

Spirit Walker

Book I

By James 'Fel' Galloway

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Chapter 1

He couldn't help but yawn.

Kyven was bored. Desperately bored.

The workshop's schoolroom was quiet at the moment, all the apprentices huddled over their workbenches with their tools arrayed before them, the only sound the *tink* of hammer striking chisel or probe striking crystal. Kyven sat at the master apprentice table watching them, as they were all arrayed in a terrace so he could see each workbench and watch them cutting crystals. Master Holm was out talking to a miner, leaving Kyven to watch over this lot, nine twelve year olds, which was, what was for them, one of the most nervewracking days of their lives. The nine boys were taking the cutting test to see which of them would be taken on as an indentured apprentice, to learn the art of crystalcutting. Each of them had been apprenticed here for a year, in one of the largest and most prestigious crystalcutting shops in Atan, which was a village known for crystalcutters and alchemists. With the mines so close, many crystalcutters moved here, where they could get crystals right out of the mines, cut them, and sell them at a profit without paying for the crystals changing hands many times on their way out into the world. The alchemists followed the crystalcutters, which turned Atan from a rough and tumble mining camp to a prosperous village, very nearly a town, with nearly five hundred permanent residents, quite a few buildings, and farms and a large cattle ranch out on the plateau east and south of the village that kept the village fed.

Kyven remembered when he was sitting in one of those chairs, nine years ago. A year of learning the basics, practicing on pieces of glass and crystal chips, the hand exercises, the hours of study at the feet of the senior apprentices as they taught them about the crystals and how to analyze them to determine how to cut them to make them reach their full potential. It was intense for them now. All that work all coming down to one moment, where you had to successfully diamond cut a crystal without shattering it, after picking a suitable crystal out of a bin that would accept a diamond cut and would enhance its natural potential. It was a simple test, virtually no one ever cracked the crystal, and the two that did the best cuts would be apprentices to Master Holm, the most prestigious crystalcutter in Atan. The others would probably try to apprentice to one of the less prestigious cutters, using their year of training at Holm's shop as a bargaining chip. Most of them succeeded in getting apprenticed elsewhere, since Master Holm didn't even accept first years that wouldn't be acceptable cutters.

He'd be an apprentice for one more year.

In one more year, Kyven would be freed of his indentured service and would be free to start his own shop, and he meant to do just that. Kyv had taken up prospecting in his free time to start saving money towards opening his own shop, and had managed to find a few decent crystals by following the tips gleaned out of miners in the taverns at night. Not all crystals were buried, and some miners were quite adept at tracking them down. They were usually small and not worth much, but Kyven had an advantage there, because he could cut them himself and sell them at a much higher price than a raw crystal.

Kyven was *very* good at what he did. He was easily better at cutting crystals than Holm, and Holm knew it. Holm had known he had a natural among his prospective apprentices when Kyven was placed with him by his miner father, for Kyven had agile, sensitive hands and exceptional hand-eye coordination. Kyven had the hands of a master cutter, but Kyven's true

advantage was an innate *instinct* for crystal cutting. When Kyven picked up a crystal, he just *knew* exactly which cut would release all the potential of the crystal, making it as potent as possible. Holm could do the same thing, but Kyven knew instinctively with just a touch, just a tertiary inspection of the crystal, where Holm had to examine a crystal extensively using a cutter's glass to study its internal structure. Crystals cut by Holm and Kyven were some of the most sought-after crystals in Atan. Holm often called Kyven a born crystalcutter, and had taken Kyven aside and trained him personally, where most apprentices were trained by senior apprentices until they reached a certain level, where they took lessons from the master craftsman. Holm knew that if Kyven managed to open his own crystalcutting shop, Kyven would be instant competition. But then again, Holm was old. When Kyven was free, there was the off chance that Holm might actually sell Kyven the shop, rather than try to compete with him.

Holm was no fool.

He blinked and looked at the nine boys. They seemed to shimmer to his eyes, and then he saw a tiny little cat sitting on the workbench in front of one of them, staring up at the boy with curious eyes. The cat had long, silky white fur, and was surrounded by a soft blue nimbus. It reached out and put its paw on the boy's wrist, and the boy seemed to calm down a little, his shaking hands becoming still.

He shook his head. Not *that* again. He stood up and lightly slapped his cheeks. Kyven sometimes... saw things. It was a very rare occurrence, happening usually when he was either sleepy or drunk. Things that weren't there. But they were consistent. Since he saw that little cat, he knew *it* was there, watching him. He turned his head, and saw it. Watching him. It was always watching him. A large dark-furred fox, with a silver ruff and charcoal gray fur, and glowing green eyes with no pupils. He'd been seeing that hallucination almost all his life, always the same, always watching him, always near but never close. And it was always sitting. Whenever he saw it, it was sitting, and it never stood. It remained where it was until he got out of its sight, and once he couldn't see it anymore, it would simply be there the next time he turned his head, sitting, watching him with those glowing eyes.

It was his great secret. If people knew that he saw things like that, they'd call him crazy, or even worse, Touched. It could get him killed, so he kept it absolutely silent. He'd been seeing these strange hallucinations for a very long time, the first time the night his mother died. While his father held him in his arms, he saw the fox sitting in the window, just looking at him. It was the only time he ever told anyone of it. When he described what he saw to his father, his father explained just how dangerous it could be if people knew what he'd seen. People would say he was crazy, or might whisper that he'd been Touched. The Loremasters might even come for him, and he'd never see his father again. So he'd never told another living soul about the vision.

It was more than just seeing the fox. Usually he saw other animals, like that little cat, or little flashes of light that surrounded people or mana crystals. Rarely he saw entire scenes, like a stage play at the festhall, playing out a scene. He saw things that sometimes made him laugh, sometimes scared the hell out of him, sometimes made him sad or angry. But those kinds of visions were very rare, thank the Trinity. They were terrifying after they were over, because they reminded him that he was different from other people, maybe a little crazy...

maybe even Touched.

And because of the visions, he was very withdrawn from other people. He didn't want to risk them finding out his secret, so he kept quiet around people, and wasn't very forthcoming. He kept to himself, didn't associate much outside of the occasional drink in the tavern with the miners to learn more about prospecting, and was cordially distant with the other apprentices. The only person that came close to being his friends were Master Holm and Aven, a rather well-known independent mountain man, prospector, and lone miner who had a nose for finding quality crystals, who lived by his own wits and roamed the mountains without fear, despite the threat of monsters or wild Arcans. The other apprentices thought he was arrogant, too good to associate with them. Holm thought he was just too shy. Kyven was what most would call a ruggedly handsome young man, tall, very sleek and healthy because of his frequent trips out to prospect for crystals, with thick black hair and piercing green eyes. And unlike many crystalcutters, Kyven was enormously strong, almost as strong as an alchemist, but it just seemed to be a natural strength. Kyven didn't swing a pick or shovel, didn't hammer metals, didn't push a plow or hoe crops. He sat at a workbench and delicately cut and shaped crystals all day, and yet he was easily as strong as the alchemist apprentices, who spent long hours pounding hot metal and mixing liquid metals to produce alloys.

He blinked as the cat faded from his vision, and sighed in relief. I didn't pique his curiosity a little, though. He came around the bench and stepped up onto the row and peered down at the boy's work. He was about half done, having chipped out the excess and found the proper alignments in the crystal lattice to make the major cuts. The milk crystal, a ruddy pink one that looked almost useless to him, would take good cuts along his planned cut lines, and would do fairly well to bring out the inner power of the crystal. He'd get a little better results cutting along a different plane, but for a first year taking his apprenticeship test, it was pretty good. He was doing much better than the boy beside him, who had chosen totally wrong plane lines to make his cuts, which wouldn't bring out any power in the crystal at all.

"Kyv!" Holm called from the door. "No helping!" Master Holm was a gray-haired, wrinkled, nearly toothless man, nearly seventy years old, and looking at retirement from active cutting. His hands weren't as steady as they used to be, and he left the cutting of the most valuable crystals to his two senior apprentices, Kyven and Timble, while he focused on appraising crystals and directing cutting. Both of them were in their last year of indentured service, having survived being turned out or sold to other cutters to be the premier, the best of Master Holm's apprentices and the next generation of crystalcutters that would give Atan a continuing reputation for excellent crystalcutters.

"I haven't said a word, Master Holm," he answered. "Just inspecting their work so far."

"Well, let's take a look, then," he said, hobbling up to the rows with his cane rapping on the wooden floor. He said not a word to them, just looked at each crystal for about a second before moving on. Holm could take in the entire skill of the apprentice in that one glance, even with them not being halfway done. Some of them had planed their crystals the right way to prepare them for the final cuts, some had not. Some had chosen crystals which were suited to the diamond cut, some had not. Odds were, Kyven supposed, Holm would choose his two advancers before they were done by seeing how they'd done to this point.

"Take the crystal bin back to the shop, Kyv," Holm told him. "Dump it in the box."

"Aye sir," he said with a nod. Holm didn't play favorites. Kyven may be his most senior and best apprentice, but he still swept the shop with the other apprentices after every day's work, picked chips off the floor, and did other manual labor. He didn't do as much as other apprentices, but he did. Holm himself still swept his personal work area and policed his own chips, for he was a firm believer in the moral character gained by manual labor. Kyven picked up

the small box of assorted milk crystals, crystals tainted by other crystal types and less useful, and carried it into the main shop.

It was busy. The main shop was a large room filled with nearly thirty workbenches, where crystal-powered lights hung over benches with tool racks and small shelves and bins, soft cloths to sweep up every tiny crystal chip, and magnifying glasses and cutter's eyepieces for inspecting crystals. On the far side, behind a crystal-inset door that was all but impossible to open or break, were the stocks of raw crystals waiting to be cut, crystals sold to Holm by the miners, and Holm would sell to the merchants and alchemists when they were cut. Kyven put his palm on the vault door, and it shuddered and opened of its own volition. Kyven, Holm and Timble were the only people in the shop who had the authority to open the vault. He stepped in as the door closed behind him, and dumped the small bin of milk crystals into a larger bin holding more, of various sizes and colors. He ran his hand through it, feeling the tingles in touching them, the sense of power lurking in them.

There were six kinds of crystal, separated by color, and each one contained within it a magical power. Red crystals were the basic crystal, with a simple power that could be adapted to many uses. Red crystal were the most common, and since they were so generic, the vast majority of all crystal-powered devices used red crystals. A red crystal could literally do anything, but the drawback was that for a red crystal to mimic the function of another type of crystal, it had to be much larger, have much more power. Most red crystals just weren't large enough to mimic the ability of another crystal. Blue crystals seemed attuned to light and sound, and were in demand among theater troops for props and set illusions. Yellow crystals were attuned to nature, and were heavily in demand by farmers to make tools that enhanced the production of their crops. Green crystals were rare, and were attuned to the living being. They were used by doctors to heal, and always fetched a high price. Black crystals were for war, full of negative energy that created injuries that almost always killed. They were fairly rare, and any miner that found one would have a hard time smuggling it past the Loremasters to sell to anyone other than the army. White crystals were the rarest of them all, as versatile as a red crystal, but they were *reusable*. A white crystal didn't bond to its setting the way other crystals did, could be placed in any setting and power any device. In his whole life, Kyven had only seen one white crystal. Holm had cut it himself some three years ago, spending an entire month to do so, and then sold it for an absolutely obscene amount of chits. Milk crystals, like the ones that the first years were using, were mixed crystals that were combinations of other colors. They tended to be almost powerless, good only for practice, crushing to make chit coins, the standard currency of Noraam, or for feeding tame monsters that ate crystals for sustenance, but they had the same lattice structure and energy patterns as normal crystals, so they were excellent practice crystals for apprentice crystalcutters. Kyven had cut nothing but milk crystals for the first three years of his apprenticeship. Holm certainly didn't lose anything. All the milk crystals his apprentices worked on were just sold to the Loremasters so they could crush them and make chit coins. It didn't matter if they were cut or not, it only mattered that they kept all the pieces, as the Loremasters bought milk crystals based on the weight.

That power was enhanced by cutting, aligning the internal energies and focusing them to their maximum at the hands of a skilled cutter. Each one was like a reserve of magic, like those electricity batteries the inventors had been experimenting with over on Stoa Street. That was the job of a crystalcutter, to examine a crystal, determine how best to cut it to make it as powerful as possible, and then perform that cut. Once a crystal was cut, it usually went to an alchemist. Alchemists built settings and devices for the crystals that used that power, channeled it, brought it out, but the drawback was that once a crystal was mounted, it bonded

to the device and couldn't be used in anything other than that specific kind of device. What a setting did depended entirely on how it was made, what metals and other materials it was made of, and how it was cured, bathed in the radiance of yellow crystals which were cut in a specific manner that caused them to radiate their power like a candle radiating light. The crystal lights over the workbenches were an example of an alchemist's work. They had taken spiral cut red crystals and placed them in a setting of tin, copper, iron, and carbon in specific amounts, placed the crystal within its setting, then cured it for a specific amount of time. The result was a common crystal lamp, which radiated a light that could be controlled by a small sliding lever on the side.

Being an alchemist was *hard*. They had to apprentice to an alchemist for three years as a kid, and after those three years, the alchemist had to recommend them to an alchemy academy in a city, like Avannar. They attended the academy for years and years, learning all about metallurgy and chemistry, how to design housings from scratch to perform tasks, build them, and then they came back out to apprentice again for another two years. After all that, they had to take a test. If they passed, they were certified alchemists, and were allowed to open their own shops to build devices to sell to the public.

It was the second most prestigious job in the world, but it wasn't for everyone. Four of the nine kids taking the first year test had been alchemy apprentices, but hadn't made the cut. But at least they'd washed out before they were too old to apprentice elsewhere, or they'd be looking at a life as a manual laborer or going back to their family farms to be farmers. In a way, Kyven could see the use of either being really good or really bad at alchemy. If you were really good, you made it. If you were really bad, you found out early enough so it didn't interfere with finding another pursuit. But if one was just pretty good at it, they spent all that time learning, then they washed out and were left in a bad position. Too old to apprentice, too young to strike out alone as a miner or hunter or join the army. All they could do was drift from odd job to odd job until they were old enough to try their hand at making it in the real world.

There was a fortune in the vault. Thousands of crystals of various sizes and colors, though most of them were red, and several sitting on stands that were quite large, waiting to be cut. But strangely enough, Kyven had never once thought of stealing a single thing out of the vault. He didn't need to. He was a good crystalcutter. As soon as he was free of his indentured service, he could open his own shop and make good money.

He left the vault and returned to his workbench. He had a half-done crystal on his stand, held in place by a delicate bronze device that looked like an overturned spider. It was a medium sized yellow crystal, being shaped into the double trapezoid cut, which was the optimum cut for this crystal. The chips and pieces were saved, since some devices could use something as small as a chip the size of a grain of sand for power, if it was small or did something minor, like a child's toy. Though these chips probably wouldn't be. This was a yellow crystal, and its crystal chips and dust were too valuable to go into a toy. The chips would be fused into an amalgam and used in common farm implements, like hoes and shovels, so they could nurture the soil in which they worked. Only Kyven or Timble would be cutting a crystal this valuable, but he also wasn't alone. When he returned, the other apprentices came over to his bench to continue their lesson. It was his job to instruct the other apprentices, and he did so in his customary quiet, direct manner, not speaking more than was necessary. He'd already explained why he chose the double trapezoid cut for the crystal, and had been explaining how it was done when Holm had him watch over the test while he talked business with the miner. The double trapezoid was an advanced cut, and they didn't often get the chance to demonstrate it to the apprentices, since few crystals were amenable to it. He

explained the methodology behind the next step, then turned the crystal, selected his tools, showed them the plane he would use in the magnifying glass, and then executed the cut with a delicate tap of his soft-wooded hammer. The wide-bladed, razor sharp chisel sheared off a flat sheet of yellow crystal and left behind a perfectly smooth surface that shone in the light of the lamp.

"Remember, a good cut isn't about hitting it hard, it's about using the lattice of the crystal to your advantage," he told them, something he said about fifty times a day to bore it into the younger apprentices. "A good cut leaves behind a smooth surface. You know what a bad cut leaves, we've all seen it often enough."

"I doubt you ever had a bad cut, Kyv," one of the middle-tenured apprentices laughed.

"I was just as clumsy as anyone when I started," he said, taking out what looked like a raw red crystal that had been cut in half, the size of a peanut. "This was my first cut of anything but a milk crystal," he told them. "See how bad that is? Holm was so mad he made me buy it, and I keep it right here to remind me."

"Well, I feel better now," the apprentice laughed. "Mine was about that bad too."

Kyven completed cutting the crystal, and then polished the cut crystal with a buffing blanket to remove any residual dust, which would be carefully collected out of the soft cloth and sold. "And there we are, boys, a double trapezoid," he said, holding the oblong, blocky yellow crystal up for them to see. "I hope you learned something, because you won't see this cut again for a while."

"Nice, Kyv, nice," one of them said, and Kyven wrapped the crystal in a soft cloth, put it in a pouch, then put the pouch in a backpack and slung it over his shoulder. That crystal was already paid for by Virren, one of the better alchemists of Atan, and now it was just a matter of delivering it. Virren's alchemy workshop was only two doors down, and Kyven had made the run from one to the other to deliver crystals many times. He poked his head into the study room and waved to get Holm's attention, who then hobbled over to him.

"I finished the yellow for Master Virren, Master Holm, I'll walk it over to him."

"Be careful," he said with a nod.

"Always."

He went out the side door of the shop, which was a narrow alley that ran to the end of the block in one direction and ended at the door to Virren's alchemy shop on the other. This alley was the common delivery route for their two shops, and they kept the alley clean and free of debris so the courier could see and ensure that it was safe to make the quick journey from one to the other. It was empty, as always, and it only took him about ten seconds to scurry down to Virren's door. He knocked once, and almost immediately a burly fellow wearing a chain jack and carrying a musket in his free hand opened the door. He had a rough, wide face, small eyes set wide apart, and a shaved head. His name was Bragga, and he was a pretty decent fellow despite his rough appearance. "Hey Kyv," he said with a nod, and let him in.

"I have a crystal for Master Virren," he said.

"He's in the foundry."

Kyven was over here so much he was almost an apprentice himself. He knew his way around the large compound, moving from the stockroom where the alley door was into the secondary forge, where two apprentices were stoking a coal fire, then through an open-air courtyard and to the main foundry. A huge blast furnace dominated the large chamber, dim and smelling of soot and smoke, so hot it made Kyven's face tighten, and he took in the room. Three first stage apprentices helped a second stage apprentice and Virren pour molten metal into an ingot mold, as an Arcan stood by with a pair of heavy tongs, waiting.

Kyven gave this Arcan a second look. He'd never seen this one before. He was tall, but

most Arcans were tall. He looked canine, with a broad, wolf-like muzzle, brown eyes, and a pelt that was a thick, shaggy brown, a little bristly and ragged. His chin was a tan color instead of brown, diving down his neck and disappearing under the only thing he was wearing, a leather smock to protect against beads of molten metal. A pair of heavy leather gloves for holding the tongs was in his other big, clawed hand. His hybrid feet, more animal than humanoid, held him up steadily, and his tail swished behind him.

Arcans. Kyven really didn't pay them much mind. They were animal-humanoid hybrids, mutants some would call them, which history said had been created by the Great Ancients at the height of the old empire to serve humanity as labor. There were many different kinds of Arcans, but they fell into three basic types. There were the huge, powerful, physical Arcans, who were often used for the most demanding labor. Most of those Arcans were ursine, equine, bovine, or canine, powerful breeds built for heavy work. There were Arcans like this one, the medium sized Arcans, who excelled at moderate labor because they were very strong. Most of them were canine, feline, vulpine, deer, badgers and the like. The third type were the servant Arcans, small, weak breeds who served most often in domestic capacities. Some breeds of felines and vulpines, and most rodents were among those. Breeds weren't absolutes, that was for sure. Some rodents worked the mines because they were powerful specimens, while some bovines served as cooks or maids because they were small or had a very placid nature. It was just a generality.

Arcans were, on the average, stronger and faster than humans, but they weren't supposed to be very smart. That was the great equalizer, and why humans maintained them as servants and labor. Because humans were smarter than Arcans, they kept control over them, were able to make the collars that almost all tame Arcans wore that kept them from becoming dangerous. Kyven didn't know if that was true or not, because there were lots of conflicting stories.

And then there were the *Shaman*.

Kyven shivered just at the thought of that, and it blew a lot of the Loremasters' stories about Arcans out of the water. If they were so dumb, then how did they explain the Shaman? Shaman were Arcans who could perform magical feats similar to what mana crystals could do, but they *didn't use crystals*. They could do the magic on their own, with no help from crystals at all! And what was worse, they could also use crystals like magical batteries, producing magic by draining the crystal instead of doing it themselves. Just the word *Shaman* made grown men shiver and kids squeal in fright. Since the Shaman appeared two hundred years ago, it had caused humans to fear wild, uncollared Arcans, even caused the Loremasters to institute a bounty on Arcans by buying Arcan pelts for twenty chits a piece in hopes that the hunters would kill Shaman, or kill Arcans that might become Shaman. Right now, Kyven supposed, there were hunters lurking in the forest outside of the village, hunting for wild Arcans to make a few extra chits by turning in Arcan pelts for the bounty. They did come to Atan to look for food or steal, and the cattle ranch to the south had to keep armed guards, armed with muskets and crossbows, to protect the herds from them.

In what to Kyven was a bit of grisly economic opportunism, some leatherworkers now bought the pelts from the Loremasters to make a soft form or leather or fur-lined clothing. Kyven thought it was a rather disgusting idea, himself. Not that he considered Arcans that highly, but because it would make his skin crawl to think that fur that had been on such a human-like creature, capable of speaking, was now up against his skin. It would be like wearing tanned human skin aprons.

Humans hunted wild Arcans to kill them or capture them for slaves, but they never seemed to make a dent in the wild Arcan population. Arcans bred like rabbits, it seemed. Every day he heard stories from the miners in the taverns about brushes with wild Arcans, but there was

a good chance that quite a few of those tales were just embellishments, or a retelling of something that happened months ago. If he believed the miners, there was an Arcan hiding behind every tree, trying to steal any tool or lunchbox left unattended. In all the times he'd been prospecting both alone and with Aven, he'd never seen a single wild Arcan.

"Kyv," Virren called, wiping his hands on his smock and stepping away as his apprentices poured the metal. "Bring something for me?"

Kyven took off his backpack, and took out the pouch. He pulled the crystal from it and unwrapped it. "Double trapezoid cut, Master Virren," he said, a little apologetically. "Sorry, I know it's a non-standard cut, but it's what the crystal wanted."

"I understand, my boy," he said easily. "Not to worry, I can adapt my usual setting to the cut. It's always best to adapt the setting to the crystal, not try to adapt the crystal to the setting. All that gets you is a weaker result."

"True," he said, carefully handing the cloth to the alchemist. "You there, take this to the vault," Virren said, looking at the Arcan. The Arcan set his tongs and gloves on a table near the foundry, then took the cloth-wrapped crystal and hurried out into the courtyard.

"A new one, eh?"

"Yah, just got him this morning," he answered. "Seems to work out so far. He does what he's told and seems to understand the need for speed. Was hard to replace Old Gray."

"What happened?"

"Broke his arm yesterday. I took him down to the vet, they say he should heal up. He's back in his room right now, resting. The old fool keeps trying to come out and sweep the floor," he chuckled. "Old Gray knows our business and he really works hard. I'll feel like we're short-handed until he's back on the job."

"I'm surprised you didn't just sell him, or have him put down. That's what most people do."

"You don't sell an Arcan like Old Gray, Kyv," he snorted. "And I could never put one down. I don't buy into that 'they're just animals' bullhockey. Anyone who can answer me in Noravi when I talk to them ain't no animal."

"I'd have to agree with that," he said. "Anything I need to take back to the shop?"

"Nah, just tell Holm I'm still waiting for that five point blue."

"Timble's working on that one."

"Well, I'd like to get it tomorrow, so tell him to put you on it. You're faster than Timble and Holm put together." He glanced at Kyven. "When are you gonna open your own shop?" he asked.

"Soon, I hope," he answered. "I still have until next Midsummer indentured to Holm, unless I get lucky prospecting and I can buy out my contract. After that, I hope to open my own shop, but it won't be cheap."

"That won't be a problem, man. Don't tell Holm, but there's quite a few alchemists who are already floating the idea of loaning you enough chits to rent a shop and buy your tools. You're the best cutter in Atan, kid, hands down. Holm's not the only cutter who's starting to get very nervous about the idea of you striking out on your own."

Kyven laughed. "I couldn't possibly cut enough to supply every alchemist in Atan, Master Virren," he protested. "There's a *shortage* of cutters. I wouldn't make a dent in the business of the other shops."

"True, but if I ever have a really good crystal, like a twenty pointer or a green or yellow, I'd bring it straight to you. There ain't five cutters in Atan I'd trust with a crystal like that. If I give it to you, I'll get back something that made it worth the investment."

"Wow, thanks for the vote of confidence, Master Virren," Kyven chuckled.

Kyven returned to the shop, and immediately reported to Holm. "Master Virren said he'd

like the five point blue finished by tomorrow, Master Holm,” he said.

“Tell Timble to get it done.”

“Yes, sir. What’s next for me?”

“You finished the twelve point yellow. Just teach the others for now.”

“Yes, sir. Can I possibly finish early today?”

“Oho, what are you up to, Kyv? Already scoping out possible shop locations?”

Kyven laughed. “No sir, I’d just like to go talk to a friend of mine, he’s teaching me how to prospect for crystals out in the mountains. I’ll start early tomorrow to make up for it.”

“What, I’m not paying you enough, son?” he asked with a smile.

“You pay me fine, Master Holm, but if I ever want to open my own shop, I’ll need more than that. I’ve been trying my hand at amateur prospecting and cutting the crystals I find to sell myself.”

“Well, that’s rather clever son,” he chuckled. “Good business sense, I can appreciate that. Go ahead and knock off an hour after lunch, and you can pay me back by taking in the new batch of first years in the morning.”

“Ouch, you’re making me pay for it, sir.”

“You bet I am,” he grinned. “Now get.”

Kyven supervised the younger apprentices for the rest of the morning as Timble worked on the five point blue, then, after lunch, he cleaned up his workbench and just watched the others. “What, you weasel some extra free time?” Timble asked him.

“I traded the afternoon off for doing induction tomorrow,” he answered.

Timble winced. “Brother, you got the short end of the stick,” he said. “Master Holm would have to pay me triple to do induction.”

“Well, if I ever wanna take my own apprentices, I’d better be able to deal with the newbies,” he chuckled.

“Eh, that’s true, I guess,” he said, adjusting the magnifying glass over the blue crystal, which was being oval cut. He was literally finished, Kyven saw. He made one more tiny cut, chipping off a final burr, and left behind a perfectly cut crystal, cut to bring out its maximum power and potential. Kyven could almost see the power pulsing inside the crystal, just yearning to be released.

“Damn, nice work, Timble!” Kyven said honestly as he took a closer look at the small blue gem. “Look at that sheen! You’ve really brought it out!”

“Thanks, brother, it really turned out nice,” he said. “I hope I didn’t just jinx it,” he then laughed as he carefully cleaned it with the polish cloth.

Kyv’s complement attracted attention, and the apprentices all gathered around Timble’s bench, which was rather rare. Timble was an outstanding crystalcutter, but he did not work well with an audience. He could cut to demonstrate well enough, but when he was doing serious work on valuable crystals, people watching him made him nervous, so he did that work alone. So long as no one was looking over his shoulder, Timble was an outstanding cutter, one of the best. Kyven didn’t have that problem, so Kyven was the one that did the demonstrations on crystals that were too valuable to damage with a bad cut.

Timble inspected the blue crystal under his magnifying glass as the apprentices congratulated him, checking with a meticulous inspection for what Kyven could tell just by looking at it, that perfect alignment of crystal lattice combined with perfectly cut angles on its surface to focus the crystal’s power to its maximum potential.

Kyven left Timble to bask in the adulation of his junior apprentices and went upstairs. The apprentices lived above the shop, the first years in a large dorm on the top floor, the younger apprentices four to a room on the third floor, and the senior apprentices had private rooms on

the second floor. Kyven’s room was utilitarian, spartan, and functional, a reflection of his sober personality. The room held a bed, washstand, bureau, footlocker, and a writing desk, with no decorations on the walls. To Kyven, his room was for sleeping, studying cutting manuals, and writing letters to the Guild, and nothing else. He picked up his prospecting backpack, filled with outdoor gear, a hand shovel, a pick, and a sniffer, a little device that Master Verrin made for him that pointed to raw crystals within five paces of it, and headed for the Three Boar Tavern.

Aven was sitting at his customary place in the tavern, at the end of the bar near the door, downing a tankard of ale. The prospector was about fifty years old, with iron gray hair, a thick, bushy beard, and wearing rugged leathers durable enough to handle the rigors of the outdoors. He had a Hudson musket leaning against the bar, and the handles of a pair of double-shot pistols were stuffed into the back of his belt. The barkeep here was unusual in town in that he refused to employ Arcans in his inn. He hated them with a passion, and always gave a free tankard of ale to any new face that showed up wearing Arcan fur. “Aven!” he called excitedly. “I got off early! Are you ready to go?”

“Lemme finish my tankard, boy!” he called roughly. “You got my payment?”

Kyven handed him a tiny two point blue crystal, one of his finds from last week. Aven looked at it in the dim light from the lamp overhead, then nodded and pocketed it. “That’ll pay for lessons all the way to winter, young buck,” he announced.

“You’re letting this old swindler teach you anything?” the barkeep laughed.

“His advice helped me find that two point blue,” Kyven said in defense of his prospecting mentor.

“Beginner’s luck, cutter,” the barkeep laughed. “What can I get you while you wait?”

“Nothing, really. I’m going to go on ahead, Aven. I’ll meet you at the oak.”

“I’ll be along in a bit, young buck,” he nodded.

Kyven left the inn, then got on Miner’s Road and headed out of town. The road wended up into the mountains, up a shallow gulley that led to a large, shallow valley between to long mountains. There were literally hundreds of mines on the west ridge of that valley, burrowing into the side of the ridge at varying altitudes, and hundreds of filled-in holes along the base of the ridge from surface digging, looking for crystals. The wide road was deeply rutted from carts and wagons, and at the top of the rise there was a large tent city where many miners housed their Arcan workers. They weren’t allowed to stable them in town, so they kept them there, in a large communal compound surrounded by a rail fence and patrolled by armed guards that both kept wild Arcans out and kept the tame Arcans in. It wasn’t unknown for Arcans to sometimes slip their collars and escape, at least the smarter ones. The collars were usually set to zap any Arcan trying to take them off, but sometimes an Arcan was clever enough to figure out how to take them off by themselves.

He wasn’t going all the way up there, though. He turned up a narrow trail about halfway up, climbing a ridge that led to a small plateau on the top of the east side of the valley, which wasn’t as heavily mined because the main concentration of crystals were on the west side. There used to be mines on the east side of the east ridge, but they’d played out all those crystals and moved their mining to the next ridge. And when that ridge was mined out, they’d move to another mountain; there were already some mines on the next mountain over, prospect mines to check for rich concentrations of crystal.

He reached the big oak, a small meadow in the forest that rustled in the warm summer wind, sending waves of white as the wind bent the blades of grass back through the tall grass of the narrow clearing, exposing their white undersides. Hardwoods ringed the clearing, oaks and maples and birches and ashes, with a small trio of pine trees to the left of the big oak, a mas-

sive oak tree on the edge of the far side of the clearing. He dug out his sniffer and turned the knob to engage its crystal and activate, then waved it around just for fun, though he knew that there was nothing in the meadow. It had been played out long ago.

Aven joined him a few minutes later. “You ready, kid?” he asked.

“I’m ready,” he nodded. “Where are we going?”

“Well, it was a pretty heavy rain yesterday, so we’ll go down south to Cougar Creek and pan the stream. See if anything got washed down.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Cougar Creek was south, over the ridge and down in the next valley. They hiked down to the large creek, the water a little high from yesterday’s rain, and Aven pulled out his own sniffer. “Alright, kid, you go one way and I’ll go the other. Let’s see if we get lucky.”

Panning a stream was something Aven already taught him. Kyven moved slowly downstream as Aven moved upstream, sweeping his sniffer back and forth slowly along the bank, looking for crystals. The sniffer was set to react to any crystal a tenth of a point or larger, which was the size of a tiny pebble, barely larger than a grain of sand. With such a sensitive setting, the sniffer kept pointing to the bank, and Kyven spent a lot of time sifting through the dirt and mud on the bank with a small sieve, using the sniffer to find where the crystals were, scooping up the mud around it, then sifting until he found the crystal.

He moved about fifty paces in an hour, and in that hour, he had managed to pan up about a point’s weight worth of crystal chips. Most of it was red, but he did find a small black chip mixed in with it. That black chip was worth almost ten chits all by itself, which made the day profitable. He kept working down the bank, feeling the warm sun shine down on him, hearing the wind rustle the trees, and then a cloud passed over and dimmed the forest, making him glance up.

It was there.

The black-furred fox, the hallucination, it was back. It sat sedately not ten feet from him, closer than usual, its unblinking eyes fixed on him. Kyven blinked and looked away, rubbing his eyes. *Just focus. It’ll go away, it’s just the same old thing. Focus on what you’re doing.* He kept his eyes deliberately down, but something felt... different. He looked up again.

For the first time ever, the hallucination moved more than its neck. It stood up on all fours, uncurling its tail from around its front legs, then turned away from him. It took several steps towards the hillside on the far side of the creek, then it stopped and looked back to him.

Kyven was rooted to the spot. What did it mean? He’d never seen the hallucination move anything other than its head before. Sure, other visions he’d seen moved, but never that one. It had always been the same every time he’d seen it, but not today. Today, it *moved*. And not only did it move, but he’d seen it twice in one day, which was just as strange. Did it mean something? Did it mean he really was going crazy, or he was Touched?

It looked right at him, still with its back to him. It was waiting.

It wanted him to follow. Why? It was just a hallucination, why should he follow a phantom, something that didn’t exist?

But... there was something else. The shadowed wood felt... *foreboding* now. Uninviting. He didn’t feel safe, for some reason. He looked around, but saw nothing among the trees around him, and the squirrels were still chattering away as they usually did. Why did he feel this way? Had this change in an old hallucination unsettled him?

Maybe. But the black-furred fox still stood there, its tail still and unmoving, looking back to him with unblinking, glowing green eyes.

Waiting.

He found his feet moving of their own volition. He waded across the creek, his sturdy wool

trousers and boots soaking in the cold water, moving towards the apparition. It looked back ahead and started walking away from him slowly, deliberately, at a pace that let him slowly catch up. He followed the animal up the hillside for a long moment, until it reached a large rock partially buried in the loam of the forest floor. It stepped up onto the rock, turned to face him, then sedately sat back down and wrapped its bushy black tail with its silver tip around its forelegs, in that pose he knew so well, and then *vanished*.

It had never done that before either! Always before, he looked away from it, and then it was gone when he looked back. But this time it vanished right before his very eyes!

He rubbed his eyes and looked at the rock, but it was gone. He advanced up to the rock, even touched it, but it was a rock. Cool to the touch, covered with moss, probably had earthworms and roley bugs under it. It just proved what he already knew, that there was no fox, that it was just a recurring hallucination that he’d suffered for many years.

Before he could even think about it, the sound of a gunshot ripped the air. Kyven started and stood up, then he heard another one, a higher-pitched one that was clearly the sound of a pistol. A musket and a pistol?

Aven!

Kyven charged back down the hill, to the stream, then ran upstream. Kyven was tall and lithe, and he covered the ground quickly, jumping over the stream twice as it wound down the gentle rise. He wove in and out through the trees lining the streambed, but he stopped abruptly, nearly falling over, when he found Aven.

There was blood *everywhere*. Spattered on the grass, on the rocks of the stream, mingling in the water. Aven was laying on his side on the side of the bank, but one of his arms was laying nearly five feet away, oozing blood onto the rocks. Laying face down on the opposite side of Aven from the stream, was an Arcan. It was a naked Arcan, a canine of some kind, its leg twitching as blood spurted out of a huge hole in its side. That spurt of blood pumped several times, then faltered, spurt one more time, and then ceased.

“By the Trinity!” Kyven gasped, moving to rush to Aven’s side, but the injured old man sat up quickly, cradling a mangled stump of his left arm, the limb literally torn off just below the elbow. Bloody stains were all over his front, and there was a clear bite wound on his right thigh.

“No, kid!” Aven barked. “Stay back!”

“But—”

“I may have been Touched!” he called.

That stopped Kyven dead in his tracks. He scrambled backwards, literally hiding behind a tree. The Touch! The most feared of all illnesses, so deadly that no man had ever been known to survive it! Arcans could catch it too, but it made Arcans go blood mad, turned them into rampaging beasts. It made humans go mad as well, but humans didn’t usually become violent the way Arcans did, they had hallucinations like the ones Kyven had endured most of his life. It was known as the Touch because it was so virulent that one could catch it from a single touch from an infected person. If Aven was Touched, Kyven could catch the disease from the lightest of contacts and not know it for months, until the disease set in... and that was too late. By the time the symptoms began to appear, the person had been contagious for weeks and had probably infected the entire village.

“Aven, what happened?” he managed to ask.

“I never saw it, kid, it came from downstream. I heard rustling, thought it was you, but then the bastard blindsided me. I gave back more than I got, that’s for sure,” he said with a grim chuckle as his mangled stump dribbled blood on his buckskin trousers. “Thank the Trinity he missed you, kid.”

"I, I wasn't at the stream, I was—checking something out up on the hill."

"That saved your ass, kid. Now around wide and get to where you can see the dog's mouth. Don't touch any blood anywhere."

Kyven quickly circled the pair, getting around to where he could see the Arcan. Arcans infected with the Touch would have pink foam in their mouths, and any attack like that, with that kind of savagery, might be caused by it. He went around a tree, then another tree, and got to where he could see the canine's face. The eyes were open, staring, and glazed, his tongue on the ground between his open jaws.

And bloody pink froth oozed onto the moss under his head.

Kyven's shoulders slumped and he looked at the ground. "Well, kid, I can see the answer," he said, then for some reason, he chuckled. He reached behind himself with this right hand, the only hand he had left, and pulled out his other pistol. "All these years, to think I'd get it from a damned Arcan. Ain't life just a bitch sometimes," he sighed.

"Aven—"

"Shut up, kid, and listen. Go back to town and warn the Loremaster. There might be another infected one running around, this kind of thing spreads through them the same as us. They need to make sure the area's safe."

"But what about you, Aven?"

"I'm gonna skin myself a dog," he said with a grim chuckle. "Then I'm gonna watch the sun set. Now get you gone."

"But—yes, sir," he said, turning and hurrying off. He didn't even think about it, he was almost in shock. The Touch, the Touch, and he was *that close*! It could have been him! Aven said the Arcan came from downstream, came from where he'd been. If it was coming up the stream, then it must have went by him when he was up on the hillside.

The fox. Did the vision save him? Had it lured him away from the stream to keep him away from the diseased Arcan? That was silly. The fox was a hallucination, a spectre, a waking dream. He'd seen it for most of his life, from time to time. It couldn't—

A gunshot ripped the air, making Kyven jump.

He didn't want to think about what it meant. But he knew.

He knew.

There was only one Loremaster in Atan, the representative of the organization governed most human settlements on Noraam in a loose coalition. The Loremasters didn't really interfere with the cities all that much, though. The Mayor and city elders ruled Atan, and just kept the Loremaster informed of what they were doing.

The Loremasters were everywhere on Noraam. Some people didn't like them, but some, like Kyven, he didn't see anything wrong with them. They didn't really harm anyone, and they didn't rule with an iron fist. They were based in Avannar, about a hundred minars from Atan, a journey of nearly ten days on foot or three by horse. The Loremasters were devoted to the study of the Great Ancient Civilization, their ancestors, humans who had achieved such technological mastery that it was said they built machines that could fly through the air without using mana crystals, and had buildings so high, so big, they looked like mountains. There were *billions* of humans then, the Loremasters taught, a number so big that most couldn't fathom it, filling the entire world. The Great Ancient Civilization had been so amazing that they had even visited the moon and sent men out into the stars!

But despite their advances, they were still human, and had human weakness. The Great Ancient Civilization fractured and fell into war with itself, known to them simply as The War, a war so vast, so sweeping, so destructive, that it shattered the Great Ancient Civilization, completely destroying it, and scattering the few human survivors to leave them to fight for

survival without their mythical technology. The War had destroyed their ancient ancestors and wiped the knowledge of their wondrous technology from the minds of the survivors, leaving humankind to rebuild from the ashes. The War had tortured the very earth itself, had been so destructive that it had caused the Breach, the titanic accident that, the Loremasters said, caused the Great Ancients to tap into the power of magic for the first time and without control, and caused a catastrophic explosion that had virtually wiped the humans off the east coast of Noraam, destroying the Three Great Cities, and starting the series of historical events that would end The War and force humanity to begin the long, hard road of returning to the glory of their ancestors.

That was the goal of the Loremasters. They were scientists at heart, historians, men and women of intelligence and vision, seeking to reclaim the technology and knowledge of the Great Ancient Civilization. They'd started in Avannar nearly six hundred years ago, starting as a society in a college in Avannar that dedicated itself to recovering the lost secrets of the Great Ancient Civilization. But over time, they'd also come to unify the different kingdoms and city-states of Noraam under a loose coalition, a confederacy that the Loremasters oversaw, to better undertake and coordinate their research and experiments. Each of the Ten Kingdoms of Noraam were independent, but the Loremasters were there to keep the peace between them, acting as diplomats, and having men in every human settlement to allow swift communication across all of Noraam.

Some men hated the Loremasters, saw them as overlords, a shadowy organization that killed anyone who crossed them, but Kyven hadn't really thought of them that way. The Loremaster of Atan had always been a helpful and friendly man, always willing to stop and chat with people on the street, and was always willing to give a hand with any problem, even something as simple or silly as helping a child look for his missing cat.

But this wasn't a simple or silly problem. Kyven tore through Atan, nearly knocking people over as he raced to the Loremaster's office, a simple little cottage with the three interlocking circles symbol of the Loremasters embroidered on a flag that hung on a small flagpole on the front lawn. He banged on the front door, paused only a second, then banged on it again. He kept knocking until the door opened abruptly, opened by the Loremaster himself. Loremaster Gint was a small, thin man in his thirties, with a small nose, large blue eyes, and sandy blond hair that was tied back from his face in a tail. He wore the Loremaster's Tabard, a surcoat of sorts over a day jacket, linen shirt, and sturdy brown woolen breeches, which was blue with silver lines along its edges and had the red, blue, and green interlocking circles in a triangular pattern emblazoned on its chest and back, a clear indicator to any who looked at him just who he was. "Goodness, what's wrong, citizen?" he asked in a calm voice.

"Come quick!" Kyven wheezed, a little out of breath. "It's the Touch!"

The man's smile drained off his face. "Did you—"

"No sir, I was warned away! Aven told me to come warn you!"

"Calm down, young man, tell me what happened."

Kyven blew out his breath and told him in short, disjointed sentences, about hearing the shots while prospecting with Aven, running to him, and how Aven warned him off until he checked the dead Arcan. When he told the Loremaster about the pink foam, the man's eyes narrowed. "Your friend Aven did the right thing, young man," he said. "Now take me there."

Kyven led him back to the scene, and the Loremaster stood at the edge of it as Kyven couldn't help but stare at the still form of Aven. Half of his head was missing; he'd put his second pistol to his forehead and pulled the trigger, and Aven liked overpriming his pistols. The Loremaster reached into his jacket and produced a small bronze ball, separated into two halves. He twisted it until Kyven heard an audible click, then he held it firmly in his left hand

as he advanced into the bloody mess. Kyven saw that the blades of grass around the Loremaster bent away from him, as if repelled by some invisible hand. He squatted down by the dead Arcan, not putting his knees on the blood-spattered ground, and boldly reached down and rolled it over on its back. Blood saturated the fur on its chest, and its eyes were still open and vacant. The Loremaster leaned down to look at its jaws, then sighed and stood up. "Your friend saved your life, young man," he said simply. "This Arcan is Touched." He took something else out from under his surcoat, what looked like an oversized dart with a black metal tip. He twisted the bulbous body of the dart until the shaft seemed to begin to glow with a dark nimbus, then he drove it into the chest of the Arcan. It quivered slightly when he let go of it, then he turned and hurried away. "Quickly, citizen, we have to be away from here."

"What is that, Loremaster?" Kyven asked as he followed the Loremaster as he retreated quickly from the area.

"An Eradicator," he said. "It will destroy the bodies of the Arcan and your companion, I'm sorry to say, and kill the Touch that infects the area. But it'll kill *us* too if we're too close to the device when it goes off."

"I've heard of those."

"They're very expensive, and can only be used once, so we only use them for the most dire of situations, like this one. Those bodies would be contagious, and who knows who might come by to loot your friend or skin that Arcan? They could infect the whole town!"

There was a dull thudding sound behind them, then the loud crashing of a tree as it fell to earth. The Loremaster stopped. "There, that's it, let's go back."

They returned to a much different scene. Aven and the Arcan were gone. So was the grass. There was a bare patch filled with gray dust, a perfect circle some ten paces across, extending over the stream. There was a jagged hole in the ground, over which the smoking end of a fallen maple tree, the end of it blackened as if it had been burned. The Eradicator, he realized, had destroyed the trunk of the tree in a circle around the dart, and the rest of the tree had fallen down when its bottom had been destroyed. The only things left were bits of metal, the barrels of Aven's musket and pistols, some metal tools, and crystals. All that remained was that which wasn't made of flesh, bone, hair, wood, leather, or cloth. Only minerals remained. "This may sound ghoulish, young man, but we should collect up what remains of your friend's belongings."

"I—yes, sir. We can't just leave it out here."

"Naturally. I'll keep watch in case there's another Touched Arcan out here while you gather it up." Kyven took off his backpack and took out a rolled burlap sack, and knelt down and began the sad task of collecting up what was left of his friend's possessions. It was hard to believe that just a minute ago, Aven was laying here, but now there was nothing but this fine grayish dust. It clung to his fingers as he picked up the pistol barrel and put it in the bag, then picked up the metal parts of the pistol that had been bound together with wood. It had happened so fast. It made him feel strangely vulnerable to think of how fast it had all happened. One minute everything was normal, and then in the blink of an eye, it could all change. It made him realize how fragile life was, and how vulnerable they really were. There could be another blood-mad, Touched Arcan lurking out in the woods, looking for them, stalking them at that very moment.

It was a little scary. He'd never really felt afraid in the woods before, not because the large number of miners around tended to scare off the monsters, animals and most Arcans. But now he felt a little vulnerable, now that he'd seen that the woods weren't as safe as he once believed. He gathered up what was left of Aven's gear quickly, putting it in the bag, then picked up his long musket barrel and stayed very close to the Loremaster, who was holding a

small silvery ball in his hand, whose function was unknown to Kyven. "I'm finished, sir."

"Alright, let's get back so I can organize a sweep of the surrounding forest. We want to make sure there's no more Touched Arcans in the vicinity."

Kyven stayed very close to the Loremaster as they followed the trail back to Atan. Kyven brought Aven's things to his office, and then the Loremaster released him to his own devices as he hurried to the office of the mayor. Kyven returned to the shop, quiet and unsettled, sitting at his bench as the other apprentices stopped to regard him strangely. So close. He'd been so close to being the one that was now nothing but a memory. If the fox hadn't lured him away from the stream, that Arcan would have attacked *him*, and if he survived the attack, he would have been the one asking to be left a pistol.

The Touch was invariably lethal. Better to die by his own hand than to suffer that agonizing death, and potentially take everyone he knew with him.

"Kyv, what are you doing back? I thought you went out prospecting," Timble said as he came into the shop, carrying a small box of dulled chisels that would be sharpened by the younger apprentices.

Kyven blew out his breath, then leaned over his workbench. "I don't think I'm ever going to do that again," he said. "Timble, Aven's dead."

"What? What happened?" he gasped. "Did he have an accident?"

"He was attacked by a Touched Arcan," he said.

The entire workshop stopped, and they all ran to him, asking him questions, clamoring fearfully around him. "I wasn't there when it happened," he said over them, then he told them what happened. "The Loremaster's probably organizing men to search the woods right now," he surmised. "To make sure there aren't any more of them."

"Wow, Kyv!" one apprentice gasped. "I woulda fainted if it woulda been me!"

"I almost did," he admitted, shuddering. "To think I was that close to the *Touch*," he said, then trailed off.

"What's all this? Back to work, the lot of you!" Holm's voice boomed across the shop, which caused the apprentices to rush back to their own benches or duties. But when he saw Kyven sitting at his bench, he hobbled up and leaned against it. "You're still working induction tomorrow, whether you take the time off or not," he teased. But his teasing smile faded when he saw Kyven's fearful expression. "What's the matter, son?"

Kyven repeated it to Holm, who frowned throughout. "There hasn't been a case of the Touch in Atan for twenty years," he grunted. "I'm sorry to hear about your friend, son, but be thankful in one way. Your friend may have saved quite a few lives, and at least he understood that at the end."

"Yeah, he did," Kyven sighed.

"But don't let it scare you either, son. It's been twenty years since something like this has happened. Don't think it's going to happen every other day. Keep on prospecting, son. If you hide from it, the fear will gnaw at you. Just jump right back on the horse. As soon as the city watch sweeps the forest and says it's safe, get back to prospecting. You need enough to open your own shop and try to put me out of business, you know," he grinned.

"Maybe tomorrow," he said, looking up at his mentor.

"Well, get out of here, young'un," he said, shooing him. "Go relax or something. I don't want to see you until sunrise tomorrow."

"Yes, sir."

The village was all atwitter over news of the attack.

Everyone knew now what happened, and that the old mountain man Aven had been killed. Everyone was a little concerned, but Kyven saw that there wasn't any panic, just concern.

The miners did come in from the mines, gathering in their camp in the clearing above the village, and most of the able-bodied men gathered in groups and did a thorough search of the area, led by dogs and hunters as they searched for any signs of other wild Arcans in the vicinity that might be infected.

There was some fallout, though. The vet who had a shop at the edge of town found a long line of men and women dragging Arcans with them, some on leashes, all of them collared, to have them checked to make sure they weren't infected by the Touch. It was an irrational idea, for if they were infected it was too late now, as it would have spread to anyone who had touched them. But there they were, queued up and waiting for the vet to check their Arcans. There was also a sudden glut of Arcans down at the kennel, fearful people who had sold their Arcans after hearing the news, probably selling them for a song, which the kennelmaster probably was happy to do. He could just wait for the panic to settle down and sell the Arcans he bought at a tidy profit.

There were a few other incidents that night, too. Kyven was one of many woken by a commotion out on Gem Street, and he and the other apprentices came out to find three young men beating a small rodent Arcan with heavy sticks, a small female wearing a maid's dress. The Arcan was collared, huddled against a wall in a fetal position as they beat and kicked it. Master Holm stormed out angrily and shouted them down... not for beating an Arcan, but for making such a loud issue about it. Holm didn't particularly like Arcans, and wouldn't buy any to work in the shop. Virren appeared as well, coming from down the street, wearing nothing but a pair of braes. While Holm berated the three young men, thin spatters of blood on their faces, the alchemist collected up the shivering, whimpering Arcan and carried her back to his shop. A squad of the watch arrived, and after talking to Master Holm, they took the three young men and carted them up to the courthouse. Attacking Arcans wasn't illegal, but attacking a collared Arcan was an attack on another citizen's property. They'd have to answer for that, and pay the owner of that mouse restitution for the damage they caused.

"Did you see the way its arm snapped like a twig when they hit it?" one of the younger apprentices said excitedly. "It was so cool!"

"I didn't see anything cool about beating a defenseless Arcan," Timble told the youth, a bit coldly. "How'd you like three miners to drag *you* into an alley and beat you 'til your bones break?"

"Timble, zone, zone, it's *just* an Arcan," the youth sniffed.

"I hope nobody ever looks at you and decides that you're *just* a cutter," Timble told him, then stormed back into the workshop.

"What's his problem?" one of the other apprentices asked after Timble left.

"Guess he's one of those Arcan lovers," the first boy snorted. "They're just *animals*, for the Trinity's sake. They'd be running naked through the woods if it wasn't for us."

"Break it up, boys, and back to bed!" Holm boomed, shooing them towards the shop.

But Kyven didn't move. He remembered the look on that mouse's face, the blood, the fear in her eyes, and an image of the dead Arcan that had attacked Aven seemed to superimpose over it in his mind. They were both Arcans, but they were... different. One had been maddened by disease, violent, the other was just terrified. But neither of them had any control over what happened to them. The canine had been driven mad by the Touch, blood mad, violent, while the little mouse had probably been sent out onto the dangerous streets by an owner who hadn't considered the heightened tension in town because of the attack. One was dangerous, the other harmless, but both had been nothing but victims.

Kyven found himself at Master Virren's shop before he knew what he was doing. The main door was open, and Virren was in his customer's waiting room, where the wares that Vir-

ren's shop created were on shelves in display for those looking to buy. The burly alchemist had placed the Arcan on the counter, a large hand on her stomach to hold her down as she seemed to convulse, coughing up a copious amount of blood, smearing on the counter and into her gray fur. He glanced back at Kyven just once, but a cry of pain from the Arcan caused him to look back to her. She gasped, her back arching, and she grabbed Virren's wrist in a powerful grip, then she slumped to the counter and gave a long, eerie sigh.

Virren sighed and shook his head. "Stupid, senseless people," he grumbled as he reached up and used his fingers to urge closed the Arcan's eyes.

"Master Virren," Kyven called, a little fearfully.

"Such a waste," he sighed. "Since you're here, run this up to the watch." He reached behind the Arcan's head, and unfastened her collar. That surprised Kyven, that he could do it without the owner's key, but he was an *alchemist*. Odds were, he made that collar, he would certainly know how to take one off without the key. He held it out in a quivering hand. "I'm not going to let them skin her like an animal and butcher her for meat," he growled. "She deserves a better end than that."

"Master Virren?" he asked in confusion as the burly alchemist collected up the Arcan, blood smearing on his chest, his hand stroking her fur and gray hair almost gently from her closed eyes.

"Just do as I said, son," he said, cradling the dead Arcan almost gently. "Now get you gone."

Kyven couldn't do much else. He walked along dark streets in his undershirt and trousers, on bare feet, taking the collar to the watch building. It was a small building by the courthouse the twenty men who made up the watch used as their headquarters. The town's jail was in the building, which was usually only used to hold a miner who had a little too much to drink, but did see its share of real criminals. Since there were so many crystals and artisans in Atan, it attracted drifters and thieves who came to prey on the town's residents. Right now, the jail were said to hold four such thieves, waiting for the Loreguard to come on their monthly visit to cart the thieves off to Avannar to serve their sentences, a deal that Atan had had with Avannar for nearly fifty years. Avannar had the Black Keep, a prison on an island in the middle of the city where the city housed prisoners from several outlying towns and villages in addition to their own, providing the towns a means to punish lawbreakers without straining their own resources.

"What is it, fella?" the watchman said as he came into the main hall of the watchhouse, a room lined with benches in the front and tables behind a gated waist-high fence in the back. The three young men who'd been carted up here sat at those tables, where uniformed watchmen wrote on loose papers on the desks across from them, taking their statements or something, he supposed.

"Uh, Master Virren told me to bring you this," he said, offering the watchman the collar. "The Arcan those men attacked died."

"It did, eh? Not a surprise, they must have torn its head off if the collar came off. Cevik, change it to destruction of property and theft by deprivation!" he called back to the men behind him. He took the collar from Kyven and put it on the desk. "I'll make sure this gets back to whoever owned it. Have Master Virren bring the body to the watchhouse."

"He said he'd take care of it, sir."

"What does that mean?"

"I think he was going to deal with the body, sir."

"Well, he'll owe the owner for the pelt and the meat," he grunted, making a note in his little book before him. "Virren, you said? The alchemist on Gem Street?"

“Yes, sir. That’s him.”

“I’ll have a watchman go talk to him in the morning so he can settle with the Arcan’s owner.”

“Thank you, sir,” Kyven said with a nod, then padded out of the watchhouse on bare feet. He sighed and hooked his thumbs on the waist of his trousers, pondering what he’d just seen. It seemed, well... silly. Why would three men beat up an Arcan like that? She was too small to be any threat. Sure, he was no Arcan lover like Virren, but he also just didn’t see any sense in being that way. Torturing Arcans for fun was no fun in his eyes. He was a decent man, he didn’t inflict pain on others, be them human, Arcan, or animal, just for his own amusement. People who did were just sick.

Induction.

No matter how unsettling yesterday had been, it wasn’t much better than this. Standing in the warm pre-dawn at the front door of the shop, where a large crowd had formed. It was a ritual of sorts all through Atan on this morning, the Monday before Midsummer, where the parents of children formally presented them to artisans in hopes of having them taken as apprentices.

Some shops simply interviewed all comers and tested the children to select that year’s round of apprentices. Some shops, like Master Holm’s, had already carefully screened the applicants to find the kids with the aptitude, and the money had already changed hands. All these boys had already been accepted. Some had a mixture of those extremes. In almost every shop, though, it was the same. Parents would pay the artisans to apprentice their children. After the first year, if they were taken as indentured apprentices, they were literally the property of the artisan. Kyven and Timble were *owned* by Holm, who could pay them whatever he wished, treat them however he wished, even sell their contracts to another crystalcutter and pack them off to another shop. When an apprentice was indentured after the first year, the apprentices had to earn their keep, be it either with manual labor or with producing goods for the shop. Holm set a yearly amount that represented the money it cost him to feed, house, clothe, and train his apprentices, and each apprentice had to earn enough money to meet or exceed that amount through work. Some apprentices, like Timble and Kyven, earned the shop far more than what the shop paid to support them, so they didn’t pay Holm, they were instead paid by Holm a percentage of the difference of those sums. Not every shop did it the way Holm did, but Kyven had to admit, Holm’s system was fair. Holm didn’t have to pay them a single chit for their labor, but he quite fairly allowed them to profit from their hard work and dedication to the shop.

Kyven was a private man, and having to face some thirty or more faces unnerved him a little. He didn’t mind speaking to the other apprentices when he taught them, because he knew them. But these were strangers, people he didn’t know, more people that might discover his secret and think he was crazy. “Good morning,” he said nervously to the nine families, nine eleven year old boys and their parents, and even a few older and younger children who had also come, all of them dressed in their Sunday church best. “I’m Kyven, one of Master Holm’s senior apprentices. Please, step inside, all of you, and go down the hall to the schoolroom at the end.”

He remembered being on the other end, holding his father’s hand as the grizzled miner led him into the schoolroom, feeling nervous and afraid. Kyven had known that he’d be separated from his father then, that he’d be living here, and that idea had scared him. His father had been his only family, and to be separated from him was almost traumatizing. He remembered his father kneeling before him, holding him by his shoulders, and telling him in that voice damaged by mine dust, “ya do yer best, squirt. Master Holm’s a fair man and a good

crystalcutter, one of the best. He can give ya a future here, train ya to be more than I ever could, far better than ya wasting out yer lungs in the mines like yer old man. I’m not leaving ya here because I don’t want ya, I’m leaving ya here because I love ya. Can ya understand that, squirt? Good. Now, I’m gonna get out of here so I don’t distract ya. Just do yer best and remember to write every week. I love ya, son.”

He could still hear that voice, just like it was yesterday. And it was the last time he’d ever heard his father’s voice. His father died in a mine accident six months after Kyven began his apprenticeship... which put even more pressure on him at his first year test. If he’d failed that test and been put out, he’d have been homeless, with nowhere to go. There was no telling what would have happened to him if he would have failed to win an apprenticeship with another crystalcutter. He’d taken that first year test literally with his life on the line, and thank the Trinity, he’d passed it.

That memory made him a little more tolerant of the fussing parents as they hugged and gave encouragement and instructions to their nervous, frightened sons than Holm had been at his own induction. Holm had been surly and a little scary, yelling at them, banging his cane on the floor, scaring them into doing as he commanded. “Everyone take a seat when you get free of your parents!” Kyven called. “Parents, wrap it up, it’s not like we’re tossing them in a dungeon! You can see them next Sunday!”

Kyven sat on the teacher’s table as the parents and siblings fussed with the apprentices for a few more minutes, then filed out, blowing kisses. When they were all gone, when it was nothing but Kyven and the apprentices, he was silent a moment. He blinked when the light in the room seemed to shimmer from the lamps, and then he felt it. He felt the eyes. He looked to the door leading to the front showroom, and it sat there in the doorway, glowing green eyes unblinking, just watching him. He shook his head and blinked, then looked back, to see it was gone.

Thank the Trinity.

“Good morning, then,” Kyven called. “My name is Kyven Steelhammer, I’m one of the two senior apprentices in Master Holm’s cutting shop. Today, you will hear me talk more than you will hear me talk for the next ten years put together,” he said, which made the onlooking apprentices who know him laugh in agreement. “There’s only one man in this shop that speaks with a larger voice than me and the other senior apprentice, Timble Longbranch, and that’s our Master Holm. Let me explain what we do here one more time, because I’m sure you were too nervous to fully appreciate it. Myk,” he called. A fourteen year old hurried over carrying a small box, handed it to him, then left. “Boys, what we do here is take this,” he said, taking a raw red crystal out of the box, a fairly large nine point crystal, “and then turn it into this,” he said, taking another nine point out, cut in the Princess cut, a heart-shaped crystal that was slightly oval. “This is a crystal, boys. A mana crystal. These are the backbone of all those nifty little gadgets and devices you use around the house, the army uses to keep us safe, and so on and so on. We cut the crystals they mine out of the mountains, and then the alchemists use them to power the devices they build. Each crystal is unique, boys. Each crystal holds inside it the power of magic, but it’s not refined, not focused. It comes to us raw, and we inspect it, study it, analyze it. We study its structure to understand how the magic in it flows, and then we cut the crystal to maximize that power. Each crystal needs to be cut to bring out that power, so every cut is different, unique to that crystal. We use basic cutting patterns as a guide, but every crystal’s cut is unique. No two are ever cut exactly the same. Our job, boys, is to make each crystal as strong as possible. The better we do, the stronger they are, and the longer they last when they power things like that,” he said, pointing at the lamp hanging from the ceiling.

“Cutting is a job that requires two skills, boys,” he said to them. “The first skill is appraising. You have to see what kind of potential a crystal has, and by appraising it, you know how best to cut it to bring out the crystal’s maximum potential. After you appraise it, you move to the next skill, and that’s making the actual cuts. You’ll learn both of these skills, and here, at this shop, you have to be good at all both of them. Some men are good appraisers, but can’t cut. Others are good at cutting, but can’t appraise. You won’t find them in this shop. To make it here, you have to prove you can take a crystal from beginning to end, take a raw crystal, appraise it, then cut it. And remember one more thing, boys. This is not a game, but there is competition. In one year, you’ll take your first test, and only two of you will be moving into indentured apprenticeship. If you want to not worry about it, then don’t. I don’t think any apprentice that wasn’t picked didn’t go on to get apprenticed at another shop, but that’s because Master Holm is the best. He only takes the best to be his apprentices. So, the seven of you who don’t make it, don’t panic. You’ll apprentice to another cutter and go on to make a good living. But if you want to be here for more than to make a living, if you want to *be* the best, then work for it. Work to be one of those two who makes the cut.

“You’re going to be very busy for the next year, boys. First, we’ll teach to read. We teach you to read because being a good cutter requires you to be able to read and study books and draw up cutting diagrams if another cutter is doing the cut. And you’ll study *lots* of books. Master Holm has an entire library on books about crystalcutting, and you’ll read them all. While you study books, you’ll work with us, the older apprentices, and we’ll teach you the art of crystalcutting from the beginning to the end from the practical side. You’ll watch us appraise and then cut crystals, and you’ll learn the method behind the craft. We’ll teach you the skills, while the books teach you the theory and the science behind cutting. But, since you are just started, be ready to work. You’re going to be doing a lot of sweeping, scrubbing, washing, and cooking for your first year... but I’m sure you knew that.”

The boys chuckled a little and nodded. “When you prove you’re good enough, you’ll take lessons from Master Holm himself. But that’s a privilege you have to earn. At first, you’ll be working with the middle apprentices, the fourth and fifth years, and our tutor, Mistress Henna. She’ll teach you to read, they’ll be teaching you the basics. Once you learn the basics, you’ll be taking lessons with the sixth, seventh, and eighth years. They’ll teach you the basic skills that the senior apprentices, me and Timble, and Master Holm will refine. If you think it’s strange that you’re not being taught by us, consider this. Part of being a crystalcutter is being able to teach *your own* apprentices when you finish your apprenticeship. As you learn from your seniors, your seniors learn a skill you’ll practice yourself when you’re at their level. And since *we* taught them, and we’ll be watching them, be assured that they won’t teach you wrong.”

One boy raised his hand, then stood up when Kyven nodded to him. “Sir, if you were taught by apprentices in your first year, doesn’t that mean you taught them when you were their age? I mean, how can we learn to be the best if the Master doesn’t seem to be directly teaching us, and leaving our instruction to his own students who aren’t masters? No offense, sir.”

Kyven laughed. “I asked that same question at my induction, kid, so no offense taken at all,” he smiled. “It’s a valid question, and it deserves an answer. Yes, I was teaching first years in my fourth and fifth years. But it’s not a matter of filling glasses over and over with a pitcher until the water’s gone, kid. It’s like pouring the same water down the line from glass to glass. Each glass gets filled to the same amount. Yes, Master Holm won’t be giving you direct lessons until you’re in your third year minimum, but remember that he taught the people that taught the people that are teaching you, and he wouldn’t allow us to teach you if he didn’t believe we could teach you right. He won’t be teaching, but he *will* be watching. Master

Holm is the *best*, boys, and that means he demands we live up to that standard. You’ll learn more from our fourth year apprentices than you’d learn from the masters in other shops in Atan. But you’re going to work, boys. Trust me, you’re gonna work for it. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, sir, thank you, sir.”

“Don’t call me sir,” Kyven snorted. “My name is Kyven. You can call me Kyv. Any other questions? Yes, stand and speak,” he nodded to a blond boy in the front row.

“Mister Kyven sir, my father said we’d learn numbers and the law, too. Do we?”

“Yes. Master Holm will teach you *everything* you need to know about running a cutting shop, and that includes being able to do numbers to keep your books, being able to run a staff that keeps your shop going, and understanding the laws of Atan concerning cutters and the rules of the Crystalcutter’s Guild, which you’ll be allowed to join when you start your own shop. But you won’t start taking those lessons until your eighth year.”

“Thank you,” the boy said, then he sat back down.

“Any other questions?” he asked, and they were silent.

“Alright then, let’s begin by showing you where you’re going to sleep for the next year. Now, everyone pick up your things and follow me. I’ll show you to the first year dormitory.”

Kyven took them up and had them pick beds in the attic, which had two rows of four beds facing each other and a lone ninth bed by the stairs. Each bed had a footlocker and a small desk against the wall behind it, where the first years could practice reading, writing, or practice using the cutting tools. They had a brief moment of interaction with the other apprentices that had taken the test yesterday. It was an awkward moment. Seven of those nine boys were leaving the shop today at noon sharp, and the two who passed would be moving one floor down. They were looking at their replacements, looking at that feeling that they were just cogs in the machine. Kyven singled out the boy who had asked him about learning from Holm and had him take the bed by the stairs. “Listen everyone,” Kyven called. “For now, this boy is your dorm chief,” he told them. “He’ll hold this position for the first week, until Master Holm interviews you and chooses who will lead the first years. So, at least for this week, you obey him up here in your dorm. It’s his responsibility to make sure the dorm is clean and orderly, but how you keep it clean and orderly is your own affair. When I was in my first year, we all met and drew up a schedule of chores that rotated every week so everyone did a little instead of a few doing everything, and nobody got stuck doing a job they hated all year. It worked for us, it may work for you.

“Look around, boys. See how clean this dorm is? See how all the beds are made, all the walls are clean, and how every footlocker and desk is polished? This is a clean and orderly dorm. This is how it has to stay. Think about what you need to do to keep the dorm clean, how you want to do it, then meet and do it. We won’t tell you what to do, and it’s your first test as an apprentice. We all work together here, boys, you have to prove that the nine of you can work together to keep your dorm clean and orderly. You have an hour to unpack and meet each other, boys. Put your things away, get to know each other, and I’ll be back in an hour to take you to breakfast.” He tapped the dark-haired boy on the shoulder. “Remember, kid, it’s your job to keep order, but don’t make them angry with you.”

“Yes, sir!” he said, putting his rucksack on the bed and opening it.

That was the start of a long day. Kyven basically herded the new apprentices around the shop all day. After breakfast, He gave them an extensive tour of the five floors and basement of the shop. He showed them every room that concerned them, and introduced them to the only three servants in the shop, the three women who served in the kitchen to do most of the cooking. Every one of them would spend time in the kitchen themselves as their chores,

helping Amva, Shii, and Surry cook the large meals required to feed the some twenty men and boys that lived and worked in Holm's shop. He showed the schoolroom where they'd learn to read and take other lessons, then took them into the workshop, where the apprentices and Master Holm did the actual work of the shop, cutting crystals. The clever dark-haired boy looked around curiously, then raised his hand to ask a question. "Excuse me Kyven, but where are the other apprentices and their benches? I mean, if there's two a year and we're here for nine years, shouldn't there be eighteen benches? I only see twelve."

"You're a sharp one, kid," Kyven chuckled. "Just getting past the first year test isn't a guarantee. There are only ten apprentices here right now besides you first years. Master Holm has dismissed or sold off nine of them, and bought the contract of one apprentice in return."

"Sold off?" another boy asked.

"Master Holm holds the contract for your services, kid," Kyven explained. "He can sell that contract to another crystalcutter who needs apprentices, and believe me, kid, masters *need* apprentices. We're the ones that do most of the work. Since I've been here, Master Holm has sold five contracts to other shops, three apprentices were dismissed, and one died in an accident last year. That's why there's only ten of us, instead of eighteen."

"Why would he sell a contract and send us to another shop?"

"He may not like you," Kyven shrugged. "He's gotten rid of a couple of apprentices that just got on his nerves. You may not be making it at our level, but are still good enough to be a competent cutter to work in another shop, doing easier work. We're the best, kids. We cut crystals they won't dare risk taking to other cutters. This shop has cut crystals worth tens of thousands of chits, and if they're cut wrong, they're *worthless*. Some of you may not be up to that kind of pressure, but be good cutters. And you'll find plenty of work, cutting smaller, less expensive crystals. The last apprentice to be sold had that problem. He was a great cutter, but he got nervous, and he couldn't seem to be able to handle cutting anything that was valuable for fear of ruining it. He works over at Master Jevik's shop now, and he's doing well. He's happier over there."

"Wouldn't a master like Holm rather buy accomplished apprentices from other shops, then, instead of taking us in from the beginning?"

"You're smart, kid," Kyven laughed. "He *has* bought a few apprentices like that. Merik, a seventh year, started over at Master Torvan's shop. But Merik was an exception rather than the rule. Merik came in his second year, his first indentured year, so he hadn't really learned enough for us to have to undo and retrain. Master Holm prefers to control every aspect of his apprentice's education, so he knows beyond any doubt that you were trained and educated the right way. With an apprentice from another shop, you never quite know what they've been taught, or what bad habits they've been taught you have to undo. In a shop like this, working with the crystals we do, that's a risk Master Holm doesn't like to take. He'd rather go through fifty apprentices to find the one good one rather than buy promising-looking apprentices from other cutters and have to retrain them. After all, Master Holm is already quite wealthy and established. He can afford doing it his way."

"I understand, Master Kyven."

Kyven laughed. "If Master Holm heard you call me that, he'd whip your bottom red. *Never* call another apprentice Master. We haven't earned that title. If you don't want to call me Kyv, then call me Senior Kyven, because I'm the Senior Apprentice."

After the tour, they were introduced to Mistress Henna, a gray-haired spinster who made her living by teaching reading and writing, which were rare skills outside of government and the clergy. After that introduction, Kyven explained the chores they'd be doing. He then fed them lunch, took them back to the schoolroom, and Master Holm met them. He gave them a

speech about what he expected of them and what he would teach them, then he sent them to their dorm and called them down to his office, one at a time, to interview them and test them. All of them had already been given tests in coordination and dexterity or Holm wouldn't have even accepted them, but he liked to give them a second test in stressful conditions to see how they handled the pressure. He would make them cut an intricate pattern out of a piece of paper with a razor blade while he was screaming, yelling, banging pots and pans, and throwing things at them. While they were interviewed one by one, Kyven got their names and wrote them on a slateboard at the head of the stairs of their attic dorm, and assigned them their shop chores for the first week. After the first week, the dorm chief would assign those chores. After the interviews, the first years were introduced to the rest of the apprentices again, more formally, at dinner in the main dining room. "Get used to it, boys, because tomorrow you'll be doing the serving!" Holm told the first years with a laugh as Surry ladled stew onto their plates.

Kyven leaned on his hand and played with his stew a moment, feeling exhausted after herding the new kids all over the compound, glad that the day was over. He saw the light shimmer a little around the table, as if the crystal in the lamp over them was about to fade, and he blinked, then looked around. There was a strange light around that clever dark-haired boy, the one that had all the questions, like a soft glow, and there seemed to be a golden hawk perched on his shoulder sedately, looking down at his plate.

Not again. Why had it been happening so much in the last few days? He blinked and turned to look behind his chair, and there it was. The fox. Sitting sedately, silver-tipped tail wrapped around its front legs, watching him with those glowing green eyes. He looked away deliberately, staring at his plate, blinking his eyes. He looked back to make sure that the hallucinations were gone, and saw that he could no longer see a hawk on the new boy's shoulder, but then realized that the fox had not vanished. The fox still sat there, still watched him, and it did not go away. It persisted all through dinner, as Kyven kept glancing behind his chair, ruining his appetite. He left the table first, going around the fox, who again *moved*. It turned its head, watching him, and when he was behind it, it stood up and turned around. As Kyven walked down the hallway towards the stairs, it followed. He turned and started up the steps, looking behind himself, but it didn't follow him up. It simply stood at the base of the stairs, looking up at him as he looked down at it.

Then it *barked*.

That sound startled him into missing the step. He fell against the stairs, sliding down a few steps before catching himself, then he got up on his knees on the stairs and looked back down as his elbows throbbed in pain from having the skin stripped off of them by the corners of the steps.

He'd never heard it make any sound before. Its bark sounded vaguely like a dog, but different at the same time, deeper, throatier, more forceful. It stood at the base of the stairs and just looked at him.

By the Trinity, was he really going crazy now? Before, it had never been like this. It had never moved anything but its head, but now, in the span of two days, this recurring vision had moved, twice, and now he heard it bark? He got back to his feet, but the fox barked again, making his jump and nearly fall down again. He looked back and saw it standing there, not sitting there, but standing there, its tail bouncing slightly behind it. It took a single step back, then turned sideway to him, and then barked again. It took a couple of steps down the hall, then it barked once more and looked up at him... expectantly?

It wanted him to follow it.

Kyven immediately thought of what happened yesterday. He had followed it yesterday, and

it had literally saved his life. What harm was there in following it again?

Plenty of harm. To follow it was to acknowledge it, to acknowledge that it was there, and face the fact that he was going crazy.

But crazy or not, it had saved him yesterday. He *owed* it to the fox to follow it now.

He started down the stairs. It vanished around the corner, walking down the hall, and he saw it down by the alley door when he reached the landing. He started when the fox walked *through* the door like it wasn't there, but then recalled that though it always looked solid, it really was just a figment of his imagination, and was therefore not bound by the laws of reality. Kyven rushed down to the door and opened it, then looked out into the narrow alley. He saw the fox walking away from him, moving up towards the dead end, where the door to Virren's shop was located. It stopped, turned, and sat down by Virren's door, and watched him.

He was startled. That was it? It brought him out into the alley? Why? Maybe he really was crazy. It certainly made no sense. He turned away and was about to go back in, but he heard a door open down the alley, and he stopped and turned partially around to look.

The fox was gone, but behind where it had been sitting, Virren's door opened. Virren himself stepped out, and he seemed to look down the alley. He stopped and stared at Kyven in surprise, and moved to step back into his shop, but a small figure behind him literally walked into him from behind. It was covered in a cloak, a full, deep cloak. Virren turned and urged the figure back into the shop, and when it turned, its cloak rose up just enough for Kyven to see its foot.

A gray-furred Arcan foot. The tip of a pink mouse tail ghosted down by that foot, and then slipped back up under the cloak.

It made Kyven stop as he realized what he was seeing, and fully comprehend what was going on. That small figure behind Virren was the Arcan that he thought had died in his shop last night. Virren had saved it, somehow, healed it of its injuries, and now he meant to... to what? Keep it? Clearly he was taking it somewhere. What did he mean to do? It didn't seem to be, well, legal. He was slipping the Arcan out the back of his shop at sunset, when most people were eating dinner. And now that he thought of it, he'd taken the Arcan's collar off it last night, made Kyven take it up to the watchhouse. And the watch was going to come down and make him pay for the worth of the Arcan's body since he'd kept it. So what was the reasoning here? Had he paid for the value of the Arcan's pelt and meat, just to try to steal the Arcan? That wouldn't work, the town was too small. Someone was going to visit his shop and see the mouse, and word would eventually get back to the original owner that Virren had stolen the Arcan. He couldn't keep it, he didn't kill it and sell its pelt and meat... so what did he mean to do with it? Sell it? He couldn't sell it to anyone in town, and couldn't sell it to the kennel, so was he going to sell it to a merchant? Was he going to meet a merchant to sell it to him? If he was meeting the merchant like this, the merchant had to know the Arcan was stolen, and there was no guarantee the Arcan itself would keep quiet if it had been fond of its former master. Dealing with stolen Arcans was a dangerous business, especially since Arcans weren't all that expensive. Kyven had enough chits and raw crystals saved just from prospecting and his pay to buy an Arcan, if he wanted to. It would be an untrained one, maybe a wild Arcan or an older one, but he could buy one.

Very weird.

Bark!

Kyven started, whirling around. The fox was back. It stood in the mouth of the alley, at Gem Street, then turned and started slowly walking away. Kyven only hesitated a second before moving to follow. He was curious now, very curious, and illusion or no illusion, now he wanted to see what else it meant to show him. He followed the fox as it padded through town

and left on the Avannar Road. It went just out of sight of the village, then turned down a hunting trail. Kit followed it, not paying attention to the fact that it was getting dark as it led him down to another section of Cougar Creek, near a ridge where Cougar Creek had a small, five rod waterfall as it drained down into the Blue Valley. Kyven followed it to the top of the waterfall, then it sat on a flat rock near the edge, its back to him, wrapped its silver-tipped tail around its front legs, and looked down.

He had never seen the back of it like that before. Its fur was thick, a little shaggy, and dark, almost black. The tips of its ears and the tip of its tail was silver, just like the ruff under its chin. Kyven seemed mystified by his old hallucination, and crept up behind it. Its ears twitched slightly, but it did not look back to him. It looked down, down to what Kyven knew was a little meadow at the base of the irregular waterfall that wasn't entirely vertical, merely very steep. He advanced to near the edge, and saw someone down there. For some reason, he didn't know why, he knelt down out of sight, then realized he was so close that he could reach out and touch the fox if he wanted to. He resisted the urge to try, for he knew it wasn't really there. It was just an illusion, a hallucination... but maybe, maybe it was more.

For the first time in his life, Kyven pondered the possibility of a third option. Maybe he wasn't crazy, and maybe he wasn't Touched. Maybe... maybe this fox was, was *real*. Maybe not real like the real world, but maybe it was real in some way he didn't entirely understand. He had always thought it was nothing but an image, but the last two days had proved to him that it was more. It moved. It could even bark. And it seemed to know things. It had warned him of the Touched Arcan, had lured him away from the creek and to safety. And it had lured him into the alley to show him Virren, but Kyven didn't understand what that meant. And now, now it had lured him out here, to the top of Cougar Fall, where a shadowy figure stood in the clearing at the bottom in the darkening evening.

Kyven leaned forward just enough to look over the mossy rocks of the edge. The figure was still there, a bit gloomy in the twilight murk as the dimming light compounded the shadows of the surrounding forest, a very tall figure that looked... wrong. It wore a cloak, and he was looking at it from above and behind, so it was hard to pin down why it didn't look right, but it didn't. It seemed, well, not standing right. When it turned, he realized why it seemed that way.

It was an Arcan.

A muzzle appeared from the hood of the cloak, and then it pushed the cloak back to reveal the hilt of a sword as a faint rustling tickled his ears. A rust-colored furry paw gripped the hilt of that weapon, and the shape of the muzzle hinted that this was a canine Arcan... a coyote, or perhaps a wolf. Kyven saw a shadow at the edge of the small clearing, and two shapes appeared from the deepening gloom.

It was Virren and the mouse Arcan.

Virren stood up and raised his empty hand, and the cloaked canine released the hilt of his sword and stepped up. Then they clasped wrists in some kind of greeting. "Thank you for coming so quickly," Virren told the Arcan. "Any trouble from the sweep?"

"Luckily no," the Arcan replied. "We saw it coming when we found signs of a Touched Arcan in the area."

"Was it anyone I know?"

"No, we'd never seen him before. It was a roaming feral Arcan. Who did he kill?"

"Aven, a mountain man, no one of consequence," Virren answered. "Come now, my dear," he said gently to the cloaked mouse, "this is Shard, the coyote I told you about. He'll take care of you from here."

"I'll take you far from the human lands," the coyote told her, holding his paw out. "You'll

never be a slave again.”

“Never?” she asked in a disbelieving voice.

The coyote opened his cloak. “Do you see a collar on me, mouse?” he asked simply. “I’m a *free* Arcan. Come with me, and you can be too.”

“Free?” she said in a small voice, then she buried her face in her paws and dropped her knees, weeping.

“There there, dear, there there,” Virren said comfortingly, reaching down and picking her up, keeping his hands on her shoulders. “It’s going to be alright now. But you do need me to give me my cloak back,” he said with a gentle smile. “I may need it again.”

“Of–Of course,” she said, sniffing. She unfastened the cloak and gave it to him, revealing that she was wearing a wool shirt and a pair of leather breeches much like the clothes that Virren’s apprentices wore.

Unbelievable! Virren was a *sympathizer*! They were humans who hated the fact that humans enslaved the Arcans, and worked to free them. He’d heard of humans like him, but had never believed he’d know one, because their beliefs were both radical and considered illegal by the laws of many coalition governments, including Atan. What Virren was doing could get him *hanged*!

Amazing! What a cover Virren had, for he owned Arcans himself, used them in his shop! Nobody would ever believe for an instant that Virren was a sympathizer... and maybe that was exactly why he kept Arcans. But it fit. It fit that off-handed remark Virren gave him about how Arcans couldn’t be animals because they could talk. It explained why he was angry at the young men who had beaten her, and why he wouldn’t let them take her body. He had saved her, and now he was risking his own life to hand her over to–

To who? An Arcan, but a *free* Arcan? Kyven had never heard of a free Arcan that was, well, intelligent. The Arcans that were free were wild, feral, acting like animals. Sometimes they were captured and tamed to be used for labor, but those Arcans were never quite like Arcans who were born into it. Tame Arcans were intelligent, they could speak, and could follow directions and perform complex tasks. Was this coyote once a tame Arcan, but had slipped his collar and fled into the wilderness to the west of the Smoke Mountains? There were no organized governments over there, just frontier settlements and mountain men eking out their own livings off the land. Was he just one of many escaped Arcans who had banded together into one of those mythical Arcan villages that the mountain men liked to tell stories about, places where only Arcans lived, imitating the culture of the humans they had served?

It was entirely possible. This coyote, he knew Virren. Virren had obviously summoned him here, somehow. And he was *dressed*. He wasn’t nude like what Kyven would expect from a wild Arcan, and he said he’d take the mouse far from human lands.

There was a glint of movement. The fox, who had been sitting so close to him, stood up. Kyven watched it as it padded back towards the path to town on silent feet, its dark fur melding with the coming gloom until Kyven could see it no longer. Was he supposed to follow it? It didn’t turn to look at him. Maybe this was what the fox wanted him to see, and now that he’d seen it, it was done? Possible. He backed up from the edge so he wasn’t seen if he stood up, then turned and crept back to the path as quietly as he could. He heard them talking as he retreated, but with the fox gone, he wasn’t sure he felt entirely safe. If that coyote heard him or smelled him, it could catch him and kill him to protect Virren, who was obviously his friend. One on one, he was no match for an Arcan. Because of the shape of their legs, with that third joint in them like other quadrupedal mammals, they could drop down on all fours and run as swiftly as any horse, but were just as nimble, agile and mobile as any human when standing upright because their thighs were just as long as a human’s thighs, which gave them

stability and agility while moving on two legs. Their legs were only different from the knees down, but they were different enough to give Arcans a way to chase down any human with ridiculous ease. They were faster than humans, stronger than humans, and more agile than humans. According to legend, Arcans were created to work and to fight, and that gave them distinct physical advantages over humans. Kyven would stand no chance against him, especially since he had a sword and Kyven had no weapon.

Kyven retreated from the falls as quietly as he could, and spent nearly an hour moving very slowly and very carefully along the path because it was now dark and Kyven had brought no light. He had to literally feel his way along the path until he reached the road, and then the dim lights of the town guided him back to the safety of Atan.

The town was the same, but he knew he was different now.

It was different. Kyven went to the Three Boars and sat at a table near the fireplace, with a tankard of ale in front of him, lost in thought.

What he’d learned today... it made things different. He’d discovered a dark secret about Virren, a secret that could get him hanged if Kyven ever revealed it. But he’d never do that. Virren was a good man, a good alchemist, and Kyven had always rather liked him. What he’d learned about him tonight didn’t make him hate Virren, not at all. Virren was following his heart, doing what he believed was right. Kyven didn’t have much of an opinion about Arcans, so Virren’s beliefs didn’t impact him very much. It did show Kyven that Virren was a very kind man, though, to care so much about the Arcans, so much he was willing to risk his very life for them. And it was definitely a risk. Virren wasn’t the only man that lived at the shop. He had apprentices, servants... did they know about Virren’s secret? Were they in on it? It was impossible to know, and because Kyven could get arrested for aiding Virren’s activities if they found out he knew about them but didn’t report it, he wasn’t about to try to find out. It was a secret that would never pass his lips, both for Virren’s protection, and his own.

He learned something about himself, too. The fox... it couldn’t be just a hallucination. If it was, then the only way it could have led him away from the stream, led him to Virren’s secret, was if he had known about them himself, and that was quite impossible. If it was a figment of his own imagination, then how did he know about that Touched Arcan? How did he know Virren’s secret? No. The fox was not a mind image, not a hallucination, not a part of himself. It was... *external*. It knew things he did not. The fox, it was *real*. It wasn’t real in body, but–it was hard to comprehend. The fox was something not part of him, but at the same time, it seemed to be something that only he could see... and not even all the time. All these years, he always thought it was some sign of insanity, something he had to ignore. But yesterday, the fox had taken action, forced him to recognize it as something other than a hallucination, and that saved his life. And today, it had shown him Virren’s secret, for some reason he couldn’t quite understand, but it had. Was it... proving itself to him? Proving to him that it was real? Or was there some undiscovered reason for why it wanted him to know about Virren?

Questions, questions, and more questions, and no answers for them. He took another drink of his ale, grimacing a little. He hated the taste of ale, because he rarely drank it. He’d always been afraid to get drunk, afraid that he might tell people about his secret when the alcohol loosened his tongue. So he was always careful to keep control of his mental faculties all the time. But tonight, after the revelations that were shaking his life, by the Trinity, he *needed* a drink.

A figure came up to him, looming at the end of the table. He didn’t look up, but he did when the figure sat down across from him. It was Virren. The burly man set a pewter tankard down

with him on the table and looked at Kyven with hooded eyes. Kyven could sense his... reservation. Somehow, Virren knew he knew. He didn't know how much Kyven knew, but he knew he knew about the Arcan.

"Ale? That's not like you," Virren said, a touch nervously.

"I needed it tonight," he answered, then looked right at him. "I never knew you had a girlfriend," he said directly. "She must have a brother that doesn't like you to slip her in and out the alley door."

The aged man gave Kyven a long, searching look. "I think I might break it off with her. I enjoy her company, but it would be the scandal of Atan if we became common knowledge. The old crones would talk about it for years."

"Well, they'll never hear it from me, Master Virren. When I have my own shop, I'd like to have you as a customer. I can't poison a business relationship before it even starts, you know."

Virren gave him a long look, then chuckled. "I guess not. And don't call me Master Virren when we're having a drink." He gave him a close look. "What's wrong?"

"I had a nasty shock earlier today."

"Over what?" he asked nervously, but trying to sound casual.

"I learned something about myself today, something that surprised me."

"What is that?"

"I'm... not the man I thought I was."

"That can be good or bad, depending on what you discovered. Might I ask which it was?"

He looked to the fire, which burned despite the warm night, illuminating the tavern's common room along with the crystal lamps. "All my life, Virren, I've seen... something," he said, tracing the lip of his tankard with a finger. It spilled out of him, then, something he had never told anyone before, but something... something he just needed to say. Something he had to admit. "An animal. A fox, but it's not a fox. It looks like a fox, but it has glowing green eyes that aren't natural. It watches me, all the time. Sometimes, I can see it. Sometimes, I can't... but I know it's there. It's watched me since I was a little boy, since the day my mother died. Nobody else can see it but me. I always thought it was a hallucination, that I was going crazy, but it never seemed to get any worse, and I got used to it. Until yesterday. Yesterday, for the first time, the fox appeared to me, and then left. It walked away from me, then it looked back at me and... I just knew it wanted me to follow it. It had never done that before. I didn't understand why, so I followed it. I found out why just a few minutes later. It lured me away from the creek, away from the Touched Arcan that killed Aven. If not for the fox, that Arcan would have come across me first, but it went by me and attacked Aven instead. It saved me, Virren. I didn't want to believe it, so I just went on, put it out of my mind. But tonight..." He took a long drink from his tankard. "Tonight it showed me that it's not a dream. It's real. I know I'm crazy for saying it, but it is. It showed me something that convinced me that it's not a figment of my imagination."

"What did it show you?" he asked seriously.

Kyven looked him directly in the eyes. "That I can trust you with my secret," he answered, then he looked into the fire. "I don't really know what to do with myself, Virren," he said in a low tone. "I don't know if I should be happy I'm not crazy, or scared to death that I'm not. Or maybe I really am, and just don't know it."

"I don't think you're crazy, Kyv," he said after a moment. "Sometimes, we all see things that others miss. We see things that others don't, and they think we're crazy for it. I understand, my friend. Probably more than you know."

"I guess," he sighed. "Thanks for the company, Virren. I... I think I needed it tonight."

"Hey, a chance to get the most notoriously silent man in Atan to talk? Who would pass that up?"

He chuckled in spite of himself, and drained his tankard dry. "I have just one question, Virren. You don't have to answer it if you don't want to."

"What is that?"

"Your girlfriend. Will she be alright now that you've broken off your relationship? Some women take that kind of thing very hard, you know."

Virren gave him a long look, then nodded. "I think she will be. She has friends to help her through it."

"I'm glad to hear that." He looked to the fire again. "I'm going to head home, Virren. Maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

"Oh, I think you might. I managed to get my hands on a seven point green, Kyv, and it needs to be cut. A crystal like that, who do you think I'm bringing it to?"

Kyven laughed. "I might not have hands steady enough for a crystal like that tomorrow, Virren."

"I wouldn't put it any hands other than these, Kyv," he said, patting Kyven's wrist with his large, scarred hand. "These are hands I can trust."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Kyven chuckled, standing up. He put a single chit on the table, an amber disc that shimmered with red flakes that made it sparkle in the firelight. The Loremasters made them, mixing crystal dust with some special combination of tree resin and chemicals that hardened the resin into a material with the composition and hardness of amber. It was inscribed with its value, one chit, which meant that the disc was worth 1/100 of the value of a pointweight of red crystal. "We'll see if my hangover lets me do any work tomorrow."

"Then I'll wait," Virren told him, then waved as Kyven left the bar.

Virren leaned back in his chair, then waved to the Arcan barmaid, a slender mink whom the innkeeper kept naked to tease the patrons, wearing only a waist apron. Though her breasts were covered with fur and they could see nothing, the fact that they were very handsome breasts that would do any human woman proud kept them coming back to be served by her.

"Drink?" she asked in a meek tone, her words clear, but it was well known in the bar that her language skills didn't go much past "drink." She could understand what drinks one wanted and was smart enough to be able to bring the right drinks to the right people, but that was about it. She was cute, in an Arcan kind of way, pleasant on the eyes to humans because of her female curves, but she was as dumb as a box of rocks.

But that's all they were meant to see.

"Another drink," he said, looking right into her eyes. He tapped his finger on the table, and made a single hooking motion, then turned his eyes and looked directly at Kyven as the young man left the inn.

The mink's blue eyes widened in surprise, and she nodded and hurried away.

At the bar, she held her tray out to the male rat who was drawing from a large cask on a stand. "Drinks," she said to him. She made the same hooking motion with her free paw on her tray, then looked the rat in the eyes.

"Ale?" he asked.

"Ale, ale," she answered. He put a full tankard on her tray, and she leaned forward, checked the location of the innkeeper, then brought her muzzle close to the rat's ear. "Kyven," she whispered.

The rat gave her a startled look, then nodded and turned to fill another tankard. He put it on her tray, then put two fingers on the lip of the tankard, which caused her to nod impercepti-

bly.

The mink brought the tankard to Virren's table and set it down. She put two fingers on the lip of the tankard and tapped it once. He handed her a chit, and tapped it in her padded paw two times before releasing it to her. She bowed to him and moved off to wait on another table.

Virren leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on the table, and drained half his tankard in one long draw.

Amazing. Simply amazing. Almost unbelievable. If he hadn't heard it from Kyven's own mouth, he'd wouldn't have believed it... but he did.

Kyven could see spirits. The spirit had saved him, and from the way it sounded, had guided Kyven to Virren to show him that Virren was a man he could trust, had guided Kyven to the one man in Atan that would understand his cryptic confession for what it was, and see the truth.

Kyven wasn't crazy.

Unless Virren was crazy himself, Kyven was a *Shaman*. A *human* Shaman. Just the thought of that seemed ludicrous, impossible, absolutely insane, but what he had heard from Kyven was just impossible to deny.

In two days, they'd find out if his hunch was true or not. In two days, the Masked would send a Shaman to check and see if the impossible had indeed come to pass.

In two days, they'd know.

Chapter 2

His mind just wasn't in it. However, years of doing what some said he was born to do took over.

Kyven's hands slid over the small green crystal, about the size of a paddleball, oddly spherical and very, very valuable. It had a strange radial lattice structure, a kind of spiral swirl of lattice within that focused the power of the crystal quite naturally, giving the crystal more innate power than other crystals its size. This kind of unusual energy pattern in the crystal made it difficult to place any basic template on cutting it. This would be completely free-handed, because a crystal like this required an absolute minimum of cutting to express it. He'd barely do more than shave the rough outer shell off the crystal, chipping it away at natural faults within the crystal that inhibited the power within from flowing smoothly and efficiently. The result would be a nearly round green crystal, looking like a dimpled ball.

He held up the crystal to the light, looking at it, looking into it... looking through it. It was how he appraised crystals. He didn't need a magnifying glass like the other cutters. He could see that it had no internal flaws at all, a truly perfect crystal that must have cost Verrin a bloody fortune. A green crystal was rare enough, but one this big with no flaws? Usually, the bigger the crystal, the more minor internal flaws it had, which diminished a crystal's increase in power compared to size after they went past fifteen points, but even smaller crystals usually had at least a few very minor flaws in them that a cutter had to identify and cut to make the crystal's power flow around it. This seven point green crystal was *flawless*.

He set it on the stand and begun, though his mind wasn't on what he was doing. His hands worked by themselves, slicing off the rough exterior of the crystal along natural planes as his mind still whirled from the last couple of days. Not only was the fox not a hallucination, but he'd *told someone* about it. But, at the time, it seemed the right thing to do. Something inside him just opened the floodgates on impulse, and his deepest secret had spilled out of him before he knew it. But even now, he didn't really dread what he'd done. Some part of him told him that he'd done the right thing. He knew Virren's dark secret, and knowing it just seemed

to bring it out of Kyven. Virren knew how to keep a secret. Virren wouldn't tell anyone, just as he wouldn't tell anyone that Virren was a sympathizer.

But to know that the fox wasn't an illusion, to admit it to someone else, which admitted it to himself... he couldn't stop thinking about it. The main question, the one he couldn't answer, was *how*. If the fox was not part of him, not a figment of his imagination, then what was it? If it truly was external, then why was he the only one that could see it? If he was the only one that could see it, didn't that mean that it was a figment of his imagination? But it wasn't a figment of his imagination, because it had *proved* it. Those two paradoxical thoughts just tumbled over and over in his mind, as cyclical as the chicken and the egg. It couldn't be an illusion because it knew things he did not, but it couldn't be external because nobody else could see it but him. If it really wasn't a part of him, then *what was it*?

He had absolutely no idea. He couldn't even venture a guess. He just had no idea, no inkling. It was a question so far beyond his understanding that he wouldn't even try. It was something he could not explain or understand, and he had to leave it at that.

There had been no help in the books he'd read at the Loremaster's library this morning. There was no mention of anything like it. The only thing that came close was some theology book that talked of demons and angels. This fox didn't seem like it could be some kind of religious being, so he discounted that. Besides, the book said angels were winged human-like beings that were part of the religious lore of the Trinity, while demons were scaly, ugly beings with horns and frightening visages. This wasn't anything like that. Yes, it was definitely not natural, but it was no angel and it was no demon.

He kept going around and around in his mind, lost in thought as his hands continued to work on their own, until he blinked and saw that it was done, and he'd worked through lunch, finishing just as the other apprentices were returning. The crystal was cut with a myriad of tiny facets around its surface, producing a scintillating jewel that sparkled with green gleams and flashes whenever it was turned or moved. It was cut with such small facets that it almost looked round, hundreds of them. He carefully buffed it with a polish cloth until it all but dazzled in the light of his lamp, then wrapped it in a cloth and put it in a backpack. He warned Master Holm he was delivering the crystal, then snuck the some twenty paces down the alley to Verrin's door. Bragga let him in and sent him to the forge, where Verrin and three of his apprentices took turns striking a piece of glowing red metal with heavy hammers while that canine Arcan held it steady and still with a pair of tongs grasped in paws covered with heavy leather gloves. Kyven just stood back silently and watched and listened as Verrin explained the consistency of the alloy to the apprentices and told them that this alloy would be used for medical devices, for healing. He quizzed the apprentices on why, and when none answered, he told them that iron was the metal most attuned to the body.

Little wonder why he was forging alloys for healing devices given the crystal that Kyven had just cut for him.

"Stoke it," Virren commanded to the Arcan, and the canine turned and thrust the cooling metal back into the forge. Another apprentice took up the tongs as the Arcan began working the bellows, tending the metal carefully as the Arcan stoked the heat of the forge. "You're finished already, Kyv?" he asked. Kyven nodded and took off the backpack, then the pouch, then removed it from the pouch and unwrapped it. Virren took one look at it and nodded in satisfaction. "Old Gray!" he boomed.

An aged, gray-furred coyote scurried into the room. He wore a cast on his left arm, the arm caught up in a sling. He wore nothing but a pair of thick leather breeches, a scarred leather apron, and a collar, and his arms and upper chest showed dozens of tiny little bald patches in his fur, burns from the molten metals with which the Arcans and alchemists worked. "Take

this to the vault,” Virren ordered, pointing to the crystal in Kyven’s hand. “Put it in the double-locked chest.”

The aged Arcan nodded and waited as Kyven wrapped it back up and put it in the pouch, then handed it over. The Arcan held it close to his chest as he hurried out of the room.

“I see he didn’t stay in his room long,” Kyven noted.

“I couldn’t make him sit still,” Virren sighed. “So I put him to some of the apprentice’s chores, things he can do with one arm. The apprentices didn’t mind until I made them do an inventory of all our stocks. Feeling better today?”

“Some. My mind’s just not been here today. It’s a good thing my hands can work without it.”

Virren chuckled. “I know that feeling. Hung over?”

“Not really. Just too much to think about,” he sighed.

“It gets better.”

“It has to. If it gets any worse, I’ll end up in the Black Keep.”

Virren chuckled. “I heard that the miners are back to business.”

“Yeah, Master Torvik was over this morning to talk to Master Holm, they were talking about it. Master Holm thinks they’ll be moving the mines soon.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard. Smaller and smaller crystals, and they’re working harder to find them.”

Kyven nodded. “Looks like Cougar Ridge has almost played out.”

“I think they’re going to try Maple Ridge next, a lot of the ground prospectors have had good luck there, and the exploratory mine they dug looked promising. They found lots of shocked bedrock.”

Shocked bedrock was the telltale sign that crystals were nearby. The presence of the crystals altered the rocks around them, producing a kind of stone called shocked bedrock. The shocked stone was more brittle than the stone around it, which was a boon to mining the crystals as well, but also required significant shoring and reinforcement when the mine had hit a major pocket of crystals, since cave-ins were such a danger when mining crystals.

“Maybe we’ll start seeing some good crystals soon,” Kyven said. “Master Holm’s business has dropped off. He’s had some of the younger apprentices cut many more mainstream crystals than usual to keep up the profit margin, though he’s been telling them it’s just so they can get some extra practice.”

“As rich as he is, he can afford a dry spell,” Virren chuckled. “Does he still have those big raw crystals in his vault? The ones he keeps on the stands?”

“I don’t think I should be telling you what’s in Master Holm’s vault, Master Virren,” Kyven said simply. “It’s not my place.”

“True, true, forget I asked,” he nodded. “Feel up to a tankard after you’re off, Kyv?”

“No thanks, Master Virren, but thanks for the offer,” he said politely. “I need to get back, I have a seven point red to double radial cut.”

“A rare cut.”

“I’m going to teach the cut to the youngers, it’s so rare they’ve never seen it done before. There’s only so much you can get out of studying cutting plans in a book.”

“Well, have fun with that,” Virren told him. “See you later.”

Kyven slogged through the training session, as all the youngers crowded around his bench and observed as he explained the approach behind the double radial cut, then did some cuts and then paused for them to see, and repeated that process all afternoon as they watched, took notes, and asked questions, until he chipped off the final burr at about their usual quitting time and polished it, then allowed them to examine it under his magnifying glass. He sat quietly through dinner as the brand new first years served it, something of a tradition in the

shop, and he left the table after barely touching his food and headed outside. He walked aimlessly in the warm summer afternoon, without direction or purpose, as his mind was lost in thought, still consumed by the revelations of the last two days. It was a sobering thought to discover that you’re not crazy, but that discovery leaves you with no rational way to explain what the hell is going on in its wake. He felt powerless, impotent... stupid. He just couldn’t explain it, and it was driving him nuts. What was it? What was it? If the fox wasn’t an illusion, but only he could see it, then *what was it?* Was it a ghost? Was it some kind of phantom? Was it some kind of crystal-eating monster that no human had ever seen before, and it had somehow latched onto Kyven since he was a kid, following him around like some kind of pet?

It was getting close to sunset. He looked up from the ground and realized he was quite a ways from town, on the Avannar Road, halfway down into the Blue Valley. Cougar Creek bubbled merrily out of his sight, behind a stand of trees and a curve in the road where an old wooden bridge crossed over it, the last time anyone on the road would see Cougar Creek as it turned south and the road continued to the east. He was nearly a half hour’s walk from town. Had he really lost track of time like that? He needed to get back. It was almost the new moon, and the moon wouldn’t rise until late tonight, which meant that it would be a dark, uncertain trudge back up the road if he didn’t get there before dark. He turned around and started back towards town.

Bark!

Kyven stopped dead in his tracks. It was the fox. He remembered that sound. He turned just his head and shoulders, looking behind him. It was sitting in the center of the road, tail wrapped around its front legs, glowing green eyes unblinking. Kyven almost ran away, but he was almost paralyzed by those eyes, those pupilless, glowing green eyes, twin pools of emerald radiance that looked at him with calm reserve. He stared at it over his shoulder for a long, long moment, and then it uncurled its tail from its front legs and stood up. It turned towards the side of the road and padded over to it, then stopped and looked at him expectantly.

It wanted him to follow.

Again, he found himself moving towards it almost against his will. To follow it was to recognize it, and to recognize it only drove him insane with confusion as he struggled to understand this absurdity, tried understand that which could not, should not exist.

And yet he followed.

It led him down a narrow game trail to the creek, then along the creekside for nearly twenty minutes. Kyven jumped the creek again and again as the fox padded along in a straight line in front of him, walking along the bank, and what made his eyes widen the first time he saw it, *on top* of the water. It proved that the fox wasn’t there, wasn’t real... and yet it was. It looked solid, looked real, but there was nothing there. It was just an illusion, a spectre in his own mind, but it was something with an external intelligence that was not part of him. At the base of the valley, nearly two minars south from where the road was, the fox finally stopped at a steep bank of the stream as it turned fully south and followed the base of the ridge, nearly three rods from the water to the top of the muddy wall, nearly, so high that the grassy top of the bank was just over Kyven’s eyes. The fox then walked out over the top of the water, went to the far side of the slow-moving, deep area of the curve, and started pawing at the surface of the water almost as if it was digging.

There was... something there. He could feel it. There was something there it wanted him to find. It had brought him here to show it to him. But what? What was he here to find? He approached and stopped at the edge of the stream, then realized that whatever it was, it would require him to get wet. He pulled off his clothes, putting them on the bank and standing nude

before the fox as it continued to paw at the water's surface, then he waded into the stream, felt a cold chill go up his spine as the cold water collided with warm skin, and felt the muck ooze between his toes as he stepped out into the streambed. The fox stopped pawing and moved, then sat down and curled its tail around its front legs a few paces upstream of where it had been as Kyven reached where it had been pawing. The water was thigh-deep where the fox was, and when he knelt down to put his hands down to the bottom of the streambed, the water lapped at his chin.

He had no idea what he was looking for. He felt around among smooth rocks half-buried in the mud at the bottom of the stream, his fingers probing, and at one point brushing up against something cold and slimy that flinched and retreated from him. His fingers probed down into the mud, searching for... what? A rock? Some special piece of mud? A buried stick?

No. *That*. He felt a strange tingle against his pinkie, a tingle he usually only felt when working with crystals. They had a tingle to them, the tingle of the power in them, a tingle he was so used to feeling when he did his work that he really paid it little mind. He carefully shifted his hand until he felt the tingle between his thumb and middle finger, then carefully and gently squeezed them together. He felt something small between them, something that was secure in his hand as he pulled it out of the mud. When his hand was free, he swished it in the water vigorously to clean the mud off his hand, then pulled it out of the water and looked.

He almost dropped it.

There, between his fingers, was a *white crystal*, a two point crystal, about the size of large pea, and his fingers tingled at the touch of it.

He couldn't believe it. It was... it was... it was a *treasure*! This tiny crystal was worth—By the Father's grace, it was worth a bloody fortune! Even though it was only a two point crystal, it was *white*. With that one tiny crystal, he could buy out his contract with Master Holm and have enough left over to buy his own tools, even put a down payment down on his own shop!

He could buy out his contract.

He could *buy out his contract*.

He looked to the fox. Its form seemed to meld with the deepening shadows of the forest, until only its eyes were visible, and then those vanished.

He was alone.

He sighed. But, it was more proof that it was no part of himself, no hidden side of his mind. It had known about the white crystal and led him to it, led him to a crystal so valuable he could free himself of his indentured service to Master Holm.

It truly was something outside of him, some external consciousness.

He knew he should feel giddy, ecstatic, but he just felt... lost.

It was a long, slow walk back to Atan, in the rosy light of the morning sun. He'd sat on the muddy streambank until well after sundown, and then only got up to move to the dry, warm sand of the sandbar facing the steep bank. He'd sat on the riverbank as the sounds of the night washed over him, passed through him, as he just thought. He thought about the fox, what it was, what it meant. He thought about what was happening to him, why it was happening to him, but he could find no answers. For long hours in the dark, he sat there, naked, and could find no answers. He didn't understand. He knew it was impossible, it was crazy, it was insane, but he knew he wasn't going crazy. What had happened, what was happening, no one would tell him he was crazy if they knew all the facts, but they'd say it was a crazy situation.

That was the dilemma. That was the paradox. It was an impossible thing that could only be explained by an equally impossible answer.

Over the night, he could only come to one conclusion, but that conclusion gave him no comfort.

Perhaps there was more to the world than he'd been taught. Perhaps there was more to the world than people knew.

As far as the crystal was concerned, he knew what he needed to do with it.

As the sun rose the next morning, he finally decided to move. Besides, Master Holm was probably worried sick when he realized that Kyven didn't come home last night, for someone would have come to wake him by now and would find his room empty. He put his leather smock and woolen pants back on, slipped his feet back into his soft boots after cleaning the sand off of the bottom of his feet, then went back up the game trail to the road and started the climb up the gentle, zigzagging ridge to return to Atan. People looked at him curiously when he came up the Avannar Road nearly an hour after sunrise, but none of them really knew him well enough to talk to him... and that was the way he'd arranged it. Kyven was an enigma in Atan, a gifted crystalcutter who was intensely private and very reserved, rarely saying more than two words to anyone with whom he didn't interact at work, or didn't pester in the bar to learn about prospecting. They didn't know him, though they knew of him. A crystalcutter of his ability was a common point of conversation in a town filled with crystalcutters, miners, and alchemists. Some of the girls had tried to catch his eye, hoping to marry someone who would clearly be a wealthy man once he established his own shop, but none had yet to get him to say more than ten words to them, even though they could tell that he enjoyed their attention and seemed to like their company. The girls often speculated that he either preferred men, which was highly scandalous behavior, or he had some kind of dark secret for him to be interested in girls yet not accept their invitations to court them.

If they only knew how right they were.

He returned to the shop and came in through the customer's door. Mistress Henna gave him a surprised look when he came in through the schoolroom, interrupting her lesson of teaching the first years to read, and then ignored all the calls, jokes and questions from the workshop when he arrived tremendously late. He went straight to Master Holm's office, and opened the door without knocking. Master Holm was sitting at his desk, a lamp above illuminating the room as he wrote in his ledger, tallying the costs and profits of the day before. "What's the matter, son?" the old man asked in sincere concern after taking one look at him. Holm knew Kyven well, and Kyven could rarely hide anything from him.

Kyven closed the door and came in, then sat at the chair opposite the desk. "I... I'm sorry I'm late."

"Kyv. Son. I've been your mentor and your friend for nine years, I've known for days now that something's been bothering you. Is it Aven?"

"It—well, that's just a part of it, Master Holm."

"Son, that was just an accident. It wasn't your fault. It was blind luck, and you shouldn't kick yourself over something you had no control over."

"I know. It's more than that, though, Master Holm. Things are changing for me. Things are... different."

"Son, these things happen. You've been a damn fine apprentice, a good worker, and one of my few friends. If you need some time away from the shop, it's yours. Your good health is more important to me than the bottom line. Your workbench will be here when you get back."

"I appreciate that, Master Holm," he said, reaching into his belt pouch. "But I could never do that to you. Last night, while I was walking, I found myself down at the east end of Cougar Creek, where it turns south and goes down into the valley. Well, I didn't really know

what I was doing there, and well, when I was looking around, I found, I found this.”

He put the white crystal on the desk, on top of Holm’s ledger.

The old man’s eyes gawked in shock. “By the Trinity, boy!” he gasped. “You found this *prospecting*?”

He nodded. “In the streambed,” he answered. “Master Holm,” he said with a cleansing breath, “I want to buy my contract.”

“Good heavens, son, you could buy out both yours and Timble’s contracts with this! You could buy your contract and buy your own shop with what’s left over! You need to take it to the bankers immediately!”

“No,” he said, putting his hand over the crystal. “You’ve been a good man to me, Master Holm. You taught me more than you’ve taught anyone else, even Timble, and you’ve always been a good friend. I want to repay you for that. This is for you, to buy my contract. Take what’s left over and just hold it for me for now. I trust you with it.”

“Hold it for you? What are you talking about, son?”

“I, need a few days to think over some things, Master Holm,” he said. “With what happened with Aven, and finding this crystal, and a couple of other things, I’ve had a lot on my mind, and I think I need to take a few days or maybe a week and think things through. And when I’m ready to come back, well, Master Holm, you *have* been talking about scaling back, maybe retiring.” He took in a breath. “I want to buy your shop, Master Holm, buy a stake in it for now, and work to pay you the rest of it once I work through this and am back at work.”

Holm gave him a long look, then laughed. “Done!” he said immediately. “Son, I was planning to *offer* to bring you on as a partner after you finished your contract with me, both you and Timble! You think I want to try to compete with you two? You’re nuts! I’m too old to try to work that hard! I’d rather have you as a partner than a competitor! As long as you agree to keep Timble on as a journeyman until he can buy in as a partner, I’ll take that offer!”

“This shop wouldn’t be the same without Timble, Master Holm.”

“Don’t call me that anymore, boy,” he grinned toothlessly. “I’m just *Holm* now. You’re not an apprentice anymore. I’ll send a letter to the Guild by lunch, Kyv. By the end of the day, you’ll be an *artisan* crystalcutter.”

Despite his problems of the last couple of days, he couldn’t help but feel a little pride at that declaration. He’d been working to earn that title for ten years, after all, to go from apprentice straight to the owner—or part owner, in this case—of a shop. That was the difference between a *journeyman* cutter and an *artisan* cutter. Artisans were shop owners, journeymen worked in them. Usually, the Guild would require that Kyven take a test to prove his cutting skills, but that would be a silly thing to do in his case. Holm’s affirmation that he was good enough was all they’d need, and Kyven’s cutting skills were well known in the village.

Holm reached his hand across the desk. “Congratulations, *Master* Kyven,” he said with a broad smile. “You just bought yourself a stake in the shop.”

“Thanks, Ma—er, Holm,” he said, then he chuckled as he shook Holm’s hand. “It’s going to take a while to get used to that, after nine years.”

“It won’t take long,” he said, picking up the white crystal and standing up. He went past Kyven and into the main shop, then banged his cane on the floor. “Listen up, everyone!” he boomed. “I have an announcement!”

The apprentices stopped what they were doing and looked to him.

“Today, Kyven has bought out his contract, and is no longer an apprentice!” he announced with a broad smile. “Our little prospector went out and found *this*,” he said, holding up the white crystal to show them.

Everyone gasped, and every single one of them asked “where did you find it!”

“On Cougar Creek, down in the Blue Valley,” he answered them.

“Needless to say, Kyven has bought out his contract, and I’ve offered him a partnership here at the shop,” he said. “So don’t call him an apprentice any longer! He’s *Master* Kyven now!” He reached out and clapped Timble on the shoulder. “And when you finish your contract, son, you’re welcome to join us, too. I was going to offer both of you partnerships, but Kyven’s lucky find forced me to spoil the surprise,” he said with a chuckle.

“Congratulations Kyv!” Myk said, and Kyven accepted several handshakes and claps on the back.

“No more work today!” Holm shouted. “Today we celebrate! Leo, wrangle up all the first years and send them to the kitchen, and tell Surry to cook us a feast for tonight! Tim, Kyv, come with me. We’re going to the banker, and I don’t want to walk the streets alone with this!”

Timble and Kyven escorted Holm to the banker in the center of town, by the watch house, and the old man revealed his plans to them. “I was going to tell you during the Yule,” he told them. “When you were six months from finishing your contract. Keep you on as journeymen, let you earn enough to buy in as partners, then let you slowly take over for me. I’m getting old, boys, and I wasn’t planning on staying in business much longer after I set you two loose, cause I won’t be able to compete with you, so the only way to do it is to sell you my own shop rather than have you run it out of business between the two of you,” he chuckled. “But Kyv got lucky, and I didn’t want you to think things were going to change too much, Tim,” he told the young blonde man. “You two have been like sons to me, and I’ve never trained a better pair of apprentices. Kyv bought out his contract, and put down a payment on his share of the shop. When you’re released, Tim, you’ll be on as a partner too, but you’ll have to earn it. You’ll start as a journeyman until you have enough to buy in, then you’ll be a partner. Is that a problem, son?”

“It’s only fair, Master Holm,” he said simply. “You taught us to be fair and honest in all dealings, especially with each other. I don’t mind at all, because I know I’ll make it. I can easily earn it.”

“Good lad,” Holm told him with an approving nod.

They entered the bank, which was a recent institution out of Avannar. The bank held onto money that people left with them, a safe place to keep it, and it was backed by the word and bond of the Loremasters. Most people in the village had an account with what was simply called the bank, and in the four years it had been there, the bank had thus far been honest and forthright. It gave back any money its customers had on deposit when they asked for it. If they didn’t, the Loremasters would come down on them like an avalanche, so they were always very careful to be totally honest and fair in all their dealings. The bank was a large building by the watch house, with stout, barred windows and a thick door, beyond which was a large common room split in half by a large counter, behind which bank workers stood and helped customers. Each worker had before him a ledger, a scale, and a crystal glass for examining crystals in detail.

The banker almost had a stroke when Holm set the crystal down on the counter. “Weigh it,” Holm ordered.

“I—I can’t help you with this, it’ll take a manager, Master Holm,” the young man said, keeping his hands away from the crystal like it was a live snake. “Master Jenkan! Master Jenkan, your assistance please!” he called urgently, waving towards the desks at the back of the room.

Master Jenkan was one of the original five men who came to open the bank. He was about sixty, with a bald head he kept hidden under a brimmed hat and a dark woolen suit. The old

banker in his dark suit nearly had stroke when he saw the crystal.

“Weigh it,” Holm demanded with a smug smile. Jenkan took it with a shaking hand and put it on the scale, then added tiny weights to the other side. “Two and one eighth points,” he said, almost reverently.

“What’s the going rate for white crystals?” Holm asked.

The banker turned and consulted a slateboard hanging in the back of the large room. “The stated rate is twenty thousand two hundred fifty chits per point,” he said. “At two and one eighth points, that’s forty three thousand thirty one and one quarter chits, sir.”

“Then I’ll take all but five hundred chits on deposit in the shop account and take five hundred in cash,” he stated calmly. “Bring me my money and write me a receipt.”

“At once, sir,” he said, carrying the crystal away. He called over a burly armed guard, and the guard escorted him through the back door, towards the bank’s vault.

“Where did you find it?” the young teller asked in amazement.

“Cougar Creek, down in Blue Valley. Kyven found it. Got it panning the bank, he said,” Holm told him with a grin. “Boy’s bought into my shop, he’s a partner now.”

“Wow, congratulations, Master Kyven,” the teller said. “Cougar creek, you say? Whereabouts in Blue Valley?”

Kyven laughed. “Down where it turns south after coming down off the ridge. Good luck.”

“Hey, you found one, maybe I will too,” he said with bright eyes.

The banker, Jenkan, returned with a small pouch and a written receipt. “A receipt, sir. The balance has been credited to the account of your cutting shop, as noted here. Five hundred chits cash,” he said, pouring twenty amber coins out onto the counter and tallying them, twenty twenty-five chit coins. “However did you come across such a find, Master Holm?” he asked curiously. “Did a miner sell it to you?”

“Kyven found it *prospect*ing,” Holm chuckled. “Used it to buy out his contract and buy into my shop as a partner.”

“Congratulations, sir!” Jenkan said.

“Thank you,” Kyven said with a nod.

“Where did you find something like this?” he asked curiously. “I would think that it would have been found long ago, given how many miners and villagers prospect the region.”

“Pretty far out from here,” Kyven told him. “Down where Cougar Creek comes off the mountain and turns south into Blue Valley. I guess it got washed down after that last storm.”

“Odd, quite a few pan that area. I guess you got lucky, sir.”

“Very lucky,” Timble laughed.

Kyven left the bank with his new partner and friend feeling... free. He wasn’t indentured anymore, he was a free man, and now a partner in Master Holm’s shop, working for himself rather than for someone else. The shop’s profits were his profits, and the shop’s problems were now his problems.

“Alright, boy, let’s go celebrate while the youngers take advantage of our absence to have fun,” Holm chuckled.

Holm rarely went out, but when he did, he went to the Crystal Chimes, an upscale festhall on the east side of town. Unlike the Three Boars, this tavern, inn, and festhall catered to the artisans, not the miners, so the furniture was better made, the place was much cleaner. The common room was fairly large, with tables and benches arranged in neat patterns, a hearth on the right wall, a stage in the back left corner, and a bar dominating the remainder of the back wall. The near left corner had targets on a wooden post for darts and knives, which were highly, highly popular games among crystalcutters. The young, pretty daughter of the innkeeper, whose name was Junni, curtsied to them as they came in. There were only two other

people in the common room when they arrived, giving Junni very little to do.

“Good morning, Master Holm!” she said brightly. “Would you like some breakfast?”

“I want a platter of spiced potatoes and bottle of blood wine, we’re celebrating today!” he said.

Junni giggled. “Isn’t it a bit early for blood wine, Master Holm?”

“Usually yes, but it’s not every day you release an apprentice!” he answered. “So bring me a bottle, some paper, and a pen. I have a letter to write before I get too drunk!”

They were seated and brought a bottle of blood wine, wine made from a type of grape called the blood grape that produced a sweet, delicious ruby wine, and the Crystal Chimes’ famous spiced potatoes. They were strips of potato glazed with a glaze of piquant spices and baked in a brick oven, which were among the most famous special dishes served in Atan. Master Garva, Junni’s father and the owner, had rejected multiple attempts by merchants and competitors to either buy or steal the recipe for his spiced potatoes.

“Kyv, let’s have a turn at the posts before we can’t aim!” Timble offered.

“You just have a deathwish today, eh?” Kyven asked.

“Brave words when you’re using the house’s knives!” he laughed. “Five chits a game!”

“Your money,” he shrugged.

Timble procured six throwing knives from Garva and held them out, fanned in his hands. Kyven waved his hand, and Timble split them into two groups of three and handed Kyven one set. “The back line,” he said, pointing.

The game was called Posts, which was related to darts. The board and throwing lane was up against the left side of the wall, in front of the small stage, where two posts were set, each with a pair of large round targets. One of those targets on each post was a horsehair dartboard, while the other was a spongeboard, a spongy kind of wood with a tiny crystal-powered device that caused it to repair punctures from the knives. Where dartboards were set up in a radial pattern, wedges divided by three sets of rings to create the double and triple score areas and the two inner bull’s-eyes, postboards were a series of concentric circles, some twelve of them, divided into four quadrants of north, south, east, and west. Each ring had a value from twelve to one, with the outermost ring being the most valuable and the innermost ring worth one... but the center bull’s-eye was worth ten. The idea of the game was to play eight rounds of three knives each and score as much as possible. On each round, a sector of the board was worth double points going clockwise around the board from north. The trick of the game wasn’t the bull’s-eye, but the outermost ring. But the danger of the outermost ring was that if one missed and the knife went out of bounds, then all scoring for that entire round was lost.

This was the game of choice among almost all cutters, because their highly developed manual dexterity and hand-eye coordination naturally translated to throwing knives and darts. It was all about control, and cutters had control of their hands. And Kyven was a *great* posts player. His natural dexterity made throwing knives totally natural for him, and he was the best posts player in the shop. He could very nearly be the best posts player in the village, but he almost never played in public. He didn’t like to draw attention to himself, because he’d always feared getting too friendly with people and blurting out his secret to the wrong person. Usually he wouldn’t even play posts here, but there were only two people in the place besides them, and they both looked too hung over to really care about two apprentices playing posts.

But Kyven and Timble both had taken it past that. Master Holm was a fairly deadly throw at the posts himself, and Holm had expanded beyond posts to learn how to throw knives and daggers in self defense, and he taught that skill to his apprentices. Kyven and Timble both

could throw nearly any dagger or knife, even ones that were unbalanced, and sink them into almost any target, even from very long range. Kyven and Myk were the best knife throwers in the shop, with Timble being a very, very close third.

And the silly part was, Kyven virtually never carried a knife around with him when he went out. It was a bit silly to be so highly trained with a weapon, and never carry it around with him. He never carried one because he never felt particularly threatened anywhere in or around Atan. He almost never went out after dark, when it was most dangerous, and he avoided places like the Three Boars when things got rowdy.

"Age trumps," Timble prompted.

"Yeah, by two weeks," Kyven snorted as he carefully weighed and hefted the throwing knife in his hand, balanced for throwing. He then took it up by its blade, stepped up to the furthest line, which was some twenty feet from the posts, took aim, and threw. His knife sank solidly into the north ten, which was worth twenty points. His second knife slithered in just above it, on north eleven, and the third hit above that, on north twelve. A good posts player could get two knives into one ring sector, but it took a great posts player to put all three in the same ring, not without hitting another knife and possibly losing all points for a throw by either bouncing off the other knife or knocking one out of the board. A knife that didn't stick in the board counted as no points, unlike hitting out of bounds, which killed all points for all throws that round.

"Ooh, Kyv's too jumpy from his find to be good today," Timble teased as he threw his three knives at his own postboard on the other post, and scored four points higher than Kyven. "All that excitement at me having to call him *Master* Kyven," Timble laughed as Kyven took his place at the line. East and west were Kyven's specialty, where most other post throwers preferred north and south. He sank all three knives into the twelve point ring in east, then gave Timble a cool, amused look.

The competition really began then. As Holm wrote his letter and savored a glass of blood wine before many men had their first break of the day, Kyven and Timble were engaged in a fierce posts war. Kyven took the first two games, but Timble roared back and took the next three, Kyven won the next three, then Timble took two in a row. "No, this is too easy now!" Timble laughed, backpedaling and jumping up onto the stage. "Come on, Kyv, let's make it a challenge! Ten chits a game!"

"You're on," Kyven told him, coming over and jumping up on the stage himself, then deliberately walking all the way to the back, as far from the posts as he could go.

"You're on!" Timble grinned and joined him. "Back foot stays against the wall!"

The "back foot against the wall" idea didn't pan out as it didn't give them enough room, so they decided on a line made from a piece of rope a pace from the back wall, which gave them enough room. Kyven was first up, and he measured the increased distance and height change almost absently, took up his knife, and hurled it. It whistled across the common room and sank into the target on the nine ring of the north sector. He adjusted his aim and threw the second, hitting the eleven ring, and the third just barely hit the twelve ring.

"I hate you, Kyv," Timble laughed as he took up his knives. The hate didn't last long, though, for he scored a ten, ten, and eleven.

Now they attracted a small crowd. Several more patrons had come in for early lunch while they'd been playing at the line, but now that they were throwing from all the way across the common room, and still scoring highly, a few people wandered over to watch from the relative safety of the foot of the stage. "Damn, Holm what do you teach those boys in your shop?" One of them, Master Torvik, asked with a laugh when Kyven threw his next three and scored eleven, eleven, ten. "They must not have time to cut if they spend all their time play-

ing posts!"

"They have enough time to keep our profit margin higher than yours!" he teased back.

"It sounds like we need a little friendly competition here, Holm," Torvik told him. Such a statement wouldn't offend him at all; he and Holm were old friends. "Why don't I put my boys up against your boys in a little posts competition? Each side puts up fifty chits, winner's team walks away with it all."

"You're on," Holm said instantly. "Tournament rules. We'll divvy them up by age."

"Hey, I'll put my boys in on that action!" another cutter artisan, Master Yevn, called with a laugh. "Not only do we have a little healthy fun, we give our boys some quality time to rub elbows with others in the craft."

"We'll be happy to take your money, Yevn," Torvik grinned. "When do you wanna do it?"

"Tomorrow is open for me," Holm said.

"I can bring my boys by tomorrow as well," Yevn agreed.

"It's set, then," Torvik agreed, clapping Yevn on the shoulder as Timble made his throws.

"No ringers!" he added with a laugh, "including these two! I have no apprentices their age."

"Then you can throw against them yourself," Holm offered. "I'm a bit too old for posts anymore, one of them can represent the honor of the shopmaster against you two. Say, whoever wins this game of theirs is my champion," he grinned.

"Hey, I like that idea!" Yevn said with a grin as Kyven made his throws. "I wouldn't mind throwing a set or two in a friendly tournament myself."

"That's a deal, Holm," Torvik agreed. "We'll have to add a new game to the tournament, though. Hell, gentlemen, now I want to try a game of posts from the back of the stage! That looks like great fun!"

"It's pretty challenging, Master Torvik," Timble chuckled as he stepped up to make his throws. He sent his knife spinning across the room, and it solidly drove into the eleven point ring. "Just aim at eleven, that way you don't blow your round if you miss," he laughed, then threw his next knife, scoring a twelve.

"I may have to aim at the bull's-eye," Yevn said, which produced quite a few laughs.

It was a tight game, with Timble up by two points coming into the last round. Kyven threw first, scoring ten, ten, eleven, and then Timble threw, scoring ten, eleven, eleven. After they tallied it up, Timble laughed at the slateboard. "Tied!" he announced.

"Then play a tiebreaker game of Ladders," Torvik urged.

"Ladders from here? This should be interesting," Timble laughed.

Ladders was a different knifethrowing game that was fairly simple and straightforward. Whoever hit all twelve rings and the bull's-eye won, but the catch was, if you hit the same ring twice, you lost credit for that ring and had to hit it again. A game could be over in thirteen throws, or go on forever if they were bad knife throwers. And from so far away, the control required to play ladders would make it a long game.

It wasn't as long as it could have been, but it wasn't short. The tricky part was the two, one, and bull's-eye. Both Timble and Kyven cleared the outer rings quickly, but when they got to trying for the bull's-eye, they kept having to redo the inner rings. Timble finally eked out a victory, to a round of cheers from both the patrons and the innkeeper, and they handed the knives over the Torvik and Yevn to let them try playing from that distance so they could go get something to eat and drink.

"That was fun," Timble laughed. "I don't beat you often, Kyv."

"I'll definitely be looking for revenge," Kyven chuckled. They watched as Torvik and Yevn tried their first round, which was almost funny. Yevn put two knives out of bounds on the first throw, and Torvik put two in for scores and completely missed the entire board with the

last throw. They both laughed at their performances, and Yevn defended himself by saying that they'd tried from the back of the stage without warming up, and using house knives.

"I think it's a good idea to have the tournament," Holm said as he sipped at his fourth glass of blood wine. "The cutters should be more friendly with each other like the miners and the alchemists. That we'll win it is just an added bonus," he all but purred. "We should have an alchemist make a little trophy for the winning shop, so we can put it in the showroom for everyone to see," he mused. "Kyv, go talk to Virren about it. While you're on the way, drop this off at the Guild," he added, handing him the letter.

"Uh, sure, Mast-uh, Holm," he said, which made Holm laugh.

"Keep practicing," he chuckled. "Now get you gone. You may be my partner, but I'm still the boss."

"Yes, sir," he laughed, taking the letter and leaving the tavern.

The posts game had done much for his mood. He didn't feel half so mopey or worried now that he'd spent a morning with one of the few friends he had. Him and Timble had been together since their first year. They'd passed the first year test together, and had survived eight years while other apprentices were sold, dismissed, or finished their contract and were released but not taken as journeymen at Holm's shop. Some of them were the premier cutters in other shops, two had opened their own shops, and the rest had left town to establish their shops in a village with less competition, or moved to Avannar where there was a demand for good cutters. Atan and Avannar were the two places where a cutter could get a job quickly and earn a good living so long as he wasn't a bad cutter.

Word had already gotten out. When he dropped the letter off at the Guild, the first large building coming into town on the Avannar Road, people kept stopping him in the street and asking him where he found it. Everyone in the Guild building congratulated him, and asked him where he found it. And when he came out of the Guild building after delivering the letter, he noticed quite a few miners and prospectors heading down the Avannar road instead of up into the mountains.

Typical. They were going to see if they got just as lucky.

But in Kyven's case, luck had nothing to do with it. He'd been *guided* to that crystal by the fox, for the fox, for some mysterious reason, wanted him to have it. Did it know he'd just use it to buy out his contract and try to buy a partnership in Holm's shop? He hoped so, for that was exactly what he did with it. Free of his contract, he now worked for himself, and thank the Trinity that Holm let him buy a partnership with him. Kyven didn't really want to leave the shop. It was his home. But, he wouldn't have been comfortable with anything but being a partner, having control. He couldn't be a journeyman in Holm's shop, he had to be a partner, an artisan. It was either own a share of Holm's shop or strike out on his own and start his own shop. He couldn't be subject to someone else, not after nine years of working for another. He was too good of a cutter to do that. He could make it on his own, so that was exactly what he was going to do.

He wouldn't be back at work immediately, though. He did want to take a couple of days and think it through, try to understand what the fox was and why it was helping him, try to find some answers to those questions that seemed to have no answer. The fox wasn't part of him, so he had to try to figure just *what* it was. He couldn't be all mopey and downcast over it. He had to approach this like a *cutter*. A cutter analyzed the crystal, took it in in its entirety, then carefully studied it to plan out exactly how to go about achieving the perfect cut. That was what he had to do here. He had to study the situation in its entirety. He had to learn as much as he could, see the whole, then plan out his approach to achieve his perfect cut... which in this case was learning what he wanted to learn.

He wanted to know just what the fox was, since it was *clearly* not a figment of his imagination.

He wanted to know why he was the only person who could see it.

He wanted to know why it was helping him.

He had to come up with a plan to find out those three things, but it wouldn't be easy. And since it wouldn't be easy, it was best if he didn't have to worry about working for a few days as he tried to learn what he wanted to know.

He entered Master Virren's shop through the front door, like any other customer, and had the greeter, a paid servant who did only this, go fetch Master Virren or one of his senior apprentices. Virren himself answered the call, wearing a burned leather apron and carrying thick gloves. Kyven's eyes lingered on the passage, though, because there was a strange shimmering behind the alchemist, in the hallway. It was almost like how he saw things shimmer before he started seeing the fox or other things, but nothing came of it. The shimmering faded away, and he didn't feel the fox's eyes on him. "Kyven, I heard about your good luck. Congratulations. What did you do with it?"

"I bought my contract and used what was left over to buy a stake in Master Holm's shop as a partner," he answered.

Virren chuckled. "Well, seems Holm's smarter than I thought," he said. "If I was Holm, I wouldn't dare let you try to compete with me."

"I'm glad he did. I'd rather stay at the shop. It's home, you know?"

"I can understand that. What brings you by?"

"Holm wants you to make a little trophy," he chuckled, and explained what was going on.

"Ah, I can do something like that. Tell him it'll run him thirty chits. I can use a lampcast base and just make it pretty." He laughed. "And tell him the honor of the alchemists must be represented."

"I think they'll probably draw the line there, Master Virren," Kyven chuckled. "Maybe the next time, but it's shaping up to be a battle of the cutting shops."

"Maybe the alchemists could arrange a similar little tournament, playing a better game," he mused. "We don't obsess over posts the way you cutters do."

"Hey, it's a game that plays to our strengths," Kyven chuckled with a shrug. "I'll go let Master Holm know. When will it be ready?"

"By closing time, I can put my first stage apprentices on something that simple," Virren said with a wave of his hand.

"I'll let him know."

"Well, Kyv, now that you're a Master, what are you going to do?" Virren asked curiously.

"Right now? There's a few things I want to think over," he said, glancing back to the passage leading into Virren's shop again. He still could... almost see something, a dark shimmer, but there wasn't anything there. He blinked a few times and looked back, and the passage was back to normal. "Important things. After I work that through, I'll be back at the shop cutting, but as a partner instead of an apprentice. I still have to fully pay off my share to buy in. Holm's shop is valuable, so I have to pay quite a bit to fully buy in."

"How much?"

"We didn't discuss specific numbers, Virren. When I'm bought in, Holm will tell me."

"Son, that's not good business sense," Virren chuckled. "He could just milk you."

"We are always honest with each other, Virren," he said simply. "Besides, I have a long way to go. It cost me five thousand chits to buy out my contract, and personally, I'd value buying into Holm's shop at a fifty thousand, minimum. Holm's shop is the best shop in Atan, and it's easily worth three times that. I got a little over forty thousand from the crystal, so af-

ter you subtract buying out my contract, I'm still a long way off from that fifty thousand. It'll take me about a year to pay off my share of the buy-in if I work hard, but I'll make it. I want to be completely bought in as quickly as I can, so Master Holm can feel like he's free to retire. He's old, Virren, he's earned it. His pride in his shop is the only thing that keeps him going anymore. He can retire and both me and Timble will be slowly buying out the rest of his interest, until he's totally out."

"Timble too?"

Kyven nodded. "Holm actually was planning on offering at the Yule, but I found the crystal and ruined his Yule present," he chuckled.

"Well, I'm glad you did, son," Virren told him. "It means you're totally free."

"In a way," he corrected. "I'll see you later, Virren."

"See you soon," he said as Kyven left the shop.

Virren took a couple of steps back, near the door leading back into the shop, then leaned against the wall by the doorframe. "That's him," he said quietly. "Guess it was good luck he wandered by right now. what did you see?"

"He has potential," came the reply from the hallway, a deep, rough, ominous voice. "It's subdued. He denies his power, so it makes it hard to assess him. I'm... amazed," the voice said. "A *human*. What has the Great Spirit done?"

"Remember who you're talking to before you keep going with that line of thought, Stalker," Virren said, a bit sharply.

"*You* are not bad, Virren," came the unapologetic reply. "For a human. You risk your life to help my people, and for that you have my respect. But your race has much to answer for, and until they are worthy of my respect, they will get nothing but my scorn."

"Then you'd better put that superior attitude back in your pants, because who do you think might have to take him back if he agrees to go with you?"

The unseen figure *growled*, an inhuman sound. "Not until I'm sure it's worth our time," came the answer. "He has potential, but if the limit of his ability is to see spirits, then he's best left here and unaware of the truth. I will take a measure of him," the voice announced. "I will force him to show me if he is worth my time."

"I've never interfered with the Shaman before, Stalker, but I'd like you to listen to me. Kyven has a neutral attitude towards Arcan, but he's *afraid* of Shaman, like most other humans. If you attack him to try see if he has any ability, you'll poison any attempt to take him in and train him. If he expresses any ability, it's going to traumatize him. He won't be able to handle it. He's already walking a fine line just over his ability to see spirits. I got him to talk to me, Stalker, and he thinks that he's going mad. If you drop something like that on him so abruptly, he might convince himself that he is. Take my advice this one time, please. That young man could be a tremendous asset to the Masked, *if he sides with us*. That young man will not side with us if you try to scare him into showing his potential. He'll either be too afraid of you to go with you, or too afraid of himself."

"I will take a measure of him in any way I see fit," the voice called, a bit coldly.

"Which would you prefer, Stalker? Having him as an ally, or scaring him to the point where you destroy his life?"

"As it goes," the voice called nonchalantly. "After all, he's *only* a human."

"He might also be your brother. I don't know much about the Shaman, but don't you frown on fighting amongst yourselves?"

"No Shaman would consider a *human* to be a brother," the voice snorted coldly.

"And if he *is* a Shaman? Then what?"

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

"Hold onto that feeling. That's how *he's* going to feel. It'll be as shocking to him as it is to you. Remember, he's been taught that Shaman are evil, and he'll be facing one, and facing the fact that he might *be* one. How would you react to news like that?"

"That... is an approach I can understand. Very well, I will treat him like a cub."

"That's the best thing you can do. When will we approach him?"

"We?"

"It's best if he greets you with someone he knows and trusts," Virren told him.

The voice snorted. "Tonight," he announced. "I will go attend Old Gray for you right now."

"Don't destroy the cast," Virren warned. "The village knows he broke his arm, if he shows up days later fully healed, people will talk. Either I wasted valuable healing crystal on an Arcan, or Old Gray must be a Shaman. Either rumor will cause me problems."

"I will leave the cast," the voice assured him.

Virren scratched his cheek. Clearly, the spirits were moving. The spirit that had attached itself to Kyven had saved his life, led him to Virren, now he'd bet that it had something to do with Kyven's lucky find. It was just too *convenient* for Kyven to find a crystal like that when a Shaman was coming to investigate him, that freed him of his indenturement and basically freed him up to be allowed to be taken to be trained. And what was a masterful stroke for the spirit, had set it up so Kyven would return to a place of prominence, where he would be of tremendous use to the Masked.

He was a little worried though. Why did they send Stalker? Clover or Coldfoot would have been much, much better. They didn't have Stalker's attitude towards humanity, and were much more sociable and kind. Clover could have sat down with Kyven and charmed him out of his fear with her charisma and wit, and Coldfoot could have used his gentle wisdom to debate away all of Kyven's fears with kind words and logic. Stalker... was not like them. He would be harsh, abrupt with Kyven, because Stalker wouldn't see a potential Shaman, he would see a *human*. Stalker's bigotry could do some real damage here.

If he wanted a Shaman to come and deal with Kyven, he'd send for Clover or Coldfoot. If he wanted someone killed, he'd send for Stalker.

He just hoped they knew what they were doing.

The shop celebrated Kyven's good fortune all day. Kyven, Timble, and Holm came back to the shop well after noon to something approaching a party in the workroom, as the apprentices played musical instruments, talked, and enjoyed themselves. Kyven wasn't in as much of a celebratory mood, however, and Holm had other things to do. As the others celebrated, Kyven and Holm sat in his office and talked. Holm showed him the books, they haggled over a final price for buying into the shop—seventy thousand chits—and Holm urged Kyven to talk about what had him so unsettled.

It was different with Holm. Kyven had just *known* that he was ready to reveal his dark secret to Virren, but he had no such similar feeling with Holm. And without that powerful compulsion to push him into it, he held back. It made it harder to convey what had him so upset without revealing that truth, but he finally managed to struggle through with half-truths and disjointed statement that let Holm draw his own conclusions. Holm concluded for himself that the brush with death, the death of his friend Aven, and finding the crystal had converged in his mind to create a feeling of powerful uncertainty and unease. His entire life had turned on its ear in the last three days, and since Kyven was a young man and quite domestic, used to a predictable life, this interruption in the daily routine had him a little jumpy. It wasn't the truth, but it was close enough for Holm to understand why Kyven wanted to take a few days away from his bench to come to grips with it and then get back to work.

Word of the upcoming posts tournament had caused Kyven and Holm to come back out to

an all-out posts practice session. All eight of the other apprentices were taking turns at the four postboards they had, bringing them down into the workshop and pacing off the lines, then taking turns throwing using their own personal knives. Holm gave everyone a set of their own posts knives for Yule in their third year, but the two second-year apprentices had bought hand-me-down posts knives from the older apprentices once they started earning enough money to buy their own set. Holm's gift knives were good, but a good posts player picked out his personal set himself, and the serious ones had them made. Kyven and Timble's posts knives were made for them by Virren, specifically balanced and weighted to best suit their hands. It took them both over a month to save for those knives.

In the apprentice's world, where they had little money of their own and little to actually buy since Holm fed, clothed, and housed them, posts knives were one of the few external luxuries and expenses.

Kyven didn't feel like joining them, however. He excused himself from the others and took a walk about town, trying to think things through... but with no luck. He simply couldn't understand it. Whatever was happening to him, it was far beyond him, and beyond everything he'd read so far to try to learn about it. He just wandered aimlessly, without a destination, for most of the afternoon, trying to come to some kind of understanding. Kyven was a bright fellow, and now that the shock of it had had a chance to sink in, he turned his sharp mind to the problem at hand.

Point. The fox was an independent entity, apart from him. It knew things he did not, and seemed possessed of an external personality. It seemed aloof, proud, because it had always simply watched with decorum and propriety. It didn't jump around like an excited puppy. It was sober and serious.

Point. The fox was not an enemy. It had saved his life, and led him to the crystal, which was of great personal gain to him. It seemed interested in him, both in his life and in his welfare.

Point. The fox was not real. It was a figment of his imagination, in a way. It was independent of him, but it also at the same time did not exist. It had no physical body, it could not be seen by anyone but him. That made it more like a ghost than an animal, but a ghost that only he seemed able to see.

Point. Given all of that information, he could therefore state with some authority that he was not going crazy. The independent actions of the fox led to rational results; following it had, thus far, saved his life, shown him a secret of Virren's that it seemed he needed to know, and had led him to a highly valuable crystal worth over forty thousand chits.

Counterpoint. The fox was a figment of his imagination that he was simply assigning a sense of external personality to convince himself that he really wasn't going crazy. It was *his* hallucination, after all... perhaps he'd gained some semblance of control over it, allowing him to cause it to do things.

Counterpoint. The fox, being a figment of his own imagination, was being some kind of external indicator for things he couldn't explain. Perhaps years of working with crystals had finally caused a touch of Crystal Fever in him, a common illness among miners, cutters, merchants, and alchemists, people who handled bare crystals, an illness that produced a physical allergy to crystals that made the sufferer sick to be around them. It went away after a few days of having no exposure to crystals, and lessened over time. Apprentices and new miners and merchants were most susceptible to Crystal Fever, but once they built up something of a resistance to it, it caused very few problems. Kyven had never suffered from it, nor had Timble or Myk... perhaps he'd finally suffered his first case of it, and one of the reactions was to cause his old hallucination to do new tricks.

Counterpoint. The fox truly was not real. He was rationalizing his own hallucination by as-

signing an external personality to it, to keep from having to face the fact that he was going crazy.

Counterpoint. Given all that information, he could conclude that, if looked at from another point of view, he *was* crazy. Perhaps he'd heard the Arcan and not realized it, and moved of his own volition. Perhaps his many visits to Virren's shop to deliver crystals had set a foundation for him to believe that the mouse hadn't really died, which led him to watch and see what Virren would do, and lead him to learn Virren's secret. Perhaps he'd come across that crystal like any other prospector did, just blind luck, and his sensitivity to the feel of crystals, the sense of them he could feel when he touched them, had been what allowed him to find it. White crystals were very powerful, maybe he could somehow detect it from a distance.

So, among those points and counterpoints, he had to ferret out the truth from the fiction... and that wasn't easy. He wandered until dinner, when he returned to the shop and ate with the others, partaking in a huge feast, and being toasted several times by his friends and Holm for his good fortune. He ignored their praise, for the most part, absorbed in his contemplations. After dinner, he returned to his idle wandering, walking to help him think as he enjoyed the midsummer evening. People who had heard of his luck stopped him in the street and congratulated him, and not one failed to ask where he'd found the crystal.

Kyven figured the east run of Cougar Creek would be very crowded for the next few weeks.

The one person he didn't expect to come across was Virren. The burly alchemist stopped him near the courthouse and shook his hand in greeting, but he seemed less friendly than usual. "Kyven, I've been looking for you," he said.

"What, did I cut that green badly?" he asked in concern.

Virren laughed. "No, no, I just have a little business with you, that's all. There's someone I'd like you to meet. He might have an offer to make you."

"What kind of an offer?"

"I think it's best for him to tell you about that," he said seriously. "Are you interested in talking to him?"

"I-sure, why not," he said. "I'm not doing anything I can't postpone."

"What are you doing, anyway? People have been gossiping about you, you know. They say you've just been wandering around town all day."

"Basically, yeah, I have," he said. "Walking helps me think."

"Ah. Say no more," he said with a nod as he led Kyven away.

Virren was silent as he led Kyven out of town on the Avannar road, and he quickly realized that he was taking him to Cougar Fall. He started getting very curious, and a little nervous, for he remembered the last time Virren came here. Was Virren looking to introduce him to someone from those Arcans? Was Virren leading him out here to try to recruit him, or—

Was he bringing him out here to kill him?

He took stock. He was carrying a few chits, and praise the Trinity, he had his posts knives with him, still in their sheath stuffed into the back of his belt, from when Timble had talked him into one game before dinner. It would take a while to get them out, but at least he was armed.

There was nobody at the creek when they arrived, though. Kyven stayed close to the trees, a few paces behind Virren. "What kind of a business meeting takes place out here, Virren?" Kyven asked.

"This isn't the usual kind of business meeting, Kyv," he answered.

"He brought you to see me."

Kyven's eyes snapped up to the top of Cougar Fall. Up there stood an *Arcan*. It was a *huge* Arcan, nearly seven rods tall, and his black fur seemed to meld with the twilight shadows.

But his eyes all but glowed in the shadows, two yellow slits that were quite dramatic. The figure seemed to flex, and there was a dark blur, and then the huge Arcan was standing not a rod from him! He was a rod taller than Kyven, a wolf Arcan with a strong muzzle and gleaming white teeth, a solidly built frame, stocky and burly, but he moved with sinuous grace. A clawed hand rose up and scratched the underside of that ebon muzzle as the huge Arcan stared down at him in manner that made Kyven very afraid. Almost like he was... prey.

There was more to it, though. This close to him, a strange, shadowy kind of nimbus seemed to surround him, an aura, and it was an aura that made him afraid. It was black and menacing, just as black as his fur.

"Kyven, this is Stalker. As you can see, he's an Arcan that I've had... dealings with in the past," Virren said by way of introduction. "When you confessed to me about what you saw, I thought you needed to meet."

"You see spirits, human," the huge wolf told him in a narrow kind of voice, those glowing yellow eyes boring down on him. "You see what other humans cannot."

"That's why you're the only one who can see it," Virren told him. "When you described what you've seen, I recognized the sense of it from your words."

"Stop dancing about, human," Stalker told him, glancing back at Virren. The wolf drew himself up in front of Kyven, towering over him, and Kyven shrank back from that intimidating sight almost reflexively. "Talking around the issue is pointless. Virren says there is no easy way to explain this to you without saying the truth, so let's get straight to the truth," the wolf told him.

"Stalker—"

"This is not your affair," the wolf snapped, interrupting Virren and making him visibly flinch from the cold tone in his voice. "There is more to the world than what humans believe," the wolf told him. "There is a world behind that world, the world where the spirits dwell. The spirits are the souls of our ancestors and the forces of nature and the land, who watch the mortal world. There are some who can sense this other world, can sense the spirits, and can harness the spirit energy that flows from that other world. You, Kyven Steelhammer, have at least some minor ability. You can see the spirits, and you might have a deeper connection to the spirit world, if you seek to explore your ability."

"Spirits? What do you mean?"

"The fox Virren described is a *spirit*, human," the wolf told him. Kyven felt a little fearful when the wolf leaned down, almost nose to nose with him, his glowing yellow eyes boring into his own. "It is the Shadow Fox, the fox of the midnight fur, a being of intelligence, cunning, and guile. It is here, now," he said, pointing to the top of Cougar Fall with a clawed finger.

Kyven followed that finger, and it was there. Seated sedately at the top of the rocky ridge, it looked down upon them with unblinking, glowing green eyes.

It was here... and this wolf Arcan *could see it*.

"So you are not crazy, human, though I think the spirits have lost their minds," he said with a growl. "You see the spirits, and if you can see the spirits, then you are *Shaman*."

Kyven's jaw dropped, and he took a step backward from the wolf as he eyes stared at him disbelievingly. "S-S-Sh-Shaman? *Me*? That's, it's, ridiculous! Impossible!"

"I would agree with you if I wasn't looking at *impossible* with my own eyes," the wolf said steadily, staring down at him. "But it is undeniable. The Shadow Fox shows herself to us as proof, and her presence incites your ability, for she is your totem. I know you can see her, human. It shines in your eyes. You have the eyes of a Shaman." The wolf took one step back and produced something in his huge furred hand, and held it up. "See the truth for yourself."

The wolf held a small mirror, and it showed his reflection. He could see it clearly. His eyes seemed to be lit from within with a faint emerald radiance, very faint, almost undetectable in the twilight, but he could see it.

It was absolutely impossible! He couldn't be a Shaman, he was human! But his eyes... they were *glowing*. What did it mean? Was the wolf right? Or was this all some kind of sick joke? Was the wolf—

The wolf was a *Shaman*!

Kyven gasped and literally fell backwards to the ground, gaping up at the wolf in near-terror. A *Shaman*! He was a Shaman! By the Trinity, what had Virren done to him, bringing him to a Shaman? Sheer terror took over as he gaped up at what the Loremasters said was the most dangerous thing alive, a monster in the flesh, a demon on earth.

"You're a Shaman!" Kyven gasped, scrambling back away from the wolf.

"You just now realize that? You are denser than I expected, human," the wolf said with a grim kind of amused voice. "I walk the path of the spirits."

Kyven acted out of pure panicked impulse. He squirmed back on the forest floor even as his left hand reached behind him and grabbed his sheath, then came up holding his sheath in one hand and a drawn posts knife in the other. The wolf Arcan—the *Shaman*!—took a single step back, his eyes narrowing as the radiance within them seemed to blaze forth, becoming noticeably brighter, literally illuminating his muzzle with amber light. "Little human, do not make the last mistake of your life," the wolf said in a deceptively calm, soft voice. "Shaman or not, you will only try to kill me *once*."

Bark!

The fox jumped down from the rocks and bounded to him so fast it was almost a blur. It went around him, circled him, then sat down with its back to him, facing the wolf. It then sat down and wrapped its tail around its front legs sedately.

"Sister!" the wolf said, almost sounding scandalized.

Bark!

The light within the wolf's eyes began to dim. He sighed, then nodded and took a few steps back on his hybrid legs, then stood by Virren, dwarfing the shorter, burly man. The fox then turned its head, looked at him from the corner of its eye, and cast upon him a discouraging stare.

He lowered the hand holding the knife, which was ready to throw.

It nodded calmly, then turned its gaze back on the Arcan and Virren. The Arcan gave a surprised look, then, to Kyven's surprise, dropped down literally on all fours, sitting on his haunches.

The fox then stood up and turned around to face him. It advanced on him, and he took a fearful step back, caught his foot on a root, and tumbled to the ground. He rose up on one elbow and found himself almost face to face with it, so close its nose was almost touching him. It was staring at him with those unblinking, glowing eyes, then sat down sedately and stared down at him, its gaze wavering and slightly reproachful.

It was *angry* with him, he could tell. Why?

Because he was *afraid*. The fox had saved his life, and helped him, and he was *afraid* of it. That was very... inconsiderate of him. He had no reason to be afraid of the fox, not after what it had done for him, and he knew it. But he just... couldn't help it. It was so strange, so new, so alien to him, went against most everything he learned when he grew up.

"I'm, I'm sorry," he apologized.

The fox nodded once, then turned to look back at the wolf and Virren. Kyven sat up, but he remained seated on the ground, simply pulling in his legs. The fox had calmed them down,

and it seemed to want him to listen to them. It had saved his life, he owed it that much, to listen to what they had to say.

“Let’s slow down and talk this over,” Virren offered.

“What do you want from me?”

“We *want* nothing from you,” the wolf told him, much calmer and reasonable in tone.

“Kyv, you have a special gift,” Virren told him. “It’s so special that no other human we’ve ever heard of has it. You can see the spirits, you have the potential to be a Shaman. That’s literally unheard of for a human. What we hope is that you’d be willing to explore that gift more, to find those answers you said you were seeking. Stalker can explain everything to you, and at least with us, nobody will think that you’re crazy.

“Shaman aren’t what the Loremasters say they are,” Virren explained. “They’re not demons or practitioners of witchcraft. They don’t drink the blood of children to fuel their power,” he said with a snort. “They use the *same* power that we tap using mana crystals, they just use it directly from the source.”

“Just so, human,” the wolf said. “The power of crystals is spirit energy trapped in the mortal world.”

“So they’re doing nothing more than what we do, they just have the power to touch that power directly instead of using the sciences of crystalcutting and alchemy,” Virren finished. “Why the Loremasters say those things is because up to today, the only known Shaman are *Arcan*. They couldn’t allow people to believe that Arcans could be anything other than slaves and animals, so they have poisoned the people against the Shaman.”

“The Loremasters are our enemies,” the wolf told him. “They seek to keep my people in perpetual slavery and treat us as animals,” he said, his voice rising with anger. “We are *not* animals to be worked to death, then skinned and butchered like cattle!”

“They seek to restore us to the glory of the Great Ancient Civilization, Kyven,” Virren told him, “and while that can be a noble pursuit, they seek to restore *every* facet of it, not just the wondrous technology they possessed, but also their customs and practices. They believe the Arcans were created to serve man as slaves, so they try to maintain that practice across Noraam, to retain a facet of the society of our ancestors. But some of us believe differently. How can he be an animal, Kyv?” he asked, pointing at the wolf. “He may look like an animal, but he is intelligent. He has feelings. Doesn’t that make him more than the Loremasters teach?”

Kyven looked fearfully at the two of them, his mind racing. He was a Shaman? Him? A *human*? It seemed impossible! But... he saw his eyes in the mirror. They were *glowing*! He felt like he wanted to panic, but another part of him told himself to take a step back and look at this from the big picture, not to seize on one little part of it and go flying off on a tangent.

The logical part of Kyven’s mind had taken in what they had said, and could admit that it was possible. Nobody knew where the crystals had come from or how they worked. It could be quite possible that they were linked somehow to Shaman... after all, it was well known that Shaman could tap crystals themselves. How could they do that if they weren’t somehow related to their power? He knew what the Loremasters taught about Shaman, yet if *he* was a Shaman, then they had to be wrong... since humans were Shaman. So how wrong were they about other things? If they were wrong about one thing, it was only reasonable that they were wrong about others... maybe even everything, though he highly doubted that.

The fox stood up, continuing to stare at him. Kyven was so close he could reach out and touch it, and looking at it—no, her, it was a her—looking at her seemed to... calm him. She was a friend. He was sure of it. She had saved his life, saved him from the Touched Arcan, and led him to the crystal that freed him of his servitude to Holm, and she also seemed to be

tied up with Virren’s activities. He wasn’t so sure about Virren, and he *really* wasn’t sure about that wolf, but the fox... he could trust her. She didn’t save his life just to hand him over to the wolf to kill or torture. The wolf could *see* her, after all. Kyven had thought his entire life that she was just a figment of his imagination, but she was not. Here was another person who could see the fox, had pointed right at her, and had called her by a name that made it abundantly clear that he both could see her and also knew of her. The wolf had called her *shadow fox*, and if there was ever a term to describe her, that was it. Her dark fur melded with the night, melded with the shadows, making her to seem as a shadow herself. Only her eyes, the silver ruff under her chin, and the silver tips of her ears and tail were easily visible in the summer night.

He’d wanted to find the truth. He’d wanted to come to understand the nature of his condition, to understand just what the fox was, and why only he could see her. He’d wanted to know... and here, presented before him, was a means to discover the answers to those questions. Virren had understood Kyven’s confession and summoned an Arcan Shaman to come tell him the truth. He had come to tell him that he *was not* crazy, that the fox was real... it was just invisible to most people, hiding itself from them.

He’d wanted to find out the truth. Here, before him now, was an Arcan who could answer those questions.

“I... want to know more,” Kyven said after long moments of silence. The fox dipped her head to him, then stepped up until her nose was almost touching his own. He looked into her glowing eyes uncertainly, but she made no other moves. She turned away from him, then padded into the darkening shadows, her form melding with the night until she vanished from view.

“See, it works when you approach people the right way,” Virren chuckled to the wolf.

“My way worked well enough,” he snorted darkly. “It caused him to show his eyes to me. I cannot believe it, though. A *human* Shaman. What insanity possessed the spirits to grant their greatest gift to one of *you*?”

“I feel so appreciated,” Virren sighed.

“Uh... what now?” Kyven asked.

“This is not something we can discuss here,” the wolf told him. “You will come with me. I will take you from this place, and you will find the answers you seek.”

“Leave? Leave Atan?” Kyven asked in surprise.

“Why do you think the fox led you to that crystal, Kyv?” Virren asked simply. “She was preparing you for this. She freed you of your obligations, and now you can search for your answers without worry.”

“How did you know—”

“It wasn’t that hard to put together,” Virren told him simply. “The fox brought you to me, knowing I could summon a Shaman, and you find that crystal so quickly afterwards. She was preparing you for this.”

“There is little more for this,” the wolf snorted. “Take him and prepare him, Virren. I will come for him tomorrow at sunset.”

“Wh-Where are you taking me?”

“I don’t know,” the wolf shrugged. “The way of the Shaman is not found in a book, human. The way of the Shaman is the path of wisdom, for the spirits are wise. You do not find true wisdom in a book, you find only knowledge. I will teach you the way of the Shaman while the spirits guide us to where they wish us to go. When we get there, they will show you wisdom, and you will grow.”

“I don’t understand.”

“And so you must walk the path, to come to understand,” the wolf said simply. “In that understanding you will gain wisdom, and that is the path of the Shaman.”

“Get used to it, they all talk that way,” Virren said with a sigh. “The Noravi version without all the mystery is this: Stalker teaches you the basics, but you learn the rest by yourself. Clover calls it the Spirit Walk. Your fox, your totem, will guide you to places and show you things, in hopes that you learn from them.”

“Totem?”

“Sometimes spirits take special interest in someone, sometimes even humans who don’t know that they’re there. When they do that, it’s said that the spirit is your *totem*. The fox has been your totem for quite a while, Kyv. You said yourself she’s watched you for years.”

Kyven pieced that together immediately. The other spirits he’d seen in his life, the ones interested in other people, they were acting much like Virren described. The cat that had calmed the apprentice during the test, the hawk on the shoulder of the new first year, they were spirits that seemed especially interested in those boys, even though the boys had no idea they were there.

“Do not confuse the human,” the wolf told him. “Take him. Prepare him. I will come for him at sunset tomorrow, so he may begin his journey.”

The wolf turned from them and gave one bounding leap that vaulted him up to the top of Cougar Fall, then glanced back before vanishing into the darkness.

Kyven felt a little strange. He was *leaving* Atan. He’d left before, he’d been all the way to Avannar before while on a trip with Master Holm, some Guild business that required him to go to the Guild’s headquarters in Avannar. But he’d be leaving for a while, maybe never coming back, and that was a bit daunting. He was a very domestic person. He’d lived all his life in Atan, first in a tiny cottage near Miner’s Road, then at the shop. He’d never hunted before, had slept outdoors only four times in his life; twice on the way to Avannar, and twice on the way back. He knew how to ride a horse, but he wasn’t used to it. This would be new to him, very new. And he’d be going with only an Arcan for company... and an Arcan that didn’t seem to like him very much.

“Don’t worry too much at it, Kyv,” Virren told him. “Stalker will explain it all to you. And if you find that it’s not the life for you, you can always come back. We’ll just make sure you set it up with Holm that you expect to return, you just don’t know when.”

“How?”

“Easy. Tell him that you’re going out to the frontier settlement over at Deep River, both to think things through and to play at prospecting. You’ve already bought him, and Holm likes you. He’ll let you go as long as he’s sure you’ll come back.”

“But what if I don’t come back?”

“I think you will,” he said simply. “If you decide to join us, Kyven, you’d be the most help right here in Atan. The Masked have a very strong presence here, and you here would make this place a bastion for us.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m an alchemist, Kyv,” he explained as he took out a small bronze device and twisted it, which flooded the area with brilliant light, illuminating their path as they went back. “I build a lot more than what the people of Atan see. There’s also a miner that’s one of the Masked, hiding where I get my crystals from. But those crystals still have to be cut, and it’s hard to explain where I keep getting such perfect crystals from, so having a cutter among the Masked would be *very* helpful to us.”

“What is the Masked?”

“We’re an organization that works for the welfare of the Arcans,” he answered. “We try to

help them as much as we can without giving ourselves away. One of the ways I help is by building alchemical devices that we use. That’s how I healed the mouse, Kyv, using a healing bell. That crystal you cut yesterday was to replace the crystal I used in the bell.” He laughed. “With you here, our miner friend may not even be needed.”

“I don’t understand. I’m no miner.”

“Kyven, Shaman can *create* mana crystals,” Virren told him. “They draw the power from the spirits and manifest it into our world in the form of a crystal, just like the crystals we mine. You can’t tell a Shaman made crystal from a natural one unless you’re someone who works with crystals for a living.”

“I... yes. That crystal you gave me, it was just *perfect*. No internal flaws, no planar faults.”

“That crystal was made by Clover,” he said simply. “She can make them with flaws inside them, but she hates doing it. She thinks it’s a waste of effort to not make something the best you can, and I have to keep explaining to her that if she keeps giving me perfect crystals, I’m going to have to start explaining that fact to the cutters that cut them.”

“Why can’t she make one that doesn’t need cutting?”

“They can’t. They have control over the power that forms the crystal, but it still has to be created in a *natural* state. It has to have a rough exterior to allow them to build the crystal inside it, kind of like the shell of an egg. Think about it, Kyv, why do you never cut a crystal until you use it? Why are all those crystals sitting in your vault uncut? To make it hold its power as long as possible. Once you cut it, the magic inside begins to bleed out, fade away. It’s locked in by its imperfect exterior, by its shell. Honestly, I could put an uncut Shaman-made crystal into almost any device and it’d run, but cutting still maximizes that power.”

“I knew crystals degraded over time, but I never heard it explained quite that way.”

“Alchemists are much more concerned about that kind of thing, Kyv. We *use* those crystals you cut, once you cut them and sell them, you’re done with them. A crystal begins to degrade after it’s been cut. It takes a long time, years, but it still happens. That’s why I never bring you a crystal I don’t intend to install in a device within the month.”

“That makes sense. So, I could *make* crystals?”

“It’s possible. Not all Shaman can do it, though, and not all Shaman can make all kinds of crystal. Stalker can’t make blue or green crystals. Clover can’t make black crystals. Coldfoot can *only* make red crystals. None of them can make white crystals.”

“Why?”

“I have no idea,” he shrugged. “It’s some Shaman thing they don’t explain to us normal people.”

“Oh.”

“You’re pretty calm about this,” Virren chuckled as they reached the road.

“You said it yourself, Virren. They have the answers I’m looking for. I want to *know*. I want to know what it means. I want to know who I am, *what* I am. I just want to know that I’m really not crazy.”

“I can understand that, friend. I really can. Now, I’ll leave you here, I have someone to go talk to. Get ready to go on a journey, my friend. Pack for the road, and buy a horse and the provisions to make it look like you’re going prospecting tomorrow. You’re going to need it. Do you have enough chits for that?”

“I think so.”

“Come by my shop if you run short, I’ll spot you. Come by my shop in the morning no matter what, tell me how it goes with Holm.”

“I will. Night, Verrin. And thank you.”

“Any time, my friend. Any time.”

They separated, leaving Kyven with his thoughts. He was... afraid. He could admit that. He was going to go off with a Shaman, a figure he'd been taught all his life to fear, because that Shaman had answers to questions that only he could answer. Kyven wanted to know. He wanted to know about this spirit world, he wanted to know about the fox that had watched him all his life. He wanted to know why the fox was so interested in him, why she was now helping him when always before, she had done nothing but watch him. What had changed? Why had she decided to take an active role in his life?

She. Yes, the fox was a she. He wasn't quite sure when she went from *it* to *she* in his mind, but she had. She wasn't some mind image, some hallucination anymore. She was truly something outside of him, possessed of her own personality and soul.

And he wanted to learn more about her.

Holm, it seemed, had almost expected something like this. He went to his former master after returning to the shop and quietly told him what Virren had said, but in his own words. "I need a little time to think, Holm," he explained after telling him his plan. "And to be honest, this might be my only chance ever to try something like this. I'll be in the shop from here out, limited to trips to Avannar for Guild business. I'd like one chance to go out and see a little of the world before my whole world becomes this shop."

Holm grinned at him. "I'm glad to hear you say that, son," he said with a laugh. "Now I feel *very* comfortable with selling out to you. Go out there and see something of the world, have your own little adventure, then come back to us. I did the same thing myself you know," he grinned. "I spent a year on a ship after I finished my apprenticeship as a sailor, just to see something of the world before I spent my life huddled over a workbench. It was a very happy and exciting time for me. I came back home missing a tooth and with a nasty disease I caught from a frisky barmaid in Gorveon, but eh. A trip to the healer cured the little bug, and I got used to the missing tooth. Your bench will be here waiting for you when you get home, my boy. And to be honest, the time away'll give the other boys time to adjust to the idea of you being a Master and not an apprentice. I can get them used to the idea of it while you're gone. It'll also give me time to get Timble ready to take his place as a journeyman in the shop. Just do me a favor and be back before he's free of his contract, if you can. I'd like you to be here to establish the new order when Timble's done with his contract, and I can start teaching you and him so I can start pulling back and getting some rest."

"I'll do my best, Holm," Kyven said, visibly relieved. "I'm just glad you're alright with it."

"You're a young man, Kyv, and there's a whole lot of world out there. The shop can make it without you for a while, and it's something that all young men should do at least once in their lives. You love to prospect, so go on an adventure! Go prospect the frontier, far from here, where everything is new and exciting! And when you're done, you can come back home and reap the rewards for nine years of hard work. Who knows, you may even come home with some money in your pocket," he grinned.

"Thanks, Holm. You're a great friend."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence, my boy. Now, you need to gear up for your prospecting trip, so get going! Be sure to talk to the other miners to get a good idea of everything you'll need."

Kyven slept fitfully that night. He had unusual dreams, but dreams he couldn't remember all that well when he woke up. They were foreboding, though, foreboding and ominous. He chalked it up to his uncertain feeling about what he was doing, but his determination was unwavering. He was willing to do this, to leave Atan in the company of an unfriendly Arcan if it meant that he would get his answers, and would come to understand the mysterious fox that had lived in the shadows of his life ever since he was a little boy. He would put up with

it for that chance, the chance to find the answers to his questions.

It was a strange thought. He was a *Shaman*... or he *could* be. He remembered both of them make that distinction the night before. They said he had the *potential* to be a Shaman. A human Shaman. A thing that was supposed to be impossible. But every time he thought about how impossible it was, that this all had to be some kind of insane dream, he remembered seeing his own eyes in that mirror, eyes that glowed from within with an emerald radiance. That one thought, that one image, it told him beyond all doubt that they were correct about at least that. He had *some* kind of strange, unusual ability, and it was related to being able to see the spirits that no other human could see.

He remembered the light of the wolf's eyes from the night before, how it seemed to intensify when Kyven threatened him with a knife. Was that radiance an indication of a Shaman's power? His eyes hadn't been glowing this morning when he looked in the mirror after waking up. Did they only glow when he could see spirits, or did the proximity of spirits cause his eyes to glow?

No reason to get ahead of himself. He'd learn about it from that intimidating wolf that didn't seem to like him... oh, that was going to be *so* fun, traveling with someone like that. But the wolf could answer his questions, so he'd endure dealing with someone that seemed to blame him for the ills of the world.

Kyven made several stops that morning. Atan was a mining town, so it had everything he needed to make it look like he was prospecting. He bought all the gear he'd need to both pan and dig for crystals, remembered to buy two sniffers for hunting for them, then bought all the survival gear he'd need to camp outdoors for extended periods of time. He ended up with so much stuff that he needed both a riding horse and a pack horse. Kyven knew little about horses, but he did know that one of the stable masters had a reputation for honesty and fairness, so he relied on the man's reputation and had him sell him a riding horse and a pack horse, tack and saddle, and a pack saddle. He bought three pairs of sturdy leathers for hard travel, rugged clothing that would handle the wild, and stopped in at Virren's shop under the auspice of buying the alchemical devices that would make living in the wild less dangerous and more comfortable. Virren met him in the showroom, and discussed several devices that he might find useful, from lamps to weather shields to excavators to rock cutters to water generators to bug repellers to a healing bell. Virren made a show out of discussing the various devices that many frontier prospectors used, and when a few other townsfolk came into the showroom to buy devices themselves, they haggled over the prices of the devices they'd discussed.

When they were alone, though, Virren immediately switched to the real matter. "As soon as you're set up, head out," he said. "It would look suspicious if you try to leave in the middle of the afternoon, but not so strange for you to head out as soon as you're geared up. That'll look like youthful enthusiasm. Take the Avannar Road and stay on it. He'll catch up with you later."

"The Avannar Road? Why not the Miner's Road?"

"That's the way you want to go if you're heading for the frontier," he answered. "You'd have to go north to get to the Podac River to get to the Cumman Gap, and it's a lot easier going up through the Blue Valley than it would be to go along the ridges."

"Alright."

"How far along are you?"

"I have prospecting gear, clothes, camping gear, horses, and now I'm buying stuff here. I just have the food left to buy and I'm done."

"Not quite. You'll need to buy a weapon. You'll look very strange if you leave for the fron-

tier with nothing but posts knives. Go to the gunsmith and buy a musket at the very least. I'd buy a pistol too, if I were you. Almost all frontiersmen carry both, and the better off ones also carry an alchemy weapon like a shockrod or firetube... but I don't think you need to get quite that exotic."

"Alright."

"You have enough chits?"

"I'm not sure, I've never bought a musket before. How much do they run?"

"A musket will run you about three hundred chits. A pistol will cost about four hundred."

"I'm short then," he said with a grimace.

"No problem, I'll give you a thousand chits to cover it. Remember to buy powder and ammunition for it too, and make sure you buy a musket and pistol that uses the same size shot, so you only have to buy one kind of shot for both."

"Alright."

"Remember, buy it, pack it, head out. He'll meet you on the road, probably after you camp for the night. He doesn't like moving around in the daytime."

"Got it. I guess this is goodbye, Virren," he said.

"Only for a while," Virren smiled. "I told you, this is where you'd do the most good, so I fully expect to see you back here soon."

"I hope so. This is my home. I'm going to feel strange leaving it."

"Just be happy, Kyv. Find your answers, and then make your decisions based on it. You might walk *the path*, you might not, just do what you think is right for you."

"I will. Thanks Virren."

"Good luck, Kyven," he said, clasping his hand in a firm grip.

Kyven did as Virren ordered. He bought two week's worth of provisions from a grocer, a musket, and a pistol, and packed it all on the pack horse as best he could, given he'd never done that before. His result looked a little bulky, but at least he was careful to balance the two sides so the poor horse wasn't pulled in a circle from a lopsided load. After he had everything loaded up, he returned to the shop and had a first year watch his horses while he went inside to say goodbye. He shook Timble's hand and got an actual hug from Holm, as well as a round of farewells from the younger apprentices, wishing him good journey and good luck on his prospecting trip.

He didn't get out without a gift, though. Holm handed him a wrapped bundle. He unfolded the leather flaps, and found within five throwing daggers in separate sheaths, all perfectly balanced. "These make no noise, son, and you don't have to reload," Holm told him. "A pistol can stop a man coming after you, but you only get one shot and you tell the whole world where you are. Remember, son, a posts player knows how to throw a dagger, and they're just as deadly as a pistol at close range. Carry them with you at all times."

"I will, Holm," he said with a nod, feeling the balance of each one. They were literally made for throwing. He put a dagger in each boot, and tucked the remaining three in his belt. "I'm going to go ahead and get on the road, Holm. The sooner I get out there, the sooner I get back."

"Too true, son. Be careful out there, and enjoy your trip."

"I hope I do, Holm. I really hope I do."

He felt... strange.

He rode out of Atan about an hour after noontime, gnawing on a beef sandwich in the saddle as he got used to the strange sensation of both riding a horse and knowing that he was riding away from his old life and riding towards a new, uncertain one.

What would he find out there, in the real world? What would it be like to learn about the

spirits? Was he really a Shaman, could he do real magic? Could he really create mana crystals? Or was he simply some kind of mutant, some kind of freak, born with the ability to see spirits and nothing else? What kinds of answers would he find to his questions? He wasn't sure. All that he knew was that after so many years of living with the fox in his life, he was ready to do this to find out about her, and everything that went along with it.

He could accept the idea that he might be a Shaman, because it answered some of his questions. It explained why he could see the fox, and that he wasn't the only one. But it left the one question unanswered, and the one that was the most important.

Why.

Why the fox had stayed with him all these years. Why the fox had saved his life. Why the fox wanted him to do this now. Why the fox was so interested in him. And in a way, why he felt like he owed this both to her and to himself.

He wasn't entirely looking forward to this. The idea of being a Shaman didn't excite him, it terrified him. He would become what the Loremasters said was the epitome of evil, and he'd be turning his back on the entire human race to become what they most feared. But he had to go through with it. He had to know, he had to know if he really was crazy, he had to know who the fox was and why he seemed to matter so much to her... and why he was beginning to feel that she meant something to him.

He was willing to travel with the wolf Shaman and learn from him, so he could find the answer to those questions. If he didn't, they would haunt him for the rest of his life, haunt him every time he saw her sitting, watching him, forever lament that he gave up his chance to learn the truth.

He *knew* that if he didn't do this, if he did not leave Atan and learn about this newly revealed part of himself, he would regret it for the rest of his life. So, he was willing to ride away from Atan, ride away from his comfortable life, ride away from everything he thought he knew to find the answers he sought.

He just had to know, no matter what it cost him to find out.

He had to know *why*.

Chapter 3

Kyven was introduced to the first little joy of the road that day... saddle sores. He didn't ride horses often, though he knew how, and after four hours in the saddle, that fact became painfully apparent as so long sitting in a jostling saddle began to take its toll on his backside legs, and lower back. He knew there were coming, though. The time he'd gone to Avannar with Holm, they'd taken an extra day both ways because neither of them were used to riding, going slow and stopping often to minimize the saddle sores. Kyven mirrored that behavior now, riding at a slow, plodding walk for the horse—which it seemed not to mind—and stopping often so he could dismount and stretch.

At first, it didn't seem like a long journey as he came down the Avannar Road into the Blue Valley, for he was in familiar territory. He came across quite a few miners, prospectors, and even some townsfolk, who had heard of Kyven's lucky find down on the east side of Cougar Creek and were now flocking to the area to see if the lucky coin would flip once again in their favor. He even saw Master Torvik down there with a couple of his older apprentices, crossing the road in front of him with a sniffer in his hand as his apprentice told him in a snarky tone that he'd *told* him the creek was on the other side of the road. But, when he came down into the Blue Valley and continued east, then the enormity of it began to make its mark when he passed the fallen maple that had been cut to clear it from the road, and moved beyond the normal boundaries of the Atan region. He moved out into what most called frontier

land, area dotted by individual settlements, farms, and mills, areas beyond the governmental authority of any village or town. This place was basically lawless, where anyone could do anything without fear of legal retribution. However, despite that fact, it was still an orderly and safe place, for the many farms cut large tracts out of the forest, the farmers and millers all knew one another, and they made sure that the area was kept safe. Any bandits or raiders that set up in the area quickly found themselves being chased off by a posse of farmers armed with muskets, crossbows, firetubes, and shockrods. There was no law here but the farmers, who enforced their own version of the law... and that was *do no harm*. It was a pretty free-wheeling place, where people were allowed to live any way they pleased, so long as they did no harm to others. But the instant they did that harm, assaulting road travelers, raiding farms, attacking families, the farmers gathered together and hunted them down. And they were not merciful. They killed the offenders without hesitation or remorse. That threat of swift and fatal retribution kept the bandits away from this section of the Blue Valley.

This was the area through which Kyven rode. He passed farms spread out along the roadside, sometimes spread across it, the road cutting through a farm, was often waved to by farmers and workers as they toiled the fields, to whom he waved back cordially. He stopped by a small brook for an afternoon meal, taking a good rest. Just as he was packing up to continue on, a merchant train pulled up, four wagons coming to a stop in the same grassy field by the brook, and he shared space with them as they moved to water the horses and take a short break for a meal. "Ho, traveler, come from Atan?" one of the men called.

"Aye," he answered.

"I do love seeing this restover," the short, wiry-haired man chuckled. He wore a leather vest over a cotton shirt, and he wore the strange knee-length white cotton trousers that marked him as a Flauren, from the southern kingdom of Flaur. It was very hot down there, but both men and women wore shortened breeches, leaving their lower legs bare. It was said that the women wore much shorter knickers than the men, leaving most of their thighs bare as well. It was entirely possible, Kyven supposed. Miyan women often went topless, a custom not very common in the northern kingdoms. If a woman showed her bare breasts in Atan, it would be a scandal that would cycle through the old women for years. But different climates created different customs, Kyven supposed. Flaur, Miyan, and Lewa were very hot places, and wearing a lot of clothes would be unbearable. "When I see this spot, I know I'm just a couple of hours out from Atan. We should roll in just at sunset. On the way to Avannar?"

"Cumman Pass," Kyven replied. "I'm heading out to Deep River."

"Oh, a frontiersman!" the man said with a laugh. "Good luck, friend, you'll need it. That's a hard life."

"I'm going to go see what kind of life it is," Kyven answered, in his usual distant manner, unwilling to get too friendly with a stranger.

"Pretty wild," he chuckled. "I've done a few merchant trains there. Frontier towns like that are magnets for outlaws and rough types. You can get on fairly well as you remember the three rules. Be polite, be fair, and be dangerous. Don't piss nobody off, and prove you're too dangerous to get into a fight with, and you're fine. As long as you're an honest and fair man, you earn respect."

"I'll remember that."

"Not the talkative type, eh? You'll fit in fine there," the merchant laughed. "Just don't let them confuse your silence for weakness. But, we can help each other. You know the road the way I'm going, I know the road the way you're going. Anything up ahead I should know about?"

"No, it's fine. A crowd at the base of Cougar Mountain, but nothing wrong with the road."

"A crowd? What's goin' on?"

"Someone found a white crystal panning the stream at the base of the mountain, so now everyone is prospecting the area," Kyven told him.

The merchant laughed. "Lemmings," he noted. "They won't get the same luck, believe you me. Welp, going your way, they had a tree fall across the road last night about five minars up, so there's a little rough spot there where they had to clear it, but outside of that the road is dry and smooth running. You're not gonna make The Red Inn, which is the usual inn that serves people comin' a day out from Atan, but there's a few farmsteads out past the Blue Forest that'll put up a lone traveler if you pay 'em."

"Thanks for the advice," Kyven told him as he clumsily pulled himself up into the saddle. "Safe journey to you."

"To you too, my quiet friend. And good luck prospecting! I hope you come home richer than you were when you left!"

Kyven continued on for the rest of the afternoon, until he reached the Blue Forest. It was an area of unplowed land on a small irregular set of low but rugged hills within the valley, not so high that they broke up the valley but steep enough to make farming them a rough prospect. The area was wild, natural, steep rises and falls of the road as it followed ridges up and down with flat plateaus atop the hills. He realized that if the wolf was going to catch up with him, then a place like this was the best place to stop and wait for him. He couldn't go stay over with a farming family with a Shaman coming for him, so finding a place away from the road here in the woods was the best idea. He came across a small, clear-running brook in a valley between two hills, and turned upstream rather than follow the road, following the rather smooth running along the stream and moving up and away from the road. He went about a minar up, until he found a rather flat area with a very small clearing that the stream bisected, little more than a gap between several very large trees and the stream, a place that showed signs of being camped by others a while ago. It had a very old burned spot where someone had set a fire.

Well, if it was good enough for them, it was good enough for him.

He set up camp. He unsaddled his horses first, and picketed them with some hay and enough rope to drink their fill at the stream and graze on the small patch of grass that grew on one side of the clearing. It took him a while to erect his tent, since he'd never really done it before, but he finally managed it. He then collected some firewood and used the firestarter he'd bought from Virren to light it. It was a small bronze tube, the size of a child's finger, and when pressing the button at the end, it produce a steady flame from its open end, which made it perfect for lighting pipes and starting fires. He locked the button so it couldn't be pressed by accident and put it back in his pocket, then pulled out the brand new cooking pans he'd bought from the outfitter and tried them out with a bit of salted bacon. Kyven did know how to cook, thanks to spending his early years in the kitchen doing chores, so he had no trouble cooking the bacon and toasting slices of black travel bread, then cutting up some onion and potato and frying them in the pan using the grease of the bacon to give them flavor. He ate in silence, with only the wind and the sounds of the forest touching his ears, and he leaned on the ground using his saddle as a backrest and read from the only book he'd brought, a rather cheesy adventure book called *Frontier Jack*, about a dashing hero saving damsels and fighting villains in the wild frontier lands known as the Snake Prairie, the prairie lands on the far side of the Snake River, which was far, far to the west of Atan. People used to live out there, but a series of wars and plagues had driven people away centuries ago, and only now were they beginning to come back... but not many. There was little in the way of crystal mining out there, so without crystals, there wasn't much in the way of civilization. Those few who

did lived truly rough lives, without crystals or with only a bare few essential crystal devices, like a firestarter or a water purifier. It was a life that was bare and stark, and couldn't be easy... which was why so few lived west of the Smoke Mountain Basin and the Deep River. The southern kingdoms of Noraam didn't have many crystals either, but they did have the ocean, so ships plied the seas laden with other goods, and they traded for them using cotton, rice, sugar, and other goods one couldn't get in the north. Beyond the sea and the natural crystal-producing areas, there weren't very many people, and no major kingdoms or settlements.

Atan was just one example of a mining village. Mines were scattered all over the Smoke Mountains all along its entire two thousand minar range, from the northern end in the kingdom of Acadan to the southern tip in Georvan, the kingdom north of Flaur. Crystals were mined all along it, though the biggest deposits were mainly to the north, from Mevia to Augen. The region around Atan was known for smaller deposits, but good quality crystals and the occasional rich deposit of large crystals, which was why it attracted so much mining. The worst mining was at the southern tip, in Georvan, where the crystals were small and the deposits scarce, but people still mined it just because even small crystals were worth money. The northern kingdoms were crystal producers, and the southern kingdoms generally produced goods not available in the north to trade with them.

As sun set, Kyven started getting anxious. That wolf would be here soon, and when he arrived, then his entire world was going to change. He was going to learn about this mysterious other world that he was able to see, and learn about something that had haunted him his entire life. What would he learn about the fox? What kind of creature was she? Why was she so interested in him? He'd find out, and learn more about himself. He'd find out if he really was a Shaman... and if he was, what he'd have to do about it. The idea of being a Shaman frightened him, but there was also a, a, *curiosity* there. What if he really could learn to do magic without crystals? What if he really could *create* crystals? That did interest him. If he could, well, he could just create his own crystal, then cut them, then sell them. The shop in Atan would be just fine, and would always make money.

He was there. Kyven just knew it. He closed the book and stood up quickly, then turned to see the wolf appear from the darkening twilight shadows, tall and menacing. He was topless now, having shed his shirt, wearing only a pair of dark leather trousers that ended at his knees. "You have made good time, human, and chose your campsite well. I'll give you that much," the wolf stated. "Untie the horses and release them."

"What?" he asked in shock.

"You will not need them. You cannot walk the path of the spirits riding on the back of a horse. It must be made with your own feet, and with only what you may carry. Release them."

"Virren never said anything about that," he complained.

"The human does not know our ways," the wolf replied. "Release the horses. Go through all this junk and decide what you may carry with you. Leave the rest."

"We're not staying here?" The wolf leveled a chilling stare on him with those glowing yellow eyes. "Uh, what do you suggest I bring?"

The wolf nodded, seemingly in approval. "Your personal effects, and whatever is important to you. Leave behind all else. The land and the spirits will provide all we need."

Kyven wasn't too sure about that, but then again, the wolf was carrying *nothing*. He didn't even have a belt pouch, all he had was that pair of ragged leather trousers. Perhaps Kyven needed to be just as spartan. After untying the horses and removing their bridles, freeing them, he went through his things, abandoning virtually everything he bought for the journey.

He kept only what he could easily carry, what wouldn't weigh him down if he had to walk on his own feet. He ended up with just his bedroll, and wrapped within it was his clothes, two waterskins, and a wrapped bundle of cheese in case they couldn't find any food. He decided to leave the musket and pistol behind—waste of money, that was—and rely on the daggers that Holm had given him to defend himself. Besides, they were a gift, and he would keep them. He tied his bedroll with a length of thong, then slung it over his back. "Alright, I'm ready," he announced.

The wolf nodded. "You chose wisely. Perhaps you will make a good Shaman, human. Now let us go."

"But it's dark," he protested.

"You have the eyes of the Shaman, human," the wolf snorted. "That is your first lesson. The ability to see the spirit world also provides the ability to see what others cannot, and see beyond. To a Shaman, there is no darkness. Open your eyes, human. Open your eyes, and the darkness will lift."

The wolf then bounded into the murk, vanishing in seconds, without explaining exactly *how* to do it.

Kyven stood there a long moment, a little frustrated and confused, then he blew out his breath. "Okay then," he sighed, closing his eyes. He knew what it felt like when he could see the fox, and he *did* notice that when he could see the fox, that light seemed to shimmer, and things brighten. But there had still been darkness, he recalled. The fox had melded with the shadows last night.

He was drifting here. He needed to *see*, to force himself to see what was there. He kept his eyes closed and groped for a way to make that happen, then opened his eyes and tried to concentrate. He concentrated on the shadows around him, trying to look into them, look *through* them, look for something he knew he could see, but was escaping his vision.

It was then he realized one of the answers to his questions. The fox had incited this in him, or more to the point, the proximity of spirits. When they were near, it *triggered* his ability to see. But now he was trying to see without them here, trying to consciously trigger his sight, and he wasn't quite sure how. He just kept concentrating, peering into the gloom, trying to see what he knew he could see.

The forest around him seemed to shimmer just slightly, and the shadows retreated from him. He suppressed giving a cry of triumph when the forest seemed to illuminate to the level of twilight, still full of shadows, but he could definitely see. He could see every tree around him, see the stream, see both up and down the hill, and when he looked in the direction the wolf had gone, he saw him standing far ahead, looking back to him, his glowing yellow eyes easily visible to him. He did notice, though, that he had trouble seeing the ground, like it was still covered in shadow, and the water in the stream was... *patchy*. He could see it quite clearly in some places, and it seemed dark and indistinct in others. Kyven ignored that, however, hurrying up the hill to where the wolf stood, waiting for him. When he reached the wolf the black-furred Arcan simply nodded. "You have consciously touched your power for the first time, human," he announced. "You forced yourself to use your eyes. Always before, the spirits incited it in you, but you have proven you can control your eyes when need be."

"Uh, was that a complement?"

"You will get no such coddling from me," the wolf snorted darkly. "I merely state fact. Now come. We will run."

"May I ask why?"

"The magic you will use is not kind or gentle, human," the wolf told him. "It takes a strong body and a strong will to control it. It taxes the body and wearies the mind. You are soft.

You would be burned out trying to channel a lick of flame. I must strengthen you, make you ready.”

“I understand. You will teach me as we run?”

He nodded. “Now come, and remember, I do to you nothing that was not done to me, so do not think I am tormenting you just because you are human. But, since you *are* human, and I am not sure how the spirits will respond to you, I will assist you,” he seemed to grunt while saying it. “Will you accept that aid?”

“Huh? Uh, sure. Why, though?”

“Because it would take me years to strengthen you if we do this the natural way,” he answered.

“No, why ask?”

“Because the type of magic I will perform cannot be done to those who are not *willing*,” he answered. “You must accept the aid freely.”

“Oh. I understand. What exactly are you going to do?”

“Give you a blessing that will cause your body to rebuild much stronger than normal once it is worn down by exertion,” he answered. “I will run you until you literally collapse. When you recover, you will be able to run *much* further the next time. Using this blessing, I will build you to an acceptable level in weeks rather than years, but it will be very hard on you. I will work you beyond exhaustion, human, for the further down you are broken, the stronger you will rebuild. The harder you work, the faster it will be. Do you understand this?”

“I understand. I’ll do my best.”

“That is all you should ever do. Your best,” he said simply.

For the first time, Kyven saw *real* magic performed. The wolf raised his clawed, furry hands, and Kyven could... *see* something coalesce around them. A kind of pattern of glowing, cloudy energy. It flowed into his large hands, and then the wolf reached out and put his hands on Kyven’s shoulders. He felt a strange, tingling vitality flow into him, saturate his entire body, and then it faded and he felt it no longer. “Come, then. Let us begin.”

And so, through the moonlit forest, they ran. Kyven struggled to keep up with the wolf, who literally ran on all fours ahead of him, whose voice called back to him as he explained the very basics of the spirits and the power the Shaman could call forth. “Behind the world you can see is another world, human,” he began. “The spirit world. It is the world you see in shape and form, but it populated by the spirits. Life in the mortal world intrudes into the spirit world, for life *is* spirit and spirit *is* life, and what you see now, through your eyes, is the spirit world. You see the trees around us, you see me, you see yourself, but you do not see that which has no life. Look at the ground. All you see is a dark mass, for you see not the dead leaves and the rocks, but you do see the life that lives upon them, hiding their forms while also showing you they are there. In the light, you can see both the spirit world and the mortal world overlaid atop each other, but here, in the darkness, all your eyes can see is the spirit world.”

Kyven could see that he was right. The trees were sharp and distinct, probably because he could see the life of them, but the forest floor was dark, murky, unfocused.

“Look at me. What do you see?” Kyven looked at him, bounding ahead of him. With this strange new sight, he looked just as he did before, tall, dark, menacing—wait. His pants were gone. He appeared naked, his fur curiously flattened around his hips, with a strange kind of dim glow around his hips and upper legs. When he relayed what he saw through a winded voice, the wolf glanced back at him. “Astute. The trousers I wear are dead, so you cannot see them. You see what lives, though for some strange reason we do not understand, we can also see hair and fur and claws, which are not technically alive. Clover suspects it is because

though they are dead, they are attached to a living body and are thus included within the aura. You see me without my trousers, though you see the tiny life that is too small to see that lives *upon* the trousers, which is that ghostly outline of my trousers that you see. When I see you, I see you without your clothes in a similar manner.”

“Well, that’s disturbing,” Kyven chuckled breathlessly.

“Indeed. Humans are bald, and it is *ugly*,” the wolf growled. “Practice will allow you to make out the nonliving things people carry, to penetrate your spirit sight into the mortal world. I can see the daggers you carry because I know what to look for.”

“So you could see my clothes if you wanted to?”

“Yes. They would not hide what lays beneath, they would be like a phantom around you, but I could see their color and shape. Seeing the non-living through Shaman eyes is not easy and it is not perfect.”

“But you can see just fine in the daytime?”

“Indeed. With the light, I can see just as any human, but I still see the spirit world at the same time.”

They ran on. The wolf described the world he could see through his eyes, explaining how life intruded into the spirit world. Life was a solid thing in the spirit world, and the spirits could interact with it as if it was solid to them, *if they so wished it*. Spirits could pass through life of the mortal world, or they could interact with it... which explained to Kyven why he saw that hawk sitting on the shoulder of that first year. Spirits could touch people and living things like they were solid, if they wanted to, but humans and other things that existed in the mortal world couldn’t feel them when the spirits touched them.

For long hours, through the night, Kyven ran, and listened. He ran until he was out of breath, until his heart was pounding in his chest and in his ears, until he could no longer hear the wolf explaining his vision, until the entire world focused down on following the wolf as he bounded effortlessly ahead of him, and continuing to put one foot in front of the other. The wolf did not slow down, but Kyven would not slow down. The wolf said that the harder he pushed himself, the faster and stronger he would be when he recovered, so he would not give up. He kept pushing himself, beyond exhaustion, still running even when his muscles felt like water and his breathing was so labored that he sounded like his lungs were bursting. He ran until blood started seeping from his nose, stopping only twice, once to vomit and once to gulp down water from a stream... and only because the wolf had stopped himself to drink. The wolf did exactly as he said, pushing Kyven by making him run, intending to literally run him into the ground.

That happened around midnight. Kyven tripped on a root and crashed to the ground, and lay there a long moment panting, feeling pain shoot through his chest. He struggled to his hands and knees, then gritted his teeth and staggered to his feet as the wolf continued on without looking back. He would *not* be left behind! He lurched forward, running on weak, unsteady legs. He stumbled through a thorn patch that the wolf had gone around to make up ground, feeling the briars pull on his clothes and tear through his skin, but he could barely feel the pain. He pressed through them and broke into the clear, feeling burning stings all over him as sweat poured into scratches and caused pain, but he wouldn’t give up. He pressed on, knowing that the harder he pushed himself, the better off he would be, and that drove him. It drove him beyond pain, beyond exhaustion, even beyond thought, as it seemed that his brain shut down to focus on pushing him beyond his physical limits.

But it couldn’t last forever. The wolf crossed a stream with a graceful bound, and Kyven’s legs slowed from the water while the rest of him kept going. He fell into the stream, the cold water assaulting him, shocking his muscles, and for a frightening moment he couldn’t move,

couldn't breathe, and couldn't lift his face out of the water. His body was paralyzed from exhaustion, and he literally lacked the strength to save himself. But survival overrode exhaustion as his lungs began to burn, and he barely managed to lift his face from the water as he took in a ragged breath, inhaling a little water. He coughed, and that cough caused him to retch violently, heaving an empty stomach in painful spasms that racked his torso. He leaned forward and collapsed on the rocky streambank, his head and shoulders out of the water with the rest of him submerged in the cold water. His brain was swimming in a haze of pain and weariness, but his will drove him forward, caused him to start weakly, shakily crawl out of the water, trembling arms and legs trying to carry his weight.

A large black foot, toes tipped with claws, appeared to him in the darkness, for he could no longer see the world as he had been. It was just before his nose, and it took him a long moment to comprehend that it was the wolf's foot. He felt himself being physically hauled off the streambed, out of the water, then he was tossed quite roughly onto a warm sandbar beside it. He rolled over on his back, his chest heaving for long moments, then he rolled back over on his hands and knees and tried to get to his feet. He rose up off his hands, his knees trembling violently, then he collapsed back to the ground.

"Rest," the wolf told him calmly. "You can go no further."

"N-No," he wheezed. "Must... go... on," he said through clenched teeth, trying to rise up onto his hands and knees again.

A foot came down on his back, and drove him to the sand, hard. His breath whooshed from his lungs, and he couldn't breathe for several terrifying seconds before his lungs and diaphragm seemed to remember how to work, allowing him to draw in a ragged, raw breath. "I will not be gainsaid, human," the wolf growled. "I told you to rest, and you will rest. Do not disobey me again. Now rest. You will eat when you are recovered."

Kyven stayed down, breathing heavily for many long moments as the wolf loomed over him, foot resting lightly on his back, almost as if daring him to try to get up again. He could only feel that foot on his back as he closed his eyes and tried to recover his strength, but then his head collapsed to the sand and he passed out.

It was daylight.

Kyven opened his eyes blearily to find himself laying on a sandbar near a stream, covered head to foot in sand. It was in his hair, in his ear, caking his skin, even in his pants and shirt. It took him a moment to remember where he was, what he was doing. And when he did, he suddenly felt like someone had carved out a hole in his stomach, he was so ravenously hungry. He scrambled to his knees, swiping sand off of him as he blinked and looked around. He was alone, the wolf was nowhere to be seen, but a dead buck was laying near the bar, a small red stain in the sand under its neck.

He had no idea what to do with it, but it was food. He knew that it had to be skinned and cleaned, and he wasn't entirely sure how to do either of those things, but he was hungry enough to take a try at it. He scrambled over to it on his hands and knees, but recoiled when he saw its belly, saw that it had literally been torn out, a gaping hole from its ribs to its back legs. The flesh around that gaping hole showed clear signs of being torn, and the visible spine inside was scratched and nicked. Something had *eaten* it.

He was too hungry to care. The buck wasn't rotted, it was fresh, and he was starving. He'd never eaten raw venison right off the carcass before, but he was about to try. He drew one of his throwing daggers, which had razor-sharp edges in addition to a sharp point, and used the dagger to slice away at the bloody meat at the edge of that gaping hole. He sliced off a small handful and did not hesitate to tear into it with his teeth. It tasted salty, tangy, but if the idea he was eating raw meat nauseated him, he'd have to wait until he felt like he wasn't dying of

hunger to think about it. The meat just unleashed an avalanche of almost uncontrollable hunger that caused him to attack the carcass like a starving animal. He barely managed to make sure he didn't get a mouthful of fur or hide as he sliced mouthful after mouthful off the carcass, systematically stripping all the meat he could easily see from it, leaving it skeletonized from the neck to the hind legs. He then cut new holes in its shoulder and hindquarters to harvest the flesh beneath to try to sate his hunger. His hunger didn't allow him to register that he'd eaten more than three times a man could normally hold in his stomach, and still his stomach felt completely empty. He continued to feast on the raw deer, for over an hour, until he finally felt satiated after stripping most of the flesh off its shoulder, hindquarter, and most of the two upper legs.

He leaned back and sat on his heels, wiping blood from his mouth. He didn't feel sick or nauseous at what he'd done at all. The wolf had clearly left it there for him, and he was too hungry to figure out how to do it the normal way, so he ate it as it was. He'd eaten plenty of venison in his life, just never raw, and right off the deer. It was what he needed, and so it was done.

He washed off in the stream, having to remove his shirt because of the blood on it, cleaned the blood off his face and hands, cleaned his dagger, and then moved upstream just a bit to drink his fill. He felt... fine. Now that he was no longer hungry, he didn't feel tired or sore or exhausted in any manner at all. He felt quite lively, in fact, spry, energetic. He felt... *good*. Strong. Very robust. He stood up and stretched, and his legs were rock solid, no quivering at all, and he felt like he could wrestle a bull. By the Trinity, that wolf's magic spell really worked! He said that it would make him recover much faster and much stronger than before, and he truly felt that way! He put a hand on his stomach and felt how much leaner he was; every bit of fat that had been on him was gone, leaving nothing but lean muscle behind. Tests showed that he was no stronger physically, but he felt as if he could run all day and not be winded at all.

Amazing!

It proved to him that Shaman really were magical, that they really could do magic without crystals. Whatever the wolf had done, it had been *damn* effective. Kyven had run until he literally passed out, and he woke up much stronger than he'd been when he fell asleep.

He stood up and considered what he'd learned last night, about vision. He closed his eyes and concentrated, and then opened them again. He wasn't sure if it was working, but he *did* seem to sense a bit of shimmering in the light, and the trees looked a little more sharper, clearer, more vibrant, where the forest floor, the rocks, and the water looked, well, like they always did. He looked down at his own legs and saw his pants, as he expected, but he also seemed to see a very faint sense of his own legs through them, almost like a shadow lurking behind it.

It was working! He could see the spirit world!

He looked around, and was a little disappointed. He saw nothing out of the ordinary, nothing unusual, nothing *magical*. He saw the forest, and up in the canopy his eyes seemed automatically drawn to a squirrel that seemed to stand out among the trees, sharp and clear. He went to the stream and looked down, and tiny minnows what blended with the shadows within the brook just jumped out at his eyes, almost blatantly visible. He even saw a faint, ghostly silhouette under a rock, a crayfish lurking under the nook. Truly, just as the wolf said, the non-living was invisible to the spirit world, and he was literally looking right through the rock to see the crayfish! True, his normal vision saw the rock and interfered, but the spirit sight of the animal still bled through, allowed him to see its outline very faintly through the rock. It moved and vanished to his spirit-sensing eyes, and he realized that it

moved under a patch of algae on the rock, and that living thing was hiding the animal underneath. He recalled that the wolf said that living things were solid to the spirits, if they wished them to be, so he saw that he couldn't look through one living thing to see another.

But still, this was literally the ability to see through a stone wall and see if there was anyone on the other side. What a useful ability!

He continued to practice with this newfound ability for over an hour, examining both living things and dead things, trying to see the tiny tiny things that lived on dead things that made them apparent, and wondering if he could see them if he used a magnifying glass... if this ability was truly based on his eyes, or was magical in nature and couldn't be augmented using a technological device.

No, it wouldn't. The spirit sight wouldn't *see* the glass, therefore it would have no effect. At least that was what he thought. It certainly seemed, well, logical to assume so.

But he came across an unforeseen issue with looking at the spirit world... it *tired* him. His vigor waned over the hour, just barely, but he began to notice it, to *feel* it. What he thought was just a different way to see with his eyes turned out to be something that required his active participation, it was *work*. He realized that he'd been exhausted both ways last night, both from the running and from forcing himself to use this spirit sight.

By the Father's grace, the wolf wasn't joking. If just using this spirit sight was noticeably tiring him, what would trying to use actual magic do to him?

He closed his eyes and did what he'd done so many times when he'd seen the fox over the years, pushed that idea out of his mind, willed it to go away. He opened his eyes and blinked and saw that the forest looked... normal to him. He didn't see the minnows sharply in the stream, and knew that he'd done it.

He was proud of himself. He couldn't say that he'd mastered this trick, but he could make it work or make it go away.

Uncertain of what to do, Kyven decided to wait for the wolf. He cleaned the sand out of his bedroll and put on a clean shirt, then sat down and rested, figuring that that was what he was supposed to do. He listened to the sounds of the forest as he watched the minnows dart about in the water for nearly an hour, as the sun seemed to be lowering as the shadows in the forest elongated, until the wolf returned. He made no attempt to move quietly, bounding into camp in that curious way that Arcans ran on all fours, skidding to a halt by the carcass and then standing erect like a human. He kicked the carcass and flipped it over, then nodded absently. "I see you did as you needed," he announced. "It was important to eat it raw. I was unsure you'd think to do that. You surprise me, human."

"I didn't eat it raw because I knew I had to, I did it because I was starving," he answered.

"Which is against your human ideals," the wolf said to him. "You are thinking outside the cultured bounds of your race," he said with a derisive snort. "Have you practiced?"

"I was until I realized that using my eyes that way took effort. You told me to rest, so I stopped."

"You obeyed me. Again, you surprise me, human," the wolf said, almost grudgingly. "It makes me wonder why you disobeyed me last night when I told you to rest."

"You said I had to go until I couldn't go anymore," Kyven answered. "I had to keep trying until I couldn't. I thought I could keep going, so I wanted to try."

"A commendable attitude, but I am your teacher. You must listen to me."

"I was trying to do what you said, that's all," he said mildly.

"Well, from now on, obey my words as I say them, not as I've said before. Things may change."

"I will."

"Are you hungry?"

"No."

"How do you feel?"

"I feel fine. Healthy. Your, uh, whatever you did, it really worked. After I ate, I felt... amazing."

"That is a false feeling," the wolf warned. "It's an after-effect of the blessing after it does its work. That false energy fades quickly once you start working again."

"I'll remember that. What do we do now?"

"Since you feel up to continuing, we work. Last night we worked on your endurance. Today, we work on your strength. Each day we will alternate between them until your body is ready for the rigors of working with the magic."

"Then lead on."

The wolf led him into the forest, again used his magic to grant him that magical spell, and they began. He looked through the world with spirit sight, as commanded, as he carried heavy stones and logs up and down a hill, and was made to stack them up over his head on a rock face. Kyven was actually a very strong man despite his lack of a heavy labor profession, and seemed to surprise the wolf with his raw strength as he moved the first heavy rock. But the kind of work he was doing was designed to wear him down. He lasted much shorter than he did running, getting to the point in a mere hour where he literally could not pick up anything, for his hands were so tired that he couldn't keep his grip. The wolf led him back to the sandbar, him on quivering legs, and ordered him straight to the bedroll. He laid down on the bedroll with every muscle in his body screaming at him, trembling, yet he stayed awake, just laid there and rested while he maintained his spirit sight, trying to absolutely and utterly exhaust himself so he'd come back stronger the next day. The wolf noticed this as he hunkered down by the carcass, ripped off one of its legs, then began to gnaw at the flesh hanging from it. "Rest," he ordered.

"May I at least try to keep the sight going until I'm too tired to?"

"You may do that," he said after a moment. "I must admit, human, your dedication surprises me. I thought you feared Shaman."

"I do. But—it's hard to explain."

"I am not stupid, human," he said dangerously.

"No, it's not easy for me to put into words," he said. "All my life, the fox has been with me. It's—well, I want to know *why*. I want to know why she's so interested me, why she's helped me. She's been there, watching me, for over half my life. It's like she's a part of my life, though a part that I've always tried to ignore or reject when I thought she was a symbol of my own insanity. But now that I know I'm not crazy, and she's real, well, I owe this to her. She's stayed by me for half my life, and I just have to know why. This is the only way I can learn the answer. I, I just have to know. If I don't find out, I'll regret it for the rest of my life. Every time I'd see her, I'd know she offered me this chance to know her, and I passed it over, and I'd feel like I'd done her wrong. You know?"

"I do understand. She is a part of you, a part you don't understand, and you must know her to know yourself."

"Exactly!" he said animatedly. "You're very wise, wolf."

"I would hope so," the wolf grunted. "Now rest. I'll go hunt another deer. When you wake up, you'll need it."

That was the routine for many days, so many that Kyven lost count.

One night, they would run. They would run in silence as Kyven chased the wolf, almost came to hate the wolf for his inexhaustible endurance. He would run until he literally col-

lapsed in midstride, and then the wolf would drag him to a suitable campsite, where he would sleep like the dead. He would awaken to whatever meal the wolf had captured while he was asleep and eat like a starving animal, eat it raw, until he almost came to enjoy the taste of raw, bloody meat, oftentimes still warm and freshly killed.

On the next day, he would exercise his muscles. The wolf would make him carry progressively heavier and heavier objects further and further, tearing down his muscles so his magical spell would allow him to build back up stronger when he recovered. He would stagger back to wherever his bedroll was weak as a newborn kitten, but would awaken, eat, and then feel much stronger than the day before.

And the cycle renewed itself.

The wolf was even more silent than he was. Hours would pass in total silence as the wolf seemed to barely tolerate him, and Kyven was too intimidated by him to ask questions or engage him. He'd spoken much about spirit sight on that first night, but since then had barely spoken at all, except to issue commands. And he had not taught him anything else, anything new, only told him to continue looking through the world using spirit sight and observe, come to understand it, and practice being able to switch back and forth until he could do it at will. He did so, usually only while he was resting after a strength building exercise, as being able to maintain his spirit sight for long periods was as much a part of his endurance training as the physical side of it.

Days flowed into weeks, and Kyven sensed that well over a month had passed as they roamed the forest in the Blue Valley and along the ridges forming it. But that time had had a dramatic effect on him. In that time, his endurance increased by almost unbelievable amounts. He went from collapsing after just a couple of hours of running to being able to run the whole night, finally able to keep up with the wolf, and not collapse in exhaustion when the sun rose. And though he hadn't become superhumanly strong, he was as strong as he could possibly be without his muscles ballooning, giving him a sleek, fatless, panther-like build that was fast, agile, nimble, enormously strong, and as durable as stone. His clothes, however, did not fare half as well. His shirts were destroyed by the running, and his leather breeches had holes and tears in them from his boots to the waist, making them look like they had the pox. His hair grew shaggy, and he'd have grown a beard if not for the fact that his throwing daggers were so sharp that he could literally shave with them. He ceased looking like a clean-cut, urbane villager over those time and came to look like a lean, lithe, bare-chested, shaggy-haired mountain man, tall and sleek and dangerous-looking.

The night he managed to keep up with the wolf until sunrise, he felt enormously proud of himself. He was winded when the wolf bounded to a stop by a very small stream, but he felt he could still run more. The wolf rose up on his hind legs and looked down at Kyven with those glowing eyes, then simply nodded. "You are ready," he announced. "Make camp here. Rest. I will bring food, but tomorrow, you learn to hunt. Tomorrow *you* must feed *me*."

"I'll do my best," he said pantingly as he pulled off his bedroll and threw it on the ground, then sat down on a soft bed of leaves near the stream. "Why are you teaching me?"

"A Shaman must be self-sufficient," he said darkly. "And you are pathetically inept. Without me, you would die out here."

"I can't disagree with that. I spent my whole life in the village. I'll learn whatever you teach me."

"As it should be. Rest. I will be back soon."

The wolf dragged a huge buck carcass back to the camp not twenty minutes later, and they ate. Eating along with the wolf had taken some getting used to, for the Arcan ate like a wolf, with his jaws and claws. While the Arcan tore into the belly of the buck, Kyven used his

dagger to cut off one of its hind legs, and used weeks of practice to expertly skin the hide off of it and begin to eat. The weeks had gotten him not just used to eating raw meat, but actually preferring it. The wolf wouldn't let him cook it, telling him it was better for him raw, and he had developed a taste for it. He ate enough to satisfy him and left the rest for later, for he knew he'd awaken ravenously hungry, after the blessing that magically augmented his body's recovery used up his vital energies, and forced him to eat like a starving animal to replenish it.

And it was so. When he woke up a few hours after sleeping, he was starving to death, and the buck was there and waiting for him. He attacked it with desperation, consuming far more than he'd normally be able to eat, literally stripping it to the bone since both of them had eaten off of it previously. When he was done, he washed himself up, then stood up and stretched languidly, waiting for the wolf to return. The wolf had said that when his body could handle the stresses, he's start teaching him about how magic worked. Well, it seemed that they were there, so he was starting to look forward to it. Finally, he would start learning about the spirits, and about magic. He'd learn about the fox that had been with him since he was a kid, learn who she was, why she was interested in him, and learn why he mattered so much to her.

Then again, it was nice to be able to just *think* after waking up, not to be dragged straight to some hillside to carry heavy rocks as soon as he finished eating.

The wolf bounded in on all fours, then slowed to a walk and rose up onto his legs. Even though he saw it every day, he was still quite amazed and impressed by that Arcan ability. Their legs were just as long as human legs, actually a little longer, but what looked like a third joint in them let them fold them down short enough to be able to run on all fours, and run fast. He'd seen the wolf sprint before, and he was sure that he could chase down a sprinting horse. He'd never seen him hunt, but he guessed that the Arcan simply ran his prey down. They couldn't outrun him. Nothing in the forest could outrun the Arcan.

It wasn't a third joint, though. It was actually his ankle, and everything below it was his foot. His foot was elongated, just like in a normal canine, and what Kyven would call a foot would be just the ball of his foot and his toes if he related it to a human foot.

"Sit," he ordered, as he dropped down on all fours, literally sitting on his haunches by Kyven's bedroll. Kyven did so, sitting on his heels facing the wolf, who lifted his hands off the ground and put them on his legs. "You have toughened up to where I feel you can handle magic," he proclaimed. "For a human, you've done well. I expected you to quit weeks ago, or die."

"I'm no quitter."

"I hope so, for you are about to put that to the test," he said bluntly. "Walking the path of the Shaman is not for the weak, human. The spirits are demanding. If you are to walk with them, you must prove yourself to them. That is why even the most basic and simplest of magic is so demanding and taxing. They demand strength of body and strength of will, and they demand it from the youngest cub as much as they do the oldest Shaman."

"That's why I have to do the walk," he realized absently. "It's not just to gain wisdom. It's a test."

"You are wise," the wolf said with a nod. "They will test you in the Walk, test your body, your mind, and your spirit. Those who complete the Walk are much changed."

"What if you fail?"

"Most don't survive if they fail," the wolf said simply. "Do not believe that the Walk has no danger in it, human. It will be the most dangerous thing you have ever faced. But that is in the future. Before you can begin the Walk, you must learn about Shaman magic."

The wolf raised his hand, which had pads on his palm and fingertips, and short, sturdy claws. “There are three different realms of Shaman magic, human,” he began. “Each is called upon the same way, however. There is the Blessing, there is the Summoning, and there is the Invocation. The blessing is magic done to ourselves or to another that enhances or aids them in some manner. For example, I blessed you to recover much faster and much stronger than what is normal for you. That is a blessing. You can also be blessed to run with great speed, or gain supernatural strength, or see or hear beyond your normal abilities. Anything that enhances the body or senses is a blessing. Blessings are not used often, but they can be very useful when you do.

The second kind of magic is Summoning. That is calling spirits to you. When you Summon, you are asking for help. You must know exactly what you want from them, which spirit you call, and be prepared to pay the price. Spirits exact a toll from you for calling them like that. But in return, they will grant you knowledge, carry messages, or grant you special favors if it pleases them. Summoning magic is *very* dangerous, human. It is always the last resort. If you anger the spirit, it will avenge itself against you, and it very well may kill you. As I said earlier, the life of a Shaman is not an easy one.

“The last form of magic is the most common, and the one you will learn from me. It is Invocation, the drawing of magic from the spirit world and manifesting it into the mortal world. You are *invoking* the might of the spirits and using their power as an agent, a proxy. The vast majority of the time, you can accomplish your task using Invocation, or what we call *channeling*. When you cast a spell, you are forming a bridge between the spirit world and the mortal world, human, and *you* are the bridge. You call the power from the spirit world and channel it through you, and then it manifests into the real world. Channeling can do almost anything you need to do, human. It is the way you will attack your enemies, confuse them, learn about what you cannot see, aid your allies, and many other things. Blessings are actually channeled spells, but we separate them because they don’t have the same restrictions as normal spells. Virtually anything you have seen an alchemy device do, we can do, and many more.”

“Does channeling follow the same basic types? You know, red, blue—”

“Yes and no. Crystals are trapped *forms* of spirit energy. We can access all types of spirit energy, but the energy we call on will be that form of energy to perform that task. We would call on what you would call green energy to heal, for example. Actually, it is just energy from different spirits.

“Some spirits represent a type of energy. Some do not. Some shaman, like you, have a totem, a spirit that has claimed you as its own. Some Shaman do not. I have no totem. That gives me certain advantages, such as the ability to use any Shaman magic I please. But when a Shaman has a totem, the Shaman is restricted by the totem’s own preferences. Your totem is the shadow fox, and her energy is blue. She is a deceiver, a trickster, a being of stealth and guile. You will excel at spells of deception, confusion, and illusion, for that is what your totem excels at. The shadow fox is also a spirit attuned to healing, which will allow you to heal. And as any spirit of healing, she rejects the black, the energy of death, and she will deny you any access to that magic. If you call on that power, she will block you. When you have a totem spirit, you gain power in one area, but lose power in another. Or, in your case, completely lose access to some parts of Shaman magic. A Shaman like me, who has no totem, can use any spell, but the spells in which your totem specializes will be stronger than my own.”

“That’s the trade-off for having a totem,” Kyven mused. “Can you gain a totem if you want one?”

He nodded. “I could go on a spirit quest to beseech the spirits for a totem if I wished it, but I do not wish it. I prefer the versatility of no totem. Some Shaman, like you, have had a totem spirit who has attached to them by themselves. The shadow fox has taken an interest in you, and she has already claimed you to be your totem.”

“If I angered her, could she get rid of me?”

He nodded again. “She could abandon you and remove her favor. You would be without a totem. Her favor would be taken from you, and you would lose the enhanced ability to cast her spells, but you would also regain the magic she denies. But that is rare. Spirits almost never abandon a Shaman like that. If you anger the shadow fox to that degree, she would probably kill you rather than release you. That is one of the drawbacks to having a totem, human. But for you, it won’t be much of a disadvantage in what she denies you in return for what you gain.”

“Why is that?”

“She only denies you the magic of death, but you gain much stronger spells of deception in return. The shadow fox, at heart, is a stalker and a skulker, human. She prefers to flee rather than fight, and your magic will reflect her nature. You will be a hard Shaman to trap and kill, but she will deny you the power to directly kill in return.” The Arcan smiled ominously. “But there are other ways to kill,” he added. “She will deny you death magic, magic that *directly* kills. She will not deny you other spells that kill *indirectly*. You will not be able to kill using death magic, but you will easily be able to channel a spell that burns your enemies to death. The spell does not kill, the *fire* does.”

“I, I understand the difference.”

“You are wise to do so. Now that you understand the basics behind magic, let’s get down to the heart of the matter.”

Kyven swallowed, and steeled himself. This was it. He was about to take that fatal last step that would bind him to this path, by *becoming* a Shaman. He would be abandoning the teachings of the Loremasters, would be embracing this new path, a strange, unknown path filled with hidden dangers and which would make him a target for death if the Loremasters ever found out about him. He wanted to know about the fox, learn *why*, and this was it. By learning Shaman magic, he hoped to become closer to her, and learn the answers to those questions. He hoped that by doing as she wished, he would finally know *why*. “I’m ready,” he said seriously.

“We shall see,” he said, sliding down until he was sitting on the ground, his tail sweeping the ground behind him. “Channeling is a very simple concept, human. You act as a bridge, a direct link between the spirit world and our world. All magic comes through you, and so it follows the same basic limitations as alchemic devices’ effects.”

“Line of sight.”

“Correct. It originates *from* the device, so if it has some kind of physical effect, that effect has to travel from the device to the target, like the lightning from a shockrod. Shaman have the same restriction, but for a different reason. What is the first ability you learned?”

“Spirit sight.”

“That is the core of Shaman ability, human. Sight. We must be able to *see* to use our magic. If you were to somehow lose both your eyes, have them torn out or damaged beyond repair, you’d lose most of your powers, because your eyes are part of what allows you to act as a bridge into the spirit world. Do you understand this?”

“It makes sense to me,” he nodded.

“So, simply put, human, Shaman usually can’t channel against targets they can’t see.”

“What about spirit sight? Couldn’t I cast—uh, channel at someone on the other side of a wall

if I can see them that way?"

The wolf grinned. "Very wise, human. Yes, you can hit a human on the far side of a wall with a spell using spirit sight, but only if the spell won't be blocked by the wall. You couldn't channel a cone of fire against him because of the wall, but you could use a spell that clouds his vision, since it affects him, it doesn't have a physical effect." Kyven nodded in understanding. "That is the first limitation. But also remember that spells that produce physical effects can be unleashed against anything despite being able to see, since the effect originates from *you*. All you do is aim it where you want it to go. Channeling lightning and hurling it at a wall means it doesn't matter what's on the other side of the wall. You don't have to see it to affect it that way. There's only one exception, human, and that's Blessings. Blessing spells can be channeled on a target you can't see, like yourself, or someone or something you are physically touching. If you're not touching it, though, you do have to be able to see it. All Blessing spells can be channeled like normal spells, but when you use them on yourself, they don't follow the sight restriction. Some Blessing spells are fairly obvious, like healing. All spells of healing are Blessing spells. Some, though, aren't quite so obvious. Basically, any spell that you cast on an ally to heal or help is a Blessing. Blessings are never negative. In order to use them on yourself, they must be positive."

"Alright, that makes sense to me too. How do you make the magic?"

The wolf smiled. "It is easy, human. You *ask* for it. The spirits will hear your call and respond. They supply the magic. Your mind and will shapes it into the spell, gives the energy purpose and function."

"That sounds almost too easy."

"It is very easy. But there are two things you must remember, human. First, the spirits are very fickle in responding to your call. You could, right here and now, call upon *all* of their power, and they will respond if only to teach you a lesson. But if you call on them to grant you power to do something they find ridiculous or degrading, they will ignore you, maybe even punish you. You are dealing with *sentient* beings, human, who are greater than we. They grant us their power so long as we remember our place and treat them with respect."

"That makes sense. I understand."

"The second thing is that the power is *very* demanding to use," he continued. "Had I allowed you to do this the first night, to touch this power, it would have killed you. Because of that, it is usually best to do something with your own paws before you resort to magic when you first begin. I guarantee you, after you manage to channel your first time, you will all but collapse from the effort, even after these six weeks of preparation for it."

"Does it ever get any easier?"

"Yes. As you gain experience, and you continue to strengthen your body, you'll be able to channel more easily. But when you first begin, it is extremely hard on you."

"I understand. What spells will you teach me?"

"I will teach you only *two* spells," he answered simply. "The first spell will be the spell that teaches you how to channel. The second spell is the spell of Summoning. Since you already have a totem, the shadow fox will be the one to answer your call when you use it."

"But, but I thought you were going to teach me!"

"My task was to *prepare* you," he corrected. "The task of *teaching* you is not mine."

"What? I have to teach *myself*?" he gasped.

The wolf shook his head. "When you go on your Spirit Walk, the shadow fox will guide you, and it is from *her* that you will learn your magic."

"Oh. I, I guess that makes sense. And it will answer my question. If she guides me, then I'll learn about her, learn why she's interested in me. That's the whole reason I'm here."

He nodded.

"Since you don't have a totem, who taught you?"

"Many different spirits," he answered. "One would take me and lead me to a place and teach me, then another would come and take his place. But since you have a totem, she will be the one to guide you on your own Walk."

"I understand. Alright, wolf, show me what I have to do," he said, putting his hands on his knees and staring into the wolf's glowing yellow eyes directly.

"First, open your eyes," he ordered. Kyven responded immediately, opening his eyes to the spirit world. The light shimmered to his eyes, and then the wolf and trees became sharper to his eyes, as he opened his eyes to spirit sight. "Remember, human, you must *always* open your eyes to channel magic. Always."

"I understand."

Now, it is a simple matter, human. I will teach you the most basic of attack spells. It sends a blast of lightning at your enemy. First, focus your mind," he intoned. "I will be your target. Don't worry, you won't harm me," he said quickly. "Focus your mind on the task at hand. Do you know what you have to do?"

"Create lightning and send it at you."

"Yes, just so. You must imagine every step of it, human. You will call forth the power, but you must know from where it will originate. Will it manifest from your hand, or from your chin, or from your elbow or chest? Wherever it comes from, though, it must come from *you*. Remember, you are the bridge. The magic can come from nowhere else. Once you know exactly where it's coming from, focus all your concentration on *that point*. Do so."

Kyven raised his hand. He imagined that it should come from his open palm, so he focused himself on his palm. He focused all his concentration right on that one point, could almost feel the skin on his palm in minute detail as he focused his attention on that point.

"Now, imagine what you must do. Imagine what you would see, how it would sound, even how it would smell."

Lightning. He would create lightning. It would be brilliant, bright, a jagged bolt of lightning that would emanate from his palm rather than from the sky. The flash would illuminate the area around him, and there would be a smell of ozone in the air after it was unleashed. It would flash from his palm directly at the wolf, a very short distance.

"If your imagination isn't detailed enough, this will fail," the wolf warned. "When you think you are ready, nod."

Kyven took stock. He felt that he had everything he needed here. He imagined the way it would look, the brilliant flash, the way it would arc from his hand towards the wolf, and the smell of ozone. There—no, wait. Thunder always proceeded lightning in a storm, so there would need to be some kind of sound that would go with it. He thought that since it would be a much smaller bolt of lightning, the thunder that accompanied it would be much less as well.

He nodded.

"Call to the spirits. Open your heart to them and ask them for aid. If they feel that your need is just, and your use of the power is both justified and correct, they will grant it to you."

Call on the spirits? He didn't know how to do that. He wanted to close his eyes, but he knew he couldn't do that. He had to be able to *see* to do this. He raised his palm towards the wolf and tried to cast his thought out into the void. *Shadow fox, please help me*, he thought sonorously. *I'm trying to do what you wanted. I need your help. I need—*

It came in a torrent. A surge of the same tingling power he'd always felt when he touched crystals raged into him, saturating him with power, the power of the spirits, the power of the shadow fox. It roared into him, infused him, then poured into the point of focus, into the

palm of his hand. The power was shaped by his mind, forced to conform to his expectations, but it was limited by his body's ability to channel that power. He could feel *so much* power trying to pour into him, yet only a tiny fraction of that power could actually manage it, and the power surrounded him even as the power that flowed into him found a gateway into the mortal world. It coalesced into his palm, and then issued forth as a bright flash of light and a jagged blast of raw electricity, lancing and arcing as it thundered across the small distance between him and the wolf. There was a loud sound like a gunshot, or the crack of a whip, and the lightning struck the wolf. It danced around his body, but didn't seem to go into him.

After the task was complete, the power withdrew from him, but when it did, it sucked what seemed like every iota of energy out of him, draining it away. Before the report of the lightning even finished echoing off the trees, Kyven's hand sagged, and for a terrifying moment he felt his heart falter from the sudden exhaustion. But it then picked back up to a normal pace, leaving him drained and weak.

"Holy Father!" Kyven gasped, his shoulders slumping as he felt barely able to move.

"That is the price," the wolf said to him simply. "Had I not prepared you for this, that would have killed you."

"I can believe it," he panted. "Will it be like this every time?"

"No. Every time you do it, you will feel slightly less weak. It is like a muscle you must train, human. Resisting the drain the spirits demand of you is something you can increase. When you reach the point where you can cast lightning and then run immediately afterwards, you will be ready for your Walk. Now rest. You will find that though you feel exhausted, your strength will return very quickly. When you are rested, I will teach you to hunt."

"How am I going to hunt? I left the musket, and I can't chase down—uh, nevermind," he said, a bit sheepishly. Why else would he be taken out to hunt if not to use what he just learned? He would hunt using this spell he'd just learned, killing with lightning.

The wolf gave him a smirk. "Such a human," he noted. "But you seem more wise than most humans, I will give you that," he added as he regained his feet, towering over the exhausted Kyven. "Perhaps that is what the shadow fox sees in you. Rest. I'll scout about and return in about an hour. You need to move as soon as you're able to get up. Rest for a short time, then push yourself. That allows you to recover faster."

"I will do as you say."

The wolf nodded, then dropped down onto all fours and loped off into the warm, sunny forest.

Kyven laid back and put his hands behind his head, trying to recover from his bone weariness. He had done it... and it had been *so easy*. So easy. He succeeded on his first try, he had touched the power of the spirits. He had felt the power of the fox that had watched him most of his life, felt it *touch* him, felt it flow through him and do as he asked, then retreat from him to leave him so weak he couldn't even walk right now. He felt nothing in the power that answered any of his questions, though. The power had been just... power. There was no sense of emotion in it, no intimacy. It was merely the answer to a call, nothing more, nothing less, leaving him a little curious. She had answered his call, so she was still interested in him, but the touch of her power answered no questions other than the fact that though he had not seen her since that night he met the wolf, she was still there.

He wondered how she felt about it. Was she happy that he had touched his power for the first time? Could she even be happy? He thought so. She had been angry when he recoiled from her in fear, so it only stood to reason that if she could be angry with him, then she could also be happy with him. And the wolf had said that it was entirely possible to anger the spirits if one called on them and tried to use their power in a demeaning or ridiculous way. So,

the fox had emotions, as did all the other spirits... which again made him wonder if she'd been happy he finally used his power, if she was proud of him for his accomplishment.

But there was another issue. He had done it. He had used Shaman magic, he had crossed that line that he knew was there that separated two sides in his mind. He had used Shaman magic, and now the Loremasters would consider him to be a Shaman too, evil, the scourge of the earth. But they were wrong. He knew it now, now that he had used that power. There was nothing *evil* about it. Though there had been no sense of emotion in that power, it felt *exactly the same* as the power he'd always felt lurking within mana crystals. Virren was right, the power of crystals truly was the exact same power that Shaman used, they just used it directly from the source, directly from the spirits that granted it. Instead of using a cut crystal in a device where the shape and metallurgical signature of the device shaped and harnessed the crystal's power to produce an effect, he had instead called directly on the power behind the crystals and used his own mind to shape and produce the effect. It was a different method, but it produced the exact same result. What he did was no different than the function of a shockrod. Shockrods zapped targets with a blast of lightning, just as he had done. In a way, he had learned to mimic the magical effect of an alchemical device using the power directly. The only difference was *he* was the crystal, and the alchemical device that created the magical effect was his own mind and body.

Why did the Loremasters think Shaman were evil, then? They had to know that the Shaman were just tapping directly into the same power that created the crystals. It seemed that a group that pursued science and knowledge as its main goal couldn't possibly miss something so *obvious*... well, unless it was something they didn't want to know.

What was it that the wolf said? Or was it Virren? That the Loremasters were working to restore humanity to the glory of the Great Ancient Civilization, which wasn't a bad thing, but they thought that Arcans were supposed to be slaves... which was. Oh, he didn't have the same fanaticism that Virren did, but he could agree that after spending so long with the wolf, that it was wrong to think of Arcans as nothing but slaves. Some Arcans were little more than animals, and that was fact, but ones like the wolf, well, that was a different story. He actually didn't have much opinion of it one way or the other. The stupid Arcans, the ones that were basically animals in an Arcan body, those needed to be controlled. But the intelligent ones, that was a different story.

He was starting to feel like his body didn't weigh a ton. He struggled to a seated position, remembering the wolf's command. He had to move around as soon as he could, the wolf said, move around to recover. He slowly rolled up onto his knees, and felt like he had a mountain strapped to his back. He then struggled to his feet, his shoulders slumped, his head bowed, and gritted his teeth and deliberately began to move. One step. One step. One foot in front of the other. His foot shuffled forward like it was tied to the ground, but it did move. He did it again, feeling like he was dragging a ship behind him, but he did as he was told, he got moving. He walked in unsteady circles around his bedroll, but then something strange began to happen. He felt warmth starting to flow through him, started to feel better, started to feel his energy coming back. It was like moving around got his blood flowing, the activity restored his energy. Every step he took made him feel a little better. He shuffled around his bedroll, then he was trudging around his bedroll, then he was walking around his bedroll, then he was marching around his bedroll. He stopped and jumped into the air a few times, shaking his hands before him, and felt just fine. The exhaustion that came with using that power seemed to be very temporary. It was debilitating right at first, but it also abated quickly.

Within minutes of forcing himself to his feet, he felt completely recovered. He felt so recov-

ered, in fact, that he decided to try again. He repeated what the wolf had taught him, he focused his mind completely on what he was about to do and where he wanted the magic to go. He focused on a mossy rock about five paces from him, half buried in the ground. He then imagined the lightning lancing from his open palm to that rock, remembering what he'd seen, felt, and heard the first time, and then called out to the fox within his mind, calling into the spirit world. *Shadow fox, please—*

KRAK-KOW!

A jagged lance of lightning blasted from his palm and struck the rock, incinerating the moss on the rock and leaving it smoking. Kyven felt the energy retreat from him, and when it did, he literally collapsed to the ground. He panted heavily, feeling like a mountain was pressing down on him, keeping him from moving. But he knew that it was just temporary, and that, after a moment of rest, he had to move, he had to shake off the lethargy. He lay there and just rested... but this time, he realized, he wasn't recovering quite as fast. He realized then that it really was like training a muscle. He hadn't worn the "muscle" down all the way yet, so it had not recovered stronger than before. He'd have to keep practicing, keep working, to build up his ability to shake off the crippling fatigue that came after using a spell. Ready or not, he knew he had to move. He struggled back to his feet and began slowly pacing around his bedroll, and felt warmth and energy begin to flow back into him like blood re-awakening a leg that had fallen asleep.

He heard very faint rustling then. He thought it was the wolf, but the wolf wouldn't be skulking about out there, he'd just bound in. He had no idea who it was, but there was definitely someone out there, several hundred paces away from him. He realized that he had no weapons, and besides, nobody would really be out here that might be entirely friendly. It was best to lay low, be quiet, and try to evade detection until the wolf returned.

Kyven was no outdoorsman, but he was light on his feet, lithe, and agile, and that gave him the natural ability to skulk. He moved on silent feet to the nearest big tree, creeping carefully through the underbrush, staying out of clearings and being careful not to rustle any underbrush. He opened his eyes to the spirits, because that caused living things to become much sharper and clearer to his eyes, and glanced out in the direction he was hearing the rustling and movement. They were still too far out. He couldn't see them. But from the sound of it, they were moving in his direction.

There was sudden movement. The rustling charged towards him, and then it erupted from the trees. It was a deer! A young buck, racing at an angle that would take it about ten paces to his left, having been spooked by something.

The wolf said he had to hunt for their food, and here was dinner, coming right at him!

He moved quickly. He was already open to the spirits, so he quickly formed the image in his mind and concentrated on both his palm and the deer. He would send a bolt of lightning from his hand to the deer, aiming at its head so as not to ruin their meal. He collected himself and gathered his concentration as it rushed towards him, at an angle, then he turned and called to the shadow fox just as it bounded between two trees and was open and visible to him. *Now, please help me before I lose sight of it!* he pleaded.

The lightning blasted forth from his palm and sizzled across the thirty paces of open space between him and the young buck. It hit the buck in the neck, not the head as he'd aimed, but it hit it nonetheless. The deer gave a bleating cry and crashed to the ground in a spray of dead leaves and dirt, then it rolled into a young tree, making the tree shudder violently from the impact. Kyven felt the magic retreat from him, and he again literally collapsed where he was standing, panting as if he'd just run a thousand minars. His mind swam in an exhausted haze for a long moment, then he found himself staring up into the glowing eyes of the wolf, look-

ing down at him with a slightly amused look on his face. "You heard it coming! Six weeks in the forest has done well for you. I am impressed, human."

"Th-Thanks," he wheezed. "Dinner."

"You have fed us this day. You have done well."

Despite the complement, the wolf was his usual self. He grabbed Kyven by the back of his breeches and all but dragged him back to camp, then tossed him on his bedroll. He then went and collected the buck, dropping it in the tiny clearing as a tiny wisp of smoke wafted up from a blackened patch on the side of its neck. The strike had been fatal, but it had also broken its back hitting the tree, which would have killed it anyway. "I heard another strike besides that one while I was out. Did you do that?"

"Yes," he panted. "You said... to push myself. I figured... that was... pushing myself."

The wolf simply nodded. "I will sleep now. You do the same. You still have more work ahead of you."

"I'll try," he said as the wolf laid down on the forest floor next to the kill. He put his muzzle on the back of his wrist, and then closed his eyes.

Despite it being the middle of the day, channeling three bolts of lightning had taken their toll on him. When his breathing regulated, instead of getting up to renew his vigor, he instead closed his eyes and quickly fell asleep.

Over the next several days, Kyven practiced that spell what had to be a thousand times.

The wolf was right, though. Every evening when he woke up, he was more tolerant of channeling the magic than he'd been the day before. His ability to withstand the draining after-effect of using the magic increased. Over the first few days, he could barely move after using the lightning, going to where he could just barely manage to stay on his feet. Then, over the next couple of days after that, he could walk slowly after using the spell, until he was capable of using the spell and then moving, albeit not very fast. Then, after the next few days after that, he was able to use the spell and then walk steadily, and then he was able to use it and then jog. Then, two weeks after his first use of the spell, he was able to channel lightning and then run immediately afterward.

It was still *very* taxing when used consecutively, though. His ability to withstand the drain of the magic was strong against one use, but if he used the spell three or four times quickly, it all but put him on his knees. But that too seemed to improve over time. He was able to use the spell more and more often, and it tired him out less and less by the end of the day. It truly was like a muscle, a muscle he was strengthening with constant practice.

During that time, the wolf reverted to old training. He would run or move heavy stones between uses of his magic, maintaining the level of fitness that the wolf had instilled into him, but the wolf also taught him some basics of hunting. He couldn't use the wolf's skills, since he used his nose and his Arcan speed, but the wolf taught him some very basic woodcraft. He showed Kyven what to look for to find deer, taught him the importance of approaching upwind of it, and showed him some very basic tenets of tracking so he could hunt for his own food. It was the most the wolf had spoken in the entire time they'd been together, and the wolf didn't seem to like it. Despite over two months of working together, the wolf still kept his distance from Kyven, and he could sense all kinds of animosity lurking beneath the wolf's furry ears. The wolf didn't like him, but Kyven could not say that the wolf did not treat him fairly or fail to teach him well. For that, at least, Kyven had a great deal of respect for the wolf. The wolf was his mentor, his teacher, and he gave him that respect he was due because of it.

Kyven wasn't necessarily the one that fed them over those two weeks, but he was the one that brought down the game. The wolf would flush the deer to him, and then Kyven would

hit them with lightning, giving him practice hitting a live, moving target.

The day after Kyven managed to channel lightning and be able to run afterward, the night of the full moon, the wolf woke him from a nap around midnight. The weeks with the wolf had been a major change for him, for the wolf was nocturnal. He'd been sleeping during the early and late afternoons and staying up all night and through some of the morning. Kyven napped quite a bit, but so did the wolf, actually. His favorite activity when not training Kyven, hunting, or eating, was sleeping. The wolf riled him from his nap and had him sit on his bedroll, then sat down in front of him. "This is our last night together," the wolf told him bluntly. "Tonight, I will teach you how to Summon. You will Summon the shadow fox to you, and then she will guide you from here."

"I understand," he said with a nod.

"Summoning is a very simple thing to do, human. In fact, you probably understand how to do it already, if you stop to think about it."

Kyven was quiet just a moment before answering. "I just call out to the spirits," he said. "No spell. Just call."

The wolf nodded simply. "Call. But you are calling a specific spirit, human, not just any spirit. Summoning requires you to know exactly which spirit you are summoning. But as I have said before, you must be prepared to deal with the consequences. Spirits do not *like* to be summoned for frivolous reasons. If you summon a spirit, you had *damn* well better have a good reason for doing so, or you will anger them. I cannot make that more clear."

"That's completely clear," he said seriously. "So, do you want me to try?"

"Yes. Open your eyes, and then call out to your totem. If it pleases her, she will respond."

Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits, but then he closed them, and then bowed his head. *Shadow fox*, he called in his mind, but casting it out away from him as he did when he beseeched the fox to grant him her power, *shadow fox, the wolf bids me summon you so you may take over from him*, he called out. *If you think I'm ready, then please come. I... want to see you again.*

He felt it almost immediately. He opened his eyes and turned his head, and she was there, seated sedately near a tree, her tail wrapped around her front legs, her glowing green eyes unwavering and unblinking. He felt... happy to see her. Excited. She had returned, and if she was here, then she must be pleased with him, with his progress. He was excited because now he would finally learn what he had come out here to learn. He wanted to know about her, to learn why she had stayed with him, why she had saved him, and why he felt obligated to her. He had undergone this training just to learn the answers, and he was willing to follow her now, learn from her, to understand why he felt so adamant about this. He just *had to know*, so badly that he had directly defied everything his people taught about Shaman. He had turned his back on his own people to learn Shaman magic just to be nearer to her, just to learn *why*. It was nearly an obsession for him, a consuming drive that clouded all his other judgment.

"Sister shadow fox has answered your call, human," the wolf told him simply. "And our time together is done. You impressed me, human, I must admit. I never believed you'd live to reach this point, or you would have given up long ago. Clearly, humans are not as weak as I first thought."

"Thanks... I think," he said uncertainly.

The wolf chuckled. "With your permission, sister, I leave him to you," the wolf said, nodding his head to the fox. She nodded back, quite gravely, and the wolf stood up. "Our time is ended, human."

"Thank you, wolf," he said honestly. "You were a good teacher. I wanted to kill you a few times, but I can't complain that you didn't do your best with me."

"As it should be," he said simply. "Fare well on your Walk, human. May the spirits guide your steps and grant you wisdom."

"Be careful, and thank you," Kyven said in reply.

The wolf nodded, then turned, dropped to all fours, and bounded off into the dark forest, lost quickly among the trees. Just like that, Kyven was alone, alone with the fox.

Kyven looked at her. What would she show him? Where would she guide him? He didn't know. He stood up and rolled up his bedroll and tied it up, then slung it over his shoulder. "I'm ready," he told her simply. He really didn't know what else to do. The wolf hadn't told him what would happen next, but if he was about to begin his Walk, then he needed to be ready to, well... walk.

The fox looked to him with... amusement? She didn't seem quite so grave. She stood up and looked to her right. To Kyven's amazement, an image appeared there, a map of central Noraam, showing Atan and the Blue Valley, and the piedmont leading to the sea. It showed the cities of Avannar and Chardon, Avannar up the Podac River from the sea, and Chardon on the road to Avannar, past the Blue Valley.

Amazing! She could create images in the very air! But then again, he remembered that the wolf said that the shadow fox's specialty was deception and *illusion*. This had to be an illusion, a visible image of something that wasn't real. She urged her muzzle towards her image.

"You want me to go... where? Chardon?"

She shook her head.

"Avannar?"

She nodded, her eyes serious.

"You want me to go to Avannar?" he said in surprise. "But... but what I've learned. The Loremasters will think I'm a Shaman. Won't it be dangerous?"

She nodded, her eyes locked on him.

"I... understand. I'll go to Avannar as you wish," he said with a nod. "Do I have to walk?"

Her mouth opened and her tongue lolled out, which Kyven took as *laughter*.

Kyven felt a bit sheepish. "Well, can I at least resupply? I'll attract attention if I go looking like this."

She nodded. She stood up as the image of the map faded away, and she nudged her head at him. He knew it meant she wanted him to follow, so he fell into step behind her. She led him for nearly a half an hour, led him to a large stream, almost a river, then padded upstream for nearly five minutes. She stepped out onto the water, then stopped in a shallow, slow-moving area and pawed at the surface meaningfully. He knew immediately what she meant. He waded into the stream and then knelt down and dug around in the silty bottom, until he felt the tingling in his fingers. He grabbed it and pulled it up, then washed it off to reveal a surprisingly large red crystal, a good nineteen points. It would easily allow him to buy new clothes and some traveling gear, as well as a couple of little ideas he had in mind.

His lightning was indistinguishable from the effect of a shockrod. Well... what if he bought a shockrod tube and carried it with him? Wouldn't people think he was using a shockrod as long as they didn't see his eyes?

The fox nodded to him, her eyes quite pleased.

"I'm glad you think it's a good idea," he said modestly. "Do you think it'll work?"

She nodded.

"I'll do it, then," he said, standing up. "Will this stream lead me to the road to Avannar?"

She shook her head, and nudged towards him with her muzzle.

"Oh, upstream?"

She nodded.

“Alright. I’ll go to Avannar. Will you go with me, or will you meet me there?”

In answer, she stood up and walked away from him, then stopped at the bank and looked back to him.

“I understand. I’ll feel, strange, being alone. I’ve never been completely alone before. But, the wolf prepared me for it. He showed me how to find food, and taught me the lightning spell so I can protect myself. I think I’ll be alright.”

She just stared at him, her glowing eyes steady.

“Shadow fox,” he called. “Just one question.”

She paused.

“Why?” he finally blurted. “I’ll learn why eventually, won’t I? You’ll tell me?”

She gave him a long look, then bowed her head. The she turned and walked into the night. Despite his spirit sight, her form seemed to merge with the darkness, and she vanished.

He stood there in the stream, feeling both humble and strangely thrilled. She was *proud* of him! And she was going to answer his questions! It wouldn’t be immediate, he could sense that, but she would show him the answers he sought.

He would find out why she was so interested in him. He would find out *why*.

It took him almost a full day to reach the Avannar Road.

He’d had no idea they’d gone so far, but then again, after thinking about it, the wolf had run him for hours every other night, for weeks. They’d traveled hundreds of minars, maybe thousands, staying within the Blue Valley the whole time. The wolf had actively avoided all human settlements, keeping them in the forest, keeping them alone and keeping them isolated. When he reached the road, after talking to the first traveler he came across, he found out he was nearly a full day out from Chardon, *on the other side*. He’d be going back the way he came to go to Chardon, but he had little choice. He needed to buy some supplies and sell his crystal, and he’d not have another chance until Avannar if he didn’t go to Chardon. Trying to sell it to some merchant in an inn along the way wasn’t going to work.

He was broke and without any kind of provisions, but he could run. It was a day on foot if one was walking, but the wolf hadn’t spent all that time building him up just so he could skip along at a leisurely pace. He put that toughening up to immediate use, settling into a steady, ground-eating pace that ate up the minars.

The whole time, he thought. He thought following the river to the road, and on the road to Chardon. He’d done it. He was on his Spirit Walk now, learning the wisdom that the fox wanted to teach. He knew that she would lead him to places and show him things in an effort to teach him wisdom, let him grow and become wiser, even as she taught him new spells and molded him into the kind of Shaman she wanted him to be. In the course of that, he felt, he would learn the answers he so desperately wanted to know, so much that he had devoted himself to this path just to find those answers.

Shaman. He was a *Shaman* now... or at least he was on the path to become one. A human Shaman. It seemed impossible, yet here he was, on his Spirit Walk, about to embark on a journey of experience that would make him a wiser man and worthy of what the fox would teach him. He knew it would be a test as well, no doubt as the fox tested his fortitude, tested his determination, tested his courage. He figured that was why she was sending him to Avannar, to the headquarters of the organization that thought he was evil incarnate, a test of loyalty and bravery. She was sending him into the bear’s den, and seeing if he could kiss the cub and escape without losing his face to the mother’s claws.

He would do it. To find out, he would do it.

He arrived in Chardon in a warm summer rain, close to sunset. Chardon was a small town, a little bigger than Atan, built in a flat area of the Blue Valley that had rich, fertile soil and

plentiful water, making it an ideal place for farms and ranches. Farmers brought their harvest to Chardon, ranchers sold cattle and horses in Chardon, and over the years, a town sprang up from the commerce. The town separated the ranches from the farms, with farms to the south and cattle and horse ranches sprawling to the north, and from what Kyven remembered hearing about this place, the ranchers and farmers actually didn’t get along. There was always a little tension in town, as the ranchers patronized their taverns, and the farmers patronized theirs, with the occasional fisticuffs unfolding on the streets between them. The shops of Chardon served the ranchers and farmers, each shop serving mainly one side or the other.

Those sitting on sheltered porches watched him as he padded into town, soaking wet... but he was used to that. He’d not seen shelter for almost two months, and had actually gotten used to the rain. He’d slept in it right along with the wolf, ran in it, worked in it. After his shirts were destroyed, and he tore all the holes in his breeches, being wet didn’t really mean all that much. He came up to a covered porch of a house where an older man and woman sat on chairs. “Pardon me, but where is your alchemist or crystalcutter? I have a crystal I’d like to sell.”

“A prospector all the way out here? Well, that’s new,” the man said. “Two streets down, there’s a crystalcutter in the big building on the right. He’ll buy it.”

“Thank you,” he said with a nod, then turned and walked back to the street.

The crystalcutter’s shop was a large affair where the older man had said. Kyven dripped water on the floor of his receiving room as the apprentice minding the store fetched the shop’s master. The master was a rather old man with a bald pate and knobby, big-knuckled fingers. The man blinked, then laughed. “Why, by the Father’s grace, Kyven Steelhammer!” he exclaimed. “They think you’re dead!”

“Huh?” he asked in confusion.

“Boy, I heard it from Master Torvik, coming from Atan. They found your horses roaming the Blue Valley some six weeks ago, and here you turn up! What happened?”

“Oh. Oh, well, I kinda lost the horses, they bolted in a thunderstorm and I never did find them,” he admitted. “I’m just glad I was camped when it happened, so I didn’t lose my gear. After that happened, I went on on foot and just stayed closer to home. Ever since then, I’ve been prospecting the Blue Valley from here to the Podac River. I found something, too,” he said, taking his soaked bedroll off his back and digging the crystal out. “I came in to resupply. Most everything I had was either lost, broken, or used up. Now that I’ve found something worth selling, I can regear and head back out.”

“Good for you! And they’ll be happy to hear that you’re just fine up in Atan, too.”

“Could you send the word? I hate the idea that Master Holm thinks I’m dead,” he said sincerely.

“I’d be happy to,” he said with a nod. “I’ll even use the Guild Talker, just for you.” The Guild Talker was an alchemy device that allowed people in different towns to send messages to each other. They used up crystals at a frightful rate, however, so they usually were only used in emergencies. That the cutter would burn a crystal just to send word to Atan that Kyven was still alive was a very generous gesture.

“I appreciate it, sir,” he said with a nod. “Would you buy this crystal from me? I need the money,” he laughed.

“I surely will, son!” he said with a broad grin, taking the crystal, the size of a child’s fist. “Nineteen points! A good find! This can get you all geared up easily, my boy. How about four hundred chits for it?”

“That’s just fine, sir.”

“Done! Would you like to stay here tonight? We have a spare bed.”

“Ah, no thank you, sir. I need to get my gear bought and get back out there. I think I could come back with a few more like that one, and I want to get back and see.”

“Ah, think you’ve found a spot everyone else missed, eh? Well, it’s possible,” he noted, turning away. “Honey! Go to the vault and pouch up four hundred chits!” the master shouted down the hall.

“Aye sir!” came a reedy response.

“You’re lookin’ awful thin there, son. How’s the wild treatin’ ya?”

“Much better now that I’ve learned how to hunt,” he admitted with a laugh. “It was very rough going there for a couple of weeks. After my stores ran out, it was learn to hunt or starve.”

“That’s always a good motivator,” he nodded. “I don’t see no musket, son, how you doing it?”

He drew one of this throwing daggers from his belt and showed it to him. “If I can get close enough to use this, I eat.”

“Ah, true, true,” he nodded. “You sick of rabbit yet?” he grinned.

“When you’re hungry, you don’t care,” he said simply.

“I can believe it,” he said. A young female Arcan scurried in, a young canine with golden fur and a boxy, long muzzle, wearing nothing but a collar, her form slender, lithe, and with small fur-clad breasts and narrow hips. She had hair, chestnut hair that was tied behind her ears in a pair of tails. She handed a leather pouch to the cutter with a little bow. “Take that crystal to the vault,” he commanded of her, pointing to the crystal in Kyven’s hand.

“Aye sir,” she said with a little bow, holding her gold-colored paws out. Kyven gave it to her, and she turned and hurried away.

“I’m not used to seeing Arcans in a cutting shop. Holm won’t buy them,” Kyven noted.

“They’re very handy, and can be quite fun,” the man said with a glance back at the Arcan as she hurried back into the shop. “I just got that one last month.”

“And you let her into your vault?”

“I have a special collar on her,” he answered. “She’ll get zapped if she carries any crystals outside the boundaries of this shop.”

“I’m sure the women complain about you keeping her like that.”

He laughed. “They can go to hell,” he answered bluntly. “She’s *my* Arcan. If I want to keep her naked, I’ll keep her naked. I prefer the female ones that way,” he said with a chilling smile. “What they got between their legs don’t look no different at all from what’s under the dresses of those women out there, once you get past the fur, and I love to look at it. It’s all the same equipment. It works the same too.”

“That is a *disturbing* thought,” Kyven said.

“Pshaw, don’t knock it ‘til you try it. Wanna try it?”

Kyven shuddered involuntarily. “I’ve never heard of that.”

“Of course not, you’ve been apprenticed to Holm. He hates Arcans. Why do you think female Arcans are more expensive?”

“Because they can breed,” he said immediately.

“Well, there’s that too,” he noted absently.

Kyven was genuinely surprised. He’d never heard of human men having sex with Arcan females before, but he figured that there were men out there depraved enough to try it. After all, he’d heard stories and rumors of men who had had sex with animals, and Arcans were somewhat similar to animals in appearance. And he was right about one part; Arcans were identical to humans in most respects. The wolf had the same equipment between his legs that Kyven did, there was virtually no anatomical difference between Arcans and humans in their

genitalia.

“Well, if you wanna get back to that deposit, you’d better head out, boy. Unless you wanna give Honey a ride,” he said with a frighteningly eager smile.

“No thanks,” he said mildly. “I need to get my gear and get back. Have a good day.”

“Good luck, Kyven. I’ll make sure Holm knows you’re alive and well.”

“I appreciate that, thank you.”

Kyven left the shop with his eyes opened just a little wider about the true nature of the world. It seemed that there was a lot more out there than he expected, and finding out that a human man was using an Arcan female for sex had been both shocking in one way, and not too much of a surprise in another. It was something he honestly had never considered, but upon further consideration of the nature of the human man, it was something that was entirely possible. It made him wonder if there were human women out there who had had sex with Arcan males.

He shivered at that thought. Arcans were stronger than humans. A female was one thing, the man could control her, put her in a position where she couldn’t use that strength, but an Arcan male—well, that was a different story. A human woman had better be pretty damn careful, and maybe a little crazy, to ever try something like that.

Probably, though.

Kyven didn’t waste much time, putting the cutter and his disturbing revelation out of his mind for the moment, because he had to get to the shops before they closed. He was committed to the story that he was restocking for prospecting, so he bought a pick, a shovel, two sifting pans, and a sniffer to keep up that appearance, then bought what he was really after. He needed to keep it light, because he’d be running, so he bought a small pack, two new sets of sturdy leather clothes, and a new bedroll. He then went to the alchemists and talked him into selling him a shockrod without a crystal, just the rod itself. “It’s useless, fella,” the alchemist protested.

“Not really. It *looks* like a shockrod, sir, and if someone sees it on my belt, they’ll think I’m armed. It may make them leave me alone.”

The alchemist chuckled. “Well now, that’s actually pretty clever. I’ll sell you one for twenty chits, then, and keep yer little secret to boot.”

He also bought a new firestarter and a little miniature lamp for those occasions he might need visible light at night, then decided to take a short break at one of the local pubs for some cooked food before starting out. He wasn’t sleepy at all, still attuned to a nocturnal cycle, and was planning to run tonight if only to distance himself from Chardon and anyone who might follow him to see where he was going to “prospect.”

That, of course, was a tricky proposition in Chardon. If one went into a rancher’s tavern, they were hated by the farmers. If they went into a farmer’s tavern, they earned a bad reputation among the ranchers. The only safe place in Chardon for a neutral party to get a drink or a bite to eat was the Stand Off Inn, an inn just outside Chardon on the Atan side, where merchants and travelers often stayed rather than get embroiled in the local politics. Kyven went there himself, and saw that it looked more or less as he recalled when he and Holm visited some three years ago. The common room had a very low ceiling, so low that he had to resist the urge to duck under the support beams that were just fingers over his head, and the walls were painted black. The furniture was black, too, and it lit by lamps that gave the place a closed-off feeling, like a dungeon or tomb. The place was populated by a pretty good crowd of merchants and their servants, so much that there were no open tables at which to sit, forcing Kyven to the bar so as not to intrude himself upon others.

“What’s ready to eat right now?” Kyven asked the surprisingly tall woman behind the bar,

with long, thick blond hair, wearing a sturdy gray shirt and leather breeches... which surprised him a little bit. Women didn't usually wear breeches.

"A side of beef," she answered. "Boiled corn ears and boiled potatoes."

"I'll take a serving of all three," he said, going for the pouch holding what was left of his money. "How much?"

"Five chits," she answered. Kyven was a little surprised at the expense, but he put down a five chit coin for it. She picked it up and bounced it off the bar, the chiming sound it made revealing its authenticity, and called through a window in the wall behind the bar. "Beef, corn, potatoes!"

Quickly, he got his entire five chits worth. A small cat Arcan with dark fur, a collar, and wearing nothing but an apron, brought a laden platter out from the back. The woman pointed to Kyven, and the little female cat set it down in front of him wordlessly.

It had been a long time since he had anything other than raw meat. He attacked the generous helping with enthusiasm, finding the meat to be surprisingly bland after weeks of the rich taste of raw venison, but absolutely swooning over the corn and the potatoes. The woman behind the bar watched him for a moment, throwing a rag over her shoulder and then filling a few tankards for another Arcan, a male ferret that was carrying a serving tray and was also wearing nothing but an apron and a collar. Kyven wolfed down all the potatoes and was halfway done with the ear of corn when someone shouted from the common room. "By the Trinity, Bella, put some pants on that that Arcan!" came a man's voice. "That's not something I want to see when I'm eating!"

"I don't hear you complain when I have the other one on the floor, Vral," the woman shot back, which produced a few laughs.

"Well, at least that one *looks* nice!"

"Well, his ass looks better to me than hers does," she answered immediately, which made the common room erupt in laughter. "Besides, clothes cost money, and I'm not gonna waste money on fuckin' Arcans. Don't like it? Go wade through the fistfights in town to find a new tavern, or close your fuckin' eyes."

"That's our sweet Bella alright," Kyven heard a man at the table behind him chuckle. "Sweet as the summer rain and as ladylike as Queen Mera."

"How much for more potatoes?" Kyven asked the sharp-tongued woman.

"Two chits," she answered.

"I'll take it," he said, digging more chits out of his pouch.

"Potatoes!" she boomed through the window. The cat Arcan brought a plate of them and set them before him when the woman pointed to him, and he handed over the chits to the woman. She kicked the Arcan in the backs of her thighs when she didn't get out of the way, and she was not gentle. The cat squeaked in surprise and pain and hurried back into the kitchen.

It was treatment he'd seen before, but after spending so long with the wolf, Kyven looked at it through new eyes. Was it really right for people to kick Arcans like that? She didn't really do anything wrong, after all. Why be so rough with her?

"You got a problem, buddy?" she asked, giving him a direct stare.

Kyven blinked. "Huh?"

"You give me a look like that, you either got a problem with me, or you're about to," she said belligerently.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," he protested.

"Nobody gives me fuckin' dirty looks in my own tavern," she said, her handsome face twisting into a snarl.

"Fine," he said simply. He took out his pouch and put a five chit coin down on the counter. "For the plate," he said, picking up his plate and turning his back on her and walking for the door.

"Don't turn your back on me, you smug son of a bitch!" she shouted angrily. He turned around to see her literally jump over the bar, and he saw quite a few patrons clear out from around Kyven.

"By the Trinity, what's your problem, lady?" he asked, in a little exasperation as she stormed up to him. He expected her to stop and yell at him or something, so when she reared her fist back, he was genuinely startled. He wasn't so startled not to react when it came at him, though. Kyven was very fast, and weeks of conditioning gave him lightning reflexes as muscles were toned and hardened from heavy labor caused his hand to let go of the plate and whip out. There was a loud *smack* as her fist was intercepted by his open palm, stopping it instantly, and then his fingers closed over her fist, trapping it. "You tell me to get out, and then you try to start a fight with me for doing what you wanted? Why don't you stop trying to walk down both sides of the street, lady?" Kyven protested as he squeezed her fist in his hand, making her gasp in pain and try to pull away.

The woman raised a foot to kick him, but a vice-like grip on her hand made her wince, gasp, and bend to the side as Kyven yanked her sideways to keep her from keeping enough balance to do it.

"Not much fun to be the one manhandled, is it?" he asked her simply as he yanked her to the other side, then back again, keeping her off balance, almost on the edge of falling down. "Keep that in mind the next time you kick someone in the butt just because they don't get out of your way fast enough." He let go of her hand as he pushed her away, making her stagger back from him, then turned and walked towards the door.

"I shoulda known, a Trinity-damned Arcan lover," the woman spat.

"Think whatever you want, lady, your opinion means as little to me as mine does to you," he told her, a bit flippantly, as he reached the door. "Like I'll ever see you again, and may the Trinity bless me to make it so."

A throwing knife slammed into the door, not a rod from his head. Kyven flinched a little at that, but covered it well. He pried the knife out of the door, looked back at her as she pulled another knife from her belt, blew her a kiss, then slipped out the door with her knife.

He knew she wouldn't let it go. He sprinted a good ways from the door and skidded to a halt, took measure of her knife in his hand, found its center, then deftly flipped it into a throwing position. When the door opened, he flung it hard and true. The woman charged out, but squeaked in surprise when her dagger embedded itself in the frame of her door, not half a rod from her head. She flinched violently, which gave Kyven the chance to take a few more steps backwards, still holding his plate of potatoes in his left hand. "There's your knife back, and I paid you for this plate. I'm out of your inn, so just go back inside and leave me be."

"Arcan loving bastard!" she snapped at him, stepping up and hurling her knife at him.

By the Trinity, she really meant to hurt him!

But from that distance, he easily saw it coming. She had good aim, but Kyven had quick reflexes and an eye trained for detail. He saw the knife coming at him and was able to sidestep it, almost easily, heard it bounce on the dirt of the road behind him. "Good lord, woman, what's your problem?" Kyven demanded. "Are you crazy? What the hell did I do to you?"

"You probably embarrassed her, and Bella doesn't like to be upstaged in her own inn," a calm voice called behind him. He glanced back and saw a tall, middle aged man wearing the white surcoat with the three circles that marked him as a Loremaster. He was probably the village Loremaster, their envoy to the organization in Avannar. "That's enough of that, Bella.

Go back inside,” he said in a mild voice, but a voice dripping with authority.

The woman gave him a dark look, made a rude gesture with her hands, then stormed back into the inn.

“Sheesh, I just wanted something to eat that didn’t involve a ten minute grilling over if I’m a farmer or a rancher,” Kyven growled.

“What happened?” the man asked.

Kyven gave him a look. This was a Loremaster, a man the wolf said were the enemies of the Shaman... and he was on the path to becoming one. But the man didn’t know that, for humans weren’t supposed to be Shaman, which gave Kyven a unique position of being able to look him in the face without fear. “She said I gave her a dirty look, so I paid for the plate here and left. She jumped the bar and tried to punch me, so I stopped her without hurting her. Then she threw a knife at me while I was leaving. I gave it back to her,” he said pointing at the inn’s door with his free hand. “I she always so violent?”

“Yes,” he sighed. “She rails against the bars in town for the enmity between the farmers and ranchers, but will do the very same things herself if she thinks someone slights her or insults her. And she has a *vile* temper. Odds are, she’ll take it out on her Arcans tonight if nobody in the inn gives her satisfaction.”

Kyven frowned. He never meant to do anything like that. He realized that he’d just caused those poor Arcans trouble, and since he was on his Spirit Walk and was supposed to be learning and gaining wisdom, maybe this was something the fox wanted him to do. Maybe he was here to do something about Bella, or help her Arcans... but even if he wasn’t, he just couldn’t let the Arcans pay for his mistake when it wasn’t their fault.

Just as he was thinking about what he might be able to do, the door slammed open again. The woman, Bella, appeared, and she dragged something out behind her. When she was out on her porch, he realized that she was dragging the cat Arcan by the foot, the cat still and limp. She pulled it off the porch, the cat’s head bouncing sickeningly off the steps.

His eyes widened when he realized that the cat had left a bloody streak on the wood behind it.

“So you like fuckin’ Arcans, do ya, you bastard?” she said with a cold, brutal smile, leaning to the side and hurling the limp body out in front of her. She crashed to the ground on her back, and when her head rolled to his side, he saw her eyes were open and glazed, and her throat was cut. “Here, take this one!”

“Bella!” the man said reproachfully. “That was a very silly thing to do!”

“It’s my money, old man, so shut your fuckin’ mouth,” she sneered. But that sneer faded off her face when she saw the cold, almost emotionless stare Kyven leveled on her, and then she gasped in surprise and scrambled back into the inn.

He saw the shimmer around his vision. He was using spirit sight! He closed his eyes quickly and got himself back under control, before the Loremaster saw his eyes and realized what he was.

“I swear, at the rate she goes through Arcans, I’m amazed she has a single chit to her name,” he said, then tutted. “Too bad, that was a cute one. I rather liked her. Oh well,” he said, then he turned and walked off, leaving the Arcan laying dead on the road.

Kyven didn’t move. He was furious, he was outraged, he was appalled, and he felt not a little bit of honest guilt. That vile woman had killed that poor Arcan just because he made her angry. Her death was his fault, his responsibility. He had to do something, both to atone and to get revenge against this Bella woman. He clenched his fists and forced himself to turn around, and slowly walk away.

He wasn’t leaving Chardon yet. He had *business* here.

He sensed her. He turned his head and saw her sitting between two houses, her tail wrapped around her front legs. The fox, huddled in the shadows between the two houses, gave him a single, eloquent nod.

Now he knew that he had permission.

He started towards the east side of town, to leave and make them think he was gone for good, drop off his gear, then circle back in the darkness and tend to this little bit of business.

His first task on his Spirit Walk had begun.

It was dark. The inns and festhalls were all closed, and the moon was all but set, but not everyone was asleep or still in Chardon. Several ranch hands were staggering up the north road towards their ranches, while the farmers had all returned home hours ago; some few of them were about to awaken and get an early start on the chores.

But there was one more moving than drunken ranchers. Kyven stalked along the edge of town, circling the buildings on his way back to the Stand Off Inn, the town visible to him with spirit sight and allowing him to see where everyone was. He already knew exactly what to do, for he’d had plenty of time to think it through, while he took turns walking in circles in fury and mourning the fact that he’d caused the death of the Arcan cat.

He was not only contemplating, but planning, murder. He was about to kill another human being, and he knew it. But that fact didn’t shock him half as much as what he’d seen earlier that day. Yes, he was going to *kill* that woman, Bella. By the Trinity, she deserved it, and he had the blessing of the fox to do it. Perhaps this was his first test, to see if he had the nerve to execute another human being for crimes which more than warranted such a punishment.

The way he felt right now, oh, *Trinity* was he capable.

He reached the inn. His sight allowed him to look through the walls and take stock of the location and race of every person in the building. He saw fifteen humans and eight Arcans, two of which were huddled together in the cellar of the inn. Those had to be Bella’s Arcans, for the others were all upstairs, probably the property of travelers and merchants. Bella seemed the kind to him that would put her Arcans in the cellar. He couldn’t tell which of those humans he could see was Bella, but he was betting that it was that one right there on the third floor, the lone female that was still awake, sitting on something his spirit sight could not make out... probably a bed or chair. He circled around to the back of the inn, to the stable, and encountered his first task. Quietly, probed the door with a throwing dagger, having trouble seeing the non-living object in the darkness, but finally got his dagger tip in enough to throw the latch and open the door. He slipped in silently, carefully navigating using the faint, ghostly radiance of those microscopically tiny living things that lived on the chairs, tables, counters, and walls, letting him see them *just enough* to barely make out their outlines and navigate around them. He crept through the kitchen and found a barred door leading to the cellar, then opened it silently and crept down the narrow steps.

The two Arcans were indeed Bella’s. He recognized the ferret, and saw once he got closer that he had blood matted in his fur on his head and neck. Bella must have beaten him. The other Arcan was a female ferret, and just one look at her told him that she was pregnant. Bella had a breeding pair... and the idea of letting that female give birth to children under Bella’s roof filled him with fury. Both of them were still awake. From what he could see through the wall that separated their room from the stairs, the female was tending the male, cleansing his fur with something he couldn’t see in her paw. He slipped down to the base of the stairs and came up to the door separating the cask room where he was with the tiny cell in which they were kept, and found this door also barred. He unbarred it, which caused the two inside the scramble back into the corner, but he didn’t open the door. He did not want them to see him. “Wait three minutes, then run like hell,” Kyven whispered through the door.

“The back door is open.”

“We can’t leave, the collars won’t let us!” the female whispered in reply.

“Damn. Then stay here, I’ll be right back,” he answered, which made her face start in surprise. He stalked away before she could say anything, then lightly navigated the stairs and hallways leading up to the third floor in the darkness, watching with spirit sight the people in the rooms, sliding past their doors quietly. He ascended to the third floor, and now that he was closer, he saw that the lone female was indeed Bella. She was naked to his eyes, with an admittedly handsome figure, in the act of laying down on what had to be a bed. He reached the door and realized that she was awake, the door was locked, and any attempt to open it would alert her.

He needed *magic* here.

The door was in the way. Any attempt to hit her with lightning would fail, because of the door. He needed some other way to get at her that either let him get past the door or allowed him to get to her despite it.

It came to him, almost like a brilliant flash. He knew *exactly* how to do it. He formed the intent in his mind, imagining exactly what it was he wanted to do. He focused all his concentration on his palm, and joined his palm to the figure of Bella, forming the path the spell would travel when it channeled into the mortal world. He put his palm flat against the door, and then called on the shadow fox. *Please help me, shadow fox. Help me avenge that Arcan and end this woman Bella, in a manner that befits you. Guile and deception.*

The power roared around him, surging from the fox into him, and then it channeled through him, taking the form he held in his mind. The spell formed in his palm, and then went *through* the door, settling itself like a sheath around Bella’s head. And there it remained for so long as Kyven could concentrate on holding it in place, a spell that dulled all sounds and left him free to throw the latch without its sound warning her.

The fox was a spirit of *guile and deception*.

He moved quickly. He used his dagger to all but cut the latch of the door, then pushed it open as she turned her head away, quickly sliding into the room and closing it before her eyes caught the motion in the gloom. Once he was inside, he crept up to her bed, looming over her. She opened her eyes and moved to gasp, but Kyven’s hand slammed over her mouth before she could make a sound. He drew a dagger from his belt as she tried to struggle, then her body shuddered when the dagger drew over her neck, slitting her throat. Hot blood spurted from the wound as Kyven deliberately stared into her eyes balefully, letting her see his glowing eyes and know that she had died at the hands of a *Shaman*, died for her cruelty. The hand over her mouth pulled away when she stopped struggling, and the glow of her body to his spirit sight then shimmered, flared with a brief light, and then quickly dimmed and vanished.

She was dead.

Justice was done.

He wasn’t done yet, though. He quickly rifled through her room, until he came up with what he wanted, the crystal-tipped silver probe that was a collar key. After pocketing it, he took his firestarter from his pocket and set a tiny flame on the edge of her covers, a flame that would not go out and would grow to consume the bed, and ultimately the entire inn. He knew he had to move quickly now. He silently left the room and rushed back down to the cellar as quickly as he dared, and as he moved, but as he moved he realized that he may not be doing those ferrets any favors. He couldn’t take them with him... did they know how to survive in the forest alone? The female was pregnant. Was it right to force them to flee, or was it right to give them that chance?

It was right to give them the chance, but only if they were willing. That was the proper thing to do.

He returned to the cellar silently and quickly, until he was again by the door. “Listen,” he whispered. “I can get you out of here, but if I do, it means you’re on your own. I can’t help you out there. You’ll have to escape on your own and survive out there on your own. I leave that choice with you. You can remain here and hope for a better master, or I’ll take off your collars and you can try to escape. But you have to choose quickly!” he said in a hiss.

“Let us go!” the female said immediately.

“Shama, you’re with child! Maybe—”

“And live the rest of my life knowing we might end up with another one like *her*? How many of us has she killed in the four months she’s owned us, Mrau? Do you want our baby to end up like poor Shii?”

There was a tense silence within. “Let us out,” the male said resolutely.

“Turn your backs to the door. Do not look at me,” Kyven ordered.

“But—”

“It’s for both our sakes. If you don’t know who freed you, then you can’t tell anyone if you’re caught,” Kyven told him bluntly.

“I understand.” Both of them turned and knelt with their backs to the door. “Go ahead.”

Kyven moved swiftly. He opened the door and used the key on their collars, touching the crystal tip to the crystal on the collars, which caused them to come apart. The collars dropped to the cellar floor with metallic clinks. “Count to twenty, then run,” he whispered. “The back door by the stable is open. Run and don’t look back.”

“We will. Thank you,” the female said earnestly.

“I hope you find happiness,” he told them, then turned and bolted up the stairs.

As swiftly as a flying hawk, Kyven made his way out of the inn and bolted for the trees. His spirit sight allowed him to navigate the darkness flawlessly, and when he reached the trees, he hunkered down and looked back. He saw the two ferrets quickly emerge from the back much later than he expected, as flames began to appear in the third floor window of Bella, carrying what looked like a tablecloth filled with goods. Clever, clever Arcans, bringing food with them! The ran straight for the forest, and then vanished into the trees without looking back.

He wished them well.

He waited several more moments, watching the fire. It spread out of Bella’s open window and took hold on the wood of the exterior, and licks of flame began to appear between the tiles of the roof.

That was it. They wouldn’t put it out now. And if they did, Bella’s body was already most likely charred beyond recognition.

He stood up and took in a deep breath, then yelled “Fire! Fire!” as loud as possible. He didn’t wait to see what happened. He turned into the forest and ran, then ran across the open area of the south road and open fields where the farms bordered the village. He ghosted through the forest on the far side until he was well out of sight of the village, then came out onto the road and ran at a ground-eating stride that would put him far, far from Chardon by dawn, far from the scene of his first act on his Spirit Walk.

Justice.

In Chardon, the shadow fox watched from the road as the Stand Off Inn burned out of control, seated sedately with her tail wrapped around her legs, as the guests scrambled out carrying whatever they could hold and villagers rushed to look on, but helpless to do anything about it. She watched as the inn burned, and everything that had mattered to the woman Bella

was consumed in the pyre of vengeful flame.

Justice was done.

Her Shaman had done well. He had understood the need for justice, but also saw the truth of the ferrets, that saving them was not truly saving them, and it would have to be their choice to face death in the forests of Noraam, or the chance the luck of the draw in the pens of the stablemaster. He had seen the truth, a truth that many would blindly ignore with false hopes that everything would just be fine once the collars were removed and they were liberated.

He had gained wisdom. And so his first task was complete.

The first task of her Shaman was complete, but there were many more tasks ahead, and many lessons for him to learn.

She nodded in satisfaction, then stood up and padded away on silent feet, invisible to all around her.

Chapter 4

If they suspected him, they'd have a hard time proving it.

Kyven was almost a horse's ride away from Chardon by the time he stopped to rest, picking up his gear and running through the rest of the night. He was so far away that nobody would ever believe that a man on foot could have set the fire. It was his defense if the Loremaster investigated the incident and found arson and remembered his altercation with the woman, the fact that he was just too far away to have done it should the Loremaster use communications to send word to locate him. If anyone investigated, they'd get reports of farmers seeing Kyven minars away from Chardon, far beyond where he could have theoretically circled back to start the fire.

All those weeks of endurance training had served him well. Most people would never consider that he could run so far, so fast, almost at the pace of a horse.

The running gave him time to think, think about what happened. He felt absolutely no remorse at his act of murder, none at all. That woman deserved to die, and he was simply the instrument of execution. He *did* feel remorse, though, for that cat. She had died, and died for no reason. It was an empty death, and she had suffered the woman's wrath for the anger that Kyven instilled in her. It was Kyven's fault that she died. He felt remorse for that, felt far more than he would have felt for the woman herself. Killing Bella the Innkeeper was a pale shadow compared to what he'd done to that poor cat, and it taught him a bitter, bitter lesson.

He knew now that one man's acts could have dire consequences far beyond himself. He knew that a man had to consider all options before taking a course, both the obvious ones and the subtle ones. Had he known that angering Bella would have led to the death of the cat, he would have been much more careful. But he had not, and his acts had started a chain of events that eventually killed the Arcan. He had to be much more careful, much more prudent. It was alright to feel as he felt, but he had to keep it to himself. Even though he was no sympathizer, his time with the wolf had opened his eyes to the... *humanity* of the Arcans, and now that point of view was bleeding through to others.

As unpleasant as it seemed, he would have to pretend to be of no opinion over them, as he used to be. And that applied to all things. He had to carefully consider things before he made any opinion... even before he said a single word or raised an eyebrow. If only because in this world, where the value of life was not given equally to all things, even the most absently given word or comment might lead to the death of another.

It was wisdom, he realized. The fox wanted him to learn wisdom... and he had learned. But he found, then, that those lessons may leave a bitter taste in his mouth. It had taken the death of the Arcan to open his eyes to things, a death he had caused indirectly through an act he

didn't even realize he had performed until it was too late.

He had to be more careful.

He stopped at dawn for a meal of cheese and bread, then practiced. He still had to practice, to build up his tolerance to channeling, and he also needed to practice with the shockrod to make it seem that he was using it rather than his own abilities. In the daytime, he had a better chance of getting away with this, he knew. His eyes would still glow, but it wouldn't be so blatant as it would be at night. He moved well off the road and into the woods, and then he practiced. He found that he could still channel the lightning from his palm, and that it would travel up the metal rod of its own volition to erupt from the tip. The shockrod was made of a special alloy that made it highly resistant to the damage the lightning could cause most other metals, so he wasn't worried that repeated lightning strikes would melt it or damage it and ruin his deception. He channeled magic for over an hour, again and again to wear himself out completely, until he could barely even raise his arms, then he collapsed onto his bedroll and slept like the dead.

When he woke up, he took another meal of cheese and bread, but found that it did nothing for him. He was still hungry, famished, and it took him only a moment to realize that it was because there was no meat. The wolf hadn't been bringing him meat just because it was the most readily available food. He *needed* meat, needed it to recover.

It was time to hunt.

He used everything the wolf taught him about looking at tracks, looking for signs, and listening. He kept the wind in his face as he moved, so his scent didn't warn any prey, and moved both swiftly and silently on nimble feet as he stalked the forest, acting very much like the fox who was his totem. Foxes were stalkers, skulkers, striking from ambush and surprising their prey.

An hour of patient work paid off. He came across a small herd of deer grazing in a very small meadow, shadowed by trees on all sides. He looked through them and picked out the smallest of them, the one that would be the least waste, and struck. Weeks of practicing the lightning spell allowed him to use it quickly and efficiently. Lightning lanced across the small clearing, striking the yearling squarely in the side of the head, and it dropped twitching to the grass. The other deer scattered as the thunderclap rocked the clearing, leaving the yearling to its fate.

Without hesitation, Kyven took his prize. The lightning had killed it, which wasn't always the case and required him to finish them with his dagger, so he collected up the deer and slung it over his shoulders, then carted it off. He would leave the clearing clean of blood so the deer wouldn't avoid it. He carried the deer to a nearby stream, then immediately started eating. As he ate, eating the most nutritious organs first like the liver and kidneys, he foresaw a slight problem if he went into a city. Wearing himself out using Shaman magic triggered this hunger, a hunger that only raw meat seemed to satisfy, which would make people talk when he was in a city. Eating raw meat wasn't too common, after all. So, if he went into a town or city, he'd need to be careful not to get to where he needed meat to recover. Well, that, or try cooked meat, he hadn't tried that yet. He could, see if it did anything for him.

He rested a bit, collected some firewood, butchered a portion of the deer into small strips he could roast over the fire, then again completely wore himself out with multiple channels of lightning, wore himself to the point where he couldn't even lift his arms. He collapsed and rested for a while, as evening began to darken the sky, and woke up some time after dark. He was starving, totally starving, so he quickly started a fire and roasted chunks of deer meat on makeshift spits over the flames, feeling like he was dying of hunger waiting for the meat to brown. He finally couldn't wait any longer and took the thinnest strips down and burned his

mouth tearing into them. The meat tasted... strange when it was cooked. It had been so long since he'd had cooked venison he forgot what it tasted like. He wolfed it down in cycles, clearing a spit and putting more meat on it, and found that, while the roasted meat did begin to sate him, it took much more of it. He could use cooked meat, but he'd have to eat a truly obscene amount of it. Somehow, cooking it made it less effective for giving him what he craved out of it.

But, that was good information to know.

He continued to cook the meat and eat it, mainly because it was too much to carry, he didn't know how to preserve it, and he didn't want to waste it. He systematically consumed virtually everything edible off the deer, everything but the intestines which Kyven just couldn't stomach because of their vile taste, then wrapped what little was left in a piece of the deer's own hide and stowed it in a bag. He'd have to eat it quickly before it turned bad, but that wasn't a problem. He returned to the road and again ran, remembering that he had to keep himself in shape to use the magic, continuing on to Avannar in the dark of night, when the road was deserted. He did pass by people, though, merchant trains that had not made inns who were camped in fields near the road. A few of their guards seemed to notice his passage, but he was gone before they could focus crystal lamps or spotlights on him.

His eyes. They had seen his eyes.

His eyes were becoming more and more of a problem, he noticed, so much so that he pulled in that morning and took stock of the situation. He had to use his spirit sight as much as he could, the wolf said so. The more he used it, the better he would get at it, eventually start being able to see the non-living in his sight as the wolf could. The episode with Bella had shown him that not being able to see the non-living could be a real problem, when he'd been unable to see the door and latch without a great deal of effort and trouble. He needed to get to where he could at least make out the non-living without using the faint shimmer of tiny living things on them to give them away, which often was almost impossible to make out if there was something living behind it.

But, humans didn't have eyes like his, so they would give him away that he wasn't normal. So, that was the problem. He needed a solution that would hide his eyes from people, yet allow him to continue practicing using his spirit sight.

The answer was *obvious*... a blindfold! It would hide the light of his eyes as long as it was tight enough, and since it would be non-living, his spirit sight would see right through it. It would also throw people off. If they thought he was blind, well, he could use that to his advantage in one way, but on the other, it would be hard to explain how he was able to navigate the streets of Avannar flawlessly without his eyes.

That other problem, well, he'd have to think about that. But out here, while he was running the road, a simple leather strap tied over his eyes would take care of the glowing eyes problem. He didn't *need* normal sight in the dark of night, when it was spirit sight that guided him.

It was how the fox would do it, he reasoned. If his totem was a spirit of guile and deception, then tricking people by feigning blindness would be right in line with her. He had to think like a fox too, and a fox would seek to deceive enemies with guile and cunning, stealth and misdirection.

Tending to his disguise was easy enough. After a quick breakfast, he approached the first farm he found on the way to Avannar, where quite a few men, women, boys, girls, and several Arcans were busy toiling in the fields. It was a very large farm, proof of the farmer's success, so much success that he even had Arcans to aid the family in their daily labor. "Hello, the farm!" Kyven called as he approached from the road. "Might I talk to you about

buying something?"

"You may!" came an answer, as the oldest of the men working in the field, a field of tobacco. Beyond the field was the farmhouse, barns, and storehouses, with fields of corn and potatoes beyond that. Kyven met him at the edge of the field and took the man's hand in greeting, a hand that was dirty from working in the earth. "A prospector, eh? On your way to Atan?"

"Actually on my way back to Avannar," he answered.

"Really? Did you hear that they had a fire in Chardon? An inn burned down, the merchants have said."

"It happened after I left," he answered. "Anyway, good farmer, I need a good length of wide leather strap, about yea long," he said, holding his hands about three rods apart. "Soft and pliable, but at least this wide," he said, holding his finger and thumb about five fingers apart. "Do you have something like that?"

"I should. Come to the farmhouse," he said, then he looked back to the field. "Divan, the water bucket's empty!" the man shouted to the other workers. "Go refill it!"

"Sure thing, pa!" the youngest boy called, setting down his hoe and hurrying off.

Kyven followed the middle-aged farmer to the farmhouse complex. The house and its buildings were all freshly whitewashed, and quite a few animals were roaming in pens in and around the two barns, as well as a number of chickens roaming the farmyard freely. A hound laid lazily on the porch of the farmhouse, raising his head to look at the two, then setting it back down and going back to sleep. "Would you like something to drink, traveler?" he asked.

"Kyven," he said, "and if it's no bother. Where's your well?"

"Bother that. May! May, could you bring some water out for a guest please?"

"Aye!" came a voice from the house.

"Wait right here, I'll see what I have for you," he said, motioning to the porch. Kyven nodded and sat down on the steps, near the dog, and absently reached out and scratched him on the head. The old hound's tail thumped on the porch in contentment.

"Water," a voice called. Kyven looked up and was surprised to see a small dog Arcan, with brown fur and a dark streak that went up her muzzle and over and between her eyes, disappearing into her brown hair. She wore a very simple, worn, slightly frayed wool dress with a stout apron over it.

He nodded and took it. The Arcan limped, he noticed, limping back into the farmhouse on a bad left leg, her left foot turned in towards her right. He found the water to be surprisingly cold, clean, and refreshing, and he drained the large tankard quickly.

The farmer came out from a barn and came over, holding out a six rod long length of leather. "Think this'll work?" he asked.

"I think so," he said. He took it and put it to his forehead, then tied it loosely behind his head and pushed it up so it drove up his bangs, keeping them out of his face. The leather seemed wide enough, and if it wasn't, well, there was more than enough to wind it twice around his head. "Yup, this works."

The farmer laughed. "I wondered what you were going to do with it!" he grinned.

"My hair is driving me crazy," Kyven said, with a little honesty. "I can't wait to cut it. How much?"

"For that? Nothing," he snorted. "Nothing but a moment's conversation while I head back out."

"Well, I think I can pay that," Kyven chuckled as he stood up.

"So, heading back from prospecting, eh? Any luck?"

"A little, but not much. I wasn't doing it to make money anyway," Kyven answered. "I was

just having a little adventure before I go back to work.”

“How can you manage that?”

“I’m a crystalcutter,” he said. “I just bought out my contract and was offered a position in a shop, but I want to see a little of the world before I’m chained to my workbench for the rest of my life.”

“I can understand that,” the man said. “A cutter, eh? Say, think you might do me a favor?”

“Sure, I can do something for you. What is it?”

“Well, from time to time we dig up crystals while we’re farming,” he said as he turned them around, heading back to the farmhouse. “Usually when we clear new land. And the kids sometimes find things by the stream. Anyway, this spring we cleared some new farmland out by the creek, and we turned up a very unusual crystal. Could you appraise it for us? I don’t know much about raw crystals, and I’m not sure what to ask for it.”

“I can do that for you, if you trust me to do it,” he said with a nod.

“Oh, I think I could,” he chuckled. “Wait here, I’ll bring it out to you,” he said when they reached the porch.

Kyven nodded and sat back down on the steps, and the old hound sat up and nudged his hand, begging for more attention. He chuckled and petted the old dog, making his tail thump the porch as he scratched him behind the ears and stroked his back and flanks with a gentle hand. The farmer returned with a small red cloth pouch, and sat down beside him and upended it into his hand. Out of the pouch came a nearly spherical eight point black crystal.

Kyven’s eyes widened as he saw it. It was a very large for a black crystal, far larger than what they usually found in the mines. He took it from the farmer and looked into it, his fingers tingling as he sensed more than he saw. The internal structure of the crystal was dense and well organized. This crystal was very strong, would take a very good cut, and was worth quite a lot of money. He handed it back to the farmer immediately. “Well, is it worth anything?”

Kyven pointed. “I see your barn’s a little old,” he noted.

“My grandfather built it,” the man chuckled. “It’s an original building of the farm, been there for over a hundred years.”

“Well, when you sell that, you’ll be able to rebuild it, and maybe a couple more just like it,” he said honestly. “That’s a black crystal, friend, and they’re rare. Add to that it’s large, and it has no internal flaws. You could sell it for five thousand chits *easy*, but you can’t sell it to just anyone.”

“Five thousand chits?” the man gasped.

Kyven nodded. “That’s what I’d say it’s worth. That’s what the Loremaster should offer for it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Black crystals are regulated by the Loremasters,” he answered. “Send for a Loremaster and show it to him. The Loremaster will buy it from you. *Do not* show it to anyone else.” He was quiet a moment. “And a word of suggestion.”

“Yes?”

“Tell him your children found it in the stream,” he warned. “If the Loremaster finds out it was buried here, you might find people digging up your farm looking for more of them. If you tell him it was in the stream, they’ll think it washed down from somewhere else.”

The man’s eyes widened, and he nodded. “Yes, I can see that. You really think it’s worth that much?”

“At least. The Loremaster will offer you at least that much, maybe even more.”

“I... wow. Just wow,” he breathed, putting the crystal back in the pouch.

The dog Arcan returned to the porch, holding two more mugs. “Water,” she said, holding them out.

Kyven looked at her, and then realized that she *had no collar*.

“Thanks, May,” the farmer said, taking them from her. “Go inside now, hon. And sit down a while!”

The Arcan limped back into house, and the man offered Kyven the other tankard. He took it and took a long swallow as the man talked. “Well, I thought it might be worth a few hundred, but that much? I, I don’t know what I’ll do with it. I could—well, I could get May’s leg looked at by a better vet than the traveling vet that usually comes,” he said.

“What happened to her?”

“Broke her leg in a fall,” he answered. “It didn’t heal back right, cause that quack didn’t splint it the right way. I could buy a healing bell for her!” he said, his eyes brightening.

“That’s a lot of money.”

“Worth every chit,” he said immediately. “May’s been with us for forty years. My grandfather bought her. After all she’s done for us, least we could do for her.”

“That’s old for an Arcan,” Kyven noted carefully.

“That just means she knows what to do,” the man shrugged.

“And not wearing a collar.”

The man looked a little uncomfortable. “Well, collars cost money, and she’s too old to run away,” he noted. “She’s lived on this farm almost her whole life, it’s what she knows. She’d run the day pigs fly.”

“Well, it’s your money if she does,” Kyven noted absently, setting his mug down. “Thanks for the water and the leather, friend. I appreciate it.”

“Thanks for the honest appraisal of the crystal,” he answered.

Kyven left the farm, and spent a moment looking back. He saw the Arcans toiling the fields right along with the humans, and saw that the young man bring them water. They took it from him with a nod, and a pat on his shoulder, and then they returned to work.

A human serving an *Arcan*. The farmer had better have a talk with his kids about doing that kind of thing in public.

It seemed this was another lesson for him. He had seen the worst in people in that woman Bella, and here, in this family, he saw the best. These people were not cruel their Arcans. They were very kind to them, even willing to spend a great deal of money to help heal an old female long past her prime. These were good people. They may even be sympathizers.

These would be the kinds of people Verrin would approach to join the Masked.

The ferrets.

This was a place where he’d feel more than comfortable bringing those two ferrets. They too were his responsibility. He freed them from a murderous mistress, but he had left them in very precarious straits. They were uncollared Arcans, fair game for any hunter or farmer if they could be captured, and they were domesticated, having no idea how to survive in the forest alone. Here was a decent man who would treat them well, and if they had to survive, have a stable place where the female could have her baby, this could be it.

Shadow fox, this is where the ferrets need to be. What do I do? Do I go back for them, or continue on to Avannar?

She was there. He turned to see her, sitting sedately in the road, facing him, her glowing green eyes steady and unwavering. She looked to her left, then to her right, then back to him.

I don’t understand. What do you want me to do?

She shrugged, then her form seemed to melt away, until she was gone.

It was his decision. She was telling him that it was his decision.

He considered it. On one hand, he felt it was the right thing to do to go back for the ferrets, to fulfill his responsibility to them by offering them this chance to come live with this kind farmer. But, if he did so, he'd have to track them down, which was something he wasn't that good at doing, and it would cost him time. On the other hand, the fox wanted him to go to Avannar, and he didn't want to disobey her by getting so bogged down in his search for the ferrets.

He understood then. This was a test. She was testing his personal desires against his obedience. But which was the correct decision? Did she want him to go back for the ferrets, or go on to Avannar?

There was a third option, he realized, that would allow him to perform both tasks at the same time. His responsibility to the ferrets didn't mean that he had to fulfill it *personally*. He could ask for help. Maybe the spirits would see his predicament and help him. He was willing to pay their price for their assistance.

It was time to Summon, to formally ask a favor of his totem in exchange for paying her price.

He continued on down the road towards Avannar, until he was in a strip of forest between two farms. He moved off the road and sat down in the forest, out of sight of the road, and then opened his eyes to the spirits. He called out then, called out into the spirit world with his thoughts. *Shadow fox, he intoned. I need help. I have two duties that conflict, and cannot satisfy both at the same time. One duty is to you, the other is to my own conscious. I would beg your aid so that I might be true to your wishes while also living up to my obligations. I'm willing to pay your price. Please help me.*

She was there. She was sitting not two rods from him, seated, as always, her glowing eyes regarding him soberly.

"Can you guide them here?" he asked. "I know I shouldn't ask it of you, but—"

She stood up, cutting him off. She padded over to him, so close he could touch her, and then she leaned in and licked him on the side of the face. The touch of her tongue against his cheek was like a thousand crystals pressed against his skin. It was the first time she had ever made physical contact with him.

In that touch, there was also communication. *You knew to ask for aid when it is needful. You could see that the presented options were not the only options you could follow. You have seen that there is more than the obvious ways to approach a problem to find its solution. This is the way of wisdom. You have passed the test, her very thought seemed to mingle in his mind. Continue on to Avannar as I have commanded. Leave the ferrets to me. I will take up their burden and deliver them safely to this place and see that they are cared for and content, if you pay my price. My price for this boon will be taken at a later time, for there is always a price when you ask for aid thusly, even of me.*

"I understand," he said with a simple nod. "I will pay the price."

She put her nose against his cheek. Her fur was soft, warm, tingly, and in that contact there was further communication. *It is not wise to agree to pay a price without knowing the price, she warned. I could take anything, even your very life, and yet you agree blindly.*

"But I trust you, fox," he told her calmly. "You've watched over me most of my life. I trust you."

That is of no moment. I could have merely been baiting you into just such a thing. You have no inkling of what I could do to you, human, what payment I could exact, which would make you beg for death. I may be doing that very thing right now, she noted dryly. I am, after all, a spirit of guile and deceit. And yet you will blindly take any offer I give?

He swallowed, and nodded gravely. "There comes a time when a man just has to trust

someone, with his very life. I decided to walk this path to follow you, to know you, and to understand you. I will pay your price, because I trust you. I believe that my trust in you is not misguided."

Indeed, she noted, with light amusement. So be it, then. I will bring the ferrets here. In return, you will pay my price at a later time, when I exact it. Thus will you learn the danger of summoning the spirits, she warned ominously.

"If I come out of it wiser for my trouble, then isn't it just another lesson?"

She withdrew from contact with him, turning and walking away. She turned and looked back at him, her face... *amused*. Then she padded away, her form melting into the shadows and disappearing.

It was done, and there was no backing out now, but he wasn't *too* worried about it. He had no doubt she would do something moderately awful to him to show him how a spirit could be vengeful or cruel, but he trusted her. He would endure that lesson gladly if it helped him atone for getting the cat Arcan killed, by bringing those ferrets to a place where they would be treated kindly and well.

But now that it was over, and now that he had heard her speak, he saw the trap she set for him. She *baited* him into doing this. She manipulated him into summoning her formally, she had tricked him. He'd fallen for it like a newborn babe, too.

She was a spirit of guile and deceit, even with Shaman she took to be their totem.

Clearly, he needed to be a touch more careful around her. Perhaps that, too, was a part of this lesson... not to trust too blindly, even his own totem spirit.

Water under the bridge. It was done, he did it, and he wasn't sorry. She had taught him his lesson, and when the time came to pay her price, he wouldn't whine or snivel or beg. He made this deal, he would honor it like a man.

He stood up and fiddled with his new leather headband, its tails reaching all the way to his waist; it was nearly as long as he was tall. He then headed back for the road, and put the entire affair out of his mind. He'd worry about it later.

It took him nearly two more nights of travel to reach Avannar, the City of History. Avannar was reputed to have been built on the ground that was once one of the mighty capitols of the Great Ancient Civilization, but even despite that legend, Avannar was definitely the greatest city on Noraam. It was huge, sprawling over both banks of the wide, slow-moving, brown waters of the Podac River, with the legendary fortress called the Black Keep on one of the two islands in the middle of the river. The other, larger island was called Loremasters' Isle, and held the large, glittering towers of the Towers of History, the headquarters and main repository of the knowledge of the Loremasters. Avannar was literally two cities. On the south bank of the river was Old Avannar, the original city, filled with old stone buildings, narrow and crooked cobblestone streets, and a great deal of history. After they built the bridges over the Podac River some two hundred years ago, New Avannar sprang up. On the southeast corner of Old Avannar and New Avannar both were the docks, where ships from the sea sailed up the Podac River and stopped. This place was chosen probably for the same reason the Great Ancients chose it, because the river was very wide, deep enough to support docking seaworthy vessels, and the land around the river here was flat and conducive to building a city, New Avannar, across the river, consisted of larger, more comfortable looking buildings of wattle-and-daub, brick, and timber, with wider, more spacious streets and many warehouses. Old Avannar was the merchant quarter and abode of the poor, and New Avannar was the abodes of the middle and upper classes as well as the place where the Loremaster's College and all the Guilds had their headquarters.

Kyven had been here once before. They'd stayed at an inn in Old Avannar near one of the

two bridges across the river, called the Beggar's Bridge because of the beggars that commonly gathered at its bases and along its wide length. The other bridge connected the Loremasters' Isle to the city, while the Black Keep had no bridges, only boats that ferried people back and forth. They'd been here for two days, as Holm did business with the Guild of Crystalcutters on behalf of the entire village of Atan, and then they went home. Every year, actually right about this time, a bit after Midsummer Festival, one of the artisans from Atan traveled to Avannar to discuss matters, do business, and keep up to date on any new discoveries or issues. He recalled the cutter in Chardon saying that he'd heard from Torvik that they thought he was dead, so it must have been Torvik that had come to Avannar this year to represent Atan.

He walked into the city of Avannar from the Atan Road right around noon, sharing the road with merchants, travelers, and farmers and others using the road to access the many farms and horse ranches to the south and west of the city. Avannar was also known for its horse ranches out west, ranch after ranch built in the grassy piedmont to the west and northwest of the city proper, in a nook created by a wide curve in the river. He was following loosely behind a wagon caravan that had come up the south road, where it merged with the Atan Road, the south road going to Freeburrough some fifty minars to the south. He waited outside the walls of Old Avannar, wishing he'd have crossed the river and come from the north, for there were no walls around New Avannar. The old city was built back in the violent times, before the Loremasters came to control Noraam, when each city was its own nation and they warred upon each other. Though guards no longer stood at the gates and challenged every visitor like they used to, the walls throttled travel into the old city down to two gates and sometimes backed things up.

He wondered why the fox had asked him to come here. He couldn't think of anything he could learn here, really, unless she was simply showing him how the Loremasters treated the Arcans.

And there were many Arcans here. He remembered the last time he was here, remembered seeing all the Arcans wearing rough clothing scurried about the streets of Old Avannar, all of them wearing collars, and some of them wearing a strange white uniform that had the symbol of the Loremasters on its front and back. Those were owned by the city and the Loremasters, he remembered, who swept the streets and did other similarly distasteful jobs.

Kyven passed the caravan and threaded his way through the slow-moving traffic and through the gates, into the city, and up a street known as The Walk, an infamous street that led to the landing from the west gate and all the way up to the Black Keep, straight and wide so people could watch as the criminals were marched to prison. There were many inns, fest-halls, and taverns along the old street, and there was an open marketplace through which the street cut near the river, he remembered. Until he understood why the fox had sent him here, he'd find a room near the river, and also make contact with an alchemist to make something for him, a little something that would work quite nicely with his headband.

Guile and deceit.

He went all the way to the river and immediately started looking for inns. Inns near the river were more expensive, but also safer, he remembered Holm tell him. Kyven still had two hundred and fifty left from selling that crystal, and besides, in a place like Avannar, he could easily get spot work in the Guild. He was an enrolled member, he could show up at the gates and ask for a spot job to make some chits if he ran out of money. The first inn he tried was literally on the corner of The Walk and the river within sight of the foreboding black stone fortress of the Black Keep, a large, bright, clean, and very orderly sort of place that would cater to well-to-do merchants and other wealthy people. It was staffed almost completely

with Arcans, rodents, cats, and small canines all wearing matching blue dresses or waistcoats and knee pants, all of them with their fur immaculately combed and preened.

He asked the small marten Arcan by the door who greeted him who he had to talk to about rooms. The Arcan gave him a speculative look, then he pointed him in the direction of a very tall, rather fat man sitting at a table near the fireplace, playing chess with a small, wiry man wearing a powdered wig and wire-rimmed spectacles. "Excuse me, I'm wondering if you have any rooms available?" he asked politely.

The fat man gave him one cursory glance. "The squatter's inns are by the wall," he said absently.

"If I wanted to stay in a run-down inn where I'd have to barricade myself in my room, I'd be looking there, sir," he said simply.

"You're a drifter, sir, a prospector. I take much more risk bringing you into my inn than you would at a lower establishment."

"I'm a crystalcutter, sir," he said in retort.

"Carrying a handpick?"

"A man has to have a hobby, sir," he said simply.

The man gave him a look, then laughed delightedly. "I'm afraid I have to protect the reputation of my inn, sir. Please look elsewhere. Good day to you."

Kyven nodded simply. He wasn't about to argue with the man, it was his inn and it was his decision who he allowed to stay in it. "Good day, sir," he said in return, and turned to leave.

"Hold."

Kyven stopped and turned around, and saw the fat man giving him a speculative look. "You have manners, sir, and I am always a gentleman to a gentleman. If you seek the safety of the river quarter and don't mind what accommodations you are given, I have a spare room in the building where I house my Arcans. If that does not bother you, it is yours for five chits a night, under condition that you do not visit the common room until you have more proper attire. Waistcoat and breeches at the minimum."

"Done, sir," he said with a simple nod. He took out a twenty-five chit coin and put it on their chess table. "For the next few days."

"Take him there," the man ordered of the slender male mouse standing by the bar.

"Follow me, please," the mouse said urbanely, bowing to him.

Kyven fell into step behind the shorter mouse as he was led through the kitchen and into a courtyard behind the inn, a gated area holding a stable and a short, squat rowhouse building. It was there that the mouse took him, leading him down a long hallway with doors on each side. Some of those doors were open, some were closed, showing him that the innkeeper owned twice as many Arcans as he saw in the inn. He must have bought enough for two full shifts of workers, and all of them were small, physically attractive Arcans, or at least attractive to a human. The mouse opened a door at the very end of the hallway, holding a very small room, barely more than a closet. It had a bed in it and a small chest, and that was it... and there was barely room for those. There couldn't be two rods of open space between the edge of the bed and the wall. "It'll work, thank you," he said to the Arcan calmly, nodding to him.

"A word of warning," the mouse said quietly. "Some may not appreciate your presence. Be careful," he warned.

"I just want a quiet, safe place, I won't cause anyone trouble," he answered as he stepped into the tiny room.

The mouse nodded, and closed the door behind him.

It was worth the money to have a secure place where he didn't have to worry about thieves

and bandits. Old Avannar was rampant with them, despite the presence of the Loremasters, as any large city would be. He sat down on the bed, musing that it was going to feel very strange sleeping on a bed after two months in a bedroll on the ground. But it was clean, it was in a good part of town, and it would be relatively safe. That was what mattered to him. He dropped off his gear, setting it on the bed, and then realized when he got up and opened the door that the door had no lock. His gear was open prey to anyone who lived in the building. Well, there wasn't anything in there that was really valuable anyway. Just some clothes, a bedroll, prospecting gear he never used. He carried everything valuable on his person. He went back down the hall and out, then to the back door by the kitchen. He knocked and waited for one of the kitchen workers to take notice of him, who came over to the door. She was a rather tall canine Arcan wearing one of those blues dresses and a white apron. "You're that human that rented a room in our building?" she asked curiously.

He nodded. "I'd like to buy a meal, but I'm not dressed to sit in the common room. May I buy one and eat it out here?"

"Certainly," she said with a nod. "Three chits, sir, and I promise you won't be able to eat it all."

"Done," he said with a nod.

"Wait here." She scurried off, then returned a couple of minutes later carrying a very large bowl of beef stew and a tankard of ale. "There's a table and stool there by the stable," she said, pointing. He followed her finger and saw it, under a short roof built out to the side of the stable's open front area.

"Thanks," he nodded, then carried the food over to the table, sat down, and began to eat. The stablehands, all Arcans, gave him strange looks from inside and near the gate, waiting for guests to ride up, but he ignored them. Here, *he* was the strange one, and he knew it. He had to respect the fact that he was invading their personal space. He was a human among Arcans, and he had to be sure to be as respectful to them in this, their area, as they were forced to be to him because of law and custom.

Despite the Arcan's boasting, he managed to eat the whole bowl of stew, though it did fill him up. He took the bowl and tankard back to the kitchen and returned to the room he'd rented, and immediately laid down. He was very tired, and this was usually the time that he'd be sleeping ever since he started this training. He needed a short nap, then he'd go see an alchemist about his little idea.

Training. Strange to think that here he was, a human learning about Shaman, about to go to sleep in the home city of an organization that hunted Shaman as a matter of policy. Why was he doing this? He had a nice life back in Atan. He was the best cutter in the village, he had nothing but good fortune in his future. But no, he'd given it all up to chase... what? A fox?

A truth. He was chasing a truth. The fox had been part of his life since before he was a cutter, and chasing her was actually chasing himself. He wanted to know why the fox was interested in him, why she helped him, but the wolf had been too right about him. He was searching for himself. He was a human that could see the spirits, and that made him different from other humans. He had to find out why, he had to explore this other side of himself to understand it, and then decide where he fit into the world. Would he go back to Atan and live out his life cutting crystals in his shop? Or would he wander the land as a Shaman, doing the bidding of his totem? If so, what would she have him do? As a *human*, he was certainly capable of much more than the other Shaman. He could go places they couldn't, do things they couldn't. Was it coincidence that the spirit that had adopted him and made him her totem was the shadow fox, a spirit of guile and deceit? With her as his totem, he would be a great spy, the wolf had hinted. He said her spells of illusion and trickery were stronger than Shaman

who had no totem, which would give him the ability to fool people.

But what would he do with it? Serve the Masked as a roving spy, a human mole that would penetrate the Loremasters and learn their secrets?

Possible. Doubtful, but possible. Kyven didn't have the sense of dedication to the Masked to try something like that... or at least not yet.

He couldn't see the use of it, personally. The Loremasters controlled all of Noraam, how would a small number of Shaman and their human associates bring down the government?

He'd probably be more use just keeping track of what they were doing. He was a human Shaman in a human city, and if what he was thinking would actually work, well, he could get away with using his magic within the city walls.

Guile and deceit.

He was up and about after a couple hours of light sleep. The bed was clean, but it was soft, and he wasn't used to soft after two months of sleeping on the ground. He was true to his word with the innkeeper and stayed out of his common room, going out through the stable door. It didn't take long for him to find an alchemist in a city as big as Avannar, all he had to do was ask the first man who wore the uniform of the Loreguard, the private army the Loremasters kept, to pass by. The fellow directed him to an alchemist's shop along The Walk, so he wouldn't get lost, and Kyven made his way there through a busy, crowded throng. The Walk was the biggest and most used street in Old Avannar, and he had to share it with quite a few people, dressed from rich merchants in their finery to the roughest manual laborers in smocks. Arcans were also all over the street, most of them being led by humans but a few roaming of their own volition, and all of them were wearing collars.

Again, he wondered why he was here. Why did the fox send him to Avannar? What would he learn here, other than the fact that there were lots of Arcans? So far, the first two lessons he'd learned had involved Arcans, he figured that since all the other Shaman were Arcan, she wanted to make certain points about them, maybe so he could relate to the other Shaman better... or something. He really had no idea.

The alchemist's shop to which he was sent was *huge*. The showroom itself was nearly the size of their workroom back in Atan, a cavernous place with shelf after shelf filled with displays of alchemical devices. Weapons like shockrods and firetubes and force beads sat on a small rack on one shelf, while lamps hung from the ceiling, and self-rotating fans circulated air through the large room. There were tiny little things like crystal-driven watches so small they could be put in a pocket to the largest, an alchemical self-propelled carriage, the wheels turned by crystal power. The carriage was made of brass, bronze, and steel, and had two seats and wooden wheels covered with metal bands. That thing had to cost something like fifty thousand chits. The place was busy too, so busy that four men were behind the counters, talking to people who visited the shop. Kyven actually had to wait for about half an hour before one of the men could talk to him.

"I'm looking for something, unusual," Kyven began. "I'm basically looking for a little toy, but I don't think anyone's ever made one before."

"Ah, a custom order? What did you have in mind?"

"Nothing fancy," he said simply. "My brother's child is afraid of the dark, but he can't sleep if there's too much light. What I was looking for was something along the lines of a small broach or medallion he could pin to his clothes that gives off a very soft light, just enough for him to feel like there's light but not so much that it keeps him awake."

"Why would he need to pin it to his clothes if he's sleeping?"

"So he can't lose it when he's not using it," he answered. "He's very bad about losing things. If you don't pin it to him, it'll be gone by supertime."

“Ah, now that I understand. Something like that would be quite easy, quite easy. I could adapt a simple glowsetting with a pin backing and muffle it so it’s not quite as bright. But I’m afraid it’ll be colored light. If you like, I could make you something with normal light, but it’ll take longer.”

“No, no, colored light is fine,” he said easily. “What colors?”

“Green, blue, and red.”

“He likes green, let’s go with that. How much would it cost?”

“A glowsetting is only forty chits. Add on ten chits for the custom work, and we’ll call it fifty chits.”

“It’s a deal,” Kyven said immediately. “When can I pick it up?”

“Something this easy? Tomorrow afternoon. Let me fill out a form for you, and I’ll have the shop get to work on it.”

The money changed hands, and after the clerk filled out a form explaining exactly what Kyven wanted and who he was, he left the shop feeling quite satisfied.

He wasn’t quite sure what he was supposed to do, and he couldn’t practice magic in the city, so he decided to go stand by the rail near the bridge at the river and just watch for a while, spending some quiet time as the beggars who gathered by the bridge plied their trade, seeking to wheedle chits from passers-by. They were a rather sorry lot, dressed in rags, filthy, emaciated from hunger, a perfect example of the dregs, the forgotten, and the lost. Some of them were old. Some of them were young. Some... he couldn’t tell. He watched the well-dressed people hurry past them, refuse to look at them, and then they all scattered when a detachment of the Loreguard marched by. Once the guards were gone, they slowly slinked back to the bridge, huddled along its sides, holding their hands out to anyone who passed them. One fellow kicked a beggar that got too close to him, sending the young boy running away screaming, then he laughed about it to his companions.

The joke would be on him, though. Kyven’s eyes were sharp and attuned to detail. He saw that young boy slip his hand into the man’s pocket when he got close to him, and the man must not have noticed.

Guile and deception, eh? Those were the perfect aspects of a thief. And Kyven had very, very nimble hands. He wondered if he could pull off something like that. Maybe he should try... or maybe not. Getting thrown in the Black Keep probably wasn’t what the fox had in mind by sending him to Avannar.

But he’d bet he could do it.

He leaned on the rail as the sun set to the west, quiet and introspective. He pondered what he was doing here in Avannar, he pondered the fox, he thought about what he’d done in Chardon, and still felt no remorse for Bella, but felt remorse for that poor cat who had died because of him. He ignored the people around him, but he was keeping his eyes open, and every time the beggars tried to approach him, a little too quietly, a direct stare quelled them and sent them back to the bridge. But then again, he wasn’t dressed as a well-off townsman, he was wearing rough, simple outdoor clothes; between his leathers and his shaggy hair, he looked every bit the prospector or miner, in no way someone who belonged in Avannar.

She was there.

He turned to look, even as he felt her nearness to him incite his spirit sight; cause him to open his eyes to the spirit world. He turned his head and saw her, seated sedately before him, her tail wrapped around her front legs, watching him. He nodded to her, and then turned to face her. She dipped her head meaningfully, and he took that to mean that she wanted him to kneel down. That would look a little strange, so he instead turned and sat down against the rail, bowing his head and closing his eyes. He sensed her come up to him, and then felt her

nose touch his cheek, sending a throb of tingling power through his face. Instead of communicating with him, instead, there was a flash of... inspiration, in his mind. He realized that she was teaching him a new spell, and he opened himself up to her instruction. The spell was a simple spell that attacked the senses of the victim, a blazing blast of light that would blind anyone who was near him for a short time... including himself if he was looking at it when it happened. But the fox knew what he was planning to do with the blindfold, and so the spell wouldn’t affect *him*... which was probably why she was teaching it to him.

He understood how the spell worked. She maintained the touch on him for a brief second, but did not directly communicate. Maybe she only did that when he formally summoned her... he wasn’t sure. She drew away from him, and he opened his eyes and regarded her. She gave him a simple nod, then took a single step back.

“What am I supposed to do here?” he whispered to her.

She looked past him. He followed her gaze, and saw that she was staring at the Loremasters’ towers on the island.

“There?” he asked in surprise. “What am I supposed to do?”

She shrugged her shoulders, then turned and padded away from him. Her form seemed to melt into the shadows, and she was gone.

He had to go *there*? To the towers of the Lorekeepers? Why? What purpose did that serve? Unless the purpose was nothing other than to go there. Maybe the fox wanted to see if they could tell he was a Shaman. After all, he was *human*, he was unique. If that were the case, well, he’d do it, but he wouldn’t be too happy about it.

But then again, he’d much rather know that they couldn’t detect he was a Shaman *before* it might really matter if they could. Maybe that’s what this was all about, to see if he was undetectable to the Loremasters.

Either way, he had his orders, and he would obey them. The fox wanted him to go to the towers, and so he would go to the towers. It would scare the life out of him, but he’d do it.

Tomorrow. He’d do it tomorrow after he picked up his little piece of trickery.

He could tell he wasn’t welcome.

It wasn’t just the typical Arcan behavior around humans, either. The Arcans in the fat man’s inn weren’t forward enough to be openly hostile to him, because he *was* a human, but they did not like him in their building, not one little bit. They wouldn’t speak a word to him, and whenever he appeared in the stable, he could tell that word passed quickly that *the human* was back, and their private domain was being invaded.

This, Kyven more or less expected. Arcans had little reason to like humans, in the first place, and at least out here in the stable yard, they had their run of it as long as there weren’t any guests back here either arriving or departing. Kyven’s presence in their dormitory was like an invasion to Arcans who had actually become accustomed to a little bit of dignity and status. The fat man clearly treated them well. They were well fed, well clothed, and were even given their own private rooms in the dorm behind the inn, which was quite unusual. The Arcans were used to a little taste of dignity, and Kyven’s presence in their private area was an affront to it.

He understood, and didn’t blame them at all. He stayed in his room when not actively eating, coming, or going, didn’t speak to them, but also was not rude to them. He was sure they gossiped all about him, because he kept very odd hours, staying out most of the night and sleeping through most of the morning, then coming in and napping again after coming back. They wondered what he was doing, he’d managed to catch one little blurb through his wall as the Arcan in the room beside his talked in hushed whispers. He’d been out almost all night, and they suspected that he was some kind of drifting pickpocket or thief who had

made a big score somewhere else and had come to Avannar to hide, but still liked to lurk in the shadows with other thieves, and was spending all night out in the seedy bars and festhalls in the southern reaches of Old Avannar.

He wouldn't tell them the truth. He'd been out all night the night before testing his blindfold, and had found that it was a smashing success. The blindfold did not in any way hinder his spirit sight, allowing him to see perfectly well. By wrapping the two tails of the leather around his head as well, it completely hid the green glow of his eyes. He'd used a stick and pretended to be blind as he wandered the streets of Avannar, and nobody saw or suspected a thing. Quite a few people tried to help him, and quite a few also tried to rob him, too, taking him to be helpless. Those were the recipients of the new spell he'd been taught, the blinding flash, which Kyven hid by using a little trinket he'd bought in a general store, a clear glass ball connected to a brass base, which he used as a prop to pretend that it was a kind of alchemical device.

The night taught him much. It showed him that people did not believe in any way that he was anything but normal, if a little creepy since he seemed aware of things he couldn't see. He realized that by using magic in Avannar, the Loremasters didn't seem to notice, or perhaps they couldn't distinguish Shaman magic from the use of mana crystals, since they were both the same kind of energy.

That was a *very* useful little piece of information.

He'd returned to the compound in the morning, eaten out in the stableyard, and got some sleep as the Arcans changed shifts. There were two shifts of them to staff the inn at all hours of the day and night, which made the inn very popular with many about town as a place where a gentleman could go at any time and get a meal or a tankard of fine ale or glass of fine wine, as well as conversation with other men and women of means. After sleeping, he again left the inn and made his way to the alchemy shop to see if they'd finished his order yet. The same man who'd helped him the day before helped him once again, and though it wasn't done, he offered to have them finish it for him while he waited if he so wished. He did so, standing silently in the corner as he listened to customers and saw what they bought. There were quite a few toys bought, from blinking lights to a little top that spun endlessly on a stand. Some weapons were bought, shockrods being the most popular because they didn't set fires when used, and he even saw the sale of a healing bell, a device to heal wounds and cure diseases, going for nearly five thousand chits. Using rare green crystals, it was the crystal that made it expensive, not the construction.

After about an hour, they were done. The clerk brought it out to him, showing him an oval frosted glass plate that glowed with a soft green radiance that had a pin on its back, allowing it to be attached to clothing. "Perfect," Kyven said with a nod. "Thank you very much, sir. My brother's child will enjoy it very much."

"Glad to be of service, sir," the clerk said with a nod.

The device changed the game. Kyven ducked into an alley, pinned the device to his headband, and then wrapped the two tails over his eyes to form the blindfold, leaving. He stepped out and into the crowd now looking like a blind man, but the glowing device pinned to his eye wrappings gave the appearance that he was blind, but being guided by an alchemical device. Most alchemists, cutters, and probably Loremasters would know that such a thing would be impossible, but the average person might not. And nor would those that would know not know exactly how it worked; perhaps it only warned him if he was very close to something, and he was simply very good at navigating using its crude warnings. Either way, it would give people a convenient excuse to believe that he had some means of moving around other than his eyes, and that was all it took to keep his eyes hidden and allow him to

use spirit sight, and Shaman magic, without detection.

He walked around for quite a while to see how people would react. He got quite a few strange looks and stares, but nobody openly challenged him. He even walked right past a pair of women wearing the surcoat of the Loremasters. Both women gave him a long, searching look, but allowed him to pass by unchallenged.

It worked!

He hoped that the fox was pleased. She was a spirit of guile and deceit, and he was following in her footsteps. The device was both guile and deceit, using trickery and supposition to make people believe he could see without his eyes, which was only a front for giving him the ability to hide his eyes so he could use his magic without being found out.

Now that he knew it worked, he found a quiet alley where he was alone and took it off. He had to go to the headquarters of the Loremasters, and he would take no chances.

It was time to do as he was ordered. He made his way to the bridge leading to the island holding the building that headquartered the Loremasters, a wide bridge with granite blocks serving as the footstones of the bridge. A detachment of ten Loreguards stood guard there, armed with muskets, swords, and shockrods, who stopped anyone carrying a weapon and turned them away. Kyven was carrying a shockrod and daggers, so he was forced to turn back like the rest of them, making him go back to the inn and leave them in his room before he could get past them.

The headquarters of the Loremasters was open to visitors, so Kyven was just one of many who filed over the ornate, elegant stone and metal bridge that connected the south bank of the city with the island. The gleaming white stone of the towers loomed over him as he approached, four towers on each corner of a huge building that almost looked like a cathedral, a building that took up nearly the entire island. Only a garden in the front, where the two bridges joined the island to both banks, and the far side were open, and the far side was supposed to be a small training area for officers of the Loreguard. Kyven was just one of many, many of which wore the surcoat of the Loremasters, coming down off the bridge and into the huge, well tended garden... a garden tended by *human* gardeners. A sign at the foot of the bridge explained why, for it read *Final Warning! No Arcans Permitted. Any Arcan Found On The Island Will Be Terminated With No Reparation To The Owner.* Arcans weren't allowed on the island, which Kyven found, unusual. Why forbid Arcans when the Loremasters saw Arcans as laborers and slaves?

Shaman. Of course. They were afraid of Shaman. And since they couldn't detect *him*, then that meant that they couldn't detect Arcan Shaman either. They kept any possible Shaman off the island by forbidding *all* Arcans from setting foot here.

Kyven joined a line of people in normal dress who entered the ornate front doors of the huge building. He stepped into a huge, grand atrium, bright sunlight pouring down from a massive glass ceiling of huge glass panes in a framework of black metal grids. Loremasters walked alone or in pairs or groups through that huge mezzanine, moving to and from the series of doors in the back, as uniformed workers sitting at desks to both sides talked with citizens who had business here. And just as on the bridge and in the garden, Loreguards armed with muskets and swords stood guard within the mezzanine, a militant presence that ensured that order was kept.

He stepped out into the mezzanine, gawking up at the glass ceiling along with a few other people, feeling very, very... insignificant. This was the headquarters of the people who basically ran Noraam, and just their entry room was massive, grand, epic in scale and design, where hundreds of Loremasters filed in and out, and who knew how many there were on the far sides of those doors at the other end of the mezzanine. He stood there and considered that

there was a Loremaster in every village and town on Noraam, and any of them could make contact with Avannar at the speed of alchemy and summon troops or assistance, or call in reports. The enormity of the place hit him like a hammer, and he realized why the fox wanted him to see this place.

To warn him.

She was warning him. These people were the enemy of the Shaman, sought to eradicate them, and Kyven being human would make no difference. Hell, they'd probably come after him even harder than an Arcan Shaman, because *he was human*. He was unique, something unheard of, and if the Loremasters fought the Shaman because they represented a twisting of the ideals of the Great Ancient Civilization, Arcans who were supposed to be slaves who had real power and could resist, then how would they approach Kyven? He was an unknown, something beyond their experience, and human beings did not react well to such things... that was an established fact. People feared what they didn't understand.

Or maybe they wouldn't. After all, he was unique, and he *was* human. They might see his unique abilities as an asset... an asset to control.

No. The Loremasters were not his friends. They were his enemies, and the wolf Shaman was right to call them so. They were enemies to the Arcan because they sought to keep them in slavery, and they would be Kyven's enemy because of who he was. They would either try to kill him because he was a Shaman or use him, because he was a Shaman. Either way, they would try to control his life, and he wouldn't stand for it.

That was what she wanted him to see.

He turned and left the building. For some reason, the place gave him the chills now, where before it was nothing but a building. It was like looking into the opening of an angry wolverine's den, and he could hear it growling inside. He hurried through the gardens and over the bridge, and didn't feel safe and relieved until he was nearly a block away from the bridge leading over the river.

She was there.

He turned to face the river and saw her, seated sedately near the rail that kept people from falling into the river, seated sedately with her tail wrapped around her legs, and she nodded once, eloquently. He had seen what she wanted him to see, he reasoned. He was certain now that the Loremasters were no friends of his, where before he only assumed it. It was something he *knew* now.

She stood up and turned and walked away, stopped, then looked back at him. She wanted him to follow. He did so after covering his eyes and putting on his deceiving device so he could use spirit sight without his eyes giving him away, and she seemed to nod when she saw what he did. When he was done, he followed her as she padded through the streets of Old Avannar, taking to a small building by the city wall and near the gate. She sat down by the porch of the small building and nudged her head towards it, giving him an expectant look. He nodded to her and took stock of it. The sign out front, and the two women sitting in the windows of the second floor who were beckoning to him with promises of giving him a good time, made it abundantly clear that this was a whorehouse.

"Here?" he asked in surprise.

She gave him a direct, steady look, slightly amused, and still expectant.

What wisdom could he learn in a place like this? Did she mean for him to actually hire a whore?

She nodded once.

He gave her a surprised look. "Why?"

The look she leveled on him was... strange. Though there was no direct communication, he

seemed to take from that look that she was serious about it. Kyven wasn't a virgin, so it couldn't be about some kind of rite of adulthood among Shaman or something. He, like many young men in a mining village, had availed himself of the local whorehouse more than once, which had sprang up to service the miners working the mountains nearby. Holm didn't frown on it, and it was one of the few things that the older apprentices could spend their money to get that they couldn't get at the shop. So there wasn't really anything he could learn here that he hadn't already experienced earlier in life.

But she seemed quite serious about it. And he wasn't going to disobey her.

He stepped up onto the porch, removed his blindfold and tricking light, and then entered a dark, stale-smelling receiving room where several women either wearing elaborate costumes or very little at all were standing near the far wall or talking with a few men who had also come to enjoy the services the place had to offer. An older woman wearing a frilly red dress approached him and gave him a false smile. "Welcome to Salina's," she said. "Which of yon ladies most takes your fancy, young man? I dare say they probably won't mind a frolic with a handsome fellow like yourself."

Kyven looked at them. Tall, short, fair skin, dark skin, and everything in between, the nine ladies standing in line shared only thinness among them and at least a passingly attractive face. Being pretty was no requirement for a prostitute, but the prettier ones would certainly do better than a place like this. So while the nine weren't ugly, none of them were particularly pretty either.

He wasn't quite so sure about this. What was the fox up to? She wanted him hire a whore... why? What lesson did it teach? What would he learn? Nothing, that's what. He'd been to whorehouses before. This wasn't anything new to him. He wasn't even particularly in the mood. But, since he *was* male, the sight of half-dressed women was starting to make him consider it. It had been a few months, after all.

He looked them over, regarding each one in turn, but one of them... stood out. That was the only explanation he had. She stood out. She was just on the good side of plain, with a moderately attractive face, shoulder-length brunette hair, and brown eyes. She was thin, with small breasts and narrow hips, almost waifish, wearing a red dress that tried to show off what cleavage she had. She looked to be about seventeen or eighteen, and looked as falsely interested in him as all the other girls, nothing but a front so they could earn a little money. "Her," he said, singling her out.

"Marya, eh? Twenty chits for a turn of an hourglass, or fifty chits and you can have all the fun you want with her," she offered.

"I think an hour would do it," he told her, fishing the chits out of his pocket. He paid the madam, and the girl took his hand with an empty smile and led him to the stairs in the back.

"Hi, I'm Marya," she introduced as she took him upstairs, and brought him to the first door on the left. It was a spartan place with a single small window framed by faded curtains, with nothing but a rickety-looking bed. "Anything in particular you like? I'll go down if that's what you fancy," she told him as she closed the door behind them.

"Uh, no, that's alright," he said to her as she pulled her dress over her head without any pretense, showing him a thin, almost bony back, very slender waist, and small rear end. She turned and faced him, and he couldn't help but pass his eyes over her small breasts and that inviting patch of dark hair down under her navel.

He wasn't entirely in the mood, but he could bring himself to manage it.

"We don't have much time here, tiger," she said with a cute little smile. "Think you might wanna take your clothes off?"

Kyven blinked, then laughed. "Yeah, that might help," he agreed, reaching for the tail of his

shirt.

Sex with the thin girl was like sex with any whore, which was generally fake. She wasn't really interested in him, but she also didn't want to seem bored, so she went through the motions of being excited when he undressed, played with him just long enough to get him ready, and then laid back and spread her legs in invitation. Despite not being in the mood when he arrived, months without any sex had finally got him in the mood once he was looking down at a naked girl with her legs spread, showing him her vagina, and her finger crooking at him in invitation. He climbed on her and did as the fox wished, had sex with her, mechanical, unemotional sex that simply allowed him to satisfy physical desire. She moaned as he penetrated her, but he wasn't sure if it was honest or fake, since Timble often noted that the whores at The Pink Crystal would moan like they were blind with lust if you so much as touched their petticoats. She continued to moan through it, low, long moans as she lay there and allowed him to thrust into her. He was as distant as she, not caressing or kissing, just leaning over her and having sex. His lack of real excitement or arousal made it take a while until he finally climaxed, and even that wasn't entirely fulfilling or noteworthy. He was doing this because he was told to do it, and it certainly showed in his performance.

After it was over, he rolled off of her and laid on the bed to recover, and she rolled over on her side and looked at him curiously. "Not much zest there, tiger," she said with a surprisingly cute smile. "What was that about? The only part of you that was really enjoying that was your dick. You could have had as much fun with your hand, and it would have been free."

"To be honest, I'm not sure why I came," he told her sincerely. "I guess just because it's been a while since I've been with a woman."

"Well, you look like the loner type. Miner?"

"Prospector."

"Ah. How long?"

"A few months."

"Well, I won't deny that it wasn't fun," she told him honestly. "It could have been more fun if you'd have been a little more enthusiastic. You didn't play with my tits or anything."

"I thought whores thought it was just business," he noted.

She chuckled. "A girl can't fuck every day and not enjoy it *sometimes*," she said honestly. "It depends on the man. You're a fairly handsome man, young, you have a nice body, and you weren't rough. I really was enjoying it there, hon, those moans weren't fake."

"I thought you weren't all that *enthusiastic* when we came in. You just pulled your dress off and got to the point."

She laughed. "Well, you only have one turn of the glass, and it's not a full half hour, it's more like fifteen minutes," she admitted. "Salina uses a short-timed glass to milk more money out of the customers that don't buy the fifty chit session. You know, make them run out of time right in the middle of it and make them buy another half hour."

Kyven chuckled. "Clever. Devious, but clever."

"I wanted to hurry because I wanted to give you your money's worth," she winked.

"Well, thank you, I appreciate that."

"Sure you don't want to buy a little more time?" she asked with an inviting little smile. "A girl couldn't do much better than that sweet dick of yours and the fact that you both know how to use it and you don't get off on slapping girls around."

He laughed. "I'd be even less in the mood a second time," he said with complete honesty.

"Well, you know, now that I've had it and found it enjoyable, I'd be *much* more enthusiastic the second time," she said with a naughty little smile.

She was here.

Kyven looked away from the girl and towards the door, and saw the fox sitting in front of it, tail wrapped around her front legs, giving him a calm, measured look. She motioned at him with her muzzle.

What did that mean?

There was a knock at the door. "Time's up!" the woman Salina called. "If you want more time, either buy another half hour or pay fifty chits for a full session!"

The fox nodded once, staring right into his eyes.

Again? Why?

She only gave him that amused look, and then her form seemed to meld with sudden shadows, causing her to vanish.

"Come on, dear, pay up or get dressed!" Salina called.

Kyven stood up and fished his pouch from his pants, then counted out fifty chits, then opened the door just enough to hand them out to her. "I'm having too much fun for just another half hour," he said to her dryly, pouring them into her hand.

She gave him a sweet smile. "That's what we're here for, dearie! Have fun now!" she said as she closed the door for him.

The whore, Marya, gave him a surprised look. "What changed your mind, tiger?" she asked curiously.

"Well, I can't very well just walk off without seeing if it's really possible for a whore to orgasm," he noted.

She laughed. "You gotta work for it," she teased as he sat back down, then slid back onto the bed.

She was a much more sensual once he recovered, and her responsiveness made him responsive as well. He touched, kissed, and caressed as they coupled for the second time, fully sexually aroused, doing more than just going through the motions. He touched her, kissed her, tasted her, experienced her, and it was actually pleasurable the second time, so much so that they were both drenched with sweat and the bed was banging against the wall as she groaned and clutched onto his shoulders with her small yet strong hands, then she cried out and dug her nails into him, either climaxing or doing a good job faking it. He climaxed quickly after her, then collapsed on top of her and tried to recover his breath.

"Now that had zest, tiger," she said with a breathless laugh. "I'm glad you bought a second try. Was it more fun than the first?"

"That's a silly question," he said between breaths. He wasn't sure why the fox made him do it a second time, but he had to admit, he actually enjoyed it that time. "So, did I do the impossible?"

She laughed. "You can go brag to all your friends that you made a whore come," she told him with a lusty sigh.

He laughed. "I feel honored."

She gave him a teasing little kiss, then slapped him on the backside as he rolled off of her and sat on the edge of the bed. He reached for his trousers, but she reached between his legs and took firm yet gentle grip of his genitals. "Third time's a charm," she invited, kissing him on the cheek.

"I'm afraid it'll have to wait for some other time, I'm about done," he admitted. "But I did have fun, so thank you for that."

"Hey, you bought a good time, just glad I could give it to you," she grinned as she let go of him. "Think you might come back and see me again soon? I don't have many customers that can make me come. I'd like to keep them. It makes this job worth doing, you know."

"I don't know when I'll be through Avannar again."

"Well, next time you do, wander by, I'd be happy to see you again. Girls do like to come when they fuck."

"Such nice language," he laughed.

"I'm a whore, sweetheart, and if you didn't notice, this isn't exactly a high class establishment. I don't think you should expect much genteel veneer."

He laughed even louder. "True," he agreed. "But I'm not used to hearing it quite so... directly. In the village where I'm from, the women in the whorehouse try to be, well, ladylike."

"Pretenders," she grinned. "At least I'm an *honest* whore."

"I'll give you that."

He finished dressing, then left the place without much more chat. What was that all about? Some kind of reward for good behavior? Some need to make sure he wasn't a virgin? He didn't know. But, either way, he wouldn't argue with the fox, nor would he disobey her. It wasn't like he was dragged into that room at knifepoint, and besides, he *did* have a good time.

He still wasn't sure what lesson he was supposed to learn from it. Maybe it wouldn't become apparent until later.

The fox sat on the bed and watched the thin whore put her dress back on, humming to herself. She pulled her dark hair back from her face, then gave a little sigh and went out and back downstairs, thoroughly satisfied by what was a more pleasant client than usual. The girl's body was bright to those who could see the spirit world, bright and vibrant, the aura of one much more closely attuned to the spirit world than most other humans.

The girl was just below the cusp that would have made her Shaman, more sensitive to the spirit world than other humans, but lacking the ability. Had her Shaman looked at her with his spirit eyes, he would have seen it. But regardless of that, he could still sense it, feel it, which was what made him choose her rather than the others.

This was an investment of time and effort that would take time to blossom and grow. In nine months, the fox's investment would bear fruit, and it was an investment best not revealed to her Shaman. It may interfere with what lay ahead.

He thought this was some lesson to him whose meaning escaped him, or a reward for good behavior. It was best to simply let him think thusly. She would have to lead him to other women in the future to maintain that false impression so he was not suspicious in the times she honestly wanted to breed him.

After all, she *was* a spirit of guile and deceit, and her Shaman was not exempted from her nature. If her Shaman could not appreciate that fact, he would be in for a rude awakening. She would deceive *him* when it suited her purposes.

Her form joined to the shadows and melted away.

The tryst with the whore was largely forgotten by the time he got back to his tiny room, for he was faced with a rather challenging problem.

Someone had stolen his shockrod and daggers.

While he was frolicking with that girl, someone, perhaps one of the Arcans, maybe the innkeeper himself, had come into his room and taken the only valuable things he'd left here.

Kyven sat down on the bed and considered how to go about doing something about this. The obvious thing to do was go to the innkeeper and report the theft. The innkeeper was a gentleman and a courteous man, so he rather doubted that it was the innkeeper who had done it. Kyven had been nothing but polite and obedient while staying in the room the man gave him, and so the odds were, the innkeeper would return his stolen goods.

But that act carried with it possible unforeseen consequences. The cat Arcan was fully in his mind when he considered that, that his report of the theft might get the perpetrator sold off, or maybe even killed or otherwise savagely punished. The innkeeper was a fair and decent man *to other men*, he had no idea how he treated Arcans.

So, given he couldn't control what happened, and he didn't want to get another possibly innocent Arcan killed through his own actions, he considered other possibilities. He could search for his missing items himself, which wasn't a guaranteed outcome since he couldn't see them with spirit sight, and would therefore have to search the inn like any other thief, or he went to the Arcans himself and demanded his items back from them. He sat on the edge of his bed for quite a while, considering his options, and then made his decision. He packed up his gear, then went back out into the yard and made his presence known at the kitchen door. "Leaving?" the male mouse Arcan that had first shown him the room asked when he came to the door.

"For tonight," he answered. "I have a message for you, though."

"For the master?"

"No, for you," he said. "I will say only this. I will be back tomorrow morning. If what was taken from me is returned, I'll be on my way without saying a word, no questions asked. If what was taken from me is not returned, then I'll have to take the matter up with someone *of authority*. Do you understand me?"

"Are you accusing me of stealing?" he demanded hotly.

"Did I say it was you?" he returned simply. "I'm just giving you the message. How you use it is your affair, but mark my words, I will do *exactly* as I've said. Either I get back what belongs to me tomorrow morning, or your master will be dealing with the Crystallcutters' Guild and the *Loremasters*."

The mouse's ears wilted.

"I'll come to the stable gate at dawn tomorrow," he said. "Just have them laying on that table," he said, pointing to the little table where he usually ate his meals. "That way, not a word need be said, nobody you may care for gets in trouble, and everyone leaves happy."

The mouse gave him a strange look.

"Good day, sir," he said simply, then he turned and walked across the yard and out of the stable gate.

Kyven left the inn behind, not sure what to do now. He still wasn't entirely sure what task the fox had for him in Avannar, unless she brought him all the way here just to prove to him that the Loremasters were a danger to him. He put on his blindfold and decoy as the sun began to set, and decided to spend the time practicing. Once the sun went down and night took over, it was the perfect time to practice spirit sight. It was a passive ability, but it still took time and training to master what he was seeing. In the city, where he could see the people but could not see the walls or buildings or ground and what might be on it, it was the perfect place to work on seeing what was not living, as the wolf said was possible. The wolf said he could see his clothing and his daggers, where Kyven couldn't see them... so that was something to practice. He spent almost the entire night lurking the streets, watching people, trying to see the non-living even as he worked to be more natural moving around using nothing but spirit sight. It was certainly educational, if only because he could see all the people, all the rats, and all the bugs. These people had *no idea* how many rats were living in the sewers under their feet, but Kyven could see them as a swarming mass of vaguely visible life deep under the ground, having to see them through the dark mass that the ground presented to his eyes. He could only see it when he was standing directly over the sewer tunnels, a shimmering life under his feet, under the cobblestone streets. Kyven saw the thieves moving about,

saw more than a few watching him, casing him, but they didn't understand that he could see them through walls, so they could not ambush him or sneak up on him. He was also much more adept at moving through the darkness than they were, and all it took to lose them was to drop into the nearest unoccupied dark alley and then mimic his totem, vanishing into the shadows by deactivating the glowing green light pinned to his headband with a single touch, and dropping back into the dark shadows, vanishing from sight.

Over the night, he felt that he'd gotten a little better. Seeing the non-living was a matter of paying attention and perception, he guessed, so he tried to focus on what *wasn't* there rather than focus on what was. He could see what was there, so it wasn't what he had to worry about.

It was strange. Ever since he'd started down this path, he'd been staying up at night, usually all night. He'd literally become nocturnal since taking up Shaman training, and he didn't mind it all that much. He felt... comfortable in the night. With his spirit sight, he could see perfectly well, and it gave him all the advantages. And since he could just cover his eyes to hide their glow, it wouldn't give him away.

It did cause him to do a little work, though. About two hours before dawn, he was wandering the crooked back alleys of the oldest part of Old Avannar when he came across two men carrying a third figure, a living one, one that struggled and thrashed between them as they toted it through the dark alleys. He couldn't see how the figure was restrained, but it was a rather young woman, maybe sixteen, her feet being held by one young, rail thin man and her shoulders behind held by the other, with her arms folded and pressed up against her chest. She had to be tied up or in a bag or something, but she was obviously in need of help.

He stopped and took stock. First, he asked if he *could* help her, then he asked if he *should* help her. He was certainly capable of helping her; he could easily deal with those two hooligans and spirit her away. Since he knew that he could help her, he wondered if he should. There was a lot of bad and injustice in the world, and he couldn't stop it all. He wasn't even sure if that's what he was supposed to do. It was the human reaction to want to help, for he'd been raised a law-abiding, honorable man. But his totem was a spirit of guile and deceit, and those traits didn't mix well with an upstanding, moral person. After all, he'd already killed another human being, so he'd lost his moral high ground forever. So, *should* he help the girl? It was, after all, no concern of his. No one would ever know if he did nothing.

But *he'd* know.

He quickly got ahead of them. He didn't have his daggers with him, but there were plenty of other options... and he could always improvise. He waited just in the corner of an alley, looking through the building as they approached, and when they got near him, he boldly stepped out and called out. Both of them looked at him, dropping the girl and going for something at their belts, but it was already too late. They were looking at him. He channeled the spell of blinding light, centering it in his palm that was outstretched towards them, creating a cone of instantaneous, blinding like a hundred times brighter than the sun. Both men staggered back, hands over their faces as they cried out in alarm, and Kyven made his move. He bulled into the nearer man, making sure to avoid his hands and whatever might be in them that he couldn't see, then reared back and decked the other man with a closed fist, knocking him to the ground. As both men struggled, flailing about blindly and unable to see, Kyven grabbed for the woman. He felt canvas when he put his hands near her stomach, but couldn't see it; all he could see was her naked body. He grabbed the canvas and pulled, then bodily slung her over his shoulder and raced back the way they came. He turned the first corner and went down a crooked street, using the peculiar angular patterns on the ground where he knew street met building as a guide to stay away from the walls, then turning down a nar-

row, crooked alley that had nothing but cats and rats in it. He was too far from the two ruffians to see them, too many buildings between them with their faint glows all built up on each other to create a background that hid them, but he'd see them if they came too far up the street he'd just used. "Be silent, woman," he hissed as he heard her give a muffled grunt, struggling on his shoulder. "If you make too much noise, they'll find us!"

The woman fell still. He stayed quiet a moment, but saw no pursuit. He knelt down and lowered the woman to the ground, and noticed that she was rather pretty. Pretty, round face, thick blond hair, attractively thin without looking underfed, nice breasts, sexy little triangle of blond pubic hair crowning what her tightly pressed legs concealed, no doubt due to the bag around her. The nice part about spirit sight was that he didn't see her clothes, only her, and got to appreciate her nudity fully. To his eyes, she was laying there totally nude; he couldn't even see the bonds that were tying her up, nor the bag concealing her. That could be a curse when looking at an ugly person, but it was a blessing when looking at someone like her.

He fumbled around until he found the mouth of the bag, tied off with a rope, and worked the knots free. He opened it and pulled her to a seated position, then grabbed the seeming nothing in his hands and pulled it down. She didn't look up at him, in fact, her eyes had been closed the whole time, so he figured she must have a blindfold. The way she held her mouth and jaw, she was obviously also gagged. "Listen," he said in a very low voice. "I'm going to take off your gag. Don't scream, don't make any loud noises or they'll find us. Nod if you understand." She nodded vigorously. "Alright. Just zone a second." He looked at the back of her head and followed the peculiar way her hair was pressed down to puzzle out the location of the knots of her blindfold and gag. He found the knot of the gag, then used his sensitive fingers and natural dexterity to undo it without being able to see it. She made a spitting sound as he pulled the invisible cloth away from her head, then took a cleansing breath. "Untie me!" she whispered.

"I can't see your bonds," he whispered to her as he pulled the bag down to her waist. He slid his fingers along her arms and down to her wrists and felt the ropes, keeping only her hands tied. He worked out the knot with his fingers, all but straining his eyes to try to see that which was not living, but unable to make anything out. She tore her hands apart once he had them free, then reached for her blindfold and tore it off before he could stop her. She opened her pretty blue eyes and looked around, peering uncertainly, then looked up at him, trying to focus on him. "Who are you?"

"No one of consequence," he said in a hushed whisper as a quartet of men came up the crooked street. He put his hand over her mouth suddenly and hunkered down into against the wall. "Someone's coming," he said in a whisper, which quelled her resistance to his silencing hand. Her eyes became fearful as Kyven waited in tense silence, as a tall, burly quartet of men closed on them. All four of them were holding something in their hands, and the brilliant red light at the base of them, under their hands, told him that whatever they were, they were alchemy. There were other red lights on them, three more each, which had to be other alchemical devices. He was seeing the crystals that were in them, a pair of nine point red crystals in those devices in their hands... nine points. Nine points. Shockrods? Possibly shockrods, maybe firetubes. He'd bet shockrods though, firetubes posed too much risk of setting the city on fire. Were they the city watch? Maybe. Whoever they were, they were heavily armed and carrying some alchemical devices.

Kyven let go of the girl and stood up, and while she seemed to turn towards they alley, he realized that they had to be carrying lights of some kind. He'd bet that they were the watch. And if they were the watch, then Kyven did not want to explain to them how he stole the girl

away from the kidnappers. He backed up, backed into the shadows, then turned and padded back to a corner of the alley and looked through the wall. The four men reached the mouth of the alley, and the girl gave a squeal and called out to them. "Loreguard! Loreguard, help me!" she called.

Kyven was right. They were Loreguard.

The four men came over to her and saw her in the state she was in. One of them knelt by her as the other three looked on. "What happened, girl?"

"I was abducted!" she told them with a relieved voice. "Please take me home!" she asked as she stood up and pushed at nothing, then gasped and pulled it back up over her waist.

The men chuckled, and the kneeling man reached out and grabbed that nothing. "Well now, I think we could do that... if you give us something in return," he said, yanking heavily on that nothing and pulling it down. The girl gasped and was pulled off her feet, falling on her side in the alley, and the men started to laugh as the kneeling man grabbed the girl and pulled her towards him as he pulled at something at his waist. Kyven realized that the man was freeing his erect penis from his trousers.

Kyven was stunned. He watched as members of the Loreguard, defenders of the law of Noraam, stood by and watched one of their own rape that girl. Kyven had a sickening front row seat, watching as he forced himself on her, pushing her face into the stone of the alley as he penetrated her from behind. He saw the girl's face contort in pain as she whimpered when the man forced himself on her, then grab her by the hips and violently thrust into her.

This was what the fox brought him to see. This showed him who the Loremasters really were. Thugs. Brutes. No better than the animals they said the Arcans were. But they were also almost countless in number, controlling the entire continent of Noraam, and not someone that he could fight.

He was torn by a moment of indecision. There were four of them, and they were heavily armed. He was just one man, and if they discovered he was a Shaman, he'd be chased to the ends of the earth. He debated what to do furiously as the man continued to rape the girl, as she choked and sobbed with her face pressed against the stones of the alley.

That moment cost him dearly. The man raping the girl leaned over her, then drove his hand forward. The girl's entire body seemed to shudder, and she slumped forward. Her body seemed to flare with a sudden light, then quickly dimmed and vanished from his sight.

The bolt of lightning raged out of nowhere, a blinding flash that illuminated the alley for a split second. That instant showed Kyven at the end of the alley, the lightning connecting his palm to the rapist's head. The man was thrown back, a blackened mar on his forehead, his eyes open and glazed. The other three men raised those things in their hands, and a trio of jagged blasts of lightning roared back down the alley, but they found nothing but the wall. Kyven retaliated by putting only his hand out around the corner, and channeling the blinding flash of light, sending the light of a thousand suns raging back down the alley. The men staggered back, bowing over as they shook their heads, and heard one of them scream those dangerous words.

"Shaman! It's a Shaman!"

Kyven pulled up the blindfold so he could see with his normal sight, and was around the corner in a heartbeat. He punched the nearest one dead in the jaw, dropping him. He grabbed the shockrod of the dead man and used it like a club, smashing it into the face of another blinded man, then deliberately jammed the butt of the shockrod into the last man's hand and channeled the lightning spell through it, blasting him directly with a killing electrical attack. The man dropped twitching to the cobblestones, smoke wafting from the stomach of his white surcoat. He channeled it one more time through the rod, striking the man he'd punched

in the back of the head with the blast, killing him instantly.

He wanted to do something more. He was furious, he was absolutely furious. He couldn't believe it. He just couldn't believe it! He saves the girl from the kidnappers, just to watch her die at the hands of the Loreguard? But what could he have done? Should he have stayed and then tried to explain, using deception to talk his way out of it? Or was the right thing to do to back off, as he had done, and attack them the instant the rape began, attacking three men whose attention wouldn't have been on him?

He felt absolutely *sick*.

She was there.

He dropped to his knees. He didn't want to look at her. He felt shamed. He felt as if he had failed her. He had failed, the girl had died, he'd tried to save her but he couldn't. He felt her right in front of him, then felt her paws come to rest on his shoulders. He opened his eyes and looked at her, saw her reared up on her hind legs and staring down at him. She stared right into his eyes, her own unwavering and sober.

Thus do you learn that sometimes, there is no correct answer, she seemed to communicate to him. *There is no perfect solution. There is no happily ever after for every person. There is only the path that causes the least pain.*

"This is wisdom?" he choked, looking down at the ground. "This is cruel!"

Life is cruel, she answered immediately and without emotion. *Learn that lesson quickly, Shaman. Thus do you learn, and thus you gain wisdom.*

"Is this the price I have to pay?"

You will know when I exact my price, she communicated to him.

"I could have saved her," he whispered emotionally.

Had you tried, you would be dead. The murder of the girl so surprised the onlookers that they were unable to respond to you. You have avenged her. And know that had you not rescued her, her death at those who took her would have been slow and agonizing. What she received here was a mercy by comparison. Take comfort in that small thing.

"It's not much consolation," he sniffed.

Wisdom is not a thing gained easily, she told him sagely. *Claim the objects of these men as your prizes. You will have need of them. In the morning, after you recover your things from the inn, leave this place. Go south. There is more for you to learn.*

"Just answer me one thing.

Proceed.

"Will all this be worth it?"

That depends entirely on your point of view. Now do as I have commanded. Time is short, others will be here very soon.

She took her paws off him and turned and padded away, her form vanishing into the shadows.

Kyven knelt there for a long moment. He—it was just indescribable how he felt. Sick. Betrayed. Angry. Useless. He did learn what the fox had to teach, but it had been a bitter, bitter lesson. For a man like him, young, kind, compassionate, maybe a little naïve, the harsh realities of the world were a cruel, rude awakening.

Perhaps, sometimes, there really was no right answer. There certainly hadn't been one this time. If the fox was right, then either the girl would have died alone, or he would have died with her.

Maybe it would have been better to die trying, but then again, the way he felt right now, that was just the coward in him talking, the coward that didn't want to face the truth.

He had begun this journey to learn about the fox, to find his answers. But now, now... he

wasn't sure if he had made the right decision. But it was too late now. He was committed to this path. He could not run now, not after this. He had to persevere, even if it caused him pain, because he had to know. And some dark, small part of him, a part not moved by what he had just experienced, that part of him was telling him that the fox was right, and that there was more to learn from her.

And not all of it would be bad.

She seemed to care about him. She had saved his life, after all, and she had sent him to the whorehouse as some kind of reward. He couldn't believe that she had enjoyed making him do that, making him learn that bitter truth. It was what had to be done, or he would never gain the wisdom she wished to teach him.

He just fervently hoped that this was the *last* of such harsh lessons. Watching people die like that was something he could never get used to seeing.

He stood up, and moved to do her bidding, stripping the men of their alchemical devices, then melting into the night before people came out of the buildings around them. He knew people had looked down from windows, but the alley was dark, and he was hidden by shadows, so he was sure that they'd never catch him, he would be long gone from Avannar by the time they started looking for him. He took their shock rods, their other items, then vanished into the night. He had survived Avannar, and survived to learn the lessons the fox had to teach him in this place.

But he would never feel the same.

Chapter 5

The running scoured it all away.

One foot in front of the other, over and over, hours on end. Kyven ran south from Avannar just after dawn, and he ran to put it out of his mind. It had been a veritably brutal lesson that the fox had taught him, a stark lesson about life, death, and the choices that one made that could lead to either. The lesson was that sometimes there was no choice that could prevent death, or the death of another, so the wisest course was to minimize the damage. But the other lesson in that to him was *get over it*. She was toughening him up, it seemed to him, showing him the worst aspects of life first to teach him how to cope with the harsh reality he'd never seen in the village of Atan and the comfort of his shop. He must seem naïve to her, immature, maybe even too idealistic, but it was just who he was. Kyven was a kind soul at heart, more willing to help than harm, even strangers. Perhaps she saw that as a negative trait, and sought to strip it out of him. Perhaps she saw it as a positive trait, and sought to help him hold onto it despite seeing how ugly the world could be by getting the worst out of the way right up front... because he didn't think it could get much worse than that, saving that girl just to watch her die.

The running was almost therapeutic. Surprised merchant trains watched him pass them up as he ran steadily south, roving detachments of Loreguard saw him pass them and wondered just where he was going so quickly, but did not chase him down. He lost himself in the running, almost feeling like he was training again, running through the night as he chased the wolf. But there was no wolf now, just him, and the forest was split by a road, and it was daytime instead of night. He ran hard, as hard as he could run and maintain his pace for at least three hours, putting as much distance as possible between him and Avannar.

He never wanted to go back there again.

At least his subtle threat issued to the mouse had been effective. When he returned to the stable at dawn after hiding to wait out the night, his fake shockrod and all five throwing daggers were sitting on the table for him. The Arcans had decided to take his offer and just re-

turn his things and leave it at that.

He had *real* shockrods now. Four of them, in fact. He'd taken a total of sixteen items from the Loreguard, four from each of them, and each of them carried identical items. The first item all four carried was the shockrod. The second was a small portable light, directional rather than a lantern, shining a beam of light in a very narrow cone in one direction. The third item was a little item Kyven had heard of, but had never seen, a talker. It used another alchemical device on the other end that allowed two people to talk in real time across great distances, and Kyven had yanked the crystals out of those things almost as soon as he realized what they were. The Crystalcutter's Guild headquarters in each town had something similar to it, but that device sent a message to *all* devices to which it was connected. This device was selective; the controller on the other end picked which talker he wanted to talk to, and *only* that talker could then communicate with the master device. Each of the four devices he'd taken had had a number stamped on it, probably its identifying number so the controller knew who had which one. The fourth device was a signaling device, that would send a brilliant red flare into the sky when activated, a signal to all nearby Loreguard to converge on that point.

Those devices might be useful.

Kyven ran hard and fast as long as he could, then he stopped, rested, took a meal, and took a much more steady pace that he could hold literally all day, stopping only to drink and to relieve himself. Freeburrough was fifty minars south of Avannar, a trip that usually took three or four days on foot. Kyven reached it by midafternoon, and ran right through. He ran until he was utterly exhausted and literally could not run anymore, almost collapsing in midstride. He had just enough energy to stagger off the road, find a place that was somewhat sheltered and hidden to keep curious travelers from rifling through his things, and then slept. He slept like the dead, but when he woke up, at least he didn't have that overwhelming hunger that he'd had when under the blessing the wolf cast on him. It was just normal hunger... but he had acquired a taste for meat. Specifically raw meat. He attended that taste quickly when he woke up in the middle of the night, tracking down and killing a deer, then going through his practice session to exhaust himself using Shaman magic. He slept again afterward, then woke up with that familiar dreadful hunger... as well as unwelcome visitors. A pair of large wolves were working up the courage to rush in and grab the carcass and drag it off, but they backed off when Kyven woke up and realized they were there. They didn't run away, lurking nearby as Kyven attacked the carcass and ate as much as he could, but he then took only a small amount of meat, wrapped it, and left what was left for the hungry wolves to enjoy.

He was starting to feel a little better. It was going to be a wound in him for a long time, but it wasn't raw and bleeding now. He still had more to do, more to see, and he had to focus on the task at hand, not dwell eternally on the past.

It was one hundred minars from Avannar to Riyan, the next good sized town to the south of Freeburrough, a journey that would usually take six or seven days on foot, but Kyven managed it in two, the pace of a cantering horse, arriving late in the afternoon. Riyan was built on a wide yet very shallow and rocky river called the Rushing River. It was a city of about five hundred buildings, fairly large, supported by huge tobacco farms on the south side of the river. Riyan was the tobacco hub of northern Noraam, where tobacco was grown, bought, sold, and made into pipe tobacco to be sold all over Noraam, even shipped across the Angry Sea to Eusica. Tobacco from the lands south of Riyan was also shipped up here by wagon, from the tobacco growing kingdoms of Cedon and Chaton, sent to the tobacco capitol of Noraam. Once it arrived here and was processed along with the locally grown tobacco, it was packed into small wooden barrels here in Riyan and then shipped down the Bay Road to

Stinger Bay, the main port city for central Avannar. Like Atan, Chardon, Avannar, and Riyan, Stinger Bay was a free city, independent, not part of any kingdom, as was the way of things in central Noraam. The kingdoms existed to the north and south of what was called the Free Territories by those who hailed from outside of the region.

Riyan had had city walls long ago, but they'd been torn down and used to build warehouses and shops and houses as Riyan expanded quickly after the Loremasters unified Noraam, leaving behind buildings made of stone that were made of randomly different colored blocks that gave the place a rather unusual look. Riyaners were a rather tolerant lot, all about the business of tobacco, so much so that they didn't grow enough food to feed themselves. Food was shipped in from Freeburrough and Avannar to cover the deficit, because farmers could earn much more planting tobacco than they could planting corn or wheat or beans.

He wasn't sure if he was supposed to stop here for a while, the fox didn't tell him where to go, but he did want to lay over for the night. He was tired, and didn't particularly relish the idea of waking up to find a pack of wolves looking down at him. There were plenty of inns in Riyan, and he availed himself of the first one he came across. It was called the Layover, and it was staffed mostly by humans, with only one Arcan, a rare male skunk Arcan; skunks were rare because they shared the same defensive abilities as normal skunks, and most humans didn't care to own an Arcan that could spray them with musk. Because they were rarely bred, most skunk Arcans were captured from the wild, and so they tended to be stupid and edgy... which made people not want them. This Arcan wore only an apron and a collar, pushing a broom across the common room's polished wooden floor.

Kyven came up to the bar in the crowded common room, full of merchants, caravan hands, and guards that escorted them to protect from the rare instance of a wild Arcan or monster attack, and got the attention of the steel-haired, tall, thin man tending bar. "Who do I talk to about a room?" he asked.

"That'd be me, fella," he answered. "Just for tonight?" Kyven nodded. "Well, I'm pretty much well booked up, but I have a little room off the stable if you don't mind it. If not, there's quite a few inns downtown that'd be happy to take you."

"As long as it's clean, I'm more than happy to take it," he said simply.

"Five chits and it's yours."

"Done."

"Rooms here come with a meal, so come back to the common room and get yourself something to eat."

"I'll be sure to do that."

"Stripe!" the man shouted. The skunk came over immediately and set his broom aside. "Take this man to the stable room," the man ordered, but Kyven wasn't listening to him. The skunk felt... strange to him. Different. Not normal.

The skunk nodded, then motioned to him to follow. Kyven did so, giving the skunk a penetrating look. He didn't *look* any different, but... he was. He just was. He just, well, stood out, and the closer he got, the more apparent it was.

The skunk led him out the side door and into a large, fenced in yard on the side of the inn, holding a very large stable and an exercise corral for horses. The skunk looked meekly at the ground as a trio of merchants passed them, then glanced back at them as he led Kyven towards a building beside the main stable.

"The spirits said you were coming," the skunk said in a very low voice.

Kyven gasped. "*You*?" he declared. "You're a-like me?"

He nodded. "You have things you took from Avannar. They say you are bringing them to us. Things taken from our enemies."

The fox *did* say that he needed them. Was this why she wanted him to take them? "I have them."

"Leave them in the room when you move on. I'll take care of it."

"I'm surprised. I didn't think, you know, I'd meet *another*."

They reached a door on the side of the building, and it opened to a very small room holding a bed, stand holding a wash basin, and a small table and chair near the window just down the wall from the door.

"There are some of us who watch over the humans," he whispered. "And watch over our brothers and sisters. So long as we don't do anything, our enemies cannot find us. I'm happy to have met you, human. To know that a human shares our gift actually gives me hope."

"How so?"

"If *you* begin to be more like *us*, then there's hope that *they* will not see *us* as animals," he answered. "It's a small hope, I know, because most humans are fearful and narrow-minded. But if they understand the spirits as we do, then maybe they will change."

"Possible. But to be honest, if they learn of the spirits as I have in the last week, they'd hate you."

"You are on the Walk," the skunk said, then he shivered uncontrollably. "It is a... difficult time. I remember mine. Some nights, it still haunts me," he said honestly. "Wisdom is not something you gain easily, and the first lessons are often the harshest."

"Amen," Kyven sighed.

"Not all are suited for such wisdom," the skunk said simply. "But the spirits demand it of us, if we are to be their messengers. They will only accept those who see that which most others do not." He put his furry paw on Kyven's shoulder. "Just persevere, brother. Soon the Walk will be over, and you will take your place among us." He leaned close. "How many spells have you been taught?"

"Three," he whispered back.

"Three already? I was on my Walk for two months before I was granted three," he said in surprised, hushed tones. "Your spells are your rewards. When you are given a new one, you have gained wisdom. They come slowly at first, but then they come quickly, until you know all which the spirits wish you to know."

"I hope that's a good sign."

"A very good sign," he whispered with a nod. "Fare well, brother. Remember, leave them here. I will take care of them."

"I will."

The skunk left him, and left him feeling a little more hopeful. If he was ahead of schedule, as it were, then maybe this wouldn't be as bad from here out as it had been so far. The skunk said that the harshest lessons came first, and his first two lessons had certainly been *very* harsh. Hopefully there weren't many more like the last one, or he'd probably go insane.

He had trouble sleeping at night now. He went back for dinner and then wandered the city randomly as darkness fell, watching drunken men, whores, and thieves replace the merchants and farmers on the streets. He again put on his blindfold and trinket and pretended to be blind, using his spirit sight to keep an eye on things and also to practice with the ability. He'd gotten quite adept with it, was starting to make out outlines of clothes, weapons, and other things by the aura of tiny things that lived on them, while he simultaneously both enjoyed and was cursed with the ability to see those around him as they looked without clothes. It was a boon when looking at the more shapely whores, but a bane when fat, slovenly men staggered past drunkenly.

Just the punishment that came with the reward, he supposed.

He came across her deep in the city, at a major intersection of the Tobacco Road with the Stinger Bay Road. She was seated sedately in the middle of the crossing, tail wrapped around her legs, and it seemed she was simply waiting for him. He wasn't entirely happy to see her. The last time had been traumatic. But if that fact mattered to her, it didn't show in the slightest. She looked directly at him, then nudged her muzzle to her left, motioning at the Stinger Bay Road.

That was the direction she wanted him to go.

He nodded to her, and she stood up and approached him. He wasn't sure what he should do, back up, hold his ground, or what. After Avannar, he was a little *afraid* of her. But she was his totem, she was still the spirit that had watched over him most of his life, and he had to keep his faith in her, his trust in her. He couldn't believe that she enjoyed making him learn those lessons any more than he liked going through it.

He decided to hold his ground. It might look strange if he knelt down to her level out here in the middle of the street, since nobody could see her but him. She reared up on her hind legs and put her front paws on her chest, and in that touch, there was communication.

She was teaching him another spell!

The spell she taught him was fire. It produced a blistering cone of fire, a spell that mimicked the function of a firetube... or a firetube mimicked the function of this spell, either way.

Strange. She was a spirit of guile and deceit, yet so far she'd only taught him two spells that really served those roles, the silencing spell and the flash of light.

Most of my spells require you to maintain them, and you are not ready yet, she communicated to him simply, through that contact. Your body is not ready. Continue to practice. When you are capable of casting maintained spells, then you will learn the magic I wish to teach.

He remembered that silencing spell, how he had to actively maintain it, and how it continued to channel magic through him while he did. He hadn't been able to hold it for very long.

He nodded to her in understanding, looking down at her, as she looked up at him with her glowing eyes.

Do as the skunk Shaman asks. Leave the items from Avannar with him. He will make effective use of them.

He nodded again. She pushed off of him and lowered herself to the ground, then turned and padded away from him. She seemed to meld with the shadows, and she was gone.

So, he was going to Stinger Bay. He wondered what she had to teach him there.

Trinity, he hoped it wasn't anything like he'd learned in Avannar.

Kyven left the items in his room when he left the next morning, as he was told.

And Trinity, not a moment too soon.

Riyan was all but invaded at dawn by an army of Loreguard. They marched in after he left the inn and moved on his way, but he was stopped and detained by them along with *every other man and woman on the road*. They rounded up anyone moving, anyone at all, then took them to their encampment north of town. Kyven was a little worried about this, because he had no idea what was going on, right along with everyone else, and he had a much bigger reason to be afraid. But when he was put in the middle of a field surrounded by Loreguards, he realized that they did not take his weapons, nor anyone else's. Men and women wearing Loreguard surcoats were sitting on chairs at little folding tables as they talked to townsmen, and men were pulled from the throng to replace men who were allowed to get up and leave the encampment. Clearly, the Loreguard was asking questions, and nothing more. But over what?

He found out quickly. He was herded to a small table and told to sit opposite a young, rather

pretty woman with blond hair, but she wore a chain hauberk and was carrying both a shockrod and a pair of mahogany-handled pistols. The woman had high cheekbones, a pert nose, a slightly squared chin, and handsomely sloped eyebrows, with long blond hair tied away from her face with tiny braids that were done at her temples and pulled back, capturing the rest of her hair like a leather thong. It was hard to get a sense of her figure under that chain jack, but she looked to have nicely proportioned breasts and a slender waist. She was quite an attractive young woman, older than him but couldn't be any more than twenty-five, more handsome than pretty and looking quite serious and sober. But Kyven found her to be very, very attractive. She put a piece of paper in front of herself on the table and took out a pencil from her surcoat.

"Name?" she asked bluntly, in a mellow, rich voice.

"Kyven Steelhammer."

"Profession?"

"Crystalcutter."

She gave him a searching look, frowning, then nodded. She didn't believe him, but was taking him at his word? Or did she have some kind of alchemical device that would tell her if he was lying?

He had to be careful here.

"Have you been to Avannar within the last week?"

"I was."

"Do you know anything about the murder of four Loreguard?"

So that's what this was about. Kyven weighed his words carefully. "Know anything? No."

It was true. He didn't know *anything*, he knew *everything*. So he gave a correct, truthful answer... given the wording of the question.

"Have you been approached to buy a shockrod or other alchemical devices in the last three days?"

"No."

"What's a crystalcutter doing with mining gear?" she asked curiously.

"I've bought out my indentured contract and bought a stake in a shop in my home village, and I did it with money I earned prospecting in my spare time. But taking over in the shop will pin me in that place for the rest of my life, so before I go spend the rest of my life there, I'm out to see the world."

"Ah. Thank you, you may go."

He both couldn't resist and also wanted to check something. He stood up and waited for her to look down at her paper and write on it, in some language he'd never seen before, and then he pulled his trinket out of his pocket. He activated it at the same time as he opened his eyes to the spirits, immediately turned his glowsetting back off, and looked this young lady over. Now that the table and her clothes were no longer blocking his view, he saw that she was carrying no less than six alchemical devices, including black crystals in her pistols.

And she had *really* nice breasts under that chain jack, a slender, sleek waist, and a pert little triangle of pale blond pubic hair. Too bad *she* wasn't in that whorehouse. She was the first woman he'd seen in quite a while that had produced that kind of response out of him, but she was a Loreguard, and thus was a woman who was out of reach.

As quickly as he opened his eyes to the spirits, he closed them. It wasn't *just* to ogle the woman, it was to see if they could somehow detect it if he used Shaman powers. Nobody outside of the Shaman yet knew that a human had Shaman ability, so he was putting the Loreguard to the test in a daring experiment to see if they could detect his powers.

His question was answered quickly, as one of the devices under the woman's surcoat sud-

denly let out a high-pitched whine. She jumped up and glared at him, a hand going to her pistol, and he staggered back with a feigned surprised look on his face. “What did you do?” she demanded, drawing her pistol and aiming it at him.

“Do? I don’t understand.”

“You used an alchemy device!”

“Oh. Oh! It’s just this,” he said, holding out the glowsetting. “It’s hard to tell if I have it turned on in the daytime. I was just checking it.”

She snatched it from his hand and inspected it, seeing that it was nothing more than a glowsetting, then gave him a look of disgust and pushed it back at him, then holstered her pistol.

“You should know better than to use things like this around the Loreguard!”

“Uh, we don’t have any Loreguard in my village,” he told her. “Just a Loremaster. I’m sorry, nobody’s ever told me before.”

“Move along, citizen,” she grunted, sitting back down.

It told him much. The Loreguard *could* detect Shaman powers, but only when they were actively used. They also couldn’t distinguish them from when mana crystals were in active use, and he also learned that not *all* Loreguard carried such devices. Those four Loreguard he killed certainly hadn’t been carrying them. They must only be carried and used by officers like her, or Loreguard who had need of them.

He left the Loreguard camp with no one the wiser that the man they were looking for was slipping through their fingers. Kyven left with a better understanding of his Loreguard foes... and also left just a little turned on by that sexy Loreguard officer.

Well, the fox made it clear that she didn’t mind him satisfying those urges. Hell, she’d sent him to a whorehouse herself. He’d have to do something about it once he got to Stinger Bay, because he wasn’t too keen on the idea of staying here in Riyan with the Loreguard searching for him.

He made his way through Riyan, left town on Stinger Bay Road, and then stepped out into a loping run that only a horse could hope to match for any length of time, putting Riyan behind him. He knew the Loreguard would appear in Stinger Bay as well, but given how long it might take them to go through Riyan, he felt fairly certain that he’d be done with whatever the fox wanted him to do there before the Loreguard caught up with him.

Back in Riyan, the Loreguard officer sat in her chair, not yet calling for a new person to interview.

Something about that man seemed... well, off. But he had told the truth, her diviner had not heard a lie.

He was prospector, but he was in Riyan. That was possible if he just got off a boat in Stinger Bay and was on his way west... but he’d been in Avannar within the last week. Why was a prospector going *south*? He should be going west, not south, unless he was a stupid prospector.

He was a crystalcutter, not a prospector.

Strange, though. He clearly knew nothing about the attack in Avannar, yet he seemed, well... unusual. And that little episode with his glowsetting, that seemed, well... staged.

And the way he looked at her, it was like he was checking her out, was—

She flushed slightly. Well, he *was* cute.

Maybe she’d try to track him down after she was off duty.

Well, he was prospecting. Maybe she’d better make sure he was about when she *was* off duty.

“Sergeant,” she called.

A tall Loreguard hurried over to her and bowed. “Yes, Captain Pannen?”

“That man I was talking to. Find him.”

“Is he under arrest, ma’am?”

“No. I just want to ask him a few more questions, not related to this case. He’ll be treated with courtesy, sergeant.”

“Of course, ma’am,” he said with a bow, then he turned and hurried off, barking orders to a quartet of soldiers stationed nearby.

She returned to her duties, interviewing several more men, but she kept glancing towards the road, looking for the black-haired man with the handsome green eyes to come back.

But he never did.

She called the sergeant back to her table after about an hour and asked about her order. “I still have men looking for him, ma’am, but I think he’s no longer in Riyan.”

“Well, he did look as if he was detained while getting ready to leave town,” she reasoned. “He had all his gear with him. Thank you, Sergeant.”

He bowed and left, and she stood and considered it a moment. She was intrigued, she had to admit it to herself. Kyven Steelhammer, he said his name was. A crystalcutter, bought into a shop but going on a bit of an adventure before he took up his place there. A strange happenstance, for they usually had their adventure to try to find money to buy into the shop after they finished their indentured service, so these circumstances were unusual. That would make him fairly easy to track down, at least in the records. The Guild of Crystalcutters would have him in their rolls, would tell her exactly which shop he worked at, since they’d have him listed as one of their artisans. So, she’d know where to find him once he finished his adventure and returned to his shop.

There was something teasing her about that man, and it wasn’t just his sleek, handsome body and handsome face. It was the way he looked at her. She’d glanced up and caught him... ogling her. She was actually used to that, since she was a passingly handsome woman and her work kept her in shape. But there was something strange about it. She’s not gotten more than the barest of glances, but his eyes were, well... strange. Captivating, but strange. The sunlight was in his face, making his skin glow and all but illuminating his eyes—

Eyes!

She gasped. *His eyes had been glowing!*

That was what was strange about it! She remembered it quite clearly now! It was just the briefest of glances, and the sun in his face made it very, very hard to see, but she was a detective, an investigator for the criminal investigation office of the Loreguard, and she was trained to notice small details. He owned an alchemical device the likes of which she’d never seen before, something that made his eyes glow like that, and he’d used it when she wasn’t paying attention to him, using it to... what? Look at her? Check her out? His eyes hadn’t been on her face, that was for sure. He was looking down, looking at her chest.

He was *ogling* her.

Well, not that that didn’t flatter her a little bit, but it was still just damn strange. What did that device do? Who had built it? It wasn’t illegal to own alchemical devices of unusual or non-standard design, but the Loreguard liked to know what was out there, how it worked, and who built it.

Now she was *very* curious. She’d never heard of an alchemical device that one could hold in the *hand* that affected the *eyes*. There were special goggles that could let one see in the dark that were alchemical, but they had to be worn over the eyes. Whoever had built it had to be a genius of an alchemist.

Avannar. He had to get that in Avannar. She looked over the scene again in her mind, with

her unique ability to recall what she'd seen recently in great detail, a trick of memory that she could use on any memory that was less than a day old. She focused on his hand, and saw that the device had been brilliantly, almost immaculately clean, and had no scratches or mars that came when one had owned a device and carried it around with him for weeks and months. That thing was new, and he'd been to Avannar, a place famous all over the world for the advancement of its alchemists. Someone in Avannar had built that thing, and not told the Loreguard, was selling it under the table.

She had no idea what it did, but now it was going a little beyond curious and was becoming a matter of honest interest to the Loreguard. She needed to find out what that device did, and who had made it for him.

And in the course of her investigation, surely, she'd learn more about that mysterious man.

She turned over his report form and began to sketch him. Danna was an accomplished artist, it was her other true skill outside of being a very good investigator, and she often used it to earn extra money by selling her drawings and paintings. She could have been a professional artist, like her parents, but she was more interested in investigating, learning the answers to things, than she was drawing and painting. Her eidetic memory, coupled to her natural artistic talent, gave her the ability to reproduce amazingly detailed scenes and the faces of people on paper. That combination of talents was of use to her now, as she put down on paper an amazingly detailed drawing of the face and body that was still fresh in her mind, and would serve to keep that memory fresh by allowing her to look at it whenever she wished.

"We *are* working, Captain," her commanding officer said with a mildly amused tone, coming over to her table, who had no citizen at it for her to question.

"This *is* work, Major," she answered. "I have reason to believe this man has a unique alchemical device. After we complete this investigation, I'm going to look into it and see who made it for him."

"Ah. Carry on, then."

She'd look into it, alright. Then, when she found it, and found him, she'd use it to ogle *him* and see how he liked it.

Stinger Bay was a hundred and thirty minars from Riyan, which was a distance that Kyven traversed in a little under three days of constant steady running. The fox had told him to practice, but he was afraid to slow down enough to do that with the Loreguard behind him, afraid that they'd catch up to him, so he instead worked to increase his endurance by pushing himself to reach Stinger Bay in three days. It was going to take them a day or two to finish in Riyan, and then they had to march to Stinger Bay, so that gave him a few days at least to figure out what he had to do there and move on before the Loreguard reached the port city. They'd also be slowed down a little by stopping in the villages that Kyven had went through, which made him confident he'd leave them far behind.

Stinger Bay got its name because of the jellyfish. They drifted in on the tides and got caught in the Great Blue Bay, named for the blue crabs for which the bay was famous, until they were all but everywhere in the water during some times of the year. It was said that during high tide in the spring, one couldn't fall into the water and get out without at least ten stings from jellyfish.

Stinger Bay was a port city, and its entire focus was based on the ships that came and went from its natural harbor. Wooden sloops, caravels, galleons, clippers, and schooners shared space with military ironclads, hulking metal behemoths that moved by means of alchemy engines that turned propellers under the water, designs that were said to be recovered from the Great Ancient Civilization itself. The military ships looked like floating narrow villages, steel platform on which little buildings reached higher, its sides made metal plates which

were welded together using alchemical welding machines, and then painted over to protect the metal from the corrosive effects of salt water. Metal naval ships were absolutely essential in the modern world, given that the enemy ships would be armed with cannons and alchemical weaponry that could burn the ship, serving both as armor against cannonballs and presenting a hull that alchemical firecone projectors couldn't burn. The lack of sails protected the ship from being crippled by grappling shots fired from cannons or fire. The metal hull also reduced the effectiveness of shockrods, he'd heard from rumor, the metal interfering with the path of the lightning and making it very hard to aim them.

Stinger Bay and Avannar were the main ports for trade in the Free Territories. Avannar's docks served the northern territories, and Stinger Bay served the south. The docks here moved goods and freight from all over the world, sending it down the Riyan Road and out into the Free Territories, but the main staple commodity that moved in and out of the city was tobacco, loading it on ships and sending it out to the rest of Noraam, and the world. Other goods were bought, sold, and traded in Stinger Bay, but here, tobacco was king, just as much as cotton was said to be king in the southern kingdoms of Noraam.

Kyven stood on a very gentle rise overlooking Stinger Bay. It was a *sprawling* city with no wall, dominated by huge warehouses, between which smaller houses, shops, and businesses were squeezed, with all of its streets wide and spacious to accommodate wagons passing each other side by side. It had to be twice as big as Avannar, but had far fewer buildings, and it looked much different than the old, packed streets of Old Avannar. Even from there, he could smell the tobacco. Most of those warehouses down there were filled with either loose leaf tobacco or barrels of pipe tobacco, the results of the first round of harvests of the growing season.

He wondered what he was doing here. He jogged down to the outskirts of the city, weaving in and out among wagons and carriages and horses, one of the few foot travelers. He walked down a cobblestone street once he entered the city, lined with cast iron lamps, and a look up at one of them gave him a start when he recognized the stamp of Virren's shop on one of them!

It shouldn't be a surprise. Atan was a craft village, devoted to the mining and refinement of crystals and the production of the devices that used them. The cutters were there because of the mines, and the alchemists were there because of the cutters... and most of the things they made were bought by merchants and shipped out of the village. Avannar too had many alchemists, but they paid more for the crystals than the Atan alchemists did because they had to pay the increased prices levied by the merchants that brought them from the mines. There were alchemists in almost every town and village, and usually at least one crystalcutter's shop, if only to have someone there to replace crystals in devices once the crystals in them were used up. But Atan was a production village, where alchemists produced quite a few items, far more than could be used by the village itself. There were probably devices made in Atan in just about every city in the Free Territories.

There was one thing he did want to do first, though. He got directions to the office of the Crystalcutter's Guild and went there, then filled out a message and asked them to forward it to Atan. It was a letter to Holm, apologizing for not keeping more stable communications, telling him that he was fine and that he was in Stinger Bay to maybe try out sailing as Holm had done, since he'd not done very well at prospecting. He didn't know if that was what the fox wanted, but he was in a port city and not out in the hills prospecting, so he had to give Holm some kind of viable reason why he'd be there.

That done, he explored the city of Stinger Bay. It was dominated completely by the tobacco trade and sailing, with warehouses, warehouses, and more warehouses, between which were

squeezed shops and homes. The wealthy merchants lived on the west side of town, away from the harbor, while the area around the harbor was coated with inns, festhalls, and other businesses that looked to glean chits from the sailors who made port here. Some businesses supported maintaining the ships, and the rest supported the citizens with their daily needs. The streets were very wide and paved with cobblestones and bricks, where wagons moved back and forth between warehouses and the harbor. The place was pretty crowded, with lots of merchants and citizens on the west side, and a large majority of sailing men to the east. The Stinger Bay Watch moved in units of six men, armed with black clubs that Kyven identified as stunsticks, black metal rods that were alchemical devices that stunned the men they hit and immediately incapacitated them, no matter where they were struck by the rod. A glancing blow on the finger rendered a man senseless. They were non-lethal but highly effective.

It said something more to him that the Watch in another city carried non-lethal weapons, but the Loreguard carried lethal weapons when they patrolled Avannar.

Here, as in other cities, there were Arcans. They rode in wagons with humans, scurried along on the streets both with people and alone, and all of them were wearing collars, but strangely, *none* of them were wearing clothes. Not a single Arcan anywhere, not even the males whom many at the very least gave pants because, unlike females, the fur didn't hide their genitals. Well, it didn't hide female genitals either, but at least a female had to spread her legs to show someone, where a male just had to be facing forward.

Again, Kyven avoided the seedier side of town, but his money was starting to run low. But it was worth the cost in his eyes to avoid having to worry about defending his possessions. He chose a small, modest inn sandwiched between two warehouses, an inn that had no stable, which was named The Hideaway... and it was exactly that, not easily seen from the street. The innkeeper was a surprisingly young man with brown hair and a scar on his cheek, and two fingers missing from his right hand. He had two barmaids employed, and owned two identical-looking female canine Arcans, with gray fur and short, thick hair of the same color curled around their ears and head. They, like all other Arcans he'd seen in Stinger Bay, were naked. They weren't even wearing aprons.

"Rooms are three chits a night, with food extra," the innkeeper told him. "My rooms are clean, and what you do in it is your own affair just so long as you leave it in the same condition as you found it."

"Fair enough," he said with a nod, fishing enough to stay for three days out of his increasingly lighter and lighter purse. Soon, he'd have to either find work or find some way to get some money. "This is my first time here, so answer me a question."

"Sure."

"Why are all the Arcans here naked?"

"City law," he answered. "Dates back to back when Stinger Bay was the main Arcan trading city. Arcans kept escaping from the ships and pens and putting on clothes to hide their necks and manacles, so the city outlawed all clothing on all Arcans. Well, the hub of the Arcan trade moved down to Rellah, but there's still a few Arcan trading operations in town, and the old law remains cause we're all basically used to it around here."

"Oh. Guess that explains it."

"I don't see why people put clothes on Arcans in the first place," he snorted.

"Where I come from, it's the practice to keep male Arcans in pants," Kyven noted. "Because they look like people, and the women find the idea of looking at something that looks like what they'd see on people to be scandalous."

The man snorted. "Foolishness," he growled. "Why don't they make their dogs go around

wearing clothes, then? God forbid they see a dog's balls. It amounts to the same thing."

Kyven chuckled. "Guess it's a matter of perspective."

"Where are you from, anyway?"

"Atan."

"Atan? That's a mining village. I figured it'd be more rough and tumble and not so stuck up."

Kyven laughed. "Well, we have a lot of craftsmen there, too, so the wives like to keep some semblance of proper society about town. But go up Miner's Road, out of sight of the women in the village, and the culture deteriorates rapidly."

The innkeeper chuckled. "Good. This ain't no prim and proper place. Like I said, what you do in your room ain't no concern of mine so long as you leave it the same way you found it. What happens in the common room also ain't my business unless you start breaking stuff."

"Doesn't that kind of policy cause problems when the patrons paw your barmaids?" he asked with a slight smile.

"Go grab their asses and see what they do," he said with a rough chuckle. "They'll either tell you to grab harder or hit you with their serving trays. Learning which does which is half the fun of it." He handed Kyven a key. "Oh, and the Arcans bite."

"I'm sure I wouldn't be grabbing them."

"Well, some men do. Sick fucks," he growled. "May as well go fuck a sheep as fuck an Arcan. First door on the left upstairs, fella."

"Thank you."

She was in his room, waiting for him. He started when he saw her on the bed in the surprisingly large, clean, and well appointed room, with a bureau, washstand, foot chest, wardrobe, and fairly large bed. All this for three chits a night? It seemed that he'd finally gotten some good luck in inns. The shadow fox sat on his bed, not in her usual pose, but instead hunkered down on her legs, laying down with her legs all tucked up under her and her tail swishing back and forth on the bed behind her. It seemed strange to see her so, almost... *informal*. She was relaxing, not her usual self. He wasn't quite sure what to do about it, how to approach her.

He let her initiate things, as she always did. And she didn't disappoint, raising her head and looking at him. To the left of her, another of those magical illusions appeared. It was a large clipper ship, with its four masts and spiderweb of rigging, its sails down and water spraying around its bow as it cut the waves. This ship was sailing, on the move, not anchored in the harbor. She beckoned to him with her muzzle, and he approached her. She bowed her head meaningfully. What did that mean? Did she want him to *touch* her? He'd never done that before. She was the one that always initiated contact with him, but it was fairly clear to him what she wanted of him. He reached out with a tentative hand, and then touched his fingers to the fur on the top of her head, between her ears. In that touch there was communion, and she seemed to communicate her instructions to him. *This ship will arrive this afternoon, and intends to leave in three days. You will leave upon it.*

"Where is it going?"

Where it goes is irrelevant. That you sail upon it is what matters.

"I understand. I'm almost out of money. How do I do this? I don't think I can buy passage."

How you do it is your own affair. Consider it a test, my human. You will be on that ship when it leaves in three days. Find a way.

"I will."

She pushed her head against his hands, her ears twitching. Not knowing what else to do, he scratched at her fur, and found it warm, tingly, soft, and almost luxuriantly thick. It was the

first time he'd ever touched her, and the first time he'd ever even thought of it. He stroked her fur tentatively, running his hand down the back of her neck, felt the muscle beneath it. Though she was a spirit, she seemed to feel like a real animal, complete with muscles and warmth. He looked down at her, looked carefully, and could see the individual hairs in her coat, saw the black fur of her feet which were usually concealed by her tail when she was seated... and saw she had claws, almost like a cat. They were long, curved, and sharp, but not retracted the way a cat's would be, since her paws looked more canine than feline. She had put those paws on his shoulders and chest before, but had never noticed them.

A gray fox. She was a gray fox, or at least patterned to look like one, but with different coloration, the same way silver foxes were just red foxes with different coloration. Gray foxes were great climbers, easily able to climb trees, and with claws like that, he could see why.

Observant. But incorrect.

"I'm sorry--"

I would be a poor totem to punish you for curiosity, given I consider it to be an admirable trait, she communicated with light amusement. Do not assign such traits to the spirits. We appear as we wish to appear. I am the spirit of the shadow fox, and it was by my will that the shadow foxes came to be in the world.

"I've never heard of them."

They are there. They hide, for your kind would call them monsters. They shun most areas settled by humans, but there are some few who live near Atan.

Monsters. Animals touched by the power of the crystals and changed, mutated. Some were benign, like the Taurons that had mutated from cows and were becoming more popular as a staple livestock. Some ranchers were starting to favor them over normal cattle, because of very mild dispositions which made them very easy to handle, but they required more food and water because they were about twice the size of the average cow, which required vast amounts of grazing land to support a herd of Tauron. There were no Tauron around Atan, but the ranchers at Chardon herded Tauron in addition to regular cattle.

Some monsters, however, were very dangerous and had crystal-based abilities. They ate crystals and used them to power their abilities, which made them a double scourge. Not only were they dangerous, but they consumed the most precious natural resource to the human world.

Your people have never seen one of my children, she added lightly. They have the power to meld with the shadows, making them invisible in the night. That is how they hunt.

"A sensible way to go about it," he noted. "Do they eat crystals?"

No. They absorb the energy to grant them that power from the spirit world. It is a minor power and does not require so much energy as a crystal holds to enact. It is for them the same as spirit sight is for you, a passive ability.

"Ah. I understand. Does that make you a powerful spirit? I mean, you created your own breed of fox."

She seemed amused. *Again, do not assign such things to the spirits. Such an observation would be extremely offensive to some. We do not measure ourselves against one another in such ways. We all merely are.*

"Ouch. Thank you for telling me that before I really embarrassed myself. I will treat all spirits with equal respect, except for you. You are my totem, I must be especially respectful to you."

And thus do you gain wisdom, she intoned lightly. And the gaining of wisdom must be rewarded.

She taught him a new spell. It was a simple spell that was the opposite of the cone of fire, a

spell that generated an intense blast of cold. Or, if used very lightly, it could chill water and make it delightful to drink. It was a spell that had uses both in and out of combat.

A spell such as that might be useful to you on a boat, she communicated to him quite seriously, which made him take notice of it. If there was ever a flat warning, that was it.

"I understand."

She slid out from under his hand, then jumped down onto the floor. She looked back up at him, her eyes sober, then walked directly through the wall and was gone.

Well, he knew why he was here now. He was here to catch a boat.

He considered his options. He had no idea what kind of ship it was or what it did, but odds were, if he tried to buy passage on it, they'd do it. So, his most obvious option was to earn money.

Earn. As much as he'd need, *steal* was a more correct term. Such an act wouldn't be seen as a bad thing to the fox, since she was a spirit of guile and deceit. If Kyven could steal the money he needed, she wouldn't care. If he could do it, it was actually a testament of his ability to use guile and deceit.

He considered the options. He'd need hard currency, and a lot of it. That was high risk, meaning he'd have to go after--

No. It was very simple. A shockrod was worth quite a bit of money, as were most alchemical devices, because of both the device and the crystal it contained. The Loreguard had plenty of them, and they had to have some Loreguard here. The Loreguard was his enemy. He just needed to waylay a Loreguard and strip him of his alchemical devices, pull the crystals, and sell them. If he felt comfortable selling the items themselves, he could also sell those, provided he could find buyers that didn't care that they'd been stolen from the Loreguard.

Actually, it was even simpler. The fox wanted him to show wisdom, and wisdom was *not* flying off the handle. Yes, plan for eventualities, but the wise man would investigate the ship first, *then* decide how to go about getting on it.

So, planning for eventualities, Kyven left the inn and investigated the city. He found that there were indeed Loreguard stationed in the city, and after blindfolding himself, he investigated the building using spirit sight. He saw quite a few crystals inside, including a large concentration of them in a room in the cellar. He saw about twenty men and women inside, some laying down, some sitting down, some on the move, but he only saw six standing in what looked like guard positions. That may change at night, when there was a greater threat of robbery... if they believed anyone was crazy enough to steal from the Loreguard.

That was exactly why it was such an inviting target. People were either too afraid or too respectful of the Loreguard to try it.

Kyven leaned against the wall of the warehouse facing the Loreguard building and concentrated. He could see the people, but he needed to be able to see the *layout*. He focused on the faint borders and patterns, and then, to his surprise, a ghostly kind of layout began to emerge to his eyes, which then almost immediately seemed to dim. That surprised him, so he shook his head and tried again, tried to focus on the *non-living*, trying to see what the wolf said he could see. Again, he started just making out hazy, shadowy textures, and then everything seemed to darken, blank out.

The blindfold! Of course! If he was trying to see the non-living, then the blindfold would interfere with it since it was a non-living thing covering his eyes!

That put a damper on the idea of seeing the non-living, at least for now. So instead, he focused completely on the ghostly borders that were the microscopic living thing that lived on the walls, and thereby betrayed the layout of the building. By carefully peering at sections of

the building, he was able to get an idea of the layout of the place. He could see that the guards were positioned in strategic intersections that made it impossible to get between major sections of the building without having to go past them. And to get to that concentration of crystals in the basement, he'd have to get past all three stations of guards.

Very well done, he had to admit. Maximum use of minimal resources.

By the time he was done casing the Loreguard barracks and went down to the harbor, he saw the ship. It was already docked, but it was definitely the ship, he recognized its dark paint and the flag of Flaur that he'd seen on the mast.

A Flaur clipper, and to his shock, when he reached the quay, he saw what it was carrying. Arcans.

It was an Arcan trader. A long line of naked Arcans of multiple breeds, all chained together by the ankle, was being marched off the gangplank under the watchful eyes of several sailors who were holding alchemical devices he'd never seen before, long, red, cane-like devices that had a thick handle. The Arcans didn't resist, however. They marched along at a slow, despondent pace up the quay, and then they stopped when commanded and were traded off to a group of men who threw a rope coil over the head of the lead Arcan and dragged him along as they went into the city.

The procession went right by Kyven. The Arcans didn't look anywhere, just kept their heads down with numb, resigned expressions on their faces. No doubt they'd all done this before.

Such was the lot of a slave.

Kyven watched as three more chained groups of Arcans were brought out of the ship, and then were marched into the hands of the men at the docks and then marched away. Two men from the ship talked with one of the men from the group that took the Arcans, a few papers were signed, and then a heavily guarded wagon came up to the ship on the dock and transferred a chest up onto the ship.

The payment.

From his vantage point near a hawker's platform, Kyven observed the ship and its crew. It had thirty-six men crewing the ship, twenty-nine sailors and seven officers. Kyven memorized the faces of every single sailor and officer as they did tasks aboard the ship for nearly three hours after arriving. As the sun began to set, the sailors scattered into the city to begin their shore leave, and Kyven took off his blindfold and went off after them.

He had to learn what was going on and how to go about this, but talking directly to the officers may not be the best way. If he asked for passage and was denied, then he'd have to figure out how to explain how he ended up on the ship when it left port. No, it was best to learn from the sailors, and sailors, like all men, were very talkative when they were drunk.

It was time for guile and deceit.

Kyven tracked down men from the ship in the nearer taverns, then began. He put on a friendly face and struck up conversations with them, got them chatty, and bought them round after round of drinks. His purse emptied out quickly over the night as he plied four men from the ship with drink, and got them nice and talkative.

"I've always thought about trying out sailing," Kyven said with feigned disjunction, acting much drunker than he was, since he'd only had one tankard of ale. "What's it like on your ship?"

"Easy, easy!" one of them, Karl, laughed. "We're an Arcan runner, my friend, we ship Arcans where they're needed. We just brought up miners and farmers for the Free Territories, and we're taking back breeders for the Arcan breedpens in Alamar."

"Strange lot, those breeders," the smallest of them laughed. "Why do they breed what you can catch in the wild with enough patience?"

"Cause bred Arcans are smarter than wild ones," the third sailor snorted. "Remember when we ran that pack of wild Arcans to Cheston? Shee-boy, what a mess! Blood everywhere. It took us a week to clean out the pens!"

"Wha-what happened?" Kyven asked.

"Why, wild Arcans'll fight each other, friend," the fourth man said urbanely. "Makes for a bit of sport, usually, but it's not quite so much fun when you have to clean up after them."

"What would they want wild Arcans for in Cheston?" Kyven asked.

"The Pens, boy, the Pens," Karl grinned. "Cheston's where the Pens are!"

"What is that?"

"An Arcan fighting arena," the urbane one answered. "They find big, wild Arcans and have them fight each other for the audience."

"That doesn't sound like anything I'd ever watch," Kyven said honestly. "Then again, I don't much see the sport in dogfighting or cockfighting either."

"You're just a softie, friend," the tall one grinned at him.

"So, anyway, I want to learn sailing, and you guys are—are my friends," he hiccupped, "mebbe you can put a word in for me on a ship somewhere!"

"Too bad you can't crew with us, mate," the urbane one sighed. "But we're overmanned as it is. Usually Demond isn't too picky about his crew. After all, look at these three," he snorted, motioning at the other three, which made them laugh.

"Maybe—Maybe I could buy passage on your ship and just watch you guys and learn, then try to get hired on with another ship—ship—ship when we get there."

"Demond won't take boarders because of the Arcans," the urbane one told him. "He used to, but his passenger wandered down into the hold and got himself killed by the Arcans. Gods, Demond had a fit. Killed the whole cage of 'em and we all lost money cause we didn't deliver the quota," he growled.

"Bad luck, friend," Kyven slurred.

As the four men, Kyven dropped his head on the table and feigned being passed out, but he actually was thinking furiously. Alright, so, he couldn't buy passage, and the ship was overmanned. That meant that he wouldn't be able to get hired on as a deckhand.

How was he to get on the ship, if the captain wouldn't take passengers, and the ship already had a full crew?

Simple. Remove the competition. The captain would hire new deckhands if he didn't have enough men to crew his ship when it came time to sail.

And that was the test, he saw. The fox was teaching him about the cruelties of the world. Well, in this case, he wouldn't be learning about the cruelty, he would be dishing it out. There were too many men in his way for him to get on that ship, so the only choice he had was to get rid of the men standing in his path to his objective.

By any means necessary.

He understood her lesson. Sometimes, ruthlessness was required to accomplish a goal, and now he had to prove that he could be ruthless. He had to either kill or incapacitate enough men to force the captain to hire new hands.

Did he feel remorseful about it? Actually, not particularly. Months of killing for his food, and the lessons he'd already learned, taught him that death was sometimes the result of conflict, be it the conflict of hunter and hunted or the conflict of evil and innocence. These men were basically slavers, and showed little remorse or pity for the Arcans they transported. He found he would have little trouble giving to them what they gave to others.

He could kill them.

And he would have to start with the four men at his table. They'd talked to him, and if they

remembered that he said he wanted to crew their ship, they might point fingers at him when their crewmates started to die.

And so, for the second time in his life, he sat there and plotted out premeditated murder. It wasn't the angry reaction to the brutality of the woman Bella, it was a cold, calculated plan to eliminate enough men to allow him to accomplish the task which his totem had given him.

That was the lesson. To be able to act in an evil manner if it was necessary, but not lose sight of the goal, and not lose his humanity. The fox said that life was cruel, and that sometimes, there was no correct answer that made everything have a happy ending. Well, this was one of those times. In order for him to accomplish his objective, he had to kill.

So be it.

Kyven was an intelligent man. He understood his objective, and hoped that he did the fox proud in his approach to the problem.

The problem was that there were too many men manning the ship he needed to board, and he could board it no way other than to serve as a crewman. The solution was to eliminate them so the captain had to hire more men to crew his ship, and wouldn't necessarily be picky.

The objective was simple enough, but the execution of that plan was what was both simple yet cunning. Kyven would have to compete with men who had experience when the captain went looking for new crewmen to man the ship, but he knew that sailors were superstitious men, so he engaged in a war on terror. The deaths of the men themselves would be easy enough to do, but he knew that he had to kill as many as he could on the first night, for they'd be too afraid to leave the ship once they realized how many of them had died. The simple yet cunning part of his plan was to draw the fleur-de-lis in blood on the body of each victim. The fleur-de-lis was the symbol of Nurys, the city at the mouth of the Great River far southwest of where they were, which was an old, bitter rival of Flaur. By making the attacks look like some old bitter feud between Flaur and Nurys, it would frighten men from wanting to hire on to the ship—or any Flauren ship in port, for that matter—fearing that they'd be next. By scaring the sailors away from Flauren ships, Kyven greatly increased his chances of getting on board that clipper.

It was simple. It was devious.

It was effective.

That night, under cover of darkness and using spirit sight to stalk the men, Kyven killed twelve of the ship's crew, starting with the four men he'd used to get information. He simply ambushed them after they left the tavern and entered a stretch of street where he knew there was nobody near or looking—easy to see since he could see through walls—and killed them, one by one, with his throwing daggers. They didn't even notice when the tallest one dropped dead to the cobblestones. The other two did notice when the short one toppled over, but they joked that he was too much of a lightweight to hold his grog. When the third one went down with a dagger through his eye, the last one gasped and staggered off in a drunken version of a run, but he barely got ten paces before a dagger in the back of his neck dropped him like a poleaxed cow.

And now Kyven was a mass murderer. But it had to be done.

He moved quickly, collecting his daggers, then cutting their throats and drawing the fleur-de-lis in blood on the chests of all four men, then he slinked back into the night. He tracked down eight more members of their crew over the night, since he knew all their faces, and executed them in a similar manner. He ambushed them in desolate stretches of street, when nobody was nearby, killing them with his daggers with expert throws that made death virtually instantaneous and silenced any potential screams. Two of them he caught along, but the

other eight had been in groups of two or three, moving about for mutual self defense out of habit, but not knowing that they'd been singled out for execution.

Kyven returned to his room in the morning, tired, emotionally drained, but resolute. He had killed twelve men, men he did not know, but men who stood between him and his goal. He felt... *evil* in a way, but he also had been hardened and prepared for this by the fox, who had shown him that sometimes, brutality was necessary to accomplish an important task, and that sometimes there was no happy ending for the innocent. He felt a little empty inside, feeling that he had done something beyond redemption, but that ended the instant the fox visited him. She walked in through the wall and sat down by the bed as he undressed to get some sleep, and simply nodded to him gravely. She then rose up and put her paws on his bare legs, and taught him a new spell... and that proved to him that she felt he had gained wisdom from his actions.

It was a *healing* spell! She taught him a spell that instantly eradicated diseases in the person he touched, and *it could even cure the Touch!* And he could use it on himself!

What a useful spell!

It was itself a lesson, he realized. She had told him to kill, now she was teaching him spells to cure. She was showing him the light at the end of the tunnel, and that all of her lessons wouldn't be about death.

The effect was immediate and dramatic. News of the murders spread through the entire city by sunrise, and it had the effect that Kyven intended. The Flauren ship's crew was terrified to come off the ship, as was the crews of every other Flauren vessel, and word in the taverns near the docks was that people were afraid to be next. When the ship's captain came off the ship and got up on the hawkers' platform and shouted that he had four openings on his crew, there was nothing but dark muttering and whispering.

Kyven was ready, though. He was standing on the quay leading to his ship, and stopped the man, a tall man with graying blond hair and dark, weathered skin. He had brown eyes, large and clear, and a missing front tooth. "If you're willing to take on someone who's never sailed before, I'm interested."

"Why would I do that?"

"Because I can work every man you have to death if they try to keep up with me," he replied simply. "I'm not afraid of heights, I have fast hands, I learn quickly, and I absolutely guarantee you I'm in better shape than any man in your crew."

"Be that as it may, I'm not taking on someone I have to train," he said bluntly, then filed past towards his ship.

Oh yes you will, Kyven thought simply. *When nobody will hire on with you.*

That didn't require any additional murders, thankfully, but it did take some work. That next night, since the place was in an uproar and watchmen and Loreguard were everywhere, Kyven opted to simply stir the pot. A little of his *own* blood formed fleur-de-lis painted on doors and walls around the docks kept them all in a tizzy.

By noon the second day, nobody would even set foot on the same dock as the Flauren ship. Nobody but Kyven, anyway. He again tried to talk a position out of the captain, and was again rebuffed in favor of experienced sailors.

Another night of pot stirring basically sealed the deal. The entire city was in an uproar by morning, as fleur-de-lis were found painted in blood all over the city.

It would have killed Kyven to put that much of his own blood up, but a bucket of cow's blood worked just as well.

Kyven placed himself in one of the taverns that morning, and when the captain again tried to recruit sailors, pleading with them that the ship was leaving that day and they'd be safe, no-

body took him up on it. Kyven said nothing, just looked at him as he went out, and then Kyven finished his ale, paid his last chits for it, picked up his pack, and then headed out of the inn. He didn't follow the captain, he instead went out to the dock, leaned against a post, and waited.

She was there. He looked down the dock, and she was sitting there, not five rods from him, tail wrapped sedately around her legs. She gave him a single nod, a knowing look, and then the shadows seemed to rise up from the quay and melt her into nothingness.

Clearly, she approved.

The captain returned about two hours later, storming back to the ship with only his own officer with him. He stalked past Kyven, then slowed to a stop, sighed, and turned around. "You receive no pay," he said. "We will feed you and teach you to sail, but you receive no pay."

"Done," he said simply as he picked up his pack and approached the captain, then went past him. "You won't be disappointed. I don't scare easily."

The captain gave him a strange look, but said nothing.

The name of the ship was *Veyonne*, which meant *lovely* in Flauren. It now had only seventeen men manning it, six officers, the captain, and Kyven himself.

It was a slaver. It smelled of Arcans, the smell had permeated the ship, and the ship was specifically designed for it. The deck of the clipper was perforated with multiple holes, and under it were lines of large cages on two sides of an aisle, where the Arcans were kept. The only cargo the ship could hold was food, but not much. The Arcans they'd carry would basically be starved during the trip, relying on the Arcan endurance to hold them over until they reached land. It freed up even more cargo space to carry more Arcans, and the lack of food made the Arcans much less likely to rebel, revolt or otherwise cause trouble. They would barely have more than a mouthful a day until they reached their destination... unless an Arcan died during the trip. Then they would skin and butcher the dead, keep the pelt, and feed the meat to the other Arcans.

Much of the food for Arcans almost anywhere was the Arcans themselves. Tame Arcans had eaten the flesh of their own many times in their lives, for that was what they did with the meat of the dead. It was cheap, most humans wouldn't touch it, and it was used either as food for other Arcans and pets like dogs and cats, or as fertilizer.

It was a delicate balancing act for an Arcan slaver, Kyven had been told. They had to keep them hungry, starving, to keep them weak, but not starve them so much that they'd kill and eat each other. When the Arcans were packed into the ship, they'd be carefully sorted by size, to keep large Arcans out of the same cages as small Arcans to prevent them killing each other and costing the ship money.

Kyven was given a hammock below decks, in the small hold off the Arcan pens and introduced to the crew and the officers. That introduction was quick and to the point. "This is the only man brave enough to sign on," the captain announced on deck. "He has no experience sailing. He boasts he can work any man on this ship to death," the captain said with a snort. "Be sure to show him how wrong he is."

Clearly, the captain was annoyed enough to put Kyven on a bad foot forward with the rest of the crew.

The second officer was a tall, swarthy Flauren with a very bad temper, and took to ordering Kyven around and being generally as obnoxious as possible from the onset. He was put to work sweeping out the pens to prepare them for the next load of Arcans, which Kyven performed quickly and efficiently. The second mate stormed down and gave the place a thorough inspection, and could find nothing to scream about, so he ordered Kyven up to the deck

to perform any number of simple menial tasks, from coiling rope to moving water barrels. The other sailors were doing no work, lounging on the deck and basically chattering at each other in Flauren, which Kyven couldn't speak.

He ignored them. He was where the fox wanted him to be, on the ship, no doubt so he could move on to his next lesson.

Then the Arcans arrived.

There were a *lot* of them. All of them were female, of every breed Kyven had ever seen before except for skunks, brought in on long chained lines. They were like the ones Kyven had seen taken off the ship, defeated and numb, with hopeless expressions of ones who saw no other possibilities in life. They offered no resistance to the humans carrying those strange red rods, which, after Kyven dared a second of spirit sight, saw were definitely alchemical. The crystals that powered them were embedded in the bases. Chained group after group were brought in, and Kyven was tasked to help one of the sailors take one of the groups down into the hold. He followed the other sailor as the first mate had them unchained, then separated them by size and had them push them into cages, about fifteen per cage. Kyven was careful not to show any emotion or favoritism, handling them with indifference, which the first mate seemed to notice and approve of with a single nod.

He was tasked to escort another group down, then another, and then the last group, and while he was stowing the chain that had kept them all bound, he glanced their tally sheet. He couldn't read Flauren, but Flaurens used the same number symbols as they did, so he saw that they had nearly three hundred Arcans stuffed into those cages.

"You," the captain said. "Are the lowest man on the ship, so these animals are *your* duty," he said. "In addition to your normal duties, you will clean their cages and water them twice a day. You said you could work my men to death, so let's see how much you enjoy that boast," he said with a cold smile.

"As you command, captain," he answered calmly. "I don't boast or brag, sir. I told you what I'm capable of doing, and I'll back up my words. I'll take any man you put up against me, and I'll run him into the ground. If he dies, that's your fault."

"I'm almost willing to take you up on that bet, Freeland," the first mate laughed.

"I'll keep this hold as clean as it is right now, sir," Kyven told them simply. "Because that's what you hired me to do."

The captain gave him a look, then spoke to his first mate and left.

"The cleaning supplies are hanging on the far wall," the first mate told him. "How you handle them when you clean the cages is your affair, but you must clean the cages at least once a day. They get watered twice a day, at sunrise and at sunset. The water for them is in the hold at the far end of the cages. That water has to last them until we reach Chedon to resupply, which is six days. Stretch it however you see fit."

Kyven nodded, and the man headed for the stairs. "Oh, and one more thing. Usually the man in charge of the Arcans is docked for every Arcan that dies on the trip. But, since you're not being paid, I'm sure the captain will probably give you one lash for every one that dies."

"If you want them alive, they'll stay alive," he said simply.

"Take a few minutes to take stock of them. Show them who's boss," the first mate chuckled. "Then come up on deck."

"Aye, sir," Kyven answered. The first mate went up, and Kyven immediately wrapped his eyes so the Arcans couldn't see him use spirit sight. He knew they were listening, he knew they were probably watching from the open deck above, so he knew he had to be careful here. "My name is Kyven," he called loudly across the hold, which made more that a few of the Arcans look at him. "I will be responsible for you during this journey." He began to walk

down the center of the aisle, and more than a few of them—as well as a few sailors above—realized that he was blind with the leather covering his eyes. “I’m sure you’re wondering what I’m doing, walking down here with my eyes covered,” he said, his eyes darting back and forth to watch them, to see which ones were truly cowed and which ones thought to take a swipe at him. “It’s to prove a point. I’m not afraid of you,” he told them bluntly. “When I bring you water and clean your cages, I will come into your cages with you. I will not chain you up or beat you, because I believe in a simple rule. I will treat you fairly, and you will treat me fairly.” He reached the end of the cages, then turned around and walked back up the other way. One large wolf Arcan reached her arm out through the cages as he approached, then reached for one of his daggers on his belt. The wolf cried out in pain and recoiled, blood splattering the floor as she fell back, and Kyven calmly shook the blood off his dagger and resheathed it.

“Now then. You will receive water twice a day, at sunrise and sunset,” he said calmly. “I will clean your cages twice a day, as I can when not performing my other duties. If you feel sick, let me know. If you get hurt, let me know. I will—”

He stopped. A very young cat in the cage facing him, she looked *much* different than the other Arcans to his spirit sight. She was... brighter. Much more distinct, much sharper.

He understood, everything. This Arcan was a *Shaman*. The fox had put him here because she was a Shaman, and now he understood his task.

That Shaman could not reach her destination. He had to save her. He had to get her to the other Shaman.

That was his task.

He closed his eyes to the spirits and removed the blindfold, then moved on. “I will treat you as you treat me,” he told them, going to the cleaning supplies and finding an old rag. He tore off a piece of it, picked up the keys, and went back down the line. He came to the cage holding larger Arcans, including the wolf that tried to steal his dagger, and he unlocked the door. They all cowered from him in the back of the cage when he opened it and came in, including the wolf. He went right up to her and grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, then dragged her into the middle of the cage. She whimpered and began to pant in fear when he grabbed her wrist and yanked her arm out roughly, but then she gave him a surprised look when he knelt down beside her and began to wrap the rag around the gash he put in her arm.

“You may not like me, but I’m not here by choice any more than you are,” he told her calmly. “Be fair to me, and I’ll be fair to you. When you leave this ship, you may be hungry, but you will be alive and well, so long as you behave. Do you understand?”

She hesitated, looking at him with fearful amber eyes, then nodded.

“Good. Now rest, all of you,” he called to them as he went back out and locked the door.

Kyven’s little speech and stunt had had its intended effect on both sides of the ship.

The Arcans were afraid of him, and a little awed by him. He heard them whispering when they thought he was out of earshot, how he’d known the wolf was reaching for him even with the blindfold, and that he was no one that they’d better upset. His absolute fearlessness around them just reinforced that, for he was true to his word. The first time he came to clean their cages, just before sunset, he opened the cage, went in and left the door open, and then proceeded to sweep and mop the grilled floor of what didn’t fall through into the bilge below. They all stayed against the walls, away from him, moving as he cleaned from the back to the front, but not one of them dared to go out that door, not even without them wearing collars. They were afraid of his retaliation should they disobey him. He cleaned each cage, leaving each door open almost as a taunt, then *allowed* them to leave their cages for a little exercise as he stood by the stairs leading to the deck, watching them, cage by cage. After ex-

ercise, he went to the water barrels and took stock, then saw that each Arcan would get little more than a single cup if he wanted to stretch it out for six days. He determined the best way to ration it, then brought the Arcans out one cage at a time and had them line up by the water barrel, then gave them their cup of water and sent them back to the cage. Once they were all watered, he went up on deck and exercised.

And that was the other half of it. The sailors were *very* nervous around him. They must have thought he was an easy mark, someone to harass and aggravate during the trip, but his walk down the aisle with the blindfold and his fast reaction with his dagger made them take note that though he was young and was not a sailor, he had fast reflexes and he was very alert, and he couldn’t be snuck up upon. He was not a man to try to blindside. And then, as the men reclined on sailcloth and rope bundles on the deck drinking rum and playing dice, they watched him exercise and saw that he had *not* been joking.

Kyven’s exercises demonstrated to the men that Kyven was every bit as tough and strong as he hinted. He carried very heavy weights around the deck. He used the rigging to do chin-ups. He ran in circles around the deck well into the night, running at a very fast sprint so it would tire him out, but doing it for a period of time that astounded the sailors.

It was a message to them. That, combined with what they’d seen him do in the hold, told them *do not mess with me*.

Once he had everyone firmly in hand, he considered the problem the fox gave him. Kyven had another Shaman on board, one that didn’t know she was a Shaman, because she was barely more than an adolescent. He had to save her. But, the question was, how to go about that. He saw several options. One, he could pretend an interest in her and buy her, but he had no money, which would require him to steal it from the other sailors. He could kill off the rest of the crew and ground the ship and free all the Arcans, which was an option. He certainly had no love for any of them. He could smuggle her off the ship when they made port; that actually had the best chance of success. But the captain didn’t trust him, often watched him like a hawk at all times, even when he was watering the Arcans and cleaning their cages. The only other option he could really see was going overboard with her when they reached the Cape of Hope, where the sailors all said they’d come relatively close to land. But that was iffy at best, because though he was sure he could swim it, he didn’t know if she could. Kyven’s exceptional conditioning would let him swim literally all day... and he had the feeling that the captain was aware of that fact.

But he certainly gave the captain no overt reason to hate or fear him. That first day, he did exactly what he was told quickly and efficiently. He only spoke when asked a question, and he was quick to offer assistance to any other sailor. There was a *creepiness* about him that unnerved the others because of his silence and his physical conditioning, but he did his job.

That basically all went out the window late that night. Kyven still had trouble sleeping at night, he wasn’t entirely comfortable sleeping around strangers, and wasn’t used to sleeping in a hammock, so he woke up often in the night. During one of those waking periods, he heard very faint, muffled cries, and immediately wrapped his blindfold and opened his eyes to the spirits. That allowed him to see everywhere on the ship. He looked and saw the few men working the dogwatch up on deck, the captain and officers asleep in the cabins, and a look out towards the hold showed him the masses of Arcans in their cages, though he couldn’t see past the first cage. Then he saw two sailors come out into the central aisle, dragging one of the Arcans out by the hair.

Oh *hell* no.

He was up and darting down the companionway separating the small crew room from the main hold on bare feet, and the picture became more clear. The female Arcans watched on

from the cages as the two sailor struck the Arcan they'd picked out, which caused her to stop struggling, and the other one grabbed her hands and pulled them up over her head. The other one climbed up on top of her.

Images of the girl killed by the Loreguard swirled in his mind, causing him to react with more force than was probably tactful. He charged into the hold on silent feet, unnoticed by the two men, but they sure as hell noticed him when the metal haft of his shockrod slammed into the temple of the man holding the Arcan by the hands, sending him crashing against the bars of the cage and dropping to the deck, screaming in pain and kicking his feet against the deck. The other one gasped and rolled off the Arcan and scrambled back, coming up with something in his hand that Kyven couldn't see because it was non-living. "Oi, what the fuck, man?" he demanded fearfully, then he took several steps back when Kyven leveled the shockrod's tip at him.

"These Arcans are *my* responsibility," Kyven said in a low, dangerous voice. "You will not beat them or abuse them unless *I* give you permission. That includes fucking them. If you want a piece, you talk to *me*, you don't come down here and drag them out of the cages and beat them into submission. Is that abundantly clear?"

"Listen, puppy, you ain't got the right to—"

The man jumped when a lance of lightning blasted across the hold and hit the wall behind him, going between his legs. The man swallowed when Kyven raised the shockrod just slightly, aiming it right at the man's genitals. "I said, *is that clear?*" he asked intensely.

The man's eyes widened. "I—It's clear," he said fearfully.

"Take that man to the doctor and get out of the pen," Kyven commanded. "And the next time I catch you in here when you have no reason to be, I'll feed you to them."

The man put whatever it was in his hand away, then circled wide of Kyven, collected up his companion, and helped him back down the companionway. Kyven holstered the rod and closed his eyes to the spirits, then reached up and untied his blindfold. He went over to the Arcan, a small mink Arcan, who was laying limply on the deck, her breathing fast and shallow. She hand her paws over her face fearfully, but she offered no resistance when Kyven pulled her arm away. Her cheek was already swelling up, and there was a little blood oozing out of her mouth. He urged her to open her mouth, and saw that she'd bitten her tongue enough to draw blood. "Looks like nothing that won't heal," he told her. "Alright?"

She nodded fearfully.

"Alright then, back in the cage with you," he ordered. He looked and saw that the key was still in the door. He'd think that one of them might try to take it, but then again, this was a ship at sea... where would they go? Trying to escape was basically impossible. These men had no care for their lives. They'd slaughter any of them that showed any resistance.

Kyven took the key, locked the cage, then went back to the sleeping quarters. He knew he'd poisoned any friendships with any of them by now, so it was time to make certain declarations. He picked up his pack, then moved into the pen. He spread his bedroll in the corner, sheltered from the open ceiling, and pocketed the key rather than hang it back up, to keep the men out of the pens as much to keep the Arcans in them.

As he expected, the captain came raging into the pen within minutes of the two sailors leaving. He had two of his officers with him, one of them carrying a pistol in his belt, and they took up a position at the only way out of the pens. "What in the bloody hell is going on?" the captain demanded.

"You told me to take care of the Arcans, sir. I'm just doing my job. Two men had dragged one out of the cage, and I was afraid they might kill it. I don't think getting them to Alamar dead is the plan, sir."

"I think you *far* overstep your authority, rookie," the captain said heatedly.

"Not at all, sir. The first mate told me that them reaching their destination alive and unharmed was my responsibility. I'm only doing what I was told to do. I had no problem with the other men enjoying themselves with the Arcan, until they started beating it. I was afraid they might kill it, so I had to intervene. I called out in warning but they didn't respond, so I had to resort to force. I was doing nothing more than protecting the ship's profit."

The captain turned to the first mate and chattered at him in Flauren, which made the man flush slightly and reply in a slightly embarrassed voice.

"I do not allow brawling aboard my ship," the captain told him. "Touch another man, and I'll have you flogged. Is that clear?"

"Abundantly clear, sir."

"Give me the shockrod and your daggers," he said, holding out his hand.

Without hesitation, Kyven pulled his fake shockrod and his five daggers and offered them to the captain. "You'll get these back when we reach Chedon," the captain told him. "Where you will be put off. You don't have the temperament to be a sailor on this ship."

"Understood, sir." He glanced up over them, where faint pink began staining the sky visible through the holes in the deck above. "It's sunrise, sir, I have to begin my duties."

"You do that," the captain said coolly, turning and walking out.

The Arcans didn't quite know what to make of him, other than he was not someone to upset. He had protected one of them from the sailors, but from what they heard, it was only because it was what he was told to do. And yet he treated them with, with *respect*, entering their cages without chaining them as he cleaned them, turning his back to them, even allowing them to move about in the hold freely after receiving their water ration. Yet he maintained steely control at all times, swiftly and forcefully breaking up a fight that erupted between a wolf and a red fox Arcan while they were allowed to exercise by hitting both combatants in the stomach, knocking the wind out of them. His booming voice ceased all commotion caused by the fight, and when he ordered them back into their cage, they complied. The sailors that watched overhead, including the captain, were a little startled that they'd obeyed him, sure that the fifteen females would attack the lone, unarmed human, but they did not. When all the Arcans were in their cage except for the two who had fought, Kyven came up to them. "Who started it?" he demanded.

They were both silent.

Kyven kicked the fox Arcan in the stomach, making her roll over on her back, then he put his boot on her neck threateningly. "I said *who started it*," he demanded. The fox gazed up at him fearfully and pointed to the wolf. The wolf pointed at the fox. "One of you is lying," he said dangerously. He looked to the pens, pointing at a large cougar Arcan. "Who started it?" he demanded.

"The—The wolf did," she blurted.

"In the cage," Kyven commanded the fox, who rolled over and literally crawled into her cage. The wolf slithered back on the floor, her eyes fearful, but she made no move to resist when Kyven grabbed her by the scruff of her neck, then literally dragged her down the aisle. He pushed her down to the deck on her hands and knees, pushing her face to the deck. "Don't move a muscle," he ordered as he let her go. She stayed right as she was, her butt sticking up in the air but her tail tucked against her legs as he locked the cage, then came back to her. She was panting, almost shivering, and she yelped when Kyven grabbed her tail and pulled it up. That yelp turned into a surprised howl when Kyven smacked her hard on her bottom. The howling continued as he literally spanked the Arcan, spanked her until she was crying, then he grabbed her by the scruff of her neck and dragged her back to her cage. He

hauled her in and dropped her on the floor, and she quickly crawled to the other females and tried to huddle with them, but they didn't want any part of her. "That was the *nice* warning," he shouted in an unemotional tone. "The next time one of you disobeys me, I'll drag you to the deck and let the other men take turns with you. Now behave," he called, then he left the cage, locked it, and went up on deck.

He was a pariah on deck, but that's what he expected. Nobody wanted anything to do with him, and the man he'd laid out with the shockrod had a bandage around his temples, and wouldn't stop glaring at him. It suited him just fine. He didn't *want* to get to know any of these men. He still wasn't sure how he was going to free the Shaman, but it might require him to kill these men in order to free her. He took orders from one of the officers to do menial tasks, coiling rope, then swabbing the entire deck by himself, but he did all he was told to do without complaint and he did it quickly and efficiently, outworking the other sailors. He swabbed the deck from bow to stern faster than it would have taken four men, because he was focused completely on the task at hand and he didn't waste time.

Afternoon brought rain, a heavy rain that soaked the ship, but without thunder or high wind, merely rain. Kyven set the empty water barrel for the Arcans out when the rain began and let the rain refill it, and he saw the Arcans in the hold below drinking the rain that poured in through the grills of the deck above, soaking their fur but also slaking their building thirst. Kyven napped through the late afternoon, then bent to the much easier tasks of cleaning the cages and watering the Arcans, for the rain had done much of the work, and had also helped clear out the building smell of waste coming from the cesspool bilge below them. The rain flushed the waste out through sloughways on the sides of the ship, leaving the ship smelling better than normal.

Kyven was alert that night. He wasn't entirely sure that the man he attacked was going to let it go, and they were afraid to try anything when he was on deck and in sight of the officers. He wasn't liked, but the captain seemed to at least accept his reasoning for attacking another crewman, and he was still doing his job if only because the ship was undermanned. He tied his blindfold to hide his eyes, moved his bedroll and pack to the far side so anyone coming in would have to come down the aisle to get them, hung his pack high on the wall, tied a length of old sailcloth over the open area where the water barrels were kept to keep those above from being able to see, then sat down on the water barrels. That allowed him to see quite easily all the way across the pens, for the Arcans were all laying down, and also allowed him to keep track of every man on the ship without the Arcans interfering with his line of sight. The Arcans that were awake kept glancing at him in the darkness and whispering to each other. From what he could hear, they knew that Kyven was in trouble with the rest of the ship's crew, he was protecting himself from them, and they weren't quite sure what to do about it.

Hmm. Perhaps that was the answer.

He considered it the rest of the night, a night passed in quiet calmness. Perhaps killing the crew at sea *was* the best way to go about it. He had no idea how to sail, but there was one thing for sure; he'd not be wanting for help trying. He wasn't alone on this ship. He had nearly three hundred Arcans here with him, who would probably help him. Surely they could figure it out enough to turn the ship back towards land and run it aground, then swim to shore and make a run for it.

There were too many of them for him to try to kill by himself. If someone raised an alarm, they'd have a huge advantage. He could probably kill quite a few of the crew as they slept using magic, but picking off the men on dog watch and the officers wouldn't be quite as easy. He'd get one or two of them, but then they'd know what was going on, and he'd have to kill men who would fight back... and Kyven wasn't the only man that knew how to throw

a knife. He'd have to deal with men who had muskets or alchemical weaponry.

Again, the answer stared him in the face. The Arcans could help him take the ship.

The captain was pacing up on deck. The captain didn't trust him, and Kyven was sure that even now, the man was pondering him, and might be worried that he seemed to have so much control over the Arcans. Maybe *he* was considering the same thing. They put him down here because it was the worst job on the ship, but he made the job much easier with his control over them. No doubt other men chained the Arcans or moved them from cell to cell when they cleaned, used a whip or rod when dealing with them, but Kyven did not. He controlled them completely just by giving them orders, and they were too afraid of him to even try anything. But then again, he saw them for what they were, defeated, spineless creatures who had been slaves for so long that they didn't know anything else, or were so afraid they wouldn't dare do anything. They would do what they were told because it was all they had ever known, and he knew it. By showing them no fear, he cowed them, made them afraid of him, and they were slaves to that fear just as much as they were slaves to the men who controlled them. There were *three hundred* of them and only one of him, and yet they were so broken, so afraid, that they didn't dare try to revolt. In their eyes, they saw no reason for it. All that would happen was that they would die, either killed by the crew or starving to death on a ship they didn't know how to work.

That was an important lesson in life, he realized. He could not be controlled by fear. Else he would become like them.

The next day, he took careful note of what was going on, without looking like it. As he swabbed the deck, he watched the sailors and saw how they brought the sails down, saw how they turned them to catch the wind. That was what he'd have to do. Drop the sails, then turn them to catch the wind so they'd go. He saw how the wheel worked when he swabbed the deck up there, how one had to turn it left to go right and right to go left. He did everything he was told, but he also got a basic idea of how the ship worked from it, enough to feel confident that he could move the ship if it was necessary. He saw how the men moved through the rigging, how they kept the ship going, he saw everything he needed to know in order to move the ship.

By sunset, he knew he had everything he needed, but he also knew that they were watching him like a hawk. Men had been keeping an eye on him all day, men armed with pistols, and there was a man on dogwatch sitting in the low rigging looking down into the hold, watching him as he cleaned the cages and then gave the Arcans their evening water. He treated them no differently than any other day, moving about with confident silence as he cleaned their cages, then brought them out for their water and gave them a few moments to move about outside the cramped confines of their cages. There were no fights this time, the females conducting themselves with quiet propriety as they stretched and enjoyed a few moments of extra space and the ability to move around without stepping on someone else's foot.

He then stripped nude, unlocked one of the cages, and grabbed a coyote Arcan from the cage, one that he knew could talk. He pulled her out, locked the cage behind her, and dragged her over to his bedroll. He threw her down on it, on her back, and climbed on top of her. She struggled only feebly, until he grabbed her hands and pinned them to the deck, pressing his weight down on her. She didn't excite him at all, so when he started thrusting his hips against her, there was nothing happening but a flaccid penis flopping against her crotch... but that couldn't be seen by the man watching from the deck above. To his eyes, their dangerous new crewman was availing himself of the available female Arcans.

He leaned down close to the coyote's head. "I'm from the Masked," he whispered to her as he continued to fake sex with her. "Tomorrow night, after I give you water, I will not lock

any of your cages. But I need you to stay inside them. When I leave the hold in the night, wait for about five minutes, then I need some of you to make a commotion *without leaving your cage* that takes the attention of the men who watch us from the deck. I need a distraction.”

“Wh–What are you going to do?” she asked in a whisper.

“Kill the crew and take over the ship,” he answered. “If you can hold the attention of the men on the dogwatch, I can get most of them. Even if I fail, you’ll be unlocked and there won’t be enough of them to stop you from taking over the ship yourselves. Do you understand?”

“I understand. We stay in our cages, but a few minutes after you leave the pens, we make a lot of noise to keep the crew’s attention on us.”

“Right. When you see me on the deck overhead, *then* come out of your cages. That’s when I may need you.”

“Why are you freeing us?”

“I’m here for only one. Someone important to the Masked. But I’ll free all of you, so you can do as you will. Try to run for freedom, let yourself get captured, whatever you want to do. I can’t help all of you, but I will give you a choice to do what you will. Do you understand?”

“I understand.”

“Good. Spread the word among the others when I put you back in the cage,” he said, faking an orgasm, pressing his hips against her, and actually feeling an Arcan vagina pressing up against his penis... and it truly did feel like a human. But that still didn’t really do anything for him, because he felt the fur on her legs and belly against his skin, and her tail kept swishing against his knees. He stayed on top of her for a moment, then climbed up onto his knees and grabbed her by the scruff of the neck. He climbed up and dragged her back to the cages, unlocked it, then pushed her in. She fell in with the others, who had been watching the whole thing, and she immediately started whispering urgently with them as Kyven got dressed.

The plan was set. Now came the waiting.

Strangely enough, the word of Kyven’s seeming abuse of the Arcans he protected seemed to change the crew’s opinion of him. The first one to talk to him, while he was swabbing the deck, was a short, wizened sailor with his front teeth missing. “Figured you were one of them there Arcan lovers,” the man snorted in laughter. “Guess you really are!”

“I do my job. No more, no less,” Kyven replied simply, then deliberately turned his back on the sailor.

That was a repeat of many episodes through the day, as Kyven did the chores the officers set for him, including his first assigned trip into the rigging along with some of the other sailors. His demeanor didn’t change among the men, for he was still silent and reserved, talked only when directly asked a question, but the men didn’t glare at him quite so much. The only thing close to socializing he did was to get challenged to a game of posts, which he squelched almost immediately by telling them that it was time for him to care for the Arcans. “Come on, rookie, one set!” a sailor laughed.

Kyven took the three knives he was offered, weighed them with the briefest of holds, then sank all three into the north twelve ring.

“One set,” he said simply, walking past them.

“Where did you learn that?” one man laughed.

“I was a crystalcutter’s apprentice. If you can’t do that, you won’t make it as a cutter,” he answered as he moved to the stairs leading to the hold.

There was tense quiet in the hold when Kyven appeared. He did not break his habit, getting

the cleaning bucket and mop and broom, then coming down to the first cage and unlocking it. The females all looked at him speculatively as they stayed out of his way, and then they seemed to gasp and sigh when he locked the door when he was done.

Silly females, they didn’t pay much attention.

After cleaning each cage, he then pulled out the water barrels and began giving them water. He started with the first cage, bringing them out, giving them water, and letting them walk around for a couple of moments, then he herded them back into their cage. They watched with fearful eyes as he took out his key, then locked the door, then fifteen sets of ears picked up when they heard the lock click *again*, which was clearly *unlocking* the door. He looked into the cage with steady eyes, nodded almost imperceptibly, then put his finger to his lips to remind them to be quiet surreptitiously before scratching his nose. He then turned around and opened the cage on the other side, and repeated the procedure.

Once everyone had water, it was very quiet and very tense in the pens. Their doors were all unlocked, and they knew it. They could, at that moment, boil out of their cages and overwhelm the small number of men on the ship, and some of them knew it, but their fear held them in check. They had been slaves all their lives, such thoughts literally beaten out of them, leaving behind obedient, compliant servants that did what they were told.

Or so he’d thought.

Looking at them as he walked down the aisle, he could see it in their faces, even the gray cat that was the Shaman. Some of them were *excited*. After spending their whole lives as slaves, they were seeing a realistic chance that they might be free, if only for a short time. Given that they were all uncollared and there was a hell of a lot of settled land between them and the wild forests of the foothills and mountains, the odds were all of them would be captured by someone and would again become slaves. But they’d have the *chance*.

Not all of them felt that way. Some of them were huddled in the backs of their cages, terrified of what they knew was coming. Those were the true slaves. Those were the ones that were so broken that all they knew and all they *wanted* was to serve, to be told what to do, to *be* slaves. He honestly pitied them. They would never make it on their own; odds were, when Kyven ran the ship aground, they’d all just sit on the beach and wait for humans to come collect them, at least until hunger drove them to finding something to eat.

He sat on the water barrel, and they all watched him. But he just gave them all a calm look, then he put his hands behind his head and leaned against the wall and simply waited.

He already had a plan for this. He could kill all the sleeping men using magic without any real trouble. Then the Arcans would create a diversion, and he would be able to kill several more on deck. By then, they’ll realize what was happening and either try to kill him or barricade themselves... but either way worked for him. It was dark out, and after he got rid of the lamps up on deck, he’d have an advantage in the dark.

He tied on his blindfold over his eyes and laid down on his bedroll and took a short, light nap, then awoke couple of hours later, well into the night. He opened his eyes to the spirits as he stood up, then surveyed the ship.

The females were all watching him intently, but they were laying down and out of his line of sight. The daywatch men were in their bunks, either asleep or not moving around. They were all seated around something, probably a table. There were five men above on deck serving the dogwatch, four crewmen and an officer. One man was at the wheel, one man was watching him, sitting on something near the grill, one man was in the crow’s nest looking for other ships, and one man was standing with the officer near the wheel on the wheeldeck. The other five officers were all in the captain’s quarters in the back, playing cards or some game from the looks of it. Kyven took stock of every crystal he could see on the ship, marking

each one as an alchemical device. There were a few in the crew quarters, but quite a few up in the officer's quarters, as well as the lamps up on deck and a large crystal in what he knew was a box up there over the grill, probably some kind of last-ditch control device in case the Arcans revolted.

That was priority.

They had one man watching him up there, but they always did. He couldn't help that, though. He got up and made a motion of pushing his blindfold up, but in actuality did not, then he walked down the center aisle and towards the crew quarters.

It was time to begin.

He figured he had three minutes before the man watching him realized he went to the crew quarters and reported that to the officer. They still didn't trust him, and they'd react. But, they all believed that he was unarmed, so that was a major advantage for him.

He stopped in the entryway of the crew quarters, where hammocks hung in columns against the bulkhead on one side and the wall on the other, split into three major sections. Men were sleeping in the hammocks, all of them still.

He did not hesitate.

He used the spell that the fox had taught him. He imagined the spell as the fox had instructed, a very wide cone of blasting, withering cold that erupt from his outstretched hand. He then raised his hand and pointed it at the largest group of men, and then reached into the spirit world and beseeched the shadow fox to grant him the power to cast the spell.

The effect was instantaneous, dramatic, and rather ghastly. A pale cone of shimmering light blasted forth from his hand, and everything that it hit frosted over almost instantly, though he couldn't see that. He felt a wave of bitter cold wash over his face and arms as the spell super-chilled the air around the area of effect, but what he felt was a pale shadow of what the men caught within the effect felt. They were rimed over in frost as half their bodies facing the effect of the cone was literally frozen solid. The light of their bodies flared, and then dimmed to nothing almost immediately after the spell was over.

And it had been utterly *silent*.

What he was not prepared for was the powerful effect the spell had on him. It was much more demanding than any other spell he'd cast so far, demanding much more power, and he saw a flaw in his plan. He had to cast it twice more, and when he did, it would leave him so tired that he'd barely be able to channel another spell.

Well, it was too late now. He was committed.

He sucked in his breath, then cast it again, repeating the process, and killed five more men with the second casting. He then quickly turned and channeled it one more time when the remaining six men began to stir from the sudden cold in the room. That casting put him out of breath, his breath misting in the sudden chilling cold in the room, and almost put him down on one knee as he struggled to recover. Move, he had to move. Activity would allow him to recover some of his strength. He waved his arms and walked in a brisk circle in the cold room, walked for a long moment until he felt warmth and vitality flow back through him, and then he quickly rifled through the frigid belongings of the dead crewmen for weapons. He dug up several knives, a cutlass, and a pistol, all of which he kept. He steeled himself and stalked up the narrow stairs carefully as he watched the man that had been watching him get up and run towards the steering deck. He got to the top of the stairs, hunkered down out of their sight but easily within his own, and then waited.

The females did not disappoint. While the sentry was talking to the officer, there was a sudden commotion down below. From the sound of it, two Arcans were fighting, and there were screams from other Arcans. That drew the sentry and the officer both down to the main deck

quickly and to the grill, and they bent over to look.

Kyven reacted quickly. The main threat was the man in the crow's nest, who could see everything on deck. That man too was bending over to look, and that proved to be his fatal mistake. Kyven channeled lightning and sent it blasting up the mast, through the rigging, and slamming into the man's forehead, killing him instantly. The brilliant flash of light and thunderclap startled the four remaining men, and that thunder would alert the officers in the cabins to the stern, so Kyven went around the forecastle stairs and slinked into the shadows by a series of lashed barrels, taking a moment to try to recover. He was getting tired, but he was in no position to stop.

The captain's voice boomed in Fl Lauren as he came racing out of the sterncastle, but then Kyven heard the shouting and the rattling of cage doors as the Arcans all boiled out of their cages and started up out of the hold. There was a great deal of chaos as the captain shouted orders, and a man ran for the stairs leading to the crew quarters. Kyven threw even as he ran, and the crewman only gave out a shuddering gasp as he collapsed to the deck with a dagger in his neck. Two officers, the last crewman, and the captain himself ran to that box, intending to unleash whatever it was in there that would stop the Arcans, and Kyven couldn't believe his luck. They were grouping up for him!

He was in range. He slid to a stop and channeled the spell one more time, just as the captain spotted him and barked in alarm, his hand going for his pistol. Kyven unleashed the blasting cone of deadly cold even as the captain leveled the pistol at him, freezing their flesh and freezing the breath in their lungs. The captain's hand cramped as it was frozen by the spell, which caused his pistol to fire. Kyven felt the air rush over his left side of his head as the shot whizzed by his ear, almost frighteningly close. But the light of their four bodies faded from his eyes, showing him that his attack had killed them all in one hit.

There was only four left, but Kyven was down on one knee, panting heavily. That spell was almost crushing in its demands on him, and he fought a moment of almost disorienting weariness, something he hadn't felt since he'd done his training... but he couldn't stay still. There was still four men left, the steersman and three officers, and those officers now were carrying crystal-powered devices, he could see. They were arming up and preparing to hold the sterncastle.

Then the Arcans started boiling out from the hold.

"The steering deck! Up there!" Kyven managed to shout as he stood and pointed. He forced himself to move, albeit shakily, as the most willing to fight charged up the stairs of the sterncastle. The steersman up there gave a startled call, and then it turned into an agonized shriek that was cut brutally short as the Arcans attacked him.

He forced himself to move. He could see the men where the Arcans couldn't, so he wanted to be in a position where he could try to kill them with a minimum of danger. If they charged the sterncastle cabins, quite a few of them would die trying to get at those men. The three of them were holed up in the captain's cabin. He could probably take them all using guile, but it wouldn't work if the Arcans charged in like rampaging beasts. He situated himself on the deck near the companionway leading to the captain's quarters, shivering from the effort but marshalling his strength for one more spell, one more very demanding spell.

He took a moment to take stock of the situation. He'd just unleashed three hundred Arcans on a ship with no supervision, for when he cast this last spell, it would wipe him out. If he didn't do something, there was no telling what chaos he'd find when he woke up, from the ship being on fire to them killing each other. He needed to make some quick decisions and just hope that things worked out for the best. He climbed up onto the sterncastle to the steering deck, and he shouted as loudly as he could to get their attention. "Listen! Listen to me!"

he shouted at the females, who slowly stopped. "Everyone sit down right now!" he boomed.

They all sat in eerie unison.

"There's still three more of them left, but I'm going to take care of them," he called to them. "It may take a while, and I'll have to rest afterward. When I do, they'll be no one to give you orders, so listen. I want all of you to just *stay calm*," he said intensely. "No fighting among yourselves, do you understand? And I know you're all hungry, but there's not enough food for us all, so *nobody* eats. Not even me," he declared. "I won't make you go hungry without going hungry myself. We'll wait until we get back to shore before we figure out what to do about food. So, this is what we will do. All of you will stay calm, you will not fight, and you will *not touch anything*. If you break the boat, then we'll never get back to shore. So don't touch anything. Just stay up here on deck or down in the pens. No exploring, no climbing up the ropes, and *no fighting*. Is that understood?"

They all replied that they did.

"Good. I know you're hungry, and I know you're going to be hungry, and I'm sorry. We'll figure something out. There's water in those casks right there if anyone's thirsty," he called, pointing to the water barrels stashed by the port rail. "There's also the water in the barrels down in the pens if that runs out. But again, *no fighting*. If I wake up and find you've been fighting with each other, you'll regret it."

He felt ready enough. He took a few cleansing breaths, then climbed down and grabbed the two largest of the females by the arms and dragged them to the companionway. "You two," he told them, "will guard this passageway. Nobody except me goes past you. You two *do have permission* to fight if the others try to go down here, to make them stay out of the passageway. Do you understand?"

They nodded to him.

"And you don't leave this place, no matter what you hear. If it comes down to a fight with the other humans, let *me* deal with it. You won't interfere. Understand?"

They nodded again.

"Now, if I fail and the three humans come out into this passage, you may attack them *only* if they go past this line," he said, pointing at the threshold between the deck and the passageway. "You must make them come out on deck before you attack them. Understand?"

The both nodded.

"If I kill them, I'll try to let you know, but I'll have to sleep afterward. So, it may get very quiet in here for a while. If that happens, if you don't hear anything for a while, *do nothing*. Just wait. Understood?"

"Yes," one said as the other nodded.

"But, if you don't see me or hear from me by sunset tomorrow, then odds are the humans killed me. If that happens, it's up to you to try to get the ship to shore. If that happens, you two are in charge of the boat, and tell the other females what to do. Understand?"

"We will wait," the big bear Arcan told him simply.

"Just try to keep them all calm," he told the two. "If I come back out in the morning and find dead Arcans, I'm going to be very pissed. I didn't free you just so you could kill each other off."

"We'll try," the large wolf Arcan said with a nod.

Kyven nodded, then stalked into the passageway, but he heard the bear turn to the wolf and say "that must be why they call them the Masked," she noted.

The blindfold. Of course.

He tiptoed quietly down the passageway as he watched the three men. They were huddled in the captain's quarters, looking to be hunkered down behind something he couldn't see,

maybe a table or piece of furniture. The way they held their hands told him that all of them were holding things, and one of them was holding to alchemical devices from the looks of the crystals under his hands. All three of them looked very nervous, almost desperate. They knew they were basically dead men. The Arcans now controlled the ship, and they were the last three, holed up in the captain's quarters. He came up to the door and literally laid down in front of it, not wanting to risk getting shot through the door when he called out. "I'm going to open the door slowly," he shouted through it. "I'll show you my hands so you'll know I'm unarmed."

"What the fucking difference does that make?" one of them shouted back angrily.

"I just want to talk," he said. "I have a ship full of Arcans but nobody who knows how to sail. We can come to an understanding that lets you walk off this ship alive."

"Then why did you take over the bloody ship, you fucking idiot?" another called tauntingly.

"Because it was necessary," he said simply. "I couldn't let you reach port. I had orders."

"Orders from who?"

"The Mistress," he answered, rather mysteriously. "Now, I'm going to open the door and step inside. You'll see that I'm unarmed."

"Yeah, you go right ahead!" one of them said challengingly.

"The other option is you either starve or drown," he replied. "I've already told the Arcans not to enter the sterncastle for any reason. So they won't come in after you. That means you either have one of those ridiculous glorious final charges out onto the deck to try to kill as many Arcans as you can before they rip you to pieces and eat you, or you break out the back windows and swim for it. But, since the Arcans can't make the ship move, well, I guess you're going to be in for a very long swim. So, those are your choices, men. You can die in a bloody spray of gore and then be eaten, you can stay barricaded in here and starve to death, or you can drown trying to swim for shore. Take your pick of those, or you let me come in and talk, and we make a deal. I'll show you that I'm unarmed, I just want to talk."

There was a long, quiet, heated conversation between the three of them in Flauren. Kyven waited patiently, for the time only benefited him by letting him rest and recover his strength. "Strip naked," one of them finally said in Noravi. "Then come in with both hands first. And you will not take one step past the door once you close it."

"Agreed," Kyven called back. He removed his clothes, then opened the door a crack from one side just in case one of them tried to unload a pistol on him, then he put both hands through the door. "See, I have no weapons," he said, then he slowly pushed the door open and showed that he had obeyed them. With his hands up, he turned a slow circle to show he had nothing tied to his back, then he stepped into the room and closed the door, then backed up against it with his hands still up.

"Remove the blindfold too," one of them called.

"I could," he answered. "But you won't like what you see."

"What does that mean?"

"I have no eyes," he answered simply. "What you saw are alchemical devices, not real eyes. I replaced them with different eyes that let me see what normal eyes can't, but they glow as a side effect. That's why I have the blindfold on, to hide the glow."

"Take it off."

"Alright, but I warned you," he said, slowly reaching down and untying the blindfold, then pulling it off his head and dropping it to the floor. Now that he could also see with normal sight, he saw that they were barricaded behind several pieces of furniture they'd literally ripped out of the floor, as it had been nailed down. They gawked at him, but they seemed to believe his lie... because they wanted to. The truth would have been completely unbelievable

to them, so he told them simply what they would believe. "I did warn you," he said simply.

"That's how you could see!" one of them gasped.

"We're drifting here. Here's the deal, gentlemen. You command the Arcans to get the ship back to shore. When we ground the ship, the Arcans and I leave, and leave you behind along with everything on the ship. We take nothing. You keep your lives, as well as everything on the ship."

"How can we trust you?"

"You can't. But you can stand in the passageway and just shout out commands to tell the Arcans how to lower the sails and set them so we can get back to shore. You stay in the safety of the sterncastle the whole time."

They ducked back down behind the barricade and whispered among themselves for long moments. "You have a deal," one of them said, then all three of them stood up, exposing themselves for a critical yet fatal instant.

Kyven struck instantly. The point of his concentration was his upraised hand, and the cone was very wide and at a downward angle. The blast of intense, lethal cold washed over their heads and upper shoulders, freezing them almost instantly, causing them to slump to the deck. Just as quickly, their bodies shimmered and then vanished from his spirit sight.

"Like I would ever make a deal with you," Kyven said in a weary, drained voice, dropping to his hands and knees as he panted in exhaustion. His limbs trembled from the drain, but he managed to stagger back to his feet, turn and open the door. He staggered out, then fell to his knees in the passageway. "They're... dead," he managed to call before he collapsed to the deck. "You can come help me now," he called, but then he felt dizzy, and a rolling wave of blackness engulfed him and he was swept into unconsciousness.

Chapter 6

He awoke... warm.

He was tired and felt like he'd run a thousand minars in half a day, but he felt very warm. Almost like he was under a soft blanket.

It wasn't a blanket, though. It was fur.

He was laying on top of something... furry. He fluttered his eyes open and found himself laying on the open deck, and was laying huddled with several female Arcans. A cougar Arcan was the one under him, which was the warmth he felt, and a longhaired cat Arcan was partially on his legs.

What was this about? He pulled himself up and found that it was sunrise, and many of the Arcans laying on the deck, sleeping, while the rest sat or stood around the deck, talking with each other or looking out over the sea. He felt the ravenous hunger that came with wearing himself out with magic, but there was nothing that he could do about it now. He had sworn to them he would not eat, and he wouldn't break his word to them, or he'd lose his command over them. He sat up and put his hand down on a tail, which made him flinch and feel around to find a safe place to put his hand. He was still naked, but then again, so were all of them. He struggled weakly to his feet, starving to death, then went off to get of his clothes.

He saw that they had obeyed him. There were no bloodstains on the deck, no bodies of dead Arcans, no females with ugly wounds on them. There had been no fighting. They had obeyed him and stayed calm, resting through the night and simply waiting.

He came back down the passageway after getting his clothes, considering the problems. They had to eat. *He* had to eat. He'd made a promise, but he didn't count on being in this condition when he woke up. He needed to eat something, or he'd be weak and virtually help-

less. Well, there was plenty of meat on the boat, he realized. It was just human and Arcan. He wasn't about to butcher an Arcan for food, so the only alternative was the humans.

He shuddered at that thought. He didn't think he could bring himself to cannibalism... but he could use the bodies of the men in other ways, and still eat.

Arcans were not quite so picky.

He came out onto deck, and almost all the females looked at him. They all obeyed him, and for a moment, he mused that he had his own little private army. A starving army that might turn on itself and kill each other at any moment, but an army. "You Arcans," he pointed, indicating a group of ten females by the sterncastle rail. "Go get the bodies of the humans down below, in the hammocks. Bring them up to the deck. You two, go get the three bodies back in the cabin. *Do not* play with anything they're carrying. Just drag them out here and lay them on the deck. I need a climber!" he shouted. Three or four cats and a gray fox Arcan scurried up to him quickly. "Two of you climb up to the top of that mast, up to that little stand there," he said, pointing to the crow's nest. "There's a dead human up there. Bring the body back down to the deck, lay it with the others they're bringing out."

"What are we doing?" the gray fox asked.

"We're going to eat," he said simply. "I think between what the ship's carrying in normal food and the meat on the humans, there's enough for all of us to at least have a few bites."

That sent an excited twitter through all the Arcans. The females quickly moved to obey, even dragging the other bodies Kyven didn't mention out onto the grill as he sat on the steep steps up to the sterncastle's steering deck, trying to rest. "You females," he called to a group of about ten that was hovering near him. "Find the galley. It should be one of the rooms back there," he said, pointing to the sterncastle. "Bring anything that even remotely looks like food out onto the deck and lay it out so we can see exactly how much food we have. Look for small casks and barrels or bags."

They hurried off to do his bidding, and while Kyven rested, they did very well. All the humans were laid out on the deck, a few of them still frozen in sleeping poses, as the others dragged salted barrels of meat, beans, sacks of flour, even a small barrel of apples out. And what was the grand prize, two sides of beef that hadn't gone bad yet, that were strangely cold to the touch. Kept cold using alchemy, maybe? Whatever the reason, that meat significantly increased the food available, and Kyven had hope that he wouldn't die of lack of food or get killed by the Arcans for breaking his promise to them.

The frozen men were going to be a problem. They were inedible in their current state, which caused Kyven to consider the problem. They couldn't be eaten until they thawed out, and that meant that they'd all either have to wait or eat less and have two meals.

Two meals. He couldn't wait.

"Alright, listen," he said as loudly as he could. "The frozen ones can't be eaten, and that's *most* of the food, so we divide the food up into two meals. There are many mouths and only a little food, so everyone gets just a little, including me. We'll have a bigger meal when they thaw out."

"How did they get frozen?" the big bear asked him.

"An alchemical weapon," he replied. "Each of us gets a piece no bigger than this," he said, holding his thumb and finger out about half a span apart. "That should leave enough left over for a second meal after the others thaw. All I ask is save me some of the beef for my second meal. I'd really rather not eat human. You, cutting the food is your job," he said, pointing at the wolf who still wore the bandage he put on her after cutting her arm. "Remember, everyone gets just a little piece."

She nodded and pulled a knife from one of the corpses of the sailors, then knelt by one of

the unfrozen bodies. “Do you want to keep what they carry?” she asked.

“Just pile it somewhere, we’ll go through it after we get the ship moving,” he answered. “I need climbers to eat first,” he shouted. “I need them to get up into the rigging and get the sails down. So climbers eat first, and they’ll get the sails down while everyone else eats!”

It actually worked. Quite a few cats, martens, ferrets, minks, chinchillas, and the two gray foxes were given what amounted to a small mouthful of meat first, and after they ate, they gathered near the sterncastle. When enough of them were there, Kyven pointed to the rigging and explained what had to be done, describing to them what he saw the sailors doing the day before. Once they understood what they had to do, Kyven sent them up into the rigging and then ordered the largest of the Arcan females to reel in the sea anchor. Sails started unfurling in the rigging above one by one, as the climbers adeptly reached the tied sails and untied them, causing them to unfurl as the other Arcans he’d talked to used ropes to lower the booms holding their bottom, just as he’d seen the sailors do it. He went up to the wheel and took hold of it, and when females shouted that the anchors were raised, he spun the wheel to the right. He watched the sails flap in the breeze, then shouted down that they needed to turn the sails until the wind pushed at them from behind. He called up several more Arcans, and described to them how he’d seen the sailors control the sails, then set them to work to figure it out.

It was awkward. It took them three hours to puzzle out how to do it, because Kyven wasn’t entirely sure either. But it showed that at least a few of the Arcans were smart, for they figured it out. Once the system was discovered, mast by mast, they turned the sails until the wind caught them, and then the ship began to move. It also began to turn, and Kyven was impressed when one female realized it and shouted “keep turning the sails back the other way! The other way! The ship’s turning, the sails have to turn to stay in line with the wind!”

A very smart Arcan there, Kyven hadn’t taken that into account himself. The Arcans controlling the booms that rotated the sails obeyed, pulling the sails to keep them attuned to the wind, which kept the ship moving steadily to the west, back towards land. Kyven straightened them out using shadows to tell him when he was going west, with the shadows straight in front of him, then looked at the compass by the steering wheel and took note of what number it showed.

The wolf Arcan he’d delegated to feed the others came up to the steering deck with a piece of cold meat. “You eat too,” she told him, holding it up. “Humans don’t like raw food, but—”

He snatched it out of her hand and tore into it with his teeth, which actually made her laugh. “How much is left?” he asked between bites.

“The thawed meat is all gone,” she answered. “A few didn’t get to eat it, so I gave them beans instead and promised them a larger slice from the other meat when it thaws. How long until we reach the shore?”

“Good thinking, and I have no idea. Go find out how much more water we have and report back to me.”

He stayed at the wheel as he waited for his scant meal to replenish him. It did, if only a tiny bit, making him feel tired rather than totally exhausted. The wolf returned quickly. “Two barrels are full, and half a barrel more. Not much,” she frowned. “We drank too much after you freed us. We will pay for that celebration now.”

“I’ll guarantee this ship has rum or grog aboard. Find it, but don’t distribute it. I’m not sure I’m ready to try to command three hundred drunken Arcan sailors.”

She actually laughed, then hurried off to do his bidding.

He called a raccoon Arcan to the wheel and made her take hold of it. “See this compass?” he said, pointing to it. “Keep us just the way you see it there, so just hold it steady. If you do

have to adjust the ship, remember this. Turn the wheel right to make the ship go left, and turn the wheel left to make the ship go right. Understand?”

“Yes, if I want to go left, turn the wheel right, and the other way around.”

“Right. I’m going to go through the ship. Keep us heading for shore,” he told her, patting her on the shoulder.

“Yes, *captain*,” she said, giving him a sly little smile.

Damn raccoons.

Kyven was escorted by the big bear Arcan and wolf Arcan he’d set to watching the passageway the night before as they went through the ship. Kyven’s goal was to find their valuables and weapons, and also to find every alchemical device and take the crystals out of the ones he didn’t intend to use. They started in the captain’s cabin, and Kyven saw a flaw in his plan quickly when the wolf Arcan picked up a shockrod one of the human he’d killed in here had had and clearly held it as if she meant to keep it. The bear too picked up a shockrod and a pistol. “You put us in command when you aren’t there to give orders,” the bear told him calmly. “How else can we exert authority?”

“So I did,” he said simply.

It took a little doing to find their strongbox. It was hidden in the captain’s cabin, in a false floor under the bunk. It was heavily laden with chits and uncut crystals, which was how he’d found it. He had the two Arcans help him clear the barricade, emptying out the cabin of everything but the bed, then they went about the business of bringing all the valuable items and alchemical devices into the captain’s quarters. They also put all the gunpowder and firearms in there, taken from a small armory that also held a large number of alchemical devices, including those thin, whiplike red rods that the Arcans simply called *pain sticks*. He could imagine their function, given a name like that. He pulled the crystals from most of the devices so they couldn’t be used, and also found his own throwing daggers and fake shockrod in the armory, which he reclaimed.

They had quite an arsenal when they were done. Muskets, pistols, swords, daggers, and quite a few shockrods and a few firetubes, probably meant for use against enemy ships trying to grapple. They also got an item that Kyven had heard of but never seen, the mana whip. It produced a long whip-like cord made of pure magic, but the line was very hot, so but it would burn anything it hit. They were rare because they were exceedingly deadly, both to one’s enemies and also to one’s self. That searing line did not discriminate, so one false move, and the whip would sear its own user. Just the lightest touch of the line would set fire to paper or clothing and blacken flesh. On a ship, something like that would be *very* dangerous to use.

That, Kyven put into his belt. He was very nimble, had enough agility and dexterity to use the whip without killing himself, and a rare weapon like that could be *very* useful to him.

The device in the box, well, he had no idea what it did. It was a cylindrical device made out of some kind of copper alloy, but whatever it was, Kyven felt that it couldn’t be good. So he pulled the crystal out of it, and gasped when he saw it.

It used a *black* crystal. And a bloody big one.

How on earth did they get a black crystal? How much did they have to bribe some miner, cutter, or some Loremaster to get it? It was already cut, which reduced some of its value, but it was worth a good two thousand chits easy. But then again, he’d have an almost impossible time selling it, because the Loremasters would pretty damn well want to know just where he got a *cut* black crystal from.

He looked at that device and shuddered. If it used a *black* crystal, then—well, him targeting that device probably saved the lives of all the Arcans. There was little doubt in his mind that

it would have killed them all.

It frightened him enough to have the Arcans throw the device overboard. He didn't want that thing on the ship, even with the crystal removed from it.

Despite having no idea what they were doing, they managed to flounder along over the day. Changes in the wind often caused the ship to stall as the Arcans tried to figure out how to turn the sails to catch the wind, but when they did, the ship began to move again. The raccoon kept them faithfully on course, and a couple of hours after noontime, the cat in the crow's nest above shouted gleefully that she could see land.

It wasn't the only thing she saw. Not five minutes after calling that land was on the horizon, she called down that she saw another ship to the north of them. Kyven went up to the steering deck and used a viewing glass that had been in the captain's cabin to see, and saw that she was right. It was far from them, a galleon from the looks of it, and though it was moving in their general direction, it wasn't coming directly at them. It looked as if it would pass by them far to the stern.

"It looks like it's just going about its business!" Kyven shouted up to the cat. "Keep an eye on it!"

"I will, captain!" she shouted back down, continuing the little tradition the raccoon started, calling him *captain*.

The food issue was solved not long after that, thanks to the ingenuity of the bear Arcan. In a lull where the ship wasn't moving because the females were trying to reset the sails, she saw a school of huge fish at the bow, and blasted them with the shockrod. The lightning spread out when it hit the water, electrocuting quite a few of them. Then she just had the others snag them with hooks and lines and pull them up to the deck. They had to weigh a hundred pounds each, and they pulled up ten of them. "Now we can eat," the bear told him simply. Kyven nodded to the bandaged wolf, and she immediately bent to carving them up.

The bear set a mouse at the bow with a shockrod and a pair of nimble cats at the stern with hooked lines. The mouse would blast any fish she saw, and the cats would try to reel them in as the ship passed by. Kyven thought it wouldn't work very well, but he was surprised to find that it *did*. Those huge fish seemed attracted to the boat for some reason, and they would die for that curiosity. The cats, who were very agile, quickly got the hang of snaring the dead fish and hauling them up onto the boat, which ensured that everyone was going to eat more than just a few bites. The mouse completely exhausted three shockrods after an hour, but she and the cats had pulled up enough of those wide-finned blue-scaled fish to feed them all quite well. Kyven found the meat of the fish to be red and very tasty, and he ate enough to flush strength back into his body and remove the gnawing, debilitating hunger in his belly.

Land loomed nearer and nearer, and with it also came other boats. The cat pointed out small fishing boats to the north, and Kyven had the raccoon steer them to the south to avoid them. They got closer and closer to land, which made the Arcans excited and anxious, until the white sand of a beach came into view about an hour before sunset.

Perfect timing, as far as he was concerned. It would give them all a night in the darkness to get away from the ship. He went back up to the steering deck and pointed to a flat expanse of beach just to the right of their current heading. "Let's try right there," he told her. "Just run us right up until we hit ground."

"You got it, captain," the raccoon smiled, turning the wheel to the left, which would turn the ship right. Kyven went to the rail and shouted down to the others. "Listen up! I want people at the anchor chains and climbers standing ready at the masts. As soon as we hit the ground, drop the anchors so we don't slide back into the water, and then raise the sails so the wind doesn't bang us around!" he commanded. "As soon as we're aground, all of you are free to

do whatever you want!" he boomed to them. "You can make a run for it, you can wait here for the humans to come, you can do whatever you want! All of you except for *you*," he said, pointing at his gray cat, who was sitting with several other females near the mast closest to the sterncastle. "You, come up here. Yes you, the gray cat. I want to talk to you."

Kyven waited for the slender gray cat to come to him. She was very young, still a teenager by human reckoning, probably no more than fifteen. She had small breasts and narrow hips, almost looking boyish, very thin and a little bony from lack of food. Her amber eyes were wary when she came up and stood meekly before him. "You're coming with me," he told her. "You're who I was sent to rescue, cat. Do you have a name?"

"I was never given a name," she answered meekly.

"Then give yourself one," he told her.

"I... I don't know. What is a good name?"

"Whatever sounds nice to you," he shrugged. "Watch that rock right there," he told the raccoon.

"I see it, captain," she assured him.

"I always thought bitch was a pretty word, until I learned what it meant," she said honestly.

"I don't know what word makes a good name."

"Well, your fur's the color of slate, so we could call you that," the raccoon noted.

"That's not really a girl's name," Kyven chuckled.

"My mistress always just called me Whisper, because I don't talk loud."

"Then Whisper it is," Kyven told her. "At least until you find something better. Mistress? Where were you?"

"I was born on a tobacco farm. My owners sold me when I became an adult," she said quietly. "They had enough workers, and they didn't want me."

"Well, I know some people who *will* want you, very much," he told her. "People who will treat you with respect."

"Why? Why me?"

He looked right at her. "They told me you're a Shaman," he told her. "I was sent to recover you. Now that I have you, I'll take you to someone who can teach you whatever it is Shaman do."

"A *Shaman*? Me? I, I can't believe it!" she gasped.

"A Shaman! You're a Shaman!" the raccoon said with a squeal of delight, letting go of the wheel and running to the rail overlooking the deck, forcing Kyven to grab the wheel before it spun them off course. "Listen everyone! We have a *Shaman* among us!" she screamed, grabbing the young cat and dragging her to the rail. "The human said she's a Shaman! She's why he's here, he was sent to rescue her!"

He heard the Arcans all screaming in delight and clapping. Even they knew who the Shaman were, and obviously, they seemed to respect them. It became totally apparent when the wolf he put in charge of the food brought up a large stack of slices of meat from the fishes and offered it to the cat, telling her that a Shaman should never go hungry. The cat looked a bit overwhelmed, both at what she learned and how they were all treating her, and decided to just stay near Kyven as he steered them towards shore, then handed the wheel back over to the raccoon after berating her for abandoning her post.

"Sorry, I got excited," she told him with a guilty smile.

"Well, stop that," he chided. "You're doing something important."

"It's why I got sold," she shrugged. "Couldn't keep my mind on what I was doing. They figured all I was cut out for was being a breeder," she said with a little shudder. "Not much attention required to be fucked by willing males until they make you pregnant."

“Sounds like an ugly business,” Kyven said with a frown.

“A male I knew worked at a small breeder ranch outside of Riyan. The girls were kept in little rooms. Males were sent in to fuck them every day, until they were pregnant. Then they have the baby, raise it until it’s weaned, then the humans would take it away and start the cycle again. They’d sell the babies off as soon as they were weaned.”

There was a melancholy in her voice Kyven couldn’t deny. It was a ghastly business, treating Arcans like animals. Forcing them to breed like that, then taking the babies away from their mothers as if the mothers had no care for their own children. That would have been the fate of all these females. Sent to the famed breeding ranches on Alamar, where they’d be raped daily until they were pregnant, and then their babies would be taken from them as soon as they were weaned. The children would then either be sold or thrown in large communal pens, where they had to compete with each other for food even as they were beaten and trained by the handlers to be submissive and compliant to human commands. The weak and sick died, leaving only the strong and healthy... and the dead were butchered to be fed to the female breeders. It would chill Kyven’s soul to think that he might be eating one of his own dead children, yet that was the horrid reality a breeder female faced every time they put food in front of her. Arcan children weren’t worth as much as adults on the market, but they were easier to train, so it was also a common practice to buy children and train them if one had the time to invest in it, to have adults that were very loyal to their owners, rather than taking an unknown adult Arcan and not knowing how compliant they were. Many house servant Arcans for the rich had been bought as children and trained for the duty.

“Take the little victories,” Kyven told them, and himself. “When you can’t change the world, just take the little victories.”

“Wise words, human,” the raccoon told him. “I’m just glad to see that there *are* humans who care about us. You’re the first I’ve ever met.”

“Thanks,” he said, looking at the white beach. It was coming awfully fast. Too fast.

They were going too fast!

“We’re going too fast!” he shouted in sudden alarm. “Pull up the sails on the mast by the wheel! Pull them up!” He looked back to the raccoon. “Turn us!” he shouted. “If we hit going this fast, we’ll all get thrown over the bow!”

They moved with surprising grace. The raccoon turned the ship to port as cats scrambled up into the rigging as Arcan females on the deck moved to furl the sails. The change in angle to the wind took some of the starch out of the sails, which in turn let them slow. The combination of the different angle and the turn slowed the ship, and not a moment too soon.

Everyone stumbled forward when the keel of the ship drove into the sand about twenty rods from shore, but it wasn’t so bad that everyone was pitched off their feet. The cats in the rigging came through it very well, with only one slipping off a spar, but her claws saved her from a nasty fall.

“Drop the anchors!” the bear shouted. “Drop the anchors!”

Kyven heard the rattling of chain as anchors both fore and aft were dropped into the water, and the ship started sliding backwards. It then caught fast, and rocked when a wave washed over its hull. But it held fast.

“We’re here,” Kyven said simply. “Nice job, raccoon.”

“Daisy,” she told him with a smile.

“Alright, we’re beached!” Kyven boomed from the steering deck. “It’s every Arcan for herself from here. Good luck to all of you, and I hope you find what you’re looking for out there.” He motioned at the cat Arcan. “Follow me,” he told her.

He went back to the captain’s quarters and got to work. He wasn’t the only one that thought to run in here, but none of them gainsaid him as he filled the bottom of his pack with chits, and kept the crystals he’d taken from the alchemical devices. After that, he simply motioned them grandly past him, and let them ransack the place for whatever they could find and use. There was surprisingly little fighting as the females ransacked the ship, but Kyven let them. He did what he promised, and from here, they were on their own. He herded his charge over the rail and down a rope ladder one of them had dropped, then he led her as they waded to shore, where a white sand beach separated the sea from a stretch of thick sawgrass and the edge of a pine forest.

He grabbed the cat by the hand and pulled her with him. “We have to be as far from here as possible by dawn,” he told her. “It won’t be long before those men on those boats we saw come to see why a ship like that has beached itself. So we can’t be here when the people realize that a ship full of Arcans is on the loose in the area. Every hunter and slaver in the region will swarm down on us.”

“What about the others?”

“They’re on their own,” he answered, looking back as they reached the treeline. Most of the Arcans were already swarming off the ship, understanding the same thing he did, but some of the cats were *still* in the rigging, and the raccoon was still on the steering deck. The bear and wolf were at the bow, and they waved to him when they saw him looking back.

He laughed. Now that was just damn *clever*!

“It looks like not all of them are getting off,” he noted with a smile. “I think the ones that got a taste of sailing are going to take the ship. Look,” he said, pointing them out.

“I think you’re right!” she said with a laugh.

“I just unleashed an Arcan pirate ship on the Angry Sea,” he said with a chuckle. “I hope they’re ready for it.”

“I hope the humans are,” the cat giggled.

“Let’s go. We have a long way to go.”

“Where are we going?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “I’ll know we’re there when they show up for you.”

“I don’t understand.”

“They’ll find us,” he answered as he pulled her into the forest. “They always do. But right now, we have to get as far from this place as possible.”

This girl had a long way to go.

She wasn’t used to such physical activity, and her Arcan endurance only lasted her for so long before it failed her, leaving her stumbling and panting behind him as he ran through the forest. She staggered and fell, then came back up retching, he knew she had nothing left, but they were still way too close to the landing site for him to feel comfortable stopping. He put his pack on her, then he put her on his back and carried her, still managing to run swiftly and strongly through the night despite carrying all the extra weight. Given that outstanding physical conditioning was absolutely mandatory for a Shaman, this girl was going to be in for a very rough road when they began training her. Kyven had been in better shape than she was before he even started his training with the wolf.

Nature did give them some help. It began to rain just after midnight, a nice soaking rain that would hide their passage from any tracking hounds, and, he mused, would refill the water barrels on the ship that the females probably had already put back out to sea.

Whatever happened to them, he wished them well.

He ran with her on his back half the night, as she stayed tensely silent, holding onto him and keeping her head down to avoid stray branches. Kyven navigated using spirit sight, with his

eyes covered by his blindfold. She would find out about him eventually, but it wasn't wise to tell her right now. If they came across anyone, once they were far enough away, they were just a traveler and his Arcan slave. If she knew about him, she might let something slip, so it was best to not risk that by not telling her. He had to feel this girl out, get to know her before he started trusting her with things like that. He had no idea how long she'd be with him, but he was sure it would be for a few days at least. His intent was to head straight for the Smoke Mountains, where he felt he'd have the best chance of encountering a Shaman that could take her off his hands, and since that was his intent, he was sure that his totem would make arrangements.

"How do you do it?" she finally asked as they ran along an old game trail, and then, to his surprise, broke out into a wide, well-traveled road, quickly turning to mud in the soaking rain. A rumble of thunder rolled softly in the far distance.

"Do what?"

"See where you're going? I mean, on the farm, none of the humans could move around on a night like this without lamps or conelights."

"Let's just say that I have lots of little tricks, and leave it at that," he told her.

"Oh. Okay."

He ran on for a while longer. "What's your name?" she asked. "You gave me a name, but I don't know yours."

"Kyven, and I told you my name when you first saw me," he reminded her.

"I was too afraid to pay much attention," she answered honestly. "I'd never been in a ship before, and it was very scary and confusing. Then, when I get thrown in a cage with people I don't know, you were there. You were very scary."

"I was trying to be."

"Then you did good," she said with a little giggle. "What's it like to be free?" she asked. "I've never been free before. I don't know what it's like."

"You won't be as free as you think you will be," he told her. "You're a Shaman, girl. The spirits will want you to be trained, so you'll be placed with another Shaman who will teach you what you need to know. After that, and after your Walk, well, I guess you'd be free then."

"What is a walk?"

"A journey where you learn what the spirits want to teach you," he answered her. "You learn both knowledge and wisdom, and the lessons aren't very nice."

"How do you know that?"

"Let's say I've had personal experience," he said dryly. He had no idea which way to go on the road, for he had no idea where he was. He turned left, for he needed supplies and information, and that meant that he needed to find a town or village. "Listen. Soon we're going to go into a human village or town. It's absolutely imperative that you *be silent*. Just pretend you can't speak, alright?"

"Alright."

"Good. I don't want you to have to think fast and try to keep up with me when I lie. Lying is not a tag team sport."

She giggled. "You don't lie."

"Whisper, you have no idea who I am. I've already lied to you about twenty times in the last two hours. It's not that I'm being mean to you, it's just so you don't know something that could get *me* killed if you say something by accident."

She was quiet a moment. "Oh. That's okay, I guess. You're just protecting yourself. You must be very important to the Masked."

"Not really. You can say I was just in the right place at the right time," he told her. "That put me in the best position to help you."

"Unless you're lying to me," she giggled.

"You'll never know," he replied with a light tone.

"Kyven?"

"Yes?"

"Thank you for rescuing me."

"Any time, dove. And that's no lie."

The sun was starting to rise when they came over a small hill and saw a village in a shallow valley below. It was a very small place, about twenty buildings surrounded by farmland on the far side. Kyven set her down on shaky legs and took his pack from her, then looked her in the eye after he took off his blindfold, throwing the two long tails over his shoulders. "Remember, say nothing. Pretend to be my Arcan, and don't get five rods from me at any time. You don't have a collar, and they're going to notice it."

She nodded nervously, and then followed right behind him, literally holding onto the tails of his headband as he started down into the village at a slow walk.

It was a very small farming village, with only one inn, no alchemist, and no cutters. It had a single general store, which was right beside the inn, both of which were closed when they arrived. They sat on the porch of the inn under a roof, staying out of the rain, and waited in silence for nearly an hour before the bolt of the door was finally thrown, once it was fully light, and the doors were opened. The old woman who opened the door gave out a gasp and jumped back when she stepped out onto their porch and saw the two of them, then laughed. "You should have knocked, dearie!" she told him. "Come in, come in! You look a fright!"

"Rain can do that to you," he said calmly as he beckoned to Whisper, who stepped into the inn in front of him.

"Have the Arcan wait at the door, she's wet," the old woman chided.

"So am I, so we'll both just wait right here," he said smoothly, stopping at the doorway.

"You won't drip on the floor, dearie, she will."

"I can understand that, ma'am, but I don't let this one out of my sight," he answered calmly.

"Wild?"

"No, quite the opposite. But I've had several people try to steal her, so I keep her close."

"Understandable, especially since she doesn't have a collar," she noted calmly. "So, what can I do for you?"

"A warm breakfast and some information," he answered.

"Five chits'll buy you both of those," she said simply. "I've got some porridge on, and I could make you some bacon, and I think we have a little leftover mutton from last night."

"I'll take all three, and some extra mutton for my Arcan," he nodded.

"Ten chits then, dearie."

"Done. Since we're wet, would you mind terribly if we ate on the porch?"

She laughed. "Go sit by the fire, dearie. Just keep the Arcan off the furniture."

Kyven led Whisper over to the fireplace, where a fire was burning merrily with a large kettle hanging over it. This inn was small, and it seemed that it had no separate kitchen. The old woman was cooking her porridge over the same fire that burned in her common room. Kyven decided to sit on the edge of the stone hearth rather than at the nearby table, taking off his backpack, fishing a ten chit coin out of it, then handing it to Whisper to hold. She put it at her feet and looped the strap around her foot so it couldn't be stolen from her. He leaned back and let the fire dry off his back and his hair, both of which were still damp despite an hour waiting on the porch. Whisper's short gray fur was matted from the rain, and she looked

quite like a drowned rat. The old woman came back with a large platter. On the platter was a plate, a bowl, and a pewter tankard. She handed the plate and tankard to Kyven, then set the bowl down on the hearth near the Arcan. She then sat down at the nearest table. "Now then, what kind of information do you need, dearie?"

"Well, to be honest, I'm lost," he said. "We've been prospecting streams and rivers the last few weeks, but I've lost track of where I am."

She cackled. "Well, you're in Mist Valley, a little speck on the map between Cheston and Austa. Cheston is about fifty minars down the south road, and Austa is about a hundred minars up the west road."

"Wow. We came a lot further than I thought," he frowned. "We're way, way out from the mountains. That's what I get for keeping moving downstream as I prospect," he sighed.

"What were you doing out in the rain, dearie?"

"Well, it wasn't raining when we camped," he answered her. "And we don't have a tent. So when it started raining, we started looking for some shelter, and well, here we are."

"Ah. Well, eat up, dearie, and mind to let me stir the porridge."

She did so, then went back into the back. As soon as she was out of sight, Kyven sensed her. He turned and saw her sitting between him and the cat on the hearth, literally within fingers of him. Kyven didn't react to her, simply started eating the mutton and bacon on his plate with his fingers. She swished her tail against his back, and in that contact there was communication. *Someone is coming for her, down the Austa road. Rest here until you recover your strength, then go in that direction to meet them. When the cat is delivered to her caretaker, you will go to Cheston.*

He raised an eyebrow. Cheston? Why was she sending him there? Then again, she wouldn't tell him even if he asked. He nodded simply, and he felt her tail pull away from his back.

When he glanced back towards her, she was gone.

The cat had never noticed her. She really did have much to learn. Her Shamanic powers had not yet even awakened. She ate from the bowl ravenously, finished it off, and licked her lips as she looked around. He handed her the tankard of water the innkeeper gave him, and she drank half of it before handing it back to him.

"Innkeeper!" he called. She came out a moment later, carrying a large basket and an iron pot. The basket was filled with potatoes. "Could I get a couple glasses of water, and talk to you about a room? We walked most of the night looking for shelter, and that kind of walk is very messy and tiring. I'd like to get some sleep in a warm, dry bed before heading back out."

She nodded simply. "Five chits, dearie, and you can stay until tomorrow morning."

"Doubt it'll be that long. I just want to catch up on the sleep we lost last night."

"Five chits, dearie, and you have a warm bed."

He paid her, and she put down her potatoes and showed him up a narrow staircase and to a room. The room was small, but it was clean, with only a bed and small table holding a washstand. "I supposed the Arcan has enough room to sleep on the floor," she noted. "Unless you want to keep her in the kitchen."

"She'll stay with me," he said calmly, taking the key from her. "Thank you, ma'am."

"Well, get some sleep, dearie. I keep food ready all the time for the farmers that sneak in for a bite between chores."

"Always good to know, ma'am. Thank you for your kindness."

"No problem, dearie. Sleep well."

She left them, and Kyven waited until he heard her go downstairs. He then chuckled when he looked at Whisper, who looked quite dreadful. "You really do look like a drowned rat," he

told her, reaching out and scrubbing her fur on her arms with his fingers, clearing out the matting.

She looked a little uncertain how to respond to that. She just stood there while he ruffled her fur, then smoothed it back out to make it look normal.

"Well, there's one bed," he said quietly. "I guess we can share it, as long as you don't snore, and don't care if I take my wet clothes off so they can dry."

She gave him a strange look, then nodded silently. He pulled his clothes off as she sat on the edge of the bed, combing her damp fur with her clawed fingers to clear the mats, then he got into bed and got over onto the far side of it to give her room. "I'll sleep under the sheet, you sleep under the blanket," he said wearily, as the lack of food and the hardships of the day overwhelmed him much faster than he expected. He fell asleep almost immediately.

He wasn't sure if having this kind of dream was entirely proper, given that a part of his brain realized where he was.

He was having a very detailed and erotic dream about that blond Loreguard officer, the cute one with the really nice breasts. It was the kind of erotic dream men loved, detailed, very detailed, and almost feeling real. He saw every strand in her hair, he could smell her skin, feel how soft she was. She was sexy and seductive, appealingly naked, and she was warm and responsive when he laid down with her, making love to her languidly, enjoying the feel of her body as he stroked into her with slow, gentle thrusts, enjoying every sensation. Part of his brain seemed to tell him that this wasn't a proper dream, not with the little cat in bed with him, but that part of his mind was squelched by the animal in him that was enjoying this wonderful dream, so much so that he felt himself about to climax.

Then a slight shiver of pain disrupted his wonderful dream and caused him to come awake... and he found out it was no dream.

The cat was on top of him, and she was straddling him. He felt it with dreadful, exquisite clarity; his penis had penetrated her, was inside her, and he was in the very act of climax when he was startled awake by the punch of her claws into his upper arms.

She had had sex with him in his sleep!

He felt... *violated*. Arcans didn't excite him in any way, and yet he'd just—he'd just—he was *appalled*. But there was no stopping it now. He felt his orgasm, though there was very little real pleasure in it for him, and the cat made a strange growl in her throat, her eyes closed and her head arched back as she took him fully inside her and seemed to climax herself, for she did something to his penis he'd never felt any woman ever do with her vagina in his life. That indescribable sensation would have been intensely erotic and pleasurable if he was in any way aroused by the idea of sex with an Arcan female.

"What the *hell* are you doing?" he hissed with shock and mortification, rising up and pushing at her with his hands, trying to push her off him. "By the fucking *Trinity*, Whisper!" he said in a low, angry voice.

She looked shocked. Shocked and totally bewildered. "But—" she whispered as he physically pushed her off of him, rolling over on her side. "But you were—I thought it's what you *wanted*!" she protested in a terrified voice. "You were squeezing my boobs and you stuck your hand between my legs and fingered me. You started it!"

"You're an *Arcan*!" he hissed. "I'm not the kind that gets off on Arcans!"

"I thought it was what you wanted, and, and, and I didn't mind. I was feeling... lonely," she said in a low tone, looking away from him.

"I was *dreaming*," he growled at her as he sat up, putting a hand to his forehead. Holy *Trinity*, what the hell did he do now? He felt, well, he didn't know how the fuck he was supposed to feel about this. It clearly wasn't his fault, he was dreaming, and it seemed she was just do-

ing what she thought he wanted. “Listen, I’m sorry if you thought I wanted it,” he said with a sigh, “but I was dreaming. I didn’t intend—well, shit,” he sighed. “I don’t know if I should feel embarrassed, angry, mortified, or stupid. It’s just been a long time since I had a woman, and there’s this one woman that I’ve been thinking about. I’m sorry if you thought that’s what I wanted of you.”

“No, no, it’s not your fault,” she told him, putting her hand on his shoulder. “I spent a lot of time in bed with the farmer’s youngest son, he... liked me. So I’m kinda, well, used to doing it with human men. That’s why I was sold. The farmer found out his son had taken a fancy to me, and he was furious, so he sold me away. And I’ve been so scared and lonely since they sold me, and you’re so nice to me. When you started playing with my boobs and I realized you were hard—I just couldn’t help myself. I wanted to feel wanted, feel good, feel like I was giving you something for all you’ve done for me, and I always felt that way when I was with the farmer’s son. I’m sorry,” she said, looking away from him again.

He put a hand over his eyes. Fucking Trinity. This had to be the most awkward and uncomfortable thing that had ever happened to him. He’d just had sex with an *Arcan*, and he couldn’t really work up enough ire to feel angry about it. She was responding the way she’d been conditioned, no more, no less. “Alright, we forget this ever happened,” he told her simply. “It wasn’t your fault, it wasn’t my fault, it was just a dumb accident.”

“It wasn’t an accident to *me*,” she said with quiet conviction.

“Be that as it may, it’s never going to happen again,” he told her with low adurance. “If there’s ever a next time I get grabby with you when I’m asleep, just slap me and wake me up.”

“Alright.”

“Let’s get going. We have a long way to go.”

They got up, and he dressed in silence. She still had no clothes, and he had nothing that would really fit her without her having to hold them up. She did clean herself up, for though he’d been willing only because he was asleep, what he saw of her showed that she’d been *quite* willing during their encounter, to the point where she had to wash the wetness and smell out of the fur on her thighs and crotch.

The idea of it just made him shudder. He’d just had his *dick* in her! In an *Arcan*! Trinity, it would take him weeks to get over it. He wanted to go take a long bath.

After turning in his key, the first thing he did was take her to the general store and buy clothes for her. It took quite a bit of talking to get the young man to sell him a pair of ill-fitting trousers for her, made of a very durable cotton cloth called denim. The clothes were either too large or too small, and he had to settle on a pair that fit her in the hips, but he cut off at her knees because they were too long in the legs. A piece of rope both kept the waist snug for her and cinched up the tear in the back to accommodate her tail, and a simple leather vest covered her breasts. The proprietor seemed shocked he wanted to dress an *Arcan*, but he also took very keen interest in the fact that she had no collar, and that she always hovered so close to him that she could reach out and touch him at any time.

Kyven could almost hear the little gears turning in his head. So much so that when Kyven paid him for the clothes, he patted the shockrod on his belt and said “I hope there’s no trouble on the road up. It’d be a shame for the village to have to bury someone they find laying dead on the road.”

The store clerk glared at him slightly, but said nothing.

After buying some travel food, a bedroll for Whisper, and three new waterskins and filling them, he started them out. He made her run with him—may as well get her started on her training—going slow enough for her to keep up, but fast enough to outpace anyone running on

foot or a walking horse. She ran in complete silence as they moved into an area of low hills and forests of pine mixed with hardwoods, as they ran past merchant trains moving in both directions, and more than a couple of mounted caravan guards seemed to want to chase after them for some reason. Kyven ran her the entire afternoon, and she was able to keep up all the way until sunset as her *Arcan* endurance showed itself, but he still ran her into the ground, and was forced to carry her when she was unable to go on. He wanted as much distance between them and Mist Valley as he could get to discourage anyone looking for a free *Arcan*. The fact that she wore no collar meant that she was technically fair game for any hunter, since the collar was the proof of ownership. If someone could snap a collar on her, they could make a very strong argument that she was theirs no matter what Kyven had to say about it... because her collar was *theirs*.

As they ran, Kyven thought about what happened. It wasn’t his fault, and really wasn’t hers. He’d never told her that he wasn’t interested, and after thinking about it, he realized he was a little, well... *touchy* with her right before he went to sleep. He must have given her the wrong signal, and when he got amorous in his sleep, she just acted on the signals she mistook from before. It did say something about her personality, though. She’d been quite willing to have sex with him because it was *what she thought he wanted*. She had a lot of slave mentality that whoever trained her was going to have to wear down in her.

But, she *did* enjoy it, he remembered. That had to be her orgasm there at the end, when—he shivered. Trinity, if only human women could do *that*. Had he not been so shocked, he would have found it intensely pleasurable.

Still, it was an accident, and he pushed it out of his mind.

Well after dark, Kyven carried her out into the forest and found a small clearing, then set her down and gave her his backpack. “I’m going to go hunt. Keep silent and don’t use any light,” he told her as he tied his blindfold over his eyes. “If any humans appear other than me, scream, but *do not* run. Just stall them here until I get back, and I’ll take care of them.”

She nodded, clutching his backpack.

He stalked out into the night, spirit sight guiding him as he started looking for the signs the wolf had taught him. It took him about ten minutes to locate signs of passage, and he tracked it back to a small herd of wild boards. Thunder echoed through the forest when Kyven unleashed lightning against one of the smaller adults, and he carried his prize back to the clearing to find the cat up in an oak tree.

Good place for her to be, he reasoned.

“Dinner,” he said, dumping the boar down onto the ground.

“That was you?” she said, finally speaking for the first time since they left their room.

He nodded. “I cheat when I hunt,” he admitted, patting his fake shockrod, then kneeling down with a dagger and driving it into the belly of the wild pig. “Well, come eat.”

“You eat it raw?”

“Probably one of the few humans who do,” he said simply as he stripped the hide off the belly. “I’ll split the liver with you,” he offered.

“Only if I get the heart.”

He gave her a light smile. “Oho, driving a hard bargain, are we?” he asked, which made her giggle. “It’s a deal.”

She seemed curious about him as they ate, and she saw that he truly had no qualms about eating raw meat... just like an *Arcan*. Arcans almost never got to eat cooked meat, and when they did it was scraps and leftovers. Because they never ate cooked meat, they got used to it, to the point where Arcans didn’t cook meat even when they had the option. They would if it had to last a while, since cooked meat kept longer than raw meat, but they preferred it raw...

and now Kyven did too.

The two of them managed to pretty thoroughly denude the skeleton of the boar, leaving little but bloody bones, on one of which the cat chewed absently as Kyven led them to a new campsite. Camping near the bloody bones was just asking for an unwanted visit in the night, he figured, so he abandoned what was left of the pig to whatever wanted it and found them a little clearing by a small stream, which had a large log laying through the middle of it. Kyven made camp there, which was basically clearing out some underbrush and laying out their bedrolls. The cat seemed uncertain and nervous as Kyven sat down on his bedroll, then she deliberately dragged her bedroll right beside his and sat down on it. "I, I don't like to sleep alone," she told him nervously. "Would you mind? I just want to be near you."

"That's alright," he told her simply. "You'd better get some sleep, we'll be on the move well before sunrise. We're literally only resting for *you*. It's tiring carrying you."

She gave a little giggle. "I'm sorry. You're amazing, Kyven. I've never seen a human that could run one of us into the ground."

"Not *all* of you. You're just soft," he accused.

"I guess I am, a little," she admitted. "I worked in the master's house almost as much as I did out in the fields. They taught me how to cook and clean, and I had to wear this stuffy dress with a big white apron. My master was a very prudish man," she told him. "That's why he was so angry when he found out his son liked me. He sold me the very next day."

"Did you like it there?"

"It was all I ever knew. Compared to being sold, yes, I liked it there. The humans didn't beat us like Howler said humans did when he came to the farm from outside, after Steady was killed by a deathrattle. The humans were fair to us, and then I got sold." She shuddered. "I was beat up by the handlers when I spoke to them. Then the other females beat me up in the pen and they had to separate me, so they put me in a pen with children and made me take care of them. They were going to sell me on the block, but then I was marched down to that town by the water and sold to the man who put me on the boat."

"Why would the other females beat you up?"

"Because I had clothes, I had something they didn't and they were bigger and stronger than me. They beat me up and took them, and the handlers thought they would kill me, so they took me out. These are the first clothes I've had since I was sold. Thank you for them," she said, reaching out and putting her hand on his arm, then she quickly pulled herself against him. "I promise I'll be good, just let me stay like this," she said in a pleading, small voice. "I don't like being alone."

There wasn't much he could say to that. He just put an arm over her and laid his head down, and said nothing more. It was disconcerting to get a small window into the life of an Arcan like that, for it had been the first time one had ever really talked to him about life as a slave. It sounded harsh and unfair, but then again, they were slaves. It would naturally be harsh and unfair. If it made her feel better to sleep up against him, he'd give her that much, as long as she didn't try anything else.

Life may be cruel, but he didn't have to be. Not right now.

She fell asleep almost immediately, and he closed his eyes, feeling her soft fur of her waist under his fingers, an evil stray thought roaming across his mind, wondering if all Arcan females were like her during sex. Not that he ever wanted to find out ever again, and not that he actually had much real experience given she'd taken advantage of him when he was asleep, but it was an honest, clinical curiosity.

If all Arcan females did *that* when they climaxed, no wonder human men seemed to have a taste for them.

But, then again, most men wouldn't ever experience that. Human men didn't normally make love to or have sex with Arcans, they raped them. And though Kyven had no real experience with the idea of it, he'd think that a woman who was being raped wouldn't be inclined to enjoy it very much. Kyven had the rare experience of having sex with a *willing* female... or more to the point, it was a case where an Arcan female initiated sex with him. Kyven had had very little experience or insight with Arcans, but he'd think that that wouldn't be a very common thing for Arcan females to initiate sex with human men.

There was a lesson to be learned here, he knew it. But the lesson was escaping him. He drifted off to sleep considering it... but perhaps this was wisdom that was something he had to be wiser in order to grasp.

She was here.

He came awake quickly at the sensation of a spirit near him, of her near him, and he opened his eyes to the spirits even as he opened his eyes.

It was still dark, but dawn was about to stain the horizon. The clearing was quiet and warm in the summer morning, and the cat was nestled against him as he lay on his side, her back against him and his arm draped protectively over her, her tail draped over his legs. But she wasn't what concerned him. Two Arcans stood at the far end of the clearing, and one of them, the slender female red fox, was a Shaman. Both of them were dressed in rugged leathers, the fox and a large canine with black fur and irregular white patches. The canine's eyes were wide and unbelieving, and the fox looked rather amused.

"I'm glad I saw it with my own eyes," the fox chuckled as she hunkered down on all fours, sitting on her haunches. "A *human*. What are the spirits thinking?"

"I keep hearing that," Kyven growled as the cat woke up in surprise, and he had to put his hand on her furry stomach to still her. "It's alright, Whisper," he told her.

"I am Dancer," the fox said by way of introduction. "This imposing male who's being quiet is Night. We are here for you, Whisper, was it?"

"Here for me?" she asked in confusion.

"Didn't he tell you that he was bringing you to a Shaman?"

She nodded.

"Well, that's me," she said with a disarmingly charming smile. "I am Shaman, small one. We're here to take you to a safe place where you can learn in peace and comfort, far from the humans."

"Really?"

She nodded. "It will take us weeks to get there, but you'll see the Haven for yourself, small one. The city of Arcans, where there are no humans."

"You're not going?" she asked, turning to look at him, then she gasped and almost squirmed out from under his arm. "Your eyes are glowing!" she gasped.

"Little one, the human is *Shaman*, just like me," the fox told her. "He's the only one of his kind, and still something of a shock to us."

She gasped, then she laughed. "That's the secret you were keeping from me!"

He nodded. "But, since you're safe now, it's alright to tell you," he told her. "This Shaman is much more learned than me, and she'll protect you all the way to where you're going. I can't go, I have other things I have to do."

"He is on his Walk, child, still in training," the fox told her. "He has more that the spirits want to teach him before he's ready to take his place in council. Should that happen," she chuckled. "There is quite a ferocious debate about you, human. Many Shaman find your very existence to be a grave insult. Others are quite amenable to the idea of human Shaman, hoping it will bring humans and Arcans closer together."

“What do you think?” Kyven asked as he let go of Whisper, stood, and helped her stand up. She didn’t let go of him; in fact, she sidled up against him as if his presence was comforting to her.

“I think that if the Shaman must debate the issue, then we lack the wisdom to see the true path,” she said simply. “And that the spirits must guide us.”

“I think that’s a good opinion. I’ve already received both ends of it since I started this. My teacher hated me, but a Shaman I met on my walk was rather enthusiastic about the idea of me.”

“Who was your teacher?”

“Stalker.”

“Ah, him. Yes, he would very much hate you,” she said with a simple nod. She stood up when the shadow fox padded in from the woods, then nodded to her. “I have come,” she told the fox. “I will take her to Haven, as you have commanded.”

The fox nodded, then padded up to Kyven and the cat and touched her muzzle against his leg. *Give the Shaman the mana whip. There is no alchemical device you cannot copy with Shaman magic, and she might need it to get the cat to safety,* she commanded, then she immediately walked in a circle around the two of them and padded back into the forest, lost among the shadows.

“It’s time for you to start a new life, Whisper,” Kyven told her, pushing her away gently. “This Shaman will treat you well.”

“Will I see you again?”

“I’d like to hope so,” he told her, walking her over to the pair. He urged her over to them with a gentle hand on the small of her back, and the two of them gave her gentle pats on her shoulder in welcome. He took the mana whip from his belt and offered it to the Shaman. “This is for you,” he told her.

“A mana whip!” she gasped. “Where did you get it?” she asked as she accepted it from him.

“Long story. Whisper can tell some of it to you. My totem said you may need it to get Whisper back safely.”

The fox nodded, and immediately handed it to the tall panther. “With a weapon like this, my silent friend can be devastating should we have to fight,” she told him. The panther nodded to Kyven with a gentle smile, and he tucked the weapon into the waist of his trousers. Closer to him and looking up, he could see a hairless scar on his neck, right across his throat. He was silent because he had no voice.

“Tell you? He killed an entire ship’s crew!” Whisper said animatedly, gripping Dancer’s black-mitted hand. “He freed a whole ship of Arcans bound for the breeding pens of Alamar!”

“Well, that was very brave of him,” the fox said with a smile, giving him a wink.

“Some of them kept the ship, too, after we figured out how to make it go!” she said excitedly. “There’s a ship out on the seas crewed by *Arcans*!”

“I’m sure it’s a very exciting story, love, but it can wait ‘til we’re on the move,” she said gently, reaching her hand out towards Kyven. He took it firmly and shook it. “May the spirits guide your path, brother Shaman,” she said with a strange cadence.

“May the spirits guide your path, sister Shaman,” he returned, unsure of what to say other than to mirror her words.

“Now cover those eyes,” she winked. “A human could get away with it where we can’t. Loreguard go after any Arcan with his eyes covered to hide spirit sight, which is why the Masked all wear masks over their eyes, to conceal the Shaman.”

“Oh, he does! He has this—that!” Whisper laughed as Kyven took the tails of his headband

and wrapped them around his eyes.

Well, that explained why they were called the Masked, at any rate. The panther nodded to him as he rolled up his bedroll and tied it to his pack and shouldered it. “Don’t forget your bedroll, Whisper,” he reminded her. “Oh, go slow with her, sister, she’s in terrible shape. She was a house servant.”

The fox laughed. “I’ll get her in shape. She won’t be an embarrassment by the time I get her home.”

He nodded as he turned, gave them a final wave, and then ran back towards Mist Valley and the road to Cheston, which was where the fox told him he had to go.

The night surrendered to the day, but Kyven was far from where he left the cat before the first rays of the sun touched him.

Unburdened from having to escort the cat and feeling a need to work himself, Kyven raced back down the road at a pace that stunned the merchants who had also decided to get an early start, or who had camped in small fields by the road in this uninhabited stretch of land between Mist Valley and Austa. He ran by at a speed that would have made a horse trot to keep up with him, trying to pace it out so he exhausted himself right about the time he returned to Mist Valley. He lost himself in the efforts of his exercise, but his mind did meander back over the last few days. He still felt little remorse for killing the crew of the ship, and he was actually a little amused and delighted to see some of the female commandeer the ship and take it back out. Odds were they’d probably die out there, but they’d do it on their own terms, controlling their own fate... and sometimes that was better than living a long life in the control of another.

But who knew. If they could get the hang of sailing the ship before they got sunk by some battleship, they could probably make a go of it. There had to be some islands out there, maybe they’d find a nice uninhabited one and take it over, some place that had everything they needed to survive.

Most likely not, but it wasn’t bad to hope. Life could be cruel, but dreams didn’t have to be.

He reached Mist Valley two hours before dawn, but did not stop. He turned down the road leading to Cheston, which was south. The general store clerk happened to be walking to the inn when Kyven ran by, and grinned maliciously since his Arcan was no longer with him.

Kyven allowed him to think whatever he wanted. Kyven knew the truth, and that was all he cared about.

He ran on, starting to feel winded, but knowing that he had to exhaust himself, build himself back even stronger. The fox said that he couldn’t manage maintained spells until he was stronger, capable of handling the demands of the magical power it placed on him. The only way to do that was to exercise, wear himself down, and build himself back up stronger. He was at a disadvantage compared to the Arcans because he was human, he didn’t have their physical strength or endurance, so it just meant that he had to work twice as hard. He wouldn’t embarrass his totem, he would prove to her and all the other Shaman that a *human* could complete the Walk, could stand among them. He may never have their power because of his human limitations, but in a way, perhaps that was why the shadow fox chose to be his totem. What he would lack in raw power he would gain with guile and deceit, magic of misdirection and trickery that would cover his basic weakness in a mask of obfuscation. He may not have their power, but they’d never know it. And in its own way, the power of illusion and trickery could be ten times stronger than raw strength, when applied wisely and appropriately to the situation at hand.

Perhaps that was what the shadow fox would teach him, after she got this strange need to show him the worst in the world out of the way.

He paid for not paying attention. He came over a rise and literally into a swarm of men on horseback, men wearing dirty, ragged clothes and carrying old, rusted pistols and muskets, crossbows and swords, being led by a big man on a black stallion who had a silvery rod in his hand. Kyven had never seen anything like it before, so it had to be a weapon, and it had to be unusual. He all but had to skid to a halt as the throng of ten men all raised their muskets and weapons and pointed them at him. He raised his hands and got his mind on what he was doing immediately, preparing the flash of light spell in his mind just in case.

“Well, it looks like we reeled in a small one,” the man with the silver rod snickered. “Almost not worth our time. What say, men, should we throw him back?” There was a rumble of laughter as Kyven carefully gauged the men. They were too far apart to kill in one shot with the cone of cold, and if he attacked them with it, the survivors would shoot him. His first impulse to consider the flash of light looked to be the correct one. It had no range outside of them having to look in his direction when it went off.

“We should send him back naked, Brawg!” one man said, which made the others laugh.

“Oi, that’s the one that came through Mist Valley with an uncollared Arcan!” someone else called. “I guess she acted just like his last girlfriend and left him!”

“By the Father’s grace, fellah, you can’t even keep an Arcan!” someone said raucously. “Your dick must be so small it can draw blood if you don’t aim right!”

Kyven felt a little offended, so he just gave them a cold look. “I ate her,” he said in an unfriendly tone. “It’s much easier when your food walks along with you until you’re hungry.”

That made a few of the men chuckle. “Well, he thinks fast on his feet, I’ll give him that,” one said.

“Well, if you want to keep thinkin’, buster, hand over your pack and that shockrod there, *real* slow and gentle,” the leader said, pointing that silver tube at him.

“I’ll make you a deal. I’ll give you half my chits and walk out of here with my gear, and we all profit,” he countered.

That made them all laugh. “I don’t think you’re in no position to bargain, little man,” the leader grinned ominously, leveling that rod at him.

“Oh, I’m very much in a position to bargain,” he replied easily, “given I could kill the lot of you before you can fire a single shot.”

He needed them all to pay very close attention to him. He couldn’t risk any of them looking away when he attacked, or he was a dead duck. By bragging a little, making them think about it a little bit, he’d get all of them to watch him like a hawk... which would bait them into what he wanted them to do.

They laughed at his audacity. “And just how are you gonna manage that, Mister Super Warrior?” the leader sniggered.

“Oh, I wouldn’t know one side of a gun from the other,” he said pleasantly. “I do *magic*. Not alchemy things stuck up my sleeves either, *real* magic. Ever seen real magic before?”

“Oh, you’re one of those fellas that pulls scarves out of people’s ears and saws ladies in half in little boxes? I’ve seen your kind at the fair,” one man called.

“That’s real magic,” Kyven said with a nod. “All sleight of hand, and prestidigitation!” he said ostentatiously. “Like this little trick. And now, gentlemen, I’ll bet you ten chits that I’ll disappear before your very eyes!”

They all laughed. “Yeah, I wanna see this trick!” one called. “If you can pull it off, I won’t even chase you!”

“Alright then, it’s a bet,” Kyven told them, closing his eyes. “First, gentlemen, I blindfold myself to attune myself to the mighty magic I am about to unleash upon the world!” he called ostentatiously, slowly reaching behind his head and pulling out his leather straps to his

headband, then wrapping them over his eyes and tying it. “Am I now blindfolded, gentlemen?” he asked, which made a couple of them laugh and affirm that he was. “Very good. Now watch *very* carefully, gentlemen,” he said as he slowly raised his hands out before him, palms out, as he opened his eyes to the spirits. “I assure you, you’ll be amazed.”

He channeled the spell. The light of a thousand suns lashed out at the men’s eyes even as Kyven tightly closed his own and flinched away, erupting from his hands and generating a blinding flash so intense that it could be seen for minars in every direction. The men cried out, the horses brayed in shock and surprise, and Kyven dove forward and to the ground even as they started shooting in panic. The shots went over Kyven’s head harmlessly. Kyven got up and ran wide of them as the blinded men covered their eyes with their hands, their horses whinnying and stomping and a few rearing as they too panicked from the flash of light that blinded them and the gunshots on top of it. “Can’t see me now, can you?” Kyven shouted tauntingly as he took off in the direction he was going, then shouted over his shoulder “you owe me ten chits!”

He kept running despite his growing exhaustion, for he had to get as much distance between him and the bandits as he could before the sun set, and then he had the advantage in the night. He kept glancing behind him looking for them as the sun touched the horizon to his right, sliding behind a series of high hills he glanced when he came out into clear areas of the forest. He kept going, running at a speed that would take a running horse to catch up to him quickly... and he was sure they were running their horses. They were probably blinded for about five minutes, and then they had to figure out which direction he went, and then get organized and give chase. He figured they were fairly pissed and weren’t about to honor their word—*he* certainly wouldn’t—so he had to outrun them until it got too dark for them to run their horses, and when that happened, he could easily lose them.

His idea certainly had merit... until he came around a bend in the road and found himself staring at a river.

It was about thirty rods across, and though it was slow moving, it certainly looked deep... and Kyven did not know how to swim. There wasn’t a body of water in Atan deep enough to drown a man, let alone let him swim in it. It had to be deep, there was a ferry raft... which unfortunately was on *the other side*. It had a pair of ropes strung across the river which went through an eye on the raft, which let people on the raft pull themselves across to the other side.

He found himself with only one option, but one that would be very, very slow. If he climbed up onto the rope and tried to shimmy across, he’d be a sitting duck if the bandits caught him while he was in the middle of it.

There was another way.

Kyven thrust his hands out at the riverbank. He channeled the cold spell, beseeching the fox for the most power she could possibly give him, aiming the cone so that it would not freeze the rope, yet would hit the water all the way across the river. The fox responded, sending a torrent of power into him, barely half of which he could channel safely. A pale cone of magical cold erupted from his hands, washing over the river’s surface and freezing it instantly, with every ripple and trough intact, even freezing the fish that had been near the surface into the ice, freezing the water nearly a rod deep and though barely more than a couple of fingers wide at the near side, it was nearly twenty rods wide on the far side, including a thick crust of ice and frost on the ferry raft itself.

He moved quickly. He hand-walked out on the rope until his feet were on the wider part of the ice, then he used the rope only as a steadying platform as he half-walked, half-slid across the ice and across the river. He reached the icebound raft and climbed over the rail, then

turned and formed the other spell in his mind, the one he'd never used before, the fire spell. He imagined a cone of blistering, raging fire that would come from his hands and hit the ice, melting it, weakening it, robbing the men behind him of an easy means to get across. He beseeched the fox for the power to use the spell, then felt her respond. He thrust his hands out, and a savage cone of twisting fire blasted from his palms. It ripped into the ice, creating an instant blast of steam and mist as it flash-boiled the water, and Kyven felt the searing heat wash over him, threatening to singe his hair and bake his skin as the air was heated by the magic of his fire. But it did its job, melting a huge hole in the ice near the ferry. The large sheet of ice shuddered in the slow current of the river, then with a dull *thrakuchock*, the ice broke at the hole he melted and was pulled downstream.

He didn't wait around to celebrate. He ran across the raft, then right past a stunned group of merchants and guards who were camping in the clearing by the ferry landing.

"Bandits behind me! I wouldn't let them pull the ferry over if I were you!" he called in warning as he ran past the startled group, then he charged off into the twilight, straight down the road.

He kept going until it was solidly night, and the moonless darkness swallowed the land and made it dangerous for day-sighted humans and horses to move about. But Kyven had no problems at all, continuing down the road at a brisk run, deciding to completely exhaust himself as he was taught.

He played out his endurance about an hour before midnight. He had the good luck of stumbling across a deer that was literally right in the road, and he blasted it with lightning before it reacted to him and turned to flee. He dragged his meal into the forest, finding a concealed spot behind a very small rise, a little rocky face, then slept against that little rocky knob until morning. He then completely drained himself almost to the point of collapse using magic, rested, ate, and repeated the cycle until nearly noon, when he took a restful nap, packed the meat that he didn't eat and continued on his way, though he was much more careful for fear of finding those bandits around the next bend in the road.

He was lucky, though. He ran into no problems as he ran through the day and into the early night, following the road down out of the gentle hills and onto a more flat plain with very gentle ridges, as pines took over from the hardwoods, and the faint smell of salt began to touch his nose. He was nearing the sea, so he was getting close to Cheston. The road didn't empty out as he ran towards Cheston, telling him that he was very close, until he came to the top of a gentle ridge and slowed to a stop, and saw a stark break in the trees in the distance, which had to be the ocean. He closed his eyes to the spirits and took off his blindfold, and saw the lights of Cheston about ten minute's run ahead of him, sitting at the end of a bay that stretched out before his eyes in the moonlight, to the horizon.

He was here. He wondered what the fox wanted him to do here, what lessons she had to teach.

She was there. He quickly covered his eyes and opened his eyes to the spirits, and saw her near the trees by the road. She turned and padded into the woods, then looked back to him expectantly. She wanted him to follow her. He hurried behind her as she led him deeper into the woods, a strip of forest just before the farms around Cheston began. She led him to a small meadow that had a large flat rock in the center of it, and she jumped up onto the rock and turned to face him.

He came up to her and stopped a few paces away. "What do you need me to do here?" he asked her.

She didn't reply. She just stared at him with those glowing eyes.

And she did not sit down.

Kyven was feeling... uneasy. What was wrong? Did he fail a task? Had he not done things to her satisfaction? She certainly didn't seem that way when she visited him at the inn. Did she think he mishandled his encounter with the Shaman, or the bandits?

"Shadow fox? What's wrong?"

He heard her clearly, it was an *audible* voice, emanating from all around him. "*Now, Shaman, I will take my price,*" her voice touched him, a voice that rippled with power. "*And now you will learn the danger of making a bad bargain with the spirits.*"

In an instant, she bared her fangs, her hackles raising, her eyes narrowing.

She was going to *attack* him!

He didn't know what to do. He was afraid, terrified, but he had made this bargain. He had allowed her to name her price, trusting in her, not believing she would do anything exceedingly bad to him. But that trust evaporated in the face of her bared teeth. He was frightened and unsure of himself, but that fear became raw terror and reflex when she lunged off the rock. He tried to turn and run, but her fangs drove into his shoulder and her claws struck his chest and side and held fast, and it was *real*. He screamed in pain and was knocked to the ground as the shadow fox sawed her teeth back and forth in his shoulder and neck savagely, trying to rip his arm off as her claws tore into his torso, rending him. He was assaulted by white-hot pain, pain that tore through him, blinded him, shattered his entire existence as the power within those fangs savaged his soul even as the fangs themselves savaged his flesh.

In seconds, he was too disoriented and crippled by pain to fight back. The shadow fox let go of his shoulder and drove her teeth into his neck, causing his entire body to shudder violently and crushing all resistance out of him. His body sagged limply to the grass of the meadow, surrounded by his own blood, unconscious and helpless.

And dying.

The fox released her jaws, standing over him with her eyes glowing with dark mystery. She could see the light in him about to waver and fade.

She opened her jaws once more, just as the light of his life wavered, baring teeth glowing with her power. She sank them into his neck, a killing blow, but instead of darkening his light, they instead caused it to blaze forth with renewed vigor. Life flushed through him, but it was life that burned into his flesh, infusing him with the fox's own life energies.

And it changed him.

The power swept through him like a firestorm, changing him, altering him. Even unconscious, he shrieked in mindless agony as the power assaulted him, *changed* him. His skin vanished in a dark shadow as fur sprouted from his skin. His nose distended, flattened as his skull and jaw deformed, elongated. His fingernails twisted, gathered, formed into claws. His feet tore through his boots as they elongated, widened at the ball, twisted and formed pads. A tail tore through his bloody trousers, quickly growing out and sprouting long, thick, bushy fur.

The fox twisted his limp body until he was on his side and released her jaws, pulling away not from a human, but from a black-furred fox Arcan. She sat down beside him, wrapping her tail around her legs sedately, watching him with inscrutable eyes as he lay in the bloody grass, breathing labored from the ordeal, with white-tipped ears, a white ruff around and under his chin that spread down his chest, and a white-tipped tail.

He was unique. Before, he was the only human Shaman. Now, he was the only shadow fox Arcan.

"*Now, my foolish Shaman, you will learn the folly of your bargain,*" her voice echoed through the trees, burning into Kyven's mind even in his unconscious state. "*You granted me whatever price I wished of you. And so I take your humanity as my price.*"

"This is the price I exact from you, my new Arcan," her voice thundered silently across the meadow, and thundered through his soul. "You show a lack of wisdom towards the Arcans, viewing them through the blind eye of privilege and power. You do not understand them. And because you do not understand them, they will never accept you. You will always be a human to them, just as they will always be only Arcans to you. This must be changed. You must know life as they know it. Only when you see through the eyes of those you do not understand can you truly know them. Now you will see life through their eyes. Now you will know their pain, and now you will know their strength.

"In these first lessons, I will deny you my blessing. Only your spirit sight may guide you along this path. Your magic comes from me, my Shaman, and I will not grant it to you until I am satisfied you are deserving of it. You will live as the Arcans live, and know life from their point of view."

She looked up, looked towards the city, and then she looked back to him. *"Your lessons begins soon, my Shaman. Learn them well, and you will regain what I have taken from you. Learn the lessons I teach, and your humanity will be restored. But never let it be said that I would take all from you, for you would gain little wisdom in death. As I have taken, so have I given in return. Use my gift wisely."*

The shadows of the night seemed to darken around her, until only her eyes were visible.

"And never bargain so foolishly with me again. Know that what I do to you is a pale shadow of what you would have received from one who did not have an interest in you. Learn from your mistake."

And then they were gone, leaving behind only an echo of her final words.

"Now, my Shaman, for your first lesson, you will learn the wisdom of humility."

Chapter 7

He knew.

Before he even climbed out of unconsciousness, he knew. He could *feel* it, deep inside.

She had... she had... she had really done it.

He didn't know how to feel. He knew that she would make him pay, but *this*... to transform him into an Arcan. It was almost too much. He was furious with her, enraged, indignant and flabbergasted, but he was also bitterly, bitterly disappointed and crestfallen. Betrayed. He felt betrayed. He had *trusted* her, and this was how she repaid that trust. She had attacked him—even now the memory of the pain of her fangs ripping into him made him mentally cringe—had taken *everything* from him. She took his magic, she took his humanity, and because of that, she took his freedom. It wouldn't take long for someone to try to capture him, since he was an uncollared Arcan. He would be hunted like an animal.

And yet... he had *agreed* to this. He had his own share of blame for it. He had blindly believed that the fox was benevolent, that she would never do something this terrible to him, but he had been horribly, horribly wrong. He had allowed her to set her own price, and now she was punishing him for his foolish supposition. This was a *lesson*, no different from the others she had taught him, punishing him for his stupidity, and now she was going to twist that initial punishment to teach him other wisdom. A small part of him could appreciate the worth of the lesson, but the rest of him *hated* her for what she did to him.

It was the shattering of an illusion. He had thought that there was something special between them, some special relationship. He saw her as a... a mother figure. Ever since the death of his mother, she had been there, always watching him, always with him. Even when he thought she was a delusion and was afraid of her, she was still there, a part of his life. When he found out what she was, he felt like he mattered to her, that she felt about him the

way he felt about her. He was wrong. Trinity, was he *wrong*. Though he'd seen her as an authority in which he could trust with his life, she saw him as nothing but... but... an *asset*. She was teaching him, but she did not love him. He was her *possession*, almost as much her slave as Whisper had been a slave before he freed her.

By the Father's grace, what a twisted irony. He had freed Whisper, only to deliver her into a different kind of bondage. The Shaman weren't free. Not by a country minar. They were the slaves of the spirits, every much the way other Arcans were slaves to humanity.

He would be through with her forever, but for the fact that she now held his very humanity, and had offered to give it back to him should he please her. So he was trapped. Trapped. He had to do her bidding to get back what she took from him, or he would live out his life as an Arcan.

He began to feel his body. He was totally drained, exhausted, and his whole body throbbed with every beat of his heart. But there was *more* to feel now. He could feel the tail, laying limply, felt where it came out of the base of his bare buttocks. He was naked, he realized. He felt the ears, just higher than where they used to be, larger, feeling air ghosting the fur on them, which was a creepy sensation. He was feeling things on parts of himself he didn't have when he was last awake.

He became aware of... smells. Lots of smells. They were much sharper than he remembered, and there were more of them. He didn't smell grass and pine trees and dirt, though, he smelled hay, wood, and waste, a stale stench that was right under his nose. He felt a strange motion under him, a jarring, rocking motion. His other senses began to return. A strange buzzing in his ears overwhelmed his hearing, until it faded and he became aware of the sound of wood creaking, and the faint sound of chains rattling. Then he heard soft voices, whispers, behind and to the sides of him, and became aware of light striking his closed eyelids, light that shifted and moved.

Voices. Men talking, but it was muffled, like he was several paces away from them.

He wasn't in the meadow. He was... somewhere else. Someone must have found him.

And if someone found him, then—

He jerked violently, consciousness roaring back into him. He opened his eyes and found himself in an open-barred cage, with four others. They shrank back as he took a ragged, powerful breath, but then something grabbed him by the neck and caused him to slam back to the—the floor.

He took a ragged breath, seeing stars, and felt his long, sharp claws scabble on wood, gouging it. He panted, feeling weak, his neck hurting, then slowly dragged himself off the floor, his head hanging limply. He lowered his nose to the straw-strewn wood, seeing the hazy, blurry image sharpen to his eyes. He had a manacle on each wrist, chaining his hands together, as well a chain leading to a steel collar around his neck that was chained to a ring on the wooden floor. That was what grabbed him by the neck; he'd pulled the chain taut.

It was no room. It was a wagon, a wheeled cage. A warm breeze ruffled through his fur, blowing in through the bars of the cage, a cage with bars on three sides and rings bolted to the floor to which chains were secured. He blinked several times as he finally got his eyes under his control, seeing vibrant colors and sharp light, almost thinking for a moment that he was seeing through spirit sight, but it was just Arcan eyes. They must see differently than human eyes, for things seemed... clearer. Sharper. His eyesight was better. He was caged with four others, two female canines, a huge bull with two sets of chains on his hands, and a very nervous-looking rabbit. He tried to rise up on his knees, but he had trouble making his legs work. It felt... weird, down there. Strange. He looked back and saw that his legs were Arcan, with the elongated foot and slightly shortened lower leg, but which still made him

taller by average than he had been should he stand erect. His feet looked... deformed, with the wide ball of his foot and the large, nasty-looking black hooked claws on his toes. He looked at his hand and saw that it too looked differently, looking down his own muzzle at it, slightly larger and a tiny bit wider, covered with fur, with pads on his palm and fingertips. His nails were gone, fur covering his fingertips except for the pad and a long, hooked claw, looking like a cat's claw but fixed in place, unable to retract.

She had turned him into one of her own. She changed him into a shadow fox Arcan.

His first impulse was to channel cold into the post to shatter the chain holding him, but her words haunted him. She would withhold her blessing from him, she would deny him his powers, allowing him only spirit sight... which would get him instantly killed should the humans see his eyes glowing. Glowing eyes were the mark of the Shaman, and he no longer had the assumption that a human couldn't be a Shaman. Now, if anyone saw his glowing eyes, they would correctly deduce the truth of him in an instant and he would be slaughtered. That was something he would use only as a last resort.

"Oi! Bayer, it's awake!"

He shook his head and looked up. A small man with greasy hair was riding a horse by the wagon, a moving wagon. Another man looked back into the cage from the driver's seat. Beyond the man, Kyven could see farms and buildings, and a look further ahead showed the tiled roof buildings of a city. Was it Cheston? Had he only been out for hours, or had he been unconscious for days?

"That's our little meal ticket," the man on the wagon chuckled. "Told ya he was worth keepin'! We'll get a hell of a lot more for him than we would just for that pelt! A black-furred fox! If some rich guy doesn't buy him cause he's so exotic-looking, The furriers will make us rich bidding for that fur of his!"

What they were talking about dawned on him, and it filled him with panic. They were going to sell him to someone that would kill him for his fur! He again tried to get up, and again pulled the chain taut, but he was expecting it this time. He tried to get one of his legs to work, clumsily trying to set his foot under him, but not quite sure how his foot worked now that it was different.

"And I told you he couldn't be wild," a third man said calmly as he rode up behind the first man's horse. He was carrying a long, slender red rod negligently in the hand not holding his reins. "He was smart enough to wear clothes to look like a tame Arcan. The wild ones don't have those kinds of brains."

He tried to indignantly declare that he wasn't an animal, but nothing came out but strange growling sounds. His jaws were now entirely different, and his attempts to speak were met with a pitiful sound as a different body tried to comprehend instructions that no longer worked to produce the desired result.

"I'll bet he slipped a collar and escaped. They never go far when they do. Can't live by themselves," the short man sniggered.

"Well, he's ours now, and that fine pelt of his is going to make us a pretty chit."

He would *not* be skinned for a rich woman's dress! He put a foot under him, finally figuring it out, put both hands on the chain around his neck, then strained every muscle in his body as he pulled. Though he was now an Arcan, he was still highly conditioned and monstrously strong, and he applied that strength now, pulling inexorably at the post driven through the wood of the bottom of the wagon. The wood under him creaked ominously, and then it split with a loud *crack*, sending him tumbling over backwards as the chain and post shot up into the air. The chain dropped back on top of him as he squirmed around and got back on his hands and knees, as the other four shied away from him.

"Holy shit! Stop the wagon!" the tall one with the rod called. The wagon pulled to a stop as the two men looked in with a mixture of amusement and surprise. Kyven grabbed the chain attached to the manacle on his neck and took up a length of it in his chained hands, because he knew what was coming next. The tall one with the rod turned his horse and lowered it, aiming to jab Kyven with the end of that thing. The Arcans called them *pain sticks*, he recalled, and he had a pretty good idea of what they did. He watched the end of the stick with intent eyes, and when it came between the bars and reached for him, he reacted. The free post of the chain lashed out like a whip and struck the tip of the device, and there was a brilliant flash of light and a loud *BANG* that thundered down the street. The pain stick was shattered by the blow, and its alchemical power exploded from the tip. Kyven was blown back against the bars on the far side, but the man was unseated from his horse, which bleated in fear and bolted down the street.

"Holy shit, he's fast!" the small man said with a laugh. "Strong little fuck, too!"

"Little fuck, he broke my stick!" the man on the ground growled as he got up, reaching for a shockrod in a holster on his belt. Kyven had a much better understanding of how those worked than the man did. The metal bars around him would deflect the lightning, so long as he stayed away from them. He immediately situated himself in the center of the wagon, which was too low for him to stand up, so he stayed down on all fours, just like an Arcan, literally *growling* at the man as he leveled his shockrod at him.

"Brend, put it away," the man on the wagon said simply. "Go get your horse."

Those other men were out of his reach. *That one* was not. Freed from the post, Kyven had full range of the entire cage, and he could *easily* reach out and grab that one. That was a fact that seemed lost to the two men sitting on that bench. The other four Arcans all cowered on the floor, even the huge bull, but Kyven was not surrendering his pelt without one hell of a fight. Kyven turned and lunged, his black-furred, clawed hand erupting between the bars, then his hand pulled back, claws punching into the waistcoat of the man Bayer and slamming his back against the bars. The driver shouted in surprise and bailed off the wagon, and there were quite a few screams and sudden shouts around him.

They were in the middle of town, and all the citizens on the street had stopped to watch.

Kyven growled as he tried to speak, trying to get a feel for it. His tongue worked the same way, though it was longer, but his lips now went all the around his muzzle, and were more chops than lips. They were semi-prehensile, though, letting him try to seal out the sides while the front and his tongue tried to work together to make coherent sounds. It wasn't easy. What came out of his mouth was a lisping growl, almost incoherent, but there was just enough there to be understood. "Oooophen sthe caaage. Ooophen. Ophen now!"

The man actually chuckled, quite fearlessly. "Certainly. Sandin, open the cage door. Let's see how far he thinks he can get."

"Bayer, he ain't got no collar!" the small man protested. "If someone else catches him, we lose—"

Kyven howled in pain when something white-hot punched into his side, a pain that was almost mind-shattering in its intensity. He recoiled and fell backwards, tearing away the man's waistcoat and leaving bloody gashes on his chest as he fell back into the cage hunched around his side, almost convulsing from the aftereffects of the. A fourth man he hadn't seen had pushed a second pain stick through the bars and jabbed him with it. It was—holy Trinity, how did they survive those things?

His arms shaking, he tried to roll up onto his hands and knees, but another explosion of mind-shattering agony tore through his back. He flinched away violently from that contact, and his mind swam in a haze of pain and disorientation. He felt hands grab the chains hold-

ing his wrists together, but he was in too much pain to respond to knowing that they were inside the cage now, they had his neck chain in hand. He felt himself being dragged by that chain through the cage, then there was a much duller pain when he felt someone kick him in the back. He felt the foot stomp his head much more clearly, leaving him dazed and unable to fight back. He shakily tried to move, but his brain wouldn't work, and the sounds and sights and smells swirled in his brain like soapy water in a laundry tub.

When he regained his senses, he was cinched up against the cage. The chain around his neck was pulled taut, keeping his head against the bars, and holding his head against the very base of the bars, near the floor, at an awkward angle that made it hard for him to do anything or gain any kind of leverage. His feet were now bound, tied to the bars, and he was partially on his side and partially on his stomach, since his hands were now chained behind him instead of in front of him. The sight before his eyes was his own muzzle and a sideways view of the bars and floor and the crowd beyond them, pointing at him and talking among themselves.

"Think this one might go for something other than his pelt," the man Bayer said calmly from out of his field of vision. "He's strong, fast, and clever. May have to see if the Pens is interested in him."

"It has an attitude problem," the man whose stick he'd broken growled, and he yelped when something hit him hard in the back of his hip, dangerously close to his tail.

"Brend got his butt kicked by an Arcan," a fourth, new voice called tauntingly, a female voice.

"It broke my fucking stick! You know how much those cost?"

"Your own fault, Brend," Bevan said calmly. "He was loose in the cage, you should know better than to try to stick them when they can see it coming and can do something about it. You should have just held its attention and let Milli stick him from behind. Buying another one will teach you a lesson, just as much as these love marks he gave me were my lesson to get out of his reach when he got free. I'll live with my lesson, you live with yours."

How bitter those words were to him now. *Teach him a lesson.*

His mind worked feverishly as he tried to figure a way out of this. He couldn't move like this; he'd break his own neck if he tried to squirm to where he could get leverage to free his feet. He was stuck, stuck like that until they untied him, and then they'd have those brutal pain sticks ready to jab him if he tried anything.

For the first time in his life, Kyven felt utterly *helpless*. He was completely in their power, at their mercy... and they had no mercy. He could scream at them that he was not an Arcan, but they wouldn't believe him. He could try to fight, but they'd just lay him out with those pain sticks, where just a single touch would put him in such agony that he'd be helpless. And if he fought too much, if he was too much trouble, they'd just kill him and skin him and sell his pelt, which they seemed to think would be quite valuable.

It was a terrifying situation. He was worth just as much to them dead as he was alive, and they'd have no qualms over killing him and taking the money for his pelt rather than seeing how much they could get for him alive. And there was nothing he could do about it. He was powerless. The fox had destroyed his life and abandoned him to fate in a world where fate was cruel. He could do nothing.

The knowledge of that made his shoulders slump, and he sagged to the floor of the cage in sudden despair. He was a slave now. A slave. Before, he always rather childishly wondered why the Arcans didn't just *do* something about it. He wondered why they were so broken, and pitied them because they seemed weak. But now he was starting to understand. What else could they do? What else could he do? He could fight them, but that would earn him certain death. Or he could comply, at least for now, and hope that he would find an opportunity

to escape.

Yes, that's what he had to do. Live now, fight later. But the instant he saw an opening, he was taking it.

But the realization was still... numbing. For the first time in his life, he had no real control, was utterly at the mercy of others, who had no mercy towards him. To them, he was *just an Arcan*. An animal, a tool, to be bought and sold like tobacco, then killed and butchered like cattle when the fancy struck them. He had no rights, he had no status other than property, had had nothing but his wits and his spirit sight to try to get him out of this.

He would get out of this. He would show that fox bitch that he wouldn't give up. She valued guile and deceit, well, he'd use that to get himself out of this. They wouldn't keep him in chains forever.

The wagon rolled through the streets without incident. Kyven watched the world outside go by, and all he could think of was that just yesterday, he could have walked down those streets without a single eye glancing at him. He had been *free*. But now he was on the other side of the bars, under the thumb of these people, having no idea where they were taking him or what they would do with him. Was there a skinning knife waiting for him when the wagon stopped? Would they simply stab him in the back, or cut his throat so as not to damage his pelt? Crush his skull with a club? He had no idea. He couldn't see anything, just the street beyond and the legs of the other four Arcans in the cage. They stayed together, he saw. They had enough play in their chains to huddle together, and that was what they were doing, sitting almost on top of each other... which was what the females on the ship did, both when they were in their cages and after he freed them. He didn't see why they did it. It made no sense to him, unless they were just seeking comfort with one another.

Small comfort.

The wagon stopped. Kyven almost dreaded hearing them dismount their horses, heard them moving around. He heard the door of the cage unlock, heard voices talking. "Not many this time, Bayer."

"True, but we got ourselves a prize," the man Bayer responded as booted feet appeared in front of him. "Look at that fox."

"That's a fox?" the unknown voice called, then laughed. "Yeah, sure is, isn't it? A fox with black fur and white markings? Rare. The furriers are going to drive up the price on him."

"He's spunky," Bayer noted, and the other voice laughed. Kyven felt very offended at being thought of as *spunky*.

"I see that. He did that to you?"

"Ah-yup. The scouts for the Pens might be interested in him. He ripped the eye ring out of the cage floor, and he was fast enough to break a pain stick before it could hit him. He's got some potential."

"I'll make sure to make note of that to them when they come look at the stock," that voice called.

"Is the next block auction still tomorrow?"

"Yah, it's on schedule," the voice answered as he saw the other Arcans pulled out of the wagon, leaving him alone.

"You men, be careful with that one!" Bayer called as Kyven felt tugging at his feet. "He's got some claws on him, and he'll stripe you if you're not paying attention! See?"

That caused some laughter around the cage. Kyven felt strange clinking vibrations in the heavy ring around his neck, and then something was crammed over his face. It was a leather muzzle, he realized, preventing him from opening his jaws, the leather straps holding his jaws together. After they had him muzzled, his head came free of the cage when they re-

leased the chain from his collar. His cramped neck throbbed as it was freed from the awkward position, but a boot came down against his muzzle, applying painful pressure and threatening to break some of his teeth as he felt his feet freed from the bars. Something was attached to the steel collar around his neck, and then the boot holding his head down was taken away. His collar now had a long, sturdy pole attached to it, and the burly man on the other end pulled on it to urge Kyven off the floor. Rough hands grabbed his chained wrists and yanked on him as the pole urged him up, which caused him to try to get his feet under him. He still didn't know how to work his feet very well, so he very shakily rose up on his feet, bowed over because the cage was too short to let him stand fully erect, and then he was literally dragged out of the cage by that pole when his feet slid out from under him. He flopped to the ground, but painful pressure on his neck forced him again to his feet.

He didn't know how to walk. The men around him that he could see were laughing when he shuffled and stumbled, falling down repeatedly because he didn't understand how his feet worked. He fell down again, then again, then again, but on the third time someone kicked him in the ribs, blasting the air out of his lungs and making him fall on his side. "Get up!" came a growling call, and the pole attached to his neck yanked painfully on him, threatening to break his neck if he did not follow its motion. He did so woozily, trying to find his breath as the pole attached to his neck pushed him forward from behind, almost making him fall down again as he tried to make his feet work, tried to figure out how to walk on his altered legs.

Toes. It was all about the toes. He stopped trying to walk on his whole foot and concentrated only on his toes. He rose up a several fingers in height when he went up on his toes, but it helped *tremendously*. He stopped stumbling and shuffling, and started walking more steadily, if not very gracefully. But he stopped falling down as he moved on shaky, uncertain legs, and that was a little victory.

He was pushed through a stone-paved courtyard and into a large, foul-smelling building. He was stopped by a small, reedy-looking woman who affixed some kind of little tag to the steel collar around his neck, then was pushed down a large aisle that had many cages on both sides on four stories, all of them with Arcans in them. The upper stories had metal catwalks in front of the cages, and it was very quiet in the place. As he was pushed forward, he glanced into the cages. Some cages only had one or two, some had nearly ten, all of them wearing steel collars with little tags on them. The cages had plaques on them that he could read, an alpha-numeric system of identifying cages. He was brought to a cage that had the same four Arcans that had been in the wagon, and the four of them looked up with dull eyes as the escort opened the door. The door had a curious horizontal slot in its edge, whose function was apparent as he was pushed inside and then the door was closed. He was yanked back against the door, and he felt a hand remove his muzzle, then he felt the pole being disconnected from the collar. When he felt it pull away, he was jabbed in the back by a stick, flinching violently from that contact for fear it was a pain stick, but it was just the end of a small baton. He staggered into the small cell, almost stepping on the feet of one of the two female canines, then heard the men who had put him there walk away.

Just like that, he was left and forgotten.

Immediately, he bent down and looped his chained hand around his legs, getting them out from behind him, wincing when he pulled some hairs out of his tail that caught on the chain links. The limb dropped back down and began to move by itself as he turned around and looked out into the aisle. There was nothing to look at but a stone wall on the far side, not even a window. The inside of the cage was only about ten paces by ten paces, cramped for five people, with nothing but a bare floor and a small grilled area and hole back against the

wall in the corner, near which none of the others was sitting. Looking through the bars into the other cages, he saw almost all the Arcans in all the other cages were sitting or laying in them, staying very silent. He could hear some whispering, but it was very faint. He prowled the cage, but saw that it was solidly built, and the hole led to a pipe running with pungent waste. A look up showed a similar large pipe running over the cage ceilings over them, which was the sewer pipe for the second floor.

He could see no easy way out, and the other four gave him fearful looks. No doubt they thought they'd been caged with a Touched Arcan, a crazy male that was violent and contrary. Needless to say, without food or water, and with his cellmates afraid of him, this was going to be a very unpleasant stay. Unpleasant for them because they were afraid, unpleasant for him because... they were Arcans. He had no idea what to say to them, how to talk to them. He didn't know how they acted outside of what he'd seen as a human, and he had little doubt that how they acted outside of the public eye was quite different. He looked at them, and had no idea what he was supposed to do, what he was supposed to say. Clearly, he had already frightened them and that seemed to put him out in their minds, from the defensive body language. Was he supposed to greet them? Was he allowed to sit with them, or had he committed some cultural sin in their eyes and would be shunned by them?

Well, one part of the fox's intent was starting to show itself here. If he had no idea how to relate to the Arcans on their own level, well, some small part of him could see why he was here. But he still hated her for doing this to him.

Unsure of what else to do, he stepped in as far as he could without stepping on their legs and hunkered down. He found that sitting on his haunches was quite easy. He remained silent, uncomfortable with looking at them, so he instead studied his own hands. They were covered with short, thick black fur, with slightly longer and thicker fingers than he remembered, with rough black pads on his palms and fingertips. He had claws on the tips of his fingers, growing out from the top centers of each tip, where they hooked down and ended in a point, a very sharp point. His fingers were every bit as agile and nimble as they'd been when he was human, and a few tests showed that he still had his manual dexterity. The claws made it a bit tricky to close his fists, since they didn't retract, but he could do it if he didn't curl his fingers into his palm. His claws were actually... sensitive. He could feel vibrations and pressure in them when he touched them that told him when they were in contact with something. The centers of the claws, he realized, were alive, like the quick of a fingernail, and he could feel vibrations and pressure in them that actually made the claws sensitive, not dead like a fingernail would be. He looked down at one of his feet. It was wider across the ball, looking like any Arcan's foot, with large, long, nasty-looking claws on the tips of his toes, that were also sensitive.

Without anything else to do, he practiced. He had a tail now, and he had no idea how it worked. The other four looked on at him in confusion and speculation as he seemed to be mystified by his tail. He stared at the white-tipped, bushy tail for hours, watched it sway back and forth, getting a feel for what it felt like when it moved. Then he probed what of it he could reach with his hands, comparing what he was feeling under his claws to what he was feeling in his tail. He approached the problem with all the logic of a crystalcutter, first analyzing, then executing. He analyzed the tail, the sensations of its movement, then he executed, quickly getting an understanding of this new appendage's movement and range of motion. It was remarkably flexible, he discovered, almost capable of looping back on itself, but not so flexible he could tie it in a knot.

It was then that Kyven was introduced to one of the more humiliating aspects of being caged. He had to relieve himself, and there was absolutely no privacy in the cage. He resisted

the urge for as long as he could, but then could no longer hold it off. He found that defecating when one had a tail made the process... delicate. It was good he'd worked with his tail enough to have control over it, both keeping it out of the way and also keeping it off the floor as he endured performing what was a private act to him in plain view of anyone who cared to look.

At sunset, footsteps and the tapping of wood on stone startled him out of his exercises, and the four others in his cell seemed to take notice of it as well. A quick glance down the line showed him that other Arcans too took note of them, and were edging towards the backs of their cells. Kyven didn't know why they were doing it, but he wasn't about to ignore it. He scrambled back against the back wall, hunkered over the hole the others had been using to relieve themselves, then he dropped down onto all fours, his hands on the cool stone in the hot, muggy prison as the makers of those footsteps came into view through the bars. It was a trio of men, all wearing very expensive black waistcoats and twill pants, and one of them was carrying a cane. Two of them were older, and the third was very tall, burly, and with sandy brown hair that was cut short and sharply. These were men of means.

They stopped in front of their cell and looked in. "This is it, sir," the uniformed guard told the three of them, pointing into their cell. "As you can see, he has very exotic coloration. Black fur, with white tips on his ears and tail, a white ruff, and those green eyes. Quite unique for a gray fox. Some fellows in the office speculate he's some kind of mutation."

"Very well. I'd like to get a better look at him," the oldest of the three said. "Open the cage."

"Ah, he's a bit wild, sir. Let me get a handler."

"Poppycock. These animals won't lay a finger on me. Open the cage now."

"But sir--"

"Now."

The uniformed man sighed, and stepped up with the key. "I want it known I do this under protest, sir," he said. "This Arcan took a piece out of the hunter that brought him in."

"Then your hunter has no inkling how to handle these animals," the old man snorted as the door was unlocked. The old man marched right in fearlessly, just as Kyven had done to the females on the boat, showing no fear at all. But the main difference was that Kyven was not an Arcan. He wasn't about to cow to the man, nor would he show him his teeth and be a good little slave. With his hands chained together, there wasn't much he could do with his claws and still keep his balance, but he now had a mouth full of very sharp teeth, and jaws large enough to bring them to bear. The man came right at him, but when Kyven hunkered down and bared his fangs at the old man, he stopped uncertainly. When he took another step forward, Kyven lunged at him, going low, his jaws snapping just fingers from the man's ankle as he scrambled backwards.

He then rose up to his full height and glared down at the old man, showing him just *who* was the one that was afraid in the cell.

"Oh, a feisty one," the younger of the two older men laughed. "I'd be tempted to buy him just to break him!"

"You'll be bidding against the furriers, Warren," the youngest of them said. "There's already talk of them trying to get him."

"Ridiculous," the cane wielder snorted. "You don't skin the golden goose! This is a prime specimen for the breeding pens." He looked to the uniformed man. "Can he talk?"

"The hunter says that he can, but not well. The hunter picked him up in the wild, so we think he grew up tame but slipped his collar and went wild before he was fully grown."

"Wrhy donn' you assk mme?" Kyven slurred, tired of being treated like he wasn't even

there. The other four Arcans, though, were giving him strangely fearful looks.

"Well, I think there's your answer, Dad," the youngest chuckled.

"He is a cheeky one, isn't he? Definitely wild," the oldest of them said from a safe distance, then he left the cage and the handler locked it again. "So, the short-sighted furriers are interested in him?"

"He *does* have a gorgeous pelt, sir," the uniformed man said simply.

"But if he's a mutated gray, odds are his coloration will breed. I say, Staven, do we have any female grays?" he asked as the four men started walking back down the aisle.

Well, that was *offensive*. He knew that people treated Arcans like animals, like they didn't matter, but having it done to him was putting it in an entirely new light. They talked about him like he wasn't there, or like he didn't matter... and of course, to them, he didn't. Even talking about a furrier buying him to kill him for his fur didn't matter to them, for not only did they feel that he could do nothing about it, the fact that he might object had probably never crossed their minds.

After all, he was *only* an Arcan. An animal, easily replaced. His only attribute that even made them pay attention to him was his unusual coloration.

He padded back out off from the toilet hole, then hunkered down, and then laid down across the cell from the other four. He was still a little angry and indignant, but he wasn't used to that. Always before, he wanted to avoid attention, to not be bothered, because he didn't want people to discover his secret. But now, ironically enough, he had his wish. Now, he was *nobody*, just another Arcan, a being discounted by humanity as an animal, and not understanding Arcans enough to seem to have them want anything to do with him. He was truly alone now, where nobody would care about him even if he wanted them to. The fox had abandoned him, the humans thought he was nothing, and the Arcans were afraid of him because he didn't act like them.

He was alone now.

He put his chin on the backs of his folded hands and closed his eyes, feeling just a little sorry for himself. It wasn't a total loss, though. The fox said she'd--

Fuck her. She stripped him of his humanity, he didn't even want to think of her right now. He'd change his tune in a few days for sure, but for right now, the wound was too raw, too deep. He loved her, *trusted* her, and this is what she did to him. Changed him into an Arcan, took everything from him, then taunted him with the chance to get it back if he did what she wanted, enslaving him to her. Teach him wisdom, bullshit. She wanted a slave, plain and simple. She wanted to punish him.

Guile and deceit. Trinity, did she ever deceive *him*.

"Were you really free?" came a bare whisper. He opened his eyes and saw one of the canine females laying with her head just by his, with brown eyes and tawny short fur, and a black nose.

"In a whay," he slurred quietly. "But yes, I whas frreee."

"You've never been caged, have you?" the other female asked in realization as she slid over and laid down with her head near his.

"Nno."

"Are you Shaman?" the first one asked in a voice so faint he had to strain to hear it.

He closed his eyes and put his head back down. "I could ha' been," he said. "But the spirrits betrayed me."

"How could they betray you?" the second female asked. "They look over us!"

"Then whry arre we herre?" he demanded, in a sudden loud voice which made the two female flinch and cower from him. He sighed and put his head back down. "I trusted my to-

tem, and she betrayed me,” he said in despair. “She denies me now, and blocks me from my magic. I am alone now.”

“We are none ever alone,” the bull told him in a sonorous, low tone. “As we walk this hard path, we always have life and each other.”

“You can’t be alone when there’s five of us in here,” the rabbit added with a quirky smile.

“You must be terrified,” the first female said, putting a hand on his shoulder. He flinched under her touch, but said nothing. “There may be no tomorrow, Shaman, so take what you can from today,” she told him, sliding against him, putting her arm over his back, nestling her muzzle close against his and nuzzling him.

“I am no longer Shaman,” he said in a tiny voice. “Please, never call me that again.”

“Do you have a name?”

“Kyb-Kyb-” he took a breath. “Kyven.”

“Then take what comfort you can with us, Kyven. Who knows what the fates will bring on the block?”

He looked at her, and she took that opportunity to burrow her boxy muzzle under his sharp one, then just lay there in content silence. In a singular act, he understood the Arcan practice of huddling. They were taking comfort from each other, because that was all they had.

Each other.

The two females urged him off the floor and pulled him between them. They huddled with the large bull and the rabbit, a tangle of arms and legs of soft fur and gentle silence, and he truly did find some small measure of comfort. With them nestled against each other, it was almost possible to forget about the terrible position they were in. One of the females stroked his fur on his neck and back in a most pleasing manner, causing him to drift into a fitful, worried sleep.

Sunrise of the first full day of the rest of his life.

He was almost resigned now. His night was full of dreams, dark dreams where he was trapped in a cage in a city with light but no sun, full of shadowed buildings with no population. He was alone, trapped in the middle of an empty city, with no way out, screaming at the top of his lungs and shaking the bars, screaming, screaming... The nightmares had caused a fitful night, but the other Arcans in the cell with him took it with surprising compassion. They laid with him, against him, surrounding him with gentle warmth, hands touching him and soothing away the pain. It was almost exquisite, how gentle and kind they were, even in the face of their own uncertain futures. These Arcans were giving, kind, gentle, willing to help one of their own through his terrifying first night as a slave.

And they never once asked him what it was like to be free, almost as if they dare not even dream of such a thing.

When sunrise came, he was startled awake by the sound of their cell door opening. A bucket was dropped heavily by the door, and then it was closed. The bucket held dirty water, the first water they’d had since they’d been put in the cell. Though some ugly spats erupted in other cells over the water as it was dropped into their cages, the five of them were very calm about it. The other four let him drink first, which he had to take slowly and carefully. His jaws were different now, so he had to work out how to get the water from the bucket to his mouth without it spilling out through the sides of his maw. He had to literally lap the water up with his tongue, using his nearly prehensile tongue to scoop the water up into his mouth, then swallow it. He only drank enough to feel that would tide him over, not wanting to deprive the other four of anything on his account.

“Why do they fight?” Kyven asked in a whisper.

“Sometimes hunger or thirst overrides good sense,” the bull said sagely. “That, or there may

be too many for the water they left. When such things happen, the strong take what they can from the weak.”

Not long after they were watered, they watched as a quartet of uniformed men arrived at cells, opened them, and then pulled the Arcans out. They followed no pattern that Kyven could make out, but all the Arcans were very afraid of them when they showed up. “They take us to the block, where fate rolls the dice,” the bull said simply. “Some go to easy tasks with kind owners. Some go to the butcher’s block or the furrier’s pen, to await the day some human decides she would look good wearing our skins.”

“Easy for you to say that, big guy, you don’t have fur like mine,” the rabbit said with a nervous twitch.

“Then you will be joining the spirits before me,” the bull said philosophically. “And your troubles will be over.”

The uniformed men came to their door, two of them carrying those long, thick rods with hooks on the end, while the third wielded a pain stick and the fourth held the key. The key bearer opened the door, and the man with the pain stick edged in with it pointed at them as one of the handlers came in behind him. “On your feet!” one of them barked, which caused the other four to quickly start rising. Kyven was slower to stand, but he was the first to be taken. The hooked stick man advanced, grabbing him by his chained wrist, then pulled him forward and slammed him into the cage bars on the other side of the cell. He was held there with an elbow to the back of his head as he felt the hook being attached to his steel collar, then he was dragged out of the cell and marched forward. He was still a little awkward on his hybrid legs, walking unsteadily as he was taken out of the building and into the fresh air, into a brilliant summer morning where the sun rose over the buildings and ocean to the east, and the large square outside the building was filled with men, women, and attending Arcans along with cage wagons.

This was block day, he realized. The scheduled Arcan auction, and from the looks of it, he was the next one up for sale. He was manhandled up a flight of stairs, up onto a raised platform, and then held near a man wearing a blue waistcoat and gray pants. “And here’s a rare treat for you, ladies and gentlemen!” the barker boomed. “We have here a young male fox of unique coloration. Though we have no scientific proof, it’s believed by our vets that he’s a gray fox, but look at him, good Chestoners! His unique coloration is just the beginning! Though he was caught in the wild and will need taming, he’s strong enough to pull a ring post out of a cage floor, and was fast enough to break a pain stick before it could be used on him! How’s that for physical attributes! Put his prime condition together with his unique pelt, my friends, and you have a first class breeding stock Arcan up for bids, the kind you’d only see in the blue ring in Alamar! Turn him,” the barker called to the handlers.

Kyven tried to resist the idea of it, but the hook on his collar made it impossible. The handler turned him on the platform, showing him off to the assembled men and women.

“Has he been checked over by a vet?” someone called.

“Yes he has, my good man!” the barker called. “He has all his teeth, no injuries, and has no known parasites or diseases. He doesn’t even have fleas!” he said grandly.

“You’re just milking it now, Devier!” someone called, which made the throng laugh.

“As the Trinity looks down on me, come check for yourself if you doubt my words!” the barker called. “Though he was penned up with other Arcans, I doubt he’s been infested quite yet!”

Kyven had never considered the possibility of fleas... and it was a disturbing idea given how much fur he had.

“You said he was wild-caught?” a woman asked.

“That he was, ma’am!” he shouted in reply. “He’s not quite tame yet, I’m sorry to say, his only drawback. He *can* talk, though he sounds like a toddler, so he’s not stupid like most wild Arcans. But think of it as just a challenge on the road to owning a prize like this!” the barker said, pointing to Kyven. “I’ll open the bidding at fifty chits, ladies and gentlemen!”

Kyven stood there, then, and listen to his freedom get auctioned to the highest bidder. He had no idea who was who down in that crowd, which ones were the furriers that wanted him for his pelt and which was the agent of that one that wanted him to be breeding stock, but more than just two bid on him. Kyven listened with detachment and building ire as the bids went back and forth for almost five minutes, until someone made a bid for him for five hundred chits, which was a massive sum for an Arcan. The kennel in Atan had never sold an Arcan for more than a hundred chits. “Five hundred is the bid. Five hundred. Five hundred going once. Five hundred going twice. Sold to Master Arthur Ledwell for five hundred chits! See the secretary, Master Ledwell.”

Kyven was dragged off the platform and to an open area near the building where cages were parked. Some of them had Arcans in them, some did not. There were also several carriages parked near them. Kyven was dragged into a fenced pen area where another Arcan was, a mink Arcan being held down by two men. Kyven flinched violently when a third man came up and clubbed the mink in the skull with a heavy steel bar, which made the mink’s body jump and then sag. The man hit the mink several more times to make sure of it, and then the two men picked up the body and tossed it into a high-fenced wagon that had *Coroba Furriers* painted on its side.

Seeing that made Kyven’s blood run cold. They’d sold him to a furrier! He was going to be killed for his pelt! No! He wasn’t going to die like this! He would not die like this! He instantly stopped, which caused the man holding the pole attached to his collar stumble, but Kyven didn’t allow his weight to push him forward. He slipped and fell, and Kyven used that momentary brace to slam his manacles down onto the wooden pole, shattering it and freeing him of the restraint of being held by the neck. The two men that had held down the mink turned and advanced on him, as did the third holding the steel bar, but Kyven was not going to just lay down and let them club him to death. He lunged at them with his claws leading, which caused the men to gasp and then turn to flee, but Kyven did not attack them. He instead put his hands down and tried to mimic the way he’d seen the wolf run all those days when he first left Atan, knowing what it looked like and trying to copy it. The wolf could run so incredibly fast when he did that, as fast as a horse, and Kyven needed that speed now if he was going to live through this!

It only took five strides to find the rhythm of it. He just had to bring his legs up past his hands and then push off, like jumping forward, then put his hands down when he came back to the ground and do it again. It was actually easier than walking on his legs. The manacles didn’t interfere with his running that way, and that allowed him to bound all the way across the pen before the man who had been pushing him with the pole had a chance to shout in alarm.

The fence. He worked out how to get over the fence, shortening a stride as he came up on it—

Something slammed into him from the side, something big and heavy. He saw a chaotic darkness and brown as he tumbled across the pen, then he yelped when his head struck a fencepost, leaving him dazed and unable to focus, unable to think clearly. He could only remember that he had to run, and his body responded to that hazy intent by causing him to try to roll over. But something snagged the chain holding his hands together, and then he felt himself get jerked to the side. Something came down over his legs, holding him down, but he

was too dazed to respond with anything more than a feeble attempt to get up, but that was still enough to dislodge whatever was on his legs. “Holy fuck, this one’s strong!” a voice droned, buzzing in his ears, then bright lights popped in his skull, and he knew no more.

He wasn’t dead. The pain in his head convinced him of that.

He became aware of the pain, and that awareness caused him to climb out of the black pit of unconsciousness. He became aware of rolling, of him gently rocking back and forth, of him laying on his stomach and side on something warm and hard, something that smelled of urine and sweat. He groaned and rolled fully onto his side, then opened his eyes.

He was in another cage wagon. He was no longer in the pen, or even the city, they were on a country road that split vast farms of short green plants growing in neat rows, as Arcans tended to them. They weren’t food plants. This was Cheston, and if they weren’t food plants, then that had to be a cotton plantation, where they grew the cotton from which many clothes and other things were made, like heavy denim. This time, he was careful to take full stock of what was around him. There were no horseback riders escorting the wagon. He saw only two figures in the seat at the front, separated from the small cage by just enough to prevent him from reaching out and grabbing the two. One was a human wearing a white waistcoat and wearing a white felt hat, and the other was a hulking Arcan of unknown breed, because he could only see its back. It was very big, though, with tan fur and a shaggy-furred tail that hinted that the Arcan was canine. Kyven realized that the Arcan was *driving*, and the white-garbed human was riding along in silence.

Kyven realized that he was no longer chained. His hands were free, and a quick check at his throat showed him that the steel collar was gone... but a new, more slender collar was in its place, a piece of metal that was curiously warm to the touch, tingling under his fingers.

He almost slumped. It was a collar. An alchemical collar, the instrument of control humans used to keep control of Arcan slaves. If he performed an action beyond the established parameters of the collar’s operation, it would punish him with an electrical jolt. The collars in Atan were set to zap the wearer if they went beyond established boundaries, penning them in, which was usually all it took to keep them obedient. But they could be set with other conditions. The collars the miners wore would punish the Arcans with a killing blast if they touched human blood, which seriously hindered any attempt to revolt. If they attacked their overseers and a single drop of his blood touched them, they were dead.

The sun was warm and the sky clear. He looked up to the sky, and felt bitter remorse. Just on the other side of those bars was freedom. Just on the other side of those bars he would be more than an animal, just on the other side of those bars, the horror of seeing an Arcan murdered for his pelt wouldn’t be burned into his memory. And part of his mind reminded him that that could have been *his* fate. It seemed that his break for freedom had caused someone else to buy him from the furrier, because he was still alive. It was just on the other side of those bars... but it was more than a world away. Even if he did get out, he was an Arcan now, abandoned by his totem and left to the cruel whim of fate, and he’d have a hard time finding freedom out in that *free* world, not when men would hunt him to make a slave, and some men would try to kill him for his pelt.

There was a touch on his foot. He turned and looked back over his shoulder, and saw another Arcan. It was a female coyote, her eyes dim and hooded, sitting against the bars with a casual slouch that told him that the young female had done this before. He saw that she had no manacles, no steel collar, no nothing. She didn’t have a collar like he did. She was completely nude and unrestrained, and rather handsome after a fashion, with larger breasts than was normal for Arcan females—they all tended to be a little flat-chested—and very thick fur with a quite pleasant coloration of gray, brown, and white in sleek bands along her sides. He

crawled over to her in the small cage, not having to go very far at all, and sat down beside her, seeking her out. She accepted him, putting her clawed hand on his arm, then reaching up and putting her hand around his muzzle, holding it shut and shaking her head.

What did that mean? That she couldn't talk, or that he shouldn't? He wasn't sure, so he decided to play it both ways, and did not try to speak to her.

She huddled against him, comforting each other, and he lowered his head as she put her head on his shoulder. Where were they going? If they weren't bought by a furrier, then who was that human, and what was in store for them? Working the cotton fields like the other Arcans? Was he off to the life of being breeding stock, like those other men were talking about? Or was this furrier the kind that kept his pelts alive until he needed them? Did the Pens buy him, and he was on his way to a short, violent life fighting for the amusement of the spectators in gladiatorial combat, Arcan against Arcan?

He got no answers from the man riding in front. He rode along in comfortable silence.

His headache eased as the wagon rolled along through the morning, as field after field of cotton went by, and Arcans and human overseers on horseback took note of the wagon as it passed. They crossed a wooden bridge over a small river, and yet more fields separated from the road by a whitewashed rail fence. A human on horseback, a young man with blond hair wearing a straw hat and sturdy work clothes, trotted his horse up to the fence and matched pace with the wagon. "Master Ledwell!" the man called. "I thought you were buying some new workers?"

"Change of plans, Bobby, change of plans. I found some very good ones today. Look at the male."

The young man did so. "Is that a fox?"

The old man chuckled. "Beautiful coloration, isn't it?" he answered. "And he's *wild*."

The young man chuckled. "You and your projects, Master Ledwell," he said. "So he's a resale?"

"Oh yes," he nodded. "He'll be shipped to Alamar as soon as he's ready."

"What about the female? Is she wild too?"

"No, she's just rather handsome. I had to outbid Beston for her."

"Ah. He must not be too happy about that."

"That's half the reason I was doing it," the older man chuckled. "We'll try her out in the house and see how she does. If she doesn't pan out, I'll send her to the fields."

The coyote gave an audible sigh of relief, and flopped her head against his chest. She seemed to have had a good throw of the dice on the block, and had secured a decent life for herself.

"That's fine with me sir, but I really do need two or three more at the least, a good ten if I had my way. I barely have enough to keep up as it is."

"Corbley is still at the auction, Bobby. He'll bring some workstock along this afternoon. I just wanted to get these two here early, to keep from fielding offers for the male from Coroba and get the female out of Beston's sight before he lost his manners."

"Coroba? Why would he want *him*? Isn't that killing the golden goose?"

The older man chuckled. "Coroba was angling for the prestige of it, Bobby. If he kills the only male with a pelt like that, then there won't ever be another coat like the one made out of him. He could have sold it for thousands of chits."

"Well, why didn't he win the auction?"

"Because he was short-sighted, Bobby. He spent too many chits on minks, martens, foxes and rabbits before the male came to the block, and the bid went past what he had left. You know they take cash only there, they don't take promissories. You should have heard him

trying to borrow money from anyone in the crowd!" the man laughed.

"How much was he?"

"Five hundred," the older man answered. "Worth every chit, too."

The young man whistled. "Five hundred for an Arcan? You're a brave man, Master Ledwell. I wouldn't spend that much on an Arcan."

"He would have went for five thousand in the blue ring of Alamar," the old man said simply. "I'm amazed the hunters didn't think to take him there instead of bringing him to Cheston, that was stupidity on their part. Once I'm done, that's where he's going. A fox with that pelt and his kind of physical prowess? They'll fight over him. I'll get great returns back for this investment."

"He gray or red?"

"From the claws, I'd say he's a mutated gray," the old man said. "That's what the kennel's vet believes, at any rate. I'm inclined to agree."

"Let me get back to work then, sir," the mounted man said.

"Very good, Bobby. Good day."

"Good day, sir."

So that was his fate. The man bought him as an *investment*. He'd be sent to Alamar and sold in the famous blue ring. He guessed he should be a little flattered over that. Only the most prime Arcans went to the blue ring.

The wagon literally went to the end of the road, for the road went through a hole in the fence and up a long lane with cotton fields on both sides. It pulled up to a huge plantation house that had several Arcans out front, beating on a large rug hanging on a clothesline with shaped wire paddles to the side of the house. The front yard had a tiled walkway flanked by large trees leading up to a huge front porch. There were many buildings behind the plantation house, showing how large and successful this farm was. The wagon went around the main house and into a large yard in the back, where a huge barn and large building flanked each other on one side, and a series of small huts were strung along the edge of a cotton field on the other. There were quite a few Arcans there, mainly very young ones, and two burly human men watching over them as two young girls in pretty dresses sat on a porch table, pencils in their hands as they wrote on something on the tables.

The wagon stopped, and the hulking Arcan got down and went around, then helped the older man down. The Arcan was a wolf, a wolf with an unusual pelt, and looked every bit as big standing as he did sitting, towering over the small, thin man. He had pale skin and wrinkles around his eyes, with gray at his temples visible under his hat, and a gold chain going from pocket to pocket in his tailed waistcoat. "Bruno, take the coyote to the overseer and get her a house collar," the man said to the wolf. "Leave the fox in the cage for now."

The wolf nodded. He came around to the back of the cage and opened it, then leaned in and reached for them with huge, long arms. He grabbed the coyote by the ankle, and physically dragged her out. She gasped from the rough handling, but then the wolf set her down on the ground, let her go, and then pointed to a building with a huge paw on her back lightly, almost gently.

He could see it in her. She had no collar. She was outside the cage. She was not chained or restrained in any way. If she ran, she might reach the forest on the far side of the cotton field behind the house, might make it to safety. All that was between her and that forest was the wolf Arcan, whom she would have to outrun, and whatever workers might be in the fields that would try to stop her. He saw the speculation in her body language, then her shoulders slumped, and she obediently padded towards the building to which the wolf pointed, the wolf walking behind her.

But it wouldn't have really been a choice, Kyven realized. She was going to be working in a house, easy work, all because she was attractive to the human eye with her large breasts and handsome coloration. Her lot here would be much better than the uncertainty that lay beyond those trees, and she accepted the life she could see over the risk of a life she could not.

And after seeing that mink get brained right in front of him, just because she had beautiful fur, he couldn't blame her one bit.

Kyven noticed that the wolf didn't lock the cage door when he closed it, and the man didn't seem to notice. Well, he might be getting out of here sooner than he thought.

The older man gave Kyven a long, speculative look. "They said you can talk, fox," he said to him. "Why don't you tell me your name?"

Kyven said nothing, just staring at him.

"Don't have one, do you? Good. You don't need one," he said bluntly. "They said you're wild. Did you slip a collar, or were you born wild? And if so, where did you learn to talk?"

Kyven said nothing.

The man reached into his pocket and produced what looked like a golden pocketwatch from his pocket. He opened it, then glanced at Kyven and put his thumb to it.

The world exploded in pain. The collar seemed to assault him with it, sending shockwaves of agony through him, pain so intense he convulsed on the cage of the floor, losing control of his bladder. His head and feet banged on the wooden planking of the cage floor as he was assaulted with mind-shattering pain, and a strangled, growling howl escaped his muzzle.

It stopped. He collapsed to the floor, laying in a puddle of his own urine, his entire body feeling like he'd been boiled in oil.

"And you learn your first lesson, fox," the man said quite pleasantly, closing his little device and putting it back in his pocket. Kyven struggled to his hands and knees, his muscles trembling, his tail drooping over his buttocks and laying limply on the floor behind him and over his calf. "When a human gives you an order, you obey. Now, answer my question. Were you born wild?"

Kyven just gave him a cold look, but when the man started reaching for his little device again, fear overtook pride. "Ye—"

The world exploded again. Kyven howled, kicking his feet on the floor, claws gouging the wood, but it passed quickly, leaving him gasping for air, shaking hands reaching for the bars of the cage.

"Animals do not talk," the man said calmly. "Your collar will remind you of that. You were wild, Arcan, and that introduces into some of you a silly idea that you're more than what the Trinity made of you, tools to humanity, as the Trinity has declared you to be. You are an *animal*, Arcan, no different from a sheep or a cow or a chicken. We will use you as we see fit, and slaughter you when it pleases us.

"You are an animal, and animals do not talk, nor do they have names unless they earn them," he said, pointing to a chicken coop near one of the large buildings. "It is one of my few pleasures to take wild Arcans like yourself and tame you, remind you of your place in this world. When I send you off to Alamar, you will be a *proper* Arcan, compliant and *silent*. I may even give you a name. And you'll earn me a pretty chit or two, I might add.

"You should feel lucky, Arcan. You'll be a breeding stud for sure. Day after day of mating with females. Quite a lucky life for an Arcan, I would gather, if your kind gets any pleasure out of it. You'll have a soft life mating females to produce a new line of exquisite black-furred foxes, and I'll get ten times the return on my investment. I could send you on to that lucky life now, but you're wild, and I do adore taming Arcans," he said with a smile that was as dreadful as it was cold. "Once you're nice and broken, I'll send you on to Alamar. You'll

bring me both entertainment and profit, Arcan. Truly worth every chit I paid for you." He reached into the other pocket of his waistcoat and produced another watch-shaped device and opened it. "Well, not even lunchtime yet," he noted, closing what was clearly a real pocket-watch. "I think I'll leave you in there for a while, and let you think things over and fully appreciate things," he said, mainly to himself. "If you're entertaining enough, maybe I'll even feed and water you today, Arcan. Keep that in mind. You have to *earn* your food and water, and there's not much you can do to earn it in that cage," he said with a cold smile.

A murderous impulse washed through Kyven. If he could get his claws on the man, he'd tear him—

The world exploded into pain. His hands clamped down on the bars before him as the pain ripped through him in waves of agony, and then it ended after a few seconds, leaving him weak and shivering in the cage.

"Ah, so you thought to take a bite out of me, did you?" the man asked with a cold chuckle. "And so you discover the second function of your collar. It was made just for Arcans like you, fox. I paid two thousand chits for that collar, it's my special wild Arcan breaking collar. It will ensure that you'll be nice and tame when you leave this plantation. I could explain how it works to you, but I'll just leave those lessons for you to learn on your own," he chuckled. "But, as you just discovered, any time you think of harming your betters, it reminds you of your place."

The man walked up to the porch and talked to the two girls there, leaving Kyven in the cage, and desperately trying to control the desire to rip the man's head off. By the Father's grace, what a *bastard*. He got pleasure out of torturing Arcans, breaking them, making them docile, compliant little slaves. But it left Kyven in a very precarious situation. He was trapped in the cage, with the collar, and now he faced being broken, becoming what he'd hated and pitied in the Arcans he'd seen on the ship, the ones that would just sit and wait for the humans to come and take them back to captivity. That was what this man was going to try to do to him, make him just like them.

He was afraid now. He was very afraid.

Maybe being sold to the furrier may have been the better thing. At least then, it would have been over quickly.

He had nothing to do.

He lay on his side in the cage, near one corner, lazily looking out at the activity of the plantation as the day marched on. The man owned quite a few Arcans, and all of them were eerily silent, at all times. They went about their chores around the plantation house quickly and quietly, the ones working in the house wearing little maid dresses or steward suits of black and gray, but the Arcans who worked outside, in the buildings or the fields, were kept naked. That was an important distinction in Kyven's mind, that the man would clothe the Arcans working in his house but leave the rest nude.

He lay there, watched, and tried to ignore his hunger and thirst. He hadn't eaten for days and had only had that one drink of water in the kennel that morning. But hunger and thirst were hard to ignore when one had nothing to take his mind off of them.

He'd entertained the idea of escape once it got dark, since the cage door was unlocked, but he discovered the third function of the collar before that got very far, and instantly squelched any idea of it afterward. The collar wouldn't let him leave the cage. The one time he'd reached outside the bars more than half a rod, trying to catch a butterfly flitting near the cage, he was again punished with incredible pain, which was exacerbated by the fact that he didn't have the mental faculties to pull his hand back inside the boundaries of the cage. He lay there for long moments, eternities, until he managed to draw his hand back into the cage,

which made the pain stop. His howling and shrieks had brought the older man back out onto the porch, to watch and laugh as he talked to an older matron who had come out with him, a woman in her fifties with her gray hair done up in a severe bun, wearing a light blue dress. Kyven lay there panting, his chest heaving as he recovered from the intense ordeal, and that was when he realized just how helpless he was.

Kyven was strong, and had very sharp, tough claws. If the cage door had been locked, he could have gouged his way through the wood of the bottom of the cage easily, but to do so would kill him. The instant any part of him left the cage, he would be punished. He was trapped within the cage by the collar, and in a cruel twist, he had the *ability* to escape the cage were it not for the collar around his neck.

It was the cruelest of taunts. He was in an unlocked cage, but he could not escape from it. The collar around his neck was more effective than any bars or locks.

Trapped in the cage, he had nothing but his hunger and thirst as companions. The Arcans ignored him, wouldn't even look at him, and the humans just stared at him and chuckled or made comments, but they wouldn't come close to the cage. He had to keep his mind neutral when he looked at them, fearing another painful punishment from the collar should his desire to kill them creep into his mind.

He had nothing to do but watch. He watched the activity wane as the day became hot, a heat that didn't really bother him because of his thick, luxurious fur which insulated him from the heat despite being black, keeping him at a comfortable temperature despite a hot summer sun shining on him through the bars. He watched the Arcans come in about an hour before sunset, nearly a hundred of them, then line up in that open area between the big building and the huts and receive bowls from a large cauldron, bowls with the heavenly smell of food that wafted through the cage when the wind blew the right way, a smell that made his empty stomach growl and knot up.

The Arcans ate in total silence, and after they were done, some few of them bent to the task of cleaning the cauldron and the bowls while the rest retired to those small huts, three and four to a hut. After they were all inside, music began to come from the huts, which surprised Kyven. The master here thought Arcans were animals, yet allowed them to play music?

Strange paradox.

Music also came from the plantation house, the sound of a piano and a flute, playing a song he'd never heard before. It was lively and upbeat, a happy song, which introduced emotions into him that conflicted with his parched throat and empty stomach. He drifted to sleep with that music in his ears, for since he had nothing else to do but sit there and starve, sleeping seemed the only option to dull the hollowness inside.

He was awakened during the night by thunder. He awoke to find all lights out, and for the first time since the fox had betrayed him, he dared to use spirit sight... but not before making some pretty extravagant preparations. He gathered up all the straw he could find in the cage and put it against his eyes, which allowed him to see through it but dulled the glow of his eyes. With his eyes open to the spirits, he saw that everyone was asleep, both human and Arcan, and that no one was watching him.

Now was his only time to try anything.

He reached up and felt around his collar carefully. It was split into four sectors, with a knob at each border that held a crystal. It took four crystals to power the collar, which meant that the collar could have quite a few different abilities, powers, and functions. A single crystal could power the three abilities of which Kyven knew, so there was no telling what abilities the other three powered. It all had to do with how well the collar was built, how the alloys were set to focus the power of the crystals. If the collar cost two thousand chits, then Kyven

would bet that it had several dozen abilities over what he'd already seen.

Well, no alchemical device was worth much of anything if there was no crystal to power it. He had a great deal of experience with alchemical devices because of his cutting background, much more than most people outside of alchemists themselves. If he could figure out how the crystal settings opened, he could pull the crystals and be free of the limitations of the collar. His sensitive claws probed the device, but, to his dismay, found that it consisted of only two pieces, a top half and a bottom, and there was no catch or seam he could find on it to disconnect it or pull it apart. It didn't make much sense. The collar was too small to over his head, yet it was fixed at a set width, just slightly wider than his own neck. How did they get it on him? If he could figure that out, he could take it off.

There was... another option. He could burn out the crystals, make the collar exhaust them. That would mean intentionally being punished, face that agony over and over, until he used up the charge in the crystals and they shattered.

He shuddered just thinking about that. Burn out the crystals on purpose? Face the punishment until he burned them out? No. Hell no. *Fuck* no. He'd rather die than try that, because trying that would kill him, and he could think of less painful ways to die.

There was a flash of lightning, and a distant rumble of thunder. He looked up at the sky after closing his eyes to the spirits, grasping the bars, wishing with all his heart that it would rain.

That, at least, was given to him. It started as a sprinkle, and then developed into a storm, with lightning, thunder and wind. Kyven couldn't reach outside the bars, but he could get against the side of the cage that faced the wind and open his mouth, feeling the rain pound against his gums and tongue. He soaked it up like a withering plant, even licked the water streaming off the bars and off the floor of the cage, desperately doing anything he could to get as much water as possible. It rained for a merciful full half hour, from a gentle sprinkle to a pounding rain with strong wind and heavy lightning, which soaked Kyven through and gave him plenty of water to drink. The wind abated after a while, and the heavy rain reduced to a steady drizzle, but Kyven still licked the water off the bars hungrily, tasting the metal as he stripped the precious water off of them, and when there was no more, he curled up into a ball in the middle of the cage, trapping the water in his fur. If it came to it, he would lick the water out of his fur, but he couldn't do that if the day dried it out of him.

This was the time to think of survival.

"Aww, he got all wet!" a voice drifted in from the void.

Kyven opened his eyes, and the hunger attacked him. He had slaked his thirst, but the hunger still consumed him, made him feel weak, almost delirious. How many days had it been since he'd eaten? Two? Three? He had no idea how long he'd been unconscious after the fox attacked him, betrayed him. It could have only been two days ago, it could have been two weeks ago. He'd never been this hungry before in his life, not even when he was on the ship after waking up after exhausting himself taking over the ship.

It was morning. The sun was fully up and over the horizon, and there was activity around him. The smell of food drifted on the gentle wind, causing his stomach to scream in protest. The smell was coming from the table on the porch, as the coyote Arcan, wearing a new dress, served pancakes with berry sauce smothered on them to three girls sitting at the table, the oldest in her late teens and the youngest looking to be about six. The speaker was a girl of about ten, with blond curls and wearing a pretty little white summer dress with lace at her cuffs and collar, standing with her nose between the bars, looking in at him.

"Leave the Arcan alone, dear, and come eat!" the matron called as she came out of the door leading into the house.

The blond girl looked into the cage at him, and he stared back at her. He could have lunged

out and killed her before she could even blink, but she was just a kid, filled with a child's curiosity. He thought to scare her away, but he thought that maybe, if he could get on the good side of the child, maybe she'd bring him food. He uncoiled and slinked towards her on all fours, staring down at her, getting almost to where he was nose to nose with her. She gave him a curious look, then boldly reached up into the cage and scratched him on the top of his muzzle. Her fingers were gentle, surprisingly gentle. Kyven laid down placidly and closed his eyes and let her scratch his muzzle, then she reached up and tugged gently at his ears, reaching through his shaggy black hair to find their bases.

"Varra! Get back right now, that Arcan is wild!" the woman called fearfully. "Varra!"

Kyven opened his eyes, and saw the woman reaching into a pocket in her dress. When she produced a small gold disc, just like the one the man had, he gasped and recoiled from the girl, backing completely into the far corner out of raw terror, dreading being punished.

The woman marched down and grabbed the girl by her arm, then dragged her away. "How many times have I told you not to play with Arcans in the cage, young lady?" she said harshly. "That Arcan is wild! He could have hurt you!"

"Why would he, Mama? If he did, Dad would just kill him."

"Arcans aren't smart, dear. They're animals. They may understand our language, but they don't think like rational people. I'm surprised that thing didn't try to *eat* you. Your father hasn't fed it yet."

"I think he's pretty," the girl said, looking back at him.

"I think he is too, dear, but I'm not going to go pet it until your father tames him. Just be patient, and you can pet him all you want after he's safe. Now eat your breakfast."

Kyven reflected on the girl, and himself. After just one night, he was already almost reflexively afraid. The pain from punishment was so intense that he was already doing anything he could to avoid it. He had been avoiding thoughts of hurting the old man, and though he did try to get the collar off, he hadn't tried anything else. He was afraid... so afraid. If he was found out or messed up, the fear of facing that punishment was almost worse than death. He'd honestly rather die than be punished again, and that fear made him reluctant to do anything. He didn't know what else the collar did, how else he might be punished, and that fear was keeping him from doing his best to escape.

He wouldn't watch them eat. He curled up with his back to them, keeping the fur on his waist and legs damp to trap the water, burying his nose under his tail to try to ignore the smell of pancakes and berries, trying to go back to sleep. Maybe he wouldn't be so hungry when he woke up again. They always said that there would come a time when you just stopped being hungry. He inhaled the smell of his own fur and closed his eyes, and did nothing.

There was nothing else he could do.

The beetle ambled across the shaded wood lazily, fluttering its wings before tucking them under the hard carapaces on its back. It skittered along the wood, following the grain, going about its business.

It never saw it coming.

Kyven slammed his paw down over it, then snatched it up and shoved it into his mouth without hesitation. He was beyond caring about what he was eating. The beetle was crunchy at first, but then squishy and not very tasty, but he didn't care about taste. He swallowed every bit of it, licking the spoor off his teeth and trying to swallow as best as he could with a dry mouth. The taste it left in his mouth was terrible, but his stomach didn't care. All it cared about was that it had at least a tiny thing inside of it, trying to fill the gaping hole inside him that sent pain shooting through him every time he moved, pangs of hunger so sharp that they

put spots in front of his eyes.

How many days had he been in the cage? Three? Four? Three, he thought. Three days of watching them walk by him, not even pay attention to him anymore, almost like he was a statue sitting in the garden that had been there so long ivy was covering it. The master of the plantation seemed to have lost interest in him, he thought, for he hadn't seen him at all since yesterday morning, but he also hadn't been either fed or watered. Nobody would come near the cage, nobody would even look at him, it seemed. He would kneel at the bars, looking at them pleadingly, begging people with his eyes to do something—anything for him. Throw him a crust of bread. Drop a blade of grass in his cage. Dip a hand into a glass of water and let the drops fall on his tongue. He didn't care. He was starving, starving to death, and so thirsty, so very thirsty. He yearned to cry out, to call to them, but even in his desperation, he feared the punishment he would receive if he used his voice. All he could do was bang on the cage with his fists, shake the bars, move to get someone to look at him, but nobody would.

He became so hungry that the smells of food around him were like knives through his belly, and the people around him stopped looking less and less like people, and more and more like food. By sunset, he was so hungry that if that little girl were to come up to him and put her hand in the cage, he would bite it off and eat it. He was beyond caring, the only thing that would stay him was the dreaded fear of the punishment of the collar, the only thing stronger than his hunger.

At sunset, the master of the plantation returned. He was wearing a gray waistcoat and brown pants, carrying a cup of tea. He stopped in front of the cage, almost within reach, and took a sip of his tea as Kyven knelt in front of him, hands on the bars, his eyes fixated on the teacup with dreadful yearning, his hand twitching to reach out for it, but fear of the punishment staying him. Several other men came up behind him from the house, and they all gave him a good look. "Magnificent, isn't he?" the master of the house said, motioning at him. "A black-furred fox. Look at that coat. Still wild, but I'm taking care of that right now. I'll get back tenfold what I paid for him, easily."

"I say, he's looking a tad thin there, Ledwell. And his coat looks dull."

"Part of breaking him, old friend, just part of the system," the man said, giving him a cold smile. "Trust me, I'm not going to lose my investment. But I can't be selling him in Alamar wild. It'll take some off his price if they have to tame him."

"When will you feed him then?"

"When he begs for it," he answered, staring into Kyven's eyes. "When he bows down to my authority and begs for his supper, and not a crumb until then. But, since he's been eating bugs that have wandered into his cage, I'll have to deny him anything for a while yet, even if he does beg," he added with an almost infuriating little knowing smile, as if he was the teacher catching the students whispering in class. "After all, I did warn him that he'd have to earn his food and drink, and eating bugs isn't *earning* it. So he'll have to be punished for disobeying me."

The man took another sip of his tea, then, looking Kyven in the eyes, he held it out before him and turned it, pouring it out into the grass. Kyven's eyes went wide as he saw that precious water pour into the grass, and was so desperate for it that he actually reached out, without thinking, lunging for the needed water. The instant his hand left the boundary of the cage, though, his world exploded into pain. He fell back and screamed in agony, his claws tearing furrows in the wood as the collar punished him for his disobedience, a pain that only seemed even more excruciating with him weakened by hunger and thirst, building on that already present plateau of pain inside him. He whimpered when it was over, crawling away from the man, crawling deeper into the protection of the cage, away from the pain, then collapsed to

the floor.

“You can be a cold bastard sometimes, Ledwell,” one of the men said, which made them all laugh.

“Be glad I’m only cold to wild Arcans, Skivvers,” Ledwell joked in reply. “Come, let’s get back to cards. I doubt my pet will be any more amusement to us now that he’s tasted the collar. That always makes them quite tentative for a while, you know.”

If there was any water left in him, he would be crying. But there was not even the water in him for that.

Dawn.

Or maybe sunset. He didn’t know.

Kyven swam in a misty haze. He had no idea how long he’d been in the cage. He had been in there for... he had no idea. He had been so hungry... so hungry. Starving, while they walked past him, not looking at him. He could smell food, could smell water, but it tormented him with its nearness, and yet was beyond his reach.

All he had to do was beg to be fed, but sometime during the night... some night, one night, he didn’t know... he lost track of that idea. He lost track of everything. He no longer knew where he was, or what he was doing. He only knew that he was trapped, trapped like a rat with no food, no water, and he was... waiting. Waiting for rain. Waiting for something edible to stumble into his trap. He didn’t know. He just knew that he was beyond hunger now, and too weak to care. His entire world was the cage, a barren desert with no food, no water, nothing but death, but a cruel death that would not come to take him from his misery. It hovered over him, taunting him, mocking him, making him suffer for as long as it could before finally showing mercy on him.

Flies buzzed around his body like an omen. He couldn’t feel them anymore, not even when they crawled boldly into his mouth, as if they knew that soon he would be their feast. He lacked the energy to shoo them away. He lacked the energy to do anything but lay here, as his body shut down everything to keep his heart beating.

He could hear voices, could hear people walking, but it was like he wasn’t there. Life went on around him. There was music, and talking, and children playing in the yard. There were Arcans tending the chickens, the house staff waiting on the family sitting in their favorite spot at the table on the porch, in full sight of him, but doing nothing for him. Almost as if his suffering was a spectacle for them, an object of entertainment. He was in the middle of them, and yet they just went by him, ignored him, like he didn’t exist.

As the hunger gnawed away at him, he began to wonder if he really did.

Was this all a dream? Was this just a vision, like the ones he used to suffer when he was a child? After all, he didn’t feel anything anymore. This could all be a dream, just a nightmare from which he might awaken.

If he awakened. He didn’t really care much anymore. He wasn’t thirsty anymore, or hungry, or in pain. He was just... tired. So very tired.

Voices. He could hear them, but couldn’t make out what they were saying without effort... and he just didn’t have the energy. He tried to raise his head, but he couldn’t, laying it back down on the wood, his dry tongue laying on the deck between his open jaws.

“Oh, I think you shouldn’t worry, dear, this is just part of the process,” a voice called, but he couldn’t understand it. “You have to wear them down first, show them their rightful place, with a combination of hunger and respect for our authority. He’ll be fed and watered in the morning, and he’ll be much more tractable. After all, we’ll have fed him without him begging, shown him mercy. His limited Arcan mind will put that together and equate us with feeling good, of taking away hunger. It’s part of the taming process, dear.”

“I was just worried, Dad. He hasn’t moved all day, he’s just laid there, even when Jerri poked him with a stick to see if he was dead. He’s so pretty, and he was so gentle when he let me pet him.”

“Don’t mistake them being nice for them being tame, dear. Arcans can be quite cunning, especially the foxes. Odds are, he was just trying to trick you into feeding him, playing on your interest in him.”

“You think so?”

“Dear, I know so. You’ll see in the morning.”

Kyven drifted back into the haze, lost in a world of weakness and delirium, and then he spiraled down into darkness.

He begged for it to be the darkness of death.

The night again brought a cool breeze, and the smell of water. That smell heralded the rumble of thunder, and then the rain fell. Wind blew the water into the cage, splattered his face, fell onto a parched tongue. At first, the still form didn’t respond to the water, as rain soaked into dull fur, rain pattered off his tail, into one of his ears, off his teeth, the form remained as still as death.

But then his tongue twitched.

The taste of water in his mouth stirred him from his drifting haze, caused him to open his eyes, roll from his side onto his back. He began to pant as rain pelted into his mouth, just enough for him to swallow. The water assaulted his throat, caused his stomach to heave, but it also ignited his spirit like a fire. He struggled to his knees and opened his mouth to the wind, as it blew the heavy, pounding rain into the cage, into his mouth. He swallowed more water, and more, and the water brought both great pain to his stomach, a stomach shocked by something in it, and seemed to focus his mind after just a couple of minutes. He lapped at the rain, lapped at the bars to get at every bit of water he could, drank in the rain as it poured down upon him. The slow rate he could drink the water kept him from drinking it so fast it made him sick, letting him slowly rehydrate as the pounding rain came down for nearly an hour, with just enough wind to blow it into the cage.

The hunger returned, more powerful than ever, but at least he could think now. The lack of water had left him delirious, listless, weak and helpless. But the water refreshed him, brought rationality back to him, and made him see a stark truth.

For all his intelligence and his budding powers as a Shaman, he was helpless. He was saved by pure chance, saved by the rain, for it seemed that the old man had forgotten about him and was allowing him to die, literally die surrounded by people and Arcans who saw him, but would not help him. To them, he didn’t exist.

And so long as he was in this cage, they were essentially correct.

He was totally in the power of the old man, just as much as the fox held power over his very humanity, to take and give back at a whim. Kyven survived by the whim of the holder of the control for his collar, and he would starve to death within sight of food, would starve to death with it literally within his reach if they set it down in front of the cage. He was nothing. He was insignificant. He could die in this cage and rot, and nobody around him would care. Without his magic, he couldn’t defeat his collar. With the collar on him, he was helpless.

He was truly trapped. He was totally in the power of another, and there was absolutely nothing he could do about it. All he could do was wait for sunrise, and beg to be fed... because if he did not, he would die.

He would beg for his life.

It was a humbling realization. He’d known that he was at the mercy of others before coming into this cage, but now, now he *understood* it. He hadn’t felt this weak and helpless when he

was in the cage of the hunters, or standing on the auction block. It took coming here and nearly dying of dehydration to see the truth of his situation. The old man had almost killed him by denying him food and water, just to weaken him to make him more tractable for his *taming*. And at that moment, that was all he was, all he was worth.

Five hundred chits.

He looked away. He knew she was there. He could *feel* her, looking at him through the rain. He did not want to look at her. He hated her, he hated what she'd done to him. She betrayed him! *She* was why he was in this cage, so hungry that his body was consuming his own muscles for energy to keep his heart going, so hungry his ribs stuck out like bare branches. If it wouldn't bring him punishment, he would curse her at the top of his lungs, but he was too afraid of being punished to dare.

She seemed unmoved. He felt her out there, staring at him, and then she was gone.

He looked to where he knew she had been, confused. Why did she appear? Why did she leave? Was she sending him a message, or just reminding him that she was there, that he had to please her to regain his humanity?

He didn't know. And in a way, he didn't care.

He went back to drinking, licking at the bars, taking in the precious moisture, feeling it reinvigorate atrophied, dehydrated muscles, reawaken parts of his body that had all but shut down from lack of water. The rain renewed him. The rain had saved him, for he didn't know if he would have survived to see the morning. Shaking arms held him up as he licked at the metal bars, tasting them, but also tasting the wonderful sweetness of water.

Nothing had ever tasted so good.

Sunrise.

The smell of the breakfast cooking for the fieldhands tore at his belly, but he could tolerate it, for he had drank his fill, drank until his belly was filled with water, even as his system absorbed it. The water flushed his system quickly, so quickly that he was able to urinate for the first time over a day, expelling a dark yellow urine through the bars of the cage that burned painfully, but also helped him a great deal by clearing out what his body had been stockpiling and had been unable to discharge. He felt much better after drinking and urinating, so much so that he actually licked at his fur like an animal as he lay on his side in the cage, licking the dampness out of his forearm, for more water went onto his tongue than was left by it with each stroke.

He was still weak, almost debilitating weak. He could barely hold himself up in a sitting position, his hands shaking like he had the palsy, but it felt good to know he *could* sit up if he wanted. Thanks to the rain, he had survived the night, if only just, and though he felt much better, he knew that he wouldn't even be able to support his own weight. He was too weak to sit up without shaking like a leaf, so he just stayed down, resting, conserving what little strength he had.

"See, dear, he's moving just fine," he heard the older man say distantly, probably from the porch. "Licking water from the storm out of his fur, it seems. I suppose I should hold back his meal until sunset for that."

"Arthur, quit tormenting that poor thing!" the matron answered, very sternly. "How long has it been in that cage?"

"Oh, five days now, I suppose."

"And you haven't fed or watered it once!"

"It's part of the taming process, dear."

"Yes, and I talked to the kennel. They didn't feed it either! And who knows how long it went without food in the cage of the hunters that caught it! Did you ever think of *that* when

you started taming it?"

"He was quite strong and healthy when I got him, dear. I know my Arcans, I know how far I can push one before it's permanently damaged. They're actually very resilient animals."

"I think you've tamed it enough! Now *feed* that poor animal, or so help me, I'll take the five hundred chits you spent on it out of your brandy money!"

"Oh, stop being so melodramatic, dear."

"Me? Am I the one that keeps talking about all the money we'll earn when we sell it at Alamar? For someone so excited about this investment, you seem awfully indifferent about whether our investment lives to see the sunset! Now *feed it!*"

Kyven almost felt smug. He'd been willing to beg to be fed, but it seemed that the man's angry wife was pulling rank on him. Perhaps his cruelty to Kyven was just so he could feel better about the fact that he wasn't the one that really ran the house.

He had his back to the cage door, and he was too weak to look when he heard it open. But the smell of food that was very close to him urged him to action, as his stomach howled at him to find the source of that smell, to satisfy a sudden ravenous hunger.

It was scraps. Meat, potatoes, corn, a thick bone, all on a wooden platter, inviting him to end his forced fast and know something other than hunger.

On shaking, palsied hands, he rolled over, crawling on unsteady limbs, his mouth hanging open as he kept his eyes on that gorgeous bounty. Every rod moved across the cage was an eternity as he neared his goal, until it was within his reach. His shaking hand reached out and grabbed the edge of the platter—

And the world exploded into pain.

Kyven's body jerked, sending food flying all over the cage as the hand holding the platter cramped, and he writhed on the floor of the cage, writhing in his own food, stars exploding behind his eyes as his breath locked in his throat, and he felt like he was smothering. The pain came in wave after wave after wave, far beyond his endurance, far beyond when he would have done anything to beg to make it stop.

It was just too much. He was too weak. He gurgled incoherently, his eyes rolling back into his head, and he passed out.

"*Arthur!*" the woman screamed in shock and anger, storming down from the porch. "Have you lost your mind? What in the Trinity are you doing?"

"I told him he had to *beg* for it," he said simply, putting away his control for the collar. "And he will not eat a bite until he does."

Her eyes flashed with cold fury. "This silly need to torment that poor animal has gone much too far!"

"I know what I'm doing, Annette."

"Do you?" she asked coldly, pointing. He followed her finger, to the porch, where his daughters looked on in only what could be called growing horror. They had never seen their father treat an Arcan like that before, and they were horrified by it. Varra, the third of his four girls, burst into tears and fled into the house.

He looked honestly chagrined. "Well, they need to learn the proper way to handle Arcans, dear, but perhaps I did overestimate the fox's health. I didn't expect him to faint. Maybe he was weaker than I believed."

"Clearly," she said through clenched teeth. "Misty, fetch the vet immediately!" she shouted to the raccoon maid who was serving breakfast to the children. "If he dies, husband, you are in for *five thousand chits* worth of brandy and cigars!"

He winced. "Let's not get hasty, dear. I'm sure he's fine, the collars don't do any physical harm."

“Does *that* look like he wasn’t physically harmed?” she asked hotly, pointing at the thin rivulet of blood oozing from his mouth, seeping across the wooden planks.

“Must have bitten his tongue,” the man noted absently. “I think the vet might be a good idea after all. Annette!” he protested when she yanked the golden chain from his white waistcoat, taking both his watch and his collar control.

“You will not *tame* this animal any longer, *husband*,” she told him icily. “That was absolutely outrageous behavior! You have starved that poor thing for *six days*, and then you punish it without any warning after putting food in its cage? What did you expect it to do? What would you do if someone starved you for days and then dropped food at your feet, ask for permission to eat it? At this rate, the poor thing will be dead by sunset! The more I see of your behavior, the more I think *you* are the animal between the two of you!” She stormed off. “Misty! Misty! Get the vet here immediately, it’s bleeding!”

Arthur Ledwell gave his wife a startled look, honestly shocked at her quite adamant reaction. She’d never shown any kind of opinion towards Arcans before. Was she upset over the Arcan, or upset over the money? She didn’t complain about the last Arcan he’d tamed, or the one before that, and he hadn’t treated those any differently than this one outside of the fact that the other two had not held out as long as this one, had begged for their food within three days of being caged. This one had never begged, and he was not about to show weakness by giving in after setting the terms by which the Arcan would be fed. That just invited a wild Arcan to misbehave.

This one was just stubborn.

But he had pushed it too far. He had invested way too much money in him to be quite so careless. Perhaps he could tame it if he wasn’t so mindful of its value, but he did have to be much more careful from here out. That Arcan was worth a *fortune*, and he couldn’t let the Arcan’s own stubborn nature kill it.

He would tame that fox, but he needed to use a slightly gentler hand, if only to protect his investment.

Chapter 8

He awoke not in the cage, but on something soft, with the smell of grass around him. He was laying on his side, and something was over him, something that smelled of cotton. There was warmth, a strange, eerie warmth around him, a warmth that felt... good. Good enough for him to ignore the voices and just bask in it silently, let it flow around and through him, because the warmth took away his dreadful hunger.

“Depends, ma’am, you want an honest opinion?” came an unknown voice, drifting to his ears as something grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and shifted his head by force.

“That would be best,” came a woman’s response.

“He should be dead,” came the first in answer. “Given the amount of muscular damage, he must have gone at least two weeks without food. Usually that’s not quite severe for an Arcan, but he was also severely dehydrated. Put those together,” the voice said, then there was a loud sound like the clapping of hands. “And it’s a recipe for death. I’d say that storm last night was the only reason he lived to see the sunrise. He’s a strong little bugger, he must have managed to drink enough to rehydrate himself, but the look of his urine tells me how bad off he was.” There was a pause, and a hand stroked the fur on his neck... gently. “How on earth did he get in this condition?”

“He’s wild, and my husband was doing his *process* for taming him,” she said scornfully. “It’s worked on the other wild ones, I’ll admit that, but he was entirely wrong about trying it on this one. From the sound on it, he was starved before we bought him, then my husband

starves him on top of it.”

“Well, he’s a mutated Arcan, sometimes it’s hard to use standard practices on them,” the first voice said simply. “Odds are, Master Ledwell couldn’t tell how bad off he was because of his unique appearance. That and this little guy is the strongest Arcan I’ve ever seen,” the voice said respectfully. “He’s not much bigger than the average female, but he’s every bit as strong as the bigger males. His musculature is almost like a rock, even in this state. I bet he could have torn the door off the cage if he wasn’t collared. That strength made him look much healthier than he really was.”

“I suppose. What do you suggest?”

“I’d usually suggest putting them down when they’re this bad off, but given how much you paid for him, I recommend rest. Lots of it. He’s going to be weak as a kitten for a few days, he will definitely need to be nursed. He won’t be able to feed himself for a couple of days, at least not without making a Father-awful mess. Start him on a diet of raw red meat mostly, but it’s alright to feed him just about anything *you* would eat, too. Oh, and feed him oranges and garlic if you can get them. They’re a little expensive, but you’ve already put in an investment here, so may as well pull out all the stops.”

“Oranges and garlic?” she asked in surprise.

“Yeah, strangely enough. It’s an old trick among vets, oranges and garlic have something in them that really helps Arcans recover quickly. If you do that, though, be careful to make sure he eats them both, not just one or the other. It will do him no good unless you feed him both oranges and garlic. And remember, do *not* feed him raw poultry, pork, fish, raw eggs, or Arcan meat, you’ll give him a case of Shaking Sickness.” There was a pause. “And for the love of the Trinity, *do not* punish him. That kind of a shock to his system might kill him in this condition. The collars may do no physical damage, but the pain still puts stress on their cardiovascular system, and he just can’t take that right now. I’m amazed he survived the one that made him pass out. This is the toughest Arcan I’ve ever seen,” the voice said as the hand patted his neck. “You’ll make a bloody damn *fortune* selling him, Misses Ledwell.”

“Provided my husband doesn’t kill him trying to tame him,” the woman said darkly.

“Well, I suggest you keep him away from the Arcan until he recovers his strength. Just put one of your house Arcans with him to nurse him for a couple of days. He’ll recover quickly. Just feed him as much as he’ll eat, as often as you can make him eat. The more he eats, the faster he’ll recover. Just remember, no poultry, pork, raw eggs, fish, or Arcan meat until he’s fully recovered. He’ll get Shaking Sickness.”

“How long will it take for him to recover?”

“I’ll be able to give you a more solid answer when I come back in three days.”

“Alright. Thank you very much.”

“No problem, ma’am,” the voice said, as a hand patted him on the neck and shoulder.

Kyven felt safer than he’d felt since the fox had betrayed him in that moment, when he was warm, and people were giving him positive attention and were talking about helping him recover. He felt that he was going to be alright. He relaxed completely and went back to sleep, as content as one could be in the circumstances.

It was a radical shift from what he’d experienced since coming to this little slice of hell.

He awoke laying on a straw pallet, and from the looks of the walls, he was in the main house itself. He was in a storeroom, from the looks of it, a dark storeroom, probably a cellar, filled with large wooden casks and barrels stacked by the walls. There was an alchemy lamp over his pallet, with six more hanging from the rafters down the narrow cellar room, in a line with casks on one side and barrels on the other, all leading to a narrow staircase on the far side of the small room. It was cool in the cellar and smelled of earth, oak, brandy, and pota-

toes.

He was famished, but he didn't feel like he was about to die any moment of starvation. He was weak, his arms still shaking just from the effort of lifting them, but he felt better than he did before he passed out. Had they force fed him? Or was that strange warmth he'd felt in the brief moment he'd been awake some kind of alchemical device? They thought he'd sell for a lot of money, would they actually pay money to have a healing bell used on him?

No, if they did that, he'd be fully recovered. It had to be some kind of lesser device, something that just lessened his bad condition, didn't heal him from it.

The sound of steps on the other end both made him hopeful and also made him afraid. Who was coming down the stairs? Was it the matron, who was on his side, or the master, who was his enemy? He watched the stairs even as he debated if he should run, hide, but he just sighed in relief when he saw that it was an Arcan, a raccoon Arcan wearing a maid's dress and carrying a large platter of food.

Food!

She ambled down the hallway formed by the casks and barrels, then seated herself sedately by his pallet. She gave him a calm, reassuring smile as she set the tray down, but put a hand on his shoulder when he tried to sit up. She shook her head with that same smile, then picked up a small bowl filled with small strips of raw red meat. He reached out for it with his shaking hands, but the female just swatted his hands away, fished out a sliver of meat, then held it out before her.

She was going to *feed* him?

She was! Her hand and the meat disappeared under his muzzle, and she pressed the meat against his chops. He had to resist biting off her entire hand as he took the meat, and didn't even bother chewing it before swallowing. She seemed to notice that, giving him a stern shake of her head, then putting up a cautioning hand before reaching for another small piece of meat.

Chew. Go slow. That must be what she wanted, and it probably made sense. He'd gone without food for—hell, he lost track of how long it had been, but after so long, odds were his stomach wasn't going to know what to do with having food inside it.

It was almost torture, but it was a sweet one. The raccoon fed him the contents of the entire tray at a slow, careful pace, not giving him the next bite until he chewed and swallowed the last one. She gave him drinks of milk from time to time, fresh, warm milk, hand-feeding him until he was dreamily, wonderfully full.

It was the most exquisitely beautiful of feelings.

He sighed his contentment when she gave him the last little bit of cheese left on the tray and helped him finish the last of the milk. He just laid on the pallet when the raccoon took the empty dishes and stacked them on the plate, then took them back down the cellar and upstairs. Another house servant came down almost immediately, the coyote that had come with him, carrying a stool and some other large things. She sat them down, then knelt down and gave him a fierce hug, which startled him. She was telling him how glad she was he'd survived, he was sure. She rose up and nuzzled his muzzle with her own, then licked him on the nose playfully. Then she reared back and showed him a bucket filled with water. Water, and lots of it, all for him. She showed him the stool, setting it aside, then showed him a chamber pot. She gave him a direct, inquisitive look, and he could only give her a slight smile and nod.

Yes, he knew what it was and what it was for.

She sat with him for a few minutes, holding his hand, and they both looked back when steps echoed on the far end. The coyote quickly stood up when he saw three people there, the old

man, the woman, and the oldest of their four daughters. Kyven shrank back against the wall against which his pallet was placed at the sight of that hated man, for all he could remember was the pain he felt every time the man was around him. The coyote folded her hands before her and put her head down when the three of them came up to the pallet. "Go back upstairs, girl," the matron told the coyote. The coyote gave a quick nod and scurried back towards the stairs, looking back to him fearfully as she turned to go up them.

She was a good girl.

Kyven stared fearfully at the man, as far against the wall as he could go, but the man showed no indication at all that he cared. "Well, I'd say he's looking much better," the man said.

"It seems so," the woman said as the oldest daughter, a pretty young lady with long, wavy brown hair and pretty blue eyes, sat down on the stool and reached out bravely.

"Cynthia!" the matron warned, but the daughter was unmoved, putting her hand on the top of his muzzle. Kyven wasn't quite sure what to do as she stroked the fur on his muzzle, then reached under his chin and scratched him in a very pleasing manner.

"Oh, relax, Mother," the young lady said. "He's far too weak to be any danger, and maybe if we show him a little kindness, he won't be so afraid of us. The poor thing's terrified."

"Well, then it seems that he's well on his way to being tame, then," the man said calmly. "If they don't fear us, Cynthia, then they won't obey us."

"Hmph," the girl snorted, running her fingers through the white fur on his neck, and down his chest in a way that seemed far too personal if he was a human.

The girl's mother seemed to take a similar opinion. "Cynthia, do *not* pet the Arcans like that," she admonished.

"His fur is incredible," she said to them, as she ran her fingers down his sides, along his jutting ribs. "It's as soft as down. I've never felt anything like it."

"Then perhaps you'd like me to make him into a stole and jacket for winter, hmm?" the man asked.

"Don't be ridiculous, Father," the girl said calmly. "He's worth far more in Alamar than his pelt would be hanging in my closet."

"Now that's my girl," the man chuckled as the girl stood up. "Now come along, it's time for your numbers lesson."

The matron looked down at him with curious eyes as the man led the daughter away, then she knelt by him and she too ran her fingers through the fur on his shoulders. "My, Cynthia was right, you do have incredible fur," she noted, sliding her fingers around his neck. "It's a good thing we got you first, or your pelt *would* be hanging in some lady's closet, waiting for the winter season."

Kyven looked at the woman cautiously. She seemed to be on his side, but that was only because she saw him as an investment.

She gave him a steady look, then patted him on the neck and got up. "Mind that your collar is set so you cannot leave this cellar. I'd stay away from the stairs if I were you," she warned, then she turned around. She left him alone, and as she walked away, he slid back down onto the middle of the pallet, laying on his side with his eyes towards the stairs. But as soon as she was out of sight, he opened his eyes to the spirits and looked around.

He was indeed in an underground room, underneath a corner of the house. There were about ten people in the house above him, the six humans and four Arcan maids, who were busy about the task of cleaning the house. A look beyond the house showed him two humans on horses riding up to the house from the fields, and four Arcans beyond them, where he knew the cooking cauldron was at, no doubt preparing a meal for the field Arcans. He made special

point to find and keep track of the master of the plantation. He and his daughter were up on the second floor, the man standing over the girl as she sat on something, and the orientation of her body hinted that she was leaning against a desk. The man was pointing at something in front of her, probably on the desk, then his hand made a motion that was hard to make out from so far away and with two floors of interference between them.

Teaching her numbers, the man said. Well, she was in for an unfriendly afternoon, accounting was boring and complicated. He remembered his numbers lessons with Holm.

Trinity, that seemed a world away. He laid back down, closing his eyes to the spirits, and for a moment he had to wonder just how the hell he ended up in this mess.

For three days, he followed the same routine. The raccoon or the coyote would come down and feed him four or five times a day. They'd feed him as much as he wanted, hand feeding him the first day, but giving him the food to feed himself after that, when he was strong enough to sit up, and his hands didn't shake like had the palsy when he raised them off the pallet. They kept his water bucket constantly filled, and they'd always sit with him a few minutes after feeding him to give him a little attention and company, the coyote going so far as to sit on the pallet with him, huddled with him with her muzzle on his neck, giving him physical touch, tactile comfort that the raccoon didn't seem inclined to offer.

Touching was *very* important to Arcans, he'd come to realize. Watching with spirit sight in the evenings, after his feeding, let him watch the field Arcans, and he saw how they huddled together in their huts as some played music, laying together, touching each other, using what looked like a unique sign-language they invented to communicate with each other. They were forbidden from speaking here, but that didn't mean that they couldn't find other ways to communicate.

Other ways to communicate.

That was something that Kyven considered in the days as he rested and steadily regained his strength, went from barely able to sit up to able to walk around his small cellar on steady legs, practicing walking on two legs and getting the hang of those Arcan feet. He actually felt more comfortable on all fours, was totally comfortable walking about on his hands and feet, which was very easy because of the shape of his legs. Despite the fact that his legs were longer than his arms were, the way his lower legs were shaped allowed him to absorb that extra length in angles. He could walk on all fours without his butt sticking way up in the air, and that was what really mattered. He had to maintain his dignity, after all. Walking on his legs was a bit trickier than walking on all fours, but the cellar gave him enough room to practice, and by the third day he felt quite recovered enough to walk about the cellar, though it did tire him quickly when he did.

Mercifully, the man left him alone. He didn't visit him again in those three days, but the matron did, at least twice a day, watching as the maids fed him, or coming down and urging him to get up, to exercise as the vet had told her to do. He responded to her warily, for she kept the collar control in her hand at all times and her thumb on the button, just waiting for any excuse to use it on him, it seemed. He was very, very fearful of that device, for that was the instrument of pain, and the only thing he could do when she was down there was watch that hand like a hawk, terrified that she was no better than her husband and would punish him just to punish him, establish her dominance.

Thankfully, she never did.

On the third day of his time in the cellar, after the coyote brought him food and sat on the stool with him and allowed him to eat, several people came into the cellar. It was the husband and wife, as well as two of the children and two other men. One was in his fifties, thin and tanned from sun and wind, with a nasty scar on his cheek. The younger of them was

about twenty, with black hair cut short under a small trifold hat and small brown eyes set close together. Both of them wore the signature leather aprons of vets, and black trousers beneath the aprons. Kyven backed up defensively on sight of the master of the plantation, his eyes fixed on him fearfully, backing into the corner by his pallet and staying down on all fours.

"Well, now, he looks much better!" the older vet said, and Kyven identified that voice as the voice that had been there before. "Has he been exercising?"

"I've been giving him walks about the cellar," the woman replied.

"Alright, just wait back there please, he seems a bit skittish," the older vet said. "Slow and careful, Jim, slow and careful. This one is very strong and he's got some nasty claws, don't give him a reason."

Kyven realized the man's scar was from an Arcan. Clearly, he hadn't heeded his own advice when he was a younger man.

What happened next made Kyven almost ashamed. The older man began to talk. He didn't know what he said, really, it was his tone, the way he moved, and his strangely non-threatening smell. It was almost *hypnotic*, the way the man talked and moved, which brought his hackles down and caused him to sit placidly in the corner, looking up at the old man with curious, non-threatening eyes.

By the time Kyven realized what the man was doing, he was already kneeling by him, scratching him lightly behind the ears as his other hand gently reached under his neck and raised his chin. "See, Jim, they can tell when you mean no harm," the older man said as he guided Kyven with gentle yet firm hands back to the pallet, and had him lie down. "That's right, that's right, just lay right down and let me make sure you're doing alright," he said to Kyven, stroking the back of his neck.

Kyven submitted to the vet and allowed himself to be examined. The older vet explained to the younger one, obviously his apprentice, as he did his work. He explained the basics of an examination of a fox, showing the young man the relevant parts of Kyven's anatomy that marked his species, with some clear differences. "Now normal grays have an entirely different coloration," he said as he held up Kyven's hand and flexed his fingers for him, checking their tone. "But these are what shows him as a gray. Other fox species don't have claws like this, they're much more canine. Grays are the only ones with these claws, which are more feline. It's just one of the markers that separates vulpines from canines. Now, what do these claws tell you, Jim?"

"He's a climber."

"Correct, he's a climber," the old man said. "He's also got more cat-like tendencies, such as using his claws as weapons. But, don't let his claws lull you, son, *these* are his primary weapon," he said as he raised Kyven's head and urged him to open his mouth, baring a mouth full of deadly teeth, including canines nearly as long as a child's finger. "He could kill you with these with one bite. Foxes have just as much jaw strength as most canines, and the tendency of every fox species is to bite, including the grays. Grays are just better armed, and much more aggressive than other foxes."

"Why is that?"

"They just are," the older vet said simply. "Just a peculiarity of the breed, the same way wolves are much more aggressive than dogs, despite both being canines. Well, looks like these teeth are just fine, no weakening or gum loss from your ordeal," the vet said after testing his teeth boldly with a hand. "No cavities anywhere either. Good, you've been chewing your bones and keeping these teeth nice and clean." He let go of Kyven's jaws and probed his chest with his fingers. "Feels like everything's just fine. Now come on and stand up for

me,” he urged as he got up, pulling on Kyven’s hand. A little intimidated by the man’s gentleness yet firm command, he complied, first standing up on all fours, then rising up on his legs, which made him a little taller than the vet attending him. The man knelt down and put his hands on Kyven’s thigh, checking his muscles, it seemed, but he was a startled when the man boldly grabbed him by the testicles and inspected them. “He looks like he’s gonna make a full recovery,” the vet said, letting go of him and running his hands down his calf, ankle, and foot. “His muscles feel quite normal. Has he had any trouble walking, ma’am?”

“None at all.”

“I didn’t think so. Alright, sit back down,” he urged Kyven, helping back to a sitting position, down on all fours as he sat on his haunches. The vet ruffled his shaggy black hair, then knelt down and stroked his shoulders and back in a calming manner.

By the Trinity, no wonder they thought Arcans were animals if they were so easily swayed by a gentle voice and friendly fingers. Kyven was almost paralyzed by the vet’s gentle demeanor; the man truly had a way with Arcans. And he wasn’t even a real Arcan! “You need to move him outside,” the vet told him. “Put him in one of the huts outside and give him room to run around. He’ll need some real exercise to completely recover, and he won’t get it in this cellar. Keep feeding him as much as he’ll eat until Friday, then transition him back to a normal diet over the next couple of days. Don’t just pull back all at once, he’ll mistake that as another attempt to starve him. Just cut down his portions over the course of two days until he’s on a normal diet.”

“Alright,” the matron said.

“How much room do you think he’ll need?” the man asked, and just his voice made Kyven tense up and back up on his pallet, against the wall.

“Ah, we’ll talk about this upstairs,” the vet said quickly, putting a calming hand on the back of Kyven’s neck and massaging tense muscles, which had a mysteriously calming effect on him. “Lay down now, you did very well. Just get some rest. That’s it,” he cooed, which caused Kyven to obey him. He laid down on his pallet, but he kept his eyes locked on the plantation owner. The vet took the family upstairs, and Kyven didn’t relax until the man was out of his sight.

Well, that was... *embarrassing*. He’d never been charmed like that before. The vet was almost magical in his ability to handle him, put him at ease and keep him at ease even while he was probing him, inspecting him, even grabbing him in about the most sensitive area he had. It was like the vet was completely non-threatening, and kept Kyven completely at ease and calm. He laid his head down and closed his eyes, wondering how they were going to take the changes the vet recommended, if they’d do it, and what the man would do to him now that he was at least partially recovered. He had no doubt the man would continue his *taming*, which would involve being humiliated and tortured.

He had to figure out a way out of here. He needed to come up with a way to get his collar off and run. But the simple truth was, his fear of the collar was greater than his desire to be free of it. If he tried to take it off, he had no doubt it would trigger some kind of punishment, so he had damn well better know that he could take it off on the first try... and once he was free of the collar, he’d—

His mind violently shied away from even *thinking* of finishing that thought. He did not want to be punished. He was more terrified of punishment than he was of death.

And that showed just how *tamed* he was. He was enslaved to the collar, and would do anything to avoid being punished, no matter how demoralizing or humiliating. He would bite off his own foot before he allowed himself to be punished. Nothing was more painful than punishment, nothing.

He heard someone coming down the steps, but he wasn’t going to open his eyes quite yet. If it was the man, he’d become afraid, and he would rather just pretend that he wasn’t there than back into the corner like a scared rabbit. He *was* a little startled, though, when a hand came down on his head, causing him to open his eyes. It was the six year old, the youngest of the four daughters, all by herself. She was a darling little thing, cute as a button with her dark hair and piercing brown eyes, and the cutest little upturned nose and dimpled cheeks. “You’re so cute!” she said exuberantly as she pulled on his ears, a little painfully, then she literally climbed onto his back in the pallet, running her fingers through the fur on his back. He endured the child’s attentions stoically, both not wanting to hurt a child so young, who clearly had no malicious intent towards him, and dreading the retaliation he would receive from the father should he come down and find his baby girl laying in multiple pieces all over his cellar. “Soft!” she said, then she giggled when she buried her face in the fur on his back, nuzzling it like he was a kitten. She laid down on his back, her feet kicking him painfully in the rump while her hands grabbed him around the ribs, grabbing two little handfuls of his fur and humming. “You’re so pretty,” she cooed, rubbing her face in the fur on the back of his neck.

Kyven just laid there and endured it, but a little part of him rather liked the attention. It was going quite satisfactorily to him, at least until he heard footsteps on the stairs. He didn’t comprehend the situation until he heard a startled, terrified scream, which surprised him so badly that he bolted out of the pallet, dislodging the little girl as he backed into the corner, his entire body quivering as he braced for punishment. The little girl began to cry loudly, laying half on the pallet, half off from where he dislodged her.

“By the Father, Liza!” the mother cried, running up and scooping up the crying child. “Are you alright? Did it hurt you, baby? Did it hurt you?”

The girl just continued to cry, clutching to her mother. Kyven gave a terrified look as the father came charging down the stairs, rushing up to the pair, as two of the daughters and the two vets came down behind them. Kyven gasped and rose up on his legs, putting his back in the corner when the woman pulled the gold disc out of her pocket with the hand not holding the baby, and pointed it at Kyven threateningly. His eyes widened, and he dropped to his knees and put his paws out in supplication, pleading, begging her not to—

And the world exploded in pain.

He howled in agony, hands going to the collar as he hunched over, then slammed his head almost sickeningly into the corner behind him. His head struck the corner again, and again, then again, as wave after wave unendurable, total agony burned into him like acid, like lava, scouring away all rational thought. It kept coming, and kept coming, and kept coming, endless waves of agony crashing against him, grabbing him, pulling him back into the sea from whence they came and drowning him. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t think, he could only scream, scream like a banshee, until the pain overwhelmed him and sent him spiraling into blackness. He collapsed to the floor like a boned fish, his tail twitching spasmodically, out cold.

“What on earth happened?” the vet asked in concern, running past the woman and child and kneeling by the Arcan, who had clearly passed out.

“He attacked my baby!” she said vindictively, keeping the button pressed and pointing it at him, trying to hurt him more.

The little girl sniffled, then tugged at her mother’s dress. “He didn’t, mommy! He was giving me horsie rides!”

“What?” she asked.

“He was giving me horsie rides, but then he ran into the corner and I fell off,” she said, quite

seriously.

“Ma’am, if he’d have attacked her, she’d be dead,” the vet said simply. “He could have killed her with one bite.”

The woman gave her a startled look, realized she was still holding down the button, then dropped the control like it was a live snake. “Oh my gods!” she gasped. “Trinity, I thought it attacked you, sweetie! What have I done? Oh gods, did I kill it? Please tell me it’s okay!”

“I dare say he probably has a concussion after that, at the very least,” the vet said, giving the woman a rather cold look. “I’ve told you before, I don’t like this collar you use, Master Ledwell. A normal collar is more than sufficient to discipline Arcans, but reproducing the effect of a pain stick is almost beyond the pail.”

“It teaches them respect.”

“It teaches them fear, and nothing else,” the vet accused, rolling the Arcan over on his back and peeling back an eyelid.

“Fear *is* respect.”

“I seem to have no problem handling Arcans without scaring them out of their minds,” the vet said, a bit acidly as he put a hand to the Arcan’s fluttering chest.

“They’re just animals, Twindle.”

“You’d be an animal too if I put that collar on *you* and used it on you,” the vet snapped as he very delicately probed the Arcan’s head, and his hand came back out bloodied. “I don’t think you understand just how much a pain stick hurts, Ledwell. Why don’t you let a hunter hit you with one some time so you can fully appreciate what this collar does? Go get the healing bell, Jim. His skull’s fractured.”

“What? I’ll not pay *that* much, investment or no!” Ledwell protested as the young man hurried out of the cellar.

“Yes we will,” the woman said, her voice quivering. “I tortured that poor thing for *no reason*. I did the same thing I accused you of doing, Arthur,” she said, her voice emotional. “And I did it for no reason.”

“Annette, it’s an Arcan. What reason would you need?”

The woman gave him a cold glare. “I *will not* allow that poor thing to suffer when it did nothing wrong!” she hissed vituperously at him, which made him flinch back visibly. “If it takes a healing bell to help it, then *we will pay for the healing bell*.”

“Dear, it’ll cost more for the bell than we paid for him,” he protested.

“Then we spend the money!” she said hotly.

“Dear, I just don’t understand. We’ll lose a significant amount of money. It can heal without the bell.”

“The bell isn’t for the Arcan,” she said, looking at the unconscious Arcan. “It’s for me.”

“You? Really, dear, don’t feel guilty about an *Arcan*.”

“It’s not *about* the Arcan!” she said to him, then she sniffled. “Come on, sweetie, let’s take you upstairs so the vets can help the Arcan,” she told the girl.

“Really, pity for an Arcan, what’s got into her?” the man asked as the vet picked up the Arcan and carried him over to the pallet, then laid him down in it gently on his side, holding his fractured skull in his hand with delicate care.

The other vet hurried back down the stairs, carrying a large iron device. A healing bell. The man gave an angry look when the two vets set up the bell over the Arcan’s head, very carefully, then an iron probe descended from the center of the bell and touched the Arcan’s head, over the wound. The younger vet activated the bell, and it began to glow with a soft emerald radiance as it used the power of a mana crystal to knit bone and flesh back together with amazing speed. “Needless to say, you can forget the recovery regimen after this,” the vet said

as the device did its work. “The healing bell will regenerate him back to perfect health. Just make sure to wean him off the increased food slowly, so he doesn’t mistake it for being starved again.”

In seconds, it was done. The Arcan’s skull was whole, and he passed into normal, regenerative sleep. The two vets tucked him into his pallet and covered him with a blanket, then carried the bell back out. The husband followed them, and when upstairs, engaged in a heated argument with his wife after they paid for the crystal used by the bell. He argued about spending so much money on an Arcan, even that one, while she kept telling him over and over again that it wasn’t about the Arcan.

“I saw his eyes,” the wife finally told him, shuddering at the memory. “He was *afraid*, pleading with me not to press that button with his eyes, and yet I did it anyway. I thought he hurt our baby, and I wanted to hurt him in return.”

“A perfectly understandable reaction, dear,” the husband said patiently. “And perfectly justified. No doubt had he not had a collar on him, he *would* have hurt Liza.”

“I berated you for tormenting that poor thing, and then I do the very same thing at the first available opportunity, without even giving it a second thought.”

“Again, dear, perfectly understandable. You were protecting our daughter from an Arcan.”

“Was I?” she asked, looking away from him. “He begged me not to hurt him, and I proved I’m every bit the monster he thinks I am.”

“It’s an *Arcan*, dear. What it thinks doesn’t matter in the slightest.”

“But it’s what *I* think that matters, Arthur. I thought I was better than that.”

“Dear, it’s an *Arcan*,” he said, with a little exasperation. “An animal!”

“I was never one to enjoy tormenting animals for fun, Arthur,” she said simply. “It has nothing to do with the Arcan, stop obsessing over it. It has to do with the fact that I tortured a defenseless animal for *no reason*. I could have easily let go of the button after just a second, but I held that button down until it passed out,” she said with a shudder.

“Dear, it was *only an Arcan*.”

She looked at him. “Arthur, until you can think of something else to say, I think I’m done talking to you.”

She walked off, leaving him surprised silence.

When he woke up, he felt... good.

Better than good. He felt completely whole, not weak at all.

His breathing was strong and stable. His arms and legs felt healthy, strong, his lungs felt stable and powerful. He opened his eyes and found himself still in the cellar, and after using spirit sight, he saw that he was comfortably alone. The daughters were outside, the husband and wife were up on the second floor, and the Arcans were busy with their daily tasks. He rose up off the pallet and felt... wonderful. He rose up on his legs, felt rock solid. He put his hand on his arm and felt strong muscle, put it against his side and felt smooth flesh instead of bare ribs. He felt so good that he was able to jump up into the beams of the ceiling and hold himself there using his claws and main strength, then dropped back down to the floor on all fours. He felt... whole. Just as he did before he was changed, strong, healthy, not hungry at all, not weak. What had they done to him? Had they used alchemy on him?

He shivered when he recalled what happened before he passed out. The look in the wife’s eyes, it was... scary. She thought he attacked her daughter, and it made her react. He guessed he couldn’t blame her too much for protecting her daughter, but still, all she had to do was *ask her daughter* before punishing him. He wasn’t doing anything but laying there while she nuzzled his fur. He didn’t lay a finger on her, and yet *he* gets punished when the mother comes down and sees them. He’d thought that maybe the woman was on his side, taking pity

on him because of what her husband did to him, but he saw that that was a false idea. She was no different than him. She punished him when he did nothing wrong, all because she *thought* he did something wrong without getting the whole story.

It was entirely unfair. But then again, he was an Arcan. There was no justice for him. There was only the whims of his masters.

He wanted out of the cellar. He felt strong, healthy, he wanted outside, he wanted to run. But he was trapped in there, trapped by his collar, and he had to settle for pacing back and forth in the cellar, both on his legs and on all fours.

He was inspecting the casks when footsteps on the stairs reminded him he wasn't alone in the house. They were the steps of people wearing shoes, which meant it was no Arcan, and that sent him bounding back into the far corner out of reflex. After tasting punishment from both the master and matron, and seeing any child as just the first step on the road to punishment, he wanted nothing to do with any of them. It was the master and matron both, his two primary tormentors, and the sight of both of them sent him into something of a near panic. His breathing became fast and shallow when they came down the cellar, and he crunched himself into the corner at their approach, kneeling in it and turned away from them, literally shivering with fear.

"Come here," the woman said, pointing to the ground before her.

He was in turmoil. He was sure that he'd be punished if he came to them, yet he would be punished if he did not. Terror played across his features, but then he realized that he'd be punished *less* if he obeyed than he would if he disobeyed, and that sparked him. He uncoiled from the corner and warily approached them on trembling limbs, staying down on all fours to look less threatening, allowing them to look down at him. He sat down before them, keeping his head down, afraid to look at them.

"Well, Arthur, I think he's tame enough," the woman said.

"Not by a country minar," the man answered. "If you took that collar off him, he'd be wild. He won't be tame until he obeys without a collar."

"Well, that's as tame as he's going to stay," she declared. She knelt down beside him, and he kept his head down as she grabbed hold of his collar. "You will come with us now," she told him. He felt her do something to it, and then she rose back up. He felt a tugging at his neck, and realized that she'd put a leash on him. He wanted to be outraged, but he was too afraid to be outraged. She pulled gently on the leash, which caused him to follow her. She led him up through a kitchen and out onto the back porch he knew from his time in the cage, and he saw that cage sitting in the yard.

She was putting him back in the cage!

He shied away reflexively. That cage—he felt a nameless dread just looking at it. The woman was tugged to a stop, and she looked back at him. But he yelped when he was kicked from behind, kicked by the man, and quickly scrambled forward, more terrified of that man than he was of the cage. He slinked down the stairs of the porch and started moving towards the cage, but the woman pulled on his leash, turning him away from it. She led him over to the huts, over to that sandy-haired man that Kyven remembered seeing when he and the coyote were brought to the plantation. "Here he is, Bobby," the woman said, reaching down and taking hold of the collar around his neck. "He'll have full run of the plantation, the same borders as the field Arcans," she told him. "Just let him run loose. Toby will be here in five days for him, to take him to Alamar."

"I can do that, ma'am," the young man said. "Why the change?"

"Because we went far beyond just trying to tame him," she said simply. "There will be no more taming."

"Annette—"

"I'm serious, Arthur!" she snapped at him. "We leave this poor thing alone! What we—what I did to him went far beyond just trying to tame him. I want him off of our plantation as soon as Toby arrives, if only to save *him* from us!"

Was she *regretting* punishing him? It seemed so! She felt remorse! He looked up at her with surprised eyes, but then put his eyes back to the ground quickly.

"We'll get our money back for him when we sell him in Alamar, and I'd like him to live to get there," she continued. "So he's all yours, Bobby. Just take care of him until Toby arrives." She knelt down and grabbed his collar. "Stay here," she said.

"Yes ma'am," the man Bobby said. He felt the leash removed, and he sat there with his head down as he heard the owners walk away, already engaged in a heated argument. "Well now, seems I'm responsible for you now, Blackie," he said, reaching down and grabbing him by the collar. "You're free to move about the plantation, as long as you stay in the boundary of the fence," he told him. "Just return here to the living area and stay here in the compound from sunset to sunrise so we know you're alright. Mind that, Blackie. If you don't return by sunset, the collar will punish you once every five minutes until you return. You have to come find me whenever you hear me call, so I can check on you and make sure you're doing okay, and no fighting with the other Arcans, Blackie, you'll be punished if you do." He let go of him and stood up. "Outside of that, Blackie, just behave, and you'll be on your way to Alamar before you know it. Be nice to me, and I'll be nice to you. 'Kay?"

Kyven looked up at him curiously.

"And for the sake of the Trinity, stand up," he said simply. "It creeps me out when Arcans do that."

Kyven obeyed, rising up on his legs, which put his eyes almost on a level with the sandy-haired man's. "Now, you get two meals a day, sunrise and sunset. You'll be allowed to roam free, so if you can catch any wild critters if you're hungry, be my guest. Just do me a favor and try to take out a few rabbits, they love to chew on the cotton stalks," he grunted. "I have others doing the same thing, hunters that chase off the critters. Do what they do. If you kill something you don't want to eat, bring it to the compound so we can use it for the field hands at dinner, so it doesn't go to waste. We got rabbits and deer that wander over the plantation fields, you're welcome to them. We got fields in every direction from the main house, and there's a stream that crosses our land to the south where you can get water if you're thirsty and don't want to come back to the house. Our borders are marked by the fence, Blackie, I wouldn't try to cross any fences if I were you or you're in for a lot of pain. If you're in a cotton field, do try to avoid breaking the plants. Outside of that, have at it," he said simply.

Kyven gave him a long, steady look, then turned and dropped to all fours and bounded away, racing towards the trees he could see just past the cotton field to the north, a forest that seemed to be within the boundaries of the plantation. He saw when he got closer that it *was* inside the fence, and vanished immediately into the trees. He went straight up a large oak tree a few paces back from the treeline, climbing almost as easily as he could walk, then padded out onto a heavy branch on all fours and looked back to the compound through the branches. The compound seemed to take no notice of him, leaving him blissfully alone.

It was more than he dared hope for. The woman seemed to be feeling guilt over punishing him, and as a blissful act of contrition, she had released him onto the plantation. Saving him from them, she'd said. Protecting their investment, he suspected, keeping him away from her husband, but still, she could have done that by putting him back in the cage. But instead, she had showed mercy, allowed him to be put in the care of another, removing him from the *taming*. He was still wearing the special taming collar, but at least it seemed that there would be

no more taming.

He laid on the branch for a long time, watching, and relaxing. Now that he was in a much calmer environment, out of the cage, out of the cellar, away from the stressful plantation, it gave him a chance to think about things, to ponder.

The first thing he pondered was escape. He thought about it for quite a while, and came to the conclusion that it was impossible to escape so long as he had the collar on. So, he turned his attention again to the collar. He examined it thoroughly with his fingers, again seeking some way to make it come apart, but again could find nothing that would allow that. So, since there was no *mechanical* way to remove the collar, that meant that one of its functions allowed it to be removed *magically*. That meant that it had to have some kind of control or trigger that would cause it to come off. If he could figure out how that worked, he would know how to get it off him and come up with a way to pull it off.

His first thought was the controller. He'd never seen anything but the back of it, and thought that perhaps the means to remove the collar was on the controller. That controller had to be how they changed the commands, moved his boundaries from the cage to the cellar, then the cellar to—

No. Wait. It was *Bobby* that set his boundaries, not the owners. Bobby—

No, that was wrong. The woman told him his boundaries when she handed him over to Bobby, and Bobby had just described them.

Wait again. Bobby had placed *additional* restrictions on him, telling him to return to the compound by sunset. What did he say exactly? If he didn't return by sunset, he'd be punished once every five minutes until he did? Well, he didn't see a controller in Bobby's hand! They just grabbed his collar and issued commands, and that caused the collar to respond.

That was it! The collars were *voice controlled*! And since the collars did not allow any Arcan to speak without being punished, then the Arcans could not change their commands themselves!

He had to try it. If he could manage to get out a full command before he lost himself, he could possibly *take off the collar himself*. He dropped to the forest floor, and took hold of his collar with a trembling hand. He knew what was coming. Pain. Agony. Mindless agony. But he had to maintain focus just long enough to get out two words. He was terrified of what was coming, but he just *had to try*.

He took a steeling breath. "Co—"

The world exploded in pain.

His voice was cut off instantly by that agony, causing him to drop to his knees, the flop weakly to the leaves of the forest floor. He struggled up onto his hands and knees, panting from the after-effects, feeling his whole body throb. No fucking way was that going to happen. The pain just shut him down instantly when it hit, and there was no way he could finish the command. Even knowing how the collar worked, he was still stuck with it. Only someone who could speak could take it off, and since he couldn't tell them what to do, there was no way to have it happen. Besides, the only people who could take it off were the humans, and they wouldn't do that. The only ones that might do it for him were the children, who wouldn't know what they were doing, but there was no way for him to explain what he wanted them to do.

Alternate methods of communication.

Of course!

They thought he was an animal. The master of the house thought that animals should not talk.

Well, he'd be in for a shock when he discovered that *this* animal could *read and write*.

It was a plan elegant in its simplicity. He just had to get one of the children alone and write out what he wanted her to do, and if she did it, he'd be free.

Not today, though. It would look very suspicious to the owners if he hung around the plantation immediately after being released, when the fear of them was still so fresh and raw. He'd wait a couple of days, and then start coming back to the compound during the day, when he saw the daughters on the porch. He had five days, after all, plenty of time, and he had all the room he wanted now to get fully adapted to his new legs, learn how to walk and run on them. Then, when he was ready, he'd try to trick one of the daughters into releasing him.

Guile and deceit.

It was a gilded cage, but Trinity, what gilding.

He felt *wonderful*. He tore all over the plantation on that first day, learning the boundaries, exploring the huge plantation from one end to the other and learning just how impressively big it was. He found an old, decayed plantation house on the far end of the plantation, looking to be hundreds of years old, the roof gone and trees growing out of it. It was fun to crawl around the place and explore, then bound away on all fours, running as fast as a horse as he came to get used to his new legs.

That, of course, wasn't entirely smooth. He got running down, but turning, well, that was another story. He wiped out more than once trying to turn, even slamming into a few trees, as he tried to puzzle out the nuances involved with his arms and legs, and even his tail, when it came to turning while running. It was actually quite intricate, a very delicate shifting of legs and tail that would allow him to turn gently, while more forceful shifts allowed for a sharper turn, all the while keeping his forward momentum in consideration. His tail was like a rudder when he was running, allowing him to drift in his forward motion, and the tail in combination with shifts of his legs and arms allowed him to turn. He practiced all morning, both learning how to run and also exercising, charging headlong back and forth across the plantation, and looking to be source of curiosity and amusement to the other Arcans and the six human overseers that the plantation employed to watch over them and direct them in their labors.

It all came to the test, though, when he smelled deer near the stream. He found his nose was quite sensitive and effective, scenting out the deer and allowing him to track them, until he saw them in the woods near the cotton fields. Seeing them awakened his hunting instincts, and he dropped to the ground and slinked towards them using the bushes, trees, and shadows for cover.

He got close to them. He got amazingly close to them, so close he realized he could ambush them. He did so, erupting from the shadowed bushes, which made the deer turn and bolt towards the small grassy field between the forest and the cotton field. Kyven exploded from the trees behind them, and as they turned, he turned as well, putting his turning skills to the test... and failing. He overshot one of them, then turned on another, bounding off the ground in a near roll. This one did not turn, tried to run, and that was a fatal mistake. He overtook it in ten strides and swiped its back legs out from under it with a hand, then jumped on it as it tumbled across the grass. Powerful jaws clamped down on its neck as Kyven delivered the killing blow, crushing its windpipe and holding it closed as the deer twitched and kicked under him. He drove his claws into it and savaged the deer's neck, tasted hot blood in his mouth, which made the deer jerk and spasm, and then sag limply to the grass.

He'd done it. He'd caught and killed a deer using nothing but himself. No Shaman magic, no daggers, just a flat ambush, chase-down, and kill, just like the wolf had done.

The Arcans in the fields looked at him for a moment before getting back to work looking for pests that would eat the cotton plants or pulling weeds that would rob the cotton of soil nutri-

ents. He gave them a steady look, down on all fours with the deer's neck still in his mouth, and saw that they looked... hungry. And envious.

He stood up on his legs, holding the deer by the head, then dragged it deliberately towards the plantation, which made them give him grateful looks. They were hungry... well, he would feed them. He needed to practice anyway. They'd come back tonight to a feast, if he had anything to say about it. And though he could do nothing about it if they felt jealous that he was allowed to run free where they were not, well, he could work *for* them, feed them as long as he was there, make sure they had more food than they could eat every night.

The deer, though, didn't quite like his idea. There were plenty of them in the woods and untilled fields south of the stream, and they were rather used to the hunters that already prowled the area. Those hunters were good enough to be respected, but this new hunter put an entirely new dimension into the game. He was stealthy, almost unnaturally stealthy, able to get within striking distance of them every time he tried, which left only their own foot speed and evasion to save them from him. They were not as fast as the Arcan on foot, but they could turn sharper than he could. That was where they had the advantage. The ones that survived his ambush attempts saw that he couldn't turn quickly or easily, that the ones that tried to run away from him were ran down and killed, and that became their defense against him. He would stalk up to them, then attack, and they would scatter, zigzagging away.

What they didn't realize, though, was that they were giving Kyven the perfect chance to practice. His turning ability improved with every failed ambush, getting a tiny bit better every time, and by the end of the first day, after he'd piled ten deer by the cauldron for the field Arcans, he was much harder to escape from than he'd been that morning.

The field Arcans that handled the cooking were quite happy with him. Adding what he brought in with the catches of the other hunters, and the field hands would have quite a feast that night. They happily took the deer and rabbits the seven hunters kept bringing in over the course of the day, skinned them, and added them to the stewpot, even started drying venison for field lunches for the hands for tomorrow. Kyven's addition to the ranks of the hunters significantly increased the day's catches, because the while the other hunters focused mainly on the rabbits that damaged the cotton plants and only went after the deer when the opportunity presented itself, Kyven concentrated on the deer to use to help him train himself in the use of his new legs.

The family was all sitting at their little table on the porch when Kyven came in for the last time that day, dragging a very large buck along with him. He gave them fearful looks as he handed the carcass over to a small female rat Arcan, an old female that served the plantation as a cook. Once he delivered his kill, he dropped down onto all fours and padded away, out of their sight, then laid down in the grass on the far side of a baling barn which held a huge machine that took raw cotton and processed it into bundled bales. All in all, he was content with this change. It showed him that the woman was the one that really controlled this place, and he had little doubt that the man's cruelty was some kind of response to that lack of control. He was not master of his own home, so he took it out on the wild Arcans he loved to tame, and probably was not very kind to the other Arcans either. He slinked out to where he could see around the corner and watched. The two Arcans that served the family tea, the coyote and raccoon, didn't seem overly tense. The man offered his cup and had them fill it, and he made no aggressive moves towards them.

Ah, that was it. He was all about control. He was perfectly content so long as he felt he had absolute control, a control he lacked against his wife. Kyven represented a lack of control, and so the man was quite cruel to him. The coyote was completely compliant, had not run even when she had been uncollared, so the man saw her as perfectly acceptable, maybe even

treated her fondly. She bowed to his authority, and was rewarded with good treatment. Kyven was a defiance of that authority, and so he was treated harshly.

So, the man was a little more complex than Kyven expected.

"Blackie!" a voice boomed across the compound. It was the man Bobby, and Kyven felt his collar twitch as a condition of its activation had been met. Kyven had to find the man, or the collar would punish him. He bounded towards the voice, and saw him and two other humans with a large group of Arcans, coming up the grassy field. He slowed down and rose up onto his legs as he reached the man's horse, nodding up to him. "Just making sure you'd come in, that's all," he said as Kyven fell in beside the horse. "Go on and get some dinner, now. And remember, stay in the compound until sunrise."

He was already full, having eaten his fill of deer during the day, so he lay lazily in the sun out of sight of the house, feeling the warmth on his fur, and feeling... good. Better than he felt as a human in some ways, laying there and feeling the sun on him but not feeling its heat because of his thick fur, fur that kept him at a comfortable temperature. He'd learned over the day that too much time out in the sun *did* warm him, but that was nothing a move into the shade didn't fix. His feeling was the feeling of a powerful body that had been well exercised, feeling strong and healthy, maybe some kind of after-effect of whatever they'd done to heal him.

It was a strange feeling, but not a bad one. He hated what he was, but in that moment, he found... contentment in it.

He watched the Arcans eat, eat a great deal of the food he'd killed for them, then watched them sit around on the grass in silence in the dwindling light. They looked content as well. A few of them got up and walked around, allowed to roam freely as they pleased after work from the looks of it, and more than a couple came up to him and nodded, or even knelt down and touched him, put their muzzles against him and nuzzled him, which he accepted. One burly wolf female with dark gray fur, almost black, pulled him out of his hiding place and among the other Arcans, which made Kyven a touch uncomfortable. He kept looking to the house, where the family was sitting on the porch, and they seemed to understand his trepidation. The dark-furred wolf female pulled him towards one of the huts, to get him out of sight of them, and he followed her willingly. But once she got him into the hut, her demeanor changed, and she got... well, *amorous*.

They weren't even the same species! And what was more, she was an Arcan where he was not, so he wasn't entirely enthusiastic about her attentions. But, as she licked at his face and put her hand quite boldly on his inner thigh, it made him think back to that cat Shaman and her willingness to have sex with a human, and also to the Arcan practice of touching and huddling for mutual comfort.

That was all it was. Comfort. She was offering him comfort, a very special kind of comfort, a very special "welcome to the plantation" gift for surviving the cage. The cat hadn't taken advantage of him just because she thought it was what he wanted, it was also for *her comfort*. She wanted to be wanted, wanted to experience a little pleasure in a world so often filled with pain. That was what it was for the wolf, he saw. A chance to forget about real life, if only for a short time, in the arms of a lover.

It explained a great deal.

But still, he found himself in a situation. She was quite enthusiastic about the idea of mating him, and he found himself trapped between angering her and seeming aloof and stuck up and bowing to her, which wouldn't be very easy given he wasn't really interested.

But, he had a few more days here yet, and it was best not to rile the residents. He submitted to her attention, which seemed to amuse her with his initial reluctance.

He wondered how different it would be, and she started educating him quickly. Where humans would kiss, she licked his face and bit at him lightly, but the need to touch and explore was the same. She seemed fascinated by his thick, soft fur, running his fingers through it ceaselessly, then bent to the task of arousing him with nuzzling, licks, gentle bites, and a hand very gently and sensually fondling him. He reciprocated, running his hands and fingers through her rough, thick fur, fondling her smallish breasts, stroking his hands through her fur on her stomach and sides, until she seemed ready and had gotten him ready.

It proved that Arcans weren't just animals. Kyven would think that a canine would prefer a canine sexual position, on her hands and knees with him behind her, but she instead put him on his back and straddled him, then lowered herself onto him with a throaty growl. Kyven had never had conscious sex with an Arcan female before, and he found it... not very different at all. Outside of the whole grabbing handfuls of fur issue, and not looking up to see a naked woman, and the fact that she seemed to like to bite at his neck while she rocked on top of him, it felt much the same. Sex with an Arcan was, sensation wise, identical to sex with a human.

But the culture around it was *not*. Other Arcans came into the hut while he and the female wolf had intercourse, two male wolves, which the female did not seem to mind at all. She even looked at them as she panted on top of him, reached out to one of them and patted him on the leg as he went by them to reach for a flute hanging on the wall. As he lay there, he realized that sex couldn't really be private in the Arcan world, since Arcans really didn't have privacy for much of anything. He felt very self-conscious laying there with a female bouncing up and down on him while two other Arcan males were crouched in the hut, one of them playing a flute while the other lay on the far side, not looking at them.

It wasn't easy to perform for an audience, but he managed to put the fact that they weren't alone out of his mind by closing his eyes, putting his hands on her furry hips, and just concentrating on the sensation. She leaned down over him and put her hands on his chest, her claws digging painfully into his skin as she panted, then gave a low growl as he felt her achieve orgasm, which in turn triggered his own when he felt an identical indescribable sensation similar to what the cat did to him when she had sex with him.

Yes, *all* Arcan females seemed capable of that... trick. Perhaps that was how Arcan females triggered orgasms in males, because he doubted many males would last long after feeling *that* after having already been engaged in intercourse for a while and being not far from orgasm in the first place.

He lay on the floor, getting his breath back as the female laid down on top of him and licked him on the face, her hands digging into his fur. Then she rose up and looked down at him with a toothy smile, climbed off of him, and immediately went over to the male wolf who was on the other side. She slinked over him, biting and nibbling at his ear, clearly trying to incite him. She didn't have to try very hard, either. The male accepted her attentions quite willingly, and then it was Kyven's turn to close his eyes and not pay attention as the two wolves had sex, laying there as he recovered from the encounter. Kyven heard something loud yet distant over the panting and low growls of the two wolves, and from the look of the flute player, he did as well. They both peeked out of their hut, looking towards the main house, where they heard voices raised in argument. It was the master and matron, standing on the porch, having an argument. They were too far away to make out the thrust of it, since the two of them seemed to not want to scream because of the children, but Kyven was curious, and Bobby's orders only said that he had to stay *in the compound*. He wasn't restricted to the huts. He dropped down onto all fours and crept out into the night, wanting to stay hidden. When he passed by the hut, he felt a curious shivering through his fur, like he passed into

cold air, and then heard an audible gasp behind him. He turned his head to look back at the other wolf, who was looking at where he was, not at the two masters.

He wasn't sure what he was gasping about, so he continued towards the house. He stayed to the shadows by the large buildings, then crept across the yard and up under the hated cage. From there, he could hear them arguing clearly, and they were arguing about *him*. The master wanted to continue taming him, but the woman would hear nothing of it, telling him that she couldn't bear the thought of seeing him or any other Arcan punished by that collar.

"But dear, we'll lose money if he's not tamed!"

"I think he wasn't wild!" she answered. "Did you see how the vet handled him? Did you see him act in any way hostile to Bobby? Did he hurt Liza or Varra when they approached him? By the Trinity, Arthur, Liza was alone with him for *minutes* and he didn't lay a finger on her! I think though he may have been caught in the wild, he's *not* wild. I think the hunters might have poached him off another plantation somewhere far from here and brought him here to sell."

"He certainly has not acted in a tame manner," the man said hotly.

"Only *after* he was punished," she shot back. "I think the vet was right. That collar *made* him act like an animal!"

"That collar had great success with Bruno and the other wild Arcans!"

"I'm starting to wonder just how successful it was, Arthur. Or if it's really necessary. Other tamers seem to have little trouble taming Arcans without using a collar like that. Most just use a standard collar."

"And who told you that?"

"The vet. I asked him before he left. And by the way, he mentioned that he wouldn't answer a call from us again."

"What? Why not?"

"He said that he would not come to call so long as we use the taming collar. And that's word for word."

"Why that arrogant bastard," the husband said, standing up in aggravation. "He has no right to tell us how to treat our Arcans!"

"I... he has a point, Arthur. I would like the collar sold."

"What? Annette, don't tell me you're developing pity for *Arcans*!"

"It has nothing to do with Arcans, Arthur. It has everything to do with *us*." She stood up. "That collar is *evil*, Arthur. I saw it when I used it on that Arcan, and I'll not have it in my house. When the fox is sent to Alamar, we will sell the collar. I'd take it off of him right now if we had a spare collar to put on him, but we can't risk losing our investment, not after putting over a thousand chits into him."

"That is *my* collar, Annette, you cannot sell it!"

"You can either have that collar or you can have me, Arthur," she told him with complete calm. "And since this is *my* house, if you choose that collar, you will find it to be rather poor company when you're looking for a new place to live." She turned and walked to the door. "Arthur, you are a good man and I love you. You have been a delight and a joy these twenty years, and I wish to grow old and die with you. But I am serious about this. I will not tolerate that collar in this house a single moment after the fox is gone. If you want to continue taming Arcans, you can do it the way other tamers do it, but you will *never* use that collar again. Every time I see it, I'll be reminded of seeing a side of myself I wish I'd never seen. The Book of the Trinity says that an instrument of evil will beget nothing but evil. I see now that the book did not lie."

"That's a crock, Annette!"

“Is it? Is it anything but evil to torture *anything* like that, even an Arcan? To put it through so much pain that it fractures its own skull in convulsions?” she asked with a shudder. “How would you feel if you came out and found Varra sticking needles into one of the barn cats, Arthur? Cutting it open while it was still alive and pulling out its organs? Would that be alright to you?”

He was silent a long moment. “You never objected to it before. You’ve seen me use it.”

“And that changed when *I* used it,” she said simply. “I’d never used it before, and Father help me, I never will again. Nor will I tolerate it ever being used in my house. The collar goes, Arthur. And there will be no debate. I will not live with that thing in my house.”

She swept into the house, leaving the husband. He had a look of fury on his face, and then he glared up at the house in a manner than made Kyven’s blood run cold.

Kyven had the idea that this man was going to choose the collar over his wife.

And he’d be a poor man for not warning her, not after she’d given him at least a modicum of freedom and dignity. That look on his face was *dreadful*, the same way that the man had looked at him when he was torturing him.

He ghosted past the back porch, then opened his eyes to the spirits and looked into the house. His eyes made notice of everyone, and saw the woman going up stairs he could not see, while her four daughters were down in a room on the first floor, looking to be sitting around a table, he would guess. The coyote was upstairs, and that was it.

Kyven was a climber. It was a very simple affair to climb up the posts of the front porch roof and clamber up onto the balcony that was over it, then enter the house through a large window. He slinked through the second floor on all fours, stalking out into a hallway lit only by a faint lamp on the far end, where there was a mirror.

Mirror.

Kyven was looking right at the mirror, showing a reflection of the hallway, and *he could not see himself*. He could not even see his own eyes, and he was using spirit sight! The glow should have given him away, but there was nothing there at all!

Shadow fox. Of course! The fox said he was a *shadow fox* Arcan, and she said that shadow foxes could hide in the shadows to such extent that they were invisible to the eye! That had to be the cool sensation he felt around himself, him melding into the shadows to become invisible!

A few paces out proved his theory. When he came out into the direct light, his body shimmered back into visibility, including his glowing green eyes. But when he backed up a single pace, out of the direct light and into the shadow created by a small table in the hallway that held a small clock, he felt that cool sensation and watched his own body dissolve away before his very eyes, through the mirror. Testing showed that so long as he kept his entire body within the shadow, he was all but invisible.

This had to be the gift the fox said she gave him. She gave him the power of the shadow foxes she created, the power to meld into the shadows and become invisible out of direct light.

Amazing! And *useful*! Kyven could hide his tell-tale eyes from giving him away, so long as he was merged to the shadows.

The coyote came down the hall, and she padded right by him. She never even saw him, and she could have kicked him if she’d been a half a rod to the left!

He stalked into the woman’s bedroom, and saw her sitting at a writing desk. He wondered how to go about this, but then heard footsteps behind him. He slinked into the room and retreated into a corner, out of the direct light of the lamp on the writing stand. It was the husband, Arthur. He was standing in the doorway, and he had a strange look on his face, that

same cold look in his eyes that he’d seen before, the eyes of a man capable of doing harm. He couldn’t attack the man, or even think of harming him, but the knife in his hand stressed that desire to the utmost. If he was punished, then he’d be defenseless against that knife, and both of them would die.

Well, he could *protect* without doing harm. All he had to do was keep the woman alive, for the man *did not* have the control to manually punish him.

He had to wait for the right moment. If he charged the man now, the woman would not believe him capable of it. If he waited too long, he would stab her. He closed his eyes to the spirits and crept out as far as he could, coming back into visibility, using his dark fur as camouflage in the direct light to not attract the man’s eye. The man stepped into the room as the woman continued to write in her little book, and then raised the knife.

Kyven *barked*. That was *not* speaking.

It distracted the man for that critical moment for the woman to look at him and see the knife. She gasped and jumped out of her chair. “Arthur! What are you doing!”

“You will not tell me what to do, Annette,” he said in a cold voice, stalking up on her. “This is *my* house, I am the *master* of this house. You cannot tell me what to do!”

Kyven jumped up onto the bed, down on all fours, then growled threateningly, startling both of them. They both stared at him in shock, but that shock turned to amazement when he darted at them, then turned and reared up on his legs, between the man and the woman, glaring at the man with his teeth bared, being exceedingly careful not to think in a hostile manner. He would *not* hurt the man, he would *not* hurt the man, he would only protect the woman.

“A brave front, Arcan,” the man laughed. “You can’t hurt me or your collar will punish you! Now stand aside!”

“Oh yes he can!” the woman said, reaching out and grabbing the collar from behind. “You may hurt Arthur to protect me!”

Kyven’s eyes went flat. *Now* he would hurt the man.

Arthur gasped, then screamed and turned to flee, but he didn’t make it a single step. Kyven crashed into him from behind, slamming him to the floor, and all it took was one bite. He savaged the back of the man’s neck, his jaws tearing through flesh and hitting bone, then a wrench of his head snapped the man’s neck. The body jerked, and then fell limp.

His tormentor was dead.

Trinity, that felt *good*, but he found the taste of human blood to be... sickening. He spat it out, made a disgusted face, even scraped his tongue against the floor. He rose up over the body, then turned to regard the woman with calm eyes.

She was trembling, up against the back wall, her hand to her chest. “You saved me!” she gasped.

Kyven turned to the writing desk, picked up her pen, and the scrawled in her book. He held it up to her and showed it to her.

You saved me from him. Fair is fair.

She gasped, then laughed ruefully. “You can read!”

He nodded simply.

There was a gasp at the door. The coyote was standing there, her hands to her muzzle as she gawked down at the body of Arthur Ledwell.

“Missy, go to an overseer and bring them here quickly,” the woman said in a quavering voice. The coyote turned and ran from the room to carry out her instructions. “Well, don’t expect me to free you out of gratitude, Arcan,” she told him. “I’m doing you a favor by keeping you, even if you don’t think so. I’ll send you to Alamar, and you’ll spend the rest of your

life in comfort and safety. You'll never fear another collar like that one again."

He wrote in the book and held it out to her. *I'm not a gray. I'm not breeding stock.*

"Well, what *are* you then?"

He was at a loss. How could he tell her without opening a floodgate? He wrote his reply. *I'm a fox, but I'm not a gray.*

"Well, if dogs can crossbreed, and cats can crossbreed, then I'd venture to say that you can be crossbred as well. So you go to Alamar, where you'll be safe and comfortable, and you'll never end up being someone's fur coat."

He wrote jaggedly on the book. *And you earn your profit.*

"Yes. But don't even think I'm not grateful, Arcan. You saved my life. Know that I'm doing what I'm doing only because it's for your own good. You'll be *safe* in Alamar. If I let you go, you'd be the target of every hunter in the entire region!"

He scratched in the book, then threw it at her and stalked out of the room. She picked it up and read it.

The road to hell is paved with good intentions.

No good deed went unpunished, it seemed.

The murder of Arthur Ledwell seemed to rock the area. Long processions of carriages came and went the next day, and Kyven was even summoned back to the plantation house twice, once for the local sheriff, and once for a detachment of Loreguard. Annette Ledwell explained what happened, then the officials asked Kyven if he killed Arthur Ledwell to protect Annette Ledwell. When he nodded in assent, the matter was closed. Arthur Ledwell died to an Arcan set on him as an act of self defense by the would-be victim.

It infuriated Kyven. He just had to stop doing things like that! He saved Annette Ledwell out of gratitude for her getting her husband off his back, and how does she repay him? She was *selling* him, that's how! Selling him in the famous blue ring of Alamar! She *thought* she was doing good by him, sending him down to Alamar to be a breeder, a life that was supposedly soft and easy for an Arcan, but still, of all the nerve!

She was quite adamant, though. She barred him from the house after the officials were done talking to him, which left him outside, trying to see, convince her to let him go, but she would not budge. Kyven was still bound by the collar and the restrictions it kept on him, so he prowled the plantation by day, and was forced to return at night.

The other Arcans looked at him as some kind of hero. They celebrated in careful silence the night after the murder, because the four girls were quite traumatized by the death of their father, so much so that he heard the oldest girl arguing with her mother the next night about killing Kyven for murdering her father. The woman was disturbed by the daughter, to the point where she summoned Kyven to the plantation that very night and, much to his dismay, removed the ability of anyone to use or command the collar except herself.

Bitch! She'd inadvertently ruined his plan to escape!

That was a *bitter* lesson. He thought he'd done the right thing, defended the woman from her husband, but it came back and kicked him in the ass. It had indirectly ruined his best chance to escape.

He was so mad he gouged most of the bark off quite a few trees with his claws the next morning, and was so unsociable that the other Arcans left him alone. They could tell he was angry, so they just gave him space.

What was he supposed to do? He thought he did the right thing! He'd repaid a kindness with a kindness, and it got him screwed!

But, it wasn't a total loss, at least in the grand scheme of things. After the funeral, when they buried the body of Arthur Ledwell on the plantation, things started to change a little bit.

The first change he saw was that the woman changed the collars so the Arcans could speak, all of them but *his own*, almost as if she was ensuring his silence until the day he left. It was a little thing, but it had a fundamental, almost revelatory shift behind it. The woman was allowing the Arcans to talk, she was allowing them to act like more than *animals*. Maybe Kyven had something to do with that by revealing that he knew how to read and write, he wasn't sure. The ability to read and write was certainly something that one wouldn't attribute to an Arcan, that was for sure.

They were almost afraid to speak, and many couldn't, having not spoken for so long that they'd forgotten how. But some of them could, and those few were always careful to remain silent around the overseers and family, but talked among themselves.

Kyven spent the rest of the time waiting for this man Toby to try to find some other way to slip his collar. First he tried to get the controls, but that was a failure. He'd been barred from the house on pain of punishment, and the controls were in the house. He couldn't get into the house to find them, he still couldn't talk so he couldn't send an Arcan in after them for him, none of the Arcans could read any instructions he could write for them, and the only ones who could, the family, wouldn't do it. The daughters were afraid of him now because he killed their father, so he couldn't count on their help even if he could get close enough to them to try. When he couldn't get the controls, he tried again to get the collar off him, but he stumbled across one of the other little hidden features of the collar when he found a saw and tried to saw it off.

He got punished the instant the sawblade touched the collar.

It took him a while to recover from that. The woman hated the collar, but she certainly didn't seem inclined to take it off of him until he was gone!

He found himself stuck. He couldn't get it off, he couldn't cut it off, he couldn't trick anyone to take it off for him. He spent five days trying to find a way to get the collar off of him, getting more and more desperate to find a way to get free of the damned collar and escape, but he had no luck.

Five days was up. In the morning of the sixth day, the woman, now wearing mourning black, called him back to house before he could vanish into the plantation grounds. Standing with her was a very tall, lean, rugged-looking man with bronze skin, blond hair done in a ponytail, handsome figures, and carrying a musket, pistol, and surprisingly, a mana whip. "This him, ma'am?" the man said in an Alamar drawl.

"It is, Toby."

"You wasn't lyin', Ah see."

"Not a bit."

"Ah'll do it fo' one quarter of his sale price."

"I'm in no mood to barter, Toby. Take twenty percent and be happy with it."

"Twenty," he said with a nod. He held out an uncut green crystal the size of a man's fist, an astounding crystal worth at least three thousand chits, and gave it to her. "The deposit," he said simply.

"They said you were a man of your word, Toby," she said, looking at the crystal with an appraising eye.

"Ain't never broke my word before, and ain't never will," he said simply. "Ah'll be takin' that collar off him, though."

"Gladly."

Kyven was not compliant for that. The man Toby had to chain him to a post of the porch and put a pistol against his muzzle. "This won't kill ya, Arcan, but Ah'll guarantee it'll sting like all hell when Ah blow your snout off," he said simply. "Now hold still."

“Release,” he heard the woman say, and he felt the collar come free of his neck. Kyven’s eyes were locked on that pistol, though, and the cold eyes of the man holding it. The woman put a different collar on him, and then the man holstered his pistol calmly.

“That collar only has one function, Arcan,” he said. “If ya get separated from me by more than a quarter minar, it’ll paralyze ya and tell me where you are. Got it?”

Kyven nodded, then glared at the woman. “I hope someday someone shows you the same kindness yrou showed mme,” he slurred.

“You’ll see when you get there, Arcan, I did what was best for you,” she said simply.

“You’ll have an easy life in Alamar.”

“He sho’ will,” Toby nodded. “This be a breeder or Ah ain’t an Alamar son. He’ll go for fo’ thousand easy. Ah’ll return with yo’ money, Misses Ledwell, soon as he done gets sold.”

“Good luck, Toby, and good luck to you, Arcan,” she said, then she turned and went back into the house, leaving him with the lean man.

“Ah got only one rule, Arcan. It’s the Golden Rule. Ah’ll do untah you as you do untah me. Undahstand?”

“I understand,” he slurred.

“Good. Ah’m Toby, by the way. Toby Fisher, and Ah’m an Arcan consigner by trade. You got a name?”

“Kyb–Kyb–Kyven.”

“Nice tah meet ya, Kyven,” he said. “Now let’s get along. We’ll be takin’ a ship from Cheston tah Alamar. Mah job is tah see you get there alive and well and sell yah for the most Ah can get. In return, Ah get one fifth yo’ sale price plus expenses, which Ah think’ll net me an easy thou.”

Kyven was a little curious about this strange man, who seemed personable him, yet clearly saw him as a commodity to be bought and sold. The man took him around to the front of the house, where a horse was being held by the coyote Arcan. He took the reins from her and mounted, but she took his hands and licked his cheek. “Good luck,” she told him simply. “May the spirits watch over you.”

He almost felt like laughing in her face, but he could tell she was sincerely worried for him. He patted her on the shoulder. “Thank you,” he told her, then she nodded and hurried back into the house.

“Ah’m a simple man, Kyven,” Toby said as he turned his horse. “Ah do mah job and do it well, and Ah’ll treat ya with the same respect ya show me. Yo’ free tah do whatever you want, so long as you don’t break no laws, stay within a quarter minar o’ me, and obey when Ah give you a direct order. Yo’ free to defend yo’self if someone comes aftah ya, but you don’t be startin’ no fights. Them’s my only rules, and Ah find they make the trip a pleasant one fo’ both o’ us.”

Toby Fisher was a very chatty fellow.

And he was strangely personable. He let Kyven run alongside his horse fearlessly, confident in the collar around Kyven’s neck, and Kyven was a little surprised at his trust. Kyven could turn on Toby and attack him, but he was almost *cold-bloodedly* confident. This man was a fighter, a seasoned fighter, and he wouldn’t be taken unawares. He was perfectly comfortable giving Kyven free reign to run around.

He was just glad to be free of that plantation. It had been a terrible place, but at least Kyven had removed the dark stain that was Arthur Ledwell from the face of the earth, and hopefully left something a little better in its place.

It was nice to at least *feel* free. He had no fences around him, no borders, just a road and a man that was allowing him to run freely, not in a cage, not sitting in a wagon, not riding on

the back of a horse. He was allowing Kyven to run on his own feet, easily keeping up with the horse thanks to his highly trained strength and endurance, was probably capable of running the horse to death in this Arcan form. He still had a damned collar around his neck, but at least this one didn’t promise that dreadful punishment that made his blood freeze just thinking about it. This one was *humane* by comparison, simply paralyzing him if he went too far from Toby... or so he was told.

But still, it was nice to at least pretend he was free, running down the Avannar Road back to Atan, back to his home.

Toby was very chatty. He told stories during the two hour trip to Cheston, all kinds of stories about old heroes and places he’d been and people he’d met during the course of his travels as a consigner. He even talked about a couple of the Arcans he’d herded to and fro as they came over that small rise and saw Cheston by the bay around noon. “Was the most stuck up bitch yo’d ever think tah see,” he laughed as he described a female silver fox. “She knew she’d go fo’ thousands in the blue ring, and lawd, did she make sho’ everyone knew it!”

“What happened to her?” he asked curiously.

“Just what she thought,” he answered as he kicked his horse up to a canter, and Kyven stretched out his strides to match. “Made mah life hell takin’ her tah Alamar. She demanded her own room and human food and a maid to comb her fur ever night. Ah put up with her, though, cause Ah knew she knew what she was worth. Got her tah Alamar and sold her in the blue ring fo’ seven thousand. Was the highest price evah fo’ an Arcan at the time.”

“What made her so valuable?”

“Pedigree and appearance,” he replied. “From a champion line, and she was a mutated silver with blue eyes, and her fur was almost as nice as yo’s. She was the dame o’ the new Vicar Silvah breed, they crossed her with another silvah and got a really go’geous fur that bred true through the babies.”

“I don’t think I’d like knowing I was the sire of Arcans kirr–kirl–*killed* for their fur,” Kyven grunted.

“Yo’ better be getting’ used tah that idea, friend,” he said simply. “Furriers’d kill for that pelt o’ yo’s. Ah’ll guarantee ya they’ll be tryin’ tah breed that black o’ yo’s intah a new line o’ foxes.”

“They won’t try long,” Kyven grunted.

“Ah, yo’ a scrapper eh?” Toby chuckled. “Ain’t none o’ mah business if ya are, friend. Once Ah sell ya, yo’ can be tearin’ all of Alamar to shreds, ain’t mah business. Yo’ be *their* problem by then. Ah just ask yah don’t cause *me* those problems, cause yo’ll find Ah’m a hell o’ a lot harder tah get away from than they will be. When ya get there, yo’ be just one of hundreds they watchin’. With me, yo’ the *only* one Ah gotta watch.”

“Fair enough. But you know I’ll try if I see a chance.”

“And Ah don’t blame ya one bit if’n ya do,” he said simply. “Ah’ll have tah track ya down and catch ya again, but Ah won’t hold it against ya. Ain’t nothin’ but business, friend, ain’t nothin’ but business. Yo’ just doin’ what ya can tah be happy, and Ah’m just doin’ mah job. But Ah done gave mah word yo’d reach the blue ring, and Ah don’t never break mah word. Ah’ll hunt ya ‘til the day Ah die, Kyven, ain’t no lie and don’t never think it Ah won’t. So think about that if’n ya try.”

“Fair enough,” Kyven repeated.

Despite the unusual situation, Kyven had a weird kind of respect for Toby Fisher. He was an honest, forthright man with a rather refreshingly direct outlook on life. He took things as they were, and treated Arcans with the same respect he showed people, and showed not a whit of concern about it. But on the same tack, the man was a professional Arcan slaver, whose spe-

cialty was taking valuable Arcans to sell in specialty markets as a proxy for their owners. That a man could be so friendly with Arcans that he was going to sell away seemed very strange to Kyven, but it was just one facet of the man's unusual, yet strangely magnetic personality. He was warm and personable, kind and respectful, to human and Arcan both. Kyven was surprised to be treated with such respect by the man, who acted almost as much like his butler as he did his overseer, constantly asking if he wanted food or water, asking him what food he liked, if he liked to sleep in beds or on floors, and so on. When they reached the docks and waited on the quay, after Toby sold off his horse, Toby actually made him a sandwich out of food in his saddlebags as they waited for the innkeeper to return with the money, literally waiting on him like a servant.

He was every bit as formidable as he looked, Kyven discovered as they made their way to the docks. Kyven padded along beside him, looking for a possible way to escape, two men rushed out of an alley wielding a pistol and cutlass and a strange black metal stick. Toby reacted with amazing speed, pulling his pistol and shooting the nearest man without even giving warning, sending him crashing to the ground, then he pulled a wicked-looking long knife from his belt and squared off against the other man, interposing himself directly between Kyven and his assailant.

And that was when Kyven realized that Toby was not stupid. His first impulse was to attack the man himself, to hit him and find the key that would release him from his collar, but the instant he moved to do so, he found that his entire body locked up, freezing him into position. Clearly, the collar would not allow him to attack Toby. He remained frozen until he gave over on the idea, and then the collar released him, but in that time Toby had slithered aside as the second man swung that black stick at him, turned, and buried that long, wide-bladed knife in the man's side to the hilt, sending him to the ground to move no more.

Kyven dropped down onto all fours as he marveled at how deadly the man was, yanking his knife free calmly and wiping it on the shirt of one of the dead men. "Ay, do a man a favah and go fetch the watch, would ya?" he called to a young man of about thirteen who was standing nearby.

This man could *fight*.

Kyven sat on his haunches near Toby as they waited for the watch, and then Toby explained what happened. The watch interviewed several witnesses, and when they corroborated Toby's version of events, they let him and Toby go about their business. "Always someone gotta go an' be stupid," he sighed. "What a waste. Come on, friend, our ship'll be pullin' out soon."

Kyven had a *hell* of a lot more respect for the man now. Not only was he not stupid, he was one hell of a nasty fighter.

Toby wasn't lying when he said there was a ship waiting for them. It was a steamer, a paddlewheel ship, using crystals to boil water that created steam that turned the wheel. Toby had already seemed to secure passage aboard what was clearly an upscale passenger ship, filled with men and women in fine clothes, and Arcan servants attending them. Kyven was the only naked Arcan on the ship, and it made him just a tad self-conscious. But he followed the lean man as he carried his bags into ship, going up a flight of stairs and coming to a stateroom door. "This be yo's, Kyven. Yo' own stateroom. Mine is right beside ya, so if ya need anything, just come next do' and knock."

"My own room?" he asked in surprise.

"Ayah," he nodded. "All yo's. We got ten days tah Alamar, friend, we only gonna stop once at Parai in Flaur. Outside o' that, it's a straight shot tah Alamar. Yo' speak Flauren?"

He shook his head.

"Ayah, then yo' best stayin' on the boat. They be a little device in there on the table by the bed, it rings the galley. If yo' hungry, just press the little button, and they ask what ya want, then send it up."

"That's it? You're leaving me?"

"Ayah, unless you like playin' cards o' some such," he said simply. "Just stay on the boat so ya don't go outside yo' roaming range, and yo' don't need tah see me again 'til we reach Alamar. Ah'll be about, makin' sure nobody bothers ya, but Ah won't be getting' in yo business. That ain't mah job."

"Uh, think I can get some clothes?"

"Sho. Ah'll dig up something fo' ya."

The stateroom he was given was *luxurious*. It had a bed, couch, sofa, writing desk, trunk, bureau, and a mirror, with an alchemical lamp set up as a chandelier in the middle of the ceiling that was controlled with a switch both by the door and by the bed. The bed was covered with satin sheets and a red coverlet, the furniture was a maroon crushed veleur, the walls paneled with a dark, rich wood. It was the stateroom for the rich, and it was all his.

This man Toby was certainly going out of his way to... *spoil* him. A private stateroom? Room service?

He had to try it. He found the little device on the night table by the bed. It had a big red button on it, which he pressed. "Can I help you?" came an immediate response from the little box, a box that tingled of alchemy. There was a crystal in it somewhere. "Just press and hold the button and speak, and I'll hear."

He held down the button. "Uh, could I get a gr-grl-*glass* of milk?"

"It will be sent up immediately, sir."

He let go of the button, curious as to how they knew which room to send it to.

He sat down on the bed. Trinity, what a gilded cage. He was being sent to an auction block in a luxury stateroom.

There was a knock at the door as he was testing the bed, and he padded over and opened it just enough to look out. "Milk," a steward wearing a black uniform said, holding out a tray. "Can I leave it with you for your master?"

So, they thought he was a servant. Well, that worked well enough for him. He nodded and took it through the door, then closed it.

Wow, the glass was... *cold*. He took a tentative sip, and found the milk cold too, which made it taste *wonderful*. Chilled milk, what luxury!

After drinking the milk, he laid down on the bed and spread his arms out. He would surely need to find a way to slip his collar and get free of the formidable and curiously interesting Toby Fisher, but he sure as hell wouldn't mind being stuck here while he figured it out.

The door opened, and Toby entered carrying a pack. "Ah'm back," he said. "Like yo' room?"

"Why? Isn' this rrearr-rrearr-rrearr-" he growled. "*Very* expensive?"

"Ain't costin' me no chits, friend," he said simply. "Ah charge the customah fo' this. Ah learned long ago that when Ah move valuable Arcans like yo'self, it's always best tah do it on high-class ships. The rriffraff that might be sent tah poach ya has a way hard time gettin' tickets, then fittin' in on the ship tah get intah position tah try. Ah'll spot em a minar away an' deal with 'em."

"But *my own* rroom?"

"What, yo'd rather be stuck with *me*?" he asked with a smile and a wink. "Ah think it'd make it way harder for ya tah try tah slip yo' collar and try tah get away with me watchin' ya all the time, don't ya think?"

Kyven actually laughed.

“Now, Ah got leathers and Ah got some wool, and Ah got some cotton,” he said, digging the clothes out of the pack. “Ah’d think those claws on yo’ feet makes leather the best choice, yo’ claws won’t tear that up so fast.”

Kyven nodded as the man pulled a pair of black leather trousers out of his pack, which would only reach his knees. But that would be just fine, since it would feel strange to have clothes around his ankle, and it would cover his genitals. “Try ‘em on, Ah think Ah got the right size.”

He pulled them on, and found that they’d do. They were a touch loose in the waist and hips, and they had no hole for his tail, but that was fixed with Toby’s wicked knife. Toby cut a slit in the back for him, then gave him a leather belt to wear with it to keep the pants up. “That’ll do,” Toby nodded, then gave him a variety of shirts. “Ah’ll sent ahead to Parai an’ have some better clothes waitin’ fo’ ya,” he promised. “Ah think these’ll do ‘til we get there.”

“Thrank you,” he said with a nod, feeling... *flattered* that someone was giving him positive attention.

“Ain’t no sweat, friend,” he said simply. “Ah’ll get ya tah Alamar safe an’ sound, and Ah’ll make sure ya don’t mind the trip. Provided ya don’t escape on me first,” he grinned.

Kyven laughed.

Wearing clothes almost made him feel *human*.

The ship was every bit the gilded cage. Toby was every bit of his word. He stayed away from Kyven, gave him all the space he wanted, and he had absolutely no restrictions. He was allowed to go anywhere any other passenger was allowed to go, at least within certain boundaries. He *was* an Arcan, so he was very much not welcome in the brandy room or dining room or among the card tables, and everyone thought he was the property of some rich person who kept him as a valet and status symbol because of his exotic fur. But in his stateroom, he was the master of his own domain, slave to no one, and he felt very good about himself.

The collar, well, that didn’t make him feel quite so brilliant. The damn thing was devilishly effective in keeping itself firmly around his neck, and after two collars, he started understanding why runaway Arcans were so rare as long as the owners weren’t stupid and left the key out where they could get at it. Unless the crystal in his collar ran out of energy, he really saw no way of getting his collar off. He tried almost everything he could think of to slip his collar, from sneaking into others’ rooms and finding *their* collar keys and trying them on his collar, to invading Toby’s room itself. But after a thorough and careful search, even using spirit sight, he found no key to remove his collar. That told him that it had to be something like the Ledwell collar, some kind of unique collar with a special condition to take it off, something he’d have to figure out.

And Trinity, did he try. He tried simple ideas from cutting off the collar to exotic ideas like pulling the crystal out of his stateroom lamp and trying to disrupt his collar long enough to get it off of his neck, but nothing worked. Toby didn’t interfere at all, almost as if he was so sure Kyven couldn’t slip his collar that he was more than willing to let him try anything he pleased.

When he wasn’t trying to escape, he spent a lot of time talking with the other Arcans on the ship. These were the “elite” Arcans, the servants of the rich, and in some ways they were just as stuck up as the rich were. They knew they had cushy, prestigious jobs, and they reminded each other of their superiority over other Arcans about every ten seconds. Kyven found their attitudes to be quite tiring after a couple of days, and lost interest in talking to them... but they certainly didn’t lose interest in him. Kyven’s unique coloration was one thing, but when

word got out on the ship that he wasn’t owned by a rich person, that he was instead on the way to the blue ring, *that* got attention. The other passengers started giving him appraising looks when he appeared on deck, and the Arcans all gushed over him.

The stopover in Parai, four days after leaving Cheston, lasted about four hours. They stopped only long enough to take on supplies, but true to his promise, Toby brought him new clothes. He received three pairs of leather trousers like the ones he had, knee-length leather trousers, but these had a dedicated slot for his tail complete with a strap and button in the back to hold his pants up without a belt. He also received some nice shirts to wear with them, cotton and linen shirts so the southern summer didn’t boil him.

Kyven thought to try to jump ship at Parai, but he couldn’t get the collar off. Parai was a flat city built on the sea, white buildings with red tiled roofs, and the docks were filled with swarthy-skinned, dark-haired Flaurens, chattering at each other in their native language, and the combination of him still having the collar on and the idea of trying to jump ship into a foreign city where nobody spoke his language made him decide against trying.

Once they were asea again, going around the southern tip of Flaur and heading into the Waveless Sea, Kyven had to admit defeat. He had failed to slip his collar, and their next stop was Alamar, where Toby would keep a very careful eye on him. Toby’s habit of using luxury ships for transporting valuable Arcans not only protect his cargo from poaching, it also minimized his cargo’s chances to get away, he realized. The ship had only made one stop, where a more common ship would have made several stops. And once they were at sea, the only option an Arcan had was going overboard and hoping he picked the right direction to go to at least see land on the horizon before he drowned. There would be no hugging the coast now, the ship would go out into open ocean to get from Flaur to Alamar, and that sealed his fate, in a matter of speaking.

Toby was very gracious about it, though. He still treated Kyven with respect when he checked in on him the day after they left the southern tip of Flaur, and would not see land again for five days, when they would reach Alamar. “Ayah, doing alright, Kyven?” he asked from the door. “Found a way out of mah collar yet?”

Kyven gave a rueful chuckle. “You outfoxed the fox, Toby,” he answered. In the days on the ship, his diction when speaking had improved, but he still had trouble with *L* and *M* sounds. “Your corl-collar is beyond mre.”

“Well, Ah’d tell ya not tah beat yo’self up ovah it, ain’t nobody ever slipped mah collar,” he chuckled, “but Ah know that ain’t no consolation.”

It was a *little* consolation. At least he didn’t feel like an idiot, if nobody else had ever slipped his collar, and Kyven knew that Toby was telling the truth. He was surprisingly candid, part of his quirky charm that made Kyven like him despite the fact that he was Kyven’s overseer.

There wasn’t much he could do in his gilded cage but wait, but at least wait in luxury. The only human that would really talk to him was Toby, and he struck up an odd friendship with the man after he admitted defeat with the collar and played cards with him most of the day. Toby loved cards, carried a deck around with him, and taught Kyven several games, from gin to solitaire. He even let Kyven keep his deck of cards every night, letting him play solitaire in his room, which really helped while away the time. The kitchens kept him well fed, even waited on him since he couldn’t eat in the dining room with the other passengers. It seemed that the ship was loyal to the money it was paid, and would serve Kyven like he was a human because he was a paying passenger. They wouldn’t do it in public, of course not, but he was served quite well in private.

It was quiet time to reflect for him. The fox had not appeared since that night in the rain, and

he was glad of it. His anger and hatred of her had not dimmed in the slightest, but his indignation had cooled significantly since leaving the plantation, if only because he wasn't being tortured for the amusement of a megalomaniac, and he'd had the chance to avenge himself against him. Killing Arthur Ledwell had been *eminently* satisfying, like he had removed a blight from the land. But he had to wonder a little bit, in spite of himself, if that pleased the fox a little. She *did* say she'd change him back if he pleased her—

No. He couldn't even think about that. He was still furious with her. If she came to him and got within reach of him, he very well might attack her, and that wouldn't do his chances to have her change him back much good. He had to cool off first.

But, he wasn't all that worried, really. He'd go to Alamar, get sold and become just one of many, then use his ability to vanish into the shadows to escape. Toby was right that he'd stand almost no chance to get away from him, but he would have a *much* better chance to get away in Alamar.

He would get his chance, for after five days of surprisingly calm seas and no rain, the ship arrived in Alamar on a bright, sunny, hot morning, hot and incredibly muggy. Toby came to get him as the ship docked, as he sat in his stateroom and prepared himself for what was coming. He would be put in another cage with Arcans, and then would stand on a block and get auctioned off to the highest bidder. He would have to suffer that indignity long enough to find a chance to escape, and when he did, they'd never find him.

"Ayah, are ya ready?" he called.

He sighed and nodded, standing up and reaching for the tail of his shirt to take it off.

"Kyven, why ya doin' that?"

"Don't I have to take off mry crlothes?"

"Only when yo' sold," he grinned. "So they can see ya got yo' workin' parts. Come on, Ah got a taxi carriage waitin' for us."

"taxi carriage?"

"Yo' a *blue ring* Arcan, friend, yo' not walkin', that's fo' sho'. Now come on, an' don't forget yo' pack. Yo' keepin' all yo' clothes. They're *yo's*."

That made him feel... almost human.

He walked with Toby down the gangplank, and past a long line of carriages for the passengers, until they reached a solidly built little open backed carriage. It was manned by an old man and being pulled by a single horse. "A'right, where to, suh?"

"Blue ring," Toby answered.

"A'right, heah we go."

The city of Alamar was filled with wooden buildings, and there were Arcans *everywhere*. It was a huge breeding city where Arcans were a major export, so nearly half the city was taken up by Arcan pens, and they were all over the place. There were more Arcans in Alamar than there were humans... but every Arcan was either wearing a collar or chained in groups and watched over by alert humans. It was actually a little depressing to see, to see so many Arcans, and wonder how many would be alive by this time next year.

This was a city that was built on pain and misery, he realized. It had turned slavery into an enterprise, and turned the subjugation and pain of the Arcans into a *business*.

Sometimes it was being generous to call people *human*.

And he was just one of the masses now, another Arcan up for sale. But the difference between him and most others was that he was distinct, unusual, and that made him valuable, like a rare crystal.

The famous blue ring of Alamar. It was a compound of buildings that were behind the blue ring, which was a circular auction platform painted with a blue border on its edge, thus giv-

ing it the name *blue ring*. But this platform was under a large tented roof, almost like a veranda, and the area before it was lined with cushioned chairs. It may be just another place to buy Arcans, but these buyers were rich. The carriage stopped by the closest of those large buildings, where two men carrying pike-like weapons that looked like Loreguard pikes flanked a door. A small middle-aged man with a bald pate and wearing a loose brown robe scurried out as Toby got down out of the carriage, then literally helped Kyven down and took his pack. "Toby Fisher!" the little man said with a laugh. "Ah'm glad tah see ya! So, *this* is the black-furred fox!" the man said, looking at Kyven appraisingly. "Ah sweah, what a coat! Ah think yo' gonna make a pretty chit, Toby!"

"Ah do hope so, Devin," Toby said calmly. "When's the next auction?"

"Tomorrah," he answered. "Ah'll get him on the schedule."

"Well, Kyven, this be it fo' me," he said, handing Devin his pack. "Ah got some stuff to do fo' Mistress Ledwell, so Ah'll be busy. Tomorrow mo'nin, they'll bring ya out fo' potential buyers tah look ovah," he explained. "They might want tah see ya climb or carry stuff tah see how healthy ya are, and so on. Tomorrow evenin', yo' go up on the blue ring, where they'll bid ya up."

"Five thousand, at *least*," the little man said simply. "Maybe as high as eight."

"When they done sell ya, Ah'll be takin' the payment back tah Misses Ledwell, and odds are, yo' be going tah a soft life as a breeder or trophy Arcan, so some rich folk can show ya off."

"He'll be a breeder, fo' sho'," the little man said.

Toby reached over and grabbed the collar, then removed it. Kyven felt his unburdened neck, then immediately looked around, seeking the best way to escape. "Ah wouldn't do that if Ah were you," the little man said. "This compound is bordered by an alchemical device, that won't let no Arcan cross it that ain't got a collar specially allowed through, like one o' Toby's. It keeps yo' safely inside and prevents people from stealin' ya. Now yo' could surely run, but yo' won't be getting' too fah, and then you'd be right pissin' some folk off. Save the escapes fo' *after* yo' sold, Arcan. Cause yo' ain't surely nevah escapin' the blue ring. Long as you behave, yo' be treated like a little king. But if ya get pissy with us, we get pissy with you."

Kyven considered it, and had to consider the validity of the little man's words. This was a place that sold the most valuable Arcans, there had to be little doubt that it was monstrosly defended, and had extravagant safeguards in place to keep the valuable Arcans inside, both to prevent escapes and prevent theft. He sighed when he realized that he was again trapped, going from the plantation to Toby to the blue ring, still trapped, always trapped. The little man took his sigh as an admission of defeat, and put his hand on the small of Kyven's back, just over his tail. "Come along now, let's get ya to yo' room, so yo' can rest and get a bath. We'll take good care of ya, don't ya worry a tiny bit. Yo' gonna be treated right heah."

Yes, he was going to be treated right here... just like an *expensive* slave. But still a slave.

Where had his fighting spirit gone? Had the Ledwell collar beaten it out of him that quickly, that easily? He didn't dread the idea of escape, but did he really, *really* try? And he *gave up*! He gave up after they rounded Flaur, thinking he'd have a better chance to escape in Alamar... and look where that got him. Got him in the blue ring, where he was certain he'd never escape. Now he'd have to wait again, wait until after he was sold, see where he went, and do what he had to do there to get out.

Because he *would* get out. He was not going to be a slave, no matter how soft and easy his life was. He'd just have to suck it up and forget about the Ledwell plantation, do his best to

remember just who he was and remember that he was *not* and Arcan, and he was *not* a slave.

He would escape. It was going to take him a little longer than he expected, but he would.

Now that he knew he could become virtually invisible in the night, it meant all he had to do was find a way to slip his collar, and he was as good as free.

Chapter 9

It was another gilded cage, that was for sure.

He wasn't placed in a cage as much as it was a room, but an odd one. The room wasn't just not a cage, it had no door at all, just an opening into the hallway beyond. Out in that hall there were men stationed, two men to each end of the little dormitory, standing silent guard. The room itself was almost like an inn. It had a bed for him and a stool beside it, with a small nightstand, a table near the stool—for what he had no idea, most Arcans couldn't write—a cushioned chair against the other wall, and a chest at the foot of the bed for his belongings. It had a mirror, a full length mirror on one wall, beside an opening that held a small closet-like room that held something he'd only heard of, never seen... an indoor plumbing toilet. They were said to have them in Avannar, on the north side of the river in the new part of the city, and they were said to be very common in the northeastern regions of Noraam, where the cold made going to an outhouse a very unfriendly proposition. Of course, from what he'd heard the ones in the northeast had to be filled with water manually, where this one and the ones in the new part of Avannar were part of a water system. The one in north Avannar used huge crystal-driven pumps to generate water pressure to move the water, but he wasn't sure how the one in here in Alamar worked. It was entirely possible, he supposed, that the city didn't have forced water, that it was a luxury built just into the compound, a luxury for *Arcans*.

Kyven sat down on the bed, testing it as his tail swished on the sturdy linen sheets. It wasn't as luxurious as that boat had been, but the sheets were clean, the bed looked and smelled free of little bugs or beasties, and it looked to have a firm mattress. The pillow smelled to be filled with goose down, which meant that it would be soft and nice to sleep with.

He got up and paced the rather large room. It was lit by an alchemical lamp high on the ceiling, some twelve rods from the floor, whose control was nowhere to be seen. How he was supposed to turn the lamp on and off was beyond him.

Now what? The little man had brought him in here, told him to settle in, then left. Well, there wasn't much he could do to settle in, just drop his pack on the chest and he was done. There was nothing to do in the room, no books, and Toby had the cards he'd been using to play solitaire, it was his deck. Was he allowed to leave his room? Well, he didn't see why not, since it literally had no door. He came up to the opening and peeked out, saw the two sets of guards on each end of the passageway, which had six openings to each side. He stepped out into the hallway and saw the men not react to him, so he figured he was permitted to leave his room. He looked across and into the room opposite his own, but saw that it was empty. He advanced down the hallway and to the next set of rooms, and found those empty as well. He went down one more set and looked, and found that one of those was occupied. It was a female mink with truly lustrous fur, naked, and huddled in the corner with the blanket of her bed wadded into the corner with her to form a sleeping place. She was very thin, curled into a little ball, and had long, shaggy, wild and unkempt brown hair with little round ears poking out of it.

It seemed that not every Arcan in the blue ring was as well treated.

"Herro?" he called. "Herro mmink?"

She looked at him with *empty* eyes. This mink was wild, he saw. She wasn't intelligent like

tamed Arcans. She looked up at him fearfully, but when he dropped down onto all fours, she didn't seem quite so afraid. He padded into the room, sliding around the doorframe, then slowly coming up to her, carefully. She bared her little fangs and hissed at him threateningly, then growling at him, which made him skitter back a step or two and sit down on his haunches, which wasn't an entirely pleasant thing to do while wearing pants. He was curious about her, he'd never seen a wild Arcan like this before; the first one he'd ever really seen was the one that killed Aven, the one that was Touched. She didn't look all that intimidating or dangerous... at least when she wasn't growling at him. She stayed in her corner, watching him with wary brown eyes, and he realized that she really was just like an animal.

No wonder Arcans often had such a hard time of it with human perception. Not only did they look like animals, there were Arcans like this mink, who were really little more than animals. He wondered what made her different from other Arcans, why she was like a wild animal. Was it breeding or upbringing? Were there some Arcans who were just naturally wild? Or could a wild Arcan be educated, be taught to speak and act properly? Wild Arcans could be tamed—Kyven shuddered just at the thought of that word—but he'd not really heard of a wild Arcan being taught to speak more than a few words. And some breeds weren't known to be very smart anyway. Minks were notoriously dull-witted, even the ones born in captivity weren't all that smart. The mink that worked in the Three Boars couldn't say much more than "drink," and she was supposedly bred tame.

So what was the difference between a tame Arcan and a wild Arcan? Was it genetics or upbringing? Or maybe both?

He was no scientist. He had no idea.

He moved to turn to leave the room, but the mink shifted. He turned to look back at her, and saw her eyes... curious. She slinked tentatively out of her little bed, and Kyven thought that if she saw him sit or lean low, being higher than her might intimidate her. So he backed up a step and then laid completely down on the wooden floor, putting his clawed hands under his chin and looking at her. She inched closer to him, sniffing at him curiously, until she was literally nose to nose with him. She ghosted her short muzzle over the bridge of his own, sniffing at his fur, felt her breath against his eyes, then heard her snuffling as she stuck her nose in his ear, making it twitch in protest as her sniffing thundered through his eardrum. For an irrational moment he felt like he was back on the plantation, that this was one of the daughters inspecting, but he pushed that out of his mind forcefully as his body seemed to tense up in preparation for being punished. The mink seemed to sense his sudden wariness, backing away from him, but he just let out a sigh and closed his eyes. He wasn't there, he wasn't there, and the man who'd tormented him was dead. He was in Alamar, not on the plantation, he'd been sent here to be sold.

The mink edged back to him, her head over him, sniffing him like she was some kind of dog. Then, much to his surprise, she clamped her small jaws on the back of his neck. It wasn't an attack, it wasn't painful, but she had a firm grip on him, and she tried to pull him up and forward. He allowed her to pull him up, but he resisted when she tried to pull him forward, until she lost purchase with her teeth and let go. When Kyven rose up over her she shrank back, but then he lowered his head to her level and inched it forward. She shied away, but then, curiosity overcoming her again, she nudged forward a little, coming nose to nose with him. He moved past her nose, nudging at her muzzle with his own, then licked her on the cheek. Her fur tasted much the same as his own, and when he licked her again, she tilted her head to accept his attention. He licked her face several times, then rose up over her, coming to a sitting position, which did not make her shy away. She sniffed at his neck and chest, everything above the shirt, and he licked at her ear.

He had no idea what he was doing. He really didn't. But whatever he was doing, it seemed to be working. The mink became much less nervous, much less wary, let him lick at the part of her ear not under her wild brown hair, then allowed him to lift up his hand and put it on her shoulder. Her fur was like his, exquisitely soft, and thick, and gorgeous with its light silver color. Trinity, how did she not end up getting slaughtered for this gorgeous fur? Seeing her reminded him of that mink he saw in Cheston, held down and killed brutally, then thrown into a wagon, for no other reason but for the fact that she had lovely fur. His fur was much like hers, except his was longer and had a shaggier exterior... and somehow, his fur let him meld into the shadows. The mink pushed more and more up against his chest, pushing him up into a kneeling position, then she pushed up against him, grabbing him by the ribs. What was she doing? He had no experience with this. She nuzzled her face against the soft fur of his neck, rubbing her nose against a collarbone just under his shirt. He put his hands around her, digging them into the fur on her back but not hurting her with his claws, and she nestled against him with a little sigh.

Of course. Touching. Even this wild Arcan craved to touch and be touched, to comfort and be comforted, she shared the need for contact that was so prevalent in her kind. Once Kyven had proved he was no threat to her, she responded by wanting to huddle with him, to share contact. He gave her what she wanted, holding her lightly and letting her root her muzzle against his neck, even gave him a couple of playful, gentle bites before giving another little sigh and letting him hold her against him, giving her the attention she craved.

He responded the same way, he realized. Exactly the same way. When that little girl, Liza, climbed on his back, at first he was annoyed by her, but then he came to accept her attentions, even enjoyed it a little bit. He liked being touched, he liked how she nuzzled at his fur and called him pretty, how she petted him and paid attention to him. That was no different from what the mink was doing. She had given him attention, now she wanted some in return. He complied, running his fingers through the fur on her back, feeling how soft and thick it was. By the Father's grace, what fur she had! Again, he was amazed she'd lived to adulthood. Then again, the fact that she was wild was probably the only reason she did.

"Ayah," a voice called from the opening, which startled the mink and sent her scrambling back into her corner... just like he had done. Did *he* look quite so pathetic, quivering in the corner with fear in his eyes? Kyven looked back over his shoulder to see the small man that had brought him in standing in the opening, looking just a little worried. "Ah'd be careful o' that one, she's a bit wild," he warned.

"Not when you know how to approach," Kyven said simply, backing away from her slowly, then rising up onto his legs and turning around.

"Beautiful, ain't she?" he said, giving her an appreciative look. "Caught wild, and lawd don't it show. She's on the schedule for tomorrah. She'll be a breedah fo' sho'. It'd be a sin tah harvest fur like that."

"If it's a sin to kill her, whry is it not a sin to kirr—kill her babies? Or mrine?"

"Cause one is a treasure, but many is a commodity," he answered with brutal calm. "Ah got a bit o' bad news fo' you though. Ah can't get ya on the schedule tomorrah. So Ah hate tah say it, but yo' be our guest heah until Friday. But don't you worry none, we'll take good care o' ya and yo' have plenty o' things tah do. Ya won't be bo'd for them four days, Ah promise ya. Toby say ya like cards, well, Ah'll get ya a deck o' yo' own."

"I'm surprised you talk to mme like I'm a *real* person," Kyven grated as he walked past the man then dropped back down onto all fours.

"Yo' an Arcan, friend," he said simply. "One o' the smart ones from the sound o' it, but still an Arcan, an' it's yo' place to serve man."

"Excuse me if I don't agree with you."

"Ah reckon that be yo' right," he said simply. "But it ain't gonna change nothin'."

"At least you give me *one* right," he said as he stalked back to his own room.

It was a very strange outlook, he thought as he sat on his bed. How could these Alamari treat him like a person, but then talk about butchering his offspring for their fur? It was a paradox. Didn't they think he might *care* about his children?

Maybe if it required a real investment in time for them, they wouldn't do it. Arcans had a very unusual life cycle. They were born semi-ambulatory, able to move, not entirely helpless, and then they grew at an almost shocking rate. The average Arcan was weaned off mother's milk after three months, and would grow to the first stage of maturity in about three years, to about the size of a human teenager, and become sexually mature. They mimicked humans in that they continued to grow slowly after reaching that plateau, reaching full size and maturity after about six years, then they lived, on the average, about forty years. That female Arcan the farmer had, the one that was nearly fifty, that was positively *elderly* for an Arcan. So, a breeder only really had to put three years of planning and effort into his Arcan stock to get an Arcan that was more than large enough to provide a pelt that could make a coat. Odds were, some of them were slaughtered much younger, if only to not have to wait that long. A six month old Arcan was nearly the same size as a six year old human, and that was quite a bit of fur.

It turned Kyven's stomach just thinking about it. And they called the Arcans *animals*. At least Arcans didn't butcher children to harvest their skins.

And that was the fate awaiting his children, if indeed he could have any in this transformed state. He knew he was capable of sex, but since he wasn't really an Arcan, he doubted he was capable of breeding with them.

Trinity, would whoever bought him be *furios* when they found that out. And it was just another good reason why he had to escape. When they found out he was sterile, he'd be slaughtered for his fur.

It was a frightening thing when your own pelt was more valuable to others than it was to yourself.

From his window, Kyven watched an auction in the blue ring.

He was only on the second floor, so he could see under the tent and see what was going on. It took place just after noon, and the Arcans were brought out, one by one, from a holding room just behind the stage. All the Arcans were naked, and were wearing collars and leashes. The escort would walk the Arcan twice around the edge of the platform, then bring the Arcan to the raised barker's podium at the center and sit while men and women in rich attire raised little fans to meet the called bid. All the Arcans were either exotic or unusual, as befitting Arcans sold in the blue ring, and the little wild mink whom he had met the day before was the first one to be sold.

He wondered what would happen to her. He was rather fond of her, as she'd slinked into his room last night, when all the lamps were turned off, and had spent the whole night with him, nuzzled with him on the bed. She wasn't amorous, she was just needful of another presence to be with her, and Kyven gave her what she wanted. She slept nestled against him and found great comfort in the arm draped over her protectively... until they came for her. They put a leather snare around her neck and dragged her out, and the look of fear she gave him as she was pulled out of his room was almost heartbreaking.

That made him want to see what happened, so he sat on his haunches on his table and looked out his window and watched, watched as the handler walked her across the ring twice as she struggled against him, then was forced down by the barker's podium. He watched as

they bid on her, for long moments, until she was sold. Sold for three thousand, six hundred chits. She was then dragged off the platform, towards the side, where a man and woman came up and looked at her, then walked towards a small building with the mink being dragged behind them, obviously to settle the bill.

And that was that. She was sold, she was gone, it was like she never existed. He got one last look at her as she was dragged into the building, and she looked up and back and seemed to see him... and even from there, her eyes were pleading.

But he could not help her.

If anything, that steeled him. Fuck waiting until he was sold. When he was sold they'd put a collar on him. His best chance to escape was right here, where he was kept *uncollared* within the blue ring compound, as they relied on the guards and whatever it was they used to prevent Arcans from crossing the boundaries of the compound. They were so certain that he couldn't escape that he was left without a collar, was put in a room with no door, no bars on the window, where he literally had free reign of the compound. The guards at the ends *would not* hinder him, he'd found out yesterday. One would *escort* him if he wanted to go out, so he wouldn't get lost, but he was allowed to go about anywhere he wanted to go. They would take him to the kitchens for food if he was hungry between meal times, or to the only real place an Arcan could really do anything for fun that didn't involve other Arcans... the playground. It was a large field behind all the buildings, near a white fence that ringed the back side of the area, where Arcans could come out of their rooms and exercise, meet each other, and do more than wait around. There were a few Arcans out there, running freely back and forth, two canines looking to be racing each other. There was little else to do, so coming out to sit in the sun without a collar and almost feel like one was free was a very pleasant thing to do, so much so that Kyven sat out there for nearly two hours, sitting on his haunches and then laying on his back on the ground, looking up at the hot summer sky.

The guard would escort him around, but his room was his own, and it was on the second floor, with no bars. It opened outward, letting him bring fresh air into his room, and it was more than large enough for him to fit through. He would have guessed that they would have put him up on a higher floor, but Kyven's claws would let him climb down no matter how high they put him, so it was probably a moot point. But then again, they were so confident in their alchemical barrier they didn't restrict him at all. If he asked to be taken to the border, they'd probably take him and allow him to stand there and try to escape. There was little to do in his room, since he was now the *only* Arcan on his floor, there were no books, and there was little for him to do but play cards with the deck that the little man had brought him. He was just waiting, basically, waiting for dark, when he could go look around without someone following him around. When one of the many workers in the place brought him a plate of cheese and some water, he startled the young man by asking about the compound.

"Oh, well, this buildin' is the guest barracks fo', ah, *gentle* Arcans," he said. "The buildin' on the other side is fo' competitively bred Arcans. Ah, Arcans bred fo' racin', o' fo' aggression and fightin' ability. They'll be sold tomorra. The buildin' behind these two is the headquarters fo' the business."

"Oh. Whrere are the ki-ki-kitchens?"

"In the headquarters buildin'," he answered.

"Thranks," he said.

He wasn't alone on his floor for long. A male rabbit was brought onto the floor and placed in the room beside his later that afternoon, as Kyven waited for sunset anxiously. The rabbit was quite urbane, could speak very well when he came to Kyven's room and looked in, then stepped in and introduced himself simply as Buster. "You know how to play cards?" he

asked in surprise as he looked down at the table. "Who taught you?"

"A hruan," he answered. "Whrat brings you here?"

"Same as you, I'd guess," he answered. "Being sold on the blue ring. I can see why *you're* here," he said, looking at his fur. "A fox with black fur? You have to be unique."

"That's whrat they say," he said. "I've been bored all day, wrant to rr-rl-*learn*?"

"Still learning to talk?" he asked, then he retrieved a chair from another room and put it at the table.

"It's not easy."

"You long-snouts always have problems with some human sounds," he said with a nod. "So, what's your story?"

"Not mmuch of one. You?"

"Pretty much the same. I grew up in a mansion, my parents were servants in Phionn. But when the master died, his son sold me. The man who bought me sent me here, because I have very good fur. I guess they agree if they agreed to sell me in the blue ring," he said with a sigh. "Guess it could be worse than being a breeder."

"Doesn't it make you angrrrry?"

"Sure it does, but what can I do?" he asked with a simple shrug. "We're Arcans, friend. Fate is not ours to decide, we can only roll the dice and hope to get lucky. I guess I've rolled the house, all my life. Born in a rich house, serving rich people, then sold to the blue ring to move on to being a breeder. What about you?"

He had to be careful. If he revealed too much, the rabbit might think he's either a Shaman or insane. "Not much," he said. "Owned by a crystalcutter in Atan. I escaped and lived free, but was caught and ended up here."

"Wow, you were free? What was it like?"

"Better than this," he said simply. "A herl--hell of a lot better than this. I rr-learned to hunt, I was doing good for mryself."

"Did you," he said, then he looked around and then leaned close and whispered, "did you ever work for the Masked?"

He shook his head.

"Well, at least you got to live it *once*," the rabbit said with a sigh, patting him on the arm.

"I'll lrive it again," he declared.

"They say it's impossible to escape from the blue ring, because of the border," the rabbit said.

"We're gonna find out."

The rabbit laughed. "Well, I'm not about to try it, but if you want to, have at it," he said. "I think I'll take the lucky roll I was given and see how it goes, and only escape if I don't like my buyer. I've heard it's much easier to escape from breeding pens than here anyway."

Kyven spent the rest of the day getting to know Buster and teaching him how to play gin. He was an amiable fellow, nice enough, and possessed of the Arcan need to touch in the form of wanting to hold hands with him. The fact that they were both males didn't seem to matter to Buster, but Kyven saw that it had to do with comfort, just as it did with the mink. It was about finding comfort in proximity, like when he'd huddled with the Arcans in the cage in Cheston. Kyven got used to the idea of holding hands with a male, understanding it for what it was, and they played gin for the rest of the day.

After dark, after Buster went back to his room to sleep and after his lamp was put out from wherever it was they did it, Kyven got down to business. First he opened the window, then opened his eyes to the spirits and drew back into the shadows in the middle of his room, between the bed and window, and looked to see where everyone was. He saw roaming guards

out on the compound, but not many since they didn't think anyone could spirit an Arcan out of the compound. Kyven's eyes marked every single person, then he moved to go out, but a glance in the mirror saved him from what could have been a disaster.

In the mirror, there was a shirt and pair of pants hanging in midair!

The clothes could not vanish with him!

Well, not a problem. He shed his clothes immediately and looked at himself in the mirror, and saw that he was indeed nice and perfectly hidden.

He had to inwardly chuckle. My, did he ever adapt quickly to the idea of being naked. He hadn't really even thought about it since being changed. Even now, he didn't think a whit about it... it was almost like the fur made him *feel* like he had clothes on, even though his business was hanging out where everyone could see it. But in this form, this Arcan body it felt... *natural* to not have clothes on. He'd put on clothes to feel more *human*. But here, now, where he needed to stalk, he wanted to *be* an Arcan.

He climbed up onto his table, out the window, and then he climbed down the wall and was out on the compound, as silently as he could. He had to stay to the shadows. Any time he could see a light source that was, it disrupted his shadowy cloak. He had no idea what the range of that light had to be to break his shadowy cloak, and this was absolutely no place to find out, so he was exceedingly careful. He hugged the walls of the buildings, then darted to the next, skulking as quietly as he could—his shadowy camouflage did *not* stop any sounds he made—working his way to that large grassy area that would have no lights around it, where the Arcans exercised. He waited there as a lone sentry padded down, along the edge of that fence out there at the end of the field, clearly visible to him with his spirit sight. He skulked out from the building after the lone sentry went by, then raced up to the edge of that fence, slowing to a stop and staying down on all fours as he came up to the edge of it. This had to be the border that kept Arcans in, either this fence or just past it. He focused his eyes and looked at the fence, and saw nothing magical about it. But when he looked down, *under* the fence, he saw it. It was a bar of magical energy under the fence, about two rods deep in the earth, barely visible to his spirit sight unless he was looking almost directly down at it.

That had to be it. That was the barrier.

Alright, so, he knew where it was, and it was definitely a device of alchemy. It was buried too deep for him to quickly and easily dig down to it, so he went ahead and tried the obvious thing, tentatively reaching out through the rails of the fence. He saw the device buried under the fence suddenly flare as power generated within it, and before he could recoil his hand, it went off.

There was a brilliant flash of light, and a loud *ZOT*, and Kyven staggered back, gasping as an electrical charge swept through him. His hand buzzed angrily, and he shook it vigorously. But he learned something from it. That charge came *from the ground*. He saw it, saw it form under him and strike when he passed into the forbidden area.

Alright. If it came from the ground, then the obvious tack here was to get very, very high, and get past it *before* it could reach him. He turned and looked back to see if there were any buildings near the fence on the inside, and saw a guard rushing towards where he was, with another guard coming from the other direction, and still another coming from behind him. All three were carrying lamps and lightcones both, and he couldn't afford to be spotted stalking the fence in the middle of the night, or they'd restrict his movements and he wouldn't get another chance. He turned at an angle and bounded away, running fast and strong, going between two of them with the cool feeling around him holding strong. They hadn't seen him, and what was more important, their lamps *had not broken his shadowy cloak*. So, the light had to be relatively close to him, he realized. That, or they had to be bright enough to pene-

trate his defense, which those were not at the distance at which they passed. That was a very, very important thing to know.

It was also good to know how long it took the guards to respond to a disturbance... which wasn't very long. These men were alert, and had showed up almost immediately after Kyven tested the fence. That told him that if he made another mistake, he had to move first, *then* ponder what he did wrong.

He ran along the edge of the fence, looking around. He really didn't think going high would work, but it was a hypothesis worth testing. The problem was, there was nowhere around that was high. The fence was built out well away from all buildings, he saw as he ran a quick lap of it, avoiding lighted areas. He could try to make a jump at it, he supposed, see if the device reacted more slowly with altitude.

It was worth a try.

He backed up just one pace. He didn't want a full head of steam, since he was physically rebuffed by the device as well as getting shocked. If he failed, he didn't want to give himself a concussion. He wanted a nice high trajectory. He tamped his feet and bunched up, then sprang high into the air, almost as if he were reaching for an imaginary window ledge, vaulting nearly twelve rods into the air, twice the height of a normal man.

ZOT!

Kyven was physically rebuffed from the boundary, an arc of lightning rising from the ground directly in front of him, forming a shell of light, and it was that which he struck. It shocked him and presented a physical barrier at the same time, and he hit the ground literally running, both hands almost numb but needing to be far from that place when the guards got there. He bounded off, a little unsteadily at first, but much more fluidly once the sting faded from his hands.

Alright. Altitude didn't matter. So, he had one viable option left, and that was to try the front gate, to see if the boundary went across it. But that would be dangerous, since there as no doubt that there would be people there, and it would also be well lit. He loped easily across the compound, staying close to the walls and using the shadows as his spirit sight kept view of everyone and allowed him to keep careful track of anyone that might be close enough to see him. He then loped down a very gentle rise, swinging out to near the boundary, coming around the blue ring and coming in sight of the front gate.

He was right. It was both well lit and guarded.

He sat down on his haunches, considering the problem. He needed to kill those lights *or* make all the men move, and keep them away long enough for him to advance in, check, and then get back out *or* go through without being seen.

Wait. He needed to think about this. If he just bounded through there without any idea of what he was doing, he was going to end up right back in here pretty damn quick. He needed a plan. Yes, finding out if he could go through the gate was a good idea, but he couldn't leave yet. He needed to know *exactly* what he was going to do once he was outside, or this would all be wasted effort. He was literally in the Arcan slavery capitol of Noraam, he'd better have a damn good plan to get away from here or he wouldn't get far.

Alright, time to find out. He slinked forward near the boundary, watching the four men intently with spirit sight, his senses keenly feeling for a sudden warming of the air around him, which would be the warning to him that he was no longer invisible. If that happened, he had to close his eyes and close his eyes to the spirits both, do it quickly, then turn sharply to the left and run like hell. The gate was decorated with some hedges to either side of the road, and those were his saviors as he slinked slowly, cautiously, and carefully up on the gate, getting behind the hedge, getting close enough to look.

The barrier was there. It was only about six fingers deep—

That was it? Six fingers? He looked down at the barrier near him, and saw that it was also buried very shallowly.

He looked back towards the compound and saw something. It was built on a gentle rise, and on the far side, it was buried very deeply. Yet over here, it was buried very *shallowly*, which Kyven could estimate that the buried ring was laid flat and level when it was installed.

Two rods was too deep. But *one rod* was within digging range. Kyven didn't have big, nasty claws just for climbing, they would let him dig too. He slinked away from the gate, got back into the shadows, and then circled very wide of the gate to the other side. The area on the far side of that gate looked to be at the same level as the gate itself, which meant that it would be a short dig if he could pull it off. He'd just have to find a section of the fence where the guards didn't patrol often and where the device was shallow. He wasn't entirely sure if he could go underneath it safely, but he couldn't see much other choice. The only drawback was that he'd only have one chance at it. If he dug the hole and found that he couldn't get out, then there'd be a big hole left behind that would tip off the people that someone had tried to burrow under the fence. If he could get out, then it wouldn't be a problem.

Wait a minute. He was being stupid. He was going about this all wrong. The way out was very clear and very straightforward. All he needed to get out was a *collar*. They had to get all of them *out* of the blue ring, and that meant that they had to have collars in the compound that could do it. He wouldn't have to be wearing it, odds were, he just needed to *hold* it to get past the barrier. Needless to say, those collars would be guarded, but Kyven would be able to see them with spirit sight because of the crystals in them.

The collar would serve a double purpose, he realized. He could remove the crystal from it and put it on, which would allow him to move through Alamar virtually unmolested, because people *would think he was already owned*. Sure, some few might try to poach him because he was so exotic and valuable, but he wouldn't have throngs of men chasing him down the street like he would if he was uncollared.

That was it. That was the way out.

Casing the administration building showed him everything he wanted to see. The collars were indeed visible to his eyes because of their crystals. They were held in a room on the second floor, there was only a very small number of people in the building, and *none* of them were near where the collars were. They were working on the far end of the building, probably in the kitchen, which left the collars undefended. The room they were in had to be windowless, since the collars seemed to be in the middle of the building. That meant that it was a locked room of some kind, most likely.

Thank the Trinity for summer. Kyven found an open window up on the second floor, left open because of the heat, and he vaulted up and managed to get a grip on the sill. He climbed in and found himself in an office of some kind, with books in a shelf and two desks and chairs facing each other. He slinked past the desks and to the door, and found himself looking down a long, dark, empty corridor. He could see the collars well down the hall, and stalked down on all fours, staying low and keeping silent, skulking up to the door that held the collars behind it. It was a sturdy metal door, not a normal door, with writing on it he couldn't make out with his normal eyes, because of the darkness. The door itself had a crystal embedded in it, telling him that the door itself had to be an alchemical device.

Plan, meet snag.

He backed off. He had to think about this, and besides, he could not tackle that door until he was ready to escape, for getting past that door would require him to reveal that someone tried to escape, or did escape. He would come back tomorrow night, if he was ready to try, and

tackle the door. But, he was fairly confident. If he couldn't get through the door, well, there was always the wall. He doubted the wall was similarly protected, and he could try to rip through it to reach the collars.

He returned to his room, put his clothes back on, then went to bed, confident that it was the last night he'd be spending in Alamar.

He spent the entire day considering that door.

He split his attention between the door and playing cards with Buster, finding that two people who were beginners at a game made it challenging, if only because both of them were so bad at it.

How was he getting past that door?

He didn't know what it did or how it worked, so that severely limited his options. He would have to just get there and wing it, which Kyven did not like to do. He was a crystalcutter by trade and nature, and that meant he liked to have a plan. The recent past had robbed him of his natural tendency to like to plan, but now that he had a moment's respite to do so, he was going to plan the hell out of this. He had analyzed his problem, and now he had a solution, but he still had the snag of the door.

Outside of that, he had a plan. A very good plan. He would pack his pack and take it with him. He would place it near where he entered the administration building, enter the building, and then be forced to wing it with the door. Once he got past the door, he would come back down, get his pack, and then immediately escape the compound in the fastest direction. Once outside the compound, he would pull the crystal from the collar, put it on, put on clothes, and then run. He'd have all night to get as far from Alamar as possible, which for him, might be a good hundred minars if he ran straight through. They wouldn't know he was gone until morning. He would run until he couldn't run anymore, which would hopefully be far enough to evade capture.

After that, he still had a plan. It was abundantly clear that he would *never* be safe in the human lands as an Arcan. He was too exotic, and would face constant harassment and attack from hunters trying to catch him for his pelt. His only hope was to escape into the frontier, to find that city of Arcans, Haven. And to find it, his only recourse was to return to Atan, to return to Virren, who could get in touch with the Masked and have them send someone to guide him to safety. It was his only chance. *If* the fox changed him back, until that happened, he was very vulnerable. His only chance of survival was to get as far from humanity as he could. So he needed to get to Haven, and the only option he had was the only man he knew who could bring someone to guide him.

He had to go home.

The plan still hinged on the door and the collars. He had to find a way past the door to get to the collars, and then hope that his assumption was correct in him not needing to *wear* the collar to get him out. If those two assumptions were correct, then he was free of the blue ring. If either of those assumptions was wrong, then not only was he stuck inside the compound, but they'd know an Arcan tried to escape... and that would definitely complicate things. If they found out it was him, then whoever bought him would be very careful not to lose him, which would make escaping much harder. So, he realistically only had one chance at this.

He could not fail. That meant that if he had to take chances, or even kill, then that's what he'd have to do. He only had one chance. If he failed, he'd be a slave for the rest of his life.

He had to capitalize on it.

"Gin," Buster called, setting his cards down. "So, what ya got?"

"Too much," he said, putting his cards down.

Buster looked at his hand, then laughed. "Uh, Kyv, I threw down a four like three cards ago.

Why didn't you pick it up?"

"Eh? I didn't notice. Sorry, mry mrind's not on the game."

"Well, it's letting me win. How many hands is that?"

"Fib—Five to two," he answered. He picked up all the cards and deftly shuffled them, not marking them despite his claws, then he dealt.

"Still thinking of escaping, eh?" he asked in a low voice.

Since Buster had no intention of trying, Kyven wasn't about to be honest about it. He liked him, but there was no telling if he'd run off and warn the people here of Kyven's intent to get special favors. "Trrying," he said. "I don't think it'rr be easy. This pr—prrace is a fortress. I don't see anry wray to do it yret." He picked up his cards. "But I'm still lrooking."

"Well, good luck," the rabbit said as he picked up his cards.

After lunch, which was served to them in his room while they played cards, they got two more Arcans in their dorm. One was another mink, this one male and tame, but the other was a silver fox, a female silver fox with bluish fur with silver and white highlights. They were brought in together and placed in rooms opposite his own and Buster's, the mink facing Buster's and the silver fox facing his. Both of them were brought in naked, and while the male asked for clothes from the little man, the female said that clothes chafed her fur and she hated them. The fox came into his room without asking while Buster dealt a new hand, and boldly nuzzled Buster from behind with her muzzle, giving physical contact as a matter of greeting. "I'm Silver," she told them, nuzzling Buster fondly. The silver fox was taller than the average female Arcan, and *much* more voluptuous, with wide hips and very large breasts for an Arcan, which meant they were still smaller than what a human would consider large. Her fur was thick and perfectly combed, her tail bushy and silky, and her hair was actually a shade of blue, like her fur, long and thick and done up in curly waves that fell down her back. "Who are you?"

"I'm Buster, and he's Kyven," the rabbit answered. "Welcome to good luck."

"Yah, yah," she said, coming around the table and nuzzling Kyven. She gasped when she looked behind him. "You're a fox!" she said in surprise.

He nodded.

"What beautiful fur!" she said, stroking the fur on his neck. "Are you red or gray?"

"They say I'm a mrutated gray," he said carefully.

"Pity," she said, stroking his fur in a strange manner. "I'd love to see what our babies would look like."

"I thought foxes could crossbreed, like canines," Buster said curiously.

"We can? Hmm," she said, giving him a speculative look. "Maybe we'll get lucky and the same human will buy us to see," she told him.

"Kyven was *free*," Buster told her.

She gave him a startled look, then immediately sat on his lap. "Oh, tell me! What was it like? Were you free long? How did they catch you?"

He gave Buster an annoyed look around Silver's rather large breasts. The male mink came up to the door and peeked in, and Silver beckoned to him. "This is Softtail," she said. "We met already, we were brought by the same human to be sold. We came in the same cage."

"Hi," he said shyly, coming in and taking Buster's hand, then nuzzling the rabbit's cheek and short muzzle.

"Nice to meet you," Buster said, reaching up and patting him on the side of his neck.

"What are you doing?"

"Playing cards," he answered. "Kyven taught me this game."

"So, what was it like to be free?" Silver pressed him.

Kyven went over what he'd told Buster again as he tried to play the hand around Silver's body, but he wasn't rude. He touched her with his free hand when he wasn't drawing or discarding, putting his hand on the small of her back or her leg or her hip. "I wras doing fine, but then I got caught, and hrere I am," he grunted, discarding.

"You're not bred at all?" Silver said in surprise. He shook his head. "What an amazing thing!" she said. "I was bred," she said, rather proudly. "I'm a Snake River Silver. I even won a contest for who was the prettiest Arcan!" she gushed. "I have a pretty blue ribbon too, but I don't like to wear it because I might lose it."

"Nice, you're a show Arcan?" Buster asked.

"Not all the time," she said. "I only got to do one contest, and as soon as I win, whoosh! My master wants to sell me. In the *blue ring*!" she said excitedly. "I might get to be a breeder!"

"I thought femrarles didn't like being breeders," Kyven said, struggling with the words.

"It's the easy life, especially if you're sold in the blue ring," she told him. "You don't have to *do* anything! You just get to be pretty and have babies!" Naturally, Kyven misunderstood the idea of it. Arcans wouldn't see the sex as a potentially negative thing. It was comfort, the chance to lose themselves in a moment of pleasure and forget about their lot in life in that fleeting time of physical bliss. A female breeder may hate giving up her babies, but odds were, she'd welcome the sex that created them.

"Whrat about your babies? Whrat happens to them?"

"Why, whatever my master wants," she shrugged. "I wish I could own my babies, but I don't. I'll love them as long as I have them, but when I have to let them go, I'll let them go and hope that the spirits watch over them. There's nothing more I can do."

She said it with a simple voice, but there was a crushing, haunting aspect behind it that made Kyven's blood run cold. *There's nothing else I can do* was like a mantra among the Arcans, for it rang so true, so true. They were totally controlled by humanity.

Clearly, Silver represented another aspect of Arcan society he'd never met before, the show Arcans. They were bred, bred like animals, bred for physical traits that humans found attractive, which explained her more voluptuous form than the usual female, and then pitted against each other in contests of prettiness. It was the kinder, gentler version of fighting Arcans, where the weapons were pretty fur or perfect hair or an attractive figure. She'd been produced to look pretty, and she was trained for it, probably from birth. But now that she was a winner, her owner was going to cash in by selling her, with the hopes that she was the dame of a line of champion show Arcans... which someone else could raise and train.

"What about you, Softtail?" Buster asked. "How did you end up here?"

"Luck," he said with a shrug. "I was working on a plantation in Georvan, and a roving Arcan trader bought me. I thought I'd be killed for my fur for sure, but here I am. Never thought I'd sell in the blue ring."

"Well, you'll never work another day," Buster chuckled.

"May the spirits watch over me," the mink said with a sigh.

"When are you going to finish your game, Kyven?" Silver asked.

"Dunno, whry?"

"I want to see what you look like," she giggled, nuzzling him. "Why do you hide under clothes? I can't see anything good."

Kyven actually laughed. "You're the first girl to ever ask mre to undress," he told her.

"Clothes are silly," she stated. "They hide what makes me pretty. They hide what makes you pretty too."

"I wear them to keep my fur," Softtail said simply. "You lose it in the cotton fields if you don't have clothes on. Don't see what the roaming trader saw in me, my fur was a mess and a

lot of it was missing from the work."

"That was a good thring," Kyven noted, which drew an agreeing nod from the mink.

"Why do you talk funny, Kyven?" Silver asked. "I don't have any problems speaking right."

"I don't talk much. Lrack of prractice," he shrugged.

After the game, Kyven humored Silver and undressed for her while Buster taught Softtail how to play gin. He felt a little self-conscious as she brazenly looked him up and down, then giggled and sidled up against him and nuzzled his cheek. "You're very pretty," she told him, reaching down and cupping his testicles brazenly, then fondling him. "I love your fur, it's absolutely gorgeous."

"Thrank you," he said, allowing her her little feel.

"Am I pretty?"

"Verry prretty," he nodded.

She absolutely beamed. "Oh, sorry, I'm getting you a little big," she said, letting go of his penis. "I'm a little tired right now, and me and Softtail were fucking on the way, so mind if I rest a little while before we fuck?"

"Uhh, surre, but it's not a botherr," he told her.

"No, no, I'd be happy to. You're cute," she said, giving him a toothy grin. "Softtail thought it was his last chance, he didn't think he was coming to the blue ring," she laughed. "So we fucked on the way up from the boat."

"Thought I was going to a furrier," he said. "Silver gave me what I thought was my last hurrah. Was great, too. Silver is amazing."

"You really thought you weren't making it here?" Buster asked.

The mink nodded. "Thought I was going to be pulled out of the cage any minute. The human never said what he was doing with me, only talked about Silver. He looked about ready to shoot me when I mounted her, but I thought it was my last chance, so we kept at it even after he told us to stop."

The silver fox laughed. "He looked sooo mad! Such a silly human, a mink can't give me a baby, only foxes can!"

It was a curious insight into Arcan society. He already knew that sex wasn't taken the same way as it was among humans, that sex wasn't a private act in the Arcan world, but that was... *brazen*. Having sex in an open cage in full view of everyone on the street, but then again, Softtail thought he was about to die and Silver was much too valuable to punish, so what did they have to lose?

Kyven rested with Silver on his bed while Buster and Softtail continued to play cards in his room. She wanted to take a nap, but she also wanted to nuzzle and huddle, and picked Kyven to stay with her. He didn't mind all that much, he'd been up late last night and he'd need to reset back to a nocturnal activity cycle, so they lay on their sides, her back nestled up against him, arm draped over her as she napped and he rested. He rather liked lying with her, for she was warm, her fur was soft and inviting, and it was almost enticingly pleasant to close his eyes and imagine that they weren't lying in a prison, but instead were snuggled up on a bed back in his old room, napping through the day while the apprentices below were working...

He woke up some time later to find her looking at him curiously. He must have rolled over during his nap, and she was now behind him, raised up over him as her hand stroked the fur on his shoulder and upper arm. He just looked up at her calmly, then she gave him a toothy smile and leaned down and licked him on the face. "I'm ready now," she said huskily in his ear, just before biting it.

He leaned up and put his muzzle under her chin, and he felt... excited. Trinity, what was wrong with him? He was actually getting aroused at the idea of sex with an Arcan! But *this*

female's sexual attraction was almost undeniable, almost as if he was responding to her in a way he didn't respond to the wolf. Could it be because they were both foxes?

Trinity, was being in an Arcan body now changing him beyond the superficial?

He wasn't sure, but what he did know was that Arcans lived in the moment, and in that moment, he was very much interested in this female. He was overtaken by that desire, getting aroused without imagining it was a human woman—that sexy Loreguard captain was always a favorite fantasy—that was with him.

The fact that Buster and Softtail were still in the room playing cards didn't touch his mind once. For the first time, he was not just willing, but actively engaged in the idea of sex with an Arcan, and his interest caused him to be much less passive. He rolled over and took hold of her, then nuzzled, licked, and bit at her face and neck before clamping his jaws down on her upper neck and mounting her. She didn't seem to mind; in fact, her breathing became faster and she put her hands on his shoulders, then slid them down his back with a soft growl as he penetrated her. He released his grip on her neck once he was fully inside her, and they had sex while the mink and rabbit finished a hand of gin, then they heard them laughing as someone called dinner. "What?" Buster called, though Kyven and Silver weren't paying attention.

"Trinity!" a very young voice called. "Uh, d-d-dinner."

"Just set theirs on the table, they're not paying attention," Softtail said absently. "Deal, rabbit."

It was no different from sex with a human, outside of certain little surprises near the end. When he felt her do that, that *thing* as she climaxed, clutching him so tightly he couldn't even move, it triggered his own. But unlike the other two times, whatever she did didn't stop. It was as if she gripped him inside her and wouldn't let go, which startled him, and it wasn't entirely pleasant for him.

"Guess... we are... compatible," Silver panted, keeping a grip on him, holding him against her.

"Whrat's hrappenring?" he asked her fearfully, in a whisper.

"We're... joining," she said, quite obviously finding tremendous pleasure in it, whatever it was. "You've... never mated... your own breed?"

"Nnro," he said as she took a very, very firm grip on him, even wrapped one leg around him.

She actually giggled breathlessly. "Then just... hold still, it hurts... males... if they move around."

That was an understatement. Since he'd climaxed, it left him hyper-sensitive, and the pressure on him made every little wiggle a little painful. He just collapsed on top of her and didn't move while she continued to pant and growl softly, literally trembling under him until she clamped her jaws on the side of his neck, immensely enjoying what was going on for long moments, then she let out a long, quite contented sigh and let go of him as she, well, *unclenched*. "Mmmm," she hummed, licking his neck in satiation.

"Good luck, Silver," Buster told her.

"Good luck, Silver," Softtail mirrored.

"Lruck?" Kyven asked, looking down at her.

"You really were a virgin," she giggled. "Didn't you learn about sex when you grew up?"

"I was alrone with humans," he told her. "And nrever been with arr-anrother fox."

"Well, Buster was right, we're compatible," she told him with a smile. "That's why I joined you. We can have a baby," she said when she saw his blank look. "Now it's just a matter of luck."

"You incited her to ovulate," Buster explained. "Human women ovulate on a regular cycle. Arcans don't, it's triggered. Now it's just a matter of luck if she conceives. It's usually pretty much well guaranteed if you two stay together for a couple of weeks, but since we're being sold on Friday, well, it's a matter of luck. Not much luck, though. It's very rare for a female to conceive from the initial joining."

"Ohr," he said as he rolled off of her. He wasn't sure he rather liked the idea of having a baby with her, but from the sound of it, the chances were very poor after just one time.

"They say babies conceived on the joining become Shaman," Softail noted.

It also showed him that Arcans and humans were *very* different in some ways, ways that weren't entirely apparent. The lack of, of stimulation to ovulate had to be some kind of control on female Arcans to prevent possible breeding outside their species, or maybe it was just some adaptation to allow them to breed only when the conditions were favorable.

And that was how the humans could control Arcan populations... just keep the males and females of compatible breeds separate.

"Well, we have three more days," she said huskily, rolling up on her side and nuzzling him. "I'd *love* to have a baby with you, to see what it would look like, with your thick, amazing black fur and my fur."

"Onry three days, I dunno," he hedged.

"Then we'll just have to work for it," she said huskily, nibbling on his ear, then climbing out of bed. "Let us clean up, and we'll come eat dinner, boys," she told them.

The encounter troubled him a little bit, on more than one level. First, he'd been *willing* that time. Not just willing, but *willing*. She offered, but he was the one in command, in control. He wanted it, he wanted her, he'd been *aroused* by an Arcan, and it made it... strange. He'd always been creeped out by the idea of an Arcan before, but not that time. He'd been highly aroused, and not just because he was fantasizing about that Loreguard captain. He'd been *aroused by an Arcan*. That almost made him shudder now, but at the time, it was making him feel something entirely different.

Lust.

Lust, for an Arcan. What was happening to him? Was he *becoming* an Arcan? Was he losing his humanity?

Well, the last few weeks, since starting the Walk, they hadn't endeared him very much to his own people. He'd seen the human race at its worst in the faces of Bella, and that Loreguard soldier who killed the girl, and the crew of the slaver. And after he'd been changed, he'd seen the ugliness of humans from an entirely new perspective, seeing it from the receiving end, seeing just how cruel people could be. The viciousness of Arthur Ledwell, wrapped in an urbane exterior, showed what monsters could lurk behind the masks of upstanding people.

But humanity wasn't totally rotten. People like Virren, and Master Holm and Timble, and the farmer family who he hoped were now taking good care of the ferrets, they were good people, they were the best of humanity. They showed the spectrum that was humanity, from best to worst, and the many shades of gray between them.

He'd been an Arcan for... he didn't know how long. In that very short time, thanks to Arthur Ledwell, he'd tasted the savagery that the Arcan race faced on a daily basis, and it sickened him. But, it was the Arcan mantra... what else could they do? They were slaves. They were beyond slaves. Some of them had their very wills crushed and became slaves in every sense of the word, who were so *conditioned* that they couldn't even fathom life as anything other than a slave, and accepted whatever they were given meekly.

So, now that he'd seen the *real* world, as the fox had probably intended all along, what would he do about it? What could one man do about the whole world? Not much. But Virren

had said that he helped where he could, when he could. He achieved little victories, like saving the mouse, which may be a useless gesture in the grand scheme of things, yet also mattered in that there were people out there risking their lives to do what was right.

Maybe, once enough little victories were piled up, they could become a great victory.

So, Kyven was a man who liked to plan. What would he do after he reached Haven? Hide? Live? What if the fox never gave him back his powers, or he never tried to please her and maintained the rift between them, and stayed as an Arcan for the rest of his life? Well, he certainly had some advantages. He could hide in plain sight, he was stealthy. He could serve. He could become one of the Masked, like Virren wanted, and work for those little victories, do what he could where he could to try to help the Arcans. He was special, unique. He was certain they could find uses for him, if only as a crystalcutter.

He would help. He had seen too much, had experienced too much, to turn his back. He would work for the Arcans. He *was* an Arcan at least for right now, he tasted the misery of their lives first hand, and when he changed back to a human, he would never forget. Never. One could learn to ignore what one *saw* happening, but it was impossible for them to go home and forget what was *done to them*.

Perhaps that was the lesson the fox wanted to teach him, but fucking hell, what a brutal way to go about it. Emotionally scarring him for life did get her point across, but couldn't there have been a slightly better way?

Water under the bridge, he supposed. There was no way he could go home and ever ignore their pain, close his ears to their pleas. He would work for his own little victories, and try to change things for the better... one Arcan at a time.

When he reached Haven, he would ask to join the Masked.

"Such a serious face," Silver teased, leaning over and nuzzling him.

"Silrver, thrank you."

"What for?"

"Forr your cormfort."

"That wasn't for comfort, that was for fun," she giggled, licking his chin.

"It wras forr me," he told her.

"Well, then I was happy to make you feel better," she told him.

"Yrou did more than help mre feel better. Yrou showed mre the wray," he said simply, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"So mysterious," she grinned at him. "What does that mean?"

"It mreans that I know whrat to do now," he answered. "I know whry I'm here."

"Same as me, to be sold."

"Nno, to find mry prrace," he told her. "I wras free, but mry eyes were crrosed. I had to be caught to see, and nnow mry eyes arre open. And I see mry path."

She gave him a long, look, then she gasped and squealed in delight. "By the spirits! You're a *Shaman!*" she said in a sudden low whisper.

"Nno, I'm nnot," he said simply. "Mmraybe, I will be someday, through."

She gave an excited little squeal, and hugged him. "A *Shaman*, I got to meet a real Shaman!" she whispered in glee. "And maybe I'll bear your child!" she realized with wide eyes.

"What a gift you've given me!"

"Nno offense, Silrver, but I hope not. Not lrike this. Not in hrere."

"Then we'll have to disagree," she said with a grin, taking his hands and holding them. "You may be Arcan, but your life away from us shows. Without life, we can't go on, and if we don't go on, then nobody will remember us. Even if he's born in a cage, our baby will be the symbol that we go on, we survive. Every baby is another victory, in a world where victories

are few and far between."

Such eloquence and wisdom, from such an unlikely source. He leaned down and nuzzled her gently, and she put her hands around him. "Thren I hrope you find yyour hrappiness, Silrver," he said, putting his chin on her head and holding her close.

"You're escaping, aren't you?"

"I'm going to try," he answered. "One wray or anotheerr, this will be my lrastr day herre. I'll either leave on mry feet orr butcherred in pieces, but one wray or anotheerr, I'll be gone by morning."

"I'd be tempted to try with you, but I'd just slow you down," she whispered. "I'll be alright, I'm too valuable to the humans. I'll be fine. But you're not fine. If they discover who you are, they'll kill you. So you have to go. But don't forget me."

"Neveerr. I will *neveerr* forrget you, Silrver."

Silver never said a word to the others.

She remained her upbeat, almost obnoxiously perky little self all afternoon. She didn't feel like playing cards, so she just sat in laps and paid attention to the males, chatting away... she was the most talkative Arcan he'd ever seen. But, her chatty nature made the time fly by, until the sun set outside of their window, they were brought dinner, and then Softail went to bed. Buster retired not long after, leaving just him and Silver. She nuzzled with him for several moments, leaned up and whispered "may the spirits watch over you," then got up and went across the hall and into her room.

Trinity, he hoped not. He didn't *want* his spirit with him. He a still too angry with her.

He waited about an hour after dark, while the sun was well down but before the moon rose, and then he got up and got to work. He packed one set of clothes in his pack—he'd need clothes to get out of Alamar unmolested—then slipped out of his window. He carried the pack under himself as he ran on his legs and one hand back to the administration building, his spirit sight keeping track of everyone, then he cased the administration building looking for an open window. Trinity praise the predictable, the same window he'd used the last time was again left open. That was fine with him, for he knew his way to the room from that office. He put the pack's straps in his teeth and again vaulted up and grabbed the sill, then pulled himself into the room through the window. He left his pack by the window and stalked into the hallway, keeping alert for some straggler wandering up, staying down on all fours as he padded silently down the hallway, coming up to the door. He could again see the collars behind it, and could see the crystal embedded into the metal door.

Now comes the tricky part.

The door was a solid piece of metal, from what he could see. The door was hinged on the other side, meaning it opened inward, away from him, and it had no knob, ring, or any other external feature. It was seated firmly into the wall, meaning that one couldn't wedge anything into the doorframe from the sides to pry it open. From what his spirit sight could see, the crystal embedded in the door could only empower the door itself. The frame around the door was normal wood, not laced or prepared wood. The frame made it impossible for him to tell which way the door opened.

Kyven first lightly touched the door, then recoiled, seeing if it reacted, but it did not. He then put his palm on the door and pushed, but found that it was indeed closed and locked. And since there was no handle or ring, it meant that the door opened via some kind of external control, key, or command.

Alright, he established that he could not open the door by normal means. Now, the planner in him examined the door, the wall, even the ceiling and the floor, analyzing it to find an *unusual* way into that room. The walls were paneled wood, thick and varnished, and from the

sound they made when he knocked lightly on them, they were solid and thick. The floor was hardwood, and from the sound of it, it had a hollow space under it. Looking up at the ceiling explained the hollow sound of the floor; the floor under his feet was the ceiling for the level below, held up with sturdy beams. Those beams were small and sturdy, and ran perpendicular to the hallway, about six rods apart.

That was the way in!

Kyven went back for his pack, and then found the stairs. Keeping a wary eye for roaming guards, he again padded down the halls, staying to the shadows as much as he could then darting through the lit areas where lamps illuminated the hallways. He found the room *under* the room holding the collars, which presented him a challenge of another locked door. This door was *not* alchemical, however, and that meant that he could use direct methods to getting past it. His choice of methods wasn't a swift kick, but slow, inexorable pressure. He set his claws of his feet to the floor, leaned into the door, and began to push. He pushed with slowly increasing force, putting more and more stress on the blocks keeping the door locked, until he heard them snap and all resistance vanish. The door swung open loudly, crashing into the wall as it swung on its hinges, and Kyven quickly darted in and dropped his pack, then closed the door and grabbed a nearby chair and wedged it against the door, making it appear to be locked, which he would have never been able to do if he'd broken the door down. He found himself in a well-appointed office, one of the two chairs facing a large, rich-wooded desk used to bar the door now, an office with a large dark-wooded desk and a padded chair on the far side. Kyven looked up and saw the crystals of the collars directly over him, then waited for long minutes as he checked to see if anyone came to investigate the noise the door made when it swung open and hit the wall. Nobody did. Most of the people in the building were on the far side, where the kitchen was, and the closest roving guard was outside the building, about two hundred rods away. He waited for that guard to roam away, then hopped up onto the desk, jumped up, and sank his claws into one of the support beams in the ceiling. He got one of his feet on it, giving him a solid foundation, then he put his other foot to the boards, drove his claws into it, then kicked. He gouged the boards with his claws repeatedly, using his claws like a saw blade, ripping more and more wood away with his large, sharp claws, literally digging through the wood. He ripped completely through the wood of about eight boards, ripped holes big enough to put his hand through, then crawled down along the beam using his claws to get within reach of his hand. He put his hand through the hole and grabbed one board, then pushed it down until he heard it crack. He pushed it down to get it out of the way, then did the same with the next board, then the next board, and down the line until he had a hole big enough for him to get through. He leaned over and hooked his claws into one of the ungouged boards at the border, grabbed the other side, then swung out under the hole and then pulled himself up and through using raw strength. He pulled himself up into the room above, then stood up to look around.

It was *exactly* what he thought it was, a storeroom for the collars the blue ring used to move the Arcans here in and out of the compound. The collars were kept in a series of shelves, each one in a numbered slot so they could keep track of them.

Paydirt!

Kyven didn't take just one, he took *fifteen* collars. He took fifteen because when they figured out that Arcans had broken in, they'd find *many* collars missing instead of just one, which would make them waste time and resources getting a headcount instead of immediately sending everything they had out into the city to hunt for the lone escapee. He hooked them all over his arm, then he lowered himself down into the hole and dropped down into the office on the first floor. He immediately bent to the task of working with one of the collars,

managing to open it, then he pulled the crystal out of its setting and put it around his neck and bent the joining ends so it would stay around his neck but also be easily removed with a sharp tug. He then put on his clothes, put the other thirteen collars in the pack, kept one in his bare hand, and then looked outside. He spied the closest border to the building, and then spied out the guards to see exactly where they were and when he could move that would maximize his time. With the collar and pack he'd be visible, so he decided to just put on his clothes too so he could immediately move right into the city, where his clothes and collar would discourage immediate pursuit, would give him just enough time to get out of Alamar and into open country.

Now!

He opened the window of the office and dropped down onto all fours and charged across the field, racing up to the fence. He slid to a halt just at the edge of the fence, mindful that he'd knock himself out running into it at full speed if the collar didn't work. He grabbed the collar firmly and reached out with his hand gripping the collar.

ZOT!

Kyven staggered back. *Fuck*, it didn't work! No, wait, it wasn't lost yet. They had to get Arcans out using the collars, maybe he had to go to the gate. Maybe that was the only place the collars could be used. He turned and raced away, using spirit sight to avoid the approaching guards, relying on the moonless night to hide his clothing as he raced across the compound. Now this time, there would be no caution. If the gate didn't work, then he'd still be trapped in here, and they'd know who stole the collars eventually anyway, so he now had nothing to lose. They'd know he escaped immediately when he blew by the guards at the gate, but there wasn't much he could do about that. He would attack them, but Kyven was really no fighter. He had no idea how to fight in close quarters without magic, claws or no claws. The claws gave him a natural weapon, but he didn't really know how to *use* them, and he'd be coming up against men armed with pistols and alchemical weapons, most likely. No, his best option was just to charge right by them, use that moment of surprise to his advantage to blow past them and into the city. If it failed, the worst that happened was they kept a *much* closer eye on him until he was sold, and then his buyer would also be more careful knowing that he'd bought a known escaper. He'd have almost no chance to escape, and he was down to his last, best option, because he really didn't think trying to dig would work.

He lined himself up with the gate. He had to take it at a full, flat run, going as fast as he possibly could, so he either raced by the guards, or he was killed by the impact with the barrier, one way or the other. Either way, he'd be free. He got out in front of the gate, just by the platform of the blue ring, and then jumped out into a run. He went faster, and faster, and faster, until his hands and feet were barely touching the ground, and his lean body was loping across the ground as fast as a running horse. He heard nothing but his own breath and the wind in his ears as he rocketed towards the four men standing by the gate with its two bright lamps, as they stood around casually talking to each other. Kyven gauged the gates and adjusted his speed so he could make the leap to clear them. He charged the four men, who had not noticed him, not even when he came into the light and the coolness vanished around him to tell him his shadowy cloak was gone. He thundered up to them, then bunched his legs and exploded from the ground, starting his leap before he even reached the four men. He rose up higher and higher, saw the four men almost as if they were in slow motion, as one of them turned towards the motion, then his head tried to snap the other way to lock onto him. He was above the level of the fence, his paws reaching out, one of them holding the ring—

ZOT!

Kyven gasped when he was attacked by lightning, but *he did not ram the barrier*. Electrical

sparks danced around him as he laid out in the air over the gate, coming from the gate itself, causing him to release the collar in his hand. He saw it spin away from his hand slowly, almost lazily, rising over him as it went up but gravity reclaimed him and began pulling him back to the earth. His arms felt like he was stung by a thousand hornets from being zapped by the barrier, but he braced himself to land, knowing that it was going to be hard and painful.

The landing was not pretty. His hands hit the ground, but the lightning had numbed his arms, and he plowed into the cobblestone street, tumbling and rolling. The ground and sky traded places wildly as he felt a hundred bites and stings from the stone street jabbing into him, as he skidded to a stop laying on his side. He pulled himself up onto his hands, shaking his head to clear the stars, and control of his body returned almost instantly when he heard the shouts of alarm, and then a piercing whistle. He scrambled to his feet and turned, then darted down the road leading to the city, free of the blue ring. Free of the blue ring, free of any collar, free of any constraint.

He was *free*!

He couldn't leave without telling them how he felt about them. "FRUCK YOU!" he shouted when he looked behind himself at the four stunned guards, then he looked ahead, found a nice rhythm, and charged into the night as whistles, and then sirens, erupted from the famous blue ring behind him.

Kyven had escaped.

He had a lead, and that lead saved his ass.

By the time organized pursuit got going, Kyven was already several blocks into the city. He dared not use spirit sight or he'd be found out as a Shaman, so he relied instead on his Arcan eyes, which were attuned to the darkness, allowing him to navigate poorly lit streets in the moonless night. Quite a few men and women saw him race by, but they hadn't quite made the connection that he had escaped yet, since the sirens from the blue ring weren't easily audible that far away. Kyven's clothes and the silver collar around his neck, easily visible, made the few that did see him coming and think to take a step to intercept him or pull shockrods or other weapons hesitate for that critical instant that was all he needed to blow by them and be long gone before they made any decisions.

By the time word did get out that one of the valuable Blue Ring Arcans had managed to escape, Kyven was already out of the city, having escaped to the east and then turning to the north, loping along the border of a swampy fen and the city, then finding a road and turning onto it, allowing himself to fully stretch out his strides and put increasingly large distances between him and Alamar. Once he was far enough away, he discarded the other collars, took off his clothes and collar, put them in the pack, then strapped the pack to his *underbelly* and continued to run. By putting the pack under him, it wouldn't be quite so obvious to people in the darkness... but that seemed to be a moot point. In the hours after escaping from Alamar, he ran though three small villages along that road, but there was no one about.

He was too focused to get too excited. He'd get excited about his escape when he had a couple hundred minars between him and Alamar. He was an Arcan on the run, he was in outstanding shape, and he had a lead. He intended to run literally until he could go no further, and hoped to have at *least* two hundred minars between him and Alamar. That far ahead, any pursuers would have to literally kill their horses to catch up with him. He'd stay on the road for a good part of that, because the open road allowed him to run at the pace of a running horse, but then he'd cut across country once he reached a point where he felt that horses would start dying. In the forest, he would go slower, but the cover would give him a tactical advantage. Unless they had some way to track him, the forest would give him cover and al-

low him to hide. He would run by night and hide by day, finding areas of darkness like dens or fallen hollow logs, areas of both shadow and darkness where he could merge with the shadows and rest, invisible to any hunters.

He ran through the night at that same powerful, ground-eating pace, putting nearly eighty minars behind him, stopping only to drink as much as he could and have short rests, then continue on, staying on the road. He knew that there would be pursuit, and a hell of a lot of it. Word would get out that he escaped, and he was a prize worth the time of every hunter and glory seeker all over the Alamar region. He was clearly the property of the blue ring, but there would be both one hell of a reward and a hell of a lot of prestige for whoever managed to catch the only Arcan that had ever escaped from the blue ring. That would put a lot of pressure on him, but he was more than willing to put up with it for his freedom. He knew that as he got further and further from Alamar, the pressure on him would lessen, since the hunters would spread out and have to cover a lot more territory. Some would even go the wrong way out of Alamar, thinking he might go due north or northwest, towards the sparsely populated areas of the Alamar region, when he was going northeast, *into* populated regions. From what he remembered of his geography, there were quite a few plantations and farms north and east of Alamar, cut out of the forests in the region. His destination was Atan, so he had to stay on the east side of the Smoke Mountains, skirting them on his way north. That was forest terrain, hilly, with many streams and rivers to cross, and that was conducive to an Arcan on the run. It would slow down the horses chasing him much more than it would him, though his inability to swim was going to be a problem in a few places, he was sure.

Maybe he should spend a little time in a stream trying to figure out how to swim, so he could cross rivers anywhere. It might be a wise use of his time.

At dawn, he turned off the road towards Morat and turned more easterly, vanishing into the forest. The forest reminded him of his initial Shaman training with the wolf, running through the forest as a human while chasing that damned wolf, wanting to kill him if he could catch him, but never able to do it. But now he was the one in front, the one running on all fours through the forest, ghosting between trees and around scrubs of thornbushes, racing along ridges, down game trails, bounding over streams. Well after dawn, he pulled up and again put on his clothes and the fake collar, but then realized that they might be able to track that collar. He tossed it aside. Yes, anyone who saw him would see that he was uncollared, but he really had no intentions of being seen by any humans. He was a unique-looking Arcan, and he'd be recognized on sight, collar or no collar. If he bounded through a village that didn't know about him, then word would spread of the sighting, some enterprising hunter might deduce his path, and somehow get ahead of him and try to ambush him. The key to his survival was to *outrun* all opponents, stay ahead of them, stay ahead of news that he had escaped, which would seed his path with a gauntlet of hunters that sought to capture the black fox Arcan that had escaped from the blue ring.

And Toby Fisher figured highest among them. He had little doubt the sleek, dangerous man would be coming for him, since he escaped *before* he was sold, and thus Toby had no money to take back to Cheston for Annette Ledwell. She was out his sale price, and Toby was out his deposit. That would put Toby solidly on his tail, and Toby was one man that Kyven feared and respected enough to want to stay as far away from as possible. He had no doubt that the man was good, good enough to track him, so he had to move fast and steadily, push the man, keep him from having any chance to stop and gather himself. If he kept Toby constantly running to keep up with him, it would minimize the danger the man could pose to him.

Kyven's main advantage was endurance, a powerful endurance that would let him keep

ahead of men on horseback. His disadvantage was mainly right here, right now, when he was forced, in this first day, to run in daylight, because he was just too close to Alamar. He would have to be very careful not to be seen, or word would spread of the sighting, and the hunters would have a new point from which to work to try to find him.

Thank the Trinity Toby had never asked him about himself, so he had no information to go on.

Fuck. He'd told *Buster* and the others that he'd been raised in Atan! They'd be interrogated for sure, and that would come out. That meant that there would definitely be hunters coming to Atan to see if he showed up... and that meant he had to get there *first*. And since some of them might take a ship to Avannar or Stinger Bay, trying to get ahead of him to wait, that meant he had to completely bust his ass to get to Atan first.

It was time to push his endurance to the limit. He *had* to get to Atan first. He just had to.

He did the math as he ran. If a steamship sailed non-stop from Alamar to Avannar, the closest port to Atan, it was seven or eight days provided it had good weather. Add two days to ride a horse to death to get to Atan, and he was looking at seeing his first hunter show up in nine or ten days, *assuming word was not sent ahead using alchemy*. If word was sent to Atan that he was coming, well, then that changed everything. But assuming that they did not, that no one would risk losing the reward, that left him nine days—well, eight now. He had to assume the worst and that there were hunters already on a ship heading for Avannar.

Kyven was in great shape, and in this Arcan form, he could go faster than a horse over the span of a day. Those combined would give him the ability to cover about a hundred minars a day through virgin forest, given stops to drink, rest, and hunt for food. It was about a thousand minars from Alamar to Atan, if he remembered his geography right. So, if he could cover a hundred minars a day, he could reach Atan in nine days after subtracting the distance he'd already covered.

Not good enough.

He had to stretch it out. He had to run all night, and run hard. He had to cover a hundred twenty minars a day, cut at least a full day off his travel time, and do it through forest and without roads. He'd have to kill his food just before he stopped and eat only when he was hiding during the daylight hours, cut down on his drinking to only when he literally had to cross the stream or river from which he drank. Rest breaks were out of the question, he'd do his resting when he stopped for the day. If he was too tired, he could slow down for a while, just so long as he continued forward.

From that point on, everything Kyven did, every single thing, had to be done with an eye on saving time and keeping him moving forward. He absolutely had to beat his pursuers to Atan, get in touch with Virren, and then escape into the frontier.

As he considered that, he came to his first real obstacle. It was a river, a narrow river, but it was deep. He stopped at the bank and paced back and forth on all fours, considering the problem, but then he decided to risk it. He waded in, where it was deep but not over his head, and tried to swim. He floundered around, kept going under, until he got a kind of idea of it after about a half an hour. If he paddled with his hands while he kind of rolled his legs, almost like he was running on two legs underwater, he would shuffle forward and keep his head above water. Once he got the hang of it, he turned his muzzle to the opposite bank and paddled out into the river. The current pulled him downstream as he slowly worked his way across, but he kept his head above water and moved inexorably towards the other bank.

After about twenty minutes of slow paddling, he made it across. He looked back and just had to smile. Horses would *not* cross that river easily, not where he did. There might be a ford or ferry nearby he didn't know about, but they'd lose time getting to it which he'd make

up right now. He dropped down to all fours and shook the water out of his fur, then bounded off into the summer morning, quickly vanishing among the tall pines of the Alamar forest.

The deer never saw it coming.

Kyven exploded out of the trees and into the clearing as the afternoon sun cast long shadows across the grass, startling the small herd of deer. They turned and tried to bolt, but the predator was literally on top of them before they could get a single jump. He singled out the smallest of them, a yearling, and drove it to the ground. It bleated in terror, but that bleat was cut brutally short when Kyven's jaws literally ripped its throat out. He didn't even wait for the animal to die before he tore into it, sinking his fangs and claws into its belly as it twitched and jerked, but then it mercifully went still when he literally disemboweled it with his claws and teeth. Bones snapped as Kyven's jaws drove into the animal's belly and tore out its liver, which he ate quickly and greedily. He hadn't eaten since he escaped, and the time in the cage had made him almost phobic about being hungry. He'd held off eating as long as he could stand it, until the pangs started awakening a nameless dread in him, which forced him to stop running and hunt. The luck of the Father was with him by stumbling across the small herd just minutes after moving from running to hunting, and he'd used his stealth to get so close to the deer that they had no chance to get away when he pounced.

He didn't have much time, and he knew it. He was a little sleepy, but not too tired. He could easily keep running, and he fully intended to do so, all night. He'd stop to sleep in the morning, which would give him a night, day, and night of constant running to get ahead of the hunters behind him. And that made him feel safe enough to stop and rest when the sun came up tomorrow morning, as he'd have a nearly insurmountable lead on those pursuing him on land. He didn't really feel safe enough to stop and eat, but hunger had forced it of him, and that lingering fear made him eat fast. He tore the deer apart, ripping the tissue to get at the most nourishing organs and devouring them, then going back to tear out mouthfuls of the choice meat, avoiding the intestines and stomach, which never failed to make Kyven nauseous if he wasn't careful to shake out what was inside of them before eating them.

Trinity, he was starving. The carcass of the deer was dragged back and forth through the clearing bite by bite as Kyven ate as fast as he could, spitting out pieces of bone and tufts of fur, leaving smears of blood on the grass and small bits of meat torn free by his careless tearing at the carcass. He wanted to eat more, but he felt the ticking of the clock, and he'd reached the point where he'd have to work on the legs to get meat, the torso was cleared of all the meat that was easy to get. He did tear one hind leg off and strip the hide off it, then rip the entire muscle off it and hold it in his mouth as he abandoned what was left of his kill and started running again, carrying the meat in his mouth to eat on the run. He did that, finding that it wasn't easy to eat and swallow while dodging trees, and spent much of the time after that licking the blood out of the fur around his mouth. He stopped at a small stream and drank his fill, but the faint sound of voices alerted him. He bounded away and into the trees, took off his pack, and then found a patch of shadow in the sunset dark enough and deep enough for him to feel the coolness surround him, telling him he had blended into the shadows and was now invisible.

It was a pair of kids. Two boys, looking to be about twelve or so, wearing rugged clothing of cotton and leather.

"No way!" the smaller of the two said as they came into view, along the creek.

"Ah did too! It was right heah, or heah abouts," the taller dark-haired boy replied. "A wild Ahcan, Bo, a small one with brown fur an' big round eahs! Ah think it was a beah!"

"Mebbe it was a *real* beah," the smaller one said. "Not an Ahcan."

"Ah guess it cudda been," the taller one agreed. "Look, heah's its tracks!" he said, pointing

to where Kyven had stopped to drink.

Tracks. He hadn't considered that... but by now, he was so far ahead that it didn't matter.

"Those ain't beah tracks, those are wolf tracks!" the smaller one protested.

"Wolf? You sho' it's a wolf?"

"Ayah, look, it's like the hound-dog's foot, just biggah. And see, heah's a handprint, so it was and Ahcan." He knelt down, then pointed in Kyven's general direction. "It went off dat way to'ds the Blackstone plantation. Ah sweah, Tem, them's some *big* prints, and dey fresh. The Ahcan has tah be full growed, and somethin' close."

The two boys looked around fearfully, then both started backing up. "Ayah, Ah think we'd bettah be gettin' back home, Bo," the taller one said with a slightly quivering voice. "An' warn Paw they's an Ahcan out heah, mebbe wild, mebbe slipped a collah."

Smart kids. But, their talk revealed a flaw in his plan. Sure, he could cover a hundred twenty minars a night, but in the forest, did he know he was going the right way? He almost stumbled right into a plantation he didn't know was there. Was he still moving north, or was he now going west? It was easy to tell in the daytime, but it would be harder at night.

He needed a compass. A map would be nice too, but he'd settle for knowing where he was right now and a compass. So, he needed information... and he had two fountains of it right here at his fingertips.

They'd never talk to someone in the shadows, he realized, so he had to reveal himself... in a way. He'd have to attack them, scare them into answering him, but not let them see him. He also couldn't kill them, or he'd have humans crawling all over the place looking for them, in an area he might be staying in for a little while as he secured a compass.

They were scared, but they were kids, so it was very easy to ambush them. While they hurried up the streambank, he slipped behind them, then bounded up, reared up on his legs, and grabbed each boy by the back of the neck and drove them to the ground. They screamed in fear as he gripped their necks and kept their heads squarely forward. "Hrow farr to Morrat?" he demanded.

"Who are yah?" one of them asked in fear.

"Hrow farr to Morrat?" he demanded, gripping their necks more firmly, a squeeze they did not miss.

"Fifty minars no'th!" the smaller one said.

"Whrere is the nearest virr-vilrage?" he demanded.

"Yo' an *Ahcan*!" the taller one gasped. "Y'all done slipped yo' collah, ayah!"

"Then I have no reason not to kirl you if you don't answer," he said coldly. "Talk and live. Stay quiet and die. Now, whrere is the nearest vilrage?"

"Up the stream, past our fahm!" the short one said immediately.

"If I go downstream, wirl I find empty lrand? No farms?"

"They's two fahms dat way, but dey small, and dey be nothin' past 'em!" the taller one said.

Kyven tamped his feet. Now came the tricky part. "I'm hungrry, hrumans, but I don't lrike easy meat. I'rl give you a ten second head startt, startting when I lret go of you. Rready?"

They started trembling.

"Then go!" he barked, releasing them. Before either of them even reacted, Kyven had turned and bounded over the stream and into the trees. He felt the coolness wash over him as the two boys scrambled to their feet, too afraid to look back, then tore upstream as fast as they could run, screaming at the top of their lungs.

Now, while everyone went downstream to warn the farms of an escaped Arcan that was hungry, Kyven would slip around them, to the village, and find a compass.

The plan worked pretty well. The village was right where they said it was, and the boys

raised an uproar in the small hamlet. Men grabbed muskets and crossbows and headed off into the woods, leaving the tavern and general store, which were in the same building, rather bare. Kyven dropped his pack off near the edge of town and crept into the general store through its second floor, through an open window and past a sleeping child. His spirit sight told him where everyone was, allowing him to slip past a nervous female and down the stairs into the general store. He found a compass in there, a very nice compass that had a thin rope tied to it that would let him hang it from his neck for easy access, basically exactly what he was looking for. After finding the compass, he looked around for other useful things. He came up with a blanket, two waterskins, and some dried jerked meat that he felt might come in handy for eating and drinking on the move. Outside of that, he had everything he needed, and besides, it all had to fit in his pack with the single set of clothing he kept, just in case.

He slipped out of the general store through a locked back door, got his pack, then bounded into the trees. He put his stolen goods into his pack, then checked the compass. If he was fifty minars south of Morat, then if he remembered his geography, he needed to go northeast to stay on the east side of the Smoke Mountains, maybe even edge to the east side. The Smoke Mountains' south edge was in Georvan, and Sagrad, which was a mining town at the very end of the Smoke Mountains in Georvan, was northeast of Morat.

He was indeed going the right way.

But he had a long way to go, and he had to put as much distance between him and Alamar as possible before he finally stopped. The night was young, and the meal had recharged him. He was a little sleepy, but he was ready for a full night of running. He put the compass around his neck, shouldered the pack, then dropped down to all fours and bounded away from the nameless village, ready to face the challenge of racing the hunters to Atan.

Chapter 10

It was amazing what one could accomplish with a compass, a little luck, and a lot of help.

Thank the Trinity for Aden. When Aden first started teaching Kyven about prospecting, his first lessons were actually about basic woodland survival, and it had been the grizzled mountain man that had taught Kyven how to read and use a compass. The compass kept Kyven on track as he went up and down ridges and hills and ran through virgin forest between settlements, keeping him moving in the direction he needed to go. That compass turned out to be essential to him, for it was very easy to get turned around in the night as one went up and down hills, changed directions to follow ridges or come down valleys. Kyven had his ability to keep his direction because of Aden, who reached out beyond the grave to help his eager student now, as he raced the hunters back to Atan.

The luck was just that, blind luck. More than once he stumbled into settled areas during the night, and once it was literally bounding out of the trees and almost into a farmer who was making his way towards the treeline and a stream Kyven had just jumped over. Only his shadowy cloak saved him from detection, as he literally had to ghost by the man so close that his fur brushed the man's hip and his tail tip lashed the man on the knee.

The help came from Arcans. When he came across settlements, he would seek out Arcans on farms, for they were almost never kept in the main house. They were always in barns or stables or little one-room hovels somewhere near the farmhouse. Where humans wouldn't help him, the Arcans were more than willing to give directions to an unseen voice, whose speech patterns were clearly Arcan; they could tell the speaker had a muzzle. The Arcans like these, working on a farm, they were almost always local. Arcans usually didn't go far from where they were born, staying in the same area for all their lives. It was only unusual Arcans that were moved distances, like Kyven himself, or specific needs in specific places. The

slave ship Kyven had taken over was an example of slavers who filled that need. They moved groups of Arcans needed in other places, like moving females to breeding pens, or moving fighting Arcans, and so on and so on. But the average Arcan was bought and sold locally, and usually didn't go far from where he was born. These field Arcans may not know where the next country was, but they knew *their* area, and using what he could piece together from them, Kyven was able to keep track of where he was and knew which direction to go next. They were his map, and with his map and his compass, he was able to navigate.

He felt... bad about leaving the Arcans behind, but he'd learned his lessons well from the fox. There could be no happy endings for everyone. Right now, his primary goal was to save himself so that he might come back to save others, and he wouldn't manage that if he freed a mess of Arcans and ended up leading an Arcan slave army north. Besides, that would attract attention, and right now, he couldn't do that. The Arcans themselves didn't seem to be hateful of it, either. Kyven was free, and they were happy for him and happy to help him. They helped him to help a fellow Arcan, so *someone* might be free if not them.

He was *their* little victory.

He would honor them by staying free, and he certainly worked hard at it. For one, he was doing much better than a hundred minars a day. After three days, he found himself just north of a mining town called Mevaga, which was in northern Georvan, and realized he was running at least a hundred fifty minars a day. He was running all through the night, keeping a hard pace, using roads when he knew where he was going and knew where they went, which allowed him to go even faster. He had come up around the southern end of the Smoke Mountains and then turned north, skirting their eastern edge along the foothills, staying out from the flatter areas where there was heavy farming, staying to the areas where there was lighter farming and some prospecting and mining activity. At the rate he was going, he would be in Atan in four days, and that would beat *everyone* there. And if they sent word ahead, he'd get there so fast that nobody would expect him to be there, they'd still be looking further south.

It was going very well, at least in that regard. He'd run over three hundred minars before finally stopping, which was a staggering distance to traverse in just two days. Only something like an ultra-rare and highly expensive crystal-driven flying device could go so far, so fast. He'd slept through much of the day in an abandoned den, dark and shadowy and allowing him to remain invisible, then came out near sunset to hunt. He ran down a large deer and ate his fill, then packed up some of the meat and carried it with him so he wouldn't have to hunt when he finished running. He then cleared another hundred and fifty minars or so, running on roads when he could, running across country when the compass led him away from the road, and checking his position with the Arcans in the settled areas when he encountered them. He slept under a huge fallen tree, and repeated the cycle, running through the night once again, staying on roads when possible but going across country when necessary as he moved steadily north along the foothills of the mountains, passing small farmsteads and mining villages, and the further north he went, the more mining villages there were.

He didn't allow himself to fall into a false sense of security, though. He continued pushing hard, running as much as possible, even during the day when he was in a stretch of unsettled territory, keeping his every thought and action on moving forward, always moving forward.

His biggest run-in with danger had nothing to do with humans, it came from an Arcan, a wild Arcan. It was a large canine Arcan who had appeared when Kyven was eating a deer he killed, a female considerably larger than him. The commotion and the smell of blood had attracted her, and Kyven found himself being challenged by the large brown-furred canine over his kill.

Kyven considered the situation. The kill was his; he worked for it, he owned it. This large

female sought to run him off, take his kill, and she was very, very aggressive. Kyven wasn't a fighter and he knew it, he had no idea how to fight and he lacked the innate, instinctual aggression and fighting instincts of the Arcans, so he knew if it came to a fight, he'd be beaten. But, he also didn't want to abandon his kill and waste valuable time hunting down another one. There was another option, he saw as she slowly stalked forward, fangs bared and growling threateningly, and that was sharing it. He was more than willing to give her half the kill, there was too much there for him to eat by himself. There was no need to fight over what would feed both of them. He advanced towards her with his belly low to the ground, a submissive posture, then raised his muzzle towards her as his tail swished back and forth. He had no idea what he was doing, but it seemed to calm the female, somehow. She stopped snarling at him, padded forward and boldly sniffed at his muzzle and head as he kept himself low to the ground, then she clamped her jaws on the back of his neck and tried to pull on him. He submitted to her as she dragged him sideways, then she rolled him over on his back and bit his neck firmly, but not painfully. He showed throat to her, submitting to her as she licked the blood off his chin and chops, then growled softly in her throat and pulled away, padding to his kill and tearing into it. He'd already eaten the liver and choice organs, but the heart, lungs, and kidneys were still there, and she went after them immediately. She growled at him as he came back to the deer, but she made no snaps at him as he sat down beside her and started chewing through the hide on one of the back legs to get at the meat beneath. He surrendered the remaining choice parts to her and ate the leaner meat.

Between the two of them, they denuded the carcass completely, leaving nothing but bloody tufts of fur and chewed bones. He moved to pad back to his pack, but the female grabbed him by the tail and pulled him back, rising up from where she'd been chewing on a thighbone, letting go of it and pulling his tail, then grabbing his waist, then pulling him back to her. She literally mounted him, which he thought was very strange behavior from a female, grabbing him by the back of the neck with her jaws as she pressed her hips against his rear end. She was giving soft growling sounds in her throat as she gripped him, then seemed to figure out that she wasn't accomplishing anything. She pulled him to the ground and rolled him over, then straddled him, clearly broadcasting her intent to mate.

He started this mess, he was stuck. He submitted to her, and if he didn't give her what she wanted, she might attack him. She was wild, but she was still an Arcan, with the Arcan need for touch and socializing, and since she was an adult, breeding was on her mind. It took some fast, rather dirty fantasies to get ready in a hurry, as she continuously tried to mount him, until he finally had enough of an erection to get the job done. She gripped his shoulders as she bounced on top of him, her eyes closed and her head held high, and he just laid there and let her do whatever she wanted, though he did steal some massaging feels of her small breasts, which she didn't seem to mind at all. He felt her achieve climax, which incited him into climax as well, gripping her waist as he rode the waves of pleasure.

But she was not happy. She looked down at him with narrow, dangerous eyes, and she bared her fangs and growled threateningly at him.

What? What did he do? He didn't do anything he hadn't done with other Arcans! Yet all of the sudden, she went from very amorous and affectionate to threatening, and with her on top of him, he was in a very, very vulnerable situation. She gave a threatening bark.

Was it because they weren't compatible breeds? Did she mate him expecting a joining, thinking he was a fellow canine? Why would she think that when she sniffed him, his scent was *not* a canine one. She had to know that they weren't compatible before mating him.

Possibly, but he was not in a position to argue about it. With him flat on his back, being bitten was his greatest danger. She could go straight for his exposed neck, unless he took im-

mediate action. He did so, startling her when he kicked off the ground, rolling them over, then he pulled away from her when she let go of him in surprise. He scrambled backwards, staying on all fours, low to the ground and with his tail low. He slinked back as she growled threateningly, her hackles rising.

Clearly, the honeymoon was over.

When he backed away from her enough to turn and start hurrying away, going for his pack, she became more calm, and then he understood. It was the Arcan version of a one night stand. She just wanted his deer and a few minutes of pleasure, and now that she had what she wanted, she was evicting him from her territory. She satisfied her Arcan need for touch and companionship, and her wild impulses had taken over again.

He fled from her, breathing a sigh of relief. She could have easily attacked him without warning after the mating, and probably would have killed him. His lack of experience with Arcans almost got him killed, and he filed that little episode away in his mind for future reference, should he come across another wild female. Or male, for that matter, the morals of that experience were not to let his guard down around wild Arcans bigger than him. And to remember that he was *not* an Arcan, so he had much more he had to learn.

Outside of that one encounter, it was blessedly uneventful when he got back into the Free Territories after six days of hard, relentless running, far, far ahead of any hunters chasing him by land and a good two days ahead of any hunters heading to Atan by ship. After he set out and found some Arcans to tell him where he was, he realized he was one very hard run to Atan. He was just south of Riyan, though much further west, and the south end of the Blue Valley was just ahead of him.

As he navigated into the Blue Valley in the night, a cloudy night that threatened rain, the first rain since he fled Alamar, he considered things, for the first time since running. He'd be in Atan by morning, and when he got there, he'd need to make contact with Virren. Virren would know how to get in touch with the Masked, and then it would be a simple matter of waiting until they got there to take him to Haven, to get him out of the human lands and to safety, because he was just too unique. Too many people wanted his hide, literally, and his only chance was to get out of their reach. Virren could help him, the Masked could help him, and he would return to help the Masked after the heat cooled down, after he was better prepared to deal with the human world when he was an Arcan everyone wanted to possess.

It would be good to see Virren again, and get a message to Master Holm and Timble. No doubt they had no idea what was going on with him, and though he couldn't let them see him, he could get word to them that he was alright. The last message he sent was from Stinger Bay, through the guild, telling them he was going to try sailing. That should have bought him some time, and he could organize, something, he guessed. Give Timble his half of the shop or something, because he wasn't sure if he'd be able to fulfill his obligations to it. He'd like to keep his name on the shop, use it as a front, but that would be up to Holm and Timble. He could just give all the profits to them and keep his name on the roll as an owner, and use that official status as a cover when he moved around. He could let a human Masked use his name and pretend to be his Arcan as they moved around, for example.

Trinity, how was Virren going to react to this? Virren knew he was a Shaman, so at least that part wouldn't surprise him... but to leave a human and come back an Arcan, it was sure to blow Virren's mind. It would blow his if he was on the other side of it. Hell, it still made him feel a little creeped out, but that was more from how quickly and effortlessly he seemed to embrace Arcan life. He was, at that moment, running on all fours. He hunted like a wolf, ate his kills raw, seemed to understand Arcan instincts at a basic level that let him interact with wild ones, and had learned a little about smart Arcans, enough to at least not be shunned

by them in groups. But he had much more he needed to learn, of that much he was sure. He'd only interacted with three groups of Arcans, the females on the ship, the Arcans in the kennel in Cheston, and Silver and the others in the blue ring. He knew that those three interactions in no way prepared him for dealing with Arcans in general; it only showed him how slave Arcans behaved. The only free Arcan he'd interacted with was the wolf, but the wolf's hatred of him made that a very tense relationship, and also didn't tell him very much.

Yes, he had much more to learn.

With the sliver of the waxing moon illuminating a band of land before him as he crested a ridge, peering through a small hole in the cloud cover above, Kyven found himself looking into what he knew was the Blue Valley. Atan was about a hundred and twenty minars to the north, on the other end of this very long geographical feature, but within the valley the going would be easier, with lower hills. But, the valley was also populated and its proximity to the uninhabited mountains meant there were more wild Arcans around, which would require him to be careful. The wild Arcans would fear humans, but Kyven's Arcan scent would not give him the same protection. They would either chase him out of their territory or investigate him. Either way, Kyven wasn't going to stop now for anything but water. He was hungry, and that hunger was triggering his fear of starving instilled into him by the Ledwell's cage, but he could wait until he got to Atan. Virren would feed him, feed him all he wanted.

The Ledwells. That bitch, he wondered if she knew by now that her investment had escaped from the blue ring, and was now free. He also wondered how far behind him Toby was, because he knew the man would come after him. He just had to keep his lead, and be far into the frontier by the time the man reached Atan, for that was one man that Kyven had the sense to fear.

The rain came, a steady, cool rain that soaked into his fur as he ran, but he ignored it, ignored everything but the objective. If he got to Atan by morning, he would have a full two days on his closest theoretical pursuers, barring someone warning ahead that he was coming. As long as nobody did that, he'd have more than enough time to contact Virren and get the ball rolling on that, then lurk near the village, using the many abandoned mines in the hills outside Atan and his shadowy cloak to evade all hunters. With so many places to hide, and being invisible to anyone who came looking, they'd never find him. He could easily evade all hunters until the Masked came for him, then took him to safety, because Atan was *his* home range. He knew the area, he knew where to go, where it was safe, where the people were, he could stay near the village and never be found with almost ridiculous ease. He would repay Virren and the Masked by becoming one of them, working to help the Arcans, because he had tasted the brutality of their lives on a level that had committed him to their cause. Even if he was returned to being human, he would continue fighting for his little victories.

Days of hard running had worn him down, but had also built him back up. He was able to run at high speed all through the night, faster than any horse, faster than anything but an Arcan, literally drinking the raindrops as he ran so he didn't have to stop to drink water. He ran on pads toughened by heavy activity, pads that could trample thorns without drawing blood, running through forest and across fields and past houses and down small lanes and roads tirelessly through the night, an invisible ghost unnoticed by all as he passed by them. He didn't have to use the compass or stop to find out where he was anymore, he knew that all he had to do was stay in the valley and keep running until he came across the Avannar Road, which would be sometime either just before or just after sunrise. He encountered no humans, no Arcans, nothing but the occasional nocturnal roamer as he ran, startling a few foxes, a handful of cats, and a couple dozen possums on his long run along the valley floor, staying near the west edge.

At almost exactly sunrise, he reached the Avannar Road. He had to turn around and come back after running across it, then padded in a circle as he recognized it for what it was, that it wasn't a country lane or road between settlements. It was still raining, making it muddy, but this was where he had to bow to Atan traditions. Arcans did *not* go about naked in Atan, and with sunrise coming, his shadow cloak wouldn't work anyway. This was the entire reason he brought clothes and carried the pack all this way. He moved off the road and dug the wet clothes out of the pack, which was itself soaked through after full night in the rain, making it rather heavy since the blanket inside was partially filled with water, making it damp and a bit squishy to the touch on the layers that had been on the top of the pack. He put on the pants and shirt, feeling quite musty with his wet fur underneath them, then shouldered the pack and bounded out onto the Avannar Road, running the final twenty minutes it would take to reach Atan.

He came up the ridge quickly, but when he got close, to where he could be seen from the road, he veered off and into the woods. The clothes would detract people until they saw he had no collar, then he'd be fighting his former village comrades as they tried to capture him. He circled Atan from the treeline, getting over to the south side so he had a very fast run in to the alley leading to Virren's shop's back door, but he saw something that worried him when he did so.

There was a detachment of Loreguard in Atan. They were already up and about, a group of five Loreguard out by the Crystal Chimes, moving from the inn and in the direction of the Loremaster's house and office on the other side of town, near the courthouse and watch-house.

What was the Loreguard doing here? They didn't keep a detachment here, just a lone Loremaster. But they were indeed here, and that just made this a hell of a lot more dangerous. The Masked might not come if Loreguard were in the area.

Hell, no use speculating. He had to talk to Virren first, that was what was most important.

He waited until those Loreguard were well gone, and then made his move. With the rain, nobody would be looking too carefully at him if he passed anyone on the street, too busy trying to get out of the weather. He walked slowly and calmly out into the village, using the blanket both as a cloak against the rain and also to hide his neck and the fact that he had no collar, going up Gem Street. He found himself walking down familiar cobblestones that felt different under new feet, walking past the Crystal Chimes, past Master Torvik's cutting shop, past the Gravan alchemy shop, past the spinster sisters who did laundry for people for a living, past his own shop, past his former life. He slid on the wet cobblestones when he went past his own shop, feeling a strange pang when he looked at it, then turned up the narrow, dark alley that ran between his shop, the barrel maker's shop and the greengrocer's shop and the rope maker's shop, and with Virren's shop forming the dead end down at the far end. He slowed down and rose up onto his legs when he reached that door, and then knocked on it without hesitation. He knocked on it again when nobody answered it, constantly darting his eyes back down the alley to see if anyone saw him run in. He almost jumped when the door opened behind him, and he turned and saw himself looking at the intimidating face of Bragga, Virren's hired strongman and guard. "What ya want, Arcan? Who sent ya?" he asked.

"Bragga," Kyven said, looking up at the big man.

The man's small eyes widened in shock. "*Kyven*?" he gasped. "Is that you?"

"I need to see Virren," he said. "Is it safe here?"

Bragga poked his head out the door and looked down the alley, then grabbed his forearm and pulled him into the shop. "What the fucking bloody blue hell happened to you, Kyv?" he

asked. "I almost shit my pants when I heard your voice coming out of an Arcan's mouth!"

"It's a verry long storry," he said, pulling the blanket up around him tighter, fearing that Virren's apprentices may see him. "Nreedress to say, it's not a verry good one."

"I imagine so! What happened? What could do this to you?"

"Like I said, it's a verry long storry," he said quietly.

"Kyven, I think you should know now. Holm died."

"Whrat?"

"He died, Kyv, about a week ago. He died in his sleep. The shop's kinda in limbo right now. Tim's been running it since Holm died, he left the shop to you and Tim. And with you not there, Tim's kinda holding the bag."

Kyven felt... he didn't know what to feel. Holm had been like a father to him. He'd been strict, but always fair, always encouraging, and had taught Kyven tricks he'd never taught another apprentice, not even Timble. Holm had been one of his best friends. And Kyven hadn't even been here with him at the end. He felt like he let Holm down, that Holm died not knowing how much Kyven had cared about him, how special he'd been in his life.

He pulled the blanket around him more as an apprentice came out of a room and into the hall. He felt... ashamed. He didn't know why. These were people who knew him, he guessed. They knew him when he was a human. How would they react to him now? How would Holm have reacted to find that his partner was now an Arcan? How would Timble react? For that matter, how would Virren react to the news? He'd been so focused on getting here, getting Virren's help. Now that he was here, he almost didn't want Virren to see him like this. But he had no choice. He needed help, he needed Virren. He couldn't find Haven alone, and he didn't want to just run the frontier alone. He wanted to help, he wanted to join the Masked.

Bragga led him into the foundry, where apprentices and Old Gray were preparing the forge for a day's work, as Virren supervised, showing some kind of plan or schematic to one of his senior apprentices. "Virren," Bragga called. "A messenger."

Virren came up to them. He was a burly man, with gray hair and had been just a touch shorter than him as a human, but was now a good three fingers shorter because of his changed legs. "Well? What message do you bring, Arcan?" he asked bluntly.

"You want to take this message in your office, Virren," Bragga told him steadily.

Kyven looked down at him with uncertain eyes, not wanting to meet his gaze, then he looked down meekly, the way an Arcan would act to a human. Virren gave him a steady look, then nodded and walked towards the door. Bragga and Kyven followed him, down a hallway and into Virren's office. It was a large place, with a desk and shelves on both sides, holding quite a few books that had to be Virren's personal alchemical manuals. "Alright, what's so important that it has to be here?" he asked, looking at Bragga rather than Kyven.

Bragga looked down at him. He sighed and dropped the blanket, his tail drooping. "Virren," he said.

Virren gasped so hard that Kyven thought he may have inhaled his own teeth. He staggered back, putting an arm up, his eyes boggling at him. "Kyven?" he asked. "Kyven, is that you?"

"Yres," he sighed, looking at the burly man. "It's mre, Virren."

Virren gaped at him, then rushed up and put his hands on Kyven's shoulders. "What the hell happened? What did *this* to you?" Kyven glanced at Bragga and shook his head, which made the alchemist pat him on the shoulder. "It's alright, Kyven. Bragga is a *friend*."

Kyven glanced at the big brute of a man, then nodded. "I was betrayed," he said. "My totem did this to mre."

"He's a *Shaman*?" Bragga gasped.

"A human Shaman," Virren said. "Or he *was*," he noted. "What happened?"

"A long story. This is... punishment from mry totem," he said, motioning at himself. "Mry totem punished mre and betrayed me. She stripped mre of mry powerrs. I'm just an Arrcan now, and an Arrcan on the run. I need herlp, Virren. I escaped from the blue ring of Aramarr," he said. "I need to get out of hruman rrands. Can you carr--calrl the Masked to take mre someprace safe?"

"The *blue ring*? You escaped from the blue ring without using magic? *How*?" Virren gasped.

"They think Arrcans arre stupid," he said simply. "Virren, I don't have mruch time. If I'm rright, the firrst hunterrs from the blue rring wirl be here by tomorrow night," he said. "I told the other Arrcans at the blue rring I was from Atan, and they wirl comre herre rooking forr me. I know they won't ret me go. I'm too *valruabre*. I had to run here from Aramarr almrost nonstop to beat them herre, the smartt ones wirl come by ship."

"You outran ships from Alamar? Holy Trinity, Kyven!" Virren said in surprise.

"Rristen, I'm *rrearly* hungrry, Virren. Can you give mre some food?"

"Sure, sure! Bragga, could you bring something from the kitchen?"

"Lrots of it, Brragga," Kyven told him. "And it doesn't have to be cooked if it's mreat."

After the big man left, Kyven endured an awkward moment as Virren grabbed him under his muzzle and turned his head to and fro, peering at him. "Amazing. Just amazing! How did this happen, Kyv?"

"It's not a happy mremrrorry, Virren," he said, pulling his muzzle away from the man's large, strong hand, then taking a step back. "I've had a verry harrd time of it since I reft here."

"I can imagine, if you ended up in the blue ring. When did this happen to you?"

"I don't know rrealry. Weeks, mraybe. Can yrou herlp mre, Virren?"

"I can, but not right now. I can't make contact until this afternoon or it'll draw attention, and we don't do that, sure as hell not with Loreguard in the village. They're going to complicate things."

"Whrat arre they doing herre?"

"Looking for you," he said simply.

"Huh? Mre? Why mre?"

"They're investigating some unique alchemical device they say you have. The *human* you," he said quickly. "The Loreguard doesn't like alchemical devices out there they don't know about, so they've been grilling the village alchemists. I already had my interview with them," he said with a shiver. "Nervous business. They never fail to give me the creeps."

"I can imragine."

"I have to ask, Kyv, I hope you understand. What *are* you? I've never seen that coloration before."

"A fox," he answered. "A *shadow* fox. Mry totem changed mre into herr own kind. It's been... usefurl, at least."

"Well, tell me what happened after you left," Virren said, going around his desk and sitting down. Kyven sat awkwardly in one of the chairs facing his desk, and complied.

He went over some of what happened, from his training with the wolf, then his runs through Avannar, Riyan, and Stinger Bay and his activities on the ship. Virren stopped him about there. "Well, we heard about that," he said. "Seems your Arcans were sunk, Kyv. A Stinger Bay battleship went out and sunk them. I'm sorry."

"Wrell, I figurred that wrould happen," he sighed. "But it wras theirr choice. They wrent down their own wray, and forr and Arrcan, that's not a bad thing."

He went on, telling him about delivering the cat Shaman, then being sent to Cheston. "That's wherre she attacked mre," he said. "Changed me into *this*, took away my powerrs. Whren I

wroke up, I was in a hunter's cage. And things went from bad to worse." He shuddered when he told Virren about the Ledwell plantation, where he was almost starved to death by the sadistic Arthur Ledwell, and then what happened afterwards. "I saved that bitch's life, and she *sells* me," he growled. Bragga returned with a large platter of food and set it on the desk, which Kyven attacked like a starving animal. It was laden with raw mutton chops, and he was not shy at all about eating it so fast he almost didn't taste it. "After that," he said between bites, "I was sent to the blue ring. I escaped two days after I got there, seven days ago, and ran nonstop to get here before the first hunters arrive."

"You ran to here from Alamar in *seven days*?" Virren gasped.

"I'm a lot tougher like this, Virren," Kyven said simply. "Besides, I had lots of motivation to get here first. I could lay down right here on the floor and sleep for two days, but I beat them."

"So you did," Virren chuckled, then he sighed. "Kyv, I hate to be the bearer of even more bad tidings, but I'm afraid that Holm has passed on," he said.

"Bragga told me," Kyven sighed. "I need to talk to Timbre—Timble—Tim, Virren, but he can't see me like this."

"Actually, I think it would be best if he did," Virren said. "Timble's got some sympathies for Arcans, Kyv, I was actually considering approaching him about joining the Masked. I think he needs to see you. It will make him understand the situation completely, and you know he'd keep it to himself."

"I won't mind seeing him," Kyven sighed. "But I think he'll mind seeing me."

"I think you'll be surprised. Did anyone see you come into the village?"

"I don't think so," he answered. "I didn't pass anyone, because of the rain."

"Good. If those hunters are coming after you, then you can't be seen, Kyven. The village can't know that you're here. I'm afraid you'll have to stay in the shop."

"I know," he nodded. "I was going to hide out in the old abandoned mines. I'd, uh, rather stay out there, Virren. I don't like the idea of being trapped in here."

"Well, I don't like the idea of that, but it's your choice," he said. "You can wait until after we see Timble then go out."

Kyven finished the meat on the table, then sighed and leaned back. "Thank you," he said sincerely. "I didn't hunt yesterday to save time getting here."

There was a commotion out in the hall leading to Virren's office. The alchemist stood up, as did Kyven, as an apprentice seemed to be protesting loudly. Kyven backed up a step, away from the chair, then flinched when the door banged open loudly. Striding through the door was someone he *knew*! It was that Loreguard captain, the one that had interviewed him in Riyan! She was just as lovely as he remembered, sleek and shapely, long blond hair held back from her face by two tiny braids at her temples, wearing a chain hauberk under her Loreguard surcoat, with black leather trousers and black knee boots. Those mahogany-handled pistols were at her belt, as well as a holstered rod at each hip, a woman armed to the teeth. He gaped at her for a moment, amazed to see her, then he remembered just where he was, who she was, and *what* he was. He dropped to his haunches quickly and looked at the floor, presenting a meek and unassuming figure that hopefully would be beneath her notice.

Trinity, was she beautiful! He recalled that peek he took of her and was surprised to find that it still stirred him in ways no Arcan except Silver could.

"Well, it's about time I catch you at home, master Virren," the woman said. "I've only sent you *three* invitations to come talk to me."

"I've been a bit busy, Captain Pannen," he said simply. "But, you have me now, so what did you want?"

"A list of your alchemical books, journals, and periodicals," she said. "Oh, and a list of your successful research discoveries. I've been told you're quite the tinkerer, Master Bandar. The other alchemists say you do quite a bit of independent research. I'd like to see what you've come up with."

"Certainly, Captain. Would you mind receiving it this afternoon? That will take a while to compile."

"That's fine with me, Master Bandar," she said, glancing at Kyven. "My, what an *unusual* Arcan," she noted.

"One of mine," he said calmly. "I just got him yesterday evening."

"Even more unusual than he's wet. And he doesn't have a collar."

"I sent him out on an errand, Captain, and I have to put a new crystal in his collar, the old one was sitting on the shelf too long and my apprentice didn't notice it when he picked it out. That's why he's sitting in my office with my man watching him, while my apprentices take care of it."

"Indeed," she noted, turning towards him. "Stand up, Arcan," she commanded. He did so, rising up on his legs, his tail swishing behind him. He kept his head down and wouldn't look at her, keeping his eyes on her black boots, noticing that there were drops of water clinging to them. She walked around him, completely around him, then quite boldly grabbed the tail of his shirt and pulled it up to look at his belly. "Amazing coloration. I've never seen it before. He's a fox?"

"Yes, Captain, he is."

"A mutated gray, I'd wager," she noted, grabbing his hand and turning it palm up. "And quite soaked to the skin."

"Yes, well, he was outside for a long time."

"Long enough to need a pack," she noted, looking at the pack he'd set in the corner.

"His task was to retrieve it from the mining camp, and he had to get there before they left for the mines. I dare say they made him wait in the rain."

"Indeed," she murmured, putting her hands on his stomach and running her fingers through his wet fur. Trinity, her fingers were gentle! He had to keep his thoughts under control as she dug her fingers into the white fur on his belly. "His fur is like nothing I've ever felt," she noted. "It's incredibly soft."

"I can rent him out to you for you to play with, if you like, Captain," Virren said calmly, but there was a hidden little catch in his voice that spoke volumes of innuendo, no doubt intended to insult her.

She gave him a flash of irritation and let go of Kyven almost hastily, no doubt reading his subtle suggestion for what it was. "Does he have a name?"

Kyven gave Virren a wild, fearful look and shook his head while her back was turned to him, almost desperately warning him not to answer that question.

"I haven't given him one yet," he answered absently.

"Indeed," she noted absently. "I'd like that report by noon, Master Bandar," she told him, turning and giving Kyven a very penetrating look, catching him with his head up and staring him in the eyes. Her blue eyes narrowed slightly as she looked at him, then she swept from the room as quickly as she stormed in, not bothering to close the door behind her.

Virren moved calmly after the apprentice ushered the Loreguard officer out of sight down the hall. He pressed a button on a little wooden box on his desk. "Bring a collar to my office," he said into the box, then let go of it as Bragga closed the door. Trinity, but that was fast thinking and smooth talking! Virren was a champion liar! "I'm afraid you're stuck here now," he told Kyven quietly. "She's seen you, you have to maintain the illusion until you go,

when you *escape*."

He grunted and nodded. Virren was right. The woman had taken notice of him, he couldn't just vanish from Virren's shop now.

He didn't like the way she looked at him. It was... strange. Searching. It was not the look a human would give to an Arcan. She didn't buy Virren's story, he realized. She didn't buy it, she thought he was something other than what Virren made of him. He was sure of it.

An apprentice scurried in carrying a simple gray collar, handed it to Virren, then left without looking at Kyven. Virren deftly pulled the crystal from it, then handed it to Kyven once the door was closed. "Just for the sake of appearances," he reminded him.

"I know, but I don't have to like it."

"Come on, let's get you someplace to get some sleep. We'll talk to Timble after you get some rest."

"Thanks."

Virren didn't have a spare room for him to stay in by himself, so offered him a pallet in the small storeroom. Old Gray and the brown canine brought it in for him, the old coyote carrying his end with one arm, the other in a cast and sling, and both of them gave him a curious look. He put his hand on Old Gray's shoulder and nodded calmly, then accepted a brief nuzzle from the bristly-furred canine.

"You seem to have learned a few things," Virren noted as he came up to the door.

"You sit in a cage with Arcans and you'll learn how to fit in quickly," he said as he pulled his shirt off. "Arcans who sit alone attract attention, and that's the last thing you ever want to do."

"Still, it's easy to see in you, Kyv. You're very *comfortable* like that."

He looked at his furry hand. "I guess I am," he shrugged. "I've *been* an Arcan, Virren. It can't help but make you comfortable in some ways."

Virren shook his head slightly while giving him a warning look. It must not be safe to talk freely out here, he probably had a few apprentices he didn't entirely trust. He nodded and padded into the storeroom, then bent down to take off his breeches, then yawned, showing off his impressive teeth. Virren leaned against the door, giving him an amused look. "You really do have exotic fur," he noted. "And you're sure not afraid to show it off."

"You have no idea," Kyven growled. "And the fur makes me feel like I'm already wearing clothes."

"I can imagine. Go ahead and get some sleep, man. I'll call Timble over when you wake up."

"Thanks, Virren. For everything."

He padded over to the pallet and collapsed heavily onto it as Virren closed the door and left him to himself, not even bothering to try to dry off. He was very tired, and for the first time in a long time, he felt *safe*.

It was a glorious feeling.

He closed his eyes with a contented sigh, for he had achieved his first little victory. He made it to Atan *first*. With luck, Virren would get him out of here before the hunters arrived, and the only one that knew he was here was that Loreguard captain, who would hopefully leave before the hunters got here, she heard who they were coming for, and pieced it together.

That might cause Virren some trouble, he realized. The hunters would find out Virren had seen him, and Virren would have to explain a few things. But, Kyven recalled that Virren never said to the captain that he *bought* him, he said that he *got* him. He could claim to capture him, hold him for a couple of days, then lose him when he slipped his collar and escaped.

And if Kyven could escape from the famous blue ring, they'd believe he was capable of es-

caping from a village alchemist.

He awoke early that afternoon. His fur on his side and stomach was still a little musty where he was laying on it, but the rest of him was dry. He yawned and sat on his haunches on the pallet and attended to his matted fur, combing it out with his fingers to clear the mats and restore it to its glossy glory, then stretched languidly. He picked up his pants and found them to be dry, so he put them back on, then pulled his shirt back over his head. He combed out his bushy tail to completely erase the effects of the rain, then decided it was time to go face reality.

He opened the door from all fours, then peered out into the hallway. It was empty, which urged him out of the small storeroom. He needed to talk to Virren, so he could go get Timble. He also had to do some writing. With Holm gone, he and Timble were now the owners of the shop, and that made him the senior, majority partner, since he'd been an owner first. It was *his* shop now, with Timble owning a stake in it. The rolls of the guild's records would reflect that, and since he was the owner, that meant that Timble could do no business with the guild in the name of the shop so long as Kyven was the owner and he wasn't declared dead. He had to give Timble that authority, which he could do with a witnessed letter to the guild granting Timble the authority to conduct business for the shop while he was gone. It was an easy problem to fix, and in a way, it was probably a good thing Kyven got back when he did. Timble could cut and sell crystals, but he couldn't do business with the guild, take apprentices, or take new contracts with other guilded artisans, like the alchemist's guild or the rope makers' guild or the miners' guild. He could only honor the contracts the shop already had and do freelance work.

An apprentice Kyven only knew by face appeared in the hallway. Kyven looked up at him from his position on all fours, then the teenager turned back towards the foundry. "Master Virren, the new Arcan's awake!" he called, then he walked past Kyven towards the big storeroom at the end of the hall. Kyven watched him go by, a little relieved. Clearly, the boy didn't give him a second thought.

"Stand up," Virren called. Kyven looked back to him, then rose up onto his legs. "Don't walk around like that, *Shadow*," he stressed, obviously giving him a new name to use while in the shop. "If you walk like an animal, people will treat you like one."

"I'm kinda used to it," he said.

"Well, break the habit while you're here," Virren told him. "It's not common practice, if you'll recall. Don't stand out."

He was right. Kyven remembered that he almost never saw Arcans walking on all fours in the village. They all walked on two feet. He nodded. "We need to see Timble."

"Let's go over to your shop," Virren told him. "I already told him I'd be coming to see him today."

Virren and Kyven went out the back door, then down to the side door to his shop. *His* shop. Trinity, that felt like a lifetime ago! He put his hand on the door. All his life, this had been his dream. His own shop, buying the shop from Holm and living his life here, in the place where he'd grown up. How distant that dream was now, even when it was literally sitting in his lap. The shop was his now. It belonged to him. He wanted to keep the shop, but only to use as a cover while he worked for the Masked. The dream of being the next master cutter of Atan... was dead. He may never sit at his bench and cut a crystal again.

But, there were other things important here. He had to give Timble the power to run the shop in the eyes of the guild, before the shop had to start digging into its reserves. The shop was actually quite rich, it could run on its cash reserves for months, maybe even years, feeding all the apprentices and paying its bills before Timble started having problems. Holm had

been the most successful cutter in the village, with natural talent that made them bring the most important crystals to him. He had parlayed that natural ability and skill into a miniature empire within the village, holding a monopoly on cutting the biggest and most valuable crystals. In a way, Kyven wanted to continue that tradition, but now he'd have to put it in the hands of Timble and let his younger friend shoulder that burden.

Kyven had a new dream now. His time as an Arcan had showed him how much they suffered, and he had to do something about it. He would take his place in the Masked, and work for the day when no more Arcans were slaughtered for their fur, or killed or beaten just because it amused their human masters.

"You okay?" Virren asked, putting his hand on Kyven's shoulder.

"Yyeah. Just letting go of an old dream, Virren. It's time to pass it to someone else."

"I'm sorry."

"I'm not. I'll be doing something much more important."

Virren gave him a long look, then knocked on the door.

Myk answered it. The young apprentice looked up at Virren, then glanced to Kyven and gave him a second look. "Master Virren," he said. "Come in. Master Timble's in the office."

Master Timble. That was almost amusing, and Kyven had to suppress a smile.

They went past the apprentice, who closed the door, and Kyven followed Virren through his old shop, his old home. He knew every nook in every wall, he could walk this place blindfolded. They went down into the main shop, the large room with many benches, then crossed it on their way to the office. Kyven had to stop when they reached his bench, the bench closest to the office door, his status as the senior apprentice when he was here. He knew every tool on that bench, a bench that was a little dusty from lack of use, but it was all there, exactly as Kyven had left it over two months ago.

Virren tapped him on the shoulder, and he sighed and left his bench behind, going into the office.

Timble was sitting behind Holm's desk, looking a little harried. Holm's ledger was open before him, and he had pieces of paper strewn all about it, as he worked to keep the accounts. Numbers had never been Timble's strong suit. He looked up when Virren opened the door, then looked back and scrawled in the ledger with his pen as the two of them came in. "Virren, hold on a second. I just figured this out, I don't want to forget it before I get it down." Kyven looked around and saw that Timble hadn't changed anything in Holm's office, it was exactly as he remembered... except for the posts trophy sitting prominently on a new table under the window. He finished writing in the ledger and then closed it, blowing out his breath. "Now, what did you want to see me about?"

Kyven closed the door at a nod from Virren, then he stepped forward to stand directly in front of the desk. "What's about to be said can't leave this office, Tim," Virren warned. "Go ahead."

Kyven looked him right in the eyes, eyes that seemed to widen. Before he could even say a word, Timble stood up violently and gasped. "*Kyven*? Holy *fuck*, is that you Kyv?"

Kyven actually laughed. "Yres, it's mre," he said. "How did you know?"

"I know those eyes, Kyv, I know those eyes! What happened? What did this to you? Is it some kind of new disease? Holy Trinity, what could change you into an Arcan?"

"It's a long story," he said. "But as you can see, you can't tell anyone."

"I say not!" he said, then he laughed and came around the desk, and actually hugged him. "I'm just so glad you're not dead! I've been worried ever since we got the message you were trying sailing!" He put his hands on Kyven's shoulders and sighed. "I'm sure they told you, but Holm passed away last week, Kyv."

He nodded. "You're stuck in the lurch?"

He nodded in agreement. "You're the listed shop master. The guild won't let me do business with them."

"We'll fix that while I'm here," he said. "I'll write a letter to them. We'll use a truth pen, they can't deny that."

A truth pen was an alchemical device that was used in guild business, and most official business. The truth pen could not be used to write a lie, and it bonded the truth to the paper itself. By writing his letters with a truth pen, and having them witnessed by a second who signed with the truth pen, the guild would know that the letters were genuine and they were Kyven's genuine intent. So long as he carefully worded how the letter was written, he could skirt the circumstances and simply authorize Timble to conduct business in the name of the shop.

"What happened to you, Kyv? What did this to you? What *could* do this to you?" he asked.

"The circumstances were, *unique*," he said hedgingly. "It won't happen to anyone else," he said, finally pronouncing an *L* sound properly. "But I'm not safe anymore. I'm on the run, Timbr-Timble. I escaped from the br-blue ring in Alamar. They were self-selling mre for my *furr*."

"You escaped from the blue ring of Alamar?" he gasped. "How?"

"They think Arcans are stupid," he said bluntly.

"Well, we can find a way to make this work, Kyv. I can pretend to buy you, you can stay in the shop and run it in the background. We won't abandon you, my friend, despite what happened to you. You're still Kyven."

"That means a lot to me, Tim," Kyven said gratefully, patting the smaller young man on the shoulder. "But this isn't my place anymore."

"What do you mean?"

"I was—I *am* an Arcan," he said, rising up to his full height, not ashamed to say it. "I've tasted what we do to the Arcans, and I could—couldn't live with myself if I came back here and did nothing about it. I'm going to go find the Masked, Tim. I'm going to find them, and join them. I know what it feels like to be tortured, Tim. I can't just come home and pretend life goes on. My eyes have been opened."

"Why don't you tell him about the Ledwells," Virren said simply. "That will make him understand."

Without emotion, Kyven described his imprisonment on the Ledwell plantation, describing how he was very nearly starved to death right out in plain sight, taking care to describe the collar he was forced to wear, and then the death of Arthur Ledwell and the thanks he was given for saving Annette Ledwell's life. "After I saved her life, she *sold* mre," he said indignantly. "Sold mre in the br-blue ring, but I escaped before they put mre on the block."

Timble gave him a pale, shocked look. "I can't believe people are that cruel!"

"You've seen it, Tim. Remember the mouse? How those boys beat her to death in the street, for no reason other than it amused them?"

Timble nodded. "Something like that hadn't happened here in a long time, though, and the scandal of it still runs through the taverns. It's just not proper behavior."

"That's what I experienced, but from the receiving end," Kyven told him. "And I'm going to dedicate my life to trying to stop it. Won't be much time for me to cut crystals doing that," he said with a toothy grin.

"If that's what you want, Kyv, but still. This is your home. The door will *always* be open to you, no matter what you look like."

"Yrou've been a grreat frriend, Tim," he said, patting him on the shoulder.

"Been? I *am* your friend, Kyv. And I always will be."

"Virren, yrou have a trruth pen in yourr shop?" Kyven asked him. "Holm has one, but I don't know whrerre he keeps it."

"I have it," Timble told him.

"Good then. Get it, let's take carre of the shop."

"You have to tell me what happened to you, Kyv," he said as he went to the desk and opened it. "What did that to you?"

"It's hrard to explain," he answered. "Yrou can say it was a magical attack."

"A Shaman?"

He shook his head. "Something mruch strongerr. It's not something that could happen to you, or just about anyone else, and it's not contagious. So don't worry."

"Oh, I'm not worried," he said as he came up with a gold pen. "Alright, here you go."

Kyven sat down at the desk and took care of it. He penned three letters that gave Timble complete authority to conduct business on behalf of the shop, to access the shop's funds in the bank, and gave Timble legal power to speak with Kyven's voice in legal matters for the village. Timble made sure to direct him as he wrote to make sure he didn't write away his ownership of the shop. "Tim, I mray never be back hrere again. If yrou want me to name you the shop masterr and mre the juniorr parttner, I wrill."

"That doesn't matter. This is *your* shop," he said adamantly. "Master Holm wanted you to have it, and you being like this does not change that in the slightest. I'm quite content being the junior partner, as long as I always have my place here. And besides, as long as you're the shop owner, that gives you at least *some* kind of legal foothold if it becomes public knowledge that this happened to you. They can't just collar you and ship you to the kennel, since you *own* this shop. You're a land-owning citizen! You've got a seat on the village council now, for the Father's sake!"

"Tim has a good point," Virren said calmly. "Your status as the shop master *does* give you a legal foothold if what happened to you becomes public knowledge."

Kyven looked at the two of them, then nodded calmly. "Thranks," he said sincerely to Timble. "Now I know whro my *rreal* friiends arre."

"We grew up together, Kyv, you've been like my big brother most of my life. What kind of brother would I be if I turned my back on you now, when you need me the most?"

"You're a good man, Tim. I'm honored to know you," Virren told him.

After Timble and Virren witnessed the letters, he was done. "Go ahead and get those out to the guild, bank, and courthouse, Tim," Kyven told him. "I'm staying writh Virren for rright now. Once I'm surre things arre gonna be okay, I'll be r-leaving."

"Where are you going?" Timble asked.

"I don't know, rreally. I want to help, and I don't think I can do that hrerre. I'll go whrerre I can do the most good."

"You can't tell the apprentices about any of this, Tim," Virren warned Timble. "If they ask, tell them Kyven got word of Holm's death through the guild and sent the letters in response."

"Yeah, I can understand that," Timble nodded, taking the letters. "I'll go get these into the hands that need them, Kyv. Can I come over a while? We gotta talk."

Kyven laughed. "I'd love that, Tim," he said. "I haven't talked to somreone hruman that didn't look at mre as a possession forr weeks."

"Come over after you get everything all settled," Virren told him. "I have an appointment with a customer in a little bit, so I won't be there. I'll leave word with Bragga, Tim. Oh, and Bragga knows about Kyven, just so you know. But no one else does. Just me, you, and

Bragga."

"Hre had to, hre answered the door," Kyven chuckled.

"And your voice is the same, just like your eyes," Timble nodded.

"Hre looked about to faint whren he hearrd me say his name. But that's not even a candle to whrat Virren did," he noted, looking to the alchemist.

Virren laughed. "It scared about two years off of my life."

Kyven and Virren went back to his shop, and Kyven was left more or less alone. He padded around the shop for a while, ignoring the apprentices until they told him to do something, which he did to maintain the illusion that he was Virren's newest Arcan. They weren't rough with him or mean to him, but they very much saw him as something inferior to them. There was no one for him to talk to, really, nothing for him to do, so he sought out the other Arcans. They were standing in the forge, Old Gray sweeping the floor with one arm as the brown canine scooped the last of the ashes out of the cooling forge. Kyven picked up an empty ash can and held it for the brown canine, who nodded to him and filled it. Kyven sneezed from the drifting ash in the air, but didn't let that detract him from helping the Arcans finish their task. Though not a word was said among them, he felt much more comfortable with them than he did with the humans. The old coyote and the canine accepted him, and that made it a much more pleasant room than standing near the humans and being looked at like a servant... or a possession. The three of them carried ashes out to the bin out in the alley, which would be taken by a farmer who had a deal with Virren to use the ash for fertilizer, then the two of them returned to a small room that had their pallets in it, clearly done for the day. The canine took Kyven's hand in invitation, and he nodded and went in with them. Inside, Old Gray and the canine nuzzled him in friendship, and they accepted him into their group. Old Gray was the clear dominant between the two, by both age and seniority within the shop, but the younger canine was quite amenable to his leadership. Both of them not only could speak, but were quite articulate. "Virren said you were to be called Shadow," the canine told him. "They call me Steady, and he's Old Gray. Welcome."

"I know those eyes," Old Gray said, the first time Kyven had ever heard the old coyote speak. He was a little surprised to hear it. "What happened to you out there to make you one of us?"

Kyven was genuinely startled, then chuckled. "It's a verry long storry."

Old Gray tutted. "I think a few lessons are in order here," he said, pulling Kyven to the pallet and sitting on his haunches, urging Kyven to do the same. "Our muzzles are about the same length, let me help you speak right. I have some experience."

"I'll bow to it," he said immediately.

And so he received speaking lessons. The coyote and canine helped him work through his speech issues, teaching him the tricks of his muzzle to form those pesky *M* sounds, and how to speak without drawing out his *R* sounds. "It's all about the back of your mouth," Old Gray told him. "You're holding your jaw too forward. You need to pull it back in a little bit, try to get your lower teeth behind your upper teeth before you make those sounds."

"I'm affraid I'll bbreak my teeth if I do that."

"You won't. Just try it."

It took a while. It wasn't easy, to the point where Old Gray held his lower jaw when he tried speak, but he finally started making the right sounds. He practiced with them for a while, well after sunset, getting progressively better and better in managing articulate speech. It made his jaw a little sore, but at least he sounded proper.

Virren opened the door and looked in, then closed it quickly. "We have to serious problems," he said urgently.

"What's the matter?" Kyven asked.

Virren gave him a slightly surprised look, then shook his head. "That Loreguard captain has been asking way too many questions about you. As in *you*," he said. "She just spent over two hours interrogating me. Right about the time she finished, a stranger came into town, a man with a blond ponytail, and carrying a mana whip. He's asking people if they've seen you."

Kyven gasped. *Toby!* And a full day earlier than he expected any pursuit!

"I think that captain thinks you're not what we tried to say you were," he said very seriously. "But with that hunter out there looking for you, we have a problem if you have to leave because she gets too nosy. Can we buy him off?"

Kyven considered that. "I, I don't know," he answered, losing some of his concentration and backsliding. "He's a prroud man, when I escaped, it was the first time he ever lost an Arrcan. I don't know how he'd rreact if you tried to bribe him to leave me be."

"He's going to find out you're here as soon as he talks to the Loreguard, since that captain has such an interest in you," he said, scratching his cheek. "But, this might turn out in our favor. What she learns from Toby mixes well with the lies we've told her, it might convince her that you just came home after being sold, that you have some kind of loyalty to this place."

"What do you think she's doing?"

"I don't know, but she clearly believes you're not who we say you are. And since she's Loreguard, she'll probably take a very heavy-handed approach to finding out the truth. With her on the prowl, I'd prefer to let you *escape*, but that hunter complicates matters. He looks like a man you do not want to cross."

"He's not," Kyven growled, standing up. "I saw him fight once, he's verry nasty. How did he get here so fast?"

"I'm not sure, but it sounds like you were quite correct in your assessment of how they'd react," Virren noted. "But either way, right now we have a little problem."

Kyven immediately began taking off his shirt.

"What are you doing?" Virren asked.

"We need to find out what they're doing," he said calmly. "Where is the Loreguard staying? Where can I find them?"

"In the Crystal Chimes, but what does that have to do with you taking off your clothes?"

"I'll show you," he said as he untied the laces of his breeches, unbuttoned the backstrap for his tail, then pulled them off. He opened the door so it blocked the light of the lamp overhead, then got behind it. "Watch," he said as he retreated into the shadow, and then felt the coolness wash over him.

"Holy Trinity!" Virren gasped. "Kyv? Are you still there?"

"I'm here," he said in a low voice. "This is how I escaped from the blue ring. So long as I stay out of direct light, I can blend into the shadows."

"That's amazing!"

"Point me to the Lorreguard, and I'll find out what they know and why they're interested in me. As long as I stay like this, I'm not afraid of either them or Toby. They'll never see me."

"As soon as you take off that collar," Virren chuckled. "I can see it, just not the rest of you."

"That's whry I have to take off my clothes," Kyven chuckled, reaching up and taking the collar off. "Go turrrn off the lamps to the back door, and come back when it's clearr."

"Wait here," he said as Kyven came out from behind the door, and Virren closed it. Kyven looked to the two Arcans and nodded to them as they gaped at him. "It's a trick, the only one I have left," he told them simply.

"Shaman," Old Gray said with tremendous respect. "Would you give us your blessing?"

"I'm not a Shaman anymore," he told them. "That trick is not Shaman magic, it's just some-

thing I can do. I've been stripped of my powers."

"You never *stop* being Shaman," Steady told him as he came up to Kyven and took his hand in both of his own. "Would you bless us?"

"I don't know how," he said, a little helplessly. He wasn't used to this kind of attention. The Arcans in the cage in Cheston had treated him with deference, but not with reverence, and they accepted his request not to call him that. The only one that had made a deal out of him had been Silver, but didn't act like *this*.

"Just bless us," Steady said simply, bowing his head before him.

He didn't know what to do, so he just put his hand on Steady's shoulder. "May the spirits bless you," he said, which almost made the canine shiver in delight. If it made Steady and Old Gray happy, he'd tell them whatever they wanted to hear. It wasn't about him, after all, it was about them. He put his other hand on Old Gray's shoulder. "May the spirits bless you," he repeated.

The two Arcans stepped up and nuzzled him, one to each side of his face. Virren opened the door, and Kyven pushed them out to arm's length and looked at him. "Time for me to go to work. Be safe, you two. Take care of them, Virren," he said as he dropped down to all fours.

"May the spirits guide you," Steady said in a low, reverent voice, literally bowing before him.

"I hope not," he grunted as he slipped out the door and into the shadows of the hallway, then vanished into the shadows and was invisible to the eye.

This was *his* village. He knew every street, every building, knew where every lamp was, even know which cobblestones on the streets were uneven. He moved through Atan with confidence and absolute stealth, an invisible ghost, slipping by miners and villagers with quiet confidence on the streets as he moved down Gem Street, towards the Crystal Chimes. He knew that inn, he knew that there was a back door in the kitchen, but he *also* knew that there was a window high in the common room over the stage, a window that was commonly kept open in the summer to generate a breeze in the room and keep it cool. That was his way in, that window, where he could get up into the beams over the common room, up into the high ceiling and stay out of sight.

This was the Loreguard he was dealing with, and he knew they'd know if he was using spirit sight, but he didn't know if they'd be able to detect this little trick of his. That was the only uncertainty, one that he'd just have to risk. If they could detect the ability, he wanted to know *now*, not when he was hiding from a pack of Loreguard in some dark cave where he had no way out.

He reached the window, glanced up and down the street, then bunched down and leaped. His claws snagged the windowsill, and he had no problem pulling himself up to where he could look in. There was a lutist on the stage, sitting on a stool playing below him, and the common room had quite a few people in it. Many of them were apprentices and artisan cutters, but his quarry was sitting around a table near the fireplace on the opposite wall, that sexy captain and a few of her men. The captain had a bunch of papers strewn out on the table before her.

It was a simple matter to clamber up to the window, get a foot on the sill, then jump silently from the window to the beam. He jumped quickly and silently from beam to beam, unseen by those below, until he was on the beam directly over their table. He was in the direct line of a lamp hanging from the ceiling, disrupting his shadowy cloak, but he was also high up and on a wide beam, very hard to see from the floor below from any angle. It was dusty up on top of the beam, so he had to be very careful not to move or he'd send a cascade of dust down onto the Loreguard, so he kept his tail high and very carefully lowered himself directly down onto

the beam, laying on it without shifting around, then put his chin on his paws and listened to them.

"There isn't much information about him around this place," a male voice said. "Seems he kept to himself and was very quiet and withdrawn. About the only thing most folks have to say about him was that he was quiet but friendly if you talked to him, didn't seem to want to make friends, and he was the best cutter in the village."

"He bought out his contract prospecting," another voice said. "Scuttlebutt is he found a *white* crystal while prospecting, and used it to buy out his contract and buy into the shop where he was apprenticed. With the shop master dead, it makes him the owner now, but he's not here."

"Oh, he's here, alright," the woman said adamantly. "You're sure they have records of him dating back to his apprenticeship?"

"The crystalcutter's guild did," came a third voice. "He's been on the rolls for ten years as an apprentice, then he was promoted to artisan about three months ago, after his lucky find. From what we've pieced together, he left almost the day after that, to go experience the outside world before coming back to take his place in the shop, a somewhat common practice for some artisans."

"That just doesn't make sense," she growled.

"What doesn't make sense is your obsession with this man," the first male voice called. "He's just a cutter."

"You wouldn't understand," the woman said. "I'm not sure even I understand," she sighed, then there was the sound of rustling papers, like they were swept off the table. "But I know what I saw. It just doesn't make any sense!"

"Well, try to explain it to us, captain."

"You'd think I was insane if I did," she answered. "But insanity seems to be the only answer. That or I'm wrong."

"No offense, but odds are you're wrong," came an amused call. "But explain it to us."

"Alright. I think that this man is an Arcan."

"Yeah, that's crazy alright," came a laugh.

"Why do you think that?" came the second voice.

"Because those were the *same* eyes I saw," she said. "I looked right into his eyes in Riyan, and right into his eyes this morning, and those are the *same* eyes. It's just everything else that's changed. But there's no rational explanation for it. Either he's an Arcan Shaman who can change into a human, or he's a human that changed into an Arcan. Both of those are impossible."

Kyven's heart lurched in his chest. *She knew!* How? How did she know?

"Why do you think that, when it's impossible? People in this village watched him grow up! He couldn't possibly be a Shaman. Too many people know him. There *is* a Kyven Steelhammer."

"Ah know there is. Ah'm here tah catch him," came a new voice. The voice of Toby Fisher.

Kyven had to dig his claws into the beam to resist the urge to bolt. The voice came from right under him!

"And who might you be, hunter?" the woman asked.

"Toby Fisher, ma'am," he said cordially. "Ah'm a consignah. Ah'm here to catch him an' take him back to Alamar."

"Excuse me? Alamar?" she asked. "Whatever for?"

"He escaped from the blue ring, ma'am," he answered.

"Really?" she asked curiously. "And this Arcan's name is Kyven?"

"Ayah, ma'am," he answered. "He's a mutated gray fox Arcan. Black fur with white tips and ruff."

"Well, the Kyven we're investigating is a *human*, hunter, a shop owner here in the village."

"Then they can't be the same person," Toby said simply. "Odds are, my Arcan took his name from the man. He tol' the other Arcans in the blue ring he was owned by a cutter in Atan. Ah came heah to track him down. Atan is the only clue we got on him."

"There *is* such an Arcan here, hunter, but he's owned by an alchemist," the woman told him.

"He was collared. I can only guess that your Arcan is loyal to his master and came home."

"Ayah, that's not what Ah wanted to heah," Toby said in a grim tone. "The Arcan's owned by Annette Ledwell, bought legal from the kennel in Cheston."

"Then he was probably stolen from here in the first place. If he was in the blue ring, he clearly must be valuable," the woman told him calmly. "Some merchant must have seen him in the street and stolen him."

"If that's so, then why ain't nobody in this town ever heard o' him?" Toby asked. "Ah've asked all 'round town, and nobody ain't never even seen the Arcan befo'. Every time Ah say that name, they all tell me that's a cutter that works in the biggest cuttin' shop in the village. When Ah give a description, ain't nobody never seen him befo'."

"His master might have kept him out of sight, if he *is* that valuable," a male voice speculated.

"Ya say he's a collared Arcan? Which alchemist owns him, ma'am?"

"Uh, hold on. Verrin Bandar, owns an alchemist's shop up the same street this inn's on. Hmm. He told me he bought him *just yesterday* when I talked to him this morning. And he *wasn't* collared when I saw him. He was soaking wet." There was a brief silence. "You say he escaped from Alamar? When?"

"Seven days ago, ma'am."

"Well, if he's in shape, he *could* have run from there to here in seven days. Arcans are capable of that kind of extended activity." There was the sound of snapping fingers. "I bet he'd *just* got here when I saw him! And that alchemist lied to me," she grunted.

"He must have come back to his master," one of the male voices called. "A loyal Arcan."

"That Arcan is the property o' Annette Ledwell, and Ah'm heah tah take him back tah Alamar," Toby asserted. "Ah have ownership papahs to prove it."

"If he's the collared Arcan of a citizen here, hunter, you're going to have an uphill battle trying to get him back," the woman said. "They don't recognize ownership papers in a place like this, and the town council and the mayor *are* the law here. They won't recognize any claim you make on him. The laws of Cheston and Alamar do not reach into the Free Territories."

"One way o' the othah, that Arcan is comin' back with me," he said bluntly. "It's mah job tah take him back."

"You'd better watch your step here, hunter," the woman said. "This isn't Alamar. If you run afoul of the locals, they'll run you out of town, or maybe even arrest you. And those papers won't save you from a stint in the Black Keep if you break the laws of this village, which *we* must uphold as a matter of oath. That's your fair warning."

"Ah'll do everything in mah powah to do things nicely. But Ah also ain't leavin' Atan without him."

"Then you might want to look into buying a house," a male chuckled, which produced a few laughs.

"Be that as it may, Ah'll go talk to that alchemist," Toby said.

"His shop is closed, hunter. They all close early here."

"Then Ah'll wait til mo'nin'," he said simply. "Ma'am. Sirs. Good evenin' to ya."

"Why do I get the feeling that we'll be taking that fellow back to Avannar in chains when we leave?" one of the male voices asked after a moment of silence.

"Well, he brought another clue to the puzzle, which just makes it murkier," the woman grunted. "If that Arcan ran all the way to here from Alamar in seven days... wow. He must be both in great shape and very smart, to evade detection and navigate all that unknown territory in such a fast time. Smart enough to *talk*, I'd wager."

Kyven did not like where this was going. He may be an Arcan now, but his voice sounded the same. If she got him to speak, she might recognize him, and then he'd be dragged to Avannar for sure, for the Loremasters to interrogate him as to how he went from a human to an Arcan.

Alright, this just got really, really messy. He couldn't stay because of Toby and the Loreguard, they both wanted him, each in their own way. Him remaining was going to cause chaos on the village and cause Verrin all kinds of problems. But, on the other hand, if he left, then he'd have both Toby and that Loreguard woman on his tail, and Verrin would still be in trouble with the Loreguard, since the woman had seen him and knew that Verrin had him. It would look very suspicious if he ran all the way up from Alamar to get here, then vanished again so quickly.

Or would it? Actually, Toby's presence in the village gave him all the justification he needed to vanish. In fact, it gave him the *perfect* excuse to leave, fleeing from the hunter that had chased him all the way from Alamar. Toby would give Kyven a reason to run, which would conveniently allow him to go on to Arcan territory without causing Verrin any excessive problems trying to explain to that woman why the Arcan she saw disappeared. In one fell swoop, he could remove himself from the scrutiny of the Loreguard woman, protect Virren, and move on to join the Masked, all in one fell swoop.

He'd just have to make a very public spectacle out of running away from Toby Fisher.

Guile and deceit.

That was what he needed to know. He carefully got up without scattering dust, then turned on the beam and started back across. He quickly made his way to the beam by the window, then jumped over to the sill and quickly slid through the window and dropped to the ground. The instant he was out the window, he felt the coolness wash through his fur, and he shook the dust out of his fur as soon as he was on the ground and bounded quickly back for the shop. He saw Toby ahead of him, then slowed down to creep along behind him. The man couldn't see him, didn't know he was there. He could have killed him right then and there, just pounce on him from behind and snapped his neck with his jaws, but no. He needed Toby alive right now, to perpetrate his deception. It might cause him problems later, but there was more than just himself to consider in this. He had to protect Virren, he had to protect Virren's unnamed contacts within the village, the members of the Masked that were present. He had to protect the very organization he wanted to join.

Maybe he did know. The man slowed to a stop, glancing behind himself through the corner of his eye, then turned around. Kyven froze, reflexively hunkered down with his belly close to the street, his tail straight out behind him. He must have made sound. Kyven couldn't be seen when cloaked in shadow, but he still made sound. He must have made too much sound. Toby was a very formidable man, it must have been enough sound for him to hear, and the man's trained fighting instincts warned him that he was being watched, he was being stalked. Toby looked to and fro down the street, then shook his head slightly and turned to continue on his way. Kyven stalked along behind him at a much larger distance, keeping a good fifty rods behind the man as he went past the shops, up towards the Three Boars. Kyven followed him as far as the alley, then slinked into it and then broke into a run as soon as he was out of

sight. He reached the door to Virren's shop in a quick second, then knocked lightly on it as he kept his eyes on the alleyway, making sure Toby didn't double back and look down the alleyway. The door's latch opened, and Kyven pushed the door open with his foot and backed into the doorway, then closed it and looked back. Steady was there, standing in the hallway. Kyven thumped Steady's leg with his tail. "It's me, I'm inside," he whispered.

Steady nodded in the darkness and locked the door, then made his way back to the room he shared with Old Gray. Kyven followed them in, and found his clothes folded neatly with the collar atop them. He dressed by the light of a lamp at its lowest setting, creating a murky gloom, then instead of going back to his pallet in the storeroom, he instead padded through the shop to get to Virren's room and opened the door. Virren wasn't there, wasn't anywhere in the shop, he found out after opening his eyes to the spirits and looking around. He had to be out talking with the Masked, that or still out at the tavern.

Well, he could talk to Virren in the morning. He was still tired from his long journey, and didn't get much sleep. He had halfway expected Timble to come over to see him, but something must have happened. That, or Timble came over when he was out, and the others covered for him by telling him that he was sleeping. Either way, he'd find out in the morning.

Instead of sleeping in the storeroom, he picked up his pallet and carried it to the room with the other Arcans. They made room for him, making it a tight fit in the small room with all three of them, but the Arcan need to be near others was too strong. He needed to be close to them, and they understood his need. He laid down in his pallet silently, without a word, but he felt confident about things. Toby Fisher would give him the perfect excuse to leave Atan, and do it without getting Virren in trouble. Then it would just be a matter of getting away from Toby and hiding until the Masked came for him.

He was confident. In the night, in the shadows, he was imperceptible. They would never find him.

All the confidence in the world, however, had a way of blowing up in one's face when one didn't take certain *complications* into account.

He had everything nicely set up by sunrise. He'd woken Virren up before dawn and explained what he'd learned to him, told him about Toby, what Toby and the Loreguard captain had discussed, and then told him his plan. The plan was simple enough. Virren sends him out on an errand or some such, he sees Toby Fisher, then bolts. Toby would naturally chase him, and Kyven lures him up to the abandoned mines up on Saddle Ridge. Up there, with so many places to hide, Kyven could stay away from Toby forever. Virren would play his part by going to the watch and complaining that Toby is harassing his legally owned Arcan, and they come and detain the man, giving Kyven time to fully escape. Toby would be right back on his tail after being released, which gives Kyven all the reason in the world not to return to Atan, the rationale being to run from the hunter that has chased him from Alamar. Virren is cleared of any suspicion when they find his slipped collar up on the ridge, which further gives Toby reason to come into the frontier to find him, thereby removing Toby from Atan, putting him out of reach of the Loreguard captain that seemed to be interested in him, and putting him in a position where the Masked could come find him and take him out of human lands.

Virren found merit with the plan, and they refined it a little bit. For it to work, he'd have to have on a *real* collar for them to find when he slipped it, but a special one that Virren had designed that allowed Arcans to remove it, by completely surrounding the collar by the Arcan's own body. This was impossible for a human to do, but was quite easy for an Arcan with a tail to do. By pressing the palms together at the throat and covering the front and sides of the collar with the hands, he only had to press his tail up against the back of the collar. His tail was-

n't long enough to do that when he was standing, but it was more than long enough to do it when he was sitting hunched over his own feet. Virren had him practice the move several times with the collar, until he could do it quickly and efficiently. All of Virren's collars had a very liberal set of conditions built into them. The collar would allow Kyven to roam the entire Atan village area and surrounding forest freely, from the base of the ridge to the east up to Maple Ridge to the west. The collars wouldn't allow the wearer to attack humans, zapping them with a painful but safe electrical discharge that caused pain but no damage, the standard punishment that the vast majority of collars used. Virren's collars had a "self-preservation" condition built into them that prevented them from punishing the wearer with a zap so long as the Arcan was acting out of self defense... and for Kyven to run from Toby would definitely fulfill the self defense condition. It would even allow Kyven to fight back against Toby if cornered, for he would be acting out of self defense.

Not that he really knew how, but at least he'd lose fast and with some dignity instead of just standing there and having a leash snapped on him.

It felt... nerve-wracking, wearing a real collar, despite knowing he could take it off. Though Toby's collar had been quite humane, the first one he'd worn still gave him nightmares. His body still trembled at the memory of the punishment that collar dished out. He kept touching the collar nervously, making sure it didn't have the knobs on it that the Ledwell collar did, and Virren had to keep swatting his hands away from it as they debated what Kyven would do after he left Atan.

"I don't know where they are, or where they go," Virren explained, putting away his ledger in the shelf behind his desk as they talked in his office. "That keeps them safe should I ever get captured. I can't really tell you which direction to go once you're out of Atan. I don't think they could find you out there any better than Toby could, so you'll have to come back to Atan."

"That wr—wouldn't be a good idea," he said. "I don't want to stay in a small area with Toby *and* that Lr—Loreguard woman here. How about if I go to Deep River and wait there? *It has* to be at least partially on the way for them. It's out in the middle of the frontier."

"Hmm, that might work," he said after thinking a moment. "It's a good three hundred minars from here, a distance you can cover much faster than a hunter on horseback moving through virgin terrain. You should buy two or three days on him easy. Alright, that sounds like a plan. I'll tell my contact that the plan's changed and you'll wait for them in Deep River. I'd just be careful there, Kyv. That's a very rough place, and since you won't have a collar—"

"Sure I will," he said with a toothy grin. "Just give me a collar with no crystal in it. They'll just see a collar, not the fact that it's a fake. It'll work, they'll see whr—what they *expect* to see."

"Clever," Virren said with a nod and a chuckle. He turned and went to his bookshelf, then pulled out a large folded map and unfolded it. "Alright, here's Atan," he said, pointing to a mark on the map along the east side of a mountain chain. "Deep River is here. About three hundred minars west southwest. The best thing to do is go due west until you reach the river, then follow the river south until you see the town. It's on the west bank of the river, but there's a ferry at the town itself. It's a very rough place, Kyv, full of outlaws and prospectors, and there's not much in the way of law out there."

"How wr—will I know I'm at the right river?"

"Kyv, the Deep River is like a half minar wide, and in a very wide valley. Trust me, when you reach it, you'll *know*."

"Ar—Alright," he said.

"Think you can get there? You've never been that way before, and you'll be doing it alone."

"Virren, I got here from Alamar, didn't I?" he asked pointedly. "I have a compass, and Aden taught mre—me how to use it. I can get there."

"Point," Virren chuckled. "That's wild territory though, Kyv. Expect to come across wild Arcans, and perhaps even monsters."

"I can manage."

There was a knock at the door. Virren quickly folded up the map and put it away, then motioned for Kyven to open the door. He padded up and opened it, then gasped and staggered back, then quite literally turned and leaped over the desk to put Virren between him and Toby Fisher. He was being led in by Bragga, who took up a position by the door when the lean, blond man stepped into the office. He was just as Kyven remembered, tall, lean, and hawkish, a very dangerous man with his pistol and mana whip on his belt, and that evil long-bladed knife sheathed behind his back, the handle jutting out behind his right hip. Toby seemed quite aware of the fact that Bragga did not leave the room, even though he didn't look behind him. "Hello, Kyven," Toby said calmly. "Ah tol' ya what Ah'd have tah do. Nothin' personal, friend. It's just business."

"You lose this one, Toby," Kyven answered from behind the safety of Virren's chair. "I'm back where I belong."

"Quite," Virren said calmly. "This is *my* Arcan, hunter. He is wearing *my* collar."

"Ah can prove he's the legal property o' Annette Ledwell," Toby retorted.

"Yes, but your paper is worth lighting a candle here in Atan, hunter," Virren said calmly.

"The legalities of Alamar don't mean *anything* here. He is wearing my collar. I *own* him. Case closed."

"And Ah'm sho' ya can prove it?"

"This is Atan, hunter. I *don't have* to prove it. Here, I am a respected and prominent member of society. I sit on the village council, and I have the ear of the mayor himself. Any attempt you make to try to talk Kyven out of my possession is going to be met with a brick wall. I'll make sure of it."

"Be that as it may, friend, it's not what Ah came heah to heah," he said. "One way o' anothah, Ah'm takin' him back tah Alamar. It was mah job to sell him in Alamar and take the sale money back tah his rightful ownah. He ran befo' that sale was made, so Ah'm still responsible fo' him. It's mah job, and Ah'll see it through tah the end."

"I'd get a new job, hunter. You will not take him. Not today, not tomorrow, not next month, not in a hundred years. You have my answer, and I think our business is concluded, so you may kindly leave. And please, do me the courtesy of not coming back. Bragga," he said. "Escort this man out of my shop."

"Sure thing, Master Virren," he said with a nod. "Come along there, shorty. I'll make sure you find your way back where you belong, cause it sure ain't in here."

Bragga led a dark-faced Toby out of the office, and Kyven had to blow out his breath in relief. He had no idea Toby scared him that much, for him to seek safety literally behind Virren, hiding like a child! "Well now, I think he's been nicely set up," Virren said professionally, leaning back in his chair and looking over his shoulder at Kyven, then giving him a smile. "He won't be able to stop himself from coming after you now, knowing that he'll never get you out of here legally."

Kyven laughed, then leaned down and put his muzzle on Virren's neck. "Thanks," he said, nuzzling him.

"You're more than just skin deep as an Arcan, aren't you?" Virren chuckled, reaching up and scratching the fur on Kyven's neck.

"It was more than skin deep," he agreed. "And I could take lessons in skullduggery from

you, Virren."

"I've been playing this game a long time. If I wasn't good at it, I'd be dead."

"That's a good point," Kyven agreed with a murmur.

"After you escape, I'll buy him off," Virren added. "I'll pay him what he thinks you'd have sold for and send him on his way, so he won't bother you again."

"I'm not sure it'll work," Kyven noted, rising up and keeping his hands on Virren's shoulders. "He's not entirely about the money, Virren. He takes his job seriously, and he gave his word when he took the job. He might consider his honor to matter more than the money."

"Ah. One of *those*," he said with a sniff. "Well, I'll take care of it, Kyven, don't worry. If he won't take your price and leave, I'll make sure to slow him down by pressing charges against him when he goes after you. That should hold him for at least a few days and give you way too much of a head start for him to catch up."

"I'll take everything you can get for me, Virren. I'm not proud."

"We'll take care of it, my friend," he said, patting Kyven's furry hand. "And I have to say one thing."

"What?"

"That Loreguard wasn't kidding about your fur. It really is soft."

Kyven laughed, then sat on the desk with his back to Virren and pulled up his shirt. "Go ahead, get it out of your system," he offered.

Virren laughed, but he *did* reach out and explore the black fur on Kyven's middle back with his fingers, experiencing its almost luxurious thickness and softness. "Incredible," he mused, grabbing Kyven's tail. "That trick of yours has to be an aspect of this fur. I've never seen its like before."

"I think so too," he nodded. "That's why it doesn't work on my clothes."

There was a commotion out in the hallway, which made Kyven look back to Virren. "Maybe the hunter isn't taking his dismissal lightly," Virren noted as the calls of protest got louder, until they were just outside the door. It banged open, but instead of the hunter, it was the Loreguard captain. Seeing her again sent a conflicting sense of fear, curiosity, and attraction through him, but Kyven saw that she wasn't alone. Two fellow Loreguard was with her, and they were holding black rods in their hands. "You will surrender that Arcan to me, alchemist, *now*," she said in a tone of total authority.

"On what grounds?" Virren demanded.

"Well, for one, you lied about him yesterday," she said, ticking her fingers, "and he's not who you say he is. He's using the name of a missing shopkeeper, and might have had something to do with his disappearance."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Well, then let's try this one on for size, alchemist. I think he's a *Shaman*," she declared. "This Arcan was in Riyan about a month ago, under the appearance of a human being. The only possible way that could be is if he came across your human, killed him, and took his name and appearance using magic."

"Do you know how ludicrous that sounds?" Virren said in annoyance.

It didn't sound quite so ludicrous to Kyven, because he remembered their first meeting. He made her suspicious, and if she thought he was an Arcan, well, it wasn't a stretch for her to think that he was a Shaman, given she was up here to investigate *unique alchemy* attributed to him. What would be unique alchemy for a human would be Shaman magic for an Arcan.

Kyven suspected that she was probably using some way to detect lies, so he thumped Virren with his tail to silence him and stood up. It was time to dance the truth in a jig so fast it couldn't keep its feet. He wouldn't be lying, but he'd be skirting the real truth in favor of truth

that was true from his point of view.

"I'm not a Shaman," he declared humbly, keeping his eyes down. It was *technically* true, since the shadow fox was denying him his magic. At that moment, he *was not* a Shaman.

"And the man you're looking for isn't dead."

"And how would you know that?"

"He got letters from him yesterday, he was talking about it when Master Virren went to go see him and took me along. Go ask him about it," he said. "How could he be dead if he's sending letters?"

"There's something going on around here," she declared, looking at the two of them. "Something strange."

"He's not lying, Captain," one of the men behind her said. "He's telling the truth, he's not a Shaman. Are you *sure* this is the same man—Arcan—whatever you saw in Riyan?"

"Oh, I'm sure," she said adamantly, boldly coming up to him and covering his muzzle and forehead with her hands, isolating his eyes. "These are the *same* eyes. Everything else is different, but these are the same eyes."

"It has to be a coincidence, Captain," the other man said rationally. "The truth crystal doesn't lie. He's not a Shaman, it would be impossible for him to be who you think he is."

"Well, something *is* going on around here," she declared. "You're not what you appear to be, *Shadow*," she declared. "Why did you lie about him yesterday morning, alchemist? When I came to see you?"

"Because he'd only just returned from being on the run from Alamar," Virren said glibly. "I didn't want to get embroiled in any disputes over him. He came home after escaping, Captain. This is his home."

"How did you end up in Alamar, Arcan?"

"I was captured by hunters," he said quietly. "I don't know exactly what happened. I was attacked by... something, out in the forest. When I woke up, I was in a cage. Hunters must have found me while I was knocked out, and they captured me. They sold me at an auction, and the people who bought me sent me to sell in Alamar."

And it was all *technically* true.

The captain gave him a long, *penetrating* look. She then grabbed him by the collar and jerked his head down, tugging on the collar. "Take it off him," she demanded.

"Uh, certainly, but why am I doing that?"

"I want to make sure it's *real*," she stated.

"Certainly, then," he said, producing a key from his pocket. He touched it to the back of the collar, and it came off of him. Kyven backed up against the wall as Virren held it out to the woman. "Care to put it on and find out just how real it is?" he offered.

"Yes, I think I will," she said, taking it from her and snapping it around her own neck.

"You asked for it. What's your first name?"

"Danna."

"Bad Danna!" Virren barked.

The captain yelped as the collar flashed with brief light, jumping slightly and grabbing at the collar. "Okay, okay, it's real!" she gasped. "Take it off me! Take it off!"

"Well, it does look good on you," Virren said casually, glancing at her with an appraising eye, then he chuckled at her murderous glare and unlocked it, then stepped over to Kyven and put it back around his neck, locking it in place. "Does that satisfy you, Captain?"

"It doesn't satisfy me, not in the slightest," she stated. "But it's answered the questions I have *at this time*. I'll go interview the cutter about these letters. What is his name?"

"Timble. It's the shop on Gem Street, right around the corner."

"Don't go anywhere, alchemist. And he'd better be here when I come looking for him," she added, pointing at Kyven.

"I'm not planning on selling him, Captain," Virren said smoothly.

The captain stormed out with her two sycophants, and Kyven went over and closed the door. He waited a moment, then leaned against it and blew out his breath.

"Very smooth," Virren said with a smile.

"You teach well," he answered.

"I think we'd better go find that hunter today... as in right now. I don't want you here if she comes back, she might decide to really grill us until she finally catches us in a lie we can't explain away."

"Won't she keep after you once I'm gone?"

"Probably, but I can handle her so long as we don't have to make our stories match," he said simply, reaching into his drawer and pulling out a small leather pouch. "Here. Go to your room and get your compass, then take this and run this up to the mining camp. Make sure the hunter sees you, then run like hell. I'm afraid I can't get you your pack or anything, because you'll look way too suspicious if you leave with it, and you don't want to hang around here once you run."

"I'll steal something from the mining camp," he said, slurring a little. "I'll be alright."

"Alright. Good luck, my friend," he said, taking Kyven's hand firmly.

"You're a good man, Virren. Say goodbye to Timble for me."

"He'll be sorry he missed you again. He came to see you last night, but you already asleep and he didn't want to wake you."

"Well, tell him he needs better timing," Kyven chuckled as he took the pouch, patted Virren on the shoulder, then left. He retrieved his compass and tucked it under his shirt, hanging it by its cord around his neck, then crept up to the alleyway door. He peeked out, and seeing that it was clear, he took the pouch in his hand and advanced out onto Gem Street.

He didn't have to walk a single block. Virren was right; Toby was played like a lute. Kyven came out into the intersection of Gem Street and the Mine Road and saw Toby a block down on Main Street, coming back from towards the courthouse, then he turned his head and looked right at him. The realization that it was Kyven hit him immediately, and he turned towards him while his hand went for something on his belt.

Toby took the bait.

What Kyven did *not* count on was hearing a startled call from behind him. He glanced back, and saw the Loreguard captain and her two flunkies coming out of his shop! "Hey! Stop right there!" the captain called, turning towards him.

Holy *shit*, not good! Kyven dropped the pouch in honest fear and bolted, turning up the Mine Road. He immediately dropped down to all fours and took two bounding strides, but then something wrapped around his foot and yanked. He gasped as he was yanked literally to a stop, falling on his stomach on the street, and a glance back showed a whiplike tendril of pure magical energy snared around his foot, leading back to the rod Toby carried in his belt, now in his hand!

That was no mana whip Toby carried, it was something else!

He tried to kick the tendril off of his ankle with his other foot, but the instant his foot touched it, it stuck fast to it like glue. He tugged and pulled with his feet, but they were secured to the line like it bonded to him, like it was a part of him. Toby snapped the line as he advanced, sending the slack up against his legs, snaring his tail, but not sticking to his pants. It must not stick to leather, he noted clinically as he scrambled to his feet and one leg, and found that he could still move. He tried to run on two hands and one foot, but it was awk-

ward, and then line suddenly went taut again, forcing him to pull at it. He couldn't give Toby and slack, or he'd snap the tendril up against his head or arms and wrap him up.

"Hey! What you doin', you fucker?" Bragga's voice boomed down the street. Kyven looked back and saw the big man charging towards Toby angrily. Bragga didn't know the plan, and was moving to protect Kyven from the hunter. Thank the Trinity! Toby turned to look just as the three Loreguard appeared in the intersection, and Kyven took that opportunity to drive his claws into the cobblestones and push off with all his strength. The sudden jerk on Toby's hand spun him around, ripped the rod out of his hand, and the instant it came free of his grip the tendril holding Kyven evaporated like smoke.

"Stand down, both of you!" the captain screamed as Kyven scrambled back onto all fours and raced away from them. "Stop, Arcan! Bad Shadow!" she screamed as Kyven scrambled past Oak Street, charging towards the hill that went up to the mining camp.

"*BAD KYVEN!*"

Kyven yowled when the collar fired, falling to the street and rolling as the collar zapped him. He rolled to a stop and rose up on his hands, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. How did she do that? She used the collar against him! He had to get rid of it, before she used it again! He grabbed it with both hands and rolled up on his back, even putting his feet on it, then curled his tail over the back of his neck to satisfy the conditions of making the collar unlock. It did so, then he kicked it off with his feet, sending it spinning through the air as he twisted back onto his feet as she charged at him, drawing a black rod from a holster on her hip, then he took off.

But it wasn't her he took note of. Charging past her faster than any human could possibly run, Toby raced towards him on two feet, his legs a blur as he ran faster than a horse at a dead run. That had to be alchemy! He was running so fast, he could run faster than Kyven on all fours! He had his rod in his hands again, but he didn't use it, instead raced at him with blazing speed, trying to close the gap between them.

Kyven didn't bother playing or thinking. He just ran, ran as fast as he could, up the hill and into the mining camp. Toby closed the distance with every stride, but Kyven had learned through experience that great speed came at the sacrifice of turning ability. Kyven vaulted the fence at the edge of the Arcan pens and raced through the empty pens as Toby rushed up to the edge, staying outside of it. He angled away from Toby, towards the tents, then vaulted the fence at the far side as Toby slowed to make the turn to intercept him. As soon as he did that, Kyven veered right at him, startling him, staying on the left side of him so he couldn't bring that whip to bear, then literally crossed his path and ran the other way, which would force Toby to turn around. Toby reversed his turn and came around the other way, but Kyven was nowhere in sight. Toby looked back the other way and saw him on the *other side*, having reversed his turn when Toby committed to his own, and was now on his right side and behind him. The man jumped into the air, laying out, then twisted his body and lashed the whip at Kyven, who curled up himself and allowed the lash to strike him across the shoulders, against his shirt, which did not let it stick. Both Kyven and Toby rolled across the ground, but where Toby had to return to a vertical base, Kyven quickly got his feet underneath him and laid out into powerful strides, accelerating with blazing speed towards a rocky cliff face at the edge of the mining camp, dotted with the gaping black holes of old mines.

"Stop! Stop right there!" the captain shouted angrily as she and her two lackeys ran up the Mine Road with Bragga right behind them. Kyven glanced back and saw Toby again racing towards him with blazing speed, but he was too late now. Kyven turned slightly towards a huge oak tree up the progressively sharper slope up to the rock face, and then vaulted up. He impacted the trunk almost stunningly, going from a full run to stopping against it, but his

claws found purchase and he literally jumped up into the tree in leaps and bounds, climbing it faster than the Loreguard could run. Kyven saw that lash blast into the tree, trying to snag him, but the branches of the tree didn't give Toby a clear shot at him. He climbed higher and higher into the tree, thirty rods up, forty rods up, fifty rods up, as the trunk got thinner and thinner.

"He's not going anywhere, stand down, hunter!" the captain barked at him.

"He most certainly is," Toby answered, then Kyven felt the entire tree shudder violently. It began to rock, then lean, and Kyven realized that the entire tree was falling over! It fell to the side, parallel to the cliff, and forced Kyven to move quickly. He clambered out onto a small branch, barely enough to hold his weight, then bounded down it and leaped for all he was worth, exploding from the canopy. He sailed out into the empty air between the tree and the rock face, then he slammed into it jarringly. His claws scrabbled on the rock for a terrifying moment, and then found purchase as the tree below thundered to the ground and then rolled down the slope in a cacophony of snapping branches. He waited a quick second to get feeling back into his hands, then started scaling the rock face using claws and main strength.

And he almost fell when the whip wrapped around his foot.

He slipped nearly a rod as the whip snared him, reaching more than seventy rods to do so, and he looked down to see Toby with a two-handed grip on the rod, the tendril leading all the way up to Kyven's foot. "Don't be no fool now, Kyven!" Toby shouted. "Come down slow and gentle, o' Ah'll yank ya off!"

Kyven did no such thing. He drove his claws into a knob above him and pulled with all his might. The sudden move dragged the man towards the cliff face, for with Kyven being so high over him, the man could not set his feet, could only use his own weight to try to slow Kyven down... which was not as much of a deterrent as it might be if he could brace himself. Toby was trying to do the equivalent of winning a tug of war with a mule, and he was out-classed. Kyven drove his claws into the rock and pulled himself up more, then set his free foot and pulled himself higher, inexorably dragging the man up to the rock face.

"Go get the horses and the other men *now*!" the captain barked at one of her soldiers as she surged forward and grabbed Toby around the waist. "Hold him down!" she barked to her other man. "We can't let him get away!"

Kyven suddenly had the weight of two men and a woman anchored to his foot. He struggled with all his might to raise his snared foot, felt skin tear from the lash holding him, causing blood to ooze down the magical tendril. But he drove the claws of that foot into the rock and found purchase in a seam, taking the strain off the rest of his body, allowing him to carefully choose handholds and a new foothold before trying to lift those three people. "Hold him, hold him!" he heard the captain shout. He looked down, and then with a gasp, saw her *climbing the tendril*!

She was coming up after him!

Was she insane? He could knock her off when she got up here with ridiculous ease! And yet she was climbing the tendril like a rope, hand over hand, with amazing speed, displaying hidden strength he'd never attribute to such a slender, sleek woman. He turned back to the cliff, seeing that he was only rods from the top, and then pulled his snared foot out of the seam and struggled to raise it, giving a growling cry of effort as his trembling leg lifted the weight of three people slowly yet steadily, until he tore his claws into a knob of rock and found purchase, allowing him to reach up and grab the top edge of the rock face. He again gave a cry when he lifted his leg and drove his claws into the handhold he'd just been using, but a glance down showed that Toby was now bracing himself against the wall, feet wedged against an outcropping as he pushed against the rope with all his might, putting tremendous

strain on Kyven's foot and ripping both skin and muscle, sending a rivulet of blood down the magical rope. The blood slicked it, slowed the woman down a great deal when her hands hit it, causing her to wrap her legs around the rope and continue up at a slower shimmy.

Then, praise the Trinity, Bragga was there.

He hauled off and clubbed the Loreguard man off Toby with a great ham of a fist, then kicked the hunter's legs away from the wall. Kyven felt the pressure taken off his foot, felt much less weight on it, and moved swiftly. He released his foot from the wall and pulled himself up by his hands and free foot, leaving his snared foot tangling as he pulled himself up and over the top of the cliff face, getting everything but his leg up and over. The woman was just under him, and he felt her grab his foot, just as he felt all pressure on his foot release from the whip. There was nothing but the woman's hold on his foot now, and he looked over the edge to see her holding his foot with both bloodstained hands, the whip gone, and Toby and Bragga down below, Bragga with his hands up and backing away as Toby held his pistol on him.

He looked down at the woman. She looked up at him with steady eyes, eyes that were now afraid, but still strong and determined. She was literally hanging by his foot, and if he kicked her off, she would die in the eighty rod fall back down to the ground below. And she knew it. He had no idea what foolish notion possessed her to climb the rope in the first place, but she was now paying for that lack of short-sightedness, her lack of wisdom, for her very life was now in his hands.

He pulled his leg up, reached over, and grabbed the woman by the scruff of her chain hauberk. He pulled her off his leg as he hauled her up and over the rock face, then slammed her to her back on the ground and pinned her down with his hands.

"Who *are* you?" she demanded breathlessly.

"I'm not who you think I am," he told her, also panting. "And I mean *you* no harm. I just want to get away from the hunter."

"You *are* the man from Riyan!" she declared. "You *are* Kyven Steelhammer!"

"I am," he admitted.

"But—what happened to you? You were human, and now you're an Arcan!"

"This is the price I paid for making a terrible mistake," he said, not sure why he was being honest with her. It just felt... *right* to do so. "And since I don't want to be dragged to Avannar and dissected like an animal while you try to figure out how it happened, excuse me if I don't go into details," he said breathlessly, looking down into her eyes. Trinity, she was *gorgeous*. "I'm sorry you got involved," he told her. "I guess it would have been nice to keep my fantasy about you the way it was."

He couldn't resist. He leaned down and licked her on the face, slurping his tongue from her chin to her forehead like an enthusiastic puppy. She coughed and spluttered, and he used that to rise up off her and bound away, towards the path that ran up to Eagle Ridge, which would let him head west. "Wait!" she called, rolling over on one hand and looking at him. "Where are you going?"

"I'm an Arcan with exotic fur. You figure out what that means," he said simply. "I'm not going back to Alamar to be skinned and butchered, and that hunter will never leave me alone. And I'm not going back to Avannar to be experimented on and dissected. Out there, at least, I have a chance. If I try to stay here, it's just a matter of time before either him or *you* finally get me. And my prospects don't look very good no matter which one of you two ends up with me. So, ma'am, goodbye, fare well, and, since we're parting ways, I've been fantasizing about you since the day we met. I just thought you'd like to know," he said with a toothy grin, then he turned and bounded on all fours into the forest, leaving her behind.

Well, that didn't work quite the way he intended, but it worked. He would have stopped to tend his bleeding foot, but that woman was far too close to him. He needed time and space from her, and he could get both by running. He'd be leaving a blood trail and he knew it, so he'd go north to Cougar Creek, stop there to tend his foot, then use the creek to hide his trail and turn west when he could. The time it would take Toby to get up there, given he didn't know the area, would give him time he'd need to reach Cougar Creek, and it would be too far for the woman to catch up with him on foot. He could get his foot tended and be on his way and still have a good hour's head start on Toby.

And when darkness fell, he'd leave them all behind.

Danna rolled over and sat crosslegged on top of the cliff, frowning.

So, that *was* the same man. That *was* the Kyven Steelhammer from the village, whose life she had investigated. How did he get turned into an Arcan? What could have done that to him?

Whatever it was, she could not blame him one bit for running.

The mystery surrounding this man was deepening. Something had changed him from a human into an Arcan. She knew of *nothing* that could accomplish an alchemical feat of that magnitude, so that left a Shaman. Did he run afoul of a Shaman, a Shaman that had the magical might to transform him into an Arcan? He said he was paying for a mistake. Was that mistake angering a Shaman? Was there really a Shaman running around out there that had that kind of magical power? He had to be *staggeringly* powerful, far more powerful than any reports she'd read of Shaman ability.

It was a viable theory, but the amount of magic it would take to do something like that... she wasn't sure. Maybe it was some kind of magical accident, an ancient device left over from the Great Ancient Civilization. He might have stumbled across something like that. He *had* been prospecting, after all.

One thing was for sure. Nobody would believe her when she made her report, not with just a report. She had to know more. She had to solve this mystery, find out what the hell was going on, because this, this was *big*. She'd started her search looking for unique alchemical devices, and had stumbled across a human transformed into an Arcan, something that she would have believed absolutely impossible.

And nobody would believe her if she told them.

But still, she had her squad, and they'd obey her, at least. She crawled over to the edge of the cliff, where the hunter had a pistol leveled at the strongman from the alchemist's shop, and Lavers was looking up anxiously, waiting to know what was going on. "Lavers! I'm alright!"

"What happened, Captain?"

"He ran," she called down. "Get those horses ready and pack them with what we need for travel in the wilderness, we're going after him!"

"Uh, yes ma'am!"

The hunter holstered his pistol and looked up at her. "Then Ah'm goin' with ya," he called up. "It's mah duty tah return that Arcan tah Alamar."

"You'd better go your own way and pray you catch him before we do, hunter," she retorted. "Because the Loreguard now has an interest in that Arcan. If we catch him, we're keeping him."

"Ah'm sorry tah heah that," he said. "Sorry, mah big friend, it wasn't nothin' but business," he said to the big bruiser. "Good luck to yah," he said, then he turned and ran back into Atan faster than any human could ever manage.

That man *definitely* had some formidable alchemical devices. Speed boots and a snaring

whip? What other expensive little toys did he possess?

Still, maybe she should have had him arrested. His attack on the Arcan provoked all this. Though, he certainly got out of his collar awfully fast...

She shook her head. Of course he would. Odds were, the alchemist set the collar so Kyven could take it off himself. She'd bet a thousand chits that alchemist knew the truth of him, and was his friend, trying to help hide him. She couldn't blame him, really. He was just doing what he thought was best, being a good friend to him.

He *licked* her. Eww! She wiped her face with her sleeve, feeling a bit creeped out about that, but when she remembered his eyes, all she could really remember was how handsome he'd been as a human, and how soft his fur was...

She got those thoughts out of her head quickly. That man was a human changed into an Arcan, and finding out how it happened was of vital interest to the Loreguard and the Loremasters. She would track him down and find the truth. It was her job, she was good at it, and she loved doing it. She could find him easily, she had his blood all over her, and that blood would lead her right to him. So he could run as far and as fast as he wanted, because she'd be able to find him no matter where he went. His blood would lead her right to him.

And she would find the truth.

The shadow fox watched the human woman with calm, mildly curious eyes. She watched her as the woman looked down at her bloody hands, then carefully cleaned the blood into a handkerchief and tucked it into a pocket. She had more blood on her, on her wrists, on the insides of her thighs in bloody streaks from shimmying up the rope, on her boots, on her surcoat, in her hair.

And in her body.

The shadow fox nodded to herself, unwrapping her tail and standing up, then padding on silent feet into the forest.

The seeds were all planted. Now came the patience of waiting for the harvest.

Her Shaman was on his way to Haven, with the woman and the hunter hot on his heels. He was leaving the human lands with a full understanding of what the real world was, and was filled with resolve to do something about it. He had learned the value of deception, but had also learned the value of truth. He had learned the value of mercy, but had also learned the value of ruthlessness. He had learned how to communicate with the Arcans, empathize with them, had lived life seeing the world through their eyes, and fully appreciated the hardships of their lives in ways no other human could.

He had gained much wisdom.

He now wanted to join the Masked, and his time as an Arcan had taught him both the harshness of their lives and how to relate to them on their level. He was ready to go to Haven now, to see the other side of the real world, bringing the hunter and the woman along with him, and ready to resume his training in the spirits and Shaman magic.

Things were moving along just as she wished.

She vanished into the forest, shadows consuming her, quite pleased with the progression of things.

Chapter 11

The night.

There would have been a time, not long ago, when Kyven would have been a little wary to be out in the middle of the forest in the middle of the night, but this was now his time. His spirit sight showed the forest everything that mattered, showed him the world as clearly as a human would see it in midday. He could see every possum and mouse, see every bat and

owl, clearly in his eyes, almost radiant as the light of their life energy shone in the spirit world, and was vibrantly visible to him. But those animals could not see him. He could feel the coolness around him, the coolness that told him that he was blended in with the shadows, invisible in the night, a living ghost, a living shadow unseen, unnoticed as he loped steadily yet a little painfully on an injured foot to the west, loped into the highest parts of the forested Smoke Mountains. The hardwood forest was cool that night, a sign that summer was starting to wane, that soon the leaves would begin to turn, and that autumn would be taking grip on the land.

They were behind him. He could *sense* it. Toby was behind him, probably holed up for the night somewhere because it was cloudy and the moon was blocked, using whatever tricks he knew to track Kyven. He was good, there was no doubt about that, very, very good. Good enough for Kyven to be afraid of him, of him and his alchemical weapons and utensils.

There was more than him he could sense. *She* was back. He could sense her. He knew she was somewhere close, somewhere near him, watching him. She hadn't approached him yet, but he could feel her.

He wasn't sure how he felt about that. He still hated what she did to him, but some small part of him... *understood*. Understood what she was trying to show him, understood what she wanted him to know. She'd wanted him to *know* the Arcans, know them in a way that he'd never have known them as a human. She wanted him to understand them, understand their pain, understand their desperation and hopelessness. She wanted him to see a world where your wife may be sold away, you children may be slaughtered before your very eyes for their fur, and you were *helpless*.

She wanted *him* to feel helpless. She wanted him to know what it was like to live or die by the whim of another. She wanted him to be locked in a cage with Arcans, learn from them, learn their customs... and she was successful. Kyven knew now the very simple way Arcans looked at the world, the world of *right now*, where tomorrow might bring the slaver's cage, or the furrier's steel club. He could be accepted into an Arcan group, understood their need to touch, understood their need to be together, for all the Arcans had was each other.

But still. He understood what she did and why she did it, his major issue was *how*. She could have found a much less vicious way to do it. She had tricked him into making a deal that gave her total power over him, then she had used it to brutal effect. She didn't *care* about him. He was nothing but her possession, her slave, her toy. He was much thrall to her as he had been to Arthur Ledwell, and she had precious little more compassion. To regain his humanity, he had to please her, had to perform for her like a puppet.

But that begged the question... so what?

So what? So what if he stayed like this the rest of his life? Would it bother him? Did he spend every day lamenting his lost humanity? Not really, at least not after he escaped from Alamar. Once he was free, he actually didn't mind it all that much. Being an Arcan actually gave him strengths and advantages that he had learned to use. Even now, he was using the gift his totem gave him, the power of her shadow foxes to use the shadows to become invisible, which allowed him to lope through the night, his clothes tied to his belly by a thin vine to minimize the visible parts of him. He wanted to keep his clothes for use in Deep River, so he had to bring them along, but he couldn't make the clothes vanish with him. So he folded them up and tied them to him, so they were a much smaller object that appeared to be floating through the dark forest.

So what? So, if he wasn't really obsessed with becoming human again, then why did he care what the fox thought of him?

Because the reason he wanted to become human again might be following him right now.

Danna Pannen. Even her name was beautiful. She was gorgeous, she had a beautiful name, she was smart, and she even smelled nice to his Arcan nose. He'd never been so attracted to a woman before, but in a cruel twist, he couldn't have her. He saw that look on her face when he licked her. He was an Arcan, and she was a human. And where human men might have sufficient lust to ignore that fact when raping Arcan females, human women weren't quite so general in their tastes. If he wanted even a chance with Danna, he had to be human again.

That damn fox. She was putting out the bait, she was teasing him with something he wanted to make him reconcile to her. He could not please her if he was rejecting her. She wanted him compliant, and though she had angered him, now she was luring him out with the promise of reward.

She was playing him. And fuck him, if he wasn't about ready to eat out of her hand. He wanted a chance to get to know Danna, and she wouldn't have him as an Arcan. So, he had to knuckle under to the fox, obey her, forgive her but never forget what she'd done to him, and walk her path once again.

He wouldn't be surprised if Danna had been in Atan for no reason other than to have Kyven see her. The fox was cunning and manipulative, he wouldn't put it past her.

She was there.

He literally slid to a halt, for she was standing—not sitting, standing—in the game trail he was using. The sight of her incited the last reaction he ever expected out of himself; he bared his fangs and growled at her threateningly. She bared her fangs in return, taking a menacing step forward, and that act snapped him back to reality. She was a *spirit*. He couldn't so much as lay a finger on her, but *she* could touch *him*. But that didn't cool his ire with her. She had been the one to sink him into that misery and agony, and at that moment, he didn't give a fuck how much he needed her if he wanted to be human again. He growled and stood his ground when she advanced slowly on him, which seemed to provoke her. She charged him with fangs bared, and he was caught between being mad enough with her to fight and understanding he was an ant biting a grizzly bear.

As if he could put up any resistance. She was little more than half his size, yet she hit him so hard he felt like he'd fell off a cliff. He was driven up onto his legs, then fell over backwards. He fell painfully on his tail as he tried to roll through and back onto his feet, but the fox was as fast as she was powerful, jumping over his legs as he fell backwards, then clamping her jaws onto his neck as soon as his back hit the ground. He slid a little on the trail, then she gripped him so firmly that he felt his throat constrict, felt her fangs punch through his skin and draw blood, sliding off his chest and yanking on him. He tried to push her off, but his hands could find nothing there. She could touch him, but he could not touch her. She literally dragged him off the trail by his neck, as he gasped for breath, then he realized that resistance wasn't just futile, it was stupid, and he went limp. He submitted to her, which caused her to stop yanking on him, putting her forepaw up on his chest, releasing her pressure on his neck but keeping her jaws clamped on him in a pure show of dominance. She held him like that for long, long moments, as thoughts of indignance and anger and hatred mixed with the understanding that she held power over him, both figuratively and literally, and she'd kill him if he pissed her off too much. That was what this little show was about, he realized, the show of naked force to show him just who was boss.

She released her jaws from his neck, finally, then started licking his neck, licking the puncture wounds she'd made there. He tongue felt... soothing. He wanted to bite her back, even in his submission, but she was untouchable, and he was completely overmatched. So he just laid there and allowed her to lick his wounds, her tongue strangely soothing and warm. She stopped, then padded down to his feet, put her paw on his knee, then started licking at the in-

jury caused by the snaring whip Toby used on him. Again, her tongue was soothing, warm, almost gentle, but he had to resist the urge to try to drive his claws into her back. He did that by not even moving, not even looking at her, just letting her do as she wanted, which, at the moment, was taking the dull pain out of his foot. Every lick of her tongue took a little bit of the pain with it. Was she... healing him? He put his hand to his neck, and found no pain there, no tenderness. She had bitten him, then she licked away his wounds.

She finished. She appeared in his field of vision, putting her paws on his chest and looking down into his eyes, her own glowing eyes both deliberate and steady. *You have pleased me,* she stated. *I will again grant you my blessing. Return to training your magic.*

He wasn't sure if he was happy or not about that. "What about—"

Do not ask for what I may or may not give you, Shaman. You made this bargain. Honor it with dignity. When you please me sufficiently, and only when you please me sufficiently, will I give back what I have taken. Never ask again.

He almost choked on the words. "I will obey."

Her demeanor seemed to change slightly. *And that pleases me. I took no pleasure in doing this to you, Shaman, because despite what you think, I do not find enjoyment in inflicting pain on others. It is not the way of the fox. I merely did what must be done, both to teach you wisdom and also to punish you for making so dreadfully foolish a bargain. No more, no less. That it angers you is irrelevant, for you brought it on yourself, and I will not tolerate my Shaman being foolish. All that is relevant is you have learned from your mistake, and learned the lessons I wished to teach you. Remember this well, Shaman. I seek not your affection, nor your approval. I require only your obedience.*

Her cold demeanor infuriated him, but he was totally helpless against her. He *did* make that deal, and she had complete power over him because of it. "I will obey," he growled.

Then do as I have commanded. Specifically, I wish you to practice the spell of silence. You must build up your ability to channel a maintained spell. Most of the spells I wish to teach you are maintained, so you must be able to channel sustained magic over time.

"May I ask a question?"

Proceed.

"How far behind is Toby?"

He is actually ahead of you, she answered with a toothy little smile. *He correctly assumes you seek the settlement of Deep River and passed you in the night en route to it, but does not know it. Guard well against that one, Shaman. Treat him with respect. He is dangerous in ways even you do not understand, but will come to learn in time.*

"As you command," he acknowledged, but that wasn't news to him. He could tell that Toby was no man to cross the first time they met.

But do not dawdle. Others are behind you, and you must be wary.

"The Loreguard," he growled.

She nodded once. *They seek to capture you to learn your secret. Be very careful, Shaman. Though the female has interest in learning the secret of your transformation, her men will not hesitate to kill you. Do not let your guard down against them.*

"I'll be careful," he promised. "They have to be on horseback, so they can't go that fast. That will let me keep moving *and* practice."

She nodded, pulling her paws off of him and standing beside him. He sat up, leaning on his hand, and realized she may ease his mind about one thing. "Spirit, what happened to Silver?"

She leaned over and nuzzled his muzzle. *She was sold to a breeding master of some repute. She is cared for in a way she finds adequate. She is not abused.*

"Did she, uh, did we?"

No.

"I'm not sure how to feel about that. It would have made her happy, but I would have hated the idea of my child being born in a place where they'd slaughter him for his fur."

I would not permit that. You are mine, Shaman, as are your progeny. I did not introduce the powers of my foxes into the Arcans to watch them slaughtered for their fur.

"Powers? But I can only do one thing."

You have not even scratched the surface of your powers as a shadow fox, she answered bluntly. *There is much more to it than blending with the shadow. You are the shadow, Shaman, capable of far more than my foxes because you are more intelligent and can comprehend the abstract nature of your abilities that they cannot. In time, you will come to understand just what you can do.*

"You won't teach me?"

No. The power of shadow is my gift to you. I will not teach you, you must learn on your own, as any shadow fox kit must learn without any help from its mother. You will find, in time, that the gift I have given you can rival your Shaman magic in some ways.

"I'm really starting to think you had all of this planned out since before I knew I was a Shaman."

There is wisdom in being prepared, she answered, rather cheekily, then she pulled away from him. She gave him a single look, then padded into the shadows. Those shadows seemed to melt her body away, and then she was gone.

Bitch. Trinity, he hated that fox... but what could he do?

For once, the Arcan mantra served *him*.

But the good thing was, she said she was returning her blessing. He had to try it, just to be sure, holding his hands apart and channeling lightning, causing an arc of it to jump from hand to hand, showing him the truth. He could again use Shaman magic, and she wanted him back to work with practicing his magical endurance, specifically in channeling maintained spells. He knew only one, the spell of silence, but that spell would be just fine for practicing, if only because it was undetectable. It wouldn't make any sound or light, it wouldn't burn down the forest or anything like that. It was a good spell for learning without attracting attention to himself.

He could do that after he stopped for the morning to rest through the light of day. Right now, there was still a good few hours until dawn, and he needed to put as much distance between him and the Loreguard chasing him as he could. Odds were, they were camped right now, and would move during the day, so he needed to get far enough ahead that they didn't catch up with him while he was resting.

She was following him. That made him feel... *happy*. She'd have nothing to do with him like this, but at least he'd be able to look at her, know she was close, be able to get those clothes off of her using spirit sight and view her in all her naked, wondrous glory...

Best not think about that too much. With his dick swinging free, he was sure to get an erection while on the run if he kept thinking about the luscious bounty underneath those clothes. And he'd definitely get an erection thinking about her.

He continued on after getting his bearings using his compass, filled with both questions and hope. Much as he hated what the fox did to him, the fact that she seemed pleased did make him a *little* happy. He might be regaining his humanity soon, with work and maybe some luck. He was honestly happy that she was again giving him her blessing, for with his Shaman magic at his command, he would *never* be caged or collared again. He could fight, fight in a way that would make it very hard for anyone to capture him. He was much less afraid of Toby now, for now he could fight... but he'd still respect Toby's prowess. Even with his

Shaman magic, Toby would be formidable.

Kyven continued on, feeling much more confident.

Shaman magic would feel almost like cheating.

In the murky light of a clouded sunrise, Kyven burst out from the shadows at a herd of deer, so close that he was literally within their midst before they even registered his presence. He'd already picked out his target, the largest of the does, and the animal never had a chance. Kyven was too close, he was too fast, and he'd struck from complete surprise. By the time the doe had turned to run, he was already on its back, claws hooked into it to give him a deadly grip on the animal, driving it down to the ground under him. The other deer scattered as the animal struggled under his weight, but then it shuddered when Kyven's jaws clamped on its neck and literally crushed its windpipe. He drove his claws deeper into it to hold it down, hold it still as his jaws suffocated the life out of it, then he rose up on all fours over it, holding it by the neck, and shook it violently, driving his teeth deeper and deeper, until he was totally sure it was dead. Even after it was dead, though, he kept his bite, almost savoring the taste of blood, until he realized that he didn't have time to play with his food. He released his bite and licked at the wound absently, licking up the blood, then released his grip on it and rolled the deer over on its side. He ripped its belly with his claws, then began feeding on it.

He wondered how far behind him the Loreguard was as he sought out the deer's liver, his favorite part. They were riding horses through virgin forest, with no roads, barely more than game trails, so they couldn't be moving fast at all. The tricky thing was Toby. Toby was now *in front* of him, racing to reach Deep River first to intercept him there, which meant that he'd have to approach that town carefully. Toby would already be there, would have time to know the town and be ready for him to show up. He was sure that Virren had sent the message to the Masked that Kyven was going to Deep River, so it was just a matter of waiting until they came for him. He'd have to keep an eye out for them even as he evaded Toby, and had to get it all done before the Loreguard caught up with them. As much as he loved how Danna Pan-nen looked, the fox had warned him to be very, very careful, so he'd rather just leave her in his fantasies and not see her again.

He heard a faint rustling to his right, distant rustling. He thought it was the wind at first, but then he felt faint trembling in the ground under his hands and feet. The rustling got louder, and he heard the creaking of wood as the ground literally began to shake. Kyven rose up from his kill, chewing and swallowing the last bit of kidney as the sound attracted his full attention, until a dark shadow appeared deep in the woods, and approached. Kyven backed up a step or two, every spell he knew going through his mind as he rose up onto his legs and watched that shadow approach him, until a pair of glowing red eyes appeared in the gloom, and the owner of those eyes took form as it got close enough to see.

An Ursorax! A monster! They were magically transformed black bears, three times bigger than black bears, a behemoth that was seven rods tall on all fours and weighed nearly half a ton! The shaggy-furred behemoth advanced, squeezing between trees, bending wood away from it, until it was close enough for Kyven to fully appreciate how huge this thing really was. Its front legs were slightly longer than its back legs, giving it a hunched posture as it bared its fangs at Kyven, then roared in challenge.

The kill. It wanted his kill.

It could have it. Magic or no, Kyven wasn't stupid enough to take on a monster with unknown magical powers, a monster Kyven might not even be able to affect with magic in the first place! Some monsters were immune to alchemical weapons, and that meant that they were also immune to Shaman magic, since they were virtually one and the same. Kyven backed away from the massive behemoth carefully, keeping his eyes on it at all times as it

advanced boldly to the deer, a deer that was only about twice the size of the huge beast's head. He backed up, backed up to a large tree, then got behind it, turned, and ran like hell. Kyven heard bones snapping as the monster probably ate half the deer in one bite, and he left the Ursorax to finish off his deer as he bolted at full speed. He wasn't stopping now. He was stopping *nowhere near* that beast. Toby would be on the move soon, and he was in front of him, so there was no risk of crossing paths with the hunter. And since the Loreguard would be moving forward slower than him, there was no danger of them catching up to him. He would put quite a bit of distance between him and that thing, find another deer, and then do his training and get some rest.

Healthy fear kept him going all through the morning. He was afraid that stopping would let that beast catch up with him, if it was tracking him. He ran on until early afternoon, then decided that it was far enough... but he sure as hell was not sleeping on the ground. He spent an hour hunting down another deer, killing it but not eating anything from it, instead slinging it over his shoulder and climbing the biggest tree he could find, a massive oak tree with branches thicker around than some trees, a tree so big the monster couldn't knock it over to get at him without waking him up well before it happened. He climbed high into the tree, well out of reach of the Ursorax, found a nice branch that was wide enough for him to lay on comfortably, then draped the deer over it and bent to his other task. He channeled the spell of silence, centering it on the deer, and found out quickly just how demanding a maintained spell could be. After just ten seconds, he felt the strain of the magic flowing through him, but he knew the key was to hold the spell as long as possible. The longer he held it, the longer he'd be able to do it when he recovered. He gritted his teeth as he felt the magic flow through him, draining his strength. He started to pant as the magic sucked all the strength out of him, making his muscles physically ache. He held the spell for a full minute, his heart starting to pound, his claws digging into the bark of the tree as the exhaustion literally became physical pain, a wracking ache that settled into his muscles as he strained to hold the spell. Spots started forming in his eyes, then he gave a choking gasp and had to let go of the spell. He sagged to the branch, sucking in air hungrily as he felt the exhaustion roar through him. But he quickly felt his strength return, much faster than it had when he was human... an aspect of an Arcan body maybe? He wasn't sure. But he felt strong enough to try again after just a few minutes, so he did so.

He didn't last as long the second time, but was rested enough for a third, then a fourth, then a fifth. Each successive attempt didn't last as long as the one before. After he nearly passed out trying to maintain the spell for the fifth time, he felt a strange weariness in him that told him he could go no further, so he made himself comfortable on the branch and fell asleep.

As he expected, he was ravenously hungry when he woke up, woke up sometime in the night. His deer was still laying there, waiting for him, and he attacked it with hungry enthusiasm. It was a little... *bleh*, eating it cold, though. He was used to eating his kills immediately after catching them, so to eat the deer when it was cool made it taste a little strange. But he was too hungry to care too much, quickly devouring the nutritious organs, then skinning the animal and wrapping up some of its choice cuts of meat, using the cold spell at a lower intensity to chill the meat so it would keep longer. That touch on his Shaman magic didn't even make him twitch; practicing maintained spells strengthened both aspects of his Shaman powers, both his ability to channel instant spells and his ability to channel maintained spells.

He had company, he saw. A pair of wolves were pacing under his tree, sniffing at it, looking up it. Both of them looked thin and hungry. They must have smelled his kill, and were looking for it. Well, he was done with it, and there was plenty of meat left on it. He hooked the deer's carcass by the head and slung his wadded clothes over his shoulder and started down

the tree, and when he was down far enough, he dropped the remains by the trunk. That startled the two wolves, but they quickly came back to the carcass and started tearing into it.

And that taught him an important lesson. He was a climber, and his best defense was in the trees, where only other climbers could reach him... and he was a hell of a lot bigger than most climbers. The only thing he really had to worry about in the trees were cougars and other climbing Arcans. He needed to do his sleeping off the ground, and his first impulse when facing danger would need to be climbing out of reach, as he'd done against Toby and Danna. He went out on one of the lower braches a ways and then dropped to the ground, causing the two wolves to look at him, rising up and growling at him, but he took a few steps back, which made them calm down and return to the kill. They saw he had no interest in their meal, and did not want to fight, so he was of no more importance.

He tied his clothes to his belly once again, checked his bearings using the compass, having to use the fire spell to create a lick of flame and *maintain* it to give him enough light to see the compass. It taught him something he hadn't known before; he could *maintain* an instant spell. Did that mean there was no difference between instant spells and maintained spells?

There sure was. He was channeling only a candlewick of flame, but the drain on him was surprising for how little magic he was using. This spell wasn't intended to be maintained, and so it cost *much* more to maintain it. That meant that there had to be another form of fire spell that *was* intended to be maintained, something like this, that channeled only a small flame for light or to start a fire.

It also showed him that he needed to *experiment*. The fox wasn't really teaching him, she was letting him go on his own. He needed to explore the boundaries of magic, see what he could do and what he could not do, learn on his own when she was not teaching him.

He released the spell and dropped to all fours, then loped off into the shadows, leaving the wolves behind.

It took him two more days to reach the Deep River, and he understood Virren's warning about the ferry.

It was at least a half a minar across, filled with dark brown water. The water was cool, almost cold, he found when he tested it from the treeline, a treeline that advanced all the way down to the riverbank. Getting wet didn't concern him, for it had been raining all night and he was soaked through. He'd reached the river in the early morning, seeing its wide river valley in the distance just at sunrise, and continuing on to investigate the river in the morning light, as he wouldn't be able to see the water using spirit sight.

Fuck, that was a long way across. But he needed to find a way. If Toby was going to beat him to Deep River, then the ferry was going to be his primary stakeout. He had to get across the river before getting there, to eliminate that advantage and trick Toby. But this... this was a *fucking* big river. He wasn't all that great of a swimmer, but he had great endurance. He could swim it, but it would take him at least an hour or two, and he'd have to be careful not to be caught by the current and pulled under. He could see the current in the water, see that it wasn't smooth and even. It had swirls and eddies in it, warning him that the current would be a danger to him.

Hmm... maybe he didn't need to swim. Maybe he needed a *raft*.

That was easy enough. Ice floats, after all.

He did need to prepare, and that required him to hunt. He fanned out and found a small herd of deer about an hour after starting, four does with a fawn, and unfortunately, he needed at least two of them. He watched them to learn which doe was the mother of the fawn, so as to spare it. He didn't need that much hide, and there was no reason to leave the fawn to cruel fate when he could avoid it. The other does would supply the hide he needed, as well as

plenty of food.

It was his first experiment. He first created silence around the does, and then immediately attempted to channel lightning. He found he could do it, but the attempt nearly put him on his knees, both having to maintain a spell and then channel an instant spell on top of it. It did its job, though. The does looked up when the flash of light from the lightning illuminated their tiny clearing, instantly killing the doe in the rear. The does looked around, saw one of their own laying on the ground with smoke wafting up from its head, which made them skittish and afraid. He dropped the spell of silence, feeling weary, too tired to try to chase one down the proper way, so he channeled lightning once again, knocking the largest of the does off her feet. The other two does and fawn bolted at the thunderclap, all going in the same direction, but did not kill the big doe he hit. He gritted his teeth and charged out on weak arms and legs as the doe tried to stagger to its feet, a black circle on its neck from the lightning strike, and he finished her off the old fashioned way. He held her down with his claws as his jaws finished her, literally laying atop the big doe to hold her down as his jaws suffocated her by crushing her windpipe. He licked at her neck after she was dead, licking at the blood as his stomach began to protest its empty state, but he couldn't eat here. He threw the smaller doe over his shoulders and dragged the bigger doe by the hind legs, taking them back to the river.

He had to skin both does, so instead of eating as much of one of them as he could, he instead ate the best parts from both of them, emptying out their abdominal cavities. After he ate his fill, he used his claws to strip the hides off the two does, then butchered off as much of the meat as he could manage with his claws. He froze that meat using the cold spell, saving it for later, then he bent to the task of making a raft for himself. That he accomplished with a log and Shaman magic. He found an old log and pulled it to the river, then pushed it in. As soon as it had enough draft under it and started to float away, he hit it with the cold spell, as powerful as he could make it. The blast froze the water about two rods to each side around the log all the way down to the bottom, forming a stable ice platform, which he immediately loaded with his meat, a few heavy sticks and branches and rocks on one side for stability, and then he spread the hides out on his side to protect him from having to stand or kneel directly on the ice, then put on his clothes to offer another layer of protection. He boarded his make-shift raft, kneeling on the opposite side from his ballast with a long, sturdy branch in his hands. He had to use all his strength to dislodge the ice sheet from the bank, but he finally broke free, then poled away from the bank with his branch, sliding out into the Deep River.

When he couldn't touch the bottom anymore with his branch, he used it like a paddle, kneeling by the edge of his raft and clumsily paddling out into the main river. The current caught his raft and sent him downriver, which forced him to alter his plan a little. He couldn't manage to keep the raft going straight across, so he instead paddled with the current but at a slight angle, which would drift him across the river and also serve to get him closer to the Deep River settlement, since it was downriver from him. He actually rather enjoyed the rafting, kneeling there on the deer hides, feeling the fur on them under his feet—and feeling a few fleas skittering around on his foot and legs, he'd have to do something about that—taking in the view of the river valley with the hills on each side of the relatively flat valley floor. A few of the hills were bare, rocky faces dotted with small islands of trees or grass along their faces where tenacious plants had taken root. The day was warm but cloudy, the rain had stopped but the clouds remained, and there was a wind blowing on the river that helped finish drying out his fur from the rains the night before.

It took him nearly three hours to get across the river, for it was almost impossible to steer the raft. He was at the mercy of the currents, and more than once he got near the opposite side only to have the currents drag him back towards the center. He struggled to break

through that current that sought to pull him back out, until he got help in the form of a rather sharp curve in the river, sharper than any other curve he'd seen up until then. The curve helped him for it curved the bank he wanted to reach into his path, and that forward momentum, combined with some frenzied paddling, finally let him break free of the current and get into stiller, calmer water. He alternated paddling with testing with his pole for the bottom, until he found the bottom and used his branch to pole himself over to a surprisingly steep riverbank. He anchored his raft to the riverbank using the cold spell, freezing it in place. He stayed on the raft, wrapping his frozen meat in the hide, then he jumped up onto the riverbank, feeling quite satisfied. He now had the river between him and the Loreguard and without any boat to ferry their horses across, they may as well be all the way across the Angry Sea. Toby was going to be in Deep River already—which was only about a day away, if he was where he thought he was—but he would expect Kyven to be coming from the *other side*. He'd be watching the ferry, which would let Kyven slip into town behind him, find him, and then keep track of him while he waited for the Masked to come.

That would be the tricky part. He had no idea who they were, so he had to be visible. People had to know he was in Deep River so the Masked would know, but with Toby already there, that meant exposing himself to the hunter—

No. No, it *did not*. The fox had given him back his powers, and he remembered what Virren told him, and what he'd known about Shaman. Shaman could *drain mana crystals*. Toby could never collar him, because he could just drain the crystal in the collar and render it useless. But, the fox also told him to be very wary of the hunter, that he was dangerous in ways Kyven didn't understand. So, though he felt confident that he'd never be collared by Toby, he still had to be cautious about the man because of the unnamed danger he posed.

He had to stop and feel a little electric thrill go through him. He *could never be collared again*. It was, it was, liberating! He felt almost giddy at the thought of it! He would never have to fear being in a collar, being a slave. He could free himself, free himself whenever he wished. The dread of the Ledwell collar and the sight of the blue ring of Alamar drained away in his mind. The memory of it would always be there, but the fear that it would happen again evaporated like fog facing the morning sun.

He searched out a good tree to spend the rest of the day, a nice stout oak with an almost hammock-like branch that let him stretch out and not worry at all about falling out. He again exhausted himself using the silence spell, then wearily pulled off his clothes to use as a pillow and nodded off to sleep, feeling more safe and secure than he had in a long time, for he went to sleep knowing that his enemies were out of reach of him, and knowing that should they actually catch him, they could never collar him.

He would never be a slave to the humans again.

Fleas. Trinity curse the maddening fleas.

He'd never had problems with fleas before, but he sure was having a problem with him now. He could feel them skittering around under his fur, crawling all over him, and he flinched wherever they bit him, feeding off of him with some kind of smug impunity, knowing that he couldn't single them out and kill them, he could only scratch the entire region and hope his claws happened across them. He must have picked them up from those deer he killed. They drove him batty as he ran in the night, often making him slow down or stop to scratch, tormenting him with their tiny evasiveness as he tried to seek them out and kill them. They made him so frustrated that he veered off during his run and literally jumped in the river, soaking himself through to the skin and only poking his nose up out of the water to breathe, drowning the aggravating little bastards by staying completely submerged for well over twenty minutes, making sure to beat every tiny little bubble of air out of his fur to rob

them of any chance to survive.

Of course, he paid for his rash act, in the form of dirt. The water of the Deep River was muddy, and the dirt suspended in the water settled into his fur once he hauled himself out of the water, dirt that seemed to interfere with his ability to meld into the shadows. He could do it, but the dirt made it... harder. His fur was an important aspect of his ability to meld into the shadows, and he learned then that when it was *that* dirty, literally filthy, he had to do something about it. His white ruff was so dirty that it looked grayish instead of white. So, after he dried off, he had to spend quite a bit of time either meticulously combing the dirt out of his fur and hair with his claws or licking it out, leaving a bad taste in his mouth. Deep River dirt did not taste very good.

He lost a lot of time with killing the fleas and then tending to his fur, nearly a quarter of the night, but that time wasted actually served him in the end, he found out at sunrise... for he reached the frontier settlement of Deep River.

The place looked as rough as its reputation. It was built out of rough log buildings, about thirty buildings all built on an open area near the river, built in a high spot on the riverbank to protect against spring flooding, so high that there was a zigzagging road wending down the hill to the river, where a simple wooden quay jutted out into the river, and a large raft-like ferry stood tied up to it. The little town was filled with all manner of rough-looking men, unshaved, most of them wearing dirty leathers and fur, some of them escorted by an Arcan wearing a collar, naked Arcans following along behind their masters.

Kyven hung back by the trees. There was no telling where Toby was, and there was also no doubt that Toby had already broadcast his description all over town. No, this was not the time to go in there. He would draw back, draw back, find a *very* good place to hide, and then wait until dark. He knew Toby was here, he needed to get and keep the advantage. He drew back into the trees, then ranged out into the valley to find a good spot.

He found one... sort of. It was a cave, a cave up a steep slope on the hills bordering the river valley, which had a well-worn path leading up to it. It was a home for someone, he saw when he peeked in, with a very rude pallet and a cooking pit just outside, in a flat area in front of the cave. Just as he was about to move off when an old man wearing rough leathers appeared at the base of the steep slope, walking along with a small female cat Arcan in front of him, his hand on the tabby-colored cat's shoulder. The cat stopped with a gasp when she saw Kyven standing up by the cave, but he sat down on his haunches non-threateningly. This old man had to be a hermit, and he owned an Arcan, so perhaps he might be good for some information. He saw the cat whispering to the old man as she led him up the zigzagging path, and as they got closer, he realized that the old man was blind. The cat brought the old man up to the cave mouth, and he got a better look at both of them. The female tabby was unclothed, wearing nothing but a collar, and from the look of her she wasn't exactly young herself. She looked to be quite old for an Arcan, maybe forty. The old man was about sixty or so from the look of him, his eyes clouded over with cataracts, robbing him of his vision. He wore rough leathers, home-cured from the look of them, and carried no weapon other than a small knife. "Well now, Stripes tells me I have a visitor," the old man said in a surprisingly vibrant voice. "What brings you by my cave, Arcan?"

"Information," he said. "I've only just come to this area."

"A runaway, eh? Congratulations, we get plenty through here," the old man said as the cat brought a stool out of the cave, and then helped the man sit down. "Enough for an uncollared Arcan not to attract too much attention," he said with a chuckle as Kyven watched the old female reach up and take her collar off, then toss it casually into the cave. She sat on her haunches by the old man, leaning up against him, and he put his arm around her fondly. "I'm

Clet,” the old man introduced himself. “This handsome young lady here with me is Stripes.”
 “Be nice,” the cat murmured to him.

“You said there are lots of runaways through here?”

“Yup,” the old man nodded. “They escape from the east and always end up going through here, followin’ what the northern Arcans call the Freedom Trail, runnin’ for the wildlands where they won’t be hunted down. The smart ones do, anyway. The dumb ones hang around here, and eventually get caught by someone in town, or one of the farmers down south on the settlements. So, friend, my suggestion is don’t be dumb. Go right past Deep River and keep on goin’, stayin’ on this side of the river.”

“I’d love to do that, but I’m, waiting for someone,” he said carefully, which made the tabby give him a curious look. “I can’t move on until they catch up to me. But, I think there’s already someone here hunting for us.”

“Ah, you must be the black-furred fox,” the old man chuckled. “Yeah, there’s a hunter down in town lookin’ for ya. Poor fella,” the man laughed. “He’s offerin’ chits or crystals as a reward to anyone who brings you in, but quite a few folks are already talking about taking some of his alchemy toys.”

“I think you already knew that,” Kyven noted calmly, looking at the tabby.

“Well, of course I did, but it’d have been rude to just blurt it out,” he grinned. “So, you escaped from Alamar, did ya? You must be somethin’ else if a hunter chased you this far.”

“Oh, he’s quite handsome,” the cat told the old man.

“Well now, what are you going to do about it?” the man asked him.

“Stay out of his way, wait for my friends to arrive, then leave,” he answered.

“May not be easy if they don’t know where you are, and with that hunter already huntin’ ya down.”

“We’ll manage,” he said. “I came up here thinking this would be a good place to hide.”

“Well now, it just might be,” the man chuckled. “I’m what you might call a sympathizer, friend. Me and Stripes are out here cause I care maybe a little *too* much for Arcans,” he declared, patting the tabby on the shoulder fondly. “I took care of her, and now that I’m blind, she takes care of me. So, you offer to do the hunting, I may see clear to letting you stay here in my cave.”

“What about the reward?”

“What do I need chits for?” he snorted. “I got everything that makes me happy right here. Food, water, companionship, and of course, quite a view,” he said, motioning out. Kyven followed his wave with his eyes, and saw the river valley arrayed before him, including the town of Deep River about two minars to the south. “Not that the view does much for me anymore,” he chuckled.

“That’s a very generous offer, friend,” Kyven said carefully. “I’d almost say it was too generous. You don’t know me, you know nothing about me.”

The cat slipped away from the old man and sidled up to him on all fours. She nuzzled at his muzzle briefly, and he accepted her attention with a tilt of his head. She brought her mouth up to his ear, then whispered to him. “Trust him,” she whispered. “He may be human, but he is outcast from them because he loves me, and I love him. He will help you.”

That startled Kyven a little, but he guessed it was possible. If the man saw the cat as a person rather than a possession, he might actually fall in love with her. And he knew that Arcans were capable of loving in return; Arcans were actually very passionate creatures, but their circumstances made it almost impossible for them to form lasting bonds. So they lived in the moment, making every moment count... after all, they might be dead by sunrise tomorrow, or their spouse sold away.

“You have a deal, Clet,” Kyven said. “How much deer do you want?”

“Stripes isn’t as young as she used to be, young fella. Bring as many as you can, so she can dry the meat.”

“As many as I can catch?”

“Aye.”

“Alright. You asked for it, old man. I’m a very good hunter.”

The old man laughed. “Sounds like a bet to me.”

“Let me get some sleep, and you’ll find out. As long as I don’t have to range out ten minars to find them, I can bring them in.”

“We’ll see,” he said teasingly. “Go find a spot in the cave, but don’t take our pallet.”

The cat helped him. She was a small thing, only coming up to his collarbones, shorter than the human, with orange tabby fur and no hair, which was unusual for female Arcans. When she saw he had no bedroll, she laid out several deerhides on the floor to give him a sleeping place, and within the cave, she told him what was going on. “We’ve worked with the Masked before,” she told him in a whisper. “But don’t ever say that out loud outside this cave.”

He nodded in understanding. “Are you part of them?”

She shook her head. “Not officially, but we’ve given them help in the past. There’s too much suspicion about us for us to really do much. The whole town knows about us.”

“That way?”

She nodded. “Things are different here in Deep River, young fox. This is not the same world as the human lands. Don’t judge what you see on the streets. Though Arcans are collared, many of them—most of them are like me. The collar is just for appearances. Here, Arcans are *partners* with our humans, not just property. The human and Arcan work together to prosper, not the human using the Arcan to prosper. They need us much more here than they do on the other side of the Smoke Mountains. Arcans are actually treated well here. Just mind that there *are* harsh humans out there, be careful. If you must, must go into town, take my collar. It dissuades some, but not all.”

“I will. Thank you for your help.”

“You escaped from *Alamar*, young one. That just begs for me to help you,” she said with a smile that was missing one of her canine teeth, patting him on the shoulder.

“I’ll repay you, Stripes, I promise. I’ll bring you so much venison you’ll have enough to hold you for a year.”

“I’ll hold you to that, young one,” she winked.

“So... a human. What’s it like?” he asked with a curious little smile, looking at the old man sitting on the stool at the cave mouth.

“It satisfies me in all ways,” she answered simply. “He is kind, gentle, affectionate, and vigorous.”

“At his age?”

“I’m that age too. Consider it being vigorous relative to our ages.”

Kyven laughed. “Thank you,” he said as she handed him the blanket off their own pallet.

“Can I buy some supplies in town?”

“Yes, but you look to have little to use for barter.”

“I’ll think of something,” he said. “I’ll prospect for crystals if nothing else.”

“There are none left around Deep River,” she warned.

“I’m very mobile, Stripes. I’ll find something.”

“Be careful,” she said, licking him lightly on the cheek, then patting him on the shoulder.

“Rest well.”

The deer on this side of the Deep River were much larger than the deer on the other side, but

they were just as helpless.

They never saw someone like him coming. He was a nightmare, a super-predator, who could strike at will and bring down a kill almost every time, because in the night, he could literally get so close he could reach out and grab them, so long as the wind didn't change.

Kyven was a whirlwind of terror unleashed on the local deer population. He upheld his promise to Clet and Stripes by hunting for them, and when he said he'd bring them so much venison they wouldn't know what to do with it all, he was not joking in the slightest. He used the hunting also as an exercise in his Shaman powers, using the silence spell to kill multiple deer per attack when he came across herds. He would silence them and hold it, stalk in blended to the shadows, kill the first deer with claws across the throat, slitting its throat, then get at least one more if he could get to the next one before they saw their companion convulsed or dropped or smelled the blood. If he could get to the second one before his silence faded or they noticed him, he could get a third by chasing it down and killing it the old-fashioned way. The attempts wore him out both magically and physically, but he was killing a minimum of one deer per attack, and once got four. He would then drag them back to the cave and pile them up near the cave mouth, then stalk off to get more.

By just after midnight, when he'd both physically and magically exhausted himself and had to stop, he had sixteen deer piled by the cave mouth. He retreated just into the mouth of the cave, laid down, and napped, keeping an ear out for any scavengers that might come looking for the deer, and also to keep an eye out for Toby.

Come sunrise, Stripes woke him up as she stepped around him, and then she gasped and laughed when she saw his night's work. "Clet, there's a pile of deer here nearly as tall as me!" she exclaimed to him.

"I told you I'd get you more venison than you knew what to do with," he said simply from the cave floor, a touch smugly.

"You are an Arcan of your word!" she laughed. "I need my skinning knife, love."

"How did you get so many?" Clet asked in surprise as he deftly reached for a bowl on a little shelf by their pallet, grabbed the sheathed knife within, then used a hand on the wall to guide him to the cave mouth, holding the knife out. Kyven scrambled forward to avoid getting stepped on.

"I'm a very good hunter, Clet," he said modestly. "I'm a climber, they never see me. Almost nothing bothers to look up."

"Ah, true, true," he answered as the cat took the knife, grabbed the top deer on the pile, and dragged it over in a flat spot. "Can you start the fire for us? I think we're having venison for breakfast."

"We'll be having venison for three months," Stripes laughed. "I don't have room on my drying rack for all this! Love, I think we'll have to take some of these down to town to barter them for bread or ale. Let's hold off on breakfast until we get them bartered."

"That's fine with me, I don't want them to go to waste," Kyven said. "Just leave me the smallest one. I'll eat that one."

"I'll ask around down in town while we're there, young fox," Stripes told him. "Quietly let it be known to those we can trust that you're staying with us."

"Thank you very much," he said sincerely. "I can start dressing these, if you show me how you do it. I've never really done it before. I just eat it as I go."

"Alright, come here, young one. I'll show you how to do it the human way."

"No racist comments over there, you two. I *do* have ears," Clet teased.

"As long as he doesn't make you eat with a knife and fork, I'll respect you, Stripes."

The cat laughed, and Clet harumphed from the cave entrance, which made Kyven chuckle.

"I just can't teach him the real way to eat, so I humor him," she answered.

"I don't like the way it tastes raw," he protested.

"I don't like the way it tastes cooked," she retorted.

"Well, you do the cooking, you don't have to cook yours!"

"I don't," she winked at Kyven as showed him her way to skin a deer.

She showed him with two deer, then supervised as he dressed the third, gutting it and cutting it into pieces with the sharp, heavy knife, piling the pieces on the hide, then wrapping it in the hide when he was done. She nodded in approval and tied four deer together, Put on her collar and a large empty back on her back, collected up her husband, then dragged the deer with her, pulling more than her own weight, as she led Clet back to town to barter the deer for other supplies.

It took a few deer before Kyven really got the hang of it. He did a terrible job with the next deer, and didn't do much better with the one after that one. He did better with the third one, and was just starting to get into the swing of it as he butchered the fourth one. He had seven deer butchered when Stripes and Clet returned, coming up the steep, zigzagging path, Clet carrying a bunch of wooden poles on his back and Stripes carrying her large pack, now full. She led Clet to the flat area by the cave and had him hold still as she took the poles off his back, setting them on the ground by the cave, then she took the pack into the cave. "How many deer are left, young one?"

"Five left to butcher," he answered.

"Leave four of them. We sold those, Stripes can't smoke that much meat at once."

"It's going to take me two days to do it," she laughed. "But if you want to keep hunting, be my guest, my young fox. We can barter your kills for goods."

"Best not be too blatant about it, or Toby will notice and possibly come seeing if I'm here," he cautioned.

"I take them to the same person, who is a *friend*," Stripes told him calmly. "He wouldn't give it away. And since this Toby doesn't know us, he doesn't know how many deer I bring into the town every day."

"Ah, true," Kyven nodded.

Stripes inspected his work, tutting him on a few of them, but nodding in approval when she saw the one he's just finished. Then she tied four of the deer together, emptied out the pack into chests and barrels in the cave, then led her husband back towards the town two minars south, dragging the deer behind her.

Kyven had nothing to do after dressing the last deer, so he retreated to the cave, out of sight, and napped some more waiting for them to return. They did so about an hour later, Stripes carrying another pack full of supplies. As she unloaded them, Clet pulled a fiddle from the rack near their pallet, then sat on the stool in the cave and played it while Stripes directed Kyven as they went about preparing breakfast, which was now lunch. She roasted deer liver over the fire for Clet as she and Kyven ate theirs raw, then she and Kyven ranged out to collect firewood so she could smoke and dry the venison. "I'm glad you came along when you did, young one," she said as they gathered firewood in trundles they wore on their backs. "I was looking at a hard time ahead hunting enough meat to hold us through the winter. Between what you brought us, what we can barter, and what I can hunt on my own over the winter, we'll be just fine."

"I'm glad I could help," he told her. "It's nice to be able to do something for someone again."

"Clet doesn't understand that about us," she told him. "He thinks we're a bit silly. He doesn't understand. He can't."

No, he could not. Arcans liked to comfort and be comforted, an aspect of the need to ease the pain of slavery. That Kyven would help so much did not surprise Stripes, who saw an Arcan helping one who helped him, showing his gratitude for their favor.

"I spread the word among those I can trust in town, young one," she told him. "If your friend comes looking for you, he'll be sent to us."

"I can't thank you enough for your help, Stripes."

"You can make sure we have a comfortable winter," she told him with a smile.

"I'll make both of you so fat you can't get back up to the cave," he winked.

She laughed, dumping more wood into his tundle.

For two more days, Kyven holed up with Clet and Stripes. By night, he hunted for them, bringing in eleven deer a night. It was the number Stripes asked him to bring, ten deer to barter and one to eat without cutting into the meat she worked all day every day to smoke and dry when not dragging the kills to barter in town, which was what she could barter away in town without driving down their value. By day, Kyven rested, talked with them, and learned how to smoke meat.

Stripes had a very quick process. She smoked the meat over two racks, her original one and one she'd bought, drying it and then packing it away. She'd dried using two racks, it taking two days to complete the process given how much meat he'd brought them, which was why she bought the second rack, to get the meat dried before it went bad. She would rotate the meat on the racks to keep the lower rows from drying too fast and the upper rows from not drying fast enough, and she was careful to cut her strips of meat to an exact width, which was optimal for smoke drying. Kyven helped by collecting quite a bit of firewood to keep the smoking fires going, and helping her rotate the racks. After she had all the meat dried and found it to be done properly, she packed it in a barrel bartered for a deer carcass. That night, Kyven again killed a large number of deer, both to smoke the meat and also to give Stripes and Clet more bartering goods to stock up on supplies they couldn't otherwise get.

There were a large number of goods in Deep River. Despite being a frontier settlement and effectively lawless, there was money to be made in Deep River, and that brought merchants. They would take the Podac Trail from the Podac River, across the Smoke Mountains, and then down the river by *ship*, of all things, using a special riverboat that went from Deep River to Twin Forks, which was about two hundred minars upriver. There were other merchants who did it by horse train, following the Deep River from further south than Twin Forks, but that was much more dangerous because of wild Arcans and monsters. Every week, the boat would return carrying goods, which were often sold right on the dock so as to avoid the merchant having to stay too long in town. He would sell them goods only attainable in civilization, and take back crystals, hides, pelts, coal, and other goods the frontier town produced. The settlements south of the town produced excess wool and foodstuffs, and they had a tanner in Deep River that produced quite a bit of deer leather and cow leather, which the merchant bought to take back to sell in civilization. The prospectors found just enough crystals to make it worth their while to remain, and that kept the frontier settlement going.

It was truly lawless. Down there, there literally were no rules. It was survival of the fittest, where how many friends one had determined how likely one was not to be harassed. The friendless had to be strong and ruthless to survive, and much as Stripes described, the relationship between Arcan and human was slightly different. Humans *needed* their Arcans, and since it was a poor town, few people owned more than one Arcan, so they had to treat the Arcan well. And, since the town was lawless, there wasn't much stopping Arcans from killing overly brutal or harsh masters. So the relationship between the two races was more of a partnership and less of a master/slave relationship. A man without an Arcan to help him was

at a disadvantage, and a man who mistreated Arcans wouldn't have his Arcan for long. Kyven was shocked to hear of brutal masters found dead, savaged by *other* Arcans for what he did to his own. The collars used around Deep River only prevented Arcans from attacking their own masters... if they actually had collars at all. Many Arcans, used to the brutality found on the other side of the mountains, found the way of things here in Deep River to be much to their liking, and were quite willing and amenable to partnering with their new "master" to work together to survive.

Clet and Stripes was an excellent example of that mindset, though they took it to an extreme. They weren't owner and slave, they were partners. They worked together in all things, took care of each other, and in their case, they went far beyond that into love. The extent of their devotion became clear to him the third morning after he had stayed with them, as Clet played his fiddle and Stripes roasted venison for him for breakfast. "We've been together for thirty-five years," she told him as she sat by the fire. "I was given to him on his twenty-fifth birthday by his parents. He was a banker, you see, and was still trying to make a name for himself. He was poor still, but was forced to appear to have means because he was a *banker*, you see. He spent all his money on his little house and his clothes, to satisfy his bosses, when he barely had the money to eat. So, his parents bought me as a present, to be his maid for him."

"She was a poor maid," Clet chuckled. "So I had to marry her!"

"Be nice, dear, and go back to your fiddle," she chided, and he laughed and did so. "I *wasn't* very good," she admitted. "I was only five, just into adulthood, and I'd been raised on a tobacco farm. I had no idea how to be a house servant. I burned quite a few dinners," she said with a distant smile. "But Clet was tolerant and kind. He knew more about those things than I did, and taught me."

"Since he was so poor, he was not welcome in the social circles of the bank," she continued. "So I was his only real companion. He taught me to read and gave me books when he was at work, since there really wasn't much work for me to do in his little house, and then started giving over his salary to me to manage after he taught me how to do numbers and the concepts of economics. I made us a little money," she said, rather proudly. "It wasn't much, but at least my speculations didn't wipe us out."

"And that's how it happened," Kyven mused. "Because you were always together, and he treated you kindly."

She nodded. "We fell in love," she said. "It took a few years, but it happened. I think we were both quite shocked. I didn't think I could love a human, and I didn't think humans *could* love before I met him. Well, the short of it is that word of our... affair leaked out. It's not a scandal for a human to use Arcans for pleasure, but it *is* a scandal when they find out that the human taught the Arcan to read, and gives her money, and treats her more like a wife than a servant. Clet was dismissed from the bank, and in the face of an inquiry from the Loremasters, we decided to leave Avannar. We fled here, to Deep River, where we floundered for a while until we learned the way things work. We went into business prospecting, and though we never made it rich, we were always comfortable and happy, and Clet was always gentle and loving to me. After he went blind, well, it was my turn to care for him. And I will until we both pass."

"Well, I think it's a wonderful story," Kyven told her, leaning back on one hand. "I hope you have many more years of happiness."

"Oh, we'll have a few more, but I'm getting old, Kyven. I'm forty-two, and it's getting harder and harder to get out of bed every morning. I won't regret not waking up at all, young one. I've had a good life, a life filled with love, and what more could an Arcan ever want or

desire?"

"At least she was easy to please!" Clet cut in, then he started a new song.

"Clet's not quite as old as you, in the relative eye," Kyven noticed aloud.

"I know. I used to worry about that, that he would have no one after I'm gone, but," she hesitated, then she sighed. "But he fixed that."

"After the last time we helped the Masked, I demanded a favor," he said. "I had a Shaman come and Seal us."

"Seal? What does that mean?" Kyven asked.

"Our lives were bound together," Stripes answered. "Simply put, young one, if one of us dies, both of us die. I did not like it one bit when he did that. It is the one bone of contention between us. He has more life to live after I'm gone. He can buy a new Arcan and continue on, live a long time and find happiness."

"I'd hate every second of it," Clet retorted. "Life without you ain't worth livin', darlin'."

"Wow. Just... wow," Kyven breathed. Now *that* was devotion! "I could only dream of finding someone who loved me that much. You're the luckiest Arcan alive, Stripes."

She gave him a shy smile. "I'm determined to outlive him now. He won't escape life by having me die on him first."

"And that's why I did it!" he said, drawing his bow and starting another song. "It was the only way to keep you with me!"

"To think I wasted my entire life on that man," she chided, but she was smiling. "But what else could I do?"

Kyven laughed, understanding the joke, where Clet just gave them a strange look and went back to his fiddle.

Clet and Stripes were... inspirational, at least to him. They were an Arcan and a human, but they had loved each other almost all of Stripes' life, and she had truly been blessed as far as Arcans went. She had not only had a good life with a kind master, but a life filled with love and fulfillment. There was little more an Arcan could ask for, except maybe children... but that was the one thing that Clet could not give her. But it showed that love could truly be blind, and Clet didn't have to be blind first to love Stripes.

Maybe... maybe he could see if Danna could be just as open-minded, start working on her before he changed back. If he could get her to see the man under the fur, maybe she'd be ready to pursue a relationship with him when he was human again. It would be worth the effort, and really wouldn't cost him that much. At worst, he was just being nice to her, at best, she would be amenable to him. He'd just have to be careful, that's all, not push her too far. If she realized he had romantic ideas about her as an Arcan, it might repulse her. It would be worth a try, as long as he was careful. Hell, if Clet could fall in love with an Arcan, at the very least, Danna could find interest in the man behind the Arcan. That would be all he'd hope for, anyway.

A figure appeared at the base of the hill, walking out of the clearing. Kyven hunkered down immediately, but sat back up when he saw that it was an Arcan. It was a long female coyote Arcan, wearing a ragged pair of leather breeches whose legs were torn off at her mid-thigh, and a simple leather wrap going around her small breasts. Her coloration was gray and dusky grayish-brown, with a lighter stomach and darker sides, and she had thick brown hair that was cut short at her shoulders, but was still wild and unkempt, her ears poking out of it. There was a *sense* about this female that he noticed almost immediately.

She was a Shaman!

She waved when Stripes waved down to her, the cat smiling broadly. "You'll meet her now," she laughed. "That's the Shaman!"

"I think that's who I've been waiting for," Kyven said as he stood up as she approached.

The coyote was shorter than him by about two fingers, sleek, and very light-footed. She moved with sinuous grace, reaching her hands out to Kyven as she reached the plateau. "Kyven," she said in a gentle, feminine voice. "It's so nice to meet you!"

He took her hands in his own and nuzzled her in greeting, and she accepted him. "Did Virren send you?"

"Of course. I am Clover, brother," she told him. "And I must say, you are much more handsome than Stalker described you! I love your fur!"

Clover? Oh, he remembered. One of the Shaman that Virren had described to him. She was supposed to be a total sweetheart, kind and gentle.

"Well, Stalker didn't have much of an opinion of me," Kyven said ruefully.

"He would change his words now if he could see you," she said, looking him up and down appraisingly. "What species are you?"

"Shadow fox," he answered. "She made me like *her*."

"Ah. Practical, I suppose. Can you do what the foxes do?"

"I was told that I can. The only trick I've learned so far is the blending trick."

"Well, we'll have to see what else you can do," she said with a gentle smile, releasing his hands. "Stripes! You look well! How have you been?"

"Well, very well, Clover," she answered, hugging the taller Shaman. "Would you like some breakfast?"

"Please!" she said with a nod, stepping into the cave. "Clet! You're getting fat," she chided as she hugged the human.

"Ain't no big thing, Miss Clover," he chuckled. "But I'm certainly trying to make it big!"

She laughed, then licked him on the cheek. "Has my wayward charge been too much of a burden on you?"

"He's been a wonderful guest," Clet answered. "He can outhunt the entire village. We have so much venison we can't smoke it all before it goes bad."

"Yes, I saw," she murmured. "Have you been practicing, Kyven?" she asked as Clet sat back down to his breakfast. She seated herself by the fire with the other two Arcans and accepted a plate of raw deer liver with a smile and a nod.

"As much as I can," he answered. "When are we leaving? And where are we going?"

"We can't leave quite yet," she answered. "I've been tasked to wait a couple of days. You are not the only one I'm here to pick up to take home. I'm waiting for one more. Besides that, there's someone following you that needs to be closer before you leave."

"The Loreguard," he realized.

"Yes. We can't let them get discouraged and give up, now, can we?" she said with a wink.

"They have to keep following you."

"Why do you want the Loreguard chasing you into the wilderness, Shaman?" Stripes asked curiously.

"We want something from them," she answered simply. "Kyven has a rare prize chasing him, dear, a Loreguard *officer*. We can learn much from her."

Kyven didn't quite like the idea of that, of the Masked interrogating someone he rather liked. But Clover put a hand on his leg and gave him a gentle smile, a smile which was... *disarming*.

"Don't worry, young brother, she won't be harmed. We are not like the humans. She will certainly not wish to give up what we want, but we can urge it from her without harm to her."

"How? Magic?"

She nodded as she bit off a piece of liver. "Coldfoot is quite adept at such magic. We will bring her to him." She patted him on the leg. "So... Kyven. You have had a chance no one else has ever had. What did you learn?"

"I learned that the life of an Arcan is uncertain and can be terrible," he answered honestly. "In some ways, I hate it, and I hate what my totem did to me. But, I've learned that there can be joy in that sorrow, and here, now, when the threat of a collar is far away, I find it... satisfying."

"What do you mean?" Stripes asked curiously.

"Dear lady, Kyven is a *human Shaman*," she told her directly, which elicited a gasp of shock from the cat and wild look. "His totem transformed him into one of us to show him our lives, so he may learn wisdom. I think he looks much better this way," the coyote said with a smile, giving him an appraising look.

"I think you're biased, Clover," Kyven retorted.

"You are Shaman? All this time, you never said you were a Shaman! And we've treated you so roughly, making you hunt for us! I'm so ashamed," she said, putting her paws over her face.

"Stripes, I *enjoyed* hunting for you," he told her, pulling her hands away from her face. "And you've been a wonderful host. Does it *matter* that I'm a Shaman?"

"Yes!" she protested.

"Well, I'm not that full of myself," he snorted. "I'm technically not even a Shaman yet. I haven't even finished my training."

"You are *always* Shaman," Stripes told him strongly.

"Well, don't worry about it. I rather liked how you were treating me, treating me as a *friend*, and I'd like to go on being treated that way."

"I—as you wish, Shaman."

"Kyven."

She gave him a slight smile. "As you wish, Kyven," she corrected. "A human? You were born to the wrong race."

He laughed. "I learned the ways of the Arcans quickly," he answered. "If only to survive. The lesson I was taught was... harsh," he said with a shudder.

"Well, I never noticed. I thought you *were* an Arcan."

"Why thank you," he said modestly. "I guess until I'm changed back, I *am* an Arcan."

"We can only hope your totem keeps you this handsome," Clover winked at him.

"Biased."

"Guilty," she said shamelessly.

"Are you going to teach me, Clover?"

She shook her head. "That is between you and your totem," she answered. "I can't interfere. She will teach you what she wishes you to know. I will give you no direct instruction."

He caught that. She said she would give him no *direct* instruction. But, if he happened to *see* her use magic and tried to copy her spell, well, there wasn't much she could do about that.

Clever coyote.

"Stripes, Clet, do remember that what you learned here today about Kyven is a secret. Among the deepest secrets of the Shaman. Imagine if word got out to the human world that human could be Shaman? It goes no further."

"I won't say a word!" she gasped.

"After all you've done for us? I'd never rat you out, Clover," Clet told her.

As they ate and talked, Kyven formed an opinion of Clover. She was *nice*. She was kind, sweet, charming, amiable, one of the friendliest people, human or Arcan, he'd ever met. She

was compassionate and wise, making them all feel totally at ease with her. But behind that friendly outward appearance was a cunning, intelligent female who saw to the heart of things and was very observant. She took in every word, every unconscious movement, every facial expression, and she analyzed them to better know and understand those with her. He found her a little intimidating, but she was so sweet and friendly that she drowned those misgivings under her charm. She was also quite *feminine*. Arcan females could be feminine, like Silver was, but the Arcan condition always made them seem not quite so feminine as human females. But Clover was quite feminine, almost demure, but her demure nature was just her outward personality when interacting with people. If she was Shaman, then she had to be quite wise and strong-willed.

Once they finished breakfast, she took Kyven's hand and got up, then pulled him up. "If you'd excuse us for a bit, my friends, I'd like to have a little talk with my young brother."

"Of course, Shaman," Stripes said deferently.

Hand in hand, Clover led him down the steep hill leading to their cave, but led him towards the river away from the town rather than towards it. When they entered the trees, she leaned over and licked him on the cheek. "Now then, brother, you must tell me what happened. All of it. I wish to know how you have come to be so *Arcan*, when you are human."

He nodded to her, blew out his breath, and told her. *All* of it. He left nothing out, starting all the way back with his time with Stalker. He told her about Avannar, and then his first meeting with the Loreguard woman, Danna, then his time on the ship. After that, he rather matter-of-factly told her about his totem changing him. He went on, describing his time in the Ledwell's cage, and then his journey to Alamar and his time in the blue ring. He was sure to describe both Toby and Silver to her, to let her know how formidable he was, and explain why he'd made the decision he did, of which Silver was a part. "She just made me see the light, in a way," he explained as they reached the river, and she sat him down on a log just near the bank, allowing them to look past a couple of trees and see the dark brown water of the river flow by. "She was so... precious," he said, reaching for words. "I knew then that I had to do something about it, before someone just like her was held down and clubbed to death just so some rich woman could wear her fur." He went on, then, telling her about the flight from Alamar, and his near-capture in Atan when Toby very nearly caught him using his alchemical trinkets. He then told her about meeting his spirit on the way to Deep River, and how she literally fought him into submission, then returned her blessing and gave him back his powers. "And here I am," he concluded. "I met Stripes and Clet while looking for a good hiding place while waiting for you. They're very good people, and in a way, they taught me much about how life can be."

"You have seen life from two points of view, brother. In a way, I envy you," she told him. "My own Walk was much different. Arcans already know the suffering our people face, so I did not have to be taught that. I, like Stalker, had to be taught mercy and kindness rather than be taught about the cruelty that life can hold for many. I learned my lessons better than him," she said with a light chuckle. "The Walk is different for each of us, so that we may know both good and evil, kindness and cruelty, the light and the dark. Shaman walk between those extremes, capable of both when the situation demands. That is the truth of wisdom, my brother. The wise Arcan knows when to be kind, and when to be cruel. When to heal, and when to harm. When to be quiet, and when to be noisy. That is the objective of the Walk, to teach you both sides and make you capable of being a true Shaman."

"I kinda figured that out by the time I was at the ship. The fox kept showing me such dark, evil things, and made me do some pretty cruel things, and I realized she was showing me the *real* world, and that I couldn't cling to my ideals in the real world. To survive in the real

world, I had to be capable of acts that would have appalled me not six months ago.”

“And that shows you are wise, my young brother,” she told him simply. “It took me over a year to grasp that simple truth. But I admit, I resisted the idea of it. I spent nearly six months in a collar, caring for a kind, elderly human who was sweeter than honey. The spirit watching me then had to deny me my magic to keep me in the collar,” she laughed. “I kept trying to slip it and escape. My time there was to show me that not all humans were what I believed them to be, that the spirits care for the humans too. Silver was your moment of epiphany, brother. Master Malvok Tallstand was mine. He was the one that tamed my anger and showed me that love is the greatest power in the world,” she said, a little distantly. “I miss him every day.”

“What happened?”

“I killed him,” she said, so matter-of-factly that it made him flinch. “That in itself was a lesson,” she said with a sigh. “He was old, Kyven. Old, and crippled, and dying of cancered tumors. After I came to love him, after he had shown me the beauty of love, he asked me to end him. I asked him why he waited until I didn’t want to do it, for I’d have ended him in a heartbeat when he first bought me. He simply smiled and answered that he wanted his death to be an act of love, not an act of hatred. And so, out of love for him, I broke his neck,” she said wistfully. “Giving him a swift and painless end to his pain.”

Kyven put his hand on her shoulder reflexively, offering her comfort. She gave him a smile and pushed against him until he had his arm around her, putting her head on his shoulder. “You *are* so much an Arcan,” she laughed. “It’s so easy to forget you were born human.”

“I learned quickly,” he chuckled. “I guess I just understand Arcans now, on a very intimate level.”

“That fact will be much help to you in Haven, where hatred of humanity is strong,” she told him. “Many there are escaped slaves, escaped from the horrors of bondage. Our children have known nothing but Haven, have lived free of the collar, but they share the outrage of their parents and a prejudice taught to them. Their hatred of humans is taught rather than ingrained, but no less strong.”

“My totem told me that I needed to understand Arcans to be accepted, that some wouldn’t accept me even as a Shaman because of me being human.”

“Some would not accept you as a human, no matter that you are Shaman. But when you arrive in Haven as an *Arcan*, they will not reject you.”

“Even if I become human again?”

“That, I don’t know,” she said, then she was silent a moment, scratching under her chin. “It would be interesting to see,” she finally said. “It would teach them a poignant lesson about judging people,” she declared.

“What is Haven like?”

“Much like the Free Territories,” she said with a smile. “It is more than a city, Kyven, it is a *nation*. Our main city is far to the northwest, on the prairies west of the Great Snake River, far from where humans care to tread because of the cold and lack of crystals. But there are villages and towns, like Atan, scattered across the prairie, where we farm and craft goods and do all the things the humans do. The Arcan Council rules Haven, fifteen of the wisest Arcans, with the Shaman working among the people where we are needed.”

“What do the Shaman do?”

“We speak for the spirits,” she answered. “The spirits do not command the Arcans, but they do wish their voices to be heard and considered when they make their decisions. It will be nice to go home,” she said with a sigh. “I have been gone from Haven for nearly six months. There aren’t many of us, you know. Maybe only a thousand Shaman overall. Some of us

work in Haven, some work with the Masked, such as me, Stalker, and Coldfoot. The Free Territories are our territory, as it were. When the Masked in the Free Territories needs a Shaman, one of us answers the call.”

“No others? I met a skunk Shaman in Riyan.”

“That was Coldfoot,” she said with a wink. “Keeping an eye on the humans and gathering information for the Masked in his special way. Quite handsome, isn’t he?”

“I didn’t think so at the time, I was human when I met him,” he mused.

“Well, he is,” she giggled, then she lifted up from his shoulder and sniffed at the air. “He has been recalled, though. All the Shaman, everywhere, have been recalled. The spirits feel we are needed back home, and so we answer that call and obey.”

“Are we waiting for Coldfoot?”

She shook her head. “The Masked is bringing a group of Arcans to take to Haven. Since I need to take you home, and lure the Loreguard officer along with us, I’ll be traveling with you.”

“How many Arcans are there in Haven?” he asked impulsively.

“*Many*,” she said with a bright smile. “Hundreds of thousands. Maybe even a million,” she declared proudly. “Haven began as a group of escaped Arcans searching for a home where the humans would never bother them. They had the first Shaman with them, Firetail, who the spirits led to the cold prairies far from here, west-northwest of the Inner Sea, where the summer permits us to work farms but the winters frighten away the humans. Firetail and the Firstcomers founded the village they called the Safe Haven, a place the spirits told them would be safe from the humans, and it has grown in the centuries since its founding. It has gone from a tiny hamlet of fifteen Arcans to a nation of hundreds of thousands. Every year, we bring as many as we can to safety, one or two at a time, as we can. We must be careful. If the Loremasters were to uncover the organized movement of Arcans into the wilderness, they would move swiftly to root out this organization and crush it, putting the Masked in grave risk. So, to protect the Masked, and to protect Haven from discovery, we move very, very carefully.”

“I can see why. They wouldn’t be ready for an army of Loreguard to march into Haven, would they?”

“They would, but it is not that army that would doom Haven, brother, it would be the simple revelation among the humans that Arcans have their own city. They would rise up against our enslaved people and kill them, then march on Haven in numbers would could not oppose. The discovery of Haven would risk the entire Arcan race.”

Kyven wasn’t so sure about that. Yes, there would be some reactionaries, but the people in Atan, for example, would just shrug and go on about their business. But, he had to admit, if people like Arthur Ledwell found out their *animals* were actually *intelligent*, they would have a bad reaction to it. They would see it as a personal challenge to human supremacy, and would try to destroy the Arcan city. The key of it would be how many would just shrug and go on, and how many would see it as some kind of inter-species pissing contest and come after the Arcans to beat them back into their perceived place. But would enough react like that to threaten the entire Arcan race? He doubted it. Would enough react to get a hell of a lot of Arcans killed? Yes, most likely, but not threaten the race. But that itself was probably enough to stay Haven’s hand about doing anything bold and continuing to try to free their people one escaped Arcan at a time. Getting half of the Arcans they were trying to save killed wasn’t exactly a victory.

“I can see their nervousness, but it wouldn’t be as bad as they think. Not *all* humans would react that way. Many would, yes, and quite a few Arcans would be killed, but it wouldn’t

wipe out the Arcan race.”

“That alone would stay our hand. We are trying to *save* our people, not get them killed. But there is no easy solution.”

There is not always a happy ending, he remembered the fox telling him, which made him shiver a little. That lesson could apply here, oh yes it could.

“We just have to trust in the spirits, I guess,” he said. “Well, *other* spirits. I’m not very happy with my totem at the moment.”

She giggled. “She did you a favor,” she teased, patting him on the leg. “I like you much better this way.”

“You’re biased.”

“Yes. Yes, I am,” she smiled, leaning over and licking him on the muzzle teasingly. “Let’s go back to Clet and Stripes. I’m sure they’re anxious to talk to you,” she smiled as she stood up, then helped him up.

“Are you staying with us?”

She nodded. “It’s a small cave, though. Mind sharing your blankets with me?”

“I’d be honored,” he answered as they walked, hand in hand, back to the cave.

Clet and Stripes played host to Kyven and Clover for two days. Over those two days, Clover quite effectively took over their entire lives with her warmth and charisma. It wasn’t that she was a bully, it was that Clet and Stripes loved her, loved her very much, and wanted to be around her, talk to her, pay attention to her and get attention from her. Clover was quite gracious, even pitched in in her own way using Shaman magic by preserving all the meat that Kyven hunted for them those two nights. She told him to bring every single deer he could catch, and he did so. He hunted them twenty-two deer the first night, then thirty-one the second night. Stripes and Clover dressed them all the day after, and then Kyven saw Clover use Shaman magic. Her spell preserved the meat, drying it out just as if they’d smoked it, but drying it in larger sections rather than thin strips. The spell, he could tell, wasn’t instant. It was maintained, drawing all the water out of the meat and preserving it, then she would touch the meat and use the spell the fox taught him to eradicate any possible diseases. The result was a perfectly preserved piece of meat.

And Kyven learned a new spell.

Not *officially* of course, but it didn’t take him long to figure out how to envision the spell to make it work, and well, the fox told him to practice, and Clover didn’t *know* what spells he knew... so he tried it himself. He imagined the meat drying out, all water drawn out of it, leaving it perfectly preserved, then he rather coyly beseeched the fox to grant him the power to make it happen. She responded with similar coyness, as if turning a blind eye to granting him the power to use a spell she had not taught him, and the piece of meat quickly dried to perfect preservation.

Guile and deceit... she deceived him, and so he deceived her. And that seemed to *please* her.

They shared his blankets, but not always at the same time. He stayed out half the night, hunting deer, but when he came back, she accepted him into the blankets and cuddled up with him. Her fur was rougher than his but still thick, and he found her presence to be quite comforting and pleasant. She treated him just like an Arcan, not treating him like a human, touching him and nuzzling him as an Arcan would wish to be touched. As far as she was concerned, he *was* an Arcan. He responded at that level, and that seemed to please her to no end.

He slept late into the morning while the others did their daily tasks, and as Clover caught up with what were clearly her old friends, then he woke up and continued his education on how

things were done in rough conditions... for he’d learned quite a bit about cooking over an open fire, storing food, and living in, well, a cave. He wondered why they lived in a cave when they could build a cottage, but one look at them answered that question. They were *happy* here, and since they were happy, why should they move?

Kyven felt much more secure, to be honest about it. He was still afraid of Toby, but with Clover here, an experienced Shaman, he felt that she would protect him. His view of her as a protector kept him pretty close to her when he wasn’t out hunting at night, when he was invisible and felt completely secure by himself, and she seemed quite content with his need to stay close to her. She rather liked having him within arm’s reach, and often would get lost in running her fingers through his thick, soft fur. Despite her infatuation with his fur and her freedom to touch, however, she made no amorous advances to him either night. That sort of rubbed him both ways. Days of thinking of Danna had made him rather amenable to the idea of a little distraction, but he didn’t think it proper to proposition a female he barely knew, one that was his superior among the Shaman, and an Arcan that was free and might have different customs than the Arcans he’d met in captivity. Actually, it was her status as a Shaman more than barely knowing her or her possibly different customs. He wasn’t sure what kind of social customs existed among Shaman, or between Shaman and others outside of the tendency of Arcans to treat Shaman with tremendous respect and deference.

She seemed a little amused by him when he woke up on the second morning, on her belly by him, propped up on her elbows with her chin on her hands, giving him a little smile. He yawned, showing off his teeth, then looked at her curiously. “Uh, morning?”

She grinned. “Did you know you talk in your sleep?” she said in a naughty tone.

“I don’t like where this is going.”

She laughed. “Who is Danna?”

“That’s a woman I know,” he said carefully. “Why?”

“You were mumbling her name, while pawing me for everything you were worth.”

Kyven was rather embarrassed, looking away. “Sorry about that. I’ve been told it’s not the first time I’ve done it.”

She laughed. “Don’t be embarrassed,” she told him. “You pawed me, so I pawed you back,” she winked.

He laughed ruefully. “I guess it was only fair. If we’re ever sleeping together again and I do that, just elbow me. You’re not the first girl I’ve pawed while sleeping. I should have warned you, now that I think of it.”

“No big deal, brother. If you ever need comfort, I’m right here,” she said, reaching over and digging her fingers into the white fur on his chest.

“Well, if I do that again tonight, I might take you up on that,” he told her.

“Oh, a promise,” she winked, then she rolled over and stood up, stretching. She wore clothes as a habit, but she slept nude, and he had to admire her very sleek, toned form, the body of a Shaman. She had a black stripe on her back, and a very unusual splotch of black on the fur on her left buttock, shaped like a shamrock.

“I see why you’re named Clover,” he said, looking at her.

She looked back at him, then laughed and put her hands on her waist, near her tail. “So you see my little clover,” she winked. “Actually, that’s just a coincidence. I got my name because I *love* the smell of clovers. I used to wear a garland of clover all the time when I was cub, and so I got the name. This is just coincidence,” she said, pointing at her little coloration. “Or perhaps a symbol of my love of clovers, who knows?”

“Well, it’s very handsome.”

“Thank you. But you win the best fur competition, brother,” she grinned as he sat up. “Your

fur is almost *sinfully* soft. I'm looking forward to sleeping up against that fur for the next few weeks." She frowned as she picked up her tattered short trousers. "We need to get going. It may still be warm here, but autumn is already taking hold in Haven. Our traveling companions need to get here soon, I don't want to have to trudge up there in the snow. I expect them sometime today, though. Swift is almost always right on time."

And he was. Kyven napped through the morning, and was woken up by Clover with a gentle hand on his shoulder. "Wake up and dress, my brother," she told him. "It's time for us to go."

"They're here?"

She nodded. "Arrived just moments ago. We have to move on, quickly."

"Why so fast?" he asked as he sat up.

"Because your Loreguard are not an hour behind them," she answered. "We must be away while they waste time trying to cross the river."

"Alright," he said, getting up. He dressed quickly then came out of the cave to see four Arcans. One was a fairly tall and burly cougar male with a nick cut out of his left ear, one was a very lean male canine with a narrow muzzle and short, wiry gray fur, one was a very young female raccoon with curiously darker markings than usual for raccoons, her fur where it would normally be dark brown instead pitch black, and the last was a thin female of a species he had never seen before. She looked curiously ursine, but she had reddish fur and a much narrower face and muzzle to be a bear. She had bear-like claws on her hands and feet, but lacked the heavy build to be a bear. Her fur was red, but she had white patches over and to the insides of each eye, a white muzzle and chin, and two white patches on her cheeks. Her ears were white as well, poking out of her dark red hair. She also had a long banded tail, red and crème color in alternating stripes, which was a dead lock that she was not a bear. Bears did not have long tails.

"Swift! Right on time!" Clover said as she came down the path, then she embraced the wiry canine. "And who did you bring for me to take home?"

"Clover," the canine said with a smile. "First, this is Claw. He escaped the fighting pens in Cheston before they broke him."

"Congratulations, Claw. I will take you where you never have to fight again," she said, putting her hand on the big cougar's shoulder.

"Shaman," he said with the utmost reverence. "Will you bless me?"

"Of course," she said with a smile. "May the spirits bless you and watch over you, my friend," she intoned, which almost made him quiver in delight.

The canine motioned to the raccoon as Kyven pulled on his shirt and started towards them, and as Clet and Stripes appeared out of the trees, Clet being led by his wife. "This is Teacup, Shaman," he introduced.

"Because I've always been small," the raccoon said, resisting the urge to bow as Clover gave her a nuzzle and hug. "Are you really a Shaman?"

"Yes, I am Shaman, young one," she smiled, then she turned to the unusual female. "My, a red panda! Such a beautiful girl," she said, patting her on the shoulders.

"She had no name, so we call her Patches," the canine informed her.

"A pretty name," she said, touching the panda on the white patch on her cheek.

"Thank you, Shaman," she said meekly, looking down.

Kyven joined them, and Clover motioned to him. "This is Kyven," she introduced, "a fellow Shaman and also journeying to our destination."

"Shaman," the cougar said, coming over and taking his hands. "Will you bless me?"

Kyven already knew that the best thing to do was just do it. He put his hand on the cougar's

shoulder and complied. "May the spirits watch over you and bless you."

The cougar literally bowed to him in gratitude.

"And I thought Patches was unusual," the raccoon said appraisingly, looking at him. "What are you, Kyven?"

"A fox," he answered.

"A breed unknown in our lands," Clover added. "But we have little time. We must be off. I see no packs with them. Are they carrying what they need, Swift?"

"Ah, no, Shaman," he said, a little apologetically. "We didn't have the opportunity to get it."

"Then we will buy it in town. Let's say farewell to our hosts and then be away."

Stripes and Clet were brought over to them and Clover said goodbye. The reactions of the three Arcans to Clet said much about how they'd handled captivity. Claw snarled at the old man, but also backed up an involuntary step. Teacup didn't react much at all to the man, but Patches quietly drew close to Kyven and surreptitiously got behind him, hiding from the old man. "It's alright, he's a friend, and he's blind. He's no threat," he whispered to the small female, which made her just get behind him more. She skittered away when Stripes led Clet over to him and she hugged him. "It was good having you, Shaman," she told him. "You're welcome with us at any time."

"Thank you for your hospitality, both of you," he said, clapping Clet on the shoulder. "Be good to each other."

"Every day," Clet said with a smile. "Every day."

"Come, then. Swift, come with us. I'd rather have them wait near the town for me to buy what is needed, and you and Kyven can keep them safe."

Kyven left the cave behind and took up a position behind the others, to keep an eye on them, as the six Arcans dropped to all fours at Clover's prompting and then loped off towards Deep River. Kyven was a little worried about going so close to town with Toby there, but perhaps he'd get lucky and avoid the hunter. He considered what might happen for the fifteen minutes it took them to run to the edge of the town, then Clover led them around to the west side of the small, log-built town, leading them to a rather wide trail that led towards the west side of the river valley. "Wait here, all of you," she said after leading them into the woods about a hundred rods from the trail, to a fallen log that was just barely visible to the town through the trees. "I'll return with what we need for the journey."

She padded off into the village, leaving Kyven and Swift to defend the three Arcans, though Claw looked to be quite capable of defending himself. Kyven stayed up on his feet as the two females sat on the log, Claw paced back and forth near them, and Swift stood back behind them with his eyes scanning the woods. They waited five minutes, and then ten minutes, and then fifteen minutes, and then half an hour. Kyven started getting worried after the half hour, worried that Clover had run into trouble with someone who saw she had no collar, worried that something had gone wrong.

He was sure of it when he heard a thunderclap, then another thunderclap, and then a gunshot. Both he and Claw found themselves taking a step forward, but then Kyven steadied himself and put a hand out to stop the cougar. Clover was a big girl, she was a Shaman, she'd call him if she needed help. Just do what she wanted, protect the others.

That confidence faded when Toby appeared in the trees. He was running straight at Kyven with amazing speed, and Kyven took a single step back and bared his fangs. He had people to protect, he couldn't run!

No, if he ran, he'd be protecting them, Toby was only interested in *him*!

"Swift, protect them!" Kyven barked, then he turned, dropped to all fours, then loped off back towards the village. Kyven slithered aside when the tendril of the snaring whip lashed

out, striking the tree behind him, but when he was clear of the others, he slid to a stop on all fours, rose up on his legs, and then squared off against the persistent hunter.

“Ah have tah take ya back,” Toby called as he rushed forward with his whip.

“I’m never going back,” Kyven growled, “and I’m not the easy mark you chased to Atan anymore.” Where was Clover? Was she alright? Did Toby ambush her and kill her, to eliminate her? No, he didn’t know she was with him, but did Clover attack him in the street, and get killed for her underestimating him? That was possible. Toby lashed the whip at him, which Kyven caught with his hand. He opened his eyes to the spirits and was about to channel lightning through the whip and into him, but Clover was there, coming out of nowhere. She slid to a stop behind the man, who was already turning to face her with a shocked look on his face, but she reached out and touched him just once, almost gently, and the tendril stuck to his hand evaporated. Toby reached for his knife, but the Shaman didn’t move, only used magic. She channeled a spell that struck Toby like a fist, but Clover never moved. The hunter catapulted backwards and slammed into a tree, then sank dazed to the earth. Clover walked over and grabbed him by his vest, hauled him off the ground with one arm, and then slammed him into the tree trunk. The man was dazed, blood oozing from the corner of his mouth, but Clover was just giving him a light, almost amused smile. “You should have made sure of me, human,” she told him, almost conversationally. “But you’re good. I’ll give you that. I think I’ve pulled your teeth, but I do think you need a little something to remember me by.”

“What happened, Clover?” Kyven asked, noticing that the gray fur on her right thigh, just under her breeches, was bloody.

“He saw us skirting the village and tried to catch me to lure you out,” she answered. “He was actually *polite* about it, but I was quite surprised when he cancelled my spell, grounded my lightning, and retaliated with his pistol. He shot me in the *leg* of all places. Too bad for him I can heal,” she chuckled. “But now he has to be shown how much I disapprove of being shot.” She dragged him over to the log as the females scattered, sat down, turned Toby over her knee, then proceeded to spank him like a misbehaving child. She spanked him hard and thoroughly, and he did not resist. Kyven suspected that the blow to his head had given him a concussion. After she finished spanking him, she tossed him aside like so much chaff and stood up. “Let’s go.”

Kyven looked down at the still form of Toby, who then groaned and made jerky movements. My, how the mighty had fallen in his eyes. He’d been so afraid of the hunter, but he’d just seen him literally spanked right before his very eyes. “What did you do to him?” Kyven asked.

“I drained all the crystals in his alchemical devices,” she said with a grin. “Without those, he’s not quite so formidable. And by the time he finds crystals to replace them, we’ll be well ahead of him.”

“You have *got* to show me how you do that,” Kyven said as Clover walked back towards the village.

“Why not kill him?” Claw asked with a dreadful eagerness.

“I never kill unless I have no other choice, Claw,” she said simply. “He is suitably pacified without me having to kill him, and is now no longer any threat to us. Now, move to the trail, friends. I’ll meet you there. I have to go recover our goods. Swift, come with me.”

“This is goodbye, my friends. Good luck, and may the spirits grant you a happy life,” the canine said, nuzzling each of them in turn, then he shook Kyven’s paw and nuzzled him. “Keep them safe, Shaman.”

“I’ll do my best,” he nodded in reply.

They took up a position on the trail, with Kyven standing between the others and the village, vigilant and watchful. Clover put their safety in his hands, and he was taking her charge very seriously. He kept scanning the woods and the town, looking for any danger, and his ears were up and listening intently. He was quite surprised by what he saw. He thought Toby would put up more of a fight than that, but it just went to show how dangerous the Shaman could be. Toby had shot her and she just healed the wound, then she ambushed him here while his attention was fixed on Kyven, while he thought she was injured and out of action. She had moved so fast, caught him by surprise, and then it was over. Without his alchemical devices, he was just one man against a Shaman, and that was a very tilted playing field. Clover still had her magic, but Toby’s magical devices were rendered useless with that single touch. And without those, he had to fight her with nothing but a knife... which didn’t last long.

A prospector leading a mule approached from the west. Kyven held Claw back from attacking and had them clear the path, and they watched the man, mule, and the canine Arcan behind them amble by, an Arcan with no collar. The Arcan just smiled and reached out his hand to them, touching each of them as he went by, then he hurried up to the human’s side and started talking to him as he put his collar on.

“Why doesn’t he run?” Claw asked in confusion.

“He must rather like the human,” the raccoon mused. “That, or he’s been broken.”

“That wasn’t the smile of a broken Arcan,” Patches said. “I think he *wants* to be here. Strange,” she noted.

Clover returned a moment later carrying five packs, each with a bedroll. She handed them out to each of them, and Kyven found his very light, virtually empty. “We will fill our waterskins later, at a cleaner stream,” she smiled. “Let us be off now, my friends. We have a ways to go before we rest.”

Clover dropped to all fours and loped off down the trail, and the others followed her. But Kyven froze when he looked past the village, down the slope, where the river was visible, and saw five horses, four of them holding riders, waiting as the ferry rowed across the river.

Danna.

He sighed and turned to catch up with the others. But half of him wanted to go the other way, to go see her. He wanted to see her, to talk to her... to touch her. But he couldn’t. Not right now.

But maybe soon. Clet and Stripes gave him some hope. When they finally collected her, he could try to talk to her, show her the man behind the Arcan, and maybe she’d be at least inclined towards him.

It was always worth a try.

Miserable place.

Danna led her three remaining men off the ferry and to the frontier settlement of Deep River, and she watched them all stare at them curiously, and a little nervously or speculatively. Places like this were populated by criminals and low types, many of them with warrants against them by civilized towns, and so they came to places like this to hide. Deep River was just an example of the many frontier towns scattered across the far side of the Smoke Mountains, filled with mountain men, prospectors, and brave frontier settlers who were willing to live without crystal-based devices and farm the land the old fashioned way, living literally by the mercy of the seasons and the wilderness, where a series of bad harvests or a single encounter with a savage monster could mean death for them.

Monsters. She could only look at the empty horse behind her, and the bandage on Evad’s arm. They’d already had their first run-in with a monster, and it cost her one of her men. It

was a Wolveran, a huge wolverine-like creature that was nearly the size of a pony. It had ambushed them yesterday morning, jumping off a rock face and landing right on Verka. He was killed almost instantly, his head literally ripped off by the thing, then it knocked the horse down jumping towards Evad. It swiped him out of the saddle, lacerating his arm with four deep, nasty gashes, but then it was shot dead by Danna's crystal slug, a bullet that killed what it hit. That round cost her nearly four hundred chits, but it was worth it to drop that thing before it killed more of her men. There was little they could do. They buried Verka, said a prayer for him, and pressed on.

That only steeled their resolve, though. The men had been told what they were chasing, and they understood how important it was to capture that Arcan—man—whatever he was and find out just what the hell happened to him. This was something that would be of tremendous importance to the Loremasters. Something they'd never encountered before had done this, something none of them believed possible, and so finding the answer was of critical importance.

They knew it would be dangerous. The wilderness was filled with monsters, wild Arcans, and unfriendly mountain men, but Danna had taken precautions. All their Loreguard surcoats were packed away, as were their chain jacks, which weren't really worn by people outside of an army or the Loreguard. They wore plain clothing, if fine clothing, and that fact and their horses made people wary of them. They didn't look like the kind of people who would be in a place like this, and people in places like this didn't like people like that. Danna led her horse and tried to stop several people, who shied away from her, until she cornered a blind man being led by a small cat Arcan. "I'm looking for an Arcan," she told them.

"Well, given I can't see, I can say with some truth that I ain't seen him," the old blind man chuckled, his eyes milky white with cataracts.

She was about to take the old man to task for his attitude, but a familiar voice interrupted. "Y'all may as well turn around an' go back," the hunter, Toby said as he limped down the street. "He got away from me just a bit ago. Ah think," he grunted, touching his bloody cheek. "He's got a Shaman with him now. She's protectin' him."

The old man and cat scurried off, and Danna motioned to her men to let them go. "And that means you're giving up?"

"Ah don't nevah give up," he said simply. "But that Shaman done put me behind. She shattered the crystals in mah gear, an' Ah have tah replace 'em."

"Well, I'd say good luck to you, but since I'm after your quarry, I won't be a hypocrit," she told him simply.

"Ah think we might be makin' a deal ovah him," Toby told her. "He's got a Shaman with him now, he won't be easy tah catch 'tall. Ah think it might take all o' us tah bring him in."

"If we catch him, hunter, we keep him."

"Ah understand that. But y'all can write a lettah Ah can take back tah Alamar statin' Ah *did* catch him, but y'all confiscated him. And perhaps pay what he's worth," he added. "So Ah can get mah deposit back from Annette Ledwell."

Danna looked at the man and considered it. He was clearly a good hunter, and was quite fearless. He'd chased the Arcan into the frontier alone, and had even had the guts to fight a Shaman. He lost, but he wasn't afraid, and from the sound of it, he'd take the Shaman on again. "You won't contest our possession of him?"

"Give me that lettah and at least be willin' tah bargain a fair price fo' him in good faith, an' Ah will not," he affirmed. "Ah think teamin' with y'all will be the only way Ah can catch him, now that he has a Shaman protectin' him."

"I think you were right, Captain," Bardin noted. "If the Shaman have an interest in him as

well, then we *really* need to capture him. To keep him away from them if nothing else."

"You have a deal, hunter," she told him. "I'm afraid I lost one of my men, but you can use his horse for now."

"Toby. Toby Fisher," he said by way of introduction. "Let me replace the crystals in mah gear, and Ah'll be ready tah go. They can't be far ahead o' us. Ah tangled with 'em not but an hour ago."

"Take your time to get what you need, since we need to resupply as well. They can run all they want," Danna stated simply, holding up a small compass, a compass with a red needle, watching the needle turn and point west, pointing right to him. "We'll catch him."

A Shaman? Well, she had one shot left of her killing rounds. That would take care of that Shaman. Once the Shaman was out of the way, they'd be able to capture Kyven, especially with the formidable hunter's help. And once she had him, she would discover his secret.

And once she knew his secret... what then? What would the Loremasters do with him? She wasn't sure. If it wasn't his fault, they should be lenient with him. He was running now out of fear, nothing else. She would show him that he didn't have to be afraid of them. The Loremasters were working for the betterment of all people, she really believed that... but she felt that the order needed a little cleaning out. The deaths she'd originally been investigating had included a very ugly fact the Loreguard had covered up, that the four men killed had raped and killed a young woman, literally in the act. They couldn't permit people to go around and dish out their own form of justice, especially against the upholders of law and order, but in her opinion, men capable of such unspeakable acts should never have been given the uniform to wear in the first place. It had been the first time she'd been ashamed of her order, and if she had anything to say about it, it would be the last. She would return from this mission and start digging through the Loreguard to weed out undesirables and sack them. She wasn't about to investigate another case of a dead Loreguard killed while committing a crime himself.

But that was in the future. For right now, she had to capture Kyven and find out just what happened to him. And she had to admit, she'd enjoy the ride back. She'd have him right here, able to talk to him, able to get to know him. It was his handsome face that had piqued her curiosity about him, but now she wanted to get to know the man behind that face. With luck, the Loremasters would find a way to change him back, and then when he was human...

She put that out of her mind. One step at a time. First, she had to catch him, but now there was a complication. A Shaman. The Shaman wanted him too, and what was not good was that they *had* him, and he was willing to go with them. Of course he would be. He was an Arcan now, they would offer to protect him and he'd believe them. But he didn't know Shaman. They couldn't be trusted. They did the bidding of some dark, sinister force that they called the spirits, who sought to subvert the natural order of things where humans ruled and Arcans served. The Shaman wanted to turn that over, subjugate humanity to the Arcans, which would cause the total destruction of all society, since the vast majority of Arcans were stupid and could not take care of themselves. And those rare few intelligent Arcans wanted to put the animals in control?

Insanity.

But that too was in the future. She had one shot left from her killing rounds, and that shot had that Shaman's name written on it. She would kill the Shaman, and that would make Kyven an easy mark to capture and take back to the Loremasters.

And then she'd discover the truth of him.

Chapter 12

It was an interesting array of personalities, and reflections of their former places in the human world.

Claw was big, powerful, and had many scars that showed his prior life as a fighter in the Pens of Cheston. He had survived there for over a year, killing fellow Arcans just to survive in their bloody, gladiatorial games, then forced to eat the flesh of his opponent when he was butchered, and often the flesh of other Arcans bought for no reason other than to feed the fighters. Claw had gone over a year eating nothing but the flesh of his own kind. Because of that, Claw was almost jumpy and quick to react to any unknown sound or touch with violence. He was quick to anger, and had a mean streak in him gained from having to entertain people who had come to watch Arcans rip each other to shreds. But despite that, he had a very real fear of humans, a fear that made him even more violent because he hated them, yet he feared them. His feeling of helplessness gave him a hair trigger, a trigger that often went off on the others. Claw was not very social as Arcans went, for he'd spent the last year seeing all others of his kind as Arcans he might have to kill, so he would not form bonds. That made him ill-equipped to travel with other Arcans, and caused him to become something of a pariah among them... which only made him angrier. But Clover wasn't afraid of him, and his absolute reverence for the Shaman made him meek and supplicant to her, and to Kyven as well. In the year he'd been in the Pens, his only dream he allowed himself was that someday he'd be free, and his white knight in his dreams was a Shaman. He'd freed himself, being sent to Alamar to be sold there as a fighting Arcan, slipping his collar, then breaking out of his cage and running. The Masked had found him and passed him along through the Network, a series of Masked in villages and lone outposts and cabins in unpopulated areas that funneled Arcans from human lands to Haven. Claw had come from Cheston, then was taken across the Smoke Mountains from another mining village in the far south of the Free Territories called Veroke. Claw would have been a problem had Clover not been there, for she was already gently and carefully soothing him and showing him that the other Arcans were not his enemies. He *knew* that already, but a year of conditioning was not easy to shrug off.

Teacup was the most social of the three. She was very young, only six, exceedingly small even for her age, and was very chatty and outgoing. She'd been raised on a tobacco farm, like many Arcans in the Free Territories were, and was being sent to Riyan for sale when she escaped by virtue of being chained to three other Arcans that did. Teacup hadn't been quite intent on escape, young and idealistic about her chances of landing a master that would put her to work in someone's house, since she was so cute and perky, but she really had little choice. The biggest irony was that after they were free of the chains, the other three were captured and Teacup, fearing being punished for escape when she never intended to escape in the first place, continued to run. She was found by the Masked and put into the Network, and here she was. She was very talkative, very very Arcan with her need to touch, and she was energetic and enthusiastic. Now that she was free, she was rather taken with the idea of life away from the humans, almost as if she had to be free before she fully understood and appreciated the life she left behind. She was now quite excited by the prospect of seeing the mythical Haven. Teacup wasn't afraid of humans at all, she was actually rather infatuated by them, by their strange diametric personalities. She was also bold to the point of recklessness, not afraid of things she should have the sense to be afraid of... like Claw. She just couldn't seem to comprehend the fact that Claw was not raised in the same benevolent environment she had been, and tried to treat him like any other Arcan.

Patches was the other extreme. She too was young, only seven, but she had been very

harshly abused by humanity in her short, young life. Raised in a rich household, she had been the recipient of a great deal of physical abuse by a drunken master and a cold, sadistic mistress. Patches' parents were abused, the family's children were abused, the two owners abused anyone and everyone in their house. She would be beaten by the man and had her hands plunged in boiling water and cut by knives by the woman. Her parents were also abused, but unlike her, they had been broken completely by the humans. They accepted their abuse with complete docility, always saying that they deserved them, and did not protect their child from similar treatment... but what could they do? Patches grew up subjected to daily abuse and became fearful and docile herself, at least until she grew up. When the woman burned her with a hot poker, Patches realized the crystal in her collar had faded, freeing her to retaliate. She killed the woman with the very poker she'd used to burn her, waited for the master to come home, then stabbed him with a knife, killing him. She took her collars off her parents, who then attacked *her* for killing their owners, so completely they were broken. Patches fled from that house in Beran and was found herself in the care of the Masked after nearly dying of starvation out in the wilderness. They had to nurse her out of her shell, help her get over her trauma first, but when she was well enough to travel, they sent her on. Patches was very nervous, very submissive, and very dependent, despite her traumatic upbringing. She was deathly afraid of being alone, and almost never left Teacup's side, having attached herself to the young raccoon. But, in the short time they'd been together, Clover had become the mother that Patches had never had but always wanted. Clover's gentle, sweet demeanor had utterly charmed the young panda, and she received from Clover the kind of warm, unconditional love she'd always craved but never received.

Three Arcans, three very different Arcans, but they shared a common goal now of seeing Haven. Claw wanted a place where he would never have to be afraid of humans again, where he could regain his dignity and try to shed his fear and hostility towards his own people, which had been ingrained into him in the Pens. Teacup wanted the adventure of living *by herself*, of learning a trade and earning her own way without being told what to do. Patches wanted safety, to be in a place where she could feel safe and secure, a place where there were no humans to abuse her and people who would be nice to her.

Their reactions to Kyven were different, but expected. Claw was reverent towards him because he was a Shaman, otherwise he would be very aggressive and hostile, as he was another male, and Claw almost always had had to fight other males. Females weren't as big and strong as males, and it was a poor, quick match when they were pitted against each other. Teacup was very curious about him because she was curious about everything and everyone, more than willing to talk with him for hours and hours if he allowed it. Patches saw him as another authority figure, like Clover, but she wasn't as friendly with him. Clover was kind and gentle, urging Patches' obedience with love, where she obeyed Kyven out of reflex and a little fear. She didn't know him and her view of authority figures was a negative one, but when she was afraid, she was more than willing to seek him out for protection. But she always looked at him as if she expected him to start beating her at any minute, and that made Kyven a little indignant. As if he'd ever do something like that.

They moved steadily northwest, into progressively smaller and smaller hills, over three days. They would run at a pace that let the very domestic Patches keep up without exhausting herself, which Kyven figured wasn't much faster than the horses of the Loreguard chasing them, eating the remains of the kills Kyven made for them the night before. Then, when they bedded down for the night, Kyven would hunt. Claw wanted to hunt with him, but Clover kept them at their camp, understanding that Kyven's method of hunting was virtually unstoppable by the prey. If he could find the deer, so long as they weren't downwind of him, he

would catch them. He would kill one or two deer each night, which was enough to feed all five of them, then give them food to last them through the next day. One deer would suffice, were Kyven not so dependent on large amounts of food he needed to recover after practicing magic until he all but passed out after bringing the food back to camp.

How they slept also reinforced Kyven's observations. All of them but Claw slept together, in the typical Arcan fashion of seeking comfort and reinforcing social bonds by sleeping together, while the cougar Arcan slept by himself on the far side of camp, or in a nearby tree. Patches slept huddled against Clover and between her and Kyven, seeking their protection even in sleep, and Teacup slept on whichever side pleased her at the time, even occasionally splayed across all three of them. Kyven was too exhausted to keep watch, but Clover didn't set any watch at all, she just let everyone sleep. That was because both Clover and Claw were very, very light sleepers, and both of them were up and investigating any sound that caught their attention. Clover would hold them in camp until Kyven awoke from his magic-induced slumber, they would eat breakfast—which was quite large for Kyven—and then they would head out again.

After three days, they came out of the hills and onto a flat plain that was dotted with grassy fields interspersed in the forest. The grassy fields were strange to him, for he could see no reason for them. The surrounding forest was relatively young, probably regrowth after a forest fire, which didn't explain the holes in the forest. They did, though, allow them a few sun-drenched stopovers to rest, eat, or refill water skins in streams.

It was at one of those streams that they saw their first unfriendly face. It was a trio of large canine Arcans, naked and clearly wild, creeping out of the forest warily to investigate the five newcomers. Clover stood up and regarded them coolly for a moment, then raised her hand and pointed at them. The three Arcans started and then bolted back into the trees, and seconds later there was a loud noise that echoed across the field.

"Who were they?" Patches asked fearfully, sidling up against Kyven unconsciously.

"Feral Arcans," Clover replied.

"Feral? What does that mean?"

"It means they're no more than animals, child," she answered.

"How does that happen?" she asked. "I mean, what made them that way?"

"Birth," she said, a little sadly. "Some Arcans are just born that way, child. Born with no intelligence, only instincts. We don't understand how or why it happens. It's not a disease we can cure, it's some kind of condition. But some regress to that state if they're abused enough. The sadder part is, the children of feral Arcans aren't feral themselves, they *learn* feral behavior from their parents. We are social creatures, child, very dependent on each other. What those children learn from their parents is very, very hard to undo. That is why when humans catch feral Arcans, they believe they tame some, where some always remain feral. The ones they believe they tame are actually normal Arcans that were socialized as being feral, and are retrained to be more social. It never works completely, they always have a great deal of trouble interacting with the social world, but they do learn some rudimentary skills. For the humans, that is enough. Any Arcan that can push a plow or clean a table is good enough."

"That's so sad," Patches said. "Are they dangerous?"

"It depends," Kyven said. "I've had no problems interacting with wild Arcans, but that's because I seem to know what to do. But if you don't approach them right, they can be violent."

"You have an unknown scent, Kyven," Clover told him. "They don't know how to respond to you, so you can approach in a non-threatening manner. I, however, don't have that luxury, so I must be much more careful. If they've ever come across a coyote before, then they'll react to my scent based on that past experience. Since you're, unique, you don't have to roll the

dice as to whether they've encountered your kind before."

"Ah. That would explain it," he nodded.

"So they wouldn't attack me?" Patches asked.

"That would depend entirely on how you approach them," Clover told her. "Kyven would be the one to explain that to you."

"There's a technique to it," Kyven said when she looked at him. "It's one quarter approach and three quarters luck."

She gave him a look, then actually laughed. "You've been attacked before?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said lightly. "My last approach to a wild Arcan was with an overly amorous wolf, who was then very unhappy with me when she realized we weren't compatible. That was when it got *very* nervous, since she had me on the ground under her."

Clover laughed, Claw smiled, but Patches and Teacup just gave him strange looks. "What does that mean?"

"If you don't know, then you're too young," Claw announced.

"I'm not *that* young," Teacup said pugnaciously. "So she screwed you? How could she tell you weren't compatible?"

"Clearly you've never joined with a raccoon," Clover said with a slight smile. "If you would have, then you would know."

"There's something that happens in a female if she's compatible with the male that's fairly unmistakable," Kyven told her patiently. "When that didn't happen, she knew she'd wasted her time with me, and got very unfriendly. At least that was the way it seemed. She had to know I wasn't a wolf from my scent, so I think it's possible she did it just because she was lonely. The lack of compatibility just reinforced her instinct to reject me after she stole my kill and took what she wanted from me."

"Even feral Arcans seek companionship," Clover nodded. "Even feral, we are social. That is why you saw *three* feral Arcans, child. Feral Arcans will band together and form packs if they're of generally similar species. Canines will form packs, foxes form packs, cats form packs, and rodents and other smaller species will form packs."

"Why do we just let them go?" Teacup asked. "Wouldn't they be able to live with us?"

"They eventually run away," Clover shrugged. "So when a child is found to be feral, it's raised to an age where it can survive on its own, then let go. They are happy being wild and free, and they also serve to help discourage the humans from trying to settle the frontier. So in their own way, they protect Haven."

"But they're dangerous to us... how does that help?"

"Ask any Arcan in Haven, child, to choose between the threat of feral Arcans and the threat of humans, and guess what they will say."

They encountered more wild Arcans over the course of the day, and one group that was not quite so wild. They were naked and appeared to be wild Arcans, two male canines, a tall one with black fur, several scars on his face and torso and a missing right ear, and a shorter one with mottled gray and brown fur, but Clover didn't chase them away. They ran up as Claw had to be held back by Clover and Patches hid behind Kyven, then bowed before Clover. "Shaman," he said in greeting.

"You're looking well, Longtail," she said, taking his hand and then nuzzling him. "Everyone, this is Longtail, and that is Strongjaw, they are sentries for Haven."

"We're that close?" Teacup asked.

"No, you're still a good two weeks or so out from Haven," the other one, Strongjaw, answered. "We're what you might call advance scouts. We look for anyone moving towards Haven and send a warning if they're unwelcome, like humans."

“Another week of running,” Teacup sighed.

“What brings you to me, my friends? Trouble?” Clover asked.

Longtail shook his head. “We just happened across you by chance, Shaman,” he answered.

“Would you like us to run with you for a while?”

“Ah, I think that would not be a good idea,” she said, looking back at Claw. “My large friend here escaped from the Pens.”

“Ah, well, I hope you find your peace, friend,” the canine said with a nod to him. “Just know that we are no longer your enemy.”

“I’m trying, but it’s not easy,” Claw answered.

“I was once in the Pens,” he said, turning and showing them his back, where he had been branded with a circle and two lines, leaving behind a scar upon which no fur grew.

“The Champion’s Brand!” Claw said in surprise. “How did you escape?”

“The ship sending me to Alamar sank, and I swam to shore,” he shrugged. “Just persevere, brother. In time, you’ll find peace as I did.”

“Longtail, spread the word. There are humans on horseback following us. They *are not* to be interfered with. We are luring them into our territory so we may capture them *alive*,” Clover instructed

“I will spread the word, Shaman,” he said with a nod.

The two canines left them, and they ran on with no more breaks until sunset. Clover had them camp in a small clearing, which for them was little more than spreading blankets on the ground and sitting down for a meal of the venison Kyven had killed the night before. Kyven ate the share he’d packed for himself and then started removing his clothes after the sun went down, and Clover announced she was started a fire. When Claw asked her why she was starting a fire, she replied, “the fire also scares wild Arcans away. They fear fire.” She had Teacup and Patches collect firewood as Claw was tasked to dig up the grass to form a safe place to start it.

“So handsome,” Clover teased him when he pulled off his pants and stood naked before them. “I’m still waiting for you to keep your promise, brother,” she teased.

“If you can wake me up, be my guest,” he answered honestly, which made her laugh.

“Why do you sleep so heavily?” Teacup asked him.

“He is still in his Walk, child,” Clover answered for him. “He is still learning the ways of the Shaman. It is *very* tiring. That is why he sleeps so deeply.”

“You’re Clover’s apprentice?”

“No, Shaman do not teach other Shaman, small one,” she answered. “We are taught directly by the spirits. That is what the Walk is about. Kyven is a totem Shaman, and his totem is still training him to her satisfaction.”

“What does that mean?”

“When I ask spirits for aid, different ones may answer my call,” she answered. “But Kyven is only answered by *one*. He has a special relationship with that particular spirit.”

“Not necessarily a good one,” he grunted.

“You don’t like your spirit?”

“Not at the moment, no,” he answered honestly. “But I still obey her, because she *is* my spirit.”

“Huh. Weird, I thought you’d be friends or something.”

“That’s what I thought at first too,” Kyven said with a low growl. “It’s dark enough, Clover. I’m off to hunt.”

“Good luck, brother.”

He heard Claw when he bounded off. “Why does he do all the hunting, Shaman? I can

hunt.”

“Kyven has advantages which we cannot match,” she answered simply. “It is his niche. Let him fill it.”

“But I feel so useless here!”

“You must learn to accept your own, Claw, that is your primary task with us,” Clover told him as he bounded into the woods and quickly was out of earshot.

Kyven ranged out into the forest, staying quiet and invisible, while he searched for deer, watched for Arcans or monsters, and also backtracked quite a bit to see if he could see how close their followers were. He kept going back the way they came, nearly an hour back, but he saw no fires. He was almost a little disappointed over that. He wanted to see Danna again, he wanted to talk to her. He gave up on trying to see her and ran back towards the others, and got back to the job he was doing, hunting. He tracked down deer about an hour after moving back towards the others, deer that were even bigger, seeming to get bigger and bigger the further they moved towards Haven. He stalked in from downwind, on all fours, slinking into position to make his attack, when the deer seemed to become alert. They stopped and looked around, their ears flicking back and forth to listen. Had he made too much noise? Clover would tease him if he came back after so much time empty-handed, not after talking him up to the others. Kyven started when a pair of gray foxes dropped to the ground from the trees above and landed on one of the deer. One of them ripped into its hindquarters with its claws as the other hung off its shoulders, the clamped her jaws on the doe’s neck. An ambush from above, clever! The two grays drove the doe to the ground, and Kyven had to wince a little bit when the male slashed the belly of the doe before it was dead, spilling its entrails to the forest floor as it kicked and jerked. Kyven watched as the female sank her fangs into the neck of the doe repeatedly, sawing her teeth back and forth savagely, until the doe collapsed and remained still. Once it ceased struggling, she joined the male at the belly of the doe and began to feed. Kyven watched the pair for a moment, saw that they seemed to be cooperating with each other. The female surrendered the liver to the male, but the male handed her the kidneys. Those had to be a mated pair.

He left them to their meal on silent feet, and chased after the rest of the herd. They bolted quite a ways and then slowed down, alert and wary, but they had no defense against him. He got literally within reach of a large buck, then executed the hunting move with which he’d has the most success. He leaped into the air and crashed into the back of the buck, catching it off guard, and his weight immediately drove it to the ground. Kyven had to avoid the buck’s antlers as he snagged his claws into it while the rest of the herd scattered, and mirrored the female gray’s move of driving his fangs deep into the buck’s throat, crushing its windpipe. The buck struggled under him, but his claws held it fast, and it slowly succumbed to death.

He picked up the buck and shouldered it, surprised that it was so heavy, then trudged back to the camp, guided by his memory and his magic. Any time he felt he was drifting off the path, he used a bit of Shaman magic he had improvised, asking the fox which way he should go in the form of a Shaman spell. She would respond, and he’d get an immediate insight into which way to go. He got close enough to see the campfire, and carried the buck out into the clearing. Clover’s silhouette appeared in the firelight, her eyes glowing amber as she looked out with spirit sight, and she came out to meet him. “What took so long? I was getting worried.”

“I checked our backtrail, and I ran into some wild Arcans that made it a little harder to find a kill,” he answered as she fell into step with him. “I think we can get by with just this one. It’s fairly big.”

“They’ll get larger as we go west. Once we’re past the Inner Sea, we’ll start seeing redtails.”

“What are those?”

“Relatives of deer, but much bigger,” she answered as he dropped the buck to the ground. “There are also bison out there, but I’m not sure you’d want to tackle one of those without magic of a weapon. They’re the size of a large bull and weigh so much you’d never move it once you killed it. One bison could feed all five of us until the meat went bad, and there’d still be half of it left.” She knelt and put more wood on the fire, and he knelt by her. “Peaceful, isn’t he?” she asked, looking at Claw. “I have hopes for him. It won’t be easy for him to reacclimate... it never is. But, we start a new phase tonight,” she said with a slight smile. “One of the best parts of the job,” she added.

“What do you mean?”

She gave him a direct look, which made him flush under his fur a little. She meant to have sex with him, probably as a trust-building exercise.

“Ah,” he said delicately.

She chuckled. “I do hope you don’t have human sensibilities.”

He nudged her. “Does screwing a girl with two males playing cards in the same room count?”

“That sounds Arcan to me,” she winked. “And to think I passed a prime chance at you back at the cave because I thought you wanted privacy.”

“Live and learn,” he teased.

“You owe me now, brother,” she shot back, nudging him with her shoulder.

He reached out boldly and grabbed the base of her tail, his thumb and forefinger pressed against her buttocks. “I can get you ready for Claw,” he purred in her ear, his other hand sliding up the fur on her stomach, then coming to rest over one of her furry breasts.

“You need to go the other way,” she teased in a low voice. He chuckled and did so, sliding his hand back down her stomach, over her pubic bone, and then touched her intimately. She growled softly in her throat as he explored her with his fingers, being abundantly careful because of his claws, as he licked her on the cheek and muzzle. She closed her eyes and let him do as he willed, then she sighed and licked him on the cheek. “You’re much more adventurous than Arcans,” she teased. “Most Arcans would never think of doing that. Most males would have tried to bend me over without any kind of play.”

“Humans are depraved,” he told her, which made her giggle, then take in her breath when he rubbed her genitals gently. He wasn’t quite sure why he was being so forward, so bold with her, but it just felt... right. She had told him before she was inclined to him, she had just invited, he was responding. That, and days of yearning for Danna had certainly put him in the mood for some serious distraction. “I’d better let you go to Claw before I *do* bend you over,” he said, removing his hand from her genitals but sliding it up and down the length of her thigh.

“If one of the girls isn’t feeling frisky, I’ll come take care of you,” she winked, licking him on the nose.

“Not quite sure how to ask.”

“Just *ask*,” she winked. “If she’s up to it, she’ll say yes. If she doesn’t feel like it, she’ll say no. And won’t think a minute past that.”

“I may have to do that,” he noted as he let her go.

“If they won’t, I will. Just don’t tire yourself out tonight, brother. Save yourself for me. You’ll need it,” she winked.

Kyven stayed at the fire as she got up and went out to where Claw was sleeping, away from the others. She knelt by him, and Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits to see. She put her hands on his chest, which started him awake, but he just laid back down when she pushed

him back to the grass, rolled him fully on his back, and deliberately straddled him. Claw seemed to respond immediately to that, his penis becoming quickly erect, and Clover wasted no time, holding his erect member as she lowered herself onto him. Kyven watched to make sure he wasn’t going to attack her for a moment, but when he started kneading her breasts, he knew that Claw was much more interested in the sex than he was afraid of the contact. Clover seemed to be enjoying it, but Kyven saw it for what it was. She was getting him used to contact with Arcans again, and starting with something his instincts wouldn’t deny... sex. But Kyven didn’t think it would take him long to adjust. He showed no fear of the females, not really, just a wariness.

He certainly could use some similar activity. He went over to the two young females, who were sleeping, and knelt down by Teacup. He put his hand on her stomach, which woke her up. “Teacup,” he said in a low whisper. “Are you feeling a little frisky?”

She looked up at him, then grumbled and rolled over, swatting at his hand. “In the morning,” she declared blearily.

Strike one.

He went around them to Patches, but hesitated. The girl had been abused, and odds were, some of that abuse was sexual. He wasn’t sure how she’d respond to his proposition... but his erect penis was telling him to try. He nudged her gently on her shoulder, and she opened her eyes and rolled back enough to look up at him. “Patches,” he whispered, “I really hate to ask this, but I’m in a bit of a mood. Are you feeling frisky?”

“I don’t—” she started, then saw his erect member. He saw the sudden tightness in her eyes, and she timidly rolled over on her back and opened her legs.

That just took the mood right out of him. He knew he shouldn’t have asked; odds were, now she’d see him much more threatening, more like the authority figures from which she’d escaped and not a protector and nurturer the way Clover was to her. She closed her eyes, which made him sigh, and he leaned down and licked her lightly on the cheek. “Nevermind,” he said quietly to her. “I’m sorry I asked, I should have known better. Go back to sleep.”

He padded away from her, wanting a little distance, if only to make her feel more comfortable. He should have realized that asking her was a bad idea, so he needed to give her some space, and make it abundantly clear to her that he would not ask anything more than she was willing to give. He would go hunt up another deer. It would give him something to do, and he wouldn’t have to listen to Clover and Claw and stay in a state of excitement.

Patches rolled up on her side and watched him drop to all fours and pad off away from the fire, into the night, then she blinked in surprise when his body just seemed to melt away once he was away from the firelight and entered the murky darkness further out. She was shocked that he didn’t take what he wanted, shocked and a little bewildered. Taking her was what they *always* did. She didn’t know any other way, and it was never very good. Sometimes it didn’t hurt, if the master was too drunk to hit her while raping her, but he’d just walked away. Was she not pleasing to him? Didn’t he want her? She was confused, so confused she just laid there, until she heard the groans and growls from the other side of the fire and realized that Claw and Clover were doing it too. She sat up and looked, saw Clover atop him, and from the look of her she was... *enjoying* it. Enjoying it? She never enjoyed it. But then again, it didn’t look like Cover was being raped. If anything, she had to be raping him, she was the one on top, the one in control.

A girl raping a boy? Why would she bother? Why willingly do something that didn’t feel good?

But... Clover did seem to like it. She kept gripping Claw’s shoulders, leaning down and licking him on the face as he held her by the waist. She bit him, but not hard, holding his

neck in her jaws as she seemed to shudder on top of him, then Claw growled deep in his throat and grabbed tight to her, holding her, pressing her hips against him. Clover's tail writhed behind her, then it dropped to the ground between Claw's legs. She giggled and licked Claw's nose playfully, then leaned down and whispered something to him. He patted her on the hips, then let her go. She climbed off of him, patted him on the shoulder fondly, then sidled back around the fire with a very satisfied little smile on her face. She saw Patches sitting up, looking at her, and came over and sat down beside her. "I'm sorry if we woke you, child," she said softly as Claw rolled over on his side, away from the fire, and settled back to sleep. "What's the matter?"

"Did you *like* that?" she asked directly.

"Oh, very much so," Clover said with a little smile. "Claw has a sexy body, and of course, he has quite a large dick."

"I never liked it," she said quietly, hugging her knees and putting her chin on them.

"You've never made love, child. All you've ever known is submission to a horny master, who was probably quite rough with you. There is no pleasure in being taken, child, but there is *much* pleasure in *giving*."

"That's what my mom said, but it never was."

"You have to desire the man, child. And I dare say you had no desire for your master."

She shook her head on her knees. She shivered a little when Clover put her hand on the girl's back, stroking her fur. "Did Kyven ask you?"

"He did. I don't know what I did wrong, he just walked away."

"I dare say you *submitted* to him, like he was your master," she said sagely. "That would turn Kyven off quickly. He does not find that attractive. He was asking if you were *willing*, not demanding you to surrender to him. Be honest, child. Do you think he looks nice?"

"He's *gorgeous*," she said immediately. "I love his fur. It's so soft!"

"Now imagine that fur all against you, everywhere," Clover said in a soft, gentle tone. "Wouldn't it feel nice?"

"It would feel wonderful."

"Well, if he asked again, now that you know he doesn't want you if you're not willing to be with him, how does that make you feel?"

She was quiet a moment. "Afraid," she admitted. "It's never been anything but scary. My master would beat me while doing it to me. To me, it's nothing but pain and humiliation."

"Well. Patches, do you trust me?"

"Of course!"

"You trust that I'd never do anything on purpose to hurt you?"

"Of course you wouldn't. You've been so good to us, Shaman."

"Then will you trust me now?"

"Uhh, I trust you," she said, but she squeaked a little when Clover reached over and pushed her hand between her leg and torso, urging her off her legs. She pushed the girl until she was leaning back, leaning on her hands, and gave the coyote a strange, worried look when Clover slid her hand along her red-furred stomach.

"Close your eyes," she said in a gentle, reassuring voice, which Patches obeyed. "You've never known anything but fear and pain, Patches. You need to learn that there *is* sweetness to it. Patches glimpsed a look at the Shaman, and saw that her eyes were glowing brightly with a yellow radiance, as they always did when she used her magic. "Now, child, feel." The Shaman put a single finger on the crown of her pubic bone, over her genitals, and the panda sucked in her breath when she felt... *pleasure*. It wasn't intense, it was a gentle kind of warm, sensual pleasure that started down there and radiated up through her. The panda

closed her eyes and leaned her head back as she felt something she'd never felt before, felt actual pleasure down there, in a place she'd always associated with pain. It lasted a long, sweet moment, and then it faded, making her sigh a little. "Now, did that feel good?"

"Y-Yes," she answered. "It felt very good."

"That is just the palest shadow of how good it *can* feel," she said simply. "When the male attracts you and you want him."

"It really can feel good?"

"It can, if you like the male," she winked. "Now, do you like Kyven?"

"I, I don't know. He's a Shaman, but he's—he scares me a little."

"Kyven? Scary?" Clover said, then she laughed lightly. "Dear child, Kyven is anything but scary. In many ways, he is just like you," she said, tapping her on the nose.

"Me? How?"

"He's struggling through a very strange and unfamiliar situation," she answered. "He is on his Walk, which, I can tell you, can be very, very unpleasant. He's already faced some very harsh trials on his Walk, and now he dreads what might come next. Does that sound a little familiar?"

Patches blinked, then nodded.

"He came to you seeking comfort, and when he saw it bothered you, he left you be," she reminded her. "Doesn't that show he cares about you?"

"I... I guess it does."

"So, think about it, child. Think about the fact that he'll never force you, he'll be very gentle with you, and now you know that it *can* feel very, very good. But not tonight. If you came to him tonight, he'd think you were still trying to give yourself to him out of fear. I'll comfort him tonight, but tomorrow... well. You might feel differently by tomorrow," she said with a smile, leaning over and nuzzling the panda. The Shaman patted her on the thigh warmly, then got up, stretched languidly, and then wandered off to where they'd designated as the place to go to relieve one's self.

Maybe... maybe Clover was right. If what she'd felt was just a little thing compared to what it could be, well. And Kyven *was* quite handsome to her, with his soft, soft fur and gentle eyes, and how he let her sleep with him, between him and Clover. She'd woke up this morning curled up against him, and he had his arm over her, and it felt so warm and safe...

She blinked, remembering that feeling Clover gave her with her magic. Was it *really* better than that?

She laid back down and closed her eyes. Maybe there *was* something different to it when she was willing. She could try, she supposed. If it was, then it might feel nice, like that feeling had. If it was wrong, well, it wasn't like she hadn't faced it before, and at least Kyven was gentle.

She drifted back to sleep, considering the possibilities.

Clover watched the girl through spirit sight as she relieved herself, smiling slightly.

There was more than one Arcan in the party that needed healing and therapy, and she had plenty of experience with the state many of them were in when they reached her to know how to go about solving their problems. It was what Clover did best, and what she loved to do, and that was to take beaten, timid, scarred Arcans and make them whole again, teach them the strength of love, the beauty of self-confidence, to love themselves again and learn to love others. She'd deprogrammed Arcans like Claw many times, and had also gently guided little ones like Patches away from their timidity and fear, showed them that there was no longer anything to fear, and watched them blossom and grow into independent, strong, caring, and social Arcans.

They were both well on their way. Claw had received his first gentle, compassionate touch, and Patches had just learned that sex wasn't always a traumatic experience when one was with the right male, that it could be sweet.

Shaman magic could be quite... versatile.

Clover kept her word, at least. When Kyven returned with a yearling, she pulled him away from the fire, into the grass, and she fulfilled her promise. Clover was a very gentle lover, but also very, very demanding, and quite... durable. She quite literally wore him out, then put him on his back when he was too tired to go on and kept right on going. She seemed to have total control over both him and herself, and didn't allow either of them to orgasm until she was totally satisfied and he was totally exhausted... but what sweet exhaustion. She literally had to walk him back to the camp, and was highly amused by it. "You wouldn't last a day in a Shaman's bed, Kyven," she teased, poking him in the ribs lightly. "No stamina at all. My second session of the night, and I wear you out? The reputation of the Shaman is in jeopardy."

"Hush, you," he shot back. "Come have a little talk to me after I finish the Walk and can channel maintained spells, and we'll see just who begs for mercy first."

She laughed delightedly, leaning against him. "It's a date," she promised as they returned to the fire. "Do you feel better now?"

"Much, thank you, Clover. It was wonderful. And as you can see, I'm literally weak in the knees because of you."

She giggled as they built the fire back up, then she led him over to the girls and laid down. Patches had been curled up with Teacup, but let go of her and turned to him in her sleep, nestling up against him. He put his arm over her and closed his eyes, hoping that she wouldn't see him in a poorer way in the morning, that she took his leaving her as an apology for bringing up something he should have had the sense to not bring up. He drifted off to sleep with his nose in Patches' hair.

He awoke with her virtually in the same position, curled up against his stomach, with his arm over her, but she was awake, awake and exploring the fur on his upper chest with her fingers very tentatively, very delicately. He decided to ignore it, startling her as he rose up on one hand and yawned, then he looked down at her. She looked a little frightened of him, and that stung a little, but he just put it behind a smile and patted her on the shoulder. Teacup, Claw, and Clover were already up and about, eating his deer, so he looked down at her. "Morning. Aren't you hungry?"

"Not much," she said in a timid voice, just laying there.

"Listen, about last night. I'm sorry."

"Huh?"

"I'm sorry," he said, patting her shoulder. "I should have realized what kind of place you came from and never asked what I asked. I frightened you, and I'm sorry. I won't do it again, I promise."

"It-It's okay," she said, looking up at him. "Thank you for caring about me."

"I'm a Shaman," he said with a gentle smile. "It's what I do. But here's a secret," he said, leaning down to whisper in her ear. "I like you, and I'm glad to help."

She gave him the most curious look as he got up and pulled on his breeches and shirt, then joined the others at the carcasses to get breakfast himself. Patches put on her clothes herself and joined them, joining him at the yearling rather than eat with the others at the buck. Kyven thought that was a little odd, but he accepted her presence, even handed her choice parts of the carcass, which she ate with little enthusiasm. "I'm still not used to this," she said quietly.

"Eating venison like this?"

"Eating meat," she answered, taking another bite. "All I got to eat back-well, it was bread and scraps. Almost never meat, my parents always took all the meat. If not that I'm a panda, I may have starved."

"Why is that?"

"I actually prefer plants, but I can eat almost anything, even twigs and leaves," she answered. "I'm not like you and the others. You're carnivores. I'm an omnivore."

"I like vegetables," he protested.

"I mean, your system can't handle twigs and leaves. Mine can."

"Ah. So, you could eat tree leaves if you had to?"

She nodded. "They don't taste very good, but I can. I mean, I did. There was never much food left for me," she said in a small voice, looking away.

"Well, those days are over, Patches," he said, patting her shoulder. "You won't be eating leaves again unless you want to."

She gave him a shy smile, and took the kidney he gave her and bit into it.

They moved faster that day, since Patches was strengthening and capable of running faster and longer, and Clover seemed to think that they needed to go faster. The pace was still almost leisurely to him. But the increased pace didn't translate into more distance, for an afternoon storm slowed them down and got so severe that they took shelter in the forest as fierce winds whipped through the region. The storm raged for over an hour, and when it was over, it was nearly sunset. "We'll set camp right here," Clover decided, "but we'll have to get an early start tomorrow. We need to increase our pace, so rest well. Tomorrow will be long and hard on you."

Kyven pulled off his wet clothes and shook the water out of his fur, then sat on his haunches as he waited for the sun to fully set and twilight to take hold, so he could go hunting. "It's going to be a wet night," Teacup said distastefully, looking at the soaked forest floor.

"Range out and collect firewood, ladies," Clover ordered. "Claw, could you sweep the area for any hiding dangers?"

"At once, Shaman," Claw said, and he turned and bounded out into the gloom.

Kyven was surprised by two pairs of hands that touched his back and shoulders. He glanced back to see both Teacup and Patches touching his fur on his shoulders. "Do you mind, Kyven?" Teacup asked.

"Knock yourself out," he answered, lowering his head. He let them run their hands through his fur, and he rather liked their attention, for they were gentle and honestly curious about his fur, which, everyone told him, was quite exceptional.

"I love how soft he is," Teacup said, putting her face against his shoulders and nuzzling his fur. "I've never met anyone with fur like this."

"And you won't," Clover said with a smile. "Kyven is a very rare breed of fox."

"Hurry up, girls, it's almost dark enough for me to hunt," he told them.

"Why do you only hunt at night?"

"Kyven's breed of fox is nocturnal, and his coloration allows him to blend with the darkness to make him almost impossible to see," Clover answered. "He is perfectly suited for hunting in the night, and none of us can match him."

"Just about," Kyven agreed. "I can sneak up on them to where they can't get away."

"What's it like to hunt?" Teacup asked.

"It takes concentration and care," he answered. "I have to get to where I can sneak up on my prey, but also pay attention that something else doesn't come along and attack *me* at the same time."

“Do they fight back?”

“The deer? Not really, their first instinct is to run. But I also make sure they don’t have the chance to try.”

“Then what might attack you?”

“Wild Arcans or monsters,” he answered. “Last night I came about fifteen seconds from getting ambushed by a couple of wild Arcans. Alright, ladies, let me go. It’s time to go get tomorrow’s food.”

“Good luck!” Teacup called as they let him go, and he stalked off into the trees.

“I seem to recall telling you two to gather firewood,” Clover said teasingly as he retreated.

Kyven didn’t have to go far to find dinner. About twenty minutes after padding off, he smelled deer on the ground, and marveled for a moment. It seemed that here lately, his senses had been becoming more acute, particularly his nose. Was he settling more and more into this Arcan body? Would he become more and more Arcan? He already was. He’d totally adopted Arcan customs, he was completely used to his tail and his fur and his muzzle, he could speak perfectly now thanks to Old Gray, and he felt completely comfortable. Would he feel so comfortable standing naked in public if he were human? Who knew. There was no telling, really, and the only thing that seemed to make him want to regain his humanity now that he felt totally safe was Danna. Thoughts of her kept making him want to be human, so he could have a chance with her. Even now, just thinking about her made him think of looking at her with spirit sight, seeing that beautiful body of hers—

Not while he was hunting. He didn’t want the deer to see him with an erection and get the wrong idea.

He followed the scent of deer, stalking through the night, and found them. It was two bucks, practicing fighting for dominance for the upcoming mating season, pushing at each other with their antlers. Kyven hesitated a moment, speculating on them. They were way too much food together, but the big one was probably enough for all of them. Clover said she wanted to increase the pace, so carrying less food over the day would probably be best. But, he wasn’t sure exactly what she wanted, so he decided to be safe about it. He would kill two deer, the smaller male and then go find something small to make up the difference. He channeled silence over both bucks, then skulked up into position as they took notice of the sudden loss of sound, their tails rising in the air as they separated. He vaulted and slammed into the side of the smaller buck, returning to visibility, which made the other buck bolt as his sparing partner crashed to the ground. Kyven latched onto the buck and delivered the killing bite, holding it down as his jaws suffocated it, then hoisted it over his shoulders and carried it back to the camp.

The camp was much different when he returned. There was a fire going in a prepared firepit, and the entire campsite was totally dry. Claw was laying on the far side of the fire, already asleep, while Clover sat with Teacup and Patches by the fire. Teacup was giggling, then all three of the females gave him an assessing look as he dropped the buck to the ground. “What?” he asked.

“Nothing, nothing,” Clover said with a slight smile.

“Something tells me I’m *glad* I’m not done hunting yet,” he said, which made all three of them laugh as he dropped back to all fours and stalked back into the darkness.

It took him about an hour to find what he was looking for. He stalked up on a quartet of deer, which included a small doe that looked to be only about two years old... perfect. He channeled silence over the four deer, which made them fidget a little, then pounced on the small doe. His weight drove her to the ground, and he killed her with his bite to her small neck, his fangs puncturing her main artery. She twitched as she bled her life out onto the for-

est floor, and then went still, her form shimmering to darkness to his eyes. He collected up his prize and carted it back to the camp, and found them all laying down. He dropped the small doe by the buck and tended the fire, then sat down a moment to gaze into the flames and relax after the long day.

A hand on his shoulder surprised him a little. He looked up and saw Patches seating herself beside him. She was quiet a long moment, looking down at her hands, then she put her hand on his knee and turned towards him. “Kyven, about last night.”

“Yes?”

“I’m sorry.”

“You had nothing to be sorry about,” he told her simply. “I’m the one that was in the wrong.”

“I, I just—” she looked away. “Clover talked to me after you left. She told me something.”

“What did she say?”

“She said it’s not scary and it doesn’t hurt if you like the boy,” she answered. “That it can feel good.”

“I suppose it does,” he answered. “I’m no female, I can’t say positively what they feel, but I’m pretty sure that they like it. I know *I* like it,” he chuckled.

“I–We–Kyven, I like you,” she said with a bit of confusion, gripping his leg.

“Are you asking?” he asked, looking her in the eyes, seeing if she was defensive or tight. She looked decidedly nervous, but he didn’t see any sincere fear.

“I–yes. I’m asking.”

He leaned over and nuzzled her, then leaned close to ear. “One thing, Patches. This is for *you*,” he told her. “If at any time, you feel afraid or uncomfortable, I’ll stop. If I think you’re becoming afraid, I’m going to stop,” he told her, reaching over and putting his hand on her waist. “Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“And you won’t get angry with me if I stop if I think you’re not ready?”

“I–no, I’ll try not to be.”

He understood how delicate this could be. Patches had been abused, badly abused, and he had no idea what Clover said to her to make her want to try this so soon after being rescued from her abusers. But she was reaching out, and he understood his duty to her. He had to be careful, he had to be gentle, and above all, he had to show her that it *could* be pleasurable. If this went badly, she might shut herself off from everyone and live out her entire life afraid of others. She had put her trust in Clover, and now was putting her trust in him. If they betrayed that trust, it would destroy her. He caressed her waist lightly and licked her ear, then continued. “I’m going to touch you, Patches,” he whispered to her. “Everywhere. Will you let me?”

“Yes,” she breathed back, her grip on his knee increasing.

He honored his duty to her. He was slow, gentle, and very careful. He built her up to it slowly with caresses and touches, nuzzling and licking her face. He felt her freeze up the first time he touched her genitals, stimulating her to be ready for him, almost making him stop, but then she relaxed and buried her face in the soft fur on his neck, nuzzling it vigorously as he explored her. He felt her breath against the fur on his chest quicken as he rubbed her gently, until what he felt under his fingers told him she was ready. He debated putting her on top, in control, but he felt that being on top of her was more appropriate, allowing her to build a new memory about being in a submissive position. He saw the tension in her eyes when he gently rolled her onto her back, but when he leaned down and whispered “only for right now, I’ll let you be on top in a bit,” she calmed down considerably. He felt her little claws dig into him, trembling, when he locked his eyes on hers as he entered her, saw the

tension appear there, but then it faded when he fully entered her and hesitated, allowed her to comprehend that he wasn't just raping her, that she had the chance to speak up when he asked her directly, "do you want to go on or stop?"

She made a quiet little noise, then closed her eyes. "I-go on," she said, a little breathlessly, gripping him.

He distanced himself from it enough to pay close attention to her. He was fully aware of the fact that he was having sex with her, but he wasn't doing this for his own enjoyment, he was doing this to help Patches overcome her fear of intimacy. He watched her face closely as he continued, being slow and gentle, not in any way giving her any feeling that he was being rough or forceful, and he was rewarded the first time she gave a little gasp, and then moaned slightly. She was enjoying it! That spurred him on, but he still remained careful, going from treating her like glass to having more normal intercourse. She was surprised by his change, but not afraid; in fact, it just made her enjoy it more. The one time he tried to slow down, to see if she was still willing when she stopped making sounds, she just gripped his fur painfully and pressed against him. He was actually startled when he felt her climax, sucking in her breath and snapping her eyes open, almost in shock and fear, then her eyes lost focus and she all but melted, giving out a long, ragged groan. Her climax triggered his own, and he clutched her small body as he lost himself in the moment, feeling her small, short little claws dig painfully into his back.

"Wh-What was that?" Patches asked in a gasping breath. "I never-that was *incredible!*"

"Congratulations, you had your first climax," he panted in her ear. "Want to take your claws out of my back now? I think you drew blood."

She squeaked and let go of him, but did run her hands through his fur languidly. "Did, did you like it?" she asked.

"Very much so," he answered. "Did *you* like it?"

"It was nothing like-yes, I liked it. I didn't ever believe that could feel so good."

"I'm very glad to hear that," he told her, nuzzling her. "You're well on your way to putting your last home far behind you, Patches."

She gave him a strange look. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, *this* is a part of your healing," he said, putting his weight down on her a little to focus her on what they'd just done, "and I'm honored you chose me to help you take this first step. It touched me, little one, touched me deeply."

"You didn't want to?" she asked, almost incredulously.

"Dear girl, you have the nerve to ask that *now*, after we already did it?" he asked with a playful smile, licking her on the cheek, which made her giggle. "I wanted to, very much. Boys can't fake it when they want to, there's this glaring visible sign we're interested," he said dryly, which made her giggle again. "But there's doing it for fun, and then there's doing it because it helps. You needed to learn that what you suffered in your last home isn't all there is, Patches. There can be sweetness in it."

"There was," she said in a whisper. "Is it like that all the time?"

"Depends," he shrugged. "Depends on your mood, depends on the male, depends on his mood, depends on a lot of things. If you took comfort from Claw, it would be much different. He's not me. He has different tastes, he has different likes. I'm not saying it would be good or bad, but I am saying it wouldn't be the same."

"Oh. Thank you for being so kind to me," she told him, looking up at him.

"It was my pleasure, Patches. Literally," he grinned, which made her laugh, and her laughter sent a twinge through the member still inside her that made him highly aware of it, and her, and sparked desire in him. "Mmm," he hummed, "I seem to recall promising letting you on

top. I seem to have broken my promise. Unless we do it again, of course," he hinted throatily, pressing his nose against her cheek.

"You want to do it again?"

"Do you want to?"

"Yes!" she declared. "I've never been on top before. What do I do?"

"Whatever you want," he said, rolling them over and putting his hands on her waist. "Whatever you want."

She was clumsy at first, but finally settled down and found that she could find just as much enjoyment out of being the one in control as she'd had being the one controlled. He didn't measure himself or take any precautions at all, he just ran his hands all over her and thoroughly enjoyed it as she did whatever pleased her. The second time was very short because she was quite energetic about it, having sex with him quite hard and fast, almost as if she sought to have that feeling again as quickly as she could. She climaxed just minutes after she started, and her climax triggered his own, holding her hips and holding her against him as they shared their pleasure.

She collapsed on his chest, and he ran his clawed fingers through her fur carefully so as not to scratch her, and she literally fell asleep. Kyven chuckled and leaned back, putting his hands behind his head. Clover came over and sat down beside him, giving him a warm smile, and rubbed the top of his muzzle. "You *are* Shaman, my brother," she told him simply in a soft voice. "Well done."

"I guess there are many things a Shaman can do without magic," he mused, stroking Patches' hair from her face.

"You knew what she needed and gave it to her. You cared for our flock. That is the Shaman way," she said to him. "We don't *just* serve the spirits."

"I see that," he nodded. "What did you say to her?"

"It wasn't what I said, it was what I did," she winked.

"Huh?"

"Let's say that sometimes, a touch of magic can set someone down the right path," Clover winked, then she leaned over and licked him on the cheek. "Carry her over to us. Don't sleep alone."

He did so, and they bedded down for the night. Patches curled up against him, and he put his arm over her protectively, even as Clover rested against her back and put her arm over her as well, surrounding her with warmth, love, and protection. It was exactly what she needed to heal, and the Shaman would provide it to her.

Things slowly began to change, both around them and among them.

They pressed to the northwest for over a week, and the further they went, the cooler it became. The trees were larger and thicker, the strange meadows vanishing, as they pressed into relatively flat terrain. But then, one early afternoon, they came out of the forest and Kyven found himself looking at a *sea* of grass. There was not a tree anywhere before them, absolutely nowhere. The forest just *ended*, and this sea of grass began.

"The grasslands," Clover announced as they all stopped and stared. "Now do you see why I had you hunt so many deer last night, brother?"

Kyven nodded. There was nowhere to hide out there if one was hunting, only very gentle rises and falls in the land. Clover had stocked them up for this journey, he realized. She had him kill four deer last night, and for the first time, she and Kyven dried the meat and loaded their packs with them.

"What happened to the trees?" Teacup asked as they stared.

"A fire, a century ago," she answered. "It burned the forest to the ground, from a hundred

minars behind us all the way to the Inner Sea. In the years since, the forest has only grown back to this point.”

“It must have been some fire,” Teacup mused, looking around.

“It will be fast from here. This is open, safe country, my friends, in which we can run freely. So come.”

They all dropped down and loped off, at a decent rate. Patches had strengthened considerably during their trip, her Arcan body rebuilding quickly and allowing her to run further and faster with each day. There was nothing but gentle rises to impede their view, which allowed them to see everything around them. Kyven made out quite a few rabbits out on the plain, and a small herd of huge animals to their south. He caught up with Clover and pointed them out with his nose, and she laughed. “Bison,” she told him. “I’m surprised to see them so far east. I’ve never seen it before.”

“Are they tasty?”

She laughed. “Yes, they are, but good luck bringing one down without using magic.”

“That sounds like a challenge.”

“That’s a warning.”

He surveyed the massive animals, only slightly smaller than Taurons, then chuckled. “I think I’ll take that warning.”

“I knew you were wise,” she winked.

They stopped up a small hill up from a fairly deep stream, after crossing it, stomping down the grass to form a flat place that actually hid them once they laid down in the knee-high grass. If it got any higher, they’d be forced to run on their legs tomorrow because of grass in their faces. They made no fire that night, and for the first time, Clover posted a sentry. Claw was tasked to watch over the camp first, then Clover, then Kyven, allowing the young ones to sleep. Claw was eager to do it, eager to finally feel like he was being useful, but he also obeyed Clover’s commands and woke her up. To Kyven’s surprise, Claw laid down with them, on Kyven’s other side from the girls, probably feeling secure enough to share space with the Shaman but not trusting himself. Clover woke Kyven up for his shift, and she replaced him between Claw and the girl. Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits and kept watch over the night, remaining silent, sitting on his haunches with just his head over the grass to minimize his visibility in the moonlight. The moon was waxing, approaching full moon, and it cast the sea of grass in a ghostly white light that was visible to his nocturnal eyes, interlaced over the vision provided to him by his spirit sight.

The night passed without note, as nothing bigger than mice moved... until the false dawn streaked the eastern horizon. Kyven was looking at it, seeing the sky lighten to a purple, when he saw them, just at the far reach of the horizon.

Five horses.

Kyven ducked down until only his eyes were over the grass and peered, squinting with all his might to see more. He saw five horses, but only four riders, and they were too far away for him to make anything out.

“Clover,” he called quickly but quietly. “Clover!”

“Mmm?” she asked, rolling and sitting up.

“Horses,” he called. “From the east.”

She slinked over, low, then poked her head up to his level and looked in the same direction. “Your Loreguard officer is quite determined,” she said quietly. “And resourceful. Those horses are running faster than horses can usually run. They must be using crystals.”

“What do we do?”

“We’re far enough out. We take them here,” she said, looking back. “Claw,” she called.

“Wake up the girls.”

“Yes, Shaman! Wake up, wake up!” he said with a low hiss, shaking the girls by the shoulders.

“How do you want to do this?” Kyven asked.

“If they keep at the pace they’re going now, they will be on us before dawn,” she noted, “and we’ll have the darkness. The only one that matters is the captain, Kyven. The other men may be either chased off or killed. Wait. The hunter is with them,” she said, pointing to the right. He looked that way, and saw Toby, running at magical speed, splitting off to the right. “They can track you, somehow,” she deduced. “Look, the hunter is moving off to flank us.”

“Let me take care of the hunter,” Claw said as he came over to them.

“No. Claw, your duty is to protect the girls. These foes are using a great deal of alchemy. They are our job. Your job is to defend the defenseless. Do you understand?”

“I—I want to fight!”

“Your days of fighting are over, Claw,” she told him simply. “Now you only defend. Remember that. You have earned your peace, and I will not take it from you.”

“But Shaman—”

“That is the end of the matter,” she told him. “The girls *need* you, Claw. If we fail, then it falls upon *you* to take them to Haven. They are your responsibility.”

Claw looked stricken, then he nodded. “I will make sure they make it alive and well,” he declared.

“That’s a good boy,” she said with a charming smile. “Now take them. Go that way,” she said, pointing. “Quickly!”

“Shaman,” the two girls said in unison, but she just smiled and shook her head.

“You have earned your rest, my children. Go to your rest. Leave the invaders to us. Now go. Go!”

The three gave them a stricken look, then turned and fled to the northwest.

“Brother, I hate to say this, but they can track you.”

“Bait,” he grunted.

She nodded. “They know I’m a Shaman and will be watching for me. What they don’t know is that *you* are a Shaman, or that you can come up on them without being able to see you. So we will wait for them at the stream, it is too deep for the horses to cross easily. I’ll circle them and attack from behind when they reach the stream, what I need you to do is hold their attention so I can take them.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Kill them,” she answered. “All but the officer. We need her alive.”

“Alright,” he said, steeling himself for the task. “Let’s go.”

Kyven and Clover slinked down the hill slowly and carefully, keeping in the grass, then the coyote veered off to the left and began her long circle to get behind them. Kyven swam across the stream, shook the water out of his fur, then hunkered down in the grass and felt the coolness wash over him as he blended into the shadows the grass created, then he could do nothing but wait. He waited what seemed like an eternity, his ears straining for any sound, as he went over what he had to do and the best way to go about it. He wanted to blind them all, but Clover would be behind them, and she might be blinded too. So what he needed to do was incapacitate them—

Silence. He would silence them all, that would confuse them and prevent them from communicating. That would give Clover the chance to strike. Yes. That was the plan. Silence them, then hold their attention until Clover struck.

Now that he had a plan, he waited with more confidence, but that confidence fluttered when

he heard the horses' hooves in the distance, felt them in the ground beneath him. He saw them after a moment, five horses with four riders charging right at him. He felt the nerves rise as he heard them slow down as they either knew he was there or saw the stream, then he saw them through the blades of grass. She was leading them, wearing a chainmail shirt that had a tear in the right shoulder. The three men with her slowed with her, one leading the horse, and the woman held something out. "He's straight ahead. Let's water the horses and then keep moving."

They couldn't see him. It was so clear they couldn't see him that Danna's horse very nearly trampled him. The horse shied when he scrambled out of the way, which caused her to pat the horse on the neck and look around, down near its feet, probably looking for a snake or rabbit that might have spooked it.

She didn't see him.

They all dismounted, and Kyven realized he'd made a dreadful mistake. Clover was working to get *behind* them, and he'd allowed them to get past him! Now she'd be coming at them from where they could see her! He had to turn them, and he realized that his only option was to reveal himself and flee back across the stream. But before he did that, he didn't want them to have an easy time of it. So he stalked up to the edge of them, to the horses, where one of the men was patting his horse on the neck, his black rod slung in a holster on his hip. Kyven slipped to his rear quarter, reached out, and pulled that rod from his holster with deft, light precision. He had no idea what it was or how it worked, but he knew how to swing one like a club. He swung hard, swift, and true, clubbing the man in the temple with his own weapon. There was a sickening crack, and blood flew in an arc as Kyven's Arcan strength caved in the man's skull.

There was chaos. Shouting, horses whinnying as Kyven gave a booming shout, startling the horses, then turned and dove into the water. He wasn't a very strong swimmer, but his jump had given him enough momentum to get most of the way across the deep stream. He scrambled out of the stream and looked back, saw the men jumping on their horses, but he also saw Danna staring at him in shock, her face disbelieving.

She was looking him in the eyes, and his eyes were open the spirits. She knew his secret now, she knew that he was a Shaman.

The other two men plunged their horses into the stream, chasing him down, but Kyven struck first. He channeled lightning, aiming not at them, but at the stream itself. Lightning blasted into the water, and then the two men and their horses screamed as they were electrocuted. Both men slumped from their saddle and fell into the sparking water, where their chainmail jacks quickly dragged them under the water, not to resurface.

Kyven himself learned an important lesson out of it; never channel lightning while wet. Part of the shock fed back into him, leaving his fur standing on end and making him feel all tingly and numb. He tried to shake it off, and when he did, he was staring right into the eyes of Danna Pannen.

"No!" Danna screamed in a strangled tone, yanking a pistol from her belt and pointing it at him. "You're a *Shaman*!" she said in a wrenching tone. "I don't believe it!"

"Danna," he said, raising his hands. She looked angry, and humiliated, and frightened. He had no idea what she was going to do. Was she going to shoot him? She'd said she wanted to capture him and take him back to see how it happened to him, but now she knew the truth. Would she just shoot him and be done with it? He thought about some way to retaliate, dis-able her, but he didn't want to hurt her, even now. "I'm sorry," he finally said.

She lowered her pistol a little. "What?"

"I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you the truth."

"Truth? The truth? You're a *Shaman*!" she screamed. "You lied, you cheated my truth crystal! You were never a human, you just killed the *real* Kyven and took his place using some kind of magic to masquerade as a human!" Her eyes widened. "You *lured* me out here!" she gasped, and she raised her pistol.

Kyven heard steps to his right. He glanced and saw Toby charging at him at a speed faster than any human could ever run, his snaring whip already in his hand.

Kyven reacted out of pure impulse. He turned to face the new threat, raised both hands before him as if to fend the man off, then closed his eyes and flinched away as he channeled the burst of light. He didn't see it, saw nothing but a bright flare in his closed eyes, but he heard Toby cry out and heard tumbling. He opened his eyes and saw Toby tumbling on the ground, but the magical tether was lashed against Kyven's shins, wrapping him up. A quick look showed him that the blast of light had affected Danna too, as she had her free hand to her face, over her eyes, hunched over. Kyven was wrapped up, but Toby was blinded, and he knew he could get free if he pulled the whip out of Toby's hand. He turned and lunged the other way, pulling the snaring line taut, but Toby doggedly kept his grip on the handle, and caused Kyven to fall to the grass. Brazenly, Kyven rolled over and grabbed the line with both hands, sticking them to it fast, but it allowed him to jerk savagely on the line, pulling again and again, until he finally pulled the whip free of Toby's hand and caused it to evaporate. He scrambled to his feet, glanced at Danna, and then froze. She was again looking at him, and she had her pistol leveled at his heart. Her eyes were flat and cold, and he knew she was going to pull the trigger.

The sound of the gunshot ripped through the air. Kyven felt himself flying, the ground and air trading places wildly, then he landed in the grass, tumbled, and fell headfirst into the water. He sucked in a lungful of water, making him gag and choke, clawing himself back to the surface where he expelled the water from his lungs and coughed violently. He was waiting to feel the pain of the bullet, but it never came. What had happened? He looked behind himself and saw Danna standing there, her smoking pistol in her hands, her eyes wild. He looked back, and saw the grass flattened. He crawled out of the stream and got over the grass, and he saw the still form of Claw laying in the grass, blood seeping from a hole in his shoulder, not looking to be a fatal wound.

What happened? Did Claw knock him aside? Why did he come back when Clover told him to go?

"No!" Danna said in a strangled tone, throwing the pistol down and drawing the other one, aiming it at him, and pulling the trigger. It clicked harmlessly, making him flinch, and she threw that one down and drew a shockrod from her holster and leveled it at him as he finally got the sense to run. But he didn't take two steps before the snaring line again wrapped around his legs, and he tumbled to the ground.

"Ayah, Ah need him alive!" Toby barked.

"He's a *Shaman*!" she shrieked. "Kill him!"

Kyven got back to his knees and saw Toby rushing at him, snapping the snaring line to tangle Kyven's torso and his left arm. But before he could take three steps, he was suddenly catapulted off to the side as if struck by some invisible, giant hand, the whip coming out of his hand again and freeing him, and he scrambled to his feet to see Clover behind Danna, a hand on her shoulder as the other pointed at Toby. Kyven saw Clover grab Danna by the scuff of the neck and physically hurl her over the stream, to crash heavily almost at Kyven's feet. "Watch her, I'll deal with the hunter!" she called, then she dropped to all fours and bounded over the stream in a graceful jump, then raced off after the hunter.

Danna jumped to her feet and drew her black rod and pointed it at him, but nothing hap-

pened. Her eyes widened and she pointed it at him again, but again it did nothing. Kyven stalked up to her, which made her recoil in fear, then turn and try to strike him with the rod, using it like a club. It struck his palm and held fast as he grabbed it, overpowering her, then he wrested it from her hands, reached out and grabbed her by her chain jack, and dragged her over to the cougar by force. He threw her down to the ground and put a foot on her, reached down and grabbed her hands in tandem until both of her hands were being held by his one, and he leaned down to see if Claw was alright.

But he was dead. His eyes were open and vacant, and his body was unnaturally cold to the touch, as if he'd been dead for days.

Claw had saved him. He knocked Kyven out of the way and took the bullet, and he died. He died saving a Shaman. Kyven felt crushed that Claw had come so far, was so close to Haven only to die, but the Arcan in him saw that Claw had died in a manner of his own choosing, and for an Arcan, that was always a good thing. Claw was almost worshipful of the Shaman, for him to die saving one's life was the ultimate honor to him.

"May the spirits bless you, and keep you, and watch over you always," he said somberly, softly, reaching out and closing the cougar's open, vacant eyes, then putting a hand on his chest in a final gesture of farewell. But his kind tone evaporated when he turned on Danna, his eyes hot and his fangs bared. "You *killed* him!" he growled.

Danna looked up at him fearfully, then her eyes narrowed and went flat. "I was trying to kill *you*, Shaman," she spat. "I can't believe I fell for such an obvious trap! Lured out into the wilds by a *Shaman*. I just wish I could gouge your eyes out before I die!" she screamed, and she started kicking and struggling, trying to get free of him.

"Kyven," Clover said, dragging the inert form of Toby Fisher along with her, by the scruff of his shirt. "Oh, no," she said in a quiet, shocked tone, dropping the hunter and rushing over to Claw. She put her hands on his face and recoiled, then put them on his chest. Then she knelt by him, put her forehead on his chest, and wept.

"I just wish I didn't waste my last shot on him if it hurts *you*," Danna said spitefully, and Kyven was shocked in himself when he slapped her hard on her belly, hard enough to knock the wind out of her. She laid there, gasping for breath, and then put his free hand on Clover's shoulder, comforting her in her time of grief. She sniffled and rose up, wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, and then stood up. "Kyven, take the two humans to the camp, strip them, then tie them up. Then collect the horses. I'll go find the children and bring them back. Then we will go on."

"Should we bury him?"

She shook her head. "We take him home, so he may rest in sacred ground and find peace for always," she declared in a breaking voice. "He will be buried on Firetail's Hill," she proclaimed.

She dropped to all fours and bounded off, leaving him with Danna. He dragged her by the hands as he went to the unconscious hunter, grabbed him by a hand, then dragged both of them back up the small hill. Danna recovered enough to kick and curse as she struggled to free herself of his rock solid grip on her hands, but he really didn't care that much now. He'd thought of her, dreamed about her, even fantasized about her, and now she had killed one of his friends while trying to kill *him*. Had Claw not been there, he would be dead, he knew it. The woman he'd been infatuated with tried to kill him. Everything he thought he felt for her vanished almost instantly at that thought. She was no longer the woman he wanted to become human again to pursue, she was a Loreguard enemy.

When they reached the flattened grass that had been their camp, he dropped Toby, dragged Danna away from him, then put a foot on her stomach threateningly, digging it up under her

chain jack and shirt to put it on her bare belly. He let go of her hands and grabbed the tail of the chain jack and jerked on it, sitting her up roughly as much as she could go with his foot on her stomach, making her yelp in pain. She punched at his leg, but he leaned down and boxed her in the forehead, knocking her back to the grass, dazing her long enough to grab her shirt and pull it off her, leaving her naked from the waist up. He switched positions and put his foot on her neck, his claws punching into her skin as a warning should she resist, and she settled down quickly once she got her senses back, understanding that in that position, a flex of his foot could kill her. He stripped off her boots, then jerked her trousers off, leaving her enticingly and sensually nude. Despite what she did, he still had a weakness for the sight of her beautiful body, and he found himself staring at her for a long moment, unable to resist admiring her. He blinked and put his head back in reality, then took his foot off her neck. She glared up at him murderously, but the cold stare she received in reply cowed her. She was now defenseless against a Shaman, and that fact had hit home. Her life was literally in his hands, and he could kill her in a split second, without even making a single move. And she *knew* it.

For the third time in his life, he was tempted to commit deliberate murder, to avenge Claw. And to his shame, the only thing that saved her life was her looks. He couldn't bring himself to do it, kill the woman he'd been pining for since the day they met. She was literally saved by her body.

"Move, I dare you," he growled at her, his glowing eyes boring into her, and he stepped back and turned to the hunter. He systematically stripped him naked, then collected up the clothes and gear of both of them and bundled it together, then picked it all up. "You are naked and defenseless, Danna. Go ahead and run while I go gather the horses, and see how far you get. Then see what happens to you when I track you down. After you killed one of my own, I don't think you'd like to piss me off right now."

"And I'm not supposed to feel something for the men you killed?" she spat back.

"*You* chased *us*," he snapped in reply. "Had you left us alone, they wouldn't be dead. And neither would Claw. Their deaths are on *your* head, not mine. I was just defending myself against you, nothing more, nothing less," he growled, then he turned and left her in the camp. It took him about ten minutes to gather up the three remaining horses. He put all Danna and Toby's gear in a pack on one of the horses, then led them carefully through the stream in a train, avoiding the dead men and horses still laying in the water, and took them back to the camp. Danna wasn't there, but Teacup and Patches were, as was the unconscious Toby. Teacup was clutching onto Patches fearfully as they looked at the sleek, naked human. "Clover went after the female," Teacup told him fearfully as he led the horses up into the flattened grass. "Is Claw dead?"

He sighed and nodded. "I'm sorry. He was shot. But he saved my life," he admitted.

"Well, I think he would have liked that," Patches said quietly.

Clover returned, carrying their packs and dragging a struggling Danna by the hands. "I told you to tie her up, brother," she chided.

"I forgot, I'm sorry. I really didn't think she'd run. She has nowhere to go."

"She is not an Arcan, brother. She does not bow to inevitability. She has to be watched constantly or she'll try to escape. Take her," she said, tossing the woman by the hands, making her land hard on her butt in the middle of the camp. "I'll go get our friend and prepare his body for the journey so it doesn't decay."

Kyven used his foot to push Danna onto her side, then he stepped on her hip, hooked his claws into her skin and pulled, forcing her to roll over on her stomach or get her skin torn by his claws, then he stepped quite deliberately on her lower stomach, his smallest toe within

her patch of pubic hair, his claws coming to rest on her hip and upper leg. "I told you to stay here."

"Fuck you," she retorted, spitting at him spitefully.

"You're just digging your own grave, Danna," he said coldly. "The table has been turned. *You're* the slave now, and *we* are the masters. How would you like a taste of what humans do to Arcans, Danna? How would you like to experience what I have since this was done to me?" he asked, motioning at himself.

"What the fuck does it matter? You're just gonna kill me when we get there, so why shouldn't I fight? Maybe I can take a couple more of you with me!"

"You will do no such thing," Clover said calmly as she returned, carrying Claw's body. She laid it down gently, which caused the two girls to rush over to it, kneel, and hug his dead body. "You belong to us now, woman. Get used to it. We will treat you with far more dignity than our kind receives from you, but only if you behave."

"Fuck you, whore!" Danna spat, but then she gasped and gave a ragged cry, her body tensing up as Clover channeled a spell into her body. The woman gave out a ragged cry, then collapsed to the ground, panting.

"Mind your manners," Clover said calmly as she knelt by the hunter.

"What did you do to her?"

"A spell that gives pleasure, but so much that it almost feels as pain. Though not painful, certainly not pleasant," she answered as she turned the hunter over and put her hand to his neck. He felt her channel a spell, and saw magical power flood into Toby's body. "There," she said with a nod, then she came over to Danna and put her hand on Danna's neck. The woman moved to resist, but the spell began, freezing her in place. When it was done, she touched her neck quickly after Clover removed her hand. "Now, understand this, human. You are now *bound* to us."

"What does that mean?"

"What pain we feel, you will feel. If we die, you die," she answered. She held out her hand and jabbed her short, thick claw into the pad of her palm, which made Danna yelp in pain and clutch her hand. "So go ahead and attack us, human. You will only hurt yourself. And mind that if you get too far from us, you will feel sicker and sicker, until you are all but paralyzed by your illness. So, let her go, brother," she said simply. "Let her stand up."

The instant Kyven removed his foot, the woman squirmed around and bolted. Kyven gave Clover a curious look, but she just smiled and watched. Kyven did as well. She got about five hundred rods, then slowed down and hunched over, the sound of her retching audible all the way from there. She tried to keep staggering forward, but she was doubled over, both hands on her stomach, until she turned around and staggered back towards them. Her steps became less and less uncertain, and then she stood up and took her hands off her toned belly, blew out her breath, and marched slowly and angrily back towards them.

"And thus she is controlled," Clover said with a mild smile.

"You have got to teach me that spell," Kyven noted.

She leaned in and whispered in his ear. "It is only temporary, but she does not know that, does she?"

Kyven had to chuckle. Guile and deceit was something that Clover practiced as well.

"I will drain the crystals from all of their equipment and take what we may use from the three dead," Clover said. "But I will not drain the crystals in their horses' shoes. They have crystal-based horseshoes that let them run faster and longer than normal horses. Very clever," she said with an appreciative nod. "The horses will need that to keep up with us."

"We're taking both of them?"

She nodded. "The spirits wish it. They have an interest in him."

Danna stomped back to them, giving them ugly looks, standing there defiantly with her hands on her hips, not even trying to cover herself. "I will find a way to escape," she stated.

"Try all you wish, dear," Clover said in a patronizing manner. "But in the end, you will go where we tell you and do what we tell you. Any misery you find on this journey you will only bring on yourself. We will treat you as you treat us."

"I won't lie down like a dog for you," she spat.

"We wouldn't ask it of you," Clover shrugged and turned from her, going to the horses.

Toby woke up after Clover finished draining the crystals and stripped the dead Loreguard of their useful equipment, and received the same speech Danna did. He too tried to run when Clover urged him to do so, and he too came back after tasting the effects of the spell. "Ah guess Ah'm yo' guest fo' a while," he said ruefully. "Ah do hope y'all don't mean tah' keep me."

"I'm not really sure what they'll do with you, hunter," Clover said honestly. "The spirits wish us to take you. They see something in you we do not. Perhaps they wish to employ your services, I suppose. You are, I understand, a man for hire?"

"Ah ain't nevah worked fo' Arcans befo'," he said with a chuckle. "But Ah wouldn't be against it if the pay is good, and Ah don't disagree with what y'all want me tah do."

"*Hire* a hunter?" Teacup said in astonishment. "Why?"

"We employ the services of many humans, Teacup. Dear child, remember, *humanity* is not our enemy, it is the *governments* and *ideals* of some portions of humanity we oppose. We hold no ill will against the humans. The Masked is mostly human, child, who side with us against the oppression of their own people. We do not hate them. We love them and cherish them. If the hunter is agreeable to work for us, he will find us to be fair employers who pay well."

"Ah'll think about it," Toby said simply. "Ah won't have much else tah do."

"It is but one possibility, hunter."

"Toby. Mah name is Toby."

"Toby," she said with a smile. "You are our guest now, Toby. Understand that we will treat you as you treat us."

"Ah understand. That's mah own policy."

Danna glared at him darkly, then when he looked at her, she seemed a little embarrassed, making a move as if to cover her breasts and pubic hair, but then realizing that it was a futile gesture, especially since he stood there naked as well.

Kyven had to admit, Toby was quite handsome, all lean muscle, and was well equipped in a way that would please women, nearly Kyven's own size... though Kyven was graced in that department.

"Here is what will happen," Clover called to them all as she picked up Claw's body. "You will ride the horses along with us. All of your gear has been drained of power and your weapons will be left behind. You both already know what awaits you if you run," she said simply. "So you may ride with us, or lay convulsing in the grass until we deign to come back for you. You will be given your clothes back after I go over them to make sure they hide no surprises, which will not be right now, so prepare yourselves to ride naked at least until our first stop. We must be away from this place quickly, before the dead attract scavengers we would prefer to avoid. Oh, yes, Toby. You weren't conscious when I demonstrated this." She again jabbed her claw into her palm while holding Claw's body, which made both Toby and Danna grab their own hands in pain. "You are bound to us. Any pain we feel, you will feel. If any of us dies, both of you die as well. Keep that in mind should you conspire to escape," she

said with a little half-smile. "Come brother, let's secure Claw to a horse so we may continue."

Kyven sighed and nodded, and helped her with the somber task. After it was done, after he was tied across a saddle and his tail tucked into the stirrup, Kyven took stock. Danna was standing, almost red-faced with anger, her arms crossed beneath her bare breasts, but Toby was sitting casually on the grass, seemingly comfortable with things. Trinity, but that man was a mystery. He seemed just absolutely unflappable. He was just as calm in his captivity as he'd been being Kyven's captor, and almost as polite. If Kyven were in their place, he'd be afraid, not angry or calm. Kyven went over to the girls and picked up his clothes, and nudged them. Teacup was staring at them with amusement, but Patches looked decidedly afraid, holding onto the small raccoon tightly. "Get dressed," he told them in a low tone. "It's time to go."

They looked at him and nodded, and reached for their clothes. Kyven put on his breeches, then pulled his shirt over his head and settled it into place. He handed Clover her clothes, and she took them with a short nuzzle to his cheek, a nuzzle that produced a very strange reaction out of Danna. She looked infuriated, then humiliated, then coldly angry.

Trinity... she was *jealous*? She'd just tried to kill him not a half hour ago! No, her jealousy was unconscious, he realized. She'd had the same kind of interest in him he'd had for her, he saw, but it was dead now, but some traces of it remained. She had been interested in him when she thought he was human, interested in *him*, not his condition, but now he looked in her eyes and saw only hate. She thought he was an Arcan who had killed the real Kyven and took his place.

In a strange kind of way, if you looked at it right, that was what happened.

It was a cruel twist of the knife, he contemplated. He had been so infatuated with her, and now he finds out she'd been infatuated with him too... but now she thought he was the enemy, knew that he was a Shaman. She'd tried to *kill* him, but had instead killed Claw. He was angry with her about that, but she had right to be angry with him for killing three of her men. Then again, if not for Claw's disobedience in coming back, he'd be alive right now, and Kyven would be the one who was dead. Either way, one of them would have died here today. He felt a little guilty in thinking that he was glad he was the survivor. But it was over now, before it ever had a chance. She *hated* him now, her very gaze at him would make a weaker man shiver... and her gaze did not leave him. She kept her eyes on him at all times, followed him with her eyes, and the hate never left her stare.

And such did dreams die.

He sighed and waited as Clover had the two of them mount, and they looked rather strange and silly sitting naked in their saddles. Clover got their attention. "Stay between me and Kyven," she told them. "Now let us be off before a Wolveran arrives."

Kyven saw that riding naked was going to pose problems for both of them. For Toby, it was dealing with his loose genitals, and for Danna, it was her breasts bouncing up and down violently as she urged the horse to start out after the coyote. Well, with luck, they wouldn't be uncomfortable long, just until they got far enough away for them to stop so Clover could inspect their clothes.

Odd that he cared for their comfort, for at that moment, Danna would probably kill him just out of spite, despite knowing that act would kill herself. He guessed that even though she hated him, he didn't feel the same. He was more disappointed and angry than he was hateful. Angry that she had attacked him and killed Claw, and disappointed that something he'd been dreaming about for weeks was obviously never going to happen.

He sighed and started out after the girls, who didn't want those horses behind them. Why

was it that his life was just such a mess since he decided to walk down this path?

The fox taught him that life wasn't fair. Trinity, was that being proved now.

Chapter 13

The two humans introduced a great deal of tension into their journey.

Patches went completely silent and stayed far away from both of them as they moved more and more westerly and less and less to the north, keeping the horses in front of her when they moved, and staying as far from the two humans as she could when they stopped. Clover carefully examined Danna and Toby's clothes when they stopped a few hours after leaving the fight scene, removing a few hidden weapons from Toby's clothing and a stout metal cord from Danna's shirt, then she deigned to return their clothes to them. Patches stayed behind Kyven as the two dressed, but Teacup was asking Toby a bunch of unrelated questions, basically pestering the poor man to no end with her curiosity. Toby took it with aplomb, patiently answering her questions but not asking any of his own.

Danna continued to glare at Kyven, her eyes almost never leaving him after she dressed and they ate a small breakfast of dried venison. When they started out again, she didn't look back at him, which gave him at least a little reprieve, but he could still feel her hate, even from her back. It depressed him more than anything else, because now the only woman who had ever really captured his attention now hated him, and what was worse, he was stuck traveling with her. He had to endure that withering glare at least for another week. They moved into an even flatter area, the horses having no problem keeping up with the Arcans because of their magical horseshoes, and encountered no other large animals or Arcans all day. Nothing bigger than rabbits and mice... outside of a cloud of angry mosquitoes that swarmed on them as they stopped for the night, which caused Clover to use Shaman magic to cause every mosquito around them to leave, almost as if they were repelled, and they didn't come back. Kyven didn't see how she did it, but it was certainly he'd love to learn. He'd love to unleash that little trick on the fleas.

Stopping for the night was tense, for both Patches and him. Patches was afraid of the two humans, and wanted to get far away from them, and Kyven was unsettled by the hot glare Danna continued to level against him. But he saw some animals in the distance, what looked like deer, and he realized that he had a chance. But Teacup wasn't afraid at all, and since she'd grilled Toby earlier, she now turned her attention on Danna. She asked the woman a bunch of questions, which she refused to answer, just remained coldly silent and continued to stare at Kyven with murder in her eyes. It got to the point where he couldn't take it anymore, and went over to Clover. "There's something over there, I'm going to go see what it is," he told her, pointing to the south. "Maybe we can have some fresh meat tonight."

Clover nodded. "If it is bison, down it and come get us, we will move to the kill and camp there."

"Alright," he said as he pulled his shirt off, then unbuttoned his trousers and stepped out of them.

"Umm, can I come with you, Kyven?" Patches asked, grabbing hold of his arm. "I don't want to be near *them*."

Kyven was about to reject her request out of impulse, but saw that she was very tense, very nervous, and very scared. He nodded reluctantly, and she immediately went for her little torn shirt, pulling it off and reaching for the oversized trousers she wore. "The key to hunting is silence and caution, Patches," he told her as she took off her trousers and dropped them on the ground by his. "Just stay close to me and do what I say and keep quiet, or we'll scare away the food."

“Okay.”

He led her out in the moonrise, as she followed him rather closely as he moved more slowly than usual and stayed visible so she could see him, ranging out. As they got closer, he saw that it wasn't bison, it was those red-tailed deer, the big ones. There were about twenty of them, a large herd, two males with large racks standing guard over about eighteen does. He slowed down and tested the wind, found it favorable, and then dropped down into the thick grass, which Patches mirrored. “These things are very big,” he whispered to her. “I'm not sure I want to try to tackle one without using magic.”

“I can help.”

“Little one, as much as I like having you here, you're not big enough to help that much. Hell, I'm not sure I'm big enough,” he grinned at her toothily. “I appreciate your company, but I'd also like you to get back to camp alive. These things *can* hurt us if we're not careful.”

“Just tell me what to do.”

“What you can do is wait here and take a little time to relax away from the humans,” he told her, licking her cheek playfully. “Keep down and stay quiet, but don't drop your guard. We may not be the only hunters stalking this herd, and you're much smaller and easier to catch than they are.”

She nodded nervously and hunkered down, her little ears scanning for sound.

He slinked off and melted into the shadows, stalking up onto the herd. They were big, real big, and he didn't feel like having to wrestle one of them down and try to kill it by himself. But, he was curious of these big brutes, he wanted an estimation of how they would react, how aggressive they were. He crept up within range, picked out his target, then channeled lightning against it. The bolt hit the doe in the head, dropping it instantly, and the rest of the herd started, braying and crying in surprise, but they didn't run. The animals saw the dead herd member, but instead of running, they circled the dead doe with the two bucks stalking around the perimeter of that ring, snorting and pounding their hooves into the ground aggressively.

Well *fuck*, they intended to defend their dead member! He wanted to see what they would do... well, now he knew.

It took a bit of doing to get his meal out of there. He crept up to the defensive ring and blinded them with a blast of light, which disoriented them, then blinded the buck that hadn't been blinded by the first one. That buck staggered to the side, swinging his head wildly to try to gore him with that huge rack of antlers, and then he channeled silence across the entire herd. It made Kyven's teeth throb to silence that large of an area for more than a second, but the sudden blindness from the flash of light and then the sudden silence broke their bravado, and the herd scattered in every direction. Kyven dashed in and grunted as he picked up the huge doe, almost struggling under its weight. By the Trinity, it had to weigh more than he did... and it was one of the *small* ones! But once he had it settled on his shoulders, he was able to run with it. He returned to Patches, who was right where he left, her and had her follow him to keep an eye out for any of those deer who might coming looking for their missing member once they reformed.

“Wow, that thing is huge!”

“It's one of the small ones,” he said, shifting the heavy weight on his shoulders. “Now let's move, girl. I'm hungry for something other than dried venison. I hope these don't taste bad,” he said. “Keep an eye out behind us. The herd was protective, and I don't want them hunting us down.”

“Alright,” she said. She did so, keeping an eye behind them as Kyven carried dinner back, but no pursuit appeared when he got it back to the camp. Clover was kneeling by Teacup,

who was sitting on the ground going through one of the packs taken from the horses, who had been relieved of their burdens, watered, and picketed near the camp. They all looked at them as Kyven carried the large deer in and dropped it on the ground heavily, then blew out his breath. “That was an adventure,” he grunted.

“Did they run or fight?”

“They tried to fight,” he sighed.

“Did they cause any problems?” she asked, looking at Patches, who had already knelt by the carcass in preparation, waiting for Kyven or Clover to open its belly since her teeth weren't up to the task.

“I left her in a safe place,” he chuckled, looking over at the humans. Toby was sitting against a saddle, gnawing on a piece of dried venison, and Danna was sitting across from him, her ration of venison laying on the ground. Now that he thought of it, she hadn't eaten that morning either.

If she wanted to starve herself, that was her business.

Kyven joined the others at the carcass, and they enjoyed the first fresh meat since coming into the grassy plain. He could hear Danna whispering to Toby as they ate, and though he couldn't make any of it out, his ears turning towards them certainly made it clear to them that he was aware of what they were doing. The four of them managed to take a pretty big chunk out of the large animal, which tasted a bit more robust than the white-tailed deer he was used to eating, and Clover and Kyven cut the remainder into pieces. Clover took to good-sized chunks and walked over to Toby and Danna and held it out to them. “If raw meat does not bother you, here. It is better for you than the dried meat.”

Danna turned her nose up at it, but Toby took the piece he was offered. “Thanky ma'am. Ah've eaten it raw befo', an' Ah will again.”

Clover nodded and handed him both pieces. “I will get your bedrolls for you,” she told them. “Are you well?”

“Say again ma'am?”

“Saddlesores? Any aches or pains?”

“Ayah, no ma'am, Ah'm doin' fine.”

“That's good to hear.”

“They want us fat before they eat us like that deer,” Danna finally said, in a low, snarky tone.

That made Clover laugh, which earned her a dark glare from the Loreguard captain. “Dear girl, humans taste *terrible*,” she said. “You taste like moldy, rancid beef.”

That made Danna give her a surprised look, somewhere between fear and indignation. She kept giving Clover wary looks as she returned with their bedrolls, and even spread them out for them. “It might be cold tonight. There are extra blankets on the pack horse if you need them. Waterskins are there as well. Kyven, we must completely remove the corpse from the camp and burn it or it will attract something we do *not* want visiting us,” she said. “We will need a fire tonight regardless, but not the one that burns the remains.”

They did so. Clover dragged the partially skeletonized carcass nearly a minar from camp and burned it as Kyven took what little wood they had with them and started a fire. He saw that Toby was eating the venison Clover had given him, but Danna had rejected the other piece, which Toby then ate himself once he finished his own. Clover returned and nuzzled him briefly, which earned him a hot look from Danna. “It is your choice, brother, first or second watch.”

“I'll take second,” he told her. “I've already been up pretty long.”

She nodded. “Then take the girls and get some rest. I'll wake you at midnight.”

Kyven nodded and, as Danna stared at him, he held his hands out to the young females. Teacup shed her clothing, which made Danna glare even more, and they joined him on the far side of the small fire. They bedded down, with Patches curling up against him and Teacup snuggling up against his back, and he put his arm over the panda. He was tired, but his mind was racing too much for him to immediately fall asleep. He could feel Danna's eyes on him even now, and it made him uncomfortable. She was certainly doing her best to make him as unhappy as possible. He tried to ignore her, but it wasn't easy. He sighed and tried to relax, but was unable to do so, at least until Patches started kneading his fur with her small hands. He concentrated on that sensation, a very pleasant one, and it lulled him to sleep.

Clover woke him up some time after midnight. He blinked woozily and opened his eyes to the spirits, and saw her kneeling over them. "Your turn, brother," she called softly. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm alright," he answered, disengaging himself from the girls and sitting up. Clover helped him up, gave him an affectionate lick on the cheek, then knelt down and carefully took his place between the girls. Patches immediately curled up against her in her sleep, and Teacup rolled over on her back, her tail twitching and her small breasts rising up as she sighed in her sleep. Kyven added some dry grass stalks to the coals of the fire, not having anything else to burn, and they sputtered ruddy light across the camp for brief moments before they burned out.

The nearly full moon cast a silvery pall over the sea of grass, allowing him to see visibly for quite some distance, but having full sight with his spirit sight. He spent long hours wondering at what Haven would be like, how he would be accepted there, and wondering exactly what the spirits wanted from Toby. He wondered what kind of reception was awaiting the two humans in a place where there *were* no humans... probably not a very good one. Many of them were going to react the way Claw and Patches did, either with anger or fear. Humans had a lot to answer for because of the way they treated Arcans... and he shared some of that, he guessed. He *was* human, no matter how he looked now, and no matter how it had dominated his thinking lately. He would have the finger of accusation pointed at him as well, and he had to be ready for it. Some would not see him as anything but a *human* when they found out what he was. He had to be ready to face the same hate he saw in Danna, and he couldn't run and hide from them the way he could from her.

He looked at her, saw past her clothes with spirit sight, and again had to admire her loveliness. Just another reason to be angry with the fox, he pondered with a sigh. She hated him now, hated him with a passion... the only woman he'd ever wanted to pursue. He sat on his haunches, resolutely with his back to the humans, and scanned the plain in the distance to take his mind off of it. But he couldn't keep his mind off it long, as he heard stirring behind him. The manner of the movement told him that it was Danna, for Toby was much quieter, much more graceful. He heard her stop, then heard her try to stalk up on him from behind, her boots making far too much noise for him to miss it. When she got just behind him, and he saw the shadow of her in the grass before him, raising a hand holding something long and slender, he decided to warn him off before she hurt both him and herself. "I'd put that hand down if I were you," he said in a low voice, barely more than a whisper. "Giving both of us a concussion would not be a good way to start the day." When that hand instead rushed forward, he slinked to the side with speed and grace, causing her to completely miss. She staggered forward, and a slap to her knee tumbled her to the ground. She rose up, holding one of the drained black rods in her hand, probably stolen from the horse before they went to sleep last night, but when he leveled his glowing stare on her, she came to her senses and slowly lowered the weapon.

He had to face her hate. If he couldn't stand up to Danna, he'd have no chance against the Arcans. "Sit," he commanded in a low tone, leveling his stare on her. She gave him an uncertain look, then sank down to sit sedately, and quite femininely, on her legs. "I think it's time to clear the air between us," he told her in low tones. "Because I'm tired of seeing my death in your eyes."

"I'd kill you in a heartbeat if I could, *Shaman*," she hissed.

"Why?"

That question made her blink. She wasn't expecting it. "Why? Would you like an hour-long diatribe, or a simple list?"

"We have a good hour before dawn yet, so I think we can do the diatribe," he said urbane, which again seemed to confuse her. "Now, which of my aspects is bothering you the most? That I'm a Shaman? That I defended myself against you and killed your men? Or that you think I pretended to be someone you thought you wanted to get to know?"

Her eyes flashed, and she rose up on her knees. "Don't tell me what you think I feel, Arcan," she snapped. "You have no idea!"

"Because I'm an Arcan?" he asked simply.

"Because you're an *animal*," she answered flatly.

"Oh, I think I have some idea," he said calmly. "So, you hate me because I'm an Arcan, I'm a Shaman, and my name is Kyven."

"You are *not* Kyven," she snapped, quite loudly.

"Yes. I am," he said simply, looking her in the eyes. "I was born to a miner and his wife in Atan. My mother died when I was very young, and my father put me into apprenticeship with Master Holm not long after, to give me the best chance at a life he couldn't give me. I spent nearly ten years in the shop as a crystalcutter."

"So you just tortured it out of him before you killed him," she said with a scowl. "So you could impersonate him!"

"I can't give you any real proof of who I am, outside of answering your questions," he told her. "I heard that you were in Atan looking for me, so I'm sure you asked around about me and learned about me."

She gave him a dark look. "There's nothing I could ask that you wouldn't already know," she retorted.

"Really?" he asked, closing his eyes. "Did you visit my shop?"

"Of course I did."

"Well, then, you entered through the front room, where we have our displays and where our customers come in. We have shelves flanking the passageway back into the main shop, filled with cut pieces of glass that resemble crystals to demonstrate the skill of the shop's cutters. You walked down a fairly long hallway to a terraced room with benches and a slateboard. That's where our first years take their classes, learning to read and write. Then you went down a hallway off to the left that had two sets of doors in it, past a stairway going up to your right, and then into the main shop. It's a large place, filled with workbenches up against the walls and six benches in the middle of the room. There's a raised portion on the right side of the room holding six benches, where the senior apprentices work, and on the far side there's a heavy metal-bound door that's the vault, where we keep our uncut and cut crystals. There's an office in the back right corner of the main shop, and right outside of it is a bench that's not used. It has a thin layer of dust on it, but it's all quite orderly. An array of tiny hammers are lined up in a groove at the back of the bench, and in a cup on the left there's an assortment of picks, and on the right there are a set of chisels of various sizes hanging off a little circular rack that spins around. There's a lamp right over the desk, and a magnifying

glass is attached to a rotating arm that's secured to the right side of the bench. Right in the middle, on the top row of the three shelves, there's a badly cut red crystal sitting on a little stand. That was the first crystal I ever cut by myself, and I did so badly that Master Holm made me keep it to remind me of how *not* to cut crystals." He sighed. "But Holm died before I got back, and Timble's running the shop now. That is my shop. There are no Arcans in the shop. Master Holm didn't like Arcans. So, how can I know so much about the shop if I weren't human?"

She was silent a long moment. "How many apprentices are there?"

"Well, if nobody's quit or anything, there would be nine first years and eight—no, wait, six senior apprentices. Was counting myself and Timble there," he chuckled. "There are two servants in the shop who primarily help cook dinner, but the apprentices are the ones that do most of the cleaning. We have a teacher who comes to teach the first years to read and write."

"So, you can read and write?" she asked challengingly.

"Of course I can. All crystalcutters can read, write, and do numbers. It's part of the job."

"That's a lie. Arcans can't read."

Kyven stood up and went to the horses. He came back with a small book that Clover had taken from the Loreguard, sat back down, then opened it. "2 September. Continuing pursuit of the transformed human. Have joined forces with a freelance hunter that seems very competent, who is chasing the same Arcan as a runaway from Alamar. Given his exotic coloration, I can see why Alamar wants him back. His fearful reaction makes sense when I take into account the fact that he was in Alamar. No doubt they treated him like an Arcan."

"Where did you get that?" she demanded.

"It was in the gear Clover kept," he said simply, closing the small book. "So, have we established that I can read now?"

She gave him a cold look.

"I'll take that as a yes," he said calmly. "So. The simple fact of the matter is that I *am* Kyven Steelhammer," he told her. "I'm a Shaman, yes, but I was born *human*. This," he said, motioning at himself, "was a punishment from my spirit for doing something stupid."

"I can't believe that!" she protested.

"It's the simple truth," he said. "Now maybe you see why I ran? It wasn't because I'm an Arcan, it's because I'm a *Shaman*. I'm a *human* Shaman, Danna. From what I'm told, I'm the first one ever known, but from what I've seen, I don't think I'll be the only one."

"That's impossible!"

"Didn't people believe centuries ago that Arcans being Shaman was impossible?" he asked with calm logic. "Isn't that what the Loremasters say, that Arcan Shaman are abominations, against the natural order?"

"You *are*! You serve an evil force that seeks to destroy human civilization!"

"The Shaman *serve*, Danna. No more, no less. We serve the spirits, we serve the Arcans because they need us, and if the humans need us, we serve them as well. I think that was why I was born, now that I think of it. Humans need Shaman for some reason, and I was born in response to that need."

"That's a lie!"

"Is it? Think about it. Why do the Loremasters hate Shaman?"

"Because they're trying to undermine our entire civilization and enslave us!"

"Just like you've done to the Arcans?"

"Arcans are *animals*. It's their proper place to serve mankind. Without us, they'd all be running through the forest killing each other."

"Does that give humanity the right to murder Arcans for their fur?"

Danna was silent a moment. "Yes," she finally stated. "Arcans live to serve mankind in whatever capacity we wish."

"Well, then, Danna. Am *I* an animal?" he asked. "I'm sitting here talking to you right now. I know how to read, I know how to write, and I'll bet I can do numbers better than you. Am I an animal?"

"You're an Arcan. No matter how smart you are, you're still an animal."

"So all you can see is my fur," he reasoned. "What if I put this fur on you? Would you being changed into an Arcan make *you* an animal?"

"That's impossible!"

"Sometimes I wish it wasn't," Kyven grunted. "But answer the question. Would being an Arcan make *you* an animal?"

"No. I have a soul. Arcans don't."

"So, you just admitted that I can't be an animal if I was born human," he reasoned. "Now, back to the original point. What would the Loremasters do if they found out that *humans* were being born Shaman?"

She seemed to flare for a second, then sat back down fully, her face thoughtful and introspective. "I... I don't know," she finally said. "It wouldn't be good. It would mean that the evil you serve is invading humanity, just as it did the Arcans."

"Spirits aren't evil, Danna, though sometimes they can do some pretty mean things," he said with a shudder. "They merely *are*. I've seen them caring for humans as well as caring for Arcans."

"How can I believe that?"

"I've been able to see spirits since I was a boy," he told her simply. "It's why I had no friends when I grew up, always stayed to myself. The only one I ever told about it was my father, who told me to never, ever tell anyone what I was seeing. They'd think I was crazy, or I was Touched. So I kept quiet, always afraid that I'd let it slip someday that I could see what I see, and get myself in big trouble. If I didn't have any close friends, then there was no chance I could make that mistake, was there?" he asked with calm logic. "Anyway, I've seen them in Atan since I was a boy. Spirits seem very interested in humanity. I've seen them help people more than once. So I don't think they're evil. It think they're like people, there are some good ones and some bad ones, just as there are some good people and some bad people. Then there are ones like mine," he sighed. "Which you can't tell one way or the other."

"I don't believe you!"

"That's your choice," he shrugged. "I just want you to understand why I ran. It was nothing personal. I was afraid of what the Loremasters would do to me, that I'd only be safe out here, where they can't reach me." He looked right at her. "Now, why do you hate me so much?"

She snorted. "You killed my men, men with families, men who were my friends! That by itself is all the reason I need to hate you! But on top of that, you're a Shaman, you've taken me captive, and you killed someone I thought I might like," she answered flatly.

He sighed and shook his head. "I protected myself from you, I can't help the fact that I'm a Shaman, you brought this on yourself when you chased me, and I didn't kill Kyven because I *am* Kyven. You think I like to kill? You're wrong. I hate it. But I had *no choice*. You mean to take me back, which I won't allow, you were right on top of me, I didn't have many options I could see, and there were too many of you. I had to fight to win, and against so many of you, my only choice was to kill. You killed Claw, and though I'm angry with you about that, at least I don't *hate* you for it. I know you're feeling helpless because we captured you, but could you at least spread the hate around a little instead of spending your every waking

moment staring at *me*?”

“I’m glad it bothers you,” she said flatly.

“It doesn’t bother me for the reason you think,” he told her. “It bothers me because I wanted to get to know you. I thought—” he said, then he sighed. “I was hoping that when I got my humanity back, I could see if we could work. But I guess that’s never going to happen now,” he admitted, looking at the ground in front of him. “I wanted to get to know you, and now all you do is look at me with hate. That hurts,” he admitted, then he got up and turned to pad off on all fours.

“Why do you do that?” she demanded, making him turn to look back at her. “If you really were human, why do you act like *them*? You walk on all fours, you eat like an animal, you touch them and fondle them like they were a bunch of whores.”

“It’s just as easy to walk like this as it is standing up,” he answered simply. “And seeing as how we don’t have any knives or forks or dishes, eating that way is much easier.”

“How do you stand it?”

“It actually tastes alright,” he told her casually. “Cooked meat tastes weird now, after I’ve eaten it raw since midsummer. Anyway, I act like an Arcan because right now, I *am* one. I had to learn very fast and very hard how to fit in with them, because Arcans who are alone stand out, and an Arcan that stands out has a much smaller chance of living to see tomorrow.”

“That’s hard to believe.”

“I’ve seen how it works from the inside, Danna,” he said in a calm yet powerful voice. “I’ve seen Arcans slaughtered like cattle, and only for their fur. I’ve seen the scars on the ones who are used to fight just to entertain people. I’ve been in the cages of a kennel and seen how people treat them. I stood on an auction block and watched helplessly as I was sold to the highest bidder. I was nearly starved to death for the *amusement* of the man who bought me after I was captured in Cheston,” he told her, a bit coldly. “And Arcans touch because they’re a very *compassionate* people,” he told her. “When you’re in a collar, when speaking draws attention to you, touching is all there is. So Arcans touch, touch a great deal, to comfort each other and establish bonds. If I want to be accepted, I have to touch.”

“You seem to enjoy it,” she accused.

“Of course I do. It’s very pleasant,” he said simply. “And it makes me feel wanted and accepted. Who doesn’t want that?”

“I wouldn’t.”

“When you’re locked in a cage and have no idea if you’ll live to see the sunrise, that opinion will change *very* quickly,” he said with a calm look at her. “All Arcans have are each other. “When you’re about to be sold and have no idea what will happen to you, you’ll take comfort from wherever you can.”

She was silent a long moment, then looked away.

“Don’t judge me until you’ve walked in my footsteps, Danna,” he said simply. “You have no idea what it’s like.”

“And pray I never do?” she asked acidly.

“No, I think you could do for a good healthy week or two walking in my footsteps,” he said, looking at her critically. “If anything, it would give you a different perspective. Who knows, you might learn something.” He turned from her. “I sure did,” he added when he padded away from her on all fours.

He sat down on the far side of the camp, leaving Danna to her thoughts. He’d tried to be calm and rational, showing her that he *was* Kyven, and he wasn’t what she thought he was. He wasn’t sure how well he did, but if he just got her to *think* for a few minutes, then it was

worth it. He watched the moon set, at least until Patches came up to sit beside him. “Is it true?” she asked in a small voice. “Are you really a human?”

“I was born that way,” he told her calmly. “So yes, I guess you can say I’m a human.” He looked at her. “Does that bother you, little one?”

She looked away, looked at the ground. “A little.”

“But think about it. I’m a human, but how have I been to you since we met? Am I so bad?”

She glanced at him, then looked down again. “No,” she finally admitted.

“Well, if I’m not so bad, maybe there’s a chance other humans aren’t so bad either,” he said gently. “Don’t judge all humans by your former masters, Patches, just like humans shouldn’t judge all Arcans by the wild ones they see as animals.” He leaned over and put his hand on her shoulder, and to his delight, she did not flinch away from him. “What do you think of me now, little one? Be honest. I can take it.”

“I don’t know what to think,” she answered, looking at him. “You don’t *act* like a human at all.”

He smiled. “Whether I have fur or not, little one, I’m still Kyven,” he told her. “I’m someone who cares about you and wants to see you be happy for the rest of your life. I’m a Shaman, little one, and you need me. I’ll always be here for you.”

She looked up at him, then wrapped her arms around his chest and back and nuzzled the fur on his chest. He chuckled and put an arm around her. “I love you too, little one,” he told her gently. “So, am I forgiven?”

“For what?”

“For being something other than what you thought I was.”

She looked up at him, and gave him a glorious smile. “I *guess*,” she said, which made him erupt into laughter.

Much to Kyven’s surprise, Danna’s hateful looks curtailed after the talk. He figured she’d just do it even more now that she knew it bothered him, but it didn’t come to pass. She still cast baleful looks at him as they moved and when they camped, but they weren’t as venomous as they had been the first day. It was almost as if his talk with her had actually done some good, had made her think. Danna seemed to be a rather intelligent woman, and his calm logic in the face of her hate may not have swayed her over to his side, but at least it made her think... and that was what was important. She also gave over on her refusal to eat, chewing down quite a bit of the newly dried redtail venison while in the saddle as they rode from the campsite where Kyven had talked to her.

They didn’t trade another word for over a week. They moved almost due west, then slowly curled northwest during that time, moving great distances during the day over the sea of grass, then resting at night. Kyven continued to hunt when and where he could, supplementing their dried venison with fresh meat, usually redtailed deer, but one night it was bison, after Kyven found a lone bison and downed it using Shaman magic.

Herbivores were not the only animals they encountered in that week. Kyven saw his first Wolveran a few days after the talk with Danna, spotting it during his watch, and then waking everyone up and getting them moving. He’d been warned by Clover about those brutes, and if he saw one, to get everyone up and moving quickly before the horses attracted it and the voracious, savage predator attacked. It chased them almost all day, too, until they passed not far from a small herd of bison and the beast finally veered off to attack them. The dogged determination of the monster was the entire reason why Clover was rightfully afraid of them.

Though Danna was totally silent, Toby was not. He was cordial and polite on the journey, often engaging in smalltalk with Clover and Teacup to pass the time when on the move, and giving Danna someone to talk to at night, which usually degenerated into her accusing him of

sucking up. Toby just laughed her off, telling her “dahlin’, they got us by the short an’ curlies, and Ah’ve always been a man o’ manners. They willing tah be polite tah me, so Ah’ll be polite tah them.”

Despite her defiant demeanor, Danna behaved completely. She did as she was told, didn’t try to escape, spent most of her time sitting or riding in silence, her face lost in thought. The only time she defied Clover was a few days after the fight, when Clover brought a piece of redtail liver over and pushed it out to her. “Eat this,” she ordered.

Danna made a face. “I most certainly will not!” she shot back.

“Yes, you will,” Clover told her hunching down to nearly eye level with the sitting woman. “Dry venison isn’t healthy if it’s all you eat. There are things in this your body needs to stay healthy. So you will eat it. And from today on, you will eat a small piece of this when we have it, so you don’t have to eat so much at once again.”

“I won’t eat it, *Shaman!*”

“You will,” she said with quiet yet steely calm. “Your silly hatred towards me does not move me at all, woman. I am tasked to care for you, and so I will ensure you are healthy and well.”

“Why? So you can feed me to your puppies when we get wherever we’re going?” she shot back, her voice a little anxious.

Clover gave her a curious look, then laughed helplessly. “Dear me, is *that* what you think? Silly woman, we’ll do no such thing. Once you answer our questions, I’d guess that you’ll be placed with a family that will take care of you. You won’t be allowed in the city, but there are any number of small villages where someone with your skills could be quite useful. They’d probably make you a sheriff.”

“Sheriff? Sheriff of what?”

“Of the village,” she smiled. “You’re an investigator at heart, Captain. No doubt that any unruly behavior would be quickly squelched with you upholding the law.”

“What village?”

“Any number of them, I suppose,” she said with a smile. “I would think that we’ll be seeing Vanguard in about a week and a half.”

As they moved north, the landscape changed. The land began to roll gently, lightly, going from flat prairie to rolling grassland, and then groves of trees began to appear. They continued on for a few more days as they moved into more and more groves of trees, which became small woods, then became large tracts of forested area interspersed with grassland. Wild Arcans became more and more common, lurking nearby but never approaching, at least until they happened across a pair of them as they journeyed northwest. It was a pair of wolf Arcans, naked and wild, a tawny-furred female laying out in the middle of a grassy plain as the dark gray male paced around her anxiously. Clover called them to a halt well away from them, and while the pacing male knew they were there, he did nothing. She called Kyven up to her and pointed them out. “I think the female is injured or ill, brother,” she told him. “I need to see her, but I can’t approach. I need you to try to get the male to calm down.”

Kyven nodded, and immediately started removing his clothes.

“What’s wrong with her?” Patches asked.

“I don’t know, I’m too far to see,” Clover answered. “Hopefully Kyven can calm the male down so I can see what’s wrong with her.”

Kyven removed his breeches and padded towards the pair, remaining calm. When the male took notice of him, he dropped down to all fours and padded towards him, moving slowly but steadily, until the male rushed him, then pulled to a stop and growled threateningly. Kyven slowed to a stop about twenty rods from him, sitting down calmly, then he slowly crept for-

ward with his muzzle low to the ground and his tail wagging. The male gave him a strange look, ceased his growling, and advanced on Kyven. Then he looked back and realized that he was advancing away from the female, so he stopped and turned around, then ran back to her. He nuzzled her still form, which caused her to move jerkily. Kyven advanced on them slowly, and when the male saw him approaching, he put himself between Kyven and the female and growled. He again dipped his muzzle low to the ground and wagged his tail, then dropped down to lay down on the ground where he was, thumping his tail on the ground. The male stopped growling and advanced on him curiously, and Kyven looked up at him when he was very close, voicing a short whine. The male sniffed at his head and back boldly, then pushed Kyven over on his back using his hands and muzzle. The male sniffed at him for several long, tense moments, sniffing every part of him from head to foot, then, when Kyven licked him on the underside of his chin when the male sniffed at his ears, the male clamped his jaws on Kyven’s neck in a display of dominance. This was the most delicate and dangerous part of any approach, and Kyven could barely hear Patches and Teacup gasp, but the male released him in short order when the female began to pant laboriously. Kyven rolled back over and slinked carefully up to the female, and while the male growled at him, he didn’t attack when Kyven licked him submissively on the neck and face. He sniffed at the female in a non-threatening manner, licking her face to try to elicit a response, but she lay there with her eyes closed and her breathing shallow and labored. Her nose was dry and very hot, and her tongue, flopping limply from her mouth, was also dry. She had an old injury on her left hip, just over the center of where her left leg met her lower stomach, that was oozing pus and looked quite nasty, flies buzzing around it.

Kyven took a couple of steps back, then looked back to Clover. “She has an infected wound,” he called as loudly as he could without upsetting the male. “I can cure the infection, but I can’t heal her leg.”

“Can you get me in?” she called, already removing her wrap.

“Give me a minute.” He licked at her wound, tasting the vileness, then channeled the spell to cure diseases into her through his tongue, literally licking away her infection. But he could do nothing for the wound itself, that was healing magic he didn’t know. His curing of her infection was no miracle cure that restored her to health, for she was still weak from her injury and illness, and she wouldn’t feel better for a while. He looked back to Clover and waved her on, and the coyote started moving forward on all fours. Kyven padded back towards her to make the male look, and when the male rushed to intercept Clover, Kyven interposed himself directly in the male’s path. The male growled at him, but Kyven just dipped his muzzle low, then rose up and licked the male on the neck. “Submissive, Clover,” Kyven told her quietly as she got near. Clover laid down on her stomach, and the male padded over to inspect her. When he caught her scent, he growled threateningly, but he seemed startled when Kyven clamped his jaws on the side of the wolf’s neck, a gentle grip, and very gently, very carefully pulled on him, pulled him back towards his female. The male nearly turned on him, growling in a very aggressive manner when his dominance was challenged, but Kyven was quite adamant without being aggressive himself. His gentle hold was not an attack, but his incessant pulling was clearly an attempt to make the male do something. The male jerked free of him and bared his fangs, but Kyven didn’t respond, neither submitting nor reacting in kind. Kyven’s impassive stance confused the male, and Kyven took advantage of it to pad over to Clover, sniff at her back and shoulders, then clamp his jaws on her neck and pull on her. Clover was forced to go in the direction he urged, to the side of the female, then he rolled her over on her back. The male advanced on them boldly and again started to growl, but when Clover mimicked Kyven’s act of licking at his neck in supplication, the male advanced and

sniffed at her foot and shin. He was still growling as he sniffed her, then quite boldly stuck his nose between her legs and sniffed her genitals, then sniffed up her body to her neck and head. Kyven was ready to intervene if the male made any hostile moves, but he just sniffed at her head, Clover licked him under his chin, and then he clamped his jaws on her neck in a display of dominance. He let go of her when she licked at his chest, and he returned to the female. Kyven got beside him, and motioned for Clover to approach on his far side, away from the male. She did so slowly and carefully, and lowered herself to the ground when the male growled at her. But she was close enough. She leaned forward and touched her nose to the female, and Kyven felt her channel magic into her. It was a sustained spell, causing the wound on her hip to slowly close, going from a festering wound to a scabbed cut, which was when Clover ceased and licked tentatively at the female's shin.

The female's breathing improved noticeably, and she opened her eyes. She looked at the male, then looked at Kyven and Clover in surprise, and not a little fear, moving to shy away from them. But Kyven leaned down and licked her face gently, which calmed her down. Kyven waved Clover back with his hand out of sight of the two wolves, and she obeyed, backing up, then turning and walking away quickly yet quietly. Kyven licked the male's neck, reared up on his legs, and put his hand on the male's shoulder. The male looked up at him curiously, but when he reached his hand down to the female, she looked up at him with both curiosity and fear. She took his hand, and he gently urged her to a sitting position, then urged her to stand on her legs. She stood there for a moment, looking at him, and he touched her wound, which was now much smaller and healthily scabbed over to minimize the chance of infection. She gave a slight wince, but she seemed surprised, touching it herself. The male sniffed at the wound, licked it a few times, then rose up on his legs as well, put his hands on her shoulders, and licked her enthusiastically. She nuzzled him in return. Kyven backed away from them, then turned and walked back to where the others were. Teacup handed him his breeches, and he put them back on calmly as Teacup gushed in a low tone. "That was so cool!" she exclaimed. "I've never seen anyone make friends with a wild Arcan before! How did you know how to do it? Why did you lick him? What's the thing when he bites your neck about? Is the female going to be okay?"

"Calm down, Teacup," Kyven chuckled, then he turned to face the two wolves as they approached warily. He put his shirt on and walked out towards them, and they rose up on their legs. The male grabbed his hand and tried to pull him back from the others, but Kyven just held his ground and shook his head. He licked the male on the cheek, then nuzzled the female, and then he urged them to retreat the other way with a motion of his hands. They gave him a long look, then turned, dropped to all fours, then bounded towards the nearest treeline. "Good luck," Kyven said quietly as they raced off.

"Pardon mah askin', but why help them? They wild," Toby asked.

"We help *all* who need us, Toby," Clover told him simply. "Be them normal, feral, or human. That is the Shaman way."

"*Please*," Danna snorted, pulling on her reins.

"You know nothing of the Shaman, Danna," Clover told her with steady eyes. "Only what the Loremasters have told you, which is all lies."

"I know what I know."

"You cling to a fairy tale," she answered. "But I will not *tell* you anything, woman. I'll let our actions speak for us. When we reach Vanguard, just watch, listen, and learn."

"How far to this place?" Teacup asked.

"We will arrive tomorrow," she answered. "From there, it will be four more days to Haven."

"Great, we travel for two weeks to see a bunch of Arcans living in a pack in the middle of

the forest," Danna growled.

Clover smiled, but said nothing

They reached Vanguard about noon the next day, seeing it in a grassy field surrounded by forest on three sides, at the end of a long grassy plain that jutted into the forest. It wasn't a pack of Arcans living like animals, as Danna seemed to think, it was instead a good sized hamlet of about twenty timber buildings, surrounded by farmland on all four sides. They would go up a road between two farms two reach the village. "Vanguard," Clover announced as they pulled up and looked down the small hill to the village. Clover looked at Toby and Danna, and the two mounted humans were *stunned* to see not Arcans living in mud, but Arcans living in neat, tidy homes, farms with houses and barns and storehouses, and smoke rising from a stout chimney where it seemed a smith was hard at work. "Kyven, lead them. I'll go ahead to warn the village we bring humans."

"Yes, Clover," he nodded, and she bounded ahead of them. "Let's go, everyone. Let's just walk, give Clover time to spread the word."

Teacup was already going a thousand minars a minute, pointing at everything and talking quickly. She waved with great enthusiasm to Arcans working in the fields, who were looking on fearfully once they saw the horses carrying two human riders. They reached the small road and walked along it, as the workers watched them go by, at least until one very young female canine bounded up to them from the fields. "Shaman!" she called excitedly. "Will you bless me, Shaman?"

"Of course," Kyven said, stopping and kneeling down. "What's your name, honey?"

"I'm Chaser!" she said with a big smile.

"Well, may the spirits bless you and watch over you, Chaser," he said, putting his hand on her shoulder and reciting the blessing with a smile. She threw her little arms around his neck and hugged him, then turned and raced back into the fields before anyone could even say a word.

"Well, I see how she got her name," Teacup giggled.

"I wonder how she knew I was a Shaman," Kyven mused as he watched her run away.

"Deduction," Patches said. "There are humans here, and they wouldn't be here without a Shaman. We're too small to be Shaman, so it has to be you."

"That's a good point," Kyven chuckled as they started out again.

Danna and Toby were quiet, and a little awed, as they reached the village. It had no organized streets. Instead, all the buildings were built in a ring surrounding a grassy field in the center, where many Arcan children were playing. In the very center was a large stone ring that was clearly a firepit, and there were smoothed logs surrounding it that looked suspiciously like benches. Clover led over a very tall male wolf Arcan with fur nearly as black as Kyven's, but a gray face and no hair. The wolf was clearly a Shaman. "Tallspan, this is Kyven," Clover introduced. "He is on his Walk."

"Welcome to Vanguard, brother," the huge wolf said, taking Kyven's paw. "And what lovely young ladies you bring!" he said with a smile, leaning down to look at Teacup and Patches. "I am Tallspan, lovely ladies, the Shaman of this village. Welcome to your first stop on the road to happiness."

"Hi! I'm Teacup!" the raccoon said, taking his hand and getting hers swallowed up in it. "You're very handsome."

"Well, thank you," he smiled. "A red panda! Such a rare and beautiful addition," he said, shaking Patches' hand. "Was your journey well?"

"Well enough," she said, glancing back at the horses.

"Ah, so these are the humans the spirits have summoned to us," he said, looking at Toby

and Danna, his head nearly at a level with theirs. "Welcome to Vanguard," he told them. "Please, dismount, I'll have your horses cared—" he looked at the pack horse, carrying the body of Claw, and he sighed. "Poor soul," he said, going over and putting his hand gently on Claw's back. "I'm very sorry."

"He died in a manner of his own choosing, Tallspan," Kyven told him quietly. "He saved my life."

"Such nobility," he said. "Clearly, he has earned his rest on Firetail's hill. But to ride strapped to a horse is below him. I will give you a cart to take him the rest of the way." He whistled, and several Arcans hurried over and started the somber task of taking Claw from the horse. Toby dismounted, and Danna did the same, though more slowly, as she still continued to look around, as if in disbelief. "Come, rest with us this day," he said to them. "You can start out in the morning. Let the hospitality of Vanguard wash the travel dust from your fur and send you on refreshed."

"Pardon mah askin', but who built all this?" Toby asked the wolf curiously.

"We did," he answered with a smile. "Vanguard is the first village those fleeing from the human lands encounter. This is the border of Arcan territory. To the north are the lands of Haven."

"Arcan *territory*?" Danna scoffed.

"Yes, you have entered Haven, woman, the hidden land of the Arcans. This is where we come to escape bondage in the collars of humans. You have been summoned by the spirits, so we will treat you with honor and respect, but do remember that you are in *our* land now," he said, quite seriously.

Danna gave him a harsh look, but said nothing.

They all looked in surprise as a pair of humans came out of the forge, both of them wearing leather aprons. They saw the new group and hurried over, introducing themselves. "New faces!" the taller, black-haired, older man said. "Welcome! I'm Darik, the main alchemist," he said, offering his hand to Toby.

"Humans? Here?" Teacup asked in surprise.

"Of course there are humans here," Tallspan said with a smile. "We have five families of humans that live in the village. Darik is our master alchemist."

"Why do humans live here?" Teacup asked.

"Well, because they aren't allowed any further north," Tallspan winked. "But some humans do live with us, part of our happy village."

"I was prospecting when I was younger and stumbled into this region," Darik told her. "I was attacked and injured by wild Arcans. The Arcans found me and nursed me back to health, and I never left. I apprenticed in the alchemist's shop and I've lived here ever since. This is my son, Verl," he introduced the smaller, leaner, rather handsome man with brown hair and striking blue eyes.

"Nice to meet you," he said, shaking Toby's hand.

"So you've never been north?"

"Well, once we were allowed to go to Glenfall, but that's about it," the younger man answered. "There are some Arcans up north who are just too afraid of humans, so we respect them by staying out of their sight."

"Wow, do you like it here? Are the Arcans nice to you?"

Tallspan laughed. "Darik and the other human families are our *friends*, little one," he told her, reaching down and picking her up, making her squeal in surprise, then setting her on his shoulders. "Darik has been here for over twenty years, and his wife was born here."

"Wow, really?"

"Yes, really," he answered as he carried her towards a large timber building on the far side of the ring of buildings.

"I'm surprised you don't have any soldiers here," Kyven saw.

"Well, your approach has been watched carefully for over a week, young brother," Tallspan chuckled. "We only move fighting Arcans to the village when hostile forces approach."

"Ah," Kyven noted. He glanced at Danna, and saw that she looked quite surprised, looking around, and giving Darik penetrating looks.

Kyven was swarmed over by Arcan children as they crossed the center of the village. Clover gave him amused looks as the children clamored around him, talking about his fur, which caused him to drop to all fours and let the children swarm him. He laughed when they literally pulled him to the ground, digging their tiny hands into his fur, letting them explore the soft expanse of his fur with their fingers. They all squealed and giggled when he powered his way back to his feet, with children literally hanging off of him. "Leave him be, children!" Tallspan called back to them. "You're trying to mug a Shaman, you know!"

"Shaman!" they all called, hugging him and holding onto him. "Bless us, Shaman, bless us!" a cute little cat Arcan said, hanging onto his neck.

"A very special blessing for all of you," he laughed, holding his hands out and wrapping several of them up in an embrace. "Now go back to your play and let me get back to my work. We can play later, but work comes first," he said as he shooed at them when they started disengaging themselves from him.

"Shaman," a child skunk barely more than a toddler said, hugging him around the neck, licking his cheek, then running after her playmates on unsteady little legs. Kyven walked past Toby and Danna, who were leading their horses, and rejoined the Arcans at the head of their little procession.

"I'm glad you distracted them so I could escape," Clover winked. "Usually I'm the one they dogpile."

Kyven laughed. "Well, I didn't mind all that much. How long will we be here?"

"Overnight. Now is our time to rest, eat, and enjoy a respite from our journey," Clover answered. "Danna, Toby, you are allowed to roam the expanse of the village," she said back to them. "Just don't go any further than the edge of the tilled farmlands, or you'll not enjoy it. Just follow us to the inn so you may get a room, and then you are free to do as you will."

"Why thank you ma'am," Toby said with a nod. "Think Ah might be able tah pay someone tah wash mah clothes while here? These are getting a tad fragrant."

"Pay?" Tallspan said, then he laughed. "Human, there is no money here," he told him. "When someone needs something or needs something done, he asks for help, and help is given. We have no need for money, we have each other."

"What? No money at all?" Kyven asked in surprise.

Tallspan shook his head. "We have no need for it," he answered. "Here, we barter for what we want, but we freely give what is *needed*."

"Very different."

"Yes. We borrowed some things from the humans, but we did not adopt their greed."

Kyven found their inn to be what he expected, but also very different. There were a few people there, four Arcans and two humans, one behind the bar, a human girl serving the guests, and three Arcans and a human sitting around a table eating lunch and talking with each other. The Arcan behind the bar was some kind of spotted cat with broad features, looking vaguely like a cougar, but not quite. "Sala, we have special guests!" Tallspan called when they entered the inn, as Danna and Toby came in after handing their horses to young Arcans outside to care for them. The human girl came over to them, then hugged Tallspan fondly.

“Shaman,” she said with a smile. “Who are these people?”

“Guests on the way to the city,” he answered. “This is Lisella,” he introduced.

“Humans going to the city? Since when?” she saw when Toby stepped in.

“The spirits have wished it,” the wolf answered calmly.

“Well, can they wish *me* to go?”

He laughed. “Maybe someday, when the Arcans there no longer fear humanity,” he told her, patting her on the shoulder. “Not all Arcans are as open as we, child. Give them their one place to feel safe.”

“Of course, of course,” she said. “My, you’ve got quite handsome fur,” she said, taking Kyven’s hand.

“I’m Kyven,” he introduced.

“He is on his Walk,” Tallspan told her.

“Will you bless me, Shaman?” the girl asked immediately.

Kyven was a bit surprised. No human had ever asked him that. But, he wasn’t about to slight her, so he put his hand on her shoulder and gave her the blessing.

Danna and Toby sat at a table of their own as the Arcans sat at a long table in the center of the room. They were brought long strips of raw meat that tasted very rich, which Clover identified as bison meat. The humans were brought a thick, hearty stew with dark bread, and Danna looked almost ecstatic to pick up a spoon and eat cooked food. Patches and Teacup talked to each other in excitement as they ate, excited about the village, and then Clover gave them a smile. “Go ahead and go look around, young ones, but stay within the boundaries of the village. Patches, mind that there *are* humans here, but they will not bother you. If you need us, just ask anyone to be brought to us, and they will.”

“Thank you, Shaman!” Teacup said in excitement, jumping up. “Come on, Patches, let’s look around!”

The panda did get up and go, but she didn’t seem quite as enthusiastic about it as she passed the serving girl, Lisella.

“You two as well,” Clover called to the humans. “Toby, Danna, Sava can help you get your clothes washed, and might be able to help you get some spare clothes as well.”

“Brienn has been working overtime with bison leather,” the spotted cat said with a nod.

“She should have some leathers for both the humans that they can wear, as well as some fur cloaks so they can keep warm. It’s coming into fall, and should be frosting soon. It can only be colder up north.”

“Ah’d appreciate it,” Toby said with a nod, then he took another bite of his stew.

Kyven and Clover lingered in the inn and chatted with the large wolf Shaman. He was a very kind and caring soul, very curious about him and very concerned for his well being. He explained Vanguard to him, as well. The village was the only village in Haven that had humans in it, and also served as the first stop on the road north from the edge of what the Arcans considered Haven territory. They saw humans in the wilderness to the south from time to time, lone settlers and prospectors, who were gently urged to keep south by roaming patrols of Arcans who pretended to be wild. They used a tactic that Kyven would admit would be quite effective; any encroachers would find themselves facing a pack of some thirty “wild” Arcans, Arcans that wouldn’t attack, but also wouldn’t permit them from moving any further north by standing in their way and daring them to try to go by. The real wild Arcans and the agents of Haven were primarily to the southeast of Haven territory, causing most of the humans to settle to the southwest, out on the grassy prairie. By using this tactic, most people, who would not dare tangle with that many wild Arcans, stayed safely away from Vanguard. Kyven was surprised to hear that there were actually quite a few humans in the

wilderness south and west of the village, mainly isolated settlers who were willing to live without crystal-based technology and rough it. Some of them were even in contact with the Arcans of Haven, though they had no idea they were from Haven, or that there was a Haven. Their visitors were Arcans they thought were escaped slaves would trade with them, trading pelts and animal meat for agricultural goods like wheat and vegetables, or chickens, or other things. The humans who were friendly to the Arcans helped by keeping them abreast of what was going on in their area, since some of the scattered humans lived close enough to communicate with each other.

To the north of Vanguard, Kyven learned, was Arcan lands. There were small farming villages like Vanguard dotting the windy plains, forest mingling with prairie randomly all the way to the city, a land filled with nothing but Arcans. There weren’t many Arcans in each village, but there were villages scattered all over the region, both to the east and west as well as north, each a little island of civilization in the wilderness, all of them connected by small roads. The Arcans didn’t trade with each other from village to village very much, each village its own little independent place, like the Free Territories. Each one had a Shaman, just like Tallspan was the Shaman of Vanguard, who served as both the village servant and advisor to the village chief, who was chosen by the villagers to lead them. Tallspan used his Shaman magic however the village needed it, healing injuries, curing illnesses, helping farmers, but his most important function was *teacher*. Tallspan taught the young children every day while the parents were busy, teaching them their heritage, and to Kyven’s surprise, teaching them how to read and write. Every Arcan and human in the village older than six knew how to read and write, which was a literacy rate that far, *far* exceeded the human lands. In the human lands, barely one in fifty could read and write.

“Why is it so important?”

“Because our lives are not as long as humans, and we are fully grown and working before human children are barely a quarter grown, we have less time to find wisdom,” he explained easily. “There is much to be learned in books, Kyven. How will our children know their history if they can’t read, since we write our history down? That’s one of my jobs, brother. I’m the village historian. I keep the village history, everything noteworthy is written down.”

“Like this visit,” Clover winked.

“I’ll be penning it after the afternoon reading lesson,” he chuckled. “The Shaman not only watch over those who need us, we also keep the history of the Arcans. It is our duty to ensure our people remember who they are and where they came from, and so we learn from our mistakes in the past and don’t repeat them.”

“Always a wise thing,” Kyven said with a nod. “Where do you get the books?”

“We make them,” he answered. “Every village has a papermaker and a bookbinder. Sometimes that’s the Shaman himself,” Tallspan chuckled. “I know spells to make paper out of wood.”

“Clever,” Kyven nodded. “Mind if I go look around?”

“Our village welcomes you, brother. Be my guest,” Tallspan told him.

Kyven found it to be a little microcosm of activity. They had a forge, alchemist, barrel maker, tanner, tailor, and smith serving the farmers who tended the crops that surrounded the village. Every family was a unit, and the families were social with each other, both Arcan and human families. Kyven had never seen such a level of *cooperation* before between the two races. Yet, there it was. The human girl working for the Arcan in the inn, and the human family working side by side with an Arcan family on a farm just between two houses. This place was a sign of hope that things could be different between Arcans and humans, but he realized that it wouldn’t be anytime soon. The entire human race had a prejudice, a concept

about Arcans that would make it quite impossible for them to just turn around and accept the Arcans as equals on a wide front. There were too many Arthur Ledwells in the world, and too many places like Cheston and Alamar, places that saw Arcans not only as a source of labor, but also as a source of amusement in the form of fur and Arcan fighting. Danna's attitude summed up the huge hurdles facing the Arcans in the quest for acceptance. She was intelligent and well educated, yet she saw Arcans as nothing but soulless animals, objects, the subjugated slave race whose rightful place was to serve man in both life and death.

Little victories. How many little victories would it take? A thousand? Ten thousand? A million, before the human race accepted that Arcans weren't animals, and had rights just like them? He'd be working on it all his life, he supposed, but there wasn't really any other way he could see. If the Arcans rebelled against humanity, or the Arcans of Haven declared war on humanity, they'd face a mass genocide of unimaginable proportions as a vast segment of the Arcans in captivity would be slaughtered either out of fear or retaliation. It was such a daunting concept, he realized. How did one free a people enslaved by another, when those captors had no care for their lives? Any resistance would get them killed, yet they couldn't allow them to go on as they were. How did one pull a piece of red-hot stock from a forge with no tools and not get burned?

He sat down and pondered on it for a while, then sighed and leaned back on his hands, his tail thumping absently on the ground as Danna and Toby passed by. He was still pining for her, but she hated him now. Perhaps... perhaps he'd been too hasty when he killed her men. But Clover had given him permission, it had been very nervous and scary, and he panicked when he made that critical mistake and let them get in front of him rather than keeping their attention focused forward so Clover could hit them safely from behind. He didn't really feel mournful over killing them, still feeling justified in his mind, but Danna had made it clear that it was one of the reasons she hated him now. Had he overreacted? Could there have been a different way if he'd stopped to think about it? The fox taught him that sometimes, killing was necessary, but her way was guile and deceit. Brawling was not her way, her way was trickery and cunning, avoiding direct confrontations, resorting to violence only when it was absolutely necessary. The fox was like a thief, silent in the night, clever and quick-witted, a shadow that slipped among men unseen and only attacked only when it was necessary.

Maybe he should have reverted to guile and deceit, rather than simple murder. He could do nothing about Danna hating him for being a Shaman, but at least that would have given her less reason to hate him.

One of the village children sat down beside him, a very small canine Arcan male with snowy-white fur and a black patch over one eye. "Are you teaching us today, Shaman?" he asked in a respectful yet enthusiastic voice.

Kyven glanced at the boy, and couldn't help but smile. "No, I'm just thinking," he answered.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I made a mistake, and I'm trying to think of a way to fix it," he answered.

"Shaman don't make mistakes," the boy said defensively.

Kyven chuckled. "I wish that were true, child, but we're just like everyone else. Most other Shaman are much wiser than me, you see, and since they're so wise, they don't make many mistakes. I'm still in training. I haven't learned the wisdom of Shaman yet, and part of it is learning from your mistakes. As long as you learn from them, mistakes can sometimes be good things. They teach you what *not* to do."

"You talk like the other Shaman," the boy told him with a grin.

"I guess they're rubbing off on me," he winked. "But this was a really, really big mistake. I

made someone very angry, and I'm trying to find a way to at least say I'm sorry in a way that she'll accept."

"Just tell her," the boy said. "My mama says just be honest, and everything works out in the end."

"Sometimes honesty is good, but sometimes it won't help," he countered. "I did something that *really* made her angry, child. Just saying 'I'm sorry' won't fix this."

"Wow, sounds like you really misbehaved."

Kyven laughed ruefully. "I guess I did," he answered. "I guess sometimes you make a mistake that just can't be forgiven."

"What did you do?"

"I killed a human. A few of them," he said. "They were chasing me, and I killed them because I was afraid. She was friends with these humans, and now she hates me because of it."

"Wow, that's a tough one," the boy said, scratching his chin in thought, a pose that made Kyven quite amused. "You're right, just telling her you're sorry wouldn't be enough, would it?"

"I'm glad you agree with me."

"Well, you could always say you're sorry anyway," the boy said. "It certainly couldn't hurt, could it?"

"I guess not," he said, leaning back on his hands again, looking up into the sunny sky.

"You could do what I do when I get in big trouble," he said. "When I get in big trouble, I go out of my way to suck up to my mom for a while afterward. Pretend to make up for it, you know?"

Kyven laughed. "Shame on you," he teased. "You're supposed to not do it again after you get caught."

"But it's fun," the boy grinned. "Just be extra-extra nice, even if she's mean to you. My sis always says that it's hard to hate someone that doesn't seem to hate you. You give them no reason, you know?"

Kyven was about to chuckle, but the elegantly simple concept behind that idea was so, so true. Kyven didn't hate Danna, and just avoiding her wasn't showing her that he didn't hate her. He *did* need to show her that he wanted to at least try to reconcile. He doubted that it would matter to her, but he had to show her at least that much. He had to show her that the only hate there was hers for him, and just telling her that a few days ago wasn't going very far to proving it to her. He hadn't even really talked to her since that day, just leaving her to stew, partially because he didn't really know what to say to her.

"I'll have to think about that, I suppose," Kyven told him. "What's your name?"

"They call me Spot, because of this," he said, pointing to his black patch.

"I'm Kyven. Nice to meet you," he said, offering his hand to the boy. The boy grinned and took it, and they shook hands.

"Wow, you have a *human* name," the boy told him.

"I should. I *am* human," Kyven grinned at him.

"No way!" the boy gasped. "You're human? But-But-"

"I'm a human Shaman, child. My totem spirit wanted to teach me the life of the Arcans, and this," he said, motioning at himself, "was how she decided to do it. I guess she didn't think I'd really understand unless I lived life *as* an Arcan. You can't know what it's like until you're literally seeing through the other's eyes."

"What's it like to be human?"

"Honestly? A little different, but not too much," he answered. "I don't *feel* a whole lot different, outside of the fur and the tail and the muzzle. But I'm *treated* much differently. It was

a very hard thing to go from being human to finding my entire world turned upside down, and being on the other end of a collar leash. I guess that's what my totem wanted me to learn, so I'd understand the Arcans I'll be working with much better," he said musingly, looking into the sky. "They were very... harsh lessons, Spot. But I guess, now that I look back on them, they were necessary. I really would have never understood unless I'd been put in an Arcan's footsteps and experienced what your Arcan cousins in slavery have to go through. It's why I'm here now, you know. Living as an Arcan dedicated me to your people, and now I'll work the rest of my life to free them from slavery to the humans."

"I'm glad you're on our side," the boy said. "A human Shaman working for the Loremasters? That would be scary!"

He was about to say something, but he came up short. A human Shaman working for the Loremasters. Scary, yes... but what could he learn from the Loremasters if he *did it*? What could he bring to the Masked, what information could he uncover if he infiltrated the Loremasters... and a human Shaman would definitely be able to pull it off! He could defeat their truth crystals, he could use his magic to move through the Loremaster organization and learn what they were up to, he could defeat or trick their alchemical devices and gain access to any part of their organization. He could warn everyone in the Masked about everything they were doing if he could worm his way into their main headquarters, get close to their leaders.

Guile and deceit. Weren't those the ultimate tools of a *spy*?

He could do it. If there was some way he could, could change back and forth between human and Arcan, he could use the stealth of the shadow fox and also use his Arcan form as a foil, while hiding among them in his human form, while they all searched for an *Arcan*, if he was ever seen or spotted. He'd be all but undetectable, and since the Loremasters would never, ever suspect that there was a human Shaman, nor that a person could change into an Arcan—wait. Danna had thought that Kyven had taken human form as an Arcan Shaman... might they suspect that? And Kyven's eyes did not change, both Timble and Danna had recognized him from his eyes, even as an Arcan.

He'd just have to be careful, he supposed.

"It would at that," Kyven mused, and he watched Danna and Toby walk back across the village, going from the forge to the leatherworker.

"That's her, isn't it?" Spot asked. "The girl you made mad?"

"You're very observant," Kyven told him with a smile. "That's her. She and her men were chasing me, but I killed them when they caught up to me. I could have done it differently, I supposed, but I was afraid and a little panicked. I acted rashly, and now I'm suffering for my mistake."

"Is she pretty? I don't know what humans see in humans."

"I think she is."

"Hmm," the boy said, looking at her. "I don't see what you see."

"I'm human, I have a different perspective," Kyven chuckled.

A bell began to ring. Kyven looked and saw Tallspan coming out of the inn, ringing a hand bell. "It's time for lessons. It was nice meeting you, Shaman. Will you bless me?"

Kyven put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "May the spirits bless you and watch over you, and keep you out of trouble," he said with a wink.

"No, trouble is fun!" the boy protested.

"Too late, now you gotta be good," Kyven grinned.

"Awww!" he growled, then got up and rushed over to Tallspan along with other Arcan children.

Kyven watched as the wolf Shaman took the kids near the center firepit, and had them sit on

the ground as a small cat Arcan passed out books to them, then laid back on the ground, put his hands behind his head, and pondered on his idea of invading the Loremasters. He could do it, he was sure of it. What could he learn? How could he help the Arcans by doing it? He wasn't sure. It would certainly be dangerous, but he was also in a unique position to pull it off. He could move about invisibly in Arcan form, and if he could find some way to be able to switch back and forth, he could hide among them in human form while his Arcan form slipped among them and learned whatever the Masked needed to know to help the Arcan people. If he was very lucky, he could infiltrate the highest levels of the Loremasters and learn what their leaders were up to... if he could switch between two forms.

But that was only one way he could serve. Even if he couldn't regain his humanity any time soon, he had unique abilities that would let him get into places nobody else could. As long as he had shadows to work with, he was invisible. He could go many places no one else could, and that ability could be very useful. Right now, he'd do whatever it took to help the Masked, to start amassing his little victories and help stop what was happening to the Arcans.

Clover came into his view, along with Patches and Teacup, looking down at him. Clover was smiling, Patches was giving him a serious little look, and Teacup was looking at the children and Tallspan. "Are you enjoying yourself, brother?" Clover asked with a sly little smile.

"I'm keeping the sky up," he said dryly. "Don't block me or it might fall on you."

Clover laughed and sat down beside him, but the two girls wandered off to continue exploring. "We'll be leaving in the morning," she told him. "Tallspan will be coming with us, as well as a few to drive the cart carrying Claw," she said with a sigh.

Kyven reached over and patted her on the knee, and she took his hand in her own, holding it for comfort. "I miss him too," he told her.

"To come so far and fall, such a pity," she said somberly. "But at least he'll find his peace resting on Firetail's Hill." She looked at him. "Heavy thoughts?"

"Pondering the future," he answered. "How I can help the Masked, given my, tricks. I hope I can do something."

"I'm positive they'll find some uses for you, brother," she nodded. "After you complete your Walk, a Shaman of your unique skills would be very, very useful. Your totem is illusion, deceit, and cunning, giving you the ability to get into many places no one else could penetrate. I'm just a little worried, that's all."

"What about?"

"The spirits have called *all* the Shaman back to Haven, brother. Even the ones on their Walk. They would not bring us home, and call those two humans, unless there was something serious going on, something of which the Shaman are unaware. The spirits know something, and they are calling us together so we may know this information and respond to it."

"What do you think it is?"

"I have no idea," she answered. "But it concerns me. To bring *all* the Shaman together is a drastic step. It has never been done before. It can only mean that what they wish to tell us must be similarly drastic."

"Who knows," Kyven said. "Maybe it's good news."

"There is rarely good news for the Arcans, my brother," she said seriously. "I would hope that it is good news, but I will expect the worst, so that I am pleasantly surprised."

"That's not like you, Clover."

"I know, but I can't help it," she said as he sat back up. She gave him a grateful look when he put his arm around her, and she pressed up against his side, snuggling against him. "It's hard to believe that you are human sometimes," she said lightly as she put her head on his

shoulder. "You are just so, so *Arcan*."

"I learned well," he said dryly. "Would you like some different comfort?"

She chuckled. "I do now that you've asked," she told him. "It would take my mind off things."

Kyven stood up and helped her to her feet, then walked hand in hand with her back to the inn.

After a languid, sensual session of lovemaking, giving Clover time and attention and a little time of respite from her worries, they dozed in one of the upstairs beds. Clover had been much more unsettled than he realized, very nervous, and very needful from the way she touched him. He gave her what she needed, gave her a few hours of simple pleasure and a chance to forget about her problems for a while, then slept with her in his arms, granting her a sense of peace and security. That she was much better as a Shaman than he, and much wiser, didn't matter. She just needed to be held, to be loved, to indulge herself in a sense of togetherness and comfort. She needed that afternoon without worry, to give herself a chance to calm down, relax, and return to the real world with a more calm and ordered mind. It helped Kyven too, since Clover was a tender lover, and she had almost unbelievable endurance and the ability to control his own pleasure to extend their lovemaking as long as she wished. He very much liked making love with her because of her lovemaking skills, one of the most sensual and sexy females with which he'd ever had the pleasure of sharing a bed. She needed a distraction, and he was more than happy to give it to her because it allowed him to experience her again, and also vented a little building frustration with thinking about Danna.

He guessed it was only bad luck that the one to barge in on them was Danna. She opened the door and gasped, which roused him from sleep, making his eyes flutter open. Clover, who was resting with her head on his chest, also woke up, rising up to look at the door, and at the surprised human, whose face was registered growing outrage. "What is it, Danna?" she asked calmly.

"What are you doing?" she demanded, a little hotly.

"I needed comfort, and Kyven was gracious enough to grant it," she said simply. "Among the Arcans, it is quite common."

"He *fucked* you?" she asked in growing shock.

"A crude term, but essentially correct," she said mildly. "He gave me an afternoon away from my worries and cares."

"I-That's-Disgusting!" she said hotly. "How could you fuck an Arcan if you weren't already an Arcan!" she demanded hotly of Kyven.

"That's an unfair accusation," Clover said calmly as she sat up fully, regarding Danna with steady eyes. "As you are fully aware, many human men do not make such a, distinction when choosing bedmates."

"And they're perverted too!"

"How so, when you have stated yourself that Arcans exist only to serve man, in whatever manner he chooses?" she asked with strong eyes. "To decry but one way humans *use* us but not others that are equally terrible is to be a hypocrite. But Kyven is in no manner a, what did you call him? Pervert? He is merely acting within the established culture of my kind, nothing more, nothing less, as his totem wished him to do when she changed him, so he could learn Arcan culture and operate among us without causing friction. I find it quite charming that he's willing to carry through with giving me comfort, because he *is* human, and he's not attracted to Arcan females. It says much about him," she said, patting him on the stomach fondly.

"It says a lot about him, alright," she growled, and slammed the door closed behind her as she left.

Kyven groaned and laid back. "Great, now she hates me even more," he lamented.

"I believe it's time I had a little talk with Danna Pannen," Clover said in a deliberate voice, sliding out of bed and standing up. She brushed her hair back, shivered her tail, and then advanced to the door on confident legs, leaving Kyven in bed. He laid back and sighed, wondering just what that was going to be about.

He dressed and left the inn, and saw that it was nearly dusk. There were quite a few Arcans and humans moving about, primarily between houses and towards the inn, ready to enjoy the rest of the day with a meal and good company. He also saw Clover and Danna. The coyote had the human woman seated on one of the logs near the firepit in the middle, which several males were preparing for a fire with wood. She was deep in conversation with the human, keeping hold of Danna's hand in her furry hand to both keep her from rushing off and also to maintain a touch on her. Danna looked angry, but she remained silent and allowed the Shaman to speak. Kyven left them before Danna saw him and got mad again, wandering down by the edge of the village, by the fields. The fields were quiet, and the wind was cool and sweet-smelling.

"Quite a view, eh?" Toby asked as he strode up to Kyven, the wind pulling at his blond ponytail. "Not what Ah expected tah see 'tall."

"Toby," he said with a cordial nod. "I'm sorry I haven't been more courteous. I was staying away from Danna, and you're the only one she can really talk to. I didn't want to start any fights and bring trouble on you."

"Ain't no big thang," he answered. "Ah understand. Are ya' really human?"

"Afraid so," he answered. "Born and raised in Atan. But I'm also a Shaman, Toby. My totem, the spirit that commands me, she changed me into this so I could fully appreciate the Arcan position, probably to make me commit to the Masked. Arcan slavery is *much* more of an issue when you live it."

"A human Shaman. Ah nevah thought that'd be possible."

"You and me both, at least until I discovered the truth. So, still gonna try to take me back, now that you know the truth?" he asked, looking at the hunter with a slight smile.

Toby laughed. "Ah reckon Ah'd have a big problem tryin' it," he said with a grin. "Ah'd never get a collar on ya'."

"That and the fact I'd be a little unwilling to go back," Kyven chuckled. "Has the trip been alright for you so far?"

"Outside o' Danna bitchin' every ten seconds, not bad," he answered. "Ah'm a bit worried about what's gonna happen when we get where we're goin', though. In some ways, Ah feel like Ah'm bein' herded tah the slaughterhouse. In a way, now Ah feel like an Arcan."

"I doubt that," Kyven said. "The spirits want you to be there, for some reason. Who knows, maybe they really do want you to do something. You're a very formidable man, and you know a great deal about the way things work. Maybe they have a scheme in mind, something a man of your talents could pull off where few others could."

"Ah'm no rabid slaver," he shrugged. "Ah do what Ah do because Ah'm good at it, an' Ah can earn a good livin'. Besides, it's the system, an' Ah was just livin' in the system. Wasn't never nothin' personal with y'all, just business. Ah've always been polite."

"That you are," Kyven agreed. "And for what it's worth, thank you."

"Fo' what?"

"For treating me with respect, even when I was wearing your collar. You're the most decent slaver I've ever met."

Toby chuckled. "No problem, friend, no problem. Hopefully that'll earn me a few points when we get where we're goin'."

"Probably. You'll probably fare better than Danna," he noted.

"Ah saw the Shaman talkin' tah her," he said, looking back to the village. "Ah'm surprised Danna ain't tryin' tah bash her face in."

"Clover has a... way with people," he said. "She's very gentle and sweet-natured, but she's also very wise. I don't doubt that Danna has her hands full trying to hold her own against her in a conversation."

"Ah wonder what they talkin' about."

"About me, probably," he sighed. "I never wanted Danna to hate me. I've—" he turned to look out over the crops. "I've been thinking about her almost since the day we met. And now she hates me," he sighed. "I killed her men, she finds out I'm a Shaman, and I'm an Arcan. You know what it's like to want to be close to a woman who won't have anything to do with you, Toby?" he asked, with a bit of resignation. "That's why it stings so much when I see the hate in her eyes."

"Ah think killin' her men mighta been not a good idea," Toby told him. "Most o' her anger has been ovah her men. She took her job leadin' 'em seriously."

"I panicked," he admitted. "I was supposed to keep the men in front of me, and I let them get behind me. I did the only thing I could think of at the time. I've been seeing how big a mistake that was more and more every day," he said. "And to think, I gave her that big speech, trying to be all rational and calm, and I didn't do the one thing I should have done."

"What?"

"Said I'm sorry," he said. "Even if I didn't mean it. I was trying to be rational to someone who was emotional, that doesn't work very well."

"They say everything's clear when yo' lookin' back," Toby said sagely. "Ah'm gonna go turn in, Ah'm sleepy. See ya' in the mo'nin'."

"Night Toby. Sleep well," he said, watching as the moon began to rise, a moon that was waning through its half moon cycle. He watched the moon rise completely, then went to the inn and sat near the corner, politely begging off the many who tried to strike up a conversation with him. They could tell after a moment that he wasn't feeling very chatty, so they left him be. He nursed entirely too many tankards of ale that were good for him most of the night, leaving him a little drunk, chin on his hand and elbow propped on the table, just watching the Arcans and the few humans that lived here interact, quite amiably. The Arcans here accepted the humans who lived here, and the humans seemed quite content to be among the Arcans. These weren't typical Arcans, though, these were just the ones that weren't afraid of people. The Arcans that were fearful of humans would be further north, from the sound of it, since humans weren't usually allowed past Vanguard.

A shadow blocked the light of the alchemy lamp illuminating his table. He looked up and saw Danna, standing there with her hands on her hips. She looked down at him, her eyes flashing, but she said nothing. "I could say I'm tired of trying," he said in a slightly slurred voice, clearly the voice of a drunken male. "I've tried reason, I've tried giving you space, I've tried being nice, but it just seems that everything I do makes you hate me more. The only thing I can say now is I'm sorry."

"What?" she asked in confusion.

"I'm sorry I killed your men," he told her, then he looked away. "I'm sorry we captured you, and I'm sorry you hate me. I can't help it. I did what I thought I had to do, even though now I'm starting to doubt if it was the right thing. I thought it was at the time. I tried explaining things like rational people, but it didn't get me anywhere. I tried backing off to give you

space, but that just made it worse. Then you walk in when I was just trying to make Clover feel better and it makes you hate me more. I give up," he sighed. "I'm attracted to you, but you hate me. Even if I did get my humanity back, what's the point? I killed your men, I humiliated you, I'm dragging you to Trinity knows where and I have no idea what they'll do to you, and to top all of that, I'm a Shaman, which you hate as a matter of course. It's over before it ever had a chance to get started." He drained his tankard with one long draw, slammed it home on the table, and stood up. "Now, I'm going to bed. Goodnight, Danna, and goodbye. Sleep well."

He got up and walked a little unsteadily towards the stairs, staggering up to his room. He sat on his bed for a little while, then struggled out of his clothes, opened the shutters on the window to let the cool late summer night air into the room, then lay on the bed, over the covers, feeling the cool wind blow over his fur. He let that sensation lull him to a troubled sleep, as he let go of any chance to be with Danna.

She hated him, and it was over. It was time to let it go and move on, and concentrate on the reason he was here... to join the Masked.

Of course, that conviction didn't last long when he had the chance to look at her.

Kyven had a bit of a headache the morning they started out, with three new people with them. Tallspan had joined them, and two Arcans from the village came along to drive the cart holding Claw's body. They rode at a much slower pace now, barely more than a walk for the Arcans, having to go slow to let the cart and its horse keep up with them. That slower pace was actually a curse for Kyven, since he had lots of time to look other places than straight ahead. He found himself glancing back at Danna almost every other minute, looking at her hair, looking at her face, looking at her now clean clothes, having been washed during the night while she was asleep. He knew he had to stop it, to let it go, but he just couldn't help it. He was drawn to her in a way he couldn't ignore.

Perhaps this was another lesson, a lesson in resisting his impulses to keep his mind on his job. He couldn't be this distracted when he started working for the Masked, or he wouldn't last long. But he rather doubted it.

Danna's presence drove him to the front of their party, and keeping her completely behind him helped a little. To look at her, he had to turn completely around, and he wasn't going to go that far. He kept quiet and tried to work through this hangover, hearing without listening as Tallspan went on and on about the territory ahead. They passed through another village around midafternoon without staying the night. They did reach a village about sunset, and while the residents gaped at Toby and Danna, Tallspan met with a burly bear Shaman who called himself Hardstep, who was then introduced to them. Kyven was shown to a room without much conversation and went to sleep without eating, mainly because his stomach didn't feel much up to eating.

He awoke feeling much the same way, his stomach feeling queasy, but he put it out of his mind as he went down after Patches woke him up. He met the big bear, Hardstep, once more, who turned out to be a rather jolly fellow who loved to tell jokes, and also loved to laugh. He joined them as they continued north, and Kyven tuned them out and concentrated on not throwing up as they walked that day, walking on all fours rather than on his legs because it made his stomach feel better. Drinking all that ale was really punishing him, it seemed, he'd been sick at his stomach ever since the hangover. Was it some Arcan reaction to too much ale? He wasn't sure, but it surely kept him from even thinking about food. He sat near the small stream at which they stopped for lunch, drinking water in small sips as he tried to get his stomach to settle down... and also to stay away from Danna.

Patches came over to him as the others ate and offered him a bit of buffalo meat. "Here, you

haven't eaten all day," she said, holding it out to him... but the smell of it turned his stomach.

"No thanks," he told her, bowing his head. "My stomach's been upset all day. Nerves, I guess," he chuckled weakly. "I'm surrounded by Shaman and we're getting closer and closer to where we're going. I feel a little out of place."

"So do I. I don't know what's going to happen when we get there. What I'm going to do, where I'm going to go. I don't even know where I'm going to live. Will I ever see you again when we get there, and the Shaman go on?"

"I hope so, little one," he said with a smile, reaching over and patting her shoulder. "I'm going to miss you when you find your place, and I leave. You've been a good friend."

"Thanks, Kyven," she said with a shy smile. "You're not bad, for a human anyway."

Kyven chuckled weakly, then leaned down and again lapped at the water, drinking a little more. Patches left him and returned to the others, but did give him a few smiles when he looked in their direction.

When they started out again, he had to catch up because he was in the bushes, suffering a bout of diarrhea; that ale had really torn him up. He had to hurry to catch up with them, following along behind them, following the cart. As the afternoon progressed, though, he felt decidedly light-headed and a little disoriented. Something occurred to him, that this might be something other than some kind of extended reaction to the ale, but he was too far gone by then to consider that he should do something about it. He was confused, his only real clear objective to stay with the cart... though he wasn't sure why. He just knew that it was what he was doing, so it was what he did. He followed the cart with a drooping head and a sagging tail, his stomach rebelling against him and his insides all knotted up, as his throat seemed to get tighter and tighter and drier and drier. He had to stop a moment to drink at a stream the road forded, lapping at the water to try to slake his thirst. He drank at the stream for long, long moments, as the cart and the others wound out of sight, and when he finally could drink no more, when his belly was almost distended with water, he found that he was still thirsty... yet he could do nothing about it. He simply sat there and lapped at the water, unable to swallow it, bringing it into his mouth and letting it fall back out. Eventually, his thirst abated, and when he looked around and saw no cart, the need to follow it faded from his mind. He sat there in confusion, unsure of what to do, then turned and went back down the road the way they came because he was unsure of why he was even there. The road seemed to swim in his eyes, undulating and gyrating in crazy ways that made his stomach churn, so he turned off of it and found himself in cool grass. He laid down in the comforting grass, surrounded by soothing smells that seemed to settle his stomach, and closed his eyes as the unsettling feeling faded away, and before he knew it, he drifted off to sleep.

The others went quite a way before any of them realized that Kyven was no longer with them. Patches was the one that noticed that he was no longer following the cart, and she went over to Clover, who was weaving a garland of clover flowers for Teacup, who was energetically babbling at the bear Shaman, Hardstep. "Clover? Kyven's not with us anymore," she said, motioning behind them.

"I'm sure he'll be along in a moment, child," Clover told her.

Patches kept watch, but after more time than she felt entirely good, she again brought it up. "Umm, I think maybe we should look for him, Clover," she said. "He wasn't feeling very well when we stopped to eat. Maybe he had to stop."

Clover gave her a steady look, then turned to the other Shaman. "I'll be back presently, my friends," she told them. "Patches thinks Kyven had to stop. If he is feeling poorly, we'll catch up with you in Glenfall."

"Certainly, sister," Hardstep nodded. "I think the boy was looking a bit unwell when we stopped, but he seemed to shake it off."

When Clover turned back down the road and bounded off, Patches followed her determinedly. Clover just smiled when the young female pulled up with her and nodded, and they backtracked for quite a ways. Clover would stop from time to time to smell the ground, trying to find Kyven's scent, she figured, then they would keep going back. When they again reached the stream, Clover paced back and forth along the edge, sniffing at the ground. "He never came over to this side," she announced. "And the stream is far too shallow to drown him or carry him off, even if he collapsed in it. Why would he leave us?"

"I don't know," Patches said. "Couldn't he cure himself if he was ill, like he cured that feral wolf Arcan?"

"He could," she said. "Let's find him, child."

The sun began to creep low on the horizon as they continued to backtrack, as Clover kept checking the sides of the road to see if he went off into the grassy plain, perhaps to chase down something to eat. They searched for over an hour for him, until Clover gave a call as Patches went past her. She came back to find her kneeling over Kyven, who was curled up in the grass in a fetal position, his breathing fast and shallow and his nose dry. "Kyven!" she called in alarm.

"Shh, it's quite alright, child," she said with a gentle smile, a hand on his shoulder. "He'll be just fine."

"What's wrong with him?"

"He has drinking sickness," she said with a little smile.

"Drinking sickness? But that's a baby's illness!"

"Patches, Kyven was born *human*, do not forget. He has no immunity to childhood diseases like drinking sickness and red-eye. He must have picked it up from the children in Vanguard."

"Can you cure him?"

"I could, but it would be an exercise in futility," she answered. "He'd just catch it again so long as he's around children. It's best to simply let it run its course, so his body learns to fight it off. From the look of him, he's already recovering. He should be up and about tomorrow." She reached down and picked him up, cradling him against her as best she could, given his arms were dangling almost down to her knees. Kyven was bigger than she was, so it made it hard for her to hold him. "Run ahead and tell the others what happened, and ask them to turn around and come back. I'm capable of carrying him, but he's taller than I am, that makes him a tad awkward for me to hold," she admitted with a smile. "Oh, and could you tuck in his arm and tail so they don't foul up my legs?"

"Certainly," she said, doing so, draping his arm over his stomach, then tucking his tail in around his leg and draping it between his legs, holding it in place. "I'll bring help as quick as I can, Shaman."

"That's a good girl," she said with a smile, motioning for her to go with her muzzle. The panda loped off, both relieved that Kyven was going to be okay, and just a little bit amused. A grown adult, catching drinking sickness? It was almost funny. But, it certainly proved that Kyven wasn't born Arcan, if he caught a baby's illness. Patches wondered if he was going to catch red-eye next, or maybe even dryscale.

He'd certainly look funny with half of his fur falling out.

She caught up with the others and stopped them. "We have to go back, Shaman," she told them. "Kyven fell ill, and Miss Clover is carrying him."

"Ill? What happened to him, child?" Tallspan asked.

“He has drinking sickness, Shaman,” she answered, a little shyly when she realized that everyone was looking at her. “Miss Clover said he’d be alright, but she wants us to go back for her because he’s hard for her to carry. He’s too tall, he’s hanging out of her arms.”

“Drinking sickness? *Drinking sickness?*” Hardstep said in surprise. “That’s a baby’s disease! How did he contract it?”

“Kyven was born human, Hardstep,” Tallspan told him calmly. “He has no immunity to our common childhood diseases. He must have picked it up from the kids in the village. Did Clover cure him, child?”

“No sir, she said it was best to just let it run its course,” she said as the cart drivers turned the cart around.

“She did the proper thing. Well, let’s go pick them up. I think I’m much better suited to carrying the young male. His feet must be dragging the ground if Clover is carrying him,” he chuckled.

“I think I’m much better suited to such a task, brother,” Hardstep laughed, thumping his barrel chest.

“Well, that proves it beyond any doubt,” Toby said in a quiet whisper to Danna as they turned around. “Ain’t no human can catch that, an’ it *is* an Arcan childhood illness. Ah done seen enough o’ it in Alamar. Kyven really *is* human. When he was turned Arcan, he got vulnerable tah they’re sicknesses. He’s like a baby with no defense.”

Danna gave the hunter a shocked look. “How can you be so sure?”

“Ah doubt they’d lie about somethin’ like that, Danna,” he answered. “Not among themselves. What good would it do?”

“They’re trying to trick us!” she whispered back as they headed back the other way.

“Why? Ain’t no reason tah do so,” he answered. “We just afterthoughts, sugah. They don’t care none what we think.”

“Is it fatal?” she asked in sudden concern. “If he dies...” she said, giving him a fearful look.

“It’s like chicken pox fo’ Arcans,” he answered. “Ain’t fatal, just puts em in a sickbed fo’ a day o’ two.”

Danna leaned back in her saddle and pondered that. If they weren’t lying, then he really *was* human, and that idea shook the very foundations of her entire core values. A *human* Shaman. It was impossible! It was... it was against everything the Loremasters taught! If there were now human Shaman, then either the evil force the Arcan Shaman served was spreading into humanity, or the Loremasters were wrong about the Shaman. So, which was it?

She wasn’t sure. But she had to find out. If the Loremasters were right, then this was something that hey had to know, no matter what it cost, no matter what it took. If humans were becoming Shaman, then the very bedrock upon which human society was built upon was starting to crumble.

If the Loremasters were wrong, then... what? What did it mean if the Loremasters were wrong about the Shaman? From what she’d seen so far, the Shaman were quite different when dealing with Arcans than the Loremasters taught. They didn’t *rule* the way she expected the to, they instead acted like, well... doctors. And after that long talk with Clover, where the Arcan basically ripped everything Danna had ever been taught apart with calm, gentle words, now she wasn’t so sure who was right or what to believe.

Kyven. Clover had been quite shameless about her attempts to change Danna’s mind about him, telling her in brutal, graphic terms what he’d gone through before she met him in Atan, how he was nearly starved to death by a sadistic man, and the horrors he’d seen in a kennel cage. Even Danna had to shiver a little bit at the thought of it, the way Clover described it, starving literally in plain sight of many who could save him just by giving him food, people

who walked right by his cage, and yet did nothing. How helpless he had to feel, literally watching others eat, and yet going day after day with hunger consuming him from the inside out...

Clover’s attempts hadn’t gained much ground with her. Kyven had killed her men, had directly taken the lives of three of her friends and indirectly caused the death of the fourth by forcing them to chase him, four men whose well being was her responsibility. She could feel sorry for what he went through, but she still could not forgive him for what he did.

But, there was a little sympathy for him, though most of it vanished when she thought of him having sex with that coyote. He was only supposed to *look* like an Arcan, not act like one to such an extent he was fucking their females! The very thought of it burned her up.

But it wasn’t jealousy. It couldn’t be, she *hated* him. It had to be something else that made her angry and outraged at the thought that he was touching some other woman, putting his hands on her, looking down at her with those green eyes as he—

She got herself back under control. Alright, she had to admit she was attracted to the *human* Kyven, it had been one of the reasons she’d investigated him, to find him. But that Kyven wasn’t the same one. He was more Arcan now, more Arcan than human, and he was a *Shaman*! She couldn’t get tangled up with someone like that.

But those eyes haunted her dreams.

She watched when the coyote came into view and came up to them. The other two Shaman surrounded her, checking the still form in her arms, and then he was transferred into the burly arms of that large male bear Arcan. They all laughed when he touched him, then looked back to the little raccoon female and the two canines driving the cart. “Drinking sickness!” the two said one after the other, which made the raccoon giggle like a little girl.

“That tears it,” Toby whispered. “Kyven *is* human.”

Human. He really was human. A human Shaman.

Trinity... it meant that the entire world was going crazy.

In a moment of silent clarity, Danna completely understood why he ran. If the Loremasters found out that humans were becoming Shaman—she had no idea what they would do. But whatever it was, it certainly wouldn’t be pretty.

In that regard, she couldn’t blame him for running, but she still couldn’t see her way to forgive him for what he did to her men.

Chapter 14

Kyven woke up being carried by the huge bear Arcan as they moved into yet another village, an even larger one than the ones before, feeling weak, a little confused, thirsty as sin, and with his stomach tying itself in a knot. He couldn’t remember anything, and for long moments he didn’t recognize any of the faces around him, at least until the female coyote checked on him and saw he was awake. That was a face he knew, and he reached out weakly to her, which made her smile and take his hand fondly. “A little confused, brother?” she asked, which only made him stare blankly. “It will pass, it’s just a symptom of your illness, which itself should pass by tomorrow. You are in no danger, so just relax, and we’ll have you in a bed in a few minutes.”

And they did. He was brought to a very large inn crowded with Arcans, Arcans who were dead silent as the group was heralded upstairs, and then he was placed in a warm bed, where he went back to sleep almost immediately.

He awoke some time later to a large, well-appointed room holding a large bed, wardrobe, writing desk, nightstand, a full length mirror, and a rather amused Clover, sitting in a chair by his bed. She was reading a book, but lowered it when he stirred and opened his eyes, feel-

ing a bit wool-headed. "Feeling better, brother?" she asked with a light, almost amused smile.

"I'm really thirsty," he said in reply.

"I'm sorry, but you can't drink right now. It will only make you sick," she answered.

"What's wrong with me?"

"You have drinking sickness," she said, her smile growing wider.

"What is that?"

"It's a sickness our children get, much like human chicken pox," she said, her smile getting bigger. "You must have caught it in Vanguard."

"A child's sickness? How is that possible?"

"While you are an Arcan, brother, you are vulnerable to Arcan diseases," she told him, her smile becoming a grin. "No doubt you will suffer from redeye next, or possibly scaleskin."

"I think not," he said, touching his own chest, but Clover reached over and put her hand over his.

"Not wise, brother," she told him. "If you cure it, you'll just catch it again. Just let it run its course. We only catch it once, and then we are immune to it."

"Oh. How long will that take?"

"I think you'll be up and about tomorrow," she said clinically. "Hungry?"

"No, just thirsty."

"Then you will eat," she declared.

"But I'm not hungry."

"If you eat, you will get better faster."

"Oh. Then bring me something."

She chuckled and stood up, then patted him on the shoulder and left the room, leaving him feeling just a little... *embarrassed*. She was highly amused that he'd caught a child's sickness, and he guessed it was a little strange. But, at least he wouldn't catch it again.

She brought him some thinly cut strips of buffalo meat and forced him to eat them. He had to force each one down, and his stomach rebelled against every bite he swallowed, which made him only thirstier. But Clover was quite adamant about not giving him any water, and he laid in bed after eating feeling like he was dying of dehydration. His nose was hot to the touch and dry, and his tongue felt like it was coated in sand and his stomach was about to spew its contents all over the room. Clover kept a hand on his shoulder and explained why she was being so mean to him, unable to stop smiling. "The illness thrives off of water, brother. The more you drink, the longer the illness lasts. If not for all the water you drank, you would probably already be over it, but you just gave it more fuel."

"I don't remember drinking any water."

"Part of drinking sickness is disorientation, brother. You were probably too addled to remember."

"That sounds dangerous."

"Usually it isn't, for usually it's an illness we contract as babies or very small children, when we can't cause much trouble."

"Why are you smiling?" he demanded.

"I just think it's funny, brother. You were singing a very bawdy song when Hardstep brought you into the inn."

"I don't remember that."

"I would be surprised if you did. Now get some sleep. I'll be here if you need me."

"You're staying?"

She nodded. "In case you try to wander off during your sleep. Sleepwalking is another

common occurrence with drinking sickness."

"Oh. Where are we, by the way?"

"Glenfall, a day's travel from Haven. We'll be stopping over here until you're well."

"Oh. Thank you for that much."

"I don't think you'd appreciate being carried into Haven. You'd never live it down," she winked.

"They'll laugh until sunset, then I'll get even," he answered.

She laughed. "No doubt."

"When will I know I'm better?"

"When you become hungry," she answered. "When you are hungry, you have conquered the illness, and will recover quickly. But sleep now. I'm sure you'll find it quite easy."

He closed his eyes, and found that despite his queasy stomach, he was able to fall asleep quite quickly.

He was *starving* when he woke up, and still quite thirsty, but at least he didn't feel like he was going to throw up at any second.

He was alone in the room. Clover was somewhere else, and the light and cool air streaming in through the open window told him that it had to be morning. He crawled out of bed on weak legs, found that he'd been undressed, but as soon as he was up and looking for his clothes, the door opened. Clover and an Arcan Kyven didn't know entered, a tall, thin, willowy female cat with gray tabby fur and short, wild grayish hair the same color as the light bands in her fur. The sense of her made it clear she too was a Shaman. She gave him an appreciative look, taking in his nudity, then smiled. "Brother, this is Patience, the Shaman of Glenfall. Patience, this is Kyven."

"I've heard a great deal about you, brother," she said, stepping up and taking his hand fondly. "Are you feeling better?"

"I'm starving, and feel a little weak, but otherwise fine," he answered. Patience put her tabbed hand on his snout, then touched his nose.

"I believe he's fully recovered, sister," the cat announced. "Let's take him for some breakfast, and we can get on the road as soon as he feels steady."

"Yes, we should also keep him isolated from the children, so he doesn't come down with another childhood disease," Clover said with a look of amusement.

"Yeah yeah, you're adding to the list of people I'll get back at when I have the time, Clover," Kyven told her, which made both females laugh. "Where are my clothes?"

"We had them cleaned, I'll have to send for them," she answered. "But this is an Arcan village, brother. If you want to come down, nobody will give you a second glance if you're not wearing clothes."

"I will," Patience said, giving him an appraising look, running her hand up and down the fur on his arm. "Spirits, he has such soft fur."

"It's almost addictive," Clover winked. "It's like sleeping with silk when you sleep against him."

"Leave my fur alone, Clover," Kyven chuckled. "And take me to my clothes."

Glenfall was a very large village, larger than Atan, surrounded by crops on all sides, with only a single road passing through it on the way north and south. It was filled with many Arcans, most dressed, but a few, like Kyven, moving about unclothed... and slightly more. On a porch across from the inn, in true Arcan fashion, a pair of canines were having sex, showing that Haven Arcans had the same attitudes as the Arcans he'd met in captivity. But Kyven really didn't pay them any mind, nor did anyone else, for that matter. The cat Shaman led them down to a small house on the corner down the street from the inn, which was on the

southern edge of the village. Instead of going in, they instead went around, where a trio of Arcans were busily washing clothes, and two more were hanging wet clothes on lines that took up half the yard to dry. This was a laundry, a professional laundry from the looks of it. “Ah, Shaman!” a tall male otter Arcan said as he stepped from his washing tub. “Will you bless me?”

“Always, Skimmer, always,” she laughed, putting her hands up on his shoulders and giving him his blessing. “Do you have those clothes washed I gave you?”

“Yes, but they’re still drying,” he answered.

“Clover, Kyven, this is Skimmer, the village’s launderer. He seems to enjoy washing clothes, so it’s how he contributes to the village.”

“I’m good at it, and I don’t find it to be tedious work,” he smiled in reply as he shook Kyven’s hand, then nuzzled him, which Kyven accepted. “Besides, it needs to be done, and when something needs doing, it gets done.”

“Bring the clothes then please, I’ll have to dry them the quick and cheating way,” Patience winked at him. “Then we can get our patient something to eat and ensure Tallspan and Hardstep he’s alright.”

The otter brought Kyven’s clothes, which Patience then dried out using Shaman magic. Kyven was pretty sure he had an idea of how she did it, so he filed that little information away in his mind for future reference as he put them on. He dressed and they said their goodbyes to the otter and returned to the inn. Patches and Teacup hugged him when he returned, having come back to the inn he supposed, as he hadn’t seen them when he left, then shook hands with Toby. “Are ya’ bettah now, Kyv?” he asked.

“Hungry, but otherwise fine,” he answered. “I feel kinda silly, getting sick like that.”

Clover laughed.

“And I think I’m going to have to teach a certain coyote not to be such a bitch,” he said, giving her a sidelong look.

She laughed again and stuck her tongue out at him. “Twostep, could we get some buffalo meat and milk please?” Clover called as she herded Kyven to an empty table in the crowded room, a room that watched Toby like a hawk as the man sat down with the Kyven and the females.

“Where are the others?” Kyven asked.

“Danna is walking around the village, and the males are probably off wrestling or something silly,” Patience noted. A tall, burly brown-furred canine Arcan brought a wooden platter with cut strips of raw buffalo meat and set it down on the table, enough to feed all five of them, then nodded with a smile and left them. Kyven attacked the platter like a starving man, wolfing down strip after strip, then drank down the entire tankard of milk placed before him when the tall canine returned. He ate fast, eating almost half of what was on the platter, until his stomach was contentedly full. He leaned back in his chair and sighed, then surrendered the platter to the girls and let them eat. “So, now that you can talk, how do you feel?” Teacup teased with a grin.

“Much better now,” he answered. “Remind me to find out which child gave me that illness so I can go back and strangle him.”

The two Shaman laughed, and Clover put her hand on his shoulder. “Poor baby. I should breastfeed you.”

“I’m gonna bite you so hard you’ll never breastfeed anyone again next time you ask for comfort, Clover,” he warned, which made her laugh even harder. “I think I should have proven to you by now that I’m not a little kid.”

“That you have,” she said with a shameless grin. “But you still have no endurance.”

He stuck his tongue out at her.

“What is that? No endurance, and he’s a Shaman?” Patience teased, slapping him lightly on the shoulder. “That’s almost inexcusable!”

“When you two are finished demeaning me, let me know,” Kyven said dryly, which made both of them laugh.

“Get used to it, we love to tease each other, Kyven,” Patience winked. “Especially the young ones. And you’re certainly young, if you caught drinking sickness,” she grinned. “You looked so *cute* when Hardstep carried you into the village yesterday, like a little baby.”

He stuck his tongue out at her, too, which made her laugh.

After breakfast, they were assembled in the middle of the village, and Patience joined them. The villagers came out to say farewell to the Shaman, asking for blessings from all four of them, but not really bothering Kyven, almost as if they didn’t know he was Shaman. He stayed near the cart, in front of the horses holding the humans and with the girls, letting the four Shaman have their moment as he recovered from his malady.

“Feeling better, Kyven?” Teacup asked. “I mean really, and not just saying it to get them off your back?” she asked with a grin.

“I am,” he chuckled. “Thank you for your concern, Teacup. I appreciate it.”

“We’re only one more day’s travel away,” she said with excitement. “I can hardly wait! I wonder what it’s going to be like?”

“Me too,” Kyven agreed.

They got under way quickly, and moved at a steady but easy pace northward. The land here was all settled, with farmsteads lining the road and small cart tracks leading off to each side to farms further from the road, and all of them were Arcans. Arcan families worked in their fields, waving to the procession as they passed, but stopping in their tracks when they saw the two humans among them, not approaching them. The good weather they’d had up to then failed them around noon, when a bank of clouds rolled in, and a steady rain soaked them to the skin as they padded on along a muddying road. It rained on them for a few hours, and then, as quickly as it appeared, the clouds rolled away to bathe them in warm afternoon sunlight. All the Arcans pulled off their clothes when they stopped to water the horses and shook the water out of their fur, then Kyven tried to duplicate that spell that he saw Patches do. He imagined all the spare water being pulled from his clothes, returning them to their normal dry state, and then beseeched the fox, rather coyly, for the power to grant the spell. She responded, and he watched with a growing smile as his clothes dried out. He tried it with his own fur as well, getting a better idea as he considered it, imagining the external water, dirt, fleas, and foreign matter in his fur and on his skin being pulled out without changing his fur at all—he thought that a rather important distinction, his fur was integral to his ability to blend with the shadows—and again asked for the power for the spell. It too was granted, and all the mustiness quickly bled out of his fur, as well as quite a bit of dust, dander, and a few fleas and even a single tick, leaving his fur healthy, clean, and shiny.

“Ooo, do that to me!” Teacup begged, grabbing his hands and all but jumping up and down.

“Such a vain young male,” Patience teased, looking back at him as she dried out her own clothes.

Kyven didn’t answer her. Danna wasn’t entirely friendly to him, if she found out his fur was part of his ability to hide, she might try to shave it off him out of spite. He instead granted Teacup’s request, drying out her fur and her clothes, leaving her clothes clean and her fur shiny and soft. He repeated it for Patches, which earned him a lick on the cheek from both girls as they put their clothes back on.

“Say, Kyv, mind doin’ that ovah heah too?” Toby asked from his horse. “Ah hate ridin’

wet.”

Kyven laughed and put a hand on Toby’s knee and repeated the spell, which dried him out.

“Uh, may I get dried out too, please?”

Kyven started and looked at Danna. She looked angry with herself for asking, but didn’t glare hatefully at him. He was honestly surprised she’d ask anything of him, but he figured she was more willing to ask something of him than she was to ride in a saddle with wet pants... which wasn’t very pleasant. He said nothing, just shifted over, put his hand on her leg, and again channeled the spell, which stripped all the water and dirt out of her clothes and hair and off her skin, leaving her dry and perfectly clean, as clean as if she’d taken a long bath. He took his hand off her leg and turned away from her quickly, not wanting to look at her because he’d just want to look at her more. He padded further from her, back to the girls, and spent the afternoon in conversation with them, as they speculated on what they’d find at the end of this road.

They didn’t have long to find out. They paused on the top of a low hill that overlooked a wide, shallow valley that had a small river running through its center, a very twisty river. In the distance, a sprawling series of hedged farms spread out before a city, a city that spread from one side of the valley to the other and reached back beyond their vision from that leading edge. It was not a village, not a town, but a *city*, a city that looked larger than Avannar or Stinger Bay or Cheston or Alamar, a city filled with stone buildings with sturdy gray tile roofs, all sloped sharply to keep snow from piling atop them.

“Haven,” Clover told him as she backed up to him and the girls, allowing them to look at the large city. “The hidden home of the free Arcans.”

“Well toss me in the Alamar Bay,” Toby breathed. “Ah’d never believe it if Ah didn’t see it with mah own eyes.”

“We’re still nearly an hour from the Lodge,” she told them, “the headquarters of the Shaman, such as it is.”

“Headquarters?”

“We’re not quite that organized,” Clover chuckled. “We obey the spirits, not other Shaman. But the Shaman that sits on the council is regarded as the leader of us by the lay Arcans, for he is the most wise of us and his advice is always good. We call him Firetail in honor of the first Shaman, and his home, which we call the Lodge, is considered the headquarters of the Shaman. That is where we’re going.”

“All of us?” Patches asked.

“Of course all of us,” Clover answered with a smile, patting the small panda on the shoulder. “Usually we have special Arcans who take in newcomers like you to serve as your foster family and teach you the ways of your new home, but since you have been with us, we’re taking you to live with Firetail himself,” she smiled. “You and Teacup. You will adjust to Haven with our most revered Shaman being your host.”

“Really?” Teacup gasped.

“Yes, he has already made room for you in his house,” she smiled. “And you two, Kyven, the humans, and I will be staying with him while council is called.”

“Some of us aren’t quite so lucky,” Hardstep called with a chuckle as they started towards the distant city.

“Some of us should not drink all of Firetail’s ale when he invites you to dinner,” Clover teased in reply.

“He offered.”

“There is wisdom when knowing when an invitation is not the invitation it appears to be,” Clover grinned.

“I’ll remember that next time,” Hardstep chuckled.

“What’s this council, Clovah? If’n ya’ don’t mind mah askin’.”

“Not at all, Toby. The council rules the lands of Haven. They are fifteen Arcans, chosen for their intelligence and their ability, the Historian, and the Firetail. The Historian is the hereditary descendent of Firetail, who sits on the council as a living history of our past. He knows the annals of history of every day that has passed since the first seventeen Arcans arrived here and formed Haven, and it is his knowledge that the council often calls upon when they need information. The Firetail is the Shaman chosen among us as the wisest, who sits on the council to speak for the spirits.”

“Who picks who sits on this council?” Danna asked.

“The people and the spirits,” Clover answered her. “The people choose who they wish to take the place of a council member that retires or passes on, but the spirits must approve of their choice to ensure that the new council member has the needs of the people foremost in his mind and heart, not the needs of himself.”

“That doesn’t sound very effective.”

“It is quite effective, Danna,” Clover answered calmly. “Our way ensures we have both leaders our people support, and leaders who can actually *lead*.”

Danna fell silent and studied the city as they approached, but Teacup got more and more excited, until she was all but running in place as they entered the edge of the city, a city without walls, where stone buildings with steep slate roofs, and Arcans moved along the streets as some Arcans, looking like entire families, sat on wide front porches that seemed attached to the front of every house. All activity stopped when the party passed by, as the Arcans stared at Toby and Danna, and some parents called their kids in or took them into their houses. Arcans started following the procession in tense silence, disbelieving that humans had been brought to their city, until there was quite a silent yet angry crowd following the cart holding Claw’s body. That crowd stopped when a small group of well-dressed Arcans met them in a large square not far from the edge of town. They were two male canines, a female raccoon, and an aged female cougar with her tail dyed red. That cougar stepped forward and took Tallspan’s hands. “Tallspan,” she said in a matronly voice. “How fares Vanguard?”

“It fares well, Firetail,” he answered with a smile. “I’m sorry we’re late, we were held over as our young Shaman recovered from drinking sickness,” he said, looking back at Kyven with a cherubic grin.

Kyven gave Tallspan a dark look.

“Please, come greet me, young one,” the matronly cougar said, holding her hands out to him. He gave Patches a nervous look, then stepped out and took her hands. She nuzzled him fondly, and he accepted her attention. “So, you are the human Shaman,” she said with a smile, looking at him up and down. “I say, I much prefer you like this. You are quite handsome as an Arcan.”

“Uh, thanks, Miss Firetail,” he said, a little self-consciously.

“Please, Shaman never address each other as anything but equals,” she laughed. “And these are the humans the spirits have called to us?” she asked.

“They are, Firetail,” Clover answered. “May I present Toby Fisher, a hunter, and Danna Pannen, a Captain of the Loreguard investigations division, who solves crimes the watch and normal Loreguard cannot solve.”

“I dare say, her problem solving ability might be welcomed,” one of the canines said calmly.

“Kyven, everyone, may I present members of the council. Longreach, Ghost, and the Historian, Sharp,” she finished, motioning to the raccoon. So, that told Kyven that the first Sha-

man was a raccoon.

“Welcome to Haven,” the taller canine, Longreach, told them with a nod. “We will not keep you long, friends, we wished only to meet you in a *public* setting, to assure the people that humans being brought here was condoned by the council,” he added, looking at the Arcans surrounding them. “We will conduct your fallen companion to Firetail’s Hill and give him a new home overlooking the river, so he will always find peace, and allow the rest of you to enjoy Firetail’s hospitality.”

Clover turned to Kyven. “Go with Firetail, my friend. I will take Claw on to his final rest, as is my duty. I’ll meet with you tomorrow, after the council meets with you.”

“I’ll take good care of him, Clover,” Firetail smiled. “And the others. Please, come with me,” she said, stepping away from the others.

They split up. Kyven, the girls, and the humans followed Firetail while the other three Shaman from the villages they passed through went with Clover and the council members as they followed the cart down a different street. Kyven could feel the anger and hate and fear around them as the citizens of Haven saw humans in their city, but the calm presence of Firetail, leading them, quelled any angry outbursts. It did little for the hot looks, looks that made Danna and Toby walk *very* close to Firetail, leading their horses to not present an inviting target in case anyone threw something at them. “Do you like our city, friends?” she asked, motioning at the houses lining the street.

“What is it y’all do here, ma’am?” Toby asked.

“Why, we *live*, my friend,” she chuckled. “Our city is like any human city. Our people create things, and farm, producing the crafted goods that some villages around us cannot make themselves. We trade our goods for the food they grow, but within the city, we have a more *human* system. We use a currency good only within the city itself,” she said, digging a small bronze coin out of her pocket and showing it to them. “Since it is much harder to barter here within town, we’ve adopted the human custom of money. “But money is only used for what we *want*. What we *need* is always supplied to us. You can go to any greengrocer and find all the vegetables you need, or go to the butcher and find meat. We also have groups of volunteers who build the houses you see to house our people as they come to us. The council pays them for their service to our people, so they may enjoy the benefits of their service. Nobody goes hungry in Haven, and everyone has a home.”

“What keeps people from taking it all and hoarding it? Or trying to sell it themselves?” Danna asked.

Firetail laughed. “Dear child, why would we ever take more than we need? It is always there if we need it. We have a much different point of view than your people. We don’t spend all our time trying to amass things and money. We spend our time helping each other, making others’ lives better because they in turn help enrich our own. We are a *communal* people, Captain Danna. We live as part of a group, not by ourselves, and the group is the primary unit we consider first. We support the group, and in turn, the group supports us. This city is but a group,” she said, motioning around her. “We work together to ensure that everyone in the group has sufficient food, and clean water, and a place to live. They may work to earn money to buy nice things for their houses, or nice clothes, if they so decide to wear them,” she said, pointing at a naked ferret male Arcan who stood on a porch, watching them go by, “or take up a trade that supplies the craftsmen with their materials, such as a lumberjack or miner, or work for the city providing for the people, like a farmer or a hunter. But they don’t *have* to work if they don’t wish to,” she told them. “Arcans such as them spend their entire lives lazing about their homes, but in return for that privilege, they earn no money to buy better things for themselves, living off the food supplied by the city and charity of their

neighbors, who give them hand-me-down housewares and furniture.”

“It sounds almost too good to be true,” Danna noted. “How do the people react to those who get rich?”

“There is no perfect system, Danna,” the Shaman answered. “We have trouble filling jobs that many find distasteful, for example, and we do have a large share of Arcans who are much greedier than others, who work to enrich themselves at the expense of the harmony of the group. Our system has its problems, we can’t deny that. But for us, it works well enough to continue it, since in the end, so long as everyone is fed and has a home and is content, that is all that matters.”

Danna pondered her words, then finally nodded. “At least you understand that it’s not perfect.”

“We know it’s not perfect. Nothing can ever be perfect. What we have works well enough for us, and that’s what matters.”

They didn’t have to go far before they reached their destination. It was a small walled compound along the river, with a small gate opening into a courtyard of sorts that had a small garden with a fountain in the center. There were three buildings within the walls, two steep-roofed houses and what looked like a small storage shed between them. “Welcome to my home,” she said as a pair of canines came out from behind the larger house, on the left, and took the reins of the horses and allowed the humans to dismount. “Teacup, Patches, you will be staying with me as you adjust to Haven. I’ll be the one that teaches you our laws and helps you adjust to your new life. You will be staying with me, my children. Danna, Toby, that house right there is yours.” She pointed at the small house on the right.

“Ours?” Danna asked. “As in by ourselves?”

“All yours,” she smiled in reply. “You are not prisoners, my friends. You are guests, and you will be given your space. I don’t think you’d be very comfortable living with me and the others, so you will have your own house. You may feel free to visit me at any time, and you will eat dinner with us, but cleaning that house shall be your own affair, my friends. I keep no servants outside of the two young males you saw, and they do that as a favor to me. All they do for me is help me receive guests who visit with me, and help tend my garden, since I am terrible at it,” she admitted with a laugh. “They do nothing else. I even do my own cooking,” she smiled.

“Guests? I haven’t felt much like a guest since I was captured,” Danna grunted.

“I’m sorry about that, but this is important,” she said simply. “As you learn why you’re here, I hope you’ll understand the necessity of us bringing you here.”

“Why don’t you tell me now?” Danna challenged.

“I could, but I wouldn’t want to weigh your mind with our troubles quite yet.”

“You brought me here to solve your problems?”

“We brought you here because what you know may help us avert a disaster,” she answered, looking her in the eyes. “But that will come later. Please, go inspect your home and ensure it’s to your liking, then come over to my house when you’re ready. Patches, Teacup, Kyven, come in, let me show you your rooms.”

Firetail’s house was very, very modest. Her furniture was simple, and she had no art or sculpture. Her house was utilitarian, scrupulously neat, and strangely enough, she owned no chairs anywhere. She had a very low table, barely more than knee high, but instead of chairs, she had pillows and cushions around it. Her house’s main room was split between the dining area and a parlor area, which also was populated with cushions and pillows rather than chairs and couches. She had a bookshelf on the walls flanking her large, deep fireplace, the centerpiece of her living area, complete with a huge brick mantle and mortared stone flooring in

front of it. There was a staircase on the wall near the front door, and she led them up to a second floor that had its own living area and fireplace, this room filled with couches and chairs, with four doors leading from that central room. "Teacup, Patches, those rooms are yours," she said, pointing to the doors on the right. "Kyven, your room is beside mine, that door there," she added, pointing at the door on the right. "Please, go make sure it's to your liking, and meet me downstairs when you're ready."

Kyven's room was much like the rest of the house. It was simple, utilitarian, neat, and organized. He had a bed, writing desk, small bookshelf, wardrobe, and a trunk at the foot of his bed for his other possessions. He put away what few things he had, then returned to the sitting room downstairs, testing out one of the cushions as Firetail returned. The mature cougar sat down in the cushion by his, then patted his leg. "Has your walk been well, brother?"

"Not really," he grunted.

"Trust me, we all know how you feel," she said. "The spirits can sometimes be harsh when they teach us. I must say, though, I much favor seeing you like this," running her hand along the fur on Kyven's arm. "You are a very handsome Arcan. Your fur is quite lovely."

"Yes, I almost lost it to a human furrier," he said in a quiet, low tone.

"I'm not surprised," she noted. "Are you hungry?"

"A little."

"I'll start cooking, then."

"You cook?"

"Of course I cook," she grinned. "I prefer my meat raw, but I do love stew, and I'm particularly fond of boiled corn, spiced potatoes, baked beets and beans, warm bread, and I adore pie."

"I'm surprised that you cook, that's all. Clover doesn't eat anything cooked."

"Clover has opinions on that matter," Firetail chuckled.

"You know her personally?"

"Kyven, I know *all* Shaman personally. It's part of my job," she told him. "My door is always open to the Shaman, and I have someone over almost every day for a chat or a meal. Clover has some kind of stance against cooked food," she chuckled. "She eats everything raw, even vegetables. But I've found that cooking with spices can really make some foods taste better than they do raw. Especially mushrooms. Mushrooms absorb other flavors when you cook them with other things, and they can taste quite good."

Danna and Toby appeared in the doorway, and Firetail waved them in. "We were discussing dinner, my guests. What would you like?"

"Something cooked," Danna said immediately.

"How does meat and vegetable stew, fresh baked bread, spiced potatoes and mushrooms, spring onions, and a blackberry pie sound?"

"Sound? That sounds great, Miss Firetail," Toby said.

"Well, then, I guess I should get to work on it," she said, standing up.

"Yo' gonna cook for us?"

"I have no servants, Toby, and besides, I enjoy cooking," she smiled. "The only reason the boys do my gardening is because I seem to be a curse on flowers," she laughed. "I seem to kill them, no matter how hard I try to care for them."

"I can help, Miss Firetail," Teacup offered as she came down the stairs. "I don't know much about cooking, but I'd love to learn!"

"By all means, come along then, child," she said, offering her hand to the raccoon. Patches joined the two females, staying away from the humans, and the three of them disappeared into the back of the house, leaving Kyven alone with Danna and Toby. The two humans

looked around, and Kyven decided to leave them be and sit on the porch, in a rocking chair with a split back to accommodate his tail. So, this was Haven. It looked like an ordinary city, and in its own way, that was profound. The Arcans had built it all, built it just as well as any humans could, and had built for themselves both a city and a society far removed from the influences of humanity. There were some mirrors to humanity he'd seen, such as building their city in a similar style, but their culture was much different. Arcans seemed to think in a collective manner here, much the same as they did in captivity, thinking in terms of *we* instead of *I*, thinking of the group rather than the individual. It was an interesting observation, almost like Arcans were like some huge pack of wolves. It wasn't foolproof, certainly, since Arcans would turn on each other based on physical size and ability, where the strong overwhelmed the weak, even preyed on them. But here, the Arcans had organized themselves into a collective, semi-communal society, where people worked for the benefit of the whole rather than the individual, but also had the opportunity for personal gain in the form of working for money in addition to working for the city as a whole.

It showed that Arcans were much different from humans, and were by no means the animals humans made them out to be.

After a while, Danna came out and sat down in the chair beside his. He was about to get up and leave, but she just leaned back in the rocking chair. "Not quite the welcome I expected," she said. "The house Toby and I are sharing is better than my house in Avannar," she added ruefully. "I expected to get thrown in a prison cell, not be the guest of a, Shaman."

"I have no idea what to expect," Kyven told her. "I do see that the Arcans are nothing like what I believed them to be. From what I've seen of them, I'd never attribute something like this to them," he said, motioning at the houses on the far side of the river, which the porch faced.

"Me either," Danna agreed. "I almost don't feel like a prisoner here. But it's clear they want something from me. Firetail admitted it."

"It has to be important, if they brought you here," Kyven said. "She said it was something you know, that might avert a disaster."

"I'm not sure what they think they can learn from me to stop a disaster," she snorted. "I'm an investigator. I solve crimes, that's what I do. I'm not in the higher circles of the Lore-guard, I don't set policies. Though I think a few need to be changed," she added. "I always thought Arcans were animals. I'm starting to reassess that belief."

"It's hard to think of anyone who could build all this as animals."

"Sure you can. Ants and termites and bees build elaborate homes, yet they're still animals," she countered. "It's how they act that makes me reconsider. There's no anarchy here, no unrest, no chaos as Arcans run wild. They're very calm and orderly. I always knew they could follow, take orders, but it also seems they're capable of *leading* as well. They're governing themselves, and doing it in what seems to be in a good way, finding a system that works for them and sticking with it, yet understanding that it's not perfect. I'd have to investigate more to see how much of what I've seen is just what they want me to see and they're hiding reality, but that's my initial impression."

"So, I'm not an animal?" he asked calmly.

"You're not an animal," she answered. "And yes, I believe that you *were* human now. Toby convinced me."

"Thank you at least for that much," he told her.

"I still want to know why they want me," Danna grunted, putting her feet up on the rail of the porch.

"I can explain it to you if you'd like," Firetail told them as she came out onto the porch.

"But I was hoping to put the serious business aside at least until tomorrow. You've had a long journey, and I wanted you to relax and feel comfortable."

"I'll feel much more comfortable when I know what the fuck I'm doing here."

"Then come in, and I'll explain it while we eat dinner."

Firetail seated them around her low, chairless table, and on it rested a plate of raw slices of meat, a large bowl of thick stew with cooked chunks of meat and several kinds of vegetables, fresh baked bread, a large platter of potatoes and mushrooms in a creamy sauce dotted with flecks of spice, a plate of boiled ears of corn, stalks of asparagus, and a pie sitting on a little stone circle in the center of the table, still steaming from the oven. "Help yourself," Firetail told them as she reached for the plate of raw meat.

"Alright, explain," Danna pressed as Toby ladled stew from the large pot onto his plate.

"It's complicated, Danna, so let me summarize first, then I'll come back and explain in more detail," she said as she cut the bread into thick slices, and started handing them out. "Do you know much of the Great Ancient Civilization?"

"About as much as most people know. I'm in the Loreguard, I'm no Loremaster."

"That means you *do* know more, child," she said simply.

"Well, they're trying to restore humanity to the greatness of our ancestors. They conduct experiments and do research based on artifacts recovered from around the world," she elaborated. "We don't understand their power, though. They didn't use crystals, they used some other way to power their devices."

"Ah, and that is the crux of why you are here, child," she said.

"So, you want to stop them from using some ancient technology?"

"Yes and no," she answered. "Now that I've given you the basic summary, child, let me explain it in detail. Do you know what caused the destruction of your people's ancient civilization?"

"War."

"The war was the catalyst, not the cause," she corrected. "The war raged for years before the chain of events that destroyed your people's civilization. From what we've managed to piece together, which your Loremasters will confirm if you ask," she smiled, "is that the war was beginning to turn. One side was defeating the other, and the losing side began grasping at straws to turn the war back in their favor. They began desperate experiments with forces they did not understand, searching for some new weapon, some new strategy to stave off their defeat. Simply put, child, the losing side began an experiment that created what we call the Breach."

"The disaster," Danna nodded.

"The disaster," Firetail agreed. "What your ancestors did, child, was penetrate into the spirit world, and the conjunction of our world and the spirit world caused a cataclysm. But, that disaster had some, unforeseen benefits, at least for modern humanity. You see, the mana crystals your people use were all created during the Breach. They are magical energy that was pulled into this world, and solidified into crystals."

"What spirit world?"

"The spirit world is the world where the spirits dwell," she explained. "It's a world behind our own, attached to our world but separate from it, much like some humans believe that their souls enter heaven when they die. When you ask them what heaven is, they say it's a place unreachable by mortal man, only by their immortal souls. That, in a way, is what the spirit world is. It's a world of spirits."

"But Arcans don't have souls," Danna protested.

Firetail smiled and took another bite of her meat slices. "We'll leave that alone for the mo-

ment, child," she said with a knowing smile. "But the spirit world isn't a world of human or Arcan souls. It's a world of different spirits, spirits that watch us. I won't explain who they are, because you'd either not believe me or we'd spend all night arguing over it. For the moment, take it as a point of future debate that there is a spirit world, and it is inhabited by spirits that are not human or Arcan. Who or what they are is irrelevant in this context, that they exist is all that matters."

"But it *does* matter," Danna retorted.

"We'll save that debate for later, child. For the moment, just know that there is a spirit world—"

"But how can I take something for granted that I don't believe if you're going to use it as a basis of explaining something else?" she interrupted. "If this spirit world is an important part of your explanation, and I don't believe it exists, then I'm not going to believe your explanation."

"Well then, listen as I explain it to you. The spirit world is a world behind our own, a world without solidity, which exists in a state attached to our own. Living things in our world appear within the spirit world, be it a tree, or a flower, or a bug, or a human or Arcan. We exist in the spirit world due to our life force, though we can't see it nor interact with it. Living in the spirit world are, well, spirits, child. They are entities without bodies who take on whatever appearances that please them. Since they are energy without material form, they *only* exist within the spirit world. We could argue for days over just what the spirits are, but the simple explanation is that they are sentient beings much different than we. It is these spirits the Shaman obey, for they are wise and powerful."

"The evil force that commands the Shaman. So, I could accede to the idea that this evil force exists in a parallel reality attached to our own, that we can't see."

Firetail smiled lightly. "If it so pleases you to think so, child," she said in a slightly patronizing manner. "So, what happened was that the humans *breached* into the spirit world, they punched a hole into that parallel reality. That hole caused the cataclysm that followed, child. The spirit world is a world of *energy*, not of *matter*, and the unbound energy of the spirit world flowed into the material world unchecked. It caused an explosion as powerful as any of the ancient people's greatest weapons, laying waste to most of what you now call the Free Territories. But included in that destruction was the seeds of your current society. The energy of the spirit world can't exist in its raw form in our world, child. When it's pulled into our world, it either dissipates, or it forms the crystals your people now use as a source of power."

"Now that I don't believe," Danna said flatly. "They dig the crystals up out of the ground. They're a natural resource, just like coal."

"Watch, child," Firetail said, putting her fork down and holding her hands a little apart. Everyone watched, including Patches and Teacup, as the air between Firetail's hands began to shimmer, then to glow. A sparkling took form in one of her palms, a glittering shape. Kyven clearly saw tendrils of pure magical energy forming near her fingers and then flowing into the glimmering core, almost like sand flowing in an hourglass, coalescing in the glimmering light in her hand. The glimmering flared brightly, and then it dimmed, leaving behind a small, rough, irregular reddish crystal, about five points in size. She held it out for Danna. "Here, inspect it, Danna," she said. "You'll find it to be a mana crystal, though not a very good one," she said with a slight smile. "I need time to make good ones. But, if you placed it in an alchemical device, it would make it work. Not very well, but it would work."

Danna let the small crystal fall into her hand, and she inspected it with a keen eye. But Toby's face showed that he was starting to understand the implications of what Firetail had just showed them, for his face was sober and a little shocked. "That is the power of the Sha-

man, child. Our power is no different from the power of your crystals. The only difference is, we access it directly from the source.”

“That’s why Shaman can drain crystals,” Toby realized with widening eyes.

Firetail nodded to him. “It is the *same* energy. Alchemical devices just copy Shaman magic using crystals to power them. The reason why you find crystals buried in the ground is because when the breach occurred, the explosion hurled them from the center in a circle. Think, child, why are most crystals found in the mountains? It’s because the hillsides are vertical and presented more area for the crystals to impact as they hurtled away from the epicenter. It’s why you find so few crystals beyond the Smoke Mountains, because the mountains absorbed most of the impact of the explosion and most of the crystals were embedded in them. But, to return to the original point, child, mana crystals are nothing but spirit energy trapped in the material world,” she said as she took the tiny crystal from Danna’s palm. “Shaman can create them, but we can also drain them,” she added, holding the little crystal up. The crystal flared with light, and then burst from its surface in an eruption of pulsing energy, which then was sucked down into Firetail’s hand. “Shaman can create crystals, and also drain them, since the energy they contain is the *same* energy we use to power our magic.”

Danna looked a little stunned. “So, child, do some of our abilities as you’ve been trained to understand them make sense now?” Firetail asked with a slight smile.

Danna could only nod mutely.

“Alright then. Can you at least admit that it might be *possible* that what I’ve told you could be true?”

She nodded again.

“Alright, since you admit that what I’ve told you is at least possible, now understand why we are so worried. The spirits and the Loremasters both know that the crystals are running out. So many humans use crystal-based alchemical devices that they’re using up the crystals formed by the Breach. The Loremasters are aware that their entire way of life of the human race is based on crystals, and they face a crisis in just a few years, as people begin to understand that there is no unlimited supply of crystals. It’s going to make the humans unstable, cause unrest, maybe even chaos. And we care about the human regime, because our *own* people are wrapped up in it,” she surmised. “We don’t have enough room here for everyone, at least not yet,” she explained. “We’ve been working hard to build as many new houses as possible, grow as much food as possible, and we have hunting parties going out extreme distances to bring down game to build up a surplus without hunting out the land that already sustains us. We’re trying to prepare to bring our people out of bondage to humanity, because we don’t want our own people caught up in what’s to come.”

“But—but humans *depend* on Arcans!” Danna blurted.

“Yes, that is one reason why we’ve gone slowly, but we will be slaves no longer, Danna,” Firetail said gently. “When the crystals begin to run out, what do you think will happen when slave owners cannot replace the crystals in the collars of their Arcans?”

Danna was silent a long, long moment. “I don’t know.”

“They will try to sell them to kennels who have no room for them. Eventually, they will begin to kill them,” Firetail said bluntly. “We have been preparing for this eventuality for years, child, for the day when we would have to take direct action. And that time is upon us.”

Danna gave her a direct look. “You’re going to attack.”

“No. We have no desire for war, child,” she said simply. “We are going to free our people, with as little interference to the humans as possible. We have to save them now, else they will be exterminated later.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Our intent isn’t war, Danna. It’s simply taking our people and leaving. We will remove the Arcans from human lands, which will vastly slow down the rate they consume crystals. It will stabilize your society, at least once it adapts to not using Arcans as slaves, and give your people more time. At the same time, it frees our people from bondage. In the end, both sides prosper, as the spirits wish it to be.”

“But y’all haven’t figured out just how tah do it,” Toby realized.

She nodded with a sigh. “If we free any one group, other Arcans elsewhere will suffer the human retaliation,” she said. “We want to recover as many of our people as we can with a minimum of loss to *both* sides. We don’t want the humans to suffer any more than we want our own people to suffer.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Danna snorted.

“The council harbors no enmity to humans. They simply know no better,” she said with a slight smile. “Don’t ever forget, Danna, the spirits care about the *humans* too, and as Shaman, we will care for the humans as much as we do the Arcans. The objective is to save our people while doing as little damage as possible to the human society. But that is a very, very difficult thing to do,” she admitted. “We have discussed this problem for years, and still have found no solution. But now, with the spirits demanding immediate action, we may be forced to make hard choices that nobody will like.” She looked at Danna. “Perhaps you can use your analytical mind to help us, Danna. People who can think in ways to solve crimes could also come up with some kind of way for us to accomplish our goal with a minimum of harm to both sides.”

“You want me to help *you*?” Danna growled.

“Would you rather allow the humans and Arcans to descend into war and cause the deaths of thousands and thousands of humans and Arcans, both combatants and innocents?” Firetail asked with a calm voice, but steady eyes boring into Danna.

Danna looked away, biting her lip.

“We want to help our people, and at the same time, slow down the humans from using up all their crystals, give both sides time to figure out what to do.”

“What do you mean, figure out what to do?”

“Remember the story I told you when we started talking, child, about the war, and the Breach?” she asked, and Danna nodded. “The Loremasters are trying to recover that ancient technology. That in itself is not a bad thing, and the spirits and the Shaman see nothing wrong with it. But should the Loremasters attempt the same experiments that caused the first Breach, then the Shaman would have to stop them. As much as we care for the humans, that threat can never be ignored. As the crystals dwindle, the Loremasters will be more and more desperate to find a solution, and might again start down a path that has no good ending, just as their ancient ancestors once did. The spirits care about the humans, Danna, but the Breach harmed *them*, and they won’t permit another Breach. We will permit the humans to live as they will, with no interference, even help them if they so wish it, but if they threaten the spirits, we must respond to protect them.”

Danna was quiet for long moments, picking at her spiced potatoes and mushrooms. “And you think I can solve this problem? How wonderful for me,” she said sourly.

“You solve crimes, maybe you can use that analytical mind to help us find a solution to this problem that doesn’t end in war or worse,” Firetail told her gravely. “This is a problem that faces *both* our peoples, Danna, and the humans need to give their input. You were chosen to provide it, to minimize friction and loss of life. Any upheaval in the human lands also hurts our own people, and we don’t want that for either side. We want to free our people, not cause them harm or cause the humans to harm them because of us.”

“How long?” Toby asked. “How long til the crystals start tah get scarce?”

“No more than five years,” Firetail answered. “At the rate humans are using them, they can’t last more than twenty, but the supply will start fading noticeably in five years. Most of the deposits outside of the Free Territories are nearly gone, and the deposits within the Territories themselves are dwindling. The Loremasters have already correctly realized this. They’ve seen the figures showing how many crystals are being mined, and they see the trend. They’re already beginning to make contingency plans, but we must act first, before they decide that a mass killing of excess Arcans will slow down crystal consumption. The lives of our people are in the balance, human, because our people are held in thrall by those who do not *value* their lives.”

“Ah, Ah see,” Toby said grimly, leaning his elbows on the table. “So, why was Ah brought heah?”

“Because of your skills and your knowledge,” she answered. “You know the Arcan slaving operation backwards and forwards. You know these people, Toby. You can tell us how they will react if we this thing, or that thing. And when the time comes to act, we would like to hire you to help us, help us free our people while minimizing the damage we cause to the humans. We don’t want to cause them any undue trouble.”

“That’s... considerate of ya.”

“We care for the humans, Toby,” she smiled. “Once our people are free of them, we have nothing but hope that they will be well and thrive. We just wish our people freed, as painlessly as possible for both sides.”

Toby took a bite of stew, and nodded. “Ah guess Ah can understand that,” he said. “Ah’m afraid y’all will have tah prove tah me yo’ sincerity, though. Ah’m not the kind tah trust blindly. An’ though Ah’m a man fo’ hire, Ah *do* have mah standards. Y’all have tah prove yo’ *worth* mah services. Do that, an’ Ah’ll work fo’ y’all.”

“Feel free to ask any questions you wish, Toby,” she told him. “You are our *guests* now. You are free to go anywhere you wish, but do keep in mind that many here in Haven will be afraid of you. I suggest you be careful, but outside of that, you have no restrictions.”

Kyven wasn’t very hungry after hearing that. He left the table and went outside, out into the garden, and considered what he heard. To think, that the shop’s very livelihood was slowly ebbing, that crystals were being mined out. It was a sobering thought, but in no way more sobering than the idea that it would impact *everything*. The entire human economy was based on crystals, the very chits that served as money were made of a resin mixed with crushed crystal dust. How long would it take before people started trying to use the dust in chits to power devices? How long before all of human civilization went insane, and the other nations invaded the Free Territories to gain access to the crystals still being mined from the Smoke Mountains?

It was going to be war... in about seven years, when there were so few crystals left that people began to realize what the Shaman and what the Loremasters already knew. That was what the Loremasters wanted to avoid, he realized, but their control over Noraam would only go so far. Their binding of the different kingdoms would only hold them together for so long until the riches of one would invite attack from the others... and that would be the Free Territories. If they were right, and they were the richest in crystal deposits that would outlast all other sources, then war would surely result. The larger kingdoms to the north, like Philia, Jeyn, Bromm, and Coda, and nations and large city-states to the south like Cheston, Georvan, and Flaur, would invade in search of crystals. The Free Territories would fall quickly, and the real wars, he saw, would be those larger forces fighting each other to control the Smoke Mountains. The center of Noraam would be washed in blood, and the Loremasters wouldn’t

be able to stop it.

So, to keep their position and controlling interest, the Loremasters would have their own plan, some plan to stave off the shortage of crystals, a plan they’d need to implement very soon if Firetail was right and crystals would become noticeably scarce in five years. And one way, Kyven saw, was to cut down on the number of crystal-using devices... like collars. The Loremasters did not value the lives of the Arcans at all. Cutting the number of collared Arcans in half would greatly reduce the number of crystals consumed. They’d have to balance an idea like that against the needs of the people who used Arcans as forced labor, but they’d do something like that.

Firetail was right. The Shaman and the Arcans of Haven had to act *first*. To leave the Arcans in the hands of people who would kill them just to save crystals would get a great many killed.

But... what to do? Firetail was right about that as well. How did they save the Arcans without causing some kind of retaliation elsewhere that would get lots of Arcans killed? As soon as they acted, then the governments of men and the Loremasters would know that there was more organization to the Arcans than just the Masked. That would, in a way, reveal Haven to Noraam. If it wasn’t an organized force freeing the Arcans, then it would be the mass exodus of the freed Arcans, which would probably cause them to be followed. If they brought the Arcans here, then the humans would find them. Oh, there were ways, of course there were, but the Arcan desire to minimize the damage to humanity would prevent most of them from being used. The Arcans wanted to be merciful, *humane*, and try to do as little damage to human society as they could. After everything that humans had done to the Arcans, they still wanted to help, to be good neighbors.

That was a mistake. Kyven... *knew*. What the Shaman and council wanted to do, it wasn’t going to work. The humans weren’t going to see the mercy of the Arcans as anything but a threat. No matter how nice they were or how much they wanted to help keep humanity stable, the simple fact was, the human governments and the Loremasters would *only* see the negative. They wouldn’t see Arcans fleeing as anything but a threat, seeing nothing but escaped Arcans lurking behind every tree waiting to attack.

In this, there would be no happy ending. He was sure of it.

If there would be no happy ending, then there would need to be the least damaging ending. But, the question was, which side would he work to do the least damage from? The humans, his own kind, or the Arcans, whom they oppressed? The vindictive side of him told him to side with the Arcans, to give humanity a taste of its own medicine, but the Shaman had a point. The Shaman served the spirits, and the spirits *cared* about humanity. The spirits didn’t want to see humanity turned inside out, even by their own stupidity.

So, what was the wisest choice? Did he do as the Shaman wished and work for the happiest possible outcome, even when he knew it was fruitless, or did he do what he needed to be done? Did he really know better than much older, much wiser Shaman? Or did he just not have their optimism?

They didn’t have his point of view. They were going on what they believed, assessing a different race. But Kyven was human, he had the benefit of having more than one point of view. He was learning the Arcan point of view now, but he was born human, and he just knew that how the Shaman wanted to do things wasn’t going to work. The humans would react violently to the removal of the Arcans, the stealing of their property, and then the realization that the Arcans were more than they ever believed would cause people to fear Arcans... humans did not react well to what they didn’t understand. It would be suddenly as if all housecats were suddenly talking, and humanity found out they had an advanced society. They’d fear it,

and that fear would lead to violence.

No matter how they tried it, Kyven saw nothing but a bad outcome.

The only way to do it, he could see, was to do it all at once. All the Arcans had to be freed at once, before word of what was going on got out, before people began to put it all together and realized it was coordinated. People would be too busy dealing with what was going on in *their* town or village to worry about what happened in Flaur. If they wanted to free the Arcans to save them, it had to be done *all at once*. Or, to the point, it had to be done in a wave, starting at the outermost edges, then moving in towards the center, so those in villages and towns between the already freed Arcans and the safety of the wilderness didn't know what was going on.

Or something like that.

The point was, no matter how they tried to save the Arcans, whoever was left after word got out what was going on was not going to fare well. The Arcans would either be locked up, guarded, or killed out of fear. No matter which one that was, it would complicate freeing those still in captivity, and that would cause what the Arcans were trying to do to fail. Either the captive Arcans would be killed, or they'd be trapped in slavery, which defeated the purpose.

He heard Danna and smelled her as she stepped out onto the porch. She leaned against the post and crossed her arms, looking at him. He put his hands on the rail and leaned over it, and said nothing.

"What do you think?" she finally asked.

"The way she explained it? What do you think?"

"It's doomed to failure," she said immediately. "The people would try to kill the Arcans trying to escape. And kill anyone who tried to free them. It would take a full-scale attack to do what that cougar is talking about."

"And that's what we have to convince them of," he told her. "I can believe they hold no ill will towards the humans, but this candy-coated, soft sheets approach won't work. The humans won't see any attempts to free the Arcans as anything but an attack."

"On that much, we can agree," she told him. "If they want to free the other Arcans, it's going to take a war. Plain and simple."

"Not precisely a war, but it can't be done without doing damage," he amended. "The trick would be freeing all of them at once, or in a staggered wave from the furthest reaches towards the center, before the towns and farms and cities could hear the rumors and find out it was happening *everywhere*," he said. "But I don't see how you could do that."

"But still, the reaction will be the same," Danna said. "The Loremasters would see it as an act of war."

"It's going to be war no matter what," Kyven said quietly, leaning on the rail. "Think about it, Danna. What will Flaur do when they run out of crystals, and they become too expensive to trade for?"

"They'll invade whoever has them," she answered immediately. "The Loremasters will try to mediate, even try to stop it, but they won't manage."

"You see the heart of the matter," Kyven said. "Firetail said that it would take the people five years to see that the crystals were running out, that the Loremasters couldn't hide it anymore if they did nothing. When that happens, the kingdoms of Noraam will fight over the crystals that are left. It's a sobering thought, seeing a war coming, and knowing that nothing can stop it." He looked out over the river. "It kinda makes me wonder what the hell I was doing all this time."

"Being a pain in my ass."

"I'm a crystalcutter, Danna," he said quietly. "My whole life revolved around crystals before I found out I'm a Shaman. To think, in five years, my shop and all the shops in Atan, all those cutters, they're going to be looking for work. But there won't be any work. Timble will have to dig into the reserves, start selling assets to feed the apprentices. The shop will go broke, and then all those men, who have trained all their lives, will have no jobs. They won't be the only ones. The loss of crystals is going to disrupt everything, and that's not just with the wars. Our whole society—" he sighed, then looked down at the ground just past the rail.

"*Our* society?" Danna asked. "Since when did you consider yourself part of the human race?"

"I only *look* like an Arcan, Danna," he snapped in reply, motioning to himself. "*This* has changed my outlook on the Arcans and what we've done to them, and now I'm devoted to helping them. But I'm still human, and I do care about them. Me and Timble grew up together, you think that I don't care about him and the other apprentices? I do. They're my family."

"You did risk a lot to help them when you went back to Atan," she mused.

"I wrote letters. Yeah, that was risking a lot," Kyven grunted.

"Still, I'm not sure about all this. You kill my men, they have you kidnap me and bring me here, they show me their secret, now they want me to help *them*, like what I feel doesn't matter at all. Then they ask me to solve a problem that would give a room full of sages gray hair." She blew out her breath. "I'm not sure what to do. I don't want to help them, but I'm not feeling like I have much choice here. They say I'm a guest, but I sure as hell don't feel like a guest here," she grunted. "And if I don't help, I'll feel like I got a whole lot of people killed. I'll give that Arcan one thing, I believe her."

"About what?"

"About them wanting to avoid war," she said. "This place isn't very defensible. A small army could burn this place to the ground."

"That's not why they want to avoid war," Kyven told her. "The spirits have told the Shaman to avoid a war, so they'll avoid a war if they can."

"What are the spirits?" Danna asked.

"It's hard to explain," he said. "They're... well, spirits. They live in the other world, not ours, the world hiding behind what we can see."

"I can't believe that," she told him. "We've been taught they're an evil force that control the Shaman."

"Well, not all of them are nice," Kyven said. "They're different, like people. My own spirit isn't what you'd call benevolent. She did this to me as a punishment."

"Then why do you follow her if she's cruel to you?"

"Because I *have* to," he answered. "She took my humanity, Danna, and she's the only one who can give it back. So I have to obey her, if I ever want to be human again."

"Well, that just proves my point."

"My spirit isn't a very good example," he grunted in agreement. "But I've seen other spirits watching over people. I used to see them before I knew what I was, back when I thought they were hallucinations, watching over humans. The spirits do seem to care about humans. I think Firetail wasn't exaggerating about that. But, to answer you, spirits are like people. Some of them are good. Some of them are not. I just had the bad luck of being claimed by a spirit that wasn't what I thought she was before she got control over me."

"What do you mean?"

"She tricked me into bargaining away my independence," he answered, leaning down on his elbows on the rail. "She conned me, Danna. I made a deal with her that allowed her to take

my humanity and make me an Arcan without knowing what she was or what she was doing. I'd seen her all my life, I had this idea that she was some kind of protector, someone I could trust, someone I believed would never hurt me. She *used* that," he all but spat. "This is what I got for my trust and belief in her. So, I won't refute you, Danna. There *are* evil spirits out there. I should know. I serve one."

"Uh, isn't it kind of not a good idea to talk bad about her?"

"She doesn't care how I feel, Danna. She only cares that I obey. She knows that I hate her. To pretend that I don't would be an insult. I have to serve her now, obey her, or I'll never be human again. Only when I *please* her enough will she give back what she took from me."

"What do you think she wants from you?"

"I don't know, outside of the fact that there are some things that I think she wants me to do, things that other Shaman can't do. So far, her training has been about teaching me how to kill, and know when it's necessary."

"That doesn't instill me with much confidence."

"It's not about killing. It's about understanding that there are no happy endings," he told her. "That real life can't always be the dream we wish it could be. Sometimes, it means people die who don't deserve it. Sometimes, it means I have to kill, even if it's innocent people who don't deserve it. She taught me that real life is not a happy ending."

"Harsh."

"It has been, but it's not her way."

"What do you mean?"

"My spirit is a spirit of guile and deceit," he told her. "That's what and who she is. It's her way, so for her to teach me about killing, it's a little strange. She actually prefers not to kill. Killing is a last resort for her, but I guess she wanted to make sure I was capable of it when it comes down to it." He looked at her. "What I did to you in Riyan is her way. I talked my way past you. *That* is what she's about. Guile and deceit."

"Then why is she teaching you to kill?"

"To show me the reality of life," he answered. "And to know when it *is* the last resort, and I have to take that action."

She was quiet a moment. "Answer me one question."

"What?"

"What's it like?"

He glanced at her, and chuckled. "Feels almost the same, except for a few things," he told her, wagging his tail. "Like this."

"So, you don't feel, well, out of your own body?"

"You get used to it," he answered. "In some ways, it's nice."

"Yeah, but the raw meat, and the touching, and the licking."

Kyven laughed. "No lips," he said with a toothy grin. "Well, there are, but they're not very useful. And raw meat tastes better like this. Guess an Arcan's tastes are different. As far as acting like an Arcan, that was learned, not part and parcel of being changed. I had to learn how to behave like an Arcan. It was one of my lessons, so I can relate to them, so they feel comfortable with me. If I never get my humanity back, well, I could live with it. This isn't so bad now that people aren't trying to skin me for my fur."

"Then why obey the spirit? If you can live with being an Arcan, then leave her. Don't be something you hate if you can live with the consequences."

"Because this is about more than me, Danna," he answered. "This is also about all those Arcans suffering in collars and cages in human lands. If I have to keep obeying my spirit in order to try to help, that's a small price to pay. I can continue to serve if it helps other people. If

I can help stop a war, then it's worth it. How I feel about it doesn't matter in the big picture. It's what people need of me that does."

"You sound like an officer in the Loreguard," she mused.

"Never that."

"That's how we feel in the Loreguard. It's not about us. It's about the people we serve."

"I didn't see that attitude in the Loreguard when I've had dealings with them," Kyven grunted. "I saw them as little better than the criminals. It was in Avannar. There was a patrol of Loreguard, I sent a young girl to them because I'd just saved her from kidnappers. Instead of helping her, they raped and murdered her. I killed them for it," he told her. "My first lesson in how life can be unfair," he grunted.

"So it was *you!*" she gasped, then she laughed ruefully. "We couldn't figure out how it was done. But, for what you did, all I have to say is *good*. Those men don't represent the Loreguard I joined. I'm glad proper justice was done."

"Thank you for that much."

"You're welcome."

Kyven was surprised when he felt her hand touch his arm. He looked and saw her sliding her fingers along the fur on his forearm, her fingers light and gentle and curious as they explored his fur. He was a little bewildered at her bold action, since he'd think her more apt to stick a dagger in his back then touch him with that kind of gentleness. "What are you doing?"

"Something I've been dying to do for days," she answered, her fingers digging into his fur, then stroking back and forth. "This is the softest fur I have ever felt in my life."

"It's unique," he told her. "My fur is why I'm so hard to see in the darkness. It's part of my ability to hide."

"I can understand why someone wanted to take it from you," she said honestly, removing her hand after a moment, her curiosity satisfied.

Firetail came out onto the porch. "You should get some rest, friends, you'll be talking to the council tomorrow."

"What should we tell them, Firetail?" Kyven asked.

"The truth, Kyven. Always the truth, even if you don't believe they'll like what you say."

"That's exactly what they're going to hear," Danna told her.

"The truth?"

"What they don't want to hear," she amended.

Though Danna was clearly in an alien situation, being held against her will, it didn't show at all.

Kyven was in attendance at a council meeting, held in a surprisingly small and modest building just a couple of blocks from Firetail's little compound. The building was three stories, and the council room was on the second floor, taking up almost all of it with a semicircular table that held all seventeen of them. There was a little table and chair facing that semicircle, for people talking to the council, and behind that little table, towards the door, where several benches for onlookers rested so they could observe. Two benches were reserved for guests of the council, but the rest of them were open to anyone who wished to watch the council in session.

Those benches were full today, full of Arcans who had come to see the humans talk to the council.

The three of them, Kyven, Danna, and Toby, first sat at the table as a group and listened as the council explained things to them, exactly as Firetail had explained them, so their news wasn't new. They publicly announced that the humans were running out of crystals, and that the Arcans had to act to save their enslaved brethren, before a disaster befell them. They ex-

plained where Firetail didn't, however, explaining that they needed to act now, even with a good two or three years, to have a good plan in place that they could use. They were showing remarkable foresight, Kyven saw, seeing the approaching problem and doing something about it early enough to have a good plan in place well before it became *needed* to do something.

After they were given that information, the council talked to them one by one. They talked to Toby first, asking his opinion, then grilling him about slaving operations in Alamar, something with which he was very familiar. Toby's honest answers made quite a few of the watching Arcans angry at him, since he had been in that system on the opposite side. But when a big bear on the council asked him why he worked as a slaver, he just shrugged. "Money, Ah suppose. Ah never had nothin' against Arcans. It's just the way things are, it was the system. Ah'm a good huntah. Ah guess it was mah niche. Ah'm good in a fight, Ah'm good with mah hands. Ah just naturally gravitated intah the profession. Befo' Ah came heah, mah job was escortin' very rare o' valuable Arcans from place tah place. Wasn't ever nothin' but business. Ah'll work fo' you just as much as Ah worked fo' them. Ah'm loyal to the pay ya' give me."

Then it was Danna's turn. She was decisive, eloquent, and blunt with the council. They asked her opinion, and she gave it to them. She told them flat out that their attempts to free the Arcans as they laid them out wouldn't work. She summed it up very simply. "Any attempt to free them is going to reveal to the Loremasters that the Arcans have organization far beyond the Masked," she told them. "If you do that, the humans are going to come down on your people. I never believed something like this existed, and they won't either. To most humans, Arcans are animals. They don't believe there are enough smart ones to put together something this complicated. If you show them they're wrong, they're going to react by oppressing the Arcans they have now. If you show them you're organized, you'll have to declare war on humanity to get back the Arcans you don't get before they realize what's going on."

"You're sure about that, Captain?" a cat on the council asked.

"Positive. To the humans, it would be like a herd of sheep standing up and singing a Flauren opera. They'd be totally shocked, and would probably kill the sheep, thinking they were Shaman. Then, fearing that other sheep might do the same thing, they'd purge the flocks of any sheep that even *seemed* more than normal. What you'd be looking at, simply put, is the death of any Arcan in captivity that shows even a modicum of intelligence. Doesn't that go against what you're trying to do?"

They questioned her for over four hours, never confrontationally, but digging for any and all information that they felt she had, questioning her about the Loreguard, their disposition, ability, but not specifics like numbers. They asked her about her job, about the work she did, and she was quite candid about her position of investigating crimes that weren't quickly or easily solved.

"So, you're not a soldier?"

She laughed. "Technically, yes. Practically, no. I *am* an officer in the Loreguard, and if I give orders, I'd better be obeyed. But they wouldn't put me on the front lines of a battle, because I'm a *woman*. Men that don't know me would never follow me into combat."

"Humans are sexist," Firetail told the ferret that asked the question calmly. "They believe that the genders are unequal, with women being weaker."

"Strange position," the ferret noted.

"I'm who they send for when they need crimes solved, not when they need officers on a battlefield," Danna told them.

"But you feel that the Loreguard would intervene even without upholding local laws?"

"Definitely," she answered. "The Loremasters' position on Arcans are taught to the Loreguard. Loreguard soldiers are taught that Arcans are animals without souls, that the smart ones are the exception rather than the rule, and they exist only to serve man. If they saw an organized Arcan revolt, they'd try to quell it."

"And is that how you feel about Arcans, Captain?" one of them asked her.

She was silent a moment. "It's what I was taught, but now, after seeing this, I'd have to say that my opinions are changing. I'd never have believed Arcans could have made all this with no help if I'd never seen it with my own eyes."

After Danna, they asked Kyven questions as well, and he affirmed Danna's observations, even as Toby nodded from the bench in the gallery. "Your friendly approach won't be seen as anything but an act of war," Kyven told them. "They'll see an organized, intelligent Arcan race, not the stupid animals they've believed all these years. That shock will cause them to react with violence." He sighed. "There won't be any happy ending with this," he told them. "What you need to do is make the plan that does the least amount of damage, but you'd better pick one side. Either you go with a plan that does the least damage to the humans, or you go with a plan that kills the least number of Arcans. You won't get both."

"With respect to your experience, Shaman, we will keep trying," a large skunk said in a calm voice. "We must respect the spirits and do the least damage possible. We will just have to debate more to find a way. After all, that's why we've started working on this problem *now*, so we do have plenty of time to come to a plan of action."

They questioned him for another hour or so, and the meeting adjourned. Kyven walked with the others back to Firetail's compound, including Clover, who had come as she promised. She walked with them as Firetail told her about what was said, but she just smiled and patted Kyven's shoulder. "I think you're painting too grim a picture, brother," she told him. "I think that humans are better than you think."

"I *am* human, Clover," he reminded her. "I know how *I'd* react before I started my Walk, and I wasn't far from the average man. A year ago, if people would have told me that the Arcans had their own city, I'd have told them they were nuts. And if the Arcans in the village all suddenly vanished all at once, I'd be afraid of what it would mean. And humans don't react well to fear."

"So, what do you think we should do?"

"Do it all at once, before the humans can react," he answered. "Find some way to free every Arcan of his collar at the same time, and have guides out there to bring them home."

"So many at once? We'd never be able to feed them all," Clover protested. "It would take us years to build enough houses for them."

"I never said it would be easy, but that's the only way I can see to do it," he said honestly. "I know it's not what you want to hear, but it's my opinion. From what I can see, my friend, there won't be a happy ending here. Either you end up in a war with the humans, or a hell of a lot of Arcans in slavery are going to die."

"I do hope you're wrong, my friend. I truly do."

"I hope so too," he answered. "Do you guys mind if I go look around? I haven't so much as stepped out of Firetail's house since we got here."

"Please, go enjoy yourself," Firetail told him. "Just please, for my own peace of mind, check in around sunset, so I know you're not lost."

"I will," he said, nuzzling her.

The city of Haven was much different from human cities. The buildings looked the same, but the streets were clean, and the city was built in orderly, neat blocks. There were no

crooked streets, there were no dilapidated buildings. And there were Arcans. They did everything he would expect to see humans do in a human city. There were well dressed Arcans sauntering down the streets, there were children playing, there were dirty and greasy Arcans heading to the nearest tavern after a long day at work. Another difference was the greengrocers. There was one almost every other block, a small grocer's stand or building where Arcans wandered in with baskets, filled it with enough to make dinner that night, or perhaps stocked up on enough for two or three days, and then left after some chatting with friends or a kind word with the single attendant that worked there. It was a surprise to see it, see that food here was free, but was equally surprising to see that Arcans *only* took what they needed. A similar operation back home would be emptied out in a day, as people took it all to stock up their own supplies. But the Arcans didn't do that. He didn't doubt that every house probably had a pantry stocked with enough to last a while, but they didn't hoard.

He explored the city, but found that its design and the buildings made it seem... similar. There weren't any landmarks he could really find, no unusual buildings, nothing that made the place seem like it had any character. It was like a military camp, in a way, houses and buildings all built the same way, all laid out the same way, all organized the same way. It was a lack of... well, uniqueness. In a way, it seemed like the Arcans had no, well, no *soul*. They built this wonderful city, proved they were the match of humans in carpentry and masonry, but there was no *art*.

It showed him a fundamental truth. Arcans could copy human society, but it was not who they were. And they didn't know *who* they were, not yet. They hadn't found themselves, and because of that, what they built was... *sterile*. It was function, not art. It was what they were taught, not what inspired them. They hadn't discovered their own culture yet, though they had started in some ways. They did things differently than the humans, but they also copied the humans because they didn't know how to do it any other way.

Kyven sat at the edge of the river and thought about that a while as he watched a few Arcan kids swimming in the cold, clear water not far from him, in a shallow bank. But his musing was cut short when he felt her, just behind him. He glanced over and saw her, as she sat down beside him sedately, wrapping her tail around her legs, but brushing the tip up against his hand.

You see many things. You see things as they are. That pleases me.

Kyven wasn't sure how to feel about that. His anger and hatred rose up in him like bile, but he also knew that he had to keep his composure, keep his calm. His life was in her hands, so he had to be careful. She knew how he felt about her, but it didn't phase her in the slightest... which was itself annoying. It was like his opinion didn't exist.

But you see what the others close their eyes to, she continued. You see that in this, there will be no happy ending.

He sighed and bowed his head. "What do you want me to do?"

Do? You are not ready yet to do. You are still on your Walk, and you have ignored your training for far too long. Have you practiced your magic at all today? Yesterday? The day before?

He shook his head, a bit shamefully. "I'm sorry."

Yes, there is much for you to do, but there is nothing more you can do until you can use the magic I wish to teach you. That is your purpose from this day forward. You will winter here, Shaman, and in the spring, you will be ready. As the others debate and talk and run in circles chasing their tails, you will do.

Kyven understood, then, that not *all* the spirits shared the common view. The fox did not agree with the other spirits. She was moving on her own, she was the contingency plan while

the other spirits moved with a main plan. She had her own idea of what to do, and Kyven was going to be part of it. He wondered what she had planned, where she thought differently from the others.

They seek harmony where none will be found, she answered his unspoken question. I see things much differently. I see the humans and the Arcans at war, and I see no other recourse. Every path leads to the same destination.

"I wish I could say I thought you were wrong, but I agree. No matter how much I wish it weren't so."

I would prefer to be wrong as well, she said simply. I do not relish the idea of war. But I will not risk needless lives on a hope. We will be ready.

"Ready for what?"

For reality. You will leave them to their talk, Shaman. Do not ignore them or snub them, but do not let their goals sidetrack you from the path I have laid out for you. I will have you devote yourself to training. By first snow, I expect you to be able to maintain a spell for a minute. By midwinter, you will hold a spell for an hour. By spring, you will hold a spell for as long as it takes.

"But--"

The magic I teach you is only useful if you can hold it over time, she told him. What good is an illusion if it fades ten minutes after you create it?

He had no answer for that.

You will work hard, Shaman. You must work hard. You already work from a disadvantage.

"How so?"

As Shaman measure ability, you are much weaker than other Shaman. You always will be. But in the one realm where it counts, the ability to maintain spells, you can at least match the others. You will never match other Shaman in power, but you can match them in endurance.

"That's why you've taught me so few spells," he realized.

Among other reasons. But for me, you are the perfect Shaman. You don't need great power to do what I wish to teach you. Between what I teach you and my gift to you, you will be a match for any other Shaman.

He heard that for what it was, and sighed. "So I'm stuck like this."

Perhaps. Perhaps not. Your idea to change back and forth has merit, but it is not practical. It would take more than you think to accomplish.

"What would it take?"

Help, she answered, a bit cryptically.

He let that drop. "What will happen to Danna and Toby?"

They will stay here, at least for now. The council will have many more talks with them, to fully come to know what they know, and also to explore Danna's declarations and try to work with what she knows to try to come up with some way to avert what we both know cannot be averted. I cannot fault them for trying, though. At least they are honest in their desire. But, Danna and Toby will understand their need to be here in time. The council will treat them with respect, even a little deference. They will come to truly feel as if they are guests here. They will be here as you train, Shaman. Do not forget them.

"I won't. What do you want from them?"

He could sense her... amusement. *I have plans for both of them, she admitted. But those are not plans that you need to concern yourself with quite yet. The other spirits agreed to bring them here so we could learn from them, but I have much more in mind for them.*

"I think they'd be a good team," Kyven blurted. "Danna's really smart, and Toby's such a nasty fighter."

Yes. I've had... similar ideas, she admitted, glancing at him with those glowing green eyes. He wasn't sure how he knew she did, but he knew. You grow in perception as well as wisdom, Shaman. That too pleases me. But for now, I want you to work. If you come home at night still able to walk, then you have not worked hard enough. There is not much time, Shaman. I think you can see that. You must be ready.

"I will. I promise."

That is all I can ask.

Chapter 15

From the next day on, Kyven entered into a torturous routine.

He would wake up, eat whatever Firetail put in front of him, accept her magical blessing that would allow him to recover faster than normal much as Stalker had done for him, then go out. Outside, he would train. His training was the same as it had been before, but at least now he had a bed and friends to which to come back at night. Firetail wouldn't let him move to another house, and after the first week, he was glad of her position. He was too tired to do much of anything but sleep when he came home. He would build up his endurance by running most of the day, carrying more and more weight with him to force himself to work harder and harder in the limited amount of time he had in the day to get the most out of each training session. He did train his strength, but the fox wanted him to increase his endurance, so that was the main thing he needed to work. That was worked by running longer and longer, from sunrise to sunset, and then weighing himself down with more and more weight while running to increase both his strength and endurance at the same time.

Each day was the same. He would wake up and eat whatever Firetail put in front of him, sometimes with company, sometimes not. Then he would leave the city and run in ever-widening circles as his endurance increased, then, as summer wound into fall, with progressively more and more weight to make the most use of his time. He came to be intimately familiar with all the local geography around the city, the many tiny hamlets that surrounded the main city where farmers lived, preferring the small village society to the society in the city, which was much, much different. They would sometimes call him to stop to talk to him, which he tried to do. He was Shaman, and the needs of the people were his primary care. If an Arcan wanted to talk to him, he made time to stop and listen.

And *everyone* knew he was a Shaman, and everyone knew that he was human, just in Arcan form by means of the spirits. That made quite a few of them very curious about him, and many Arcans stopped him just to talk to him about what it was like being human, and what he thought about being an Arcan. He didn't mind answering the same questions over and over, because, he realized, this was one of the reasons why the fox had changed him. Had he showed up human, they wouldn't be even fractionally inclined to speak to him. Their fear of humans would have poisoned them to him, and made it impossible for them to accept him for who he was.

He would run, literally, until he collapsed. Then, after recovering enough to be able to move, he would drag himself back to Firetail's house and practice magic out in the yard, near the garden. He would maintain spells until he was gasping for breath and near the point of collapse, wearing his body down to the breaking point, almost to the point of doing himself physical harm, and only then would he stop. Firetail would literally have to carry him up to bed, because he lacked the strength to walk up the stairs to reach his bedroom.

Then, the next morning, he did it again.

Over and over, day after day, that was his routine. He worked hard, for now he knew the stakes, he knew for what the fox was preparing him, and he knew he had to be ready. She

was training him for war. It wouldn't be war in the traditional sense, it would be a different kind of war, but war nonetheless. Given who he was and his totem, he would best serve in this war by invading the enemy and using his magic and abilities to gather information, cause confusion and misdirection, and other underhanded things. Kyven's magic and his powers made him the perfect spy, using the illusion that the fox said she would teach him to trick his enemies, using guile and deceit to worm his way into enemy operations, learn what he needed to know, and pass that on to the Arcans. Though the fox hadn't told him exactly what he'd be doing yet, that was what he could see would be the best way he could contribute, so that was what he was expecting. But no matter what, he'd be ready.

It didn't really bother him, he realized. He was human, and he was about to go against his own people, he was about to betray his own race by siding against them... but he didn't care. Kyven wasn't loyal to humanity as much as he was loyal to the sensible way he was raised by Holm. Though Holm didn't like Arcans, he nevertheless taught his apprentices to be honest, trustworthy, decent, and honorable men. Those traits, some of which admittedly conflicted with the teachings of the fox, saw the brutal treatment of the Arcans as wrong, and since it were wrong, it had to be opposed. Holm wouldn't have taken Kyven's view because of his bias against Arcans, but because Kyven had experienced it first hand, Kyven had a different outlook. The cruelty towards the Arcans had to be stopped, and in what was coming, in what he could see coming, the only way to accomplish that was to separate the two races. That was what the Arcans wanted, that was the only way the Arcans could see themselves ever being free of human prejudice, and Kyven agreed. Humans saw Arcans as animals, as livestock, just smart livestock... and just as expendable. They would never respect the Arcans or treat them with any decency, not so long as women of means walked down the streets wearing coats made from the fur of dead Arcans.

That far north, winter came early, and came fast. In September, when the leaves were just beginning to turn back home, the leaves on the trees here were already past their fiery peak and beginning to fall, and some mornings were cold enough to make one's breath visible in the nippy air. But the cold didn't bother Kyven that much. His fur was extremely thick, so effective that Kyven remained comfortable in either the cold or the heat, for the fur insulated against both the summer's heat and the winter's chill. His skin under all that fur was kept at a very comfortable temperature. And while it got colder, the days got shorter, almost noticeably so. Every day had a couple of minutes' less daylight than the day before, and the sun moved further and further to the south in the sky. The Arcans of Haven were preparing for the coming winter as well, stocking up on firewood cut from a forest to the east, and also bringing in coal mined from mountains to the southwest, and there was plenty of both. The coal wasn't easy for them to get, as they had to go nearly five hundred minars to reach the mines, and they shipped it back in large caravans of heavily laden wagons all during the summer to stockpile it, leaving it laying out exposed to the elements in huge piles of black rock to the southwest of the city, but it was worth getting. It prevented the Arcans from denuding the forest to keep warm in the winter, and the forges where they made their metal goods needed coal to be more efficient.

But not all Arcans used mundane means. Alchemy was quite present in Haven, since Shaman could make crystals. Arcans like Old Gray back in Atan learned the art of alchemy from their masters and then escaped, and now they were masters of their own alchemy shops, continuing the craft. Many Arcans had alchemical lights in their houses, and many used alchemical heaters to keep their homes warm in the winter. Buying alchemical devices was one of the reasons why many Arcans worked to earn money, and alchemical devices were the main export out to the villages, given in return for the food they raised in the barter system

used outside of the city. Arcans worked to earn the money or goods to buy or barter for alchemical devices, but they *never* had to buy crystals. Shaman made crystals for anyone who asked, at least those Shaman who could, it was one of their duties to their people. It showed Kyven that at least in a few ways, humans and Arcans were the same. Both used alchemy, and highly valued it as a powerful tool.

That similarity was the root of the coming war. As the crystals waned, as the humans used up the finite number of crystals, their need to fuel their crystal-based society would cause them to turn on their former slaves, for each and every Arcan in a collar needed a crystal in it to keep the Arcan controlled.

That was the realm of other people. The fox was right in that Toby and Danna had come to truly feel like *guests* in Arcan, honored guests, as they spent much of their time with the council trying to come up with some way to save the Arcans without causing a war. In the rare times Kyven had a chance to talk to them, he found that they were both very impressed with the sincerity of the Arcans in that regard, their need to save their people while causing a minimum of damage to human society. Danna saw their idealism as misplaced and misguided, but she could admire the council for their honest desire to be good to people who had been so cruel to their own people. The council was only trying to do the bidding of the spirits, who didn't want war between the two races, and that was another thing Danna and Toby had come to understand. Though Danna still wasn't convinced that the spirits weren't evil, she had finally grudgingly admitted that *some* spirits were trying to avoid a war.

That was another part of his life that shifted with the marching of the days. Firetail had taken Patches and Teacup under her wing, and started teaching them how to live in Haven. Patches was still too timid and dependent to be let out on her own, but Teacup was more than ready to strike out on her own after just a few weeks. Teacup moved into her very own home about a mile from Firetail's house, on the south side of town, leaving only Kyven and Patches in Firetail's house. In the small guest house, things also changed. Toby, who had acclimated quickly to Haven, also moved out, moved into a small house just down the street from Firetail's house, staying within the heart of the city where most of the council lived. In fact, Toby lived in a small house between two council members, often held in reserve for Shaman who came to talk to the council and needed a place to stay for a few days. The split of Danna and Toby was nothing but amicable, as both of them explained, rather patiently, to the council that human males and females didn't feel *comfortable* living in the same house that weren't related or married. So, to accommodate their desire for personal space, the council moved Toby to his own house and left Danna with Firetail. But, by Firetail's request, Toby still walked over to her house to eat dinner with her; Firetail seemed to like Toby quite a bit, and enjoyed talking with him. Patches remained, and though she was still a little afraid of the humans, she was quite attached to Firetail, seeing the matronly, wise old Shaman as the mother her own mother never was.

Kyven did find at least a little time for distractions and such, though. He honored his totem's commands by keeping in touch with Toby and Danna, speaking to them every few days, which allowed him to more solidly secure a friendship with the enigmatic hunter and enter a somewhat tense, wary, and cautious friendship with Danna. Danna still had some issues with him being a Shaman and killing her men, but her time with Firetail seemed to have softened her outlook somewhat. Danna's hatred of Shaman was quietly challenged by the matronly Shaman and her soft voice and her calm, gentle ways, forcing Danna to see the *personality* behind the title of Shaman. Firetail was kind, gentle, warm, compassionate, and caring, and it was hard to see someone like that as evil, no matter how hard one tried. Firetail, Kyven saw, was much like Clover, and it was clear quickly why Firetail and Clover got

along so well. Clover too stopped by to see him quite a bit, every couple of days, usually eating breakfast with him as Firetail fed him massive amounts of food he needed to recover from his expenditures the day before.

And there were other distractions. Kyven's unique coloration made some of the vixens... curious about him. In a city where there were nothing but Arcans, males and females never had to look far to find a sexual partner. These Arcans had the same giving mentality as captive Arcans when it came to sex, and Kyven found that Silver's attitude towards him was not unique. Quite a few fox vixens of all four breeds, red, gray, arctic, and silver, saw him as both a Shaman and a potential breeding partner. They loved the way he looked, and Kyven found his training interrupted by quite a few offers of doing a different kind of exercise. And that was an invitation he couldn't deny, both because of the fox and because of himself. The first time he was boldly propositioned by a red fox, in much the same way as Silver had done, the fox had appeared to him and told him, in no uncertain terms, that he *would*. Just as in the whorehouse back in Avannar, the fox pushed him on a female, and he realized that the fox fully intended to breed him. He was the only one of his kind, the only shadow fox Arcan, and the fox wanted more. He was *her* creation, her very own special Arcan, and she wanted her creation to continue beyond just him. So, every few days, Kyven's training was interrupted by a female with breeding on her mind.

But, over the weeks, and then months, it became clear that Kyven was either sterile, or he was not compatible *enough* to mate to other breeds of fox. He was compatible enough to trigger ovulation in females, but it wasn't enough. Kyven wasn't capable of impregnating females.

Firetail examined him after that came to light, when females he'd mated for more than long enough to make pregnant weren't, she proclaimed that he was fully healthy, so it wasn't him. It had to do with his unique nature, she surmised, that he was a created Arcan of a brand new breed. He *was* a fox, enough of a fox to trigger ovulation in females, but he was still too different to allow breeding.

That told him that not even the fox was as infallible as she seemed, and to her credit, she was big enough to admit it herself. She came to him in the morning just as he woke, the day after Firetail examined him, looking quite perplexed. She touched his hand with her front leg. *I seem to have erred*, she told him, quite simply. *I thought you were capable of breeding within the main species, but it seems that you are not. Perhaps your being Arcan of a monster limits your breeding capability, rather than being an Arcan of a common animal.*

"It's nothing to apologize over. It's not like I didn't enjoy trying," he told her, which made her give him a somewhat toothy grin in reply.

I must find another way, she noted to herself, but he heard her. *I want your line continued before you return to humanity. I expended too much effort changing you to lose all that work when you change back.* She looked at him. *Return to your training. I will attend to this matter.*

Kyven thought little about it, returning to his routine. The snow kept piling up over the winter, getting higher and higher, forcing the Arcans to haul it out of the city in wagons to keep the streets somewhat clear and prevent houses from getting buried. Kyven continued to run, continued to build up his endurance, working himself half to death every day and dragging himself back to Firetail's every night, barely able to walk. But the months had done much, since he could channel a spell and maintain it for over an hour by midwinter day, which was one of the checkpoints that the fox had demanded of him.

Midwinter day was also rather momentous for another reason, which Kyven didn't hear about until the next morning. When he woke up to the huge breakfast that Firetail had laid

out for him, Toby and Danna were already there, looking a touch smug. Firetail herself was quite happy over something, which provoked Kyven to ask what was going on.

“Ah think we found a solution to the problem,” Toby answered. “At least a temporary one.”

“Yes, it’s quite clever,” Firetail agreed with a nod.

“Well, what did you come up with?”

“Let us say we’re *very* glad that Toby came with you,” Firetail smiled at him.

“We’re going to *buy* the Arcans,” Danna told him.

“Buy? Buy how?”

“The usual way,” she said with a smug smile.

“It’s quite simple, but also quite ingenious,” Firetail said. “Already, every Shaman capable of it is making crystals, a mixture of the best and most valuable ones we can as well as many small industrial ones we can produce. In the spring, Toby will go to Alamar and buy every Arcan he can get his hands on using those crystals, then we will arrange to have the Masked pick them up and escort them out to where our guides can bring them home. We will do what we can to house them, but we will find a way.”

“It’s a double move,” Danna told him. “At the same time, we remove Arcans that take crystals, but also bring crystals to at least stem the short-term shortage.”

“But we cannot do this many times or the humans will become suspicious,” Firetail told Kyven. “This is a one year action, with the objective to slow down what is coming long enough for us to think of something better. But with luck, we can buy ourselves two or three more years before we face a crisis.”

“How are you going to explain what you’re going to do with so many Arcans?” Kyven asked Toby.

“That ain’t none o’ their business,” Toby told him. “They won’t much care, neither. All they’ll care about is that Ah paid good money fo’ them. What Ah do with ‘em an’ how Ah handle ‘em is *mah* problem, as far as they’re concerned.”

“Alamar’s on the coast. How are you going to get them all the way up here?”

“They’s not much population tah the northwest o’ Alamar,” Toby told him. “We can take ‘em that way without arousin’ much notice. It’ll work best if Ah buy ‘em in groups an’ send them on, not all at once. What Ah hope tah do is reach Alamar in early spring, an’ leave in the fall with not a single Arcan left anywhere in the city.”

“Toby has explained that Alamar has the largest concentration of slave Arcans in Noraam, and that is the best place to do this.”

“It won’t be the only place,” Danna said. “Masked agents will buy up every Arcan in the border villages abutting the frontier from Philia to Tret and bring them in. As kennelmasters run out of slaves, they’ll buy more from the cities where the agents aren’t working, and then we buy *them*. That lets the slavery system do our work for us. They’ll bring the Arcans to our agents, and our agents will take them and ship them back here. The idea is to take at least one quarter of the total Arcan population this summer, which, like Miss Firetail said, should buy Haven a good two or three years.”

“It’s going to alert the Loremasters if that many Arcans disappear.”

“Will it? They’ll be *bought*, Kyven,” she said with a smile. “Yes, people will notice there aren’t as many Arcans for sale, but after the Arcans are bought and marched out of the villages and towns, what can they say? It’s *legal* to buy Arcans. What those people do with the Arcans isn’t anyone’s business, because it’s *legal*. We’ll use humanity’s own law against them, Kyv. They can’t tell humans they can’t buy Arcans when they have the money to do it.”

Kyven leaned back, scratching his muzzle in thought. It *was* deceptively simple. If they

simply bought the Arcans, and could get them out of human territory, what could humans really do? They would be bought legally, not stolen. The kennelmasters wouldn’t care as long as they were paid, and the Loremasters might not see what was going on until after it was over. And when it was, there would be much fewer Arcan collars to power and a sudden influx of crystals. Yes, the Loremasters might piece together that something had happened, but without understanding Haven or just how extensive the Arcan system was, they’d lack crucial information to piece everything together. But... would they see it as a *bad* thing? There would be more crystals and fewer Arcan collars to power. Yes. They would see it as a bad thing. They would ignore the benefit and focus only on the mystery, and that was the sudden disappearance of one quarter of the Arcan slave population.

It would cause two problems that he could see. One, it would drive up the price of Arcans, as the supply would dry up. Two, it would alert the Loremasters that something strange was going on, and that, coupled with their other problem, would make them wary and harder to circumvent when it came time to get the rest of the Arcans from captivity. He communicated as much to them, and Firetail nodded. “The council thought much the same, and I agree, but we see a net gain. If it makes them more cautious, they still may not fully appreciate things, and they may also relax a little and delay any kind of drastic action. We feel it’s a worthwhile risk to prevent a Loremaster policy of *thinning* the Arcan population.”

“Ayah,” Toby sounded.

“It’s a practical approach,” Danna added. “It doesn’t solve the problem, but it does defuse the immediate threat. Yes, it’s going to alert the Loremasters that something’s going on, but they won’t know what, they won’t know why, and they won’t know how. They’ll only know that for some reason, a whole lot of Arcans were bought. They’ll do a count and find out there are a lot fewer Arcans available in the kennels, but they won’t piece things together until they get the reports from the crystalcutter and alchemist guilds and see that the orders for collars and crystals didn’t go up, and they see that their inventories of available crystals are actually *up*. How they react to that information will flavor how the Arcans make their next move. If they realize that the Arcans weren’t collared and seem to be nowhere to be found, they might raise an alert. But, there’s no guarantee that they’ll reach that conclusion. The Loremasters don’t do a headcount of *collared* Arcans, only Arcans in kennels and collars made. They may never put it together, and that only helps our side.”

“*Our* side?” Kyven asked with a smile.

She laughed. “I’m stuck here, Kyven. I’m not stupid enough to think anything different. They’ll never let me leave here, not with all I know. But, I’ll admit, at least the council treats me fairly.”

“I’ve told you that many times, child, you are our *guest*, and we both value your wisdom and need your guidance,” Firetail smiled at her. “We are trying to avert a war.”

“And that’s the only reason I’m cooperating with you, Firetail,” Danna told her simply. “Because I believe you when you say that. I’m still angry over the loss of my men, but in a small way, I can understand the desperation that caused you to go so far to bring me here.”

“What about you, Toby?” Kyven asked, looking at him. “Where do you fit in with this?”

“Ah’m bein’ *hired* tah do the work, Kyven,” Toby said. “The council’s already agreed tah pay yo’ fair price in the blue ring so Ah can take it tah Misses Ledwell an’ honor mah agreement with her. They also hired me tah carry through the plan, and Ah’m a loyal man, Kyv. If yo’ hire me, Ah do mah job, and Ah do it tah the best o’ mah ability.”

“Master Fisher’s services are already retained,” Firetail smiled. “And quite sharply did he bargain payment for his services.”

“Ah may like y’all, Miss Firetail, but business is business,” he said simply. “Ah’m no pa-

triot o' zealot o' no Masked. Ah'll work fo' y'all because yo' payin' mah price. But fo' that price, y'all *do* get mah loyalty. Ah always keep mah word, an' Ah nevah back out o' a deal."

"I'll vouch for him on that," Kyven said simply as he attacked breakfast. "Toby is a man of his word."

Kyven pondered their rather unique temporary stopgap measure as he trained that day, and decided that it did seem to have merit. If the Loremasters didn't make that connection and realize someone bought all those Arcans and then vanished with them, they very well may never know what happened. And it would buy them time. With more crystals in circulation and fewer Arcans pressing demands for collars, it would buy the Arcans a year, maybe two, to try to come up with a permanent solution. This action was a stalling tactic, nothing more.

But for what it was intended to do, it would be effective, he surmised.

It would fall on the Shaman. They'd have to make a *staggering* number of crystals over the winter to raise the kind of money it would take to buy out the slave pens of Alamar and the kennels of the border towns, like Atan. It would be a king's ransom, but the advantage was that the humans took for money something the Arcans could manufacture in theoretically limitless quantity.

But that was a secret that the humans could *never* learn. If they found out that Shaman could make crystals, they'd come after the Arcans like never before, trying to capture Shaman and put them in the most pronounced kind of slavery, one from which they would never escape.

As the weeks rolled on, Kyven saw that the Shaman were preparing. Firetail had set a quota of every Shaman capable of creating crystals, for not all could. Kyven himself could *not* create crystals, because it was an advanced use of Shaman magic and far beyond his training. When he brought up the matter with the fox, she simply shrugged and told him *it is not important, and thus it is not something I will teach you at this time*. That left Kyven free to prepare as his totem demanded, while the other Shaman created both crystals of high quality to sell for large amounts of money, and also more commonplace crystals to try to help build up the dwindling supplies, to dissuade the Loremasters from making any rash moves. Though he couldn't see it, he was sure that the rest of the city and the Masked were also preparing, for what they were planning was going to take a lot of coordination and some work. The Masked would have to bring the Arcans into the wilderness, and guides from Haven would have to be there to bring them the rest of the way. Those Arcans would need food on their journey, and that many Arcans moving through the same territory in a constant stream would stress the supply of game to support them. They'd need food stocked in supply posts in place and ready for them to feed them on their journey here. And when they got here, all those Arcans would need to be housed and fed, which would press the area in new ways. But they had to find a way, necessity demanded it. And since there was no other way, they'd make due as best they could.

Deep in winter, early one bitterly cold morning that made the pads on Kyven's feet ache, the fox appeared to him as he reached the edge of the city to begin his daily training. She said nothing, only sat there with her tail wrapped around her legs, quite sedately, her eyes demanding and expectant. He knelt in the snow in front of her to bring his eyes to her level, then she reared up and put her paws on his shoulders, looking down at him. In that touch there was communication, and in that communication there was instruction.

She finally taught him a new spell.

It was the spell she wanted him most to learn, he realized. It wasn't so much a spell as it was an idea, a concept, a *method*, and that method was the system of creating illusion.

It was the core of what she wished to teach.

This is one of only three spells you will ever need learn, she told him after she imparted to

him the idea behind it. *Illusion is the most powerful force in the world, my Shaman, because it is limitless. It is not hindered by your lack of power, it is hindered only by your imagination.*

"If that's so, why will I have more ability in illusion than other Shaman?"

Two reasons. First, because this spell is very demanding to use if you are not, by nature, a creature whose nature is compatible with illusion, she answered. *The other side of it is that other Shaman are limited by what kinds of illusions they can create, where you will have no restrictions. Other Shaman can only create standardized spells of illusions, where you have much more free reign. For them, illusions are spells. For you, they are a technique. You do not suffer the same restrictions they do. This is where you differ from them. This is the advantage you gain by being a totem Shaman. My affinity for illusion will make this spell much less taxing for you to cast than other Shaman, and you can do much, much more with them.*

"I understand. How does this spell work?"

The way it works is simple, my Shaman. The larger the illusion, the more power it takes to create and maintain. You have reached a point where I now expect you to train both your body and your magic at the same time. From this point on, you will do your training while holding an illusion. Begin simply. Create a very small illusion and hold it, you will find that you will not have to search for ways to make your training more rigorous, she said with amused eyes. *I'm rather disappointed that you did not think to do this*, she sniffed. *You separated training the body from the magic in your mind, and they are essentially the same thing. You should have used magic while exercising.*

She was right; that idea had never occurred to him. That wasn't how Stalker had taught him, and he was just following the same routine Stalker created.

Illusion, my Shaman, is making others believe in the unbelievable. That requires that you do not think the same way others think. For you to be convincing, you must sell the illusion to those who will not believe it. That requires you to believe in what is not there yourself, and that belief is what gives the illusion its power.

"That doesn't make any sense. I know it's just an illusion. It's not real."

But they do not know that, she told him. *That is the secret of illusion, my Shaman. For them to believe, you must believe. If you can weave that belief into your spell, then you will create something that is real.*

"That's impossible!"

Is it? What is impossible, Shaman? she asked with a toothy smile. *What is truly impossible? The world is naught but what you perceive. Attend.* She looked to her left, and Kyven looked with her. Standing there was Danna, naked as the day she was born, giving him a lurid smile. The sight of her made him attentive in ways not entirely proper when in the presence of his totem. Then, to his surprise, she vanished.

It was an illusion!

What did you feel when you saw her? she asked.

"Lust," he answered honestly. Lying to her was pointless, as she seemed to know what he was thinking.

And yet it was not real, she pointed out. *That is the power of illusion, Shaman. You saw what was not there and accepted it as real before you even considered the plausibility of it. Your mind reacted to the illusion before your reason started wondering why Danna would be standing out in the winter naked, and why there were no footprints in the snow showing her arrival.*

Kyven blinked.

Humans and Arcans are beings entirely grounded in their senses, Shaman. Fool those

senses, and you substitute their reality with one of your own choosing, and that reality can impact them in very real ways, such as the sight of Danna inciting your mating instincts. But for that attempt to be convincing, you have to be ready to believe in your own creation yourself. That is the art of illusion, Shaman. It is not so much spellcasting as it is painting in smells, or playing music seen with the eyes rather than heard with the ears. When you can so fully and completely imagine that which is not there and build it into reality with your magic, you will create illusions so convincing that they actually take on properties of reality. Believe so utterly in an illusion of a wall, and you will be unable to pass through it.

In a twisted kind of way, that made a kind of sense. "So, if I can make an illusion so convincing that it even fools me, then it will fool everyone else?"

Correct enough to answer your question, she told him. The key to it all, Shaman, is your imagination. If you cannot imagine it and make it believable, then it will not work.

"I'm not much of an artist."

It has little to do with art, it has to do with memory and imagination, she told him. And those are qualities you already possess to my satisfaction, or I would never have taken you for my own. How this spell works is thusly, Shaman. First, imagine what it is you want to create with illusion. It must be detailed, as detailed as possible. The more detail it has, the more believable it will be, and thus more effective. Let's start small. Imagine a crystal, much like the ones you used to cut. Build it in your mind. Imagine every detail of it, how it looks, how it sparkles in the light, how it feels in your hand, the texture of its surface, even how it smells. Give it as much detail as possible.

He did so, and this was an area where he had a lot of experience. He imagined a spiral cut green crystal, ten points in weight, that was without flaws. He imagined its planes and lines, he saw in his mind's eye how it caught the light in emerald flashes as it was moved, he knew almost exactly how much it weighed, and knew how it felt in his hand, how it tingled, every minute detail.

Very good. Now build the spell. Take what is in your mind and push it out into the real world, into your own hand.

He did so. He took that image and swept it up into the spell, then besought the fox for the power to cast it. She was literally right there in contact with him, so the spell's power came through her, literally through his own shoulders, and it focused into his open hand. A glittering spiral cut green crystal appeared in his hands, and to his surprise, it had weight.

It has weight because you imagined it to have weight, she informed him with a toothy smile. Your belief gives the illusion a sense of weight, where there actually is no weight. Now do you begin to understand the power of illusion?

He did. By giving it weight, and making it so realistic, if he threw it at someone, they would flinch. They might even believe that it hit them.

Precisely. The mind is a powerful thing, Shaman. It can, in some ways, influence true reality by shading it with its own impression. A man struck by an illusory hammer, who believes that it is real, will suffer a real injury, at least in his own mind. His mind will be so convinced that it will create pain where none exists, but as there was no real harm done, the pain will vanish when he realizes it. But there is a threshold, Shaman, a level of belief that will cause that man to suffer a real wound from an illusory weapon. It is at that point where the conscious mind so shapes its perceived reality that it overlaps into truth. That is the pinnacle of illusion, Shaman. That is the goal for which you strive. The day an illusory knife cuts, then you have mastered what I wish to teach, and you will understand the true power of illusion.

"That sounds... impossible."

It is not something you will achieve tomorrow, she smiled. That is where your belief begins.

When your mind and your victim's mind are both working in unison on a common belief, then that belief will cross into truth, and it will become real. It is the ultimate expression of illusion, the power to alter reality.

He nodded.

Release the illusion. Build another, something simple, and maintain it as you run. I believe you'll find you can't run nearly as far as usual when you do, she said with a toothy grin, then she pulled away and put her feet back on the snow.

"What are the other two spells you want to teach?" he asked impulsively.

She shook her head, then got up, turned, and walked away. Despite it being sunny and snow-covered, almost glaringly bright, shadows seemed to converge around the fox, and they swallowed her up, leaving him alone.

Something simple. Kyven decided it had to be something that didn't involve him holding it, so he built an image of a simple little leather bracer in his mind, something around his wrist. He imagined its color, its texture, the way it would feel around his fur, how it would feel moving up and down on his wrist as he ran, even its smell. Once he had a complete image in his mind, he pushed that image into the spell, then reached out to the fox to have her grant him the power to cast it. She naturally responded, and the black leather bracer, new and impressive, shimmered into view around his right wrist.

At first, it wasn't hard at all. He ran on as he usually did. But after about twenty minutes, when he'd usually be still running at full speed and quite strongly, he was already getting a little tired, and he found it hard to focus... for more than one reason. Not only was it draining on him to maintain the spell, he found that he had to concentrate on it even as he did other things, and that splitting of his attention was something that was surprisingly difficult. If he paid too much attention to the bracer, he lost track of what he was doing. If he paid too much attention to running, the illusion around his wrist began to break down, lose its clarity and focus, and he had to work fast and hard to maintain the illusion or it would tear, and that tearing of the magic creating it would cause it to fade.

So, this was about more than just building his endurance, he reasoned. By teaching him the illusion and telling him to use it while running, he saw her other intent, and that was to train him to be able to keep his attention on more than one thing at a time.

The new training regimen didn't take up nearly as much of his time, but it left him just as exhausted.

Instead of staying out until well after sunset, now he was dragging himself back to Firetail's house not long after noon, trembling with exhaustion, barely able to hold himself up. The combination of physical and magical exertion sucked all the energy right out of him, and left him all but incapacitated when he could go no further.

But it was working, in more ways than one. Thanks to Firetail's blessing, Kyven's endurance continued to build, and he could run a little further each day, maintain his illusion longer each day without being incapacitated while his body recovered. But on the other front, he was learning how to divide his attention, to maintain his illusion even as he engaged his mind on other matters, almost compartmentalizing it so one part of his mind could focus on the magic while the other part dealt with everything else. As the days passed, Kyven could run further, hold his illusion longer, keep his concentration on it to maintain it more clearly, and also sharpened his imagination by practicing building illusions of various kinds.

That was a trial and error process. He found that he had to practice the images that he used with the illusions. His first attempts were usually not very good, and the little flaws he noticed were things he corrected in future attempts, practicing the image over and over until he got it right. He also found that larger illusions were harder because there was more detail in-

volved in them. An illusion of a Wolveran was harder than an illusion of a rabbit both because it was larger and required more magic, but also because the larger illusion had more area for detail, and he had to fill in those details... it was more to keep track of when he conjured up the image to use for the illusion.

He started with very small illusions, but as time went by, he expanded on that. The little bracer became a necklace that bobbed and jerked as he ran, then became a pair of pants that ended at his knees, then became a long-sleeved tunic, then he ran out not as a shadow fox, but appearing to be a male coyote with the same markings and coloration as Clover. *That* was when it started getting really hard. He had to hold the image in all three dimensions and keep it visible in all directions, and attach the illusions to his body so the illusion's ears moved when his did, and the tail moved as his did, and so on. The other things were only really seen from one direction, and so he didn't have to include a *back* to them. The first attempts he made at wearing an illusion like a costume were almost comical, and it took him nearly a month to get the hang of it to the point where wearing the illusion of a coyote didn't make other Arcans give him funny looks.

Of course, it was fun, and satisfied his sense of ego, to have his coyote illusion sport a much larger penis than his own; not that he wasn't at least gracefully endowed in that area, but it made him laugh to watch the females' eyes gawk as he went by.

The evil of the fox was wearing off on him.

Clover wasn't his only model for learning illusions to hide his true appearance. With Firetail's help and a lot of observation, he built detailed images of cougars, skunks, wolves, bears, mice, cats, and badgers, and practiced them all. He had an idea of what the fox wanted him to do, so he was preparing by getting his disguises lined up. He wanted to be able to appear to be several different kinds of Arcan.

And also human.

It was almost *painful* to do that. He remembered what he looked like, so he used that to build an illusion of himself as a human, with the green eyes and black hair, sleek, muscular form, every detail he cared to build while smoothing over some of his features of which he wasn't very proud, like the scar on his shoulder, to create a stylized version of himself that looked like him, but looked as he imagined himself to look, which was probably better than how he really did look.

About everyone has an ego-influenced image of themselves.

It took him a few days to get it right. He spent much of that time before exercising looking in the full-length mirror Firetail had gotten for him, working out the mars that made it unbelievable, and practicing moving in a way that didn't look too strange given he had much different legs in reality, and he had a tail that the illusion concealed. It was the first illusion covering himself that moved in a completely different way that he did, mainly in his legs, and it took him a while to learn how to merge the reality with the illusion to make his movements look natural.

This was the imagination that the fox said. He had to *imagine* how he would look walking as a human, since he didn't have much memory of it... after all, he'd never sat around and watched people walk before. Toby was a great help as he perfected his human illusion, being his model in a way as he worked out exactly how his illusion would look when it moved. Toby was a pretty good sport about it, and the work with him actually caused them to become closer, reaching into the realm of good friends.

Danna's reaction the first time she saw him in his human illusion was startling. It was during one of his and Toby's modeling sessions, and both of them were undressed so Kyven could see the movement under the clothes, which would allow the clothed illusion to move

properly. When Danna barged into his room without knocking, Toby was wearing a blanket around himself to stave off the chill as Kyven walked back and forth in front of him, testing out how believable he looked to someone that was *looking* for flaws.

That was also the belief that the fox had told him about. Half of the success of hiding under an illusion was the *attitude* he projected. He had to believe he was what he appeared to be, and that took quite a bit of acting. If he looked timid and tentative and nervous, people would pick up on that, and it would make them scrutinize him. But if he *acted* human, then it just reinforced what they were seeing, and made them much less apt to penetrate his illusion and see the reality underneath. He was human, though, so wearing a human illusion wasn't hard at all, where it would be extremely difficult for another Shaman, like Clover, to attempt. They may understand human nature, but they were *not* human, and that would make it very hard for them to hide under a human illusion and interact with other humans. They couldn't project the *aire* of *believability* required to pull it off.

"By the Trinity, she changed you back!" Danna gasped, looking at Kyven in amazement. Toby laughed, and Kyven gave Danna a rather sheepish look. Before he could object, she rushed over and hugged him, hugged him while he was naked, and he froze in the middle of the act. He felt her touch his back with her bare hands, then sink her fingers into his fur, then pull on it almost painfully. "What the fuck?" she asked in surprise.

"Ow! Danna!" Kyven objected, pushing her away. "This is just an illusion," he told her, looking her in the eye. "I've mastered other Arcan illusions, I'm trying to master human illusions. I guess I did a good job," he said as he smiled at her.

"That's definitely convincing," she agreed, looking him up and down clinically, then her eyes focused on his crotch. "Though I think you're overdoing it a bit there. You already have enough down there, Kyv, no need to look like you have a third leg."

Toby exploded into laughter, and Kyven's illusion actually blushed. "It's a sort of joke," he told her in a weak voice. "I've been teasing some of the females around the house."

"Well, it just won't do," she told him bluntly. "Fix it." As Toby kept laughing, Kyven dutifully corrected the illusion to match his actual proportions, to which Danna simply nodded in approval. "Much better. It looks just like the face and body I remember," she told him. "You did a good job."

"Uh, thanks," he said uncertainly, releasing the illusion and causing his Arcan form to reappear. For some reason, he... *wanted* that fur around him right now, because he felt quite naked and exposed under Danna's penetrating eye. Toby just kept on laughing, so Kyven imagined a large bucket of icy cold water hanging over his head, and built that image into an illusion. The bucket appeared over his head, and with a snap of his fingers, he caused it to overturn, pouring its ice-chunked contents down over the laughing man. Toby's laughs turned to a hissing inhale of breath, then a quite satisfying scream of shock when the illusory water's chilling bite sank its icy fangs into Toby's skin. Toby had accepted the perception that it was real water and ice cold, and his body reacted to the impression of his mind, just as the fox said he would if Kyven made the illusion believable enough.

"That's cheatin'!" Toby spluttered, coming up appearing to look dripping wet and shivering. But Kyven just gave him a slight head-tilted look, then dismissed the illusion, leaving him dry, but still standing there hugging himself with his teeth chattering. That made Danna explode into laughter.

"Ah'm stahtin' tah hate you, Kyv," Toby challenged, but he was grinning.

"That was punishment. Someday I'll show you reward," Kyven winked.

"Seriously, though, it's getting' tah where Ah never know if what yo' doin' is real or just an illusion," Toby told him.

"I think that's the idea," Danna said professionally. "That's the objective of any illusionist, isn't it? To get to where people can't tell the difference?"

Kyven nodded, smiling a toothy smile. "Thanks for the compliment, Toby. I guess I *am* getting better at this."

"Don't get a big head, though," Danna told him. "Or two of them."

Toby exploded into a fresh round of laughter.

The complement did reflect reality, though. Kyven's constant use of illusion had sharpened his mind and his imagination, and that sharpened imagination, in turn, allowed him to produce more and more detail in his illusions. It was a self-reinforcing circle of training and result. Kyven felt he was moving right along with that, though he still dragged home every day so tired he could barely move as he maintained larger and larger illusions while running, trying to push himself beyond the limit, but thanks to Firetail's blessing, he rebounded every morning feeling fresh and new. Every day, as the snow piled deeper and deeper, Kyven could run further and further holding his illusions longer and longer. Kyven's endurance seemed to increase exponentially over the bitterly cold days, days so cold that he had to take steps to protect his exposed genitals, which had no fur to protect them, else suffer a particularly humiliating and painful form of frostbite. By February, when there was at least three paces of snow on the ground in a winter that many in Haven said was one of the snowiest winters they could remember, Kyven had achieved the fox's empirical demand that he be able to hold an illusion all day. The first time he managed it, he dragged back to Firetail's house staggering so badly he could barely stand, let alone walk, but he was still cloaked in an illusion of a skunk Arcan. He managed to take about two steps into her compound, *then* he collapsed into the snow, panting heavily. Firetail always seemed to know when he was back, so she came out and collected him, carried him into the house, and tucked him into bed so he could rest and take a short nap before dinner.

That first victory wasn't the last, but it wasn't repeated for four more days, as Kyven decided that if he could manage it wearing an Arcan illusion, he had to use a bigger one, something that was even more demanding. His illusions became larger, even more detailed, and then became multiple illusions as he did everything he could to make it as hard as possible, knowing that his very life would depend on how long he could hold an illusion, and how believable those illusions could be. He was aiming to build his endurance first, then come back and train with the illusions themselves, but he *was* getting better and better at making them. He strove for perfection even holding an illusion nobody but he would see while he ran out into the snowbound wilderness, because sloppy work could be habit forming.

By March, Kyven found the fox sitting in the courtyard when he staggered home still cloaked in a highly detailed illusion of him as a bear Arcan, seated sedately with her tail wrapped around her legs. He dropped to his knees before her, hands in the snow to steady himself, and she reached forward and touched her nose to his muzzle. In that touch, there was communication. *Your physical training is complete*, she told him. *You have reached your pinnacle. No amount of training will increase your endurance any further. You must continue to exercise to maintain your endurance, but you do not have to push yourself to this extreme any further.*

He could only pant his relief at that.

You have reached this point ahead of schedule. That pleases me. From here, you will practice illusions. Your work thus far has been quite pleasing, but you need more work. You must be able to produce convincing illusions on the first try, even images you have never tried before. So spend your time observing, memorizing, learning new shapes, new faces, new things. Work with your imagination, try illusions of things you have never seen, only imagined.

Don't restrict yourself to animals or people either. An illusion of a wall can be just as useful to you as an illusion of an Arcan, when used properly. And remember, always, the most convincing illusions are more than just visual. An illusion that has a smell and a sense of feeling is much more convincing, and those are things you can give them if you are detailed enough. You have reached your peak in endurance. Now you must exercise your mind, Shaman.

"I... will," he panted in reply.

Tonight, rest. Tomorrow, I have something for you to do.

He did just that. Firetail fed him a light dinner, and he went straight to bed.

The morning started with his usual massive breakfast to stave off the physical drain that practicing magic and endurance training put on him, a breakfast shared by Danna, Toby, and Patches. Firetail just smiled and piled it in front of him, then sat down and patted him on the shoulder. "So, you are finished with the physical training," she noted. How did she learn these things? "Now what? Is your spirit sending you back out to resume your Walk?"

"She said she has something for me to do today," he answered between bites of buffalo meat. "She also said that I need to work on my illusions. I think she thinks they're not good enough yet."

"They fool me," Firetail laughed.

"Only the ones I've practiced doing for a while," he answered. "She wants me to practice until I can get it right the first time. She said I have to exercise my mind now."

"Yes, I can see that," Firetail nodded. "Illusions are one of the hardest forms of Shaman magic. That she chose you to be her Shaman, well, a few of us have wondered why."

"Because I'm so weak?" he asked simply.

"Weak? Weak how?" Danna asked.

"As Shaman measure raw power, child, Kyven is, well, not very strong," she said delicately.

"I doubt he'll ever be able to perform much of the magic the rest of us can."

"It doesn't embarrass me, Firetail," he said simply. "I *am* human. I guess humans just don't make good Shaman."

"You just lack the physical requirements," Firetail sighed. "I had thought that maybe being in an Arcan body might change it, but it doesn't."

"Why would that matter?" Danna asked.

"Child, magic requires physical strength and stamina to use," she answered. "Arcans are naturally strong, so we have the strength necessary to be able to handle the power."

"That doesn't make any sense."

"Think of it like this, child. Magic is *work*. It is just like carrying heavy rocks. Carrying heavy rocks requires strength, but also requires endurance. Kyven is weak in raw strength. He can't carry rocks as large as I. But his *endurance* is just as good as my own. He may not be able to carry rocks as large, but he can carry them all day long. By the spirits, he may be able to carry them longer than I," she laughed. "But I'm old, and my endurance isn't what it used to be."

"You don't seem old at all," Danna protested.

"I'm nearly fifty, child," she answered. "The only reason I'm not hobbling about using a cane is because I'm a Shaman, and I'm in such good shape. I don't see myself lasting more than ten more years. I feel my age more and more every day when I get out of bed in the morning," she said with a light-hearted chuckle.

"Naw, Firetail, yo' be 'round for another fifty years," Toby told her.

"Spirits, I hope not," she laughed. "I'd be so disabled by age I'd be bedridden. I'd much rather sleep a peaceful death than endure that."

"I think we can talk about something less depressing now," Danna said.

Firetail gave her a smile. “By the way, dear, the council wants to see you today. They have a few more ideas to put to you.”

“I didn’t have anything planned today. Or any other day,” she grunted.

“Have you given any thought to their proposal?”

“I’ve thought about it,” she answered. “But I’m not sure how much cooperation I’m going to get if I do it. Most of the Arcans here won’t talk to me, and if I can’t get information, what good will I be as a sheriff? Most Arcans here would be afraid of a human having any authority over them.”

“Those attitudes are changing, dear. I think you and Toby coming has been very good for us. It shows our people that there is no reason to fear humans, that we can get along with them.”

“Well, Ah’m not so sho’ about that, Firetail,” Toby said. “Ah still get quite a few ugly looks an’ nasty comments on the streets. Ah’ve even had a couple Arcans try to mug me.”

“Why didn’t you say so?” she asked, with sudden heat. “Who were they? What did they do?”

Toby laughed. “Nothin’ Ah couldn’t handle,” he answered. “Arcans think Ah’m easy cause Ah’m not as strong as they are. Ah educate ‘em quickly that that don’t mean squat. Ah don’t do no permanent harm, but Ah do remind ‘em to mind they manners.”

“Good,” she said with a nod. “I will not tolerate any kind of behavior like that. You are our *guests*. The council brought you here to help both our peoples and try to stop a war.”

“Some of yo’ people don’t feel that way,” Toby told her. “No matter why we’re heah, all they see are *humans* in they city.”

“I’ll have a little talk with the council. And if you get accosted again, let me know.”

“Ah will.”

There was a knock at the door. “Excuse me, friends,” Firetail said as she stood, then she went to answer it. Kyven continued to eat, which made Danna give a slight face as he ate more raw buffalo meat.

“How can you stand that?” she asked, for what had to be the fiftieth time, which made Patches giggle.

“I was eating it raw long before I was turned into an Arcan,” he answered, for the fiftieth time.

“Kyven, dear, I think you need to come into the parlor,” Firetail said as she came back.

“You have a... visitor.”

“Really?” he asked. “Who’d be visiting me?” He stood up and came over to the matronly cougar, and followed her into the sitting room. He stopped dead not five steps in and gasped.

Across the room, near the door, stood two canine Arcans wearing the uniforms of the city watch, flanking a nude female shadow fox Arcan. She was about a rod shorter than him, sleek, slender, with the exact same coloration, but where he had short black hair and green eyes, she had shoulder-length raven-black hair and amber eyes. She didn’t have the pattern small breasts of an Arcan female, instead having more pronounced breasts that were more human-like in proportion, and looked to barely be more than an adult.

“Kyven!” she said in a chiming, sweet voice. She rushed over to him and pushed herself against him, holding onto his shoulders with her hands, and then she put her head and muzzle against his chest and nuzzled him. “I made it!”

“Who—Who are you?” he asked in consternation.

“Mother made me just for you!” she exclaimed.

“Who?”

She looked at him and grinned. “She made me just for you!” she repeated. “Am I pretty?”

He was totally scattered. “Hold on, you’re losing me here,” he said, pushing her out to arm’s length. “What’s your name?”

“I don’t have one. Can you give me one?”

“I guess we can, but later. Now who are you talking about? What do you mean, made you?”

She put her hands on his shoulders. “Mother made me, just for you!” she said, once again.

“Who were you before she made you, child?” Firetail asked.

“I was one of her children,” she answered.

One of her children? The only person she could be talking about that would do such a thing had to be the spirit. She had done to someone else what she did to him, changed them into an Arcan. “You mean my spirit changed you into this?”

“Yes! Am I pretty?”

“Uh, yes, you are pretty,” he said, a little confused.

“She made me just for you!” she said yet again. “I’m happy!” she proclaimed, pushing past his hands and hugging him again.

Kyven gave Firetail a helplessly confused look, but Firetail shrugged with a similar expression. “Girl,” Kyven said, pushing her away again. “Well, I think you need a name, first. What kind of name would you like?”

“I don’t know what names are good.”

“Whatever sounds nice to you.”

“Oh. Well, you pick. She made me—”

“Just for me,” he cut her off. “Well, how does Umbra sound?”

“I like it!”

“Umbra?” Firetail asked.

“It’s another word for shadow,” he answered, then looked back to her. “Alright, Umbra, tell me what happened.”

“Happened?”

“How did the spirit bring you into this?”

“She asked me. I said yes,” Umbra said simply.

“What exactly did she ask you?”

“She said she needed a mother for a new race of Arcans. I agreed,” she said calmly. “So she made me just like you, just for you,” she completed. “You and me are supposed to have babies, and our babies will be a new race of Arcans.”

Well, that much matched what Kyven already knew. The fox wanted him to continue his line before he regained his humanity, so her creation would live on after he was human again. “Well, did she promise to change you back when you have the baby?”

“Change me back? I don’t want to change back!” she told him. “I *like* being this way! But she said that you might change back into a human,” she added. “I guess that’s okay, if that’s what you want. But you’d better still come see me after you do. I’ll be the mother of your babies, after all.”

“She told you about me?”

“All about you,” she answered. “I wanted to know you before I agreed. I liked what she said of you, and decided I could easily be your mate. I guess it’s a little vain,” she laughed. “But I wanted to be the mother of a whole race. I had to convince her to pick me over the others.”

“What others?”

“You don’t think I’m the *only* one she asked, did you?” she grinned. “She asked several of us, and I was the one she picked!”

“When was this?”

“About two full moons ago,” she answered. “It took me a while to get here. I wasn’t entirely

sure where I was going, and I had about two weeks when I had to take shelter from a blizzard.” She leaned in against him, wrapping her arms around him. “So, am I pretty?” she asked, in a rather seductive voice.

“Uh, you’re pretty, but this is a little fast for me,” he said, putting his hands on her waist. “I’m not like an Arcan, Umbra. I need to get to know you a little more.”

“What’s there to know?” she asked. “There’s only one of you, and one of me, and we’re the only two of our kind in the whole world. *She* wants us together. What else is there to know?”

“Plenty. I don’t know anything about you at all. Where are you from?”

“We can talk about those things later,” she said dismissively.

“We can talk about them now,” he told her. He glanced over and saw Danna, and to his surprise, he saw a look of naked, unmitigated *jealousy* on her face. Why on earth was she jealous? She’d made it clear that she had no interest in him, because he was an Arcan, he was a Shaman, and he killed her men. “Now, where are you from?”

“I lived near a human village called Devonshire,” she answered. Devonshire was a name Kyven knew. It was a village like Atan, but it was to the north, up in the Two Forks area. “I made my way there just as any of us do, hunting and hiding from the humans. Two full moons ago, the spirit came to us and told us what she needed. Several of us agreed to do it, but she only chose one of us. Me. I thought it was a bit strange that she would only pick one given she wants a new race, but she could only change one, so I convinced her to pick me. I guess that means I don’t have to share you with other females.”

Kyven coughed uncomfortably under Danna’s hot stare.

“So, she changed me and told me which way to go, and I’ve been on my way here ever since. Being changed *hurt*,” she said with a shiver. “But it was worth it. I got the chance to come here, and I get to appease my vanity by being the mother of a new race.”

She was... strange. She seemed almost childish in some ways, like her bubbling enthusiasm, but now she sounded much more mature and wise than she had just a few minutes ago.

“So, here I am,” she grinned up at him. “I was made just for you! Am I pretty?”

And right back to seeming almost childish. “Uh, you’re very pretty, Umbra,” he said, which made her all but glow from his praise.

“I want to see if you’re as handsome as she said you were,” she announced, grabbing the waist of his trousers with her clawed hands. “Take these silly things off. I want to see you.”

Danna wasn’t the only one leveling a hot stare on this strange Arcan. Patches was giving her what for with her eyes as well as she clumsily tried to unbuckle Kyven’s belt.

“Uh, this isn’t a good place for that,” Kyven told her.

“Why not?” she asked.

“Because the human here might find it a bit offensive,” he said, motioning at Danna with his muzzle. “And since she’s a guest, we have to be polite.”

“Oh. A human, here? How strange,” she noted, then looked around. “Well, let’s go somewhere else then. I want to see you.”

“I want to talk to you more first.”

“If we go somewhere, we can talk while I look at you,” she said with surprising logic.

“I think that might be a good idea,” Firetail told him with a slightly amused look. “Take her upstairs, my friend.”

“Just don’t be gone too long,” Danna said in a threatening manner.

Patches mirrored Danna’s expression as Umbra took his hand with both of her own. Why was *she* jealous? They hadn’t had sex for weeks! Patches had been going out with a very friendly little raccoon that lived down the street, and now she had the nerve to be jealous over *her*?

Kyven took her up to his room and brought her in. She looked around curiously, leaning over and touching the lamp with a curious finger, then jumped back with a squeak of surprise when her touch caused it to come on, to give a gentle warm light from the bulb at its top, a bulb covered with a canvas shade to protect the eyes from the direct source of light. But her attention was right back on him when he closed the door, her hands pulling at his shirt, raising it up to reveal the soft white fur on his stomach. “Alright, Umbra, talk,” he said bluntly, as she pulled the shirt higher. “What’s going on? The truth.”

“You heard the truth,” she shrugged as she pushed his shirt up to his chest. “Take these off. I want to see you as you should be, not wearing stupid human clothing.”

“That’s something of a stretch,” Kyven said, but he did take off his shirt. She ran her fingers through his fur gently, almost sensually. “Why did you call her mother?”

“That’s who she is,” she answered. “She’s the mother. She created us. Both of us.”

“I have more colorful names for her than that,” Kyven growled. “She may have asked you, but she didn’t ask *me*. She tricked me.”

“Do you hate what you are?” she asked pointedly, grabbing his belt buckle. “How do you work this silly thing?”

“No, I don’t hate what I am, but I hate how I got here,” he said, sighing and moving her hands. It seemed she would be quite persistent until she got what she wanted, and Kyven no longer had human modesty. If she wanted to look at him, fine.

“Does the past really matter?” she asked simply. “If you’re happy the way you are, does it really matter how it happened to you?”

“It does to me,” he stated as he removed his trousers, and stood unclad before her. She took a step back and gave him a long, appraising look, then she licked her chops.

“Just as mother said,” she smiled. “Very handsome.”

“Thanks,” he said dryly. “So, you agreed to this?”

“Totally,” she answered. “I get to feel special, and it’s not like I’m not going to enjoy it,” she said with a little hum, running her hand sensually along his white stomach, dipping it down and fondling him brazenly, which triggered a reaction out of him as his penis began to thicken. “You’re taller than I expected. And bigger,” she said with a wink, her tail slashing behind her aggressively.

So, this was what the fox meant when she said she’d attend the matter, months ago. She went out and convinced some female Arcan to be changed into a shadow fox Arcan, like him, so he had a compatible breeding partner. He couldn’t deny that her touch was gentle and inviting, and her hold on his penis was making him erect. He *was* male, after all, and here was a very willing female. But the consequences of it were what cooled him down a little. If they had sex, she might get pregnant, and that meant he’d become a father. Not a father of a human baby, but the father of an Arcan, just like he was now. That would introduce *responsibility* into the equation, where he would feel a duty to watch over his children, and might dissuade him from wanting to be human again.

“Why only one?” he asked curiously as her hands began exploring his waist, hips, and lower torso.

“She said it was only possible to change one of us,” she shrugged. “I don’t know why. Ask her, if you want to know.”

“I think I’d better,” he said, stepping over to the bed and sitting down, and patting the bed beside him. She sat down by him, but one of her hands kept sliding up and down his side, over his hip, up and down his thigh, and her tail slinked against his lower back, hooking around him to slide its soft fur along his own in a manner he found *very* appealing. “And you came all this way alone?”

“Mostly,” she answered. “Some guides found me last week and brought me the rest of the way. It’s not like I can’t hunt, or I’m not safe,” she grinned. “I know the tricks of shadow. I was quite safe.”

“So, you learned how to hide in the shadows?”

“Can’t you?”

“Of course I can.”

“Well, I’m glad you were worried about me, even if it’s just now,” she smiled. “So, want to get started?”

“You just got here! Aren’t you tired or something?”

“A little, but I’m more curious than tired,” she grinned at him. “I changed my life to take up this purpose, Kyven. Besides, are you saying I’m not pretty enough for you?” she challenged.

“I never said that. I said I wanted to get to know you better.”

“Oh, alright,” she sighed. “We’ll take some time and get to know each other better, but I think it’s totally silly. We both know why I’m here, and we both know it’s going to happen. I was made just for you,” she said with a smile. “Mother said you’d find me very, very attractive. Am I not pretty?”

“You’re very pretty. How old are you?”

“I’m five,” she said proudly.

“Five? Trinity, that sounds so bizarre,” he sighed. “To a human, five years old is barely past weaning.”

“Well, that’s them. We’re different,” she said simply. “How old are you?”

“Twenty,” he answered.

“You don’t look that old. You look like you’re only about six.”

“I guess in Arcan years, I *am* six or so,” he said simply. “What did you do?”

“Huh?”

“Before you were changed.”

“What do any of us do? I hunted and stayed hidden,” she answered.

“You weren’t owned? You weren’t a slave?”

“No!” she said with surprise.

“You’ve never been a slave?”

“Never.”

“Your mother raised you in the wilds outside Devonshire?”

“Didn’t I just say that?” she asked. “I’ve never been close enough to humans to get a good look at them. My parents kept me far from the humans and always taught me they were very dangerous. When I was weaned and went out on my own, I obeyed their teachings. They stayed far away, so I stayed far away.”

“You’re lucky. Most Arcans have very bad experience with humans.”

“Then my parents were wise,” she said simply. “Mother told me all about you, and your past. She said you’re a Shaman.”

“I am.”

“What’s it like? Being a Shaman.”

“It hasn’t been all that good so far,” he said honestly. “It’s a lot of work, and there were some pretty harsh lessons I had to learn,” he added, rubbing at the fur on his arm absently.

“I think it’s nice. I think you’re pretty,” she told him.

“Pretty? I’ve never been called that before,” he chuckled.

“You are pretty. I’m glad I was picked,” she said in a cooing tone, leaning against him. “Do you know me better now?”

He laughed. “Not quite yet,” he said. “And I have training to do today. Why don’t you stay

with Firetail today?”

“Who is that?”

“The Shaman downstairs that answered the door. This is her house, she lets me stay here.”

“Is she your girlfriend?”

“I don’t really have one,” he answered.

“Well, you do now,” she announced. “Me!”

“So it seems.”

“You don’t seem very happy,” she said, a bit challengingly.

“I’m a little surprised,” he answered honestly. “And a little intimidated.”

“By me?” she asked with a laugh.

“No, by what you represent,” he answered. “I never really thought about what she was doing until I looked you in the face. She wants me to be a *father*,” he said, in a slightly reverent tone.

“Don’t be scared. I’ll help you through it,” she grinned.

Kyven laughed in spite of himself. “I guess I’ll get over it,” he said. “I’m bound to the fox, and I have to do what she says, whether I like it or not. She wants this, so this is what she gets.”

“Don’t make it sound like a chore,” she said archly.

He put his hand on her knee. “Sorry. I just need a little time to get used to the idea of it, that’s all. Before, she was sending me to other vixens. This time, she sent the vixen to me. I, I guess you’ll be living in here,” he said, looking around his room.

“Of course I will,” she said calmly. “At least until I know I’m pregnant. After that, if I bother you, I can move out. But I’d rather stay.”

“No. No, you can stay,” he said. “You’ll be carrying my child, I’d rather keep you close so I can make sure you’re okay.”

“That’s nice,” she said, leaning against him affectionately. “I was told one thing.”

“What?”

“She wants me pregnant before spring. I think she has something for you to do. When she told me, she said you wouldn’t be here to get the job done if I wasn’t pregnant before the snow melts. So, that’s why I’m a little, well, enthusiastic,” she giggled. “It’s not long until spring, and we don’t have long until the snow melts.”

“Well, that fits in with what I guessed at,” he said, patting her knee, and finding her fur almost sinfully soft. He found himself caressing her leg before he knew what he was doing. Trinity, was this how his own fur felt? He never really thought about it before. Umbra just leaned back on her hands, invitingly, and that spurred him to more bold investigation. He ran his hand along the soft white fur on her belly, feeling how taut and sleek her stomach was, then his hand followed that narrowing fur towards its terminus just at the crown of her pubic bone. If her fur was like his, it would be white around her genitals, but go no further. He was curious enough to check, parting her legs just enough to look at her vagina, and seeing she mirrored him in that regard, her genitals flanked by narrow strips of white fur that ended at the base of it. Her breasts were like his chest, the outside of them covered in black fur, the border between black and white just outside the area of her nipples. He traced that border from her collarbone down to her hip with his clawed finger.

“Do you like what you see?” she asked.

“Very much,” he answered in a serious voice. “You’re very beautiful.”

“I was made just for you,” she winked. “And I love it that you think I’m pretty.”

“Not pretty. Beautiful,” he corrected.

“Is that better than pretty?”

“Much.”

She positively beamed at him, then she hummed lightly in her throat when he slid his hand between her legs and he explored her the same way she explored him, out of curiosity more than any sexual desire. “Now we’re getting somewhere,” she said, giving him a hungry-eyed smile as she reached over and fondled him again.

Perhaps it was pure luck, or perhaps Danna had been waiting for the perfect moment to burst into his room, but she picked that exact moment, when the two of them had their hands in some very sensitive places. She leveled a withering look at him, one filled with scathing contempt, and then crossed her arms below her breasts and stood in an aggressive posture. “Firetail wants to know if you’re staying for lunch,” she said, but her eyes were blistering.

“I am,” Umbra said simply. “This is my room now.”

“*Your* room?” Danna demanded heatedly.

“My room. I live where he lives,” she said, patting Kyven on the thigh. “This is where he lives, so this is where I live.”

“I think you’d better reconsider that,” Danna hissed.

Kyven stood up. “Umbra, can you wait here for me?” he asked pleasantly. “Are you hungry? Would you like me to bring you something?”

“Sure! Can you bring me some meat? Um, you *do* eat it raw, don’t you?”

“Of course we do,” he told her, leaning down and patting her on the shoulder. He then stalked across the room, grabbed Danna by the upper arm, and dragged her out of his room.

“What is your problem?” Kyven demanded after closing the door. “I don’t understand you at all!”

“Problem? A woman just shows up and throws herself at you, and you don’t see a problem? I’m your friend, Kyven, and you’re starting down a road that ends in a cliff! We don’t know this woman! She could be anyone, even a Loremaster spy!”

“Sure,” Kyven said with vast levels of sarcasm. “They found out about Haven, then found some Arcan and miraculously transformed her into a species they’ve never seen before, which you said was impossible, then ran her out here to spy on us instead of marching an army in to crush us, since we kinda don’t *have* an army. I though you were a little smarter than that!”

“You’re going to trust her out of blind faith?”

“It’s not blind faith, it’s simple logic,” he answered, letting go of her. “*Nobody* could do that but *her*. She *created* me, and she’s the only one that could create another one of my kind.”

“Your kind? *Your* kind? I thought you were a *human being*, Kyv! I thought all this work was to regain your humanity, not get involved with an Arcan hussy and fuck her up a whole brood of little Arcan puppies!”

“Kits,” he corrected absently. “Fox babies are called kits.”

She leveled an icy glare on him.

“I *am* trying to get back what she took, but she also seems to have other plans,” he said. “I’ve known since before I met you that she wants to breed me. I’m an Arcan of a *monster*, Danna, not an Arcan of a common animal. I have the same powers as the monster that’s part of me, and the fox wants me to pass that on before I become human again.”

“What powers?”

“I’ve told you before, I can hide in the shadows,” he told her. “It’s not just skill, Danna, it’s a *power*. When I’m in the shadows, I vanish, I become invisible. The fox said I have some other abilities, but I’ve honestly never experimented to try to find them, I’ve always been too busy with my Shaman training. But think about it. If I had kids, and those kids were raised here, they’d become part of the defense of this place. That’s a handful of Arcans that are to-

tally invisible in the night, stalking the land and dissuading humans from invading into Arcan territory. If you think about it, you can see how valuable my children could be.”

Her face became a dark cloud. “She’s *breeding* you, like an animal?”

“She’s been trying for a while,” he said simply. “That’s what most of those vixens were about. I wasn’t just having fun with them—well, I can’t deny it wasn’t fun,” he admitted. “I was sent to them. But it seems I’m not compatible with them—well, not compatible enough. Same species, but something’s too different. So, I guess she is *her* solution to the problem,” he said, jerking his thumb back at the door. “You think I’m happy about this? Not very. But it’s *her* will, and I have to obey. I don’t have any choice if I want to be human again.”

She said nothing, just gave him a long, unfriendly look.

“What’s it to you, anyway?” he asked. “You’ve made it abundantly clear to me that you won’t have anything to do with me. It took you three months just to talk to me again. Why do you care?”

“I *am* your friend,” she said, a bit defensively.

“Then why are you jealous?” he asked bluntly.

Her face flushed a little. “I’m—” she began, then she blew out her breath. “Alright, I’m a *little* jealous. But that doesn’t really mean anything.”

“Really?” he said archly.

She blushed. “You’re my friend, of course I’d be concerned about you!” she snapped at him. “This stranger shows up and just throws herself at you! That’s just a little suspicious!”

“Now you know why. Is it so suspicious?”

“No,” she growled in reply.

“Listen. It took months to get back to where you’d speak to me. I’d rather not end up seeing more of your back than your face again, so let’s not get back to that point,” he said, in a reasonable tone. “Don’t just skulk around and be pissed at me for something that’s not really my fault. *Talk* to me.”

That seemed to hit a nerve, and she responded by hitting him. It was not gentle. She hauled off and slapped him on the shoulder, and it was hard enough to leave his skin stinging. “You want me to repeat that?” she asked, her eyes hot.

“Not especially,” he answered urbanely, which made her stamp away, muttering to herself.

What was *her* problem? He just didn’t want to be angry with him, and yet his attempt to engage her rationally about it was about as effective as trying to freeze the sun.

The other little problem stormed up the stairs and marched right up to him. Patches stood in front of him, her hands on her hips and arms akimbo, glaring up at him like a mortally offended wife. “Well?” she demanded.

“Well what?” he asked her, in a bit of confusion.

“Who is she, and what is she doing here?”

“My totem spirit sent her, for fairly obvious reasons,” he answered. “My spirit wants me to have children before she lets me be human again. If I want to get my humanity, I have to obey.”

“And I’m *so* sure it will be a burden for you,” she said spitefully.

“Patches, I’m disappointed in you,” he said calmly. “I’m not the one for you, and you know it. This jealousy doesn’t become you.”

She gave him a heart-melting look, then threw her arms around him. “I just don’t want you to stop looking at me!” she wailed. “She’s so pretty, and she’s your species! You have her, what do you need me for?”

“Child, you are my friend. I will *always* need you,” he said gently, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Friends always need each other. It’s our only bastion against loneliness. I’m not

going to forget you just because she's here. I'll always be here when you want to talk, or just when you want someone to hold your hand. Did you feel like I'd be jealous when you became Firetail's friend?" he asked pointedly. "When you had more in your life than just me and Clover and Teacup?"

"No."

"Did being Firetail's friend change how you felt about me, even after you found out Firetail sometimes comes to my room when she's feeling lonely and needs comfort?"

"No!"

"Well, there you go. The heart's not a confined space, my friend. It's boundless, and it has the capacity to love more than just a certain number of people. Umbra's being here won't change how I feel about you the tiniest bit. She's not going to push you aside."

"You mean it?"

"Of course I mean it. I think she's going to be a little demanding for a couple of weeks," he speculated, "but I think she'll calm down. She's a little... odd."

"What do you mean?"

"She's like two different people," he said, quite seriously. "There's a wisdom about her that's quite profound, but at the same time, she acts almost like a dumb Arcan, or a little child in some other ways. It's really confusing. She'll repeat that she was made just for me over and over, acting like the ones that aren't too smart, then she'll turn around and make a very astute observation about very complex things. She's a real challenge to talk to."

"Sounds strange."

"She's strange," he affirmed. "Something about her... it's odd. She's not normal."

"Well, your spirit made her."

"She made me too. Do I act like that?"

Patches had no answer to that.

"I'll have to get her to talk to me, try to dig for what about her makes me curious. But for now, let's attend to some other matters."

"Like what?"

"Breakfast," he said. "She hasn't eaten yet. Come on, let's make her a tray. Then I'll take it back and start grilling her. I want to find out what about her is making my tail itch."

Chapter 16

Umbra turned his life on its ear.

The duality of her nature drove him absolutely *insane*. She would bounce back and forth randomly from vapidness to intelligence, sometimes in mid-sentence, making it hard to get anything out of her... that, and the fact that she was deliberately evasive about some things. Some of her transitions to the dumb Arcan were obviously fake, whenever he tried to press her too much about her past, and it drove him wild knowing that she *couldn't* be that dumb, yet unable to pin her down and make her tell him what he wanted to know. Theirs was a combative relationship, where he aggressively tried to learn about her, but she put him off with a nearly practiced ease that flustered him and drove him nuts. Their talks became arguments, which often erupted into fights that Firetail had to break up, or Umbra cut off by methodically seducing him. She learned early that he wasn't quite so combative when she was amorous, so she used that like a cudgel. He *knew* she was doing it just to shut him up. He *knew* that he was being manipulated in the most basic way, but it was hopeless to stop it. After their first sexual encounter, some baser part of Kyven's nature had latched onto the idea of *willing female*, so all it really took Umbra was a few suggestive comments and a couple of touches to get him in bed and to stop talking. He was almost embarrassed at how easily Um-

bra could manipulate him, but he just couldn't seem to evade it. She could turn him on like a switch, and when she got him like that, he wasn't worried about what she knew anymore.

About the only time they weren't fighting was when they were in bed. Now in *that* matter, Kyven had no complaints. Umbra was a very enthusiastic partner, and she not only saw what they were doing as a duty, she also seemed to enjoy it quite a bit. Their first night had proved that they were compatible, as Umbra had joined to him, and she was almost insatiable after she experienced that first orgasmic joining. Umbra was much more Arcan than he, so she was more based in feeling, and she *really liked* joining. So, since it was something she really, really liked, she pursued it with almost militant aggression.

It seemed that as long as they were in bed, they were quite a happy couple. It was just all the other time they were together that wasn't quite so blissful.

There were many things about her he could deduce without her telling him anything, though, just by watching her in those rare times when they were in the same room and either not verbally fencing or not in bed. For one, she was very... strange. She had almost no inkling of some things. It was hard to explain—well, not really, but it was just odd. She seemed to have *knowledge* of many things, but no *experience* with them. Kyven eventually attributed this to a wild Arcan being *told* about things without ever seeing them. An Arcan that had lived wild in the forest didn't live in a house and as such had no practical experience with many things one would find in a home. Umbra understood the idea behind a fire, but she was afraid of it. She knew what silverware was, but didn't know how to use it. She knew what a lamp was, but was totally mystified by it, how it gave off magical light. Often, he would come into the room and find her examining the blanket to puzzle out how it was made, or examining the walls to understand how the stones were put together. Or she would be standing at the window—an open window, which often made it cold in his room—staring out with a certain wonder at the street below, just dazzled by life in Haven.

She also had a very odd turn of mind when it came to language. She seemed incapable of comprehending that a word could have more than one meaning. She seemed to latch onto only one definition of a word, and afterwards, even after she was told that the word could have a different meaning, she would always associate that word with the first definition. Now this was bizarre, since she seemed to speak fluent Noraavi. She *knew* the language, but she just couldn't seem to get it down that the word *run* might have more than one meaning.

For that matter, her way of speaking was also unusual, beyond her bouncing between smart and dumb. She always spoke in the simplest terms possible, and she didn't embellish her words or use flourishing descriptions. Her idea of *pretty* was a good example. When she liked what something looked like, it was pretty to her. Not handsome, beautiful, lovely, charming, or cute, but *pretty*. There were no degrees in her mind, no varying degrees of pretty. It was either pretty or it wasn't, and since all pretty was the same, she didn't embellish that concept. It was just *pretty*, whether it was a cute puppy or the most gorgeous sunset ever seen by man or Arcan in the history of the world. To her, Kyven was pretty, just as he thought she was pretty, and Firetail was pretty, and the ivory comb he'd bought for her so she could comb her blue-black hair was pretty. They were all of equal weight in her mind.

Outside of that, and her ongoing war with her, she was actually not bad. She was a very earthy person, logical and rational, and had a great deal of common sense. She was rather smart as well, but more than that, she was very *cunning*, just like a shadow fox Arcan should be. They were both beings of guile and deceit, and Kyven learned quickly that she was both manipulative and treacherous, capable of tying anyone in the house outside of Danna around her finger any time she pleased. Firetail seemed to understand her manipulations and gave into them with a certain amount of amusement, as if playing a game, but poor Patches was

bowled over by Umbra's guile and was all but held in thrall by her. Despite her *seeming* innocence about many things, Umbra was very worldly when it came to manipulating people into doing what she wanted them to do, and the poor panda had no defense against her. Patches found herself in the enviable position of all but being Umbra's maid when Kyven was out training, but, on the other hand, Umbra seemed to have a genuine affection for the girl, and didn't make her do anything *too* outrageous. A little stealing from the kitchen, a couple of harmless little things in the house mysteriously disappearing and reappearing in her room, those kinds of things.

The only one that Umbra couldn't dupe was Danna. Danna had taken an immediate dislike to her, and try as she might, Umbra couldn't get close to her. Danna wouldn't even talk to her. The human just gave her that icy stare that never failed to send Umbra scurrying for the safety of their room any time the female got anywhere near her. The only time they were in the same room was during meals, and Danna pointedly ignored the female, usually spending much of her time giving Kyven hot looks. For some reason, Danna objected to Umbra, and she just wouldn't see the situation for what it was.

Toby was a slightly different matter. Toby had taken quite a liking to Umbra, and Umbra seemed to really like him as well. She was honestly timid with him at first, because her parents had taught her to fear humans, but Toby's honest friendliness wooed her into a wary association. She was very curious about him, because he was an unknown, and not what she was told humans were supposed to be. Toby was not a *good* man. He was a mercenary, a fighter, and had killed his fair share of both men and Arcans over the years. But he was earnest. He was affable and kind, in his way, and very honest. He could be kind to those he liked, but was indifferent about those he did not. Something about Toby really interested Umbra, and she spent much of the time not with Kyven talking to the hunter.

Kyven didn't mind, really. What he had with Umbra wasn't love. It wasn't necessarily even *like*. It was duty. He found her to be a nice enough person, if a little maddening, and they had fun in bed, but their relationship wasn't built on much more than that. What she did and who she talked to wasn't really his concern. They were together for one purpose, and one purpose only. Umbra was definitely interested in him, and beyond the fact that he was the sire of her future child, but there was no love there, on either side. Umbra liked him, liked him a lot, but didn't love him.

He found he could live with that.

There were a few love-like tendencies. He was protective over her, because she was so childlike in some ways. After she nearly burned the house down playing with an alchemical device that produced a flame to light the stove and the fireplace—at least when he or Firetail didn't use Shaman magic to do it—both he and Firetail realized she needed a guardian to keep her out of mischief... which became Patches. Her innocence about some things made her endearing. He found her to be a brisk conversationalist, at least when they weren't fighting, her strange mind seeing to the core of matters even as it maintained that childish façade. She was playful as well, often getting him to wrestle on the floor like a couple of kids in their more compatible moments. As long as she wasn't dodging his questions, they were quite domestic, almost a couple... but not quite.

But, as hard as she tried to be mysterious about her past, he did worm some of it out of her, in their more intimate moments. Like many women, Umbra got very talkative and snuggly in bed, either to sleep or have sex, and it was in those moments that he struck and got the best results. Those tidbits by themselves didn't make much sense, but when he started putting them together, he started to understand the true nature of her. That nature became apparent when he pieced together those tidbits, and realized he was wrong about his initial assumption

that she was originally an Arcan. She was not.

She wasn't an Arcan... or she didn't start out as one. So, if she wasn't an Arcan, and she wasn't a human, well, there was only one other thing she could be.

That realization shocked him, almost to the core. Umbra had been born a *shadow fox*. His prejudices ran away from him at first, but then, when he sat down and thought about it, he realized he needed to keep an open mind about this. After all, he had been changed too. He had been changed from a human into an Arcan... well, Umbra had been changed into an Arcan as well, but from the *other direction*.

One of the reasons it shocked him so much was because of the implications of it. Humans and Arcans were blatantly related in their similarities. It was said that the Great Ancients created the Arcans from animals to serve mankind, by giving them human-like bodies and more intelligence so they could perform tasks. That was what Danna had told them about the Loremaster's view of Arcans. But, at their core, they were still animals, without souls, and without the true intellect of humanity. Kyven had always secretly suspected that humans and Arcans were closely related, but the truth of Umbra showed him that he was wrong. He wasn't sure if Umbra was a typical Arcan or a creation of powerful spirit magic, but the end result was the same. A monster, a shadow fox, had been transformed into an Arcan. As the fox changed him by taking his humanity and giving him a part of the shadow fox, he changed her by taking a part of her shadow fox nature and *giving* her humanity.

She *was* an Arcan. So was he, for that matter. How they were created didn't matter as much as that simple truth, that they were just as Arcan as any other Arcan in Haven. Umbra was no different from other Arcan females outside of her personality, and personalities were different for everyone. She was indistinguishable from other Arcans, and physiologically she was as Arcan as Firetail. The fact that she joined to him told him just how completely Arcan she was. Though they were created by magic, both of them *were* Arcans.

Thinking of Arcans as infused by humanity was a disturbing philosophical epiphany. Were the Arcans really animals infused with humanity, humans infused with animals, or were they something else?

Either way, when he looked at her in that light on a fine April morning when it was very nearly warm enough outside to melt the snow, but not quite, he saw that when one looked at her with that truth, many of her little quirks made sense. She had knowledge but not experience because the fox had obviously tampered with her mind, had taught her Noraavi and gave her knowledge of many things, but since she had no direct experience with them, she was still quite childlike in her reactions. It explained her earthy nature, since animals were eminently practical creatures. But it made him wonder just where the tampering ended and her true self began. How much of her was the *real* female? How much of her fox personality was hers, and how much of it was the creation of the spirit? Would she have been like a shadow fox animal had the spirit done nothing to her, as wild as the Arcans that roamed the lands outside Haven?

Another disturbing epiphany. Were wild Arcans born without *enough* humanity in them to give them human intelligence? Was the humanity within Arcans the factor that gave them their intelligence, or was it something else?

He spent a long night coming to terms with that idea. He was living with and sleeping with a woman who used to be an animal. But, he looked at it from the long view; wouldn't *she* feel the same way about *him*? After all, he too wasn't born Arcan. He was born human, and transformed into an Arcan by magic, just as she was transformed from a shadow fox. Clearly, the spirit had given her an Arcan mind as well as a body, making her just as intelligent as, if not more intelligent than, most others in Haven. Her inexperience with Arcan society made her

seem dumb, or childish, and she had a playful bent in her personality that reinforced that, but in reality, Umbra wasn't monstrous or revolting, she was just... different. He could accept that difference, because he wasn't exactly normal either. He had no right to call her down when he was just as unnatural as she was.

Learning the truth of her changed their relationship. Most of their fighting was over her refusal to answer his questions, but when he discovered the truth of her, he stopped asking those questions and just started watching her, observing her. That took quite a bit of tension out of their relationship, and it made things much more peaceful. He still dug at her from time to time to keep her on her toes and not make it apparent to her that he knew, because he wanted to observe her, to see how she acted. It was deception, but on the other hand, she was quite deceitful with him, so it was all fair in his mind.

It made their life interesting. They were both creatures of deceit, living together, deceiving each other on a daily basis. Kyven saw it as good practice for the jobs in his future, getting used to spinning a deception and maintaining it, that deception being his pretending he didn't know Umbra's true nature. He goaded her in some ways, created a few fights just for the sake of appearances, but mainly he just watched her, watched and learned. He watched her learn about Arcan society and customs, watched her quickly learn about all those things of which she was told but with which she had no experience, like learning how to eat with utensils, learning how to start a fire, and her painful period of integrating into Arcan society.

That wasn't fun for her. She wasn't used to others outside her group of known friends—or enemies, so she was very standoffish, tentative, wary, like she'd been with Toby. It was an indication that she had *some* aspects of her former life, for foxes were solitary creatures. She hovered on the verge of open hostility when forced to interact, at least at first, and that created a few tense scenes when the very social Arcans encountered someone not as social as they. Firetail and Patches were the ones to teach Umbra about being social, and helped her adjust to the idea of living in a group environment, both inside and outside the house. But, as time went by, Umbra adjusted, and went from watching the comings and goings on the street from the window of their room to short jaunts outside to speak to other Arcans, to slowly immerse herself into her new life and the change of custom.

It had to be much more radical for her than it was for him. Though the culture of the Arcans was radically different from humans, at least the Arcans had a *semblance* of human culture, and that was a base from which Kyven could draw. But Umbra had no such base. She was taken from one lifestyle and thrown into one that was tremendously different, and quite profound. Though the fox had educated her about some of it, that *knowledge* only went so far. She had to *experience* it, and the course of that experience was not smooth. She made a large number of social gaffes and little mistakes, but she also learned quickly. She went from an animal's life with an animal's mind to living in an intelligent society as an intelligent being. The fox had given her intelligence to match those around her, and had clearly tampered with her, but that innocence about her was one of her childish qualities, and was also a stark monument to how different she was, and how huge a step she had undertaken when she accepted this task. It would be the same as if he was changed into a shadow fox and loosed into the wild; that was how huge it was for her.

He found himself truly admiring her. She had wanted a grand adventure, and she was living it. She was doing something that no one else had ever done, moving not only between cultures, but between major animal groups. He could look at her and know that she had once been a fox, but after the initial shock of it wore off and he observed her, studied her, he saw that it truly *did not matter*. The fox had changed her mind as well as her body, and that change made her just as Arcan and just as intelligent as anyone around her.

It did raise some disturbing theological points in his mind, though. Umbra was born a fox, and was now an Arcan. The Loremasters taught that animals and Arcans had no souls... so where did that leave Umbra? Was Umbra possessed of a soul? She was indistinguishable from any other Arcan... she *was* an Arcan. And so was he. So, did she have a soul as a fox? Did she somehow gain a soul as an Arcan... or did Kyven *lose* his soul when he was stripped of his humanity?

There were just too many scary thoughts there. He didn't think about those things very long, or very often. The implications were just too dire.

Kyven continued his training despite the disruption that Umbra brought to him. He spent some time each day maintaining his endurance through exercise, which Umbra sometimes joined with him, but the rest of it was devoted to sharpening his mind. Firetail helped him by devising mental exercises for him dealing with memory and imagination that he practiced daily, and he also spent nearly as much time out in the city looking at everything in as much detail as he could, from Arcans to buildings to rocks to snow to stables to hay to food, *everything*. He needed a large base of memories of detailed images to be an effective practitioner of illusion, and those jaunts outside also served to help him practice his illusions. He had a constant illusion going at all times, and sometimes had more than one going at the same time. That was a trick he taught himself, and it was *extremely* demanding. Concentrating on two illusions at once took almost all his mental faculties, leaving him virtually incapacitated and oblivious to the world, and it was also extremely demanding on his body. He thought running while using an illusion was hard, trying to keep two highly demanding spells operating at the same time, both demanding of his energy and demanding of his every iota of concentration, and left him both trembling with exhaustion and mentally drained to the point of listlessness. It was definitely *not* something he would use as anything but a last resort.

In the month since Umbra's arrival, Kyven felt that he had progressed satisfactorily. He was getting to the point where he could produce illusions from only his imagination with a fair degree of success on the first try, but each subsequent attempt allowed him to correct little things and make it more and more believable. Creating objects he had studied was easy for him from the creation point, and the illusions were utterly indistinguishable from the real thing. Firetail and Clover were amazed by his aptitude for illusion, and Clover was just a tiny bit jealous. Kyven was a weak Shaman in any realm of Shaman magic *except* illusions, but in that one specialized field, he had no equal. His totem status gave him overwhelming advantages that no other Shaman could hope to gain unless they were totem to a spirit like the shadow fox themselves.

March yielded to April, and a warm snap of temperatures that were *almost* above freezing, coupled with sunny skies, warned him that time was running out, that spring was coming, and the spring was the harbinger of a major action. He stood at the window as the sun went down, feeling a little edgy. Tomorrow, Toby would leave Haven with Clover and a small party of Arcans to begin his journey to distant Alamar and his mission to buy every Arcan he could get his hands on. He would be traveling by sled until the snows melted, then on by wagon, carrying a *huge* number of crystals with him. The Shaman had all but killed themselves all winter producing crystals, and as a result, Haven probably had as much crystal wealth as Avannar. Those crystals, separated by size, weight, color, and value, were all ready to move out to various Masked agents along the border between human territory and the wilderness, where those agents would buy out kennels en masse and cause strip Noraam of every Arcan they could buy. The council had outdone themselves with a clever plan to set up a central staging encampment about fifty minars north of Deep River, a small city of tents back away from the river so it couldn't be seen by merchant boats, where Arcans would be

transitioned from slavery to freedom even as they were built into groups and then moved out. An elaborate supply system had been set up that would all but depopulate Haven of able-bodied Arcans, for those masses had to be fed. Foragers and farmers would be hard at work stocking supply stations along predetermined routes for the freed slaves, while those remaining behind would be building houses, tents, any kind of shelter at all on the plain by the river south of the city, creating a temporary refugee camp where the saved Arcans would stay as they integrated into Haven's society. Not all of them would live in the city itself, but many would. The rest would filter out to the villages around the city, and quite a few *new* villages were already being planned and built, mainly to the southwest. The coal supply routes from the mountains past the prairie could stand to have some villages along it, the council decided, so they were going to build Arcan settlements along that vital supply route. And the sudden influx of new Arcans would serve to both populate those villages and supply food by farming the fertile prairie land between Haven and the coal-producing mountains.

Kyven could agree with what they were doing. The council was expanding the borders of Haven, both because they had to and because it was necessary. By civilizing the land between Haven and the coal they used, they were securing that supply line against monsters and wild Arcans... and maybe against future human aggression. By establishing it now, it would make it easier to defend in the future.

There were several council members coming. Kyven opened the window and let the cold air into his room and looked out, and saw them. Five of them walking up towards the gate of Firetail's modest compound of two small houses and the garden, now snow-choked. They waved to him when they saw him in the window, and he waved back. He didn't know them very well, because he was too busy with his own mission to get embroiled. They came over and ate dinner sometimes, but that was the extent to which he socialized with them. He didn't even know all their names, though they'd been told to him, several times. He was just too busy to worry about things like that. Firetail and Sharp, the hereditary descendent of the original Firetail, were the only ones he could ever really remember.

"What is it?" Umbra asked, pushing under his arm and looking out the window under his chin. "Oh, them again. They're very strange."

"They're among the ones that lead the others," he answered.

"Such a silly idea," she chided.

"The council? It seems to work."

"It's still silly," she said simply. "What are you doing today?"

"Same as I do every day."

"Well, we're mating before you get started," she announced. "It's nearly spring, and I'm still not sure if I'm pregnant. I was told I have to be pregnant before the snow melts. We'll be mating twice a day until I'm sure."

"You make it sound like a chore," he teased.

"It can be when you're not doing it for fun," she answered simply. "Of course, I'll be saying something different once we get started," she giggled.

"Well, I think I can bring myself to accomplish this dreadful chore," he said with a mocking sigh, which earned him a stomp on his foot.

Their sexual relationship was healthy and fun, and probably the most stable part of their relationship, since the whole thing was built on sex. They had sex at least once a day, out of duty, but that didn't mean that they didn't enjoy it. At first, Umbra was a one-position woman, probably a holdover from her life as a fox, with her on her hands and knees and him behind her. But he introduced her to the *fun* side of sex, different positions, foreplay, some pretty alien concepts to her before, which only made it more apparent to him that she had

started as something radically different from what she was now. Actually, it was her sexual habits that first got him started on the idea that she may not have been an Arcan before, because she had knowledge of how Arcans did it, but no experience... and there was just no such thing as an Arcan her age being a virgin. Sex was a casual activity among Arcans, and even wild, she'd have had sex long before then. She'd been enthusiastic but a bit timid that first time, and in a very fox-like manner, she'd just knelt down and waited for him that first night, like a fox waiting for a male to mount her. She'd come a long way since then, much more playful, much more daring, much more curious, much more intimate. But, since she always assigned one word and one word only to anything, words and concepts like *having sex* and *making love* and Danna's crude reference to *fucking* were all just equated to the word *mating* in her mind.

Since it had to be done before they got started, they got to the point. They fooled around a while, which got Umbra in the mood, but before long he had his jaws locked on the back of her neck as he mounted her, her tail shivering in anticipation. That, of course, was the exact moment they chose to open the door. Kyven didn't look, but the scents coming from the door were Firetail and Danna. But he was too Arcan now to stop just because of company, even if it was Danna. He fully mounted Umbra before he gave them any notice, then held her by the hips as he looked to the females. "What is it?" he asked calmly, as if he and Umbra were sitting in separate chairs reading.

Danna's look was withering, but she said nothing. Firetail just gave him a slight smile. "I was wondering if you're coming to breakfast," Firetail told them. "It's getting a little late."

"We'll be down in a bit," Kyven said. "As you can see, we're a little busy."

"So I see," Firetail smiled, then she left. Danna lingered in the doorway, her eyes hot. It was the first time she'd ever *seen* them in such a position, and Kyven felt oddly annoyed by her staring.

He made a specific point to start moving his hips, which made Umbra growl in pleasure, demonstrating he was unmoved by her accusing gaze, blatantly having sex with Umbra with his eyes locked with Danna's own. "If you're going to stay, want to get a better look? I'm sure you could see everything if you got behind us and we spread our legs a little bit and I raise my tail. We may as well make a show of it."

Danna's cheeks instantly flamed scarlet red, and she almost slammed the door in her rush to escape, which made Umbra laugh. "Why is she like that?" Umbra asked as Kyven leaned over her. She braced her hands on the bed as he pressed himself against her back, one hand grabbing her breast as the other supported him so she wasn't supporting his full weight.

"She doesn't know what she wants, I think," he answered.

"Would you mate her?" she asked directly.

"In a heartbeat, but she won't have anything to do with me," he answered honestly. "Besides, I think I'm busy mating someone else right now," he noted dryly.

Umbra giggled. "Then get to work," she commanded. "I'm not feeling anything—" she broke off into a deep throaty growl when Kyven obeyed.

It was short, but very enjoyable. She joined him after his climax, which caused him to hold very still while she panted through the intense, orgasmic pleasure of it, feeling her literally tremble under him. Despite her sexually adventurous disposition, this was still her favorite position, and she always seemed to have the most intense orgasms and most intense joinings this way. After her grip on him eased, she rose up onto her knees, pushing him up with her, and just let him stroke her fur and fondle her breasts as they entered the "snuggly" phase of their bed behavior. These were the moments when he usually sprang surprise questions on her to get honest answers, and she was almost always expecting them anymore. It was just

another aspect of the game they played, as he dug for the truth and she artfully evaded it... but that game was itself a deception, since he knew the truth already. It was a lie within a lie, and somehow, he felt that the fox would approve of the two Arcans she created being as deceitful with each other as she was with them.

Guile and deceit. It was the foundation of their breed.

"Mmm, not yet," she hummed when she felt him prepare to release her and pull out of her. He complied with her request, pulling her tighter against him and putting his arms around her, holding her. "So, where is your surprise question?" she asked with a soft chuckle.

"None today," he told her, reaching down and fondling her genitals in a way that made her dig her claws into the arm holding her around her stomach. "I'm thinking of something else." "What?"

"Doing that again," he said huskily in her ear.

"I'm all yours," she panted in agreement.

"I'm not ready yet. But I demand payment for my services," he said in a gentle yet commanding voice.

"Oh? And what would that be?"

"An answer."

"And here I thought there'd be no questions," she giggled.

"No surprise ones. I want you to see this one coming," he told her. "I want the truth."

"The truth, eh? And what makes you think I'll give you that? Isn't that against our religion?"

He actually laughed. "It might be," he agreed. "But no truth, no second wind," he said, even as his hand got her *very* ready for a second engagement.

"I-hey! Kyven, that's *cheating*!" she gasped when she realized what he was doing.

"There's no cheating in a game that has no rules," he said, holding her tightly as he literally masturbated her. She was still hyper-sensitive from their first session, and she couldn't deny the sensations his hand was producing in her. She was too open to sexual pleasure to ignore it anyway. "Now, do I get the truth, or do I leave you hanging?"

"Bastard!" she accused. She didn't even try to get away, because she knew it was pointless. Kyven was *much* stronger than she was, and he had a grip on her she could not break. Umbra was eminently practical. There was no use struggling when it would produce no gain.

"So, do I get my answer?"

"Do I have a choice?"

"Of course you do, but it's up to you if you want to spend the rest of the day horny. And I suppose I'll be late getting home tonight," he added casually.

She laughed ruefully. "What did you want to know?"

"You'll be honest?"

"As honest as you think I am," she countered playfully.

"Does it bother you that I was human?" he asked her.

"You wanted an honest answer about *that*? So silly!" she laughed. "Of course it doesn't bother me!"

"Good. Because it doesn't bother me that you were a monster."

She froze, then pushed away hard enough to break free of him. She turned on her knees and looked at him, quite seriously, then she grinned. "So, figured it out, did you?" she asked.

"A while ago," he admitted. "I was just enjoying the game... but I think I'll be leaving soon, so I wanted to tell you the truth early enough for me to enjoy it," he grinned. "Why did you hide it?"

"*She* told me to," she answered. "She wasn't sure how you'd react to me."

"Well, I was a little freaked out when I first realized it, but then I thought about it a while, and found it doesn't bother me," he told her. "What you were doesn't matter as much as what you are now. You have a few odd little quirks, but aside from being a little eccentric, you're just like the other females to me."

"I'm glad you know the truth," she said earnestly. "It makes me happy you aren't rejecting me."

"Over something like that? I don't have much room to talk, you know," he said, patting his furry stomach pointedly. "I'm not what I used to be either. We're both the same, Umbra. Two of a kind. Literally and figuratively."

"Huh?"

"In more than one way," he corrected. Umbra didn't have a very extensive vocabulary. "So, now that you know that I know, be honest with me."

She laughed. "Honesty? Honesty! You'll get no such thing from me!"

"Then I'll just have to figure it out on my own," he grinned. "So, lie a little bit about what it was like before," he said, leaning back and sitting down.

She climbed up and straddled him, sitting in his lap, looking down at him with a smile as her hands rested on his shoulder. "What it was like? I think you'll be disappointed," she answered. "I was very young, only just out on my own. I was a very bold and carefree female, and before I could even find my own territory, the mother came to me and offered me this chance, along with a few others. She gathered us together, and then she tested us."

"Tested? What kind of tests?"

"Questions. We're very smart monsters, Kyven. We're not just animals," she told him pointedly. "The mother changed my mind to give me Arcan intelligence, but she didn't have to make me *that much* smarter than I already was. She was looking for an adventurous female that hadn't yet had any kits, and I'd always dreamed of being something more than what I was. My earliest memories were watching the birds and wishing I could fly too," she said, a bit wistfully. "Anyway, the mother decided I was best suited for it, and so she took me and changed me. It *hurt*," she said with a shudder.

"I wasn't awake when I was changed," he told her. "I guess it would have been painful."

She glanced around. "I don't think you were changed the same way," she told him, a bit conspiratorially.

She was there. Kyven felt her behind him, and then felt her paws come to rest on his shoulders, rearing up, and he could almost feel her eyes looking down at the back of his head. *Do not ask questions unless you are ready for the answers*, came her ominous warning.

"Why could you only change one?" he asked immediately. "It's because of *me*, isn't it?"

I could only make one because I could not change her as I changed you. You are a Shaman. That gives me certain hold over you because of our deal. I had to use more... dramatic means to create Umbra.

"What does that mean?"

Are you sure you want to know?

"Who are you talking to?" Umbra asked, her face puzzled.

"*Her*," he answered. "And yes, I'm sure I want to know."

I was able to easily give to you because what I gave in return for what I took is the essence of what I am. I lack the ability to give to her what I gave to you, because it is not me. But where I could give you what makes you Arcan by granting you something from myself, I could not give to her what makes her Arcan. So I had to take it from elsewhere.

"Where?"

There are no happy endings.

She killed someone. She killed a human and used the human to create Umbra. That might have shocked him. But how did she do it?

No, she *already* had humanity. *His* humanity. She could only make *one*.

There was a cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

She was made for you, she said simply. *And she was made from you*.

“But... but your promise,” he said in a bare whisper.

To regain your humanity, I will have to take it from someone else. If I take it from Umbra, you strip your children of their mother and she will be a shadow fox once more. But I can take it from anyone. What made you human, and what I took, wasn't unique to you. Take it from another, and you will be human again.

He should have been shocked, but he wasn't. It wasn't the first time she'd betrayed him. She took what made him human, and put it in Umbra to create an Arcan—

To create an Arcan.

A truth struck him like a thousand stars in his eyes. The Arcans were *part human*. She had made him by taking a piece of him and replacing it with an animal, and then she did the same with Umbra by taking an animal and putting that piece of him into her. The end result was the meeting of the two in the middle, and that was what the Arcans were. They were the bridge between humans and animals, a merging, a *hybrid*, created by magic. Kyven and Umbra were Arcan, just as Arcan as any other Arcan, and they were creations of *magic*, not born to it.

You see the truth. You and Umbra are a resurrection of the ancient past. You are the first Arcans since the ancient war to be created using magic.

“Magic?” he whispered.

That is how they did it, Shaman. The Great Ancients did not use their mythical technology to create the Arcans. They used alchemy.

Alchemy? It was always said that they used their science to create the Arcans, created to be beasts of burden and to fight in the Great War that brought about the downfall of their civilization.

To them, alchemy was nothing but a science, Shaman. A new science, one they did not entirely understand. The Arcans were one of the results of their experimentation with forces they did not comprehend. Another result was the destruction of their world.

She seemed to push more weight on his shoulders, leaning her head down over his shoulder, her nose coming into view in the corner of his eye. *Understand this*, she communicated to him, which made Umbra gasp. Obviously, she could hear it too. *Long ago, during the height of the human civilization, they fell into war with one another. The war was ghastly beyond anything you could imagine, she intoned in a grim manner. It raged for a generation, and reached a point where the reason for it became lost in the hatred the two sides had for one another. But, as wars go, there is inevitably a victor. That victor was the side opposed to the civilization that held these lands, Shaman. This side, in its desperation, began experiments on anything they hoped would turn the war back in their favor. One of those experiments was alchemy. Those experiments led to the Arcans.*

They were originally created to fight in that war, Shaman. They are stronger than humans, faster, tougher. They were the perfect soldiers, created with a powerful pack mentality and need for social structure that displays itself even today, even among breeds whose animal halves are solitary. They used animals indigenous to this continent as much as possible, using canines and cats most, since they were plentiful and had the necessary qualities that made good Arcans. There were more exotic ones, Arcans created from animals from other lands, but they lacked enough breeding partners to sustain their numbers, and they have died

out over the years since. That is why you see so many canine Arcans, Shaman, and cats being the next most numerous. The Arcans were a success in the field of alchemy, and it spurred more experiments.

As I have told you before, that was their doom. They pushed too far, and you know what happened next. The destruction of their civilization stemmed from alchemy, Shaman. What I did to you and to Umbra is naught but what those ancients did. Remember, there is nothing that alchemy can produce that cannot be done by a Shaman, though there are many things a Shaman can do that cannot be reproduced by alchemy.

The Arcans were created by your ancestors as nothing but tools of war, she told him, And their very creation was an act of brutality. Understand, my Shaman, it takes two to create an Arcan; the animal and the human, and the nature of the creation required that the human be willing—or at least not struggle during the process. But what those humans were not told was that they would not be the end result. The animal became the Arcan, Shaman. The human only served to sacrifice himself to grant his humanity to the animal. The human died, and the animal was changed. Those ancient scientists deceived their population in the most horrible ways imaginable, never telling their sacrificial lambs that volunteering for the project would kill them, only saying that they would be the Arcans that resulted. And they did not restrain themselves to just those who volunteered, or who they volunteered by force. Towards the end, anyone who was of no use to the war effort was taken to be used to create an Arcan. The old, the young, the ill, the mentally unfit, all of them were marched to the Arcan chamber and died to create soldiers that could fight. Even children. Not more than a fair share of infants were sacrificed to create Arcans.

Kyven's mind shuddered at the image of a long line of old men, young children, the sick, the injured, the insane, being herded towards a steel door beyond which lay their unknowing death.

That is the grim origin of the Arcans, Shaman. They were created for war, and created by exacting a horrific price on the humans who died to make them. That is what we fight against, Shaman. The Loremasters want to resurrect the past, but we will not permit them to become what perished from the earth.

“If the animal becomes the Arcan, how—”

You? I had to change the original process, but the end result was the same. It still required you to sacrifice your humanity, though. The night I created you, Shaman, I literally killed you. You had to die for the transformation to be complete. What I took from you to enact the change became what was given to Umbra to create her.

“All those people,” Kyven whispered, his mind almost reeling at the enormity of it.

You do not comprehend the totality of that war, Shaman. It began as a war of conquest, but descended into a war of total destruction. Billions of humans died. Entire races were wiped out. An entire continent was so devastated that even today it is a poisoned wasteland that cannot support life. The scope of it was such that what was done to create the Arcans was but one small atrocity among ones that would frighten me to repeat. The lives taken to create the Arcans were just a tiny fraction of those who were slaughtered in that war.

Any time you find your determination wavering, Shaman, think of this. Remember that the tale of the Arcans is only one of many travesties, atrocities, and horror stories of those ancient times, and know that you are working to prevent anything like that from ever happening again.

She was gone, leaving him to his frightened thoughts.

He was almost stunned. She told him a secret that he doubted even the Arcans themselves knew, that they had been literally created to fight a war, and it had cost human lives to make

them. For every Arcan the Great Ancients created, one of their own people had to die... and from the way the spirit talked, they had made *armies* of Arcans. Hundreds of thousands of people, maybe even millions, deceived into giving up their lives to fight a war that they were losing, or may have already lost.

And then, flushed with success over the Arcan experiments, they continued exploring the boundaries of alchemy, searching for a new weapon, a new breakthrough to regain the advantage in their great war, and then caused the breach into the spirit world that destroyed ancient man and seeded the world with the crystals man now used. He wondered briefly how they used alchemy without crystals, since the crystals came *afterward*... but they had to have come up with something.

He wondered what it would look like, to see an army of uniformed Arcans on some battlefield, fighting in that terrible war. But it wasn't a good kind of wonder.

Umbra just stared at him, then wordlessly put her chin on his shoulder. He held her close, comforted her... it wasn't every day one learned she was created from the death of someone else. Kyven had *died* to create Umbra, had sacrificed his humanity to give it to her. Though he wasn't really dead, the method was still the same.

"I'm sorry," she said in a small voice.

"I don't blame you, silly girl," he chided gently, patting her back. "Dear Trinity, I've been sleeping with my daughter."

Umbra shivered, then burst out laughing, which made her relax.

Kyven wondered why she told him that, but it didn't take much to realize why. Knowing the truth of the Arcans didn't make him revolted or repulsed, it instead made him more resolved. They were the descendents of Arcans who had been created for nothing but to fight and die. They hadn't been given any choice. They had been created from animals, torn away from what they knew and forced to fight for their creators, and when the breach happened, they changed. They ceased being soldiers, but instead became property. They stopped fighting that ghastly war, but then were forced into a different kind of service. The Arcans had never had a break, he saw. They were created to fight and die in that terrible war, and when they no longer had a purpose, humanity enslaved them after the war was over and civilization broke down. They had never known their own freedom from the day the first Arcan was created by their experiments in alchemy, until the original seventeen founded Haven. How many years had the Arcans been slaves, either slaves to the army fighting a war, or slaves to the remnants of humanity? It was almost frightening to contemplate.

That was what he'd be fighting for. He'd be fighting to give the Arcans the one thing they had never had... freedom.

Sacrificing his humanity was a small price to pay when one looked at that big picture, if his children could help protect that freedom.

There was another reason, he saw. He didn't have much more time. Toby would be leaving tomorrow, and he had no doubt that the fox would send him out soon afterward, most likely the very day they confirmed Umbra was pregnant. He had a hunch he was being sent back to Avannar, so he didn't have to go as far as Toby did. That meant that some things needed to be done, and he didn't have time to dawdle. And one of the things he'd been meaning to do was sitting in his lap right now.

"Umbra?"

"Hmm?"

"You were born a shadow fox."

"Yes."

"Teach me."

She pushed away enough to look at him. "Teach you what?"

"You were born knowing what I don't know. You have instinct, I don't. *She* told me that the shadow powers I have could rival my Shaman magic if I learned to use them, but I've never tried. Teach me."

"Teach you? I can't teach you," she said. "It's not something I can really teach. I can only tell you what I can do, but I can't explain *how* I do it. I just... *do* it."

"She told me that too. But if I have an idea of what I can do, it will help me."

"Alright, that I understand. We *are* the shadow, Kyven. The shadow is a living thing, and it will respond to us, because we're just asking ourselves for help. When we hide in the shadows, we join to them and it conceals us, for a shadow within a shadow is invisible... they join together and become one. We can call them through us, creating shadow where there isn't any, like a fog of shadow, to confuse our enemies. I've learned how to change shadows that are already there, making shapes. I used to do it for fun as a kit," she smiled. She held her hand out to the side, and he saw a *fog* of darkness surround her hand, like a wispy mist of pure shadow. She waved her hand through it, and it billowed behind her hand leaving little eddies and swirls, like dark smoke. She raised a single finger, and all the swirling darkness stopped in the air, then formed into the rough shape of a rabbit, wavering in the air. She then pushed away from him and turned on his lamp, then turned and pointed to the wall, where her shadow was. She took on a serious expression, and then her shadow grew visibly larger, then took on a different shape. It went from being a shadow of her to being the shadow of a tree. But then the shadow pulled off the wall! It became a tree of shadow, but it had no features, no depth. It still looked like a silhouette, but it was clearly not on the wall. It was a two dimensional shape, but it wasn't attached to the wall, and turning his head this way and that showed him that it really was in three dimensions, it just had no depth and no visible marks to give it the appearance of depth. It was a curious thing. It would appear a floating shadow with no dimension no matter what angle one looked at it. "This was one way I hunted," she told him, reforming the shadow into a ball, and then pulling it over them. Suddenly, all light was swallowed up, leaving them in a murky darkness that seemed to have hints of light.

Naturally. There could be no shadow without light. So there could never be total darkness, else there was no shadow. So, though her ball of shadow wasn't total darkness, it *did* distort what he could see, turning the room into a dark, writhing image that made his eyes swim and his stomach a little queasy. Given that kind of thing before its eyes, any animal would be frozen in fear and confusion, or might bolt wildly in any direction, maybe even running headlong into a tree.

"Clever," he said, looking around.

"If they caught my scent while I was stalking them, I did this. That way they couldn't see to run. Sometimes they ran away, sometimes they ran towards me, sometimes they even ran into trees," she giggled. "But that's all I know. Just remember that the shadow is your friend. Ask it to help you, and it will."

"I'll practice it while I'm doing my illusion training," he promised her. "And I hope you don't mind if we just go on downstairs. What I learned from *her* kind of spoiled my mood."

She smiled and patted him on the chest. "You owe me tonight," she said archly.

"I'll be happy to give you all the attention you want tonight," he told her with a smile. "Thank you for understanding." He reached into her little shadowy rabbit, felt the coolness there, and on an impulse, tried to summon that cool feeling through his fur on purpose. He did it the way he called power as a Shaman, he beckoned to the shadow. And it responded! Kyven's hand wavered, and then vanished within the foggy shadows, becoming invisible within the fog of shadow. Kyven had never made just one part of his body vanish before.

It was a start, though. He'd done something he'd never done before, and that was the way one began learning a new skill.

They went downstairs and took their seats at the breakfast table, but only Firetail remained there. She handed Kyven a plate of buffalo meat, which he took with a nod. "Sorry," he apologized.

"I sensed *her* up there with you," Firetail noted. "What did she want?"

"She... told me something I don't think I really wanted to know," he said with a shiver.

"She told us where Arcans come from!" Umbra announced.

"I would think you'd know that by now, dear," Firetail said with an amused smile.

"No, she told us how the Arcans *began*," Kyven elaborated. "She explained how they did it."

"Ah. Quite a sad tale, isn't it?"

"You *know*?"

She nodded simply. "*We* remember, Kyven, where the humans have forgotten. We don't tell humans for obvious reasons."

He could only nod. How would humanity react to find out that the original Arcans were created by killing humans? Not well. Not well at all. "That was how she made Umbra," Kyven said. "She took what she took from me and gave it to her. She said I was made differently, but the end result was the same."

"You are Shaman," she said simply. "She can do things with you she cannot do with mundane beings, because you *agreed* to it. For us, the rules are slightly different when it comes to the spirits."

Kyven sighed. "And she said for me to get my humanity back, I have to take it from someone else," he concluded. "I'll have to kill a human and take his humanity."

"Does that bother you?"

"A little," he admitted. "But I've killed before. That was my first lesson," he said, a little grimly. "When I do earn my humanity, at least I'll know what's involved in being human again. I know what it will cost."

"Just pick someone we can live without," Firetail said with a smile, which made Kyven laugh in spite of himself. "Toby leaves in the morning."

"I know. Have you got everything ready?"

"As ready as it will ever get," she sighed. "Haven't you noticed that there are far fewer on the streets lately?"

"I did," he said.

"We have crews building villages in the snow," she said. "And crews building new houses in every village in our lands, as well as in the city itself. We've had to reassign some Arcans to the new villages to help our brothers and sisters adjust. The next two years will be quite chaotic," she admitted. "So many new mouths to feed. So many problems coming. But it will be a labor of love," she added. "I'll gladly take those headaches over the heartache of them being slaves."

"Amen," Kyven said as he started breakfast. "What did the council want?"

"They came for Danna," she answered. "They're trying to get her to take a position in the government."

"A human serving in the government? Won't that cause a riot?"

"It might. Kyven, the council has decided to form an army."

Kyven looked at her. "An army?"

Firetail nodded. "And they want Danna to command it," she answered. "She is very intelligent, and to be honest, she has more training in military matters than anyone else in Haven.

She's the best qualified for the job."

"But she wasn't in their army."

"Neither were any of us. But she *was* in a military organization, Kyven. Like I said, she's the best qualified for the task. Her training is far beyond anything any of us has. We want to avoid a war, my friend... but we must be ready if we fail."

"Well, that's only smart. I'm just surprised the council thought of Danna."

"There was quite a bit of debate over it," she admitted. "Several council members wanted to run the army, until I asked them exactly how they would go about setting it up. That stopped them, in their tracks."

"Set it up?"

"How many Arcans do we induct? What kind of arms do we give them? Where do we get the arms? How do we train them to use these arms when we have so few with any practical knowledge of it? How do we assign rank? What rank do we assign? Do we house them in barracks or let them go home after training? What kind of basic tactics do we teach? Do we use cavalry? Do we build artillery? How do we feed them? How much do we pay, if anything? And so on and so on."

"Ah, I see," Kyven said with a nod. "Danna was in the Loreguard, she'd know a lot more about things like that."

"As I said, she has more training and practical experience than anyone in Haven. She would be the best choice."

"I can't argue with that kind of thinking," Kyven nodded, returning to his breakfast. "I think some of the people here won't like it too much."

"That is the council's problem to deal with, my friend. We have to start looking at some realities here. We must do what is *right*, not what is *popular*. If our plan fails, then we must be ready to defend ourselves."

"True enough."

Kyven thought about that, and what the fox told him, after he left for his morning exercise of a brisk run around the outskirts of the city while maintaining illusions, to keep his endurance up. Firetail was right. Of course, the fox and he already believed that war was inevitable, but it was a relief to see that the council was finally facing the possibilities of reality rather than blithely believing that they could not go wrong. They were finally admitting that war was possible, and it was only prudent to prepare. They could hope for the best, but it was only wise to prepare for the worst.

Any Shaman could have told them that. Clover had been quite unnerved by the council's lack of preparation for any kind of contingencies, and Firetail had been pressing the council to start looking at preparing fallback plans. The council's decision to create an army was just the first step in the right direction, as far as he was concerned.

Trinity, would the citizens go up in flames when they heard that the council wanted Danna to command the army. But Firetail was right; Danna was probably the only person in Haven with formal military training. She was the most logical choice.

If she accepted it, anyway. Danna's belief that the Arcans were trying to avoid war was the only reason she was so cooperative. She hadn't tried to run away, or burn down any houses, or been in any way an ungracious guest. She didn't exactly enjoy being here, but she could see the seriousness of what was going on, and the Arcan attempts to avoid war had caused her to sympathize with Haven's plight, even if she didn't feel quite as much for individual Arcans. To Danna, her being here was to avoid getting *humans* killed more than Arcans killed. How would she react to being offered the chance to create an army for Haven, that might go to war with her own people?

He wasn't sure. Danna was... complicated. He was still attracted to her, highly attracted to her, but she wouldn't have anything to do with him... and yet she was jealous of Umbra. She seemed content here, but he knew she missed her home and her job. She could admire the Arcan desire to avoid war, admire what they built here, but Danna still wasn't too enamored of the Arcans. To her, they were just intelligent animals, creatures without souls. She could respect their accomplishments and be friends with Firetail and members of the council, but her true thoughts and motivations were a mystery to him.

Typical female. The day a man could understand a woman, the world would end.

Kyven put the affairs of the day out of his mind as he finished his run, then wandered the city, looking at people and things, from fences to wagons, memorizing the way they looked, the way they *seemed* for his illusions. He practiced them as well, working to be subtle about it, trying to create illusions in crowds without anyone noticing things just *appearing*. It was almost an art, he'd come to find out, since Arcan eyes were very sensitive to motion... and something just appearing constituted motion in their eyes, since it was a change of visual stimulus. He worked to be a subtle and unobtrusive as possible, since he had a feeling that such activities might very well need to be done when his life depended on it, so he wanted to be ready. He had background illusions appear and checked to see if anyone noticed them, both to see if they saw them appear and also to make them seem good enough to be *ordinary* and thus not worth notice. But nobody seemed to pay much attention to his illusory chairs, pots, and posts, though one small raccoon did walk around the illusory snowbank he put in the middle of a small street. That pleased him greatly.

After working with illusions for a while, he returned to the Lodge and sat down outside, on the chilly porch, and bent himself to the other training. Umbra had shown him three things she could do that he couldn't, things he'd honestly never considered before. Two were related, the manipulation of shadow and pulling it off the wall, two sides of the same trick, while the cloud of shadow was completely different.

He looked at the shadow of the gate on the snowy ground across from the house, the shadow long and deep in the late winter afternoon sun, and remembered what both Umbra and the fox had said. Both had said that he *was* the shadow. Shadow foxes *were* shadow, and if one could control himself, then one could control a shadow. That told him that this ability was *internal*. He wouldn't be reaching out like he did with Shaman magic, he'd be reaching in, reaching into the shadow the same way he did that morning when he made his hand vanish inside Umbra's shadow bunny. He started with that shadow. He looked deeply into it, *feeling* it, being aware of it, and then he reached into it with his mind and his will. He beckoned to the shadow, called to it, bade it to lengthen across the courtyard and reach his furry foot as it rested on the frozen ground. He gestured as well, reaching out to it with his hand.

He *felt* it inside him. He could feel the shadow, felt its presence, and then felt it obey.

On his first try, he mimicked Umbra's trick. The shadow of the gate slowly stretched, like a languid snake, and crept across the courtyard where all the other shadows remained stationary. It stretched to him, just barely casting shade over his toes, and he could feel the *effort* involved in it. It was doing something unnatural, and while it obeyed him, *he* was the one that gave it the power to bend beyond its normal dimensions. Since he made it stretch so far, he could feel the shadow drawing the strength to do it from him. Thankfully, his Shaman training made him strong enough to handle it without any real strain, but he could feel the effort. He found he had control of the shadow, so he caused it to pull off the ground just as Umbra did, rising up into the air before him, and then he caused it to change its shape, taking on the silhouette he knew oh so well, becoming a shadowed image of Danna's sleek form.

Alright, that worked. He released the shadow, and it quickly reverted to its natural state. He

then turned to her other little trick, creating that cloud of shadow. Since there was no shadow to work with, he realized quickly that it was something he had to *make*. There wasn't a shadow to manipulate, he was instead going to have to create a semi-solid shadow-like cloud of fog. He remembered how it felt when he put his hand in it, how it had been cool, almost cold, just like the feeling he felt in his fur when he melded into the shadows and became invisible.

His fur. Of course.

He got it on his second try. His training with illusions helped immensely by allowing him to imagine it with clarity and detail. It was again something *internal*, and he reasoned quickly that what Umbra did was invest some of her own energy into creating that shadow-like cloud. It wasn't real shadow, it was instead a form of magic innate to the shadow foxes, a magical shadow, or a shadow created by magic. It was the innate power of the shadow foxes, what made the monsters, and when he did it, he could *feel* the power of the spirit world channel through him almost as if he were using Shaman magic. He saw tendrils of shadow seep from the fur of his hand, and when he waved it, it trailed a cloud of shadow behind it. He stood up, and in a moment of total concentration, he unleashed that power as hard as he could.

The result was an *explosion* of shadow all around him. In the blink of an eye, he was surrounded by a cloud of swirling shadow, a cloud that expanded to envelop most of the courtyard. Where outside it looked like smoke, inside it was like the world in deep twilight, with dim light struggling to reach through the darkness, a murky darkness that was not totally dark, but also barely illuminated. A human wouldn't be able to see much past his own arm's length, but Kyven's eyes had no trouble seeing within the cloud; all Arcans were night-sighted, but Kyven, being a Shaman, could simply use spirit sight within the cloud. Kyven did find, though, that he had to work to sustain the shadows, that they wanted to dissipate like fog before the sun when exposed to bright light. It wouldn't take so much effort to maintain a smaller area, but he wanted to see how large an area he could affect... his life might depend on it, so he needed to know *now* just how big an area he could affect with this ability. A pretty big area.

"Wow, you already figured it out!" Umbra said with a giggle from the doorway. Kyven opened his eyes to the spirits and looked beyond his cloud of shadow and saw her leaning against nothing, probably the doorframe. "That's a big cloud, Kyv! You're pretty strong!"

"I think being a Shaman helps," he said modestly as he relaxed his hold on the cloud, and it very quickly dissipated away to nothing under the withering light of the sun. "I could imagine what you did very well, and that helped me. You're... happy," he said, walking up to her. She put her arms around his shoulders and nuzzled him. "I'm pregnant," she cooed to him. "Really? That's wonderful!" he said sincerely, giving her a hug. "You weren't sure this morning."

"I had Firetail look," she explained, then she licked him on the nose playfully. "She said I've only been pregnant for a few days. I'm very happy," she said with a laugh, hugging him. "The mother said I had to be pregnant before the snow melts, and I did what I was told to do. Now just comes raising our babies."

"Babies? As in more than one?" he said in surprise.

"Three," she said in his ear. "I was hoping for five, but I have three in here," she said, patting her flat belly.

"Three?" he gasped. "You're having triplets?"

"What is triplets?"

"Three babies."

“Didn’t I just *say* I was having three babies?” she asked, a little archly.

“I guess you did. I’m just... wow.”

She laughed. “Why are you surprised? I was hoping for five, but only got three. Clearly, you didn’t work hard enough!”

“Most human women only have one baby at a time,” he explained. “Two is rare, but I’ve never heard of anyone having three.”

“Ohhh, no wonder you’re surprised,” she giggled. “I don’t know about Arcans, but three is kinda small for shadow foxes. Five is about normal, that’s what I was hoping for.”

“Well, then I’m kinda glad we’re splitting the difference between one and five,” Kyven said with a chuckle. “I’m going to be a father,” he said, with a little reverence.”

“And I’m gonna be a mother!” she said excitedly. “And our babies will be a new race of Arcans, just like the mother wants! And just like I want,” she said, nuzzling him. “I get to be the mother of our race, Kyven. Our babies will always remember us.”

“I hope they remember us fondly,” Kyven chuckled ruefully. “But now I have even more to fight for, I guess,” he told her, reaching down and putting his hand on her flat belly. “My children will be Arcan, Umbra. Even if I become human again, my children will be Arcan, and they’ll live here. That means I have to do everything I can do to keep them safe from my own people.”

Arcan children. He’d been avoiding even really considering that until now, when it was going to happen. He was going to have children, and they would be Arcan. It seemed that more and more lines were tying him to his Arcan body, even as the lines that tied him to his humanity were falling away. Danna and the desire to try to have a relationship with her was falling away with every hot look she gave him, while the ties that bound him to the Arcans were constricting around him in the form of Umbra’s slender arms.

He was *not* an Arcan. He was human, and he still thought like a human, and he still wanted to be human again. But he was going to be a father now, and his children would be Arcan. It was just more ties holding him to the Arcans, for now his own children were at stake, and he had to fight tooth and nail to protect them. As if his experiences didn’t bind him to the Arcan cause enough, now his own personal life was entangled here in Haven. Umbra would remain here while he went off to do whatever it was the fox wanted him to do, and his children would be here in harm’s way if the humans marched an army on Haven, as both he and the fox feared they would. That made his involvement *personal*, beyond the duty and responsibility he already felt to help the Arcans after all the pain they’d been through. To save his children from a collar or the business end of a human musket, he had to do everything in his power to hamstring the humans if they tried to make war on Haven.

“You don’t look happy,” she accused.

“I’m feeling the weight of all this new responsibility,” he answered honestly. “And I’m feeling a little torn. I never danced around the fact that I hope to someday be human again, Umbra. But now I’ll have Arcan children.”

“And you’re not sure if you want to leave them,” she noted. “You’re a male, Kyven. Your duty isn’t to raise the babies. That’s my duty.”

“Humans are very attached to their kids, Umbra, even the males,” he told her. “They’re not just yours, they’re *ours*. I’m already starting to feel torn between what I want and my duty to my children. I’m not sure how they’ll handle having a human father.”

“They already do,” she said simply. “How you look won’t matter, Kyven. It’s about what you feel in here that counts.” She touched his chest gently, clearly in one of her more wise and insightful moments of her usual erratic behavior. “If you love them, and they know you love them, do you think it will matter that you don’t look like they do?”

He could just smile down at her and give her another hug. “Sometimes you amaze me, Umbra,” he told her with a chuckle.

“I hope so, or you’ll get bored with me,” she giggled in reply. “Umm, I know we did what we were supposed to do, and usually I’d reject you after I know I’m pregnant, but... you think we can mate some more before you go? It feels *sooo* good.”

Kyven laughed. “I guess you’re all Arcan now,” he teased. “Animals do it to reproduce, but humans and Arcans do it for fun.”

“Good,” she said with an explosive sigh. “I thought I was being wrong for asking.”

“It’s only wrong when you don’t ask,” he told her.

“That I don’t do anything about it?”

“That and trying to mate someone against his will,” he said. “Not asking when you want it dishonors you. Trying to force someone dishonors you more, and is seen as very bad behavior among Arcans.”

“I can imagine. I’m glad you’re happy. Patches didn’t seem that happy.”

“Patches still has a little crush on me.”

“Crush?”

“She really likes me. I like her too, but not the same way.”

“Oh. I can’t wait to tell Danna,” she said with a wicked smirk.

“Bad girl,” Kyven laughed, rocking her back and forth in his arms. “Since when did you start going out of your way to aggravate Danna?”

“Since this morning, when she seemed mad that we were doing what we were told to do.”

“I think she objects to the fact that we enjoy doing it,” Kyven noted.

“Well, that’s her fault. She makes eyes at you and gets jealous over you, but she won’t touch you. And Firetail told me that sometimes, humans and Arcans *do* love each other.”

“I think she’s waiting to see if I’m going to be human again.”

“It’s what’s *inside* that counts,” she said again. “If I were you, I’d have nothing to do with her. If she can’t accept you like this when she knows your mind and your heart, then she’s only interested in what doesn’t matter. Looks are just to flatter. It’s the way the male acts that counts.”

“It’s a little more complicated than that,” he told her.

“No, it’s not. It’s very simple. She knows you’re a human, but yet she won’t treat you like one and won’t be honest with you. If she wants you, but only wants you as a human, then she doesn’t want *you*. All she can see is this,” she said, patting his furry neck. “She never saw what was inside. You should stay clear of females like that, Kyven. They’re nothing but trouble, and they make bad mothers. They get impressed by a shiny coat and a handsome ruff, but don’t see the bad hunter that won’t provide for her and her kits hiding under that handsome face.” She licked his nose. “She’s just like those silly females. All she sees is the human you used to be when she’s blind to the *real* you, which is just the same no matter what face you wear with your illusions. If she was *really* interested in you, you being Arcan wouldn’t matter. You should forget her. I don’t love you, but I’ll always *respect* you, Kyven. You’ll always be welcome with me.”

“Well, I’m glad of that, since I will want to see my babies,” he chuckled.

“Now come inside. It’s cold out here.”

Kyven found himself being pulled inside, and again he was impressed by the deceptive complexity of Umbra’s mind. She was so childlike, but she also comes out with such startling wisdom like that one. It was truly deep to consider the real person and not what one saw on the outside, and chiding Danna for being so shallow, seeing only what she wanted in him without allowing herself to see the *real* him. She wanted him *her* way, and when Umbra said

it like that, Kyven couldn't help but agree. He'd never hidden his interest in her, it was Danna that rejected him. But, in her defense, Kyven was looking at the same Danna, where Danna was looking at an *Arcan*. For Danna, that was a damning fact, the fact that he didn't even look like her species. Umbra didn't consider that, though... but her reasoning still had a glimmer of wisdom in it. If Danna couldn't accept him after getting to know him and at least acknowledge her interest in him, keeping him at arm's length even as she glared accusingly at him for taking up with another female instead of waiting forever for something he'd been told quite succinctly he'd never get, then he should move on. She didn't want him, but she obviously didn't want him being with another woman either. That was very unfair to him.

He could understand Danna's point of view, but he was also selfish enough to only want to see Umbra's point of view. He was willing to try with Danna, but she wasn't willing to try with him. But, he was the one who looked so different. If she was the *Arcan* and he was the human, would he be so willing?

Probably. Clet and Stripes showed him that it *was* possible. Kyven had to be patient, and Danna understanding... which was why it was never going to happen. Danna was too proud, and had an innate bias against Arcans, and a personal bias against him. Her attraction to him was the only reason she'd been his friend over the winter, since he could sense it in her. She was just as attracted to him as he was to her, but where he was willing to explore that attraction even as he was now, Danna was not. Was it selfish and shallow of her to demand he be human, or was it just proper? It would take a very special human, like Clet, to be willing to explore a relationship with an *Arcan*. Could he really hold it against Danna that she didn't want to get involved with him?

The practical side of him said no, but the child in him said yes.

Of course, he hadn't been acting very well about it, grinding Umbra in Danna's face a little. He had no doubt that his willingness to stray from his professed interest in her was a black mark against him in her eyes, but she also had to admit that it wasn't fair to him to make him hang on like that. If she wanted him, she had to *say* it, not pretend she didn't, and that was something she'd never done, nor probably ever would. They'd become friends over the winter, and that looked to be as far as it would ever get.

Firetail gave him a hug when he came into the sitting room and congratulated him, and Toby, who was visiting, stood up and shook his hand. "Ah heard the news, congratulations, friend," he said. "Ah'm glad Ah heard it befo' Ah leave tomorrah."

"I think I'll be out not long after you," Kyven said. "I've learned what I was told to learn, and done what I was told to do," he said, nudging Umbra, who giggled girlishly. "There's not much more for me to do here."

"Any idea what that may be?"

He shook his head at his friend. "Not for sure, but given what I've been taught, I have almost no doubt I'm going to Avannar," he answered. "I can dig into the Loremasters and learn things nobody else can."

"Ah don't doubt that. With those illusions, it'd be child's play tah slip through they whole organization."

"Maybe not child's play, but I could definitely dig deep into them and learn some things."

"Enough serious talk," Umbra said, grabbing Toby's hands. "You leave tomorrow! Come talk to me, Toby!" she ordered, pulling him towards the kitchen.

"She is truly fond of that young human," Firetail chuckled as the two of them left. Kyven accepted Firetail's nuzzling, and they sat down together on cushions near the fire. "I think she will miss him nearly as much as she misses you."

"I'm going to miss him too. Toby's a rare kind of fellow. I've always respected him, even

when he was taking me to Alamar."

"He gives me hope for the future," Firetail added. "He may not have scruples, but at least he is honest and willing to accept us for who we are."

"He's always been like that," Kyven noted. "At least as long as I've known him."

"What do you think you will be doing now?"

He shrugged. "I'm not entirely sure, but I can guess. She's taught me things that makes it pretty clear I'm going back to the human lands to spy on them. I think I'll be sent to Avannar. It would only behoove us to have someone inside the Loremasters who knows what they're up to, so we can work around them, or get ready for them. I can only guess that's what I'll be doing."

"It's a wise assumption," Firetail nodded. "It would only help Haven to have someone in a position where we know what the Loremasters are doing, and what they may know. It would be what I would have you do, but I admit I am nowhere near as wise as the spirits."

Danna came in through the front door and stamped the snow off her boots on the scrubby mat Firetail kept there. Her cheeks were red and a little chapped, and her eyes were dark and stormy. "Firetail, do you know what insanity has possessed the council?" she said angrily. "They want me to be the general of the *Arcan* army!"

"You are the most logical choice, child," Firetail said calmly. "None of us have any military training. We have no idea what to do, where to even begin."

"You knew about this?" she said hotly.

"I suggested it," Firetail answered in an unflappable manner.

"I have you to thank for this, then?" she growled. "You want me to command Arcans who hate me against my own people when we'll get annihilated if there's a war?"

"Basically, yes," she answered smoothly. "Because of everyone in Haven, you're the only one with the kind of experience, training, and education to build an army from scratch. You can accept part of offer, child. Help us build the army, then find someone competent to command it and walk away. Because simply put, child, we have *no idea* how to do it. We are not soldiers."

If she only knew what her people *used* to be. "I think that's a fair compromise, Danna," Kyven told her. "Help them set up so they can protect themselves if everything falls apart. That's all they're really asking. You *know* they don't want war, but can you blame them for being prepared for the worst? They just want to have a fighting chance. And you're the only one who can give them that chance."

Danna gave him a look that could have burned the fur off his face, then turned and stormed back out into the cold.

"She'll get over it," Firetail chuckled. "She knows we are right. She's made friends here, and the thought of them being defenseless will spur her if nothing else."

"I hope so," he grunted.

Danna did return at dinner, as Umbra chattered animatedly with Toby, and Patches and Firetail talked quietly about her desire to apprentice to a cooper. Kyven didn't understand Patches' interest in barrels, but it was a decent trade. There was always a use for barrels, and it was a good craft. But Kyven had other ideas. It was an idea he broached to Firetail as Danna sat down in sullen, angry silence and was handed a plate of stew. "Patches," Kyven said, looking at her. "Are you good with your hands?"

"How do you mean, Kyven?"

"I've seen how delicate your hands are, and you're very nimble, but how good are you at doing very small and delicate things? Like tying a very fine line together, or threading a needle?"

“Pretty good,” she answered.

“Good. I’ve had something of an idea.”

“Go on,” Firetail said.

“When I go back to human lands, odds are I’m going to Avannar,” he said. “When I get there, odds are my job will be to find out what the Loremasters know. I can do that either by working *in* the Loremasters, or living in the city. I think it’d stretch me to join the Loremasters, since I’d have to hold my illusion at all times, and that’s just too risky. Instead, what I was thinking was to set up in the city, as just another crystalcutter. It’s a common trade in Avannar, and I won’t attract much attention. I’m going to move in and buy a shop, or buy a building and start a shop, and from there, I can maintain the illusion that I’m just another crystalcutter in Avannar, while I dig through the Loremasters at the behest of Haven. Given what I’ve learned, I’m fairly confident I can work my way into their organization, but since I *am* and Arcan, I have to do it from the outside. Now, any master crystalcutter is going to have apprentices,” he said, looking at Patches with a toothy smile. “You don’t have any crystalcutters here at all, Firetail. I’m sure they wanted me to teach the craft to someone before I go, but my training didn’t let it happen. So, I’d like to take Patches back with me. She can help me in Avannar, and at the same time I’ll train her to be a crystalcutter. When I send her back here, she’ll be more than good enough to train others. That way the Arcans gain a crystalcutter, and I get someone I know and trust to help me in Avannar.” He looked to Patches. “What do you say, little one? I know it’s a scary idea to go back to human lands, but this time you’ll be with me. And I’ll train you in something no one else can do. You’ll be one of the most important people in Haven.”

The small red panda gave him a long look, then smiled shyly, though her hands were trembling a little. “I’d have to wear a collar, wouldn’t I?”

Kyven laughed. “Yeah, you would,” he admitted. “But I’ll share in the chores.”

“I can teach you to cook,” she offered.

“Are you sure about that, dear?” Firetail asked. “You would have to go back to the human lands, and Kyven would be doing something *very* dangerous. It would require you to lie and be very, very brave in the face of people that would frighten you.”

“Firetail, to them, I’d just be an *Arcan*,” she said, a little nervously. “They won’t think I’m smart. And besides, you said I don’t face my fear, it will make me like some of the others you’ve shown me here, afraid to come out of my house. I don’t want to be like that. I want to be brave. And I want to help. If my helping is nothing but sweeping floors and making Kyven dinner, well, that’s what I’ll do.”

“If he’s found out, then you might be captured. And they’ll make you tell them all about Haven.”

“Then we’ll have to be careful.”

Before Kyven could say another word, he sensed her. She was behind him at the low table. He felt her paws come to rest on his shoulders, rearing up over him, and Firetail was looking right at her. *You have done well*, she communicated to him. *You saw to the heart of the matter, planned for it, made preparations, and you have a plan of action. I am pleased.*

“Then it is Avannar,” he noted.

Indeed. Take the little one with you, and perhaps one or two others, so that you have a stable of apprentices that the people of Avannar will see as nothing but your Arcan slaves. You will also need a Shaman to create the crystals you will cut. Clover works well with you, so she will go. It was not my original intent, but your reasoning is indeed sound, and I see interesting possibilities with your idea of subterfuge. You may pass on your training, and you have a viable means of concealing yourself within the city as you engage in espionage

against the Loremasters, so we might know what they intend and what they know. Very clever, Shaman. I am quite pleased.

He simply bowed his head.

Make ready. You will leave as soon as you are ready for the journey, but no longer than five days from now. Oh, and tell the human that she will do as Firetail asks, she added with a flinty tone that made Firetail laugh. *The spirits see value in her building an army to protect Haven. In that regard, there is unanimous agreement among us. The council has done well in taking this step, and the spirits are most pleased with them.*

“We are most humbled, spirit,” Firetail said graciously. “I will tell the council you find favor in our preparations.”

Indeed.

And she was gone.

“I’ll make the necessary inquiries, Kyven,” Firetail told him. “I think two more apprentices will fill things in nicely. I’ll find you two Arcans who are very good with their hands, and are also willing to go with you into danger.” She looked to Patches. “And I’m quite proud of you, my friend. You are indeed being very brave, and I commend you for facing your fear.”

“What are you talking about?” Danna asked.

“Kyven’s spirit just graced us with a visit, Danna,” Firetail said with a smile. “She told us that Kyven’s idea to take apprentices to Avannar and open a shop is a sound plan, and agrees to it. She has given permission for Kyven to take Patches, Clover, and a couple of others with him to begin his work infiltrating the Loremasters. So, I think, tonight the two of you need to sit down and talk.”

“About what?”

“You were in the Loreguard. You may not be a Loremaster, but you know names, places, things he will need to know to begin his infiltration, for that infiltration will require him to talk his way into the inner circles, or talk his way past guards. The more he knows before he arrives, the safer he will be, and the fewer risks he will have to take.”

“Infiltration? I thought you were just going to sneak into the headquarters and steal documents.”

“I could, and probably will, but think about it, Danna. If I’m going to be useful, I need to supply *constant* information. I need to be there to tell Haven if the Loremasters figure out what’s going on when you buy the slaves. I need to be there to warn you if they find out about Haven, what they know, and what they’re going to do. If they decide to attack us, then we *really* need to know that. I’m positive I’m going to rifle quite a few desks and mug several Loremasters in positions of power, maybe even assassinate a few powerful people to slow down or stop plans to attack Haven, but the core of it is that I have to be there *over time*. My illusions are just to make it impossible for them to find me. And if I’m an established part of Avannar society, I have a foundation to work from, a way to hide in plain sight. They’re going to be looking for a mysterious black-furred Arcan, *not* a crystalcutter making his living in the south bank trades district.”

“Guile and deceit,” Firetail said with a smile.

“I’m a member of the guild, I’m an artisan by rank, so I can work that angle as well,” Kyven continued. “That will let me set up a shop quickly and get some work. I have a reputation as a very good crystalcutter, and that should let me make enough legitimate money to hide what’s going on. That will also let me dig through the guild’s rumors. The guild picks up a lot of information, because there’s so many of us, the alchemists gossip with us, and *everyone* talks to the alchemists.”

“Is that going to cause a problem? You’re the owner of a shop in Atan,” Danna said soberly,

her professionalism taking over again.

“Doesn’t matter, I still have that shop. It’s a little unusual for an artisan to move to a new town, but I can pass that off as a desire to leave the sleepy village life and try to make a living in a big city. After all, the story the guild has is I’ve been trying my hand sailing... maybe I got enamored of the big city, and I want to start a shop in one. There’s any number of plausible reasons I can give for opening a new shop in Avannar. Maybe me and Timble had a falling out. Maybe we’re trying to expand to two cities and share our profits. And so on and so on.”

“Perhaps you should stop in Atan on your way and talk to Timble, so your stories match up,” Danna suggested.

“I was planning on passing through anyway,” he said. “It’s basically on the way. I won’t be going out of my way to go there.”

“Patches, dear, why don’t you go look through your room and decide what you’re going to take while Kyven and Danna go over what she knows?” she said. “The spirit said you have to leave as soon as you can. I’m going to go talk to Strongjaw and track down two apprentices, and I also need to get word to Clover that she’s been assigned this new task.”

“I will,” Patches said, standing up and hurrying to the stairs.

“I should be back soon, my friends,” Firetail told them as she too stood.

Patches and Firetail left the two of them alone. Kyven could sense the lurking hostility in Danna’s eyes, but she seemed to push that aside. “Alright, I’ll tell you what I remember from when I was stationed in Avannar, but it’s not much. I was only there for two years, and the Loreguard didn’t exactly go to the tavern with the Loremasters after duty.”

“Anything at all will help,” he told her.

“I think this is an insane idea, Kyven.”

“Insane or not, nobody else can do it,” he answered. “I have... unique qualifications,” he noted, patting his furry forearm. “Besides, you’re going to be doing your own insane thing here.”

“I am *not* commanding their army,” she snorted.

“Maybe not, but you *will* help them create one,” he told her. “If only to help save them, because you can’t deny them at least that much, can you?”

She gave him a dark look, then sighed. “I guess I can’t,” she agreed. “Oh, where is your little toy?”

“She’s saying goodbye to Toby. You know she likes him. She’s pregnant, by the way.”

“I’m so happy for you,” she said with undisguised venom.

“I’m sure someday that might matter to me,” he said dryly, shivering his tail. “This isn’t about *us* right now, Danna. So tell me what you know. I’d sort of like to survive for a month in Avannar.”

Chapter 17

It was a cold time to travel.

The five of them loped on a sunny yet cold morning steadily towards the south, retracing steps they had taken months before. Three of them were old friends, but two of them were relatively new, and a little excited about the idea of what was coming. Kyven wasn’t too sure about them, but he’d reserve judgment until he saw them in action.

After quite a bit of debate, it was decided that Kyven would take two apprentices, Clover, and an Arcan that was versed in fighting, to protect the apprentices. Patches was one of his apprentices, and the other was a small ferret male named Tweak. He was very nervous and excited, but that was just because of the newness of all of this and the idea he was going to

go to Avannar. Tweak talked a lot, but he was friendly, earnest, and outgoing, almost like a male version of Teacup, though just a bit more mean-spirited with his wisecracks and teasing. He was only six, and had been apprenticed to an alchemist since he was two, working in an alchemy shop before the council asked him to take this dangerous mission. He was chosen because he was well known for having very nimble hands, and his knowledge of alchemy might be useful to them. Despite his young age, he was supposed to be nearly finished with his apprenticeship, and could build and repair alchemical devices. He was incredibly smart, but a little hyper... but he knew how to keep his mouth shut when it counted.

The fighting Arcan that was chosen was something of a surprise, at least to Kyven. For one, she was female, and for another, she was quite small. Her name was Lightfoot, and Kyven would have expected a fighting Arcan to be, well... bigger. She was a cat Arcan, not much bigger than Patches, with white fur tabbied through with black stripes, one of the most unusual coloration patterns he’d ever seen in an Arcan. Her hair was dull white in color, the same color as her fur, and she had piercing amber eyes. She was silent, very silent, almost never talking, but Tweak did enough talking for both of them. She was a lithe, sleek form, like Clover, but she was immensely strong, almost like a Shaman, and she carried a pistol and a slender metal shockrod for weapons. Despite the cold, all she wore was that leather belt that held her weapons, preferring to go unclothed. It didn’t seem to bother her, though, though she went around with the nipples on her small breasts almost perpetually jutting out.

It only took them two days to get moving. Firetail had found the apprentices and Lightfoot the next day, and they were on the move the day after. Kyven would have preferred a little more time to spend with Umbra before leaving, if only to get to know her a little better—she *was* the mother of his future children, after all—and to try to talk to Danna. Danna was *pissed* about Umbra’s pregnancy, and they spent most of those two days arguing with each other. Kyven had worked hard to be Danna’s friend, but Umbra and her pregnancy seemed to have driven a deep wedge between them. Danna had told her everything she knew about Avannar, though, all the names and places she thought he may need, and Kyven had memorized it all. When he got to Avannar, he’d know where to start when he began infiltrating the Loremasters.

Kyven had a good feeling about this. He knew he was doing the right thing, because Haven needed to know what the Loremasters were up to, what they knew, and how they’d react, and he was the best possible choice for the job. He was probably the only one who could invade their organization using illusions and sift through their records, trick information out of their officials using guile and deceit. If the Loremasters were going to move against Haven, Kyven would be the one in a position to know about it, and send a warning to them. And while he was there, he was going to take that place apart for any useful information he could find. And when the time did come that there would be war, Kyven would be in the perfect place to disrupt the Loremasters by killing their leaders, which would throw them into disarray.

Danna. What the *fuck* was her problem? Maybe Umbra was right about her, that she could only see what she wanted to see in him. The fact that he was the same person inside didn’t seem to impact her at all, and in a way, he was glad to be separated from her for a while. Their fighting had taken its toll on him, because he couldn’t let go of the idea of her, no matter how hard he tried. She could only see the fur on him, she either seemed unable or unwilling to see the person inside. She did like him, and before Umbra came, they were getting along very well. But Umbra seemed to just destroy their relationship, because Danna couldn’t give over on him. It was so confusing. She wanted him, he could see it in her eyes, but she would have nothing to do with him. She wouldn’t let him live his own life, but she wouldn’t let him go either. He could understand that it was hard for her to accept that he was

an Arcan, at least for now, but there was no reason for her to be so *spiteful*. And yesterday she was spiteful. Very spiteful. She was angry with him over Umbra, angry with him because Umbra was pregnant, and she was even angrier with him because he was taking Patches with him. She raged at him that the little panda had no business going back to human lands, that she was too young, too timid, and too frightened to do what he wanted her to do, and then accused him of taking her just so he'd have a willing woman to fuck. That argument blindsided him. She seemed unable to forgive him for being Arcan enough to be free with himself to women who asked it of him, because that was the *culture* of the Arcans.

Maybe that was the core of it. She didn't see him as a human, she was seeing him more and more as an Arcan, and she wanted the human. So she was getting angry over the Arcan things he did. Well, he couldn't much explain to her that *human* men acted pretty much the same way. A human man wasn't much likely to decline that kind of offer. And Kyven was no innocent young boy. He was an adult, a man, and had visited the Atan brothel quite a few times before becoming a Shaman. He hadn't been subverted by the willing Arcan women as she seemed to think and was now happily living in sin. He'd been much inclined to that sin long before he ever met her.

Toby was too. Kyven had been a little shocked to find that Toby had been, ah, exploring the depraved side of human behavior among the Arcan women. He had three girlfriends seeing him off yesterday morning, and it made Danna's eyes bulge when they all admitted, quite casually, to sexual relationships with the sleek hunter. Maybe that was another reason why Danna had been so vituperous yesterday, after hearing that little bit of information. He guessed she saw that all the human men around her were being seduced by the wanton Arcan females, willing to fuck any dick that moved no matter what was attached to it. But she didn't understand Arcan custom, and even after a winter in Haven, she seemed unwilling to try. She had her mind set on how things were, and wasn't willing to open her eyes and look around.

More the pity.

Kyven was a little surprised, but shouldn't have been. Toby had a much different attitude towards Arcans, and had probably had sex with Arcan females long before coming to Haven. No doubt Toby had fun doing it, too. Having sex with an Arcan was... intense. At least for men it was. Kyven wondered idly what it would be like for Danna to have sex with an Arcan male. Well, since she wouldn't clench, he'd probably go a long time before climaxing, since the female's orgasm triggered orgasm in the male. Without that trigger, it would probably take a while for him to get to that point, where a female Arcan could induce it in him. So, perhaps she'd find it enjoyable, if only because it would be a long session, and human women liked that.

Maybe that's what she needed, a good healthy lay from some stranger that would fuck out the steel rod stuck up her ass. He would have loved to have been the one to do it, but that would have to wait. But maybe the next time he saw her, he'd drag her upstairs, rip her clothes off, and pound some sense into her with his dick.

The fighting made him bad-tempered last night, and made him a little aggressive with Umbra. She didn't seem to mind him taking his frustrations out in heated, almost rough sex with her, found it almost delightfully refreshing to see there was some fire in him. At least *she* was understanding, and had given him what he both wanted and needed. There was no love between them, but there was at least good sex.

Fuck Danna. He wasn't going to worry about her anymore. Tonight, he'd fuck Clover, or Patches, or maybe even both of them. He'd sink his dick in any willing pussy he could find, just to spite Danna. If she was going to condemn him for having sex with Arcans, he may as

well enjoy it to the limit. If he was going to be punished, he was going to make sure he got the joys of committing the crime.

Because he was so angry and out of sorts, he was a poor traveling companion that day. He pushed them quite hard, and they reached Glenfall by early afternoon. Clover had to talk him down from going on, explaining that she'd much rather have a warm bed and a hot meal as much as possible before they had to start sleeping in the snow, which would be necessary after they passed Vanguard and entered the wilderness. Kyven was reluctant to stop, but Clover's quiet, calm wisdom talked him out of most of his ire after they reached Glenfall, and he calmed down enough to understand that Clover was right. And after she calmed him down enough to stop, they sat in the common room of the inn and talked. Clover was a charmer. She was gentle and wise, but she also had a keen mind and gift for conversation, and that was how she operated. She talked to people, got them to talk to her, and then gently guided them using her words.

The first thing she did was dig for why he was so angry and upset. Clover was not one to be denied what she wanted, and it wasn't long before she had broken through his token defense and learned all about everything, using gentle words to urge out of him what he wouldn't have told anyone else. It was Clover's way. In some ways, she was the most powerful Shaman among the Arcans... not because she was strong in magic, or was wise beyond all others, but because her gentle ways and quiet manner put everyone at ease and got them to talk to her, and to *listen* to her. Clover could do things no other Shaman could, but her power was a matter of personality, not raw strength. That was how she went after Kyven, and he was defenseless against her. By sunset, she was privy to every little thing that went on in Firetail's house, and she explained things to him in a way he hadn't considered. "Danna is frightened, Kyven. I know it doesn't look it, that she is too strong to be afraid, but she is. I know she has been in Haven a long time, but that doesn't mean that she still can't be afraid. She is in a difficult position, and she has little outlet but to take it out on you. You shouldn't read too much into what she says."

"It doesn't seem that way with Umbra."

"Umbra is different," she said. "She is angry because she has feelings for you, Kyven. Though you were only doing your duty with Umbra, Danna sees your fling with her as a betrayal. How would you feel if you were human, and Danna was going out with another man while continuing to try to woo you?"

He sighed. He already knew she felt that way, but hearing Clover say it to him just reinforced his own suspicions. "I know it's hard for her to understand," he told her. "I've tried explaining it to her, but she just won't listen." He sighed. "But I wasn't *asking* for anything, Clover. I just wanted to be her friend."

"The problem is, both of you want something else."

He bowed his head.

"What can I do, Clover?" he asked.

"Wait," she said simply. "Danna must decide for herself, one way or the other, before you can really do anything. Both of you need to get over this silly need to aggravate one another."

"I was never trying to aggravate her."

"Really?" she asked with mild calm, but piercing eyes which made him cough uncomfortably. "And what did you say not twenty minutes ago about inviting every female in Glenfall up to your room? Is that not just to spite Danna? Surely she'll get word of it."

Kyven sighed.

"Fighting childishness with childishness only makes both of you look like fools," she told

him. “Her reaction to Umbra is spite, because Umbra is getting what Danna wants but won’t take. Danna seems to be unable to think of you in that way as an Arcan, but she knows you want to be human again. So she waits, though her waiting is not pleasant nor calm. It is the erratic waiting of someone who sees what she wants being given to another. And that eats at her. I think somewhere inside her, she knows she can *have* you, but that will require her to accept you with a little fur on you,” she said with a smile.

“So, in other words, not gonna happen,” he sighed. “Danna’s view of Arcans would never let her do that.”

“And so it is a problem *she* must solve,” she told him. “I think your departure may be good for her. She will have plenty of time to consider you without you there making her angry.”

“But Umbra will be there, and Umbra’s not above annoying Danna, or rubbing her face in it. She’d do it just for the fun of it. She’s like that.”

“So are you,” Clover pointed out. “The two of you show some remarkable similarities. And I think you will find that Danna will leave Firetail’s house now that you’re gone,” she said with a slight smile. “She could have moved out at any time, my friend. She was only staying because, at first, she was staying close to you, then after Umbra arrived, it was to keep an eye on the two of you. Nothing was holding her there. After Toby moved out, did you not find it a little odd that Danna did not do the same?”

“Well, Toby’s much more comfortable in Haven than she is.”

“Danna is much braver than you think,” Clover told him. “She was staying at Firetail’s house because of you. And your, escapades with Umbra did not help,” she said.

“I never did a single thing—”

“Kyven. Firetail told me about the day before Umbra found out she was pregnant, how she and Danna walked in on you. Deliberately having sex with her in front of Danna wasn’t helpful to your cause.”

“I was making a point.”

“Yes, and the point you made wasn’t the one you were trying to make. You proved you could be an inconsiderate boor.”

“I know,” he groaned. “But she made me angry.”

“Kyven, human females are very touchy. I don’t think you knew very much about them as a human, and that lack of experience is hurting you now that you’re dealing with Arcan women, who are very different.”

“I guess so.”

“Perhaps the two of you need to grow up a little,” she grinned.

“I thought I’d proved to you I’m an adult already, Clover,” Kyven drawled.

She laughed. “Well, then you need to grow in other ways,” she winked.

It gave Kyven something to think about over the next few days, as they loped through the lands of Haven, and saw all the preparation. The villages in which they stayed at night were expanding, adding houses for the coming new citizens, and there were construction crews out in the snow building even more. There were many traveling Arcans in the inn, on their way to the southwest to prepare the land Haven had annexed for settling, which required all of their group to stay in the same room... not that it bothered any of them. Arcans were very social and didn’t mind sharing.

After they went past Vanguard, though, things changed. Lightfoot was much more alert as they struck out into the grass and woods patchwork that extended south of the village, the silent little cat’s eyes always scanning, her ears twitching towards every sound, even as they ran. When they stopped for the night in a snow-choked grove of trees, Clover took steps to make their camp both comfortable and secure. The snow choking the ground was moved

with Shaman magic and shaped into icy walls with a single narrow outlet, and firewood was collected and dried out as Kyven ranged out to hunt. He brought in a huge deer-like animal Clover called an antelope, which surprised Clover to see. “They don’t usually come this far east this time of year,” she said as Kyven dragged the animal, which weighed more than he did, into the surprisingly warm encampment. The snow walls reflected the heat of the fire back into the small camp area, which was free of snow, dry, and the ground thawed out, again using Clover’s magic.

Kyven both practiced using his shadow powers and also played a little bit after they ate. Sitting against his bedroll and pack, he raised a hand and lazily spun a small cloud of vaporish shadow into the air with lazy circles of his hand. He then took command of that cloud and reformed it into a silhouette he knew all too well, the sleek yet appealing curves of Danna, with her taut belly but nice bosom and feminine hips, a figure not many Arcan females possessed, since most Arcan women were a little flat-chested. The three females with him shared that trait, though Clover’s chest was a little more developed than Patches’ or Lightfoot’s. Perhaps Clover’s age was a part of that, Clover was twenty-eight, where the two females were both under ten.

Lightfoot stood before him, her white fur with black stripes glowing in the firelight, then she squatted down in a pose that left nothing to his imagination, showing him absolutely everything she had between her legs. Lightfoot was totally indifferent to that, though, and Kyven didn’t pay it much attention once he got his first appraising look. “I think the two children should be spared watch,” she announced. Those were the most continuous words Kyven had heard out of her mouth since he met her.

“That’s fine with me. I take it you’re volunteering to take a shift?”

She just gave him a steady look.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he said dryly, changing the shadow cloud over his hand with a wiggle of his finger, making it take on an image of Lightfoot’s silhouette as she was now. “You and Clover work it out, I don’t much care what shift I take.” He glanced at her. “You know, you’re the only Arcan I’ve ever met that goes without clothes in the winter. Why is that?”

“I don’t like them,” she answered bluntly, without further elaboration.

“Isn’t it cold?”

“It’s cold regardless,” she shrugged.

“Well, you’re very handsome,” he said with honest appreciation. “How did you come by such unique fur?”

“Birth,” she answered simply.

Kyven chuckled. “I’m going to get a conversation out of you yet, Lightfoot.”

“Keep trying,” she said, standing back up, then tilting her head slightly when she saw the small shadow over his hand mimic her move. When Kyven had the little replica of her start dancing a dance still popular in Atan, the only one he knew, she gave him a steady look... then the slightest of smiles briefly played across her handsome face.

Patches snuggled down with him after sunset and they went to their bedrolls, which, in Arcan fashion, were all laid out side by side so they could sleep close together. The panda had been doing very well so far, hadn’t complained, but he could tell she was nervous about this decision of his. She hadn’t slept by herself since leaving Haven, sleeping in turns with Clover and Tweak, with which she had struck up a friendship that had crossed over into a physical relationship. It was good for her. Patches hadn’t been very social with males since coming to Haven, begging most of her comfort from Kyven, and he thought it was a healthy step that she’d taken an interest in another male. Tweak was a little erratic, but he had a fast mind and could be very funny. And, since he was a small Arcan himself, Patches and Tweak just

looked like a good couple. “Are you mad at Tweak or something?” Kyven asked curiously when Patches burrowed under his arm and snuggled against him.

She giggled. “No, I thought you could use some company, that’s all.”

“Company, or *company*?” he asked.

“Just company,” she laughed. “I’ve missed this,” she sighed. “I always felt so safe in these arms.”

“Well, you’re my apprentice now, so don’t get any ideas,” he teased. “You’re not getting any preferential treatment.”

“You think I could do it? Be a crystalcutter?”

“I’ve seen you use your hands, and you’ve got the dexterity for it. And you’re pretty smart, so I’m sure I can teach you the technical aspects of it without much trouble. So yes, I think you could. I think you could be a pretty good one.”

“I’ve never done anything before, or been good at anything before.”

“Well, it’s going to take a while, and you’ll have to live in Avannar.”

“I’m going to hide in the back room the whole time I’m there.”

He laughed. “That will work,” he assured her. “So, you’re going to teach me to cook, are you?”

“If you want.”

“I think I’d like that,” he said, nuzzling her.

He took the last shift, gently shaken awake by Lightfoot, who was on her haunches beside him. “Your turn,” she whispered. He nodded, and they basically traded places, as the small cat laid down between Patches and Clover and was almost immediately grabbed hold of by the little panda. He sat on his haunches in a tree limb near the icy walls of the camp and pondered his talk with Clover. He had to admit... she was right. He’d been pretty inconsiderate of Danna, he had indeed been acting like a child. The both of them had been, but that was no excuse for his own behavior. It showed a marked lack of wisdom on his part, and that was something he wasn’t supposed to be doing. He should have considered how his behavior was affecting her, despite the fact that it wasn’t his choice.

Well, that wasn’t entirely true. He had no doubt that Danna got word that both Patches and Firetail occasionally visited his room before Umbra arrived. To Arcans, it was an eminently practical arrangement. Kyven was in the house, he was available, and both of them liked him. His... hospitality probably angered Danna as much as Umbra did. That Kyven was acting like an Arcan was probably part of what annoyed her. Telling her that he’d have probably been just as willing as a human probably wouldn’t sit well with her, though. Kyven wasn’t one that was too resistant to that kind of an invitation. He was, after all, male, with all the weaknesses for women that condition entailed.

But still, there was blame on both sides. If Danna would be just a little understanding, they could have worked through it. She would have to share him a little while, but after he got his humanity back, she would have gotten him all to herself.

Wisdom told him that he did need to apologize. He’d acted like a child, just as Clover said, grinding Danna’s nose in his exploits. No matter what duty demanded of him, he didn’t have to *act* like he enjoyed it so much, and that was probably what aggravated Danna most.

Still, it was going to keep happening, and he knew it. Both of them did, most likely. Kyven may be human, but he was in an Arcan body living among Arcans, and that required him to behave like an Arcan to fit in. Being free with one’s self to those who wanted it was an Arcan custom, because it reinforced the powerful social bonds that were so important to the Arcan race.

Pack mentality. That’s what the fox called it. Even in Arcans whose animals were solitary

creatures, like foxes and cats, they shared that powerful need for social structure and togetherness. In a way, that was one reason why the gladiatorial pits in Cheston were twice an abomination, for they robbed Arcans of that togetherness and also made them fight each other, an anathema. Acts of violence against Arcans by Arcans wasn’t unheard of, but from what Kyven remembered hearing about it, it occurred mainly in times of stress or duress. When Arcans were put in a position where lives were in danger, such as a single bowl of food thrown into a cage full of Arcans who were already starving, the strong turned on the weak... which was also a human tendency. Some Arcans, though, were just naturally anti-social. Perhaps Arcans got that from their human half. Just as there were social deviants among humans, there were ones among Arcans as well.

He could see why they did it. Why the Great Ancients introduced social behavior into Arcans. They were created to fight a war, and that meant that they were soldiers... and soldiers and armies were a social construct. Soldiers had to work together, depend on each other, and the pack mentality fostered such behavior by instilling into Arcans a need for togetherness. But that was *programming*. After so many generations of Arcans who had been born the more conventional way, he doubted today’s Arcan was anything like those Arcans that had been created using alchemy. Arcans may have been created artificially, but they were a viable species now, and that meant that they changed over time just as others did. Years of breeding in slavery had changed the Arcans, bred the warrior aspect out of them, and instituted some different social mechanics as well as the ability to turn on each other. Human greed had been filtered into the Arcan society, though, to be fair, it could also be called self-preservation. Put any living thing in a position where it had to climb over the backs of others to survive, and it would. But greed was a good way to put it. The Arcans in Haven who labored to be like the humans and amass wealth and property were different from the much more social and sharing Arcans with which they lived, possessed of a slightly different sense of values from their kin.

A strange thought. Were those years of contact *infecting* Arcans with human behavior?

He wondered if they all saw it, or Kyven was just sensitive to it because of his unique position, straddling two different societies. He was human by birth, but had come to understand the Arcans quite keenly, and found them to be a noble and admirable people, possessed of incredible strength in the face of such hopelessness. He was just glad he wasn’t the only one who saw what he saw, though. Humans like Virren and those who served in the Masked understood. They may not see the same way he did, but at least they understood.

About dawn, the others started to get up and get ready. The cat, Lightfoot, climbed the tree and padded out onto the thick branch with him, her feet and balance as steady as if she were on solid ground. She soundlessly handed him a large piece of meat left over from last night, and he took it from her with a nod. She perched with him in the tree, as silent as the grave, and Kyven mused that despite her silence and her abrupt manner, Lightfoot was just as infected with the need for social contact as any of them, since she stayed with him rather than leave him alone. Below, Tweak was getting an early start on wisecracks and teasing, focusing mainly on Patches. Patches didn’t take Tweak seriously, having lived with the Shaman long enough to gain some self-confidence, but Kyven mused that had Tweak and Patches been together when Patches came to Haven, she would have reacted *much* differently to his good-natured teasing. It was an indication of how far Patches had come from the meek, frightened little girl she was when they met. She was still timid and a little jumpy and sensitive, but the first glimmers of bravery were starting to appear in her. The winter of being nurtured by Firetail had done wonders for her. The ferret was teasing Patches over something, which stopped instantly when the taller Clover padded by and slapped him lightly on the

back of his head with her tail.

“Any trouble?” Lightfoot asked finally.

“Didn’t see a thing,” he answered. Tweak watched Patches go by, then he descended again on Patches, leaning close and saying something to her. Patches giggled, turned, and grabbed his crotch rather boldly. She leaned in and whispered something in his round little ear, which made the ferret’s tail shiver. She left him, and he stood there a moment, then shook his head and moved to start rolling up the bedrolls. Kyven chuckled; no doubt, Tweak just found out that Patches wasn’t half as meek and timid as she appeared to be. “I think this is going to be an interesting journey,” he noted as Tweak kept glancing back at Patches, and not doing a very good job of rolling up his bedroll.

Lightfoot reached out and put a hand on his shoulder. He looked back at her, and saw a little invitation in her eyes. “Tonight?”

“I’m surprised you’d ask,” he said honestly. “I thought you were much too serious to be interested in something so frivolous.”

She gave him a frosty look, which made him laugh. “Sorry, I guess Tweak isn’t the only one that likes to tease. I’d be honored. We’ll see if you’re this silent all the time, or if I can’t get some something out of you.”

He *almost* got a smile out of her.

Despite the cold and the snow, they moved swiftly and easily back along the path they had taken last summer. Game was plentiful and there were no problems at all along the way, not even any encounters with wild Arcans. It was such an easy journey that Kyven was surprised when they moved through thinner and thinner snow, and then almost seemed to cross some invisible line where the snow began to melt. As they moved further south, they moved out of winter and more and more into spring. The snow melted as they went south, and the air was warmer and warmer almost every day as they moved further and further to the south. They almost seemed to have journeyed out of winter and found themselves smack in the middle of spring as they turned more and more to the east. It was late April, and it took a few days for Kyven to fathom that in Atan, late April was when the trees were budding and the leaves were regrowing. He’d been so accustomed to the snowy, cold north that he forgot that simple cycle.

It was a very easy journey, and also fun. Clover and Patches were old friends, but he found friendship for the silent Lightfoot as well. She was a very serious, sober young lady, only nine years old, but both her parents were survivors of the pits of Cheston, and they taught their daughter the arts of fighting. Tweak, despite his sharp tongue, was a very amusing and energetic young man, as quick to help as he was to tease, and he had a very quick mind to go with his nimble fingers. Tweak was almost stupidly fearless, making wisecracks at Clover and Kyven as well as the serious Lightfoot, whose very presence seemed to drive the ferret wild. Lightfoot and Tweak were polar opposites as far as personalities went, but despite that, they seemed to get along... as long as Tweak kept his more bold ideas of teasing Lightfoot under control. She was tolerant of him up to a point, maybe even found him amusing in some ways, but when he crossed the line, look out. More than once, Lightfoot chased the ferret all over camp, and when she caught him—and she *always* caught him—she would spank him so hard his teeth would rattle. But Tweak would just laugh, vigorously rub his bottom to get the sting out, and plot his next joke to unleash on her.

They were a very cohesive and content little group. Tweak, despite his annoying tendencies, was Patches’ partner in bed almost every night, and the two of them acted like they’d discovered the greatest thing in the world. As soon as dinner was done, the two of them were humping on the bedrolls like sex-crazed rabbits trying to repopulate the entire world in a single

night. He was the first male outside of Kyven she had allowed into her bed, and Tweak had acquitted himself fairly well by being both enjoyable to her and also gentle with her... mainly because both Clover and Kyven made sure to explain a few things to the ferret long before Patches asked him, one warm night when she was in the mood and Kyven was already engaged with Clover while Lightfoot stood watch. The two of them had been friends before she took that step with him, so they already had a good base on which to build. That left Kyven with Clover and Lightfoot, which he didn’t mind. Clover was both an old friend and a former lover, and he found time with her to be just as enjoyable as they used to be. Lightfoot, on the other hand, was intense. She took sex as seriously as she took her job, approaching it with an exacting attitude that Kyven almost found funny. But, he had to admit, that intensity did make it very enjoyable, and her tongue was rough, which produced the most amazing sensations—

That wasn’t something Kyven thought about unless he wanted an erection.

The air was warm and sweet with the smells of spring when they arrived at Deep River one glorious afternoon, when the redbuds and dogwoods were in bloom, the trees all showed half-grown leaves of soft, beautiful green that swayed on a wind that carried the warmth of the changing seasons within it, inviting the world to shrug off the cold of winter and rejoice in the approach of summer. They had covered the distance from Haven to Deep River in two weeks, moving very smoothly without even trying, since game was plentiful and no troubles crossed their path. They entered the frontier town from the west side, the side from which he’d fled from Toby last summer, and the five of them padded into town as the humans and Arcans gave them all curious, speculative looks. Lightfoot walked protectively close to the two youngers, but the calm reserve on Kyven’s face and Clover’s confident steps seemed to dissuade the residents from getting too many ideas. They moved right through Deep River and to the river, then turned and moved north. They had a destination, and it only took about half an hour to reach it; the steep embankment leading up to the small cave of Clet and Stripes.

But they weren’t there. Kyven and Clover climbed the narrow trail and found the cave empty, the barrels and jars and shelves all gone. The place was dusty, and had the look of a place unused all winter. The firepit that was dug outside the cave mouth was filled with partially buried blackened sticks covered with mud, as winter rains and snows pounded the bare earth beneath the ashes.

“Did they move down into town?” Kyven asked Clover as they looked around.

“I’m not sure. Bring the others up and I will go down and ask about. I know some few people in Deep River, and one will surely send me in the right direction.”

As they cleared the cave enough to make it usable for the night, Clover left to go talk to her contacts. Lightfoot and Patches cleared out the firepit as Tweak went out to gather firewood, and Kyven used a few minor spells he’d picked up watching the other Shaman to clear the dust out of the cave, just blowing the dust out of the cave. Kyven had learned quite a few of those useless little spells from Firetail, and all of them learned surreptitiously. The fox seemed to enjoy the game as much as he, seeing how much he could learn by himself without her help, and then asking for the energy to power spells he wasn’t supposed to know. It was part of the game of deception between them, a need to deceive that seemed innate within both the spirit and the two Arcans she created. Kyven and Umbra had been deceptive with each other, and the guile extended to Kyven’s relationship with his spirit. Kyven had the feeling that his independence was a trait she encouraged, as well as his coyness. It was an exercise in deception, and in his upcoming task, the ability to practice constant deception would be vital. He saw it for what it was, nothing but further training. She wanted him to be

independent, self-sufficient, and willing to press boundaries and push, push, push. It fit her nature, he saw. She wanted him to be on the edge of out of her control. She didn't want to lead him around by the hand. She wanted him to be able to think and do for himself.

After Tweak brought up enough firewood to start a fire, Lightfoot went hunting. Lightfoot was an *amazing* hunter. She was the most agile living thing Kyven had ever seen in his life, able to run through the trees as fast as a man could run on the ground, and that was how she hunted. She would use the trees like a highway, get over her quarry, and then drop on it. She never missed, and never failed to bring down her kill on the first try. She would land on it, dig in her claws, and it was over. It would struggle, but that meant nothing the instant she got her hand on its neck or head. Lightfoot's jaws weren't wide enough to kill something as big as a deer with a bite, as Kyven did, she instead broke the neck or ripped out the throat of her quarry with her incredible strength and her razor-sharp claws. She'd grab her quarry by the snout, and with a powerful flex of her arm, snap its neck, or drive her claws into the neck and rip out its throat. Either way she did it, it was invariable lethal. She was as efficient a hunter as Kyven, and had brought back a small buck for dinner even as Clover returned from Deep River.

"It is not good news, I fear," she told Kyven. "It seems that Clet and Stripes passed just at the onset of winter."

Kyven sighed and bowed his head. They'd been good people, very good people. He had been looking forward to seeing them again, and hadn't once even considered the possibility that they may be dead.

"It was natural, from the sound of it. They were found in bed. They died in their sleep. They had friends in town, who did them the courtesy of giving them a proper burial."

"I'm... shocked. They seemed so, well, lively."

"Sometimes age can be as slow as a snail, or as swift as an eagle, my friend," Clover said sadly. "I just wonder which of them was the one to pass. Stripes was so determined to outlive Clet," she sighed. "But, they died as they lived. Together, in harmony, and happy."

"You can't fault them for that," Kyven agreed somberly. "I just hope their final days were as fulfilling as the rest of their time together was."

"I believe it was, brother. There was too much love there for it to be anything but that."

It wasn't the happy stopover in Deep River he expected. He sat outside the cave, watching the river flow by, for most of the day, remembering his visit with Clet and Stripes, and mourning their loss in his own quiet way. He'd only known them for a few days, but they'd had a big impact on his life. Clet and Stripes had shown him how boundless love could be, showed him how there could be life and love between human and Arcan, and it was one of the reasons he'd acted the way he had towards Danna. He was hoping that she could see past his appearance the way Clet could, if only to give them a chance to get to know each other... and in a way it worked. It gave Kyven the courage to at least try to talk to her. They'd become friends, at least until Umbra arrived, and he enjoyed the winter with her and Toby, Firetail and Patches. It had been very comfortable, almost like a home. But things change, he guessed. His relationship with Danna deteriorated rapidly after Umbra arrived, and Clet and Stripes had passed away during the winter, and now they were both in the arms of the Trinity, hopefully still loving each other even beyond the mortal coil.

The weather, which had cooperated with them the entire journey, had finally decided to do something different. A bank of low, threatening clouds were rolling in from the west, and he could smell the rain that was surely coming. Spring rains were common in the region, since Deep River was close enough to Atan for him to consider them to be in the same region. If this would be a pattern spring, it was now going to rain off and on for a good two straight

weeks, or more, then they'd have daily rain showers until mid-May.

Clover sat down beside him, and they shared a period of silence. Then she put her hand on his knee and patted him. "They are happy, my friend," she told him.

"I believe you," he said. "Was it hard to bind them, knowing it was going to kill one when the other died?"

"Not at all," she said. "For it was the right thing to do. They were so deeply connected that one would not live more than a couple of months beyond the other. Clet's solution saved the survivor months of grief and wasting away. Clet knew, and Stripes knew as well, deep in her heart. Remember when I told you about Master Malvok, during my own Walk? There is a time, friend, when sometimes it can be an act of love to end a life."

"Wisdom," he sighed. "Sometimes wisdom can hurt."

"Wisdom is not always a joy, my friend," she told him. "Sometimes it is a burden. But that too is something you have learned on your Walk." She leaned against him. "That is our burden, my friend. We bear it for our people so we may grant them aid and comfort."

"If they only knew what we go through."

"They do not, but they respect our devotion to the cause," she told him. "In some ways, we have more power than the council, Kyven. The council may rule, but it is to us that the people come with their problems. But open rule is not our way nor our desire. Let the politicians hold the sceptre of power, my friend. The Shaman are concerned with the people, not with power."

He leaned against her, and she put her arm around him. "Don't weep for them, brother. Re-joice. Somewhere out there, Clet and Stripes are together, and they are happy."

"As it should be," he breathed, putting his head on her shoulder.

The rain was cold, persistent, and made for a miserable journey, but in a way, it fit his mood.

The journey from Deep River to Atan was made in a perpetual steady rain, the kind of rain that soaked everything within a half an hour of exposure, but was not so hard that it flooded the rivers and streams. Finding out about Clet and Stripes had affected Kyven, and the others gave him a little space so he could work through his thoughts and come to accept it. They were his friends, and it was always a shock to find out that friends had passed on.

It was in itself a lesson, he realized. It showed him the impermanence of things, that nothing was as set in stone as one often thought. Things changed, people changed, and there was never any guarantee that one would find something the same way as one left it. It made him introspective for the four days it took to travel to Atan, but, in the end, he had to admit that Clover was right, and Clet was right. It was best for them to be bound together, it was best for them to see the end as a couple, for it was how they had done everything. He could mourn their passing, and had come to terms with it, but he did see that, in a way, it was all-right to be happy that they were together. He had no doubt that no matter which had died first, the other would not have lived long afterward. The survivor would have been utterly lost, grieving, and would not have lived long, wasting away from the pain of separation. It was merciful, the way it happened. He could only hope that in that moment when the end came, that they were happy with the way things were. Stripes had been not too pleased about their bonding, but Kyven felt in his heart that Stripes knew it was the best thing. Clet would not have lived without her long, and he knew she would have been devastated by his loss had he died first.

He sincerely hoped they were happy.

They encountered several others during the journey to Atan. Elements of the Masked were out in the forest along the very route that they were taking, setting up supply stations for the

imminent influx of Arcans that would be moving west as soon as the word was spread to begin the operation. Atan was one of the target villages in their plan, and Virren was doubtlessly involved in it. Odds were, the humans and Arcans out here setting up the supply stations were there at Virren's orders. The meetings were always cordial once they recognized Clover, who was well known to the Masked in the area, and both she and Kyven were often giving out blessings to the Arcans working on the project. Arcans in Haven didn't often ask for blessings, but they were no longer in Haven, and the Arcans out here asked for blessing almost religiously.

They all prepared for Atan. Kyven prepared by practicing his human illusion every day all day, which looked a little strange seeing a human running like an Arcan, and running as fast as an Arcan. Atan would be his first major test, because he had to fool people who knew him. His illusion had to be *perfect*, and it had to move perfectly, or people would notice. Clover prepared the others by drilling into them about every ten minutes for three days that *nobody knew of Haven in human lands except the Shaman*. The Masked did not know, the Arcans living in human lands did not know. That was a secret that had to be kept at all costs, no matter what. Clover made it brutally apparent to them that anyone who accidentally heard of Haven from them would be killed, no matter who it was... even if it was Kyven's oldest friends. Clover especially bored that fact into Tweak, and warned them all, repeatedly, that they absolutely had to think about what they were saying before they said *anything*. She told them that if they couldn't control their mouths, then just keep the fuck quiet and let Clover and Kyven talk, because the survival of their people hinged on their silence.

They timed it so they would arrive in Atan late in the afternoon, just as the shops closed for the day, and they did so, one soggy, rainy afternoon just before sunset. They had circled very wide of Atan and approached along the Avannar Road, and Kyven was now hiding behind an illusion of himself as a human. Clover and the others filed along behind him, uncollared, but the rain would keep anyone from looking too closely at them. It was a challenge to make his illusion of himself appear to be wet, since he had to envision all the water dripping out of his hair and off his illusory clothes, while making the *real* water dripping out of his fur appear to look normal. He had to invent a surcoat and a few folds in the illusory clothing to match up with where water dripped out of his fur so as not to introduce an element of doubt into the illusion. But months of practice had made him ready for the challenge, and so it was an utterly normal-looking, wet, and miserable Kyven led four Arcans up the Avannar road, past the kennels, and into the village of Atan.

It felt... strange to be back here. It felt like it was a lifetime ago, and yet he knew every single nuance of this place, a part of his former life. He knew everyone in the village by name, though not well since he'd avoided conversation when he was here, back when he was trying to keep his dark secret. But this was, still, his home, and he felt both oddly wistful and a little excited to be back.

Home.

Their first visit wouldn't be with Timble, it would instead be with Virren. He led the others through the village confidently, and down the narrow alley that linked Virren's shop with his own. He knocked loudly on Virren's alley door, and it was opened almost immediately by the huge, brutish-looking Bragga. Bragga's eyes almost popped out of his head when he saw Kyven. "Kyv!" he gasped. "Look at you!"

"You'll be even more surprised later," he said ruefully. "May we see Virren?"

"Come in, come in!" he said, backing up and opening the door fully. Kyven and the others stepped in, and once the door was closed, Kyven used Shaman magic to strip all the water out of his fur, then dried out Patches and Tweak as Clover dried out herself and Lightfoot.

Bragga looked closely at the four Arcans, then led them along the passageway, through a workroom, and to Virren's office.

Virren wasn't alone. To his surprise, Timble was sitting in one of the chairs facing Virren's cluttered desk, and his old friend looked much more mature. In the winter Kyven had been in Haven, Timble had grown from looking like a half-grown boy to a man, with mature eyes and a leaner frame. The responsibilities of running the shop had stamped themselves on his features, but it did not look bad. Timble stood up and rushed over with a laugh of surprise and embraced Kyven, but then his hands froze when he touched what shouldn't be there. "Kyv!" he gasped, touching the invisible fur on Kyven's neck. "What's going on?"

Kyven dismissed the illusion as soon as Bragga closed the door and revealed the truth to them. "As you can see, I'm still the same," he said with a toothy grin. "I've just learned magic to hide it, that's all."

Timble laughed. "It worked! I saw you and thought you'd been changed back!"

"Not yet, but hopefully soon," he said, clapping Timble on the shoulder. "How have you been?"

"A little harried, but okay," he answered. "I'm not too surprised to see you, Kyv. When word got back to us what was going on, I thought you may come back out."

Kyven looked at him curiously.

"Timble has joined the Masked, Kyv," Virren told him with a smile. "Finally, we have a high-ranking member of the crystalcutters among us. A real coup."

"I'm not sure to congratulate you or ask what insanity possessed you," Kyven grinned. "And what am I, Virren?"

Timble laughed, but Virren smiled. "You're a Shaman, Kyv."

"Well, I'm a crystalcutter again," he announced. "But let's talk about that in a bit. Virren, Timble, I'd like you to meet some people, though Virren already knows one of us. Tim, this is Clover."

"Shaman," Virren said, coming around his desk and taking her hands. "It's been too long since I've seen you. How have you been?"

"I've been well, my old friend, very well," she answered. "And I've heard much about you, young Timble," she said, taking his hands in turn. "I'm overjoyed that you have joined the Masked. Between you and Kyven, it gives us much."

"After what happened to Kyv, I just had to do something," he said impulsively. "I couldn't leave things the way they were. If he never gets to be human again, I can't just stand back and let him face what's waiting for him on this side of the mountains."

"He has said many times you have always been his fastest friend. I see his faith in you is well deserved," she told him, which made him blush a little.

"These are Tweak and Patches. They're my new apprentices," Kyven introduced.

It was a study in opposites. Tweak stepped forward boldly and shook Timble's hand, but Patches tried to melt back into the scenery, deflecting attention away from her. Clover took her by the hand and urged her back into the forefront, and with a gentle smile, she nodded and made her take Timble's hands in greeting. "Apprentice, eh?" Timble asked. "Is he teaching you Shaman magic, Mistress Patches?"

"Crystalcutting," she answered in a meek tone, not looking him in the eyes.

"I'll explain in a minute," he said. "And this is Lightfoot. She's our guardian, trained to be a fighter."

Virren looked her up and down and chuckled. "First, you should put some clothes on, Mistress Lightfoot, the village women around here take a very short view of Arcans going around without clothes. This is a *very* conservative village. Sometimes I'm amazed the vil-

lage women haven't managed to get the brothel shut down yet, Trinity knows they've tried. Second, an Arcan shouldn't be seen in public carrying a shockrod and a pistol. I'm afraid you'll have to put them aside while in human lands."

"I need them," she said simply.

"I think a deep cloak would do the job," Clover said, looking at the striped cat with a critical eye. "It would deflect the outrage of the village matrons and hide her weaponry."

"It just might," Virren said. "I'll try to find something."

"Tim, I'm glad you're here, that way I can explain what I'm doing away from your apprentices," Kyven said. "I'm going to need your help."

"Anything you need."

"I'm glad you said that before you heard what I want," he grinned. "I'm moving to Avannar to open a new shop, and I need some supplies and equipment."

"Avannar? Why Avannar?" Virren asked.

"What is about to be said cannot leave this room," Clover said quickly, looking to Bragga, who nodded grimly and checked outside the door, then looked back and nodded. "The spirits are sending Kyven to Avannar to be our eyes and ears within the city," she explained. "As you've heard, the Shaman are beginning to move. The spirits have decided we need someone in the city who can gain access to the Loremasters, so we might know what they know and how they react."

"I'm going to be a spy," Kyven smiled. "My job will be to infiltrate the Loremasters so anything that goes across their desks ends up in the hands of the Shaman. But to do that, I need some kind of cover so I can hide myself in the city. And, well, what better cover is there than to be just another crystalcutter?"

"Clever," Virren said with a nod. "So you're opening a new shop to hide yourself in the city?"

"Yeah. I've learned how to create an illusion of myself as a human, so I can run the shop without attracting any attention. They'll never suspect I'm an Arcan. Tim, I need enough equipment to open a shop and train a couple of apprentices, and I think I'd like to buy one of the boxes of practice milk crystals from you."

"Kyv, it's *your* shop. You don't have to buy what you own already."

"Not anymore," he answered. "It's *ours*. I'm setting it so we own equal shares before I leave. I want you to have Artisan rank before I go, not just have the authority to speak with my voice in village and guild matters. I want it set up so you control this shop while I expand our business and open a shop in Avannar, but we both keep our names together. I want it to look like we're striking out in a business venture to increase our profits by expanding into a larger city."

"That would work," Virren said as he sat back down, stroking his chin in thought. "It's not unheard of, that's for sure. Why, Barga Mell owns four alchemy shops in four different towns, here, Riyan, Avannar, and Balton. He came in, built up the shop, promoted his best apprentice to run the shop in his stead once it was viable, and moved on to establish a new shop. He's retired now, but what Kyven's suggesting is something that's been done before."

"Right. So, I'm going to buy a wagon, load it up with as much spare equipment the shop can manage to give me, and move to Avannar and open a new shop. It's all going to be totally legal, guild registration, everything. The shop in Avannar will be owned by both of us, just like our shop here is, completing the disguise that I'm just another crystalcutter looking to establish a new shop in Avannar, which certainly has enough cutters and alchemists to make it look entirely normal."

"We can certainly manage it," Timble told him. "Holm never threw away anything, so we

have plenty of spare equipment."

"I can make a few informal announcements in the alchemist's guild, Kyv, sort of let them know that one of the best cutters in Atan is moving to Avannar, and that's where they should go if they have a valuable crystal that needs cutting."

"Not one of the best, Virren, *the* best," Tim said simply. "Kyv's much better than me."

"The only snag I can see is apprentices," Virren grunted. "It's unusual for a shop owner not to have any."

"I can get away with it for a while, since I'll still be establishing myself, and I'll appear to have four Arcan slaves," Kyven said. "And I *will* have apprentices," he added, motioning at Tweak and Patches. "Of course, nobody will ever see them, and they'll help explain my lack of them at first. I'll have four Arcans to help me around the shop, who will cover all those little things that apprentices usually do."

"You mean I'll have to clean and do laundry and stuff?" Tweak protested.

"Those are things that apprentices usually do," Timble grinned in reply. "My apprentices *work*, Master Tweak. They work hard, and not just on learning the trade. Go to my shop and try to find a speck of dust. My apprentices keep my shop spotless, they do the laundry, and they help cook the meals. It's part of being an apprentice."

"I told you that you'd get no special treatment," Kyven winked. "And I demand a spotless shop just as much as Timble does. We were both trained by the same perfectionist."

"Aww, nuts," he grunted.

Kyven chuckled. "Virren, I need four collars," he said. "I need them to have crystals in them, but not actually *do* anything. Something that will pass muster if someone examines them."

"I know exactly what you mean, and I've already made a bunch," he said. "I've had Old Gray and Steady making them, and we're putting milk crystals in them, part of the deception we plan to use when Operation Auction begins."

"Auction?"

"The plan the Shaman sent down to the Masked," he explained. "That's how we call it. We have a foreign agent here ready to start the buying, and I'm making collars for him to put on the Arcans. He's posing as a mining speculator from Phion who's buying an army of workers and marching them deep into the wilderness to hunt for undiscovered deposits. He'll keep buying them and buying them and marching them off into the wilderness, and if anyone asks, he'll stonewall them. They don't *need* to know why he's buying them. The Masked and some Arcans will discourage anyone from the village from getting too curious about where all the Arcans are going."

"Clever," Kyven nodded approval.

"The same story's going to be used in different ways all up and down the mountains, but only if pressed about it," he continued. "After all, it's legal to buy Arcans, and we can do anything with them once they're paid for. We just have to dissuade the curious who might start wondering where they're all going once they're bought."

"That's not going to be as easy as it sounds," Timble grunted. "Already, quite a few of the gossips in the village are trying to interrogate the life story out of our agent. You know how a new face attracts attention."

"I told him he needed to be here earlier," Virren sighed. "It just takes one busybody like Matron Methars to unravel everything, if she gets enough of a burr up her skirt to start snooping. I swear, there's never been a person alive born with a greater need to stick her nose in everyone's business than her."

"I hope your agent set up in the mining camp," Clover said.

“Of course he did, on the edge,” Virren answered. “He can sneak quite a few Arcans out during the night on top of the ones that are marched out in the day to keep up the appearance. We’ve already set up a system for him to get the collars back to me, so we’ll be using the same collars over and over. Our agent had the foresight to buy a mess of Arcan pelts to bring back to make it appear that his workers are dying and he’s just replacing them, and skinning them to sell their fur.”

Kyven wasn’t the only one to shiver at that ghastly thought. To many humans, Arcan fur was a fashion accessory. To Kyven, they were once *people*, and it was a very personal and frightening reminder of human attitude towards him, who very nearly lost his own skin to a furrier, and could never forget the sight of that poor mink being killed in that kennel yard in Cheston, murdered for her fur. Arcans had died to provide those pelts, but in a way, he thought they’d approve of them being used to save other Arcans. Clover put a hand on his elbow compassionately, and he blew out his breath and nodded to her.

“A disgusting idea,” Tweak grunted, “but if I were killed and skinned, I’d be happy to give my pelt to such a cause.”

“Nobody was killed for it, he just bought pelts that were already on the market,” Virren told them. “But it was a clever enough idea to send out to the other agents. Masked agents have been buying up pelts and shipping them to our buyers.”

“Only wise,” Clover nodded. “I hope the agents in other towns are as organized and prepared as the ones here in Atan.”

“Well, not all of them have an alchemist on the inside with them to help, but I’m sure they’ll manage. We just want to make very sure we have a very effective cover *here*, since Atan is so close to Avannar. If the Loremasters suspect anything, *this* is where they’ll come to investigate. We’re the closest mountain village to them, and there’s a road that runs directly from there to here.” He chuckled. “That reminds me, Kyv, what happened to the hunter and those Loreguard that chased you out?”

“The hunter is on our side now,” Kyven answered. “He’s a mercenary, Virren. We *hired* him, at least after we promised to pay him the money he has to pay to Annette Ledwell to complete his contract with her. He may be a mercenary, but he’s very serious about keeping his word.” He glanced at Clover, who nodded. “The Loreguard, well, all of them but one died, and the survivor was captured.” He had to be careful; the humans in the Masked did *not* know about Haven, though by now they certainly suspected something like it must exist, given the operation that had been landed in their laps. They didn’t know for their own protection as well as the protection of Haven itself... what they did not know, they could not reveal.

“The officer?”

Kyven nodded. “She’s been held by the Shaman ever since, and she’s even helping us now. We explained to her what we were doing and how important it was, and she actually understood. She’s not very happy, but she sees how important what we’re doing is, and she’s helping. She’s actually not bad, once you get to know her.”

“That’s a surprise. She seemed quite tenacious.”

“She is,” Kyven said simply. “Virren, is it alright if the others stay with you tonight?”

“Certainly. I can set up some pallets in one of my storerooms.”

“I’m going to go over to the shop and visit, and see if my disguise holds,” he chuckled. “Stay in my old room, and me and Tim can go through the old stuff to figure out what I’m taking with me. Tomorrow morning I’ll go out and buy a wagon and horses, and me and Tim will go over to the guild and set things up. If we do everything right, we’ll be ready to go by supper tomorrow.”

“Geez, Kyv, you trying to avoid us?” Timble laughed.

“No, I just need to get there quick,” he said. “I need to get set up as quick as I can. The more time I have to set up, the more invisible I’ll be when the Loremasters start looking for me.”

“I can understand that,” Timble said with a grin. “But I’m glad you’re coming to see everyone. They’ve missed you, and so have I.”

“That sounds fine,” Clover said. “I will enjoy visiting with Virren. It’s been too long since we’ve talked.”

“Much too long,” Virren agreed with a smile.

“Alright, let’s get moving,” Kyven told them, turning to Clover and the others. “I’ll see you all in the morning, alright?”

Patches stepped up and gave him a strong hug, and he patted her on the shoulders fondly.

“You’ll be fine, hon, Virren’s a good man. And Clover will be here with you.”

“Come child, let us talk with humans you can trust,” Clover told her. “I think you’ll enjoy your time here with Virren.”

Patches let Kyven nuzzle him for encouragement, then she let go of him and went over to Clover. Tweak shook his hand, but Lightfoot moved up beside him, silently putting her hand on her shockrod. “Stay with them, Lightfoot,” he told her as his image shimmered back into that of his human self, as he almost effortlessly formed the image of his human appearance in his mind, then called to the fox for the power to create the illusion. “I’m safer than any of us here. This was my home. They need your protection much more than me.”

She gave him a searching, serious look, then nodded and stepped back.

“Just don’t kill anyone in here. They’re all good people here. Virren, I need a long sleeved shirt.”

She *almost* smiled.

“Timble, take him to my room, I have a few that will fit him.”

“I sure will, Virren,” Timble nodded, and the two of them left as Virren asked if the others wanted some dinner.

The reunion with the shop was both joyous and careful. Kyven was happy to see old friends and was social, but up to a point. He was very careful of the tail that was there that nobody could see, keeping it tucked between his legs most of the time, keeping their hands only where they’d feel his shirt, and only touching them on their clothing with careful attention to his claws. Shaking their hands was a bit tricky, but he solved that problem with a very firm grip that made them feel the pain of his grip more than the fur on the back and sides of his hand. He also had to resist the urge to drop down on all fours, which was something he tended to do if walking in a straight line for any measurable distance. But it was both very good to see his old friends again, and good practice. He was no mind reader, but these, his best and oldest friends, didn’t seem to notice anything overtly out of the ordinary. He was just sure to be careful, and he maintained a tight grip on his illusion at all times, always careful to match his movements up to the motions of the illusion, and *not eat or drink*. He declined all such offers, since he wasn’t entirely sure he could make that look believable quite yet. He wasn’t quite sure how to go about matching up how that would look yet, and it was something he realized he needed to do. A few days in front of a mirror watching himself eat as an Arcan and watching humans eat would help him iron out those differences.

They stayed up a little too late, and got involved in a few games of posts—and Kyven got his favorite posts knives back—which Kyven lost, claiming to be rusty but actually having issues with his claws messing up his aim. Again, something he needed to practice, since posts was a tradition among all crystalcutters and he’d need to be able to play when he got to Avannar. He went to bed in his old room, feeling a little nostalgic about his old life, but also feeling...

out of place. This wasn't his home anymore. It was nice to visit, to see Timble and the others again, but he knew that this was not his home. Maybe it was because he felt self-conscious, having to fool his friends, maybe it was all that had happened, whatever it was, he knew in his heart that this was no longer the place for him. When he left Atan tomorrow, it would not be leaving home. It would be leaving the place in which he used to live.

Where was his home? He lay in the dark, his hands behind his head as his tail thumped on the bed between his legs. Was Haven his home? No. Haven never really felt like *home*. It was a nice place, but it didn't feel like home to him. There wasn't really anywhere else he'd ever lived, so he guessed he was just a little homeless right now. He knew Avannar wouldn't feel like his home when he got there, since he'd be there on business, and it would be a very nervous business at that. Home was... what was it?

It was friends. It was contentment and happiness, it was where one raised his children. Home was where his friends were.

Then why didn't he feel like Haven was his home? He had friends there. Umbra was there. Danna was there. Everything that would make it feel like a home to him was there. So, why didn't Haven feel like a home to him?

He wasn't sure. And he was getting sleepy, so further pondering of it drifted with him into slumber.

He was up before dawn, both because they had a lot to do, and he didn't want anyone walking in on him when he was sleeping, since he couldn't maintain an illusion while he was sleeping.

The first order of business was the shop. Kyven woke up Timble, and the two of them inventoried the equipment in the shop and worked out a split that would let both shops operate without having to buy anything extra. Kyven took his own personal tools and got two extra sets, as well as his own personal workbench. He was taking one chest of milk crystals and a few normal crystals, if only to hide the fact that he'd be getting the viable for-profit crystals from Clover. Once they had a list of everything Kyven was going to take, and the apprentices understood that he and Timble were going to expand their business by him opening a shop in Avannar, Kyven and Timble went down to one of the mine wagoneers and found a wagon that was big enough and sturdy enough to get them to Avannar. It took a bit of haggling to get the wagon away from him, since it was one of his biggest and sturdiest. Old Gevan ran a steep price for the wagon, and it was almost fun for Kyven to dust off some negotiation skills to try to talk him down while Timble bought two horses to pull it.

After he finally reached a price Old Gevan smirked about, yet Kyven could live with, they moved on to the next phase of the day's plan... at least after Gevan taught him how to hitch the horses to the wagon; Kyven had no experience with wagons. Kyven and Timble went to the guild, and there, Kyven had Timble raised to the rank of Artisan by announcing that they were now equal shares partners in their shop, with Timble having *majority* interest. That distinction meant that Timble had total control of the shop, and was no longer speaking with Kyven's voice. They then went on to file the papers to inform the guild that Kyven was moving to Avannar and was going to open a shop as soon as he found a suitable building for it, and asked for the guild in Avannar to look into some possible candidate buildings. As an Artisan, that was something that they would do for him, and with luck, they'd have a list of possible buildings or current cutter Artisans in Avannar willing to sell their own shops to him when he arrived. The Avannar shop was also filed with the same ownership, Kyven and Timble sharing, but Kyven would have majority interest in the shop that would be founded in Avannar.

"Looking to run some cutters out of business in Avannar, eh?" Sevalt Greene said with an

oily smile, the guild representative in Atan.

"We're just looking to get more profit," Timble said. "The mines aren't putting out as much as they used to, so we decided that I'd stay here and get the mine business while Kyven goes to Avannar and tries to carve a niche out there."

"A sound business venture," he said with an understanding nod. "I think it's a good move. How many apprentices are you taking to Avannar, Kyv?"

"None," he said. "Once I get set up, I may have Timble send me a few from our shop here, but I want to get settled in and get everything nice and organized before I start dealing with apprentices."

"You know, that's the most I've ever heard you talk at once," Sevalt laughed.

"I was saving it up, just for you," Kyven said dryly.

"That's a lot of work, Kyv, how are you going to manage it?"

"I don't have Holm's prejudice against Arcans," he said simply. "I bought a few. They'll do the cooking and cleaning while I focus on business."

"That will work," Sevalt nodded. "I'll send word ahead and have our people hunt down some real estate for you. It may not be as big as your shop here, but it should be enough, and of course, we'll try to find something that has a strongroom, given what kind of inventory you'll be holding."

"I want enough room to house two or three apprentices," Kyven warned. "And my Arcans too. So three or four rooms in addition to the workshop."

"I'll make sure they're aware of it." He cleared his throat. "Do you want to handle the guild fees here, or when you get to Avannar and actually get your shop going?"

"I'll pay them now," Kyven answered, reaching for his purse.

By the time he returned to Virren's alchemy shop, everything was ready. He had a wagon and two horses, and the apprentices from both shops were working to load the equipment and supplies that Timble had slated for the new shop. Kyven rejoined the others, and saw that they were all wearing slender, almost dainty little brass collars, barely more than a loop of slim metal around their necks that nearly resembled an adornment or a necklace rather than a collar. Clover looked quite comfortable wearing hers, but the other three kept fidgeting, and Patches especially looked a little high-strung over the metal around her neck. Lightfoot stood resolutely near the door, her arms crossed under a deep woolen cloak that hid her nudity and also concealed her weapons.

"Are you staying, Kyv?" Virren asked. "It's a little after noon."

"We're leaving as soon as the wagon's loaded," he announced. "I'm in something of a hurry here, Virren. Are you alright, little one?" he asked gently, putting his hand on Patches' shoulder.

"I'll be alright. It's just bad memories, that's all," she said, touching her collar warily.

"Well, that one doesn't do anything. It's just a prop, don't forget."

"It's not easy to forget," she said tremulously, and Kyven couldn't deny that simple truth.

"Well, you'll have new memories soon," he told her.

"I'll just take getting moving," Tweak said excitedly. "I've never been—uh, to Avannar before," he said, giving Virren a nervous look. Thank the Trinity, at least Tweak caught himself before he said something Virren couldn't hear. "Is it big?"

"It's fairly big, young friend," Virren told him. "The city's divided by the Podac river, both literally and culturally. The working-class people live and work on the south side, and the rich folks live on the north side, crossing the bridges to go down to their shops and businesses. They have some pretty elaborate bridges, both from bank to bank and from the two banks to the island holding the headquarters of the Loremasters."

"I wonder what it looks like."

"You'll never see it, young one," Kyven told him bluntly. "They kill any Arcan that even sets foot on the bridge. Arcans are banned from the headquarters."

Tweak laughed. "So, the Loremasters proved that humans can do the sweeping and the gardening in their own headquarters."

"True, young one, true," Clover chuckled.

Kyven ran into an unexpected problem when the wagon was loaded and he brought the others out to it. Three apprentices, Braul, Vint, and Praidle, all but begged to be taken to Avannar. "It's not that we don't love Master Timble and we don't have it good here, but you're going to *Avannar*, Master Kyven!" Praidle wheedled. "The big city! I've always wanted to live in a big city, and this is my chance! *Please* take us! You need apprentices to help with the work and keep the shop clean!"

"No, Praidle," Kyven chided the twelve year old boy. "I'm starting a new shop, boys, I won't have *time* to teach for a while, I'll be too busy! Your training can't be interrupted right now, it's too important to *you*, and I won't have time to teach until the shop is fully up and running and I have steady revenue coming in. Besides, Vint, do you know what your mother would do to me if I took you from Atan?" he said, which made all three of them look a bit sheepish. "Now I might take on some apprentices when I'm settled in, but I don't know when that will be, and let's be honest here, boys. If I do, it'll probably be a couple of the older apprentices, ones I don't have to spend as much time training."

"But, but, what about the shop? Who's going to clean it, and who's going to cook for you?" Braul asked.

"I bought some Arcans to handle the chores," he told them directly. "They'll take care of me for now, and I'll be doing my best to earn enough money to keep us all fed and sheltered. Now back to work, all of you. If Timble catches you out here shirking your work, he'll box your ears."

"I'll do more than box their ears," Timble said in a dangerous voice from the doorway of the shop. "Back to your benches, you traitorous ingrates! And I think you three just volunteered to clean the entire first floor tomorrow morning after breakfast!" he barked, which made the three boys grumble and file sullenly back into the shop. Timble laughed after they were all inside, and he gave Kyven a rough embrace. "You be careful in Avannar, Kyv," he said thickly. "Don't get caught up in the big city."

"I'll be very careful, Tim," he said with a nod, clapping Timble on the shoulder as Clover helped Patches and Tweak into the wagon, putting them in the bed just behind the driver's bench, then she pointed at the wagon and gave Lightfoot a commanding look. The striped cat sighed and climbed into the wagon as well, then Clover climbed up onto the driver's bench and took the reins, waiting for Kyven. "I'll send letters."

"You'd better, or I'll bring the whole shop to Avannar and kick your ass," he said. He then reached into his belt and pulled out a leather-wrapped bundle. "Here, a good luck present."

Kyven unwrapped it, and found himself holding three brand new posts knives.

"I had Virren make them, exactly like your old competition ones," Timble grinned. "Same weight and balance."

"Thanks, Tim, I'm sure I'll get use out of them," he said, wrapping them back up. "When I'm hustling the other shop masters at the local taverns, mostly."

Timble laughed. "Just practice. You were terrible last night!"

"I'm a little rusty," he admitted, a bit sheepishly. He turned and shook hands with Virren. "Keep things sane around here, you two," he said as he climbed up onto the wagon, hesitated to get his tail out from under him while surreptitiously taking the reins from Clover, then sit-

ting down with his tail tucked around his leg, invisible because of his illusion. "I'll send a letter through the guild when we get there, to keep you up to date."

"We'll be waiting. Travel safely, my friend," Virren told him.

"Always," he said with a nod, urging the horses to move out, waving to the apprentices looking down from the windows above, then waving to Bragga, Old Gray, and Steady as the brutish-looking man came out onto the street with the two Arcans.

The wagon rolled out of Atan and down the gentle hill leading down into the Green Valley, leaving the village behind. They were all quiet until the village was a good ten minutes behind them, then Clover chuckled and leaned back on the seat. "I hope it doesn't look strange for an Arcan to be riding up here."

"It's common enough around these parts. I'm not sure how they'll see it in Avannar, though." He glanced over at Clover. "Did you all enjoy your stay at Virren's?"

"He was very nice to us," Tweak said. "He's a very nice human, isn't he?"

"He's one of the best humans," Clover said with a smile back at him. "I'm glad Old Gray is still just as vigorous as usual."

"I didn't need to hear that," Kyven told her.

"He's a coyote, my friend. I don't pass up that kind of chance."

"If I end up caring for your baby, you're paying me rent," he warned.

She laughed. "I'm not pregnant," she assured him. "But it's worth the risk to enjoy the joining."

"And here I thought you were a sensible woman, Clover," he teased.

"Will you have to stay looking like that from now on, Kyven?" Tweak asked.

Kyven nodded. "Until well after dark, and it's *Master* Kyven or just Master out here in the human world, Tweak. Don't forget that. This is what I trained all winter to do," he added.

"You're doing it very well," Clover said with an approving nod, scrutinizing his illusion. "Did anyone suspect?"

"Not that I noticed," he answered. "I was very careful. It gives me reason to hope, though. If I could fool *them*, then I think I can fool anyone in Avannar."

"That's a possibility."

"Now, let's discuss you molesting poor Old Gray," Kyven told her. "I thought you were *my* girlfriend, Clover."

Clover laughed delightedly, reaching over and patting him on the leg. "But Arcans *share*, Kyven," she grinned wolfishly.

"I've got something you can share," Kyven grunted at her, which made her explode into laughter.

It was a slow and deceptively easy journey from Atan to Avannar, though that was only how it appeared.

Kyven didn't rush the wagon despite his hurry to get there, because he didn't want to spend any night in a village or an inn, and he wasn't all that good of a wagon driver so he didn't want to hurry. He kept the wagon moving at odd hours, going slow or fast to make sure that he didn't make any inns, and he especially wanted to avoid dawdling in Chardon. He made sure to pass through that small village in the early morning, riding past a brand new timber building where the Stand Off Inn once stood, a new inn whose sign named it as the Smoky Inn. They bedded down under the wagon each night as he carefully guided his wagon so he was left in the wilderness at sunset, and thus had an excuse to camp for the night. They camped well off the road each night, and he maintained his illusion until he was literally under the blankets of his bedroll.

There were plenty of travelers on the Avannar road, going in both directions, but none of

them so much as blinked at Kyven or his unusual party. He had three Arcans in the back of his open bed wagon and a fourth sitting beside him in the seat, quite a few Arcans for a solitary wagon driver, but none of the travelers, merchants, or wagon trains who stopped him to ask about the condition of the road the way he came said much about it. His illusion fooled them utterly, for it was seamless and perfect, absolutely indistinguishable from the way he looked as a human. The first real test of his disguise came three days after leaving Atan, when a small patrol of four Loreguard were escorting a robed Loremaster, and they stopped Kyven in the road one misty morning as the skies threatened to pour down on them. "Hold a moment, citizen," one of the Loreguard called, and Kyven reined in his horses as the Arcans in the wagon behind him fell silent and nervously still. "Can you tell us how far it is to Char-don from here?"

"Oh, about a day's wagon ride, so about half a day on horseback," Kyven answered. "Given I'm not in a hurry and you might be."

The soldier chuckled.

"Anything unusual on the road ahead of us, citizen?" the small, wiry Loremaster asked.

"Not that I can think of," Kyven answered, scratching his cheek. "Anything I need to know about going towards Avannar?"

"The road's a little muddy once you get past the next village, and we left Avannar just this morning, so you should get there either tonight or early tomorrow," the Loremaster answered, then he seemed to look into the wagon. "That's quite a few Arcans for a wagoneer," he noted.

"I'm not a wagoneer, sir, I'm moving," he answered. "From Atan to Avannar. What you see in this wagon is literally everything I own. I'm a crystalcutter."

"Ah. Well, there's plenty of shops in Avannar that will hire you, journeyman," the Loremaster told him.

"I'm an Artisan, sir," he corrected politely. "I'll be setting up a shop of my own once I find a suitable building."

The small man chuckled. "Well, you'll have lots of competition," he smiled.

"I don't mind competition, sir, they keep me on my toes and my work consistent," he said, which made the Loremaster laugh.

"How far will we have to go to come to a stream where I can refill my skin?" one of the other soldiers asked him.

"We forded a stream just a couple of minars back," Kyven answered. "So not far at all."

"Well, we'll let you get back to your trip, and we need to get on our way as well, so good journey to you, Artisan," the Loremaster said.

"Good journey," Kyven mirrored, and the mounted group rode past the wagon and down the road without another word.

"Very nice," Clover murmured under her breath. "They never suspected a thing."

"I'm glad of that," Kyven chuckled as he urged the horses to start moving again.

The Loremaster was actually very accurate in his distance, and correctly predicted Kyven's arrival in Avannar, as they traveled around and through the many horse ranches west of the city that lined the Atan Road, ranches for which Avannar was famous for the quality of the horses raised there. The distant lights of the city came into view as they crested a hill that evening, the city bisected by the mighty Podac River. Kyven halted the wagon, and his apprentices stood up and looked over the wagon seat when he pointed. "Avannar," he announced.

"Now you must be on your best behavior, and your most guarded," Clover told them. "Remember, you are *slaves*. Act like it," she told them, looking right at Lightfoot, who nearly

smiled in reply. "Remain silent, children. Never speak in public, that is the safest way to go about it. Let them believe you are just dumb Arcans."

"Actually, we may not make it," Kyven noted. "They'll be closing the gates soon, we may not get there. If that happens, we'll be spending the night under the wagon tonight."

"Still, we're in enemy territory now," Clover said. "It is time to put into practice everything we have told you, my young ones. It is time to begin playing the game."

Kyven was accurate with his prediction, for the gates were closed when they arrived. Instead of seeking out an inn in the village just a minar from the city gate, Kyven instead unhitched his horses just a short distance from the city gate, just outside the range of visibility of their alchemical lights, and enjoyed a cold dinner of bread and cheese, food a human would eat, and eaten with his back to the city walls so they couldn't see anything that might jeopardize his illusion. The apprentices were a little nervous, and Tweak fidgeted a lot while Patches stayed glued to Clover's side. "What now?" Tweak whispered.

"Tomorrow we go to the guild," Kyven whispered back. "They'll keep my wagon for me so I don't have to worry about losing all my things, and then I'll take the list they give me and go look at buildings."

"What about us?"

"You'll stay with the wagon. I should put you in the kennel, but I don't think I'm going to do that. I don't have control over what they do in there, and I won't risk any of you to some campy kennel keeper who thinks you're cute and my collar is too easy to cut off."

"A k-k-kennel?" Patches gasped.

"I'm not putting you in a kennel," Kyven told her calmly. "It's not unusual for Arcans to be left to their own, if they're obedient enough. And I think I can depend on you to behave yourselves," he said, his illusory human face giving that sly smile he practiced in a mirror for days. Every conceivable expression had been practiced until he could create them quickly and perfectly.

"You're certain that it won't raise any curiosity that you buy your building in cash?" Clover asked.

"Not if anyone asks around, and they will," Kyven answered her. "Our shop is very rich, Clover, and it's well known to the guild. We have a small fortune stored in the strongroom, and another small fortune deposited in the bank. I could afford to buy a shop outright on the shop's assets, easily. The only thing that might get attention is the crystal I'll be changing, because you can't seem to make one with flaws in it," he said, giving her an accusing smile.

"It's a question of style. Sloppy work can form bad habits," she said airily.

"Consider it an artistic challenge to make one that looks more *natural*," he teased.

"Kyven, you're asking me to make something look natural that is itself unnatural. Isn't that asking a bit much?"

"I need to get you away from Tweak, he's corrupting you," Kyven grunted, which made Clover giggle. "I'm going to bed. I suggest you stay very close to the wagon."

They entered Avannar as soon as the Loreguard, who acted as the city's watch, opened the gates. Tweak and Patches huddled in the wagon, the boy's bravado fading almost the instant they were inside the city to reveal the scared little boy hiding underneath, who just acted silly to conceal his fear. There were people about even this early, shopmasters sleepily making their way to their places of business to start another day. Some of them had Arcans or men or women with them, some walked alone. Kyven walked his team of horses slowly through Old Avannar, the narrow, crooked cobblestone streets holding the old stone buildings of the original Avannar. The horses' hooves echoed off the walls of the old buildings, made of dark stone and some of them weather-beaten, but as they moved closer and closer to the river,

there was more traffic. Other wagons started to come out of stables and yards, carriages, even one of those dreadfully expensive crystal-driven horseless carriages Kyven had heard about, a frightening construction of brass, iron, leather, and padded wooden wheels. It probably cost as much as a whole block of buildings in Avannar, and it could only carry two people, the driver and a passenger. It was a device that served no other purpose but to show off the wealth of its owner, for it was neither practical nor functional.

They reached the wide mouth of Beggar's Bridge, and Kyven urged his two horses onto the stone construction, even as a pod of rag-wearing beggars eyed the wagon and the people inside it, too wary to advance; the beggars had learned long ago that an irate wagon driver could easily yank a beggar under the wagon and run him over, so they tended to focus their begging efforts to those who were on foot. Besides, this wagon had Arcans in the back, so they couldn't even try to sneak up behind it and filch anything out of the back while the driver's eyes were facing forward. A few of them may have thought about it, but the chilling amber stare from Lightfoot probably leeched that little bit of courage out of them.

"Where are we going?" Patches whispered from under the wagon seat.

"All the guilds of the different crafts have their headquarters in New Avannar," he whispered back. "Look at the river, Patches. I've always marveled at how they could build a bridge so long."

Patches and Tweak did so, rising up enough to look. The bridge was wide, its underside made up of arches spanning between stone columns that sank down into the water, spanning the nearly quarter a minar between the two banks. Here, the Podac River was nearly as wide as the mighty Deep River to the west, and from what Kyven remembered, it got wider and wider as one went towards the sea, eventually opening to become a branch of the massive bay into which the river drained. The bridge rose gently towards its midway point, then lowered gently back towards the far shore. Architects and stonemasons from all over Noraam came to Avannar to study the engineering wonder that was Beggar's Bridge, for it was the longest bridge of its kind in Noraam, its pilings going hundreds of rods down through the river water and into the bed beneath. Built by Arcan slaves and with the assistance of alchemical tools, specifically one that parted the water around where the pilings were placed so the workers could literally build it from the bed of the river upward, the bridge was a testament to what could be done when alchemy assisted human ingenuity.

They came off the bridge and entered New Avannar, a place of different buildings made of different things spaced apart from each other enough to give this section of the city an open feeling, combined with its wide avenues and patches of grassy parks here and there. There were trees growing among the buildings here, making New Avannar a much more peaceful, pleasant place... but only if one could afford to live here. This was the section of town where the rich lived, and the Loreguard mounted on horses as they patrolled gave anyone that didn't look to belong in New Avannar a hard, long look. Two patrols stared at Kyven's wagon as they passed, and one patrol stopped them to demand where they were going. They backed off when he told them they were going to the Crystalcutters' Guild's headquarters, even offered to give them directions. He refused them, naturally, for he knew where the guild was.

They reached the guild just as they opened their doors for the day's business. It was a large building not far from the river, in the Guild Quarter, a place where many guilds had their headquarters. Each guild tried to outdo the others with the opulence and grandness of their headquarters building, so the place resembled some kind of crazy avenue where the gods might dwell. Marble-faced buildings with fluted towers and spires jockeyed with one another to be the most grand and impressive, all of them enclosing immaculately maintained gardens and grounds within ornate wrought-iron fences. Even Kyven's own guild was victim to the

silly game, housed in a large building sheathed in marble, with a circle out front paved in crushed white stone that surrounded a fountain of a delicate nude female form holding a huge mana crystal, a crystal the size of a watermelon... but it was only a milk crystal, and therefore only good for being put in such a display. Although, its size did give it a certain value, he supposed. There weren't many crystals that big in the world, even if they were milk crystals.

A couple of grooms hurried out from a shelter by the impressive steps up to the building. Kyven halted the horses and set the brake, then stood up. "I'm going to leave my Arcans with the wagon," he told the grooms as they came to take the wagon. "Just don't take it far, I don't think I'll be that long."

"We'll park it right over there, sir," the taller groom said, pointing at a stable to the side of the building.

Kyven nodded and looked back at the others. "Stay with the wagon. No wandering. I'll be right back," he ordered, then he climbed down.

Patches looked genuinely frightened as the groom climbed up into the seat after Kyven got out and drove the wagon over to the side of the building, and the other returned to his shelter to await the next visitor. Kyven watched for a moment, but nodded when the groom got out and left the wagon without giving the Arcans within a second glance.

A greeter inside took his name, and once he told them his business there, he was directed across a large room filled with desks to a specific desk near a wall, not much different from any other of the others, with a alchemical lamp and sheaves of paper on it. It was occupied by a rather young-looking woman with dark red hair, and was perhaps a bit on the plump side. She was a little plain looking, not ugly but not pretty. "Kyven Steelhammer, it's good to meet you," she said, standing up and offering her hand. He was careful to shake it with enough force to be just a bit painful, so that pain registered over the feel of the fur around his fingers, then he sat down—carefully because of the tail nobody could see—at a guest chair beside her desk. "I'm the guild representative assigned to help you get set up here in Avannar. We have all your permits ready for you, Artisan," she told him, opening a file that was on her desk. "We've paid your city taxes for you as well, so you're ready to start business as soon as you're settled in."

"Thank you. Did they look at buildings as I asked?"

"Yes, I did, sir," she smiled. "There wasn't much to go on with the requirements they sent to us from the Atan office. I found two properties that filled all your requirements, and both aren't exactly that good. One is an old greengrocer near the south gate, the other one was built to be an alchemist's shop, a couple of blocks from Beggar's Bridge, but it's in poor repair. The previous owner died, and there was a fight between his sons over the property. The city took it for not paying their taxes."

"Do both of them have strongrooms?"

"The greengrocer building has an interior room that could be made into a strongroom. The alchemist's building has a strongroom." She tapped the parchment with a finger. "Each one has some good points and bad points. The main thing I think you should consider is location. The greengrocer is just three blocks from the south gate, on the Bridge Road, which is a very good location, but you'll have to do some renovations to make it work for you. The alchemist's building is two blocks from Beggar's Bridge on Chain Way, but it's in poor repair and it's not exactly in a location known for cutters. The greengrocer location is a larger building with access to a wide street, but the alchemist location, since it was built for a craftsman, may not require as much renovation, and comes with a strongroom already built. If neither of those suit you, I have some addresses written there of other buildings that were close to what

you wanted, but didn't match up completely."

"I'll go look at each one, and a few of these other addresses you have written down if those two don't suit me. Where do I go to buy the building when I choose which one I want?"

"The Loremasters handle all those things here, sir," she told him. "They govern the city. You'd have to go to their building."

Kyven nodded, not betraying a flash of nervousness over that idea. But he'd have to go to that building eventually anyway, and it was best to find out right here, today, if he could penetrate their building without any of their alchemical devices detecting him or seeing through his illusion.

"I'll go take a look at them. Do you have a groom that can take me to them?"

"I can find a guide for you," she answered.

"I have some Arcans in my wagon, is it alright to leave them and my wagon here while I go look?"

"Certainly."

The guild provided. Kyven and a very young man, barely more the fifteen, rode out from the headquarters in a open cart driven by the young man. He wore the livery of the guild and was quiet, but the young man knew the city. First, they visited the alchemist's shop. It was a small structure built with the shop on the ground floor and an apartment on the second floor. It had four rooms on the first floor, a receiving room for customers, a forge, a storeroom, and a second open area where a dusty anvil stood on the floor. The strongroom was in the basement, sectioned off from the storage area by a very stout and sturdy door with rusty eyelets for the application of bars and locks. The apartment above was three rooms, dusty and filled with cobwebs, as well as a few streams of light from a roof in need of repair. The good part of the alchemist's shop was that it had a low balcony-like porch on the second floor built out onto the roof of one of the storerooms, which would be a very easy way for him to get in and out of the apartment without being seen or without the doors opening downstairs, and it was big enough to serve their needs. The bad part of it was its poor condition, which would require a lot of work just to get it to where he could do business, and he wasn't sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing to live so close to the Loremasters' headquarters. If they swept the city looking for him, they'd reach his shop quickly once they started.

The greengrocer building was in better repair, but it was clearly a building set up for selling food. It was a single large open room with a glass window flanking the door and a second large room behind it for storage. It too had an apartment over its shop, a two room shop. It also had a cellar, but it was all one large beamed area, for storing perishables. The main problems with the greengrocer was that it was too *open*. They'd be doing a lot of things that people outside couldn't see, and it would take some work to make the place sufficiently hidden enough to suit his tastes.

Neither of them was desirable. They'd take too much work to get ready, and he didn't have that much time.

"Alright, let's check some of these other addresses," Kyven told the guide. "Neither of those will do."

It took most of the morning until he found what he was looking for. It was a small, run-down little shop that the list only mentioned as an address. It had once been a rope maker's shop, empty for only a few weeks he'd learned from talking to the neighbors, a two story affair with an attic and a cellar. On the first floor, there were three rooms, a large workroom, a storeroom, and an office, as well as a very small receiving room for customers, with racks on the walls to hold examples of the craftsman's work. It had a larger door in the back of the workshop large enough to carry in bales and coils of hemp and other materials a rope maker

would need, which opened into an alley just wide enough to allow a small wagon to go through it. The apartment over the shop was also a three room affair with a narrow stairway up to an attic, and there was a window in the back of that attic, built in a way that allowed one to climb out of it and stand on the roof of the squat two story building beside it, which was a laundry. It was buried deep in the southern reaches of Old Avannar, but was only two blocks from the city wall and five blocks from the city gate, not very far from the greengrocer building, just another shop in a line of shops along that block, on both sides. There was a laundry to the north and a Chandler to the south, with a tavern past the Chandler and a brothel past the laundry. There was also an alchemist's shop at the end of the street. It wasn't a poor neighborhood, instead filled with the working class, but that was actually what Kyven was looking for. It was a business district, and would allow him to submerge himself into the rest of the craftsmen in the area. And what was most important, the shop was close to the city wall, in case everything went to hell and they had to run. The only thing the shop had against it was a lack of a strongroom, but they could convert the cellar to serve in that regard. Kyven wouldn't need nearly as much storage space as a rope maker would, since he didn't need raw materials in that much bulk to practice his craft.

"Perfect," Kyven said to the young guide as they closed the door, since Kyven had sort of broken in to inspect the building.

Kyven made no outward signs at all of his fear and nervousness as they rode the guild's little cart to the main building of the Loremasters. Kyven had no idea if they could detect him or if they'd see through his illusion, but it had to be tested. He had to know *now* if he could get into that building without detection, before he tried it in earnest. The fox had made him practice illusion for days, weeks, months, and he'd dutifully reached a level of competency that made the illusion of him utterly convincing, even changing expressions based on his moods... but those were *active* changes. Kyven had to make them. He was glad of that, since his serene-looking illusory face concealed the tension and worry that existed just underneath it.

It all came to a head when they reached the bridge, with its four Loreguard stationed there, and that sign: *Final Warning! No Arcans Permitted. Any Arcan Found On The Island Will Be Terminated With No Reparation To The Owner.* That sign symbolized everything that was about to happen, and all the problems and issues that Kyven, the Arcans, and Haven had with the Loremasters. The Arcans didn't want war or strife or hatred, they just wanted their people freed. But the Loremasters, clinging to their vision of the past, would not let the Arcans go, both because they did all the work and because they would never admit that Arcans could be equal to humans in any way or manner.

Before Kyven was really ready, the guide trotted the horse and cart up onto the bridge. Kyven tensed up, but the Loreguard did not stop him, there were no sirens or alarms, nothing at all. He sighed audibly and leaned back in the seat as much as he could without pinching his invisible tail, and regained a measure of composure. He moved with more and more confidence as the cart passed through the meticulously maintained gardens outside their glass-sheathed main building, where citizens moved in and out with armed Loreguard, carrying muskets, swords, and shockrods, stood in protection. The guide stopped the cart near the stairs leading to the main doors. "I'll wait over there for you, sir," the guide said, pointing to a graveled area where several carts and carriages were parked.

"Alright, I hope this won't take long," he said with building confidence, climbing down from the cart.

It looked exactly as he remembered from before, when the fox had him come here so he could understand that these people were his enemies. He did stop to admire that glass ceiling

one more time, shining early summer sunlight down onto the marble-tiled floor, with its many potted trees lining the walls. Again, there were no sirens, no alarms, no clusters of armed men rushing out of doors to kill him. Either they couldn't detect him, or they didn't bother trying out here in these public areas.

He approached one of the Loreguard standing guard against the wall. "Excuse me, I have a little problem. Where do I go to talk to someone about a piece of property?" he asked. "My guild gave me a list of properties to check out for my shop, but they didn't tell me who owns the one I'm looking at. The two they suggested they said the city owned, but they never mentioned the others on this list."

"Second door from the left, look for a large double door on the right side of the passageway, the first door you see on that side. Can you read, citizen?"

"Yes, I'm an artisan in good standing with my guild," he answered.

"Very well. The door is marked *Department of City Tax*. They handle the deeds for property in that office. They can tell you who owns a piece of property, and if it's for sale, they can help you start the process of buying it by pointing you to who owns it."

"That's exactly what I need. Thank you, sir."

"Good day to you, artisan."

The office to which he was directed was a cavernous, almost-library like chamber filled with shelf after shelf that held books, tomes, volumes, folders, and boxes filled with documents and ledgers. It was separated from the door by a counter, and Kyven wasn't the only citizen there. Surcoated Loremasters were helping other city dwellers along the counter, and a short, balding man of middle years, wearing a plain gray smock covered over with a Loremaster surcoat, came over when he came to the counter. "What can I do for you today, citizen?" he asked in a mechanical manner, as if it was a greeting he used all day every day.

Feeling totally confident now that they had no idea who he was, that they couldn't penetrate his disguise, Kyven took out the slip of paper with addresses and got down to business. He explained what he wanted, and how he wasn't sure who exactly owned the property he was interested in buying, that it was just one address on a list of possible shop sites compiled for him as a service by his guild. The little balding man left and returned moments later with a large ledger, and looked up the property by its address and description. "Ah yes, that one's owned privately, and the taxes are currently paid up to date," he said. "It's listed as being owned by Shario Brelann. Hmm, that's a Flauren name," he mused. "Anyway, I can look this fellow up for you and you can find him and discuss this piece of property."

"I'd appreciate it, sir."

Kyven left the island of the Loremasters barely able to contain his elation. It seemed to his guide that it was over getting the building, but it was actually because he now knew that he could get into the Loremaster's headquarters without detection. Whether he could get into secret areas was another question, but for now, he knew that he *could* get into the building itself without being found out. That was the open door he needed to infiltrate their headquarters and learn their secrets.

It took them about a half an hour to get him a name and potential address for the owner of the vacated shop, and about another hour to track down this mysterious Flauren. He was something of a shady character, one of the mid-level criminal players in the city, a dark-skinned Flauren who conducted court of sorts in a seedy dive called the Five Rings, in the center of Old Avannar. Kyven could see that he was a criminal, and had probably attained that property in some kind of cheat or blackmail scheme against the last owner. Kyven noted the very burly men who took careful note of his entrance into the tavern, and the tired-looking female canine Arcan wearing a heavy collar milling between the tables. Kyven had

to steel himself against that; there was nothing he could do for her, and to try would ruin everything and get thousands killed.

There were not happy endings for everyone.

The moustached Flauren was lounging indolently in a chair near the bar when the barkeeper pointed the man out to Kyven, and he walked calmly up to the table. "Are you Shario Brelann?" Kyven asked in a casual voice.

"I might be," he answered in a thick Flauren accent. "If it's worth my while."

"The city records say you own a building I'm interested in buying," Kyven began. "A little rope maker's shop on Moon Street."

"Ah, I think I might own that," he said, taking his leg off the arm of his chair and sitting partially erect. "But I'm not interested in selling."

"Why not? It's just sitting empty."

"Because I never sell anything I buy," he said, looking Kyven up and down. "Unless what I get for it is twice what it's worth."

"Worth is a relative concept," Kyven said, looking down at the man. "The building suits my needs very well, so it was worth the effort of tracking down its owner to me. But it's nothing but a tax liability for you since it stands empty and earns you no profit, so its worth to you is considerably less. So, what is it worth to you, Master Brelann?"

"Oh, I could see to part with it for, say, two hundred thousand chits," he said with a little smirk.

"I could buy every other building on the block for that much money, and probably half the next block over."

"But that is what it is worth to me, Freeman," the Flauren grinned, which made his cronies laugh.

"I'll offer you one thousand, in cash," Kyven countered. "Which is more than the building is worth."

"A thousand, for property in Avannar?" the Flauren said, then he laughed. "You couldn't buy a grave plot for a thousand chits."

"You make a ridiculous offer, I make a ridiculous offer. We'll keep making ridiculous offers until we find something in the middle that we can both live with," Kyven told him.

"Let's make it clear, since you're obviously too simple to see sarcasm. The building is not for sale. I have plans for that building."

"You're sure about that?"

"Quite."

"And you won't change your mind?"

"Why should I?"

"Oh, say, because you won't get much use out of it after I burn it to the ground. Think that might change your mind?"

The Flauren gave him a wild look as his sycophants jumped to their feet, then the man *laughed*. "Pull up a seat, friend, and let's discuss this building of yours."

Kyven declined an offer of ale as the street criminal told him about the building. "I was planning on opening a whorehouse there," he explained. "It's a good location."

"There's one just two doors down, though."

"Ah, but competition can be profitable, if it's done correctly, since I own *that* whorehouse as well," he grinned. "And I run some... other businesses, that could make use of the building's location for certain things. But, since you've proved you're serious about buying my building, let's see if you can find a price that will make me consider giving it to you."

Money really wasn't an object to Kyven, since Clover could make crystals, but he also

couldn't leave any memory in the man's mind that he was so willing to spend so much money for a building in which he intended to open a shop to make a living. Kyven knew how to negotiate, but this Flauren was a fast talker and a smooth operator, so it kept Kyven on his toes.

After nearly an hour of haggling, they reached an agreement. Kyven would buy the building for twenty thousand chits, in cash, payable immediately. Further, Shario demanded that Kyven make his services available to cut certain crystals that he would prefer the government not know he has from time to time, for a reasonable fee on his side, like black crystals that were heavily regulated by the Loremasters. This Kyven agreed to do, after a moment of furious thought, since Kyven appeared to them to be a lawful and honorable man.

After they agreed to a final price, they both stood up. "Where do you want me to bring your payment?"

"I'll have to go get the deed," Shario told him. "Meet me at the Bank of Avannar in an hour. We can complete the transaction there, and the bank's notary can witness the passing of the deed."

"That's fine with me. It was good doing business with you."

Shario laughed. "How did you know to say that to get me talking?"

"I may just be a cutter, but I was trained by my master in how to do *business*," Kyven said simply. "And Master Holm explained that sometimes you have to say something outrageous to get a Flauren started."

Shario laughed. "Indeed, indeed. I'll see you in an hour then, Master Kyven. I believe we both found a transaction to equalize the worth of your new shop for both of us."

"We did," Kyven nodded, then he turned and left the tavern.

"This place is a wreck!" Tweak complained as the Arcans got their first look at their new home for a while, as they padded in through the back door from the alley.

"It has potential," Kyven told him as he went by. It had been remarkably quick to get everything done once he had an agreement with the Flauren, and for that at least, Kyven couldn't fault the Loremasters' system for administering the city. Kyven dipped into shop funds to pay Shario his price, since they easily had twenty thousand in their account, and it was the same bank here as it was in Atan. Kyven would replace that money within a week, but it also ensured that he didn't have to move any cash and be open to having it stolen.

Shario was a bit surprised to see Kyven simply talk to the bank manager about the money. Shario thought he was some wandering journeyman, not an artisan.

After buying the deed from Shario, all he had to do was take it back to the Loremasters headquarters and show it to the people there in the tax department. They logged him as the new owner of the property in their books, made him pay a tax for the sale, and that was it. It was now his building. He went back to the guild for the others and the wagon, and now they were here. "We'll set up the main workshop right here, in this room," he said. "There's no kitchen, but we can convert the storeroom to a kitchen easily enough if we buy an alchemical stove for it and install some shelves and counters. That'll save us some room upstairs. I'm not much of a carpenter, but we can work it out. Now let's get the wagon unloaded so I can go sell it and the horses."

Patches looked a little annoyed as they unloaded the wagon, stacking boxes and bags in the main room, looking critically at the building's main room, with its dust-choked tables and cobwebbed corners. "It's going to take me a week to get this place clean," she said, making a face as she wiped her finger through a thick coat of dust from a table near the office door.

"You'll have plenty of help, child," Clover told her as she and Kyven set down a large wooden crate holding the milk crystals and other valuable items. It was all boxed together to

make it hard to steal it without taking it all, and it was too big to do easily. "Now come, we need to get this done before it gets too late. I, for one, am hungry."

It took them a little bit of time to finish unloading the wagon, and Kyven left them to start sorting things out as he took the wagon down to a stable and sold it and the horses. He stopped by a butcher and picked up a side of beef for them to eat on his way back, and was accosted outside the shop by a young looking woman wearing an outrageous red velvet dress. The woman had sensual eyes, blond hair that was a little tangled and unkempt, and walked seductively. "Care for a bit of a frolic, friend?" she asked, glancing back at the brothel. "We can have a lot of fun just inside."

"No thanks, I'm a bit busy," he told her, stepping past. "I just bought that empty rope maker's shop and I have a lot of work to do to settle in."

"Really? Shario finally sold it?"

"He drives a hard bargain, but I got it away from him," Kyven told her.

"Well, we give discounts for our neighbors," she said invitingly.

"I'll keep that in mind," he said calmly as he went past her.

Kyven went back past the shop, around to the alley, and came in through the door to find Clover directing the other three as they started stacking things on tables, in the storeroom, getting it out from underfoot but not setting anything up until they had a chance to clean. He closed the door and barred it, then held up the side of beef. "Dinner," he called.

"Thank the spirits," Clover said excitedly. "Let's clear a clean space somewhere and eat!"

"What are we going to do now, Kyven?" Tweak asked him as Clover all but mugged him for the heavy slab of meat, which was enough to feed all three of them.

"Well, we're going to be doing a lot of cleaning for the next few days, then I'll start setting things up," he said, looking around. "Once the shop is fully up and running, then I'll start doing the other work. Clover, you know that one of you will have to go out in the city."

"I wasn't about to let any of the young ones do something like that," she smiled. "I've been to Avannar before, I can get around without getting in trouble."

"Good. I just won't be able to do everything myself. I'm going to be very busy for the next few weeks," he noted, then chuckled as Patches berated Tweak for putting a canvas bag down and raising a cloud of dust. Patches had been a house servant, and all the dirt and dust and webs in the old building seemed to awaken some strange need in her to restore order to the chaos. "I have to get the shop up and running, and once it's stable, I can start working on our other little task."

"That can wait for later. For now, I am starving! Let's eat!"

Chapter 18

He wasn't entirely sure just exactly when he lost control of his own shop, but somewhere, somehow, that was exactly what happened. And he didn't lose it to Clover... he lost it to Patches.

The little red panda was in her element, and she was in heaven. She took command of them all the morning after they moved in, sleeping on their bedrolls on dusty floors. She made out a list of cleaning supplies they'd need—showing off her new ability to read and write, taught to her by Firetail over the winter—and pushed Kyven out the door almost before he could even get his pants on and get his illusion settled around him. It was a rainy late spring morning when she hustled him out to go buy her brooms, mops, dust rags, scrubbing brushes, buckets, and some basic tools, implements, and utensils that any home needed, such as a pots, pans, dishes, silverware, and a hammer, for example, and he found it very challenging, once again, to make his illusion appear wet. It was probably his proudest achievement, he

mused after he got home, that he could put that much detail into his illusion that it looked totally real dripping wet. Once he got home with everything Patches wanted, she drafted all of them and ordered them around like a little general as she took command of the situation. She split them up and set them to cleaning, and Kyven thought that all of them, even Lightfoot, were too startled by her sudden boldness to put up much of a fight. Clover did as Patches said because she saw the practicality and efficiency in Patches' plan to clean the building, and Kyven didn't much care. He was no maid, and Patches knew what she was doing.

Because the shop was the first priority, getting it cleaned was their immediate mission. Kyven did skive off cleaning here and there to go get food, and also to start buying furniture for those rooms that were cleaned. Room by room, the empty building was filled with furniture, starting in the apartment above and working down into the shop proper, as Patches cleaned from a top to bottom pattern. The apartment above was the private space of the five of them, and it was done in Arcan fashion. There were three rooms up there, and it was decided that they would create two bedrooms and a common room. Kyven's room looked like the room of a working shopkeeper, functional and practical and also an illusion to keep up the appearance that he was human should anyone come to visit, but he never really slept alone, so there would almost always be someone with him. The other bedroom was the room for the others, and Patches had had him buy two beds, both of which were large enough to hold three people. Because of the size of the beds, wardrobes were sitting in the common room to hold clothes, sitting behind two chairs and a sofa that formed a square with the hearth in the common room.

Once the first floor began to get cleaned, the shop started to take shape. Kyven bought work benches for Patches and Tweak and set up his own bench, taken from Atan, near the door to the office, which would be where he'd manage the shop's dealings... as well as some other things. He set up the work stations with all the tools a cutter needed, and then bought a desk, chair, cabinets, and a shelf for the office once that room was cleaned out. Kyven had to hire a carpenter once the customer lobby was cleaned to convert the hooks and racks that had once held rope to shelves that would display crystals behind glass panes, to show off Kyven's skill as a cutter to prospective clients. A simple counter would cut off the entry to the shop behind the door from the front door, which the carpenter assured would be easy to put in place. The storeroom was swept out and the carpenter was also contracted to convert the musty room to a kitchen, a kitchen that would require the use of an alchemical stove since the room had no fireplace and hearth. The stoves were simple iron boxes that had a crystal in them that generated heat on the surface above, and also heated an interior cavity used for baking. A slider bar on the side adjusted the heat given off by the device, allowing for a slow simmer or a searing sauté of the food prepared on it. The stoves were fairly common, as were metal boxes with two doors, with crystals that made it cold inside to store perishable foods, aptly named coldboxes. One side of the big thing was merely very cold, but the other side froze whatever was placed inside it. They were common enough not to be out of place in a kitchen, but they weren't cheap, so one didn't see a coldbox in the houses of the poor. But Kyven saw it was more economical to buy it and save on wasted food in the long run, since they could chill what they didn't eat to make it last longer. Besides, Patches' old home had one, and she wanted one for their house... and he wouldn't deny her that luxury.

By the time Patches had overseen the thorough cleaning of the cellar and the attic, including getting rid of some old rope making supplies that had been forgotten and some old barrels and an empty trunk, the carpenters had completed the counters and table of the new kitchen, and Kyven had bought the stove and coldbox and had them delivered, then spent a *hell* of a lot of money outfitting Patches' new kitchen. But when he was done, when the carpenters

were done, and when Clover had went out and bought all the food that Patches demanded to do real cooking, Kyven couldn't deny that the little panda had a point. Her kitchen had more tools than the workshop; knives of all kinds, pans, pots, kettles, baking sheets, cutting boards, graters, racks, everything a professional cook could ever want. And it was all bought and intended mainly for vegetables. Patches was omnivorous by nature but was herbivorous by breed, and most of the kitchen was designed around the preparation of meals that involved vegetables as well as meat. Some of the meat would be cooked, mostly in dishes that called for it, but for the most part the meat would be eaten raw. All of that kitchen was for the vegetables and the occasional prepared cooked meat dish, such as stew or pot pies.

After everything Patches had gone through before coming to Haven, Kyven felt that her little luxury was the least he could give her. Patches had done the cooking, but had rarely if ever been allowed to eat the fruits of her labor. That they would make her cook food she would be beaten for eating and then make her eat twigs and leaves just to survive was the epitomy of cruelty... but nothing about Patches former owners was anything but cruel. They were monsters, total monsters, and Kyven would loved to have had the opportunity to teach them the error of their ways. But they were dead now, killed by Patches herself when she found her collar wasn't working, probably the first time the meek little panda had ever done anything brave. It was just an example of the strength hidden inside the little Arcan, for she had found the strength to strike back at her tormentors, and had killed her master and mistress for all the torment they had perpetrated against her.

The carpenters had done a little more for him than just remodel his customer lobby and kitchen. They built a proper stairway and opened the floor in the corner so the cellar would serve as the pantry for the kitchen. Kyven then hired a stonemason to build a wall to bisect the cellar, and had a blacksmith install a stout steel door to form the new strongroom. The carpenters then came back and built a wooden wall against that stone one so Patches could hang things off of it, and also to conceal the strongroom door, which was hidden behind a wooden panel. The strongroom was huge, and it was going to hold more than just crystals very soon. It was going to hold *information*.

Kyven bought another desk, and another cabinet, and another set of shelves, and they were down in that strongroom, as well as a single alchemical lamp. That was his other office, and that office was directly underneath his official office. It was a separation of the front from the real action.

About ten days after Kyven bought the building, the place was clean and already felt cozy, the benches were ready, and there was even a sign hanging outside of his front door proclaiming that the building was a crystalcutter's shop, just one of many in Avannar. It was perfectly anonymous, a little shop on a little out-of-the-way street, the perfect way to sink himself into the city with all the justification and cover he needed to hide the truth. Everything was ready. The shop was ready, the apartment was furnished and they'd already settled in.

So, once the cleaning was done, how exactly did Patches wrest control of the shop from him? He sat in his office and mused about that with a rueful grin on his face. She had control of the place because she was the cook, he realized. She controlled the food, and just about everyone in the place liked their dinners.

But the cleaning was also never done. Every morning, she had fallen into the habit of cleaning the whole building from top to bottom, even going so far as to scrub the landing of the door and the flagstones of the street just outside the shop, the only time she ever left the shop. Kyven had Lightfoot keep an eye on her, not because someone might try to steal her, but because she might panic when she realized she was standing out among humans, sur-

rounded by people who frightened her. She was very timid out there, but in here, she ruled the roost. She was the one who decided when they ate and what they ate, she was the one that knew where everything was, she was the one who kept everything neat and orderly, she was the one that sent Clover out on errands and to buy her groceries, and that gave her an unspoken authority. It was an authority Kyven realized Patches didn't even know she had, which amused him. She was controlling the shop without knowing she was doing it.

Eh, it was good for her. Taking control and running things gave her something to do and kept her from worrying too much about being in Avannar instead of back home in Haven.

Kyven had other concerns. Earlier that day, he'd sent official notice to the guild that he was opening for business tomorrow, and paid the last of the fees required by the guild for his licensing and the new shop fees; the guild didn't take a percentage of a cutter's profits, they instead kept in operation with fees for some services, such as their help in getting him set up in business in Avannar, and yearly dues on top of those fees. Every year, he paid a small amount to the guild as an apprentice, but in return he received the guild's support. Now that he was an artisan, those dues were larger, but in return he also received more help, as well as official status as an artisan, which had certain weight in cities and towns in the Free Territories. In Atan, artisans were land-owning citizens, with a voice in village matters, and Kyven had been a member of the city council by proxy, since it was Holm's shop which had that seat. Whoever controlled Holm's shop owned that seat. It had been Kyven, but now it was Timble. Here in Avannar, there were an onslaught of artisans of many different crafts and trades, so they didn't have the same prestige as they did in Atan. But, the fact that he was an artisan *did* make him a shop owner, a land owner and a businessman, a rung above the people who would work for him.

Tomorrow, he would open his doors and begin being a crystalcutter again.

But there was much more going on, and that was why he was in his office. Kyven was a crystalcutter by trade, and like alchemists and many other trades, it was a craft that required planning and a methodical approach. Now that he was being a cutter again, he tackled his *other* work here with that same practical, methodical approach. He had a job to do here, and since it was an unusual job, it required him to sit down and carefully consider what had to be done.

The first step was to define *exactly* what he was here to do. What was he here to do? The short simple answer was that he was here to spy on the Loremasters. But the true objective he had here was simpler; he was here to *gather information*. That was his purpose. So, now that he had that defined, he went so far as to define just what information was. What *was* information? It was... well, information. News, rumors, lore, facts and gossip, all of them were information. The writing in books was information. The picture painted on the side of a shop's wall was information. Two drunks telling old war stories in a tavern were trading information. A toddler lying about not breaking a vase was information. He was here to gather information.

So, in what ways would he find that information? Where would he look for it? He used an illusion before him to make a list, so he had a visible means of keeping his thoughts ordered without putting anything down on writing someone else may find and read. He marked down *books, reports, and papers* as his first entry. Those were written records, letters, communications, and other archived data that he could plunder from the Loremasters' building. Below that, the words *people* appeared. People often knew things about what they'd seen, heard, or read, and they were a means of getting at that information. The Circle, the council of Loremasters, would know all the things he wanted to know, but he might be able to find some groom or maid that overheard this, and some page that overheard that, then put it all together

and build a complete picture of the information he was after. Below that, he put a single word, *alchemy*. The Loremasters used some alchemical devices to communicate between offices the Loremasters kept in the various cities, towns, and villages. One way to gather information would be to find some way to intercept those communications between the alchemical communication devices. The Loremasters used the same kinds of ones the guilds did, so it would be a matter of stealing one, getting to the person who used it, or building their own that could intercept those communications. Below that, he put *rumor*. Rumor wasn't exactly the same as people, since people knew information, where rumor was pure information shaded by the people who passed it. But rumors could be useful, especially in what the Masked was doing this summer. Rumors of what was going on may reach him, and that would be useful information. Below that, he put *others*. There was other information out there, and Kyven certainly couldn't be the only person who made a personal mission out of gathering it. One established network that was already there and would help him was the network of the Masked here in Avannar. They had a small but efficient organization here, several laborers, a couple of shop owners, and even a single low-level functionary that worked for the Loremasters as a contracted lawyer. He wasn't a member of the Loremasters, but he worked for them. That existing network would help him by providing him with information, and Clover had already made contact with them and let them know that a Shaman was in the city and would be here for a while. He was fairly sure that Shario was also well connected and knew what was going on, or he wouldn't be a very good criminal. If he could tap *other* intelligence-gathering networks for what they knew that interested *him*, he could learn things without having to do the work himself. Kyven had basically an unlimited budget at his disposal, since Clover could make all the money he needed... he could buy that information from them.

That was a lot of ground to cover, he realized. And there was a lot of information he had to go through. He made a list of that, as well. First on his list was *Operation Auction*. His primary, short-term mission was to make sure Haven knew exactly what the Loremasters knew about the Arcan exodus under the guise of buying the Arcans. Underneath that, he put the word *Haven*. He also wanted to find out if the Loremasters had any inkling of just what was hidden far to the northwest of Noraam's human settlements. Below that, he put *Crystals*. He wanted to find out exactly what the Loremasters knew about the crystal situation, and what plans they had to deal with the crisis. Under that, he put *Shaman*. He wanted to know exactly how much the Loremasters knew about Shaman, because if they knew what their enemies knew about them, that would help them maneuver around them. Under that, he put the word *Arcans*. He wanted to uncover any plans the Loremasters had about the Arcans, which was related to their plans for dealing with the crystal shortage, but may be parts of other plans. If the Loremasters started buying Arcans for a construction project, and he knew nothing of that project, then he might find out about it because he was paying attention to how the Loremasters dealt with or used Arcans.

And below that, he put a single word. *War*. War would be the inevitable result when people realized the crystals were running out. He wanted to know what the Loremasters knew about that, and what their plans were about it. Would they take sides? Would they try to prevent war? Or would they perpetrate war in some way to keep control of Noraam, manipulating some of the kingdoms into war with others? What would they do to protect the Free Territories, where they both had their headquarters and also was the last area with any significant amount of crystal deposits? Would they try to prevent wars, or would they send all the various kingdom and city-state armies against some other nation, like Balton, Bron, Cheston, Flaur, or Phion? If Haven knew what was going to happen, they could make plans and take

steps.

Any of those were possible. The Loremasters didn't officially run Noraam, but unofficially, they did. It was a very clever setup, Kyven could admire it. They just advised the various kingdoms and provided communications to maintain the loose coalition between the various kingdoms and city states, and the Loreguard was the subtle enforcement arm of their unofficial power. Danna told them that the Loreguard existed as a free-standing army that kept the different factions of Noraam at peace, for it was a non-aligned army that would be sent to help defend any kingdom or city-state that was invaded, without caring who it was or why it started. They only defended, did not attack, to make it all but impossible for the invading power to conquer the invaded power. The inability to solve conflicts by war made the various factions of Noraam negotiate, and it was the Loremasters who officiated those negotiations.

The information that Danna gave him also factored into what he was planning. Danna gave him names of officers, of Loremasters who were chatty and friendly, and of many of the more important workers and servants within the headquarters and in the Loreguard thinking that Kyven might be able to tap some of them for information, the ones she thought might be most apt to leaking information of interest to Haven.

Danna. He created an illusion of her that was the size of a doll, on his desk, one of the memories he had of her when she was naked, and just stared at it with a distant smile. She was just so *gorgeous*, so perfect. He'd never seen a body like that, not among humans, not among Arcans, and staring at that little illusion was sparking a reaction under the desk that made him inclined to go hunt down one of the females. It was too bad that they just couldn't seem to get along. Well, they *did* get along, the problem was Kyven's state as an Arcan. She couldn't handle it. She wouldn't touch him while he was an Arcan, but their mutual attraction and his desire to be human again kept her lurking in the background.

The door opened without him noticing it, and a chuckle broke him out of his reverie and caused him to dismiss all his illusions, in a bit of a start, except for the illusion of his human self. Clover was leaning against the doorframe, her arms crossed beneath her breasts. "I'm not sure that little image on the desk matched with the others you had in front of you," she said with a little smile.

"I was daydreaming," he said dismissively. "What is it?"

"Patches wants me to go out and get some things. I need a little money."

Kyven laughed. "Just when did she take over my shop?" he asked, a little plaintively.

"When we let her," Clover grinned in reply. "Do you need anything?"

"What I need is in Haven," he sighed.

"Oh? Did just looking at that little image get you that bandy?"

"It never fails to," he said honestly, reaching into the desk and taking out a small purse.

"Here," he said, tossing it to her. "You can buy a few things for me."

"What?"

"I need a couple of empty ledgers. According to Brin, the Chandler down the street, there's a bookmaker on Sun Street that sells ledger books. That's just the next street over, so it shouldn't be hard to find. Buy me two, and some pens and ink."

"I'll find it," she assured him. "I'll leave you to your, ah, work," she added with a wicked little grin, then closed the door.

He made a face at the door, though it was hidden behind the unchanging expression of his illusion, and went back to his pondering. He barely had his thoughts reorganized when the door opened again, and he saw Lightfoot pad in. She said nothing, simply closed the door and then pointedly took off her leather belt. She only took off that belt for two reasons, and the act of seeing that belt come off instantly got him in the mood. "Clover sent me," she said

in her usual abrupt manner, stalking up to the desk.

"I'm glad she did," he replied, standing up and dismissing the illusion, then starting to unbuckle his own belt.

Lightfoot was always very serious and intense, even when it came to sex. She didn't like to play or touch or caress like most females did. When she wanted sex, that was exactly what she wanted, *sex*, right then and right there. She would touch and caress during sex, but she didn't want it as a precursor to sex. Where he had to engage in a little foreplay with Patches and Clover to get them ready, Lightfoot was ready almost on demand, which was a little surprising and strangely erotic. In her normal pattern, she was ready as soon as she closed the door, and all Kyven had to do was shed his own clothes. She looked down at his erect penis and raised a brow, nearly smiling. "Let's go," she declared in a voice that would almost sound like they were still moving furniture, or cleaning. She leaned over the desk and raised her tail, and that was all the invitation Kyven needed. She was tolerant of his own quirks, and was still and receptive when he leaned over her and clamped his jaws on the back of her neck, holding her still as he mounted her. "Don't gouge my desk with your claws," he grunted as he fully penetrated her, holding onto her hips, then he set about relieving the sexual tension he'd created in himself by lusting after Danna.

Danna would consider it cheating on her, but Kyven didn't care. He was worked up, and he released that energy on Lightfoot, who certainly didn't seem to mind. She panted and growled in her throat as Kyven thrust into her, then he pulled her up so her back was against him and pawed at her small breasts. Of course, that would be the perfect moment to be interrupted, so Kyven wasn't entirely surprised to see the door open, and Tweak appeared. He took one look at them and laughed, then leaned against the doorframe much the same way Clover did. "Breaking in the new desk, I see," he said with a clever smile. "How is it?"

"What do you want, Tweak? I'm busy," Kyven grunted, trying to keep Lightfoot from reaching back and grabbing hold of his hair. She always pulled it, and that wasn't entirely pleasant.

"There's someone in the customer room," he said. "He said he wants to talk to you about cutting crystals."

"Go back and tell him that I'm not ready to start cutting crystals yet, and I'm really busy right now, but I'll be open for business tomorrow. He can come back then," he answered. "But ask him who sent him to me before he goes. Nobody should be coming yet."

Tweak watched them with a slow smile. "You know, I've always wondered how you two do that without cutting each other up," he noted. "I'm just surprised Lightfoot's enjoying it. I thought she wasn't capable of enjoying anything." Kyven pointedly pinched both of Lightfoot's pert little nipples with his fingers in reply, not drawing a drop of blood despite his hooked claws, which made Tweak chuckle even as it made Lightfoot growl in pleasure.

"Keep it down, or the human will start wondering why you're busy," Tweak grinned, then he closed the door.

"Little rat," Lightfoot groaned. "I'll get him."

"Later," Kyven told her as he hooked his arm around her stomach.

Arcans didn't view sex as a private activity. It was private in that it was practiced between only two, but it wasn't something they hid from the world. So it was entirely natural for Tweak to return moments later, just as Kyven and Lightfoot were working up to climax, and was forced to wait to report until after they finished, and Kyven pulled Lightfoot down into his chair with him, enjoying the last afterglow of their climax. Lightfoot just leaned back against him and panted to recover her breath, and Kyven wrapped his arms around her in contentment. "Now that I've enjoyed the show," Tweak grinned, "the human was named

Veraad, and he's an alchemist, the one just down the street. He wanted to talk to you about cutting some crystals for him, since you're so close to his shop. He gave me this note," he said, holding up a scrap of parchment.

"What does it say?"

"It says, umm, hold on, his handwriting isn't that good. Uh, okay: 'Greetings. I'm Veraad, the alchemist who owns the shop on the corner with Star Street. Since you're the closest cutter to my shop, I'd like to talk to you and inspect some of your work to see if we can do business, since it will be much easier and cheaper for me to deal with a cutter that's just a few doors down. I'll come to call tomorrow morning when your shop is officially open. Thank you.' He signed it."

"I'll talk to him tomorrow," Kyven hummed, rubbing Lightfoot's taut, muscled belly and licking the side of her face.

"Aww, so cute," Tweak teased. "The widdle kitty likes to have her tummy rubbed, doesn't she?" he said in an insultingly cooing manner. "Though after watching that, maybe I'll go hunt down Patches and see if she'll do a little cleaning for me. I have a little something in my pants she can polish," he said crudely.

Lightfoot patted his arms to make him let go, and she got off of his lap and rounded the desk. Tweak didn't pay her much mind, at least until she grabbed him by the back of his peasant smock and started dragging him towards the door. "Let's see if I enjoy it," she told him over his protests.

"Kyven! Kyv, she'll skin me alive! Kyv, don't-let go! Stop!" Tweak protested as she dragged him from the office.

"And *that's* why you don't annoy Lightfoot," Kyven chuckled as he heard the cat drag Tweak upstairs.

Tweak's howls from upstairs were like music that accompanied Kyven's further pondering of the problem, then he went out to the workshop, sat down and started cutting some milk crystals to shake off the rust. Soon he'd be doing this for a living again, and he had to make sure he could do it after nearly a year without picking up a hammer and cutting chisel, and with claws on his fingers now. But after cutting his third milk crystal and both having no problems with his claws and making his cuts clean and perfectly angled, he moved on to one of Clover's created crystals, a fairly large irregularly shaped red crystal with several internal flaws, a crystal she made for him that would be very hard to cut, just so he could ensure he still knew what he was doing. He inspected the crystal for nearly half an hour, feeling it in his hand, looking into the crystal with his innate sense that made him so good at what he used to do for a living. He guessed his status as a Shaman was why he could *feel* the power of the crystal, and that sense of it let him know innately, instinctively just how to cut it to bring out its maximum power. The sound of steel against crystal chimed in the shop like a tinkling bell as he got to work on it, carefully keeping the chips in the shallow box over which the crystal hung by a cutting clamp, since the chips themselves were valuable. By the time Tweak came down, blood staining his ruddy brown fur on his sides and a pink patch over each collarbone where Lightfoot sank her claws into him, he was nearly done, cutting in a very challenging cleft between two protrusions of the irregular crystal to cleave into a natural fault—or an intentionally placed fault, since this crystal was made by Clover specifically to challenge his cutting skills—and balance its energy. "You look wrung out," Kyven said with a slight smile, his tail swishing behind him as he returned his concentration to his work.

"She—she did that on purpose!" he accused. "She dug her claws in me in all kinds of places! Look at my butt!" he raged, turning around and showing Kyven some bloodstained roughed-up patches of brown fur on his backside. "She was an animal!"

Lightfoot padded down the stairs silently behind him, and he jumped in surprise when she tapped him on the shoulder. "An animal?" she asked in a deceptively mild voice, then she gripped his shoulder, making sure to dig her claws into his skin.

"Uh, I meant that in a *nice* way," he said, looking over his shoulder back at her, then he hissed in pain when she drove her claws in just a little deeper.

"Really?" she asked in a mild yet dangerous tone.

"Uhhh, sure," he said, the mask of brown fur over his eyes seeming to tighten as he tried to put a good face on, to save his hide. His face became nervous when she extended the small yet razor-sharp claw on her fingers on her other hand and reached it around him, sliding the tip of her index finger claw down the cleft of his chest, then down over his slim stomach. He almost squirmed when the tip of that claw came to rest at the base of his penis, exerting a very light but absolutely unignorable pressure in a *very* sensitive area. "L—Lightfoot? What are you doing?" he asked, a little fearfully.

"Thinking," she answered in her usual mild, calm voice, tapping that claw into his skin pointedly.

"About?"

"What to do to you."

That about did it. He squirmed out of her grip, which had to be painful with that clawed hold she had on his shoulder, then ran, which made Lightfoot smile a smug little smile. Kyven just chuckled and gave Lightfoot a grin. "How was it?"

"Bloody," she answered in her curt manner, licking little red spots off the tips of her claws, which made Kyven explode into laughter.

Since the shop was mandatory for hiding him and his future activities, Kyven invested his undivided attention into it the next morning. Kyven put the cut red crystal in his display case; that he could cut a crystal that irregular was all the testament that Kyven needed to display his skill in cutting crystals, and he really didn't need to put anything else in it... but he would, and that was what he was working on that morning. He was just glad Clover made the crystal red. That crystal was worth about four hundred chits, but if it were green or blue, it would be worth a few thousand, and that might be tempting to a thief. Then again, a thief might be tempted by that crystal too, but Kyven was comfortable displaying it. Then, without much fanfare, he unlocked the front door to his shop, and was *officially* open for business.

Since he had no business yet, he decided to cut the crystals that he brought from Atan and a few others Clover made for him to add to the display case, to demonstrate different cuts to further advertise his skills. He needed to get the shop established before he could start snooping, and besides, he couldn't do that snooping right now. He did it in his human illusion, finding it challenging to hold the illusion while concentrating on his work, and left the door between the workroom and the customer lobby open in case anyone came in. Kyven ignored the bustling about, as Patches scrubbed the workshop floor with a brush, Clover was out buying groceries for their lunch, Tweak was reading a book that Kyven gave him that explained the basic theories of cutting crystals—though he did that well out of sight of the door, since Arcans weren't supposed to be able to read—and Lightfoot stood silently nearby, her belt around her waist but not carrying any weapons. He had convinced her to just keep them concealed nearby rather than wear them, since it was too warm for her to wear that deep cloak. She still refused to wear clothes, but here in Avannar, that wasn't much of an issue. And besides, Lightfoot had a sexy body, and it was nice to admire her whenever he looked up. If she wanted to go naked and show off that body, he wasn't going to argue in any way at all.

He finished a square cut on a nine point red crystal and was in the act of putting it in the display case when the door opened. A swarthy-skinned, square-jawed man of middle years

wearing a burn-spotted leather apron over a bare chest and a pair of rugged canvas breeches entered. He was one of the dark-skinned people that were rumored to have originally come from Eusica, but had lived in Noraam for so long that they were native now. He was huge, easily seven rods tall, so tall he almost had to duck to get in through Kyven's door, and he was heavily corded with muscle, which wasn't unusual for an alchemist that worked with metal. Alchemists and blacksmiths shared the job requirement of hammering on hot metal much of the day, and that made them well muscled. His hair was typical for his people, very curly and black as pitch, but he kept his face clean shaven, showing off a wide, serious nose and dark, pensive lips. "So, you're open today?" he asked in a strong voice.

"I am, my first day," Kyven answered. "I'm Kyven Steelhammer, the shop master. You are Veraad?"

"I am," he answered, closing the front door. "I own and run the alchemy shop down on the corner. I wanted to see what kind of work you do, and if it's good, I'd like to contract with you on a few crystals... get you started."

"My work is right here," he said. He took out the irregular crystal from the case he had open, which was on Kyven's side of the counter, and handed it to the large, burly man. Veraad turned it over in his hands, inspecting it, then he nodded in appreciation.

"A difficult crystal to cut, and you cut it well," the man said. "I think we can do some business, Master Kyven, on a few small crystals to start. Once I get a feel for your work, we'll see about increasing our business."

"Always prudent, my friend. Back in my home village, we didn't often worry about such things because everyone knew everyone, but here in the city, it's only wise to be cautious. I'll do your orders, and if you like my work, you can keep coming back."

"I'll send over an apprentice with the crystals. What fee do you charge?"

"It depends on the crystal, but I differ from the guild's standard fee structure, master Veraad. I don't charge extra for different crystal types. A crystal is a crystal, if it's milk or white. But I hold to the guild's standard guidelines on weight and the type of cut. The larger or more difficult the cut, the higher the fee, because it means more work."

"That is different," Veraad mused. "Which village did you come from?"

"Atan," he answered.

Kyven discussed his fees and other things with the huge alchemist for the better part of an hour, and then drifted into gossip, as tradesmen often were inclined to do. Kyven used his newness to Avannar to subtly pump Veraad for information, and he learned a great deal in that hour. He learned all about his neighbors, learned the names and basic personalities of the tradesmen who own the shops along Moon Street, Sun Street, and the intersecting Star Street, which were considered the local neighborhood. There were quite a few of them, since the area into which he'd moved was a trades district. The laundry, chandler, and whorehouse that were immediate neighbors shared the neighborhood with Veraad's alchemy shop, a smithy, a gunsmith, a cooper, a greengrocer—which had to be where Clover was buying their food—a butcher, a glassmaker, a tailor, an apothecary, two taverns, and a festhall. One of the taverns was considered classy, the other seedy. Luckily, at least to Kyven, there was no furrier or kennel in the neighborhood, though odds were the butcher probably dealt with Arcan meat. Most butchers did.

Clover returned as Kyven and Veraad were leaning on his counter, and immediately assumed a submissive demeanor. She was carrying a large pliable handled basket that could fold closed, her grocery basket, and Kyven opened the leaf in the counter to let her by and into the back area of the shop. "You let your Arcan shop?" Veraad asked, with a bit of surprise.

"She's smarter than most men," Kyven answered, patting Clover on the shoulder as she came in. "She's my errand-girl, Veraad. She goes and does the little things I'd usually have an apprentice do."

"Ah, you have no apprentices?"

"I just opened after moving from another town. I decided not to bring any apprentices from the other shop, and I don't have time to find and train any here until I get to where I can't handle the work by myself anymore," Kyven told him. "But, I also need help keeping this place going, so I have Arcans for that. They do the cooking and cleaning, and my little coyote is smart and independent enough to be able to handle the chores on the other side of my front door. That frees me up to focus on keeping us all fed and housed."

"A curious approach. Does it work?"

"We'll find out."

"Indeed you will," Veraad chuckled. "I'm just surprised your Arcan can get the shopkeepers to even take her seriously. If an Arcan came into my shop and ordered something, I'd chase it off."

"She has money, Veraad. They may not take her seriously, but they take *it* seriously. Now, if that Arcan came in and told you her master wanted something, then held up a handful of chits, would you listen to her?"

Veraad's face turned thoughtful, then he laughed. "I guess I would," he admitted. "And you're a brave man, giving an Arcan money. If she doesn't run to a blacksmith to see if he'll take a bribe to cut off her collar, she'd be mugged on the street by ruffians when they realize she's got it."

Kyven just smiled a chilling little smile. "They can certainly try," he said. "My collars don't stop my Arcans from protecting themselves, Veraad, but they *do* protect my Arcans. Any brigand that takes a shot at my coyote will be in for quite a shock. Literally."

Veraad gave him a look, then laughed. "I've never thought of that!" he said. "Collars that defend the Arcan from attack? I would almost beg to have you lend me one of those collars so I can study it!"

"Just send a message to an alchemist named Virren, in Atan. They're one of his inventions. I'm sure you and he could come to some kind of business arrangement for you to produce his design."

"How exactly does it work?"

"I couldn't tell you that, I'm not an alchemist. I just know it works. You'll have to write to Virren to get that kind of detail."

"I think I might do that," Veraad chuckled. "Dear me, I've been here too long. I'll send an apprentice over with the crystals I'd like cut, so have your bond ready for them."

"I have enough on hand as long as you don't bring me anything huge," Kyven told him.

"Alright, expect my apprentice in a little bit. Good day, Master Kyven."

"Good day, Master Veraad," Kyven returned, and the huge man ambled out of his shop.

Clover came out and leaned on the counter, looking over at him. "What was that about?"

"The seeds are sown, Clover," Kyven chuckled, glancing at her. "Now you can feel free to zap anyone who accosts you. After all, it's just your collar protecting you."

Clover's eyes narrowed, then she chuckled. "Devious," she said in appreciation. "I'm not sure how Virren will react when he receives a letter asking for a design of a collar he's never made."

"We'll make sure our letter gets to him first," Kyven grinned. "Then he'll have at least a few days to invent something."

Clover laughed. "I'll go write it. I'll take it to our *friends* here in Avannar, they'll get it to

him quickly. And I'll make sure to warn Virren his design has to look like this," she said, tapping the fake collar around her neck.

"He's going to love us," Kyven noted dryly, then both of them began to laugh.

The crystals that Veraad wanted cut were small ones, basic red crystals, and the bond wasn't much. In the shop in Atan, they never bothered with a bond in Holm's shop, but this wasn't Atan and Kyven's shop didn't have the impeccable reputation and trust that Holm had gained over the years. The bond was the fair value worth of the crystals in cash that Kyven gave to the apprentice, after Kyven appraised them and the apprentice agreed with his assessment. Kyven was, in effect, buying the crystals he was going to cut, and then he would sell them back to the alchemist's shop once he was done at a price that was the original bond added to his fee for the service. If Kyven messed up the cuts, then it was his loss, not the client's.

Kyven put Lightfoot to watching the counter, closed the door, and then introduced Patches and Tweak to the business of crystalcutting. He wanted to wait for a real client before doing this, so they could see the real thing, not milk crystals. It was a psychological thing to Kyven, let them get their first exposure to real cutting involving real crystals and with real money on the line... the shop's money. Patches had already read the book Tweak was reading, but he went over it again, explaining the very basics of cutting crystals as the two phases of cutting. Assessing, and then cutting. Kyven evaluated the crystals, explained what he was looking for, explained why he selected the basic cutting patterns but stressing that every cut was unique, a paradox that Patches noticed immediately.

"How can each cut be unique, yet you're going to teach us cutting patterns that are standard enough to describe in a book?"

"Because of the crystals themselves," he answered. "Though every cut is unique to the properties of the crystal, there are some basic cutting styles, patterns, that are based on the natural shape and internal structure of the crystal. And those are fairly common. Most crystals are shaped like this," he said, holding up the roughly round crystal before him. "The type of cut we give them depends on the internal structure, which tends to be similar. The arrangement of its structure and the presence of internal flaws are what dictates the basic pattern. You follow that basic pattern, but each cut is unique to the crystal. That's the art of cutting, and why you can't learn it from a book, you can only increase your practical knowledge from books." He motioned at the five crystals in front of him. "That's why the square cut, the princess cut, the oval cut, and the octal cut are the most common cutting patterns. But there are many cuts, some of which you may never see, because the crystals that need them are either very large or very rare. Larger crystals are more irregularly shaped, and so you use different cuts. But the smaller they are, the more predictable they are. And there are some differences in the different types of crystals. A red crystal that you'd cut in a princess cut may need a different cut if it's blue or green or yellow, because the energy in them flows differently. And that's what it's all about, apprentices, unlocking the full potential of the crystal's power.

"Why don't they cut the crystals we get back home in our alchemy shop?" Tweak asked.

"Because they're made to be all but perfect, and a crystal like that doesn't necessarily have to be cut to power alchemy. But if you cut it, it would be *much* stronger, because the cutting maximizes the power in the crystal."

"Oh, I get it."

Patches and Tweak watched as he began to cut the crystal after placing it in a little device that looked like a steel crab, with pincers and legs that served to hold the crystal still and allowed him to rotate it. Using a magnifying glass big enough for all three of them to look through it, a trainer's glass, he pointed out the flaws and natural faultplanes in the crystal,

and explained how one went about doing the cuts, with a scalpel-like chisel and a tiny hammer. "Those fault planes are the key to the cuts," he told them. "Those have to be removed as much as possible, and if there are more of them too deeply in the crystal to remove, you have to cut in such a way that the angles of the surface reflect internally *away* from those faults, so the harmony of the crystal works around its internal flaws."

"What if it has no faults at all?" Patches asked.

"Then it's easy to cut, you basically just shave off the rough exterior," Kyven answered. "Remember also that the size of the crystal is a direct proportion to its power. Our job is to maximize its power while taking the absolute minimum away from it. The more you cut away, the weaker the crystal becomes. That's why not just anyone can cut a crystal. That's why your assessment and planning to make your cuts is so critical. You have to cut away the flaws and reduce the impact of internal flaws while removing as little of the crystal as you can."

They watched him cut the crystal, then polish it with a crystal blanket and set it aside. "And there you go, a square cut five point red crystal. Odds are, it'll go into some little trinket or toy, or maybe an alchemical lamp. It doesn't have the power to do anything really major."

"Cool!" Tweak said, picking up the crystal and looking at it. "I've never seen one cut before, the Shaman just brought us little round crystals that looked like balls."

"Well, the Shaman can make the crystal any way they want," Kyven said as Clover came back downstairs, holding a parchment.

"I'm finished. I'll take this over to our friends and have it sent off. It should be in Virren's hands by tomorrow morning."

"That fast?"

"They use an alchemical device, the same one the guilds use to send letters back and forth. Virren has one of his own, as do most alchemists, though Virren's is linked to one here rather than the guild. Virren is the contact between Atan and Avannar," she explained to Tweak's blank look. "It won't send the letter, it will instead cause a device in Virren's office to trace the words on the letter they put in the device they have here. What Virren will get will be a copy of my letter, even in my own handwriting."

"And Virren uses something like that to get in touch with you?"

She shook her head. "An Arcan in Atan calls a Shaman when they need us, using a spell placed on them that allows the one who placed it to hear their words."

"I think it might be time to think about revealing our little secret to the Masked, Clover," Kyven said. "Because soon, I think they're going to know about it anyway, and besides, that would make it much more efficient for messages to get back and forth."

"That's not our decision to make, my friend," she told him simply. "Besides, you have me, and I can get a message to our brothers and sisters immediately."

"I know, but I'm thinking longer term," he grunted. "I want to have the people here feed me as much information as they can get, you know."

"Yes, you told me that, and I passed it on to our friends here."

"Well, information isn't worth much if those who need it don't have it or can't get it. We'll need some way to communicate."

"That's my job," she smiled.

"But I—"

"You have another job to do here, Kyven," she said seriously. "Let me worry about those things. You focus on your task."

"Alright," he grunted. "Let's get the rest of this done."

It took most of the morning to cut the rest of the crystals, though they were such an easy job,

he could have done it in two hours. He went slow to show Tweak and Patches, then, after lunch, he put the crystals in a small leather pouch, double-checked his illusion, then headed over to Veraad's shop to deliver them. Veraad's shop was small, much like Kyven's was small, with the big alchemist and three apprentices. An apprentice hurried into the lobby that showed various alchemical gadgets sitting on shelves, from a little iron soldier that would probably walk around thanks to the crystal, to Arcan collars, to lamps, to one device Kyven hadn't seen for a while that chilled the air around it, which allowed it to cool off a hot home in the summer. There were others that warmed the air, which allowed a house to go without buying firewood, but Veraad wouldn't have those out on display with spring about to yield to summer.

Kyven made a mental note that buying a couple of those cooling devices might be a good idea.

The apprentice called out Veraad, who examined the crystals one by one, holding them up to the light pouring through his windows. "Well done. I think we'll be doing business quite a bit, Master Kyven, though I'm surprised it took so long."

Kyven chuckled. "It took about two hours, but I had some problems. I thought I had everything all set up and worked out, but it seemed that my workbench didn't like being brought from Atan in a wagon, and I didn't check it as carefully as I probably should have. It almost fell apart on me when I sat down to work."

Veraad laughed. "I can imagine. Did you fix it?"

"Yeah, it's stable. I had to pound a few nails in it, but it's good now. I don't think either of us would want me to be cutting crystals on a wobbling work bench."

"No, that wouldn't be very good," Veraad chuckled. "I'll go get your bond and your fee, my friend. I have no other crystals for you to cut today, but I will recommend you to some of my more friendly rivals."

"I'd appreciate that."

Kyven returned to his own shop carrying a small leather pouch and feeling... content. His first day open, he turns a modest profit—as long as one ignores all the money he spent to get his shop ready. That gave him a very strange feeling of accomplishment, even though the shop was only a cover for what he was really doing. Despite the seriousness of what was going on and what he was and what he was doing, there was still a part of him that was a cutter, and the cutter in him was quite proud of what he'd built and the profit he'd made that day.

His shop wasn't a success yet, but today gave him hope that it would sustain itself without having to rely on Clover's crystals for its money.

Besides, in a way, it was nice to do what he was trained over half his life to do. He was a cutter, and he was a *good* cutter. It was the achievement of a dream to run his own shop, even if that shop was nothing but a cover for his real activities, and that gave him a measure of happiness to bolster himself against the ugliness he knew was coming. When the time came that he left Avannar, he would mourn leaving behind his shop, but he'd enjoy it while he had it.

The shop was the shop, but it was also a front for what was really going on. That night, Clover went out, then returned with a large box that was obviously heavy. Clover carried it down into the cellar without a word, and then set it down and started opening the strongroom. Kyven helped her when Tweak told him that she was back, and they carried the box into the strongroom. "What is this?" he asked as they set it on the floor near his desk.

"Your first day on the other job," she said with a sly little smile. "Our friends donated this to us."

"What is it?"

"Remember that alchemical device I told you about that sent my letter to Virren?"

"Yeah."

"This is another one. Our friends in the Masked agreed that they need a way to send us information without me having to go back and forth. They bought another pair. They have one, we have the other. It's fairly simple. Just open the lid and put a piece of blank paper or parchment in it, make sure it fits. When they send us a message, it will burn the words into this paper exactly as they appear on the one they used. To send one, just open this lid here and set it *face down* on the pewter plate. As soon as you close the device and press this button, it sends the message to the other device. Just keep a piece of paper in it all the time, brother. If you have no paper in it when they send us a message, we won't get it."

"Clever. Hmm, can't the Loremasters pick these things up?"

"Theoretically, but no one has yet managed it, else we would have total access to the Loremasters' own network of communication devices."

"Have the Shaman tried?"

"We've been trying for years," she grunted. "But it is a mystery. We can sense the magic they use, even hear it, but we can't *understand* it. And to make things more curious, the same alchemist has to build devices that communicate with each other. Something about the *alchemist* makes it impossible to eavesdrop on these devices. It's actually quite interesting. So long as they keep possession of all the devices, their communications are secure."

"So, any device an alchemist makes can hear any other device he makes?"

"Yes and no. Let me explain," she said as they pulled out the device. It was a squat little rectangle, about a half a rod tall and a rod wide. "It has to be built knowing in advance how many devices it's going to be able to contact. Every one he builds after that he links to the first using an alchemist's trick, and something those in the trade don't discuss outside their craft. But, *only* the alchemist who made it can link them together, just as only devices made by the same alchemist can be linked together. This device can only contact *one* other device, and that belongs to our friends, that is how they were set up. The first device was built with only one other device able to be connected to it, then the alchemist connected them when he built the second. They are exclusive. The alchemist who made them can't even build a third device to intercept messages between them, because they were built exclusively as a *pair*. But some of these devices can talk to dozens of other devices, like the large networks that the guilds and the Loremasters use. Those devices can be set to talk to just one other device, or all of them. That's how the guild sends their messages to all their satellite offices."

"Do all of them work like that? Like the ones that transmit voices from device to device?"

She nodded. "They can only work between devices built by the same alchemist, and that alchemist is usually *very* busy if he's won a contract to build many of them for a large organization. This device will let our friends pass along any pertinent information they gather, and we'll never have to meet. That protects both of us."

"It sounds so. As long as the Loremasters can't pinpoint our location using the device."

"They could, if they were aware of the *other* device. But that's the risk we take to reduce the even greater risk of our friends getting constant visits from an Arcan. *That* raises eyebrows, whether I'm wearing a collar or not."

"So, you could find one device if you had the other?"

"Easily."

"Hmm," he mused. "That might be useful at some point."

"I have another device for you," she said, taking the other device out of the box, that looked like a metal tablet. "Put paper on this surface, and speak into this device here, and your words are burned into the paper as neatly as any pen and ink. This will let you quickly make

notes and compose letters. It's fairly simple. A very short pause makes it add a comma, a short pause makes it end the sentence, and a long pause begins a new paragraph. You'll get the hang of it after you play with it for a while. It can be useful."

"Not if I want to put it in a book," he chuckled.

"Just learn to bind them then," she winked. "Until then, I suggest you invest in a good filing system."

"Thanks," he said dryly.

Kyven put the two devices on the shelf behind his desk, and he felt like he was getting somewhere. Clover was right that the device would be extremely handy, it would let the Mask send along any information they gathered that may be useful. Clover had already told them that Kyven was here to gather information directly from the Loremasters, something the Masked had never attempted, but they didn't know who he was. That was for both of their protection. Just as elements of the Masked were basically independent, linked only by the Shaman, Clover was isolating both of them from each other. Operation Auction was the first major event that had caused the elements of the Masked to work together. Oh, elements of the Masked did communicate with each other, but it was always very distant, and the elements never saw each other face to face. That, too, was for their protection. Each cell worked alone with only minimal assistance from the Shaman of the territory, and up until now, their only real function and purpose was to try to save Arcans from slavery, and keep an eye on things as best they could with their limited resources and small numbers in each cell. The Avannar cell of the Masked was one of the largest, but it wasn't any more special than the others. It was a very small little cell trying to survive in the capitol city of its greatest enemy, so it always moved very carefully. From what Clover told him, they had a few friends among the workers in the Loremasters' headquarters from whom they got a little low-level information. They would be very useful to Kyven because they already had some contacts. It was up to him to take that information, and what he gleaned on his own, and put it together to get a full view of what their enemies were up to.

That would begin in a few days, as soon as he was nice and situated here, and after Operation Auction began. That day was tomorrow. Tomorrow, agents all over Noraam would start buying any Arcan they could get their hands on, and then they would be moved into the wilderness. And while they were doing that, Toby would be virtually clearing Alamar out of its Arcans. He just hoped that Toby had a good system for moving them out, since it was such a long way from Alamar to Haven.

His first foray into the Loremasters would serve no purpose other than to learn his way around their building. He seriously doubted that he'd find any floor plans anywhere, so he needed to learn the layout of their building. He wanted to find the council chambers of their rulers, the offices of those in power, learn where everything was without actually trying to enter the areas. He wanted to be able to walk their halls with a blindfold, and know the first names of every rat that hid in their walls. He figured that an intimate knowledge of their building would both allow him to gather information and be his ally if he were ever caught or discovered. And it would also test their defenses. He wanted to know the *first night* if they could detect him in any way, so he'd know from the outset just how he was going to do what he was sent here to do.

He created an illusion of the building before the desk, then crossed his arms and pondered it. He had no doubt that there were different layers of protection in the building. There would be virtually no real safeguards in places where there was nothing important, but the closer he got to the center of their power, the more protection he would encounter. More guards and alchemical devices would no doubt be present once he penetrated into deeper parts of the

building, where those who held power did their work and had their meetings. He wouldn't test those defenses quite yet, he just wanted to learn his way around their headquarters so he'd know where to look when he *did* start testing those defenses.

He was fully aware that there might be a moment in the future when his life might depend on how well he knew that building.

Clover started, then laughed. "Dear spirits, my friend, that is quite good," she said as he studied the building of glass and iron, with its stone towers at each corner.

"It's what I trained a half a year to do," he said absently. How did they have the building divided? Were those towers where the important things done? Where did the council members that ran the Loremasters keep their offices? Would their library hold any information that the Shaman and Haven could use? How many offices would he have to search? How much information could he pick up just prowling the halls, hidden from their view? Where would he have to go in order to find the most important information, about what the Loremasters have planned and what they knew about the Arcans and possibly about Haven?

The Loreguard might be a good source. Any military orders had to come down to them, so keeping an eye on Loreguard deployment might give him some insight.

"Planning?"

"Thinking," he answered, scratching his muzzle. "I have to learn my way around first, then I can start digging. I need to learn the layout of the place, and the names and faces of anyone with anything even resembling power or authority in there. And in the Loreguard barracks too, and maybe even in the city."

"In this city, the Loremasters *are* the authority."

"I know, but not everyone in power in the city has an office in that building."

"True. You've really thought about this."

"More than you'd think," he answered, his tail slashing the air behind him. "I've thought about quite a few things since we started from Haven. The man I bought this building from, Shario, he's a criminal, and I'll bet he knows what's going on in this city. I thought maybe I could get some information out of him."

"Most likely," she agreed. "But you'll have to move carefully."

"I know. You can't trust a criminal, but I have my foot in the door with him. He wants me to cut crystals under the table for him, it's part of our agreement that had him sell me the building. I can use that to see if he can't sell me some information."

Clover chuckled. "You've grown up so quickly," she teased.

"Thanks," he said archly, then he sighed. "I wonder how Umbra and Danna are, and how Toby's doing."

"I'm sure Umbra is fine, being babied by Firetail, and Danna is up to her ears in building an army from scratch. Toby should be preparing to start his task, tomorrow if I'm not mistaken. The council and Firetail, no doubt, sit every day worrying about what they've begun and where it may lead, but they know that it was the best thing to do."

"It was the only thing," Kyven said, a bit darkly. "I don't believe we'll avoid it, Clover. The idea to buy the Arcans was brilliant and will minimize the casualties when the humans retaliate against the captive Arcans, but I think no matter how hard the council tries, they're not going to prevent a war."

"Why do you believe that?"

"Because they can only control one side," he answered. "They can't control the humans, and it's the humans that will press the war. No matter how benevolent or harmless they want to look, it just comes down to the fact that the humans will never accept the idea of the Arcans being separate from humanity. They'll either fight to return them to slavery, or they'll fight

to prevent the Arcans from achieving an equal status, or they'll fight just because they won't allow a society so different. There are many reasons, but they all point to the same thing."

"If you expect war, why are you here to prevent one?"

"I'm not here to prevent a war, I'm here to make sure the Arcans have the upper hand when it starts," he answered. "If I can help by tipping them off to everything the Loremasters are doing, and maybe assassinate a few Loremasters to disrupt their planning, then that helps." He looked at her. "I'm a human, Clover, but I don't agree with what my people are doing. And when it comes down to a war, I'll be on the *other* side from my own race. I just hope I'm not the only one. I'm not sure how the Masked are going to react when they realize there's war. We can only hope that they stay with us."

"Well, I'm a little more optimistic than you," she said with a smile. "My hope is that the humans see the futility in trying to engage us in war while we sit in our northern lands, where there are so few days warm enough to march a human army to engage us, and have to do it across so much empty land. I hope they see how futile it would be to war with us, since we have no interest in them or their lands, and there is so much land here that we never need bump into each other."

"Humans don't think that way, I'm sorry to say," he sighed. "They'll see the Arcans as a threat, no matter how harmless they try to look. Hell, they'll see that as nothing but a trick to make humans *think* they're harmless. The Loremasters will never allow a second power to exist in Noraam, and besides that, they'd never permit Arcans to have their own society. To them, Arcans are animals, slaves, created by our ancestors to serve us. They'll never give that up."

"So you think there is nothing but war in our future?"

"I *know* it," he said grimly. "I can hope for peace, but I know it's not going to happen. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst. Isn't that wisdom?"

"It is indeed," she agreed.

"Kyven! Clover! Dinner!" Patches called from the stairs.

"Something more important just came up," Clover grinned, and Kyven could only chuckle and dismiss his illusion of the building.

"Our mistress calls, we'd better go up or she'll punish us," Kyven noted, which made Clover laugh.

Patches' meals were unusual, at least to the human in Kyven. Since they ate their meat raw, her cooking focused on the many ways one could cook and prepare vegetables, fruits, grains, cheese, breads, and also pastries, pies, and cakes. She did occasionally cook meat, but only in the course of preparing a dish that also contained cheese or vegetables, like meat pies or stew. She always had enough meat for them, but also prepared at least three vegetable dishes and a bread to go with it, and also had a dessert of some kind for them. Patches preferred vegetables to meat, and Kyven and Clover both were raised on an omnivorous diet, so the vegetables were mainly for them. But Tweak and Lightfoot were willing to try the dishes Patches cooked, and found, to their delight, that vegetables and fruits could indeed taste good. But Patches really shined in her desserts. Kyven loved her baking, and she always had a small pie or cake for them to enjoy after dinner... and she could be ruthless in the dispensation of that dessert. On the days when Tweak was more annoying than usual, the piece she gave him was pitifully small, just a taste of what the others were allowed to enjoy in big, eye-catching slices. The little panda controlled them through that dinner table, for she was the one that fed them.

He kept thinking about things after dinner, as Patches and Tweak read the books he put before them, Clover was playing with a lute she'd bought—he had no idea she could play—and

Lightfoot simply lurked in the room, quiet and ready for anything. He arranged things in his mind, organized them, and set himself a schedule of things over the next couple of weeks, the main issue being his first clandestine infiltration of the Loremasters' headquarters in four days.

Four days. On Sunday, the day when the least number of people would be in that building, he was going to invade it and learn his way around, find the offices of the important people, and test their defenses to understand how easy or hard it would be to move around in there. After he had the layout of their building memorized, he'd start digging, gathering intelligence. In the meantime, he had to start going out after he closed the shop. He needed to find the people Danna had talked about, start making friends, start practicing the guile and deceit required.

It amazed him sometimes, how easy it was for him to lie now. He could lie on the spot, and lie like a champion. He could make up a lie instantly, and keep it fully in mind to reinforce it if needs be, not forgetting what he said. It was such a change from the honest upbringing he'd had under Holm. He wondered if it was the influence of the spirit that had made him so good at it, or if it was just a natural talent that had long been suppressed by his straight-laced guardian. He lied almost every day, and he lied so naturally that it was second nature to him now.

Guile and deceit.

He'd put that to the test very soon, both in his making tentative contact with the people that Danna said might be amenable to passing information and his digging through the Loremasters' building, since he'd be moving through it under an illusion. For the people he'd grill for information, he'd have to use guile to get into their good graces, then use guile and deception both to tease information out of them. When it came to moving through the Loremasters' headquarters, he'd need everything he could manage to talk his way past the roving guards and explain why he was where he was and make it sound believable. He honestly had no idea how he was going to do it, but something told him that, when faced with that situation, he'd know what to do. Guile and deceit were in his blood, they were a fundamental part of him. He would know what to do.

He was sure of it.

They thought he was being a little silly, but he didn't care what they thought.

He spent almost all morning practicing eating.

There were some fundamental differences between himself and the illusion he projected, and it had everything to do with his muzzle. The way he ate and drank as an Arcan was *vastly* different from how a human did it, because of the maw and the human's lips. Where he used a fork to basically lay the food in his maw as an Arcan, it was pushed into the mouth as a human. Where he had to kind of seal up his muzzle using his chops and pour liquid in through his front teeth then push it back to his throat with his tongue, a human kind of sucked the liquid in through his lips, or could pour it in, but the fact that their mouths didn't go all the way around a muzzle was a major advantage. What he had to learn was how to eat and drink as an Arcan and not have it cause a fatal problem, like liquid disappearing before it actually touched his lips. Eating, that wasn't much of a problem. He just had to push the fork almost to the back of his maw to make it match up with the illusion, then use his tongue to trap the food and pull the fork out while his illusion closed its mouth over the fork. But as time went by, he realized that it just wasn't going to be possible to make drinking look believable. There was just too much of a discrepancy between illusion and reality to allow it to look like he was drinking naturally.

For that, he resorted to another solution. If he couldn't do it in reality, then he'd do it by *il-*

lusion. An illusion of the drink covering the real drink would allow him to drink what was really there but hide it under that illusion, then have the illusion drink in a believable manner. He just had to create an illusion of the mug or tankard or goblet and then attach it to his human illusion when he grabbed it, then just go through the motions. He could drink for real under the illusion, then release the illusion when the container was empty—it might not be easy to constantly judge how much liquid was left in the container, since he couldn't see it himself while it was covered by an illusion. He realized after he worked that out that he could do that for eating too, to reduce the chance he choked himself on the fork, just cover the food with an illusion of itself and eat normally, using an illusion to cover the fact.

By lunchtime, he was already so full he could barely move, but he didn't get much respite. Veraad came back over that day with another crystal for him to cut, a single red crystal that was about eight points, a larger crystal than before. It had an irregular bump on it, which would make it an interesting challenge to cut, and Kyven realized that Veraad was foregoing some of the tentative feeling out and was going to see just how good Kyven was. "This one may take a little while," Kyven told him as he held it up to the light. "Irregular, and it's got a nasty internal flaw in it I'll have to work around."

"Well, if that right there is any indication, you can do it," Veraad said, pointing at the irregular crystal in his case. "My dealer slipped that one in on me, I may as well try to get some use out of it."

"I can cut it to match any other eight point," Kyven said confidently. "And you need to have a long talk with your crystal merchant. He never should have bought this as an eight point. This is a split four point, I could cut this in almost perfect halves with that flaw."

"He's a man I don't deal with often, and I doubt I'll deal with him much at all after today. But, can you do it as an eight?"

"I can," he said confidently. "I don't think you'll get it back until tomorrow, though."

"That's fine. How much extra do you want for such a hard job?"

"Nothing," he said simply. "Consider this proof you can trust me," Kyven grinned.

"I trust you enough to bring it to you," Veraad smiled.

"I appreciate that," Kyven said. "Let me get you your bond, and I'll get to work on this after I finish lunch."

It was a challenging crystal, but not *that* challenging. Kyven had Patches and Tweak with him as he pointed out the flaw, explained how to cut it, that it would be a freestyle cut following no basic pattern since it was so irregularly shaped, then cut it with quick, sure, steady hands. It took him about two hours to cut the crystal, and finished with a crystal that was still eight points and worked around the large internal flaw. He let his apprentices study it, since it was going back to Veraad in the morning, told them which books to study next, then he went up to his room and got ready to go out and start making some contacts. Clover came up and leaned on the doorframe as he got ready by changing into clothes more appropriate for the kind of activity he was about to undertake. He wore a long-sleeved doublet and sturdy leather trousers that covered as much of his fur as possible, to minimize the chance that someone touched his fur and doubted his illusion.

He knew that he could cover the fur with the illusion by instilling enough *substance* into the illusion, but he hadn't quite figured out that trick fully yet. His first illusion, the crystal, was nothing but an illusion, but it had apparent weight to him because he had *created* it with a sense that it had weight... and that made the illusion actually feel like it weighed something in his hand. He needed to start working on making his fur *feel* like human skin, but he wasn't entirely sure quite yet how to make the feel, so he'd not quite mastered that trick quite yet. It was the first touches of the fox's instruction to him, that if he believed an illusion enough

himself, he could cause others to believe as well. He had not yet managed to make it seem believable to himself when he tried it, and so his lack of faith in his illusion made it unable to fool anyone when it came to disguising his fur as an illusory sense of the feel of human skin. That was the keystone of any illusion, that he believe in what he had done himself. Visual and auditory illusions were easy to believe in, since he could actively see and hear them, and others would see and hear the same thing. But tactile illusions were based on touch, and that was quite different, because not everyone may feel something the same way. Olfactory and taste illusions were even harder, because of personal taste. Trying to create an illusion of turnips that someone actually tried to eat would be hard for him because he hated the way they tasted, so any illusory taste of a turnip would be flavored by that dislike and make it taste bad to everyone, even those who liked turnips. It was a limitation in illusion, and one he hoped he wouldn't have to try until he was much more adept at the subtleties and art of illusion. He was good at what he knew so far, but in other aspects, he had a very long way to go.

"Going out?" Clover asked as she came up to the door and leaned against it as he changed clothes.

"Yeah, I'm going to go to that tavern Danna told me about and see if I can't start making some contacts with the people she suggested," he answered, stepping out of his knee-length half-pants and pulling out a pair of full-length trousers. He hated how they pinched at his knee and ankle, but he had to cover as much fur as he could. Those pants, the doublet, and a light summer cloak would handle it well enough, since the cloak had a cowl and that material bunched up around his neck insulated that fur from contact. "I also need to start studying the city, so I'm going to walk around for a couple of hours before I head for the tavern. I need to know every side street and alley in the entire city like the back of my hand. Have our friends sent us anything yet?"

"Only a message asking if we had our device set up, which I answered," she told him. "Outside of that, no." She leaned against the doorframe and tilted her head slightly.

"What?"

"When are you getting back?"

"I'm not sure. I hope I'm not out all night, but I need to start worming my way into some people's good graces. That may take a while, and buying quite a few drinks for people. I'll be stopping over at a crystal merchant to sell a few crystals, since I also need to go to the bank and open a separate account just for this shop, and pay back the money we borrowed from the other shop to outfit this one. I don't want Timble to have a heart attack when he visits the bank and finds all that money gone."

"Come back tonight, if you don't mind."

"Why?"

She gave him a steady look.

Kyven chuckled. "Go bother Tweak."

"Tweak's too young and excitable," she complained. "He climbs on me and tries to give me friction burn," she said with a face, which made Kyven laugh. "He's not half as enjoyable as you are."

"Teach him. That's a skill too, just like anything else. If you don't teach him, he'll never learn."

"I guess I could, if Patches wouldn't stop corrupting him," she sighed. "She lets him act that way, and then he acts that way all the time."

"Talk to her."

"I guess I need to, though I hate to interfere," she mused.

"I've noticed you've been a lot more frisky than usual," Kyven teased lightly as he pulled

on his trousers and reached for his simple belt.

"I know, it's not like me," she admitted. "Maybe Umbra got me thinking of having children of my own, maybe it's having a good friend that satisfies me always on hand, I don't know. I'm sure you don't mind," she winked.

"Men *never* mind unless they're sick or dead," he told her, which made her giggle.

"Isn't that the spirits' own truth," she agreed. "Has Lightfoot come to talk to you yet?"

"About what?"

"She wants to go out at night," she answered. "This is terribly isolating for her. She has nothing to do, Kyv. The children are learning cutting, and this is a safe place, so she has almost nothing to do."

"Well, I'm not holding her here, but we have to keep a low profile. I can't have the Loreguard camping outside my front door because they suspect she's been out killing people."

"You shouldn't overlook Lightfoot's usefulness, at least in that regard," she said. "She's a stalker, Kyv, just like you. She's the most agile Arcan I've ever seen, and I'd bet she'll be as good a thief as they come, after she learns the tricks of it. You should think about using her in that manner."

"I will," he promised. "She might be a useful partner in crime for me. But, I can find a few things for her to do, not that I think of it."

"What?"

"Teaching the kids how to defend themselves, for one," he answered. "I'd like Patches and Tweak to at least have a basic understanding of it, and Lightfoot can teach them better than we can. We don't rely on Lightfoot's method."

"I think she'd do that," she said as he pulled on the doublet, settled it in place, then swung the cloak over his shoulders and pinned it closed in the front. "How do I look?" he asked as he reached for a pair of soft leather gloves whose fingertips had been punched out to make room for his claws. Those gloves were his answer to the fur problem. As long as he was very careful about his claws, the leather of the gloves hid the fur beneath them. Fortunately for him, his hooked claws didn't descend below the level of his fingers when he held his hand straight out. As long as he didn't flex his fingertips too much, he could apply his grip to things without touching them with his claws.

"Like you have too many clothes on," Clover grinned.

"You're biased."

"I've never pretended not to be," she retorted.

"Be biased over this," he said as he formed the image of a blond man with handsome features—looking not too much unlike Toby—in his mind, and then beckoned to the fox to make his image an illusion. His form shimmered, and it was replaced with a human-looking Kyven wearing the same clothes, but also wearing a pair of stout leather half-boots, the only illusory article of clothing on him. His feet, shaped like a fox's back paw, just could not fit in any pair of human boots.

"I don't know, I've sampled a few human men," she said with a wink. "A couple of them weren't bad."

"That's perverted."

"You're one to talk, Kyven."

Kyven chuckled. "I guess I'm just a perverted as you."

"It's not perverted, it's expanding your horizons."

"Sophistry," he grinned.

"Having sex with a dead animal is perverted. Having sex with a willing partner never is," she answered.

"Ewwwww," Kyven said, shuddering involuntarily.

After doing his errands, and wasting enough time, Kyven went to the Two-Edged Sword, a very popular tavern with Loreguard soldiers. Kyven felt a little odd coming into a place like that, since they were all his enemies, but this was what guile and deceit were all about. He took a place at the bar and struck up an idle conversation with the barkeeper, a man that Danna said was named Berraro, and who knew just about everything that was going on in his neighborhood and in the Loreguard. Danna said he had to be approached just a little carefully, that he could be a bastard if he didn't like you, but he wasn't that hard to befriend as long as one was nice to him and didn't talk bad about Flaur, since he was Flaur. Kyven unleashed all the charm he could muster against the man without seeming pushy or invasive, being friendly and a little dishonest. Kyven identified himself as Dory to Berraro, a prospector who had had enough of the wilderness after finding enough crystals to give himself a nice summer vacation, and who also declared to be something of a fan of Arcan racing, which wasn't really followed in Avannar, there were no race tracks for anything but horses. It was linked to organized Arcan fighting, which was illegal in Avannar; but certainly not because the Loremasters cared about brutality to Arcans. Fighting rings and Arcans designated as fighting Arcans were illegal in Avannar because the Loreguard had had too many problems with drunkenness, fighting among bettors, and one instance four years ago when a fighting Arcan escaped from the pen and killed nineteen people before it was killed by the Loreguard. After that, public outcry against the lawlessness caused by the pens and having such dangerous Arcans within the city caused the fighting pens to be closed down, and the Loremasters bowed to their wishes and made it a law.

Of course, just because it was illegal, it didn't mean that one couldn't find an underground fighting pen or two in the city, or a few just outside the city in the villages south, where the official power of Avannar did not reach. But oddly enough, there were no underground Arcan racing tracks. Kyven figured that since horses were so big in Avannar, that was all the racing the people here needed, and racing Arcans was seen as a shadow of that more noble sport.

Over the course of the evening, Kyven bought enough ale and wine to make a Wolveran drunk, and pretended to be quite inebriated while in reality he was just barely buzzed. The excess was quietly making its way into the tankards and goblets of those sitting by him, who were getting at least three tankards of ale while paying for only one.

Ah, the trickery one could initiate when one's real hands were hidden invisibly by an illusion. He could easily disconnect his arms from his illusion, then pour his ale into another tankard while the illusory hand holding the tankard appeared to never move.

He made a couple of friends that night, and Berraro was only one of them. He made contact with another name on Danna's list, a Lieutenant in the Loreguard who was responsible for the south district of Old Avannar for the daywatch. He was a thin, wiry, tall man named Tabbet, already beginning to bald despite only being midway into his twenties, his thinning brown hair combed straight back from his face to hide his balding spot. Tabbet was a talkative, slightly insecure fellow that jumped on Kyven's offer of talk because he wasn't too well liked within the Loreguard. After talking with him for a while, Kyven found out why. He was a conniving, insecure man who boasted about his accomplishments to make himself seem more important than he really was, and Danna had suggested that if Kyven got into his good graces, he might be a virtual cesspool of information. Danna was dead-on right. After only about an hour of conversation with him, as he gently reinforced Tabbet's idea that he really was important and Kyven liked and respected him, Kyven heard about every little detail of Tabbet's entire day. Tabbet played up all the work he did that day and the men he or-

dered sent to the holding cells, for things like public drunkenness. He even boasted about a response of his men to arrest a thief, though he had nothing to do with it personally. Everything that happened in his district and was done by his men was spoken as if Tabbet himself had done those things. He was a man with a massive inferiority complex, and Kyven almost instinctively seemed to understand that and how to approach the man to make him talkative. By the time Kyven was ready to leave, he knew absolutely everything that had happened in the south district—which was where Kyven’s own shop was—that day, and for the last few days.

By the time he left, pretending to be much more drunk than he really was, Kyven felt good in his work. He had made two contacts that night, had befriended Berraro and had twisted Tabbet around his fingers to the point where the man would tell him if he ever had lewd thoughts about his own sister.

He felt... odd. He remembered everything he said, almost word for word, and he knew he could easily go back to that tavern tomorrow and pretend to be Dory once again, picking up exactly where he left off. His cutter’s meticulousness was bleeding through into his guile, making him very methodical.

He was going to kiss Danna repeatedly the next time he saw her. Her observations about the men and women she put on the list had been dead-on accurate, and it helped Kyven know *exactly* how to approach them to get into their good graces, and therefore subtly pump them for information. Danna had been so precise and detailed, so amazingly accurate with her observations, that it made it almost ridiculously easy. If the other people were as easy to beguile as Berraro and Tabbet, this was going to be a walk through the roses.

He returned home just a little tipsy, but feeling very, very hopeful. And, of course, Clover was feeling a little frisky.

“What are these for?” Tweak asked as Kyven handed him a trio of posts knives.

“These are for training, in two different ways,” he answered. He’d dropped off the crystal for Veraad as soon as Veraad’s shop opened, and since he had no work to do, he was concentrating on his apprentices. He had a little bit of a headache from the ale and wine he’d drank the night before, but it wasn’t so bad that it was affecting him. His illusion was still quite stable and solid despite his minor inconvenience, as he handed Tweak three posts knives, one of the three sets that he’d bought the day before, just before he went to the Two-Edged Sword. He was hoping that someone was going to play posts there, but it turned out that Loreguard didn’t like the game too well. Odds were, they got sick of throwing daggers in their weapons training, which Kyven assumed was part of it. “Cutting crystals requires hand-eye coordination, Tweak. So does this. Believe it or not, learning to play this game will make you a better cutter. It’s why posts is a favorite among cutters, and you won’t find a single one that doesn’t own his own set of posts knives. I’m going to teach you the rules of posts, and you’ll practice two hours a day, playing each other or just practicing. This will sharpen your hands, and also teach you something that may save your tails if you’re ever attacked. Because it’s well known that cutters play posts, many cutpurses are very wary of getting into a position where they have to run from someone who can plant a dagger between their shoulder blades before they can take ten steps.”

Tweak laughed. “I bet. Okay, how do I do this?”

“First, let me explain the rules, then I’ll show you how to throw the knives, then you can start practicing after I get behind the safety of my office door.”

Patches started giggling, and it turned into helpless laughter when Tweak scowled at her.

Kyven explained the rules of the game to them as Lightfoot drifted closer and closer, to listen, often gesturing at the two posts boards he’d nailed up onto the wall that morning just af-

ter breakfast to point out the scoring rings. Then he helped each of them by showing them how to hold their knives to throw. “It’s going to take a while before you get the hang of getting them to hit point first,” he told them. “For right now, concentrate on hitting the post-board, even if your knives bounce off. Once you get the hang of hitting the board, then vary the snap of your wrist until your knives start hitting point first.”

“Okay,” Patches said with a nod. “Can I try now?”

“Go ahead.”

Patches’ first throw hit the board, but hit with the knife almost flat flush against it. It bounced to the wooden floor with a clatter, and Patches gave a sheepish giggle. “You said that’d happen,” she said with a smile.

“It takes a little practice,” Kyven told her. “Oh, Lightfoot,” he called, then he held out a small leather sheath holding three posts knives, each in an individual pocket. “For you. You’ll find these are very easy to hide, they’re quiet, and they can be just as deadly as a pistol if you have good aim. Play posts with the kids and learn how to throw, or just throw at the other board when they’re playing each other.”

She gave him a calm look, then nodded gravely and accepted his gift.

“Did you learn the rules while listening?”

She nodded again.

“Alright, keep them from killing anyone with their knives. I’m going to go hide in my office,” he announced, which made Patches giggle again. “And remember, *do not* play posts with the door to the lobby open. Humans can’t see you practicing using any weapons. Did you install that bell on the door, Tweak?”

“Yes I did, Kyv,” he answered.

“Good enough. If the bell goes off, stop practicing and one of you go see what the customer wants. I’m going to be in my office.”

“Play me,” Lightfoot said, pointing at the board.

“Me? Lightfoot, I grew up playing this game. I don’t want to embarrass you while you’re just learning.”

“Watching you will help me,” she told him, using more words at once that he’d heard out of her in the last week.

“Well, I guess I can. I was just going to enter our profits in the ledger, but that’ll take all of five minutes, since we only have two days. Let me get my knives.”

Kyven was a little rusty, but given he was the only one who could plant his knives consistently in the board, which was an alchemical device that repaired the holes created by the knives after they were pulled out, that made him a virtually guaranteed winner. He shook off the rust almost as fast as he got back into cutting trim, however, quickly adjusting to his new posts knives and getting back to where he could have given any posts player a serious run for his money. But he was surprised at the quick improvements of his three companions. Lightfoot got the trick of hitting the board point first quickly, after only about an hour, and by the end of the mandatory two hours of practice, every single throw was hitting the board and hitting it point first. She didn’t have much aim quite yet, but that was amazing progress after just two hours, given that Patches and Tweak still couldn’t sink two knives in a row in the board. Lightfoot truly was exceptionally agile, and that agility was letting her pick up throwing daggers at a fast rate.

“This feels so right,” Kyven chuckled as he pulled his knives out of the board. “Posts is a tradition in almost any cutter’s shop. We used to play any time we had ten spare minutes back in Holm’s shop, when I was growing up. A set of personal posts knives was the first thing we saved up to buy,” he said, remembering with a smile. “Of course, Holm bought us

our own set of knives for our Yule present in our third year, but some of us bought hand-me-down knives from older apprentices to use until then, and we still bought our own sets, since a true posts player has his knives made custom just for him. Or her,” he said, smiling at Patches. “I bought my first set when I was in my second year and used them until Holm gave me a brand new set for Yule. I bought my own set the next year, and a new set every year until my seventh year, when I was grown up enough to feel comfortable with the set I had. Saving for posts knives was all I really did with my money until I was that old, then I had something else to do with it.”

“What is that?” Tweak asked.

“Visit the brothel in Atan,” he answered with a light smile. “I spent more money there than I ever did on posts knives.”

Tweak laughed, and Patches gave him a surprised look. “You used to go to brothels?”

“Any time I had enough chits to pay for it.”

“I never thought you were the type.”

“Patches, all men are that type, whether they admit it or not,” Kyven chuckled. “I didn’t become as interested in girls as I am now when I was changed. I was like that *way* before then. I made more money than any other apprentice in the shop since I was the Senior Apprentice, and most of it went to the Pink Petticoat.”

“I don’t mind,” Lightfoot noted calmly, which made Kyven chuckle.

“There wasn’t a girl in the whorehouse I couldn’t identify in two seconds just by grabbing her butt,” Kyven added, which made Tweak laugh and almost throw his knife through the storeroom door. “I was there at least once a week, and I bought time with the prostitutes in turns. I took to prospecting just to earn extra money so I could start saving to buy into Holm’s shop and still visit the brothel.”

“I’m surprised Clover didn’t have to cure any diseases for you,” Patches grinned.

“We had a few in the village, but the madam of the brothel kept a healing bell handy,” he answered. “She stepped on that before her girls could spread anything.”

“It’s good to know I’m not the only horny male in this shop.”

“Tweak, there’s nothing hornier than a human teenage boy. I may be a little older and a lot different, but the lech that stares at the girls’ butts after they go by is still in here,” he said, tapping himself on the chest. “Of course, I can do something about it now,” he added, reaching back and pinching Lightfoot’s naked butt fondly, which made Tweak and Patches giggle.

“So can I,” Lightfoot intoned, grabbing Kyven by the hand and dragging him towards the stairs, which made his apprentices erupt into gales of laughter.

Lightfoot was quite seriously “doing something about it” by the time Clover returned, having Kyven pinned to the bed and bouncing up and down on him quite energetically. “Why do I keep finding you two acting more and more like Tweak and Patches when I come home?” Clover asked lightly from the doorway as Lightfoot worked herself to a climax, then arched her back so severely that the top of her head nearly broke Kyven’s muzzle. “I swear, Lightfoot, you’re as bad as Tweak, always trying to hurry through something you should spend all day enjoying.”

“She started it,” Kyven said breathlessly, grabbing the cat by her lithe waist and holding her down as he joined her in climax.

“It looks like she finished it as well,” Clover intoned. “It’s certainly quite an interesting view, at any rate.” Lightfoot responded by opening her legs even wider to give Clover all the view of their joining she wanted, which made Clover chuckle. Lightfoot had a strange sense of humor. “I have some news for you,” Clover said as Kyven grabbed Lightfoot and pulled her down against him, then wrapped his arms around her, pawing her breasts and sliding a

hand down to cup the crown of her pubic bone, his claws teasing the top of her labia. She reached behind him and tried to grab his hair, but he just playfully slapped her on her lower belly, just above the crown of her pubic bone, which made her give a single amused sound and relent. Lightfoot was a hair puller.

Kyven licked the side of Lightfoot’s face languidly, then sighed in contentment as she fully relaxed against him. “What news?” he finally asked.

“The first two waves of Arcans have left Alamar,” she told him. “So far, there seems to be no interest in them from the human authorities. From what I was told, Toby bought a large group of them, put them on a barge, and then shipped them off. The barge is going to ship them up the Snake River past the last human settlement at Redmark, then unload them at a camp Toby had set up on his way down that looks like a staging area, complete with a few humans in the Masked and a group of Arcans from Haven there to pose as slaves that will look like were already shipped there. The barge owners will only see the camp, they’ll never know where the Arcans are going. From what I was told, he’s also sent a large group of Arcans towards that camp on foot, being herded by *real* hunters and kennel hands who have no idea they’re transporting Arcans to freedom. Toby has a Masked member with them posing as the buyer to make sure they don’t harm the Arcans, but they have no idea they’re helping us.”

“Clever,” Lightfoot intoned, stretching on top of Kyven in a very sensual manner.

“It does reinforce the idea that the Arcans are just being shipped to some new project, if Toby’s using local hunters and kennelhands to herd the Arcans to that camp. As long as he never uses the same men who won’t see that the Arcans they took there before aren’t there anymore, I think it will work.”

“How about from the mining villages?” Kyven asked, caressing Lightfoot’s taut belly.

“There’s not an Arcan left in the kennel in Atan,” Clover answered. “Our agent there has ordered more Arcans through the kennel, so you’ll see quite a few Arcans from here in Avannar shipped to Atan, if they’re not on the way already. The same story’s playing out up and down the border. Our agents are cleaning out the kennels, even trying to buy Arcans from the villagers and miners, and the larger cities should be shipping replacement Arcans to the border kennels after the kennelmasters send orders for them. It should take from a couple of weeks to about a month for anyone to take notice of what we’re doing. That gives you plenty of time to get into a position to find out about it.”

“I’m already working on it. I’m going to make contact with someone Danna told me was a low-level functionary inside the Loremasters headquarters today. I’ll learn how things work inside that building from the functionary, and that will let me explore the building without sticking out like I have a hole in the seat of my trousers.”

“You do,” she noted with a smile. “Your tail goes through it. Now if you had a hole in the *front* of your trousers, you’d stick out quite a bit more in human company.”

“Yeah yeah yeah,” he grunted. “But the amount I stick out would depend entirely on how cute the girl I was looking at was.”

Clover laughed. “Then I’d say that Lightfoot must be rather cute.”

“Cuter than you,” he teased, running his clawed hands up and down the cat’s body quite deliberately.

“She has youthful charm and... exuberance. I, however, have the calm confident handsomeness of a mature woman. And I can work you all night where she can barely manage to last for ten minutes,” Clover said slyly, which made Kyven laugh.

“But what a ten minutes it is,” Kyven announced, grabbing both of Lightfoot’s small breasts and kneading them, which made the cat purr in her throat. “Think you’re up for another ten

minutes, my exuberant, charming young girl?” he asked tauntingly, giving Clover a clever smile.

“Let’s try for fifteen,” she said simply, which made both Clover and Kyven laugh.

Again, Kyven relied on Danna’s quite astute observations and understanding of the people she described to know exactly how to approach his target. The functionary which Danna described was an older man named Bevken, who had worked in the Loremasters as one of their employees for nearly thirty years. Bevken was an old, small, cadaverous, ugly little man who Danna remarked, quite casually, had a very unwholesome interest in little boys. He was a pederast, and to gain the man’s favor, Kyven spent most of the day lurking in the taverns and tea houses which catered to people tolerant of the man’s perverted appetites, which would give him some common ground to work with as he talked to the man.

This was a task which Kyven found disgusting and revolting, but he had little choice in the matter. To gain access to the Loremasters and be able to walk around in the building, he needed to understand how they worked inside, and the disgusting little man had information he needed. He fell back on his almost instinctual aptitude for guile and the illusion of a tall, very young-looking man of handsome features and brown hair which Bevken would find attractive, and thereby would be more inclined to be talkative.

Kyven made contact with him in an almost effeminately decorated tea house called the Pink Dragon, which catered to men who preferred other men.

It was the most unpleasant conversation he had ever had. He was forced to be accepting and enthusiastic about something that privately made him cringe, but he lied like a champion, and kept the sound of his distaste out of his voice.

It was dealing with Bevken that Kyven realized that there were other ways that this job could be difficult.

He spent almost three hours in the tavern talking to Bevken, who was, quite understandably, touchy and hard to urge into a friendship. He knew what he was, and knew how many saw him as disgusting, so that made him quite defensive. That was why Kyven had chosen to approach in the guise of someone that, while not sharing his views, shared a view that was considered abnormal as well. Kyven had spent the time preparing to take the guise of a man interested in other men, because he doubted he could have made himself believable to be a man interested in little boys. His guise’s name was Verick, who was a wagoneer who had just moved to Avannar from Cheston because Chestonites took an extremely dim view of his personal tastes. Once his personal inclination became common knowledge, he lost his job and was forced to move. Avannar was a more tolerant city, so he had moved here just a few days ago, had already found a job, and had found the Pink Dragon to visit in the times he had leisure, a place that accepted his different inclination because it catered to men of similar inclination themselves. Kyven solidified the false identity as he talked, inventing an entire back-story for him basically on the spot, but one that was believable.

“I’ve never really worked with Arcans,” Bevken noted as the waiter brought them each a glass of wine. “They’re not allowed in the building where I work, and I’ve never been inclined to buy one to do my cleaning. I’ve always preferred hiring young pages for that,” he said, his small eyes seeming to light up with a dreadful kind of eagerness.

“Driving a cage wagon isn’t all that glamorous, friend Bevken,” Kyven answered. “Most of the time the animals just sit there. Some of them can talk, but none of them are ever very much worth talking to. The few that seem smart enough to hold a conversation don’t like to talk to strangers.”

“Whyever not?”

“Because the last thing an Arcan ever wants to do is attract attention,” Kyven said. “I’m a

man who likes to avoid attention myself, so I could see it in the smart ones I drove in my wagon. Some people are rather mean to Arcans, so Arcans don’t attract attention. I can sympathize with them in that regard.”

“Amen. Maybe someday, people can accept others who are different without being judgmental or condemning.”

“The world would be a happier place if they could,” Kyven said, clinking his glass with Bevken’s in a toast. “I’m not doing that now, though. I’m a freelance driver, working for whoever needs things moved. As soon as I have enough money saved up, I’ll buy myself a wagon and team. Until then, I don’t mind doing day labor. At least I feel safe here.”

“Well, I might be able to find you some work here and there, my friend,” Bevken said with a slight smile. “I’m an administrator in the Department of Municipal Stoneworks, and we’re carting stone to work on streets, sewers, public buildings, and walls all the time. I’ll go have a chat with some people I know in the Department of Workers and see if I can’t get your name a little higher on the list of contracted day laborers they use when it’s needed.”

“That would be appreciated,” Kyven said gratefully. “At least after I get back. I was hired to drive a cage wagon to some place called Atan out west, and I’m leaving in the morning. I’m not sure when I’ll be back, I have no idea how far away it is.”

“Probably ten days or so, depending on how long you stay in Atan. It’s about four days to Atan if you’re not in a hurry, and you’ll be driving a wagon, so you won’t be going very fast.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad. Hmm, departments? That sounds pretty complicated.”

“The city’s government is broken up into departments, which oversee different aspects of the operations of a city,” Bevken told him. “The Loremasters run Avannar, but they basically allow us to do the running for them. Each department does its own work, works together where things overlap, and it frees up the Loremasters to worry about the bigger picture. I’ve worked for them for nearly thirty years.”

“Surely you’re joking, you can’t be that old.”

Bevken gave him a bright smile. “You’re nice to say so, my friend,” he chuckled.

“So you’re a Loremaster?”

“No, no, I’m just a functionary,” he replied. “I work for the Loremasters. There are no Loremasters in my department, our department head answers to a Loremaster that acts as the liaison between us and the Council of Advisors.”

“Doesn’t Avannar have a king?”

“It has a mayor,” he corrected. “The Council of Advisors appoints one of their own to the post, and he only answers to the council.”

“Sounds complicated.”

Kyven gently guided their talk more and more towards Bevken’s work, and was finally rewarded for his patience when Bevken explained how the departments worked. Despite his disgusting preferences, Bevken seemed an intelligent fellow, and Kyven could tell that the man had a keen understanding of both how things were supposed to work, and how they actually worked. The departments were semi-autonomous, and any time a group of people had that kind of authority, they abused it. Bevken slyly told him about all kinds of ways the workers in the city government skimmed off the top with schemes that enriched themselves at the expense of the city, and how the various departments jealously guarded their territory and were very reticent with each other. There were some individuals who were friends among the departments, but the departments themselves were highly competitive and were, the way Bevken explained it, at each other’s throats in a political game of backstabbing and discrediting to get more prestige and a bigger yearly budget, which provided department

managers more opportunities to steal.

That was very useful information.

But he got the real paydirt when Kyven asked him about the building, asking if it was all as pretty as the mezzanine was. "I went there to try to find work, and the entry hall is amazing, with all that glass," Kyven said. "Is the whole building like that?"

"I work in a dungeon," Bevken grunted. "Most of the department offices for city government are on the first two floors. Our department is in an interior office, so we have no windows at all. The Loremasters do their work up on the upper floors."

"Ah. I didn't think of that, I guess. It has, what, six floors?"

"Nine," he corrected. "Six floors up, three floors down."

"Down?"

He nodded. "They have storerooms and other things down there. The important people have their offices in the towers, and they're kinda poetic about it. Each tower holds the person responsible for things in that direction. Since there's little out there to the east and west, the one in the east tower is the foreign minister that deals with communications from Eusica, and the one in the west tower handles general matters that involve everyone in Noraam, kind of a minister dealing with the things that affect the kingdoms and city-states as a whole. As you can imagine, the higher up you work, the more important you are. Of course, they get to climb up all those stairs," Bevken chuckled.

"I'll take working on a wagon. It's not that bad, at least when it's not raining. You always have a view, and the climbing you do is in and out of your seat."

"It doesn't pay as much, though."

"I've never been one to worry all that much about money. As long as I have a good meal and a spot under a wagon or in the bed of a friend on the road, I'm happy."

"You should take on a partner as a partner, then you'd never sleep alone," Bevken said with a smile.

"When I can buy a wagon of my own, I just might," he answered. "If I can find someone who doesn't mind the life of a wagoner."

"Maybe that's the life I should have chosen, that way I'd always be on the move," he said with an eager smile that only made Kyven shiver under his illusion to even consider what the man might be thinking.

"Sometimes it's nice to be on the move, but sometimes it's nice to have a roof over your head. Driving a wagon in the rain is never very fun."

"Winters must not be fun either."

"I don't mind them all that much. You just bundle up. It's summers I don't like. You can keep putting on clothes to stay warm, but there's only so many clothes you can take off to keep cool until you get arrested."

"Well, summers here shouldn't be half as bad as they are in Cheston. That's a fair clip to the south."

"I certainly hope not."

Kyven again let the conversation drift so it didn't seem like he was pushing it anywhere, then he edged it again back towards Bevken's work, feigning curiosity about how all those people managed to work in one building without stepping on each other's toes. "Oh, it's not that bad," he said. "We almost never see the Loremasters because they stay up on their floors, and they have their own personal stairwells that go up there without opening onto our floors. The only uniforms we ever see are the Loreguard when they make patrols of the corridors."

"That does sound like it's less of a problem," he nodded. "I guess they thought about things

when they built the place."

He snorted. "No, they walled off those stairways to keep us off of them, and even walled off our single stairway so we can't go up to their floors," he grunted. "If we need to go see a Loremaster, we have to go down to the first floor, then back up using another stairway. We only have one stairway we can use, and it gets *real* crowded when we start and end work."

Kyven chuckled wryly. "And let me guess, there are more stairways that go up to their floors than to yours."

"Of course," he snorted. "Their reasoning for it was 'well, your people are only on *one* floor above the ground floor, you should only need *one* stairway'. What bullshit," he said with a indelicate grunt.

Kyven laughed. "Well, it's a twisted sort of logic until you actually try it in reality."

"Twisted is a good word for it."

Another critically useful piece of information.

They sat there until sunset talking about nothing in particular, and then Kyven looked at the filling tavern and then out the door and heard a rumble of thunder. "I think it's about time for me to head out, before I get soaked," he said, quickly standing up and then putting enough chits down to cover their drinks. "Thanks for a pleasant evening, my friend. It was nice to meet you."

"Same to you," he said, shaking Kyven's hand, which made Kyven's fur crawl at the thought of touching that man, even if his hand was in a glove.

"I meant to ask, why the gloves?" Bevken asked curiously.

"My left hand was burned in a fire when I was a kid," he answered. "I wear the glove to spare people the sight of it. And, well, I just wear the other one because it looks a little strange to be wearing only one glove."

"Well, that's a good reason," Bevken said. "It was a nice evening, friend. I hope you get back to your inn dry."

"Me too," he said, hurrying from the table and looking for all the world like a man trying to beat a storm home. In reality, he was quite pleased with the information he had gathered. Thanks to that disgusting Bevken, Kyven had a basic understanding of how the Loremasters building was organized. He knew that the first and second floors belonged to the city government. He knew that those stairs were isolated from the Loremasters above, sealing the second floor off from the other floors in a way. He knew that the more important people had their offices on the top floors, and that the *really* important people had their offices in the four towers that decorated each corner of the building. From the sound of it, the west tower, holding the Loremaster in charge of things that affected Noraam as a whole, was the tower that would be of most interest to him when he started digging to see what the Loremasters knew about what Haven was doing. Though he knew nothing of the defenses of the building—it would have been too suspicious to ask about such things—he now had a general knowledge of the building, and that would prove invaluable when he started snooping.

Tomorrow, he would investigate the building, again through guile. He was going to go to the tax office and inquire about another piece of property, but his real reason to be there would be to observe the guards on the first floor and get some basic information.

He discarded his illusion of Verick and returned to the illusion of his human self, as Kyven, in an isolated alley, and then hurried home. But when he arrived, he found he had a visitor, at least of sorts. He came in through the back door, and to his surprise, found Shario sitting quite comfortably at his workbench, his feet propped up and a posts knife twirling between his fingers. "I was wondering if you were ever coming home," he said in his Flauren accent.

"Where are my Arcans?"

“The little red one is cooking dinner, the others are upstairs. Your coyote is pretty clever, and the little two-toned cat isn’t a bad posts player,” he said with a grin, twirling his elegant moustache between two fingers. “She was gracious enough to give me a game or two while we waited for you to come home.”

“I hope you won’t spread that around. The Loreguard gets antsy if they hear someone’s teaching an Arcan how to throw knives.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” he smiled. “Since we’re business partners. And speaking of business, I have a little business for you.” He reached into his doublet and pulled out a little silk cloth, set it on his workbench, and unfolded it. Inside was a small black crystal. “I’ve heard that you’re a pretty good cutter, my friend. Veraad speaks quite highly of your work. I need your expertise. Can you cut this?”

Kyven came over and picked it up and surveyed it, holding it up to the light. “A three point black. It has a small fault off center, but I can work around that. I can cut it at three points,” he said confidently. “Do you want the chips?”

“Of course I do,” he said with an oily smile. “How long?”

“It’s small. I can do it in about an hour.”

“Then please, by all means, don’t let me hold you back. I’ll be back in an hour. Think you have room at your table for one more?”

“If you don’t mind raw meat,” Kyven told him. “Unlike most Arcan owners, I treat my Arcans as friends more than possessions. As I’m sure you’ve deduced after looking around. They got me to try raw meat, and I found it’s actually not that bad.”

“I’ll try anything once,” he said with a smile, putting his feet on the floor and standing up. “And yes, I did notice that,” he added with a sly smile, no doubt thinking it gave him a hold over Kyven. “What kind of meat are we having?”

“Whatever my Arcan bought today,” Kyven shrugged, sitting at his bench and turning on his lamp. “I send her out to do the errands, since she’s clever enough. I’ll have it ready for you by dinnertime.”

“Good. I do hope your little red one is a good cook.”

“I rather like her cooking.”

“Excellent! I’ll be back in an hour, then. Good luck with the crystal.”

“I’ll have it ready for you.”

Shario sauntered back out into the lobby, and the bell on the door told him that the Flauren had left. Clover brought the young ones and Lightfoot back down almost as soon as he was out of the shop, a rueful look on her face.

“I thought I told you not to play around humans,” he chided.

“He saw the boards,” Lightfoot shrugged. “He knew we play.”

“That man is very smart, and quite devious,” Clover told him. “Very, very perceptive. He correctly realized that the Arcans play posts after just a single glance. After he asked about it, there was no reason to deny. We told him you taught us all to play posts because you love the game and have no apprentices to play against.”

“Well, I doubt he’ll say much, since he’s a criminal. He can’t do much, if he turns me in, I’ll reveal that he’s been bringing me black crystals to cut. At least now he thinks he has a little extra to hold over me, that I taught my Arcans how to play posts.” He secured the crystal and put a lamp both over and under it. “Now give me a little space here. This is a rare crystal, and I can’t mess this up.”

It took Kyven only about forty minutes to cut the crystal, and it was done well. He had worked around its rather nasty internal flaw without reducing it under three points. The chips made from the cuts were carefully gathered up, even the dust, and were placed in a small

leather pouch for Shario. The olive-skinned Flauren returned almost exactly one hour later, just as Patches finished cooking dinner, coming in through the front door and sauntering into the workshop as if he still owned the building. “How did it come out?” he asked without so much as a word of greeting.

Kyven took the crystal and handed it to the oily man. He took out a jeweler’s glass and inspected the crystal, then laughed lightly and placed it in a small silk pouch he had in his pocket, then pocketed the pouch of chips with it after opening the leather pouch to see what was there. “I see our deal has turned out to be quite profitable for both sides. Well done, well done, master crystalcutter. Now, on to the more important matter. Dinner! Little red one, what have you cooked for us this night?” he called loudly.

Patches scurried out into the workshop. “Clover bought us a side of beef for our meat,” she said in a reluctant, nervous voice. “I have made baked peppers, boiled corn, cheese-baked potatoes, beets and turnips stewed in wine sauce, and a mulberry pie for dessert.”

“It sounds delightful, little one. What is your name?”

“P–Patches, Master,” she said meekly.

“A pretty name for a pretty girl,” he said with an earnest smile. “You have done the honor of cooking, allow me to do the honor of setting the table. It’s a Flauren tradition.”

Kyven and Tweak set up the table—they ate in the workshop—and Shario was true to his word, helping set the table. “It’s a rare man that sits at the same table as Arcans,” Shario noted as he set the table.

“I’m not a very normal man, Shario,” Kyven said, which made the Flauren chuckle. “And we have too much on each other for you to make an issue of my quirks,” he added, which made him laugh.

“True, true. Let’s see how well your little red one cooks, my friend. Flaurens have a love affair with a good meal, you know.”

Shario joined them at dinner, and he was not shy at all about trying raw meat. “A Flauren will try almost any food once,” he said with a light smile as Clover cut a slice of beef for him. He cut a mouthful and placed it in his mouth and seemed to savor it a moment before chewing, and a smile played over his face. “Quite different from cooked meat. It’s much more robust.”

“That is why we like it,” Clover told him as Patches picked up a plate.

“Wh–What vegetables do you want, Master?” she asked.

“No need to be afraid of me, my little chef,” he smiled. “And I want them all! I delight in all foods. I want to try them all.”

Patches put a little bit of each dish on the plate and passed it down to him, and Lightfoot quietly cut him a slice of the warm brown honey bread she’d made with the meal, right out of the oven. He took just one bite of each food and seemed to just hold it in his mouth for a long moment, then chewed it with deliberate slowness. Each new bite brought a smile to his face, and Patches, strangely, seemed to hang on the edge of her seat to see if he liked each dish. Each bite brought elegant complements, such as “such exquisite texture” and “your sauce truly makes the flavor of the beets explode.” She all but beamed at him as he complemented each dish, and particularly seemed to enjoy the cheese-baked potatoes. “I may have to entertain the idea of making you an offer to buy this excellent Arcan from you, Master Kyven,” Shario told him as he had Patches heap a large helping of potatoes onto his plate. “She’s an amazing cook.”

“I’m afraid she’s not for sale, and never will be,” Kyven answered.

“Wise, wise, you don’t sell such a wonderful cook,” he chuckled. “But I will certainly be stopping by for dinner again, my little Patches,” he said, smiling at her. “Do you happen to

know how to cook in the Flauren traditions?”

“I only know what I was taught, Master,” she said in a shy voice.

“A pity. I’d love to try some chicken flaurentine or butter sautéed tuna with mint sauce prepared by your skilled hands.”

“Well, Master Kyven can read, Master. Can these dish recipes be written? He can read it to me.”

“An excellent idea!” he said, slapping his hand on the table. “I can easily have several recipes written down for you, and Kyven can help you learn them. If you don’t mind, that is, Master Kyven.”

“I think I can find the time,” he said calmly.

“Very well, very well!” he said grandly. “Now, let’s try that dessert you prepared for us.”

Shario took one bite of the mulberry pie, and made a sound in his throat as he closed his eyes and waved his hand before his face. “Ohhhh, my! You astound me, little chef! This is the best mulberry pie I have ever eaten!”

“She’s really a good baker,” Tweak agreed, then coughed and added “uh, Master Shario.”

“You should try her chocolate cake,” Clover added. “It is quite good, Master Shario.”

“My dear little chef, would it inconvenience you terribly to make me one? I’ll pick it up from your shop tomorrow afternoon.”

“Umm, I, uh, yes, I can make you one, Master Shario,” she said, lowering her eyes.

“It’s a deal, then!” he said, slapping his hand on the table again. “Now, let’s enjoy this meal as a meal should be enjoyed. Savoring every bite!”

Shario was a criminal, but he had *exquisite* manners, Kyven saw. He did seem to truly enjoy the meal, and he lingered at the table with a glass of wine, swirling it wordlessly for long moments before sipping it down to the bottom. After his wine, he stood up and quite grandly told them that it would be his honor to clear the table, and he even helped Patches and Tweak do the dishes. He came out of the kitchen and sat at one of the workbenches, put his feet up on it, and lit a cigar. “Kyven, my friend, I’m seeing more and more that selling you this building was a good idea,” he said in a content, almost satiated voice. “You made me a pretty chit by cutting my crystal, and you treat me to a wonderful dinner.”

“You liked it that much?”

“A Flauren never jokes about food, my friend. That little Arcan of yours is an *outstanding* chef. Wherever did she learn?”

“She was taught by her parents. She was raised as a house servant, and her owners were well off before they died, and I bought her.”

“Ah, well, that explains it. She’s quite a smart little thing, isn’t she? In fact, all your Arcans are quite intelligent,” he noted. “And that coyote of yours is probably smarter than many men I know,” he added with a sly smile.

“I prefer someone I can talk to, Shario,” Kyven told him. “Dumb Arcans are easy to train, but they’re lousy conversationalists.”

“They’re more than slaves to you, aren’t they?” he asked directly.

“I’d be lying if I said no,” he answered. “The coyote, Clover, she’s one of my closer friends. My owning her is just a formality. My other Arcans are also more like friends to me than servants. They take care of me and keep the shop clean and provide me with company and conversation, and I take care of them by keeping us all fed and housed and treat them with kindness and respect.”

“I understand, I understand,” he nodded. “There is much more to many Arcans than what meets the eye, and I am not one to look down on your point of view. Why, I even employ a few in my business dealings myself.”

“You train Arcans as thieves?”

Shario gave him an almost impish smile. “I see you’ve asked around about me,” he laughed. “I must admit, I used to be engaged in less than legal activities in the past, but I’ve been slowly moving into the realm of being a respectable businessman.”

“At least on paper,” Kyven noted.

Shario laughed. “True, true. There’s much more opportunity for profit as a merchant and businessman than there was as a burglar. Anyway, Arcans are very strong, and some of them are *amazingly* agile,” he grinned. “That little cat of yours, I could train her to be something special. She moves like flowing water.” He smiled at Kyven. “I’ve been around a while, my friend, and something tells me that you, too, are only a crystalcutter on paper, though you’re quite good at it,” he said. “There’s a secret lurking behind that honest face, my friend. But I won’t ask any questions. I have no care for what you do, as long as you’re not trying to take over my territory.”

“Why would I? We are only in a position to help each other, Shario,” Kyven told him carefully. “I rather like my shop, and you can certainly use my skills from time to time. That was our deal, as I recall, and I intend to honor it.”

“Certainly, as do I,” he smiled.

“It works in my favor that you think more of me than what you see. I might be interested in buying some information from you from time to time, my friend, information an honest crystalcutter wouldn’t think very important. Do you think you might be interested in such a deal?”

“Anything is for sale, my friend,” Shario told him with a grand smile. “Anything. And I am a man who deals in a *very* wide array of merchandise.”

“No matter what kind of merchandise? Even merchandise that might seem odd or dangerous?”

“That only means it’s worth more,” Shario told him. “I’m a simple man, my friend. Pay me, and you will get what you pay for. Since we’re in a position to be, ah, inconvenient to each other, you can be sure that my merchandise will be good and offered at a reasonable price, and I will always be discreet. A man in my line of work won’t be in business for long if he’s not discreet. And if you keep feeding me your little chef’s wonderful cooking, you’ll find me to be more than just a business associate,” he laughed. “I’ve always been eager for a good meal. It’s a Flauren weakness,” he added with a sly smile.

“I think we’ll be able to work together, Master Shario,” Kyven told him with a smile.

“I agree, I agree,” Shario said, taking another puff of his cigar, and blowing a lazy ring of smoke into the air before him.

Chapter 19

Shario was a very, very dangerous man.

In the two weeks since he’d started to wander over, about every other day, the man had already managed to intrude himself into Kyven’s affairs entirely too deeply for his comfort, and the method of that intrusion was friendship. He’d been working his way into the good graces of the others, and that was the way he did it. His method of getting into a friendship with Tweak was to play posts with him, chatting away amiably. The way he befriended Lightfoot was to lure her out of the house after dark and introduce her to the shadowy world of the cutpurses, thieves, burglars, and criminals. Much to his shock, Shario had even managed to subvert Patches, by bringing her recipes and begging her to cook for him. Shario had also tried to charm his way into Clover’s good graces, but in Clover the man found an opponent with which not to play. He was very polite to her, but he kept his distance from her. He

could sense, maybe subconsciously, that Clover was the most dangerous of the Arcans, wise and intelligent and able to see right through him and read him like a book, and that made him gave her a wide berth.

But, his faith in his friends was well deserved, for they knew that there was a line they could not cross. All of them kept that in mind at all times, even as Shario tried to charm them into saying something that they really shouldn't; and in that regard, all of them saw the man for what he really was, and that was dangerous. Shario knew that Kyven wasn't who he pretended to be, and he was trying to fish that information out of the Arcans, because he seemed to understand that he wasn't going to get that information out of Kyven himself. Clover kept the others on track, but Shario didn't seem to mind being denied what he was after. He seemed to think it some game or challenge, and one he tackled with enthusiasm and delight.

Shario was a man that knew many things, and a desire to know everything he didn't know about the city in which he lived. He probably knew more of what was going on in Avannar than anyone else in the city, and that information was often used for his many pursuits, be them legal or not. Kyven felt that some of the information he might need was in Shario's hands, but getting it wouldn't be easy. To get, he felt he might have to give, and that was something that would be fatal for the handsome Flauren. If Shario learned more about Kyven than he felt was good, then Kyven would kill him. He would regret having to do it, but he would in a heartbeat. There was too much riding on what he was doing here for him to risk it all because of one charismatic, overly curious Flauren. That was one of the things the fox had taught him to do, to know when it was necessary to kill, and be capable of it when that time came.

Kyven was a little worried about Shario for the first few days, but once he saw that Clover would keep a leash on him, he focused himself back on his own task.

That task began to take shape. After hanging out in a few taverns in the evenings and talking with many of the workers in the building, going over everything Danna told him, and speaking to a few people in town, the wall down in Kyven's office began to slowly become decorated with the guts of the Loremasters' operation. He kept it all pinned up on that wall, so many pieces of paper it almost looked like a slateboard, and it held the organization.

Their organization was based on a dual system of councils and overseers, supported by a bureaucracy. For example, the city answered to the Council of Advisors, which was a council of lower-level people of importance, almost like lower-ranking nobles, who worked with the city's mayor, which was the overseer. The city government was a series of bureaucratic departments that oversaw various aspects of the running of the city. Above the Council of Advisors in authority and importance was the Council of States, where Loremasters represented each major kingdom, nation, or territory on Noraam. Leading that council was the High Statesman, which was the overseer to which the council answered. The Council of States was just the most important of a series of councils used by the Loremasters that oversaw, regulated, inspected, or dealt with various aspects of the continent. There was a council for trade, a council for defense, a council for resources, a council for research and scientific advancement, and a council for Arcan management. Some of those councils all answered to the Council of States, but others answered to the council above that one in importance. Above them was the highest of the Loremaster councils, which was simply called the Circle. The Circle represented the interests of the Loremasters, not the peoples or nations of Noraam, and similar to other councils within their organization, it was led by the High Master. But there were four other overseers that were part of the Circle, four special members of that council, and those were the four overseers in the four towers. Each of those men led his own council, which helped them in their special duties. Each individual council and overseer had its own

series of departments and offices that supported its operations, staffed by Loremasters and outside workers, and the headquarters building wasn't the only building in which the Loremasters did their work. Much as Kyven had suspected, there were other buildings in the city where the Loremasters did some of their business, but those satellite offices were all mainly low-level departments, dealing mainly with the city of Avannar itself or the Free Territories. Everything of importance was in the headquarters building, though. It was all up on the wall, a organizational tree that showed which department answered to who, where it was in the power structure, and how they all inter-connected to form the bureaucracy that was the Loremasters, a bureaucracy that shadowed the governments of Noraam and both held it together and quietly ruled it from the behind the curtain.

The building itself was sectioned off in much the same way that the second floor had been isolated from the rest of the building. The building had six floors above ground and three floors below with extra floors in the four towers, from what he'd learned in his conversations with those who worked inside it. The third, fourth, and fifth floors held the council chambers, offices, and departments that dealt with the affairs of Noraam. The sixth floor held the offices and chambers that dealt with the offices and workers that supported the Circle. The towers had additional offices that focused on the special jobs those four members of the Circle performed, supporting them in their special tasks. The higher up one went, the more important the job, and the more important the office.

Within that framework, there were names. Kyven had, in two weeks, managed to discover the name of every member of every council and every overseer, from Meryk Thallson, the most junior member of the Council of Advisors, to the High Master himself, an old, wizened man named Greggor Tallmast, the highest ranking member of the Loremasters, and what one might even call the ruler of all of Noraam... but not overtly. The Loremasters didn't do things overtly. They ruled from the shadows, behind an illusion of only being an organization that helped the independent kingdoms work together, trade, and cooperate. In addition to the names of all those Loremasters, there were also names of many different Loreguard that would be patrolling the building and the grounds, names that Kyven might need to know if he were stopped and challenged. Names. Hundreds of names. And Kyven spent a day memorizing every name on that wall, the name of every department, what floor it was on, and the names of many Loreguard that protected the building. That information was going to be his key to learning every nook and cranny of the building. By knowing who was on which floor, he could talk his way past guards and Loremasters, and also locate all the offices and important rooms. By knowing which floor was which, he could assign places to all those names and titles on his wall.

He'd spent nearly two weeks amassing that wall of information, and now it was almost time to start using it. Tomorrow night, he would penetrate the building for the first time, with the mission of learning his way around. He would find the offices belonging to those names and familiarize himself with the patrol patterns of the guards, what kind of security they had, and the possibility of any alchemical devices in there to dissuade intruders.

He felt... anxious. Excited. He was a little nervous, but also looking forward to finally doing something, not just sitting in smelly bars and talking to boring people while feigning interest. But he wasn't so excited that he couldn't keep his mind on what he was doing, and what he was doing right now was his other job. A twelve point blue crystal sat in his holder on his desk, Veraad's first show of trust in him, and Kyven was almost done with it. Kyven would make a decent profit off the crystal, not that profit really mattered. But it was a matter of pride to him that his shop could make money above board, totally legal, using Kyven's cutting skills. Veraad wasn't the only alchemist for whom Kyven was now cutting crystals,

either. Veraad had recommended Kyven to his more friendly fellow alchemists, and four of them had brought Kyven some crystals. They approached him the same way Veraad had, by giving him small, less valuable crystals to cut first to get an idea of his ability, and coming back after they saw he was good. Kyven was now facing the idea of having to work all day, cutting the crystals they brought him, seeing the crisis facing humanity get that much closer with every crystal he cut, and knowing that at that very moment there were more crystals being cut all over the city, and all over Noraam.

His wasn't the only bench in use. Behind him, at their own benches, Tweak and Patches were also cutting crystals. They were cutting milk crystals, doing nothing more than playing, learning how the various tools were used after Kyven showed them each tool and its use. They were just playing with them, basically, cutting the crystals to get a feel for the tools and a feel for how crystals cut. They'd been doing it for two days now, and already they were showing signs of improvement. The exercise was about them learning how to handle the tools more than anything else. Kyven had done the same thing in his apprenticeship to Holm years ago, starting working like that after months in the classroom learning to read and write. He looked up in the mirror he put over his bench to look behind him, both so the apprentices could see what he was doing and so he could see what they were doing, and saw two backs bent over benches, and the *tink tink tink* sounds of delicate chisels striking crystals. Just from those sounds, Kyven could tell much of what they were doing. "Not so hard, Tweak," he cautioned in a gentle voice as he made the final major cut on his crystal, chipping off a small burr on what would be the underside of the setting. "Apply only the force it takes to cut the crystal. It may be hard, but when you're cutting it, a crystal is just like glass. Hit it too hard, and it'll shatter on you."

"Sorry," he apologized. But the bell of the shop door opening caused him and Patches both to quickly stop what they were doing, and take their crystals in their settings and the metal pans holding the chips and run with them into the office, leaving behind empty benches. Clover's voice came from behind the door to the lobby, greeting the customer in a vapid tone that made her seem quite brainless. The authoritative reply seemed a little harsh to him, and the sudden commotion outside made him jump up. There was a loud sound that had no business being in the lobby, which caused him to rush to the door and yank it open. Beyond, he saw Clover laying on the floor behind the counter, blood dripping from her muzzle, and two Loreguard standing beside and in front of a tall, thin, haughty-looking woman with brown hair and wearing a Loremaster's surcoat over a very expensive silk dress. "Who the hell are you, and what the fuck do you think you're doing?" Kyven demanded in a hot, indignant tone.

"I am a Loremaster," she said with a slightly arrogant tone.

"Loremaster? I don't care if you're God, woman, you don't come into my shop and strike my Arcans just for greeting you. Now get out of my shop."

"We are here on official business. Send your animals away."

"You have no business with me," he retorted, making sure his illusory face showed all of his anger and outrage. "When you try your next cutter, I suggest you don't beat the Arcan behind the counter, you might get a little more cooperation."

"You stand up for an Arcan?" one of the large men asked bluntly.

"How'd you like it if I came into your house and kicked your daughter's favorite kitten?" he snapped. "Besides, what you've done is showed me total disrespect for my property and my shop. I'll do no business with anyone who forgets just whose shop this is. You've showed me absolutely no respect in striking my Arcan, and I will not do business with you. Now get out."

"I believe you haven't been in Avannar long enough to understand a few things, Master Steelhammer," the woman said, a bit archly. "You were recommended by your guild as a cutter capable of cutting rare or difficult crystals, a specialty of yours learned from the master cutter Holm of Atan. The Loremasters will contract your services."

"You can take your crystals and shove them up your ass, bitch," Kyven growled at her as he helped Clover off the floor. Her eyes were glazed, and blood oozed from the side of her maw. "I told you, I *will not* work for *anyone* who disrespects me and my shop not ten seconds after you walk in the door. Now you go back to your boss and tell him that Kyven Steelhammer will not work for the Loremasters because the Loremaster they sent to talk to him pissed him off before you even met him."

The woman's lips formed a tight line, and her eyes turned cold. "Again, you seem to not understand just who controls this city, cutter," she said frostily. "I didn't say you had a choice."

"Fine. I'll cut your crystals for a million chits per point of weight, and that price is non-negotiable," he said with a chilly stare. "That's what your rudeness is going to cost the Loremasters if they want to do business with me."

"You will cut what we bring you for the guild standard fee or you will *lose* this shop," she snapped.

"Try it," Kyven said in a low, dangerous voice. "Because I guarantee you, bitch, the very first thing I'll do after you leave my shop is go straight to the guild. You try to close me down, and you'll get to deal with *them*. I think you may remember what happened the last time a city or government crossed the guild?"

The woman gave him a long, hard stare, then turned and marched from the shop without another word.

"You're digging a hole, friend, and over a fuckin' *animal*," one of the men told him.

"Her being an animal doesn't change the fact that you had no right to hit her in *my shop*," he retorted in a cold voice. "You seem to think this is about the Arcan. Well, it's not. What you did is just the same as if you took out a club and smashed my display cases because you didn't like the crystals I keep in them. These are *my* Arcans, this is *my* shop. You have no right to damage anything in my shop. So, it's not about an Arcan, it's about showing me respect inside my own shop. You marched in here acting like you own this place and thought you could do whatever you wanted to do. Well, you *can't*. Even here in Avannar, where you make the rules, you can't get around the simple rule of common decency and respect. I don't work for *assholes*," he snapped. "Now get out."

The two men gave him dark looks, but they too left the shop. Kyven glared at them until they were well out of his windows, then he turned and urged Clover to open her mouth. He hissed under his breath. "You're missing a couple of teeth, my friend," he warned.

She just looked at him dazedly.

"Think I'd better take you up to bed. Come along," he urged, pulling her through the shop door.

Upstairs, he put her down in his bed and dabbed away the blood, waiting for her to snap out of it. Kyven couldn't heal, had been told he didn't even have the power to try, so all he could do was wait for her to come back to her senses. Whoever hit her must have hit her *really* hard. Clover was a very tough young lady, and to be struck so hard that her eyes were unfocused and her mind was addled must have taken some serious power. It might have killed Patches.

The other three appeared in the doorway, and Kyven waved them in. "Is she alright?" Tweak asked as they looked over the bed.

“She’s dazed,” he answered. “I’ve seen something like this before, back when Orad got hit in the head by a box he was trying to take off a shelf. We just have to wait until she comes around. You two go back to your training, but I want you to lock the door going out to the lobby. Lightfoot, keep an eye on the front door, but do it from the roof. If you see them come back, come in and warn me.”

“Alright,” Patches said, as Lightfoot nodded to him, and the three of them left.

It took about half an hour. Her eyes fluttered for a while, then they finally took focus, and she stirred. “Kyven,” she murmured.

“Good to see you back,” he smiled. “You’re going to have to heal yourself.”

“What happened?”

“When you greeted that Loremaster, she had one of her thugs club you,” he answered. “At least that’s what I think, since I wasn’t in the room. You lost a couple of teeth, my friend.”

“No matter, easily replaced,” she said, sitting up and wincing. “My head feels like this building is sitting on it.”

“Are you alright to use magic?” he asked.

“I’ll be alright in a minute,” she said. Her eyes opened to the spirits, and Kyven then felt her call out to the spirits, a hand to her own head. He felt the magic flow into her, and visibly watched the two teeth knocked out grow back in her mouth. “There, I feel much better, but I think I still need to rest,” she said. “I still feel a little dizzy.”

“Then my bed is yours,” he said grandly.

“As often as I sleep here, you should say it’s ours,” she said with a winsome smile. “What happened after I was hit?” When he related to her what happened when he found her, she gave him a concerned look. “Brother, that might not have been the best course. You want to get *into* the Loremasters’ organization. Working for them would give you a new path.”

“I won’t tolerate them coming in here and hitting you, probably with a rod, just for greeting them.”

“Brother, I’m an *Arcan*,” she told him simply. “I should have known better than to say a word. I guess being around you and Shario has dulled my usual senses.”

“What do you mean?”

“Any Arcan who’s been here very long knows never to speak to Loremasters or Loreguard. It seems to violate their sense of superiority,” she said with a light smile, but serious eyes. “I should have known better than to greet them, even using very humble words.”

“Well, you won’t have to speak to them again.”

“Defending me will earn you their suspicion.”

“I didn’t couch it like that. My anger was with their disrespect for my property and my shop,” he answered. “And you’re my property, woman,” he teased lightly, tapping her on the upper chest with a clawed finger. “I *own* this handsome little body.”

She laughed. “Flirting even while I’m injured, taking advantage of me. You’re such a scoundrel,” she grinned.

He reached under her shirt and cupped her small, furry breast. “*This* is taking advantage of you,” he said teasingly.

“Scoundrel,” she laughed, and just laid back languidly and allowed him to squeeze her breast.

“Wanton little trollop,” he accused with a grin.

“Depraved reprobate. Care to see how depraved you are? I can undo the ties on my breeches so you can get your hand in there without clawing me.”

He laughed. “You’re definitely feeling better,” he said, leaning down and licking her on the cheek, a move that appeared to be a kiss by his human illusion. “Now stay in bed for a little

while. I remember that much.”

She nodded. “Until the dizziness fades,” she agreed.

Kyven gave Clover some peace and quiet as she recovered and returned to the shop. He had no doubt that the Loremasters would be back, if only to reassert their sense of dominance in Avannar. They weren’t used to being denied anything in *their* city, and he had no doubt that willowy bitch was right now whining to her superior about how the mean cutter threw her out of his shop for no reason. So, it was time to take some steps. He locked the customer door and hung a big sign on it reading *at the guild, will be back soon*, then left from the back door and went straight to the guild. He got in quickly and told them what happened, and told them specifically that the Loremaster threatened to take away his shop for refusing to work for them after they damaged his personal property, which outraged the guild representative he was meeting. “I think the Loremasters need to remember that they aren’t the beginning and the end,” he snapped, standing up from his desk. “Let me go get the Junior Secretary.” The Junior Secretary, a middle-aged woman, agreed that Kyven had an honest grievance, and sent him back to his shop with a calm reassurance. “Don’t you worry a bit, Artisan. Go back to your shop, and I’ll dispatch a watcher to make sure nobody harasses you. We’ll show them that they’re not the only people who hold power in Avannar.”

That was one of the reasons the guilds came into existence. The guilds were insurance for artisans, protection from persecution and exploitation by governments. The first guild was the guild of blacksmiths, which organized in Cheston nearly three hundred years ago when the smiths all began to mightily resent unfair taxes levies on smiths by the city. Every smith in the city joined the movement, and as a group, they refused any and all work for the city. At first the city was amused, but when their watch started needing new horseshoes for their patrol mounts, and things like uniform buckles, armor, and weapons began to break and they had neither any way to repair nor any way to replace it without paying three times as much to have it shipped in from another city, they started taking the new guild of smiths seriously. It took nearly two years, but the guild broke Cheston’s will, and Cheston repealed the unfair taxes. Other cities, and other professions, seeing this amazing success, also organized guilds to further the interests of their trades. Over time, the guilds of a trade in individual cities and kingdoms merged to form continental organizations, and the guilds began to offer services to members, as well as begin to charge fees for membership. Kyven, overall, considered the guilds to be good things. They defended the rights of the craftsmen from exploitation in the form of unfair taxes or being forced to work for unfair pay.

The Loremasters would take the guild of cutters quite seriously. If they pushed Kyven, the guild would back him, and they would declare a strike against the Loremasters, refusing them any cutting services. That meant that they’d have no replacement crystals for any of their equipment, which would extend also to the Loreguard. The Loremasters might control Avannar, but they were not the only power here. The guilds, be it one or all of them together, were forces to be reckoned with.

He returned to the shop and was not surprised at all to see a large contingent of Loreguard standing outside his front door, visible down the street as he went around to get in through the back. He entered and went straight to Patches. “Get Clover into the fake room,” he ordered her. The fake room was a fake sleeping room for the Arcans, four rude pallets laid out in a small unused storeroom that they’d set up. They’d had to use it several times already because of Shario, since he couldn’t know that the Arcans slept upstairs in much nicer rooms. Patches nodded and rushed upstairs as Kyven surveyed the shop and made sure that there was no trace that more than one cutter had been at work, and Patches returned escorting Clover, with Tweak supporting her other arm. They looked nervously at him, but Kyven just

nodded his head when he saw that everything looked proper; no glints of crystal chips on the other benches, the tools were all neatly put away and covered with a soft linen cloth to keep the dust off of them. Kyven took just a second to compose himself, to put on the air of a slighted artisan who was outraged at a lack of respect, putting his affection and attachment for his Arcans in the back of his mind. If they knew he had personal feelings for the others, it would jeopardize things.

Once Clover was ensconced in the fake room, Kyven went out into the lobby as if to reopen the door, and stopped and stared at the large group outside his door. There were too many for this to be a social call, or some kind of negotiation to soothe his ego and have him work for them. But, they also hadn't just smashed down his front door, so they did want to talk about something. He wasn't sure why they needed ten Loreguard accompanying them, though. He saw another Loremaster out there, with graying, balding hair, standing with the same effete bitch that had angered him in the first place.

He hoped that watcher for the guild was already in place and saw this.

He opened the counter and stepped through as twelve pairs of eyes outside focused on him, then stalked up to the door, removed the sign, and unlocked it. "What do you want?" he challenged, in a not-so-friendly tone.

"We're here to contract your services," the graying man said, tugging at his Loremaster surcoat as if to attract attention to it. His surcoat had a silver border, which marked him as a high-ranking member.

"Well, I suggest the shop of Brogan Dunn, five streets down and near the Black Monument. He's a very good cutter. Good day to you." He moved to close the door, but one of the Loreguard put a muscled arm against it, preventing him. The graying man looked to the young woman, who looked as if she'd eaten a large rock from the expression on her face, then she bowed.

"I... apologize for ordering your Arcan struck," she said in halting tones, clearly choking on every word. "I had no right to take such action within the boundary of your property."

"We will pay you the fair worth of the Arcan," the graying man. "Taken from her salary, of course."

Kyven gave the woman a long look, then nodded. "The Arcan isn't badly hurt, just dazed," he said in a much friendlier tone. "Besides, I think the apology cost her more than any fine ever will."

The woman glared viciously at him, which just made him smile.

"Come in, good Loremaster, and let's discuss your need of me. Just send *her* back. She'll not set foot in my shop."

"Very good," the older man said with a slight smile. "Take Veralda back to the office, if you please Denalt."

One of the Loreguard saluted, and five Loreguard followed the woman as she stomped off back up the street. The graying man was escorted by the other five Loreguard into the shop, and Kyven brought them back into his workshop, showing them courtesy. The older man looked around and nodded at his layout. "I see you're preparing to take on apprentices," he noted.

"As soon as I'm well established, yes. I'll send for a few from our shop in Atan," he answered. "I'm sure you know I'm part of a partnership. My partner runs the shop in Atan, while I've come here to expand our interests."

"You're wise for a young man," the older man chuckled. "Yes, we looked into your background before deciding to approach you with a contract."

"Please, sit down," he said, motioning at one of the chairs. "Patches!"

Patches scurried from the storeroom, then immediately put her eyes on the floor, obviously afraid.

"Bring wine for our guests," he told her.

"None for me, thank you," the graying man said with a smile. "And though the Loreguard is usually forbidden to take strong drink while on duty, I think they should be allowed a little leeway in this matter," he added with a mischievous gleam in his eye.

Patches rushed towards the kitchen, as all eyes followed her.

"An unusual situation for an artisan to have Arcans but no apprentices," the older man noticed.

"I'm in an unusual situation," Kyven chuckled. "I'm not ready to split my time between work and apprentices since I'm not established, but I do need help keeping this shop running. So I bought some Arcans to help me. One of them is very clever, smart enough for me to send out to do errands, and that helps a great deal. Once I'm established and I'm making a decent profit, I'll send for some of the apprentices in the Atan shop and probably send a couple of the Arcans back to Atan."

"I must say, you're a very brazen young man, standing up to us," he smiled.

"I'm a country boy, sir. In Atan, you'd *never* walk into a shop and do something like that."

"Yes, well, that's why I'm here. I used to be the village Loremaster in Atan, years ago," he smiled. "So I understood what happened better than most. The department wanted to march a contingent of Loreguard down here and arrest you," he said seriously. "But, it's a matter in the past now."

"Indeed it is, sir," Kyven said as Patches returned carrying a tray holding glasses of wine. She offered one to each Loreguard with her eyes down and her paws trembling visibly.

"Now, what can I do for you?"

"Why, we'd like to contract you to cut certain crystals for us," he answered. "The guild told us that you specialize in rare, valuable, or unusual crystals, and being the man to whom Master Holm sold his shop, that recommendation carries weight."

"It's what Master Holm trained me to do."

"I was sorry to hear of his passing," the older man said. "When I was there, I was quite fond of Master Holm. He was always such a serious man, and he was the best posts player I've ever seen in my life."

"You knew him?"

"Oh yes, about thirty years ago," the man chuckled. "Atan was my very first post after joining the Loremasters, and I think I amused Master Holm, this downy-faced pup being sent to represent the Loremasters. I was younger than some of the sons of the men on the village council. I think they never quite took me seriously," he smiled, his eyes distant and merry.

"That sounds like Master Holm, alright," Kyven chuckled.

"We have several unusually formed crystals of a certain worth that we'd like to have cut by someone trained for such things," the Loremaster continued. "There are any number of quite competent cutters in Avannar, but these are special crystals, and so it was decided we needed a specialist to handle them. Brint, if you please," he beckoned to a Loreguard.

The Loreguard, a tall, willowy young man with black hair and a handsome face, produced a leather pouch from under the neck of his tunic and handed it to Kyven. Kyven upended it into his hand and found himself staring at a jagged, highly irregular black crystal, about fourteen points in weight. "Yikes," Kyven grunted, turning the spiky thing over in his hand, feeling the energies within it, studying it for long moments in silence. "This won't be easy," he finally reported, holding it up to the light. "It would be best to split it into two crystals, it has a very nasty flaw off center on the smaller side."

“This is why we wanted a specialist,” the man said soberly. “Can you cut it as a single crystal?”

Kyven nodded. “It won’t be at fourteen points, though. I’ll have to cut it down to thirteen points to make it viable. The internal flaw is just too severe.”

“Thirteen would be acceptable,” the man nodded. “Are you currently available?”

“I have three other orders to complete first,” he answered. “But they’re not that difficult. I could start work on this crystal tomorrow. It may take a couple of days to cut, though.”

“Understandable. We pay our cutters the guild standard fees, but given this is a specialty job, I’m authorized to offer you half again the usual rate, given the amount of time you’ll have to devote to it.”

“That’s acceptable,” Kyven said immediately.

“I’ll be sending a page down once a day to inquire. When it’s done, just inform the page, and a Loremaster will be down to pick it up and render your payment.”

“I’ll have to go to the bank to get the bond for this,” he said. “I don’t have that much money here.”

“We don’t bother with bonds, Master Steelhammer,” he chuckled. “We know who you are and where you are. I highly doubt you’ll try to cheat us.”

“Feels like back home,” Kyven chuckled. “We never bothered with bonds at our shop.”

“You cut for the same people every day. Here, it’s a little different.”

“Truly,” Kyven nodded.

Kyven was entertained by a few stories from the Atan of thirty years ago by the old Loremaster, who finally named himself as Yoris, as the Loreguard finished the wine that Patches brought them. Patches stood by the kitchen door with the tray in her hand, her head down and quite obviously frightened. Once the last man had finished his wine, the old Loremaster stood up, quite deliberately. “Well, we should be along to let you get back to work,” he announced. “It was nice to meet you, Master Steelhammer.”

“You too, Master Yoris,” Kyven said, escorting them out into the lobby.

When they were gone, Kyven breathed a sigh of relief. He had no doubt that he got off *easy*, and only because they needed something from him. He was surprised that they would bring him such a large black crystal to cut, though. Surely they had a stable of master cutters from which to draw to cut a crystal like that... why bring it to him? Was it a test? Was it a test of his skill, of his loyalty, or both? He remembered what Yoris had said, *the department wanted to march a contingent of Loreguard down here and arrest you*. Yes, the Loremasters were scoping him out, this young, unknown cutter who came from a very prestigious shop in Atan, who actually owned it, but had opened a new shop in Avannar and brought on a partner to run the Atan shop with him. He had no doubt that they knew all about him before they sent that girl, but he also wondered why they had blundered by sending someone that would offend him the way she did.

Then again, it was probably something they just overlooked. The woman was probably violently prejudiced against Arcans, and Kyven was from a village that took private property, good manners, and proper behavior seriously.

Still, Clover was right. Working for the Loremasters would help him break into their organization, at least now that he was in their better graces. The misunderstanding had been smoothed over, and now Kyven was working for the Loremasters. If he could make a few more friendly contacts like Yoris, he could get a lot more information.

He looked to Patches, who was still trembling near the kitchen door. “Well done, little one,” he said with a smile.

“Th-Thank you, Kyven,” she said with a nervous smile. “I thought I was going to faint there

for a minute.”

“You were very brave,” he said assuringly.

Kyven called Lightfoot down from the roof and into the fake bedroom where Clover and Tweak waited, and he relayed the entire confrontation to them. “I think it was smoothed over,” he mused. “Yoris didn’t seem combative at all, and he *did* leave the crystal for me to cut. They clearly value my skill over my insult.”

“This may well work in our favor,” Clover agreed. “If you can befriend those in this Yoris’ department while avoiding that humiliated woman, we might gain valuable information. After all, if the Loreguard mobilizes for war, they will want a stockpile of cut crystals, and you will be one to cut some of them.”

“That’s a cheerful thought, cutting crystals they’ll use against my own side,” Kyven muttered darkly.

“No one will blame us,” Tweak said impulsively. “If what we can pass back to home helps more than cutting crystals hurts, won’t it be better in the long run?”

“Well reasoned, young one,” Clover said with an approving nod. It was a rare display of logic from the usually hyper and ferret... but the brutal practicality of it was not lost on Kyven. After all, it was what the fox had trained him to do. There are no happy endings for everyone. That mantra applied to Tweak’s reasoning.

He didn’t have to like it, though.

“I would just be careful of that woman, friend,” Clover warned. “She was forced to humiliate herself in public of an *Arcan*. Arrogance like hers will poison her against you. I would keep an eye on her from here out.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised,” Kyven agreed with a nod. “This isn’t changing the plan, though. Tomorrow night, I’m still going to their building and snooping.”

“Company?” Lightfoot asked in her direct manner, her tail almost wagging behind her in expectation.

“Not tomorrow, but you’ll be coming with me once I know my way around,” he told her. “After I find all the traps and know which offices hold what we want, a second pair of eyes and hands will be useful.”

She gave him a nod of understanding.

“He’ll be safer going through this feeling out process alone,” Clover agreed.

“After I’m comfortable bringing help, I’ll just put the illusion over *you* and stay in the shadows,” he added.

They discussed the events for a few more minutes only, for the bell rang noting the entrance of a visitor, and a booming voice echoed through the shop. “Hello! Where is everyone?” Shario’s voice boomed.

Kyven turned his head towards the open doorway. “In here!” he called. Seconds later, the swarthy Flauren appeared in the doorway, holding a pair of large bowls that smelled of fish, wine, and spices.

“Whatever is the matter?” he asked, seeing Clover in bed and the others gathered in with her. “Are you well, Clover?”

“I had a bit of an accident,” she said mildly, “and must now bear the mothering such a thing creates.”

Shario laughed lightly. “My little chef, I’ve brought you the marinated bluescale flanks,” he announced, holding out the bowls. “Did Master Kyven read the recipe to you?”

“Umm, he did, Master Shario,” she lied artfully, since she could read the recipe herself; a skill that they kept secret from the Flauren thief.

“Then might I come for dinner this evening?” he asked, looking to Kyven. “I hope to see

how the little chef interprets a classic Flauren dish such as baked bluescale.”

Kyven looked to Clover, who gave a nearly imperceptible nod assuring him she was up for it. “You’re welcome at our table tonight, Shario.”

“Very good, very good,” he smiled. “I also came to congratulate you on your good fortune. Word is the Loremasters have contracted you.”

“Thus my little accident, Shario,” Clover said with a rueful chuckle. “I foolishly made humble greetings to the Loremaster without realizing to whom I spoke. She did not take... kindly, to me speaking to her.”

Shario nodded gravely. “I do hope you are well, then.”

“I’m quite fine, just resting away the last of the dizziness. Thank you for your concern, I am grateful for it.”

“You are a very clever Arcan who delights me with your wise banter,” he grinned.

Under his illusion, Kyven’s ears picked up. The way that Shario said the word *wise* seemed to Kyven that he was hinting that he knew or suspected that Clover was much more than she seemed.

“No one has ever accused me of wisdom before,” Clover laughed. “It is a dangerous thing to say about an Arcan anyway.”

“True, true, I suppose,” the Flauren agreed. But fear nothing from me, my dear. I’m too wrapped up with your master to ever make mention of such things. Speaking of that, my friend, I have another business arrangement with you.” He put the owls into Patches’ waiting hands, and produced a small leather pouch from under his doublet. He poured a small symmetrical black crystal into Kyven’s waiting hand. “How long?”

Kyven took it and inspected it, even as his fingers assensed the magic lurking within the crystal. It was two points in weight, had no flaws, and was remarkably well structured. “By dinner, easily,” he answered.

“Excellent, excellent!” Shario said brightly. “Then I have two reasons to look forward to this evening. I will bring the wine, and dear little chef, you will *not* set the table in advance this time. You rob me of a Flauren tradition!” he said with a playful smile.

“I’ll remember,” she said demurely.

Patches took the bowls to the kitchen, and Shario gave Kyven a smile. “This evening, then,” he said. “Tonight, my Lightfoot?”

She nodded. Lightfoot had been going out at night to run the streets, no doubt learning the arts of thievery from Shario’s band of rogues, whores, burglars, cutpurses, and assassins. Lightfoot was well named, and took to the thief’s arts naturally. He was amazingly agile, much stronger than a human, and could climb almost anything. Kyven had no doubt that Lightfoot was out there robbing Avannar blind, and Shario was profiting outrageously from her *education*. Lightfoot’s athleticism, agility, and climbing ability made her a natural burglar, and he had no doubt that she had already mastered skulking silently through someone’s house as they slept, and stole anything of value.

After Shario gave friendly farewells and left, Tweak grinned at Lightfoot. “Going out on dates with him now?” he asked. “Is he putting you with the thieves, or the prostitutes?”

Lightfoot fixed Tweak with a challenging stare that made him flinch, and Clover and Kyven laugh. “I thought you were smarter than that, Tweak,” Kyven noted with a sly smile.

“You’re the one needing training,” she said, using more words at once than Kyven had heard out of her in days. “You hump like a hyper rabbit.”

Clover giggled uncontrollably as Tweak took on an insulted and outraged expression, his banded fur ruffling. “Well, Patches doesn’t complain!” he said indignantly.

“Patches ruined you for females with experience,” Clover said with a light smile, her eyes

twinkling with mirth. “Giving comfort is not a race, young one. It’s a journey, not a destination. Trying to get there first ensures you won’t get many offers to repeat. Be the tortoise, not the hare,” she jibed.

“Watch Kyven, he knows how,” Lightfoot told him.

“I’ve watched. He’s no different than me!”

“Come in when we *start*,” she told him. “Not when we’re almost done.”

Tweak turned and marched huffily out of the room, which made Clover giggle again. “He’s still bad?” Kyven asked curiously.

Clover rolled her eyes, and Lightfoot actually laughed. “He still tries to give me friction burn,” Clover complained, which made Kyven burst into laughter.

Tweak seemed to take the remonstrations of the older Arcans as some kind of personal challenge to his manhood, but he didn’t dare seem to want to prove himself to *them*. After Kyven cut the crystal Shario brought, and the Flauren returned to pick it up and have dinner, he and Kyven walked into the kitchen to find Tweak proving his virility and ability to please women on the only woman in the house that didn’t complain about him. Shario didn’t seem all that startled or shocked when they came into the kitchen and were greeted by the sight of Patches bent over her work table, giving little squeaks and cries of pleasure as Tweak thrust into her, her tail shivering each time he drove up against her furry backside. Instead of trying to give Patches friction burn, he instead was driving himself into her with hard, measured strokes, hard enough to shake the table with each one.

“I do hope you finished everything,” Shario chuckled.

“Tweak, what have I told you about this?” Kyven demanded. “Not in the kitchen!”

“Leave them be, my friend,” Shario said as he put the bottle of wine down on the counter, then moved to the cupboard holding the dishes. “Arcans are very generous with themselves, and have different customs concerning such things in public. I’m not offended in the slightest.”

“Yes, I know, Shario,” Kyven responded. “I’m not complaining about what they’re doing, I’m complaining that Tweak knows not to tie up Patches when she’s cooking. There are two other women in this house he can go to. If he holds her up and our dinner gets burned, I’ll be pissed.”

Shario laughed delightedly. “Ash, I see,” he grinned, as Patches began to moan uncontrollably. Shario ignored the two of them as he took a stack of plates out of the cupboard, and Kyven fetched the silverware.

“You’re more worldly about Arcan customs than I would have guessed, Shario,” Kyven told him as they carried the dishes into the dining area.

“I told you before, my friend, I both own and employ Arcans in my businesses,” he answered. I’m used to them in ways many humans are not, given I work with them quite closely. They have no sense of modest about the act of love, my friend.”

“Worldly, eh?” Kyven asked with a sly smile.

Shario actually blushed. “I’ve been, ah, *curious* in the past,” he admitted delicately. “And continue to be *curious*. My Arcan whores are quite willing to satisfy a man’s curiosity. They quite enjoy their work.”

“You have Arcan prostitutes?” Kyven asked in surprise.

“Naturally,” he said simply as they began to set the table. “I’m certainly not the first man to be curious about Arcan women. My girls have never gone a night without entertaining a curious man.” He moved down the table, deftly setting each plate in exactly the front and center of the seat. “I certainly don’t keep them in my licensed brothels, though. Not in this city,” he chuckled. “But I keep a few unlicensed brothels where they do a very brisk business.” He

looked at Kyven. "Have you never been curious?"

Kyven gave a rueful chuckle. "My friend, there are three Arcan women here, and only *one* man... and he's little more than a boy."

Shario grinned. "Say no more, say no more," he said with a sly little wink. "But you certainly are not the first, nor will be the last. Arcan women are like masturbation, my friend. All men have done it, but few admit to it."

Kyven laughed.

"But let's change the subject. Between our little friends' display of affection and this conversation, I believe I'll be going home *curious*. It will be worse given I'll be staring at Lightfoot's naked little body all night, and she's not timid at all about it."

"She catches your eye?"

"Climb up a rope under a naked woman and tell me your eyes wouldn't be drawn to her glory," Shario said, which made Kyven nearly drop the silverware as he laughed.

Despite Tweak's waylaying of Patches, dinner was served on time and without damage. The baked fish was amazingly tasty, marinated before baking and baked with vegetables and spices that infused with the flavored fish to produce an exquisite dining experience. Shario couldn't stop heaping praise on Patches. "Though I doubt my thanks can quite match the rather *special* way that little Tweak thanks you," he added with a clever little smile, that made Patches' fur on her face stand on end.

"At least *she* appreciates me," Tweak said with a grin.

"I'll fix it," Lightfoot announced, which made Tweak flinch and Clover and Kyven laugh.

"No claws!" Tweak demanded.

"Pain teaches," she shrugged.

"What kind of work did the Loremasters bring you, my friend?" Shario asked curiously.

Kyven saw no harm in telling him that much. "Cutting a very unusually shaped crystal. It's what you might call my specialty."

"Ah. I see, I see. Will it take you long?"

"I finished all my other orders so I can work on it undisturbed on Monday," he answered. "I don't want any distractions at all."

"That difficult?"

"It's not a crystal just any cutter would or should attempt," he answered honestly. "I'll have to be *very* careful with it. Usually one small mistake can be fixed without damaging the crystal, but this one will be completely ruined if I make even one tiny error. But at least they're paying me double guild standard fees for the job."

"As is only fair, given you are one of the few cutters capable of the work," Shario nodded. "You're a very talented cutter, my friend. You deserve the special pay that come with special skill."

Shario said no more about it, and Kyven wondered what the information might mean or matter to the cunning Flauren. He never asked about anything that didn't have an ulterior motive, and Kyven wondered what he might read into the information. He helped clear the table and wash the dishes, showering Patches with the usual praise he afforded her after a meal, then bade them all a good night. Kyven locked the doors after he left, then gave Lightfoot a hearty smile and laugh when she grabbed Tweak by the wrist.

"Training before I go," she announced, and Clover waved at the complaining young ferret as the cat literally dragged him up the stairs.

It would be a very busy day.

Kyven woke early because he was he was too anxious and excited to sleep any more. Tonight, Sunday night when the Loremasters' building would be least populated, Kyven was

going to infiltrate it for the first time. He had a lot to do before then, though, and those tasks were what pulled him out of bed well before sunrise, pulled him out of the arms of a sleepy coyote who didn't want to surrender him to duty. Clover had become a near fixture in his bed every night, though they didn't make love quite that often. Clover was Arcan to the roots of her fur, and didn't like to sleep alone. If she didn't share Kyven's bed, she could be found sleeping with one of the others. In some kind of unusual display of hierarchy, Clover came to his bed when she wanted his company, but the others came to *her* bed when she wanted it. She didn't confine herself to just Tweak when it came to a sleepmate, as she called it. She had Patches and Lightfoot in her bed as often as Tweak, though she did things with Tweak she wouldn't do with the girls. That wasn't to say Clover was overwhelmingly prim or recalcitrant around other women; clover was depraved enough to know a Shaman spell that induced sexual pleasure in women, which she had used on Patches to help break her of her fear of intimacy. She was comfortable enough with herself and other women to be intimately friendly, but only up to a point. She would go no further than that. Her spell was the extent of her willingness to push that particular boundary.

"Mmph, where are you going so early?" she asked, opening her eyes to the spirits in the dark room so she could see him, and also look around the house. It was a habit of hers.

Kyven went to the dresser and pulled out a clean pair of leather trousers, then returned to the bed and sat down, his tail draping over Clover's legs under the quilt. "I want to get that Loremaster crystal finished today so I don't have it hanging over my head tonight," he answered. "Then I want to spend some time refreshing myself with the wall."

"You're up much too early, and you're much too restless," she complained. "You need to rest, or at the very least, relax."

"I'll take a nap this afternoon, and I'm going to relax a bit downstairs before I start," he promised as he unbuttoned the flap on the back of the trousers that fastened over his tail, which kept his pants up. "How's your head?"

"Never better," she smiled in reply. "I see Lightfoot is still out," she noted after looking through the wall.

"Having fun, no doubt," Kyven said with a light chuckle.

Clover disrupted his task by putting her hand on his upper thigh meaningfully, the tips of her short little claws just barely making contact with his member. "We should follow her example," she said throatily, sliding her hand down and fondling him, then cupping his testicles.

"*We are* feeling better," he chortled, leaning back over her legs and letting her have her feel. "Oh yes much," she said thickly, grasping him gently, then teasingly pinching the tip of his penis. "You should not be getting out of bed so early, so it's my duty to keep you here by any means necessary," she told him.

"Oh, *any* means necessary?" he challenged. "As in you'll lick me?"

"I'll bite you," she teased as his member began to stir. "Arcan girls don't do that. No prehensile lips," she teased. "Besides, why should we, when we can do so much *more* than human women when you do it the way nature intended? What you'll feel putting this where it belongs far outstrips what you'd feel if I put it in my mouth."

"Well, I can't refute that logic," he said, leaning back more on his hands as she fondled him into arousal. "But human men have a kind of fondness of oral sex. It's very erotic, because it's so exotic."

"And Arcans aren't exotic?"

He laughed. "No argument there. I think your plan is working," he noted dryly as he looked down at his expanding member.

"I believe it is," she said winsomely.

Kyven was grateful to Clover. All the anxiety he felt when he woke up, that kept him from falling back asleep, was channeled into a harmless and entertaining diversion. He pulled the covers off of the coyote, and as she laughed and mock protested, he returned the favor by touching and fondling her breasts and labia, until she hummed in her throat and leaned back in invitation. He wasted no time accepting it, pushing himself easily into her as she gripped his shoulders, looking up at him with sultry, sensual eyes. Those eyes never left his as he settled fully inside her, challenging, inviting, beckoning, telling him to take her in any way he wished, that she was there for him, there to comfort him and help him calm down, relax, and burn off some of his nervous energy.

He took her, almost acting like Tweak. She found herself driven down into the bed as he drove into her, and he felt her short, sharp little claws dig into the fur on his back as he made the whole bed shake with powerful thrusts. He thrust into her, hard and heavy, for far longer than any male that wasn't a Shaman could have maintained... for only a Shaman had the physical conditioning and control to last so long at such a pace without climaxing.

Clover didn't complain. She couldn't do much of anything but lay there and let him have his way with her, panting fiercely between growls and groans, even when he hiked her legs up so the pads of her feet pointed at the ceiling and the base of her tail was completely off the bed. He continued the heavy, fast strokes until she clenched around him, and the sudden powerful grip on him immobilized him and spurred him to climax. He dropped down on her and pushed himself as deeply into her as he could go, felt the lips of her vagina grip the very base of his penis, and spent himself into her. He collapsed on top of her as they panted together, her hands gripping the fur on his shoulders and back as she wrapped her legs around him.

"Ooooh, Clover, you know how to make a man happy," he sighed, feeling her breathing push her small breasts into his chest.

"You certainly return the favor," she said with a breathless laugh. "Feel better now?"

"Much," he said with a lick to her cheek. "Care to make me feel even better?"

"For as long as you want, you silly man," she laughed. "You certainly needed this."

"For more than one reason," he sighed in contentment. "*Thank you, Clover.*"

"Any time, my friend. What kind of friend would I be if I let you leave this bed nervous and out of sorts? It would make cutting that crystal very difficult."

"You make it sound like work," he teased.

"It's a labor of love," she grinned at him.

"Or a labor of lust," he noted.

She laughed. "Point. It's an open invitation, my friend. If you find yourself getting nervous or anxious today, I'm here for you. Make use of me. Better to spend your nervous energy on me than with pointless worry or pacing."

"Sex as therapy. Maybe we should introduce this to the humans," he noted clinically, which made her laugh and slap his shoulder.

A little playful slapping, biting, and wrestling turned into another heavy session of shuddering bedsprings, this time with her kneeling and him behind her, his hands roaming all over her breasts, torso, and dipping between her legs to vigorously rub her as he stroked himself forcefully into her. She just knelt there with her hands on the bed and her head arched back, accepting his weight as he leaned down over her and took full command of her lithe body with one hand around her stomach and the other roughly kneading her breasts by turns. She climaxed quickly, and he again gripped her with husky growls and penetrated as deeply into her as he could go, allowing her to drive him to his own climax, reveling in the sensation of earthbound heaven. He draped his muzzle over her shoulder and panted huskily, his arms

trembling as he held her bottom pressed hard against his hips.

"Kyv, you're about to break my tail," Clover gasped as he pulled her even harder against him. He shifted enough to let her pull it out from between them, then she sighed and reached behind her and patted his muzzle. "Mmm, I think we've about burned up all that nervous energy," she cooed, then gasped and laughed when he wiggled himself against her bottom. "Surely not again!" she protested.

"No, I think I'm done," he chuckled, licking her cheek. "You're a wonderful girl, Clover. In both ways."

She giggled girlishly. "It's so nice to be appreciated."

"Oh, I appreciate this," he said, touching her cheek. "And this," he said, touching her chest, over her heart. "And I certainly appreciate this," he said thickly, sliding his hand down to lightly touch her, which made her shiver, and then giggle again.

"Flirt."

"It's not flirting to do it *now*," he retorted, which made her laugh.

Clover was such a gift from the Trinity. Kyven was able to go downstairs, get a bit of cold meat and cheese, and sit down to start working on the Loremasters' crystal without any nervousness or anxiety. She had calmed him down a great deal, and after breakfast, he was able to seat himself at his table and get to work on a very challenging crystal. And it was *very* challenging. He spent over an hour studying the crystal with practiced eyes, and had pulled out his rarely used slateboard to make some sketches and some planned cuts, meticulously planning this job because it was the only way it was going to be done. After that extensive preparation, he took a short break for something to drink, then pulled the cover off his rack of chisels, picked up his tiny hammer, and went to work.

It was almost like taking his first year test again, that stressful examination that determined the fate of his entire life. He had passed that test, years ago, and he passed this one. For long hours he worked with absolute concentration, barely aware when Lightfoot returned at sunrise, not hearing Patches as she snuck past him and into the kitchen, and then took enough food for the others back upstairs. Everyone was staying out of his way, not distracting him, but that was a needless precaution. He was lost completely in his work, and his entire universe had focused down to the jagged black crystal before him. Slowly, with painstaking care, the difficult crystal's exterior was chipped away, as Kyven reduced it by one point in weight to unlock the power inside of it, a necessary sacrifice given the almost crippling central flaw that would have allowed him to cut the crystal into almost perfect halves. He did take the majority of that point off in one chunk, leaving a half point crystal chip that might be useful to the Loremasters in some other way.

It took him nearly seven hours of constant work, and he did not stop until he was done. It was past noon when he made the final tiny cut, chipping off a nearly imperceptible little burr on the underside of the crystal, and then he carefully cleaned the result with a crystal blanket, leaving it glossy and smooth. He swept up the chips and dust on the shallow pan that cutters kept under their stands and carefully got every single little mote of black crystal dust into a silk pouch; that was the property of the client, not his, and he had to return it to them. He then blew out his breath, leaned back, and scratched his muzzle to admire his work. The crystal was still jagged, two jutting spires sticking out at angles from a knobby center, but it was now focused, and would serve as a stable and strong source of power for whatever dark device in which it was placed.

Kyven was again a little unsettled at the idea of cutting a crystal that might power a device that killed Arcans in the coming war. He was working for the enemy... but to do what he was sent here to do, to win back his humanity, he would have to do that unpleasant thing. In

the long run, it might save more lives than this crystal took if he took back information to Haven that helped the Arcans either avert, win, or escape from the war to come. This crystal might kill a hundred Arcans, and that would be blood on his hands. But if those hundred died to save the tens of thousands that remained, he could only hope they would consider that a good trade for their lives.

Sometimes, there were no happy endings.

He scrubbed his muzzle with his clawed hands, and realized he was not shrouded in illusion. He was just glad that the shop was locked up; if Shario had barged in on him while he was cutting and saw him as he really was, things would have gotten very, very ugly. Kyven would have had to kill the Flauren thief, and he'd rather not do that. He was a valuable source of information, and he was also something of a friend, the only real friend he had in Avannar outside of the Arcans in the shop. He'd certainly allow no one else to come eat dinner with him.

He took the crystal and the shavings down to the vault, and set them on a little stand by the door as he sat down at his desk and attended to the other business. There were several pieces of parchment in the bin under the device that let them communicate with the cell of the Masked here in Avannar, and they had sent Kyven some communications. He sat at his desk and leafed through them, seeing that they were status reports that were sent from Haven; though the Masked here had no idea what Haven was. They thought they dealt with the Shaman. Operation Auction was in full force, he saw from the communiqués, and thus far no major problems or complications had come to light. The Masked cells in the major cities were reporting that Arcans were being shipped to the border villages in endless caravans, which were then bought up by the Masked agents and moved into the frontier lands. There were *some* grumblings in a couple of them that kennel masters in the major cities were getting suspicious that something was going on, mainly because they were finding their attempts to buy Arcans from other cities hard to do. Those cities were *also* shipping Arcans out to border villages, and they didn't have any Arcans to spare to sell to another Arcan trader. They were trying to buy as well.

As expected, this sudden run on Arcans was driving up the prices. The market for Arcans here in Avannar had almost doubled in just a week since the operation began, and it was trickling down into some segments of the Arcan commodity economy. Furriers and tanners were finding Arcans to buy to slaughter for their fur and hides to be hard to find, since the kennel masters were sending every Arcan they could get their hands on to Atan, Two Rivers, and Brandollan, a large mining village on the southern edge of the Free Territories. Arcans were suddenly more valuable alive than dead. Arcan meat too was becoming scarce, and it was suddenly more expensive than beef or mutton, a fact that shocked quite a few humans who fed Arcan meat to their own Arcans. Furriers, tanners, and butchers were raising prices, and that effect had no doubt caught the attention of the Loremasters. That made tonight's infiltration even more critical, because it was absolutely *vital* that Haven and the Shaman know what the Loremasters were planning to do.

That was why he was here.

It was having a broader effect as well. Slave ships from Cheston and Alamar were suddenly overwhelmed with contracts to move Arcans, and kennel masters were fighting over any available contracts.

It was happening almost exactly as Danna and the council had expected. They had foreseen all of this, and according to the messages passing through the Masked networks, everything was transpiring as expected. Where Kyven would come into play was to be there to warn them of the Loremasters' response to the plan, so they could adapt without having to pull

back. That made tonight's infiltration critically important, because that infiltration would tell him where to go and where to look the next time he went in to find information. It also told him that this week, he needed to troll the bars and make contact with several of the Loremaster workers he'd already met to dig for information.

Shario. It was time to start hiring Shario. Putting Shario and his extensive organization to work on this would be useful.

He leaned back in the chair, his tail slashing behind him, pondering both the events sent to him by the Masked and what he knew, and what he was preparing.

Things were starting to move.

The door opened, and Clover stood in the opening, lithe and attractive since she'd not yet put on any clothes. "Looking for another session?" Kyven asked with a slight smile.

She laughed. "Only if you want one," she answered. "Shario just left. He brought ingredients for Patches and has asked to have dinner tonight. I told him that you would be very busy with the crystal, and it might have to wait until another day. He asked you to send a message telling him when was good for you."

"Why don't you go fetch him *now*, Clover?" he asked. "I think I'd like to talk to him."

She raised her furry brow. "Something happen?"

"Just what we expected," he answered, holding up the pieces of paper. "Read through them when you get back. Things are happening exactly as Danna and the council predicted, at least so far. I think it's time to make use of our friendship with Shario."

Clover took the papers and glanced over the top one, taking in the meaning of it quickly. "You'll set him to this?" she asked, holding up the paper.

Kyven nodded. "I think we can assume that Shario can find out anything the Loremasters can find out. How much he learns will be a good measuring stick against what the Loremasters can uncover."

"Not precisely, but a good idea nonetheless," Clover countered. "The Loremasters have access to more resources and alchemical devices for ferreting out information, which Shario lacks. But it is a good idea to see what Shario can find out, to see how well our plan is working."

Again under his familiar human illusion, now so easy for him that he barely had to think to create and maintain it, he went back up and waited for Shario by practicing posts, as Patches and Tweak stayed upstairs, no doubt Tweak trying to either practice to where the older women wouldn't tease him or take his frustrations out on the only girl in the shop that didn't mind his lovemaking style, and Lightfoot was skulking around somewhere. This was allowed by Kyven, since it was Sunday, and the shop didn't work on Sunday. Very few shops were open today; closing on Sunday was a tradition so old that almost no one knew where it came from or why they did it. It was a custom that had become a custom for custom's sake. Practicing with the Arcans had put him back into form, more or less able to hit anything on the board he pleased from the standard distance, but Kyven had taken the little game with Timble to heart, and he now practiced from all the way across the room. The increased distance made playing from tournament distance almost easy. Clover brought back Shario while he was practicing, and the swarthy Flauren laughed when he saw what Kyven was doing.

"I think you're a bit too far back off the line, my friend," he grinned.

"It makes it more challenging," Kyven said. "You said to me once that anything was for sale, Shario. Did you mean it?"

"Of course I meant it," he said, his voice turning serious almost immediately.

"Good. Yesterday, someone offered me a sum of money that's entirely out of line for my Arcans," he said. "So I asked around, and it seems that there's not an Arcan in any kennel in

Avannar that's available. I've never heard of a kennel running out of Arcans before. I made note of it to my partner Timble in our daily message, and he said the same thing is happening in Atan. Something weird is going on, and I think I'd like to know what it is."

"And you wish me to find out for you?"

Kyven nodded, then went back to the board and pulled his knives from it. "See what's going on, Shario. Something certainly is."

"And how much would this information be worth to you?"

"Five hundred chits," he answered.

"A steep sum for a crystalcutter," Shario noted.

Kyven gave him a steady look. "If someone's going to try to kidnap Clover when she's out running errands, I want to know about it," he said grimly. "It's worth the money to know if my precious Arcans are in danger."

"Of course," he said mildly, though his smile betrayed his thoughts. Shario knew that Kyven wasn't entirely what he appeared to be, since he spent so much of his time trying to learn Kyven's secrets. But it was time to use Shario's abilities for something constructive.

"Find out for me, Shario. Something's going on, and I want to know what it is."

"I *have* noticed some unusual movements in the Arcan markets lately," Shario said, scratching his goatee thoughtfully. "A lot of Arcans have been shipped out into the hinterlands. Someone out there is buying Arcans like mad, drying up the markets in Avannar. At first, I thought it was just some construction project someone was working on out there, but if the same thing is happening in Atan, well, that's another matter. Someone's trying to corner the Arcan market."

"Something is certainly going on, and I want to know what it is," Kyven said.

"I'll find your answers for you, my friend. There's nothing that goes on in this city I don't know about," he said with a boastful smile. "Or I won't find out if I have a mind to do so. May I stay for dinner?"

"I'm afraid not tonight, Shario. I'm still working on that crystal, I'm just taking a short break to settle myself. It's a very nervous business. Tomorrow is just fine though."

"Tomorrow it is. I may have something for you, and you will have my five hundred for me," he said with a smile.

"It'll be here."

Shario let himself out, and Clover locked the door before coming back into the shop. "Not much of a cover story," she noted seriously.

"He knows I'm not who I appear to be, why waste energy with a convoluted lie?" he asked simply, sending a knife whizzing across the room, sinking into the board.

"To at least keep up appearances?" she answered.

"Well, Clover, how would you go about asking for that kind of information when you have absolutely no business needing it?" he asked pointedly.

She was quite a moment, then chuckled. "True," she nodded. "But why plant the seed that something's going on?"

"Simple," he answered, throwing another knife. "*They* will know that something's going on, and they have access to much more information and more resources than Shario. Whatever Shario can find out, they'll find out. By putting Shario on the trail of a mystery and seeing what he uncovers, it'll give us an idea of what the Loremasters discover."

"Yes, that's true. You've matured so quickly," she smiled at him. "From a simple craftsman to a spy in a little under a year."

"I seriously think it's in my blood," he grunted, throwing the last knife. "I never thought like this until *after* she did this to me," he said, holding out his furry hand. "And Umbra is every

bit as conniving as me. It has to be some kind of shared trait between us and *her*."

"Well, you're not a *normal* Arcan," she acceded. "So there's no doubt that there might be a little tampering. She *did* create you. I have no doubt she added a few little, *modifications* to make you better at this. That or humans are just naturally cunning," she grinned.

"Given our history, I won't debate that one with you," he chuckled. "I'm going to go take a nap. Make sure I'm awake before sunset."

"I will. I'll have Patches make something for you. You don't want to go in there hungry."

At sunset, he felt he was prepared.

After the nap, he went back down to the vault and studied the wall until every name and general location known to be connected to that name was committed to memory, and he could recall a name almost instantly. He could answer any question without any hesitation, and that was the level of memorization he felt was required. After refreshing his memory with the wall, he went upstairs and deliberately, slowly, removed his clothing. It made him feel... vulnerable, somehow. He was going into the lair of the enemy, and he was doing it without weapons, without armor, without even clothes. It would just be him, his knowledge, his quick memory, his Shaman powers, and his control over shadow. Small weapons in the face of the opposition, who controlled the entire populated tracts of the continent of Noraam, and no doubt had defenses and traps waiting for him inside. The Loremasters considered Shaman to be their mortal enemy, and he had absolutely no doubt that they had protected their headquarters against them.

And Kyven would be invading that home base.

He came downstairs and had to laugh when Clover gave him a catcalling whistle, then he sat down to a light yet filling meal of baked vegetable casserole and strips of lean raw mutton. Patches was very nervous, and Tweak kept looking at Kyven. But Lightfoot and Clover were unperturbed, joining him at the table. Kyven himself was a little nervous, but there was also an almost irresistible excitement about the idea of what he was about to do. He would be putting all his training to the test, the ultimate test, and it would be a challenge of not just his powers, but of his mind. He'd have to think fast, adapt, just work with what he had and do his best. There was no way to plan for this, since he had absolutely no idea what was in there waiting for him. It would be a true test of his powers and his ability to deal with the unknown.

The only semblance of a plan he had was that he would go in under the illusion of a page. The Loremasters didn't take time off; there were workers in that building every day, at every hour. The people who worked over the night weren't important people, they were cleaners, low-level bureaucrats whose job was to organize things for the people who worked during the day and do much of the tedious paperwork amassed by those who worked in the evenings, and the guards that patrolled the place. Even in the dead of night, there were pages. Pages were children, young boys and girls whose job was to carry messages from department to department. Pages were the first step on the road to being a Loremaster for many, for pages often entered service after they came of age. Even in the middle of the night, there would be pages in that building, running whatever messages needed to be carried. Kyven could have imitated a Loreguard or a bureaucrat, but he felt that mimicking a page would be the best course of action. Hiding behind the innocence of a child might make those who came across him less threatening, and he could always proclaim to be lost; the newest pages were the ones that worked the unpleasant nightshift, so he could claim that he was lost and have a measure of believability.

The only thing he would take with him was a piece of paper. Kyven had seen the Loremaster seal, so that piece of paper would be the prop upon which he would place an illusion mak-

ing it appear to be a sealed message. The illusory writing could be changed at Kyven's whim to match whichever department he claimed to which he was going, and that would allow him to be able to talk his way past anyone who challenged him. Since he knew where departments were as far as which floor they were on but not exactly where on that floor they were, it would let him get to the right floor and then ask someone for directions.

The others were quiet. They knew how dangerous this was going to be, so they didn't chatter or banter, they just gave Kyven his space and time to quietly compose himself. Patches and Tweak were obviously worried about what he was going to do, but Lightfoot and Clover were quite at ease. Clover knew he was good, and trusted his abilities, and very little really flustered Lightfoot in any way. Kyven decided to break the somber mood. "So, anyone want anything while I'm out?" he asked casually.

Clover laughed, but Patches looked mortally offended. "You shouldn't joke about this, Kyven!" she said nervously. "It's going to be dangerous! I'm going to be up all night worried sick about you!"

"Don't worry about me, little one, I'll be just fine," he smiled. "I'm not doing anything overtly dangerous or tricky tonight, just learning my way around. I'll be back before you know it," he said soothingly. "The worst thing I'll do tonight is ask some sleepy bureaucrat if I'm on the right floor."

"I, I hope so," she said, looking at her plate. "I'm just scared, that's all."

"No reason not to be scared. I'm a little nervous myself," he admitted. "But what we're doing is all about facing up to that fear and doing what has to be done. That's what we're here to do, little one. I told you before we started that this would be dangerous. We have to face that danger, because we're the only ones who can do this."

"No, *you're* the only one who can do this," Tweak said. "We're not doing that dangerous stuff."

"You help provide the cover that lets me do my job, Tweak. You and the others are just as important as I am. We're a *team*. It takes all of us to do this job. If I didn't have the shop, if I didn't have you, I'd never be able to do what I was sent here to do."

That made Tweak smile a little.

Lightfoot stood up. "I'm coming," she announced.

"I told you, not today."

"I'll wait outside," she said. "But I'm coming."

"As long as you're careful."

She gave him a flat look, her black and white stripes almost seeming to bristle.

"Well, if you're coming, then get ready. No weapons," he warned. "Just you."

She deliberately reached for the buckle of her belt, and removed it. Kyven had to resist certain impulses that had become a conditioned reflex at the sight of her taking off her belt... and was glad that he was still sitting down so he could avoid a few comments from Clover over it. He finished his light meal, only eating enough to feel that it would tide him over, then stood up and looked to Lightfoot. "Let's go."

Like a pair of ghosts, Kyven and Lightfoot left through the back door of the shop, and then slipped off into the night. At first he thought Lightfoot's bizarre, almost unique fur pattern would make it hard for her to move stealthily, but that was a dumb assumption. The lithe cat moved with utter silence, and she slinked through the shadows like a prime hunter, invisible and silent. Kyven stalked with her, keeping to the shadows in the early night, his fur and shadow powers rendering him utterly invisible so long as he was within the shadow. The pair of them ghosted through Avannar on their dangerous mission, and Kyven felt a strange... *joy* at running on all fours in the warm early summer night, sliding from shadow to shadow, with

the smells of the city in his nose and the faint, almost nonexistent sounds of his partner touching his ears as she loped quietly behind him. They picked their way through the city, taking alleys and little-used back streets, until they reached the river and the lit island of the Loremasters came into view, light shining off their four-towered building of stone, steel, and glass that shone like a beacon to all who beheld it, a bastion of the power of the Loremasters and all the majesty that power entailed.

"Wait here," Kyven whispered as they looked at the building from the mouth of a narrow, crooked alley just one block from the inn where he had stayed when he first visited Avannar as a human.

"Be careful," Lightfoot warned, leaning over and licking his cheek.

"I intend to be," he answered seriously, then he stood up on his legs and cloaked himself in the illusion of a sleepy-looking young blond-haired boy with a handsome face, wearing Loremaster livery. The face was a real face, and it belonged to a young man named Aldin Vonner. Aldin Vonner *was* a page, the youngest son of an alchemist, and only having just started working as a page a week ago, but he was not slated to work this night. Kyven had discovered this in his dealings with Veraad, and had sought out the young Aldin to learn his face to use as a cover for his infiltration into the building this night under the guise of looking into an alchemical room cooling device which Aldin's father sold in his shop. The identity of Aldin Vonner would get him into the building, but the lack of experience that people within had with young Aldin, only being there a week, would let him avoid any kind of intimate conversation that might make anyone suspicious. Aldin was the perfect foil to use to get into the building and pretend that he belonged, but also not make his unfamiliarity with the building suspicious.

As usual, there was a kind of disconnection when using an illusion that was of a different height than his own. It was always *much* easier to attach the illusion to himself, making it move as he moved, but that height difference meant that his head and the illusion's head wouldn't match if he was looking at someone from close distance. When that moment came, he'd have to detach the illusion from himself and make it move independently, having it look up while he looked straight ahead, and that would increase the demand the illusion had on him. But, the illusion was good for one thing; underneath it, he could open his eyes to the spirits and not have the glow of his eyes give him away. When he did so, the guards at the bridge lost their uniforms, but their alchemical weapons and devices were quite apparent to his eyes. All of them carried shockrods, and the floating black balls at their waists told him that the shot in their pistols carried black crystal slivers, probably making them fatal, ensuring that even the most glancing hit with the pistol ball would kill... just as Danna's pistol had killed Claw with what was effectively a graze. The guards advanced on him as he approached, then took a look at his livery and the folded paper in his hand, and waved him through without challenge, without even a word.

Just as they had done for every other page he had seen gain entrance to the island.

Once past the bridge guards, he knew he was home free. He filed into the building, still carrying the note, and then drew on the information he'd gathered to walk through the atrium and into a passage on the far side that led to the staircases that went up and down. Kyven's eyes searched all around him, searching for any sign of any alchemical device built into the walls, floor, or ceiling, searching for any traps or warnings or anything that might give him away. But the walls were quite mundane, and he was able to look through them without effort. He could see three floors up, but that far up, he did start seeing glowing auras that denoted that magic of some kind was in action higher up.

As he expected. The higher one went, the more important, and thus the greater level of pro-

tection. There would be more guards up there, and possible alchemical traps, and who knew what else. But down here on the first floor, which was all but deserted because it dealt with low-level city issues, there were no protections, just a single patrol of guards roaming the hallways on the other side of the building.

There were guards stationed at the stairwell to the second floor, and given there was no one up there, he'd never talk his way past them by claiming to have a message, so he bypassed that floor for now and went to the staircase that led to the higher floors. He went up about halfway and saw that there were people on the third floor, both guards and a few bureaucrats and servants... which were serving in more ways than one, given what he could see about halfway across the building. Kyven could see through stone and wood, so it was rather apparent to him what was going on to see the Loremaster sitting on seemingly nothing with the head of a young woman in his lap. He could tell the Loremaster from the servant because the Loremaster was carrying an alchemical device on his belt that was apparent to his eyes. But watching some Loremaster get oral sex from a cleaning girl wasn't what he was there to do. He changed his note to show that it was meant to go to the Department of Continental Roads, which was on the third floor, and filed up the guards stationed at the landing of the stairs.

"Where are you off to, lad?" one of the guards asked, a grizzled older veteran with steel gray hair.

Kyven held up the paper and let him read it. "I'm supposed to slip it under the door if nobody's there, sir," he said.

"Aye, aye. Go ahead," he said, waving Kyven through.

"Umm, which way do I go? I'm still learning my way around," Kyven said in a helpless tone.

"I thought they gave you pages a tour," the other guard said.

"Well, they go so fast," Kyven said in a humble tone, which made the grizzled man laugh.

"Cut the lad some slack, Arbi. I've seen Loremasters wandering around lost in here," he said. "Take the left passage, and then turn at the first right. You'll see their office door on the right."

"Thank you, sir!" Kyven said in a suitably grateful voice, then scurried off in the indicated direction. However, once he was out of sight of the guards, he cast his eyes about in all directions, making sure there were no alchemical devices anywhere that might give him away. He quickly moved through the hallways, making note of where every single office was, moving through the third floor with efficient speed; he was under a time limit here, for those guards knew he was here and would come looking for him if he was gone too long. Luckily, though, the third floor was not deserted, and he moved to an occupied office, the Department of Guild Relations, and knocked politely on the door before opening it. The middle-aged, crow-footed woman inside was sitting at her desk, and looked up at him from her work. "What is it?" she asked, a bit surly. She was rail thin, he could see, and her body showed the marching of the years in an unattractive manner. Kyven couldn't see her desk or clothes, so he could see just about everything about her, and found it unattractive, from her spindly legs to her sagging breasts, tiredly constrained by material he couldn't see but clearly showing the years of being pulled by gravity on their tops.

"I was delivering to another department, ma'am, and thought I'd see if you need anything sent off or needed anything before I go back."

The woman gave him a grunt, then pulled something from a little bin behind her. "As a matter of fact, you can," she said. "This was to go to the Department of Alchemy tomorrow morning, but you can slip it under the door."

Kyven hurried into the office and took the bundle of papers, tied together with twine and the

knot sealed with wax, and bowed to her. "I'll take it straight away, ma'am," he told her.

Kyven used the package as an excuse to continue his prowling of the third floor. He memorized the location of every office on the floor, and noted which offices were empty and which ones had workers in them. The Department of Guild Relations wasn't the only occupied office this night. The Department of Public Health and the Department of Farms were also occupied, the Department of Farms being the one holding the amorous couple, and maids were cleaning several other offices. Once he had full stock of how things stood on the third floor, he looked at the sheaf of papers in his hand. The Department of Alchemy was on the fifth floor, and from what Kyven had learned from the many men and women he'd talked to in bars and taverns, it dealt with alchemical devices, not alchemists themselves. It kept a record of all known alchemical devices, their function, and often who had invented them, trying to keep abreast of all alchemical advances and know what was out there. Danna's interest in what she thought was a new alchemical device had been one of the reasons she had chased him, and that information would have been sent to the Department of Alchemy.

The package meant he had to skip the fourth floor for now, and that didn't set well with him. One of the important departments was on that floor, the Department of Arcan Control. That office was going to be of *critical* importance to Kyven over the summer, and that was one of the main reasons he was here. Getting to know that office was going to be nearly as important as learning where the council chambers and the offices of the important people were.

He went back to the same stairs, and the grizzled guard chuckled when Kyven approached holding the sheaf of papers. "They got you before you could leave, eh?" he asked.

"I don't mind, sir, it's better than sitting around trying to stay awake."

The man laughed, and his surly partner joined in. "That's the Trinity's own truth," the surly guard agreed, his face looking much less suspicious.

"Where do you have to deliver that?"

"Umm, the Department of Alchemy," he said. "That's on the fifth floor, right?"

"Right, but you're coming to the wrong stairs if you want to get there quickly," the grizzled man said helpfully, pointing down the central hall that extended out from the landing. "Go to the stairs on the far side, they come up right at the office door."

"Thank you, sir," he said gratefully, his illusion giving him a smile, and then he turned and hurried down the central passage. The stairs were on the far side, and the two flights of stairs were literally visible at opposite ends of the long passageway. It was, to Kyven, a very smart defensive layout, allowing the guards at either stairway the ability to see both stairwells. Kyven showed the package to the guards at the other stairs, a hawk-like looking young man and, surprisingly, a lithe woman with short brown hair, pretty green eyes, and the cutest little heart-shaped birthmark just over her pubic hair, and they let him pass with smiles and kind words.

Kyven felt that using a page as his cover was a very good idea about then.

As he went up the stairs, past the fourth floor, he looked up and frowned. Above him, on the sixth floor, he was starting to see magical auras that marked alchemical devices. They were set into floors and walls and ceilings, and were obviously some kind of defensive system to deter, reveal, entrap, or kill invaders. But it also made sense that they would be up there, for everything above the fifth floor was considered highly sensitive, where the Loremasters kept their important offices and departments, and were the working areas of the most important people in the organization. He had fully expected to see some kind of magical defense within the building, and realized that the Loremasters didn't consider the lower floors to be important enough to protect using very expensive alchemical devices. They saved that level of pro-

tection for the most important and sensitive areas. His disguise may not work up there.

Kyven smiled his way past the pair of guards at the landing of the fifth floor, showing them his package, and they pointed him to the very first door on the left in the center hall of the fifth floor, the words **DEPARTMENT OF ALCHEMY** etched into the wood and filled with bronze or some kind of golden metal. Beyond the door, Kyven could see four workers, a maid, and the magical auras of many alchemical devices, the crystals in them powering them. Kyven knocked politely and then opened the door and stepped inside, looking at the four workers and maid. Two of them were older men, one was a middle-aged woman with graying hair, and the fourth was a handsome, athletically built young man with black hair and, Kyven noted, a truly large penis, so large that Kyven couldn't help but notice it... and he doubted that middle-aged woman didn't miss it either. Kyven couldn't see the young man's clothes, but a bulge like that would be hard to hide, even under a surcoat.

Such were the dangers of seeing people unclad. It let one see all kinds of things, be them good or bad. "I have a package from the Department of Guild Relations," he announced, holding up the twine-bound papers.

"I'll take it, lad," the shorter of the two older men announced, holding a hand up from his desk towards Kyven.

"Do you have anything for me to deliver before I go?" he asked as he handed the package to the man.

"No, lad. Go on back to the page room."

"Thank you, sir," he said with a little bow, and then scurried from the room. He didn't go back downstairs, though. He produced his little paper and created an illusion that it was destined for the Department of Inter-Noraam Trade, which was another office he knew was on the fifth floor. He left the office and walked down the central passageway away from the guards, but they did not challenge his movement in the slightest. Pretending he knew where he was going, he took in every door along that central passage, noting which department it was, and also the personal offices of quite a few low-level functionaries; their names were emblazoned on their doors, as well as which department for which they worked. The Council of Advisors, the city council governing Avannar, had their personal offices on the fifth floor, but their council chambers were, oddly enough, on the fourth floor. That seemed quite curious to him.

At the far stairway, he turned to the left rather than try to go past the guards, giving them a smile and a wave to be social but not stopping to talk to them, so they couldn't find out where he was going. Again, pretending that he had a firm destination in mind caused them to let him go unchallenged. He memorized the doors along that passage, and then walked straight past the guards at the first stairwell and went down the right passage, memorized those doors, then turned back the way he came and changed his illusory missive to state that it was bound for the Department of Arcan Control and returned to the stairs. Again, the guards did not challenge him, just allowed him to pass, nor did the guards on the fourth floor challenge him when they saw the paper in his hand. They just gave him a curt but friendly greeting and allowed him to go about his assigned task. There was a patrol of moving guards on this floor, moving on the right side, so he went to the left. He took in the various doors on that side, noting a couple of departments he didn't even know existed, like the Department of Timber and Forest Resources and the Department of Fisheries, then went past the guards at the far stairwell with a smile and a nod and went down the right, watching the patrol of four roving guards as they now filed back towards him but in the center passage. He went down that passage and noticed that the Department of Arcan Control had to be in the center, going past a couple of departments and the private offices of several Loremasters, passing a couple

of sleepy-looking maids who were pushing a cart holding cleaning supplies in the hallway. He came around and to the center passage, passed the stair guards once again, and padded down the hallway with both pairs of stair guards watching him. He wasted no time now that they might suspect he was either goofing off or up to something, and when he found himself at the door to the Department of Arcan Control, he knocked once and let himself in. Inside were no less than eight Loremasters, poring over documents at a table in the middle of the room, talking among themselves in puzzled tones. "Do you require anything, good masters?" Kyven asked from the door, taking in both the large office and the look of the people working in it.

They knew. They knew something was going on. They didn't know what it was, but they knew something was happening. That was why there were eight of them in here on a Sunday night. They were poring over reports from other cities and trying to make sense of what was going on, he was positive. That made this trip a good move, he saw. They had to know what was going on, and now he knew that they knew that something was happening, so he knew to start keeping a very close eye on this department. This was the department that looked to be responsible for finding out the truth.

"I'm glad you're here, I was just about to ring for a page," one of them said, a balding older man with wrinkles around his mouth and strange brown splotches all over his chest. "Have them send us up some dinner, and I also want you to take this up to the office of Evira Longsail," he said, picking up a paper, folding it into thirds, and then sealing it with wax. "I don't care which order you do it, just get both done quickly."

Kyven had to keep a professional look on his face. Evira Longsail was a name he knew, she was a member of the Council of States. And to deliver this message, he'd have to brave the sixth floor and the alchemical devices above.

"Yes sir, I'll go have your dinner sent up first, then deliver this message."

The man nodded, already back with the others, and Kyven heard snatches of their conversation as he moved back towards the door.

"—word from Jeyom is the same," one of them said. "No Arcans available. Have you got those missives from Alamar?"

"The Alamar situation is pretty straightforward," another voice said. "Someone's bought literally every single available Arcan in Alamar and marched them north, along with an army's worth of building materials and supplies. Someone is building something out there, something *big*, but finding that out isn't our department."

"I have something about that here. Here it is, it was reported that the Arcans were put in a camp on the Snake River about two days from Alamar. Whatever it is they're building, that's where they're doing it."

"But that doesn't explain what's going on up here," another voice said in concern. "There's barely a single Arcan for sale all the way up to Contann. In every city, it's the same. They're being shipped either out to the border towns or to Alamar. And in the border towns, the Arcans are being bought so fast the kennels can't keep up with the demand."

"So, the question is, what's going on out there in the border towns that's creating the demand?"

Kyven closed the door, his thoughts sober. They certainly knew something was going on, and he expected no less. But the key to it would be keeping the Loremasters in the dark enough to not know until it was too late, but not make it seem so threatening that they completely banned the sale of Arcans until they got to the bottom of it.

He definitely had information to send back to Haven.

But he had another matter to deal with. He hurried back to the first floor, to where the page

room was located. It was where the pages waited to be summoned. He knew that they'd know that he wasn't supposed to be working tonight if he went there, so he bypassed the page room and the Page Master, who sent them out, and went straight to the kitchens, which were located in an outbuilding behind the Loremaster building, near the Loreguard barracks. A page would have been sent to make the order anyway, so Kyven just bypassed the order to go arrange the meal by doing it himself. He opened the door to the kitchens, and was almost immediately challenged by a large, tall, beefy woman with her hair in a stern bun and an even sterner look on her red face. "What ya' need?" she demanded.

"Ma'am, there are eight Loremasters in the Department of Arcan Control that wish dinner sent up to them," he said humbly. "But I can't stay to deliver it," he said, holding up the missive he had to deliver. "Could you please ring the page room and have them come take it up?"

"Aye, I'll take care of it, lad," she said with a nod. "Go get your delivery done."

"Thank you, ma'am," he said with a bow, then turned and hurried away.

All those talks with the workers had been a life saver, for it was what let him move confidently across the yard and back into the Loremaster building through the servant's door in the back, then back to the stairwell for the long climb up to the sixth floor. He wasn't alone on the stairs, though, for he passed another page who was on the way down, who gave him a curious look, and then a single young maid that looked a little harried, rushing downstairs for some reason. Kyven climbed past them all, and when he reached the landing of the sixth floor, he found himself facing his first major obstacle.

There was an alchemical device installed in the floor of the landing.

Kyven looked down at it and saw that it was attached to a metal plate that was nearly two feet across, stretching from wall to wall, making it impossible not to step on it without being blatantly obvious about it. He had no idea what the device did, but he also saw its weakness; it would put him into physical contact with it. Kyven could drain the device of its power with that physical contact, but that would leave a tell-tale mark that a Shaman had been through.

The solution was not to step on it. That took very little real effort, since he was invisible under his illusion. So, the guards on the far side of that metal plate saw a young blond page run across the metal plate with a fearful look on his face, while in reality, Kyven, under the illusion, leapt the metal plate without touching it. Kyven could separate himself from the illusion partially, but it had to remain in contact with him; if he totally separated from the illusion, he would become visible, so the illusion had to stay in contact with him, and it could only do that if it ran across the plate in time with Kyven's leap. The guards gave him a look and then both laughed as he hurried up to them and showed them the missive. "I'm taking this to Mistress Evira Longsail's office," he announced, holding it out to the guards. Both of them were mature, burly men who looked quite serious except for the amused looks they gave him when he appeared to run across the plate, and the taller of them took the missive and inspected it carefully.

"Go ahead, youngster," he said, handing the paper back to him. "And the floor won't hurt you, you know," he added with a grin.

"Umm, I've never delivered up here before, and you wouldn't believe the stories they tell down in the page room," he said apologetically, which made the guards laugh. "Where is her office?"

"Straight down and on the left, son," the other guard said.

"Thank you, sir," Kyven said with a nod of his head, then hurried down the center passage, the eyes of the guards on him all the way.

From what Kyven knew, this was the nexus floor for the towers. At each corner of the floor,

there was a stairwell that led up to the towers. This was also the floor where the Council of States met, their council chambers and the offices of the vast majority of the council members on this floor. As a result, there was only one department that had its offices on the sixth floor, the Department of National Relations. The rest of the floor was dominated by the Council of State and the offices of its members and their staff. Kyven found her door, her name emblazoned on the stained wood in red letters. His spirit sight showed him that she was indeed in her office, and that the door itself was an alchemical device. Kyven did not want to risk touching the door, so instead of knocking, he created an auditory illusion that perfectly mimicked the sound.

"Enter!" she called from inside, glancing a look up at the door before going back to her desk.

Kyven wasn't quite certain of what might happen, but there was no help for it. He gritted his teeth and grabbed the door handle, but nothing happened. His illusion was holding, he heard no sirens or klaxons, he wasn't attacked, and the woman inside wasn't jumping from her chair and calling for the guards. Whatever the door did, it didn't seem to concern itself with him.

Evira Longsail was a woman in her forties, but was still rather handsome, with a proud nose and pointed chin framing sober brown eyes that had very faint wrinkles at the outsides. She was thin but not emaciated, and had a very nice figure for a woman her age. He couldn't see her clothes, but if her neatly done dark red hair was any indication, he had no doubt that her dress was well tailored and immaculately clean and well tended. She gave him a glance, then she fixed her eyes on him in a manner that didn't entirely give Kyven much confidence he'd get out of the room unscathed. That was a *predatory* look. Clearly this woman enjoyed taking more liberties with the pages than was entirely proper. "What do you want, page?" she asked, standing up.

Kyven noted absently that this woman had shaved off her pubic hair. Then again, on closer inspection, he realized she had no hair under her arms, nor did she even have eyebrows; the dark red lines over her eyes were *drawn* on. Was she that compulsive about body hair, or was it some kind of condition? He looked closely at her hair, and realized that *that* was real; if it were a wig, he wouldn't be able to see it. He could not see that which was not alive, nor was physically and intimately attached to what was alive. He wondered idly if she truly did shave off all her other hair, or if she was unable to grow it for some reason.

She noticed his look at her, and gave him a smile that made him almost flinch. "Do you have something for me, young man?" she asked in a purring voice.

"Uh, yes, Mistress, a message from the Department of Arcan Control. The master down there seemed it was quite important, he bade me bring it to you right away." He offered the sealed message to her.

He didn't like the way she was moving towards him. He found some real jeopardy here; if she touched him, just about anywhere, she was going to find out he was *not* a teenage boy, that he was *not* wearing clothes. She'd discover he was covered in fur, was about a foot taller than his illusion suggested, and clearly was neither human nor a teenage boy. His cover was in real danger, and it was from a source he had never really considered. Being challenged by guards, yes. A trap or device, yes. A mistake on his part, most possible... but to get discovered by being felt up by an amorous Loremaster hadn't really been on his list of possible dangers. He realized there was no way out of this, so he had to turn desperately to his only real option, and that was the illusion.

He had to *believe*, put so much substance into the illusion that it would fool her when she took the missive, for he had absolutely no doubt that she was going to grab his hand, maybe

both of them. He thought furiously about human skin, how it felt, how it looked, even how it smelled and tasted, and poured it into the illusion, giving it as much detail as possible, far beyond the usual level of detail he imparted in his self-image he used around the shop. He imagined how young skin would feel to the woman; soft, warm, the feel of the individual hairs on the back of his hand tickling over her fingertips when she touched him, resilient to the touch but still soft. She would feel the bones of his hand underneath his skin, feel the ridges of the skin over his knuckles and the slight rises in the blood vessels on the backs of his hands, and she would feel hands that were smaller than her own, able to be cupped inside her long-fingered hands. He imagined how the wool of his uniform would feel under her fingers, warm, soft, a little fuzzy, and the smooth coolness of the embroidered Loremaster symbol on the chest of his page's doublet. He imagined how it would feel if she pulled up the hem, the weight of it, the way it would fold and crease around her hand, should she dare try to reach under his doublet to touch him.

She reached out for the missive, and he felt her hands swarm all over his own, caressing them in a way that made it abundantly clear she had more on her mind than work. He put on a startled, nervous expression at how her soft, strong hands seemed to caress his own, and prayed fervently that the substance he put in the illusion would fool her. He watched her intently under the illusion, but the smile on her lips never changed or faded.

She had been deceived by his illusion.

She took the paper and broke the seal, then opened it, standing almost uncomfortably close to him. He wanted to flee from her, and for more than just one reason, but he knew he couldn't leave until she dismissed him. The predatory smile on her face slowly faded to a serious look, however, as she read the message. "They weren't joking that it's a serious report," she mused to herself, but that didn't stop her from reaching over and patting him on the shoulder, then leaving her hand there in almost caressing manner. "Yet another reason I'm working these hours," she grunted in a sigh, then turned and walked back to her desk. He noticed that she walked in a way that exaggerated the swaying of her hips; she was really trying to pique his interest... or the interest that a teenage boy might have in the form of a grown woman. "I tell you, my young page, it's almost criminal the work I've had to put in this week. I've had almost no time for anything else," she sighed, turning around and looking at him. "What's your name?"

"Aldin Vonner," he said almost immediately. "My father put me into service with the Loremasters just last week. I've just started serving, I finished training just two days ago."

"Ah, no wonder I've never seen you before," she smiled. "I'd certainly have remembered you, my young man. Come here."

Trapped, Kyven could only obey her or be discovered. He approached her, his illusory face nervous as he was in reality, and she put her hands on his shoulders fondly. "I need you to do me a favor, Aldin," she said softly. "I'm in need of strong hands to massage knots of tension from my shoulders. Be a dear and soothe my aches," she said, her hands moving to the buttons of her bodice. Kyven could already see everything under that bodice, which he could not see, so it seemed to him that her fingers were working on something invisible... as the nipples on her breasts began to harden.

Thank the Trinity for the knock at the door. The woman's eyes flashed darkly, and she quickly buttoned her bodice back up. "Enter!" she barked, but the irritation on her face melted away to be replaced by a mask of feigned friendliness. A tall, mature man with short salt-and-pepper hair entered, standing tall in the doorway. "I need to see you in my office," he said, and he gave Kyven a look that was cool and calculating. "*Before* you start playing with the pages."

"Yes, Councilor," Evira said immediately and respectfully.

It seemed that there wasn't just one pedophile employed by the Loremasters, nor was it restricted to men. Kyven made a note to avoid this woman from now on if he ever used a page illusion again. And what was more, this man seemed fully aware of the woman's appetites, but seemed unconcerned about them.

Councilor. That meant that this man, this graying man of impressive bearing, was a member of the Circle, the highest council of the Loremasters. It meant that he had an office either on this floor, if he was lower ranking, or in one of the towers if he was not.

Kyven beat a hasty retreat from the office of Evira Longsail, without even being dismissed, but the stern-looking man allowed him to go without a word or even a glance. He was shocked that something like that would actually happen, but he was also elated and very proud that he had put enough *belief* into the illusion to fool her when she touched his hands. She had never even blinked, fully believing that what she touched was a teenage boy's hands and not the furry hands of a fully grown Arcan.

He was beginning to understand. The *substance* of the illusion fostered *belief*... and it wasn't that he had to believe in the illusion himself, it was that he had to pour so much *belief* into the illusion, to the tiniest detail, that it took on the properties of the reality. Just as his first real illusion had weight because he had imagined it with weight, the sense of *touch* he had put into the hands of his illusion had fooled the woman into believing she was holding human hands. The more detailed he made it, the more real it became... real enough to fool a woman who probably took any opportunity she could to grab the hands of any young man within reach... and probably just about anything else.

The near miss made Kyven much more cautious, but now that he was on the sixth floor, he couldn't just leave because he was a little unsettled. He moved away from the stairs from which he ascended, his eyes scanning around for more alchemical devices, but only saw them as doors on the walls and devices at the stairwells. There were many in the towers, he could see, so many that he wasn't sure how he was going to get past them.

"Page!" came a familiar voice. Kyven stopped immediately and turned, and saw that same mature man, the Councilor, marching up to him with the woman in tow. "Come with me, I have a message for you to take downstairs."

"Yes, Councilor," Kyven said immediately and humbly, then he fell into step well behind the pair. He followed them to the stairs, and while the woman kept glancing back at him, Kyven passed the guards at the far stairs and started up. He kept careful eye on everything, noting that there was a lot of magic above them. They passed the first floor of the tower, and then the second, going up to the third level of the west tower, which meant that this Councilor worked closely with the Loremasters that dealt with the affairs of Noraam in general. Kyven followed them and listened to them discuss something that Kyven found very, very interesting. "So, they have no idea?"

"None yet, Councilor," the woman said. "The report is just that they're still working on it. Are you so sure that this is coordinated?"

"I have no doubt," the man said grimly. "I've been arguing the point with the Circle for years, Evira. The Arcans have structure beyond the Shaman. The Shaman are *not* stupid, and they have had years to bring some kind of order to the wild Arcans out in the frontier lands. I have no doubt they were capable of taming them to use them."

"But Arcans could never accomplish something like this. After all, Arcans can't walk into a kennel and buy other Arcans."

"Not alone, but there are any number of traitors among us. The Masked."

"The Masked?" she scoffed. "They're little bands of silly young men who steal Arcans and

set them free, which really accomplishes nothing given the Arcans end up right back in the kennels inside a week.”

“Evira, the Masked are highly organized and very effective,” the man grunted. “Their cells are quiet, effective, and efficient. Only the pretenders act that way. The *real* Masked are a formidable group, because they are supported by the Shaman and their magic.”

Again, Kyven found himself facing an unknown alchemical device, but where the one below was set into the floor, this one, at the landing of the stairs, was built like a tunnel that Kyven had to pass through in order to proceed, the walls, floor, and ceiling all shimmering with magical power, with misty tendrils of magical energy roping down from the ceiling to the floor, undulating like grass before a breeze. He saw the two of them stop by a little table in front of it, flanked by two guards who carried only pistols and swords, and the woman stopped to remove a couple of alchemical devices from her belt and place them on the table. Clearly, nothing magical could go through that device.

Kyven had no choice. He had to attack the device. He stepped up to the edge of the device, as if waiting for the woman to finish, and then ghosted his tail into the area of effect and set it against the wall. That contact gave him direct access to the large crystal powering the device, which was in the floor under them for easy access, and he drove his magical power into that device exactly as he'd seen Clover do. He struck directly at the crystal, diverting it, offering the crystal a different path for the magic to flow that had absolutely no resistance. The magic, following that easier path, rushed out of the crystal in a tidal wave, flowing into Kyven's body. He realized he didn't have to totally drain the crystal, just cripple the device for as long as it took him to get past it, since nobody seemed to notice that the device was suddenly not working, not even the guard stationed there. He maintained that touch on the wall with his tail as the woman finished unloading her three objects, and walked along the wall with his tail maintaining solid contact with the wall as he followed behind them, continuing to drain the power of the crystal and prevent it from powering the device. As soon as he walked out of reach of it, his tail touching mundane stone rather than the device, it winked back into operation as if nothing had gone wrong. Kyven, now all but charged with magical power, opened himself to the spirits, beseeching the fox not for energy to cast a spell, but beseeching her to take the magic away, drain it out of him.

And she complied. A connection opened between them, the same as when she granted him power to cast spells, but instead of giving the connection took. The magical energy he had stored in him drained safely away.

He had no idea what the device was supposed to do, but at least he was glad that it wasn't meant to try to kill Shaman. It probably had some kind of detrimental effect on crystals and magic, preventing anyone from passing through it under magical disguise given that the others had removed their alchemical devices before passing through. A pity for the Loremasters they had no idea of the true capabilities of the Shaman, for the Shaman kept their powers a secret. The Loremasters knew that Shaman could drain crystals and use them to power their magic, but what they did *not* know was that Shaman did not have to touch the crystal itself to do so. They only had to touch something built to channel magic that contained the crystal, giving them access to it, and that was the definition of an alchemical device.

And now he realized how they did it. A Shaman being held by an alchemical cage could simply disable it without totally draining the crystal, leaving it fully operational after they got out of it, making it look like the Shaman simply vanished like smoke from inside. Even a device designed to disrupt a Shaman's magical powers would be vulnerable if the Shaman could touch it. Magic was magic, whether it was granted by the spirits or drained from a crystal. The Shaman could use it either way, using the crystal of his constraining device to

power a spell to get out of it.

“So, what do you think the Circle will decide?” Evira asked.

“I'm not sure, but for now, there's really nothing they *can* do,” he answered. “There's nothing illegal going on, at least nothing we've found yet. We need to find out who's doing this and why before we can make any decisions. It may be something illegal, or it may simply be some rich eccentric trying to corner the market on Arcans by buying them to drive up the prices, then sell at a profit.”

Kyven followed them to a large, ornate door, and it opened by magic at the touch of the mature, formidable man. “Page, I want you to take a message down to the Loreguard barracks,” the man told him, moving quickly to his desk, going around it, then seating himself and picking up a writing quill. “You will bring the acknowledgement of the orders up to the guards at the stairs and give it to them. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Councilor,” Kyven said in a suitably impressed, awed voice at being in the office of such a high-ranking Loremaster.

The woman kept looking at him with heavy, smoldering eyes as he waited by the door for the man to stop writing, taking in the office with a steady eye. It was well appointed with functional furniture that was also aesthetic, but Kyven's eyes were drawn to the large shelf behind the man's desk, filled with books and papers. Given that this man seemed to be in charge of the attempt to find out what was going on, Kyven thought that a little rifle through that desk and those shelves would be very educational in the very near future. He'd be coming back to this office soon.

Kyven felt almost wildly lucky. This trip had been about finding things in the building and learning which offices he might need to investigate later, and he'd all but been handed this one. He still needed to investigate the rest of the building, but he could leave right now and feel that he had successfully accomplished his goal. On his very first infiltration, he not only found a very promising target, but he also overhears that the Loremasters did *not* know about Haven, but *did* know that the Shaman and the Masked were very organized. This Councilor seemed to suspect that the Shaman and the Masked were behind the strange Arcan movements, from the sound of his voice, but he had no proof, and seemed to want that proof before making any decisions. This was a methodical, organized, intelligent man, judging from what he'd heard and the condition of his office, and he would be a dangerous adversary.

The man held up a note, sealed with wax, and Kyven quickly advanced and took it. He then bowed and rushed from the room, but when he reached the door, a door with no handle, he was honestly puzzled. He heard the man chuckle. “Just touch the door and it will open,” he said.

With a little sincere trepidation, which would look to them like a young man afraid of a magic door but in reality a Shaman's uncertainty that the door was trapped in some way. But, he had no choice. He had to play the part. Gritting his teeth under his illusion, he put his hand on the door.

It *attacked* him.

A powerful jolt erupted from the door, but Kyven was halfway ready for it. Still maintaining his illusion, he attacked the door the same way he attacked the device near the stairs. He opened a path for the magic that bypassed the alchemical device, which caused it to deactivate, caused that initial jolt to fade quickly. The door gave a visible shimmer of light as Kyven opened the door, but thank the Trinity, the man was deeply in discussion with the woman, and neither of them noticed it. He quickly rushed out, closed the door, and then let go of it. The door gave another visible shimmer of light, and he waited tensely to see if anyone charged out of the office shouting in alarm.

Nothing. He had made a lucky escape. Looking through the wall, he saw why. The man had gotten up from his desk and was standing right in front of the woman, and his hands were all over her bodice. He was much more interested in the woman's tits than he had been in the shimmering door.

He hurried out of the office before the man noticed anything awry, his mind already whirling, but not whirling so much that he didn't make a special note to memorize the name on the outside of the door. The office belonged to Councilor Jamus Abberdon. Perhaps this was a good place to count his blessings and get the hell out of there before something happened. He'd learned a great deal, and three near-misses in a matter of minutes had soured his desire to continue exploring. It was time to take his little victory while he could and run with it. He only had one thing left to do, and that was carry out the task the man had set before him. He again drained the device at the landing to get past it, doing so again without arousing the notice of the two guards, then all but ran down the stairs two by two, hurrying to the Loreguard barracks. He was spooked now, and he wanted to get this done and get his ass out of there, get back home with this information and pass it on, as well as think about this, about how they might disrupt the Loremasters' attempts to figure out what was going on. He was coming out of the building with much more than he expected to have, and now that he had it, he was suffering from the thief's complex; get out with the booty.

Going to the barracks was a simple affair. The barracks were guarded at all times, and all he had to do was approach a guard and tell them he had a message. The guard sent him to the officer on duty, and Kyven handed him the note. "I'm supposed to take back—"

"Yes, an acknowledgement the order was received," the young lieutenant said absently, breaking the seal and reading the orders. His eyes widened slightly, and then he blew out his breath. He sat down behind the small desk and scribbled out a note, then folded and sealed it. "Here you go, youngster. Take that right back up." He turned to the side. "Sergeant!" he boomed.

Kyven was curious to know what was in that order, but he couldn't hang around to find out with the officer giving him an expectant and slightly annoyed look. That was his signal to hurry to complete his task, and besides, he had to get out of the building with his information. What he had, the Shaman and Haven needed to know. He hurried back up the stairs, over the first magical floor, across the sixth floor, and up the tower stairs, until he was again before the two guards and magical device. He offered up the note with a short bow. "The Councilor told me to bring this to you, it's the note from the barracks," he announced to the guards.

"Very good, page," the taller of the two said, advancing up and taking the note with a nod. "I'll take it straight to him."

Kyven bowed again, and then hurried back down the stairs. Now was the time to get the hell out of there.

It was as easy as it had been getting in. He went back downstairs, passing another page, a maid, and a pair of Loreguard on the stairs, and after reaching the servant's entrance, he used spirit sight to make sure he was alone and unseen, then shifted his illusion. He couldn't use the illusion of a page to get out, since he'd have no business leaving the building, but a Loreguard *could* leave the building at that time of night without arousing any suspicion. Kyven created an illusion of not just a Loreguard, but a Loreguard on a horse. He made sure to include every detail, including the sound of its hooves on the ground or flagstones, the creaking of the saddle, the swaying of its mane when it shook its head, even the smell of it. Once the illusion was fully fleshed out, with him invisible in the center of it, he bounded into a loping run, which was matched by the horse. He made sure to focus on the clattering of the

hooves on the flagstones as he rushed from the building, the illusory horse cantering as Kyven ran on all fours. Kyven ran across the bridge, then past the four guards at the foot of it without the illusory man on the horse so much as waving or taking any note of them at all. He charged into the city, turned a corner, then slowed to a stop while being very careful to create an auditory illusion of the horse's hooves clattering off into the distance before falling silent. He dismissed the illusion and vanished into the shadows, then crept back to the place where Lightfoot was waiting for him. She was sitting on her haunches in the alley, her tail twitching slightly as she stared at the island in the river intently. He couldn't resist slinking right up to her back and leaning over her, putting his muzzle right by her ear. "I'm back," he whispered.

She didn't jump or flinch, which was slightly disappointing. "Let's go home," she answered. They ghosted through the city silently and without a single eye drawing attention to them, until they were back at his back door. Lightfoot was totally silent during the trip home, seeming content to hear about it when they were safely back in the shop, and he obliged her. The door was locked, but a look up showed him that the attic window was left open on purpose. Kyven and Lightfoot had no trouble climbing up to the window, doing so with grace and agility, not making a whisper of sound, then they climbed in through the attic. After Kyven closed and locked the window, Lightfoot unexpectedly grabbed him in a strong embrace. "I'm glad you're alright," she told him.

"It wasn't as bad as I thought it would be, but there were a couple of nervous moments," he said. "Let's go get Clover, I have a lot to tell you."

Clover, Tweak, and Patches were, naturally, still awake, down in the apartment. Kyven got more hugs, even one from Tweak, then he sat them down and told them about his adventure and what he had learned. Clover listened intently to his every word, her eyes serious and calculating. They laughed when he told them about nearly getting caught by an overly amorous Loremaster, but Clover turned quite serious when he told them about what he'd overheard. "They know something's going on, but we knew that was going to happen. They're not sure what's going on yet, but they're going to try to find out."

"That is good to know," Clover said. "We can send a warning out to our agents to be very careful, for the Loremasters are starting to snoop."

"Isn't it a bad thing they know?" Tweak asked.

"What we're doing is impossible to hide, young one," Clover told him. "What we're trying to do is hide *who* is doing it, for as long as possible. What matters now is how our agents get the Arcans out of the villages and Alamar. Now, the agents of the Loremasters will try to follow them to see where they go. The council may decide that it's time to bring in the Shaman, to eliminate those scouts and cover our operation."

"Won't that tip them off?" Tweak asked.

"Eventually, but killing them off will buy us a couple of weeks, and remember, my young ones, we undertook this fully knowing that it would eventually reveal Haven to the Loremasters. What we are trying to do is delay them discovering the truth for as long as possible, so we can get as many of our brothers and sisters as we can out of human lands," Clover said. "Either way, it's not really our decision. All we can do is pass on this information to the council and allow them to decide what to do."

"We can send it off right now," he said.

Clover shook her head. "Let's finish here first. Now, what kind of defenses did you encounter?"

"Not as many as I thought I would," he answered. "But then again, I only really penetrated the sixth floor, and was taken to one floor in the west tower. There was a device set in the

floor at the stairs on the sixth floor, and some kind of large device on that floor of the west tower that I had to disable to get past. I'm sure that there are plenty more, since every door from the sixth floor up was alchemical. I think they do different things," he said, telling them about touching the door of Councilor Abberdon's office, and the door of the woman's office that did nothing to him when he opened it. "The Councilor's door shocked me, but thank the Trinity that the man and woman didn't notice when the door shimmered. That door is proof that rifling the desks of the important people is going to be tricky. There's bound to be even more defenses that I didn't see because I was acting like a page and not ransacking the office."

"Still, you learned much more than you expected on this first attempt," Clover said.

Kyven nodded. "I learned so much I decided to get out and bring it home without finishing," he agreed. "But I'll finish that next time I go in."

"When will that be?" Patches asked.

"Probably a few days," he answered. "I want to see what Shario digs up, I want to do the rounds of inns and taverns to gather up what the workers know, and I need to learn more identities to use to infiltrate the building. I can't use the same page again or people will get suspicious. I have to find another mark and use his identity."

"All in all, though, it was a successful mission," Clover smiled. "I'm glad of that, but I'm more glad that you are home safely."

"You and me both, Clover," he agreed. "Now I'm going to go write down everything I saw and remember before it fades from my mind, so I'll be down in the vault," he said, standing up.

"I'll bring you something to eat," Patches told him.

"I'd like that, little one," he said. "And maybe something with a little kick. I could use a stiff drink right now," he said, which made the others laugh. "That was a *very* nervous business."

"I'll bring you a glass of wine," Patches promised.

"I could use it," he said, standing up. "Now go to sleep, you worriers. Let me get everything on paper before I forget, then I'm going to get some rest myself."

Chapter 20

The infiltration of the Loremasters had been a success.

However, it had also been discovered by the Loremasters.

The very next day, Kyven learned that dark truth after fifteen seconds out and about. His first stop was to Veraad to drop off a crystal he'd cut for him on Friday but had forgotten to take over, and Veraad told him that he'd heard from the Chandler that he'd heard from a streetsweeper that something had happened with the Loremasters last night, and that the Loreguard was out in force, so he'd better be careful as he walked the streets. When Kyven went out, he saw that they were more than correct, for the streets were *crawling* with Loreguard, and they all looked angry. He stopped in at the greengrocer that Clover patronized most often for their vegetables to buy some beets, and the man told him in a whisper that someone had attacked the Loremaster building last night. He said he'd heard it from a patrol of Loreguard that stopped in at his shop just as he opened to get some water. They talked of a break-in in the building, and how the Loremasters had had a collective apoplexy and now all the Loreguard had been mustered out of the barracks to patrol the city. Kyven couldn't get much out of him other than that, though he immediately knew that it had something to do with him. Somehow, some way, they had detected him, or had learned about the invasion after the fact, and now he was seeing an immediate response. That morning he passed by the

bridge leading to the island after stopping at the greengrocer, on his way to the guild, and saw a whole *company* of Loreguard on the bridge, stopping every single person going to the building, be them Loremasters or civilians, and both searching them and interrogating them, going so far as to use an alchemical device that looked like a steel rod, waving it around people to check for something. They were stirred up like angry hornets, and he knew that it was because of him.

He saw that delivering that crystal might be just a *little* tricky. Thank the Trinity the Loremaster was supposed to come to his shop to pick it up today. From the looks of all that security, Kyven would never get past them all without being found out.

Shario confirmed his suspicions when he arrived that morning to collect his five hundred chits. The first thing he did was give Kyven a cool, amused look, stepping in when Kyven opened the door of his shop that morning. "Ah, I thought you wouldn't be here today, my friend," he said with a knowing smile.

"Whyever would you think that, Shario?" he asked as he led the Flauren back into his workroom, where Patches was handing bowls of porridge to Clover and Tweak. "I have a lot to do today. The Loremasters are coming to pick up that crystal I cut for them over the weekend."

"Oh? I see," he said with a smile. "So, do you have my money?" he asked.

"Clover," he called as he pulled out his stool. "Go get it please."

"Certainly," she nodded, and hurried towards the cellar.

"Would you like to come for dinner tonight, Shario?" Kyven asked.

"Ah, I fear not, my friend. There's much afoot today. Have you not heard?"

"The greengrocer mentioned something about some kind of trouble with the Loreguard, and I saw a bunch of patrols out."

"You've barely heard the surface of it!" he said. "My friend, last night, someone *broke in* to the Loremasters' headquarters!"

Kyven gave him a startled look which was not faked. "Broke in? How could someone break in?" he asked. "What happened? Did they take anything?"

"Ah, I'm not sure," he answered. "I'm still gathering the truth of it. Many thought such a thing was impossible because of their alchemy and their heavy guards, and yet someone has managed it. My people have been out ever since word of it leaked from the island. I may be able to come tomorrow, though."

"That's fine, you're welcome any time," Kyven said.

"What did you hear of it?"

"From the grocer? Not much. You know how it is, he said that someone said that someone said. I didn't pay much attention to it, at least until I saw all the patrols out on the streets when I went to the guild this morning. I thought that the grocer had misheard something and that some rich noble or something had had his house robbed. I immediately thought of you," he said, his illusion giving a sly smile.

Shario bowed with a flourish. "Funny, when I heard of the break-in, I immediately thought of *you*," Shario told him with a slight smile.

"Me?" Kyven asked with a start. "Why me?"

"Oh, you know, a mysterious cutter who is not who he appears to be, showing up just weeks before a break-in in a building many say is unassailable."

"Yeah, sure," he snorted. "I'll bring you the wiping paper of the High Master right out of his private privy next time I'm there."

Shario laughed. "I'm sure it will be soft and perfumed, and befitting a man of my station."

"Yes, something worthy of wiping the shit off your ass," Kyven noted, and they both laughed.

“Since you seem to be a man curious about the goings-on within Avannar, I might see fit to let you in on what I discover,” he offered.

“I think that might be worth buying,” Kyven said carefully. “If only so I keep abreast of things. It might affect what I charge the Loremasters for my work.”

“Yes, I thought you might see it that way,” Shario smiled as Clover returned carrying a small leather pouch that chimed with crystalline chits. “I’ll let you be privy to my findings, for, say, an extra one hundred?”

“I’ll have it for you when you return. Later, then?”

“Later.”

Clover watched him go, as Lightfoot ambled down the stairs and passed him, and she leaned against his workbench. When the bell tingled in the lobby to herald his departure, and Lightfoot closed the door to the lobby, Clover looked seriously at him. “I heard most of that.”

“I thought you might.”

“Be careful, Kyven. I get the feeling that Shario knows something. I don’t think he was joking when he said that he suspected you were behind the break-in.”

“That’s possible. Shario is very, very smart,” Kyven said. “I just hope he’s given up on me, for his sake. I like that man, Clover, I really do. I’d hate to have to kill him.”

“Me too,” Clover agreed. “Do you have to deliver that crystal, or are they coming to get it?”

“They said a page would check in once a day to see if I was done and then come get it when it is. They won’t let something like that walk the streets. Speaking of that thing, let’s bring it up to my office. I’d rather not have one of the guards insist on following me down to the vault.”

“Ah, no, that would not be a good idea,” she grinned in agreement.

The page showed up asking if he was done about an hour before lunch, as he quietly sank back into the identity that kept him hidden, cutting a crystal for one of the alchemists that Veraad had directed to him, an old alchemist named Bralder who had a shop about nine blocks from Sun Street. When he told the boy he was, about half an hour later, the same gray-haired Loremaster, Yoris, arrived with six Loreguard escorting him. “You are finished, Master Steelhammer?” he asked.

Kyven nodded and waved for them to follow him back into his shoproom. Kyven had already carefully prepared the area for their arrival by covering the other benches and making sure that Tweak, Patches, and Lightfoot were nowhere to be seen. They were all upstairs, and they were going to stay there until the Loremaster left. Clover, however, attended him, sweeping the shop, wearing nothing but a long apron. She had her back to them as they entered, and Yoris looked around curiously. “Setting up for apprentices, Master Steelhammer?”

“I’ve had these benches set up since I opened the shop,” he answered. “I’m not quite ready yet, though. I don’t have enough capital built up. I think I might be ready for apprentices in a month, though. Come to my office, I have the crystal there.”

Yoris followed him to his utilitarian office, where the crystal sat on his desk, covered with a simple wool cloth. Kyven removed the cloth and picked it up, offering it to the graying man. “It’s cut at thirteen and a quarter,” he said. “I cut the nexus at the base in case you socket it.”

“It looks quite impressive, Master Steelhammer,” he said, taking a magnifying jeweler’s glass from a pocket under his surcoat and inspecting the crystal with a practiced eye. “Yes, a very good job. Very, very well done. The chips?”

“Here,” he answered, pointing at the pouch on his desk.

“I see your reputation with the guild is based on merit and not looks,” he said with a chuckle. “You have earned every chit.” He took a leather pouch from his belt and spilled it

out onto his desk, holding seven one hundred chit counters and a fifty chit counter. “There’s an extra fifty for timely delivery, Master Steelhammer, and be assured that we will definitely be bringing you some more contracts.”

“Why thank you, sir,” Kyven said with a smile, handing him the pouch of chips and crystal dust. “I’m just glad you got here so fast, and didn’t forget about me. There’s quite a bit of rumor flying around out here.”

“Oh yes, I’m not surprised,” Yoris laughed. “Isn’t it amazing? A break-in on the island! I thought it to be impossible, and yet some enterprising scoundrel managed to circumvent all our defenses and slipped past all our guards!”

“Was anything damaged or stolen?”

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t be surprised,” Yoris said. “There’s quite a few valuable items in our headquarters. I have no doubt some valuable knickknack or maybe a crystal or two pulled from a device found its way into the thief’s pocket.”

“Always possible. I hope they don’t go too crazy, though,” Kyven said, his illusion frowning. “I passed like *ten* patrols on my way to the guild this morning. I hope they don’t punish the whole city for what one person or a few people did.”

“There’s no telling. The whole building’s in an uproar right now,” Yoris said, making a sour face. “They even sent a search team into my office, and I’m *way* out of the way of where it happened.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, my office is in an underground level, and the break-in occurred up on the sixth floor, I heard,” he relayed. “Though how they got up there is beyond me. They had to get past five floors worth of guards and alchemical devices.”

“Well, when they catch him, I’m sure they’ll find out,” Kyven said mildly.

“Oh my yes. Well, I’m afraid I’m busy today, Master Steelhammer, so I’d best be off. I’ll send a page to call next time I have work for you, to warn you someone is on the way down to see you. That way we avoid any other little *misunderstandings*,” he said delicately.

Kyven chuckled. “I do appreciate that, Master Yoris.”

Kyven escorted them out of his shop and went back into the workroom, then thumped the broom handle on the ceiling to tell the others it was safe to come down. “Well, that was interesting,” Clover said. “I heard you from out here.”

“Yoris didn’t really say much, but at least now I know where the crystal stocks are kept,” he grunted in reply. “His office wouldn’t be far from the storage rooms.”

He and Clover spent two days gathering all the information, added it to what Shario brought him, and then pieced it together to form a complete picture of what the Loremasters knew, what happened, how they discovered him, and how they reacted. It took Shario’s people and two days of trolling taverns frequented by Loreguard and city workers, pouring copious amounts of ale down throats and making suitable promises that he’d keep a secret spread among several men allowed him to take the different pieces of information they knew and piece it together to form a framework of an explanation, and a timeline.

Evira Longsail was the beginning. It was where their tracing of his infiltration began, for it was her door that was the first indication to them that something was awry. It turned out her door *did* have some kind of reaction to him, for on that door was a glowing imprint of an Arcan’s hand on the knob, and two Arcan footprints on the floor, where his feet had to have been when he grabbed the doorknob and opened it. He had never seen those footprints, but thankfully, neither did Evira Longsail. Both of them had walked right over them without ever seeing them. Because of that door, they knew that an Arcan had somehow invaded the island and gained entry into the compound. From there, using alchemical snoopers, they tracked the

invader's movements, both forwards and backwards. They tracked the trail backwards through the Department of Arcan Control, through floors below that made it clear that the invader had wandered around, tracked the trail all the way back to the bridge, showing that the invader had walked right past the four Loreguard stationed at the bridge's foot. Literally right past them, right between them in an insultingly *brazen* manner, as if the invader had no fear whatsoever of the guards through which he entered. They couldn't follow the trail any further than the bridge, because of a limitation of the device dealing with suddenly having the trails of many other Arcans crossing the trail it was following.

Forward, they discovered, to their shock, that the invader had breached the defenses of the west tower, and had *entered a Councillor's office*. Somehow, the invader got past the defenses on the sixth floor and the west tower, had walked right past guardposts on every floor without arousing suspicion, past an alchemical defensive device, and had even gotten past the Councillor's magical door. Then, the invader went down to the barracks, back up to the west tower, and then left the island by going right back over the bridge from which he or she entered.

The Loremasters were in a *furor*, the Loreguard had told him morosely. Harsh interrogations had been undertaken with the guards that had been on duty that night, for they wanted to know *how the hell* an *Arcan* could walk right past them without them ever noticing it. Vituperous reprimands were dished out liberally to everyone involved, even the watch commander who was on duty that night, even though he had no direct involvement in it. Loremaster alchemists were marched through the halls droves to inspect the alchemical devices through which the Arcan had passed without activating them, from the doors he'd opened to the devices in the floors he'd walked over.

From what Kyven pieced together, it didn't take them long to work out just how he did it. Interrogating the Loreguard and Evira had introduced the common element, the page, and it didn't take them long to find out that the page Kyven had used as a cover had not been in the building that night. A low-level department worker that oversaw the cleaners had told him in a conspiratorial voice that they had given Evira Longsail the third degree when they interrogated her, wanting to know just how she had been that close to an obviously disguised Arcan and had *never noticed*. But she swore up and down that the page was human, making sure to tell them that she touched his hands, that she was absolutely positive that she didn't touch anything but skin. The functionary told him that they'd even used an alchemical truth-divining device on her, but she had passed that test. She was utterly convinced that she had dealt with a *human*.

Yet there were unmistakable Arcan prints on her door and floor outside her office.

Their interrogation of Jamus Abberdon wasn't as intense, but it was just as in-depth. The Arcan had gained entry to *his* office, and after they ensured that nothing was missing or disturbed, they grilled him about the page. He too swore that the page had to be human, that he'd looked right at the boy, and that the door, which was bane against Arcans, did *not* attack the boy or otherwise hinder him when he opened it. Abberdon declared that the boy performed the tasks that he had given him just like any other page, and the recipient of the message, as well as the men in the Department of Arcan Control, testified that the messages they entrusted to the page were delivered promptly and without being opened and read beforehand. Both Evira and the Loreguard officer in the barracks testified that the seals on the messages were intact when they were given to them. The page had given not one indication that he was acting out of character for a new page still learning his way around, for that was how every guard interrogated described him. A young, slightly nervous and flustered teenager who was trying to find the offices to which he had been tasked to report, but obviously knew

where he was going well enough to know generally where his destination was located. It was a common enough sight in the building for it not to arouse too much suspicion. Pages often needed a few weeks to fully learn their way around.

An interrogation of the *real* Aldin Vonner and his father was fruitless. The boy swore up and down he'd been home all night that night, and his parents backed him up. The boy passed an alchemical screening to prove that he wasn't in the building that night, and he didn't know how he seemed to have been in two places at once.

The Loreguard officer that he'd had to get almost falling-down drunk to tell him filled in the last pieces. The Loremasters had no idea how he did it, but they *knew* that an Arcan, probably a Shaman, had either assumed the identity of the page, or had kidnapped the page and forced or brainwashed him into acting as the invader's decoy, following the boy and using him to gain entry to sections of the building, then wiping it from his memory to sweep away his tracks.

This was almost panic-inducing to the Loremasters. Never before had their building been infiltrated by an Arcan, and the ease with which this Arcan seemed to have gone through their building, right past guards, into offices, into a *Councillor's* office, terrified them. They had no doubt that it had to be a Shaman, a Shaman using magic the Loremasters had never seen before, some kind of magic that had either allowed the Shaman to convincingly masquerade as a human or had thoroughly altered the memories of everyone the Shaman had encountered within the building, altering their memories to make them all believe that the invader was a human page, not an Arcan.

That was the theory in favor with many of the gossipers. They couldn't see how an Arcan could disguise himself as a human and get away with it, so they all thought the Arcan knew some kind of magic or had some kind of device that changed the memories of those who had seen him, making them believe he was a page.

The third day, Kyven received reports from the Masked in Avannar, and got another tidbit from Shario, that demonstrated the Loremasters' reaction. They had *quadrupled* the guard within the building, introduced roving patrols utilizing alchemical devices to detect the use of magic or devices that were crawling all over the building at all times, and even restricted pages by requiring the Page Master issue a badge to them showing exactly where they were going to any guard that stopped them. Pages could no longer perform cascading tasks, doing an errand for the recipient of the message they carried, they had to return to the page pool as soon as the task was completed. They could, however, bring messages back with them to the page pool for delivery. Workers were restricted to the floor on which they worked and were forbidden from wandering without justification from the guards.

Kyven couldn't understand this extreme reaction to a single break-in, but on the other hand, the Loremasters weren't accustomed to anything ever going wrong within their capitol city. Someone had walked right into their headquarters and wandered around, a hated *Arcan*, using a method, device, or magic that was completely unknown, unknown to a group that thought it knew *everything*. He would expect them to tighten security, but not go this crazy. He didn't think it would last long, though.

But in the interim, it did pose a problem. He had to find out what they discovered about the Masked's operation, and the answers would be in that building. He'd have to go in again, and go in soon, and ransack the office of the Department of Arcan Control. If they already knew that there was an invader, then there was little reason for him to particularly try to cover up what he was doing. It gave him free rein to take more direct action than he originally intended, since rifling through an office was very hard to do without someone noticing that someone had been there.

The first step, though, was Shario. Kyven was still waiting to find out what he learned, since Shario still had people working on it, and was waiting for some messages to come in from other cities. Shario was a prince of sorts among thieves, operating an organization here in Avannar that, while not the only such organization, was the largest. He controlled more territory than the other thieves' rings, and that made him the most important. He had connections among other rings, both the rival rings in the city and other rings elsewhere, and those rings would pass information along, both for a price and to repay favors. Kyven had paid for that information, and it was Kyven's money that bought that information from other cities.

After four days, when Shario came over while he was filling an order, and his face was quite serious as he came in through the door to the lobby, waiting to be let in because the door to the workroom was locked. They'd installed the lock just because of Shario's habit of walking in without permission, and that lock gave Tweak and Patches more than enough time to cover their benches and open the door without having the Lauren wait more than ten seconds to be let in. "Ah. I'm glad I caught you in, my friend," he said, coming to Kyven's bench. "I feared you might be out on errands."

"More so than usual. The streets are getting jumpy, I just don't feel comfortable letting Clover go out by herself, not with all those patrols out there. They never look very hard for a reason to abuse Arcans who are unescorted.

"Dreadful, dreadful, I've had to nurse three of my thieves back to health because of them," he said with a frown. "You are quite right, my friend. They see any unattended Arcan as a troublemaker in need of severe punishment. But, I'm not here on a social call, my friend. I finally have enough to bring to you about the issue we discussed last week."

"Really? What did you find out?"

"I'd rather discuss this in your office, my friend," he said soberly. "But, I think that our dear friend Clover should join us. I know that little goes on here she does not know, so at least let her hear it directly from me rather than secondhand from you."

Kyven immediately put down his tools. "Certainly."

In his office, Shario sat on the chair in front of his desk, Clover sat on the desk, leaning near Kyven, who sat behind it. Shario produced a small sheaf of papers from his elegant doublet, held together by two silver rings, and filed through them. "Alright, where to begin. I guess with a basic overview."

Kyven and Clover gave each other a serious look. Had he learned so much he had a detailed report ready for them?

"Alright. It seems that what is going on is a coordinated effort," he began. "The identities of the players is easy to discover, but that is where it stops being easy. I investigated each man," he said, filing through the papers. "Each one is a small-scale businessman who had been running shops or working farms in cities and farmland all over Noraam. Here are a few examples. The fellow buying Arcans in Two Rivers is a cooper from Cheston. The fellow buying Arcans in Atan is a farmer from an area south of Phion. And strangest of all, the man in control of the Arcan buying effort in Alamar is a successful and respected former hunter who has been part of the Arcan trade for years, named Toby Fisher.

"Now, it's clear they're all working together. Each man began buying Arcans on the *same day*, and seems to be working primarily on his own using the Arcan kennelmasters. The only exception is Toby Fisher, who began buying Arcans earlier than the others, and who is buying up every Arcan he can find, even sending out agents to buy them off plantations all over the south. The man is throwing around *obscene* amounts of money, and that money is producing results. Arcan kennelmasters and plantation owners are depopulating the entire south of Arcans to sell to Fisher. There's barely an Arcan to be found between Alamar and Flaur,"

he said with a frown. "He is buying them for outrageous sums, but he is also buying them *quickly*. As a result, even the famed Blue Ring is finding it hard to field any auctions. Four days ago, Fisher marched into the Blue Ring and bought *every single Arcan*, outbidding everyone else. Racing Arcans. Fighting Arcans. Breeding Arcans. All of them. Every single one. Then he just added them to a huge train of working Arcans and sent them northwest, buying them for *labor*, it seems," Shario frowned.

"Now, here is the mysterious part," he said, flipping to another page. "It's one thing that these fellows are buying Arcans. That's not illegal. But the fellows I traded information with *can't find* the Arcans that have been bought. These fellows who buy them are marching them into the frontier wilderness in chain gangs, and they never come back. It's the oddest thing. They outfit them with collars and march them out of the villages, or out of Alamar, and nobody has managed to follow them deeply enough to find out where they are being sent or what work they are being made to accomplish. The rumor is that some new player has entered the scene, and is buying out the Arcan stocks to build something *big* out in the frontier. The tracks of those being sent out seem to hint that all their trails will converge at a lawless frontier settlement called Deep River. I have a friend who has sent a man out to investigate what's going on in Deep River, and when he writes me back with the information, I'll pass it on to you.

"Now, back to these men and what they're doing. Some of my colleagues seem to think that this is some kind of mass movement by a new power player in Noraam, maybe even some country from Eusica who has secretly landed a force here and is buying Arcans as a slave labor force to erect fortifications to lay claim to the unsettled lands west of the mountains. Some think it's the work of a consortium of rich merchants who are buying all the Arcans in order to corner the market; buy them at low prices until they own most of them, then sell them at high prices, making a profit. The theory is that they're using many agents in many cities to hide what they're doing until it's too late... which was a few days ago."

"You called those theories. You're a businessman, but you're also a man who has his ear to the ground, Shario. What do *you* think?"

"I think that you don't want to know what I think, my friend," he said seriously. "For it would open up all sorts of uncomfortable questions and nagging uncertainties that would threaten our rather unique relationship."

"I paid you to find out everything. I value your opinion, and your opinion would be part of it."

Shario made a face, but Clover was looking at Shario *very* closely.

Shario seemed to steel himself. "Very well, if you wish me to be honest, then I will be honest. I think *you* are behind it," he declared.

Kyven honestly laughed. "Me? *Me*? Shario, I'd be a little over my head trying to operate a global Arcan buying ring. I have enough trouble doing my own books."

"You sent me on this errand to see what I could learn, knowing that what I could learn, the Loremasters could learn," he said calmly. "You aren't just more than you seem, Kyven, you *are not* who you appear to be. You, and Clover, are members of the Masked," he declared. "I think that my Little Chef, the ferret, and Lightfoot are simply Arcans along with you to help you, servants to you, but are not part of this themselves. They may not even know what you're doing, but I doubt that. Arcans are very open with each other, and they are very good at keeping secrets. I should know, I both own and employ quite a number of them myself, and once you earn an Arcan's loyalty, they are steadfast allies and companions.

"I believe the Masked is behind this. They are freeing the Arcans on a massive scale, and doing it not by stealing them, but by *buying* them," he told them. "I would guess that some

Masked sympathizer who doubles as a miner must have hit a mother lode of crystals out in the mountains, and instead of keeping it for himself, he donated it to the cause. Now the Masked is using that fortune to do in one fell swoop what would have taken them a hundred years to do otherwise. Instead of sneaking about and stealing Arcans from owners one at a time, they're buying every Arcan they can find, and setting them free in the wilderness west of civilized lands."

"He *is* quite sharp," Clover noted to Kyven with a slow smile.

"They sent you and Clover to Avannar to be in a position to keep an eye on the Loremasters to watch for any possible retaliation or action to stop your comrades from completing their mission. I think it was *you* who invaded the Loremasters' headquarters last Sunday, Kyven, to try to find out what they know. Only you could walk past those guards without arousing suspicion, yet still manage to circumvent the defenses of the building. You are not human, my friend. You are an Arcan, and I will shave off my moustache if you and Clover both are not Shaman. What I see before me is some kind of amazing magical disguise, so effective that it fools everyone who sees it, including me at first."

Kyven gave the sober Flauren a long, steady look, the body behind the illusion tensing up, but Clover made no motion of tensing or preparing, simply leaning on her hand, her tail swishing on the desk, regarding Shario with light amusement. "That's a pretty wild declaration, Shario," he said carefully.

"I've known you're an Arcan for quite a while. Since our third dinner together, I think," he mused, tapping his cheek in thought. "Your disguise is quite amazing, my friend, but it can't hide everything about you, and I've been around you long enough to notice these discrepancies. For one, I have never seen a *boot print* in this building that was not my own, despite the fact that I see you wearing boots all the time. I do, however, occasionally see a much larger pair of Arcan prints similar to Clover's, larger than could be made by anyone except your size, before Patches scrubs them away. When you pass by me, sometimes I feel a strange rush of air that has nothing to do with your back, which I would assume is your tail, hidden by your magical disguise. And those times I've seen you pick up food and put it back down at the dinner table, deep in conversation with someone, I have noticed that there are small holes in your food over where your fingers grip it, made by something that is not there. Claws, perhaps?" he said with a smile. "Now, I know that I've probably just put my life in danger telling you this, but you *did* ask me to be honest, and we are friends. At least I hope we are still friends. I know your secret, my friend. I've known it for quite a while, and as you see, I'm still here, and there is no platoon of Loreguard beating down the door to your shop. I've done nothing either against you or to spite you. Simply put, I *don't care* what you do, because I find myself in quite a profitable relationship with you. And by being honest with you, perhaps it will become even more profitable," he said with measured words. "As long as you keep your part of our bargain, who am I to interfere in what else you do? Little Lightfoot knows enough about my operations to destroy me, and I am in a position to destroy you, yet I do hope it never comes to that. You have done right by me, and continue to do right by me. In return, I will do right by you. Among thieves, that is a powerful motivation to keep the status quo."

Clover looked back to him, and she gave him a slow smile. "Should we kill him?" she asked, which made Shario flinch.

"We *should*," Kyven grunted. "But Patches would be devastated."

Shario blew out his breath. "I am quite glad you're willing to be reasonable about this," he said.

"Oh, we'll decide that later, Shario," Kyven told him, deadly serious. "Deciding to have you

killed isn't something we'll decide right here and now."

Shario gave a nervous laugh. "So, my secret is given, and I'm glad you didn't overreact. I'll have more information to pass along when it comes to me. I still have favors out, waiting for my colleagues to get the information and bring it to me. May I come to dinner tonight?"

"You want to come to *dinner*?" Kyven asked in surprise.

"I hope that little changes, my friend. I do adore my Little Chef's cooking, and I enjoy your company. I don't come here *just* because I know you are major players in a dangerous game, and associating with you keeps me in the loop on major events, far beyond the Loremasters," he noted, a touch smugly. "I come here because you and Clover are intelligent, brisk conversationalists, Patches is an outstanding cook, Tweak is quite amusing with his youthful outlook, and Lightfoot is still one of my most promising apprentices.

"Would you indulge me with one thing?" Shario asked. "What do you *really* look like?" he asked.

"Why Shario, I look like this," he said calmly, motioning at himself.

He laughed lightly. "We shall see, my friend. I will find out, if only to satisfy my own curiosity. So be warned," he grinned. "Well, I will take my leave now. I'll bring the wine," he promised, standing up. "Be well, my friends."

Shario took his leave, and Kyven and Clover were quiet a long, long moment, just looking at each other. "What do you think?" he finally asked.

"He knew a while ago, yet he kept it quiet. He didn't have to tell us, but he did anyway, because he wants to be more involved, wants us to include him in information he can't get anywhere else. He is clearly playing his own game, my friend. I think we might hold off on having Lightfoot kill him," she said, her eyes reflective. "At least for now. He can still be useful. He can get information that only the Loremasters could match, as he so effectively proved *before* he told us. He was proving his value to us. We will have to watch him very, very carefully, though. I like him, and I see use in him, but I don't entirely trust him." She tapped her chin absently. "We'll just have to be very careful."

"I'll trust your judgment, old friend," he told her. "You have much more experience with this kind of thing."

"It could be a mistake," she admitted. "I'll have to have Lightfoot find out what game he's playing. She has much more extensive contacts with his thieves. She might get that information. Until then, we treat Shario like a live snake. We let him continue the task we paid him to do, let him come to dinner, but we give him nothing in return until Lightfoot feels him out." She sat up on his desk, then swung around to face him. "If we can trust him, we can certainly benefit from him. If we cannot..."

"Then he dies," Kyven said in a grim tone. "Lightfoot!" he shouted.

The striped cat opened the door and looked in, her nude body swaying in a way he found attractive as she closed the door behind him, her belt hitched jauntily over her hip. "Lightfoot, we have a problem," Clover told him.

"Shario?"

Kyven nodded. "He knows about us. And I mean *everything*."

Lightfoot nodded simply. "I thought he did. He's smart. Should I kill him?"

"Not yet," Clover said. "What he said and did in here hinted he's willing to ignore what he knows in favor of continuing his association with us. We need to find out if we can trust him, Lightfoot, and you have the most contact with him and his people. Find out for us."

She gave a single nod.

"Given what you know of him, what's your inclination right now?" Kyven asked her.

"Kill him," she said simply. "The dead don't talk."

“So you don’t trust him?”

“I trust him. I just think it’s safer killing him.”

“Well, Shario proved that he can be *very* useful to us. The information he brought to us about the operation was detailed and thorough, and we couldn’t get that kind of information from anyone else. That’s why we need to know if we can trust him not to run to the Loremasters.”

“He wouldn’t,” she said simply. “He hates the Loremasters. They did something to his family long ago, and he has never forgiven them. But that doesn’t mean he wouldn’t sell us out to someone else.”

“Then it’s up to you, my friend,” Kyven told her. “Find out if we can trust Shario. The matter is entirely yours. We’ll abide by your decision.”

She nodded simply.

“I hope you don’t need to talk any more today. That had to be your quota of speaking for the entire week,” Kyven noted.

She smiled. “I’ll start tonight. I’m going out with him tonight.”

“Has he really been teaching you burglary?”

“Personally. He has this childish love of it. He’s very nimble-fingered. I’ve learned how to pick pockets and pick locks already.” She licked her chops. “Locks were difficult.”

“In just a couple of weeks?” Kyven asked in surprise.

She shrugged. “I’m still learning.” She reached into her belt, along the inside of it, and pulled out a small metal tool that looked strangely like a tiny awl. “Shario gave me my own set of lockpicks. He says I have the hands of a thief.” She patted her belt. “They’re all in here.”

“Well, that’s about the only place you could put them,” Kyven noted, looking at her unclad form.

She reached into her bone-white hair, just behind her ear, and withdrew a tiny little flanged tool, a slight smile on her muzzle.

“I stand corrected,” Kyven said mildly.

Lightfoot replaced her tools and left them, leaving them to their debate. They talked about Shario for over an hour, fully voicing all their fears and concerns even as they explored the possibilities of the benefits that leaving him alive might bring. Shario was clearly vastly connected, and was able to gather information from all of Noraam. What was more, he was very intelligent, able to read into what information he gathered and ferret out the truth. After all, he had correctly reasoned that the Masked was behind what was going on, but still had investigated many leads, and laid out alternate theories that someone without the same information he had might adopt.

Clover summed up something both of them were thinking. “Shario would be an *outstanding* asset to the Masked,” she said. “Even if he’s not a member. If we can buy his silence, his connections would be of great use to us. He’s shown that he’s willing to work if we pay him and treat him with respect.”

“But it’s such a risk,” Kyven grunted. “He knows about us. He could get us all killed.”

“He has known quite a while, but has done nothing,” she reminded him. “Let’s leave it to Lightfoot, my friend. We can trust her judgment.”

“If we can’t trust each other, who can we trust?” Kyven said, to which Clover nodded simply.

Shario did indeed come for dinner, and it was a very curious, nervous, and enlightening dinner.

They’d told Patches and Tweak that Shario knew about them, and that made the two young-

sters very nervous when Shario arrived. He seemed aware of the tension, but he was his usual chatty, charming self. He brought a bottle of wine, as was his custom. But he was also much more open with them, in ways that weren’t like his usual observant, quietly curious self. He set the table for them, then sat at the table with Tweak and Lightfoot, breaching something that he’d never asked before. “So, Tweak. What’s it like being an apprentice to Kyven?” he asked directly.

That flustered the ferret something awful, and sent him fleeing from the table.

That set the tone for the dinner. Shario was quite willing to ask all kinds of questions that he’d never dared to ask before, showing that the man had quite effectively guessed out at the entire structure and behavior of the entire shop. He seemed to know that Patches and Tweak were his apprentices, not his servants. He knew that Clover was Shaman, and asked her quite a few questions about what magic was like, which she deflected with her usual charm and wit. And in the most curious and frighteningly insightful question, he looked right at Kyven and asked, “so, how did an Arcan come to have the cutting skills you possess, Kyven? You are certainly one of the masters of your craft. How did an Arcan manage to convince an artisan to give you such training? I’ve never heard the like.”

“I’m sure you don’t believe that an artisan would ever do such a thing,” Kyven said calmly.

“*You* are,” he smiled. “Those two benches you’re always so careful to keep covered, yet also show signs of use, belong to Patches and Tweak, or I will eat this table. Are they any good?”

“Shario,” Lightfoot said in a mild voice. The Flauren looked at her, then chuckled.

“Yes, yes. I will stop asking such questions now,” he promised.

Clover moved the conversation to more mundane matters, skillfully fencing with the Flauren to make him focus on the events in the city more than the things within the shop he was most curious to discover. The Loreguard patrols were still very heavy, and none of them were allowed to go out by themselves. Kyven had been accompanying Patches to the market every day since Sunday so she could tell him what she needed, and almost every time, Kyven had to keep a firm grip on her and hurry her past eight-man patrols of angry Loreguard that looked to stop anyone for any reason and interrogate them. The city was still on edge, but it was all because of the Loremasters and their heavy-handed reaction to Kyven’s invasion of their headquarters. It was almost as if they were sure they’d catch the invader if they kept up the heavy patrols and constant searches of people in the streets. Kyven’s shop hadn’t been searched yet, but he figured it was just a matter of time before they did. But, they were ready for that. The vault was hidden behind the secret wall, and Kyven had viable reasons for having everything else in the shop. The only thing he had that was unusual was more Arcans than what would be normal for a single shop owner, but that too was easy enough to explain. Patches and Tweak were his servants, and Clover and Lightfoot served him in... other ways. It wasn’t entirely unusual for young men to keep a female Arcan or two for their personal pleasure. In fact, quite a few female Arcans were sold as sex slaves because they were attractive to human men, and many of them ended up in “beast brothels” which were somewhat common in larger cities outside of Avannar, and existed here in Avannar underground. Avannar law made using Arcans in brothels illegal, part of the Arcan reforms that also banned Arcan fighting and racing.

“Another fine meal,” Shario said with a contented sigh, patting his belly. “I swear, you’re going to make me fat, my little chef,” he said with a smile.

“I’m glad you liked it, Shario,” Patches said with a bright smile. “I wasn’t entirely sure about this recipe. I’ve never had to do so much preparation before. I was afraid I did it wrong.”

“You did magnificently,” he told her. “Now, I’m afraid I don’t have much time for our usual talk after dinner. I have some things to look into, and some things to prepare for tonight. I have no doubt that Lightfoot will grill me tonight, in her own special way,” he said, smiling at her, “so I must be ready for it. Allow me to clear the table, and I’ll be on my way.”

“I’ll help you,” Kyven said. The two men worked to clear away the dishes, then carried them into the kitchen while Tweak lured Clover into a game of posts, Lightfoot looked on silently, and Patches decided she needed to scrub the table clean. Once they were in the kitchen, Shario gave him a calm look.

“I’m sure you’ll have Lightfoot inspect me over the next couple of days.”

Kyven nodded without changing the expression of his illusion. “I don’t think I need to mention what she’ll do if she finds you lacking.”

“I wouldn’t be able to stop her. She’s very special, my friend. She could be the best. The best *ever*. I find in her an apprentice that I can finally teach what my other thieves could never quite master. They don’t have her innate skill and aptitude. In just a week, she learned the art of lockpicking that outstrips some of my young ones who have been practicing for over a year.”

“This isn’t about her, Shario. You said once we were in a position to hurt each other.”

“We are.”

“I’ll be honest in this, my friend. You are in a much better position to hurt me than I will ever be to hurt you. When you told us what you thought you knew, I almost had you killed on the spot. The only thing that held me back was my friendship with you. That, and Clover believes you could be of tremendous use to us.”

“I knew revealing myself would introduce risk, Kyven,” he said honestly. “I know what kind of people you are. The Masked has survived this long because of secrecy and discipline. You are the *only* members of the Masked I have ever uncovered, and I believe I would never have found you if I were not so close to you.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because whatever it is you do that hides you, Kyven, it is *amazing*. But that is only how you appear. The other half of it is that you *seem* human, far beyond some magical trick that hides your appearance. I would never believe you are an Arcan, not in a million years. You look like a human, you have a job no Arcan could ever do, you even *act* like a human. There are some fundamental differences between my kind and yours, my friend. Those differences don’t make one of us better, they just make us different. I am very intimate with Arcan society, so I know what those little things are, what to look for. I see none of them in you. You are so well versed in the nuances of human behavior that you *feel* human. Almost as if you were raised human instead of Arcan. Does that make sense?”

“It makes sense,” he admitted. If Shario only knew just how right he was, and it amazed him anew at just how intelligent and observant Shario was. He was almost as clever as Danna. But then again, both of them were highly trained to notice the tiny details, Danna through her job, Shario to survive.

“So, I’m sure you wonder why I decided to take this risk, knowing that you could easily kill me. I stand no chance against two Shaman, no matter how deep a hole I find to hide in.”

“It did cross my mind.”

“I sense something major coming, my friend,” he said seriously. “I have my own sources, ears to the ground. Something is... wrong. The Loremasters are acting strangely, and have been for over a year. They know something, something that has changed them from their usual activities, but I just can’t put my finger on what it is they know. And it seems that the Loremasters themselves do not know. The orders come from the Circle, and while the lower

ranks sense something is going on, they don’t know the reason behind it. Their activities in the southern kingdoms has increased, and they have been sending armadas of message ships out to Eusica, even to the tribal kingdoms of Friia. They’ve also been stockpiling supplies, goods, putting in orders with alchemists, recruiting Loreguard by the platoon, building up an arsenal of both conventional and alchemical arms. It is almost as if they were gearing up for war. But war with who? They have no enemies here aside from the Shaman, who are too mysterious and disconnected from the affairs of humans to be much of a threat. And now this, where the Masked and the Shaman have finally made a move, and the most audacious and bold move I have ever seen out of them, far beyond anything I ever dreamed they’d do. Was this what the Loremasters was waiting for, or is this some kind of reaction by the Masked to what the Loremasters are doing? What do your people know, my friend, that has caused you to try to pull your people out of Noraam so quickly, so daringly? *Something* is going on, but I have no clue what. And it drives me mad,” he fretted. “I’m honestly afraid, my friend. I fear for my Flauren brothers and sisters.”

“You’re a patriot.”

“If that’s what you want to call a man who loves his country, then I’m a patriot,” he said simply. “But I’m afraid for more than just Flour. I’m also a businessman, Kyven, and I fear that what’s coming will impact my business. My people depend on me to know where to send them and what to do, which corners are the most profitable for beggars, which houses are easy marks. My people depend on me knowing everything about this city, and quite honestly, social turmoil is bad for business. If there is trouble on the horizon, I want to know as soon as possible, so I can take steps to protect my business, and protect my people.”

Kyven was silent a very, very long moment, so long that Shario seemed to get nervous. Shario truly did know what was going on. He could read the signs, he knew much of what the Shaman knew... that the Loremasters were preparing to act. But he didn’t know *why*, and without that critical piece of information, their actions would indeed seem strange, out of character to him. Clover was right; Shario was a very, very valuable man to have on your side. He was much, much more intelligent than he thought, since now he was being honest, not dancing around subjects he wouldn’t dare bring up before.

“My revealing my knowledge to you was done mainly so I could hopefully gain more understanding of what is going on, my friend,” he admitted. “I’ll be honest about that much. I hope that you might impart to me that last bit of information I might need to finally understand exactly what is going on. For something surely is, and whatever it is, it is *big*.”

Kyven was quiet a long moment, and then the words escaped him before he even realized it. “The crystals are running out,” he said, grimly, seriously. “The mines are running dry. In a year, maybe two, there will be a critical crystal shortage. The Loremasters know it. So do we. We’re trying to save the Arcans for when there aren’t enough crystals to power all their collars. When that day comes, we fear the Loremasters will order a mass slaughter of the Arcans.”

Shario gave him a long look, then nodded soberly. “I... see. Yes. It makes sense. And if the crystals are indeed running out, then war will come to Noraam,” he said, then he sighed. “Kingdom will fight kingdom over the dwindling supply, and the poor Free Territories will be an open battleground where every army in Noraam will battle to control the mines, to get what crystals remain. And the Loremasters intend to conquer us all, to rule openly rather than behind the scenes as they do now.”

“We don’t know about that, but it wouldn’t be a stretch,” Kyven told him honestly. “All we really know, or care about, is saving as many Arcans as possible. Because when this becomes public knowledge, you know what will happen.”

“Chaos,” he said, shivering his shoulders. “Thank you for being honest with me, Kyven. That more than anything matters to me. But this... I almost wish I hadn’t heard it,” he sighed.

“I know. But you have to do one thing for me, Shario, if you do nothing else.”

“What?”

“Don’t shout that from the rooftops. If the Loremasters find out that people know, they’ll see what’s going on and piece things together that much faster, which will stop us from doing what we have to do. You know how the Loremasters feel about Arcans. They’ll never let them go, they’ll never allow Arcans to go free, they’ll kill them first. Every day we have is more lives saved. If you decide to do anything, do it quietly, and don’t explain. Don’t tell anyone, not even your most trusted business associates. Give us time to save as many as we can. Please.”

“Of course, my friend,” Shario said. “I understand. Believe me, I understand. As you know, I both own and employ quite a few Arcans myself. The thought of a death squad of Loreguard barging into my brothel or my warehouse and putting my Arcans to the sword—” he shuddered. “You will lose no time because of me, my friend. That is my solemn promise.”

“I believe you,” Kyven said seriously.

When Shario left, Kyven felt much more confident about him than he had earlier. Kyven *believed* Shario. He believed that the Flauren would honor Kyven’s request to keep the revelation to himself, and would not interfere as the Masked tried to save the Arcans.

He was sure of it.

Lightfoot kept a very close eye on Shario over the next two days, which were very tense for everyone, both in the shop and in the city. The Loremasters were getting even more oppressive, and as Kyven had suspected, they began searching the city for information about whoever had invaded their headquarters. Most in the city grumbled at this, and many didn’t see why they were going so crazy about it, but Kyven understood why.

It was because of *how* it was done.

The Loremasters knew that they were dealing with someone that was not normal. They knew it was an Arcan, and they were positive that Arcan had to be Shaman, and a Shaman using magic they had never seen before. That Shaman had walked right through every defense they had, even interacted with the guards and Loremasters, meaning that not only could he evade their traps and security, he could overcome their guards and their people, pass through them without raising an alarm. He had even *talked* to them, had gotten into the office of a Councillor and spoken to him without any suspicion, and that meant that he could do it to others. They were adamant about finding him or finding information about him to stop him, for they understood that someone that could do what he did could dig every secret they had out of their headquarters.

Yes, the Shaman had been caught, had been discovered by one of their defenses, but that had not stopped him. It had only told them that it happened. For all they knew, he could be in their building *right now*, learning their secrets, and they had to stop him, no matter what it took.

Two days after Shario had revealed himself to them, Kyven got a little visit from the Loremasters and a contingent of twelve Loreguard. They barged into his lobby as soon as he opened for the day, and he was surrounded by dour-faced men. “By order of the Loremasters and the Council of Advisors, we are conducting a search of this premises for possible treasonous activity,” the Loremaster read from a parchment. “You have been identified as a potential seditionist due to your anti-Loremaster activities in the past and your ownership of Arcans.”

“What? I *work* for the Loremasters!” Kyven said angrily. “I’m a contract cutter for them! Go ask them!”

“Yes, well, the complaint was issued by someone within that department,” the man said smugly. “Now take us to your vault. We’ll work out to the rest of the building from there.”

Kyven yanked his arm out of the grip of a Loreguard. That *bitch* woman, she was the one that made the accusation in revenge for his humiliation of her! “I will, but you will mark me,” he said in an angry hiss. “If your guards do any damage to my shop, I will be at the guild lodging an official complaint so fast you won’t know what happened.”

Kyven took them down to the cellar, already performing the action that he had prepared. Kyven saw the surprised looks when he moved the fake wall to reveal the door to his vault, a very cleverly hidden door, and then he created an illusion within in that moment when he could see inside, but no one else could. Instead of the huge room filled with chests, a desk, and many shelves, what the Loremaster and the four Loreguard that came in with him was an extremely tiny little cubby, not even big enough to enter, which held a locked chest on the floor and two plain shelves over it holding both cut and uncut crystals. Kyven had put a *huge* investment of energy and detail into the illusion, even giving it a dank smell of a damp place that was kept enclosed, which wafted over them as the door was opened. The walls were imparted with the sense of stone, how it would feel to the touch, how it smelled, even how it might *taste*, and that level of thorough detail was woven into the entire illusion. From the spotty, slightly grimy floor to the narrow ceiling crisscrossed with cobwebs, from the glint of light off the stones from the light behind them to the grain of the wood of the planks forming the two plain shelves set into the walls over the rusty chest, the place looked, smelled, even *felt* how it appeared. “Don’t touch the chest, it’s trapped,” Kyven warned. “Outside of that, you see what you see.”

“Open the chest,” the man ordered. Kyven knelt and did so, his hands matching seamlessly with the illusion, as he seemed to open the lid and push it back, revealing a nearly empty chest that held only a few small, uncut crystals, a few pieces of folded parchment that Kyven unfolded to reveal the deed to the shop and some guild paperwork, and a small leather money pouch at the bottom.

“I don’t really use this for anything but holding my commissions and bond money,” Kyven told them. “And I only cut on commission, so I don’t keep a stock of raw crystals. I don’t need them.”

“What does that mean?” one of the Loreguard demanded.

“He only cuts under contract with someone else,” the Loremaster answered for Kyven. “He doesn’t sell crystals, he only cuts crystals others bring him.”

“Exactly. That’s all this is for, to hold my commission crystals and my bond money.”

The Loremaster gave the place a penetrating look, then reached inside. Kyven silently prayed when the man set his hand against the illusory wall, and it did not go through. Kyven had implanted into that illusion all the substance he could muster, the feel of the stone, the slight dampness, the cool touch of it, and it was so convincing that the man’s mind would not allow his hand to pass through what was not there. The illusion didn’t just fool him, it caused his mind to conform to a reality which was not real, caused him to touch what was not there and consider it to be solid, just as the fox once told him an illusion could cause. Kyven’s conjured fantasy had actually intruded upon reality, or at the very least, the reality of a single man.

He gave it one final look as he removed his hand, then nodded gruffly. “Close it up,” he ordered.

Upstairs, Kyven was shunted to the side, and the Arcans were roughly dragged from the

various parts of the shop and made to kneel or stand in the main workroom as the Loreguard roughly searched his building. Kyven stood there with hot eyes and his arms folded before him as the twelve guards worked from the basement up, roughly opening doors, upending drawers, pulling things off shelves, searching for anything that might be hidden. They didn't give his vault the same scrutiny because they knew that Kyven would violently object to them putting their hands on valuable crystals, and also because the illusion Kyven created to hide the real vault was detailed enough to make it fool the five men that looked inside. They all saw a broom closet, so narrow and shallow that nothing could possibly *be* hidden within it.

"Why are there three benches when there is only one cutter?" the Loremaster demanded.

"I'm about to take on apprentices," Kyven answered, in an unfriendly tone. "Some of my apprentices from Atan. They need their own benches."

"From Atan?"

"I'm part owner of a shop there as well," Kyven told him with flat eyes. "I have apprentices there, and my partner manages that shop. I was going to bring a couple here once I was settled in and had steady income."

"I find that hard to believe, that someone as young as you owns *two* shops," he said.

"Go look it up," Kyven growled. "The guild has all the records to prove it."

"And why do you own *four* Arcans?" the man pressed. "They must cost you more than they provide."

"The two little ones are my servants," Kyven said bluntly. "The two older females are my *servants*."

"At least he's honest," one of the Loreguard snickered behind the Loremaster.

"You know that it's illegal to use Arcans for carnal purposes."

"Only for profit," Kyven said calmly. "I can't rent them out to my friends, but nothing stops me from enjoying them myself."

"So, you pay to keep two Arcans just to, to—*that*?" he asked, prudishly.

"I like variety. And women who don't say no," Kyven said in a way that made the guards behind the young Loremaster laugh. Clover, who couldn't seem to resist, sidled up to him and put her hands on his shoulder, leaning against him, her tail curling around his leg coily. "You should buy one yourself. You might actually enjoy it."

The young Loremaster gave him a stiff, offended look.

"Now hurry up and finish."

They did seem a bit suspicious about upstairs, since it was clear that the Arcans lived up there with him, but he just glared when they asked him and answered "I can put them wherever I damn well please, and I like to have them handy when I *want* them," he said in a way that made the young Loremaster flinch, blush, then quickly change the subject.

One of the guards, however, wasn't quite so prim. "Then what's that room down on the ground floor for?" he demanded. "The room with the pallets that looks like an Arcan stable?"

"I tried keeping them separate at first, you know, the young ones down here and my girls up with me, but it didn't work out too well. I'd find them all in the same room in the morning, either up here or down there. So, I just put the two young ones up in the room with my girls and let the room down here go. When my apprentices get here, I'll convert it so they can sleep there, make it their room. Until then, it's just extra space, so I'm leaving it as it is."

The guard gave him a somewhat suspicious look, but didn't press the matter any further.

Thank the Trinity for their overt focus on his sexual habits, for it let him hoodwink them when it came to them searching his room. They scattered his things all over the place, but thankfully, only one guard searched his clothes dresser. That meant that he only had to focus

in one place when it came to using illusion to hide the fact that his pants were all Arcan-cut, with a hole in the back for his tail and a strap that buttoned over it. Kyven had to maintain each illusion for his four pairs of pants, even though three of them were tossed front-up onto the floor as he searched the chest. Kyven kept his winter clothes (which had not yet been altered, since it was summer) in the chest at the foot of his bed, kept his unused coats, cloaks, and shoes in a small closet on the far side of the room, kept a pair of boots and a pair of house slippers by the bed, and kept shirts, pants, undergarments, and socks in the small dresser by the closet door. Kyven maintained the illusion of his humanity even here in his private domain in the form of owning shoes and socks, a necessary precaution that proved to save his ass now that the Loremasters were in here searching his personal space. The shoes he had, which he never wore, *looked* like they saw heavy use, not bought new and just left out, so the Loreguard that inspected them didn't give them a second glance. He covered his pants by angrily gathering up his clothes after they finished searching, then rather heatedly throwing them all in a bundle in the closet without folding them and slamming the door shut.

Outside of those small things, the Loremaster and his guards could find nothing unusual or suspect about Kyven Steelhammer. All they really had to report was that he had an unnatural sexual interest in Arcan females, but aside from that, his shop was legitimate. He was what he appeared to be, just another artisan crystalcutter, though a rather eccentric one. There was nothing hidden in his shop to arouse any suspicion at all.

That didn't stop them from interrogating him, though. He spent nearly two hours answering questions from the Loremasters and the Loreguard, always answering quickly and concisely, but using the simplest terms possible. Kyven lied like a son of a bitch the entire time, and had to concentrate to keep all his lies straight. In the end, he either satisfied them or bored them enough to make them leave, for they finally marched off with a stern warning to keep his nose clean, for they'd be watching him. Luckily, the Loremaster prejudice against Arcans worked in his favor. The Loremaster never once thought to interrogate any of the *Arcans*, for no doubt he believed they were stupid animals that would provide him nothing of value. The only thing they did was force Clover to give an ink imprint of her footprints, no doubt to check against the prints that Kyven had left inside the headquarters. But they would find that her feet were too small and the wrong shape to be the infiltrator, so Kyven wasn't worried about that at all.

This was a revenge search by that Loremaster woman he'd humiliated, and the searchers hadn't come armed with really serious search equipment. They had brought no alchemical devices to search for magic, for example, and probably hadn't even come expecting to find anything. This was retaliation for a woman's bruised ego and nothing more, meant to inconvenience him and give that woman a chance to have someone snoop through his shop and private life. Now, they would go back to her and tell her that they had nothing, that he was an upstanding member of society whose only black mark was his sexual interest in Arcan females... which was not itself illegal.

But he doubted that was the last he'd hear of it. The woman would latch onto this one aberration and try to run with it, maybe have him investigated for possible law violations concerning selling Arcans for sex. They might know that Shario came over a lot, given Shario had a somewhat unwholesome reputation among the Loremasters and they may keep tabs on him; they suspected he was an underworld figure. He would need to be ready to be attacked on that front as well, being accused of being in league with organized crime.

"That was nervous," Clover said quietly when Kyven finally got them out of his shop. He saw her open her eyes to the spirits, then felt her channel some kind of spell that swept through the entire building. "They left nothing behind," she reported to them. "No alchemical

trinkets that might eavesdrop on us.”

“Thank goodness!” Patches said, sighing explosively. “I thought I was going to faint when they came in. And they *destroyed* my kitchen!” she complained loudly. “It’s going to take me all day to clean it up!”

“They scattered my clothes all over my room,” Kyven grunted. “It made hiding the truth of them from them a little tricky.”

“I’m quite glad you could,” Clover told him with a chuckle.

“What now?” Tweak asked.

“Now? We give them a few more days to settle down, make sure I don’t get searched again because of that woman, make triple sure they’re not watching me or the shop, find out where Shario stands with us, then I go right back in,” he announced. “We *have* to know what they know and how they’re going to respond when they do find out. I can’t let them scare me off. No matter how much extra security they put in, I have to go.”

Things did settle down over the next three days.

The city was still in a state of high tension, but for Kyven and the shop, they calmed down considerably... mainly because Kyven had complained to Yoris about being searched, and how he was specifically told that someone in *his* department had leveled an accusation against him, when Yoris had come with a contingent of Loreguard to deliver another crystal for Kyven to cut, a whopping twenty-six point green, nearly the size of a baby’s head. “Veralda,” Yoris growled. “I’ll take care of it, Kyven. Trust me.”

“I’m surprised you brought something this valuable to me,” Kyven said, holding the crystal up.

“See that flaw on the lower left side? That’s why,” he said. “What can you do with it?”

“I’m pretty sure I can work around that with minimal loss,” he said confidently, turning the crystal over in his hand. “I’ll know more after I give it a full examination.”

“Fine, just have a written report on your complete exam and just what you’ll do to the crystal sent to my office, or drop by and tell me yourself, so I know where things stand. The boys over at the Department of Health and Welfare have big plans for that crystal, testing an experimental large-scale alchemical device that cures disease in a large area, in the event of a plague or other calamity. The device has shown considerable potential, more than enough for them to risk such an expensive crystal testing the larger prototype. They need to know how many points you can save on it for their reports upstairs. How busy are you right now?”

“Four orders in front of yours,” he answered. “None of them are particularly hard, though, just simple cuts. I can start on this either late tomorrow or the day after tomorrow, unless this is important. I can push you up and start on it today or tomorrow if you’d like, since it sounds like all they’re waiting on is the crystal.”

“Yes, I would like that, Master Kyven. Like I said, this crystal has some priority. If any of your other contracts complain, send them to my office.”

“I may have to do that,” Kyven chuckled. “The alchemists that contract me aren’t used to having to wait for their orders.”

“I’ll give you an excuse,” Yoris winked. “Same rate as last time?”

“Since when am I going to argue about getting double the standard fee?” Kyven asked, which made Yoris laugh.

“I’ll have a page check in once a day until it’s done,” he informed Kyven. “But, I’ll have a page drop by later this afternoon, around closing, as well, in case you have that report ready for me.”

“I should,” Kyven nodded. “Thanks, Yoris. And thanks for getting Veralda off my back, too.”

“She’s about to cost me one of the few cutters in Avannar with the training to handle these special orders,” he growled. “If I have to choose between you and her, well, she’ll find herself being transferred to some other department in a hurry.”

“It’s nice to have friends,” Kyven laughed.

Yoris was a bright spot after a few days of worry, and worry on multiple fronts. Every morning when Lightfoot came home, Kyven would ask her about Shario, and she would just say “not yet.” Kyven was very nervous about his Flauren friend, that Lightfoot would not change her mind and then they’d have to kill him. Kyven could accept that it might be necessary, but he would not like doing it, not one bit. Shario was about his only friend outside of the shop.

She did finally come home with an answer, though, the day after Yoris brought him the green crystal. She woke him up well before dawn, padding into his room and shaking him. Clover grunted and rolled over as Kyven sat up, and she sat on the bed beside him. “Kyven,” she said, leaning over him, putting her hand down on his thigh.

“What is it, Lightfoot?” he asked.

“Shario,” she said. “He slipped.”

“Slipped? What do you mean?”

“He’s much more than a thief,” she told him. “He’s a spy.”

“Spy? Of course he’s a spy,” Clover said, rolling back over and looking at her. “He knows everything in this city.”

“He’s a *Flauren* spy,” she announced. “I figured out how he does it.”

“Does what?”

“Moves information. He uses *Arcans*,” she told him. “Arcans and a kennelmaster, in the kennel *he* owns. They give the Arcans messages and ship the Arcans to Flaur. The Arcans relay the messages there, then get sent back. They use the same Arcans, ones Shario feels are trustworthy and loyal.”

“Woah, start from the beginning,” Clover ordered, sitting up.

She did. She told them about the short night she and Shario had breaking into some low-level guild functionary to get information about her to sell to a rival—all done under contract—and her following Shario after they parted ways. He went to one of the kennels that he owns, and there, Lightfoot heard him give several Arcans messages. They were then immediately put on a ship and sailed down the Podac River, on the way to Flaur, with a small contingent of Arcans that looked to be nothing but a shipment on its way to market. She then heard him ask about when his other ship would be coming back with word of what their response was to his last message, and she specifically heard him mention that he’d warned Flaur about the impending crystal shortage, and suggested in the strongest terms possible they begin stockpiling crystals for future use. He *also* broke his word to Kyven, Lightfoot had heard, because she heard him tell his kennelmaster partner that he hoped the Flauren Intelligence would *not* hinder the Masked as they continued their operation. “I told them to leave the Masked alone,” Lightfoot repeated what Shario had said to the kennelmaster, “not to help, no matter how tempting it might be. The Masked have a good plan, I told them to just leave them alone and let them execute it. The Arcans are in terrible danger. We would be poor excuses for human beings if we tried to help, tipped off the Loremasters, and then caused a genocide by our good intentions.”

“Well, fuck me,” Kyven breathed. He’d never have believed it... Shario, a thief and a huge figure in the criminal underworld of Avannar, was a *Flauren* spy!

“He hides it well,” Clover noted. “I would even dare say he *allowed* Lightfoot to discover his secret. I have no doubt he knows that Lightfoot knows, and that now we know. He is be-

ing as honest as he can be without breaking his own oaths.”

“I’m not sure. Kyven, we should let him live,” Lightfoot said immediately.

“Yeah. Shit, yeah,” Kyven said. “He has more connections than I ever believed,” he said in wonder. “And it sounds like he’s on *our side*.”

“Only so far as our opposition to the Loremasters and our concern for our people,” Clover warned him. “But I doubt that Flaur will react any differently than the Loremasters when they discover the truth of Haven. He will be our ally until then, and then he will become an enemy.”

“Then we use him as an ally until he becomes that enemy,” Kyven said. “No wonder Shario can get such detailed information from so far away... he’s not *just* pulling information from other thieves, he has the entire Flauren intelligence network to feed him information!”

“And if he works here, he *must* be good,” Lightfoot said. “Would you entrust a novice to running your spy operation in the capitol city of your enemy?”

“You think he runs it?”

“Kyven,” Lightfoot said with a steady look.

Kyven chuckled. “He *is* very smart. If he doesn’t run it, I’d be surprised.”

“So, we spare Shario,” Clover announced. “And hopefully, his contacts and connections will benefit *us*, so long as we keep feeding him information he believes will be useful to Flaur.”

“We can use him,” Lightfoot said. “Feed *misinformation*, throw people off.”

“It’s possible,” Clover said, tapping her muzzle in thought. “But that is not something we will decide. I’ll send this message on to the council,” she said. “Right now. They need to know, and what’s more important, the Masked *must* be warned away from Shario. They must not interfere with him in any way. We don’t want our own people causing him trouble until he is no longer our ally.”

She climbed out of bed and hurried out the door, and Lightfoot watched her go. Then she stood back up and unbuckled her belt, then let it fall to the floor.

She only took that belt off for two reasons, and she was definitely not about to take a bath.

“This a good time for this?” Kyven asked. “I mean, after you just—”

“Clover can handle it,” she cut him off, climbing into bed with him. “Now shut up and pay attention to me.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Kyven chuckled, pulling her down into an embrace.

Chapter 21

Darkness. A swirl of shadow and light, hazy and indistinct, surrounding him, concealing him. He felt the shadow pulse through his fur, felt that cool sensation as he melded within it, became as shadow himself. Though he was surrounded by darkness tainted with light, he could see perfectly, for shadow was nothing to eyes that saw the spirit world, looked beyond the mundane and saw the world in shades of life rather than shades of light. That shadow was inorganic, non-living, and because of that it did not register to Kyven’s eyes as he moved through it, a shadow of his own creation, an inky cloud of shadow that moved with the direction of his will. It was an extension of him, it *was* him, and moved with perfect harmony to his thoughts and desires. This was the oneness of shadow both the fox and Umbra had mentioned, the extension of his will into the realm of shadow, controlling that which was both a part of him, and he a part of it. Every mote of the shadow was under his control, and though he couldn’t see it around him, he could *feel* it. He knew precisely where the shadow was, how it was moving. He could feel it coursing through him like blood, flowing through him as it came from wherever the shadow came from into the real world, where his will controlled

every aspect of it.

But that was little defense against Lightfoot.

The small cat could sense him without her eyes, moved with her eyes closed and her ears turned towards him, circling him within the room. She held a shockrod in her hand and her other held towards him, claws out, as he pondered the task at hand. He had to defeat her, take her weapon, and do it without harming her. It was one of many exercises that Lightfoot now made him do, for she did *not* like the idea of him going into the Loremasters headquarters with no training in how to defend himself without magic.

In the weeks since he invaded the building, they still waited for the Loremasters to calm down enough for him to go in again. Lightfoot had started this basic training in self defense for him to fall back upon as a last resort, since Kyven would always use his magic as his first option. But there were times within the building that Kyven either may not or could not be able to use his magic, and because of that, Lightfoot wanted him to at least be able to fight back. Her training wasn’t indepth or exhaustive. It was very basic concepts of combat that played to Kyven’s strengths, and those were his strength, his agility, his claws, and his ability to blind his opponents without losing his own sight. Through control of the shadow he could summon from within himself, Kyven could blind an entire room full of opponents, and using that as a base, Lightfoot taught him some basic moves and methods for attacking his blinded foes that minimized risk to himself. She was sure to teach him that blind didn’t mean helpless, though, making him *think* about how he intended to attack a foe that could not see him, that may be holding a weapon that could harm him. The Loreguard guarding the building were well trained and would not panic when he plunged them into darkness, so he had to be ready for when they pulled their pistols or their shockrods and tried to hit him without seeing him. Lightfoot was a good opponent in this regard, for she didn’t panic and she didn’t fear him. If he could disarm *her*, he could disarm or kill a Loreguard who opposed him.

Kyven considered her. She was standing slightly off square to him, turned a bit to the left, but her ears were facing him directly. Her shift to the left was bait, it was a feint to goad him into making a move, for he could clearly see the attitude of her hand closed over a shockrod he could not see but knew was there, its crystal hidden within her hand. He knew from experience now that the entire rod would flare with magical power just before it discharged, and that flare of light down the shaft was his warning to move. He dropped down onto all fours and slithered to her right, using her trick against her to try to get behind her, but her ears turned in his direction even if the rest of her did not. No matter how quietly Kyven tried to move, Lightfoot always seemed able to hear him. She didn’t turn as he moved, though, and he thought that he finally had her. He lunged, but instead of coming in low, he instead jumped and arced at her from the air. Lightfoot’s ears seemed to lose him for a second, but then they tracked right back in on him when he was a hair’s breadth from her. She moved with viper-like speed, twisting away from his pounce... or at least trying to do so. His left arm impacted her side, and he hooked into her and knocked her off her feet, carrying her with him to the floor. He grabbed her right wrist and wrested it to the side, keeping that shockrod away from him, rolling partially over her and grabbing her left shoulder with his other hand.

“I gotcha this time!” he said triumphantly, pinning her to the floor under his weight.

“Really?” she asked with calm eyes, and he distinctly felt her claws declare themselves just over and between his collarbones, in a position to take out his throat. “You’re dead,” she announced.

“The Loreguard don’t have claws, though.”

“No. But they do have daggers,” she told him with steady calm as he released her wrist.

“But not bad,” she told him as he rose up onto his hands and looked down at her. “You’re getting better.”

“No Loreguard would be half as dangerous as you, Lightfoot,” he said with a smile down at her.

“Flattery,” she told him. “Let me see.”

Kyven dismissed his cloud of shadow with but a thought. Lightfoot blinked her eyes, then looked up at him with her neutral expression. It was always hard to tell what she was thinking, and even harder to tell what she was feeling. It was one of the things that made her so interesting; she was always a mystery. He let her up, pulling back to sitting on his haunches, and she turned and got back onto her feet. She wasn’t wearing her belt, which usually was a visual key for him to get excited. She’d been in the habit of taking it off when she trained him, to rob him of a potential hold on her, and he’d spend half of the lesson trying to ignore the fact that she was beltless. That in itself was one of her exercises for him, to keep his mind on the fight when there were other things trying to distract him. It didn’t always help, though. More than once, one of their training sessions turned into something they weren’t there to do, because just as seeing Lightfoot without her belt excited him, Kyven’s unclad condition got to her as well. And one could only roll around on the floor with a lover for so long before extraneous thoughts started invading their minds. But, to his slight disappointment, this didn’t seem to be one of those times... at least if he left it up to her. He rose back up onto his legs and wrapped his arms around her from behind, licking her behind her ear, through her bone-white hair, in a manner she would identify immediately. “Insatiable,” she accused, though she didn’t push away or struggle in his arms.

“What can I say, I’m a male,” he breathed in her ear as he pulled her into a more favorable position, pulling her back down onto all fours.

Fortunately, they weren’t bothered, for it was still early and nobody else was really awake yet, and Lightfoot was silent, even during sex. Soft growling sounds were usually the most he could ever get out of her, and today was no different as she stayed tightly wrapped up in his arms as he had sex with her. She was by no means docile or submissive, but when he held her like that, there was little she could do but let him do all the work, or she was going to lose some skin and fur to his claws. He knew that she’d get her revenge on him next time, taking control of him the way he had control of her at that moment, but right now he was lost in the pleasure of the moment.

They finished with a synchronized pair of soft, satisfied growls, and he spent several moments licking the backs of her ears affectionately, holding her small body close to him, then he released her, and released his growing Arcan habits for the day to embrace the human in him. The illusion that covered him caused the change in his thinking, for he *acted* human when he wore his human illusion. He had also started wearing the illusion without bothering with clothes, for Clover had pointed out—quite wisely—that clothes for him were nothing but a dangerous vanity. If he had sudden need to use his shadow powers to hide, his clothes would make that impossible, and things were no longer entirely safe for just about anyone in Avannar. Kyven had achieved a level of mastery with his illusions to make his illusory clothing *feel* real to anyone who touched them, just as he had learned how to make his human skin *feel* like skin, so he had evolved his powers beyond the need to rely on props like clothing. He hadn’t worn a stitch of clothing for nearly a week, and he found that he actually rather liked it. It gave him a feeling of confidence, of safety when he was out on the streets, knowing that he could dismiss his illusion and vanish if an emergency called for it.

And his illusions had matured. Though the fox had not visited him since he’d come to Avannar, he could sense her satisfaction, nearly her pride, every time she answered his re-

quest for the power to create his spells. The trick he had learned in that moment of desperation in the headquarters of his enemies had stayed with him, and he had practiced with it, refined it, learned to extend it to all aspects of any illusion he wore. The white linen shirt he appeared to be wearing would feel like rough linen to any who touched it, would feel like the cheap, cool, utilitarian cloth that a craftsman would wear, just as they would feel the soft strength in the leather that made the trousers that appeared to be covering his lower body and the boots encasing his feet. The sense of feel within the illusion gave it a semblance of actual substance, just as the fox had said it would... Kyven’s *belief*, his power to instill something more than just sight or sound or smell into an illusion, was actually making it take on aspects of reality. His illusory clothes moved with him in ways that he didn’t entirely control any longer, and his illusory shirts would shimmer in the wind of their own volition, as if the wind were actually grabbing a real shirt and tugging at it. Kyven’s growing skill with illusion was starting to blur the boundary between illusion and reality, just as the fox had said that it would. She had told him that when he reached a certain level, when he believed in his own illusions so deeply, so completely, he could create an illusion that was almost as real as reality itself, an illusion that could actually project itself into the real world. At its ultimate expression, he could create an illusory pistol that fired a shot that could do *real* injury. That was the ultimate expression of the power of illusion, and a level which the fox seemed to want him to reach.

But where he hadn’t been actively practicing his illusions, learning and refining through actual use, his shadow powers were something he’d been actively practicing. The fox had once told him that his shadow powers could rival his power as a Shaman, and he could... *feel* that she was right. As he practiced his powers, gaining more and more control over shadow, he could feel that he was only scratching the surface of its potential. There was something... different. He couldn’t explain it. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it. But he knew that there was a different path he could take, a different way to use the shadow that would allow it to perform something different. He’d tried to find that path over the last couple of weeks, but so far it had evaded him. He had, however, refined his control of shadow even more, expanded his ability to control and also to generate shadow. He could now fill the entire shop with a cloud of shadow, far beyond just the small area he could manage when Umbra first taught him the trick, and he could utterly control that shadow.

He opened the shop after Patches made them breakfast, and immersed himself in the deceit of his daytime life as his mind pondered his true purpose. Even now, after over a month since he had invaded their building, the Loremasters *still* were searching for him, searching for him hard, hot, and heavy. He thought they would have calmed over a couple of weeks, but they had only gotten worse. Loreguard were searching random houses and shops within the city every day. Veraad’s shop had been searched just last week, from cellar to attic, and everyone in his shop had been interrogated in a very unpleasant, nearly hostile manner. Anyone on the street was subject to being stopped and searched, and Arcans were being harassed in a terrible manner. There wasn’t a day that went by that the Loreguard didn’t kill an Arcan on the streets, even Arcans being led by a leash by his owner. As a result, Arcans had all but vanished from Avannar, for the kennels were empty because of the Masked’s plan, while the Arcan owners were keeping their Arcans inside else their investment would be slaughtered in the street with no chance for compensation from the Loreguard.

Kyven, Shario, and Clover had discussed this, and they had agreed on one thing. Kyven had struck a nerve. He had frightened the Loremasters, frightened them to such a degree that they were going absolutely insane trying to find him, and now Kyven wanted to know *why*. Their reaction was too extreme, too overblown for them to be reacting to an Arcan sneaking into

their headquarters. This concentrated and extensive search, and the subsequent terrorizing of the people of Avannar, hinted that Kyven had scared the Loremasters badly when he invaded their building.

Shario had come up with an interesting point, one that he and Clover had discussed for several days. “The invasion of their building is one thing, but the reaction is too extreme when compared to the act that spurred it,” he said over a dessert of bread pudding last week. “We must ask *why* they have reacted so strongly to the breach.”

“They are hiding something,” Clover shrugged. “Any organization like that would be hiding something.”

“Ah, but that’s still not enough, friend Clover,” Shario pointed out as he speared a piece of bread with his fork. “The crime doesn’t warrant the reaction we’ve seen unless we ask ourselves this question. What is so secret, so important within the Loremasters’ headquarters that would cause them to take Avannar apart looking for the invader? This is something more than they are hiding something. They think you *know* something, my friend, and they are trying to find you to find out what it is you know. And if you’ve left, they are trying to find the Masked, to find out what you told them. It’s not that they have a secret, my friends, it is *which* secret have you discovered? Whatever that secret is, it is something so important, so vital to the Loremasters that they are dismantling Avannar block by block to try to find out just what you discovered and just who you told. That is not a normal reaction.”

“So, the question is, what are the Loremasters planning that would make them go to such extremes to keep it a secret,” Clover surmised, which caused Shario to nod soberly.

“And that is the secret we need to unearth,” Kyven said, to which Shario nodded again.

“I’ll have my people start trying to find out,” Shario said. “I’ll share what I find with you, if you share what you find with me.”

“And so you can send it on to Flaur,” Clover had told him with a clever little smile.

Shario just smiled in return. “I *am* a patriot,” he said simply. “This is something too dire for us to ignore. Though I left my homeland many years ago, I find it is my Flauren duty to warn my countrymen of the threat of the Loremasters.”

“Well said,” Clover smiled.

That had begun their debate. After several days, they had come up with nothing solid, just Shario’s very wise question of just what the Loremasters were hiding. And that, Kyven had come to discover, was what he had to find. If it was so important that the Loremasters would have their Loreguard take Avannar apart looking for him, that was something he *had* to know. It went to the very core of why he was here, why he was opposing the Loremasters. They thought that he knew some vital information about their plans, and it caused them to disassemble Avannar hunting for either him or the people who passed on that information. But, by doing so, they tipped their hands that they *did* have a great secret, and now Kyven had a mission to find out what that secret was.

That was why he was going back into the building tonight, despite their increased security... and this time, he would not be going in as a shadow. This time, he was going in as a thief. That meant that he did not care if he left evidence of his presence behind, if a Loremaster came in to find an office ransacked, or if he had to kill guards to gain access to more vital areas. He had two missions tonight, to find and take records that might hint at this great secret the Loremasters were keeping, and to see what the Loremasters knew of the plan, while Clover also did her part to help with the first objective. While Kyven was in the building, Clover and Lightfoot would be invading the personal home of one of the Circle’s members who kept his house outside the island compound, one that Clover had identified as having the weakest defenses. They would ransack the house and interrogate the Circle member—using torture if

it was necessary—to learn anything and everything they could. Then they would cover their tracks by killing the Circle member and getting rid of all evidence of their activities.

This was not going to be subtlety and guile, this would be an attack. But Kyven knew that this was going to happen, that it would eventually come to this. They were expecting it, and they had planned for it. Patches and Tweak already knew what to do if, one morning, Kyven, Clover, and Lightfoot never came back. If that worst case scenario was to happen, they would burn the shop to the ground and go to Shario, who would help them get to Atan, get to Timble and Virren. Virren could summon a Shaman, and they would tell the Shaman everything they knew, everything they had learned. Shario had already agreed to do this for them if something happened to him and Clover, under the thin guise of having his Arcans returned to his partner, who jointly owned the Arcans with him just as he jointly owned the shop, and who would become their owner if Kyven died.

Shario knew the truth, of course. Patches and Tweak would take word of Kyven’s death back to Haven and warn them of everything they could.

In the furtherance of guild and deceit, Kyven and Clover never talked about Shario’s secret, pretended to go on as if they didn’t know, even though they knew... and Shario knew they knew. They’d never come out and told him that they knew, they were never overt—Kyven was never overt about *anything*. But careful words and comments had delivered the messages *we know who you are* and *we will keep your secret*. Since then, Shario had opened up even more, started telling them about little things he knew that actually helped a great deal. It was Shario’s information that got Kyven the addresses of the homes of virtually every member of the Loremasters. And while they waited for the Loremasters to calm down, Kyven and Lightfoot had investigated those houses in the dead of night, when they couldn’t be seen, and assigned to each one a priority based on two things, the rank of the Loremaster and the amount of security present around the house. It was Shario’s information and Kyven’s work that had opened the door to tonight, for Clover and Lightfoot would be invading the home of Circle member Reldavan Darkwood, the most junior member of the Circle who had something of a vice for gambling, which drained much of his money and caused him to live in a smaller house with fewer protections than other Circle members. Clover and Lightfoot would kill his guards, Clover would defeat his alchemical defenses, then they would ransack his house, interrogate him, then kill him and burn his house to the ground to cover their activities.

It was daring. It was bold. It was dangerous. It would certainly send the Loremasters into a frenzy once they discovered it. But it was also necessary. The original mission of Kyven, to find out what the Loremasters knew about Haven and the plan, was still important, and Kyven would also be looking for *that* information while he was in the building, but he would also be hunting for the reason why, why the Loremasters had reacted so severely to Kyven’s invasion of their building.

He was a touch nervous, but he wasn’t afraid. This was what he had trained to do. Much like the first time he went in, he had all day to prepare, and Lightfoot had already helped alleviate a little of his tension. He had some work to do first, clearing all his backlog of work so he had nothing hanging over his head, and have all of Sunday to himself to digest the information he brought; it was tradition that no craftsman did work on Sunday. So, by going into the Loremasters’ headquarters on Saturday night, he was buying himself an extra day.

Breakfast had passed in relative silence, and the shop was tense and quiet. What they would do tonight would be dangerous, and what was more, the Loremasters would react violently to it, so they would be taking more preparations than usual today to prepare for it. Clover would use Shaman magic to close off the vault tonight before she left, raising walls from the stone

to make it look like the tiny illusory cubby the Loreguard had once seen, as well as removing all crystals from the devices within the room so they couldn't be detected if the Loreguard searched his shop again and used alchemical devices to search for crystals and other forms of magic. Patches and Tweak would spend tonight locked in Kyven's room, which had the large window overlooking the alley that would give them a fast means of escape, since both of them could easily jump to the roof of the single floor building on the other side of the alley, and then make their escape.

But that was tonight and tomorrow, and Kyven had business today. Patches and Tweak were sitting at their benches, cutting milk crystals while Kyven cut one of the four crystals brought to him by sour-smelling yet friendly alchemist named Gart, one of Veraad's friendly rivals. Kyven had a stable of customers now, six or seven alchemists who brought him most of their crystal work because he was good, he was fast, and he was dependable. The only time he pushed back their orders was when the Loremasters brought him their own work, but they didn't begrudge him that too much, since he still got their orders done quickly. He had four crystals to cut for Gart, and two crystals to cut for Veraad, but none of them was larger than seven points.

The alchemists were starting to notice, though. Crystal prices had been steadily increasing, slowly yet steadily, since spring, because the mines in the mountains weren't putting out as many crystals. Veraad dismissed it as a natural cycle, saying "well, they'll pick back up when the mines move. This has happened before, just an unlucky convergence of several larger mines playing out at the same time." Gart didn't think much of it at all, and Remaine, a rare female alchemist with a horse-like face but a funny disposition, thought it was a ploy by the crystal merchants to make money. "They're holding back crystals like they did ten years ago, holding them back to drive up prices, before the Loremasters intervened and threatened to close all their brokerages. The instant they did that," she snapped her fingers, "the crystal prices dropped in a heartbeat."

Kyven finished the crystal, put it aside, and started on the next one. "Not so hard, Tweak," he reminded for the millionth time, able to tell Tweak was using too heavy a hand just from the sound his tools made on the crystal. Both of them were progressing amazingly fast. Kyven felt a little smugly justified in taking Patches as an apprentice, because she was *very good* at it. She had nimble, steady hands, but what was more, she seemed to grasp the method of appraisal much faster than Tweak, and she learned *so fast*! Trinity, did she learn fast! She was at the same basic level as one of Timble's second year apprentices, able to appraise and cut a crystal, and she learned it in the course of about three months. But, then again, She received personal instruction for hours every day, and she had nearly unlimited milk crystal stock on which to practice, which were luxuries most apprentices didn't have. That personal training let her advance faster than most other apprentices. She could sit down with a rough crystal and inspect it, and three times out of four, she chose the best course of action for cutting the crystal. That was a vitally important skill, one half of the holy pair of appraising and cutting. Her weak point was her cutting skills, but those she would master with practice. Tweak was a better cutter than he was an appraiser, outside of his tendency to use a heavy hand with the tools, but he still wasn't nearly as good as Patches. He did try his best, though, and Kyven felt that he would become a good cutter, more than able to find work as a journeyman in some shop if he were human. Patches, on the other hand, would be good enough to be an Artisan with practice and study.

Patches would be the cutter Kyven sent back to Haven to train other cutters.

She brought her finished milk crystal to him as he inspected the five point yellow in his hands, then took the milk crystal from her and inspected it. "Very good, little one," he said.

He noticed a few minor errors that caused the crystal to not achieve its maximum potential, and pointed them out to her. He wasn't condescending, instead inquisitive, asking her *why* she chose the cuts she did. When she answered him, he pointed out why some of those decisions were right, and some of those decisions were wrong. She seemed to absorb his teaching like a sponge. "Always remember your angles, Patches. On the whole, you did very well, but here, here, and here, these angles are wrong. They're reflecting back into this tiny little flaw, and that weakens the crystal on the whole. Your crystal would be about an eighth of a point weaker than it could have been, but that would be nearly unnoticeable. If this were a red crystal, I'd sell it. It would be viable."

Patches absolutely beamed.

Kyven went back to his office, and came back with a small one point red crystal, half the size of a child's marble. "Alright, little one, here it is. Your first *real* crystal. See what you can do with it," he said, giving it to her.

She took it from him with trembling hands, then rushed back to her bench.

He cut all of his backlog while Patches worked on her crystal, almost afraid of it... but actually afraid of doing a bad job. She seemed desperate to do well, to make him proud of her, so she spent a long, long time studying the tiny crystal through her glass, then made copious notes, even drew a diagram, everything Kyven had taught her about planning to cut. Kyven moved on to training Tweak as Patches worked on her crystal, then he went out to deliver all his finished crystals, pausing to chat with the alchemists as he delivered them, he even went to the guild to catch up with gossip there, to nose around to see if the guild had noticed the increase in crystal prices... and they had. The cutters who were there doing business accepted Kyven into their conversation around a posts board, and he steered them to crystal prices. They complained about it because they bought crystals too, primarily milk and small red crystals for their apprentices, while others bought their own crystals to cut and sell. They'd seen the prices go up, which meant that they had to put up more bond when they took a crystal to cut, and that meant they had to keep more money in their shops... and that was something no cutter liked to do, not in Avannar. This wasn't Atan, it was a big city, and thieves liked to target craftsmen because they almost always had something of value there. Kyven didn't have that problem because he was friends with Shario, and Shario controlled *all* illegal activity in Kyven's neighborhood. Shario didn't tolerate freelancers around his legitimate businesses, and since Kyven and Shario had a back-office deal, Kyven's shop was also under that protection.

"One broker tried to charge me two chits for a four point milk!" one of the cutters, a wizened old man, said in an outraged voice. "Two chits! I remember when I could buy a *box* of milk crystals for two chits!"

"The guild of crystalbrokers has to be up to something," another one said. "Remember about twenty years ago, when they intentionally held back crystals to drive up the prices? I think they're trying it again. I'm just glad I bought a good supply of expendables last year, so I don't have to worry about it."

"I can draw on my partner's shop in Atan," Kyven said. "Timble can ship me any milks I might need with the apprentices."

"When *are* you going to take on some apprentices?" one of the cutters asked, a tall, wiry man of middle years named Veddon, whom Kyven had met at the guild enough times to have an acquaintance with him. Veddon was one of the players, so he started throwing his knives. "I have a couple of good apprentices I could let you take on, my friend. They're both very good."

"I have enough apprentices in Atan," Kyven said with a chuckle. "There was almost a fight

when they found out I wasn't bringing any of them. They wanted to come to the big city. But, I'm secure here now, I have a good business, and I'm making a modest profit, so I can afford to bring apprentices."

"That and you're tired of doing all the work yourself," Veddon chuckled, throwing his last knife.

"I have Arcans for all the chores," Kyven said, "but having a couple of good apprentices around to help with some of the easier contracts would be nice. Especially now, since the Loremasters are contracting me. Every time they show up at my door, they mess up my schedule, because they want their crystals *now*."

"What good is being an Artisan if you have to do *all* the work?" one of the others laughed.

"I hear you about the Loremasters," Veddon agreed. "I've been contracting out to them too, they show up and say that they want it yesterday. Bunch of pushy bastards," he growled. "They dropped a box of thirty reds on me last week and said they wanted them *tomorrow*. Thirty!"

"But they pay well," another cutter chuckled. "I've been doing some work for them too."

"So have I," another cutter piped in. They all looked at each other, then they laughed. "At least we're not competing with each other," Veddon said.

"Still, that's odd, isn't it?" Veddon's opponent said as he stepped up to the line. "All of us doing work for the Loremasters."

"They must be up to something," another cutter mused. "Maybe they're upgrading the arms of their soldiers or something. Anyone heard of a new version of shockrod or anything getting developed?"

"Gaven, an alchemist down the street from me, created a new device that freezes a large amount of water all at once," Veddon said. "Freezes it twenty feet wide and a foot thick in a straight line. He's developing it for the Loreguard as a quick and easy way for them to cross rivers."

"It would break away from the shore and float off it froze to the other side," one cutter chuckled.

"He's still working on it," Veddon shrugged as he took his place at the line. "It's an interesting idea, though."

"Yeah, it is interesting," the cutter agreed. "He might make some money off it if he can make it work."

Kyven left with a bigger sense of what Shario had told them, that the Loremasters were gearing up for something major. They were stockpiling crystals against the coming shortage, but they were *cutting them*. They wouldn't be cutting those crystals unless they intended to use them, for they would only last a few years in a cut state before their power bled away. If they were cutting the crystals, then they were going to *use* them. But what would they use them for?

More information to send on to the Masked.

Patches spent all day working on her crystal, which also kept her from worrying about tonight... which was part of Kyven's plan of giving it to her. He'd much rather see her sitting at her bench, absorbed in the task he gave her, than see her running all over the shop trying to clean what was already spotless in a frenzy of nervous energy. It gave her something else to do than fear.

Kyven took a short nap after he cleared his backlog, and kept the *At the guild* sign on his door to make sure that he didn't get any other business that day. After he woke up, he sent on the information about cut crystals to the Masked, then sat down with his big chart to go over what he intended to do tonight.

Tonight was going to be an attack. He intended to invade as many offices of the Circle as he could, and while he didn't know exactly where they were, he knew where *one* was, and he'd bet that there were other offices around that one. He rather doubted he'd find anything useful in the office he'd visited, that or he'd find it much more heavily defended. It was common human tendency to either not put something valuable in a room which had been invaded or tighten security to a ridiculous degree around that room, even long after the access to the room by the thief had been closed up. There was a loss of that sense of security about it, and that made humans tend to avoid using it or go overboard trying to defend it. He would invade the west tower and search every room he could find, search for any information he thought was useful, and if he managed to come across any members of the Circle or other Loremasters while there, he would interrogate them.

Then he would kill them.

That was the other side of the lever. If Kyven killed a few of their high-ranking members, he might disrupt them, give the Masked more time to pull the Arcans out of Noraam without Loremaster interference. Before, the attempt to keep himself a secret overbalanced doing something so rash, because he could have quietly leeches information out of them. But now they knew he was here, they knew a Shaman had breached their headquarters, so there was no longer the need to cover his tracks. The only covering he had to do was ensure they couldn't find the one doing it, track him down and find him here in his shop. That they discovered it was done no longer mattered. And if that were the case, then assassinating a few members of the Circle could only be useful to the Masked and to Haven. It would throw the Loremasters into disarray, frighten them, force them to focus on Avannar rather than the world beyond this city, mainly for one reason; if he made the Circle more frightened for themselves then they were concerned about the political machinations of Noraam, then they would be distracted from those machinations. Slaughtering one or two of them *inside their own headquarters* just might do that.

This wasn't about being invisible anymore. This was now about guile and deceit, unleashed in all its myriad forms. Kyven would trick the Circle into focusing on *him* and ignoring the Masked, then deceive them by hiding within the city, hiding in plain sight, an ever-present menace that would terrorize them into keeping their eyes away from where he did not want them to look. He would use the tools of guile and deceit within the building, tricking guards into lowering their defenses, then either passing them by or killing them as needs dictated. He would also disable every security device he came across by causing the crystals in them to overload them with magic, breaking them. They would have to repair or replace those devices, which would heighten their paranoia that he might reappear *at any second*.

Guile and deceit.

He studied the maps he had made of the building, showing where every department office was, looking at the empty spaces in those maps. Those were where he'd be going, *but*, he would again invade the Department of Arcan Control to find out what else they knew. He closed his eyes and see the halls in his mind, in his memory, remembering the shape of the halls, the *feel* of them, the shape of the stairs and how one could only partially up them, since they zigzagged their way up the building, turning back on themselves once between each floor. The guards stationed at each landing could not see the floors above and below, but the guards at the landing of the stairs on the far side of the floor could see the guards at the other landing. There were other stairs at the center of each side of the left and right hallways, but those stairs only moved between the third floors and higher on the left side, since that was the lone stairway leading to the second floor. The right side went from the ground floor to the fifth floor only, creating a chokepoint for anyone trying to reach the sixth floor or higher,

forcing the invader to get past guards, and alchemical traps, and the fact that the guards on the other side of the long passage could see as well.

It was a very practical design to make sure no guard station isolated from the others, with the two stairwell guard stations leading from the floors below the keystones of the design. Three guard stations were visible to each other on the sixth floor, and each guard station could see its counterpart on the far side down the three long halls. It would be impossible to attack any one guard station without two others seeing the assault and raising the alarm. If Kyven were not faced with trying to get around it, he could appreciate its tactical soundness.

But there *was* a weakness to their design, and it was that they relied overly on the sixth floor blocking any invasion of the towers. In those towers, there was only *one* stationary guard post at the landing of the stairs, relying on that one guardpost and the traps they had. If one could get past the sixth floor, one could invade the tower with minimal resistance.

If one played by their rules.

He created a detailed illusion of the building at small scale before him, about six rods tall, and studied the exterior. The two towers rose above the glass and metal façade covering the first two floors of the front, but it was the *windows* Kyven studied. The rooms on the outer halls had windows, glass-paned windows, with the rough exterior stone blocks surrounding them. It would be dangerous, and something he would only do if he was cornered, but Kyven saw that he could climb the *outside* of the building between the fifth and sixth floors, climbing the fifteen or so rods from one window to the next, then bypass the guards at the stair landings at the sixth floor if he had to do it. Of course, then he'd have to get past the guards at the base of the stairs at the tower entrances, and those guards were visible to the guards at the sixth floor landings. If he was even more daring, he could climb out a fifth floor window, move laterally to the tower, then climb up the tower wall to the windows in the tower proper... but that would be *extremely* dangerous. He was a climber by nature, but that was not the kind of climb that Kyven wanted to try to do without being a master of rock climbing, for one mistake would be lethal. He would much rather try to slip past the guards than try to climb that outer wall. But it *was* an option.

But, that wasn't part of his plan, yet. He would invade the west tower first, going straight for it, for that was the primary objective. Information about what the Loremasters knew about the Masked would be there, as well as any hints of what plan they were hiding, that they feared would be discovered so much that they had gone crazy trying to find him. He would start at the bottom and work his way up to the very top, which was where the Councillor responsible for the affairs of Noraam in general had his office and the offices of his staff, and where they also had a small council room, where the Councillor headed his own council of Noraam affairs, one of the many sub-councils peppered through the Loremasters' power structure. The main meeting chamber for the entire Circle was on the sixth floor, a central location for the Councillors so some of them didn't have quite as far to go if, say, they had their offices in the east tower.

That Councillor, the one who oversaw the general affairs of Noraam, was named Vair Sablemane. He was said to be a middle aged man with great intelligence and foresight, but also had a reputation for ruthlessness, and he was the second in command of the Loremasters. He was the ideal target for Kyven's search, but that also meant that his office would be one of the most heavily defended. If he wanted into that office, Kyven was certain he'd have to *fight* his way in, and have to get past several alchemical defenses. But he was determined. He was sure he'd find a gold mine of information in that office, all he had to do was get inside it and have enough time to ransack it.

His plan relied on stealth at the beginning, then brute force at the end. He would use stealth,

guile, and deceit to search the lower floors, slipping past or tricking the guards, searching the floor, then moving on. Then, when there was nothing but the top floor to go, he would go back down and kill the guards on the lower tower floors to limit the numbers of quick responders if he raised an alarm. Once the guards were eliminated, he would invade the top floor, kill the guards, then find and search the office of Councillor Vair Sablemane.

If, through some miracle, he had yet to raise a general alarm, he would go back down to the Department of Arcan Control and ransack the entire office.

That was the plan, but he also knew that plans often changed. If he happened across a Councillor up there, then everything would change as he interrogated, then killed, the Councillor, and for that he would need time and a little space. He'd have to have enough time to interrogate without being interrupted, and do it without getting himself killed by guards that might intervene... so he'd need space, a private space hidden from the guards that would give him the time he needed to tear the information he wanted out of the Councillor.

It was a grim, sobering thought. If he had the chance, he would *torture* to get information he wanted. He would adopt the same tactics as his opponents, who would torture and kill. But every time he thought of that, just one thought steeled him. His babies. His three coming children would be Arcan, and he had to fight tooth and claw, fight with every fiber of his being, fight using any tactic that would work, in order to protect his children. He had a very personal stake in this now, and that stake was the well being and future of his children, the first generation of the new race of shadow fox Arcans.

With that kind of commitment, he could *easily* find it within himself to torture, and to kill, in order to protect his children. He would do *anything* to protect his children. For if he did not, if he did not do anything in his power to discover what the Loremasters had planned and do everything he could to stop them when they discovered Haven, then he would be putting the lives of Umbra and his children in jeopardy.

That was no choice.

Clover came into his room as he studied the illusion, closing the door behind her. "Preparing?"

He nodded. "Are you and Lightfoot ready?"

"Yes. She drew a diagram of the house compound for me. We know how we're entering and what we're doing. It shouldn't be too difficult, the Councillor's house is poorly defended. We can get in without fighting any guards, get to the Councillor from inside, ransack his office, then set fire to the building and get out the way we got in."

"How many guards does he have there?"

"About ten," she answered. "I can eliminate them much more easily from inside. They won't expect an attack from behind."

"Good. I hope you don't mind doing this."

"I was trained the same as you, my friend. I know that there is a time to be kind, and a time to be merciless. It is the path of wisdom."

He nodded simply.

"Are you ready?"

"I know what I'm going to do. I'm going to use a heavier hand this time. They'll *know* I was there after I leave tonight."

"Is that wise?"

"I want them to know. I want them to be so worried about me that they're not paying attention to what our brothers and sisters are doing out there."

"Misdirection. It will make it very dangerous for us, but it may help the others."

"I know, but I think it's an acceptable risk," he told her. "They've *already* searched this

shop, so I think we'll escape another search for a while. As long as we keep our heads down, I think we can stay hidden." He was silent a moment. "I'm thinking of having all of you go back to Atan after tonight, at least for a couple of weeks," he said, giving her a serious look. "After tonight, Avannar will be a deadly place for Arcans. The Loremasters might start butchering any Arcan they can find to try to kill the Shaman. We need to warn Shario to hide his Arcans, and I think I'd like you and Lightfoot to take the kids to Atan for a couple of weeks, at least until things calm down here. I don't want the Loreguard to break down my door and kill every Arcan in the shop. I don't want you here when they retaliate."

"No."

"Clover—"

"We are here *together*," she told him seriously. "We accepted this risk when we came. And you are thinking like a human, my friend. Think like a *Shaman*. Do you really believe I'll allow anyone in the shop to be killed? Would you? There are any number of ways we can prevent it without causing us to reveal ourselves, Kyven. The vault will be more than safe enough, and I'll take some precautions to ensure they can't take us by surprise. We'll be perfectly safe."

"But the Loreguard and Loremasters know that Kyven has Arcans."

"But they don't know which the Loreguard have slaughtered in the street," she told him simply. "The next time the Loremaster, Yoris, the next time he comes, complain to him that your Arcans were slaughtered in the street, and demand compensation."

"Clever," Kyven said with a nod, appearing to tap his finger to his human chin when it was actually tapping his muzzle. "But I'd still rather you be safe."

"We will be safe regardless," she told him. "You often underestimate the power of Shaman magic, my friend, because your own powers are so specialized. I am *not* specialized. I can use Shaman magic to defend our home in such a way that the Loremasters will never know magic is involved."

"How?"

"I'll ask a spirit for help," she told him.

"No!" Kyven growled, dismissing his illusion. "The cost—"

"I know how to bargain with spirits better than you, my friend," she told him with a serious look. "I will summon a spirit and bargain for aid. The spirit will watch over us and warn us, even protect us, and the Loremasters will never know. Bargaining with spirits is something Shaman do, Kyven. Your own totem told you this."

"Spirits try to take more than what they give."

"Yes," Clover said simply. "So it's the responsibility of the Shaman to bargain a fair contract. I've dealt with spirits many times before, my friend. I know a spirit that will help us, and has always bargained fairly with me in the past. Trust me. Not *all* spirits are like your fox. Forgive me for saying this, but your fox is deceitful and dangerous, far too dangerous for anyone to try to bargain with her. Not all spirits are like that. They still require you be careful, but they don't *try* to be that way."

"Tell me something I don't know," he sighed, looking at his clawed, black-furred hand. "I have this little reminder."

"Don't judge *all* spirits by your totem's example," she told him. "Your fox is not like most spirits. She has told you so herself, if I recall."

"She did," he admitted. "She also said she's one of the few that knows war is coming, so she's wiser than most spirits," he said, a little defensively. She *was* his totem spirit, after all, he had to defend her honor.

"Spirits are wise, but can be just as clouded by emotion as we," Clover told him sagely.

"The desire to avoid war is jading their view. To them, both humans and Arcans are their children, to be nurtured. They loathe to see us fight one another... but that is inevitable now."

"So, you think war is coming?"

"I do," she said with a single nod. "Being here and learning what we've learned, it is clear that the Loremasters cannot be bargained with, or reasoned with. They will never see us as anything but animals and slaves. We will eventually be forced to fight them, so it's best to fight them on our terms. Let's see how well they fight in a northern winter, when *all* of the spirits are against them," Clover said, her jaw setting and her eyes hardening. "For they are *wrong*. The spirits will not help them."

"I'm glad to hear you say that, my friend," Kyven said, putting his hand on her shoulders.

"You can do more for me," she said, smiling. "Tonight I go into danger. Send me off into it with a smile."

He laughed. "Insatiable," he teased.

"What can I say, I *am* a female," she smiled in reply. "And I find myself nervous about this."

"Well, let's work off that nervous energy," he smiled, reaching for the tail of her ragged shirt.

It was all about Clover, so he gave himself to her. He undressed her, pulled her onto the bed, stimulated her to readiness, then laid back and let her have him. She was more than willing, climbing atop him and lowering herself onto him, then spending a long, very pleasurable time riding him. He held her by her hips for quite a while, then fondled her small breasts, then held onto her shoulders when she increased her tempo. Her tail beat against his thighs as she rose fully up and put her hands behind her head, lacing them into her hair, and he stroked the fur of her striped flanks, her coyote markings, until he felt her clench around him. That incited him to orgasm himself, and he rose up, almost breaking his tail, and held her tightly as he spent himself inside her, clutching her around her middle with his muzzle pressed up against her upper chest.

"Trinity," Kyven growled, "I love it when you do that."

She smiled and put her arms around him, licking him on the top of his ear. "Do what?"

"Make me feel so good."

"The feeling is mutual, my brother," she told him, hugging him to her chest.

"That sounds almost incestuous," Kyven noted dryly, which made her laugh helplessly.

"We are brother and sister in spirit, not body," she winked down at him.

"Thank the Trinity for that, or we'd be in so much trouble," Kyven said in a dry tone. "Feel better now?"

"I will after we do it again," she said, pushing him slowly back down to the bed, then rolling them over. "As soon as you're ready," she winked.

He spent a great deal of time licking her face and neck affectionately, then when he was ready, he gave her what she wanted. She wanted to feel safe and loved and needed, to know what she was about to go out and kill for, and he gave it to her. He made love to her with tenderness, for she wasn't looking for physical pleasure now, she was looking for the reaffirmation of the powerful emotional bonds that tied them together, bonds renewed with intimacy. Kyven and Clover didn't love each other as a man and wife would, but they were undoubtedly closer to each other than they were to anyone else, shared a very special bond of friendship and intimacy that was very, very Arcan, one of the strongest footholds an Arcan mentality held within Kyven's human personality. It was a joining not of lovers, but of Shaman and friends, a celebration of Arcan tenets of closeness and sharing. Kyven was not tak-

ing, he was giving, and Clover was more than willing to seek out what she needed that Kyven had to offer. He knew she wasn't looking for sexual gratification as much as she was the act, the feeling of closeness, of *union*, so he tried to drag it out as long as possible. He made love to her with almost agonizing slowness, keeping his entire weight on her, letting her feel him against her, within her, giving her the sense of intimacy she wanted.

Feeling her short little claws dig into his back as he made love to her told him she was getting what she needed, both physically and emotionally.

But, no matter how long he tried to make it, realities were realities, and the urgings of the primeval stirred within both of them. What started in languid slowness ended with her literally pinned to the bed, clutching him and crying out as he gave her the release that was so needed, and then the clench of her returned the favor for him.

She panted beneath him, felt her chest rise and fall against his, as her hands gripped handfuls of the black fur on his back. "No matter what happens, I will always cherish these moments with you, my brother," Clover said in a low, breathless voice.

"Don't talk like that. You'll be fine."

"You are in far greater danger than I am," she reminded him. "And it is for you that I will worry far more than for myself. I will pray to the spirits that they watch over you and protect you tonight," she said, clutching him tightly.

"I'll take all the blessings I can get, my sister," he said earnestly, licking her on the side of her muzzle.

She held him to her, held him tightly, for what seemed hours, but he found peace and comfort within her embrace. Her concern for him, her love for her friend, was like a warm and peaceful blanket laid over them, giving both of them quiet, contented harmony.

They both drifted off to sleep like that, and at least for one warm, sunny summer afternoon, all was good with the world.

It was a moonless, starlit night. The warm breeze swirled lazily through the city, blowing through open windows, along deserted streets, and along the tiled rooftops of the city of Avannar. It was a sleeping city, quiet, almost reverent in its observance of the unspoken rule that the night was a time of silence. It was a time that was populated only by those few either daring enough or stupid enough to brave the unknown. Thieves plying their trade in the silent, darkened streets. Drunken revelers stumbling home after a night of harmless partying. Sleepy Loreguard, out patrolling the city searching for signs of wrongdoing. Idle-faced harlots lurking near lamps on street corners, in search of their next customer.

And then there was Kyven.

He stalked along the edge of a wide avenue, surrounded by the cool breath of shadow, which concealed him from the eyes of those that might be looking down from windows. He could see those people through his spirit sight, which looked beyond the stone and dead wood comprising the buildings around him, allowing him to see only the life upon and within them. He still had not yet mastered the trick of seeing that which did not live, but the very faint aura of those tiny, tiny things too small to see with the naked eye, yet which existed in such abundance that a preponderance of their infinitesimal bodies created a faint nimbus upon those unliving surfaces, highlighted walls and floors, roofs and porches, allowing him to see them as almost invisible, ghostly vestiges of themselves. Those ghostly shades of reality made it hard for him to see beyond the buildings, filling the city around him with a kind of glowing background radiance that blurred everything in with itself, making only the large living things apparent to his eyes easy to see on the same block. The living people on the next street over were less sharp, and the ones beyond that were all but lost to the background light of the glow of a billion microscopic creatures, making them nothing but small blurs of

brighter light within the life of the city.

Kyven moved with certainty, but also with anxiety, for he knew that before this night was done, he would kill. Men would die tonight, men that may not even believe in the organization for which they worked, only believed in the money they were paid. But that no longer mattered. Tonight, Kyven would invade the headquarters of the Loremasters, and within that building of glass, metal, and stone, he would kill. How many he would kill he did not know, but it was an unavoidable outcome. To do what he intended to do tonight, guards would have to die. And they would know that their mysterious Shaman invader was still within the city, and could still move with utter impunity through their most sacred of places, the very center of the Loremasters' entire network.

Tonight, the first true casualties of the coming war would be tallied, for Kyven was not entering the territory of his enemy as a spy, but as a soldier.

Getting in was not going to be an easy matter, he knew. The bridge was now guarded by *twenty* Loreguard, ten at each foot of the bridge, and the bridge was blocked off by a wooden barricade to prevent horses and wagons that was flanked by alchemical lamps. They stopped everyone and interrogated them, he had learned, and turned away anyone not expected within the headquarters. There would be no wrapping himself in an illusion and talking his way past them tonight. But tonight, he would be using stealth, not guile and deceit, to gain entry to their island.

Maybe a month ago, he would never have been able to do this, but Kyven's ability to control shadows had improved since the last time he had done this, and he was confident that his powers were up to the task.

The weakness of their plan was that they *did not block off the edges of the bridge*. The waist-high rails of the bridge were nearly a rod wide and flat, made of granite, and they were the way in.

Kyven reached the edge of the street leading across the avenue and to the bridge, and there he did his work. First, he called forth a small area of shadow, careful to match it to the same darkness of the air over the river. He then surrounded himself with it and moved with slow, silent feet, down on all fours, across the paved avenue and to the edge of the street, with its low wall keeping pedestrians from tumbling down the bank and into the river. He slinked low to the ground along that low wall, right up to the heavy column of stone that marked the beginning of the bridge, then waited for a moment. He listened to the Loreguard talk among themselves in quiet tones, listened to them chat idly, until he was sure they had no idea they were not alone. He then climbed up onto the low wall, just by the tall square column of the bridge, tamped his feet while carefully measuring the five rods of empty air between him and the far side of that column, and then he jumped.

He landed exactly where he intended, and landed silently. He set his hands and feet on that rod-wide span of rail and moved slowly and smoothly along the rail, slinking past one Loreguard that could have reached out and touched him. He had to stop suddenly when another of the ten leaned against the rail with his back to it, so close that Kyven's nose was almost against his shoulder, so close that Kyven dared not even breathe else the force of his breath tickle the curly blond-haired man's face and neck. For agonizing seconds Kyven stood motionless on his hands and feet, down on all fours, until the man finally rose up from the railing to take a wineskin offered to him. Kyven stalked past him slowly and carefully, then once he was past them, he moved quickly along the rail, balanced between the floor of the bridge and the twenty rod drop to the water below.

The other end of the bridge was more heavily fortified. There was an alchemical device sitting squarely in the center of the bridge's width, and a magical aura extended out from it,

visible to his eyes, a perfect sphere whose edges extended past the rail of the bridge... but only just. Kyven saw that he could jump over the edge of the sphere and clear it, not get inside its area of effect, if he could manage about ten rods of vertical distance. To do it, he saw, he'd have to make his jump nearly at a run, then land on a rod wide stone railing literally within arm's reach of two Loreguard that would certainly hear him land.

Or maybe not.

Kyven formed the idea of a spell in his mind, to create a zone of silence centered in such a way that only the very edge of it stretched over the rail, almost exactly the same way the alchemical device just barely encompassed the rail into its area of effect. Once he had the details of the spell firmly in his mind, he beckoned to the fox to grant him the energy to make the spell a reality. He felt her touch his mind, touch his soul, then channeled the power into him. It flowed through him, shaped by his will and conscious, forming a zone of silence that would mask his landing from the men on the far side of that device. Kyven immediately felt the drain of channeling the spell, of maintaining it on top of holding his cloak of shadows that hid him from the eyes, so he had to act quickly. He took two careful steps back, then bounded forward. The rod's width under his hands and feet seemed to narrow down to a knife's edge as he ran long it, then he bunched his legs and vaulted high into the air. He saw the sphere of the device under him, sliding under his laid-out body, and then all sound ceased when he fell into the area of his silence spell. He landed hard but securely on the rail, then bounded away. The air disturbed by his passing caused two of the men to turn and look where he had just been, but he was all the way down to the thick pillar of the edge of the bridge and jumping off the outside, landing on well-manicured grass. He ended his spell of silence immediately, then padded away on all fours as the two men called to the other eight, and they all looked carefully around the bridge. But Kyven was too far away now, moving deep enough in the shadows to banish his own shadow and meld with the natural ones.

One obstacle down, about ten thousand to go.

He moved quickly and quietly around the building, to that back entrance the pages used to go between the Loreguard barracks and the main building. He was positive that that door would be guarded now, but getting through that door would be easier than getting through the front doors and the heavy guards that would certainly be there. He got around the building, and found that the door was guarded, alright... guarded by four Loreguard, two flanking the door and two in front of it.

Too many to slip past, and he seriously doubted that they'd buy any lie he tried to tell under an illusion.

Kyven backed up, and fell to the idea he had before, but hadn't considered from this low altitude... windows. He backed up on the lawn and looked up, looked for windows that were open. He slipped almost all the way back up to the front of the building when he saw one, an open window on the second floor.

Kyven stopped a moment, to consider the issue. If he gained entry through the window, he'd have to explain to any guards on the second floor how he got there when they never saw him enter. That meant that he'd be fighting a running war going down to the first floor and then back up. But, the advantage in that was that the second floor was an orphan floor, and odds were a patrol wouldn't find the corpses for a while.

Looking up higher, he saw an open window on the fourth floor. Up there, he had a chance of getting past the guards, since there had to be people working up there tonight. He could hide himself in the guise of a Loremaster and just take a short attitude with any guard that challenged him. Both windows were along the same line; he could see how well he could climb the stone exterior of the building. If it was very hard, he could go in through the second floor.

If it was easy enough for him to risk it, he'd try for the fourth floor.

It was worth a try.

The wall was *not* conducive to climbing. It was made of very tightly fitting granite blocks, so tight that Kyven could barely find any purchase for his claws. It took him nearly five minutes just to get his feet off the ground, for he had to feel around for gaps between the stones that had been widened by exposure to the elements and he couldn't *see* the cracks, since the nonliving stone did not appear to his eyes when they were open to the spirits. But then he found himself stuck, unable to find another handhold, and he slipped off the wall and fell to the grass below.

He saw on his haunches, considering the problem. Trying to get in through the doors would likely become a fight, and fighting down here would mean he wouldn't live to reach the west tower. Going up the outside of the wall, on the other hand, was virtually guard and trap free. He saw now magical auras on the wall, and there were certainly no guards up there patrolling the exterior.

So, if going up the wall was the safest move, and he couldn't climb the wall, then where did it leave him?

Magic.

He bowed his head. *Fox*, he called. *My totem spirit. I need to climb the wall to get in, so I can continue the task you gave me. How do I do it? Please, show me. Grant me your wisdom and show me the path.*

She was there. She was behind him, and he felt her paws come to rest on his shoulders as he sat on his haunches. In that touch, there was communication. *If that is what you seek, then so be it*, she conveyed to him. *What price will you pay for my assistance?*

I'm asking for your advice, not your help, he thought, a little defensively, his body shivering at what happened to him the last time he tried to bargain with this spirit.

So long with Clover, and still so little you have learned, she conveyed, a bit sharply. *I will give you neither. You have summoned me, Shaman, you have formally summoned me. Now you must bargain from me what it is you wish.*

I will bargain nothing, he thought immediately and with heat. *I'd rather do it myself than bargain with you. And I didn't summon you, you construed my thoughts in a manner you wanted, not the intent I gave them.*

You cannot run from me forever, Shaman, she answered, a touch amused. *Eventually, you will have to face me in a formal summoning again. Pray that you show much greater wisdom than you did the last time.*

And then she was gone.

Kyven resisted the urge to spit a few choice curses aloud, then rose up on his hind legs and looked up at the window. It was too high to jump to reach, and he couldn't climb it. Trying to go in through the doors was suicide at worst, a guarantee he'd have to flee before reaching his objective at its best. He *had* to get in through the window.

A sound to his right, near the corner, caused Kyven to quickly rush up against the wall and lay down, then cover himself with a cloud of his own shadow just in case they carried torches or lamps. A natural shadow would be banished by the light, but one of his conjured shadows would remain even in the face of the light of the sun. He narrowed the shadow down to literally a sheath of shadow that covered him, and only just enough to allow him to meld into it, vanishing from view.

The patrol appeared around the corner, a patrol of eight Loreguard moving in a two by two formation, two across and four deep. They didn't march so much as walk, and they were all looking around, not just walking in a stiff military manner. This was a patrol of men

paying attention to what they were doing. Kyven unconsciously became very still, even though they couldn't see him, as they walked up even with his position, and he saw two of them look right where he was. They had sharp eyes, but their eyes were attuned to the lamps they carried, and the dancing shadows of those lamps concealed the pool of deeper shadow collected against the side of the building and grass before it, making their eyes pass over it, dismissing it as yet another dancing shadow.

But the men did show him how he was going to move inside. The patrols moved quietly and in a formation. If he could kill one or two of the men bringing up the rear, he could replace them with himself and an illusion of the other man, if he had to kill two, then just follow the patrol as it made its rounds. He could abandon the patrol when he was near where he intended to go, and hope they went a ways before the other six men realized that two of their number had wandered off on their own.

But that still left him with his current problem... getting in without getting killed or raising an alarm. He stayed enveloped in his shadow for a long moment after the patrol left, until their lights were too dim to prevent him from melding with the natural shadows of the night, then again reverted his eyes to normal sight as he pondered the wall. He needed to climb the wall, climb it without his claws, and do it safely. He knew it was going to take magic, but how would he perform a spell he was never taught to do something he couldn't quantify? He had to have a specific idea of what to do if he tried using a blind spell, like the spells he'd copied by watching Clover, because watching Clover showed him how to go about making the spell. Clover had never used a spell to climb a wall before, so he wasn't sure how to go about doing it.

He bowed his head slightly, looking near the base of the wall, and chanced to see a spider skittering along on the stone, surging forward, stopping, then surging forward again, on the prowl for prey—

That was how to do it!

He closed his eyes, then opened them to the spirits even as he kept his lids shut. He brought forth an image of *him* skittering up the wall just like a spider, his hands and feet sticking to the wall, but not so greatly that he couldn't take them off, just enough to hold his weight comfortably. He focused his attention, his awareness, on his own hands and feet, then beckoned to the fox to grant him the power to make the spell a reality, to give him the ability to climb the wall like a spider, to move vertically with the same surety and grace as a spider.

He felt the shadow fox respond. Power surged into him, power flowing from an *amused* spirit, flowing through him and into his hands and feet. The power pooled there, and unlike a maintained spell, he felt magic collect in his hands and feet, collect and coalesce, almost like he had little crystals in his appendages absorbing the power, saving it, storing it. The torrent of magic flowing into him ceased, but he felt the power remain behind, merged in with his hands and feet, where it would slowly fade as it powered the spell Kyven had channeled, which left Kyven to focus his attention on other things.

It was a different kind of spell, and the wolf, Stalker, his training came back to him. This was a *Blessing*, a different kind of Shaman spell that dealt with positive magic, of beneficial effects, which often used different rules than normal channeling. That he cast the spell on himself, directly within his own body where he could not see, was all the indication he needed that he had used a Blessing rather than a normal Invocation.

It was the first Blessing he had ever done... and it *worked*.

Elated, Kyven turned and vaulted into the air, and his hands and feet made contact with the wall, and they held fast! There was a strange tingling in his appendages from their contact with the wall, and he most certainly felt the pull of gravity, but the tickling in his hands and

feet defied the pull of gravity and held him fast to the wall. It had worked!

Moving, he found, was a simple affair. Though his hands and feet held fast to the wall, he could, with a sharp tug, free them, almost like pulling a spoon out of a hardened jar of honey. Kyven's natural strength was more than enough to free his hands and feet to allow him to climb the wall, and his altered legs actually made climbing the vertical surface much easier. His Arcan legs were naturally shaped to allow him to move on all fours, and that allowed him to walk right up the wall on all fours with confidence and good speed. He was always careful to keep at least two appendages on the wall at all times, but that was very easy, and he moved up the wall as fast as a human would walk along a street. He moved past the second floor window, his body hidden by the natural shadows of the night and making him invisible on the side of the granite wall. He climbed up to the closed third floor window and then past it, then up to the fourth floor. Before going in, he stopped just beside it and considered something. He could walk up the walls now. What if he went up to the roof and climbed the towers, gaining entry to the towers without having to get past any guards at all? Would there be any defenses up there for him to worry about? Why settle for the fourth floor when he could go for the whole basket of eggs?

The stored power in his hands and feet, though, told him that the spell had a set duration, and he could feel the power drain almost like the ticking of a clock. From how much he had when he started to now, he felt that he had about three more minutes before the power faded, and if he was still on the wall when that happened, he would fall off if he did not recharge the power of the spell by casting it again.

A decision. He would climb up to the roof and check things out from there. If it looked like a good idea to climb the tower, he would cast the spell again and climb it. If it did not, what he could do was get into the building from the roof, through one of the skylights or hopefully a door that might be up here to give cleaners and workers access to the roof. That would allow him to bypass a great deal of trouble and only have to deal with the sixth floor and above.

He climbed up to the roof, which wasn't a simple affair, for the top of the building wasn't a single roof, and he had to look at the world through mundane eyes to take in the landscape up here. It was a series of rooftops with walkways between them, little triangular hills breaking up the top of the building, with channels and water drain pipes and narrow walkways. Some of the rooftops had stairs going up them, some did not. Most of the rooftops were made of thin granite sheets with sturdier granite blocks between them. Some of the rooftops did indeed have skylights in them. At each corner of the building, the four towers rose over the rooftops, towering a hundred rods or more into the sky over the man-made triangular hilltops atop this massive construction.

From the walkways up here, Kyven was almost certain that there had to be a door up here somewhere, a door that would give him access to the sixth floor.

He felt his spell fade as he set foot on one of those walkways, and he opened his eyes to the spirits. His eyes probed below, through the stone, looking down into the sixth floor, looking down to see just who was down there and where they were. He saw the guards at their six positions, the tower stair guards barely visible to him in the distance, but also saw quite a few others on the floor, moving around, sitting at desks he couldn't see, as well as a congregation of twelve humans sitting at what looked to be a long rectangular table that looked to be in a room in the middle of the floor. A meeting? A meeting at midnight on a Saturday night? What on earth would they be doing here at this time of night unless it was an emergency, something that—

Something he thought he might want to overhear.

Kyven stalked across the roof, having to squint to see the aura of life on the surface of the stone to see where it was, to keep him from walking headlong into a column or up a rooftop. He got himself to where he was nearly right over the twelve humans, nine men and three women, all of middle age or better, then he returned his eyes to the mundane to see if their room was one of the ones that had a skylight, windows in the roof to give them light from the sun during the daytime. To his delight, he saw that it indeed was one of the skylight rooms. He stalked up to the skylight and looked down, and saw them, twelve men and women sitting at a long rectangular table, five to each side and one on each end. They had papers and files scattered in front of them on the desk, and it was clear that they were in the middle of a deep discussion, a discussion that he couldn't make out. Their voices did carry up to the glass, but the glass muted it, garbled it. He lowered his head to the glass and put his ear against it, nearly having to stand on his head to do so, but the awkward position *did* allow him to hear enough to make out what they were saying.

“—is starting to complain about the levies,” one of them said, a deep male voice. “It may not be much, but you know how they are. If we ask them for a single chit, they make such a case out of it.”

“We'll deal with normal business at Monday's meeting, Bevan,” another voice called.

Bevan. Bevan Longspike. This was a meeting of the Council of States, which meant that each person down there represented the twelve major kingdoms or city-states of Noraam, from southern Flaur to northern Menn.

“Shandi?”

“Two thousand troops left Phion yesterday afternoon, Councillor,” a woman's voice answered. “The Council of Phion made no comment of it. I think they were glad to be rid of them, to be honest.”

That caused a few chuckles. “Defol?”

“We've left four thousand troops in Mayam, but another six thousand are on ships now,” a male said. “They should reach Stinger Bay in four days, and it will take another three to four for them to arrive.”

“Why did you leave so many there?”

“The local Loremasters demanded a large troop presence to prevent unrest. You know how the Flaurens are. They resent our presence in their country.”

“Damn Flaurens,” the High Council's voice spat. “Does anyone need any additional support anywhere, or do you think your states are prepared and able to handle it?”

There was silence for a moment, then he heard a sharp sound. “Alright then, we're adjourned.”

Kyven got out of his awkward position and looked down through the skylight. Troop movements? They were pulling troops in from all over Noraam, it sounded like. But where were they being sent? For what purpose were they be gathered? What was it one of them said? Three to four days from Stinger Bay. Well, that was on the coast, so it had to be somewhere with three days' march of Stinger Bay. Riyan maybe? Avannar was too far away, it was six or seven days of forced march for an army to march from Stinger Bay to Avannar... but it *was* three to four days on horseback, if one really pushed the horse.

Did they have that many horses waiting at Stinger Bay?

No, it sounded like the troops were destined for Riyan.

But still, this was... not good. The Loremasters were calling in troops from all over Noraam for some reason, which seemed opposite of what he would expect them to do. With the coming crystal shortage, they should be spreading their forces out to prevent unrest, and to take control, not concentrating them... unless they meant to form a barrier here in the Free Terri-

tories to prevent armies of the kingdoms and city-states from warring in the territories over possession of the mines, which would threaten Avannar by virtue of its location. If that was the case, well, stationing a large force at Riyan, the center of the Free Territories, that did make a kind of sense. It was three days to the borders, from Balton to the north and Rallan to the south, on horseback, and maybe seven days forced march on foot. That would give the Loremasters a central base from which they could quickly respond to any invasion, from either side.

But still... why? There was more to this. But this in itself was vital information. Shario would love to know that the Loremasters had pulled a large number of troops out of Flaur, and the Masked needed to know that Riyan was about to become extremely dangerous.

But, there was something going on, and Kyven had to learn what it was. He looked down and saw the men and women filing out, all of them but a gray-haired man who was gathering up documents and papers, one who had been sitting at the head of the table. The Councillor, the one that headed the Council of States and sat in the Circle. Kyven dredged his memory for that bit of information, and came up with a name. Gerrad. Gerrad Blackspear, Councillor of the Circle and head of the Council of States, third in command of the Loremasters.

It was almost a perfect opportunity. In just a second, the man would be alone, and Kyven would be able to swoop down and abduct him, then rip every scrap of information out of him he wanted. Looking at the man through eyes open to the spirits, he could see that the man was heavily armed with at least seven different alchemical devices, including a weapon of some sort hidden under his surcoat that might be a shockrod. This was not going to be quite as easy as just dropping down and grabbing him, he saw.

Nope, not easy at all. A contingent of six Loreguard filed into the room as the Loremasters left, and the Councillor spoke briefly with them as they waited for him. They were his guards, his escort; clearly, the Loremasters still so greatly feared him that they would not move around inside their own headquarters without armed guards.

Actually, that was wise of them, since Kyven was lurking over them right at that very moment.

Maybe taking a Councillor would be a hard job... but Kyven's eyes narrowed on those hands, hands holding papers and reports that he could see overlaid with his spirit sight, since there was visible light down there in the council room from alchemical lamps hanging from the ceiling. Those, on the other hand, would be much easier to take. A Councillor would be a prize, for sure, but the records that the Councillor used were just as much a prize, and would be easier to take.

Stalking along the roof, Kyven watched the Councillor through the roof using spirit sight, tracking him. He walked towards the west tower, as Kyven felt he would, and Kyven watched as he talked with the guards there for a second and then mounted the stairs. He climbed up, and up, past the first floor, past the second floor, and quickly faded into the background aura, out of Kyven's range of vision. Kyven quickly cast the Blessing once again, allowing him to climb the outside wall, and he scrambled up the wall until he again got the Councillor in sight. He climbed up four floors, and then went through an elaborate process of getting past the guards, surrendering most of his alchemical devices, stepping through a device, and then moving on without any of his protections. But, Kyven could see that the *entire floor* had a faint magical aura about it, something that had been lacking from the lower floor where Kyven had been while pretending to be a page. The entire floor, the walls, the ceilings, they were glowing with a magical emanation, some kind of protection or defense.

The entire top of the tower was itself a single alchemical device, protecting the top three

floors.

That was not something that Kyven wanted to deal with while hanging from the side of the building, hundreds of rods above the ground.

Kyven descended one floor, the third floor of the tower with five above him, and channeled his spell of silence around a small window leading into a small office. Breaking the window would reveal how he got in, but he had a feeling they'd figure that out themselves anyway after they learned of his invasion, so he wasn't losing anything. Next time he came, he'd have to find another way in. He climbed down to the window, reared back a fist, and shattered it with a soundless blow, which was very odd since he couldn't see the glass. It was as if he punched his fist through something invisible, almost unreal, with only the sudden resistance meeting his knuckles that told him he'd hit anything solid at all. He felt around the edges of the window to make sure there were no sharp splinters of glass, breaking out the window to its frame, then he clambered in.

The thick pads on his feet felt the broken glass upon which he tread, but they were too thick for the glass to penetrate and draw blood. He was in a small office, probably some secretary or aide to a Councillor, but an office was an office. He channeled a very simple spell that created a very small and faint spot of light centered over and between his ears, a trick he'd seen Clover do many times, which allowed him to see the office in the world. A quick look about showed him that this was indeed an aide to a Councillor, Councillor Eredal Hardstone, and much of the correspondence in the office dealt with the Councillor's position as the deputy to the overseer of the west tower, the Councillor that was responsible for the general oversight of the continental affairs of Noraam. That made Eredal the third most important person among the Loremasters. This office was the office of one of his many aides, one that wasn't very important given that Eredal's office probably wasn't anywhere near here. Odds were, the owner of this office was almost never in here, spending most of his time tending to his boss.

The very first thing he did was gather up all the glass and throw it out the window. Glass laying on the floor showed that someone broke *in*, but if they only found little bits of glass on the floor and the majority of the glass on the roof below, then they might assume that the window was how he got *out*. It was a little thing, but misdirection was all about the little things, the attention to the little details that built into the big picture. After that was done, when there were nothing left but small little bits and shards, he ransacked the place. Quietly and thoroughly, Kyven went through every drawer, every cabinet, and every piece of paper he found, he skimmed over to see what it was about. Much of it was mundane information, about how many Loremasters were where, what they needed, routine communications, but he did come across one little blurb on a small scrap of parchment that had been scribbled in haste and thrown in the desk, nothing but a short note to one's self to remember to do something. The note read *troop movement report pushed back 14 June*, which was today. This note was about the very meeting Kyven had partially overheard, which showed that this wasn't something spur of the moment, something of an emergency nature. But, it had to be important for them to be having a meeting about it in the dead of night on a Saturday. Had they been waiting for some important information to arrive before starting the meeting, which made it run late? Did they have to wait for someone to arrive before they could have the meeting? Either was possible.

Another important paper. It was a report on the Arcan movement, with a scrawl at the bottom different from the handwriting on the top; *investigate possible ties to a major guild or country. Clearly this is coordinated. Find out who is pulling the strings*. The report was dated nearly a month ago, though, probably ending up in this aide's office because it was no

longer really important. And another blurb about the Masked, this one dated two weeks ago; *Councillor Ulis wants information about possibility a state has somehow gained control of a Shaman. This could be espionage, most likely from Flaur*.

That was something Kyven had never really considered. What *would* stop a kingdom or city-state of Noraam from finding a Shaman and offering him a job? And since the Shaman were all connected, well, that was something the council at Haven very well might approve, for it would give them access to that state's internal workings.

He knew that wasn't the case in this case, but it was interesting that the Loremasters had considered it. Maybe their doctrine of hatred towards the Arcans and vilifying the Shaman wasn't as deep-seated in the humans of Noraam as Kyven believed. Or maybe some king of Noraam was willing to deal with evil in order to increase his personal power.

That was certainly possible. Men would go to almost any extreme to gain power.

Kyven finished ransacking the office, finding nothing else of interest. He was now inside, and now he had to be much more careful. The hallways outside were lit, and there were six guards at the landing. Those six guards would see the instant he opened the door, and there was also that alchemical device at the landing he had to deal with.

Now, he knew, it was time to kill.

He would have to kill those men, and do it quietly, because if he raised an alarm, he had to eliminate as many guards that would quickly respond as possible. He would have to do it in such a way that he didn't warn the guards on the floors above and below, and didn't find himself facing a small army of pistol-wielding Loreguard.

The key, naturally, was illusion.

He needed to get all their attention, do it in such a way that they didn't spread out, and he needed to lure them all onto *this* side of that alchemical device. He would have to be out in the hallway so he had unobstructed line of sight, but also be in position where he wasn't killed if they pulled their pistols and started shooting.

This would take preparation.

First, he again cast the spell of climbing upon himself, channeling the Blessing into his hands and feet. Once that was done, he formed a very detailed illusion in his mind, a very clever illusion of something that the men wouldn't immediately believe, but would certainly get their attention; a *ghost*. Creating an illusion of a ghost wasn't that difficult, because it allowed him to take certain license with reality. The image he created was a young human woman whose lower body dissolved into mist, but was nude from the thighs up, which was all of her that was discernable. He made sure she was well stacked with very generous breasts and a triangle of pubic hair to get their attention, and a pretty face that was hauntingly beautiful, and a little somber and sad. Ghosts shouldn't look happy. He made the illusion opaque, allowing them to see through it, which would reinforce its ghostly appearance. Once he had his illusion fully created and the spell channeled, Kyven unlatched the door, sent the ghost through the walls parallel to the hallway, where it would erupt from the wall *behind* the guards. If he was right, seeing it would scare them and send them across the alchemical device, but then seeing it and comprehending that it was a ghost, a spectral image of a naked woman would cause them to think things over before they ran off to raise the alarm.

When the ghost was in position, Kyven climbed up onto the wall over the door, then channeled another spell. It was again an illusion, an illusion centered on the six guards, and because it wasn't a physical effect it allowed him to affect them despite the wall being between them; he could *see* them using spirit sight. The illusion was not sight or sound or smell, it was *feel*, an illusion of cold. The effect was dramatic. The six men all looked around in surprise as they started to shiver, as Kyven's illusion tricked their skins to believing the tem-

perature in the hallway had suddenly lowered, and when they had acknowledged it, he had the ghost slowly appear through the wall by the stairwell.

There were startled shouts and oaths of alarm, and Kyven used those as his cue to open the door and climb out from above, curling around the top of the doorframe, and then wrapping himself in one of his own shadows to vanish from sight. Maintaining two illusions and his shadow started taxing him, but it had done its job. The six men had indeed crossed the alchemical device and were staring at the ghost with their pistols drawn and pointed at it, as the image held her arms out to them longingly, her mouth open but no sounds coming out.

“What the fuck is that?” one man said urgently.

“It looks like a ghost!” another said.

“Ain’t no such things as ghosts!” another said belligerently, then he laughed roughly. “Ain’t nothin’ to be afraid of!”

“Well, why are you over here with us instead of over there with it?” the first asked, a bit acidly.

Now came the second part. He saw no guards hurrying from the other floors to find out why the men were cursing, so he had the ghost move forward, *very* slowly, as he crawled forward on the ceiling and the men all took a reflexive step back. Kyven was keeping the location of that alchemical device firmly in mind, wouldn’t allow the illusion to enter its area, so he had her move forward only a little bit, then look at the men peeringly, as if searching their faces, looking for someone in particular. After a moment, the illusion’s face seemed to fall, disappointed, and she turned and floated into the opposite wall, vanishing from sight. As soon as she was out of sight, Kyven released that spell, and then released the illusion of cold almost immediately afterward.

“What the fuck was that all about?” one of the men asked nervously.

“I still say that wasn’t no ghost. It was a trick! We need to warn the Lieu—”

He never finished that statement, for Kyven was now in range, and the men were all nice and gathered together. With his feet magically sticking to the ceiling of the passage, Kyven channeled his withering blast of cold, the only true area of effect attack spell he knew. A pale cone of magical light blasted from his extended hands and flooded the entire passage right where the men were standing, instantly sucking the warmth out of them. In the blink of an eye, frost rimed over their bodies and their skin turned a ghoulish blue-white, and they all were locked, frozen in their defensive stances, frozen solid.

The spell cost him. It was a very demanding spell for him, even now, and when the fox withdrew her power from him, he felt very weak. Had he not been hanging upside-down off the ceiling, he would have felt his knees tremble from the effort of holding him up. It was just the rapid succession of spells, that was all. He had been maintaining two separate illusions *and* hiding within a shadow of his own creation *and* he used a very demanding spell for him to cast all within a heartbeat of one another. He lost concentration on his shadow and felt it dissolve around him, causing him to shimmer back into visibility, and he just hung there with his arms dangling limply for a moment as his body quickly recovered its strength from the draining succession of spells. He closed his eyes and took several deep, cleansing breaths, then he swung back up to the ceiling, turned around, and then pulled off to drop to the floor. He moved quickly, breaking the frozen men off from the floor, then carried their statue-like bodies into the nearest room. One of them had been really stuck to the floor, so much so that his foot broke off at the ankle rather than breaking the ice holding the frozen boot to the floor. Kyven pried the foot up, the ice within the break red from the frozen blood and flesh, then he tossed it in the room with its original owner, who was now laying on the floor, and locked the door after he finished, hiding the corpses.

Kyven moved up to the alchemical device, saw that it was just like the one on the lower floor, and that meant he knew he could disable it before it did whatever it was it was supposed to do. He slid his hand into its area and opened himself to its magic, draining it away by attacking the crystal that powered it. But instead of holding it, he formed a bridge between the crystal and the spirit world, like casting a spell in reverse, beckoning the shadow fox to drain the crystal dry, to take back that magic into the spirit world. She complied, and Kyven felt the crystal within the device shudder as it was connected to a great power, a power that offered it absolutely no resistance to the flow of its power, allowing it to completely discharge itself back to where it belonged.

In the span of five heartbeats, the crystal powering the device was drained, shuddered, and then shattered into nothingness.

His Blessing still affecting him, Kyven climbed up the wall and to the ceiling of the stairs, then he worked his way up, wrapped within his own shadow to render himself invisible, creating a strange shadow that slithered along the ceiling. Kyven climbed up to the next landing, and peeking around the wall showed him that there were also six men here. A couple of them were standing near the stairs, and two of them were debating. “We should go down and check,” one of them said. “That didn’t sound exactly right.”

“Pft, Drent, that sounded like one of them played a joke or something. I heard one of them shout ‘ghost,’ for the Father’s sake, then one of them laughed. Someone was messin’ around.”

“I still think we should check. We’re supposed to investigate anything unusual.”

“Then go look. We’ll be here when you get back,” the man chuckled.

Kyven couldn’t allow that. If the man saw the missing guards, he might go *down* to sound an alarm rather than go back up to his post to tell his companions. Besides, it was the *perfect* opportunity for him, to isolate a single guard, kill him, then take his place with illusion. So Kyven followed him, crawling down on the ceiling as he went down. He stalked along just behind the man, and when he reached the landing and saw no guards there, he paused for a critical, fatal second before deciding what to do.

Kyven grabbed him by the neck, blocking his windpipe to prevent him from screaming in alarm, then used his Arcan strength to snap the man’s neck. The body jumped and convulsed a few times, and then went limp, and the air in his lungs escaped in a final sigh, even as the rather unpleasant smell of the man’s bowels voiding into his pants reached Kyven’s nose. Kyven dragged the body to a door on the floor and threw it in, but then he took the man’s weapon belt and studied the man’s face intently, then turned him over and memorized how he appeared from behind. He then left him there, belting the wide leather girdle around his waist holding two pistols, two *real* weapons, but also set the belt so a single flick of the tongue of the belt would pop it open and free it from his waist. He then created an illusion around himself that perfectly matched the man he’d just killed, and then went back up the stairs, careful to duplicate the sound of his boots on the steps by using illusion.

“They said they saw a ghost,” Kyven said with a little open disgust, his voice masked by an illusion of the man’s own. “A couple of them were trying to sound really serious about it. I think they were trying to spread their rumor.”

“See, I told you,” the man who had been talking to the dead man laughed. “You need to learn to relax, Vril, if you keep taking stock in all the crap the Loremasters say you’ll start seeing ghosts and Shaman around every corner.”

“Guess so,” Kyven said. “But one of them did sound really serious about it. Either he really thinks he saw a ghost, or he was really trying to sell it to me. He said it came out of one wall by the stairs, hovered there a minute, then vanished into the wall on the other side.”

“He was trying to sell it,” the man chuckled.

“He said it was a naked woman,” Kyven added, which made all five of them look at him, and a few of them chuckle.

“Now if I had to come across a ghost, then a ghost of a naked woman sounds like the kind of ghost I’d like to see,” the man grinned. But his grin vanished in a sudden explosion of shadow that went off like a bomb around them, plunging them all into murky darkness. The darkness swallowed not just light, but also sound, for the men tried to shout and found no sound, leaving them blind and deaf.

But Kyven was not blind. He reacted with blazing speed, using the skills Lightfoot had taught him, and used his claws to rip the throat out of the man to whom he’d been talking as the others went for the weapons on their belts, and one turned blindly to flee down the hallway. But they didn’t get the chance, for the other four men were gathered together and far enough away for Kyven to attack them with magic; only the fifth man was outside of the effect of Kyven’s blast of cold. Kyven constructed the area of that effect very carefully, not allowing it to intrude into the area of that device further into the hall, making it a very tightly controlled effect. But it was still devastating. Just as one of the men moved to lunge across that device, Kyven’s spell struck them, freezing them all instantly. The light of their lives wavered and then vanished to Kyven’s eyes, as the light of the man whose throat he’d ripped out seemed to vibrate, pulsate, and then it flared, and then it slowly faded away to nothingness.

That was another floor removed, but again at a cost. Kyven hadn’t used magic like this in a long time, and he was starting to tire. He spent nearly a minute with his hands on his knees, resting to recover from that exercise of power.

He debated for a short minute what to do. He now had two empty floors to search, but the bigger prize was upstairs. He could search these floors now and risk a roaming patrol finding two floors of guards missing, or he could press on and go for the big fish and pass on whatever information he might find here on these floors. He had to keep in mind that he was getting tired, that he couldn’t keep going on like this for much longer. But, he also knew that he may never get this chance again. The Loremasters would go absolutely nuts after this attack, an attack that left men dead and their building compromised.

The prize upstairs was a risk, but also worth it. After he drained the power of the device on that floor and moved the bodies into the nearest office, he started up the stairs.

This was the last floor before that magic that enclosed the top floors, though. He crept up the stairs, his ears straining for any sound, as he came up to the very edge of that magical boundary, that went across the stairs like a roof that only he could see, marking the beginning of whatever it was that did whatever it did. He approached the boundary warily, but having no other recourse, he reached out to put his hand on it, to try to drain it of its power. His hand touched that boundary, and passed through. But he couldn’t drain the power of it, because as soon as his hand touched it, he felt the magic around him and in him *drain*.

It was some kind of field of anti-magic, preventing any and all magical power within its area of effect.

Thank the Trinity he didn’t try to climb up the wall on the outside! It would have killed him when he hit this boundary and this effect cancelled his spell!

The denial of magic was absolute. As Kyven stalked up into the area, he found that even his spirit sight wouldn’t work here, and neither did his shadow powers. But that only made sense to him, since his innate power to control shadow was based on *magic*, just like any other monster’s powers. It may be a natural power, but it still required magic to exercise, and this strange effect eliminated it.

He saw, now. This was here to prevent any spies using alchemical devices, Shaman, and even spirits from looking inside. A boundary like this, it would extend into the spirit world. If the Loremasters did their planning inside this area of effect, not even the spirits would know what they were doing.

This was why he was sent. He was sent to go where the spirits could not, and find out what was hidden from them.

The next floor up was much different than the ones below. Kyven could only see using his normal sight, but the light up here was dimmer, giving him lots of natural shadow for his black fur to use for cover. It wasn’t melding with the shadows, but his black fur still made him very see in the dim light of torches just over the lip of the steps. He could hear voices up there, another post of guards.

He paused, considering. Magic wouldn’t work up here, so no illusions, but it also meant no alchemical traps, and no alchemical weapons. All they had would be pistols, swords, and other normal weapons. All Kyven had was the element of surprise, his mind, and his claws.

No. He had plenty of weapons, if he went back down and stripped the dead.

He did so quickly, going back down and stripping the dead of two pistols and several daggers, which would be a little clumsy for him to throw but would still work, then belted on two swordbelts to give him places to put the daggers and pistols. The pistols would be weapons of last resort, for the report of the pistols would alert half the building that something was amiss. But, the small round pistol shots could be useful, so he took the small pouches from the dead and combined them into a nice pouch full of small lead balls. He hurried back up into that strange anti-magic, and crept up to the very top of the steps without being seen, literally laying on the steps with just his ears and eyes peeking over the landing, lost in the murky shadow of the torchlight. He saw four men up there, wearing gold tassels which denoted them as officers, sitting two by two at a small table, facing each other as they played cards. But instead of remaining silent, they were talking amiably among themselves. Kyven found it a bit odd that these men were playing cards where everyone else was standing around, but perhaps being assigned so high up in the tower, and having the gold tassel, gave them more latitude for such things than normal guards. These men had more than pistols, though. Four muskets stood on the walls behind the men, and each man carried a sword in addition to two pistols in their belts. These men were heavily armed, and Kyven had no doubt that they were well trained in using them. They were four to his one, but they were not paying attention, and Kyven could use that. He’d never kill them all without getting killed himself, but he could get past them and continue up to the next floor. The top floor would be where the treasure lay, and that was his objective.

Getting past the men was a simple matter of misdirection. He took a single pistol ball and lobbed it over the table, where it landed on the far side. The *plink-plink* sound it made when he hit the floor made all four men look in that direction, and that short moment, Kyven literally leaped from the lower stairs to the upper stairs, slithered over the guard rail and up the rest of the steps, then turned to get out of their sight past the landing halfway between floors where the stairs turned back on themselves. By the time one of them looked back towards the stairs, glancing a dancing shadow out of the corner of his eye, as one of them got up to find what caused the noise, Kyven was already past the turn-around.

He crept up the steps on that side, fully aware that he was now between two guard posts and with two floors below him cleared, which would raise an alarm if a roving patrol came to check on them. This was a *very dangerous* position. He crept up to peek over the steps upon which he lay and found another guard post, but where the ones below were playing cards, these four, thank the Trinity and all that was holy, were *asleep*. Three of them had their heads

on the table, while a fourth, which was probably a lookout so they didn't get caught sleeping, had his head propped on his hand and his elbow on the table, with his eyes closed and his face holding a bemused expression. Kyven moved slowly and with absolute silence, creeping across the landing, up the stairs, and then he turned and got out of their line of sight, leaving him on the last flight of stairs that led to the top floor. He crawled up the stairs on his hands and feet, staying under the level of the light, then laid down on the stairs and peeked over the top step, to see what final obstacle he would face to get up here.

Four guards. Four guards, plus the six guards Kyven remembered seeing with the Councillor, six guards he had not seen go back down. They had to be up here still, probably in the Councillor's office, and as such he had to keep them firmly in mind. But, since he felt that it was suicide to even try for the Councillor, he would satisfy himself with rifling through an office on this floor, that would undoubtedly contain important information.

There were four guards here, guards sitting at a table to one side of the passage, two by two facing each other, with their sides to the landing. They too were playing cards, but it wasn't them that Kyven had his eyes on, it was what was on the far side of the hallway, down at the other end.

It was a crystal, a massive fifty point red crystal inset into the wall. That was the source of the anti-magic field, but in order for it to work, then the device itself had to be *outside* that area of effect. The effect wasn't a sphere, it was a shell, like a peach with its pit removed. So, the question was, how far down that hallway did he have to go before he got back to where he could use his magic? He had no idea, but that opened up a huge number of possibilities. If he got inside, he could use magic where no one else would have alchemy, meaning he only had muskets and pistols to fear. In there, Kyven could hold off a large number of guards, then, when he was ready to leave, he just had to remove that crystal then go out a window, which would let him get back down. Once he was down, it would be a matter of sneaking back either to the bridge or to the river and getting away.

But the trick, he saw, would be *getting there*. He had four men standing in his way, and six more lurking somewhere on this floor, who would boil out to stand between him and his goal if he got caught or those men had time to call out an alarm. Kyven slinked back down and took stock of what he had. Two pistols, six knives which weren't balanced for throwing, and a bag full of pistol shot.

A bag full of little balls...

A crazy plan formed in his mind. He could kill the four men, but not before they raised an alarm. So, he would kill the men, take one of their muskets, and use the bag of lead balls on the floor, scattering them in front of any door that opened, which should give him just enough time to get down to that crystal. Once he was again able to use magic, he could easily protect himself, meld to the shadows, give them nothing to see, and that would let him get into a room and out of their line of fire. After that, the alarm would be raised, so he would have very short time to gather information before he disabled that device and then made his escape out the nearest window.

Actually, that was a bit *too* crazy. It might work, but it defeated the purpose of him being here. He abandoned the plan, and abandoned the floor. He would take his chances downstairs, but what was more important, he now knew about that device, and knew where he had to go and what he had to do if he was caught or the alarm was raised. He would go *up*, not down, and make for that oasis of magical power, where he could effect his escape where he had a major advantage.

He returned to the four sleeping guards, and quietly, slowly, and painstakingly snuck past them. He kept himself almost on the floor, sliding by their table, the man supposedly keeping

watch with his back to Kyven. Once he was past them, he moved a little faster, but no less quietly, going to the very first door he could reach. The door was unlocked, so he opened it, darted inside, the closed it with painstaking quiet.

It was very dark inside, in what was clearly an office, but Kyven could just make out a candle and a flint and steel on the desk, what little light coming in coming through the window. Kyven first took one of his belts and stuck it under the door to block the light, then he used the candle and flint to get the candle lit, then he took stock of the room. It was indeed an office, an office that was richly appointed with very nice furniture, and a large tapestry on the wall showing an eagle holding arrows in its claws. The office had several cabinets in it, and the desk had deep drawers that, upon opening them, revealed sheafs of papers carrying the seal of the Circle.

Bull's-eye!

By the light of his candle, he rifled through the papers quickly. His eyes skimmed the pages, looking for anything that might catch his eye, like numbers or the words *Arcan*, *Masked*, or *troops*. He didn't have to look far before he found the first interesting paper. It was a report from Bevan Longspike to another Councillor, named Fradd Greataxe, one of their lower-ranking Councillors and an underling of Bevan. *Ensure all details are included in my report about the project*, the note read. *Include troop deployments and logistics involved for the expedition. Remember maps and Arcan slave numbers needed for labor.*

Project? What project?

He kept reading through the papers, and found another report that mentioned Arcans. *Estimated 5,000 Arcans needed for the project*, it said. *Also requiring 1,000 kegs of gunpowder for blasting*. He read on, and found that this was a recent enough report. *Arcan slaves are coming up short*, the report read. *Arcans are vanishing from the kennels. Alamar reports they can't supply the Arcans we need, even though we don't need them until the spring. They say it will take them years to rebuild their Arcan stocks if we can't find where they're all going. There's not an Arcan in any kennel anywhere!*

He picked up the next paper in the stack, it was a reply. *We'll have to go with some human labor*, it said. *Hire enough men to do the job. We'll commandeer all the Arcans between here and Deep River, mainly the mining Arcans in Atan.*

The reply in the next paper was neutral. *Make sure our Lord understands how expensive it's going to be to hire that many men for an expedition that's going to take over a year*, the report said. *And we'll have to factor in many more supplies. We won't have the option of just feeding them Arcan meat like we could with Arcans. We'll also need clothes, shoes, everything our Loreguard will need.*

The reply was simple. *I'll see to it. Just start making the preparations to move forward using human labor. We have to have everything in place so the expedition can move with the first thaw, and our advance force has enough time to dig in for the winter.*

That report was dated just three days ago.

Project... the Loremasters were planning something. Something big, something that was going to require a huge number of Arcan workers, and would also require explosives. For blasting, the report said. But what was more important, the Loremasters were going to march into the frontier, right through Atan, all the way to Deep River and probably beyond.

That was going to cause problems if they did this while the Masked were still working, for Deep River was the main gathering point for cells to take Arcans to send them on to Haven. But still, what purpose did the Loremasters have invading the frontier wilderness, and why did they need so many laborers? Were they going to mine the western hills for crystals?

He searched more, trying to find something about this mysterious project. For long, nervous

moments he searched, fully aware that at any moment he might hear an alarm. He opened a cabinet and dug through a series of old reports, months old, until he found a piece of parchment he very nearly threw aside in his haste. It wasn't a report, it was a letter, and it was the second page of it.

It was sobering. *The coming crystal shortage is, of course, the most pressing matter before us, the letter read, but this project has the unique ability of solving two problems at once. If it is successful, our crystal problem will be over, with the added bonus that we will control all crystals on Noraam, which will cause the states to be under our full control. That will allow us to begin the work to revert them to their original states. But additional to that is gaining control of territory beyond the present states of Noraam, fertile and productive farmland on the plains around the great Snake River. With this bread basket of food and our control of the crystals, we can rebuild Noraam to its former glory. And we'll also have the chance to eradicate the majority of the wild Arcans roaming the forests west of civilized lands, freeing it up for settling by human homesteaders. Just as our ancient ancestors spread west from the eastern coast, we will again spread from the original states all the way to the Blue Sea, reclaiming all the territory of the original Noraam.*

The discovery of the ancient Tree Briar site has been a true gift from the Trinity. The ancient records there will allow us to rebuild the machine that created the crystals, and since it is a device of alchemy, our most skilled alchemists can do the job. Though we still haven't quite worked out how to power it yet, I'm sure we'll figure it out once we get it built. While our expedition rebuilds the device, our other expedition will excavate the ancient ruins in the Snowy Mountains and recover the device responsible for creating the original Arcans. Thank the Trinity that Egra has such an amazing memory, or she would never have pieced it together! With that device, we can understand how the Arcans were made, so we might effect some kind of weapon against them that will make it easier to control their numbers. As you know, the unchecked explosion of the Arcan population is not just a drain on the dwindling crystal supplies, but also poses a risk to any attempt to settle the wildlands west of the mountains. If left unchecked, the Arcans will breed such an advantage of numbers that humanity will be hard pressed to hold them back. And Trinity save us if they ever start working together. I know many say it is impossible, but I have seen too many Arcans who are nearly as clever as people. They are growing smarter, old friend, smarter with each new generation, and we must do something about it while we hold the advantage in intelligence and before they gain an overwhelming advantage in numbers. Finding an easy way to kill them off, reduce them to manageable numbers, would be more than worth the expense. By understanding how they were made, it might also show us an easy way to thin them out. If worse comes to worst, we will eradicate the Arcans and use the device to make new ones to serve us, as the Trinity intended the beasts of the fields to serve at the hand of man.

The paper was like ice in his hands. By—what the writer was suggesting, it was *genocide*. The destruction of the entire Arcan race! And then—did they have any idea what that machine did? Did they understand that to create new Arcans to serve them, they'd have to sacrifice human lives to do it? And for the Father's sake, did they *know* what happened the last time the device that “created the crystals” was used? It would destroy everything Noraam had regained since the disaster! It would destroy the entire civilization here!

Holy *shit*, was this the project they were preparing to undertake? To rebuild the machine to create crystals... which would cause a cataclysmic explosion when they breached into the spirit world! They must believe that the destruction of the ancient civilization was caused by something else. Did they really think they could control that machine? If the ancients couldn't, what chance did they have?

Were they really so *arrogant*?

Dear Father, how could they do something so, so, so *insane*?

But three things were abundantly clear. First, the Loremasters were preparing to begin this insane plan, with that advance force. That had to be Loreguard, marching out to secure the site where they would build the machine, far from the civilized lands of Noraam. Second, it put the entire Masked operation in grave danger. They were moving Arcans through Deep River, and the Loremasters intended to take over the frontier settlement. Third, Haven had to know. They had to know this. Haven itself was in danger when that expedition crossed the great central plain to the Snowy Mountains. Their scouts might discover Vanguard or the mining colony, and then the Loremasters would know.

This, this couldn't be allowed. The Loremasters, they had no idea what they were doing. What destruction they would wreak on Noraam! Dear Trinity, what madness!

They had to be stopped. Stopped *before* they could perpetrate this insanity.

Kyven let the paper fall from his fingers. He had to get out. Now. Right now. At this moment, the most important thing that ever mattered in his entire life was getting out of this building alive, and live long enough to pass on this information. The lives of virtually every person on Noraam, human or Arcan, depended on it.

By the Trinity, shadow fox, I wish you could hear my pleas now, he thought furiously. *I would pay anything to get this information to you.*

That was it. He *had* to get out of this area of magic-dead. If he could get either up or down, he could contact his spirit, and she could learn what he had learned, and that would help protect the Arcans and Haven. Right now, that was what mattered most.

There were two guard posts between him and the boundary. One set was asleep. The other set was playing cards. With luck, he could get past both of them.

He slipped the door open after blowing out the candle and putting the belt aside, and crept out of the room with three daggers in one hand and a fourth ready to throw in the other. The four guards were still sleeping, but a new one was now awake, the one facing the side he'd have to go, his head on his hand and looking quite bored.

He couldn't get crazy. He was careful getting in, he had to be careful getting out. Despite his heart hammering in his chest, despite his desperate need, he had to be careful. He couldn't let his urgency get the better of him and make him do something stupid. He snuck past the guards once, he could do it again. Putting the three daggers away, he put the fourth in his teeth and slunk forward on all fours, moving slowly and with absolute silence as he approached the table. He watched the face of the sleepy guard intently as he moved by step by silent step, slowly, carefully, one cautious move at a time. For agonizing moments he barely dared to breathe as he moved directly in front of the guard, aware that any sudden move might make him open his eyes, but at the mercy of whim should he open his eyes anyway. Kyven nearly jumped when the man's chin slipped out of his hand, but he just propped his head up again without opening his eyes.

Kyven got past them.

He reached the stairs and scrambled down, to the middle landing, then stopped and peered down at the next set, so keenly aware that he was at his most vulnerable possible position, trapped between two sets of guards. The guards were still playing cards, King's Crown from the sound of them bidding, and Kyven stopped to consider. Below him, at the next midway landing, he'd reach the boundary that would let him use magic again. Those men were all engaged in the game, and if he moved quickly, jumped from the upper steps to the lower ones, he could be out of their line of sight before they could draw a weapon, even stand up. But he'd then have people chasing him, and he had no idea what was below.

That question was answered for him when a horn sounded loudly from below them. A roving patrol had found his handiwork.

His heart seizing, he moved instinctively. He lunged forward, onto the rail, and then dropped from one staircase to the other even as the guards at the table started scrambling to their feet. He heard a shout above him, behind him, and he twisted around the landing just as a pistol shot struck the wall not a hand's span from his head. "Shaman!" came a cry from above, while his ears were locked on what was below. The patrol below wasn't at the floor below, they were at the floor below that, at the first floor he had entered, which gave him critical seconds. The men above were running down the stairs as Kyven crossed the boundary, re-entering the area where he could use magic.

Almost instantly, an absolute *explosion* of shadow erupted around Kyven, as he opened his eyes to the spirits, cloaking him in shadow and rendering him invisible as the cool sensation washed through his skin and fur. He bounded out into the passageway, running far down the passage as he heard the startled cries behind, heard one man fall and tumble down the stairs. He took the pouch of pistol balls and tore it open, threw it behind him, and the sound of them rolling across the stone floor mixed with the shouts and the sound of the horn. *Shadow fox!* He thought in near terror. *Shadow fox! I need you! You have no idea how much I need you right now!* He ran to the very last door at the left side and pushed himself into it, then slammed it shut behind him. It was an office, like many others, with a *window*. He jumped over the desk and pushed it across the floor, pushing it up against the door, then he grabbed a small wooden stand and threw it on top of the desk. *I need to get out of here! Dear Trinity, I need out!*

What will you bargain for this service?

"This is no time to be asking for payment!" Kyven shouted aloud angrily as he turned and shattered the glass of the window with his clasped fists. "*Fuck you, I'll do it myself!*" He knew it was a bit silly to curse her in one breath and then beseech her for her magic the next to cast the Blessing, but for whatever reason she had, she granted him her power to cast the spell. He very nearly killed himself lunging out of the window, almost missing, but he started scrambling down the side of the tower. He could hear them above him, heard them stumbling on his pistol balls as they knocked doors in searching for him, even heard a few pistol shots and the report of a shockrod. He was hidden by the shadows so he wasn't worried about them seeing him climbing down, but they would also know that he was out of the building and flooded the island with Loreguard. Swimming would be out of the question, so he had to try to make it to the bridge. If he tried to swim, he'd be slaughtered unless he could stay under the water for a long time. They'd see his wake, hear him swimming, and then he'd get peppered. He dropped nearly ten rods to the roof, landing on all fours, then bounded with hard strides across the roof, getting to the side of the building facing the bridge, fear sending waves of adrenalin through him. He skidded to a stop at the edge of the roof, looking down nearly a hundred rods to see an *army* of Loreguard running all over the place, but what mattered most to Kyven, they were barricading the bridge as patrols roamed the coast of the island, trying to stop any escape.

Exactly what he was afraid of.

What he needed was a diversion, one hell of a diversion that would cause chaos, give him a chance to get past the Loreguard, disrupt their discipline. He needed, needed—

He needed a *fire*.

Easily done! The roof was peppered with skylights. He could break the skylights and channel spells of fire down into the rooms below! If he set fire to the building, they would be *forced* to divide their attention to put out the fires, which would give him a chance to escape!

He moved quickly, rushing to the nearest skylight, then he shattered it with a crushing blow from his fist. Below was an office, a nicely furnished office filled with all kinds of combustible material. Furniture, paper, a tapestry, even a carpet! He channeled a blasting cone of fire down into the room, and though it lasted but a heartbeat, it flash-ignited the carpet, the tapestry, and much of the paper in the room. He bounded to the next skylight and repeated it, then rushed to yet another, the same conference room where he'd listened in earlier, and set fire to the table below. He spent nearly five minutes running from skylight to skylight, breaking the window, then channeling fire into the room below. The effort exhausted him, casting so many spells so fast on top of everything else he'd done, but it had done the job. Nearly a quarter of the sixth floor was now on fire, and the Loremasters and Loreguard had a hell of a lot more to worry about than just him.

A puff of granite smoke right by his foot woke him up *fast*. He flinched away even as he heard the musket shot, then glanced up and saw a Loreguard in a window of the east tower, being handed another musket. Kyven had become visible when he channeled fire into the last room, and the musket shooter had drawn a quick bead on him. Kyven scrambled up a sloping roof and then dived over the other side, unwilling to let the man see him vanish and warn them he could turn invisible in the shadows. When the man lost line of sight of him, he unleashed a large cloud of shadow, then vanished into the shadows, using the cloud as cover to prevent any other marksmen from trying that he might not see. He left the cloud there, left it to keep their attention as he raced out of it and to the east wall, then tired himself out even more by again channeling the Blessing to allow him to go up and down the walls like an insect. He knew he didn't have much left in him. Channeling that Blessing had drastically exhausted him, so much so he had to stop a moment and pant to recover his breath. He couldn't cast more than one or two more spells before he was totally exhausted, but he needed to save that energy to give him control over shadow.

He had enough for one more illusion. When he got down, he could take on the guise of a Loreguard and join in the search... but he wouldn't be able to hold the illusion more than fifteen minutes before it tired him too much. He'd have to maneuver into a position where he could make a run for it, or hide somewhere and give himself enough time to rest. But where would it be safe to hide?

He started down quickly, as fast as he could go, watching the men running around under him, getting down to the ground and out of his vulnerable position as fast as he could. He got past the fifth floor. The fourth floor. He heard shouts from the third floor, shouts of fire. The second floor. He dropped nearly fifteen rods to the ground, then dashed away before he even fully absorbed the shock of landing, running far faster than any human. He rushed as close to the water as he could get before tiring himself with an illusion, weaving in and out among frenzied Loreguard who were shining lamps and torches in every direction, searching for him. He stayed wrapped in his own personal shadow and melded into it, much easier for him to do than stay in an illusion, nothing but a dark patch on the ground, a slightly darker shadow within the night, literally his own personal form of invisibility.

Shadow fox, he thought, getting over his bout of pique. *Look into my mind. See what I know. If I don't get off this island, you have to take it with you. Warn Haven. Warn the spirits.*

Now you are behaving as a Shaman, came her response. *Go to the bridge. I will ensure you make it to the mainland safely.*

He turned and rushed towards the bridge, running right past two Loreguard who seemed to see his shadow pass them, turning to look for a long moment... but by then he was gone. He rushed across the lawn, up to the barricaded bridge, and then he slowed to a stop.

Go to the water's edge.

He padded carefully down to the water's edge, a marshy merging of water and earth, filled with cat tails and marsh grass. He scrambled back as a pair of Loreguard rushed out from under the bridge, carrying lamps, but they went by him.

Go under the bridge.

He did so, stepping into the deep shadow, where the lamps and lights of the bridge and the Loreguard did not reach, a vast darkness only touched in the slightest way by the light. The deepest shadow... a place, he realized instinctively, that his spirit's power would be at its strongest, for she was a spirit of shadow, a spirit of guile and deceit.

She was there. He felt her beside him. She stood up, stepped before him, then turned and reared up on her hind legs. She placed her paws on his shoulders, and the instant she did so, he felt the shadows come *alive*. They swarmed around him, enveloped him, encompassed him, and he felt a strange cold shiver through his entire body. His spirit sight seemed to fail him, as the light of the life on the bridge above seemed to dim, to darken, to get lost in the shadows surrounding him, and then the shadows receded. Warmth flowed back into him, and when he looked up, he saw that the men who were above him were no longer there. He was in a dark room, and when his spirit sight seemed to reassert itself, he saw that he was under the bridge *on the other side of the river!*

She had moved him! She had taken him into the shadow, and just as he'd seen her do so many times, she vanished into it. But this time *she took him with her!*

Thus have you used up my favor, she told him, though she was very proud. *Your offer of sacrifice was your payment for my assistance. You made a good bargain. Now go. Go home, and do what must be done. And know that I am proud of you, my Shaman.*

Kyven climbed up the wall by the bridge, exhausted, fearful, but strangely proud that his spirit was proud of him.

But he wasn't home yet. There were now twenty guards up on the bridge, within a stone's throw of him, hastily setting up alchemical devices on the bridge, probably to either detect him or stop him. But he was behind them now, past them, beyond them. And as a bloom of red appeared in a window in the Loremasters' building, a fire breaking out a window on the sixth floor, Kyven clambered up onto the avenue, turned tail to the river, and ran like hell for home.

He was bone weary, but there was much to do.

Kyven had to break through Clover's clever façade in his vault to get to the message machine. He wrote out an urgent, desperate warning that repeated what he had learned, that armed Loreguard forces would be marching into the forests west of Atan and en route to Deep River soon, so they had to quickly change the plan the Masked was using, and to warn Haven that the Loremasters were going to invade the Snake River region. Kyven didn't know where, but they were coming. And he warned them about their insane plan to build a new machine to try to *make* crystals, as well as their expedition to the Snowy Mountains to recover one of the ancient machines that originally created the Arcans.

Dear Father, would Firetail have a seizure when she got that message.

He sat at his desk for a long time, his hands over his face, fear consuming him. He knew what was going to happen now. There was no choice in the matter.

War.

The Arcans would have to attack. They had absolutely no choice. If the Loremasters accomplished any one of those three objectives, then the Arcans and Haven were in danger. They could not allow the Loremasters to establish a foothold in the Snake River valley, anywhere in it. They could not let them come over the mountains. If the Loremasters recovered the machine that created Arcans, then untold thousands of humans may die as they used the

machine. They could not allow that machine to fall into the hands of the Loremasters, even though their crazy idea that they could use the machine to unlock the secrets of the Arcans and create a weapon to kill them wouldn't really work. And in no way, in no manner, could the Arcans ever allow the Loremasters to build the machine that breached into the spirit world. The spirits would never allow it, the Shaman would never allow it. They would do anything to stop it. To save the spirits, to protect the humans of Noraam, to protect all life on the continent, the Arcans of Haven would come down from their cold plain to do war upon the Loremasters to prevent that from coming to pass.

It had to be done.

Kyven thought that the coming war would be a war of defense, as the Arcans defended their hidden home from the invasion of the Loremasters. Never in his wildest dreams did he believe that the Arcans would be the aggressors. But they would have to be. They would have to find out where the Loremasters intended to build this machine and attack that spot. They would have to wipe out the Loreguard preparing to invade the Snake River valley and establish a foothold there in preparation for a major expedition in the following spring. And they would have to stop the expedition to the Snowy Mountains... though that would be the easiest for them. The lands west of the mountains belonged to the Arcans. That was Arcan land, Arcan territory, and the Loreguard would find themselves in a world of pain trying to beat them back. But the third issue, finding the machine they were building and destroying it, that would require the Arcans to invade *human* territory—

No. From the way the letter read, they intended to build the machine out there, in Arcan lands, away from the kingdoms of Noraam. They would build it on *Loremaster* ground, so they could make their crystals without fear of anyone interfering, anyone laying claim to it, and then produce their crystals to control the rest of the continent. Were it not insane, Kyven could appreciate the wisdom of such a plan, but the Loremasters didn't know the truth. They didn't know they were building a weapon that might destroy everything, and they'd never believe it if they were told. They were dangerous in that they knew *just enough*, just enough to understand what had happened, but not enough to understand why. Either they didn't know the machine they wanted to build destroyed their ancestors, or they arrogantly believed that they, with a greater knowledge of alchemy than the ancestors, could prevent it from happening again.

Good Trinity, did they truly believe that they could succeed where their ancestors failed? Or did they simply not know what terrible danger they were bringing into Noraam?

There was sound at the door. Clover stood by the broken façade, looking in with curious eyes. She looked completely unhurt. Lightfoot padded in behind Clover as she came into the vault, with Patches and Tweak looking in from the door. Clover came to the desk and put her hands on his shoulder. "Brother?" she asked softly.

"I... Sister," he said, reaching out and clutching her middle tightly.

"What's wrong, my brother? Are you alright?"

"I found out what they're doing, Clover," he said. "It's, it's, it's—dear Father."

"Tell us about it, my brother."

"I need to. Clover, you have to send word ahead. Firetail has to know as soon as possible. And you'll need to call on your spirit to defend the house, as soon as you can. Tonight."

"You set the fire," Lightfoot said calmly.

He nodded. "It was to keep them from chasing me down," he told them, then he blew out his breath and started.

Clover's jaw dropped, Patches gasped and started to cry, and Tweak just shook his head ceaselessly when he told them what he found in that letter. "I don't have any confirmation,

but—dear Father, think about it, Clover. Even if it's wrong, we can't take that chance. And I'm very sure that the Loreguard are about to march into the frontier. I overheard them talking about troop movements, I saw those reports about them making preparations, them trying to find Arcans to do their slave labor, and we know they've been preparing for something major. They've been recruiting and hoarding crystals and building weapons for this, for their expedition into Arcan territory. Clover, we can't let them build that machine. If they do—"

"I know," she said sadly, shaking her head. "They would destroy everything that has taken a thousand years or more to rebuild after the great war. Such a pity," she sighed. "They are either blinded by power, or they are fools. Either way, we cannot permit it. We just cannot."

"War," Tweak said grimly.

"War," Lightfoot agreed.

"Our poor people," Clover said sadly. "We are not soldiers. Danna has barely had any time at all to form the army. I doubt she's even truly begun! And now we must call upon our untrained people to fight against our well-trained opponents."

"But it'll be on *our* side of the mountains," Kyven said. "Even if we're untrained, let's see how well the Loreguard fights when they have no supplies and they face an opponent that won't engage them in open battle. We can strike from the shadows, strike and fade away, destroy their supply lines, strip them of any chance to hunt, and just bleed them to death over the winter."

"I'm sure Danna will do what's best," Clover told him. "Let her handle it, Kyven."

"Danna may abandon Haven," Kyven said darkly. "She may not lead Arcans against humans in battle, especially if *we're* the ones who attack first. She was never really committed to our cause."

"She couldn't!" Patches said urgently. "Not knowing what would happen, she could never do it! She won't be fighting her own people, she'll be *protecting* all of Noraam!"

"We can just pray she sees it that way, little one," Clover said quietly. "Let me call to a spirit to carry our warning, then I will make sure we are protected."

She was there. Kyven stood up, and Clover did as well, as they looked towards the door to the vault. She sat there with her tail wrapped sedately around her legs, her eyes glowing unwaveringly with green light. She stood up and padded towards them, then jumped up onto his desk and sat back down, wrapping her tail back around her legs. She then spoke, her voice audible within the room, even audible to Patches and Tweak. "*The warning has been relayed,*" she said. "*The spirits are aware, and Firetail and the council know. And they are starting to prepare. Shaman. You have done well, both of you. All of you. But your work is not done. Shaman. My Shaman,*" she said, looking at Kyven. "*There is more here for you to do. We need to know what they are doing. We need eyes here, and you will be those eyes.*"

"I'll do whatever I can, fox, you know that, but after tonight, it's not going to be easy. I didn't just sneak in this time, I set fire to their building. I think they're going to go just a *little* overboard with their reaction."

"*We know. But we are confident you will find a way,*" she told him. "*You are clever and resourceful.*"

He said nothing, just bowed his head.

"*Clover. Lightfoot. Tell him what you learned tonight.*"

Clover blew out her breath. "With what you told us, no wonder we forgot," she sighed. "But what we learned falls into place with your information, my brother. The Councillor wasn't home when we invaded his house, but we ransacked his office, and saw that the Loremasters are buying every crystal they can get their hands on, as well as trying to secure aid from Eusica. They want Eusican rifles in exchange for crystals."

"What are rifles?" Tweak asked.

"They're a kind of musket that have greater range and more accuracy than standard muskets," Clover answered. "Eusicans are much more advanced than we in gunsmithing, because they have much fewer crystals and rely on guns for their primary weapon, where Noraam uses both guns and alchemical weapons. Anyway, the Eusican nation of Briton has taken the Loremasters' deal, and are shipping rifles to Stinger Bay."

"What else we learned is that the Loremasters are going to take over the Free Territories this winter," Lightfoot said, looking at Kyven. "They're going to invade the mining villages of the Free Territories and close the mines," she told him. "Atan is going to be invaded."

"Which puts Loreguard in place to defend the mines when the other kingdoms of Noraam try to take them," Kyven reasoned. "Then, if they follow their plan, they can use the mines as cover when they start *making crystals*, so nobody knows what they're doing or where the crystals are really coming from, and that will let them eventually *buy* the rest of Noraam, which isn't far off from the plan we used to save the Arcans. They're going to be one step ahead of the rest of Noraam."

"Not for long," Clover said. "This is something we *must* get into public, my brother. We must send this to Shario, and let him spread the word. The kingdoms and city-states must know that the Loremasters are about to move openly, violating their treaties by invading and openly claiming sovereign territory. And they *must* know the Loremasters are looking to claim the wilderness west of Noraam to start their own kingdom. I'm sure that Alamar, Rallan, Cheston, and Phion would like to know about that, since they all sit on the border of the frontier," she said with a dry smile.

"So, things are coming to a head," Kyven grunted. "The Loremasters had a much more detailed plan than we thought, and they're starting to act on it."

"*And we must stand opposed to them,*" the fox intoned. "*The word will go out. Haven, the Shaman, and the Masked will come out of the shadows and openly oppose the Loremasters.*"

"And everything will change," Clover sighed.

"*Change is inevitable,*" the fox told her with steady eyes. "*The lack of change is stagnation, and stagnation brings extinction. The Arcans must come out of hiding and show the world their truth, or they will never be anything but the slaves humans believe them to be. Whether they flourish or perish depends on them. It depends on you.*"

"It is still difficult," she said.

"*Shaman, I have something for you.*" She lowered her head and moved her tail, and he saw a dark medallion necklace resting on the desk where her tail had once been. "*This will help you in your coming efforts to infiltrate the Loremasters, for this will hide your true nature from them in a way that they cannot detect.*"

"What is it?"

"*When you wear it and enact its power, it will change your outward body into a human,*" she told him.

"But you told me that was impossible!"

"*It is not permanent. And it only changes your outward appearance. Within, under that mask, you will still be an Arcan, and still retain your Shaman magic and shadow powers. But when you use this, Shaman, you will pass any test they use. You will appear human by every measure of mundane and magical inspection. But know this, Shaman. It can only work for one day, and when you use it, it requires an equal amount of time to rest as you used it before you can use it again. If you spend four hours appearing as a human, it will need four hours to recharge once you change back. And it can only work for you for a maximum of one day before it exhausts its power and you change back. So use it carefully.*"

“Like, when I’m about to go into the Loremasters’ headquarters,” Kyven grunted, picking up the medallion, looking like a woman’s face. It was actually very handsome, made of a dark, smoky metal that wasn’t black but wasn’t gray, like charcoal, and the medallion wasn’t very large. He looked carefully at the face on the medallion, and saw that it closely resembled Danna’s face.

“She helped in its creation,” the fox told him. “When you wear a human face, she grants it to you. And she will wear your Arcan fur while the medallion’s magic is in effect. So, while the medallion is in operation, she will look like an Arcan, and you will look like a human.”

“She did? Why?”

“Because she made a bad bargain with a spirit,” the shadow fox intoned with a malicious smile. “And, she was so worried for you that she was willing to grant you this protection to help keep you alive. She is still of two minds about you, Shaman. Part of her wants you, part of her rejects you. The part that wants you struck a deal with me to create this medallion, to help keep you alive.”

“I thought you couldn’t bargain with mundanes.”

“What we can do with mundanes is much less than with Shaman, but we can do some things. But, now that I have a hold on her, I can bargain more and more with her, until I have what I want from her.”

“And what would that be?”

She didn’t answer, just stared at him with her unblinking, glowing eyes. *“Warn the Flauren thief. Spread the word. Reveal the hidden Loremaster plans, Shaman. And then bunker down and prepare to ride out the storm to come, so you are ready to keep us informed of their plans and intents. There is much more work for you to do. But in the meantime, know that all the spirits are well pleased with your service to us this night.”*

And then she was gone. Clearly, she wanted nothing to do with answering that question.

“Now what?” Tweak asked, a bit reverently.

“Now? Now, we do as we were told,” Clover said in a businesslike tone. “There is much to do, my friends. Lightfoot, go get Shario if you would. We need to talk to him without delay. After we explain things to him, I will ask the spirits to help hide and protect us from the retaliation to come. We must seal ourselves up in this shop, our little fortress, until it is safe to come out again.”

“I’ll go see how much food we have,” Patches said, in a frightened voice. “We’ll need to

have plenty here, just in case.”

“I’ll bring Shario,” Lightfoot said, padding out.”

“And you, my friend, will go rest,” Clover told Kyven gently. “Your hands are shaking. You are so tired you can barely hold yourself up. So let us take over for you now, my brother. We will take care of everything. That is why we are here, to help you when you need it,” she said with a gentle smile.

“I won’t say no. I’m just... numb,” he said, clutching the medallion in his hand.

Clover helped him upstairs, then literally tucked him into bed. He was bone tired, drained, exhausted, and numb, and when she put him into bed, he found it impossible to remain awake.

He fell asleep with a mind all but reeling from revelation. He knew what was coming, and he dreaded it. But it was not his battle to fight. His place was here, in Avannar, using his illusions and his shadow powers to continue to dig deeper and deeper into the secrets of the Loremasters. He was the eyes and ears of Haven, their ear in the middle of the enemy’s den, and he had to keep them informed.

And there was so much to do. He had to warn them of Loreguard movements, Loremaster activities, changes of plans. With him in Avannar, he would save many lives by giving Haven inside information. The Loreguard would be unable to launch surprise attacks, their supply lines would be vulnerable, their plans would be known both to Haven and to the other governments of Noraam.

With Kyven burrowed deeply into the side of the Loremasters, they would find it hard to keep their secrets.

But that was later. For now, they would have to survive the certain savage retaliation by the Loremasters as they turned Avannar inside out searching for Kyven, searching for the Shaman that had invaded their deepest secrets, set fire to their headquarters, and killed their men, then vanished right under their noses. When they found out just what Kyven had learned, and what secrets had been exposed, they would triple their efforts to find him. It would be a dangerous game of cat and mouse, he knew.

And if anything, the coming fall and winter would be anything if not momentous.

Kyven fell asleep holding the medallion of Danna’s likeness in his hand, knowing that what he had seen tonight, what he had done, was just the calm before the storm.

The storm of war.

THE END

Thus ends Spirit Walker.

*In the story, Shadow Walker, Kyven,
the Arcans, and their human
allies struggle to stop the
Loremasters from destroying
Noraam in their mad
plan to try to resurrect
a past best left forgotten.*