

FIRST LORD'S FURY

BOOK SIX OF THE CODEx ALERA

JIM BUTCHER



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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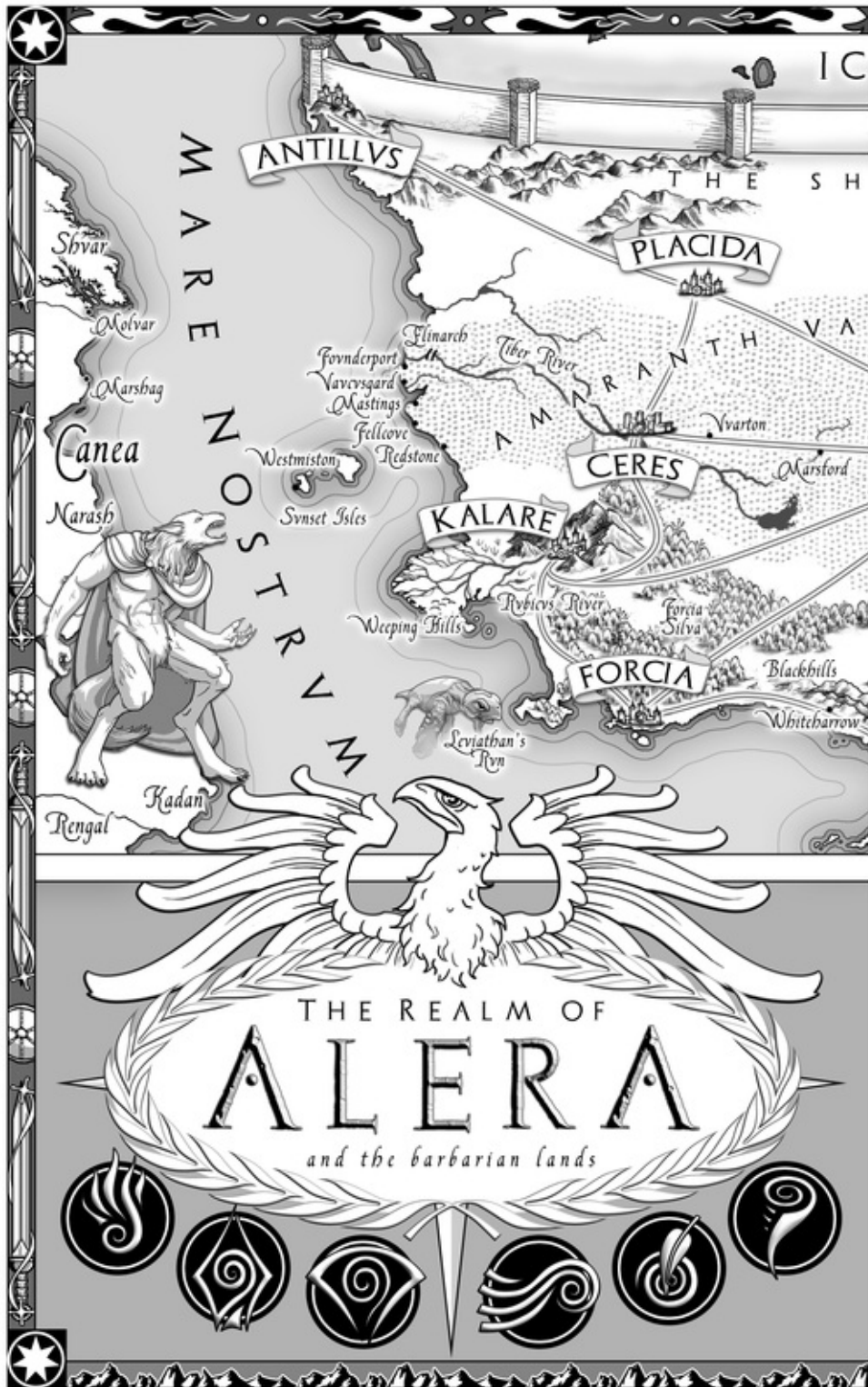
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*For our own Knights and legionares,
the men and women of the United States Armed Forces.
If you didn't do what you do, I couldn't do what I do. Thank you.*

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MAP BY PRISCILLA SPENCER



PROLOGUE

The steadholt was located several miles south of the ruined wasteland that had once been Alera Imperia, and it was an old one. Windmanes had not been sighted there in more than six centuries. Furystorms had been absent for even longer than that. The land, for miles about, had been a patchwork of farmlands, steadholts, villages, and roads for hundreds of years. Wild furies had been so few and so feeble that they were all but extinct.

As a result, the little steadholt had not been built with stone walls surrounding it, or with a heavy stone central hall for shelter from fury-inspired weather. It was instead a collection of cottages and small houses, where each family had lived in its own home, separate from the others.

But all that had been before the vord came.

Invidia Aquitaine stood at the outskirts of the little steadholt, hidden in the shadows.

Shadows were abundant these days, she reflected.

The newborn volcano that stood as a gravestone for Gaius Sextus, the final First Lord of Alera, had continued to spew forth clouds of dark smoke and ash in the days and weeks after its creation. Even now, the sky was covered with low clouds that would release spring rain in fitful sputters or maniacal bursts. Sometimes the rain was yellow, or red, and sometimes green. The clouds themselves were dimly lit, even at night, by an angry scarlet light from the fire-mountain to the north—and in every other direction by the steady, haunting green glow of the *croach*, the waxy growth that covered the ground, the trees, the buildings, and every other feature of the land the vord had claimed for their own.

Here the vord had driven their presence the deepest. Here, at the heart of what had once been Alera, they had taken the most. The *croach*, the living presence of the vord, covered everything for a hundred miles in every direction, choking all other life from the land.

Except here.

The little steadholt was green. Its kitchen gardens were well under way despite the fact that summer had not quite arrived. Its modest-sized field already promised a fine crop of grain. Wind sighed in the leaves of its enormous old trees. Its animals grazed upon the grass of a rich pasture. In the darkness, one ignored the eerily lit sky, the green glow of *croach* stretching to the horizon in every direction, and the occasional alien shriek of one of the vord, it looked like a normal, prosperous Alera steadholt.

Invidia shuddered.

The parasite on her torso reacted to the motion with an uncomfortable ripple of its own. Since its dozen awl-tipped legs were wrapped around her, their sharp tips sunk inches into her flesh, it caused pain. It was nothing compared to the agony she suffered as its head twisted, its eyeless face and branching mandibles sunken into the flesh between two of her ribs, burrowed invasively into her innards.

Invidia loathed the creature—but it was all that kept her alive. The poison upon the balest bolt that had nearly taken her life had spread all through her body. It had festered there, growing, devouring her from within, so swiftly and perniciously that even her own ability to restore her body via furycraft had been overwhelmed. She had fought it for days as she stumbled away from civilization, certain that she was being pursued, barely conscious as the struggle in her body raged. And when she had realized that the struggle could end in only one way, she found herself lying upon a wooded hillside and knew that

she was going to die.

~~But the vord Queen had come to her. The image of that creature, staring down at her without a ounce of pity or empathy, had been burned into her nightmares.~~

Invidia had been desperate. Terrified. Delirious with poison and fever. Her body had been s knotted with shivering against the fever-cold that she literally had not been able to feel her arms and legs. But she *could* feel the vord Queen, the creature's alien presence *inside* her thoughts, sifting through them one by one as they tumbled and spun in the delirium.

The Queen had offered to save Invidia's life, to sustain her, in exchange for her service. There had been no other option but death.

Though they sent a wave of agony washing through her body, she ignored the parasite's torturous movements. Like shadows, there was, of late, also an abundance of pain.

And a small voice that whispered to her from some dark, quiet corner of her heart told her that she deserved it.

“ You keep coming back here,” said a young woman at her elbow.

Invidia felt herself twitch in surprise, felt her heart suddenly race, and the parasite ripple inflicting further torment. She closed her eyes and focused on the pain, let it fill her senses, until there was no semblance of fear remaining in her mind.

One never showed fear to the vord Queen.

Invidia turned to face the young woman and inclined her head politely. The young Queen looked almost like an Aleran. She was quite exotically lovely, with an aquiline nose and a wide mouth. She wore a simple, tattered gown of green silk that left her shoulders bare, displaying smooth muscle and smoother skin. Her hair was long, fine, and white, falling in a gently waving sheet to the backs of her thighs.

Only small details betrayed her true origins. Her long fingernails were green-black talons, made of the same steel-hard vord chitin that armored her warriors. Her skin had an odd, rigid appearance, and almost seemed to reflect the distant ambient light of the *croach*, showing the faint green tracings of veins beneath its surface.

Her eyes were what frightened Invidia, even after months in her presence. Her eyes were canted upwards slightly at the corners, like those of the Marat barbarians to the northeast, and they were completely black. They shone with thousands of faceted lenses, insectlike, and watched the world with calm, unblinking indifference.

“ Yes, I suppose I do,” Invidia replied to her. “ I told you that this place represents a risk. You seem unwilling to listen to my advice. So I have taken it upon myself to monitor it and ensure that it is not being used as a base or hiding place for infiltrators.”

The Queen shrugged a shoulder, unconcerned. The movement was smooth but somehow awkward—it was a mannerism she had copied but clearly did not understand. “ This place is guarded ceaselessly. They could not enter it undetected.”

“ Others have said as much and been mistaken,” Invidia warned her. “ Consider what Countess Amara and Count Bernard did to us last winter.”

“ That area had not been consolidated,” the Queen replied calmly. “ This one has.” She turned her eyes to the little houses and tilted her head. “ They gather together for food at the same time every night.”

“ Yes,” Invidia said. The Aleran holders who dwelt in the little steadholt in cobbled-together households had been working the fields and going about the business of a steadholt as if they were not the only ones of their kind living within a month's hard march.

They had no choice but to work the fields. The vord Queen had told them that if they did not, they would die.

Invidia sighed. "Yes, at the same time. It's called 'dinner' or 'supper.' "

"Which?" the Queen asked.

"In practice, the words are generally interchangeable."

The vord Queen frowned. "Why?"

She shook her head. "I do not know. Partly because our ancestors spoke a number of different tongues and—"

The vord Queen turned her eyes to Invidia. "No," she said. "Why do they eat together?" She turned her eyes back to the little houses. "There exists the possibility that the larger and stronger would take the food of the weaker creatures. Logic dictates that they should eat alone. And yet they do not."

"There is more to it than simple sustenance."

The Queen considered the cottage. "Alerans waste time altering their food through various processes. I suppose eating together reduces the inefficiency of that practice."

"It does make cooking simpler, and it is partly why it is a practice," Invidia said. "But only in part."

The Queen frowned more deeply. "Why else eat in such a fashion?"

"To be with one another," Invidia said. "To spend time together. It's part of what builds a family."

Great furies knew that was true. She could count on her fingers the number of meals she had taken with her father and brothers.

"Emotional bonding," the vord Queen said.

"Yes," Invidia said. "And . . . it is pleasant."

Empty black eyes looked at her. "Why?"

She shrugged. "It gives one a sense of stability," she said. "A daily ritual. It is reassuring to have that part of the day, to know that it will happen every day."

"But it will not," the Queen said. "Even in their natural habitat, it is not a stable circumstance. Children grow and leave homes. Routines are disrupted by events beyond their control. The elderly die. The sick die. They all die."

"They know that," Invidia said. She closed her eyes and for an instant thought of her mother, and the too-brief time she had been allowed to share her table, her company, and her love with her only daughter. Then she opened her eyes again and forced herself to look at the nightmare world around her. "But it does not seem that way, when the food is warm and your loved ones are gathered with you."

The vord Queen looked at her sharply. "Love. Again."

"I told you. It is the primary emotion that motivates us. Love for others or for oneself."

"Did you take meals like this?"

"When I was very young," Invidia said, "and only with my mother. She died of disease."

"And it was pleasant to have dinner?"

"Yes."

"Did you love her?"

"As only children can," Invidia said.

"Did she love you?"

"Oh, yes."

The vord Queen turned to face Invidia fully. She was silent for two full minutes, and when she finally spoke, the words were spread apart carefully for emphasis—it gave the question a surprising

hesitant, almost childlike, quality. “What did it feel like?”

Invidia didn't look at the young woman, the young monster that had already destroyed most of the world. She stared through the nearest set of windows at the dinner being set down at the table.

About half of the people inside were Placidans, taken when the vord had completed their occupation of Ceres and moved forward over the rolling plains of that city's lands. They included an old man and a woman who were actually a couple. There was a young mother there, with two children of her own and three more that the vord had deposited in her care. There was a man of early middle age who sat beside her, an Imperian farmer who had not been wise enough or swift enough to avoid capture when the vord came for Alera Imperia and the lands around her. Adults and children alike were tired from a long day at work on the steadholt. They were hungry, thirsty, and glad of the simple meal prepared for them. They would spend some time together in the hearth room after the meal, take a few hours of quiet time to themselves with full stomachs and pleasantly weary bodies, then they would sleep.

Invidia stared at the little family, thrown together like a mass of driftwood by the fortunes of war and invasion and clinging to one another all the more strongly because of it. Even now, here, at the end of all things, they reached out to one another, offering what comfort and warmth they could, especially to the children. She nodded toward the candlelit table, where the adults actually shared a few gentle smiles with one another, and the children sometimes smiled and even laughed.

“Like that,” she said quietly. “It felt like that.”

The young Queen stared at the cottage. Then she said, “Come.” She strode forward, graceful and pitiless as a hungry spider.

Invidia ground her teeth and remained where she stood. She did not want to see more death.

The parasite writhed in agonizing reproof.

She followed the vord Queen.

The Queen slammed the door open, disdaining the doorknob, to shatter its entire frame. Though she had displayed it on rare occasions before, her raw physical might was unbelievable from such a slender figure—even to Invidia, who was well used to seeing earthcrafters perform feats of superhuman strength. The Queen strode over the splinters and into the kitchen, where the little family took their dinner at a table.

They all froze. The youngest of the children, a beautiful male child perhaps a year old, let out a short wail, which the young mother silenced by seizing the child and placing her hand over his mouth.

The Queen focused on the mother and child. “You,” she said, pointing a deadly, clawed fingertip at the young woman. “The child is your blood?”

The young holder stared at the vord Queen with wide, panicked eyes. She nodded once.

The vord Queen stepped forward, and said, “Give him to me.”

The woman's eyes filled with tears. Her eyes flicked around the room, haunted, seeking the gaze of someone else—anyone else—who might do something. None of the other holders could meet her gaze. The young mother looked up at Invidia pleadingly, and she began to sob. “Lady,” she whispered. “My lady, please.”

Her stomach twisted and rebelled, but Invidia had learned long ago that retching sent the parasite into convulsions that could all but kill her. She ate seldom, of late. “You have another child,” she told the young mother in a calm, hard voice. “Save her.”

The man sitting beside the young mother moved. He gently took the boy from her arms, leaned forward to kiss his hair, and held him out to the vord Queen. The child wailed in protest and tried to go back to his mother.

The vord Queen took the child and held him in front of her. She let him kick and wail for a moment

watching him with her alien eyes. Then, quite calmly, she held the boy close to her body with one arm and twisted his head sharply to one side. His wails ceased.

Invidia found herself about to lose control of her stomach, but then she saw that the child still lived. His neck was twisted to the breaking point, his breaths coming in small, labored gasps—but he lived.

The vord Queen stared at the sobbing mother for a moment. Then she said, “ She feels pain. I have not harmed her, yet she feels pain.”

“ The child is hers,” Invidia said. “ She loves him.”

The Queen tilted her head. “ And he loves her in return?”

“ Yes.”

“ Why?”

“ Because it is the nature of love to be answered in kind. Especially by children.”

The Queen tilted her head to the other side. Then she stared down at the child. Then at the young mother. Then at the man seated beside her. She leaned down and touched her lips to the child’s hair and paused for a moment, as if considering the sensation.

Then, moving slowly and carefully, she released the child from her hold and passed him back to the weeping mother. The young woman broke down into shuddering sobs, holding the child close.

The vord Queen turned and left the cottage. Invidia followed.

The young Queen walked up a nearby hillside and, once they had crested the hill and moved in sight of a vord landscape stretching out before them, stood with her back to the little steadholt for some time. “ Love is not always returned among your kind.”

“ No,” Invidia said simply.

“ When it is not,” she said, “ it is a kind of pain to the one who has loved.”

“ Yes.”

“ It is irrational,” the vord Queen said—and to Invidia’s shock, there was a quiet heat to the words. An anger. The vord Queen was angry.

Invidia felt her mouth go dry.

“ Irrational,” the Queen said. Her fingers flexed, the nails lengthening and contracting. “ Wasteful. Inefficient.”

Invidia said nothing.

The vord Queen spun abruptly, the motion so swift that Invidia could barely track it. She stared at Invidia with unreadable, alien eyes. Invidia could see a thousand tiny reflections of herself in them, pale, half-starved woman with dark hair, clad only in a suit of vord-chitin carapace that fit her as closely as her own skin.

“ Tomorrow,” the vord Queen said, smoldering anger filling the normally empty tones of her voice. “ you and I will have dinner. Together.”

Then she turned and vanished in a blur of green silk into the endless rolling waves of *croach*.

Invidia fought the sense of terror spreading through her stomach. She stared back down at the collection of cottages. From her place on the hillside, the steadholt looked lovely, furylamps glowing in its little town square and inside the cottages. A horse nickered in a nearby pasture. A dog barked several times. The trees, the houses, they all looked so perfect. Like dollhouses.

Invidia found herself suppressing a laugh that rose up through the madness of the past several months, for fear that she would never be able to stop.

Dollhouses.

After all, the vord Queen was not quite nine years old. Perhaps that was exactly what they were.

Varg, Warmaster of the fallen land of Narash, heard the familiar tread of his pup's footsteps upon the deck of the *Trueblood*, flagship of the Narashan fleet. He peeled his lips back from his teeth in macabre amusement. Could it be the flagship of a Narashan fleet when Narash itself was no more? According to the codes, it was the last piece of sovereign Narashan territory upon the face of Carna.

But could the code of law of Narash be truly considered its law without a territory for it to govern? If not, then the *Trueblood* was nothing more than wood and rope and sailcloth, belonging to no nation, empty of meaning as anything but a means of conveyance.

Just as Varg himself would be empty of meaning—a Warmaster with no range to protect.

Bitter fury burned inside him in a fire-flash instant, and the white clouds and blue sea he could view through the cabin's windows abruptly turned red. The vord. The accursed vord. They had destroyed his home and murdered his people. Of millions of Narashans, fewer than a hundred thousand had survived—and the vord would answer to him for their actions.

He got hold of his temper before it could goad him into a blood-rage, breathing deeply until the normal colors of daylight returned. The vord would pay. There would be a time and a place to exact vengeance, but it was neither here nor now.

He touched a claw tip to the page of the book and carefully turned it to the next. It was a delicate creation, this Aleran tome, a gift from Tavar. Like the young Aleran demon, it was tiny, fragile—and contained a great deal more than its exterior suggested. If only the print wasn't of such a diminutive size. It was a constant strain on Varg's eyesight. One had to read the thing by daylight. With a proper dim red lamp, he couldn't make it out at all.

There was a polite scratch at the door.

"Enter," Varg rumbled, and his pup, Nasaug, entered the cabin. The younger Cane bared his throat in respect, and Varg returned the gesture with slightly less emphasis.

Pup, Varg thought, as he looked fondly upon his get. He's four centuries old, and by even a reasonable standard should be a Warmaster in his own right. He fought the accursed Aleran demon on their own ground for two years and made good his escape despite all of their power. But I suppose a sire never forgets how small his pups were once.

"Report," he rumbled.

"Master Khral has come aboard," Nasaug rumbled. "He requests an audience."

Varg bared his teeth. He carefully placed a thin bit of colored cloth into the pages of the book and gently closed it. "Again."

"Shall I throw him back into his boat?" Nasaug asked. There was a somewhat wistful note to his voice.

"I find myself tempted," Varg said. "But no. It is his right under the codes to seek redress for his grievances. Bring him."

Nasaug bared his throat again and departed the cabin. A moment later, the door opened again, and Master Khral entered. He was nearly as tall as Varg, closer to nine feet than eight when fully upright, but unlike the warrior Cane, he was as thin as whipcord. His fur was a mottled red-brown, marked with streaks of white hairs born from scars inflicted by ritual and not by honest battle. He wore a demonskin mantle and hood, despite Varg's repeated requests that he not parade about the fleet in that garment made from the skins of the creatures who were presently responsible for keeping them alive. He wore a pair of pouches on cross-body belts, each containing a bladder of blood, which the ritualists needed to perform their sorcery. He smelled like unclean fur and rotten blood, and reeked of

a confidence that he was too foolish to see had no basis in reality.

The senior ritualist stared calmly at Varg for several seconds before finally baring his throat just enough to give Varg no excuse to rip it out. Varg did not return the gesture at all. “Master Khral. What now?”

“As every day, Warmaster,” Khral replied. “I am here to beg you, on behalf of the people of Narash and Shuar, to turn aside from this dangerous path of binding our people to the demons.”

“I am told,” Varg rumbled, “the people of Narash and Shuar like to eat.”

Khral sneered. “We are Canim,” he spat. “We need no one to help us attain our destiny. Especially not the demons.”

Varg grunted. “True. We will take our destiny on our own. But obtaining food is another matter.”

“They will turn on us,” Khral said. “The moment they have finished using us, they will turn and destroy us. You know this is true.”

“It is true,” Varg said. “It is also tomorrow. I am in command of today.”

Khral’s tail lashed in irritation. “Once we have separated from the ice ships, we can pick up the pace and make landfall within a week.”

“We can make ourselves into meals for the leviathans, you mean,” Varg replied. “There are no range charts of the sea this far north. We would have no way to know when we entered a leviathan territory.”

“We are the masters of the world. We are not afraid.”

Varg growled low in his chest. “I find it remarkable how often amateurs confuse courage with idiocy.”

The ritualist’s eyes narrowed. “We might lose a vessel here and there,” Khral acknowledged. “But we would *not* owe our lives to the charity of the demons. A week, then we can begin to rebuild on our own.”

“Leave the ice ships,” Varg said. “The same ships that are carrying more than half of our surviving people.”

“Sacrifices must be made if we are to remain true to ourselves,” Khral declared, “if our spirits, our pride, and our strength are to remain pure.”

“I have noticed that those who speak as you do are rarely willing to include themselves among those sacrificed.”

A furious snarl burst out of Khral’s throat, and one paw-hand flashed toward the hip bag at his side.

Varg did not so much as rise from his crouch. His arms moved, shoulders twisting with sinewy power as he flung the Aleran book at Khral. It sailed through the air in a blur of spinning motion, and its hard spine struck the master ritualist in the throat. The impact knocked Khral’s shoulders back against the door to the cabin, and he rebounded from it to fall to the cabin’s deck, making gagging sounds.

Varg got up and walked over to the book. Its leaves had opened, and some of the delicate pages had been harshly folded. Varg picked it up carefully, smoothed the pages, and considered the Aleran creation again.

Like Tavar, he mused, it was apparently more dangerous than it appeared.

Varg stood by for a moment, as Khral’s gagging gradually transformed to labored breathing. He hadn’t quite crushed the ritualist’s windpipe, which was disappointing. Now he’d have to suffer the fool again tomorrow. After surviving today’s conflict, Khral would be unlikely to allow Varg another such opportunity to remove him.

So be it. Some ambitious underling might turn a dead Khral into a martyr. It was entirely possible.

the ritualist would be more dangerous dead than alive.

“Nasaug,” Varg called.

The pup opened the door and considered the prostrate form on the floor. “Warmaster?”

“Master Khral is ready to return to his boat.”

Nasaug bared his throat, not quite hiding his amusement. “Immediately, Warmaster.” He leaned down, seized Khral by his ankle, and simply dragged him out of the cabin.

Varg gave Nasaug a few minutes to get Khral back into his boat, then strode out onto the *Trueblood*'s deck.

The ship was painted black, as most Narashan vessels were. It offered a stealth advantage when moving at night, and during the day it collected enough heat to enable the adhesive sealing the hull to remain flexible and watertight. It also lent them an air of menace, particularly to the Aleran demons. They were nearly blind at night and painted their own ships white so that they could see a little more clearly during darkness. The very idea of a black ship was alien to them, and darkness was a primal fear for the species. While their blindness and fear might not stop them from attacking, especially with their sorcery at hand, it *did* prevent any independent individual or small group from attempting to board a Narashan vessel for whatever mad reason it might concoct.

The Alerans were many things, but not stupid. None of them liked the idea of stumbling around in the darkness while the night-wise Canim came for them.

Varg went to the ship's prow and stared out over the sea. They were in waters hundreds of leagues north of any he had sailed before, and the sea was choppy. The weather had remained clear, either as the result of fortune or Aleran sorcery, and the fleet had made the long, slow trek from Canea without a serious incident—something Varg would have considered the next best thing to impossible only a few months before.

The voyage from Canea to Alera was a month's worth of sailing with a moderately favorable wind. It had taken them over three months to get this far, and there were still three weeks' worth of ocean in front of them at their current pace. Varg turned his eyes to the south and studied the reason for the fleet's crawl.

Three almost unbelievably enormous ships rode squarely in the center of the fleet, rising like mountains from the sea and dwarfing even the *Trueblood* into insignificance—but their size was not the most remarkable thing about them.

The ships had been built from ice.

The Alerans had used their sorcery to reshape icebergs calving from a glacier into seaworthy forms with multiple decks and a vast capacity for their precious cargo—all that remained of once-produced in Canea. Makers, females, and pups filled the three ships, and the Narashan captains of the vessels escorting her had orders to spill their crews' blood like seawater if that was what it required to protect the civilians.

The ships had enormous, flat decks, and no mast could stretch high or broad enough to hang enough sail to move the vessel, but the Alerans had managed to overcome the problem with their typical ingenuity. Hundreds of poles with crossbars had been placed on the topmost deck of the ship, and the deck billowed with every form of cloth one could imagine. They alone would not propel the ice mountains, but Tavar was, correctly, of the opinion that even a small contribution would prove significant over time. Then, too, the wind demons with the Aleran fleet had been tasked with bringing up enough of a breeze to lighten the load on the water demons who truly drove the vast ships.

Propelled primarily by Aleran sorcery, the ice ships had proved to be steady in the water. If the quarters for his people were a bit cold—albeit less so than one would have imagined—the

discomfort was a small price to pay for survival. Some of the sick and elderly had been transferred to Varg's transports to get out of the cold, but for the most part matters had proceeded with relative simplicity.

Varg looked up and down the length of his ship, watching his sailors tending to their work. His warriors and sailors were painfully lean, though not cadaverous. Gathering rations had been a hurried affair during the escape, and there were thousands of mouths to feed. Priority for food went to the Aleran wind and water demons, then sailors, with civilians close behind. The demon Legion followed, thanks to the necessity of maintaining their fragile forms, and last came Varg's warriors. The order might have been reversed during lean times in a land campaign, but here, on the open water, those most vital to the fleet's progress and purpose had priority.

Varg watched as a hunting ship sailed into the fleet from outside the formation. It moved sluggishly, even under full sail, but its speed was adequate to catch the ice ships. A massive form floated in the water behind the hunting ship—the corpse of a medium-sized leviathan.

The demons' work, again. Leviathans were fiercely territorial, but they hated the cold of the chilled sea surrounding the ice ships. Hunting vessels would sail out of the bitterly cold water and draw the attention of a leviathan. Then air and water demons would work together to slay it, somehow drowning the creatures on air even while they were in the water.

It was a dangerous business. Two out of ten hunting ships never returned—but those that did brought enough food with them, in the form of the leviathans, to feed the entire fleet for two days. The taste of leviathan meat and blubber was indescribably foul, but it kept a body alive.

Nasaug came to his side and watched the hunting ship with Varg. “Warmaster.”

“The good Master is gone?”

“Yes,” Nasaug said. “And surly.”

Varg bared his teeth in a grin.

“Father,” Nasaug said. He paused to choose words carefully. Varg turned to face him and waited. When Nasaug did that, what he had to say was generally unpleasant—and worth listening to.

“In three weeks we will reach Alera,” Nasaug said.

“Yes.”

“And fight the vord beside the demons.”

“Yes.”

Nasaug was silent for a long moment. Then he said, “Khral is a scheming fool. But he has a point. There is no reason for the Alerans to keep us alive once we have won the war.”

Varg's ears twitched in amusement. “First we must win the war,” he rumbled. “Many things can happen in the passing of time. Patience.”

Nasaug flicked his ears in agreement. “Khral is building a following. Speaking to gatherings on the ice ships. Our people are afraid. He is using that fear.”

“It is what bloodspeakers do,” Varg said.

“He could be dangerous.”

“Fools often are.”

Nasaug did not gainsay him, but then he rarely did. The younger Cane straightened his shoulders in resignation and looked out to sea.

Varg put a hand on his pup's shoulder. “I know Khral. I know his like. How they think. How they move. I have dealt with them before, as have you when you fed Sarl to the Tavar.”

Nasaug showed his fangs in a grin of remembrance.

Varg nodded. “If necessary, we will deal with them again.”

“ This problem might be better removed now than later.”

Varg growled. “ He has not yet stepped outside the code. I will not kill him improperly.”

Nasaug was quiet for a moment more. Then he looked back behind them at the tiny, cramped cabin built just behind the forecastle, the smelliest and most uncomfortable quarters on the ship.

It was where Varg’s Hunters lived.

“ Hunters do not exist to circumvent the code,” Varg growled, “ but to preserve its spirit against its every letter. Of course they could do the job. But it would only give Khral’s ambitious underlings additional fuel for fire—and a genuine grievance to rally their followers behind. We may need the ritualists before all is done.” He leaned his paw-hands on the rail and turned his nose into the wind, tasting the sky and the sea. “ Master Marok is the brother of one of my finest enemies, and seniormost of the followers of the Old Path. I have his support within the ritualist camp.”

Nasaug flicked his ears in acquiescence and seemed to relax a bit. He stood with his sire for a moment, then bared his throat and departed back to his duties.

Varg spent an hour or so on deck, inspecting, offering encouragement, snarling at imperfection. A ship was quiet, otherwise, which he mistrusted. There hadn’t been nearly enough adversity during the crossing. Ill fortune must be holding its balest bolt until it could be sure it was lethal.

Varg returned to his book, an ancient Aleran writing apparently handed down since their people’s prehistory. Tavar had said that they were not sure how much of the material was original and how much had been added in over the centuries—but if half of it was truth, then the Aleran warmaster described in its pages had been competent, if a shade arrogant. It was easy to see how his memoirs had influenced the strategies and tactics of the Aleran Legions.

Though, Varg mused, he was not at all convinced that this Julius person, whoever he was, would have had a very great deal to teach Tavar.

Sir Ehren ex Cursori walked toward the tent at the heart of the vast Legion camp outside the ancient city of Riva. He looked up the hill toward the walled city and felt uncomfortable for what must have been the hundredth time in a few days. The walls of Riva were high and thick—and offered him a conspicuous lack of comfort, considering that he and the surviving Legions under the command of the First Lord Aquitaine were on the *outside* of them. Traditionally, when attacking a city, that was where the enemy tended to congregate.

Oh, certainly, the palisade walls around each Legion were a perfectly defensible barrier, he knew. But the modest earthworks and wooden walls were not enough to stop the vord.

Then again, the walls of Alera Imperia herself hadn’t stopped them, either.

Ehren shook his head and brushed off the heavy thoughts with a sigh. There was no good dwelling over what even the true First Lord of Alera, Gaius Sextus, had been powerless to stop. But at least in dying, Gaius had given the people of Alera a fighting chance to survive. The fire-mountains that had arisen as the vord closed their jaws on the heart of Alera had all but wiped out their hordes, and the Legions brought down against all hope from the far northern cities by Gaius Isana had savaged the survivors.

Against any other foe the Alerans had faced, that would have been quite sufficient, Ehren reflected. It seemed quite unfair that such an enormous act of wanton destruction should prove to be nothing more than a moderate setback, regardless of who the enemy might be.

A quiet and rational part of his mind, the part that did all of his mathematics when he was faced with columns of figures, told him that the vord would be Alera’s last foe. There was no way, none .

all, to defeat them with the forces Alera had remaining. They were simply breeding too swiftly. More wars, in the end, came down to the numbers. The vord had them.

It was as simple as that.

Ehren firmly told that part of his mind to go to the crows. It was his duty to serve and protect the Realm to the best of his ability, and he would not better attend to that duty by listening to such demoralizing naysaying, regardless of how correct it might be in a historical—and literal—sense.

After all, even driven to her knees, Alera was still a force to be reckoned with. The greatest gathering of Legions in a thousand years had congregated on the open plain around the city of Riva—the vast majority of them made up of veterans from the continually warring cities of Antillus and Phrygia. Oh, true, some of the troops were militia—but the militia of the sister cities of the north were quite literally as formidable as any of the active Legions of the south, and smithies were turning out weapons and armor for the Legions more rapidly than at any time in Aleran history. In fact, if they could have produced even more equipment, the Realm had volunteers enough for a dozen more Legions to add to the thirty already encamped.

Ehren shook his head. Thirty Legions. Just over two hundred *thousand* steel-clad *legionares*, each one part of a Legion, a living, breathing engine of war. The lower ranks of the Citizenry had been distributed among the Legions, so many that every Legion there had a double-sized cohort of Knights ready to do battle. And, beyond that, a full bloody Legion Aeris, its ranks consisting solely of those with the skills of Knights Aeris, led by the upper ranks of the Citizenry, had been harassing the foe for months.

And standing by beyond even that force was the First Lord and the High Lords of the Realm, each a furycrafter of almost unbelievable power. There was strength enough in that camp to rip the earth from its very bones, to set the sky on fire, to draw down the hungry sea from the north, to raise the winds into a killing scythe that would destroy any caught before it, all protected by a seething sea of steel and discipline.

And yet refugees, fleeing the destruction spreading from the heart of the Realm, continued to flood in. There was a desperate edge to the voices of centurions driving their troops to drill. Couriers, riding the winds, went roaring into the skies on thunderous columns of fury-guided air, so many that the Princeps had been forced to establish a policy for lanes of approach to prevent the fliers from collisions. Smithies burned their forges day and night, creating, preparing, repairing, and would continue doing so until the vord overran them.

And Ehren knew what was driving all of it.

Fear. Unmitigated terror.

Though the gathered might of all Alera spread for miles around Riva, the fear was a scent on the air, a shadow hovering at the edges of vision. The vord were coming, and calm, quiet voices whispered to every mind with the capacity for thought that even the power gathered there would not be enough. Though Gaius Sextus had died like a rogue gargant brought to bay, crushing his foes as he fell, the fact remained that he *had* fallen. There was an unspoken thought lurking behind everyone's eyes—if Gaius Sextus could not survive the vord, what chance did anyone else possess?

Ehren nodded to the commander of the score of guards surrounding the command tent, spoke the current passphrase, and was admitted to the tent without needing to so much as slow his steps. Nothing much really slowed Ehren's steps these days, he reflected. Gaius Sextus's letter to then-High Lord Aquitaine had apparently seen to that—among other things.

“Five months,” snarled a rumbling voice, as Ehren entered the tent. “Five *months* we've been sitting here. We should have been moving south against the vord weeks ago!”

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