

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 1

Alps' back struck the pantry wall, the wolf huffing out a hot, anxious breath, hand moving down to long hair, at the level of his tummy. A sack of grain fell from the bottom shelf from the shuffling of his feet, forcing the wolf to consider where he was, and the chances of being caught in the main kitchen pantry in a lustful act. The wolf was blushing scarlet, gasping loudly as he looked down to see a white muzzle overtake his already heavily aroused, tightly swollen member. He gritted his teeth, lowering his own muzzle, hips trembling as he felt that sensual, trained tongue curl into a hammock along the underside of his girth, and warm, fervent suckling began. This was utterly heavenly, it was the purest pleasure Alps knew. He could not ask for a kinder act to be rendered to him, but... but what was he *doing*?

"Nnnh... We... We shouldn't do this. It would be frowned upon... yes?" he asked, his chest feeling tight with anxiousness. He looked down plaintively at the one who gazed back up to him, her hand wrapping around his aching, swollen girth and stroking him up and down slowly and rhythmically ahead of her muzzle. One violet eye and one green eye showed a nearly begging expression. Alps inhaled deeply. He watched as Luna, not taking her eyes off of him, lowered her head slowly and engulfed his pink cock yet again. Alps felt the pure bliss of her deep mouth sinking over him, her hand stroking his heavy sack. It tightened just a bit against his body, so eager to provide the priestess with exactly what she was after. "What if we're caught? Not everyone will understand." The white lupine male huffed, feeling her tongue swirl around his cock tip. Even Alps didn't understand. How could he let it come to this? He knew the truth about her now. Did that not change a thing? Luna finally slipped her mouth off of him and spoke, looking affectionately at the member she pumped in her hand slowly and wetly.

"Alps, we don't have to hide this. No one's going to judge a High Priestess. For the seven hundred years of suffering I endured alone in that wasteland, is it not for me to enjoy my freedom? So there are rules and taboos. What part did those taboos play in freeing me? You freed me. And you had no problem with this before. You were still my son then, you know." Alps grimaced, and sank to his knees, moving to hold Luna's shoulders and slip his member out of her reach. He didn't want to cause her difficulty in her transition to Amanian society. She frowned as his nose touched hers.

"It's just that those who would not understand would never understand, no matter how we explained, and I want your stay here to be pleasant, and long." Alps explained.

Luna lowered herself to all fours before him and looked at him with a stern expression. Alps gritted his teeth again. It was a scolding expression. She did an about-face and hiked her tail over her back, grinning at the younger wolf over her shoulder. "No, wait, d-" She sank back hard to his lap. As she did, she tucked her fingers down between her thighs to grab his aching shaft and direct it sure and true. He groaned hotly as he felt her hot, soft flesh yield achingly around him. She ground him in deep, her puffy mound fuzzily stroking at the base of his cock.

"Now... You can't say you don't like thaaaat..." she crooned softly. Alps throbbed inside her, holding her hips, trying to draw back, but her hips sank back with his, and he could not draw back enough, his back was to the wall. Why did he have to be so heavily aroused? His body was not listening to his mind at all. He could not control himself, and, shocked, even found himself pushing back into the priestess when he found he could to draw out. She groaned out softly, "Very good boy... Much better, yes?" Alps huffed hotly over Luna's shoulder. He couldn't stop. Was she using some kind of essence art upon him? Was this natural? Was he really in so little control of his body? He had given in to Rios and the stakes were possibly higher there. Was he so weak as to not control this aspect of his masculinity? Everyone had weaknesses.

"We'll get caught..." Alps panted softly, but his hips were already moving, his thick, longing shaft slipping easily, snugly in and out of his mother's clutching, clenching sex. This was so depraved, but he couldn't help it. She was right, he had done this to her so heavily and wonderfully before, and it must have made Luna sad to think she would be denied this from the only one left in the world that she knew and trusted. The former slave leaned over her back, panting hotly as his hips collided with hers.

"Just make sure... to lay it out over my back, Aris... Ah-hah-hah... I want it over my back... I want to feel it running down my sides... Nnn... NNnn!" the priestess panted happily. Alps winced again as she used his real name, another reminder that this was his mother, and what he was doing was so very taboo. Even growing up as a slave, he knew that the accusation of relations with a parent was the kind of wording hurled just before a fist. But here he was, not even slowing his hips anymore as he pounded away hotly, grinding in deep occasionally and loving the depth, the feeling of penetrating her lusty, needy body, and hearing the hot cries of pleasure that issued forth from her shaking body. He slapped his hips harder on hers. It was not taking long, but perhaps it was that sense of danger and forbidden action that was magnifying this. Luna squeaked out happily, and then gave an anxious, rising cry. Then another cry, this one loud, and sinking hard. Her pussy convulsed hard around his twitching, pistoning member, her honey splashing into his lap as he slapped his thighs hard on her haunches through it.

Then, Alps gasped as he felt his nerves all light up at once, responding rapidly to the knowledge that she was cumming. He slipped himself free in a jarring motion and gripped his meaty shaft, hand pumping only twice more over his length for how close he was, and he went off like a fountain. The wolf gave a wavering deep groan as white

ribbons of heavy seed painted over Luna's back and rounded motherly rump, the lady wolf in front of him lowering her chest and still obviously convulsing from her climax. She had pushed herself to the ground to slide her hand between her thighs, stroking her clit to stoke the fires of her climax through their full course of heaven upon her quaking form.

Alps dizzily gazed at her, as she fluttered her fingers away at her sex, his heavy, gooey stripes of seed clinging to her shamefully. Alps breathlessly watched her, unable to believe what he had just done. He was so very out of control, but as a slave, he would have to do anything his mistress had asked him, even if it was taboo or depraved. How was this that different? Was it just because this was the life he was trained and developed for? Or was there something genuinely wrong with him?

"Oh... Pop, what are you doing?" a different voice asked. He jerked his head up and looked to the now open door of the pantry. Rios was standing there with a younger male, perhaps twelve summers old. He had violet eyes, a dark muzzle and just a few speckling grayish black spots over his body, even on his tail. He had spiky hair, dark with light tips, a very unusual, but strong-looking lad. He looked a bit confused and stunned, but Rios looked utterly horrified. Luna looked up and murmured softly.

"Ah-heh... Heh... Looks like you were right. We got caught. Aris, be a dear and see if my grandson could run and grab us a towel." Alps was simply astonished at how completely unfazed Luna was by the scenario. Her grandson just caught her in one of the most compromising positions one can be in with his own father. What level of shamelessness was this?

"I... I..." Alps stammered. Not taking her staring, wide eyes off of the pair, Rios slowly closed the door.

Alps sat up, bolt-upright. He looked forward in his semi-dark bedroom, and then winced a bit as he felt the oversensitive pang of post-climax and hot, wet, swirling attention to his throbbing cock. There was someone under his blanket, having some fun while he slept. He pulled the blanket up and looked down with a sigh of actual relief at his beloved Nita. The same thick streamers of his opalescent release were on her muzzle, cheeks, and chest. He had been half afraid that Luna would be there.

"You started dreaming and you were... bouncing your hips so I guess I just kind of helped myself." Nita chuckled, reaching into the end table by the bed and withdrawing a soft hand-towel that she had taken to keeping close by for the sake of tidiness at night. She cleaned herself up a bit, but had to tend to Alps' soaked tummy as well. He panted heavily as he looked at Nita, so glad it was her. He was so very, very glad.

What was wrong with him, having a dream like that? Was he that afraid he was not in control of his life? Was it guilt from what he'd done to Luna, or guilt over what he'd done to Rios that provoked that?

"Heh... I am glad that you were able to enjoy it instead of things just going to waste against your back without you even knowing it until morning." The white wolf chuckled weakly. If that had happened, they would have awakened glued together. That would have been an embarrassing call for help early in the morning, to be sure. Almost everyone was aware of their relationship by now, but even the castle guards were a little mystified over what Nita saw in her slave.

"What were you dreaming about?" Nita asked, perhaps curious to find out if it was about her.

"Uh..." Alps stammered.

"C'mon, it can't be that bad." The queen giggled and flumphed Alps with a pillow. "It's okay if it wasn't about me, you have lots of really good friends, honey. In the end, I was the one who got the treat." The green-furred lady lupine giggled a bit, wiping a little droplet of his cream off of her blue silk night gown.

"Oh, it could be." Alps rumbled, suddenly trying to think of something else to say the dream was. Would Nita think something was wrong with him for it?

"You have no need of hiding around me, love. I will not change my stance on you no matter what you say, but I will scold you if you hide from me or don't say what's really on your mind." Nita sat up, stroking Alps' face as he caught his breath. He was a little stunned that he could sleep through what had probably been very wonderful oral sex.

"You may regret asking." Alps chuckled meekly.

"Let me decide that." Nita crooned.

"I had ducked away in the pantry with Luna, and got caught as soon as I climaxed all over her back by Rios, and what I assume to be my... maybe twelve year old son." Alps blurted it all out at once so that Nita would get the full effect and image to see just how willing she was to hear it.

The queen burst into a heaving fit of laughter. Alps furrowed his brow. It was depraved and reckless, not funny. He tilted his head. Why in the world was she laughing?

"Alps, oh honey, you are putting too much thought into that!" Nita barked out between fits of laughter. Alps flattened his ears a bit at that. He thought he was being too relaxed about the whole thing, actually. "Sweetie, neither of you knew, and no harm

was done. Even if you still bear some attraction, that's not abnormal. Even if you did know, some physical attraction would not be unheard of. Your mother is beautiful, and as a trained priestess, she is skilled at seduction so appealing that she constantly provides sensual and attractive body language which attracts every male in the castle. Don't be ashamed of it. Luna is so happy to have you back, and she doesn't regret what she did. She's not worried about it, and you shouldn't be either. If the thought is tangling your fur too badly though, you can talk with Misty. She's a good listener and knows a lot about curious matters of the mind." Alps sighed a bit, nodding at that as Nita held both his hands reassuringly. He looked down at his softening member. Nita may have been the one whose mouth he was physically enjoying, but it was his thoughts of Luna that made him so easily explode, unable to even wake up before it happened. Alps shook his head a little and hopped up to get himself cleaned up a bit more. He would probably adjust to the revelation of his mother's reintroduction into his life, and the reality of his bloodline continued by the Asuna empress. The dreams surely would pass. If not, he would take Nita's advice and speak with Misty on these rather embarrassing troubles.

"Today is the meeting for long term strategy, Alps. We should get cleaned up nicely. I am very curious to find out what you and Vhale have spent so long discussing." The queen undressed, letting Alps appreciate her beautiful body a bit, his tail wagging as he watched her. She padded into the adjoining bath and lit the water heater to draw a nice warm bath for the pair. Alps rubbed the back of his head a bit. That might well have been another cause for such an odd dream. There was a lot of responsibility thrust upon him of late causing him unusual stress. He had spent so long discussing possible outcomes of the recent revelations and had worked side by side with Luna and Vhale. It had been more pleasant than he thought it would be. Luna had stopped trying to "accidentally" hurt Vhale. The misguided Letai student who was responsible for the fall of his own kind had cheered up a bit with the prospect of actually helping to fix it. Alps had gotten to know both a bit better in the process.

Luna was very strong in her leadership role, but needed Alps to help her adjust to how the world had changed, who was in charge, what was good to eat and drink, and all the other general aspects of living seven hundred years after she'd been locked away. Vhale took to the changes a bit more easily, as he wasn't making many choices on his own. He seemed to be okay with being the queen's new slave, now that Alps had dropped that title. The former white-furred slave stood as Nita's life mate. There had not been anything in the way of official ceremony, but no one denied it anymore. Vhale himself was a little difficult at first because he spent so much time brooding about his guilt, but after enough prodding from Alps and Luna to focus on repairing the damage, he seemed to embrace the thought of moving forward wholeheartedly, and the mother and son saw him slowly change his personality to one of thoughtful selflessness. It was very hard to believe that this was the same one responsible for killing so many, and ultimately, while he still felt he should perish for his crimes, Vhale did agree that it was selfish to do so before he had bothered to *fix* any of it.

Alps felt that Vhale was actually relieved about his new role and complete lack of

any power. Only he or Nita could allow him to harness the essence. He was banned from its use otherwise. Luna explained to her son that Vhale likely felt safe for the first time. He was safe from making the same mistakes that had caused so much despair.

Nita beckoned Alps to the bath, shaking him out of his reflection. He happily joined her, embracing and snuggling as hands moved along bodies, and they shared a soothing, but ultimately invigorating grooming. They took their time, but looked ahead to the very important meeting that would commence at noon.

Bone had his own chair. That was the first thing that struck Alps about the meeting room as he entered. For whatever reason, Bone had his own chair. Misty was sitting by Nita, and Nidaja was at the queen's other side. On Nidaja's side sat first Misha, then Uri, and, much taller than Uri, Lyat. On Misty's side sat Luna, then Mannus, and then Bone. As far as Alps could tell, Reika was not even present. He took his seat at the far end of the table, facing Nita. Everyone greeted him casually enough. This was not exactly a formal meeting. The priestess wore a green and gold set of robes that she had taken to wearing since she returned, and of course, Nita was dressed in her usual royal attire, Nidaja in black leather armor gilded in silver. Alps himself wore the black uniform with gold trim that Nidaja had him wear in Jalana to show him as part of the royal house.

He was no longer a slave, but in truth it changed very little about the dynamic of his life in Diera. He was still loyal to the queen and when she took him as her mate for life Amanian custom subjugated him to her anyway. His life with his friends was largely unchanged, and for this he was very grateful. After taking his seat, he looked at the bone club, freshly painted and looking pristine with a new feather head-dress banded to the top and clearly painted interested-looking eyes. Alps watched it a bit as everyone finished their greetings. He could hear Bone when he held the thing; it had essence of its own. The unusual implement that Reika used as a weapon, and as a friend, was intelligent and free-thinking, somehow alive and not. It existed in some way between the world of the living and somewhere else. Alps knew that the link was to that strange realm he was still only just learning about... The nether. Could such a thing connected to that place be trusted to sit in at a meeting? He supposed that it did not make much difference. If Bone was a spy, their endeavors would have long since ended. Lyat seemed to notice Alps perplexed by the weapon's lone presence.

"Sister is wanting Bone to be in meeting because she is being busy." Lyat said in his deep, raspy tone. Alps regarded the hyena, clad in his own leather armor, looking a lot more dangerous than Nidaja, and considerably larger. His spiky crimson hair was carefully groomed and styled to the form that he seemed to feel made him a more fearsome foe. The strong warrior had accompanied his sister to Diera to give the crystal to Nita, risking his very life to do so in order to bring the white wolf home. Nita's beloved had locked himself and the general in the crystal with a Shadowfall spell. It was testament to Lyat's bravery and sense of duty, as this dangerous act had been

committed to protect Lyat's homeland and the lives of his loved ones. Alps arched a brow at the hyena's comment.

"Busy? Doing what? She didn't get herself a job during your short stay, did she?" the wolf asked. He had assumed that the royal family was tending to their needs while they were in the city, so there would have been little cause for the younger (more unstable) female hyena to have to find work, and they were not allowed to wander the city without guards to protect them from misunderstanding citizens of Diera anyway. Lyat shrugged a bit, his flaring black pauldrons lifting a bit.

"She is thinking we leave soon. Says she is being friendly with black-furred guard person before she leaves. Reika is being nice to him while we stay, and he is being nice to her, so she is being sure they is friends." He said. Nita looked up at that, flattening her ears in apparent disbelief.

"Wait, Uncle Lunar is? She's friends with Lunar is?" she asked.

"Yes, that is being the name." Lyat stated.

"Huh..." Nidaja mused. "I would not have expected him to like hanging around someone so unpredictable."

"She is not the type to be caring if he likes it." Lyat explained.

"Oh dear." Nita murmured. "I'm sure he will be fine. Anyway, the uh... Bone... is here in her stead, as Lyat has said. She seems sure that her weapon will fill her in on everything." The queen shrugged. Nidaja had explained Bone to her, but the queen was still a bit skeptical to the idea. Alps did not want to push the subject because he felt that his own experiences with the matter would make the queen uncomfortable and he didn't know enough yet to tell her any different than what she might fear.

"Now that we are all here, I suggest we discuss the business at hand." Misty proclaimed, trying to put the moment back on track. As head of the High Council, she was often charged with doing exactly that. Alps nodded and spoke.

"Right. For the past three months since Vhale has been back from his isolation in the wastelands of his own design, I have given a great deal of thought, and spoken at length with High Priestess Luna and Vhale himself over what possible options we have for dealing with this dark avatar of the essence." The former slave leaned over the table. Everyone peered at him, transfixed, hanging on his every word. Alps had to pause for a moment to take stock of the absurdity of the scenario. A couple years before this, he was living in Luca unable to even determine his own meals, much less the course of action for an embattled people.

"Go on, Aris." Luna prodded, seeing her son falter a little to appreciate the moment. Alps looked back to her, and felt his ears warm as images of the previous

night's dream flooded his mind. He cleared his throat and looked back at Nita quickly. Her own ears tinted rose as she seemed to realize that Alps had thought about it. She smiled to him reassuringly, however. Alps continued.

"Ah, yes. Um. The course before us will be difficult and full of risk no matter which path we take. However, Luna and her majesty both agree that the most likely course to succeed will not be a direct attempt at vanquishing our foe. He might well expect us to take that action if he felt we had the capability. We should not let him suspect even for a second that the balance has changed at all. We do not, as of yet, have the ability to take him on alone, much less his army. Our very best option would be to give us more time, to push back his army and prevent them from attacking us, at least until he can recover his losses or select a new strategy entirely." Nidaja broke in softly,

"The spirits of Silverlight had a similar plan, if you recall, snuffing small bases and causing him to have to micromanage his assets to slow him down." The general leaned forward a bit. She certainly had every right to interject in a meeting about strategy. "As I remember, it was neither economical nor efficient. Forcing a stalemate is only possible if we have similar strength. We do not." The white-furred male nodded to his lover and general.

"Right, so we cannot take the same course that we have been on until now. I have an issue of my own, a responsibility to the Asuna, that I have to take care of as well. This allowed me to ponder other options that we would never have considered before, but this has been a very dramatic change to take into account." Alps looked at Lyat, who nodded sagely. Even though Alps had adopted the Asuna into his plans for the future primarily because Empress Rios had forced him into siring a child for her, he was very adamant that Lyat's people had been abused long enough. Even if Rios did not now carry his child, he'd protect them. He would fight for them, and Nita had told him she was proud of him for it. The former slave continued, his convictions justified anew in his glance to the appreciative Lyat. "It is fortunate then that the best possible solution for the first problem lies in my conviction to solving the second. If we drove back or destroyed a large number of the avatar's army, it would not do us much good in the long run. He would have a bunch of new soldiers in short order because he works the Asuna to death in his nightmare mines and Uruk golem assembly lines. The first thing I shall do is allow Whale to explain something about how the Uruk work that no one this day in age knew or remembered." The white lupine male gave a nod to the black-furred one, who sat forward at the table a bit, looking uneasily at the bone. It seemed to really bother him. Alps was sure that it was because Mannus could see the glow of the essence around the weapon quite clearly. Alps had explained a little about it when they talked about the Nether, but this was actually the first time Whale had really been able to look at the thing. Breaking his distraction, he looked up and cleared his throat.

"Yes. It was not widely known even seven hundred years ago." Whale stated uneasily. He had not been able to talk to many people since he had been released from the crystal, and had not been able to leave the castle. He seemed a little awkward

talking at all. "Raise your hand if you know how the Uruk are controlled." He stated. Alps looked at the young-looking former warlord curiously. He stood up, hands on the table in his black robes with silver trim, long hair spilling down his back, and tendrils of it laying in front of his eyes occasionally. Whale was a brilliant student before the war, so he seemed to better handle a meeting like a classroom, which was his only social experience before turning his back on the Letai. Misty raised her hand. Nita and Nidaja did as well. Alps and Luna, being a part of the planning process, obviously knew.

"Did Bone raise his hand? I can't tell." Nita stated. Nidaja chuckled at that. It was good to see her being a little light hearted, given how serious the matters at hand were. Misty spoke up.

"The crystals in their bodies, usually represented like glowing eyes, are imbued with the will of their maker, and are controlled remotely. The incredible power it must take to run entire armies all at once fighting on the battlefield is a testament to how immense the power of this 'Avatar' is." She seemed very dark in how she explained her understanding of this. It was perhaps to remind Nita that this was a very serious meeting.

"You are actually only part right." Whale stated. Misty furrowed her brow. Being proved anything but entirely right was probably not something she was used to. He explained. "You see, the crystals take the commands of their master, but the Uruk are not mere puppets. They do not perform action by action. They have a set of instructions permanently written into them in silver and essence, a very unique use of crystal-smithing that I pioneered. Are you familiar with the art of crystal-smithing at all?" he asked. Misty held her head up proudly, seeming eager to redeem her wisdom.

"Certainly. Those who could use the essence to a high degree could take purified sands and forge them to crystal, and in the process create essence-charged seals in the crystal with silver dust. Those seals would allow the crystal to perform a simple task when activated by essence. Many Letai relics that you still find occasionally today were made this way. They can provide light, or create heat or fire, or even heal people... Some were even weapons near the end of the Letai's struggle. Many legends exist about common items with those crystals inside them. There is an entire black market reserved for supposed Letai relics based on mere supposition that a crystal exists within the item." Mannus nodded at the head of the High Council. He spoke up after she stated her knowledge.

"Correct. The Shadowfall crystals are made in exactly this way, but are obscenely more complex than a light or healing crystal, having hundreds of seals in dozens of layers inside them to make them work." Misty widened her eyes at actually learning of the level of complexity. "You see, it may seem like it, but controlling the Uruk has never been about a level of extreme power. It was never about me being that much more capable of using the essence than any other Letai. It's about how complex the crystals can be made, and just what they will do when they react to the energy provided. The Shadowfall crystals take a lot of power to activate because of what you are making

them do. You have to have far, far more power than one Letai is capable of on their own. You have to tap into the Nether and draw upon forbidden power, so that has little to do with one's own essence. However, the crystals used for the Uruk to give them life require only a little constant energy, but they still get that from the Nether which their crystals are lightly linked to, which means that they do not need someone providing them essence close by to function."

"So, the avatar is not pushing out his essence all the way across the continent?" Misty asked, gleaning clarification.

"Correct. From afar, he need only provide an instruction via the essence. Not a puppet string, merely a switch. This can be done over pretty vast distances. The crystals each Uruk has are extremely complex. The Shadowfall has a few hundred patterns in it to make it work, and relies on intense energy, but each crystal in an Uruk is just as complex, and can contain entirely different instructions to allow them to solve simple problems on their own. Navigating, defending, attacking, building, moving... Different patterns allow it to do different things. It gives it the illusion of responding to their master's intelligence. The more crystals an Uruk has, the wider the variety of things it can do, some even have the ability to use other essence crystals, like attack and defense techniques. These are beautifully complex golems that could very well be used for mining, tending fields, and building cities." Uri cut in.

"So wait... Why the fuck doesn't Mannus... I mean... the avatar... Why doesn't he just use the Uruk to mine for the crystals and build more Uruk? Why keep the Asuna around to do it?" Lyat looked a little pained at that, given the other option available to the avatar if he didn't need the Asuna for anything. Vhale answered.

"He doesn't need them to build the Uruk, this is true, however he thrives off of the suffering this slavery causes, both to the ones working themselves to death in the mines, and to their families who have to send their children to die in this horrible fashion. The fact that he has the Asuna doing it instead of other Uruk just gives him more Uruk to use to wage war and spread suffering to increase his power. Ultimately, if he wanted to, he could do without the Asuna at this point." Lyat sighed a bit at that. "However, there is one thing he cannot use the Uruk to do. It is something that he only does himself, I am sure, or leaves to those who he feels are the most loyal if such a thing exists. And this is where our opportunity lies." Nita and Nidaja perked up a bit.

"Opportunity?" Nita asked. "Well here is the part I wanted to know about the most!" Nidaja nodded to her sister. Alps resumed the explanation, garnering a relieved look from Vhale. He did not like public speaking, it seemed. Alps was learning to deal with it.

"The avatar can only send commands to the Uruk over a certain distance. It's based on the horizon. If you go too far, the command cannot "see" the Uruk, and they will not react. To counter this, there are special crystals set up in guarded locations. These are called whispering crystals. They take a message he provides, and they send

it to all the Uruk within range, and to other whispering crystals. These crystals are typically set up in high locations inside Uruk bases, very heavily guarded.” Nita and Nidaja listened as Alps explained. Vhale cut in briefly for clarity.

“I used to make the whispering crystals myself, and they are rather simple, but they do represent a challenge in dealing with the Uruk and their growing territory. The general idea is, one cannot send a request or a command to the Uruk beyond the range of the crystal. Let’s say there is a crystal at the front line, as far as the territory goes, and you send a bunch of Uruk out to the edge of its range. Then someone destroys the only whispering crystal that’s able to reach the Uruk. The Uruk’s crystals go dark and while it can defend itself when attacked, it won’t perform any other task. They are essentially harmless if you don’t provoke them. They can be disarmed carefully and dispatched afterwards with a bit of time. It’s not very hard.” Everyone at the table seemed to get the idea of where the plan was going at the same time.

“So, we intend to destroy a bunch of these Whispering Crystals to push back the front line and defend our lands from the Avatar.” Nidaja stated bluntly. “The Avatar will figure out what we are up to and bring death upon us very quickly I assume, and probably the Asuna too. Besides, to destroy a significant number of these bases, we would need a much larger army than we have, we would be unable to defend our border towns, which might immediately be attacked when we started our offensive, and we would lose hundreds or even thousands of lives in the process. It’s not a terrible choice; we just don’t have the capability.” Alps quietly listened to Nidaja, and nodded, smiling. The smile seemed to disarm her a bit.

“This is where the plan has a more clever shape.” The former slave leaned over the table a bit, standing, to look Nita and the others in the eyes. “Neit, our little burglar friend, was kind enough to provide us with information about someone who had firsthand knowledge of Uruk bases going deep into the avatar’s territory. Her knowledge of the current landscape was needed because it verified that a weakness that Vhale never resolved still exists.” The former warlord nodded at Alps’ statement in agreement.

“A weakness? *This* I want to hear.” Nidaja stated. She got confirmation of support in that from Misha and Uri. Alps unfolded a map that he had brought with him, and placed it unfurled on the table. He showed where Jalana was, on the coast, and drew a line east northeast across the map with his claw tip as he spoke.

“This takes us through the heart of our holdings in Amani territory, off to the northern edge of the Asuna territories, bordered along the north by steep, nearly impassable mountains. On the far eastern corridor of the Asuna territory, all that exists beyond are the ruins of the Letai homeland, the avatar’s territory. There is a half-ring of mountains, sheer cliffs almost completely impassable, except for right here.” Alps pointed to a small point where the mountains seemed to be pinched together. “Here, there is a narrow, but long and winding pass through the otherwise impossibly treacherous mountains. In this pass, there are two forts held by the Uruk, and two

Whispering Crystals. These were established pretty early in the war, when there was not even a fortress around the crystals. Vhale himself was posting the things to extend his control over the Uruk outward into Amani territory in his hunt for the fleeing Letai.” The pass was not very clear on the map, but it was there. The general rubbed her chin softly as she considered this, seeming to struggle with herself on how good this news actually was. She finally spoke again.

“So if we took them out... The Uruk would just stand around doing nothing until he could replace those two crystals himself.” she stated. “That is rather clever, and perhaps doable with a sizable force if we can push into his territory that far. It’s risky, but I think it might be done, especially if the Asuna do not attack us because of Lyat’s assistance. But that won’t buy us much time, will it? He will attack and bring replacement Whispering Crystals, won’t he?” The very realistic and tactical Nidaja had her counter argument ready as always. It was Vhale who spoke next.

“The first one will disable the Uruk that are in the second one, and all that are beyond it. All the Uruk everywhere beyond these mountains.” he stated.

“So, what, we have another force go to each base once it’s neutralized and attack it? Won’t that take a while too? We still don’t have enough warriors to pull it off. There are too many other crystals to have to take out once those two fall.” Nidaja seemed a bit frustrated. She could see it was a wonderful idea, but there were too many risks and the task was too large for her army to accomplish fast enough.

“That would be one way, but you are right and we thought of that. Too much risk that it would not get done in time, and when signals started flying again, anyone near the Uruk would be killed.” Vhale said. “So, Alps came up with a funny little trick, and I feel confident that I was able to design the right tool for the job perfectly. Luna had Ceriss make it...” Alps reached into his hip satchel and pulled out a long, slender blue crystal. It had countless layers of silver streaking through it.

“And what is that?” Nita asked.

“With the first tower, the one closest to the Avatar down, we will attack the second tower, the one filled at that time with Uruk still unable to act. We will clear it out, and once clear, replace the crystal in that fort with this one.”

“What will that accomplish?” Nidaja asked.

“It will send out a single command to the Uruk that they must obey, since their master will be cut off from them and they will be unable to resist it.” Alps rumbled, “... Find the Whispering Crystal in their fortress or base or tower, something they can see very plainly due to the high level of essence that it draws on, and destroy it. He can replace one or two bases quickly, perhaps in less than a month... but he cannot fix all of them in any semblance of time. It will give us plenty of time to dismantle his army and figure out a way to defend against him when he finally does find a suitable means of

attack.” There was a stunned silence at the meeting table. Alps smiled finally, realizing that even Nidaja was having trouble finding a fault with this plan. Luna had been ecstatic when it came together, even hugging Vhale. It was Nita, finally, who tried to find the chink in the armor.

“What if he just brings a massive army of everyone we didn’t dismantle, and attacks us all at once? I mean, he can fit a lot of Uruk in his own line of essence control, right?” the queen asked. Luna answered.

“We rather doubt that he has cause to keep many Uruk close to him. It’s a risk we have to take, but it is very likely that nearly all of the Uruk exist beyond the mountains. We will have destroyed nearly his entire army. Thousands and thousands of these relentless, awful golems... ended in a day.” She seemed to embrace that thought happily.

“And how long until he makes a new army using what’s left of his old one to do the work, and attacks us?” Nidaja asked. “I am sorry, but as a general, I have to...” she tried to apologize for sounding negative.

“Not at all, General, we welcome the concerns.” Luna crooned, smiling.

“He can’t use Uruk to make other Uruk.” Lyat said, uttering his first words of the official meeting.

“What?” Nidaja asked. The newly appointed black-furred slave replied to this one.

“He means that the Asuna put the Uruk together, and they mine the crystals or the sand for the crystals used in the Uruk, but they do not layer the instructions in the crystals. That cannot be done by Uruk, or by the Asuna.” Vhale sat up a bit, pushing his long hair out of his eyes. “He can make a new army, yes, but the crystals used for Uruk are very complex. His army is so huge because of how long he has had to build it, and the Uruk, when they properly maintain themselves, last for a century, maybe more. Some of the ingredients are harder to obtain than just digging them up and the process of layering the commands into the crystals takes time. He will not be able to make a massive fighting force quickly. This will provide us with valuable time to plan what to finally do about the avatar himself. We may not be able to destroy him, but we might at least be able to contain him. If this is the best we can do, it’s still better than the impending doom we are dealing with now.”

“I can live with that then. Luna, what do you think the chances are of pulling this plan off?” Nidaja asked. Alps looked to his mother, and she nodded to the general courteously, giving an approving smile. She answered softly,

“Significantly better than our chances if we continue to do nothing and just let him harvest our suffering until the strife caused by it makes us go to war with our own kind

and that wipes the rest of us out.” The priestess made sure to put a lot of weight in her words. She seemed rather certain that this was the only course the future could take if nothing was done. Nita nodded at this, agreeing with her. The weight of leadership had likely made her think of this many times before. Had Alps not intervened the way he did, the Spirits of Silverlight might well have been the start of a civil war exactly as Luna had feared. Alps could often see it in the queen’s eyes, the knowledge that ultimately, it would all end. Whether by the Uruk, or by the fear in her own people, it would end. It might not end in her lifetime, but her children or their children might well know the means of the final days of their people. Now, this was a chance to prevent that future from ever being known.

“So, who are we going to send on this dangerous task?” Nidaja asked. “I imagine a large enough force to be successful might attract the wrong kind of attention, especially since we are pushing right through the Asuna homeland on the north side here. We want to garner a lasting peace, not sudden suspicion. I volunteer to assist the task to ensure its success, but we all know the danger. Anyone who goes is taking nearly foolish risk. We should limit the numbers to only what is necessary.”

“I will go, of course.” Alps stated.

“Like hell you will.” Nita said bluntly.

“Nita...” her white-furred lover murmured sadly. “We cannot afford for this to fail. I have some abilities which might save the mission if we get into a bind...” he stated.

“Oh, by what, Shadowfalling yourself and any other survivors and hoping someone remains to take the crystal home?” the queen asked. “Hell no. Absolutely not. You seem to think that you can just prance off happy as can be to dangerous places, saving everyone along the way. You’ve been lucky, love, and that luck will run out. You will stay, others will go. It won’t necessarily fail without you.” There was an awkward silence from everyone present. Alps had not openly defied Nita before.

“I will be going.” Luna stated. “Nita, Alps feels rather strongly that this is something that he has to do. If he did not go, and the mission failed, and you lost Nidaja, and he lost me... would you look him in the eye and tell him it was not because he didn’t go? Will he ever believe that he could not have done a thing? It is for this very reason that I will take the risk myself. I won’t look back and wonder if my inaction cost those who needed me most their very existence.” Nita gritted her teeth tightly at that, seeming near tears with rage. Alps was a little shocked by how upset she was over that. She finally spoke, trembling a bit.

“Then I will go with him.” She said this with grim determination.

“Uh... No?” Misty said. “We can’t have you *and* Nidaja both go. There would be no one to hold the throne.”

"You have acted as my retainer in the past, Misty. What if my going is what saves them? Will I be able to look back and wonder the same thing as Luna has said? I cannot deny her logic. It would destroy him, but I cannot let him go and think that I lost him because I let him go. So if he is lost, so am I." The queen was still near tears. She really did fear losing him again, as had nearly happened a number of times now.

"This is not a very good idea. You are far too valuable a target on the road like that, your highness." Misty shook her head. "I would be remiss to agree to such a reckless thing.

"Then you shall be remiss." Nita crossed her arms. "I am going. I will see this through. My people would understand. It is for the sake of us all. Be it those in royal standing or those sitting in huts with dirt floors." The priestess spoke up softly.

"Your highness, I cannot express enough how dangerous this will be. Alps, if you had to choose between bringing her with us, and knowing that you might not be able to protect her if she goes, which would you choose?" Alps gazed at Nita a bit, and considered that. He wanted to be fair with this but his answer might upset his beloved. If he intended to risk himself for this fight, what right did he have to say that Nita could not? He would try to protect her, and might well die doing that, but he could not tell her that she was not allowed. Alternatively, he could opt not to go and she would not need to go either. But that would not be fair to those that he knew were depending on him. He mulled it over a little while and finally spoke.

"Nita, you will come with us if it is your desire, but I make no promise that I can protect you. I hate to say this, it pains me to say it, but the success of this venture is more important than all of our lives. If I have to make a decision where your very life is forfeit to ensure that we cut off the Uruk, I will do just that." The former slave hated to sound so cold, and it garnered some rather distressed looks from Misty and Luna, but Nita nodded in apparent understanding, before saying,

"This is agreed, as I would do for you, my love. It fills me with pride that your own needs, your longing to be by my side forever, will not cloud your judgment about what needs to be accomplished. Rather than upsetting me, this proves to me that Luna is right. You are the right person to go. But in that same regard, I believe I am too. So that is decided, who else is going?" she asked. There was a short pause as those gathered let that moment sink in. Nidaja answered.

"As I stated, I will go, Luna will go. Lyat will go." The large hyena broke in.

"Reika is also to be going... and Bone." There were worried glances cast to the Asuna.

"Reika? Is she up for something so ... detailed and critical?" Nidaja inquired hesitantly. She did not want to insult the hyena at the table who she had come to rather enjoy the company of by reminding him that his sister was not very stable. This task

required a lot of control and precision. It was Alps who answered instead.

“We can’t keep her from coming.” He said this rather flatly. “She won’t let us have all the fun without her. We’d be in more danger from her when we got back than we ever faced on the journey there, I promise.” Lyat raised an eyebrow to Alps.

“You is travelling long with my sister. I am maybe suspicious if you know her a little too well.” Alps looked back at the Asuna, and then his ears went scarlet at the possible implication. He had not intended it to sound like he was attracted to her. Especially not her. Then again, she knew his flavor, as she had sampled him before re-gifting his essence to her empress without his consent, so he could not state that nothing intimate at all had happened. Alps swallowed, unsure if Lyat was protective and might be sore with him for that.

“Ah... Yeah, I got to know her pretty well. I had her train me a little in fighting. If you can call the daily ass-kicking training.” He laughed a bit at that. There was a shrug from the hyena.

“Sister is being very sure that you is getting better and be good life-mate for Queen Razelle.” Alps looked away, off the hook for the moment, it seemed.

“We will also have a guest with us who knows more about surviving in the wilds beyond our borders than anyone else, or so we are told. Aris’ treasure-nicking friend Neit introduced to us to this contact. She seems to be the real deal though.” Luna pushed the conversation along. “An emerald lupine lady, she is actually a rather distant relation to the royal family, she tells us. I have my doubts on her direct blood relation, but she does appear to be quite reliable and very wise in the way of travel in less-than-safe circumstances.” Nidaja spoke up.

“Luna, will Ceriss be accompanying us?” The priestess looked back to the general and shook her head, looking a bit regretful.

“No.” Luna stated softly. “She will be staying here. Her abilities are not well suited to what we will be doing. She would serve better in assisting Misty. She fought hard in the war, and paid for it with 700 years of sad isolation. Her war is over. She’s done, I can assure you. She may gladly and fiercely defend the capital, but no running off into the jaws of the enemy. Apparently that’s how she went out, a quiet little mission that no one even knew about. I didn’t even know her back then, and was appointed as high priestess a few years after she was sent. I was never even made privy to the details of her mission, aside from being told that it was utterly futile.”

“Then these are all we are taking.” Nita said calmly. “Taking a large force does not ensure that we will succeed, it will draw far too much attention to what needs to be a quiet and precise operation.” Nidaja nodded to her sister. Alps, however, was fairly certain of one other who would be going with them. Ellis. She had not been to this meeting that he knew of, but he was sure that she was aware of the meeting, and was

aware of all that had been said at it, perhaps before it ever happened. She was spooky enough to him that the former slave had no problem believing that. Priestess Luna spoke again, in a rather hushed tone.

“The question to ask then is when do we leave? It should be soon, because every day that passes is another day that the enemy may learn that some of the Letai have escaped, and if that does not send him into a nightmarish rage, I don’t know what will.” Everyone nodded at that, obviously very sure that she was right. Nidaja raised her voice to give answer to that question.

“We will leave as soon as I have my supplies ready. Our guide to the outlands will be at a cottage in a little outlying town on the west side of the island, so we will be taking my boat from there.” The general leaned back in her chair as she spoke confidently. “We will need to arrive on the continent away from any towns or villages, and we will be avoiding them for the most part on our journey. I am sure the supplies that we will need will be rather limited, since we have a survivalist with us, but I motion to take as much as we can carry. It will slow us down at first, but by the time we arrive in the outlands, I suspect that even our survivalist friend will be happy that we brought them.”

There was little more to discuss concerning the coming task, and the dread everyone likely felt about it, but the group was content enough with the success of the meeting that they were glad to break for lunch. Matters of logistics were better left to Nidaja and Misty who were much more practiced in planning those kinds of things. Alps and Nita excused themselves and adjourned to the garden to get some fresh air. Lyat took Bone with him to reunite him with Reika. Luna went with Vhale to return him to his cell. Vhale’s temporary “home” had been nicely decorated so it was no less a room than most of the servants stayed in with the exception that it locked and that he was under guard. The guard was posted more to guard the secret of his presence in the castle than to prevent him from getting into mischief. Time alone with him had made both Alps and Luna rather confident he would not pose a real threat anymore.

Alps held Nita’s hand as they strolled through the garden together. There was a time not terribly long before that they would not have been seen holding hands together in a public locale. It had been too much a taboo for Nita, but she stopped caring about the taboo, and the reputation of her servant had become better known, his assistance in uniting the Spirits of Silverlight and the royal house was very much a talked about topic. There was little worry now about holding hands or even kissing and holding one another publicly. They were together, and would stay that way. This warmed Alps’ heart in ways that nothing could ever hope to deter. The white lupine looked at his queen and mate as the wind whipped through her hair. It was good to be with her again. She spoke, breaking the silence as her violet eyes peered into his.

“So, this time, I will get to travel with you on your little adventure. Are you really okay with that? It is dangerous you know. It’s no joke.” The queen’s lover nodded his head slowly to that.

“Indeed, no joke, but at least if we die we will be together. I know that you suffer when I am far away. The worry is not good for you. Truth be told, I am glad that you are going. I don’t like being away from you. I feared this last time that I could not come back.” He said, a lump forming in his throat.

“Because you had to Shadowfall yourself?” Nita asked. “That could not have been a nice choice to have to make. I am sorry that you had to even consider something so... reckless. I admit, I was pretty sore with you, but it was explained to me by Lyat that if you had not, it was a lot more than just your own life at risk. You did the right thing, and even if largely symbolic, since most of the Asuna have no idea you even exist, what you did was a very critical part of what will hopefully one day unite our people in friendship.” Alps thought for a bit as Nita talked. While having to cast himself into a possible oblivion was a hard decision, it was not what he was fretting about.

“I feared I would not be coming back long before I had to make that awful choice.” Nita listened to his words and stopped. She looked up at him curiously.

“You were going to stay in the Asuna lands because of Rios? You would have given up on being here with me because you feared I would be angry about the claiming of your bloodline?” the queen asked. She seemed genuinely hurt by the thought.

“No, certainly not.” Alps clarified, not wanting her to feel that Rios had trivialized her love for him. “I know what I am now, Nita. And especially learning who my mother is, I cannot run from it or deny it anymore.” He began walking with the queen again. She stepped along lightly beside him. She spoke up.

“What, Letai? We had suspected even before Nidaja switched her mind into you and ran off to crush Chana. It doesn’t change the fact that I want you here, Alps. In fact, I think it is wonderful that you are. It is proof to what we’ve known all along. You were meant for something greater than scraping dirt into a latrine in some border village, my love. You are the son of a Letai High Priestess. This does not change how we love one another and why, but don’t think I haven’t considered how much easier this makes things for me in my intent to take you as my life mate. The queen claiming a servant is something that might have been a tough chunk of hide for some to swallow, but the queen marrying the son of an authentic Letai High Priestess? That is the kind of thing that happens in legends, Alps. Our binding will serve to bolster hope and unity and happiness for the people. We cannot announce openly yet what you are, but it will eventually be known, especially if this task we intend to undertake actually works as planned. I don’t necessarily care that they would have frowned on our union before, but I won’t deny being delighted about what it will mean to them now. I would be silly to ignore it. It does not change what I feel for you, but it does change in a very positive way how welcome we will be to do it. Why would you have even paused in coming back if you suspected this?” Alps widened his eyes a bit at Nita’s feelings over the matter. She was very thorough in her explanation of those feelings and for that bit he could not get a word in over her. As she finally questioned his motives for staying away,

he spoke.

“It may bring happiness to the people, Nita, but at the time I had not known what we know now about Mannus, or the Uruk. They were an unstoppable and unthinkable force, and I knew that if it came out that I was Letai, and I was joined with the queen, the enemy would do everything he could to stop it. When I finally realized that I was Letai, when I could no longer deny it to myself, I had thought to stay away, to never come back because of the number of people that would die if I were there with you. I was sure that all my friends would stand and fight for me, and I was afraid to watch each and every one of them fall. And for what? Just to keep one person from dying? I could never let that happen.” Nita faltered a bit, and embraced Alps, who held her tightly in return. She murmured softly into his ear.

“That I have you now, and that I had you before, that you were delivered into my hands by my well-meaning sister, even though I had misgivings at first borne of fear of my own heart, I do not regret you, and even if I should die to protect you, I know that you would do nothing less for me, and for all in my kingdom. Alps, you do not have to run from what you are, and what we will be. It’s time you stopped being something that affects us and start being one of us. You are family now, and that means Luna is too. Our family will grow, whether by the gift of new life you ultimately provide for the royal house, or by those who love you and join us under one roof to stand against the darkness. Even Rios may be counted as family to the royal house at some point, and that may prove to be a greater boon for our future than you could have imagined, Alps. If all must end tomorrow, I am still glad that I had today.” Alps choked a bit, and then clutched Nita tighter as she held him in the garden.

It would be a long, difficult journey and it was possible that some of them might not even make it back, but the queen was right. It was a journey they had both decided to make together, and he would never again consider going it alone. He had his mate, his lovers, and friends. He was certain they would be with him no matter what, and that gave him strength that he felt he could face the Avatar himself with. One day, Alps thought, he might have to. And he would have his friends there at his side. He leaned back a fraction of distance and then forward again, parting his lips and cupping his muzzle to Nita’s own, kissing her deeply, heavily, and for a very long, smoldering while.