

## Sirius, Book IV

### A Slave's War

*Comments or Questions?*

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## Chapter 10

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The orange glow of the setting sun seemed an appropriate lighting for the end of a life. It would soon all be dark. Would Nita and Luna and the others succeed without him? Would Luna comfort the queen enough for her to go on? These thoughts seemed to come so slowly to Alps, even though the world moved quickly. Why did it all feel so slow? He moved as fast as he could, reaching Reika just before the first of the Uruk did. She had stopped to brace herself for the fight, otherwise Alps would have never caught up to her. Stunned by Alps throwing himself into the fray, Lyat was only a few steps behind him.

"Die!" Reika screamed to the first of the Uruk, and swung Bone in an arc from low to high. Alps was surprised by the kinetic force that hyena must have used, as the entire front of that golem was removed, including the eyes, sent sailing far over the others. Lyat came to a stop just on Alps' other side looking bewildered.

"Run wulf!" he cried. "My sister!" Alps held his staff tightly as the next arrived. He didn't even get to touch it before Reika repeated the motion from before with just the same result, despite an attempt by the golem to block. It was not strong enough to stop the hyena girl's furious blow. Her eyes were wet with tears of rage. There was no reaching her now. There was no running either. He would be followed and he stood a better chance with his Asuna friends than he did alone. He was told to rely on his friends, to believe in them. It was time to put that to the test.

"My sister too!" Alps launched himself forward, parrying two weapons and tagging two Uruk. They were then defenseless to the attack of the hyena behind Alps. So began a rapid flurry in a seemingly easily repeated pattern. The pair stood back to back as Alps tagged golems with his staff, the hyena circled around and cleaved the defenseless targets down. They tried to corral Reika and separate her from the fight, but she was blind furious. Some of the damage she did with Bone, his face wiped away by vicious impacts already. She had insane force with each swing, enough that Alps wondered if Bone somehow assisted in those impacts. The other damage she did was that if too many got too close she would push her way into their flailing weapons, surely taking injuries, and she would begin just ripping off their arms. In short order there were armless Uruk staggering around, trying to get out of the way of the functioning ones, a sea of

yellow glowing eyes pushing forward slowed to walking speed in the waning light.

“Child killers! Take take take! Stop taking from nice wulfs! Leave Asuna alone! No more you take!” Reika sobbed with fury, bleeding from her head and her back. She wind-milled violently with Bone making it impossible for Alps to get closer to her. Inevitably, as Lyat and Alps had their own Uruk to fight, they pinched her off from the group, causing Lyat to wail with grief.

“Reika, no! Stop this! Come back, we run! This is crazy!” She was deaf to him. Alps gritted his teeth. He had to do something to save her. She pushed deeper into the confused and bustling crowd of Uruk. If Alps and Lyat were paying attention, they might have been somewhat proud of the twenty or so husks that littered the battlefield, but they were paying more attention to the hundred that remained. Alps heard a scream from the hilltop. It was Nita. Damn it, she should have been far away by then. He did not have the luxury of even looking for her.

It was all falling apart. He could not reach Reika. He could not get her under control. If they could pull back, Nita might be able to blast a group of them with a fireball. Luna might be able to root and shred a few. Lira could lend her sword. Even Vhale, as much as he didn't want to, might be able to break his promise not to use the essence and remind these creatures who their master once was. But if Reika was already dead, it was all for nothing.

Essence. Alps thought about the essence as he considered the attacks that Luna might be able to do. He wished that he could use the essence himself, but he was essentially worthless. He tagged two more and Lyat began fashioning a wall of the scattered broken Uruk. There was a loud explosion deeper in the group. Nita's fireball. Now they would be after her. Alps then grunted, feeling an impact, then fiery pain in his side. He was hooked by one of those savage weapons, and it hurt terribly. He tagged his attacker and pushed closer to Lyat, who seemed to be tiring. Alps' muscles were unable to keep up as well. He gasped and heaved, body burning for air as he moved in circles with the Asuna male. Where was Reika? Where did she go? They were being pushed back up the hill, so he looked down toward the camp.

Reika was surrounded, bleeding badly front and back, and still hewing with Bone at the crowded Uruk who were keeping their distance and just picking at her, taking an opportunistic cut any time the chance presented itself. She was no longer dropping any Uruk; they were closing in for the kill. Her muscles were burned out, she was losing a lot of blood, and her expression was entirely different. The madness had worn off. She was conscious again. And she was scared. She tried in vain to defend herself as Alps felt blood spilling copiously down his side. *Boom!* Another fireball. Alps shoulder-checked a lunging Uruk into the ground with the pauldron the fox had given him and drove his staff into one of the crystal eyes. It shattered, leaving the fallen golem impaired.

"I'm sorry!" sobbed Reika, seeming so far away. She fell to her knees, still waving Bone desperately. The Uruk were no longer attacking as heavily at Alps and Lyat either, they had begun to regroup to go after Nita and the others. Alps looked in anguish to the tattered hyena girl so close to death and still fighting. He wished he could save her, but his own strength was waning and he feared that he would die right in front of his beloved. He looked to Lyat for protection as he was having trouble raising his staff anymore, but Lyat was bleeding too. When had he been injured? It looked like it was a grazing cut to the side of his head, but it was hard to tell. This is not how the day was supposed to end. He cried out to Nita an anguished apology, and then a loud crack was heard, like thunder, something Alps had not heard Nita do before. He glanced in the direction he heard it, toward Reika, and staggered back a bit as he took in a completely unexpected sight.

The fox, Ellis, was there beside Reika, stooped down with her hand upon the ground. Around her in a ring were shattered remains of Uruk that seemed to have exploded outward. Reika was on her knees, stunned and wavering. She reached out for the fox shakily.

"Help Reika..." she whimpered. "Is sorry..."

Time seemed to stand almost completely still for Alps. How had the fox even gotten over to her? He never saw her enter the battle. How had she destroyed ten or twelve Uruk in an instant? The black and white vixen stood up slowly, a look of casual disgust on her face toward the Uruk. Her long white hair and black robes trimmed in silver waved in the winds that swept the scent of death and smoke across the field. She faced the group that surged from the direction of the village as the regrouping had finished, the Uruk ready to overwhelm their attackers once and for all. Another explosion sounded, this time behind Alps at the advancing Uruk that had left Alps and Lyat alone and were heading up the hill toward Nita. How many fireballs could she do? Nita may have been at her limit as well. Alps looked back to Ellis as Lyat dropped two more Uruk, the larger Asuna's chest heaving, gasping for air from the exertion of a fight for his life that had already gone on too long. The white former slave clutched his side. He felt light-headed and numb. He could not go on. They would lose. Reika dropped against Ellis, holding herself up against the vixen as her blood drained away. She offered Bone to the fox. Her precious Bone.

"Fox fight!" she sobbed. "Friends always help. Please?" The dizzy hyena coughed and sputtered a bit, breaking Alps' heart to watch. Ellis took bone in her hand, and held it up a bit, gazing at it. Her voice was then clear as she spoke loudly to Reika.

"This is the terrible loss you risk when your anger rules you." she scolded. "Your friends will die for you. Would you have it be for nothing, girl?" Alps felt a

little life slip back into him in the form of rage. Reika was dying, and even now the fox would dare to lecture her like that? She was begging for help!

“Reika is sorry! Please save friends! Please!” she sobbed weakly. The fox then turned to face the advancing tide of Uruk that pushed forward rapidly, making it obvious they would just run the whole group over. Would Ellis just be run over too, just to make a point to the foolish hyena? Alps didn’t want to watch, but he could not look away as the tide of Uruk headed up the hill like a grey and brown flood. Ellis held a dark and disapproving expression.

“Before you ask the help of friends who tend to arrive late, Reika...” She lowered Bone down to her side and held it tightly in her fingers, facing the advancing troop of golems. “...You should learn the power of the friends you’ve had with you all along.” The fox reared back a little, taking a deep breath and for a brief moment Alps thought he could see wispy tendrils of golden essence trailing up along her arm over the sleeve of her robe all the way to the side of her neck as she leaned forward toward the oncoming Uruk.

What happened next defied all explanation to Alps. Ellis opened her mouth as if she were screaming... but instead of the shrill scream he was expecting, a torrent of white flame erupted from the vixen’s wide parted muzzle, accompanied by a nearly deafening roar, a sound that Alps knew would haunt his dreams for some time. The fox blasted that intense wave of flame like an expanding wall blown from her unwavering lips and Alps had to shield his eyes from the brightness of it as she turned slowly to engulf the entire advancing group. The ones who had been heading for Nita recognized the real threat and turned around, heading back down the hill. That wave of flame rolled down the hill and engulfed the Uruk camp, the roar continuing as the crescent wave of white flame terminated hundreds of feet beyond, leaving only charred wasteland in its wake and wet-looking bubbling orange glowing glass where sand had been bare to it. Nothing at all was left of the Uruk or structures that had been in the way of it. Alps looked back up to the advancing group of golems. Barely over a dozen remained.

There was utter silence from everyone else on the battlefield. Even the Uruk stood motionless a moment, whether caught in that fireblast or not. The wolf wavered, trying to focus on the blurry sight before him, pain wracking his whole body from pushing himself beyond his limits, being injured, and his grief over having to see a dear friend ravaged by those cruel halberds and hooks of the Uruk.

The fight had looked like it was to be an inescapable death and now Lyat roared with new life as he clutched his sword in both hands, ready to meet the returning Uruk. Alps struggled to stay on his feet. His wound hurt and he felt weak from blood loss, but he could fight. He could stand a bit longer and see this through to the end. The Uruk made a mistake in turning their back to Nidaja and

Lira, they both hit the group from behind, and Alps moved as fast as he could to tag the ones he could reach with his staff. They had not realized yet what Ressaia was doing to them because Lyat had been cleaving them so fast. The white lupine male's renewed attack was rather short-lived however. Alps went backwards hard as he felt a stinging blow to his face and head and felt wet heat spill into his eyes, blood blurring his vision. He had been hit again. He shook the blood from his face and watched through one eye as he fought. This was certainly not the glorious battle they had known before. This was no mere skirmish; this was Alps' first true battle. He looked over at where Reika and Ellis had been. To his surprise, Ellis was still there. He watched as the vixen released Bone from her grasp, letting it fall to Reika's side as she spat a wisp of white flame onto the grass and reached up to wipe her muzzle with the back of her hand. Reika lay on her back, sprawled out, possibly dead with Bone lying just out of reach as if she'd not been saved at all, her outstretched hand reaching for him, but her body still and quiet. The blackened fields and still-glowing sands reminded him that Ellis had intervened in a big way, but it looked as if the mighty Reika, tragically, had fallen. The black-furred vixen looked directly at Alps, seeming disappointed. Ellis voice rang out clear in across the battlefield.

"You can do better than this." He was certain he heard her speak directly to him, but her mouth never moved, and she was far enough away that he'd not have heard her so well. He watched as Ellis strode off, a slender, slightly curved single-edged sword in her hand. She moved toward the remaining Uruk ahead until she passed in almost ethereal slow motion from Alps' field of vision in his one good eye. He tried to open the other to follow her, but the blood and the searing pain on that side of his head made it impossible. How could she always leave without him actually seeing it? Alps looked back with his good eye to Lyat. His jaw went slack, and he slowly lowered his sword in silent awe. What was he seeing? What was the fox doing? Was she still fighting? Whatever Lyat saw gave pause even to a seasoned warrior.

"Luna hurry! There are injuries!" Alps recognized Nita's voice. All he could really remember as he dropped onto his back on the ground with a puff of tan dust was that he was so happy that she was alive. Fighting still went on around him. Lyat and Nidaja and Lira still had six or eight enemies to contend with. How many were left ahead? He wanted to get up. So very badly, Alps wanted to get up and help his friends fight, but his arms and legs would not work. He tried to get up, but no movement occurred. Were his other friends okay? Would he see them again? He saw Luna's face appear over him, her expression horrified.

"Help Reika! She's worse! Help Reika!" Alps tried to scream, but what came out was barely a sound. Then, all sounds became distant and hollow, pain muted, and the already darkening world fell upward and into infinity as all went black.

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The rain hammered down hard enough that it was hard to hear his own footfalls as Leal moved briskly along the row of squat, dilapidated shacks and crumbling houses that were the part of Diera that had been damaged severely in a flood during a storm ten years before. This place had since become a location that even the town guard avoided if at all possible, but this was a place that seemed logical to search, given that they were looking for something that was supposed to be hidden from those who had authority in the city.

Leal had practiced for two hours in seeing the essence. Ceriss had been very pleased, in fact slightly surprised by how quickly he learned to recognize not only essence itself, but different kinds. She held him longer than she might have originally intended because she wanted to prepare him as best he could. He had gotten so efficient at it that, as he moved along, he could see it slightly, ever so lightly, in places that the priestess had told him he would not until he'd been training longer. He was not sure if it was because he had just slept with a powerful priestess and shared in her essence, so he did not want to waste time or ability. He could, if he looked hard enough, see the essence of those who were laughing or happy, or furious or afraid. Strong emotions made the essence easier for him to see. He even saw a slight variance in color based on the emotion involved.

He did not waste much time studying the different kinds, he made his way quickly to a side of town he did not want to check once it was completely dark. The sun was already waning and he moved along the narrow alleyways as he looked for any bright source of essence. The rain actually made his task easier as he had fewer people looking at him. His cloak did not merely disguise his identity, it was needed for the weather so he didn't attract unwanted attention by trying to be inconspicuous. He could not see anything around these shanties and broken buildings, so he was prepared to leave, however he heard something of a commotion in one of the darker, more flooded alleys. He crept along cautiously to see if it might lead him in a direction that might be helpful.

"She's inside. She hasn't given up a word. She laughs when we strike her. She says she's a thief and was following a mark, but none of the others came back!" Leal was immediately interested.

"Then kill her and move! We can't stay here if they were stopped, we might be compromised!" Leal had to get closer and help Neit if he could. He did not want her to perish because she followed Lunaris' orders. That's the sort of thing that could get one haunted forever. He moved back into an archway that was once part of a storage shed and hunkered down as the one who gave the kill order ran from the alley. The other went into a building that seemed to be a small warehouse, pulling a rolling heavy door only part way closed. Leal moved to the

edge of the doorway and peered in through the gap between two posts that made one side of the doorway.

His suspicions were right. Neit was bound to a chair, half naked, head hanging, ears back, blood on her mouth as she laughed.

"I keep tellin' ya, if your friends are in trouble, you are wasting time with me, I'm just here to nick your goodies." She spit blood on the floor. Leal put a hand over the place where he had been slightly stabbed. They had patched that up nicely and it was still sore. He and Neit now both had injuries from their defense of the crown. Would she understand the honor of it? He lowered his body. The girl was not alone. There were four people in the room with her, standing in a circle around her. A slender, ragged-looking lady wolf with black and silver fur and matted, bound-back hair spoke.

"I don't believe you! You had no reason to follow us all the way back. But it's fine, you won't be taking any stories back to your friends, even if they are just stories of taking things. We are gonna kill you anyway, girl. This is how the Sons of Sorrow deal with impertinent brats!" Neit looked up boldly. She had apparently lost her fear with a bit of beating. She did not look too badly injured, but she seemed pretty pissed all the same, her red essence was visible to Leal, even though he had just learned to see it. He looked around the room. Was there anything he could use as cover if he ran in and pulled Neit away? He could not get her untied and fight at the same time. Two dark-furred cloaked wolves drew their heavy swords. The scene played itself out under the warm glow of twin lanterns on either side of Neit which gave the questioning an almost surreal feel.

"I have last words for you worms then." Neit growled. The assassins drew closer. Leal's heart raced, fearful of watching the girl die, even though he barely knew her. She might have had a price on her head before and was destined for death, but she threw her lot in with the royal house and that granted her his care, at the very least, but what could he do?

"Oh?" asked the lady wolf, a broken-toothed smile leered at the bound Neit, her breasts spattered with blood dropping from her nose and muzzle.

"Long... live... *the Queen!*" she barked, and spit blood in the matron's face. She growled with rage, and all of their essence flared up bright red, as Neit shrank in blue-lit terror at the death that was coming.

Leal made his decision in an instant. He embraced his new ability and a new way to use it. The guard launched himself into the room.

"*Long live the Queen!*" he howled, throwing them all off guard. They jumped back to the four corners of the room to avoid him, preparing for the

offensive but they were not his immediate target. He planted his boot in Neit's chest and sent her and the chair she was bound to across the room before smashing both lanterns in a single stroke.

"I can't see!" cried one of the attackers. Leal gripped his long, utilitarian guard's sword. He growled out viciously.

"Too bad. I can see *you*." The outlines of essence circled the room clumsily, perhaps searching for the exit, but the stormy weather made it as dark outside as it was inside, and their eyes had been accustomed to the lanterns. With the ability to see that glowing haze at the center of each, he knew their positions, and used long thrusts to keep himself at length as he drove his blade into the core of each. He was surprised how quickly the essence vanished from each point when he did that, confirming the success of his attack. He spun about the room quickly, as the chair had been the only thing in it. There was nothing but him, his sword, and easy glowing targets. Ceriss had taught him. Killing was bad, but what these people wanted was worse. He would do this for all of Amani. A grunt, a yell of agony, a female scream, and a gasp and gurgle and it was over.

After all four essence-marks had been snuffed by his blade he looked to the back of the room. Still there was one more essence. It was blue with fear. There was a silence except for the din of rain and the soft puffing of her breath.

"It's alright Neit..." She jerked a little as Leal touched her face. "I've got you." She whimpered a bit, trying to choke it back, but then sobbed for a bit. He leaned in, soaking wet but he held her in the darkness.

"They were going to kill me!" she cried.

"It's alright, I stopped it, they won't hurt anyone ever again. Let's get you out of here, and someplace safe." Leal felt a rush of absolute joy. One of the most valuable things to the wolf was his honor and valor and he had just rescued someone who needed him. It was an emotion beyond what Misty or Ceriss had given him. This was what a royal guard was for, he thought. This was what he was supposed to be. He grinned as he carefully cut the bonds from Neit, and he gave her his cloak, before leading her out of the corpse-lined room. As they exited the building, Neit holding his hand tightly, still shaking from cold and wet as much as waning fear, they stole along the alleyway, and into a more brightly lit, safer portion of town. They stayed at a brisk pace, but did not try to attract attention to themselves.

"Th-thank you, Leal. I'm sorry I questioned your abilities as a guard. I had heard the Royal Guard were a different breed, but I had not realized... That was..." She was impressed with the results of a risk that played out well for him, and he could not help but have his ego fanned a little by that.



“It’s alright, it might not have worked, but you got them off guard with your last little taunt. It was as much you as it was me.” The royal guard was not arrogant, after all. He had to be humble. “Neit, did you happen to see where else they might be hiding? Was there a place that looked like it might have been a base, because that surely was not it.” The former thief nodded a bit, her ponytail bouncing.

“Yes, Leal. I saw it. It’s a manor by the bay. The docks are right by it. I think they probably get in and out of the city and do their trading from there. From the way they were talking, they were afraid I saw something important at that house. I... I don’t want to go back there, Leal.” Neit shivered a bit.

“I won’t make you. We will tell Lunaris where it is, and you can let the town guard handle this part. It’s time to carve a little justice for Diera out of these fools.” He began to move quickly toward the castle with Neit. She would be taken care of and kept safe there and the issue of the crystal would be taken care of with an entire day to spare.

Leal felt his cheeks warm a bit as the girl’s hand tightened in his own. It was an affectionate grasp and she pulled herself closer against him, making the pair look less like comrades in a secret war on Diera’s street, and more like lovers walking home on a rainy evening. The guard did not mind this, and pulled her closer still, letting her loop an arm around him as they padded briskly to the castle gates. It was almost two and a half hours of walking to get them there, and he could tell that Neit, who had not slept and was pretty soundly beaten, was exhausted. Lunaris met them at the gate and ushered them inside. An attendant, the same who had helped Leal’s wound, tended to the more minor scrapes and bruises of the former thief.

As this was done, she provided the information to Lunaris, giving a description of the house. The captain of the guard knew easily which house it was. It had been purchased years ago by someone who was reputed to have been a recluse or simply did not live there at all. It was a perfect location to hide something large and important.

“Leal, get your cloak back from Neit, the guard’s been mustered and this is your duty too.” Lunaris belted on his sword. Leal sighed, tired from the running and fighting, and he still had not slept from the previous night, going on two days without sleep. War had a way of keeping one awake. How was Lunaris faring so well? Would they ever rest? He turned to tell Neit to be good, but she launched herself into his arms, and cupped her muzzle to his, her tongue probing his mouth deeply.

“Oy! None of that, you’ll lay open that lip again, girl!” cried the attendant, and she carefully pulled the kiss-stealing not-so-former thief off of the guard. Neit watched Leal as she was prodded off to go rest and recover. The grey-

furred wolf grinned, staggering a bit.

“Happy?” Lunar is asked, watching the sleepily stumbling happy Leal.

“Guarding’s good work.” He proclaimed. Lunar is laughed heavily.

The trip to the manor by the dock was slower than a normal walk because it involved having the guard fan out to move in small groups as quickly and quietly along the streets as possible to disguise their destination. They did not want to alert anyone to the attack, and they did not want to give the group a chance to sneak the crystal out to another location. During the winding, long trip to the manor Leal explained to Lunar is what he had done to win the fight against the four that had taken Neit, and he understood better why the girl had kissed him. The dark-furred wolf complimented Leal on his learning so quickly, and made him promise to teach him the technique in the future. He was unaware anything like it existed.

As they pushed toward the bay, Leal continued to use the ability he was taught, but he was so tired that he was having trouble focusing on things well. He hoped that the crystal would be easy to find or that the essence would really stand out as well. As they arrived at the manor, it was immediately obvious that the group had not evacuated. They had a dozen guards posted around the perimeter of the house. The three story manor rose above the stonework dock as the rain came to an end. It was the middle of the night, and there was little going on anywhere except around that house. It was as suspicious a thing as Leal had ever seen, but as he crept closer to the house, he saw a light at the top, gleaming right through the walls. The highest point of the house, perhaps to act as a beacon, was the home of the crystal they had been sent to retrieve. The people guarding all wore red trim on dark robes or leather armor. They were part of that wretched group of traitors. Lunar is smiled at Leal and nodded.

“You ready to do this?” he asked.

“I’m exhausted, my eyes hurt from looking at things weird, and I’ve not been dry all night.” He offered. “Let’s do this thing.” Lunar is took a big step right toward the manor. Leal widened his eyes. They were just going to walk right up to it? That was not what he thought they were doing. He thought the entire town guard would descend upon the house and he would help them find the crystal afterward.

“Can I have your attention please?” shouted Lunar is. A few of the guards around the house moved quickly to confront him. Others followed, pulling not so close, wanting to perhaps keep someone else from sneaking in. Once as many as he could get were looking at him, and surely some alert was sent to those waiting inside, Lunar is spoke again. “Her majesty does not enjoy being targeted for assassination. Do not bother surrendering. Do not bother laying down your

arms.” Leal widened his eyes. He wouldn’t. That evocation of law had not been used inside the city since Diera was made the new capitol. “I am Lunaris. By the powers granted Guard High Captain, and Second General of the Amanian Defense Force, those on this property, outside and within, are granted no leave. You are all sentenced to death.” And with that, the guard did descend, two hundred strong, weapons out, cries of war echoing into the night for the third round of killing the guard had seen in less than 36 hours.

He was glad to not be directly involved in the fighting, and perhaps Lunaris felt it too. They were both tired, and there only for what each were required to do. Lunaris was there to give that executive order of a death sentence with no trial, and Leal was there to search upstairs among fifteen broken and blood-soaked bodies where the crystal was stored in a plain-looking and unassuming crate that had been disguised as a dresser with a non-working bottom drawer. The crate was broken and a massive bluish-black crystal, six sides and double-terminated, was taken out. They put it in another crate and it left under heavy guard to the pier on the other side of town. Lunaris oversaw the careful investigation for a while, and the removal of a total of 34 bodies, the weight of two of those bodies in gold and jewels and documentation that might implicate others involved in the conspiracy.

After that was the long walk back to report to Misty. As wonderful a mood as they both should have been in, the walk was relatively silent. Both the guard and his captain were exhausted. Misty was awake, having napped, and heard the report. With both ragged, tired warriors before her, she listened, and ultimately, smiled.

“Lunaris... You have proven again your worth to the royal family, and you bring us pride and honor. You earn our name that you so rarely use to your benefit. Lunaris Razelle, do not hesitate to enjoy the benefits and rights of a royal house member. Your requests are always law to this land with all of our gratitude.”

“I ‘ave a royal request, Majesty.” The captain of the guard stated to the retainer of the throne.

“Anything at all.” Misty offered.

“A royal *bed*.” He barked shortly. Misty chuckled and bowed elegantly to him.

“A royal bath might do you well too, my champion.” She proclaimed playfully. “Yes, do rest. Thank you again. You are dismissed.” Leal marveled at that a moment. He had dutifully followed orders under Lunaris for a while, but he had not really seen him so subservient. Was he like that for Nidaja and Nita? They, along with Misty, were about the only three who outranked him. What was

it like to have that much power? “Leal!” called the stand-in queen. He snapped to attention, suddenly aware that he was sagging with exhaustion. Despite his familiarity with Misty, he refused to be rude to her in an official capacity like he was.

“Yes, Highness!” he stated solidly, standing up straight, with almost everything in his body hurting.

“You are well on your way to sharing the last name of the house Razelle yourself.” His heart skipped a beat. Her tone was serious, it was not playful affection. The highest honor that could be bestowed on a subject of the royal house was the honorary title. It did not just affect one’s immediate status, it changed the status of their family for three generations. Nobility was not a joke! He bowed low in appreciation.

“I long only to serve, your majesty!” he stated with a flourish.

“You will serve us well, Leal.” Misty stated. “And if I have my way, you will be serving us for a very long time. Do not take unnecessary risks.” She seemed to be scolding him. He nodded a little, confused. Her eyes wore genuine worry. He padded closer, in spite of himself.

“Misty.” He said, then remembering himself, “Your Highness...” She cupped his cheeks.

“I must ask that you and Lunaris accompany Ceriss to dispose of this crystal. This in and of itself should not be too dangerous, but it means little rest for you for just a few more days. Do not worry, I will keep a soft bed for you here.” She leaned in close, her lips at his ear. “... my bed is just as soft as you deserve...” He perked, and winced, his body too sore to get worked up. He suddenly felt that the trip off shore to take care of this task might be more valuable as time to recover from the intensity of his past few days so he could share Misty’s bed was offered. No finer reward could be offered for the new and eager castle guard.

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Alps’ eyes fluttered open slowly. The lights were all washed out, and the voices were hard to make out. He listened carefully, still unable to move. He was in pain, though it was a dull pain, as if muffled somehow. He was moving, even though he felt unable to move a muscle. He realized as his senses slowly lifted above the dense fog that he was on a hastily fashioned stretcher. He was being carried along a road. He tried to speak but nothing came out. For some time, he could not even remember why he was injured. When he did remember, he tried desperately to look around. Reika. Where was Reika? Lyat’s head was

bandaged, and he was carrying the front of his stretcher. Nidaja was the one carrying at his feet. His eyes barely open it was hard to see her, but he could hear her, and knew she was carrying him. He heard Nita's voice too.

"Luca's another three miles. It won't take long to get there, but I don't think we will be there by sunset. There is no cause to hurry, we should rest at least once before we get there." She sounded strong and well. That was encouraging.

"He ees not heavy wulf." Lyat stated in his usual calm and gentle tone.

"And you haven't slept, so we will simply discount your offer of continued walking as incoherent sleepy babbling." Lira stated. Alps heard the sigh of the large Hyena. Was he sad? Resolved? Why had he not slept? Did Reika die? Lyat surely would not be able to sleep if his sister had died. Alps could not hold back tears, even though he could not really cry. He felt them roll down his cheek. He didn't see her. He could not hear her.

"How about it, Vahn?" asked Nita. "You good for a rest?" Alps perked as he heard a child's voice.

"If you like, ma'am. I can keep going if we need to though." His tone was tired, but genuine in his offer to keep going. Luna spoke.

"Let's stop, I think Aris' eyes just opened. I saw them gleaming." The plodding stopped, and he was lowered down into the grass on the side of a dusty road. They were supposed to be staying away from roads, but based on the conversation, it seemed that they were breaking that rule for some reason. Luna's face appeared over Alps' own.

"You awake?" she asked. Alps tried to nod. Nothing really happened.

"He's quiet." Nita said with a whimper.

"He's still stunned to keep him from using energy he doesn't have." Luna stated. I can tell he's awake. Alps, you can't talk or move right now. I was not able to heal you because I used all my stored essence before I got to you. You are stable, and we are getting you to some shelter until I can renew some of that energy and heal you properly, but for now, it's going to be uncomfortable, and you aren't going to be able to move or talk." Alps was able to at least move his eyes, and saw the young lupine child they had found nearly dead on the road look over him.

"Thanks for saving me, Alps." He said. "You don't remember me, but I remember you. We lived in the same town. My folks live just outside Luca, on a tuber farm. You guys can rest and hide there, I won't tell anyone, I swear." He

was called over by Lira and moved out of Alps' vision. Nita leaned over her lover and whispered. "We told him we were running from Jalana town guards. He's got no idea who we are. Kids are not great at keeping secrets. We will take that up with his parents, but we have to get there first." Alps screamed inside. Where was Reika?! Why wasn't anyone telling him about Reika?! Were they afraid the sorrow would cause him to get worse? He had to know! He wanted Lyat to check on him. He wanted to look into his eyes. He would know the moment he saw Lyat.

As if in answer to his inward scream, Lyat appeared over him. Alps' heart froze as he studied the large Asuna's face. He smiled wryly. Alps relaxed the muscles that were not actually able to be tensed and exhaled heavily.

"You attack many Uruk beside Lyat." He grinned broadly, further chasing Alps' worries away. "Reika gain another strong brother. She ees resting too, we heal you both. Hard fight, but everyone be okay!" Alps' heart soared. His worst fears were laid to rest. Why would Luna not just tell him that the second she saw he was conscious? She should have known that he would want to be told. But Lyat seemed to understand what was important right away.

His mind clear of that intense dread, he was free to consider other things. Like the searing agonizing pain in his side just under his ribs, and how the technique Luna used to keep him still made it feel like he was not getting enough air because his chest barely moved as he breathed. Alps found additional pain in realizing that if Luna had not been with them, Reika and Alps at the very least would be dead. He found only a little solace in the fact that it was his own energy, given to his mother, which saved them. He would *not* have reservations sharing that energy again.

The group began to walk again after resting about an hour. Alps was glad. Somehow, the gentle rocking motion eased his pain. He was able to glimpse Reika, in a similar stretcher, being carried by Vhale and Lira. Her fur was still brown-splotched all over, filthy with caked blood as she looked far worse off than Alps. Was she really going to be alright? Luna walked sluggishly, and carried herself like she was far older. She was worn out too. Everyone seemed stretched nearly to their limit. Only Vhale seemed to be holding up well, but he was not involved in any of the fighting. The rocking motion took his mind off everyone's suffering for a bit. Ultimately, it lulled him back to sleep.

When he came too, he was being jostled a bit as he was brought through a gate in front of an old-looking house. He opened his eyes and saw black ribbon on the gate itself. That was not a good sign. Someone died. He heard a scream from the house. The thumping of two sets of feet, and the boy squeaked from the impact of apparently both his parents. Alps would wag if he could. He was happy that he made it home. How often does one get to reverse such tragedy? The Letai had been known for that. He was happy to experience it,

even if immobile.

“Vahn! We thought you had perished! Tir said you were brought down by Uruk! He said he saw it!” a male voice, sobbing, said. The black ribbon was apparently for the boy that they just brought back.

“Dad! It’s okay, geeze! Tir ran off like a coward and left me there. There was just two of them. But they got me. They really did. These people saved me. They are running from Jalana. They need a place to stay while their friends get better.” There was a surprised cry from a female, perhaps the mother.

“Asuna? Here? Vahn, go inside! Now!” the male shouted. He tried to protest, but his father loudly reaffirmed the “Now” part of it. Alps was set upon the ground, which made it a little easier to see. Nita and Nidaja stood in the way in their travelling cloaks as the father, a very strong-looking tan-furred wolf squared off with Lyat, which was apparently why Alps was put down. Lyat might not have been in good enough condition for another heavy battle against Uruk, but punching out a farmer would be sleepy work for the still-larger Asuna.

“I would advise you to stay your words of hate and open your heart, kind farmer.” Nita stated.

“I appreciate you all for saving my son, however you managed to do that, but I will not tolerate these spots upon my estate. I would be barred from town if anyone found out. I don’t know what you people did, why you are running, or where you are going, but my advice to you is that you keep on going and stay the hell away from town.” Alps could not hate the wolf for his words. He was very well aware of what the farmer was afraid of.

“No, I mean, you should really reconsider.” Nidaja said sternly. Alps watched as the general and her sister both removed their hoods. Nita held up the royal crest to the farmer. Another loud squeak from his mate, who seemed good at that noise. He lowered his head in a bow.

“I meant no disrespect, Your Majesty, I would never!” Nita moved up closer to him, and took his hand.

“No apology needed, kind sir. But your help *is* needed.” Her words were gentle and professional. He flailed a bit, backing up and indicating the door.

“By all means, Your Highness, please! Please, bring them in, we will help in any way that we can!”

The tension of the moment perhaps wore too much on Alps. He wanted to look around the farm house as they brought him in, but he simply lost consciousness again the moment he was through the threshold. Something

about being inside a house after everything had happened filled him with a sense of safety and peace. Or maybe Luna just knocked him out so that he would not experience the agony of being transferred to a bed. He didn't know.

When light greeted his eyes again, he felt different. He moved slightly. He had control of his muscles again. He turned his head. Reika lay there by his side, clean and sleeping, it seemed. He twitched a bit, thinking of her fearful face as she watched the Uruk dance around taking cuts at her, slowly killing her. It was a horrible thing to see. She was alive though. Would she be okay emotionally? That was terribly traumatic. He sat up and immediately regretted it. He nearly vomited, barely keeping himself together. He laid back down until his head stopped spinning, and then slowly, very carefully sat up again. He felt awful, but he could sit up. He looked at Reika again, who slept peacefully. He was clad in his trousers which appeared to have been cleaned. He lifted the sheets a little, and dropped them back down immediately. If Reika had anything on at all, it was not on her chest. He looked over to the door, then around the room. It was small, lined in grey stone with a wooden ceiling, a small lantern hanging above the window which let in plenty of bright sunlight. The shutters were open, and a soft, cool breeze ruffled Alps' fur.

"Hello?" Alps called out. His voice worked again. For the condition he felt like he was in before, he was actually doing rather well. The door swung open almost immediately. Nita was there. Alps smiled at her and she pulled him into a deep and slow kiss. Alps closed his eyes immediately to enjoy it, even though his side was still very sore. Nita then pulled a cloak onto Alps hastily. At first, he thought he was being taken outside or something, but then realized that he was only being brought into the living area where the farmer and his wife were talking with the others. Nita was hiding Alps' wings. He wondered how any of this was to remain a secret.

"He's awake! Welcome back to the world of the living, you lunatic!" the heavy farmer laughed.

"I am going to take him for some fresh air." Nita stated tenderly. They nodded and the queen escorted Alps outside. The air outside was indeed fresh and it was pleasant. Having come close to death, it was easy to appreciate every little detail of being alive. The tubers were already harvested so the scent of fresh soil was everywhere.

"Is Reika going to be okay?" Alps asked. It was the first thing he wanted to know for sure.

"She will be alright, but it will be at least two more days before she's up and about like you are. She had more injuries. Her brother is holding up alright." Alps sighed in relief. He then perked up. He had not thought that Lyat was that severely hurt.



“Lyat was badly injured?” he asked. He then remembered that he blacked out before the fight was over and felt utterly ashamed.

“No, not really, but who do you think Luna’s drawing essence from for the healing sessions for you and Reika?” the queen asked. Alps went scarlet. He could not help but think of Luna repeatedly pleasuring Lyat. “He and Nidaja both, but they have been very willing, given the task at hand.” He blushed even more as he considered Nidaja’s involvement. Was she tending to Lyat to help with essence drawing, or were she and Luna embraced in intimacy? The former slave nodded, trying not to work himself up dwelling on that. “We can only tell little bits to the farmers. I wanted to fill you in on the story before you went back in there. We were travelling to investigate a strange report, is what we told them. They immediately had a strange report in mind that they thought we were investigating, two things, actually and we rolled with that. Alps, this is not something you are going to like.” The white lupine looked curiously at Nita as she leaned back against the fence.

“What is it?” he asked. He did not like the unhappy expression that she had.

“Alps... There have been two very high profile assassinations while we have been tied up with such intense matters.” Nita seemed so dire and serious. The first thing Alps thought of shot through him like an arrow made of ice. When he thought of assassination, he always thought of what Nita had to be protected from.

“Please not Misty.” He croaked, feeling sick again.

“No, no, not that!” the queen said hastily, “...but both are people you know Alps... Sit down.” Nita helped Alps down against the fence post, to the ground. His heart was already racing with preparation for terrible news... and to mourn.

“Please. I need to know. Just say it.” He huffed with bile collecting in his throat.

“Alps, Azia was assassinated by members of the Spirits of Silverlight.” The words rang like a bell right in Alps’ ears. He did not know her as well as many of his friends, but it pained him severely to hear that. He pulled his knees to his chest, tears in his eyes.

“Tia?” he asked, assuming that was the other. Nita shook her head.

“No one knows where she went, but it’s assumed she somehow escaped. She was obviously not part of the conspiracy.” Alps sighed softly, wiping wetness from his eyes, sniffing a bit. Azia’s role was dangerous. He knew that. She was

changing things in a very rough environment. He wished he could have protected her. The Spirits of Silverlight had apparently gone back to being enemies of the crown. He hoped Tia was okay. He looked up again and tilted his head, his heart already heavy.

“The other?” he asked.

“Chana Feras.” Nita said bluntly. She had very little expression as she said it. Alps knew why. Nita and Nidaja both wanted her dead after finding out what happened to Alps in her care. Alps felt suddenly hollow. He had asked his friends to leave her alone, but it had not changed her fate.

“The town’s been in an uproar. They kicked the Sprits of Silverlight out and there’s been trouble with that, but the group suddenly packed up and left for some reason and things have been calming down, but they are not really patient with strangers right now. The farmer helped us get resupplied without any of us having to go into town, but we have had to keep Reika and Lyat carefully hidden. Hyenas this far north would throw those people into a frenzy and they would burn this place down.” Alps sat up again, a memory hitting him like a landslide.

“Ellis... the fox!” The mention of fire reminded him of that horrible attack she unleashed on the Uruk.

“We didn’t see where she went after the fight. We assume that she’s still around though. We have found dead Uruk the entire way to this farm house. It’s like she was picking off any that escaped the fight, or maybe just stragglers or patrols that were out when the attack occurred. They aren’t just heavily damaged, Alps... They are in pieces. I don’t know what kind of sword she was using, or if she somehow uses essence to improve it or the power of her strokes beyond what even Nidaja is capable of but she hews through Uruk as if they were imaginary to her. She’s dangerous... Luna claims that she’s got at least the essence ability, the raw power... of a high Priestess. We do not know what we are dealing with when Ellis is around, so please be careful when dealing with her Alps. We know she’s been following us but we are not sure why.” Alps nodded to Nita. He’d felt that way for a while. He would be cautious with her. Still, she had never done anything to them directly to make him think she intended him or any of the others harm.

“Where are the others?” Alps asked, thinking of everyone else again suddenly.

“Lyat and Luna are ... taking care of private matters we would rather the good farmer does not see. Lira and Vhale are fishing. They have taken to doing chores to pay the family back for their kindness. Nidaja’s inside. We should be able to leave soon, in a day or maybe two depending on Reika’s condition, but I want you to keep your wings covered. Nothing is said about the Letai, nothing is

said about the Uruk or where we are headed, alright? I just want you to keep your strength up, eat and drink plenty of food and water, and rest so you have your full strength back.”

“So, wait... You want me to spend two days with you, close, warm, safe in bed, eating and drinking and resting?” Alps asked, his tail slowly swaying side to side as he pulled himself up along the fencepost.

“Correct.” Nita stated calmly.

“I think after fighting a hundred Uruk, that’s sounding a little dangerous!” Alps laughed, and kissed his beloved Nita, not caring if the entire world saw that.