

## Sirius, Book IV

### A Slave's War

*Comments or Questions?*

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## Chapter 13

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The expression on Nita's face made it more than apparent that she was mortified that Alps had actually run into a real problem in Luca. She was irritated with him having to go alone anyway, but agreed with the reason why he had to. And it had, in her open opinion, nearly cost him his life. He did not enjoy relating his story, but finally explained Ellis' involvement. She admitted to killing Chana, and then, right in front of Alps and Bree, had slain Enna. She was a killer, that much could not be denied. But it was not entirely clear who she was doing these things for. Did she have her own agenda? Did she have another allegiance? Alps had not related that he spoke to Ellis in a dream to summon her. It was something he was simply not sure how to explain. That was not the topic of discussion at that moment. What to do next was more important. Nidaja leaned back against a half-uprooted tree, still growing strong even after redirected by some storm of the past. It was a good metaphor for the slave himself. The general spoke calmly as Lyat stood quite typically by her side.

"Alps, you know my feelings on the matter. If Ellis really did kill Chana, there's an open spot on my bed for her." The queen's sister had not hidden her continued desire to throttle the former regional matriarch herself. Alps nodded to Nidaja and spoke up.

"I don't want my friends committing senseless acts. I know Chana was wrong to act as she did, but killing her was not necessary. We cannot state by our actions that such extreme punishment without careful justice is acceptable. That same mentality nearly caused my demise in Luca. Barr would have tried to help me, but if Enna had acted immediately..." Ellis' words rang in his mind. If she had immediately killed Alps and Bree, he would not have been able to call the fox to help him.

"I don't want to think about that." Nita said. "But you still have not given me a reason why we should involve ourselves in this issue right now. We have more important things to do." Reika nodded to Nita in agreement.

"Queen wolf is right, Alps." she rumbled. "Luca is having better time with bad person gone. We is leaving them to it." She looked to Lyat for his vote on it, and he nodded. The former slave gritted his teeth. This was not going as well as he had hoped. It was important to him, was it not so much to the others?

Diplomacy was hard. He did not envy Nita for having often to take a course she did not much care for because of the votes of the council. It seemed like it might be infuriating on important subjects.

“Mother, what is your opinion on the matter?” Alps knew that a vote from Luna might well sway some of the others. She commanded a lot of respect. She looked up, her fingers bridged as she sat upon a small hill just to the left of the half-fallen tree with Whale somewhat typically sitting beside her, quiet and somber. She seemed to be thinking hard. The priestess finally answered.

“I am torn, obviously. I know this is important to you because you grew up in that town, and I know that you worry that with almost half of them still in the mines they are vulnerable, but I have to agree with the queen. Unless there is some tactical advantage to this, we would be ill advised to raise a hand against the Silverlight now. This is a dangerous and likely unnecessary task that could just as well be left to the townspeople. The Silverlight intend to control a wide region, oppressing a small town won’t work in their favor. They will just as likely leave it alone, at least for a time, until they can figure out a better way to control it.” Alps sighed softly. That was his only chance to sway the vote. He had told the townspeople he would do this. He should not have spoken so quickly. It would weigh heavily on him in the days to come.

“No one asks me for my opinion? I am your guide after all...” Lira had not said much at all during Alps’ somewhat shocking meeting. She pulled her cape around her, looking a bit sharper than the queen’s lover had seen her thus far. Everyone looked her way.

“You had not offered it.” Nidaja spoke bluntly. “As a tactician, of course it’s valuable. Speak.”

“I say we hit the area’s Silverlight as hard as we can before we leave.” There was a perplexed look on Nita’s face in particular as her trusted friend said such an unexpected thing.

“What value is it to us, Lira?” asked Nidaja.

“This is a dangerous course of action.” Luna protested.

“Look.” Lira placed a rough hide map that she had rolled up in her hip-pack on the ground. “The Mahlta River...” She pointed at a river that passed right by Luca, to its north and went far north to a huge lake. It seemed very distant.

“I see it. It’s a slow moving, wide, murky affair this time of season. Why is that important?” Nidaja asked.

“The crystals were being taken to a river boat. A large portion of our planned journey is north because of the lower population and likewise fewer Uruk patrols. We could take the river all the way up to Lake Frostpelt. There is a small town at the mouth of the river that we could get a sailing vessel from to get across the lake.” There was a pause, silent and tense as the others considered the weight of what Lira was explaining. She elaborated slowly for Reika, who was eating a leaf of some kind. “It would cut the time it takes to get to our destination in half, weather permitting.” There was another short pause, and then Nidaja blanched slightly as she realized in full what was being suggested.

“Lira, we can’t steal a river boat. We don’t even know how to pilot one. I barely even know how a steam engine works; much less have the ability to maintain it for a long journey.” Alps widened his eyes. He was not sure initially what a river boat was, and was imagining something similar to Nidaja’s boat, maybe just smaller. The thought that it worked on steam power, a very new invention, made it even more appealing to get it out of the hands of the Silverlight. The idea that they had any kind of technological superiority over the royal house which had not picked up the use of the engine due to the cost of fabricating the parts was unsettling to him. It made him feel that the Silverlight had somehow managed better funding. This was likely coming from an outside influence, or even the avatar himself.

“My suggestion is that we steal the pilot too, actually.” Lira’s answer was matter-of-fact.

“I like this plan.” Whale stated calmly. Alps looked to him with a little surprise. Whale tended to remain quiet during these kinds of meetings of direction.

“Why do you like it?” Luna asked.

“Three reasons.” Whale stated. He stood up from where he was sitting on the leafy ground under a tall deciduous tree. “First, it sounds like there is an outside influence directing the Silverlight as I am sure others are starting to suspect, and if that is the case, then it’s likely that allowing them to keep getting stronger without any kind of resistance to make them pause and rethink their strategy will make them a bigger thorn in the future. Taking something with the value of a ship from them would be a pretty substantial detriment, and keeping Luca intact would allow the news to spread that they should not be trusted, limiting their easy influence. Certainly they would have more trouble masquerading regional matriarchs.” He began to pace. “Next, I am certain that they are not trying to destroy the crystals, since leaving them buried and not mining them up in the first place requires far less work. Those crystals are the hardest ingredient to obtain because they are not natural. They exist naturally but they draw on nether energy slowly over time. That is what makes them so good for linking essence over a distance. For controlling the Uruk. They are

very special, and they are a finite resource. Ground into sand and reformed into the crystal eyes for the Uruk, they are far too dangerous to leave as they are. I agree that we have to destroy them.” He looked to Nidaja and Nita in particular, as he knew the next course of action would be their decision and no one else’s. He seemed to at least respect that.

“And your third reason?” Nita asked solemnly.

“We do not know who moves in the shadows around us. Our efforts may well be undone if it becomes known even the direction we are moving. We can trust that the farm folk will not intentionally betray us perhaps, but unintentionally saying the wrong thing can be even more devastating. That boat, whatever a steam engine is or is not, is our best chance to move faster than the news of our journey. Moving fast is in our best interest.” Lira hopped up and down a little.

“Right! Right, I agree completely.” Nita sighed and looked at Nidaja.

“A fight with our own people... swayed to do wrong though they may be. You must know this is hard for me.” The queen stated softly.

“I know, but we cannot allow our risk to be for nothing. This is for all people. Asuna and Amani alike.” Alps was more adamant now more than before. He had not thought of everything that Vhale had said and it only cemented his resolve. Nita seemed to consider this for a bit longer before sighing and nodding slowly. Luna wrung her hands quietly a moment at that and stated,

“I will assist in any way that I can, but please understand... I cannot take a life unless I myself am threatened. I would be better to hang back and assist with healing. Blood on my hands actually affects the ease with which I can use the essence to heal. Uruk are one thing, but the Asuna or a lupine life is another entirely. Priestesses are not allowed to kill. It’s something Mannus was quick to use against us.” She then cupped her muzzle, seeming to have actually forgotten that the former “dark one” was right there. He nodded.

“Indeed. Effective tool, that little rule. Even I would avoid taking a life if I could. That’s why I let the Uruk do that, and why I dispatched of the Letai using the Shadowfall. No blood. Certain kinds of essence are repulsed heavily by physical suffering. You can see and sense just fine, but using it in certain ways becomes more difficult. Also, I have my own reasons for wanting no part in a face off against the Silverlight.” He crossed his arms. Alps understood. He was trying to separate himself from his dark past. Fighting anything but the Uruk was out of the question. Alps had not expected this particular problem however. He looked to Lyat and Reika.

“Will you two be able to fight?” the former slave inquired. Reika began emphatically nodding, until she looked at her brother, who was shaking his head. She began shaking her head as well, looking a little crestfallen.

“Asuna is trying to garner trust for future relationship with Amani empire. Killing of Amani outside of Asuna territory is currently unlawful.” The male hyena looked down as he said that, knowing that this was making things harder. “We can fight in self-defense, of course, but attacking boat is not defending. It is attacking.”

“I can fight.” Nidaja stated. “Nita should not. She uses healing essence as well. She might need that. That and you know... leader of our empire.” Alps nodded slowly at that. Lira spoke up.

“While I would rather not, I am also able to fight. But that leaves only three of us, including Alps who is not a trained fighter, to do this.” She seemed to gather Alps’ worries easily. “We are willing to take the boat, but it seems we are voting down the act of fighting the Silverlight. I don’t know where we go from here.” The white lupine male sat down against a tree and pondered that a moment. Reika finally shrugged at the conversation.

“Is silly we worrying about how many of us is attacking Silverlight. We is lucky if even boat captain is alive now.” Luna and Nita looked curious at her. Alps’ heart sank. Reika had thought of something that he had not openly considered right away. The girl hyena was likely right. He spoke up.

“I suddenly worry now that the choice was made for us because we have been slow to act.” Nidaja looked inquisitively at her sister’s consort, and then jumped up, seeming to ready herself for a conflict.

“What do you mean?” she asked hastily, obviously thinking that he meant they were about to be under attack.

“I was not the one who asked where the crystals were being kept originally.” Alps stated. Nita puzzled over that a moment and then widened her eyes.

“The fox.” Lira answered darkly.

“Those people may already be dead.” Luna added quickly with a fair amount of distress. “We need to move. We have to discourage her. If the dark one has agents here, they will tie Alps to the slaughter. This would certainly cause suspicion on the other side.” Everyone got up and began to move, Lyat immediately falling into step with Nidaja, Vhale with Luna, Alps with Nita on one side and Reika on the other. Lira did not seem to care that she was not paired

with anyone. She was used to moving alone. The green-furred survivalist barked out,

“As long as she leaves the boat intact, maybe it won’t matter, but I agree. Either way we need to get there quickly. If we are early enough to prevent her meddling we will do that, if too late, early enough to keep someone from reclaiming the ship.” The group moved hurriedly north from the forest, up to the river, and east to where the river boat likely would have been.

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There was a loud crash as a wave broadsided the boat. Leal and Ceriss both grabbed the rigging for the mast which had come undone and worked to pull it secure. Leal was happy to find that Ceriss’ strength could be increased by her essence, making her more effective for that than he was. The pair managed to get it under control, but the ship was broadsided again, the Lhap having to be caught in mid-air by his captain. Leal was impressed by his diligence to a crewmate that he had seemed to initially dislike. He pulled himself tight to the rigging as well, just to hold on. With his huge ears it looked like he might just blow away in the wind. It did not seem to be raining, however, which was unusual for the severity of the storm. Leal began to suspect Ceriss was right. This had something to do with their cargo.

“Why are we still getting broadsided?!” screamed Kaji, the ship’s captain. “I thought you turned the ship!” The fox barked adamantly,

“I did! The waves ain’t even goin’ th’ same direction as the wind, it keeps changing!” Ceriss pulled herself to the edge of the ship. Lunaris, gritting his teeth, soaked by a wave that had crashed over the bow of the boat, helped the priestess to her feet. She cried out into the din of wind and waves.

“I know! Hold fast, this is not an act of the natural world!” She peered out into the sea, then up at the sky, then back toward the ship. Leal tried in vain to catch a line that broke off to find out what it had been tied to.

“Anchor’s gone! Must have popped off on that last broadside!” he barked.

“Shit! My lucky anchor! We’re doomed!” the captain wailed.

“Lucky anchor?!” Neit screamed. “What made that thing lucky?!”

“It was the only thing that survived the sinking of my last ship!” the captain shouted over the roaring gale that seemed to be ever-changing its direction.

“It was on the ship that sank! That’s not lucky!” the former thief yelled back. “That might have been the unluckiest part of the ship!”

“No!” Ceriss yelled, enhancing the volume of her voice with essence enough that it startled everyone to focus. “The unluckiest part of the ship is in the hold right now! That’s what’s causing the storm!” Leal looked back to the priestess, then looked in the direction of the hold. He used what he had been taught about essence viewing to see it, even through the wood of the vessel. It was glowing brightly. It was probably glowing visibly in the hold. It was doing something, of that he was certain.

“We have to get rid of it!” the captain barked. “This boat’s not made to handle this!”

“No! We have to get it farther away from shore. The storm’s not blowing us back, it’s still moving us away!” Ceriss said loudly. Kaji called back furiously.

“We can’t last to get further away! It’s going to snap the mast like a brittle old crust of bread!” There was a loud pop, and the fox screamed. He went sailing overboard as he was holding rigging attached to the mid-part of the mast, which was sheered just below its connection point and flung by the winds far off the starboard side. Lunar is tried to grab him but he was not even close. The large black wolf called out fearfully. Those waters were so turbulent and dark it was not even possible to see the fox that went in.

“No!” Neit cried out. “Noooo!” She obviously did not want to see someone who was not even directly involved with this mess die for it. Ceriss moved unnaturally quickly over to that side of the ship, and her entire arm glowed with a violet light as the fox was wrenched out of the water, from below its surface, and right back onto the boat, sputtering, eyes wide in shock. As he was pulled out of the water, he had been surrounded in the same violet light.

“Hold onto him!” Ceriss shouted to the other fox. He did as told.

“Good heavens!” the captain shouted, having seen her do what had been impossible in his life time. Leal gritted his teeth. Well, that secret was out at least. “What am I dealing with here!? This was not part of the deal!” Ceriss ignored the stormy interrogation.

“Prepare the life boat!” the priestess barked.

“There’s not one!” the captain shouted.

“What?!” Neit and Leal both shouted. Lunar is groaned disdainfully.

"I had a lucky anchor!" the captain screamed over the wind. The ship was broadsided again.

"We're gonna die!" Neit sobbed.

"Pull it together!" Ceriss shouted. "Leal, if this ship goes down with us on it, we will be crushed as it comes apart, this thing's barely together as it is. We have to get off now!"

"What?! And go into the ocean?" the captain yelled. "How will that fix things?" he asked.

"I'd do as she says, Captain!" Lunariss shouted loudly. "She's every bit what you think and more. If you want to survive, we need to act, not sit around and hope for lucky anchors to come and save us." The general pulled the rigging tight again, doing all he could to try to hold the crumbling ship together, but it would not last long. Every single attempt to fix something was a patch job, and certainly not likely to even hold long on a calm sea, much less the monster that they had awakened around them there.

"I will make a raft, being smaller will make it more likely to survive! Leal, get rope, we will need it!" Amid the loud protests of foxes, the guard struggled on hands and knees to get to the door to go below deck. He managed it finally, and pulled his way through the seemingly spinning hall to the storage room. Things were tumbling around everywhere, but he finally found a length of about fifty feet of old, useless-looking rope. They really did pick a winner for sailing over the sea! Leal managed to get back up to the deck, feeling suddenly queasy. He could not be sure if it was from the violent pitching of the ship or the fact that he was terrified. He'd never seen a storm this terrible. The clouds seemed to be getting closer to the surface of the water, turning in a threatening fashion, as if a tornado was about to touch down on it.

"Can everyone swim?" Ceriss called out loudly. Everyone answered in the affirmative. Leal was impressed that she asked. One would suspect that people who travel the sea would mark that as a job requirement, but this captain was not overly competent, it seemed. "Move to the front of the ship, everyone! I am going to have to remove part of the deck!"

"How do you intend on doing that?!" the captain cried, flailing a bit, and almost toppling. The ship was swiped at the side again, and nearly listed completely over. Still, everyone did as told. Ceriss knelt down close to the deck, hands upon it. Her arms glowed violet again. "Oh. Shit!" The captain backed closer to the front of the ship, helping to shelter the lighter fox against the wind. There was a series of loud pops and cracking noises, and then, rather suddenly, a large portion of the deck simply lifted up, and flipped right overboard, snapping some additional rigging.



“Impossible!” Neph cried, having not realized how he was even pulled from the water.

“Not for her!” Leal barked, swelling with pride even among his fear. Sometimes he forgot, holding her in his arms, what she was actually capable of doing. She seemed weakened by that, slumping over the edge, and rather suddenly vomiting. That was not a good sign. Leal moved toward her, and she shook her head, coughing and sputtering a bit.

“No, I’m okay! It’s like being kicked in the gut, it’ll go away. Get everyone on the raft!” she called.

“How are we supposed to survive when we are on it?!” Neit rightfully asked.

“It’s small enough I can control it, and things should get better if we move away from the ship! Trust me!” Ceriss called. The fox immediately launched himself over the edge. He seemed to have a lot of practice abandoning ship. Leal made careful note of that as Kaji failed to be the last one off the ship, getting off right after his crewmate. Leal picked up Neit, who protested by biting him, but he understood that, she was absolutely terrified. He vaulted over the edge just before another wave crashed into them. There was a hard impact of water, as the next wave coming sucked the ocean right out from under him, and what had been, seconds before, an eight foot drop turned into nearly a thirty foot drop with the ship seeming to hover over him as he fell. They surfaced right beside the ship, having only barely cleared it as it surged down the wave toward them. Lunaris struck the water as soon as it was level again, knowing better, it appeared, than to jump after the crest.

“You’re all insane!” Neit sobbed, choking on saltwater.

“Where’s Ceriss?” cried Neph, pulling himself up onto the splintered but thankfully floating section of deck. Leal pulled Neit toward the makeshift raft. It was barely staying above water, and it seemed like it could snap in half at any moment. Ceriss was already on the raft, somehow. Her hair was not even wet. Had she jumped right to it? The raft rather suddenly stabilized, even though the ocean had not. It seemed to “stick” to the water. It made climbing on a bit easier. The captain was the last one to get on, helped on by Lunaris who had clamored on board along with Neit. Everyone was alive, at least.

“No! My best ale is on there!” Kaji cried, reaching longingly toward the ship as it simply snapped in half, and began to slowly vanish beneath the swirling waters. Leal realized suddenly that they were moving away from the ship at an unusually fast rate. He turned and saw that Ceriss was concentrating hard, hand touching the surface of the water, as if she was letting an unseen chain pull them

away to safety. The clouds reached the top of the ship, spinning and dark and threatening. The whole vessel practically exploded, being shredded by the intense winds of a powerful tornado. The farther they got from the ship, the calmer the winds got, though the water was still choppy some way out. The rest of the clouds, though more slowly rotating, descended upon them. Leal was at first afraid they would be shredded to, but it was only a cool, dark fog, even the wind eventually fell silent.

A few minutes later, everyone clinging to the still moving faux water craft, the water fell mostly calm. There were no real waves, but the craft continued to move, powered for a time by the intensely focused Ceriss who pushed the craft in a straight line far away from where the ship went down, but the fog clung to the ocean as far as the eye could see, which was never very far. Everyone was silent for a time, and Leal knew why. They were mulling over the fact that they were more than a day from shore with great wind, and the chance that they would make it back before they died of thirst was pretty remote. Lunariss and Leal worked quietly to secure some of the flotsam from the ship to the raft to increase buoyancy, the priestess no longer pushing the craft a moment, as she seemed lost in thought. Occasionally she would adjust their heading, but she was not using much energy for that.

“So we just wait for the end, then...” Neit finally said, having the lack of decorum to force the subject.

“Yep.” The captain was pretty secure in what he said.

“No.” the priestess stated calmly. Leal looked back to her. Kaji spoke before Leal could.

“We don’t have a lot of options. We have a couple of days before we die out here. Do you have another trick up your sleeve?” he asked. “What are you supposed to be anyway, a Letai? What the hell was all that back there?” The priestess answered.

“I keep pushing us. I can move this small raft almost as fast as the wind brought us here if I work hard at it. And yes, I’m Letai.” Neph gasped loudly at that, cupping his smallish foxy muzzle. Ceriss ignored the reaction. “And however much you think that complicates matters, Kaji, you are not even close to how complicated things are.” Leal sighed softly at the dark priestess.

“Even I know that your well runs dry, Ceriss. You can’t do it around the clock, and you got sick from overexerting yourself on the ship.” He appreciated her resolve, and her attempt to calm Neit, but surely that was not realistic.

“It’s not that different from being in a healing circle.” The dark furred priestess put her fingers back into the water. The craft started moving again.

The amount of essence force that it took surely had to put strain on a body. Leal was aware her body was nearly at its limit already. This could break Ceriss.

“What’s a healing circle?” asked Neit. Neph chimed in.

“If the Letai encountered a town with mass casualties or somethin’, they would be havin’ several work together t’ focus a lot of healing energy o’er several people at once while one focused on individual healing.” The captain looked at his crewmate with a little surprise. Leal looked to the vulpine as he explained, since Ceriss would not talk while she was pushing the ship. The fox continued to speak. “Sometimes, they would do this fer hours and hours. It took a lot of power, but the Letai store essence like a grain bin, puttin’ more and more in their bodies to use up the reserve for just such an occurrence.” Leal nodded to this. He did not want to tell the fox that Ceriss had been using essence like it was in danger of going bad for the past few days. Her endurance for handling essence was not really in question, as she maintained disguises constantly, but this was a lot of effort, if she could not even talk while she did it, and she still held onto her darkened form. Would it break eventually? Would everyone see the battered lupine lady she really was? That would shake their confidence to be sure.

“How do you know about that?” the captain asked the fox curiously.

“My parents were somethin’ of an authority on their old customs and the like. They told us stories all the time. My grandfather owned a library, and my dad was a fan of the old tales. It’s how he met my mother. So obviously, they told me about it.” He nodded and sat back down. At least it made better sense to the guard why the vulpine was so shocked. He knew what a big deal Ceriss being alive really was. Leal leaned down over Ceriss as she wore a calm but very focused expression.

“Don’t worry, Ceriss. We will do what we can to help you. Don’t hesitate to ask. We’re in this together.” He said, wondering if she could teach him the trick she was using. He was younger, maybe he would sustain things a bit better. Just watching her was not enough to learn. He learned to see the essence, but not to really use it. It would likely take longer than they could survive out here for him to learn a trick of this magnitude.

“How does she know we are going the right way?” Neit asked. Ceriss finally answered, as the craft slowed, her focus broken.

“I don’t. But I know the current lay of the essence around me. It doesn’t tell me what direction I should be going, but it at least keeps our heading. Whatever direction we are going, I will keep going in that direction.” That did not seem to encourage Neit.

“Where will we end up?” she asked.

“Somewhere alive, that’s all that matters right now.” The priestess sighed softly. “I think that we got the crystal far enough away. Diera should be safe at least. It was not for nothing.” She seemed to take strength in that.

“Not much use in being a hero if you don’t get to come back for the party.” Neit stated.

“The greatest heroes don’t get parties.” Leal said in a soft, sage tone.

“The greatest heroes end up locked in dark crystals to suffer the darkest of their nightmares for eternity because the entire world has forgotten they even existed.” Ceriss growled darkly. Leal gritted his teeth. The craft began to move again. Neit appropriately shut the hell up. Lunaris oooohed softly on Neit’s behalf. The tiny, barren raft, populated by a captain with no ship, a fox from the islands, a Letai Priestess, a thief and a guard and an Amanian general continued to drift swiftly but quietly over barely perceptible waves. The parting shot for the booby-trapped crystal as it was pulled out of range was to kill the motion of wind and water to trap anyone who was even successful in moving it out of range. It was not assumed by the dark one that any priestesses existed, so they were supposed to be dead in the water even if they had abandoned the crystal. They were not supposed to be able to escape. They might still have been doomed, and even if they survived, they had no idea where they would end up.

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Alps and his companions’ journey there was rushed and tense, nearly a run most of the way as forest gave way to rolling hills, the sounds of wind rushing through leaves replaced with the scent of wildflowers that one could smell but never quite see. The day seemed remarkably calm for all the problems that had occurred, and the new ones Alps was sure they would have to deal with by the time they got to where they were going. When would things begin to return to normal for him? What was even normal anymore? His life with Chana had been hard, but at least he had a pretty good idea of what he would be doing weeks out. Now, he could not plan ahead even half an hour. He could be attacked, kidnapped, subjected to spirits and phantoms from the present and past, pushed into places that hardly count as places, and be forced to shatter reality to escape it. The wordless plodding toward their destination allowed him to consider this for some time.

There was a small extension of the town of Luca that acted as a modest trade and fishing port on the wide and slow Mahlta. It took nearly two hours from their camp to get there, but the little town seemed quiet as the Alps’ robed entourage approached. It was late in the day, but there should have been someone there.

"This is not looking good." Lira stated. She moved back to the group, having been slightly ahead. Nita stopped short of one of the low wooden fences that seemed more useful for determining a property boundary than actually preventing entry. It was for looks, not function. A stand of trees stood in the center of the little half-town that existed there which blocked the view of the dock, taunting the group as they approached. What lie on the other side? Would they be attacked?

"I smell blood." Nidaja was the first to verify what Alps' senses had just started to tell him. His stomach knotted a bit. This could be very bad. Would she have just knocked people out like she had with the Luca town guard, or would she be more vicious since these people were acting directly against the royal house? Who was Ellis even loyal to? As they moved cautiously around the stand of trees, the scene unfolded terribly.

The first obvious bookmark to what must have been a very one-sided encounter was a nearly perfect ring of five lupine individuals of various sorts, ages, and builds laying on their backs with their eyes open to the dimming heavens, expressionless and still. There was an identical band of blood across each person's chest. In each hand, there was a weapon drawn, clutched tightly, but clean. Alps approached them, but Luna held back, seeming detached. There were seven of them.

"They all went in a single stroke." Lira stated, following immediately behind Alps. "They confronted her... stood around her, and she sent them all to the life stream in an instant. They probably didn't even know they were being killed." Alps remembered with a pang of anger that she even told Enna that she didn't know she was dead. Was killing so easy? Was it right? These people stood in their way, and would intend the queen herself this very fate. Was it right, was it justified that Ellis killed them first? Alps whispered softly as the wind pulled the scent of blood around him, and poisoned his senses more and more.

"I guess they were a threat. I mean, their weapons were out. If I know her, she hadn't even shown herself to be a threat by that point." His mother took his hand to lead him away from the lifeless forms. He was an essence user, perhaps she wanted to protect him from whatever effect their blood might have.

"Are they Silverlight, or did she take out the villagers?" Nidaja asked. "Would it matter?"

"I think it would." Alps said in a murmur. "I don't want to think she could do this to innocent people."

"This one's got a crest on a large coin." Nidaja stated as she searched one of the bodies. "This one too. A sword and moon... I don't recognize it. It's not

the Silverlight, but it looks like they are all carrying it. Maybe it's something they changed after Azia was gone." Whale moved further on as Nita held back. Reika and Lyat stayed with her, forming something of a perimeter around the queen as they had been doing any time the situation was tense. Mannus finally spoke, his voice grim.

"While she might have gotten the first few around her by surprise, she was not so subtle with the others." Alps moved over to where he was, fully beyond the stand of trees. The first thing the white wolf became aware of was the boat. It was a very unusual design. He had heard of the river boat before, even back when he was with Chana. She had told him about it, but stated that she hated all the attention that the experiment was getting. They were too expensive and hard to maintain. It would pass. But it did not pass. This one had been in active use for three years.

After the attention-grabbing watercraft, his attention went to the obvious evidence of a rather disproportional fray. There were eight more bodies of lupines flung this way and that in an apparent line from the initial ring of corpses to the boat, and even two lying off the edge of the gangplank. They had been dispatched in various ways, but it appeared that a sword had been used in most cases. There was a soft thump, and everyone immediately became defensive. Alps looked toward the sound, and saw a rather rare site. A male emerald Amanian. Most tended to stay in Diera, close to the royal family as they shared a common ancestry, and they tended to be well cared for because it was assumed in most cases they would sire the children of the royal house. No one wanted to deny themselves such an honor by not being available. This one seemed frightened and confused. The moment he came into view, Nidaja and Nita pulled their cowls over their heads.

"H... Halt, who's there?" came an unsteady inquiry. Alps recognized his red and white sash. He was a member of the town guard. He didn't have any armor, but most in the outer villages did not. It was pricey. He just wore a brown shirt with a red sash around his middle.

"Did you see what happened here?" Alps asked. At least it seemed that Ellis left someone alive.

"I came out and they were like this. It just got real quiet. I heard them talking to someone, and then I heard a shout, but they told me I was supposed to stay inside all day today because they had some boxes I wasn't supposed to be messing with, so I figured they could handle it, and if they needed me they would call me. They didn't say anything else, and after a while I poked my head out just to see if everyone had gone. And it was like this. Just like you see it."

Lira pulled her hood down, letting the male see her. He stepped back a little. Emerald Amanians were not terribly common this far out, so it was a surprise, but it had been a surprise to Alps as well.

“You wear the garb of the town guard. Why are you guarding this place?” Lira crossed her arms skeptically. Alps nodded at her lack of trust. She was not a survivalist just to be gullible.

“It was this or the mines, which would *you* choose?” he asked bluntly. “Who are you people, you aren’t from the Silverlight. Are you from their parent group?” he asked. Alps furrowed his brow.

“Parent group?” he asked softly.

“Never mind, forget I said anything.” The guard sat on a part of the low and decorative fence. “Look, I’m just glad you aren’t the brigands that did this. I bet whatever those boxes had in them sure was valuable.” He looked at Nita and Nidaja intently, but they were not showing their faces. They were far too recognizable, as both of their faces were emblazoned on the highest valued coin in the land. Alps called the guard’s attention back.

“Do you know where the pilot is for the boat?” The white-furred male was not overly hopeful, but he had to ask. The green-furred guard pointed to the river.

“The Silverlight guys said he fell in the water a while back, but they had me kind of moving it up and down the river the past month or so. We’ve been able to get around on it, it’s not too complicated.” He walked over toward Lyat, who also had his hood up, but that did nothing to hide the spots on his arms which were bare from nearly the elbow down. “Shit.” He just stopped dead in his tracks, reaching for his sword.

“I’d advise that you think a little harder about how you want to spend your last day. It could be with family decades from now, or it could be here and now.” Lira stated calmly. He held still. Lyat did not move either, though his sister moved a little closer to him.

“I have to protect the town.” His voice wavered a bit, and the fear there was more than plain.

“I just got done protecting it. The false Regional Matriarch is dead.” Alps sighed softly. Saying who did it was not even important at that point.

“Wait, what?” asked the guard, turning to Alps suddenly.

“Barr is now the regional matriarch. The rest of the town guard is fetching everyone back from the mines.” Alps tried to make this sound as positive as it really was. It seemed to work.

“No kidding? This is not a trick? That woman... is gone?” he asked.

“Yes.” Luna stated. “And you are going to need to pilot that boat one more time, and then we can get you back to where you belong.” Alps looked with some surprise over to his mother. Technically, she was not giving him a choice with it, which seemed more forceful than what he was used to seeing from her.

“If you guys really did improve things in town, I will gladly take you away from here. Is there any way I could go back first and verify that this is the truth?” he asked. Alps looked warily at Lira and then his mother. They were more aware of the tactical needs in this case. Luna answered officially.

“I am fine with it. It will take us a little bit of time to properly deal with... the state of things here. I would prefer we leave under the cover of darkness if that is possible anyway. Do you agree?” she asked this last part of Nita. The robed individual nodded. If this was indeed a town guard, he would be easier to travel with knowing that the people he was with meant him no harm.

“I... I will be right back, I promise.”

“Wait.” Lyat’s tone was very cold. He stopped with a jerk, as if shouted at.

“Y... yes?” asked the guard. It was Luna who spoke next.

“You may only go back to verify things are going well in town. Do not speak to anyone about what you are doing here, what has happened here, or where you are going. You will only endanger yourself and other innocent people.” Alps had not considered that he might tell the town about him, since the town already knew about him. But they did not know he was travelling with an Asuna or two and it was better if they did not. He felt that they did not trust him a whole lot anyway.

“I promise. I just want to know everyone’s okay. I’ve not been in this town long, but there’s someone I have to make sure is alright.” Luna nodded to him.

“He’d feel less disposable if you people would ask his name you know.” Lira stated.

“Huh?” Alps asked.

“I’m Mytan Shuraza.” His reply had a bit of pride to it, making Alps feel that the last name had some meaning.



"Well, hurry Mytan. We intend to leave the moment of the sun's last light." Luna rumbled. He bowed to the pretty white lupine lady and then bolted.

"He's not coming back." Whale said sourly.

"I would not have wanted to kidnap him." Luna stated.

"It sounded like you might at first." Alps said.

"I would have kidnapped him." Lira growled in a meaningful sensual tone.

"What's an Emerald Amanian even doing as a guard out in the sticks?" Alps asked flatly.

"He's from the Shuraza family." Lira answered matter-o-factly. Lyat looked at her blankly. Luna spoke up.

"Which means what, precisely?" she asked. Alps' mother was not well informed about current politics and customs either.

"Ironically, they are interested in bringing back the Letai customs and teachings." Nita answered for her. "They left Diera two generations ago to push deeper into the border territories to find artifacts and books and the like if they could so they could bring back what they felt was the real power that the Emerald Amanians should have." Alps felt he understood exactly why Nita knew that. Her mother was exploring and hunting for those same artifacts.

"So wait, this guy comes from a family who practically worships the Letai?" Alps asked uneasily. They would have to keep some secrets to keep him calm. But if they were to be attacked at any point in their journey, those secrets would be difficult to keep.

"This sounds like it will be a fun trip, if he comes back." Lira laughed.

"If he's got something he's protecting here in town, I can't see him running off to come with people who might have just committed wholesale slaughter under his nose." Whale moved over to one of the bodies and started dragging it toward the forest.

"Where are you going with that?" Luna asked.

"Hiding it." Whale answered calmly.

"We *bury* the dead, Whale." The priestess growled.

"These people were criminals." The former ultimate foe to the Letai murmured.

"We don't have time to dig a dozen holes for people who meant to murder and destroy." Vhale growled. This was the first time Alps could recall seeing him disagreeing with or resisting Luna.

"There's time." She said coldly, and knelt down. She placed a hand on the soft ground and vine-like roots erupted from the soil all around her, her hands glowing softly in green light that was visible even to those not able to see essence. The roots all toiled around her, opening gaping holes, uneven though they were, all around Luna. They were deep enough to put those who had fallen to rest, but they were not exactly perfect graves. The black-furred wolf watched in silent awe, and then looked away, toward the slowly setting sun.

"There. Cast them in, then we can let the roots cover them over. No need to just leave this kind of horror in our wake. It won't help things." The priestess dusted off her robes. Alps had seen Luna command roots in the past, but had not been aware she was that strong with them. Vhale and Reika and Lyat helped with the bodies, 13 in all. Had it been a very lucky surprise attack, or was Ellis really just that level of fighter? The white former slave tried to assist with burial, but Luna openly objected to him handling the bodies.

After a few soft words in her native tongue, Luna left those to bring fertility to the soil, interred and unmarked as they were. The group turned their focus to the boat itself, still moored to the short, wide dock by the river Mahlta.

It was dark blue with silver trim, and looked like a squarish floating tavern if he had to choose an appearance. There was a tall barrel like post on each corner of the flat-bottomed boat. As it was explained to him by one of its operators at the town's inn, each vertical post had a paddle that oscillated forward and backward inside the post, and each post could be individually controlled under steam power from the center of the boat. The operator could adjust the amount of power to the post to control the speed of the boat, and could also turn a wheel for each post to control the direction of out-flow for the paddles, which meant that the boat could hold its position in the water no matter which way it was going, could move from side to side, forward or backward, or even turn at a nearly complete stop. It was not as fast as a sailing ship, but it was perfect for navigating the winding, often somewhat shallow Mahlta river. Alps did not understand much of this when it was initially described to him, but as he looked at the ship, it made a little more sense. The operator was explaining it to try to impress the people at the inn's tavern, but Alps had been fascinated by it then. He wished he had paid more attention.

"Let's have a look around on board..." Lira stated calmly. "I've been wanting to see this ship for a while anyway." The white male lupine followed, and

the others came along a moment later, feeling confident that the place did not look like a government sanctioned slaughter anymore.

Inside, the ship looked rather elegant, and reminded Alps even more of an inn. At first, he was not certain why regular ships did not look like that, but as he thought about it, he realized that they could not. The often violent motion of the ocean made it easier to care for a ship that was fairly utilitarian. The river was not likely to ever be so harsh when travelled upon. The river craft would be moored in the rather sheltered parts of the river during the rains, but ultimately even in a flood it was not likely to be pitched nearly onto its side.

He toured the craft to find rooms, some quite stately, a nice and fairly well stocked galley, and a pilot's cabin at the top that gave a great view all the way around the vessel to allow for precise piloting and confident awareness of what was around the ship. There were a dozen levers at the front of this room, and no steering wheel. Alps was pretty sure he could not pilot this boat. He hoped Mytan really could. Would they really spend such a large portion of their trip in this kind of comfort? There were beds, a lovely sitting room, and a nice deck around most of the boat to watch the lazy river beneath.

"Looks like she missed a few of them." Vhale said from the galley as they passed by it a second time. He held up a small box that had two yellowish crystals in it. Alps recognized the color. It's what was used for the Uruk's eyes, but they were five-sided dual-terminated crystals, so they did not have the smooth, glassy oval feel of Uruk eyes. As he said, they were carefully formed to their purpose.

"I'll just be holding onto those." Luna stated softly, taking them away from Vhale. He laughed at her, which made Alps feel a little better, as he worried that the dark-furred wolf might be genuinely offended at Luna's distrust.

"Be my guest. I want nothing to do with them." He looked at Luna as she walked off, and Alps flattened his ears a bit. Was he looking so wistfully at the now prohibited crystals, or was he gazing after his mother? Surely not. On their first meeting, she nearly killed him, and he sent her son into oblivion right in front of her. Maybe he missed what he used to be able to do. He slapped Vhale on the back, shaking him from his daydream and murmured,

"Thanks for being understanding. I know it's hard sometimes, but you have our support." Alps leaned over the edge as the others moved around the boat to stake out their temporary residences. Reika in particular seemed excited, skittering around opening cabinets, boxes, anything she could find to satisfy her curiosity, chatting away with Bone the entire time. Lira kindly avoided asking questions about that. Vhale watched the others a bit, and looked back to Alps.

“Given what I am, when this is over, you will be better off not having the liability of my identity causing problems for you and your soon-to-be life mate.” He stated. “What will become of me?” Alps was actually happy that Vhale asked this. It meant that he had started to care about his fate.

“I have given a bit of thought to that. My mother has to, I am sure. Trust that we will have an answer when the time comes for us settle down a little. I assume that you will be allowed to live in peace somewhere out of the way, where you won’t have to worry about such things.” Alps cradled his chin in his hands, leaning against the railing of the boat, watching as the sun got lower in the sky.

“I had a garden, a really nice garden, back when I was a student at the Temple of Gize. The shrine to lost lovers was considered to be one of the most beautiful places in the world because of it. I think I would like to do that again.” Alps looked at Vhale with surprise as he smiled. His tail wagged slowly, the first time Alps had seen it move. The white lupine grinned. Vhale was used as a weapon against the entire world, he had a lot of guilt, but the close proximity to the Letai were healing him. Perhaps he would never really fully recover, but if he could wag his tail again, it was not all in vain.