

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 11

The low white clouds seemed to move so much faster because of their closeness to the ground, and illuminated by the moon it gave them an ethereal look. Nidaja rested on her back in the medium length grass, a stalk of it between her teeth, sweetness from it on the tip of her tongue. She sighed as she enjoyed the cool evening air. The opportunity to rest had not been offered easily. Alps and Reika were badly injured, but would recover. Luna assured them all of that. It had been a three day rest, but Nidaja knew this was to be the last night that they stayed here. It was too dangerous for both the mission, and the people who had agreed to give them shelter. They had little trouble keeping visitors away by saying the house was under quarantine due to an illness in the family that would need a week to run its course, but well-wishers would not keep their distance too long once that was over.

Nita needed time to recover from the shock of seeing Alps fall in battle. The queen herself sustained him with what little essence energy she could when he demanded that Reika be taken care of. His mother had just saved the child, Vahn, so she didn't have enough energy to do more than pull the girl back from the brink. Nita could do even less, but she got unexpected help from Lira, who was a marginally capable user of healing essence. Survivalists without the ability to treat a wound don't make it long, she said. Upon getting to the farm house, the routine for two days had been for Lyat and Luna to slip out to the forest near the farm house to let Luna draw energy, which she had done four times. The hyena was willing, but his body was tired.

"Thank you for being so understanding. I am certain this is unusual for you." The white priestess stood ten or so yards away, her simple but elegant green and gold robes easy to recognize even in the darkness of a passing cloud. The general sat up and smiled to Luna. Nidaja wore a simple grey tunic and her leather plated skirt, seeming a bit more relaxed than she should be given their mission. Armor was not needed for the task at hand, however.

"I wish you had asked sooner. I was not aware that was an option, or I would have offered." Nidaja patted the grass at her side. Luna bowed courteously and took a seat.

"I had not been sure that it was not a taboo to you. It is to some. At least,

beyond preference.” Luna explained. The general shook her head softly.

“No, I imagine Alps would not have volunteered that kind of information. I was the only affection Nita allowed herself to know for a long time, so I am both accustomed, and genuinely amiable to the idea.” She reached up and caressed Luna’s cheek, getting a soft blush from her.

“It’s common in a Letai temple shared by multiple priestesses obviously.” The older lady wolf whispered. “It is good to hear that you were there for Nita though. I am sure it’s hard to know who you can trust in her position. She needed that.” The general nodded to Luna as she said that, finding her to be both kind and intelligent. Her wisdom would be a wonderful asset to the royal house if she was willing to stay close. With Alps and Nita bound, Nidaja imagined she would likely stay in Diera. Nidaja murmured softly,

“Actually, it was enough for a while, but she needed more eventually. She needed something different. It’s why I gave her Alps.” The green-furred lady slipped a little closer. Luna was here to draw essence, of course. When Nidaja had realized that the hyena was yielding less essence because his soreness made the encounters less pleasant, she swooped to his aid, but she did not do so begrudgingly. To her, she was being given the opportunity to both help Alps with her own power, and give a very warm impression of gratitude to the one who brought her very best friend into the world. There was no taboo to her. Besides, she had become accustomed to shattering taboos anyway.

“Thank you, Nidaja.” The priestess leaned in and touched her lips to the green-furred lupine’s own. The first touch was electrifying to her. She was so gentle. Her touch, her voice, her long, soft hair, her generous bosom, the way she pushed in closer. Nidaja leaned back a little, putting one hand slightly behind her as she sat on the grass to keep her upright, the other slipping over Luna’s back as the white female kissed her, tongue tracing lips, then caressing tongue, the moment easily slipping into just the kind of passion she had shared with her sister and with Misha and Uri so many times.

“If it were not for you, Alps and Reika and a child we only just met would be slipping farther and farther away from us in the lifestream.” Nidaja explained in a whisper. “I would say this was thanks for that...” Her hand tightened over Luna’s shoulder as she nibbled along her jaw line, “But I am sure you are figuring out that I do not view this as a favor.” Her words became more sultry as she grinned. How would Alps feel about this? Would he blush when he found out? She loved seeing him flustered.

“It brings me a special kind of pleasure to be closer to those who have brought him so much happiness. You are just as responsible for my freedom as Alps is.” Luna’s words gave Nidaja some pause as she tried to follow the logic on that statement. Luna slipped her hands along the general’s sides, and then

drew her tunic up over her head, the lady Emerald Amanian shaking her head slightly, her long ponytail draped over her shoulder as her narrow, sly eyes regarded the beautiful priestess.

“Why do you say that?” she asked, actually a little surprised at just how comfortable this was. She had expected a little awkwardness, at least until the pleasure took over for them both. The general leaned back a bit more, bosom shamelessly presented to the mother of her long-time lover. She enjoyed the feel of a cool breeze teasing over perking, firming nipples.

“His determination to get back to you both was where he got the power to make it out of there. While he may have gotten the ability earlier in his life to get out of the crystal, he would not have tried; he would not have had the will, if it were not for you.” Nidaja considered that a moment. She was right, of course. When she first met Alps he was a very different guy. He could barely look at her in the eyes. Luna continued. “Neither of you treated him like he was a slave. I could tell that immediately. I know he is where he belongs and I have just as much gratitude to share with you as you do.” Her own words became smoldering as Nidaja found herself pushed back to the ground.

She had expected a somewhat utilitarian experience tailored to her direct pleasure for Luna to draw from her quickly to serve Alps and Reika their last session of healing, but that was not what she got. Luna’s kiss was passionate, almost desperate as her thigh pushed between the general’s own, her plated skirt dividing, pushed up and to the side a bit as she felt a bare leg ease up against her with urgency. It felt more like how she took Alps, wanting, feverish with desire. It incensed the Emerald Amanian, her hands pulling at Luna to bring her closer as she popped free for a gasp of air. The moment she did, firm suckling greeted her bosom, a nipple pulled hard and drawn tight against a stroking, rasping pink tongue. Nidaja was immediately soaked with need as her leg pushed back against Luna to try to grind with some insistence between her thighs to return a bit of that anxious pleasure that was already welling in the generals’ tummy.

There was a firm bite at one of those turgid nipples that drew a bark of heat from Nidaja, and she pulled the robes off of the priestess’ shoulders, baring her back, and her chest. She pushed Luna back by her shoulders, and then pulled her up and forward to capture a heavy mammary in a wide muzzle, then suckled with equal severity to what she had been shown on one of those thick nipples. Luna groaned loudly, and shifted her leg again, before drawing it back, and slipping a hand down between Nidaja’s thighs. The audible squish that greeted the mother wolf’s seeking fingers granted her all the permission she seemed to need.

Alps was very efficient at pleasure, and had become even more so because of the time he spent in Nidaja’s body, but there were things that only

came with knowing one's own body for a lifetime. Those were the things that Luna unleashed on the general. Nidaja cried out almost immediately as if tortured by fingertips that drew tight circles around that focused point of pleasure. Knowing the spot is something Alps could do. Knowing the exact rhythm and timing was only just slightly beyond him. It was not beyond Luna. She pushed Nidaja back, her grip strong on the collarbone of the stronger general. The Emerald Amanian could probably easily physically overpower Luna, but the pleasure screaming through her body with each motion of her two fingers upon her wet folds prevented her from doing much other than plaintively squeaking for mercy. Luna had none.

Nidaja found herself spread out on the grass, watching mindlessly at the passing clouds occasionally obscuring the moon, casting hard, long shadows over the fields and trees that surrounded them. The general groaned out as Luna held her down, then moved slowly down her body. When the priestess cupped her mouth on Nidaja's soaking honeypot, she realized that Alps seemed to have inherited a few traits without knowing it. The general immediately seized up at the sheer skill and power of that tongue. Luna did not stop. She pulled Nidaja's hips off the ground, pinning the general to her shoulders as her hips were embraced against the priestess' chest, the Amanian's legs draped over the white lady's shoulders as she released a long rush of groaning from being stoked in a plateau from one release to another.

Nidaja had considered that the idea of the essence drawing was being pleased to peak. It seemed like a very simple idea. Once the peak was reached, the priestess took her time and drew upon all that essence, sometimes even with some visual indication of it. Nidaja could not even see Luna, and it didn't seem like she was slowing down to draw from her. The general did not want her energy to go to waste, but she could not push herself to ask the priestess what she was doing.

The green-furred girl eventually struggled a little as she approached another climax quickly, and it ached inside her. She knew this would be one that Alps had been able to get from time to time. She hoped to be able to return the favor a bit on his mother, but it was looking like Luna had something to prove. Nidaja grabbed handfuls of grass.

"N-no! I can't take it!" she cried. Luna pulled her mouth off the general and panted out,

"I do love hearing that, but I am more aware than my son is of what a girl can take..." She pushed Nidaja's hips down a little, still cradling her lower back to keep her boosted up and pushed three fingers into her, beginning to piston them just as her spongy wet inner flesh squeezed tight. The priestess fluttered her tongue in that perfect sense of timing as her fingers hammered rapidly in and out of her. Muscles clenched, eyes shut tight, Nidaja wailed with agonizing

waves of blinding pleasure. Seven minutes was all it took a Letai Priestess to bring Nidaja from 'interested' to violently splashing her honey all over Luna's bare chest as the wolf relentlessly fluttered her tongue at her.

"Yes! Oh yesss!" cried the pinned green wolf girl, her back arching as her toes spread out. Luna crooned out happily, stopping her tongue to talk a moment.

"Very good, Nidaja. Emerald Amanians have so much essence, and it's just the right color for healing." Nidaja dizzily groaned out, almost sobbing from the force of her release.

"C-color?" the general asked weakly, wanting to keep Luna talking because if her tongue hit her again, it was going to start all over and she could hardly breathe. It was pleasure like she had been shown only rarely and Luna was pushing her into it with the skill of a bricklayer at a wall. Luna continued to stroke Nidaja's sex, going slow and gentle for the moment, which relieved her a bit.

"Letai see the essence very clearly, and sometimes discern color. Different colors of essence lend different strengths. Red essence from passionate warrior types work great for pushing and pulling and forcing the environment. Nita, though she does not realize, gets a lot of that essence from you, Nidaja." The general looked up her pinned body, her hips still up well above her head as she looked into Luna's mismatched beautiful eyes. Slender, skilled fingers continued to evenly push in and out of her tightly quivering sex.

"My essence is red?" she asked.

"Right now it's green, because you have been acting very much in a motherly, caring fashion for Aris and Reika. Normally it's more red." The priestess explained. "Nita gained more skill in fire magic because of your essence. If she drew from me as she learned, she might never have learned to use it at all." The general panted. Luna was being gentle, slow, and left her clit alone but she still felt herself rising.

"Ahhah.. I... I think I understand. So this will... nnnh... This will help Alps?" she asked.

"Aris is almost healed, he needs very little. His own essence reinforces his healing. His mood is all that keeps him in bed." Luna stated. "Until Reika's back up to her usual mischief, he will be a bit gloomy, I think. Reika's the one who is getting this last session, and this should have her smacking people with Bone in no time."

A memory flitted through Nidaja's head as she considered Bone. Ellis had

picked it up and done something unbelievable with it. She seemed to draw energy from it and then spewed the hottest fire the general had ever seen all across the battlefield. She then dispatched Uruk with such ease that she seemed almost bored with their inconvenience. What was she exactly? Why was she following them?

Luna seemed to notice Nidaja's focus slip away, because her mouth sealed suddenly upon the general's sex again, and it took seconds before she arched her body hard and gave up another wave of that precious energy. She had watched Lyat drawn from twice, and the second time even helped pleasure him, but he was not treated quite like the general was being treated. Males often find it unpleasant to be pushed too far beyond peak, but Luna had no shame in milking Nidaja for every climax her conscious mind could provide. The way she did it made it seem that it was not just about the essence though. Luna's smile, her laugh at how the general writhed and sputtered and whimpered, made it apparent that she was enjoying that.

Nidaja groaned finally with relief as Luna let her hips down, and let her rest on the ground, her leather skirt falling back into place. Luna leaned back a little and smiled at Nidaja, her eyes actually faintly glowing from the essence drawing.

"Very good, Nidaja. Thank you. This will be enough. When we get safely away from the prying eyes of a village who actually knows the poor boy, I will take my fill of essence from Aris." The priestess pulled her robes back into place, her clasp loosened from being pulled off of her shoulders. The general pulled her tunic back on, grateful that little else was needed in that moment. As much as she wanted to pleasure Luna too, she no longer had the strength. She marveled at Lyat's ability to do this several times a day with Luna.

"Luna?" the Amanian asked softly.

"Yes, Nidaja?" she replied.

"We will be family soon. I just wanted to tell you that... I would have never thought we would even see a real Letai in our lifetime, and now we look to see you as a mother to us. You will gain a place in the royal house. Will you stay with us?" she asked.

"I will." Luna stated. "Alps and Nita will want me there, I think." She seemed to feel it was a silly question.

"I just want to make sure you know... after all that time you spent in the Shadowfall, you will never be alone again." The general hugged the motherly white wolf tightly.

"I have no intention of being alone." Luna chuckled. "I still intend to have a family of my own, right alongside yours. A new life has started for all of us. Now, we are taking measures to make sure it goes as smoothly as possible."

"Luna..." Nidaja was having trouble getting something off her mind.

"Yes? You seem troubled. Do I have to start over?" The priestess grinned. Nidaja waved her hands desperately at that.

"Oh no! No, I am okay!" she cried. "... I just wondered..." She sat up a bit as Luna stood.

"Wondering is a good habit." Luna smiled to her demurely, but it was hard to seem entirely regal when her face, neck, and chest were soaked with feminine release.

"The fox..." Nidaja inhaled softly. Luna nodded to her.

"Ah yes. Ellis." Luna murmured. "I assumed you might be dwelling on that."

"She's not a Lhap Islander. Fen and Kun, Lunaris' specialists... Those are Lhap. They are short, petite, have adorably oversized ears... Ellis is a different kind of fox. Alps assumed she was Lhap because those are the only foxes we know about, but after what we saw..." Nidaja gritted her teeth.

"You are wondering if she's dangerous." Luna asked wisely. "This is a good thing to ask. I cannot tell you, however. I am not entirely sure of her motives. She does seem rather insistently attached to Aris though, doesn't she?"

"Because he freed her from the Shadowfall?" asked the general.

"No, something more. She seems to be following him. She doesn't need to. She can return to her homeland, wherever that is, but she has not left us. She is a mystery to us both." Nidaja felt a little better that she was worthy even of Luna's curiosity.

"That attack she did over Reika..." Nidaja murmured, not sure exactly how to address it. Luna seemed tense as it was brought up.

"That was very alarming. I had just come over the hill when she did it; I have never in my life seen an attack like that. No essence technique I know of can accomplish it. That was not a natural fire." Luna whispered.

"Then it's something specific to her? Can only Ellis use it, or is it a technique you might be able to do?" Luna frowned at Nidaja's question darkly.

“Even if I could, I may be unwilling. She may have drawn that attack from the Nether. That’s very dangerous. Alps might be able to, as he seems to be able to draw that kind of energy but I would certainly not recommend he try. He appears to have very little refined control of the essence anyway. Nidaja, if you mess up a technique, it may rip your muscles. Can you imagine Alps losing control of a technique like that? Ellis seems to know things about the essence that perhaps we do not. She seems to know a great number of things.” Luna stretched a bit as she thought about that.

“What was she doing in the Shadowfall?” Nidaja asked.

“I put her in there.” A male answer came from a short distance away. Nidaja gasped and sat up, turning to see Vhale standing, dressed in his dark robes, looking glum as usual.

“Taking in the sights, Vhale?” asked Luna. Her tone was surprisingly soft and casual for what she was accusing her once mortal enemy of. Nidaja was surprised how closely she was honoring Alps’ wishes that he be treated with kindness despite what he did to her.

“I kept my safe distance until the cries had ceased.” He seemed unaffected by it. The sudden image of him entangled with Luna flitted through Nidaja’s mind, making the general blush a little. Surely they would never be that close in their possibly forced friendship. Besides, it seemed like Vhale was too deeply entrenched in his self-suffering to allow himself that kind of pleasure.

“How did you manage get someone like that into the Shadowfall?” asked the priestess.

“It was the only way that I could stop her. When I found her, it was only a few weeks after our... meeting... at your temple, Luna.” The black-furred male gave a pained look, as if having an old wound poked. “I did not attack her specifically, we just sort of ... found her on the road as if she was waiting for someone. My Uruk of course attacked, regarding someone with strong essence as Letai, and she proved to be unexpectedly hazardous to the Uruk. I didn’t bother counting my losses from that encounter, there were parts everywhere. I suppose she was not expecting the Shadowfall, since she didn’t get out of the way of my spell. I kept a key she was holding because I intended to find out what she was and it had an inscription on it I could not recognize. I had wanted to trace its origins. As you can imagine I saw her and her kind as a threat. I never had a chance to do that though, as you already know. The one thing I remember is the expression on her face when I cast her in. She just... Waited. It wasn’t like she was doomed; it was like she just didn’t have anything left to do.” Nidaja was not comforted by that. Even Luna shuddered a bit. The general decided to change the subject. There was not much to learn in that discussion.

Still, she was surprised to know that even the Letai knew almost nothing about that enigmatic vulpine.

“What brings you out here, Vhale?” she asked.

“Reika snores. I told her to stop so I could sleep.” He explained, lowering his head so tendrils of his long hair fell over his eyes. The white lady wolf folded her ears back in immediate understanding. Nidaja, too, knew why the black-furred male was likely there.

“Oh. Yes. Yes of course, I can heal you, have a seat.” Luna sighed, smiling at the dark lupine. Nidaja cupped her muzzle to stifle her smile as he let the priestess tend to the bite on his shoulder as he sat sullenly in the grass. Vhale was never happy. He had very little hope. He would be dead weight except for his knowledge of what they were working so hard to do. However, as Luna tended to his shoulder, the general saw that her face was relaxed and happy, she had all the genuine contentment that the general imagined she must have shown Alps’ father over and over again so long ago. Were the Letai so deeply linked to love and tenderness that they could show this kind of care genuinely even to this wretched thing?

Everything was upside down. That was the first thing Alps realized. He looked at his feet, because he was standing on something. It appeared to be the steps of some kind of ruined temple. The walls were hollowed and crumbling and it looked like it had not had a roof in a long time. Above him was what appeared to be a forest, but there was a lake directly beneath him. Somehow it was familiar. There were small chunks of land, grass-covered, or even holding trees drifting under him like clouds. It was almost as if land and sky switched a moment, and it was overcast with land, with patchy land passing under the higher canopy of overcast “sky.” The island of temple he stood on did not seem to want to drop him any time soon.

“Another dream.” Alps stated solidly. “This is a weird one. I should wake up now.” He tried to will himself awake. If he had a disturbing dream and realized he was dreaming, that had always been enough in the past. This time nothing happened.

“You said you didn’t want to see this place. Yet, here you are.” Alps turned and saw the fox who he had just gained a lot deeper respect for. He also somewhat feared her. He had never assumed that she was weak, but he had no idea that she was that powerful. He remembered the blackened scorched ground and glowing sand, the Uruk removed from existence outright. Now, there

she was, seeming demure and quiet and wise as before. Alps was used to extremely strong individuals being anything but shy. Somehow, her gentle and calm demeanor made her even more unnerving with what he now knew. He tried to figure out what she meant, and then gritted his teeth.

"Wait... This is the Nether? I had assumed something more..." He tried to think of how best to describe what he *had* expected.

"More horrifying?" Ellis asked. Alps nodded.

"This is actually rather peaceful, if very odd." He looked up at the slowly drifting forest and more quickly flowing chunks of various land masses.

"Give me your hand..." Ellis asked. The white wolf did as he was told. The world abruptly blinked out to darkness, and then became a dimly lit cavernous area. Alps felt like he was falling, and his stomach lurched. No wind swept past him though, and he realized that he merely wasn't standing on anything. He was weightless, but not moving.

"Sensation seem familiar?" Ellis asked. Alps nodded. He peered through the darkness and saw what appeared to be a ledge of some kind, dimly lit in red at the edge. He willed himself toward it the way he moved through the darkness of the Shadowfall. It worked. He had remembered how to do that the time he took the Shadowfall for Nita. Had he learned that technique in this place? In the Nether? The wolf looked behind him. Ellis was drifting behind him, but seemed somehow far more elegant at it, able to change her body posture to seem like her motions were far more intentional and controlled. How did she learn to do this? Or was this all just a dream. He had begun to suspect that the Ellis in his dreams was the real deal, somehow in communication, but she could just as easily have been a label, a face that he attached to his own mysterious memories coming back to him.

"How did you do that fire thing before?" he asked, deciding that he could ask something that there was no way he would know the answer to, and if she did not know or would not answer, it meant that she was only a dream, a figment of his own mind.

"I borrowed the ability from your friend's weapon. It is part of a creature from this very place, and a very powerful one at that. That girl does not understand what she holds, but he would very gladly give me the power of Whitefire if it meant protecting the girl." Well, that answered that. There was no way Alps knew that already. Then again, maybe he was making things up on the spot. He found it easier to believe she was real though, even if just for the purpose of knowing where this dream was going, and why he could not just wake up. "He does care for her. I would not be too concerned about his allegiances. He does not side with the Avatar, nor the queen, or even you. His loyalty belongs

to the one who calls to him in the dark and loves him from across the void.” That, at least, was comforting to Alps.

“Why are we here?” Alps asked as he looked at what appeared to be a vast, barren wasteland that ended in a void that he had just drifted across.

“You wanted to see this, for some reason. Maybe as proof you were here?” Ellis asked.

“I don’t need proof. I had already figured out I was here. I just didn’t know why the place we just were looked so pleasant.” He stated.

“The Nether is a very chaotic place. The world is endlessly wrapped in on itself, and reflects every world that is linked to it in some way. The place you just were was the last place you were before slipping free. Do you remember that?” the vixen asked.

“No, I don’t. I don’t remember anything about this place.” He felt it was familiar, but the fox had shown him a similar place before, perhaps in an attempt to get him to remember. If she could make him see these things, he wondered why she did not just tell him about it instead of trying to rely on his mind to call it all back. Alps dove to the rocky ground as fire swept overhead, barely missing his ears. Ellis did not move, and the fire bent around her. Of course it did, he thought. He sat up. “Do you remember anything about it?” he asked. She frowned and the world changed back to the pretty temple that was far less dangerous.

“It would seem that you have not merely forgotten. There is something actively getting in the way.” The fox said. “This is most unfortunate. You will not enjoy breaking through it. I regret what I must do.” Alps felt ice stab through his very being the way she said that, and then he woke up, sitting bolt upright, panting.

“Alps?” came a soft voice beside him. Nita was lying beside him, asleep, but she was not the one who spoke. He looked on the other side of him. The bed was not very large, and it was hard for both he and the queen to fit, but mashed up against the wall in a very small space was Reika, stealing a little of the bed with the wolves.

“Sorry. Weird dream.” He said softly.

“Reika dreams ugly things too. Remembering almost dying.” Alps wilted a bit. She had been very sullen after regaining consciousness and he knew it was because she felt at fault.

“No one’s angry with you, Reika.” Alps stated gingerly.

“Then they is stupid for not being. Reika is deserving fury. Angry. But no one says they is. They lie to Reika.” Alps frowned as he watched her face become more and more pained.

“I am sorry we were not fast enough to stop you.” He rumbled.

“Reika sorry she ees losing control like that.” Her tone was very regretful. Alps had never heard her sound that way. “Reika is being too weak for such important task. Is maybe thinking she is going home.” Another jolt of ice stabbed through Alps. He had not realized that she was suffering quite like that.

“Reika...” He sat up, looking at Nita, and then nodded to the door. “Come with me.” The hyena did not say a thing, she got up, pulling on her robes, making Alps blush as he realized that she had been cuddling with him in his sleep completely bare. He carefully and quietly got fully dressed, needing to put on his cape to hide his wings. Alps picked up her bone club, and they walked together out the back door. Reika still limped, being injured a lot worse than he was. Even with almost hourly tending from Luna, she had been slow to recover from the extent of the damage.

“No trying to talk me out of going. Reika ees dangerous to mission. Ees not able to remember until Uruk almost killing her. Anger ees always like that.” She hugged her chest, seeming near tears. It was painful for Alps to see the girl like this. She hated crying. She hated weakness, and she was close to it.

“Hold Bone.” Alps said authoritatively.

“Reika ees not talked to Bone. Ees ashamed of failing.” She looked away, fearful of meeting Alps’ gaze, it seemed.

“I know you haven’t, or we might not be having this conversation. Hold him, we are going to have a word with him together, alright?” he asked. Reika sighed, and put her hand around the shaft of that bone club above his own. Alps closed his eyes, focusing on that essence heavily. “Close your eyes Reika. I want you to focus on what’s being said.” Immediately Alps felt contact with the entity linked to Bone.

“Reika? Alps? Reika’s there? Talk to Reika.” Bone’s voice was more clear than Alps could remember hearing him before. It was soft, though. He sounded large and powerful, but still so gentle. He spoke well, and the wolf could hear a great deal of care in his voice.

“Reika ees listening.” The hyena said softly, gripping the club a little tight. She sniffed a bit. “Sorry for weak anger and fighting foolish.”

“Reika, that fox who threw me when you were fighting with the wolf, she picked me up again, and she could speak to me like you both can. Who is she? You didn’t tell me about her before.” Alps felt even more sure he had just spoken to the real Ellis after that revelation.

“She said she used your power, ‘Whitefire’.” Alps stated bluntly.

“Yes, she called upon me to help... to save Reika.” He stated. “I had not expected she could do so much.” Knowing for a fact that she could get into his dreams did not make Alps feel better.

“She ees Ellis. Strong fox who better maybe for holding Bone. She ees not weak like Asuna girl. Reika goes home.” There was a pause. Alps had hoped that Bone, who knew Reika best and she trusted the most, might be able to encourage her and curb her self-doubt.

“Why do you feel this way?” Bone asked. Alps did not think that was the best way to ease her conscience. Making her think about it was punishment, not help. The hyena sounded immediately exasperated.

“Friends ees almost dying! They almost die to help and Reika ees not right! Ees bad for important mission!” Alps refused to open his eyes because he knew she was crying now. He remembered what he had been told. If an Asuna sneezes, you don’t acknowledge it because it would be acknowledging weakness. If he saw her crying and tried to comfort her, it would probably get him savagely beaten.

“Are your friends weak, Reika?” asked the voice in the darkness, soft and soothing. Alps had not spoken to him nearly enough to learn just how calm and wise he actually sounded. He felt more and more like Bone was good for Reika, and Ellis had confirmed that, for whatever that was worth.

“No! No, friends ees strong! They ees strongest of all! Reika follows because no one else ees strong and leads like Alps and hees friends!” Her grip tightened on Bone, making it seem like she was throttling him for daring to accuse her of saying her friends were weak. Bone spoke again.

“Alps... Son of a Letai High Priestess... Essence-walker who can pass through the infinite void to the endless realm...” He rattled off a list of accomplishments with such gilding that the white wolf had to think hard about just what all of it meant. “Do you want this girl to travel with you?” Alps balked a bit. This was not the reason he got Bone involved. He merely put it on him to tell Reika what to do. The idea was that she was supposed to learn that she was not weak. No one but her that Alps knew could survive non-essence combat with Uruk that well. Even Alps and her brother would have fallen before taking down more than she did.

He considered what he was being asked. Did he want Reika to travel with him? He lowered his head some in his thought. He wanted Bone to talk to Reika and tell her she was strong, but Alps could have sent Reika home as she asked, and she might have lived a long life instead of risking herself in the dangerous things that were likely ahead. So why did he not do that? He suddenly realized why Bone pushed the conversation in this way. It was to make Alps realize why he asked.

"I do want her to come with us." He said solidly.

"Do you worry that she will fail?" asked Bone.

"I worry that all of us will fail. When we began this journey it was with the knowledge that none of us may return, but it's the best chance we have." He gripped the weapon a little tighter. With his eyes closed, he saw some kind of haze ahead of him. It was a very odd shape. Was he seeing a mental image of Bone? It seemed unlike a person. Four legs, short but powerful, a rather longer neck, and a very long tail made the silhouette. What a strange creature he must have been.

"If you worry that she will fail, why would you want her to go?" asked the creature from the Nether.

"Because I love her." He did not even think about his answer, and bit his tongue the moment he said it. There was an audible squeak from the hyena. It was true. Alps loved easily, and those friends he relied on and he had gotten very close to he loved with a great deal of passion. Reika, for all the damage she had done to him, and the times that she had made mistakes, wanted the same things out of life that Alps did, and she cared for her friends and family just as much as the former slave. She was an ally, and he regarded her and her brother as family. He had even told Lyat that in the heat of battle.

"Reika, why did you go with Alps originally?" Bone was proving to be uncommonly insightful, and Alps vowed silently to speak with him more.

"Reika..." She sniffled, making it obvious she had started crying again. "... ees wanting to be strong for brother... brothers..." she added, making sure that Alps knew she included him. She accepted him. To be regarded as a brother to the strong Asuna was a great compliment. "... ees for strength. Reika gives them strength and ees big help. Ees not wanting to make trouble for them." She shuddered enough that Alps felt the weapon waver.

"You think Alps is strong?" asked Bone again.

"Yus." Whispered the girl.

“Remember what you learned about the Letai, Reika.” The entity in the darkness whispered. “... Remember where they get their strength.”

“From... from their loves. Their friends. Alps get his strength...” She faltered a bit in realization. Alps answered for her.

“... From Reika.” His tone was confident and strong. Suddenly, it felt like every part of the conversation had been designed to end at that very point. It was a revelation that Alps himself had not really been considering until that moment. Bone spoke smoothly, with strength and soothing confidence.

“Luna draws power from her son, who stores it without thinking from every one of his friends who he shares happiness and close company with. Part of the power that Luna used to save your life and that of the boy that you fought to avenge came from you, Reika.” It was a very clear, commanding tone. These points were not meant to be argued. “Hold your temper Reika, we will work together on that, but know that even if you did not raise me in battle, your strength will be used to fight, to heal, and to push that dark ... thing ... back to where he came from.” Alps lost focus on Bone as the wolf suddenly went to the ground, Reika pouncing him.

“Ees sorry! Reika stays! Ees going with you! Never wanting to leave anyway!” she openly sobbed. Alps clutched her close and held still. He did not know if he should console her, because she might still batter him for it, so instead, he kissed her. She kissed back willingly, her tears streaking down his own cheeks. He felt his wings warm under his cape, hidden from view still. He was drawing her essence from her sudden outburst of joy. Even sobbing he could draw uncontrollably from her.

“I will just go back inside.” A soft feminine voice came from the back porch of the house. Alps and Reika looked back up. The wife of the farmer stood in the doorway, holding rubbish that she had been taking out. Alps blushed deeply and murmured,

“It’s personal.” He did not want her to dare attempt to openly judge Reika while she was crying. “Nita will explain.” The woman nodded with a dumbfounded expression and slowly turned around and went inside, visibly blanching.

“Why is so funny about Reika crying? Ees insult Reika?” she asked, her brow furrowing. Alps shook his head vigorously. If the hyena thought she had been insulted, the group would be looking for a new place to stay the night, and they had intended to leave out on good terms in the morning.

“No, Reika. It’s because you were kissing me, I think.” He clarified.

"That's still a pretty stiff taboo." The hyena looked curiously at Alps.

"What ees taboo?" she asked.

"It's kind of like if I were to tell someone they were weak in Asuna culture." Alps explained.

"Taboo is kind of assault then?" Reika asked. Alps gritted his teeth, not having realized that the feelings the Asuna had about that were *that* severe.

"Not so much. Maybe more like... something that gives a negative feeling because it's not understood or is very unpopular." The wolf was not sure what to compare it to for Reika.

"Oh! Ees like bleeding upon feast after battle." She nodded, seeming to think she understood. Alps did not try to correct her. He felt that it was not quite as disgusting as the farmer's wife likely thought kissing a hyena was, but she had not at all been informed why the queen was even travelling with them. She was sworn to secrecy, and given nothing else but enough gold to efficiently forget everything she was seeing during this long few days of their company.

"We go back and sleep, yes? Wulf is not having weak dreams now?" she asked. Alps grinned at Reika's insult. It was good to see her a bit more like her old self.

"It's all loaded up sir. Are you sure that you do not wish for an accompaniment of warships to go with you?" asked the tall brown-furred guard, touching left shoulder with right hand in a salute to Lunaris. Leal stood proudly by his captain who answered authoritatively.

"No, we will manage fine." The Guard nodded to that and departed. Leal then sighed as he looked back to the ship. It looked like a fine vessel, a similar type to Nidaja's own swift-sailed clipper but that was not what had him uncomfortable.

"Could no one else really be found?" he asked. Lunaris chuckled softly.

"No one willing to go the direction we are headed, no." Leal looked up at the captain of the vessel. He was a tan wolf with a black muzzle and long, unreasonably bushy black hair. It could not have naturally been that way. He wore a massive, heavy-looking gold plate necklace over his bare chest, and billowing red silk trousers held up by a white sash. He appeared, in a word, ridiculous. "He stands to earn a rather nice sum, and money's short for him

these days apparently.”

“Kaji Sidali... He has sent more ships to the bottom of the ocean than most life-long sea captains have ever stepped foot on. The guy is out of his mind. Or worse, cursed. We should take one of the warships.” Lunaris nodded to Leal.

“I would feel better about that too, believe me, but those ships need to blockade the port to prevent direct access to the city for the Sons of Sorrow if any accompany those ships full of Uruk they promised. Even if the Uruk arrive unable to function, a large number of then desperate traitors could inflict unacceptable harm upon our city. It’s not the best of circumstances, but it’s what we have.” He nodded to the ship.

“The other merchants are cowards.” Leal huffed, and ascended the gangplank slowly.

“The direction we are going will take us far beyond line of sight to the west, and the western ocean is reported to be home to terrible and dark things unleashed by the dark one to prevent us from fleeing to the lands beyond. Few that go come back, and those who do don’t care to try again.” The guard lowered his head and sighed again.

“And we face that with this floating disaster.” Leal grumbled.

“Are you having second thoughts about accompanying us on this task?” he asked. Leal lifted his head sharply, suddenly at attention.

“Never!” he barked, as if by reflex. He was not going to bow out of a mission after all he had been through. Ceriss and Neit were both going, he would go too. “If you are sure Misty will be fine, I will accompany you. I have gone this far with this incident, I wish to see it through.” Lunaris slapped Leal on the back hard enough to nearly send him off the side of the ship once he got on.

“Misty will be fine, she’s got the rest of the town guard handling things, fully aware and prepared. They were depending on the element of surprise. They’ve lost that. Even if their ships got past the blockade, the city of Diera is not so easily invaded as all that. Arcana Razelle was very tactics-minded and part of the reason this group saw her as a threat was that she made preparations for just such a day. They were too late to prevent those preparations. Trust me; Diera’s biggest threat is being taken by us. Misty and the others have the easy job.” Leal listened to his captain, and then watched as Ceriss and Neit boarded.

“I get why we are bringing Ceriss, she will know when the crystal is far enough away, but why exactly is Neit coming?” he asked.

“Romantic boat ride with big strong guard types.” The girl answered,

blowing a kiss to Leal.

“Uhh...” the grey-furred guard blinked at that. Lunar is laughed heartily. Leal never got a straight answer from her as she headed onto the deck, carrying extra supplies in case getting back turned out to be harder than they hoped. Ceriss, as always, brought almost nothing. The ship was well stocked, so there was not much needed. The ship captain, Kaji, bowed to Ceriss, who was adorned in a cloak that hid even her face, and bowed much lower to the more scantily clad Neit, who wore the expensive outfit that she had ‘forgotten’ to put back in Nita’s room. It seemed to have been part of the payment arrangement for the former thief, since no one bothered to tell her to put it back.

“Quite pleased to be meetin’ ya, Ladies. Welcome aboard the Driftwood.” Kaji said with a flourish.

“That’s an odd name for a ship.” Neit stated.

“Tis a lucky name!” stated the ship’s captain.

“It’s named as such because driftwood don’t sink, ma’am.” Came a chimed in answer from a young-looking lad hoisting the sail.

“Wait, is that a – “ Leal stammered.

“Well I’ll be. It is!” Lunar is barked warmly. The ‘lad’ was not so young after all, he was a Lhap island fox. The sandy-furred male was only about four feet tall, and his ears spanned almost a foot on either side of his head as they splayed out, his petite nose pointed and dainty. His large almond eyes seemed equally exotic. He wore an outfit painfully similar to Kaji’s own, save for the lacking gold chain. He also wore a knife that looked almost like a sword given his small size. The blade seemed more utilitarian than weapon-like.

“Neph! Don’t be disparagin’ my ship!” He hurled a fish at the fox. Leal recoiled at that, not even sure where the damn fish came from. The fox caught it and tossed it over the side. Leal looked down the side of the ship at it. It swam away. The captain threw a live fish at his crewmate for speaking ill of the boat. Leal wanted off. The fox yelled back.

“I ain’t disparagin’! I’m sayin’ it floats! And it always be makin’ it back to land, see! Tis a nice thing I said, so don’t be fishflickin’ my way. I’ll be savin my disparagin’ remarks for you, Captain Reefmaker.” The ship’s captain bolted after the fox, who slipped down below deck. There was shouting, laughing, and dull thumping under the guard’s feet.

“Oh by the stars, he doesn’t even have control of all of his crew.” Leal whispered to Lunar is.

"It's worse than that." Ceriss stated sullenly. "I see no more essence on the boat."

"What's that mean?" Neit asked.

"That mean's this *is* all of Kaji's crew." Lunariss patted Leal on the back.

"You hate me, is that it?" he asked his captain.

"A Lhap islander..." Ceriss said, coming the rest of the way on board as the port attendants pulled away the gangplank. "This will be an interesting diversion indeed." She smiled.

Somehow, having Ceriss smile did calm Leal's nerves a little. He had trouble believing that they would run into hardship that a priestess of her abilities would not be able to handle with ease. He looked at the sails towering rather high over the ship, two masts. Those white sheets of wind-catching fabric would take them far from home for this task, and put the threat of an invasion so far out of Diera's way that such an attempt might never be made again.

For as silly as it was starting out, Leal was feeling very good about the task that he was undertaking. Ceriss moved up behind him.

"There is little to worry about. We will not fail in our task." She seemed to be able to tell he was concerned about how important a duty he was involved in.

"I know, but I always worry about some unforeseen calamity preventing us from this. It's just too important to fail." Leal stated firmly.

"There should be little to worry about. Not many know that the crystal was even compromised, if any at all. Certainly none who stand a chance getting it back. They are likely either in hiding or renouncing their ties to the Sons of Sorrow as we speak, if they know what's good for them." The priestess growled. Leal made note of just how much she hated betrayal again.

"Yeah, but knowing our ability to find trouble, it would not surprise me to suddenly find ourselves boarded by a bunch of them in the night." Leal said. "I just tend to over-think these things. Being overcautious is part of what makes me a guard." The grey wolf slipped an arm reassuringly around Ceriss so that she would not have to dwell on it. So long as he didn't spend all of his time worrying, it might turn out to be a rather pleasant excursion.

"If we are boarded, and there is the slightest chance that they could take the crystal back, I just want you to know..." Ceriss whispered. Leal perked up a bit and looked into her eyes, expecting that she might remind him that he had

done very well and they would fight and win. "... I will tear the bottom of this ship wide open and send us all to the bottom of the ocean. So don't let anyone get onto this ship, okay?" She gave a pleasant smile. Leal's blood ran cold. She was serious. He nodded slowly.

"You have my word." He said in a whisper.

"Hey everyone!" called the ship's captain as the ship started to drift away from port. Leal had not realized that the chase was off and the fox was back on task, having weighed anchor with a level and pulley system that negated his small size to the task. Everyone directed their attention to Kaji.

"What?" called Lunariss.

"Don't forget that tomorrow is naked day. Dress the part!" he cackled. The small fox groaned.

"He's... not serious is he?" whispered Neit close by. Leal inhaled deeply. He hoped that they would at least live to see Diera drift below the horizon!