

## Sirius, Book IV

### *A Slave's War*

*Comments or Questions?*

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## Chapter 12

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"It's you!" The lady lupine's startled tone gave Alps a cause for recoil. She backed away slowly. The white wolf was uncertain as to exactly why she seemed so distressed. He recognized the grey-muzzled, brown-furred individual as the woman who ran the mill. She baked wonderful bread every morning when he was growing up in Luca. He always lingered a moment to smell if he was passing her shop. He remembered being fascinated by her waterwheel as a child. Alps stood in her store as he had hundreds of times before, the lantern flickering, pushing back the twilight as he'd barely made it in time before closing. He came here all the time. He remembered being on very good standing in this shop. The owner knew him better than quite a few of the townspeople, so he had no idea why she was being so fearful.

"It is me." Alps replied mellowly. "I don't intend to stay long. I just wanted to get a few supplies." The agreement was that he would indicate that he was travelling alone so that it would raise less alarm. He did not think he would cause a stir just because he visited his own home town.

"Oh, hey... Aheh... that's alright, we can do that. Anything you like, we will get you set right up. You are heading right back out then, yes? Tonight?" There was a heavy sense of concern in the lady's voice. Alps folded back his ears.

"What's wrong? You seem upset." Alps suddenly worried far worse things were happening in this small farming village. He had understood at the farm house that things were harder on the borders, and that the Spirits of Silverlight had been ejected when they turned, but it seemed that a darker presence had taken its place. Chana was dead. Was there concern that more assassinations would occur?

"I don't want any trouble, Alps." The shop-keep whimpered, looking horrified rather suddenly. Alps' heart sank. No one had every spoken to him like this. "Look, I've always been nice to you. We could not do anything about Chana, you know that. You know what she was like as well as any of us." Alps tilted his head at the direction of

conversation. Was it because he was close to the queen now? Were they fearful that he had come to affect some kind of retribution against the people of Luca with his possible influence of the royal family?

"I hold no one responsible for Chana's actions except Chana, and I don't have to worry about her anymore now, do I? I have a new life and a new home." Alps tried to sound positive and hopeful to make it clear that he was not angry with the other people in the town. He was certain most of them knew about his owner's abusive nature even when he was a child, but he also knew that they were, for the most part, fearful of the matriarch. The shop keep gritted her teeth a bit.

"No, no I don't think you have to worry about her anymore." She crossed her arms. "I don't blame you for it you know. If I was given a royal pass to do it, I probably would have done the same after what she did to you all those years." The white lupine backed up a little and narrowed his eyes. What was she talking about? A royal pass?

"I am not sure what you mean." He stated calmly.

"It's okay, Alps. Like I said, most of us don't blame you. It's just... You didn't seem the type, so it's a bit jarring, especially how bad it was. But she didn't have many friends. For a little while, things got better after you had gone, until the new matriarch got here. I'd almost have preferred Chana to that one." Alps had assumed that a new matriarch would have to be assigned after Chana was stripped of her title by Nidaja, and certainly if she had been killed not long after, but he felt badly that it resulted in worse times for the town.

"What is the new matriarch doing? I hate to think that my interference has caused issues here." Alps inhaled deeply, and focused on the essence a moment. Was the shop keeper suffering? Had he caused this? He widened his eyes a little. The mantle of darkness over her was almost as bad as the Asuna. His heart sank.

"If you knew how bad she was, you'd not have come back here, Alps. You've ruined this town. I don't blame you for what you did, but the rest of us did little to you to deserve Enna. Please tell her majesty this? She need not punish us all. Even children suffer under Enna." The last part was whispered. Alps did not recognize that name. He had sat in on many a township report, and was familiar with most of the regional matriarch's names.

"I assure you that Nita had no intention of punishing the entire town for Chana's actions. I will inform Nita when I return home that there is an issue, and it will be resolved." He offered. He felt heavy, sullen, and grim. He did not like causing suffering. The white wolf pulled his cloak tighter around his shoulders, the single pauldron gleaming in lantern light. He was aware of how different he looked from when he'd left his home so long ago. He had not assumed that he would be treated so differently, however.

“Do you think... Do you think she would be willing to release the men from the mines?” The tone of the shop keeper was suddenly hopeful, and Alps saw that shroud dissipating.

“Mines?” Alps asked. “What mines?”

“You really don’t know what was done?” asked the worried female. “I... Maybe I should not say more. I’m sorry. Please do not repeat any of this. I have been out of line.” She bowed back a bit.

“What has been done? What mines?” Alps knew for a fact that his beloved would not have forced hardship on the people. Not like that. That fact, paired with the unknown name of the regional matriarch made him feel a sudden sense of dread. Something was seriously wrong.

“Alps, every capable male in town was sent to an excavation to dig up some stupid yellow crystals. It’s to prevent them from being used to make Uruk, they said. “But it’s a prison. They can’t come home, they just dig. I heard two of them died! Alps, things have been terrible here!” She began to weep. The former slave’s heart sank even more. No, Nita would not do that.

“This is not her majesty’s doing.” The former slave growled grimly.

“What?” asked the whimpering shop owner. “Alps, she came in saying she was ordered here under the crown just three days after you killed Chana.”

She might as well have fired an arrow of ice through the suddenly silent Alps. He felt his stomach muscles seize. They thought Alps killed his former mistress? That’s why she was acting so fearful? He would be no part of such an act. Not for revenge. He was clear with Nidaja; she was not to be touched! No, Nidaja would not have betrayed him like that. Besides, the general remained at his side after that meeting with his former owner.

“I didn’t kill Chana.” Alps stated flatly, barely able to hear his own voice.

“What?” inquired the shop’s owner.

“I didn’t kill Chana. I didn’t touch her. She was fine when I left.” The white lupine narrowed his eyes. Someone did kill her though, and he suspected that person to be responsible for the suffering of the town.

“Alps, two people saw you arguing with her the night before she died, unless she had other white-furred former slaves? Like I said, no one here would begrudge you that reprisal, we’re sure she deserved such a treatment. But we only ask for help against what plagues us now.” Alps winced. He was not aware that they had made such a commotion that others saw it, but with how that argument went, he was sure that it

looked like he was responsible. Nidaja, in his form, had come to kill Chana. It might have looked obvious before he intervened.

"I had that argument, yes, but I left her alive and I requested that no harm come to her. She was to live in humility, but not suffer by my hands or theirs. I was very clear about it." The look of confusion on the girl's face was short-lived as the door behind Alps was kicked open. There were two guards there, along with an unusually tall and unhealthily slender black and grey lady wolf in violet robes and a flat-topped wide hat of some sort.

"Enna!" exclaimed the shop keeper.

"Well, well Bree..." said the crackling, aged voice of the other female, "... What interesting company you keep these days. Falling in with common murderers I see." Alps had never even known this shop owner's name, but immediately knew who the other female must be. Bree cried out.

"Enna! I was about to go to the guard as soon as he left, I promise!" That sound of panic in her voice was unmistakable.

"Stow it you stupid wench!" barked Enna. "I heard enough before I made my entrance. Guards, arrest them both. I will have a little talk with our white friend here. You can string up the lying bitch, though." Alps growled in a low tone.

"You would be advised to stand down, Enna." He would not have his important mission halted by this utter side-show. He had grown accustomed to the importance of his duties under the queen and hardly a shadow of his previous uncertain self still remained. He held an air of confidence.

"Or you shall kill more regional matriarchs, I assume?" Enna asked with a sour face. "I think not."

"I didn't kill her and you know it. I think you know who did." Enna strode to Alps and savagely backhanded him. He was so used to Chana doing such things that it simply did not faze him, but with the guards standing there, swords not yet drawn, he did not care to escalate if he didn't have to.

"You would dare accuse me of your own crimes, you worm?" Enna hissed. "I shall have you sent to the mines too. You will wish that you were stung up like your co-conspirator!" Alps kept his head down, having not looked back up from the attack on him. He was thinking. He could possibly escape. Nita coming into town with her sister and the full weight of the crown would solve this pretty easily, but that would reveal that something bigger was going on. He could not afford to get the others involved, but he could not afford to be arrested either. There was no time for that.

"I don't know that the news has gotten this far, but I am the chosen life-mate of

the queen. Do you think she will respond well to my arrest?" There was a genuine expression of surprise on the face of his accuser. The guards exchanged worried glances.

"That is s-such slinkshit you miserable dog!" Enna finally stammered. "It's known that you were bought by the hot-headed general, but that does not put you in the queen's bed. I should cut out your tongue for such a claim." Alps sighed softly. That did not work well. "Arrest them both now. Forget the mines, I want them dead by dawn. Do not grant them any audience." Enna crossed her arms. Bree burst into tears. That certainly was not the better outcome he'd hoped for by trying to temper the woman's response.

"No! No, I didn't do anything wrong, please don't do this!" she cried. Alps grimly turned to the guards. He could not fight them and be sure of his survival, and he could not afford to get killed now. He would try to figure something out, but he'd need time to think. Hopefully he would have enough.

"This is my final warning to you, Enna. Stop now and escape." One of the guards already had his wrists and was binding them behind his back.

"Alps, this is my final warning to you. Shut your mouth, or I will have you knocked out so I don't have to listen to your pompous, delusional madness. You want to at least be awake for the rest of your short life to make peace with yourself for your crimes, right?" she asked. Alps widened his eyes suddenly, a thought shooting through him. There was clear risk to it, but it might be his only chance. He could not let himself be arrested. If they took off his cloak, it could end everything then and there.

"Fine, I'm okay with that, if it means I don't have to gaze upon your rotted fish-for-a-face." Alps looked away, very intentionally exposing the back of his head. He heard two quick steps and tensed up, teeth gritted. Thump.

He felt dazed, his body going limp, but called out loudly into the darkness. Ellis. Ellis could speak to him in his dreams, could she hear him now? Would she be able to hear him and help him and the shop keeper before they had nooses around their neck? There was darkness and silence. He called out again, speaking into the hollow void. He was in trouble. Agents of the dark one had overtaken the town and he was captured. He needed help. He willed what he knew into that void. Suddenly, in the darkness, silver eyes gleamed, narrowed in anger, and were gone. Alps sighed softly. He hoped that he was right. He hoped that this, as in the past, was no dream.

He felt himself being dragged, and his head ached. Alps' eyes fluttered open, and he winced a bit, knowing he had a substantial knot on the back of his head. His cloak was still on, so that part of the gamble at least worked. He was being pulled through the streets. Despite how late in the evening it was, there were people in the street. As his senses came back to him, he figured out why. Enna was shouting as she had Alps and a sobbing Bree dragged through the street. The former slave looked over

to her, feeling terrible for her horrible night. She seemed unharmed thus far at least.

“Look upon them! This is the fate of murderers and traitors in this world! You will wait no longer for justice from the crown. The queen has appointed me to ensure that you are not cut off from the protection of the royal house any longer. This is the reality of that promise I made to you. The Uruk will be stopped, and the criminals will die. Sleep well tonight, my people. This villain will not harm another, and upon the dawn his life will end and ours shall resume!” Alps remained quiet. He didn’t need to be knocked out again, he was pretty sure that he got what he needed out of that. The looks on the faces of people he knew reassured him that not everyone thought he murdered anyone, and those who did think it did not hold him in ill light for it. This matriarch did not hold the faith of the town.

He found himself in a place that Chana threatened him with often. The cold dark cell underneath the small town hall. There was not much of a need for a large jail in such a small town. Their prisoners were usually transferred to Seravi, a larger town. He suspected that most crimes ended at the rope now however, as the cell was empty. He and Bree were both thrown into the same single cell. She threw herself back at the door as it slammed shut, reaching to the guard through the bars.

“No! No! Don’t leave me here with him, he’ll kill me! He thinks I’m at fault for his capture, are you crazy?!” she sobbed. That pained Alps a lot.

“Shut your yap, traitor.” The guard grumbled. “You will be dying in the morning anyway, so it don’t matter anyway. Maybe he will give you the royal treatment if you’re nice to him. The bed’s small, but I bet that don’t matter.” He then left, closing the heavy iron door that lead to the single damp underground room the cell was in. Alps sat heavily on the small cot.

“I’m not dangerous.” Alps stated calmly. He tried to act more confident than he really was to calm Bree.

“Damnit, I was fine! I was just fine and you just walked into my fucking shop and now I’m dead!” she screamed at Alps, hurling a shoe at him. It missed. “I hate you! You ruined everything, you miserable tick!” The queen’s lover sighed softly, not holding to heart what was being said. Bree had every right to be upset and he was the only one around to be upset with.

“I was not lying.” Alps stated. There was a pause from the girl. “When I stated who I was now. I am the queen’s chosen mate. Do you really think this will stand?”

“It doesn’t matter! She won’t even know about this until we are both dead!” Bree sobbed.

“Do you think her majesty would allow her lover to travel to the border territories without the ability to keep him safe?” he asked.

"You were not even armed, you idiot!" barked Bree. "You just let them knock you out!" She cast herself down on the floor on her belly like a child and sobbed, pounding her fist on the cobblestone floor.

"We'll be fine, Bree, quit that." Alps said calmly, even though he was not so sure. He did have one option he could use to get them out of the cell. It would not be the safest route, but there was always the Shadowfall. He preferred not to use that because it would certainly raise suspicion, and it would most certainly traumatize Bree. What was Enna's deal? Was she an agent of the dark one? Was she just a zealous individual like Azia had been, trying to help but terribly misguided? They were mining crystals to keep them away from the Uruk, weren't they? Or was she just mining them to give them to the Asuna in the south for material to build more Uruk? Was this corruption or delusion?

Bree managed to cry herself out over the course of about an hour, and finally sat on the bed beside Alps. The wolf looked sadly over to her. He did feel genuinely bad that she had to go through all of this.

"We'll be dead soon." She stated in a whisper. "So be completely honest. Nothing to lose, no need to hide. You didn't kill her did you? It really was not you?" Alps shook his head softly.

"I did not harm Chana, and my friends were asked not to as well." He knew it was hard to believe if everyone was aware of the argument the night previous to her death. It was hard for Alps to even grasp that she'd died. So much was happening that he had not been able to think about it. She may have been awful to him, but she was still his primary caretaker for almost two-thirds of his life.

"Are you really the queen's lover?" Bree asked.

"I am. And her sister's too, if you'd believe that." Alps shrugged a bit. There was little harm in telling her that. Most in Diera at least seem to already suspect or be quite sure.

"Are you afraid?" Bree asked.

"A little, but not of the same thing you are." Alps answered calmly.

"What do you fear?" Bree asked.

"Someone is on the way here now. She already knows what has happened to me, and her style of diplomacy can be a little... heavy handed." He had seen what Ellis was able to do. Alps worried that she might do great harm to the guards but ultimately too many lives were at stake to handle this event gently. Bree got up and stood by the door. Alps got up with her, both facing out, looking to the iron door beyond the more

cage-like door of their cell, a single room within a room.

“How do you know she’s on her way...? And what will she do against the entire town guard? Even if the queen showed up, I bet Enna could convince the guard she was an imposter and have her arrested.

“The one on her way is not the queen.” Alps stated.

“I hope she comes soon.” Sighed Bree. A few moments passed quietly, before Alps smiled a little, lowering his head as he considered something. Bree noticed right away.

“What’s the smile about?” she asked dryly.

“Here we are both looking at that door hopefully, like she will walk right in and let us out.” Alps looked at Bree who seemed a bit confused and irritated.

“What, is it wrong to hope? It’s all the hope we got, right? Or were you lying?”

“No, it’s just... I don’t usually see her use a door to get in, I usually just turn around and she’s there.” Alps chuckled a bit. Bree turned and yelped, casting herself back against the cage. Alps smiled and spun around slowly. He knew it.

“You got here faster than I thought you would.” He stated. Ellis was there, leaning back against the wall of the cell, her black and silver robes leaving her looking more like a priestess than a fighter. Her silver eyes carefully looked Alps over.

“You are not injured.” She stated calmly. Alps inwardly sighed with relief.

“No, I’m fine. We need to deal with the new matriarch here in Luca. She’s mad, or corrupted, one.” Ellis remained standing as she responded.

“She will be here shortly. We can deal with her then.” Alps cringed at the fox’s words.

“Please don’t tell me you hurt the guards, they were only following orders. She comes across as being some kind of savior sent by the queen. I believe them to be fooled, not corrupted.”

Ellis just stared at him a moment, before she spoke. “The breach of security will lure the target to us.” Ellis took out a small silver flask taking a sip of whatever might be within.

Bree finally squeaked out, “Is ...is that a Lhap islander?” Alps looked back to her. She was stunned. Most people never got to see a fox in their entire life. The white lupine often forgot how unusual his new life would seem to most.

"No." Ellis answered, somewhat coldly. Alps felt a pang of guilt. In all his talking to her, he demanded to know certain things of her, but never asked where she was from. He felt maybe it was because he doubted that he would get a very straight answer.

"How did you get in?" Bree flailed a bit, that part seeming to dawn on her last.

"From outside." answered the fox. Alps rolled his eyes a bit. There, see? That's what he gets. At least it was not just him.

"Oh." stated Bree, seeming satisfied with that answer. The white lupine looked furtively back and forth between them. She was actually okay with just that?

There was a loud thump from upstairs and rapid footsteps. Alps and Bree both turned to the door as it was loudly unlocked and shoved open. The same two guards that had arrested them were back, the furious-looking Enna right behind them.

"What?!" she exclaimed, "They are still here! Was someone here?!" she demanded of Alps. Bree turned around to look at the fox, but Alps knew better. She would not be there. For what was to follow, she would certainly not need to be in the cell. Bree gasped and turned again.

"Did something happen outside?" Alps asked grimly. "Perhaps now would be a good time to rethink things?" He was worried still that the guards had been harmed.

"I swear, if you find your subordinates were just drunk, I will have you strung up right along with these two!" she barked angrily at the guard who had arrested Alps.

"They would not!" he barked defensively in return. "They were knocked out!"

"By who?!" shouted Enna, glaring at Alps. Bree looked back at the cell incredulously again. Alps knew what was going on in her head. Was she imagining the fox? Was the nearness to her death driving her insane? As she reviewed the now empty cell, she missed getting to see that same vulpine stride silently through the open door and place a hand firmly on the shoulder of both guards. The flinch that Alps saw from them indicated that it was an awfully heavy touch. It was just that the force did not seem to require much effort from Ellis.

"By me." The fox's calm voice uttered darkly, making the matriarch spin on her heel to face their guest. She turned in time to see both her guards drop to their knees, eyes closed as they slumped over onto their sides behind her, unconscious. Ellis stood in the doorway, her robes elegant and unsullied. She was vulpine perfection there before an adversary, calm, quiet. Deadly.

"A fox?!" cried the matriarch. "Why are you here?! You come to aid a murderer!"

An assassin!" The graying lady wolf pointed accusingly at Alps. "Let justice run its course or the darkness shall surely triumph!"

"What of the crystals from the mine? Are they following the path of justice?" Ellis asked. Alps widened his eyes. She had truly seen his mind when he called out for her. She knew everything in that brief exchange.

"Destroyed by the thousands to protect the Amani nation." Enna growled furiously. "No business of yours, you should go back to your island."

"How do you destroy them?" asked the fox.

"I give them to the Sprits of Silverlight. They see to their disposal in a lake of fire to the south. This is the will of the queen." Enna seemed very sure of herself. Perhaps she really was misguided. Ellis seemed to gaze right through her.

"How did she get out?" Bree whispered to Alps.

"From inside." Alps whispered back.

"Oh..." The answer seemed uncertain. Alps felt a little prickle inside him. She answered the way she did because the answer was complicated and she did not care to waste the time trying to explain. It was not important enough that others fully understood. He actually began to understand to a degree her often infuriating vague demeanor. The dark-furred vulpine disagreed with Enna on the fate of the crystals.

The fox approached slowly, Enna slipped back, until her back was against the cage. Ellis spoke in a cold, distant tone. "You. are. lying."

"How dare you! My authority here is second only to the royal house! You will not accuse me this way!" she shouted.

"You were not appointed to this position by the queen." Ellis had no waver in her voice. It was not supposition. It was a fact. She knew.

"You are not even Amanian, so you can't be charged with treason for your words, but you can be strung up for subversion." Enna looked fearfully down at her guards. Why would they not get up?

"You were appointed to this position by the Spirits of Silverlight... or whatever they are now." The black fox held up a small, folded sheet of paper. There was a broken red seal on it where it had been folded.

"Where did you get that?!" Enna fairly shrieked. Alps gritted his teeth. Ellis worked fast. She had gotten evidence already?

"You would certainly not want someone sneaking into your office and finding it, so you have carried it on you." Ellis stated. The former slave widened his eyes. She had pulled it right off of Enna at some point, but when? Her abilities to move in silence and come and go made Alps wonder for a moment why she had even refined such skill. What had she done before she was Shadowfallen?

"Well, no matter. I will deny it anyway. Take your friends and leave if you want. It won't change anything here. The queen has lost her control of these border lands. It's only a matter of time before that becomes completely apparent. This place needs order. It matters not who brings it. The war is lost, we just need to survive." Alps gripped the bars of the cell, shaking with anger.

"Just need to survive, huh? Like the Asuna? Enslaved? Our first born always sent to the mines to dig for crystals?" It slammed into place all at once inside him. Everything made complete sense now. Whoever this group was, they were trying to make a deal to survive just as the Asuna had been forced to do.

"You have no room to speak! You are nothing but a thug with noble blood on his hands!" cried Enna. "You belong at the end of a rope, and nothing you say or do will change that."

"I didn't kill Chana!" Alps barked again, starting to get really irritated at that accusation. Why didn't Ellis just knock out the matriarch and let him out already? They didn't have time to fool around there.

"Then who did?!" cried Enna in clear disbelief.

"I did." Ellis spoke darkly and it drove like a spike through Alps. Ellis killed Chana? Was she telling the truth? Would she really do such a thing?

"You... Why?" the illegitimate matriarch turned and gasped as the fox moved up right against her, leaning in and speaking softly into her ear. She looked past Enna toward Alps, who could hear what she was saying.

"I ended her life because she was selfish, cruel, mad with power, and unable to ever change her ways. There was no redemption for Chana. I killed Matriarch Feras for the same reason that I have killed you." Alps heart skipped a beat. Was Ellis truly about to murder Enna right in front of him?

"You haven't killed me, and I am *not* afraid." The words were growled from Enna with confidence.

"Your lack of fear is due to ignorance. You have become a master of deluding yourself." Ellis continued to speak into the older female's ear, keeping her pinned against the cage. "You spent the past few months truly believing that you were saving your people while instead you damn them. It's no wonder that you cannot allow yourself

to believe the truth that you are dying. At least your final words were more inspired than those of your predecessor.” Alps jerked a bit as Bree cried out sharply and jumped back. He looked to her, saw she was looking down at his feet, and he looked down as well.

Alps stumbled back a little as well. There was a pool of blood growing at the illegitimate matriarch’s feet. The white wolf tried not to hyperventilate as disbelief crashed through him. The realization was finally there that Ellis was capable of doing whatever she felt necessary no matter the consequences to those actions. She was truly and genuinely dangerous. Enna slowly slid down the bars and Alps caught the metallic glint of steel as the fox wiped it clean on the matriarch's own clothes as she came to rest, seated in that slowly spreading pool of dark red. She did not move. Just like that, she was dead. By the essence, Ellis actually mortally wounded the woman! When? Enna never made a sound of pain! Alps looked up fearfully at fox. She killed her. And she killed Chana. Why did she kill Chana? The white lupine felt rage build up in him, and fought to contain it. His friends and allies would *not* just go around murdering people!

“You know, we could have let the town deal with her treachery.” Alps watched Ellis unlock the cell door with a key she’d taken off of Enna. When? “You could have just taken the key. You didn't need to kill her.”

“A single message from her to the people who sent her would have doomed this town.” Ellis stated. Bree looked up and nodded to the fox.

“No, it’s true, Alps. If she was not sent by the Queen, it’s hard to say who is really with her and who was just fooled.” Bree stepped out and looked down at the quiet corpse. “Did it hurt?” she asked.

Ellis did not answer, walking toward the door. Alps boiled with quiet rage. He told his friends not to touch Chana. Ellis knew that. She had to. She was always watching.

“The proof...” Bree asked softly. Ellis handed it to her. It was the folded note with a seal on it. Alps did not recognize it as a Silverlight seal.

“So she was illegitimate. That at least will overturn her policies and get our friends and family home... but what if they just replace her with someone else? How long should it take for the queen to put someone else in place?” Alps was not looking at Bree as she spoke. He continued to glare at the quiet Ellis.

“Whoever the highest ranking individual was before Chana’s... demise...” Alps spoke that word with disgust. “... That person needs to take charge. Do not replace them with anyone else unless they produce documentation signed by both the queen and Misty, the head of the high council.” Alps turned away.

“Do you know where the crystals have been gathered?” Ellis asked. Alps faltered

a little. That was an important question. He was letting his surging anger cloud him a little. Ellis pointed up the stairway, waiting for them to go.

"They are on a river boat owned by the Spirits of Silverlight." Bree answered, the black and tan female seeming a little out of breath as she followed Alps through the quiet, vacant town hall, the tables and chairs all in their respective place as if a terrible thing had not just happened in this place. They left through the heavy double doors of the building outside onto the street. There were people gathered there already. They were tending to the first set of guards. There was a pause. Bree spoke again, clearly for those around her. She was not going to just get immediately arrested again.

"Regional Matriarch Mara Enna was not placed by her majesty. I have proof here. Our blood and sweat have been squandered!" She held up the paper.

"Girl, give that to me, let me see!" barked a much older female, bent over and graying, her silvery gray fur a slight mess given that she had likely been awakened by the growing commotion of Alps' arrest and the apparent jailbreak. Alps recognized her immediately.

"Councilor Barr." he said reverently. She had been in Luca all her life. She was certainly not a plant. She often was the deciding voice on disputes in the town when Chana was not able to deal with them because of personal interests in the matters. She was perfect for that task. The letter was reviewed.

"This is not an order by her majesty. It's entirely the wrong narrative. What have we done?" asked the lady woefully. "Alps, why have you returned? To correct your mess? When I heard you were in the clink I came to ask that Enna reconsider your punishment. She should know better than to issue a death sentence without consulting the council. That's not how we do that sort of thing. We know full well what was done to you by Feras, there should have been some leniency." She glared at him, however. He felt a renewed fury toward Ellis. How could she put him in this position? She knew he would be held partly responsible if something were to happen to her.

"I did not kill her." Alps stated.

"She did." Bree pointed behind her where the fox had been standing. Alps didn't even turn to see, he knew she wouldn't be there. "Where did she go?"

"Just know that I did not do it. Chana was her own undoing. You need to deal with other problems." Barr nodded to that, the older lady turning to a few of those gathered.

"Assemble the guard; get everyone out of that mine. I will take care of the arrest of Enna." Alps felt another stab of rage.

"That won't be necessary." He stated coldly.

"She's dead." Bree announced. "Downstairs." There was a gasp of shock and all eyes were on Alps again. Of course. Now murdering regional matriarchs was assumed to be a hobby of his. It was this thing that he did if he happened to be visiting his home town. He shook his head. "Oh. No, he didn't do it." Bree flailed a bit, trying valiantly to correct them. "It was someone else. She's gone now though." Bree sounded puzzled about that last part.

"Uh huh." Barr was justifiably skeptical. Alps would not be inclined to believe that either. The skepticism in the murmuring of the gathering townsfolk was clearly audible.

"He did not." A calm voice cut through the murmuring smoothly from behind him and he turned, as shocked as the other townsfolk to see the black fox emerge from the doorway of the town hall, dragging the body of Matriarch Enna behind her by the collar of her clothes. She stepped in front of Alps, dropping the body before her and the very knife used to end her on top of her chest. A trail of blood marked their path back into the building.

"Look upon her." the fox stated calmly. "This is the fate of traitors and murderers in this world." The white wolf couldn't stand it any longer. He lashed out at her.

"*You* are a murderer! You cannot simply kill anyone you want because you think it's an easier solution! You can't ...!"

The black and silver vulpine silenced Alps with the back of her hand to his temple. It seemed like such a light and easy stroke, but he nearly blacked out from the nearly silent impact. She then grabbed the white wolf by the clasp of his cloak, shaking him back to his senses.

"Incorrect." She stated simply. "And that aside, consider the ramifications of letting her live. Of letting Faras live... She would have done this very same thing to your town." Those gathered gasped, taking a fearful step back. Alps looked at Ellis with wide eyes. She had just claimed those murders publicly. The implication in how she answered was chilling. He felt anger boiling up inside of him again, threatening to bubble over.

"You can't ..." he clenched his teeth. "You can't ...!" She gave him another hard shake.

"This may surprise you, Aris, but your precious queen kills. Her sister, your beloved general, kills – she does so en masse when she has to, by means of an army. This land is embroiled in a war that it is in danger of losing unless the people do what they have to do. Even your mother would kill, if she had to."

"I am fighting for a world with *less* killing, Ellis!" Alps barked, feeling light-headed from the shaking. The fox let him stand on his own again and pointed an accusatory

finger at him.

"You have all the tools necessary to fight, yet you refuse to use them." There was that look in her eyes again, that anger that he'd so briefly seen in the darkness before he was knocked unconscious earlier. "Tell me then, when was the last time pacifism won a war?"

She turned then to leave, looking over her shoulder for a moment. "What if she hadn't wanted to make your execution a spectacle?" she asked coldly before heading back into the darkness of the town hall.

Alps didn't know what to say. He stood there in stunned silence, listening to the unsure murmuring of the gathered townsfolk. It took him several moments to collect himself.

He felt Bree tug on his sleeve softly. "Alps ... who the hell *is* that ...?" Alps did not answer. He felt that he knew, but at the same time, had no clue. He could not answer Bree honestly. He finally spoke.

"I ...I am going to go deal with the Silverlight. They are no longer allies of the Royal House, and I can't just leave them to their devices here." He knew he was not going to be going alone, but this was his adopted hometown. He grew up in the forests and fields around there; he would not see it ruined by Azia's murderers. He pulled his cloak a little tighter to himself, still feeling so different from the person who left not so terribly long ago.

"Alps..." Barr spoke softly. The white slave turned back to her, expecting that she would demand he not go until an investigation was done. That was Barr's way. She would likely be the rightful Regional Matriarch until a new one could be appointed. She looked at the young lupine a little longer and then murmured, "Sometimes these things are necessary. Don't falter. We need you." Alps widened his eyes a bit. A vote of confidence from "By the Book" Barr?

"I never killed anyone." Alps stated flatly.

"The town will be fine. Go." Barr pointed to the river.

"I have something I must get before I handle them. Hold things together here. Empty that mine." Alps turned and headed back toward the forest. These were ill tidings that he was bringing back to Nita. Would she agree to help the town? Surely she would. Those crystals could not be used to make more Uruk. Alps heard a soft murmur from the crowd, and recognized it as a child's voice.

"Did he help us?" There was an answer, an adult, though Alps didn't know if it was his mother.

"I don't know, Rai. I think he's trying." Alps' heart lifted a little. He was trying. That he was. He purposefully strode toward the forest as Barr started giving blunt orders to those gathered.

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Leal closed the book and leaned back as Ceriss padded into the small cabin where they had assigned themselves for the journey. They were well off shore, almost beyond the view of the shore. Sailing west was done cautiously because the ocean currents could be stronger than the wind at times, and it was easy to be sent far off course. As a pre-correction, Kaji had sailed almost a half a day north so that their return trip would not miss Diera entirely due to the loop current. The lanterns flickered cozily as she slipped willfully forward and took her place on the lupine guard's lap. He was adorned in the red and yellow shirt that he wore under his chainmail hauberk, the metal garment folded on the floor, and his dark trousers. The priestess, however, wore nothing at all. It was obvious what was on her mind.

"Finally, a little bit of time to focus on something other than danger, assassins and battle." She smiled to Leal warmly. The black and grey male placed a hand on Ceriss' shoulder. She closed her eyes and just let her darkness whisk away like wind had pulled it from her. Her pristine white fur gleamed, leaving her nude there on his lap.

"I want to talk about something. Something that troubled me... has for a little while now." Leal spoke, his voice heavy with concern. Ceriss answered dolefully.

"I'm not used to those I like being close to actually interrupting snuggling for serious talk." She laughed lightly. She was such a different creature from the night in the courtyard of Nita's summer home.

"Letai pull their strength, their energy from the acts of pleasure, happiness, joy and the like." Leal clarified, gazing at Ceriss' energy as it crackled around her brightly.

"This is basic, yes." She responded, undoing the clasps that held Leal's cloak on.

"As a priestess, I thought that you were not allowed to commit dark acts." He let his hands rest on her hips. He was not stopping her, but he had to deal with this. It was troubling him too much.

"This is also true, and very basic." The priestess spoke softly, leaning in to kiss Leal's lips softly, perhaps trying to distract from the subject.

"Don't you feel that the act of obliterating a spirit entirely, not letting it return to the life stream... might be seen as just a little bit dark?" Ceriss paused a bit, looking forward, empty at the wall. Leal held his breath. He knew that would likely not produce a positive response from her, but didn't know how much it would bother her.

“Yes, one might see it that way. That is how it is, Leal. We are in a war. Dark times are upon us, and when one side can do no harm, the other side is free to do all the harming. Do you think ill of me for what you saw?” She leaned down, darkness sweeping over her body again. “Do you see me as a monster now?” Her voice echoed unnaturally.

“No, I do not see a monster.” Leal said calmly, hand sweeping the long tendrils of hair out from in front of his lover’s eyes. “I see a priestess who has been wounded in the worst possible way by the dark one.” Those eyes narrowed.

“Wounded? You think I am broken, Leal?” she asked, her voice rising in anger.

“Wounded and dying.” He clarified, his own tone becoming heavier.

“Do not pretend that you understand me on that level, Leal!” she barked angrily. “You did not go through what I did! You did not watch everyone you ever loved either cast into eternal suffering or slaughtered outright. You were not the last person in your family, knowing that there could never be another. You didn’t spend 700 years reliving every one of your worst memories in different ways, aware that it wasn’t real, but powerless to stop the constant reminder that the suffering you are being forced to relive was still real. Don’t feel sorry for *me* Leal, my dark days are over, but don’t act like I am dark in comparison. I’m not. I am doing what I have to in order to make sure that this ends. It’s not pretty, and I am not proud of it, but if we are to face that darkness, we have to be willing to harm it. The Letai power of healing will not end this thing.” Leal folded his ears back a bit, not in bitterness, but in thought. He whispered again.

“You taught me to see the essence, Ceriss. So I want you to answer something for me. Answer it honestly.” The priestess tightened her hand on Leal’s shoulder, but nodded.

“Removing a spirit from the life stream... destroying that essence...” the guard sat up a bit. “You have to do something pretty horrible to make that happen, don’t you?” The priestess hung her head a little, lips drawn back in a grimace.

“I don’t need you judging me, Leal. You don’t know the kind of betrayal the Letai have endured.” Leal placed his hand over Ceriss’ hand on his shoulder as she rested with her hips in his lap. The guard spoke softly.

“I am not judging you. I am not sorry for you. I am afraid for you. You are tearing part of your own essence away... I saw it leave with the assassin that you removed. Ceriss, I don’t have to be well versed in Essence Training to know what happens if you start hacking away at your own life. You learned to change your appearance because you knew that over time...” Ceriss let the darkness fall away abruptly. Leal did not flinch. He expected it.

She was the same white lady wolf, but she looked different. Both of her ears were missing wedge-like chunks, as if hacked with a sword several times on both sides. One of her eyes was closed, presumably gone as well. Her hair was kept long as it was just to hide the damage to her ears if she were seen in her regular form, but there was little to mistake the fact that she was losing a lot of her fur. She looked as if she had been poisoned.

"I had not assumed you had learned to see with so much clarity. I should have known. I did teach you myself, after all." She whispered. The priestess sounded utterly defeated. It was apparent that she knew very well what she was doing, and what it cost.

"I was not aware of how much damage, but I could see it happen. I wasn't sure, but I guess now I am. You can't do this to yourself." Leal stated with a tone of anguish.

"The Letai spent too long not doing what needed to be done. Extreme steps should have been taken early on, Leal. I do what I can because I must, even if it does this." Leal slipped his arms around Ceriss and pulled her to his chest. He felt the naked patches under his fingertips and just pulled her tighter to him. Ceriss trembled a little, and then choked back a sob.

"The war will end, Ceriss. You have to believe that it will. You sacrifice too much. This is why you didn't want to go with the others, isn't it? You knew Luna would eventually be able to tell. When she sharpened her senses for battle, she would see it." The priestess cried quietly for a bit.

"How can you still want to hold me knowing what I do? How I am?" she asked.

"I love you, Ceriss." He answered this flatly. He had a lot of love for her, and knowing that she was doing such a terrible thing to herself and to others in the name of protecting was more than he was willing to overlook. Her appearance changed again, to the pretty white wolf that she was meant to be.

"I don't love me. I don't know how you could either. But I won't refuse your love, Leal. I need it. You don't understand." She trembled a little.

"I do understand. Without regular essence drawing..." He looked at her sadly, and she nodded, tears still rolling down her cheeks.

"I'll die. But I look at you, and I know I can tell you that, because even if that were not the case, you are still willing." She whispers.

"How long do you have?" asked Leal in a distant tone. The more she said, the more he understood. He had only learned a little about essence and drawing, but he knew how closely linked essence and life actually were.

"A year or two, maybe? I don't know exactly. I wanted to just spend it with friends. No more fighting, no more strife. I knew the dark one was still out there, but I was safe there in Diera. I thought I was. My last little bit of time to enjoy. No one had to know a thing until my passing. But when the darkness found me there in Diera... in my safe place where I intended to slip away quietly in the night... I just..." Leal clutched Ceriss again. The assassin's punishment had been so violent and cruel because of what he represented, not because of what he did. Ceriss was, in that moment, utterly insane with rage over her last days tainted with war. Leal understood.

"This little bit of time you have left, so long as you are at my side... I do not want you to fight unless it's absolutely necessary. Once this crystal is at the bottom of the ocean, we will go back, and you will have that rest you need. And all the essence I can give you." He whispered. Ceriss just fell against him and sobbed. Leal let her. He held her against him, and held her tight. She needed this. She could not ask for it herself, it had to be offered. She could finally stop. Her pain and suffering were not over after all she had done to herself, but she would commit no more darkness in this world.

The lady lupine smiled warmly, her eyes warm with affection. Leal peered back up at her. It was not just affection, no. There was genuine love and adoration in them. The moment was sealed with a deep and ardent kiss, the guard pushed tighter into the not-so-soft cot in their small cabin. His tongue responded to hers, their moment together sliding easily from that anxious, mournful and melancholy confession, to something beyond what even Ceriss had likely come for. Leal clutched the damaged, but still loving priestess tightly, not letting her move an inch away from him. She needed this. She needed to have that admission of love and devotion reaffirmed, outlined in gold from her lover.

The next few moments were an emotionally charged flurry of moving hands, pulling clothing, and twitching and writhing and kissing on a cot too small for two, but more than enough for two who wished to be joined as one. This was not about essence drawing, and Leal knew it. Ceriss wanted to make love. And he was more than happy to allow her to. He took a moment to appreciate how bizarre his life had become, and how different things were since he had become a guard in Diera. Ceriss, still straddling Leal's lap, shifted her appearance quietly, making herself appear like the thief they now travelled with.

"Oh by the stars, quit teasing!" Leal laughed, the wolf priestess changing back with a smirk.

"At least it's not the queen this time." She chuckled. "So maybe..." She shifted her appearance to that of the general. Leal squeaked in surprise, as she did this just as her hand slipped around his rightfully swollen organ, stroking him lustfully up and down.

"Hey, stay out of the chain of command!" he playfully complained, and then groaned softly as "Nidaja" slipped him right inside her tightly squeezing depths. The shifting female bounced a few good heavy times upon Leal, her ponytail bouncing

appropriately as if it was really bound behind her head like Nidaja's. She had great internal muscle control which she was quick to use to his pleasure. He sighed with relief as she switched back to her normal dark form. The shadowy look was the one he got to know first, so she seemed to know that he liked it. Leal clutched her and let her grind closer into his lap. He tilted his head back as the cot creaked softly.

"Better?" she asked in her own soft and soothing tone. Leal bit her shoulder, making her gasp out as he pushed his cock in deep and twitched hard inside her. By all rights he should have been getting used to this treatment, but it was still so hot and lusty every time he shared himself with one of his new friends. He was not warned before coming to Diera that this sort of thing might happen to him, but he was glad he was not warned. He might have passed up the opportunity because he thought the person was lying to trick him into a far more unforgiving situation. Ceriss leaned forward into the bite from her lover, and bit him as well, hips undulating hard and purposefully, the motions perhaps slightly exaggerated as she shook the wolf under her a little with her needful rutting. Leal folded his ears back, swept up with the passion as the ship they were on bounced a little harder suddenly. A slightly higher wave was likely responsible, but it only cast the priestess a little harder against him.

"Faster... If a storm's coming, I won't be interrupted..." Ceriss growled. "I want all of it in me... please..." She gripped his shoulders tighter and lurched almost furiously upon the guard. Leal closed his eyes, not having to fantasize to speed up his release, he just had to let himself go, let himself enjoy that slick tunnel suckling and stroking him inside his lover. The ship pitched again, making it seem to Leal that a storm might have been approaching. They would definitely not be doing this if they were having to ride out a storm.

"Yes love... I want you to. I want you to have every drop." She shook him a little harder at that. He tightened and loosened the muscles in his leg, pushing up into Ceriss as she bore down upon him harder. The creaking and protest of the cot was louder, but a slight rush of wind from outside made them comfortable in the fact that they were not being heard. Leal grunted softly, letting himself slip closer. The ship listed again, and he held Ceriss upon him as she held herself to the cot.

"Are you close?" she asked, ears pinned back, grim determination. She needed his release, not for the energy, but because he was making her so happy. That dark fur was only a disguise now, there was very little actual darkness left around Leal's eager lover. The grey-toned wolf pushed up tighter and more insistently into Ceriss' clutching depths.

"Yes! Getting closer... yes love, please! Make me cum!" he whimpered, letting Ceriss take the enjoyment of causing his pleasure. She seemed to take that idea very happily and run with it. She ground over him, stirring his ridged shaft against her slick inner walls. She slowed to a crawl, however.

"Good, Leal. Very good. Let's let nature handle the rest..." The ship slammed

down at the base of a wave, shaking the wolves together. Leal winced. The motion of the boat was being used for his pleasure now. Also being used were long, slow contractions of those well trained inner muscles of his lover. Leal's head was swimming with pleasure. It was hard to tell sometimes that it was the boat that was moving, and not just the way he felt while being taken by his skilled and beautiful dark lover.

"Gonna cum..." he whimpered softly.

"Yes... please..." Ceriss held still, only her inner muscles working that thick cock wedged wetly inside her claiming depths. Leal curled upward slightly, knees shaking, then his legs relaxed and spread as he felt pleasure rush violently through him, the boat listing harder to the side.

"Nnnnguuuhhh!" he groaned out heavily. Ceriss cried out happily, then leaned back, letting Leal watch where they were joined, so lewd and wet, and she began strumming her clit with her fingertips. Leal got to watch in rapt attention, not used to seeing a lady pleasure herself, but as his cock jerked and spasmed inside her, she let herself focus on her own pleasure. The guard moved his hand over hers and he gave gentle insistence to take over her pleasure. She arched back, the boat making her nearly fall off as Leal rolled his thighs under her, working his cock inside those squeezing muscles.

"Oh yes! Good Leal. You are so.. nnnmhn!" her body went tight finally. She came easily, though not very heavily. Leal was not satisfied with that. He fluttered her clit with a claw tip and throbbed hard inside her, spilling the last drop of pearly cum inside her suckling depths as she gave a lilting cry of peaking joy, pushed up to another level of her release by the wolf's persistence. The entire time her body lit up like this he felt her sex clutch and convulse around his jerking member.

"Good girl, Ceriss, let it all out, you've earned this..." he growled, reminding her that he liked her and wanted her pleasure.

"Don't stop! Don't stop! I'm gonna..." She was plateauing and the lupine male knew it. He relished this simple torture of pleasure upon her, and drove her to one climax after another, her body lurching with each one. His oversensitivity waned, and the guard began enjoying the chance to use his cock as a nice implement of pleasure for his priestess. She seized again, crying out just as a loud pop was heard and both wolves were dumped in a painful jumble on the cabin floor. Ceriss laughed, unhurt. Leal was a little more battered, but nothing he could not shake off.

"We have discovered the structural limit to our bed already, it's not even been a full day." Leal chuckled.

"It's alright, I will just fuck you standing up then." Ceriss growled, being a little more vulgar than needed, but making her point. She was going to enjoy every minute that she got to spend with the wolf who knew the real her and loved her anyway. There

was no replacement for that kind of comfort and she would take full advantage of it. Leal felt better just knowing that he would be that person for Ceriss. He felt that this might, in the long run, make all the pain she felt worth it. She made it through those dark days; it was time for her to see better ones. The boat rocked and shook from time to time as they lay in a wet heap on the floor for a moment, kissing and cuddling before there was a loud rapping on the door of their cabin.

“I knew that was coming.” Leal panted out. “...Probably here to tell us to secure everything and get ready to ride it out.” Ceriss laughed a bit at that.

“I think we are pretty secure right here.” She grinned.

“Ceriss! Leal! We have trouble. Get up on deck!” It was Neit who was speaking. Ceriss sat bolt upright, her eyes glowing.

“What’s wrong?” Leal called out.

“It’s not a regular storm!” Neit barked.

“It’s the crystal!” Ceriss barked. “Fuck! Leal, move! I should have known they would have an essence release command in it! I’m so foolish!” Ceriss did not even get dressed, her darkness shrouding her and keeping her decent, she bolted out the door, barreling the stunned thief over. She looked up at Leal and went scarlet, since he was still sprawled on the shattered remains of that cot on the floor, naked with his release and Ceriss’ all over his lap.

Leal was fearful of what had panicked Ceriss so much, but he was also saddened. Was she doomed to never get to relax and just be loved and held? He shook off the sorrow and without even dressing himself, ran up to the deck to face whatever horror had found them on the open sea.