

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 14

The fog seemed to have spread out over miles and miles and as the morning of the following day pressed on, it held fast in its battle with the sun. The crystal generated a lot of this fog, but the real problem was likely that the air was so calm over that part of the ocean that it caused the fog bank to stick. The slow moving air may have been moving the fog in the very same direction they were going and they would not know. It was a strange weather dynamic to be stuck in, but even in the gray morning, they could not navigate. Ceriss was obviously tired, and the raft was not moving so fast as it had been before. Leal had long ceased to feeling self-conscious as he had Lunar's jacket wrapped around his thighs, since he had come out of the cabin naked in the storm. Ceriss, in her ability to make her fur so shadowy and black, was difficult to make out intimately, so she seemed completely unconcerned about modesty.

Neit had spent a while talking to the fox about their customs and their homeland, finding out that, as it had been explained, the Lhap were fairly tribal, but the curious things were very well informed. Neph did not have a rough and tribal feel to him like she expected. They were not savages, and she found him rather endearing to talk to. It had calmed her nerves.

The captain was quiet for most of the night. His ship was gone. As far as he was concerned, it was the crazy mission he was sent on that was responsible, so he did feel a little less social. He even slept for a time. When Kaji awoke, he was no more cordial. Ceriss spoke little also, since she was focused on moving the raft, seemingly endlessly in one direction, not even sure what direction that was in the fog. She would rest every once in a while, but tap the ship back in line if it drifted off course.

About mid-way into the day, Ceriss finally moved to the center of the raft and rested on her back a moment. There was a period of quiet as everyone looked at her. Leal felt he knew what was coming. She could not press on anymore. They may drift off course before she could recover, and there was no way that they would know if they were continuing in a straight line. This thing had beaten them. Finally, she spoke.

"Leal... After the last few days with me, I know you are tapped out. You have expended quite a lot of essence, and are worn a little thin. I cannot draw

from you the kind of energy I need to recover and press on..." The guard nodded at this, and Neit gritted her teeth, seeming to understand where it seemed this was going. She was out of energy because Leal had been pushed just as hard as the lady wolf over the past few days.

"It's alright. You tried. We are thankful of that. Maybe... just maybe the water current will do the rest." Leal stroked her forehead. She shook her head slowly, panting softly.

"Oh, you'd know if I were done, Leal." The priestess stated softly. "I would look done. I do not. No, I am saying that I need more energy than you would yield at the moment. That does not mean I cannot get it from the others who have not had such a difficult trial these past few days." She panted.

"What do you mean?" Neit asked, getting onto her knees by the priestess. She seemed willing to help the Priestess, as it would, of course, be saving her own life.

"She has to draw essence energy." The fox spoke softly, reverently "It's just like in the stories. But the one she has been drawing from is pretty dried out, yes? He's why you could pull the ship apart and save us like that?" he asked. Leal had not thought that it was his power that was used to save everyone. It made him feel better about what he had done to Ceriss right before everything went wrong.

"If not from Leal, how will you get your energy? Does it have to be someone special?" Neit asked.

"Actually, there is someone on the raft now that has stronger essence, even if less focused, than Leal does." The priestess sat up a bit as she said that.

"M...me?" Neit asked incredulously, seeming to blush all over.

"No." Neph whispered, looking back at Ceriss.

"Huh?" Neit asked. Lunarix perked up at the fox's interruption. The priestess spoke.

"The Lhap Islanders are brimming with energy. There's a reason they are very familiar with Letai customs." Ceriss murmured weakly. Neph spoke up.

"The Letai came to Lhap festivals t' draw upon our energy. We had dancing, celebrations, feasts, and ... other *nice* events... in their honor when they arrived and they would bring good fortune with them, and would barter and trade and provide wealth t' the island. 'Twas a good relationship." Neit nodded,

a little crestfallen that she was not the one with power that Ceriss was indicating, but not seeming to mind that.

“So, how does the essence drawing thing work exactly? You just... touch him and take essence until he gets tired from it?” Kaji asked. Leal lowered his head a little, having not considered that part of it until that very moment. The fox’s captain and his own captain were both right there on the raft. This might be a little awkward for all involved.

“Well...” the fox tugged one of his ears nervously. “I mean, on the islands they was drawin’ the pleasure of feasts and dancing and laughter and other kinds of merry-makin’. We don’t have that on th’ open sea with just the lot of us.” Neit looked like she was in silent shock.

“Wait, so how the hell’s she supposed to draw from you?” Kaji asked.

“Bitch.” Neit growled. “Tell me that’s not why you insisted I come! You said you might need my abilities! This was not what I thought you meant!” She fumed at the Priestess. Leal had expected she might be irritated by that. He was right. Still, the thought of tending to Neit himself was not so bad. He was apparently too exhausted by Ceriss’ standards to be the one, though. Was that why she originally brought Lunaris along? Was his own commanding officer supposed to be the other source of essence for the priestess?

“I have to focus on keeping the raft straight, Neit, I can’t do this myself. If I travel in a situation where it might be possible I need extra essence, I cannot rely solely on my own. The Priestesses back in my time kept a temple boy... often more than one. When we travelled, they would happily compete for the honor of going with us. That aside, we usually had a new priestess or at least a student who would happily lend her essence in a time of need.” Ceriss sat up slowly to look at Neit. “The Letai are nearly all gone. Luna and I are all who remain. I don’t have a lot of options, and I had to be sure there was someone who could assist me in that regard. I will be using your essence Neit; you are young and strong...” The rehabilitated thief cupped her muzzle, recognizing what Ceriss was asking her to do. The dark-furred priestess continued. “... you still get to help us with your power, but you won’t be doing it alone.” Ceriss touched her fingertips to the water as she lay back on the raft again, correcting the angle again.

“What if the fox doesn’t want me to do that?!” she asked, flailing a bit. Leal could understand her frustration with the situation. But, he trusted Ceriss’ choice. From what he understood, she was one of the last Priestesses to be Shadowfallen. There was likely a reason for that. She was a survivor. He looked at the vulpine, who was looking away with some measure of embarrassment. Kaji was staring intently, seeming to understand what was

being asked, but not having a clue where it would end up. Neph murmured something very softly.

“What was that?” Kaji asked. “Speak up boy, a real flesh and blood Letai Priestess is askin’ for your help!” The captain seemed to be suddenly interested in honor about the situation, but Leal could not help but wonder if there were a more lecherous reason that he wanted to see Neph help in this regard. After all, it would have been entertaining to watch.

“I’m okay with it.” He said louder.

“By the essence!” Neit exclaimed, highly embarrassed. “I don’t know half the people on this raft, and I actively despise one of them!” she sneered at the guard-general who got her into this mess. Lunaris stifled a laugh. Neph stammered a little.

“She doesn’t have to. I mean, I can... I mean, if it means gettin’ us home, pleasure is not that hard on m’ own...” The fox seemed willing to do what was needed for the priestess. “I mean... I kin ignore everyone else and just... lay against ya and...” Kaji laughed that time.

“Quiet, you, you are not helping.” The Priestess snapped. She then smiled at the blonde-furred vulpine. “Neph, I appreciate that, but I am going to need a lot more essence than that alone would provide. Neit was brought for a reason. She has a special kind of essence. It’s very hard to explain to someone who can’t see it, but it’s very malleable. I can use it to help draw in other essence. I did not choose her because I knew Lunaris could force her to come. I chose her because if I needed essence... and could not draw it myself... there had to be someone who had the same kind of essence I use.” Neit perked right up at that.

“I use the same kind of essence you do?” she asked.

“No, not use.” Ceriss clarified, adjusting the course of the ship again. “Have. You don’t have the kind of volume of essence it takes to learn to control it. With heavy training, I might teach you to see it the way Leal does, but it just happens to be the same ‘color’ as mine, which makes it perfect for what I need you to do. Provoke Neph’s essence in my place, just as I would. I can draw it, but I need you to be the one triggering it... In such an encounter, essence mixes, and it allows me to hold on to it easily. And Neit, it might take more than once.”

“Good on ya, Neph.” Kaji said playfully. “Looks like you don’t need no anchors.”

“Kaji...” Lunaris warned.

“Whatever. Next week we are gonna be shitting ourselves over this exact conversation over a pint, I swear to ya.” He laughed, and then turned around, feet in the water, butting out of the conversation. Lunar is sighed.

“I know you don’t like me, Neit, but...” the general began.

“No, it’s alright, Lunar is.” Neit sighed. “I don’t really hate you. Just... I’m not used to this kind of thing. I know how important it is but... I feel silly.”

“Don’t.” Leal said. “It’s to save us. As the priestess said, it’s your power we need.”

“Would it make ye feel better if I told ya I thought about it when I first saw ya?” the fox asked. He gave an encouraging grin, sitting up a bit. Neit laughed lightly.

“Neph, you are stuck on the ocean for weeks at a time with Kaji barking orders at you. If you did not think about that when you saw me, I would have to be very offended.” Neit scooted closer to him. “So, you are really okay with this?” she asked.

“Yeah. I’m a bit nervous, but I guess that’s expected.” He pulled one of his large ears a bit, a sign of his nervousness.

“Can I touch?” she asked, reaching for that tugged large fox ear. Neph grinned a bit, going scarlet over his muzzle. Leal watched quietly as the pair softened a bit against each other. The guard had never just watched people in an intimate situation. Would it be better if he were not watching? He could turn and watch over the water, the way Kaji was doing. Even considering this, he stayed right where he was. He decided to himself that it was because he wanted to watch an essence drawing being done without being blinded by pleasure himself. The fox grinned at Neit’s request to touch his ears.

“You’ve been wantin’ to since you saw them, haven’t ya?” he laughed. Neit pounced the fox suddenly, mashing him back against the raft and tweaking those large fuzzy ears softly. She grinned joyfully, seeming to find some special joy in it. She rubbed them between her fingers and thumbs sweetly for half a minute or so.

“They are so soft!” she laughed. “Okay, now that I have gotten that out of my way, what is it you like?” she asked, staying straddled on the fox’s hips. “I suppose it’s fair I ask. The more I make you happy, the better this will help us.” Neph blushed a bit more as Leal watched the moment unfold.

“I like m’ ears touched.” He whispered, making Neit take her turn at blushing, her short tan fur dappled with dew from the persistent fog all around

them. Neit cast a glance over to Lunaris, who was sitting with his legs crossed beside Ceriss. She narrowed her eyes. He rolled his eyes back at her and moved over to the edge of the raft, turning and putting his feet in the water. He spoke softly to Kaji.

“Is this the farthest you’ve ever been from Diera in this direction, you think?” he asked. This captain was somewhat unorthodox, it would not have surprised Leal if his answer was in the negative on that. But he nodded.

“Aye, it certainly is. I reckon maybe it’s farther than anyone I’ve heard about ever coming back, but them that went before don’t have a Letai priestess with them, now do they? We might be just fine. I don’t know where we will end up, but if we get to land, we can worry about what comes next later.”

The two captains spoke quietly back and forth about places that they had visited and the places they wanted to see, seeming to have more in common than Leal had originally suspected, but that was good for keeping them occupied to let Neit relax a little. She looked up to him, and he expected an insistence to turn around as well, but she just smiled instead and leaned down over the pinned male vulpine and took a tip of his ear in her mouth, suckling it as her hands spread out over his chest, his body arching up at her as he whispered softly,

“Sweet essence...” The guard looked at his commander and the other wolf, but neither turned to peek. It seemed that, for now, they were going to give that pair their privacy. Ceriss rested a fingertip in the water, correcting the course of that little craft as it followed a current for a bit. She was focusing mostly on drawing essence, it seemed. Leal could understand. She had a lot taken out of her to save everyone the way she did.

“You are doing fine, Neit.” Ceriss encouraged. She leaned down and kissed along the rim of one of those ears and then leaned back up, crossing her arms in front of her and stripping her blouse upward in a quick and efficient manner. Her smallish breasts were certainly nothing like the more voluptuous Ceriss, but her youth and perkiness made up for that. And the fox was certainly not about to complain, given that he was the intended recipient of that view. Leal was not certain why he was allowed this view, aside from the fact that he had saved Neit before. It seemed fair that he should watch her save him back.

“Kin I touch?” the fox asked in a similar fashion to the thief’s own query. There was a slow nod from Neit as she leaned down into the palms of the exploring vulpine, his ears splayed somewhat dopily as he took twin teats between fingertips and squeezed and pulled gentle and sensual. Neit tilted her head back, her jaw going slack in a sweet ‘ooh’ as the smaller fox explored her. She was easily the smallest out of Alps’ friends, so it was interesting seeing her with someone smaller than her. Leal wondered, as he watched, whether she was attracted to that at all, or if it made her feel more comfortable than she might

otherwise have been. She began a slow, caressing roll of her thighs, stroking the fox through the canvas trousers that he wore. They were likely feeling a little snug on him, the guard considered as he watched Ceriss close her eyes and lay a hand on the vulpine's thigh.

"Nnhh!" Neph gasped a little as the priestess caressed him. The wolf atop him, small though she might have been to Leal, overpowered the fox easily enough, pushing herself over him and finally kissing him deeply. Leal had not figured the somewhat selfish Neit as a kisser, but she did so quite passionately. The craft rocked ever so slightly with a few more insistent motions of lupine hips upon happy fox thighs. Ceriss slipped a hand up from his hip and undid the ties to his trousers. It seemed that she was interested in cutting through the teasing and getting to the energy that she needed.

"This is great, Neit... he's young, and even for a fox he's got lots of essence. It's positively boiling off of him..." Ceriss was careful to encourage Neit and remind her that what she was doing was helping everyone. She seemed not to care as much about that by that point. As a rather thick, well-endowed fox was freed of his trousers, she rocked back a little to take in the view of him, and snared him in her fingers away from the priestess. The following interaction was not really complicated. She stroked him up and down fondly as Neph moved his own hands around to unfasten her shorts. She shimmied out of them, seeming loathe letting go of that captured phallus, but ultimately leaving herself bade before him. Neph murmured sultrily,

"Neit, you are very beautif-AaAh!" He was cut off as her head dropped and oral heat overtook his sea-fog dampened pink flesh. Leal grinned a bit at how he arched and spread his toes.

"Poor fox. Been on the open sea long?" Ceriss asked. She was extremely comfortable with what was going on, since this was a task she was used to doing herself. How often had she drawn energy in tense situations like this? Was it all that common? Were Letai lives so hard?

"Not a lot of wolf girls lookin' for foxes these days." Kaji chuckled a bit at his observation. "I've seen 'em looking, but they never approach, and this one's a bit on the shy side, you understand." Ceriss smiled.

"Ah, I see. How long then, Neph?" she asked.

"Ah... I... Nhnn.." He arched again as Neit slid her mouth up that turgid flesh slowly, tongue likely grinding heavily on his more sensitive surfaces. Leal was actually kind of surprised that Neit wanted to do this to the fox. Did she not observe some kind of species taboo? He did not think that it was a problem, but he wondered if the girl ever did. Had she thought at any point that she would be treating Neph like this? Had she ever considered even meeting a fox before she

met Neph? Leal could not help but be aroused watching this. Would Ceriss let him relieve the pressure, or have him hold it so she could draw from him later? That seemed a bit torturous.

“How long, Neph?” Neit asked tenderly. She seemed curious at that too.

“N... Not since I left th’ islands.” The fox panted. Kaji assisted.

“That would be about six years.” The captain sucked a breath in through his teeth. “Man I should scoot a little further back from this.” He moved off toward the corner of the raft, Lunarix laughing a bit.

“I...” The fox tried to speak again, panting hotly.

“Don’t stop, Neit.” Ceriss crooned softly, her hand on the fox’s hip glowing again, this time a beautiful blue color. Was it always different?

“He’ll pop, Ceriss.” Neit whispered, holding his tip at her lips and stroking him gingerly in her hand to stave it off as best she could.

“And you will keep going. He’ll be fine.” Ceriss seemed to know what she was doing.

“Aaahh!” the fox whined softly, plaintive, begging. Neit nodded and pushed her mouth back down over the vulpine’s shaft. He was enough to fill two of her hands one on top of the other, so he actually seemed to be the perfect proportion for Neit. Neit stroked him only a few more times in her mouth before issuing a deep, guttural moan around his flesh, eyes closing as the fox shook heavily, legs slipping upward, feet planting on the raft as his tail flitted about rapidly. Leal felt a rush of heat through his own body as he heard Neit’s throat contract hard several times, then watched her gasp a bit, a small flood of overflow spilling down the fox’s heavy sack as he shook. Her mouth sealed around him again and she continued to longingly work him in her tight muzzle. Oversensitive seconds later, the fox began giving panicked twittering giggling, mind short circuiting and not sure how to address the situation, it seemed. Neit popped her muzzle off of him, grinning and stroking him even as he wriggled beneath her, his body hard to control as she slipped back on top of him, settling her hips over his lap. Her tan-colored bare form made her seem a little more fox-like if it were not for her smaller ears and tail. She was a pretty good match for him as far as size.

“This is very good, Neit, keep going, don’t let him rest... I want your pleasure to mix with his. That’s what will really work.” Ceriss’ words were calm and endearing, as if she were training a dear student to her.

“Nhnhn!” the poor vulpine arched, and Leal tingled all over as he watched Neit push her tight channel right down over his twitching cock, seeing every inch sink into her with a single hard grinding stroke, his sack drawing tight again briefly as if erupting immediately all over again. He panted freely, making it seem that had not happened. It was perhaps just intense pleasure. He placed his hands on her rump and pulled her tight to him, feet planting as he pushed her up a bit. She growled deeply as she pushed hard onto him several times, making a very hot show of it, back arched, teeth bared, ears back. She began to relentlessly grind him, and Leal was immediately aware of a violet tint to the energy around Ceriss’ hand. Her natural color. Leal could see the difference there. Neit made it so that the Priestess was renewing her own energy directly. He considered for a moment that pleasure was a very fortunate fashion that the Letai could renew their essence, and then he considered the fact that eating was used to renew the body, and eating good food was a pleasant experience, so why should renewing essence not also be nice? It seemed natural at least. He writhed a bit in need as he watched. Oh how he would like to just slip over the lovely dark lady wolf on the raft and renew his eager gift to her again, but he would wait.

Neit, however, saw no purpose in waiting. She rocked her hips harder, building up a nice breeding pace with the fox. The raft began to pitch a little, shaking with the force of her motions, even as light and small as they both were.

“I have to admit, I’m a little envious.” Kaji mentioned, breaking from his intentionally banal conversation with Lunaris.

“You get yours often enough, I bet, owning your own ship and all.” He laughed.

“Yeah, more than the fox. He deserves this. Hard worker. Whiney little bitch sometimes, but at least this is one thing he won’t whine about again for a while.” There was a louder laugh from Lunaris.

“Uhhn, I... I...” The vulpine whimpered out again.

“Yes! Do it, Neph! Inside me!” barked Neit. She lowered her head, slapping her thighs against his harder, determined.

“Ahhnn! I want you t’... I want you...” he panted out raspily.

“I’ll cum, just fill me, fox! Stop fighting it!” Neit was pretty vulgar in her demand, and Leal only felt painfully aroused from that. Neph bucked hard, and then growled loudly as he obviously erupted. Neit slapped her thighs harder on him, squeaking out a few times, and then shuddering hard, a sinking groan announcing the success of her own pleasure. Ceriss crooned happily, her entire body bathed in a brighter violet glow. The captain and general were both turned

to look over their shoulder at Neit as she peaked. They could not deny themselves that beautiful site.

“Oh, that’s what essence looks like?” asked Kaji, apparently able to see the essence because of how bright it was glowing during the exchange. Leal squirmed achingly as he watched Neit slightly open her eyes and stare right into his own, a hungry, drunk, happy expression tantalizing and seductive. Then, rather suddenly, she slipped forward, the fox’s pink member slapping his belly wetly, a little pool of his own release matting his fur in his lap as Neit pulled Lunaris’ borrowed jacket up and her muzzle pushed deftly, easily right into Leal’s lap, her mouth snaring his tip, all she really needed to send waves of pleasure screaming through the guard’s core.

“Hey, that’s royal property!” exclaimed Lunaris jovially. It was unclear if he was speaking of the jacket, or the guard.

“Phk yuu...” came the muffled announcement from his lap. Leal slapped his hands behind him and he looked desperately at Ceriss. She had not said he could do this. Her hand went to his thigh, just as it had been on the fox, her eyes half open, her tail wagging slowly as she watched the somewhat pleasure-desperate wolf girl take on the grey and charcoal-furred guard. He winced a little as her mouth pushed back and forth lustfully over his aching shaft. Leal closed his eyes, surprised, but happy at this turn of events. He was so aroused he was hurting, and this was very much appreciated. He watched one of Ceriss’ hands slip over the fox’s shaft, stroking him slowly, making him squirm, then move back to Neit’s puffy hot sex and run her fingers in and out of her, making a bit of a mess of the soup of life that spilled from her as she penetrated her with three fingers that way.

“Uh...” The captain of the now ocean-bottom-dwelling ship seemed to want to comment, but words escaped him. Ceriss’ hand went back and forth from the lady wolf to her fox companion, working him over with her slick juices, stroking him and making a nice show of it for herself. Leal was barely able to focus, but it seemed that with a little energy back in her system, she was able to enjoy this herself a bit. There was nothing wrong with that. He groaned deeply as Neit wrapped her hand around his girth. He was larger than the fox, and she seemed interested in using hand and mouth both on him. Her tongue was furiously busy too. She seemed to know quite well how to tend him in this way, and it surprised him less that the fox lasted less than a full minute with it, if it really had been so long for him.

Ceriss pumped the fox as he squirmed on his back through it all for a few minutes, getting him nicely riled up again before she rather abruptly stopped. He got onto his knees behind Neit and the wolf girl whined loudly as, with a mouth full of Leal’s intimate flesh, she was taken rather roughly by a once again willing vulpine. He was fast and frantic with his motions, and those motions only carried

through the girl's body. The illicit nature of sharing her like that only drove Leal higher. He leaned forward, cupping the sides of Neit's head as he grunted out loudly and spent his hot essence all over the back of her tongue and into her throat, feeling it contract greedily around his tip as he twitched with each hard pulse of his seed. He arched back in his eruption and the glow for Ceriss went brighter.

Neit popped off of his girth and threw her head back, panting in pleasure as Neph drove himself into her from behind. Her tail pinned to her back with his hand as he had pulled it up out of the way. She lowered her head as Leal sat back again, feeling light-headed and spent. He realized, coming out of the fog of want, that it made more sense to conserve his strength as they needed to last as long as they could on the open sea with no water, but the temptation had been too much. Still, he had trouble regretting it right at that moment.

"Come on, Neph, leave a little for later, lad!" his captain barked. He grunted with frustration, likely feeling the burn in his muscles making it harder to get what he was obviously very much after. He rose up on his feet, leaning over her body even as she sloped herself with her chest to the shattered deck of the ship that had gone down. The whole platform shook with his frantic motions. Lunaris commented in a hushed tone to Kaji,

"Captain, it would be sad indeed if we survived that storm only to sink because of frantic fox-pounding." Kaji covered his mouth and had to fight not to laugh. Finally, the pistoning, shaking fox grunted loudly just as Neit wailed a plaintive, echoless tone out into the fog. Her convulsing inner flesh likely did all that was needed as the fox gave a hot little squeak, then just lowered onto his knees behind the wolf and groaned a few times, hugging her hips close.

"I suppose there's none left for the rest of us?" Kaji asked the Priestess, who shook softly, arm glowing brightly. She flashed a grin to the captain and growled softly,

"You help us make it to shore, and I will ensure that you don't need a companion for weeks." Kaji widened his eyes. "Letai are *trained* to do what is pleasurable." Leal nodded to that.

"It's true. You won't be able to sleep for a while with those thoughts and memories coming back to you in the night." The guard grinned to his commanding officer. Lunaris arched a brow at that. Leal grinned at his captain, and the fox just fell back onto the planks, wheezing, twitching, and thanking the very fog itself as he steamed from the heated release with the quietly wagging lady wolf who panted just as happily from the flood she'd been given. The priestess sat up and stroked Neit's head.

“See, that wasn’t so bad, was it?” She grinned at the wolf, who rolled over and lay beside the vulpine, pulling her trousers over her lap and just letting them rest to keep her a tiny bit modest.

“Never thought it would be. Nicer than I hoped though. The fox is so cute with all the little sounds he makes. I had fun.” She chuckled.

“Good girl, Neit. You are very helpful. I will move us along faster for a bit. You rest, then you take him again. And no taking Leal! I may need him later, you greedy girl.” Leal and Neit both blushed hotly at that.

“You can borrow the ship’s captain if you want.” Neit looked up at him and giggled.

“You got your promise from Ceriss. She will take care of you. I’ve got what I want.” She reached over and stroked Neph’s ears, making him quiver and sigh. Leal found himself feeling rather good about the result, even if the circumstances which caused it were particularly tragic. Neit might well have gotten a good friend in the deal.

There was a lull in activity as Ceriss moved the group quickly, enough that they felt the wind over their ears. That really had given her a new energy. She seemed a lot more cheerful and positive, despite how hopeless the situation seemed. The day wore on and conversation drifted from subject to subject as the group just tried to keep Ceriss awake. As much as her essence energy was recharged, she had not slept in well over 36 hours. Neit even snuggled up to her occasionally and pampered her to make her feel better, but lack of water was taking its toll the most.

It was Kaji who finally realized that the fog made it so that his shirt was wet when the raft was pushed along. He widened his eyes and laughed.

“Hey guys, watch!” He twisted his shirt and collected a nice mouth full of water. This led to the nearly broken crew holding their garments up and waving them around wildly in the fog to try to get as much dew on them as possible. Leal had no clothing, but he borrowed Kaji’s shirt on the second pass and gave water to a grateful Ceriss. Lunariss took off his own shirt and Neit used her blouse. After a good hour of this activity, they seemed to all feel a little more lively. When the fog went away, they would not have that ability, but they might at least be able to know where they were going. They had bought a little more time. That might be exactly all they needed!

Mytan arrived at nearly midnight. Vhale had been prepared to collect a bet he'd made with Luna, and grumbled a bit when the soft footfalls of the approaching guard were heard. He came around the stand of trees and then went right up and onto the river boat. Alps greeted him there with a bow, feeling good that his mother's choice to let him go was vindicated.

"Nice to see you again." Alps stated. Mytan panted and related his findings from town.

"You and someone else were the only ones anyone saw. Not a group. I didn't say anything about there being more of you, but you must know... they are talking. They are playing you up like some hero who killed a bunch of Uruk a while back and have come back to clean house on the corrupt Silverlight." Mytan's assessment was not entirely factual, but he did kill some Uruk in the valley to the north east with Azia that time. It might be seen as heroic if that got out, but he had thought that it was seen as an entirely Silverlight action. He did not understand that his name was ever attached to it. He suddenly wondered if Tia might have been responsible for that.

"You were delayed?" Luna asked, coming up behind Alps. Mytan took a long, hard look at her. She was solid white, like Alps, and the family resemblance was there. Perhaps having family did not go with what he'd been told about the wolf. Mytan nodded.

"The mines are empty, the entrances will be sealed, they said. But there was a lot of stress relief going on. Parties, often right out in the street, dancing, instruments, food, more ale than I have seen that town break out for anything. I had trouble getting out of there without being seen." Mytan shrugged and moved around the boat, addressing three solid posts where the craft was carefully moored. He began unwinding the rope. "Is your lot ready to go?" Alps nodded.

"I think the Asuna are asleep, but the rest of us are up and about. I will let them know we are leaving." Alps assisted in getting the rope pulled up, and then went back onto the boat to let everyone know that they were on their way. Luna was already discussing it with Nidaja and Lira, who were dining in the galley. Nita was sipping some wine that was found on board, and rested in a deep, lavishly cushy chair. Alps felt a rush of joy seeing her like that. Yes, this was how the queen, his beloved, should be travelling. No more fighting with Uruk, close brushes with death, and sleeping in the dirt. There might be more of that later, but at least for a bit they could travel together in relative comfort.

Nita looked up as Alps arrived and pulled her cowl back up. She then lowered it again, seeing that it was her lover. Alps touched his head in indication.

"Mytan's back, might want to – " Nita got it back up just in time to see the young guard enter the room.

“Alright, you...” he pointed to Alps. “I need you in the boiler room, before we drift back into the docks.”

“What?” Nita asked.

“It’s a steam ship. We move by burning the black-stone.” He pointed at Alps. “Those are servant’s colors, right?” He made note of the outfit the former slave was wearing. Yellow trim on black uniform. He was observant, and quite right.

“I can’t have him toiling in the – “ Nita started with an indignant tone.

“It’s alright, I can do it. Lyat can switch out with me when he wakes up.” Alps stated. Nita frowned. Alps realized that if she made a big deal of a marked servant not being a servant it would make the nature of their identity even more suspicious. However he looked, he had to play the part. Besides, he had worked hard for years; this would not be so different.

“I will have him relieve you as soon as he wakes then.” The queen was keeping her voice soft so as not to seem too authoritative, obviously getting why Alps was alright with the arrangement. The white servant moved down into the center of the ship, almost half under the waterline, finding that there was a room there lined in steel, made to be sure no fire could kindle and spread. There was a small glow in the round basin which held another basin above it, copper and heavy with a rounded bottom. Two extensions that appeared like flat pans ran downward and alongside the boiler, as plates for shallow pools of water that would boil quickly with the given heat. There was water in there, from what Alps understood.

“Keep the fire from getting too hot by dumping more black-stone in and closing the damper here. To heat it up, let the black-stone light up, and open the damper. Pull this chain to use the blower to really get it heated up. This bar here will go up and down with the temperature. You want it to stay in the blue marked area...” The guard who knew more than he should about the boat showed Alps what to do. There were a few other details about boiler pressure and the like that the emerald Amanian tried to go over. Alps was a quick study and after a few moments proved he knew what to do. The emerald lupine then returned to the control deck to pilot the ship, and Alps, at the sound of a loud whistle from on deck, began putting in more black-stone and pulled the blower several times.

The wolf immediately realized his shirt was going to have to come off. He removed it and began using the shovel until the temperature gauge was right, and the steam pressure gage began bouncing up and down the way Mytan said it would. Alps carefully adjusted the damper to control the temperature, being reserved enough in how he applied black-stone to not have to add more to

control the heating of the water. He felt the ship begin to move, and turn, and then, in minutes, they were on their way. Alps panted, a bit uncomfortably warm already, but it made him feel good to actually do some work to trade off for the queen's safety and comfort. This was a world he knew.

He did not know it alone for long. Nidaja showed up and crossed her arms as she watched the shirtless wolf work. Alps was quiet as he pulled the blower again, then opened up the damper a bit. Nidaja's cowl was up, but her armor was visible.

"You learned fast. The stand in captain sent me down here to tell you that you could do this as long as you like. He's got a good constant control pressure. It's really an amazing ship, Alps. I worry that we will draw attention to ourselves on it, but Vhale is right. We will move faster, perhaps, and that will give us an advantage. Yes, we might make a scene as we go, but we will get to our destination hopefully long before that scene is common knowledge." Alps smiled and panted out,

"Nita was sitting comfortably in a state room in the fore of the boat. I saw her there. She looks pretty here. I like that she gets to travel like this for now." Alps shoveled a little more black-stone and closed the blower a little more. He was ever watchful of the gauges. This was entirely different from anything he'd ever done, but at the same time, it was work, and work he knew. Being exact and not messing up were critical things he lived with for so long that he was a natural for this task.

"Alps, did you see the fox on board?" Nidaja spoke softly.

"Ellis? No, I haven't seen her since Luca." He leaned back against a railing away from the fire, letting it moderate itself a bit.

"I saw her on top of the boat. I thought she had left with the crystals or something, since those are gone, but I think she's still with us." Nidaja made it obvious this caused a little discomfort. Ellis was a killer. It was not known just what kind of killer she was. Alps understood the discomfort, and picked up a water-skin and drank from it a bit to cool himself. Nidaja seemed to take great pleasure in watching him work hard like that.

"I think she will stay with us unless I tell her outright to leave, and even then I can't promise she will. She had her reasons, and fortunately those reasons seem to involve keeping me alive. She was very cross with me for getting in such trouble." Alps drank again. It was refreshing, not just the water, the needing it from hard work.

"Telling me that comforts me a little. If she wants you to live, that is not a bad thing to me." Nidaja leaned in and kissed Alps nose, self-consciously looking

around to make sure Mytan was not spying on them. But of course he could not be. He was piloting the ship. The general watched her lover work a bit longer and then spoke softly, "We won't be able to hide the truth forever from the guard. Mytan's not an idiot. He might have been misused, but he is sharp enough. Do you think you can learn to pilot the ship if we need to... replace him?" Alps did not like the connotation there.

"I get this on a basic level, but if we have a problem here, I do not know that even he knows how to fix it. He's not the owner or the normal operator, he said. We need him if we can keep him. We just have to hope we can be sure of his allegiances. We should tell him sooner rather than later."

"He will not be able to pilot endlessly, of course, so when we moor to let him sleep, we can have a little meeting and let him know what he's gotten into. But I must warn you, if he flakes out, I will allow Reika to escort him off the ship." Nidaja nodded as she said that. Alps cringed.

"As you said, he's smart. I think that he will know his best option for survival is not to cross the royal house." Alps added a little more black-stone. Not much.

"You think so? Because if he is intelligent and gets some inkling where we are headed, he will be smart enough to know that we are dramatically reducing his chances for survival. Then it comes back down to loyalty." Alps fanned himself a bit.

"He's a town guard. All of them swear to protect the queen and uphold her laws. I think he will still do that. He might have been working for the Silverlight, but he seemed to have no love for what they were doing." Alps pulled the blower chain a few more times.

"Alps, you are very trusting. We love you for that, but don't let it put those you love in danger. Be vigilant." Nidaja bowed and headed back up to the deck, probably to keep an eye on the motion of the river boat. It steamed along at a decent pace and Alps worked for several more hours in the heat. Alps looked up at the ceiling of his little room in the heat and the scent of burning.

"I trust that you will be watchful, Nidaja... But I know that someone else is watching too, and if he seems like he will harm us or stop us... You may never know what happened to him." He sighed.

Alps watched the fire flicker for a while in the belly of the boat, always mystified by how fire glowed the way it did. He was left alone with his thoughts for a bit as he considered what Nidaja had told him. He did not want to feel distrusting. He did not want to suspect that everyone he met would harm him. He was a good person. At least, he felt he was. That should count for

something. But then again, perhaps he was too trusting, and at the very least needed his friends to protect him from his trusting nature if he got too relaxed. He didn't know that he could ever be as guarded as Nidaja was.

"Make no mistake." Ellis' voice startled Alps, as it always did. Nidaja had been right; she was here on the ship after all. "I don't just randomly kill the people you come in contact with." Alps narrowed his eyes.

"No? It's just a coincidence that the people opposing us end up buried?" He was still very angry with Ellis, how could he not be? Killing didn't seem to bother her at all; she didn't seem to care at all for a light-handed and subtle approach to their problems. She moved closer to him, eyes seeming almost to gleam in the dimness of the room.

"Your attempts to keep your hands clean are futile in this." She said quietly, calmly. "You cannot hesitate when your companions may be endangered. They rely on you to be stronger than you have been and you cannot leave their lives to chance. You must fight and you must survive."

Alps felt his anger rising. All she seemed to do was lecture him after doing something he didn't approve of. His fingers tightened around the shovel as he added more black-stone to the fire, gritting his teeth, silently fuming a moment. He finally spoke again.

"Can you at least consult me before you kill someone?" This request seemed reasonable at least, if the mark of his passage was going to be killings he was not responsible for. The fox crossed her arms.

"Would you have given me permission to kill Chana? Would you have given me permission to kill Enna, even while you were awaiting your own execution?" Alps didn't think much before he answered that.

"No." He replied solidly, gritting his teeth a little.

"Then why would I consult with you?"

"Because I told you to." he said defiantly. "Because this journey is hard enough without knowing that you are leaving slaughtered Amanian bodies rotting in the sun in our wake!" His voice rose as he said this, fairly shouting at that last part.

The fox just stared at him, her face stern. She seemed to be studying him. "Do not presume to give me orders my boy, and do not attempt to meddle in *my* duties."

"And what *is* your duty? What are you even trying to do!? You are making me into a pariah! When all this is done I want people to generally find strength and joy in what I have done, not fear my continued wrath!" he barked, losing control for just a moment. "If you're so capable and so skilled, why haven't you just taken care of everything already instead of playing on my sympathies?"

Ellis scowled. There it was again, that look of sharp disappointment in her eyes. He didn't understand why it bothered him so much to see it, but he felt almost as bad as he might if Nita or Luna wore it instead. She spoke in a darker tone.

"You are caught up in a grand scheme, Aris, and you are poised to play a pivotal role, everyone here is, and you know it. To believe that what you need to do could be done without bloodshed is... foolish at best. Consider your queen and the army her general commands. Would you have them march weaponless, armed with good intentions and the trust of others?"

"I would not have them march at all if there were any other way." He replied tersely. "That's how we are different. I would do what I could to find another way. I have seen enough suffering without sending people needlessly to die." He turned his back to shovel more black-stone and immediately regretted having said it. It practically insulted what Nita and Nidaja were forced to do all the time. The fox spoke again, her voice pure and clear, but certainly not soothing.

"Your innocence is endearing, but your naivety will be fatal. Heed your general. Be vigilant. Be strong. Wake up, Aris." She said, turning away from him.

"Stop being so vague!" he said, frustrated. "I need you to..." He turned to face her only to find out that she was gone. Of course she was. Standing at the doorway was Lyat, already shirtless with his spots looking like soot from the black-stone. He seemed more than happy to be there despite giving Alps a curious look at his mis-aimed statement. He nodded.

"Asuna is intending to be giving wolf a break. Wolf is showing Lyat how now." His voice was deep but gentle. Alps sighed.

"Yes, of course..." He spent some time showing Lyat just that. The Asuna had a little more trouble learning the basics, but it was mostly because of a language barrier. He managed to finally get it across, but knew he would want to check up on him from time to time so he could make sure that he was not forgetting anything. It was not hard, but it was even more out of Lyat's element than his own.

After getting the Asuna started and observing him for a good half hour, he wandered back upstairs, finding Nita and Nidaja and Luna in the galley.

“Well, this is a torturous sight.” Nita said softly.

“I’ve worked harder than this before. I’m fine.” Alps explained.

“You misunderstand the kind of torture.” Luna stated with a grin.

“Oh?” Alps took a seat at the table.

“You look rugged and handsome and so deliciously hard-working...” Nita leaned in and kissed her lover. The ship was drifting to a halt.

“We are stopping?” Alps asked.

“It will be dawn soon. The Asuna will act as our scouts and lookouts with Lira, and Mytan will sleep. I have asked for his audience here as soon as Reika gets the moorings done. We will stay in a sheltered part of this river with clear view north and south for the morning and leave again late afternoon.” Nita stated.

“We are going to tell him who we are?” asked the shirtless servant.

“Yes.” Nidaja rumbled. “We are far enough from town, and I should be able to judge by his reaction his feelings on travelling with us.”

“What about Luna?” Alps asked. He nodded to her.

“She is what we feel will guarantee his continued... support.” Nita stated, making the priestess grin. Alps rubbed his ear a bit as he considered this. He did not want to get more people involved. This was a case where they had no choice but to get someone heavily involved, and they needed to be able to move freely at least while on the boat, as it would be their refuge for a while. Nita shared her wine with Alps and gave him some fine cheese and bread that was already on the boat. The Silverlight were living lavishly off the blood and sweat of the town of Luca, and maybe others. The former slave was not really tired from the hard work, he was tired because he had not slept the previous night or the current night, so getting to stop work, and relax with his love, that was something hard for his body to ignore. He almost dozed off against Nita before Mytan wandered down into the galley.

“I could keep going a bit longer if you need me too, but I think this is a good place to rest.” He said as he cleared the door. Nita and Nidaja both looked up to him with a casual expression. He froze. Mytan was not even breathing.

“Have a seat. We need to talk.” Nita stated calmly. He did not move.

“Mytan Shuraza.” Nidaja commanded clearly. “Sit down with us.” He was not moving. Alps folded his ears back.

“You are not in trouble. We need your help.” Alps spoke up finally, realizing what the emerald Aமான might be thinking, seeing the queen there on a boat that he had piloted for a group of traitors and murderers. Of course all of them had died quickly in the courtyard if the queen herself was involved. Now this guard would have to answer for it. He shook his head, and gasped, as if just realizing he had stopped breathing.

“I swear, I did not know what they were doing.” The ship’s temporary pilot walked shakily over to the table but could not bring himself to sit right there between the queen and general. “We understood from royal decree that we were in cooperation with the Silverlight... Then Enna came with a decree from Nita Razelle. You didn’t really send Enna did you?” He looked to the queen. She shook her head.

“I did not. She was planted by the Silverlight. Some within that group appear to be cooperating with someone outside of it, possibly even the dark one himself to make an arrangement similar to what the Asuna have... slavery to the dark one in exchange for not being wiped off the map completely.” Mytan looked horrified. “The Sons of Sorrow.” He lowered his head. “Had I known who you were, I would have told you about it sooner.” He seemed fearful that he might still have to face repercussions for his actions. Nidaja spoke up, a little louder.

“Stop worrying, Mytan. Whatever you feel you might have done wrong before now can be corrected by the help you are giving us. We cannot tell you what we are doing, but you will be in charge of getting us to Lake Frostpelt. But for us to travel effectively, we cannot hide from you who we are. You have to know so we can act freely on the boat, and fight freely if we have to. You are hereby sworn to complete secrecy about all that you see or hear while in our company.” Mytan nodded emphatically.

“On my family’s honor and to the death, you have my word.” He nodded at that.

“It will need to be longer than to your death.” Luna stated.

“I can’t tell anyone anything after I am dead.” He stated this with some level of distress.

“Swear it.” Luna stated coldly.

“I swear.” He nodded. “So then... Who are you?” he asked. He shook his head at that. “No... I mean, I know who you and the general are, of course, but the rest of them... Why you travel with the Asuna, all that...” The emerald

Amanian leaned forward to listen. "I know who Lira is... The forest Spirit... She's helped my family in a couple of expeditions, but the rest..."

"Well, obviously..." Nita spoke up, "I am Queen Razelle. This is Nidaja Razelle, so we are being completely open about it, no assumptions. This..." she indicated Alps. "Is Alps, he is my chosen life mate." Shuraza looked suddenly horrified, his violet eyes going round.

"You didn't know before you had me working, and I'd have done it anyway. It needs to be done, and we are on this journey together. The queen herself would shovel black-stone for this mission." Alps stated this flatly. This did not really seem to comfort Mytan very much, but he looked back to Nita.

"Right, no worries about that. He grew up as a slave in the town that is now your home." She had such an adoring tone when she spoke of him that Mytan surely could not deny what Alps was now.

"He grew up a slave, but that's certainly not what he ever was." Luna chimed in this time, seeming pretty stern about it. She was not happy that Alps had lived in such a way, and made it well known. She looked over to Nita, who nodded to her.

"And who are you?" asked the uneasy Mytan.

"This will be easier to show you rather than tell you." Luna stated. She stood up, held out her hand and murmured, "Istamir Letai Hurista Perenistatireldastah Luna..." And with that, white ribbons of light erupted around the priestess and swirled as if captured in underwater currents, winding their way to a suddenly paralyzed Mytan. They stroked his cheeks and chest, and he arched, as if in mind-numbing pleasure, mouth agape. Her eyes, violent and green, glowed brightly. "There can be no mistake in what you feel and see. Know this, and know why your secret must be kept beyond the grave, if need be Mytan. You are, for a time, involved in something that the Shuraza have likely dreamed of for generations." The ribbons withdrew and faded away, leaving the emerald Amanian male slumped back in his chair, shaking. Nita spoke again, delicately.

"The Asuna are representatives of their empire, sent by Rios Dominis to help protect us on this dangerous journey, a show of peace that will be a lasting alignment once this is done. They... They..." Mytan was staring directly forward, unblinking, slow shallow breaths.

"I guess Lira was right about him. He seems a little shocked." Nidaja spoke softly. A tear rolled down the unblinking, unspeaking Mytan's cheek. Luna looked over to the others gathered and murmured soothingly,

“Perhaps you can leave him with me. I think I need to give him a little bit of time to ... get his head around this. I had not really realized that the Letai were held in this high regard by anyone so long after we failed to save Hurosmir from the dark one.” She moved into a chair right by Mytan. “Can you hear me?” the white lady wolf asked.

“Alps... Come... You need to rest. It’s been a hard few days.” Nita took her lover’s hand. Alps nodded as he watched his mother lean in and touch her muzzle to the paralyzed Mytan. Alps gritted his teeth. She wouldn’t.

“I am going to head to bed myself, I get the next watch shift when Reika and Lyat are done. I will make sure that Lyat’s not still down there shoveling black-stone. Mytan was supposed to take care of that, but he’s a little out of it. Luna...”

“Mmhh?” she murmured sweetly, running her cool nose-pad on the still unmoving Mytan’s ear.

“Yeah, get him to relax a bit. We will see you when we get up.” With that Alps was led from the room. Surely his mother would not be thinking of just being intimate with the helpless member of the Shuraza family. That had to be ethically wrong somehow, even though his understanding of how the Shuraza clan felt about the Letai would suggest he’d like that. He has a special someone, right? Was Luna considering what? What was she really going to do? Alps suddenly wanted to stay, but Nita was pretty insistent that he sleep. It had been a long and hard few days. It was time to rest. He allowed himself to be led to the Queen’s bed for the first time in a very long time.