

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 16

Leal held a plump, dripping melon half in each hand. 'Pish!' went the melon as his jaws clamped on it, rind and all. His hunger was pretty obvious, but that, paired with the divine flavor of this fruit were far too much for him to keep his composure. Others were eating too, and none that much more reserved. It had been Neit who brought the fruit back to the small makeshift camp where they had been resting through the afternoon and overnight. For the most part they had slept after enjoying plentiful water, but now, their minds clear from the horrors of their uncertain journey, they were all very much back into the spirit of tending to their immediate needs. Ceriss was eating the most casually, but she had seemingly spent most of her life about to die, so she appeared to be the least affected by the harrowing experience. Kaji sat hip to hip with her, perhaps waiting for his chance to cash in on her promise, though he was not teasing her about it so verbally. He at least seemed to know when it might be seen as an annoyance. His vulpine crewmate Neph consumed melon just as frantically as Leal, sitting close with his now close friend Neit. She was not much bigger than him, so they were actually kind of charming together. Lunaris sat alone, one gutted melon-half filled with water from a nearby stream. He was done eating, he merely sipped contentedly at sweetened fresh stream water.

The shade of the tall tropical trees kept the heat from being unbearable, and the close proximity to the beach gave a comfortable breeze that ruffled their fur and made this day of continued survival in an unknown land more like a vacation. It was Ceriss who ultimately broke the serenity.

"I am pretty certain now that we are on a shore opposite of the Amanian homeland you all know so well. I would like to clarify that while some Letai left to come to these lands in times past, we did not have any of them return." There was a chill up Leal's spine as she said this. Why would she ruin the moment with such a claim?

"What could stop Letai from returning?" asked Neit fearfully, speaking the worry that kindled in everyone's heart.

"One of two things and one answer is cause for some hope." Ceriss stood up, pulling her robes a little tighter. Leal watched her reverently. She seemed a

little less dark once survival seemed like a thing, even though she was on borrowed time due to her past abuse of the essence.

“Don’t go keepin’ us in suspense.” Kaji rumbled.

“First, obviously, they might not have made it, or things here were harder than things there and they lost their lives. Late in the war, about sixty or seventy Letai left for the sea. It was hoped that they could start a colony, and come back for the rest once it was found to be fruitful. Losing seventy at once who did not come back... was not good for the efforts back home.”

“What do y’ think happened t’ them?” asked Kaji.

“Well, the first option is what we assumed.” Ceriss paced a bit. “But this place... does not seem like they would have had much trouble surviving, so maybe they never made it, just as we nearly did not.” She rubbed the back of her head.

“We had a little different reason for nearly dying on this trip.” It was Lunaris who replied. Ceriss nodded at that as she stroked Leal’s ears tenderly.

“The other possibility... is that they got involved with something here and could not return.” She seemed a little more doubtful of that. “I think after 700 years though, at least one would have returned, a descendant or something. So I still assume the prior. The Letai would have stayed here if they were needed and could help, that is a duty we are bound to, but I doubt that duty would have lasted for centuries.” She leaned back against a tree.

“Well, we are here, we survived, do you think we could return home?” asked Neit. Kaji answered.

“If we got a boat, even Neph could stock it with food and head back until we hit the opposite shore.” Ceriss crossed her arms.

“There is one other distinct possibility...” The survivors all looked at her.

“And that is?” Leal asked.

“Maybe sailing won’t ever get you back. What if the lack of wind through most of our journey was not an effect of the crystal?” Kaji grunted.

“That... would certainly make sense as t’ why no one comes back. Getting stuck in a pocket with no wind would be fatal to a journey. Hit some doldrums when I was south-coast bound once. Thought I were dead that week, I tell ye.” Neit crossed her arms as well.

“Would you be able to get us back the same way we got here?” she asked. Ceriss shrugged a bit.

“A little raft is one thing - I was able to move that. I can’t do a large ship, and we’d need something with better shelter, more food-stocks, and lots of fresh water, since we might not have the fog conveniently providing that. I assure you that our skills alone were not responsible for our survival to this point. A lot of luck was involved.” Neph stood up and shook some of the sticky melon off his hands.

“Well, I din think we’d make it, but here we be. We at least are havin’ time to think of a way now. So what do we do now that our bellies are bein’ full?” His huge ears twitched quizzically. Leal stood, Lunar is following. Ceriss found herself inadvertently in a leading role. She deferred immediately.

“Lunar is?” she asked. The general seemed thoughtful. Leal was actually a bit impressed. Ceriss was looked upon as the one with the most power, and she’d saved them already more times than he wanted to think but she still knew her part in this new world. Nita did not appoint Ceriss to a position of power; she was to take the orders of the crown which, in this situation, could only be given by Lunar is. He was the highest ranking officer available. The dark-furred general finally answered.

“Let’s find high ground first, and get a view of what’s around us. If there’s some kind of settlement and the people seem not to be the warlike types it might help us to find out what the locals know about this land. If it’s all wilderness, that will make things harder, but the availability of food and water certainly do not suggest that this place is not hospitable. However, we will need to try not to frighten them. They are likely not going to be like us, they might not know the problems we have in our land, and we should strive not to let our problems become theirs. That’s not a very friendly thing to do.” Leal looked over to Ceriss. Her dark fur crackled around her for a bit as she looked back. She sighed softly.

“Alright, fine.” Her form shifted slightly, a hard thing for everyone’s eyes to really follow. When it was done, she looked a little like Luna, solid white fur gleaming. Her hair was longer, however, and both of her eyes were violet. This was the form of Ceriss that Leal had been one of the few lucky ones to see. What she likely looked like before her abuse of the essence damaged her. “Better?” she asked.

“Oh yes...” Kaji growled. “This is quite nice.”

“That will help, yes.” Lunar is stated. “Now, the trees here are too dense for us to try to even find the direction of high ground, so...” He seemed to think a bit more.

"I can help with that." Neit stated, and she shot up a tree with a level of assurance that seemed to suggest that trees were a favorite mode of transit for the former thief. She had chosen a properly tall one, so it took a little while for her to get to the top, even so, but the use of acrobatics made her journey to the top seem particularly dangerous and yet entirely effortless. Leal held his breath at times as she seemed to just recklessly cast herself from one branch to another. Finally, she reached the top of the tree.

"Shows off a bit, that one..." Kaji murmured softly.

"It's useful." Ceriss replied.

"It's sexy." Neph claimed. Kaji rolled his eyes.

"Got you hooked, don't she?" he asked. Neph grinned. Neit's voice chimed from on top of the trees.

"We're not alone!" Leal's heart sped up. He had half expected to find out it was a large deserted island and that they would be dealing with their problem by themselves. A very new and potentially dangerous dynamic was present when it was found that there were others here.

"What can you tell us about them?" asked Lunar is loudly.

"They have a village about ... eight miles south of here. We came in pretty close, and it's the closest thing I can see, but there are mountains pretty close due west. If there are other settlements, I bet they are there. We are in something of a valley, so the one village is all I can see, but if this is an island, it's pretty big." Leal listened apprehensively. He called up to Neit.

"What's the village like?" he asked. There was a pause.

"It's a village. It's got houses and stuff. And a dock, but I don't see any boats. There's forest around it, so I can't see into it, just mostly white rooftops, what are you specifically asking about?" she barked down again.

"Is there a *wall*?" asked Lunar is before Leal could ask that important question. Walls were a good indication of the mental state of the society, and the danger inherent outside of it.

"I can't tell but I don't think so!" Neit called. "The trees leading to it are really thick!"

"Don't look at the trees, look at the beach; can you see the beach in front of the village close to the dock?" Lunar is called again. Neph perked his ears

too. Kaji seemed to nod with everything said, committing to memory the details of the situation. Neit answered right way,

“Yes, I see the beach, It doesn’t look like there’s defense on the beach. It’s too far to see if there are people.” She shouted from atop her tree. She hopped down branch after branch and finally came down with a chuff onto the forest floor. Neph hugged her in greeting which she happily accepted. Leal looked to Lunariss with expectation. He seemed to be thinking heavily.

“What are we doing from here, General?” asked Ceriss.

“There is a lot of risk involved. I am trying to figure out if we should allow a scout to learn more before we reveal we are here. We have no friends here, and no safe places that we know to run. Just running straight to the village and saying hello might be what the Letai did long ago.” Ceriss sighed softly.

“Yeah, that sure sounds like them.” She noted.

“But if even one of use shows up, if we are so different from the people there, we might suffer the same fate regardless.” Neit proclaimed this with some exasperation.

“How close do you need to see someone to mimic them?” asked Lunariss, looking to Ceriss.

“If they are not even lupine, I imagine I would have a hard time pulling it off, and that takes quite a bit of essence. I would not be able to maintain it long.” Lunariss frowned. “Then I cannot risk the most powerful of us to that mission. It needs to be someone who would appear non-threatening and could get information without seeming like they would cause harm to the village.” The general crossed his arms in thought.

“Crap.” The word blurted out came from Neph.

“Well, you don’t appear very threatening.” Kaji clarified.

“This in’t what I signed up fer. I could die th’ second someone sees me. This en’t my best idea.” Leal rubbed his muzzle a bit.

“It seems the best possible answer on these lines. And you are quick enough. How about if we have you meet with someone outside the village to gauge their reaction, and if they seem hostile or too frightened, we get you out of there? Ceriss can stay nearby, disguised as part of the terrain for that, yes?” He looked at the Letai priestess. He had seen her pretend to be a statue, so he knew that she could make herself appear like pretty much anything. The priestess spoke up finally.

"I could do that, but we must approach the village carefully. Getting caught and attacked is bad, but harming an innocent in the process would be irreparably worse. We are about to become possibly the first envoys to the kingdom of Amani. We have to try to make this as amicable as we possibly can. Promise that we will avoid conflict." She said this to Lunariss, who she perhaps felt might have a more military angle on dealing with this new land. He nodded to that, seeming to understand.

"It will do none of us any good to immediately start making enemies here." He stated calmly. At his leave, the group headed back down to the beach, and followed it along the tree line to stay out of the more dense forest and make better time. The walk was mostly quiet, as the knowledge that they were not alone made the group a little more cautious about being loud. They were not trying to sneak exactly; they were just not trying to attract attention. Lunariss had felt it might attract just as much attention if they really were sneaking, so they decided to just travel more or less without speaking. Neit and Neph talked a little, seeming to just like relying on one another to bolster their strength and their bravery. There was a short pause in their journey when Kaji found a very, very large tooth of some kind that had washed up on the shore. He picked it up and declared it the first new item for his ship's treasure when the queen bought him a new boat. He seemed pretty sure that would be his reward, and this had encouraged him a bit since breakfast. The tooth was nearly as long as his forearm, so he tucked it in his belt. This would fetch a good price back home.

It was after noon before they got to an inward curve of the beach where they were just able to see the town about half a mile away. They pushed into the trees a bit to make themselves less visible. Leal looked with some worry to Kaji, and then to Neph, before nodding. Kaji had to prod Neph forward, toward the village, as the rest of the party hunkered down a little in the trees. Ceriss followed behind a little more quietly, and a pretty fair distance back. Neph took careful steps, trying not to make much noise and then circled back, heading right for Ceriss fearfully. Ceriss lowered herself tight to the ground, whispering out softly.

"What's wrong?" Neph flattened his ears.

"There's a *road* there." He seemed positively petrified.

"Oh no a road we are doomed." Ceriss narrowed her eyes at the small fox as she said this.

"Please don't tease. What if they are huge? What if they have those teeth like what Kaji found?" his voice was a little squeaky. Ceriss sighed.

“Those things with giant teeth can only kill you. I don’t have to stop there.” She growled. Neph squeaked, and turned around rather automatically. He stumbled back toward the mentioned road. The dark Letai Priestess was definitely a scary thing to have to contend with, and he knew that her power was not mere boasting. He took his chances with the unknown, striding purposefully out of the trees and onto the road. It was very neat and clean and orderly, a carefully built cobblestone street under the heavy canopy. It was strange to see such a nice road in a place that seemed so wild. How did it stay clean and packed and worn smooth near such a small village? Neph looked back to the forest, uncertain if Ceriss was even still following. He doubted that she would just let him go on his own very far, she needed to make sure that the first meeting was at least peaceful. He moved on the road toward the village. He could not hear Ceriss following, so he accepted the possibility that she would be pretty far behind and he’d be completely full of teeth before she could get to him. At least someone would know what happened to him ultimately. That gave some comfort. Not much.

As he rounded a curve on the road, he got several answers at once. The first was what the people looked like. She actually did not look terribly different from him. The slender, taller female had much longer, narrower ears, and her eyes were almond-shaped, large and expressive. She did not notice the Lhap right away, the rabbit-like female answering the other question by sweeping leaves and branches off the road with a long, wide broom of some kind. She was dusty brown in color with doe-like brown eyes, ears tall and perked, feet bare but body adorned in shimmering silky fabric which cascaded along her arms and wrapped around her hips. There were soft chimes of tiny bits of glittering silver metal along the hem of her skirt down to her shins and her wide sleeves, shoulders bare, chest wrapped in the same fabric as the skirt. She wore a thick silver and light blue gemstone necklace which seemed somewhat tribal in design, but her clothing was elegant and delicate. She wore two broad feathers clasped to her right ear with a gold sun-shaped coin-like accessory.

“Hello.” Neph gritted his teeth as his own voice came from behind him, in the bushes. Ceriss had given away the fact that he was standing there. The rabbit looked up, seeming unafraid at first, not at all startled that someone else could be on the road. Was it so peaceful here that they did not worry about bandits either? When she saw the fox, she smiled, and spoke softly, not in common, but in Neph’s own native tongue from his islands far south of Diera along the coast of Amani.

“You are a week late for the festival, silly, what brings you this far north?” She did not seem afraid or angry or any of the other deadly things that Neph was preparing for. He rubbed one of his ears. Were Lhap settled across the sea? His islands were sparsely populated, but there were stories of them being settled from other places, so perhaps his bloodline really came from these lands. Maybe everything here had big ears.

"I am a bit more lost than ye' suspect." He offered in common. She tilted her head a bit, seeming not to understand him. He repeated it in his native tongue, clarifying that she didn't speak common. She gasped and rubbed her chin. She stated in a soft, velvet tone,

"You are not coming from Lhap. You speak a strange language. You do not come for the festival. Why are you here? Are you in trouble?" There was a sense of worry and caring in her voice. It did not seem to be worry for herself, however. It was the sound of someone who genuinely wanted to help. This was encouraging to Neph, so he moved closer.

"I have washed ashore here. I am not even sure where here is." He offered in his tongue for her to understand.

"Are you from farther away than Lhap? Are you from Val-Rasha?" she asked with a little hint of fear. The fox did not know exactly how to respond. He did not know where that was, and if that was what she called his homeland, not knowing what his word for it was he did not want to lie about it.

"I am not sure what Val-Rasha is." The fox approached the slender, rather pretty lapine female. She approached as well. The broom she had could be used as a weapon if she needed to, but she was not holding it like one.

"It's a place far south of here. It's got a big sea and an island in the middle, and the people there are very strange and keep to themselves mostly, but most of us know they are also extremely dangerous if you do something bad in their lands. So, we tend to be a little more wary of those coming from there. Which direction did you come from?" she asked.

"East." He stated, pointing at the ocean. "From over the sea, we think."

"We?" asked the lapine with a bit more concern. The vulpine cursed himself as he gritted his teeth. How incredibly stupid he was! He rubbed the back of his head. How was he supposed to proceed now? She seemed harmless enough, but he didn't know if she was like the rest. The fox heard rustling from behind him, and turned around to see... a very beautiful white-furred Lhap fox female. Ceriss had switched forms into something that would have been familiar to the rabbit from how she was treating Neph. The fox was impressed beyond words. He let the priestess talk, her ears perhaps overdone, larger than normal even for a Lhap, which only made her more beautiful to Neph.

"Sorry, I got caught up in the trees back there, love, I... oh..." She bowed to the rabbit. "Sorry, I did not realize someone was here." Ceriss spoke Lhap, which was another surprise to the vulpine as well. The other surprise was that Ceriss made an incredibly attractive Lhap. Her long hair was bound behind her,

almost to her very fluffy tail, her thick, huge ears sleek and perfect, her eyes remained violet. She seemed to have to have used a lot of her ability to shift her form just in making her ears look the way they did, so changing her color was too hard with the short amount of time that she used.

“Hello there! I’ve never seen a white Lhap, you folks are from a different place, huh?” The brown lapine female moved over to the two foxes, her little dewdrop tail fluttering a little with nervous excitement. Fortunately, she did not seem afraid.

“We come from Amani, an island there called Diera.” Ceriss wanted to be truthful at least to that, even if disguising her form. “Do you know that place?” she asked. The rabbit shook her head.

“I do not.” She spoke somewhat sadly, perhaps realizing she would not be of much help.

“Is there anyone who might know? We are not... likely to be able to get back home otherwise.” Ceriss seemed to be close to tears. It was an act and the real fox knew it.

“I... I think our magistrate might know.” She pulled at her silver necklace a little. The lapine turned, facing the town, her little bells jingling. “I can take you there, but please take care to be polite. Our town is pretty traditional. Outsiders can’t make demands or be rude, you will get pushed right back out onto the street.” Neph was actually relieved by that. His bigger worry was that the sight of them would get a spear in their throat. Just being run out of town was not as bad a fate.

“We can be polite, I assure you.” Neph spoke. In his homeland the males were equal to the females, so he did not wish to betray that notion by constantly deferring to Ceriss. “I’m Neph, and this is Ceriss.” The rabbit bowed back, seeming to share or at least quickly pick up that custom. She spoke up softly,

“I’m Vernicia.” She began to move over to the town. Neph thought to himself quietly as he listened to the birds calling loudly in the trees which were ruffled high above them, the heat not dissipated as well by his large ears because of the lack of wind in the forest. The land they were in seemed peaceful enough, given the lack of walls, the kindness to strangers, and the willingness to help. Would the Letai have simply stayed in this place because of the lack of war? How long had this peace been here? Or was it just that the people were strong enough that they had very little to fear? It was not long before they got to the town to find that it was very much alive and rather busy.

There were tracts of land to the north of town where rows of trees with the fruit they had been eating were cultivated and growing, and a very green kind of

sectioned reed-like plant, similar to bamboo was growing in the specific form of barriers, carefully bent and twisted and wrapped to form the walls of buildings, and even the form of the roof-tops with white stone panels which curved upward in cathedral-like fashion. It was designed to send the water off the top of the seemingly living houses as fast as possible. The walls were divided outward, spreading, then dipping back in so that windows were formed like long oval ports covered by glass and sealed with some kind of likewise glassy substance. The doors were created by simply leaving a section in the wall, and then topping usually with wood or stone, and there was always writing in this section, perhaps giving some idea of who lived there, or what kind of shop it was

There were little trenches dug around each home lined with stones which held water that had perhaps run down as rain. This seemed to keep the plants that the houses were made out of strong. A few of the houses were lined along the walls up to a certain height with carved and patterned stone, but the effect was more visual than practical. These changes were just for decoration to make the homes which were otherwise all fairly green into more original designs, and give them some distinction. Bent into their proper shapes, the actual canopies of these plants were formed into covered walkways, hanging gardens, and other features around the town. It seemed like the strange oversized reed-like plants were used for almost everything that was built, but there was extensive stonework and metalwork used for enough that it was obvious that these practices were not lacking for this society.

Everyone wore the same delicate, shimmering fabrics in a wide variety of colors. It seemed far more festive than the typical colors used in Amani, but the styles were almost provocative for the females, while the larger, stronger-looking male lapines wore a bit more covering outfits, shirts and long pants, but no one wore shoes. Their large feet seemed happiest bare. Neph had never seen such a paradise of a town as this appeared to be. The entire town smelled of fruit and incense, herbs from the herb garden and a clean ocean breeze.

"Your town is beautiful." Ceriss had no trouble stating what Neph deeply felt. "I think I have never seen a place that compares. You live here so I don't know if you ever stop noticing, but you should all be proud of the home you've made for yourself here." The rabbit turned around, walking backward, smiling brightly.

"It would please the magistrate that you notice! Our town is small, but we take care of it. We've been here for six generations, right on the ocean. The weather has been kind, and the jungle has been generous." Ceriss looked around with obvious amazement. Was she thinking what Neph was? If the Letai came here... what would they have gone back for? Why would they have ever considered returning on the off chance that they could not come back here?

“Have you ever had other visitors from where we came from?” Ceriss asked. Neph felt a little thrill as he realized that he was on the same level of thinking as she was.

“We have our emissaries go over the sea occasionally to those places, but that’s not my area of knowledge. We are not in open dealings across the sea. It’s a hard place with wastelands, they tell us, and we don’t need to expand in that direction.” Ceriss gave a nervous glance to Neph. The question had been reversed. She had not answered, only stated that they sent people of their own across the sea. The lands east over the sea were called wastelands? Well, they certainly did not yield the kind of fertility this place did, but it was hardly a wasteland. Perhaps the emissaries were too far south or north, and had not seen Amani before? That was hard to believe though. It was populated, even if sparsely, across almost all the available shoreline on that continent. Neph looked over to the girl and shrugged.

“It’s not really a wasteland where we are from at least. But I can assure you it’s not like this.” He motioned toward all the sights they were seeing. He felt bad that his new friends were just hanging out in the forest, waiting when confronted with this splendor. He was certain there was some kind of dark secret waiting around the corner. As they rounded the corner there was, instead, a central stone fire pit filled with glowing embers and a metal screen upon it. On top of this they found lots of different kinds of food cooking, predominantly vegetables, but a few kinds of grilled fruit as well. They did not seem to have much of a liking for meat based on what was cooking, but the grilled roots were seasoned with brine of some kind, and sweetened to a degree that made the scent alluring even to the fox.

“Help yourself, I will go and find the magistrate.” The lady lapine said, nodding toward the grilling food. There were a few people cooking, but it was not evident who really owned the food. Then, the realization hit Neph that they *all* owned it. This was the very opposite of a dark secret. No one seemed to want for necessities here. Ceriss did not need to be told twice. She wanted to try a little of about everything. Some of it she didn’t care for, but most of it was delicious even for a wolf. There were a few very spicy things that Neph liked. They took a broad leaf that they put their selections on and sat on a low wall that circled the center of town that everyone seemed to like to park themselves on when not busily helping with about everything in town.

“What d’ ye think?” Neph asked Ceriss. “Ya have an eye fer things like danger and conflict. What do ye think?” he asked. Ceriss looked around, her massive ears lying flat.

“They are utterly at peace.” She said this somewhat anxiously.

“Why does that seem t’ bother yeh?” he asked.

“Only two things cause this level of harmony.” The tone of her voice made her seem very wise. How old was Ceriss really? Neph had no idea what her real form even was.

“Those are?” he asked. She seemed to know a lot of things about how the world worked, of that he was certain. He was secretly glad he ended up having her with him. He was sure he would have found some way to foul things up here. The priestess answered very softly, keenly aware of how much larger ears could hear now that she had them.

“The first way this can happen is if there were just a pure and sincere culture of peace, where unkindness, greed, avarice, and those sorts of things are unthinkable crimes. That’s a lifestream society.” She nodded to those helping themselves to food, and a few others bringing food from their gardens. “Everyone helps everyone and no one thinks there’s any other way. It’s ingrained from birth. Why struggle when cooperation and peace are easier and leave you more time for pleasurable pursuits? Everyone works, no one tries to take advantage, and everyone at least has some measure of happiness even if there is very rarely a real level of decadence. Opulence is determined by how you see yourself, not how much you gain, and the only way to see yourself as better is for you to be more useful and more valuable. Everyone works hard and strives for that level of respect in their village. The worst thing that can happen to you is to be banished, unwanted or unneeded.” Neph widened his eyes.

“That sounds absolutely wonderful. It... It pains me that things are neh like tha’ back at home.” He looked at Ceriss. “Is that how the Letai was, way back?” he asked.

“No.” Ceriss said flatly. “We’d have liked to be, but in all honestly, we were too meddlesome, and needed to be involved in other people’s problems all the time to keep the tenuous peace where we lived. If we lived alone and no one had ever experienced real suffering... Maybe we could have one day had that, but it was never like that for us. Our duty was to ease suffering, so that was perhaps never to be our world. We needed others to take care of, and those who fought, killed, suffered and hated needed us the most. That makes this kind of life well out of our reach.” The fox gritted his teeth. Ceriss was pretty harsh on the reality of her people but her honesty impressed him.

“So, what’s th’ other possible reason fer this paradise?” Neph whispered softly. Ceriss lowered her head, ears flattening more as if trying to hide behind them.

“Heavy, heavy tyranny.” The words echoed in Neph’s head.

"This dunnah look like oppression, Ceriss." The vulpine looked about, his own slightly smaller ears flattening.

"That's the thing, Neph..." Ceriss whispered softly to the young Lhap. "Tyranny and paradise look, on the surface the same. If you make a mistake in paradise, you are forgiven, taught better, and held closer. If tyranny is the cause, you are cast out, no one wants anything to do with a disruption of their carefully placed order. It looks beautiful but can get really ugly really quick." Neph remembered what the girl said about being polite or one can be thrown out. Were there hundreds of laws and customs that could place them in danger if they unwittingly broke them?

"Which does this look like t' ye'?" asked the real fox.

"I can't tell yet, but what I can tell you... is that there are essence-users among them, and that means that some of them can see the essence. I might not be able to hide my power from them." Neph gasped slightly.

"They might know yer nerry a fox?" he asked.

"No, I can hide my form, but I can't hide my power if I am keeping this form. They will know that I'm a powerful essence user. More powerful than normal for this place from what I've seen. That might make us seem like a threat." She seemed genuinely worried.

"How much of a difference is there? Is it tha' noticeable?" Neph asked.

"A glass of water versus a fountain." Ceriss was very blunt.

"It's nice to see a fox or two here off season." The soft words took them both off guard, and they visibly flinched. Neph looked up. There was a bent old male rabbit leaning on a gnarled cane looking up at them. He was so old that he was actually shorter than the vulpine pair, as stooped as he was.

"Hello there." Neph spoke first in Lhap. Ceriss added to it.

"We had not intended to be here, but we certainly do not regret the hospitality we have found. We do not wish to be a burden. We merely seek information on the best way for us to return home." There was a measured gaze from the old lapine staring at the white fox, his ears folded back as if they were just too tired to be up any more.

"It is my understanding that you come from the east, across the sea." The old rabbit had already been told that much, it seemed.

“This is true.” Ceriss stated. “It’s a long journey and we were displaced by a storm. We’ve never been here before.

“You may never be able to leave.” The rabbit seemed pretty sure of that. “Travel across the sea is very, very treacherous. Only a few seem to be able to make it there and back, and they don’t have the best things to say about the lands beyond. If you wish to make the journey, you would not be able to do it alone.” There was a pause from Ceriss. Neph inwardly groaned. He knew it. They would be trapped, prisoners either of the natives, or of the location itself.

“The wind and currents do not easily allow passage, huh?” asked Ceriss. The old rabbit nodded.

“Indeed. It’s a fool’s errand to go when worse awaits you there than you have here.” That seemed to strike a chord with the priestess. She sighed softly and took another bite of food. It was too delicious not to eat even in a funk.

“So, do you think anyone knows a way that was possible? I am sure some must have made it to bring back unfortunate stories. Even if we get into a wasteland territory far from home, at least we would be over the ocean.” She seemed to want some encouragement. Neph wanted to encourage her, but simply knew no way to do so.

“It is possible, there’s a fellow in the valley who says he can do it, but he’s a bit odd, I don’t think you will want any part of that one.” The older lapine suggested, rubbing one of his ears backward. Ceriss perked up.

“Is it hard to get to where he is from here?” she asked.

“It’s not exactly safe, but I imagine a spry couple of foxes could do it, sure.” He stated. Ceriss stood up, wagging her tail a bit, and the elderly fellow before them held his hands crossed before him, gazing at the beautiful fox. At least, that’s what it looked like, and Neph sure could not keep his eyes off of her. She was stunning. However, the pair just stared at each other, and Ceriss’ expression hardened.

“What makes the guy so odd?” asked Neph curiously, wanting to break the awkward silence.

“Doesn’t matter, if he might know a way for us to return to our homeland, I am all for it.” said Ceriss. Neph flattened his ears cautiously. Ceriss was not normally one to take risks. Did something seem out of place to her? The slightly smaller male vulpine looked around, and then back at the older rabbit, who was very shrewdly looking at Ceriss.

"You would surely like to stay the night, it is getting late, and the winds at night blow cold out of the valley." He stood up a little taller. "We would be happy to have your company." Neph looked at Ceriss, who seemed hesitant. He wished he could read her mind to know what made her want to skip a restful sleep in a safe town.

"I am not able to do what you probably think I can do." The priestess spoke in a slow, careful tone.

"Oh, I am pretty sure you can." The grey bent creature leaned forward again and grinned. "If you desire any help getting home, that is. It will be awfully hard if no one will as much as talk with you." Neph widened his eyes, realizing suddenly that things were not going in a positive direction.

"Would you have me just trust you that when my task is done you will part with me? Or will I be ever at your disposal to help where you see fit?" she asked. Her eyes narrowed.

"You think me wrong, life-singer." The rabbit stood up slowly. "It is not your continued services we seek. Just a one-time favor that would aid us quite nicely.

"Life singer... So you have encountered those with my power before?" Ceriss asked. Neph's heart sank. The rabbit knew she was a powerful essence user, just as she had feared. Somehow, the highly perceptive Letai automatically knew that she would be forced to do some kind of work for the village. What would they ask of her?

"Those with power like yours, they like to hide it, but there's ways to know." He hobbled toward Ceriss. "I want you to soften my pain first, to know that you do not merely use this aura to push away curious onlookers."

"That's not the power I have." Ceriss stated. "Mine is not the healing kind. I hurt people with my power, and I have no intention of using it here." Ceriss narrowed her eyes and bared her teeth. "But you knew that, that's why you asked me to do that, you keen old codger." She crossed her arms. "I'll do no killing. Look at this place. You see the peace? Why would you ask me to harm that?" she asked.

"Quiet, fox!" barked the rabbit. "It will not do for the legend you leave behind to have the villagers see us quarrelling." Neph perked his ears. Legend? Were they going to be asked to do something great?

"Very well, I will hear you out, what is it you want?" Ceriss asked, leaning back against a bamboo-like wall. The other fox ground his teeth a bit. These two were very intense for being rather cute to look at. The elderly rabbit folded his

ears far back and inhaled deeply, before leaning back against the wall beside Ceriss.

“From this place, close to the town square, you can see every part of our fair village. Is there anything missing, life singer?” he asked. Neph scratched his head. Hearing it in his own tongue did not make it seem any less cryptic. Ceriss looked around a while, her eyes narrow, her brow furrowed in wisdom and thought. She finally spoke slowly.

“You offer no monument to your dead, for one. No graves, no markers, no hint that you have death, but I do not sense so much life essence in you to consider that the end never comes. You inter them in fire?” she asks.

“We never get the chance. If one of us falls, it comes for them, and none who intend to stand after dare to interfere.” Neph’s blood suddenly felt like ice.

“It would be the little problem you want me to solve.” Ceriss stated. “I have trouble believing you have ever met someone with the gifts that I have. How do you know I can do it?” she asked. The other vulpine felt quite left out of this.

“You smell of death, Ceriss. I knew it the moment I came close to you. You can affect the spirits. Even being a part of the river of life is not enough to separate an enemy from you.” The priestess narrowed her eyes.

“How can you know this?” she asked. She seemed distressed.

“Some of us can see. Some of us knew before you came. You will not leave us in the state we are in, and none after you will do much good.” He tapped his cane on the ground. Ceriss growled, which sounded kind of cute from a fox form of her.

“We have very big problems we are dealing with in our own homes. Can you see how those will turn out if we are stuck here helping with yours?” she asked. “You do not appear to be doing poorly.” She waved a hand to express everything there.

“The solution to this problem is the easiest solution to you going home. Our destinies cross here. You should be grateful that there is a clear path.” Neph put his fingers to his lips, the fox thinking this sounded like a very wise thing to say.

“I know of only one thing that does the thing that you say, and it is not an easy thing to deal with.” Ceriss seemed to know more than she wanted to let on to Neph, perhaps worrying that this would frighten him. That frightened him. He shifted his weight back and forth from one foot to the other. What about the

others? What if the commander did not want anything to do with the kind of trouble that this would obviously be?

“You and your friends will find a way.” Ceriss gritted her teeth tightly. Neph put a hand on his chest. They thought they had been so careful, but had they been watched all along? This innocent little town was far better defended than the pair had thought.

“How long have you waited?” asked Ceriss.

“The entire time.” The lapine answered.

“What’s your name?” the Lhap-disguised wolf asked. Things were moving almost too fast for Neph to follow. Was this kind of conversation so typical to the Letai of old that they did not have any trouble dealing with how chaotic and scary all of this was, or was it only Ceriss who had dealt with that? He knew that she was a bit more hardened than most from what Leal had been talking to her about on the raft, but surely she was not this hardened by what she experienced alone. The rabbit smiled finally and stated in a low, soft tone,

“I am Wahkeme.” He leaned forward again. “You will aid us?” he asked.

“You already know that.” Ceriss growled coldly.

“We will both be happy.” The codger smiled.

“Perhaps, but for all that you know, you know how I will react if I have been deceived...” She narrowed her eyes. Neph felt his heart fall to his feet. Ceriss would threaten this lovely and innocent village? That didn’t seem necessary.

“You will not be deceived, but understand... Even with our help the path which lies before you to get home when this task is done will be difficult, and deadly.” He frowned at Ceriss.

“This... Sounds exactly like the truth.” She smiled and nodded back to the rabbit and he smiled and nodded back. All Neph could think, as he watched them stare each other down, was that both were quite mad. What had they all just been volunteered to do?