

**Sirius, Book IV**  
*A Slave's War*

*Comments or Questions?*

Contact Alps: [sarsis@gmail.com](mailto:sarsis@gmail.com)

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

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**Chapter 18**

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As the sun sank lower in the sky, Kaji and Neph returned from washing up. The others did not seem to know that there had been a bit of fun had between the fox, the captain, and the priestess-turned fox. Ceriss waited for everyone at their makeshift camp when Leal and the others had returned. They had been a bit surprised by her changed appearance, but her mannerisms caused Leal and Lunarix both to recognize her through her disguise easily enough, as she had not been trying to hide them. Leal sat quiet, munching still on more melon. He found them all over the place here and could not stop eating them. He had plenty of good food to compare it to back home, but it was unthinkable that it just grew everywhere, and it seemed to him that he was doing a favor to the plants by eating them and scattering the seeds everywhere. After what Ceriss had told him of the Lapine culture, he doubted they would mind if he ate a few of them, at least.

The location they had regrouped at after the others had washed up was a clearing at the base of a cliff, kind of wedged into a valley that seemed to suggest that the group was cornered. This was intended, however. There were thick broad-leafed plants that clung all along the cliff's edge, casting a greed pall to the valley below when the misty air was heavy in the evening. The sun was behind the mountains already, and the ocean breeze pulled the smell of salt air over them, pushing warmth into the valley to mix with the cold spilling down from the mountains. The loamy, rain-soaked field they stood in seemed a bit marshy, but it was clear of most obstacles. It was obvious that Ceriss intended a battle here.

Not wanting to alarm the other lapines who were not so well informed, Wahkeme came to the clearing himself. Leal had heard from Ceriss that he was not in the dark, but she did not really elaborate on what she meant by that. When he arrived and did not inspect a wolf beyond a glance, Leal understood though. He either knew all about wolves, or even knew about everything, including wolves. It put Leal at ease immediately to see that he did not recoil from any of the group, despite being old and frail. Still, that was probably an earned level of bravery, so the guard did nothing to try to seem intimidating. It was the lapine's world they were stuck in for the moment.

"Your friends are loyal, I fear no betrayal of them. This is good." Wahkeme stated coldly. "It is almost dusk. You seem to know already what you face, then you must know what you need to bring it here." The lupine guard widened his eyes, gazing back and forth between the beautiful white female Lhap and the grizzled old rabbit. He got

right to the point. This actually encouraged Leal a little. There was not a lot of fear from the rabbit, it meant that he felt confident that the group could handle it. That lightened his heart a little. Ceriss spoke coldly.

"It may still not be enough to do what you asked. The Letai avoided these things for a reason. Our connection to the essence makes us epically appealing targets." She crossed her arms. Leal looked back and forth between her and the old rabbit. Well, that sucked all the comfort right out of him. Ceriss told them that they would have to do something difficult for the lapine village, but he was not told that she was that fearful that it would not work. He stood up, wanting to interject something, but not knowing what to say. His normal hope to instill confidence was not there because he did not know enough. So he asked.

"I have still not been told exactly what we are supposed to stomp out here." He was willing to do anything the priestess needed, but he was a little alarmed that no one liked even discussing what this was. He liked moving forward knowing what was there and not just plunging into the unknown. Careful balance of bravery and wisdom had kept him alive this long at least. Ceriss glanced at the guard who had developed a deep and meaningful fondness for her.

"Well, now's a good time to tell you, Leal. We are going to be making an attempt in the offing of a Culier Shadow tonight." There was a pause. It seemed to mean little to Neit, but Kaji, Neph, and Leal all tensed up heavily. It was like being told that there was a fire coming that would consume them all and there was no way to get out of it.

"Those don't die." Leal's response got Neit's attention.

"Wait, what?" she asked, pulling her pack a little tighter. Ceriss spoke up.

"Not from something as basic as a sword attack, no, but Letai have other ways to fight. I stand a chance, but I need the rest of you to keep it away from me long enough to work my energy around it. I cannot be touched by it, or it just gets another corpse to feed upon. The rest of you will follow because it will be kind of pissed about the hacking and hewing of its parts." Leal inhaled deeply. This was a nightmare scenario. There were no adventure stories that ended happily with, 'And then the heroes faced a Culier Shadow'. Only horror stories ended like that.

"Is this really a necessary course of action?" Leal asked, plaintively gesturing to Ceriss, ignoring the fact that the old rabbit was still standing there. He did not seem fazed by it. It was probably expected that not everyone would like the idea that they had this kind of challenge. Ceriss shook her head.

"I get the impression that the best way to get the Lapine population here to assist us is to prove that we'd assist them when given the chance." She also seemed to ignore the codger. He did not seem to mind that either, and, eyes closed, was smiling blissfully. Leal looked at him carefully. Did he enjoy the terror some of the party who

knew what they would be facing felt? He didn't seem the type. He seemed oddly at peace, as if it did not matter so much to him how this was to end. Since it concerned his own people, it was odd to Leal that he relaxed as much as he did. His flopped grey ears rested upon his brow as he leaned on his cane. The captain took his turn to speak.

"Well, I feel a peck more confident since we have a priestess with us, sure, but this still be a fool's errand. Then again, coming across th' sea was as well." Kaji pulled his belt a little tighter, as if getting ready to scrap. "How do we go about findin' it?" he asked. Ceriss looked toward the darkening sky, seeming not to want to discuss that immediately, as if searching for another way.

"This is the part that none of you are going to be thanking me for." She spoke softly, with an air of regret. "I am very sorry to put everyone through this." Leal was immediately fearful. That tone of regret he had heard before.

"Well, it comes immediately if someone dies," The rabbit offered. "... And I've lived a long life, so one of you can take the honor, and my sacrifice will save the valley. I have no regrets." The bent, old creature nodded to Neit, as if she would be the most likely to be able to strike him down. She balked.

"Absolutely not!" the former thief barked. "I'm no murderer!"

"Splendid." The rabbit announced. "Only a burglar then." Neit looked accusingly at Ceriss as if she was the one who told him. The priestess lightly shrugged. Wahnkeme continued. "Not so bad, really. But the offer does stand. None of our villagers particularly feels like dying tonight, and I am not sure how else to attract the thing." He leaned back against a palm tree, arms crossed over the top of his cane. Leal suddenly understood exactly why Wahnkeme was being serene and calm in the face of this danger. He was not intending to face it. He was intending to sleep the final sleep. Ceriss answered, her voice raised with a tone of finality.

"And our refusal still stands, Wahnkeme. The Letai do not murder. Even for this. Fortunately, I think I have another way. Death is not the only thing that will attract those. My way is not much better, but it does not involve actually killing someone to an end that might not promise victory." The priestess took two large steps back, her thick tail swaying. Leal watched her as she posed a figure of extreme vulpine beauty. Did the rabbit know what she really was? Could he see it? He did seem wise, and she seemed to think there was nothing worth hiding from him.

"Do you seriously know another way?" he asked curiously, seeming as if he was not exactly celebrating his sudden survival where he had assumed that he would be ending his life right there. Perhaps he was having trouble believing it.

"There is another way, but you won't enjoy that I do this. Nor will Leal. Enjoying it least of all, however, will be Lunar." She stated, looking at the grey lupine with a

heavy heart, then to the guard's commander, who looked up with more than a fraction of genuine concern.

"If it involves not killing this nice old rabbit, I think I can forgive you." Leal offered honestly. He did not want Ceriss carrying around more weight when it was obvious that she was trying to help in the best way possible. She did not want blood on her hands unnecessarily, and there was a time where he was sure that the means to an end would have meant that she would have been fine with snuffing the rabbit who was old and had offered to go. This, to the guard, was an improvement.

"I will have to attract it by using a forbidden essence technique." She approached Lunariss. "And I am a little limited in just who I can use it on." She stared him down pretty sharply.

"This is going to hurt, isn't it?" he asked.

"Oh my goodness, yes." Ceriss answered.

"I'm all in." Neit said jovially.

"You won't be for long." The priestess stated. She took the large fang from Kaji's belt, making him jump. He backed up a bit. It was not him who Ceriss had targeted though. Leal's commander gazed at the priestess coldly. As she approached, worry flickered over his features. She was serious.

"Wait, what are you doing..?" Lunariss asked.

"I have been drawing essence heavily from Leal and Neit and Neph, and just earlier from Kaji. This has to be someone who has strong essence still." She looked at the tall black lupine apologetically. "There is too small a margin of error for this on the others. They will be far less likely to survive this."

"I am starting to feel like maybe the rabbit is at a ripe enough age." Lunariss backed up a little.

"Calm down, you waif, it will hurt, but it won't hurt for long." Ceriss continued to approach. "I can no longer handle the exact kind of pure energy Luna can, I've done too much on the other side of the spectrum. If I am to gain a lot of power at one time, enough to do this very difficult thing, there's only one way left for me to do it."

"This is one of the most interesting things I have ever seen." Wahkeme stated softly. It was as if he were not even a part of what was going on.

"No one asked you." Leal answered, not liking the thought of Ceriss hurting his commanding officer like this, but he suspected there was not a better or more reliable way. The rabbit spoke up in his defense.

"I am not so crass as not to appreciate the meaning of all of this. The Letai are an unknown to our people, though stories of those who mastered the use of the essence exist, folks from across the sea. Bad omens there, so you might not want to advertise that about yourself." Wahkeme said warningly. Leal had no intention so that wasn't a big deal. While his attention was otherwise directed at Wahkeme, however, he heard a sharp cry from Lunariss, who, as he turned suddenly, was holding his shoulder. Ceriss handed the fang back to Kaji, who held it sickly between two fingers. The tip was crimson. Had the priestess actually stabbed him? It certainly appeared that way. Lunariss seemed angry about that. Kaji offered the fang to Neph, who took it and balked.

"No, I'm good, you can have it." But he did not immediately put the trophy down, he moved it over to some leaves and laid it there, perhaps intending to clean it later. Like his captain, he felt it might have value.

"Ceriss, can't we just get another rabbit? Someone who will be fine to endure this?" There was no stopping Ceriss though. She did not make this kind of decision easily, it seemed. Especially not after the conversation that she had with her deeply favored lupine guard. She shook her head slowly.

"That won't do and you know it, Lunariss." Her voice was sorrowful and soft. She wanted to make sure he knew that she did not catch some strange pleasure in all of this. "Most importantly, you are related by blood to the Royal house, which is related by blood to the Letai highland line. I have no way to know if a single lapine will have the essence that you do. Also, the rabbits need someone to help them, but it will darken our feat if any of them come to harm at our hands. Wahkeme was testing us though I doubt he would admit it."

"I admit it freely." The codger lapine stated.

"I don't like you." Neph stated flatly.

"I wasn't being hostile." Wahkeme rumbled.

"Enough." Ceriss growled. "Lunariss, the really painful part is done, but what comes next will be far more unpleasant in a different way. Sit down."

"Well, when you offer it like that..." Lunariss looked even angrier at the priestess. He did not like being 'abused' as it were, and that was what was going on here as far as he was concerned.

"I will heal it and be quite nice about it later, I assure you." Ceriss stated. "I stuck you in a place that won't inhibit your fighting. Just a scratch, I assure you."

"I know that, I'm perfectly fine, but I would like to at least know what..." The priestess backed him against a tree and cupped her mouth against the wound. There was no warning and no time to react.

"No..." Wahkeme backed away slowly. Leal glanced over to him. The inside of his limp ears had gone ashen. He was horrified more than anything that Leal could understand. He looked back at Ceriss. Lunar is was pushed against the tree tightly, shaking, which Leal did not expect from him, his eyes wide as the sound of Ceriss' throat contracting was very easily audible. She was drinking from the wound.

"Ew. Oh Ceriss... No..." Neit backed away just a bit squeamish.

"I have no idea what's going on." Neph whispered to Neit. The former thief looked ill.

"Oh by the heavens, this is dark enough, I assure you." Wahkeme said in a somewhat flat and dead tone. He was still backing away, and then, somewhat inexplicably, he was just gone, he bolted from the scene so fast it was hard for Leal to believe that he was even an old rabbit. He was simply missing that single moment later.

"I feel like shit." Lunar is said in a wavering tone. He seemed shocked at whatever Ceriss was doing to him. Her eyes slowly opened, and were glowing bright red. Leal backed away a little too. This was a very dark thing, even he could feel it, the energy emanating off of her. It felt like death. He could describe it no other way.

"What?" Neit stated. Lunar is sank down slowly against the tree.

"I feel like I'm dying. Oh Neit, I-" He closed his eyes, words failing at the end before sliding fully and silently down the tree. Ceriss went with him, mouth still upon that wound.

"Ceriss, what are you..." Leal asked.

"She's drawin' from the source." Kaji stated, his voice wavering as well. "Letai... ain't allowed to do that. It's bad. It's real bad."

"Drawing from the source?" asked Neit.

"She's takin' his essence he en't naturally parted with." Kaji explained. "There's stories about Letai what went bad and did that. Bad stories. It's a high crime. Letai don't..." He cupped his muzzle. Leal looked back to Ceriss. Gone was the pretty white fennec, and back was the dark, frightening, shadowy Ceriss, her eyes glowing red, not violet. Kaji backed up a little more as well, obviously fearful. Neph, seeing his captain backing up, did the same, as if there was about to be an explosion. Leal however did not back away. What she did, even if horrifying, she did for the reasons that she had explained before. Survival. Leal felt it was up to him to make sure she knew she had

arms to fall into when these ill moments were over. That was the love he had openly offered to her.

"I still forgive you." The guard explained to Ceriss, knowing that she did not like doing what she was doing, but thankful that they did not actually have to kill someone to do the thing they needed to do. He was still more or less unaware of what they were supposed to be doing, or what they would specifically be facing. Ceriss had stated they would distract it while she got ready to attack it. Was there a reason she left the plan open outside of that? Was it that volatile a situation that planning was a hindrance? He had heard the name uttered in taverns and such, but he was not really very well aware of what a Culier Shadow was. Only that it was about as bad a thing as one could have to fight.

Ceriss did not really respond to Leal. She finally let go of Lunariss, and left him half-lying, slumped on the ground. He looked pretty dead to Leal. He drew closer to Lunariss, but then noticed that he could still see his commander's essence. It took a lot of focus to do it, however. Something less focused and more used to finding dead things would easily mistake him as deceased. Leal backed up a little more as Ceriss moved closer.

"You will attack when this thing shows..." her voice sounded strange, as if heard through a layer of rippling water. "Do not touch with your body, just hack at anything that looks like your sword can sever it. That will get its attention. These things are not very fast when they appear fully in our world to feed." It was then that Leal realized how much Ceriss actually knew of what she was doing. Wahnkeme was right about her, eerily so. Was there anyone alive who knew what to do as well as she did? For all of their sakes, he hoped not. He paid close attention to her as she explained the very simple requirements for their survival.

"I will do my best. What do the others do?" he asked. What could Neit do? What could Neph do? They were not fighters. Kaji, he felt, could hold his own.

"Not much time." Ceriss warned. "Kaji will stay and help you in case it directs entirely upon you to make it turn again. It will come for Lunariss, then for me. Don't let it have either. Neph, Neit, take Lunariss the moment it arrives and head toward the stream. Get over the stream; it will have trouble sensing his death more than my anger when you get him across." There was a sudden look of actual panic on Neit's face.

"His *death*?!" she cried, looking at the limp captain of the guard, his eyes looking up blankly at the darkening sky as the sun was beginning to set. Leal felt a pang of guilt. Neit cared about Lunariss even though he antagonized her so, and she had no reason to understand that he was alive. He didn't even seem to be breathing. The guard opened his mouth to tell the thief his commander still lived.

"Time's up." Ceriss barked. There was a heavy feeling in the clearing. Leal felt physically sick, and very nearly vomited. The others did not seem affected as badly.

"It's here." Kaji stated. There was a distortion in the middle of the clearing. It looked like there was something there, but it was just not possible to really focus on it, like there was a spot in Leal's vision, and then, there was a black, hulking shape, like a pile of grass and limbs and other clippings, but it was as black as anything could be, even more than the shadowy, no-light-reflecting Ceriss. It was as if it glowed with blackness. It was also immediately very large, casting bewilderment on how one could not see such a thing come into being so suddenly like that. It was two heads taller than Leal, and about twelve feet across. A dark, horrifying beast with no head whose mere touch rendered the living lifeless. Even the Letai left stories in the oldest texts of just abandoning towns if these showed up close by. How long had the rabbits been dealing with it to not even have a graveyard, since it always came for their dead? How many perished just removing someone who suddenly died from the village?

There was a soft throb and air pushed back as it seemed that it finally came completely into the clearing. Leal's ears popped from its sudden appearance.

"Alright, move Lunaris." Ceriss said in a soft tone. Neit whimpered and pulled at the heavy wolf. He seemed dead, and Leal made a mental note that Ceriss had been right. She seemed to not enjoy that fact at all. As much as she might have teased before that she didn't care, this was bad for her. She did not have the ability to see his essence. She did not know he was alive. Neph was a bit more helpful in getting Lunaris up. He was deceptively strong. It took a lot to keep a ship going with just two crew. Leal looked back at the beast. It was turning toward Ceriss, and then toward Kaji who did not waste a moment of time hewing off what looked like a stick. That part of it squirmed around like a slug on salt as it hissed on the grass. Leal advanced.

Things were happening so fast. Ceriss was not one to waste much time with discussion when something was decided, and she had perhaps already decided that this was how they were going to summon the thing but it made sense at least to Leal why she did not opt to tell everyone else the plan. Several would likely have refused it. This was something that needed to be done, not discussed. What Ceriss had told him about how things went earlier on the war with the dark one allowed it to make even more sense to not to allow for committee vote. That sluggishness had perhaps cost the Letai their very existence.

"Keep it back; work it toward the cliff if you can, farther away from me! Make it back up, even if it means putting yourself behind it and attacking!" Ceriss called her orders very specifically. She then began moving her hands side to side in a flowing dance-like motion, her hips following suit. Leal was pretty confused by this, but decided it had to be some kind of ritual.

"Don't let it touch you!" Kaji called, snapping Leal's attention back fully. A tendril had sprouted from it and it reached for Leal. The grey lupine gasped in horror, having not realized that it could change shape and sprout parts like that. He swiffed his blade neatly to the side and off came the tendril. He backed away hastily as if it could run in

full pursuit, and then moved in a circle. He was surprised to find it was not a very fast creature, but it was not very slow either. One had to keep moving in the fight or they might well be overtaken. Certainly it had no trouble scooping up a corpse, and would likely have followed these rabbits to the end of the valley for its quarry.

“Lunaris is safely away.” Ceriss barked. “When I tell you both to, you have to get *behind* me. You do not want to be any part of this.” She was still gesturing. Leal focused so he could see essence a little more clearly. There was a red ball of essence, so dark it almost looked like blood in her hands, rolling around like a glass ball, almost hypnotically. Was this another darker essence ability? Was it what she used the essence that she had removed in such forbidden fashion from Lunaris for? Kaji cried out, almost overtaken, and Leal took off two tendrils with a single swipe. The thing suddenly wheeled around, as if Ceriss had just done something to it. She was extremely focused and did not call out to anyone. Leal hacked at its retreating form, careful that it didn’t just stop suddenly and cause him to barrel right into it. Kaji was a bit more distant, but was advancing as well. This fight was rattling him and Leal could tell that he did not spend much time fighting.

“Help me with this, Kaji, it’s not backing down!” he cried. It was getting close to Ceriss and he could not get it to focus back on him. Kaji hacked at it a few times, fearing, as Leal did, running right into it and ... suffering whatever fate *that* meant, which was unclear, but it was not working. The creature advanced uncaring. It seemed to know already that Ceriss was the real threat. Swords could not truly stop it, but what she was doing was deadly.

The priestess was moving faster, a look of fear in her eyes. She would not be ready in time. She had not told them to get behind her yet. Leal spun himself, hitting it a half dozen times in a second, dark mass flying everywhere, Kaji having to dodge pieces of it and hopelessly dropping back because of being unsure which parts flying off of it were still attached. Still, it would not stop. Leal hurled his sword into the center of it, sinking it in to the handle, so much that he dare not try to retrieve it and still it wanted Ceriss more. Did it simply stop feeling pain?

“Ceriss, move!” Kaji barked. She moved, but only her hands, trying to finish her technique. She certainly knew how to perform under pressure, but her expression was one of abject horror. There was clear desperation in her eyes.

“*No!*” Leal screamed, hands out. He wanted to use his own essence to bait it to him. His ears folded back tightly and he held up his hands, willing himself, with what little he knew of the essence that Ceriss had taught him, and he felt a sharp pain in his palms. He shook his hands, a little stunned by that jolt of unbidden agony, and there was a bright flash in time with the shake, like flicking water from wet fingertips. He flinched from it, thinking at first that Ceriss had performed her technique in panic with everyone still behind the shadow. As his eyes focused again, the damage to it, a red, ember-lined, blood-like glowing crater, was on Leal’s side, not Ceriss’. The dark beast

stopped. It did not seem to care about Ceriss for that moment, slowly turning toward the one who in all appearances damaged it.

“What in th’ darkest fires was that?!” Kaji barked.

“Uh, back up.” Leal stated.

“Oh crap.” Kaji stated, beginning to move.

“Get behind me!” Ceriss barked.

“Absolutely!” Kaji shouted, bolting around the injured creature. Leal was stunned, but followed directions as best he could. His hands hurt as if he had just held his sword with both hands and swung as hard as he could into the side of a cliff. It was a kind of stinging he hoped would only last that long. The moment he and Kaji were past Ceriss’ shoulders, she cried out,

“Staros’lin stahurarthurir’eldaren!” There was a flash of red light, and the Culier Shadow made a horrifying roar like a storm in a bottle held up to one’s ear. Kaji and Leal both fell to the ground, holding their ears and crying out and the dark mass expanded outward violently, overtaking them. Leal feared immediately it killed everyone, but he only felt intense heat from the explosion, a wave of fire emitted out like a sphere but it was brief enough that it didn’t burn so much as it just charred their fur in places. A few dryer patches of vegetation lit on fire, casting an orange glow on the clearing.

Leal’s ears were ringing, he could hardly hear, and he suspected the others were likewise affected. He looked over at Ceriss, who sat down, holding her head, looking like she might get sick, and Kaji just lay on his side, blinking, rubbing his ears. A few moments passed and the guard was thankful that his hearing began to return. The still dark-furred priestess panted softly, audibly Leal was happy to note. Neph and Neit returned, Lunaris walking in between them with some assistance. His shoulder was still bloody, and he looked like he was suffering from a horrible illness.

“You are up faster than I expected you would be.” Ceriss stated calmly. Leal was still in some level of shock from what happened. Ceriss hit that horrible legendary monster so hard it exploded. Was it really and truly gone? Was the technique she used that intense? How long had it been since one of those creatures had fallen?

“I cannot believe you did that. You could have warned me about that shit hours ago.” He seemed very cross. “You drank my blood, you spook. That’s as far on the scale of things I didn’t want to know about the Letai as it can go.”

“You’d never have allowed me to do it.” Ceriss drank some water from her flask as if they just got done with some friendly sparring and everyone did not just almost die. Leal assumed it was to get rid of the taste as she had not wanted to do that in the first

place. "You'd have gone on about how you were one of the most skilled fighters and could not be laying there paralyzed and pissing yourself while everyone else was fighting." Neit looked down and then let Lunaris go, taking a big step to the right.

"The old vision-tales were true. You really stopped it. You stopped it in an instant." The rabbit approached far more slowly than he had departed. Ceriss narrowed her eyes, glowing violet again, at the rabbit. Leal wondered if he had actually watched that from afar.

"Funny thing about visions like that, Wahkeme..." the priestess stood up, and then held one of his ears, making him freeze in place. "They have a way of singling out someone who seems strong to match the legend and that person is just forced to come up with a way to prevail where all others are too cowardly to try." Leal gritted his teeth. She seemed as if she was about to strike down the codger. He did not seem afraid though.

"Most of them are too fearful, you are right, but tell me Ceriss." He approached her to prove his own resolve, surprising for Leal since even he would not just walk right to Ceriss if she was mad at him right at that moment. "Do you really think any in my village could have burned four generations of our dead back into the lifestream?" His eyes were narrow, sly, and very wise. Neph stammered softly,

"What? That thing was ..."

"At least 150 dead rabbits." Ceriss answered flatly. "Caught up in a ball of hateful energy, a single spirit accumulating more and more and hungering always for yet more. That is what a Culier shadow is." Wahkeme spoke up,

"We prefer to be called Caefahnians, honestly." The dark priestess flickered in her form again, and seemed to kneel down a little, but then it was evident that she was not stooping, but actually changing size. She went back to being a small, sweet-looking Lhap. Leal blushed a little seeing her like this. When he saw it the first time, he thought that it had been Neph that she was drawing from, he was surprised she used it on Kaji, but he found that he liked this form for her quite a bit. She stroked the old rabbit's ears, and he parted his mouth just a little, his body tensing, proving that he was not immune to the touch of a beautiful girl, particularly one as powerful as Ceriss was.

"I will call you that then, but if you recall, there was an opposite side to our deal. You will assist us in leaving? In going home? Surely there is really a strange person who lives not too far away that has a way, as you stated?" There was such an undertone of absolute danger in the sweet, soothing voice that Ceriss used. It was almost more frightening than seeing her fight. The rabbit actually softened in his demeanor.

"Oh, there is, I will keep our part of the bargain, and furthermore, I offer our village to you for the night. Good food, a comfortable place to bed down, and our

hospitality for as long as you care to enjoy it. Your friend there looks like he might need to rest a little. All of you seem a little tattered, truth be told. I imagine the trip over the sea, while forgotten in the face of that fight, still aches in your bones?" He looked even at the young Neit, who nodded slowly. She seemed to like the idea of getting to rest a little after all she had been through. Leal noticed, also, that she clung close to Lunariss. Perhaps a little extra sliver of good had come of Ceriss' very dark act upon him. Life had been hard for her, he knew, and the culmination was a fight for her life that she perhaps had never considered the real ramifications of. Those she travelled with were her companions and she did not want to lose any of them. Even crass Lunariss.

"We will accept this. We could definitely use some time to recover. Will this cause too much disruption in your village?" she asked. Leal was warmed a bit by the fact that this even mattered to her.

"I think it would sadden them more if you refused to accept the invitation." Wahkeme stated.

"I am liking this plan more than the one we just went through." Lunariss said with a glare to Ceriss. Leal frowned at that. He hoped that he would be able to forgive the priestess. He knew it was hard, but he believed that Lunariss would have reacted just as she said he would. Still, that probably did feel like a serious violation to him. The former ship captain spoke up immediately.

"You'll get over it. It's nothing being loved by everyone around you for a while won't cure." Kaji said, breaking the tension and slapping Lunariss on the back. He shuddered and looked to Kaji, then softened his expression and laughed softly.

"Food is in order at least." The guard captain sighed and hobbled along with the others, Neit tucked helpfully and warmly under his injured shoulder. It had stopped bleeding on its own. As Ceriss had stated, it was not a bad wound. Leal smiled a bit at Kaji. For however awkward he might have been in battle, the older lupine had a way of lightening the mood when that was needed. That was a valuable skill in a tough spot too. Many missions failed because those who took it on fell apart before they could succeed. At least now the group had a chance to find someone who might be able to get them home, though he had no idea how. They began to trundle toward the village.

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The boat listed ever so gently. The river was always calm and it did not push the ship the way the ocean did vessels that Luna had become more accustomed to. It felt sometimes like they had stopped moving up the river, and often she had to glance out of a porthole to make sure they were still on their way. It had been a few days of travel and they were already certainly outpacing any news of their journey. There would be

news of it she was sure. There was so little for her to do on the boat, however. She found herself getting to know Lyat better. She spent quite a lot of time just resting with him when it was her son's turn to shovel coal. Alps had insisted that he be allowed to do it, and at first the priestess did not understand, but after a day or so it became evident he was doing it to keep others from feeling that his position as the soon-to-be mate of the queen did not afford him special treatment. They were in this fight together, and that, to Alps, really meant together. In the time that she rested with Lyat, she found out that he had originally been chosen as a potential mate for the empress but that there was a fear that the dark one would target him to make the empress suffer, so he was kept close, but not close enough. Ultimately, they had to take such measures to hide their closeness that it became impossible to be together. This, it seemed, had been the start of her desperate search for a true end to the war. This made Luna like Lyat far more. His love for his empress and lover was strong enough to rewrite history.

It was thoughts of this which were interrupted by the soft click of her chamber door. Vhale was the one who entered. He smelled sweet, immediately evident as he entered the room, dressed in black and silver robes. He'd been munching on fruit perhaps. It was rather late so Luna was surprised to have a visitor.

"I was hoping you'd still be awake." The dark-furred lupine stated in a soft, gentle tone. Luna nodded to him.

"Something is on your mind? Troubling even to you?" she asked with some concern.

"Actually, less troubles me now and it is for that I come to you." He looked into her eyes.

"You want more trouble? I suspect Nita would be happier to provide that." Luna chuckled to ensure that her former foe understood she was not serious.

"You defended my convictions and my point of view even if it cast ill light upon your own flesh and blood. I wanted to apologize for saying those things, Luna." He looked down at his feet. "I have my fears, but it's not right for me to burden others with them. Things are hard enough..."

"Vhale, sit here..." The priestess patted the short plush couch she was sitting on. He approached and sat, hands on his knees, looking straight forward, seeming riddled with regret. He had not been kind in his wording of his fears about Alps.

"It's alright for her to be mad at me. I am quick with my tongue. I didn't have to deal with keeping people around me happy." He lowered his head a little. Luna gritted her teeth. She had not taken even a second to consider what life was like for Vhale during the war. He was surrounded by artificial soldiers created to wage his war, and never did he have at his side real companions. It made perfect sense that real, live companions would be new and difficult for him.

“She can be mad at you, but Alps thinks you are something different than what you were. I hope that he is right, I really do, and that I think is good for you. I do not know what you really are, what you had been, what you could have been, but if I can hope that you are something better, well, that’s not a bad start for you.” Luna placed a hand on Vhale’s robed shoulder. He felt hard as a rock, muscles tight with anxious worry.

“I think a lot about the first time I met you face to face Luna. It makes my heart ache to know what I took away from you. From everyone, but I know that I won’t be able to make anything right, make anything better if I just sit and do nothing. So I go with you, but make no mistake, my primary loyalty, my very life, is for Aris. I want you to understand that even with my fears; I live and die for him now. He illuminates the one path that will mend these broken lands. What happens to me then, I care not. I promise you; I swear to you, I will not betray him or you.” Luna was a bit stunned to hear this from him.

“I accept your promise, Vhale. I hold you to it forever.” She slipped her arms around him. There was a hard shudder. He leaned forward, shaking. She blinked quietly. Was he ill? She then felt wetness against her bosom. Her heart jumped inside her. She pulled him tighter to herself. This cold, aloof, seemingly unbreakable warlord could not fall apart in her arms. That was unthinkable. A choked sound, and then a dull, muffled sob as his arms slipped behind her and held her as well. Luna swallowed loudly, finding her own eyes wet. She lowered her head, and clutched Vhale tighter. He completely broke down.

What she had expected to feel in such a circumstance was a dark boiling essence of sorrow and regret, all the pain he’d felt and had no one to tell it to, but what came from him surprised Luna. The familiar tug of joyful essence kindled her desires to draw, and she could not help but pull it slowly to herself. Vhale felt deep contentment in her arms, enough that she could draw an appreciable amount of essence from him. The priestess stroked the former villain, even as he slowed in his somewhat embarrassing sobbing, he clutched her tight, mostly pressing his cheek to her shoulder, seeming to find incalculable joy in just having someone to hold, and moreover, someone who would hold him too.

What happened next Luna could not really control and certainly would not be able to explain. She pulled Vhale’s chin up, eyes closing, she tilted her head, and pushed her mouth over his. Every muscle in his body tightened and his hands clutched at the back of her robes as her tongue pushed into his sweet-tasting mouth. He went somewhat limp at that, before stroking his hand down her hair, from behind her ears and down her back in slow, tender caresses. Luna’s heart hammered hard and fast. What in the entire history of the Letai was she trying to do? Forgiving was one thing, but was she just overwhelmed by the power of his essence of joy? Luna pushed Vhale back, hand on his chest, pulling at his robes with a sense of want as her mouth matched perfectly to his own, her body suddenly blazing with need.

Vhale leaned back a little more, his neck bared to her, as the priestess kissed it, his choked final sob sifting to an anxious, needy sigh. This, Luna thought, was not what he came for. Was he taking advantage of her, or was she taking advantage of him? She bit softly at his neck, then a little tighter, a lot of lust behind it before lifting her head, thinking a moment on the bite she had given. Panting, Vhale did not seem to mind, but Luna suddenly understood why every cell in her body was on fire. She was healing Vhale. Her need for healing was kindled so heavily by his breakdown in her arms that she did what she almost invariably did in such a case, and lost control.

"I... I am sorry to be so... aggressive about this... I cannot help it." Luna whispered, pushing tightly against Vhale. The past foe gazed up dreamily into the priestess' eyes. He shook his head slowly.

"I should certainly not be encouraging it. It would cause unneeded distraction for the others, I fear." He whispered, but groaning slightly as his hips pushed against Luna's thigh, letting her feel just how much of an effect her kiss had caused. A chill went up her spine. In that moment, she felt that it would not hurt just to let him know what it was like to feel release in the arms of another. She reached slowly down his front, drawing his robes open.

"It's alright, Vhale. It really is no one else's concern but ours." Luna bit his shoulder again softly, making him tense up and arch against her again. He felt so warm. Luna could not believe she was even considering allowing this to happen.

"We don't have to... if you have even a single reservation... but..." He writhed against the only slightly older priestess.

"But you would not dream of denying this much more, Vhale..." Luna's whisper was all but inaudible. "Have you ever?" she asked. She knew what the answer had to be. He did not allow himself such diversion, not early on when his studies were all that mattered. He gasped slightly as Luna's gentle and loving hand pushed down his robes and curled around his thick, already wet member. He answered in a shuddering breath.

"No, I haven't before toni-"

Click.

The door swung open. Luna leaned back so suddenly she nearly knocked Vhale off the couch. Vhale clutched her robes, holding on so he didn't fall, and as Lyat entered, he looked up with a measure of surprise, and then narrowed his eyes at Vhale. Luna gritted her teeth.

"No, no! It's fine Lyat, he's not hurting me." She shook her head rapidly to indicate even that he didn't need to be there at all. Lyat stood firm, but Vhale got up, not

facing Lyat for his own modesty, which was lost on Luna completely. She blushed at that, but cupped her muzzle. Whale inched toward the door.

“That is enough practice for tonight, Luna. Thank you, I shall take my leave so that Lyat can attend to whatever business he has. I really appreciate it. Really. I am very grateful...” He shuffled sideways to the door, then around Lyat, and out onto the deck and presumably toward his room. Luna inhaled deeply, suddenly very alarmed at what nearly happened. Was it good that Lyat showed up? Was it bad?

“Is everything being alright, Priestess Luna?” asked Lyat very formally.

“It is.” Luna leaned back on the couch, aching with desire. Her eyes fixed on the hyena. He inched toward the door.

“Lyat was hoping to be helpful in preparations for queen’s weeding. I will inquire about Letai life-mate tradition thing later.” He backed away slowly. Luna widened her eyes, suddenly very much against him leaving. She could use a strong hyena right that moment. With the pulling and pushing and grabbing and biting. That would be perfect. But the door clicked.

“Faaaaaahhhk!” Luna growled, flopping back on the couch and sighing heavily. She moved a hand to her chest, and then, frustrated, pulled open the top of her robes and just pulled her pink nipple to her lips, nipping with a whine. “What d’ hew if wrong wif meh?” she growled around the stinging little nub, and then she cupped her mouth over the flesh and suckled softly, before huffing through her nose, still getting a slight trickle of milk. It took a long time, left to nature, for that to stop for a mother Letai, and Luna’s motherhood had been interrupted, cancelled even by the very one she was about to give her body to completely. The thought somewhat infuriated her.

It was his fault that she did not get to be a mother. How could she want to do something like that to him? What justice would that serve? Luna then tensed and groaned around her captured nipple, and popped her muzzle free, a thought, fleeting and silly, running through her head. With that thought, the mere consideration of what she was about to do seemed almost harmonic with the essence, and her body trembled. It was as depraved a thought as she’d ever allowed herself, and it only incensed her more. She tucked her fingers under the heavy hem of her green-hued robes. Her sex was puffy and almost sloppy with arousal, and she spread her folds around her pushing, swirling digits. It occurred to Luna as she did this that she had not once had to pleasure herself after leaving the Shadowfall. She bit her lip and laid back a bit heavily, pushing one foot up on the leg of the couch as she pushed three fingers in to the knuckles.

She used her thumb to pinch her stiffening clit against the surface of her fingers as they probed deeply, the priestess panting out hotly, breathlessly as fleeting images of things she had nearly done danced through her mind. Whale, so dangerous and dark, so hated and despised, pinned to the couch, the priestess biting and pushing and being as much a hyena as Lyat utterly failed to be a moment ago. He belonged to the Letai

now. Vhale had no destiny of his own, only what was chosen for him, that was what he had chosen, and he would give himself willingly, would he not? What would she take? Oh, Luna trembled, shook like a little leaf as her fingers pistoned noisily into her clutching, tight, steamy channel when she considered what she would take, her feet both coming up off of the floor and the couch arm. They bounced with a little shock of pleasure with each loud splat of her knuckles hitting her clit, her whine welling up. Oh what Luna would take, as he arched hard, told her please to be more cautious, more careful, and then surrender, sweet, sweet surrender as he yielded to her demand, the justice destiny provided.

Luna arched and then pulled her knees to her shoulder, fingers flittering back and forth rapidly as she bucked hard, trying not to cry out as she recalled every memory of that heat bathing her inner flesh, that gift of essence, the very thing that Vhale threatened to take away forever, all of his essence would be hers to use to heal, to seal, to push back the darkness. His hot waves of seed welling inside her; that was what she would take from him and her entire body shook violently as it ignited a wildfire climax that spread through her like lightning. What better use could there be for the former enemy than to use his own life essence to turn back the darkness at last? Luna, in her fit of pleasure, did not consider it merely excusing her rather dangerously selfish desires, she just took the time to enjoy her darkest, most taboo fantasy. For a priestess trained in the art of pleasure as she was, very little held a dangerous taboo, but this... Oh how could she think of anything else but this?

She slid slowly down off the couch, onto the floor, her skirt bringing back her modesty, her robes slowly pulled shut as she panted heavily, and absentmindedly licked clean her soaked fingers, She looked at the door, shamefully pondering notions that she knew full well she ought not, and then slumped back against the couch, still planted on the floor, and dozed off right where she was, locked in a daydream of selfish ridiculousness that she knew she did not dare partake of or even discuss. It would be seen as madness, but it was her sweet, dark madness to enjoy.