

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 21

There was darkness all around Alps. He was drifting again in the by now familiar blackness and he felt an immediate thrill of fear course through him. Had he been Shadowfallen again? He recalled then that when he was genuinely Shadowfallen he had trouble feeling much of anything. That was not how a Shadowfall was supposed to work, it just did not affect him the way it seemed most others. He'd become immune. He shook his head a little and willed his surroundings, but they did not change as they had in the Shadowfall, and while he felt motion, he was standing on something. What was this place he was in? Instead of willing his motion which was not working, he merely took off his cloak carefully. His little wings glowed brightly and illuminated the world around him incredibly well. He could see that he was on a gravel-covered castle courtyard of some kind but the castle was broken and in ruins behind him and chunks were tumbling and floating around as if stuck by some kind of magical field. It was hard to tell if the entire courtyard was floating just by sight but the sensation of slight motion made it obvious that it was.

"Hello?" he called out, his voice sounding normal, but there was little for it to echo on here, as there seemed almost nothing outside this single location.

"Do you recognize it?" a familiar voice asked. Of course. He turned, facing Ellis who had arrived noiselessly behind him as always.

"Can we give these mysteries a rest just for tonight, fox?" he asked.

She canted her head slightly to the side, regarding him. "You know my name." She leaned in closer, eyes narrow and fixed on the former slave. "And I'm not the only fox here."

"Is this revelation amusing to you?" Alps stated.

"It was no revelation at all." Ellis said as she walked noiselessly over to him. She stood there dressed in the same black and white robe that she always seemed to wear.

"You cannot tell me that you knew." He knew the moment he said it that she had known. Of course she had known. She seemed to have a way of knowing everything. It was yet another truth that she just didn't care to share with him.

"Don't be cross, I come with reassurance, not riddles." She narrowed her eyes, seeming a bit indignant. Alps widened his own eyes at that. This was a little unusual for her. He leaned back against a partially broken stone pillar that held up... something long ago and he crossed his arms expectantly. She resumed, content that he did not intend to interrupt her it seemed. "You were right to suspect that you are a weapon, this means that you have come to accept that you have a strength to you." Alps shook his head immediately.

"I'm not a weapon. My mother, Vhale, Nita... none of them see me like that." He believed them and he was not going to let Ellis shake his resolve.

"Oh they do see you as a weapon. That doesn't mean they care for you any less." Ellis crossed her arms as well, looking up at the white wolf who, adorned in his usual uniform, looked back confidently.

He shook his head. "I suspected it, yes. I could almost see myself as a child being honed into some kind of tool to slay Mannus, and that poisoned my heart terribly. I'm no sword. I am past that. I was foolish to suspect it" He smiled to Ellis.

"I believe that you have no idea what a real weapon is." Ellis answered, her tone becoming sharp.

"Together, my friends and I are strong enough to accomplish this task. I believe we can do this and me being ruthless is not needed to that end." Alps growled, knowing that Ellis was still harping on the fact that he had told her not to kill for him.

"Are you? The power of belief alone will see you through, then? A weapon is not about how much blood it spills, but it must still one day strike to accomplish its purpose." Ellis circled him.

"I know that a day may come where I have to, but I do not intend to do so recklessly as you. I've accomplished so much without a mountain of corpses behind me already." The wolf did not hold back.

"Alps, do you think Rios left anything to chance when you vanished from her empire?" Ellis asked. The former slave blinked at that. What an odd question to ask.

"Left to chance?" he asked.

"Not all Asuna were happy with you having been allowed to come into her city, and then to just mysteriously leave. What do you think happened when they made their move to inform the Asuna's dark master about the empress' unusual behavior?" Her tone was cold. Alps could almost feel the chill of it.

"Her subjects are loyal." He stated. Ellis narrowed her silver eyes.

"Her subjects are crushed with fear and self-loathing and know only one true master. Many are genuinely true to her, but she knew full well which ones weren't. I will say that those few will never be a threat to her child. She did not hesitate. "These are the actions of a mother and a leader. Do you begrudge Rios this action? Do you hate her now for having spilled the blood of her own to protect the future you fight for?" Alps did not feel well rather suddenly. Was Ellis just talking? Why would she, about something like this?

"Her actions were to prevent the deaths of possibly thousands of Asuna if the city were attacked." He claimed. "You just kill indiscriminately anyone who gets in the way." He expected Ellis to be angry at that. She did not change her expression, which actually unnerved Alps more.

"You make it seem as if I kill the innocent." She spoke very coldly.

"I don't think you exactly take a tally of who's got blood on them before heads start dropping off." Alps growled.

"Aris..." The wolf seized up a little, feeling as if his heart were gripped in the fox's hand when she spoke his real name. Her voice even sounded different, but somehow familiar at the same time. "It will give you no comfort to know that I think with great care about every life that I end, I do not merely scatter their essence like ashes to the wind. You have seen me kill but you do not realize that my methods are deliberate and calculated. It is easy for me but that does not make it trivial. Aris, when I kill I claim those lives. In each final heartbeat, each last slow breath for which I am often the only witness, every harrowing life-long tale that fades into dream in my passing, I am fully and completely aware. I kill because I know the cost of what should happen if I do not. It is a price that I have as yet spared you from paying but if you follow this path it is not something you can avoid forever." As she spoke in that icy, knowing tone, her narrow eyes never left him, their seemingly blind silver fixed as if upon his aching and fearful heart.

Alps could not move. He could not remember, in all the horrifying moments of his life he had felt more afraid. To know those who would kill for glory, for riches, for honor or their own lives was part of existing in the world, there was no way around it, but that never prepared him for how it felt to meet someone who was a genuine killer. She leaned in close to the wolf, her breath warm in his ear despite how impossibly cold her presence felt.

"Do you begin to understand me now?" Alps had to steel his courage even to speak his wavering answer.

"I...I will not have you killing for me." He wanted to make it clear that it was still his wish.

“Young lover...” her voice did not change. “What if I do?” Her mouth actually touched the rim of his ear, making him feel utterly electrical. His hands hurt from the adrenalin. Was this really one of her dreams? “Will you kill me? Take up the sword and avenge those who would see you buried and your cause fall to ruin? Do you have the skill or conviction to face me?”

She circled around to his other side and moved back a bit, crossing her arms in front of her again. “What of Enna, then? Suppose I had let her live. Think of all the people who’d have died slaving away in the mines for the materials used to make more Uruk. Think of those who’d have died at the hands of that unknown number of Uruk produced. One life taken to save many, including yours. You look me in the eyes and tell me that killing her was wrong.” She said coldly. “The reason you don’t have a pile of corpses in your wake is because they’re all stacked up behind me instead. And if not me, then Nidaja or Nita or Vhale. Your precious queen. Your sweet, gentle mother. The father you never knew. The only one unwilling to do what must be done ... is you.”

Alps gritted his teeth. He had begun to despise being lectured by Ellis as she spoke from a position of apparent authority and the blood on her hands made it plain to Alps that she could cause more darkness in her actions than he could ever hope to repair with his. What good was freeing the world from the threat of the Uruk if the body count in doing so resulted in a civil war where everyone was the enemy? He looked up to Ellis again and stepped forward.

“You know my feelings. I won’t discuss it again. I am sure you know I cannot stop you, I’ve seen what you can do, but I won’t thank you for the graves we’ve had to dig. They were not yours to fill. Enna, and others like her, need to face justice by the law of the land, not by the judgment of an unloving fox.” He refused to show her the fear that she seemed to want him to feel. She seemed surprised by his words, and turned away a moment.

“You find me to be unloving?” she asked.

“How else would you have me see you?” the wolf hybrid growled.

“You know far less than you boast, Aris. Love can sometimes prevent a war, but it will not win one.” She spoke softly. Alps stepped forward again, and placed a hand on her shoulder. He regretted his wording. He did not mean to cast that kind of stone. Just because he did not know Ellis’ heart didn’t mean she didn’t have one. The world she came from, the world of a losing war with the dark one was where she came from. She was a product of his evil not so different as Vhale. He could forgive her if she would understand that so much death would soon be unneeded. She put one of her hands upon his. He found it to be surprisingly warm and soft.

“This is just a dream. I can’t hurt you. You have nothing to hide.” He stated. She turned to face him again, still holding his hand. She took it in both of hers, her eyes gazing up at him, still narrow, but her expression was just impossible to read.

“Aris.” She spoke very softly, and for a moment, he felt perhaps they connected a little more warmly than he had before. This was a very good sign. She moved his hand to her nose. Alps blushed a little as her eyes closed. What was she doing, surely she would not suddenly be so tender. Her mouth parted and then closed around his hand. Searing pain raced up his arm. He tried to pull away but her grip on his arm was absolutely rock solid.

“What the hell!” He growled, pulling back unsuccessfully. He finally felt her let go he snatched his hand back. She had not bitten too deeply – it was just enough for it to have begun to bleed, but it hurt a lot. He backed away.

“Do you still think you can’t hurt someone in a dream?” Alps shook his hand, spitting blood about. He was surprised, but then shook his head.

“It’s a dream you control, of course you can hurt *me*, or make me think I’m hurt, I meant I could not hurt you, and I would not have, though I’m considering it now!” he barked. His blood positively boiled. How could she do that when he was doing his best to show her the kindness he thought she really needed?

“Are you ready to try?” Ellis asked, stepping forward. “I’ll let you have the first hit free.” She held her hands out to make it appear she would not defend herself. Alps trembled a little in rage. Just once. Just once to knock the smug unfeeling look off her face. He stepped closer to her as well, nose to nose with her.

“You think I cannot do it?” he asked.

“I think you will not.” Her breath was sweet. Alps wrapped his fingers tight around the crossed fabric of Ellis’ robes, near her neck and pulled her up a little. She did not try to stop him. She was so light, he thought. How could someone so dangerous seem so light? He drew his hand back, closing it. She was a killer. She did not need a light touch. It was a dream. It was okay, she wanted this. He felt even more angry about how much he wanted this too. She was testing his resolve. He could do it.

Alps did not let himself think another moment. He half-turned, drew his arm back as if he might walk away, and then spun around and put all the momentum of his entire body into his swing, fist balled up tight. He could not help how furious he was at everything. It was not even just the fox, it was all the people who kept secrets, all the people who toiled against their own interests, the blood that would have to be spilled because of cowardice and greed by hands who never wanted to harm anyone, and here this fox was willing to say that he was made just for that and he should just do it. It was all he could take and lashing out was the only thing left for him with that constant taunting Ellis seemed able to give.

To the white wolf’s shocked disbelief, he felt a jolt in his arm as his hand caught the firm, soft-fur-lined cheek of the lady vulpine. His heart fell through his feet. He had

no doubt in his mind that she would not even be there when he threw that punch, but as promised, she left herself wide open. Her head jerked to the side as she took the punch, the force of the blow turning her almost fully away from him. The hardest punch Alps thought he could throw because he was sure she would not even be there, and she just let it land. Alps shook quietly, unable to believe what he'd done, unable to look at the person he had just hit in anger, and fighting with himself about just how to feel about it. An eternity seemed to pass after that impact where he could not look at Ellis, his heart raced, and he felt the intense satisfaction spreading through his body that he's actually landed a punch, even if it was given. He did not back down. He'd not been afraid.

"Seems like you have it in you after all." Ellis stated in a slow, even and emotionless tone. She did not seem angry. Was that really what Ellis had wanted? She continued. "How do you feel now, did you enjoy that?" He finally looked up at the fox, who stood there with that same look of calm resolve, looking off into the dark distance. Alps felt like he should be apologizing, he didn't think he could actually hit her, he was sure she'd have vanished, but he could not lie. Not here. Not to her.

"Fuck yeah." Alps growled without thinking it over any further. "...Like the first time." He shook his hand a little, finding that it stung a bit and not just from the bite, but he felt far less stress. He was troubled by that. He backed up a bit more, expecting he was about to get a beating, but he was willing to throw that punch, so he knew he'd deserve it. It was just a dream. How bad could it be? He looked at his lightly bleeding hand.

"It seems at some point you forgot how to throw a proper punch." The fox stated instructively as she turned around to face him, grinning enough that Alps could see her perfect teeth. If she were injured, she was very good at hiding it. "There is strength enough behind it, but you lack technique. If you had not forgotten, you might have grown up very differently." Alps growled at that. He was not going to let her berate him even after that. If he landed one, he could land another.

"Shut up. Slaves get buried for striking their mistress. There's no justification for it." He crossed his arms, stepping up closer to Ellis. The fact that she didn't understand the rules did not make him wrong for having been tortured the way he'd been.

"According to who?" asked Ellis, suddenly nose to nose again with Alps. He recoiled again, gritting his teeth. "Who told you that law?" Her tone was very sharp. Alps' heart sank a little. He hated being proven wrong, or worse yet, foolish, but he answered.

"Chana did. And I was a child, who else would I have to believe?" he asked.

"Did you like it?" Ellis put her hand on Alps' chest. "Did it feel like love...?" She pushed him back against the towering broken column. "Did you feel cherished and adored as a little innocent whelp having a hot poker pushed under his tail for practically

no reason at all?" Alps blood utterly ignited. How could she talk about something like that? "Did you feel like that was *right*? You knew it was wrong Alps. You knew every time she hurt you that it was wrong." The former slave's heart hammered, his stomach in knots. He screamed in his head for Ellis to shut up, to stop talking, to be quiet but no words came out. He felt tears welling up. How weak he would seem to her if he cried, but he wasn't sad. He felt a complete loss of control. Why did it even matter to him what she thought? However, she was right; he knew how bad he felt about each time he was unduly punished, or disciplined well beyond what was called for. He admitted that freely to himself, but he managed to take it all and come out a winner by his standards. Why did it hurt so much to hear Ellis say this now? She pulled Alps away from one column and spun him to the side, slamming his back against another, one-handed. "You knew it and you let it happen. She could have killed you and you'd have let her. And for what? What good did it do you to be weak for half your life in this place?" Finally, Alps shouted back at Ellis into her face, spitting a bit as he barked out.

"Fine! I hated it! You have to *know* I did, but I couldn't do a thing! I was a child! She was bigger, stronger, and even the folks at the orphanage told me that my mistress was my legal obligation once I was purchased! I had no idea where it ended! I was a *kid*!" How could Ellis be so blind to what his life had been when she seemed to know every detail of what he went through? This conversation alone was as barbaric as any punishment Chana dished out. Why did it all hurt so much coming from the fox? Alps didn't give a shit what Ellis thought, did he?

"You hated it. You wanted to stop it, but you thought you could not?" Ellis' voice was smooth and casual. "Preposterous. You did not suddenly become Letai, you've been one since you were born. I want you to consider this very seriously." Ellis pushed Alps tightly against the column with one hand still on his chest, making him wheeze a bit. How could she have that much force when she weighed so little? She spoke softly, her voice sounding gentle again. "You are the son of a Letai life priestess and draw naturally more essence than you use. You heal faster and better than a normal Amanian child because of your link to the flow of essence. *A lot* better. You could take much more punishment than a regular child would hope to survive. Think about what that *means* Aris." Alps' heart went from rage at Ellis, to complete horror at a thought that he was rather shocked he never once considered even after learning about his heritage.

"If I had not been Letai..." He slowed his breathing, feeling sick.

"How old were you the first time you needed days to recover from one of her punishments, Aris?" asked Ellis icily.

"A little Amanian kid would have died..." Alps felt numb for that brief moment of realization. If he had been normal, he'd never have met Nita and Nidaja. He'd never have known Uri and Misha and Misty. Chana would have taken him away from them and not even cared. Chana, who had had defended from Nidaja and tried to excuse even to Ellis could have murdered a child.

“Sometimes you have to fight Alps. You don’t want to, and that’s respectable – you don’t have to enjoy it, but there are those out there who need to be fought and those out there who need you to fight for them, and as strong and righteous as you think your friends may be, sometimes... justice gets there too late for the person who needs it the most.” Alps’ blood ran cold. This was a monumental truth. He would never have fought Chana, but he needed someone to. Ellis darkened her tone again. “You did not have to live through that, Aris. You were a coward. You *are* a coward. And now your friends have to see the scars and know that as much as they need you, you will ultimately *fail* them. Your new wife, your friends, your lovers, your family, all of them will suffer because you let yourself become completely useless in the face of your fear and inaction, Aris.” The lean, black and silver fox lifted Alps up in one hand almost effortlessly and actually *threw* him. He felt the lurch as if it was not even remotely a dream and his back thumped into a broken part of a wall and he fell over the back of it. As he looked up, dazed by this, his back stinging from the impact, he looked up to see Ellis perched on the wall neat and casual, arms crossed. Alps struggled to his feet, only to get a foot planted in his chest with a push that sent him stumbling backward. The white wolf regained his balance and stood up, a hand on his chest. He coughed a bit and barked out,

“Do you think I could do what I’m doing now if I were a coward? Do you think I could fight the Uruk and defend my friends and my world if I were a coward?!” Alps barked at Ellis.

“I’ve seen you fight, you flailing whelp!” shouted Ellis, giving Alps a very good impression of what her genuine anger looked like. She strode to him and gestured wildly with her hands. “It’s like watching a panicked child slap-fight a sibling! You know better than that! You act brave but you are terrified to stupidity. It’s the Uruk who should be afraid of you! You are a complete waste!” Alps backed up a bit. He’d not seen Ellis so genuinely mad before, and he knew what she was capable of. She got closer. Alps gritted his teeth. He was not a coward, he’d shown her that before, and if he had to show her again, he would. He tightened his resolve and took another swing at her.

“Stop!” Alps shouted as he delivered that punch. This one did not connect. She caught his wrist easily and her grip was like iron.

“I only said you get one!” she barked, raising her foot to his chest again and kicking him backward, sending him sprawling in the dirt and rocks with a sliding crunch. It took him a moment to get back to his feet, as he was a bit more stunned by that kick. Alps growled. If she wanted a genuine fight, fine. It was a dream, he could dream about pulling those stupid fox ears all night if he had to. He let his body take over a bit and just raced to meet her, taking a good couple of swings at her. She seemed to not actually be anywhere he was punching. He wished he had Ressaia, at least he’d have some reach.

“Hold still, since my punches barely seem to faze you! I want to slap your little black fox nose so hard it lands in Misty’s dream!” He moved faster, willing himself much

as he did in the Shadowfall. That was not much different from a dream. He felt himself getting stronger as he fought, his will for this increasing. It felt like it was not his anger that fuelled him, but just his will to fight, as if having no will for it was all that had held him back before.

"What are you trying to hit me with, Aris?" barked Ellis. "Where are you even swinging? You are better than that!" She seemed very frustrated and angry. Was this somehow what she really wanted? He stepped back a little and panted. How was he winded in a dream? That did not make any sense, unless his mind itself was just tired.

"What do you want from me? I don't know your tricks!" he barked.

"Then you use the tricks you do know! What use is a sword that is so afraid of its actions that it cannot even be drawn from its sheath?!" There was a dark blur which Alps assumed was actually Ellis' hand striking him, and he flipped backward from the force of it. He got up onto all fours. That stung, but not as much as he thought it would. Perhaps he was getting the hang of dream fighting. He grinned at that thought. He was fighting Ellis. Maybe he was losing, but he was fighting her. What was he feeling? Every time he'd actually been in a fight he was terrified, but that was not what he was feeling now, even though the one he was fighting was perhaps the most terrifying fighter he'd witnessed. He stepped side to side and tried to jab at Ellis. Her foot caught him in the temple and then he was on the ground again. The attack hadn't worked, but her reprisal hurt less than expected. He hopped back up, panting. He felt exhilarated in a way that he knew he should not, but it's how he felt all the same.

"Now how does it feel, Aris?" Ellis asked, her voice much quieter than before.

"What difference does it make, I'm fighting aren't I?" he shouted, jumping forward to just use his body to slam into Ellis. She simply stepped to the side and pushed her fist into his stomach. Alps landed and fell to his hands and knees, coughing, but he pulled himself back to his feet a moment after. Without knowing it his feet slid into a more stable positioning, inching closer to the fox before throwing his weight into a kick that he somehow felt that he *knew*. He spun his body quickly and brought his foot around to strike her in the neck, and perhaps he might have, but she simply seemed to blink away. He'd seen times where she seemed to just be there when he turned around, or gone when he looked up, but he'd never seen her actually vanish. She was controlling the dream. He looked back to the broken wall to find her standing on it again. He pitched a rock at her and she caught it as though Alps had just thrown the stone right into her hand. The fox hopped down, her tail waving silkily side to side.

"You are fighting yes, and you are losing terribly. It's shameful. But how do you feel, even so?" She seemed much calmer now. Alps wiped his chin, finding that he was drooling a bit from panting.

"I... Fine, I'll say it. I feel ... great. I feel awesome. Is that what you are waiting on? Proof that I am enjoying this?" He crossed his arms.

"Do you feel like a weapon?" Ellis asked. Alps narrowed his eyes. That was an odd question.

"No, I don't." Ellis raised an eyebrow, prompting him to say more. To think about it. He looked down, thinking hard. How did he feel? "I feel... I feel like I ... am not ..."

"Afraid." Ellis whispered, suddenly right by Alps' ear.

"Yes. Like I'm not afraid, like every other time I've fought you, I've never been..." His eyes widened suddenly, and he felt a shock through his whole body in that moment of realization. A thousand ghosted images barely within the view of his memory flickered as if on a dark mountainside and illuminated by a single flash of lightning. It felt as if he were just dropped through all of space as a sheer sense of knowing struck him, and yet the knowledge seemed impossible.

Alps sat bolt upright, panting still, the room dark. He scrambled his thoughts, the single dawn of memory still vivid in his mind, unforgotten. He could not forget it. He looked at the peacefully sleeping Nita at his side. He sighed resolutely, trying to calm down. Ellis let him out of the dream. Was that memory all that fight was about? He could not shake the realization that had hit him, but he owed it to his beloved to keep himself calm, and to focus on the moment. He did not want to wake Nita and worry her. Besides, it had been a dream, how much of what he had experienced was even a real experience? He looked down at his hand which he could swear was still stinging and he came to realize his back and ribs felt sore. His heart sank. Two points of red were clearly visible on the back of his hand. That had to have been the most terrifying revelation of his entire evening. Ellis... could harm someone in a dream.

Alps winced a bit at that, holding his hand and carefully getting out of bed. He would want to clean that up well because the last thing he wanted was for Nita to see it and ask questions. She did not need any more stress than what everyone else had already caused and he could handle the fox. He felt a lot more secure in that now, but the emotions he was feeling and the familiarity that was resting in his head were making it so that he was not likely to be able to sleep right away anyway. Alps moved through the temple as silently as he could. In the near darkness it was very difficult to see where he was going and it did not take him long at all to become lost. He felt very silly about that. At least he was able to see somewhat because of his incessantly lightly glowing little feathery wings. He was finding that to be the most useful they had been since he got them.

"Seriously," he said to himself, "I lived here as a kid, you would think some of this would be more familiar." He looked at the decaying walls and broken tile on the floor, worn and weathered and beaten by the years. It was pretty different from how he would have been likely to remember it. He stumbled along until he found some stairs that went down. He shook his head. "No, I definitely did not go below the ground floor." He turned away, but heard a voice from below.

“Hey, come look at this.” He stopped in his tracks.

“Reika?” he asked. It sounded like Reika, but she lacked the Asuna accent that made her speech so broken and sometimes grating to listen to.

“Come on, this is nice, you should see it.” It was definitely the Asuna female’s voice. Alps felt a little strange about it, but it was not much different from everything else that was happening to him on a regular basis these days. He shrugged and sighed. He was not likely to make it back to his bed without someone who had done a little more exploring leading the way. He plodded down the stairs which wound down for quite some time, the walls smooth and seeming a bit less damaged. Then again, it was harder for the kind of weathering seen up above to get down this far. It also felt a little cooler and dryer. The wolf made it to the bottom and found that it was carpeted; his bare feet grateful for the lack of broken tiles and other jagged favors upon the ground. He moved much more silently through the halls. He was able to see in the pale silver moon-like light of his wings well enough. The carpeted halls seemed to stretch forever. There were doors that went off to the sides which were closed and a thin layer of dust upon them suggested they had not been opened in some time.

“Reika? Are you down here?” Alps asked.

“Yes. What’s taking you so long? You are always so slow.” The voice continued to be indistinguishable from the somewhat tomboyish and grating voice of the hyena, it was just that her speech was unbroken and perfect. Alps finally arrived at a very solid-looking metal and wood door at the very end of the hall.

“Well, this is not ominous at all. But, this is a Letai temple, I don’t suspect it’s that much trouble...” The wolf rather confidently moved through the door, beginning to wonder if he had actually really become awake. It would explain how he’d still been injured. If he was sleeping, he could not seem to will himself wake up, that much he verified. As he opened the door and moved to the room beyond, he was dumbstruck. The room within was immense and housed a single large, radiantly glowing crystal. It seemed gold in color, but it was hard to tell if it was the crystal that was gold, or just that the gold gilding through the room reflecting back at the crystal made it seem like that. The walls were the same white stone most of the rest of the temple was made of, but there were bands of silver and gold all around the place, and despite how brightly the crystal was glowing, the ceiling which stretched away terminated only in darkness. It seemed impossibly high. Were the stairs that he had followed really that deep inside the temple? It had to be well below the lake’s water-line. What was this place? He did not see Reika anywhere.

“Are you here?” came the disembodied voice. It still sounded like Reika.

“I don’t see you.” Alps said softly. This was not going in a positive direction. Strangeness seemed never to work out for Alps.

"Look in the crystal, silly." Reika's voice complained. Alps had trouble believing it was her. That was too polite. Still, he moved up to the crystal. It felt pleasantly warm. There was certainly no dark essence that Alps could feel about it. The crystal was about fifteen feet wide and easily sixty feet tall. It was six-sided and seemed clear, if a little refractive. He placed his hands on the warm-feeling crystal and peered inside. He would not have been surprised to find out that Reika had somehow gotten into the crystal. The moment he looked inside he felt a lurch and then blinked as the crystal vanished and he found himself standing in a clearing in the middle of a forest with impossibly tall trees. The moons cast a lot of light and it was very easy to see.

"Of course. Now what?" Alps sighed. He could be hundreds of miles away now. How foolish of him, but he simply was not surprised. He looked at his hand which now was not stinging. It seemed completely healed. That was not a big surprise either. He was having trouble understanding what was real and what was not and felt that this was likely a dream as well. "Reika, you here?" the white lupine asked.

"No, she's not. Sorry to use her voice, but I needed to see you." This was a completely unfamiliar voice. Alps froze. Whoever it was... they were behind him. He swallowed and turned slowly. There was no one there. He looked straight out into the forest. As far as the eye could see, there was no one. This was not exactly a positive development.

"I hope I don't remember this dream. It's really weird." He half-whispered.

"Down here, Aris." The voice, feminine, stated somewhat casually. Alps blinked and then looked down. Standing right in front of him, only inches away but considerably shorter, was a lady fox, more akin to the Lhap islanders that Alps was more familiar with than Ellis' kind. She had bright white fur, however, which made him feel like maybe this was a relative of his father's. He backedpedaled a little, somewhat surprised to see her there instantly when he didn't even see her approach. He looked at length at her, trying to slow his heart. "I had not imagined myself to be so imposing to one such as you." The vulpine female said softly. Alps blushed a little, finding that she was bare, not so much as a ribbon upon her. She was petite, standing not more than four and a half feet tall, if that, and seemed very much the same sort of fox his father was. Her ears were, if possible, even larger, swept back, graceful and beautiful. She wore no jewels or markings; her appearance as pure as fresh-fallen snow. Her eyes were bright violet which made her feel more familial. Her tail was impossibly voluminous, even more than the fox that stood by his mother in the painting. It seemed as long as the rest of her body was tall. This could well be a relative.

"How did you know my name? And why in the world would you have chosen Reika's voice to draw me out here?" he asked, by way of perhaps getting her identity and her intentions. She did not seem a threat, but it was hard to know who was in this stage of his journey.

"I know what's going on in my temple, Aris. I chose the Asuna's voice because she's the one you seemed like you would both believe was bold enough to wander down to the crystal, and you'd be unwilling to ignore." Alps arched an eye-brow. She got that right. He'd not have ignored Reika. She spoke up again. "I know about your plans for tomorrow in the temple. It's very exciting! Are you excited?" Alps felt his worries immediately wane. This was not the kind of questioning an enemy might pursue right away. The chance to talk about something nice was not what he expected, but if that is what she wanted to talk to him about, he was willing. Even though he had trouble ignoring her beauty, he wanted to return to Nita's side as soon as he could, but this fox might be able and willing to help him. He responded with a bit of a smile.

"I'm excited, yes! I'm a little nervous too. I know Nita says things won't change but a lot of stuff is going to change. If we succeed in what we are doing, there will be a lot of attention on the royal family and I know it's going to be a very fast-paced at least for a while." He rubbed the back of his head in much the same fashion as he found himself doing much of the time when talking to his mother. This fox seemed a little like her.

"Do you enjoy your life with Nita right now, Aris?" asked the lady fox.

"Of course! Even with all the hell we've been through, these are the very happiest days of my life. I would not suggest otherwise." He nodded at that, sincerely believing it. He glanced down the vixen's body, inhaling deeply. Was he supposed to be attracted to her, or was her nudity just plain and natural and it would be insulting and crass for him to feel this way? He didn't know a lot about Lhap culture.

"So how is your life going to be that different if things are crazy and changing rapidly, so long as you are together?" asked the very wise-sounding lady. Alps paused. That was the most calming thought he'd been subjected to since Nita suggested that she take him as a life mate. His life had been a roller coaster since he met the queen and he'd never been happier. Even if things continued to be wild and crazy, it would not be any different between them, just around them. There would always be a storm, and it would always have surprises, good and bad, but they had agreed to weather it all together. He felt immediately wonderful.

"I cannot... believe the relief to that concern was so simple." He looked back down to the smiling vixen. "Thank you for that. Why did you want to see me?" He felt he owed her whatever she was seeking after her comforting words.

"I like seeing you. You've grown so tall. Your mother was sure you'd be no taller than Dias." Alps recoiled a little at those words.

"How could you have known my father?" he asked. "Are we... Are we in a Shadowfall?" This did not feel like a Shadowfall, but they would have to be for her to be old enough to know his mother and father or to have seen Alps when he was little.

"No, this is different." The lady said.

"It feels different." Alps explained.

"Does it? How did the Shadowfall feel to you?" she asked. Alps paused again. She knew that a Shadowfall did not work on him? How did she even know he'd been in a Shadowfall at all? This was even more bizarre.

"I guess... they didn't really work on me..." He crossed his arms.

"Initially perhaps, but after a while of dealing with the effect, you should have become immune. It was a very careful and clever seal." The wolf blinked again incredulously.

"A seal? From who?" he asked. Someone made him able to resist the Shadowfall? This was sounding more and more like he was intended for the things he was doing. His heart was sinking again. He wanted to believe his mother. He was not 'made' for all of this. He was doing it of his own volition.

"I did." She answered, cutting off his train of thought. "And before you go fretting about that whole 'am I a weapon' thing, don't. The seal was to make it so that your eventual, unavoidable eternity in the Shadowfall was not suffering. And... your mother had no part in it. She would have been mortified that I thought that the Letai in Amani were going to die out. I did not expect you to gain the ability to actually leave the Shadowfall. It's not from that seal. That's not how it worked. It might have made it so you had the chance to gain the ability, sure, since you were not being terrorized anymore, but you got out on your own. And after you did, I lost track of you completely, which means you left the lifestream. You can imagine my complete shock when I felt you and your mother approaching the temple seven hundred years later. So, yes, Aris. I *had* to see you." The wolf-hybrid wavered slowly side to side. That was a lot to have to digest. Yes, he knew that he escaped the Shadowfall and went into the Nether, which was not exactly in the lifestream, but he was unaware until that moment how he had the ability to do it. The reason he was different from other Letai was because he was not affected by the negative essence of the Shadowfall. Would others with the seal he had have eventually been able to escape? But he didn't escape from the Shadowfall and return home. His escape was supposedly much worse.

"Just... who are you?" Alps asked.

"My name is Luna. Should be familiar enough." Alps nodded. She shared his mother's name. It was a popular name for female Letai because the original High Priestess who arrived in Amani was named...

"Wait, not *the* Luna..." Alps stammered. Surely he was being over-dramatic.

"If by that you mean the one who established the Letai on the eastern continent, then yes, I would be that Luna. But obviously I'm long gone, it's been a very long time." Alps blinked at that.

"So this is just a dream?" the wolf asked.

"No, this is as real as the word real is allowed to suggest." Luna stated, her huge ears perking with some interest. "For what you went through Alps, you seem pretty in the dark about why you were Shadowfallen in the first place." The rather lovely lady fox circled him, seeming to take in his appearance. Despite the fact that he was wearing a simple grey robe tied in the middle, he felt oddly naked in front of her.

"I was told that the Letai were still dangerous if you killed them. I did not know what it meant. Does that mean you are dead? Am I talking to a spirit?" He was surprised to find himself suggesting that and being completely unafraid. Alps was terrified of ghosts as a child.

"Something like that. The stronger your essence is, the longer you can continue to influence those closest to you. In my case, I imprinted my energy in a crystal to make my consciousness last longer. 400 years before your mother was born, if you can believe that. It takes a lot of essence to do it, but it's worth it if really want to continue to help those you love. Also, since the crystal was at an important Letai temple, the essence drawn there was given to me routinely, and this kept me strong. In my case, I keep loving more people. It makes it easy to stay around. These last few centuries have been pretty uneventful, but the forest has gained enough essence to make sure I don't fall into the forever slumber." Alps listened intently. Did his mother even know about the spirit of their ancestor being in the temple? The conversation that she and Vhale had with him earlier came back to him. Was this what they were talking about?

"So this is kind of a dream inside the crystal because that's where you have placed yourself? So it's like a Shadowfall, but with no negativity, just your essence, sheltered? It's like a living dream?" Alps was starting to understand. He could control the entire world within the Shadowfall with his desires. It was likely that Elder Luna could do the same. He remembered some of the history that Vhale gave to him. Vhale found out about this technique perhaps from the library where he studied, and bent it to the perverse weapon it later became. He didn't create the Shadowfall as a concept, just corrupted it into an attack. His ancestor spoke again in her sweet and caring voice, seeming to know when to distract him from his darker thoughts.

"It was not a very easy seal to create within a crystal and took a lot of essence. Essence is good for making illusion, and for seeing into the spirit. Some, if they are strong enough, can even go into the dreams of another. The Val-Rashans were particularly adept at this." Alps felt that was immediately relevant.

"Who were the Val-Rashan?" Alps asked.

"The Val-Rashans are folks that the Letai were very, very polite with." Luna answered cryptically.

"Foxes?" Alps asked.

"Yes. Tall, graceful, lean, quiet ones. You've got one with you, why are you asking me about them?" Alps lowered his ears.

"She does not talk about herself."

"They usually don't." his ancestor stated calmly.

"She's very mysterious." Alps stated. He hoped that would prompt this ancient Luna to provide a little more information. He wanted to find out the meaning of the memories that prickled at the back of his mind that seemed to have lain dormant for so long. She answered courteously.

"Then you are every bit the scholar on the Val-Rashan that I am, Aris. They were not terribly open about their culture, even in my day." No, that was not terribly helpful.

"So you ... just wanted to meet me and make sure it was really me?" Alps was beginning to fret about getting back to his bed and returning to slumber for the very important event to come.

"I wanted to ask you where you went when you left the lifestream, obviously." Alps smiled at that. It was a very honest answer and he appreciated that. She did not hesitate to tell him exactly what she wanted. This was a rather refreshing change to him.

"I think I broke my Shadowfall. I don't know exactly what happened, but out I went." He rubbed the back of his head nervously. He hated not being able to tell her exactly what happened. She seemed very curious about it, and it had to be important. Still, where he went was troubling to everyone he told and he didn't want to give Elder Luna a hard time. He still was not entirely sure this was not all a dream but it felt too vivid.

"I don't think you went right from Shadowfall back to Amani. You have been outside of your Shadowfall for centuries." Elder Luna pointed out. The former slave sighed. He'd have to say it.

"I slipped into the Nether." Alps answered calmly. Surely this great priestess would know about that, maybe more than his mother and Vhale did. Maybe she had some answers about that for him.

"No, that would have killed you. You were a child, Alps, there's dragons, Culier Shadows, and worse in that place." She seemed to study Alps closely, and then,

carefully, she put a hand over his heart and jerked it back, eyes wide. "You aren't kidding. That... is where you went. I can still feel the endless void upon your essence. You really were... there." She seemed a bit fearful. That was not the reaction Alps had hoped for. He got the impression that the Nether was a bad place, but he didn't think it could be that bad. He'd survived it. Almost painfully, another memory prickled in his head.

"Alps... what awaited you when you got into that place?" The curious former great priestess asked a question that was completely appropriate for her to ask given that she was confronted with someone who had actually been there, and in that instant, for the first time, Alps had a solid, real, and unwavering answer.

"Ellis." He said it flatly, and it might not have meant a lot to the priestess, but it meant everything to him. He suspected that she had been in there, but he was never completely sure until that moment. And he was not sure about exactly what her role there had been. The brief and clear memory of skidding on his belly to a halt on what felt like sun-baked gravel. He got up and dusted himself off, turning around and seeing a wavering black mass slowly approaching. It smelled like sulfur and blood and he immediately and instinctively knew he needed to stay away from it. He did not remember his entire attempt to escape, but he recalled a ledge so high up that a ground beneath was not a promised possibility. With nowhere to go, he turned around again to face the death that had been following him for who knew how long, but she was there. Ellis was there between him and it. He did not see what she did, but he remembered a light so bright that the next thing he knew was being carried away from that place in her arms slowly regaining his sight and being scolded for looking right at it.

"Ellis?" Elder Luna asked. Alps supposed he had not said the taller fox's name in the temple itself, and his last conversation with her had been in a dream which may have been just as real as what Alps was experiencing now.

"The Val-Rashan." Alps whispered, still in a daze from the sudden clear accounting of his first moments in the Nether. But it cast a much brighter light on the other memories that were foggy and ethereal in his head after the fight with her before. He remembered fighting Ellis. Even if blurred in his consciousness, it was clear in his heart. They had been in there together for so long and somehow he could not remember until he struck her. He had never struck someone like that before, in a brawl you intend to fight even if it's not about self-defense, but when he fought Ellis he remembered it as if singing a song he knew as a kid and remembering everything as clear as it could be. He'd been in sparring matches with Reika and with Nidaja, but those were not like this.

"You don't remember it." The priestess seemed shocked.

"I am just starting to remember a little. A bit more just now. I know it was her. She stayed with me. She ..." Alps did not know how to feel. Should he be revolted that this seemingly cold-hearted killer had taken care of him for so long? Why did he not

remember her? Why did he not love her? He then folded back his ears. He did love her. It's why he got so upset with her criticism. He shook his head. Elder Luna, as she seemed apt to do when Alps was troubled, soothed him with her sweet and gentle voice.

"I am not helping you at all, am I? You should be relaxing for your ceremony tomorrow." She frowned, the short vulpine circling him again.

"It's alright. I guess you understand that it's been a pretty crazy journey." He remembered her encouraging words and it comforted him again. It might always be crazy, but he would be with the ones he loved. Even after the dark times were over after this journey and the world changed, the one thing that got to stay the same was his closeness with the ones he loved.

"I am starting to see that, yes." Elder Luna stood in front of Alps. "I won't have you exhausted on my account. Let me send you back." She circled Aris again, seeming to really give him a thorough looking over.

"You know I will come back, right?" he asked.

"If you live through this foolish thing you all intend to do." Elder Luna stated.

"Do you think we can do it?" he asked. Having her support in this would mean a lot to him.

"I am less aware of what needs to be done than you are. I only know the very basic concept of what you are trying to do based on discussions between Nidaja and Lyat in the temple. You and your friends have a chance of surviving it, even if not everything is a success. I think it's worth trying. I wish Vhale had visited my temple sooner. I might have been able to stop this." She looked up at Alps, her eyes fixed on his.

"It won't help to shoulder the blame. It's time for happier things, if we can manage them." Alps found it strange that he was comforting someone who was legendary even by the accounts of people who were associated with legends.

"Alps, you spared Vhale. You had no idea that I had purified his heart; all you knew is what he had done when the Nether had consumed him. So little of the real Vhale was there when he cast you into the Shadowfall, and yet, just to torture himself, he refused to let me heal that dark deed. What did you see in him that made you spare him?" Her words seemed crafted in wonder. Was it that unthinkable? He was not around during the war and he was not subjected to, in his memory, those things that the dark one had done.

"I never knew the Vhale of the war." Alps stated. "When I met him in his Shadowfall, I saw someone consumed, not in hatred of others, or darkness, but

sadness and regret. That did not, to me, seem right. I guess killing him would have been easy, and he even felt it would be justified, the essence knows my mother would have done it without a second thought, but looking at it now, it seems she would have lost a friend..." He smiled a bit, feeling even better about his choices. Elder Luna was happy that Vhale had been spared. It was a good choice.

"Friends with your mother? Yes, I could agree there." The lady fox nodded emphatically. "I wanted, before you left, to tell you that You are right to love so strongly, even if you run the risk of falling to ruin by it. Your friends know this is your weakness, but they won't let it destroy you." Alps looked away, thinking back to Ellis.

"Not all of them are happy about having to protect me when I am being too gentle." He shuffled his feet.

"This is something that worries you a great deal, so here is my advice as you return to those you love." Her words were measured and slow to cast importance on what came next.

"Yes?" he asked attentively.

"Trust your friends as they trust you. When you tell them to love, they do. Against their better judgment, Vhale was spared. This, it seemed, set the path for you all to follow. They do not regret listening to you. But you must listen to them. When they tell you its time to fight, do not hesitate. Do not shy away. Lyat and Nidaja both know very well when and how to use force. They will give their lives to protect you from harm, but you will be expected to do the same. Do you understand?" Alps inhaled very deeply, holding his breath a moment. Nidaja and Nita and Lyat and Reika had never asked him to kill someone, to fight to the death, they did not want him too, but Ellis was far, far more direct about the very same thing this sage vulpine priestess was saying. Alps could love and still fight. He would have to. He nodded to the lady fox.

"I will. I promise." He stood straighter. He was not sure what he had to do in order to allow her to send him back. And then he was standing in the crystal chamber, the light of the moon gone and that golden light of the crystal returning. There was no jarring motion, nothing. He was just in a different place. He shook his head slowly. His life was so very complicated and strange. Finally, he remembered that he was not entirely sure how to get back to his bed. He hoped that Nita did not wake up and worry. The wolf hurried from the crystal chamber into the long hallway that headed back to the stairs. As he plodded along quickly, he found himself suddenly anxious at a certain point in the hallway, but that feeling ebbed quickly as he moved. He stopped. He turned back to the point where he felt that anxiousness. He narrowed his eyes and moved back to that area. He stood there for a moment, peering into the shadows. His wings glowed enough to let him see. He then looked up and crossed his arms.

"Found me, did you?" came a voice from behind. This time was not a dream. It was really Ellis. She had followed him down her, perhaps.

“Somehow, yes. I think I understand what that fight was about.” He turned as faced her. She wore white robes this time. He did not recognize them. Did she even carry a pack around? He never saw her with anything like that.

“Do you?” she asked, her tail swaying back and forth liquidly behind her.

“I remember you in the Nether now. I remember you protected me.” He approached the fox who seemed fairly relaxed. This was not a dream, he was sure of it. She did not have any unnatural control here, he felt.

“Is that all you remember? You don’t remember anything more useful?” she asked. Alps flattened his ears. Without being told, he was quite aware of what she meant – of what she wanted from him. He took two quick steps, feeling lighter than usual in his rapid motion. He spun backwards, keeping as good an eye on the fox’s position as possible as he made two very powerful and very fast swings at her. This, perhaps, she would not be able to shrug off so easily. He felt the impacts but could tell it was just her hands blocking his. He advanced, the movements seeming come naturally. This was what she wanted, he was sure. She wanted him to remember fighting her and to prove that he would still do it. He had practiced fighting in a sparring nature with Reika, but he always felt confused and sluggish and awkward. That feeling was gone. Everything felt organic and clean. He shifted his weight, brought one foot up and then the other in a series of kicks that felt familiar, though he didn’t quite know how. He felt like he might have felt if he were a dancer, flowing motions and planned responses. Ellis blocked each attack, but he felt confident in them all the same. The fact occurred to him even as he was fighting that she had to block them.

“Don’t fancy a blow to the head in the real world, Ellis?” he asked, smirking.

“I told you, one. Don’t pretend being willing to fight makes you automatically more able.” She barked.

“Was I able before?” Alps asked. “I was a kid, it must have been pretty easy for you!” He was panting as he threw a few more punches, using the heel of his palm instead of his fists. He seemed to be faster that way. Ellis seemed capable deflecting his blows with ease, like it really was some kind of planned dance routine. Alps’ heart raced. He could not fully comprehend why it felt so right, but he felt good fighting with her.

“You’d be surprised.” Ellis seemed to enjoy the sparring as well as her demeanor didn’t seem as dour as usual. Alps bounced from heel to toes, side to side, changing his direction and position. He tried harder, pushing himself to move faster, but he seemed a prisoner of his body with what he wanted to do in the fight, and what he could expect to work. He called out to the vixen.

“Maybe you should try your hand at attacking, I doubt my opponents would ever be content t-“ Alps took a hard punch across the muzzle, sending him in a half-spin to the left. He jerked back a little, inwardly laughing at himself for being that silly, but he advanced again despite how much it stung. Ellis did not waste time, kicking in graceful combination level to his chest, but he found himself blocking them just in time. They were not gentle attacks and it hurt his arms to block them, but they did not find their intended target. A feeling of pride swelled within him. She spoke again.

“Better, Aris. Better.” Ellis moved in a manner that seemed like a cluster of reeds in the wind and Alps inexplicably got tapped under the chin, making his teeth clack together loudly. He found that if Ellis attacked him she was willing to get closer because she had to reach him, and in the next moment, he used that to his advantage. She moved in to give him another tap, and he made no effort to block it, instead turning with the stinging impact, not much different from anything he dealt with as a child under Chana, and he moved his hand to give a solid back-hand to the fox. She blocked this, and he punched with the other hand as he let the block switch his momentum. She blocked this too, or would have, if he hadn’t jerked his hand back once she committed to the movement and thrust it forward again, planting his palm firmly to the side of Ellis’ muzzle with an audible thump. Everything stopped. Her head tilted back slightly she stared at him out of the corner of her eyes. Alps looked at his hand to the muzzle it was planted against with disbelief.

There was an odd, appreciative look in her eyes. “How beautiful it is when the seed of memory blossoms again into the flower of knowledge.”

“I thought you said I only got one.” He said as a coy, boastful smirk spread across his face.

Before he’d even finished he felt her foot against his chest again and sure enough with a single hard push she sent him sprawling across the hallway. A sharp reminder not to be arrogant around her.

Panting raggedly he picked himself up, glaring at Ellis.

“What do you even fight for?” he huffed. It was hard feeling so capable in what he remembered, at least subconsciously he could do, and still being so bitterly out-matched. She stood still a moment and folded the end of her sleeves over, knowing he was not going to try another attack.

“We have similar goals, I just achieve mine differently.” She spoke rather matter-of-factly. She moved forward again quickly, putting a finger against Alps’ chest. The pressure behind it was enough to hurt his sternum quite a bit. He backed up as she spoke. “And I’ve been fighting to keep *you* alive. You would do well to bear this in mind going forward.” She crossed her arms. Alps leaned back against the wall and panted heavily.

"I ... may have been wrong to criticize you, Ellis." Alps stated. "You are not the person I thought you were. I was foolish to question you as I did. I am not happy about the people who have to die, that won't change, but it does not do any good to be mad at you for it. They have made the choice to stand against a world where we are not in fear of our extinction. This is not a civil war. One path is the loss of all our lives, the other is a hopeful future. It's not a mere difference of opinion. Greed or madness are the only things that would make one choose the first choice." Ellis watched Alps quietly for a moment before stepping backwards and vanishing into the shadows with parting words.

"Spare me the philosophical rhetoric. You've quite a day tomorrow and I should think you'll be a mess without sleep." Alps would have thought she was only hiding, except that sensation of anxiousness, that telling feeling that actually told him she had been there.

"Why didn't she bother teaching me *that* trick I wonder?" Alps asked himself. He waited for her to somehow answer that, but knew she was gone. Alps moved back to the stairs and shuffled up them slowly. He had so much on his mind. It was clear, at least when it came to the opinion regarding her, the fox didn't much care one way or the other. By the time he was done walking through the quiet temple back to find his room, thankful it did not take much longer, his mind was nearly blank with need for sleep.

It gave him some time to appreciate the peacefulness of the temple. It was hard to believe that he really was a child in this other-worldly place. There was little doubt that his life would have been entirely different even if he had been in this place a little longer, but would it have ultimately been better? He would have been a temple focus, and he would have far fewer memories of an abusive nature, but he would not have Nita, or Nidaja or Reika or any of these friends he could not imagine life without.

He strolled along the outer hall, knowing that area at least so he was certainly no longer lost. The forest itself was a bit noisy. He was surprised how quiet it remained inside, but the walls were fortress-thick. He finally went back in through the front of the temple, and found his cozy, safe sleeping quarters. Nita was clutching a pillow in his place, but without disturbing her, he managed to switch places with it. It took less time for him to fall asleep than it did to get into bed with his life-mate-to-be.