

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 4

Alps rubbed the back of his head as he looked up at Nidaja, who was still playing with the tiny wings that had erupted from between his shoulders the previous night. It was morning already and he found it strange how natural they felt. It was like they had always been there, but no one had ever noticed. Did everyone have them? Was it just him? Was this normal to the Letai? Were manifestations always wings? Nothing he had ever read had discussed them. He was glad an actual Letai priestess was on the boat to help him with the issue.

The general was clothed in relaxed fashion beside him on her bed as she toyed with the long, silky and simple feathers. The wings were a bit minimalist, having five long primary feathers, and a row of shorter secondary feathers reaching to a crook before the joint that lead down to the base. It gave them an almost playfully small appearance, and made it plain to see they were not useful for flying. They did seem to be useful for making Nidaja happy. Alps could actually feel the warmth of her delight flowing from her as she stroked the feathers. That was not going to make it any easier to release the energy that formed them.

"They are so warm, Alps..." she marveled. "It's not like something that's just... body heat. It's like something that was left in the sun. And the way they glow isn't like the light's coming from them, it's like it's reflected off of them. They are very... magical." Alps had made the same observation, but it was interesting hearing that Nidaja saw them and felt them much the same way.

"There are very *weird*," Alps offered. "If we run into enemies, and any are able to immediately report, I would prefer something so... unusual not make it back to the ears of the Avatar. He would immediately know he was dealing with a serious attempt against him." Nidaja frowned a bit at that, looking at her lover, who sat before her in his black trousers with no shirt on. It would not fit at that moment without some modification.

"Don't worry too much. We can let you wear a cape or cloak or something over them, no one will see them." Nidaja seemed to be rather positive about it. She seemed to understand that Alps was worried about not getting to enjoy the happiness of his friends for the constant need to reduce his essence-charge.

"It's summer." Alps stated flatly.

"War's not comfortable." Nidaja offered just as two dimensionally. Alps nodded a bit at that. She did have a point. There were bigger matters to fret over than just wings on his back. "Does it hurt if I pull at them at all? Can you feel them?" Nidaja did so, not terribly hard. Alps could feel the pressure of her pulling, but it didn't hurt.

"No, I can feel them, but they don't seem to hurt." He felt the wolf general behind him pull a bit harder. "Don't try to rip them off, that can't be good for them." He didn't even want to think about that. Nidaja shook her head.

"Your skin at the shoulder doesn't move." The general sifted through Alps' fur at the base of his little wings. "They aren't attached to the skin, or even your body. It's like they ignore it and are attached to something deeper in." She seemed mystified.

"Maybe they are just essence... Like... visible essence that one can touch?" the former slave considered aloud, "The halo of light people have isn't attached at the skin either and I got these wings while drawing from you and Lyat." Alps said thoughtfully. Luna could answer for certain, but it was interesting to try to figure them out on his own.

As he brought up Lyat's name, the warrior Asuna entered the room and brought in a curious-looking Nita, who he had been sent to retrieve once the sun had risen, giving her time to sleep before subjecting her to the unusual result of Alps' essence-drawing. Alps moved his wings between his shoulders so they were not immediately visible, sitting on the bed facing his life-mate-to-be. She wore a white blouse and a very light and airy-looking skirt that came down just past the knee. It looked like a vacation outfit for her.

"Good morning Nidaja, hello love... You didn't come back last night. You didn't get sick did you?" the queen asked. Alps found that to be a sharp assumption, as he likely would have left her side rather than keep her up all night groaning with illness from the ocean waves.

"No, I am fine... I came to talk with Nidaja..." He pondered the right words to delicately describe his tryst with the queen's sister. He was allowed these encounters and with honor, but he didn't want to seem like he didn't want to be by Nita's side. He had left for reassurance, not physical affection. The affection just kind of happened.

"... And ended up dozing off over here." The general answered for him, seeing him struggle a bit as he tried to protect Nita's feelings.

"Oh! I see!" the general's sister barked brightly, grinning at her lover. "I was so tired, and you needed to tire yourself out! You always have so much energy, love!" She laughed, showing that the idea of it didn't distress her at all.

"That was not the original intent, but no, I could not sleep." Alps stated. "I guess I was just worried about what we were doing. But you guessed right as to why I fell asleep here."

"It's alright, I know you worry." Nita moved over toward the white lupine who lowered his head a little.

"Also, in the process, I drew too much essence energy. I was not aware that was even a problem, but apparently, for some, it is." He had felt he knew what he would say to keep from shocking her, but he didn't feel so sure now.

"Too much?" Nita asked, standing before her lover, who leaned back a little to keep her from seeing the wings yet. "It drifts away naturally on its own, you can't draw too much, I don't think. Do you have a headache or something?" she pondered, touching Alps' brow. Her fingertips were so gentle, and he could so easily feel her love through her touch. He was getting so much more attuned to the emotional state of those close to him. Alps wondered at the speed at which he was gaining experience with the essence. It felt like remembering things, rather than being taught new things.

"Apparently, pure Letai can over-do it." Nidaja assisted as Alps enjoyed Nita's touch. "This is especially true if they have not been trained in any techniques that use up the excess, like healing and sealing." She spoke with an air of authority, as if Luna had not just taught her that night about the subject.

"Oh? How can we tell if he's had a bit much?" the queen asked. Alps finally leaned forward and spread his little wings out. Nita made a faint little squeak, her eyes wide, shocked but not really fearful. Alps peered at her with a measured stare, wanting so much for her not to be upset with him. This could complicate things for him, and it made him even more strange-looking than the white fur alone did. Would she have reservations about them the way she had on the dock their first day meeting when she saw his fur?

"Aren't they cute?" Nidaja asked, beaming. She was trying to diffuse the shock and stress from the tense moment.

"Oh goodness, Alps, you ... you have..." The wolf nodded, glad that she didn't scream at least. He was afraid she might, and he would feel badly for frightening her. Instead, to his surprise, he could feel her adoration flooding over him, just as Nidaja had done when she saw them. Were they somehow enchanted to cause that reaction? He felt stunned wonder from Lyat, who still seemed to feel that way as he watched them.

"They aren't permanent. Luna knows a technique to make them vanish again." He wanted to quickly clarify that. Nita nodded and took one of the wings between her fingers.

"Th-They're real. And they are so *warm*..." she whispered.

“You are not upset?” Alps asked fearfully.

“Of course not, my love... these are pretty. I don’t know why, but they seem to suit you, like they had just been missing before, and I couldn’t place it.” He flittered the wings subconsciously as his tail wagged, getting another happy sound from both sisters. Lyat groaned.

“I think I am needing these when I was younger.” He laughed. “Might not have spent so much time alone.” Nita laughed at that, and then Alps heard a voice that made him freeze.

“It is time for food soon, yes? Is... in here?” Reika wandered right into the cabin, Alps’ wings clearly visible. She held Bone close suddenly, as if listening to him as she stared at the white male in stunned silence. Alps could not hear Bone without holding him, so he was not sure what information was being given to the younger Asuna. The former slave had not looked forward to her discovering his wings so soon, and feared she would make a scene, or be too curious or hands-on about them.

“It is being okay, Reika. Alps is having these because he is getting stronger.” The Letai male regarded Lyat somberly as he said that. It was perhaps about as well as he had understood the previous night’s conversation, but it wasn’t that far off. He had more energy, and that’s why he had them. Reika would be able to respect more strength too. Lyat was bright for having said it, that was as simple and concise an explanation as could have been given.

“Bone is liking them, so Reika is liking them. Where is food?” She then turned and left. Alps was a little surprised in how little fuss the normally over-the-top Reika made of them. The only one Alps was worried about delicately showing them to while on the boat was Nita. The scent of frying meat had followed the investigating Reika into the cabin, so he suddenly had food on his mind, and stood up.

“I think food is a good idea.” Alps stated, and took the sisters both by the hand. Lyat left behind his sister and the rest followed up on deck, then to the aft sub-deck where the food was being prepared. The morning was warming nicely, and the breeze above deck refreshed Alps as much as he assumed breakfast would. He had feared that at least on the boat there would be little to eat, but for the first day, they had eaten well. He assumed it would be less and less as time went on, so he vowed to enjoy it while he could.

Breakfast was briefly interrupted by the former slave’s arrival, and he had to explain again the essence-manifestations. Lyat’s simple explanation was more suitable, so the wolf used that, adding only a little detail when pressed. It made more sense to the others at least, and while they stared a lot at them, they did not hassle him too much about them. Alps hated being the center of attention, but he would tolerate it just until the novelty of those wings around his friends wore off. Uri and Misha joked about a new

fashion trend once everything calmed down if he were seen out and about with them in the company of the queen; a trend where male Amanians wore them elaborately to impress their potential lovers. Nita had to admit that she saw that as a distinct possible outcome, and it comforted Alps a bit to think of a time where it might be okay for him to be seen with them. He appreciated the guards for looking far forward instead of just in the grim immediate future.

Luna had already eaten and was bathing herself, so she was not present to answer questions. This was unfortunate because after food had been consumed Lira had a sustained barrage of them that Alps answered as best he could, which was not very well. She was still in a bit of shock because of all the new information that had been thrust upon her. Letai on the move, the Shadowfall broken, an impending alliance with the Asuna... it was all a large amount for her to take in.

Vhale came to retrieve some food, saw Alps, widened his eyes, and aborted his attempt to even enter the room. He just turned on his heel and left. The white wolf was aware that he made Vhale uncomfortable, so this did not surprise him. He had not shown any negative feelings toward Vhale, the former warlord seemed to furnish all those for himself. He seemed to think that Alps should hate him most of all, and would not hear any other way. After everyone had settled down about it, however, things got back to normal, more or less. Nita was unusually snuggly with him, which he didn't mind, but Lira seemed to find him fascinating. Even that eventually gave way to a regular post meal time bantering conversation. It felt nice to relax with his friends again, and it was easy in their company to forget the great task ahead for a moment.

After a while, Alps excused himself and went to do what was definitely needed the most at that point. In a small room a door down and across from where he had slept the previous night, Luna had filled a large fifty gallon barrel with sea water and warmed it using her essence. Alps needed a bath. He had expected, as social and affectionate as Nita was being, that she might have suggested joining him. This was in part why he vocally stated he intended to bathe but to his surprise she opted instead to go and take essence lessons from Luna as she had scheduled the previous day. Alps didn't mind. A relaxing soak would do him good.

Alps sighed as he walked into the small room on the boat that was used for bathing. The barrel in this room was quite wide, and deep enough to bathe while standing. For something so simple, it was always a welcome sight. He had not had to use it often, as the trips back and forth over the ocean had thankfully been few, but he used it enough to know he wanted it now, especially with the knowledge that the water was made warm by Luna. He wondered how often she had warmed a bath for him while he was but an infant, and if she considered that wistfully as she prepared the bath for him this time. Was it why she did it? Did she want to remember those days? He didn't remember them at all. After locking the door, lost in those thoughts, he turned around, and thumped his back against the door.

He was not alone. There were a few possible scenarios that he knew could play out encountering one of his friends in the bath, and normally those scenarios would not bother him, but this was one that he had certainly not hoped for.

Reika glared at the wolf from under half-closed eyes, leaning over the edge of the bath, seeming as if she wished to sink in deeper and hide herself. Her clothes were strewn about, the scent of the saltwater used for that bath high on the air since it was warm. She had intercepted the bath intended for Luna's son. Alps knew better than to scold Reika for it. She was not likely told it was for him, and it would have been just as inviting to her as it was to him. He could see himself out, and come back when she was done. It would likely at least still be lukewarm by that time. Alps reached for the door latch. The hyena perked up, and folded her round ears down a bit.

"Wulf stays. Is talking for Reika to enjoy." The winged lupine fluttered those new appendages with some degree of aggravation. He would rather not be caught hanging out in the bath with Reika, as it would send entirely the wrong message, but he worried that if he made her feel he was leaving out of lack of any kind of interest, she would be dishonored, and he had a lot of traveling yet to do with the hyena. He sauntered over to the tub, and leaned back against it, standing, resting his elbows as he took his place in front and just beside her outside the tub, still clothed in his trousers.

"Alright then, I stay. What would you like to talk about?" Alps asked.

"What is you thinking of Reika?" she asked. The white lupine faltered a bit, looking down at his feet. What kind of question was that? Was she concerned that he was still angry about how he was treated when he was initially abducted? Those painful times had been forgiven long ago.

"I trust you implicitly." He stated. "You are loyal, and your brother cares very deeply for you. The empress puts a lot of faith in your abilities, and I do as well. I feel safer with you around." Alps lied about the last part. Reika made him feel lots of things, but safe was not the highlight of those things.

"Alps is being good to all Asuna, even when it is dangerous. Reika likes wulfs now. Alps is strong. Wings is proving it." She reached up and strokes the feather appendages. Alps shivered a little at her touch. He was not used to Reika touching him gently. It was not unpleasant, but seemed sorely out of place. "Does Alps like Rios?" she asked, which seemed so out of the blue that he leaned forward, his nose almost touching hers when he looked to her, before looking forward, not wanting to nearly bump muzzles with her and get his head pulled off.

"Rios is very strong. She loved her people a great deal and would do anything for the survival of her friends and her race. I respect her a lot." Alps hoped that this answer would suffice. His real feelings about Rios were confusing.

"Does Alps love Rios?" Reika asked. The former slave winced. Why in the hell would she ask that? She knew he was not really able to do that.

"I am promised to Queen Razelle." He hoped to steer away from the topic altogether. Undeterred, the curious hyena continued her line of questioning.

"What if no Nita was there waiting?" She leaned forward, huffing softly in his ear.

"I don't like to think of Nita not being there." Alps answered honestly.

"Reika knows, but if not, is Rios being loved by Alps?" she asked. The wolf relented finally. She would not stop until she had the answer that she wanted.

"Perhaps. She has a lot of the same qualities that make me love Nita. I don't see why not. But if I were to lose Nita, I don't think I could love another the same. You might understand if you fall in love so deeply." Alps wanted to make it clear that Nita not making it through the journey was not an offer of himself to Rios.

"Alps is enjoyed being with Rios, though, yes? Is feeling so good, holding and being inside?" Her questions again disarmed the wolf. He folded his ears back and looked at the floor, blushing. Why would she ask that. She was there for the first time that it happened, and ensured her empress carried his child. The first time he did not enjoy it, but then he did. It was part of his confusion about the powerful and rather demanding empress.

"It feels wonderful, Reika." He wondered why she was asking those questions. She huffed softly behind his ear.

"Did Reika feel wonderful too?" she asked, her voice crackling a little. Alps perked his ears a bit. Why did she sound so anxious?

"Y... Yes. You felt very good. I did not expect you to do that. It was so sudden. And very effective." He was not outright glad she did it, but at the time, he remembered that it was everything he wanted in that moment, since he had been fighting off his climax so he could fake bursting in Rios.

"Reika knows. She is counting. Wolf makes it twenty-seven counts. Then he gives to Asuna everything, and is very hot." Her voice raised at the last part, and she murmured, "Reika liked it too." Alps felt his cheeks go scarlet. He had suspected that she did that because she was ordered to and would gladly carry out any order. Perhaps at the time she did, but she was anxiously telling him at that moment that she liked it.

"I am..." Alps thought hard about what to say. "... I am glad. I worried that you were forced to and resented me for it." He wanted to seem appreciative that it was not a bad memory.

“Reika is having to, and maybe does not like idea before, but is loving to think of it now. Talk to Reika? Tell is how you feel when Rios is doing those things, and then Reika... Tell about it honestly.” Her voice wavered a little, making Alps feel that she might have really been stressing out about how he felt about it all this time. He decided it would be a good idea to let her know that he was not hurt by the alarming experience.

“R-Rios being on me made me fearful at first. I knew what she wanted, and I could not give it to her. I was afraid that Nita would not want me back if I did. So I resisted. I tried to relax, but she was so hot, and so tight around me, sliding up and down like a perfectly form fitting glove. I felt like she could not be any more perfectly shaped to hold me inside her, and every stroke felt like a tightly undulating wet hand stroking me, eager for what I had been trained to give to my queen. Every part of me was willing and desperate to give her what she wanted but my troubled heart and mind.” The white canine blushed deeper, holding his ears back as he felt himself becoming aroused. He was pretty sure that Reika could not see him from where she was behind him.

“Then?” she asked with a little anxious puff of breath.

The realization hit Alps hard. He had walked in on her as she was already thinking about these things in the tub. He had caught her pleasuring herself to those memories of him, and she was getting off on him telling her how it felt to him. He had not really considered Reika in such a light, and knew becoming involved with her in that fashion would have been unpredictable and dangerous, but if he were to just walk out as if disgusted, she would be impossible to travel with. Another thing that he became immediately aware of because he suddenly focused on it... was that he could feel her pleasure in his wings, a soft, very pleasant tingling sensation, like being gently caressed in just the right soothing, loving way.

“Then...” Alps pondered continuing. What would happen? What might she desire? Would she be content to pleasure herself? She seemed to be hiding it. The sudden quiet pause let the wolf become aware of something else. A light thunk-thunk-thunk from inside the tub. Alps perked his tall lupine ears again. Her knuckles rapping the front of the wooden tub? Her hips were back a bit.

“Please... huhh... Tell Reika...” She was growing impatient. Alps closed his eyes. It certainly could not do too much harm.

“I felt her pulling me inside her, suckling me with her body. I wanted to just let go so bad.” He made sure to speak in such a fashion that was more descriptive as he suspected she desired to hear as she masturbated behind him. He continued to look away as if actually unaware.

“Yes...” The hyena’s scent was masked by the warm saltwater in the tub.

“Twice... No... Maybe three times...” Alps continued, “... I thought I really was going to cum, but she slowed to talk to me, to encourage me, and that was enough to let me slip back from the brink. I think she would scold herself if she knew how close I came to just surrendering and apologizing to Nita later.”

“But then Reika would not be needing to help.” She panted. “Is better way we did yes...” She gave a gentle and tense squeak. Alps jerked slightly, actually feeling the pulse through his wings. “Keep telling Reika...” she said in a shivering whisper.

“O-okay...” Alps murmured, feeling his cock swelling so tight in his trousers. Why was it so alluring having her masturbating behind him? “.. Anyway.. Uh... Yes, she came close to making me burst inside her a couple times, so I decided I had to go ahead and let her think she succeeded. Surely she was able to tell how close she had me. It would be believable, right?” Reika panted faster, and the thumping became a bit louder. It seemed too hard to be her knuckles alone. Did she have one of Nidaja's brushes in the tub? Alps blushed scarlet at the thought of one of those smooth-handled wooden-brushes pistoning in and out of Reika's tight sex.

“She is not falling for it... Please, what next?” the desperate-sounding and potentially violent girl asked. Alps knew what she wanted to hear about.

“She slipped off of me, panting from her release, and seemed satisfied. I thought I was in the clear. I was going to really have to stroke myself off though... maybe spend myself all over the sheets, however hard it was going to be. That took everything I could muster to keep from spilling it all inside her.” Another squeak from Reika and Alps felt another hard throb through his wings. She nearly climaxed. Oh, if the wings let him tell so clearly, he could be dangerous in bed with his lovers from this point on! He continued. “then I felt your mouth around me, Reika.”

“Yeessss...” Her melting tone was so grateful. “Tell Reika is how it feels...” Surely she did not think the wolf was still unaware. The loud thumping had sped up a bit, and he knew what she wanted. He gave it gladly, no longer having any reservations about making her cum in the tub.

“You began stroking me in your perfect mouth, just short enough, tongue just wide enough, and I needed it so bad too. I wanted to cum and I thought I might not get to, maybe not for days. I ached from it, and you stroked me so perfectly. And then, I just gave in. What harm could it do? You would get a surprise, but you wanted a taste. I gushed for you, Reika.. I filled your mouth... I sprayed every drop of my seed on your tongue, and you held it there, a gift for your empress...”

Thunk thunk thunk THUNK THUNK! Thunk! Reika stopped thumping and gave a rushing breath of a long shivering moan, and Alps felt satisfied pleasure all through those new feathery appendages, and a faint sensation in his tummy that he recognized from when he had switched forms with Nidaja. He could feel the actual sensation, however light, of Reika's climax. The wings put him in far closer contact with the

essence of others. He would have to be careful just what they allowed him to feel. It stunned him a bit, and she melted a little into the tub. Alps turned around and slipped his trousers off. She would certainly not refuse to let the wolf in the tub with her after that, and he wanted to feel the warm water over him, given how much he ached. Maybe she would even taste him again. He thought he might rather like to allow it.

She did not protest at all as she hung over the edge of the tub. Alps slipped in and caressed the hyena, who panted softly, gratefully. Alps stood behind her, stroking her back. The short, strong Asuna was quite lovely to look at, he had not considered any attraction to the stocky girl until that moment, but there was no denying it. Her energy also felt wonderful flowing through him.

"Closer to Reika... so she is touching..." She moved a hand behind herself from the edge of the tub. Alps brought his hips forward, thinking carefully to try to remember if he locked the door. This would be hard to explain to a few of those on the boat. Like her brother. Alps groaned happily as strong, but pleasantly gentle fingers wrapped around his girth and began lovingly stroking him in a milking, lusty fashion. He put his hands on Reika's shoulders, standing behind her, letting her stroke him off.

"You liked it too, then?" he asked.

"Reika is learning to like lots." She huffed. Her hand sped up a little, and her fingers turned and twisted around his throbbing organ. He was surprised at how ready he was, but he leaned over her back, fluttering his wings a little subconsciously. "You feel good in Reika's hand... Is fun be doing this to wulf." Alps closed his eyes, the act of breaking a taboo always a fast way to bring him to his peak, and he was not trying to hold back. "You is forgiving Reika. Is making her happy."

"I'll cum..." Alps huffed, a warning that came right as he considered that their bath was about to be for nothing. Their fur would be gummed up terribly between the saltwater bath and the sticky wolfseed. His worries about spoiling their fur were suddenly squelched as Reika pushed her hips back and took Alps fully inside her. He could remember telling himself no, he didn't want to do that, but the next moment, his back was arched, the water was splashing violently, and he was fucking Reika for everything he could muster!

The hyena was beyond a doubt delighted. Alps gritted his teeth tightly. What was he doing? Surely this was not healthy to do to the somewhat insane girl? But the next few seconds found her pushed hard to the front of the barrel, and a hot cry from her sent that little shockwave through her unexpected lover's wings, and then hot, heavy torrents blasted away at her cervix as Alps pushed as deep as he could, getting a very positive-sounding groan from Reika.

Alps stopped, and rested against her back, still writhing with pleasure as he felt her just squeezing rhythmically around his cock. That was more risk than he should have been taking. He was not confident about the hyena's ability to handle such a

complicated concept as a sexual relationship with someone not even in the same culture as her. Still, making her feel good made him feel good all the same. Reika let him stay like that a bit longer before turning around, planting a soft kiss on his muzzle, and smiling greedily at him.

"Is good being closer friend to wulf. Is making Reika feel better about scary places she will see with good friend wulf." Alps looked into her eyes, feeling blissful, but philosophical.

"Are you ready to face the unthinkable things we will? Even I am not so sure we will make it." He stretched against the back of the tub and gazed at her naked body. What the hell had he allowed himself to do?

"Reika is thinking that Alps and Reika's new friends is supposed to be on journey together. Is not knowing why, but with all together, is feeling right. Maybe not all supposed to make sense until the end, but is feeling like is the right thing, all things we do. Maybe if we is keeping to feeling right, is going to be okay. Even if we is not realizing victory, Reika is never ever regretting going on impossible journey with her friends. Is happier to die in this than to be in mines of death for horrible Avatar. All Asuna is happier to be with Amani Queen on trip, and being closer and closer to friends who is sooner dying than betraying. Is luckiest life even if short. Reika is glad, Alps. Reika is glad for all things with you." The white wolf listened to the normally chaotic girl's lengthy explanation. He widened his eyes. It was the most lucid and sensible and valiant thing he had heard her say, and far more than he thought her to be capable of. Perhaps he should lay her more frequently, it just might have been good for her!

"Thank you Reika." Alps said, feeling genuinely closer to her. "I feel the same way. I think this is a good feeling that we have, and I hope that while our journey is successful..." he leaned in and embraced the hyena, "... that it is maybe not... too short." Reika giggled at that and placed a gentle kiss upon the bridge of Alps' muzzle, before crawling out of the barrel to dry. Alps watched her dry rather smugly, not feeling as bad about what he had just done. Perhaps Reika was not really as odd and crazy as he had believed?

As if cued by Alps' consideration, she reached into the barrel where she had been standing and pulled Bone, her club and very best friend, out of the water. Alps recoiled. Had he been in the water the entire time? Then his mind truly derailed. The hard thinking on the inside of the barrel... She had been thrusting Bone in and out of her sex as hard as she could while Alps talked to her. She had sex with her fully sentient bone club with the wolf right there at her side! Alps gazed at her emptily. No, she was just as crazy as he thought she was. He could not even speak with the realization that he had just enjoyed a three-way with Bone.

"Thank you Alps. Reika loves you. We is making it together, you see. We are being stronger." With that, she pulled on her skirt and top, despite being mostly wet, and she and her befucked bone club walked out of the shower, leaving a sated but

creeped out wolf alone with his most distressing thoughts. The door closed behind her, Alps squeaked out,

“I need a new bath to wash off the crazy.”

It had been raining for the better part of the morning, in a very grey and drenching fashion, leaving Lunar is a bit of cover in which to work. Leal and Ceriss were already in place “guarding” the queen’s rural cottage. There was more work to do, however. He pushed his way into one of the less reputable establishments, a hush falling over the patrons as the leather-cloak-clad black-furred wolf dripped on the dirty wood floor, the water spilling through the aged and unsteady slats into a dank basement filled with the foulest beers money could ignore. This place would be perfect.

They were hushed because Lunar is did nothing to disguise himself. One of the captains of the guard walking into a known den of thieves did not open for much dialogue, and a few of the patrons scooped away money, contraband, or just their belongings in preparation to leave. Lunar is glared at the room with an appreciation for where he was. He pulled a bottle to his lips, drinking from it heavily, spilling a good portion of the potent alcohol on himself, then staggered into the room. While he was not drunk, the intentional spilling and his intentional wavering made it appear that he was.

“How about this place, eh? I’m not *about* to get chunked outta here! I kin drink all I want here, right? Cause no one here’s about to say what I can’t do cause I got warrants for like half of ya! Bring me drinksh, and a stool, maybe a girl, and we will just act like I’m not even here!” He spoke far louder than needed, and stumbled over to a table, before just sitting on it, right between to people that were probably discussing something that they could have been arrested for. They glared at him. “Fuck off, my table, bish.” He huffed alcoholically at the female member of this party. Both got up and chose a different table. A barman moved quickly over to him, and replaced his bottle with something inferior, making a point to stow his more expensive fare behind the counter, as he rather expected.

He pretended to get very into the awful dredge that he was served, spilling more than drinking, but he was paying, so he doubted they would care. He poorly sang a few words of some song, and added on words from another with the same misshapen melody of the first, and eventually, people sat back down, assuming he had been thrown out of nicer places and washed up there, unlikely to remember even being there. How far a captain could fall if given the right drink. He watched the patrons for a while, finally noticing someone who did not belong. A rather reserved lady, gaunt, hungry-looking, but well dressed and eager-looking with deep grey fur sat in a corner with three accomplices, watching him with obvious irritation. It was not their conversation he was interested in, Lunar is could not hear it. It was their clothing. They all wore some combination of deep blue and gold. The colors of the Spirits of Silverlight. It had taken

a couple of locations, but he found them. It was not likely to be all of them, and making a move on them here would be playing his hand too soon. He was there as part of the plan, not the result of it.

Lunaris watched the other patrons a while, trying to decide the most organic way of making his plan work. He spilled more drink on him, toxically soaked in the stuff already. His outfit would scarcely be reusable after this mess. Finally, he found an avenue he did not expect, but knew would work perfectly.

“Neit, you ponderously ineffective shneakthief! In mah lap!” He indicated where he wanted the girl. The tan-furred lean and small former burglar stood bolt upright and gritted her teeth. Her dark green cloak obscured her dainty form well enough, but her hood was on her shoulders, so she was easily recognizable. She looked at Lunaris, wide-eyed in disbelief. Surely he could not be talking to him. “Watsh wif the delay, cur? Yew wanna shtay offa the wanted poshter yesh?” Lunaris intentionally forced his ears to move different from one another, which he actually could not have done if he were drunk, but made him look a lot more drunk.

“Uh... Uh, I think you have me confused with someone else, mister.” Neit politely backed slowly toward the door.

“Even shmashed, I kin catch yew and shake yew worsh than Nidaja did, shlut, git in mah lap!” he barked severely, enough that she stopped dead in her tracks. Lunaris could see the horror in her eyes. Even if she ran, he would just use it as an excuse to go into a drunken tirade to get his point across. He was a little surprised to see her turn and come over to him where he sat on the table.

“Maybe get into a chair like a proper adult, Captain Lunaris.” Her words had a lot of bite to them, showing that she was not happy with this turn of events. Lunaris smiled at her lopsidedly, and then slipped into a chair, then onto the floor, then clamored his way back up into his chair. He then patted his lap. The former thief flumped down onto his thighs, and sighed. Lunaris pulled her short ponytail so her ear was right by his lips.

“Good girl!” he barked raspily, but then, in a barely perceptible whisper, “... *play along...*” She gritted her teeth, and he let go of her ponytail. “How are yew enjoying the good life, girl?” he asked. “... Nice not having to be on those postersh anymore, huh? You gotta pay a while for that, though. You knew that right?” he asked.

“I figured.” Neit growled softly at Lunaris, doing as she was asked. While he was not going to actually take advantage of her, she was actually somewhat indebted to the royal family for her pardon, and had extended the intent to help them when possible. She had given up her life of crime, but still depended on her network of contacts in the world she was leaving behind until she could figure out what she wanted to do with her life. Being on a wanted poster did not make you very appealing as an apprentice, even after you have been removed from them.

"I should take you to Castle Diera." The black-furred brute growled. "I wanna fuck you right on the queensh own bed, won't that be fun?" he laughed.

"I rather think her majesty would be appalled, Lunaris." Tia tensed a bit, and the captain smiled at her squirming. She was actually visualizing what he spoke of in his ruse. He was surprised to see that it got to her.

"You think? Maybe she walksh in and you are shtill tied to all four poshts, splattered with the lust of a guard captain and half the guard staff from two days of heavy use, won't that be a shock?" There was roaring laughter from those in the tavern. Almost everyone was listening to this exchange. Neit would probably not be able to show her face in this place again, ever. The sort of wording he was using and the scandalous subject matter was sure to get attention. He didn't want to avoid it though. He wanted all ears on him.

"Lunaris, I think she would find us before two days had passed. She has to sleep too, you know." Neit seemed dumbfounded as to what the dark wolf was up to. He grinned and spilled more drink on himself and his lap-sitting hostage.

"Pshhhh... Naw. For the next two nights she'sh still at her cottage north of here. Plenty of time to wreck her room. You don't git to shay no to thish." He laughed. There was a cumulative oooohhhh from around the room. Lunaris half-glanced to the table occupied by the Spirits of Silverlight. They were suddenly very, very interested.

"Well, you will at least not have too many guards to help you splatter my fur, as you say." Neit said, seeming to relax a little, though she was still obviously completely confused as to what in the world Lunaris was thinking or doing with this.

"She hash Nidaja with her. She and a couple other guards are all she needs for that place. No one goes and bothers her there. Not if they don't want to deal with a pished off Nidaja. She doesn't like their vacations interrupted." He said this with one eye darting back to the group he was watching. They began yammering back and forth like crazy, their faces lighting up with delight. Package delivered! He scooped up Neit, who squeaked in surprise, and he headed for the door.

"Wait! I don't want to go with you, you are filthy drunk! At least wait until you are - OW!" He walked her head right into the door-frame of the tavern, getting another roar of laughter from the patrons who were not likely to let her forget that she had to deal with that. With that, the door slammed behind him, and they were out in the rain. She looked at him with a sour expression.

"Thank you, Neit." Lunaris spoke without the slur of his voice. The scent was still there, but he was obviously sober.

"What the hell was the use of all that?" she asked, crossing her arms, still draped in Lunaris' cradling hold.

“Planting information.” The black wolf looked serious again, regarding the younger thief. She widened her eyes and then folded back her ears. She was very bright, so it didn’t take more than that to give her the news.

“The queen’s in danger. Oh heavens, who would dare?” she asked.

“I am deputizing you, Neit. Welcome to the royal guard.” He began walking away from the castle, toward the cottage he spoke of. She struggled a little in his arms.

“Lunaris, I can’t fight, look at me! I’m a sneak, not a warrior.” She protested, kicking her legs a bit, still talking in a tone so hushed that it could hardly be heard above the din of the rain as it washed the smell of alcohol off the guard captain.

“None of us have the luxury of saying that now, Neit.” He said with deep sincerity. “I need a sneak. You are coming with me.” Without another word, the former thief was carried off into the night, another stage of the plan set.

Alps sighed softly and leaned against the edge of the tub. Reika had gone to find her belongings, where she apparently kept the dye used to meticulously repaint Bone’s features after his bath. He shook his head a bit, considering the relationship between the girl and her club, but dismissed the thought. Bone could talk to her. He was a friend to her. Why would she not fall in love? It made more sense than some of the other relationships he had seen. Alps was allowing himself to dry with the slatted shuttered window wide open, a warm sea-breeze wafting in. He rubbed his fur thoroughly, making dusty salt fall from his fur, the expected side-effect of sea-water bathing. When he looked back up, he nearly fell backwards.

As hetoweled off in the nude, Ellis stood before him. He gritted his teeth. There was no way she had gotten in without opening the door. Had she been there the whole time? Had she seen what he did with Reika? He stared at her, wide-eyed. She finally broke the awkward silence herself.

“Interesting choice in fashion.” She gave a nod to the wolf. The black fox was adorned in her usual black and silver robes, but she seemed to wear some kind of mesh under it that covered her chest up to her neck where it had been bare, and sleek and narrow, elegant-looking pauldrons upon her shoulders. The mesh was visible over her upper arms where the opening of the sleeves had allowed the robes to breathe before. The outfit made her look far more regal, and he wondered where exactly she had obtained it. He did not remember seeing anything like it in the castle, but he had not exactly pried through the closets, either. Did it belong to Nita? The two had the same build. Nita would have likely shared with the fox given circumstances of her arriving after 700 years with nothing. The gold clasp at the collar of the outfit which helped hold

the pauldrons in place looked similar to the clasp on his uniform, so he assumed it was given to her by the queen.

"You have an interesting addition to your outfit as well." He remarked.

"A little more protection. Where we are going, we are going to need it." The fox spoke of their mission with a grim tone. Alps felt his heart sink. Even mysterious Ellis was concerned.

"We did not pack much in the way of armor for me." Alps suddenly wondered why Nidaja had not considered that.

"You are not trained to wear it. It would inhibit and endanger you." The fox answered his unspoken question uncannily. "You have Ressaia. It will serve you better than armor, I assure you." Alps looked over at his hip-pouch where the metallic green sphere that shifted to a staff was kept. It was a strange Letai relic which seemed to block essence attacks, or diffuse them, or just negate them, he was not sure. It was helpful already, but he wanted to know more.

"We will be going against the Uruk. They don't typically attack using spells. Are you saying we will encounter people who do?" he asked.

"We may, but do not discount the staff's use against even the Uruk. It will not break, and a weapon is a weapon. When you learn its effectiveness, and remember the things life has taught you already... it will make you an enemy the Uruk never wanted." Alps considered that a bit, the tone she used always so cryptic. Why not just tell him exactly how to use the weapon. Or even train him to fight? The fact that Ressaia was a stick was a little ironic to Alps since it had been the implement that Nidaja had taught him to use long ago, and the weapon he was most comfortable with. Was that chance, or did Ressaia form what Alps could use? Would it have been different in Ellis' hands? What weapons would such a wise and crafty fox use?

"You have said little of my wings." He finally noted, a little surprised by that. She did not even see to care.

"They make you look more effeminate. Now the boys will want you too." Her words jarred Alps almost right back into the bath. That was not in the least what he expected to hear. She was smiling though, which was something that he did not see her do often. He sighed and shook his head.

"I should get rid of them, yes? I should let Luna help me remove them?" The expression on Ellis' face hardened a bit.

"I am unsurprised because it's not the first time I have seen them, but I do not think that your mother was clear with you on how rare essence manifestations actually are. I would not be so hasty to be rid of such a gift if I were you, Aris." The white-furred

wolf widened his eyes at that. It was incredibly rare that Ellis gave advice that was not a seed planted by means of questions or some other round-about means of arriving at the conclusion himself. Did she feel strongly about the wings?

“She didn’t say that they were that rare, and she seemed to know what caused them. Was she wrong? Are they not just manifestations of having drawn too much essence?” he asked. The fox was quiet a moment, gazing at Alps as he fluttered his wings a little in reminder for her to speak. He didn’t mean to, it just seemed they expressed his emotions almost as well as his ears or eyes did.

“She was correct in what gave them form, but short-sighted on their potential value, Alps. She told you they would do you no harm, yes?” The fox gazed intently at the wolf.

“She said they were harmless, yes.” He replied a bit tensely. The fox knew something. Why didn’t she just tell him?

“They are of no burden, and may yet have a use. Part with them if you are so vain, but what logic would tell you that having extra essence energy is a bad idea where you are going? Will you scold yourself if you need that power later?” Alps gritted his teeth a little at that.

“I don’t know any techniques to really use the energy though.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest. “Have any you would like to teach me?”

“I already have. You will figure it out. But before you get rid of those wings, I wish for you to consider something.” The fox leaned in close to Alps, who suddenly felt extremely naked. She had not shown any interest in him before, had this now changed?

“Yes?” Alps whispered.

“Where are Luna and Ceriss’ wings?” Alps held still at that question. His mother was a High Priestess. She was immensely powerful. She was a valued healer during times of war. She was capable of blocking fireballs from Nita, pinning Vhale to a wall, and other great feats, and yet, she had no wings.

“I have more essence...” Alps mused quietly.

“Your mother is perplexed, Aris. She knows this.” The queen’s young lover wavered a bit. Why did so much focus have to be on him?

“Why do you know so much about it? What makes you so wise, Ellis?” Alps asked in a whisper.

"I only listen, Aris." He was getting used to hearing his name used, but it seemed to only feel natural from Luna or the fox.

"You listen? To who?" he asked.

"Your mother discussed those wings after breakfast. I overheard."

"Vhale." Alps remembered the dark-furred wolf turning and padding out suddenly upon seeing them.

"She can still remove them?" Alps asked.

"She believes that she can." Ellis stated.

"Will she?" he murmured.

"If you wish it." The fox leaned back again, away from him.

"What should I do?" Alps asked boldly. She was advising him, he would hear her advice.

"I already told you what you should do." Alps flattened his ears at that. She had suggested why he might want to keep them, but she had not said which was the right choice.

"What should I do?" he asked again, a bit more stern.

"Defeat the Avatar." Ellis said just as sternly, her eerie white eyes narrowing. Alps said nothing, but focused on her, not looking away. He stared at her in silence for a while, steeling his courage not to look away this time. For a while, they stood frozen in time that way. Finally, Ellis spoke. "Why do you stare so? I told you what it is you should do."

"After you lay down such a stark command, Ellis, I always look away to consider it. When I look back up, you are gone. Not this time. I am going to watch you turn around, walk over to the door there, put your hand on the handle, twist it the correct direction, pull the door open, walk into the hall, and pull the door closed, just like every other real person does." He had been dwelling on it quite a bit. Others saw her so she was not imaginary, but it was far too uncanny how she was able to come and go so silently.

"And if I do not wish for you to see me leave?" she asked.

"Oh, I am going to see you leave." Alps grinned knowingly. He had her this time. He would win this tiny little victory.

“Silly wolf pup... you entertain me so.” Her words echoed in his mind, as if he had heard it a million times before. His eyes widened, and he looked at her brightly smiling face. She had the most beautiful smile he had ever seen, and seemed so confident and happy in that moment.

“Aris? Aris, don’t sleep in the tub, you could drown, love.” His mother’s voice pulled at him, and he looked up, the world suddenly jarring and blurry, his position having changed in the room in that instant. He was leaning back in the barrel, arms over the back, the water a lot cooler and his toes feeling very pruned, telling him he had been in the water a while. The fox, of course, had gone. He was dreaming. She left without him seeing her. He flattened his ears. That was utterly impossible. Was it real? He looked up, seeing Luna standing before him with a towel. He blushed a bit.

“I was ... dreaming?” he asked.

“Perhaps. Come on out, get dry. Lira says she can alter your clothing to fit your wings, she just needs to take some measurements. You might have them a little longer after all. We are ahead of schedule because of a nice tailwind. No worries, it will be fine.” Alps crawled out of the tub, and began drying himself. He had been in there a while. He had actually been dreaming, but did that mean that the conversation was not real?

“We are not ahead of schedule. You spoke with Vhale about the wings, and neither of you think it’s a good idea to get rid of them just because they make me uncomfortable.” Luna looked away, her eyes widened.

“This is true... but... how would you have known that, Alps? Did Vhale tell you already? I thought he went to get some food while you were in the bath.” Alps shook his head softly.

“I am only figuring things out. They stay for now, mother. Perhaps we will find a use for them after all. You all trust me. I can certainly trust you.” He fluttered his wings a bit, and they glowed softly in the lamp-light. The conversation was real. What was Ellis?