

Sirius, Book IV
A Slave's War

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 9

Nita and Alps sat shoulder to shoulder, watching the flickering campfire. The others had not awakened yet, but Alps found his short sleep oddly restful. He wondered if it had to do with the act of transferring his energy to his mother before he slept. He verified with Nita that she was fine with that which was required of him because of his abilities, and she slept pushed tight up against him enjoying the warmth of those wings against her chest. She said that she slept on the ground with him better than any time alone in her soft bed in the castle.

Luna was the next to join him, and Alps was happy to find that he did not feel odd the following day. It was still strange to him, but he did not regret his actions. He leaned in against Nita, who sighed happily. The priestess looked back and forth between them and gave a very motherly grin. Alps warmed a bit at it. Luna spoke soothingly.

"You two are sweet together. It makes me proud to see you there." Nita blushed a bit at that even more than Alps did. "You intend to marry... Have you given much thought to when?" The queen raised a brow at that. Alps looked over to her curiously, then back to his mother. It was an unusual thing to ask about so suddenly.

"I had figured it might be after we return." She stated. Luna rubbed her chin a bit thoughtfully at that. She did not seem content with that. The former slave found that to be silly. His mother seemed so happy when he first told her that he would be Nita's lover for the rest of his life.

"Is something the matter?" Alps asked. The queen held his hand gently, getting his attention.

"She worries that if we wait, we might never be married." Nita said.

"I trust you at your word." Alps replied. Of course she would still bind herself to him when they returned; it was what they both wanted. He had no reason to think otherwise.

“My word is not what’s shaky, Alps.” The green-toned royal murmured with some anxiousness in her voice.

“This is a very dangerous journey. If you and Nita wish to be life bound to one another, dare you partake of the risks which lie ahead without those bonds in place?” Luna’s words were carefully chosen and very effective. Alps clearly and immediately understood her worry. He wanted very much to be bound for life to Nita, but if one or both should perish in this mission of great importance, what a painful mark on history it would be that their dream never came true.

“I have thought of this as well.” Nita stated. Her lover gritted his teeth. She had worried of this and not shared with him? Did she think he might feel differently? Luna spoke up again in her helpful, endearing tone.

“I can perform the ceremony, you know. I’m a Letai high priestess. No one short of your own mother held more right and power to perform that ceremony for you, Nita.” The queen visibly fluffed, a smile spreading on her lips. Alps’ heartbeat quickened. Bound for life to the one he loved the most, no more waiting. How soon could it be?

“I would still want a more... official ceremony when we return... but Luna... I would not refuse such an offer. It’s important to me. To us. It’s very important.” She remarked. Alps heart raced. He agreed wholeheartedly with that. He would not hesitate.

“So... When may we be bound then?” Alps asked, almost feeling light headed. He did not expect this even moments ago when he got up. It was a sudden and wonderful revelation.

“My temple... or whatever remains of it... is in the direction we are going, if a little farther north than we intended. It’s worth the slight course diversion though.” Alps blinked a few times at that. The temple. Luna’s temple. He would be bound to Queen Nita Razelle in his first home. His real home. He had spent so little time thinking about what his life had been when he was smaller than his memories allowed.

“Not much must remain of it after 700 years...” Nita stated wistfully. “It would be an honor to be bound to him in the place he was from though. I will demand our course take us by there. Will you be able to find it?” she asked.

“It’s very obvious, and not likely to have changed much, ruined though it already was. We will be able to find it.” Alps’ mother stated happily. “It is decided then, I will bind the two of you. I wish you both to be aware the honor and happiness this is to me.” The white lady wolf sat back a little, her tail whiffing rapidly on the blanket she sat upon in front of the fire.

"It brings us all happiness, and that happiness will give us strength." Alps stated, nodding to Nita, who seemed nearly in tears. "I wish more of my family could have been able to see this day." He relaxed a little, leaning back with his hands slightly behind him, propping him a little.

"Your father in particular would surely not believe it." Luna chuckled. "He always felt life was better as simple as one could make it." Alps' expression fluctuated. His father? He sat up. He had been speaking of the family he had made of those in Diera. Misty, Uri, Misha... all of them would not get to be there, but Luna was right. There was an entire family that he had that no longer existed. He had not asked one time about who his father was, what he was like, anything, and felt suddenly alarmed with regret for that.

"I don't... know anything about my father..." he said with obviously pained realization.

"You never met him, Aris." The priestess half-whispered. "He passed away weeks before you were born." Nita frowned at that and pulled Alps close, but he felt little from it. It was sad, but it was not really sad for him. He didn't know.

"What was he like?" Alps asked curiously.

"He was..." Luna pondered that for a bit, looking thoughtful before sighing and smiling. "He was very unlucky, love." She chuckled a bit at that. Nita looked at Alps and then back to Luna in curiosity. She thankfully elaborated. "Before I became a High Priestess, I was the primary healer in the Temple of Life in the Great North Province where we are now headed. From the time I was a young student in the temple, to the day I was cast into the Shadowfall, war is what we knew. The Uruk back then made a mess of folks, so healers were in high demand, and very busy. As you can imagine, for a girl living as a healer in such times the best chance you would have to get to know someone... to get close to them, is if they needed to be healed. Often." Nita stifled a smile.

"He was accident prone, then?" the queen asked. Luna shook her head politely.

"No, not specifically, he just... had a way of finding himself in ridiculous circumstances where anyone's luck would be expected to break. Yes, his injuries were often unintended, but he was a border courier. He was primarily responsible for delivering messages and the like between the temples. Every time he came back to ours, he was damn near in pieces. But he was eternally happy and cheerful. He saw the war at its worst in some locations, but he held hope for things to get better and bolstered everyone's hearts when they saw him. Of course, after the fourth or fifth time I healed him, we had fallen in love. He stayed at the temple exceptionally long to recover from an injury to his back and

arm, and I decided on my 'mother's moon' to keep a little of him with me before he left again. We were bound under that moon, and consummated, and a few days later, he was gone. I would not get to see him again, but that was our world. It was almost expected." Nita rested her chin on her knees sadly as she heard that.

"What was his name? What did he look like?" Alps asked, still a little shocked that he had not thought to ask a thing about him so far. He hoped that telling him of his father was not painful for Luna.

"Dias. He had black and grey fur. He was actually rather small, like he was underfed as a kid. He was quick, and witty, and funny and kind. He had blue eyes. His tail was too long, and it got closed in doors sometimes." She nodded to Alps' almost overly full-bodied tail. "You ended up with a bit of that." Nita laughed a little. Alps fluttered his wings happily at the sound of his future mate's laughter.

"Do we know what happened to him?" Deep down inside his biggest fear was that Mannus was somehow directly responsible. That would only make it harder for the misguided Vhale to recover from his darkness, and the longer Alps thought about it, the more it felt like he would have to for this war to ever really be over.

"I am sure you would like knowing he perished in a battle, fighting valiantly against the Uruk and defending a town, or protecting his friends the way you would." Luna smiled as she said that. Alps nodded. It was easy to imagine he came from such stock. He would certainly do so for his friends. "Sadly, that's not the story I have to tell you." Nita grimaced at that.

"He did not die doing something bad did he?" she asked. Luna shook her head.

"No. But it was certainly not valiant... You see, one night, travelling with others, he met his end. They had stopped along a cliff overlooking a lake far to the north-east. The cliff made it so they had fewer directions to guard and they could sleep a bit longer. That allowed couriers to camp shorter periods and travel farther in a day." Alps nodded as he listened, his wings slowly twitching.

"Tactically sound, but I take it they were overwhelmed and pushed from the cliff?" Nidaja asked, making Nita jump a little. She did not realize that the general had come up behind her. Alps smiled to his first lover and patted the ground beside him. Nidaja took her seat, looking to Alps' mother.

"I wish it were even that valiant, but no. If that were the case, I could never have found what became of them." She explained.

"Then what happened?" Nidaja asked. Luna sighed softly and answered as soothingly as she could.

"Dias slept too close to the campfire, and accidentally rolled into it. It set his robes on fire, and he panicked." Alps winced at that, and Nidaja and Nita both cupped their muzzles. "He opted to chance the drop, and jumped to the lake below to put out the fire."

"... And the drop was too far and killed him?" Nita asked sadly. Luna shook her head no.

"... He drowned?" Nidaja asked. Luna rested her chin on her own knees, looking a bit disappointed herself.

"... The lake was frozen over." Luna finally muttered. That got a collective pained groan from all three.

"Oh, Luna, I am so sorry." Nita leaned over and hugged the priestess.

"It's alright. He would be happy to know the result of our union. The love he felt for me eventually ended up in the heart of the Queen of Amani. The gift he gave me eventually resulted in my freedom from the Shadowfall. He'd never have regretted that. It's worth the sorrow we held in our parting. And at least it was fast. He didn't suffer, I feel. His friends were unable to recover him though. He burned after he hit and melted the ice and fell through before they could get him and the lake claimed him. But I think he would have preferred I did not get to scatter his ash. He never wanted to see me mourn." Alps gritted his teeth. It was a complicated and awful way to go. He hoped his own exit would not be so elaborate.

"I think he would be happy that Alps got his ability to see the light on the horizon too. It's what has brought us here." Nidaja said softly. Luna smiled at that.

"Brighter days are ahead... even a few ahead of the darker ones that loom before us." The Priestess beamed as she said it.

"Something I should know?" Nidaja asked.

"I suspect that in about nine days we will arrive at the place where my temple used to stand." The priestess stood up and stretched a bit. "When we arrive there, Nita and Alps have decided... to allow me to perform the ceremony to bind them, and unite our families."

Nidaja squealed with delight, and the sorrow of family lost collapsed under the joy of a family gained.

Misty rested her chin on her fingertips which were bridged in front of her chest. She did not look happy. She sat upon the throne, the room darkened. It was the middle of the night, but she had not slept. She had waited for Lunaris and the others to return, and when they did, the news was far from good. Leal looked back and forth between Ceriss and Lunaris a moment in silence.

“Lunaris, as you know I am aware of the group you speak of. A few of our less official eyes have seen them... whispers of a group who would undermine us, and threaten the throne, but it's been some time since I have heard the name come up. I had started to think they were limited to the group that was found, and were only posturing, but I can see now this was not the case. You remember the ones I speak of, Captain?” Misty asked. The black-furred captain nodded at that slowly.

“Yes. Fen and Kun exposed them, before they were involved in the Kishu incident. I thought that had been the end of them. I guess it went a little deeper than that.” He seemed to be fuming about it.

“The extreme damage that those two did to ensure that was done with... and still they persist. We had to redraw the damn map, and it was not enough. I will send word to them to let them know. Our new little friend can deal with whoever they find on their side, but we need to busy ourselves with the defense of this city. Ceriss, prepare Leal as you said. Lunaris, make the preparations to have that crystal taken to sea, and find the thief. If she was found, I want her rescued. We cannot afford to lose any edge her knowledge might give.” Leal inhaled deeply at that.

“Ceriss might be faster at locating the crystal...” he offered. “I worry about leaving my post.”

“Do you think you could do a better job of defending me from attackers than Ceriss, Leal? If so, I can let you trade places.” The grey lupine guard widened his eyes, feeling suddenly rather foolish. Of course that was why he was the one who had to go. Ceriss needed to defend the throne. Misty would be far better protected by the pure and inescapable death that the priestess represented. He bowed his head.

“Understood. I will train with Ceriss.” He looked to the dark priestess, who smiled. He was still slightly frightened by her after what he'd seen.

“What will you do in the meantime?” Lunariss asked.

“Based on your report for what happened...” Misty said softly, “I shall be making arrangements to have the summer cottage cleaned.” Leal blanched a little, remembering all too well the look of the place. They had given the bodies to the ocean, but there was blood absolutely everywhere in that courtyard. Nita would not enjoy coming back to that if she needed a rest after whatever important journey she was on.

Ceriss motioned for Leal to follow, which he promptly did, and Misty was left to think. The guard hoped very much to get these troubled days behind him so he could spend his evenings in the soft and loving arms of the one who sat on the throne again. Ceriss was great, he would not say otherwise, but Misty did not drown people with unseen forces and torture and obliterate their spirits. Leal found her motherly caress to be a bit more genuinely appealing. Ceriss had merely needed the energy Leal released, and he had certainly not failed to consider that his life essence was used to kill those people.

“You seem a little more sullen than I am used to from you, Leal. Is this impending mission so frightening to you? You seemed stronger than that.” The priestess spoke as he walked close behind her. He looked down shamefully.

“There is much to be done. I worry that I...” He stalled a bit. He didn’t want to start thinking too much about what would happen if he didn’t succeed.

“Give up those thoughts, Leal.” Ceriss said, turning and holding his shoulders, looking into his eyes. She then lead him into a room that served as a study, though not the same that he had met Misty in the first time. The priestess closed and locked the door. She leaned back against a bookshelf. “But that’s not all that is troubling you.”

“Did all of them really have to die like that? It seemed so unnecessary.” Leal felt like an idiot saying it. He knew full well that even if they had just captured them, the queen would have ordered them executed. Ceriss put her hands back on Leal’s shoulders, making him look into her eyes again. She seemed to look deeper into his eyes than he remembered her doing before. She then looked down, sighing heavily.

“I was wrong. You have not suddenly become afraid of battle. You have become afraid of me.” Leal backpedaled a little. How could she tell that? He gritted his teeth; unable to lie and tell her that was not true. He was at least a little fearful. She had so much power and killing those people seemed almost trivial and unimportant to her. Life was dear to Leal. He widened his eyes a bit as the obsidian shadow drew inward, as if her snowy white fur absorbed it. Her expression was pained, much easier to read with the shadow gone.

"I'm sorry..." Leal said in a wavering tone. "I did not intend..." He realized that he had offended, or even hurt her.

"No, I should apologize. It's not for you to feel sorry here. Yes, I am scary when I fight, Leal. I have to be. The idea that helping the dark one would deliver salvation is not a new one. Ultimately, it took a great deal of betrayal by the Amani kingdom and the Asuna Tribes to cause our downfall." Leal's heart caught in his throat. The Amanians betrayed the Letai? He had heard no such thing.

"I cannot imagine the queen could do such a thing." He whispered. Ceriss shook her head, her long hair falling over her shoulders as she rubbed at her chin a bit.

"It was never the royal house. But people were afraid. They were afraid for their families, and the threat was there that everyone would die if the Letai were left alive. Most were willing to just tell us to leave their cities, and we could handle that. We understood. Some took it upon themselves to speed things along, and mobs formed to exterminate the Letai near the end." Leal gritted his teeth tighter at that. That was awful!

"I am fearful, yes, but I don't hate you, Ceriss." The guard pleaded softly. It wounded his heart seeing her sad, older-looking face as she told him this. "I fear the power you have... the ease with which you could do those things." She was obviously given a great deal of reason to be furious at the thought of people betraying the queen to save their own necks.

"We had to defend ourselves. We would never turn against the Amanians, Mannus was a Letai after all. It was our problem. Our fault, and we faced the problem as such. Sometimes you did not know if the ones you loved would be the ones you fought the next day. This was true war. Soon, Amanians who wanted to protect the Letai fought those who wanted them gone, and hundreds were dying without a single Uruk in the city. It was the darkest time, and I will *not* have this nation fall to the same." Leal felt sick as he watched tears streak the beautiful white-furred Ceriss' cheeks. "I will not see brother turned against brother like it was before, mother driving sword into son, I will *not* see that again. The Letai could have stopped that from happening before by fighting back against those who would do us harm ourselves, but we refused to harm the Amanians. It was too late before we changed our minds. Please understand that if that seemed easy for me, it is because it was too hard before, and I will not show that foolish restraint again. This group will learn fast that the Kingdom of Amani will not fall to betrayal. Not while a single Letai is still among them." Leal inhaled deeply, feeling wretched that he could feel Ceriss a monster for what he saw.

"No, Ceriss, I really am sorry for being... distressed by that. I have not seen the real face of war. I've seen a few crazed bandits brought back, and seen

bodies and the like, but that was my first time seeing what a real battle was like. I suppose I foolishly thought it would not be so..." He felt like he was digging himself in deeper. He sounded so naïve.

"... Not be so sad?" Ceriss asked. He faltered a bit, and looked up at her. He had not expected her to say sad, but that was truly it. The deaths of those people made him sad, not scared. "Leal, I don't want to kill. I opted not to go with the queen despite how much help I could be to her because I felt like I was done with the killing. I would help care for the castle until they returned. But it would seem that the world has a different plan for me. Don't hate yourself for being afraid, Leal. You are right to be afraid. What I am capable of is truly terrible, and you have not seen the worst I can do. I will do all I can to make sure you do not find out the worst a priestess *can* do. But know that what I do is tempered with resolve for a world that no longer needs me to be anything but a woman. I would love to have nothing to do but have a family, maybe do some herding, and prepare feasts for the village nearby and draw upon the joy of their merrymaking. That's what I want, not the terrible battles like you saw." Leal sat down by a table, and sighed softly.

"I am glad we got to talk about this." He spoke softly. "It really did weigh on my heart."

"I know. I cannot let you lose hope, Leal. What we must do might not be pleasant, but do not forget why we must do it." The guard nodded to the white-furred priestess. She paused a moment, and then slipped close to him, and then straddled his lap, tilting his head up. "Do you know why I color my fur black?" she asked.

"I assume it is to seem more imposing... To prevent conflict because people fear that darkness?" She smiled at him as he spoke. He offered more as she did not immediately reply. "I guess I always thought it was a way to display your power and make sure others knew not to push you. That's the effect it has on me at least. Immediate respect for your abilities." She leaned in and touched her lips to the bridge of his muzzle, making him warm a bit.

"Most feel that way, and I am okay with that, but I gained the ability for a more selfish and vain reason." She looked at him sadly a moment.

"Vanity should never be an issue for you. You are stunning to me. Very beautiful." The guard wanted the lady wolf to feel better. He wanted to see her happy again.

"I want you to think a moment, Leal... about what a massive amount of blood after a battle... the blood of your enemies... might look sprayed and splattered all over white fur." Leal recoiled a little as realization crashed over him.

“You gained the ability to make it so...” he whispered sadly.

“... so I could not see the blood. Sometimes, it’s all I see if I see my own fur. I can’t make myself not see it, and somehow I always feel like everyone else sees it too.” Leal’s heart sank. It was not easy for Ceriss. It was brutal to her. It did terrible damage to her every time she had to take another life. Leal gritted his teeth and pulled her forward in an embrace. She quivered a little, trying perhaps unsuccessfully to restrain her emotions. He would not fear Ceriss anymore. He would try to fight harder so she did not have to wield that terrible scythe again. Her hands should not be stained again. He inhaled raggedly and then pushed his lips to hers. This, he thought, would let her know he was over that fear he had. Gone were any reservations that he might have felt to working with her. And she kissed back with as much passion as he gave.

Inside of seconds they were a tangle of emotionally driven embraces, kisses, soft nips, reminders of the intimacy they shared with the battle all but forgotten. Leal growled with fierce desire as Ceriss gripped his shoulders and pulled herself tighter up onto him, the armless chair letting her straddle his thighs easily in a rather intimacy-inspiring fashion. Her fur remained bright white, her shadow not returning. She did not need it. Not for him. It filled him with joy to know that. He pulled at her robes, and they fell away from her shoulders as she unclasped the two clasps of his chainmail up to his neck, and then pulled the twelve pound shirt upward and off of him, eagerly freeing him of his tunic after. Leal considered that she might be after more energy, but that did not feel even remotely like what this was about. She was happy that he saw through the ugliness battle had shown him.

The lady wolf pushed her hips forward again as the guard kicked his boots and trousers off hastily, smoldering in another wet, tongue-tangled kiss. The next heated moment had pouting wet flesh kissing against his own turgid shaft, his erection almost painful in its sudden emergence. He clawed hotly at Ceriss’ back as she pushed her thighs back and forth, stroking him against herself in those heavy, eager motions. Her robes pulled off of her shoulders, the lupine priestess presented her round, pert mammaries for the wolf whose lap she claimed. Leal eagerly pulled one of her thick teats into his mouth and suckled hungrily, gasping a short, hot breath through his nose as he felt his member pushed and stroked by Ceriss’ dexterous fingers. She strummed him against her sex for a short moment before pushing his tip upward, and impaling her depths upon him, driving herself hard down into his lap with a happy groan.

Leal panted out, his chin over Ceriss’ shoulder, a little shocked at how fast it had gone from tears of regret and sorrow, to his flesh being tightly gripped inside her, feeling her pulsate around him excitedly. He didn’t mind it though. He felt like he needed it. It gave him more strength after what he had lost in that battle, and made him feel closer to Ceriss. Was he supposed to? Surely she

knew how he would feel about having such closeness shared. He closed his eyes as she kissed him again and began to roll her thighs in long, flowing strokes. She drew his cock almost completely out of her, then pushed him easily back in, every single motion seeming intent on causing him the most pleasure imaginable.

At first, it would have been easy for him to believe that she was doing it for the energy that he was able to provide, but her gasps of pleasure mixed with his own, and after a bit, each stroke terminated with her grinding him in deep and rubbing her sex tightly to the root of his cock. She was pleasuring herself just as eagerly as she was him. This was about the pleasure they intended to share, not about the energy she wished to gain, even though Leal would have proudly given it to her. He closed his eyes, giving a long groan of pleasure as she slowly picked up speed. He parted his thighs a little to brace his feet, pushing up tighter into the priestess each time that she bottomed out, giving a hot little grunt with each impact of their bodies.

It was easy to get carried away, which was why neither noticed until it was too late to react that someone had pushed a key into the lock. Both looked right, toward the door, to see who would dare interrupt, hot, panting bodies frozen in a deep grind. The door swung open, and a guard, younger than Leal, poked his head in to see what was going on, and why the study that was normally open had been locked. Ceriss flicked her ears a bit, and then huffed hotly, just resuming her ride. Leal tightened up, blushing severely. He worked with that fellow, and that was the first time Leal had even considered that it might ever be known that the things he got up to in the castle were not the most professional. Ceriss, however, did not seem to care what this might do to Leal's professional relationships in the castle. Surely Lunariss would know about this. The other guard's eyes shot wide, and he backed out slowly, his shoulder bumping the wall by the door, the brown-furred lupine turning rather suddenly, closing and locking the door. The remaining guard, ridden steadily by a passionate priestess, looked back to his heated companion.

"Well, that will make it back to Lunariss." He chuckled a bit meekly at that, hoping that it would not cause troubles.

"He will certainly not be able to blame you for this. After all, it was a locked room, he will scold the guard for poking his nose in without knocking." It comforted Leal a bit to know Ceriss at least was not worried about news of this desperate tryst getting out. He lowered his head, kissing at the bouncing lady's breasts as they jumped into reach, then bounced back out. He felt her thighs slap harder against his own, and then a hard wriggling grind as she growled with obvious release, her sex drawing up tight around him. His scrotum tightened as well, and he growled out sultrily,

“Ceriss, I’m close...” She allowed it before, but he did not just assume that she intended that for him again. She began bouncing heavily again, her honey spilling down his sack and onto the chair. No, she actually did intend that for him again, it seemed. “I’m gonna cum...” he gasped, just to be sure.

“Do it, love! spray it inside me... nnnmmnnh!” The lady wolf ground tightly to him. She did not utter a word, nothing in that odd language of hers, no incantations or strange effects... as he sprayed his heavy load hard into her suckling depths she just groaned in sinking release of her own, cumming along with him as she ground her sex tight to his base, stirring her orgasm eagerly. This moment was entirely about the union of their bodies and their need for one another. Leal folded his ears back as he spilled every drop into her, and clutched her tight, his embrace not intended to merely show want, but love. He wanted to let Ceriss feel love. Her life was not about war, it was about who she protected now, and he would protect her too. He rocked his body hard as she squeaked in her spasming release.

The pair quivered together for a while, holding one another, not saying a word. It felt so good to Leal. It was less about the hot and heavy encounter he had before with Ceriss where she used her abilities to evoke a more powerful emotional response in the illusion of Nita, and more about the absolute longing passionate moments he had shared with Misty. His life was so strange, and dangerous too, but he would not trade it at that point. Not for anything. Ceriss relaxed against Leal, and looked into his eyes, wagging her tail slowly as she savored the full feeling she had. He was not slipping out of her if he could help it. He liked the feeling he had inside her.

“So... Are you ready to learn the technique for essence-tracking?” Ceriss asked gingerly. Leal gave her a blank stare, and then chuckled numbly.

“Oh, Ceriss, I had honestly forgotten that was why we came in here.” He laughed. She grinned and pushed him deeper again, making him wince with pleasure. She leaned back some, holding her hands in front of her lovely chest.

“Now then... Leal...” He peered at her chest a bit obviously. He then shook his head a little as a glowing string appeared between her fingers. “Do you see that?” she asked. It was hard to see. It was like a dark afterimage that one saw if they looked at a light for a bit, then at a white wall, but it was very hard to focus on. The line made a waving motion, like ocean waves between her fingers. He nodded to her.

“I see something, yes.” He offered. He was not sure what he was supposed to see.

“What is it?” she asked.

"It's a line. Like a string. It's a little thicker." He was not sure if that was what he was supposed to be seeing.

"What's the string doing?" the priestess asked.

"It's doing this..." Leal made wave motions with his hand. Ceriss smiled, and gave a pleasant squeeze around the guard's softening shaft internally. It was a sweet reward for getting that right.

"You are looking at the essence." Ceriss stated. "I have made it a little easier for you to see. It's like seeing it illuminated. That's not the same as seeing it on your own. It's the difference between seeing a shadow on a silk screen with a light behind it, and knowing what is behind the silk screen with no light. You have to see differently. I want you to look at this essence very carefully for a while, Leal. Stare at it and look slowly past it to my chest, until you can no longer see my chest, just let your vision kind of fade out. Eventually, all you will be able to see is the line, okay?" Leal nodded at that, and spoke in a whisper as he stared, as if the volume of his voice would make him fail in this offered task.

"I'm not Letai. Are you sure I will be able to see the essence at all?" he was worried about why she felt that he could even accomplish a goal that sounded tailor made for a Letai. The world seemed to slowly be getting darker. He had noticed this when staring at text for a long time or something of that nature, so that alone did not seem so strange.

"We all can see the essence if shown how, it's just a lot harder to actually manipulate it. Some see the essence more clearly than others, of course, but you have powerful essence of your own, Leal. You will do fine. Just keep focusing." Ceriss explained. Leal nodded and did as he was told. Slowly but surely, the world went darker and darker. As the world got darker, the string changed. It went from being a dark string on a bright world, to a bright line in the darkness. It was eventually a light peach-colored band of bright light, and he could see nothing else.

"It's all dark except for the line. It's orange color." He continued to watch it. Ceriss spoke again.

"Alright, what is it doing now?" she asked.

"It..." He watched carefully. The line seemed to disconnect from between her fingers, and coil in on itself, and form a little orb, which went up and down slowly. "It's a ball now, and it's going up... down... up... down..." The priestess spoke again.

“Very good. Relax yourself fully, do not move at all. I am going to touch you, and you tell me where I am touching without taking your gaze off that ball, alright?” she asked. The wolf nodded. Ceriss touched his ears with her fingertips.

“Ears.” He stated. She then touched his nose. He chuckled a little, finding that kind of silly. “Nose.” She chuckled as well. “Shoulders.” He stated as her fingers graced along his shoulders. Then, he felt a sudden sense of confusion. He felt her fingertips come to rest on his eyes. He normally might have flinched to have someone touch his eyes, but those fingers were touching his eyelids. He held perfectly still, and whispered, “Eyes. My eyes are closed. I still see it.” He felt a thrill of excitement race through him. To have essence ability is one of the most popular fantasies of children at play. Letai were revered, particularly by those who loved peace and justice with adventurous streaks. Leal had one an ocean wide. To find he had the ability to see the essence, to be taught this by a real Letai priestess, was a dream. He could not help but feel an intense swelling of ego. He was then snapped a little back to reality as Ceriss squeezed his softening member out of her. He opened his eyes after she moved her fingertips off of those lids, and he lost sight of the essence.

“Is that it?” he asked. Ceriss nodded to him, smiling.

“Essentially, yes. I had assumed it might take hours to get that far, but this gives us time to practice it. We will let you look at that essence again and again until I do not have to even start out with it visible. You will train your mind to see it without being shown first.” Leal panted slightly, overwhelmed with the intense joy of learning such a coveted skill.

“How will this help me find the crystal?” he asked.

“Essence can be seen through things, usually. If you see essence easily, you can find things that are hidden. The queen could find the crystal easily enough, if she were here for instance. I can see it too if I got close to it. You can see how many people are in a room before you enter. You can follow the slight echo of their essence through a maze if you had to. But you will not have the ability to see the essence of people for a while. The essence of a fully charged crystal like what would be needed to control the Uruk will be easy to see, but you will have to get within a couple hundred feet of it. It will be bright, and likely long, about as long as you are tall, if not larger. You will see it the moment you come close to it if you are looking for the essence. Hopefully your little thief friend will have a general area you can search. When it’s found, do not attempt to do anything on your own. Come and get the captain. This cannot fail.” Leal nodded, and, with the priestess, continued to practice, taking the occasional break to kiss and embrace, and just savor the peace of being in her company, her shadow dropped, her body his to worship and enjoy.

The day had again heated up, the sun was getting lower in the afternoon sky, and the travel had been productive. Lira paused every quarter mile or so to hop up into a tree to check the riverbed ahead, but eventually the trees gave way to rolling plains. There were even small cottages dotting the land in the distance, pushed back away from that dusty dry natural path. Reika and Lyat spent a lot of time talking to one another, and to Lira in their Asuna tongue. Lira was concerned that there may have been an Uruk base fairly close by because of the number they had encountered on the riverbed the previous day. They were all cautious. Nita and Luna spent time discussing how the beautiful ceremony of bonding would go, and everyone was overjoyed to know it would happen so soon. Lira in particular was excited because she would be taken right to the ruins of a temple that belonged to a High Priestess. She could easily ask Luna anything about the Letai she wanted, but somehow the artifacts were still highly coveted.

The conversation lilted from one pleasant thing to another, and occasionally back to the highly successful fight the day before. That was something that Reika was especially happy to talk about. Alps was given the impression that there was a lot of rage that had been building up for very long time that was let out in that fight. He felt it might be therapeutic to allow her to kill any lone Uruk they might find. Lyat seemed fairly happy about the fight as well, but he seemed happier to just walk alongside Nidaja. Alps found that he was secretly pleased every time he saw the large Asuna take Nidaja's hand, or loop his elbow with hers as they walked. They were fast becoming more than friends and he could not be happier to see it.

Vhale had stayed back from the fight, not allowing himself to use his powers and not wanting even the temptation to do so. He had little to add to the conversation about the fight, but he did talk a lot to Luna when she was not discussing the wedding plans. He actually always seemed happiest when talking with her. Something about the lady lupine comforted him. Perhaps she used her essence to caress him in a way to lighten the burden of his sorrow. Alps was not sure, but he would clam up if Alps approached, so he usually just let them be and allowed them to talk. He was sure that if his mother was working on helping the former dark one, he would be fine eventually. It seemed like nothing could shake the genuinely positive travelling mood, and they were making great time. Lira, however, changed the mood abruptly.

"Oh no, this is terrible..." Everyone slowed their pace, and moved forward cautiously as they saw what the green-furred guide was looking at. There, on the ground, was a young grey-furred lupine lad, shirtless, face down. He lay perfectly still. The fur along his back in a long line was rust-brown. He had been slashed with a hook-like weapon. He appeared to be dead. The boy could not

have been more than nine years old. Alps could not will himself to move. He'd seen death in his journey, but looking at a slaughtered child was very different.

"Who... did this?" whimpered Nita, immediately near tears. Nidaja pointed out flat-looking three-toed prints in the dust. They were clearly Uruk prints.

"Take a guess." She growled. Alps knelt down by the child. He was this small once. He would have been, back then, very easy prey for Uruk. Those days were filled with concerns of not being smacked around by Chana, but he didn't have to ever face real intended death like this poor boy had. Nita sniffled. Alps put his hand on the boy's shoulder.

"Please don't. I don't want to see his face." Nita whispered.

"I have to." Alps said softly. "I have to know his face because this is who we are fighting for. This is why we are not going to fail."

"There is smoke over the third hill to the west, the tracks go that way. Safe to say where the Uruk camp is." Lira stated, looking around carefully. "The poor child got too close. I bet he never even knew."

"I bet his parents don't even know." Nita cried softly. Alps pulled him over. He looked peaceful. He looked like he might have been fast, clever, and maybe he loved to laugh with his friends. Luna knelt down at his other side.

"*I KILL!!!*" The sudden shout from Reika jarred everyone, Alps nearly toppling over. The hyena female bolted across the plains in the direction of the smoke, Bone held in hand, her feet carrying her faster than it looked like her frame could move. "Uruk dead! Uruk are *dead!*" her cries were heard as she gained distance between herself and the group. Lyat bolted after her.

"She is maybe doing it! I having to stop her!" he called as he ran after her. Alps looked to his mother, and to Nidaja. The general nodded to the white lupine male.

"Go! I don't think anyone other than you can calm her down." She shouted.

"Aris!" Luna barked suddenly. "He's alive! Barely! Tell her that! Let her know!" His mother's hands suddenly blazed with green light as she planted them on the lad's chest. He arched. It was true. He was alive. He might be saved. If Reika got to that camp, she would not be. Alps could not possibly catch up to Reika, and Lyat was pulling away, but if he could catch her and hold her, the white lupine male might be able to calm her down and keep her from going on this suicide run. This was not the time for them to lose one of their valuable friends on their journey. Not when they were so close to happier days.

Alps ran at full tilt, pulling Ressaia out in case he needed it to trip Reika. She was deceptively fast for being rather short, and he was not gaining on her. They had cleared one hill... then another... Reika was cresting the third, Lyat hot on her heels. Alps had never seen the lady hyena this angry. He felt sorry for anyone getting in her way, and then realized that he was about to get in her way. He hoped telling her the boy was alive would be enough. Could Luna save him? He looked really bad. Reika vanished over the third hill. Then Lyat vanished over the third hill. He was still only barely starting to catch up. Panting raggedly, he topped the hill, and then skidded to a stop, his body almost going limp. He fell to his knees.

The camp on the other side of the hill was huge. There were dozens of tattered cloth tents, and several fires arranged in a circle to appear like they were only one. The worst revelation was what came in that following moment. Reika was not stopping. Her brother ran behind her as fast as he could, trying to catch up, but she was on the outskirts of the camp already. A loud rapid thumping on a drum made it clear. Reika had been seen, and Uruk came pouring out of the tent. They seemed like they were not ending. Alps staggered a bit. If he ran back to get help, Reika and Lyat would die. If he stayed and tried to help, he might be able to frighten off some of their attackers with his unusual staff, but no help would likely come, and if they did, Nita and the others might also be doomed. Alps heard soft footfalls behind him. It was Lira, perhaps running to scope out the camp.

"Go back!" Alps shouted at her. "There must be 120 of them here, Reika's already been made, get back! Get the others to cover!" Alps cried. He then bolted in the direction of Reika and Lyat. If he could cause enough confusion with his staff, he might be able to help the hyenas slip away. He felt numb. How could this happen now? What was Reika thinking? She was possibly dooming the mission out of uncontrolled rage. Alps found his number to be about accurate, more than a hundred Uruk were rushing to meet Reika. When it came to an attack by two Asuna, it seemed that they did not mess around.

"Reika!" Lyat cried, sobbing with grief, drawing his sword, ready to fight for his sister, ready to lose his life. Alps extended Ressaia and skidded to a halt beside Lyat.

"I will distract them with Ressaia. Get Reika out of here! Don't worry about me, I will figure something out!" Alps lied.

"No! What are you doing here! Run away! Go with Nita!" Lyat cried, tears in his eyes.

"We stand together as brothers!" Alps shouted, and dashed in the direction of Reika as the first eight or nine Uruk reached her. Alps felt lost. He felt like he

was already dead and was just watching a play detailing his last moments. It felt empty. It felt awful. But he was already there, and he would make sure Reika knew that for all that was lost, she was not alone. The flood of Uruk came.