

Sirius, Book III
The Essence

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 18

As the reality of the situation fully sank into Alps tired mind, he found himself with less and less of an appetite. Cleaned, uniformed, neat and tidy he sat at the table as others gathered there in a dining hall. He'd been absent from this hall for a couple months due to his travels, but it still felt welcome and cozy. Nita sat to his left, at the head of the table, already laying out her napkin and preparing for a meal she seemed a lot more interested in than he was. Misty sat across from Alps, and to his side sat Nidaja, then Misha, then Uri. Beside Misty were Luna and Ceriss. The wolf had not seen Ceriss since he returned, so he was glad to see that she was still faring well.

They were all assembled for a meal and Alps guessed for a meeting to discuss what should be done with Mannus. The matter of Vhale weighed heavily on the slave's mind. Aside from that, the things Alps had done in the past few weeks had caused a lot of trouble for his lover, he was sure.

First, Alps brought the Asuna to the royal house, creating a chance that the general public might panic over the thought that the Asuna might be ready to attack the city of Diera. This brought Nita matters to fret about. Then, he had released the enemy that everyone thought the Amanian Empire had been fighting a losing battle with for centuries. The danger that Alps brought upon his lovers and friends in doing this was extreme and the slave felt terrible for his folly. His queen certainly had every reason to stress about every one of his actions. However, things only got increasingly complicated from there.

After releasing Mannus, they found out that the former head of the dark armies had acted in terrible error, and unleashed a terror upon them that they might have no way to defeat, even if they freed an army of Letai. Essence energy would not be enough to stop it, as it was essentially the same as a Culier Shadow except with immense intelligence and a motive for making the Amanian and Asuna people suffer.

To top all these matters off, the High Priestess had assigned Alps the task of coming up with a decision for how best to deal with Vhale himself. She apparently would do this once she had provided the white-furred male with what she thought might be very pertinent information. Alps felt that he still was not the right one to make that kind of decision. However, Luna was sure to have some good and valid reason for making him choose. He thought of these complex matters even as servants brought bread and butter to prepare for the meal to come. Luna finally stood up and tapped a knife on a crystal goblet to get the attention of those murmuring and breaking bread together at the table. She spoke in her usual intelligent, feathery, doting tone.

“Thank you everyone for coming to this meeting and meal. I know matters are dire and food may not be on everyone’s troubled minds, but I remind you all that little has changed from a year ago that has not only made us stronger and better prepared to face whatever tomorrow has in store for us but has also increased our chances of gaining at least some semblance of defense to the borders we already tentatively have. Do not sicken yourself with worry, it will change none of these realities today.” Several of the sets of eyes looking at the priestess seemed to have a bit of doubt in her optimism, but Alps could certainly understand.

The door to the dining hall creaked open softly at that point, and the graceful Ellis sauntered in noiselessly, taking a seat all the way down the table, facing Nita. It was an esteemed spot usually occupied by Nidaja, but she preferred to sit close to Alps on this day. Everyone looked at the vixen as she reached over to obtain some bread for herself. She did not say a word, and seemed hardly aware that it was more serious than a typical meal in her own home. Ellis took a bite as everyone watched awkwardly. She looked back at everyone with her wide, silver, haunting eyes. The vixen quietly swallowed, and had a sip of water with a wedge of citrus. The silence continued, as if someone might speak up and ask the uninvited addition to the table what she thought she was doing. She finally spoke, just as it seemed someone would have to say something.

“Well prepared, honeyed butter, quite sweet.” The fox seemed to speak only to solidify the fact that she didn’t care if this was a meeting, she was going to enjoy a meal with everyone, so they might as well just go on with it. Alps could not argue. The wolf was fairly sure she’d know any secret discussions held here even if the fox had not been noticed at the meeting. The awkward pause did not last too much longer. Luna watched the lady fox a moment, and then continued.

“In the past few months, the world has changed for each of us in a very dramatic way, and yet, most of the world is unaware that anything is different, and life goes on all around the empire in spite of these new truths. We learned that the Shadowfall is not a permanent concept, and that there is a way out, even if it took centuries to find it. We know this potential freedom and the power it requires pose their own perils and fearful consequences. We learned that the Letai can be brought back from the extinction that the darkness forced upon us. We learned that the enemy of the Letai, once a Letai himself, lives still, having been rooted to a crystal just like all of his kin. Even as we learn this, however, we find that he is apparently remorseful and does not intend to continue to wage war with the world.” Ceriss nodded at this, still seeming a bit stunned and quiet. Luna had likely brought her up to speed while Alps and the others bathed and tidied for supper.

“If we are to believe a word he says.” Uri said, thumping a fist on the table. Nita looked cautiously at the invited guard. It was poor form to interrupt the meeting’s host, and that was Luna.

“I think he speaks truth. Or at least, some truth.” Nita said, perhaps more to calm Uri than to provide insightful opinion.

“Why do you think that?” Misha asked, seeming doubtful as well.

“He has placed himself in a position of being utterly powerless. He’s unconscious, and he is among people who have every reason to want him dead. You or I have only a grudge against this... Avatar... But Luna and Alps and Ceriss have almost seven centuries of anger that he knows he is subject to. I saw the look in his eyes. He truly expected the priestess to kill him. And at the moment, I think he hopes she still will. He brought ruin to a world that he seems to have genuinely thought he was protecting. Luna can confirm the story, at least, up to his reasoning for attacking the Letai in the first place, and if the voice in the darkness is now the Avatar, the motives match up. This creature requires suffering to exist, and it knows very well how to farm it.”

“Again, that is if everything he says is true.” The black-furred lady guard retorted. “I do not wish to take everything he says at face value. I also very adamantly think he should die, mistake or not. Countless graves are filled with both Asuna and Amani and that is by his hand, misguided or not.”

“I can understand that.” Luna stated calmly. “His actions have brought unbelievable suffering on everyone. But now is not a time for fuming and fangbarring. Now is a time for reason, and moreover, to stand in celebration of the things that were not taken from us. We have Alps and Nidaja back, and there is cause to believe that the tensions between the Asuna and Amani that were always a clash away from outright war might well come to an end as well. There is peril laced into all things of course, and our hopes and ambitions are not immune to failure, but we cannot give in to our doubts and stifle any chance those hopes might yet have. I do believe at least most of what Mannus has told us, and all of what he’s said he at the very least seems to believe is true.” Uri nodded a bit to Luna as she explained, and smiled in acceptance at least of the things she was to be happy about. Alps and Nidaja were safe, and her friends had defeated the worst that the darkness was known to dish out. They had returned from the Shadowfall.

“Alright, so we take him, for now, at face value. But this still means an unbeatable enemy.” Misha offered, drumming her claw tips on the table rudely.

“... Who requires we exist in order to suffer to retain his existence in this world. We only strengthen him to fret about his existence.” Alps finally added, having been in deep thought through much of this time. There was something he needed to do in all of this. He began to feel that the moment Ellis walked into the room. She seemed endlessly interested in the choices that he was forced to make.

“We should just stop being unhappy then, is that the answer? The Shadowfall crystals will keep him alive, even if we made everyone happy.” Misha grumbled, seeming a bit exasperated. Alps responded.

“We won’t defeat him that way, no, but we also won’t do any damage to him by refusing to find happiness in the things that he hasn’t taken away. I agree with Luna. There are better things to do now than fret and worry. I refuse to believe there is no way to destroy this...”

Avatar, or at least pull out his teeth so he can't wage war any further." Nita looked over to her lover, seeming quite proud with how authoritative he sounded, at least for a slave. Alps looked back to Nita. "I wish to apologize for bringing this trouble to your life, Nita. It was not my intention, and I know my actions have caused you endless worry..." The queen cut off Alps mid-ramble.

"Do not apologize. Our lives are better than you realize for your company, and I intend to have it remain so. I am still taking you as my life-mate. I have not changed my mind at all in my resolution to that end." Nidaja applauded happily at her sister's renewed proclamation. The promise seemed to raise everyone's spirits.

"... No, I caused another complication for you while I was with the Asuna... their reason for kidnapping me, you see..." Alps wore a pained expression, trying to think how to explain it to Nita. He had been fearing this so much before, and still he had nearly forgotten it with the weight of Mannus' return upon his mind.

"You mean Rios borrowing you for her personal breeding stock?" Nita asked. Alps winced. Lyat told her? He then looked up fearfully, having just remembered to ask.

"Lyat explained that to you then. Is he ... alright?" Alps had not seen either hyena since he got back. If Lyat told Nita that, and handed a Shadowfall crystal to his lover, it might not have ended well at all. Nita waved a hand dismissively.

"He's fine. I may not agree with Empress Dominis where her methods are concerned, but her reasoning is sound. Her people are being pushed to the breaking point by Man-... By the Avatar." She corrected herself, looking about with agitation. This change would take some getting used to. "... If the Empress does not allow for a strong and capable heir, the Asuna will be lost. I do *not* forgive them for everything they have done, Alps, but I do understand. If you can forgive Rios her actions against you, I will as well. Also, tactically, I cannot think of a better reason to pursue peace with the Asuna than the sharing of our very lineage, yes?" Alps looked at Nita in near shock. On such a personal and intrusive matter he had not expected her to have such a level of calm understanding. She shared a lot of Rios' worries, it seemed, and perhaps thought carefully about what she might do in the same position. Alps wanted to tell Nita that he forgave Rios already, given that he had come to understand quite well their situation, and their suffering, but he decided that this could probably wait. The main course of their meal, roasted water-fowl, arrived. There was a bit of general light conversation as everyone began with their meals. Alps found his appetite had returned a bit, until Uri, still seeming to obsess on the subject a little, asked a question that put worry right back into the pit of Alps' stomach.

"So, Alps... Do *you* think Mannus is too dangerous to leave alive?" Everyone looked at Uri as if she'd just committed a terrible taboo by asking it right then. Alps thought a bit on that, quietly. He looked to Luna and murmured softly,

"I do not think I am in the right position to make that kind of judgment, Priestess. There are those who he's wronged more severely than me who can better judge his actions. Surely you or Ceriss, who remember the harm he inflicted back then, would be far better suited..." The

priestess gazed at Alps, and then to Nita, as if questioning the queen. Would she defer the judgment to her? Alps agreed at least that the royal house had better right to that decision than he did. Nita spoke up.

“Alps... Since you got back, there has been a matter that we have wanted to verify, and it’s something extremely important to you. I agree with Luna in that it will help you make the decision we are asking you to make. The matter which has come up is due to something Misty saw when we were searching for evidence of you being Letai using the Mindwalk Sphere.” Alps nodded in understanding. They had done this because they had their suspicions that he might have been Letai after he escaped the Shadowfall. Back then, even Misty felt somewhat silly suggesting it, though now it was just accepted as a matter of course. They used the Mindwalk Sphere to move about in his memories, their minds linked to his. The intention was to look at a time before he was an orphan, as he could not remember any further back than that himself. Nidaja had seen his suffering at the hands of Chana and left in his own body to exact revenge on his former owner. Alps had, as a result, not been able to hear about what the others had seen in his memories. Was there something there that he did not remember that would help him decide? Had something Mannus done resulted in his being treated badly as a slave, or even the death of his parents? Or was it the fact that Mannus’ darkest creation, the Shadowfall, was something that he obviously suffered before, when he was a child? He had come to suspect, or even outright acknowledge this at least.

“I don’t remember those things clearly.” Alps stated. “Not even slightly. I don’t remember the suffering, so even what you saw back then does not weigh on me emotionally.” Luna shook her head at Alps and spoke softly, sadly,

“Oh no, Alps. If this... suspicion of Misty’s turns out to be the truth, you will have a lot more right to this decision than you understand right now.” The priestess got up and padded over to Alps’ side of the table, behind the white-furred wolf.

“What?” the slave looked to Nita. “Something about me?” he asked. He had learned more about himself in the past few months than he ever wished he’d known. Life was not so simple now as it had been even months before and he was fearful of what would come next. He looked at Ellis finally. She had been the only one in a long time to give him meaningful advice, but she just gingerly nibbled on a drumstick, looking quite content with her meal as she peered across the long table at him curiously. Even she did not seem to know what they were talking about.

“Let me look in your ear, Alps.” Luna said. She seemed extremely anxious, less calm and collected than the young slave was accustomed to.

“What’s in my ear?” the wolf asked, tilting his head to the side obediently. Luna hesitated. She seemed almost afraid to look. The hesitation seemed so incredibly uncharacteristic for the priestess that the wolf had released. She had always seemed so self-assured and strong, until that very moment.

“Misty said that she saw... something in your past, and she told me about it. I am afraid.

I am afraid to believe and then find out she was mistaken. Please bear with me.” Alps looked sidelong at Luna, who seemed to struggle with the notion of looking in his left ear. His eyes moved to Nita and Misty, who looked at the pair with rapt attention, almost seeming unwilling to breathe and break the tension.

“What’s supposed to be going on with my ear?” the slave asked, flicking his tall, white wolfish ear experimentally. This was starting to give him chills of fear. Luna finally worked up her courage, pulled his ear back a bit, and peered into it, inspecting the warm pink-tinted flesh deeper in. Alps looked at Misty and Nita again, who leaned forward a bit to listen and watch as what he began to feel was a very important scene unfolded. Suddenly, he heard a soft sob as Luna crumpled against him, wrapping her arms around him tightly. Alps’ heart sank at the crying priestess, and he was immediately fearful of how he’d managed to cause it. Ellis had stopped eating, looking as deeply curious as everyone else. The fox seeming surprised at any development frightened Alps even more. He gritted his teeth warily and looked back to Nita. The queen cupped her muzzle a bit, and murmured softly,

“Luna... Is he?” she asked. Apparently, the priestess’ tears had not clearly answered her question. Was he somehow linked to a horrible prophecy? With how things had been going, it would not surprise him to find out that he was doomed before he was even born. Luna looked up at him, tears in her eyes as he tried to figure out what was going on, and she then gazed back to Nita. A smile broke onto her face which relieved Alps even if it didn’t answer him. She nodded to the queen, and hugged the white lupine tightly again, shaking a bit. Nita and Misty cupped their muzzles with a sharp gasp and tears spilled down their cheeks as well. Alps flattened his ears.

“Can anyone *please* tell me what this is all about?” he asked, looking primarily over to Ellis. This had to be another of those things that she failed to mention to him, since she seemed so frequently to know the answers and only share hints. The black fox looked up, mouth full of roast game hen, and shook her head, shrugging. Alps turned back to Nita and murmured, “Please?” The queen seemed to get herself under control, using a napkin to dab at her eyes. The others present, Uri, Misha, and Ceriss, seemed likewise clueless. Misty was the one that finally spoke, her words still a little broken from tears of what Alps decided gladly were actually happiness.

“Alps, the reason that you are the best one to decide what is to be done about Vhale Mannus...” she stood up, walking over to the slave, “... is because you were the victim of his most terrible crime.” The slave looked blankly at the councilor’s words. His most terrible crime?

“...His worst crime that he told *us* about was putting Luna’s child into the Shadowfall. He said so himself.” Alps stated this flatly, thinking that he was not in agreement with the others on what the ‘worst crime’ was. Was that not it? Then the entire scenario fell together in a perfectly assembled heap in his mind. Luna clutching him crying happily was all the clarification he needed when it finally occurred to him what they were saying. Alps grabbed the whimpering priestess, hugging her close. It was impossible. It was impossible, but there was little denying it that moment. The facts were bared and plain to him that echoing, chilling

moment. The steps of logic played out fully in his reeling mind. Mannus stated that casting a child into the Shadowfall was the worst thing he'd done, making it clear it was the first and only time he'd done it. Alps was certain from his experiences that he had been Shadowfallen in his past. There was only one child who had been cast in. Alps was that child. Luna was his mother.

It was hard for the slave to wrap his mind around it. In the orphanage, many times he fantasized about his mother, a beautiful lady kind and tender, scooping him up and being joyful, crying because she was so happy that she found her lost son, and he went to bed with these thoughts even after he was sold as a slave. He would be rescued and happy and he would be given wonderful food and a warm, safe place to rest. He could play with the other kids who ran around with sticks and pretended to fight Uruk in the fields. But here, now, it was real. The fantasy he had given up on only a few years before had just come true. Not only was he now in her arms, feeling safe and warm and joyful, but he had freed her himself. She would be proud of him, yes? This was easily tied with Nita's proposal only months before as the happiest moment of his life. He could not remember any other worry that had ever been on his mind.

Alps finally looked up at Ellis to see if she seemed surprised too. He wanted to know what shock looked like on that normally emotionless face. She *did* seem surprised. Her eyes were round, and her bottom lip quivered a bit. Would she cry too? He hardly imagined her capable of that kind of outburst. She got up, her chair noisily scooting on the wooden floor, her expression strained as she picked up a napkin and dab-dabbed her lips demurely, before she padded out into the hall. Alps lowered his head in understanding. She did not want others to see her any other way but perfectly composed. She would slink away to cry for the happy wolf. He would allow her that. The others noticed, looking after her curiously as she left. There was silence aside from Luna's sniffing over Alps' shoulder, and then, barely audible was heard stifled, twittering laughter from the hallway. Alps quirked a brow. Why was she laughing? What was so funny about Luna being his-

Oh. Alps gritted his teeth. There was that. The priestess seemed to understand what Alps had just realized as the wolf looked at her with an expression of meek and distressed apology. She shook her head, stroking Alps' soft cheek-ruff.

"It's okay sweetie. Neither of us knew." She offered. The laughter in the hall continued, still stifled and barely audible, but likely straining the owner of said laughter to quiet it as she did.

"Yes, nothing to worry about, Alps." Ceriss assured him, waving a hand dismissively. Nidaja touched her lip, looking a bit shocked as well. She had only recently been told, while in the Shadowfall with Alps, what had gone on in the crystal when Alps was freeing his mother. Uri and Misha were not privy to the conversation, and shrugged, but Misty seemed to catch the drift. She spoke loudly as she tried to redirect the topic away from that uninformed act of passion.

"This is worthy of celebration, we should all sit down, eat, drink and be happy for the reunion of mother and son. It's been a long time coming." The councilor held up a glass to toast. This distracted everyone nicely, as all raised their glasses and drank for the two white

wolves in the room. Nidaja gave up her seat to Luna to allow her to sit by her son, and took the priestess' chair across the table. Nita sighed softly and then spoke warmly to her lover.

"I suppose that keeping you as a slave now is no longer a choice you get to make. I doubt your mother would hear of it." She laughed a bit at that, seeming satisfied in how Alps gained his freedom. Luna nodded to Nita on that. Of course her son could not be a slave. That would be silly. She was a Letai high priestess. Even if her return was regarded as a secret, it would be known someday. Alps could not remain as he was. The now former-slave was not distressed by his sudden freedom however, as he spoke warmly,

"Not that it will last. Upon our wedding day, I serve you by choice, without the threat of an auction block." The young lupine male laughed, tail whipping side to side. The High Priestess leaned against Alps' opposite side, wagging quietly, getting control of herself a bit more. Alps looked at her and smiled, feeling extremely complete. How could he cast any kind of judgment against Mannus? He was even less capable of negativity now than he was before. Yeah, Alps got Shadowfallen as a kid, but he didn't remember it. His suffering in that place was lost to him, and while being a slave was rough, it delivered him into Nita's loving arms. He would have to recover from the shock of this wonderful discovery before he could decide the responsible way to handle Vhale. He was scarcely able to imagine how long that would take, as joyfully as he felt this day.

A single candle offered flickering, wavering, unsteady light to a familiar, long missed bedroom. Alps sat naked on the enormous, cushioned bed in the center of the queen's oversized bedroom. He was used to his duties in this place, and everything felt so familiar. For months he had been in a state of peril, and here he was, back safe at home. His thick, full tail wagged briskly back and forth over the sheets as Nita pulled the curtains closed that lead out to the balcony. She looked back to the wolf with a playful smile. Alps sat up a bit, trying to look a bit more proper. He then forced himself to relax a little. The queen chuckled, seeming to be able to read the thought that shot through his mind easily.

"That's right Alps, you are not a slave any longer. You can relax a little." Alps sat up straight again.

"Slave or not, you are still my queen, Nita. You will always be that, even when the time comes to let your heir replace you." The white-furred lupine noted sagely. Nita smiled and ran a fingertip under Alps' chin, her baby-blue robes falling open a little to give the wolf a sly little peek at her lithe and beautiful naked form beneath.

"Already thinking of kids, then?" Nita asked, making the wolf go scarlet under his fur. He stammered a bit.

“I, well, I mean, I have had little choice but to think of it, I mean... with the Asuna... and all.” Nita had a fond chuckle at her lover’s expense. Alps looked back at her quizzically. Nita spoke up again.

“Do not be afraid that I will be jealous that your first son or daughter is not my own. I am proud of you for the things you have done. You have brought me joy and happiness, and in doing so, you bring happiness to others who my decisions affect. If your bloodline can bring the same happiness to the Asuna, then there is nothing to be ashamed of. I won’t have you wait for very long to provide me the same gift, however. I’m not long from my mother’s moon. You will find yourself quite busy during that time, and others will sorely miss seeing you around, as you won’t be getting out much.” Nita laughed. She sat on the bed and whispered to her fiancé, “Now... lay back. I wish to enjoy you as my own for tonight, no more thoughts of what others need or want from you. For now, it is just you and I.” Alps nodded to this, and did as he was asked, closing his eyes a little as he put his hands above his head.

Nita slipped on top of him, not even taking off her robes, but they were not really in the way either. He could see her lovely smallish breasts and her trim tummy as she scooted into place. She pushed her naked sex against his already swelling shaft. He knew what Nita wanted from him, and found himself glad that even with the ferocity of what he’d shared with Nidaja he had no trouble bringing up the energy to give Nita what she wanted. He wanted it just as much. She leaned in and slowly, deeply kissed her soon-to-be life mate. The candles continued to flicker as she held her hips aloft just a little to barely trace the ridge of Alps’ swelling masculinity with the tuft of fur alongside her already begging folds. She held his wrists tightly and just used her delicate touches to gently tease her wolf.

“I have missed you beyond words to describe.” Alps whispered lovingly to the beautiful former holder of his title. “Even though I am free, I would give myself to you willingly for the rest of our lives. I can think of nothing but you so often...” Nita smiled as the wolf buttered her up a little with his kind and adoring words of near worship. She whispered softly,

“You need not worry that I think your mind wanders. I know what I mean to you. I can see it in your eyes when you watch me across the court while I am tending to my royal duties. Just as you need not worry that I would want you less one day. You are mine, given to me by such complex twists of fate that I could not dream of denying my fortune in your grace.” She said, pushing her hips a little harder down on the wolf, slipping her moistening folds against his now pulsing shaft. She applied a glaze of her honey to him before beginning to stroke him fondly against her with short, slow undulations of her hips.

“This is one of the happiest days I can remember... So much has happened, but in the end, I am where I need to be, and the people who love me are all around me. I am happy, Nita.” Alps said, wanting his lover to know that she brought him the one thing he had never been given before they met.

“I am sorry that you do not remember your childhood, but I am sure that some of those nicer memories of before you were in the orphanage... before you knew that awful Chana... will come back to you. Luna will tell you of those days. She might spark a few memories, and we

can share them..." Nita said. Alps blushed as his cock twitched hard against his lover's nethers. She gave a playful grin. "Now, about the little embarrassment at the table." The queen asked. "What was the lovely Luna talking about, huh? What did you do in the Shadowfall? I think I know..." she crooned. Alps squirmed.

"Aw, come on, I didn't know. And she seemed to really need that, and it was the energy that she released that I used, in part, to escape the Shadowfall, so I kind of had to, you know?" he said, fidgeting. Alps was not unhappy, but he was a little distressed because the thought, the memories of what he had done to Luna did not bring down his excitement for Nita at all, whereas he thought that kind of teasing should probably have some negative effect on that thickly throbbing flesh that Nita stirred eagerly with her slick and needy folds.

"How about Ceriss, her too?" Nita asked, leaning in a little tighter to stroke up her wolf nicely. Alps arched his back, huffing hotly. He wanted so much to just slip inside his beloved, feel her body nursing his pleasure and drawing his desire to its breaking point, but he let her keep control, as she was still holding his wrists in a way that made him feel that she was truly claiming him, which he rather liked.

"Huh... aheh... Yes, Ceriss too. Both quite... vigorously. Neither had been touched in ... centuries. Letai crave the energy of pleasure and joy and happiness. The chance at it was like roast waterfowl to one who is starving. Irresistible. Nnnh... To be honest.. even if Luna had.. known... in her state, I am not sure knowing would have been enough... to make her stop..." he admitted, remembering very clearly how on edge the priestess was when he first found her in the Shadowfall. He liked the experience, he could not take that back, but he had a new relationship and a new life to build, with Luna a very key part of it. Things might be different, but that memory would not go away. Alps groaned deeply, forcing the air from his lungs as he felt Nita's sex claim him finally, her hips slipping a little farther back before scooping him into her slick, suckling depths.

"Good booooyyy..." Nita groaned as well, feeling him throb inside her. "How about that odd little fox? She was on edge too, yes?" Nita asked. "They say foxes are graceful lovers." The queen teased. Alps gritted his teeth, suddenly fearing a boot to the face for even thinking of Ellis while in the throes of pleasure with his mate.

"Who Ellis? No, not interested. I think she's got too many other things going on to even think about that stuff. But she saw what I did to Ceriss and Luna. She didn't seem to care for it. I forget sometimes that not all my friends... oh goodness yes..." he arched his back, lifting Nita's hips up as he pushed himself nice and deep into his softly panting lover. She could hold him like that forever as far as he was concerned.

"Oh? So if she offered, would you?" Nita asked, very obviously and mirthfully teasing as she sped up. Alps panted lightly. This was heaven. He pushed back, hands moving up in the gap of Nita's blue robes, grasping her bouncing breasts a little, letting them roll in his palms as he felt the hard points of her nipples.

"I think I would be afraid to. She is a very strange... scary person." Alps huffed. Nita

lowered her head, getting into a nice rhythm.

“Well, I don’t judge you for any of that. These are all things which brought you back to me. I am happy to have you, and don’t want to let you go again. You are mine, and I will one day let everyone... every Amanian alive, know my joy.” With that, she lowered her chest to Alps’ own, and slipped her hands behind his head, panting over his shoulder as her hips pumped heavily up and down, pistoning the thick wolf cock inside her. Alps slipped his hands down to clutch her rump to help her force and rhythm, pulling her hard to him.

“I’m getting close.” Alps admitted. He was a little shamed, as the reason he was so close was Nita making him think of what he did to Luna. He closed his eyes tightly, and grimaced as she sped up.

“That’s not likely... to stop me this time...” she panted. Alps widened his eyes, knowing very well what she meant.

“I’m gonna...” he whimpered, a little alarmed at how quickly he was rising to the moment of his own pleasure. Something felt a little different. He became a little more keenly aware of the essence that he was drawing upon. Nita’s beautiful, pure light that was washing over him. Alps lurched up, pushing himself deep, and then giving a sinking rush of his growling voice as his thick seed sprayed hard inside her. As promised, even as he spouted hard in her gulping sex, she didn’t abate in her speed or force. She began offering short little barks of pleasure. Alps leaned back, letting her ride him to her release, marveling at her beauty dizzily as he flooded her hot channel with his seed. It was that moment when he realized that he was not just drawing her essence. There was someone else, close by... close.

He looked down by the balcony. He could see a shadow on the other side. Someone was hiding behind it. He focused, trying hard to recognize the essence, but he had not been intentionally drawing it long. He pushed his own light outward from him, and stroked the other person with it, letting them feel the heat of his passion and release. He used the form of his essence to “feel” the shape of the other person, learning their size, position, and with a blush, their activity. He heard a soft squeak from behind the curtain. Neit. The little thief was watching from under the curtain, laying on her back, strumming her soaking pussy as quietly and greedily as she could. Nita did not hear the squeak, only speeding up as Alps resumed thrusting at his lover from underneath. Oh yes, having these new essence abilities would be a lot of fun for the wolf. He intended to study them hard, but for now, if he was being watched, it was time to give a good show. He rolled Nita on her back, the plaintively huffing queen making a hot little cry of delight as he pinned her and began pumping his hips hard and fast.

“Yes, love, give it to me! Give me all you have!” she cried, feeling that spunk rolling down her inner thigh from where some of his heavy fluids had spilled from her sex. Alps growled and gripped his lover tight, knowing that the position he rolled her to gave the voyeur a clear view of deep royal penetration. Alps found himself utterly thrilled to give a show to the private watcher, and found himself reaching his peak again.

“Nhh... Yis! All of it... Here we go...” he promised. Nita seized up, climaxing as Alps

gave her a bludgeoning with his hips that loudly scooted the bed back and forth on the cool flagstones that made up the bedroom's floor. Alps barked out with a happy, heated cry of release, and in mere minutes after the first time, found himself heavily painting Nita's cervix with his thick release all over again, holding her as his body jerked and spasmed with pleasure. He pushed his essence out intentionally again, and held it against the other person, feeling her release right along with theirs. He could feel his body readily claiming, consuming, feeding on that energy like soaking up sunshine on a cold winter morning. It was magnificent. He rested himself over Nita, panting as she twitched and groaned and protested not at all.

After a few moments of resting with Nita like this, Alps felt his contact with Neit on the ground by the balcony break. She had moved back, perhaps to crawl off to bed. He wondered how often the girl had watched him. Alps looked back at the panting, weakened, happy queen beneath him. He'd not tell her. The act of not being caught was the thing which gave Neit so much energy in her release when it finally hit. Trying to be quiet, trying to enjoy it without being seen, the danger and thrill of being clandestine. She'd not steal again, but this she could do. Alps would allow her. He closed his eyes, holding Nita.

"Thank you, oh heavens I needed that." She murmured. "I have been focused on work in your absence, and not even my own hands were enough to distract me. I feel rejuvenated." Alps slipped back a little, though keeping his cock deep inside that suckling, spasming pussy. He smiled at his lover and murmured,

"I think you will have to make more time for this again. A very suitable end to a wonderful day. Not everything went as planned, but at the end of the night, I am in your arms, and that's all that matters to me." The former slave crooned happily.

Luna regarded Alps quietly, having no reservation about gazing at him with a renewed adoration. It was not very different from how she watched him before. She always had a motherly feel about her, it just felt more natural now. The shock of the earlier revelation had worn off a little, and he was feeling a little more comfortable and happy about it. Still, even with that nice feeling running through him, he had been dreading this task.

Mannus had been awakened; the herbal extract no longer applied every few hours by Ceriss. He sat on a chair alone in a large empty room with his hands bound behind him. He did not seem to mind. His hair hung down over his eyes as he breathed softly and slowly. Alps watched him for a little bit. This was the start of seven hundred years of suffering, and perhaps the ultimate doom of their world, he told himself. He would have to remember that. His life was not the only one affected by this person. And Alps was the very same child that Vhale had sent directly to what should have been eternal suffering and nightmare. Even if he was regretting it, he had still committed unspeakable crimes against all of civilization.

“How do you feel?” Alps asked calmly. He furrowed his brow at his own words. That’s not what he meant to say. He was supposed to be there to cast judgment on Vhale. There was not a lot of room for compassion in this task. It felt so unnatural to Alps to be expected to be angry.

“My head hurts. Those herbs are pretty powerful stuff.” He said, looking at Luna with half-closed eyes. Luna looked away innocently, despite being the real reason behind the headache.

“I have been apprised of the information they wished to share with me, so I am in a better position to decide your fate.” Alps stated almost casually. He was just not feeling angry enough to act the way he thought he was supposed to act in his position. It was almost eerie.

“Was it anything I should remember?” Vhale asked. “If it affects your judgment in my fate, I am a bit curious.” The former slave looked to Luna curiously. Was he supposed to talk about it? Luna seemed to think a little as they exchanged glances, and then smiled and nodded slowly. Alps looked back to Vhale and swallowed. He immediately understood why Luna agreed. If Mannus had been telling the truth, what he did to Alps was what ended his reign of terror. It caused him to suffer so much that he could not resume his destined mission, even at the risk of the end of the world which he believed was still a possibility at the time. Now, he would be facing that very person he committed that crime upon. It suddenly made perfect sense to Alps why Luna wanted him to do this. The white-furred male finally spoke.

“You would remember me... if I were a great deal smaller... maybe six years old.” Alps offered. Mannus looked at him curiously, seeming not to get the implication right away, and then the life seemed to suddenly sink out of him, the prisoner suddenly looking violently ill.

“No...” he murmured softly, his voice a strangled croak of disbelief.

“Yes. I have verified it myself.” Luna said imperatively. Vhale shook his head.

“He was just a child.” His words sounded utterly haunted. Alps suddenly felt a little bad about Vhale. He seemed to genuinely suffer in his presence. But, as the white lupine male watched him, his shock seemed less mixed with regret, and more with actual fear. Was he finally afraid of dying? Or was he afraid Alps could do worse to him? Alps was capable of casting the Shadowfall, even if he did not intend to do that again if he could at all help it.

“I got out of the crystal for the very first time when I was a child. I don’t remember much about those early days. I remember only the orphanage, not anything before then. But, I did have reason to believe that when I released Luna it had not been the first time I had been in the crystal. It felt familiar somehow.” Mannus’ eyes were round and fearful as Alps spoke, the dark wolf actually softly shaking.

“No, how could this...” he murmured in disbelief.

“Then, Nidaja and Nita used a Mindwalk sphere on me, to see parts of my past I had

forgotten, interested in finding out when I might have been Shadowfallen before. They suspected even then I was Letai, but the Letai had long since vanished, so it made no sense. But in my memories, they saw Luna, looking much as she does now. Misty suspected very much at that point.”

“Impossible... the chances are... are nothing, zero... and then to just find me... and release me...” Whale whimpered, seeming suddenly near tears. Alps hated seeing him suffer, even if he agreed with Luna that it was certainly deserved. The former slave derived no pleasure from this.

“Last night at dinner, Luna checked inside my ear. She remembered clearly that when I was a child I had four little speckles in that ear, and when she looked, there they were, as much proof as either of us needed.” Alps stated. Mannus hung his head.

“So that’s it, huh?” he rumbled with a sullen, sinking tone. “Eternal suffering was not enough, the universe wanted to really drive the point home... You being the one to free me is proof that what comes next is certainly my destiny. I will accept your judgment.” Whale looked up into Alps’ eyes with his own red irises rising, pupils shrinking a bit as they regarded Alps fearfully. “But I have to know something first.” He asked.

“Yes?” Alps asked, leaning in closer.

“What do you remember of your Shadowfall?” the black-furred wolf inquired, his voice wavering.

“Nothing.” The former slave replied. “I don’t remember anything of it. Why do you ask?”

“Alps...” he finally said after some reflection, “I don’t want you to remember whatever nightmares may have presented themselves to you in there, just let it go. If fate would let you enjoy life without those memories, that would be kind and just. Even if you think it might help you to make the right choices, believe me you don’t want that torment. I don’t know how you gained the abilities that you have, but to have gained them as a child, I rather doubt the learning experience was pleasant.” Alps nodded to that. He understood.

“So, what will your judgment be?” Luna asked finally, slipping her hands over Alps’ shoulders and holding him from behind.

“I deserve no less than the worst death I can imagine. Given my experience, I would think that the worst you could imagine would seem compassionate in comparison.” Whale said with self-loathing.

“You’ll get nothing like that from me.” Alps stated slowly, his mind reeling as he thought hard. This seemed to all fall together like a puzzle. Alps ended the darkness that Whale had committed himself to, and prevented him from continuing his war. The Avatar sent Whale to an eternal prison perhaps with a taste for irony or just longing for the wolf’s suffering. Alps freed

himself somehow, and later returned to start undoing Whale's darkness. Somehow, ending Whale's life did not seem like the right shape puzzle piece to use next. It didn't fit. What fit? What ironic justice did fate seem to want now?

"He is right, Alps. He does deserve it, and even if you don't give it to him, there is a world full of people out there who would kill you to have the chance to do it. I know you dislike the thought, but this is the logical next step." The priestess spoke regretfully to Alps, having likely put a lot of thought into it as well. Alps looked at his mother dolefully. She had expected him to responsibly choose death for Whale. It was the logical choice, but it felt like the wrong one for Alps. Somehow, he just knew there was something else. Then, a thought darted through him, an answer that seemed to fit in with everything else thus far.

"What is logical and what is right aren't always the same." Alps said slowly, feeling that sudden rush through him, the way he did when he knew he had figured out a puzzle, in the Shadowfall, on the mountainside when he buried the Uruk army, he just knew. There was a short silence as his eyes traced back and forth in thought, as if reading rapidly a book that wasn't there, habitual for the former slave. Alps looked up at Luna. "Logically, you should never have seen me again, and eternal suffering would be your decided fate. But that was not right. This is what is right. I have my family back, and I know happiness in spite of all that I have endured. It's not logical, given the odds, but it's right." Luna's lip trembled in apparent realization of Alps' determination and conviction. It was Mannus who spoke up.

"If not death, what would you do? You endanger your friends leaving me alive. I won't harm anyone ever again, I can promise, but I cannot promise others who wish me dead won't harm you or others. Luna is right." Mannus stated.

"Whale, since the day I met you..." Alps growled, deciding that he had simply had enough of the dark wolf's self-pity and death-begging. "... since the day we first crossed paths, I have been cleaning up your mess!" Mannus shrank back a bit, and Luna let go of Alps' shoulders as he raised his voice.

"Alps..." his mother murmured with concern. Her son continued with irritation in his voice.

"I don't even want to know what I did to get out of that crystal the first time I was there, or what kind of things happen to a child in that place. As far as I am concerned I am *glad* I don't remember. But when I got out, I got shunted into an orphanage where I was viewed as a burden. The folks who ran the place had no problem telling me that I was likely abandoned because I looked different, and I was treated like I was afflicted with an incurable disease, with pity and held at a distance. As soon as they could, they threw me on the auction block. A lot of my earliest memories are of not being good enough to sell as a slave, much less be adopted. Yeah, I don't remember shit from the Shadowfall, but you know what? That place lives off the suffering, fears and doubts in the person's own mind. As a beloved child of a High Priestess, I kind of doubt I went in with a large variety of sufferings and fears. So maybe I don't remember the place because *nothing* happened. Why would I remember over 600 years of just feeling bored and alone? I had plenty of new memories to suffer through that trumped all that." Alps

ranted. Luna gritted her teeth.

“Children have fears.” Whale clarified.

“But I doubt I knew suffering. Not real suffering.” Alps snapped back. “Not until I got out. When I got out, oh then... then I knew suffering. I was finally sold to a drunk regional matriarch with a reputation for violence, and if you think my youth exempted me from it, I have a few scars you should see. And I do not hesitate to place the blame for each one of those scars squarely on you, Whale!” Alps grabbed Mannus’ muzzle and forced him to look up at him. “Look at me, stop staring at the floor. Now, I have happiness. You have seen the people around me, ready to risk their lives for me, and willing to face even the Avatar together with me. In the coming days or years or maybe for the rest of my life, I will be working to undo the damage you have done. I will free more priestesses, perhaps. I will maybe find new ways to wipe out Uruk armies. I will serve my queen as her life mate just as hard and reliably as I did as her slave. This world needs to be fixed, and who better than a slave to do it? But! This is *your* mess, Whale. Do you honestly think I am just going to let you die and leave this mess? Do you know who has to finish cleaning it up? *Me!* Fuck you, you jerk, I will not let that happen. So here is my judgment.” Alps said, letting Mannus’ muzzle go and turning away.

“Alps, it’s okay, you don’t have to decide right now.” Luna murmured with a worried tone in her voice. Alps knew she had not heard him sound so angry before, but the woe-is-me bit from Whale was wearing on him. Whale was not the one who was having it hard right now. The rest of the world was.

“I have decided already.” The white lupine replied to her, arms crossed as he faced her, and away from Whale. “Whale Mannus will be allowed to live, but... a life of privilege and a lack of discipline was what led to his grand mistake. He will not be afforded such opportunity again.” Alps turned around, facing the prisoner again.

“Being stripped of further opportunity is not a punishment.” Whale stated.

“No, it is not, but I have better shit to do than stand around punishing you. Whale, you are now a slave to the royal house, just as I have been.” Alps narrowed his eyes at the prisoner.

“That’s crazy, even if you worked me in the heat or in the mines it would not be enough.” Mannus growled with despair. Alps cut him off.

“I told you! I am not cleaning up your mess alone. As a slave to the royal house, you will do as I say, and you will aid me to the very death in my attempts to give this world a future. The Asuna are still enslaved, the Amanians are being pushed slowly into the ocean, and there is an entire continent uninhabited by anything but soulless golems. I have a lot of fucking work to do and you do too. This is *not* a choice for you, Whale. You are responsible for the Avatar, and you are going to help fix this problem.” Mannus looked fearfully at Alps and spoke with a trembling voice.

“It’s not as easy as just storming his fortress and killing him. He’s in between. He’s

partly in the Nether, and partly here. When I realized what he was, I even tried to cast him into the Shadowfall. He simply ignored it and laughed. Blades won't cut him, essence won't affect him." Whale explained. Alps narrowed his eyes, leaning in close to the dark-furred wolf.

"I don't care if you are *afraid* of it, Whale. You aren't afraid of dying, and seem to think you deserve the worst thing I can imagine... well this *is* the worst thing I can imagine. Knowing that you are about to follow someone who intends to defy this thing should be sufficient punishment."

"Alps, others will not agree with this. Your friends will worry for you. They already suspect Whale of treachery." Luna stated.

"As they are wise to do." The dark wolf pled. "Alps, you risk too much."

"And yet, I feel like I am doing the right thing, just as I have done all along. You let me regret my choices if I need to later, but for now, I get to make this as my first free choice. I'm not a slave anymore, and I intend to act like it." With that, Alps turned and left, leaving a still bound Whale in the room. Luna quickly followed him, closing and locking the door behind her. She caught up with Alps.

"Are you sure this course is wise, Aris?" she asked, automatically reverting to using his original name. She had done this a few times already, but it still felt a little strange. Nita still called him Alps. "Whale is still dangerous. He had a very troubled mind..." Luna fell into step behind Alps.

"... He had a foolish and arrogant mind, mother." Alps said solidly. "He is not helplessly sick. He knew his mistake the moment he finally saw the Avatar. He was fooled because he believed himself infallible. He does not believe this anymore."

"What good does he do us left alive though? He's a political liability and a clear danger to your friends from others if they find out who he is." The priestess gestured back the way they came. "... Even he knows what would happen if one single Asuna knew his identity. They would kill everyone who stood between them and him to get their hands on him and make him pay."

"Then his presence among us is to be a secret. He gets a new name to go along with his new slave's life, just like I did. If he tries real hard, maybe he can make half as many people happy." Alps said with continued determination. He was very certain of his decision. This was the answer that fell into place in this puzzle. This was the answer that felt right. Luna sighed with some resignation, and spoke again.

"We can keep the secret, I am sure, not many people know, but what use is *he*? Will he just carry your stuff when you are travelling or something? I would not trust him to use the essence again, it may invite more trouble upon him, and I think he knows it. He's not even tried to draw upon our essence, and for Letai that can be involuntary. He's literally shut himself off out of fear of his own power. He'll be worthless in a fight." Alps looked back to his mother, and

then leaned against a wall, not walking a moment as he considered this. He knew that he could not expect Mannus to fight. He could tell the wolf was fearful of ever handling the essence again, and it would be wrong to force him to fight as a slave. He finally spoke.

“Mother... I have a lot of work to do and not a lot of time to do it. I will need his help for menial things as any slave could do, but the reason I need Vhale... is because of what he knows. To do what I need to do, what the world needs all of us to do, I will need to know what he did that eventually brought us all here. I will need to fully understand what I am dealing with. I will find a way. Even if the Avatar cannot be killed, it would be enough, at least for a while, to break his ability to wage war on a large scale. The Uruk were created by Vhale. He may be able to figure out a way to stop them. He’s fearful now, but I think he will come around. I don’t have time to figure out all of this stuff on my own. When the Avatar finally figures out what’s going on, he will come down on all of Asuna and Amani in a very big way.” Alps explained. He had originally been afraid to even return home and endanger his lovers for that very reason.

“Then what do you intend to do, Aris? Have you already got some kind of plan in place?” Luna asked, gesturing a bit with exasperation.

“Not a full plan yet, no, but I have an idea of what I have to do first. I just need to figure out all the steps to get there.” Alps explained.

“What is that?” the priestess asked.

“I have to free the Asuna. Their slavery and their suffering *have* to end before we can do anything else.” The former slave said this with a tone of utter finality.

“I understand that it is necessary to have the Asuna freed so that the Avatar has no one making new Uruk and we can fight a war of attrition, but that is not a very realistic short term goal. It would take years to even get them all to understand that the Amanians were saving them and not conquering them. Even then, it might take decades to be able to defend them against outright invasion by the Uruk, even if we combine our numbers. Early on, the numbers would be greatly stacked against us. The Asuna would be wiped out. Years of our work would be lost.” Luna explained. Alps narrowed his eyes.

“Oh I *will* do this, and I will succeed.” Her son’s tone was deep and commanding. Luna gritted her teeth a bit as he continued somewhat grimly. “However, we cannot take years to do this. They *have* to be free of Uruk control in less than eight months.”