

Sirius, Book III

The Essence

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 8

The bite of rope into Alps' wrists reminded him that he and Neit seemed to have an inescapable history with being bound. It reminded him of the thief's assault upon him on the rooftop garden in Diera. She seemed to have grown since then. Perhaps he had too. He plodded along in front of Neit quietly, watching around warily, his hands bound behind his back. The rope was cut just under the knot, so if he got into trouble, he could break away. For whatever good that would do him, since he wasn't really a fighter. The white lupine hoped that when this was all over, he could take more fighting lessons from Nidaja. He was starting to feel like he was eventually just going to need to know, even if his rightful place was the peaceful home and bedroom of the queen.

It was after midnight, and the streets were still active. This was something Alps had always liked about Jalana. One had more time to get things done because it seemed like the city was always ready for activity. There was no activity on the streets above they were interested in, as Neit led the slave into a small, squat building, one that looked as if it were about ready to fall on its own. There was a spiral staircase in the center of this otherwise unassuming building, whose only intention was apparently housing this staircase into the subterranean passages below.

Alps wrinkled his nose as he walked ahead of Neit, pushed along gently, as she seemed to know where she was going. He rumbled softly to her as they walked, his voice soft as if fearful of calling attention to them even as they walked into certain danger.

"Guh... Neit, if this place smelled better, I might be willing to call it a sewer." The white lupine's feet were careful, as if he were vehemently afraid of stepping on the source of that smell. Neit prodded him from behind.

"You'd be surprised how fast you get used to it when you have to live down here, and how quick you become unaware that the stench is in your fur, and everyone else can smell it but you." she stated to him. The male felt a pang of guilt, realizing that she knew this from experience, and even his life with Chana didn't leave him that offensive to others. Being tolerably clean was a right he'd always enjoyed, even if not overly attractive or healthy.

There were torches along the walls, leaving black oily marks along it. There were only one or two per bend in the underground passageway, which left it precariously dark inside, but Neit walked with the certainty of someone who had plodded around down there for months. Alps smiled a bit. Her life was about to change. No more sewer life for her. He was still afraid down here, however. Even with Nidaja following not too far behind, ready to take down the Asuna criminals who had placed the price on Alps' head in an attempt to have him kidnapped.

The lack of moving air, of any wind, didn't make this place any warmer. It seemed perpetually cold and clammy, which did not lend itself well to comforting Alps about this plan, even with the knowledge that Nidaja would never let harm come to him. More and more it was just feeling like an unnecessary level of risk. Nidaja seemed to feel this route was the only sure way to get a good idea that the Asuna were willing to go through the lengths they were advertising to get him, however, and proof to the general that the actual Asuna governing body was involved in the crime, and not just a smaller group or individual.

After about half an hour of winding, uneventful and quiet walking, which left Alps so lost he could not hope to have ever left this place on his own, the thief and slave approached what looked like a small underground shack, looking as dilapidated and poor as anything Alps had ever seen. There was a dark figure standing outside of it, robed and quiet. When Alps and Neit came into the light, more than adequate in this antechamber, the figure immediately recognized what Alps was, and went into the shack. A moment later, two individuals exited the shack, looking very much unlike anyone Alps had ever seen.

Tall and muscular, there was a male Asuna who came out first. He had to be half a head taller than Alps, his fur a light tan mostly with his ears and muzzle and hands a deep chocolate color, and a myriad of smallish spots in all the lighter tan fur. His head was adorned with thick, spiky copper-colored hair, jutting out and sticking up at impossible angles. He wore dark brushed scale mail armor over his chest, a hauberk which came down over his hips, and dark leather pants with black plates stitched to the front of his thighs. He wore black boots with black metal shin guards, and had the same black metal bracers on his forearms. His forehead was somewhat covered by heavy-looking silver and black goggles, which as out of place as they were, didn't seem too far fetched, given the unusual creature they were on.

After him arrived a female Asuna, actually a little shorter than Alps, and looking a little more refined, wearing just bulky-looking leather armor and a crimson shirt and dark pants which didn't completely cover her legs. She seemed lean and wiry, a bit like Neit. Her fur was a dusty grey color with black spots, ears, and muzzle. Her hair was also coppery, like the male's, but was fanned all in one neat direction, and cut short in the back, not nearly so spiky. She was, at Alps' first glance, somewhat exotic and beautiful. He was pushed

along, up to the front of the little hut. He looked up into the eyes of the male hyena. His eyes were narrow and serious, and he seemed extremely dangerous, a scar along the left side of his muzzle showing he was no stranger to fighting. There was a big nick in the same ear that lined up in such a way as it might have been the result of the same incident. He had just barely gotten his head out of the way of a blade, the wolf was sure. Neit spoke softly, and uneasily. It was obvious that she was afraid of these two.

“Uh... I ... I brought you this Alps. Um... This slave from the queen. For the reward.” Her words betrayed her familiarity with him, which Alps hoped was not obvious to the pair.

“You are using your body then, yis? To get this one?” came the male’s deep, breathy reply. It was such a strong, willful voice. Alps folded his ears back at the connotation.

“What do you mean?” Neit asked. Alps already knew what he meant. An Asuna nose was a powerful tool, it seemed, and bathe though Alps might, he knew.

“You are trapping heem with promise of pleasure to your body.” The male offered again, nodding. “We are not to be paying more for this, no.” he shook his head. “This trick you do on your own. We do not pay for the mating with too, just the bringing him here.” His accent was fairly thick, as Alps listened, but he got the general idea. The deal was to bring Alps, but they were not going to pay Neit more because she had sex with him first. They thought she used the sex to trap him. Neit blushed as she realized they could smell the sex on him. Alps then had another painful thought. If Nidaja was closing in, they’d probably know it before she got there. It might go very bad.

“Brother, I should be taking our guest to be wearing more concealing attire for the traveling inside.” The girl, with similar difficulty speaking common, offered. “It ees being hard enough to move heem unwilling without all knowing his look.” The male put his hand on the hilt of a sword which was strapped upside down along his back that Alps had not even noticed before. It was short, but heavy-looking, curved forward at a weird angle. It was definitely a brutal hacking implement. A kukri style blade made for use as a tool just as much as a weapon. Alps immediately feared for the safety of the thief.

“If you think to betray me, I would have you know that a letter rests comfortably in an undisclosed postbox with confession to my crime, and full implication of the Asuna in its contents.” Neit stated flatly, the defense Nidaja felt would prevent them from painfully altering their deal. “I don’t know what you need the slave for, and it’s none of my business, but you *will* pay me and let me leave safely. I’m not daft.” Alps found something alarmingly natural in the way she bartered with her life. It was likely this was the very life she was leaving

behind. He was surprised she made it this far alive if this was a common occurrence.

"Yis, gurl, I dun intend to alter our deal. The money ees here, fret not." The male stated, frowning at Neit. His demeanor was so cold and professional and strong. His voice was smooth and deep and comforting. Alps could not help but think that Nidaja might actually find that attractive if he were to emulate it. Neit nodded, still fidgeting.

"Where are you taking him?" she asked, obviously meaning the question toward the girl hyena, who was attempting to take the rope from Neit. The girl answered her.

"Into hut to get clothing to hide him. We are not wanting the guard to see we take him from this city. Asuna is not staying underground all the way home." She barked at Neit, seeming irritated with her questioning.

"Reika." Came a stern voice from her "brother". The girl looked up.

"They not needing to even know we taking him to homeland. It ees not being part of deal." He shook a finger in a scolding fashion.

"They ees not needing my name either." She shook her finger back to him. He rubbed the back of his head at his own mistake. The two looked at each other a moment and then the male looked up a second, and spoke.

"Tanayl'kum holignamur aynordun gunock." The words were strange to Alps, and he could not get a single inkling of meaning from them, especially given the calm, icy demeanor of the male hyena who spoke them. The girl nodded.

"Yis, yis, come come. We ees getting a robe on you, then we can pack up camp and get ready. You ees good for carrying heavy things, yis? Slave boy?" Reika asked. Alps nodded and looked plaintively at Neit and she looked back at him. Nidaja would have to intervene soon, but was likely waiting until the two hyena were separated. The big male alone was problem enough! Alps prepared to break his ropes as he was led inside the small hut. Inside it was dark. He felt the bindings on his wrist being untied. This, at least, he was thankful for, but it made sense. He'd have a problem getting on a robe with his hands tied behind his back. At least the pair was not unreasonable. He then felt an embrace from behind.

"What are you doing?" Alps asked in the quiet darkness.

"Rios ees being pleased, I think. You ees nice to look at. She ees being pleased with us, yis? Ees long trip. White wulf needing to rest." Alps jerked

slightly as he felt a soft object, some kind of pillow, pushed into his muzzle. He inhaled suddenly to suck in the air to shout for help, but inhaling was exactly the *wrong* thing to do. There was something in the little pillow. There were some acrid fumes. Then, Alps felt his muscles just vanish. He felt like he was falling, even in the girl's embrace, and she pulled him up against her, and walked out the back of the cabin with him. The last thing he remembered seeing before muted foamy darkness took his mind, was an odd looking boat with a heavy-looking metal cylinder on the back. His last thought was simply an apology to Nita. Wherever he was going, for whatever reason, he knew it would be trouble for her. Then nothing.

Outside the cabin where Alps was being "dressed" Neit stood with the male. There was a pause for reflection, before the thief murmured, "Is Reika getting the money from inside as well? How long will it take for you to break camp?" she was stalling, not sure where Nidaja was.

"There ees no money for betrayal, leetle wulf gurl." came the frozen reply of the male hyena. Neit's heart sank. They knew. Somehow, they knew. She said a silent prayer in the back of her mind that Nidaja was close, and could at least limit the injuries she was about to receive. She stated softly,

"The Asuna will be implicated. Killing me won't stop that. The royal house already knows, and they are already here." the thief said shakily.

"They ees one more gurl, you are meaning?" the male hyena asked. "Yis, I know they are here. I know for a while now. She can be coming out. We are tiring of sneaky bitch in shadows." he said, his tone never changing, even as he used strong words, as if bitch were not meant as an insult, but merely another word for girl. With those words of challenge, Nidaja appeared, her hands already holding a long, slender blade. Neit tightened up. The threat already apparent, this hyena might just cut her down. She bolted off to the side to be a couple strides away from him in case he made that decision.

"Neit! I'll worry about him, you get Alps out of the hut, and get him away from the fight!" she barked. "Alps! Break free, *move!*" There was silence from the hut.

"Ees too late, yis?" came that smooth, almost sensual male voice from the hyena. Neit froze. What did too late mean? Nidaja gritted her teeth and gripped her sword.

"If you hurt him, you'll wish I was only going to kill you!" she shouted, and launched herself at the male. He simply side-stepped and caught Nidaja's swinging arm, then wrenching her, and throwing her with a quick, powerful movement, letting her own momentum be used against her. Nidaja's very capable balance kicked in, and she landed on her feet, skidding. "Neit! *Get Alps!*" she yelled again. Neit turned toward the little shack, and then yelped as it shuddered with a loud roar. The thief backpedaled and held her head as Nidaja got ready for an attack from the hyena, letting him take the lead this time. He stood his ground and smiled as something moved from behind the cabin. There was a channel of water that had been behind it, not visible from the darkness in the antechamber, and upon that channel was a boat. On the back of the boat was a bright metal cylinder with tubes and framework and bracketing making it seem very complex, and from the back of that cylinder came a long band of brilliant blue fire. The boat came into view slowly, but left view faster than Nidaja thought remotely possible.

"No, Alps!" Neit cried. Nidaja roared with fury.

"What was that?! That slave had better not have been on that, you wretch!" Nidaja exclaimed, taking a few very direct swings at the male's extremities, as if trying to hack him off at the elbows and knees. It seemed all too easy, even with his size, for him to avoid Nidaja's speed and accuracy. Neit was starting to get an idea why the hyenas were feared in combat. Their sense of detecting movements and intentions from their opponents made them very hard targets! The hyena only smiled at Nidaja.

"You ees thinking we was not having plan for these things? We ees Asuna, of course wolfs betray us. Money ees here though, if you ees wanting it? Queen is happier to have something instead of nothing? She be mad if you bring back no money and no slave, no?" he stated, his body not even seeming tense. Nidaja inhaled deeply, seeming to try to calm herself. Neit gaped at Nidaja for so easily altering her style to fit the opponent. Violent, fast action was useless against the hyena just yet.

"You seem to misunderstand, bright-spots." she stated coldly. "If we do not get that wolf back, or if any harm comes to him, the queen will not look at this as the theft of her slave. That was her chosen life mate you just took. You are about to start an all out war." Neit cupped her muzzle. It was true, of course. Nita would likely go right for the throat of the Asuna over the loss of Alps. It would not even matter to her if they had noble reasons for taking him. This seemed to cause a flutter in the hyena's willful stance.

"More wulf trickery." he spat at the general. "We ees having at least local scrips. Thing like marriage of queen is big news happening. Nothing ever about it. Who ees you for knowing the personal life of queen? You ees town guard making things up now." he barked. Nidaja reached into her hip-pouch and drew

a golden medallion, holding it cupped in her palm at the hyena. It was her royal seal. The hyena growled loudly and backed up.

"I am General Nidaja Razelle, sister by blood to Queen Nita Razelle, and you'll get violence from me, you'll get cunning and power, strength and justice... but you will get no lies, Asuna." The male looked down a moment, fists balled up, Nidaja held her sword at the ready. This one now knew he was sinking his teeth into a dragon, not a snake. The general expected him to act as a cornered animal.

"Asuna ees not interested in more war." the male said. "We ees pushed too much and pulled too much so to break, it ees not intent for starting war. If you ees speaking truth, then Asuna is admitting mistake, and return slave when we ees finding out. Never was intent for harming him. My nose finds liars. Always finds them." He poked at his black, wet nose. "You ees not found. You ees who you say, and your story ees still impossible. Why ees no scrips talk about white wulf for queen's mate?" he asked. Nidaja did not put down her sword, even as he seemed to present no additional threat.

"Alps' relationship to Nita was secret because it's a social blunder for someone of her class to openly consort with a slave in such a way. But, if you know anything about love..." she growled.

"Ees no rules for love. No rules to bind it, no rules to break it. No force to tame it, I am knowing this. And still you not lie. You ees being true. The Asuna ees making mistake, and I apologize. But no way is to catch Reika. She is being out of city already." The male rumbled sadly. "Ees sorry." he hung his head.

"Sorry?!" Neit barked, striding over to the male. She took a swing at him, which connected with his jaw, but left the thief gripping her hand and cursing. He nodded, seemingly unfazed by it.

"This city's huge. She can't be out already." Nidaja barked.

"Aqueduct ees straight. Straight to make it not block up for storms. It goes to ocean, yis?" the hyena stated. Nidaja nodded. She knew this much at least. It wasn't her first time in the aqueducts on Alps' account, after all. The hyena continued, "Boat Reika ees having, ees special, Just for today. Just for stealing slave. It ees moving fifty times faster than slink runs. Asuna not lie. Boat is on ocean, and moving still farther by now. Asuna apologizes. You would be having to go all the way to Asuna home with me to get him back, and he still be there for days before we get to him." he stated, his spiky mane even seeming a bit downcast over this blunder. He did seem genuinely sorry for it.

"Then pack your things, and we will get moving." Nidaja stated. Neit balked.

"That ees being... not so good idea for wulfs to go right to Asuna home." The male stated, seeming almost in shock that it would be suggested.

"You have me in Asuna home, or you have my army there. Your choice." She stated.

"I am packing things, yis." The male replied.

"How do we know he won't just kill us and escape?" Neit burst, seeming in a frenzy over how bad an idea this was. "The Asuna serve Mannus! They build his armies! They create Uruk!" she said, as if Nidaja had somehow forgotten.

"They don't do it because they want to." Stated Nidaja flatly.

"Again general is true. Asuna is not enjoying being slave to Mannus. We is wanting nothing of it, but homes is already overrun. Wulf will have same fate soon. Mannus will overrun, and then all just build Uruk." He said with a nod.

"How does that mean we will survive the trip?" Neit asked sternly.

"You won't be going." Nidaja stated. "You will be providing the queen with my message, and preventing the war from happening until I get back. If I am not back in what Misty deems a reasonable amount of time, your information is all my sister needs to... redirect our military attention for a while." the Asuna nodded to that, understanding. Neit was to be insurance that nothing happened to Nidaja.

"Not that I mind not going to that horrible place and dying, but how is both you and Alps getting killed supposed to help the empire?" Neit said sharply.

"Don't forget, you work for me now. You will follow your order immediately. I will not repeat myself. There is no more bounty for you, and my royal seal will grant you safe and free passage right to the queen's throne. Take it, and travel quickly to Diera. We need to prevent unnecessary bloodshed at any cost."

"You speak wisdom." The hyena stated.

"Asuna, you said they are taking him to the city, and he will get there before we do. Will he be safe? You said your intent was not to harm him." The general stated. "Why did the Asuna take him?"

"Rios ees saying to take him, because he ees being Letai." The male said simply.

“Rios? The empress wanted him? But their purpose for him? Why do they need a Letai?” the general asked.

“I am not knowing. Rios ees knowing. We do not ask questions of empress.” he stated flatly.

“But you feel that she won’t hurt him? He’s not a sacrifice to Mannus is he? If Mannus thinks any Letai are left, he’ll..” Nidaja faltered, apparently not wanting to think about what would happen.

“It ees being worse. If Mannus ees knowing that Letai is able to get out of dark crystals, he ees finding some worse thing to do. Rios being very specific in who ees chosen to get wulf. Only trusted people. Reika and me, we talked about it also. Rios is wanting not for Mannus to know. Rumors perhaps, but no one says we taking him, and no one saying we having him. Rios means to move against the dark one. This is contempt. This is dangerous, we know. But she is wanting to get Letai before Mannus. Not knowing why.” Stated the hyena. Nidaja nodded to that, and crossed her arms. She then handed her seal to Neit. The general stated,

“You are now a royal envoy. Go. Be quick about it. This needs to remain as secret as you can make it until you get to the queen. I don’t want additional rumors about this to get out.” Nidaja barked commandingly to Neit. The thief nodded to this, and bowed.

“You have my word on my honor.” She stated solidly. “Secrets are the only thing I’ve ever had until now. I won’t blow it.” she stated, and then turned and started off, looking back and saying, “Get him back safe?” Nidaja nodded, and the thief bolted off into the dark, winding underbelly of Jalana.

The white slave lupine looked around him. It was black. He immediately knew it was another dream. It felt the same as the dreams he’d had of Luna. It was not so real as actually being in a Shadowfall crystal, but it was definitely that kind of place. As the darkness faded around him, like the grey dawn rising on an overcast day, he could tell that it was the same ruined landscape, the wasteland the Letai were forced to wander in their nightmare existence within the Shadowfall. It looked empty as before, so he decided to walk in one direction, hoping it would take him quickly to the focus of his dream this time. Why would he dream of Luna again? He’d already freed her. Before, he had assumed that she had somehow called out to him, because of whatever link he had with the crystal, but now? Was there someone else calling out? Would he have to go

back into these crystals often to free others? He'd been thinking about it ever since the discussion Neit and Nidaja had about it being too dangerous. Was the danger so great that they could not try to free others from an eternity of loneliness?

As he walked, Alps became aware of something he had never felt in the Shadowfall. Wind. It was at his back. He began to move faster in the direction he was already going. Wind meant an opening. Was there an opening in this Shadowfall? What was this dream even about? If the person had somehow left, there was not likely much reason for him to be here. As he came up over a hill, down in the bottom of a very distinct crater, was a gash in the air, pulling the air rapidly into it, glowing bright white. The slave blinked at it. The crater had been formed by the long weathering of that wind pulling the landscape with it into the hole, which stayed at the bottom. Had someone punched out of it? He slid down the slope into the crater, and walked cautiously toward the hole, but as he got even a little closer, he lost his footing, and yelped as he was sucked in.

The dream did not meet with any improvement on the other side. Alps found himself suspended in a space where every direction could have been up or down. There were chunks of land floating around, colliding with one another, and dark shapes bounced around like shadows that were cast on plain air, as if some kind of barely visible creature, as well as massive flying shapes moving in the distance. They reminded him of the dragons from stories in the library, tales of fantastic massive creatures that were simply unbelievable even to his open mind, and there they were. The wolf tumbled around, startled at first, but finding himself oddly not truly fearful. There was something sickeningly familiar about it. There was something almost comforting about this place.

He used the will-to-move that he'd used inside the Shadowfall, and found that it not only worked, but it was far more effective here. In minutes, he was racing along in one direction, and able to quickly stop and change directions. It felt even more natural to him than walking did. He could not hide the fact that it was exhilarating. He could not remember ever feeling so free. Even the dark shapes of the dragons in the distance, and the fleeting glimpses of other "creatures" here did not really frighten him. He felt strangely peaceful and immune. Until he saw a shape he knew. He stopped instantly in mid air, looking blankly at it.

On one of the floating rocks, one with unusual sigils and designed carved into it, stood the silver-haired black fox he had freed from the crystal Luna and Ceriss had been in. He sped over to her, and stopped right in front of her.

"Hello. What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Only waiting." she stated in that usual cryptic voice.

"Waiting for what?" Alps asked. Her riddles were always so far beyond his understanding.

"To find out what happens next." she stated.

"What do you think happens next?" the lupine asked.

"You wake up." she said blankly.

And Alps woke up.

He could not really move. He found himself very securely tied down in the bottom of the boat that he had been placed in by Reika. He remembered the darkness, the muffled cry as he found himself being abducted, right out from under Nidaja and Neit's noses. The fact that he was still in the boat told Alps that Reika had succeeded. Were his friends okay? Surely Nidaja would not have been bested in combat. Alps squeaked out, trying to move, but his muscles were still numb from whatever had been used to knock him out.

"You won't be up and about for a while, wulf." came Reika's voice. Alps could not turn his head to look up at her. He could not really move his head. It was such a far cry from the freedom he felt in the dream. "Your muscles ees still being useless from the sleeping poison." she said. "If you ees trying to move, you ees unable to keep from peeing." the hyena girl explained. Alps promptly wet himself while trying to reflect on that. He rolled his eyes, inwardly hating Reika immediately for it. The girl rumbled, "See, there you go. Now you ees having to clean boat, thanks."

Alps rode in silence for another thirty minutes or so, realizing a few simple things in the process. They were out in the open because there was sunlight. They were on the boat, as there was occasionally the slap of water underneath it, and they were moving pretty quickly, from how the craft lurched occasionally. He also realized that there was a constant dull roar from the cylinder that was at the back of the boat. He was very groggy and disoriented for much of that time. When he finally got to where he could move a little, it didn't really matter, since he was tied down. The next thing he realized is that Reika was very talkative, but she wasn't talking to him, and no one else was on the boat. She spoke in her native tongue, which seemed so crude and guttural to Alps, but he felt it also sounded a little like Letai too, if a little jagged and hard. Occasionally the hyena girl spoke softly as if chatting with a friend, and at other times, harsh, as if in an argument. Alps began to feel a bit put off for not being at least privy to why she was talking, and finally spoke up.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked. Reika stopped talking for a moment. She then spoke again.

"I taking to you to Asuna big city." she stated flatly.

"Why?" Alps asked simply.

"Because we is paid heavy gold for bringing you." the girl replied just as frankly. Alps sighed, able to move his head up to look at her. He tensed a little. The girl was holding a heavy looking massive bone club. The wolf could not imagine a creature who would even have a bone like that. It was painted in blood red paint with thick, angry-looking stripes, and adorned with feathers at the base of it's leather-wrapped "handle". The thing had odd, ridiculous-looking "eyes" painted near the bulbous head of the club, which stood out and drew a lot of attention. The slave decided that Reika expected him to resist, and had plans for that should it occur.

"Who is paying you?" Alps asked, thinking perhaps from the male hyena's conversation with her that Reika was not so good at filtering their plan. Besides, he was going to find out anyway when he got where they were going.

"Asuna Leader, Rios Dominis." She answered flatly. Alps blinked at that. It had been the rumor that the high council at least was involved in paying for the task of capturing him, but to hear that their empress was the one responsible was a little shocking. He pushed forward with questioning since it was at least more enjoyable than sitting in the bottom of the boat, urine soaked and listening to the hyena speak in her native tongue to nobody.

"What does Rios want with me?" he asked. Reika yammered away in her native tongue for a bit, and then said softly,

"Bone says you question too much. You ees being quiet now, so I ees not being in trouble later for too much talking." The girl nodded with some finality. Alps looked at the girl quizzically. Was there someone else on board he was not seeing?

"Bone? Who is B-" he tried to say, and then found that club thrust into his face, those silly googley eyes staring him down. Alps' mind faltered a little. The one she'd been talking to all this time. It had been her club. This did not bring any comfort at all to the slave. The girl was insane. The large bone club with the goofy looking eyes talked to her, and only she could hear it.

"That is Bone?" Alps asked, simply having to clarify it, and his situation, for himself.

"That ees Bone." Reika said. "You should leesen to heem."

"I can't hear him." the wolf murmured softly.

“Only I can hear heem.” the girl stated proudly. Alps whined at the back of his throat. He knew it. He lurched a little, trying to sit up, to at least get up off the wet bottom of the boat. Why could they not stop and at least get cleaned up.

“Bone...” he said softly, unable to believe that he was about to try this. By how Reika talked, Bone was in control of the girl, so perhaps her rational side was forced onto the object somehow. If he could appeal to that side of her personality, he might be a little more productive.

“Bone ees leestening.” Reika said, looking out over the water. Alps could see more now too. There was land off to the left, so he felt they were likely going south down the coast from Jalana. It was daylight so they had been traveling all night. There was a haze of blue coming from the back of the cylinder that was roaring, which Alps knew to be very hot fire. What weird kind of object was this? Beneath that, taking up much of the back of the boat, was a large metal tank, perhaps carrying the fuel that the cylinder was burning.

“Bone, I’m not a fighter, and I am hopelessly lost at this point, and probably in enemy territory, so I don’t intend to escape or try to harm Reika. I just want to know what’s to become of me. That’s not an unreasonable question.” the slave said softly. There was a bit of a pause.

“Bone say’s you ees smelling like wulf pee.” the hyena stated.

“I can’t do much about that right now.” he churred.

“We stop soon, coming to place where we walk. We get you into ocean and make you smell like saltwater. Ees nicer.” Reika explained. It still didn’t explain what was to become of Alps, but he decided he would wait until he’d been cleaned up to pressure her and the club for more answers.

So, the white lupine remained quiet, half-sitting as the boat pushed along the calm surf. It was a rather pretty day overall, and it would count as a nice ride in an amazing contraption if it were not for the outstanding fact that he was being kidnapped, had wet himself, and his only company was an insane Asuna. Inside of half an hour more of travel, they changed course, the girl seeming to have pretty precise control of the boat. They slipped into a little cave at the end of an inlet pretty far up a wide river that emptied into the ocean. It would have been easily three miles or so inland. The terrain was something a little different than Alps was really used to. There were open prairies and short, squat trees, and a great deal more wind than he was used to. The land seemed entirely different. How long had he been out? Was it really this different south of where he lived? He’d been pretty far in all directions to the sparse towns near Luca to get things for Chana, but had never seen a place like this.

“Get into water. Get clean.” Reika said flatly. Alps did as he was told, not wanting Bone to have to tell him to do it. Reika stood close watch in case Alps tried anything funny. He still felt a little numb from whatever was used to knock him out. He hoped it was not a permanent effect. That was really powerful stuff, whatever it was. After getting out of the water, the slave took off his clothes, and pressed them against the rocks to try to get them dry. The slave had long since lost any self-consciousness about his bare body because of Nita and her friends, so it was not until he was folding and pressing his trousers that he realized he’d just stripped naked in front of Reika. He looked up at the shore, to see if she might be displeased that he was nude, even if he was pretty obscured by the water. She seemed to be in a pretty heated argument with “Bone” so it didn’t seem she noticed or cared. Alps finished, got out of the water, and pressed the water in downward sweeping strokes out of his fur, and prepared to put his clothing back on. He had been wearing the sort of clothing he normally did as a traveling slave, so he did not look as refined as Nidaja might have liked for going to visit an empress. Alps secretly hoped he would be given something more presentable.

“Alright, Bone, I’m clean. So would you be willing to tell me what the empress wants with me? Despite being taken against my will, I actually tend to be inclined to help people when it’s needed. It would not hurt to tell me what Rios thinks is so important about me that she’d risk open war with the Amani over this.” he said softly. Reika looked to her club, and seemed to pay attention to him. Alps felt so silly doing this, but he decided that ridiculing Reika and saying the club wasn’t really talking would probably send him to Rios a little more injured than cooperating with her madness. Suddenly, Reika seemed tense, anxious, and then desperate, looking with a piercing gaze at Alps.

“Bone, he say’s that wulf is Letai. He says that is why Dominis is wanting wulf. Ees this being true? You is Letai? Dark one hates Letai. War started over Letai. If you ees Letai, ees safer I kill you now! Asuna be in big trouble if you ees one, and we ees not killed you!” Reika shouted. Alps backpedaled a little in the water. Reika knew this already, or Bone would not know it, but it was just now a problem? He realized perhaps that he had grossly underestimated the level of the girl’s madness.

“The Letai were killed off seven hundred years ago!” Alps barked loudly, trying to deflect this blame.

“Yis bone! Ees true, how he can be only one if there is being none before him?!” Reika argued with the club, holding it up to her, its eyes upon her. Alps could not help but think this was the one way he never entertained in his mind that he would die. Would he really be beaten to death by the bone of some large animal at the hand of a completely demented hyena? The wolf watched as Reika began to pace on the rocky shore at the mouth of the cave where Alps was washing himself. “No! No no no, that is stupid idea, ees not possible! Ees not

working like that, when you ees going in, you ees never getting out, that is why. Wulfs lie about story. It is only story to make dark one think his beast haves no teeth now!" Reika argued.

"What is Bone saying? Maybe I can explain and put the notion to rest. I can't be Letai. The Letai are all gone." The lupine stated. He bit his lip a little, knowing he was lying. He'd brought a few back after all. It was no longer true. And if he had the chance and a crystal, he might well bring back more. If they knew, if the Asuna knew, he'd likely be asked to do this for their own fallen warriors if they had been sent in. It was what Nidaja had thought would be their interest in him. He could at least find out if that's the case.

"Bone say's you was in crystal, and got out. He say's Asuna helper merchant wulf saw it happen, then say you alive again after. This ees proof!" Reika gripped the club. "I kill!"

"No, wait! The Letai could not get out, so why did I?! I got out but the Letai didn't, so I can't be Letai!" the wolf barked.

"You got out?! This ees true?!" Reika fairly screamed. "It ees not possible, but you smell of truth! You smell of not lying, and merchant say'd it too with no lying! But Rios is saying you ees Letai to bone. Bone hear it! He hear all the talk brother is having with Rios! She wanting Letai, have to be only Letai!" Reika said, getting into the water, coming after Alps. He gritted his teeth.

"I got out, so I can't be Letai. Don't you see, no Letai ever got out before I escaped! That doesn't mean I'm one of them. There might just have been something wrong with that crystal!" Alps barked.

"Crystal ees not place, crystal is only lock for door!" Reika shouted. "Door with broken lock doesn't mean someone ees getting out! Even shattering crystal and turning to sand doesn't make horrible place go away, it just mean door ees still locked but Mannus not able to draw energy from trapped Letai inside."

"Draw... energy from them?" Alps asked.

"You know nothing of place you were? Crystal ees like ... string attached to person inside, or people, some even more powerful. Energy from Letai used to make powerful spells possible. Mannus controls Uruk with power from Letai. Bone, he can't be Letai if he not even knowing this!" the girl argued.

"Right! I don't know much about them. Only stories. I grew up in Luca. My earliest memories are just from an orphanage in Jalana." Alps stated. Reika paid attention to the club, eyes narrowed upon it. She nodded, and then spoke again.

"Bone ees saying you ees Letai, but he won't let me kill you. I strangle you if I must. But you answer this then. What ees mother look like?"

"My mother?" the slave asked.

"Yis. Your mother. What is looking like? Remember?"

"I don't. I don't remember before the orphanage." the white lupine rumbled.

"Then if you ees Letai, you don't know it. You ees not able to lie about it because you ees not knowing. You believe what you are not because you not seeing what you are. You don't believe because.. because.." She looked to the bone club again, and slumped a little. Alps watched whatever exchange was going on between them. "You don't believe because... you ees afraid." Alps gritted his teeth. "Talk wulf. You is afraid to being Letai." she stated, he nose quivering. The Asuna could smell lies, he already realized it.

"I can't be Letai." Alps stated solidly, shaking a bit. He didn't want to play into her assumption that he was.

"Say it, or I *kill*!" Reika shouted furiously.

"Rios wants me alive!" Alps shouted back. Reika lurched forward, and grabbed him by the neck. She had unbelievable strength as she pulled him down and forced his head under the water. Alps struggled, but could not get free. He was then lurched back up just as he was starting to feel dizzy. The wolf gasped for air.

"Rios ees not knowing you ees with Reika! Accidents is happening! You say! You say you ees scared of being Letai, that ees only reason you say you not!" the hyena screamed, shaking Alps. Alps gritted his teeth. If she was going to kill him anyway, he was not going to go down without a fight. He brought up his elbow, right into Reika's temple. She jerked back, letting him go. Alps grabbed the club from her hand. He backed up, clutching it in both hands ahead of him.

"You want me to say it?!" he barked, shaking with fear and anger. "Alright, I will say it! I'm scared! I'm afraid of being Letai! I know things I should not know, and am drawn to them in ways I should not be. My life has been, in the past year, a constant storm of realization that there was something different about me that I could not place, and when I was in the crystal, I felt things that were familiar and had abilities in there that I felt were from long ago, just being remembered. I felt like I had grown up in that horrible place!" Alps screamed. Reika rubbed the side of her head, looking at him hatefully. He had her weapon. She was not advancing just yet. "You want to know?! Alright fine! I don't know if

I'm Letai, but I do know this... I somehow knew how to move in there. I knew things about it I could not have. I knew because... I think I had been there before. I think everyone else knows it. Misty had Nidaja go into my memories to find out things I forgot about my childhood. I know they went in there to answer the same question you are asking me. So I'm afraid! I am not afraid that it will be nothing, and they will feel let down and I won't be special. I'm afraid they will find out it's true, and deep down inside, I'm having more and more trouble believing it's not! When I was a child, I was thrown into that place. Why would I have been put into a Shadowfall, Reika?! I'd have been put in there because I was Letai. Maybe I was put in there 700 years ago, and don't remember, because I don't remember anything before the orphanage. I have dreams of that place. I have visions of things I can't know and links to people I've never met. So that's why I'm scared! I don't want that kind of thing thrust upon me! I just want to be with my friends and have an uncomplicated life for a change, but now I have to be kidnapped because of what I might be, and that's the reality of being Letai. I'm a target, and Nita may not even be able to keep me safe. Ultimately, Mannus will find out, if the Asuna already suspect. I will bring hardship upon everyone I know!" he said, unable to stop himself from crying. "Is it so wrong for me to deny it?! Is it so unacceptable for me to be afraid?!" the wolf sobbed. Reika moved forward, taking the club from Alps' shaky hands. He didn't care now. He would let her beat him if she wanted. He felt like he was falling and there was no bottom. He could not go back to his friends if he was Letai. It would be too dangerous for them. Reika spoke in her native tongue for a bit with the club. Alps cried. He couldn't stop. All he thought about was how wonderful his life had been for that short time and it was stripped away from him for nothing. Just because of what everyone thought he was, even with no proof.

"Bone ees say'd you ees selfish. You ees powerful and do nothing because you scared of losing things you has, when others has nothing." Reika stated calmly.

"Fuck you, Bone!" Alps shouted, bristling. "Your life is simple, you just hit things and get fawned over by a pretty girl! Don't you fucking judge me – oh fuck, I'm arguing with the bone!" Alps wailed despairingly.

"You ees right Bone. Truth is making people go to pieces sometimes. Wulf ees crazy." the hyena said sadly.

"Are you going to kill me and save your people from the calamity I am going to bring or not?" Alps asked, looking into the water as it lapped around his legs.

"No. Bone say's I can't." she said softly.

"I hate Bone. Bone's a dick." Alps said flatly. "Now will he let you kill me?" There was a pause, and then a reply from the hyena.

“Bone say’s you ees sad, and don’t mean it.”

“What do I do then? Am I going with you to release people from crystals? Is that what Rios wants?” he asked. “I will do whatever Dominis asks. It’s better I am far from Amani.”

“Bone ees saying you would understand this when you ees made to realize what you are. Bone ees wise.” Reika said, nodding. “Sorry ees making you so sad though. It ees for the better though, no?”

“Better for them. Not better for you.” the lupine male said softly.

“Rios ees wiser than Bone. She ees knowing why she does this. Bone ees not even knowing. Mannus kill us all if he knew. That ees why I want you to die. Bone says you will save us. Will you?” the girl asked quizzically. Being told that she wanted to kill him seemed so out of place for how otherwise nice she sounded.

“If I could save everyone from the darkness He brings, I would do it, Reika. But bone should understand, I’m just a slave. Even if I have a weird ability concerning the crystals, it doesn’t stop the fact that Mannus wiped out a Letai army centuries ago and he’s only gotten more powerful since then. One Letai male with no essence-using ability is not going to change much.

“Rios ees wise. She knows something you don’t, I am betting.” came Reika’s soft voice. Alps got out of the water and looked at the girl.

“Are you scared too?” Alps asked.

“Yes.” Reika replied. “Reika ees being afraid we all die because Rios ees wrong, but has to believe in Rios. In the end, we all ees dying, one way or another. We should do something grand with life if we can, even if it ees maybe not right, so long as we ees thinking it ees. Essence never remembers those what was uncertain about their life. Bone is telling me this.” Reika said softly.

“Bone is wise.” Alps conceded. “Let’s go, Reika.” he stated, nodding.

“Alps...” the girl said softly. It was the first time the wolf heard her use his name.

“Yes?” he asked cautiously.

“I ees liking how you smell. This big compliment from Asuna. You thank me.” she said.

“Thank you Reika.” Alps said softly, and began to follow her on another long journey.