

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

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## Chapter 9

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Once again, Nidaja found herself sitting in front of a fire, underground, with a different species, all to try to help Alps. She had her chin on her hands, her elbows on her knees as she sat in barely anything at all, while her armor dried in front of the fire. She looked across from her, where a hyena sat, not wearing much either. His clothes baked in front of his side of the fire. They had been rained on a bit before they could find refuge in a limestone cavern, which was not overly dry in and of its self. The strong, musky scent of Persi Moss hung in the darkness around them, and the dripping and trickling of what was probably an underground stream or natural run-off deeper in the inaccessible recesses of the cave could be heard.

"You are sister to this Queen of Amani, yis?" the strong-looking male hyena said, finally breaking the silence. Nidaja looked up, actually welcoming his words, since she was bored from just waiting in the darkness. She prodded the fire a bit, helping dry the slightly wetter wood a bit more in hopes that it would catch before the flames died out.

"Yes, Nidaja Razelle, General of the Amanian Defense Forces and Sister to Queen Nita Razelle." She said softly.

"Girl who ees bringing heem to us, she smelled of mating with this wulf you bring us." The spotted male said casually, nodding so that his tall spikes of red hair bobbed a bit.

"Err... Yes." Nidaja replied. Suddenly, quiet seemed a little easier subject to bear. He had a very potent sense of smell.

"It ees common then for before wedding to lie with other girl?" the large shape in the darkness added. Nidaja shifted her weight a little from side to side. She was starting to regret being so happy about him talking. She had not expected he'd be asking such intimate questions right away. Then again, the general did not know if Asuna culture treated those discussions more openly than the Amani did, since they were openly more savage.

"Not really. Alps is a very unusual... Um... example of..." the general tried to figure out the best way to explain what he had been for so long now.

"You ees laying with heem too, yis? Sisters share? This ees not uncommon in Asuna tribes either. Family ees strong. Family ees share." He nodded. Nidaja felt hot under her fur, where moments ago she had been cold. She folded her ears back.

"Well, that's not entirely what made all that come about really. It's not that common." she tried to explain.

"Ees secret then? You and Alps? Maybe sister is not sharing?" he asked, leaning forward. The general looked the male in the eyes. It was hard to believe how interested in this sort of thing he actually was.

"May I ask a question, as you are so curious about these personal things?" the green-furred female asked.

"Yis?" the hyena replied.

"What could possibly be interesting to you about such intimate details about your enemy?" Nidaja asked.

"Nidaja Razelle ees not my enemy." he stated flatly. "Nidaja ees not attacking Asuna villages and stealing Asuna food. Nidaja ees just not liking Asuna. That ees not making enemy." He stated. "That ees making closed-minded hateful girl." He added with a nod. The general cringed a little. It was true, off course. She felt immediately vile for being called on it, but knew immediately that it was pretty open and pointless bias at this point.

"Okay, I see your point there. I won't call you an enemy then. But a stranger I still am. Why do you want to know these trivial things? They don't really help you any, and you seem to be more thoughtful than to just like idle chat." the general stated.

"I am never just talking to Amani girl before. I am never understanding them and knowing them. They ees running always from spotted males. Never wanting to chat. So I am smelling that you and other girl ees both liking very much this Alps, and wanting to know why, since queen is supposed to be liking heem too. It is okay, or no?" he rumbled, his smooth, soft voice a pleasant tone in the near darkness. Nidaja still could not get over how calm and intelligent he seemed. For so long, she'd regarded the Asuna as barbarians, and this one certainly was not. Perhaps he'd been trained like this as he was supposed to interact with the Amanians.

"I am not like every Amani girl either, if that's helpful at all to you." Nidaja said coldly. "But it's true, Alps found a very unusual social ... niche. His original purpose when we bought him as a slave was to be a personal servant, an

intimate companion for the queen, since the war and her social requirements made romance pretty much out of the question.” The general tried to explain. She didn’t want Nita to sound depraved. “This was, of course, my idea, not hers, but it turned out that he was something she very much needed, and in the end, wanted.”

“This is happy story for slave wulf, but ees not explaining why you and other girl ees smelling of him too.” the hyena stated. “Not if you say ees not just sharing.”

“Alps is someone we all love dearly.” The wolf female answered without thinking. “Not just Nita. We all love him. He’s very close with us, and he’s got the purest, kindest, most genuine spirit of anyone I’ve ever met.”

“Ees Letai. All Letai supposed to be like that.” The male stated.

“Maybe. Alps sure is like that, Letai or not, and he didn’t have it easy growing up and all. His previous mistress was horrible. I don’t know how he ended up being so...” Nidaja gritted her teeth. Part of her would always want to strangle his mistress for what she’d done to him. The lady lupine was not aware that Chana had already met her end.

“Nidaja ees wanting heem? If sister ees never to marry, ees Nidaja marrying heem?” the hyena asked.

“No. I’m a fighter. Fighters don’t live long. I’d bring sadness to a family. That’s not part of my future.” Nidaja said.

“Nidaja does not get to have happiness? She fights so others can, but she cannot? Even if she ees not living long?” the male asked.

“You are kind, Asuna, to think that.” Nidaja said softly.

“Lyat.” Came his quick reply.

“Huh?” Nidaja asked.

“Ees my name. Lyat Rasenko.” He patted his chest.

“Oh!” Nidaja stated, a little embarrassed suddenly that she had not yet asked him his name. “I’m not without happiness, Lyat.” The general stated, leaning forward, suddenly feeling much more personable since his name had come up. She prodded the fire a little, making it flare up so she could see his eyes. He wore knee-length canvas shorts, which had been under his shin-length trousers. They were dry now, as was his fur, through the course of their conversation.

“Alps ees giving you happiness, even after Nita ees being married?” Lyat asked.

“That was the idea. He’d be a life-mate to her, and sire children perhaps, but I can’t imagine his close friends not knowing his intimacy.” she stated softly.

“More than you and other girl?” came Lyat’s questioned reply. Nidaja sighed, fearing that she was making this sound a lot more depraved than it was. They all shared a very powerful and loving bond. It could not be seen as being insincere or trivially playful.

“Quite a few. Alps is very good at bringing happiness to those around him. And when he does that, other good things happen. It seems like since we met him, we’ve all be pushed in some positive way, and life has gotten better. Maybe he’s lucky, maybe it’s something Letai do if that’s what he is, but it’s not just playing around to any of us. He’s touched us, and we are very protective of him. That’s why we have to get him back. You don’t want to know the dam-break you are going to see if the queen thinks the Asuna hurt him.” The general clarified.

“Rios is not hurting him. But you ees maybe not looking at bigger picture, Nidaja Razelle.” Lyat said.

“Bigger picture. What do you mean? What’s bigger than Alps being the life mate of the queen?”

“He will only know loss and pain.” The hyena stated flatly. Nidaja gritted her teeth. That picture of Alps’ existence angered Nidaja because she knew that before she’d met him, it was the day to day truth.

“He has only ever known happiness with us.” The green-furred female said defensively.

“The Asuna get rumors of heem already. Some say he ees Letai, so who else may hear rumor, Nidaja? What happens if Mannus knows? Can you or even queen protect him? How many you think dark one kill to get last Letai?” the hyena asked seriously, his tone very dark. Nidaja cringed. Of all the things she thought about when she considered that Alps *might* be Letai, that was something she found herself shocked to have never considered.

“Mannus... would burn Diera to the ground. Oh living essence...” the general murmured, a jolt of pain stabbing through her. Alps would be ruined by knowing his very existence brought even the chance of that.

"Alps will learn of the danger. Reika will tell him. It ees being part of why Asuna empress is taking him. Wulf might be everything to Amani queen, but he might be only thing for Asuna." Lyat stated.

"I am not sure I understand." Nidaja said, still wavering with despair over the unrealized complication. "Because he can free people from the Shadowfall?" she asked. Lyat widened his eyes.

"Free people? He freed himself, that was rumor, but you suspect he could free more?" he asked. Nidaja gritted her teeth. That was foolish of her! She just gave away a very large piece of information that she did not want anyone, let alone the Asuna to have, and she could not lie her way out of it with Lyat. He'd see right through it.

"This is a very imperative secret, Lyat. You will not speak of this to any but your empress. I beg of you, it would be epically ruinous." The general pleaded, stepping up and walking over to Lyat, getting on her knees in front of him, her nose almost to his as she looked into his eyes, trying to determine once and for all if he was the sort to be dangerous holding this knowledge. Very few outside the high council knew of this secret. Not everyone even in the high council knew.

"I am starting to think this ees kind of secret that kills." The spotted male stated calmly, "But I will hear of it. It may help in understanding importance of this Letai." Nidaja put her hands on Lyat's shoulders, steadying herself. What was she doing? Why was she confiding something like this in him? Was it his calm strength? Had she become so unable to stand on her own? Was the loss of Alps that crippling?

"Alps is no longer the last Letai, Lyat, if indeed that is what he is. The Letai are no longer extinct, regardless of what Alps is." the lady lupine stated with a sigh. "When he escaped the Shadowfall, he released two powerful Letai Priestesses. It is possible that he could release more. Maybe all of them could be freed if we had the Shadowfall crystals, or knew more about how they worked. Mannus may not, even knowing the rumor of Alps' existence, understand the danger that slave represents. We know the Letai were destroyed because he feared them, and if they come back when he doesn't expect them, he'd have a lot to worry about." Lyat gritted his teeth.

"I curse it." He whispered. "I curse my ability to know you speak truth." The hyena stated. "This ees deadly secret. This is bending very wind of fate to you, and now to me. I am thinking maybe the reports that reach my empress are more complete than either of us realizes. I am not knowing why Rios ees taking heem away from you, but if she ees knowing even part of this, or suspecting, than she takes him because she ees thinking he ees vulnerable, and does not want Mannus to get heem. This ees secret from Mannus, this mission I am on.

Very high risk. Mannus burn down all of Asuna villages for this. What ees Rios thinking?" Lyat asked himself. "What can we do for Alps, if no one can protect heem? We can hide heem, and make the rumors go away, spread stories about fraud or his death? Would it be believable?"

"Well, we have to get him back first, if we are to save either of our villages from ruin." Nidaja said solidly. Returning without Alps was out of the question. She could discuss the real problem of Mannus' retribution with her sister and build a plan with Misty when they got back, but there would be no leaving him somewhere, even if it seemed safe. Nidaja knew her sister would never forgive her.

"Reika ees trusted. He make it to Rios safe. Nidaja can talk with empress, and resolve conflict, I am thinking. But, Nidaja..." Lyat said softly, putting his hands on her shoulders as well, the two closer together as he whispered. "He will know what going back can mean. If he wishes to stay away, will you take him unwilling? He may not stay with us, but if he ees what you say, he will not endanger his friends. What then?"

And with that, Nidaja just shattered. All the strength and composure she could muster could not stand in the face of the very real thought of losing him, not because someone stole him, or someone killed him, but because in his grief, he'd not return. The thought of him feeling and being completely alone was far worse than any thought of him being dead and gone. She dropped her head against Lyat's chest with a thump and just sobbed. This took the hyena by surprise and he wrapped his arms around the general, gritting his teeth, seeming a bit at a loss to how to deal with her crying on him, instead of trying to kill him.

"Nidaja wulf, don't do that, I am not being hopeless, I am meaning Nidaja should be asking heem and making sure ees... ees going back what he wants, and letting heem know his friends will take all risks to have heem. Don't let heem doubt..." he said softly.

"I *know* Alps, Lyat, he won't get us killed. He'd run. I know he would." Nidaja cried. "He'd rather die than harm us!"

"What would happen to his friends if he left?" asked the hyena. "What would happen to your sister? What would happen to you? Which are you thinking ees being worse? Dying? Or not knowing where he ees? This he will know too. He will know what it does. Or you will tell heem." Lyat whispered. "He will go with you, but don't make heem go without making sure he ees knowing that you and sister accept the risk. Don't tell heem you will take action to protect heem. Tell heem that you will act to protect you, and he will still be there with you. This ees only way you keep heem, if he is being what you say he is to you." Nidaja thought about this for a while, sniffing away her tears, and then looking up quietly at the dark, savage eyes of her traveling companion.

"Why do you help me, Lyat? You know it may not be what your empress wants." The general asked.

"I have a clear understanding of what my empress wants of me." The hyena stated, perhaps clearer than anything he'd said before. His voice was deeper and more proud, and he seemed even more mature than he'd sounded until that point. For all the things he had perhaps been trained to say to an Amanian general by his empress, this was from the heart. Nidaja peered at him curiously.

"What do you think she wants you to do here?" she asked.

"Empress would want me to give hope, because that is what empress wants for all of us. There is little hope left, but she doles it out like wine at festival. We know the darkness. We know that our spots drift against a backdrop of blood and fire, and yet, she whispers to each of us when we are alone with her. You tell a secret to Lyat, I tell a secret to Nidaja." He leaned in, his velvet lips cupped into her tall, eager ear as her heart sinfully skipped a beat from his closely pressed body.

"A secret?" Nidaja asked mindlessly, a wistful whisper, born of her trying to figure out why her body tingled against the sturdily built male. She could not think of anything more heavily taboo than how scandalously close he was to her right that moment.

"In our ears, Rios Dominis, the empress, whispers that a day will come where darkness will fall so black that our spots will shine like stars within it, and then, in that darkness, one will rise up who treads the darkness like the brightened plains, and knows no sadness in the face of eternal suffering. It ees this spirit we will embrace, and the darkness will fall, and the sun will rise over the Asuna once more. Mannus demands of us blood and sweat, the very pelts off our backs, but Rios will spit in his face to give us hope. There is no open hostility to the Amani now, Nidaja. We know hope we had forgotten, us few who have heard this secret. We believe. We believe in our empress, and the coming dawn. She said it will be during her life that this light will shine, and we do not question it. She risks death for treason to utter the words, and she spreads the secret among those with the strength to help make it happen. We only wait for the one who walks in the darkness, Nidaja. And we think your white-furred friend ees the one. Rios will see heem, and she will know. That is my secret." Lyat said in an eerily calm tone.

"What will she do if he's the one she's waiting for?" Nidaja asked.

"I do not know what she intends, but I know, I believe just as she does, our endless night will be over." He said.

"Do you really think the hyena would turn against their dark master?" the lady lupine asked, a little cynical.

"Do you think Alps could make them?" Lyat asked in reply. The general looked up into his eyes, her own widening a little. She had not really thought about what effect *Alps* would have on the empress, or others he was likely to come in contact with. There had been an almost bizarre level of social interference that seemed to follow the slave everywhere he went. He changed people. He affected most of those he came in close contact with. He even changed Nita. Would Rios be any different? Nidaja leaned forward a little, thinking about it. Crying had made her weak, she could feel it. Now, the warmth of the fire calmed her, and she felt the recovering warmth in this cave as it dried from the heat. Just to think about her lover made her feel better. He had something of a gift where bringing positive change was concerned, and the thought of what Alps might be doing to others where he was even as Nidaja rested in this dreary cave made the general feel cozy, even if just for a moment, and, wanting to cast off her own darkness, she let herself revel in it a bit.

"Lady Nidaja?" came Lyat's voice after a few quiet moments.

"Yes?" the general asked, her head still leaned forward, eyes closed.

"What are you doing?" his voice was soft and inquisitive. Nidaja opened her eyes. Both her hands were on Lyat's broad chest, her claw tips slipping back and forth through his chest-fur in long, slow, caressing strokes, exactly as she might have done with Alps. Nidaja blushed a bit, jerking her head up.

"I-" she stammered. "I was just... I mean I'm not..." she hung her head. She had to be very careful what she said, because if she lied, his assumption could be a lot worse than the truth.

"I didn't hate it, I just, I don't..." the larger male said dismissingly, seeming to try to make Nidaja feel less on the spot, even as her fingertips were all over his peppering spots.

"I've grown used to touch." Nidaja explained, as truthfully as she could. "I didn't need it before, but now I do. It helps. Life's so hard. Touching like this makes it better. I'm sure you know." she stated solidly, trying not to seem weak while at the same time knowing that right at that moment, she was.

"I don't know this touch." Lyat replied.

"What, gentle touching? You don't know?" Nidaja asked incredulously. For a hyena, Lyat was a splendid specimen. She refused to believe he'd never been held lovingly. At least his mother would have.



"No, I am knowing gentleness, I had good family. I am not knowing Nidaja's touch. Girl Asuna is not touching their male like this. Ees biting and pushing, then running and teasing, that ees how we touch when we are close. When we want to be close." He stated with a nod.

"I don't want to be that kind of close. Not like girl Asuna." The general said a little more loudly, blushing hotly under her fur. She moved her hands away from Lyat's chest, hugging her middle to look more withdrawn. "That's not what I meant." She cursed herself silently for having very openly broken a severe taboo.

"You touch me to make you feel good, and you are afraid that you might feel good. This ees why Amani confuse Asuna. You want thing you won't let yourself have." He said with a nod.

"I don't want it." Nidaja barked.

"If you did, what would stop you?" Lyat said, smiling to Nidaja. He suddenly seemed a lot more confident with her than he was a moment ago. The general bit her lip. Did she smell like she was lying? Was she lying? She shook her head, starting to get flustered.

"The fact that you are an Asuna would stop me, Lyat. Do you know how much almost everyone I know would frown on that? How can you even think of it? Don't your people frown on it? Is it something you've thought of before now? You've been spending too much time on the wrong side of the plains." she said, nodding curtly.

"I admit, I have been thinking of it sometimes. Some Amani girls have great beauty. Lyat likes the green ones. Very thoughtful and healthy and powerful. Strong ladies is beautiful to Asuna." He chuckled. Nidaja could not honestly tell if he was just teasing her.

"That's flattering. I've always thought of hyena males as slobbering, frenzied, savage walls of spotted meat, so you will excuse my lack of intimate ideas about them." The general stated. She felt so embarrassed by even being forced to think about whether or not she'd have entertained the idea of intimate contact with the Asuna. At the same time, she did not see Lyat that way at all, and that was bothering her even more.

"I am thinking in your company maybe they are not being able to help it." Lyat chuckled.

"Surely my kind do not arouse you, Lyat. Even if I am attractive, we are not typically very nice to Asuna, regardless of whether or not we are wrong to

feel the way we do.” The general pleaded, wanting to shake the thought away. It would be a lot to carry with her for the next few days of travel if she thought he might be watching her sleep and fantasizing about her.

“Then you admit you might be wrong to despise Asuna!” Lyat barked triumphantly. Nidaja gritted her teeth. What a mean trick! She turned and thumped his arm with her fist, barking out,

“Hey, I never said that! I just said even if I were!” she crossed her arms over her chest, suddenly a little self conscious about how close-fitting her cotton shirt and dark cotton shorts were on her.

“Does thought of me pressed close against your body, keeping you warm appall you, Nidaja?” Lyat asked, smirking. While normally Nidaja would welcome his relaxed nature with her, as it made for easier traveling, this was a little *too* relaxed!

“That’s not fair, Lyat. You could say I was lying when I answered to fluster me!” Nidaja barked defiantly. “I refuse to answer.”

“You are so quick to defend yourself, but that ees what we know so well, both of us warriors. How those we fight act when they are afraid. This ees no different from fighting, what we do now.” Lyat rumbled. “It ees contest of will, and your will ees shaking. Lyat ees stronger?” he asked, still on his knees in front of the defensive general. Nidaja growled, and then lurched forward, pushing Lyat back, straddling his hips, nose close to his.

“Then I answer. No, I am not interested in holding you.” the general rumbled, her nose close to his.

“You lie.” Lyat said.

“I told you that you’d say that, just to try to shake me, well, I’m not shaken Lyat.” The lady lupine said with a grin.

“That ees not changing the fact that you do not speak truth.” The hyena said.

“You are starting to anger me!” The general barked.

“I am starting to frighten you.” he said, looking up at Nidaja. “Even though you are overpowering hyena, he scares you, yis? You are afraid body wants what mind refuses. Body is stronger maybe. You give in and regret it, this ees what you fear. I have good nose.” He chuckled.

"I'm seriously about to slap that good nose right through the back of your head." Nidaja bristled. At the same time, that lingering doubt boiled within her. That was the thing that was making her more angry.

"I am knowing you already, General. You regret injustice more than insult. Will you lie, then break my accusing nose to hide it? Do it Nidaja. Try. Prove that you hate me that much."

"I don't hate you, but that doesn't mean I want to have sex with you, Lyat." The general growled. "When did you become so pompous and arrogant?"

"I only act like this with those who lie to me." Lyat said soothingly.

"I am not lying. I don't want to have sex with you." she hissed.

"You are not lying now. This ees true. But you lied before. You said you did not want to hold me. You want to be held. You cannot hide that." The hyena said. Nidaja paused a moment, and then just dropped, her chest right over his, her chin over his shoulder and she sighed.

"I hate your stupid nose." The wolf female growled, arms pulling up along Lyat's sides to let her hold him. His strong, warm body was perfectly fit beneath her, a nice and secure place to rest. He was a lot larger than Alps, and not exactly a pain to cuddle with. She could not even begin to deny that.

"Truth is good thing, yis?" Lyat asked.

"It's not always so great. It's just convenient for you right now. My mother would eat her own tail if she saw me snuggled up to a big, half-naked hyena, you know that? Do you have any idea what kind of trouble this is?" the general rumbled. Her hands slipped up over his chest, and she stroked his fur, leaning up enough, propping herself with one elbow, as to actually make a show of the fact that she was casually and even tenderly touching Lyat.

"I understand, Nidaja. I am not to be teasing you more about it. Only wanting to show how useful ees my nose. It ees nice to hold though, this ees good truth. And your mother not watching. Ees okay." He chuckled.

"Yes, Lyat. It's nice to hold. And when I have much to worry about, it helps. I ... appreciate it." the lady wolf stated.

"Nidaja, I can say something serious?" Lyat asked.

"Now's not a good time." The Amanian said, her head resting over the spotted male's shoulder. She just wanted to be content a moment in front of the fire.

"Imagine for this moment, Mannus ees gone. No more Mannus. Like, tomorrow, you ees waking, and hees armies, they lay in ruin, and hees darkness is lifted... What do you do?" Lyat asked. Nidaja thought about that a moment, hands cupping at the firm and muscular form beneath her as she remained straddled on his hips.

"I guess I would turn my attention to bandits. Brigands and the like. There is always room for a general." She said.

"That ees not what I am meaning. Would the Asuna be your new enemy? Would we fear losing our homes to the Amani armies, even as we collect the pieces of our scattered families and dreams? If Mannus fell, would we fall too, because for so long our conflict has been forced?" Lyat said softly, looking up at the cavern ceiling. Nidaja lifted her head, looking into his eyes. She wanted to tell him no. But that would be her answer. Would others push for retaliation against the treacherous Asuna? Would the royal house be able to deflect the war, as ugly as it would be? The people, especially those in border areas, would be afraid of the Asuna, and want them driven out. What would be the end to that?

"Our people are afraid of yours, Lyat. They have been for centuries now. I can't promise there would be an easy peace the next day. I would bet that fear and distrust is on both sides. It would not be easy." Nidaja stated.

"This ees honest answer from you, Nidaja. I appreciate that. There will be a day that the Uruk armies do not push us, and they do not invade your lands with our blood and sweat upon their backs. I still believe our empress. This darkness will end. The winds of fate that push us together now give us only the chance to choose. I will commit myself to you, even against the will of my empress, if you will promise me only one thing, Nidaja." The hyena rumbled.

"You risk your very spirit in committing yourself against your empress and you know it. The essence does not look favorably upon treason." The general stated. "I would not force you into such a promise, but I will hear out your request." Nidaja looked intently into Lyat's eyes. She could not believe how very deeply she could feel herself bonding with this fellow warrior. Was she betraying herself, or was this a boon to her existence as giving herself to Alps had been? She listened intently to Lyat.

"Forgive the Asuna, Nidaja. I ask only that you forgive the Asuna." Lyat said, his tone so deeply mournful that it caused Nidaja to have to swallow back tears. She felt herself tremble. There had been a few other times in her life when she was so moved. Alps had been responsible for most of those. She closed her eyes and cleared her mind and her heavy heart for just a moment. She could not make a false promise here, even if it was just one she was not

sure of. She had to be genuine. She looked back on her dislike of the spotted plains tribes of her world. Cities burned, savage attacks, and the centuries they toiled to help build the Uruk that cared not whether a warrior was torn to bits, or a day-old child. And there lay Lyat beneath her, pleading that he be forgiven to prevent the very retribution she knew would be at hand if such a day as Lyat prayed for ever occurred.

"I cannot convince all my people, Lyat." Nidaja whispered.

"That is not what I ask for." He replied.

"Why do you need my forgiveness?" the general asked, feeling herself choking up more. This was hard. She knew how very big a request this really was.

"I don't need the forgiveness; I can forge that for myself. I want you to forgive all the Asuna. Forgive every one of us everywhere, even those who are sure to fall prey to hatred like so many before. Forgive us all, Nidaja." His soothing voice caressed, making her ears slick back. She swallowed again.

"Why is this important to you?" the general asked, still trying to figure out how she could possibly adequately comply with such a request.

"The Asuna do not need it, Lady Nidaja." Lyat said with deep earnest. "You do." The words took a moment to register with the general, but she suddenly realized, with a shock, what he meant. Lyat was not trying to rid his race of the blame for past and future atrocities. This had little to do with them. He was trying to rid Nidaja of the hate. Her mind sharpened to a point, remembering something very defined about the one she was trying to save. Alps could not bare ill will. That very thing had come up in his need to reconcile with Neit. He would not even let harm come to Chana, with all she had done to him. Everything that he did was out of loyalty and love. It was for that reason she would go right into the mouth of hell to save him. For a brief moment, Nidaja could almost see into Alps' very soul as she held herself against Lyat. He didn't just try to act happy. The white slave they had come to love had forced hatred from his heart completely. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she looked into Lyat's eyes and felt a sudden rush of tingling crush through her like a tidal wave. No challenge had been set before her as grand as what she was now asking herself to do. Give it all up. Give up every ill thought, and look at the Asuna without hatred.

And in that moment of self-realization, Nidaja forgave the Asuna. Yes, they were dangerous. Yes, they killed many of her friends and family in their actions and inactions, they had burned cities to the ground and killed travelers and warriors alike, but one thing suddenly gained crystal clarity in the general's heart.

Hating the Asuna would not change them. She could fight the Asuna to protect herself, to prevent towns from burning, or to keep travelers safe, but she could not hate the Asuna. Nidaja looked up into Lyat's eyes and cried out,

"I forgive them. I forgive them all, Lyat. I let go of my hatred, and will look at you with eyes unclouded..." she sobbed. "What have I been doing to myself all these years? Was I so sick with... with..." she thumped her head on Lyat's chest and shivered.

"Ees alright, Lady Nidaja." Lyat rumbled. "You will get better. You recover, just like Lyat. I had this disease too. Rios cured me. You ees not forgetting your promise. I am thinking... that you ees finding a new strength if you always remember." The hyena said, looking up into Nidaja's eyes. The general looked back, and then, heavily, she sank forward, her head tilting to the side as her mouth embraced his own. Lyat's eyes opened wide, then closed as her lips pulled tight against his, and she kissed him for a long, sensual time, hands cupping behind his head to hold him near. Nidaja knew very clearly that what she was doing would get her booted out of Diera if anyone else saw it, and yet, she could not remember a time before meeting Alps that she had ever wanted to kiss someone so much. How much hate could she give up? How good could it feel each time she gave up a little more? She was drunk with the joy of it, and simply could not bring herself to care about the taboo.

She gripped Lyat's shoulders and pushed herself tighter against him, exhaling heavily through her nose as she felt a familiar warm rush through her body. She closed her eyes, unable to believe what she was doing, and far more shocked at the things her mind now freely invited her to try. She groaned softly as she felt Lyat's tongue push into her mouth in the kiss. Apparently, he wasn't having much trouble letting himself cast aside the taboo. The canvas shorts he wore didn't do much to discourage her either, as she felt that his firming form beneath them was swelling just as proud in length as her white lupine lover, but quite obviously a great deal thicker. Lyat's muscular body lurched a little in the eager press of Nidaja's own hips, her mouth pulling from his rather suddenly to let the general gasp for air, the flickering reddish-orange light of the fire casting dancing shadows around the cave.

The general looked at the strong, handsome hyena beneath her, seeing his glistening eyes, half closed, gazing pleadingly up at her, as if begging her not to stop. She gritted her teeth, and then inhaled deeply, arms crossing in front of her, and dragging her shirt upward, baring youthful, firm breasts to the hyena. She felt him stir to life between her thighs, that thick, swelling member forming a very obvious ridge for her to rest herself intimately on. The lady wolf then groaned loudly as she felt both of Lyat's large hands cup heavily over her breasts and squeeze and roll them, touching teasingly at her nipples as she arched her back in a rewarding grind against that hidden shaft. Lyat panted out softly,

“Nidaja... You must... know this ees not what I had intended... to happen here, my interests were innocent, you have to believe-“ the hyena was cut short when the general grabbed his muzzle in her hand and held it shut.

“...don’t care, Lyat. Gonna see if I’m anything like your fantasies...” she lowered her chest, bringing her nipple within reach of the dark muzzle of her spotted captive squirming beneath her thighs. “Or are you all talk? Is this a little too tabooooo?” the general purred. She then barked out in pleasure and shock as a tight muzzle captured that thick, perked nub and Lyat suckled eagerly upon it, rolling his tongue against it with heated determination. “That’s right. You aren’t forcing me. We can regret this all we want tomorrow.” Nidaja then slipped her hand down his tummy, and pushed her fingertips into the front of his shorts, feeling the slick and hard tip of his tapered shaft, already glistening with his pre. Hyena or wolf, the two males didn’t feel so different when she pushed her fingertips together and tweaked his sensitive tip, making him flinch and jerk from oversensitivity, and having that large, dangerous spotted male laying beneath her, whimpering helplessly under her touch was furiously empowering to the general. She might not be able to easily best him in combat from what she could tell before, but now, he was completely in her control.

She delighted in how his muscles flexed, and how his lips pulled tight, and how he bit at his bottom lip as she stroked and teased his tip. It remained hidden in his shorts for now, but the general could not help but want to peek. She was not a virgin even when she’d met Alps, but a Hyena was different. This was new and exotic to her. The lupine female swirled her thumb in circles over the tip as she backed up down his legs, and then untied the front of his light, slightly tattered under-shorts. Lyat’s chest rose and fell heavily, heaving as he squirmed.

“Feels so good...” the hyena murmured in his deep, normally dark voice. Nidaja’s eyes widened as she freed a thick, pulsing ebony shaft from his light tan shorts, pulling them down his hips. He had to be nearly twice as thick as Alps, though perhaps not quite as long. Still, the thought of squeezing him into her made her shiver. It would be a tight fit. She wrapped her hand around it, and massaged up and down that glistening black flesh, the glistening pre pouring down over her knuckles. She crooned at how wet he was, quite a bit more than a wolf. She tentatively touched her tongue to the tip, making him literally whimper with fitful need and anticipation. He tasted no different from a wolf, really. In the end, there were not so many differences. Not enough to make him unappealing, for certain, especially not with how Nidaja was feeling. She engulfed half his throbbing shaft with her tight muzzle, the male grunted as he felt the pressure drop around his aching flesh, and that thick meat was drawn back out of the general’s suckling muzzle slowly, her tongue stroking wildly at his tip. She looked up at the nearly panicked-looking hyena and smiled, licking his shaft.

“You didn’t like that?” she asked teasingly.

“Girl Asuna do not... do that...” the spiky-haired gasped, trembling.

“That’s too baaaad...” Nidaja teased, and then she wrapped her hand around his base, screwing it in countermotions from her muzzle as it rose and fell over that hard, thick, pulsing shaft, the black flesh vanishing into her skillful muzzle each time. The hyena groaned out loudly, his hips rising off the cave floor as Nidaja worked over him.

“That ees too much... I’ll spill in your mouth if you keep- nnng..” he pleaded. “Gah!” he stiffened up as the general sped up, her hand stroking his length up and down as she suckled and lolled her tongue at his tip. The hyena immediately made good on his word, thick torrents of his sweetish spunk spraying heavily into the general’s muzzle. It was a bit thicker than Alps’ normal release, though not quite as copious. Nidaja suspected that was more because he had not exactly been primed much before she took him over the edge.

Lyat twitched and grunted as he spent himself heavily upon the back of the general’s tongue, held half way inside her muzzle as she just suckled and stroked him with in her muzzle, that hand that had been riding the lower half of his shaft just cupping and cradling his balls lovingly as they emptied forcefully for her. Finally, as the climax calmed, and the over-sensitive hyena began to protest, the wolf drew her lips off of him, and she looked up at the Asuna warrior, huffing from the heat of his passion. Nidaja carefully rose to her knees, and removed her cotton shorts, leaving her hot mound bare, her puffy lips visible as she scooted up alongside Lyat, caressing his tummy. His hand moved from along his side, right up behind the general. She parted her thighs, putting her hands on his chest as he pushed two fingers into her sex with a wet, audible squish.

“Mmmnh, yis, Nidaja... Ees okay I pleasure you now?” he asked, beginning to push his fingers in and out, the panting female lowering her head and nodding. The general allowed this intrusion for a while, looking at the semi-flaccid spent shaft twitching back to life slowly as he aroused himself with her pleasure. The lupine found this to be a commendable trait. Something she had tried to teach Alps, after all. The pleasure of another should always force you into your second wind. She rolled her hips eagerly, enticing him to stroke her clit, but he seemed to think penetration was all that was necessary. This was frustrating to the general. Alps seemed to figure it out so easily. Still, she decided better than to try to tutor him in it, as it might insult or shame him. Instead, she stroked his stirring member back to life with gentle hands as he worked her sex, pumping his fingers in and out wetly.

Once she had him throbbing in her hand readily again, even amid the occasional stroking of her tongue, she moved back over him, her motion making him curious enough that he drew his hand from her, and his eyes went wide as



she moved over his hips, pairing herself up with him, lining up for the most intimate act.

“Oh, Nidaja, you ees not having to do that. I ees already felt pleasure of - HAAAAH!” he cried out as the lady lupine wrapped her hand around his thick cock, moved him into position, and pushed her self down his thick length hard and slow. Nidaja moaned with boiling lust as her flesh spread around his cock so tightly that she felt almost a pinch of pain from it. The hyena trembled heavily, swearing softly in his own tongue, seeming unable to believe that the powerful, revered general of the Amanian forced was now arching her back for him, grinding her clit happily on the base of his shaft. As he throbbed inside her, the general rode him with lurching hips, stroking herself toward her climax on top of him, panting freely.

“But... I get to feel pleasure too. Exactly how I want it.” Nidaja growled, pitching herself back and forth a bit as her hips rose and fell, the loud slurp of her sex suckling on his thick shaft as lewd a sound as that cavern would ever hear. As thick as he was inside her, it was making it easy for the general to rub herself to climax on the base of his shaft. She gleefully worked herself toward that, unashamed, unworried, and regretless. Climax came easily to the green-furred lupine, and her hot, tangy nectar poured over the grayish tummy fur of her pitching, moaning playmate, and down his balls and between his thighs. She pushed herself down harder on him as she squealed in tense release, and then began to ride him hard and fast, letting herself crest with the waves of her release. Without warning, she felt the hyena tense, bucking hard, and then her knees rose up off the hard stone floor as his strong muscles pushed him up deep inside her, enough that she felt the flash of heat on her cervix when his second climax rocked him, spewing thick ribbons of sticky hyena essence hard to her deepest intimacy. That set the general off again, and she roared her approval, bucking and flinching, before heaving, panting, burning bodies slumped back to the cool cave floor, their fur caked in dirt and lust.

They laid there together for a while, the general's hips lurching and rolling softly, nursing her and him both through their afterglow. Nidaja's mind was spinning, imagining that the hyena was just as shocked at what had happened, but even as her mind cleared from the lust, Nidaja could not bring herself to regret it. He had cured her hatred. It seemed somehow appropriate that she lift a burden of a different kind from the hyena. The general smiled as she rested on top of him to let him recover. She found herself greedily hoping it would rain all night. The lady wolf closed her eyes as she thought about the one she was still going to save. He'd not be angry at this. He'd be proud of her, she thought. In the meantime, Nidaja decided to make her trip with Lyat as pleasant and informative as possible... for both of them.

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Reika knelt beside Alps as he tried to get back up from the muddy riverbed. Normally dried out, the rain had soaked it pretty well, and it was not easy going. He was holding most of supplies himself as Reika seemed content to just hold Bone. She said sternly,

“How is wulf being slave? You ees not strong! You ees lazy! How you getting so lazy!?” Alps huffed out in reply softly,

“I’m not ... used to this kind of work anymore. I don’t carry packs for miles when I live in the castle. That’s not what I do.” He panted.

“What ees you doing there, then, that ees made you so soft?” the hyena grumbled. “What ees your purpose in castle?”

“I ... I clean and run errands.” Alps stated, suddenly regretting he went that direction. He didn’t want to talk about his real main purpose.

“Asuna nose says you lie. What you really do?” Reika asked darkly, making it obvious she’d not be lied to again without some intervention from Bone, who the slave had definitely grown to fear.

“I... I tend to the queen’s personal needs. Those of other members of the high counsel too.” the wolf remarked.

“You ees telling truth, but ees not being very open. You ees consort then? Toy for them. There ees no shame in this. Ees not uncommon for Asuna too.”

“I’m not just a consort.” Alps growled, feeling a little defensive. He didn’t just sit on a bed and wait for people to use him. He genuinely loved everyone he shared himself with.

“Nose ees saying this true. What else ees you.”

“I’m their friend and lover. And don’t you forget it. I am there to bring them happiness, not just be a bedroom toy.” he barked, re-shouldering his packs and trying to pull himself out of the muck again.

“But you weak! What ees happen if you have to protect those what love you? You let them down? You say, ‘Oh sorry, I ees not used to fight, I just trained to move hips, good luck.’” Alps growled savagely at that. Reika’s taunting had kept him moving all morning, but it was now beginning to try his patience. The mudcaked wolf hurled a blob of mud at Reika, and laughed as it caught her right on the side of the head, the girl having at least turned to not take

it in the face. She stood there silent a moment, and Alps stopped laughing, immediately realizing he'd angered her. For that moment though, he felt grimly satisfied that she was wearing mud on her face for what she'd said. He'd die for his friends, and she ought to already know it. Reika wiped the excess mud off, leaving her fur rather caked in it. She murmured calmly,

"You ees not knowing how to fight. Your life ees dangerous. You should learn. Ball of mud ees not stopping twenty Uruk pigs from taking you apart." Alps looked at her sternly.

"I was learning how to fight from Nidaja, the general of the Amanian Defense Forces, before you kidnapped me, so who's fault is that going to be?" the wolf growled.

"Nidaja? Her stink still all over you when first found you. She not teach you to real fight." The hyena spat.

"Bone or not, you speak ill of her again, and only one of us is making it home." Alps growled threateningly. "Nidaja is a great fighter, and she will teach me everything I can learn." Reika plodded down into the mud again, slopping through it up to her shins as she walked to Alps, poking him in the chest with Bone.

"Reika ees meaning you and Nidaja is lovers. You stink of her love, slave. Lovers not teach you to fight." she barked.

"She teaches me because she loves me." the slave grumbled, pushing Bone aside.

"But does she hurt you?" Reika asked.

"When training? Hell yeah it hurts sometimes. I have had more bruises from training with her than any time I can remember." he stated flatly.

"Broken bones?" Reika asked.

"What?" Alps asked in reply.

"Ees she break wulf bones?" the hyena clarified.

"No, she doesn't want to injure me." He asked, and then gritted his teeth, already realizing where Reika was going with this.

"If slave ees not blocking he blows, if he ees tired and just stands there, too much tired to move, does Nidaja hit him again?" the hyena asked.

"No, she doesn't." Alps said softly, thinking about it a little more. It was true. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that Nidaja would never really injure him. She'd never knowingly, willingly break his bones and make him suffer more than bruises at her hand. And it was with this knowledge that Alps understood what Reika meant. "Nidaja... would not hurt me. Not really."

"In fights, wulfs gets hurt. Wulfs maybe dying. A real teacher what teaches you to fight ees nearly killing. You ees get good at fighting, or you ees getting broken. If Nidaja ees not doing this, then slave ees not able to protect eef Nidaja ees hurt. Slave watches general and queen die because he ees to soft and too weak. You get stronger. Complain less, hate Reika more, and make it to Asuna home faster." the hyena girl growled.

Alps plodded along again behind her, growling as he hauled himself out of the muck. He didn't hate Reika, he was actually finding himself respecting her, despite her obvious insanity. She was a real fighter, regardless of mental condition, and she was a very successful survivor. The wolf admitted to himself that the Asuna was right. He was soft. He wasn't learning how to defend himself in a life or death battle with Nidaja, only how to play with sticks. It might give him more advantage than no training at all, but if he were ever to be able to really protect himself, or others, he'd have to learn from someone who was not afraid to hurt him. He'd need to practice with someone who could kill him. The lupine looked up to Reika as he huffed and thumped along behind her.

"Will you train me?" he asked with a reverent tone.

"No." came her reply.

"Why not?" the lupine asked.

"Reika ees having to get wulf to empress alive." Alps gritted his teeth at that, and continued to walk in silence.