

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

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## Chapter 10

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"I really am not comfortable with this." The white lupine murmured as the rope bit into his wrists. This time, he really was being tied up. It wasn't a fake the way it had been when Nidaja and Neit were trying to use him as bait to lure out the hyenas. Reika pulled the ropes still tighter.

"You is not having a choice, wulf. Is for safety of you and for people in this village." She stated. Alps sighed softly, shaking his head, relenting. He did not want to get that bone club to the side of his head again. The white lupine strode forward, up to the wood-slatted gate. The entire fairly small village was surrounded by an outward jutting palisade that made just hopping over the wall remarkably dangerous. Reika spoke again, "You is keeping head down, and not speaking to anyone. You is never commenting on sign of weakness or you die. You see sneeze, pretend it not happen. You see broken leg, look at *other* leg. Understand?" Alps nodded to that. "Asuna is not taking prisoners typically, so is needing to speak with village elder about purpose here. Is only staying long enough to get supplies." Reika's captive looked around the village. In this location, there was not even scrubland. It was cracked dried mud and rocks as far in either direction as the hilly landscape allowed him to see.

"Where do *they* get supplies though?" he asked. Reika looked up and murmured softly,

"They is getting supplies brought to them. Outer villages produce clay for the Uruk. Or mine crystal. Is not producing anything else but that, and more Asuna." Reika said. Alps flicked his ears at that. It was hard while walking all this time with the very strong and dominant Reika for him to openly consider the fact that she, and every single one of the Asuna, were actually slaves to Mannus. He hung his head, pondering that fact while the gate was pulled open.

Alps listened to some of the guttural tongue that the Asuna used to speak back and forth as Reika seemed to argue with a gate keeper, who pointed at the ground vehemently a few times, before storming off. Reika walked to the exact location he was pointing, pulling Alps along.

"Wants us to wait here, huh?" he asked.

"Bone says you is learning to speak Asuna good." Reika said, marveling.

"No... No I'm not." Alps noted, rolling his eyes a little. It was just a very obvious threatening gesture. After a short while, the wiry gate guard came back with an older-looking male Asuna. He yammered some things to Reika, and she nodded a few times.

"They is needing to lock you in safe place so other Asuna do not kill you while I speak with Elder Kiranna. You go with them. No dying." Reika stated. Alps whimpered a bit as the older, grizzled male took his rope and jerked him fairly hard. He fell into step behind him. What was going to stop them from killing him the moment he got away from Reika? Surely she'd have thought about that. She was certainly crazy but she wasn't foolish, was she?

After a few moments of walking down a couple dusty alleyways between short, squat, closely huddled wooden structures, Alps was brought to a stone building. The thing was held together with mud-mortar and an internal structure apparently of wrought iron. It was as close to a jail as this place had. A very heavy wooden door was pulled open, and Alps was pitched into it. The door slammed shut behind him, and he sat with a soft thump in the very fine dust that was an overly dried dirt floor of this obvious storage room. The walls were squat but thick and solid, perhaps to protect whatever was normally stored in here from the elements. For the moment, the only thing really stored there was him. It was musty and rather dark, but quite secure. The white lupine realized perfectly well that he was not being imprisoned as much as protected. His presence here would not be seen as a blessing.

"Well, this is a great mess to be caught up in." he stated, crossing his arms as he sighed heavily. He then looked down at his mud-caked legs and grumbled, softly picking clumps of mud out of his fur. "I had forgotten what it was like to be absolutely filthy," he mused.

"Why haven't you escaped?" came a familiar gentle but seldom heard voice. Alps' head jerked up, his eyes wide. He looked directly beside him.

There, in her black and silver robes, was the mysterious fox he'd taken from the Shadowfall. Alps backpedaled a bit and shook his head, "Oh come on, How? How are you even *in* here?!"

"That is what I wanted to ask you." The fox stated.

"I'm abducted. I have trouble believing they got you too." The white slave replied.

"Certainly not." She stated icily.

“Is this another dream? I would like to wake up now.” Alps huffed. “This is not fun.”

“Not this time,” the vixen said, looking away from Alps, at the more or less blank wall. Alps hung his arms a bit limply. She was utterly impossible to understand. It was sometimes infuriating.

“Can you get me out?” he asked. There was a long pause before she turned and looked into his eyes. Despite being a bloodline known for being smaller in stature, she was at least as tall as Alps.

“You rescued Letai priestesses from something a lot more substantial than a storage room. This can’t hold you.” Her words were so calm and serene. It was as if she were giving a lecture or a lesson on something exceedingly boring that Alps should have picked up months ago. He wrinkled his nose. He had no idea how she got caught before him or why he had not noticed she was in the room when he was initially thrown in here, but her attitude was not helping him think out his predicament.

“It’s not as simple as that. If I run...” he thought about it a minute. They’d try to recapture him, but what was worse was that he knew what Reika had said was true. He could not go back, even if he did escape.

“Are you afraid of dying?” the dark-furred vulpine asked, her long, silver hair down over her equally silver, blank eyes.

“No, I am afraid of getting others hurt.” Alps crossed his arms, not liking the direction of her questioning. She seemed to have a knack for asking questions in such a way as to make him think about something that only complicated things further.

“You would never hurt your friends.” Her tone remained unwavering as she faced away from him, as if just staring a hole through the wall, her hands clasped in front of her, relaxed. She seemed so calm for being stuck in a storage building.

Alps gritted his teeth and barked out with more than a little irritation, “Of course not, but Mannus *will*!” he slapped the side of the wall. Grit fell from the mud-caked ceiling. There was another staggering pause from the vixen. She turned and looked at Alps.

“Will he fail to hurt them if you don’t come back?” she asked.

“I just don’t want to be what causes him to-“

The fox cut him off. "But in the end, whether it's someone they love who dies, or the pressure of leading a hopeless cause, they will be hurt, won't they?" the vulpine lady asked coldly, looking at Alps with a more serious expression. He backed up a bit.

"That's the ugly reality behind all of this. You know that. You were stuck in the Shadowfall too. There's not an 'up' side here." Alps tried to explain things as carefully and calmly as possible, but being made to think about how hopeless all his options were was not helping him retain his composure.

"So stop him." The reply seemed so completely arbitrary and sensible if it were not for who she was talking about. The slave just gaped in the semi-darkness, only a little light filtering in through the slats near the ceiling. Alps turned away from her in near disgust. Now she was just making fun of him!

"Why don't you?" the wolf asked.

"I don't have a dozen lovers to protect." Alps gritted his teeth. He could not tell if that was meant to be insulting or not. He spoke, still facing away from her, now holding his temples which he found himself more reliant on doing every time he spoke with the usually quiet and enigmatic fox.

"Since you seem to have the answers, how am I supposed to stop him, if you don't mind my insatiable curiosity on the matter?" he asked with a long, slow sigh.

"Why are you here?" she asked again.

Alps rolled his eyes. "You don't like answering questions, do you?"

She stated again, "You don't have to stay." The slave growled softly.

"I'm here because I am being kidnapped by the Asuna, and if I leave, Mannus will kill my friends!" His voice was something of a hiss as he didn't want to shout and draw unwanted attention.

"The Asuna are in far more danger than Nita and Nidaja ever were. If they keep you, Mannus and the Amani both will crush them. Do you want the Asuna to die that badly?" the dark vixen asked. Alps scoffed and looked back at her. How could she even ask that? She didn't know him well, but she should have known he'd not want anyone to be hurt because of him.

"I don't want anyone to die, that's a terrible thing to suggest." The male clenched his fists a little, truly perturbed, but his mind was racing. What was she trying to get him to think about? Was she just crazy?

"Then what do you want from the Asuna?" Her words were once again calm, cold, and collected.

"What *would* I want from them? They are savages. They don't have anything I want." Alps turned again, putting his hands against the wall. He was lying. He realized it the moment the words left his lips.

"But they do have something you want. They have an answer to a question your friends can't answer." Alps closed his eyes, teeth gritted, hands pressed to the warm earthen wall of the not-very-spacious building. The vulpine was right, of course. He'd been asking himself since Reika made him realize that he was a danger to Nita and Nidaja and everyone else he loved.

"What... makes me so dangerous...?" he asked, looking down at his feet, wanting to just hear her say it. Surely she knew the answer, if she was guiding him so expertly to ask himself.

"That is why you do not run from them." Her voice was neither congratulatory nor pleased. It was as if just a fact. His own thought, telling him what he said was true. Alps already knew that though.

"You aren't here to get me out of here." Alps stated this clearly, knowing it to be the case. She'd have not wasted his time with such interrogation if she were here to release him. He could not help but feel that she was after something bigger than even he was directly involved with. Her answer to his question did not surprise him, neither in its assurance or its monosyllabic simplicity.

"No."

"Then why are you still here?" Alps finally asked before looking up and turning around.

And he was alone. There was not so much as a scent of the vixen in the room. Alps thumped his back against the wall, looking at the ceiling, onto the earthen floor, and everywhere in the simple, square room. She had to have been there. He was not going insane was he? That was no better than Reika talking to Bone!

Alps didn't have long to chastise himself for his apparent madness, however. The door swung open, Reika plodding through, followed by a much older-looking Asuna. Alps looked up at her. She was tall and lean in comparison to the very sturdily built Reika. She looked as 'savage' as Reika, her hair dark with silver streaks pulled back and bound in tight but thick braids bound with what appeared to be large crossed canine teeth. She wore a long, dusty-grey robe. The older Asuna looked at the prisoner for a little while, head tilting up and down

for a bit as she seemed to study him. This made the slave uncomfortable, and he murmured softly,

"I'm not normally this filthy." Alps closed his eyes, feeling a bit silly for even saying it. But he did feel like she was appraising him based on appearance alone. There was a long pause before Reika finally spoke.

"You is needing Reika to be taking him away? Sorry for being trouble. I have my supplies and can continue to Puranasse." She stated. Alps didn't know the place names of any of the Asuna villages so he had no idea where that would be. The older female stood there quiet, gazing at Alps a little longer before saying softly,

"No, Reika... that won't be necessary just yet. I need to talk to him a moment. Close the door." Alps looked back to Reika, who did as asked, shutting out what appeared to be the older female's guards. Alps was glad, as they were rather imposing male Asuna with jet black, very heavily spiked hair. They would look angry and dangerous quietly munching on cake. The white lupine looked back to the older female. She seemed to have a much better command of the common tongue than the younger Asuna.

"Is private now. You is needing Reika to go?" she asked.

"No, that's fine, Reika, you should be here for this too. It's better that you are." Alps was impressed with how refined and elegant this older Asuna sounded. She seemed to be perhaps just a little older than Misty, and in some ways appearing just as wise.

"You speak Amanian well," the wolf rumbled softly.

"Long ago, I was entrusted to gather information about encroaching settlements from your kind. I dealt a lot with trappers and traders. That started long before I was even your age, and continues from time to time even now. Information is an important tool even to simpler folk."

"Did Reika tell you why the Asuna needed me?" Alps asked calmly. The aggravation he felt from the Asuna was actually a little less than the frustration he felt from his unexplained visions of the fox. This, in comparison, was a meaningless interview.

"Yes, she explained." Alps had not expected her to answer that way.

"She wasn't interested in explaining to me. I think she doesn't like me. Would you be so kind as to explain what the Asuna want with me? You are a lot better off not being caught with me if you know what I am." The wolf stated. That pang of his conscience reminded him about what the dark vulpine had said. The

real reason he wasn't escaping from the Asuna. They knew. And he had to know too.

"I was aware before you got here. There are a few who Rios can trust. And there is a reason that this was Reika's supply stop. Originally it was just a safe house to keep you until you recovered from your injuries," she explained. Alps looked at her blankly.

"I'm not injured," the wolf stated plainly. The older female looked at Reika and then at Alps and smiled warmly. It was a rather distressing expression from her given the seriousness of his situation. It was an almost condescending smile like Chana used to get when Alps was little and tried to talk about something he didn't have a clue about. Alps blushed a bit, feeling stupid for some reason just at that expression.

"You were an easier target than we'd have assumed, Alps. You were not supposed to just walk with Reika, we expected you to fight tooth and nail, and you were supposed to be brought here half dead and then be sent with a larger compliment of enforcers." The explanation made perfect sense, and reminded Alps of the danger he was actually in. Alps sank a little, leaning back against the wall.

"So Rios trusts you?" he asks. Reika jabbed him in the stomach with Bone. He huffed, croaking a bit from the belly-blow and doubling over.

"Males call her Empress or Lady Dominis, " Reika's elder stated. "Whether they are Amanian or not." Alps nodded a little as he inhaled, trying to ignore the soreness of his tummy. It should not have been so hard to forget the younger girl's violent nature. "But to answer your question, " the older lady continued, "You are right, she does. You don't need to know her plans for you, suffice it to say, if you continue to cooperate with us as you have been, you will continue not to need to stop to recover."

"What's your name, then?" Alps asked as he looked at Reika and then back to the older lady.

"Lady Kiranna, " she stated calmly. "Am I to believe that you are still a bit confused about what exactly you are?" she asked him. Alps sighed softly. It was the right direction for the conversation, but he still felt very uncomfortable with that possibility. The Letai were legends. He was a slave. Alps closed his eyes and answered.

"I know what Reika says I am. I don't want it to be true. It means I can't go home." There was a long silence as Kiranna watched him speculatively. It was a little comforting that she was less violent than Alps had began to assume the Asuna as a rule were.

“So she explained the risk you posed?” she asked, putting a hand on Alps’ shoulder. Reika leaned against the wall.

“If it’s true.” Alps looked up at the lady and gritted his teeth.

“It’s good that you understand, “ she added, “but Reika should not have told you that, as taking away a prisoner’s will is not entirely beneficial to ensuring his survival. Reika, you should have bound his hands so he doesn’t –“

“I won’t.” Alps answer was very affirmative. He’d promised Nita after the day he’d first met her. He’d never intentionally hurt himself. He was bound by his promise.

“Well, since you have been through so much, I think I should tell you, if Reika hasn’t already spilled the beans, “ Kiranna explained, “The Asuna are not willing participants to our part in the ugly history that your people have endured.” Alps perked his ears, lifting his head a little. This was not the direction he expected it to go.

“A rebellion?” he asked curiously in a hushed tone. “You are defying your empress’ orders?” Were they going to release him?

“Hardly.” The reply from Kiranna was icy. “The dark one’s control over us must come to an end. We slave in his mines and war with your people. If the Letai are returning, even just one of you, then it’s the only chance we will ever have to break free and control our own destiny. There are less than half the Asuna than there were a hundred years ago. More of us die with rock in our hands than with progeny to our name.” Alps’ eyes widened. He had not realized that such a movement was occurring within the Asuna. And to think that it was at the very top of their empire. Alps pushed his rump against the wall to make sure that no one saw his tail wag. If Nita knew, it would be extremely important and positive news. An end to that conflict was a valuable asset to the defense of the border towns. He then stifled his emotional rise, thinking it out carefully.

“You are not... in a good position to push Mannus back.” Alps was still being very secretive and soft spoken. Kiranna nodded at that and half-whispered back,

“It’s true, but it won’t all happen at once. Rios has plans. It might not even happen in our lifetime. But she said the dawn is upon us.” The older lady seemed very sure. Alps felt that the conversation should have been a little familiar.

“I will do whatever I can to make this end of conflict between our people a reality, save for betraying my love.” Kiranna perked a bit as Alps said this.

"Your love?" she asked. Alps smiled a bit, not minding talking about it. It was forever his reason to stay strong.

"Nita Razelle." His words were proud.

"The queen?" Kiranna asked. "The slaves have love for their queen?"

"We were to be married before I was filched," the wolf stated, "hopefully this is only temporarily delayed." Kiranna seemed to wilt a bit.

"That complicates things a bit." Alps nodded to that also. Reika nodded as well. There was a short pause before Kiranna spoke again. "No matter, it won't change Rios' mind, that I'm sure. She has no other choice. That is, if you are really Letai." Those words were whispered more softly than the others.

"There's not any way to be really sure, though, is there? I mean, it's all supposition unless you happen to have a written note from my parents saying they were Letai." Alps felt that he was being a little cheeky, but he was feeling glad that the situation was not actually as dark as he had feared it to be. His kidnapping was not intended as an act of war, it was an act of resistance against the very element that had forced the conflict. He would find out as much as he could about it before being returned, he hoped, and be able to give very good tidings to his beloved.

"There is actually, but it might embarrass you," she replied. Alps tilted his head curiously, and she continued. "If I ask something, would you answer the question no matter how odd or personal?" Kiranna asked. The wolf blinked at that. He didn't have any odd birth marks or fur patterns in intimate places so he could not imagine what kind of question it might be. He shrugged and answered softly,

"Sure. It's not like I can hide much on my little trip anyway." Kiranna nodded at that and leaned back, crossing her arms.

"Do you like physical pleasure?" The elder's question took Alps completely by surprise. He looked at her to see if she had a teasing expression, but she was serious.

"That doesn't prove anything. Even slinks like to be petted, Lady Kiranna." He crossed his arms too, feeling a little embarrassed, just as she had warned.

"I don't mean for yourself, Alps. How do you feel about other people who are feeling it? Do you like being near people when they are happy? When they feel good?" she asked. Alps quirked a brow.

“That still doesn’t prove much. Most people like to be around others who are happy.” Alps could not quite figure out where the wizened Asuna was going with this.

“But not you, Alps. It’s more than that for you, isn’t it?” Kiranna asked in a near whisper, leaning closer. Alps looked down. More than that? He thought about it a moment. How did he feel when he watched Uri and Misha play their bedroom games? He didn’t always get to play with them, but he loved it anyway. It felt...

“Exhilarating...” Alps said softly.

“You feel full of energy and life, don’t you?” Kiranna asked.

“It makes me happy. Being happy is the same as feeling full of life.” He said. As far as he knew, everyone felt energetic and healthy if they were happy. Alps looked up at the slight part in the ceiling that kept the storage room from overheating. He waved Kiranna’s explanation away as easily disputed.

“But for you it was so much more, because... when you found yourself surrounded by these people who you brought pleasure to, you noticed that you had a very strange effect on others. Particularly females. Inexplicably, they want to be close to you. They long for you even though you are a slave, without question.” Alps widened his eyes, his heart sinking. That was a little more distinctive, and the explanation of his own internal question about his effect on others coming from her without provocation was outright eerie.

“That... seems to happen a bit. But I mean... Not until just recently.”

“But it’s been the rule since you have found your own happiness and contentment, hasn’t it?” she asked.

“Yes. But Nita really does love me. It’s not just some weird effect of being Letai.” Alps stated solidly.

“I am sure she does, but you have a very potent ability to make her happy, just in being near. Her love is genuine but her happiness is enhanced. Nothing is wrong with that.” Kiranna smiled at the wolf. It felt a lot more genuine. He did not feel like smiling back.

“How does this prove anything? Why would it mean I am Letai?” he asked with a bit of a frantic tone. He hadn’t expected they could prove it.

“Alps, do you even know where the Letai get their power?” Kiranna asked incredulously. It seemed like Letai lore was a normal topic of discussion for the Asuna. The wolf felt envious. He could hardly get strait answers about them

from Misty, aside from the fact that she was fond of them, and was the authority on them in Diera.

"No. I'm a slave. I don't really have much in the way of reading time." He explained.

"This take time." Reika stated, and sat casually on the floor of the storage room. Alps wondered what the guards outside must have thought was happening. It had already been a while.

"Would you like me to explain it to you?" Kiranna asked.

"Yes." Alps answered monosyllabically. At last. Someone with answers. The wolf didn't even care if they were the right ones or the ones he wanted to hear. At least if he understood some of this, he'd know what made him a target. The fox had been completely right. Kiranna nodded downward, indicating that Alps should sit, and she sat on the dirt floor in front of him.

"Close your eyes Alps. I need you to try to envision the things I say. It helps." she stated.

"Alright," the wolf answered, crossing his legs and sitting in front of the older lady hyena. He closed his eyes, which was, in truth, a little comforting. It was easy to forget he was a captive and was being "interrogated" by the enemy when all he could hear was a gentle feminine voice. At least he felt certain that his odd effect on others was limited to his friends, since he'd not been remotely happy since being kidnapped.

"First, I want you to forget what you know about being alive, and whatever you learned about the world around you." Kiranna said. Alps inwardly rolled his eyes. Sure, that would be easy. But he didn't say anything. "Imagine yourself as a little lump of clay, wet and soft, in the shape of a funny white wolf-boy who's not had the best couple of days." This got a chuckle out of Alps. That seemed to please the hyena, who seemed to have a good tone for a teacher. The slave could not help but pay very close attention. She continued. "Now, this little lump of unhappy clay doesn't live on a rock. He doesn't live in a tree. His home, like every little lump of wet clay, is in the bed of a mighty, endless river. The river doesn't move fast, it moves actually very slow. Can you see the river, Alps?" she asked. The wolf calmly replied that he could see it in his mind. At least, he could imagine it.

Alps felt the presence of Reika beside him. She sat close, like a sister might sit by her sibling when grandmother tells a story. This made Alps blush a little as well. He had not considered the remotest possibility that he'd become close to or comfortable with the Asuna. It had been the furthest thing from his mind. Kiranna spoke again. "As the river moves, the clay wears away. You've

seen that in the bed of streams before, haven't you? The bands of orange or blue from the clay in the bottom of the river as the motion of the water wears it away?" she asked.

"Yes, I know. I can see it," the wolf whispered. Reika said that she could as well. Alps actually felt incredibly relaxed now, which was a nice change. He found himself wishing he could sleep a little before heading back out. It was easy to forget he was tired when he feared for his life.

"What becomes of the clay when it's gone?" Kiranna asked.

"The little white wolf boy is dead." Reika said flatly, sending a chill up Alps' spine, both because of how easy it was for her to say, and because he assumed the same thing. The slave nodded, though.

"Yes, but not quite. Where is the clay?"

"Miles downstream, I guess." Alps said softly.

"In the water." Reika added.

"Right. So the wolf isn't dead. He's a part of the stream. With all the other wolves and hyenas and birds and beasts. And eventually, there will be more lumps of clay, and what once was his will be part of them as the stream deposits it against the banks along the way." Alps nodded to her explanation. He'd thought he heard a story kind of like that from people traveling in Seravi when he was an orphan there.

"So the river is time." Alps asked, assuming that's what the imagery was supposed to be.

"No, the flow of the river is time. What makes it move. The river is just reality." Alps thought about it a bit, Reika thinking in silence as well. The wolf wondered what the nutty hyena's mind was making of all of that.

"So, what is the clay? Is there any way to keep the river from pulling it away?" he asked. He felt this was an important part of the lesson because Misty had stated that Letai lived much longer lives than the regular Amanians.

"That's very astute, Alps," said Kiranna, "Yes, there is, and that is the very basis of the Letai's power." Alps smiled. He thought so. Kiranna continued to explain. "You see, the Letai can see and feel that clay being pulled away from people, but only if it's under the right conditions. And if they can see and feel it, they can pull it toward them. Think about it. Their clay would gather that band of clay that the river pulls from others. It eventually becomes a part of all living things anyway, but the Letai can choose to take it now. And they don't have to

make it a part of themselves immediately. They can “muddy” the water, changing the world around them a bit with that clay. They can cast spells that let them heal, or can even do terrible things, if they so choose. Mannus himself was once Letai, and his incredible ability to draw this energy, these bands of clay... gave him the ability to raise his armies of real clay, mixed with blood and crystal for control.” Alps gritted his teeth. Just pulling energy that had already left other people could make someone that powerful? He could never imagine pulling that kind of energy himself. Then his ears flattened as he thought of something.

“What conditions have to exist before they can pull the energy to themselves?” He felt a sense of dread as a few of the pieces fell together loudly in his head.

“The Letai are able to draw energy that comes from those around them when they are feeling very powerful positive emotions. Laughter, joy, pleasure... All these things make that clay almost magnetic to them. The more positive, the more they can draw at once, and the more positive energy they draw, the easier it becomes to draw from others, so long as they are experiencing intensely positive emotions.” The explanation was exactly what Alps had expected and desperately feared the moment the idea fluttered into his head.

“Can they draw it and not even be aware?” he asked finally, actually dreading the answer. Had he been drawing the energy of his friends all along? Could it possibly harm them or would they be upset if they knew?

“It’s possible, but it’s very rare. However, given the rumor that you were forced into the Shadowfall, and then broke out, I would say you took some very powerful positive energy in there with you, or you found a lot of it while you were there.” Alps’ ears rang from how much of a rush of truth lay in those words. He became stronger in the Shadowfall as he brought pleasure to Luna and Ceriss. They felt a shock of joy boiled from years of isolation and hopelessness and his positive energy he’d already drawn before that was a scent they could not refuse, longing for the pleasure of his touch immediately. After they had enjoyed the pleasure of his company upon their bodies, their joy didn’t even begin to falter because of the hope he gave them. When the moment came to task, he drew upon their energy completely, and with it, broke out of the Shadowfall. There was finally an answer, but it was one that meant Reika was right. He absolutely had to be Letai.

“Then if I am drawing that energy from those around me I could get stronger?” he asked.

“Absolutely. But carrying the joy of those you love so close leaves you to carry their worries and their fears as well. You won’t let them suffer, and that means that you will take incredible risks for them. This is what we had feared. Mannus used that against the Letai. They’d never let harm come to the

Amanians over their existence, and they stood against him one by one only to be cast into eternal suffering. Rios did not want you to be destroyed like that before she could get to you. Before you could make a difference for the Asuna.” she added.

“What am I supposed to do to make a difference?” Alps asked, finally opening his eyes. He felt light headed.

“I cannot tell you that myself. I know the reason, but I don’t know her method. You will play a part, but I cannot say just how. Rios knows more. You need to go with Reika to the mountain village of Puranasse. You will find your answers there.” Kiranna got up onto her feet, holding her back a little.

“Kiranna...” Alps said softly, getting up as well. Reika stayed on her rump, holding her knees, looking happily up at her elder. There seemed to be a lot of respect there. The slave looked back to her and said, “Who can teach me to use the essence? Will Ri – Lady Dominis... Will she be able to teach me?” he asked, wanting to know if there would be more answers than just what the Asuna wanted with him where he was going. If he was to protect his friends, he would need to become stronger. He had been taken from them so easily, but if he made the most of this event, it might never have to happen again.

“She will be able to show you more than any Amanian could ever dream,” was Kiranna’s reply, making Alps’ chest rise with a deep breath. That was most certainly a lofty and appealing possibility. Despite knowing the danger he’d be in, Alps only steeled his resolve about following through. Perhaps the black vixen was right, and he could have escaped long ago. He might have actually even been able to overpower Reika a few times and kill her to secure his freedom, but there was something a lot stronger than a crazy Asuna with a bone-club forcing him along now. He would have to see this through.

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The morning light greeted Nidaja a bit harshly. The rains had stopped, which was a good thing to enable her and Lyat to catch up to Reika and Alps, but the resulting sunshine glistened off of everything, high and bright in a cloudless sky. Nidaja ducked back into the cave. Lyat was finishing the drying of their rain-soaked clothing. Nidaja was already dressed, but the canvas-style clothing that the hyena wore, particularly his traveling cloak, was a little more difficult to dry. Nidaja sat back down beside him. The general looked to the large, strong Asuna, his fur looking soft and dusty even as wet as he’d been the night before.

“We should have gotten up a bit earlier, but I was... so comfortable.” The green-furred lupine had a very guilty tone to her voice. The large male fretted with his bouncy spiked hair a little and looked to the wolf with a wry smile.

“You had reason to be. You slept on me. I couldn’t move an inch. My back ees killing me.” He stated in his usual accent. One that Nidaja was finding herself somewhat endeared to. Had it been true? Did giving up her anger toward the Asuna make that much of a difference on her? Surely if the Asuna and Amani could find common ground it would make a long term difference. She could not help thinking about that a lot as she got ready in the unusually bright morning. Nidaja looked up and down the spotted, naked hyena still sitting there.

“You don’t complain enough for me to know.” The general barked playfully, looping an arm in between his thighs, hugging one of those thighs against her side. Lyat chuckled to that, and shook his head.

“Lyat ees not likely to be complaining about that, no. Lyat ees needing eh sleep last night too, not moving much even without wulf girl on heem.” There was a soft lean of his body against hers, and Nidaja’s ears flitted back a little. She inhaled a bit, drawing in that hot, musky male scent. Alps, for as wonderful as he was with her body, and how attentive he was to her needs, and those of his other friends and his beloved, was not physically strong, and Lyat was, which was something that Nidaja tended to look for a lot more in her lovers before Alps. Given that he would be marrying the general’s sister, she didn’t feel guilty about the previous night at all. And less guilty about what played through her mind at that moment.

“Another ten minutes before your clothes are dry, huh?” Nidaja said with a smirk. Her hand slipped up between Lyat’s thighs, making him jump a little.

“Daahj...” he panted out, already shortening her name to something of an affectionate pet name. “Lyat is not keeping up with fast-footed Amani general if she ees relentless before Asuna is even on his feet!” His words were in protest, but as the general’s strong but gentle hand wrapped around the very generous helping of Asuna masculinity, it didn’t have anything negative to report, throbbing to life immediately. Nidaja leaned comfortably against his side, slowly moving her hand up and down his thickening length.

“We can’t go anywhere for ten minutes, let me see if that’s... enough... time...” her hand cupped at the slightly thicker tip of his lengthening flesh. She twisted softly, crooning as she got a bit of wetness from him finally, without a minute or so of gentle but skillful work.

“Ees enough time.. if you ees not stopping...” Lyat rumbled, putting his hands back a little to prop himself up, tightening his legs a little. “You ees nice wulf for liking Lyat’s pleasure, but ees making a mess if you ees going on –

unnnh-..." his rounded ears folded back, his expression tightening into pleasure. This delighted the thankful wolf female. Nidaja's intentions were to get Alps back from the Asuna and bring the source of her sister's happiness home, but if she could also build a closer friendship with the Asuna, it could relieve a lot of the tension her sister had over their part in the overall conflict. Nidaja would not lose out on that kind of opportunity, especially when she found herself rather enjoying the feel of that hardening flesh in her hand, twitching and pulsing with life as her Asuna companion leaned back a little more, his hips lifting off the edge of the rock ledge he'd been sitting on. Nidaja looked into his lap at the length she fondled and stroked in her capable hands. Used to holding a sword, she found it equally suited to being tender in just the right ways for Lyat.

"It's alright, Lyat... You can make a mess. I want to see it." The general focused her attention on his flaring tip, wet with pre now, so easy to manipulate. The wolf female folded her ears back with a bit of playful determination. The spotted male huffed softly, clutching the edge of the ledge and pushing his hips back and forth slowly, rolling them as Nidaja paid close attention to just the tip of that throbbing shaft. She moved her other hand, finally, down beneath his sack, holding it, cupping it softly, letting her gentle hand undulate underneath it, working to get the tide of his lust boiling over.

Nidaja leaned forward a bit more, letting her head rest against Lyat's chest as she angled his cock upward a little, slipping her hand up and down over it methodically, and a little more briskly. He huffed a little louder in pleasure as she seemed to work him at exactly the right speed to provoke his need only more and more. His hips lurched and rolled desperately for what Nidaja was giving him. This made the general grin in spite of herself, simply for the sense of control it gave her over this powerful warrior who she knew could probably best her in battle. Strong and formidable though he may be, he'd be having trouble walking out of here because of her, and she'd see his essence spilled all over the floor of this cave in mere minutes. This made her pant softly as well.

"Nnuf... Daaj... Ees getting closer... F-Faster... not slowing down... Unnk!" he bowed his head. The wolf female barked back to him sharply,

"Yes, Lyat! Now hold still! Let me do it! Let me bring you there with my own hands... Oh good... Good..." she huffed as his hips froze, trembling, muscles bound tight. There were many times that Nidaja brought Alps pleasure just to watch him climax, but this strong male seemed a bit more taboo to do something like that too. It was certainly more so given that he was not even the same species, but at that point, Nidaja had already ceased to care.

The general brought her hands together, cupping them over his tip and wringing them together wetly with his copious pre, and seconds later both hands felt a surge of heat, and overflowed. The general crooned loudly with encouragement as she flattened her hands and began to stroke his pulsing,

throbbing cock between them wetly and vigorously, watching with sheer delight as thick, heavy streamers of hyena seed arced from his throbbing shaft. He sank down a bit, hips suddenly lurching uncontrollably again, reminding the general very much of what it was like to feel him pushing into her. She held her hands still for a little to let him pump, his shaking muscles and bristling fur a nice reminder of the pleasure he was suffering through because of the green-furred beauty. After a few short moments of this potent and wet display, Nidaja released him, and leaned back again, panting lightly as well.

“Nidaja... ees not regretting last night, Lyat ees thinking.” He huffed, looking down at his pulsing, bouncing dark shaft. The general shook her head softly.

“No, not at all.” The general’s reply was casual and serene as she looked at her hand, ribbons of cream hanging thickly between her fingers. Lyat was right, hyenas weren’t very tidy where their climaxes were concerned. The lady wolf was glad though. It was exactly what she wanted to see. It was a short, depraved little thing to do, but it felt right somehow. A perfect use of that ten minutes, probably less, to prove to the hyena that she had given up her negative feelings.

Lyat rested a bit longer, helping Nidaja to dry her hands using the hem of his grey robes. She protested a bit, but he insisted that they had endured worse. The general thought better than to ask for clarification. She wasn’t close enough to him to ask those kinds of questions yet. After getting dressed and having a little bit to eat, the pair made it back onto what passed for a trail to the Asuna.

“We lost a bit of time. Should we worry for Alps’ safety?” Nidaja asked. She knew she’d asked before, but it weighed on her heavily. She’d never forgive herself if stopping to have fun meant suffering for the white lupine she’d grown to adore. Lyat answered softly.

“Wulf ees not in danger if he ees being not murderous to Reika.” He answered. The general thought about that carefully. She just could not imagine Alps trying to hurt someone if there was any other way, but if she made him think he was going to die or worse, there was no telling.

“How about when he gets where he is going?” the green-toned general asked.

“If he ees being agreeable and helping Lady Dominis... he ees maybe finding his stay pleasant, and not at all unhappy.” The spotted male crooned.

“We’re close enough to one another now, you can be honest with me. What does Lady Dominis want from Alps?” Nidaja asked.

“More Letai. Ees obvious, yur?” he churred happily, his tone soothing.

“Well, Alps can certainly provide that...” Nidaja stated. “Do you have many Shadowfall crystals?” she asked, curious to know what kind of force Alps might release given the chance.

“We ees not allowed to handle them directly. No Shadowfall crystals.”

“How’s she supposed to get Letai with no Shadowfall crystals?” Nidaja asked, plodding along behind him.

“Empress is having other way. It ees just taking longer. And ees less dangerous to your friend.” This idea made Nidaja feel a lot better. She had worried he would be forced back into the Shadowfall, and maybe this time would be unable to get out.

“She won’t hurt him then?” Nidaja asked, once more to be sure.

“Norok..” came his negative reply. “She ees not hurting. Ees so nicely treated that ees making Asuna spots pale with jealousy. You see. He be fine when we get there.” He laughed. Nidaja nodded to that, and plodded along behind the hyena, feeling better about the journey already, and hoping Alps’ days were no less positive.