

Sirius, Book III

The Essence

Comments or Questions?

Contact Alps: sarsis@gmail.com

Or just drop a note at: <http://www.furaffinity.net/user/sarsis/>

Chapter 12

Rain pelted the ground outside as Alps looked out the double doors to the balcony. The palace he was in now was not any less lavish than the one he resided in with Nita, though it was about half its size. The population of the Asuna versus his own people was about the same, they just didn't elevate their ruling class in the same way. It wasn't the entire family of the empress, as it might have been for the Emerald Amanians, it was just the Empress herself, and those who protected her. Alps watched a few Asuna wander by through the rain on the cobblestone street below. Their bare feet splashed on the wet stones, and their square little shields, pulled over their heads, kept the rain off of them to an extent, though as the wind was blowing, not so effectively.

Alps was told that this was the rainy season. As it had rained so much through his trip, he could believe it. He had been lost in thought most of the morning. How could he not be? Rios had mentioned that she was feeling a "warm glow" and was sure that the first night had taken nicely, even as she'd made Alps perform twice more, with Reika's "assistance", of course. He felt guilty about it because it still felt wonderful, even if he didn't really want to commit himself in any way to Rios. He knew it brought her pleasure, and his enjoyment was his reaction to that pleasure, but it still made his mind heavy with worry.

The thing that weighed on his mind the most was the simple fact that his own flesh and blood, his first born, would not be Nita's, and that he would worry constantly over the kind of life the child would lead. What if the child were male? Would he need to be kidnapped again until Rios had a daughter? Nita certainly would not stand for that, but would she understand any of this at all? Surely she would not think that he should have fought to the death and risked his life to prevent this. In the end, she'd still have him back. Alps turned and left the room, going downstairs to a room he'd become rather acquainted with. The library.

After a few flights of stairs, and a number of guards that pretended he was invisible, which Alps never quite got used to, the lupine walked into the large, cavernous room that housed much of the assembled knowledge of a crushed race. Which was not much in comparison to the library in Diera, he found. Alps could not read most of the things in the library, but it was eerily quiet, and it was a good place to think where he was not likely to be harassed by Reika, who didn't seem to enjoy the amount of attention Rios was giving him. A few of the books he found in there, larger and heavier than most that he found in Misty's personal collection, had pictures of famous people,

battles, and even of the Letai. He knew that these were what the pictures were of because of the crest that adorned the vestments and banners they carried. The mark was of a crescent upturned, The Mother's Hand, they called it, and a sphere inside it, the essence, cupped within the mother's hand. The Letai, Alps was finding, particularly revered mothers, who brought new life into the world. How ironic that he should suffer for that same desire that the Letai so revered.

The wolf sat back down in a chair, heavily, considering that. The past two days had been so hectic for him emotionally. More than any time he could recall since leaving Chana behind. At first, he was furious with Rios, and was disgusted with her for the level of contempt she had in forcing him into this, but in this very library, looking at these pictures, and even asking Reika, rarely, a few questions, he started to get a better picture of what life meant for the Asuna, and what terrible sacrifices they were expected to make for Mannus just to ensure he did not slaughter every last one of them. In a matter of days he softened his hatred of Rios and Reika, replacing it with soft, sad sympathy.

What would *he* do to end all the suffering? He could understand a little better now what forces would provoke such a seemingly selfish act. In the end, it was easy to feel that Alps' wishes were not significant in comparison. After all, he would still be going home. He'd still have his life. Things were far worse here than the life that he was going to be going back to.

These thoughts did not bring the wolf comfort, however. Understanding lead to forgiveness which made Alps feel better in one way, but generated a deeper sense of empathy for Rios' people. It made him worry more that his bloodline would be passed on to this world only for short-lived misery. He was especially concerned with what he discovered only the previous day. A law called the Second Child Promise that all the Asuna lived with. This was the breaking point for Alps' anger with the spotted race. He shook away the thought of this injustice and looked at his stack of books he had yet to go through. He didn't even know what he was looking for, but he didn't feel like lying around doing nothing. As a slave, nothing felt more "wrong" than idleness.

The white lupine began thumbing, again, through one of these books, when he found a few pages here and there written in Amanian. He had not expected this in an Asuna book, but he peered over the pages in curiosity. Misty had taught him to read a bit better, so with a bit of struggling he gleaned some meaning from the pages. The pages referred to techniques the Letai used. There were apparently different schools of essence users. This was immediately enthralling to him, and he forgot his troubles, just for a bit.

The first school of Essence User was the Channeler. Many initiates were in this school when they began their training. They would draw energy into a crystal, called a focus, and the energy could be stored there for use either by themselves, or others. They would learn the importance of only drawing energy that was spent, and never life energy from the source. Alps was not certain what that meant, but he continued to

read. There were three levels of channeler. The first level was able to pull the energy into a crystal after some training, and could sense energy, see it in their mind, know how much energy was there, and could control how much they drew from either a crystal, or from the air around them. The second level could, after more training, draw energy from a larger variety of situations, instead of just base situations, which Alps understood to be rather extreme, like elation, joy, and ecstasy.

This was a helpful thought to him. It might get tiring to need to bring extreme emotions just to collect energy. So he could get energy if he learned enough from just mildly happy people. The third and final level of channeler was on the level of a priestess. They could channel energy into themselves, instead of just crystals, and draw upon that energy later, becoming more powerful the more energy that was drawn. Alps blinked at that. From what he understood from Lady Kiranna he was apparently already doing this. Was it possible to be a high level channeler and not know it?

He continued to read. The next kind of essence user was a crystal smith. Alps had not really heard anything about this, but discussion with Misty had made him think they had to exist. The crystals, like Shadowfall crystals, did not exist naturally. Their components were harvested, a special type of sand or stone, and the crystals were cut or formed somehow, and inside the crystal, using ones bond with the essence, lines of silver or gold were spread through the willing crystal, whatever that meant, and the crystal was essentially trained to react to any flow of essence by whatever special pattern was imbued into it. Some crystals created light, others had healing properties, and some were even used to enhance pleasure. Very few channelers ever gained the ability to become crystal smiths, and not many priestesses taught the techniques for it as a result. The wrong kind of crystal could be used as a weapon, and this was forbidden for all but those charged with defending the temples. The priestesses with close ties to the spirit world, like Ceriss, generally reserved the right to use those crystals. This was because they were best suited to understand the repercussions to the essence to use it to inflict harm, which should rarely if ever be done. Alps shuddered at the thought of essence itself being used as a weapon. It would likely be an unstoppable kind of force. Blades and armor would be useless against it. No wonder Mannus feared the Letai.

The final school of essence user was called the Guardian. The Guardian did not just draw the essence or build crystals that did tricks. These rare few were often the holders of a nation's destiny itself, it was said. They could bend the essence to their will so intensely that they could produce the effects of powerful crystals without a crystal at all. Banning a weapon crystal from them was pointless because they could do what those crystals could on their own. Alps was immediately captivated. This was what he was talking about. Real strength to protect the ones he loved. What was involved in becoming a Guardian? Could Luna or Ceriss teach him the skills he would use to do this? Alps blushed to think that he could be revered as a Letai at all. The mere name was a legend, but there was little doubt now of what he was, by birth. It made him self-conscious in a very unpleasant way.

"This kind of extreme power..." Alps read as he turned a page, "... was reserved to only the high priestesses. Indeed, it was this ability which earned them the title, but very few could... maintain it... very long. One had to use their own energy, from the source, to actually perform the techniques. This often resulted in a short life span, or at least, a short amount of time one could remain a high priestess." Alps rubbed his chin. Luna was a high priestess. Was she harming herself to have that power? He didn't want to think of that. Alps turned the page. The next page had been half torn out. This was odd, he thought.

"The Nether and the School of the Forbidden Arts..." the slave read out loud. "In some texts written long ago it was stated that before the Letai mixed bloodlines with the first Amanian Empire, when the original Letai first arrived from the ocean..." Alps rubbed his temple. From the ocean? The Letai came to Amani from across the sea? Did this mean there might be an island or a continent with more of them? He looked back to the half-destroyed page. "... these Letai spoke of a forbidden school of essence using that called power from the void, from the darkness, far too powerful and violent to control by all but the most powerful high priestess. This art is not taught, and an attempt to learn it is grounds for execution by the Letai, the only crime in which this is the non-negotiable penalty." Alps swallowed. So this was not something he'd be looking into. "The story spoke of a technique that allowed the user so much power that they could create a world out of the fear and suffering in someone's own mind. It would be a seemingly endless world barren of the things that brought the doomed spirit joy in life. There is no escape from this eternal loneliness."

The white lupine gritted his teeth. He knew what this was referring to. He'd been to that place. The Shadowfall. His reading the page, however, nullified the statement of there being no escape. If it happened again, could he actually get free again, or was it a fluke or happenstance because he had joined with two powerful priestesses?

The rest of the page was missing. His hands suddenly felt cold and numb. Someone had plucked this page out of the book. This very old book. Was he holding the tome that Mannus himself had read to learn of this exact technique? But the rest of the page was gone. He would learn nothing more of it, nor of his inexplicable ability to escape. He looked at the pictures that were on the other page, and saw, with some curiosity, the item he still carried in the leather satchel on his hip. The writing there was in Letai, which Alps could not read, and the image was in color to make it more obviously the item he held. A simple mirror polished metal ball.

Alps had not yet learned what the item was for, though the enigmatic fox had seemed to know. He took the green metal sphere out of his satchel and looked at it. He had taken the item from an Amanian priestess named Vahna, in disguise as Nidaja. The fox had called it Ressaia. An item to be used by a Letai Guardian. Her words rang in his mind now more than before. Now he knew what a Letai Guardian was, and she apparently knew as well. She had said others could not use it because they lacked what it took to give it shape. She said Alps had that, though. What did he have? Bad luck? He looked up from the green sphere and nearly fell out of his chair, jumping up

with the wooden seat clattering on the ground.

“You!” he barked, seeing the fox there. Had she felt him thinking about her? How did she just appear like that?! His mind reeled. What was she doing right in the palace of the Empress; did she have absolutely no fear at all? She stood there before him silently, gazing at him with her silver eyes fixed on him. He looked at her, and then flattened his ears. She let him walk right into this mess. She had to have known the grave danger he was going into and she still did not discourage him. Why was she following him if she was not protecting him? Now he was in too deep to just walk away!

“Me.” The fox’s single-word reply was very certain and non-argumentative.

“What are you doing here?” the slave asked her with a hiss in his voice, trying to be hushed about it. This he genuinely would love to have known, but immediately upon saying it, he knew she would not give a straight answer.

“I was going to ask you the same thing.” Her icy reply gave no hints. “Are you enjoying your greater calling in this land?” she asked. Alps gritted his teeth, staring icily at her.

“Did you *know* what they were going to do to me?” he asked. “Did you know and just let me come anyway?”

“Would it have fixed anything if I had told you?” she asked. The white lupine bristled, which he found himself doing more and more around this fox.

“You have got to be kidding me! I would never have agreed to this!” he barked savagely, not caring now if guards came and arrested this troublesome lady fox. He’d seriously just had his fill of her careless word-wandering in the face of his extreme peril.

“Did you think you ever had a choice?” the dark vixen asked.

“Choice? You could have helped me, right? You could have gotten me out of their clutches and back home to Nita, don’t act like you couldn’t! You got in this place easily enough; we could have knocked out Reika and slipped away!”

“I knocked out Reika. You didn’t run.” Alps took a moment, trying to remember what the fox was talking about, and then vividly recalled Bone sailing through the rain and nailing the hyena in the back of the head.

“You did that?” he asked coldly. “Then why didn’t you come get me and let me know it was a chance to escape.

“You didn’t really want to escape. You wanted to help Reika and keep her from drowning. You missed your chance. I didn’t think you’d go, anyway. I just didn’t want her to stomp on your neck and accidentally kill you.”

"So you saved me, but you didn't save me?" the wolf asked, very visibly perturbed.

"No, I saved both of you. Reika would have been exiled if she killed you. That is worse than a death sentence to these people. They always end up right in the mines and they don't live long there." She noted. Alps gritted his teeth. The mines, getting the materials for Mannus to make more Uruk. He assumed that was a painful and short life, yes. Even the pictures he saw in the books stated that.

"Well, apparently, I am failing at asking the right questions. Otherwise I would not be in this mess. Like you said, I am obviously being somewhat ignorant." Alps said, trying with grim determination to calm down. Screaming at the fox wasn't going to undo the mess he'd been pulled into, or help him solve any of his problems. He would try to be more amicable. "I suppose you are well aware of what I've been asked to do, and what has been taken from me, whether I wanted it or not. What should I do about that?" he asked.

"What do you want to do about it?" the fox asked in return.

"Stop answering my questions with questions. I want you to just answer me straight. What should I do about what's happened to me here? I asked you what to do about my friends, who were in danger from who I was, and you told me save them. So I went on this trip willingly, and ended up in this mess because I was looking for the strength and knowledge I thought I would find with the Asuna to help my friends. I thought maybe I could create an ally out of the Asuna, and sure, I might have done that, but I don't think Nita's going to enjoy the cost of it. Now, my bloodline will be a part of the Asuna." Alps sat down heavily, rubbing his head, trying not to tremble. What a mess.

"You seem to have found that undeniable answer for yourself. Allies are a good way to help your friends." The fox spoke softly in her peaceful, velvet tones. Alps looked up at her with disdain.

"I've watched how this place works. I see it in their books, even just in the pictures. Do you know what the Second Child Promise is?" he asked. The fox said nothing. "The second child of every family is taken to the mines when they are of age and worked to death. Every family knows this, and they still have to persist because if they don't have at least *three* children, their population ultimately begins to shrink, and the Asuna will die out. So every family deals with the pain of sending a beloved child to their unspeakable end just to survive as a race. This is monstrous! What the hell am I supposed to do about that? I don't want my own flesh and blood seeing that world!" Alps barked furiously. He then lowered his head, holding his muzzle in his palms, looking with distress to the seemingly unmoved vulpine. She finally answered.

"You ask a question I already gave the answer to. Your friends would be safe if

you stop Mannus. If you stop Mannus, the Asuna would be safe too. So save the Asuna.” Alps looked up incredulously at the fox.

“Really? That’s still your answer, just matter-of-fact? Sure, okay. I accept. I will save the Asuna and the Amanians. Now, if you could just help me with the little matter of *how do I do that?!’*” he fairly yelled at the vulpine.

“You already have what you need.” The answer was just as useless to him. He slammed the green sphere on the table.

“What, Ressaia?” he shouted, the fox looking at it.

“No, that’s a weapon, but not enough for Mannus. And certainly not for what comes after. You will need something more.” Alps rolled his eyes. How very valuable, this information.

“Alright, damn it, I have had it. I want you to tell me the most important thing I could ask a question about, don’t hold it back, just the single most important thing I need to know right now!” The wolf pounded his fist on the table, making the books on it hop. The fox got up, slipping around behind Alps, who felt a chill as she put her hands on his shoulder. She did not usually touch him. Was he too forceful with her? Was she going to hurt him? She whispered softly to the wolf.

“Very well, Alps. I will, just this once.” His heart leapt. Finally, real answers! True wisdom from the only one he had started to feel fairly certain could help him in the bigger mess that was really going on. Alps was not sure why, but he felt that she, if anyone, knew how to fix this.

“Thank you.” Alps said quietly, as her cold nose touched the rim of his ear.

“My name is Elis.” Her words were simple and sweet, her tone gentle and soothing. Alps blinked at that.

“Elis?” he asked, turning around. She was gone.

“FUCK! FUCK, FUCK, FUCK!!!” the wolf screamed, jumping up and kicking a chair across the room. It shattered, and ungratefully hurt his foot too, making him hop around. Finally, now that it did no good, someone came in.

“You seem cheerful this afternoon.” Rios said. Alps turned around, suddenly blushing, embarrassed. As far as she could tell, he’d been talking to himself perhaps. Even he wasn’t sure. Luna and Ceriss had seen the fox, but he’d not asked them anything more about her after that, so even he was beginning to wonder about his sanity where “Elis” was concerned. Alps sat on the edge of a table, rubbing his face, almost to tears from the frustration the fox had left him with.

"I'm sorry. It's not... typical for me." He explained to Rios. The wolf-hyena mix sat on the table beside Alps. She looked at the huge, dusty book that he left open, with the half-torn page.

"Doing a little light reading?" she asked, seeing the stack beside it.

"I don't read Asuna." Alps answered sadly. "I don't get much from them, though that one talked a little about Letai techniques. It's got stuff about essence use, like channeling, crystal smiths, that sort of thing.

"Apparently not the things you were looking for. Are you trying to learn something specific? You said you've never been formally trained. My child would be an adult by the time you were ready for some of these techniques, I'm afraid. It's not as easy as just reading about it."

"Why are you trying to help?" Alps asked, knowing full well he'd not get to stay long enough to learn from Rios, but he might well get to learn from Luna, which would be just as good, perhaps. It might even be better, despite Reika seeming to think no one knew more about the Letai.

"Alps..." she leaned forward. "I know you don't like me. For what I did, for what I took from you, but please know that I would never do such a thing if I thought there was, reasonably, another way. I don't want my people to live like this anymore. I'm the last High Asuna. My actions will dictate our future. If I make a single misstep, these books..." she waved her hand around the modest library, "Will be the only thing left. No more spots. No more Asuna. This world will forget, and it will have all been for nothing. I can't let it happen, Alps." Her words were marked with genuine sorrow.

Alps melted somewhat, his earlier rage at Elis subsiding. The Empress seemed to think maybe he was this enraged over her. It was so easy for him to give up being angry. He had not discussed it with Rios, but he'd already learned what she wanted. He wanted to stop this nightmare from happening to her people.

"You mean things like the Second Child Promise?" the wolf asked. Rios gritted her teeth and nodded. "I can imagine there's worse but I don't feel like asking about it right now." He put his hands on the edge of the table, leaning forward.

"What are you searching for, Alps?" Rios asked. It sounded hauntingly similar to the kind of question Elis would ask. Everyone wanted to know, but he seemed to be the least concerned about it. Without thinking, he answered.

"Happiness." His single word was so much surer than most of the things Alps had said the past few days. Rios was quiet a moment. Alps was a little shocked by the simplicity and genuine truth of his answer as well.

"I took you away from that." Her words were a little sullen.

"I don't mean my own." Alps said genuinely.

"You are looking for happiness for your friends? Your mate-to-be?" she asked.

"It's more than that. I feel it stronger now than ever before. I suppose if I needed much proof that I am what I am so afraid I am, this feeling is that proof." Alps felt like his explanation was far too complicated and cryptic to be understandable, but Rios surprised him with her own answer.

"You want to make everyone happy." The wolf hung his head and nodded a little. "Even the loathsome Asuna?" she asked.

"Especially the loathsome Asuna." He offered this with a chuckle. "I thought I would be able to just walk away from it all, and go back to my happy home in Diera, and just... push it all to the back of my mind. Maybe I would not even tell Nita that part of me lives on among you."

"No one's asking you to do anything but that, Alps. You can go back and you can pretend it never even happened. It may be a century or more before Mannus makes it to your lands, and you would have enjoyed a happy life and brought joy to those around you, and that will satisfy any Letai, I've been told." Rios leaned against Alps, who found it endearing, and a little unusual as she'd not shown genuine affection for the wolf even in the few times he'd flooded her with the promise of his progeny. She would hardly even look him in the face while having him perform the task. This was a little more genuinely affectionate version of Rios he'd not seen before.

"I thought I could do just that, but I see the suffering you endure now. You all try hard to hide it, not to talk about it, and you bear a culture of strength, where showing that you suffer is a taboo, but I still see it. I don't know how I see it, but it's like a dark blanket that hangs over so many of you, like..." he rubbed his head.

"Like a mourner's shroud." Rios' answer came in a soft whisper.

"Yes..." Alps mused softly. "Exactly like that."

"Alps... come to the window..." Rios offered her hand. The wolf looked at her curiously, but took her hand and moved to the first-floor window, looking at the courtyard. It had stopped raining, and there were a number of Asuna out and about, gathering some things from the market not far away to bring them back to their homes or to the palace. Alps looked at them curiously.

"Looks like it stopped raining for a bit." He noted matter-of-factly, not sure what else to say.

"Who wears the shroud?" Rios asked.

“What?” Alps asked in return.

“Who, out there, is wearing the shroud you spoke of? Who has that darkness draped over them?” Her words were somewhat insistent. The slave tilted his head in confusion.

“I was being figurative.” Alps gestured to the folks milling about. “I don’t see actual shrouds.” Rios moved behind Alps, leaning over his shoulder as she looked out the window with him. Again, she was being affectionately close. The wolf cursed himself for liking it.

“But you do see them, Alps. You just described them. You have seen them since you got here. The imagery was there, and very real, Alps. I don’t want you to be as literal.” Her hand slipped under his chin, rubbing soothingly. “That’s like my asking you what music looked like. It’s the wrong sense, but imagery works different altogether, doesn’t it? If I asked you what spring time music might sound like, you could choose it, even if the music was played in the autumn. We make images in our mind for how things are, outside of our regular senses. How we see the world is not how we understand it, right? So use your imagery, Alps. If there are people out there that you think would wear that shroud that’s in your mind... who is wearing one?”

Alps could not help but wag his tail a little. Was this a lesson? She was teaching him something elementary, and he suddenly felt like this was far more important than she was even immediately letting on. So he looked out at those souls wandering the courtyard. Some of them seemed emotionless, just going about their business. Some seemed to be happy because it wasn’t raining. A few were idly chatting with one another, and a couple were even arguing, one pair of them almost coming to blows, which Alps found to be a rather common occurrence. As he watched them though, he tried hard to imagine who met the description in his mind. Which of them was being pressed under that black ... what was it? A shroud? A sheet? A mass? And then, he rubbed his eyes a bit, and Rios held him a little tighter. He could see a flicker, like a fleeting shadow one sees when they are sick or overtired. Not see, maybe understand. It was weird. It was like he was imagining it. It seemed like one of the ones he was looking intently at was suddenly wrapped in a dark layer of smoke, over his chest and shoulders, like a closed tunic or vest. Alps pointed.

“That one. He is wearing it.” Alps spoke softly.

“Anyone else?” Rios asked.

“Her... and that kid over there, the one that’s pulling the cart with his folks.” Alps pointed the two out, and as he looked his focus would move from one person whose smoky garment would fade, and the one he looked at would gain it. As his focus settled, his mind “looking” for that image, he would actually see it in a flickering, unnatural kind of way, as if he were tricking his mind into an illusion.

"Do you see them, or are you just imagining that they are the type to have them?" Rios asked.

"At first, I was just imagining, but if I focus on them..."

"They get a smoky little jacket..." Rios finished. Alps turned, looking at Rios incredulously, his jaw slacked, a little startled at her accurate description.

"What is it?" Alps asked.

"Alps, that's the essence. That's their essence, as it's manifesting itself."

"Is everyone's like that?" he asked, knowing that not everyone he looked at had the smoky vestment. Did they not have it or was he missing it?

"No. Just those who are suffering terribly. Those who feel utterly hopeless." Her words sounded so eerie as she said that. Alps was suddenly not so sure he wanted to have the ability to see that.

"Why would I want to know how to see suffering? I can just tell some of these people are unhappy without seeing that scary shroud." He leaned against the window frame again.

"The Letai honed this ability because they wanted to bring happiness to those around them. It's important to know who is suffering because those are the people who are the most in need of finding happiness. Ending their suffering is crucial to the development of a Letai's power. Suffering is the cause of more suffering. The Letai would ease all suffering as best they could to prevent greater suffering from leading to things like war. Death. Destruction. Those things damage the essence of a place. They poison it. It takes a lot of work to restore the essence of a place after a war." Alps looked at the folks in the courtyard. One of the children happily playing with his friends wore a shroud, while someone who was glum and trying to repair a cart that had just snapped didn't seem to have one. Something was wrong with the child, and without that ability, he might not know. He might suspect the real suffering to be with the person who was obviously not having a very happy time with his property.

"So many of them are suffering. Do you see them too?" he asked.

"I do." Rios answered softly. "Every day."

"Is this the first step to becoming a channeler then? Seeing the essence?" he asked.

"No, Alps. It's one of the last steps. You say you have never been trained, but this took me six years to be able to see the essence. You have the ability, Alps, you

just need... to understand what it is you are doing naturally. You see, but you don't know what you see, and perhaps you have been trained to ignore it just to fit in. Because they were things others could not see." Rios held the lupine from behind. He felt warm suddenly. He leaned back into her.

"That feels better. Seeing them, seeing their suffering, is sad. It helps to have someone to hold." Alps whispered this, knowing that it was likely why Rios did this. Was she always this kind? Did he ignore it before because of what she had to do to him? The slave cupped her hand against his tummy with his own. She moved it up in front of him.

"That's my own warmth, Alps. I want you to think of what my warmth might look like if I held it in my hand. What comfort might actually look like if you imagined it before you, as I gave it to you? You can feel it, sure enough, but can you find it?" she asked.

"Comfort?" Alps asked, and then looked carefully at that hand over his chest, held in front of him with her palm facing him. He focused on it with the same "drifting" feeling he used to see the cloaks, not knowing what it had to do with his eyes, but he now recognized the feeling he had when he did it, and could make himself "feel" that way again. It took but a moment, but he was able to see a wisp of golden smoky haze caressing his chest, like it was licking right over his body, from his tummy to his neck. He blushed a little, suddenly feeling very much like she was licking him. The wolf whispered softly,

"I imagine it to be like... a silky scarf or something that you hold out, and it strokes over my front, up and down, slowly." Alps tilted his head back. It felt nice, and he felt his heart racing not from the embarrassment of the sensation, but from the feeling that he was finally learning something of value.

"Tell me when it's up at your neck, and tell me when it's down at your tummy..." Rios continued to hold Alps from behind as she spoke. Alps nodded, but the warm feeling ended. He continued to watch, but the "scarf" was no longer actually touching him, it was just making the same sweeping motion inches from him. He didn't feel as happy, but he could still tell her what he saw.

"Up... Down... Up... Still up... Down..." he continued this for a while, until she finally let that scarf touch him again, and he felt mushy and happy again, not wanting it to stop. Alps wondered if she would teach him the scarf trick. He was sure Nita would adore the way this felt after a hard day of dealing with snippy merchant companies and land owners with unsolvable gripes.

"I know without a doubt that you do see it, then, Alps." Rios said softly.

"I dunno... Maybe I would have always seen it, I just would not have looked for it? It's like seeing shapes in the clouds. You can see a cloud, but you have to imagine it looking like something to see something else." he noted. Rios let go of Alps and

walked back over to the table, sitting on the edge of it. She picked up the book Alps was looking through, just leafing through the pages. Alps stood behind her, and thought about that scarf she'd used on him.

The wolf imagined a "scarf" of his own, holding it in his hands, a streamer of golden energy. It was not as easy as just imagining it, so he focused more on where it was from. He tried to reach in him to find that feeling again, to see his own energy. It came from the same energy that he already felt. It wasn't too different from everyone else's was it? He tried to feel that same warm feeling, and fashion it into a scarf. One doesn't start with a scarf, after all. One makes it from the materials you have. He saw the golden wisp extend from his fingertips, faint, but coalescing slowly. It only extended a few inches from his fingers as Rios looked through the book.

"There are some helpful things in this book. It's a rare book with some very interesting wisdom for advanced Letai. I think, to show my intentions to bring peace between our people, I should let you borrow this book. It's something that your scholars would treasure forever." She then gasped, arching her back as Alps slid the golden energy of his scarf up her spine. The wolf wagged his tail to see it had an effect. He did it! It was actually pretty easy when he got it started. He stroked Rios with it for a while, and she held still, facing away from him, her fluffy tail bouncing back and forth in jerky motions. When he stopped, she slumped, hugging her middle.

"Err..." Alps circled around to the front of the table. "Did I do it wrong? Did that hurt?" he asked, gritting his teeth. He was focusing on exactly what it felt like to him when she used it on him. She shook her head, but looked almost frightened if Alps had to label the expression as anything.

"Alps, that's not a 'see it once and do it' technique. You show unusual predisposition to using these essence techniques. You have to know the third school to be able to do that. It's not a toy, be careful. You can hurt someone if you push a dark feeling into that. You want it to feel nice, but Alps, you can make it hurt just as easily." The slave widened his eyes at that. Was that actually how it worked? It took all his focus and effort to get it a few inches from his fingertips, but if he could touch someone with the intent to harm them, he could actually do it? He was a little afraid of that thought. He nodded and stopped focusing on the idea of it. He definitely hoped the priestess could help with his education when he got back. He stood in front of the empress, tilting his head.

"Do you think I could become strong enough to stop Mannus?" he asked. Since Elis had said it, that thought was weighing more and more on his mind.

"What?" Rios asked, looking at him incredulously.

"This has to end. My friends are suffering. Your friends are suffering. How long are we going to let him do this? What if we have the power to stop him?" Alps asked.

"You say this like no one's ever tried. The fully trained Letai numbered in the hundreds, and could not face him and stop him, and that was before his army was even half the size it is now. He gets stronger and stronger, and his range spreads, almost all the way to the coast now, so I hear. You or I alone won't stop him. Making a new force of Letai, and hitting him when he doesn't expect it, right at the heart, right in his own citadel. We have to bypass his army in secret and hit him with everything we've got, but that might be a hundred years away." Rios leaned back a bit. Alps nodded to that.

"So that's your plan. Build a secret purified race to face him? Something he doesn't expect?" Alps asked.

"That's pretty much the idea. Obviously I have no trouble telling you about it. Mannus would want you dead more than anyone. You are hardly an ideal spy for him." Rios smiled wryly.

"You mentioned bringing peace to our two peoples?" he asked.

"We cannot succeed alone. The new blood would have to stay out of Mannus' reach until they are ready, and that's well inside the queen's territory. And then, what would we have to look forward to when Mannus was gone? War with your people? Certainly not. That's not acceptable at all. There has to be peace. I will speak with your queen one day, but there is much work to do before we come to that point. I won't ask you to do this task either. I've taken enough from you as it is, and your kindness and inherent trust may cause the queen to question the sincerity of any promise I make to you. But there will be peace. There is no other way."

These words made Alps feel a lot better. Something good may yet come of this, even if Rios' plan did not work. The wolf would trust Rios to her end of things, but he was not content to do nothing. There had to be something more. Something that did not take one hundred years to do. That odd silver-haired fox, Elis, had told him to save them. His people and hers. Somehow, he had trouble believing that she did not mean it. There was a frantic tap at the door, which then swung open.

"Brother's back." Reika barked with agitation. "She brought company." Alps looked at the annoyed-looking hyena, who was followed by someone Alps only barely recognized. It was the male hyena that Nidaja had been fighting with when he was separated from them. That seemed like months ago, even if it had only been a little over a week. So many things had happened, and so much had changed about his already increasingly complicated life. Alps did not expect the next face he saw. His heart leapt.

Nidaja. She strode in wearing her leather armor, looking every bit as beautiful and powerful as she did when she first took him from the little town of Luca. Alps stood up, near tears with happiness. It was like home came right to him instead of him having to go home, and he didn't feel as fearful and alone anymore. He then flattened his ears. What was she doing in the palace? Was she taken prisoner by the hyena? His head

then jerked to look at Rios. She would probably not have expected to see Nidaja either. By the look on her face, silently stunned, she did not.

"We ... were not supposed to take her entire family, Lyat." Rios said shakily.

"She kidnapped me." Lyat answered. Alps softened a bit. Of course. Nidaja wasn't so weak as to be kidnapped. But what was going on?

"If you thought she meant me harm, you'd be dead rather than standing here. Don't be silly with me, Lyat, you took the Amanian General right to the palace. Why?" she asked.

"She insisted." Lyat said, shrugging. Alps covered his muzzle. Had Nidaja just done something so dangerous for him?

"Oh dear." Rios said.

"I'll get bone." Reika said flatly.

"No, it's alright." The Empress said, Alps looking back and forth between them.

"Reika, Nidaja isn't as soft as me." Alps stated.

"Reika uses bone on Lyat." The lady hyena said shortly.

"Alps, am I too late to keep her from..." Nidaja started. Alps looked away, rubbing his muzzle. He didn't want to talk about this right now. Not in front of everyone.

"Lyat, you did to tell her about that. Please say you were not so foolish." The Empress said with a slight squeak of fear in her voice. "I thought I expressed how very secret everything about this notion was."

"Then it's done..." Nidaja said, her voice wilting. Alps walked over to the window. He couldn't look at her. He didn't exactly do a whole lot to stop it.

"Lady Nidaja, he came here of his free will. His eyes are open, and he knows what we do is to protect ourselves, to save ourselves. Even as important as Alps is, this is bigger than him. You have to un-"

"Enough!" Nidaja barked, cutting Rios off mid-sentence. Alps turned around quickly. He did not want them to fight! Nidaja strode to Alps, and pulled him forward, kissing him. The wolf was startled, but soon melted into the kiss. Reika murmured softly,

"Told you so." Alps closed his eyes and sighed. It was not judgmental. It did not demand anything from him. She was filled with joy just to see him. The slave

embraced the one who came across the wilds just to save him again. He finally leaned back, tears in his eyes, so fearful that his actions here had messed everything up and disappointed not just Nidaja, but hurt her sister.

"I... I'm sorry, Nidaja..." he said with a slight crackle in his tensing throat.

"Alps, just tell me... Do you believe they did what they really believed was right? Do you believe that Rios wants something better for her people, and in return, for all who are against Mannus?" Nidaja's words were very bold and confident. The white lupine gritted his teeth. That was a very odd question to ask him. Was she asking if he wanted it to happen? Not exactly, but he was no longer so upset that it did. He understood why now. He sympathized with the Asuna.

"I believe she wants peace and prosperity for both of our people." Alps finally answered, not sure how to bring his own feelings into it. Nidaja looked over to the stunned and silent Rios.

"Is it true? You are part Letai, and Alps is full Letai? Are you able to tell without a doubt?" she asked.

"I had some doubt before I met him. I do not now. He is Letai." Rios said.

"And you intend to tap his bloodline to bring stability to your empire, as Lyat said?" the green-furred general asked. Rios nodded to that.

"That would be the idea." The empress spoke evenly and properly.

"Did she hurt you?" Nidaja asked Alps.

"No." Alps said, glad that she wasn't asking about Reika.

"Alps, do not fret. My sister will understand. She knows what's at stake, but what this reveals about you will make keeping you close to her out in the open difficult." Alps felt a bolt of pain go through his heart. He knew of course. It would be too dangerous for the queen to be openly married to someone who Mannus even suspected might be Letai.

"If he realized what Alps was, he'd suspect the queen of using him for exactly what we needed him for." Rios said softly.

"To purify her bloodline and challenge him." Nidaja finished. Alps swallowed. He had not considered that it might work the same way for the emerald tribe, perhaps even more so.

"So what can we do?" Alps asked.

"The wedding may have to wait, or just be a private affair, a close secret if Nita cannot endure, but it only changes how things look, not how they are." Nidaja explained.

"What of my legacy here?" Alps asked, almost afraid of this part more than any other. "How will Nita react to what I have done here?"

"With what options lay before us, for the Asuna especially, did you think it was a choice that you were allowed to make?" Nidaja asked. This surprised Alps greatly. She would have supported the Asuna not giving him a choice?

"No, I suppose not. This was too important for me to say no to." The wolf spoke in a near whisper. Of course he understood that now, but he really didn't expect Nidaja to understand. She loathed the Asuna, didn't she? Would she even be able to touch him knowing he'd been with one? She had kissed him though...

"Moreover, there are happier things to discuss than whether this was all entirely right or wrong." The general stood taller, facing Rios.

"A lasting peace." Rios said. Alps' heart soared again. They would actually speak of it openly? What has Nidaja seen on her way here? Had her eyes been so keen to see that the Asuna were Mannus' worst victims? He sat down in a chair with the back of it hugged to his chest, enthralled.

"Yes. If the bloodline of what is to be the royal house is to mix with the Empress of the Asuna, then the essence would forbid either to spill the blood of the other." Nidaja said.

"You are wise to know this rule. I am happy to see that the laws of the Letai are not lost in the royal house." Rios said. "It will not be easy, as many of my people have no inkling as to a reason why a peace would have to exist. It may be a more complicated endeavor than you getting here safely and making this agreement with me. Not everyone sees the world that *could* be like you or I do." Alps marveled between them. He'd seen the rebel group, the Spirits of Silverlight, reconcile their differences with Nita and Nidaja in his presence as well, but this was much bigger. The Spirits of Silverlight were a rag-tag group of farmers and miners who wanted to defend their land without the queen's help. This was an entire empire on the brink of war with his homeland about to end that conflict. He felt dizzy from the weight of importance upon the moment.

"I would be foolish to ignore the change it would mean for both our people to face the enemy together, even if in secret, unwitting to the cooperation of the other. There is too much to lose any other way." Nidaja said with deep conviction. Alps spotted Reika's tail wagging. This pleased her. Nidaja and Rios were recognizing each other's strength. That was important.

"I wish for you to forgive me for forcing my intentions upon your friend and lover

in these past days. You may understand, but it does not make right the things I have done.” Rios said.

“I understand Lyat to be your friend and lover as well.” Nidaja said calmly.

“This is...” she looked side-long and suspiciously at Lyat. “... Not a publicly known arrangement, but yes. You speak true. Who else would I trust so much?” Rios looked at Lyat, who looked down, hands behind him, trying to look invisible. “What does that have to do with Alps?” the Empress asked.

“I can forgive your trespasses if you can forgive mine.” Nidaja said. Rios’ eyes went wide, though she tried to absorb the look of shock as best she could quickly. Reika was not so tactful.

“You is fucking joking.” came her guttural proclamation.

“I see...” Rios said, seeming a bit shaken, and then, a chuckle, and then, a laugh. A long, hard laugh. She sat beside Alps, who Nidaja now stood beside, arm looped over his shoulder. She leaned on the table, laughing.

“What is being funny? Lyat is getting watered by ferns. Is weird, not funny.” Reika seemed clueless and indignant. Alps understood the significance, but he was very surprised that such a thing would happen. He knew quite well, even in a few days of discussing it, how Nidaja felt about the Asuna. Perhaps Lyat had been very good at explaining the way things really were to her. Or perhaps Nidaja had done so to prove her strength, which seemed to be how things worked between the Asuna anyway.

“I’ll have to mark him as mine again later.” Rios said, touching Lyat on the nose, making him obviously a little flustered. Reika left, blanching visibly at the thought. Alps rubbed his chin. That calm, ordered and regal male was actually Reika’s brother? He barely saw the resemblance, aside from the coloring. The slave looked back at Nidaja.

“Well, I was worried that you might have reservations about me after being so intimate with an Asuna, but...” he rubbed the back of his head, looking with uncertainty at Lyat. He was shared so openly between Nidaja and her friends and family that the thought of another enjoying her didn’t make him jealous at all. It seemed perfectly natural to him. He was openly loved and knew to love openly. Was this something he was supposed to feel? Nidaja chuckled and murmured,

“Alps, my feelings about the Asuna were misguided by decades of hate based on a situation that Mannus intended. He wants anything but an alliance between our people. Separate we are far weaker. And in learning to forgive Lyat and the Asuna, I found out where my real strength lies. Things will get better, Alps. We are all on the shore of a new world, watching the dawn. There’s a lot of work to be done, but the right people are in place to do it.” She said. Rios put an arm over Nidaja’s shoulders, and Nidaja placed hers around Alps. Lyat rubbed the back of his head.

"This is being quite... a lot. It is looked so much less intense in fanciful day-dreamy discussion." The male Asuna smiled though. Alps looked up to Nidaja and then to Rios, and murmured softly,

"I'm still afraid. Everything is so uncertain." He had to be honest with them, even as excited as everyone seemed.

"Admitting fear shows wisdom." Rios said softly.

"Reika would say it showed weakness." Alps replied.

"That's because she's not strong enough to admit her fear yet." Rios said coldly. Lyat winced, and Alps looked down. He could not argue the logic. In the times of his greatest fear, he'd often refused to admit that he was even afraid. Even Reika would have to face this darkness with them. They were going to be in this together. Alps looked out the window at the dark courtyard. The sun was setting. It was raining again. It would only get darker.

So why was he so happy?

The light in the palace bedroom flickered eerily. These rooms had candles more prevalently than the oil lanterns in the castle that Alps called home, so it seemed darker and spookier even if the quality of the bed was not so different. The wolf looked up with a contented expression at Nidaja as she removed her armor. It would be the first night in far too long that the wolf spent in the arms of this lupine general that he had learned real love and trust from. He was looking forward to this more than he was telling her, especially because of how affectionate she had been with him, touching, stroking, and soothing during dinner. It had been a private affair, as the nature of Nidaja's visit to the castle was being kept a secret, but only a little was discussed concerning the logistics of the secret alliance.

They both agreed that a neutral meeting place and less ears and eyes would be needed, so the bulk of the conversations were stories from Nidaja's youth, and the somewhat eccentric questions from Reika, who was inexplicably interested in everything Nidaja was talking about. Alps suspected it was because her brother was equally inexplicably fond of Nidaja, and she was trying to figure out if she was a danger to her family. The white lupine hoped that Reika did not decide she was dangerous. At least, in as much as Nidaja did not intend to take her brother away. She might very well have had some fun with the hyena, but she'd hardly just taken a mate.

Alps had taken a short bath with Nidaja, scrubbing her down, and gratefully

getting a very thorough scrubbing from her. They both smelled of lavender shampoo, which was all that the palace seemed to have. Neither minded. Alps still had the scent of hyena on his fur and Nidaja smelled like hot, wet leather from her travels. It was a nice change. The general returned to the bed after drawing the curtains and blowing out the far candles, leaving only the portable one on the night table lit. She slipped out of her robes, baring herself to the already bare wolf.

"It's been far too long." Alps stated softly, his ears folding back as he held his arms out to welcome Nidaja to him.

"Too long since we've been together, Alps?" Nidaja asked, smiling wryly. "It's been like... a week. We've gone much longer than that just loving together in the castle." She laughed.

"Having Reika for company is like being without civilized, refined folk for months." The white slave chuckled. He pulled Nidaja close as she gave him her hands. The wolf drew her down to the bed, looking at her equally violet eyes as she smiled back up at him, stroking his face. He took a moment to think this time, however, as he looked into them. Of course, he took precautions with his friends because he entirely expected that if they were in their mother's moon, they'd be expecting soon enough. They didn't want that yet for the complications that would cause, obviously, but would that change now they knew he was Letai? Nita might be a lot more insistent, at least, in being a mother. Just as he was purifying a bloodline for the Asuna, he'd be doing the same for the Amanians. Nita's children would be more powerful. Even Nidaja would perhaps want her children to be stronger. Would Nita find herself having to make such concessions to other Letai as Alps freed them because there were no male Letai for them to pair off with? He blushed a bit at that thought. He could certainly request to Nita that such things not be allowed and she would protect him from that extreme complication of his life, but how selfish would that make him, especially if that was all they asked for? He would discuss that. Later. For now, he was concerned with something very simple and very much something *he* wanted.

"She was rough with you then? Should I challenge her? She seems to be building some respect for me." Nidaja stated, her hands sliding over Alps' chest as he loomed over her naked form, gazing at her perfect, round bosom. Alps lowered his head and kissed her chest softly, savoring the feel of her fingers lacing behind his ears. He was exactly where he wanted to be. He spoke softly, his breath wafting over the sweet scented velvety fur before him.

"I think she's inspecting you carefully in case she wants to challenge you because she feels you are not Asuna enough for her brother." Alps laughed a bit at this, knowing, from how Reika was very imperialistic and proud, that her brother playing with Nidaja would be a real splinter in her foot. Nidaja looked up at her lupine lover curiously for a moment, and then smiled, before saying softly,

"You aren't really jealous, are you? I had wondered if you might be, but you

really aren't. Why is that I wonder?" she asked. Alps seemed to ponder, but he pondered with both hands rolling her heavy, beautiful breasts as his hips slipped in between her own, his already firming member stroking over her velvety lips. There would not be much in the way of foreplay this time. They both needed this and there could be no denying it, even as they spoke, their bodies made it happen. Alps finally answered after thinking about it a bit himself.

"I guess I am not used to having claim on anything, so that would not be my natural and immediate reaction, no." He stroked Nidaja's face, forcing himself to think about that more. What if she took Lyat home and had him whenever she wanted him? Alps could not imagine that he'd suddenly not see Nidaja's affection again, and even if they didn't have time to lie together anymore, he'd still have her friendship, he was certain, for life. He added to his consensus, "... besides, my being replaced in bed once in a while doesn't mean that I'm out of your heart. No more than my spending time with Nita, Misty, Uri, or Misha puts you out of mine..." and with that, the slave's hips pushed forward, and a hot, happy squeak was pushed out of his lover as her honeypot yielded to his sexual desire, spreading around his now quite firm flesh. Alps tilted his head back in pleasure as he felt that slick, creamy stroke of her inner flesh as she engulfed him in that powerful push of his hips.

Alps bristled a bit, his muscles quivering as he strained to push himself as deeply into the now more deeply breathing general as he could. He wanted to fill her, to fulfill her, to please her in every way in thanks for braving the dangerous journey to come and get him. He didn't know what tomorrow might hold, but at least he could face it with her. He was not alone. He began, at that point, to feel that maybe he'd never have to worry about being alone. His friends would be in danger, yes, but as Elis had said, they would still face danger without him. He'd face it with them, instead of hiding and hoping his absence gave them a better chance. In Nidaja's embrace, this was even easier to understand for him.

Alps reared back, pulling Nidaja's legs up a bit to hold them against his sides, letting her lie there before him, sprawled out beautifully, her ponytail resting over her shoulder, making her seem so casual about the sexual congress she was now enjoying. Alps decided to try to do what he'd intended with Nita, but felt perhaps testing it first would be prudent. As his hips slowly rolled back and forth, giving him a nicely graphic view of his cock pushing in and out of those straining, wide pink lips which suckled upon him so delightfully, he placed one hand on Nidaja's tummy, just below her navel. She looked at the slave curiously.

"Mmmmn... you are being so very deliberate this evening, love. This is nice." Her crooning voice only further delighted the wolf. He focused his energy into his hands as he had done for Rios, focusing not on just the pleasant warmth she had shown him, but on the warmth that Nidaja gave him, sharing his love of her with her. To tell her that he loved her was one thing, but to actually touch her with that feeling, he felt, would magnify his intentions when he said it. He let that energy spill into her from her fingertips as he whispered softly,

"I adore you, Lady Nidaja. You are one of my dearest friends, and I intend to take good care of you for as long as this world will allow." As his words ended and he felt the energy finally 'connect' with her, the wolf general arched her back heavily, and in a sinking groan, Alps was shocked by the sensation of a spasming in her sex as she climaxed almost instantly. Alps continued to feed her that energy, grinning mirthfully. This was perhaps too much for her to handle, he thought, but what a nice way to punctuate what he was saying.

"Hunff! Hurf! Haahah!" Nidaja pitched desperately, startled, it seemed, but riding her climax with reckless abandon as she bucked enough against him that he didn't have to move at all while she worked her squeezing, soaking sex. This was not something Alps was used to with Nidaja. She was essentially helpless to him. He pulled his hand away, and she immediately calmed down.

"Whuuh.." she panted raggedly, looking up at her lover with bleary, happy eyes, "What was that? I felt so..."

"You deserve every bit of it." Alps said, putting his hand back on her, lighting Nidaja's fires again instantly, getting that same sinking groan out of her as her hips rose and fell against him. She could not help but buck back against him as that energy spilled through her. Alps grinned joyfully, having to keep himself from laughing in his glee at getting to do this with the pretty lupine general. It was a lot of power to have, and he was sure that this time she was aware he was actually doing something, her eyes widened. She rode out the pleasure, which seemed short of a climax now that she'd already been pushed over the edge. Alps removed his hand again, and resumed happily pumping her himself, watching his slick, pink member slip in deeply back and forth.

"Alps... what are you doing... to make that happen.. You've never... uhhhuh..." The general panted out, still having plenty of pleasure to contend with as he resumed his happy thrusting into her suckling depths. Alps closed his eyes a little, giving a soft groan himself. The effect of having this control, and pleasuring Nidaja so much was making it harder for him to stave off his own climax. He didn't want to put it off. He wanted to blow his essence hard inside her to remind himself where it belonged. He lurched harder, panting out his answer to his green-furred lover.

"You didn't think I came away..." he pushed hard into Nidaja, making her squeak hotly, "... came away from all of this without learning at least a little about what the Letai could do?" he grinned mirthfully again at his lover before putting his hand on her tummy, and making her cry out again. She bucked hard into him, obviously erupting again, her eyes pinned shut as her ears folded back, her tightly trembling body rushing with heavy sensations of pleasure. Alps leaned over her, huffing hotly. "Yes, love... keep it up... Keep moving... I'll cum... Please make me cum. I need you so much... Mmnnh..." he folded his own ears back. He kept his hand on her tummy. If she kept moving like that, that's all it would take! She was so tight around him, and he could swear he could feel

some of those waves of pleasure contacting him as well, stoking his own fires faster.

The wet sloppy sounds of her sex slapping his groin only intensified as she worked herself into a frenzy against him again so easily, catapulting herself into another climax, and then slowing only a bit, before renewing her vigor, very obviously wanting to make her lover spill his essence for her just as he so desired.

“This is... an essence ability?” Nidaja huffed loudly, lurching back at Alps heavily, following his instructions, even if she were able to help it after that second climax ebbed. It was all happening so fast. They could be at this all night as far as the happy slave was concerned. She could wake up with his hands on her spilling his intent of pleasure into her. “Alps, this is...” she bolted again as Alps let her feel the first splash of his hot seed inside her, the wolf barking out as his body jerked, and he spasmed heavily, finally taking his hand off her tummy, ending that flow of energy as he exploded inside her. He could not focus on that while he was so close to climax, and especially not as he truly burst inside the writhing general!

“I’m cumming!” the wolf piped out happily, his head down, his teeth bared with the searing waves of joy that coursed through him at the same time. He opened his eyes, hazily, and could actually almost see a shape of greenish haze around Nidaja as she squealed in delight. Was that essence as well, or was he just a little over-assuming in the promise of his new abilities. Still, as he watched, that energy seemed to rise from her like smoke, and cling to him, as if it were a silk curtain attracted to him by static because he’d shuffled his feet on the carpet on a cold day. Was he drawing the energy without even knowing it? Had he always done it? Had he stored up so much energy from his lovers and friends that it allowed him to escape the Shadowfall?

Alps slumped happily, holding his squirming general under him as she panted happily, not caring very much about that now. So what if it came natural. His friends loved him for it anyway, and it surely wasn’t *why* he was doing it, after all. He looked up at Nidaja, who panted weakly, but seemed quite happy, even with his still pulsing shaft inside her. The wolf grinned at the lady general and slid back, spilling his own seed a bit as he withdrew from her, and stroked her with his hand, still flooding her with energy, but focusing more on that more maternal warmth that Rios had used on him. Was it different in its effect? Would he need to take time to learn many different kinds of touches for his friends.

“Oh that’s just so...” Nidaja groaned as Alps stroked her tummy and chest.

“Warm and comforting?” Alps asked, to verify. He remembered very well what it felt like.

“Who taught you this?” the general asked.

“Rios.” The slave’s answer made the general open her eyes a bit.

"You were learning essence techniques from her? That seems... mmmnn.... Industrious of you, given the situation." The general stretched out, obviously relishing the attention. Alps stretched out alongside Nidaja and cuddled in against her side, having satisfied himself more than merely in sexual release. He had enjoyed the very deep satisfaction of making Nidaja understand what she meant to him by letting her actually feel his joy. He relished the thought of just getting to do that for any of his friends.

"I won't pass up the chance to learn the things I could use to help you and Nita. I want to become stronger, whether by fighting alongside you or taking lessons for essence use from the priestesses. We will go through a lot together, and I am not going to shy away from it." Alps explained. Nidaja smiled wryly.

"Thank you Alps..." she looked away thoughtfully, and then took a rather puzzled expression. "What the hell is that thing?" she asked. Alps looked in the same direction she was looking, and then gritted his teeth. Placed behind a chair, propped up in a corner, was Reika's bone club.

"That would be Reika's partner, Bone." Alps groaned. He pulled himself out of bed and stumbled over to it. He picked up the bone club and looked into its ridiculous-looking googly eyes. He shook Bone a little to make the feather "head-dress" whiffle a bit.

"Why did she leave that in our room?" Nidaja said, sitting up and pulling the blanket in front of her a little. "It's kind of creepy-looking."

"She thinks it's alive, actually. She talks to it all the time." Alps said softly.

"That's kind of insane." Nidaja said. "I am surprised that Rios would allow someone who is obviously so unstable to assist in a mission so important." Alps looked carefully into the painted on eyes of the bone-club. Its "face" was blank and unfeeling. Only a slight line had been added as a mouth to make him devoid of an intelligent expression. Alps held it with both hands a moment, thinking about the conversation Reika had with Bone in the rain, concerning Elis.

"I dunno... If you understood just how ... well she understood this thing, you might find it even spookier. I am not so sure she can't at least see a little through it." Alps said softly.

"Wait... so you mean she was watching us through it?" The general pulled the covers up a little more.

"Not so much like that, since she doesn't seem to always agree with the club, but she seems to be able to understand its experiences. Like, I suspect when she gets this back, she'll ask what he saw. It would be pretty useful for spying."

“Yeah, that doesn’t make me feel much better. Put it outside the door.” Nidaja said, pointing.

“I don’t want someone else to come along and take it. She’d be furious. You don’t want to see Reika angry, believe me.” Alps said. “I will tuck him in my pack for now where he can’t see anything else.” The white slave did so, stowing away the bone club, at least the head of it, so it’s staring eyes would not bother his lover more. He walked away, turning to look at it. He could swear, just for a moment, when he was talking about it as a thing that could see, he saw a flicker of white essence energy. Only living things gave off that energy, though, from what he knew, so he felt that it was an illusion of his sex-addled mind. A long, happy sleep with Nidaja would do a world of good for him, and tomorrow, they could plan what they intended to do next.