

Sirius, Book III

The Essence

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 13

Rain continued to hammer down outside, delaying Alps and Nidaja's departure yet another day. The low-hanging grey clouds seemed to have no intention of allowing a single hour of sunshine through. There were moments where it seemed the skies would clear up, and then that moment would end abruptly in another torrential downpour where one could not see a hundred feet ahead of them. Nidaja had told Rios that she did not mind traveling in the rain, but the empress had advised against it, as the Uruk, she said, had even less trouble walking in the rain. If Alps and the general could not see more than a few dozen feet at times, by the time they saw a roving party of enemy golems it would be too late. The lady Amanian general reluctantly agreed that it would be better to wait out the rains. Nita would worry, as by now she would certainly have been told by Neit what had happened in Jalana, and perhaps fear the worst. That only made it more imperative to make it back safely.

Alps had gotten to know Lyat a bit better in those rainy days, and felt he understood why Nidaja liked him. He fully shared Rios' vision in a hope for the future of both Asuna and Amani and he was perhaps more calm and serene than any Asuna the slave had met. His strength and confidence were apparent and the lupine male was sure his green-furred lover was quite enamored with those traits during her travel with him. Alps was happy for Nidaja to have made such a friend among the Asuna.

The young slave had taken advantage of the extra time to continue to research in the library and Nidaja had spent quite a lot of time with Reika and Lyat. She had continued to spar with the elder Asuna sibling, and even some with Reika, in an effort to learn a bit about the very effective fighting styles of the Asuna. Rios had originally expressed some misgivings about teaching it to the Amanians, but at Lyat's insistence that it helped further the intent that peace was possible between the two cultures, she did ultimately allow it. Nidaja was happy to learn a great deal about the actual culture of the Asuna, saying that the person who would be the most enthralled would most certainly be Misty. She had borrowed four books from the library just about Asuna history, particularly interested in their prehistory before Mannus, and how they had lived before their slavery.

Their culture had always been warlike if the books were accurate, and before they were further divided by Mannus, they were comprised of four major feuding tribes, and even more sub-tribes that were just as conflicted. A council of elders from each

tribe were put in charge of uniting the tribes under Mannus with the new “promises” that were ordained by the dark one himself, and this held a tentative peace of utter misery and despair for almost seven centuries. It was easy to see how the effects of it were so ingrained in their every day life at this point that few could even think of any other way. This nightmare was how it was, and how it would stay. It had been easy for Mannus to pit the already war-like Asuna against the Amanians, since they were now forbidden to fight among themselves, and had a lot of anger that could be easily funneled against their lupine neighbors.

Even this was well documented. It was understood, at least at the top levels, that antagonizing the Amanians, hating them and attacking them, was not necessary, and in fact, only further isolated and cursed them, but there was little to be done about it. Following the urgings of their true antagonist, Mannus, was their only choice, lest he form even worse promises for them to have to make. Alps and Nidaja had both gained a much better understanding for what created the strife between their peoples, and armed with this knowledge, the general intended to win the support of the high council to lay the groundwork for what she and Rios had begun to call “The Dawn Initiative.”

The Asuna and Amanian military would stage small battles along their borders at certain intervals with few losses on either side, minor skirmishes here and there to make it appear that the strife itself had been stepped up, rather than decreased. This was to discourage the Uruk or Mannus from suspecting that they were working together. It troubled them both that the fighting had to continue, even with the intent being to reduce losses on both sides by controlling how and where the fights would be and what the ultimate objective was, but it was ultimately necessary for the greater good.

Alps understood this, and knew that the greater work would have to be done on figuring out ways to deal increasingly massive blows against Mannus’ Uruk armies. Mannus himself was powerful, no one denied that, but reducing the Uruk numbers sufficiently at least earned the dwindling peoples of Amani and Asuna time. Time was what they needed most at that crucial moment. Among the research Alps had committed to, he continued to read the things that the Asuna had compiled on the Letai, and even had Rios continue his essence lessons, though she had little time to dedicate to this since she was still technically hiding the white wolf and his lover from most eyes. It was known that he was taken prisoner, which was witnessed by anyone who saw Reika bring him in, but no one really knew what became of him after he disappeared into the more tightly controlled areas of the palace. It was “rumored” that he was being pumped for information about relics that the Amanians held. It was known that Nidaja had come with Lyat, though not nearly so widely and few would know who she was, but the rumor being fashioned is that a prisoner exchange was being worked out due to the sensitive knowledge that the young white wolf had.

Despite the rain, Alps felt that he had managed to accomplish quite a bit in his wasted time, and was deep into one of the most filthy, dustiest tomes that he’d found yet, pulled up from the basement from a trunk that Reika had found while looking for “outfits” for Bone before she settled on the tribal attire she decorated him with now.

Alps found that much of it was written in Letai, which he could not read, but some was written in Asuna, which Lyat was willing to help with. The larger, much stronger Asuna sat beside him, reading carefully as he looked back and forth at the translation, following with a claw-tip. The direct translation was a little more difficult than speaking because some of the references made did not translate directly in their language. With a little work, however, he managed to help Alps trudge through it. Lyat didn't know much about the essence, so he was even less able to understand the ramifications of some of the scrawling, but after a while, it became apparent that the book was someone else's research into the forbidden arts, which was likely why it was hidden away. The Asuna spoke softly, in a hushed tone.

"This is bad book, Alps. Is being such bad idea to be reading this. Is maybe cursed. You see, is study of dark magics. Even Rios not reading this kind of thing." Lyat told the slave in a wavering tone. Alps shook his head to the Asuna and gritted his teeth.

"I understand, Lyat, but I am afraid we do have to read this." The larger male looked distressed. Alps continued. "We aren't going to be able to go against Mannus with little or no understanding of the power he's using against us. We don't have to use the same power, but we do have to know what he can do, why, how it works, and maybe how we can resist it." The slave felt that it was fairly common sense, but the fear of Mannus' power was deeply ingrained in the Asuna.

"Is maybe causing Alps to do bad things if he is knowing these powers. It is saying dark powers is forbidden with reason." Lyat pointed at the passages. Alps nodded.

"Then tell me about that." The slave pointed where Lyat was pointing. "Tell me why the power was forbidden. We should at least know that. We should know what made Mannus' power so dangerous that the Letai themselves forbade its use." Lyat paused a moment longer, reading the passage, feeling perhaps more safe to read since he had no essence ability and could not use the powers described.

"This part..." he pointed lower down. "It describe 'the dark source'." Alps looked at it curiously and then back at his translator. He asked softly,

"What is the dark source? Why is this important?" the wolf leaned forward a bit, feeling that he was getting down to the very root of the real cause of the seven century nightmare that was Mannus.

"The dark source is being the place where the dark energy is drawn from." Lyat stated softly.

"The Nether." Alps stated, nodding. Lyat shushed him harshly and held the back of the slave's neck, making him duck like something would come flying out of the wall. This startled Alps, but he held still a moment before murmuring, "What? What did I do?"

"We do not be talking about ... that. You not say that. Not here in city. Is dangerous thing. Is dark place. Rios speak of it and tells us not to speak of it after her. She say Mannus gets evil from there, and there is where things are worse than Mannus. We is not speaking of it!" he hissed. Alps nodded.

"Alright, I see, I will not name it again, but speak of it is something we may need to do. I am not sure I understand your wording, though. Are you saying Mannus gets his power from there? I think I already knew that from another book I read. That's the place, or the energy, or something, that dark essence users get their power from. But Mannus is the one who chooses to use this power for bad things, it doesn't say that there is something wrong with the energy does it? It's just the kind of energy someone would use if they were doing things that would not bring the kind of happiness and contentment that give the Letai their power normally. So, the power is not evil, but the person who is using it might be because that's the only way they would have power." Alps tried to state simply. Lyat shook his head.

"No no. That is being very dangerous mistake. Power is not the dangerous thing, place is the dangerous thing. Bad things are being in this place. If you is using the power from there, you is connecting yourself to it, and maybe dangerous things is coming out. Is very dangerous thing to do. It is saying that in this passage. That is why it is being banned. Many bad things happened where power is being used. Worst things of all, Culier Shadows, is from there." Lyat said with a sound of dread in his voice.

"Culier shadow? What is that?" Alps asked with a sinking tone in his voice. His hopes that he might be able to use Mannus' own power against him were effectively dashed by the understanding that even using the power was a bad idea.

"It is large black mass, like moving shadow, nothing seen inside, just sliding through forest and swamp and desert with tendrils reaching out forever seeking warmth of life that is lost to it." Lat's tone was low and ominous as he spoke, as if he were telling a story to scare small children. "It is size of small hut, maybe as big as large house. If it is touching you, you is left without spirit. You is not speaking or moving or doing. You is alive, but quiet, yes? Then, after a day, you is going mad, and attacking everything until you is dead, no food, no drink, just tearing and kicking and fighting, breaking yourself on things around you until dying. Is worse than dying because friends is having to kill you. If it is consuming you completely, though, you is just lost. It is consuming you. That is Culier Shadow. Is monster released in worst attacks of Mannus upon cities." Alps listened to the description in absolute horror. He wanted to believe that it was an old tale passed down to frighten the Asuna, but somehow, he doubted it. He doubted that someone as well informed and strong as Lyat would play party to a rumor and superstition without having seen those effects.

"How do you even kill something like that?" Alps asked. Lyat shook his head, his expression still fearful. "Oh..." the slave stated softly after that. The headshake was

pretty self explanatory. "Does the book talk about anything else that might actually be helpful?"

"No. It is talking about touching the ... dark source... And it is talking about body essence change." He pointed at another passage. "Another forbidden thing."

"What is that?" Alps asked.

"This is marked over, someone is thinking it was important before you. It is about making you into essence, and not being a normal body anymore. Is hard to understand, and not good to translate." Lyat stated.

"Being a not normal body?" Alps asked. "Like, turning yourself into essence energy?" Alps felt a chill run through his body, beginning to connect puzzle pieces.

"Yes. Like, making you into all essence." The warrior Asuna tried to explain to the best of his understanding of the passage. "Hard to fight thing that not has body, Lyat think, but they is not talking about it like that, they is talking about moving between essence items. Like, from one crystal to another that is connected, yes? But that is bad because is not able to use your own essence while in such a state. You is having no choice but to use bad place essence. It says it here. Is good theory, and maybe work, but you is touching bad place to be able to move that way. Is maybe make yourself part of crystal, like it is saying, and you is safe there, but you is not able to get out unless you is really powerful with magics from the dark source. It says to get there, you is having to reflect essence of self with essence of dark place perfectly, like mirror." Alps felt a little sick, suddenly. A sudden realization of several things all dawned on him at once, and he just wanted to put the book away. Lyat seemed to know the look, and closed it, putting it back on the bottom of the stack. "Is sorry, not much help. Is all just scary things Mannus do, not good things Letai do."

"No Lyat..." Alps half whispered his reply. "Actually, that's a lot of clarity on a few things. I think I understand exactly how the Shadowfall was created, even if that is not originally what it was for. I do not especially like what that means for me, though. It does not comfort me at all." The Asuna tilted his head curiously at that.

"Is okay? You is not liking something you is found out?" he asked.

"It's better I don't speak of it further, you are actually right about that. These are hopefully mistakes I shall not repeat if I am lucky." Alps got up and looked out the window. "Still raining, huh? I think I have learned enough for today, I am going to go check on Nidaja and Reika and see how their customs tutoring is going." Lyat smiled wryly at that. It was something Alps said intending to lighten the mood, and it did just that.

Reika teaching about Asuna customs had not been difficult, she understood them just fine, but Nidaja trying to teach the young warrior female about the customs of the

Amanians was not going as well, because so many things that the Amanians did as part of their normal lives seemed to make little sense to Reika. A rather lengthy argument broke out about having people whose only function to society was bringing letters back and forth. It would make more sense, to Reika, for people to deliver their own crap, so that person could do other things. It was hard for Nidaja to make the point that not everyone had the time to do that among the other things that they did. Ultimately, it was not really certain if Reika understood or not, but Nidaja had dropped it. These were the kind of entertaining discussions the pair would have for hours on end.

Lyat excused himself to go have lunch while Alps went to rejoin his friends.

The walk to the meeting hall that Nidaja and Reika had taken over to have their discussion about cultural differences was fairly close to the library, so it didn't take long for Alps to get there. When he arrived, he found Nidaja sitting on a table holding bone, looking into the painted-on eyes intently as if trying to see something small written on them. Alps remained silent a moment. Reika was watching Nidaja for some time. The young hyena finally spoke up.

"You is hearing him, yes? He is saying you is having odd fur. You is green. That is what he is saying, you is not hearing this?" she asked.

"Uh... No, I don't hear a thing, and I am looking right at him. He is just... a quiet bone club." The general did not seem irritated or distressed, as Alps thought he might actually feel himself if Reika was trying to get him to talk to the bone club. The rather insane Asuna looked up and spotted the white-furred wolf.

"Morning Alps-slave. You is done with study? Maybe helping Nidaja hearing Bone! She is almost hear him, Reika is sure, just not close enough. General Nidaja - put nose on Bone! You hear him. You maybe has to touch him closer."

"I am not putting my nose on it."

"Him. Is him. Is okay, he is not hurting you."

"I know he's not, Reika, this is a bone, it can't talk. Alps, you told her this can't really talk, right? This can't be healthy." The General waved to her lover to summon him over to assist her in the matter.

"Ummm... I don't know." Alps felt bad to not be able to back Nidaja up, but he had some suspicions about the shorter hyena's link to the weapon after it "told" her about Elis throwing it and hitting her in the head. Her back was turned to Elis, and she still had a description of the thrower. The fox had admitted to Alps that she threw it. It was hard for him to think of a more logical explanation than the one given so adamantly by the apparently crazy Asuna girl.

"See! Alps, you doubt less now, you is hearing him? You hear bone?" she asked.

"I haven't heard him, no, but I haven't really listened to him either." The slave reached for the weapon, willing to take it off of Nidaja's hands to diffuse the situation. Denying Bone would not make one friends with Reika. The hyena was very sure about the sentience of her weapon and Alps had learned the confrontation involved in suggesting otherwise. Even if he was not uncertain himself, he was not willing to categorically deny the club spoke to Reika. Calling her a liar was not a very helpful position to advance.

"Listen to him! See what he saying!" Reika piped, jumping up and down a little in a bit of a child-like fashion. Alps chuckled at that, actually a little entertained by it, even if not altogether sold on a friendship with Reika given her violent nature.

"Alright, alright, I will listen..." he said.

"This is kind of silly..." Nidaja said, shrugging.

"Is not silly, is real. Reika is real, Bone is real. Alps know." The young hyena gestured wildly to the general. Alps focused on the bone. Of course, it said nothing. He frowned a bit. Maybe he was listening wrong. He felt a little silly himself, even considering it, but maybe hearing Bone was the same as seeing the essence. Maybe it was the kind of thing someone shut out unless they really tried to see it again. He cleared his mind, just as he had been instructed to do by Rios, half closing his eyes, looking into the ridiculous crudely drawn eyes of the bone club. He felt light, loose, the way he did when trying to see the essence, and in fact, did see the essence around Nidaja and Reika, before glancing back to the club.

This was when Alps got the most jarring surprise of his day. A silvery essence crackled around Bone in a strong way, an aura as strong as any living thing he'd been able to make out thus far.

"Nidaja, this thing has essence." The slaves words were flat and incredulous.

"Impossible. It's not alive." Nidaja shook her head at that. Reika bounced happily.

"Yur! He sees! Alps is stronger! Reika make him stronger! Only strong persons know bone!" she piped sunnily. Alps cut her off hastily.

"I can't hear anything with that talking, Reika." His words were not severe, just intense. This was not possible, he knew it wasn't, and yet, that's what he was looking at, but it only pointed more and more to the fact that there was more to Reika than he'd let himself believe. She was crazy, there was not much denying that, but if what he saw was real, Bone was not a part of her madness, and in all respects, from her dealings

with the weapon on the journey to this city, Bone seemed to actually guide Reika, advise her and prevent her from being so severe and resorting to her madness. Did Rios know? Would she have had cause to try to look at the club and see what Alps now saw? Would she consider it a danger? He would not want Reika to be separated from this seeming better influence on her.

“Reika is quiet now. You hearing?” she asked. Alps focused, not on seeing now, but hearing. The senses were attuned different for the essence. Not just seeing, perhaps hearing too. He heard a low sound, hard to make out. He held bone closer.

“This does not make sense, Alps...” Nidaja stated, but the slave held up a finger, shushing the General. This was something he’d never have been impertinent enough to do a year ago. His mind was more focused on the moment than his manners. That sound did have a pattern, like talking. Was it talking? It was the kind of low sound of a male in another room, talking loudly, but too far away to really hear clearly unless one put their ear to the wall. Alps envisioned doing that, not putting it to a wall, but putting his ear to the essence, to the air between him and the essence, whatever that meant. And that’s when he heard it.

“...are the same color as me. I haven’t seen one like you before.” Alps blinked at that, and looked to Reika.

“Can you still hear him?” he asked.

“Yes.” Reika answered.

“Did he just comment that I was the same color as him, and that he hasn’t seen one like me before?” The Asuna’s eyes went wide, which only deepened Alps’ surprise. Even before she answered he knew. Not only was that what Reika also heard, but she had not really expected him to hear it too. She was as surprised as he was.

“You can hear Bone!” the hyena fairly screamed, pointing at Alps with a shaking finger, seeming almost afraid of him for it.

“No way.” Nidaja barked.

“I heard something. It sounds like a voice in another room, or just underground. It’s very odd. I hear it when I do the same things I do to see the essence.” Alps knew this likely distressed Nidaja too, because it did somewhat change the entire understanding one forms of the world around them. How many things were like that, Alps wondered? Were there other objects that were alive but seemed inanimate? Were crazy people not usually crazy, but just able to see and hear more? It was very disturbing.

“Alps,” Nidaja rubbed her chin a bit, thoughtfully. “Ask him what secret I told Reika about when we were talking about traveling alone... This should prove things

once and for all..." The lady wolf seemed almost smugly certain. Alps, however, was hearing Bone's response from the very moment she stopped talking. He listened to Bone.

"Nidaja's afraid of skeletons." The words were muffled, but, like before, definitely there. Alps furrowed his brow. Okay, he didn't know that, so that made sense that if bone told him that, she'd know it was for real.

"You are afraid of skeletons?" Alps proclaimed curiously, hardly able to believe that himself. All the color left Nidaja's ears and she sat down hard on the floor.

"Oh by the essence, that thing is *alive*. It's actually *alive*..." the poor general whimpered.

"Yes! Yes! Finally, someone hears! Reika not gets made fun of anymore! Brother! I tell brother! I tell him now now *now*!" and out the room the hyena fled. Alps looked after the running girl, and held up the club.

"No, don't leave this... she's gone..." he sighed, looking back at Nidaja. Her eyes were fixed on Bone's stupid-looking eyes and blank stare. She looked horrified of it. Alps could not blame her, knowing what he knew now. She was afraid of skeletons and this was part of a living skeleton as far as she was concerned. This was a nightmare for the lovely general.

"It's okay, if he was dangerous we would certainly know by now." The white wolf said. He could not hear anything else bone was saying, since he was too distracted in comforting Nidaja to focus on the essence at that point. "He can't move or anything, just talk. And he's got a moderating effect on Reika. Keeps her level. Keeps her from really going nuts." He stated. The general looked up, her expression not seeming comforted, but Alps looked over to where she looked, as she did seem to be focusing on something. Rios had wandered in. Alps held up Bone. "Oh good, I was hoping to see you sooner rather than later." His words were more positive sounding than they should have been, but he was trying to make light of the spooky situation to comfort Nidaja.

"Why do you have that, Alps? Reika doesn't let other people hold it." Rios asked.

"I think I am allowed now." Alps looked at the painted features of Bone's face.

"Why is that?" Rios asked, "What's wrong with Nidaja, she looks upset. What was that racket earlier, did she get into it with Reika? I swear, that girl is more of a handful than Lyat's worth half the time." The empress sighed with soft reservation. Alps shook his head, regarding the silent, horrified Nidaja a moment, and then speaking, as he figured she was not going to offer up the reason.

"She's a little alarmed because Reika's not as crazy as she thought. You didn't tell me Bone had his own essence. Did you know?" he asked, looking up at Rios. The expression on her face made Alps almost regret saying it. It wasn't much better than the one Nidaja wore. "Err... Maybe not? Look, he has this white essence..." the wolf held up Bone. Rios peered at it with her look of distress for a moment.

"Alps, I don't see anything, and I have watched Reika while she was talking to it to watch her own essence, trying to figure out if she was just transferring her suffering onto the thing. It doesn't have essence." Rios approached, and took the club.

"I can see it still, even now as you hold it, and I could hear him." Alps stated.

"What?!" Rios barked harshly. Holding the club away from herself suddenly. "Please tell me that's a joke, you can't seriously expect me to--"

"It's true." Nidaja said. "I told Reika something before Alps came in that he would not have known, and Bone repeated it for him. That thing talks." The general looked dead-serious as she gazed at Rios and the Empress looked back at her. Alps could tell that Rios was thinking quickly. What had she said in front of it? Could it convey messages to Mannus? What did the fact that it had essence she could not see mean? The slave felt bad to generate such turmoil, but this was something that had to be known.

"Alps, I am aware that you catch on quick in your essence-viewing, but I told you that it takes time to be sure that you are seeing real essence. Did you try crossing your eyes? Did the image separate?" she asked. Alps blinked. He had not tried that, so he did so. He was not cheered up much by the fact that the image did in fact separate. He was looking at something real.

"It's definitely not in my head. And that still would not let me know what he was saying, even if it was." Rios sat down on the table, holding Bone in one hand and then the other.

"Reika's not able to see Essence, is she? Why would she be able to hear Bone?" Nidaja asked, just as Alps was thinking the exact same question. Rios put bone down on the table, looking at it with a bit of worry.

"There is a chance she can actually see the essence, but I didn't think she could. I thought that was pretty much out of her family." Rios stated in a hushed tone. "But, I will admit, she has a bit of the other... residual traits... The violent tendencies and the madness, for one."

"She's got Letai blood." Alps stated.

"Like Rios?" Nidaja asked.

"You are correct. One of the last of her family, her and Lyat both." Rios was calm and contemplative, looking at Bone quietly.

"You and Lyat are lovers because you initially hoped ..." Alps didn't finish the sentence, already knowing he was right.

"It didn't work, of course. My bloodline and theirs was already too far diverged. They were descended of one of the families that was supposed to pair with mine that the elders were developing, but they knew early on that their link to the essence was already far more dilute. Very little Letai blood remained. It's amazing to see anything made it through for Reika. But why can't I see it? That does not make sense..."

Alps felt another harsh cold chill run through him at a possible realization. There was a good reason that he could think of that he was able to see the essence around Bone and Rios was not. It was the same reason that Alps was starting to suspect he was able to escape the Shadowfall, and no one else had been. It was a truth he did not want to face that moment.

He did not get to share that realization with the others, however, because Lyat, out of breath, burst into the room loudly and hastily.

"Empress! We is having big troubles!" Rios looked back to him fearfully. It was obvious to Alps by her reaction that she did not expect him to do that for small emergencies, like being out of food stocks or something of that nature. She was instantly on edge, knowing this had to be a dire emergency.

"What's happened, what's going on?" the empress barked quickly.

"A huge detachment of Uruk are in the city, searching for something. They is going house to house, in a sweep. I am not thinking that rumor about the one who rose from Shadowfall escaped the dark one's ears. He is following rumor, he is being after Alps!" The words fell like a death sentence on Alps' ears, and he looked with despair at Nidaja. He had been right. He brought her doom. If she was found here, it would ruin the plans of the Asuna. Rios would be killed, and Nidaja and Alps were certainly to face their end.

"Hide us! We can't be found here!" Nidaja shouted to the empress. Reika skidded into the room.

"Trouble!" she cried. "Oh, you know already." She leaned on the door frame and crossed her arms casually.

"Yes, big trouble. Nidaja, we can't hide you or Alps. If the Uruk come into the palace, they can follow your essence. These things were made to track and hunt the Letai. Since you are both essence-users, there isn't a way to hide from them, and you can't flee the city because there's not a back way out. It's made to be defended, not

escaped. The Asuna don't retreat." Nidaja groaned. Alps felt ill. Just his luck. He was about to be killed over someone's infallible valor.

"We can't be found here, everything will be ruined! We wanted to prevent needless carnage, not cause it!" Alps cried, knowing that his life was not the only one on the block now. He knew the promises. He knew the laws. The entire city could be burned to the ground for this treachery. Every Asuna here could die, and he knew it very, very well. The look on Rios' face made it more obvious to Nidaja, who had not caught on yet.

"No... Oh Empress they will attack your city, there has to be some way out... There has to be a way to keep us from them." Nidaja said, her voice cracking. Alps rarely if ever heard the general genuinely afraid. She was now. He gritted his teeth, cursing now what he was more than ever.

"There is no way out. There's no other option now. We tried my friends, but this, sadly, may be the end of our plans." Rios said, obviously still frantically thinking, even with her spoken realization staring her in the face. There was not a way out.

"Think, Lady Rios. Surely there is being some other way out..." Lyat held the empress' shoulders reassuringly. Alps' eyes twitched back and forth rapidly. He was thinking deeply. Thinking rapidly. He was searching his mind for any answer, the way he had at the mountaintop the last time he faced the impossible number of Uruk that were about to sack Jalana. He felt that strange thrill of excitement, the burn in his body and mind of danger and the response to it, adrenalin pumped into his system, slowing down time as he thought... thought...

"It's alright, Lyat, we did try. We did our best. What we did, we did for the Asuna and for the future of all peoples who deserved to be free from him. That we fail does not change what the outcome would have been if we had not tried." Rios' words were sage and genuine. She was a powerful leader well accustomed to her responsibility. She knew what she risked, and why she did it. Alps growled under his voice, clenching his fists. He would *not* have cost her the city, or even a single life in it. There was a way. He thought desperately. The best answers were impossible, so he immediately thought the worst.

If Alps and Nidaja were dead, would they still attack? Killed while being interrogated? Surely that would stave off the attack, but they did not even tell Mannus that they were suspected of anything. No, it would still look like treachery, and he'd be watching Rios. She'd not be able to have a child without it being obvious what she'd done. But what could be worse for Alps and more convincing than their deaths? The only way that the city would be safe is if the rumored white wolf and general were not even found in the castle. So how could they hide so that someone who could see essence itself could not find them?

The idea hit Alps hard, like a shot through the heart. He even staggered from it, winded, but the idea was so terrible it made being killed by the Asuna to protect the city sound inviting in comparison.

"We will be ready to fight. We is taking many, many deathdolls with us!" Reika took Bone from the table. "We is fighting to the end with courage!" she shook the club over her head, it's feather head-dress bouncing.

"I am with you Reika. We will make this cost Mannus before the end. We will not be a city of sad, beaten dogs!" Nidaja said, drawing her sword.

"That is not working. They pin us down in the castle, then make us see city burn, and children die on the stones on the street, thrown from their houses." Lyat explained.

"Thank you for that, Captain Sunshine." Nidaja groaned.

"We won't be here when they get here..." Alps said, holding his hand out to Nidaja. "Give me your satchel." The general looked at him like he was crazy. Alps' mind was still burning, but the pieces had all come together. There was a reason for it all to go the way it was going, and he felt certain that he found the solution that was left for him to find, as horrible as the decision would be.

"What's the plan, Alps? You seem a bit confident given the circumstances." The general asked him with heavy skepticism as she handed him the black leather satchel where she kept food, maps, and the like. Alps looked in the satchel. It was still there. She actually kept it with her the entire time. He was not really surprised. He felt that the puzzle had to fall together in just this way, and the fact that she actually carried it with her only proved it more to Alps. It was not a happy moment of revelation for him. That his plan might work was the most horrifying thing he'd ever come to realize.

"Speak up, they will be at the palace in less than an hour, we are very much out of time." Rios said with obvious exasperation. "You can't hide anywhere here that the Uruk can't see you, and you can't sneak past them. If you know another way then fill me in, we have a lot at stake!"

"We will not hide in the palace. We will hide somewhere no one would expect us to go." Alps said softly. "And trust me... they won't be looking here..." The white wolf held up a dark, almost black crystal, and Nidaja's eyes widened. Rios backed up four steps or so.

"Alps, what are you ... Why would you even have that, those are terrible relics." Rios seemed to definitely know what it was. Alps flattened his ears and looked away a moment, at the crystal, staring into it deeply. Rios seemed to get the hint when he did. "No. You could not even consider..." Rios growled.

"How's that thing supposed to help us?" Nidaja asked with a grimace. "We don't have enough time to fetch a priestess to help, and there's no way for you to get in to yank one out." Alps lowered his head, ears back. The general had not figured out the implication as fast as Rios, but she was only getting half his idea at the moment. She was about to be a lot more upset.

"I don't have that ability, Alps. Only Mannus does, and it's very, very dark. It uses the energy from the void. The worst possible magic, that's not an option for me. Even if I could use it, I don't think I am capable of that." Rios held her hands out, as if trying to reason with the young slave.

"You won't need to do it, Empress." Alps said darkly, looking back at the general apologetically.

"Alps, it's a dead end, if it can't be done, it can't be done!" Nidaja said even louder.

"Rios..." the slave said with a soft tone, sad in his utter certainty on this answer, "... I have been there before, and escaped. I can see essence on Bone that you cannot. I have a link to it. I don't want to do this, believe me I don't, but I cannot let your city burn over me and ruin the plans that are all that give you and so many others hope. I will face this for the Asuna. Nidaja will too." He stated, to Rios' stunned silence as her mind raced over the very things that Alps had. He was not an expert, not even close to what the empress was, but he just knew now, given the options, and how fate had stacked the peril against him, that *this* was what he had to do. The puzzle pieces fell into place for Rios as well, as she seemed to go pale and quiet, clenching her fists.

Elis had been right. If he didn't want his friends to die, if he didn't want to see the fall of the Asuna, or hear the anguished cries of his friends, he would have to do something. If he thought he could do something, he had damn well better do it! He steeled his courage a bit, and moved to the center of the room.

"Reika. Lyat. Out." Rios said.

"Is begging pardon?" Reika said. "What is going on?"

"Reika, we is having to leave." Lyat stated coldly, his eyes wide and fearful. "You is not seeing this." Alps nodded to Lyat. It seemed the large male warrior at least understood. He knew well the research Alps had been looking into.

"No! No killing new friends, we fight together!" Reika shouted with fury Alps had not seen except before he had his arm broken. He smiled wryly. Reika would be a good friend for someone to have in a pinch, he thought. A little off the path, as it were, but a good friend, to say the least.

"They is not dying. They is hiding, but we cannot watch. Come." He pushed Reika out of the room, and cast a long glance back at Alps. He took a long moment to gaze at the wolf before speaking again in a solemn, very symbolic-sounding tone. "You is shaming the spots off of the Asuna in your bravery, wolf. Lyat is knowing why your friends risk all to find you." And with that, the large male Asuna closed the door. Alps looked back at Rios, and a fuming Nidaja.

"Okay, we have the place to ourselves. I kind of trust them, but okay. Fill me in on your plan." The general demanded.

"They were not sent out because we don't trust them." Rios said.

"They were sent out because they should not see what I have to do. It would weight too heavily on their spirits." Alps stated.

"I'm a fighter, Alps. Suicide is not an option." Nidaja said.

"There's worse things than dying." Alps replied.

"What?" the general questioned in return, then looked at the crystal Alps was holding. "Oh *FUCK* no. No, no *no*, you are out of your mind!" the general held her sword tight, but her hand was shaking. "Besides, Rios just said she's not capable!"

"But I am." The white slave said, looking sadly at Nidaja.

"You got out! That doesn't mean you can go right back in! It's probably doesn't work that way!" the green-furred lady fairly shouted.

"I have been researching for days, Nidaja. I read the same things Mannus read to figure it out. I know how he did it and I know why others can't. Everything about this is forbidden, but we have no choice. Stand close to me. Hold my hand..." Alps held his hand out to the general. She looked at him like he was holding a crossbow to her face.

"This is impossible. We are wasting time." Nidaja stated solidly.

"Rios," Alps said with grim determination, "...after we do this, give the crystal to Lyat. Have him take the crystal to Diera, and explain to Nita what happened. If I am right... about this... about everything I have gone through so far... the next person who will see me will be the queen, and we will have forfeited nothing." The empress nodded, gritting her teeth, and Nidaja reluctantly took Alps' hand, shaking.

"I don't believe this. No, Alps. You can't be serious..." the quaking general pleaded. "If this doesn't work..."

"Then the situation is no worse." The slave completed the sentence himself.

"Be careful, Alps, and good luck." Rios said.

"You have to leave too. It's not like I have had practice. I can't afford to drag you with me by accident. There are no guarantees." The young lupine smiled at the empress weakly.

"I would not want to watch it even if it were safe to see." Rios said with a squeak in her voice. Nidaja whimpered softly in quiet despair. The white lupine felt awful for what he was doing, but it was not like he was supposed to enjoy this kind of choice.

"Thank you Rios. Don't worry. We will realize your dream. If I am willing to do this for it... who can stop me?" the white wolf asked, grinning, acting far, far more confident and hopeful than he was feeling. He knew what he was about to try, but not if it would work, or if he would fail and scatter his and Nidaja's essence to the universe. Either way would spare the Asuna. Nita would understand the sacrifice of two for a kingdom. The slave cleared those thoughts from his mind, however. He had to succeed. There was no choice for failure. He would do this, and he would be with Nita again. Even Mannus would not stop him. He closed his eyes as the door closed, and Rios likely took Lyat and Reika far from that room, to avoid getting caught up in it.

"You are really going to try, aren't you...?" Nidaja asked quietly.

"Not a lot of choice." Alps said, focusing, chasing thoughts of failure, loss, despair, all of it from his mind. He had to fortify his spirit, he refused to cause a rift where other things could slip through. He already knew what the energy looked like. He could see it around Bone. He could call it up in his mind. Nidaja stood in front of him, looking at the crystal in his hands. The room began to feel colder. Alps knew the feeling. He felt it for an instant before it happened the first time. He swallowed. It had not been the first time. That had been the second. He'd not escaped just once, he'd somehow done it twice. Once as a child. He looked up into Nidaja's eyes. She murmured softly,

"I believe in you, Alps... We will be fine. We will face this together, and come back home in victory. You've come out of this place before. We are gonna be okay." The slave looked into her eyes, and her eyes widened. He could see his reflection in her eyes as light seemed to erupt around them, flooding the room. "Oh Alps... something's happening..." came Nidaja's soft, stunned words. Alps could not see what she could see, but he focused on what he needed most now.

Alps felt the heat of that energy tearing through him the same as he did when he escaped the crystal with Luna and Ceriss and the fox. He felt that rise of pressure. This was truly intense power. He could see how it could cause the Letai great fear. He focused harder, and pushed his mind to thoughts of Nidaja. Nita. Misty. Uri. Misha. He felt his heart flood with joy. Others had let the dark energy corrupt them perhaps, making them lose control, but the slave would not allow that to happen now. Not when he had to protect Nidaja. Not just the general, but everyone. Everyone needed him to

succeed. He gritted his teeth and focused. Peace. The end of his friends fears and wars and the suffering he saw in the Asuna. This would be a scary story to tell children some day and nothing more. He called out softly,

“We will make it, Nidaja. Don’t be afraid. Wherever we go, we go together!” and with that, all his joyful thoughts coalesced into a single motive. He’d help his friends no matter what. He would return their love to them in a way that even he could not fully comprehend. Without a word to describe it, he flooded his heart with that joy, and cried out, “*Shadowfall!!!*” and then all was silent.

All was so beautifully dark and quiet.

Rios looked out over the plains that lead to the walls of her great city. The Uruk had been gone for a day, traveling back to hold the northern borders from the encroachment of any curious folks who wanted to take a better look at the mines where her people were toiling. How many more generations would they toil? How long would the same story play itself out for every family in her dominion? Her hair was whipped in the cool wind, the rainy season bringing hectic weather, storms, and cold and hot days in a mere week of separation. The empress held her tummy with her cupping dark hands as her robes fluttered in the breeze. She could feel the life there. She was glad of it beyond words, and it filled her with hope that other fears could not bury. She leaned back against a squat, fluffy plains-tree. She heard a voice from behind her.

“We is ready to go with your leave, Lady Rios...” Lyat said softly. Reika was with him, dressed for travel once again, holding bone clutched with determination in her hand.

“You surpassed all expectations on your last mission. Even Alps felt he could only trust this to you. Are you sure you are willing to go there, all the way there, on your own?” Rios looked into her lover’s eyes. His brown, tattered cloak flapped in the wind a bit, worn from travel from many journeys before.

“I would shame us all if I was refusing the slave’s request.” The spotted male spoke with a sense of duty and honor. Reika nodded to her brother.

“We is getting crystal to the queen. She is maybe not thanking us, but we is getting it there, and bringing your message of peace, even if Nidaja is not delivering it.” Reika said as intelligently as she knew how. It was a lot larger task to her than kidnapping someone. And she knew the danger. Handing a Shadowfall crystal to Nita and saying, ‘Here’s your guy... let’s be friends.’ seemed as reckless as what Alps had done.

With an embrace to Reika and a loving kiss to Lyat, Rios sent the pair on their way, to travel far from their home city into what was still understood as enemy territory. They had gone before, though not to Diera. They would come back again, Rios felt sure. Perhaps they would bring the news she wanted just as much as the safe return of her lover and dear friend. Perhaps they would bring her news that Alps was free, and back in the arms of his own lover. The Empress rubbed her tummy again. Lucky arms those were indeed to get to welcome back someone like that. She hoped that the queen would see Rios' living treasure as the peace offering the Empress intended. She turned and looked at her city. The Asuna leader spoke softly as Lyat and Reika vanished over the windswept grassy plains.

"Alps, I don't know if you got into that place safely... I feel odd actually hoping that you are in that terrible, lonely place... But I hope that you see the ones you love again. Yours is a story I wish for the bards to have a happy end to..." She hung her head, and, fearful, but still hopeful, she wept, unable to think of any other thing to do as the winds pulled at her long, dark hair, and the day wore on into yet another sunset that Alps was not going to see.