

## Sirius, Book III

### The Essence

*Comments or Questions?*

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## Chapter 7

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Alps looked up at the blue sky, patterned with occasional clouds drifting aimlessly above him, not even all seeming to go the same direction. That was not uncommon for the oceanfront places like Jalana, where he had arrived late the previous night. The patchy fog-remnant clouds that were lifting were being pushed out to sea by the land breeze, as the higher cumuliform clouds above wandered inland along their usual course from the west. It was enchanting for him to watch, and he remembered, for a bit, that he cloud-watched a lot back when he was a slave. Those days were permanently behind him now. Even though he did not know that Chana herself had met her end at the hands of the mysterious fox, he knew that he'd never see his cruel former mistress again. It was a good feeling.

As he reflected, Nidaja arrived, taking a seat by him at a small round table on the patio of a somewhat expensive café where they had both enjoyed their breakfast. The general smiled at Alps, wearing her typical black leather armor, silver trim making her look as wealthy as she surely was. Alps had ceased to really think of the actual wealth of the royal house, however. It was just how their lives were, and it was natural for them to have a little luxury. They didn't go out of their way to act lavish unless it was to offer a show of dignity or strength to the public, which seemed important enough. Nidaja was also wearing a dark green cloak which pushed back the cold from the breeze sweeping out to the ocean. The slave, however, was a bit better dressed than he had been on most of his journey. He wore his more regal formal garb of a royal house member. Nidaja had insisted that he have it on now when meeting in public with those in the high council or the royal house.

The outfit itself was a black uniform. The slacks were long and neat and pressed, the top was a light, but thick fabric made from dyed, tightly loomed slink fur, so it was warm and fairly water proof. The collar of it rose to the top of Alps' neck in the back, but a 'v' formed at the front left his throat bare and gave him mobility while looking neat and official. A small gold disk clasp held the neck of the garment closed at the bottom of the collar, and then five or so neat frog buttons of gold wire held the front closed over his chest and tummy. The bottom of the "jacket" was a bit longer than a shirt, covering his hips, and making him look a little more casual at times than a suit coat would have. Well shined shoes

adorned his feet, the first time he'd ever worn anything that tight and confining on his feet.

He was not terribly comfortable in the clothing, but knew it was important to Nidaja, and the way she looked at him when she saw him in the outfit for the first time made it equally worth it. Alps found himself lacking the extreme self-consciousness he always had about his fur because somehow, it looked very good with the black outfit. He was clean, healthy, well groomed, and well loved. His being out here at a table at an expensive café with the general of the Amanian armies felt somehow normal to him now. The year that had passed since he left Chana had torn by so quickly that he had trouble remembering exactly when he had changed, but he was not the same person he was back then, of that the slave was sure.

"The others are returning to Diera today," the general said casually. "We are going to get the next ship, as I would like to have more provisions before we go, due to the higher risk involved traveling with a general. The others are safe as they are, but I need to be more guarded. I needed to ask you about something curious I found in my possession, though." The general said, reaching into a leather pouch on her side, and producing the odd, mirror polished green metal sphere. Alps gritted his teeth. He had not even thought about the item he'd taken from the temple maiden who, in Nidaja's body, he'd been intimate with. He looked at it on the table, and then remembered something the unusual fox had said.

"Ressaia. It's some kind of Letai weapon." The wolf stated. Nidaja widened her eyes and perked her tall, triangular ears.

"What? Did the temple maiden find out in her research of it? Why would you have even taken this, Alps?" the lady lupine asked seeming a bit exasperated.

"No... It wasn't her. The fox I released from the Shadowfall was the one who recognized it. Or thought she did. Anyway, something about her makes me inclined to believe what she said. I don't know why I wanted to take it. I'm sorry Nidaja. I should have asked first." The slave said, hanging his head. "I had forgotten about it with everything that happened. The fox seemed glad I took it though." He stated.

"That ... fox is a bit weird, Alps. I'm not sure why she'd have said anything about it, but if you want it, you can have it. I don't know what it's for, and it's not particularly useful to me as it is." The general said, crossing her leg and rolling the sphere across the table to Alps. The young slave picked it up. It felt so cold in his hand. He churred softly,

“Thank you Nidaja. I will guard it, I know it’s valuable just for being a relic, but I do feel drawn to it.” He remarked, before tucking it in his own hip pouch, the orb not overly large, only the size of a large plum. “I suppose then, if we don’t leave until tomorrow, we have some time to take in some of the sites here in Jalana?” the wolf asked. The general smiled brightly at him and nodded.

“I think that’s a delightful idea. I would enjoy getting to accompany you about town and getting to show you some of my favorite spots. Dinner will be a nice change of pace from the rations I’ve been munching on these past few days.”

“I tried my best to act like you during all of this.” Alps stated. “It was not easy. I have a newfound respect for your duties and even the personality you have to display to others.” Nidaja smiled at that, the wolf paying her a compliment. He continued, “I think maybe I picked up some traits that would not have been very welcome in my previous life as a slave.” He hung his head a little as he related that fact. Posing as Nidaja taught him will and free-thinking that Chana would have gutted him for a couple years before. Alps had found in that short time that he liked it, and before he switched back with Nidaja, he had started to become accustomed to it, and feared an action might slip that would feel more like a general than a slave.

“Alps, I am glad you learned some of that. Even if you made the decision a while back that you wished to remain a slave, Nita intends to marry you. Your life won’t change much with her, but you will need to change a little in public. The clothes you wear are only a part of that. It won’t always be easy, but I am given the impression by your former mistress, the memories I saw and how she was when I met her, you were not really used to having it easy.” The wolf nodded, smiling.

“I am glad that the habits I picked up running around as you won’t cause too much stress for everyone.” The slave chuckled. “But I was curious... if I am married to the queen, then I’m not going to be a slave anymore. What would I be? What will people call me?” he asked curiously.

“Alps...” Nidaja murmured casually, “When you marry into royalty, you are immediately knighted. That was a rule made long ago, since only knights originally could marry into royalty, but our lovers have not always been found exclusively in the royal house. Noble birth and noble marriage are the only ways to become a knight. You really don’t have much knowledge of the political structure, do you? I thought Misty was teaching you.” The white lupine male blushed a bit at that and rumbled,

“I admit that I have missed a lot of lessons with Misty in between running off for a war against Uruk, being Shadowfallen and saving priestesses, and chasing after you.” He remarked. “It’s a wonder that I even know what the

regional matriarchs do at this point.” He laughed. Nidaja blushed at that, in realization that she had been part of the deflection of his education. She chuckled at him and nodded, saying softly,

“Okay, you have me there, I suppose you have not had as structured a life as you might have otherwise wanted, but it’s been fun right? You’ve not been unhappy with your new life?” she asked, sipping her tea from a straw.

“Oh goodness no, I’ve been loving every day of it. I’ve heard people talk about standing in line to buy a book with stories about exactly the sort of life I lead. I certainly have no complaint.” He laughed.

“You like our crazy “adventures” then?” the general asked, resting her cheek on her hand, stirring the sugar in her tea a little more.

“Without a doubt.” Alps barked with finality, to make sure his lover knew that their faster-paced lifestyle wasn’t getting him down.

“Oh that’s good!” came a familiar but unexpected voice from nearby. Alps and Nidaja both jerked their heads up, looking for the voice. A familiar face appeared from behind a column. Neit, the thief who Alps had not seen since she slugged him in the rooftop garden in Diera, was standing there, dressed in simple grey and black robes. Her hair had been cropped short to her head, so she looked as if she belonged in a monastery, not a café.

“What are you doing here?” Nidaja grumbled acridly. Alps said nothing. He didn’t know how to feel about the girl after she had betrayed him. He was not naturally inclined to grudges and ill feelings, but that had been proof to him that his affection for others could be used as a weapon against Nita herself, and it was both sobering and hurtful to him. Nidaja, however, had softened a little in her view of the thief, as much as she had little respect for her because she had twice now helped her when it came to Alps. Once when he was sick, finding the lapine shaman, Xanthas, and again in telling her where Alps had gone when he ran off with the Spirits off Silverlight.

“I’m not going to lie, I traded the information about Alps’ whereabouts in order to get free passage over to Jalana, but I came here broke, and with a price still on my head, lady Nidaja. I haven’t vanished from the underbelly of society just yet, even if it is my ultimate goal. I have to eat until I can earn a more noble living after all.” She stated.

“So you’ve gone back to being a pickpocket and thieving?” Alps asked, getting the gist. “You realize that by telling Nita and Nidaja where I was you risked their lives. They could have died going after me.”

“They’d have found some other way to track you, and if you had died because the Silverlight folks had dragged you off into danger, it might have started civil unrest. I knew the chance I was taking. But I wasn’t doing it for free.” the tan-furred female said wryly.

“You still haven’t answered me, girl.” Nidaja growled. “It’s all well and good to know you aren’t dead, it will delight Uri, I can assure you. But that doesn’t tell me why you are standing around in a fine café where you could not afford to eat if you blew weeks worth of filched savings here.” She demanded. “Why are you disturbing our tea time?”

“I have an opportunity to help the royal house, and redeem myself a little more.” Neit said, her face becoming serious. “I have to admit, I would normally have never thought of this avenue, but I have information to sell, and it pertains to Queen Razelle and it pertains to her slave.” she stated flatly, her arms crossed, making her seem a bit darker, since she was not getting a terribly warm reception.

“We aren’t buying information from you. You’ve already proved a stunning capacity for lying, Neit.” Alps barked.

“How much?” Nidaja said after a brief pause.

“What? Nidaja, you can’t be serious, she’s crooked.” Alps pleaded, gesturing at her.

“Crooked she may be, but her words have been true to me twice now, when it really mattered. How much girl? I won’t dance around the subject.” Neit nodded curtly to Nidaja, seeming more businesslike now that the formalities of greeting had been devastated by her reputation. Alps felt a little withdrawn suddenly. He had just made himself out to be rather hateful, and that wasn’t his nature at all. Still, he felt sure he’d given the message that he wasn’t to be stepped on in the future.

“I want to be off the wanted sheet, and I want to be assured a job. I can’t start a new life and make a decent living without that.” She stated.

“Your head should currently be buried in a separate location from your body. I think you’re doing remarkably well for someone who has committed the crimes you have and been in my grasp twice now.” Nidaja said. “I will give you 200 bits for your information.

“No deal, you will just have to find out the hard way.” Neit said, turning away.

"Find what out the hard way?" Alps asked, standing, feeling a sense of dread. The attack on Nita that had him locked in a Shadowfall crystal had been a good example of what could happen if no one knew what was coming. To intentionally dismiss information seemed a terrible error. Alps didn't get a reply, he simply heard a squeak from Neit, who Nidaja had moved in a flash of spell-bound speed to grab by the back of her neck. "Shit." The slave barked, a little alarmed by the sudden shift from coaxing, to violence. This was a side of Nidaja the wolf didn't think he could ever duplicate.

"You could have gotten 200 bits. Now, we are gonna see how an execution robe looks on you." The general growled. Alps' stomach sank. The thought that Neit was about to actually die did not set well with him. Even if he didn't like her much for what she'd done, he still knew her intimately.

"Neit, just tell her what's going on, I don't want you getting killed over this." Alps said sternly. Nidaja seemed a little surprised that Alps defended her.

"Two hundred bits won't change my future. I'm gonna end up always skulking about in the trash, with the trash, making more trash, and being trash. I've had it!" Neit barked. "You don't know what it's like! You were born with a good life. You've been royalty from the beginning! You know how I started?" she asked. Nidaja kept a tight hold on the girl's neck. Alps originally thought it was just to keep her from running, but the general reached under Neit's arm, and withdrew a long, slender knife that had been hidden there. Had the girl gone for a weapon, it was obvious that Nidaja would have simply and instantly killed her with a magic-imbued jerk of an already muscular arm.

"I imagine you are about to tell us." A small crowd had started to gather along the street. The group was high enough up off the street on the patio that no one could hear the conversation, and there were not any other patrons seated near enough that they would risk getting closer and facing Nidaja themselves.

"I was an orphan. The little boys get sold as slaves, and the little girls stay in the orphanage until they are old enough to take care of themselves, and then they are ejected out onto the street." Neit explained. "I didn't get to have it easy like Alps did, where I just do housework and someone takes care of my needs. I had to find other ways to get food in my belly." Nidaja shook her head.

"Alps didn't have it easy." Nidaja growled, tossing the knife aside. "And you've got no right to bring him up; he doesn't have anything to do with what happened to you then."

"He didn't then, but he does now!" Neit barked again, seeming infuriated. Nidaja shook her to make her quiet down. Alps gritted his teeth, a little confused. What did anything about Neit have to do with him now?

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?” Nidaja cast Neit against the column by the gate to the café. “What’s your unyielding obsession with being involved with him, you hurt him! You betrayed him!” Nidaja barked.

“I know!” Neit cried, tears welling in her eyes. “And that’s when I knew what I had become was wrong, and at first, I was just scared and alone, and running.” She barked. “As soon as I hit him, I knew I had hit bottom, and I thought a lot. I stood on many a bridge, thinking about where I was going.” Alps rolled his eyes inwardly. They were drawing an audible crowd now. Many could hear the things she was saying. Nidaja fidgeted, not wanting the negative impacts of this public interaction.

“So find another way, but I don’t see what Alps has to do with any of it.” She barked.

“He was the same!” Neit shouted back, her face heated, red tingeing in her ears as tan fur bristled. “He was a slave. An orphan. A nobody, and on his own he’d have had to make the same decisions as me, but look!” she pointed flamboyantly at Alps. “What is he now? He’s not a slave, not dressed like that. He’s not a pet. I already know he publicly announced his love for the queen, and even many of the people are rallied behind the commoner who united the Spirits of Silverlight and the royal house. What is he?”

“In a few months, he’ll be a knight.” Nidaja said. There was intense murmuring among the crowd. There were only a few possibilities that it could mean, and it would be nationwide rumor-fodder by nightfall. Nidaja didn’t care. It had not been made secret anyway. Things had just been too chaotic of late to be very official about it.

“Oh.” Neit said. “That... is very much my point though.” She added. “It wasn’t about what he was born into. It was about choices. He was at the same starting line as I was, and he found a happy life while I lost my way. And I screwed up my life so bad thieving and lying that I only had one avenue left, and that was the gallows. And even after trying to change and redeem myself, and pretending to be someone new, it’s still all that I have ahead of me. So kill me if you won’t help me, but I’ll die before I help you again.” She looked sternly at Nidaja.

“Very well.” The general said, dark energy crackling along her arm. Neit’s eyes widened, then snapped shut as she gritted her teeth and prepared for the end.

“Don’t.” Alps said solidly.

“What?” Nidaja said.

"I said don't hurt her. Take her off the wanted list." He stated.

"Alps, I don't mind you acting a little stronger, but this is the course of law. You can't make the choice here. We can't have any criminal taking hostages to get their name off the list. Do you think you are anything else to her?" The general said. Alps gritted his teeth. He was a hostage? And Nita was too, since she had mentioned both. It was true though, if he thought about it that way. She had indicated something bad could happen if Nidaja didn't do what she wanted. Still, he couldn't watch Neit die. He especially thought this if she was finally telling the truth about wanting to change, and take a new direction. The slave really felt that she deserved a second chance.

"Hostages? You think I'm taking hostages?" Neit said with her eyes wide. Then she lowered her head, apparently suddenly feeling that it did very much look like she was. After a moment, she spoke up. "You are right. Of course you are right. I'm still making the same selfish choices. What would you have done, Alps?" Neit asked, looking to the white wolf. He gritted his teeth again. Her eyes seemed so sorrowful. He felt immediately that she was being genuine. She was confused, desperate, young and afraid, and just didn't know what to do. The slave's features melted a bit.

"I'd help my friends." He said softly.

"I have none." She stated flatly.

"You could have." He answered.

"I messed it up. I can't go back." The thief stated bitterly.

"We don't decide who your friends are, you do." The wolf rumbled. Nidaja watched the exchange quietly, as did about twenty other people in earshot.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Neit huffed.

"When is knowing you could help someone... and choosing not to... ever going to be the right choice, even if there was something you wanted? I would have helped my friends even if it meant I would lose my life. Would you do the same in the face of your own mortality?" the white lupine explained. Neit hung her head. She was ashamed.

"Will you tell us your secret, Neit?" Nidaja insisted. Alps flattened his ears, wishing it didn't have to be driven to threatening to get this out of her.

"Yes." Neit admitted finally.

“Even if I don’t take you off the wanted list?” Nidaja rumbled. “And even if, now, you have forfeited your 200 bits?” Neit nodded again.

“Nidaja, she needs to eat.” Alps stated.

“Come on girl.” The general said, tugging Neit along. “Regardless of what the secret is, I will not let you jeopardize what little chance you did have by the wrong people thinking you ratted them out.” The general whispered. “This will have to be somewhere more private.” Alps got up again and padded quickly after the Nidaja and Neit, whose arm was being wrenched a little by the older general. She protested a bit, but not enough to get shaken again.

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The three of them wound down alleys and streets, main roads and thoroughfares and even right through a couple shops, Neit staying quiet for the most part, before Nidaja burst right into a small cottage where a lean, old grey lupine was casually painting a lovely sunset image of the bay from memory. The grizzled old thing looked up at Nidaja with shocking disinterest, and Nidaja paid him little more mind than he did. Apparently, Nidaja came bursting in there with protesting girls a lot. The general cast Neit onto the couch and barked,

“Out with it.” her words stern and final.

“As I was saying before, I resumed my life of crime when I got here.” Neit began.

“Is this relevant?” Nidaja cut in.

“Very.” the thief replied.

“Continue.” the general insisted.

“I got into some places that most people don’t, and I see things that go on that even the town guard won’t acknowledge.” The girl continued. “I saw something I didn’t believe at first, so I ventured closer, in the shadows, to make sure. There’s a pair of Asuna, a male and female, in the city.”

“That’s... Not good.” Nidaja growled.

“What’s an Asuna?” the slave asked.

"You are better off not knowing." Nidaja and Neit both said in unison. Alps tilted his head, puzzled. How could it be so bad that he'd not even get to hear about them? Why would Neit and Nidaja know just fine and he didn't? The wolf really wished he could read the news board in the town center, or had more time for books, since no one taught him about the big things. Reading was still new and difficult for him, even with Misty's tutelage.

"And you are sure that's what they were?" Nidaja asked.

"Positive. Most of the thieves and lowlives in the city know better than to deal with them even if they get in this far." She stated.

"What were they here for? What are they after?" Nidaja asked.

"They want Alps." The thief said.

"Why?" Nidaja asked frankly. The old guy continued to paint.

"They said he's got an ability that they want. I don't even know what they were talking about. He's a slave. He's kind and I wish I hadn't hurt him, and he can change people's lives if they get too close... but aside from that, he's not anything that unusual." Neit explained. Alps blushed hotly at that thought. He had changed a lot of lives that he'd touched, and he knew likely a great many he had not directly touched.

"Did you hear them mention anything else? Even if it was something you didn't understand, we need to know what was said." Nidaja said, suddenly seeming very serious. Alps recoiled a little. For Nidaja to seem so severe over it, it must have been a real threat.

"They didn't speak common very well, but they mentioned that no one comes back, and that they needed Letai blood. It was pretty cryptic at times; I don't know what else I could repeat without speculation." The younger girl stated. Nidaja paced a bit.

"They think Alps is Letai then." The general stated. "They think this because he some how got out of the Shadowfall crystal. Maybe they have former leaders they want to free and want to use Alps to do so." Nidaja growled, pacing.

"But I'm not Letai, they were wiped out hundreds of years ago." The wolf answered.

"Alps, I would not be so sure. We don't know enough about you to be sure." Nidaja said.

"What? No, that's silly Nidaja, I'm just a slave. It's nothing so odd." Alps complained.

"Not at all odd that you have white fur, and Luna has white fur and that you have abilities to travel around in the Shadowfall crystals, breaking out priestesses?" Nidaja asked sharply.

"Wait, what?" Neit asked.

"You repeat none of this if you care to see the sun come up again." The general barked. While Alps' emergence from the crystal had not really been kept a strict secret, the fact that he brought anyone back was practically forbidden knowledge.

"There are Letai priestesses that have been released?" Neit repeated. Nidaja nodded.

"Alps was shadowfallen by a spy who had intended to assassinate Nita, I am surprised you hadn't heard about it." Nidaja explained.

"I heard about the assassination attempt, that was mostly why I was so desperate to skip town. The mood of the underside of Diera went real sour, people ratting everyone out and getting rid of their enemies by claiming they had something to do with it. You know it was going on." Neit said harshly.

"I know. I saw more heads fall in that two weeks than I have in years run together." Nidaja admitted. "No one died that wasn't a criminal, you know that." She stated.

"Still, I didn't want to chance that someone would say it about me, so when I heard Alps was running off to Luca, I made that deal with you and Uri and Misha to get safe passage in return for telling you where Alps was going. Alps nodded to that as Nidaja looked blankly. Neit didn't know Alps was in Nidaja's body at that time. He had been the one to trade for that information.

"Okay, still, Alps wasn't shadowfallen, he couldn't have been. No one comes back from that. It's beyond even death." The girl stated.

"I'm not a liar, Neit." Nidaja stated. "If I dare tell it to you, you can be sure it's the truth. He was in the Shadowfall as true as he's standing here now. And if the Asuna caught wind of that, it's likely they feel he can go in someone else's Shadowfall crystal and save one of their own.

"Who's saying I can't?" Alps asked. Nidaja looked at the slave with a pained expression.

"That's the problem. You might actually be able to go into a crystal if someone else cast the spell on you, but how do we know you can come back again? Maybe there was something wrong with that crystal? Maybe that fox broke it? She wasn't Letai. There might be something else entirely at work there. Your luck is a blessing to me, love, but I won't risk you to help ... those." She waved dismissively.

"So what do we do?" Neit asked. "They were offering 40,000 bits for someone to capture him. People know he's here now, and people would be willing to kill a general for that kind of money to get at him."

"This is where the solution is easier than the problem. If there isn't a person left living to offer them a reward for Alps, no one's gonna want to cross the queen to nick him." The general said. Alps gritted his teeth yet again. There had been an unfortunate amount of talk about killing this morning.

"So ... I can go then? I have told you all I know." The thief said sadly.

"Oh no, not a chance." Nidaja barked, snagging Neit's tail. She whimpered.

"We had a deal." The younger female whined plaintively.

"The deal has changed. I could not have dreamed it would have been a problem this serious. If they are offering a reward that high, then the Asuna tribal council itself has to be involved. The council controls the money, and no mere merchant or collector has that kind of gold to back them up." The general stated. "I am changing our deal to match the value of your information."

"Please..." Neit whimpered.

"Nidaja, be fair." Alps rumbled. The older guy had stopped painting, though he wasn't looking. There was no denying that this was interesting, even to the painter who Nidaja apparently didn't mind crashing in on.

"I am being fair, and it's fortunate for you. I will take you off the wanted list, as you requested, and I will give you work to do." The general growled. "But until I am finished with this investigation, Neit, you work for me." The girl wavered a bit in shock. Alps had full sympathy for her.

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The shutters were drawn closed and locked on the second floor of the inn. A message had been sent on a fast schooner to inform Nita of the development, and that her life-mate to be would be just a little delayed in getting back. Until the Asuna responsible for putting the price on Alps were dealt with, it was too risky to move him around without Nidaja having full control of the situation. She had even enlisted the help of the town guard, who was more than joyful to help protect the slave, since he'd been responsible for helping to bury the Uruk threatening the city under an avalanche. Again, the young lupine male was feeling the burden of unwanted popularity, and stayed more or less out of the way. Nidaja and Neit had a meeting without his assistance, leaving Alps to eat in the company of six guards, which was an uncomfortable experience, and the two had apparently come up with a plan to flush out the individuals paying the money for Alps. There was a lot of risk, however, since Neit would have only a closely following Nidaja to help her in the immediate area. Only a few of the higher members of the town guard had been told. The other risk was that Alps himself would be used as bait, to make it genuine that he had been captured by Neit.

Alps found himself sitting on the edge of a bed as Neit and Nidaja discussed back up options with the plan. Originally Neit had objected to playing any part in this little risky venture, but the offer of a thousand bits for a completed mission had given Neit some deeper interest in playing the part. Nidaja was still adorned in her customary dark leather armor, and Neit had changed to something light and casual. It was nothing more than a ragged-looking skirt and a tattered, stained white blouse. Alps recognized it as the shirt she'd been wearing the first night he met her. It occurred to him that she probably didn't have much in the lines of property now.

"So... you think you can beat two Asuna in a fight?" Neit asked, kicking her legs a bit as she sat by Nidaja on the desk in the large room Alps had been staying with them in.

"With them not suspecting I'm with you, most certainly. They are savage, but they aren't immortal." Nidaja laughed softly. Alps coughed a bit and cleared his throat. Neit and the general looked over at him. The white lupine rumbled softly,

"Okay, I think I should be allowed to know who the Asuna are." He was beginning to feel offended that they were leaving him out of this. It affected him obviously, he felt he had some right, slave or not. He was their friend, wasn't he? Nidaja slicked her ears back, nodding.

"I'm sorry Alpsie." she rumbled, the white wolf a little surprised to actually hear her apologize, and feeling a little guilty about being defensive. She moved over to the bed, sitting down in front of him, "It's not just who, Alps, it's what." She added, clasping her hands over her lap. "Not a lot of people talk about the Asuna since they have lived outside of our territory for a very long time, and seldom

venture into it, but when they do, I promise you, trouble follows. They are barbaric, cruel, and heartless. They are a ruthless people who, to save themselves, sold themselves to Mannus, and ended up getting pushed into slavery to farm the crystals needed to make the Uruk, as well as the clay and other things that were required. The Uruk army would never have grown to what it is now if it were not for the loathsome, cowardly Asuna." Nidaja explained.

"They are not welcome in our lands, for the most part, though thieves will deal with them, because they can still bring gold, so if you see Asuna, you know there's dirty dealing going on." Neit added. Alps looked between them curiously.

"What does an Asuna look like? Are they lupine like us? Would I know one if I saw one?" he asked. Nidaja nodded to him briskly.

"Oh yes... You would definitely know an Asuna if you saw one. They have kind of a lupine look, but they have very thick, white manes of hair, male or female, and they have spots all over them, and dark hands and feet, and dark faces. They have shorter, rounder ears than we do, like little bowls on their heads, it's very striking." Nidaja described, as Neit sat by Alps on the bed. The wolf wagged his tail softly. He was happy to see Nidaja not beating Neit up, though he was still not entirely comfortable around the thief. She had been the only one to intentionally hurt Alps since he'd come to belong to Nita.

"Barbaric and violent they may be," Neit said, "But they aren't stupid. They are clever, and they are not easy to track or fight with. We would prefer to not have to fight one on one. The idea is to draw the pair of them out, and have them arrested alive. If they will allow it." Neit said ominously.

"They aren't known for making good prisoners, but we have to find out exactly why they want to steal you. If they are still around to offer money, you are in danger." The general stated.

"How long ago have we been out of diplomatic contact with the Asuna?" Alps asked curiously, finding it odd that they would remain so terribly at odds as to be relegated to a criminal element only. Even to the extent that none lived in lupine settlements at all.

"We've never been friends, Alps. They seem to take our attempt to build nice cities and the like as an insult to their own tribal heritage. They have burned Jalana down three times, long, long ago. That was even before they were in league with Mannus." She stated. The slave gritted his teeth at that. It was obvious that the Asuna would be a sore subject around Nita too, if that were the case. He hoped this was not causing a lot more strife than just having to get him out of trouble. He didn't want a war over him.

"Then we need to make sure that these two don't come back with me, but what's to stop them from seeking me out again?" he asked.

"In the future, we will ensure that your protection is as paramount as the queen's. We won't have you without someone capable to guard you." Nidaja stated.

"I don't like that." Alps stated. "Is there no permanent resolution?" he asked.

"Sure, If they only want to borrow you, we can hand you over to them, and hope they don't skin you before they give you back." Neit said flatly.

"That bad, huh?" he asked.

"Yeah." Nidaja commented.

"Why do I keep getting into these messes?" Alps asked softly.

"This one's not my fault at least." Neit clarified.

"You should still be punished for what you did." Nidaja added, making the girl shrink back a bit.

"Don't tempt me." Alps stated.

"You have the right. I won't stop you." The general added.

"Don't you dare." The younger female said, balling up a little on the bed. Alps could not help but notice her tail was wagging, however. He looked at her for a moment, and then smirked. There might be a real level of therapy in accepting her punishment. Alps leaned over her on the bed and murmured,

"Do you feel that you deserve no punishment at all for your transgressions?" he asked, his voice half whispering. The tan female looked up at Alps and blushed hotly, her short-cut hair making her look more tomboyish than usual. The tone of his voice made her mind wander a bit off course, obviously.

"I'm ... not saying that. I don't deserve the fortune I have now, to be sure. I feel terrible for what I did." she stated, shivering a little.

"Then he should be the one to get to punish you, yes?" Nidaja insisted, sitting at the edge of the bed. The girl stiffened up.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, looking at Alps and making the white wolf blush again. Alps got up and looked quietly at the girl. He could hardly believe what thoughts were even going through his head. The mere act of considering what flashed through his mind was actually a crime. Would he commit it, even in reprisal, in front of Nidaja?

“I’m not allowed to strike her in return. It’s punishable by death for me.” Alps offered to Nidaja, even knowing that it would perhaps break the guilt that Neit was feeling and make things run a lot smoother. The smaller female shuddered visibly and held her knees. She nodded to Alps.

“I give you Royal License to evoke Modified Law.” The general said. She said it as if she were just offering the slave some wine.

“What do I do with that?” Alps asked.

“Anything short of murder.” The emerald lupine female said flatly. Neit gasped.

“Anything?” the slave asked heavily.

“Provided she lives.” Nidaja announced. The thief backed up on the bed a little, pressing against the railing at the head of the bed, shaking her head.

“This wasn’t part of the deal.” she stated. Alps got up on his knees on the bed, approaching Neit.

“I’ll not hurt you any more than you did me.” The wolf crooned.

“You two can’t be serious.” The smaller girl stated, gritting her teeth. Nidaja nodded to her, and looked to Alps.

“Would you like me to get a rod?” she asked. Neit squeaked and tightened up, trembling.

“No.” Alps said coldly. The thief visibly relaxed. “Give me your belt.” He added. Neit whimpered and put her butt against the wall, arms out along the railing at the head of the bed.

“No please...” she said in a meek voice. Alps leaned in as Nidaja handed him her thick, heavy leather belt. The slave folded it in his hands. He pulled on it a little, making it squeak from the pressure.

“Turn around.” Nidaja stated flatly. Alps nodded. Neit gritted her teeth, and shook her head.

“No way. He’s gonna hit me. He’s a male. Males aren’t allowed – “ she huffed. Alps cut her off.

“It’s alright Nidaja, I’m okay hitting this side.” His voice seeming so flat and cold it was alarming even to him. Alps’ heart raced. This was a very serious thing for him to do, but his own ill feelings about Neit had been troubling for him. He didn’t like feeling disgust the way he did, especially if she was genuinely trying to help. He truly felt that this was the best way to get rid of those dark feelings he so disliked. Being told that he’d strike her front got Neit to turn around, her hands clamping the bar, her head down.

“You don’t have to do this. I told you I was sorry about that.” She cried, her body shaking. Alps pondered just how bad a beating she expected she was about to get. He’d not actually injure her. He had no intention. Still, he didn’t intend to make it a loving caress either. Alps didn’t wait for Neit to come up with anything that would make him second-guess himself. The belt flicked across the light-skirted backside of the anxious thief with a resounding *CRACK!* And Neit barked out in pain. Alps gritted his teeth, not enjoying hurting her, but he could not get around the fact that it was justified, and it would leave her no longer “guilty” in his presence. This would make things run a lot more smoothly, and would help to blot out a very bad memory.

“More than one, Alps, if you are going to do it.” Nidaja said sternly. Alps brought the belt back over his shoulder, and the girl cried out,

“No no no no!” and braced. Nidaja held the end of the belt, preventing the next stroke, holding up a finger, until Neit relaxed, and then she let it go, nodding to the slave. Alps gritted his teeth. *CRACK!* The thief cried out again, pushing her chest to the wall. The slave let her have another one as she relaxed again, as indicated by Nidaja. His ears folded back. Another one, and another, and finally, the girl sank to the bed, sobbing, and Alps slipped the belt under her chest, and pulled the thief up to his own chest, holding himself behind her close, the girl shaking in his arms. He whispered into her ears softly as she cried,

“Now you owe me no further apology, and you bear no more guilt on my account.” He said in a soothing tone, Neit relaxing a bit as she found the punishment was over. Alps held her up against him with the belt over her chest still, under her smallish breasts, the lean, underfed thief girl not a difficult thing to hold. Alps had gotten stronger through good food, and continued hard work any time he could for Nita.

“Thank you.” squeaked Neit softly. Nidaja moved over beside Alps on the bed and churred softly, “I had figured that is where you were going with this.” She noted. “No hard feelings on either side now?” she asked.

“No hard feelings.” Alps stated.

“Liar.” Neit chirped softly, pushing her hips back a little, making Alps gasp as he found himself inexplicably aroused. There was something alarmingly intimate about punishing Neit like that. Doing something so strictly forbidden to someone Alps had long ago shared himself completely with was an act of passion and trust. Nidaja head-tilted a bit and murmured,

“Alps, I’d not have expected that from you, of all people.” Her words were teasing.

“It’s not on purpose. I don’t.” he recoiled a bit, sitting back. Neit turned around, tears still streaking down her face, but her expression was still happy.

“It’s alright Alps. It’s about physical contact. That’s natural.” she stated, obviously trying to keep doubt of his intentions from entering his mind.

“Yea, for animals.” He barked back shamefully, covering his lap a bit. Nidaja pulled Alps’ hands up by his head.

“We’re all animals, Alps.” The general stated slowly. “Most don’t learn that until they are on the battlefield. This isn’t the worst time to figure that out. Don’t worry about it.” The thief drew closer, eyes still wet from her tears, and embraced the white wolf softly, her tan body still lightly trembling from the beating she’d just gotten. It was nothing compared to what Nidaja had given her, but it meant so much more than anything the general could have done, so it was having a lasting effect. Alps murmured softly,

“I don’t think it’s sane to get any kind of...” he started softly.

“... Pleasure from inflicting pain? Not as strange as you’d think. Especially to those who have known as much as you have. You don’t enjoy the pain you gave to Neit...” the general stated.

“... you were aroused by the pain you took away from me.” The thief practically purred.

“That’s natural.” Nidaja said softly, and then whispered into Alps’ ear, “... for a Letai.” The slave blushed hotly again, his body tensing as Neit’s hands drifted up and down his chest, bare between the hanging vest on his shoulders.

“Cut it out, you know I’m not...” his words came, tail flitting nervously. He was very aware of Luna’s power, and to be called anything close was embarrassing. Neit leaned forward, chin over his shoulder as her fingers sought out his soft fur along his chest and tummy.

He found no disgust with her now. Had the punishment really reset their friendship like that? It had been his intent, but he didn't realize how much good it would do. The white male found himself only more aroused now, as those hands drifted along his front, the belt hanging limply in Alps' hand. Neit began to cry again, but it was a little different.

"Missed your only friend?" Nidaja said softly into the thief's ear. She nodded, and kissed at Alps' throat. The slave tensed up. Surely it hadn't repaired things that much! The male tensed up a bit, as Nidaja held his hands up by his head, pulling his back to her front, as Neit slid down his body, lips kiss-kissing at his tummy. Alps' eyes grew wide. It was happening too quickly for him to fight, and at the moment, he didn't want to. His thighs tightened up slowly as hands slipped down over the tented front of his trousers, and casually, slowly undid them. His pink, hot masculinity fell from the 'V' of his undone pants, and the cool air only greeted it for a second before replaced by a very warm, deep, passionate mouth.

"Oh dear light's call..." Alps whimpered, his hips tightening as he leaned his shoulders back to Nidaja's chest. She pulled Alps' hands behind his back, the slave suddenly finding himself prisoner to this moment. His already aching erection throbbed as a hand slipped around the base of that pulsing length. It was not Neit's, but Nidaja's, who stroked him in long, soothing, sensual strokes ahead of that slowly rising and falling muzzle. Alps looked down into the closed eyes of his renewed friend, and he began to pant softly. The wolf was unable to believe the turn this had taken, but he was not about to resist it. Crushed under the stones of this single moment, the hurt and hollowness he'd felt for months after Neit's betrayal was unable to reach him. His legs tightened and relaxed as he watched transfixed, his point of view filled by the rising and falling hand ahead of the smallish, but deep mouth of his sudden lover. Her eyes closed tighter as she swallowed loudly, getting the taste of pre, perhaps, finally.

"Good girl, Neit. That's a much better place for your head than on the gallows, yes?" Nidaja teased, making the girl smile around Alps' cock so broadly that he could feel her lips tighten around his shaft. Alps struggled a little, wanting to stroke that lovely, lean, poor face. Now that she'd mentioned it, there was a striking realization of just how difficult his life had been compared to what it was now, and here was the girl in front of him, getting a taste of that life, useful, unbound by a dark future now, enjoying real friends who weren't trying to pinch a coin off of her. Nidaja held his arms though, both his wrists held tightly in her single-handed grip. The wolf huffed as he watched that tan-furred muzzle sink down harder on him, and his hips flexed and relaxed a little harder. He wanted this now. There was no denying it. And likely, there would be no turning back from this point anyway. Not that he wanted to.

Alps heard Nidaja moan softly, and he looked back over his shoulder to see her face lit up with soft pleasure, and he pondered that a moment, before he

realized with how tightly she was held up against his back, his tail was between her thighs, and her sex, under the skirt of that leather armor, was pressed right to the ticking root of his strong, wagging tail. Alps made a point to continue to wag, though it didn't take much thought. He was enjoying this. The white-furred male watched Neit push back and forth over him, and felt his sack drawing tighter as he thought about her just swallowing around him as he climaxed, pulsing deep in that short, cute muzzle of hers. His toes curled at that thought. He began to pull in short, shallow breaths, his hips flexing again and again, which the close-hugging Nidaja could surely feel. She whispered lightly,

"Neit... You are pretty good with him. He'll not be able to hold back much longer at this rate." She promised, perhaps a word of warning to the girl in case she wanted more. The general continued to stroke Alps' twitching cock as Neit's head popped off the tip, looking up at the male wolf longingly, her breath baited with need as she looked back at Nidaja.

"I can't believe we are..." she seemed unable to break the spell by even putting a label on what she was doing.

"Don't stop." Alps panted pitifully. Neit looked up at Nidaja and the general nodded to her.

"You'd not want him stopping with you, would you?" she asked. The girl turned around, holding the railing of the bed ahead of her. Alps was still in a half-kneeling position on the bed in front of Nidaja, his hips back a little from trying to keep his tail where it was, wagging against her sex. It wasn't the first time he felt the wetness of a lover there. Neit looked over her shoulder flirtatiously at Alps as he gritted his teeth, not wanting to move away from Nidaja, but she was holding his hands where they were and he didn't want the pleasure to stop for his first lover.

"Oh you naughty little tease." The general growled playfully, and then there was a swish, a startling sound as the belt that Alps had used to beat Tia moments before flicked out, making the girl jump, thinking perhaps that she would be struck by it again. The girl did not get hit by it though, finding to Alps' surprise that Nidaja had neatly gotten it wrapped around the front of her strong thighs. The general pulled her back by her hips as if that wrapped belt were a harness, and Alps groaned a sinking tone of raw pleasure as soaking wet heat engulfed his throbbing, needing shaft. It was a single, hard, penetrating stroke that took the girl by surprise. Still nearly virginal in tightness, she lowered her head and chest against the railing and quivered as she felt so utterly filled.

The slave found his hands free, but simply reached back over his shoulder to hold the back of Nidaja's neck with one hand, and tucked the other under the general's skirt. While the thief could not seem to come up with the coins to get

underwear under that light cloth skirt, Nidaja had what might have been, at one time, rather nice lacey under-things. Were it not for how the male's claws tore them asunder, splitting them wide open as his fingers pushed deep into her, making her hips roll against his rump, almost flattening his determined hand against his own rump. It was awkward, but it felt so good as Nidaja held the thief girl against his hip with her leather belt-harness. The thief drew forward almost completely off of Alps, trembling with the pleasure of her penetration, and Nidaja jerked her back onto him. The white wolf squeaked loudly as his hips rode up high and hard, almost pushing the girl off her knees and onto her feet, hands gripping the railing.

From that point, things got very base and intense, and Alps got a very good taste of Nidaja's comment equating everyone to animals. There was something outright feral about how aggressive the general pulled Neit back into the male's hips, striking them together as Alps' fingers dug into the emerald lupine female's quivering depths. Because of how Alps intentionally fluttered his fingers against the general, it was Nidaja who popped first, buckling a little, holding the thief tight against Alps a moment. The slave bucked his hips hard for that moment of uncontrolled, untamed contact, making the tan-furred female squeal with delight as she bucked her hips against him, a bit more rough and eager than Alps had felt her. There was no need for her to pretend to be meek now. Especially not now.

Alps kept one hand behind him, pistoning two and then three fingers in and out of the general's sex, his other hand resting on Neit's lower back as the general finally started jerking her hard back and forth with the leather strap, tugging her intentionally over Alps' throbbing flesh. It felt so tight that he could swear her depths were actually clinging to him, suckling him toward his release. The white male whimpered softly,

"Nidaja, I'm not gonna last. I can't hold it..." his back started to tighten up. He could not believe the kind of pleasure this was giving, but he had regained someone he cared about, so the emotional addition to his physical pleasure made his mind reel. His hips lurched back and forth hard as the general let him pump a bit more, and then pulled Neit back hard enough that she cried out, and Alps found himself trapped so tightly between Nidaja's hips, and Neit's, that he could not move at all. He just throbbed painfully inside her soaking wet sex. It was too much for Neit, and she just squalled as her nectar flooded over the slave's fuzzy white pouch, spattering the bed lewdly.

"Gonna spill inside that little thief, lover?" came Nidaja's words, so critical of him. He felt at first she might be telling him no, as if he could force himself held completely still like that in the first place. He tensed as she whispered more into his ear, the convulsing sex of his vindicated friend suckling at his shaft, just missing the mark of being enough to send him over the edge. "We are being so shameful and yet, it feels so good, doesn't it? Her welted butt against your

tummy so tight, your cock buried so fucking deep inside her that you can feel the breech of her womb..." Alps gasped out loudly as Nidaja's words were not longer critical. They were provoking. He struggled, trying to roll his hips. He *did* want to climax, how could she tease like that? He flexed, and groaned softly. He could feel the mouth of her cervix, as deep as Nidaja was holding her against him. The slave huffed in deep, feral panting,

"Yes, love... I'm close... Another few tugs will do it..." his entire body shaking. He wasn't lying. If the girl could just buck a few more times, he was sure he'd blow so hard in her it would back-draft all over his tummy and lap. The wolf trembled as the girl in front of him apparently caught full force what Nidaja was saying, and it made her buckle, climaxing again as Alps' thick base made her convulse with another climax. Alps hissed through his teeth.

"Go on, love. Burst inside her. Let her feel it. It's been rough, hasn't it, Neit? Feeling so bad all the time, not knowing where your friends are. Not knowing what happened to them? And worst of all, thinking the only real friends you had were going to hate you forever, or even kill you when you saw them next, and now, all you can think is that you are going to be so full of the very thing that you thought you'd never know..." Alps gritted his teeth. This was something very different than mere sex that Nidaja was doing to Neit. And it showed. It completely overtook the girl, and she buckled and sobbed with pleasure of every imaginable kind. Her heart was stoked as powerfully as the flaring nova inside her body as she positively –gushed– into Alps' lap.

"FFFUCK!" Alps barked, uncharacteristically swearing, and then leaning down, still not able to move. "Please, Nidaja... I have to cum..." he whimpered.

"I'm not stopping you." Nidaja panted, grinning as she pulled him tighter to her front, wagging.

"I can't move!" he barked.

"You don't need to, sex isn't physical." The general stated, as if making this another important lesson for the wolf.

"NnnngaaaAAAAAH!" sobbed Neit, convulsing hard around Alps again.

"See? She doesn't need to move.

"Cum for meeeEEEE!" wailed the thief, her sex clutching so greedily and heavily on Alps' shaft that he felt if he didn't do what she said, he might not get it back! Alps groaned.

"I'm close!" he barked loudly, shameful that he was sure others in the inn could probably hear.

“Cum for her!” Nidaja barked.

“I... I..” Alps’ hips began to tighten and relax, even though he was held perfectly stable inside that tight wet heat. He could feel the barely gracing touch of Neit’s cervix.

“How does it feel Neit?” Nidaja growled savagely, lips drawn back in a snarl, though her tail continued to swish rapidly behind her. “How does it feel finding out that the only thing this master thief could never steal was hers to take all along?” Nidaja growled. “Does it feel good to know that as good as you feel now, *he’s* about to feel even better?” and the girl convulsed again. It was finally just enough for Alps, who roared out,

“Neeeeeeeeeeitt!!” and he jerked and spasmed hard as he burst inside her, his sack quivering, tightly bunched against his body as he emptied himself violently inside the bucking, squalling tan female as her body relented to the further abuse of another reeling climax. The male felt each jerk of her body, and knew it was from the sensation *she* was feeling of each powerful and copious jet of his thick seed over her sensitive cervix. Nidaja held the pair together tightly, not letting either move as the white lupine simply flooded her over the course of what felt like twenty minutes. Alps then slumped over the thief’s back, panting weakly as Nidaja let the belt go. Neit collapsed onto the bed, taking a few spattering droplets of pearly fluid from Alps’ still bouncing member along the small of her back.

“Very good you two. That’s what I call justice.” Nidaja barked, and then tugged Alps onto his back, making him yip softly, and sank down over him. Neit remained on her face in the pillows as Alps released a long, almost begging moan as the general suckled him clean, making his hips flex and squirm, oversensitivity making the wolf try to escape that heavenly mouth. Alps tried to reach over to Nidaja’s thighs again, and she sat down softly, stating casually, “I’ve ruined enough clothing for the moment, hon.” Her head over his softening shaft. “We have work to do today, and I’m the last one of us that needs to be cum-drunk and sexually exhausted. In case I need to fight later.

“Thank you, Nidaja.” Alps said, finally sitting up as the general relented on suckling his softening flesh. He looked shamefully at his soaked trousers, scented heavily of sex now. He should have wriggled out of them, but everything happened so quickly.

“You don’t need to thank me. It’s you who decided what was right. I simply knew that you would, given the chance.” Her soft tone made it apparent that she really had planned it. Maybe not to this level of success, but this would be a chance to heal, which Alps took hook line and sinker.

"You have ... so much of my gratitude; nothing I can do will come close to repaying you." Neit said to the general, unable to get off her face. She spoke, muffled, into the pillows. Nidaja rolled her carefully onto her back, and the tan-furred female panted out softly, "I will be loyal to you and your family for as long as you need me." She stated, blushing, her heaving chest straining against her shirt. The front of her skirt was as soaked as Alps' trousers. Nidaja smiled at the girl.

"You'll follow my command then?" she asked, wagging slowly. Neit nodded.

"Anything you wish, I shall try my best to succeed in for my friends. This is real treasure, not those baubles in the tower in Diera." She remarked.

"What if I asked you to steal for me?" Nidaja asked, perhaps playfully, it was hard to tell. Alps perked up inquisitively.

"Stealing is wrong." Neit whispered, frowning, likely trying to make it obvious those days were over.

"War is difficult. Sometimes dark things must be done to protect those you love." Nidaja stated. "You have a talent, Neit. Don't be unwilling to use it if it's genuinely needed. Be it by my order, you have no law to worry about. I may tell you to be sneaky, I may tell you to take something the royal family cannot. Life's not always fair, even for those with a better life than most. Would you do something everyone knew was wrong, if it was the only way to make things right?" the general asked genuinely. Alps widened his eyes at the asking of such a deep question after something that left him, at the very least, a bit addled.

Neit seemed to give that very real thought, even as she lay panting and emotionally and physically fulfilled. Her tail flopped lazily and wetly side to side. Alps thought hard about the connotation of what Nidaja asked. Sometimes, to prevent harm to many, sacrifices had to be made. Nidaja may have had to make many such sacrifices for her empire, sending friends and lovers into a battle she knew they could not come back from. Alps thought about that. He had done exactly what Nidaja was referring to. He'd gone against his own lover's wishes, and even against the very laws that bound him to do what he knew in his heart was the right thing. This was why he had the life he had now. Being willing to do what Nidaja was asking became clear to Alps as a positive mark, not a negative one. It wasn't disobedience, as he had always been ashamed to think. It was love. After reflecting as long as Alps, Neit finally answered...

"I'd do it... but there would be a very key condition to my ever committing the crimes of my youth again..." she murmured. Nidaja arched a brow.

"Oh?" she asked. The white slave peered at her curiously as well.

“I’d have to be punished.” Neit remarked, gazing at Alps. The slave blushed crimson and looked away, wagging his tail.