

Sirius, Book III

The Essence

Comments or Questions?

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Chapter 17

The scenery was again familiar, but Alps was somewhat surprised. He had only freed one individual from the Shadowfall other than Nidaja. He had only taken one session of essence-drawing with her, and as potent as it was, he did not think it would be enough, but there he stood, standing on what appeared to be thick, translucent glass with endlessly tall glass walls blocking them in either direction, just as he had when he stood in the crystal with Ceriss, Luna, and Ellis. It looked the same as it had when he had broken free the last time. It was bright enough that seeing the light of another who might be trapped in the crystal would not be possible. Still, Alps knew then that he could come back to the crystal and save others when he was not desperately needing to get Nidaja home, so he didn't need to stay longer than was absolutely necessary just to fetch them. The souls lost to this place had been here for centuries. The equivalent of a few more months, days, or years would not have made much difference. The black-furred wolf spoke softly,

"This is not possible. This is some kind of illusion of the Shadowfall. They are all ultimately illusions. Even if you are real, and have somehow found me, we aren't getting out. Not with our own essence." Alps turned around, still holding one of Nidaja's hands, while Nidaja held that of the other wolf, reluctantly. He had immediately ceased with the bleeding that he had been doing after she head-butted him violently to the ground. Injuries in this place healed almost immediately, it seemed, or perhaps that was the Letai male's own doing. Either way, he didn't seem to hate Nidaja for it. To him, she was still most likely a figment of his imagination.

"Impossible or not, this is my third trip into this place. You will be out soon." Alps stated calmly. The other male seemed perplexed. To the slave, he seemed even a little distressed, like he was fearful of leaving. Then again, everything in this place until then had been things he likely was able to predict because of what he knew. Alps and Nidaja were unpredictable and uncontrollable. This either represented the impossible, which was frightening, or it was evidence of an unstoppable descent into madness, which was equally distressing. The white wolf could not fault him for being a bit uncomfortable at that moment. The dark-furred lupine spoke again, his tone wavering,

"This can't be. The place uses your own essence to strengthen its hold on you. The more of your own essence you use here, the harder it works to fulfill your nightmares." His words were full of experience. He seemed to know more about the Shadowfall than others had told Alps. He knew as much as that book had told him, and

more. It stood to reason, for Alps, that this was more than enough reason for Mannus to have wanted to lock him away. This kind of understanding was dangerous.

“I know, I read that recently.” Alps replied to him, walking over toward one of the glass walls. He would break it. He would escape from this place just like last time, and he would be back in his lover’s arms, perhaps finally for good.

“If you know you can’t use your life essence to get out of here, what do you intend on doing?” the dark lupine asked, hooking a thumb in the belt of his robes, seeming a bit haughty as he questioned the slave. Alps shrugged a bit, and said,

“I won’t be using my own essence. I have to break the rules a little. Sorry about that.” The white-furred male was very much aware of the taboo of what he was doing, but there was no avoiding it.

“The Nether then? Won’t work. I tried it. Believe me, I would not still have been sitting around on a rock if there were still more things for me to try.” The other lupine said this with a sigh of resignation, as if Alps had gotten his hopes up for nothing. The slave arched his brow, however, because the admission that this fellow had tried to do that was a bit strange. It was taboo, so he had assumed it would not be attempted or even thought of. What did this person know of the Nether?

“Then you did it wrong.” Nidaja answered before her lover could say anything. “I have watched him shatter a crystal he was in and deliver three others with him. I am not afraid because I know he can do it. I will not listen to you talking down to him and trying to shake his confidence while we are trying to leave.” Their new companion shook his head a bit, looking frustrated, as if trying to explain something very complicated when there was more important work to be done.

“Using the nether to get out of this place would be like trying to break through the walls by using the opposite wall. The amount of force that it would take to do so is far beyond the abilities of an essence user. That kind of control of the nether is not possible.” Their guest was very dark in the way he said this. “The very nature of that source of power makes it violent and unpredictable. Even if you used that power to get in, you don’t use it to get out.” Nidaja narrowed her eyes, and the wolf grunted in pain. Alps only assumed that she was crushing his hand. The slave spoke up.

“Stop, Nidaja. He’s had a long time to formulate his beliefs about the place. He is not entirely wrong. I don’t use just the nether to get out.” Alps thought a moment, placing a hand on the thick, seemingly forever-deep wall of the crystal. It was starting to make more sense to him, that last moment before he freed himself. Bringing himself into the Shadowfall was about balance. He had to create a mirror of his own essence and Nidaja’s in order to let them slip into the crystal. While they were here, there were two images of them. He readily thought of this, not as a theory, but more like someone had once told him.

“Well, that cinches it then. Here we are, right at the exit, and the door’s locked, is that it – *Ow!*” The general gave the black-furred wolf another crushing squeeze.

“Shut up and let him think. He’s far cleverer than that. You just wait until I get you out where hurting you is going to *matter*, you twit.” Alps cast a glance to Nidaja, and she backed off. He released their hands. They would be fine as long as they remained close. Nidaja still held the other’s hand, however, as it was her avenue to cause him pain. Alps could not blame her, really. This one was socially unpracticed, it seemed.

“There is a way. I did it instinctively last time, but I think I am beginning to understand it now.” Alps spoke softly, his eyes closing. The two images, himself and the nether image, they were involved... What had been said? Someone had said... It was a lady’s voice, long ago. It was in his childhood. There were two kinds of essence at work in this place. Life essence, and the nether. The Letai knew control of life essence by giving it a charge. They drew upon energy that was charged, it had to be a definite emotional state, but nether energy had no charge. It was just there, and that’s what made it so violent and unpredictable. But Alps remembered, somehow, that he was told differently. It was true that Nether essence had no charge, but it didn’t mean it could not take one. Just as iron could hold a charge if lightning struck it, Nether could hold a charge if sufficient energy was applied to it. Alps opened his eyes. That was what happened when he left with Luna and Ceriss and Ellis. He had felt that joy at hearing Nita’s voice through the crystal, and he pushed that joy at the crystal wall, thinking that was what shattered it, but it didn’t. He pushed that intensely charged essence hard into the nether reflection of himself and perhaps the others, and the reaction was violent enough to break the Shadowfall. He understood now. He was not sure how, but it made complete sense, like a simple lesson of arithmetic.

“Alps, there is no hurry. If you need more essence, I will gladly allow you to draw upon mine again. The naysayer can enjoy watching that if he wants.” Nidaja gave a wry grin to him. The black wolf folded his ears back.

“That... sounds like a nice plan...” he let his eyes wander up and down Nidaja’s body before arching his eyebrows. She pulled him at her, to head-butt him again, but he managed to avoid it this time. “Temper, temper!” he laughed. “The Emerald Amanians used to have such a sense of humor.” Alps shook his head at that and spoke, finally.

“Are you both ready to get out of here?” he asked. Nidaja stood at attention.

“Yes!” she barked. “Hopefully, they will have lunch ready for us when we get back.” The general stood with her back to the wall of the crystal, and looked into Alps’ eyes. “I am ready.” She smiled brightly and took one of Alps’ hands. The other wolf stepped alongside Nidaja, and shook his head.

“I still don’t believe any of this is real, but it is by far the most interesting delusion I have ever had.” He shrugged his shoulders and took Alps’ other hand. “Ready

when you are.” Alps smiled to the other male wolf. It was about to be a very long-lived fantasy at that.

The white lupine could see their reflections in the glassy surface of the crystal wall, so he was able to see it as he began to let his spirits rise, his joy magnified by thoughts of being back home, and protecting his friends, of saving the Asuna the way he did, of bringing happiness to those around him. He thought of his friends, and how hard they fought for him, and how much love they had given to him. There was the thought he needed. They gave to him every bit as much as he wanted to give for them. There was no disparity. He was cherished, and he belonged. Nothing could stop that now, even his absence from them. He felt the heat of his joy ignite his essence, and he smiled, looking at Nidaja as he flooded the Nether image of essence that mirrored his own. The effect was immediate. Nidaja’s eyes went wide, but not as wide as her dark-furred neighbor’s. Last time in the crystal he was aware Luna and the others had seen something, but now, seeing his reflection in the wall of the crystal, he was finally aware of what it was they had glimpsed.

In his reflection, he saw himself bathed in white light, as if by sunshine coming from outside of the crystal, but without an actual source or sunbeam. His fur was just exceedingly bright, and from between his shoulders erupted two large, white wings which were broad and powerful-looking. He recognized them immediately somehow, as if again from a school lesson. They were a reflection of his own essence, a manifestation of power too intense for him to keep entirely within. They were perhaps intangible, as he felt no weight from them, but they were certainly visible. Tears rolled down Nidaja’s muzzle as she gazed at him in such a fashion that told the slave she was committing those ethereal wings to memory. She would absolutely not forget what he looked like in that moment. He smiled lovingly to her, and then sent his will into the crystal. It was not much different than how he sent his will to move in the darkness when he first got here, but his command was not to move. This time, his command was simple and very direct.

“Free us.”

The brightly glowing crystal sat on a small stone altar that Nita had brought into the little meeting hall separate from the throne room. The place was rather utilitarian, no furniture, save for that altar, and just carpet and blank walls. The wind whipped around her as she watched the crystal pulse with energy. He was coming back. It had been hardly any wait at all, and he was already coming back. She clasped her hands with hope and joy as she watched the pulsating light from the crystal. That light was her lover. Only the day before she had seen it shine, like a pinpoint the same as it had been before in the beginning. It had flooded her with hope and joy because she knew it to be a sign that the impossible he had done before was about to happen again. It was him, fighting his way out of the bonds of darkness that even other Letai could not break.

“Soon now! I can feel his energy, even outside the crystal!” called Luna. She stood at the queen’s side. Misty was also there, her bright blue robes blowing in the heavy wind, hands pushed down to keep herself modest. She was watching everything carefully, ready to write all this down later. It was still historic because this was the first time someone had gone in and left the crystal willingly. This was a very big deal to her in ways that Nita did not quite understand. The councilor seemed to think it opened up serious defensive possibilities. Nita doubted anyone would want to actually go into the crystals, even with the thought that they could get back out again. Her own violet robes fluttered and flitted in the wind, but two heavy leather belts laced down her thighs in decoration kept them from drawing up like Misty’s did. Luna’s own green and gold robes seemed to be heavy enough on their own not to be interfered with by the wind.

The crystal pulsed brighter, everyone standing back. Misty pushed her goggles on, intending to watch the explosion that she missed last time when she flinched. She did not have to wait long.

With a bright white flash, the three people in the room were now six. Misty cheered, joyful of having seen the eruption of the three from the crystal. Nita was a bit blinded by the light, so the figures were a little hard to make out, but one of them, for a second or two, seemed winged. The shapes shifted and changed a little, until she easily recognized Alps standing there, and Nidaja, and a stranger. She rubbed her eyes a bit, and smiled at her beloved.

“Welcome home love. And to the one who has rejoined us at long last, welcome to Castle Diera.” Alps smiled back at Nita, and then looked over to the other male wolf. He seemed in shock. Of course he would be. Everything he believed was just proven wrong. Alps resumed his look about, happy to see Misty, who was still bouncing excitedly about this historic moment. Then there was beautiful Luna, but something was not right.

She did not look happy. She looked shocked and horrified. Had she been hurt when the crystal burst? Nita seemed to notice too, given her lover’s look of concern at the priestess. Alps looked back at the other dark wolf, who now appeared to obviously be staring at Luna with the same look of unrestrained horror.

“Ummm...” Alps tried to break the awkward silence as Misty quieted down, realizing there was some kind of conflict. It was Luna who moved first, eyes narrowed in a look of utter rage Alps thought her to be incapable of, and then her severe, shouted words,

“*Linista'tir osfor tirhurelda eldanardae!*” she cried, and a stroke of lightning connected between her suddenly outstretched hand and what would have been the new wolf’s face. He managed to push a glowing green mist between him and her, but the force of the bolt sent him and the hastily erected small shield of light sailing back, slamming him against the wall. She put both her hands out, and he slid up the wall rather than down it, grunting and hacking a bit. Alps stood there in dumbfounded silence.

What the hell was going on? Why would Luna attack this person? Did she know him? Was it not just Nidaja, did all women want to hurt him? With the number of ladies he was about to meet, he would have been better off in the crystal if that were the case.

“Luna, what’s wrong? What are you doing?!” Misty cried out, moving over by the priestess.

“Someone, *kill* him, we won’t get another chance!” the priestess shouted. She kept her trembling hands up, and the black-furred wolf remained pinned solidly to the wall, three feet off the floor. He writhed in pain as he was obviously being choked, his hands pushed by his sides. Luna was using the essence to hold him down as if with rope.

“I can’t do that! We don’t even know who he is!” Nita barked.

“That’s Mannus you idiots! Alps, how could you not have remembered!?” Luna cried. Nidaja whipped out her long, gleaming sword in an instant, putting the tip of the blade in front of the wolf’s heart. Harming him was not a long stretch for the general, particularly since she brought him right into the castle and was partly responsible for his intrusion.

“Give the order, Nita. If Luna’s telling the truth, we have been presented with the only chance we have.” Nidaja said. Alps gritted his teeth. It was all happening too fast for him to process. Mannus was the one he saved? That made no sense at all, unless this had been some kind of trap. Would Mannus have known that Alps was going to go into the crystal like that? That seemed hardly feasible.

“Do it, Nidaja. I am who she says I am.” The male pinned to the wall spoke out in a strained voice, being pressed harder by Luna. Alps looked up. Answers. He needed more answers, killing him without a thought was not right, but could he afford to stop them only to release this person if he was Mannus? If he was Mannus, a single Letai priestess could not hold him like that, could she? That dark wolf needed almost no effort to attack him when they were in the Nether. Breaking free of Luna would be hard, but this person did not even struggle. Alps looked up at the wolf. He only seemed... intensely unhappy. The slave sharpened his mind as he looked at the self-professed Mannus. He had to focus, a mere second could be all that was waiting between that moment and Nita’s order for the kill.

So Alps focused. He looked at the essence in the room. It was almost impossible to see a thing with the incredible amount of fiery rage boiling from Luna, but Mannus had no rage. His was no different than that black shroud hanging over the shoulders of the Asuna. That made no sense either.

“Wait, don’t!” Alps called, looking back to the queen, and over to Mannus.

“Don’t stop her, Alps. She is right to do this to me. I have hurt her in ways you cannot even imagine.” Mannus stated, his words heavy with regret. Alps could tell in his

essence that the regret was not likely a ruse. He was suffering far more than Luna's attack would account for. "She needs this. The world needs this. I did not believe you could actually pull me out, but you reminded me of someone I met before the end... before it all fell apart... And I wanted to follow you." He was plaintively explaining, but as he was doing so, he seemed to be begging to die. "If my tormented mind had one last thing to show me, I had to know that last part of myself I fear I kept buried too long. My regrets, my fears, I thought you were a mere manifestation of them, but you brought me here. I won't fight, I ask only for the mercy of swiftness in your judgment. It was destiny that she should be the one I faced at the end, since her loss finally stopped my madness." His final words were given with tears in his eyes. Alps looked at the scene unfolding, dumbfounded. He had played his meeting Mannus in his mind a few times in his travels, when he felt more and more that it would be an eventuality. It was never like this. He was actually trying to protect the guy.

"What do I do, Nita?" Nidaja asked, her sword wavering. She obviously did not want to act against Alps' wishes either, even if she disliked the guy even before finding out who he was.

"I... I don't know..." Nita said in shock. Alps could not blame her. He was the person she had feared and hated and been hurt by for her entire life, but he was just pulled from a Shadowfall. Alps narrowed his eyes. If Mannus had been in the crystal like he said, for so long that he was given to fantasies, who put him there, and why? Did he put himself there? If so, who controlled the Uruk? That was a question that shot through Alps hard. Who had the Amani and the Asuna actually been fighting?

"Alps, I am sorry..." Luna cried, tears streaming down her lovely white-furred cheeks. "You are so loving and sweet, you have no heart for this. Forgive that I must do this, but you don't know what that *thing* is! You don't know what he's done, and I want to spare you from remembering!" She held up her hand. Nita's slave felt the pressure in the room rise suddenly, his ears popping. "This is a monster, Alps, it does not deserve your beautiful forgiveness and understanding. He certainly didn't give it to anyone else!"

"Alps, move!" Nita shouted. The white wolf male gritted his teeth, and stood between the priestess and their enemy. What was he doing? What right did he have to interfere? If this really was Mannus, he took Luna's child away from her. He took her world away from her. He pushed her into oblivion to suffer the nightmare of her failure as a healer to restore her people. Could Alps really stop her from claiming justice? He asked himself this repeatedly in his mind as she cried, holding her hand up. It broke his heart to see her so distressed; sobbing as she was, but this was a mistake he didn't want her to have to live with. She finally lifted her hand suddenly, pointing up above Alps, to Mannus' face. The black-furred lupine spoke softly,

"It's okay, Alps. It might not be nice, but at least I'm not suffering forever with the memories of what I did. Luna is right to do this. She was right all along." The heavy-hearted male hung his head, and stated, "I am everything she said I am." Luna cried out her words in a barely intelligible sob,

“Burlinarthukarnlinista ’tir!” The room darkened suddenly, as if most of the light was pushed out. Alps felt a rise in nether energy. Luna was using a forbidden essence technique. She was no longer waiting for Nidaja. She was going to do it herself. Alps’ mind snapped back to absolute clarity. This was wrong. That was all he knew at that very moment. He shoved his hand into his side-pouch and drew it back out quickly. Just as he did, another bolt of lightning, this time black as pitch, ripped from Luna’s outstretched hand, but it did not make it to Mannus.

Alps held the shimmering green staff of Ressaia above his head, having used it to block the attack. He looked with severity at the priestess.

“He was what *you* will never be, Luna.” Alps was very solid in his words, his voice actually echoing, some after effect perhaps of all the essence in the room magnifying it. “You are not a heartless killer!” He held the staff up in front of him, between himself and the horrified-looking priestess. That attack was probably not something that could just be swatted down.

“No! Alps what are you doing, He’ll kill you!” she cried. The staff-wielding wolf looked back to Mannus, putting the weapon to his gut, pushing a bit.

“Where have you been the past several centuries, Mannus? Hide nothing. If you think you owe this priestess your life, you better fucking believe you owe her answers.” Despite the fact that he was saving this creature’s life, Alps was only committing himself to this to understand why this felt all wrong. When he was done, he knew he might well need to step out of the way and let the execution take place. All he wanted now was to understand what happened.

“I have been where you found me. Most of the time right on that rock, alone, where a monster like me belongs. Don’t stop her from doing this. She will hate you for it.” Mannus was still speaking in a very regretting tone. “You don’t need to do anything for me, you allowed me to face judgment. This is more than the Avatar would have given me. You offer me a far better end, and I face it willingly.” Alps narrowed his eyes. Luna looked up, her hand lowering as she spoke.

“That Avatar? Who is that?” she asked. Alps inhaled deeply. He was glad that Luna was starting to see what he did. Something was wrong here. Mannus answered, still hanging against the wall helplessly.

“He will be left when I am gone, the final song for this world, and my own doing.” The black-furred lupine spoke softer as tears rolled down his own muzzle. Regret. Deep, sorrowful regret. “This is my real crime upon all people. My reason to deserve every day for eternity what the priestess would do if you did not hold her back. He is the one who will be the end, not me, but it is by my foolishness that he exists.” Alps felt a cold chill run up his spine. He knew. Somehow he knew that Mannus spoke the truth. Something else was there, pushing the Amani and the Asuna to the brink of

oblivion.

“So you wish to die to pay for the crime of bringing him here. From the Nether, I suspect?” the slave asked, pushing his gut harder. Regretting it was not punishment enough for dooming their world to something they might not be able to fight. He was finding it harder to disagree with Luna that he was deserving of the sentence she would give him.

“What have you done, Mannus? I see it in your eyes. Death is not justice to you... You betrayed yourself just now...” Luna growled.

“Shit...” Mannus whined, looking away suddenly. Alps looked back to the priestess. She had seen him waver enough to see all that?

“You don’t want to die to pay for it; you want to die to *escape*. You are afraid of what you left in this world, so you move on to the next.” she stated coldly. Alps could tell by Mannus’ reaction that Luna hit a nerve with that. He looked back to Mannus.

“What is it? What is the Avatar? How do we fight it? Tell us!” Alps barked, thumping the essence-bound wolf in the tummy with the slightly heavier head of his staff. Alps did not hold it just so he could prod Mannus. He was keenly aware that for whatever reason the wolf’s attacks, and even Luna’s, did not work on the bearer of the staff. Holding the staff kept either from lashing out at the other.

“You don’t fight it! It’s beyond anything you can even comprehend, boy!” the black-furred wolf barked. “It’s beyond even a Culier Shadow!” Alps recoiled a little, remembering from the books and what Lyat said about them. They were monsters that destroyed people just by getting close to them. Alps growled deeply.

“Did you summon this from the Nether?” he asked.

“No, it started as a shadow. I realized that I had been releasing them, and was trying to destroy them. I failed, and I made a terrible mistake.” Mannus explained. Luna let the wolf slide down the wall, so that he could stand, but his hands were obviously still bound at his sides.

“What happened? What did you do?” the priestess asked, wiping her tears of rage out of her eyes. “How have you doomed us, Whale?” she asked, using his first name. Alps looked curiously back to her. She obviously saw the same value in this line of questioning he did. The slave felt better about interfering now. He didn’t want Luna to hate him.

“Culier Shadows thrive on strong emotions the way Letai do, but they long for suffering and fury and anger. Instead of just drawing upon it for the energy, they draw upon it like food, making them larger and stronger. I should explain a bit more as to ... everything that led up to this. Otherwise, none of this will make any sense.” he noted.

Misty padded toward the door.

“If we will be here a while I will get some additional guard so we are not so on edge.” She spoke in a marveling tone as she exited. Alps looked after her a bit. He had not considered it, but despite the darkness of things that had transpired, this was a fairy tale to someone like the councilor. She was talking with someone who claimed to be Vhale Mannus himself, and a powerful High Priestess of legend who had just tried to kill him with power unlike anything that the well-read scholar had even heard of. This was a red-letter day to Misty. Alps looked back to Mannus as Nidaja approached him, and pulled his hands back, holding him in place. Nidaja had said almost nothing since returning, but she was the symbol of order for the castle. It was right for her to restrain the prisoner.

“I won’t run. There’s nowhere for me to go.” He spoke in a very depressed fashion. Alps frowned. He likely needed as much protection from himself as he did from anyone else. Misty ultimately returned with two chairs, and with some additional guard. They had just returned from their patrol to find out Alps’ crystal had started brightly glowing, so they were out of breath from running all the way from the city of Diera below the castle. Uri and Misha threw their arms around the slave and peppered him with little kisses.

“Popular guy.” Mannus stated. Nidaja gave a severe look to him, so that he knew to hold his tongue.

“Who’s the new guy?” Uri asked, pointing at him.

“Vhale Mannus.” Luna stated. “...And no, I am not joking.”

Alps wondered if Luna had meant to just watch the reaction of the two guards when that was stated. The two girls looked horrified at the restrained male, and then back to Luna.

“You are joking.” Uri said.

“And here I said I was not.” Luna stated.

“It’s true.” Alps said softly.

“This can’t be Mannus, no one’s killing him.” Misha stated matter-of-factly.

“We’ll get to that, it’s story-time now.” Misty said, placing one chair in front of Nita, who sat down demurely. The councilor placed the other chair in front of her. Mannus was pulled by Nidaja to the chair, and Uri and Misha bound him to it with leather restraints the guards typically carried, not always for prisoners.

“Any attempt to attack or get free will result in immediate decapitation.” Uri said,

hefting her hand-axe in indication.

“We will be fine.” Luna said, standing behind Nita. She gazed curiously at the very familiar but unexpected captive. The day had obviously gone far from what she expected, so Alps was sure even her mind was reeling from it. She had to be far more alarmed than he was at this development, as she had fought this person and lost everything, and now it seemed he was completely in her power. “Now that you are more comfy, you may talk. Tell us everything.”

Mannus cleared his throat, not in a symbolic gesture to draw attention, but because Luna had been choking him heavily when he was mashed against the wall with whatever essence ability she was using to hold him there. He looked around the room to see who would hear his story, perhaps the first time he was able to actually tell it. He looked back to Alps, however, and gazed at him for a very long time.

“Speak.” Nidaja said, kicking the chair.

“I am sorry, yes.” Mannus stated, shifting a bit, and sighing. “First, I will start by saying, regardless of my story, I still expect my judgment to be carried out as I deserve. What you will hear is not a plea for my life or for understanding. I merely agree with Alps... that for what you have endured, and what you still face, you deserve the answers he demands. You all deserve to know what I have done, and why it happened.”

“Damn right we do.” Luna growled. “Don’t drag it out, let’s hear it.” Alps nodded to the priestess. He agreed, the more they knew the better, but there was no need to drag out the story.

“Alright, I will try to be concise...” Mannus said, inhaling deeply, before speaking again, “When I was a student and apprentice in the Library of Gize, they found that I had a strong influence in all three schools of Essence manipulation. This was highly unusual for males, so they provided me with the education of a priestess.”

“We already know this part.” Luna said impatiently.

“I don’t.” Nita interjected.

“None of us do.” Misty stated, obviously not wanting to miss a single chance at new knowledge of what started the war.

“Really? No one thought to write that stuff down?” Luna asked.

“It’s been hundreds of years, Priestess. Much of that info was lost.” Alps stated. Luna looked back at Alps, her expression softening suddenly. She murmured to him,

“You don’t have to call me Priestess, you know. You don’t have to be so formal with me.” She seemed to warm quickly, but then shook her head. “... Anyway,

continue, Vhale..." The slave looked at Luna curiously. What was that about?

"... As I was saying..." Vhale resumed, "I was given a very good education into the use of the essence, but I was young and adventurous, as male youths are given to be, and I immediately took an interest in the only rules there were to break." Luna nodded in understanding. "While I excelled at crystal-creation and imbuing abilities to them, I felt limited by the amount of energy I was restricted to using. I thought that I could make the world better in every possible way if I could just make more powerful essence using devices. I wanted everyone to know who I was, and my name to mean success and discovery! I knew I could get in trouble for it, but I wanted to find out more about the Nether, and the essence therein. It seemed impossible that there was no way at all to use it safely, and the things we could do with that much power were seemingly without limits. I had to learn more, so I began, not drawing it, but pushing my own essence into it. I had to see how it reacted and what I could learn about it. At least if it was impossible to control, like everyone had said, I would know this for sure, and not just think that was something they said to keep anyone from becoming too powerful."

"Even before you, there were rumors to that effect." Luna stated. "You were certainly not alone in thinking there was a conspiracy of the elders to prevent others from gaining more power than them just because they had the rare ability to use the nether essence, but the appearance of tragedy in places where nether essence had been used was very well documented."

"Indeed, but those who bought into the rumors, like I did, thought that such events could just as easily be fabricated, or even caused by those who wished to retain their power over that region." Mannus interjected, brushing his errant tendril of hair from in front of his eyes again, which he seemed to do when he was thoughtful. "So I thought this was the case, and I pushed my essence into the darkness, and I found something there..." He shifted a bit, seeming uncomfortable. "I found a voice. And the voice was that of a man who said he was an ancestor who took the very power I was seeking, and in doing so left his will imprinted on the essence to deliver a warning, because he would be the only one who could deliver it." Mannus paused a moment, seeming to think of how to explain it. Misty cut in gently,

"What was the warning?" Alps looked at the councilor, who seemed more engrossed than he had ever seen her. He knew she probably felt guilty about it, but this was likely the best day in her memorable life.

"The Letai were going to bring about the end. Their greed for control and power was creating an imbalance in the essence of the world that invited what he called 'The Great Backlash' that would occur eventually over the whole world, and that might possibly kill every living thing in the world." Vhale leaned back and looked back over to Luna, letting her speak, as he seemed to know she would.

"You said that was your own theory, you never said you heard it from weird voices in the darkness, Vhale." The priestess seemed justifiably cross.

“Yeah, I kind of imagined I would not get much support for my cause if I said I was hearing voices.” Mannus admitted. Alps nodded. That was a wise assumption.

“What was supposed to cause The Great backlash?” Nita asked. “Why were the Letai supposed to be responsible? You seem bright, so I doubt you would have believed such a story without some kind of evidence.”

“The lady is very astute.” Mannus leaned forward again, nodding. “You are?” he asked.

“Queen Nita Razelle.” Nidaja answered for her.

“Royalty, oh I did crash a serious coming home party.” Mannus marveled. “This wolf keeps important company.”

“Continue your story.” Alps said, cutting him off. The black furred lupine resumed.

“Sorry, where was I? Oh yes, the proof. The voice of my ancestor offered up the very same evidence that forbade the use of nether essence. Monsters attacked where the imbalance was already strong, he said. Disasters happened too, large unexplained fires, rocks falling from the sky, floods and famine; these were all caused by the essence trying to balance itself.” Misty cut in again.

“But what was supposed to cause the imbalance? How were the Letai responsible?” she asked.

“The Letai draw their power by easing suffering and bringing happiness and contentment. Obviously they can use other emotions, but these are the socially acceptable ones that made people happy to have the Letai around.” Whale looked to Alps. “Some seem rather adept at being wanted around, as you already know. They made some towns nearly paradises, vacation lands for those who could afford their services in these beautiful temples and gardens. Strife happened, but it was harder and harder to come by, and usually quite localized. The voice told me that the essence was out of balance, and that a certain amount of suffering should be allowed. Anger, sorrow, strife, all these things should happen naturally, or the natural order of things would cause catastrophe. I was warned that it was already so bad that we might only have a couple of years before the planet was simply doomed no matter what.” It was Luna’s turn to cut in. Misty, Nidaja, Uri, Nita, and Misha all hung on every word. This was the most important conversation in the past several centuries, they were quite sure.

“He went to the Council of Elders and tried to sell them on this story, telling them that they had to cease all essence-gathering and allow the natural order to return.” She stated, knowing very well this part of the story. “The idea that the Letai were causing anyone harm, when their very intent was to cause peace and happiness to all around them

was utterly foolish. The idea was laughable, and not only was Vhale denied his request that the positive activities of the Letai stop, but he was revoked of access to the library, and asked to cease his investigations into the nether immediately. To use it was punishable by exile, and violation of exile punishable by death. Being alone is the worst punishment upon a Letai, so exile was usually seen as worse than a death sentence. He was given only one warning.” Luna said with finality.

“As you can guess,” resumed Vhale, “I didn’t think much of the warning, and in fact, thought it was the best proof of a conspiracy by the Council of Elders who were in fear of losing their station and their control of Amani. I continued to talk with the voice and contact the Nether and the warnings grew darker. Finally, I decided that I had to act against the Letai, but I did not have enough time to make them stop by trying to sway opinion to my side or affect slow change. I had to do something drastic to save the world.” Alps listened to this explanation in near shock. Mannus was not a dark enemy of the people, he was trying to save them. That was the farthest thing from what the slave had expected. Luna did not seem to be trying to correct them either, so it was apparent that the Letai knew what Mannus was saying, and even if they did not believe him, he was still telling the truth about what *he* felt was going on. There was a chance the world was in danger, and he was trying to stop that disaster from occurring. The wolf began to relax his feeling that Mannus still deserved to die.

“What did you do? What happened next?” Misty asked, her eyes round and looking oddly very youthful as she adjusted her spectacles. The youthful affect was mostly due to the fact that she had seated herself on the floor like a child listening to a fireside story.

“Yes, this is the less heroic part of it all.” Luna stated with an acidic tone. Mannus nodded to her.

“Indeed. This is where my fall began.” His words verified Luna, rather than challenging her. Alps felt a very cold chill run through him, as if it had only just dawned on him that this really was Mannus, sitting right there before him. This was the one that he had sworn he would do everything in his power to keep away from those he loved, and now, here they all were, just listening to him talk, not even seeming fearful. The double doors of the meeting room swung open, and everyone looked up.

Ellis the fox, still adorned in the black and silver robes that the slave always saw her in, padded in quietly. Everyone watched her as the room went dead quiet. She made a beeline over to where Mannus was sitting. Alps looked back to Vhale and saw an expression of stunned silence on his face. Of course he would recognize her, Alps thought. Just like Luna, he had sent the vixen into the Shadowfall, and a fox would probably be harder for him to forget. He didn’t move at all as she walked over to him. She stood between the queen and Mannus, perhaps a little impolitely, and she leaned forward, her black vulpine nose nearly against Mannus’ own.

The quiet was chilling, and the slave found himself wondering if the chill he felt

before was a result of her, and not of his just being fully aware this was Mannus. It felt just as cold as she looked hard into the frozen black wolf's crimson eyes. She then leaned back rather abruptly and pulled open the front of Mannus' robes, quite similar to her own, baring his chest. There was a glittering silver chain around his neck, thin and elegant. At the end of the chain was a small silver key with a crystal inlay. Whale didn't even seem willing to breathe as he looked into the fox's eyes, never looking away. She did not look away either, she just curled her fingers around the little key, and yanked, breaking the chain. No one said a word, seeming stupefied by her blunt and unusual actions. She then just turned and walked out with a calm sense of casual duty, taking the key with her. All noses followed her direction as she left, and slammed the double doors behind her, seemingly without even touching them.

"Umm..." murmured Nita.

"What the hell?" Uri asked.

"I'm not dead." Mannus said softly with a blank expression. "Unbelievable."

"What... did she take from you? What was that key?" Luna asked. The black-furred male seemed to snap out of it.

"The key... The key! Oh that was hers. When I fought her, I pulled it off of her. I had forgotten who I even got that thing from..." He marveled at this a moment, but everyone else just seemed utterly perplexed. Alps, however, was just glad that everyone saw her. He was sure everyone saw her when she first arrived, but he had begun at times to wonder if she was just in his head.

"You fought her?" Misty asked.

"I fought Luna too." Mannus stated calmly. "But yet, here she is. It would seem Alps here has been a busy fellow." He indicated the wolf in question. Alps looked away a little, always hating to be the focus of conversation. Luna nodded to Whale.

"He's an admirable creature, yes, but now that our vulpine lady friend has retrieved her belongings let's get back to your less than admirable deeds, shall we?" Her words were stern and calm. She wanted to keep everyone focused.

"I apologize." Whale responded, and continued. "I decided that the only way that I could succeed was to use the Nether essence myself. The voice told me how to create an unusual crystal that could receive my will, and move material around it when made properly... I could make clay figures dance and move about, and ultimately, I made them carry weapons and defend me. I called these golems Uruk. When the Council of Elders finally caught wind of what I was doing, I held a large town under my control with about fifty of these Uruk soldiers, and the population of this city was helping me build more of these golems every day under penalty of death. My intention was to capture several towns and force the Letai out, leaving the population to suffer as normal. This would at

least slow the progression of the imbalance. I would not kill more than was necessary to keep order, and I would just let the natural state of things take its course. The voice told me that one town was not enough, so I took two. Then two towns were not enough, so I took three. I took a larger city finally in my attempt to buy more time to convince the Letai that they were a threat to the world's very existence."

Alps listened in horror at this tale. The peaceful cities were being captured and forced into slavery to balance the essence. This was a very big change from someone who just wanted to help. It was an attack on a large scale. He could not imagine the number of people who likely died just to keep Mannus from taking a city, but if Vhale had intended suffering, he certainly found it if he had to destroy so many lives to achieve this end. The slave spoke up softly.

"You say that you did this for the good of the people, but you would have had to destroy so many lives just to overthrow a single town, did you believe this dark voice so much back then that you felt this was really necessary?" Vhale looked back at the wolf and shook his head.

"Part of me always wanted to think he was wrong about what would happen, but the actions of the elders seemed so suspicious to me. They were not even willing to help me research. They wrote off what I said not as just a possible mistake, but as a criminal act. I felt they did not take it seriously, and the matter was serious. I know now, of course, that I was wrong to listen to the voice, and that my deeds were a mistake, but do not pity me too much, Alps. I am still at fault for what happened. It was still my doing." The white male nodded quietly, but still felt sorry quite a bit for Vhale. If he did believe back then that he was saving everyone, the lives he took, the choices he made back then, could not have been easy.

"Please continue." Nita said, leaning forward, paying very close attention. The prisoner did as requested.

"I thought for sure after taking a city I had enough suffering to allow me some time to work, but the voice told me that the Letai were only stepping up their efforts elsewhere to counteract me, trying to prevent those in other cities from defying their will and panicking and demanding that I be taken seriously by only making lives more pleasant where they were, giving a false sense of security, and a false sense of how powerful they were in their ability to stop me. They were proud and foolish, and that would only cause the world to suffer its end faster." Mannus wrung his hands expressing the added stress he was given. Nidaja took a turn to ask a question.

"If taking over cities was not enough to stop it from happening, then the problem would seem to be the Letai themselves. So is that when you began exterminating them instead?" Alps gritted his teeth at how brash the question Nidaja asked was but the general was plainly aware of the history involved at least to that point. The Letai were wiped out directly. Mannus seemed to falter a bit, lowering his head. He spoke again.

“I asked the voice what it was I should do. How could I slow the end, how could I make them see? The voice in the dark told me that I had to make the Letai fewer in numbers, and make those that remained suffer terribly. The suffering of those with their level of power would have a dramatic effect to stop the end from coming. To make the Letai suffer is not a simple task though. They are given to ease of comfort and find joy in one another beyond any suffering I could exact with mere stress or injuries. My only option would be to destroy them. This did not give me much joy, but it did comfort me in that I suddenly felt that I no longer had to try to take every city and kill innocent people who were only defending their homes. The problem was, the Letai were very powerful. In all the fighting my soldiers and I had done, only a few had actually fallen. It was unlikely I could fight them all at once, so I had to deal with them one or two at a time, so I held back my advance, I even abandoned a couple towns, and moved east into Asuna territory. The Asuna at the time were very tribal, and had no cohesion. A few Letai were among them only to bring peace and healing to the towns and villages that wanted it, but I overtook those towns.” Mannus stopped a moment. Luna took the time to speak again.

“Because you were retreating, the Letai believed that you felt your mission done. I recall those days of relative peace in my youth. But it was not to last. You were learning something new about your abilities while you enslaved the Asuna.” The lupine priestess prodded the fallen Letai to keep the story going.

“I discovered a property of the Nether essence... I found out that the Nether was a place, and it was different from where we live, but that it could be opened up when one used a lot of Nether energy. Unfortunately, when one did that, it released monsters into our world, some of which even I could not destroy. It was during this time that I accidentally released the first of the Culier Shadows. I wanted to dispose of them, because I felt that regardless of how well I did saving the world from destruction, those creatures could undo whatever remained. I knew that the creatures seemed to be made entirely of things like fear, despair, loathing... and this intrigued me. During the time that I was trying to figure out how to kill a Culier Shadow, I found that these creatures created a pattern in the essence when they came through. I imbued a crystal with a similar pattern to see if I could mimic the energy and force that energy onto someone else, and mirror their essence with nether essence. I would, in a sense, be controlling what they felt. In this way, I could make a Letai suffer as long as I wanted.”

“The first Shadowfall crystals.” Uri interrupted. Luna shushed her. She shushed.

“Right. I didn’t know what I was really doing, but when I used the crystal on one of my Asuna slaves, he was just... gone.” Mannus continued. “At first I thought I had created a terrible weapon that just vaporized anyone I used it on, and I was fearful of such a thing, but I began to feel energy emanating from the crystal. I had not charged it with more energy, so I was uncertain of where the energy was coming from. I tried using one again, this time measuring and carefully examining the life essence of the hyena I used it on.”

“That’s utterly awful, those poor people.” Nidaja murmured sadly.

“Yes, my apologies.” Vhale said, making Nidaja wrinkle her nose. What was done was done, so Alps understood, but Nidaja was not wavering on her irritation.

“Continue.” Luna and Alps stated simultaneously. Mannus resumed.

“I measured his essence, and found out that the essence emanating from the crystal was still his. I pushed my essence into the nether and found that the hyena was still in there, but from what I could tell, he was running from his fears in that place, which seemed to have been created by his mind. I wanted to get the hyenas out of the crystal so I could find out exactly what was in there, but try as I might, I could find no conceivable way to reverse the process that sent them there. I studied and learned a great deal about what it did, and knew with certainty that it was as permanent as anything could be, but breaking the crystal from outside would not release the person, and breaking it from inside was impossible. That was by far the worst turning point for me. I realized then that someone confined to that crystal would suffer forever. Even the Letai.” Luna sighed and shook her head as he said this, knowing what that turning point meant for her people.

“So you began using the Shadowfall, even knowing that the effect would be permanent on the Letai. They would suffer forever, without end?” Alps asked incredulously. He was not so shocked that Mannus did it as he was that the wolf could even make a choice like that. Vhale nodded at the white wolf.

“It is one of the things that I regret the most. One of them. There was one event that finally ended it, but I will get there soon. Luna could tell you pretty much everything that occurred after this point. I began advancing, taking towns again, not to make the people suffer, but to provoke the Letai. I already had more than four thousand Uruk soldiers and the Asuna made more all the time, so my supply was unlimited, more or less. The Asuna would farm the materials needed and construct the Uruk from molds, and I would spend a few hours imbuing the crystals that I had created. But the first few towns I took did not provoke a response. I had to make the Letai stand in force before I used my new weapon. I had to get as many as I could as quickly as I could.”

“You killed everybody.” Luna stated.

“Not everybody. I let mothers and their children leave.” Mannus responded.

“They would have rather died.” the priestess barked angrily. “You killed everyone but them and burned their towns to the ground. You sent them just to convey the message of what you were doing to make the Letai move against you. To finally stop you.” Mannus nodded at this, and he sadly explained,

“Yes. I did this. I wanted the war to end quickly. That is what it was at this point. I was convinced this was what I had to do to save the world. I say it again, Luna,

everyone... I do not make excuses nor beg forgiveness. In fact, what I have done is so far beyond forgiveness I could not even dream of it. So don't think I am making light of what I have done by telling you this now. I asked to be killed for a reason, and it was not merely to run away. I do deserve the sentence I know I will get, but I am appreciative of the chance to at least give answers as to why. My mistakes can never be repeated, if there is any hope for the world at all."

"So the Letai amassed. I was there that day." Luna said sadly, "The Council of Elders brought twelve hundred of us, believing that we would be against the entire Uruk army, and that these numbers would be sufficient to destroy your army, and we could then hunt you down to the ends of the world if we needed to, liberating the Asuna, and ending your reign of terror once and for all. We went into battle with heavy hearts. The Letai were not made for war. We had only ever fought to protect before. We saw as we advanced that quite a few of the Uruk had staves with crystals affixed to the ends of them. We did not think much of it, feeling that these were likely to use essence attacks upon us, but many of us could defend against such things, so the attack continued." Luna gritted her teeth in memory of this terrible event.

"Then, when I saw that there were almost all of the Letai on the battlefield, I gave the command for the Shadowfall Uruk to use their staves." Mannus stated, clarifying the timing of his plan. Luna spoke again.

"I was being held back near the Elders. As one of their most powerful healers, my main duty would come after the battle, hopefully in only limited capacity. So I watched from a lot farther back, and it was for that reason that I was spared the horror, if only for a time, that the others immediately found. As we viewed the battle from the ridge, we started seeing our friends just... vanish. One at a time, and then in clusters, and soon, there was just a crushing number of Uruk fighting against very few Letai. Those few that didn't simply vanish were overwhelmed and killed. It was a slaughter. The Elders and I retreated. There were but a few active Letai, less than two hundred, left after that terrible, terrible day. We tried to hold on in a few locations, and then many went into hiding, some among the Asuna. We even tried mixing blood with the Asuna, which was against the rules because of their violent tendencies, but anything to keep our bloodline alive and give the world a chance against the Uruk and against Mannus. Mannus was clever and managed to find all the Letai where they hid. He had the resources and the time. Everything was against us, and we failed. I shamefully went into hiding because my skills were not well suited to hiding, but soon, with a child of my own, I could no longer afford to watch the world slip away. I learned the worst offensive essence techniques anyone knew, my intent to attack Mannus directly. I would lure him out to take me down." Luna growled.

"She lured me out by obliterating easily a thousand Uruk over a few weeks time, liberating a few towns and bringing a lot of pressure on my eastern border. She was very valiant and effective, and her ability to command people and make choices was second to none." Mannus complimented. It did not seem to appease the again smoldering Luna.

“I stood and fought, and right before my eyes my own child was taken from me by this monster. I was so distraught I tried to wipe him out with a single attack, but he had his crystal ready, and off I went... into a scorched land where try as I might, nothing would grow. I would try to heal the ruined land, and it would go back to being ash and broken stone. I believed, for so long, that I merely woke up in a world that had lost all life, and even when it finally dawned on me what had actually happened, that I was in the Shadowfall, I knew that without the Letai, the world would fall to ruin, just as I was seeing. It was no different from reality to me. I stayed in there for 700 years, Vhale, and then the most unexpected person of all came to rescue me. And now, he’s rescued you for some strange and ironic reason. So, tell us Vhale... how came you to be Shadowfallen yourself? What stopped you, and why didn’t your terrible war stop with you? Do the Uruk fight on without you? Did they not need you to control them after all?” Mannus’ head was down, and tears again marked his dark muzzle. He struggled to get control of himself, before speaking again.

“You were the last Shadowfall cast in that terrible war, Luna.” Mannus looked into her eyes sorrowfully. “And yet, it was not because you were the last of the Letai, it was because of my taking your child. After that day, I was preoccupied with that act. It was by far the most terrible thing I had ever intentionally done. I know the Uruk had occasionally killed children, I could command them, but I did not guide their every move, and this saddened me greatly, but never had I looked into the eyes of a child and destroyed him.”

“You didn’t destroy him, you cast Shadowfall upon him. You condemned a child of seven seasons to eternal suffering.” Luna’s words were dark, and so heavy that Nita and Misty both began to cry. Mannus was already crying, and Uri, Misha, and Nidaja looked at the wretch with utterly murderous intent.

“I told you it was bad.” Mannus looked away. “But that was it. That was what broke the cycle. Too high a sacrifice for anyone, but that’s what it took. After that day, I did not move my armies. I did not seek out one more Letai. I did not reach out and speak with the voice. I began to try to repair the damage. There were a few Letai remaining. Maybe twenty or so. The world would heal. I decided to seek out and destroy the Culier Shadows. This is where my end comes to pass.” He stated.

“About forever too late.” Luna growled, bristling. “I know one thing you do not, and it’s the only reason you are telling us this story, but proceed.” She brought a hand to Alps’ shoulder, rocking the slave a bit to pull him back to her bosom, giving him a hug. The slave was near tears, in shock that Vhale could do such a thing himself, and Luna comforted him. He appreciated it.

“When trying to deal with the Culier Shadows, I decided to attempt to use my ultimate technique. I could send them away into a world where they would have all the suffering they wanted and they would be no harm to anyone. I attempted to use the Shadowfall upon one of them. This was a terrible, terrible mistake. It failed, and I retreated, the thing consuming the crystal I had created just for it, and something

incredible, and utterly... unthinkable happened to the Shadow.” Mannus winced a bit, this memory painful. Alps rumbled softly,

“Keep going. We need to know this.” His voice was softer now, feeling a bit better thanks to the priestess.

“Very well, Alps. It changed. It changed right before my eyes, that horrible abomination. It became an image of me, standing right before me, its eyes glowing red, its hands wrapped in crackling dark energy. And he spoke. It said, ‘This took so long, but here I am at last.’... and I knew the voice immediately.” Mannus stated in a cold, wavering tone, near tears again.

“The voice from the essence.” Nita stated flatly.

“The same. That very moment, I realized that all I had done was for him, and his warnings had been a ruse to bring the parts together for this very moment. I attacked him, but essence attacks were meaningless to it. It didn’t even seem to notice as it looked at its hands and wiggled its toes and stroked its new and fluffy tail. It was delighted at its existence. Finally, it addressed me. It told me that it needed three things to come into existence. It needed a world filled with a very special kind of suffering. I had created that, making a world of war and loss where even children fantasized about slitting my throat. That is a very powerful kind of hate and violation of innocence and beauty.” Alps cringed at that thought, but could understand entirely. It was horrible, but it was true. Mannus had indeed created such a world. “Second, he needed a body that could draw power from suffering alone. The Culier Shadows were that, to be sure. He made sure to push one through any time I opened a wide enough hole into the Nether. The final thing he needed was a door to be opened wide enough for him to get through. Part of his plan had been failing. He had not realized I would create the Shadowfall Crystals. As a result, I no longer opened doors into the Nether like I had done before. I didn’t need to. However, when the Culier Shadow consumed the Shadowfall Crystal, it released all the Nether Essence into itself. He could feel it, and commanded the Shadow to do something simple with the energy. Just open a little hole into the Nether. That was all it took. And there he stood before me. He was the voice in the dark, my foolishness and my shame, my failure to this whole unfortunate world. He is an avatar of all the pain, suffering, and fear in this world. That is why I call him the Avatar.”

“So wait...” Alps stated softly, seeming to shake the gloom off of him. It was pretty easy to do with Luna holding him as she was, “If the dark voice needs suffering as one of the three elements, doesn’t he have to keep people alive in the world to generate that effect?” Nita looked proudly to her lover as he mentioned something that did give her some hope. That was finally a reason why they had not been merely wiped out. He could not do it if he needed that suffering. The occasional raids to thin them out and keep them from getting too aggressive finally made some sense. Whale inhaled deeply, and shook his head. The black wolf spoke sadly,

“You are right in that, he needs suffering. It’s his food, and his power would

wane over time if he didn't have enough, but I doomed the world completely. You see, he likes the flavor of the living a great deal in how they suffer, and draws upon it happily, playing with their lives like toys and pushing them to the brink as he will, but he doesn't need them. I left almost a hundred Shadowfall Crystals across the land, and each one slowly emanates with the suffering of those trapped in the Shadowfall. They will do so forever. He doesn't know how long those crystals last, so he does not take the chance needlessly, I suppose, but if he felt his existence might be threatened, he might well take the chance to subsist on those crystals for a while, and wipe out nearly every single living being in the world. He would not have to kill them all, but the ones who are left certainly would not be willing to defy him again." Alps sighed softly, slumping a bit against Luna.

"So that is it? This darkness you unleashed is unaffected by the essence, so essentially unkillable in any fashion that we know of, and it allows life only to cause it to suffer, willing to take it away on a whim? That is what you have given us to enjoy?" Luna asked.

"Correct. You may kill me now." Vhale responded matter-of-factly.

"No." Luna stated.

"What?" Nita asked.

"I wanna do it." Uri interjected.

"I have seniority." Misha barked.

"Death is an escape to you. I won't kill you." Luna growled.

"Then allow someone else to do it." Mannus groaned, "I would not be an asset to those who remain in this wretched world. I would just be a burden. I would be eating someone else's food in a prison cell someplace. I have no intention of using the essence, Nether or otherwise, ever again, but I wish more for an end to my existence. I have had more than six centuries to enjoy my guilt."

"I say we let Alps put him back in a crystal. Forever is a nice time for him to think about what he did." Nidaja growled.

"He wouldn't do that." Nita asked before Alps could say exactly the same thing. The slave had his own reason, however. He would not allow the Avatar to have one extra crystal to draw energy from.

"Luna, you are more aware than any of us what has been done, and what should be done from here." The queen stated softly, looking at Alps and Luna both. "I will allow you to make the determination. What shall be done?" Luna seemed to think a bit, looking at Alps more than Mannus. The slave lowered his ears, feeling like she was looking to him for some manner of guidance, and he felt he was entirely out of place to

offer anything of the sort. She finally spoke, her words gentle and soothing and calm, as Alps remembered them so fondly.

“Vhale Mannus... We will detain you for the time being under careful restraint of unconsciousness, as I fear your ability to harm yourself more than I fear your attempt to escape or harm others at this point. You will be unable to use the essence as you will be kept asleep by herbal extract. During this time, those in this room will be enjoying a meal, as a few of us spent way too long without a meal searching for you. During this time, I will be explaining something very, very important to those who have been kept absent from the queen for too long. It is something Alps deserves to know, and will allow him to understand his role in this with greater clarity. Once these matters have been explained, I will let Alps himself be the one to determine your fate. I do not know what choice he will make, and given the weight of what I must tell him, he does not know either. But he will decide, and all will be bound to his decision in this matter. Do you understand?” she asked solidly. Mannus lowered his head, and nodded, looking down at his feet.

“Alright... Very well, I am in agreement if you feel that is the wisest course, Priestess Luna. I apologize to all who live and have ever lived for what I have done, but cannot ask forgiveness. I only offer my condolences. I await your herbal extract and will not struggle. I agree that everyone will be more comfortable if I am not awake.” He stated. Luna leaned closer to Vhale and whispered,

“The extract is not used to make you unconscious, only keep you there...” and with that, she leaned back, slipped a leather-wrapped cudgel from the silky folds of her robes, and then brought it down hard on the back of the black wolf’s head. Alps winced hard, and everyone else equally cringed. There was an awkward silence as Luna left the room to prepare the herbs. Finally, Nidaja spoke.

“Why was she carrying that around?”