

Chapter 6

What kind of place was this? Alps looked around in abject confusion. It was a forest, but the trees were unbearably tall, the tops almost out of sight, giving the forest the appearance of being columns holding up a ceiling he could not see. There were bees everywhere, and if he got too close, they would sting Alps, which irritated him, but he had endured far worse pain in his life. There were plates with foods that he remembered not being fond of as a child, and occasionally he could hear a woman scream. After a few minutes wandering in this weird place, he found a painting of Luna posed in a cry of anguish. It was nailed to a tree. There were pictures of her crying, hurt, bleeding, or otherwise suffering on quite a few of the trees after he spotted the first one. He then gritted his teeth and fumed, flittering his little wings with aggravation.

The winged lupine crossed his arms. Something about all of this was eerily familiar. Was there some reason he was here? He remembered talking with Luna and Reika about Bone, and they decided that it was safe to bring him along, and Reika kissed him, then he spent the day practicing with a staff with Nidaja, wearing himself out thoroughly, with Lira offering advice on the use of a sword as well, before her and Nidaja decided to spar a bit, and he got to watch some very impressive fighting. Then there was dinner, salted fish, which agreed with the slowly descending quality of food he expected on a long ocean trip. Then he crawled in bed with Nita, and she had him go down on her while she played with his wings almost the whole time, before returning the favor, and he curled up with her in that small bed, and they went to sleep. Where the hell could he be? Wait a moment...

"What the hell? Did I Shadowfall myself or something?" he asked to no one in particular. He tried to change the place, as he had learned to do in a Shadowfall before. It did not change. "Uhhh..." It had all the classic looks of a Shadowfall. It was filled with things that were designed to make him suffer, though bees and vegetables and spicy fish were not things he counted as high on the list where his suffering would have been concerned. "I should be seeing Chana standing over Nita's bleeding corpse if I'm in a Shadowfall. This is kid's stuff."

Almost on cue, he saw himself as a child. He was darting from place to place, bees all over him. He didn't seem to care about the bees. Alps watched as the younger version of himself ripped a picture of his mother off one of the trees, and held it like a shield, picking up a knife from one of the plates of unpalatable food.

“Don’t worry, we will get out of this cave together! Follow me and we will all be okay, I have done this more times than I can count to. Like... twenty five or something! Attack!” the six year old Aris darted off, and Alps gave chase. What the hell was this?

“Ellis? Are you in here? This is a dream, isn’t it?” he asked. Child Aris was rather fast, and Alps had to push himself to keep up, before they arrived at a house made of carefully stacked and sorted pictures of Luna suffering. This was a very surreal and bizarre scenario, and Alps felt it had to be a dream, but of what? And why could he not just wake up?

“There we go. We are safe here. This is Marx and that’s Reese. We are the resistance here. You can stay the night, and we will get you out of here.” Alps realized that the young wolf was not even talking to him, and he indicated two others who did not exist either, on carefully made chairs.

“Wait... I know this place...” The former slave leaned against a picture wall, his heart sinking. “How do I know this place? Oh by the essence...” he cupped his muzzle, his wings pinning back fearfully. He had been right. For a Shadowfall, the place was kids stuff. It was exactly the sort of thing that he would have hated the most as a child. He would not have known much suffering at that age, but fearing his mother suffering, bees if he had been stung already, and the food he didn’t like, along with being lost in the woods... those were the things a child would see in a hell custom made for him. He had been in a place like this for so long but he didn’t seem to be suffering. This was not how the Shadowfall was designed to work. Even after 700 years the crystal was forcing Luna to loathe her failures, the death and destruction around her... Ceriss stood vigil over the dead and was the last one alive to mourn their passing in a temple of darkness. They all suffered, why was this child... why was *he* playing?

“No, we cannot go yet. We have to stay and help the others to escape. It is our mission, and will do this for as long as it takes, until we save all our friends, and all your friends, and all their friends too.” The child was stubborn-sounding but had the mentality of someone brought up by a healer. It was glorious to save people. Healing and bringing happiness were the paramount responsibility for the Letai. Was he programmed so well at that young age? Alps felt a little embarrassed. As a child... he went insane. He created imaginary friends, an imaginary sacred mission, and he played for perhaps seven hundred years. Instead of languishing and suffering, he imagined the place entirely different. The bees, surely stinging him, went completely ignored... The pictures of his mother suffering were ignored and had no effect, he could somehow tell his way around the forest well enough to build a home and venture out and save his imaginary friends every day, and he had realized long ago that he didn’t need to eat to sustain himself in this place. The Shadowfall was completely pointless against him.

Young Aris then hopped up and said loudly, “Reese! Tend to their wounds; I sense another spirit entering this horrible place! I shall go to the light, and free another one! I cannot leave anyone in this place.” Alps felt a severe cold chill. He had said it.

He knew the words. He remembered them now, from so far back he could hardly picture it, but it was there. He said those words, and he said them a thousand times. And when he grew up, he came back, and he rescued people from this place, just as he had practiced it. And the Shadowfall had no effect on him. He could ignore it. He trained himself to do it as a child. In designing this terrible place, Vhale had never intended to send a child. He was not aware of the flaw. Adults suffer, but children more quickly adapt. They are not content to languish in their suffering the way an adult will. They don't know guilt and self-loathing. He felt a sudden rush of realization, and ran out of the little picture hut. The greatest things he could think of that he had ever done, freeing the Letai from the Shadowfall, saving the Asuna and then freeing himself and Nidaja, freeing Mannus himself to be able to come up with a way to possibly change the fate of all the Asuna and the Amani... he figured it out here. He wanted to remember that practice that made him what he ultimately became.

He caught up with himself, smiling as he watched himself do battle with an imaginary foe, marveling in how resilient a child could be, and then saw the young version of himself falter a bit.

"The way out?" he asked. "Where?" He looked around. Alps had not heard a voice, but the small Aris seemed to. Then again, he was interacting with imaginary friends. That was likely all he was seeing.

"What the heck?" the adult Alps asked, seeing a red line slit open between two of the trees. It looked like glowing blood, and poured out onto the ground, smoking lightly, seeming very hot as well as eerie.

"But what about the others?" young Aris asked, seeming unconvinced.

"You will come back for them, and you will be bigger and stronger." The adult Alps said under his breath. "The voice... I remember... The voice said I would be bigger and stronger, but if I stayed, then I could never help all of them..." Alps held his head. "What's going on? Why couldn't I remember all this before?"

Suddenly, the world began to pull inward, toward the red gash. The little wolf boy screamed, stabbing his knife into a tree to try to hold on. The gash was consuming everything. There was a roar that was deafening, and Alps remembered it clearly. This was not a mere dream; it was a very real memory. The things he had seen and done recently had brought it back. He had perhaps suppressed them when he was younger because they would have been confusing and traumatic, or the owner of his orphanage would have thought he was making things up and told him to stop talking or thinking about it.

Alps remembered how he made Reese, a young girl of fair fur and a long ponytail, someone who worked as a healer. She would take care of those Alps brought back, and he remembered his best friend, Marx. Marx had been real, and probably died of old age or in later raids for all Alps knew after he had been Shadowfallen. Marx was

a somewhat pudgy brown-furred rough-housing layabout that his mother felt was a bad influence on Alps, but that he liked to visit anyway. Marx had better toys because his parents spoiled him, and there were always wooden swords and painted wool armor to play with. Luna disliked war because it made life as a healer very tragic and dire, but Alps liked to play war with Marx. Luna taught the boys to play rescue instead of war, and the rotund youth actually liked it better, so that's what they did.

The realization of all this hit Alps just as the world bent inward toward the gash and then, Aris was gone and the rest of the world was too. The picture house, the bees, the screaming Luna everywhere, the plates of icky food, everything ceased to be. Alps stood alone in the dark.

"It collapsed. M... My Shadowfall collapsed. I fell into the Nether..." he said with a sense of dismal finality. "I... I don't want to remember this. Please, let me out... I don't want to remember!" he shouted, fearful of what he would see. What was in his Shadowfall he could handle, since it was only scary to a child, but he would be learning *real* fear in the Nether.

Alps jerked hard as he felt himself shaken. He was falling. He was in the Nether and he was falling! But he opened his eyes and saw Luna staring back at him, Nita looking fearful beside her. His mother looked very concerned, and his lover frightened.

"Wh... Wha..." He sat up, and found that his heart was racing, and he was panting.

"Are you alright, Aris?" Luna asked.

"I think so. Just a bad dream, sorry to alarm you love..." he looked apologetically at the Queen.

"You wouldn't wake up!" Nita said in exasperation.

"I'm sorry. I think... I think my brain needed to resolve that. I remember..." Luna shook her head.

"You don't have to talk about it." The white priestess stroked her son's head soothingly.

"I remember my Shadowfall." Alps sat forward, and fluttered his wings a little, looking over his shoulder at them and then smiling at Nita. As if under a spell, she softened. He pondered that a moment. It seemed almost as if he forcefully calmed her nerves. Luna seemed to notice it as well and quirked a smile at her son.

"Well, you don't have to speak of it if you don't want. It seemed like it was traumatizing to you." She stated. The white male lupine shook his head slowly. He was

getting over the shock and fear, and he had not seen anything really traumatizing in the dream.

“The Shadowfall I had as a kid was just stuff a little kid would not like. Bees and being lost in the woods and stuff I hated eating.” Alps stated. He calmly left out the millions of pictures of Luna suffering. She would not like to hear that he was surrounded by that for who knows how long. “I... I guess I just wrapped myself in fantasy as a kid though, and was ignoring those things. I pretended I was saving people and ran around with imaginary friends and had fun. I remember it rather vividly now... especially so fresh after the dream...” Alps felt the recollection growing a little cloudier as he spoke.

“Alps... That’s very...” Nita looked a little perplexed.

“That’s very fascinating...” Luna said, with a very serious tone in her voice. “A Shadowfall Crystal powers that false world off the suffering of those who are trapped. You will always be trapped, but the power it has to create illusions and pain are controlled by your own power. So you basically just hid away in your daydreams until something happened and you figured out how to get out? Oh!” Luna leaned forward suddenly, very attentive and interested. “Did you see how you learned how to get out? I want to hear this!” she cried.

“Uh...” Alps fidgeted. “That’s the part I didn’t want to see. I didn’t get out.” He swallowed, knowing full well what he witnessed.

“But you are out. And you learned to get out, because you did it with me.” His mother seemed a little distressed.

“Yeah, but I didn’t learn it then.” Alps stated. Luna suddenly looked very uncomfortable, looking away as if she might try to scope out an emergency exit from the conversation.

“What? What happened? Why did you not want to see? Why were you scared?” she asked.

“He got out of the Shadowfall, but he didn’t come right back here.” Luna whispered, suddenly pulling Alps to her. “Aris... As interesting as I think it would be to know how you gained the ability that you have, it’s probably not... worth it to you to remember that place.”

“What place?” the Queen asked insistently.

“The same place the one who replaced Mannus came from.” Alps finally answered. Nita wilted.

“Coming back from the Shadowfall is one thing... that place preserves you. But the description of the place where Nether energy comes from... There is no way a child could survive long in there.” Luna leaned back again. “Don’t try too hard to remember, Alps. We know, and that’s fine. We can move on with that. You went through a lot, so we can just focus on the reward for getting out, right?” She kissed her son on the nose, making him blush a bit. Nita kissed him on the lips, still seeming as if she didn’t understand, but obviously grateful that he did get out.

“What time is it?” Alps asked.

“It’s morning, late enough. You had overslept, so we came to check on you.” Nita answered.

“I’m hungry.” The young male said.

“Then get some food, love.” Nita stretched a little and stood up. “I shall return to my studies. Come meet me when you are done. I want to spend a bit of time with you. Despite being stuck on a ship, we have hardly seen one another. It’s so busy.” Luna nodded to her son again as well and looked to Nita.

“As we were then?” she asked. The green-furred Amanian smiled and left. Alps headed for the galley, having not been terribly hungry, but wanting to just have his thoughts for a bit. There was a lot in that single dream for him to have to absorb, and while he was not overly hungry, he would eat, and consider those things. Ultimately he knew that he would have to remember what he saw in that place.

He found unfortunately that the galley was occupied, but he decided to stay because of who was there. Lira was sipping what appeared to be tea, and writing in a journal. Alps sat across from her, and she looked up, peering at him for a while.

“Stay like that a moment.” She stated. Alps held still, not certain why.

“Can I speak?” he asked.

“Yes. Just no moving around much.” She seemed to be sketching in her journal. This embarrassed Alps a little, but he allowed it.

“Have you figured out the way that we will be travelling? Your charts looked like they would creep a little north, to the far northern edge of the Asuna territory, near the mountains. That doesn’t leave us many directions to run.” Alps wanted to be helpful.

“It gives us only two directions other than the direction we are travelling to really need to watch, also. That’s more important for a smaller group. Our best bet to escape harm is a head start or not to be seen at all. Standing and fighting and then hoping to have an avenue of retreat are not going to be an option.” She sounded a lot like Nidaja. It made sense that they worked on the plans together.

"That course takes us close to Luca before we leave Amanian territory." Alps stated inquisitively.

"Yes. Is there something that you need there? We will be close enough to resupply in that place, but if we do, only one or two of us can risk venturing into town. A group travelling will generate news and rumors."

"I grew up there." Alps stated. "I can resupply there and no one would likely think twice about it. I am gonna check up on someone there too." He said. He had heard Misty give orders to replace Chana as a matriarch, but her wording of it concerned him and the council skirted around the issue with him. He did not want to be a pest about it, but he could learn this way.

"I will allow that, but we will be very brief there. It's not truly necessary to stop given who you travel with. We have much of what we need on the road. Remember that." She went back to her sketching. She seemed too young to be so serious.

"Do you like travelling like this?" Alps asked, wanting to get to know her better at least. He might have to depend on her for his life.

"I have always liked it, yes. I have seen many strange and wonderful things. My friends where I grew up used to tease me. They said I intended to see everything, and I would cross them all off my list until finally I could cross off Mannus himself." She got a good chuckle out of that. Alps swallowed uncomfortably.

"I imagine it is possible you will see him with the adventure you have signed up for." He offered this meekly, trying to hold his position.

"If I see him, I will make every attempt I can to make him pay for my family. My friends are right in saying he's probably the last person I would ever see." She held up the book, showing Alps a very good likeness of him, an image from the chest up, wings and all. Alps applauded that, wanting to escape the line of discussion.

"You like art then? What would you like to do eventually? What if we are successful? What if it ends a lot of the threat, and he's pushed back into the mountains and can be held at bay? What would you do with your life?" he asked.

"Find the truth!" Lira stood proud. "There's a lot of things that time has forgotten, and I can explore places that I could never reach before, and learn the origins of the Letai, and of the powers that started all of this. There is so much to know, and so much of it is hidden from us by artificial borders and threat of death. My family has always sought the true history of the Letai. You have no idea how incredible it is to me to actually travel with people who lived 700 years ago. I understand you don't remember anything, but I have worn Luna out with my questions, I am sure. And the Letai are such a beautiful people. The books tell you, but to look at you..." Alps squirmed a bit,

able to move now, and wanting to after that level of compliment. "How about you? What would you do if there was no more fear of a sudden and overwhelming end?" Alps pondered that a moment. He had actually been giving it more thought of late.

"I would want to have a family with Nita, of course..." he stated this matter-of-factly, but left a slight upward inflection to indicate there would be more.

"Of course..." Lira offered in the expectant tone. She encouraged him to share more, but the more was something Alps was not certain he could pursue if Nita was more concerned with having a happy family and running her empire without additional worry. Alps looked away.

"The others..." he whispered. He was thinking about it more after the dream. He had practiced it as a child for centuries, perhaps. Was it so ingrained in him that he just did it naturally, like an instinct?

"The others?" she asked.

"I would want to go into the Shadowfall and find the others who were sent in there." Alps stated. He felt so selfish in saying that. He made it out alive, and he even brought a few others out, but there was no guarantee he would always be safe doing that, and Nita had already expressed reservations about him being in the Shadowfall intentionally. She was outright cross with him for being so reckless with Nidaja.

"I think Nita would support that decision, Alps... If you told her you felt it was important." Lira stated.

"No, I don't think so. She would not want to risk losing me. She said so herself." He leaned back a bit, looking at the picture of him with the wings again. He had not looked at them in a mirror, so it was very interesting to see what other people were seeing when they looked at him.

"Alps, I think she says that because she does not want you thinking others expect you to do it. She doesn't want you to be forced into that risk." Lira leaned forward a bit.

"I am sure she doesn't want me thinking that, but at the same time, she has everything to lose, and little to gain from my going back." Alps stated. Lira looked at him blankly a moment.

"Nothing to gain...?" She leaned back, seeming a bit dumbfounded. "Alps... Did you forget? Her mother is in there." The white wolf froze. He had heard it before, but felt almost sick in the realization that he had never given it a second thought. Nita rarely, if ever spoke of her mother. Her absence was the reason she was so unhappy and cold when they first met. Alps put his fingertips to his temples, his wings shrinking back. Nita had an incredibly great reason to want Alps to hunt for lost people in the

Nether, but neither she nor Nidaja, who was in there with him, asked. They would not risk him, even for that. Alps looked up to Lira.

“With how fast things had been going, I have not really considered that. I must admit, I hadn’t thought about it at all.” Alps felt almost ill with regret. He could have looked. He could have stayed a little longer; it would not have made much of a difference in his getting back. But, he could worry about that later. He knew that the more pressing issue to Nita would be to have a worth-while place to bring her mother back to. Alps would bring her back without a second thought if he could figure out how to find a specific person.

“I would not worry yourself about it. Nita would likely be angry if you tried without her consent. Focus on what we must do for now. Then you can worry about perhaps finding a safer way.” Lira looked back to her sketch book, added some writing, but Alps could not read it. She was writing in the same form that he saw in the Asuna library.

“You are friendly with the Asuna already, aren’t you?” he asked.

“This is true, and I suppose it doesn’t make you think ill of me as I might have suspected when we first met. You are traveling with a pair of them, and Nidaja seems to really like the hyena boy she’s traveling. Not to say I would mind it myself.” She chuckled. “How about you? Do you feel good about our future alongside the Asuna?”

“Without a doubt.” Alps stated, but did not go into more detail about why. “I think it will be hard work on both sides though, and the Asuna are hurting very bad right now. We will want to do all that we can to help them and show that we mean to be allies, not just tolerant.” He mulled over his own words for a while, and then continued. “There will soon be plenty of land to share among us, and much of it has grown wild and forbidding, I am sure. We will do better settling it together.” The white lupine stood up, stretching a bit. He felt much better after this discussion, thinking more about the positive-sounding distant future.

“Alps...” Lira said in a gentle tone.

“Yes?” he replied with a smile.

“Your friends believe in you. You should believe in yourself too. It’s the best chance we will have, and they all know it.” He blushed brightly at her words, but was fearful, so fearful that they were absolutely true.

The grey-furred lupine guard sat with his elbow resting on a small but polished wooden table that was set up facing the main door to the queen’s vacation home. He was adorned in his normal guard-duty attire, his silver mail hauberk, dark leather

trousers, and his sword. The sword Leal carried was long and slightly curved, and along his back he carried, upside down and easily reached, a slender, but long knife that was good for close quarters combat. The sword and knife seemed to be all one piece construction, very strong and almost utilitarian, but still regal in the sweeping hilt and heavy, balancing pommel on each. Leal glanced up to the large, heavy wooden doors as one of them swung open almost silently on gleaming well-oiled brass hinges. His hand immediately sought out the pommel of his sword, resting on it at the ready in case someone unbidden entered.

His captain Lunariss entered. He carried in a great deal of water cast down in rivulets and pooling onto the floor from his dark leather cloak. It was still heavily raining outside. To see the dark-furred lupine enter was reassuring to Leal, as he worried that he would face what was coming with just himself and Ceriss. The priestess seemed confident she could handle the assassins, but the guard, given his training, felt such confidence was foolish. Still, he would not dare tell her such. She was at least powerful enough to handle him, he was sure. He considered his good fortune in having Lunariss back only a moment before he saw someone follow him in, also in cloak, though hers was fabric. The very small individual simply took it off, wearing nearly beggar's clothes beneath, a size too small, even for one her size her tunic hugged the tan-furred lady's very modest bosom with the threat that it might pop the two buttons that it held itself together with. Her pants looked as if they could not make up their mind whether they wanted to be shorts and were threadbare above the ankles. Her feet were adorned in wooden sandals with hemp straps holding them on.

"A... guest?" asked Leal. Did his captain just want to get a poor girl out of the rain? She was certainly not going to be better off in this place.

"Someone to assist us with watch." Lunariss replied, taking off his cloak to let the guard see his captain's war attire. Plate armor was rare as it was expensive to make, hot to have on, and required a lot of strength and confidence in one's ability even against high odds to wear, but steel plate armor was what the black-furred captain had on, polished and painted black with silver trim like Nidaja's leather armor. He looked regal and extremely dangerous, only made to look larger by the angled pauldrons with large slink-teeth and heavy cuirass. He wore a steel plated sash in front that looked like a slightly tapering loincloth, and was gilded with an angular tribal-looking pattern. It seemed almost barbaric, something an Asuna might wear. Leal grimly wondered if the outfit had been won from a hyena in a fight. The loose-looking heavy canvas-style trousers vanished into black gilded leather boots that matched the outfit. Lunariss' single-edged sword was a little longer than his own, but more slender and with a curve to it, making it better for hewing than for crushing. He was, like Leal, dressed and ready for battle. The presence of a strong, seasoned veteran should have comforted the guard but it only verified his suspicions that this would be a real fight. Even his former captain had told him it was terrifying every time. Neit looked between the pair and folded her ears back.

“Oh hey... No armor on this girl, so I’ll just see my way out. I suddenly think I might be a little squishy for what’s to come.” She turned on her heel. Leal narrowed his eyes.

“Wait, I know you...” He crossed his arms. “You sure you want this one in the queen’s summer home, captain?” He padded over to Neit as she was captured by the base of her tail by Lunariss with a soft squeak.

“She will do nicely. She has a debt to repay.” The larger male turned her tail loose and she rubbed the base of it, looking with irritation at him, and then to Leal.

“I don’t doubt that. She’s a thief.” Leal stated.

“Was a thief.” Neit corrected, sighing. The grey guard continued.

“I am sure I still have her narrow little face with her greedy beady eyes on a poster in my bounty box at the castle.” What was Lunariss thinking? How could he bring someone like this in a place that was sure to contain Royal valuables?

“She’s been encouraged to turn over a new leaf... works for us now.” Lunariss slapped Neit on the back, making her nearly topple forward.

“A royal pardon? Are you kidding? She had two thousand on her last I checked.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest defiantly to the idea of going into battle with such a person. “...And the poster did not go so far as to recommend what condition she was brought in under... or how much of her was required intact to get the reward.” He glowered at Neit. She fumed back, seeming not to enjoy being reminded of her past. She broke in before the captain could speak again.

“Cool it, guard-boy. You had your chance, you didn’t catch me, I got pardoned, now you have to watch me traipse around in this beautiful home and get my thief hair all over the carpet and eat her fine foods and drink the wine, and I will laugh at you the whole time because you could never catch me if you lived a hundred —“ There was a loud thump and Leal had to dodge her as she was flung past him. He didn’t even see Lunariss hit her, but it silenced her, the dazed girl looking up at Leal from the floor. The grey wolf blushed slightly as he looked down at her where she had landed behind him. Both the buttons of her tattered and sad outfit had popped off, letting the tunic fall open and present smallish but attractive breasts to both guardians. She sat up, closing her arms over her chest, looking in horror at Lunariss.

“Ahh, the peace and quiet.” Lunariss rumbled. Leal made it a point not to intentionally antagonize the girl back. He knew that his captain would have given him the very same if he were so out of line, even if Neit was a thief.

“What the hell?!” the former thief cried out, trying to salvage her outfit somehow. “Is this how you ask for a favor?” Leal could understand why. Striking a female in

Amanian culture was one of the worst taboos a male could cross. He was surprised even his captain could so boldly do it. Lunar is crossed his arms and glared at Neit, though he broke to a smile.

“Did I say it was a request, girl?” Leal watched his captain studiously as he spoke. It was a bit disarming how confident and forceful he could be. His position made it so he had to be. Neit looked with despair at the high-ranked official.

“You made it seem like you needed my help for a threat upon the royal family. The Queen has forgiven my trespasses. Bring her here, I will speak with her and have your stance with me corrected.” The girl stood up.

“The queen...” Lunar is turned slowly, “Is in danger. She is doing something of great importance, and her would-be murderers are trying to prevent her from succeeding. You will help us watch for them, and you will help us fight them. You gave yourself to the royal family. Surely you knew what that meant. Your life is pledged to their service, Neit.”

“They have you! They are not in any less danger with me here. You cannot use my life as you see fit when the family doesn’t even need it.” The girl put her hand down, fists tightly balled, and then gasped, covering her chest again. Leal looked away, shaking his head. What did Lunar is think she could do? This girl would sooner stab him in the back than help him fight.

“There is a danger, if any of the assassins escape, Neit.” He answered her bluntly. “Your job is to make sure to watch their movements, and make sure that none have fled the property. You will fight only if ordered, so I would not worry much.”

“If she doesn’t want to, making her stay won’t be of much use.” Leal said sagely. Neit softened her attitude toward the grey-furred guard immediately. She nodded and pointed him out.

“No one is better for the task. She has better eyes and ears than most, and can follow her mark almost as silently as Nidaja if they slip away and lead us to that individual, and any other survivors.” The captain stood by the doorway leading into the study, where Ceriss would be.

“Is the whole army hiding out here? You seem sure it’s gonna just be a slaughter in your favor.” Neit looked toward the study, just as Ceriss, disguised as the queen appeared. She glared at Neit, who shrank back a little. “Surely you do not need me too? You have powerful knights, great magic, and your sister is a great tactician. I will mess this up and bring shame upon the royal family the whole time I’m here.” said the young former thief. Leal looked to the ‘queen’. He had not met the real Nita Razelle, but the thief seemed to have done just that, and she still fell for the disguise.

"I could release you from your obligations if you like, young Neit... and you shall retain your freedom for a time. But by now, I am sure you have noticed that while your crimes have been forgiven, your face has not been forgotten. Have you had trouble finding honest work, Neit? You look a little tattered." Her voice sounded accusatory and very regal, but he could not bring himself to look into those violet eyes. Not after what he'd done with the faux queen. He looked down in what must have appeared to be subservience to 'Nita'.

"Your highness, I have found life to be very challenging, yes. What money was given to me before to start anew I have given up to cut the ties I once had to folks who were loathe to lose my services... But I would never succumb to the temptations of my former life. I will never have as good a second chance as you have given me. I will find something for me." She looked down as well. "I will not jeopardize my freedom."

"Your freedom is assured then, but will you thrive, Neit?" Ceriss asked in what was obviously a convincing Nita voice.

"It will be hard." the girl stated in a soft tone, looking away.

"Harder than the task we offer to you?" Lunar is asked, cutting in.

"I don't know." The girl seemed a lot more serious, and a little sad. Leal found himself suddenly wondering at the things that drove her to become a thief in the first place. He always assumed thieves did what they did because they were ultimately lazy, and it was the fastest and easiest way to get the objects you desired. Neit seemed lazy in her refusal to help.

"Had you expected we would make you do this thing for free?" Ceriss asked.

"No offer of payment was given." Her answer was quick, but she seemed to perk up. "This is a dangerous task. What is the help of just an extra pair of eyes and legs worth? I'm no fighter."

"I offer you ten percent of your last bounty if you stay the night. If you contract yourself to work for me henceforth, your full bounty shall be lavished upon you. Does this suffice? Will it give you a better start at your new life, Neit?" Leal folded his ears back. Two thousand. That was not a small amount. Did Ceriss really have it, or was she bluffing and simply did not expect the thief would survive. Neit's eyes were huge upon the offer though. She staggered back a little, and let her tunic fall open again. This time, for a bit, she did not correct herself. She was too stunned.

"I... I won't get a better opportunity than this..." She said it more to herself than to anyone else. Leal blinked at that. The queen would have the services of this thief, but what was it worth? What use would the royal family have for her? Still, he was not about to object to Ceriss' words. Lunar is nodded at her and seemed to go along with it, however bad an idea it was.

"You likely will not, but you know it can be dangerous. Then again, you spent half your life among murderers and in the shadow of the gallows. At least you will have someone thank you for your successes this time." Ceriss' tone was as regal and elegant as he imagined Nita to be. She was very convincing. It only made him blush more. Would Lunariss ever find out about it?

"I have to accept. I have no better choice I can make." The girl seemed very resolute in that. 'Nita' nodded her head and returned to her study, closing the door. Leal knew the real reason was that it took a lot of energy to hold the disguise. It made no sense to him why so much was invested on getting the girl's help, however. She gasped and covered her chest again, flustered. "Well... I suppose I am in, then. Try not to get me killed, please."

"Leal." Lunariss' voice was deep and commanding. He stood at attention instinctively.

"Yessir." He barked.

"Take Neit to the east wing. General Nidaja and her sister used to stay there when they were younger. The clothing there might fit our newly commissioned guard better. At the very least, it might survive the night." Leal saluted and nodded to Neit.

"I can't wear the queen's clothes without permission." The thief seemed taken aback at the casual suggestion.

"She cannot wear them anymore. She's grown up." Lunariss said. This seemed to insult the petite Neit, but she followed Leal anyway. The walk there was frosty enough given the insult, but looking around the room, she seemed to perk up. It was very elegant and refined. It showed wealth, but had things a young girl might like to have around. There was a music box, a canvas for painting, a desk with a few books upon it, and a very elegant looking bed. Tapestries and curtains hung on the wall to give the room bright and cheery colors. Leal pointed her to a wardrobe with a large mirror on it. The smallish lupine female began sorting through a few outfits. Nita was still so young when the yoke of royalty was dropped upon her, so this room had frozen in time at that point. The clothing, to Neit's surprise and delight, fit perfectly. She selected a white leather tunic that elegantly drew in double over her chest, to almost her side where it fastened with an elegant silver frog button. She wore underneath this leather a dark blue blouse with billowy sleeves made of something light like silk, but she wasn't sure if that was what it was. As the cottage was often the queen's summer home, and before she was expected to be more refined, there were shorts more than there were pants or skirts, but the shorts seemed the better choice for a lookout that might need speed. She selected a pair matching the tunic that were cuffed heavily so as to have wide cuff-bands on the legs, making them appear almost overly short, but they looked rather sexy and adventurous. It was enough to get Leal to heat up again in picturing the queen wearing them. The young lady wolf then turned and gestured to the

door. Leal looked at her blankly for a bit, and then nodded, leaving the room to let her get dressed. She did so quickly, and came out, looking much better, and somehow more thief-like even with the nice clothing.

"That's much better." Leal stated, nodding to her.

"It's the nicest thing I have ever worn." She positively beamed, "I've never even stolen clothing this nice." She remarked of this with a bit of fondness. She seemed much happier now that she was wearing something respectable.

"It is very fitting. It looks good on you." Leal said honestly. He indicated she should go to the main hall again to be given her assignment from her new boss.

"I am a royal guard now, huh..." the girl asked softly, seeming unable to believe it.

"If that is what the royal family wants you to be, yes." Leal answered. He was comforted a little in how profound this seemed to be to her. A thief, made a member of the royal guard. She seemed to understand both the irony, and the opportunity this presented her.

"I wonder if Alps will be proud of me..." Leal tilted his head a bit, puzzled. She knew Alps too? He had heard the name dropped all over the castle already, and had been told a little about him, but the impression he made on others was almost uncanny.

"You know him?" the elder guard asked.

"I do. Not as well as I would like, but he's very kind and generous, and he fights hard for his friends. He was taken by the Asuna, and then came back, I heard, but I don't know where he is now. Probably with Misha and Uri on some adventure. I can't see how Nita lets him go. She loves him so much." There was the barest hint of jealousy in her voice.

"He seems to make friends easily. I will eventually meet the guy, I'm sure. I heard he has white fur. He's solid white? All over?" Leal asked. He'd not seen anything like that until he met Ceriss.

"All over." The girl made her statement with an emphasis on the 'all', and seemed suddenly very pleased by it. The grey-furred guard flicked his ears a bit. Had she been very close with him, then? Did Nita know?

"I think white fur is lovely." Leal stated, finding himself suddenly embarrassed. He had felt a deep connection with Misty, but found himself also enamored with Ceriss. This was not a part of his life he expected to become confusing when he became a royal guard. He felt he was pretty well done with a social life. Things were far different.

“Alright, layabouts. I think it’s show time.” Lunar’s voice was loud, carrying down the hall. Leal stood straight, stiffening. Show time? The assassins? Already? He turned and ran toward the main hall where his captain was. Neit ran behind, whimpering a little. She was certainly not used to running into battle. Lunar stood in the main room when the others arrived. He held a kitchen knife out for Neit. “Defense only unless told otherwise. I will go to the balcony overlooking the garden with Miss Neit here... she will be observing the fight from there, and staying low. If anyone slips away, she will follow, but hopefully she will still be watching from the balcony when the fight is over.” Panting, Neit nodded. If she didn’t have to do anything but watch, it would still be horrifying for her. She agreed, though. She would stick with it until the end. Lunar continued. “Nita is already waiting there. She will draw them out, and when we have the signal, we push the attack and make sure no one leaves.” Neit took the knife and panted out in exasperation and fear before blurting out,

“Wait, Nita’s there? We are letting her risk herself to draw them out?” She seemed mortified.

“She knows what she’s doing, trust us.” Lunar said.

“This is crazy! Is there more than one or two?”

“Possibly a lot more. It’s what remains of the Spirits of Silverlight. They’ve turned on their leader, and decided to pursue a new future for themselves and for the Amani.” Lunar finally told Neit what was going on.

“Lunar, there’s hundreds of those guys, they even control trade east of Seravi.” Neit panted out. “If they attack the queen directly, they won’t risk failure with one or two assassins. This is going to be over the top. They can’t risk putting her on her guard or being able to order war against them.”

“My, my. A little tactician too. You might be more useful than you think. Come, to the balcony. Leal. Do as I asked.” Lunar nodded to the guard, who turned and headed for the garden. This was it. This was the fight that he had trained all his life to be in. A fight for the life and honor of his queen, the greatest moment of valor a guard could face. It didn’t matter that it was not the real queen; the intention to kill the queen was in the hearts of those who would attack. His chest felt heavy, his feet heavier. Sounds echoed in his ears as things seem to move almost in slow motion at that moment of realization. Would he be up to this task?