

Chapter I

Embers of the Past

Episode 12

Date: 28th of the 4th Month, 3242 A.U.

Location: Ruins near Lake Ranvar, Flax Mountains

A vast stretching moon, towering full and orange-ish though not quite eclipse orange. Below, a large body of water surrounded by vast expanses of forest. Tall trees, coniferous, an orange tinge cast upon them much the same. The crystal waters of the lake, with an island at its center, reflected the form of the glowing orb above.

A lopsided lake, wider to the East and thinned to the West, elongated. Small streams rippled out from the large mass of water as did three large rivers. Rivers connected to this body, one south, one west, and one slightly north of that- the last being an inlet and the rest outlets though not to any particular point except maybe underground. The streams, a variety though most flowing out with only a few in.

Near the inlet of several, between an incoming fork, sat a ruined tower. A fortress, most walls gone aside from the tower. And it was here where torches lit around a massive pyre at the center of what was the fortress, alongside the tower. The light cast illuminated what could only be described as several shadows, several very distinct and unique shadows.

Though those were only those who were closest to the pyre, with a great few others outside of the ring near the outskirts. Some sat, some stood, all in different poses and stances. They all sat, awaiting, a man right up on the flames all but practically. No one said a word, no one shifted... until-

From the darkness of the woods to the hooting of owls approached a group. Vulfax, headed by Calagras. He, Lysander, Nora, Sacho, Elise, and a few warriors of the clan. Elise moved near Lysander, Nora and Sacho behind, Calagras just in front of her.

The illuminated shadows danced though none actually moved.

A short woman, wavy water-like light brown hair, blue eyes with an outline of red, dressed in a long black battle dress.

A tall bulky armor clad man, partially broken armor, certainly worn- short gray hair and sky blue eyes with a huge white mustache and a massive ax on his back.

Beside Kakuja, an older lizard man with wrinkled scales, cut and styled back ash gray hair with some signs of black, yellow reptilian eyes. Dressed in a short black trench coat with a red shirt underneath.

A man of short shaven blond hair and a large cloth over his eyes, dressed in robes almost kimono-like, heavily layered up.

With Krudule, a smirking man, shaggy light brown hair of mid-length down his neck and around the eyes, amber eyes grinning with flame, a very fierce smirk with sharpened teeth, dressed in black combat robes with a cape wrapped around his body hanging very low, large boots, sharpened nails. Three hooded individuals stood behind this man, along with other warriors.

Several other individuals stood around, leaders of some sort- and at the head of it all nearest the flame overlooking the group on a pillar... a tall man, black swirling hair that danced around large horns, huge orange eyes. Scaly, a loose fitting unbuttoned shirt, baggy pants, a sash around his midsection, a long goatee.

Calagras moved in line with the other gathered leaders, Elise and the rest hanging back. Lysander moved ahead though kept close. The leader moved, glancing around. The one beside Krudule grinned with a snicker. Some looked a bit more serious, such as the man with eyes bound in cloth, or the old lizard man.

The head of the flame approached forward, the tall man with horns, "Welcome Calagras Verte. It is well that you are able to join us."

"Thank you Za'hir," Calagras replied.

From across the way, the sneer of Kakuja and his lord beside him. The smirking leader beside Krudule crossed his arms, teeth showing with a widened grin. Several of the leaders looked from Calagras to the head of the summit, Za'hir. All the while the moon above continued its reign, strong overhead now.

Elise shifted into the background of the groups, looking around, her head turning to look round and round. Her eyes scanned person after person, several dozen minimum gathered here and now. Men and women, some young and some old, few if any around

her age though. People from the various clans were exchanging pleasantries, words of their recent month, concerns for the future.

“Funny thing the Orcs, did you know they are also called Goblins?”

“Goblins? That’s weird. Is that a human name?”

“Yes in fact.”

“Dunno I kinda like it actually. Sounds cooler than a grunt sound.”

“Orc isn’t a grunt sound. Oh you silly Alvons.”

A sigh left her as she closed her eyes. A few seconds passed her by until someone walked up beside her, causing her to look. The red shoulders and fur of the black jacket caught her immediately.

“Long time no see stranger,” she greeted.

“Likewise,” Alto replied back while looking at her, “Vulper isn’t here?”

“No, unfortunately. He uh, well- some things have changed recently.”

“A lot has changed hasn’t it,” he murmured.

Both turned their attention back to the leaders around the fire, “Anything happen so far?” she asked.

“Just the same old same old before you lot arrived. Lots of this,” he replied.

Across the way the arguing continued full fold.

“AWOOOOO!!!!”

“Shut the hell up!”

A sigh left her followed by a head shake.

“{And so the bickering begins,}” she thought to herself.

“Heh heh, some things never change.”

“Suppose not,” Elise finally spoke with a light chuckle.

The two began to make their way around. Tales of giant spider monsters spitting projectiles, tales of bandits raiding different trade routes. Tale of actually trading in human settlements. One group talked simply about the weather of the last month.

A group of several sat around a smaller fire. One had a small pouch of some kind of crisp. Another had a full turkey leg roasted that they and two others were tearing away at. Another group nearby held bowls of rice.

“Peaceful, no?” Alto asked as they walked along.

“It’s nice, seeing everyone get along like this despite everything.”

“Peace is the ultimate reward for our kinds of people. It should be enjoyed.”

She nodded, looking at a group of young warriors practice sparring. A few people clapped them on. Then across the way a few people danced, mostly women but a few men too. Around the fire, a smaller fire.

A couple of the more elderly and weathered folk sat back or stood leaned against walls and trees watching. A few discussed this or that but not much more.

Clap clap

Heads turned towards the center. Elise and Alto both looked over.

“Now that we are all in attendance can we get this meet underway?” the short woman leader asked aloud.

Bodies began to move, some people closing in to go and stand back with their groups.

“Very well,” Za’hir agreed from his place as around him many settled in.

Elise moved with Alto to a spot not with Vulfax or really any other group. There were individuals around them though not many. Multiple mingled groups remained despite the clans converging as Za’hir continued.

“Before the might of the full moon, we are gathered here and now to discuss matters which hold to the Mountain Clans. Gathered here by request of Clan Vong, Clan Vulfax, The Wessex Colony, and The Corgan. Our Summit shall commence.”

“If I may be so bold as to begin this,” the leader in armor began, speaking with a tone of might and firm resolve, “We Larquist have observed the growing rebellion and would like to share word of it with you great leaders.”

Za’hir looked to the armored man, “Very well. Archibald Kasius of the Larquist, you may begin.”

“Thank you Za’hir. To begin with, my men have personally witnessed the attacks of the Orcs and several other of the lower races. Trolls have been used to demolish villages along the lower reaches of the Flax Mountains, with these Orcs using ground forces to sweep survivors. The attacks are coordinated and the humans are wearing thin. As they climb these mountains I suspect resistance will only grow before the Inquisition becomes involved. From that point I would-”

“BAH!” yelled out another of the leaders, a tall lanky fellow with long hair down to his ankles practically and no bangs, all straight, dressed in form fitting armor, “No one cares about the rebels OR the Inquisition. Those are human matters pertaining

to the lower folks. Now what REALLY matters are events here and now. Ain't that right Amon?!"

The outspoken individual looked to the man beside Kakuja. This man, Amon, said nothing. Two leaders across from the individual, on the other side of him from Amon, the blindfolded man spoke calm and collected.

"Spoken with true ignorance Malro."

"Eh? Oh that's rich comin' from you Veskar. You know as well as I that it's people like us that hold the true threat," Malro snickered now looking over to Calagras.

"Threat surrounds us all, always. Even the most unexpected of foes may prove to be detrimental to survival."

"HA! This comin' from you like I said. What a joke."

"Shut up Malro. Your voice is giving me a headache," a man spoke from across the flame, a dull tired voice, the man looking back completely uninterested.

"Better watch yourself there bud. I swear I will-"

The ramblings of the different leaders began in earnest. Za'hir at the head sighed at that point and stepped away from the flame, sitting back on a large wood throne-like seat. Elise looked around, watching the back and forth while also listening. The body language of those howling out, the tones.

"And what IS the prime solution to the dealings of the madmen who think they own these mountains hmmm? What would you have us do?"

"Well the first thing I would do is-"

"I DON'T GIVE A DRAGON'S ASS!"

"Up yours!"

Alto sighed and shook his head.

"My my. It amazes me that they can even come together at all without outright killing each other," he spoke.

Elise glanced towards Za'hir, the calm and honest indifference of the leader. He appeared to give the meeting no mind at this point as the many rambled on down below.

"... I don't know how long that is going to last Alto."

Across the way the bickering of the clan leaders continued. Za'hir paid no mind to any of it as the loud ones gathered continued their protest. Malro stomped forward, howling out after a short stint more.

“I think we’re all ignoring the BIGGEST problem in the air right now. There are enemies among us, enemies pushing us to collapse and to war. War with the humans eventually too!”

Calagras looked up as Amon from the Vong stepped forward. Amon looked directly at Calagras in that moment. A scowl filled the old lizard man, Kakuja behind him shifting.

“What did your loud neighbor do this time? Piss on your lawn?” one of the various leaders asked.

“Silence!”

“I accuse Clan Vulfax of intermingling with both the humans and the Inquisition, to draw our enemies close to tear us down!” Amon barked.

Howls of shock and outrage erupted at once, with an immediate blast from Sacho who crashed ahead.

“That is baseless and a lie!!”

“What proof have you?” Calagras questioned.

“I have it from reliable sources. Members of Vulfax have been interfering with the Lords of the Lands, exposing our existence out here to their hunters. As the rebellion grows their focus will turn to we mountain clans with the same animosity that their kind has always had for us!”

“What do you mean Amon?” Archibald questioned.

“Yeah that’s a lot to lead with. Surely you can tell us something?” the wavy haired woman asked.

“Their people have interfered in the affairs of the humans twice. A convoy on its way to Emerton and then an incident in Emerton itself. One of their own completely exposed herself to the Inquisition and the human leaders. Who knows how many other incidents have happened. This raises their awareness to our existence in these woods, something we have all collectively worked to avoid for decades!”

“Your claims are wildly exaggerated Vong. Our warriors aided the leaders who became the targets of a plot,” Calagras spoke.

“And we’re supposed to believe that eh?” Malro asked.

Nora stepped forward, “It is not unknown that a squad of our own handled a Scorupi Mamba attack on the lords through the mountains. The attack on Emerton shouldn’t be news to you all by this point. More of the Mamba attacked with assassins.

If anything our actions just stopped the leaders from being martyrs which would lead the humans to us.”

“What so the humans will think we’re friendly just cuz some kid helped beat the rabid dog up that shat on their grass? Get real- they are egotistical bastards. They’ll forget that as soon as it happened,” Malro mocked.

“You call it a plot but have you any proof other than it being a freak accident?”

Amon growled.

“Scorupi Mamba up here a freak accident? Or the assassins?”

“Coincidence.”

“Bull-shit!”

“So mutant bugs attack and the assassins are just conveniently there?”

“Was anyone there that really can say what happened?”

“Does anyone know if these attacks even happened-”

“Alright enough!” Sacho howled.

“Our warriors ensured passage of a convoy through our territory when it came under fire by five of the mamba who focused on the lords. At a later point in time one of those warriors was in Emerton on a different matter when both the creatures and these assassins attacked, one assassin of which was a Vampire,” Calagras began, “Later a group of those assassins attacked our own territory near the river and gravely wounded two of our own.”

“A likely claim,” Amon growled.

Now it came to the man with Krudule. The smirk remained as he hopped forward. His amber gaze locked on Calagras.

“See now here’s the interesting thing. Say your warriors are seen favorable by the humans... well that protects Vulfax’s interests, not ours. Vulfax could use this position to ask the humans to help you claim the whole of the mountains, no? I mean- why not?” he began, catching the blinding scowl of Sacho and the rage of Nora as he continued with his sharp daunting voice, “Think about it. If they view us as a threat, maybe they work with Vulfax. See them as safe, extra security. And the rest of us poor schmucks, we’re simple fodder.”

“Using the humans as a power grab?”

“Of course, they take in humans all the time!”

“Cowards!”

Calagras and Lysander both directed their attention to the man with the latter speaking, "Of course you would push such a theory Dustin Abbott. You and your Stark Pack are no strangers to stirring the pot."

His smirk widened.

"Do tell Abbott," Calagras began, "Vulfax is not the only collective of races here in the mountains now is it? Your mercenary clan, it holds such similar weight if not greater- does it not?"

The wide smirk shifted slightly, curving down into a slight scowl.

"The assassins. Could they not in fact be yours in a bid to gain more control over the clans? Your Pack is an outside force... maybe you are looking to cement your own positions here, no?"

"An outrageous accusation!" Krudule spat at once, "We earn our livelihood doing work for the clans. It is not in our interest to take such actions."

"Yet it could be a transition into becoming more permanent, more powerful, could it not?" Lysander added.

Grumbles and murmurs filled the air at the remark.

"This is clearly a diversion from accusations aimed directly at Vulfax! We would take no such actions. We don't even have Vampires in our ranks!" another of the Pack yelled out.

"Regardless of where these supposed assassins come from, it's clear that Vulfax has always been more chummy with the human side of things," Malro chuckled, scowling as he did.

"Recruiting humans and sending your own into human territory."

"Does anyone remember that one fellow, Edmond? Need more be said?!"

The grumbling and yelling intensified, support for Vulfax on one hand and support for the opposition on the other. Elise remained by Alto, a few beads of sweat dripping down her face. Her non-existent smile curled back into a twitching mess with foggy stare. Her shoulders slumped as did her head.

"The rebellion is problem enough. If they make their way up here we'll have to deal with them on top of the humans. And if Vulfax continues to operate we'll have to deal with the Inquisition far sooner!"

"You are grossly over examining the situation!" Lysander barked.

“Like hell we are! If you are allowed to continue operating like this the humans will start digging. We made a pact at this summit decades ago to remain out of human affairs, yet here you still mingle with their kind even now with the rising threat!”

“Vulfax needs to be reminded of its place!”

“You all are over reacting. If anything Vulfax has the potential to prevent our collapse with their connections.”

“I agree that the Pack probably has something to do with this matter, why not investigate them?!”

“Maybe the Vong are in on it to claim more territory!”

“And- heh, MAYBE IT’S VULFAX and NOT the Vong eh?!”

“Maybe we should be joining those rebels and doing our part to keep those humans in line!”

“Wipe out the humans!”

“Are you friggen nuts?! The Kingdom will come for us then!”

“They’ve long since abandoned us- who cares?!”

Sacho and Nora stomped forward, while across the way Krudule braced himself beside a smirking Dustin. Kakuja turned to those stationed with Veskar while some of Malro’s own men walked up around their leader ready to draw weapons. Some warriors and leaders remained passive but many now stood riled. Elise’s focus on the man above turned to the tension around them all. Beside her Alto began to back away.

“This is about to get ugly...”

The moment any of the warriors moved a step is when high above the figure shifted. Za’hir rose from his seat, fire leaving his nostrils and moments after his mouth itself. A breath of fire traveled the sky above the gathering, immediately drawing to halt all of the bickering. All attention shifted up, from the leaders to their people.

Not even a roar, simply a puff of his flame with flare as he stomped up to the edge of the pillar, “That is more than enough. I will not permit this to unfold any further.”

The crowd grew silent with that simple command of the powerful Drachon above. Za’hir looked out over them all. Even the smirking Dustin no longer smirked.

“Enough imagined blood has been spilled here. I will not entertain the idea of letting it become reality,” he spoke.

Shuffling occurred below from this.

Za'hir looked down upon Calagras, "I will no longer permit Vulfax to act as it has towards the humans. Whether for benefit or not, we all made the agreement to protect the secrets and people of these mountains. Involving ourselves any further jeopardizes all of our hard work. Do I make myself clear Calagras?"

"... yes. I understand Za'hir."

"Good. Then let this discussion be gone with the setting moon come morning. We may not all like one another but we have a common objective here. Survival."

The Drachon nodded before turning himself away and removing himself from the scene's edge and returning to his seat. The snark of a few of them returned, some leaders such as Amon turning to pull away at once with his subordinates. A grunt of disgust left the elder lizard man. Around them all the other clans began to settle back.

Dustin remained out only long enough to look at Calagras, grinning as he moved away. He walked with Krudule, the three hooded individuals behind turning and following. Right as they did though his sights set on the hooded Elise. Her face clenched slightly along with the rest of her body, those blazing amber eyes passing her over, marking her as he disappeared into the crowd of his own men and others.

A swelling of tension crept through her gut in that moment. The sweat dripped now as she wiped her brow. Her fogged eyes looked ahead at the flame now, her thoughts swirling.

She had turned to him in the tunnels of Vulfax, looking to Vulper.

"Seems as though conflict is inevitable."

"Such is life Miss Bakuuva. We can not live without conflict, lest we become stagnate and rot."

"I... am aware, but- conflict should only go so far... is another war likely?"

"Hopefully not Miss Bakuuva. If anything I hope for this to be resolved quickly and quietly."

Her hands clenched up. She turned, Alto beside her standing firm though with a rattled expression of his own.

"This isn't going to be over that easily, is it?" she questioned looking around, many faces of discomfort surrounding them now.

"Not by a long shot," Alto grumbled, "Can only hope that cooler heads will prevail after this is done."

“If you boys are all done fighting,” a voice called out, the voice of another leader, a female one rather plain if not a little energetic and sassy, “I think we should try and talk about... other matters, right?”

Attention turned to a younger woman, long wavy midnight hair which held a silver streak, rose red eyes that had a very distinct red glow to them, a slender face and frame, long black robes with a torn tail, absolutely no shoes, fingernails and toenails both painted a strange purple. She stepped forward, the patter of her feet on the grounds very soft compared to the crackle of flame of the gathering’s fire- not a single person uttering a word as she made her way to the helm of the group.

Dustin himself came back into view with a scowl and crossed arms. Calagras remained as he was, the others like Amon and Archibald remaining at ease though focused.

The woman stopped, turning her attention towards Dustin, “You make bold claims Dustin,” she spoke softly, yet boldly, “Vulfax is the threat for their connections? Yet what of your order? Stark Pack has all sorts of resources with no known tethers, doesn’t it? And- what about the Ryzo incident?”

Dustin’s demeanor dropped immediately as the young woman singled him out. Her head tilted, the gleam of those eyes resting entirely upon his soul. Yet all the same the fire of his eyes, the chaos within them, reflected back at her like the fire.

“Gwendolyn, I do not know how your people found out about that but it will be handled shortly,” Dustin muttered.

“So you say,” she replied continuing to look upon him.

“Pah! This is a waste of time. All we’re doing is bickering at this point!” Malro called out.

“So it would seem,” Veskar muttered aloud, “Perhaps then-”

“We should simply end this,” Amon growled turning himself away.

“Very well. Though the night is young, I find this tension unyielding. May cooler heads prevail in the times to come. We are adjourned!” Za’hir called out.

Among pressed away, Veskar and Malro both turning away and retreating. Dustin scowled in the direction of Gwendolyn who turned her head back with a smirk as she crept away on her feet. Archibald with an over the top grin of pride moved away through a crowd with his warriors. Calagras soon moved back with those of Vulfax heading the way they had come from.

Elise remained beside Alto, who now himself was moving to leave, “Eventful as always... I have to be off. Duties to tend to early if I’m lucky.”

She turned her head, “Alto- just, be careful alright?”

“You know me,” he chuckled, “I’ll catch you later Elise.”

Elise nodded and soon turned her focus back towards Vulfax’s representatives. As she did though she crossed sights with Gwendolyn, the latter of whom gave only a polite smile and a nod as she disappeared into the crowd dispersing. Dustin on the other hand was already gone with Krudule following close behind. Elise now began to walk, heading across the center and passed the fire.

Above her Za’hir observed her with a blank expression- yet he nodded as she looked up at him. His arms behind his back as he backed away into the unseen darkness of the tower. And with that Elise returned to proximity with Vulfax, returning near Lysander and the others. They moved back towards the woods, Calagras at the head.

“Well that could’ve gone better,” Sacho grumbled from behind.

“It’s to be expected,” Lysander replied.

“Our fears may yet be realized. The tension here was palpable, and I have no doubt that there stands an enemy among us responsible for these random attacks,” Calagras conferred.

“So... what happens next?” Norra asked.

“The unfortunate that we wanted to avoid,” Lysander murmured.

Elise beside him looked only at the ground in a cold sweat as the word ‘war’ was uttered. The cold night air swirled around them. Her pained struggled expression latched onto the floor of the woods itself with thoughts again swirling. Those words from Vulper, his response to her.

“Such is life Miss Bakuuva. We can not live without conflict.”

The words clung to her then and there as the group moved along, the moon high overhead above... far far back behind though as they left, high high atop a remaining column overlooking the former courtyard. The flapping coat, two tails, drenched in black. Long sleeves, a covered figure, all black pants and shoes. Hooded with the skull mask. Those glowing eyes behind that mask locked on the Vulfax crew and specifically on Elise.

He uttered nothing as the winds carried his coat tails. Black gloved hands at his sides with the flap. Those eyes of his narrowed, setting in.

For Elise as she moved, only the sensation of dread and unease remained with her as her people departed the overall clearing and vanished into the woods. Unseen clouds had gathered overhead of the whole of the forest, over all of the region. A storm of untold power was set upon them, now fast approaching.

The moon overhead would continue to glow as it always had over the valley. Unchanged from above, yet so very much different below.

What is to come would be anyone's guess. The darkness has only now begun to set itself in. For all those set to be caught up in it, a future of chaos would be the inevitable. And what of the Inquisition and these assassins hellbent on causing said chaos? Only time can tell...

END OF CHAPTER!!