

Chapter I

Embers of the Past

Episode 9

Thomas stood at the ready, hand already on the grip of his sword. He arched forward slow and spread his stance. Beside him Destiny held her own not yet ready to engage. Standing before them was Elise who was none the more ready.

Calm. Patient. Calculating.

She stood there so simply with a hand on the sheathe of her sword and her other arm crossed over to take hold of it. Really she could best be described as stoic and unflinching as both of her entrusted students faced her. Thomas's grip tightened while Elise remained as is.

Destiny was the first to break, stepping forward though without hand upon her weapon, "Alright hold up Tom."

"What?" he grumbled.

Elise's head climbed only slightly.

"I know how you fight. Don't just go charging in like you usually do. She's got twice the reach and she knows how to use it."

"She's got range but she can't slash. Rapiers aren't made for anything other than sticking it to someone and keeping them back!"

A slight smirk crept across Elise's face with that insinuation.

"Idiot! Where did you hear that bunch of mumbo jumbo? Look she's even smiling about it!"

"Fine if you're so concerned then lets take her together!" Thomas spat, "She can't take us both on at once!"

"Don't limit yourself by what you perceive to be true Thomas. That'll get you and your partner killed one day. Any weapon can go above and beyond once you learn how to harmonize with it."

"Ngh... come on Destiny we've got this!"

He tore forward and ripped from his back his own sword, lunging in raised ready to hack down. Elise set her sights ahead. A quick draw, lightning quick in fact. In the fraction of a blink her sword swung from sheath up and into Thomas's blade before he even brought it down.

The clatter of metal. He was stopped at the reach of her weapon and it took not but a moment for him to look up to see that blade lowered to his face. She stood with one arm behind her back and a very blank expression. His own eyes pulsed.

Thomas stepped back and swung into Elise's weapon, bouncing it away though with a slight twirl it'd be raised right back up to his chest. Another smack of his blade against her own would send him forward. And it was at that same time that Destiny shot forward drawing her own sword. Elise flickered back while retaining her pose.

Upswing, right swing, back left.

Her form retreated as both adversaries pressed- yet with every swing of their swords her own met with subtle strikes. A strike to the side to throw a swing off, an angled block to deflect. Her sword flew across to her right, still left handed, catching the side of Destiny's sword. Then came a twist of the wrist to turn the rapier back left to catch and block a slash from Thomas.

Both swords came down at once and all Elise responded with was to twist her sword back to the right with a flick of the wrist. Both swords came down on the rapier's flat. As they did Elise's arm buckled but not flat out, rather enough to catch both swings. Thomas's drop was harder, pressing Elise.

Her arm dropped and thus the sword angled. Thomas stumbled forward while Elise acted against Destiny. Their weapons broke and the rapier descended for the latter's knees- stopping just short. Then came another swing left aimed at Thomas's side, again, stopping just short.

"Attack in sync," Elise spoke jumping back a few paces, "Balance off of each other!"

Her sword tossed from her left hand to her right, the arms exchanging positions now. A loud howl left Thomas who delved forward. He swung down and Elise moved her sword. Both locked, Thomas pressed.

Their lock broke as Elise back stepped. Thomas came in with a jab to her left, a simple swing up and his blade went flying back. Then came Destiny to the right with another swing. A twist and a downward swing from Elise grounded that strike.

Another swing blocked Thomas once more and a down swing sent Destiny almost to the ground. Right as she stumbled, in came her partner. A metaphorical backhand came with a slap from Elise's sword against his. The trio began to move once more with Elise backing away and the two pressing; huffs leaving them while Elise remained rather cold.

Thomas shot in with a thrust as Destiny took the blunt of Elise's sword; though very quickly Elise flicked her weapon. Thomas's sword met right where the blade met the guard, his force pressing against- though a mild sidestep gave her the opening. Her elbow flew and jabbed right into Thomas's face.

He sputtered and spun, while Destiny took another swing. Once more Elise side stepped and brought her rapier up and over, swinging down with tremendous force. Destiny's strike buckled and her weapon dropped. A little twist left the rapier once more positioned at Destiny's face.

And as Thomas came back in from behind she turned, blocking the strike and angling the rapier to strike at Thomas's exposed flank.

"Too blunt and too unfocused. You're not working together proper," she addressed.

"How are we not beating you with a god damn rapier?" Thomas grumbled stepping back.

"You're not working together and you're not thinking before you attack," she replied "I'm able to deflect and redirect each of your strikes because of how you're coming at me. A rapier is not some simple floppy piece of aluminum that buckles to thicker swords. It is a true sword like any other."

Both looked to her with weapons lowered.

"When you both hit me at the same time, your forces were uneven, letting me take advantage to make an opening. Thomas you are putting far too much into your strikes which has given me numerous ways to take advantage if I had wanted. And Destiny you are holding back too much, almost like you're second guessing your movements."

"Tch," Thomas grumbled, "If I came at you one on one with lethal intent it'd be different."

"Thomas!" Destiny shouted.

"Hardly," Elise replied coldly, "I was not trying myself Thomas. I didn't even go on the offensive. There was no need. If I had you'd have lost far sooner."

“Oh yeah?!”

“Cut the tough guy act Tom. If I were at all serious about fighting you I could have won this in seconds. Don’t let arrogance cloud you. You’re a warrior in training and still very young, far from a master.”

“Young... we’re the same age!”

“Young in experience. You have not seen many fights, you have not been in many battles. You’ve hardly trained until recent. Experience is more important than rank and physical age... that is what Edmond taught me.”

Her sword flew round right back into the sheathe. Both Thomas and Destiny followed suit.

“Says the one that the clan dunks on constantly for being weak-” he grumbled.

“Tom!” Destiny spat.

“She’s barely a warrior Destiny! She’s just babysitting us!”

“Say what you wish of me, the point stands. If you are going to make a trade for power you have to understand it means nothing if you don’t know how to wield it proper,” she concluded.

“Screw this!” Tom howled tearing off, “I need a real trainer!”

“Thomas! Tom wait-” Destiny called heading off after him.

Elise watched the two depart, one chasing the other. Eyes closed and a sigh left her. With sword sheathed she turned and began to walk, the sound of the two understudies arguing growing ever more distant as she followed the river. Elise carried forward.

The rush of the waters beside her, the drifting ambiance of the nature around her. Creatures a cross of rabbit and squirrel, cat-like creatures with horn nubs and wings, strange shapes of birds. White wolves held ground across the river to her left though paid her no mind as she strolled across the way from them. A shorter distance along, pinkish-brown deer with white undersides and green horns.

She halted near a larger space in the river, the water a bit more shallow here, rocks poking out of the waves smooth as can be. Turning left, facing the wide open waters.

Staring. Sighing.

She glanced down at the hilt of her sword, briefly with a long tiredness in her sights. Her eyes drooped ever so.

“... I wish you were still here...” she murmured to herself before looking back out at the waters.

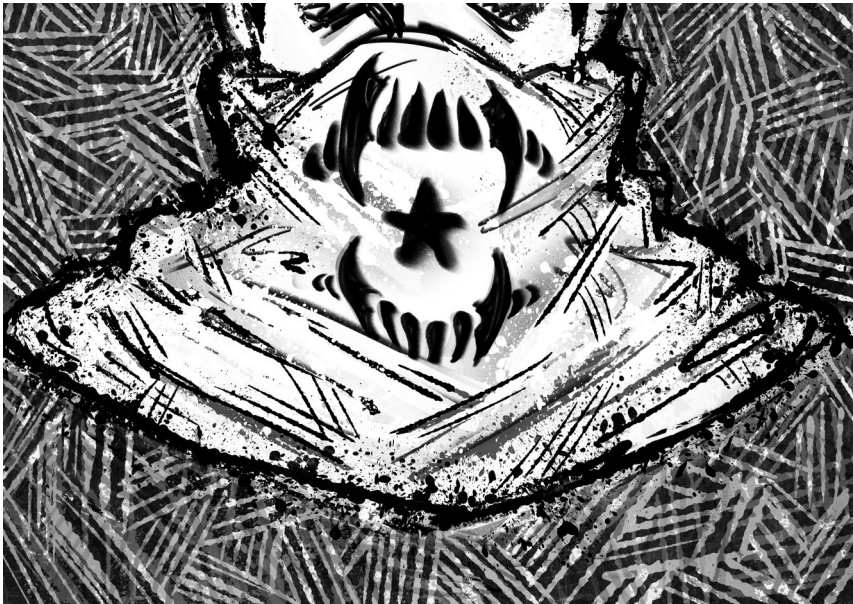
Elise knelt down at the waters edge and reached out with cupped hands. Bringing the waters to her face she splashed herself. Another sigh escaped her as she then wiped her face with her sleeve.

Crackle

Her head perked. Her attention turned. There, across the waters, the brush moved beside... figures. A few stood already and a few more were emerging.

Elise slowly rose keeping her eyes trained on the group. While their attire wasn't uniform, the theme was similar. Ragged, mostly in torn tunics and coats overtop plain shirts and pants. Some with daggers, some with long swords.

Several of them though stood out for their bandanas draped around their necks. Navy blue with gray fang patterns that resembled those of a canine howling. A star hung in the middle of the jaws, center of the bandana.



Art by Aureolin

“Stark Pack,” she grumbled.

She remained as is, watching as the few bandits made their way up along the river sticking to the tree line.

“Didn’t spot me... lets see what you’re up to,” she murmured reaching back to her hood.

As the fabric flipped forward she began to move. Sticking to her side of the river, she watched from behind as those men moved along the bank through the brush; though she herself soon moved to the brush of her own side. The trail continued for some time with Elise following behind on her own side of the river and the pack across the way. The members of the pack moved without much caution or concern period.

The crest of the Vulfax Mountain, specifically the Vulfax Mountain, stood behind her as they moved. And with the curve of the earth and river came a new pillar. Closer to the ground, not nearly as big as the ahead Vong Mountain or the Ar’tak Mountain. This one was stone brick rather than straight stone.

A broken tower left behind, one attached to an old fortress. A tattered old water wheel for the mill of the fort, the fallen stone walls, the broken fence line. It stood at the fork of the river where one stream carried to the left and another to the right, dividing the mountains. Only so much further would bring Elise to a halt at the forest’s edge.

Across the way stood a bridge from the Ar’tak Mountainside to the Vong Mountainside which held the fort. From said Ar’tak’s treeline emerged the ragged band... and waiting for them at the edge of the forest, several humanoids. Those humanoids, not simple humanoids. While they wore similarly ragged attire to the Stark Pack and to Vulfax, they had other features.

Gray skin and dull blue skin, flaked skin... scaly skin... and tails, long thick tails. One with horns sticking straight up and another with nubs of horns, and another with nothing. A tall man stood easily at a over two meters tall at the head of the reptilian people- dark brown hair kept short cut aside from large bangs draping curved over his face, red eyes. He wore a fur pelt over his shoulders, no shirt, and baggy pants with sandals. An ax rested at his side, a huge one at that, one stained with old blood.

From the collective of Stark Pack, one stepped forward from the rest. An older man, slightly wrinkled though not fully- his hair was long down his back and rather spiked like classic anime villain, messy bangs. Brown eyes with a slight golden-wolf sheen to them. Muscular, visibly fit, tattered brown tunic and cloak, sweatpants also tattered, bronze hand guards, boots, and a red visor over his forehead. A large visible broadsword rode this man’s back with the handle visible jetting from behind his shoulder; though there was no sheathe visible. The bandana of the pack hung from his left arm like a band.

“{Kakuja and the Vong... and Krudule with the Pack. This doesn’t look good-}” Elise thought to herself.

Although out of earshot for her she retained position and eye contact on this meeting as the leaders of both groups approached one another. Kakuja stepped forward, a hand on his ax as he slowly drug it along via its broadside.

“You’re late” Kakuja began in a gruff low voice.

“We had other matters to deal with,” Krudule replied with a deep silky slowish voice.

“Is it about that turn coat Ryz0?,” Kakuja growled.

“Ryz0 won’t be a problem for much longer. The boss has put the Trio De La Muerte on it after the Emerton incident. No- this is about another issue that appears to be plaguing us.”

“You people had best handle it Krudule. Our leader is not happy. Our neighbors are not happy.”

“Do you mean Vulfax? Honestly Kakuja, if you people are so afraid of offending the shadow huggers, then Clan Vong has issues.”

“Still your tongue you welp!” Kakuja spat.

“No matter. What does Amon wish of us this time around?”

“... bring it.”

One of the Vong stepped forward, an old looking scroll in hand. The lizard person held the parchment out, which then was received by Krudule. The old warrior’s hands moved taking hold of it and undoing the string. As the parchment rolled open he would examine it, eyes darting around.

“... very well. We’ll handle this matter. Our usual fee will suffice.”

“We’ll have no problem paying up so long as you get a handle on Ryz0. The Inquisition is focused on the rebel army but if this keeps up they’ll start focusing on us.”

“They likely already are.”

“What do you mean?”

Krudule looked at Kakuja, stone faced, “We have it from our network. Vulfax is causing issues. Lots of issues. One of their members was involved in Emerton, as were a few others in other incidents.”

“Vulfax?!”

Krudule nodded.

“Nrrrrgh... leave it to Calagras and his bumpkins.”

“What will the Vong do?” Krudule asked.

“... we’ll handle that ourselves.”

“Very well. I believe we are done here then,” Krudule said before turning around.

He moved back towards his group who all turned about. They began to move while the lizard warriors remained. From there Kakuja took up his ax and turned away with his group. This left the young Elise in the brush watching. Slowly she rose up seeing them go, a sigh leaving her as all enemies moved out of range.