

Orders

Blood spattered tree bark, axes and swords dug into the ground, a lopped off arm here and a head over there. The field- littered. Bodies strung about everywhere around the four, partially rotted and some completely without flesh. Heads lopped off, limbs torn free, bodies dissected and scattered with splashes of red all over the grasses.

Larry on his backside with hands planted, staring shaken. The four- pistols, a broadsword, twin ruby daggers, and a katana. Elise and her crew stood tall over the bodies that littered around them, one corpse's hand wrapped around Elise's boot though very loose, only the top third of its torso remaining attached to that hand while the rest was tossed away. She pulled back, pulling herself from the hand whilst slowly gliding her sword back into its sheathe.

Blake lowered and immediately holstered his weapons, sighing, "That was uncharacteristically easy."

"What do ya expect?" Dante grumbled, twirling his blade in hand, "Not like them bastards were anything special like Dires."

"Definitely not Arkaza Zombies," Roxanne added, "Those Galahan Vampires could learn a thing or two from that demon."

"Still, they did escape," Dante grumbled once more.

"It's strange though," Elise murmured, looking down with a somber expression.

"What is?"

"Those three seemed just as confused about these things," she continued, "As if it wasn't expected."

"We should forget about those three for right now and instead focus on the matter at hand. Getting through this forest with those cultists is going to be a pain. They already attacked a few squads."

“There’s... more to it than that Dante. If we are to get out of this forest, we’ll need to take them out and find their base,” Blake began.

“Why is that?”

“Well you see, from what the old man told us, this forest is a-”

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Soaring through the trees, the three figures flew along. The elder Vampire Knight at the helm with the two apprentices trailing close behind. Leaping from branch to branch moving many meters between each step and launch. Fen Rao continued to wear his iron mask whilst the other two were very much so softened up like butter.

Step and launch. As Shree hopped off of the next branch in unison with Yeager her attention shifted back behind, turning her head to physically look back. The light of the clearing long gone, nothing but darkness and trees lingering behind.

“I don’t think we’re being followed,” she called as she took another leap.

“Why are we running? And the hell were those things anyway?” Yeager asked immediately following.

“How did those guys get the better of us like that? I thought we were supposed to be more attuned to everything after being turned!”

“Sure as shit didn’t seem like it old man. You had better tell us what the deal is-”

“Will you two shut the hell up already?!” Rao barked out, catching both apprentices by surprise, their shocked expressions latching onto his back, “I warned you not to drop your guards. Just because you’re now superhuman doesn’t mean a damn thing. Quit behaving like a bunch of children or it’ll get you killed!”

“Well what’s the plan now old man? We can’t let their convoy get out of the forest or that’ll be it for Galahan!”

“Silence Yeager, I am aware of the threat!” the old man shouted, completely abandoning his stone look for one of genuine grief as he glared over towards his young comrade.

“Nrgh-” Yeager grumbled.

“Old man-” Shree began before going silent, watching as the old man again stared forward.

Another step on the next branch and a snap, all three bolting along, “{We never anticipated them to have *power users* amongst their ranks. It was the briefest of encounters but they effortlessly showed their superiority to the two brats. I don’t stand a chance on my own against all five of them. There’s no time to send a request for backup back to the capitol... ack, and those undead. Perhaps it wouldn’t be out of the question to attempt to team up with the ones who made them?}”

“Huh? Hey, ahead of us!” Shree called out.

“What?” Rao growled.

Several figures flew straight into the path of the trio from below, flopping in and swinging away. The duo stepped down whilst the master ducked back and flipped beneath a strike, going completely under and beyond the assailant. Other figures wasted no time, landing around the duo and the old man, whilst the attacker landed on a different branch.

Rao turned, “Grah, another pestilence. Who the hell are you?!” he growled out.

The attacker rose, their back to Fen Rao, the only thing visible being their long blond hair and their jacket, a brown jacket with a little fur collar and red stripes over the shoulders like arm bands. The figure turned just a hair as something slipped from their right sleeve into their hand. Rao’s eyes shot down and his stance readied.

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“-so as you youngins can see there ain’t no escape from this place without that cathedral runnin’ again.”

“That is preposterous! You mean to tell us that we are stuck here without engaging that filth? I don’t buy it- you, you only want us to believe that so that we will clear them out!”

“Fellow, I don’t expect nuffin cuz we’ve tried. Ain’t no one ever come back thas gone out there. You’re better off settling here in our little town here.”

“Magistrate Garvin, we have no reason not to trust the Mayor’s word. Besides- those *things* attacked several of our convoys. What makes you think they won’t attack the rest?” spoke the young girl known as Andi.

“B’sides that, what makes you think we stand a chance in hell of defendin’ the whole bloody show from this town to forest’s friggen edge?” Dante added, “We’re good but we ain’t gonna be able to defend everyone from the numbers that Larry mentioned.”

“Protecting OUR assets is YOUR job. We hired your agency to aid us, not break rank and help out some hermit- FREAKS. You will do your duty to us and get us out of here!”

“Our mission was to get you out of here alive and stave any threats to that mission,” Elise murmured, looking over at the magistrate with a slight turn of her head and a glare, “Frankly, your irrational pride is a threat to the mission Magistrate Garvin.”

“She’s right,” Blake added, “We don’t know what we’re up against. Yes they are strangers but if this is an Eternal Hollow, which why would these folks even know what that is, then there’s no leaving. If we charge out there blind on your orders we are putting this entire operation in jeopardy.”

“We have a duty to carry out and our people can wait no longer. We will regroup and push ahead, that is an order!”

“I really don’t like this guy,” Elise murmured, stepping forward now towards the magistrate.

“Elise-” Blake called, to which Elise did not stop.

Garvin looked now to the young warrior, glaring practically as she strolled right by, “Where do you think you’re going? Bakuuva! Bakuuva are you going to ignore my orders child? I swear to you if you do this I will-”

!!!



Art by Sonmie

“WAAAAAAAAAAAH!!” Garvin yelled out, stumbling backwards.

As he felt the room shook ever so slightly, the floor boards creaking, pottery on the shelves and tables beginning to shake and rumble. The slightest glare of those eyes, the flex of her hand, and an aura becoming visible the color of black as it expanded around the room. Blake lowered his hand, Roxanne smirked. Andi and the rest all appeared unnerved with their expressions, whilst it was only Dante who looked on clueless.

The magistrate looked around him, then up. The shaking stopped and Elise stood there, her expression softening. It took her no time to turn and walk out of the door to the room, right passed the Mayor who stood in shock. Dante's puzzled look turned into a grin as he soon followed, Roxanne close by him and then Andi. Blake on the other hand moved over by the Magistrate as another Guard helped the leader up.

"Magistrate?" Blake asked as the man stumbled to his feet.

He turned away, saying nothing, his hands clenched into tight fists for a moment, "Bah! Do as you please then; but know that we can not afford to stay here for forever. So if you're going to do something clever, figure it out pronto. Our people need this convoy to succeed!"

Blake stepped back, nodding, "Thank you, Magistrate. We will have a plan within the hour."

A door creaked open with a bit of a listing rattle. Elise strolled out with both of her hands in her coat pockets, while close behind her were Dante and Roxanne. The former was chuckling a bit to himself as he roamed out the door.

"Ah man that was priceless, didja see the look on the ol' guy's face when you flexed your power like that? Thought the fellah was gonna shit 'emself," Dante laughed.

"Yeah well, he didn't give me much of a choice. Either we let him kill the whole group or we actually do something."

"Yeah but like- what exactly ARE we going to do Elise?"

“Simple. Three of us go out and scout for that town with the cathedral, make a call and maybe hit it hard if opportunity presents itself. Otherwise we report back and hit it with all of our forces. If the worst should occur, two of us should be efficient back here for defense.”

“Heh, easy enough luv but who goes and who stays?”

“Dante why even ask?” Roxanne grumbled, “Obviously a long range specialist, Andi, and our strongest defender.”

“So Blake,” Dante replied.

“Bla- hey fuck you!”

“Would all of you just calm down,” Blake called out as he stepped out the door behind, Andi following, all attentions turning to the Vampire, “The Magistrate just gave us permission to handle this however we want.”

“So we don’t have to worry about the idiot taking unnecessary risk then and pushing his convoy ahead? Neato.”

“Yes well- he also said we don’t have all of the time in the world. I like the idea of us splitting up; however we are going to do this a little differently. Andi, Roxanne, and I will head out into the forest and find this Cathedral.”

“Wha?!” Dante spat.

“Roxanne has the highest defensive ability out of any of us with her *Crystallization Technique*, and Andi is the best when it comes to long distance surveillance and combat.”

“That makes damn well sense Blake but why you and not me or Elise?”

“We’re dealing with something that doesn’t die if you take its head off supposedly. Elise lacks the experience to determine what and how to fight whatever this might be, and while you are arguably more equipped than I am as a hunter of my kind- you’re biologically more frail than I am. Both of you are human, and we need to be able to take some hits. Besides, I have something else in mind for the two of you.”

“And that would be?” Elise asked.

“Oh, I gettit. You want us to go after Fen Rao, doncha?” Dante questioned.

“Exactly. I have affirmed what sort of barrier spells they use here. Our employers will be safe within the gates of this town. Not only do I want you to find Rao and his team since their Mud Dolls can cross the boundary, I want you to research what you can that might aid us. I am honestly not expecting to beat whatever these cultists are, if they are what these people say- but I do want information.”

“You can count on us Blake,” Elise stated swiftly, without question.

“I- er, ugh fine. You just make sure you guys come back alive Blake, ya hear me?”

“Heh,” the Vampire chuckled, “Don’t worry Dante, by now you and I should know full well how we stand.”

With that Blake strolled forward, Andi following close behind, and Roxanne soon joining as the trio moved passed the duo, “We’re going to be taking a few of the Mayor’s people with us to find this Cathedral, likely a few of the better rested guards as well. I want the both of you to be careful, alright?”

“Again, you can count on us Blake.”

“Yeah what she said.”

“Right then... lets go you guys-”

The trio shot off, wasting no time whatsoever, leaving just Elise and Dante back to watch them depart.

Hunt of the Unknown

Swish swish.

Flap and crackle.

The turning of crinkly paper in a bound book. The flap of each page echoing around a vast room stacked to the brim with shelves and books; though many a book were scattered across the floor or piled right up. Dust clung to everything, cobwebs dancing in the breeze with the spiders wrapping their silk around the flies. Old tables, old shelves, old dirty covers, a library well and truly left to rot for years on end.

A few lamps lit aflame sat around on windowsills and on the tables cleared of books, and around the room walked the duo and several others of both town and guardsmen. Elise moved from one aisle with a book cradled in hand, looking down upon its text with a finger surfing along each word. She scrolled, whilst around her three towns people dressed in stitched up ragged clothes hobbled around pouring through the books.

Two guards scrolled through the books on the shelves, while another set with their captain moved about the piles. Several aisles down the mayor moved with the magistrate's assistant, a few others collected with them. Dante leaned against the wall a short bit behind them, a window to his right, his expression that of a dullard that was sleep deprived. A yawn slipped him as Elise stepped into the main aisle, again flipping pages.

"So waz it that you're lookin for again darlin? Gotta say, for as much as I dislike Hell I think I'd prefer it to this place," he blabbed out aloud, catching a few glances of some of the townsfolk as he did so.

"This is a library Dante. You should be a little more considerate," Elise spoke back calmly as she began scrolling another page, "One of these journals that have been left behind might hold the clue to these immortal cultists. It's worth looking over."

"Right but like, ain't it just a little more practical to go find 'em and beat them into the ground? Immortal or not it ain't like they're invulnerable... right? No one said they're that right?"

Elise flipped another page, scanning the next that she turned to- and then again flipping to the next, eyes darting across, “{If even one of these were to have info on what we’re up against proper, it would even the odds more than charging right in blindly hoping to learn. But so far no luck. I wonder if-}”

“Well well, look at you being oh so book smart. Have you learned nothing young one?” a voice questioned with an echo that came from nowhere.

Her eyes shifted up briefly. Sat before her atop the table was a lone figure, dressed in half-black and half-white clothes, his hair in spiky strands with a reddish orange coloration. The figure, certainly older, drew a smug grin. No one else in the room stirred, continuing at their own pace despite the sudden appearance.

“Jeez, you again? What is it now, Sephiroth,” Elise murmured before looking back down at the book in her arms.

“Nice to see you too Bakuuva, I’m really feeling the love you brat,” the figure growled, looking to the right as someone backed into the table.

The table shook and the individual swiftly spun round and continued to walk, “Yeah well, I’m busy here. So why don’t you go ahead and take a hike?”

“Heh heh heh, ah come on now. Is that any way to talk to an old friend?”

“You’re not my friend,” she grumbled.

“Oi Elise, you talking to yourself over there? What happened to respecting a library?” came a shout from Dante.

“Yeah just trying to think aloud, sorry-”

Sephiroth chuckled visibly, the snicker heard echoing around the room though not a single individual raised their heads in response.

“Look I don’t need this right now. Come back and bother me later,” she muttered.

“Heh, fine fine. I only wanted to see how you were doing my dear, and you seem so truly lost in thought. Ah but here’s a thought for you-”

“If I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it.”

“Heh... what if that old Vampire from Galahan knows something that you don’t? Wouldn’t it be convenient to see if one Vampire knows about another or supernatural knowing the supernatural? After all, it wouldn’t be the first time you missed something from shrugging someone off~”

“Wait what?!” she spat looking dead ahead.

Her focus broke. Before her was only the table, the man sat upon it now gone completely without a trace. Her head shifted left and then to the right, a few heads turned looking at her. A pause, a brief one before the book slammed shut and was placed upon the table.

“Dante, ready up. We’re going to go find Fen Rao,” she called out, beginning to walk down the main aisle.

“That Old Vampire Guy? Why would we-”

“Call it a hunch from an unwelcoming voice in my head,” she spoke, interrupting, breezing right by her companion, “Everyone else should keep researching until you find something we can use!”

“Hey wait up!”

Dante shot right after her as she sped from the room, the doors rattling open as she pressed against them.

“Blake, what exactly IS the plan here? Are you expecting to waltz right into the enemy stronghold and take them all out?” came the call of Roxanne.

The group moved at a casual pace down an old overrun trail, a few of the townsfolk with them and a few of the guards. A couple of horses were within their ranks just the same as they pressed ahead, relatively quiet with handlers around them. Guards were armed and ready, crossbows and melee weapons primed.

“I’m not expecting anything,” came the male’s reply, “I wish only to see what we are up against. Immortal cultists, a rather obscure thing wouldn’t you say?”

The clucking of the hooves upon the ground and rock. The shuffling of metal and fabrics from pouches. The shimmer of light from up above without any indication as to its source due to the dense cover of tree tops.

“So we’re walking in and hoping to find out what we’re up against? Doesn’t seem very thought out,” came the voice of a young girl, certainly young.

“What other choice have we? It will be fine Andi. We get in, scope it out, take care of whatever if we need to- and then get back and prepare for the full assault.”

Branches crackled beneath them as they shuffled along through the forest, critters skiddling off and away from the group. They moved through the crush, following what was laid before them. The canopy above moved along with them and stretched on eternal. Passing beneath another intersection of changing branches, a shimmering dark above, shifting ever so slightly.

They continued on, Roxanne not saying a word even as she glanced over towards Blake, “I know,” the male spoke.

Hands upon his twin guns, daggers appearing from Roxanne’s sleeves, Andi glancing up. Three masses of black, three sets of glowing red eyes staring right back at the trio.

The branches creaked as weight came down upon them, many many meters off of the ground. Step and crunch, the whoosh of air as two figures soared through the tree line under the cover of darkness. The dome of color once present completely obscured with only the slightest of

illumination lighting up the blue-dyed trees and grass. Birds squawked away, startled by each step taken and the vibration caused.

Dante trailed slightly behind Elise, only slightly. His stomp echoed each time he hopped from tree to tree, clearing at least twenty meters with each launch of himself. Elise held her own pace at about the same; though with far less of a thump. Her look was obscured with a flapping hood once again over her face, aside from that serious frown of hers. All the while Dante continued on as normal, if not a bit mixed from a good shake.

Bit by bit Dante was moving up closer and closer, some minutes in finally being on her tail. His tired expression stared at the back of her head as they hopped along. A low grunt escaped him as his bland expression synced with his dead brain, not a thought rendering out as he looked back ahead, bouncing a little harder to match pace yet again.

“So what’re we even lookin’ for ‘ere? You wanna capture Rao?”

“Rao and the other two might know exactly what we are dealing with. Tracking them down could be important.”

“Aoright but what if we don’t find ‘em, ever consider that?”

“If this is an Eternal Hollow they can’t leave. Besides they won’t abandon their prey, they want that last convoy. If anything they’re around here somewhere preparing more of those mud things to get through the town’s barrier.”

“Mmph, right. Hm? Hold on a minute-”

Dante slammed down atop a branch near the main trunk, Elise dropping down at the next just ahead. As she turned back round to look at him, he placed his right hand upon the tree and cast his gaze to the left.

“Dante, what is... it?”

“Is that what I think it is over there?”

“What do you... ??? There’s no way- is that?”

“Dunno but lets have a look at ‘et.”



Art by Sonmie

Both hunters approached on foot, stopping meters away from the fallen vessel. Cracked and splintered, not a sail to be seen nor a mast, instead the fabric of a massive balloon itself. No growth aside from moss on the sides near the ground. A ship relatively the size of a three story barn, smashed dividing the front and the back.

“This isn’t an Altivolus, is it? No- nothing like what the Tribe or Association use.”

“Likely not one of ‘em but it is a flying ship. Can’t have been here for but more than a few weeks most. Custom build maybe.”

“Large enough for a decent sized crew. What do you think happened? And- where do you think the owners are now?”

SNAP

The snap of a branch just behind both and subtle jumps following, Dante spinning around right then moving to draw his sword, “I think we’re about to find out-”

All at once there were well over a dozen figures bolting from the tree line surrounding the vessel, all rushing at the duo. They were humans, armed with rifles and sabers, all quickly moving in.

“You are surrounded. Put your weapons down and put your hands up!” came a bold, deep shout.

Both Elise and Dante stood shoulder to shoulder angled, Dante with his sword already drawn and Elise with a hand on her own weapon, both glaring out at the surrounding forces.

Attack of the Dead

Guns and crossbows alike all aimed straight ahead. A wall of boat to one side, and half of a circular wall of men and women to the other, armed to the teeth with either ranged or melee combat in mind. At the epicenter, a fair enough gap between the latter, were both Elise and Dante. Twenty-eight guardsmen had the duo held up, both with their own weapons partially drawn.

Dante twirled his broadsword though did not make any moves, thrusting it into the ground. Elise on the other hand released hold of her own katana without a change of stance. Two shrouded phantoms of the night with only face and hands visible. Dante cast his grumpy sight around in a bid of rage from soul to soul, whilst Elise herself looked only ahead.

Light lit up the area, a brilliant pumpkin orange cascading through the trees. Several of the ambushers set forth their lights in effort to illuminate the soon-to-be battlefield.

“Pft- just a buncha schmucks prodding with their damn brights.”

“Yeah, damn brights and weapons trained. The hell do we do Dante?”

“Quit muttering amongst yourselves and surrender, now! I will not say it again!”

The melee weapons stretched ahead, their wielders lining up alongside their ranged brethren. The half-circle was tightened immediately, drawing ever so closer. A gap of only ten or so meters remained wide open between the two sides.

“Do it,” called a voice.

She glared ahead, hand placed back upon the grip of her katana, gazing out as a form rose up right beside her. Sephiroth walked just beyond her side and out towards the open, stopping front and center with a chuckle.

“Oi ‘lise, what’re you thinkin’ in that head of yours?” Dante hissed.

Sephiroth turned his head to the right, his right eye casting madness right back at her. A chilling stare, those deep blue eyes emitting a red glow around them like a ring. The pupils,

dancing mad upon the stage, that ear to ear grin that practically peeled back his face and exposed what lay beneath.

“We are not going to ask again, this is your last chance! Stand down now or die!!”

Her emerald glow locked, that blue with the red aura radiating back upon her own flesh, “You’ve got to do it Elise. You have no choice. They are going to kill your friend here, unless you kill them first. Will you allow for another of your friends to die?”

The handle clacked as she took firm hold, her teeth gritted together.

“Oi... ‘lise? What’re you-”

“READY AND F-”

CRACKLE CRACK

“RRRRRRRRRRRRREEEEEEEEYAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA- HA HA HA
HAAAAAA-”

All eyes spun around and watched the tree bark shatter from the surrounding trees- an exposure of hollowed out mass with decomposing bodies spilling out with a waterfall of blood. As the corpses tumbled out and onto the ground, they lay in the pooled up large puddles of blood. Several trees, and dozens of bodies.

The looks of shock, enough to drop an elephant if they were poison. Bodies, wearing the very same uniforms as those guardsmen all ratted and torn.

WOOSH

Ruptures of dark green flames blew out from the ground beneath the corpses and quickly traveled along the length of the bodies- climbing off of the ground and engulfing them.

Rattle rattle rattle CRACK!!

The bodies shook and crackled, arms bending and crunching, bones adjusting themselves, eyes aglow with the dark green flames. Bunch by bunch the corpses were rising from

the ground, risen by the dark magic. Roars and howls left them, jaws breaking open and drool splashing out onto the ground with a dash of vomit. Up they rose, some armed and others not, their bodies continuing to jolt and partially regenerate.

As the saliva left some, eruptions of blood came as well- sent cascading out of the mouths as the moans and groans let loose. Half rotted faces, half eaten and torn faces in fact! Flesh hanging off exposing the bone beneath the face, the glow of those eyes. In almost unison they began to stumble ahead, their skin darkening with a very evident shading.

“Oh fuck me.”

“Nah- fuck them!”

“Fuck whatever, open fire!”

BANG BANG BANG

Shots rang out instantly, shots from the rifles- bullets slamming through the torsos and some of the heads. Arrows flew and slammed true; however so very few of the undead dropped, rather many were still more than alright and stumbling forward.

“Shit-”

“WEAPONS READY!”

Elise glanced to Dante, who in turn looked back to her, the latter nodding. Before them were the guardsmen with their melee weapons drawn, the combatants moving forward whilst those with their ranged attire began to reload and prepare. Her katana came loose instantaneously as Dante ripped his own blade from the ground. Both shot ahead, with Elise herself leaping up and over the line of guardsmen, whilst Dante slammed right through them.

“OUTTA THE WAY!” he barked, pulling three vials of blue liquid from his pocket.

“**ROOOAAAAA!**”

Elise took the center, charging head first as the undead took aim with their many rifles. Shots banged out, shots all aimed right at her.

Blip blip BLING- PFT TSSS

Shots sped off straight into the ground, ricocheting right off of both her clothes and her skin. With a few more groans there came the next wave, again- to no avail as the shots reflected right off of her body. The gaggle of undead moved in as Elise stepped down, her sword poised.

SWING

With just the single swing of her katana, bodies quite literally exploded. Split in half at the waist or higher, as if being hit by a truck despite her failing to make physical contact. Blood scrambled into the air like steam from water poured upon the rocks. Their groans echoed out, their limbs and bones and guts flopping to the ground.

“HYAH!”

Another swing and another batch exploded from lack of contact, visually or physically. Behind her ran Dante who had begun to toss the vials at a few more undead. Upon impact said vials shattered, the blue vaporizing instantaneously and engulfing multiple undead in clouds of blue. The effects became readily visible, flesh and muscle vaporized in an instant leaving behind quickly dissolving bones collapsing down to the ground.

One good stomp and one downward swing, yet another undead split in half down the middle right then and there. Dante stepped ahead through the halves as they fell away, swinging his sword round and straight through three more undead. Two fell, their heads taken right off, the third stumbling back with its head barely still attached. He next pulled beside Elise and ripped forth another vial, hurling it.

As the vial shattered open, dark blue flames erupted around the undead. Their shrieks and howls reached out as they burned out, slumping over as more stumbled forward. One more slash from Elise and another batch fell, a great hole wrenched right open inside the crowd. Behind them the guardsmen stood frozen, focused on the bloodshed before them.

Another set of bodies slogged onto the ground like a mixed berry smoothie before the duo. Both twirled their swords in hand, their heads spinning around. More and more trees were birthing out the undead with seemingly no end. One dozen here, and another dozen there, slapping down and rising up groaning. Both stood back to back, Dante facing the left and Elise facing the right.

“Heh heh, lot of the lil’ bastards now ain’t there?” Dante huffed.

“Certainly a lot of them. There’s no questioning it, these guys were made with Black Magic alright; but the spell is completely different from the one Arkaza uses,” Elise replied, holding her katana out before her.

“Yeah I know, it’s the *Infernal Resurrection* technique, flames were a dead giveaway. It also means that the caster is nearby!”

“Heh. Give the lad a prize, he knows his stuff,” a voice echoed out.

Among the risen rose a solid shadow, an inflated fellow, both buff and round. The figure leaned ahead with a large ax, swinging it downward at Dante. The clang of ax on sword rang out, Dante blocking the weapon with a hold of his sword both on the flat and on the handle. Dante stumbled back, his eyes big, the tall looming figure before him pressing down with their weapon with a wide spread grin.

“Dante!” Elise called out with a twirl on her left foot, swinging out with her katana at the newcomer.

The blade clanged against more metal, a figure falling down right before Elise with an even wider grin. Both shot away from one another, Elise barreling down and left while the new figure galloped backwards and took stance. At the same time both the ax wielder and Dante broke off their engagement, both leaping apart.

Both now became visible. The large man, certainly a length and a half over an average man with dark red hair barreling down to their lower back all jagged and rough, a pair of yellow eyes shimmering. And the other, certainly shorter though still above average, a shaven head and

only one eye protruding as a brown orb- the other lost. With their appearance the movements of the undead ground to a halt, followed right thereafter by a round of chuckling.

One sharp look to the East and there came more into focus. Three figures, high up in the trees. A man with wires wrapped around his fingers bound with a wicked grin and fire dancing in his eyes, a woman with an old fashion crossbow with a scope atop set stone cold with a glare able to pierce an animal's hide, and then one other man stood with his arms crossed and a grin open for all to read. Both Elise and Dante turned their bodies, their sights locked full ahead to what stood before them.

“Welcome to the show, and oh what a performance we are about to give you lot at long last,” chuckled the man with his arms crossed, his amber gaze set down upon both Dante and Elise.

The Iron Wall

A crashed boat, a mob of guardsmen armed with mostly melee weapons and some ranged bows and rifles, a duo of trained combatants, a mob of undead ever increasing, and five warriors of darkness. That is the matter that stood now in this forest. The guardsmen, having yet to make a single move, so fragile and ready to crack from the weight alone. The duo, determined and set to the course. And finally the five with their army, intent ever clear for death and destruction.

“So you’re the bastards that’ve really handed it to our employers. Who the hell are you lot anyway?” Dante barked out.

“Hee hee hee. The hunter wants to know who we are? I thought that having such time among those miserable humans would have clued you in on that one,” spoke the one eyed man.

“Ngh-”

“So, you’re the famous immortal cultists we’ve heard so much about,” Elise murmured, glancing around.

“Heh heh, that’s right.”

Atop the trees at front and center, the wire wielder, wires from his fingers launching through the air and into the very trees and undead themselves. Dark brown hair, long though not exactly shoulder length, piercing blue eyes. Dressed rather intriguingly, like a priest with red instead of white.

“Name’s Vamu.” he spoke.

Next to him was the sniper girl, right around in her twenties if not her thirties. Long brown hair streaking over her shoulders and back, trained green eyes as she held the crossbow with its scope out. Dressed as a nun only again with red instead of white.

“Megan, pleasure to do battle with you,” she commented.

The shaven blond with one brown eye, dressed in woven combat robes- a violin case attached to his back, “Da’shire, ready to play!”

The bulky brute chuckled, wearing only an unbuttoned black vest and red pants- not a shirt or anything to be seen, “Hanz here, ready to filet you lot like fish.”

And finally the man with his arms crossed, simple black hair and simple amber eyes, dressed in a black and red priest uniform much the same as Vamu, “You can refer to me as Drake for however long as you have left.”

“We done with the introductions? I don’t think names are really going to matter here in about two seconds, what say you Dante?” Elise grumbled aloud, glancing around to each of the five one by one.

“Heh, I suppose not,” Dante chuckled in response.

“Oooo I love the sass. I might make her one of my stars, watch her and the other fellow dance!” Vamu laughed.

“Now now, lets not get ahead of ourselves here Vamu. After all, it was just a short while ago when those other three vanquished a small legion of our undead, and now these two have done much the same. That fascinates me,” Drake chuckled.

“Other three?” Dante mumbled, turning his focus up towards Drake, “What other three do you mean?!”

Drake’s smirk widened, the glow behind his eyes intensifying whilst beside him Megan stepped forward, “Enough talk. Lets kill them both off and finish these little men they’re protecting.”

“’fraid she’s got a point,” Vamu sighed, “They did just slaughter a bunch of our playthings. Not easy to replenish.”

“How about we make things interesting then?” Drake questioned, glancing out to the Guardsmen just beyond, “You people, you’re not the first ones we’ve encountered from *Sarzentio*. If you agree to ignore us and go back to your bloody struggles at home, we will gladly let you leave this forest alive. Hell, we’ll even help you reunite with the one you’ve been searching for.”

The Guardsmen all looked up in consistent unison, a motion off putting to both Dante and Elise who caught glimpse of it. From the crowd of twenty-eight a passage parted, and from that passage approached one lone man. Dressed in a gray fur military attire with a cap on plus a set of badges, he broke from his unit and approached, looking up at Drake.

“How should we know that you’re telling the truth and will simply let us go? You’ve killed and animated dozens of our people already- how do we know that the Princess is even still alive you bastards?!” he spat.

“Hoh? Are we really that untrustworthy?” Drake questioned, a fledgling of sorrow passing over his now dulled out face.

“What do you know of her highness? Answer me that!”

“Lighten up you dullard and show the boss some respect!” Da’shire barked, “This is a genuine offer that you’d be dumb to not accept.”

“Believe me-” Drake cut in, “The last thing we want is for the weight of the Empire to come down on us. It was you people that attacked *us* first because of your cheap flying and landing your vessels in our territory. Simply allow us to finish these two, and we’ll help you find the girl and escort you from these woods. Have we an accord?”

“C-Captain Mercer,” one of the guardsmen began.

The captain looked from Drake right down to both Elise and Dante, pausing briefly. Both had their heads turned and were looking right to Mercer, no one then saying a word, not even as the Captain began to back away.

“Sir?”

“We have no choice. Our duty is to the Empire and her highness- very well, dispatch of these two as you see fit and we will take you up on that generous offer!”

“Captain!”

“HA. I knew you people could be reasoned with. Very well then, it’s a deal.”

Drake's grin returned, widening as the guardsmen lowered their weapons and sheathed them. Both Elise and Dante turned their individual attentions back towards Drake, as well as the two opponents standing off between them.

"Well thas rotten luck now innit? Bakuuva you're the idea gal, any plans?"

"The situation hardly calls for a plan Dante. We're outnumbered and are vulnerable from several points. We'll go with Duck Duck Goose, easier that way to watch our backs. I'll be the gray fowl."

"Heh, I won't object to that. Blasted Blake shoulda realized a thing or two about your play style before divvying us up. Works out in the end though now doesn'tet?"

"I'll have this wrapped up in three seconds flat."

The ground beneath him crackled, Hanz's form launching off like a cannon, a fist raised high as he flew straight at Elise yelling out, "Don't underestimate us little girl!"

CLAP, CRACK

Her left hand positioned up and in collection of Hanz's fist, her right held out with a pointer finger leveled to the cultist's head. Her arm buckled only so slightly from the force, whilst Hanz himself could only look on with a shaken expression and quivering eyebrows. She had remained unmoved beyond that flex, catching him without even looking at him proper.

"Hngh- AAAAAAAA!!!"

CRASH

Down the ax swung, blasting straight into the ground. A couple of echoing footsteps followed, sent by Elise's own boots as they clapped down atop the back of the ax. Her own katana remained stabbed to the ground just behind her prior position. Then came the SMACK, a smack that sent Hanz flying.

With that loud bang the big guy flew from the ax and crashed into a collective of the undead just behind. Da'shire stared with eye round, the startled looks of the other three syncing up

just the same. Dante stood before the Guardsmen with his eyes shut and a wide grin formed up, his guard dropped along with the weight of his sword. Elise stood atop the ax with her leg stretched out, then lowering it.

Flicker **BANG!!!**

“KWAAAHF!!” Hanz spat out.

The ground beneath his back crackled with thunder as Elise drove her drop kick straight into his gut. Only a flicker of movement, a dance of light really and she had delivered a singular blow to the man. Her foot cut down and swung again right into his side, another strike delivered that this time sent Hanz rolling off and skipping across the ground briefly.

“Hanz!” Da’shire yelled, “You bitch! I’ll kill you!!”

The one eyed man broke from where he stood and began to run forward at Elise, his weapon drawn still. **CRACKLE!!** Elise’s foot slammed into Shire’s face on his left, and with that kick he also went flying. Da’shire crashed straight through another group of undead and slammed into a tree, coughing as his back made impact.

Above the impact zone stood the rest of their unit of five, staring in discomfort, eyes shifting and set upon Elise. Drake’s teeth were gritted, Vamu was stepping back ever so slightly, and Megan was most certainly shaking with her eyes taken from her sights.

Her foot lowered to the ground slow, her attention on the three above, “Well come on, is that it?”

“Buncha buggarts ain’t even Vampiric now are they?” Dante grumbled, “Basic humans with some odd capabilities, thas all.”

“Vamu the hell is going on?” Drake growled.

“I-I don’t know. She must be a power user of some kind, like that crystal girl.”

“... fuck!”

Swoosh

Elise hung in the air before the trio, only a single leap. Drake's expression buckled, his arms swinging out in front of him. **BANG!** Back he flew with arms crossed before his chest in a block. Gravity wasted no time in taking him, his form plummeting to the ground below while both Vamu and Megan had just begun to glance their way towards Elise.

Right as she landed in Drake's spot, he hit the ground, and the other two bolted. Vamu shot back and to the right, while Megan went straight left, both hopping from their perches. Megan plopped down and took immediate aim, pulling the trigger to her weapon. The clunk of the projectile hitting wood and only wood echoed, side stepped by Elise who had not even batted an eyelash in Megan's direction.

"How did she?!"

Vamu crossed his arms, going to town with an immediate finger twirl, the wires radiating with his whim. Below on the ground Drake rose off of his knee, while beyond him Hanz stood now rubbing his head. Da'shire stood moving his lower jaw around hands free, while finally there was Megan who now reloaded her weapon. Around the three on the ground the remaining undead pressed forward, all set a lit and trained upon Elise above.

"Little brat," Hanz growled.

"Hanz no- now is not the time," Da'shire barked.

"Yeah you know what I think? I think things aren't looking too good for us right now!"

"Oh please, calm yourself Vamu," Drake mumbled out, "So she's fast, big whoop. We've got her outnumbered, we've got this!"

"Idiot it isn't just speed, wake up!" Megan spat out, "If she's like those other three then we are outmatched here, we haven't been turned yet. We don't have the power to fight someone like this. We should report back to Soreis, let him know that we've got more for the *Trio de la Muerte* to take care of."

“Screw those guys, we’ve got this!” Hanz barked.

“I agree. Vamu, more Infernal!” Drake spat.

“Uuuugh you guys are gonna be the death of me-”

A burst of a vibrant dark green light radiated out from Vamu’s fingers along the strands of wire, reaching out and drilling into the branches around him. The bark of multiple trees began to glow with that same energy, and then slowly the bark broke way- ruptures in the trees splitting open. Blood and bodies poured out much as they had before, this time with the green power radiating around and inside of them.

More and more fell, more and more rose, more and more came to life. The snarls and groans raged out as a very smug Drake looked back up to Elise with a wide spread grin. She though glanced down upon him with nothing more than an unsavory blankness. Even as the dead rose around her it changed nothing.

“Shaken in your boots, child? Ready to- to... hrmgh?”

“Do I look frightened- it’s Drake right?” she replied as she continued to look down upon the cultist, “You guys aren’t anything new to me. You’re just basic humans with a couple of things going for you. Your center is around preying on the weak and powerless. I grew up in a war zone, surrounded by the constant threat of Zeherian, Vampires, and Drachen- even my own Drachen clan at times. And that was before I honed my potential with the Lightonians and my new comrades. I mean- did you not see me tank gunshots and arrows?”

“Grr-”

“These zombified servants of yours are nothing more than filler to be cut through. Your comrades are nothing but punching bags that exist to be knocked around. You are nothing but a speed bump to me. If you want to continue this contest then you are going to die forgotten in these woods, maybe left to be turned into scavenging undead yourselves.”

“That’s enough out of you, witch! I’ll show you exactly what we’ve got, hrrrghyaaaa!”

Swoosh. For as soon as Hanz finished yelling out, his ax had gone sailing through the air aimed at Elise's back. Like a boomerang it rolled through the air, more of a spinning top really. His grin widened as it came up upon her.

BANG CLANG DANG

“Wha-”

“No!”

“Impossible- that hit her dead on!”

Elise remained stationary while the ax fell to the ground. Hanz watched as it fell, his face bubbling with rage. **Grip-** Hanz launched himself up and caught the ax in hand. Whilst he himself had made the bound upwards, Da'shire and Drake had both done the very same with the former pulling twin daggers and the latter showcasing a spiked gauntlet with blades. And as the three came upon her, Elise did nothing.

Fwoosh fwoosh shift

Hanz flew passed her, his ax's swing missing entirely but the subtle duck of her back. Her weight shifted left, evading the twin thrust strike of Da'shire. Finally a singular disappearance and reappearance to the right with a flicker of her form, completely evading Drake's attack. All three landed on the high up branches, all three turning swiftly with their weapons still in hand.

“Gah, how did she dodge all three of- HUH!?”

“HA!”

CRASH!!

Her arms had swung out and with them went the air. Drake's face flapped and his body fell back, or truthfully it was the same for the other two just the same. A shock wave struck them all and sent them flying away. Megan's eyes darted left and then right before resting ahead- *pull*. Her next arrow soared right passed Elise's now tilted head, striking the trunk of another tree.

“Hell there is absolutely NO beating her. Drake lets get the hell out of here before we all croak!” Vamu shouted.

“Gah, fine fine. Lets get out of here then and- HWAH!”

Drake flew back and slammed into a tree, Elise hovering just above where the man had been standing.

*Flicker- **CRUNK***

Da’shire, Megan, and Vamu looked over towards Drake as he hit the tree, not yet noticing as Hanz hit the floor of the forest after crashing through the branch he had been standing upon, a branch now snapped just above and falling down.

*Flicker- **BANG***

Da’shire flew from the tree with a singular strike and flopped down upon the rocks below, both Megan and Vamu now starting to shift their heads over to where Hanz had been standing.

*Flicker- **SNAP***

Megan flew back and hit the base of the tree she had been stood atop, slumping over with her weapon snapped in half.

*Flicker- **SMACK***

The shling of wire rattled as Vamu soared back and hit the bark of the branch. A light groan escaped him before he slumped to his side. Elise walked up, stopping a few paces away from his body, watching as the green spark in those wires went out, and as it went out came the thumps and thuds from below. She stood firm at the center of it all, as all five of the cultists lay in place with eyes shut- completely out of it from that moment on.

Hunt of the Unknown: Part 2

“.....”

“.....I.....ov.....nev.....”

“..... and if we..... but then..... potassium....”

“In the bread?”

“..... but then we would be faced with-.....”

Wince. Blink blink

“{Ugh... my fucking head. Where am?}”

Shuffle

“Oh hey look, this one’s awake,” spoke a now distinguishable male voice.

“This one... wait wha-?”

Chains wrapped around the one described as awake, chains binding them to a tree.

There were actually five chained to the trees, a group of two, another with the one, and then a big bulky guy double chained and by themselves. Around the trees, about a half dozen small campfires with many people in and out of uniform sat around, a few with blankets around the shoulders, some already asleep on the ground. Stood around those chained up were several soldiers in uniform and holding weapons, melee weapons mostly.

The individual shook in a vain attempt to straighten out, “What the bloody hell is this?!”

“Oh lookie, the bastard is awake. Oi Bakuuva, guess you were right.”

“I told you I didn’t hit them *that* hard Dante.”

The slightest crunching of grass and scuffed dirt, a figure stepping right in front of the chained up individual. The individual looked up into the emerald gaze of Elise, now kneeling down with her knees not coming close to the ground, held up by just the fronts of her feet.

“Hello there. Drake, right?” she spoke, looking back at the bound man.

“You- you’re that- what is this? What have you done? What are you doing you crazy-”

“Crazy bitch, yada yada, yeah I get that. Look I just have a few questions is all,” she interrupted while moving her right hand out just beneath Drake’s chin, holding it up shortly thereafter and in place, “Only fair that you answer.”

“I ain’t telling you anything lady so go fuck yourself!”

“See now that’s what I was expecting,” she spoke now beginning to rise with her hand taken away, “But lets just skip the dialogue and cut right to it. You’re a prisoner, your people sound like the kind of people that would sooner kill you than let you talk- probably kill you even if you escape. So it’s certainly in your best interest to comply.”

“Pft- it isn’t so black and white as you put it.”

“Well enlighten us then,” Elise began to conclude, the soldiers and Dante now walking around behind Elise who still stood over the captured Drake.

“We chose this, alright? We know the risks. We know what we are up against. Dying is infinitely more preferable compared to what our masters are-”

Elise’s head tilted to the side, “Masters are what?”

“I have nothing more to say to you people. Wasting your time!”

“Miss Bakuuva,” came the call of one of the soldiers, the captain from earlier to be precise, who now was approaching, “With all due respect, I don’t think you’ll get much out of them.”

“No?” she questioned, turning to acknowledge Captain Mercer.

“He seems rather set on not saying a word, fear I suspect.”

“Fear is easy to exploit if you understand it captain. From the bit you told me, *Sarzentio* is nowhere near here and has its own problems. So why was he offering you a deal?”

“Because he... uh-” a soldier began, “He wanted to keep us out of it so he could finish you and then deal with us?”

“He got too specific for that ruse. I suspect he genuinely wanted you to leave and not bring any attention to their little cult.”

Gulp

Elise turned back towards Drake, looking down upon him, “Whoever or whatever he fears ties back to Sarzento. So- how about it Drake? You either cooperate or we can barge out of the Hollow and send you back with them.”

“... I despise you,” he growled, glancing away, “Won’t make a lick of difference. You ain’t getting out of this forest. You beat us but there are many more like us, and some beyond comprehension when compared to us.”

“You mentioned a... what was it? Trio day? Trio... umm?”

“The Trio de la Muerte. Heh, yeah,” he spoke with a wide spread grin, looking over once again, “They are our strongest by far. Your three friends, those were your friends right? The Vampire, The Elf, and The Drachen. The Trio dominated them in battle without our Infernals. I don’t know what you and the other dink can do; but if you were assigned to track down those weakling knights then clearly you are the weaker ones. You haven’t a chance in hell!”

“Far from the first time I’ve heard that, rather bit of a mundane threat if you ask me. Well then, I guess we’ll just have to go and see this Trio de la Muerte for ourselves.”

“You’ll never survive this, they’ll kill you you dumb cow, they will end your life!!”

“... I believe that we’re done,” Dante spoke, walking away with Captain Mercer and Elise both, whilst a few of the soldiers moved in with a mouth guard.

The camp they moved through was rather large with a well cleared clearing. Chopped trees and logs everywhere, tents and lines strung about, creatures resembling deer and coyotes hung from those lines. A few soldiers spent their time swinging away at lumber with mini axes in

hand. Others were in the process of heating kettles and meat over the open flames. None seemed particularly on guard, none seemed particularly anything for that matter. It was as if all the troubles in the world were nevermore present here.

Mercer and a few of his aids walked with the duo of Elise and Dante, both of whom seemed as relaxed as the Sarzentans around them. The campfires illuminated the clearing pretty well, exposing mountains of crates and supplies far off near a raised section of earth. Exposed as well were strands of a white powder, perhaps a chalk or sand unclear at a distance. These strands did in turn run around the entirety of the clearing, possessing a slight glow about them.

“Arrogant bastard now aint’ee?”

“Those certainly aren’t the immortal stab-them-in-the-heart Vampiric we had heard about. I’m willing to wager that these Meurte people are though if they captured Blake’s group.”

“Captured? Are we sure that they’re actually alive yet there Bakuuva? I mean thinking ‘bout it now-”

“It doesn’t change things for us Dante. If we want out of here we need to find that building, meaning we’re going to be running into those things rather we like it or not.”

“I hate to interrupt your discussions but we have an accord as well.”

“Captain Mercer, I am very much aware of that fact; but this is a huge forest. It will take time to find your Princess, if she hasn’t been captured already.”

“Agh, an’ I hate to say it but we really could use that Fen Rao bastard’s help if we’re going to be chargin’ into enemy turf. We should get back to hunting those guys down.”

“We should get a move on soon either way. The allies of those five will be on the lookout when they fail to report back in most likely. We’re better moving as two, while Mercer’s men hightail it for Lox Town.”

“Captain Mercer,” one of the aids began, “Are you sure about this?”

“... no son, not at all. What more can we do on our own though? Unless the homeland sends in a new *Code* we won't be good for much. We can only hope that Princess Adalaine's personal guard have kept her well, and we can then only hope that those guards with these two can capture this ghost town they've talked about.”

“And with that, lest get a move on Bakuuva, while we have the element of surprise yet,” Dante broke in.

“Agreed. We will meet again Captain. Just follow the directions and get there as soon as you can.”

“Very well. Happy hunting to you both.”

With a flicker of the shadows, both Dante and Elise vanished without much trace. Only a swirling cloud of dust danced behind where they had once been, leaving only Mercer and his aids. The captain looked to their former positions and ground to a halt, a sigh leaving him, his stare soon adrift out into the darkness before them all.

Mercer's attention soon shifted back behind him, “Alright, ready up to move out! We're bringing these cult pricks with us!”

Mercer moved from the boundary of the clearing back towards the camp, a flock of birds scattering behind... a flock of black birds, birds with red eyes. From the flap of their wings like a cloud of ash, a figure stood out among the trees. A figure in black, a figure of dark green eyes with the slightest of glows to them. This lone figure stared out at the camp, their focus LOCKED to Drake and Vamu. With a tilt of their head ever slightly to the side, a wave of rings washed through the pupils like flames erupting outward, pulsing to life within the eyes.

“Vamu's team has been captured, Lord Soreis.”

What stood now was none other than a vast chamber, complete with decorative glass windows in color, broken and smashed wood benches, large columns around a vast rectangular room, statues erected all around covered in growth. Vines reached around the chamber and up to the balconies. It was at the end of the chamber, beneath a large Rose window, where a pedestal sat.

Before the pedestal, or rather behind, a single man cloaked in a pure black vestment, torn and ragged. This figure, a figure of darkness with only eyes of flaming orange, looked up across the way to another figure. This one was transparent, dark in nature, eyes green and radiating. Upon the balcony above sat a black bird with red eyes, staring right down at the pedestal.

“Captured? By who? Speak Feng!” the orange eyed figure demanded.

“Not sure... a squad of Sarzentans hold the five now; but it was a girl who defeated them just a little while ago.”

“A girl? Alone??”

“Seems to be... there are two of them, allies with those three that Maja’s team captured just a little while ago.”

“Damn it all, seems as though Maja was right about there being others. This may prove troublesome for us.”

“The girl has left the custody of the Sarzentans, along with her partner. They are seeking knights from the Vampire Kingdom for aid against us... and there is another thing- the Princess.”

“Princess Adalaine? Mmm yes, she is still loose in these woods. It would be good in our case if we were to find her proper before anyone else, a valuable bargaining chip against Zaraka’s forces she would make... very well. See what you can do for Vamu’s squad and get them back. I will dispatch another group of Hunters to tend to this duo that you speak of.”

“Yes sir, right away sir-”

The green eyed shadow vanished with the squawk of the bird atop and the flap of its wings. This left only the figure of fire for eyes, their head lowering, a low growl escaping.

“How hard is it to destroy a damn- GAH! If we don’t wrap this up, no- no it’s probably too late already for as many platoons that’ve been sent. No doubt Zaraka’s spies know, which means they may come searching- oh if that happens. GAH!!! Rokral, prepare to activate the tower,

the time has come for us to leave with our forces. But first- we shall put that puny town out of business once and for all!”

The Drafted Accord

Over the river and through the woods the duo stripped through the darkness. Side by side with equal bounds that could well and true clear half a football field's length before trees would get in the way and force a course correction. Aside from minor formation changes that surrounded them, the forest itself had hardly changed at all. The same old repeating dark, the same old bog of woods and the occasional river or clearing.

His brown jacket and her blue coat, her dirty blond hair and his brown hair, her sheathed sword and his weapons. All were grabbed and all were released with each bound and landing. Their stern, serious expressions mounted firm, shifted only by the sudden crackle of metal on metal. Both eyes darted way ahead and off to the right where another spark arose, followed by a literal sparking glimmer of something.

Their heads turned, now eye to eye. One shifting nod from each to the other, their pace quickening as they returned to looking in that direction.

Three figures launched at one another, two to one side and one on the other. **BANG!!**

“WAAAAAAAAAAAAAH-” a man wailed

CRASH- the roar of an avalanche of wood and debris falling to the ground with a very audible crackle.

“Gah- fucking BITCH!”

SHWING- out flew the double ended halberd through the air like a boomerang. As it drew near the solo figure ducked and bolted, rocking to the right right around the weapon- it slamming into the ground just behind as an aquamarine glow erupted around the target figure. The figure's hand flew forward and out sparked twin bolts of pure energy, almost like zaps of visible lightning, sent plunging straight into the halberd thrower.

“GYUUUUH!!!” she screamed as she was flung unto the ground, kicking and rolling.

The armors of the two clanked and groaned along with their echoed voice, both coming to rest at nearly the same time. It was as both came to a rest that yet another figure appeared, the ground behind the glowing girl splitting open. Out popped yet another in armor swinging a sword. The shing-schwing of the blade slicing through the air echoed, the target barrel rolling through the air with a single bound.

The attacker stepped from the hole out onto the even ground, coming into focus. Fen Rao flung his arm out, tossing the sword forth and straight into a tree. As he did so both of his subordinates, Shree and Yeager, began to push themselves up off of the ground.

“Hmph, little brat,” Fen grumbled.

Standing across from the wrinkled old vampire with her glow fading, a young girl no doubt in her teens judging by appearance. Somewhat of a faded blond or duller dirty blond hair, rolling back down her neck with a little bun over the back of her head, long bangs curved around the sides of her face, greenish blue eyes that favored the lighter blue. Little else stood out, black combat boots that went up her lower legs, cargo jeans, fingerless black gloves, a baggy black shirt with a gray stripe running across her chest, and a large cargo jacket with a fur collar- the only exceptional thing being the red stripe bands on the coat just beneath the shoulders.

Several trees had fallen by this point into their fight, however long it had been. A few cracked and toppled at the lower trunks, smoke still bellowing out of some stumps. It was by one of these that about three Sarzentan Guards stood with another young girl- wavy blond hair almost golden, a faded red dress torn in several spots, high socks but no shoes. Her green eyes shimmered, shaking ever so slightly, obvious exhaustion creeping over her face.

The girl in the cargo shirt widened her stance, stomping her right foot out and then her left, bracing her upper half. Once more and with a crackle almost that of thunder, the light appeared yet again.

“Ugh, again with this shit? Yeager lets gut this damn tramp already!” Shree spat.

“I’m with you girl, I’m tired of the way she’s thrashing us,” Yeager chuckled, “How about you Rao?!”

“The brat has technique, I’ll give her that,” Fen Rao muttered.

“You creeps are never going to beat Illiya, just give it up already!” the girl in the dressed yelled out.

“Highness- please don’t agitate them further,” one of the guards spoke quickly.

“HRGH!” Fen Rao grunted, dropping to the ground and immediately slamming both hands onto the ground- fingers flexed, palms flat.

Around Illiya, the cargo girl, the ground began to swell upwards. Sands fell way as human shapes took form.

“Hmph…”

STRZZZ- the swelling ground around her burst like balloons, a surge of aquamarine electricity dancing around her all at once like a blizzard of lightning. Both young vampires stumbled ahead with mouths hanging. Fen on the other hand grew only a larger scowl.

“Since when does lightning beat earth?!” Shree spat.

“This is getting nowhere. First those schmucks back at the town and those damn zombie guys and now this shit? I mean honestly- I thought being a Vampire would make us all powerful but really, we’re just a bunch of cannon fodder right about now!” Yeager barked out.

“Will you two shut up?! It’s not helping the situation!” Fen spat.

“He’s right,” Illiya murmured, correcting her stance and then beginning a stroll forward.

“This isn’t going to go our way Fen, we need to get out of here!” Yeager roared.

“Our situation was set in stone the minute these guys jumped us, the girl is faster, we can’t outrun her you idiot,” Shree yelled back.

“I’m not allowing a Vampire to escape me, let alone one with powers. This will be it for you three,” Illiya concluded, her hands balling into fists as the crackle of energy grew more potent.

“I’m afraid that we have to object to that decision,” a voice called out.

Blink- all eyes set gaze upon the sudden appearance of both Elise and Dante, stepping down on the ground in the middle of both the knights and Illiya, completely blindsiding the fight.

All stopped with only their reactions in motion- Illiya with an eye raised, Fen Rao with a scowl, Yeager letting his jaw hang open, a look of shook shock shaking over Shree, a cocked curious head tilt from the girl in the dress, and guards who were stiff as statues.

“Hey it’s those schmucks from that shithole town!” Yeager spat.

“Huuuaaaah???” Shree groaned loudly with a very evident confused undertone.

The sharp eyes of Illiya latched onto both new arrivals instantaneously, “Backup for the knights?”

“No, not quite,” Dante murmured, looking over to her, pointing a finger back at the trio, “We need these schmucks to get ourselves outta this bloody forest.”

“Who are you?” Illiya asked.

“Just a couple of mercenaries hired to escort some people through here. These goons attacked our convoy; however, we need them to reinforce us to escape,” Elise spoke.

“Help you? HA! Under whose authority?” Yeager smacked back.

“Have you dickheads not figured it out yet?” Dante spoke, “This bloody forest is a god damn Eternal Hollow, and according to the townsfolk the only way out is to beat the owners of those walking corpses you ran from earlier.”

“Corpses?” Illiya murmured, “So you guys-”

“Hey, d-do you know what’s going on with those things??” the girl in the red dress spoke out, slowly walking forward.

Elise turned herself, looking over now to the girl and the guards now behind her. Illiya's aura sparked as Elise turned; though as it did, Dante turned himself to face Illiya.

"You... are you Adalaine by chance?"

"Huh?" the girl murmured.

The sparks around Illiya shot up immediately, crackling like firecrackers, her stance narrowing and almost taking on a sprinters stance. To this effect, Dante reached into his coat and pulled out a dagger immediately, twirling it in hand until in reverse grip after a few twirls. Elise's eyes moved over to Illiya for a brief moment, then back to the girl.

"We met Captain Mercer and his squad while searching for the knights. We are not with the cultists, nor are we with whoever you are running from," Elise announced, now turning over towards Fen and his students, "Look, from what we have figured out- this forest is an Eternal Hollow. The way out is locked by the people raising those undead, and those people intend to capture every last one of us and turn us into more of their walking dancing Infernal Beasts. They've captured three of our own, so the only way to get out of here alive is to work together."

"Hmph. Bold of you," Fen began, "We are enemies of the people you are protecting, and now you wish to work together?"

"From what we can tell, it is the better way to do it. Somethin in it for all of us now," Dante replied.

"The cultists know of Sarzento and whatever is happening within its borders, they know of the Vampire Kingdom and want to conquer it down the road. And like I said, the only way out is to take the key from them to reopen these woods."

"Why should we listen to you?" Shree asked.

"Yeah cuz the minute we help you lot, I bet you'll just off us. Fen the way I see it is that we're screwed either way if she's telling the truth. Either we help 'em and die, their stupid escortees get backers and run us out- or these cultists hunt us down eventually and conquer our homeland."

“I can’t speak for the people of Glastol, or whoever they find to help them. Our job is just to escort them out of the forest. What I do know is that if you don’t help us, we’re all going to get picked off by their overwhelming numbers, then your people will certainly be killed and turned into more of those things... perhaps we can make an accord though.”

“Heuh? Well, speak up!” Yeager barked.

“Help us open the forest, I can guarantee that we won’t kill you- and perhaps against my better judgment we can even let you flee back to Galahan.”

“What’s that now?” Yeager questioned.

“Elise?” Dante murmured.

Elise stepped forward towards Fen and his team, unarmed, her arms spread, “I was raised within a Drachen Clan, I grew up dealing with what you people now are on a regular basis.”

Adalaine’s tired eyes perked up, looking upon Elise. As hers did, so too did the eyes of Illiya. In Illiya’s case, her sharp gaze had softened, her stance lighting up and the lightning dying back. Even Dante’s position had shifted by such point.

“Do I like the whole blood suckers killing things thing? No- but that’s no different from people. Do I like the prospect of your kingdom possibly preparing something to keep Glastol under your control? No- that’s speculation only. If there’s one thing that I have learned, it’s that not all of your kind are the evil they are often framed up to be. Vampires are no different from any other race, and in your case you used to be of a powerless race until you were converted. So lets just cut the hostilities for now and agree to reach an agreement when this is all said and done.”

Yeager’s gaze died back from a painstaking scowl into more of a... gentle, concerned, confused one, looking now to his mentor. For Shree it was the same. All eyes fell to the elder Vampire Knight, whose expression remained rock solid, never faltering.

“Hrmm... agreed,” Fen Rao spoke.

“Fenn? What are you-” Yeager murmured.

“Be silent Yeager, this is over your head at this point. None of this has gone the way we wished it. True, our kingdom has enslaved Glastol, sucked it dry of its wealth to sustain our own people; however we are not war mongers, we are not going to fight a war to keep Glastol at the risk of our own kingdom.”

All eyes now were to Fen Rao, as he went on.

“Galahan has faced this reality before and survived, we will do so again if we can’t stop that convoy. Our odds of working out a deal are better than hoping that these corpse raisers don’t go after our own. This is the better option, as long as the girl upholds her end of the bargain.”

Elise nodded.

“Hrmph... besides... if this forest is what it seems to be, it could be of... easier value to us. So long as you uphold this girl.”

“I swear it. I will do the best that I can to see this through,” Elise spoke.

“Hey Illiya,” Adalaine spoke out, looking to the guardian.

“Yeah. I know,” Illiya replied plainly, catching the attention of Dante in that moment.

“Well then, now that we’re all bloody friendly, how about we plan our next move ‘ere? We should head back for Nox Town, ready up and take this fight to those cultists bastards. I’m sure that that Mercer fellow would appreciate us bringin’ the girl back to ‘em.”

“Yeah. So what do you say? Shall we?”