

Act 1- A Girl Named Elise

Chapter I

Thunder boomed, lightning flashed, winds howled, and trees had begun to crash. The Yukon, normally a place of beauty and life, now turned upside down by a relentless storm. Not a bird flapped, not an animal scurried, not a single figure moved. A blackened sky with vicious intent.

Below many a tree blew with several collapsing atop a pathway right through the forest, one being torn and sent flying along that path. Through the air and straight into the side of a mountain, exploding with splintering force the moment it hit. Rain pelted down, a landslide beginning with trees flowing down the mountain side mixed into the muddy waters. With splashes the mud blew right over several caves to seemingly seal them tight; though even as the mud blocked them the light did not fade.

CLANG

Inside the echoing cave where wind and water howled, deeper down to the sides of the tunnels were torches. Freshly lit, burning brilliantly. Further in the chatter of English speaking individuals had overtaken the sounds of the storm hounding outside. Up ahead further still the air shifted, blood scenting the air.

CLANG

The sound of metal on metal, banging together with extreme force. A large cavern with torches all around, paint and chalk drawn onto the cave floor dividing the room with a large rectangle in the middle. Steps echoed in this chamber along with the source of the blades, blurs of movement from corner to corner of the drawn shape. Rock

was tossed by the skidding of feet, two individuals standing near head to head with locked blades on a final swing.

With arms and blades quivering, the two looking straight into the other's eyes. Eyes locked fierce with fire, their weapons at full force against the other. A female with long dark hair and bright eyes in a long black coat and pants holding out a dagger, while the other a male with short light hair and dark eyes holding out a sword. Both grunted, the male pushing the female back with her feet digging into the ground though only momentarily.

With no wasted movement the woman stepped left, her body turning with only a single blade blocking the sword. The male grunted, stumbling forward at the sudden shift of force. Another clang, this time metal on rock followed by a thudding slap of flesh to floor. Quickly he turned round, the female standing over him with both blades to his throat.

"D-dammit," the male grumbled.

A clapping echoed and flooded, the female stepping back to which point the male began to stumble up. Their heads turned right, a bench of stone visible where upon it sat a clapping young girl with nothing but the largest of grins on her face, "Heh heh, alright, that's game and point."

Her hair long down her back and dirty-blond, light green eyes shining off the light of the torches near her. Her shirt long sleeved and black with a few tears in the sleeves, her pants typical blue jeans with gashes around the legs, black boots half covered by the length of the jeans. In her lap a book with a red cover with patches of black, no writing on it though there was a portrait of several shadowy figures, "You guys did great that time, way way better than before."

“Ugh,” the male growled stumbling up full stance, “If you say so. My performance was crap.”

“Got that right,” his opponent chuckled.

“Oh shut it. What the hell was that anyway Destiny? Dancing around me to let me stumble. That’s not fighting, that’s being a ballerina jerk!”

“Thomas Thomas Thomas, are you always such a sore loser? All is fair in love and war, haven’t your parents told you that before?”

“Yeah well we also agreed to not cut each other. Look at my damn arm you grazed.”

“Oh don’t be such a baby, it was an accident. You’re a man so act like one. You’re supposed to be stronger so I went at this with more than just intent of practice, get me?”

“Such a poor excuse Destiny,” the girl on the sideline laughed, “That whole men being stronger than women thing is so last century. Face it, you both wore each other out plain and simple and that cut was just a miss swing.”

“Oh shut up Elise,” both barked.

Elise broke into a slight laugh with her eyes shut and a hand up to her mouth, a smile on her face. Her eyes quickly opened and shifted back down to her lap with her hands also moving down to it. They skimmed from left to right across the pages, her mouth still open as she continued to speak, “You two work too hard sometimes, I swear.”

“We just want to be the best fighters in the area Elise. We’re going to show everyone up and utterly prove our power and-”

“Oh pipe down Thomas you arrogant lad you,” Destiny laughed, “I’d be happy being the best that Vulfax has to offer.”

“Yeah well beating each other up constantly isn’t doing it. Elise should come join us and put her silly book aside.”

“Oh, no, no thanks. I don’t particularly care for fighting. I’m fine being on the sidelines when I can be.”

“Come on Elise. You have the strength to lift a man and freakin’ throw him as far as I can throw a rock. With a little practice you’d be perfect with that monster strength!” Thomas barked, “At least help me get stronger.”

“If you want to get better you should do chores with me,” Elise laughed.

“What? The hell does that have to do with anything?”

“Try carrying a few dozen liters of water for a few kilometers,” Elise replied with a shrug, “I think you’ll understand what I mean then. Besides, when I fight it gets me yelled at for being an uncoordinated woman or whatever my brother feels like throwing in my face at the time. Way easier to avoid everything.”

“Oh pft, come on. If I can do it so can you.”

“Yeah but you’re not the one with a sexist brother, Destiny.”

“Rusty isn’t sexist, he simply hates everyone.”

“Heh, true true,” Elise replied, her book being placed now at her side, “By the way, isn’t it about time you two report to Vulper for duty?”

“Why not come with us?”

“Nah, I’m not much of a hunter unless it’s trapping.”

“Look just because your butt hates meat, unlike the rest of us-”

“No see, I do enjoy fish when I can get some.”

“Whatever. You should still help hunt and keep the clan happy. The clan comes first and foremost.”

“I’m aware, I just prefer my stance as is.”

“Man you are stubborn even for a female Drachen. Even Destiny isn’t as much of a pain as you are. That might be why you and your brother get into it.”

“Really Thomas?” Elise sighed, rolling her eyes for a brief instance.

A smack could be heard, Destiny’s hand pressed into Thomas’s face pressing the back of his head firmly up against a stone wall as her expression showed annoyance, mouth opening to speak, “You big dummy, think before you speak.”

“Gah, I’m sorry I wasn’t thinking, sorry Elise, ow Destiny that hurts that hurts that hurts,” Thomas cried out.

“It won’t be the only thing that’ll hurt if you keep this up,” she growled.

Yet another bit of laughter left Elise at that moment, higher in pitch. The book rose in her hand, held firmly to her side as she swiftly stood, “It’s quite alright. I’m aware that I’m not like most of the clan. I’m fine being different. Alright, I suppose then. Vulper’s in the main chamber right? ”

“Er, yeah,” Thomas replied.

“Don’t have much choice in the matter but I suppose I can do my best, right?”

“Yeah, even though your best isn’t-”

“Thomas I swear to our non-existent god or gods, I will claw your face off Captain Honest.”

“Eh- s-s-sorry.”

“Haha, oh Destiny, relax. Now come on, we have a job to accomplish.”

“And by job you mean you’re going to see us off when the storm clears and then you’re going to go get some new reading material.”

“Thomas!” Destiny boomed.

“Well he’s not wrong,” Elise chuckled.

She walked forward towards a tunnel entrance, quick to disappear down into the torch-lit cavern until she escaped their view. The two blinked and immediately took off into a dash, Thomas shouting, “Hey Elise, wait for us!”

Chapter II

Day crept above, sun glowing brilliantly in the blue sky scattering warmth throughout the region. Thick puddles drenched the land, water hung in trees gradually running down to the ground. A storm passed beyond a bustling small town of only a few hundred. Trees lined the streets with lamp posts, old world houses mixed with newer, some with plastic siding and others straight up wood. Tar streets lay surrounded by white concrete sidewalks that were surrounded in turn by grass. Many were on the move including a blue dressed mailman stationed by a box, a bag filling to the brim with letters.

Towards the middle of town there stood an old brick building with a large wooden door, large glass windows, and a sign reading *Emerton Library*. Inside were many bookshelves, all lined with books; tables spread out across the middle and by the windows, chairs around each table, and a front desk with a woman sitting at it. Her hair long and black, her eyes bright lit green, her eyes staring down at the pages of a book with one hand upon it and in another hand an ink stamper.

She sat at this desk with a radio on a shelf behind, playing the end of a song that sounded right out of the eighties. Above this radio sat a sign with the text *Music Is Acceptable Here*. A smile spread upon her face as her stamper went down on the back of a book, punching ink onto a card that was then slipped back into a plastic sleeve, “Well this just won’t do, overdo by a week. Going to have to make a note of that.”

An old bell rang by the door as the clank of the knob was heard, the door being pushed open brushing the bell as it hung from the ceiling. The woman at the desk looked up and quickly smiled bigger, “Ah Elise, good to see you back in town.”

Elise walked in the door with three books in hand, “Good to be back and out of my home again,” was her response as she walked forward, the door shutting behind her brushing the bell again.

She slowly approached the front desk looking up and down the rows of books with a slight smile. She stopped at the desk and placed the books down, looking to the woman sitting on the other side, “I can’t even tell you how good it feels to get out of there again Miss Holly.”

“Heh heh, I’m sure of that. Family can be such a pain at times,” Holly spoke as she spun her chair around to the radio, free hand outstretched to a nob.

With a twist she began turning it down a slight bit to make conversation easier. Once done she spun back around and placed the ink stamper back on its pad. Her hands folded, her elbows resting upon the desk, and her chin resting upon the hands, “A father so dense and a mother so clueless. So, what can I do you for this time?”

“I’m only here to return these and get a couple more for the month.”

“Ah right right, I suppose. So what did you think of Martin Trainworth?”

“Interesting. Different from the science fiction books I’m so accustomed to; though still superior to those princess stories I read that one time by, uh, oh man I can’t remember.”

“Well that’s fine. If you’re interested in more science fiction might I recommend Isiah Avacados or perhaps some Mariah Shores? Oh, we also recently got in a new Emeelia Norland novel.”

“Actually I was thinking about maybe some normal fantasy.”

“Ah fantasy, those are some good ones. Young Adult, New Adult, Middle Grade, or-”

“Young Adult is fine.”

“Ah darn, I was hoping to introduce you to this one about magic that’s super popular. Thing is that it isn’t Young Adult though but it’s still super good.”

“Maybe next time though trust me Miss Holly. I want to sorta slide into the genre before I read something totally crazy.”

“Fair enough I suppose; though I personally would find it cooler to dive in and be completely bewildered at something new. But hey, to each their own.”

“Eh, I don’t know. I like being able to compare things.”

“Oh man, sometimes you young people I just, oh I don’t get it. I can’t comprehend it.”

“Like how I can’t comprehend that old music you keep playing Holly,” came a voice, a male approaching from beyond the book shelves.

“Marve, the eighties were brilliant for music. Put your neck out a little and hear the greatness.”

“Stop being old,” Marve chuckled, quickly disappearing down another aisle as Holly sighed.

Elise let out a slight chuckle as Holly looked back up, “Oh uh, right then, so books. For this particular genre, perhaps, what about-”

“Oh it’s fine Holly. I’ll go by book cover and their description this time, keep a small bit of surprise to everything right?”

“Oh, haha, alright. Well, fantasy is down aisle twelve. I think you’ll like it, truly.”

“It’ll be interesting to read though I’m not sure how I’ll feel. I prefer something imaginable that’s realistic, not fake but who knows.”

“Fantasy is the imaginable luv, things not real to some that might be true for others. Regardless of what you say all fantasy has to start from something and chances are that it is somewhat realistic.”

“Fair enough. Well I’ll still give it a try. It can’t be that bad, unlike that one thing you swore up and down would be the best thing ever.”

“Hahaha,” Holly laughed waving a paper fan at her face for but a moment before placing it over her mouth, “Oh that. Well you’ve got me there.”

“Yeah I gu- hey where did that fan come from?”

Holly lowered it, a smile spread across her face, “Well, either way. Thank you for stopping by again Elise. When you’re ready I’ll check you out. I’m sure you’ll be busy for awhile since you’re here.”

“Right. Well, thanks again Miss Holly.”

Elise turned, walking towards aisle twelve as it was labeled above, looking around and as she went down aisle twelve. Holly let out a sigh having been smiling until that point, “Well, she definitely resembles how her father used to be and yet she’s far more gentle. I wonder how much longer she’ll continue on this way. Hmm, I suppose I won’t truly know that. Heh, though on another note, I wonder how that old coot friend of mine is doing? Hopefully doing alright.”

Chapter III

“Warning, warning, security breach on the South end of the facility.

All non-military personnel must take shelter immediately. All able fighters report to defensive positions and lock down the facility. This is not a drill, repeat, this is not a drill!”

That was the voice over the loudspeakers as a high pitched shrieking alarm went on. Within the halls of the facility men and women ran with rifles primarily, steel doors dropping behind and in front of them sealing off various sections of the base. The facility was quick to rumble, the sound of a massive explosion going off somewhere within that shook viciously leading to some of the soldiers falling over. Many of those in lab coats ran around quickly with notes flying everywhere, some turning corners to run right into one another and fall backwards.

Lights began to flicker on and off repeatedly until the main lights went down entirely leaving only emergency lights on. Soldiers rushed along the corridors turning in various directions at each fork with doors slamming down behind them. Many turned down a passage, running down quick soon entering the Hub grounds with the various pathways where many others had entered. It was from one of these that Wesley ran down from with others in the same robe as him, all meeting up, “What happened?”

“Sir, we’ve had a breach. It’s them.”

“Dammit, how many?”

“At least a battalion's worth sir-”

“What? Damn it all. How did they gather so many and sneak up on us? All of you with me.”

They turned and flew quickly down a passageway with a sign hanging above that read South. They ran quickly, vigilantly, all with a fierce look in their eyes. Ahead an inhuman moaning roar was heard, then a shriek of some form of creature, followed by the sounds of gunfire as another explosion rocked the facility. With this one all of those running behind Wesley stumbled and collapsed, quick to get back up with fright however, "General, what the hell is going on?"

"It's The Hive so I haven't a damn clue. How close are we?"

"Not far sir, they should be just ahead."

All of them skidded to a halt as in front of them were several soldiers on one knee each, firing their rifles off into the darkness. Wesley's eyes danced around from one side to the other then back down the middle before widening as another roar was heard. Charging at them from up front taking round after round of ammo fire was a wolf-type creature with blazing sapphire eyes, black in color though covered with splotches of blood all over, it being many meters tall.

"Take that thing!" Wesley shouted though as he did there was a crash to his right.

The wall ripped open with an explosion of fire flying out, one that would quickly engulf the general. His body flew in these flames, flung through the other wall of the hallway.

The soldiers looked on, mouths hanging and eyes swollen, "General!"

One man flew out wearing the robe of The Hive, his hair shoulder length and pure white, his eyes that of a simple blue. His eyes shifted left towards the soldiers, sharpening upon sighting. With screams they opened fire upon the individual, shots that would never reach. Bullets stopped within the air

before the man, all rounds just freezing with no visible damage or hold. His eyes rolled, the soldiers continuing their fire even as the frozen bullets shifted. A snap of his fingers, then came the screams of pain as every bullet flew straight back into the bodies of their owners.

Many dropped, many continued fire stumbling away. The man launched himself forth, his body a blur of color as he went. Purple flames flew from his body, breaking off as his arms flew forward with black rods extending from his sleeves. There came more screams followed by the sound of flesh being ripped clean from bodies and of blood splattering the floor, walls, and ceiling. Bodies were flung everywhere littered with holes from both the rods and bullets. Behind the wolf howled out, blood flowing from both of its eyes which now had begun to glow orange and blue both.

More figures in Hive uniform flew from the hole, following the man of white hair down the hall. Behind a few of the new comers stopped, not in Hive uniform yet marked with red stars, all chuckling, "Well I guess that takes care of-"

Metal clanged again, blood spraying out as the individual fell backwards collapsing on the ground. Before him stood Wesley all a sudden back on his feet with some tears to his outfit, a white aura surrounding him as he looked upon the individual. Wesley's eyes drifted down the hall to where the white haired man had run, "Dammit! How could I have let myself be taken by that crap?"

THWACK!

Wesley flew, crashing to the tiled floor riddled with dents and holes. Before him stood another individual, a laughing individual, "Haha, too slow old man."

Wesley back flipped and landed securely on his feet in a single motion,
“And who might you be, sunshine?”

“Heh heh, they call me Rohwer,” the individual spoke, high pitched.

Behind him cartwheeled two more marked with the red stars of the Hive, flipping up to land on their feet. Both female and identical, both with green hair smiling looking upon Wesley, “Oh he looks like fun,” one spoke.

Rohwer chuckled, “Cindy, Sidney, shall we get down to it and roast this turkey?”

“Sounds fun Rohwer.”

“Oh yeah I call dibs on his legs.”

“Hmph, a bunch of children who think they can tangle with me?
Normally I’d be up for a little fun but right now I have no time for you,”
Wesley spat charging forward at them.

The twins quickly leaped back, Rowher also taking a quick step back with his arms flying up, “Alright we can do this, come on old man!”

“Nope-” Wesley muttered, skidding with a turn.

Bolting away, he shot down the hall in the white haired man’s direction. Rowher blinked, head turning with a mouth slightly open, “Uhhh.”

“You blockhead, he’s going after Lord Shadow!” came the bark of Sidney.

“What? That snake- I thought he was going to take us on. Bah, stop him now or it’ll be the ax for the lot of us!”

Ahead Wesley ran, passing bodies strung about on the floor and through walls; many his own soldiers, some of the rest being those marked by The Hive. His eyes darted back and forth as he ran, passing to the right at a fork

in the hall. Ahead came roaring of a beast of some sort, loud footsteps, and gun shots. Then thuds, redundant thuds, almost like something stomping upon the ground.

All at once he came to a halt at another fork, eyes glowing big,
“{Alright now what the living hell is that then?}”

A creature stomped forth, large enough to take up much of the hallway. A very big green beak flying open, the body and legs of a wolf, tail of a reptile, head of a pterodactyl, and small wings upon its back. A roar left it at once as it spotted Wesley, the same roar Wesley had heard the moment prior, loud enough the shake everything in its general vicinity. All at once it then shot forward right at Wesley, who at that point stepped a single pace back, “Oh you have got to be shitting me!” he shouted turning down another hall with a quick dash.

Behind the creature crashed in an attempt to turn, the walls and ceiling behind falling straight down atop its body like an avalanche. In seconds it shot forward through the rubble, down the same hallway as Wesley with its roar. Right passed this creature crawled Rohwer across the ceiling with a glow behind his eyes and a wide grin, while along the walls the two twins ran with smiles and a happy look to their eyes.

Glancing back ahead his right hand moved to his ear pressing against it, “This is General Wesley Ezdorth to all available units near the South Twenty-First Passage. Meet at the East Twenty-Fifth Passage immediately. I have a whole herd of trouble on my tail and I’m not having it.”

Chapter IV

“Elise, you pathetic pile of vomit!” a voice yelled, echoing off rocky cave walls along with the echo of dripping water.

“Excuse you?” was the response given with a slight bark to it, also echoing off the walls as a number of footsteps came to a halt.

Elise looked ahead, eyes locked with the individual who yelled and his scowling face, anger seeping through his expression like oil through a paper towel. Hers, a cold brittle stare with eyes absolutely locked and her body tensed. All around bodies stood with eyes locked on both, a stand off.

“I just heard that Vulper let you skip out on another hunt to go get your stupid made up tinker blinking bullshit. You should be cleaning and food prepping and gathering.”

“Since when does my involvement in a hunt matter to you? Last I checked I’m just a good for nothing woman who can only clean. And what does it matter if I have more books to pass the time? We live in a damn cave, I can’t make it shinier than a diamond jackass. Not like it’ll matter what I do.”

His jaw hung a tad, his face growing a tint of red as his eyes lit ablaze with more inferno, “Not like it’ll matter? Not matter?” came the growl back, “Damn straight it doesn’t matter because **you** don’t matter you worthless broad.”

“And that’s why I said my presence doesn’t matter.”

“Pft, just burn her damn books Rusty,” came the voice of another.

“Kick her ass!”

Around the two a crowd had begun to gather, heads poking themselves up and other poking down. Some shoved way to the front with grins, others blank or with darting eyes.

“Yeah, do it, she should be doing work the little freeloader,” called another.

“Beat her ass straight, no way in hell can she fight back,” laughed a third.

“God, your sister sucks,” a fourth concluded.

“Pft, whatever,” Elise grumbled with a glance away, eyes looking down towards the ground.

“Submissive like the woman that you are. Pathetic,” Rusty growled, “I’m disgusted that we’re blood.”

“Hey you said it not me,” she murmured raising her right hand to grab her left shoulder with a slight shrug.

“Useless hack, you’re submissive as all living hell and no one likes you. You should do us a favor and get the hell out of here. Go drop dead somewhere, I don’t freakin’ care.”

“No because all you care about is fighting. Why should you care about anyone or anything else?” Elise grumbled, her eyes dancing back towards him.

“Are you talking back to me? Do you want me to beat the crap out of you again?”

“Rusty, that’s enough of that,” came a call from the other end of the cavern.

All eyes, even those of Elise and Rusty, shifted to the source to see two figures emerge, “Hmph, Sacho and Nora, what a surprise,” Rusty muttered.

Both figures stepped forward to the center of the crowd which in turn parted around. The male crossed his arms, the female placing her hands to her sides, both looking directly at Rusty with fire in their own eyes. The male in particular looked with a spit of disgust, “Rusty, for someone who thinks your

sister isn't worth a damn thing, you sure seem to like bugging her. You could be using your free time to get stronger, right?"

"Well pardon me for trying to take out the trash. She doesn't even gather crap right. She has no skill to hone, she has no worth with chores, she's slow and utter crap," Rusty growled in response.

Once more Elise's eyes glanced away, her body shifting off from Rusty. The crowd parted as she moved, all letting her move on as their fixations on the three before them grew stronger. Rusty stepped forward, a knife sliding from his right sleeve, "You should know your place Sacho. I am an heir to the Clan of Vulfax. Screw with me and I'll make your life a living hell just as it is for the girl."

"Big talk from a runt who can't even beat a Zaherian," Nora growled sharply.

"You stay out of this," Rusty hissed.

"You're a bloody arrogant disgrace to Drachen everywhere, you so often act like a vulgar Zaherian Wulfn on the hunt. You honestly think that Lord Azala will choose you over Britt? Ha! You barely have half the brains of him. And for that matter, though she's ignorant to fighting, your sister is smarter than both of you put together. A smarter choice would be to label Britt as leader, Elise as his tactician, and you as a mindless enforcer. Oh hell or even pick her for her brains, that would be classy, so priceless. Sure we might all burn by the end of her reign but it would so be worth it to see you put in your place for once in your life."

"Did- did you just compare me to that loser sister of mine? I'll have your bloody head Sacho!" Rusty spat.

"You underestimate your father's insight and it comes off as stupid."

“You want stupid? Really now, oh, I’ve got you bro. Sacho, how about you and I go at it eh? I’d love to take you down a peg or two and show you why I am the best.”

“Rusty, stop it,” came a loud call, the call of a not-so deep commanding voice, rather silky smooth.

Elise’s head poked up, her eyes meeting the torso of another before her. Eyes turned again to see a figure approaching from the nearby crowd, a figure to which Rusty scoffed with his head shaking, “Oh hell no Britt, I’m not dismissing this again. Sacho has to run his mouth and now I’m going to kick his pretty face in.”

The newcomer stepped forward, more eyes turning to him as he moved up near Elise in a few steps. His feet stopped behind her, to which she slowly turned to look at him. With a sigh he raised his right hand to his head and mixed it in with his lengthy brown hair, “My my, you never learn brother.”

“Neither of you learn and your father needs to be aware of this. Elise might be a weak piece of trash but at least she’s smarter than the both of you when it comes to knowing her place.”

“I’m getting real sick of your mouth Sacho so come on, let’s get on with it,” Rusty called out.

Nora stepped aside, letting Sacho proceed towards Rusty, “Bring it on then little brat.”

“B-Britt, are you going to?” Elise murmured watching the scene unfold.

“Step in? No. He’ll have to learn the hard way,” Britt grumbled crossing his arms, “Now then, how long will Rusty last I wonder?”

Elise gradually looked back ahead, eyes glancing away after so long with both arms crossed relatively low, “I’ll watch this for now, then I have to go gather things. Vulper said he might come and watch me work for a spell.”

Chapter V

Daylight flourished with shadows cast from the trees. They danced over a winding dirt path along a forest floor, littered with natural beauty. Open and beautiful as wild flowers danced along with a slight breeze, the leaves shaking. Small shrubs shook with small critters scurrying about. A Chipmunk chirped before rushing off, squirrels wrestled in the tree branches above, birds fluttering in the air.

Those birds then swooped and caught many insects with each pass, one nearly slamming into a rabbit as it moved along. Rabbits flew forward across the path from one end of the forest to another, the sun moving overhead bit by bit. They'd move, stopping along the path sitting up before turning back to where they came from. From up the path came Elise, walking in the sunlight with a pouch at her side, a large handbag and a backpack filled with canisters at the top.

"Get this woman, go do that Elise, hey you should try something lady, just- ugh," she grumbled with her walk.

Her gaze darted back and forth with a slight smile forming as the sight of the wildlife darting around, rummaging through the vegetation, "Gets his pale ass beat for being a cocky dastard, then has the audacity to slug me in the gut and order me to go find crap out here. I can't stand him!"

Rusty lay upon his back, twin knives at his side covered in blood; though not the blood of his enemy. Above him towered Sacho, grinning as he looked down upon the battered Rusty. Elise observed, her face relatively calm and blank while Britt looked on in disgust, a sneer of disappointment overtaking him for a moment. Elise stepped forward twice, stopped as Britt's right hand grabbed

her left shoulder. Her head turned only to be met with a shaking of her brother's head.

"What was that about me hitting like a girl, Rusty?" Sacho chuckled.

"Kkk, y-you hit and look like one still," Rusty growled.

"Pft- Rusty you idiot," Britt murmured beside Elise.

Blood trickled from Rusty's nostrils, his right eye half-swollen, his left pinky bent straight back. An arm also lay twisted, a hole through the right hand from a blade. A hole also rested in his foot. He lay there, down and battered to nothing. With Sacho, it was only mere cuts to his clothes and little blood on the left arm, some down his chin leading from the mouth.

Her eyes turned to the right, acting in response to the sudden call of a falcon. It swooped down with talons out, narrowly missing a small rodent by centimeters. Having missed the falcon took off right back into the air, leaving Elise to chuckle a tad.

"Little ones aren't always easy to take out I suppose."

"No they're not, yet you still let yourself get pushed around," came a deep voice from behind Elise.

Her head turned again, eyes staring back at a man in black. She side stepped, sighing, "Well Vulper, not like I my words will make much difference and I definitely can't just kick his ass."

"There are many ways to win a fight, you know that better than anyone," he spoke stepping ahead in the shadows.

"Yeah yeah, I know."

She carried on as Vulper followed close behind, the leaves crunching beneath their feet as they moved, then came the crunch of the grass. Her head perked up, eyes looking ahead to a large wooden cart sitting with a deer upon it,

several foxes, ducks, and various other animals. At the back of the cart laid a stack of wood, topped with various ropes and bear traps. Sacks hung around full of canisters, some hanging by ropes off the cart.

Behind Vulper pulled a piece of paper from his sleeves, unrolling it for a minimal amount of time. His green eyes zipped around with a tint of read, examining what was drawn upon it, "Alright, the next trap is to the South."

"Suppose I have to pull this damn cart myself right?"

"You suppose right Elise."

"Dammit, the thing is going to be so heavy. Whatever."

Vulper stepped out of the shadows into the light, a brief breeze hitting him causing his long black hair to flow back. He stood bold and tall, shoving the paper away into his coat pockets, "What, you want help with that or what?"

"No thanks. I'm good. I don't want to burden you. Why did you want to come along anyway Vulper?"

"Curiosity I suppose. Make sure you're doing your job proper."

"I suppose that's the one benefit you have, being a Drachen half of Zaherian and not a half of Vampire. Makes me wonder why our ancestors thought to go with Vampire blood hybridization. Yeah they're crazy strong but the whole sunlight thing among other things is kinda trash. Inheriting all those weaknesses and such."

"Pretty much just the power thing and for convenience. If our line was of Wulfin blood or just Zaherian in general, well, that would be something weaker than what we are now. Or I should say, weaker than what the bulk of you are now. Regardless of what we are a mix of, we are Drachen, descendants of the proud Dragons that once ruled this world."

Both stopped before the cart, Elise lugging off her many containers onto the back with a single movement, “Huff! Those things are heavy.”

“Well you carry a ton so not surprising. Now don’t forget that after this you also need to cycle some of the straw bedding the elders have and from some of the others, the torches to the south need to be redone. Oh and you need to deliver the kills so they can be cleaned up and preserved a bit. Dust the tunnels, collect empty water canisters, burn the old cart, and-”

“Yeah yeah I get it Vulper, the normal chore list, I know. All I can say is that I’m glad we found a new cart, that old one sucked. Ugh, that deer though is going to stink it up. Been dead for awhile.”

“Well you don’t need a nose to know it has been rotting. Heck, its organs sloshing around should have been sign one.”

“Ugh, gross, how can you guys eat this stuff?” she gagged.

“Sweetie, a Drachen can eat anything. Just stick to your vegan diet.”

“Dude, I eat fish, I’m not vegan or vegetarian.”

“Right right, just don’t complain now, there’s work to be done.”

Chapter VI

There came a chain of explosions, a deep rumbling that rocked entire sectors of Nospheross. Creaking metal, snapping panels, crashing pillars. Deep inside a fire spread out while more metal pipes began to clang upon the ground, roaring out liquid that would flood rooms. Footsteps moved forward, a man gurgling before a crackle took the place. A thud and then more pipes banging down.

“Sounds as if we’ve got company on the way. Heh, no matter.”

Walking through the prison room, a sole man in a black cloak with red stars patterned across it, his hair long and silver, his eyes gleaming purple. Around him lay the bodies of several of the Security Force. As the prison bars dropped, sliced to nothing but pieces on the ground, many would leave the cells and look around. Many would grin, turning and heading off in their own directions leaving the man.

“I thank you both for freeing me.”

Behind him now from nowhere appeared two men, both with the same coat and each masked. One stood shorter with black hair and sapphire eyes, his mask half gold and half silver, carved with a smile. The other wore a simple gray mask with a giant red visor in the middle.

“But of course Cortez, it wouldn’t be a party without you,” the one with the gray mask spoke.

“Heh heh yeah let’s do this. This should be well worth the four hundred years of waiting.”

“Right. On that note, might I ask who is the one leading this operation?”

“The Prince of Darkness of course.”

“Heh, so my old apprentice is the one leading. Fascinating.”

“That is an affirmative.”

“Fascinating indeed. It will be good to see Leon after all this time. So, have you found what we seek yet?”

“Affirmative, again.”

“And uh, how about that other item I requested?”

“Affirmative to that as well, Cortez. All the pieces are in place so rest assured that this will all be said and done for good at long last.”

“Nothing is ever set in stone my friend, do well to remember that.”

“Gah, Nazi Vampires, Zombie Werewolves, what the hell else is in here!?” came the bark of a soldier, followed by a crackle of fire.

“Pissed off Leprechauns?”

“Shut up Timmy, I am not in the mood for jokes!”

“Who said I was joking jackass!?”

Footsteps rang out along with the sound of metal being cleaved open, a shriek coming out of said metal. Soldiers tore down a single hallway with metal-made rifles loaded with screens and other gizmos. They held ahead, firing white laser blasts upon Hive soldiers. Three flew ahead, their appearances all identical with flowing white hair and blue eyes, all wearing the black cloak of a Hive Elite. All shot around the shots, flipping onto walls, onto the ceiling, and then back onto the ground itself.

“Who gives a rip snort, fill them full of holes private. And fix that damn communicator so we can get backup in here!” came another yell.

“I am trying Lieutenant, I truly am but I’m telling you the main systems are down and I’m locked out. These guys had to have had help in order

to pull this off, I'm telling you!" came the response not more than a moment's passing later.

"You're telling me a lot of things and I don't want to hear any of it. We are pinned down here Commander and I'm not having any of this. We're dealing with Vampires who have flippin' guns. Vampires with guns, do you know how messed up any of this is? I swear a couple of them are dressed like the Nazis and even American Civil War guys too."

Wesley slammed down behind, throwing Wulfn after Vampire after Wulfn with his strength, blades of glittering white slamming through some. The Vampires once struck were set ablaze with inferno filled shrieks, stumbling around in agony as they went up, "No shit they planned this, we have a mole in our ranks!"

Yelping and yowls of pain, howling of wolves. Chunks of ceiling collapsing and walls blistered out, many soldiers holding place behind each viable spot as bullets stormed the air.

"Hold the line, hold the line!"

Many stood in the halls behind piles of debris, behind the holes in the walls, around corners, some even against the walls. An explosion filled the hall as another section of wall blew out, sparks of electricity sent flying out along with a body. The body flew clipped by several bullets after the fact and slammed through another wall. Wesley turned, two corpses in his hands, "Bloody dastards."

Halls lit crimson with the sound of crackling flames, the crackle of gun fire, the screams of many a mortal man.

"General look out!"

Wesley glanced at the soldier that had yelled to him and then to the opposite direction seeing three Wulfn Wolves charging him.

“Mongrels, have at thee, ha!”

Swinging his outstretched hand a blinding flash of light shot out and slammed into the wolves, sending all of them crashing back into a group of enemy soldiers, “Gettin real tired of this shit right about now.”

“General look out behind you, again!”

Without a moment’s hesitation Wesley twirled around and hurled the man from his right hand at what was approaching, only to be met by an explosion. The force sent Wesley flying back right into another hole, “Bah, damn.”

A man approached dressed in a Black Long Coat with a red star pattern, his hair white and down to just above the shoulders. Icy blue eyes stared back into Wesley’s brown eyes as he stood, “Hmm, judging by the power I’m feeling, you’re a Hive Elite. Am I right?”

Wesley glanced around quickly examining white gloves, black boots, no obvious weapons, though his gaze did focus upon a mask half covered by a black hood. A white mask with a black lightning bolt on the right side and a blue squiggly line beneath the left eye hole. A frown was carved into the mask while upon the forehead a black star surrounded by dark red flames rested. Black aura danced around the man with a sapphire tint echoing outwards from it like a bunch of waves.

By this point the gun fire on both sides halted, men looking across the line to their foes and then back towards their comrades. Wesley continued, “I would ask for your name but honestly I think I already see the answer. Iced

blue eyes, the white hair, and that black star with the flames. Heh, I'd call you a fake but that aura, has to be. Are you Zero Skyheart?"

"Mmm, perhaps, does that fact really matter?" was the response in a low, calm tone.

"Somewhat considering he should be dead. Half his face was blown off and he was left to burn after the Battle of Jerrisan. He's well done and well dead."

"Who knows, am I?" came the response as several other figures approached from behind the masked individual.

Wesley's eyes filled with a level of shock seeing these newcomers. All stood identical with the same hair and eyes as the masked man. None of them shared the mask though all shared the same face; pale with no lines, merely a scar around the right eye that ran from two inches above to five inches down the face.

"I find it most amusing how the moment someone wears a mask, everyone has to find out who sits behind it, rather than find out what the individual is acting on."

"Kind of my business in case you have a weakness, and what are they supposed to be? Replications?"

"Heh, you might call them that though does it really matter Ezdorth? Who and what we are should be of no concern to you at this very moment, what should be of concern is what we are about to do."

"Cylux," called another voice, this one a shout from the direction of the enemy soldiers.

Another set of individuals approached through the ranks, "Cylux, you and Shadow go on ahead. I want this one for myself," one of them spoke

Four individuals and all in black Long Coats with the red star pattern, two masked and two without.

“Shit! They let him out already?! Shit! Gonna have to kill ‘em now before he can return to full power-”

Two masked individuals stood alongside Cortez, who now stood in full uniform. The fourth individual’s Long Coat was dressed with splendor, silver fur lining around the neck band and sleeve openings as well as around the tails of the coat. Wavy dark brown hair flowed down his head to the base of the neck behind, parted and unkempt at the front exposing his forehead in full. His eyes a gleaming amber with a silver around the corneas.

Wesley scowled as he looked upon the man approaching, “Well well well if it isn’t the High Commander himself. Leon Sycamore. And what’s this? Two backup dancers to make yourself feel in charge? Losing your touch I see.”

“My my Wesley you’ve always acted with such ill-mannerism towards me and here you still are, alive and in command. I should correct that,” came the response of Leon in a cool and collected tone, his figure stopping in place as did the rest, “Cylux, be gone. I have business to tend to.”

Cylux nodded to Leon, “As you wish Leon. In the event that I don’t get the chance, I would like to say, Wesley... I’ve always felt you to be the biggest ass among the entirety of the Tribe. Ciao.”

At once the man and the others disappeared with only a trail of dust being left behind.

“Tch, high speed movement. Damn-”

“Oh I wouldn’t worry about that Wesley. You have bigger problems to contend with.”

“Suppose I do,” Wesley muttered turning to face Leon, “Guess I’ll have to kill them after I kill you, eh?”

The air around the two shifted once more, their intent to kill filling it and bearing down heavily. The very floor beneath them crackled, the sound of shattering as the air shifted again with the echoing of running off the walls.

Chapter VII

The breeze had begun to pick up more as the path guided her forth. Rustling up ahead stopped Elise short, stopped by the hop of a bunny on the move. Her smile perked up and with that her feet kept her moving. Her eyes darted right, a blur of movement on the horizon. Around a hundred meters out moved multiple humans, all dressed in armor vests carrying varying melee weapons and long range weapons.

Some with spears, some with axes, some with rifles, others with whole vests of grenades. Each wore cross necklaces, and none of them paid her any mind. Her pace stopped right behind a tree to block their potential view of her, eyes shaking a slither, “{Hunters? Yeah, definitely hunters. People from the Church probably. That’s just great. Looks like they’re heading in the direction of Pointe Peak. Stark Pack? I had best report back on that later I suppose.}”

Her head slowly poked out, eyes zooming out. Not a single one of them was in view though tracks left in the mud led on further away heading towards the North, “Well they’re either going for Pointe Peak for Stark Pack or their heading off to Faro. Dang, I should visit Faro again some time, I love that town. Alright, guess I should get back and report this, then get to work with all my other duties.”

The underground tunnels of the mountains, home of Clan Vulfax. Through these tunnels Elise moved at a sluggish pace with a basket upon her back filled with the unlit torches. Behind was her large cart, full of broken and diminished stubs that once were burning sources of light. Behind those, more wood and other torches, even supplies to make more torches. With a plastic

lighter in hand, she moved about lighting each new one up, removing the old ones, and placing the new ones in their new holders upon the cave walls.

Step, swap, light, repeat. That was all as she moved along with others walking passed her. She gave them a glance then continued on down another tunnel, “Hmm, lets see, I think I need to trade these out tomorrow, or did I put them in later than I think I- eh, whatever. I’ll roll with it. What was it next again? Oh... great.”

Upon another cart lay a stack of sheets and straw pulled by Elise as she went on to small openings within the tunnels. Behind the cart was another cart with torn sheets and messy straw piled high. She stopped at each small opening and reached in, pulling from them more torn sheets and straw piled.

She gagged as she carried it over to the back cart, dropping it aboard. Her attention turned to the front cart as she moved again to grab new straw and sheets. Moving to the entrance she set them down with a nod and a sigh, returning to the cart pulling it on as she had done many times before, “I hate swapping out old bedding.”

At the end of the tunnel was a stack of water canisters. She gave another sigh as she stopped right in front of them, bending down scooping several up, “Great, now I have more water duty to worry about.”

The carts moved to the outside now with her pull, upon one multiple water containers and upon the other much of the bedding and old torches. With

a sigh she stopped once a fair distance away, turning to the second cart, “Well, this cart is about done like this lighter. So-”

With a single flicker the cart erupted into flames, the lighter having been tossed lit right into it. Her foot pressed down and released the latch connecting the two carts. With that done Elise turned away and pulled the first cart aside, a book now in hand which she opened, “Lets see... so tomorrow I grab a few dozen liters of water again and find another cart if at all possible, then catch fish. What joy.”

Her eyes glanced up to the entrance where they then rested upon Vulper who stood with arms crossed. The book lowered as he gave a nod, turning to walk back in. Elise glanced back down to her book, reading along as the fire roared on, “Man, what a pain. Next I have to, uh, oh right, Vulper wants me to go tend to the Eldership and bring them their herbal tea and then sweep the tunnels out. Ah man, why do we even clean cave tunnels out?”

She sighed looking up as the smoke bloomed and moved up, “Just another day I suppose.”

Down the tunnels a new rolling cart squeaked again, pulled by Elise by a rope tied around her waist. This one carried only brooms. Forward she moved with one in hand. A sigh left her as she swept along the ground as she moved forward, eyes small and glum.

She looked left, hearing the sound of sudden clapping, then the sound of something smacking against the rock.

CRASH

Behind her the cart shattered, broom splinters flying as a man crashed down on top of the cart. He yowled, arched on his back. In the entryway there

stood two individuals laughing to themselves, bumping fists as they then disappeared back inside. Elise turned round, “At it again Brett?”

“Nah- urk, I got beat because I failed my recent mission. Gahhh I’m in pain.”

“You’re in pain but you’re not acting like it.”

“Yeah that might be because I fell into a burning patch of some weird looking plant that was then hit by flaming arrows. Did I mention that?”

“Uh, no, pretty sure you didn’t.”

“Ah well, there’s that. Unfortunately it wasn’t just that that I inhaled, I think? I didn’t inhale enough either but it sorta buzzed me. I’m not really thinking right. I feel the pain but I’m not in pain if that makes sense.”

“Alright alright just uh, umm. Hey how about you sleep it off, I swapped out a bunch of the bedding a minute ago.”

“Sweet,” he mumbled standing, slowly stumbling off.

Elise’s gaze followed though only for a moment as she let off a sigh, “I don’t have the medical supplies anymore unfortunately ever since Father told me to stop collecting them, sorry about that. Ugh, this clan is too harsh with its punishments though-”

“Nah nah das, das just fine Lil’lise. Alls good. Jus-justrust me k? Heehee.”

“Heh, right. Try to be careful alright?”

“Yee yeah, whaeva,” he laughed stumbling off.

She sat in a carved seat now, the cart beside her. In her right hand an apple with a few bites taken out of it and in the left a book. Next to her Thomas and Destiny chowed down on bits of meat from recently caught deer, both

laughing at each others jokes. She smiled slightly as she flipped the page with one finger.

“Right so then I was all like *yo get out of my face before I drop kick you into next Tuesday* and they got all up in my face.”

“So what happened next Destiny?” Elise asked.

“Drop kicked Baske through the floorboards at the mansion and through a couple floors into the basement.”

“Ha, I wish I had been there, those two drive me insane,” Thomas laughed.

“Oh gosh, don’t even get me started again. Elise be happy you don’t have to put up with all the idiots in Vulfax like us.”

“I mean, I still have to put up with them. Earlier I ran into Brett and, to say the least, the man was a walking pile of wounds and somehow fell into a patch of marijuana that got started on fire. He was so messed up that he couldn’t feel his pain yet he knew he was in pain.”

“Oh my gosh, did you help him?”

“No. Remember I was told to stop collecting medical supplies a few months ago? I can’t patch anyone up anymore like I used to.”

“That’s a shame because you were good as a medical person. I’d say you’re one of the best in the valley when it comes to herbs and medicines.”

“I’ve done a lot of reading, what can I say.”

“Heh, remember that time you had to sew half of Omanick’s arm back on when someone cleaved through it with an ax?”

“Oh lord, don’t even remind me. I had to use horse tranquilizers on him just to get him to stop twitching so I could sew him back up.”

“Wait, horse tra- is that good for- I mean, what?” she questioned loudly.

“Destiny, I have no idea. All I know is that what I was using didn’t work and I hadn’t read that I shouldn’t have used them. We’re Dragon people, not Vampires or Humans.”

“Sucks that he got blown to pieces a week later. Stupid land mines.”

“Mmm.”

“Well well well, if it isn’t the little loser Elise,” came laughter.

Attentions turned ahead and rested upon several individuals on the approach, Rusty among them with a wide smirk.

“The mistake herself eating fruit like the fruit that she is, haha,” came the laugh of another.

“Shut up Rick. Leave Elise be,” Destiny grumbled.

“All of you shut up, it’s time for your daily tasks to be handed out for tomorrow,” Vulper spat approaching, “All of you except for Elise file in, I have words to give.”

“That’s fine, I have to be on my way to get more water anyway I suppose,” Elise mumbled.

A sigh left her again as Destiny and Thomas left with the group, her head drifting back. The book flipped shut to which point she stood again to approach the cart. With that she carried on, cart following close behind as she moved. Her head turned, a slight glance off to the right where Britt stood, a nod given with a slight smile present.

Chapter VIII

Her back to the wall, her arms crossed, one foot backed and pressed against. Eyes shut, head lowered, hair flopped to the sides of her face. Around Elise stood several, various lengths and builds. Among them as well were Destiny and Thomas, both standing with arms crossed, both looking invested to what was before them.

The first a tall man, bulky, shaggy brown hair, green eyes, a huge grin spread across his face. A torn sleeve long-sleeve shirt with patches in it, ripped up jeans, black combat boots, spiked shoulder guards, piercings, even a few tattoos.

A small girl, still a middle teen like Elise, stood next to him. Green eyes, flowing silver hair, a petite face, square lens glasses. Dark red coat, blue tank top, green jeans, socks, and half battered sandals. She cowered back a smidge, appearing little before the group.

Two stood at the same height, just over a meter and a half. Both in dark blue coats, black red pants, ruffled shoes. Their faces were also the same, both well shaped, both with amber eyes, both with black hair. The differing factor: one had half green hair on their left, the other orange on their right side. Their arms crossed, casual stance, both grinning.

Finally was another, this one in a dark red Long Coat. A black tank top, cargo pants, swords holstered to both her sides below holstered pistols. Her hair long and flowing red with a flower centered above her face. Eyes hot pink, lips painted green, a dash of blush. She held back at half attention with a smile.

“So... how about that Rust, eh Elise?” the first bumbled out.

“Mark, I’m not in the mood to talk about him,” Elise grumbled.

“Yeah I know but come on, really? You’re going to have to talk about him sooner or later.”

“Mark you just need to know when it is best to shut up friend,” the half red-head laughed.

“Right right, I agree with Scott. How about you Samantha?” the half green-head retorted.

“Drake, I don’t see the problem. She can choose not to talk if she desires,” the red head concluded.

“Uh, I mean, mmm- if she wants to stay quiet she should,” the silver haired girl replied.

“Glasses, shush,” Mark laughed, “Oh I’m joking Elen, get back here.”

“Seriously guys? Pipe down. It’s not Elise’s fault that she has a dickhead for a brother,” Destiny barked.

Elise’s eyes opened to the comment, drifting over towards Destiny, “Honestly, I know I shouldn’t listen to him but every time he calls me out for being worthless or a burden, I- I just can’t help but feel that he’s right.”

“No way!” Mark spat.

“Yeah, M-Mark’s right Elise. Y-you’re no burden, y-you’re pretty awesome,” Elen murmured.

“I appreciate the thoughts everyone but still,” she sighed back.

“Seriously, that guy can get screwed. You’re, you’re great Elise,” another from behind Mark spoke up, another girl.

She walked around finally as Mark moved behind Zoey. This one was of the same height as Elise, black hair, silver eyes. Half black and half purple jacket divided down the middle. Pants the same only swapped around, then shoes that were simply red. She looked at Elise, firmly.

“Zoey, you need ta quit gawkin from behind me,” Mark grumbled.

“Sorry Mark, not my fault you’re a giant,” she replied.

“Guys, I appreciate this but come on, there are other things you could be worrying about,” Elise shrugged off, her head turning to the right with her eyes closing slightly, “The clan is all that matters anymore anyways. What I face is meaningless.”

“Bullshit. Without us there is no clan. People are the clan. We matter and so do you!”

“Hell, if that were the case then Sven would be here right now,” Samantha grumbled.

“I remember that, that was just bitter and pointless. Could’ve been saved,” Mark growled.

“I remember that too. I was the one who he died beside after all,” Elise sighed, her eyes shutting completely.

The main hall, crowded with the people of Vulfax. Some stood in corners, chewing into the raw flesh of animals. Some tore the heads off of birds and shoved the bodies straight in. Some even devoured human limbs, Vampiric of course. To one corner stood Elise with Zoey, Mark, and Elen.

Mark chomped on a hove and the leg attached to it, while Zoey picked cooked flesh off of a whole chicken. Elen sat, holding herself, hair covering her eyes, a human arm on the ground in front of her. Then there was Elise who stood with a stone bowl of berries. She looked up, speaking to those around her.

“Yeah so, what you need to do is avoid that plant. Hemlock is super toxic,” she spoke, looking at Mark.

“But you said-”

"Yeah I know, it has other uses. It can be used to make medicine. Still if you don't know what you're doing, don't."

"Latoma taught you a lot, didn't she?"

"Yeah."

"T-that's cool Elise," Elen murmured, glancing at Elise.

"Thanks Elen," Elise replied.

"Huh?! Uh, y-yeah," Elen replied looking away for a moment.

"Medic!" came a shout from behind Elise.

Her bowl dropped to the ground, as did the meat her friends chewed upon. All turned in the room to one of the entrances where there stumbled a man. He fumbled, bleeding from the head. His right eye shut with blood flowing, blood from his left hear and his nose.

A woman leaned on him, hunched over. Her eyes shut, her head bleeding bad. Her right arm was torn off with strands hanging. Her throat slashed, a blood soaked white cloth wrapped around. Several puncture wounds in her gut, one of her breasts bit clean off.

Elise moved forward, "Sven, hurry and set Grace down-" she began, pulling a hair pin out of Zoey's hair.

She halted not more than twelve steps towards them at the sound of a man barking, "Stop!"

Elise turned to her right, as did many other. The injured man looked with quivering eyes, a face of dread. A man in black approached, his hair white, his eyes red. Fangs were laid out, "You know the rules brat. In this clan you die on the battle field or you pull through without help. Let the girl die Sven. Drop her."

"B-but sir, she's my friggen wife, I can't let her!" Sven screamed.

"The code of this clan is the code, now drop her!" he barked, looking and nodding to two standing beside Sven.

They at once moved forward, both grabbing onto Sven shoulders while another approached Grace. The third ripped her

cloth off, exposing a gash in her throat. From it blood washed out quickly, the wound opening. The first two yanked Sven away as the third pulled Grace from him.

"No- no no no!" Sven screamed as Grace dropped to the ground.

Elise turned quickly, "Phil, I can help her, let me please!"

A fourth walked up in front of Elise and swung his arm, slamming her back and onto her butt, the hairpin sent flying across the room. Phil shook his head as Grace's own head struck the ground, "Code is code. If you're going to die, you die in battle. You don't get fixed. You two, drag this traitor before Lord Azala. Drag him to the ravine if he is to be banished, or send him to Rusty to be killed. I care not which it is that our lord picks."

"Phil, please, I can he-"

"You can not do a thing. All you're good for is gathering for this clan. The injured are of no use and so healing is of no use. You're useless beyond your assigned task! You three, get her out of her, throw her into isolation!"

Three approached Elise, all grabbing hold of her. She struggled, yelling as the three took her away. Sven yelled out, crying as he was drug through the halls. All this as Grace lay there, dying on the cave rock.

"I'll never forget that," Elise growled.

"I know as Drachen we're supposed to frown upon the weakness of others, by nature, but that... that was just being heartless," Mark mumbled.

Elen turned away, taking a few paces back. Her eyes glimmered as she gazed upon the ground, her right hand over her heart clenching at her clothes.

“Ha, well what have we here?” came a voice from the left of the group, catching attentions from everyone, “A couple of gays hanging out with some freaks!”

Elise turned her head last, glaring down the hall where an older woman stood. Wrinkly, pasty skin, glowing orange eyes, silvering hair.

“Belama,” Elise muttered.

Chapter IX

“You should watch your tongue Loserlise,” Belama chuckled.

“Stop calling me that you old witch!” Elise spat back.

“Such a temper, hahaha. So what are you doing? Having a queer party in the cave?”

“Eat ass you old hag,” Mark barked.

“How dare you- I’ll have your rear for that one. Such a mouth on you,” she muttered as others soon came from behind to join her.

“Get out of here!” Samantha yelled.

“Oh pipe down. I’m not here for you freaks anyways. I’m here for the princess over there.”

“The hell do you want?”

“Why, simple. I’m here because you’re such a disappointment and you need to be reminded of it daily. Also your bedding job was total shit. There were thorns in mine, brat.”

“Seriously?” Thomas muttered, “Can’t imagine why-”

“Why yes. A disgrace to the very name Vulfax. Your father tries so hard, your brothers try so hard. And here you are, consulting with the gays, being useless even for a woman. Ugh, you just reek of failure. I was hoping if I asked you nicely to run off and die somewhere you just would. Your brothers are both so stressed, poor Rusty is slipping up because you’re his blood, and it’s getting to him.”

“I don’t give a damn what that jackass has to say about me, nor do I care what you have to say about me you old hag. Fuck off already!” Elise spat.

“Oh such a temper. Gosh. No wonder you’re such a failure. Can’t respect your elders.”

“S-shut up. Elise is no failure, she’s great!” Elen chimed.

“Oh, I’m sorry, did the little queer say something?” Belama retorted, “I know none of the rest of you are that way, or at least don’t yet seem to be. It’s such a disease, bringing such great shame. Elen, I don’t get it. How could you do that to this proud clan?”

Scott and Drake moved forward towards Belama, at which point three of her own people stepped in front of her to block the boys. Belama smirked, her eyes wild with flare, “Your own parents were so disappointed in you Elen that they had to run off and die. Your friends say nothing in retaliation that’s worth a shit. You are just as big of a failure as Elise.”

“Belama!” Elise spat, standing straight with arms down, turning in the old woman’s direction, “Get out of here now! I am still an heir to Vulfax, I can have you banished or executed with the snap of my god damn finger!”

“Ugh, standing up for that?! You must swing that way too, oooug. I was only joking about the gay party; but I guess I was right. You nasty nasty terrible girl. That’s alright though, we’ll talk again soon. Toodles,” she said with a laugh, turning and walking away, “Oh and Elen, stop your gushing over Elise. If she was ever going to smash your little hole with hers, she’d have done it AGES ago. You’re both just trash. No wonder your parents left you behind, just so they wouldn’t have to look at you, their mistake, an utter failure. Both of you should just kill yourselves and be done with it. You and your fake fucking depression, god!”

She departed down a corridor with others following close behind. Elise’s body relaxed as she let forth a sigh, turning round, “Hey uh, you alr-”

Mark turned, no sign of Elen. She had disappeared.

“Elen? Oh man, guys, please just, go find her,” Elise spoke.

“Gotcha,” Destiny replied.

The group moved down the tunnel, breaking off into different directions down different tunnels. Elise followed in a quick pace, looking around as she did, “Damn Belama, she knows Elen is more on the sensitive side. I hope she didn’t get far-”

Elise followed behind Scott and Zoey first, who then turned down different tunnels. Elise kept forward, turning, forward, and turning again. All the turns and tunnels appeared largely the same with torches placed every so often, some out and some still ablaze. Another turn and then there came shouting.

“Fucking little whore, stand up!” an elderly man yelled.

Elise turned another corner. Before her now a large old man in brown robes, two bulky warriors around him. On the ground before them was Elen. Blood trickled down the right side of her face, a bruise easily visible. The old man swung his right foot ahead, nailing Elen in the jaw sending her onto her back.

“Know your place, servant!” the old man spat, literally spitting on Elen’s face before walking over her with the other two, “I could give two shits about you being a queer. You’re still a woman and you’re fit to serve us warriors, bitch! And I don’t care what you say. Good luck surviving on your own you little queer! Out there, there’s nothing but death and worse hell than this clan!”

He approached Elise, scowling, “As for you,” he barked holding his right arm out, his pointer finger poking her chest, “Clean this shit heap up like a good little worm.”

He pulled his hand back and glance down slightly, “And while you’re at it, fluff these up so you’re at least presentable.”

He brushed passed Elise with the other two following, leaving her scowling with a following gaze. Her attention turned quickly back to Elen who was just now starting to sit back up, rather teary eyed. Her head and body turned round to look at Elise who was now approaching, who was moments later kneeling down with arms wrapped around Elen.

Embrace.

“Elen, it’ll be alright,” she spoke softly, patting Elen’s back.

“E-Elise I-I, I just- I hate it here, I don’t want to be here anymore!” she sobbed in response, “I hate everyone, it’s like this every day!”

“Easy now. I know. Belama has it out for anyone who isn’t up to her so called standards, and the elders are just stuck in their old ways.”

“They’re all like this though, all the time!”

“Vulfax- does have issues, lots of issues; but it’s not all bad, right?”

“J-just don’t lie to yourself, you get is worse than any of us-”

Elise glanced off to the left, a sigh escaping her in that moment. Elen tore free from Elise’s hold, causing the latter to stumble. The former moved away down the tunnel, her head lowered with her hair in her face, “I need some time Elise, j-just leave me be-” she finished with a sob.

By the time Elise stood, Elen had already taken off.

Chapter X

The Emerton Library sat largely vacant with exception to the rows and rows of shelves holding books, and only a few people. Rooms of shelves loaded with books, a mix of carpets and hardwood floors, furniture, wooden tables, the works of any small town library included inside. Holly drifted back and forth between sections, passing by a single table with books constantly being stacked high with every pass. Sitting at one side was Elise, her gaze following Holly's each and every move.

There came others, a few of them who would follow patterns similar to Holly. Up and down the aisles, returning with books and then leaving with books. She sat puzzled as this went on, head tilted. The books simply piled higher and higher, dozens stacked atop one another on the table.

Holly approached with five more in hand, setting them down upon the table right in front of Elise. A huff left her. Black hair flopped as her head turned, "And that luv is our entire inventory."

"I just wanted your three best on the subject, not- not this. Even I can't read all this. Heck I can't even carry all this," Elise replied baffled.

"Well that's because there is no *three best* when it comes to this sort of thing. You either do or, well, you don't. There is no middle ground unless you're lazy."

"I only needed to learn a couple things, gosh! Like, what am I supposed to do with this one. This one is all about reacting to being an amputee. I mean no disrespect but that's kinda useless to me."

"Never know when you'll be an amputee though, heh heh," Holly concluded slumping down into a chair, "Honestly we just needed to throw about nine tenths of these in the archives or in the trash, as our vendor asks. Not

that we would trash 'em. Newer, more up to date ones are coming. We're required to do this every tenth year so, I just thought I'd pile them up and see how you'd react."

"Ha ha," she grumbled with an eye roll, "Well still, I just need whatever your best are."

"Uhhmmmmmm- oh, here, this is a fairly decent one," Holly said reaching into the pile.

Elise leaned forward, observing as out popped a book upside down. It was handed over, text covering the back. Upon being received, her eyes shot over it. A few seconds of looking, then a glance was granted back up to Holly with an even more confused set expression, "This is a furniture catalog."

"Eh- what?" she replied swiping the book back, giving it a look over, "How did that get in there? Boras, here-"

One hand tossed the book back towards a man, while the other arm and hand reached into the pile for another book. The man turned only to meet the book cover to his face, "Gyah- dammit Holly!"

Another moment later and Holly pulled out another book, one cover-side up. The book was handed to Elise.

"Sweet. This one seems right."

"So," Holly began taking a seat yet again, "What does one need a psychology book for?"

"Curiosity," Elise replied as the pages were flipped, "I have a friend that I'm worried about. Just hoping one of these books will help me figure things out."

"Ah. Well you'll find that what you're reading is only good for a basic set of knowledge," Holly spoke as she stood again.

“How do you mean?”

“Psychology is something that can be studied day and night for years on end. Unfortunately you’ll never find answers. Human emotions, really brains in general, they just aren’t all built the same. You can reference any of these that you want but really you should try and feel the situation out yourself for an answer. It’s just like trying to understand the world and the many people of the world. It doesn’t work.”

“I see,” she murmured, “If only people could just get along and go out of their way to help one another.”

“Unfortunately things don’t work that way. Sin defines living beings. There are certainly virtues to be had; but we’re still a species of sin.”

“Well that’s reassuring.”

“Give it time my dear. Things always get worse before they get better; but when they do get better, they get a lot better,” Holly concluded as she disappeared behind more aisles.

Elise returned focus back to what lied before her, eyes half closed, shaken. A breath of air left her as she nodded. Eyes turned left and down towards the floor before moving up the lines of shelves.

Chapter XI

The two titans stood before one another, Leon of Hive and Wesley of Tribe. White aura crackled out of Wesley's body, surging around him. Electricity sparked, his hair flapped along with his Tribe Coat. The power's dance carried it high to the ceiling while it vined outwards around him at the same exact moment. His men stepped back, shaken, their guns clacking just as were their boots.

Before them there was the cold roar of Leon's black aura. It drifted like smoke, racing to the above ceiling while also slowly breathing around him like mist. Bursts of purple and blues popped with red appearing every so often. His eyes gleamed within the darkness, his ear to ear grin quite visible. The red stars of his coat, glowing with their own brilliance, set off his position in the dark which now took away the rest of his color, leaving only his eyes and smile.

Wesley's head turned a slight to the right, eyes darting back towards his men, "Stand down. This is not a foe you have any hope of matching. Reinforce the rest of the compound."

"Y-yes sir!" one choked.

Their boots clattered and stomped as they tore off, leaving the two warriors to square off. Light and Dark, Warmth and Chill, Life and Death. That was all that stood in that hallway now. The darkness broke from Leon as the light shattered from Wesley, their forms returning to complete visibility, their heads tilting with eyes locked dead shot. Their feet twitched, gliding across the ground as they prepared their charges.

"Let's go, Light Star Strike!" Wesley called out.

His hands clapped together, upon which sparks of white light appeared all around him. The Light Energy whirled, flying off as spinning arrows

towards Leon, leaving behind speckles of electricity which crackled in said air. Leon's grin widened even further, parting only when his mouth flapped with speech, "This is too easy!"

His feet bolted, his body launching ahead. Knees bent and sprung, his form shot high into the air straight over the first batch of arrows. The wind whirled around him, his coat flapping, his hair flailing. The light had closed the many meter gap in seconds, and in only that time he had effortlessly dodged, "Reaper Strike!"

His arms shot ahead, his sleeves flapping. From them launched multiple chains of Dark Energy which shrieked as they flew through the air. Wall panels and floor tiling alike shattered as the chains struck through with the force of anti-tank rifle bullets; though the bulk continued ahead straight to Wesley. His eyes lit up as they neared. A step back, hesitation.

BLAM

Wesley flew back as the chains blew straight into his torso and out of his back, crashing through the walls behind him seconds after. His center, his lower abdomen, his right side, and his left shoulder, all struck followed by others which danced around, "Gyah-"

"Ha, trouble already? My how times of peace can make one grow so weak, eh Wesley? Huh?"

Much of the color left Wesley's form in a heartbeat, becoming a pasty dark brown. Said brown began to pool off of his body, splashing along the ground and walls, his entire form melting with all features leaving. The chains detached from Leon's sleeves, clanging along the ground now solidified as he dropped down to the ground, "A Mud Replacement?"

His eyes remained on the replacement as it splashed to the ground. It was after that they shifted, drifting left to one of the intact walls.

“You face the challenge that is Wesley the Earth Dragon, now you shall be swept away,” Wesley’s voice echoed.

The wall shattered, a torrent of mud and water sent blowing out of a giant hole the size of a minivan. It swept into the hall, gushing its way down and straight into Leon in seconds. The Dark Warrior was blown back, the current taking him along as right ahead the entire hall was filled with the roaring waters. He growled, his body squirming against the waves as the space filled up more and more, “You call that an attack?!”

“No, I call that a diversion,” came Wesley’s voice from right ahead.

The water and mud dropped, revealing the other side of the hall dry as can be. There stood Wesley, his arm out, his right leg swinging and his foot slamming down to the ground shattering tile, “Now, Liger Bomb!”

Leon’s eyes widened, locked to Wesley’s out stretched right arm. With palm facing him, the Dark Warrior watched as there came a spark of white, followed by a sphere which quickly began to swell. As quickly as it appeared it shattered, doubling in size once. Two more times followed, the entire sphere practically filling the hall. It fired.

The sphere of Light Energy launched forward at two hundred Kilometers Per Hour, blasted right through the waters, and came right up upon Leon. His arms crossed as it struck. The blast went off immediately, filling the hall with a blinding white light and a colossal blast. A dome of white surrounded Wesley as the power swept him away, engulfing his shield with a flood that washed him away.

The entire ceiling erupted with the force of a volcanic eruption blasting its way up. It traveled wide, pushing out everything around it, forcing itself upwards especially. It was a blast that would easily penetrate the rocks above and blow open a hole straight into the depths of Nospheross. Leon's wail could be heard only momentarily as his form was washed away in the blast itself as well.

The attack subsided not more than eight seconds after, leaving behind only a minimal amount of dust and smoke. The hall had been obliterated, a blast radius of sixty meters having pushed way dirt and the facility, vaporizing practically everything. Above light shined down with a rain of falling rock and panels, a hole punched straight up all that way to the surface.

Wesley stood in a section of the destroyed hall, the very end of it, a branch of halls right behind him. His dome of energy dissipated seconds following the end of the blast, leaving him standing tall with a smug grin. His eyes glanced around, "How's that, welp?"

Wesley huffed, steam drenching off his body following those words, "Liger Bomb, a technique in which I expel all of my power into a single blast as quickly as I can for maximum kinetic damage. Practically an unstoppable bomb if you think about it. That should've packed a... what the fu-"

"Heh heh heh, not bad General," came the call of Leon.

Smoke disappeared the moment those words finished to reveal Leon standing firm at the epicenter of the blast, hovering, his arms still crossed. Dark Energy flowed off of his body, like a shedding skin. His Long Coat was torn, muddy and burned; overall though his form was intact. His arms lowered to his sides to reveal a smug expression.

His head tilted, his neck cracking audibly, “Liger Bomb, been awhile since I last tanked one of those. Have to say, yours sucks compared to the Princess’s. Then again, I haven’t been hit by her in at least twenty thousand years.”

“Hmph! That was just an opening attack,” Wesley growled as the light of the base and of the surface shined down upon him.

Once more his aura crackled, the light warping around him, appearing to be sucked right in, “So long as I draw breath, I will not let you out of here alive!”

“My my you appear to be underestimating me. I do hope you’re right though about this only being the beginning. If peace had made you that weak, well hell, do I even need to say it? You’d be better off quitting now, General Ezdorth.”

“Arrogant much?” Wesley growled.

“I digress. Shall we just get to it? Might I recommend taking this fight to the surface so we have more room to play? I’d hate to reduce Nosfeross to rubble while my troops are still inside.”

“I don’t take requests from scum.”

“That is so like you. So be it General Wesley Ezdorth. Please, try to make this interesting for me will you? Now... come!”

Chapter XII

Dipping sunshine lay before her. Crimson and orange cloaked the land with the ball of light descending on the horizon. Shadows cast forth from the standing army of wood, with a slight breeze present as opposed to earlier. Birds clung to branches, being some of the last visible things in the region.

Elise strode forward, a backpack attached to her filled to the brim with canisters and thick packs of leaves. Red dripped from the leaves, blood in fact, with some just open enough to reveal meat. Canisters sloshed all around, hooked to the bag. Upon her shoulder sat a long pole, rope and more canisters hanging right off of it.

The ground slopped beneath her feet mostly, with only some crunching, a couple twigs snapping. Another step and a snap. A flutter of feathers and cawing came from above, crows quickly flying off with squirrels scurrying along the branch right through where the birds had been. Rabbits around Elise flew off, darting into brush.

A sigh left her, as they typically do. Her head shaking, her feet stopped, her eyes began to drift around. The golden and orange sun bathed over her; though slowly it began to ebb away. She looked to a squirrel that fell right before her from above, one that quickly tore off.

“Great, something else I just so happened to ruin. So much for the tranquility.”

She moved on with the grass bowing for each step she took, a grunt leaving her as she bent her knees. The backpack and pole were both hoisted up a notch, resting easier on her now. She moved ahead faster than before, eyes still moving around though. Not a creature stirred around her, not a thing left.

CRACKLE

Her head perked up as she stopped in place. Twigs had snapped to her right. Her head drifted towards the right, facing it head on. No sign of movement other than the brush moving due to wind. The pole shifted, her left hand holding it up firmer with support from that shoulder. All the while her right arm moved over, hand grabbing her left arm.

A twig snapped to the left, her head turning quickly. As she shifted around she was struck. A massive object flew into her, knocking her right off her feet. The straps of the backpack ripped, the pole went flying. Canisters slashed and clattered against one another, against the rock, and right into the mud.

She rolled off in the direction she had been heading in, rolling through mud. She flipped around onto her knees and hands, huffing. She faced now the object that hit her, as well as her backpack. The pole lay bent against a tree with half the canisters having rolled off. Slowly standing, she caught view of the shape.

A man stood before her dressed rather well. Black dress pants, a white vest, a black coat in the fashion that a conductor might wear, black and white tap shoes, white gloves. Blood dripped down a partially burned face, black hair mopped right in said face. Steam rolled right off the burn, the red of it slowly disappearing giving the man back his normal color.

He looked to Elise, his eyes glowing silver and red. Fangs also made themselves visible with a curl of his lips. She stood tall, shook, “{A Vampire!}”

The man growled, “You wretch, you’re going to be in my way. No, you’ve promptly gotten in my way.”

“Look, I’m sorry for that but you ran into me. I don’t want any trouble,” Elise replied.

“Bah, too bad missy, you’ve got trouble now!” he spat pulling from his sleeve a black rod.

Blood dripped from the point at the end of the rod. He stood ready, eyes sharpened, “Human, I will take you and be on my way!”

“Human? No buddy, I’m a Drachen of Vulfax so I suggest you settle the hell down! {On the off chance that he is like every other Vampire, he’ll go shit faced and leave me be. If not, damn, I’m going to have to chance defending myself.}

”Gah, Drachen of Vulfax you say? Hrgh, yes, I smell it on you. That stink, disgusting. Well it doesn’t matter, I need a hostage anyway. I’d take anyone, especially one of your people. Those damn Hunters are right behind me and I will be damned if I get caught, quite literally. So how about you help a brother out and let me take you hostage, they won’t know the difference between you and a civilian.”

Her eyes skimmed over him, widening not more than a moment later, “I know you- you’re Kensa of the Blood Mist. You’ve hunted and killed everything from humans to Drachen, infant or otherwise- no way in hell will I help you!”

“Listen bitch, I don’t have time for this-”

“He’s here, stop him!” came a voice.

“Dammit!” he barked.

People with crossbows and crosses on them poured out of the brush, several including an elder. Elise stumbled back a pace, “{The guys from before.}

“Ah hell no, I am not falling here and now. You *will* be my hostage and get me out of this!” Kensa spat, launching himself forward at Elise with the rod raised.

“Hold fire!” the elder man yelled.

Elise stepped back, watching Kensa draw near. His rod flew forward at her gut, her eyes widening as the weapon got close. Her left foot flew back, stomping down as her back arched. She side stepped out of the way, dodging the lunge of the Vampire who in turn flew right on by. Her head shot right, staring at the pole, “{There-}”

Her body turned and her feet floored it. Kensa stomped down and turned sharp a whole one-hundred eighty, bolting right after. Elise leaped up and somersaulted through the air, coming down right next to the canister pole. Both hands grabbed hold, hoisting it up with a swing. She turned and swung, slamming it right into Kensa’s weapon. Elise buckled back a single step though held, pushing firm back as her feet sunk into the ground.

The Vampire stumbled back following, “What?!”

“Did that girl just block a Vampire’s strike?” a man from the Hunter party called aloud.

“I carry hundreds of pounds of weight a month for my people all by myself. No way in hell am I getting my ass beat down by some lowlife thug!” Elise barked side stepping to the right.

Her pole rose up with canisters shaking. Kensa flipped round and swung again, thrusting the rod right into the middle of the pole.

SNAP

The pole snapped in half at the impact point. Elise’s right arm fell as that half of the pole’s weight went loose, falling right on down, “Hrrgh!”

She swung the right pole as it fell and slammed it right into Kensa's head. He yowled out and fell to the left as water canisters flew off in every direction off the right pole. Again she swung, this time with the left going up. Kensa's rod swung and blocked, only for more canisters to fly off and nail him in the face. He coughed as he stumbled right, struggling on his feet.

He shot backwards with a cough, staring at Elise with eyes wide, "What the hell is this girl?! Drachen or not, she's holding her own!"

Elise huffed more with the two halves of the pole, or rather twin poles now, holding each up ready to go again, "Come on Rusty, try me!"

"Rusty?" Kensa murmured.

Elise blinked, looking to the two poles, lowing them in the process. With that one glance she looked back to Kensa and growled, holding them ready once more.

"You got more than just a few lucky hits despite having such a sloppy form, ignorant cow," Kensa growled.

His eyes darted round as did Elise's, the Hunters clearly moving into attack-ready positions. Kensa gulped, stepping back a bit, "But I don't think I'll be able to take you without them jumping in any longer. Guess I'll have to keep moving, maybe find a fricken toddler I can actually kidnap."

Her eyes sparked and her form shot forward. Yells rang out from the Hunters at once as Elise charged the distracted Kensa.

"Don't do it girl!"

"Madam, stop!"

"Blast it, move in everyone!"

Kensa's attention moved back to Elise as she roared up on him. She hung in the air after a leap, her right foot flying round. He blinked, thrusting his

rod forward at her. A miss as her foot connected with the side of his head. It practically snapped at the bend, his body folding off to Elise's left with the rod flying off. A clang could be heard as it banged against a rock, bouncing off and onto the ground. She landed over him, both pole halves flipped. The ends facing Kensa's throat now were sharp, jagged, they being the parts where the whole pole snapped in half.

“Nyeh- wait,” he murmured looking up at her with eyes shaken.

Footsteps and squashing filled the air as the Hunters moved in. Elise simply continued to look down upon the Vampire, her own eyes still fierce with no indication of letting up with the weapons in hand.

Chapter XIII

Elise sat quietly in her room, the flickering crackle of a candle's flame going along with her breathing, the candle set upon a nearby table. She glanced at the floor with one eye swollen. A slight patter echoed off the walls from dripping blood that left her fingernails; though not a wound lay visible on her skin. Upon the cave walls hung a broken pole with crushed canisters still dripping of water hanging.

She held her hands with a quiver, her eyes shaking, one swollen, "Dastard."

"I don't care if you beat up a God, you still lost a lot of canisters and got quizzed by Hunters. You worthless bitch!" came the shout of Rusty.

THWACK!!

Her head shook, her body lurching forward for a short second to then hunch over. Her eyes dropped to her hand, a hand that quickly squeezed at the air letting the blood flow even more, "Not enough that I got involved with Priests hunting a bloody Vampire, no. I get back and Rusty has to wail on my face for letting the canisters get totaled. Tch-" she muttered, clenching at herself.

"You have no one to blame other than yourself Elise," a voice called back, bold and commanding to some degree.

In the doorway stood a man, arms crossed with black hair covering much of his face, only his green eyes truly being visible against the whites and the slight glow of the room. Elise coughed, standing at once, "Vulper?"

“You allow yourself to be pushed around by your brother kiddo. If you did to him what you did to that Vampire, heh, I doubt he’d be in such a hurry.”

“Pft, I’m not a fighter, I’m just a weak servant girl.”

“Since when did you listen to your brother? Or is it your mortals talking? Or is it morals, not mortals? Pft, an excuse for laziness either way,” Vulper sighed glancing away for but a moment, eyes resting upon a book resting on a pillar of rock.

He walked in, stepping towards the novel giving it a look over while speaking back, “Ignore that idiot. He’s honestly lucky that that fight he got into with Sacho didn’t get him killed. It’s also too bad he can’t be like Britt.”

“Pft, that’s because no one can be like Britt. You’ve seen him fight, you’ve heard him speak his mind, you know what he thinks. He’s the success story out of the three of us, bloody brilliant at all he does. I’m just a failure, more so than my brother.”

“Everyone has potential dear Elise, you just need proper motivation to push forward. After all when motivated to save yourself you took that one Vampire down. Or at least, that’s what you reported to Ogma at first when you returned.”

“Kensa was just weak already from battling, I did nothing-”

Vulper turned away, moving back towards the entrance of the room. His back to Elise, he paid her no mind as he continued to move, “Well at any rate I’m here to collect you. Lord Bakuuva has an announcement to make to the entire Clan of Vulfax. Attendance is mandatory.”

“An announcement?”

“Yeah, not sure what the specifics are but you need to gather with the rest. So, come along.”

A shuffling of feet and a turn, Vulper departing from the room with steps echoing as he went down the hall. With a sigh she moved towards a wood box in the room and opened it; she reached out and grabbed out a gray t-shirt, a red skirt, leggings, and a torn black jacket. With a nod she shut it and moved away from it. Eventually her pace carried her right out of the room and down the main hall.

Her steps echoed off the walls for many minutes as she proceeded down the tunnels, turning down another pathway heading towards the assembly room anxiously. Torches lined the walls, all lit with flames dancing. The smell of blood was present, a lot of blood, the sign of freshly killed humans being present. Turning around one more corner her eyes moved ahead to see a crowd already gathered and in silence gazing up.

A few steps forward and her own eyes shifted, shifting to view Britt standing atop a ledge with a tunnel behind. Near him an older woman who was stationed as the clan's Queen. Also set to the left and right of them several of the best fighters of Vulfax among which were Vulper and Sacho standing at attention. A shadow loomed behind, slowly creeping forward.

An elderly man, his hair thinning at the front though covered next by a Tricorne, the hair a mix of white and black, scraggly though long and ragged along the sides. A long and wild goatee, wild wrinkle lines, a fire in his glowing red & orange eyes, a bold expression. Both the long goatee and the long hair flowing out of his hat were easily considered unclean, yet also styled to some sense with beads and tied knots in it. He approached in ragged clothes with a cowl pulled back, a cloak wrapped around him tattered and slightly burned on the edges.

"My children," he spoke in a deep and raspy, yet booming voice.

At once everyone clacked their feet together and stood at attention. All held their right fists against their chest and their left fists behind their backs, all pressed firmly. Azala's burning gaze drifted around the cave from one side to the other, front to back to front again. In his right hand a bottle of rum drained empty. With one final glance around his right arm raised up and flung down, the empty bottle sent flying down off the ledge towards the ground to shatter against the rock.

All eyes fell silently upon where the bottle had hit and then back up to Azala with not so much as an ounce of being discontent. A cough was heard though following there was silence for what felt like an eternity, all as Azala simply continued to observe those standing at attention. With a slight grin he shifted to speak out as he stepped forward, "At ease."

All at once they all dropped their arms, the men ceasing to puff out their chests letting out many sighs of relief. Azala's eyes once more shifted around then then looked out over the crowd as a whole, "There are but two reasons ladies and gentlemen, why I have gathered you all here. That first reason," he said stomping forward a few paces before halting again at the edge, "Britt."

Britt gave a nod and stepped forward without hesitation, Azala's voice continuing as he stepped around behind Britt, "The reason is because my eldest boy here has finally, how you say, impressed me."

As he moved his cloak parted back a bit revealing a sheathed sword with an old decorative hilt, the blade lengthy to the tip and from front to back though relatively thin.

"You see, hombre," he said looking now to Britt, "You did exactly what I told you to do and did it well."

With those words stated Azala turned back to looking upon the crowd, “You see, he got a group of *Priests* to go after a pack and a rival Clan. Stark Pack and Clan Despo now have, shall we say, met their undoings before the wrath of the English Church once and for all eh? Heh heh, yes.”

At once the crowd broke out into laughter at the comment, many laughing even on the ledge with exception of Sacho, Vulper, Britt, the Queen, and one other. On the ground Elise declined to laugh, simply glancing away with her thoughts turning elsewhere at that instantaneous moment. Azala’s arm went up with his palm held towards the ground group, all immediately falling silent.

“Yes, yesss, it is good, very very good,” he spoke while turning to walk away again, “As such I have invited my son to join the ranks of our fine elite as a First Mate, so to speak, eh? Heh heh. Consider this a formal announcement and promotion for ‘em though that is where the tale falls short.”

Turning back in full to the crowd now with his boots echoing as if walking across a hardwood floor with each step, he’d breathe in a slight bit heavy, speaking out, “Gentlemen. I give to you our newest insightful goal. We shall obliterate the Noble Clans and those pitiful Packs, to which we will then rule the entire underbelly of these mountains. From there, we can begin again as we did long ago and control many a human from the wretched underbelly that is man’s pitiful greed.”

Once more, the cave echoed with cheers, Azala’s eyes glancing around with a wide smirk. From one face to the next, it was so that all were in celebration of their leader’s plan, all but one who stood idle behind the crowd. Azala’s eyes lifted up, matching that of Elise’s to which his smirk quickly faded. This did not go unnoticed as at once the cheers fell silent, the shuffling

of feet filling the room instead as many eyes fell from Azala back towards Elise. She looked around, stepping a pace back with her eyes looking away as a pit formed within.

“Rusty if you’re going to scowl at your brother then at least have ounce enough courage to step out from behind your sister, swine.”

Elise’s expression changed immediately, a bit of fright splashed on the surface, Rusty behind with fire all around him it felt like now that she was aware of his presence. He stepped left and around to which he then stopped only a few paces ahead looking at Azala.

“Father, I can’t help but feel aggravated by this. It’s always Britt isn’t it? I am sick of it!”

“Hmph, among the three of you he is the only one that is not a complete failure. Elise who does nothing but squander in self pity and then you who lost to Sacho who barely gave enough of a damn to fight you seriously. You’re both disgraces to this Empire.”

“{Empire? Pft, since when do we qualify as an Empire?}” Elise thought quickly though only briefly as the air around Rusty changed again.

“Disgrace? Me, the same as her? How dare you you old fool. I am not some weak woman that knows only how to clean and produce offspring!”

Laughter filled the room though much of it quickly ceased as the yells of women within the group were heard.

“She is a little nothing compared to me Father. I can fight. I can do things. What can she honestly do? Eh? She’s a waste of space that should honestly just up and die already. Her and her pathetic friends are all a bunch of soft-hearts that we should offer up to the Priests as a platter of delicious evil. They slaughter them, we clean the Priests up. Win win for all.”

“Rusty!” Destiny barked.

“Shut up you damn rotten whore!” Rusty barked back.

Elise’s eyes shot right to lock sight with Rusty’s, “How about you shut up instead?”

Silence filled the room, a minor look of shock spreading across Azala’s face. Murmurs of surprise drifted quickly and then faded. Azala stepped a few paces forward with his coat creaking as he bent ahead. Rusty’s feet shifted and slowly he took a turn, head moving back, “What... did you say to me?”

“I asked you to shut up- no, I’m telling you to shut up!”

For a brief instant their gazes locked, his full of rage and her own fierce with just as much anger.

“You should know better than to cross me sister. The last time I nearly hurled you into the bottomless pit.”

“Yeah well maybe you should have. Taking your trash attitude out on me is one thing, taking it out on my friends for being my friends, you foul mouth bastard. I wish someone would take you out on the battle field already so we can go on with our lives without having to hear your worthless banter!”

“You rotten little, next word out of your mouth and you’re dead.”

“Then do it, kill me so I don’t have to suffer through your crap anymore, bitch! I took out a Vampire, what’s to say I can’t take out one of your eyes or your fricken teeth?”

“Why you-!”

“Heh, hahaha! My children, you have humored my old bones with this sharp display though save it for another day Rusty. I have things I wish to discuss with you before anything else. Dismissed.”

Elise turned round with a swift walk away, ignoring Rusty as he spat out a remark at her. Turning down a different corridor from before she headed off towards sunlight present in the cavern, creeping in from the outside.

Quickly Elise paced away from the mountains, out into the rich sunlight. Behind her were other footsteps though quick to stop, “Elise, hold on, please-”

“No Britt, I- I need some time to think.”

Turning back around to face him as he held place in the shadows out of the sunlight. His hair messy, his expression sincere as he looked upon her. Zipping back around Elise sprinted off quickly, leaving Britt in the shadow of the mountain to simply look on.

Chapter XIV

Night had fallen over the town of Emerton. Several walked along the sidewalks and some on the streets themselves. Many sat upon benches by streetlights while others laid upon the grass, eyes gazing to the stars. Several officers in uniform were out and about as well yucking it up with the locals; though mostly they remained quiet as they patrolled around town.

Near the outskirts of the town was a park, a long path down the middle with many a flower pot scattered round, even under the trees and by the light posts. Swing sets, benches, picnic tables, flower beds around statues, fountains, the works. Many a thing stood in the park with lights stationed all around. In fact it was under one such light pole, upon a bench, where Elise was placed.

A fountain roared nearby, the platter of water. Next to Elise with a book of their own was a hooded man, turning their head to her on occasion. Her voice echoed occasionally as well, distraught yet soft, “-and so halfway through my time there I find out he’s behind because Father pointed it out. I was so bothered thinking Father was going to call me out you know? But no my brother is behind me and where does it go after that?”

“Elise, I hear you, truly I do.”

The reply calm, belonging to a young man who now began to lean back, “Your brother is a jackass and that’s a fallback of where the clan is heading. Vulfax has gotten too political, too tyrannical, so that crap is somewhat to be expected.”

She stood, marching off a few paces with a growl. The man’s head rose as Elise moved over to the swing set where she plopped down. Hands on the chains, she held on as she kicked at the ground to slightly swing. Her head shook with eyes at the ground as they had done many times.

The young man nodded as his hood fell back, revealing dark blue hair with a bit of brown at the roots. His eyes glistened a brown as the light reflected off though as he leaned back the brown was replaced by a glowing silver. The man let out a yawn, "Oh man."

"Alto you live by the night, why the heck are you tired?"

"Why aren't you tired when you live by the day?"

"I don't sleep well anymore anyway."

"Really? Yet you still look so very awake. Neato," he chuckled.

"Yeah, neato is right Alto," she muttered back with an eye roll.

"Good makeup I guess."

"I live in a cave, I don't have makeup."

"Really? Well, you collect so many things so I simply assumed. Then again, why would you need makeup anyway? Everyone hates you anyway."

"Gee, thanks."

"Sorry sorry," Alto laughed with a stretch, "Just stupidly pointing out the obvious. You're not the type to try and impress with looks regardless- not that you're ugly or anything."

The moon above stretched its gaze, light basking over everything but the vary shadows strung by objects. The swing set squeaked a bit as Elise stood back up, shuffling off with eyes looking up to the sky now. Stars glittered, covering much of what was above. A book flew open in her right hand to which she then looked down at, eyes drifting along the lines.

Alto hopped forward a pace, his head moving to the sound of laughter. Off in the distance several kids had begun to run around being chased by one another. Parents sat in benches nearby, laughing a bit at each other while also observing their own. A chuckle left Alto followed by a sigh as he moved ahead,

“Man, there’s just something about peace. That’s really what’s worth fighting for ya know?”

“Fighting for peace which is the lack of fighting. Lovely logic.”

“Well, fighting to protect it I suppose.”

“I can understand that. People who do that have my total respect. People who fight to only cause pain though, not so much.”

“Well that’s the world we live in mostly,” Alto murmured throwing his arms behind his head, leaning it back upon them, “Have you ever considered fighting?”

“What?”

“Fighting, ever consider it?” Alto asked tilting his head now looking at her.

“No, it’s not really my thing.”

“Says the one who flipped a Vampire, eh?”

“Look, I don’t know how that happened- I blacked out for a second is all.”

“Heh, sure sure,” Alto chuckled, “So what’s next on your agenda?”

“Not really sure,” Elise said continuing on, “They’re dragging me along for some mission in about an hour.”

“You have a mission? That’s great!”

“Bah! They just want me to drop dead is all. That or they probably think I might have a decent strategy for them to use.”

“Hey, it’s something at least Elise,” Alto said with a shrug.

“Pft, I guess,” she mumbled back.

Owls hooted nearby, flapping off with the stars and moon as a backdrop as they went. Both had begun to walk through the park, staying on a

straight forward path. Side by side they went, passing a group of children at play. Alto looked at them, eyes shut and curved with a smile formed.

They laughed and ran off, leaving the two be. A sigh left Alto, then a chuckle, “Man, reminds me of when we met.”

“What does?”

“Children just playing around. Of course I remember you getting stuck in a tree and needing help down,” Alto replied with a grin.

“And I recall that that only happened because your scarf got stuck in a tree and you couldn’t climb.”

“Hey, I was adapting to my bloodline and had paws and claws at the time. They aren’t the best for climbing.”

“Cats can climb.”

“Well, cats don’t count because they’re evil space wizards.”

“Ha! Right right, sorry. How could I have forgotten,” she laughed as they arrived at the sidewalk, “Listen, I’ve got to go and meet up with the others. I think it’s about time.”

“They’re waiting for you actually?”

“Yeah, hard to believe I know. Vulper has taken interest in me lately. Kinda weird. I swear Rusty is paying him off to kill me, or, I dunno, something nefarious.”

“Tell him to send some bribery my way then, haha!”

“Very funny.”

“Yeah. Well, see you tomorrow Elise!”

“Right, see ya-”

Elise strolled along with her head set forward, eyes still dodgy towards the ground. The book stood shut at her side with not a blink from it. Her head shook with each step she took as she moved towards the mountainside where the caves stood, a chill quickly coming over her. In front at the forest's edge sat an owl upon a branch, an owl that simply observed as she drew close.

With a hoot it took flight, going right overhead though not alone. As it flew, a number of bats quickly joined in rank following alongside it. All completely ignored Elise, all heading right towards the park as she entered the forest. At the edge as she entered stood several individuals, all of Vulfax.

“Surprised to see you guys waiting here,” she murmured.

“Figured it'd be quicker to start here with you. Ready then young one?” one questioned.

“Pft, she better be so she doesn't screw us over,” another growled.

“Yeah yeah, I'm about as ready as I'll ever be,” Elise mumbled.

Chapter XV

Elise went on the move in the group of around a dozen Drachen. All appeared battle ready at a glance, small hand axes at their sides and daggers tucked into pouches on their sides. Three to the front moved with wooden crossbows. Plenty of arrows rest in the quivers attached to their backs.

Her eyes shot right, glancing at the moonlit forest where only a few nocturnal animals rushed. To her side was another of the older warriors. A glance to the left and what she saw was the same. Their steps echoed, marching across the land with grass crunching beneath their feet.

Ahead again she looked, branches passing by with few critters in sight. The moon hovered above, stars dancing around it joyfully. The wind danced from ahead, blowing right into them as a slight breeze. Straight ahead at Vulper's back she glanced, a sigh leaving her.

"What's the problem Bakuuva, ya scared?"

"Shut up Donokraka. I'm just feeling, confused is all. What are we even doing? Vulper never told me what."

"Recon," Vulper called back, "Chance of a battle with a Vampire Clan that's moving over the area. One of the ones the Priests were supposed to hit actually."

"Whoa whoa, you're bringing ME along on a mission that could involve fighting? Are you seriously trying to get rid of me or something?"

"Nah," Vulper laughed back, "I told you before, you might not be a true warrior but you've got more brain than half the people in Vulfax. That could come in handy for something like this. Plus, you've run into these guys before when you got into it with Kensa. That's useful info for us."

“That’ll come back to bite you Vulper, she can’t fight for JACK,” laughed one of the people to her side, “She’s a worthless turd that can’t harm a fly.”

“Elise, shut him up and prove a point. That’s an order,” Vulper muttered back.

“Oh uh, kay,” Elise replied looking right.

“Prove wh- WHA!”

THWACK

The group went on, Elise included while the man who had insulted her crashed into a tree. Three-fourths of the people looked back laughing, Elise included.

“Oh my lord, she just, she tripped you Mackie, she tripped you good, bwahahaha,” laughed one of them.

“Have a nice trip?” laughed another.

“Oh Charles that was in poor taste,” Vulper muttered still looking ahead as he ran, “Now see, I’m just going to say it. When it comes to smarts, the lot of you are idiots. Elise is one of the rare few in Vulfax that can actually use her brain, making her valuable to a commander like myself. I know my viewpoint won’t change your minds but do me a solid and respect my decisions.”

“Fuua-” Mackie groaned from behind.

“I didn’t mean to trip him straight into a tree,” Elise mumbled.

“Well Mackie deserved it for running his mouth. I was getting sick of it. Besides, not like you did it of your own choice, it was an order. Well done,” Vulper chuckled from ahead.

The group carried on, charging through thicker line of trees. With some zigging and zagging they made their way through, pushing further away from Emerton. The wind broke and all at once there was light. The group flooded out of trees onto plains, tall grass off to the South and relatively nothing to the North. Straight ahead was a middle mix of nothing, deer all around.

As soon as they had charged out, the deer had begun to charge with many running off to the North and South. Some shot back into the trees from many meters away. The squad tightened formation, Vulper still at the head with two of the crossbow wielders at his side angled back, the third beyond the three.

“Now Elise,” Vulper called from the head.

“Yes?”

“Say you were in charge of a bunch of blood suckers looking to take Drachen Territory. Where would you advance from and why?” he questioned.

“Well where would they be coming from?”

“Southwest. The thicker forest and mining systems.”

“Well if they have the Priests around looking for ‘em uh, I would say I’d want as much cover as possible. I’d probably have them close in by the river valley along the rocks, then charge through tall grass until they reached the forest. Once in it’d be hard to find them. Plus they could hollow out the trunks with their abilities and hide in them to avoid sunlight.”

“Makeshift coffins. Nice. And of course this group of ‘em can’t cross through running water which means they’d take the bridge straight ahead of us. Going Northeast for the bridge, crossing it, then heading Southwest at the

bottom. Should be the case if the Priests at all blessed the stream to contain them.”

“That’s what I’m thinking sir,” Elise called back.

Crunching steps came from behind. The heads of a couple people turned round to take view of who or what was coming. A smile spread over Elise’s face as her head turned, fading as she turned back ahead. Mackie joined back up with a groan, charging right behind the group. In not but a few moments he had synced with the group again, trailing a touch behind Elise at that point.

“How was that Mackie?”

“Shut up Chloe, I don’t want to talk about it,” he growled.

“Heehee,” Elise giggled.

The squad continued normal as they had prior with the formation changing up, several now surrounding the archers ahead. Mackie trailed behind Elise while two others joined her sides. To her left ran Charles now who had begun to sniff the air, “Mmm.”

“What is it Charles?” Vulper asked from ahead.

“Ngh, I’m not picking up anything sir. We’re downwind and there’s nothing.”

“Not a peep of the enemy?”

“Nada.”

“What the devil,” Vulper muttered, “Was our intelligence wrong?”

“No way boss, it’s gotta be Loserlise’s friggen thought on the enemy’s movement,” someone diagonal to Elise spoke back.

“Are you doubting me Mikhael? Look I might not be a fighter but if there’s one thing I know it’s how to use my brain.”

“Wait, wait!” Charles spat, skidding straight to a halt.

All others zoomed by temporarily, all stopping at their own pace with some slowing to a halt and others throwing on the breaks. Elise in particular shot right into Vulper’s back, bouncing off and back a few paces, “Wha-”

“What is it, what do you smell?”

Heads as before turned, heads and eyes facing right upon Charles. He stumbled, sniffing at the air. To the rear of the group one individual crossed their arms with a smug scowl, “It’s probably nothing-” he spoke.

“No, this is. I smell fire on the wind, and a lot of blood.”

Vulper turned full quarter, his eyes fully stern upon his man’s expression. Charles backed away, his mouth hanging by a hair and his eyes sunken in wide open. His face curled back, his face turning a slight tint of blue practically. A stumble back, then another stammered step.

Elise tilted her head as she gazed upon him, though for only a moment. Her face turned to one of similar expression with her mouth hanging open far more, “N-no-”

“Guys his sniffer is broken right? No way is he smelling what I think he’s smelling,” Mikhael murmured.

“He has the best nose by three to one hands down,” Vulper glistened back, “He can’t be this wrong.”

“I can smell it. The blood of young, of old, men and women alike. Vampire blood. It’s on the air. If we got closer you’d be able to smell it too. I smell, burned hair and leather. Burned flesh,” he began, taking another couple of sniffs, “And I can also smell the stench of fecal matter and urine, light in touch compared to the rest.”

“D-does that mean,” Elise began, stopping herself.

“I uh, I don’t think that Vampire Clan is going to be a problem ever Vulper,” Charles concluded stepping back with lowered shoulders.

“Tch, not good. Lemon, Momo, both of you with me. We’re going ahead to check this crap out. Charles I want you with me too,” Vulper called.

“What are you going to do? What about the rest of us?” Elise questioned.

“I think it obvious. We can’t just show up with fourteen plus people. It’ll be harder to spot only four of us. The rest of you are going to return to the clan and report on this. Ogma, you’re in charge of the retreat.”

“Understood boss,” he replied with a bow to the North of the group.

“But Vulper-”

“Elise, this is for the best. It’ll be easier for four of us to scatter. I’ve got two long range shooters and a great nose, plus my own eyes. We’re the best for what is to come. Four is plenty enough people for now.”

“Alright,” Elise sighed, looking to Vulper as his group broke off, “Vulper, Charles, Lemon, Momo. I wish you all the best. You come back to us now, alright?”

Vulper grinned turning back to face her, “Is that an order?”

She nodded, to which Vulper quickly replied, “Well, we’ve no choice but to obey that order then. You are an heir after all. You three, let’s move!”

Vulper shot round and tore off, the other three taking place behind him. Lemon took the left flank while Momo took the right, Vulper at the lead with Charles right behind. Turning back to her own group, they had also begun to move heading Southwest. Elise in turn took off herself, bringing up the rear of the group.

Chapter XVI

The sky burst into pitches of light and dark over Nospheross.

Explosions of white and explosions of black, dancing around the area. Rocks collapsed and rained down upon the surface of the valley. Twin figures danced in the air, leaps and bounds around one another.

Wesley launched backwards, coughing, skidding across the rock.

Before him up front skidded Leon, firm in landing with hardly a beat lost. The Light Warrior glared forward, his teeth gritted at the sight of the casual landing that was his foe's. Another cough left him, his stance evening out as his breath died back down to normal.

Leon continued to stand, arms open. Wesley's scowl simply intensified at the sight, "{Grr, the bastard. He's expelling only enough power to throw mine off. Is he trying to hold out until nightfall? No- if that were the case, it would've been easier to push me underground. Night isn't pitch blackness here either necessarily. What is he scheming?}"

Leon's head adjusted, "Hmph."

"{Mockery, this is a mockery. He's baiting me. So be it.} Alright then guy, let's try this another way," Wesley retorted, his arms raised with hands balled into fists, his overall stance changing.

"Hmm?" Leon mused, head tilted.

"If it means killing someone as high ranking as you, I'll collapse this entire god damn mountain and the base. Whatever it takes!" Wesley barked, his right leg rising.

Down it slammed, foot blasting through the rock. Right away the left did the same as again his stance changed, knees bent, arms out in front of him.

Light Energy erupted around Wesley, pooling together into a thick aura, “You, a threat to The Tribe, to we Lightonians. I will bury you with this attack!”

“Well now, that just won’t do,” Leon mumbled crossing his arms behind his back, eyes locked ahead, “And what of your own soldiers below. Do you truly not care for their safety, for their lives?”

Wesley dropped to the ground, slamming his hands down, “They’ll all die for the cause they were sworn into. I took an oath to destroy you Dharkanians. Now I am going to pour all of my power into this and do away with you, all of you. I will sink this valley so far, the pressure will just pulverize you!”

“You know, I get that you’re slow old man but,” Leon began with his eyes closing, his feet skidding apart with arms at his sides.

The ground beneath Wesley rumbled, cracks quickly appearing. The old man could only watch, eyes widening. The ground blew apart, black snakes flying up with fangs exposed. Completely black from the Dark Energy that formed them, they hissed as they flew.

“Gyah!” Wesley yelled out.

The bulk of the snakes, all two dozen of them, slammed into his limbs and torso with fangs sinking in firmly. Following the snakes came an assault, more of the chains sent flying out. Ten chains flew up and slammed straight through Wesley’s gut sending blood rushing out. Out his back they went, covered in that crimson red liquid known so well, spinning as they flew.

They separated and crashed out around him with many meters of length for slack, hooks on the ends. The chains and hooks clanged as they dropped. Blood rushed out the top and sprayed like a fountain. Wesley hung and dropped to both knees and hands, “Gwarrrrk-”

“You really shouldn’t be a stereotype and tell your enemy what your plans are. Dark Art Number Five, Hidden Burial,” Leon chuckled, his arms crossing as his smirk returned with his eyes.

The chains broke apart into miniature black clouds, as did the snakes not more than a moment later. With them gone it left Wesley to drop to the ground with a grunt, while Leon strolled forward. His head tilted, looking at the injured body before him, “You know something Ezdorth, peace really has made you sloppy. I remember a time when you would’ve not hesitated to snap one of my kind’s necks with some secret move, even if they were an infant. To you like so many other Lightonians, we Dharkanians are just evil after all.”

The Dark Warrior halted ten meters away from his fallen foe who now began to twitch. Leon’s smirk faded as he went on, “Meanwhile we’ve only ever gotten stronger in preparation for this day. Oh look at you. I really should kill you; but, I feel like Cortez might enjoy it more. You killed his son-in-law and his daughter.”

“G-go to hell,” Wesley coughed.

“Ah, see? That’s the spirit,” Leon said with a grin, raising his right arm up with darkness coating his hand.

Wesley grinned, looking ahead. Leon’s eyes widened. His head moved upwards as smoke drifted right by it, eyes shifting slowly to the right.

BAM!!

A blast quickly went off, engulfing Leon. His form flew off backwards and into a pile of rock, quickly followed by a slew of rockets. The rockets struck and went, causing simultaneous blasts right alongside and right into Leon.

“Fire!” came a yell from beyond Wesley’s position.

Multiple figures came into view, around a dozen. There quickly came another batch of ten and then another batch of the same. All held one shot rocket launchers, all aiming at Leon's position. The next twenty all fired at once, sending twenty more rockets squealing through the air at the Dark Warrior's position.

All fired, the weapons were dropped and in their place rifles were grabbed by most. For some they chose hand guns of the semi-automatic variety, all taking aim. One woman headed the group in military attire, grayish blue, decorated with medals on her left side. A military cap sat atop her head, covering scraggy mid-lengthed hair.

"Protect the General, fire on that thing if it moves!" she barked.

Wesley groaned, slowly standing as two dressed in white approached him, both with paper stamps. On each stamp were symbols, all of the symbols being the same. They wasted little time, approaching and slapping the tags on, one to Wesley's front and the other to his back. The symbols then glowed gold as steam began to blow off of the wounds. The tags themselves then began to fade, seeming to sink into the General's body.

"Guh, thank you Lieutenant Ashley," Wesley coughed as the woman and the other soldiers approached.

"Of course sir, I'm just glad we got here in time. So, think that took him down?"

"Hard to say, I'm not skilled at sensory techniques. You were right about baiting him in like that. Good thing we still had some leftover healing tags from the Schlandershcliqu incident, or we never would've had that opening."

“Tell me something, would you actually have brought the mountain down to try and kill him?”

“Hell no. If it were anyone else, maybe; but I know damn well I’d just be wasting power and killing my own for no reason. Something is different about Leon since I last fought him and I can’t put my damn finger on it.”

A blast went off, sending forth a radiation of blackness from Leon’s position. It was like a bubble, popped with black water going everywhere, only it was not liquid. Standing tall with ruffled hair, a more torn jacket, and a little bit of trickling blood, was Leon. His left arm crossed over, the hand brushing off his right shoulder, “How, cunning.”

“How the hell?!” Ashley croaked.

“Fire!” Wesley barked.

Gunfire went nuts as everyone aimed an unloaded. Leon stood unmoved as the bullets came at him. Sparks appeared in the air, points of impact just in front of him. Nothing was happening to him; though the bullets were still hitting something, all being deflected.

“Come now General, have you learned nothing?” Leon questioned, stepping forward as the bullets continued to bounce off, “Right then, let me refresh you memory.”

Chapter XVII

It had been hours since the group split. The moon crept closer and closer towards the ground with it set to soon vanish beneath the horizon. The lights at the entrances of the caves had been extinguished utterly, even those only a minute's walk in to reveal no light. Elise moved along the tunnels with new torches in hand, taking some old ones off to place in a weaved basket, placing new ones that were then lit. Without word she kept on, having many burned in a basket on her back full of full ones.

Steps approached followed by the clanking of wood on rock. Her head turned to the left where Destiny stepped up with a lighter in hand and Thomas with a collection of burned out torches.

"You dropped some," Elise sighed with a shake of her head.

"Ah come on, it was an accident," Thomas groaned.

"Uh huh, I'll remember that excuse," Destiny chuckled.

The trio moved up the hall to a cart with a pile of burned wood. A few stacks of unlit torches rested ahead of the pile of used. Pulling the basket at her side ahead, Elise dumped what she had down onto the pile of used. In only a second she had added dozens to the pile, to which Thomas added just as many by dropping his load clumsily.

"Blehk, now I've got ash arms," he muttered.

"Welcome to the club," Elise chuckled back, moving ahead to the rope of the cart.

The three continued on, the cart being pulled behind. Bedding on the back that sat ragged had begun to shift, the used torches spilling on top. It creaked as the wheels turned, stuff shuffling as it hit the holes and cracks in the

floor. Their steps echoed with the crackle of the flames and the dripping of water.

“So you mean to tell me that you just- you let Vulper go with three people?” Thomas asked with a look right to Elise.

“It was an order and it made sense at the time. They were a well equipped squad and in that situation, ya know it just- well it fit.”

“Yeah yeah I know,” Thomas mumbled, “Still I have to wonder about them, what they found and all that.”

“If I had to guess, those Priest guys set fire and destroyed that Vampire Clan,” Destiny growled.

“No way Desti, how in the hell could mortals do that?”

“It’s possible,” Elise replied with a glance at Thomas, “Their technology has come a long way. We’re using some of their older stuff to light the caves up after all. All humans can get these lighters for practically nothing.”

The group turned a corner, stopping short at the sight of a man in front of them. He stood, arms behind his back, eyes forward as the trio came round. With a nod directly at them the three stopped.

“Ladies,” the man called.

“Tyler?,” Thomas mumbled, “What’s up. Has Vulper’s team come back?”

“Yeah, yeah they have. Pretty much what Destiny guessed by the way,” he yawned.

“What?!” Elise stammered.

“You eaves dropping pig,” Destiny barked.

“Yeeup, entire clan of about a hundred got reduced to a pile of shit I guess. Not a single survivor. Bunch of guys in crosses were responsible for that

according to Vulper. He took off though when some lady in white popped up apparently throwing a fit.”

“What the hell, the children too?” Destiny replied.

“Dude, that’s messed up,” Thomas mumbled stepping back a pace.

“Yeah. Azala is ordering a lock down of the clan, no one is to leave and all traps are to be recovered till we learn more. Oh but that order does not apply to you shrimp,” he spoke, coughing at the end while raising his right arm.

Elise looked forward, seeing Tyler’s pointer finger stick out at her while the rest of his bent back. With a blink she looked to his face with a tilted head, “Me? Why?”

“You have a routine of heading to Emerton every now and again when you finish one of your stupid books. You’re going to go snoop around at dawn here in a few hours and find out what you can.”

“Why me though?”

“You can walk in the daylight with no discomfort you scrub and people are used to seeing your ugly mug. You can say you heard about a fire and ask around. Unless people feel like covering it up, should be real easy to figure out what happened and if anything else is going to go down. Oh and see if you can find where Elen ran off to.”

“Elen? Why?”

“She’s been missing for a few days, ever since Belama ran into her and beat her.”

“What!?” Elise spat.

“Ha, can’t believe you didn’t hear about that. Yeah Belama cornered her in a tunnel and just went ham on Elen.”

“Elise, don’t-” Destiny began, cut off quick though by the rise of Elise’s hand towards her.

“No Desti, this is fine. If I can be useful by doing this then I’m going to do it for the clan. He’s right. People are used to seeing me during the morning and at night. Should be a real easy task. Besides, if Elen is out there, well, I want to find her.”

“Good luck, gay girl,” Tyler chuckled walking forward, bumping right passed Elise with a chuckle.

The three turned, watching him disappear down the twisting tunnel. Thomas growled in response, “That creep.”

Elise simply turned with a rather audible step, nodding in response. The cart rattled a few seconds following, their steps echoing off the walls again, “The rest of these torches will have to wait until tomorrow evening I guess. The old ones should be good till then, or at least there should be enough to cover for those that go out.”

“Just be careful,” Thomas replied.

“Stop worrying. I mean, I’m thankful that some people in the clan are concerned for me but still, it’ll be alright. This is one of the few ways I can prove my worth without being yelled at after all. I can do this like nothing compared to the rest of you. Meanwhile, see if you guys can find Elen in the deeper caves. She can’t have gone too far. She might just be below either lost or isolating.”

Chapter XVIII

“Gnyeuuahhhmmmm, mmmph.”

The sun rose, gradually climbing orange over the sky with yellow streaks spreading out. Forward across the grass coated in dew Elise move, birds chattering off to the side of her as she went. Squirrels charged with a rampage across the grass and over the trail, several feral cats moving right after them. Her eyes looked down at the movement, missing by two seconds.

The trail swerved left and right out of the forest, the town of Emerton a good hundred or so meters ahead of her. Her left arm swayed as she went on, book in hand. Right as she cleared the trees her right hand raised, a yawn escaping her again. The sun climbed higher and higher as she slowly progressed, closing ten meters in ten seconds.

Her face drooped, her stumble ceasing gradually rather than immediately. The bask of the sun's glow struck, carrying with it a brilliant warmth. A mumble left her, a mumble that quickly became a murmur of pleasure, “Oh man, had I known I'd be here this early I would've tried to sleep a bit earlier. I told him that Vulper would shove me out early, blast it.”

Ahead following a walk of over two minutes was the sidewalk. Already out and about were several. Of them stood a mailman and an officer, both with coffee and donuts in hand. Further on a woman and her dog, stopped beside a man dressed in jogging attire.

Right at the edge of the town where she was about to enter stood a man in front of a shop. A rather stocky individual, older in appearance complete with wrinkles and parting white hair. Dressed in a vest with a name tag, he stood before the door of a shop with a key in hand. The knob could be heard turning, the man simply fidgeting with it.

Rocks crackled in front of Elise, a bit of dust flying off of her shoe. Her eyes shot down, rocks tumbling that had been piled right where she stepped. The man in particular turned, having clearly heard the rocks. Upon seeing Elise he simply smiled, waving with his free hand, "Ah good morning Miss Elise. Lovely day isn't it? That lovely sun, that brisk breeze. Perfect."

"Heyyy Mister Vilmur. Yeah it is," Elise commented with a yawn following, "Ueaugh."

"Oofta, you sound tired yet. Come to think of it, I don't recall you coming into town so early."

"Oh uh, I was woken up in the middle of the night is all. My uh, sister decided to let me know about this fire off to the West that happened I guess. I never saw much though by the time I got out of bed, couldn't get back to sleep after either."

"A fire? Huh. Never heard anything about that from Old Joe. A forest fire?"

"I don't see how it didn't spread if it was. Eh, doesn't matter I suppose too much; though I am sort of curious in case something happened that my family should be aware of."

"Well Old Joe is at the cafe if you want to ask him."

"Ah that's fine Mister Vilmur. Say is uh, is Ms. Bell in?"

"Holly uh, yeah should be opening the library soon I would like to think. Got another book to return Elise?"

"Yeah, here soon I do. Thanks Mister Vilmur," Elise said with a smile.

She turned away as the shop door opened, breezing by as Vilmur went inside. Her eyes darted left, seeing another officer leaning against a tree next to the street. Smile continuing, she approached, "Good morning Officer Hansel."

“Ah, if it isn’t my favorite rogue. Heh heh, good morning to you too Elise. What’s up?” he replied.

“I was just wondering if you or any of the others heard about a fire that broke out to the West sometime last night?”

“A fire? Mmm, no, don’t think so. Why, did you hear about something?”

“Yeah my sister woke me up in the middle of the night screaming about a fire and smoke off West of our place. By the time I got dressed enough to head outside I didn’t see much. Was wondering if she’s crazy or if I’m crazy.”

“Haha, yeah sorry Elise, I haven’t heard anything.”

“Oh uh, alright. Thanks anyways Officer Hansel.”

Elise carried on again, turning back to the direction she had been heading in originally. The book she had in hand was raised up, flipping open a few hundred pages to the tail end with only two dozen remaining, “Just as well finish this up while heading to the library I guess. Feeling more than awake enough now to read it.”

Carrying on with eyes set to the pages, she swiftly moved around a pole, stopped at a street, and turned left down another street. Her eyes set to the paper, though slightly ahead to see what was in front. Signs of the smile she had prior utterly faded as she kept on, dancing across the pages with each flip.

“Hi Elise,” came the voice of a male off to the left.

“Hi Mister Watson,” came her reply, a slight wave of the right hand with a slight turn of her head, “{Why is it that random people I haven’t said many words to talk to me more than my own clan? Heck, they’re friendlier too. Heh, maybe I should go find a cardboard box to live in so I can just stay in

town or something.}"

An old bell rang alongside the clutter of an old knob. With a creak the old door to the library opened, shutting with a bit of a thud behind Elise. She carried forward, book shut in hand as she approached the counter. Stationed in the chair was a large newspaper, bold with scribbles all over it. Gradually it was lowered, revealing the green eyes of Holly, "Hmm?"

Elise stopped at the desk, her book plopping down onto the counter. The newspaper lowered revealing a smile spreading quickly across Holly's face, practically ear to ear. Elise looked to her with a slight chuckle.

"Heh, what a surprise. Good morning Elise."

"Good morning Miss Holly," Elise laughed rubbing the back of her head.

"You're in a few hours too early. Breaking schedule, why would that be. Mmm, ah, I know. Already bored of that novel eh?" Holly replied with a grin.

"Oh heavens no, I actually really like Space Fighters; though for a Sci-fi novel it sure keeps its focus on the romance."

"Well, romance sells these days, what can I say," Holly giggled taking the book from the desk, placing it into a basket on the side, "So what can I do you for this time?"

"Well I said I'd try fantasy so, fantasy I guess. Anything you want, I don't care what the age rating is. Young Adult, New Adult, even Children's. I'll take it."

"Weee! Alright alright uh, Franklin," Holly called out.

A man emerged from the bookshelves looking as groggy as Elise had been, “Whaaaat?”

“Fetch Steve Fireman, three of them. Oh and Larry’s Quest too. And whatever else you know I like to read.”

“You know this is a library, why are you yelling?”

“I do what I want Franklin, you and the others need to learn to deal with it.”

“Whatever,” he mumbled turning back into the rows of books.

Holly turned her attention forward again, resting her chin on the backs of both hands, “So what’s new?”

“Not a lot, kinda tired. My sister woke me up yelling about some fire to the West last night though I never saw anything. Did you hear anything yet?”

“Mmm, a fire to the West you say?” she murmured looking right into Elise’s eyes, “Well not really. Though if I hear anything I’ll make a note for you.”

“Oh, alright,” Elise replied as Franklin dropped several books atop the desk before turning way to return to the shelves.

“Thank you Franklin,” Holly replied, still looking at Elise.

With a yawn Holly turned her head to a monitor on the desk, “Alright so, let’s see. Eh, I’ll log these later. Stupid software updates all the time, they make life so annoying.”

“Life annoying? Do they now,” Elise murmured grabbing hold of the books.

“Well, not the end of the world I suppose thooooooough that’s the end of my time off tonight. Oh, on that note I have a note for you.”

“Hmm?”

“Alto stopped by earlier, he’d like for you to meet him at the park. He wants to talk to you about something along the lines of your destiny.”

“My destiny?”

“No idea, he was purposely being cryptic and I had neither the time nor coffee to deal with that, haha. Something going on there with-”

“No no, not at all. My life is too hectic for such things-”

“Haha I was just joking around.”

“Well, thanks for the message. And thanks for the books. Eh, I had best be getting back then. No point in lugging these around for half a day to go drop them off at home and come back right away.”

“True true. Take care dear,” Holly laughed waving as Elise departed with books in hand.

Chapter XIX

“So have you ever considered simply training outside of the clan?”

“Ha yeah, and how am I going to do that? Things in the clan are getting worse as I get older. Ten years ago he was a jerk but he was never that bad. Half of them would probably try to break my legs for even showing signs of acting up at this point.”

As it had the many nights prior, the moon was high though not full. Starts twinkled away with still winds and very few clouds moving. The park sat full of various animals moving around. Owls hung to trees with their heads spinning round while deer simply tripped around completely ignoring the presence nearest them.

Present again was Alto and Elise. Alto stood alongside a light pole as he had done many a time prior with a slight grin that came to him naturally. Elise laid upon a bench, book at her side as per usual, with her face relatively blank, “I’m getting so sick of it.”

“Listen I don’t mean to sound like a masculine jerk that sees only one viewpoint but, I see just one viewpoint. You need to learn to fight. They need to liven up their lives somehow and picking on you is how they’re doing it. I’m sure if you were to, ya know, break their faces-”

“Seriously Alto? I’m not much of a fighter. As it is, I feel half bad that I sent that Vampire to his probable death to save my own skin the other day. Those hunter guys are exterminating them in mass, guy was probably desperate. At the same time, that was Kensa, a known psychopath and murderer.”

“Ah but you see, you see, that was self-defense. Your instincts to survive kicked in there. Besides that guy was a scumbag who probably has hurt

more than a few young girls. Would you really feel happy if he hurt you, killed you, and moved on to another girl?”

“N-no, not at all. Actually when he threatened to move on to an easier target, that’s when I snapped and went off on him.”

“See, you have a sense of right and wrong plus you know self-defensive instincts. True warriors are mostly like that so clearly you have a fighter inside of you, so you aren’t as worthless as your brother says.”

“Pft, *as* worthless he says.”

“You know what I mean,” Alto muttered with a shake of his head, “What I’m saying is, you battled a Vampire to save yourself and in the long run it probably saved others. And you got angry when Rusty threatened your friends, meaning you felt defensive of them, meaning you have something to protect.”

“I guess? Yeah.”

“Fighting doesn’t need to be for the intent of violence Princess, it can be, well, for fun. Or it could be for protecting that which is dear to our hearts. Or my personal favorite, fighting for what is right. You’re not a total wimp either, get what everyone says about you out of your head.. I mean, I think defeating Kensa of all people speaks for that, haha.”

“How would someone like me even learn to fight?” Elise sighed, looking to the ground with somber eyes, “Like you often say, I’m a nerd. Last I checked, nerds aren’t known for fighting. Though, I did sloppily beat Kensa. I dunno.”

“That stereotype is so stupid. Besides you need to do your best thing either way. How you ask? Read.”

“Read?”

“Read. Do some reading on combat styles, do some fencing, practice on a tree if you have to. You’re a quick learner after all you nerd,” he commented with a hint of laughter, “Do you know how many books there are with offensive fighting and defensive fighting in them? Comics, Anime, uh what else? Music too I guess.”

“A lot probably. But Alto, I’m not a fighter by trade,.”

“Screw what those dickheads think. You are what you are inside. If you want to be a writer, boom, you are. If you want to be a librarian that fights evil, boom, you are. If you want to be a hermit, boom. If you want to be president of Europe, there’s that.”

“President of Europe? Europe is a continent with multiple countries like Germany and the United Kingdom.”

“Whatever. Point is, you can be anything that’s inside you if you work hard enough towards it Elise. Besides, you should learn something before Vulfax declares war on the world and gets itself slaughtered, just saying. Learn a couple of fighting stances, apply them, go from there. Use your brain like you always do, certain to work. Have you ever considered asking for help Elise?”

Alto turned to face Elise, his head cocked to the side as she then stood, walking back over to the bench, “You know how to fight with a sword Alto?”

“I er- well uh, umm... no, but I can learn.”

“Haha go figure. Of course not, you’re a Wulfn, why would you need a weapon when you turn into one?” she replied, taking a seat back at the bench.

“Hey hey hey, alright, I tell you what. We can learn together. I’m a slow learner that has a fair bit of experience, you’re a quick learner with little experience. I’m sure we’ll balance each other out with this right?”

“I mean, I guess?”

“Excellent. You’ll teach me and I’ll help you practice,” Alto chuckled.

“Why not just say we’ll teach each other?”

“Because you don’t need to be taught, you only need a sparring partner to help.”

“Pft, you’re too generous,” Elise murmured standing up.

“Well I try.”

“Right. Well thank you Alto. When can we get started?”

“I’d suggest we go get a book from Holly Bell in the morning. Or a couple. It’s a great place to start after all if you can hold out that long. Anyways, I need to get going,” Alto concluded standing with a walk away beginning.

“Heh, alright,” Elise murmured going the other way, “Thanks for believing in me.”

“Well hell, it only takes one person,” he chuckled carrying on, stopping at the edge though, “You know, Holly might still be at the library doing inventory. Wanna go see?”

“Sure, I can get a head start if I get a book now,” Elise chirped.

“Then let’s go,” Alto laughed turning towards the center of town, bolting at once.

“Hey wait up!” Elise shouted following.

With book in hand and a slight smile spread over her face, she moved. Her steps pattered lighter than they had been prior, not as heavy into the ground with as much of a thud. Towards the buildings she went with confidence splashing over her face.

A turn to the left and down, then across the street and down. Their footsteps echoed as the streets grew quieter until finally, straight ahead, the

library. Elise smiled though quickly that expression changed as she stopped in place, hearing the sound of talking coming from an alleyway, Holly's voice with another familiar one. Without a moment's hesitation her hand dropped onto Alto's shoulder and pulled him back, to which he let out a slight startled yelp.

"Shh," Elise whispered.

"Why, what is-"

"Hey, did you hear something?" Holly's voice carried, quick to subside though.

Silence lasted for a matter of moments, quickly replaced next by footsteps echoing. Stepping out of the ally were four figures, Holly among them. Quickly she pulled Alto back around the corner they had turned moments earlier. Elise's eyes narrowed as she peaked her head slightly out, "{Hey, two of them are those Priest guys.}"

The elder man and one of the younger Priests walked behind both Holly and the last individual, a male in a black Long Coat. This man's hair slicked back and silver, slightly messy. "Aye Miss Bell don't worry about it," he spoke, his accent thick Brazilian.

The man turned ever so slightly, barely enough to allow Elise to catch a glimpse of a long and dangling Cross Necklace. His face blistered slightly with a long, deep scar across it. Purple eyes reflected the light, glowing it seemed.

"Now as for our agreement, I believe you offered to provide assistance on that little matter," Holly mumbled.

"Oh Miss Bell, don't worry about it, I can assure you that no harm will be dealt without intention."

“Funny because you seem to be doing more than what we agreed upon.”

“Heh heh, I mean, it was not but a simple showing madam, we know they were not the ones.”

“Well then I suggest you keep that up Marco. I tore your Lieutenant’s head off last night after what he did. He was not supposed to act, nor kill, nor burn any of them!”

“A miscommunication, it won’t happen again, I swearz.”

“You do a lot of swearing for a preacher. I’m warning you this one time, stay out of my way. The Vulfax Mountains are my jurisdiction, you should damn well know that. Cross me again and you’re going to lose more than your title.”

Elise pulled back with Alto immediately, both turning with a sudden dash off. Through the streets, onto the grass, off towards the forest. Not a wasted movement, both continuing to run.

“Those guys were the guys I mentioned that jumped the Vampire.”

“Yeah yeah, uh, yeah I uh, I know. That’s a faction of the Catholic Church believe it or not that hunt things unholy. They are known as The Priests and they are damn good at what they do.”

“Why would Holly be working with them?”

“Who knows.”

“We- we need to move. Man, if she is actually with them like that then I don’t want to lure her back to my people, and we can’t have her discover you.”

“Aren’t you overreacting just a bit possibly? Wait, what am I saying, we heard part of that conversation. Shit. Still why worry?”

“Normal people might not notice things like a girl in the middle of nowhere with crap clothes, no visible family, strange talk, random bruises, and questions about burning vampires. Guys like them though, yeah, yeah they’ll notice immediately. Plus with what I did to that Vampire-”

“Ugh, understandable Elise, understandable. Alright, we need to separate and get out of here for now.”

Nodding to each other they both quickly split up, going in different directions.

Chapter XX

Grass crunched beneath Elise's feet as she ran through the forest. Once more the moon stretched tall, a backdrop made from the sparkling trees and the hooting of owls. Wolves roamed near though quickly scattered by the sound. Zig zagging around trees she quickly came to a halt, arm pressed against a large oak tree as she went around, "{Why was she working with the Church? Alright, alright, I might be overreacting, I might be overthinking. She doesn't know much about me, she just thinks I live in the woods with some people? No, no she's my friend yet, there's that too- right?}"

With a cough she leaned down and bent slightly as she attempted to catch her breath. Her breathing heavy, her legs slightly wobbly, the town now over a kilometer behind her, "Urk, man, I haven't run like that in forever."

She looked up to the sky, coughing once, "{I need to chill and stop panicking, no way can she figure out what I am or who I am with, right?}"

The grass crunched again as her back straightened. Deeper into the forest she went, her head shifting left and right as she went along, "What the hell am I even doing anymore. If she's with them then she's against me. Fuss it all, I've opened a giant hole and fallen right in. There's no point in getting better for my people, I'm just dragging them down with me. I'm never going to be good enough for them, not like this, not for anyone. This just sucks, what's the point!?"

"One should always motion to be better dear lass, for the sake of ones' self."

Her head perked up to the sound of a male voice answering back, the sound of footsteps to the right; with a slight glance her eyes rested upon the approach of two individual. One older, possibly mid-thirties, long flowing

white hair at the front and sides with a long ponytail behind, eyes light purple with a slight glow to them. Tied around his torso were many sheathed daggers, silver in coloration, many more covered by a long Trench Coat. From his neck dangled a long necklace with a Cross right below the chest.

The other younger, around the same age, shoulder length brown hair messy at the front covering one eye, the other eye a glowing red. Long flowing black robes decorated with a red sash and a Coat of Arms on the chest. On the bottom flap of the Robe that hung down in front of his legs, a Cross pattern sewn in. From him dangled a very similar necklace though this one with a Yin Yang piece, swaying back and forth as the two approached.

“{I am just a magnet for pests apparently.}”

“Pardon our intrusion, we were on our way to visit an old friend and couldn’t help but see you lurking around a quarter mile back. Thought we would see what was happening,” the white-haired individual said with an Italian accent.

“Oh uh, nothing much. Just out, going for an enthusiastic walk.”

“And ranting about people being pissed off at you for failure?”

“I... am just very self-conscious about my failures.”

“Ah, best be careful lass. There are Vampires on the prowl, possibly more that could attempt to steal your soul.”

“Don’t forget the Giant Wolves, master.”

“Ah yes, those as well.”

“And the Drachen.”

“Right.”

“And the Zaherian.”

“Yes yes I know now enough, I think the point has been made.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. I’m surprised, few people I’ve met actually call those guys Zaherian. Usually they call the wolf guys Werewolves and ignore all the rest.”

“How much do you know?”

“I’ve uh, studied a lot of the paranormal, Drachen in particular.”

“And did you know that Drachen are never the same. The original Drachen of course had a tendency to mate with different humanoids to obtain different abilities. As a result only those of Pure Blood are capable of turning into Dragons. And that the offspring take on traits of whatever non-Drachen they have as a parent?”

“Yes. I uh, I suppose you guys would know about them being part of The Church and all.”

“Aye, just because my partner and I have crosses doesn’t mean we are with them. I would say that we sometimes work with them but that’s about the extent of it. How do you know of the Priests?”

“I’ve heard rumors and-”

Branches crackled near, all eyes turning. To Elise’s amazement what came forth was none other than Alto rushing through the debris. His feet skidded to a halt, “Elise, we need to get the heck out of here!”

“Why, what happened?”

Brush crackled more giant black wolves launching out behind Alto with paws slamming down, claws dug into the ground. Behind came more crackling, then visible figures. Out came wolves carrying humans, bleeding and unconscious. Brush crackled one last time as it parted revealing two humanoids walking in line with the Wulfn, a man and a woman.

“{Oh crap, not now, not now!}” Elise thought to herself with a quick step backward.

Alto turned and stood defensively, the two who had approached Elise also turning to bare witness to this horde. The male tall and buff, his hair shaved short, eyes yellow like lemons. The girl’s hair long and red, eyes green like grass.

“Well well well, what have we here Milly?”

“Not sure David, I think a couple of Priests and, wait wait I know this uh, that’s the daughter child, the baby thing. Azala’s right?”

“I think it is Sis.”

Elise let her gaze fall sharp upon the two, completely ignoring the rest of the Wulfn, “{No point in hiding anything that this point.} Gee, you two, that’s great. How’s the Stark Pack doing?”

“Better than your failing Clan of inbreeding butt munchers.”

“No, I think that’s your shtick. You’re the ones that turn into wild dogs, right?”

“Ooo, canny,” David chuckled.

Fur began to drop from the wolves, slowly growing in size while attempting to stand up tall, torn cloth visible beneath the shedding fur as their snouts began to shrink back along with the ears. David smirked ever so slightly, arms crossed as Milly spoke out again, “You can tell your father that we’re done bowing down, Stark Pack will rule the mountains.”

“Haha. And how might that be? Has your fat donkey of a leader dropped weight?” Alto laughed.

“{Ugh, yeah, no point in hiding anything from these two guys now. Guess I can be natural from here on out,}” Elise once more thought to herself.

“Another canny remark, I love it. Let’s just say Stark Pack has recently acquired some very convenient allies that’ll make our takeover that much easier,” David replied.

“And they are?” Elise replied.

“Not here at the moment. Currently they’re rounding up a couple of friends of their own.”

“Sounds like an excuse David.”

“You’ll see girl. Really though, we might not even need them. You’re here, a perfectly takeable hostage. Your father will offer a lot for your safe return I bet.”

“Hmph, hate to burst the mood here David but he could care less about my well being. Fewer than a dozen people at most would even care about my return in the Vulfax Clan, if even that.”

“Aye, Elise, I’m right over here,” Alto muttered.

“I said in the clan. Counting everyone, maybe five.”

“It doesn’t matter. We’ll take you regardless just because of your father. But first, get rid of the humans.”

Elise’s eyes grew big as howls were heard, then the sound of crunching and splatter of liquid. Several thuds followed next by footsteps forward as David, Milly, and the Wulfn readied themselves for the charge, those who had previously been wolves standing ready as well as if wanting to simply take a leap forward and pounce.

“Yeah uh, how about no.”

The two from before walked pass Elise and even Alto. David’s eyes lit up a bit, “Hmm? And who the hell are you two?”

The white haired man stood tall, taking a defiant stance, "I am Ryuu of the Mephisto, and this is my apprentice Zero, Third Heir to the Mephisto."

"Memphos- what?"

"Now here's the thing buddy. Personally, I don't care if you're a mermaid with horse legs that breathes lava from a straw. While that'd be interesting for something to study, it doesn't change the fact that you just killed several innocent people who had no part in any war of any sort. So I couldn't care less what this girl is, right now she's an allie."

"Isn't that about how it is though, Ryuu?" came the voice of another.

David and Milly both turned their heads and glanced back, stepping apart as a third individual moved forward between the two. His hair long and black down his back, jagged and lengthy down the front of his face. Several scars littered this newcomers face, eyes illuminating silver. With his smile he bore out jagged, filed teeth. Tattooed on the left side of his face was a giant red star that took up most of the cheek.

"{Where the hell do these guys keep coming from? This is starting to get confusing,}" Elise thought to herself.

"Ah, Medontei Onoragi. How's the arm?"

The individual stepped forward, his left arm sleeved while the right was left bare; burned severely to the bone in some places, it simply hung there appearing to have nothing to it. Elise stepped back, "What on Earth is-"

"You Mephisto, I swore I would kill you all one day and now I shall."

"Mmm, amusing statement. Zero, tidy up the trash while I tend to Medontei. I trust you two kids can either flee or fight, right?"

Alto nodded, "Clearly you're wanting to be good to us so. Yeah, I'm a Zaherian. I can turn Wulfn on them."

“And you?” Ryuu questioned looking to Elise.

“I uh, well, I-”

“She kicked a Vampire’s ass, pretty blue yet though,” Alto replied.

“Well then, perfect time to learn. Here, catch,” Ryuu stated as he reached into his coat with his right hand.

Pulling back he took out a long silver pike which quickly extended into a silver saber with a hilt and guard. With a nod he moved his arm out giving it a toss; with a nod back Elise held her hand out and caught hold of the weapon, looking at it.

“Retractable Blessed Saber, useful as a small pike or as a long saber for combat, made of Dynamista Steel. Swift, durable, and above all weightless.”

“But, I-I don’t know the first thing about fighting with a sword or even fighting in general.”

“Better learn quick then.”

Charging footsteps were heard as those who had been wolves rushed forward, fur coating their arms and legs as their snouts extended out. Racing right behind them were the true Werewolves with David and Milly beyond. Medontei laughed, running to the right. Ryuu without warning flew to the right as well heading after him while Zero stepped up beside Alto who now began to change.

“Elise stand back, this guy and I will handle the heavy work,” Alto murmured as he bent down, fur coating much of his body at this point as his arms and legs changed.

When all was said and done Alto stood now as a Giant Wolf with Zero beside him with a sword drawn.

“Hey, don’t sideline me. I’m an incompetent fighter, not a coward.”

“And that is the first step towards becoming a proper warrior, admitting your fault.”

“Hey so, I don’t know you two but I think you should focus,” Zero mumbled.

At once a line of wolves leaped snarling. Zero’s blade swung and slam into the shoulder of one, swatting it aside with blood flying and a fair amount of howling as he stepped aside. Alto leaped forth snarling, slamming into a tall Wulfn, toppling it over with his teeth sinking into the throat. Tussling around, Alto rolled off as the Wulfn stumbled away, trying to breathe though unable as they fell to the ground.

This in turn left Elise open to many as they ran forward, her feet stumbling as she quickly stood ready with the sword outstretched, “{Oh man, just as well-}”

Her legs twisting left, sword lowered, head cranked. Upon turning she broke into a bolting run with several Wulfn Wolves and Wulfn Beasts heading right after her. One leaped, one which she rolled left and evaded. Another behind her then, one which she jumped up over. As she landed she stumbled. A third flew by, missing by itself as it crashed into a tree.

“Get back!” she shouted swinging the sword backing away from them, fear in her eyes.

“Not a coward eh girl? Voltar, get her!” David barked.

Elise glanced back as she turned again, her feet shuffling. A Wulfn Wolf flew above and right down at her, snarling. With a yell she thrust her weapon up. Promptly, the Wulfn fell right into it, impaling itself. A howl came

forth, a yelp, and then a final snarl as Elise stumbled away. Weapon in hand, bloodied, she looked forward at the wolf.

“Volar?”

Still in Wolf Form, Volar yelped and rolled round. His chest had been impaled, blood spraying out like the water of a pool with a hole in it. Beside her landed Zero, who had danced his way out of the swarm of Wulfn Wolves and Beasts. He landed with a stomp, looking left and right as more approached both him and Elise.

Elise took stand, holding her weapon with both hands, “Stay back!”

The sound of bark crackling, the sound of leaves and branches shuffling, the crackle of fire. All heads turned to the East to see several trees break, some vertical and some horizontal. Medonteï was visible hopping off one tree as it fell North towards the ground, while Ryuu was visible slowly walking forward with what appeared to be silver threads dancing around him. A smirk spread across Ryuu’s lips as his eyes followed Medonteï’s leap, the threads launching themselves after splitting through branches.

“Hmph, Master, you’re using your techniques already? Very well, then so shall I,” Zero spoke.

Elise stepped away, while Alto launched himself out of the way. All the Wulfn looked to Zero as his sword stabbed into the ground, his hands clapping together. He took in a breath, halted for a split second, and then spell out of him though instead of only air there came flames. Flames flew far out of his mouth slamming straight into the Wulfn, an attack which immediately caught all by surprise.

“What?” Milly spat.

“Fire? He’s a-” David stammered stumbling back.

“Whoa,” Elise murmured.

The fire spread like a wave and engulfed a fair few of the Wulfn, setting their fur ablaze. Many howled out in pain and bolted, some quickly collapsing from the pain as they burned and others rolling around trying to extinguish it. Zero’s breath of fire quickly stopped as the male’s eyes darted, a hand placed back upon his sword, “That’s how it’s done.”

“Gah, they’re like those Tribe guys or something. Everyone fall back. Mark my words little girl, this is only the beginning of this. Once those two freaks are gone, you’re all going to be dead beneath my heel,” David shouted.

Turning tail quickly, he bolted followed by Milly and a couple others who had evaded the flames. Behind Medontei turned his head to see them fleeing, a scowl appearing as he too turned and bolted away.

“Zero, after him, let’s go,” Ryu commanded following after Medontei quickly.

With a nod Zero turned his head and bolted off leaving Elise to look on in shock while Alto slowly padded near her. Without word his fur began dropping and his form slowly had begun to change again, “You alright?”

“Y-yeah. I-I know I should be like, demanding answers or something but honestly I’m kinda in utter shock at the moment.”

“Fire breather and a man who uses silver things that can cut through multiple trees. Yeah, I getcha. You, you going to be alright?”

“I- I don’t know,” she murmured looking down at her hands, stained in blood, “I never intended to kill him, truly I didn’t.”

“Don’t question it. War is hell, and in war you have to make decisions that’ll result in the death of the enemy. Well, suppose this ain’t war but it’s close enough in a sense. You’re the type that fancies defense, acting only when

you need to. Respectable. But Elise, Princess, you need to realize that this world steps all over people like you if you're not ready."

She stood tall and firm, looking to Alto. One of her eyes covered by her own hair, the other half closed and zeroing in on him. A nod was given, "I know."

"You did good even if it wasn't much. I hope this'll inspire you to learn how to fight too, so you can protect what you value, and your friends of course."

Alto looked to Voltar's body and then right back to Elise with a nod, "There's a difference between being a pushover and being someone who values peace. Pushovers are trampled upon and let their own die without a care because of whatever compels them. That's not you, otherwise you wouldn't have snapped at Rusty like you said you did, you wouldn't care about the well being of your friends or other brother. Fight to prevent needless death, not cause it, that is what justice is and where peace comes from," he concluded, turning away.

There was a pause of silence between the two as the flames continued to crackle. Without a word Alto turned and began to stroll off with a sigh, his head turned away from Elise at that moment though only for a moment, "I suggest you get back to Vulfax and fill them in on this move by Stark Pack.

"I know, I will."

Exchanging nods they both turned and began to walk away, each going their separate ways. Elise passed through brush, glancing back one last time at the charred bodies of the Wulfn and then at the body of the one that had impaled himself upon the pike. With one more nod, she moved on.

Her pace quickened, turning into another full on run, “{Sorry Alto. I know I should but- I just can’t. Dealing with this is my burden. It’s not for anyone else to decide upon.}

Chapter XXI

Helicopters buzzed in the dark gray skies, illuminated with a fire red and orange with smoke drifting around. Through the smoke they flew, loud on the approach. Fire swept through a single valley with ground torn apart and bodies strung everywhere. Large craters in the land itself with holes going down deep, smoke drifting out of those holes as more rock crumbled. Rock continued to fall in and crash against the bottom, rolls of smoke parting to reveal metal structure and long cables flopping around.

A nearby mountain crumbling with half of its structure missing. Beneath the mountain to the West side a massive pile of debris all from the mountain. On closer inspection some bodies and a lot of rubble was visible. Carnage lay inside the Compound of Nospheross. Bodies lay strung around under rubble, blown through walls, ripped into pieces too many to count, riddled with holes. Shock and pain lay carved into the faces of many, blood flowing over the tiles. Screams were more than audible inside the facility, screams of only a few.

A unit of people moved down one of the hallways, dressed in SWAT uniform with rifles customized with flashlights and bigger shoulder stocks. Forward they moved, some stepping over the bodies and some around them. Helicopters hovered above several of the holes with ropes going down which more and more slid down to enter.

One squad moved through quickly behind an individual wearing a white robe with sky blue stars. A female with long blonde hair drifting long and flowing down her back as she ran. "Come on guys, we need to go!" she yelled in a somewhat soft tone despite the yell.

Approaching was another squad led by another individual with the near same uniform. His hair flowed right past his shoulders and black, his eyes red and zipping, "Move faster lads!"

Ahead of both of them was another individual in a much more exotic version of their robe. This one was with silver fur and stretched like a coat with a tail flap rather than a robe. His sleeves were lined as was the neckband. His squad broke off, some heading down one hallway and then another squad down another. He turned as the man and woman approached with their teams.

"Sir!" both shouted.

"Lana, Omocha, report," the man barked.

"Squad Fifteen has found twelve survivors in the Lower North Wings," the male known as Omocha reported.

"Squad Thirty-nine found four in the reactor bays sir," the female, Lana, replied, "This happened a week ago, all in one day. Our chances of finding anyone-"

"What of you sir?" Omocha questioned, interrupting his comrade, "Anything Sir Maxwell?"

The man turned around to face them both, shaking his head. His hair a light blonde though with patches of gray all around, his eyes a bright yellow on the outside though dulling as they neared the pupil. His skin wrinkled and face thin.

"Negative. I've dispatched eleven squads. Survivors are rare and few between. The Hive made sure to leave as many dead as they could, meaning they're probably readying themselves for more as soon as possible."

With a shift of light a new individual in the same attire as Omocha and Lana appeared, on his knees, “Reporting! Lord Bell, the power systems show signs of sabotage.”

“Elaborate.”

“The systems were damaged but not totally gone. Upon repair we discovered we could not log back into the system, indicating that we were locked out.”

“That goes against logic. The Hive would have blown the thing up,” Lana murmured.

“Unless it wasn’t The Hive,” Maxwell mumbled, “Someone on the inside assisted them in this attack.”

“A spy? Who would do- one of the humans?”

“No, no human was on site today with access according to the log. That shift isn’t until two days from now and the last was twelve days ago.”

“Wait, one of us did it?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” Maxwell muttered walking away, his eyes down towards the ground.

“Sir you need to stop blaming yourself for that traitor.”

“I’m not. Who was the General in charge of the facility during the attack?”

“That would be-”

“General Wesley Ezdorth!” Lana shouted stumbling forward.

All eyes shifted to see a stretcher moving along. On it was Wesley hooked up to an assortment of wires and tubes, strapped down. Maxwell and the rest quickly approached, concern in all of their eyes.

“What happened to him?” Omocha spat.

“According to the eye witnesses, he engaged Leon Sycamore in the East Wing and was wounded when the reactor in that sector went critical. He lost an arm, most of a leg, and some of his internals. He’s in critical condition.”

“Get him to the surface and get him in a Healing Capsule. Omocha, go and report to the Council. Tell them what happened here and tell them to tell their Governments to prepare for any possibility.”

“Sir?”

“Do it!”

“Y-yes sir,” Omocha stammered before disappearing with another shift of light. Maxwell stepped aside as Wesley was rushed out towards the entrance, turning his back to that direction a moment after as Lana remained stationary.

“This sort of attack, they’re clearly planning differently than they did back then to have come to this point. Something has changed.”

“New leadership?”

“Could be. Now the question becomes, what will their next target be?”

Another dropped down with a shifting of light, this time an individual hooded and masked. This one dropped to both knees and bowed, “Sir, your daughter is attempting to contact you. Her Astral Projection appeared before Lady Sandra.”

“That’s it!”

“Sir?”

“Chun, I haven’t time to answer her. Tell my daughter to expect The Hive’s company in her area within the next few weeks. I must finish up here and rally every hand that I can before it’s too late. The Hive is going to go after the Temple of Light, meaning my daughter is in danger. Tell Holly to get everyone she can because Hell is coming straight for her.”

Elise traveled forward, the mountains of Vulfax just another ten minutes ahead. A few paces forward and another turn. Her head scoped around as she moved, this pace continuing. All a sudden her nose wrinkled, tears drifted out of her eyes. She skidded to a halt, throwing both hands over her mouth and nose, “GYAUH, WHAT IS THAT!?! It smells like rotten skunk ass mixed with- UGH, did a wild boar die or-”

Her face went blue as her head turned back around, her eyes going absolutely wide. Grass and flowers bloomed around a figure. A tattered dark red coat. Green jeans lay torn beside the figure. White flowing hair. Lots of blood, well dried. The torso hollowed out with only bones and rotting flesh visible.

A face half eaten, the other half with blood stained lines going from a clouded green eye. A blank expression, cold and gone.

“N-n-n-eyh-” Elise whispered, her face caved in, her body shaken.

Laying against a tree with a slumped over head, skin pale and peeling, was Elen... or what was left of her. A rat hung out of her left eye socket. Her organs lay on her outside, most eaten up but some not so. Some organs, faded black and mush in appearance scattered around. Down below her stomach was nothing but a gaping hole of eaten corpse with the pelvic bone showing. Fur and some blood clung inside her fingernails while others were broken off.

“Sh-sh-she wasn’t... d-dead when-”

Elise dropped to her knees, her eyes shaken, even more teary eyed. They skimmed up Elen’s form, then down. Then to her hands. In her right hand rested a blood stained knife, half covered by a torn and fallen sleeve. Then, over to the left, nothing but blood over the hand. Eyes traveling up where there was no sleeve, there rested a gash in the skin. Her wrist had been cut.

"Leaving Vulfax isn't possible. Those who abandon the clan often end up wishing they were dead if they ever get caught."

"E-Elise I-I, I just- I hate it here, I don't want to be here anymore!"

"Good luck surviving on your own you little queer! Out there, there's nothing but death and worse hell than this clan!"

"Worthless disgrace. Your parents were so disappointed in you that they had to go and die. You should do the same."

"Fucking freak!"

Voices screamed in her head, violent, twisted, screeching. Elise hunched over before her friend, her right hand leaving her mouth and brushing over her heart, "Why- why!? Why does it- no it, no!"