

Act 6- A New Path

Chapter XLIV

“So Medonte failed did he now?”

“Indeed Basilisx. Killed by Holly Bell from what I have heard.”

“Is that so Wave? And to what does that matter to the likes of us?”

Multiple figures sat around a clearing before the moonlight’s glow, trees dead surrounding them blackened to the core with not a leaf in sight; those who sat were all dressed nearly identical with the cloak of The Hive, only some with minor alterations to their uniform.

“I quite agree with Basilisx. What does it even matter? So a couple of insignificant scrubs were scrubbed by Holly, big whoop. They can’t stop what’s coming right Shadow?”

“Don’t be overconfident Raxsha. My agents are fast at work. Dustin and Azala in particular are doing above and beyond,” Shadow replied with eyes shifting to the right to two figures present as Astral Projections.

Indeed both Azala and Dustin stood before the group, both in uniform which was distinguishable despite being in Astral Projection Form. Dustin simply smirked while Azala crossed his arms giving a nod.

“Yet I hear they failed to assassinate the daughter of Holly Bell, what’s up with that?”

Dustin looked across from where he stood, now with fierce eyes, “Watch what you say Flare before I set you ablaze.”

“The girl was lucky. She survived several missions and somehow knew about the last being a trap,” came the voice of Azala, “So to that I simply must say that our best was tried.”

“It doesn’t really matter,” Shadow replied with eyes shifting around, “As it turns out she isn’t even Holly’s child like we originally thought. Holly just took a significant interest in Elise for whatever reason. I investigated the matter myself following the battle of Vulfax and Stark. She was no spy, she was no tool set in place by Holly. Problem is that now Elise might know enough to be able to inform Holly of everything.”

“And we will cross that bridge when the time comes, eh? It hardly matters though heh heh. Holly is by herself. The forces of The Tribe are still cleaning up trying to figure things out. They’re all over the globe looking for us since we haven’t gone for that prize yet.”

“Still Idontis, I would prefer if she were dead,” came the response of Leon.

“And so I shall have it dealt with,” Shadow replied, “I have more operatives in the field. They’ll do nicely, especially since they are about as expendable as Medontei’s entire team was.”

“Speaking of operatives, Shadow have you found what we seek?”

“I have Leon. Holly has stayed near it the entire time, though it will do us no good if we haven’t the time to break the barrier.”

“What type?” came the voice of Cortez.

“A Level Five Tetra Seal. Breaking it could take upwards of a month.”

“A whole month?” came the flabbergasted response, “Are you insane? If Holly is nearby that thing we’d barely get five minutes. Even if we kill her the others would run in immediately.”

“Calm down Galland, I have accounted for this. Holly won’t be a factor, nor will the rest of her people. If all goes according to plan as it has so far, heh heh. By the time any of them catch on it’ll be too late.”

“Even with Elise now joined with Holly?”

“Dustin and Azala will likely be reported as having been tied to us; however it is in the nature of our foes to think little of them other than a bonus army for when we make our next move. They’ll observe while they search for the rest of us. That’ll be the key, especially when we start laying down fake bait. Once all risks are dealt with, it’ll be time.”

“Time to at last claim this world in the name of The Hive.”

Chapter XLV

The moon climbed to its maximum height now. The wind had become not but a slight breeze, opposite that of a gale. The leaves barely responded while so few animals remained out in the somewhat open. Down a dry dirt path a group moved, led by one with a very bright coat. A hooting owl flapped its wings at once and tore off as the group approached, a feather falling.

“So when were you going to tell me Alto?”

“Well Elise, truth of the matter is that Miss Bell wouldn’t let me.”

“And why is that?”

“Because of a matter of Global Security,” came the response of Holly at the head of the trail.

“Global Security?”

“Well from what you already have figured, it’s something that Dustin and Azala are in on.”

“I’m sorry but I fail to see what this has to do with them.”

“Heh. In time you will,” Holly murmured.

“Miss Bell, I think it’s time. Azala got her into this because you kept interacting with her. You at the very least could give her an explanation.”

“In due time Alto. For now we need to report back to HQ and inform Dewy of the situation. Now that we know the truth we need to prepare to possibly evacuate everything within one hundred kilometers. I also need to apprise the Prime Minister of the situation. If it comes down to it the rest of the world’s leaders will also need to be briefed.”

“I understand that, truly I do.”

“Well can I at least get a summary over here? All I know is that my father is mixed up with some evil people and that he is a traitor working with the clan’s enemy. How does any of this pertain to the world?”

“Because what Medontei said back there was true,” Alto replied looking to Elise.

Her eyes darted to Alto at once and then ahead to Holly, her feet stammering for a few steps, “People like that are real?”

“There’s much you have yet to know. I’ll inform you of anything you desire once we get to HQ. What I can say is that Azala is mixed up with some evil people who have the potential to destroy the world should they succeed. Multiple worlds really. They’re cut off from their super powered armies at present and as such are building an army of supernatural entities to fight the entire world, my people included,” Holly replied looking back.

“Miss Holly, I am sorry but I’d really like to know the full story before I agree to anything!” Elise shouted slamming her right foot down, “I’ve been through too much lately to buy into all of this. What I should be doing is going back to Vulfax and warning them!”

Holly stopped in turn, as did the rest. Silence drifted as many eyes looked to Holly, even Elise’s as they filled with shaking anger. Holly’s hair shifted, her head turning back, “So be it then. I’ll give you a little taste of the past.”

“What are The Hive? And why are they up to what they’re up to?”

“The Hive is the culmination of a superhuman race in the form of an Empire. They can all use supernatural abilities, and they originate from another

world by title of Sillith. You've clearly already heard of their potential in battle but I suspect it's only a brief mention."

"That they all have the power to destroy cities, right?"

"Some do. I'll at the very least tell you the main points of our history. We have arrived by the way," she replied.

The path now trailed off leading out of the forest, before them a mansion several stories tall, stretching over the size of a football field. Forward they moved, all as Elise looked around in awe. Gardens of flowers and rock all around, fountains in the shape of angels. A crushed rock trail moving up with hedge plants on the sides. A vegetable garden was also visible on the right.

Lights and light poles scattered around the property were lit up. To the west stood an orchard of trees filled to the brim with apples. Chipmunks ran across the yard followed by rabbits, a very area despite the time. As they walked on several wolves lay present looking up and then down as they rest, observing the oncoming group.

At the end of the trail stood several men, each with white patches with blue stars on the left sides of their vests. One stood at the head with a smile, bowing. His golden locks of hair fell around him, even as he rose. As he rose back up the light reflected off his eyes, showing a bright green. Fully up he stood taller than all of those with Holly, easily two meters tall and somewhat buff, "I welcome you back, Princess Bell."

"It's good to be back Dewy. Ready the Emergency systems, we have much to discuss," Holly replied at once moving past him and up the steps of the mansion.

Chapter XLVI

A large dining room was now the scene, one stretching multiple meters around with many sitting. To one end sat Holly and to the other was Elise. Dewy stood at the front of the room with several others, blocking the doorway. Elise glanced around, candles lit and set in candelabras among others. Flows decorated the sides of the room, the walls white with painted blue waves. A chandelier sat above them with candles also present inside and burning.

Many chairs sat empty, a studio camera parked in the corner. Holly looked ahead to Elise, her head slightly cocked, “Well we have a short bit of time before I’m supposed to do some of this and that, shall we get through this?”

“Huh? Oh, right,” Elise replied looking to Holly now rather than around the room.

“So what would you like to know?”

“Everything. I’ve been brought into this like you said be it that I want to or not, you even said as we entered I needed to make a choice. I want to know what I’m going to be deciding about.”

“Hmm, very well. I’ll summarize the basics of what happened and leave the full history lesson for another time. It all begins on another world you see, a world known as Sillith. Sillith was a planet divided in half from the beginning. Due to some disaster millions, if not billions of years old, our planet was divided in half along the equator by a ring of fire. In the North you had my people and in the South their people. We would be known as the Lightonians,

Masters of Light, and they- the Dharkanians, who were Lords of Darkness. Our power is derived from a sort of life force from the Cosmos.

Over the years it has had many names including The Celestial River, The Gateway, even The Great Mother. It is the flow of all energies in this universe and grants life from its vast system, something that in a way unites all things while at other times dividing them. It is from this life force we gain our power to do things, like Medontei's fire or my Light Energy control, even the ability to prolong our lives for as long as we would desire. I won't go into the finer points of that yet.

Light gives life, with it we enriched our lands and prospered once we were able to take the power into our being. Our Hemisphere united as one under my Great Great Great Grandfather, becoming The Tribe. Eventually came a time of curiosity and we destroyed the Equator's Fire, when we discovered the Dharkanians who had unified as well as The Hive. With their Darkness they could enrich the lands with finer minerals."

"So you could literally draw a power into you and provide anything you needed? Interesting," Elise murmured, looking to Holly curiously.

"Quite. While we prospered off the land they had prospered off Industrial Revolutionizing, mining their lands to near death. It wasn't sustainable. When we made contact we tried to help them by restoring their land and opening up trade. After a few centuries we had technology the kind your world has only dreamed of, some of which we still have here but with all good things comes the Yang or rather bad things. My Great Great Great Grandfather was assassinated by The Hive's leader, William Axis. That in turn

sparked a war that would lead to the deaths of billions over the course of several tens of thousands of years.

It wasn't until this world's 18,000 B.C. give or take that there was a change. My father and I fought the Hive in what could have been the decisive battle; though in doing so we upset the balance of the Celestial River and split Time-Space. We found many worlds that day, including Earth. Naturally the fighting spread to those worlds as The Hive's greed got the better of them and so we opted to protect those worlds.

One by one we closed them, our mages using their magic to undo the damage to Space-Time. Sadly the damage to Earth's Space-Time was too great and we failed to close it in time. The Hive immediately found allies with the ruling class of beasts like Vampires and Lycan, even Drachen. We in turn founded an alliance with the humans, one we keep to this very day. Time went on and many battles occurred. Eventually our best Mages were able to design a relic that could make and break the Space-Time Rift, a Mirror."

"A Mirror?"

"One that could suck out the Light Energy keeping the rift open. When together it maintained the barrier. When broken into pieces it closed it. After a fierce campaign of forcing The Hive back we had our win and broke the Mirror. Many Dharkanians were trapped on Sillith, a win as far as we're concerned. At the cost of our Home World we saved many others, including our own people."

"So what are these guys after now after all this time?" Elise questioned with her hands pressed to the table.

"To reunify the Mirror. Over the years our numbers dwindled off through various means. We helped the humans take back their planet and

spread our power to aid them agriculturally. Realistically we're pretty much not even legend at this point and few in number. Many had also given up their eternal life to live among the humans. As time went on, as I said, our numbers dropped. After the capture of a few individual Dharkanians we let our guard drop, thinking the worst was over. We of course maintained our alliances with the humans in secret and kept the most troublesome locked up or executed, couple of us even kept watch but for the most part that was it.

For the last few thousand years though it would seem they've been in the shadows planning. Recently they attacked our compound and freed many prisoners, and as you no doubt are aware have been recruiting for an army."

"Yeah, I'm aware of that. So essentially these guys want to take over this world and bring their armies back, right?"

"Mhmm. What I'm set to do is alert the Prime Minister shortly and other operatives of The Tribe of the situation. If this comes down to it, the humans will need their many armies to unite to stop this threat."

"Why do you need them involved? Can't you guys handle it?"

"Elise, remember what Medontei said about the thirteen?" Alto murmured.

"Yeah, you mean they're-"

"The Hive has been recruiting non-Dharkanians into their arms and granting them power. We have no idea what to expect as a result, especially considering we've identified five individuals at this point who are on par with even the strongest of our kind, if not leagues above, five capable of perhaps destroying an entire country with their mass reserves of power."

"What?!" Elise spat out with a choke.

Holly nodded, "There could be more."

"Who are these five?"

Holly closed her eyes, head lowered, "Audrey of the Red Water, a warrior capable of splitting herself into many forms. She has her title because her blood is strong, mixed with water which this planet has an abundance of, she could cause ungodly tsunamis and submerge your coasts completely."

"No way~"

"Chino Amagai of the Undead. She has the appearance of a child with an army of the Undead big enough to oppose any army. Leon Sycamore, known as the apprentice of another on my list of five. His power is enough to perhaps rival even a nuclear blast. He's believed to be the leader of their current operation. Another goes by the name of Shadow, someone we have no knowledge of but it is believed he is the brains behind The Hive's latest activities, perhaps even the one who made contact with Clan Vulfax and the Stark Pack."

"What the hell, how can you even fight guys like that?"

"With extreme luck and skill. Last on our list is perhaps the deadliest of all, a General by the name of Cortez. He alone is strong enough to take down an army of human soldiers with plenty of power to spare, easily the strongest Sillithian known to have ever lived. Those five are the reason why we need the humans because we simply don't have the arms and strength that we need, even with our technology. We need an army of our own, which on that note, is what I'd like to talk to you about next."

"Me?"

“I’ll cut straight to the chase Elise. Obviously I know you are from Vulfax, I’ve known this for a long time. I knew from the moment you checked out that defense book you were practicing so you could fight for Vulfax, except at the time you didn’t know the truth. Azala has been trying to get you killed for one specific reason.”

“Yeah cuz he thinks I’m your kid or whatever.”

“Well there’s more to it than just me bonding with you.”

“And what’s that?”

“The reason they probably began to believe that, beyond you visiting me all the time... it’s because I’m the one who brought you to the Clan of Vulfax.”

Chapter XLVII

Elise's mouth hung open, her eyes massive with pupils in full dilation. Her eyes rested upon Holly, a slight prickling feel in Elise's head. Her eyes narrowed, her mouth closing with teeth gritting, "You did what?!"

Holly stared back now, her hands together and her chin resting upon them. Half closed eyes, somewhat empty yet calculating. Elise slammed both hands down and stood, "I'm sorry but I thought you just said you brought me to Vulfax. Care to confirm that?"

"Elise, calm down," Alto spoke quickly.

"No, she just said something I want to hear dammit and I want her to explain what exactly she meant by that."

"You were an infant left in our care Elise, I couldn't risk bringing you into things at the time. I left you with Vulfax because I felt you would be safe. I spoke to Azala about it myself and made a deal. So long as he toned his activities down and took care of you, I'd turn a blind eye to his underworld dealings."

"Why... why Vulfax? Why him? Do you know what I suffered through? I went through hell every day in that damn clan! Haven't you heard of an orphanage before?" Elise spat.

"I had little other choice in the matter."

"How's that?" came the growling response from Elise.

"Never mind that now. Surely you suspected something though while in Vulfax, right? You displayed no characteristics of the Drachen, you were very different."

Elise looked down with quivering wide eyes, breathing in and out somewhat quicker than before.

“Azala sent you on death missions no doubt because he thought you were a spy of some sort even at the age of a toddler. I didn’t think he would do such a thing, I didn’t know what you would go through, I didn’t even know he worked with The Hive. Had I known in time I would’ve reversed my decisions, I could have done different. By the time I realized it it was all too late.”

“I went through so much and they weren’t even my people, do you know how that makes me feel? There wasn’t a day that went by where I didn’t want it to all just end for me. If I weren’t such a coward or frightful of what they might do to me if I said or tried anything, I’d have left my own way long ago. I hated everything!”

“But you had people who supported you didn’t you?”

“Many of those people died because of what Azala thought I was!”

Silence filled the room, Elise’s eyes locked with Holly’s, the tension swirling as their eyes seemed to clash. Alto looked back and forth, his arms twitching with worry flashing in his eyes, “Makes no damn sense, sticking me with those barbarians when I have no power. Clearly there’s more you know that you don’t want to say. So why am I here then anyways, huh?”

“Because I want you to join our ranks and combat the Hive.”

Everyone immediately shot glances to Holly; Alto, Dewy, Sora, all joined Elise in staring at Holly.

“Whoa, Holly, what are you-”

“Alto, it is obvious that she is a brilliant young lady. She’s come far from my understanding, she has the determination, and above all, she has the

will to do the right thing. She's already in on this and by helping us she can help her people and so many others."

"Let's rewind that. You, the person who stuck me as an infant with a bunch of fire breathing assholes for *protection*, want me to join you and fend off things that can blow up cities, people who are basically demigods."

"You have the brains clearly, using Hemlock and Wolfsbane against Zaherian. You know how to plot a battle. You have compassion and care for your comrades. That's enough for me to confirm you would be a major asset, especially once I train you to become one with the Celestial River like any Sillithian."

Eyes shifted as a chair quickly shifted, the source being Alto who had shot up out of his chair, "With all due respect, Elise is just a human with sword skills and above average strength. How can you say we need to involve her in this? If it comes down to a battle like with Medontei she'll fall. We can't ask her to do that."

"Times are desperate Alto. When I came to you over a decade ago, were you at all ready? No. You are able to turn into a wolf and nothing more, yet your skills as a secret agent are impressive."

"So I'm a ninja among others, what about her? I've been here for many years on top of that and still haven't learned to connect to the Celestial River."

"For one, you're more of a warrior. For two, you lack the focus and concentration. Three, you're not one with nature or your inner self. And four, you're not a quick learner. To my knowledge Elise is more in tune with herself,

with nature, and is most certainly a quick learner. She might not be a warrior like you but she has the potential.”

“Picking up a sword is diff-”

“Alto shut up!” Elise spat now glaring at him. At once she continued as all eyes shifted, “Right now I’m pissed, I’m in shock, and I’m being asked to make a huge decision by a woman I trusted who has honestly lost all my respect with one god damn sentence. I don’t need the crap and belittlement from you, especially with how that fight against Medonte went. Why put a *human* in with lizard people? Why let the torture go on?!”

“But Elise I’m just-”

“But nothing Alto! I won’t stand for any more bullshit!”

“And you most certainly shouldn’t,” came a voice from a doorway.

All eyes shifted to two individuals as they walked in, one younger and the other older. Holly sighed with hands on her temples, “Ryuu, Zero, welcome,” Holly commented.

“We couldn’t help but overhear the situation while waiting to come in. Have to say the kid’s right, why did you stick a human baby in with Drachen?”

“Because I saw potential in her from the minute I laid eyes on her,” Holly spat back.

Eyes shifted, locked to Holly once more. Holly stood, hands down on the table, “Alright now call it selfish but maybe I just saw Elise day one and could tell there was something about her that had a lot of promise. Because of that I stuck her with warriors thinking they could beef her up until I could train her myself.”

“Zero, how about you talk to Elise outside for a minute,” Ryuu growled, “Everyone but Holly can leave the room. I... would have words with her.”

Elise swung her right arm, a vase flying straight off the table right into a wall. With a loud shatter it splashed upon the ground, a mark left in the wall just as much. With a sharp turn she walked out, followed by Zero who moved quickly. All others had already begun to stand and walk out themselves.

Feet shuffled for awhile until finally the room left only the two in it, both looking right at one another. Ryuu looked right at Holly with glaring eyes, his mouth already in motion, “What the fu-”

“Holly did what she felt was right is what I’m getting at.”

“She put me with a pack of warrior dumb asses who mostly treated me like dirt for my entire life. How is that a good thing?!”

Zero stepped outside with her, right onto the balcony of the building overlooking the garden. A sigh left him, a shake of the head following, “I don’t get the thought behind that myself quite honestly, stupid reasoning. What I do get is that I know what it’s like being treated like crap your whole life, being just lied to because they want to turn you into a weapon.”

“How so,” Elise grumbled.

“My father did the same thing to me,” Zero sighed, his eyes closing for a brief moment, “From the day I was born he saw that I could be made into a weapon for our empire. From the age of three I was already being taught to kill, and I was not permitted many friends. In fact, most of the ones I did make he simply dismissed from the palace. Ultimately though, it made me stronger.”

Elise turned to him as his head turned to her, face forward with eye lock, “Sometimes bad things happen by hand of others when they thought it would be for the best, or by complete accident. I’m not saying what Holly did was right by any means. Yes she could have put you in a normal orphanage or at the very least raised you herself but maybe she just saw something in you from infancy. Sillithians are known for seeing that sort of thing you know.”

“Paths and fate are bullshit,” Elise grumbled, “Don’t bring up that prophecy sounding mumbo jumbo. There’s no way she could’ve told how I would turn out.”

“No, I suppose not. You still had to work to get where you are now with some relative dumb luck. Who knows, maybe she had no reason and just wanted to mess with you. I doubt it but who really knows. But Elise, if you leave now you’ll never find out,” Zero mumbled looking away.

“If I leave now? Oh don’t you start on that recruitment crap too.”

“If you truly want to find out, you should stay. If you truly want to help Vulfax, you should also stay.”

“To hell with them,” she growled.

“Oh come now, assholes or not, they’re still your people just as the people in Emerton are. Elise, I’m going to be blunt. Holly wouldn’t have mixed you up in any of this if she didn’t think you could handle it, especially if she didn’t think she needs the help. To put it bluntly, if the Tribe falls, this world as so many know it will forever end. Then everyone will be like you under the power of the Dharkanians.”

“Tch..”

“I’ll be back,” Zero concluded turning away, pacing himself back towards the door, “Think about it, all of it. Please Elise, give it a lot of thought for the friends and family you still have.”

His steps echoed back inside as he moved out of sight. Elise stood there, looking out at the plants, her hands digging into the railing of the deck, the wood itself splintering around those hands. Her teeth bare, her eyes quivering, her whole body had begun to shake apart.

“-and you who would be so arrogant as to,” Ryuu began.

“I know Ryuu, I fricken know!” Holly spat.

“So why!?”

“Because we’re desperate! I gave her to the sharks thinking they’d raise a warrior for our side. It was dirty, it robbed her of whatever life she could’ve had. But it was necessary. She’s not the first nor the last that the Tribe has attempted this with.”

“Why not tell her where she comes from then? Where does she even come from, and why her?”

“I don’t have that answer at the moment, I don’t know where. All I know is that it was a feeling, an urge. I made a gamble, it might not have been the right one but in the long run it could benefit our efforts greatly. That child, Ryuu, isn’t a prodigy. But you know what? She has guts. She has come far and that’s what it’s all about.”

“You’re no better than General Mud Bath, he murders Dharkanian children just because they’re Dharkanian. Hell I’m sure he’d love to execute all the Hive turncoats who joined up with us! And don’t even get me started on

that one General, Midoridantei or Mirdora or whatever the hell his name was.

That one is a bloody psycho-”

“Ryuu, just, just listen, alright?” Holly said with a sigh, walking around the table, “There is a reason for everything, k? And there is reason for this, for certain.”

“Then do tell?”

“Alright, it’s like this-”

Chapter XLVIII

Dawn had hit, the sun slowly rising over the horizon casting a golden glow across the forest and gardens before the mansion. Birds chirped happily, flying from their trees. On the lawn many rabbits bounced. Before this as deer moved sat Elise upon the patio, eyes drifting across the gardens. Flowers blossomed with a light dew drifting from the blades of grass.

Her eyes drifted with a slight smile as deer moved at the edge of the forest. As the warm glow of gold struck her face, her eyes lit with a mix of green and yellow, glowing warmly and most certainly bright. Half closed and lost in thought, memories stirring.

"Elise, you pathetic pile of vomit!"

"Well well well, if it isn't the little loser Elise."

"Loser-lise, loser-lise, loser-lise, hahahaha."

"You'll never be good enough."

"Such a pathetic little girl."

"You let your comrades down, that ambush should have been avoided daughter. Raka and Denma both died and they were in your care!"

"But Mother it wasn't my fault, I was just following--"

"You should have been able to do it, even if you felt the orders were wrong."

"Oh I get it. You're mad because the only two friends you had died. Such is the way of a warrior though."

"Are you serious?"

"Enough! My mind is made up. I brandish you both as cowards who retreated and for questioning my authority. As for you, Vulper, I hereby strip you of your rank as an elite of Vulfax. Your performance was legendary for how crap it was."

"You weren't even there Father, don't judge what you did not see--"

"Enough! Be silent before I banish the both of you. And on that note, which of you shall it be that I send away, hmm?"

"With all due respect, Elise is just a human with sword skills and above average strength. How can you say we need to involve her in this? If it comes down to a battle like with Medontei she'll fall. We can't ask her to do that."

"Pft, to Hell with all of them" she muttered, her fist slamming down on the railing of the deck, the wood again cracking beneath, "Yeah I had some good people but they're getting screwed just as bad."

Her steps echoed as she drifted back several paces, looking over the garden as the sun's light swamped the various plants.

"Why? Why did I get mixed in with all this? Why couldn't my life have just been normal? Tch- Desti, Tom, Sacho. Elen. I am truly sorry. Had I not been, so many others would've. What am I supposed to do? Gah, someone please--"

Steps echoed to the left, the wood creaking. Elise's head shot round quickly, eyes blinking, "L-Lucy?"

Sitting before Elise in a chair was Lucy, one leg folded over the other with hands laid upon her lap. She looked ahead with a slight smile and nod.

Elise stumbled round, arms spread from her side, "Lucy?"

"Hello deary. Pardon the intrusion but I could sense your distress from kilometers away," Lucy replied, raising a small white cup to her lips, "Had to come and see it for myself."

She took a sip of dark tarnish liquid inside, a lemon wedge sticking out. Following the sip the cup was placed down at the side, next to another cup near identical. Before the second cup's place sat another chair, to which Lucy beckoned.

"No thanks," Elise murmured, "I'm too sick to my stomach for tea."

"So, what's troubling you?" Lucy asked.

"I-my, my life is all just a big rolling lie of a joke. That's what my problem is."

"Hmm, how so?"

Elise approached, stopping short of the table, "I grew up in a clan of jackasses who thought nothing better than to constantly push me around for being a weak woman. I tried to please them by doing chores and taking their blows, and instead they just punished me further. I tried to do good and be what I thought they wanted and they just accused me of messing up despite sending me on suicide missions. Then I come to find out one of my few friends still alive is the one that set me on that path and that my other remaining friend is on her side."

"Mmm, but let me ask you, were you true to yourself?"

"Huh?"

“Elise, were you true to yourself at all? Your people. Were you reacting to them how you felt you needed to, or how you thought you needed to?”

“I- well how I thought I guess.”

“Mhmm, and tell me were all the memories of your people that bad? I suspect that your fondest will come not from making them happy; but rather from being yourself and especially around your actual friends, right?”

“H-how did you know that?”

“We all wear masks luv,” Lucy spoke taking another sip, placing the cup back down as she continued, “There’s nothing wrong with putting them on to deal with this and that but know that the mask is always hiding the truth underneath. Those who do not master the use of the mask can never find happiness with themselves, once forced to wear it.”

“Well... I suppose that-”

“Tell me, were you ever happy playing the role of servant or warrior to just, make your people happy?”

Elise looked to the garden again, off at a dwelling pond, “No, I guess I wasn’t. I thought I was but-”

“And were you happiest when with those friends of yours, as a reader, as a person with a brain, as one who helped others without true cause?”

“Yeah.”

“How can you say you hated Vulfax when your friends made you you while they were alive?”

“How do-”

“I know of Vulfax? I have my means,” Lucy chuckled, “Elise, I’ll just put it out there. No way in heck would you be as strong as you are now under Holly or a normal life.”

“Strong? How do you mean?”

“You’ve pushed forward,” she spoke standing up from the chair, approaching Elise as her head turned back round, “By dealing with such hardships and overcoming them, you’re stronger than any person with abilities. Power is not of the body but rather of the mind. Those who truly embrace themselves and what they have faced will always triumph over those who wish to tear them down. Holly may have thrown you down a path that seemed bleak but think for a moment about the others you so blatantly ranted about earlier. And to top it off there’s that power of friendship nonsense and what not, right? I know that’s part of your deal.”

Elise tilted her head, eyes open in full with a blank expression.

“Given a normal life, you would not have anything to overcome other than moving from A to B. Despite how simple it sounds, that’s not really living. Living is overcoming obstacles before you that make your life hell, triumphing with a genuine smile as you pass task after task. Given a normal life, you would not have met those who have become so dear to you. You would not have the experiences you currently have. Cruel as it was, Holly made you a fine individual with a goal in mind, your true calling that is one for the better.”

“My calling?”

“What is it you want the most Elise? To make yourself happy or your people happy? To end war? To end sorrow?”

Elise turned way, body facing the pond once more. Geese splashed around, wading across the surface with ripples moving around. Her eyes locked to the pond, closing part way, her body's stiffness easing. Air left her, a nod given as the fire of her eyes died back, "I did feel something. To help protect people who can not protect themselves. To help my friends."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. I first felt it really pull at me when I helped out Holly's squad mates fend off Medontei's team of jerk wagons. It... it felt so, me? Yeah I guess. After what happened with my friend Elen, I just- and then Desti and Thomas, I don't want anyone to have to go through that again."

"I'd call that an enlightening goal that stands above any other, wouldn't you? It really is true to your aura because it is you as a person."

"Yeah."

"And if not for Holly and Vulfax-"

"I never would have thought about it. In fact, I guess- well, I wouldn't have the opportunity to help people; and it's an opportunity they offered me that I snapped at them for."

"Now you're getting the picture," Lucy chuckled walking passed Elise, "Destiny has given you a chance to do some real good for the world. Who knows, you could be one of the big change makers in the near future. Either way you look at it, the Tribe needs more fighters for what is to come, and so far you seem perfect for the job."

"I guess. I don't like what either did but you're right, it really is what built me at this point."

"Glad I could help."

“Mmm,” Elise sighed, closing her eyes for a moment.

Slowly she turned with her eyes opening again, turning to the direction Lucy had gone in, “Say Lucy I- huh?”

Upon turning there was no Lucy, there was no one, “She’s gone?”

Zero stepped out the door, his head turning away from Elise and then a quick turn around to face her, “You talking to someone Elise?” he questioned.

“No, just myself,” she replied.

“Ah. Well, I’ll let you get back to what your rage I guess-”

“Zero, hold on please.”

“Eh?”

“I. I’ve thought about what Holly offered. And I accept.”

“What?”

“I want to join the Tribe and battle the Hive.”

“Y-you do?”

“Yeah. I thought about it. I can’t just let people suffer when they can’t do anything to help themselves. If this war threatens the world, then as a warrior-in-training, it’s my duty to help fight off any and all evil.”

“Never thought I’d hear that. Heh, Alright then, let’s go tell Holly and get you ready to start training with the Celestial River shall we?”

“Right,” Elise chirped, following Zero as he shot back inside.

Chapter XLIX

“Alright Elise, Holly has entrusted me to teach you to use Light Energy. She’ll attend this little party shortly after her war meeting so look alive,” came the bark of Zero.

“So how does this work then?” Elise commented back.

Both stood before the pond, right in the heart of the garden. Around them the wind blew ever so slightly, the sun stood high in the sky, and birds chirped all around. The two stood directly across from each other at first.

“The biggest step is being in tune with yourself, aware of who you are, what you want, that sort of thing. One must also be focused and able to concentrate, even meditate if necessary. This is where people like Alto fall short.”

“So if it’s that simple then why don’t more people do it?”

“I wouldn’t call it that simple in practice. One must first learn to become one with the universe and let it peer into them. One must give into everything around them, which is where most people who think with brute strength fail. Understood?”

“Well for one, I feel like calling you One rather than Zero now to be honest but I kinda get what you mean.”

“Heh, sorry. I’m just repeating what I learned when I was brought into the fold. If I might be so bold as to say I know you’re going to pick up on this in a heartbeat.”

“Why is that?”

“A friend of mine, Tara Frost, is just like you. Bit of a nerd, very concerned for the well being of others, wants to help, yada yada. People like you are more of the in tune type when it comes to themselves and typically have an easier time picking up the skill to work with the Celestial River. Now going back to Alto, he’s not yet certain of who he is and lacks any real drive, he thinks aggressively and isn’t as-”

“In tune right, that’s what you people keep saying.”

“Yeah, that. I’ve seen guys like him finally pick up the ability to control a type of energy and then boom, they end up blowing their faces off practically on their first time.”

“How many energies are there?”

“Many. The Celestial River has no specific energy you can draw on, that all comes first with how you are as a person. If you are balanced and one with the world you’ll likely acquire a positive aspect like Light energy, where as if you’re of a darker breed you’ll get something negative like Dark Energy. That’s not to say one is superior to the other, just that they have different uses and properties. At the same time a person’s nature could change rapidly and in doing so might change the type of energy they can produce if they desire to.”

“You said first, what else is there?”

“Bloodline plays a factor. If your parents used Light energy then you’ll have that energy by default. If say they’re mixed, you can use both in addition to your own particular energy. Some energies can’t be crossed, some can. Quite interesting really.”

“So say someone has Lightonian and Dharkanian parents, and have a nature of, oh I don’t know, love? Could they have Light, Dark, and Love energies?”

“Haha, I suppose. Now then, are you ready to give this a try?”

“Yes,” Elise replied slowly shifting, standing up tall turning to face Zero, “How do we do it?”

“Meditate first and clear your mind. Once everything is gone you’ll need to basically let yourself go and be lost in the world around you. As one who is already one with the Celestial River, I am capable of assisting with the connection though that’s only if you’re capable.”

“Alright,” she murmured back now turning around yet again and sitting, the sunlight continuing to strike.

Her eyes shut, her breath leaving her as she crossed her legs and placed her hands on her lap. “And now comes the fun part,” Zero chuckled walking up to Elise from behind, his left arm raised up and slowly lowering, “Forcing you to meditate into the Celestial River.”

“How does that work?”

“I could tell you but I doubt you’d be able to follow it unless I gave you a couple hundred page manual on how this all works.”

“Fair enough,” she mumbled as Zero’s hand was then placed.

“Now comes your rebirth, Elise.” Zero concluded, a purple glow wrapping around his body immediately.

In seconds it drifted up his arm and began to spread across Elise. At first it moved slow, only a few centimeters a second. Ten seconds following, the purple swarmed all around, completely engulfing her body like flames to

gasoline trails. Her eyes flew wide open at once, gasping for breath, a bright light engulfing the both of them at once.

BANG

A flash of blinding white light quickly engulfed the heavens, spanning over a large region of the sky as it flew upwards. Tree tops crashed to the ground split at an angle, scorched at the point of the breaks yet cut as if by a solid blade. Holes plunged through the ground with mounds of dirt present. Smoke drifted into the sky gradually as animals fled from the area.

A thud could be heard followed by a loud grunt. Another blast quickly went off sending dirt, smoke, and white light flying out in various directions. Down Elise went, crashing in front of both Holly and Alto who had begun to approach. Slowly she sat off, coughing slightly.

“The hell was that Zero?!” Elise coughed.

“Hack, ack, yackablack! Ugh, that was me trying to help you enter the friggen River. For whatever reason, it blew up on us.”

“I never would have guessed that,” she muttered with an eye roll.

“Hey, you had best hope he can help you enter. If you have to rely on pure meditation alone, it can take a decade plus potentially.”

“A decade plus? What the heck.”

“Yeup. It kinda sucks.”

“Alright,” Zero coughed approaching again, “Let’s try this one more time.”

“Oh boy,” Elise mumbled, returning to position while Zero moved his hand in.

BANG

Zero flew off straight into brush, Elise herself launching into the pond. White waves of energy flew from her and the ground, smoke traveling up into the sky at the origin point. Alto sighed, turning, "Well this might take awhile."

Zero stepped forward again, coughing as Elise moved out of the dripping pond, "Third time's the charm?" she called while water poured right out of her.

Zero stepped forward, a branch in his hair that fell out the moment he neared Elise, "Right."

"So how is this supposed to work anyway? How am I supposed to draw this power in?"

"Drawing in power depends on your energy. If I had to take a guess yours would be Light Energy, based on the last blast with the white energy that flew everywhere," Holly replied, "Your power will come from the light around you, be it fire, lightning, even a reflection off of a body of water. All you need to do is meditate to draw it into you, similar to how you first synced with the Celestial River. You just need to focus on it and reach out to it, which will enable you to draw it in by pulling on the energy. Given time you'll be able to effortlessly draw in light, even during battle."

"Uh huh, ok?"

"You'll get my meaning in time."

"So I just, feel everything around me and pull it in?"

"Correct."

"Alright," Elise sighed.

"You ready?" Zero questioned.

Elise nodded, her eyes closing as she sat down, basking in the sun's warmth. With a nod Zero placed his right hand upon her left shoulder. To Elise's right approached Holly whom in turn placed her right hand on Elise's left shoulder. She breathed out, her shoulders giving way.

Purple aura shot up immediately around Holly and Zero, slapping itself onto Elise in no time. With no warning it burst, a rocket of the aura flying high up into the air. Alto in turned stepped back, slightly choking, "Gaherk, wha, what the-"

Silence drifted momentarily as she did not move a muscle period, her mind taking over, "{Alright, focus focus, feel around me.}"

Her eyes quickly shot open, her head turning around slowly. Around her drifted a variety of colors. Blues, silvers, greens, yellows, and many more. In place of Holly stood an outline with a bright blue and white swirl. Outlines of everyone stood around now rather than the people themselves, various colors inside their outlines. Where Alto stood was a patch of green and red with the light blue, where Zero stood was the white blue and a red.

A step was taken to the left as her torso turned following her gaze, now to the left and then to the right, "Whoa. Is this-"

A quick glance up and her eyes went big again, a stream of bright purple with mixes of black, white, yellow, and even more colors zooming around. The surrounding area before her lay bright, sparkles of white drifting all around her. Off towards where the forest stood was an abundance of green and outlines of the trees among other things, including animal outlines with

light blue to them as well. Patches of black drifted beneath the outlines with white sparkles all around.

“This is the Celestial River? Incredible.”

Her head moved up with her right arm, slowly extending out to touch the sparkles. All at once the sparkles flashed, many flying straight into Elise’s body with tremendous force like a wave of water, though rather than wash her away it seemed to enter her.

Chapter L

Waves of white light flew through the air, sparks of white bolting out away from a large cloud as the sun soared high. Another crackle could be heard and then an explosion. The lawn tore itself apart, Elise flipping backwards constantly gaining some distance as a wolf charged at her. With one more flip she slammed down on her feet yet again, her right fist flung forward unleashing a ball of white which had flung forward.

The wolf leaped, evading a direct hit only to then be engulfed by smoke and dust as that blast struck the ground below. It rolled to the side, fur falling off with limbs becoming humanoid, coughing the entire time, “Thas ‘nough!”

“Whoa, heh, sorry Alto. I don’t quite know how to hold back just yet but I’m getting there.”

“You damn intellectuals, the Celestial River is brainist.”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Clearly. I’m amazed that you actually learned to channel Light Energy so quickly,” Alto murmured looking at the potholes present.

“Haha,” she laughed on the approach towards Alto, “Sorry but it’s just as Miss Holly said. Power of the mind and concentration.”

“Pft, women.”

“I’m actually going to take that comment as a compliment because you’re right, we women are definitely more in touch with ourselves.”

“Men can be just as in touch.”

“Maybe. Just not really in my experience.”

“You’re totally just one of those types of people that gets everything right away like in the novels and movies. That’s so dull.”

“Well it’s not like I can easily do it you know,” she spat stepping forward.

A thud followed, to which Elise dropped to both hands and knees shaking, “Guh-”

“Elise!”

“I’m fine,” she huffed, breathing slightly heavy.

“Well it’s as Alto said, you are one of those people who got everything right away,” Holly called from a distance, Zero beside her, “Though you had help and have not had time to truly bond to this new power. Even though your body took in what it could from the River, it still is not used to what it took in. Nor is it used to what it is now using and putting out.”

“Guess my mind isn’t that focused after all.”

“In time, think of the energy like your sword. It’s an extension of yourself. If you can focus your body you can perform much in the same,” Holly concluded.

“Alright,” Elise coughed pushing herself back onto her feet.

Sluggishly, she stood back tall with slight shaking. Holly nodded with a smile forming, “There you go kiddo. Whenever you run low on Light Energy you’ll need to reenter the River for now until you can learn to take the energy without needing to concentrate. For example, here in the sunlight, I can use as much as I want without a moment’s hesitation. Until you learn that, it is very inconvenient to use in combat unless you have comrades to back you; though

with your performance you shouldn't be dreaming of using it for battle. Either way, you'll need a good source of light to recharge."

"Got it," Elise called back.

"And during that time," Alto resumed, "You'll want to fall back on conventional combat like your sword. I don't know the specifics but once you master your powers a bit you can actually brand your katana with your energy and semi-remotely control it."

"Uh, Alto, remember how that weapon melted?"

"You mean this one?" Alto asked, reaching behind his back.

Elise's focus turned to his arm and the his hand, watching carefully as Alto slowly pulled out the mostly melted sword. One eye raised looking upon it, "Huh?"

Alto jolted his arm ahead, tossing the hilt of the melted weapon right at her. With a swift motion it was caught with her left hand, eyes looking down at it, "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"Holly was vague but she wanted you to pool your power into it. She said something would happen because that's no ordinary katana so, give it a shot?"

"What like this?" she replied glancing down, a bright white glowing around her left hand quickly stretching upwards through the weapon, "Whoa."

She stumbled back releasing the katana, though there was no clang from it hitting the ground. It simply hovered now, a white glow completely engulfing what remained of the weapon; though slowly that glow stretched up along where the blade would have been. Up and up and up, expanding and contracting, slowly until it reached the length it once had with the blade. At

once the glow faded and revealed a white stained blade with a golden hilt covered with sky blue and pink striations.

At once it flew back to Elise, slamming into her outstretched left hand. Her eyes began to move as did Alto's, both sets of eyes observing it in awe, "Whoa. Ok so one, radical. Two I definitely felt like something just left me but I don't feel weakened," Elise commented.

"You'll find that Lightonian Weapons are very interesting. I once had a sword electrocute me actually. Not pleasant. Then they had a laser gun of some sort they had me carry but the thing malfunctioned and blew up in my face. I just realized how much my job can suck."

"I'm sure it was well deserved."

"Oh shut up."

"Hahaha, oh that's too good."

"It wasn't for me at the time!"

"Heh, right right. Sorry for laughing."

Elise's head moved back, gazing up upon the sky illuminating brilliantly, "Alto, if I might be so up front. I feel good, better than I have ever before in my life. I feel like I could actually make a difference soon enough and help people."

"Getting cut free from Vulfax will help with that."

"Soon enough I'll help them, even if I am hated. With Azala out of there the clan will face fewer problems."

"One can only hope Elise, one can only hope."

Blue figures stood before Holly, her arms crossed behind her back. Her eyes gleamed, staring straight ahead. The figure, surging white on occasion, gave a nod. Holly's mouth flapped, "So yeah, I can check again buuuuuut so far I have not seen anything. Vulfax and some others are confirmed to be with the enemy but other than that Omocha-"

"It is fine. It's been about a month since we responded to the incident, or a month and a week extra. Your father believes the Hive won't attempt to take the temple yet since we're on such high alert status. We're pooling our efforts around the rest of the Earth at present."

"Will it soon be time to dispatch everyone to other worlds then to look around?"

"Likely, yes. They're hiding somewhere. We believe with you there, they won't strike. Still, keep Dewy and his forces at the ready."

"I understand Omocha. I'll move around right now actually if that's fine."

"Very."

"K. Tell my father I said hi then, will you?"

"Certainly Princess Bell, I will do just that when I see him."

Chapter LI

A brisk wind swept across the land as the moon rose again as it had countless times before. Lights were on as they had also been before many times. Animals moved and bugs danced before Elise as she looked ahead from the patio. The moon glistened in the sky drifting across inch by inch. A slight smile rested upon her face.

Up she looked again, her smile becoming bigger as her eyes closed, a slight blush appearing as her thoughts drifted.

"Nope. It's like I said the last time buddy. I'm not about to turn my back on people in need when evil scumbags like you are after them. I'm done being powerless, I'm done watching people be forced to submit themselves to a higher power that stands against them. And above all it pisses me off greatly seeing things like this. I'm stopping this here and now!"

Her head tilted down with a slight nod to herself, "Things are looking up, aren't they? Heehee."

"Now what has you so happy?" a soft, cold voice called out.

Her head perked up, head and torso slightly twisting round, "What the-?"

Before her stood something in the shadows, only white hair and red stars visible, then the gleam of dark icy blue eyes. Elise shot up quickly and flipped around in full at once, "You!"

Her right arm flew back and then flung forward, a bolt of white light flying.

CRASH

Cobblestone, brick, and other debris flew outward in a puff of smoke, Elise quickly flipping backwards off of the patio. She stood ready, a hand upon the hilt of her sheathed katana and the other raised defensively, yet ready to fly out again, "Tch- did I get him?"

"My you have such improper manners, though I suppose that- like many things, will never change," came the reply.

Visible through the smoke was Shadow, standing with the air circulating around him as he gazed upon Elise now atop the upper balcony.

"I know you- you're that one guy, Shadow!"

"So it would seem my reputation precedes me. Excellent."

"You're the one fixing The Hive's gears, the one kicking them into action, the one that messed up Clan Vulfax and so many others."

"I'm impressed that I've been evaluated to such an extent already. This pleases me greatly, yet also reveals that some info about me has been leaked. Troubling. That will be dealt with in due time though. For now I'm here to tend to you."

"Me?"

"Yes. Azala seems to be deeply concerned with your progress. I can understand his fear. The Bell lineage often produces very strong and powerful individuals, from what I have experienced first hand. I need to sever a certain end before it comes to that."

Elise's raised an eyebrow, looking to Shadow, "You think I'm- nuh uh, no way."

“You decline yet until recent you’ve known nothing about your history. Why do you think you picked up on Energy Control so quickly, particularly Light Energy of all things? Because you’re smart? Well that might be part of it but the simple explanation is that it is probably of your blood.”

“No, that isn’t true. If Holly were my mother then there’s no way she would have left me with Vulfax, no way in Hell!”

“Unless she truly did intend to use you as a spy. Then again, Azala can not sense such things. I personally can not completely tell if you are of Bell lineage, I can not tell if you are a Sillithian, a Drachen, I can’t even tell if you are just a simple human. It makes no difference to me, my orders are to kill the supposed child of Bell. Orders are orders and you have to die.”

At once multiple figures flipped through the air around Elise and slammed down, snarling with fangs showing as they quickly rushed towards her, “Vampires?”

Quickly her katana flew out of its sheath and into hand, swinging through the air slamming against three daggers. Her feet skipped, leaping back and with a flip tossed herself from the ground using her right hand. She landed on both, holding the katana with both hands now slowly stepping back looking at no more than eight Vampires, then up to Shadow who now had his arms crossed.

A smirk crossed him, a figure rising up behind Elise. Her eyes grew big, a sharp pain felt in her neck. Shadow nodded, “Game over- over?”

One of the Vampires had clamped its fangs into Elise’s neck though upon doing so immediately burst into flames. The individual shoved Elise away

and began to scream, blood on the fangs with fire coming out of the throat. She stumbled forward and looked back, shock overtaking her, "What in the world?"

"Ayieeyaaa-" the Vampire screamed out as it fell apart, burnt to nothing but ash. At once Shadow's arms moved to his sides, eyes narrowing with focus on Elise only and no longer the other Vampires.

Elise turned around, viewing the other Vampires. At once her fist flung out, a bolt of Light Energy flying out at them. One quickly was struck and screamed out, fire spreading over him for a short spell. Feet shuffled, all of them immediately tearing off away from Elise.

"My my, that says quite a bit now."

"What does?"

"Well then, perhaps I shouldn't take you for a lack of threat."

She looked to him, rage flooding her face as her feet parted, ready to move.

"Elise!" came a shout.

Shadow glanced to his right as Elise looked to her left, both viewing the approach of Zero and Alto. Both skidded to a halt in front of her, both standing ready facing Shadow.

"Alto, Zero, what are you two doing here? Where are Ryuu and Holly?"

"They went out to investigate something half an hour ago and should be back shortly," Alto replied.

"Couldn't help but notice your predicament so we came to help," Zero commented looking forward.

“Well well, unexpected though adding a little extra trash to a fire doesn’t do much to stop it now does it?”

Two figures shot down at Elise’s group, all heads shifting only to be met with quick jabs. Zero flew forward skidding across the ground, flying back again once Elise slammed into him. Alto flipped to the right and swung out with a single wolf arm, missing as the two assailants flipped away.

Elise shot up quickly and launched herself, right fist flying out ahead of her unloading a shot of Light Energy straight at the two. A third came down right atop the attack and slammed it into the ground, a fourth launching right in front of Elise delivering a solid knee to her gut. Saliva flew from her mouth as she let out a choked cry, stumbling back to be met by a fist to her face.

“Nice shot Scourge. And thanks for the save with that energy blast Winston.”

“Don’t mention it Adam, so long as you and Jazz are fine.”

Elise looked up coughing again as Alto skidded back, looking as Zero helped Elise up. Before them now stood four individuals, all very ragged looking. One individual by name of Adam stood with arms crossed and a smirk, the wind blowing through his short black hair only a couple inches in length. On the scrawny side though tall, he looked ready to blow over despite having packed a huge punch. His brown eyes reflected almost like fire.

Beside him stood a woman with long flowing black hair and brown eyes, petite yet muscular. The one who had slugged Elise resembled a buffer yet shorter version of Adam, scruffier as well. All three wore torn shirts with jackets, along with boots and jeans. The fourth individual who had slammed into Elise’s attack rose up.

He grinned looking at Zero, then with a glance to Elise let his teeth show gritted together. Alto shot forward immediately, howling out as fur began to spread across his body. The one who struck Elise's attack, Winston, looked to Alto who came close. All at once Alto flew off at Jazz and Adam, slamming into both of them who then wrapped their arms around his body as the fur fell. Elise watched in shock as Winston lowered a leg she never saw fly, "Alto!"

"Me thinks you two should worry about yourselves," Scourge chuckled stepping forward.

Behind them Shadow jumped up and dropped down, landing beyond the patio with his cloak flapping in the wind. Slowly he approached from behind them as Scourge moved to them from in front. Zero glanced back and then ahead, then to Elise, "Elise, watch those four. I'm going to take out Mister Gloomy so we can focus on the guys ahead of us."

"What are you going to do?" she muttered back.

"You'll see," Zero chuckled turning around to face the approaching Shadow as Elise stepped ahead a few paces for Scourge.

Shadow stopped in place, grinning. At once Zero clapped his hands together, parting them with his left hand forming a fist while the right palm in turn rested atop.

"Hmm? Hand Seals? Wait, is this-"

At once Zero's hands clasped together as he looked straight at Shadow who now stood somewhat defensively, "Taste the power of Dragon Art Atomic Migraine, bah!"

Flames exploded straight out of Zero's mouth with sparks flying off in all directions, sparks shooting into the ground creating holes several times the

size in diameter. The cloud of flames move forward at a rate faster than any man could run. Closing a gap of twenty meters in only three seconds with sparks flying everywhere, the color turning bright with white visible inside the cloud, it struck the ground. Shadow took a step back, engulfed immediately in the flame cloud. All at once the flames bolted up into the sky as Zero ceased producing them, the cloud swelling as it propelled up.

Zero smirked as he stepped back, the sight of the flames causing Scourge to cease his approach. All looked on in shock, even Elise. Zero nodded, "Dragon Art is something dominate within the Royal Bloodline of the Mephisto. We produce a flame with our energy and add a touch of Cursed Magic to it. This is not like a normal fire which simply kills the body's cells and leaves burns. With that addition the flame in turn spikes the speed of the electrons of atoms and completely disassembles the victim on the molecular level. In a way it's like an exploding laser. Atomic Migraine is actually one of my more powerful forms of Dragon Art as well."

Zero nodded, looking as the flames danced and ripped into the ground as they continued to rocket upwards like an erupting volcano, "No one who gets hit by that is going to survive no matter what they hide behind. Shadow was dead the minute I engulfed him inside that cloud."

Zero turned around, slamming his right fist into his left palm as he looked to Scourge and the rest, "Alright now, which of you would like to visit Hell next?"

"How about you?" a voice responded from behind.

Zero's eyes pulsed wide, his head lurching round as Elise simply gulped, stepping back quickly with her mouth hanging, "No that can't be!" Zero spat.

The flames split in half down the middle at once, revealing Shadow with glittering dust swirling around him. Shadow stepped forward with that whilst the dust vanished, the flames closing up behind, "Not a bad attempt kid, truly. I can tell you practiced that one quite a bit. So was that it, your strongest attempt? Gotta say, didn't really work did it?"

Shadow stopped as the flames behind him died completely, "Truth be told if that were used on anyone but me, it might've actually done some damage. Well, maybe not just me, I can think of only six other who perhaps could have dealt with that."

"If that's how it is then I have no other option," he muttered.

Zero at once gritted his teeth, eyes flashing orange. His arms flew out, a bright orange glow quickly engulfing him. Elise turned round, her back now to Scourge, "Elise you need to get back now. Truth be told, what I'm about to do next I can't even really control!"

"Y-yeah," she replied with a turn to the right, running immediately.

Dust began to flow away from Zero as did small rocks, wind pressure flying away from him at once. The glow sparked out, becoming far thicker engulfing the majority of his body as it rose quickly into the air.

"Grr, Shadow! I dare you to stay right where you are! If you're really that confident then this shouldn't be a problem, eh?" Zero barked out as blood began to flow from his right nostril and right ear, even a small dribble from the right eye.

Shadow narrowed his eyes at once, stopping in place, “Oh? Is that so? How curious, I’m game. Flip that coin and show me what you’re made of boy,” he then said with a smirk while folding both arms.

At once Zero flexed his fingers, twin spheres of orange energy appearing hovering in front of his palms. His glow subtly began to fade, much of it drifting into the spheres which began to swell. As they swelled they also began to contract, electricity flying out as sparks. The ground around began to crumble, cracks spreading and the grass itself turning brown and dying.

Rock hovered up with dust as Zero began to grunt in obvious pain, yelling out once though as he did a spew of blood flew from his mouth. Eyes fierce he looked to Shadow before him who now began to walk forward step by step, “Bring it child, show me what you’ve got.”

“Zero don’t do it!” came the shout of Ryuu.

All heads turned except for Zero’s, all viewing a quickly approaching Holly, Dewy, Ryuu, and many others.

“Too late master, this man is evil and will lead to the downfall of many, he dies now- hyahh!”

With a mighty grunt his arms whirled forward slowly as if wading through ultra-dense water, the twin spheres flying forward. They spun in circles around one another, the distance between them quickly shrinking until they touched. Upon contact they then exploded forward as a mighty beam of orange light like a wave. Shadow’s head turned back as this occurred, his eyes widening, “Wait, the feel of this power it’s-”

The speed immediately tripled as fear flashed upon Shadow’s face, the wave of energy slamming clean into him. Quickly it roared and tore through the

ground as it plunged forward, slamming through shrubs and then through the patio. It plunged clean through the mansion and out the front, slamming into trees where it then blew. The flash was visible immediately, a bright white and yellow with an orange tint to it. A cloud of dust flew up immediately in the shape of a mushroom cloud, shingles sent flying from the mansion off into the backyard where everyone stood.

Zero dropped to his knees and then to his hands, his arms being what held him up at this point, his body retching as another spew of blood flew. Zero at once vomited a mix of stomach contents and more blood, collapsing to the right as the blast's influence reached illuminating the area white and the sky black. Flickers of the flash were seen until it faded.

Scourge stepped several paces back with eyes shaking, as did Jazz and Adam. Elise looked on with eyes seemingly sparkling while Ryuu and Holly looked with shock. Winston alone was the only one to stand appearing unphased.

"Th-that's the power of energy?" Elise murmured to herself stepping back once more.

Ryuu's head lowered, "Dammit Zero, you know what your power does to you. It's powerful yes but completely unstable, a power that takes a toll on your own body. Idiot."

"Whoever that was must have been a major threat Ryuu if he resorted to such an attack," Holly quickly replied.

"Still, it is not something to be trifled with and he just went there. Wait, is, that's just, what? No-"

"What is it?"

Elise breathed out at once, her body shaking as her jaw hung. Standing in the smoke was a humanoid figure with arms folded in front of their face. Zero coughed looking ahead with his right eye closed, breathing heavily. With the blow of the wind the dust and smoke quickly drifted away revealing Shadow standing as if he were never touched, the same sparkles as before drifting around him.

“That’s not possible,” Ryuu murmured.

“Heh, ha ha ha,” Shadow laughed, slowly lowering his arms with eyes glowing slightly red. Once more the sparkles faded and drifted into the wind, “Have to say I wasn’t expecting Chaos Energy out of a kid like you.”

“He knows about Zero’s power? But how?” Ryuu growled.

Shadow’s arms lowered to his sides letting his face now be visible with not more than a bit of dirt on it, “I haven’t come up against that power since I fought Skyheart. Really it is an impressive power. Nearly ten times as destructive as the blast of a keg of powder. Fearsome indeed; though I see the tole is as great on you as it was him, heh.”

Shadow stepped forward again as the wind settled, behind him a hole visible straight through the mansion and off into the forest out front. Holly observed him as he moved, her face puzzled as she observed. Shadow glanced off viewing her for a short bit, then ahead, “I would love to test out whatever power you people have as a whole yet but I am out of time.”

Elise turned around quickly hearing a yell, “Alto!”

Alto was gone, as were Adam and Jazz. Winston and Scourge bolted into the forest at speeds above thirty kilometers per hour, “No Alto! Bring him back!”

“We’ll meet again,” Shadow replied, his hands clapping together at once.

Upon doing so he shattered, dust flying away as sparkling shards of glass fell where he stood. Holly and Ryuu took off quickly towards Elise as Dewy and the rest went off towards the forest.

“Alto!” Elise shouted out, stepping forward though only for a moment, dropping to the ground quickly as her own breath left her.

“Damn, Zero’s attack must have struck her body by accident. Get her to the medical room, immediately!” Ryuu shouted as two men approached.

Chapter LII

“We need to go after them and get Alto back!” Elise shouted, her voice echoing off plaster walls. Gathered around the round table were several individuals, all sitting normally though with a variety of expressions.

“That would be foolish young mistress. Young Zero unleashed a quite powerful attack that didn’t even phase that Shadow fellow. Meanwhile if the reports indicate what we believe, those four who attacked with him are not ordinary,” Dewy replied.

“Dewy is right Elise, The Hunters are a pack of some of the most powerful supernatural individuals born of this world. Winston in particular has a ranked eight level of regeneration and a strength rating of at least nine. The mortals have been chasing after him for generations to no avail. Look, Alto was our friend but we can’t just stumble into this blindly,” a young man spoke in response.

“Jimmy you need to shut up!”

“Callie I’m just being real for a minute.”

“I hate when you think logically because sometimes it isn’t all about logic like you think,” Sora growled.

“Well Sora, Callie, I apologize but that’s the way I am.”

Elise looked at the three, then to Anna and Chelsea, then to Holly and Dewy. Holly’s own eyes had been shifting around the table the entire time, evident that she had been listening.

“Listen, that Shadow guy isn’t ordinary,” Ryuu replied, “I can’t remember the last time someone withstood both Zero’s Atomic Migraine which

is literally a vortex that rips apart anything in it on the molecular level, and then his Chaos Energy. We can't go after an enemy we know nothing about. All we know from our intel is that he's the reason why The Hive has returned as strongly and as fast as they have, and then that he is apparently able to walk through attacks that should have killed him."

"Shadow is a threat, yes though as with everything there is a weakness. If he has some special ability to negate damage, it is possible that we can find a way to get through his defense. It is not the first time I've seen magic like his."

"Holly, with all do respect, you can't just go after them to save one person with what's coming," Dewy spoke.

"And it is possible that if we can track them we can find more of their kind and plan an ambush. They took Alto to no doubt extract information, if not to bait us into an ambush. At any rate, you know just as well as I do what that can mean Dewy."

"I, er, well um, yeah I guess but what if they're planning on that?" Dewy replied.

"Then we plan around their plan and plan for the possibility of them planning for our plan around there plan that's around our plan. In short, we expect both the expected and the unexpected and walk in ready for anything. Besides Dewy, remember who it is that you're talking to. Among their kind there were perhaps only three that posed a threat to my capability. One of them is stuck on Sillith and the other I doubt would move a muscle unless forced. As for the third, well I doubt he's regained the power he lost while imprisoned. If we go now we'll have a shot Dewy."

"What about the temple?"

“Only one with Light Energy can find its location.”

“What if they have a person with Light Energy?”

“Stark was the only one on their side with Light Energy, Dharkanians are too prideful with a very dark bloodline. While possible, I just don’t see it being a risk at this point. Should anything happen I know your team can handle it,” Holly concluded, turning her attention to another on the right of the room, “Callie.”

“Yes?”

“Elise is going to become a part of Domino Squadron to balance for Alto’s absence.”

“Understood.”

“Tony is still out with Michelle and Dryden right? Dewy, tell them to follow after us when they return.”

“Understood.”

“And what of you and your apprentice Ryuu?”

“We need to return to our Empire; though we do wish you luck.”

“Then that settles it. Everyone ready yourselves, soon we shall head on into the forest after Alto!”

Chapter LIII

Birds on branches flapped their wings, taking straight off into the air as the sun began to set once again. The crackle of a snapping twig, movement on the forest floor. Brush moved ever so slightly as several walked through it.

Holly moved at the head in her uniform with a sheathed sword on her back, the type a knight of old would wield. Behind in succession was Sora, then Elise and Callie, then Jimmy, with Anna and Chelsea taking up the rear. All continuously glanced around on guard, all except for Jimmy who simply sniffed the air as they moved. Elise tilted her head and glanced to the rear once before turning back ahead, a hand rested upon the hilt of her own sword.

“So Elise,” Sora began.

“Yeah?”

“What was it like working in Vulfax? I’ve heard only rumors but from what I have heard they’re a bit ruthless right?”

“Mmm, more than you know and more than I’d like to admit. Then again what do you expect considering what the man in charge is doing, him and his shady dealings.”

“Power corrupts. That’s all there is to that,” Callie replied.

“Power most certainly can though it is not the only factor. Influence from a third party can be the biggest culprit in many instances. Don’t forget, not all people are born evil,” Holly spoke out, “I’ve seen many empires rise and fall in my time on Earth. Many ruled the way they did because of culture, many because of events that happened to them, though some I suppose really are lost when you think about it.”

“So what do you know of Azala on that note?”

“Well Elise, he’s at least several hundred years of age. For a spell he was a Pirate and eventually commanded a small fleet of ships until that era ended, then formed the Vulfax Clan from the remainder. Other than that there isn’t much to tell. He grew up in the mountains of China and moved on.”

“And what about Dustin?”

“That is a different story. As I recall Dustin was born during the era of the Roman Empire and was actually a pretty high ranking individual when he discovered his power. Supposedly he made illegal dealings to increase his own power up until the fall. From there he went on to work as a mercenary for a few hundred years, then around the time the Crusades began he fled into who knows where. At some point he came to North America and formed Stark Pack from scattered individuals.”

“I had no idea Zaherians could live that long,” Callie murmured.

“Typically they don’t. Dustin likely has something special in his genetics though as to what I most certainly am unsure.”

“Maybe Shadow made contact with him long ago?” Elise questioned.

“Possibly I suppose. At any rate he’s likely the one who introduced Azala to Shadow.”

“So basically he’s using Azala to further his own agenda, just as Shadow is in turn using Dustin.”

“Likely though as of right now I am still very uncertain as to the extent of Dustin’s partnership with The Hive, especially with how he is still alive.”

“I see.”

Jimmy’s head immediately shot up with a grunt, “Holly, they’re here!”

Everyone shot to life at once, all looking around quickly taking combative stances. Laughter could be heard up ahead at once, all eyes shifting as the falling sunlight pierced through the trees illuminating up ahead at last. Two individuals stood against trees, one with one foot up against it and the other with crossed arms. Visible off to the side were three individuals though two were on the ground with the third standing over them.

Elise's heart skipped a beat at once as she saw who was tied up, "David and Milly of Stark Pack?"

"Heh heh heh heh heh, ha ha ha ha ha!" came a deep laughter from up above. All eyes shifted up, their sights resting upon a lone figure, Winston, "Ah at last, I was wondering when you were going to get here."

Chapter LIV

The sun now set off on the horizon, the moon overhead as darkness swept forward. Dry sands blew whilst stars came into view not but moments later, the wind dry and gentle. Scorpions moved as snakes slithered to their dens, few creatures stirring at this present point, that is all except for a few humanoids. Two were on the move dressed in black coats dotted with red stars. Purple hair blew from the one, long and flowing while beside her simple white fluff danced with strands flailing.

Their feet sunk beneath the sands as they moved, the wind failing to bother them. Both moved in near unison, the woman's arms moving back and forth while the man's failed to move in the slightest. Over a dune they climbed, before them flat rock with strands of boulders littered around.

"Shadow you're late," came a call.

Seven figures dotted the rocks, all dressed similarly. Dustin stood among them with crossed arms, his eyes glowing as the last bit of sunlight vanishes over the horizon. The two stopped walking, both looking to Dustin. Shadow nodded, "Yes well, I had to help take care of Holly. My subordinates are already tending to that problem though."

"And what of the Ripper's Gate lead by Dewy?"

"Oh, you know."

Blood lay scattered around an open field, bodies lay scattered. Heads cut off, arms torn apart, torsos blown open. Dozens of bodies lay scattered around a single massive crater, around which were many more craters. Laying

in the middle of the biggest one was Dewy, his eyes curled back into his head.

Shadow looked up from the ground to Dustin, giving a nod, "They won't be bothering us anytime soon."

"Then let's get on with it. Leon has been waiting and I'd hate to continue to make him wait," came a response straight from Xander.

"Right."

A metallic liquid echo could be heard, the sound of many bugs scattering all at the same time as at once a form appeared, "I do hate to be kept waiting, how wise of you to remember."

"Now that I've seen to everything we can begin on the barrier."

"Pft, and how are you so certain of this damn barrier? I don't see a damn thing and I walked all around where you said it would be."

"Heh heh. For one, Xander, those of you with only Darkness in your blood will never be able to sense it, let alone see it. And the other reason is that this barrier uses the properties of light to make you think you're moving inside when in reality you may only get a few feet. Anyone from the outside will see you proceed as will anyone inside but in reality the barrier is making you walk in circles. It's powerful as it works on all physical entities. That's why we're gathering to tend to it."

"And you're positive that the map is inside?"

"Why would they leave Holly nearby with an elite unit if it weren't true?"

"And we're supposed to just trust you? A man who naturally can use Light Energy? I don't much care for that idea. An enemy is always an enemy."

“Oh? I wonder about that. Perhaps I was truly born with it, perhaps I simply stole it, perhaps I can mimic it. My secrets will not be unlocked so easily Xander so you should simply choose to ignore it. All that need be said is that I seek the destruction of the Lightonians.”

Xander’s head quickly turned to Shadow and tilted to the left, “You want to kill all of the Lightonians? That’s never been our goal to my understanding, eh, Leon?”

“Hmph. Shadow is a curious breed with many unique talents. He is to be respected due to his power yet feared by allies alike. At any rate we should get on with this before the Tribe suspects anything. Before I forget though, you did give Winston that experimental drug of yours right Shadow?”

“I did.”

“Good. Then that will get rid of Holly for us. Now, gather!”

At once the same echoing liquid metal sound could be heard with the scattering of bugs from all around, a wave of nineteen projections appearing. A variety of colors, a variety of shapes, a variety of noises. Leon’s projection turned round facing the variety of newcomers, his eyes shifting around.

“Now then, I’m going to go over it once and only once.”

“What, not going to let Shadow do it for you this time?” Dustin chuckled.

Leon slowly turned his head, slowly allowing his eyes to glance back, “Shadow has been good at getting us this far as that is what he was tasked with doing. Leadership of this operation still falls to me, do not forget that Dustin.”

“Right right,” Dustin replied glancing away.

“Now then, I’m going to go over this once and only once so pay attention. We are up against a Level Five Tetra Seal Barrier. Breaking it alone could take months. With all of us working together on this though this will most likely take three days to a week.”

“A whole week? How in the name of Lucifer is something that strong? Can’t we just blow it up?”

“Tetra Seals are special seals that reflect the opposite of Lightonian Philosophy. They suck out the life of everything within their range in addition to natural light to sustain themselves, and the longer they stand the harder they are to destroy. As you know they use light to lead people astray so that they never truly interact with the contents within, applying to even our direction of attacks no matter how hard we try. In addition, the barrier is still a barrier so you’d need to destroy it regardless.”

“Right so how are we going to destroy the damn thing if attacks are worthless?” Xander barked.

“We’ll be using the Tataran Sigmacus Ultraminicus Curse. It is a Curse that binds the target and strips it of its life. It is one of the few ways to destroy a barrier of this scale.”

“The downside though is that the Curse is slow under normal circumstances, let alone on something the size of a large city. Even with as many of us as there are, such a task will take significant time. During that time we must not falter for the Curse will break if even one of us fails. As a result of that I’ve ordered Shadow to tend to any foreseeable circumstance as far as Holly is concerned, while leaving the rest to our assets by way of Dustin. In

any event though, I want to station Basilix at the appropriate placements as discussed.”

“I am aware milord,” came a slithering response.

“Your abilities are best suited for long range patrolling though in the event of anything else going wrong, I want Revan to stand as a backup. Your abilities will suit us well for this task.”

“I know they will. Dustin, what of your two lackeys?”

“You mean Toby and Szayel? Yeah they’ll have us covered. It’s nothing to worry about Revan.”

“Hmph, a blind child and an old goofy are the ones we’re letting be our last line of defense. How stupid.”

“Hold your tongue Xander. Szayel is a powerful warlock all in his own right and Toby Tazaki isn’t far behind. He has enough potential to one day match even the strongest of you I’d say.”

“Whatever, can we get on with this?”

“That’s the plan,” Leon murmured, “Now let’s get to it.”

“Right,” Cortez murmured.

All turned to face away from Shadow, all flashing and disappearing for a brief instance only to reappear. Now spread out they in turn looked around and nodded. Their arms slowly moved outwards and rested before them, their hands outstretched and fully open glowing with darkness.

“Now begin the Tataran Sigmatic Ultraminicus Curse,” Leon commanded, symbols appearing all around the feet of those gathered quickly stretching outwards. Clouds of dark mist moved from the hands of the many,

the Astral Projections included, and began to hover around. At once from all shot black lightning with a red tint.

The lightning crashed forward many meters in the blink of an eye and immediately hit a wall of nothingness. Whiteness began to appear as the darkness stretched and spanned outwards from its impact points. Black hands weaved and stretched out from the impact points of the lightning, a low pitched moaning heard followed by a roar unlike any other. Puffs of white dust quickly began to erode as the hands stretched and in turn began to reveal a wall of whiteness.

“Seals of the darkness in our hearts form, the cracks of our souls spewing, the crimson crest of destruction, the crawling angel of corruption, revolt, rejoice as your own life slips. Begone, be laid to waste, lost in the void, given no rejoice, feel your own powerlessness, and cry your heart out!”

At once the darkness leaving the many exploded in size, the color turning blood red with a black aura surrounding it. While their cloud remained the same and the lightning changed, the hands simply continued with ruins dancing around them. Sparks flew from the hands the color of blood as bit by bit the white of the barrier turned dark into a red of its own.

“From here on out, The Hive shall rule this world, and then the whole universe will be ours!” Leon shouted out.

Chapter LV

“Welcome to the neighborhood kiddies, ready to die?”

Elise moved her left arm around, hand resting on the butt of the hilt of her sword. Holly stood at the head of the group as the rest took stance. Ahead David and Milly were tossed further with single kicks from those with them. Above in the trees remained Winston with his teeth showing, sharpened to points now just like Dustin’s.

“So which of you will I be fighting first, hmm? Perhaps the one in those Tribe duds? Oh or maybe I should sink my teeth into the little lady with a sword. Hmm, or how about you in the back? Well it doesn’t matter, Shadow promised us a feast and so a feast we shall have.”

“Where’s Alto?” Elise snapped.

“Not at all the kind of comment I was expecting. Come on I mean like, we’re here menacingly ready to skin you alive and you’re worried about a rat who might already be dead? Haha. Women.”

“Really? You have to go there and try using my gender as an insult? I wonder how that makes your female partner feel Adam,” Elise muttered back, audible enough to be heard.

“Yeah she’s right doofus, shut your crapper up.”

“Aye aye Jazz I’m sorry.”

“Hahahahaha, this girl has spunk. No wonder Shadow and Toby were interested in her,” Winston laughed.

“Toby? Oh great another one?”

“Should really have brought Vein along to have a little fun but whatever, this works,” Winston concluded.

Gravel flew at once from the group, all heads perking up. Elise looked ahead with widening eyes, Winston’s laughter fading as a stream of white light could be seen. All at once a crash could be heard and Winston could be seen flipping backwards. With a flip he landed on another branch as Holly could be seen landing on the branch Winston had been on.

“Gah, witch got my face. Guess that’s the Lightonian Light Dash that Shadow warned us of.”

“Light Dash?” Elise murmured.

“It’s a super high speed foot technique where the user creates a stream of light at their feet and somehow they’re able to move from one end to the other faster than anything can see. It has limited range but when used close to a target when their guard is down it is highly effective. Only Skilled Lightonians are capable of this technique in particular rather than all of them,” Callie replied.

“It’s not so impressive when compared to the Dharkanian Shadow Flash but I will give you credit,” Winston chuckled rising, “Getting surprised by that will scare the piss outa ya.”

“Quite. So you should know who I am and what you’re up against Winston. I’ll give you a chance to explain yourselves, otherwise I’ll be demanding answers as I dissect your bodies bit by bit.”

“Ooo, scary, I wonder how you’ll follow up with no power?”

“Wha-”

All at once the branch Holly stood upon was engulfed in flames and smoke, a loud blast ringing out. Black flames roared out for a split second as Holly bolted out with a cough, “Damn that was- what?” Winston smirked as Scourge shot up and dove at Holly, his foot swinging down crashing right into her head.

She yelped and crashed down, landing hard on the ground while Scourge back flipped off onto a branch. Slowly Holly pushed herself up, coughing once more. At once she looked up to Winston, “Guh, I can’t feel the Celestial River. What did you do to me?”

“Heh heh, a special weapon designed by Shadow to neutralize your ability to tap into the Celestial River. Marvelous isn’t it? It’s a gas that prevents your mind from entering the Astral Plane to collect Light Energy, even if you’re standing right in direct sunlight. And with that Holly Bell, you’re ours!”

All four launched forward immediately at Holly, claws visible from Scourge and Winston while knives were seen in the hands of Adam and Jazz. Scourge’s mouth hung open with drool flying, Jazz and Adam both smirking, Winston with a smile. Quickly they approached, only a few meters away.

KABAM

At once an explosion of light slammed into the group, blowing them off with yelps. Winston yelled, Jazz shrieked, Adam grunted, and Scourge yowled. Winston alone slammed into a tree, coughing out a small spell of blood as the others skidded beside him. “What the hell was that?” Scourge barked out.

Elise stood beside Holly, her right arm extended and her hand balled into a fist. A slight white glow danced around that fist though quickly faded away as Elise’s fierce expression could then be read. Her eyes narrowed, her

lips curled, scowling straight on at those who stood before her. Winston slowly stumbled up with a low growl as he examined Elise.

Another step was taken forward passed Holly, “You guys are done”

“Heh, this girl thinks she has spunk. I like that in a woman. What say you guy- eh?” Scourge began, falling silent to the sight of Winston raising a hand up.

Scourge quickly backed away and fell silent while Winston crept forward.

“A high velocity thrust of energy, somewhat like a bullet. You’ve come far youngling in such a short amount of time,” Winston called out.

“And how would you know how long it has been, huh?”

“Because of our employer, Shadow.”

“That guy again?”

“For whatever reason he seems to have become quite fascinated in your ability, and no I’m not talking your powers.”

“Elaborate!” Elise spat as Holly slowly stood looking behind to the rest of her team.

Winston’s team stepped up behind him leaving David and Milly unattended, at which point Elise continued, “What is Shadow paying you? Surely we can talk this over. Evil people never keep their word so what makes you think Shadow will?”

“This kid is annoying the heck out of me with these assumptions,” Adam hissed.

“What is Shadow after then if we’re wrong?” Holly asked aloud.

“My you people know nothing,” Winston laughed stepping forward,
“He does not care of the mission, this is all simply a game to him. I find myself fortunate to have come into the service of such a noble warrior.”

“Noble?”

“In time you might come to find out, though know that money and power alone will not dissuade us. Our mission is too important. And with that in mind I think we should take you now and kill the rest. If we deliver you wrapped up like a present it might favor the cause. Ready gang?”

“Everyone get ready!” Sora yelled out.

Chapter LVI

Scourge was the first to launch himself with claws extended, heading straight at Elise with a laugh. Water flew and crashed straight into the side of Scourge, a force strong enough to send him spiraling away. Across the ground he skid, looking ahead with a growl. Callie stepped forward with a scowl of her own with words flying, “Lesson one, never mess with my team. Lesson two-”

Scourge flew up with a yowl many meters into the air, his back crashing against a branch as water slammed into his gut propelling him. Callie continued, “Never underestimate our kind!”

Lightning flew from the tops of Callie’s fingers and crashed into the water in front of her, the surge of electricity quickly hitting Scourge through the water.

A scream of pain left Scourge immediately to which point Adam and Jazz charged in with sharp eyes glowing. Sora quickly moved ahead with dust moving around him tight. At once the dust flew forward and exploded in volume unleashing a wave of sand that quickly closed in on the two. Both dug their feet down and yelled as the sand swept into them like an ocean wave.

Atop the sand Anna and Chelsea ran, mud surrounding Anna as the nearby trees began to groan. Vines shot down and flew alongside Chelsea while still attached to the trees, diving down into the sand as the mud took on humanoid shapes and ran at the swept away enemy. Vines broke from the sand and quickly wrapped around both Adam and Jazz, both gagging as the vines slapped around their throats.

Winston chuckled looking ahead, “You intend to run me down? Child are you mad?”

Elise had begun charging straight at Winston with her sword unsheathed, right arm shooting forward unleashing another bullet of Light Energy. Winston’s right fist flew forward and slammed clear into the attack. White light flew everywhere with a burst from the impact, a cloud of smoke quick to appear which Winston shot through. His feet stopped as did his laugh.

Before him stood only Holly without a sign of Elise, Holly simply staring back at him. Winston looked to her took sight to the air to the air. A yell escaped him to the sound of ripping fabric and liquid flying. Forward he stumbled with a crash to his knees, blood oozing from a large cut all the way down his back as behind him landed Elise with a sword bloodied at the edge. With a swift glance back she smirked, eyes locking with those of Winston.

“Energy, like magic, is not to be underestimated, which you and your friends clearly have done Winston,” Holly called out.

“Ooof, well you might be onto something there but we aren’t called the best of the best for no reason,” Winston chuckled.

Elise blinked, her eyes opening wide. Before her stood a humanoid figure completely devoid of color. Murmurs of surprise could be heard from the others. All of them had become pure black, all slowly melting away. On the horizon to the North stood four individuals in various stances, all casually chuckling.

“Dark Style Clone Replacements,” Holly murmured.

“We have experience with hunting your kind Miss Bell. Take my word for it that we’ve studied a lot,” Winston called back.

“You filthy creatures thinking yourselves superior, we’ve found trinkets to let us mirror your power to let us fight you as equals. Now, we’re going to kick your faces in,” Adam laughed “We don’t even need Captain Vein for this one.”

“So what will you show us next?” Scourge questioned aloud.

“I’ll show you death,” came a comment from the distance.

All eyes shifted upwards quickly above the heads of the four, a single man visible launching down with a broadsword the size of a man, shaped like a cleaver, in hand. The ground exploded upon the impact, rock sent flying. Winston and his cohorts had quickly launched left and right prior to impact. The man stepped down with only one hand on the sword, his head darting left and then right where Winston had gone.

“Kurayami?” Winston yelled out shocked.

The man’s right arm quickly heaved up, the sword rising out of the ground at which point he took charge with it resting on his back. The man jumped through the air and swung wide with aim set on Winston. Again Winston jumped with Scourge close behind him, the sword slamming clean through the trunk of a tree as the two landed on the branches. Down it began to fall, the two jumping once again to a tree behind them without taking their eyes off of their attacker.

“{There!}” Elise thought to herself, observing Winston.

At once Elise flung her right arm out and unloaded another blast of Light Energy, aimed directly at Winston’s feet. At that point she flung her left forward with the katana in hand yet, firing off another round a bit lower. Winston blinked at the first shot struck the branch, breaking it beneath his feet.

Ahead he looked, face in shock, “Oh no!” he yelled as the second shot slammed into his torso and exploded.

White light flew everywhere as the bullet burst, Scourge flipping back looking at the blast in shock, “Winston!”

Winston shot backwards with his left hand over his right shoulder, his shirt torn more than it had been with a bit of blood flowing, “I blocked it with my arm, I’m fine! Just focus on the rats in front of us.”

“Winston!” Scourge shouted again with his voice crackling.

Elise flew at Winston with her sword in hand, water propelling her from her feet like rocket shoes. Behind her Callie held her right arm out with her hand flexed, eyes shut. Winston looked as Elise flew by, the blade ripping through his side as another blast went off, both he and her grunting. Winston flew back, crashing into the trunk of a tree with a large gash in his right side spraying blood like a cut fire hose. Not far off Elise flipped away with some minor cuts and tears to her clothes, landing atop a branch looking ahead now to Winston.

“Dammit, I hadn’t planned for Kurayami’s interference. Scourge, Adam, Jazz, regroup!”

“Right!” they all shouted, quickly leaping up through the air and across the branches, moving to a waiting Winston, “We’ve done our part. Now we retreat.”

Dark mist quickly erupted from their sleeves, wrapping around each other them like a vortex. Seconds after, the vortexes exploded, all of them now gone.

Chapter LVII

The moon stretched, full and beautiful. Insects could be seen fluttering as the many standing with Holly's team gathered together. Elise approached David and Milly, both of which were still tied up. Elise stopped in front and looked down at the both of them. Behind Holly approached Kurayami with a woman closing, "Kurayami the Bounty Hunter, right?"

"Yes. And you are the legendary Light Goddess uh, Holly Bell right?"

"I am, or at least I was. I can't feel my power right now after whatever they did to me."

"It's a Nitrusfelus Drug by the smell of it," came the response of the woman, "The Hive have been beta testing it on test subjects from The Tribe. If I had to guess, the drug they used on you was an imperfect concoction so it won't last for long."

"Alice, it's been quite a long time."

"Forty years as I recall."

"I trust that you being here now means that your cover was blown?"

"Yes. Leon was aware of there being a turncoat for quite sometime. He put a man named Shadow on the job to find the turncoat. I left just before he found me out."

"That guy again, what do you know of him?"

"Not much. I am not aware of his past and what Leon knows he wasn't saying. In fact that drug was designed by Shadow."

"And you're certain it will wear off?"

“Definitely. I overheard Shadow talking about it. The dosage used on you is experimental to see how long someone of your power will be victim to the drug. The maximum dosage wouldn’t have made for a good trial run, since it is hard to produce and they don’t want to waste too much of it on only one individual.”

“This is why we welcome you as one of us Alice.”

“Thank you Lady Bell.”

“We should contact General Ezdorth while we have the chance and appraise him of the situation,” Sora commented.

Elise looked over David and Milly, her eyes scanning many gashes and puncture wounds. Blood dripped from David’s nose, his right ear torn, claw marks dancing across the right side of his face. Milly laid on her back breathing hoarsely, bite marks in her side and in her arms. Elise stepped right examining more and more wounds. David’s head slowly moved on with his left eye only half open, the other closed.

“{Those wounds could be fatal if left untreated, Milly’s especially.}”

Elise tilted her head, “What have you gotten yourself into David?”

“Ack, Dustin turned on us for failing to kill you. He, Leon, and Shadow ordered Vein’s crew to kill us-” he said, cutting off as a cough escaped him at once, “Guh, we ran until they caught us.”

“Lie still. Callie, my bag please.”

Callie approached holding up a backpack, handing it off to Elise, “Here you are but why?”

Elise moved her hand inside the bag and quickly pulled out a small paper bag, “I’m going to apply some herb wraps to treat their wounds. If left untreated Milly will pass in a matter of minutes, and David perhaps in a few hours.”

“Ba-but after everything?” David stuttered.

“We were both played David. Dustin played you just as Azala played me.”

“Th-thank you, truly.”

“I’m going to treat her first. This is going to sting now so hold tight Milly.”

Milly let out a bloody howl as a patch of green mush was applied to her side, her hands balled into fists and her body squirming. David looked to Elise and then to Milly, then to Holly as she approached.

“This Vein fellow sounds like a top notch problem even if those guys weren’t much off guard,” Callie murmured.

“David, what exactly are they plotting?”

“They, they found your temple in the desert.”

“What?”

“You have a turncoat of your own working with them-”

“Was it Stark Bell?”

Elise looked quickly to Holly and then to David, “{A family member?}”

“No. Shadow can see it, he saw it. And it was Toby, Toby knew of it. Toby pointed Shadow in the direction the Hive needed.”

“Those guys again. Ugh, just what is Shadow?”

“They’re already destroying the barrier protecting it. They began as soon as you went after Winston.”

“What? Alright but no need to worry. It’d take a powerful curse to break it, maybe a month at most. A Level Five Tetra Seal is not easily broken.”

“They claim to have a way. I don’t know much. Leon ordered Stark Pack and a lot of others to watch out for them. An army awaits if you intend to stop them.”

“We have to get back right away. Elise, finish immediate treatment. Alice, tell Wesley we need reinforcements as soon as possible. Kurayami, we need all the help we can get so we’ll happily pay you once this is all done. Sora, your sand, use it to transport Elise and those two. Let’s move people.”

Kurayami nodded as Sora quickly took off towards Elise and the rest, Holly turning towards the direction they had come from, “Dewy was right, damn it all. With Vulfax at the helm, man I can’t even imagine what will happen.”

“So what do we do about that Undead army they’ll have protecting themselves?”

“If Azala and Dustin are at the head that means Vulfax and Stark Pack are leading. We’ll have to deal with them immediately. I’ll tell Wes to order an air raid prior to our arrival. We’ll evacuate who we can and bomb whatever we possibly can. This is a matter of World Security. Everyone, we’re camping out here until morning, then we’re heading back to deal with our uninvited temple invaders.”

Elise glanced to Holly and then down, “{Vulfax huh? That, Miss Holly, is my burden to bare though, not yours. I know what I have to do.}”

Clouds danced before the moonlight, red clouds firing off black lightning, a purple tint around the glow of the moon. Beneath its vast glow The Hive stood, their hands now clapped together with darkness surging around launching forward. Before them the vast barrier of The Tribe was now a third of the way revealed, the dome cracking considerably now as the Curse spread over it.

“Ugh, it’s taken us this long just to destroy barely a third of the damn thing. My shoulders are getting stiff,” came the growl of Basilisx.

“Quit being such a baby,” came a low rumble from a young girl.

“Coming from you Chino that’s hilarious.”

“What’s tha-”

“That’s enough the lot of you, focus on the Curse. It won’t take long for Holly to figure out she’s been tricked. We need to be ready for this right?” a man growled.

“Oh shut it Saru. Aye, Leon, how much longer?” another questioned.

“Surprisingly this has gone far faster than anticipated. I’d give it another twelve at the most, eight minimum.”

A cackle came from another of the projections, “And how exactly is the trial with Holly and her friends going? They going all the way this time?”

“Hard to say,” Shadow muttered looking over to the individual.

“It doesn’t really matter, hmm. We’ll deal with Holly in due time, heh heh. For now, we simply need to focus on the destruction of this pathetic barrier. Once that’s out of the way, only victory will await us.”

“So you say Idontis, so you say,” Xander muttered, looking up at the sky.