

London Arrival

Bright blue skies with dots of silvery wisp here and there, high high above the ground with an abyss of white and blue down below. A deafening roar, higher pitch, blaring from the outside but not for those within. Through the skies a business jet flew forth like a ship sailing the open ocean, small but not insignificant. Three engines echoed on the outside, wings tipped and blinking, many a window giving access to the waving seas of sky, providing view inside just as well.

Within the cabin stood many seats, all cushioned and well furnished. Large reclining chairs, couches of soft pillowy fluff, glimmering smooth tables. Laptops and monitors rested upon the tables and against the walls, data pads flashing with various text and images. Food and drink sat left and right before several of those present, some continuing to eat as flight attendants moved around the cabin.

Elise sat to the left beside a window, elbow rested upon the ledge with the back of her hand beneath her chin. Her eyes glanced outward, a pulled expression with no smile or joy even in her cold eyes. To the direct rear faced in the opposite direction sat Holly with three data pads in hand. A laptop sat upon a table just before her, eyes scanning rigorously from screen to screen.

Members of Domino Squadron swallowed much of the rest of the cabin, some laying about on the couches, some hung back in the chairs. Tony himself sat with a laptop to his lap, typing away. Near him laid Anna, head laying upon Chelsea's lap. Dryden also lounged, laying down with a mild snore, one leg up and the other to the floor. Beyond those working with information, all remained lax and casual.

Caldori moved from the rear of the cabin with a roll of white bandage cloth in hand, passing a few of her own squadmates before stopping beside Elise. Casually she leaned over, unwinding some of the cloth, "This is the point where you let me-"

"Huh? Oh, right," Elise replied moving herself up.

Caldori sat to the chair beside Elise, while the latter rolled her right sleeve and right pants leg up. Along both arm and leg, bandage was already present with a tinge of red to it. Without wasting a beat, Caldori set to work, unwrapping the old while preparing the new.

“So about Frostosis then,” Elise called out.

Holly’s head perked up a touch behind, a slight grin forming on her face as she looked back, “Mmm? Well, where to begin. Frostosis is the home world of the Frost Clan, one of our longest standing allies since the end of the war. We actually chose them to harbor one of the Shards, thinking it would be safe with them as guardians. Of course we added our own security measures, just to be safe.”

“You did mention temples, and if they’re like that one then they’re fully equipped. But you guys still seem concerned.”

“I’m not too familiar with everything myself Lady Bell,” Chelsea spoke, now looking to the hub of the conversation, “You’ve kept the war hush hush since it doesn’t concern us directly, and now you’re freaked by the developments.”

Holly’s eyes dipped down, as did her expression for a brief instance, “The Frostosis Civil War... is a war that has been ongoing for four and a half years by this point. It really all began with the death of the last king. His son had died years prior, so his young daughter was named Queen. Of course some others would help govern until she was of age; but some individuals decided it was time for a change.”

“What sort of change?”

“Different regions had already begun to separate their cultures within the last few centuries, and about seven years ago, they broke off for independence. Might’ve been more than a hundred governments at first but twenty-three were dominant. And, well in time, some of those dominant ones wanted to expand their power and beliefs. It realistically started with the North and the Maltans. Right now, there are only three powers left in the conflict. The North, the South, and the Maltans, who are currently in trouble themselves.”

“And it was the North that allied with the Hive right?” Caldori questioned.

“Mhmm, exactly. The Northern Leader wanted more and more power, to expand the Frost Clan as a whole across the Universe to make themselves into a solid empire. The Hive has always been known for promising power. We’ve always been close with the Royal Family and the South, so it’s no surprise that the Hive wanted in. Even when divided, the Frost Clan is immensely powerful.”

“So why hasn’t the Tribe stepped in if you’re such good allies?” Elise growled, glancing back with a bit of fire in her eyes.

Holly returned a glance with a slight turn of her head, emotionless though in doing so, “It is a civil matter, or at least it was. So long as the Frost Clan did not turn on us, who was in power did not matter. Now with the North joined to the Hive, who are also controlling the island that our temple is on, we have to act.”

“You guys don’t even care then.”

“Hey,” Tony barked, “Don’t get ahead of yourself Elise. There’s a lot you’ll need to learn.”

“And learn she shall,” Holly replied, “The top brass want to evaluate Project Stingray. That includes observing Elise and the rest. Once we arrive, I’ll be attending a meeting. The Project and the war will be some of our main talking points.”

“What about Project-”

“No, Sora, don’t go there.”

“Sorry.”

“At any rate, we should be near London shortly. In time you will learn all you need to Elise. How to go to other worlds, what Magic is, the history of our conflicts and allies, and so on. But for now, just relax until we land.”

“Alright, I guess,” Elise mumbled back, glancing back out the window beside her.

“All will be good Elise, have faith.”

“I lost my faith back in the Yukon,” she once more mumbled, “I guess time will tell.”

Down the jet had begun to descend through the open blue and white marshmallow dots of the sky. The sun, now higher by a margin of nearly two hours difference, was high into the sky aglow behind the descending jet. Swiftly it dropped in altitude, gliding in with engines on the downlow with so little a hum. Like a swooping eagle, it went in elegantly towards a flowing river.

Seconds to minutes passed as it went lower and lower until finally hovering above the water heading forward, speeds dropped to minimal. Down with a splash, water blowing out as the jet skipped back up like a rock. Down again with another, then another, and another before finally floating forward with a wave flowing outward. Floating along the river, now moving ahead, the jet cruised towards a turn with a large rocky side.

Steam blew forth from the middle of the rocks, a small slit opening. Water rushed in, the two sides split now spreading apart. Hydraulics and gears became visible soon after as the wall opened like hangar doors to the left and right. Inside sat a large hangar, stone docks all around and metal walls everywhere.

As the jet entered, the walls behind had begun to close immediately until at last the flow of water was cut after a minute. The jet floated inside, stopping to the center of the hangar. With the doors behind shut, the next stage had begun, drains and pumps kicking in sending the water level down. Before long, the floor was barren, the wheels of the jet touched down.

Armed guards moved out, rifles to their shoulders. Stairs dropped from the jet as the side door opened up.

“FORM UP!” one shouted, all taking positions shifting their rifles from their arms to across their torsos.

Holly moved out first, right hand on the rail as she moved down with a slight smile. Behind moved Tony and Caldori, then others of Domino Squadron. Near the back and last out was Elise, slow to follow.

“Welcome back Lady Bell,” one soldier stated.

“Thank you Sergeant. I trust that all is as I left it?”

“Yes Ma’am!”

“And the meeting?”

“The chamber is prepared Ma’am.”

“Good. Alright well, if you would Sergeant, please have someone show Domino Squadron to Lab H and summon Agent Lowry. And then if you could personally do so, escort Lieutenant Bakuuva to Conference Room J’s waiting hall. I’ll send someone to meet up with her later.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Alright then,” Holly murmured turning round, “So I take it you all heard that rather easily. Domino Squadron has something else to tend to. Meanwhile I need to be on my way to that meeting. Elise darling, I have chosen someone to help you explore the facility and be a sort of mentor figure. Sorry I can’t do this myself but duty calls.”

“Alright, that’s fine,” Elise replied looking to Holly.

“You’ll get a full overview about the facility. This is our number one in the world and easily our best defended. There’s much to see and much to learn about. And trust me, I selected your guide specially. You’ll get along just fine.”

“Gotcha.”

“Right then, I’m off. Toodles,” Holly concluded, heading towards the left in the direction of a stone staircase.

“I suppose then,” Tony mumbled watching her go, “Time to say our goodbyes.”

“Is it really alright to let Elise just go?” Caldori questioned with a turn.

“Orders are orders,” Jimmy replied.

“It’s fine, I’ll be fine,” Elise stated with a bit of strength to her voice, “We’ll still be in the same facility, I’m sure we’ll still see each other.”

“You’re sure? Oh- alright.”

A slight giggle, to which Elise then turned to face Tony. Tony himself turned as well, looking to Elise. Immediately, a nod was given by Elise forward to Tony, who then returned with a slight smirk for response. A nod of his own was then given before the two returned to normal gaze.

“Thank you, for everything. You and your squad have made the last six months... tolerable, I suppose.”

“Heh, only tolerable eh? Well maybe next time Sora won’t breathe so heavily when we’re all napping.”

“Hey!”

“Ha, right right,” she said with a sigh, “Well, I hope we get to team up again. It’s easier when you know people.”

“True.”

“Alright,” the captain called, “Lieutenant Gex, follow Becker. Lieutenant Bakuuva, with me.”

“Goodbye for now then, Elise Bakuuva. We will meet again,” Tony called.

“Definitely. Goodbye for now, Domino Squadron.”

“This is an outrage!” a voice yelled out, echoing around the room.

“The Hive has got us, they fucking have us!”

“Nonsense, we still have the edge, they have nothing-”

“How can you say that when they have half of Frostosis under their thumb?! Frostosis, ney, the entirety of the Frost Clan is one of our strongest allies, and they have half!”

“Third.”

“HALF!”

“And here is Bell, wasting HER time and OUR RESOURCES on a bunch of backwards nonsense!”

A room, rather a small auditorium, stood wall to wall with people gathered around a large holo-table. Chairs everywhere, many hologrammed in, many present in person. Among those present were Holly Bell, Wesley Ezdorth, and Jarrajod Jorgenouf. Many different individuals of many ranks hovered around: Lords, Advisors, Generals, Royals, Scientists, Commanders, and more.

“What good is your Project Stingray? What good is your focus on this Bakuuva when you could be focusing on the Frostosis situation? Where is the focus on your father who is distraught?! There are so few candidates, so little results!”

“Elise is one of many, and she has paid off for us already,” Holly replied.

“HA! She’s inefficient as all hell. Who was the dumb ass who made her a Lieutenant?”

“AHEM,” Wesley growled, glaring towards the individual, “*I* am the *dumb ass* who suggested her promotion, because she’s actually impressed me.”

“What’s that? You General Ezdorth?” one laughed.

Wesley glared to his right, staring straight at an individual. Dirty blonde hair, crimson eyes with a slight red tint, stood in a Tribe uniform with shoulder guards. A scar rested just below his left eye, a crescent scar with black outer edges.

“Do not piss me off, Abagor,” Wesley growled.

“Pardon me but really? REALLY!? YOU?! I’m surprised you’d waste your time on outside FILTH such as that Drachen wench.”

“Silence Abagor!” Wesley spat, “I may not like her for who or what she is; but I like her for the results. It is thanks to her we have the Yukon and much of North America under control. She is the one who blew the whistle on Azala.”

“Oh, right. And remind me, WHO was stationed in the same damn area and noticed nothing?” Abagor growled, looking from Wesley to Holly, “You may be Lord Bell’s daughter but damn if that means shit to me when you’re blind sided by a brat. She’s just a slave, and we can get those at our leisure.”

“Elise, no, none of ours... none of our projects are slaves. None of our people are slaves, tools, weapons, or anything less than human. They are champions, our champions.”

“The girl has some talent,” Wesley continued, “She earned her promotion.”

“I do find her impressive,” another spoke, an older woman by the name of Lady Sandra Novele, a Royal.

“May be so but where do her loyalties lie? What can she offer?”

“Her loyalties lie with justice,” Holly replied, “Remember. She blew the whistle on Vulfax which led us to much more. The scheme to build a supernatural army, the revelation of the traitor Tazaki, the spies Shadow and Cylux. She also beat a credible foe in Azala Bakuuva, and unmasked Arkaza.”

“Except the Phantoms and other specialty fighters are beyond such limited capacities as Azala, and she had help for that,” Vega replied.

“General Abagor is right, the brat and the project are worthless,” another spoke, “As is your collective judgments Ezdorth and Bell.”

“You want to say that to my face Vexika?! I’ll rip your head off!”

“Try me mud boy, I’ll blast your ass into the moon!”

“Why you-”

“ENOUGH!” a loud voice boomed.

All eyes turned towards the entrance of the room to view an older man, hair graying and eyes yellow, approach. Dressed in fur and fancier looking Tribe gear, he slowly approached with a cane in hand, “Speaking ill of my daughter and of one of our best Generals... pathetic! What has come over you buffoons? THIS is why the Hive keeps beating us, all this infighting! If we are to win, for the sake of all worlds, we have to get along!”

Silence befell the room for a moment as all heads turned, looking away. Maxwell moved in slowly, eyes firing daggers all across the room as he looked around. He carried himself to the edge of the table, both hands soon placed upon it with a slight lean, “Now then, lets get down to business.”

The Meeting

White stained halls of stone and tile, shining and sanitized. Pillars of concrete from floor to ceiling, decorated vigorously with etched splendor. The floor stretched on and on with armed guards marching in and out, with those in Tribe robes strolling across, with many unbound individuals simply on the move. Stationed, a lone bench with which Elise found refuge in for the time being.

For a time, sat up right with both hands in her lap. A short while after, lying atop with her back to the bottom. Another spell, now upside down with arms sprawled out and head to the ground. Seconds became minutes, and minutes became portions of hours. Two minutes, eight minutes, fifteen, thirty-five, and so on.

Her pace continued round and round before another passage of returning to her seat. The ticking of a clock mounted to the wall just above, the time from ten past nine to forty after eleven. Upright she sat as the tick drew to noon, a couple more in passage. A sigh left from Elise as she laid on her side, hand to the side of her face, elbow to the bench supporting her.

“This is lousy... hasn’t been a person through here in over an hour. What’s the deal anyway?” she murmured to herself.

A set of echoing steps drew close, steps more conjoined than those that had preceded. Her eyes darted, gazing down the Western Hall. Two walked together in near sync, one of Tribe garment, a simple white leather jacket atop basic clothes, decorated with the Stars of Light. Beside him another, a knight bound in sectioned armor and cloth.

The former came in, muscular beyond belief though rather short and stubby, a banjo attached to his middle back’s clothing. The latter came in average in height and build, carrying a sheathed broadsword to his side. A simple glossing emerald look from one to the other, a look over as both drew near, finally directing their approach.

“Are you Miss Bakuuva?” the banjo wielder questioned, a slight southern drawl in his questioning.

Slowly she sat upright, off her hand and onto her bottom as she looked on, “I am.”

“Ah perfect perfect. ‘bout time. Sorry for the wait now,” the man replied once more.

“Oh, right um, and you are?”

“Oh gosh, right right ha sorry. I’m Captain Hope of the Elite Guard. Lady Bell sent me to take care of showing you ‘round and such. A pleasure to make your acquaintance after all the things I just heard.”

“Likewise I guess?” Elise replied with a raised eye, “{This guy... is not at all what I was expecting. This is what an elite captain is like? Carefree and kind of straight forward.}”

“Oh uh, right and this is Satoshi Nova of the 212th Squadron from Frostosis’s Southern Tribe,” Hope continued.

“A pleasure, Miss Bakuuva,” Satoshi stated with a slight bow.

“Heh, nice to meet the both of you. Wait, just heard?”

“We’ve just come from the meeting that I’m sure Lady Bell told ya’ll about. General Ezdorth and Lady Bell had much to say,” Hope replied.

“As did that other fellow, General Abagor was it?” Satoshi asked.

“Don’t mind Vega. He’s just a punk ass brat,” Hope laughed.

“Abagor... I’ve heard that name before.”

“Well no matter. Not much to say ‘bout ‘em really other than just a lot of rage about the Hive, the War, and a couple projects. Speakin’ of, I’d be obliged to say I think you’ll know these other fellows who came with Satoshi.”

“Know us? Well that’s a bit of a statement I suppose,” called a voice from behind the duo.

Far back approached two who bore similar attire to one another, from black coats and buttoned shirts to silvery white hair to dark blue eyes, even cross necklaces dangling around their necks.

“No way,” Elise choked out, “Ryuu? Zero?”

Both walked into full view and indeed, both were none other than Ryuu and Zero. The former approached with a rather blank gaze, standard but not uncaring, having a depth of observance to it. As for Zero, he simply approached with a wide grin.

“*Lieutenant* eh? Shocking to see you go from blowing your attacks up in your face to being able to command a squad, haha!” Zero laughed.

“Well hey, don’t forget, it’s your fault that happened in the first place ya know.”

“Oh heh, right well- shut up about that will ya?” he mumbled back.

“Haha. Man it’s good to see the both of you again.”

“That it is,” Zero replied, “We haven’t seen each other since before the Azala Incident. I’m uh, sorry, about Toby.”

Her gaze darted for a second, looking to the left before returning swiftly ahead, a shallow frown forming up before fading away, “It’s... what it is. He chose his path. Still, for all those years that I knew him to just- use me and turn like that... it’s, it’s what it is. Anyways, how about you guys since you know all about me? What’ve you been up to?”

“Master?” Zero asked looking to Ryuu.

“We’ve been partaking in the Frostosis War,” he replied with a deepened voice, “The Mephisto Empire has been an ally of the Frost Clan for some time. The South in particular has remained our ally. Of course, we’re mostly just advisers as fate would have it. Our Emperor has declined moving soldiers to the South’s Front due to affairs of our own.”

“Well at least you guys have a reason I guess. It just sounds like the Tribe-”

“They have been incredibly dodgy about the situation,” came a growl from beyond, “I don’t get our purpose here if all they are going to do is argue and debate about the politics of losing our world!”

Satoshi turned round as heads and eyes followed, observing several clad in leather and black plating approaching.

“Ragna, stay your tongue,” Satoshi called.

“Captain, this is just a waste of our time! What does Master Zenith expect to have changed here? The Tribe are just-”

“Easy now,” Ryuu called, “Don’t get so worked up while in the Tribe’s own facility young Frostonian.”

“GAH! Our people are dying, and they give us this?!”

“Hey!” Satoshi called moving off towards the newbies.

Hope turned his head back to Elise with a sigh, “There’s all a bit worked up.”

“I can see that... and the Tribe doesn’t seem to care.”

“The Ruling Council is trying to decide on their approach now. These things just take... time,” Ryuu murmured.

“How much time though?” Zero muttered, “They’ve been at war for nearly five years.”

Elise turned her head, staring back up at the clock with only a slight turn of her body, while her head moved in full at an angle. The ticking and the tocking, bit by bit, continuing slower and slower.

“The war conflict is getting out of hand! The Southern Clan can’t seem to accomplish their victory alone, so why don’t we send in our forces to crush the resistance!?”

“Butarenga, that will just make the opposition hate us more. This needs to be done naturally, let THEM fight it out!”

“Maybe we should just ally ourselves to the victors,” stated a low growl.

“And what if the divide happens again?! The last King died and from the death of the Frost Clan came several dozen sub-factions. Now those many have collapsed into barely half a dozen, with only three dominant powers showing yet. The North might have a hold now but if we don’t act they’ll just split again!”

“This is not why we have come to you!” a young girl’s voice barked, “We’ve come to you for help!”

“A child should not be-”

“HEY!” a booming voice called out, “You’re speaking to Her Highness. If you wish to disrespect her, come down here and I will personally rip your heart out you dastard!”

“ORDER!” Maxwell’s voice boomed.

Silence drifted among the dozens of bodies, holograms and physical all shutting themselves. Maxwell drifted back, slamming into his seat. To his side stood his daughter, to his other side his wife. Distant to the opposite side of the room in turn stood a pair, one tall and older, the other short and young.

The man, tall and cloaked in a classic era trench coat with black pants, boots, and a gray shirt. He stood decked out as a count of sorts in some regard as fur and luxurious accessories drowned out his coat. His hair, flowing black and complemented by silver eyes.

The girl beside him stood shorter, decked in a stunning yellow and white dress with shoulders exposed. A crown sat atop her long bright blond hair. Ocean blue eyes stared out across the room, eyeing Maxwell, a drawn back and serious glow to them.

Rage sat within the male’s, and shock within the girl’s. Behind them stood several in leather armor with black plates, swords at their side.

“This is ludicrous. Princess Frost has done more for her people in such a short amount of time than you have for us in all the years leading up to this!” the male barked, “YES it is true, the Northern Clan has pushed the South back considerably. The interference by the Maltans over the course of the fighting has not helped. Even though they’ve shrunk to a short gulf and few cities, they are still able to resist both North and South. The South has access to only Tundra and Desert right now, meaning our natural resources for food and shelter are inferior to that of the North. We’ve asked for special aid from special forces, even just a few ships or some supplies yet you all bicker as if we’re asking for you to win this war for us! Don’t just abandon us after all we’ve done together, just because it doesn’t benefit you as much. We are allies and we aren’t asking for much here!”

Silence drifted again for several seconds more, until a reply finally drifted forth, “Princess Frost, Lord Zenith... I do apologize for- well, just in general,” Maxwell murmured.

“So now what?” one from the crowd asked.

“Fighting about tradition and acting anew is what got us here in the first place,” an older man from the front of the crowd spoke.

The man stood, slowly, standing with a cane. Cylinders and hoses stuck out along his right shoulder, metal plates bent round. A respirator clung round his entire throat, replacing flesh, while the right side of his face flared with burned scar tissue. A single visor stood in place of his right eye, metal plating moving to the side of his skull where a box sat in place of his ear. His entire right side in some way seemed mechanical, from the grinding of gears as he stood with his right leg to the metallic bend of his arm.

An amble eye glared around the room while the mechanical visor presented an eye as well, also adrift in sync with his physical one. His gray hair flopped slightly, brushed aside by his left hand. Steam jetted from his back and his right shoulder, the folds of his military coat flapping, as did the overcoat around him.

“Grand Admiral Seraph,” Maxwell replied, pointing to the man, “If you would.”

“It is clear that the North has our island. That should be enough motivation to drive the lot of you who object to saving the South. We should have stepped in and crushed the North the minute they expanded passed their borders; but we left it as some trivial civil affair. True we can not run our allies; but we should recognize this crap and act ahead of it starting. Maybe if the Hive had called out that it was helping them a lot sooner, we would’ve acted. Eh, Abagor?”

“Grr, get to the point Seraph!” Vega Abagor spat back.

“We rely too much on old ways of thinking. We focus only on the Hive, only on the safety of the Shards. We’ve ignored many things in doing that. Meanwhile, look at the Hive, happy to accept new allies and to even give them high positions within their ranks. They openly accept others, unlike us. Even now we’re looking on results like Elise Bakuuva as inferior to natural Lightonian might. She has all the spirit and drive, yet we look at her as an inferior creature. We look at the struggle of the Frost Clan as a sub-problem that is beneath our watch. We need to grow up and welcome outside perspective,” Seraph called.

“There you go about that brat,” Vega growled with a roll of his eyes, “Not even part of this conversation. Why is Holly’s special project so viable to the Frostosis situation?”

“She isn’t the only one,” Seraph replied, “We have many more like her in some regard. We have many allies just like her. You denounce people like her for wanting revenge, without even understanding if that IS her goal in the first place.”

The old male began to walk, another puff of steam jetting from his right shoulder as he crept around the table, looking over it, “Bakuuva seeks justice. And then take Bjorn for example. He might be hated but we made him that way. He was another from Project Stingray, which might I add is not our only project.”

“The project is a flop,” Vega muttered, watching Seraph walk, “And Axel Bjorn is a demon, no better than the Dharkanians.”

“A judgment you have just so happened to pass without ever getting to know him, and he isn’t the only one. Look at Vulfax. That whole clan and many others falls under the parameters

of Stingray, even if we didn't plot their growth, yet we ignore all of them just because they were once our enemy? That's stupid."

"Since we're on the subject," another spoke, "Why is this Bakuuva so special? She didn't beat any foes alone. She had a squad to back her up, and in the case of the Azala Incident, her Starblade backed her up."

"Everyone needs help from time to time," Holly called, "How about missions? Has she failed? No, she's gone above and beyond. Her smarts earned her the rank of Lieutenant in just six months of working for us. She hasn't disappointed because she is chosen."

"What like a prophecy or something? That kind of Chosen One? That's just garbage," another laughed.

"That's not what I meant so shut the hell up, that is a terribly outdated thing. Prophecies and Chosen Ones, pft."

"She's brilliant, and she isn't the only promising outside cadet at our disposal," Seraph concluded.

"And what about Project Venom?" Vega questioned, "If anyone survives, they become mighty weapons for our cause."

"That is inhumane and unethical," Wesley spat.

"No different than Holly's Stingray. The only difference between the two is that in Stingray, we take time to polish the turds from whatever situations they are already in, or that we put them in, then spend years and plenty of money to develop them slowly. In Venom, it's direct and fast, we just give them a major buff."

"Stingray has done plenty Abagor," Holly replied.

"Thousands of failures, either died or were abandoned as failures. Elise and Axel are two of maybe a handful of successes from over the years."

"They are lives, not playthings General," Seraph growled.

“I agree with Admiral Seraph’s assessment,” a female called out, “We need to branch out more if we are going to grow.”

“Alice, if I wanted your filthy opinion I’d ask. If you don’t like fighting with the Tribe then go back to the Hive you Dharkanian wench,” Vega growled.

“I am loyal to the Tribe, through and through. Don’t try me,” Alice growled, “We’re clearly several steps behind here, *General*. We should be learning from our enemy. They’ve been at this for years.”

“Speaking of, how did they bounce back so fast and hard?”

“Ahem, if I may,” Jarrajod replied, “I believe it is the work of this Shadow fellow, and maybe the masked man Cylux. The use of Arkaza and Azala both is clearly a tie of this Cylux fellow, and it is likely that Cylux has tied other keys to their strategy in place, likely having hand in the Northern Clan’s advance on Frostosis. He is very clearly a top tier threat that we should deal with.”

“HA!” Wesley laughed, “Easy now Jarrajod. Cylux is a troll at best, not that special.”

“Don’t be so sure,” a deeper voice, more honey silk-like, replied.

“Minister Ivan, surely-”

“Think about it General Ezdorth. Clearly this Cylux had a hand in gathering Arkaza and Azala both. Clearly this Cylux manipulated Toby into our ranks and planned the attack on Nospheross. Why shouldn’t we assume the worst? Either way you look at it, Shadow and Cylux are not Dharkanians, nor is Tobias Tazaki. The Hive has put their faith in these outsiders to do such important tasks.”

“The time for playing around is at an end then,” Maxwell murmured, “Princess Lynn Abigail Frost, Lord Zenith Tataru. I will commit special forces to Frostosis along with more supplies and resources. We’ll include some of our special project forces to give them a proper test as well.”

“Thank you,” Zenith replied with a bow.

“We can no longer idle around. Our enemy is gaining the upper hand. We can’t let this carry on. Like it or not, we need to adapt. Ready the girl and the demon, along with any other special project forces. Then ready up units of both our normal and elite units. I want our best personnel to depart for Frostosis with those units to help turn this war around. Our counter attack... is now!”

Project Stingray

Their steps carried through the hall, the steps of Elise and her new group. Elise, Hope, Ryuu, Zero, Satoshi, and several more with the Captain in the lead.

“So, Elise, tell me, what do you know about space travel?” the Captain asked.

She looked ahead, a slight puzzled look emerged and in bloom, “Uh... well I- hmm. Not much.”

“I thought not. Well ya see, it’s like this. There exists the Celestial River as you know, the source of all energy in the universe, flowing through Space and Time.”

“Yeah.”

“And ya know about the whole situation with the original portal right?”

“Yep.”

“Great. Well ‘sentially we’ve learned how to replicate it. The first portals first got ripped open by an em-balance of energies. The River works in pairs that balance one ‘nother, and those opposites have the greatest effect when they clash. During that battle there was so much light and dark bein used that it broke the universe. We’ve since learned how to replicate it with magic.”

“Magic?”

“Yep. By your report, ahem, uh- you reported the ruins in the mines. That was a Warp Gate likely. Ya see, Warp Gates are specially crafted relics that allow one to replicate that space-time rip of energy and jump between it and a sister gate. Course not all gates go to the same gate, that’s sort of the key and lock we’ve got. They exist in pairs and the codes never match, kinda like finger prints. Course, since there have to be pairs, finding new worlds is a bit complicated.”

“So how do you find new worlds? And how many are there?”

“There are many,” Ryuu replied, “Earth is far from the only world in the universe to hold life as you’ve gathered by now. By our estimates, there are hundreds that we know of.”

“As for finding new worlds, that’s kind of a toss up at this point,” Zero continued, “There are space-time spells that can project new coordinates but that takes a lot of time to do.”

“Why not just, I don’t know, a ship with light speed or something?”

“Light speed is snail speed,” Zero laughed, “But we do have means to traverse the Universe, also in a time consuming manner.”

“We might not have Light Speed but we do have Warp Drives,” Hope continued, “Name suggests it I ‘spose but just in case, we use magic to move ships with another relic and newer technology. Space Travel ain’t too bad with that to get us places. Bit slower than gates though.”

“How so?”

“You’ll see soon Elise, when we depart that is” Hope finished.

“So... does that make you my new Captain?”

“Captain? What gives ya that idea?”

“I mean, Holly picks you to show me around and you’re talking like you’ll be helping me for awhile so, just assuming.”

“Told you she’s sharp,” Zero called out, “Though she’s right, was sort of obvious.”

“You never were the subtle type either,” Ryuu added.

“Heh heh,” Satoshi chuckled.

“Heh... yeah, yeah,” Hope sighed, “Yeah, I’m going to be your new Squad Captain. It’ll be a special unit by Lady Bell’s personal request. You’ll be working with me and other Stingray’s.”

“Other?”

“The Tribe has attempted to make a unit of individuals like you for some time Elise,” Ryuu began, “An experimental unit that breaks tradition and normality.”

“How many more like me are there?”

“A few,” Hope replied, “You and a fellow named Axel Bjorn will be under my wing first, with you taking the lead as Squad Lieutenant.”

“I see...” she murmured ceasing to a halt.

The group stopped shortly thereafter, some turning round to look back at her as she looked on ahead, “So... who is this Axel then?”

“Heh,” Hope chuckled, “I’d be much obliged to introduce you to him. Follow on, we’ll head to the practice range.”

“HEEYA, HA, HOO, FREAAAA!”

Loud grunting ran amok with a following of loud claps, the sizzle of fire. A large gymnasium, well above three football fields in length, stood full of combatants. Many clashed with swords, many hand to hand, three with fire. One male shot round two girls standing close to one another, fire flying from the male at the two.

Fireballs slammed into the ground and blew, rock sent tumbling away from the pressure and heat. The two dodged round, one to the left, another to the right. Both flew up on the male, both yelling a battle cry as they launched in. High above on a massive balcony stood a plethora of other individuals in observation of all activity going on below. Tony stood above with Anna and another, older, gent.

Below on the field, the male shot around one of the ladies, swinging his right leg square into her side. She gave out a yell and flopped to the side, a slight bit of scorching around the impacted site.

“CHLOE! You BASTARD!” the other yelled.

The male turned just as the second woman came up on him, her left leg flying through the air with visible air flowing way. A loud crackle rang out and the male flopped as well, yelling out in the process.

“ARGH! SHE BROKE MY ARM, THE FUCKING BITCH, GYAHHHH!!!”

From the sides, guards armed with batons and cuffs raced out and were quickly followed by medical staff. Guards slammed into the aggressive woman, holding her back as literal steam vented from her nostrils and mouth.

Back up top the old man growled, “None of them are worth a damn.”

“We have two spots to replace,” Anna muttered, “We should just pick already, that’s the twentieth match of the day.”

“You brats don’t get to just pick and crap alright?! Domino Squadron has standards because if one of us falls, we all fall!” the man yelled.

“Either way it goes, I don’t want my brother to be involved with our squad,” Tony grumbled looking down at the male, now thrashing around on the ground in a roll, still screaming.

“GOD DAMN WHORES!” the male screamed.

“Why don’t you SHUT UP!” a guard screamed back.

“Heh. Sorry Tony but your brother is definitely an idiot,” Anna laughed.

“Nhhh... Marco has strength but could definitely use some more discipline.”

“I’ll be back, I need another bottle,” the old man grumbled, walking away.

As his steps trailed away, a group of steps drew closer, Elise’s group. Both Tony and Anna turned their heads, taking in as the group came close. Several had been shedded on the way to present- leaving Elise, Ryuu, Zero, Hope, and Satoshi.

“Seems that we have a habit of bumping into each other on the regular, Bakuuva,” Tony called out.

“Heh- uh, yeah. Hi Tony, Anna,” she replied as her group came to a halt.

“Hello to the both of ya,” Hope spoke, “We’re here for-”

“TONY!” came the call of the male from down below.

The young man launched up on the ledge, landing on both feet. His damaged arm dangled, a bit of flame still racing around his torso. Orange hair, only a few inches long and ragged, then yellow-green eyes. A simple black tank top, blue jeans, fingerless black gloves, and combat boots.

“Marco,” Tony muttered.

“The hell bro, not even going to- eh?” he mumbled back while glancing over towards Hope’s group, “Well- hello gorgeous.”

He looked upon Elise, a sparkle in his eyes, a sparkle swiftly sprinting around her as the air turned a brighter pink- for him. Elise raised an eye and returned a glance. Tony swiftly face palmed himself, saying nothing while both Anna and Zero chuckled.

“Um... hi?”

“Haven’t seen you ‘round here before. Say, do you happen to have a training partner yet? If not, I’m uh, I’m a bit of a pro at this ring so I’d be happy to-”

“Good lord you are an embarrassment when you try to flirt. Cut the crap Marco, she’s a Lieutenant, not some rookie,” Tony growled.

“Smooth,” Elise replied.

“Bro you need to just shut up and let me work, sheesh. I wasn’t going to- eh... whatever. Lieutenant then? Since when, I’ve never seen her before. Are you trying to bullshit me?!”

“Ahem,” Hope resumed.

“Oh uh, sorry Captain,” Marco replied.

“This is Lieutenant Elise Bakuuva of Vulfax.”

“Thee Bakuuva? Jesus, why didn’t you tell me?! I never would’ve been so direct if I had known that god dammit,” Marco said with a sigh.

“You know of me?”

“Hell, good few of us do. You’re a legend for having been part of that Azala Incident as the higher ups say. You exposed a lot of nonsense that’s got the Tribe all sorts of *fired up*.”

“I-I see... and you are?”

“I’m Twenty-Second division Ace Pyro of the Battle Magic Corps, Marco Santo Gex, brother of the emotionless rock over here.”

“Mmm...” Tony grumbled.

“Are ya done?” Hope asked.

“A pleasure uh, Marco. If I may, why is your arm hanging like that?”

“Oh, just, just ignore me then, that’s fine,” Hope exhaled.

“Oh, this? Heh- some crazy bitch flew into a fit because I kicked her sister during practice. Should probably fix that quick.”

A golden glow roared up around his broken arm, a sparkle of flame present just above carrying the same color. His arm twitched and bent, his fingers danced and ran, all ceasing with the glow as his hand balled back up into a fist with the crackle of bone.

“There, much better.”

“Wait- did you just mend your bones? How did you do that?!”

“Heh, well ya see Elise, my brother and I are, what is known as Pyrovastmites, of the Pyrovastmas Race. We’re a select race that can freely command and even become fire. Pretty metal, eh?”

“That’s actually pretty cool,” she replied.

“Cool? No, it’s hot, flaming hot.”

“Ugh,” Tony groaned.

“Honestly, I find it strange how so many races are just humans in appearance. It’s so hard to tell if someone is something different.”

“Well that’s because humans are the superior form, heh heh.”

“Ugh, enough Marco. Evolution can go in many different directions. There are many races that aren’t humanoid in the slightest.”

“Must you ruin everything?”

“AHEM!” Hope choked, “If I may-”

“Sorry Captain,” Elise replied.

“That took you long enough,” Zero mumbled.

“So Marco, have ya seen Axel?”

“Axel?”

“Yee, Axel Bjorn. We were-”

“Been here the whole time,” a voice called out from the shadows of the balcony.

Elise turned her attention, moving from Marco to a set of green eyes staring from utter darkness. Forth from the shadows a lone figure moved, a single footstep followed by an echo, then another. Another, and another. First his clothes became visible, a typical black trench coat with same colored shirt and jeans, black boots.

Step.

Then his hair, lengthy with mild strands, also black in color. Step. Step. Step.

Then his face in full as he emerged with both hands in his pockets. A scar protruded beneath his left eye, almost crescent shaped in some regard. A void face with only glaring, glowing

eyes, scrunched with disdain. Elise turned in full, facing him head on, a serious gaze of her own cast back.

A New Squad

The figure stood, hands in pockets, glaring mildly ahead to the entirety of the group presented before him. Elise stood attent, eyes moving down and up, studying his face shortly there after. Almost immediately, with a slight turn of his head, his eyes returned with a gaze into her own. Quickly she looked aside, her head jumping back an inch in the process.

“Do you have to talk like an idiot constantly Captain?” he muttered, now looking at Hope.

“I rather enjoy it son. I could talk like a gent but that’s nonsensical ya hear?”

“Ugh, whatever old man,” he grumbled back before giving an eye to Elise, “Hmph.”

With a simple grunt he removed both hands from his pockets, taking a slight stroll around to her left. A shift of her emerald glow, a slow follow with a retracted expression, head slowly circling counterclockwise in follow. Only a few paces after had he come to a halt, turning, down and up with a view.

“So... you’re the famous Elise Bakuuva?”

“Yes, apparently famous, not a Bakuuva, definitely an Elise. And you are?”

“This here is Axel Bjorn,” Hope replied walking over towards the man, placing a hand upon his shoulder after, “Your predecessor.”

“Unfortunately,” Axel sighed, “So *lucky* we are, to be chosen that is, right, *Captain*?”

“Ehermhem, AHM, uh, yes, lucky lucky,” Hope choked.

Elise broke rank, approaching Axel slowly, her right hand gliding out, “Either way, it’s a pleasure.”

“Keep it to yourself and sod off,” he growled in response.

She halted, hand lowering back to her side.

“Just because we’re comrades doesn’t mean we have ta be all buddy buddy.”

“Alright, I guess,” she mumbled back.

“Right then. Captain, what other special dodgers do we have joinin’ in. There’re only three of us and three doesn’t make a squad. Need seven more.”

“See, ‘bout that there-”

“Captain!” a voice called.

Moving up several stairs not far off were multiple guards, many of which were in the process of escorting the two girls from before. Marco turned in disgust, snarling ever so slightly. A slight growl left Axel in that next instance.

“Getting a little... crowded, wouldn’t you say master?” Zero asked, looking to Ryuu.

“Just a bit.”

“Captain, we brought them like you requested.”

“Let GO!” the angry girl yelled.

“Ah perfect. Thank ya Sergeant, that’ll do.”

Saluting, the guards backed way and turned way, leaving the two girls present before the group.

“Bloody demon sisters.”

“Bunch of misfit rejects the lot of them.”

“Dunno, the one is still kinda a hot slot of milk on a cold winter’s day.”

“Still should just throw them back in the pit with the rest, haha.”

“Tch- annoying bastards,” she growled once more, turning around slowly.

“Talia please, not again-” the other girl began.

“HEY!” Elise barked.

The guards stopped in place, turning back around. Hope's attention turned to Elise, as did the attentions of those around her. She stepped forward, pointing at the group, "And you're supposed to be guards?! Bullshit!"

"The devil is she doing?" Axel asked looking to hope with an eyebrow raised.

"Dunno."

"The hell did you just-" the sergeant began.

"NO, stop right there. I am a Lieutenant and I outrank your lowly ass. If you're going to be a bunch of shit stains, then go mop up the shit stains in the latrines!"

"I- you- wha-"

"Well gosh now, orders are orders and a higher up just gave ya'll orders," Hope called back.

"But Captain, you can-"

"Sorry sergeant but you know the policy 'bout overturning another higher ranked officer's orders. I'd hafta file paperwork fer that one," Hope concluded.

"U-rk-KRE... **sigh** yes sir," he replied back.

The group turned way again and moved down the stairs, their heads lowered ever so slightly. A slight chuckle left Axel, while a laugh left Zero.

"The hell was that," Talia growled.

"Sorry, I just couldn't resist. Every day of my life I've wanted to do that to some unpleasant jerks such as them," Elise replied with a slight laugh, scratching the back of her head in the process.

"H-hey now, you didn't have to tell them off like that though did you?" the other, Chloe, asked.

“Chloe, who cares. Those guys are assholes anyway, just like Marco here,” Talia growled.

“You dumb bitch, you broke my arm!” he spat back.

“You healed, didn’t you you dumb ass?”

“This is why no one wants to team up with you two, you’re a bitch and you’re over protective!”

“ALL OF YOU SHUT IT!” Tony screamed, “You’re in the presence of a Captain, of three allies to the Tribe, ME, and a new damn Lieutenant plus other comrades.”

“Whatever, I don’t need this. I’m a friggen star,” Marco growled walking away.

“Ugh, friggen brother,” Tony grumbled.

“Heh, right right. Now uh Elise, these two here are Talia and Chloe Lynch. They are the Lynch sisters, also part of our upcoming team.”

“Pft-” Axel snorted.

All looked to Axel right then after, Talia included who glared, “The hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, nothing at all,” he grumbled back, “Please, do go on.”

“A pleasure to meet you,” Chloe said with a slight bow.

“Heh, nice to meet you both as well,” Elise replied a little flabbergasted.

“Hmph. So, we’re teaming up with the success story huh?” Talia grumbled while looking back at Elise.

“So I’ve been told, yeah,” she replied again.

“Hmph. At least you seem to acknowledge how stupid people can be. I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt right now. Can’t wait to see you become a fellow failure.”

“Failure?”

“What, has Hope not told you anything? Yes, failure. We’re all failures. My sister and I, Axel over there, and countless others. We were written off for not being what they wanted from their precious project.”

“Heh, and yet they want a team of failures with the success. Probably wants to kill us all in some accident to put an end to the project,” Axel murmured.

“Shut it you British Pig,” Talia growled.

“Hell demon witch, bloody Christ.”

“Easy now,” Hope called.

“The hell are we doin Hope? This is rubbish as all hell. We aren’t worth a damn, just a bunch of gits. And throwing in another future reject just because the muppets in charge want you to-”

“Now Axel that ain’t my choice. The council feels that ya’ll have potential comin together. Now ya’ll may be a few short of a full pack and they are going to work on that.”

“Hey,” Elise called out, “We’re only worthless rejects if we believe it. Personally, I don’t care what anyone says. If I do my best, I can make a difference... as can the rest of you.”

Silence fell over both Talia and Axel, both of whom looked to Elise once more, as all the rest did once more. With a nod, she continued, “I don’t intend to be useless. And if they want to fire me for not performing right, screw them. Right?”

“HA, that’s the spirit,” Hope laughed.

Zero leaned over, muttering to Ryuu, “Remember that, might be able to steal ‘em from here.”

“Eh, I guess. Time will tell with that one,” Ryuu muttered back, starting to then walk away, “Alright. Satoshi, I hate to interrupt the drama show but we need to get back.”

“Oh uh, right, coming sir.”

Both Zero and Satoshi walked off, Ryu following close behind. Tony remained at the side looking at the group of five before him. The five themselves stood around, looking around. Hope let off a sigh, while Talia glared away, and Axel in turn rolled his eyes with arms now crossed. A sigh then left Elise as she looked to Chloe.

“Well now, like Elise said, ya’ll are gonna be part of Project Stingray’s first fighting force. Ya need to get along and remember, this WAS the council’s decision.”

“Pft, screw them, bunch of old out of date fucks that they are,” Talia growled.

“Talia!” Chloe yelled.

“What, it’s true!”

“Bleedin perfect,” Axel mumbled.

“TONY!” a voice shouted.

A lone man strolled forward, a tall man. Black hair swayed side to side in front of his face, showing his sunken blue eyes only occasionally. A slight bit of five o’clock shadow, darkness around his eyes, a whiskey bottle in his hand. He strolled up, guns in holsters, groggily looking as he stopped about twenty paces away.

“Tony!” he yelled.

“Uh, yes, Captain Murasame?” Tony replied turning around.

“Lets go, wee been summoned,” he called back with a slight lisp, “Leave these- mmph, FREAKS be.”

“Freaks?!” Talia spat.

“Sis, please don’t-” Chloe began.

“Old man, why don’t you sod off back to the bar and leave us in piece before I wallop yer arsehole with a spade,” Axel growled.

“Fff- NAH, shut it you demon twit,” he muttered while turning around, “Don’t geh uh... don’t get it. Ninety-nine in fifty years. The hell and a- soa- pff_-_-”

He moved out of range, his muttering being drawn to a close after. A sigh left Tony who then proceeded to follow soon after.

“Friggen asshole,” Talia growled.

“For once I agree with you. Not sure how they can let a drunk be a Captain like that. OR to let him roam around the base freely.”

“So, that was Domino Squadron’s Captain... interesting?” Elise commented.

“Sorry bout that. Akito should be watched when he gets this way,” Hope began.

“He said ninety-nine in fifty years. What was he referencing?” Elise asked.

“Uh- well-”

“Stingrays,” Axel replied, cutting off Hope, “There’ve been thousands of us before and every single one has either died or been thrown off. The Tribe loves its projects with kids. Stingray isn’t the only one luv, there are actually-”

“Axel now hush that, that’s enough!”

“Why Captain, why not tell her before she finds out anyway. Save the bullshit and stop beating around the bush.”

“Alright alright now. We’re all a little tense right now so how about we just slow down and low down. How about we all just meet back up at Lounge-44 tonight and we can talk about things? That good?”

“Whatever,” Axel muttered.

“Sounds great,” Chloe replied.

“Right then, see you all tonight.”

Drive

Her eyes slowly crept open, a slow crawl to an eighth, then a close. A blink open, then another. It was dark, a dim red glow outlining a large room. Atop a bed she lay, black shirt and pajama bottoms on, wrapped in a blanket. Head resting upon a pillow for a moment, Elise came to as she awoke.

Hours had gone by now as she shifted herself upwards. Slowly her eyes scanned around: a large room, empty mostly. Walls white normally now coated in the dim red, a wooden desk with a small wooden chair. A clothing rack hung in the corner, from which Sephiroth dangled with some of her outfits. A door far out ahead of her, and then one to her left.

A sigh left her as she turned to the bed's side, feet placed on the ground with a hoist up towards the left door.

A squeaky faucet turned, the sound of scooting metal followed by the patter of water from the shower. Steam drifted up into the air as she stepped in, water dumping itself into her face, now aimed towards the shower head. Taking it in, she stood there with the mist dancing around her, wrapping her like a warm blanket. Her hair drooped, full on flopping as it became soaked.

Once more, a sigh left Elise, her eyes shut as the water poured out onto her face and ran down her chin.

A low scrunching, a slight scratching. A zip and a crackle. Another flopping and fluffing. An echoing scrunch and then the louder flap of a coat. Elise stood near the corner, her jacket adrift in the air as it wrapped round her. Finally Sephiroth was placed at her side and her belt fastened.

The door zipped open and out she walked, her footsteps echoing as she went out down the halls. Empty, for the most part, short of the occasional official every now and again walking

alone in their white cloaks with blue stars. Still not a single murmur or comment arose, as these encounters drifted few in number.

Then, another sigh left as she passed round yet another turn.

She stood to the center of the training grounds, Sephiroth sheathed and in hand. All around her stood multiple thin tin looking drones, arms that honestly seemed like silver plastic tubes covering only a minimal amount of wiring. Only the torso, gauntlets & fists, boots, and head were on the thicker side- and even then not by much. Some stood dented, some with cuts in their metal, some with very visible welds and tape.

She held Sephiroth tight, set above her head, taking on the ox position as she stared down the drones in front of her, "Alright... begin!"

Right away, six of the tin cans started to charge right ahead at her, one taking the lead with a training sword held up in ox as well. The first swung down at an angle, to which she simply lowered her own weapon. The sheathe of her sword blocked the strike of the drone's, a loud thud echoing as only she and the drones were present in that hall.

A single kick to the lower torso sent the first drone flying back into another two, while two others swerved around swinging their own weapons. One handed, reverse grip, she held Sephiroth out in front of her chest to block both of their swings. Effortlessly after impact and the clang, her hand flipped around and as it did, she swung out with force.

Both drones were thrown back as she did this, next attempting to block as she swung left and then right. Simple sword swings, left and right and left, one handed; though met with turns and a slight dance as her feet carried. She bent back to dodge a swing, then swung up to strike the arm of the drone. Quickly it fell backwards, dropping to the ground, powering down immediately from the sheathed hit.

Next she turned and threw out her right hand, five beams of white energy sent flying from her finger tips straight into the remaining drones. All of them flew backwards and collapsed,

not yet deactivated with minor scorching to the impact points. She blinked looking ahead as one last drone took a charge for her, a training-dagger in hand, quickly being thrust forth towards Elise's left side. She stepped back, left hand gliding through the air as her right took Sephiroth.

With a clap, her hand struck the lower side of the drone's arm, a minor deflection, slapping followed by a kick square to the gut from her right foot. The drone toppled backwards and collapsed, deactivating just as the rest had. One more sigh left as her body lowered.

"How am I meant to get stronger if these things can't even put up a fight..."

"You're weak and pathetic girl!" a voice echoed in her head, "You are NOTHING to Vulfax. Now piss off and work on your gathering skills, because that's all you'll ever be good for!"

Her teeth gritted as Azala's words drifted through her mind, grip tightening. In front of her the five drones took charge with their training swords, raised high and ready to strike. Her eyes flashed, a glow of white rising up around her. The sheath of Sephiroth flew off, the blade exposed with a white glow absolutely erupting around it.

"HRRRAAAA!" she yelled, swinging the sword around.

A blast of Light Energy ripped way from the sword, slashing through the air, slamming clear into the drones. All of them were split in half at the mid-section, ripped to pieces from the impact of the Light Energy swung out like a blade. The head of one hopped and skipped, rolling away as a heavy exhale left her.

Her stance relaxed and her weapon then lowered, eyes glaring on ahead, "{I can't stop, not now, not until I beat *them*,}" she thought to herself, gazing off as images of Toby, Shadow, and Arkaza formed before her.

A clang of metal broke her focus as to her right the decapitated head rolled in the opposite direction. Standing present to her right was Holly, looking at the broken drones. Elise turned to face her, Sephiroth now being completely lowered and pointed to the ground at an angle.

"My, and I thought Wesley had anger issues," Holly commented.

“H-Holly, I-”

“Your energy control has gotten significantly better, hasn’t it? Though it’s still a ways from perfect, seeing as your first barrage didn’t shut them down and uh- well... heh, good thing we can repair and replace these things.”

“I-I’m sorry. I... I let my anger get the best of me there. It’s just that whenever I think of Azala or what those three did, I just-”

“It’s fine Elise, truly,” Holly again interrupted, stepping forward, “Honestly, anger can be a good motivator. Just make sure it isn’t what drives you.”

Elise looked down at the ground, sighing once more, “**Sigh.** I know. My drive isn’t for revenge though, it’s just to make sure what happened to me doesn’t happen to anyone else. That is my sole drive.”

“And are you referring to the betrayal of Toby and Azala which almost destroyed Vulfax? Or are you referring to what we did to you?”

Elise looked up in a heartbeat upon hearing those words. Their gazes met in that instant, curiosity from one side, and a cold confusion from the other. Holly’s body relaxed itself, her shoulders loosening. This time, a sigh left Holly while her eyes closed, next moving her right arm up so that she could scratch her head with said arm’s hand.

“Look, it’s alright if you’re not content with that just yet, I totally get it. I just need to know that you’re good. Are you good?”

“Yeah,” Elise huffed, “I’m fine.”

“Good,” Holly said while walking over to the drones that lay in pieces on the ground.

Elise followed her with focus, turning slightly and then fully. The drones lay with random bouts of electrical discharge occurring from the exposed wiring. Holly bent down with her knees and back, right hand out and placed onto the scrap. Shortly then after she stood back up and turned back around to face Elise, an eye raised.

“What? What is it?” Elise asked.

“Your energy control is still relatively out of hand you know. I thought that after all these months you’d have picked up on that.”

“What do you mean?” Elise asked.

“Your attacks are too wild and unfocused. After you discharge your attack you should still apply focus to it to control it. Otherwise you’ll end up with that situation again where someone might steal your power before it even hits them. Remember how so often you can take the power out of someone’s fire since it gives off light?”

Elise glanced down at the drones, looking over them. Her eyes drifted open as small remnants of white energy drifted from the parts of the drones up and into Holly’s clothing.

“You might also not need to expend as much power as you do now. If you had been able to focus, you could’ve essentially extended the range of your blade versus hitting them with a thick blunt blast that just ripped them apart.”

“I can influence it even after?”

“Yes. It’s just like how you capture and absorb energy normally. You just need to apply your concentration to discharging it. If you can do that, you could accomplish feats such as these,” Holly stated.

With her back to the drones, Holly smirked as they began to quiver, shaking rather. A gap had begun to show between ground and pieces which now had begun to hover up. Only a minimal glow existed around them as they climbed up to about the height of Holly’s head. Then in the next instant, fire erupted around each part for only a brief instant, fading out just after.

The pieces dropped to the ground instantly charred black, as if they had been set in the fire for many minutes; though it had been only a second or two at most. Elise’s emerald gaze looked down at the scattered remnants, then back to Holly.

“You can influence many things with proper control Elise, and I know you have a knack for it. Magic is not the only way to manipulate the elements. And you need not absorb an energy to manipulate it. In this case I absorbed some of yours earlier, then controlled the remaining bits and added some energy from the air. And then, poof, flames.”

“That’s- that’s kind of hax.”

“Isn’t it though? You can even apply this to your own body.”

“What?”

“Ever wonder how beings such as myself or the guy you fought in the mine lab could tank such tremendous attacks? The answer... is Aura Guard.”

“Aura Guard?”

“Aura Guard is a technique in which an Energy User applies their energy to their body’s cells, sort of like supplying them with oxygen in a sense. It can dramatically enhance our physical capabilities, including speed, durability, strength, and so much more. It’s also how we are able to constantly rejuvenate and not age a day.”

“That’s... that’s brilliant, fantastic even. So what’s the downside?”

“Well, while you might be enhanced... your body still can exhaust itself,” she replied while walking over to Elise, “Think of it like doing anything physical for too long, it’ll wear you out. And as far as durability goes, heh- think of it like one of those video game things where for some reason you can wail on someone in-game with a laser weapon that, practically of course, could cut through a building. Yet because it’s a video game, it just lowers their health bar. Kinda works like that.”

“I see... I still have a long ways to go then, don’t I?” she murmured, looking up to Holly who now stood merely a meter away.

A smile crept along, followed by a nod. Following this, Holly continued walking, brushing passed Elise while continuing to speak in that instant, “You have a knack for Energy

Control Elise. It'll take time but it won't be too difficult. You have the talent for it. It's like a writer trying to write for the first time, or a technician working with a computer for the first time. Some trial and error at first but it'll stick if it's what your personality is geared for. Of course for you-magic might be different, so focus for now on energy."

"Got it... say, Holly I-

As Elise turned around, she saw nothing. As quickly as she had arrived, Holly had also left, now nowhere to be seen. Her head turned left to right, scanning all around. Nothing. For a moment there was silence, until Elise let off another sigh with her eyes closed.

"Thanks for the lesson, I guess... back to the drones I go I guess, eh?"

A Lack of Good Faith

She moved through the halls, steps echoing as was so often the case with not a soul around. Sephiroth clung to her side, her coat flopping about as she pressed forward, hair swaying from side to side. Much of the day had already gone by, from hours of training, to hours of personal time. Now, it stood as only an hour until her meeting with Captain Hope and the rest of the squad.

She exhaled with the turn of a corner, closing her eyes briefly, opening them with a twitch of her lower jaw.

“{Another hour, another day, another lifetime,}” she thought to herself, “{Lets see... the observation garden room should be just ahead. Huh?}”

Up ahead a cluster of individuals stood. Their backs to the entrance to a room, people stood in black leather with a coat of wolf fur draped around them, broadswords sheathed on their backs. A wolf hat blocked their eyes, revealing only their mouths. Those before them were a group of Tribe officers, one in the standard coat with stars, others in the strange plastic-looking white armor.

“We can’t just let you pass, so turn back now!” one of the wolf warriors barked.

“Now see here, this is Tribe property you ruffian. We might be allies but that doesn’t give you the right!” one Tribe soldier spat back.

“Do you want to escalate this?” the officer of the Tribe questioned.

“What’s going on here?” Elise called out on a slow approach towards the group.

All Tribe personnel turned round, while the wolf warriors seemed to give her their attention as well. She looked puzzled from one group to the other, finally settling right on the leader of the Tribe group, “Sergeant?”

“Plefh, if you must know, these hooligans are stopping us from accessing the observatory. This is a Tribe facility and they are visitors here,” he growled while turning back around.

One of the wolf warriors turned their attention back to the man with a shake of the head, “No sir. We have been granted permission by your leadership that if we choose to occupy a room we may do so. Right now her majesty and his lordship are in discussion with another ally about certain affairs.”

Elise looked to the leader of the wolf head warriors, looking him down and up again, silent for a number of seconds. He looked to her, then to the Tribe official once more. Finally, the silence was broken, “Sergeant... dismissed.”

“What’s that?” he growled turning round to look at Elise once more.

At this time they all had turned to look, all eyes on her as she continued, “I outrank you, and I’m instructing you to get going.”

“Now see here- this is our base. I won’t let these hooligans-”

“Our base, our guests. It’s as simple as that. They are allies in need and right now they want some time with their other allies, who I believe are also ours. If you have a problem with that,” she concluded while glancing with daggers back to the official, “Then take it up with someone who outranks me.”

“Outranks you?!” the man growled turning fully to Elise, stepping right up in front of her, “You’re just a child, you shouldn’t outrank anyone!”

She glared back at him, shorter, yet still towering in her own right as she stepped forward looking up, “I was given my rank because of my performance, and because of the trust Lady Bell has in my judgment.”

“That doesn’t mean SHIT to me. You’re still just a brat. I’m sure that General Abagor would demote you in a heartbeat.”

“Then bring him here,” she growled back, still looking up into his eyes, “See if he thinks something as trivial as this is worth his time. I’m sure he’d love to tell you where to stick your opinion.”

Shock flooded him at once, face twisted with his right eye now twitching. A step was taken aback as he clamored on, “I- you- what the- GRAH!”

“Yes, Sergeant?” she asked once more.

“BAH! This isn’t over!” he spat storming off passed her, followed soon after by his soldiers.

Her head turned with a side step in order to witness him leave. In doing so, a bigger exhale of air occurred, eyes closed yet again.

“Thank you Ms...-” one of the wolf soldiers began.

Elise turned back round and gave a nod right back to the soldier, “Bakuuva, Elise Bakuuva. Sorry about that- I’m getting kind of sick of the jerks around here myself.”

“Bakuuva... as in Lieutenant Bakuuva right?”

“Uh- yeah?”

“Well that’s convenient. Listen uh, we dispatched a couple guys earlier to go and find you actually. Lords Ryuu and Zenith have actually requested your presence inside,” the warrior said with a head scratch via the back of his head.

“Presence? What for?”

“They did not say. So if you would, please uh- go on through,” he concluded stepping aside.

She looked at him, then to the others who also stepped aside. A slight nod was given, customary it seemed, before she moved on down the hall heading towards the garden area.

Deep inside the garden, the two stood in tandem, Zenith before Ryuu with Ryuu to his back. Zero stood near as well, along with the Princess and Satoshi, then another group of five. Guards stood all around, arms tucked behind their backs, legs pressed together with feet pointing straight. Ryuu's arms went up with a shrug, his head tilted to the side, while Zenith then simply turned right around.

"I'm just saying General- are you sure about lying like that?" Ryuu questioned, his tone serious, his expression highly focused, only a slight quiver present in his voice.

"It is her highness's wishes, for she does not trust our *allies* and I'm sure you can relate," Zenith replied with a deep tone, low growl.

"Zenith is right," the princess murmured, low and deep with sorrow, "Our lives are politics to them."

"We'll keep telling them what we want them to think until they try to intervene. This is a test for this alliance as well don't forget," Zenith added.

"With all due respect," one of the five growled, stepping forth, "I don't trust those Lightonians one bit. They've left us out to dry for most of the conflict, even when they knew the Hive was looking into allying with the North or the Maltans. They only give a damn now because their precious shard and temple are at risk!"

A young lad, likely fourteen in age, eyes of silver in contrast to his dark hair kept short.

"Mmm. The Tribe expects you to conquer your smaller allies for resources and territory to assist. You've claimed to have done it, and yet-"

"We haven't because we don't want to think that way, Ryuu," Zenith carried on, "We are all people of Frostosis, to have to conquer our own- allies especially just to gain some magic foothold. Preposterous!"

"Not even the North and the Maltans have tried such a thing, and they are both power hungry allies to each other," another of the group spoke.

A tall girl with overflowing blonde hair, red eyes of vibrant ruby blending with the almost gold consistency.

“The North Clan and the Maltans are getting along more than we would like... they are pressing too hard to really be stopped at this point, unless all of the remaining fragments of the clan come together to put them back in their place. It’s so clear that the North is under the Hive’s influence, and the Maltans appear to be under the influence of some *other* type of force,” Zenith replied.

“Are there ANY options at this point?” Ryuu questioned.

“Minimal at this point,” Zenith sighed.

A set of footsteps came close, booming off of the ground and rock. Heads turned just then as Elise and one of the Guards approached the group. Ryuu’s eyes lit up swiftly, while anger welled up on some of the faces of the others. Zenith looked her over and then nodded right to the guard. With a bow the guard broke off and left, leaving Elise to approach the group alone.

“Elise?” Zero mumbled.

“Lieutenant Bakuuva, I presume. Welcome,” Zenith called out.

“Uh- thanks uh-”

“Zenith will do for now,” he replied.

“That’s just great!” the young lad from before spat, “Why is this Lightonian here?!”

“Daemon, hush,” the blond muttered.

“But sis-”

“It’s alright,” Satoshi stated, cutting him off, “The General called for her.”

“A Lightonian? Why though?” another of the group asked, another older lady, mid-back length dyed blue hair, a lance attached to her back with a rope off of theommel.

“Because, I want to confirm something,” Zenith murmured, now walking forward passed Ryuu, moving right up towards Elise who had stopped in place.

“Confirm something?” Elise asked.

“Yes,” Zenith responded now a few feet from Elise where he stopped, looking her over just as she was looking him over, “I’m guessing you haven’t heard our conversation until this point?”

“No- I just got here.”

“Certain are you? Or are you lying so you can tell your superiors later?”

“No,” she said with a growing glare, “I have no business telling anyone anything, let alone any *superiors* you think I should be reporting to.”

“Heh,” he chuckled with a slight smirk, “Very good.”

With that he put his back to her and paced away. Elise looked around the room and then back to him, a scowl rising up, “What’s this about?!”

He stopped amidst the middle of the group, looking straight ahead, “So if I were to tell you that we don’t trust the Tribe and are lying to them about our intel... you wouldn’t be tempted to rat us out?”

“Lord Zenith!” the blond girl choked.

“The hell is he doing?” Zero hissed to Ryuu.

“Not sure,” he muttered back to Zero.

“No,” Elise said, bold while still looking at Zenith’s back.

“What?”

“Huh?!”

Silence for yet another moment, from which Zenith blinked, turning his head down and back slightly to position his ear better, seemingly.

“Everyone is entitled to their own reasoning, and I’m sure you have your own for not trusting the Tribe. I would only ask though... why even be allies if you don’t?”

“Do you trust them?” Zenith asked, arms crossed behind his back, still looking back as he was in a manner of speaking.

“I-” she began, chomping down immediately with a slight step back.

A glance at the ground, eyes drawn closed more, a slight shake of the head as her hair stood on end. It took only a couple seconds before she looked back up, a sorrowful expression replacing her scowl of anger. Zenith at that point turned around again as all others in the room faced her.

“No, I don’t,” she replied simply.

“What?!” Daemon coughed.

“I don’t trust them- I don’t think I ever have,” she continued.

“Don’t trust? But Elise, Ryuu and I were there! You accepted them and went on to free Vulfax with their help!” Zero called out.

“Honestly, while I let go of what I was feeling in that moment, I refuse to forgive them. They put me through Hell and only because they saw me as a potential weapon. Even now, seeing their practices- how they treat their allies and others like me... I can’t approve of that.”

Zenith gave a nod, “I see... you’re still resentful of them, and so very disappointed in what you’ve seen. If I were to guess, you’re only working with them to accomplish a goal or two of your own. Am I right?”

“Right,” she boldly stated, looking back up at Ryuu, “I haven’t, nor do I intend to... I do not wish to officially join them.”

“As I thought,” Zenith sighed with eyes closed, exhaling, “I had heard much about the Tribe’s special projects. You actually were the big talk when Stingray came up. Some consider you a success to their centuries of trying to indirectly raise a strong warrior- and then there are others who doubt your ability and want to see you removed. Still, you have a strong resolve to do the right thing, that is very apparent to me.”

“Zenith,” Ryuu grumbled looking over at him, “She’s young and inexperienced. Maybe you should-”

“I don’t care Ryuu. The South is losing ground and the Tribe with their games are not helping. We need people who believe in the cause, who can actually help us. Don’t forget, Princess Lynn Anne Tabatha Jacobs Frost is also young and making big decisions. Never underestimate the youth- I’m sure there’s a handful of times where your apprentice has made better choices than you even.”

Ryuu silenced himself, glancing over to a shocked Zero who stared back in turn.

“Both her majesty and myself believed we could confirm our theories by speaking with this young girl, and sure enough, we’ve seen her view and have a conclusion. This alliance is failing, nothing but old traditionalists refusing to take on new ideals. And the unfortunate thing is that they aren’t dropping off enough to be replaced, as bad as that sounds.”

“What can I do to help?” Elise asked, looking at Zenith.

“Please,” a young voice called out, that of Lynn Frost, who now slowly approached Elise.

Elise turned in full to witness her approach, big eyes full of grief, a scrunched face of bitterness and distaste. The princess stopped feet away, looking up into Elise’s eyes.

“Please... help my people survive.”