

To War

It was a nice and quiet evening now with so very minimal stirring. A lone lounge sat with so very few bodies at present. Multiple tables decorated in white cloth, ablaze in color via the candles lit atop in their small jars. Chandlers hung over with a large dome-like glass ceiling, reflecting the floor below.

The chairs all appeared fluffy, sofa-esc or as fancified bar stools. To one end of the room down a few stairs, there were actual couches and chairs around a large wooden barrel, with barrel seats included in the mix. Pillows garnished each sofa, elegant in their variety and form. To the other side of the room, a well stocked bar stood with vibrant lamps of different shades and color.

Few tables were occupied at the present moment, and around one towards the heart, a table of eight seats sat with two present. Both Hope and Axel sat across from one another, Hope sitting at ease while Axel held his head up with his hand beneath his chin. One of Axel's eyes was nearly closed, and a scowl was quite visible. A groan left him, while Hope then sat back with arms at his sides.

Silence... silence... and even more silence... the clatter of silverware, scraping on plates, mild chattering around them both.

"Uuuuugh, that's it!" Axel spat throwing his head back, his arms and hands outward.

"Axel please," Hope said looking over.

"This is a JOKE mister captain man. No way in hell are those ass hat sisters showing up and I doubt the famous star will show up either!"

"HEY, SHUT THE HELL UP!" a yell came clearing the whole room.

Both of them looked across the room to see a steaming mad Talia being followed by a very embarrassed looking Chloe. Little was actually said as the sisters moved across the lounge with many sets of eyes focusing on them. Finally the two came up to the table and took their seats, Talia growling and glaring at a very annoyed Axel.

“Well, that’s four. Now then uh, Elise isn’t here yet right?” Hope asked looking around.

“Nope. Figures. Fame probably got to her head or some shit,” Axel muttered while opening up a newspaper.

“Do you have to be such a dick?” Talia growled.

“Do you have to be such a bitch?” he asked back.

“DO you want me to kick your ass?!” Talia spat slamming both of her hands down on the table.

“Good lord you people are so loud,” Elise’s voice called out.

Attentions turned and all at once, there she was, walking up to the table with a chair already in hand, taking a seat. Elise pulled up, both arms at rest on the sides of the chair, looking around.

“Alright, everyone is here. Good. Now then, lets all have a good evening. I ordered some apps and drinks that’ll be brought out in-”

“Cut the crap old man,” Talia growled.

“For once I agree with her,” Axel muttered.

“Please, sis, can’t we just-” Chloe began.

“No, I’m not going to just sit here and look all nice and cozy with these idiots and waste my damn time.”

“Ugh,” Elise groaned.

“Alright, everyone just be quiet. Alright? Try to get along guys, we’re all going to be working together from now on,” Hope sighed, “So uh, Elise, how have you been getting along?”

“The hell does her opinion matter?” Axel growled.

Elise turned her head, looking to him next, “What now?”

“Your opinion shouldn’t matter. Who cares if you’re getting along alright. We have a job to do. Screw your personal feelings.”

“Excuse you? All Hope did was ask me a damn question.”

“Whatever.”

Silence drifted for a few seconds until Elise looked back to Hope, “Doing... fine I guess. It’s been mildly boring I guess, a bit... lonely I guess?”

“Pfeh,” Axel growled again.

“What now?” Elise muttered.

“Lonely? Screw that. You should be relying on your own strength and pushing forward, screw others.”

“Dude, are you just determined to be a dick smack? Or do you just not want friends?”

“Seriously, Axel, chill,” Hope spoke, “There’s nothing wrong with feeling lonely from time to time.”

“I never get lonely and I do just fine,” he growled.

“Pftyaaaa clearly,” Talia giggled.

“What was that?!”

“Having comrades is only natural, and those who don’t care about their comrades are piss poor at best,” Elise replied.

Both Elise and Axel slammed their hands down on top of the table, both standing and immediately glaring at each other. Only a few feet separated their faces from one another; though their glares were clear and powerful nonetheless. Chloe sat back with both hands cupped around her mouth, while Talia just started to grin as she sat back. Hope let out another growl.

“Look, enough you two!” he spat.

Both looked to one another for a few more moments before sitting back down as Hope went on.

“We’re all stuck together now, this is what the top brass wanted, and here in four days they’ll be sending us out to Frostosis to survey the situation as an experimental unit.”

“Why the rush?” Talia asked with a hint of sarcasm and a wave of her arm & hand.

“The South needs our help. They made that very clear, and the higher ups want a survey to be done before doing anything.”

“That’s such a load of crap,” Elise growled.

“When something needs life support it’s better off dead you brat,” Axel muttered, to which Elise resumed her glare with intensifying rage, “Screw ‘em, the brass wants to see if they are beyond salvation or not.”

“Axel, just- ugh anyways-”

“But Captain, we’re a group of five counting you. We’re short,” Chloe added.

“We’ll be working with a squad from the South when the time comes.”

“Four days is shit for time to prepare,” Talia grumbled.

“Leave it to the weak peasants to complain about time,” Axel growled.

“Why you!”

The sheathed extension of Sephiroth immediately flew between them as they now stood, inches from each others faces. Elise sat back, right arm extended with her weapon in hand, glaring at the both of them. Their fires died back momentarily, looking from the sheathe to Elise, then back to each other. Backing off, both sat back down.

“Look, if it’s all the same to you guys, I think I’ll just leave this to you guys to sort out,” Elise replied.

“Oh, and why is this so beneath you Princess?” Axel chuckled.

“Because I’ve already talked to the Frost Clan’s top adviser and the princess.”

“What?” Hope murmured.

“Yeah,” she said looking over to Hope, “They sought me out and personally asked me to serve as an advisor.”

“What?!” Axel spat.

“You bitch!” Talia yowled.

“Elise- that isn’t team spir-”

“Sorry Captain but I don’t care,” she said looking around the table, “I was personally asked to help them out because they believe I’ll be more effective helping them directly, than I would be following orders.”

“And did you explain that you and a team have been assigned to help?” Hope asked.

“Yes. And they didn’t fully care.”

“Pft- arrogant as hell,” Axel growled, looking at her with cold eyes, “Being some sort of Super Star isn’t going to make up for your failure to protect Vulfax and those dear to you.”

At that moment she stood, looking down at Axel with another scowl, breathing out as she did so, “Only a pathetic loser who has nothing would dare to antagonize those he believes to be lesser, just to make themselves feel better. Well sorry Axel, you’re still a sorry loser who SHOULD feel sorry for himself. Grow up.”

“Elise!” Hope called.

“Pft- come on Chloe, lets get out of here,” Talia muttered standing up, now walking away.

“But sis I- w-wait!”

As they both walked away, Axel did the same, standing and heading out in yet another direction. Hope was left, pouting mildly. Elise sighed sitting back, placing her weapon against the

table, letting it lean. Her left hand was placed out as a waiter walked by, who then deposited a pinkish orange and red looking drink into her hand.

“Damn kids,” Hope growled, “You lot don’t know what they’re getting into.”

“Honestly Captain, this is for the best. It’s clear that there is no chemistry between at least three of us, with Chloe being a wild card,” Elise began, taking a sip from her beverage, “Lack of chemistry leads to mistakes. Mistakes on the battle field lead to death.”

Hope looked over to her as she took a bigger swig of her drink, “But Elise- we were assigned to do this together. The goal is to make a squad that can be borderline unstoppable, very elite.”

She finished drinking and placed her glass on the table, half full yet, “Then they’d have given us time to try and cooperate, or sent us on less dangerous missions. This push to get us to either fall in line and be something, or to not and die, it’s like something Azala would’ve done.”

His eyes flashed wide, while she cast an ever so casual- if not annoyed glance.

“I’m done playing games Captain. I grew up with it, and for the last six months I have still seen it. Some like you and Holly are nice, really nice. But then there are people... how can this group truly claim to be better when they allow a bunch of jackasses to run around with positions of power?”

“I- I wish I had an answer for ya Miss Bakuuva.”

“I escaped one special hell Hope, I’m not trading one for another,” Elise finished, now standing, giving Hope a slight bow as she took hold of Sephiroth, “If you’ll excuse me.”

She turned and walked off all while focusing forward, not even bothering to look back, Sephiroth swaying at her side now reattached. She exited the lounge, now mostly empty, Hope being one of three final occupants who simply slumped back with a low groan. A few tables away, however, there sat two more individuals, each with news papers held up.

Said papers dropped to the table, both looking outward. One, eyes so very crimson, a bit of a bright red tinge over the darkness. Below the left eye, a crescent scar, black around the edges. He stared as Elise exited the lounge while his partner looked to him.

“Well?”

“She’s as troublesome as I had imagined,” the scar man chuckled, “I’ll give her points, what she suggested is exactly what I wanted.”

“Doubtful that what she said is what the other leaders were thinking at the time. So General?”

“Let her have her fun. If she wants to piss off and go play with the Frostosans, that’s her choice. That’s one less pain in the ass to deal with now that we can deal with later. Keep an eye on her though would you Agent?”

“Yes, General Abagor.”

The Devil Inside

Darkness, lifelessness, a total lack of sound. These things would narrowly be true if not for the tossing existence of one lone entity. Elise tossed and turned in her bed, covers undone. She flopped about in pajamas, decorated in floral of the tropics, something provided directly by the Tribe itself.

A digital clock sat on a small stand, numbers lit light green, four-thirty. Another toss and another turn, a pillow held tight to her by both hands. A pained expression, teeth gritted, a sweat washing over her.

“Elise!” a frightened girl screamed out, drowned out by the sound of splashing.

Dripping, dripping, spatter and a thud. A body toppled over with its head spilling, hair flowing away in the wind. Two figures stood in utter shock, their bodies shaken, while a third stood behind where the fallen had been cut down.

“Destiny!” one of the two shouted before charging forward.

“Thomas no!” the last shouted rushing after the other.

“DIE YOU BASTARD DIE!”

The one- Thomas- jumped, flying through the air with claws out, teeth turning jagged and sharp with a snarl. The lone third simply smirked and disappeared. Both looked in shock before the sound of ripping fabric and crackling bone filtered into the area. The third stood beside Thomas with their arm into his torso and out his back, ripping with it beating organs and broken bone.

“Thomas!”

The third stood, waving brown hair spattered in blood, glowing amber eyes staring back at Elise, mouth hung back in a wide spread grin baring his teeth. A low growl emerged from the individual in that moment as Elise stumbled away.

“N-no!” she cried out.

“D-d-damn weak... sister-” a low groan echoed out followed by another set of thuds.

Elise turned round quickly, eyes wide and totally amet with despair. There they laid, Rusty and Britt both. The former lay with his right arm ripped apart and throat ripped out, blood spilling from both wounds, washing his torso and his face. The latter lay with a caved in skull, the top half completely smashed.

Azala stood well over both corpses, snorting out smoke with eyes blackened and a mouth mostly shut short of a few visible teeth. Behind Azala lay many more, many in the robes of the Tribe. Dozens of bodies strung about with a single figure in the middle, blood dripping from their blade. Their back to her, visible only was the black hair as it flowed upon the winds carrying the stench of iron-rich blood and decay.

Fire swept outward, passing over Caldori’s slain body, the sound of echoing footsteps present. Multiple in black robes and red stars marched through the rising flames, all shadowy and blackened out with few distinguishing features. Then... there came Leon, walking forward ever so casually, a mop of blackness in his right hand, blowing hair.

A head, dripping blood still, face visible revealing wrinkles and green eyes rolled into the back of their head mostly, only a small hint of cornea visible.

“Holly!”

Finally, a figure of white rose up, stretching out of the ground before her. White with a strange symbol upon the jacket, hooded, and masked. A lone sapphire blue eye stared back as the figure grew tall, two meters, three meters, five meters, seven meters. She fell backwards onto her rear, slowly pushing away with her hands, crawling backwards hyperventilating.

Slowly the white figure reached forward, their hand reaching out for Elise.

“GYAHHHE-!” she croaked, launching up.

She breathed heavily, right arm rising up, right hand to her face. Swear poured off of her as her breathing exploded. In and out, in and out, multiple times a second. Time passed as she sat there in a red shirt and black sweat pants. Her head turned slowly as her breathing decreased, two in the morning on the clock.

A low groan left her as she placed her palm firmly to her face, eyes drawn shut only shortly.

Water splashed not more than a minute later. Now before the sink, she looked down into the water as both hands moved in, cupping, and then splashed it right back into her. Twice, thrice, and a fourth after. Her breathing continued, nowhere near as severe as it was before. Still, her skin crawled, shaken.

“Nothing will ever change,” the voice of Toby rang in her head.

“You’re pathetic, a disgrace to this clan!” came the shout of Azala.

“This brat is supposed to join us? Tch- she’s going to muddy our mission Holly!” was the bark of Wesley.

“Tch- shut up,” she growled back, hands grasping the sink firmly.

“But it’s true,” a female voice echoed, higher in pitch than Elise’s, monotone at that, “After all-”

It went on, and slowly she looked up. Inch by inch she brought her head up, looking from down to up. Finally as she stared ahead, her eyes popped. Looking back at her in the mirror was herself, coated in blood, hair drawn black, eyes glowing red, bodies piled up around her.

“I am you.”

Bones poured from the mirror and into the sink as the water turned red and thick. The real Elise stumbled back, kicking bones behind her. Looking around, she froze up more. Bodies lay all around- the Ghoul whom she had slain before during the raid, of Kensa- the Vampire whom she

had sentenced to death by capturing for the priests. Many more bodies lay around her, some unrecognizable, others painfully so.

Then with another turn, there lay Sacho, there lay Elen, there lay both Thomas and Destiny.

“Take it from me, we’re good at piling up bodies. And that is the truth. Every time you try to help someone, you fail someone. You either let them die, or you lead them to die, or you kill them yourself. We’re a monster Elise- that is our reality.”

“NO!” Elise yelled, raising Sephiroth and swinging before herself.

The mirror split itself in half, the distorted image of a demonized Elise disappearing along with the bodies in an instant... however-

The glass split, blood sent pouring out and into the room, a total flood that quickly consumed the room. Cuts appeared all around Elise as the blood level drained. Cracks began to emerge as the level dropped, shaking her up as she stepped back. All at once, Sephiroth was gone, and now cracks had begun to spread across her own body.

She looked to the back of her right arm, then held her left hand to her face. Splits and cracks were spreading everywhere as the mirror continued to chip and break. Finally, it shattered, and as it did a layer shattered away from Elise with blood sent splattering along the walls. A loud crash filled the room, as the room then departed.

The floor collapsed and the walls shattered, sending Elise flying down into a black abyss of eternal nothingness. No color, no light, just abyss. She let off a scream as she fell.

Her eyes shot open, red. Her skin, pale as can be, dripping with sweat. A subtle glance around the room, then to the clock. Four forty-three. A low groaning sigh as her feet touched the ground and she shifted up onto them. Groggy, tired, exhausted, wasted, any word realistically would work for her as she stood there drained.

Slow, so very slow, each step taking seconds to complete. She moved from the side of the bed into the bathroom area, arm raising up slow to tap on the lights. As done in her dream, she splashed water right into her face. One splash, two splashes, three. After a fifth splash her head tilted.

“Sigh What is wrong with me?” she murmured.

She gradually looked up and stared straight into the mirror. Nothing out of the ordinary, other than that she appeared to be shot. Tired eyes, a drooping face, hair a mess. A slow shake of her head and she turned back towards her bed, her emerald glow now more of a dark green that was fading.

“This place has a hot spring if I remember right...”

Streaming water, a trickle compared to a roar, flowing like a stream. Rocks placed all around a decent sized body of water, just over nine meters in size. Water flowed on in, while fake plants and bamboo stood everywhere. High up top a large projection ceiling displayed a full moon, cloudy sky. In many ways, it was like a high tech Onsen, only entirely man-made with a non-traditional heating element.

The water gave way with a mild splash as Elise lowered herself into it, a black bathing suit on, simple as can be. Her lower legs submerged slow as she sighed, slowly submerging bit by bit until sitting down with her shoulders and head sticking out. Her hair floated at the top while she leaned back against the rocks, allowing her body to then go limp, arms floating upwards. Just the sounds of the water flowing into the body of water, a slight shifting of the bamboo and fake plants.

A slight murmur of pleasure left her as she sunk deeper, blowing bubbles with a breath of exasperation leaving her, “{This... this is nice.}”

A figure emerged from the mist drifting off of the water. Water did not splash as the man got in, though the water certainly affected him as his body formed up from the mist. She

looked over, emerging slightly from the water just so that it rested beneath her chin. Finally the figure took full form, that form being Sephiroth's.

He hung back in the water with a towel over his red-orange hair, swim trunks being the only thing he wore.

"Back to being young and attractive as Caldi puts it?" she asked out loud.

"Hmph," he grunted in response not batting an eye, "I do what I want."

All at once his appearance changed, shrinking in fact. In the blink of an eye her sword's projection had transitioned, becoming a young child floating on their back. His hair now was straight gold and his eyes a blazing ruby-crossed-flame.

"And now childlike. I guess that reflects your personality at least," she said with a slight bit of chirp and giggle.

"Bite me. No, really, bite me. Break your damn teeth on my steel," Sephiroth grumbled back.

"Right right," she sighed while leaning back further into the water.

It was just the two of them, water streaming in with steam rising, and then water draining through small drains in the bottom of the man-made spring. A clunk came from bamboo hitting the ground but it was short lived. She looked down, then back up over to her weapon's humanoid form.

"Yesssss?" he asked.

"Sephiroth, do you even need to ask?"

"I don't constantly read your mind or thoughts Elise, just as the one called God doesn't... or at least God shouldn't."

"Hmph... fine fine," she murmured low, "You're supposed to be a teacher, that's what Holly said. So... am I making the right choices?"

“What you do is your own choice Elise. I can’t make decisions for you.”

Her eyes darted and her head turned a bit, the water splashing only a tad as she did so,
“You could at least give me your input.”

“What is bringing this about, the interaction with the Frost Clan leaders I’m guessing,”
he grumbled back with eyes shut.

Even still, he drifted on his back, legs out, arms crossed behind his head so that the
latter may rest on the former.

“Back when- back when I was with Vulfax. I- no, it was just Hell; but I put up with it. I
always wanted to do my best, to help my friends, to... to protect them... even if I didn’t want to
actually fight.”

She sighed, pausing for a moment as her lids shut, exhaling in the process. Slowly, they
drifted again, allowing her to look down at the quivering steamy water.

“I don’t regret becoming a fighter, I really don’t. I just- I question who I am fighting
for.”

“Hoh?” Sephiroth called.

“I wanted to fight for those I cared about- yet in the end, they died because of the war...
because I wasn’t strong enough. I honestly wanted to stop what happened to us from happening to
anyone else... but at the same time, I question the path I have taken.”

“In what way?” Sephiroth asked, opening his eyes and turning his head to the left to
look at her.

“I still had some of my friends, even some new friends. But ever since I started working
with the Tribe- I’ve just felt anger,” she murmured as her hair drooped in front of her face, “They
use people. They’re just like Azala and honestly even the Hive, if not worse. I know they aren’t all
that way but- I just don’t know what to do.”

“Elise...” Sephiroth murmured, sighing after.

His eyes closed for a brief moment as his head turned back around, looking up at the moon and clouds.

“You have an incredible heart. You actually give a damn about people, and about doing what is right. However, you are allowing the expectations and demands of this order misguide you. Even in your bouts of anger, you’ve never once wanted to kill senselessly. You’re haunted with the fact that you’ve killed and caused people to die for seemingly no reason. The Ghouls, Kensa, hell-even blindly trusting your superiors which has gotten people on your team killed. Still, you’ve followed your own path, rough as it may have become.”

“If it’s to protect someone precious to me, or for the greater good, I know I should. Kensa bothers me; but for what I did to those Ghouls. Honestly even just seeing the Tribe’s politics at work. They’d rather let their own allies die if it meant preserving their resources to protect their own interests.”

Her own arms rested behind her head as she now also looked up at the clouded moon. Leaning back, eyes full, she stared upwards, sighing.

“I dunno Sephiroth. I just feel like I’m stuck in a loop and I don’t like it. While this might be for *justice* of some sort, I feel like nothing has changed. Six months serving another Vulfax under Azala, even though it’s different.”

Her mind flashed back to a time, a time where she sat before the patio-area with Lucy.

“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.”

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“Those who truly embrace themselves and what they have faced will always triumph over those who wish to tear them down.”

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“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.

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Her mind flashed back to what lay before her, still staring upwards, “I feel like the Tribe is... mmm. It hurts, it really does. But if I just give up, will any of it even really change?”

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“Life is what you make it, luv,” the voice of Holly flashed before her mind.

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“The choice is yours, young master,” Sephiroth murmured, “If you leave now, things may never change. Just like with Vulfax. They would have destroyed themselves had you not returned to stand your ground.”

Her mind then took her aback once more. Thoughts drifted slow, of Mark, of David and Milly, of Scott and Drake, of Zoey, of Samantha, of her brothers, and of Vulper. Her mind flooded back to the clan as a whole, all of it together after the Battle of Vulfax Valley.

“I suppose... I shouldn’t bow out just yet then. I’m just terrified of going into battle with another squad, a chaotic one. I don’t want to be responsible for anyone else dying, never again.”

Thoughts of Sacho, of Elen, of Destiny and Thomas, they all flooded her immediately. Of Baskel, of Dauntless, of David and Milly nearly, of Domino Squadron nearly.

“You can’t control everything. Things happen, often without reason. What you can do is become stronger, to tip the scale. Fight on with others by your side. Once you fight alone, you’ve lost everything.”

A slight smile opened up on her face as she continued to look up at the sky, “Yeah... Sephiroth?”

“Hmm? What?”

“We’re going to have to work harder, aren’t we?”

“Heh- maybe so young master, maybe so.”

“Then it’s decided,” she announced, her arms pulling away from behind her, hands clapping in front of her, “We’re going to have to work harder and make sure that whatever happens next is for the better. If it means trying to change the Tribe and those in it- then I can’t give up now when I’ve barely begun.”

“Heh,” Sephiroth chuckled, the color of his form fading, the form itself now becoming transparent, “That’s the spirit.”

As Sephiroth faded out, Elise was left alone in the waters, staring up at the projected moon, a flame growing within her eyes. Once more, the bamboo clanked on the ground nearby, while the subtle flow of water continued as it had.