

The Expansion of Darkness

“Arkaza? Arkaza! Lieutenant Rass, go and get the General and Lady Bell immediately. This is vital!” Jarrajod called out.

“Sir yes sir!”

Jarrajod turned, watching the man rush out of the tent while calling out for the two leaders. With a side turn he looked back upon his monitor which now displayed both Vikram and the hologram of Arkaza, all displayed from Elise’s card.

“Best to let this record now. Dammit, what is the meaning of this callout then? Arkaza and the Hive must be working close together. This is not at all fortunate for us-”

Arkaza’s hologram hovered before Vikram, looking right down at him as the two Ghouls bowed. Elise remained in hiding, her head only slightly poking out with the card’s reader held out as well, giving a full view of the meeting at place.

“Milord- you’ll be pleased to learn that we are right on schedule. Thousands of units have been transported from this facility, and we can expect a good few tens of thousands more in the near future.”

“Your progress does not interest me so much as the interference of the Tribe does. They’ve stopped several convoys of Undead already and taken out several of our fellow Vampiric. If we are truly to take over the Earth then we are going to need something new.”

“I assure you milord, they will not be able to stop us. True a few units have been undermined but in the long run we have many more facilities that can crank out just as many units. They will not be able to keep up if we manage to unleash a hundred thousand a month.”

“And yet the Earth is not our only primary target. We need those hundred thousand across multiple worlds. Do not forget, we are a part of the Hive now- we are their major backers in expendable weaponry. Their forces are severely depleted right now until other worlds join the cause. What we produce is valuable.”

“I understand. What I don’t get yet is why we still work for those Dharkanian bastards. We have the means to take them out, surely right?!”

“They may be few in number but the Phantoms are far beyond what we are used to combating Vikram. Despite that, they are up against an entire Empire that spans dozens and dozens of worlds. We are as well. We are best off serving alongside them you see- if we are to achieve our own goals. So with that said, I will not reiterate, what we produce is of value. The Dires are especially valuable and we can not afford to lose many of them this early on. Figure it out or I will find someone more qualified to handle the task at hand.”

Vikram gulped, a slight bit of sweat visible upon his forehead as he replied, “You have nothing to worry about Arkaza, I will not fail.”

“See to it that you don’t. You know damn well what awaits you should you fail. That said, if the Tribe gets suspicious, wipe all data and destroy the facility. I want to leave nothing to chance.”

The glow of the hologram continued to fill the room, illuminating where all had hidden partially at the very least. Elise stood back, shutting the locker more, “This... this is vital- this is a bout of luck if they’re just going to keep talking.”

“I understand. Err- how is the Frostosis situation going sir?”

“Well within expectations so far. The North combined with our forces have decimated the South- and the Tribe have yet to actually step in thinking it is still just an affair of the locals. Until the shard is threatened, or until they realize the loss of Frostosis to the Hive itself, we will continue to hold the advantage. Right now we have pushed the enemy across the hemisphere and are digging deep into their own lands and seas.”

“I trust that my Dires are helping that along?”

“For now. Both Shadow and Leon are breathing down my neck to contribute more of our own might to the effort- so I am going to send some of the Mortiferis and one Executive to oversee our operations.”

“I see, very good. Perhaps you would like me to see to it milord? I have facilities already present on-”

The voices of Vikram and Arkaza went back and forth, the monitor continuing to display shakily. Now many had gathered within the communications tent. Holly and Wesley both stood side by side with Jarrajod close by. Holograms of other Generals and Advisors were also present, all looking to the screen in observation.

“So Arkaza’s forces have joined with the Hive... and they are allied to the Northern Frost Clan.”

“That would explain why they are having such trouble putting down the rebellion.”

“General Ezdorth, Lady Bell, what do you propose?”

“Shh, shut up- be silent,” Wesley grumbled.

“Wes, this is bad either way you look at it,” Holly mumbled.

“I know... Arkaza, The Hive, and the North. Hell- this is going to be a resurgence of the Hive, it won’t just be Dharkanians we have to watch out for if they win this thing. And right now the North is in control of the Temple that holds the Shard.”

“We’re going to have to act, this is beyond simple politics now. I will inform my father,” Holly stated, turning and exiting the scene.

“Bah, that damned Leon,” Wesley growled, clenching his fists.

“-and in turn, I will grant you this. See that you do not fail me, as I said. As an Executive of our forces, failure is not an option.”

“I understand.”

Arkaza stared at Vikram for a few seconds, ceasing only as the transmission was cut, the hologram disappearing immediately. This left just Vikram and the two Ghouls in the room, as far as they knew that is.

“Sir, I feel uneasy about this.”

“Neh- just do your job and everything will be fine.”

“But sir- it’s only a matter of time before the Tribe finds us. Why didn’t you let Lord Arkaza know that they already have the nearby clans and-”

“It does not matter! This- this is MY glory, MY work. I will not let my efforts be undermined by the fear of that white haired Giraffe! Without Hisan, Arkaza has no business telling me what to do!”

“Then- then why put yourself out there?”

“Because I want power, more of it. In the end when all is said and done, I will be the one standing on top. Not Arkaza, not the stupid Dharkanians, it’ll be me- the Great and Powerful Vikram Arghaust!”

“As- as you wish, sir.”

“Now then, we have more batches to produce. Time to stop wasting time. When the Tribe comes for me, I will show them what power truly is!”

His words finished, Vikram walked away, exiting through the only door that left the room. The metal doors could be heard clanging and banging as they flew open, the two Ghouls following close behind- then the crash of them closing. Silence followed for what seemed like hours, just what they had been waiting for. The locker door opened with a slight grind, the closet door creaked.

The entire group came out of hiding, stepping out near the table. Elise looked around, nodding to the rest as she pressed a button on the card, “Jarrajod are you-”

“Yes Ms. Bakuuva. I’m actually here with General Ezdorth and others now. Lady Bell was here moments ago and-”

“Enough of that,” Wesley’s voice boomed, “I’m going to inform Tony and Zoey to lay low with their teams for now. They’ll plant the explosives and maintain their status as investigative. I want your team to explore more of the facility, find anything that you can. If we attack, I know that they’ll destroy anything they have. There is no doubt more down in the depths of that building.”

“So we just need to find the secondary access since we can’t just take the elevator... shouldn’t be too hard,” Britt replied with a bit of a low murmur.

“There are more doors on the translator than there are on the old blueprints of that building. There HAS to be another way down. Find it and report back once you’re able.”

“Copy that,” Elise replied, pressing another button on the card.

Effortlessly she placed it back in a coat pocket, then turned to face her team, “Where should we start?”

“The old elevator shaft actually. It’s near the back of the building. That seems like the most obvious, right?”

“That’s a fair point. Alright, lets check that out.”

“Alright, lets do this!”

The group turned and raced, exiting right out of the door which had been left open, turning away from the metal doors back down the hallway.

Demons in Human Skin

Grinding metal and shaking materials, creaking wood and a crunching set of bars, an elevator in the dark descended down a very old and unused shaft. Near the back of the facility as called, an old elevator system indeed stood. An old box realistically of wood with metal parts atop, then a cage of steel to open and close off access. Fairly large, enough for a good few dozen people, it held only five now as it moved down.

Elise hung to the back with arms crossed close, hair drooping before her face. Sora and Caldori hung near the right, Rusty towards the front, and Britt the left. All in all they stood mostly ready to move, all except for Elise. The rickety cage shook like a truck hitting a bump on the road, only a short jolt but soon followed by others.

In just a few minutes, the old elevator came out of the shaft, now descending into an open area. All of them looked ahead, light flowing over them. Before the elevator stood walls of metal and tile. A final jolt came as it hit the bottom, Rusty quick to throw the cage open.

“Coms probably aren’t going to work down here,” Britt muttered stepping forward behind Rusty, the two of them being the first to exit out onto the tile, their steps echoing.

“We’ll just have to be careful then,” Elise replied, arms lowering as she moved forward behind Sora and Caldori, soon passing ahead of them.

“There’s a hatch up ahead,” Rusty murmured, eyes aglow, “Looks like a vault door. Only- looks like it’s reversed.”

“Reversed?”

“Yeah Callie, reversed. I can see it clear as friggen day, they put the door in backwards. I see the mechanisms to open that thing from the inside on our side.”

“Strange. Maybe they did it that way to lock any infiltrators inside?” Sora questioned.

“More likely to keep whatever is already on the inside ON the inside,” Britt finished.

“That’s clearly where we have to go,” Elise mumbled, “Lets hop to it.”

In no time at all, the vault door groaned open, swinging slow as the entire group pushed. Heavy, unlocked, and just in the way- that is what it was at that point. It screeched as it opened, finally ceasing when pushed far enough open for the group to slip out of into another set of halls. White, lit, filled with crates and mechanisms to move said crates.

Doors stood scattered throughout the hall further ahead with many branching paths, windows even visible to peer into several of the rooms.

“I’d call this the main facility,” Caldori mumbled.

“Without a doubt.”

“Hey get down!”

The group ducked, flying behind several crates as a door swung open. Two in lab coats exited, eyes aglow like Ghouls, pushing a single wheelchair. In the chair sat a woman, bound in a straight jacket, eyes droopy, head lopsided. An IV ran straight into her arm, a strange orange liquid in the back attached to a pole connected to the chair.

The two Ghouls, smiling, moved on down the hall, slow, one pushing, the other writing words down on a clipboard. As they moved on, their footsteps fading out, the group all stood. They came close together, their own steps echoing off the halls, then proceeded. Elise at the head and the two brothers to the rear, Caldori at the middle with Sora.

Sora broke from the group, racing towards the first window.

“Hey- Sora, don’t break formation! They could see you if they’re in those” Rusty hissed.

“It’s one way glass, don’t worry,” Britt mumbled.

“Calm da- whoa, what the absolute fuck? This room is full of corpses!”

The group joined him in no time at all, every one of them peering in. Indeed, the room had corpses strung about everywhere. Body parts from organs on ice and floating in liquid, to limbs hanging by hooks, corpses sewn heavily together in a mishmash of pieces. To the far back

was a torso of half darker skin low, breasts and a woman's top in a lighter color, one wolf-like man right arm, and a head with a face sewn together with parts from at least three different faces.

"Survey says we found where they assemble their Undead, or at least one location," Rusty growled.

"So they can just use any body parts and sew them together?" Elise questioned.

"Yeah," Caldori said with a nod, "Like you heard before, they can just do that. The spells they use to resurrect them does some partial healing and will fully attach whatever is sewn on, so long as it somewhat connects. There wouldn't be some eight armed wolf since that isn't natural- but they can combine different species like Zaherian and Drachen if they want to."

"Hey guys-" Sora called, "Weapons room right next door."

Elise stepped over, head at an angle to peer in as she walked up on the window. Wall to wall guns, grenades, RPG's, the works. It looked like a full armory in a room of about thirty meters in length. Racks of guns and daggers, spears, axes. In the back there was even body armor, the same used by the group Elise faced off against prior.

"Oi, they actually have a room back here to manufacture weapons too!" Rusty called out as he came upon another window.

Elise carried forward, passing by another door and reaching another window. Her movement halted at once as she peered inside the well-lit room. Inside, several gurneys with people lying down upon, brown straps securing arms and legs and torsos, even heads on some. More IVs with the orange liquid hung near, flowing right into their bodies.

"GRAAAAAAAAAAAAAA-!!!"

She jumped back, head shooting to her left. Her eyes peered further down the hall whilst the others also turned their attention. More screaming came from two doors and two windows ahead on the left side. Slowly Elise crept along, her left arm held back and her hand flexed open.

Before long a view of what was inside became clear. More screaming, screaming from people. Her eyes quivered. Several in lab coats moved around a dozen in chairs who were strapped, more IVs hooked into them- only it was not the same liquid. In clear text, it was written *Warning-Toxic Mateiral- Cyanide 9.5L*.

Elise stumbled backwards, eyes continuing to shake, her breath quickening. The screams ramped up as two Ghouls wheeled in with two more wheelchairs. One Ghoul stood at the foot of one gurney with a clipboard, scribbling away with a smile on her face. The one in said gurney screamed only for a bit longer before going silent- eyes sunk in, mouth hung open, body tensing and then releasing.

“What in the absolute fuck is this?!” Rusty roared from behind Elise.

“Wh-wha-what-” Caldori shook.

“Bastards-!” Elise hissed, immediately grabbing for Sephiroth.

A hand grabbed her wrist from behind, her head and body swinging around to face Britt. His own eyes were two-thirds closed, yet dead locked on Elise as he held her. His own head then shook, “Don’t. You and Rusty can’t.”

“Why?! Give me one reason not to go in there and save those people!”

“They’re already dead... and it could blow the mission. I don’t like it any more than you but-”

More wailing screams came from up ahead as the lights flickered several times in a span of four seconds. A distinct *brrrrrrrr* could be heard as well from another room up ahead. Sora approached said window, peering in. All at once he flew back and landed on the group, shaken, breathing heavily.

“Sora, what happened?!”

“Th-th-they’re doing the people in there- but not just- I mean-”

“Speak clearly!”

“Keep your damn voice down Rusty-” Britt hissed.

“Th-they’re electrocuting people in there to the point where they char and burn-” Sora finally choked out.

Caldori stepped away from yet another window, “I see drawn and quartering here, and racks. Blood everywhere but no one inside right now.”

“What the hell is this place?” Sora whimpered.

A gun shot could be heard from further ahead, heavily muffled but still loud enough due to the halls. This time it was Rusty who approached another set of windows, looking in. Blood spattered the glass as a human crashed into it. A hole was present, large and spattered where a bullet had blown through. Slowly the human slid down the glass, blood gushing out of their nose.

Rusty looked down, legitimately horrified, then looked ahead. A Ghoul moved behind another human with gun in hand. It didn’t take long, the gun was then placed to the back of the human’s head and the trigger pulled. Another pop and another splurt of blood flew everywhere as the human fell over. Towards the left side of that room was another Ghoul with a clipboard, writing everything down with a smile.

Rusty stepped away, watching as two other Ghouls kicked the executed humans into a pile.

“What the absolute ever loving fuck is this shit?!” Rusty spat out amidst the screams from other rooms.

“And you want me to just ignore this?!” Elise hissed, hand still on her katana.

“For the time being! Look, we’re all pissed, even Rusty whom you never get along with is pissed. For now we just have to-”

A door shut just behind, followed by the chatter of voices.

“Yeah and so I was thinking we report that Subject 2289-05143-H lasted shorter than 2289-05143-N.”

“Well of course. H was a little girly girl man baby and we all know that- eh?”

Both Ghouls stopped in place, staring ahead. Elise slightly turned, viewing them at a gap of about five meters. All the rest turned round as Britt released Elise.

Silence...

“Uh-” one Ghoul began.

The shing of an unsheathed sword came next as the two backed away, followed by a mad dash of foot steps. Elise shot forward, sword half drawn ready to be swung. Both Ghouls backed up, one heading for a button on the wall as the other reached into their coat pocket. The first Ghoul drew a pistol, silver and rather old fashion in appearance, aiming it out.

In the next instance blood flew across the ground and onto the walls, a thump following as fabric drifted. The first Ghoul yelled out, left hand grabbing where their right hand had been, which now laid upon the floor. The second Ghoul stumbled back as a louder thud lit up the hall, their whole arm sliced clean off.

“GYAHHHH!” the Ghoul began, stopping as Elise’s blade flew into their mouth.

The other Ghoul simply fell over, a boot slamming onto their throat, held down by Elise. One at sword point to the back of their throat, the other at stomp point unable to speak hardly due to the pressure. Both were pinned.

“You two are going to tell me everything I want to know or so help me, I will peel you both like bananas!” she spat, eyes of fire moving from the one on the ground to the one with the sword in its mouth.

“G-g-go to hell-” the one on the ground choked.

Blood sprayed again and immediately something had begun to roll across the floor. The second Ghouls’ eyes went huge, staring as his partner’s head rolled away. A blade of light stuck out from Elise’s heel, much like a clever, having decapitated in an instant. Her eyes went from the now-dead Ghoul back to the one with Sephiroth in their mouth, the blade slowly pulling out.

“Alright, lets try that again, tell me what I want to know- NOW!”

“Damn,” Rusty murmured from behind, the others all collecting in observation.

“Eh- it’s, it’s a research lab. We’re trying to find the best candidates with parts for our new Undead- the Dires,” the Ghoul said with a quiver.

“Dires?”

“Y-yeah yeah, super zombies. Heh heh, super zombies that will wipe you and your friends clear off the-”

Sephiroth was placed to the Ghoul’s throat, a bit of blood trickling as the sharp edge cut in, “Rephrase that-”

“EEP- alright alright. We’re trying to make new Undead capable of replacing a platoon of normal Undead easily- super skilled, strong, even intelligent. For them we need the best material. We test our subjects to see if they are worthy. Those that aren’t we execute if they don’t die in our experiments. Listen- let me live, alright? I’m defenseless. Heh heh- you wouldn’t kill me right? I can do you no har-”

Blood, again, splattered the wall and the floor behind, followed by another thud and a roll. A splotch of blood flew out and splattered across Elise’s left cheek, her eyes cold as she stared forward. The Ghoul’s body collapsed backwards, crashing with a thud.

“I have no mercy for your type, even if you were sincere you bastard,” she growled, lowering Sephiroth.

Britt looked on, jaw hung, eyes aflutter. Beside him were Caldori and Sora, both of whom looked onward horrified. Rusty even stood back, shock flooding his face; though quickly that expression went from hung to tight and smirking, “Heh... even you can be cold when given a reason eh? Amusing.”

Elise turned, blood still dripping from her katana and still upon her face, “Come on. We have a job to do.”

Secrets of the Mines

“Tony, this is Jarrajod. Have you found anything at all?”

“Nothing yet, my team is still searching. Zoey’s team is in position just awaiting orders. Whatever they have, there is nothing up here. Chelsea blew the hatch open off this one room earlier and we found a mainframe but it hasn’t been touched in years.”

Jarrajod sighed at his table, flicking a switch. Wesley and Holly stood close behind him, looking over multiple monitors.

“They found some of the deployment locations but those are only recent ones left lying around,” Holly mumbled.

“These bastards are smart,” Wesley growled, “What about Bakuuva’s team?”

“No word,” Jarrajod replied, “Sentries have spotted no movement, teams headed by both Tony and Zoey have reported nothing aside from the ordinary thus far. We have tried to get ahold of them but the signal appears to be just too weak.”

“So they’re either far under ground or they’re being jammed. Bah! Never should’ve sent a bunch of squirts in there.”

“Calm down General,” Holly replied looking over to him, “Elise will not fail.”

Elise’s eyes remained lit ember as she carried on through the halls with her squadmates close behind. It was a similar formation, Elise at the head with Sora behind, then Caldori, then the two brother side by side. There was no chill whatsoever among the group except from Caldori. Elise appeared enraged, Rusty looked the type to rip a person’s head off, Britt seemed disgusted, and Sora was plain mad- leaving just Caldori as flustered.

Around another corner they turned and yet another hall. Britt broke from the rear at that point, handing a data pad forward to Sora before falling back. Sora glossed over it at once, “Alright... that elevator from the warehouse is up ahead according to the Echo Translator.”

“Good,” Elise mumbled.

Right around another turn and they came to an opening, a wide open doorway lay ahead. Their steps faded out as their paces slowed, becoming far more composed and careful. In no time at all they had crossed through... before them was metal, a metal floor with railing. Stairs led downward into a darkened abyss, metal stairs.

“Whoa-”

“Gonna guess that your fancy tech didn’t say there was a big hole in the ground eh?”
Rusty muttered.

“No, no it definitely didn’t. But that’s impossible. There was floor and walls right here! The elevator shaft should be... up that way yet!”

“The translator wouldn’t be wrong,” Elise murmured, “Just as there’s no point in this stairway. This is like a fire escape, it doesn’t work industrially for any reason.”

“What are you getting at?”

“There is probably a switch that extends something from the other side out here. This is probably a shut off measure like the vault.”

“Should we- should we call in reinforcements for this? I mean, it’s clear that the facility continues on the other side of this,” Britt asked.

“Apparently not unless she’s right about that,” Rusty growled.

A sigh left Elise for a moment, eyes shut only for that moment. Her left arm was then extended, hand flexing. All at once a white glow appeared around, the glow then streaming off in flows congregating before her palm. In just seconds a white energy ball had been formed and with a simple retraction and thrust of the arm, the ball flew forward.

It went slow at first, fading rather quick; but it indeed lasted long enough. The cavern illuminated slightly and to the other side another vault door was visible. Slots also became visible along the sides of the vault door.

“Unless anyone here can fly- we either go down below and try to find a way up top which I’m sure there are ways... OR we wait for them to throw the floor and walls over this way again.”

“Would there be controls on this side though?”

“Only if remote probably though I doubt that Sora,” Britt murmured, “It’s no doubt a security measure that that’s setup like that, and the stairs are probably here for a reason.”

“Lets just go,” Rusty again growled, trailing slightly as he began to descend.

“Wait Rusty-” Britt began, stopping as Elise began to follow, “Huh?”

“It’s the fastest way across, better than waiting out in the open for the platform to extend.”

“Geh- guh... fine.”

The pitter patter of small paws and squeaking rats became more and more as they went down, water dripping and splashing on the ground. Their footsteps were silent though with some form of echo the further down they went, winding around every so many meters to another section.

“How old do you think these mines are?” Caldori murmured.

“A century or better maybe. They’ve been abandoned for decades ever since the Drachen and Vampire populations took over the area.”

“You mean Trolls and Goblins mostly, right Rusty?” Sora asked.

“Sure whatever. They do like to hide in chasms like this, giant centipedes too.”

The ball of light Elise had tossed across had maintained, drifting down with them bit by bit, illuminating the bottom which Britt and Sora were both actively observing. Elise still followed behind Rusty.

“Hey, I see a door down there and- tracks?” Sora commented

“Mine cart tracks, new looking too,” Britt grumbled.

Down on the ground level they stood around the tracks, spick and span new not even anchored down to the ground. The ball of light continued to hover, drifting around. There was not much at the bottom of the stairs beyond the metal door; though multiple tunnels did branch off with wood supports in place. Whatsmore, mining equipment sat along the walls themselves, some relatively newer as well and the rest worn down to the nub in cases.

“So... Arkaza is having his people mine... for what though?” Elise mumbled.

“Probably some sort of ore remains down here that’s of value to them. What and why though I can not say.”

“Something to do with the ritual to make Undead?”

“Maybe the Dires?”

“Oi, how about we rip this door off and go searching for some answers.”

“I like that answer. Elise?”

“Got it,” she mumbled approaching the door, “I’ll blow it off its hinges I suppose and-”

“Wait a minute,” Britt called, approaching quickly.

“What?”

Britt placed a hand upon the knob and gave it a simple twist. With no issue, the knob turned and the door pulled out.

“The lack of security is frightening.”

“Maybe there are workers out and about down here. With that in mind lets get going,” Britt stated moving in.

All moved forward, the door shutting behind them. Inside was another hall like up above, lit, and metal. The group proceeded on, no doors or anything in sight for a good bit until

after a solid minute or two, they reached the end of the hall. Another door stood between them and the next section, one that was then opened. Inside sat the elevator shaft they had been seeking, the one to the warehouse.

“This is all that’s in here,” Rusty growled.

“So the next section is up,” Elise murmured looking upward.

“More stairs over here,” Sora called.

“Perfect, another long hike,” Caldori groaned as the group advanced towards the next stairwell.

Jarrjod stood before multiple monitors, looking over different statistics, different video feeds, and different reports. Again people were moving in and out, the General and Lady Bell nowhere to be found at that moment.

“Hmm... calculative- more data has come back from the system used by these thugs and it points to records of several proprietary needs to-”

“English if you would!”

“Right right. Basically, I’m learning about their new Undead and some of where they want to ship out to. The problem is that this is a terminal that regularly wipes itself.”

“A terminal?”

“Correct. It is connected to a system somewhere in that facility, likely down below considering Tony’s group found a mainframe nerve that feeds down into the ground and across the upper area. I anticipate that Elise and her group are about to find exactly what we’ve been in search of.”

“Hopefully they get it all figured out then.”

Another door shut behind as the group of five made their way down yet another hall, this time across carpeting. Painted plaster walls, wooden regular doors, it seemed like the inside of a normal house at first.

“Keep close-” Elise whispered, leading onward.

Around another bend and it became visible. Down the hall, it was clear that the wall angled off to the ground and stairs were visible alongside the hall. Ahead- a massive opening to another room complete with monitors. Slowly the group crept ahead and stopped short of passing through the hall.

“Go!”

Quickly the group shot around the stairs and barreled into the room, ducking behind several cabinets stationed near the entrance. Elise moved around, peering out from behind a large system. Multiple monitors with keyboards and mice, entire tanks of liquid with bodies floating inside, wires and other sensors hooked up to them. Large capsules of bodies stood everywhere.

In the center was another holo table, then a regular table beside that with a body sewn together atop; though still an incomplete body. To the far back of the room stood an archway, runes engraved into it.

“Survey says we just found Doctor Strange’s laboratory.”

“And speak of the devil,” Elise mumbled staring back towards where they had come from.

Down the stairs beside the hall they emerged from, two Ghouls from before moved along with Vikram Arghaust close behind.

Contract of War

“Update me on the status of the project,” Vikram called out as he slowly approached one of the tables holding a corpse upon its surface.

“Executive Arghaust! Uh- sir, everything is proceeding as planned,” one of the lab techs quickly replied.

“Heh, that is good,” he murmured in response, stopping just before one of the tables, “The Dire Project is presenting us with great fruit. It won’t be long until we can begin our other experiments for the greater forces.”

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The group of five maintained their presence, peaking around the corner of the systems. Sora was the first to pull his head back, followed then by Britt and Caldori, with Rusty being fourth.

“Alright, so-” Sora whispered, “We should probably report in to the General.”

“How are we going to do that?” Caldori questioned, “We’re way below ground and there is all kinds of interference.”

“Should one of us try and get back out do you think?”

“No Britt, that’s stupid, the chances of being caught are pretty damn high. Just use one of your stick gizmos and hack their systems when they aren’t looking,” Rusty growled.

Elise’s eyes narrowed as she stared out. Far in the background of the room stood a tall archway, dozens of symbols carved right into the stone. Panels and lights hung all around, platforms connected to it with wires taboot.

“I’m saying we need to head up top and report in, it would be safe. There’s too much going on here to-”

“Everyone be quiet,” Elise hissed.

“What is it?”

“Someone’s coming.”

Vikram turned his body a full ninety degrees towards another doorway. Two figures moved through the doorway first, both drenched in black with vivid outlines, the only thing visible being a red star pattern upon whatever garments they wore.

Her eyes went big.

The two figures moved into the light, both in long robes of black flashing that pattern. The first moved in, of dirty blond hair long and flowing before the visored mask covering their face- a simple structure of light gray and a large red crescent visor for both eyes. For the other they possessed rigid black hair with a far more stunning mask- a jester mask. A four point star held over the right eye which remained invisible, then to the left a seven sided star revealing a half closed glowing sapphire eye. A smile was carved into the second’s mask, which itself was split in half with a dark gray to the right and a gold to the left.

The four behind Elise poked their own heads out to grant observation of the two.

“Those two are Hive,” Sora mumbled.

Rusty and Britt both looked ahead with shaken eyes, stunned in silence. Elise glanced back, then looked ahead, “Are they Phantoms? Or are they lower in rank?”

“Hard to tell,” Caldori murmured, “I don’t think they are. Judging by the style of robe... and the fact that the Dark Star isn’t upon them, I’d say they are probably Sepcters.”

“Which means that a Phantom could be nearby-”

“Speak of the devil,” Elise growled, “There’s a third one approaching.”

A third figure had begun to approach from the darkness behind the two masked goons, and unlike them a single eye was visible the entire time- a golden sort of amber. Their foot steps echoed as they approached, soon passing from shadows into the light. Elise’s hands quivered, her whole back going stiff. Beside her were gasps, then a shove from a retreating Sora.

“B-but that’s-!”

A trench coat of black and red stars, fur at the tail, fur at the cuffs of the sleeves, and then a gray fur neckband right around the head. Long flowing brown hair with a mild spike to the front, cut short behind- the jacket itself appearing to be sewn up at the front with a zipper amidst the stitching pattern.

“Why- why is he here?” Britt mumbled.

“This- this is not good,” Rusty growled.

“No, it’s not. Shit- retreating might not even be an option with him here,” Elise said with a shake.

“Ah,” Vikram called, “Phantom Lord Leon Sycamore- I am honored.”

Vikram and the Ghouls beside him immediately bowed as Leon strolled out of the darkness with both Specters to his lead.

“I- I must admit I was surprised to hear that you were coming here in person-” Vikram choked out.

“Why should it be that surprising? As the head of the Hive, I have a duty to check in on all aspects of our operation. You’ll do well to learn this, Vikram Arghaust,” he coldly replied.

-

Silence drifted among the five, all ducked far back behind the systems at that point. Sora’s eyes were huge, shaking viciously, his breath increasing rapidly to the point of hyperventilation nearly. Rusty and Britt both sat in silence, their eyes down to their side. Caldori and Elise both looked down with half narrowed gazes, the latter of whom appeared to be lost in thought.

“This is bad,” Caldori whimpered, “I-I never thought Leon would be here, no one could have predicted that.”

“Is... is he really that powerful?” Britt murmured.

“He is the student of Cortez, noted as the Hive’s one-man-army who can fight for days and days on end. His actual strength is unknown but he destroyed General Ezdorth at the Battle of Nospheross supposedly with less than minimal power.”

-

“So Lord Sycamore uh- how can I be of service?”

Leon held his approach near the edge of the holotable, the two in masks moving back behind him, “Exactly how many of your new *Dires* are ready for deployment?”

“Er- well, from this facility we have about twenty. The uh- the humans of this world are not that good for material.”

“Pity, I would have thought someone of your caliber would have figured that out,” Leon stated, observing as Vikram looked away with a swell of rage spreading across his face, “No matter. I want to know what you have in total. The resistance on Frostosis is getting rather... intense. The South is becoming rather tiresome.”

“Ah I see I see. You don’t need to worry- Lord Arkaza has already spoken to me about how to go about handling Frostosis and we are right on track.”

“Has he now?”

“Yes, he wants to prove our use and position to you Dharkanians in order to properly defeat the Tribe. We have multiple facilities now as you know for experimentation. The only thing is that I need other species to work on before long, better species. As I said, these humans are fragile and nearly worthless for anything beyond simple grunt work.”

“Produce what we want and you’ll get what you want. If you need something sturdier then you shall have it.”

“I thank you sir.”

“We have much to do thanks to the loss of Azala at the hands of that brat of his.”

“Bakuuva? Ha, I assure you, she will be dealt with. Our spies know all about their little Project Stingray. While impressive it won’t produce the fruit they need to stop us. My only concern is that if the Tribe finds out too quickly about our War Pact, they’ll join with some of the systems we’re trying to change.”

“A fair assessment,” Leon stated, now walking around the side of the table counterclockwise, “It will all begin with the South being knocked out of the war. If one world folds, others will surely join us. There are more than enough of us Dharkanians left alive and free to help push everything along; but the key is showing how fragile the Tribe- no, rather the Lightonian Armor, really is.”

Elise maintained her view of the ongoing conversation, eyes slowly drifting back towards the archway. A spark had appeared, followed by yet another, then a wave of sparks. All at once an alarm had begun to sound, blaring loud and repeatedly. A swirling vortex of silvery energy had begun to appear within the archway- quickly expanding out with a burst of energy. Finally a burst of pressure flew out as the silver aura collapsed to become a large void, purple electricity surging along the outside.

“I will show you a demonstration of the power of the Dires,” Vikram announced, pressing a button on a nearby panel.

Another alarm began to blare, a capsule of liquid turning green and then red, bubbling fiercely. Ghouls stationed right beside the capsule stepped back quickly, eyes growing big, “L-Lord Arghaust!”

“Heh-” Vikram chuckled.

SHATTER

Glass exploded from the capsule, flying off in all directions. A loud clang filled the room, a hulking figure dropping down onto the ground straight from the capsule. Eyes big and

wide, whites orange and pupils purple- a deafening roar left its mouth as it then howled out. The Ghouls both stepped back, each nervously whimpering.

Another roar left the Undead's mouth, following which it lunged forth straight into the two Ghouls. Blood quickly flew into the air as the Undead's hands flew into the two Ghoul's chests. Both yowled out, their bodies quickly flung aside. A third Ghoul backed away, yelling out, "HELP!"

Figures dropped from above, all in armor and with rifles in hand, their eyes also glowing with the essence of the Undead. Upon landing they all groaned, their weapons raised aimed straight at the Dire. The Dire roared out again and broke into a dash, arms crossed in front of it as it crashed right into a trio of Undead. Said hands then reached out, grabbing hold of two of the rifles as the Undead were sent flying.

RATA TAT TAT TAT

Bodies dropped in no time at all as the Dire roared out, firing on the other zombies. One by one they all dropped until the group of twelve were nothing more than stains upon the ground, fallen to pieces. The last Ghoul backed away, loudly whimpering, hyperventilating at that. More zombies flew in with roars of their own behind the Dire. In a flicker of movement the Dire launched up into the air and spun run, landing two powerful kicks on the heads of both zombies.

Both dropped as their heads spun roar, gurgling and grunting. Shots rang out again, three final zombies unleashing a fire storm straight into the Dire. It didn't halt, instead charging straight into those three Undead as well. Shots rang from the guns the Dire held, shots that flew right into the squad of Undead.

"That's enough," Vikram called out.

The Dire howled one more time, becoming stationary immediately after Vikram's words. The three zombies collapsed full of holes while the Ghoul themselves fell backwards huffing and exhaling quickly, eyes completely dancing and void of any form of attention. Far back by the panels, Elise stepped back herself, growling.

“How awful- his own subordinates-” Caldori stated.

“This is bad,” Rusty growled.

Vikram turned fully towards Leon, “There you have it sir, a small test. Granted it wasn’t all that but if one Dire could take down so many Undead and my Ghouls with so little effort while receiving hits- heh, imagine what a platoon of Dires could do to the humans.”

“Hmph. You’re right though, Zombies are hardly a suitable test. Their reaction time is slow and they are not as durable as a human. Still, compared to the average Zombie and even most human warriors, that display was promising. Very well. Ship what you have to Frostosis immediately,” Leon concluded, eyes adrift.

All at once another door opened at another end of the room. Capsules were rolled in on large wheeling carts, all pushed by other Undead and Ghouls, all heading right for the archway now alit by a portal. In just seconds, said carts and capsules were then wheeled right through the archway, dozens of zombies and Ghouls following close behind.

“Eh heh heh heh, this will be good, very good!” Vikram laughed.

“Quite,” Leon murmured, “I accept your proposal fully. We will certainly be in touch if this plays out as you have planned.”

Elise ducked back behind, looking at the others, “This is not good. If those things get out onto the battle fields... it’ll be a massacre.”

“We need to report back to Lady Bell and General Ezdorth immediately,” Caldori concluded.

“-and before I go,” Leon continued from the center of the room, “How about we do something about the five mice hiding in the back over there, eh?”

Elise’s eyes split open, her cornea and pupils shrinking as her face choked up. The rest all had similar reactions, stressed instantaneously. Leon’s right arm extended out to his side with a turn of his head towards where the group was hiding. Blackness immediately spread along said arm

and sleeve, cultivating right before his palm. Then, all at once, a blast of Dark Energy flew out of his hand straight for the equipment.

CRASH!!

The entire structure blew apart, flames and smoke blew out- as did the five. Elise and Britt flew to the right around the system, while the other three flew left, narrowly evading the blast itself. Elise landed on both feet, eyes glanced towards the explosion and then straight ahead with a glare, locked right onto Leon. Vikram beside said Dark Warrior stumbled for but a second before regaining his composure- while Leon just stood there with his arm out and his head still turned towards them, darkness still flickering.

Trapped

The five clumped close, flames dancing straight around them for only a minute moment in time before scattering into the eternal nothingness. Both Britt and Rusty glared forward, while Caldori and Sora took a back approach with eyes shaken. Elise maintained her ground, hand upon the hilt of her weapon. Leon's arm slowly lowered as his body finished a full turn to be viewed from front in full by the group, Vikram still beside him appearing semi-startled.

Her face drew into a scowl, teeth in full grit as the hand closed upon Sephiroth's handle, "Damn him."

Leon's cloak flapped open near the coat tails once, then a second time as the darkness drifted away, strung around as if responding to a release of pressure. His eyes locked upon Elise, burning, filled with pure venom- the likes of which one witnesses eye to eye with a hungry Saltwater Croc.

"It is... a pleasure to meet you, at long last Elise Bakuuva," Leon announced, his eyes remained deadlocked on her form.

Those beside her turned their heads, now facing the back of Elise who again changed stance with a slight shift. Her feet swept round, one out and the other in retreat, positioned ready to spring, "You know me?" she questioned in a mild nervous tone, a gulp half-heartedly within her voice.

"Of course. Everyone among my rank knows of you. The brat who took down the Drachen King, Azala Bakuuva. It was an impressive feat to take him down. My agents who were there that day observed it all and I must say- we are truly impressed by your progress."

"Progress? So you guys have had your eyes on me for awhile."

"Heh- yes. We know about Project Stingray. You are not Bell's only pet, far from. She had produced many a strong warrior; though you are one of the very few we have yet to kill."

"So what's stopping you?" she growled with eyes closed a touch more, short of a full on glare yet more than enough with a slight forward tilt of her head.

“I believe you to know better than that. You know we’ve had our eyes on you, so you should know that we know more than enough about you. A young teen looking to protect what she loves, looking to avenge what has been lost, looking to bring about justice. Thing is- what if I were to say that we are not the apparent bad guys here?”

“Preposterous!” Sora spat out, “You Dharkanians, you’re all vile bastards! You started this!”

“Sora!” Caldori hissed, quick to throw herself around him with a hand over his mouth.

“You’re not the first one to state that,” Elise called back, “Why should I listen this time and not any other?”

“Heh. Surely enough time has passed to see some of the Tribe’s own darkness. From that loud mouth toad parading around with your new master- thinking that he is tough shit, all while you are continually used in a conflict you don’t fully grasp. But if anything Shadow says is sufficive, you know she gave you that hellish life just to raise a weapon and that should say enough, right?” Leon replied with a grin, smirking off to his left side with humored eyes.

“Yes, I- I am well aware of what she did,” Elise replied, her tone softening along with her stance; though in no time at all it resharpended, her stance just as firm as she looked fiercely back, “But I have come away from that with a unique life and goal that I wouldn’t trade back.”

“You may see it that way now but ask yourself, how much do you truly know about the Tribe? Perhaps I overestimated your perception- or perhaps they are shadowing you from the true dread within their ranks. Heh, no matter, that can’t last for forever.”

Again her stance softened, becoming slightly more casual as Leon went on.

“Like so many others Miss Bakuuva, you are simply being used by your new... adopters. We may be using these barbaric meat heads,” he replied once more, gesturing towards Vikram, “But they are to combat the full force of the Tribe itself. And unto you, Miss Bakuuva, I would like to extend my hand.”

“What do you mean?” she growled back.

“What I am proposing is the notion of having you join our cause.”

Her head flew back a square, her eyes sent aflutter. Behind the entire group tripped up much in the same manner, full bodies put into it. Britt immediately gave off a scowl as he returned a look to Leon, “No way, Elise is one of us, she’d never join you!”

Leon gave a short glance towards Britt, again smirking big, “So sure are you? Perhaps not at this present moment; but you know it, and I know it. The Tribe is not as holy as they preach themselves to be. They do enjoy selling out their allies if it benefits them, while also leaving so called mundane affairs to their allies, even if it means the potential deaths of said allies. When push came to shove, were they not ready to simply nuke the entirety of the Vulfax Valley just to silence one known enemy of that time? All that over Azala, I can’t say that’s very wise, right?”

Her head hung a bit, her gaze shifting down to the ground at her right. At that moment, Leon’s arms flew out, almost as if inviting an embrace, welcoming Elise forward, “Come now, I know just how smart you are. You know that I am right.”

“No-” she choked out, glancing from the ground back to Leon, glaring now, “You- I won’t believe a word that you say. You’re the enemy here, not Holly, not the Tribe, you! You people broke the peace, you planted the seeds of corruption and power in my clan, you were going to sell us out as pawns to fight for you. I refuse to believe a word that you say!”

The smug grin of Leon quickly faded, his arms lowering with his eyes and expression, “That’s... too bad. If that’s how it’s going to be, we’ll end this here. Your resolve makes you a threat, and a witness.”

She blinked.

Standing around the group were dozens of Undead, all normal-level zombies with melee and long range weapons drawn. Many began to drool, shifting as they stood stationary.

“W-when did-” Rusty choked.

“From the very beginning,” Leon replied, “Darkness is my ability do not forget. I can easily make it so your eyes see only what I want you to see, or rather what I don’t want seen.”

“Bastard!” Elise choked out, quickly unsheathing Sephiroth with her left hand, holding the weapon outward with both hands.

“Mmm. Alright then,” Vikram muttered.

With a simple flicker of light the Vampire Elite vanished, appearing in the next instant right behind the Undead surrounding the group, “In any event, I’ll be sure to take the girl alive. Realistically any of them would make for good material; but for her, the one who took down Azala, she’ll be a specialty.”

The group crowded closer, back to back as the Undead moved in unison closer step by step. Both Rusty and Britt raised their arms, taking on a basic boxer stance. Caldori and Sora moved to their backs. Elise maintained her position, looking around with sharpened eyes.

“Not a lot of openings here, are there,” Sora muttered.

“No, no there are not,” Rusty growled back.

“In that case... Sora, lets go with Plan Ten,” Caldori murmured.

“Plan Ten? Heh, you’ve got it Callie. Everyone, hit the deck in sync with us and get ready to move.”

“Why? What are you going to do?” Elise asked.

“Watch and you’ll see,” Sora replied, raising both of his arms up in front of him, hands outstretched.

The various Undead with long range weapons held said weapons up, for most that being rifles. The rest stood ready, their weapons held up. Vikram narrowed his eye, observing with both hands placed upon his cane.

“Now!”

The group dropped to the ground as Sora brought his arms down. Dropping to the ground himself, both hands slammed onto the ground, a vast white glow appearing around him for

only a split second. In the next instance a blasting puff of dust and smoke flew high into the air, a thick cloud which quickly obstructed all manner of sight. On the outside Vikram's eye widened as the smoke engulfed him.

"Now Callie!"

"Got it! Dance of the Fireflies!"

Both of her arms flew up, electricity surging quickly around each finger and thumb. The ten flows of sparkling power jetted outward, firing off in all directions like bullets out of a gun barrel, a high pitched pew sound following. The electricity scattered, crashing into several of the zombies, which now had begun to open fire as well with multiple ratta-tat-tats. Several were struck by the electricity, bullets of which burst on impact scattering a net of yellow static right around the targets.

Those hit both fell and flew, six in total falling from the fight immediately. Others fell, struck by their own fire- or rather the fire of their comrades. Both Sora and Caldori remained down as the other three sprung into action, Britt and Rusty being swift and quick as they flew into selected targets. Upper cuts and sideways smacks first, then strikes straight forward into their faces. Several more fell in the next instance as the brothers spread, nailing other Undead in the legs to topple and some right via the hands holding their weapons.

Elise shot ahead, swinging Sephiroth clear into one enemy at an angle, then another straight across at the torso. Both fell back as she sprung right by, heading straight for Vikram.

CLANG

Sephiroth collided, not with flesh, instead something harder. A quick blink and the object became visible, Vikram's cane was held via one hand, holding off the Star Blade's edge. The rattle of blade to metal was heard, a quaking, force applied from Elise with a shaking set of arms while Vikram remained mostly unphased- now visible as the dust around the two cleared way. His gaze then met with hers, his appearing rather bored.

“You’re not at all what I had imagined. What kind of moron attacks the head of the enemy head on without gathering any sort of battle data on what that enemy might be capable of,” Vikram muttered, “Your green is showing.”

“You’re not the first Vampire I’ve done battle with- and you certainly won’t be the last!”

“Hmph, so stubborn and arrogant, yet so very determined. I can see why Azala might have underestimated you; though you would do well not to underestimate me either brat,” he growled back.

Vikram’s free hand flew out, quickly grabbing hold of Elise’s blade. Her gaze widened, and at once a surge of light blue electricity flew straight around and into her. A yell escaped her instantly, while the very unimpressed looking Vikram remained stationary, “This is why I hate brats. You think you’re some tough shit until you face a veteran of actual combat.”

His grasp on her weapon was released, to which he then stepped back. As smoke rolled off of Elise, his hands returned to the top of his cane as it connected to the ground. Slowly she stumbled back, flopping forward after four steps. Sephiroth plunged right into the ground, both of her hands upon the hilt of the weapon with force. Heavy breathing escaped her as she stood there, looking at Vikram, using her own weapon as a support.

“You are the one who defeated Azala? Truly? I knew that man for centuries. To know he was defeated by a NOVICE like you is just insulting.”

“Shut up- do not-” she growled, a white light flooding around Sephiroth in an instant.

Vikram’s eye widened as Elise stood back up quickly. Both of her feet stomped down as she forced her weight into Sephiroth. Rock could be heard crackling and ripping apart as her blade’s edge cut through the ground, white energy completely coating it. As he twitched to move, Elise’s weapon flew from the ground and with it came a slash of pure Light Energy straight forward, blazing through the air.

“Do not underestimate me!”

The blast flew straight from Elise and her weapon into Vikram, the latter of whom let out a wail as it struck. A blast, rather an explosion, followed right after. Flames and smoke flew as she stood there, breathing in and out, “G-got him!”

The dust behind her cleared way, revealing the others standing around. Rusty held two Undead in his bare hands, hoisted high into the air. Britt stood around several, as did Caldori who stood over Sora. All looked around, then forward towards Elise. Every Undead present now lay upon the ground unmoving, their weapons scattered.

Slowly Elise stepped back towards them, Sephiroth held out as the blast of her attack faded. A form remained in the smoke as it cleared, standing tall. Her gaze sharpened, ferocity present as Vikram’s form came to light, intact.

“How the hell- she landed a direct hit on him? He should’ve burned to ashes!” Rusty spat.

“Hmph. Arrogant pups. Do you believe every Vampire to be so weak as to be destroyed by simple light? Pft-” Vikram muttered in response, remaining stationary.

“Tch- guess this won’t be so easy after all,” Elise growled to herself, holding Sephiroth straight out still.

Behind Vikram, Leon remained with both of his escorts. The dark warrior looked on, smugly smirking as the battle had come to fruition.

Unraveled

“Lets wrap this up,” Vikram muttered, hands clasped together in an instant with his cane suddenly flipping high up into the air, “Wall of Flame!”

An explosion of fire flew high directly in front of the elder vampire as his cane flew back down with a spin. Right as he caught said cane in hand, the explosion of fire flew forward at Elise’s group, spreading to become a wall as it moved. Both Rusty and Britt stepped back, arms risen to brace for impact. Elise stood firm, sword out, ready to charge ahead- stopping only as Caldori flew on by.

She flew ahead with arms trailing behind her at first, bringing them forward, “Water Wall!”

Vibrations shook the ground, tile and rock slowly cracking apart. Just as the fire was right before her, the ground bulged- blasting apart immediately with a torrent of crystal blue flying high into the path of the fire. The two walls collided, both bursting apart instantaneously, unleashing a thick white steamy mist. Quickly it flew backwards, heading straight into Vikram while Caldori was already engulfed.

“Calie! Plan thirty-three!” Sora yelled out, doing so while shifting stances.

“Got it!” she shouted clasping her hands together in a different hold.

As she did this, Sora broke from the group in a dead charge forward, sands and dust flying up from the ground below as he traveled towards the steam. Britt stepped ahead, his head turned right with eyes locked onto Rusty, who returned the same with a glance to Britt. Both gave a nod and followed suit, charging from their positions after Sora. This left Elise, sword held ready, eyes sharpened and loading out the scenario before her.

“Hmph. You brats are up to something? Don’t look down on me just because I’m old- heh heh!”

Sora jumped right ahead through the mist, stomping down with both arms flying out and around forward. With them flew two jets of sand and dust straight at Vikram. As said jets of

debris flew ahead, both Rusty and Britt leaped as well right into the air, moving passed Sora.

Vikram stood at the ready, both arms raised, the cane actually held like a melee weapon outwards.

Forth came the sands jetting from the mist right at him.

“Oh?”

His form launched into the air, evading as the sands crashed into the ground where he once stood, “You guppies are far too young to- hmm?”

The sands halted beneath Vikram as he came back down, then came the two brother running atop the sand. Vikram’s eye widened as both jumped right up at him, claws out and hands bulking up.

“Tch- don’t mock me!” Vikram spat.

CLAP

SMACK

CRACK

With a flicker of an outline of where he hovered, he vanished and appeared directly behind the two brothers as a barrage of connects were heard. Both tumbled off and onto the sands below while Vikram again dropped, this time onto the ground.

“Lime Light!” Caldori yelled out.

Vikram shifted up again, stomping his cane down with his right hand as he looked around. Right then, he blinked again as a green color skirted around him. With Caldori’s call the mist itself had turned green around Vikram, beginning to swirl and wrap around. Then came the surge, a violent surge as the mist crashed into him with the crackle of electricity.

“GYAH-!”

His hair puffed, his arms shaking and holding out, his head thrown ever so slightly back. Again, he blinked, this time in response as another figure flew at him with a shinging light

pooling off of her blade. Elise shot up high and dove right down, both hands on the hilt of Sephiroth. Vikram hovered there, bound by the force of the electricity, grunting with teeth gritted and arms bound tight trying to pull free.

“HYAH!”

She swung and as she did, a blinding white light flew forward straight into Vikram. Yet another blast went, followed by a loud grunting yowl straight out of Vikram. The mist blew away, the sands fell with the brothers. Elise landed firmly as Vikram flew back out of the blast, two smaller figures plus his cane flopping out.

It crackled as it landed as the other two clunked and thumped with slight rolls, followed by Vikram himself crashing onto the ground now armless, “GYAHHH!!! AHHH!!! My arms!”

“Heh, that got his sorry ass,” Rusty chuckled.

“Glad that we saw that opening and jumped in,” Britt followed, “Gave the hellist of openings.”

Vikram flopped around on the ground, rolling until finally he managed to hobble onto a knee, one foot back on the ground with a hefty grunt of pain. Caldori jumped into the air, her fist flying, “Woohoo!”

“Won’t be doing anything now, he’s been *disarmed*,” Sora laughed.

“Beh, I’ll let you have that one since that all worked out,” Rusty growled back.

Elise’s gaze moved from the disabled Vikram up across the room, setting on Leon. Gradually, Sephiroth followed her gaze as her arm held out, tip aimed right at the dark warrior, “Alright Leon. You’re next.”

“Am I now? Well, I’d say there’s no need for my direct involvement yet,” the dark one replied.

“How is that? We just took out this old ass Vampire,” Rusty laughed, “You think your two guards are all high and mighty? Come fight us you jack ass or you ain’t jack shit!”

“Irrelevant!” Vikram spat out.

Elise’s attention moved from Leon back to Vikram, the latter of whom now had stood up fully on two feet with a few remaining huffs. In short time the rest looked at him as well, Caldori remaining at the back.

“Soon enough, it won’t matter. You’ll all be dead, just as will be the way of your allies outside this place!”

“Hardly,” Sora laughed, “We took you down. All that’s left is a fight with Leon, and we’ll be sure to not lose that one either.”

“Heh- heh heh,” Vikram chuckled with a quickly spreading grin.

“Hmm? Hey- something’s not right,” Britt muttered.

“Hey, his arms are gone!” Rusty spat out.

“What?” Elise choked throwing herself around, eyes scanning the floor immediately.

“Heh heh-” Vikram again chuckled, his eye shifting to the far right.

Caldori’s eyes reached his, then turned about, following, “There!” she called out.

Their attentions turned towards the figure she saw. A small thin shape moved across the ground, the shape being none other than Vikram’s left hand moving via its fingers, held up by said fingers actually. It scooted across the floor, heading towards a terminal. There atop the station, at the keys, hovered in midair his other hand slowly clacking away at the keyboard. Elise’s eyes pulsed, watching as the second arm hopped into the air, slowly floating towards the panel as well.

“Heh heh, hahaha! You brats, you narrow minded insignificant brats, the lot of you, you all lose!” Vikram spat out, his pupil shrunk with the white of his eye overtaking the entire works.

“Bastard!” Elise spat out, quickly charging straight ahead at Vikram with Sephiroth raised.

As she moved in, it began. A loud, blaring buzzer went off, followed next by an alarm as both of Vikram's arms slammed straight through the panel with fists. As she swung, unleashing another blast of white light, Vikram again was gone.

"There!" Britt shouted pointing back at the panel.

There, Vikram reappeared with both hovering arms flipping around, lowering to where they had been blown off of. Steam vented off as they reattached, the lines from the cuts quickly fading as the steam drifted around and around. As the last bit of the steam vented off, both of his hands flew together and clasped, "Roaring Earth Technique- Pit Fall!"

Cracks spread along the ground from his very feet, launching left and right around the room, bending around and around encircling the group of five in no time.

"Shit!" Sora spat as he looked around, the two cracks meeting.

All at once the entire ground shattered, large chunks and small, some pure sand. All of it collapsed and fell downwards, the floor as a whole dropping deep into a suddenly formed pit. Caldori flew down along with Rusty, both yelling. Sora's hands flew out, pulsing a bit. Rock beneath the two, as well as beneath him, Britt, and Elise, immediately ceased to fall. The cave in collapsed the entirety of the room they had been fighting in short of the archway and where Leon stood.

"That bastard!" Sora spat.

Outside of the compound, an alarm blared: loud, echoing, and repeating. Inside attentions were gathered, from the two squad inside with their heads raising, from the Ghouls and others sorting the weapons and zombies who looked around, then to the outside where Wesley's hands slammed into his hair taking grip.

"God dammit!" Wesley spat out.

"That's their security alarm, they know that we're here!" one soldier called out.

“Dammit to hell, they blew it!”

“Jarrajod to Tony and Zoey, come in. What happened? Were you guys detected?”

Jarrajod asked into his ear piece, stepping away from Wesley for a moment.

“Krrz- no, it wasn’t us,” Zoey’s voice replied.

“Negative. Did something happen to Elise’s unit?” Tony replied.

“We’re not sure, we haven’t been able to-”

“All soldiers, move in!” Wesley ordered into his com device, “Jarrajod, have those two get the hell out of the warehouse and blow the bastard. We’re moving in now!”

“You idiot, if you collapse the place that could seal in Elise!” Vulper spat out from his position.

“I don’t care! We need to contain this now!”

“Fuck that, if you blow it then I’m going in!” Vulper spat, charging quickly away from the group towards the ledge overlooking the compound.

“That stupid mother- gah! Open fire!” Wesley yelled.

Rockets immediately flew from the ledges and trees, flying right down into the compound. A collective of rockets crashed into the gates, blowing them clear off with multiple blasts, roasting multiple Zaherian and Zombies in the process. Others flew forth straight into the trucks, blowing the cabs and even some trailers clear apart. The trailers hit explosively went off, all of the ammo within detonating bit by bit, leading to a mother hole of a blast, ripping a section of the warehouse clear apart.

Others flew straight into the towers, blowing them to pieces. Soldiers yelled out, beginning to charge straight down the side, guns ablazing with dozens and dozens and dozens moving in on the compound.

Five sections of rock remained afloat over the newly opened chasm as dust flew high from the collapse. From the sides, the doorways rather, figures began to move in. Well armed Ghouls and Zombies stormed right in, a few Dires in armor making their appearance as they moved in. Elise's head moved back and forth, her eyes bolting round and round.

"We've been compromised severely, that damn Vikram no doubt stirred something up up top as well with that alarm," Britt muttered.

"We need to get out of here and report what we know. We can't afford to-" Caldori began.

"You really think they're just going to let us out of here? Once those Undead fucks have clear aim, they'll open fire on us!" Rusty spat.

"Not if they have something else to target," Elise mumbled looking back towards Vikram, scowling practically.

"What do you mean?" Sora asked.

"As Squad Leader, I'm only going to tell you this once. Get out of here, now!"

"What? And let you deal with-"

"I have considerably more available fire power. Sora is the only one who can burrow out from down here. Callie, as the healer, will need to keep his power reserves fueled by healing him to insure he gets out. Meanwhile you two are going to back them up in case Sora digs into anything troubling."

"Elise-" Britt began.

"Enough! Most of us getting out of here is better than none of us getting out alive! I'll be fine, I've got this."

"She's right," Rusty growled.

"Are you serious?" Caldori questioned, "You want to just leave her?!"

“I don’t like this,” Britt muttered, “But when her mind is made up, its made up... alright. Sora, move us to the ceiling. We’re getting out of here.”

“But Britt!”

“Enough Callie,” Rusty growled, “The brainiac made her idea known. It’s the best move we have.”

“But- grr, fine! But once we’re up top, we’re coming back down here with backup, got that?!”

“Copy that,” Elise murmured, “Now go!”

The ground beneath her blew apart as her form rocketed across the chasm, heading straight for Vikram. The group watched on while Sora lifted his arms, the floating piles of debris slowly hovering up after.

“Good luck,” Britt mumbled as they came closer to the ceiling, which now had slowly begun to open up.

Meanwhile from the far back of the room, Leon stared on. Beside him the two tone mask, Xander, crossed his arms while looking up, “My my, we’ve got some escapees. Chrom, lets ax them!”

“Heh, of course,” Chrom replied.

“No- let them go,” Leon mumbled.

“Sir?”

“This is Vikram’s mess to clean up, not ours. For now, how about we let him and Bell’s experiment treat us to some more fun. Lets see how this goes.”

As Elise flew forth at Vikram, the latter continued to laugh, “HAHAHA! Your friends will NEVER make it out of this alive!”

“We’ll see about that, you bastard!” Elise yelled out, a jet of Light Energy then erupting around Sephiroth, swelling outwards, “HYAHHH!”

Forth it flew, another massive slash wave of Light Energy, this one enough to cut a building in half judging by the size and ferocity as it flew. And still, Vikram stood there, scowling back with both hands together, “Wall of Stone!”

The light crashed with a rising wall, another blast following immediately that engulfed a third of the room. The shock wave itself swept around the room, blowing many of the Ghouls and Undead off their feet. For the rest like Leon, it simply moved their cloaks and nothing more. Leon himself continued to watch, staring as Elise plunged clear through the smoke and blast headed straight for Vikram.

New Age Wisdom

“You’re stronger than any Vampire I’ve ever faced, I’ll give you that,” Elise called out as she launched right back out of the smoke.

With a single puff of wind, the debris all scattered to reveal Vikram stationary with a smug grin, his lone eye following, “Heh, and you’re not bad for a pup. So, brat, what will you show me next eh?”

“Heh, you’ll see,” she replied with a smirk; though upon doing so her foot work put her several paces back with an unchanging defensive stance, “{I can’t beat this guy with conventional means... so, it’ll be like *that* time. Sacho, I owe you many times over for that day, for giving me the drive.} Here we go-”

Her right hand broke from the hilt of Sephiroth, drifting straight into her coat pocket from which several fabric-rapped balls were pulled, strings jetting out of the tops. Quickly said strings were brought up and into her mouth. With a bite and a yank, the strings remained behind as the balls were pulled, then quickly tossed with a bit of smoke jetting out the tops.

“Petwew!” she spat, the strings flying as the balls struck the ground around Vikram, bursting and unleashing multiple clouds of smoke.

“What’s this? Trying to blind me? Brats these days, hahaha!” he laughed.

“Not just that old guy,” she murmured as a sphere of Light Energy pooled together in her free hand, “Have it!”

With a toss as if tossing a baseball full force, the sphere flew forward straight into the cloud. Yet another blast went off, this one setting the smoke ablaze as well, intense flames of green pouring straight out of the cloud as it went up, followed by a yell from inside barely drowned out by the blast. The ground once more caved, this time right below Vikram.

“Go fly!” she shouted throwing her left arm up, bringing it back with Sephiroth reverse-gripped.

“Hoh?” Chromwell called, “What is she going to do with that?”

Almost immediately her arm flew forward and Sephiroth was sent flying forward while she arched forward, practically falling onto her knees and hands.

“She tossed her weapon like a spear, right in Vikram’s path. Not bad,” Chromwell concluded.

Right on cue, Vikram’s figure dropped from the blast as the ground continued to cave under him, his garments singed as he fell, “Damn brat!” he coughed, “Huh?”

BLAM

Sephiroth slammed straight into him, the tip exiting straight out his back. Blood flew from his mouth as his head bounced forward, his body sent backwards crashing. Sephiroth’s hilt stuck straight out of his chest with only a little bit of blade showing, the rest having penetrated and gone clear through either still in or outside of his body.

Down onto a pile of rocks he crashed with flailing arms, “GYACK!”

With a tussle and a thump he rolled right down the rocks, resting in a crevice nearly fifteen meters below. Up top Elise stood with both of her arms held out and her palms facing bare towards Vikram, “I’m not done yet- Light Arrows!”

Light Energy flew up around her bare palms, extending itself outwards as if forming a little bubble. All at once multiple yellow arrow-shaped figures of energy flew forth from the bubble right down at Vikram, now struggling to stand. He looked up, teeth gritted with a sunken eye. The rounds all struck and compiled into another blast, followed by more and more and very many more micro-blasts as Elise kept on firing.

“You may not be weak to light but I’m sure if I hit you like this you’ll still feel it!” she yelled out.

From behind the trio maintained their view, Xander crossing his arms firmly with a narrowed eye, “She’s turned the battle against him so quickly.”

“How do you mean?” Chromwell asked, looking over to Xander.

“Vikram is already done. Those weren’t just smoke bombs. I know her style, those were no doubt bombs filled with more of that hemlock concoction of hers, and something else to make them explosive.”

“Heh, remarkable,” Leon chuckled, “And by that logic she probably has new kinds of poisons mixed in, or even on her own blade that she harpooned him with. Now that she has access to a military arsenal of drugs and toxins, there’s no limit to what she might do. Simply incredible.”

The rain of energy blasts maintained, right up until the very end as Vikram flew sky high out of the blast, “You damn brat, your efforts are totally futile!”

The wound in his chest was visible; though not her weapon, rather it was not where it had been left though it was still present. Via his right hand, Vikram held Sephiroth up and quickly hurled him right back at Elise. The blade clanged across the ground, resting beside her while Vikram kept up his movement, heading straight at her with hands grasped together, “I’m ending this with a little fire. Are you ready to die chi- URK.”

His hands released, a gap opening up while his arms twitched, followed then by his legs. His head fell back several notches as his eye began to quiver, “P-poison? I should be immune to poison! Unless- you!”

“Wolfsbane, the weakness of all Supernatural on Earth. Undoes transformations, always takes away some of the immunity a Vampire will naturally have, and then some. You underestimated me because of my age Arghaust, because I was alone, that is why you have lost!”

“HRRRAAAAAA!” he yelled out, now falling right out of the air.

His form disappeared beneath the surface, falling straight back down into the collapsed pit before Elise who now stood rather emotionlessly. Her gaze moved down, staring into the darkness. The crash came not long after, multiple seconds after in fact. Finally with so very little wasted effort she bent down to grab hold of Sephiroth, standing firmly back up with a quarter turn after, her head turned as well with both eyes resting now on Leon and his group.

The trio stood calmly, casually even. Chromwell with both arms down, the sleeves of his robes just flapping in the breeze. Xander stood with arms folded over, seeming somewhat smug himself and even a touch bold. Then there was Leon in the middle with hands at his sides, his face being the only visible face among the three, holding with it a rather amused sort of look with a smile and warmed eyes.

“She’s good, I’ll give her that,” Xander commented.

“Yes, I agree. I can easily see why Azala lost to someone like her. Her powers are still growing, and already her selective brains for combat are unlike any other,” Leon chuckled.

“How do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious dear brother? Her use of fast-acting toxins to make up for her lack of experience and power, her resolve to make herself appear as unthreatening as possible to Arghaust, an old buzzard clearly underestimating of youth. His caution went out the window the minute Elise was alone. You and I both know that he would’ve gotten out of that smoke immediately if the other four had remained,” Chromwell concluded.

“Heh... fair enough. So now what? You want us to step in Leon?” Xander questioned.

“No,” he murmured, “I think... I’ll handle this one myself.”

“Huh?” Chrom uttered.

“Eh?” Xander followed.

“She is well beneath the two of you just as you are both significantly beneath me... but that’s all the more reason to take her cautiously.”

“But sir-” Xander began.

“She took out Arghaust who at his full could’ve given either of you two a mild run about. She nearly effortlessly walked him into his own downfall. What’s the sense in giving her the chance to nail either of you, eh?”

“Hmph... valid point,” Xander grumbled.

“Well then that’s decided I suppose,” Chromwell chuckled, “Bakuuva will cease to exist after this then.”

“Quite,” Leon muttered, launching himself up and forward with a single leap.

Leon flew high, several meters up and many more forward before dropping back down, landing upon both feet. Elise turned a full, Sephiroth held at her side as her view embraced the sight of Leon who now stood so casually before her. Swiftly, black mist jettied itself clear off of Leon’s cloak and into the air, drifting swiftly around him and clinging like a form of aura.

“I’ll say it once more Bakuuva, you’re just being used by the Lightonians. People like Wesley Ezdorth and Vega Abagor... even your Holly Bell, they’re looking at you only for military application, not because they want to help you.”

“So you’ve said,” Elise called, pacing to her left now with the tip of her sword held out, “But at the same time, look at what you guys have done. Am I supposed to just bow down and join you? After everything? Or should I willingly fight alongside the others to stop you? I am well aware that they’re using me... and right now, I couldn’t care less. I have a score to settle.”

“Heh, so be it,” Leon chuckled, spreading his arms apart from his body, “Then I guess this is where it begins, your downfall. Show me what you’re made of, Bakuuva!”