

“In the heat of any battle, victory does not come from simply defeating your opponent or following a set of orders and regulations. Victory comes from upholding what you believe in, facing any odds to make your stand known to all sides. Balance between the heart and thought makes the difference between unchallengeable freedom and complete defeat.”

~The Dancing Queen, 20xx

Set It Off

“War. Anarchy. Rebellion. Destruction. And as of now, no salvation.”

“That... is the state of things, of the world that we know. Ever since the Vulfax Valley Incident, attentions have again been set outward, seeking a conflict, seeking something to blame. The chaos in the air started by that minor rebellion has paved the way for much more to render out. The VVI, an incident that would see the return of old evils from a struggle that spans back eons.

A hundred and sixty thousand years ago, in their time, their war began. Two races of people upon the world of Sillith- the Lightonians and the Dharkanians, each with the power to control the energies of Light and Dark respectively, each with the ability to command and control their world. Light was good for enhancing the minerals of the land, yielding better crops and abundant food. Darkness would be able to expedite and purify materials in the grounds for rich mining of resources. From these two abilities came different cultures, different values, different views on... enlightenment; and from that came the conflict as two sides clashed.

A war fought for eons of their time, one to never be forgotten by those who learned to halt their aging by this use of energy. Grudges were never forgotten with the reaper not taking them from time. And as time went on, things only grew more dire. With the development of new magics, new curses, it was inevitable that at some point space-time would be breached, and controlled. With the breach the war spread to other realms and quickly influenced others.

Those that aligned with the ideologies of the Lightonians joined their side, while others joined with the Dharkanians. Earth in particular saw the enslaved humans of early Earth join with the Light, seeking freedom from the Vampiric forces that had taken root. While the war did come to an end at some point with a Dharkanian defeat trapping them on Sillith, things did not end there. More civilizations began to learn the ways of the Celestial River and draw energy from it, and from that energy new magics and weapons were developed.

Disaster struck easily, with kingdoms essentially nuking each other. The despair that could be felt from that impact, the loss of tens of hundreds of thousands... perhaps even millions. From the desire to prevent further loss, the Aether Confederacy was founded by the Lightonians as

a means to bring new kingdoms and realms together as allies, backing each other, protecting, assisting.

The Aether Confederacy spread like wildfire for some time, despite its flaws becoming quickly visible. Corruption, pride, greed, something to be expected from all long-lasting politics. And now following the attacks of the Dharkanians after all these years, and the rise of other threats such as the Vampire Rebellion under the Vampire Lord *Arkaza*, the long-standing Confederacy has fallen into trouble. Nations breaking away, attacks on allies and neutrals alike, and yet the Parliament of the Confederacy only debates and argues about the actions to take.

The last ten months have been nothing but unrest. The Lighntonians on the hunt for the returned Dharkanians, the Vampire attacks, the politicians freaking out about their hired mercenaries letting these enemies slip through the cracks and make the order as a whole appear weak. Chaos is now the order of the day for most... though there are certainly those with voices who refuse to let this continue. One voice in particular is determined to do what they can to stop this anarchy from spreading, refusing to let the suffering they endured from the Vulfax Incident to spread.

That one voice may be destined for greatness, or perhaps they are destined to fail. All that can be said though is that they have peaked my interest. Months ago they broke from the norm, leaving the Lighntonians and the Confederacy behind to find a brand new calling- determined to make a difference, determined to be so much more than what they were in the life they lived before that incident... where she will go, no one knows.

This... is the story of-"

RAVENLIGHT

SAGA 1

SCARLET DAWN

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“Tell me, have you ever heard tale of what happened to Etoan of Dengar? Perhaps if you had, you’d have seen this coming.”

Crackle crackle.

The bitter drowning whiff of smoke digging deep into the skin, a drifting scent of metallic slapped right into the nostrils, an utterance of a most foul stench just beyond familiar yet so distant. Like a poison on the tongue, flavoring so blatantly. A blinding inferno of warm hot color and darkening clouds drifting to the backdrop of a crimson sky. Tremendous heat flooding an area with a vacuum of cold ever present mingled within. Howls filling the night, howls of beasts, howls of battle, howls of anguish.

“Kkk- krrrek!!”

Pop pop pop

Snapping wood and the explosive roar of an open flame, a tsunami of fire washing around a vast stone clearing. Building after building giving in with the moan of twisted metal and broken matter. Gunshots heard in the distance drowned by those same howls and more and more screams. Men yowling out, canine type barking and calling to the moon, women screaming, children crying as the flames washed over them.

Figures darted everywhere, four legged and two legged both. Some fours leaped high and plowed into the twos, knocking them to the ground. More gun shots and but a few of the wolfing figures fell while others continued straight in. Guns held out and fired while those darting dark figures continued right into them. Other two legged dashing in like a blurring flag on the wind.

A woman screaming with arms outstretched, pinned by a burning beam, blood coating her face, tears streaming out. Two of the four legged backing away, their heads down as they quickly retreated. A small blanket squirming with life, a high pitched scratchy cry let out as it was drug away. The crunching munch as one four leg chomped right into the blanket, the cry cut short.

All around carnage was at play in this town set to burn. Humans dropping like flies to a zapper from the wolf-like creatures of blazing red and darkened gray, eyes aglow and their front halves bulked out. Bodies lay asunder, a flood of red staining over the brick and cement. Buildings collapsing and taking to the armed men fending off against these rushing creatures.

“Outstanding, isn’t it?”

The soft whisper of a woman to the backdrop of the roaring inferno. A wafting figure stationed at the center of the blaze surrounded by mutilated corpses of men, women, and even children. To the center, the figure of two. One held high, one held by the other.

A hooded figure cloaked in black, a-dance from the flowing winds. Blackness was all that there was, not even a face despite the vast light around. And yet... despite the obstruction, what could be seen were two colors of eye, one a snow white silver and the other a golden amber, yet both stared dead into the soul of the other figure above.

Her arm outstretched- connected to the throat of another held high in the air. Ragged, clothes torn, eyes bulging, face turned blue. A cracked rifle sway by his side attached to his being, his hands up to the very arm & hand held to his throat. The claws dug deeper in with an ever tightening grip. Blooded nose, coated face, hair torn from place and matted.

A sway of the wind and a flicker of light shining on the face of the woman, revealing only a brief glance at an ever growing grin. Those eyes, lit by delight yet ever so cold at the same time, a contradiction to be sure.

“Now had you simply answered my inquiry earlier-” she continued, the sound of crackling bone heard echoing along with a low pitched gag following, her grip tightening, “All of this could have been avoided, *worm*.”

A distance aback near a section of the town not yet burning, silhouettes began to emerge. Human, fast moving, clumsily. One to the front of the group came into perfect view, slightly on the older side with grayed hair, not a weapon in hand. Dressed in rags he stumbled out.

“HEY!!”

Her head turned with the hood following with a simple flap, grip unchanging.

“Stop this, Sonya!!” the old man called as those around him took position, rifles aimed out at the hooded figure.

Blink

All stationed men fell back, one with a scream, stumbling to take active stance with guns aimed now right before the old man. Standing merely a foot from him now was the hooded figure with the choked man still held up. The old man’s eyes shook as he gazed beyond the scenery around him- a gaze right into those eyes.

“Have you not heard? Sonya is no more, Veljeq. A *Shiver* of Wrath is all that remains...” her voice spoke, low and calm.

As she did speak the man in her grasp began to thrash once more slamming his fist down upon her arm before gripping hold with both hands once more.

“Release him. Now!”

CRRRRRRACK-

The man dropped. Arms limp and swinging, legs hanging, head rolled. From there the man’s body fell to the ground whilst the woman’s arm retreated back down to her side. The old man stared down, gulping on air as he took a half step back. Eyes returning to her own, which had not once left their position.

“My... look at you, Veljeq. For a Drachen, you’ve aged quite a bit in so short an amount of time, haven’t you?” she murmured, eyes remaining solely on Veljeq.

“Foolish girl- stop this now while you still can, please! It’s not too late to-”

“To? To what? To stop my ways and turn back to the side of righteousness? Please- there is nothing to be gained by allowing things to continue like this, old friend.”

“And what is there to be gained through destruction? Nothing. Any progress that could have been made will simply be dashed!” Veljeq spat back.

“Heh,” she chuckled with eyes shut, face turned away to face down-right with a slight chuckling.

“Think it’s funny do you? After what happened to you you would-”

Her head snapped back into place, her eyes open once more though relatively risen rather than low or narrowed. Veljeq’s eyes shook, a little sweat forming in pools around his face now draining.

“After what happened to me... hmm- such a poor choice of words wouldn’t you say old man?” she pondered aloud, now walking to the right and scoping around slow.

Even as she began to circle to his left and back around, he did not move further. The men armed with him would train their weapons upon her; though take no further action. All the while, he could feel it, her eyes piercing right through his very body. Taking a breath with closed eyes, they again began to open with a quiver.

“Nothing happened to me, not a single thing,” she continued while now moving around to his right.

“You would disregard your history so easily because it pains you. What happened to your family was not right. Your father would-”

“My *father* abandoned me to this infernal hellhole. Not that I can blame him, he was in as much shit as you are now and likely had no idea I survived,” she chuckled.

“He did not abandon you Sonya, and it was not the fault of this world. Those are Cylux’s words! Do not allow Cylux to twist your soul to his needs, it will only end badly.”

Slowly she stumbled back into his line of sight from his right, continuing her circle until positioned right back in front of him. Only her left side was visible though for she had yet to turn back to look upon him once more.

“You think my actions are out of some deep rooted quest for vengeance. How petty do you believe me to be, Veljeq?” she again questioned.

“Then what are you looking to gain if not revenge?”

“That,” she murmured while turning her body now to face the old man, “Is of no importance to you. What is important though is that you answer my question. Your friend there refused and that is what started this whole disaster.”

“You want to know where Shaluq went... I refuse to answer that.”

“No no- see, I know where he went. He went to get help from afar. What I want to know is who he went to see?”

Slowly she began to approach, her right arm outstretched. The tips of the underside of her fingers softly brushing against Veljeq’s face, her form now no more than an arm’s length away.

“Aether’s Assembly won’t hear the cries of Sarzento. I know that that Republic’s mess won’t hear any cases yet. And above all, I know that the Ruling Council here would not have sanctioned it so you’re acting alone. So where could he have possibly gone without order of the Government?”

His head slowly bobbed up, her fingers having moved from the side of his face to under his chin, holding his head up higher.

“I have no intention of telling you anything, not after what you and your followers have done here!”

“I see... went to get *him* did he? I find it hard to see what *he* can do at this point. The fall of Sarzento is set in stone at this point. For your sake, you should just give in Veljeq.”

With those words she leaned in slow, her face passing by his line of sight, her mouth right beside his left ear, “They hurt you too, didn’t they? You can simply sit back and watch it all unfold. Help us, and reap the rewards.”

His hands flew out and she was swiftly shoved off, her expression turning a touch sour. His race reddening and fire flooding his pupils. He stomped ahead, right fist out with a shake.

“No! It’s not right! Why should everyone suffer because of what happened then? I don’t care what you say, this is revenge. You’re just lashing out because you feel that your father abandoned you. That’s no justification for starting a genocide!”

“Suit yourself, I tried.”

“Gah! Killing tens of thousands won’t change a thing Sonya. It won’t change that you’ve become a bitter bitch with a heart throb because you think your daddy left you for dead. Just leave this land in peace!”

“Well you’re half right I suppose.”

CRUNCH

“EUAH, UHAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!!”

Veljeq yelled out and stumbled away, a rocket of scarlet rushing from his right where his arm *used* to be whole. Now it sat in the hand of the girl, limp with a spray of its own flying back at Veljeq.

“Nothing will get in my way Veljeq, not even the Nightstars,” she grumbled.

She launched ahead with her right arm up, hand turned with claws extending half a meter in length. Down they swung, slicing clean through the man’s chest.

“Veljeq!!” one of the armed men yelled as the body fell back and landed with a loud thud.

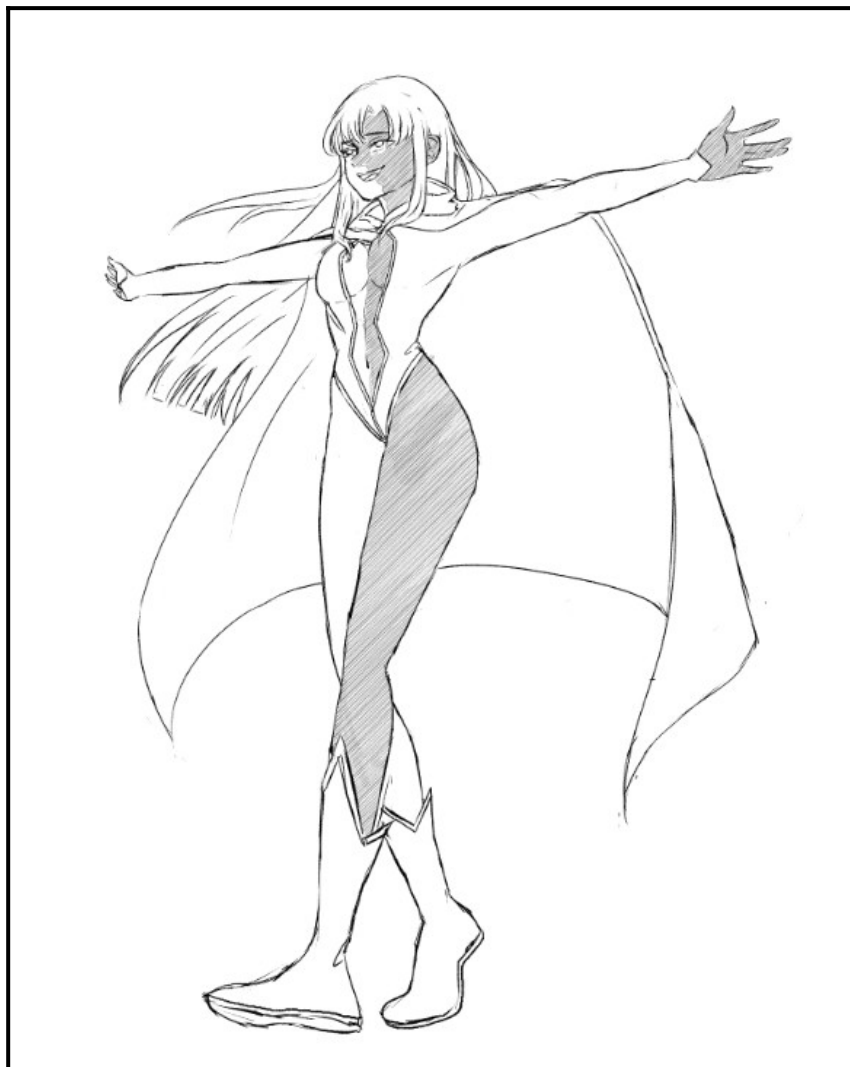
“You psycho bitch!” another man yelled.

Gun fire, howls of rage. Screaming, the ripping of flesh.

Blood splatter in the air, coming down as a thick rain.

And gradually... the screams came to a halt as the fires continued to crackle.

“Hee hee hee- the sweet sweet smell of burning away your past problems, it’s so very invigorating. And once we’re done here,” she giggled, stepping forward, her arms swung out to her sides, her grin widening, “The whole of Sarzento shall rest in the fires of hell and wither away into dust!”



Art by Sonmie

The Dark Forest

The chirping of hundreds of crickets aghast of the moon lit night. A brilliant fall orange globe flowing through the sky with such few clouds that the night sky could be seen in proper focus- a darkish maroon with a haze of the darkest of purples. A couple stars glittered overhead though relatively few, and whatever there were were likely to be swallowed by the grasp of standing trees.

Hooting owls and the chirps of an army of crickets. Brush scrapping to itself with a very minute breeze guiding its scraggly movements, all echoed around in the brisk of the hoots and calls. Coyotes heard in the background, howling out every so often, a symphony attributed to the burning night. The tops of trees stripped naked from the briskness of the season rattled like skeletons on the prowl.

Brief glimmers of light from hovering fireflies in a cascading darkness, only broken briefly by the still-white glow of the orange moon, rather odd at that. Eyes could be witnessed in the rounding black and brown depths of the seemingly dead forest, eyes of predators, eyes aglow in many colors with thick black pupils. Tall leafless trees all around, very much showing lack of vibrancy, a few dead leaves hanging on for what they had left now brown and gold. Most lay littered to the forest floor around the twisting trunks and shrubs left dark by the lack of the sun's rays.

The forest floor, few dips and sputters between sections, showered with leaves that never seemed to dissipate. Some grasses poked through their color was that of a darkening blue, only really visible due to the glimmer of the moon's gaze. The light cascading down also made visible the appearance of the occasional rocks and bones laying about, rotting beneath the umbrella that was the forest's roof. The only out of place disturbance in truth was the existence of well stretched, winding paths.

Paths of stone and dirt, carved in through the gaps of the trees, etched to the forest floor giving the only sense of broken diversity. While the brush and dead tree foliage did cling to the paths, it was far less than within the general floor. Roads outlined with stone and packed with dirt,

all in relatively good condition for being undisturbed for some time. In fact there were no disturbances beyond some minor fallen leaves- no grass penetrating the path, no young trees taking root, not even fallen trees themselves lay upon the path.

There was nothing... nothing but an air of eerie dread. Only the sounds of the breeze, of the scratching trees, of the creatures that dare to call this dark forest home. And as one traversed deeper into the woods, darkness would only encroach further and further as the dome above grew tighter and tighter. Many arms around one's vessel in embrace, many cold hands clinging to the clothes, a tight choking sensation held by a force left unseen to the naked eye.

The dim ember glaze of the fiery moon above jet forth and washed over all, still becoming a dim pale glow as it reached the ceiling of the forest. It traveled one path best of all, one to which there was no canopy, only a great view of the above heavens; though with passing distance that canopy would grow tighter and tighter until at last the heavens themselves were extinguished from sight. The central path, a twilight path, cutting through the dense acreage of bark and dark. Winding and roaming along, disappearing beyond the warmth of the moon's swift embrace.

Further and further along the path, movement of the wild life became more frisky. Groups of three coyotes prowling low to the ground as if to pounce; though with not a target in sight. An owl turning its heads slow and tactful, flapping off at a sudden disturbance to its right further down on the forest floor. There a couple large possum took off disappearing into the shrubs. From a distance, the glow of eyes, reptilian, blinking with a low sounding gurgled hiss.

A few more birds flew from their branches, some sort of clocking and clubbing coming nearer and nearer. Lights became visible, dim though certainly enough to light up a brief portion of forest. The clanking and clacking, accompanied by some rusty grinding sounds, snorting, and muffled marching. A squeaky sound echoed around the halls, along with two horses bellowing out.

Crackled leather reigns, connecting back to a large wood carriage decorated with lanterns on all corners plus a dark red roof. A slight visor window opened forward to the

coachman, who sat in control of a round of six horses clomping at the dirt. A few over a dozen in leather coats, boots, and fur hats walked around the perimeter of the carriage.

All were armed differently, some with muskets, some with swords, some with nothing at all. Four walked close to the carriage and the horses in robes with hoods right up, not armed by any means aside from the lanterns held by two of them. A couple guards also sat atop the carriage, looking out in different directions. It rattled and buckled as the troupe moved on through the woods.

A fifth in robes, hooded, sat upon the same bench as the coachman holding out a map, a feminine finger pointed at one point on said map. The coachman stared down at the old wrapped fabric, nodding to whatever it was being said until the map was lowered. Far far up the winding road, much like drawn upon the map, the path diverged into two. To the left the forest continued to darken gradually, while to the right it was instantaneous; however that fork was several dozen meters ahead yet.

Coyotes flickered around this caravan, some snarling with their heads turned, observing it travel before booking it back off into the woods. The reptilian hiss echoed again before brush breaking off became heard, the eyes disappearing in the depths as the light of the cluster of humans passed over.

One of the hooded figures, taking the head now ahead of the rest of the group, suddenly threw their left arm out- hand open. The guards in leather all stopped, and with the quick whip of the reigns the horses stopped as well. All heads turned, attention solely upon the front figure. This one continued to walk out, followed shortly thereafter by a second hooded individual.

The first lowered there arm and stopped a good few paces ahead of the convoy, two amber spheres glowing from the darkness shrouding their face. They looked ahead, paused as the second approached beside them. This second one was a good foot or two shorter when side by side with the first; though they too were looking out across the forest. Silence, no one stirred, and the calls of the forest itself had come to a halt.

The second's head shifted from ahead of them and then to their partner standing beside them, to then go back ahead. Behind a voice could be heard shouting out "What's the hold up?!" though it was quickly silenced by a flip of the hand of the first individual. Silence...

Snip

The slightest crackle of a branch not too far ahead of them. The first figure moved their right hand up to their face and lifted the hood ever so slightly- their eyes now more than visible with a glowing red tinge to them. Their amber gaze scanned out across the entire section of woods before them. Slowly to the left... and slowly to the right. All attentions from behind, still presented forward.

The second individual then strolled forward a few paces passed the first, both hands raised up to their hood. While shrouded in the darkness of the forest, the cascading light of the above heavens that peaked through illuminated the second individual ever so. Eyes somewhat dull and cold from the lack of anything resembling life around them, not embraced by warmth for it was not present. Much like the amber eyes of the first, these green glimmering vessels shifted from side to side relatively slow.

Silence...

Those shallow green eyes then did slowly close, focus narrowed with a slight glare presented forward. The wind upon a sudden did swirl just behind both cloaked figures, disappearing then after. For just those few brief seconds they stared off into the darkness, and only the darkness was staring back at them.

Finally the second figure turned to the first. The first figure took a few, their jaw opening up only to shut a brief few seconds after. Their eyes narrowed and zoomed, cast out like a fishing line. The figure shook their head, stepping back a few paces before turning. The second figure looked ahead again as the first retreated back towards the convoy.

They said nothing, they did nothing, even as right behind the convoy switched back into motion. Their gaze sharpened and stared out into that dark, only thin outlines visible outside of the

bubble of light. The ground crunched beneath as the second stepped on ahead a few paces more whilst the convoy was getting itself back together. The first hooded individual looked from the convoy and twisted back around, gazing back at their comrade who now had thrown their hood back.



Art by Sonmie

“Bakuuva!” a man behind the hooded man called out.

The first hooded figure then turned back around to see a man in a fine fur hat, slightly more colorful attire compared to the other apparent soldiers. ‘Bakuuva’ remained stationary for a short while longer as the convoy moved up behind, and from there the second figure simply joined back into line while the man in the finer duds slipped back behind the carriage.

“Pst- hey. Did you sense something?” a guard whispered up towards the two.

“...”

“I’ll take that as a no-” the guard then murmured, backing off after the fact.

As the two walked, the first turned his head over to look at the second. The lower part of their face remained visible while their hood was pulled back up into place, and what was visible right then was nothing but an emotionless mask. And so the first turned back ahead.

“So- you sensed it too then,” they murmured, somewhat of a Twang to a male’s slightly deep voice.

“... yeah,” the second spoke, their tone feminine and somewhat timid- a bit of a soothing nurture to it as she spoke, “Seems like they found us.”

“How many did you pick out?” he murmured.

“One,” she replied, “How long?”

“About the last three or four kilometers. Been keepin’ their distance from us.”

“Got sight of anyone else?”

“No... just the one. No one else has been near.”

“I see. Likely they have a crumb trail. Better not to let them know that we’re on to them. How much longer until we hit the town?”

“A couple hours yet at this pace. It’ll be twilight once we get through this length of the forest.”

“That’s when they’ll strike then if they’re going to.”

“That’s only if they figure things out. Be wary Elise, this could get ugly,” he concluded.

“... I know.”

As the crew then continued, far far away out of the light of the bubble, still within sights of the bubble though- something did in fact stir. A little moving brush beside a tree. It shook a little, a product of the wind mostly. Though trees and brush were not the only things in that quadrant.

Shooting higher up into the tree, hidden by branches all around, stood a lone humanoid figure. Dressed in a gray shirt, black coat, dark jeans, tennis shoes. They looked almost ordinary aside from their eyes, eyes almost a glowing orange in color, jetting out and locking sight upon the caravan. Upon the figure's shoulder sat a black bird, one which would stare with red eyes.

Lox Town

A dull orange skyline with a backdrop of dark reds turning slowly into a dark purple high above, dark gray clouds stretched in isolated splotches. The backdrop of the dark forest, many trees illuminated by that dark orange from a source not seen. Truly it were as if there were a moon or sun above sending out a cascading light; though one look to the sky would confirm that there was no such orb present, such appearing as if the landscape itself was glowing this coloration. There were stars glistening above however, albeit rather faded into the purple maw- which to the absolute top of this canopy of a clearing faded from the purple into utter blackness.

A vast, VAST clearing lay just short of three square kilometers; however it most certainly was not an empty clearing. A town lay propped near the middle of this empty void of trees, structures of mostly wood and stone standing. Many small one to two story homes dotted this town, of which there were no more than a couple dozen. Multiple houses appeared worn out with broken windows or fallen shutters, boards falling from the structure or holes in the walls, a few with their roofs even caved in.

Dirt walkways dotted the town for the most part and it wasn't until one neared the center of the town that stone walkways were laid. In the town square three stores, an relatively large inn, a tavern, and most striking of all a large stone cathedral with a bell tower, one which held a tremendous clock face. An icon of this ghostly town with so few souls present in the streets, most held up in their homes or straight up not around.

Little to no sign of life aside from the stragglers, and the approaching convoy of which there were now three carriages, many horses, and many guards. The clatter of hooves and the crackle of the cart wheels echoed as they strolled right along. To one side of the convoy moved Elise with her hood up at the present. Her gaze crossed over the landscape and around the town. Beside her still walked her ally from before who now stared out at the town as well.

"This is Lox Town?" Elise murmured to her friend.

"Not at all what I was expecting," he grumbled back.

The group closed in on the town, the carriages continuing to rattle right up to the town's entrance; however as they got closer to the main gates the guards to the front of the group held their arms out. The horses let off their cries as they came to a halt, eyes of the coachman and guards stationed around looking up. Four individuals stood near the gate, all of them men, all of them in ragged stitched up clothing.

Stitched up vests, brown and blue. Stitched up pants, some with the length cut back or torn. Two with crossbows that looked cracked and worn, one with a chipped dagger ready to fall out of the handle, and one with torn apart gloves. Not a single one of them appeared all that built, some tone and muscle but certainly not much of a presence.

The Caravan Guards readied themselves, some with swords a tenth unsheathed or bows loaded up with arrows. Even the five cloaked figures were standing uneasy set to pounce. With the carriages stopped and everyone tensed up, it came as no surprise when the well to-do man from before in the fine furs popped out of the back and began to bark away~

"What is the meaning of this hold up? Have we arrived at the-" he began while walking ahead, immediately spotting the four rugged goons, "What malarkey is this then? Men- ready up and arrest these rascallions!"

"Hold it sir," the cloaked man beside Elise called out, throwing his right arm out and then approaching forward.

The four tensed up and readied their weapons, while the guards behind the cloaked figure did the same now at half ready to attack. As he approached the hooded man dropped his hood, revealing a relatively handsome figure- sculpted face, well looking black hair that seemed freshly washed somehow, visible cross-earrings, amber eyes with a hint of glow to them. He appeared relatively young, in his late twenties at the very most.

"We intend no harm here. We're simply traveling through on our way from Glastol to Hanover Pass on the other side of this here forest. Buncha our fellows are 'sposed to meet up with us here," he stated.

The four said nothing, and no one moved a muscle from the caravan side aside from the man in the fine furs who appeared to look only more displeased with a growl, "Such insolence... ready arms!"

"HOooooooooooooOLDIT!" came a shout from behind the four, who now appeared surprised.

A gruffly response, raspy somewhat. There came a clatter behind the four guards of the town who quickly stepped aside. From the gates came two newcomers, one a woman in similar attire to the other men whilst the second figure was a short old man. The old man had thick bushy eyebrows that mostly covered his eyes, a very messy thick white beard and stache combo that obstructed his mouth entirely, little hair atop his head, and he himself was dressed in even worse rags and holding a cane. He scooted passed the four, easily done as he was around half their size, and stopped before the unhooded member of the convoy.

"Well now... we don't get many visitors. Actually since I've been mayor, we haven't had ANY visitors. Who..... are you people??" the old man questioned.

"My name is Blake Holkot. I'm one of the guards of this here convoy. Bunch of folks here are lookin' to move some cargo out of the mountains through these here woods to Hanover Pass," the man of black hair replied, "Bunch of small groups set out with a wagon a'piece. All agreed to meet up at this small town. According to the maps it was a good mid-way."

"Guh, maps? Sonny if we're on a map then your maps are damn well older than I am. No one goes through these woods anymore, and no one ever leaves. Been that way for the better part of the last eighty-five years."

"What uh... what do you mean by that last part? No one ever leaves?"

"Course not youngster, not since those cult folks cursed the damn place. Once you fall under the shroud there ain't no leavin. Most folks that walk in wanderin 'round for the rest of their days searchin for an escape. Ain't no way out of here."

“I beg your pardon!” the man in the fur barked, now storming ahead, “We are on an important mission for the Region of Glastol, to deliver this cargo to our benefactors for their professional aid in dealing with a number of issues concerning our brethren. We do not have time for such superstitious insolence.”

The old man looked from Blake to the bureaucrat before him, “Sonny, ain’t no superstition. This here is the real deal. There ain’t no escapin the *Eternal Hollow*. Ye be daft ta think this is some joke. Our folk been stuck here in this place for a long time.”

“Now listen here, I don’t care what you might believe or say. If these savages you speak of are of such danger, then we will appropriate them proper!”

“Heh, heh heh. Ye fools be walkin to yer deaths with attitudes like that,” the old man chuckled.

“How dare you, you wretched- filth!”

“Sonny, I never said it were the cultists stoppin’ folks from leavin. I said it was the curse they put down. Guarantee ya this- you keep on goin from here and you won’t be walkin back out. Be lucky enough to find our here lil town again.”

“Wretched-” the man growled, growled that is until Blake placed a hand upon him.

The man looked to Blake who was already in the process of speaking, “Magistrate Garvin, please,” he began, “Lets just let calm heads prevail now, alright? What does it matter if you don’t agree with the geezer? We’re here now, and we have to wait for the other wagons anyway. Why not settle in for the night and organize your men. Maybe a couple people from our team can inquire about these cultist guys and the curse?”

Garvin stared with irate fire for a few brief seconds, until finally sighing out a, “Very well Mercenary.”

Garvin then turned and walked from the presence of Blake and the old man, brushing right passed Elise. Blake in turn turned with an apologetic response, beginning to converse further with the old man. All the while Elise stood motionless, lost in thoughts of her own given by the

expression she now wielded. Around her the guards of the convoy would begin to break off and head back towards the other carriages, following up with the magistrate. The cloaked figure that had sat beside the coachman for the majority of the journey hopped down to the ground with a slight thud, joined soon after by the other two of the group of five.

“Elise,” Blake called back, to which the hooded folks all shifted their heads back to look ahead, “I’m going to go with the Mayor here and negotiate our stay in town. I want you to come along. Andi is in charge while we’re away. You hear that Dante?!”

“Yeah yeah,” a loud bark came from one of the hooded figures.

Elise broke from the group and strolled ahead. As she did the old man had already begun to walk back into town with Blake right behind, as well as the woman who was accompanying the old man. Entry into the town was swift, just through the gate, and within the boundaries of the town all was as it appeared on the outside. Inside the houses appeared boarded, some secure, others falling apart.

There was little to no life in the town, simply a few people in the same baggy stitched attire as the old man and the woman. A few faces could be seen poking around corners and through windows. As Elise flipped her hood back she did so slowly, turning her head left and right, looking upon the place. Broken crates and carts in the streets, stains on the ground that looked slimy.

The group walked up to a particularly well-to-do building, single story though very wide with a large window to one side of the home. The young lady accompanying the elderly mayor opened the door, to which the entire group walked in and entered the foyer. The inside of the building was very open, no walls on the inside dividing up the rooms aside from the apparent bedroom and bathroom which had open doors at the present. All else- the kitchen, the living room, the foyer, it was all open.

The old man moved across the room to a large torn up chair and sat upon it, with the woman standing right beside him, “Ooof, yeh, sorry bout that. Now what was that ye spoke of before? From Glastol?”

“That’s right sir,” Blake began again, “My team is helping to escort a bunch of folks from the Glastol Region. It stands about a good couple days journey East of here. It’s surrounded by mountains and rough seas to the East and North, and to their South is an enemy kingdom.”

“So what’s the hot head’s story with all of this?”

Elise looked around the room briefly, her thoughts trailing off for a short bit as Blake and the old man began to talk.

Curse of the Hollow

Tick-tock. Tick-tock. Tick-tock.

The sound of the clock second by second by second in a small office room. A wood desk, a bulletin board behind, a whiteboard in the corner, a book shelf off to the right with big windows to the left. A couple chairs between the desk and the door, and a chair between the desk and the bulletin. A filing cabinet drawer slammed shut and a thick folder slapped down right onto the desk.

A man sat there, dressed in a literal mob suit behind the desk, with the hat and a red tie. His fingers interlaced, hands quite together. Then across from him, sitting at the other chairs- Elise herself and two others, one in another mob-type suit and the other in military attire.

"Now lessy 'ere. Miss Bakuuva, you've been a... greatly appreciated asset to our lil ol' Guild here," the man spoke in somewhat of a drawl, "Ya got dat spunk, and spunk is critical in this here biznes, yuh know what I mean there?"

"I- er, yes sir," Elise replied, looking at the man across the desk.

"Now listen' an I get 'et. You got this grand ol' plan butcha gotta remember that we ain't in the bizz to go round solvin the world's problems. There'za system in place dear," he spoke, shifting his chair back and beginning to stand.

The three across from the man watched as he paced around his desk and over to the window. Arms folded behind his back as he tipped his hat, shades glistening in the light.

"It ain't no damn rocket science there Miss. We simply got ourselves a system. Yer dealeo with the vampire is gonna have ta wait fer now. Less o'

course, yer buddy boi is involved in one of them thar assignments. We got a whole heap of 'em comin in lately. Vampires this and vampires that. Got 'em comin out da tooter, know what I mean?"

"Y-yes sir, I do... I think."

"Look- keep it simple. You wanna take to yer cause ya shoulda stayed with them Lit Folk. You wanted to explore, you wanted to go all in in this game. I respect that; but ye gotta own up to yer choices ma'am. You be on the job, you get the job done. You doin your own thing, I don't care."

"Sir- I **do** do my job. I beat that gang and had a few questions for them, that's all."

"Well golly, if'n you did yer job then I dunno why you were brought to my office. Aye there Cataris whatcha got?"

"Well sir, it's just that Miss Bakuuva here was interrogating targets and the clients were not very pleased with her resolve to not finish them off. One report states that she let three of the targets escape in order to... hunt down more of them?" the other mobster-looking person replied.

"I mean yes, I did do that; but it wasn't just for Arkaza. I thought that if I beat a couple of them up and let some go, they'd either back off completely or- more likely, bring back their boss to kick my ass."

"And did they?" the main man asked.

"Yeah, actually. It was later that day. And the other hunters managed to capture all of them. And that's when I started asking about Arkaza."

"So ya did yer job and they want ta complain about yer work. 'ight, fuck 'em."

"But sir we can't-"

"Cataris I do declare it don't matta now ya hear? The youngin' did 'er job and did it well. What she does when she be done is all on her own I do declare o' eclare. Ya hear? Give'r a medal for all I care."

"For breaking our protocols?"

"Yer darn tootin'!! This just be a lot o dat dere hogwash. Now- nuffa dis bizz. 'Lise you be a durn star in the bizz when I git dun witchu I do be declarin ya hear?"

"Yes Mister Starrk," Elise replied with a slight head tilt.

"Now I gotcha one more, this time with yer bois in the ol' A-Team of yers. See, bout a day ago we got a contact come in, sayin they got this uh, this problem. Uh- Catar' you be fer tellin now."

"Ueh- yes sir," the other spoke moving forward, grabbing at the file on Starrk's desk, "So, last night, we received a request from a little... kingdom? Garvin. They have a vampire problem."

"I'm listening," Elise replied, spinning around in her chair to look at the secretary.

"Garvin is under rule of a Vampire Warlord who is draining the region of its natural resources and selling them for profit. In fact the region is locked down with mountains and raging seas to the North and East, and a wild forest to the West. South is a nation that is trading with the Warlord, and thus will not allow anyone to escape the region."

"Real mess there it be," Starrk remarked.

"Quite. This has been going on for years. Any attempt at escape is shut down and quickly results in harsh penalties. Just a couple weeks ago, a small group managed to get through the mountains and sail out to sea. They

were picked up by the coastguard of some nation, and ended up here. To keep it simple they-”

“They set up a deal with some buyers, and then went on to hire mercenaries. If they can transport an offering of their resources to a neutral land of the buyers as proof, the buyers will work to politically intervene on behalf of the people of Glastol, and push the Vampires out,” came the voice of Blake.

Elise opened her eyes back up and looked over to Blake. She hadn’t moved the entire time as the conversation came back into focus. Blake stepped forward a pace, moving his arms out and becoming more expressive as he told the tale. The old man was busy twirling his beard with his left hand, the woman beside him remaining at ease.

“I see I see. So they convince ‘em buyers that their land is worth something, and the buyers get involved with their own buddies and militias,” the old man posed, “And ya couldn’t just go through the mountains or sky because?”

“With the Vampires patrolling the mountains such movement would’ve been noticed. Even if they got out to sea, there was no guarantee. And for why the buyers don’t send an airship or anything is because they demand the proof first. Last thing they want to do is piss off these folks to Glastol’s South. And so they opted to send multiple carriages through the Eternal Hollow. If even one gets through to the rendezvous, Glastol is pretty much liberated.”

“Heh, well that’s all fine and good but you kids made one big mistake and that’s that no one leaves the Hollow,” the old man chuckled a little before falling silent.

“... you mentioned the curse, and the cultists,” Elise spoke up, “What is there to tell?”

“Plenty,” the old man grumbled, “You see, the Eternal Hollow is an infinite forest. No matter where you enter or leave, yer gonna have a bad time tryin to get out. You go South and suddenly it’s West. Ya exit East and somehow you’re in the West.”

“Infinite Forests, I have heard of them. A fun little trickery born by the Celestial River, and they always have some means of escape to them,” Blake began, looking at the old man, “You said it’s been cursed like this for eighty-five years. So did you settle here back then... or did something change?”

“That’s... where them cultists come in,” the old man murmured, “Our small nation, if you could even call it that, has been trapped for a long time. There were multiple communities that migrated into the Eternal Hollow to escape some of the nonsense back in the day hundreds of years ago. Wayfinders were the ticket in and out.”

The old man grasped at his pants, shivering a little, his brows furled as he looked to the ground. The woman beside him knelt down a little and placed a hand upon his shoulder, drawing the man’s attention back briefly. He looked to her and then back to the two.

“There were five towers. Four to the cardinals and one at what we thought was the center. It let our Wayfinders work for generations, ‘nd eventually we built the central tower into a cathedral ta eliminate the risk of the other four towers going out. And it worked, till them damn cultists came.”

“Who are they?” Blake questioned.

“Buncha bastards. We never knew who. We thought they were vampires until we shot ‘em through the heart, and they didn’t die. And then their leader, some sort of bizarre... *cultist*, who just talked a buncha rubbish about some beast in the ground. They took the main town and cathedral and broke the Wayfinder connections, trappin all of us in here. After that they started taking people. Day by day they took our people, people who then never returned. We tried to fight back but then they brought in legions of these masked things and other vampires. They we could kill but for every batch we did kill, more just kept coming. One by one towns went down, and now we’re all that remains. Tried makin a new Cathedral for the Wayfinders but it didn’t work.”

“If they kept taking people... then how is this town still here?”

“Big forest, people probably comin in like you folk. Plus the main gate ain’t just for show, we got us some magic in effect around the walls of the town. Nothin gets in without goin through that gate, and nothin gets in through that gate without our say-so. Course a town can only survive for so long without foraging. They don’t come through nearly as often as they used to... actually whenever they snag someone they leave us alone for awhile.”

“Troublesome,” Blake murmured.

“... hey,” Elise murmured, “If the forest is so big and they aren’t around, how do you figure they go about grabbing people? Do they have small groups out hunting?”

“Why... no. Usually they just have scouts out that communicate with birds somehow. If the scout spots a big group they call in backup, otherwise they just take after and grab a single person. Usually just lone men up in the trees keepin watch around the forest best we could tell over the years.”

Blake’s body twitched immediately, a cold sweat descending down his face instantly. Elise turned over to Blake at the suddenness of the twitch, then stepped forward while continuing to look at him.

“What is it there fellow?” the old man asked.

“Lone scouts with birds... Elise-”

She blinked, calm at first though within just a few seconds her blank stare began to swell into something of genuine fear, shrunk up with eyes bulging. Both Elise and Blake shot round and bolted for the door, slamming it open and blasting right out. The old man watched as they ran, and then looked to the lady with him.

Dance of the Dead

Dead in the darkness of the woods with only a few lanterns adorned- a wagon sat with the surroundings lit up. Guards aplenty stood around the wagon, some with swords drawn and others- particularly those atop the wagon, with rifles drawn. Some held crossbows but for the most part it was either rifle, rifle with a bayonet, or the sword. Around twenty-five men total and all in different attires. Figures blitzed all around this group of people, completely encircling the lot of them.

“What the hell are they?!” one man yelled out.

All around them, many many figures masked in darkness swirled around, dancing. Yes they danced. Several doing a fast Waltz, a couple hopping about with the Foxtrot, a little Swing here and some Halay there. A little skipping and a little hopping as these shrouded figures broke off from their individual dances and began to twirl with one another. Enter the violin players, four figures with glowing eyes and bodies drenched in black with hoods up masking their faces ever so.

As those big dark figures began to play those very many around them began to group into pairs. A clap clap clap clap and the round about with arms locked together, step step twirl. The level of play of the hooded figures, it was rapid and certainly without even the slightest of flaw. Their performance, rapid, far beyond that of a human with speeds almost blurring to the eye. All the while those around them continued to dance, soon entering into a Barn Dance around the entire carriage and the guardsmen.

A big round circle skipping around, hand in hand only to be broken up into pairs or trios that would continue to circle whilst twirling themselves. The guards were left fear plastered. Rifles pointed out and swords held at the ready to be swung. Three men came rushing out of the back of the carriage that the guards and this dancing. In hand several lanterns now beginning to glow with flames kicking right off.

The diameter of the light bubble quickly intensified and revealed... more.



Art by Aureolinflax

“ZOMBIES!” one of the guardsmen immediately spat out.

The fear on one guard’s face peaked with a flash fire, his entire expression practically popping off of his face. Corpses in various states of decomp- some very fresh with throats still stained with blood, others rotted or rotting or dried, a few mostly skeletons in the mix. Bones rattled and feet shuffled.

And it was at that moment when the lights caught yet another sight, high up in a massive tree branch overlooking the area. A lone undead dressed in clothes almost identical to that of the soldiers, aside from the rot, all with a face that was completely dried and easily to be considered mummified. Its eyes were black with only a little glimmer offered back after the fire’s light struck.

Gray patches of long hair and a jaw stuck in open hang with the teeth completely visible, some of those also rotted out. The figure in the trees danced, their arms flailing up and then down, then up and back down again. A little shift and skip on one side of the body, then a hop to the other side. As the corpse kept doing its little dance, something else came into focus. The Guard Captain froze up firmly.

Something was dancing right behind that mummy, a figure in black much like the violin players with eyes aglow with a haze of orange. Their face was visibly pale and peaking out from behind the corpse's head, their mouth curled back into a massive malevolent grin. More of that individual came into view in the form of their pale hands having hold of the wrists of the corpse, and shoes underneath the feet of it as well. The man was puppeteering the mummified corpse, making it dance using his own body.

"Look!" a man beside the captain shouted out, pointing up above the man and his dead doll.

In the next branch higher up was another all black figure, this one though with their arms held out right in front of them. They were dancing a little as well; though their fingers were twitching like mad and their arms were regularly bobbing up and down. A slight glimmer occurred with the shifting lanterns, silver strings, strings that whirled and wrapped all around the area-leading straight to all of the dancing undead.

Looking back down a few more figures in black had joined the fest of the undead corpses, now actually dancing with said corpses doing a little Swing. Spun right round and round while the rest of the corpses began to do their own individual dances. The Guard Captain shot forward and raised his sword swiftly-

"Ain't no undead, they're using the corpses as a distraction! FIRE! FIRE FIRE FIRE!!"

The guards wasted no time with all of the rifle and bow users aiming their weapons out. A rapid fire of bangs and bams rang out, puffs of smoke popping up around the group. The figures in black all zoomed into the air, darts of blur with even those with their violins evading. Shots flew into the corpses. Pockets of dust blew out with the shots hitting, different things transpiring after that first wave of gun fire.

A hand blew off of one corpse, falling right to the ground. Legs blew off, heads even rolled. The dancing figure up above swung his corpse partner round and twirled out of the way of some arrows which struck the bark of the branch. In one swift movement the figure then twirled the corpse right off the side and let it fall straight to the forest floor.

“WOOO HOO HOO HOO!! These guys are fired up now boys! Let’em have it!” the man then shouted aloud.

Green energy surged from the fingertips of the puppeteer high above and flew through those silver wires leading straight to the corpses. Flashes of green then engulfed the bodies, resulting in them all beginning to twitch and shake on their own. The Guards all looked around as empty casings flew from their rifles, as the bowmen reloaded. Collective gasps and groans were heard, and all at once the bodies began to stand on their own. Blazing eyes of pure green fire swelled within the sockets of those bodies which continued to shake.

The flesh of some began to grow and spread, becoming more moist than it was just seconds ago. Drool dripped from several of the corpses, now all beginning to stand.

“The fuck is this?”

“What the hell are they!?”

“Fuckin undead! FIRE ALL!!”

Another barrage of gunfire and arrows screaming through the air, with only a few shots taking off any limbs. For the most part those undead stood unphased. Up in the trees the four violinists and six figures in black stared down, some smug and others blank. The puppeteer landed beside the one who had danced with the corpse in the tree branch, both of whom were looking down now with smiles of their own.

Screams rang out as the undead began to move in on the guardsmen, followed by more shots sounding off and more grunts and groans.

As both Elise and Blake bolted from the residency and made it outside, the sound of metal clashing against metal could be heard followed by a variety of shouts and wails. And it took little to no time for both to sprint full speed ahead. Up ahead the convoy was well in distress. Guardsmen all running around with weapons drawn, with there being quite the collection from three carriage groups now together.

Still the clangs and clashes of metal were ongoing, followed now by shots of rifles. Both came skidding to a halt, staring out at a significant sight. Multiple knights bound in bright green metal armor, armed with swords and crossbows themselves though not a rifle in sight. In addition were several hulking trolls more than five times the size of a human, wearing not more than loin clothes.

“WOOOHOOO HOO HOO!! HELL YEAH- LET IT ALL OUT!!” came a very loud, extraordinary shout from behind.

Behind where the green knights and the guardsmen were fighting, a decent distance away in its own battlefield, four figures clashed two on two, with two more in reserve behind the fighting. Three knights who stood out for not wearing full sets of armor at all, instead wrapped with black garments with some dark purple armor pieces such as shoulder guards, knee guards, gauntlets, and chest plates, green capes flowing behind the three. Their eyes glowing, the fangs of the two clashing more than visible.

“Tch- those are the Warlord’s Guard!” Blake barked beside Elise.

Three knights, the Knights of Galahan. The first in reserve- an old man of graying hair and brown eyes, a slightly wrinkled face, relatively buff: **Fen Rao**. Another knight- a young lad with brown hair around the neck and over his ears, green eyes, not nearly as buff as the old man though certainly not scrawny or average: **Yeager Carloff**. And finally the last knight- a young woman with brown hair cut above the neck, wine red eyes that appeared very pleasant, and a very fine figure despite the bulky armor around her: **Shree Vampa**.

The three previously hooded, now unhooded yet cloaked. The first, a small girl of short dark hair- cropped bangs, kept off of the shoulder- her eyes a sapphire blue, long pointed elf ears: **Andi Dazzleton**. The second being another woman, mid-back length hair with eye length bangs and a color of which shifted from light brown to orangish around the mid and finally turned to a reddish pink at the ends, her eyes somewhat a blend of emerald and lime green, horns curving out of the sides of her head and arching straight up: **Roxanne Trebish**. The final individual a man in

what appeared to be his early thirties, short brown hair parted and somewhat a mess, golden brown eyes, square glasses, a little chin hair, and tremendously plain: **Dante Thompson**.

In the hands of the two fighting knights, a dual ended halberd for the girl and for the guy a large scythe, whilst the elder in the rear held a plain battle ax. In the hands of the two cloaked fellows fighting, the man held a large broadsword and in the hands of the woman were two pink crystal daggers, while the short girl in reserve held a rather plain bow and arrow. The halberd swung down and slammed upon the crossed daggers, the holder of both in turn struggling to beat back the force of the knight. As for the scythe and the broadsword, the back of the scythe's blade was currently blocking a downward strike from the sword.

"YEAAAAAAAAAAH!!" the knight lad, Yeager, shouted out.

Yeager's scythe slammed down and in no more than a second he flipped right over the top of Dante, using the scythe as a means to pole vault. The knight's armor clanged as he dropped down onto the ground, and one brief turn and a swing of the scythe brought broadsword and snath together. Yeager held his weapon with both hands spaced rather far apart, the broadsword held with both hands clamped up in the center. A smug grin crossed Yeager's face whilst Dante's was one of contortion and strain, the latter trembling ever so with the former stiff as a board damn well unphased.

A flurry of swipes and strikes went down right next to this show of acrobatics and strength, this one being a show of speed and precision. The halberd jabbed forward at what seemed to be half a dozen or better strikes per second, spattered all over the place. The sound of whipping air from the barrage, whilst on the flip side Roxanne was swiftly dodging a third of the strikes and blocking the rest with her daggers- even taking a few opportunities to counter strike. The two twirled around and jumped in a mystifying display of twirls, flips, and strikes, both girls appearing dead set on striking the other.

And then in the back lots of these fights, the old man watching unmoved with his hands resting on the butt of the handle of his ax which was presently pressed into the ground. He leaned upon his weapon, everything about him stationary as he gazed ahead at the combat. The only thing

Fen Rao truly did was shift his eyes every few seconds. The elf girl did much the same, standing with her weapon in hand though with her own eyes set straight ahead, her expression completely serious.

As the two trios did battle, or rather the two duos, the fight was raging on all around them. Shots fired off from the rifles of the guards into the armor of the knights- even a few head shots landing. Arrows plunged in through the eye holes and swords swung for the vulnerable locations not covered by armor, solid thrusts able to make it through. Holes in the armor opened up for certain but not a drop of blood came from them. All the while a few guards were taking meaty hits and downed easily from fists and swords alike.

Shots rang out from a position near Magistrate Garvin, at least eight guards with rifles in hand firing out. All of the rifles- single shot rifles with bolt action reloading and black powder cartridges. As the first wave of guards fired off, the next wave covered and fired their own, alternating back and forth. Though despite the heavy fire and the landed hits the assailing knights did not fall.

Echoing groans roared out of them, the head shots and heart shots not making a bit of difference. Elise's focus shifted to one group of guards well in distress, rifles lying on the ground smashed, now defending with clubs and daggers.

"Bakuuva!" Blake's voice rang out.

"I'm on it!" she called back, breaking from her position into a dash at the group.

One guard swung his bat hard against the head of one of the knights, the weapon crackling apart raining out splinters. A jolt back and a look of shock came over as the knight before him raised their own club, a spiked club.

CLANG!!

The guard fell to his rear and slumped back, gazing at the sight of Elise's back. She stood before the guard now with both of her hands on the hilt of her own katana, a katana which now had blocked the spiked swing of the knight. She grunted a little, the blade quivering from the

force of the impact backed by continued pressure; though such a struggle was ever so short lived. Shifting right out of the way, her blade slid along the club until-

SHIIIIING

The knight stumbled back, two steps back to be precise. There came a thud on the ground right behind, a rather hefty one, followed by the club then hitting the ground. Said knight then dropped to its knees, followed by the body slumping over and collapsing upon the ground-headless. Literal brown sludge pooled out of the point of decapitation, followed soon by the body beginning to deflate as more sludge poured out of the various fabric components of the armor.

Elise glanced down at the disappearing form for a brief stint before locking sight of the next enemy before her, swinging at that as well, "Blake, Mud Dolls!"

"I'm on it I'm on it!" he called back, his cloak flying off to reveal his attire.

A dark blue dress shirt under a red-wine vest, adorned by a large ash-gray n blue dustrer coat, dark gray jeans, and black boots with spurs. Holsters at his sides with revolvers in place, slightly larger than standard sized revolvers. It took him no time to whip both out and aim ahead, twin shots ringing out. A couple of the knights struck, sky blue light pouring out of the wounds, followed then by the subsequent melting of the bodies with an outpouring of mud.

"Back up the guards, leave the Vampires to those two," Blake called back to Elise.

"I know!" she then yelled back, raising her weapon again ready to strike, "Melee combatants, decapitate these guys to put them down for good. Riflemen and Archers lay down cover fire with your ranged weapons. We can win this!"

High Rush

“YEEUUHUUAAAA!”

Another clang followed this obtuse, high pitched battle cry. The swing and slice of Yeager’s scythe, carving right through the air and slicing into the ground with a single stroke. Not but the slightest of flicks and it ripped right back up with a little spin in hand, the knight actually beginning to twirl it like a baton before again lashing out. One more good swing in front, completely missing Dante.

Just a few skids back was all there was, narrowly missing the fatal strike by no more than two dozen centimeters. He stumbled back a little more, red in the face, pupils dilated ever so, most certainly not all that coordinated in his dodge. Before him, the vampire knight continued to grin with a fire in his eyes and his teeth clammed together very visible in that wide show. Scythe still held out, the Vampire made no moves as Dante continued to stumble just a smidge until taking stance again.

“You’re not half bad there friend,” Yeager chuckled, “But you ain’t got shit on a fuckin’ Vampire now have you, eh?!”

“Bugga me, why do I always get the flamboyant ones?” Dante grumbled.

SCCCCCRAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAPE

Dante’s eyes drifted over, bouncing as they did. Across the way the dual ended halberd was flying wild and carving right through the ground with each swing. One swing, two swings, three and four, five swings, six, and so forth. With each swing the weapon was twirled just as the scythe was; though when this weapon turned it was able to swing and attack immediately, unlike the single bladed scythe.

Each swing a miss, Roxanne ducking and weaving between each strike, holding a boxing stance and reverse gripping her daggers the entire time. It was footwork mostly, slight shifts and bolts around each oncoming attack from the other vampire knight. One more swing and a miss; though this time Roxanne shot ahead and jabbed forward with her right hand.

CLANG

The chime of impact. A slight clicking and blacking from two materials interlocked and quivering. Roxanne's ruby crusted fist lay against the base of the halberd's shaft, while Shree held different points of said shaft with a bit of struggle against the force of the punch. The Vampire shifted back with her feet scouring the earth beneath, the cloaked defender pushing harder and driving the former back.

Shree's teeth gritted, her body shaking ever so, "{Again with the damn crystal- her strength is legit!}"

A quick jolt back, releasing the lock of fist and weapon, followed by a kick sent straight ahead into Roxanne's gut. The latter skid back a bit, opening a gap between the combatants and in no time at all the Vampire went into action. One solid leap into the air and a dive straight down.

"HA!"

CLANG

A blade of Shree's halberd slammed down into the crossed red crusted arms of Roxanne, the latter of whose knees in turn buckled ever so from the force of the strike. The Vampire followed up then after with a flip right over, landing behind. Another swing and another block, this time into a raised kneecap covered with the same red crust. A fist swung down and smacked the halberd like a hammer, smashing the blade into the ground.

"Nrgh!"

Shree shot back with the halberd ripping from the ground, narrowly avoiding a swing of Roxanne's fist and crystal dagger. The gap between them opened yet again, leaving both in a huff.

"{Again with the damn crystal, what is this girl- can she cover her entire body with that crap? Whatever the case my weapon isn't getting through her defense like this-}"

"Aye now there Roxanne. Thought we agreed not ta be doin that so early into a fight," came a call from the sidelines, straight from Dante.

“Ah come on now Dante, you’re half in the bottle over there and you said you wouldn’t drink the whole mission!” she yelled back.

“Ya well- too much down time Rox. Und these guys ain’t much-”

“Whoa whoa there,” Yeager interrupted, “Ain’t much? Jeez man that’s totally insulting to hear!”

“They’re bluffing,” Shree replied, “Come on Yeag, remember what we are.”

“Heh, yeah,” he chuckled, raising his scythe and extending it out in front of him, “Fuckin Vampires. We’re the top of the pyramid baby!!”

“Hrmp... arrogant brats,” Fen Rao grumbled from behind to himself.

“Gotta say though sis, I am but just the slightest bit jealous. You’re fighting with a real hottie over there like man, lose the cape and she has some ASSETS,” Yeager laughed.

“Pfft, how do you think I feel bro? To me I’m fighting some trumped up mascara wearing ho-bag and you’re fighting a reeeeeal handsome guy. Honestly, I could just eat him up. Too bad they are our enemies though,” she replied, grumbling at the end as she again raised up her halberd.

“Psh, typical freshies,” Dante grumbled, “You get so high and drunk on yer newfound power, thinkin you lot are that tough shit. You ain’t nuffin but slightly hardier people till you feed long enough.”

“Hell now,” Yeager said with a slight smirk forming, “This guy would make for an ironic pet in a cage. Course you could always fuck ‘em to death sis. I’ll switch with you.”

“Hey- HEY!! Shut it Yeag!” she spat with a scowl, “I’m not some dollar store whore!”

“You could’ve fooled me- you hang on every *hunk* that you find on the job.”

Her scowl soon shifted, going from a look of rage to one of... pleasure, “Mmm well what can I say...”

Both Dante and Roxanne shuttered- Shree vanished before them, now standing some distance away near a group of guards, her halberd lowered.

“Mmm-” she hummed, now approaching the young lad, extending her right arm out and placing a hand upon the chest of a fellow before her.

“Hey-” the guard mumbled, the others around him soon taking note of the sudden appearance.

“W-when did she-”

“Golly gee Yeager, I can’t help that I like pretty things... handsome men make for such fun playthings,” she hummed.

“Hey!” a different guard yelled out.

“Ooof, dammit Shree. Mostly dudes around here, the hell am I supposed to take back eh? The crystal girl is all I’ve got to pluck?” Yeager called.

“Why not look around, bound to be another bro,” she giggled.

Shree moved around the guard in leather, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, hands crossing over his chest as she slid behind him. The side of her face rested into the guard’s, her smile radiating warmth despite her touch being ice cold. As she did this, Yeager swung his scythe out with a groan, whilst both Dante and Roxanne readied up with their stances.

“For fuck’s sake, we’re not here to play you two. It isn’t wise to turn your backs on power users, remember that!” Fen Rao barked out.

“Ah chill old man,” Shree giggled, nuzzling the guard she had picked out, “They’re very contempt. Maybe I... I will keep one or two of them.”

She whispered this into the ear of the guard, her lips mere centimeters from his lobe, her warm breath washing over his neck. The elder man shook his head at the sight.

“Oi, listen to old man Fen Rao, Shree,” the young Yeager called back, “These guys could be dangerous. That one you want to ride on probably wants to stick something else in ya if you know what I mean, YEEHOO-”

“Oh pleeease, baby boy can stick me with whatever he pleases,” she again murmured into the guard’s ear, one of her hands now brushing the side of his face, “Little bit of... *passion* never hurt anyone~”

“Oh I’m sorry, thought you weren’t a dollar store whore. Yeah well keep having your fun until they stick something in your heart and kill your big dumb butt, now get your horn caked ass off that guy and get back to killin!” Yeager shouted.

“Ugh- fine!” she harshly howled back, shoving the guard away from her.

The young guard flopped over onto his side and rolled, looking back up to Shree with a bit of shake in his eyes, “Lame ass mother- I mean seriously, what’s the point in being immortal if we can’t have a little fun? Playing into their lust and killing them, maybe keeping one or two for realsies, what’s wrong with that when you do it?!”

“Because sis, I’m a man, and men can do these things without being-”

“Don’t you dare finish saying that- I will totally stab you in the fucking stones if you do sexist pig-”

“Try me bitch!”

“The hell is with these guys?” Roxanne grumbled aloud.

“Like I said, drunk on their own newfound power. Bastards don’t realize that they’re already skewered... well, except for the one,” Dante then grumbled, turning his attention over towards Fen Rao.

Across the combat zone the old man continued to observe, his gaze narrowing momentarily.

Shift

“Well now isn’t this just dandy,” came the voice of Blake.

Shree blinked. Standing right behind her now was the cowboy, he who had now held out a revolver to the back of her head. She froze, instantly, a shiver visibly going right down her spine whilst her face opened up wide.

“Wh-what?” she murmured.

A blade was pressed firmly to Yeager’s throat not more than a second later, and a hand gripping firm hold of the wrist of the hand which held the scythe.

“Gyeh- what the hell?” he grunted.

Around them the guards all moved in now, weapons drawn or rearmed. Puddles of mud and armor lay clattered along the ground everywhere. Elise’s grip on his wrist was strong, and her placement of the katana- right to the vital point along the side of his throat. Both now stood caught, caught in the grasp of their enemy.

Hell Riders

The two knights held at point, all around them their backup lay in puddles of rot and death. Mud dolls, all as nothing more than piles on the forest floor. Behind Shree stood Blake, his revolver pressed firmly to the back of her head, guards now rushing in all around them. And then behind Yeager, Elise stood, her blade wrapped around his neck with her free hand grasping his wrist.

“H-hey now,” Yeager mumbled, staring across at Shree, feeling the edge of the blade on his neck.

Shree’s gaze shifted around, eyeing all of the mud puddles lying around next to the armor, soon venturing over towards Yeager. Dante and Roxanne both grinned, turning their attentions swiftly towards the old knight, their weapons still in hand. Yeager wasted no time at all, dropping his scythe from hand, allowing it to clatter onto the ground.

“Hey hey hey now- le, lets not get carried away here uh, alright?” he laughed, a very evident fake laugh.

“How the hell did they catch us? No- how the hell did they beat the dummies??” Shree questioned aloud.

“The answer... is simple,” Blake murmured, “Your mentor over there called it so perfectly, it would be an insult to have to repeat it. You spent a literal minute arguing with your friend over there too, far too easily distracted.”

“This sensation... you’re a Vampire too?” Shree asked, slightly turning her head.

Her movement stopped immediately, the end of the revolver jabbing into the back of her skull, another jetting into her back, “Don’t move.”

“These two are... Blake, try not to kill that one,” Elise called out.

“I know. Same goes for you Elise,” Blake called back.

As the two exchanged words, both Roxanne and Dante moved forward. Dante still had a slight stumble to him, the red in his face beginning to fade, while the red dust around Roxanne's arms began to chip away and fall to the ground. Both would come to a halt some distance before the old vampire, whose expression did not yet change.

"That just leaves you Mr. Guy," Roxanne spoke.

Fen Rao stood as he had the entire time though with his gaze set adrift now, scanning the surroundings. All of his knights were down with the two captured. He alone with the risk of multiple guards, the two approaching, and Andi who had yet to make a move.

Grin

"You expect for me to be intimidated by your outsmarting of the two chicks cast so recently from their mother's nest?" he spoke, finally shifting.

Fen rose up and stood tall, his left arm falling by his side as the right hand took grip of the handle of his ax. It wrenched free from the ground in no time flat, just a single tug. Swung round only once, the massive weapon clanged as it rested upon the armored shoulder of Fen Rao. The elderly man took steps forward then after, only a few before halting.

Both cloaked warriors before him stood ready, Roxanne twirling daggers in hand and Dante with his sword. Elise stared from them over to Fen Rao, a shift that Blake did the exact same.

CRACKLE

"Mmm?" Fen Rao grumbled.

"Ngh-

"Eh?"

Both Dante and Roxanne lowered their arms slightly, now looking passed the knight. The old Vampire turned his way around a quarter stepped and stared back behind him. Far far from the edge of the town, a figure bolted out of the trees, a horse shaped figure. Then came three more.

With this the attentions of the other guards and the rest of the five were sent outward, even the focus of the two captured Vampire Knights. People on horse back were charging full speed a great distance across the open plain, more than visible. Then there came two more blasting right out of the brush behind the four.

“The fuck?” Yeager voiced.

“Hey- those are our horses!” one of the guards called out.

“One of the other caravans? But- where’s the carriage?”

CRASH



Aureolinflax

Three horses came bellowing from the woods behind the two, their flesh torn up, their legs twisted round, their heads turned- running in reverse. One hauled ass across the ground running sideways, again with twisted legs. And atop the backs of all of them were the dancing heaps, waving their arms and jolting with their weapons.

“The flying FUCK is that?!” Shree barked out.

“Good lord-”

Elise and Blake both looked to one another as around them the guards backed away slightly. By now the trio about to fight had completely dropped their guards and their weapons, Fen Rao turning completely around to bare witness to the sight.

“What in the name of Valan’s Light is that supposed to be?” Fen Rao mumbled.

“That’s them- the cultists!” one of the town guards yelled out.

Across the way the six guardsmen on their horses were riding hard, holding tightly to their rides. Behind them the twisted up undead horses were only drawing closer. One of the corpses dancing atop the undead horse moved with the robot, half of the body’s face peeling off. Right next to the jiving body was another, moving without any direction- simply flapping their arms around and hopping up and down like a drunken buffoon.

A loud gun shot could be heard, followed instantaneously by one of the fleeing horses wailing out. It tipped and tumbled, the man riding it sent flying off and crashing across the grass- the horse tumbling and rolling to a stop. The man stumbled up.

SHING

SPLATTTT!!!

The body of the man collapsed to the ground with the head looking like a smashed pumpkin, one of the undead horses flying right on by with one corpse atop holding a massive bloodied hammer.

“Shit!” Blake yelled.

Elise’s attention turned to see Blake rushing off from where he had been, having completely let go of his prisoner, and in no time at all passing both Dante and Roxanne. Fen Rao blinked and glanced to his left, right as the Vampiric Outlaw flew on by the old knight. Elise hesitated for only a moment more, quickly releasing Yeager and taking off after Blake.

“Dammit!” she spat as she did so.

“Dante and Roxanne, come on!” Blake shouted now holding two revolvers in hand.

Both tore off after Blake then after with Elise trailing close behind. Up ahead another horse went down, and this time when the guard stood up he was split vertically in half with a single swing of a lengthy two meter sword followed then by the decapitation of that man's horse. Another horse went down in no time, an ax thrown straight into the side. The guard however was quick, reacting by turning around and firing a rifle off at the oncoming threat.

No damage dealt, and with one swift stroke the guard was slashed in half at the waist. His blood spilled out, his upper half turned and fell over. Three remained, still being chased down.

"Hrgh- Shree, Yeager, split now!" Fen Rao called out.

Both knights, now free, wasted no time and launched away with single leaps each. Fen himself lost all color and became a drooping pile of mud in seconds, the form of his body lost. Andi watched as the old knight melted away, then turned back to witness the other two disappearing. Her teeth gritted as she whipped back around.

Up ahead the remaining three on horseback were continuing to ride hard and fast with the undead chasing right behind. One of the undead animals spun round, its legs crackling and twisting. Whilst the body spun ahead, its legs arched out parallel like the legs of a crab to the body, with which it then began to charge forward at a slightly faster pace.

"Screw this!" one of the guardsmen shouted out.

"Larry the hell are you doing?" one of the other two questioned.

"You two keep going, one of us has to stay alive. I'll throw them off!"

"Larry no-"

"Larry wait!"

With a defiant neigh, one of the remaining three broke away and slowed greatly, the horse flipping around and then charging right off. The other two guardsmen continued on ahead, now more than halfway across the open plain and almost to the approaching group of four

warriors. The third guardsmen however tore off right for the undead horses with his rifle in hand. His back straightened and his gun aimed ahead.

POP

Reload

POP

Reload

POP

The leg of one undead horse split in half and down it went, the body slamming into the ground and immediately rolling right on over. The corpses that had once been dancing were swiftly flattened by the horse's weight as it moved over top of them. Arrows flew in return though, striking right into the body of Larry's own, dropping it and sending Larry tumbling ahead; unlike the corpses however Larry rolled only a few times before rolling upright in stance.

His rifle dropped and a sword quickly unsheathed, "Come and get some!"

The charging undead ceased, stopping a good solid twenty meters from Larry. Waterfalls of blood spilled from the bellies of the undead horses not more than two seconds after said stop, blades poking out, bodies ripping free. The riders, or dancers rather, all hopped from the backs of the dead. The three legged horse rose with its belly splitting open, the corpses it rolled over rising back up as if nothing had happened.

Well over a dozen bodies covered in blood and guts. Some freshly slashed up, some already decomposing, and then the skeletons. All in all they were all armed raising axes, swords, even maces. With a clammer, Larry's sword banged upon the ground. Before him this wall of what seemed to be undead stood, even the horse whose leg had been shot off.

"... Nope!"

Larry turned sharp and broke out into a sprint, his weapons falling around him as he took off. And the very moment that he booked it out of there, the corpses all began to move forward.