

Embers of the Mask

“As the hours pass and the ashes fall, the storm fades and leaves you now, what remains- an ever mess, that life is gone, forever more.”

A figure drowned in shades of gray pressed forward in the midst of a black abyss, their coat tails streaming behind them with each and every step, darkness pressing outward from within and advancing their state. In the light their figure would illuminate a brilliant white, utterly spotless, with only the blackness engulfing their form present- short their face. Half of their face was visible, the hood and shadow cast by their cloak of gray shrouding the top portion above the nostrils. Only a partial scowl visible protruding on pale skin, a lip curled down protruding an air of disgust in the form of their frown.

Their steps echoed, metallic with each clunk, echoing off of iron walls. A glimmer of brown hair, or perhaps a very dark dirty blond, swaying around and over their cheeks. Lights up above continued to flicker, old and rusted warehouse overhang lights. Bulbs cracked, some dimmer than dim and even a little reddish. It was a hallway they prowled forward through, gliding like a serpent through the corridor in light and dark.

As the figure rounded a turn the fabric of their cloak flapped, a gloved hand raising up and wielding a mask. A mask, blank in expression, and overall relatively dull. The only features of true note- a black and white star upon the forehead, surrounded in a red and magenta painted flame. And then the scar over the right eye, diagonal right across, carved into the mask rather than being painted like the flame.

The mask was placed to their face, the hood pushed back ever so revealing their masked face entirely now. The hair, shown again in the light, now silvery white- a lone sapphire blue right eye somewhat aglow beneath that mask and very much visible. And as the lights went out yet again their form would be mostly obscured, short of part of their wardrobe, and the entirety of that mask which remained visible even in the darkness itself.



Art by Alexander Stormsong

The end of the hall neared, evident by the creaking of metal and a door opening, shining a dim light upon the now-masked entity. Their steps changed, no longer thudding echoes, instead clanking as they stepped out upon a catwalk one and then two. The hatch open and to their right. Around them, several identical individuals of white hair, blue eyes the same as the figure's right, though all of them were cloaked in black robes with red stars etched upon the shoulders, chest, and back.

Rain pounded the metal sheet roof of the outside, cascading echoes sent in. This figure themselves bore a white cloak, patterned with a different symbol entirely- almost appearing to be an eye with tendrils. Their head tilted forward and their gaze moved outwards, off of the catwalk. The entire surrounding room was nothing more than a rusted worn down factory. Equipment in disrepair lay all around, broken glass scattered across the floor, ceiling panels dead upon the ground; though that is not what this figure was taking in.

Down on the factory floor before them were several more in black. Unlike the multiple lookalikes standing with the masked figure, those on the floor were all somewhat custom. One man, dressed as a gentleman with a cloak draped around their shoulders, appearing rather elderly with long gray hair. Another, a woman of blood red hair, dressed in a skintight black jumpsuit with a shortcut black jacket over top and black shorts, the former of which held red stars over each of her shoulders. And then in the middle a man in a black long coat decked with silver fur wherever the fabric ended, patterned with the dark red stars.

The last man with a lone left amber-colored eye, stared up at the masked figure. This man's expression was particularly sour, scowling- his wavy brown hair covering one eye and casting shadow over the other. Behind them, several dozen SWAT-dressed people in nothing but black, the same red star patterned across their chests front and center. The masked figure's eye narrowed into a fine almost-glaring glare. Water dripped through the broken roof above, streams of it dripping down and pooling as puddles on the factory floor.

"Leon," they spoke, a relatively hoarse and distorted, deep-pitched masculine voice, "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"You know damn well what this is about Cylux- your little alliance with that bastard Arkaza. When did you think it appropriate to tell us, eh?!" Leon spat, his tone full of rage.

"Ah, so you've come all of this way just to discuss that," the masked figure replied.

"Heh, 'discuss' he says, yeah we can go with that," the woman chuckled to herself.

Leon then stepped forward, his right arm shot out, pointer finger pointing straight at Cylux, the look of total and excessive rage looming, "Your use of Arkaza, and the very essence of what you did with Azala, it is sickening. The Hive will no longer require your services as a result of your actions... and... because we can not allow for a loose end to continue lingering, we're here to ensure that no threats befall us in the near future."

“Hoh?” Cylux replied, unmoved, “So you’ve come all this way just to kill me? So I see; though I would very much implore you to reconsider your position here, Leon Sycamore. Do not forget that this is not *your* playing field, you’ve entered the unknown that is my dwelling.”

At once, all eight of the lookalikes stepped forward, their hair covering their eyes as they stopped at the edge of the catwalk, overlooking the Dharkanians below. The SWATs backed up a touch while the woman and the older man stepped forward, side by side with their leader, the leader of whom was now scanning the lookalikes- “Art of Dancing Shadows eh?”

“Considering your aim moving forward... anything you seek to accomplish here will not be without cost. Are you in a position to proceed with such risk that may compromise your grand plan? I would reconsider this one, old friend.”

“Nrrgh... Cortez, Tori, with me. Our combined might will be more than enough. Look alive!”

Without another word, all three shot high into the air, all with single leaps, all jetting ahead, all aimed right at the bodies and Cylux. And as they closed in the eight did not waiver, nor did Cylux, whose head simply lowered, their narrowed gaze turned into a glare. At once all of the lookalikes dropped low, their right hands touching the walk- and then BAM, out they flew, leaving the masked figure behind who simply gazed out. The three and the eight, launching for one another, not another word spoken in that moment short of the thoughts racing in their heads.

“Conflict in life is inevitable. The fire is fanned by our interactions with the world. From the flames we rise anew. We are grown by it, shaped by it, guided by it. A world of peace will never be an option- for if it were, we as humans would no longer evolve as people. Though when a fire grows out of control and ravages the lands, it falls to the cosmos or individuals to fight back those flames before they consume everything. With the fates holding out, it leaves only the latter, and for someone to move forward to answer the call.”

Servants of the Righteous

Night stretched as far as the eye could see through the Pacific Northwest. Rolling hills and mountains, stiff sprawling Douglas Fir trees. A stereotypical scenery most certainly, perfect for camping with open forest floors and small clearings with no roofs of branches or leaves. Yes there were eyes, there were critters, they moved and danced the night away. Truly nothing was out of place without taking a much closer look.

Trees obstructed much from above though from within it was a little more obvious. A faded path, old and not used for years now overgrown. Snaking between the trees and marching through the forest for miles upon miles, connecting to a normal highway in one direction while to the other end it led to a run down power plant on the water. A simple complex, gates now down and overrun with trees growing right through them onto the property- plant life sprawling up the plant. Moss, dirty rock, broken windows, the distinct colors of rust and rot.

A railroad sat behind the facility, mostly covered over just as well with grass sticking up; though the metal of the tracks still more than visible. Of course this forest and abandoned plant were not the only things out here, there were people as well- several people. All of them appearing more like goons in general gang attire, black hoodies and face masks, torn jeans and boots, all of them armed with rifles and shotguns, side pieces at their sides or in actual hand. There were several up on the roof, several down by the tracks, and several patrolling the grounds.

The eyes of a couple glowing, illuminated amber or red or orange from the shine of the moon's brilliance upon them. Those eyes though were not omniscient, scanning only the horizon rather than the verticality. The floor of the woods, very clear; though the high up branches and tops not so much. Shadowy figures zoomed like blurs on the outskirts, clonking down on the branches and tops without disturbing the trees greatly. A slight shimmering though nothing major.

Several stopped several trees back from the beginning of the compound's clearing, a distance of half a kilometer or so back. These figures were scattered around, several facing ahead, several armed with gunnery of their own. Most of them were dressed in SWAT-like attire and cloaked with hoods. Face masks up, helmets on; though not one had normal eyes as all of their

eyes were glowing however dimly they might've appeared at a distance. The glows of amber, orange, yellow, and silver or white.

A man held position ahead of the pack, his silky black hair blowing in the wind, his green eyes locked ahead with the slightest of amber glows around the green. He wore simple clothes as opposed to the others, basic blue jeans and black combat boots, a ragged open black coat with no shirt. One of the SWATs had a hand up to his right ear for a short period as they locked their focus ahead at a patrolling group from the compound. Soon enough though, there hand would be lowered and would grab hold of the rifle that hung around their neck & shoulder by a strap as they properly took hold of it.

"Vulper, the orders are clear," the man spoke to the man at the head.

That man at the head, Vulper, then side stepped and turned around- his gaze cast back upon the entire division behind him, "Alright, listen up. We do this, we do this fast- and we do this heavy. Units two and three will engage after the side units lay down cover fire and deploy rockets. The objective is the same, eliminate the enemy. Remember what this victory will mean everyone, liberation!"

He turned his head, scanning the lot of them from left to right as he continued on with his speech- "We've come a long ways since the Azala-Hive conflict. Not only will Vulfax be freed after this; but as will all of you who chose to serve, and your friends, and your families. With this strike we prove that we are not the same fear feasting monsters as those who serve Arkaza. We prove that we are people!"

At once, every single individual there flung their right fists up, weapons left held by left hand only. There was no sound aside from the shuffle of arms and fabric. Vulper himself smiled ever so as he witnessed this.

"To victory," he spoke.

BANG!!!

An explosion of flames, an explosion of the debris, an explosion of the roof. A huge section of the plant roof blew high into the sky and broke up, debris flying everywhere along with the freshly minced bodies caught and flung by the blast, many pieces of which were in flames. Three guardsmen fell from the roof, wailing as they fell to the ground with one even striking their head on a balcony before tumbling to the ground. The front doors blew wide open with one man walking out of the inferno with their arms flailing, completely engulfed by flames- their screams going unheard due to all that was going on around them even as they tripped over the steps and fell to the ground.

Vulper swung around with both of his arms flying up crossed before his face, squinting at the huge burst of light and the spreading flames. Debris rained down like hail, striking the branches all around them and tumbling through to the forest floor.

“Ger- what devilry is this?!” he grunted.

The sound of gun shots echoed through the air shortly thereafter. People on the compound’s grounds were shot and gunned down, shots to the head and chest, pinpoint accurate. And then not long after came the sound of shots from within or beyond the plant, the true origin point obscured by the crackling inferno and the shots out in the open. Then *they* came into view, individuals in colors of red and blue and white wielding swords and guns of their own. Vulper’s gaze narrowed sharply, viewing the cross necklaces dangling down in front of the chests of these newcomers as they hacked away at and shot down more of the facility’s guards.

“It’s the damn Church, they have snipers eyeing the plant. All of you get back now!” he yelled out.

“Oh please, if we wanted you fuckers dead we would have blown you up to,” came a voice echoing out from Vulper’s right.

All heads turned immediately towards a tree not far off, where there upon a branch stood a man not seen prior. He wore a black trench coat, dark blue pants, a dark blue vest. A necklace with a huge cross dangled in front of his chest. The figure turned to face them, dark sunglasses

worn, their short brown hair slicked back. The man wore a white band around his neck, unlike those down below.

To this man's sudden appearance, Vulper tensed up and growled out, "A Priest-"

"We've had our scopes on your *people* here for awhile now, could've taken some shots at any time. Only thing saving your worthless hides is the fact that you're working with the Confederacy AND the UN," the man spoke, "However if you intend to interfere with our operation, I'll happily clean you lot out as well."

"And you are?" Vulper growled.

The man smirked, his posture adjusting to a more casual stance as he then spoke, "Castersin, Deker Castersin. And you would be Vulper. Vulper Arloo Gornetraof. It's a bit of an honor I must say, my mentor told me a lot about you."

"Mentor?" Vulper muttered, glancing back as his SWAT bound folks raised their weapons, a couple taking aim right for Deker.

The whole while as they did, Deker appeared to watch with his smirk turning into a shit eating grin immediately.

Vulper looked to him and then glanced back, quickly swirling around, "DON'T!"

Shots rang out, and immediately four of Vulper's men fell from the trees and fell to the ground. Blood splattered from their faces, some blood even splashing Vulper's left cheek as they went. His eyes sharpened and the glow turned his eyes from green to pure orange, shifting over his shoulder towards Deker. The man began to chuckle as Vulper swung around, his coat flapping.

"I warned them, did I not?" Deker chuckled.

A low growl left Vulper, his hands flexing and crunching into fists. Deker's head raised ever so along with a brow.

"Yes, that's right. Come and show me your power Drachen, show me what my master foretold as the unyielding power of your kind!"

Vulper's gaze narrowed even further as he looked over Deker's face, muttering out, "Almec eh..."

The branch beneath Vulper's feet shook violently and split, the hulking figure of the Drachen Leader launching forward at Deker with one fist raised. Deker took a step back with a single foot and threw his arms out to his sides immediately, embracing the attack with an ear to ear smile, his mouth hanging open.

Floodplains of Magic

“Tell me, what do you see luv?” a feminine, elegant, somewhat lower pitch voice questioned.

Two individuals stood in what could only be described as a beautiful view of an ocean. Light blue grasses with flowers streaming out in reds and pinks with blue stems, a pinkish sky with creamy orange, overlooking a multi-colored body of water. To shore it was a blend of darker blue, lighter purple, and a blend of pinks in between while further out it was more bluish green or perhaps greenish blue. A town with a huge harbor sat on the seaside, wood docks mostly with some cement ones. The architecture of the town, a mix of ocean vibes with seashell stylized houses and some other aquatic backing.

The shoreline, dotted with these docks and brilliant beach fronts. Sparkling sands all around leading to the rolling hills and plains. High up overlooking all of this on the hills were the two, one cloaked in a white coat with sky blue stars, black hair. The other, younger and slightly shorter, dark blue coat and pants, a purple shirt, dirty blond hair somewhat long, and stunning emerald eyes. It had been the one in white that spoke first, questioning the second.

“I see... wait, do you mean literally or metaphorically?” the second asked.

“Yes~”

“... not going to dignify that with an answer,” the second murmured, “So why did you bring me out here Ms. Holly? To show me how great things are off of Earth?”

“Hee, well partially my dearest Elise. I actually wanted to show you that there are many *maaaaagical* things out in the world that you have yet to learn about luv,” the first, Holly, replied.

“Why-... why did you say it like that?” Elise questioned.

“Hoh? Say what like how?”

“Magical, the way you said it?”

“Because luv, magic is bullshit,” Holly then replied, monotone at the end.

“... then explain-”

“Here,” Holly murmured, a bit of color back in her tone as she held out her right palm, upwards.

A ball of white light appeared before her hand, hovering above the palm, crackling. Elise looked to Holly, then to it with slight shifts of the head.

“To the uneducated yes, this is magic; but *magic*, as you Earthlings know it, is so far off. This is Energy Control. As you know to do this we draw power from the flow of cosmic energy, provided by the Celestial River,” Holly spoke as she jolted her hand up and down, tossing the energy ball.

Elise nodded, watching the ball go up and down, “Yes, I know that. So it’s not magic because it is... a property of the universe?”

“Oh, no, we just don’t like it being labeled blatantly as magic; but yes actually,” Holly giggled, “There are three main aspects to Energy Manipulation luv. What you know as that manipulation right now, we call basic Energy Control. Simple right?”

Elise blinked in response, her expression unchanging.

“Right, well, anyways. Energy Control is where you draw a spectrum of the River’s power into yourself. You store it, excrete it-”

“Please don’t call it excre-”

“Summon it, happy? You store it, use it, and guide it. You can use it within yourself to augment the body, or project it as a physical force using yourself as the origin, such as this ball,” she concluded, grabbing the orb firmly as it fell back into her palm.

“I know that already, you’ve had me reading on the subject for weeks.”

“I know that you know. Mostly universally, this concept is understood, and is actually something attainable by many so long as they have the right mindset. What comes next, is the part people often refer to as- Magic.”

Holly's free hand flexed once, then twice, and then once thrice she grabbed hold of what was seemingly nothing. A grip held on the air; though not long after she swung her arm up and as she did a solid three to four liters of water rose up out of the ground and hovered before her. Followed in the next seconds, the orb of light erupted into an orb of flames. Her hand gripping the air flung forward with the arm as she took a step- the water launching itself forward as a small wave flying through the air itself.

Following that, the orb of fire was thrust forward as she shunted her right side ahead, ejecting a torrent of flames from her palm straight into the water. An eruption of steam came after and swiftly engulfed Holly, followed by Elise.

"This... is what people refer to as *magic* in our world luv; but it too is not simply magic," Holly's voice called out.

Within a few seconds the mist cleared around her, Elise's head swaying left and right. She blinked again, now surrounded by eight of Holly. Eight bodies, all identical, all standing around her.

"If you want, it is also Energy Manipulation; though this time-" all spoke in unison, the voice of Holly echoing.

A simple tap of the foot from one and a jolt of the head. Right beneath Elise a column of earth rocketed up with her standing atop. She rose several meters into the air on the pillar, shaken and stumbling at first, looking down as her arms swung out in an attempt to balance. Soon though the pillar broke apart and left Elise atop a hovering mound of soil, which then drifted towards the Holly that jolted. The other seven disappeared and the earth was set down on the ground, following which Elise stepped back and off.

"This is not simply taking energy within oneself and casting it out with some chanting of spells or technique, usually. This is to manipulate the energy in the environment itself, the very substance and flow around oneself. It's how we used Light Energy to cultivate our homelands eons ago actually. Of course there's certainly a lot more to it beyond just making copies and controlling elements of nature," Holly concluded.

“Incredible,” Elise murmured, partially stunned, her blank face now replaced by one of intrigue, “Just, manipulating the environment. That’s got to be some limitless stuff-”

“Like I said there is a lot more to it than just commanding the energy. You can conjure attacks, perform what you know as *spells*, summon companions for battle, so on and so forth. My particular favorite battle companion just so happens to be a Flame Unicorn, one with blue flames and wings. Some people are able to play with space-time actually on a time freezing level, or move across entire continents in an instant.”

“F-for real?”

“Yes. The point though Elise, is that you have a lot to learn before you can call yourself a master. You have proven very capable with basic energy control; but you need to realize that there is far more out there than just Light and Dark Energies. The Celestial River holds great power, it is the blood of the universe itself.”

Elise paused again for a short time, glancing to her right briefly before looking back to Holly, “Taking energy into yourself and using it, and controlling the energy in the environment around you..... is there- is there a means to manipulate the energy in another?”

Holly’s stare drew cold as she looked back to Elise, a breeze passing between them, “That... is the third classification, from which status and ailment *magic* is attributed to. Energy Control, so-called Magic, and that- that would be Curse Manifestation. It’s usually frowned upon, for the same reasons that gave the world Vampiric creatures.”

“Or, for turning them into monsters. Like Azala,” she murmured.

Holly’s cold soft gaze rested upon Elise, followed by a nod, “Power can be corrupting, that is the one drawback of the River’s gift. In order to progress Elise, you will need to overcome your demons. Otherwise you risk being consumed, and devoured by the world’s evil. Never forget, it isn’t the weapon that kills people, people kill people for their own sinful gains. Even an act of good can lead you down the wrong path if you’re not careful.”

You ARE The Parliament

The scene, one ever so simple. An auditorium, a huge one, with tables and seats stretching all around. A middle left blank and open, rectangular in shape. To the left and right of the long sides, three rows of tables and seats, each row presiding behind another raised up as to give those in the back a clear view. Then to another side of the room, the very same though not nearly as long as it was the smaller side of the rectangle. And then to the final side, a huge platform with desks and its own systems more advanced than that of the other seats.

And high above seats, a huge gallery and balconies overlooking the entire scene below with many MANY more seats in the form of benches. Fine dark wood paneled floors and walls, brilliant stained glass letting in the outside light, a very inviting marble floor at the center of the room. A proper parliamentary chamber, and one absolutely bustling with people. The main chambers on three sides of the lower level, all stacked with people in an uproar shouting and wailing, all of whom were dressed somewhat ritzy; meanwhile up above the gallery was packed with ordinary people in ordinary outfits who were also yelling out down below.

“Repre-repre-representative, no, no what I am- NO LISTEN UP GOD DAMMIT!!”

“This new Republic is a DISGRACE to our Confederacy, we need to take action IMMEDIATELY!!”

“Who gives a shit about the damn Republic, we’ve got rivals all over like that new Coalition. We should get the Warlords active and get rid of these-”

“Get rid of what, absolutely nothing? These new alliances are of no concern to this Confederacy. A threat to *your* micro-nation maybe but not to this council.”

“My nation is proud and strong you gatlinger!”

“Why would we use the Warlords? The Tribe failed to stop the Hive and now we’ve got this Republic!”

“Screw the Warlords! That system is ineffective! We should invest ourselves in an actual military-”

“Screw that, we should be going to Light Tech of these others and get the actual resources to keep us on top of these matters!”

“Light Tech Industries charges way too much, my kingdom is facing famine and drought, we can’t afford to-”

“Yeah well maybe your kingdom should face facts and just absolve itself!”

BANG BANG BANG

“ORDER, ORDER!!!”

It wasn’t long after the strike of the gavel that many of those in the Parliament Chambers settled down, all turning to the end of the room where there sat the main overseers of the session. A few staff surrounded the man with the gavel, all flooded with papers flying everywhere, and some typing away at a typewriter. Just as all focused, the man who struck down stood and slammed both hands atop his table.

“We will have order!!” the older man spat out.

At once one man, dressed in a slick spiffy suit, stood up on one of the long sides of the room, middle column, “Interum, permission for the floor!”

“Granted,” the old man growled, slumping back down into his seat with a hand over his face with a groan escaping him.

“Please, members of this congress, listen. All of this bickering is pointless. This... Republic of Sovereign Nations, it is not the first council in opposition to our *Great Union*, nor will it likely be the last. Remember The Coalition of Independent Realms, The Federation of Nations, the Dusk Confederacy. Another democracy is the least of our concerns, when we should instead return focus to that of the Vampire Lord- Arkaza.”

“Save your concerns Representative Mars, Arkaza is not a threat to any of us-”

“And how can you be so sure? Representative Mars has a point Vorex. Take a look at the Vulfax Valley Incident that plagued our allies in the Tribe. Had it not been for unexpected allies

within their network, the Earth would've been lost entirely to the Supernatural Uprising proposed by Arkaza, AND the Hive of that time. Even now they continue to commit acts of terror upon other independent nations. Surely we can not ignore such a thing?"

"You speak of non-member states, hardly a concern to our own nations or this Confederacy as a whole. It is not our concern what happens to outsiders."

"And are you saying that we should ignore cries for help? How long until this threat plagues our smaller member-states, and then snowballs into something we can't handle?"

"A preposterous claim. What threatens us most is the dissolution of our collective interests. We risk being divided by these new systems, a fracturing in our power and ability to respond to crisis that concern our own."

"It is the choice of the people that they break off from this Confederacy when we prove ourselves so incapable of action!"

An uproar of cheers and boos alike broke out immediately, followed by more yelling even from the people of the viewing gallery. There, high up at the edge of the room near an entrance, two individuals stood- both in white cloaks with sky blue stars. One of the two had a visible expression of disgust, as if revolted by a foul stench. Both turned and moved away as the yelling continued.

A man of graying brown hair and yellow eyes, his face slightly wrinkled, standing just over a meter and a half tall. The other was nearly that second meter tall, brown hair and amber eyes, a bit more bulky at the seams. Both moved through the halls of the building, away from the echoing roars and the continued strike of the gavel.

"I can see why the Chairman chose to sit these meetings out as of late, utterly ridiculous," the second man growled.

"It is to be expected," the first sighed, tiredness in his voice, "The Parliament has been that way ever since the Azala incident with Vulfax."

He paused as they strode along; though continued after a few seconds, “They are afraid Wesley. They want something to blame, something to attack. The more nations that join the new alliances, the more incompetent it makes the Confederacy appear. And the more incompetent they look, the less power their voice holds. A couple members have already left the alliance... and more are sure to follow.”

“I know that Lord Bell, it’s just... I don’t like it. The Hive has aligned itself with the new Republic, something that they clearly dislike- yet they want to condemn us?”

“Our failure to stop the Hive and Arkaza on Earth is what has led to this.”

“How were we supposed to handle that? Our main prison got hit hard out of nowhere. We had no idea what Azala or Arkaza were up to!”

“It doesn’t matter my friend. We hold the blame no matter what the portrayal of that scenario is. We were there, and we could not stop them. Now they are propping up a threat, as they see it.”

“Nrrgh... so what’s our next move? Should we not go and investigate this Republic more closely?”

“No. We can not risk anything political right now. For now we wait and continue to act against the Hive. That is our only objective unless ordered otherwise. If we engage recklessly it makes us look like oppressors. That risks backlash, war, and maybe even our dismissal if the Confederate Parliament disapproves of our actions. Rest assured though my friend, the time will soon come for us to resolve this, a time to crush and end the Hive once and for all.”

Blinding Light

A tall cascading monolith of stone and brick, that is how it could best be described. A massive prison building with no courtyards, metal fencing, and walls completed with towers at each junction PLUS barbed wire far beyond the main wall. Guards on patrol across the walls and their walkways like castle walls, guards atop the towers with search lights scanning. Units down on the ground both within and beyond the walls. Overall a very basic prison by appearance from the outside, set in a wilderness full of blowing snows and frozen trees.

What wouldn't be so basic however was that about a kilometer away in the blowing snowstorm, a lone man. Short black hair blowing in the winds, a red and white eye mask with glowing sapphire triangles over where his eyes would be, a black and red coat... and a bamboo stick in his right hand with a handle which he held firmly. He looked blankly forward, stationary.

Behind him, PLENTY of rotting corpses stitched together with glowing red hollow eyes. They were the literal undead, dead skin, rotted partial faces with their bones showing- all of them dressed up though in matching attire, mostly black jumpsuits with shoulder guards. Many snarling, many with crossbows and swords in hand; and a couple handling axes. Some of the figures though wore actual coats, long or otherwise, with their hoods up and eyes glowing a mix of ambers and silvers.

To the left of the eye masked figure approached three uniquely dressed individuals- one grinning, one blank faced, the last looking aggravated. To his right, two women and one man, each with varying expressions. All in all these six to the left and right of the central figure were their own regards of creepy, with one having a completely pierced AND stitched up face- while another had no face at all and simply had a bloody skull face showing and eye balls sticking out fiercely. As for the man at the center of this cluster of freaks, he said nothing, instead just holding his bamboo sword out in front of him- pointing ahead.

Shouts and howls behind the masked figure rose up. The six around him charged ahead immediately, breaking into dead runs whilst streams of the undead and clearly Vampiric behind him stormed ahead. Their steps, imprinting in the snow, storming all around.

“{Are these actions just? Are they the only way? Hmph... why am I even questioning my decisions to this point? Humans are not nearly smart enough to be reasoned with.}”

These thoughts surged through his head, the bamboo sword in hand still held out though now beginning to blow and turn black, as if it had become a blacklight itself or even a black laser sword. He swung it back, holding it like a bat with a single hand- his right hand. Then as the left arm stretched over and the hand took hold, he swung. The sword flew forward and fired off an attack, a huge energy slash wave of black energy.

The shot flew hard and fast, screaming overtop the undead troops. Those on patrol turned to face the direction of the attack, hearing both it and the screaming- their expressions freezing.

KABAM!!

The shot connected with the wall front and center, and as it did that wall erupted into a mass explosion. Rock and brick went flying, smoking one guard right in the head and splattering the head like a dropped egg. There was no warning as the wall collapsed, several soldiers who had been atop it either being blown off or falling right in and being buried. Those patrolling just beyond the wall were caught up, debris raining down right upon them. One tower and its spot light even blew from beneath, sending half the tower screaming through the air with more soldiers being sent off.

Then they came in, the undead, howling and screaming. The moment the stunned soldiers out in front of the gates turned back around to the source of the attack, BAM, two were immediately toppled by a force slamming into them. CHOMP CHOMP CHOMP. The eye of one bit and torn out, the ear of another bit right off, half the face of another ripped. Screams turned out immediately from those being fed upon by both Undead and Vampire, the latter of whom were busy slamming their fangs into the necks of those left unprotected due to their own failed guards over the attack.

They moved like lightning, storming right through the patrols and immediately right into the rubble, charging up and over the collapsed structure. Some even leapt up high through the air

and grappled onto the wall that remained, halfway up, and began to climb. Others, the Vampires in particular, would leap up and over the rubble in an bid to lead the charge and storm right into patrolling units on the other side. Screams from the towers, lights spanning the attacking horde silenced with shots from arrows. A series of explosions followed, and one by one more of the towers fell- then went the metal fence between the wall and the actual facility.

It all went down, the masked man lowering his weapon to his side, his expression unchanged as he began to pace forward. All around the grounds the guards took up positions, raising futuristic-looking white and black rifles, taking aim at the Undead and firing upon them. Bullets did not fly, instead with pew-pews came laser shots of white and yellow. The Undead struck by the shots would go down easily enough with shots to the head or torso, or at least that was the case for most.

Some, decked out in armor much like a knight's plating, would tank a few hits to the chest before going down. Of course those in the plating were jumping and leaping out of the way here and there, returning fire with laser rifles of their own. Vampires for the most part were evading the shots though those hit would be engulfed in flame right around the point of impact, screaming out and falling back after the strikes. This mostly applied to those hit by the white lights of course, with the yellow not resulting in the fires.

The front doors, doors of metal, were ripped right out by one of the Vampiric and flung. One guard outside of the complex would be crushed, while the heads of two others were struck. In no time at all the Undead flooded right in through the exposed doors whilst guards began to appear atop the prison's roof. Shots of laser fire flew out and down, striking far fewer of the invaders than those on the ground were striking.

“{Mother... what would you say? Would you understand why?}”

The figure moved through the courtyard with his bamboo sword in hand, a slight black glow around it. As laser shots came right at him he swung one-handed, batting one shot and sending it flying right back into the shooter. Then came another two and three, one missing the mark while the figure deflected the others away. One shot that came dead on he swatted with full

force, sending the attack screaming back and into the chest of the guard. As he sent that last shot back while his eyes could not be seen, his brows could be seen intensifying as if he were staring angrily, his teeth gritted for a bit.

“{What would you think... sis?}”

The thought went through his head. Rain on the streets, concrete sidewalks, old and decaying buildings. Then the scene shifted, the inside of one of the buildings- dark, wood floors, decaying plaster walls, a nearly broken off chandelier. Lying there upon the ground in a pool of her own blood, a girl with long black hair that streamed down to her calves. Her face was obstructed by the hair, her bangs covering the eyes. A hole right through her chest from which blood now cooled, with plenty of blood around the face and nostrils. Beside her a man slumped over on his side, short brown hair, a gun in his right hand- a single shot through the right side of his scalp.

Three bullet casings lay on the ground around them both... and to the far end of the room, a young boy, blue eyes, short black hair that nearly covered his own eyes. Tears streamed down his face, a broken face flushed red.

A guard screamed and went down before the man with the eye mask, his bamboo stick sword having somehow just carved through the body armor and chest of one guard. He stepped over the fallen fresh corpse and swung out, projecting another slash of the same black energy that quickly cut into three more guards. Blood sprayed from their chests as they fell over, no sound coming out of their screaming faces as they hit dirt. As he continued forward the fires and explosions continued, prisoners now out and about smashing clear through the packs of guards, more of that black energy flying from their hands and going right through the guards.

One guard stumbled away from a blast, disarmed, holding both hands out whilst screaming ‘please don’t’ before a fist slammed right through his cracked chest plate and into his body. Blood flew from his mouth and that was it as the attacker ripped their hand out, letting the dead guard fall over. The floor, covered with streaming blood, easily gallons of it from all of the bodies strung all over. And as it continued to flow the masked figure walked right through it, his

steps through the blood coating the bottoms of his boots in blood, leading to him leaving bloody footprints behind as he moved forward.

“{Humans... are such selfish creatures. This is what they deserve,}” he growled in his own head as again his thoughts shifted.

A dead priest, full of stab wounds. The young man stood there, the knife in hand, staring down with shaken eyes. Right behind him a young girl, covered in bruises, gagged and bound, lying on the ground in a pool of their own blood. Several grown men stood around him and the corpses, slowly moving in. Just as the young man looked around, all of the men flew and slammed into the walls- their necks all snapping in the process before they even fell to the ground, save one who rolled only to have a boot slammed upon their back.

A figure cloaked in white, a mask with a lightning bolt scar over the right eye. CRIIIICK SNAP- the man was dead as the masked figure pressed down and broke the man's spine. They looked from the corpse, to the priest, and then to the young boy- the boy of whom now held the knife defensively, fear plastering across his face.

Doors again blew inward, HUGE metal doors like hangar doors. A massive gash was opened up in them as the eye masked figure moved forward into the room with the bamboo sword in hand. The room they now were in, a massive prison block with bars and cells everywhere. And just as the guards within that room took aim, in came the Undead. A fire fight began as the eye mask figure again began to bat shots back, stepping into the room.

Guards again screamed as the ones on ground level were overrun immediately, while those up above were tackled by leaping figures cloaked in black, teeth then sinking into their necks. The eye masked figure stepped forward further into the room, the cells all opening up with the sound of an alarm. Some of the prisoners stepped out, while some were in their cells hung up to machines binding their limbs. It took no time at all for some of the Vampires that came in with the Undead to rush into those cells and get to work unstrapping the people within.

And so he stood there, 'watching' the room as it was cleared and the prisoners freed, soon turning and walking away.

“If you follow me, I can offer you a better life than this, a life of purpose,” came the voice of Cylux, “I intend to remake the world into what it should be, a free world, a better world. A world in which no one will ever have to worry about being powerless ever again.”

“... why should I believe you?” the boy asked, “It’s impossible- there is no fixing this world, and there’s no way to change it. People can not change!”

“It can be changed, and it will- because we will not simply petition for change, we will force it! We as people hold the power to make anything a reality, we simply need to come together for the collective vision to make it happen. If you come with me, Tobias Tazaki, I promise you... freedom.”

Cylux held their hand out, beckoning. Toby looked around Cylux, the down and dead men... and then a look back at the dead girl behind him. It took him only a moment, the knife in hand released, clattering to the ground as he looked back ahead to Cylux.

“Never forget Toby, humanity can be-”

“Truly... vile,” the older Toby murmured, facing ahead to a lunchroom full of fire and bodies, begging soldiers being ripped apart by the Vampiric or cut down by the Undead.

My Story

April 3, 20xx

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

It's been ten long months since everything happened. The desertion of my clan, the deaths of most of the people I was close to, the betrayal of most of my remaining... "friends"... heh- *The Vulfax Valley Incident*.

The V-V-I. Many recognize it as the re-ignition of an ancient struggle between the forces of Light and the forces of Darkness, of Good and Evil; though that's such a Black and White way of looking at it. It's all Gray, and there's more to it than just that, like the Vampire Epidemic that followed.

Maybe I should wind the clock back a bit. I won't go over everything in the past in great detail because I'm sure it'll come up again but... basically there were two clans that could use magic, one worshiping the Light and the other Darkness. Lightonians and Dharkanians. Neither was inherently good or evil, just as a vampire isn't born evil and a Priest isn't necessarily good.

I don't know how it happened or why it happened but those two clans eventually went to war with one another, and that war lasted much of the span of one hundred and sixty thousand years. And then at some point their war managed to reach other Realms, including Earth. Earth at that time was actually ruled over by vampires, who of course chose the worshipers of Darkness over people who worshiped light... given that sunlight and vampires don't mix.

Ultimately the Dharkanians lost the war along with other so-called *Negative* races like vampires, Drachen, Undead, and so forth. Millions if not billions had died in this war, and so to insure that nothing like it ever happened again, the Lightonians and their allies established a system known as the Aether Confederacy.

It was basically their version of Earth's United Nations; though all political and with no centralized military... which I think is how the UN works but I don't know. Basically they wanted to safe-proof as many realms as they could so that the remaining Dharkanians and other enemies would never rise to power again.

Using mercenary guilds as a supplement for an actual military, their assembly could basically give orders and for pay- those mercenaries did the job; but it stopped at that. Still there were some primary forces to the Confederacy and even prison facilities- like the Earth Prison known as Nospheross.

But outside of making those facilities and keeping a couple governments informed over the years, Earth was left to face its own struggles for twenty thousand years. Nothing else mattered because Earth wasn't officially with them, they left us to fend for ourselves, left us to our own destruction and devices. So long as their problems were taken care of, that's all that mattered to them!!

Bit them in the ass though because in those Realms they ignored, even Earth, some of the remaining Dharkanians with their allies in toe, plotted for centuries on how to strike back! With my home world it came to a head with a major Prison Break at Nospheross, and the Vulfax Valley Incident. It all led to sociopaths taking advantage of the *lesser races* in an attempt to recruit them for war.

My clan was one such group affected. Drachen may not have been as hated as vampires or other Undead; but they were still disregarded enough that the Dharkanians were able to take hold of them. It almost worked too... but that's where I come in I guess.

Through sheer dumb luck I threw a wrench into their plans and exposed everything, all because the man I called my father, Azala, made a miscalculation. I was adopted into the clan thanks to a deal he made with a Lightonian. At the time he wasn't affiliated with the Dharkanians; but as a Drachen Clan, Vulfax was always under threat of being wiped out.

The Lightonian, Holly Bell, offered him a deal: raise me, and Vulfax will be left alone. Granted years later when he allied with the Dharkanians, it led to him believing me to be a spy... probably because I befriended Holly who was working as a librarian in the town over.

Holly never really said how I was to be raised either, and because I was a girl- not blood, not a warrior, I was treated like crap. Even a slave at times. Still- I... had my friends by the time I was twelve. Some didn't mind me being a girl, or a pacifist, or a book nerd.

Some even liked me because I was able to blend in with the humans and procure supplies that made our clan's way of life way easier.

Still it didn't save me. I was weak!! If not for my idealistic views, perhaps my friends could have... could have- no! My existence is what did it to them, if I hadn't been there, if they didn't believe me to be a spy- if they hadn't tried to kill me I-... no, sorry sorry **huff**.

Ten months ago... I had finally had enough of being treated like a damn donkey, seeing my friends trashed for my weakness. When Elen ended her life to escape, I knew then that I had to give up my idealism and get stronger! But that only encouraged them-

With the help of my friend Vulper, a strong Drachen within Vulfax, and my friend Alto who was outside of the clan... I learned how to fight. I learned how to protect **THEM**. And then, I learned that my fath- that Azala, was trying to kill me, And then I learned about the Lightonians and became involved.

Holly and Alto, two of my best friends outside of the clan. Both with the Lightonians, both against Vulfax. And it was around that time that I learned the truth, why I came to Vulfax. At first I was angry, I wanted to yell and scream and just attack Holly for putting me there.

Then I saw the bigger picture as I learned of this ancient struggle. They filled me in on everything and even taught me to wield Light Energy, the *magic* of the Lightonians, so that I could fight.

From there I found out that the Canadian Government and the Lightonians on Earth at the time were planning to bombard the valley that I called home. Azala was a major part of the Dharkanians and their plans, and turns out a couple other clans were also in on it.

Like the saying goes, can't make an omelet without breaking a few eggs.

For whatever reason I opted to return to Vulfax to expose Azala by myself in a bid to protect my people. Sure they were total assholes to me but they were still my people, and I still had friends there. I guess he was prepared for that as a few Dharkanian allies were there- including my... my friend Alto.

That was when the Battle of Vulfax Valley began. With the help of my friends, we turned the clan against Azala, and for a time we were winning, until he turned into a dragon and totally wrecked the mountain side. Holly and her comrades later backed us up and after a struggle, we brought Azala down. With his fall the Dharkanians retreated, his Vampiric ally known as Arkaza fled, and all other members of the opposition stood down in surrender.

For a brief period of time there was the prospect of peace; though I knew that even with Azala defeated and the Dharkanians fleeing from Earth, it was only the beginning of something more. And with that realization I joined the Holly and the Lightonians.

.
.
.

Ten months...

In those ten months, a number of things had happened. I saw first hand what this Aether Confederacy was about, and anyone who knows how shady politics can be should know right off the bat what it was like. I saw first hand what several of this new worlds and realms were all about, some cool and some not so cool.

I learned a little more about the Dharkanians and this Arkaza vampire. And I learned that basically, Holly and the Lightonians were full of shit.

My trust in them had already been fragile. I- I never could get over the fact that Holly gave me to Vulfax to use me. Or the fact that there were many like me put into such situations as part of some military project. Or the fact that... they just- didn't care about anything that wasn't part of their mission.

I think it wasn't more than two months in when I left Holly's side. It was scary at first, I had absolutely no idea of the world I was about to be dropped into- but some of the new friends I made in those two months quickly helped me. I was even able to join a sort of Bounty Hunter Guild.

It was an incredible time to meet new people who believed in doing good, 'course some did it for the profit but that aside, it was nice. Then, it came to my attention how bad it all really was getting. It all began with the start of the Vampirism Outbreak.

The Land of Vilmonta began to track a number of disappearances, dozens at a time, across dozens of different towns and cities. Perhaps something seen as normal to some. The not normal part was later finding dump sites full of dismembered corpses- or the reports of vampire attacks.

Come a few weeks after the disappearances and suddenly the dead were running amok attacking people in broad daylight. People continued to disappear, vampire sightings continued, and eventually armed micro-armies of zombies commanded by those Vampiric began to attack population centers. They were able to get a handle on things; but despite asking the Confederacy for aid, none was ever given. It was dismissed as a one off incident, perfectly controlled. Until it wasn't.

Month by month a few more countries began to have the same problems: starting with the disappearances and then full on armed zombie army attacks. After the seventh country came under threat was about the time the Confederacy finally began to offer advisement to these lands, and by the eleventh they began to take it serious enough... to just, talk, about it.

Meanwhile the Lightonians were busy accusing the Dharkanians and trying to probe for a declaration of war; which the Aether Assembly completely ignored. Some chose to acknowledge it as solely Arkaza's work after reports of him and some of his followers were made, along with a tip-off by someone actually affiliated with the Dharkanians. But it didn't matter.

All in all though, the problem has more or less been ignored by the Lightonians and the Confederacy. The Dharkanians did finally pop back up to help some of the civilizations out with an alliance of their own; but it hasn't gone far. Few governments have joined them officially; meanwhile the Lightonians only care about accusing the Dharkanians of being involved with the outbreaks. Of course they denied the involvement, which at this point may be true since they have taken losses to the Vampiric Forces.

Ten months...

It was ten months ago that I made the choice to join the Lightonians and fight against those who had wronged Vulfax. I felt it was my duty to make sure no one else had to suffer as we had. But I had come to quickly realize through their inability to do anything except play politics and rely on said politics, this was the wrong choice.

I couldn't help anyone, and whenever I did attempt to help, it was like pulling on shackles chained to an unmoving concrete wall. Revolting. Then after joining the bounty guild... yeah, I could help more; but I still can't help but wonder if it was the right decision in the long run. I've turned my back on comrades and left them behind. I'm trying to help others but with the limitations of being a small third party I- I just wonder, is it enough?

No- there's no point in debating that.

I've chosen this path. And like the many choices I've made before whether right or wrong, I have to bare the consequences that may follow. I've lost family, friends, my home, my place..... all I have now? All I have is my purpose, and my purpose is to protect those who can not protect themselves, to protect so no one has to go through *that* hell ever again!!

For the lives of those who have fallen before, I can not fail now!

For the lives of those still at risk, I can not fail now!!

For myself, I can not....

Thank you for following the FIRST volume of Ravenbytez. I promise that in the future much more will follow. I began this wanting to give some “filler” leading up to the launch of the actual series and, well, here we are. And with that said, I am here to announce that starting June 4th, the OFFICIAL launch of the Ravenlight Series begins!!

Follow Elise and friends as she goes from badass bounty hunter working for a new faction, to charging in and helping the young Princess Adalaine save her kingdom from the forces of the night. Along the way she will face assassins dressed as terrifying Slashers, absurdly strong monsters that can bench press the singing fat lady, politics and corruption, and herself as she experiences a life she never had while partaking in this mission. The series will feature chapter art, possible OSTs, and other experimental things that I come up with on the fly.

Coming to Tapas, Penana, World Anvil, and more?

See you then~