

## The Fall 479

### Chapter 479: Fragments

"GET OUT!" Yasera screeched, her eyes muddled and unfocused from the Hera Leaves. "You keep taking up time and money, what are you good for?"

Tears pooled in Alea's eyes, but she knew her mom was not herself at the moment.

"I'll be useful, I promise," Alea said as she shuffled out of their corner of the communal space, her eyes downcast to avoid the mean stares of the others.

She quickly found herself on the streets, the two burly guards at the door only sparing her a glance as she vacantly stopped after a few meters. What should she do? Mama was not well, and they had no money.

Alea already scrounged food outside most days, but the shopkeepers had started to become wise to her tricks. There was only one solution left. She needed to start working as well.

The madame had said that she should wait a while longer, but mom needed money now. So Alea tried to still her beating heart as she looked back and forth along the street to find a willing customer.

She finally spotted a young man who seemed to have recently passed the Age of Adulthood. He wore mostly ragged clothes just like most people in the slums, but there was something about him. There was an energy around him that made him feel the same way as the scary man who always followed the Madame around.

The energy of a cultivator. Besides, he looked very handsome even if he had a lazy expression, and the dirt on his body seemed to be recently applied compared to the ingrained filth some walked around with. He would no doubt have some coin to spare, and compared with most of the men who entered the Tea House this one seemed a lot better.

She slowly walked up toward him before he had the chance to walk away, and quickly gathered her courage as he looked up at the man who was over two heads taller than her.

"Yo-young master, ho-how about having a cup of tea with me?" Alea stuttered as she desperately tried to mimic the ladies of the White Lotus Tea House.

The young man with the lackadaisical expression looked down at her with surprise, and she tried to give off the innocent charm that Madam Sai said would be her best weapon for the next few years. However, Alea became uneasy when she realized that he didn't have that gleam in his eyes that was so easy to discern. The expression that meant that the man was no longer thinking with his brain.

Was he too young to be interested in these kinds of things? Alea still wasn't sure how everything worked, but she was confident she had seen even younger men entering the private compartment in the Tea House.

"Why did you call me young master? Do you recognize me?" he said curiously as he walked closer.

"Ah, no?" Alea said, some fear taking hold of her heart.

Had she made a mistake and said something she shouldn't? Madam Sai always said that words were the most dangerous things, and one wrong word could cause a lifetime of suffering.

"Then how did you know that I am rich? I am not wearing anything expensive, and both my face and my clothes are dirty," he said as he took another step closer.

"That," Alea said, looking back and forth, trying to figure out a way to get out of the situation.

She pleadingly looked at the two guards behind, but they pointedly ignored her. Had they already realized that the young man was too dangerous to mess with?

"I'll give you an E-Grade Nexus Crystal if you tell me," the young man said.

Alea's eyes widened in shock when she heard what he said. An E-Grade Nexus Crystal was a huge fortune. One aunty in the Tea House had been tipped one once, and she had been able to eat her fill for over a year on that, even after having given the Tea House their share.

Could she make that much money by just answering a few questions? Her instincts said no. Things that seemed too good to be true always came with hidden dangers. More than one girl in the Tea House had disappeared after being offered a handsome reward to visit a patron in their homes.

Some believed they had found a better life, but Madam Sai said they were usually sold into slavery, or even turned into some sort of materials for evil cultivators.

"My patience is only so long," the young man said as he took out a shimmering crystal from nowhere and waved it in front of her.

Alea's heart started to beat rapidly, and she was unable to take her eyes off the mesmerizing crystal in his hand. She had never seen anything so beautiful, and it radiated amazing amounts of energy.

"Your clothes look worn but they are new, the wear doesn't seem natural. It is like you have rubbed the clothes against a stone to make it look worse than it is. It's the same with the face, it's dirty but your skin is healthy and clear," she said, the words tumbling out of her mouth as quickly as she could form them.

"I guess I overestimated my disguise," the youth wryly smiled as he threw her the crystal.

Alea's eyes lit up as she clutched the crystal, quickly placing it inside a hidden pocket within her dress. The youth looked at her with amusement for a second before he seemingly had thought of something.

"Here, hold this for a second," he said, handing her another crystal, though this one was a smoothly polished sphere that didn't emit the same beautiful colors.

Alea didn't dare to say no to the young master, so she gingerly gripped the ball, and she noticed that the young man's eyes lit up when it started to gleam with a mysterious purple shimmer.

"Are you sure about this?" Ogras asked with a serious expression.

"What's there to think about?" Namys growled from the side as she glared at Alea. "The Lord has spent so much time on effort on this. Why are you hesitating?"

"Namys," Ogras sighed before he turned back to Alea.

Alea looked down at the large vat with trepidation, knowing that she might never be able to leave once she entered the bubbling pool.

The young lord didn't know this, but she had found out that there had been three before her. Three young women who had died while attempting this. Her knowledge about constitutions was shallow, but she had learned from the old master that instructed the nine of them that the risk of dying was extremely high unless there was a great fit between you and the manual.

And that risk only increased when you were dealing with deadly poison.

But this was the path she had chosen. If she died she would at least die at the peak of beauty. Her thoughts went to her recent return to the White Lotus Tea House, the first visit in 6 years. Her mother, the beautiful goddess wrapped in the finest garments, was gone, replaced by a wretched hag.

Her face had been pocked by scabs, and her skin sallow from overindulging on alcohol and Hera Leaves. The lithe and graceful curves were gone, replaced by sagging skin and festering sores.

Yasera hadn't cared where she had been. She hadn't even bothered looking for her after she left with Lord Azh'Rezak. Her mother had only demanded money or liquor after having seen the quality of the dress and jewelry she wore. Alea had turned away without another word, ignoring her mother's cries as her childhood crumbled around her.

"I'm ready," she said as she let her dress fall to the ground, showcasing her pristine body.

"Good," Ogras said, trying his best to appear unperturbed by the scene as he handed her a shimmering beast crystal. "The main component of the medicinal bath comes from a swamp creature named [Er'Harkath Marshwalker]. They are known for their ability to store all kinds of poisons in their body without harming themselves. Try your best to fuse with this thing as quickly as possible."

Alea nodded and after one deep breath swallowed the crystal whole as she stepped into the pool. This would either be the first step on the path of cultivation, or the last day of her life.

"Is that him?" Ilvere whispered with incredulity as he gazed at the human in the distance. "I can't believe that guy toppled the Azh'Rezak Clan singlehandedly. While wearing lady's garments."

"Progenitor. Odd advantages," Janos muttered.

"Why is he even alive?" Namys growled. "He's a threat to our Lord, especially now that he's doubly weakened. Alea, shouldn't you do something?"

Alea's mouth curved upward as she looked at the man, trying to imagine the scene that Lord Ogras had described. One human dressed in Vesarith's dress and drenched in blood, running around causing havoc. It somehow felt like the world had just turned a bit more interesting.

"Lord Azh'Rezak hasn't told us to do anything, so why should I?" Alea smiled as she stood up and adjusted her dress.

"What are you doing?" Namys wheezed as she saw Alea skip toward the human.

"Are you heading to the mines again?" Alea said with a smile as she walked next to Zac.

"Yeah," he said, looking a bit perturbed.

"Why don't I join you?" Alea said, snaking her arm around his.

"I have a lot to do," Zac sighed, helplessness evident in his eyes.

It was a refreshing difference compared to those meathead warriors at the compound she had trained with, a bunch of men with overblown egos and rampant aggression. This guy was the strongest warrior on the island, but he didn't even know what to do with himself when she teased him. It was both intriguing and a bit frustrating.

"I know, learn about The Ruthless Heavens?" she said, pushing her breasts toward his arm, the response leaving nothing wanting. "I know. I know all that basic stuff as well, I can teach you just as well as Alyn can. And wouldn't it be nicer with just the two of us?"

Her heart hammered in her chest as she hurried away from the Gazebo, and she immediately jumped onto the teleporter taking her to Azh'Rodum.

Just what had she done?

This had been the perfect opportunity, but she had ruined it all by poisoning him because of that stupid impulse. She regretted stepping into that bath for the first time since gaining this odd constitution. For the first time, the gains didn't seem to match up to the costs. Of course, a larger part of her knew that absorbing the essence of the swamp monster was the only reason she had been able to save Lord Atwood at all during the final Beast Wave.

Without it, she would just have been another bystander.

She walked up to the secluded rooftop garden in her mansion and lay down on the recliner, her eyes absentmindedly looking up at the stars. The blue sky that once had felt so cold and glaring felt soothing for the first time since arriving to this odd world.

He was drifting away. The sturdy back kept growing, now towering like a mountain in front of her. It was this cursed situation that pushed him toward the Heavens themselves. It should be a joy seeing the man she loved growing stronger, but she couldn't help but feel pangs of loneliness as the two drifted further and further apart. She simply couldn't keep up. No one on Earth could.

Zac was leaving again soon, this time for the Underworld, and a changed man would no doubt return. She had somewhat managed to improve their situation after her mistakes, and there was no longer that thinly veiled disappointment in his eyes when he looked at her.

But that didn't change the reality they found themselves in. He was Lord Atwood, the de-facto leader of a world, and perhaps even a future elite that would make his name known in the whole Sector.

She was just Alea, a prostitute's daughter who hadn't even earned the right to take a last name. She had thought that becoming a cultivator would change her fate, but she was still that same dirty child from the slums looking up at the gods soaring through the skies toward their faraway palaces.

How long would it be until they looked at each other like strangers?

Zac was inundated in one vision after another, snippets of Alea's life flashing past him. He had a vague understanding of what was going on, and the knowledge was terrifying. Alea's soul was rapidly falling apart, and fragments of her soul released the visions for him.

He didn't know how this was possible as it had never happened with all the people he had killed until now. But one thing was certain; Alea was not long for this world if this kept on. Suddenly another shudder emerged from the coffin, but this time Alea's voice rather than another vision entered his mind.

"I'm not ready. I want to follow you."