

Abyssal A 1001

Chapter 1001: Escorting A Lord

In front of her stood a split-haired girl who seemed to be someone important to the Underground.

A powerful Lord trying her best to suppress her aura, yet failing to do so.

And a bystander who seemed nonchalant about everything that was happening, almost as though none of it concerned him.

Renna massaged her eyes.

Three days...

If these three wanted to "relax" in the city for three days, she definitely needed to assign a guard to them.

Not to protect them from anything, but rather to keep an eye on them and prevent them from causing trouble.

Exhaling through her nose, she stared at the trio once again.

Alice Agnelia looked perfectly at ease, acting as though having a Lord as her assistant was completely normal and that people should stop making such a fuss about it.

The Lord looked composed. Apologetic about the aura, but that was it.

And Elias, the man behind them, looked bored.

She pinched the bridge of her nose.

'World Tree, give me patience...'

"Can you three give me a moment?" Renna forced the best smile she could manage. Alice nodded.

Excusing herself, Renna left the room.

She needed someone sensible. Someone who could navigate this situation, observe the group, and report their movements. Someone who could keep their composure with a Lord next to them.

Yet...

Her eyes swept over the guards standing outside the room.

Their faces were pale, sweat dripping down their cheeks. Lab's presence had terrified them, even from another room.

Just being in the vicinity was enough to make them tremble.

One of the guards looked as though he was fighting his inner demons, trying to stop himself from sprinting away at full speed while still on duty.

Another had become a statue. Every muscle tensed to its limit, making him look more like a decoration than a guard.

The third had become a musical instrument, his body shaking so much that his armor rattled like a loose chain.

Renna stared at them.

They stared back.

Silent pleas screamed in their eyes.

'Please... don't make us escort that monster.'

All of them had the same expression. Men who knew something terrible would happen and prayed she would choose someone else.

Renna's eyelid twitched.

"Wonderful. F*cking wonderful..." she muttered.

She could already imagine what would happen if she sent one of them to escort Alice's group.

'...'

Absolutely not.

It was chaos waiting to happen.

There was only one person left. The only one who could escort a Lord without turning into a panicked mess.

Of course she had to do it herself.

"You can return to your posts. I'll handle escorting the Lord," Renna sighed.

The command felt like a miracle.

"If anyone asks, tell them I have it covered."

All of them saluted at once with renewed vigor. Their fists slammed into their chests, armor ringing loudly and sharply enough to make Renna flinch.

One of them was already halfway down the hall before she could react, her smile twitching violently.

'If you had this much energy, you could have escorted the Lord yourself...'

She stood outside the door, watching them scatter back to their posts.

Turning around, she noticed Alice staring at her with a smile on her face.

"Seems like you care about your subordinates quite a lot," Alice chuckled, causing Renna to sigh.

"Can't exactly expect normal Hunters to escort a Lord after all." Sitting back down, Renna regained her professional expression as she stared at Alice.

"For the next three days, while you are here, I will be escorting you. Please do not take offense, as this is for the safety of the city. Having a Lord walk around unable to restrain her aura is concerning, even if we ignore the other factions in this city.

"The civilians won't be able to rest easy," Renna explained.

"Wow~ It is an honor for us to be escorted by someone such as yourself."

Renna ignored the praise.

"Since you are here to restock, can I assume you plan on visiting the Underground branch? Or will you be purchasing from the main market?" she asked.

Alice shrugged.

"Depends on what we need."

Renna tilted her head in confusion when Alice snapped her fingers.

Behind her, the air started to distort as a portal to Grand Cathia revealed itself. Through it, the humming of a machine could be heard.

Renna blinked in confusion.

"Suyin, you there?" Alice asked as Suyin Mark 2 dropped down from above, clearly in the middle of repairs.

"Sup, what do you want?" Suyin asked before pausing.

She noticed that Alice was in a guard room.

"Did you get detained again? What is it this time? Please don't tell me you bombed a city like when you were in Sikha," Suyin frowned, remembering their first meeting.

The fact that her inventions had gone haywire due to Alice's unique constitution, which then resulted in her committing acts of terror in the city.

Renna's ear twitched.

She... bombed a city in Sikha?

"No, no. First of all, that was an accident, and you know that. And second, do you think any of the materials you need can be bought in the market? Or would it strictly be from the Underground?" Alice coughed before Renna got the wrong idea.

Suyin folded her arms.

"Unless everyday merchants can get specific beast parts, I doubt it. I'll make a list of things I need once I'm done with this."

Alice nodded her head as she watched Suyin climb back up.

Snapping her fingers, the portal disappeared with a distortion of blood mist once more.

"There you have it. We'll be visiting the Underground and seeing if they have the supplies we need," Alice smiled, pretending as if everything was normal.

"Right..." Renna replied slowly.

But her mind was in chaos.

While portals weren't rare, she couldn't believe what she had just seen.

First of all, how on earth did she manage to hide it? Even though she was a Lord, Renna couldn't sense the portal until Alice revealed it.

Second of all, how long had it been there??? The energy needed to maintain a portal was astronomical. It was why people only kept them open for a short period of time rather than maintaining them.

And if they wanted to maintain a portal like that, they would have an array put into place with Abyssal Engineering to sustain the upkeep rather than rely on the reserves of one person.

And third of all, even if she did have the energy, how was she this composed?! She should have been feeling a substantial drain right now. Unless...

Renna creased her brows.

"Anyways, shall we go to the Underground before lunch? I do wonder what the food is like here." Alice smiled, gesturing to the door.

Renna coughed lightly. She had gotten distracted by the portal.

"Right. Let's do that." She nodded.

Thalmyra was a weird sight. Alice had already noticed its peculiarities from a distance, but seeing it up close was something else.

There was a certain rough charm to this city. A mishmash of cultures compressed into one location. White stone, greenery, the World Tree's roots threading through buildings. Elven and human architecture existing side by side.

It didn't clash. Not quite.

But it didn't blend either.

It felt like two worlds occupying the same space, neither willing to yield.

No one seemed particularly bothered by it. But then again... how could they be, when there was someone else attracting all of their attention instead?

Lab.

Even with Renna walking at their side, the pressure spilling from Lab's body was impossible for ordinary people to ignore. It was not the sort of thing one could simply look past.

Renna reassured the civilians that Lab was only releasing her pressure because she couldn't control it, and that she was here to escort the Lord and keep everyone safe.

Yet even with this reassurance, many of the civilians chose to steer clear.

So much so that Alice couldn't even buy snacks from the street vendors.

Her eyes wandered toward a grill where mushroom and meat skewers were being prepared.

The use of elven spices made the aroma smell heavenly. The kind that instantly made you hungry, and Alyss was practically begging for a few skewers to taste.

'That one! Gimme that one! No, wait... both! Mushrooms too! Extra spicy! Actually, no. Get me all of it! Gimme all of it!'

Yet the moment they approached, the vendor accidentally spilled a bunch of oil in terror, and the cart erupted in flames.

'NO!!!' Alyss cried out in pain as she watched all of the skewers burn to ash.

Alice stared at the burning stall while the owner frantically tried to put it out.

Lab smiled apologetically.

Renna quickly helped the man as Alice came to a conclusion.

'Let's get some skewers when Lab isn't around.'

In her mental scape, Alyss sat on the bed with a heartbroken sob.

Skipping the food for now, they made their way to the Underground branch.

Since this was a major branch, they were operating at a much larger scale, and the entrance was rather grand compared to the other places.

Alice opened a portal next to Lab to make it easier for Suyin to place the orders. Meanwhile, she took the chance to rest by sitting down near the entrance. Elias decided to do a bit of shopping as well to buy some more materials to work with.

With Lab shopping alongside Suyin and Elias doing his own thing, Alice decided to use the moment to have a drink.

Reaching into her pouch, she pulled out a bottle of mead.

Renna watched from behind...

Of all things... why did Alice have to pull out alcohol?

Once again, a single thought passed through Renna's mind.

'I want to drink!!!'

Chapter 1002: The Devil Of Mead

Alice paused. A strange feeling washed over her mind. As though... she had found a kindred spirit of some sort.

She felt Renna's gaze. Not focused on her, but rather...

'No way...' Alice thought to herself.

She moved her hand to the left...

Renna's gaze shifted.

She moved it to the right...

Her eyes followed.

'F*cking hell, another alcoholic.' Alyss blinked in disbelief. It wasn't just a normal alcoholic either.

There were normal drinkers. And then there were competitive drinkers. Alice was part of the latter, and apparently so was Renna!

Right now, Renna's duty should have been making sure Lab didn't cause trouble in the city.

Yet despite that looming danger, her attention had been completely hijacked by...

Mead.

Alice thought about it for a moment. She glanced back at Renna, then slowly at the bottle in her hand.

The elf noticed Alice's glances and tried her best to look composed. She forced herself to stare forward, but every now and then, her eyes would be drawn to the bottle.

Alice narrowed her eyes.

A smug grin formed on her lips as an idea took shape in her mind.

How often would she find someone who loved alcohol as much as her?

Not very often, and not a Lord on duty at that. In fact, Alice might even humour the idea of Renna beating her when it came to wanting a drink. After all, not even Alice would drink on the job when something dangerous could happen.

'Don't torture the poor soul. She's already having a hard time keeping herself composed.' Alyss sighed.

'Aw, but where's the fun in that? Wouldn't it be a huge waste not to do anything when she's exposing herself like this?' Alice laughed as a devilish smile formed on her face.

Cayla was already giving Renna a silent prayer, hoping she could get through this tribulation.

Shaking the bottle slightly, Alice allowed the sloshing of the mead to reach Renna's ears.

She brought the bottle to her lips and took a long... slow sip.

"Puwah~ Nothing like a bit of mead on a day like this. Though..." Alice pretended to make a face of displeasure.

"Hmm... this isn't good enough."

Renna's smile twitched.

'Not good enough!? You brat, I can smell the aroma from here! That's top-grade mead, you ungrateful swine!!! You cur! Hand it over if you can't enjoy such treasures!' she screamed in her mind.

Veins bulged on the back of her hand as she held her arms behind her back.

Sealing the bottle, Alice tossed it into her pouch half-heartedly, enough to almost make Renna snap as her eyes turned bloodshot.

Looking away, she forced herself to calm down.

She imagined herself in a tavern... enjoying a nice drink without a worry in the world...

'Sh*t, that just makes me want to drink more!' she cursed.

If there was a silver lining, it was that she could feel her heart calming down.

So long as she looked away, everything would be fine. It didn't matter what she was looking at so long as she was distracted from the smell of alcohol. Paintings on the wall, beast parts being traded.

Eyes forward. If there was a time for her to show her resolve, it was now!

Renna took a deep breath. Her shoulders finally eased. The stress left her body as her discipline returned. The tension in her jaw softened, and she could focus on her duty once more.

She had resisted temptation time and time again. Temptation from the nobles. Temptation from the Abyss.

This was simply another trial. The temptation of alcohol. And like always, she would prevail-

*Sniff...

Renna noticed something lingering in the air.

A deep aroma.

It brushed against her nose, soft as a lady's fingertips across bare skin. Not forceful nor did it scream for attention. Just the feeling of seduction.

The allure of beauty and temptation. It need not call your name for it already knew you would turn your head.

Like the moment a man felt something otherworldly pass by his shoulder and looked before he could stop himself. A passing smile. A single glance. A quiet wink from something far too beautiful to belong to the world. And just like that, his heart was gone before he even understood he had offered it.

Even though Renna was looking away, that aroma stole her attention. That split second was all it needed.

Her breath faltered.

"Would you like... a taste?" the devil whispered by her ear.

A bottle hovered before her.

Temptation made manifest.

Renna swallowed. Her throat felt painfully dry as her mind lingered on the aroma.

Before she could force out a refusal, the devil spoke again.

"Ayrian mead," Alice murmured, her voice soft as silk, each word slipping past Renna's guard and settling deep into her soul. Where she was most vulnerable.

"Lost to time. Never recreated since the fall of that ancient nation buried deep within the Abyss."

Alice tilted the bottle slightly, letting the golden liquid catch the light cast down from above.

"Wouldn't it be such a waste... to let something this rare go unappreciated?"

Renna trembled. A bead of sweat traced down the side of her temple.

She didn't move. Didn't dare to.

Her eyes were fixed on the bottle.

Her fingers twitched at her side.

'No.'

She clenched her hand.

'You are on duty.'

The aroma lingered, wrapping around her thoughts, slipping through every attempt at discipline she tried to enforce.

It was patient, persistent.

Every second she looked, Renna felt her resistance weaken. Every hesitation, the desire grew deeper.

Her throat tightened.

Dry... Oh so very dry.

'Just a single sip...' The thought surfaced in her mind.

She tore her gaze away forcefully, crushing that thought.

'No.'

But the rejection was weak. A pitiful act of defiance. Her gaze flickered once more.

Back to the bottle.

Before she knew it, her finger traced its body. She froze.

She could still turn back. Pull her hand away and ignore. To salvage what remained of her discipline.

'This is ridiculous...' She persuaded herself desperately but this time... she couldn't pull her gaze away.

Her fingers finally wrapped around the bottle.

Something inside her disappeared.

Surrender.

Behind her, the devil's smile widened.

Alice leaned back just slightly, giving her space.

A step back but never far.

For temptation need not drag its victims by the throat.

Sometimes it simply waits, smiling softly, as the sinner reaches out on her own.

And finally, Renna took the plunge. A single sip.

'It's over.' Alyss closed her eyes.

At last... Renna tasted Ayrian mead.

Warmth... radiant gold... it wasn't just the sweetness. The depth of this flavour felt unfathomable. The kind that unfolded into a myriad of tastes even as you take a tiny sip. What was one taste became ten, then twenty. Each revealing a new side of the drink like a woman slowly undressing the layers.

Like a flower opening beneath moonlight to reveal a thousand hidden folds.

First came the honey. But not the crude kind they find on the surface. No, these were not the crude honey of the surface that is simple and eager to please.

No...

This was richer. Older. Dignified, even.

Honey aged through time until it became something more than a simple sweetness. What it carried was not merely flavour, nor the memory of an ingredient. It carried the time, patience, and devotion of everyone involved in its making. The careful harvest. The preservation. The waiting. It was a representation of that effort.

And beneath the honey was the wood.

Rare abyssal wood. The kind once used in old fermentation casks by those who truly understood how to draw beauty from the Abyss without letting it overpower everything else. Carefully chosen so that its presence never dominated but rather supplemented the drink.

Like dancers behind a radiant lead, the wood moved in perfect harmony with the honey. Graceful, restrained, never stealing the eye, yet impossible not to notice once understood.

Then came the floral undertone. So faint she nearly missed it.

Flowers that did not grow beneath proper sunlight. They survived in the harsh lands of the Abyss yet even so, they did not let that tear away their gentle nature.

The fragrance was delicate, elusive. Always on the edge of vanishing yet persisting through sheer tenacity of will. It lingered like a memory of something glimpsed once then never found again.

The trace of beauty that the mind couldn't quite recall.

After the flowers came the fruit. Oh how could she miss the fruit?

Like the rest of the drink, it didn't overpower. It was the stage of which the dancers pranced upon.

Fruit ripened in the light of the Abyss. The sort of flavour that represented a sensation rather than a traditional taste. Like the moment someone asks what one thought of when picturing the season of spring.

A taste of the fruit that can no longer be found easily in the modern age. That faint sharpness beneath its sweetness.

To prevent the drink from becoming too soft, too indulgent.

And yet, despite all of this, the drink was far from done. The stage had already been set. The actors were all in place. Honey, wood, fruit. Each one playing its role to perfection.

What more was there left to reveal?

Ah~ the lighting.

The final touch.

The last, delicate hand that transformed the scene into something unforgettable.

Above everything else was a cool brightness. Clear, subtle... like moonlight pouring down on a gentle lake. It illuminated the scene, bathing in its lunar glow. It highlighted the details and allowed a break.

As though, after the performance had unfolded in all its perfection, the world itself stepped back to let the observer take it in.

Like a man standing at the edge of something beautiful, completely enraptured, unable to look away.

The moonlight falls.

He takes a deep breath.

Not because he needed air but because he was lost in the moment.

To capture everything in his eyes, to bask in that afterglow after seeing something truly spectacular.

To engrave everything into his memories. Every detail, every sensation. So that even after the performance has long ended...

He will still long for the moment he first sat down at the beginning. The feeling of what it felt like to stand in the audience.

The devil of mead has won.

Chapter 1003: Taming A Lord

"I've finished placing the orders. The materials should take around four days to— hold the f*ck up."

Suyin stopped mid-sentence, confusion spreading across her face.

Perched on Lab's shoulder, she stared at the scene in front of her with utter disbelief.

The Abyss Lord of Extalia.

The elven woman who was supposed to make sure they didn't get into any trouble.

Was currently half-melted against the wall.

Renna leaned there like her bones had given up on maintaining her body. One arm wrapped tightly around the bottle as though someone might try to steal it from her at any second.

Her cheek rubbed against the glass as a goofy, nay, blissful smile could be seen on her face.

She was less of an Abyss Lord and more a woman who had just reunited with the love of her life.

And as if that wasn't bad enough...

Alice had somehow acquired a tiny fan and crouched beside her. With devilish intent, she angled it just right, gently wafting the sweet aroma of the mead toward Renna.

Each soft gust carried that golden scent straight to her, wrapping around her senses and pulling her in deeper.

Ensnaring the poor woman even further.

Renna melted further.

Alice noticed Suyin and Lab's return.

"Oh! Yo, welcome back. Did you get what you need?" She asked innocently.

"Oh! Yo my ass! What the hell did you do to her???" Suyin pointed towards Renna.

"What do you mean?" Alice blinked her eyes.

"Look!!! Look at her! Don't look away you she devil!" Suyin pointed at Renna who was taking small careful sips of the mead.

It was truly unlike anything she had before.

And the worst part...

The part that made Cayla and Alyss pity this poor sinner who drank the devil's mead...

Was that Alice was the only one who had this mead.

A limited supply. One that can't be gotten anymore unless they try to recreate it through reverse engineering.

So now, this poor Lord who has gotten a taste of heaven, can never taste it again unless it was Alice who gave her another bottle.

"ARGHHH!!!" Renna suddenly screamed as her bloodshot eyes glared at the sky.

"UWEAH!!!" Suyin screamed as well, surprised by Renna's outburst.

"A-A-Alice did you t-try to poison her?!" Suyin panicked.

Why else would a Lord release such a blood curdling scream???

"I didn't do anything." Alice shrugged.

Renna quickly sat up in a panic.

She stared at the bottle in her hand before turning to Alice.

Sweat dripped down her face as she had a look of pure terror in her eyes.

As though a catastrophic mistake had just been made. She hesitantly reached towards Alice.

"H-how many-"

"Just one. You're not getting more." Alice grinned, cutting her off.

Renna's fingers trembled. How could it be...

In her lust, in her indulgence, she had drank most of the bottle. Leaving barely a mouthful left. This rare mead, lost to time...

It should've been enjoyed carefully, little by little.

And yet she made the amateur mistake of drinking so much at once.

"Sh*t!!!" Renna couldn't hold back her curse as she punched the ground.

Alice reached out, patting her on the shoulder.

"It's okay, everyone makes mistakes like this every now and then don't they?" Alice smiled softly, almost as though she wasn't the one to cause all of this to begin with.

"But what matters is that you managed to stop yourself before you finished it all right? That final sip... savour it properly when the time is right."

Renna clenched her fist.

Alice was right. This final sip had to be savoured.

Storing the bottle away carefully, she stood up.

"Whatever you need while you're in this city, I'll do my best to provide." She smiled.

To think that Alice would give her a bottle of such a priceless mead...

An angle!

Renna wasn't going to be greedy to ask for more. The fact that she had gotten the chance to savour such a drink was already a miracle.

Lab was speechless, Suyin didn't know what to say.

A Lord was tamed just like that.

Meanwhile, Cayla entertained herself with a possibility. In another world... Perhaps there would be a book written about Alice. About a girl taming weapons of mass destruction one mead bottle at a time.

She couldn't help but chuckle at the imagery in her mind.

A goddess of mead who blessed farms with good harvest. Not because she wished for prosperity but more so to ensure her supply of mead didn't run out.

'How stupid.' Alyss mumbled. It was the dumbest things she had heard in a while. To think Alice's stupidity was this infectious.

With Renna offering her help, Alice turned to Suyin and gave her a peace sign.

Suyin facepalmed.

"I'll be working on the memory device. Since there are four days before the materials arrive, do whatever you want in that time. Let me know if sometime changes."

Without wasting any time, she jumped through the portal and Alice reapplies the camouflage.

"Do you lot have an accommodation yet? If not, would you like me to show you around? There's an inn near the elven district with a great view of the city. Even if Miss Lab here can't restrain her Lord aura, it wouldn't be an issue." Renna asked, clearly more friendly than before.

"Sounds great. Is there a place where I can find some good drinks as well?" Alice grinned, making the motion for drinking with her hand.

Renna's eyes sparkled.

"Of course I know a place. Who the hell do you think I am?" Renna grinned. "I've drank in all the places in this city. I know where the best stuff is hidden."

Alice laughed as she had the same look in her eyes.

Renna lifted her hand.

Alice grinned and did the same.

*CLAP!!!

Their palms struck each other with a loud clap and they were locked into a handshake.

An acknowledgement between two similar minded people.

From one alcoholic to another.

Elias had returned from his shopping trip as well. Seeing this scene, confusion dominate his mind.

What happened while he was gone???

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"Erm... Monika." Plume called out while Monika was drinking tea in the back.

"Hm?"

It was rare for Plume to be the one to call her out. Most of the time, it was the other way around.

And in the first place, what is there for her to see? Alice hadn't been dragged into the Nightmare for a while now. With Grand Cathia being transformed into an optional Nightmare Zone, it would be hard to have Alice enter out of her own choice.

Not to mention the fact that her next location was Thalmyra. Another experimental zone.

"Take a look at this." Plume pointed at one of the screens as Monika sighed and walked over.

But the moment she laid her eyes upon what was being projected, her body froze.

There was a strange look in her eyes. Anger? Disbelief? Confusion?

A myriad of emotions cycled but at the end, it landed on one.

Caution.

"When did this happen?" Monika asked.

"I just noticed it now. But from the way it looks..." Plume frowned. "It's probably been going for a while now... I think."

"That damn boss... What the hell does he think he's doing..." Monika clicked her tongue.

For Plume, it was a first. To see Monika genuinely annoyed and disturbed by what was happening.

"Erm... what should we do?" Plume asked.

Monika fell silent.

What should they do?

Easy to ask, hard to answer.

She folded her arms and summoned her staff.

Having it hover horizontally, she took a seat and crossed her legs.

"What to do..." She mumbled.

When it comes to what she wanted to do, she usually allowed the cogs to simply move at their own pace.

As an observer, there was little she can manipulate without punishment.

When she knows the future possibilities, tampering with the present too much would earn their ire.

Which only made the current situation more annoying to deal with.

Because what Nyer had done... What he has experimented with...

The cogs connected to this was far too big!

No matter what she does, the moment she decides to tamper with this, the likelihood of black chains appeared on her limbs increases drastically.

To know what is happening yet not having the power to change things.

It was in times like this that Monika wished she could turn off her ability to perceive the cogs.

Should she warn Alice? No... Doing so was a dead end.

If she makes a move carelessly, a domino effect will be created.

And... She had no role to play in these cogs. The stage has been set, the actors chosen.

She was merely a member of the audience, chosen to observe the play before it was released publicly.

Massaging the bridge of her nose... Monika made a decision.

"Plume." She called out.

"Yes?"

"Do you trust me with your life?" Monika asked.

". . ."

Ever since Monika had found her... she had always told her to not do anything. To not stand out if she can help it. To simply watch so that she could live.

And yet now... It seems like that time was coming to an end.

As fragments of Yrael, there were only two fates open to them.

To observe and do nothing.

Or...

"Mnm. I trust you." Plume smiled happily as Monika revealed a face of guilt.

With no other choice, she leaned forward and gave Plume a hug.

"I'm sorry." Monika apologised.

Plume returned the hug.

"Do what you need to do."

With that, Monika separated from Plume. Her fingers hesitated briefly before slowly digging into Plume's chest...

Chapter 1004: Renna's Title

Renna slowly opened her eyes, and immediately wished she hadn't.

The room was spinning in slow circles, and she clutched her head in pain. The headache felt like several Lords had taken turns punching her in the skull.

She groaned, trying to sit up, only to realize she wasn't on stable ground.

Instead, she found herself sitting on a chandelier.

"What the hell," she muttered, confusion flooding her mind as she tried to recall how she ended up here.

Trying her best to sit up without breaking the lights, she glanced down at the room.

Strangely... it felt as though a hurricane had passed through the main hall with several holes littered along the walls.

Broken chairs and tables.

She's gotten drunk before yes. But never like this. Not to this extent anyways. Pinching the bridge of her nose, she a green energy flooded her body as she gave herself a quick cleanse.

Only to stumble, immediately realising one use wasn't enough.

Cleansing herself twice, she looked for her drinking partner last night.

Alice Agnelia.

A strange girl with a love of mead that rivalled her own. For the first time, someone had been able to keep up with her drinking.

A sigh escaped her lips as she flipped down from the chandelier, landing softly on the floor.

She began to pick up the wreckage, tidying the hall.

Strangely, she didn't see Alice anywhere.

'Did she go back to her room?' Renna wondered, glancing around.

That's when her gaze caught a shadow moving outside.

She poked her head out of one of the holes in the wall, and her smile froze.

Alice was there, repairing a fallen tower next to the inn.

Stacked neatly on the ground was a pile of materials she'd gathered early that morning. Above, Alice hovered on a floating piece of metal, blood threads weaving together the broken pieces, fixing everything one piece at a time.

"Hm? Oh good morning." Alice smiled, noticing Renna and gave her a slight wave. "You look surprisingly fine for someone who drank a bunch."

"So do you. Do you have an Ability or artifact to help you cleanse poisons?" Renna asked curiously.

The reason why she can even function after drinking so hard was because of the ring on her finger.

One specially designed to purge her body of poisons. An elven artifact gifted to her by an old friend who was also a drinking buddy.

"Why would I have that? I just shrug it off." Alice blinked her eyes.

Renna visibly recoiled at that reaction as though she couldn't believe what she just heard.

"Anyways, care to help me repair this? I wasn't the only one who decided to punch it down after all." Alice chuckled.

"Ah! Right." Quickly stepping out of the inn, Renna kneeled down next to the tower as the ground started to tremble.

Then, one at a time, trees began to grow around the damage. Their branches intertwined and wove together, repairing the fallen tower faster than Alice had been able to do.

In no time at all, the tower was restored to perfect condition, even better than before. Not only that, it was decorated with blooming flowers and lush greenery.

"There we go, much better." She smiled while Alice stared at her.

"Your Lord title wouldn't happen to be something like Abyss Lord of Building Repair now would it?" Alice asked while hopping down from above.

Taking a few steps back, she observed the building.

"How rude. I'll have you know, that as a once proud member of the King's Guard, my title is nothing stupid like Building Repair." Renna grumbled in annoyance.

"Then what is it?"

"Hmph, listen up and listen carefully." Renna puffed up her chest as she folded her arms. "I am Renna, one of the King's Guard and my title is the Abyss Lord of the Sacred Grove."

She grinned, closing her eyes expecting gasps of wonder and awe.

Only to be me with...

"Wait... that it?" Alice sounded unimpressed.

Renna felt an arrow pierce her heart.

"What do you mean 'wait... that it'??? It's a Lord title you know? One that's involved with the Sacred Grove of all things!" Renna's smile twitched.

She wasn't sure if she was feeling anger, dejection or just pure sadness from Alice's reaction.

"I mean... I heard and seen some rather impressive titles at work." Alice shrugged. "I've seen Execution, Shadows, Tyranny, Apocalypse, Time, Life, Death and the list goes on. You see why something like the Sacred Grove is not exactly impressing me?" She blinked.

Renna almost collapsed onto her knees, wanting to cry.

'Sis! You're telling me to compare my title with freaks of nature! How do you even get the title that governs Life!? That governs Death!?'

She knew some of the these titles while others were unfamiliar to her. But just hearing them was enough to make her realise how outclassed she was!

Apocalypse? Execution?

What's her sacred grove going to do when the sky falls down? What can she do when the opponent is the literal controller of the death sentence?!

"The Sacred Grove is important too you know... to us elves at least..." Renna mumbled, her pride shattered to pieces.

The fact that Alice didn't look like she was making those titles up only made her pain worse!

"Really?" Alice tilted her head.

"You don't know what it is do you?" Renna sighed as Alice shook her head.

"Have you been living under a rock? Anyone living in Extalia or even the nations outside knows about the Sacred Grove."

Alice looked inward, towards Cayla who shrugged.

[I know. But... Kaden's evaluation of it might not be helpful. In his own words, he called it the elven drug shack.]

Alice almost choked on her saliva hearing that description.

From Renna, she could tell that the elf respected the location a bunch. Yet in Kaden's words... it was nothing more than a drug shack.

There was no elegance in that name whatsoever.

"C-can you tell me more about it?" Alice forced a smile.

Since Renna was now a drinking friend, she at least wanted to give her the chance to redeem the Sacred Grove.

As for Renna, hearing Alice's curiosity about the Sacred Grove, her ears wiggled as a sparkle appeared in her eyes.

"You see, to know about the Sacred Grove is to understand the importance of the World Tree to us elves.

"The World Tree is not merely an old tree that grew larger than the rest with roots piercing through Extalia. Rather, it is one of the oldest living things of this world. It has stood since the old age where... this is a secret by the way." Renna winked.

"There were four gods rather than three." She grinned.

Alice held back a laugh.

"Enris of the Eclipse, Solaris of the Sun and Lumiria of the Moon. Then there was the fourth. Velouria of the Abyss.

"The World Tree has watched the changing of eras, the fall of gods and even the creation of nations that stand to this day. The reason why it can do so, is because its roots passively absorb energy from all realms. Surface, Void and Abyss.

"The roots that touch the realms become a corridor that prevents them from drifting apart. It is said that the World Tree is the reason why balance exists between the three realms.

"Why they can exist side by side without shredding one another to pieces or drifting too far apart."
Renna explained, turning her gaze to Alice.

"Do you understand why it's important now? Excluding the cultural reasons, the World Tree helps stabilize the realms."

"So like a scaffold?" Alice made an example.

The comparison was a little crude but not inaccurate and Renna nodded her head.

"To some degree, it does function that way. Now that you know about the World Tree, let me tell you about the Sacred Grove.

"When I say I am the Lord of the Sacred Grove, I do not mean I command a patch of woodland from the forest.

"Rather, the Sacred Grove is the land where the World Tree rests upon. The grove that surrounds the trunk connected to the three realms.

"It is not simply a forest. It is a sanctuary. It's hard to put into words for someone that has never seen or experienced it. But the air there is different. For elves, being in the Grove is akin to being in the presence of our mothers if not greater.

"It's a warmth that submerges our entire body and relaxes our mind. To us, the Grove is paradise. It is safety incarnate constructed by the balance of realms. Within the Grove, beneath the World Tree, all abilities ranging from these realms are enhanced should the tree give you its blessings. Abyssal, Holy, Void.

"But the opposite is also true. For the World Tree is sentient. Hostility towards the Grove will instead be met with punishment that weakens the use of these powers instead." Renna chuckled. It served similar to a defensive mechanic to protect the Grove.

"So when I say I am the Abyss Lord of the Sacred Grove, what do you think I can do?" Renna smiled.

Alice thought about it for a moment.

If the World Tree, and by extension the Grove, is something connected to all three realms and can even enhance the abilities that come from those realms...

"Is your ability based on enhancement?" Alice asked curiously, wondering if Renna was the supportive type.

Renna shook her head.

"As the Lord tied to the Grove, I can summon a reflection of the Grove wherever I go. I can enjoy its boons and most importantly, I am its guardian. Should the need call for it..." She narrowed her eyes and crossed her arms.

"I can even tap into power rivalling that of Realm Rulers."

Chapter 1005: Parasite On The World Tree

"I can even tap into power rivalling that of Realm Rulers."

Alice creased her brows.

Power rivalling that of Realm Rulers? Beings like Feris who governed entire realms?

The same beings who are comparable to Gods with the only difference being Divine authority?

Alice found that to be very doubtful as Renna didn't feel like that strong of a Lord.

Noticing Alice's doubt, Renna's smile twitched.

It was the first time she had seen a being below Lord look down on her so much. Without fear for her own safety at that!

If she were a petty Lord, she might've even considered attacking Alice here and now.

"You? Can summon powers comparable to Feris?" Alice questioned as Renna grinned.

"I may not look like it but I-" Renna blinked.

Her words slowing down.

"-I can summon... powers like the Lady of the Void... Due to the connection... Hold on. Hang on a f*cking second how the hell do you know the name Feris???" She recoiled in realisation.

There was only one reason she knew about Feris and that was entirely due to the way the World Tree is connected to the three realms. Had her predecessors not told her about the Realm Rulers, their battle in the past, she would've never even known about Feris' name.

All she would've know would be the fact that she exists. That's about it.

Even before the battle between Realm Rulers, Feris was someone who hardly showed herself to anyone.

So how in Gods name does this Hunter know about her name of all things, and even speak with such familiarity!?

"I've talked to Feris a few times. Some of my techniques were taught by her. Actually... now that I think about it, I haven't seen her in a while." Alice shrugged before folding her hands.

She decided to try and summon Feris.

"I consider our relationship to be that of friends."

She glanced around.

Nothing.

"Best of friends?" Alice spoke hesitantly but Feris wasn't here to correct her.

"Hm... That's weird. She'll usually tell me to shut up by now. I guess she's busy." Alice sighed.

Renna lost strength in her legs and collapsed onto the floor.

To speak so carelessly about Feris...

Even to the point where the Realm Ruler would tell you to shut up... How was she alive?

She even managed to study from Feris?

Impossible.

"There's no way you learned techniques from her. I refuse to believe that." Renna shook her head.

Feris was notorious for disliking interacting with people. Why would she teach-

Alice stood up and gave her body a stretch. Activating her Sigil, Void energy fluctuated from her body and gathered around her feet.

Void Steps!

In an instant, Alice disappeared from her spot and reappeared behind Renna.

"She owed me a favour before and I cashed it in. It's a shame though... I thought my relationship with her was bigger than just favours and owing each other." Alice sighed disappointingly.

[The fact that she hasn't killed you is already a miracle. You kept sending sh*t into her home after all. If it was me, I would've kicked your ass ten times over.] Cayla rested her chin on her palm.

'Don't let the poor alcoholic know otherwise I worry for her mental state.' Alyss yawned.

If Renna realised the type of crap Alice gets up to with people who can easily kill someone of her calibre, she'll never recover.

Especially if she finds out that Alice was the reason behind Kazira's death.

"Th-tha-t-that's..." Renna stuttered.

Void energy was powerful, volatile but difficult to control. The signs were extremely obvious so anyone trying to use it during a battle would struggle.

They would prepare counters to some degree.

But Alice's activation of Void Steps was near instantaneous! A trademark of Feris!

Feris was one of if not the greatest users of Void energy.

Instantaneous casts, mastery over control! Movement that made it near impossible to catch her properly in a fight!

She represented the pinnacle of everyone trying to understand Void energy.

Even to this day, there were records of Feris's powers inscribed and stored in the Sacred Grove.

Records for someone like her to study so that they could efficiently use the power of the Void when activating the authority of the Sacred Grove.

Yet... there stood a girl in front of her that was approaching the level of Feris in pure control.

Renna only had one question on her mind.

What the hell is Alice's background!?

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Renna suffered from a headache despite not being drunk.

"I don't think it warrants that level of reaction. I've shown it to other people before but they didn't seem surprised by my use of Void energy." Alice walked while playing with a singularity above her finger.

Aside from her flames, Void energy was the easiest for her to manipulate.

"That's because they don't understand how truly difficult it is. Manipulating Void energy takes a special kind of talent to achieve. For one, you have to be specially honed to the sensation of redirecting the flow of Void energy." Renna sighed.

Snapping her finger, energy flowed from her body as she manifested a piece of the Grove by using her body as a conduit. Then, with a flick of her wrist, Void energy started to gather.

Alice immediately noticed the issues.

It was still fast, yes. But this was a Lord who was using it. The deployment of energy should be much faster than this.

"As you can see, it's quite predictable right? Best used as a distraction as well as traps rather than in direct confrontation. Of course, if I fully manifest the Grove, I can artificially increase my control to reach a level that is usable in combat." Renna explained.

"But that's not really me using it as I please and rather letting the Void do its own thing. I simply redirect and hope it takes the shape I want it to. But you're doing it differently."

She turned to Alice.

"The way you're manipulating the Void... It's like you can see exactly how it moves. How it flows and how it wants to reject the world around it. Something bordering on the Authority a Realm Ruler holds I suppose."

A deep sigh escaped her lips. Renna had given up trying to understand what Alice was doing. Instead, it was much easier to just accept that Alice was a freak of nature when it comes to talent, disguising herself as a Hunter who's yet to reach the realm of Lord.

"But since you most definitely aren't one, I'm going to guess that you probably have a way to specially sense the flow of Void energy right?" She asked.

Alice scratched her cheek.

Renna's intuition was... surprisingly on point.

Cayla allowed her to see the flow of energy which, if Void energy was as hard as Renna was making it out to be, the source of her proficiency.

There was probably talent mixed into it but Cayla's influence is undeniable.

[Yes, praise me more.] Cayla smirked.

Alice rolled her eyes.

"Actually..." She turned her attention back to Renna.

Based on her description of the Grove...

"With the Nightmare over Extalia, are you able to dispel it? Or is the Grove already connected?"

Depending on the answer that Renna gives now, it'll determine how far Nyer has progressed with his plan.

With the mention of the Nightmare, Renna turned serious and regained her demeanour of a Lord.

Dusting herself, she stood up and walked towards the railings. The sight that overlooked the city.

"The... Nightmare is a bit of an anomaly as you know. Usually, it would've dragged you in but it's different in this city. You can choose whether or not you want to enter." Renna took a deep breath while Alice followed behind her.

While Renna wasn't sure of Alice's background, the fact that she has an Underground Lord working with her along with her connection to Feris, there was a good chance that Alice wasn't happy with the Nightmare realm.

In which case, it wasn't an issue to give her this information. She would get it sooner or later with her connection to the Underground after all. What's the harm in letting her know sooner?

"It appeared out of nowhere and took the nation by storm. There's not a single part of Extalia that hasn't been tainted and by the time we noticed, it's already too late." Renna narrowed her eyes.

"Abyss, Void, Surface. These realms are... natural in a sense. They've existed for so long that the World Tree is connected to them on a deeper level. But not the Nightmare. This realm is artificial, created through careful consideration rather than letting nature take its course.

"Whoever created this realm did so with a sole purpose in mind. If I had to describe it... The Nightmare feels like an egg. It's waiting to hatch." Renna clenched her fist as there was a look of anger in her eyes.

"If the three realms are attached to the World Tree through its roots, then the Nightmare realm is a parasite that's latched onto the trunk. It's siphoning a portion of the World Tree's energy to stabilise the realm. Not perfectly, but it's using the existing information of the other realms as a foundation, I suppose." Renna took a deep breath and leaned back.

"But trying to locate where it's connected to the world tree is the difficult part. The roots spread far and wide. As the Lord of the Sacred Grove, I have a mission in preserving the Tree. Which means not allowing this parasite of a Realm to manifest." She turned to Alice with a smile.

"So even though I look a little unreliable, I'm working behind the scenes. The elves are already in the process of separating the Nightmare realm from the tree. Once we succeed, the false realm should break apart naturally without anything to anchor itself."

Chapter 1006 Wound In The Sky

Alice frowned.

If the Nightmare was a parasite on the World Tree, she doubted Nyer would simply let it be destroyed. He wasn't someone careless enough to leave something like that unattended. If anything, he would be actively searching for a way to use it—perhaps even to usurp the different realms entirely.

The Abyss was off limits. Nyer was working toward Velouria's return. Destroying or destabilising it would defeat his own purpose.

As for the surface...

The three gods resided here. He might not fear them, but Alice doubted he wanted the trouble of all three turning their attention on him at once.

Which left only the Void.

As much as Alice wanted to believe Feris had everything under control... the lack of any movement from her was starting to worry her.

Creasing her brows, she let out a deep sigh and turned to Renna.

Since she knew about Feris and the Void...

"Say, do you know what Feris has been up to? I know she's not someone that made her presence known... But if a fourth realm has shown up, I don't think she's the type to just sit around doing nothing."

Renna raised an eyebrow.

"You're... asking me about her???"

Between the two of them, she thought Alice would be the one to know more about what Feris was doing right now.

But seeing the seriousness in Alice's eyes, Renna realised it was probably to do with the Void rather than anything else.

"I don't know. From the Sacred Grove, we can only observe the stability and current status of the Realms. Whether or not the Abyss is expanding and so on. The Void had always been a point of stability, never expanding nor retreating.

"It was just kind of... there. But recently, there's been signs of fraying around the edges. The realm is slowly breaking apart but Feris isn't doing anything about it." Renna admitted.

Alice exhaled slowly.

"Seems like it's bothering you quite a bit." Renna folded her arms.

"Was it that obvious?" Alice chuckled, pulling out a small bottle of mead.

"F*ck! Already? It's still the morning!" Renna stepped back in fear.

"What? You don't want some?" Alice narrowed her eyes.

Reaching for her pouch, she pulled out a second bottle for Renna to enjoy.

Swallowing her saliva, Renna accepted.

"Pft, I thought you had a job of making sure we don't cause mischief?"

"With Lab not being able to hide her aura, don't you think I can tell where she is at all times? As long as nothing major happens, a drink or two is fine. And..." Renna opened the bottle, taking a small sip.

"Out of everyone, you're the most dangerous. Keeping an eye on you means keeping an eye on the others." She smirked, narrowing her eyes at Alice who stuck out her tongue playfully.

She wasn't wrong after all.

"I have a slight inkling on what's happening behind the scenes." Alice focused back on the discussion at hand while sipping her drink.

"The person behind the Nightmare won't let things continue as they are. His goal is to manifest it properly as a real realm. To allow for the ascension or rather... The resurrection of a dead God."

Renna listened in silence.

"The surface will be left alone for now. The Nightmare needs something to attach to after all. The Abyss has something else keeping it stable."

By this point, Renna realised what Alice was saying.

"So the Void is now in the most danger. Feris is the only one looking after it and she's nowhere to be seen." She exhaled slowly as Alice nodded.

"If the culprit wants to make a move, they'll probably aim for the Void."

Renna thought about it for a moment as she considered the actions that she must take.

After a long pause, she finished her drink in one go.

"I'll notify someone and have them keep an eye on the Void. We might not be able to contact Feris but at least we'll be able to tell if the Nightmare tries anyth-"

***RUMBLE!!! BANG!!!**

"!!!"

"!!!"

Renna couldn't even finish her sentence as a crushing pressure slammed down from the air above the city.

Both Alice and Renna were forced onto their knees as their head snapped towards the sky.

Above the city, a jagged crimson fissure ripped itself open as though a pair of invisible claws had split reality open from the other side of the figure.

The scarlet crack pulsed with malevolent energy, flickering like a wound in the world. At its core, a blazing ring of swirling red and black spun ominously, encircling a single crimson moon that hovered within.

Its sinister light darkened the world around it and from the fissure, blood encroached onto their reality, dying the world in red. Like a stain against a shirt, it bled across the heavens without stop.

Renna paled as she quickly stood up. Alice had a dark look on her face as well.

Through Cayla, she saw the invisible truth hidden to the naked eye.

Nightmare energy poured out of the wound in the sky without stop. It latched onto the energy of their realm in a manner not unlike Eldritch energy.

Adapting, corrupting.

Countless writhing tendrils that stretched and coiled like serpents reaching down into their world. Pulse one pulsating with a sick vitality too vile, too grotesque to be even classified as life.

A mutated mass of energy that lusted after their world.

It could only be described as an abomination.

Renna punched the ground as abyssal energy fought against the pressure, making it easier for Alice to move.

"I don't know what kind of influence you have but ask Lab if she can help evacuate the people. I need to contact the Grove." Renna shot Alice a glance before disappearing with a swirl of energy.

Alice gave the sky another glance before running towards Lab's energy.

Yet by the time she had arrived... it wasn't Lab who greeted her.

But rather...

Faust.

He stood atop a building with his arms folded. His gaze fixed onto the tear in space.

That... wound reflected in his eyes as he could feel the Nightmare energy pouring into the city.

It was different from the sieges that occurred in certain locations.

Those were done with the purpose of harvesting in mind.

But this?

This was not harvesting.

Far from it.

He creased his brows and let out a deep exhale.

Despite noticing Alice, he didn't turn.

"This is quite the issue." He spoke first.

"Do you know something?" Alice frowned.

"Of course. Who do you think I am?" Faust let out a dry chuckle.

Then, after a short pause, he flicked his fingers and a card could be seen trapped between it.

"Take a look yourself."

Catching the card that Faust tossed over, Alice saw that it was a reflection of all the cities that had been 'spared' of the mandatory Nightmare explorations.

These were the cities they classified as testing grounds.

And above them...

Above all of them... similar wounds could be seen.

Some progressed faster than the others, some struggled to propagate.

As for this city... it was some of the better ones.

"The Nightmare is encroaching on reality. It's sinking its teeth in and trying to take out a large bite."
Faust explained before Alice could even ask.

Previously, the nation of Extalia could be considered as a piece of meat presented on a plate.
Unseasoned yet presented all the same.

The Nightmare was the seasoning and now, the consumer was taking a bite.

Standing next to Faust, Alice stared at the tear.

"Just tell me what you want." Alice sighed.

The fact that Faust was here rather than anywhere else meant that he was probably looking for something from her.

Something that'll help him resolve an issue.

"Glad you catch on fast. I, or rather we, can halt the spread of Nightmare energy for now." Faust chuckled.

Alice creased her brows.

"Blood?"

"Blood." He nodded.

"There's been some experiments. Nothing too major yet. But I believe by using some of your blood with my authority, I can create a barrier that can isolate or repel the natural energies in our world." He admitted.

"Are you sure this isn't just a request for more blood so you can play around with it?"

"We signed the law did we not? Or do you want to sign a new one to make sure I'm not messing around?" Faust let out a hearty laugh.

Though he had to admit.

One part of him indeed wanted to use this moment to experiment a little.

To push Alice's blood to the limit and see how it deals with a threat like this.

Alice pinched the bridge of her nose.

She wanted to reject him but...

From what she could see through Cayla, it's clear that this outbreak wasn't going to slow down any time soon.

It's an open wound that keeps spitting out blood and they need to seal it.

Fast.

"Fine. But you're not taking it from my body." Alice snapped her finger.

Her Sigils trembled with energy as blood started to appear around her feet.

In a sense, it was rather reminiscent of the scene above them.

Only this time, Alice was the cause of the flood of blood below.

Twirling her finger, she condensed it into several floating orbs.

"This enough?" Alice asked as Faust blinked his eyes.

"For this city maybe. But I think I'll need a bit more when it comes to the other places."

Alice's smile twitched. He could tell she was still holding back.

"Tch. Just make sure you seal it up properly."

With a grin on his face, Faust snapped his finger as the sky started to ripple.

Pieces peeled away one by one as cards started to fall.

Chapter 1007 Allura Or The Void

In the span of a single day, the city of Thalmyra witnessed two abnormalities.

The first was the sky splitting apart, as though some monstrous beast had risen with a grudge against the heavens themselves.

The second came moments later, when countless mirrors flipped into existence around the wound, forming a vast prison that halted the spread of crimson into their world.

With the appearance of the wound, confusion spread across Thalmyra.

It was confusion at first. People stepped outside and tilted their heads back to look at the sky.

Trying to make sense of what they were seeing, what was happening.

Guards, merchants, and civilians broke into hysteria when blood started to dye the world in its colour.

Stalls were abandoned, and people surged to leave the city in all directions.

No one knew what was happening, but they didn't want to stick around to find out.

Even when the mirrors held back the spread, the panic didn't stop.

In fact, it only got worse, as people were unsure of how long these defences could hold. All they knew was that this was an opportunity for them to run while the tide was being held back.

The guards were trying their best to settle the commotion, but the civilians were not cooperating.

Watching all of this happen from the top of a tower, Renna had a deep frown on her face before letting out a deep sigh.

Behind her, four people were seated around the table.

Alice, Faust, Elias, and Suyin mk2.

At first, Renna wasn't sure who Faust was, as all she felt was Lab's aura shifting.

Then, when he introduced himself essentially as Lab's boss, she threw common sense out of the window since there were bigger things to worry about.

Things such as the hole in the sky.

"I've halted the expansion for now. Same with the other cities. But even with... the special assistance I've gained, this solution won't last. Even now, they're slowly eating away at my power," Faust admitted.

Tapping his finger, a card was ejected from between his fingers as Alice noticed the spreading cracks along the outer edges.

"You can think of this as the integrity of the barrier I put into place. When this card breaks, you can safely assume that there's nothing else I can do against the spreading corruption."

Like Eldritch energy, this strange Nightmare energy was slowly adapting and deconstructing the secrets behind the barrier.

Once it had completely solved the hidden mechanisms, Faust would no longer be able to do anything about it.

Even if he tried to refresh the barrier he had put into place.

"What's the status of the World Tree?" Alice asked curiously.

She noticed all of the elves having a dark look on their faces and realised it must be something to do with the World Tree.

Considering its connection to the different realms, if a wound like this had opened across Extalia, then it was definitely a cause for concern.

"It's..." Renna paused, her brows knit tightly together. "Stable. Freakishly so. A wound like this should be... detectable. But the Tree is showing no signs of rejection or corruption. The world is as it has always been. 'Nothing has changed.'"

Alice frowned.

Faust scratched his chin.

"Nothing has changed, huh? Our foe is quite the devious one. Even an action as large as this is ignored." He let out a small chuckle, gesturing to the sky above them. "If the Tree isn't rejecting this kind of phenomenon, then it's safe to assume this is within the limits of what the Realms are allowed to do."

"The only question now... is which ones are being manipulated."

Renna and Alice had discussed this before.

The only possible candidate being the Void.

"I've already had someone look into this issue. However, the roots connected to the Void show no sign of deterioration. No sign of outside influence," Renna said, hesitating.

The only way for this to be the case, yet still show such a destructive effect on their realm, would be...

Alice furrowed her brows.

"Feris, huh?" she mumbled, tapping her finger against the table.

"Unfortunately. For this kind of thing to happen, the Realm Ruler must either give her consent or someone has hijacked her authority. One of these must be true for the Tree to remain silent. Otherwise, we'd be able to easily find the core issue." Renna nodded.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice understood that talking to Feris was a must.

However... she needed to make her way to the capital to find Allura.

Feris or Allura...

The world or someone she saw as her mother...

Alice clenched her fist.

Renna noticed Alice's struggle.

She had seen that kind of expression countless times by this point. The expression of someone debating the importance between their duty and their family. Between what must be done and what they wanted to do.

"Trying to locate the Lady of the Void will not be an easy task. Especially when the Void is currently undergoing a strange mutation. This kind of task is better left to people like me, who are familiar with the realms." Renna tapped her own chest.

A helpless smile appeared on her face.

"I can monitor the changes and figure out a way to contact her. The only thing is... how I can talk to Feris without her killing me." Renna let out a dry laugh.

She had always done this. Offered her help to people who were struggling. Whenever they were stuck between decisions, Renna found herself offering her services.

It was that way before she became a Lord... and it remained so even after becoming one.

An escort job that others were too terrified to handle, she accepted without hesitation.

And oftentimes, she had asked herself one question.

'Renna, why did you offer? You can still back out.'

Yet she never did.

"There's something more important than this that requires your attention, right?" Renna chuckled, taking a seat opposite Alice. "So go do what you need to do."

Alice hesitated.

"What's with that look? This is something I should be doing anyway. I'm the Lord of the Sacred Grove, the overseer of the place where the World Tree resides. If something is going to mess with the realm we're in, it is my responsibility to ensure that everything is okay." Renna laughed it off with a wave of her hand.

In the end, Alice reluctantly nodded.

Even though the world seemed to be spiralling towards the end, she wanted to ensure Allura's safety first and foremost.

"Since it'll take a few days for the parts to arrive, feel free to use me however you want. My powers are at your disposal, same with the connections I hold. And by extension, the services that belong to the Leader of the Underground." Alice smiled, gesturing to Faust next to her.

Faust choked on his saliva while Renna blinked.

"You can't just start outing my identity, you know? And when did I agree to help?" Faust coughed with a slight frown.

"Then let me put it this way. She'll request me, and by extension, I'll request you. With that, you might as well extend your services to her, no?" Alice chuckled.

"That- no-..." He paused. If he rejected the notion here, there was no doubt that Alice would choose the pettiest possible response. Perhaps even changing the way she delivered her blood to him. The kind that made it obnoxious.

And if she was anything like Allura, then simply playing along would be much better than denying them.

He could still remember that one time when he denied Allura.

Only for her to then complete his favours in the worst way possible.

Artifacts that had been destroyed, split into several chunks. Their abilities weren't lost, but the effort of repairing them far outweighed the gain.

Or even when he asked her to help him find a certain ore in the Abyss, only for her to bring back a giant beast that had eaten said ore. So if he wanted it, he'd have to wait for it to be... dispensed in a certain manner.

Of course, he couldn't kill the beast either. If he did, Allura would have killed him instead.

Clenching his teeth, Faust let out a deep sigh.

"Fine. But only for as long as you are within this city," Faust bargained, but Alice shook her head.

"Nope. You gave me the services of the Underground. So I'm going to use those services. Whatever Renna requires, I will do my best to fulfil. And by extension, everything will be a request pushed to the Underground, yes?" Faust's smile twitched.

Meanwhile, Renna blinked, recoiling at the fact that the man sitting at the same table was, in fact, the leader of this organisation.

Once again, Alice's background was called into question.

However, even if she did have connections such as Faust, what did she mean by her power?

Renna doubted a Lord like herself needed the assistance of a Hunter who had yet to reach this realm.

Alice sensed her doubt, rolled her eyes, then turned to Faust.

"Give me a drop of your blood." She held out her hand.

"What do you need my blood for? It doesn't have special properties like yours." Faust raised an eyebrow.

"And this is a Mirror Clone. It doesn't have blood in the traditional sense."

Alice paused, realised her mistake, then turned to Renna.

"Can I have a drop of your blood?"

"...." Faust held himself back.

Why was it a demand when it came to him, but a humble request when it came to her???

Renna saw no reason to deny it and pricked her finger, letting a droplet splash against Alice's hand.

Bringing it up to her mouth, Alice licked it up, confusing the two.

*RUMBLE!!!

Renna blinked.

Faust froze.

"Tada~" Alice shrugged, showcasing the aura of a Lord in its entirety.

By this point, Renna couldn't hold back anymore.

"What the f*ck???"

Chapter 1008: Verona's Dream

"What the f*ck???" Renna felt her mind shatter as Alice suddenly gained the aura of a Lord.

Even Faust found himself almost falling over in shock.

This...

This was impossible. Inconceivable!

How does one even achieve this?

"Wha- Huh? How?!" Renna asked, double checking, triple checking and even quadruple checking to see what she saw was real.

And no doubt, Alice right now was a Lord with no authority!

No... That's incorrect. Alice had one...

"Is that... my authority???" Renna widened her eyes.

"Yep~" Alice grinned, sticking out her tongue.

"If I drink the blood of someone, I can temporarily gain Sigils equal to them. So if I drink someone with nine Sigils, I gain nine Sigils. Then, I can choose to either keep their abilities or replace them with my own." Alice waved her hand.

In that moment, the aura of duality seeped out.

"Wait... so you can access the Sacred Grove?"

Alice tapped her chin.

"Somewhat. If I trace your memories thanks to my sixth Sigil, I can. But previously, I couldn't. I needed to know what you're able to do before I can use it fully."

Turning her gaze back to the two Lords, she grinned.

"So what do you think? Useful right?"

"Useful!? That's beyond useful. It violates everything we know!" Faust collapsed in his chair. His mind was spun as it felt like all of his prior knowledge had just been erased.

"How is this even possible?" Renna poked Alice in the cheek, wondering if what she's seeing is even real.

Surprisingly... Alice's cheeks bounced like delicate jelly as Renna found herself unable to stop.

"Dunno. It's just something I've had for as long as I remember."

Meanwhile, Faust realised something.

Had they fought... and Alice drank his blood...

"So while I'm here, if you ever need something to be dealt with, just give me a shout." Alice showed a peace sign with her fingers.

With Alice revealing that she can easily achieve the status of Lord, they decided to scout out the situation for now.

Faust had Lab take his place once more while Renna was focused on ensuring the World Tree was stable.

On top of that, there was also the issue of tracking down Feris.

Alice was only going to stay as long as needed for Suyin to get her materials.

Once the Memory Device was finalised, she'll be able to speed up her travels significantly.

Sitting in her room, Alice glanced out at the city, then towards the sky where Faust had sealed the wound for now.

With this city being one where you can choose whether or not you want to enter the Nightmare, Alice could sense the invisible door that would allow her to dream.

She's helped resolve the Grand Cathia Nightmare to some extent. The rest was up to Miki.

As for this city... well, she was planning on leaving soon anyways.

The only thing she wanted to check out was her own Nightmare. The one connected to the north during the time of famine.

Taking a deep breath, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

Entering the Nightmare through this method was different to the feeling you got when being dragged inside.

First of all, Alyss and Cayla weren't forced along with her.

Second of all, it felt more akin to submerging yourself fully in hot water than being dragged through a maelstrom of dreams.

After a brief pause, Alice felt the cold biting against her skin. The howling of the wind and the lifelessness of the north.

"As expected. Now that I'm away from Grand Cathia, I can't access their Nightmare anymore." Alice mumbled, opening her eyes.

But just as she was about to stand up, she paused.

In the boss arena before her, where she should have been preparing to face the red knight, something had changed.

A young girl rested in his arms.

Cradled with such care as though he was afraid the world would harm her. A stark contrast to his brutality when fighting.

The red knight sat motionless amidst the snow, his greatsword resting at his side, angled low yet close enough to be raised in an instant against anyone foolish enough to approach.

Snow gathered on his armour. Frost clung to the edges of steel. The girl remained tucked against him, small and fragile within that monstrous embrace, as though he were trying to shield the last remaining ember in a world that had already frozen over.

The wind screamed around them, yet the two sat in utter silence.

Staring at this...

Alice couldn't help but frown.

To her, it felt as though the two of them were against the entire world.

But most of all...

The girl reminded her of someone.

That aura... that appearance.

Even the faint traces of divinity that lingered. A little corrupt and damaged but unmistakable.

Verona.

Why was she here? Better yet... How was she here?

Shouldn't this Nightmare be her's? Why was she here?

And...

Alice glanced up at the woman overlooking the arena with a deep frown.

Her eyes narrowed and she summoned her weapon, ready to fight if needed.

"My my, such hostility." Enris chuckled, crossing her legs and elegantly flipped her hair in the northern winds.

"Who wouldn't show hostility? I'm sure the relationship between the two of us need no explanation." Alice scoffed.

But Enris wasn't even bothered. In fact, she welcomed people to be hostile like this.

The more hostile the better.

"Fufu~ That's true. But tell me, what do you plan on doing with the girl and her cherished knight hm?" Enris stood up.

With a twirl of her body, she appeared behind Alice, stepping out of her shadow.

"Verona, oh poor Verona. A girl who watched her parents die then forced to make the hardest choices. To sink deep into sin. Then, when the knight saved her from her despair, when he showed her a better path forward..." Enris's smile twisted into a sick grin.

"He dies, leaving her all alone in this world. No one else understanding the suffering she had to go through. The pressure placed upon a little girl's shoulders, for her to become queen. Then, when she tries to reach divinity, she falls short and now her life hangs on a thread."

Alice had a frown on her face while listening to Enris.

The God took pleasure in this suffering.

"The people she vowed to protect... dead. With very few left to protect, how could she face the knight?" Enris asked as she was about to rest her hand on Alice's shoulder.

But with a blade pointed at her throat, she simply chuckled and leaned in closer.

When the blade tip pierced into her flesh, when blood started to drip, her smile only widened, causing Alice to click her tongue.

"Why are you here?"

Enris wouldn't show up without reason.

She was here because she needed something.

"Hm~ What if I told you..." Enris paused, wrapping around and cupping Alice's cheeks.

"I want to see your choice?" She asked.

Alice tried to push her off but Enris was slippery, weaving around her movements while violating her private space.

Lifting a strand of Alice's hair, she brought it up to her mouth and gave it a slight kiss.

"I don't know what Velouria saw in you to consider you a friend." Alice sighed in frustration.

"Veli... Dear Veli. She tried to see everyone as a friend. She wanted everyone to get along, even when some of us were clearly hostile towards her power. Now... I'm sure you understand what that poor man Nyer is trying to accomplish. A fool trapped in delusions of the past." Enris leaned back, falling into her own shadow before being spat out.

This time with her male form.

"Honestly, I don't see why he is so enamoured by Veli. Don't you agree? People like him should just look towards the future." Enris cackled, swooping below Alice and trying to pick her up.

But Alice refused. Flipping her body, she slashed towards Enris's eyes and created some distance between them.

Regenerating his wounds, Enris grinned, licking his lips.

"So let me present you with a different case. Perhaps we, and by we I mean you, can get a better idea of Nyer." Enris stepped to the side, motioning towards the two stuck inside the boss arena.

"Though this current Nightmare is a product between, you, I and her, she is now adrift in her own dream. Living the life she hoped she could've gotten. I do wonder... Wouldn't it be cruel to take that away from her?" He asked, leaning against the door.

With a snap of his fingers, their surroundings started to shift as he forcefully dragged Alice into Verona's dream.

###

Alyss blinked her eyes.

With Alice in the Nightmare, the control of the body naturally fell to her.

The golden chains were still present yes.

But they felt... loose?

It was a strange feeling. It lacked the pull to forcefully rip her control away yet was still present.

If anything, it felt like clothes that were a little too tight.

Giving her body a stretch, she let out a slight exhale as she decided to change her outfit for now.

Alice and her taste in clothing varied quite a bit after all.

While Alice preferred cute outfits, she enjoyed the more revealing ones. Ones that allowed her a sense of freedom.

As for why she was taking the initiative to control Alice's body... Naturally, it was because of a job Alice wanted her to do.

Changing into something that suited her tastes better, Alyss opened the window and glanced up at the sky.

The chains around her hummed as a grin appeared on her face.

As expected... Like their body, that wound in the sky was an amalgamation of energy.

A combination of all four that exists in a paradoxical harmony.

Cracking her neck, Alyss jumped out of the window.

"Time to get to work."

Chapter 1009: Five

The girl had always looked to the sky.

To that boundless expanse above, where the heavens seemed endless and the world below felt small enough to disappear. Night after night, her gaze wandered across the infinite cosmos, chasing constellations she had not noticed before, tracing the slow rearrangement of that celestial chessboard as though unseen hands were forever moving its pieces one by one.

No two nights ever felt the same.

There were always differences for her to find. Small shifts that others would never notice. Some evenings, the stars shone with unusual clarity, bright enough to make the dark seem thinner. On others, vast iridescent bands of light poured across the stellar sea, veils of violet, blue, and green rippling through the heavens with a beauty so mesmerising that it hardly felt real.

She could have spent a lifetime staring upward and still felt she understood too little.

Because up there, everything seemed limitless.

And to a girl like her, that endless sky felt far kinder than the world below.

The world to which she belonged.

"You're out here again."

A boy climbed onto the roof where she sat, careful with his footing as he pulled himself up beside her.

"If you get caught, the boss will be mad, you know? How many beatings do you need before you learn?"

The girl glanced back at him, silent as ever, before lifting her eyes to the sky once more.

It was as though nothing in the world could break the spell those lights had over her.

Seeing that, the boy let out a helpless smile and sat down beside her.

"So what's different this time?" He asked, tilting his head back. "Did a new star appear? Or was there another streak of light?"

This was the only way he knew how to make her speak.

After a brief pause, she lifted her hand and pointed at the sky.

"There."

The boy followed her finger.

He saw nothing unusual. The same old sights, at least to him.

"Near the brightest star." The girl pouted in annoyance.

Focusing harder, he finally noticed a faint shimmer near the brightest star. Its glow was different to the usual lights that they would see.

Softer and gentler. A rippling current of pink.

"It was weaker yesterday. If it continues, it might become like those lights." She shifted her finger, pointing at the bands of colour that painted themselves across the sky.

Had the girl not pointed it out, he would've never noticed something small like that.

But perhaps that's simply the difference between the two of them.

She found joy in staring at this sky night after night.

"Thank you for telling me." He reached out, patting her head.

"I'm not a cat." She creased her brows, shaking her head to push his hand away.

"Sorry sorry, shall we go before you're caught?" He pulled himself up. But the girl refused to budge.

When she was like this, no amount of persuasion was enough.

Letting out a helpless sight, the boy shrugged and climbed down.

If the boss does go looking for her, then he'll have to stall for a bit of time.

The girl continued to stare at the sky.

Only in times like this did she feel free. When she felt that life was worth living.

The wind brushed past her and a soft chime echoed out.

From the chains around her limbs and her neck.

Five.

That's what they called her.

If she had a name, that would be her name. A designation.

The fifth one in the batch. Numbers rather than people.

Their purpose?

Every day they had to wake up and excavate the earth. Whatever the boss wanted to find was of no concern to them. They simply needed to dig with each and every waking moment.

Every morning before the sun rose, they would be forced to march out in groups. Those who didn't fill the quota were beaten.

Those who talked back were beaten.

Those who refused to listen were also beaten.

And if you were unlucky and the boss was in a bad mood, you will be beaten.

They were simply tools.

But for Five... she wanted to be something more.

Maybe... If she could be like one of the stars in the sky...

But even if that was the case...what then? What purpose would she had? What do the stars live for?

Perhaps she loved the stars simply because they're pretty to look at.

Maybe there was nothing out there...

Five slowly pulled back her hand as she let out a soft exhale.

Perhaps the stars in the sky had a crueller fate than hers.

Or maybe... what if they're just like her?

Their freedom removed.

"Ah... are you pitiful as well?" Five mumbled towards the sky.

###

The mines were beyond the edge of the city. They had to walk there since the boss didn't want them disturbing the people inside.

They were disgusting to look at after all.

Clutching her stomach, Five let out a sigh.

Hunger... endless hunger...

She wanted to eat.

But she had to work for it.

She had to keep working so that she could eat.

Five had walked this path enough times now. To the point where she could be blindfolded and she would have no issue.

The path was a simple one. Past the rotting fence, past the ditch where rainwater mixed with the dirt. Beyond the old road where broken pieces of carriages lay half buried in the ground.

The same path each and every day.

The only thing that changed was the depth of this hole.

She hated working. She hated digging. She hated the feeling of exhaustion multiplying with her hunger.

Yet at the end of the day, only given barely enough to continue and never more.

Behind her, six stumbled, falling out of the group.

She crashed into the ground as mud was splattered against the boss's pants.

'Ah... Seems like a new one will replace her now...' Five thought to herself.

At least she gets a moment to rest now. The march stopped because the boss had stopped.

Reaching down, he pulled Six by her hair.

She screamed from the pain as tears streaked down her face.

"Shut it!"

A punch against the face.

Then another.

And another.

Five didn't turn her head to look.

Neither did the others.

If she didn't want a beating, she should've grabbed onto one of them to prevent herself from falling.

But doing so would risk more of them being beaten if they also fell.

"I-I'm s-sorry..." Six gasped through tears and blood.

Her breath cutting short as she struggled to form the sentence.

Gritting his teeth in annoyance, the boss punched Six in the stomach, tossing her against the ground.

Kick after kick.

It seemed like her screams of pain were enough to sooth the boss's anger.

Even when she stopped responding, the boss's kicks continued for what felt like an eternity.

Then, once satisfied, he had everyone march again.

Five finally glanced down.

Six's head was twisted in the wrong way.

Her jaw broken, eyes crushed.

Her hair torn out from the roots as blood, mud and tears mixed into one.

Five only had one thought in her mind.

She wanted Six's clothes. They were only given barely enough. So if she could take it..

But that would hold up the match.

And if she did, she'll be the one on the ground rather than Six.

'What a waste...' Five thought to herself, continuing her march.

###

Deeper in the pit, the air was heavy. Hard to breathe.

Five swung her pick.

Swing, pause, pull.

Swing, pause, pull.

As long as she kept herself to the rhythm, she could get loss in this sensation. No pain in her arms, no ache in her body.

Not even the hunger.

As long as she focused on digging, she could forget about everything else.

The people around her did the same.

They only had one order after all.

To keep digging.

"ARGHH!!!"

A cry of pain, excruciating pain.

Five turned her head.

There was an accident.

Someone had slipped.

A boy's foot slid against loose stone, his balance collapsed and his grip faltered.

He fell forward at the wrong angle and...

The pick was now piercing his stomach.

His hands trembled as blood spilled from his stomach, to the pick, then to the ground beneath them.

He pulled it free but the blood didn't stop.

"H-help!" He choked, fear dominated his mind as he frantically tried to close the wound on his stomach but it was no use.

"P-please! I- I don't want to die!"

Everyone watched.

Like Six, his fate was set in stone.

All of them knew better than to help.

The Boss glanced over before clicking his tongue.

"Keep working!" He shouted as the sound of stones being broken continued.

The boy's screams continued, desperate. But it kept growing weaker as blood pooled beneath him.

Five struck the stone beneath her.

Injuries were a death sentence. Not because they were hard to heal but rather...

It was far cheaper to replace them than it was to heal the injury.

The boss could get someone better, stronger.

Why waste money to save something that can't benefit you no more?

Swing, pause, pull.

Swing, pause, pull.

This emptiness in her heart continued to grow. As though what she was excavating wasn't the earth but her soul.

If the stars continued to shine through the night, then she was to dig through the day.

When she rested, the stars worked.

Then she worked, the stars rested.

In that sense... how were they any different?

Then, as her pick struck against stone, Five felt something change.

Something was... different.

Something beneath her.

A small gap leading towards the cosmic sea. It should be above yet... it opened beneath the earth?

Five reached out. Her fingers brushed against the gap.

In that split second, she saw something else.

A realm different to their own.

A void in space like the sky above...

"Ah... beautiful..."

Chapter 1010: Five's Desires

Five dug. She kept digging.

She wanted to see more of that void. That radiance within her hands reach rather than the skies above.

Rather than the stars.

Something she can touch rather than simply see. This burning desire, this greed in her heart.

It pushed her body forward.

Dig.

Keep digging.

Don't stop.

As if possessed by madness, Five swung her pick without any care for her own stamina.

Even when her skin broke apart, even when her blood seeped into the handle, she kept pushing.

"Five!" The boy shouted from behind. He couldn't reach her with how she was swinging the pick. Doing so would risk his death.

"FIVE!" He shouted once more.

But Five wasn't responding. There was an insane grin on her face as she swung. She didn't blink.

Completely entranced by something the others couldn't see.

With no other choice, the boy timed himself and lunged forward, grabbing the pick before Five could pull it back up.

"Five!" He shouted for a third time as the girl finally turned to look at him.

"Let me dig." Five spoke, surprising him.

She only spoke when it came to the stars, nothing else.

Yet today, she was asking him to let her work.

He glanced at the blood splatters around her.

"You're not making much progress. If you just swing, you won't be able to dig well. Look at your hands." He shook his head.

The key to dealing with Five wasn't to deny her what she wanted to do. But rather to convince her that it wasn't efficient.

The boy glanced at her hands and winced. The flesh was torn horrifically yet she acted as though it didn't bother her.

Finally, Five relented as digging like this wasn't going to be good.

"What's gotten into you? Was there something that you liked?" He asked, giving her back the pick.

It was time for a break along with a chance to help dress her wounds.

"Mnm... You didn't see?" Five asked, her mind lingering on that beautiful fractured piece of space." Five asked, glancing back.

Even now, she could see that tiny gap.

He followed her gaze but saw nothing and shook her head.

Deliberating for a moment, Five opened her mouth.

"A piece of the sky. It's in the earth."

A cryptic answer as the boy realised she must be seeing something he wasn't.

Something worth grabbing her attention.

"I see... Do you want me to help you?" He offered. At the rate she was going, Five will wear herself out before she could excavate whatever it was that she wanted to dig out.

". . ." Five glanced down at her bloodied hands and nodded.

"Please."

"Alright. I'll help you out after we get some bandages. I think if we get Six's clothes and wash them on our way back, it'll be fine. For today, let me mine the rest." He patted her on the head.

Five glanced at the back of the boy who walked on ahead. He's someone who always checked up on her, showed her the sky and now offered her help for the shard he couldn't see.

###

Their routine was solidified after that.

Not that it wasn't before.

They woke up, marched and went deep into the pits to mine.

But this time, Five wasn't doing so just to pass the time or because it was an order from the Boss.

No, this time she was doing it because she wanted to. She had a purpose.

This shimmering shard of a different realm...

She wanted to see more. Feel more.

Know more.

She even made sure she got herself a full nights worth of sleep.

Five would curl up at night, ignoring all the noise and the people around her. Conserved her strength. The time she spent looking up at the sky was instead focused on resting.

So that when the morning came, she could dig with full strength.

This change was naturally noticed by the boy. He always noticed the small details when it came to Five.

Without a word, he adjusted himself to match her focus. Helped dig around her to make things easier. Attracted the boss's focus when he was suspicious about anything.

When Five faltered, he would pick up the pace and help finish her share.

"If you just use your arms, it'll be more exhausting. Lead your body into the motion." He would teach.

Five listened. Everything for the goal of mining this piece of the sky.

The deeper they dug, the more the fragments started to appear.

So much so that even the boy was starting to feel as though something was off in the air around them.

These fragments would appear and disappear at random intervals. But Five was seeing them more often now. The more she saw, the more her eyes shimmered.

If she kept digging... She'll be able to find more.

Right now, they felt like strange visual distortions. Not something she could hold onto.

At least not for the moment.

But her instincts told her that she had to keep digging. If she kept digging, she'll be able to find the piece she so desperately wanted to hold onto.

A piece of the sky just for her.

Her heart pounded against her chest. This rush of excitement.

She wanted to indulge herself in it as much as possible.

The Fragments got bigger.

At first, they were no bigger than a finger, no bigger than her palm. But now, they were bigger than her hand. They pulsed with a soft energy that felt... warm. Soothing even.

They felt comforting, as though it was a piece of herself that she had lost and finally recovered.

The emptiness in her heart that she filled with her love for the sky was finally feeling full.

The boy watched as Five showcased more emotions than ever while digging during this period.

Her joy when a new piece was found.

Her delight when he mentioned he could feel something in the air.

All of it brought her joy like no other. It reached a point where he couldn't help but smile.

To help her even though he couldn't enjoy half of what she was seeing.

Of course, it wasn't just Five who noticed the shift within the pit.

The boss noticed as well.

First was Five's performance.

He noticed that she was getting faster, more eager than the others.

More consistent.

Where most slaves chipped away blindly, she worked with the boy next to her to achieve progress others could only make after working for three days.

This kind of efficiency...

He couldn't lose it.

She showed results the others could only dream about.

He didn't understand why, not that he needed to.

The only thing he needed to know was that Five must be preserved no matter what.

Same with the boy next to her.

"Give her more." He would order, allocating more food so that Five could gain the strength to dig.

An extra portion of food. Cleaner water.

It wasn't kindness. Oh no, far from it. It was... a kind of investment for the future.

If she performed better, she would be fed more.

If she was fed more, she would perform better. A simple cycle of the carrot and the stick.

Naturally, Five didn't care.

As long as she could dig better, that's all that mattered.

Food was food, it didn't matter how much.

Each day, the pit was dug deeper.

And soon, the sounds began to change. The toughness of the material...

It sound that it made.

The pit had changed and no one else seemed to notice.

Except three people.

Five noticed. So did the boy.

They felt it in their bones when they dug. The vibration travelling up their hand.

But the biggest change of all... Was the distortions that they were seeing.

They were much bigger now. Around the side of an arm.

One day, Five touched the edges and felt a spark travel through her body. A numbness that made her eyes glimmer with excitement.

"Look! Look! I can touch it now!" She would exclaim to the boy beside her. He had a look of surprise on his face.

After all...

He could see the distortions as well. Not as clearly as Five.

No.

What he saw was the warping of the air. As though something invisible was pressing against their realm.

As for the third, it was the boss.

Whatever he was looking for seemed to be exactly this because he was urging them to dig faster, to dig harder.

To be more like Five.

He bought more slaves to work, more food and spent money for better picks.

He was now more involved in the work than ever. The boss wasn't satisfied with just sending them down to work and sitting back.

He was now also down in the pits, barking orders while telling people not to both Five.

She was his treasured worker right now. Distracting her was not something he tolerated.

*CLANG!!!

A sharp echo like no other rippled through the pit.

Everyone looked over.

Five dug into something others haven't.

*CLANG!!!

She hit again.

The feed back caused her to drop the pick as the metal couldn't pierce the ground no matter how hard she hit.

The boy moved first. The thing they hit wasn't stone. He pulled the debris aside and brushed it with his sleeve.

The two wasn't sure what they were looking at.

A patch of black material, glossy and reflective like no other. Cool to the touch and strangely...

It radiated the same feeling as the distortions that Five had been touching.

This material... It must've come from that realm.