

Abyssal A 1021

Chapter 1021: Hayil's Suffering

*CLANG!!!

Ria stumbled back as sweat dripped down her face.

Rusted weapons rushed through the air as she twirled the blade in hand, deflecting two before ducking under the third.

There was something strange about these weapons.

They couldn't be blocked at all. If she tried to stop them head on, they would penetrate any kind of defence she pulled up.

But deflection was still possible.

Then there was the matter of not being able to step away from the angel.

Two authorities that the angel could access yet...

'They don't activate simultaneously. If one is activated, the other disappears.' Ria analysed, lunging forward with a flicker of lightning.

Her weapon stabbed toward Hayil who wrapped a chain around Ria's hand in an attempt to restrain her.

Despite the madness in her eyes, her combat sense was off the charts!

*KSH!!!

Lightning crashed down from above as Ria quickly swapped her location, escaping the chains.

Even though the contact was brief, Ria could feel some of her energy being pulled away.

Not only that, but the wound she had suffered was beginning to fester.

If this fight continued...

Ria exhaled through her nose.

Authorities of War and Famine.

She couldn't help but recall the prayer that Astrelya had given her before stepping in here. The one that exiled her from the Eclipse.

For the Eclipse that revels in chaos. For the one who smiles in calamity.

Let her blade find its path. Let her strike carry the weight of her will. When hunger gnaws at her bones, when the world strips her bare and leaves nothing behind, let her endure.

Let her cling to life with bloodied hands and broken bones.

There were hints to Hayil's power within this prayer.

The blade that finds its path, the weight of her will.

It clearly reflected the authority that made it impossible for Hayil's strikes to be dodged.

Then what about Famine? The hunger that gnaws at the bones...

'That's probably the cause of me leaking energy.' Ria flickered from her spot as lightning webbed out from her feet. Her form flickered across the arena in a zigzag as the authority preventing her retreat was activated.

'Then what about endurance?' She frowned, unleashing slashes against Hayil's body.

In response, Hayil covered herself with her wings, causing the slashes to bounce off.

Ria's sword was thrown back, her guard was open.

Gritting her teeth, she braced herself as the wings slammed into her body, throwing her across the arena.

Ria realised that Hayil must have figured out that her defences were rather low. Especially considering the fact that she was starting to use the authority that prevented retreat more and more.

Quickly flipping herself in the air, Ria prepared for the follow up attack yet...

There was none.

Hayil simply stood in place as one hand clutched her head.

Her lips were moving, murmuring in a hushed tone.

"You always liked the rain... Right... It cleansed the blood and made things feel clean. Do you remember?" Hayil creased her brows before her face warped in fury once more.

"Enris... Enris!!!"

But that fury quickly turned to laughter as blood tears rolled down her face.

"You gave up on me. Tossed me aside... Why did you keep me alive?" She stumbled back, unable to contain the laughter.

"I was your fragment. The first of many. I failed but... you didn't abandon me... You... didn't?"

Hayil paused.

"You did! Didn't. DID!!! You left me to rot!!!" She started slashing at the air around her.

"Then why do I live? I let me live. No... yes?"

"Ahh... ARGHHH!!!" A mournful cry slowly transformed into one of rage as red and gold energy enveloped her body.

The world around them started to tremble as a blur of red appeared in front of Ria.

"!!!"

Quickly stabbing her blade into the ground, a wall of lightning erupted around her.

"Was my effort in vain?" Hayil's voice echoed out as her hands clawed through the energy. Even though her flesh burned, strange black energy filtered through her veins as her flesh started to regrow.

Charred yet continuously writhing around the wound as Hayil breached the wall.

"It was you... You gave me to that mad man. Doomed me to this fate.

"Look at what you've done!!!" She screamed, tearing the wall in half.

Wings started to grow like malignant tumours on her back as her flesh bulged and burst apart. Her regeneration fixing her body yet her form continuously mutated, sending her into a cycle of destruction and repair.

"ARGHH!!!"

Ria took this chance to jump back as Hayil's eyes snapped toward her.

"Have you come to take me back to Enris? I don't want to go!"

Her wings unfurled, unravelling into a mutated grotesque display as feathers ripped themselves free and surged toward Ria.

Quickly breaking her sword and scattering the fragments of lightning, Ria teleported repeatedly to dodge the strikes.

*CRACK!!!

Hayil started ripping out the wings one by one, her fingers digging into the base. With a sickening wet tear, she tore the first one free. Blood splattered against the ground as her expression twisted in pain.

She reached for the second, then the third.

One by one, she ripped them out, tossing the wings away while her body continuously tried to repair itself. The regeneration surpassing the damage she was causing.

"You did this to me!!!"

Pulling her blade back, blood converged toward her location as three forms of energy swirled in her arm.

Ria recognised it.

A familiar sensation.

An amalgamation of Abyssal, Holy and Eldritch!

Ria's eyes widened.

'F*ck! This isn't mini Enris, it's mini Alice disguising as Enris!'

"ARGH!!!" Unsheathing her blade, Hayil released a giant arc of raw destructive crimson energy. One that felt as though it would swallow the entire space.

With no other choice, Ria retrieved the nodes she had hidden throughout the battlefield, filled to the brim with energy, and gathered it into her own body. She had done this in preparation for a trap but...

If she couldn't offset the destructive force of this strike, she would die!!!

Lifting her hand, a giant blade of lightning formed. She slashed vertically as the edges collided, shattering the space upon impact as cracks splintered across Ria's arm.

Clenching her teeth, Ria held back a scream and focused her power, surpassing the slash before her.

***BANG!!!**

As the attacks detonated, Ria's body fell toward the ground as the right side of her was burnt from the overload of lightning coursing through her vessel.

Slamming into the ground, she coughed up a mouthful of blood and glared at Hayil, who was struggling to keep up with her own regeneration.

To constantly tear apart pieces of herself so that she didn't become a giant mutated mound of flesh.

This was what Alice could have become.

The failure that came before, kept alive only because of Enris.

This was the Endurance that Astrelya had spoken about. To endure the pain of constant regeneration even though the body was already fixed.

A pitiful fate.

"Let her cling to life with bloodied hands and broken bones, huh?" Ria mumbled with a pitying smile. Forcing herself to stand up, she took a deep breath.

What sounded like a blessing was actually a curse for Hayil.

A curse to live no matter the torment she was facing.

To live as a failed experiment.

How long had she waited for liberation?

Then what about the last part of Astrelya's prayer? Was it because she knew what Hayil had become?

Ria resolved herself as she took a step toward Hayil.

A blade manifested in her left arm while Hayil collapsed on one knee, the weight of countless wings bearing down on her body.

The power of Famine spread outward as Hayil corrupted her own wings, forcing them to rot and fall off. Flesh splattering against the ground while bone cracked and withered.

Her bloodied tears turning black as tar.

From the sludge of her own rotting flesh, Hayil crawled out with hatred burning in her eyes.

Flicking her wrist, two twisted barbed blades appeared as she tightened her grip around the handles. Spikes digging into her palms as her regeneration fused, nay, assimilated flesh and metal together.

Rusted weapons continuously stabbed and slashed from her own back. Spear tips piercing through her flesh while spiked chains dragged across her legs.

An existence stuck in perpetual battle the moment it recognised danger. A being who couldn't control her own regeneration until all life around her had perished.

Eldritch forces tainting, mutating and consuming her body.

Only in the ruins of Ayr could this be suppressed by the lingering presence of the Goddess.

Yet even so... Even when suppressed, she continued to suffer a life of torment.

She had been abandoned by Enris. Left to rot until she found worth in her existence.

So until then...

There was only one thing she could do.

Suffer.

Ria stared at the crying woman once more with pity. This was no longer a hunt. This was purification. A cleansing in order to save the life in front of her.

And the only salvation she could find would be in death.

"May madness never stain your mind.

"May corruption never run through your veins."

Ria recited the prayer that Astrelya had given her before stepping into this tower. But one line stood out to her. What Astrelya had said after her marks were cleansed.

"Didn't you say you wanted to wipe out the Eclipse? I've given you the foundations of a weapon. Whether or not you can make it a reality is up to you."

Only now, after seeing everything Hayil had become, did Ria understand what Astrelya had given her.

It wasn't just a ritual to cleanse the markings. With it came a gift.

"May your actions erase the mark of the Eclipse upon this land." Ria spoke the final line.

*BANG!!!

A burst of energy erupted from Ria's body as the roars of thunder echoed through the air.

With a flash of light, black and white lightning crashed down upon her as her blade shifted.

A blessing of purification specifically targeted at Enris.

One that would erase the blessing of endurance placed upon Hayil and kill her for good.

Ria aimed her blade.

"May you find peace in death."

Chapter 1022: Unloved

The first impression of this world.

A bad fall. A sudden pain. The shock of something going wrong.

These fears cling long after the details have faded. The context, the location. All you remember is the action that led up to that fear. It's how most learn.

Later in life, when they look back at that memory and laugh, they can't help but wonder: why were they so afraid in the first place? Something so... meagre had embedded itself so deeply, that after all these years, it refuses to fade away.

Enris.

She wasn't born a child. No... she lacked the time needed for a childhood. She simply came into existence as an artificial being.

Though at that time, Hayil didn't know the truth.

There was no cruelty in her expression. No anger, no disgust. But there was also a lack of warmth. No sense of tenderness toward the arrival of new life. She simply watched.

Whether or not she was worth the effort of keeping around.

Her motion was clumsy, awkward. A 'soul' still getting used to her body.

She smiled at the fragile being reaching out toward the god, despite not knowing her nature as one who revels in chaos.

was of rejection.

Instead of love, Enris gave Hayil only one thing.

It wasn't a lesson. It wasn't wisdom. Not the kind passed down from parent to child.

As an empty state, survival was deeply ingrained into her mind.

But looking back at it now...

The request for survival, she had followed it faithfully.

She had not known who he was at first. He was simply someone her 'parent' had made an agreement with.

She would be placed under his 'care' for the time being. Nyer would look after her for a while, and Enris would come back for her.

Nyer was not a kind man. He didn't beat around the bush.

Needles were arranged around her, carefully inserted into her body.

She was simply... an experiment.

Pain flooded her mind, and her body jerked. Straps held her in place, but they did little to dull the torture.

Abyss blood entered her veins. It felt... alive.

Then there was the crown.

That burning white light overhead while her body was mutilated and abused.

But that was only the beginning of her pain.

After the operation, her hell had truly begun.

These... 'things' moved. Crawling, wriggling, tiny things that swam through her body. Countless restless worms chewing and digging through her from the inside out. She could feel them everywhere.

They consumed everything, rebuilding her body into something... disgusting.

Sleep never came. Every time she teetered on the edge of relief, the writhing would intensify.

They wanted her to stay awake through the torment.

That was what Enris wanted her to do. To survive this ordeal.

She cried out for help, for forgiveness. For the pain to stop.

Like a curse, her words echoed ceaselessly in her mind.

She'll be given praise...

So Hayil endured.

How long did the cycle last?

The operating table, where new flesh would be grafted. The burning sensation spreading through her veins like lava being poured into her body.

One of these days, she'll be back.

Endure and come back stronger than ever.

That was the order. For her to survive and return.

Return.

Return.

Enris... Enris... Enris... Enris... Enris, Enris, ENRIS, ENRIS ENRISENRISENRISENRIIS!!!

"We'll stop here," Nyer said.

"There's no need for us to continue. I suppose I should congratulate you in the end." Nyer placed down his scalpel.

Hayil paused.

She survived.

Yet Nyer simply stared at her with pity in his eyes.

She was 'fixed' in a sense. Her wounds closed, scars healed. A new vial was injected into her, one that seemed to temporarily calm the writhing mass within her body.

She gave Nyer a quick glance before turning to Hayil.

She was barely able to lift her head, but did so anyway. An excited smile on her face. Eyes begging for validation, for recognition. For her parent to love her back.

She had survived and returned, just as the God had ordered.

Her hands trembled. Her arms reached out, weaker than the first day she was born, yet the intent was the same.

Enris glanced down at this small being, observing her body. The changes within. The things squirming in her flesh.

Hayil's smile faltered for a moment, but she quickly deluded herself. Maybe Enris wanted her to prove herself. To make the journey without assistance. To reach out and jump into her arms like a child learning how to walk.

Enris turned to Nyer.

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She tilted her head back before looking at the girl holding the black and white lightning.

Ria creased her brow before shaking her head.

". . . I see." Hayil closed her eyes. "You are truly blessed."

"I know. And I... I hope you find someone better in your next life."

"I doubt it."

Cracks of light formed across her skin, yet this was the most peaceful she felt in all her years alive, if you could even call it that.

Tears began to fall once more as she cried like a child who didn't know what they did wrong.

Her words were cut off as her body shattered into pieces.

Chapter 1023: Ria's Title

Standing in the white Void, Ria was silent as she stared at the empty space where Hayil was a moment ago.

The angel abandoned by her creator.

All she felt for the girl was pity. Pity that Enris couldn't even show her a fraction of love at the end. Even going as far as calling her a disgusting thing.

As though she and Nyer weren't the root cause of Hayil's suffering.

"Hayil's story is a sad one. But one of many. How many suffer a similar fate to her in this world? Children being abandoned. People betrayed by the world around them, forced to step onto a path of destruction, never given a chance to do something 'good'." A voice echoed out as Ria exhaled slowly and turned around.

The Will of the Abyss.

A grin wide on his face.

"One of many but that doesn't stop me from sympathising with her plight." Ria frowned.

"I never said you weren't allowed to. I'm simply saying you shouldn't be so hung up on one case." The Will chuckled.

"How else are you supposed to judge and cleanse the world if a single case like this brings you to your knees? Are you even prepared for all of the world's evils?"

Ria clenched her fist.

"What's the point of trying to judge humans when you're unfeeling like a machine? A weapon? What difference if both render judgment without hesitation?"

The Will smirked in amusement.

"Perhaps you're right. But some cases require the heart to be closed off. Some don't deserve sympathy, and sometimes, empathy is the cruellest choice of all.

"What will you do when the person you forgive proceeds to slaughter millions? What if, in an act of retaliation, someone you forgive turns around and kills someone you love?" The Will leaned forward with a laugh.

"What then? Or will you put safety nets in place to stop them from doing so? Will you monitor them? To make sure they do good?" He asked.

"Killing someone doesn't mean closing my heart. I can empathise with their suffering while still handing down judgement." Ria shook her head yet the Will seemed unconvinced.

"Can you, though? Let me give you a harder question then." He licked his lips.

"What if the person you trusted betrayed that trust? What if... Alice or Luke were to betray you? When the day comes where you have to judge your friends for their crime?" He cackled.

"Would you keep an open heart or would you judge them impartially? Can you promise you won't be biased?"

Ria immediately punched toward the Will as he stepped to the side, dodging the strike.

"Don't mock me. I trust that Alice and Luke will not stoop to such a level. But in the case they do, I will not let friendship blind me. Laws must be upheld. If the time comes when I have to judge them, I will do so with fairness."

She could only say this because she understood both Alice and Luke. She held them to a higher standard than the others.

Even though Alice was wilful, she didn't wish harm for the world. Or else, someone like her could just splatter her blood everywhere without care and not clean up after herself. To let the world mutate in her wake.

Yet she doesn't.

She wishes for the world to remain intact as she is just a simple girl at heart. A simple mead loving girl.

And as for Luke... She holds him to a higher standard than even Alice.

As the one who's accompanied her the longest, as the one by her side.

If that day truly comes, then she will judge them fairly and bear the punishment with them.

To be friends is not to turn a blind eye to their crimes. It is to stand beside them and face the consequences together. To take part in their fall so you can pull them back up. To drag them onto the right path, no matter what.

That's what being friends meant to Ria.

*Clap

The Will clapped his hands before avoiding the next strike.

"How admirable. But I am not here to lecture you on your beliefs. What I am here to do, is to judge what kind of title you are worthy of."

Snapping his finger, thunder echoed out in the white realm as dark clouds loomed overhead.

Energy surged and Ria felt an overwhelming amount of energy flow through her body.

Cracks splintered across her skin as her flesh burned.

"You may have lost the mark of the Eclipse but its divine authority continues to flow through your body. With that, it shall become the foundation of your power.

"However..." The Will narrowed his eyes.

With a flick of his finger, lightning crashed down on Ria's body, splitting her flesh as blood evaporated. She crashed down on her knees, the pressure making it impossible for her to stand up.

"I think binding you by the 'logic' of the Abyss is far too... primitive for someone of your desires. I think greed such as yours go far beyond."

Ria clenched her teeth.

Even if she can't stand, even if she can't walk, she can still look up in defiance.

Her eyes burned as she glared at the Will.

"What are you aiming for? Skulking around in the background. A rat." She squeezed out.

The Will smiled, flicking his finger. Another wave of lightning crashed down as Ria let out a scream of pain.

"What need is there for a pawn to understand the player's actions? They direct and you obey. That is the hierarchy between us. You follow what you believe to be your 'will', unaware that the course of fate has already been laid out before you."

"However..." He spread out his arms.

"As I lay out the pieces upon the chessboard, there will come a day when the vessel is complete. When the rules of heaven are overturned. And when that happens, I will be sitting there. At the front row seats."

Reaching out, he grabbed Ria by the head as a wide grin appeared on his face.

Strange black fragments started to manifest in shards, converging around his wrists and neck yet the Will simply snapped his finger, destroying them.

"I don't believe I'm breaking any rules now am I? Constructing a title and enhancing authority based on what they already got. Or... Don't tell me..." The Will cackled as a single horizontal line appeared on the right side of his face.

"Are you getting scared?" He opened one eye, glaring at the invisible presence beyond the realm.

"Ha!- HAHA!!! Are you finally feeling fear? Are you even capable of such emotion? Oh but don't start complaining now. YOU set the rules. YOU made this board. Don't start b*tching just because the players figured everything out." The Will created a portal beneath Ria and let go, allowing her to fall into a realm of storms and lightning tribulations.

"Now just keep watching by the side. Because we're approaching that fated moment and things are quickly spiralling out of control." The Will closed his eye before shaking off the fragment that tried its best to cling on.

Just as he turned around, a pillar of lightning tore through the realm.

The Will couldn't help but pause as he slowly turned around.

There, connecting the heaven and earth of this endless space of white, was a torrent of lightning energy crashing against anything and everything. It carved deep cavities where the realm collapsed under the pressure as the Will couldn't help but let out a slight laugh.

Clearly surprised by what he was witnessing.

From that pillar, a silhouette slowly emerged as Ria stepped out.

Lightning clung onto her body, snapping at her yet she was unfazed.

Her breathing was uneven, burn marks traced her skin. Her flesh was stitching itself back together.

A tenacity like no other. An aspect of Famine now repurposed into something else entirely. It didn't deprave, it endured.

Her eyes burned with fury. Not the wild uncontrollable berserker like wrath but rather something more controlled. A storm waiting to be unleashed.

"Well well well... Would you look at that." The Will was clearly impressed.

This was the first time someone had crawled their way back up personally after he sent them to be remoulded into a vessel befitting their title.

Instead, Ria was reconstructing herself with the new authority manually. She wasn't letting the realm do the work. She took over.

"I suppose I should say congratulations. How does it feel? Breaching the threshold into Lordship?" The Will smirked as Ria took a deep breath.

She glanced down at her hands. At the flesh being reconstructed then tempered under this lightning.

She could feel a foreign- No... a new power floating through her body, waiting to be summoned.

Authority.

"I must say... I expected you to reject the titles I would offer but not so soon. You didn't even see all of the options available." He shook his head helplessly.

Ria clicked her tongue.

"Was there even a choice? Everything was pointed toward one thing."

". . ." His grin widened.

He couldn't play the fool in front of this girl it seems.

"Perhaps. Since that's the case, I must congratulate you on stepping into your role upon this play." The Will clapped his hand once more.

Snapping his fingers, the endless white of the realm faded away as stellar radiance filled the skies.

And from Ria's shadow, the glass like floor rippled outward as an icon slowly took form.

"I welcome a new authority onto this world." The Will bowed slightly, a respectful gesture.

The icon solidified, Ria's vessel was complete and she fully ascended into Lordship.

"I welcome...

"The Scales of Heaven."

Chapter 1024: The Mask That Ascended

Slowly opening her eyes, Ria glanced at the world around her.

Having attained Lordship, her perception of the world had... changed.

Like getting glasses after seeing the world blurred all this time, this sense of clarity was new for her. It overwhelmed her mind yet she couldn't let it show.

Not now. For there is a burning question on her mind.

Standing in the middle of the tower, chains still scattered around them, she slowly turned around toward Astrelya who looked at her with surprise evident in her eyes.

"My my... To think you'd transform the authority in such a manner. Seems like you left a rather good impression on the Will." She chuckled.

Ria felt like a rabid ball of lightning before. But after achieving Lordship, that feeling transformed into a silent raging storm. You never know when the lightning will strike and each passing second leaves you dreading the moment she strikes.

Ria creased her brows before exhaling slowly.

A golden glow radiated from her eyes as she clicked her tongue.

"I knew it." She mumbled in a mix of disgust and annoyance.

"I was wondering how the hell someone like you can even exile me from the Cult. How someone can tamper with Enris's markings and why Hayil would scream Enris the moment she saw you." Ria walked toward Astrelya who rested lazily on her cloud.

Astrelya narrowed her eyes, the smile was kept on her face.

"Ohya? And what kind of conclusion did you come to? Don't tell me... you want to fight?" Astrelya's aura erupted, clashing with Ria.

Yet much to Astrelya's disappointment, Ria didn't attack.

Even when entering the optimal range of attack, she didn't lash out.

All she did was stare at the Lord of Stars.

"If Hayil was considered a failure, then I suppose I should call you a success? Hayil had a trace of Enris's authority yes. But you... You hold more than just a trace.

"It'll be no exaggeration to say what you hold is almost equal to the original divinity. So let me ask you this. You're not Alice. If you were truly a success, Nyer wouldn't have created Alice. What are you?"

"I am who I've always been. Astrelya, Lord of Star-"

Before she could finish, Ria crossed the final gap and stared her in the eyes. Without saying anything else, she punched up and Astrelya tried to lean back.

Authority of War!

Her body was frozen and afterimages manifested around Ria's fist.

She was going for the kill!

Astrelya's grin widened.

Snapping her finger, the authority was dispelled momentarily as she flipped back, avoiding the hit.

Just as she looked up, Ria was already gone.

A flash of lightning and she appeared behind Astrelya.

"Alright, let's give your new powers a taste shall we?" Astrelya laughed, swiping with her finger as constellations appeared between them.

Ria ignored it as a net of lightning clashed against the motes of light. Both sides equalising as she lunged through the smoke.

Lightning transformed into a spear overlaying her arm as magnetic coils manifested in front of her jab.

*BANG!!!

Punching forward, the attack accelerated in the blink of an eye, splitting the tower in half while Astrelya managed to redirect it to the side.

Ria instantly swapped position, creating a blade and slashed down.

Raikiri!

*CLANG!!!

Rusted weapons parried Ria's strike, both authorities clashing as two unstoppable objects crashed against one another head on.

The weapons were forcefully redirected, neither gaining an advantage.

Twisting her body, Ria kicked toward Astrelya who parried her knee.

Sliding back, she traced a few constellations in the sky as a pillar of light erupted around Ria.

Then, within that light, a gap was formed.

Shinsei Raikiri!

A lethal jab that Astrelya narrowly dodged by tilting her head. A single line of red appeared on her cheek as her grin widened.

Excitement burned in her eyes as Astrelya created a mote of light in front of her before crushing it.

Resonance!

Light burst out from Astrelya's body, drowning the tower in radiance as constellations spiralled around her. Her hair shifted to that of a golden blonde that shimmered with starlight.

Her eyes bound by white bandages etched with Sigils and beneath the bandage, golden tears streamed down her cheeks.

Unfurling behind her, three pairs of wings spread outward.

As for her outfit, a celestial gown appeared, woven from white and gold threads.

Then, above her head, a crown of stars shattered to form spears of light.

Astrelya flew into the air.

"I am the light at the end of all things." She chanted as a ritual began.

Alice was able to block this strike when she was at five Sigils. As a Lord, what level of power would Ria show her?

"I am the memory of the first dawn.

"I am the star that illuminates the all consuming darkness."

Around them, the tower began to change as it transformed into a realm that benefitted Astrelya.

Ria glanced up. There was no nervousness in her expression. Just patience as she allowed Astrelya to finish her ritual.

After a brief pause, Astrelya opened her palms and a single spark manifested from the coalescence of energy.

A spark so bright it flooded the realm with light.

'Show me. Show me what you're capable of.'

Astrelya allowed the spark to fall.

Ria cracked her neck and took a single step.

In that moment, energy rippled outward, disrupting her realm.

Snapping her finger, the star was swallowed with a torrent of lightning that crushed and contained the strike before it could destroy anything.

"Eh?" Astrelya blinked, confusion filled her mind.

She had imbued her strike with hints of her authority, to make it impossible to block.

Rightfully, it should've detonated without issue unless Ria countered with a force equal to it.

Yet...

It was contained without problem? Her attack? Contained?

"There are more ways of using authority than just making attacks unblockable." Ria spoke, walking toward Astrelya slowly while massaging her wrist.

In order to block her attack, Ria had actually applied two aspects of War's authority in her lightning.

First was the authority that made her attack unblockable. It'll create a force equal to Astrelya's attack that'll counter the detonation. However, leaving it as it is would also just destroy their surroundings.

This is where the second authority came in. To make it impossible for retreat.

She knew that Astrelya's output was greater than hers at this moment. Even if Ria was confident, she wasn't stupid.

Then there's also her theorised true identity. If her suspicions are true, she'll never beat her in a head on confrontation. Not now.

So by combining both the unblockable attack and denying retreat, an immovable wall with increased durability was formed. Then all that's left to seal the deal was the authority of famine.

What seemed to be a simple counter was actually the manipulation of three authorities in order to completely shut down Astrelya's attack.

"Why don't we drop the bullsh*t now Astrelya. I'm grateful for everything you've done for me. Especially erasing the mark. However..." Ria glared before sighing.

"Did you simply bring me here to clean up after everything you've done, or was it actually because you wanted to help me? Enris."

Astrelya hovered in the air for a moment before slowly walking towards the ground, one step at a time.

Little by little, her Resonance was stripped away until she was back in her base form.

"Nyer creates some fine works. Discovered loopholes that many can't even imagine. Violations of the fundamental rules of the Abyss." Astrelya smiled.

"Sigils are usually unique to the individual. Even if you make extra bodies, they either cannot get bounties or their powers reflect yours.

"When you call me Enris, it's not exactly correct. But it's not exactly wrong either." Astrelya took another step as the full aura of the Eclipse appeared around her body.

"I suppose I should reintroduce myself."

"One of the Angels belonging to the Eclipse, the largest fragment of Enris' masks. Astrelya, the mask that ascended to Lordship." Astrelya gave Ria a courteous bow.

"What do you mean by not correct but not wrong either? Are you or are you not Enris?" Ria creased her brows.

"Does your shadow count as you? I am attached to Enris. I reflect her actions but I don't share her thoughts. I am part of her yet I cannot be considered to be her. Does that make my position clear?"

Ria paused for a second before nodding.

"What do you plan to do now? I'm sure you should understand that until everything is resolved, I won't be giving you nor Enris the fight you desire. Not when sh*t is this bad."

Now that she's ascended to Lordship, she needed to get out of the Abyss as soon as possible. She needed to reconvene with the others.

"I'm aware. If I couldn't forcefully make you rely on the Eclipse, what made you think I believed you would fight me properly?" Astrelya yawned, throwing herself onto a cloud.

"However, that's only if I try to force you to fight. You told me the answer yourself didn't you?" She chuckled, causing Ria to throw.

"By now, the real 'me', Enris, has probably made contact with Alice already. While we've been down in the Abyss, Nyer has made large movements on the surface, preparing for Velouria's resurrection. So for the time being, I believe we are allies."

Flipping her body on the cloud, she did a lazy stretch along with a yawn before turning to Ria.

"So how about it? Care to ally with the God that caused you so much misery?" Astrelya chuckled, reaching out with her hand.

Ria stared at the Lord in silence.

Contemplated the possibly.

And finally, she reached out and shook Astrelya's hand.

Chapter 1025: Elven History

Slowly opening her eyes, Alice gave her body a stretch as she glanced around her.

Currently, she was sitting on a roof as Alyss and Cayla were sorting out another task for her.

Just as she was about to say something, she paused and glanced down.

Her eyes widened, and she immediately changed her outfit.

She chose a black turtleneck shirt with extra-large, baggy sleeves that reached her knees, a sleeveless white vest over the shirt, and a skirt.

She paired it with a pair of black stockings and knee-high boots.

'Can we please not have me run around in something basically akin to underwear?' Alice grumbled while Alyss simply shrugged.

'I wouldn't go that far. It's still clothing, after all.'

'You realised that I would be more covered up with underwear compared to what you were wearing, right?' Alice's smile twitched.

Letting out a sigh, she looked up at the wound in the sky.

'I did what you asked. It's using a portion of Eldritch energy, but... it's not connected to anything. I tried cutting the link off from any outside interference using Destruction Point and the golden chains.' Alyss turned serious.

[Based on what we found out in the time you were gone, it seems like the 'host' of this Eldritch energy isn't an Outer God in the traditional sense.]

'Wait, so... an Outer God "isn't" connected to this?' Alice turned with a confused look on her face.

[Not really. The host of this energy seemed to have come from this world. Either Nyer is using a loophole to avoid Velouria's barrier or...] Cayla paused for a moment. [Or he's found a way to create an Outer God inside the realm.]

'That's... pretty bad news, right?'

[Take a look at the sky. It's already starting to spread after being restrained by Faust and even through the golden chain's power. Since it's anchored down in this world, getting rid of it is rather... difficult.] Cayla scratched her hair.

She knew that Nyer was insane, but surely this was too much even for him.

Why would he invite calamity into their world by creating an Outer God here? Was it to experiment for Alice?

She does have Eldritch energy in her veins, but even so... the risks were far too high compared to the reward.

Simply extracting samples from elsewhere and using them would have been sufficient. There was no need for him to go this far.

Alice folded her arms.

'Could we maybe-'

[Absolutely not. If you try to cleanse that thing, it's like trying to fit a dragon into a purse. Not possible.] Cayla shut the idea down immediately.

'I mean, surely we have to do something, right? We can't just let these things spread without doing anything.' Alice frowned.

'Unfortunately, we're not equipped to deal with realm-level dangers like this. You have to leave it to someone else.' Alyss shook her head.

Glancing up at the sky one more time, Alice sighed and nodded.

'Fine. But surely we can help, even if it's just slightly. I have Eldritch energy in my blood, right? If we give it to Elias and Faust, they should be able to figure something out.'

[Already tested it out. There's a stark difference between the Eldritch energy in your body and the one polluting the air above us. The scale is simply too different, same with the "nature".] Cayla shook her head.

[To put it into perspective, trying to use your blood to decode the thing above us is like learning how to stab someone with a spear in order to figure out how to shoot a bow. They're both weapons, in this case Eldritch energy, but the fundamental usage and nature are too different for there to be a suitable connection.]

Alice opened her mouth, wanting to offer a new idea before backing down.

She clenched her fist, annoyed by the fact that she couldn't do anything about it for now.

[It's not like we're completely helpless in this matter, however. We've already asked Faust to send a message to Rosalyn's brother. With how long he's been around, he's bound to know something. And that serves two purposes for us.]

[First, if he's able to reply, then that means this isn't something that spoils the future. The black chains won't be holding him back. Second, if he isn't able to reply, then this energy plays a major part in Nyer's plans to resurrect Velouria. It will give us a good starting point.] Cayla held up two fingers.

[After all, we're not sure if this energy is just used for the expansion of the Nightmare Realm or something else. We just have to wait.]

Waiting. How simple, yet at the same time nerve-wracking.

'Alright. We still have a few days before Suyin is done with her experiments, after all.' Alice sighed.

Glancing up at the sky for the last time, she crouched down before jumping away.

###

Making her way to an inn that Renna recommended, she spotted the Lord drinking in the distance. She leaned against a railing while overlooking the city.

"Quite the drinking spot you got here. Thought you were going to drink inside the inn rather than out here." Alice took the initiative as she jumped up, landing next to Renna, who shrugged and offered Alice a bottle.

"Can't. The moment I step into that tavern, everyone gets so on guard. I'm a Lord, after all." Renna chuckled with a slightly bitter smile.

"So? What does it matter when everyone is there for a drink? You're still a person, after all." Alice took a sip.

"Easy for you to say. You can fight me on an even playing field. Imagine if someone far stronger than you sat in the same bar. Can you still drink casually?"

Alice thought about it for a moment. Considering her... conversations with Enris, probably.

"Actually, scratch that, don't tell me. The look on your face is already telling me everything I need to know. Jeez." Renna groaned.

If Alice was seriously contemplating the answer, then there must have been more than one case.

Alice stuck out her tongue.

"You're such an anomaly, you know that, right?" Renna spoke, letting out a deep exhale.

"I'm aware."

"No, you don't. I've only met you for a short while, but you've already violated everything I know about this world." Renna shook her head.

"Most people would kill to get power like yours, but..." She paused, glancing at the split-haired girl. "To you, it feels more like a means to an end. A burden, if anything. You just look so... sick of things."

Alice's finger twitched.

"How so?"

"Just a feeling. I'm not saying you don't like power. You're not stupid enough to think power isn't needed. With a world like ours, where you can die randomly at a moment's notice, power is the only thing keeping us safe. You just don't like the way things are.

"Those thoughts aren't necessarily wrong, since you're not the only one who thinks like that. The anomaly comes from the scenario. Most people think that because they're weak. They've been limited in one way or another, finding this world unfair.

"But those who have reached the 'top', Hunters with more than five Sigils and Lords, they don't think that way." Renna turned to Alice.

"Despite being more powerful than any of them, even having the ability to copy authority, you still view things from the perspective of someone weak. You don't like the natural hierarchy, do you?"

Alice let out a slight laugh.

"No. No, I do not. I dislike it a lot. It's too much power given to any individual. Especially when happiness can be taken away at a moment's notice.

"How many people has Nyer killed for his own desires? How many have I killed? The collateral damage. Those out for revenge, those blinded by rage. Those caught in the circumstances. This power... it's a poison. Necessary only because the world is already screwed up due to the presence of this power. It blinds people."

Renna turned around and leaned against the fence. Tilting her head back, she let out a loud laugh that echoed through the area.

"You're drunk." Alice smiled helplessly.

"I'm just relaxed." Renna shrugged.

"You're right, though. Power does blind people. Have I ever told you why I wanted to become a Lord in the first place? To serve under the King?" Renna asked with a sad smile.

"Nope. We just talked about drinks the first night." Alice shook her head.

"Tsk, your memory is good for someone who drank so much." Renna raised an eyebrow before letting out a deep sigh.

"I lost my parents when I was young. As Elves, we have an inherent compatibility with Abyssal powers since it flows in our veins. We're mutations, to put it bluntly. And that makes us precious in a time where there's so much uncertainty about Abyss Blood.

"Can you believe it? Some dipshit spread the rumour that drinking elven blood makes you more resistant to Abyss Blood. What evidence? It's just a bunch of assumptions." Renna twisted her expression into one of anger.

"Yet that assumption is what caused them to hunt us down like fucking cattle. Do you know how we survived?" She turned to Alice.

Alice shook her head. The history of the elves was unknown to her, after all.

"We had to enslave ourselves to Extalia. It's not passed down to the younger generation since it's shameful, after all. But we had to give up our free will and rights in order to survive as a species. And even then, we were still hunted whenever we were discovered to be alone.

"My parents died saving me. They bought enough time for me to be saved by the knights. I couldn't even get revenge, you know?" Renna closed her eyes.

"I didn't see their corpses. The ones who killed my parents might still be alive out there. Somewhere."

Biting her lip, Renna swung her head back and drank the entire bottle in one go.

"This kind of history isn't unique. It doesn't matter if you're an elf or not." She smiled bitterly.

"One way or another, everyone gets pushed onto the path of pursuing power."

Chapter 1026: Drinking Buddy

"After my parents died, it took a long time for me to get back on my feet. I spent the days sitting in my room, sobbing about what had happened. I hoped it was all just a bad dream." Renna laughed, taking another mouthful of alcohol.

"Weeks I spent in that room. I couldn't tell night from day. Time just... it all just blurred together. You go through the motions until your body is exhausted, you know?" She sighed as Alice nodded her head.

She had the same feeling trapped in the Zenia prison. Those days of monotony. When the thought of giving up clawed against her heart night after night.

Yet even as she wanted to give up, the collar denied her fate.

Without knowing, her fingers drifted up to her neck.

Her collar was gone but...

A small part of her still felt trapped in that tiny room, like an invisible leash wrapped around her neck.

Maybe one day, she could forget those days and step forward without care. Maybe when the Zenia family disappears, she can truly let go of her anger and hatred.

"When we made the agreement to enslave the race, we had to prepare carefully and move to Extalia. We had to abandon our old home, burn down our memories.

"The pain of having to leave fuelled our desire to get strong. The elders, the adults. They promised to get stronger no matter what, so that our race could stand on their own two feet." Renna smiled bitterly, tapping her empty bottle against the railing.

"Most of the children were simply told that they were moving to some place safer. They weren't exposed to the truth, with the exception of those who lost their family. Me included.

"Like many others, I thought to myself, what if I take advantage of the Abyss Blood in my veins? What if I can use this to propel myself further than anyone else? To become a Lord so that I can kill those who caused such destruction to our people." Renna held her hand up against the sky.

In the blink of an eye, she felt as though she was transported back to that hellscape.

Burning landscapes, crackling trees as they toppled in the distance.

The suffocation of trying to breathe, only to have smoke clog up your lungs. The heat searing against her skin, her tears evaporating from her eyes. And... the blood staining her hands as her parents bled out while hugging her.

Blinking once more, she found herself back at the balcony.

The times had changed, but she had never left that spot.

"I can still remember my first hunt. It was a bloody one. I struggled and struggled, failed a few times before I finally got the kill." Renna chuckled.

"It wasn't even a difficult hunt either, now that I think back. Just a steel falcon. Feather edges so sharp they're like blades. Speed was the only thing they had going for them. As long as I brought a shield or something similar, it would have trivialised it.

"But~ I decided to bring a dagger to try and kill a falcon." She laughed, recalling how dumb she had been back then.

"What about you? Do you remember your first hunt?" she asked, pulling out a new bottle as Alice nodded her head.

"Clear as day. Twilight Hunter. That's the beast I had to kill. There were no second chances for me." A soft smile appeared on her face as she recalled the days of the arena.

Talking with Lilia, harvesting the plates from the sealed Lord. Her first taste of 'freedom,' if you could even call it that.

Then, with Lilia's death, she was pulled out of the arena by Allura and truly embarked on her journey.

But no matter the connections she makes now, she could never forget her first ever friend.

"Twilight Hunter? For your first kill? Yikes..." Renna blinked her eyes in surprise.

"But I suppose it's normal considering what you can do now. After I killed my first beast, I became good at hunting. Far better than my peers, you know? Steel Falcon isn't a complicated power. What it does is enhance what's already there, giving me speed, power, and an affinity for using bladed weapons.

"But using that, I climbed to the top of my class. But..." She paused. "Having lost my parents, I closed off my world for the pursuit of strength. The people who tried to befriend me, those who struck up a conversation every morning, I forgot all of them. I didn't even bother to remember a single one of their names."

"Are you lonely?" Alice decided to ask straight up.

Renna almost choked on her drink before letting out a loud, hearty laugh.

"Yes. Yes, I am." She grinned. "All the people I meet now, they are either subordinates or people who are scared of me. It is very hard to make a close connection when power is involved. I suppose I could try to make friends with other Lords, but..."

"As a member of Extalia who guards the King, no connection is ever simple. If you are not trying to take advantage of them, they are trying to take advantage of you. It is a connection built on advantages, and once you lose the advantage, you are discarded."

Had she split even a speck of her focus on making friends with the people around her, maybe she would have someone to talk to after a day of work. Someone to share her burdens with. Someone she could confide in rather than drinking all alone on the balcony.

She had respect, she had honour. But what use is that if the heart is empty and crying?

Yet... she could not say she wanted to trade away the power she had in this moment either. Power meant safety and security. Giving herself up to the whims of others? After all these years at the top of the food chain?

Renna could not do it.

She could only drown herself in alcohol while watching the same old sunset every evening.

"You have got a friend next to you, do you not?" Alice smirked, holding up the bottle of alcohol.

Renna blinked.

"Tell me, do you think I am trying to use you? Are you trying to use me? Or are we just two dumbass alcoholics ranting about the world while enjoying a good drink?"

Renna opened her mouth. She wanted to say something in return before letting out a helpless laugh.

"Well, sh*t, you got me there. I do not think I have seen anyone as fearless as you. Talking crap to a Lord, not caring about retaliation. Honestly, even if you were trying to use me, I might have gladly let myself be used with the way you are talking." She bumped bottles with Alice.

The two of them drank the whole bottle in one go before letting out a sigh of relaxation.

"Honestly, I do not understand why you old folks make it so complicated." Alice grinned as Renna's smile twitched.

"Old?"

"Yeah, duh, old to me. You are already at the top of the food chain. What is there to take advantage of? You have already won at the game we call life. Just enjoy it. Do not scheme, do not plot. Look forward to tomorrow knowing you will not be in danger and enjoy a good drink." Alice smiled.

"But that only works if everyone is in on it. Which makes this simple happiness harder than anything to get. Especially if you try to start late like you are."

"You little sh*t. Are you trying to cheer me up or piss me off?" Renna grumbled in annoyance.

"Do you want me to be myself or crying in fear?" Alice flipped the question back to her.

Renna rolled her eyes as the answer was obvious.

"So how about it, drinking buddy? Do you consider me a friend?" Alice asked as Renna chuckled and shook her head helplessly.

"Can I even reject? You win. Just do not go around taking advantage of my good name and smearing it in the dirt, and you have got yourself a deal."

"Only if you do not be an arse about what you do." Alice shrugged.

"What do you even mean-"

"I was a student at Rosalyn's school when you were sent to deal with the Inverted World. I might have been the cause of it blowing up and Rosalyn ascending to Lordship. So if you see her greeting me, do not be surprised." Alice dropped a bombshell as Renna's brain short-circuited.

"You, Rosalyn? Huh? Wha? The f*ck?" Renna stuttered in confusion.

"You do know why you were sent to recover the Inverted World, right?" Alice asked while sipping some alcohol.

Renna was still trying to grasp what Alice had just revealed.

"It was so that the Zenia family could... Ohhh..." Renna realised the issue.

The Zenia family.

"There you go. Now you have got it. The Zenia family wanted access to the Inverted World because I ran away from home. There was a copy of me in that world, so if they recovered it, they would have been able to use my strange blood for more experiments.

"I do not exactly know how the hierarchy in this country works, so I am just giving you a warning. If the Zenia family tries anything, do not follow." Alice warned.

Renna gave up trying to figure out the full picture.

"Ignorance is bliss, right?"

"Yep. Ignorance is bliss. Though I am just giving you a heads-up in case you walk straight into danger. Perks of being friends." Alice raised her bottle for another cheers.

"What kind of drinking buddy gives warnings about nation-toppling conspiracies based on facts? Are you not putting me in danger just by telling me?" Renna's smile twitched as she bumped bottles with Alice.

"This one. And would you rather meet on the battlefield not knowing what the hell is happening?" Alice pointed at herself.

Renna thought for a moment before exhaling through her nose.

"Topic too serious. Let's just drink the night away." Renna chuckled.

Alice nodded as the two laughed.

Drinking with a friend was much better than drinking alone.

Chapter 1027: Finished Memory Device

The days passed quickly, with Alice spending time with Renna. There wasn't much else to do, after all.

After the original explosion, the tears in the sky seemed to have stabilized. They weren't expanding, nor were they retreating.

They were simply... there.

A wound in the sky that refused to close.

There were times when Alice would find herself staring at the sky in silence, time just passing by.

A part of her wanted to rush to the capital, yet she needed to wait.

"You've got that gloomy look on your face again. Are you that worried?" Renna asked, sitting down next to Alice.

In the days they had spent with one another, drinking, talking, and simply enjoying each other's company, it wasn't a stretch to say they were good friends by this point.

"Just a tad. The longer I wait, the riskier it becomes." Alice exhaled slightly.

"I get you. Sometimes you feel like you've got no time at all, panicking about what could happen. But~ that's also how you lose time in the present." Renna patted Alice's shoulder.

"You want to get to the capital, but you need to wait for Suyin to finish her device, right?" she asked as Alice nodded.

"Will you be rushing Suyin?"

Alice exhaled and shook her head.

"And that's because you understand how difficult it is. You might see yourself 'wasting' time right now, but think of it as an investment. Once Suyin's device is done, you can throw yourself through portals and

reach your destination faster. Granted, you'll have to worry about the Void with everything going on." Renna chuckled.

Alice tapped her finger, reluctantly agreeing.

"Speaking of which, how's the plan of tracking down Feris? Any news?" Alice asked as Renna scratched her cheek awkwardly.

"Unfortunately, no. We've been trying, but her location is evading our searches." Renna grumbled.

If anyone were to walk in on the duo, they would just sound like two pals complaining about work.

"And the tree?"

"You know, calling the religious icon of my race 'the tree' isn't exactly good, right? I'm pretty sure if you say that in front of any of the elves guarding it, they'll be shooting arrows and throwing abilities at you." Renna rolled her eyes.

"Alright, fine~ How is the almighty, most important, my one and only, the best in the world, the irreplaceable World Tree that connects the realms? May holy ichor nourish its roots. Does that sound better?" Alice grumbled.

"Much better." Renna smirked. "It's stable. Same issues as before. It seems like Nyer is focused on bringing forth the Nightmare through the Void. If it all goes to plan, well... you'll lose access to the Void unless you can somehow convert it to Nightmare energy." She sighed as Alice offered a meat skewer she had bought earlier.

Accepting the snack, Renna lay down on the roof.

"I'm guessing that'll probably override my main attacks." Alice creased her brows.

Flicking her finger, a singularity spun to life above it.

"Depends on how Nyer wants to go about taking over the Void. Whether or not he wants to keep the properties of the realm or completely swap it out for the Nightmare realm. If new rules are put into place somehow, then yes, the nature of your Sigils should change.

"You'll no longer have access to Void abilities."

"That's not good." Alice creased her brows.

"Not good at all. Not just for you. How many vaults do you think are floating around in that place? How many portals, how many emergency exits?" Renna asked as Alice froze.

If the Void were to truly collapse...

Chaos.

"I'm already having a few people work on trying to stabilize the Void as much as possible. Even if Feris is somehow behind its collapse rather than Nyer, it should hold together long enough for us to try to figure something out."

Alice exhaled slowly.

Trying to stabilize the Void was... difficult.

However, there was a possibility that Alice could track down Feris if given the time.

"Once Suyin is done with the device, I'll try to track down Feris's whereabouts after meeting up with Allura."

"I'll be counting on you then. But if you don't mind me asking, even if we find Feris, how do we dismantle the Nightmare? From what I'm seeing, it's ingrained itself far too deeply into our realm for a

clean removal. Finding Feris is just stopping the damage from spreading, not necessarily ending the threat." Renna asked curiously.

"That's for Feris to tell us, I suppose. She's the realm ruler after all."

"This is the best I can do with the time and materials you've given me." Suyin let out a slight groan as she stood there in person. There were deep bags under her eyes, and she had white patches stuck against her forehead and arms.

Items she developed to keep herself awake and energized in order to work continuously. Even the patches had their limit, as Suyin was clearly nearing her physical limit.

At the end of the day, she was still just a normal human.

"This f*ckass realm keeps adapting and changing. The barriers are annoying to deal with at all. If I want to make something that properly counters the bloody thing, I'll need months, not days." She complained, letting out a loud yawn while rubbing her eyes with her sleeves.

Alice simply nodded as she looked at the new memory device.

It was still a prototype, but it had already eliminated a lot of the key issues the first one came with.

The main one being its size.

After the new adjustments, it was now the size of an earring. Small and inconspicuous.

"It should be safe for you to hop through the Void in order to travel, but don't do it too often. Around two jumps per minute if you're moving through multiple barriers. Give it time to record." Suyin warned.

"Anything else I need to know?" Alice asked, fiddling with the earring.

"Yes. A lot. First, it's not very durable. Everything is compact. I've installed a barrier, but it's not a very good one. It simply lets you know if it is about to come into contact with anything. So it's up to you to keep it safe.

"Second, it won't be easy to make multiple spares. With the materials I bought and had on hand, I've only been able to make four. Unless I can get more materials, these four are all you have before you're back to using the clunky version." Suyin explained.

Most of the materials were used for experimentation until the first successful one was created. After that, it was simply a matter of dividing up the rest to make more.

"A word of warning, though. The two jumps at top speed is an estimate. I've put it through a bit of testing, but not enough. It'll be akin to a trial run for you."

The hard part was always the testing phase. How much testing until she was confident it wouldn't buckle under pressure?

Once Suyin was sure Alice understood, she sighed in relief.

"Third, be careful with how much energy you flood your body with. I've taken precautions to make sure it doesn't blow up on contact. But if you were to fight with it attached to your ear, the influx of energy will overload the earring and blow it up. I won't go as far as to call it a sensitive piece.

"It should be perfectly safe for normal people. You are the last thing I can call normal, and your flow of energy is far more aggressive than others. So take care." she emphasised.

Feeling the device in her palm, Alice glanced up at the yawning girl.

"Will there be a version three?"

Suyin almost grabbed a chair and hurled it at Alice.

"Do you even know how hard it was for me to make this in the time you gave me? Don't you ever ask me to do something like this on the fly!" Suyin cursed.

"In a world of motherfcking gods, Lords, and bstards who can fold space for some fcking reason, I'm just an average sleepy btch with no powers and machines rigged up to every f*cking bone in my body! There's a limit to what I can and can't do in a reasonable time!" She huffed as Alice quickly apologised.

Only when Alice apologised did she finally calm down, throwing herself into the chair.

"Give me a few weeks for version three. I need to improve the durability and reproducibility of the thing so we can mass-produce it. Miki has a bunch of people waiting for my orders when it's ready. By then, all the major issues should be solved." she groaned.

"Just make sure you note down some feedback so I can make the changes. I'm going to sleep now before any of your questions make me want to bite off your f*cking head. Goodnight." Suyin spun on her chair and rolled through Alice's portal, returning to her lab.

To make sure the device worked, she had used test subjects as well as herself to ensure they could keep the Nightmare from permanently altering their memory and other factors.

Without giving Alice a chance to thank her, Suyin was already fast asleep as Alice glanced at the rings.

With four rings, one was for herself, one for Elias, and the other two she wanted to save for Allura and Gin.

'It's finally time.' Alyss smiled.

Alice nodded.

It was finally time to reunite with the woman who had granted her the name Agnelia. The one she viewed as a motherly figure.

Allura Agnelia.

Chapter 1028: Leaving Thalmyra

"You got everything prepared?" Renna asked with a small smile on her face. She had to admit that a part of her felt... sad that they had to separate after talking to each other over the course of the last few days. But for someone like her, partings weren't uncommon.

"I have my mead, I have my memory device. I don't see anything else I need unless you want to give me a gift before I go." Alice checked her important belongings.

Renna simply rolled her eyes. Of course her friend would prioritise mead before the other stuff. Why wouldn't she?

"In that case, take care on your way to the capital. I'll keep investigating the World Tree and will let you know if I find Feris's location. I doubt someone like me can talk sense into the Lady of the Void after all." Renna laughed.

However, her laugh soon faded away as her expression turned serious.

"Are you ready for what's to come?" she asked as Alice exhaled softly.

"Can't say for sure. I'm just a six Sigil Hunter after all," she joked.

"Oh ha ha... Taking on the entire Zenia family, even with your strength, won't be easy. I don't know what they've done, but ever since they tore off their mask of doing things for the greater good, they've been creepy as all hell." Renna furrowed her brows.

"They've always been like that. Though it's just more obvious now, I suppose."

Renna paused before nodding reluctantly. After everything Alice had told her, their strange actions in the past had now been verified. Everything was connected, and it started to make sense for Renna.

Why they did the things they did, the requests, and the takeovers.

In isolated incidents, it was hard to find a connection. But now that she took a step back and had gotten some information from Alice, it all made perfect sense.

Shaking her head, she reached into her pouch and offered a small twig to Alice.

"What's this? Am I supposed to shave it and use it to smoke my drinks?" Alice asked curiously, picking up the stick.

"Hell no! I swear if you try to smoke a branch from the World Tree into your drink, I'll personally run over and steal the branch back!" Renna held back the urge to kick Alice.

"I'm only kidding,ahaha. It's to contact you, right?" Alice grinned.

Renna massaged her eyelids.

"Yes. You can contact me through this branch and vice versa. If anything happens, don't shy away from contacting me. We're..." Renna hesitated.

"Friends, right?" Alice finished the sentence for her.

A smile appeared on Renna's face as she nodded.

"If for any reason I'm not there to receive your contact, a subordinate of mine will answer instead. They're the ones currently checking the World Tree, so if anything major happens, feel free to inform them of the changes.

"I can vouch for all of the ones I've given the branch to. They're all trustworthy."

"Is that so? I'll keep that in mind then." Alice smiled.

She was originally going to tease Renna about the fact that they grew close in a few short days but decided against it in the end.

"Since it's also a branch from the World Tree, it'll provide you with some benefits by just keeping it close to you. Realm tears, poisons, sealing. As long as you keep it on you, it should be able to ward off against one high-level ability. It won't activate against weak stuff.

"But~ From what I know about your power, you shouldn't need any help with the low-tier crap, right?" Renna asked as Alice held the branch against the sky.

"Should be fine unless it breaks when I use my own skills. I do use all three of what you just mentioned after all. Well... maybe not sealing, but I use a lot of Void stuff and poison." Alice squinted at the branch.

"It won't react to anything you do, so don't worry about it. And here's the second gift." Renna threw something at Alice as she quickly caught it.

Opening her hand, Alice noticed that Renna had given her an emblem of sorts.

It was a silver emblem that felt cool to the touch. An intricate design showcasing what seemed to be a crown with swords behind it. Even without Cayla, Alice could sense a bit of Abyssal energy stored within the emblem.

Likely a verification of sorts to ensure that the emblem was real.

Alice weighed the object in her hand before looking at Renna.

"It's the King's Guard emblem." Renna folded her arms. "I may be sent to this place, but my name should still hold a bit of weight. Not to brag, but I was a rather good employee at the time.

"With it, you should be able to request one meeting with the royal family. Just one, no more," she explained.

"Is that a guarantee?" Alice raised an eyebrow doubtfully.

If Renna was sent to this place, she doubted the emblem held enough sway for the royal family to grant her an audience.

"Well... maybe not exactly a guarantee. But at least you won't get turned away at the gates if you show them the emblem. As for how you want to convince them... I'll leave that to you."

"You think mead will win them over?" Alice joked, putting the emblem into her pouch.

"Convince them to put you into a cell, definitely." Renna smiled.

"The royal family is at odds with the Zenia family, as you know. It's been escalating for some time now, even if civilians don't know the full picture.

"Even though they hold a lot of power, the royal family is in need of allies. So this could be your way in. Enemy of my enemy and all that. You know the deal."

"Are you sure you should be encouraging this? What if I'm someone suspicious?" Alice was surprised by how much information Renna was giving her.

"If you're suspicious, then we're all doomed. I don't exactly think you're worried about Lords, so why would you go out of your way to cause chaos?"

"Either way, just be careful. The people sitting in power always have a bit of a fragile ego after all. Say the wrong things, do the wrong greeting, and they might just take offence to it." Renna ranted.

Renna paused for a moment, then let out a small sigh.

"Just... don't treat it like a game and piss off everyone you see," she added. "You've got a habit of walking into things without thinking about the consequences."

[She's not wrong, you know?] Cayla squinted at Alice, who kept quiet.

She appreciated Renna's advice and made a decision. Reaching into her pouch, she pulled out an extra bottle of Ayrian mead.

She held it up, offering it to Renna, who swallowed her saliva slowly.

"Want another drink before I go?" Alice smiled.

Renna's eyes lingered on the bottle momentarily before she pulled her gaze back.

And to Alice's surprise...

"I'll pass."

"Huh?"

"Ayrian mead. Stuff you can't get anymore. You shouldn't be wasting two bottles on someone like me. I still have a bit left after all." Renna folded her arms with a chuckle.

"Stuff like this is liquid gold. Who knows when you'll want another sip only to realise you're one bottle short? It's not something you can get your hands on easily, so don't be so eager to offer it away.

"If anything, I'd be happier if you use it to bribe another Lord to be your friend. At least then, I know I'm not the only dumbf*ck who got swayed by a good drink." Renna let out a hearty laugh as Alice smiled helplessly.

"If you say so. Just don't beg me for another bottle afterwards, okay?"

"Well~ If I want another drink, I can always tempt you like you did with me. Or what? Are you going to enjoy a good drink without anyone to share it with you? A drink tastes better when shared between two people." Renna glanced up at the sky, forcefully ripping her gaze away from the bottle.

Even though she said all of this, she had to admit.

A part of her still wanted to accept the bottle.

Alice didn't push it further and stored the bottle away.

"Let's go for a drink once we solve the Void issue then," Alice suggested.

This was something Renna could get behind, as that would be when her biggest headache would be sorted.

What better time to drink than after a job well done?

Alice and Renna gave each other a firm handshake as Renna patted Alice on the shoulder.

"Try not to die on the way there. Be careful of anything and everything. Know that spies could be around every corner."

"No promises," Alice chuckled.

Pattern recognition was a powerful thing. Based on everything that's happened already, even if she was careful about spies, sh*t would probably go up in flames regardless.

Renna rolled her eyes.

As reluctant as she was, there was no more need for words between them.

They had already said everything they wanted to say. Anything extra could wait until next time.

Watching the group walk away from the city, Renna found herself struggling to walk away.

"Troublesome girl," she mumbled. But a smile never left her face.

Alice Agnelia. A mead lover who acted like a gremlin. That cheeky grin, that playful personality. But most of all, her love for peace.

"May the World Tree bless your endeavours. May you reach the life you seek." Renna offered Alice a prayer before turning around and walking away.

Now that she had said her farewells, it was time for her to track down Feris.

Chapter 1029: State Of The Void

Alice glanced toward the horizon, her fingers brushing lightly against the earring. Suyin had warned her about the device's durability, and the thought of it breaking during transport wasn't something she intended to risk. Precautions were necessary. A barrier came first.

She adjusted the trigger cast, setting it to activate whenever anything approached the earring. To test it, she picked up a pebble and brought it close. The moment it neared her ear, a dome shimmered into place around the device, intercepting it.

The barrier wasn't static. It rotated, deflecting the pebble away before it could make contact.

Once the preparations were done, Alice gave her body a stretch.

"How will we be moving? Are you just making portals?" Elias asked curiously.

He knew that using the Void could allow one to cross large gaps in mere moments. However, those are usually limited to one-person-sized portals that quickly shut afterwards. Shuttling through portals rapidly was... risky, to say the least.

A grin appeared on Alice's face.

"Oh, don't worry about it. I have it covered," Alice reassured before turning to Lab, who was standing by, waiting for her orders.

Once again, Alice was reminded that a Lord was acting as her assistant while she still had an agreement with Faust.

"Lab, can you tell me roughly which direction the capital is in? We don't need to take any routes. Just a straight line will do."

It had been a while since Alice had last used this method of transport, so she needed to make sure everything was still okay, especially with the worry that the Void might have been destabilised by Nyer.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Lab pointed towards the right.

"If you travel straight right for around a day or so, you should reach the capital," Lab replied.

"I see... so... maybe a few minutes? Maybe an hour if I'm rusty," Alice mumbled.

Hearing this, Elias immediately sat up, his brain slowly processing what Alice had just said and the issues that might possibly arise with movement that fast.

But most of all, how the hell they were even supposed to go that fast in the first place.

Moving through the Void didn't skip distance. You still had to travel the required distance.

He didn't know about the others, but he was certain he could not travel that distance in an hour.

He simply wasn't prepared for such a journey.

Creating a blood knife along with two mirrors, Alice had the knife shift between the two reflections as a smile appeared on her face.

There was a slight delay, but everything else should work like normal.

"An... hour? Do you perhaps have a mount that will help close the distance, Lady Alice?" Lab creased her brows.

Even as a Lord, travelling that far would take her several hours, never mind what Alice had suggested. The only reason Faust could even travel as far as he wanted was because of his authority as a Lord.

Something that he modified to help with travel rather than combat.

And yet... Alice had a method to shorten that journey down?

"A mount won't be able to fly that fast. Unless maybe a Lord-level one focused on speed," Alice shrugged.

"The method we're using is a little... special. Something I made myself." Alice gave her body a final stretch before looking at the area around them. She wanted to make sure she had plenty of space to work with.

Hearing that Alice made this method herself, Lab's interest was piqued.

And based on what she was saying... taking an hour only happens if she's rusty? Which naturally suggests that this was a method she made much earlier.

What kind of travel method could a Hunter with less than five Sigils have that surpassed the speed of Lords?

Lab didn't know, and Alice wasn't preparing anything extensive either.

"I only have one question. How safe is it?" Elias asked with a slight worry on his face.

Alice paused. She tilted her head and thought about it. If they had a clear path and didn't crash into anything, it should be relatively fine. Though... if anything were to get in their way...

"It should be relatively fine as long as nothing jumps in front of us. Then maybe we might feel a slight bump," Alice shrugged.

This did little to soothe Elias's worries.

With all her tests completed, Alice turned to Elias and Lab. She reached into her pouch and pulled out a hat she hadn't used in a long time.

"Ahem~"

She cleared her throat.

"This is your captain now speaking. Please hold onto your personal belongings and grab onto the railings~ We will be departing soon."

Elias and Lab tilted their heads.

Behind them, metal railings appeared with safety belts waiting to be buckled.

"Please direct your attention to me for important safety information." Alice gave them a slight bow.

"Fasten your belt by inserting the metal tip into the buckle. Tighten by pulling on the belt. At no point should you release the belt during this journey. You have been warned."

"However, in the event you wish to remove the belt, simply lift the metal flap on the buckle. This aircraft has no emergency doors. If the structure does collapse, may luck be on your side."

Elias blinked.

Aircraft? No emergency doors? May luck be on his side???

"Thus far, the survival rate has been 100%. We work hard to maintain those rates. Weather conditions are a little unstable with a high chance of spatial distortion and turbulence. Please hold on tight and await further instructions should such events occur."

"Please ensure all personal belongings are secured. Any loose items may be lost to the void and will not be recovered."

"In the event of... dismemberment, please remain calm. Assistance will be provided once available."

By this point, Elias was already regretting the fact that he fastened the belt.

He looked for the metal flap to undo it and yet...

There was nothing.

Alice had melded the belt into a solid piece.

Looking up, he saw the grin on her face.

Clapping her hands together, blood and metal expanded around them before consolidating into an orb. Windows were created, with a barrier manifesting around the orb itself.

Once they were flung into the Void, this should give them a rather good view of the realm.

"We should be reaching our destination in less than an hour. During this time, I hope you have a pleasant journey."

Before Elias could even voice his complaints, Alice slammed her palm down as Tiamat's wings unfurled from her back.

Feeling the energy bursting out of Alice's body, Lab instinctively grabbed onto the railings as her survival instincts kicked in.

Beneath them, a crack into the Void was torn open as a wall of energy slammed into the orb, punting it through the realm.

"ARGHHH!!!!" Elias let out a cry as he felt as though his organs were about to jump out of his mouth. Even Lab paled as her grip nearly crushed the railing she was holding onto.

"YAHOOO~" Alice simply laughed as tethers shot out before anchoring down.

She clenched her fist.

Now that her power had grown significantly, she could launch the orb through the Void at greater speeds.

*BANG!!!

An explosion erupted behind them as they were launched forward. Alice modified the railings into actual seats, with Lab and Elias being pressed against them due to the speed.

Lab held back her scream as she didn't expect such a drastic shift in speed.

"Aren't you enjoying yourself—" Alice was about to tease the duo when she suddenly froze.

The words were stuck in her throat as the world beyond the orb revealed itself.

The Void.

Or at least... that's what she believed she was looking at. Yet compared to before, it had changed far too much. Mutated. Like an infection spreading across the body.

Dark veins spread through the realm. Some far into the distance, some close up. Countless expanding veins filled the sky, some splitting into branches while others joined up to form large nets.

Alice creased her brows, her frown deepened, and she slowed down the orb.

Looking down at her hand, she could feel another energy stirring in her body.

Nightmare energy.

There were still Void beasts floating around, but they weren't unscathed. Several of them were showing... mutations that matched the monsters Alice saw in the Nightmare.

Strange fog clinging onto their wounds as they struggled to hold themselves back.

Some cried out in pain while others simply decayed on floating islands, their flesh rotting and peeling back to reveal a writhing mass of darkness.

Where their blood touched, the infestation would spread. A fleshy garden blossoming upon stone.

Alice wanted to say something, but... what was there to say?

She already knew that the Void had been partially taken over thanks to the information she received earlier, but...

Seeing it for herself, with her own eyes, was different from hearing about it.

Only when she saw all of this did she finally realise how dire everything had become.

Hell, if it wasn't for the memory device, would she even know what she was looking at?

Alice clenched her fist.

Based on initial estimations... it was safe to say that almost fifty percent of the Void had been taken over thus far. Otherwise, how else could she explain the current state of this realm?

[Alice...] Cayla was worried.

'I know. But meeting up with Allura is our priority for now. Trust that Renna has this covered.' Alice closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

She only had one question right now. And that was why Feris was fine with things reaching this point.

Wasn't she the Lady of the Void?

Or did this realm, her home, mean so little to her? Alice doubted it.

'Just trust in Renna.' She convinced herself and continued through the Void.

Chapter 1030: Noah's Promise

"Pst!!!" A young girl tried to get a boy's attention as she pulled herself over a small ledge. Her hair swayed in the wind, almost as though it was reflecting her emotions. She looked left, she looked right, making sure there were no others as she sneakily climbed up.

"Pst!!! Noah!" Feris shouted in a hushed whisper.

Creasing his brows, Noah let out a small groan as he slowly turned around.

As his vision cleared, he almost jumped back in shock when he saw Feris' face covered with mud.

Holding back his scream, Noah glanced around before letting out a sigh of relief.

It had been a week since they found the black material. During this time, the boss had them stay put, fed them properly, and didn't make them go out to work.

While it was a good break, some of the kids were getting anxious, wondering if the boss was about to discard them or worse, kill them.

"What happened?" Noah glanced at Feris, who revealed a toothy grin.

The boss wasn't the only one who went through a change. So did Feris.

Ever since Noah gave her the name, it was as though new life had been breathed into her body. She was more active and expressive than before, a stark contrast to what she was usually like.

She laughed, she joked. She even talked to the others often. But at the end of the day, she would still come looking for him.

Either to play or to sneak out and look at the black material from above.

Since she hadn't called him earlier today, he figured she was probably resting. And yet...

She was now in his room with mud all over her face and clothes.

"Hehe~ You'll never guess what." Feris giggled, struggling to hold back her excitement.

With a sparkle in her eyes, she quickly rummaged through the makeshift pouch Noah had made for her a while ago.

Inside, a small crystal shard could be seen.

Cool to the touch and reflecting the stars.

Noah's pupils constricted as he understood what she had just brought back.

A piece of the black material!

How?

"I got it!" Feris grinned. "I actually got a piece, hehe~"

Noah quickly grabbed Feris as they snuck out. He couldn't risk others overhearing her since they could easily be reported.

"I thought we couldn't mine. How did you even get a piece?" Noah asked curiously once they arrived a little further away from the rooms. This way, he could be certain that no one was overhearing.

"I didn't mine it. It was a loose piece buried near the main chunks." Feris gave Noah a thumbs up before crawling out of the bushes so that she could see the night sky.

Holding up the crystal into the air, her smile widened once more as an excited giggle escaped her lips.

She kicked her legs before gesturing for Noah to come over.

"It looks just like the sky, right? If we go to where this rock came from, do you think we'll be in the sky?" Feris asked as Noah sat down next to her.

"If we do end up in the sky, it'll be rather scary, don't you think?" he chuckled. Feris tilted her head momentarily.

Thinking about it, she reluctantly nodded.

"That's... true. But if there are rocks like this, there should be land for us to stand on... right?" Feris pursed her lips.

Smiling helplessly, Noah patted her head.

"We'll see. First, we have to make sure the boss doesn't find out," he reminded her as Feris nodded.

Looking towards where the pits were, Feris exhaled softly.

The longer she looked at the black crystals, the fuller her heart felt. Yet at the same time, being separated from them gave her a deep sense of yearning.

As though she couldn't bear to be separated from the crystal.

"I saw the boss preparing some kind of big thing around the pit. Do you think he's trying to take all of it out?" Feris turned to Noah. He was the most knowledgeable person she knew. If anyone had the answer, it would be him.

Noah creased his brows. He had also noticed large machines being transported into the pit. And based on how the boss reacted to the crystal's discovery, excavation was the priority.

As for the purpose, Noah couldn't tell.

Looking at Feris, Noah was faced with a dilemma.

First, some of the kids were already planning an escape from this place. With the boss feeding them properly as well as giving them plenty of rest, they were now in peak condition. All of them were energised and ready to go.

The second issue, however, was that not everyone was fit to go. The more people they dragged along, the more would die. Some didn't want to leave because it was still safer here. They had food, shelter, and protection.

All they needed to do was work, and that was it. Nothing more, nothing less.

For that kind of protection, a bit of work was nothing to them.

And... he could already tell Feris would be part of the group that wanted to stay behind.

Not because she liked the protection, but rather... she was infatuated with the crystal.

The same crystal that had breathed life into her body.

Noah found it difficult to ask Feris to leave when he thought of the way she looked at the shard.

"Feris," Noah called out.

"Yes?" Feris blinked, turning back to face the boy.

"If... some of us wanted to leave, would you want to come along? You've seen how many people have died for this pit. They don't want to stay anymore."

Feris glanced down.

She looked at the crystal in her hands before looking up at Noah.

It was as he said. A lot of people had died for this pit. Not that she cared, as it never affected her.

Her only job was to dig. But that had changed now. There was a purpose to her digging.

This time, she wanted the crystals. Yet she knew how difficult that was. How could she monopolise the pit? Impossible.

The crystal was too big for her to carry with her. But she couldn't bear to be separated from it.

Feris scrunched her face.

To stay with her crystals or to leave with Noah...

Was she content with the crystals filling her heart?

Feris glanced back at the pit.

Just as she was about to say something, she paused.

She knew what would happen if she said she would stay. The chances of Noah also staying behind were very high. And... if Noah wasn't here...

When this thought crossed her mind, she felt a slight pain in her chest.

A struggle between what she wanted to do.

And in the end... she tightened her fingers around the crystal.

"Are... you leaving as well?" Feris asked, not turning around.

Noah clenched his fist.

There was a long pause, and before he could respond, Feris spoke first.

"If Noah wants to leave... I'll come with you."

Her response surprised him as he looked up in disbelief.

Knowing what he knew about Feris, he couldn't believe she was willing to abandon the crystal that had taken root in her heart.

He recalled all the times he tried to pull her away from staring at the sky, her adamant refusal.

Her happiness admiring the stars. The joy she felt touching the crystal and the elation of stealing a small fragment from the pit.

And yet... she was about to give it all up.

He couldn't understand it. Had she not spoken, he was going to suggest that he stay behind with her.

"That... are you sure?" Noah asked hesitantly.

Feris bit her lip as a bitter smile appeared soon after.

She pointed at the pit.

"Even if I stay... the boss won't let me have the crystal, would he?"

Noah nodded.

There was no timeline in which the boss would willingly give them a piece. It was what he had been looking for all this time, after all.

"And... I'm happy with just this piece." Feris forced a smile.

She wasn't.

It was a lie, and Noah could tell.

For Feris, it felt like ripping a part of herself away. It was a feeling that not many would understand. For someone who had always felt incomplete, this crystal filled that hole in her heart.

So to step away after tasting joy...

Noah stepped forward and gave her a hug. His arms wrapped around her as Feris widened her eyes in surprise.

"It'll just be for now. Once we leave this place and survive, we can find a way to get the crystal again. We'll keep an eye on the boss so we know what he plans to do with all of this. I promise."

Hearing this, Feris's body trembled for a moment as she nodded.

"Once we get stronger, we can come back for the crystal. I've heard that if you become a Hunter, you can get the strength of a hundred men. With that kind of power, taking the crystal back will be easy," Noah persuaded.

Pulling away from Noah for a moment, Feris stepped back before turning around.

The sky became her backdrop as a sad smile appeared on her face.

"You know what it means for me to leave... right?" she asked as Noah nodded.

There was a look of reluctance on her face.

"You've got to take responsibility, okay?"

If she was going to leave behind a piece of herself, she needed something else to fill that void in her chest.

"I will," Noah promised.

Hearing his response, Feris glanced down at the piece of crystal she had stolen. From now on, this would be the only reminder of what she had lost until they reclaimed it.

Taking a deep breath, Feris ignored the pain, stepped away from the edge, and walked towards Noah.

"When do we leave?"