

Abyssal A 161

Chapter 161 - 161: Emerald Glade

"Everyone! We will be making a main camp in this forest once we've reached the location known as the Emerald Glade. Please do not stray from the main camp as we are here to collect some Sylvan Essence." Cedric called out.

"Even though the beasts within this forest are weak, please bear in mind that they are still beasts in the end. One mistake and it can cost you your life! Thankfully, we are under the protection of strong and experienced Hunters so all you have to do is remain at the camp! If you venture out, it is your own life that you're putting at risk.

"We will be leaving in exactly one day! Any longer and you will be left behind so remember that!"

Hearing the announcement, all of the lone Hunters and Travellers understood that he was simply warning them from doing anything stupid. All they have to do is wait at the camp and things will be resolved.

"What do you want to do?" Ria asked curiously.

Alice had mentioned that she there might be something she wanted to check out nearby but she wasn't sure where it was. Now that they were stopping for a day, this may be the perfect chance to explore.

"I'm not sure how long it'll take though. If we spend too long, they'll leave without us. And you know how it went last time we tried to navigate by ourselves." Alice sighed while glancing at the map.

"However... I think what I'm looking for is in this forest so I need to check it out. It has something to do with Allura."

"Well if that's the case then obviously we have to go." Ria smiled as Alice nodded her head.

Glancing towards the Raven's Watch party, she couldn't help but sigh at the sight of Ellie.

After travelling for a few days, they never continued the training session as Ellie seemed more and more hesitant on the career path of being a Hunter.

'Did the training affect her that much?' Alice thought to herself with a sigh.

However, considering the fact that they were working as a group, they will cover for one another.

"Let me mark down this location and then we can search the forest."

Making a cut on her arm, Alice left a small blood orb by her carriage so that she could sense it wherever she went. The range wasn't as far as she had hoped but it was better than nothing. They knew the general direction of the camp anyways, the blood orb was simply confirmation.

As Alice was preparing to explore the forest with Ria to find the ruins, the Raven's Watch party had noticed this. And despite wanting to ask for a bit of help, they decided against it for now as they heard of what had happened during the night.

The demonstration that Alice had performed.

There was a desire to recruit her help but considering the state that Ellie was left in, it seemed as though the training was too much for her.

"Guys... You don't have to do it for me." Ellie sighed but Finn shook his head.

"We're a group. We work better when we're on the same page. Even if she is powerful, we need to first make sure we are comfortable as a group. So don't worry about it." He reassured while making double checks of their equipment.

There was a slight increase of beasts on the way here but they stayed relatively weak.

Most of them were just two star fodder that they can take care of easily or three star beasts that required a bit more effort from them.

The caravan leader had already provided them with all the information they needed for the location of the water and all that was required for them to do was clear the path and claim the treasure.

"Remember, there are anomalies right now and even if it is still within expectations, keep an eye out." He reminded as they made their way out of the Emerald Glade and into the forest.

At the same time, Alice and Ria made their way out as well with Alice leading the way based on the feeling she received from the mark.

Towering trees surrounded her as their large trunks were akin to pillars that held up the night sky of the Abyss. Through the gaps of the leaves, the ethereal moonlight descended upon the land as a kaleidoscope of colours reflected from the flowers that inhabit this forest.

Despite searching for the Ruins, Alice couldn't help but stop and marvel at this sight.

'The Abyss is truly filled with beautiful places like this... Yet dangers lurk behind the radiance, waiting for a chance to tear out your throat.' Alice thought to herself.

"Do you think we can take some of these flowers back? If kept in a glass, I think they'll look quite nice." Ria asked curiously as she was about to lean down and pick one up but Alice stopped her.

"If you want to have it burrow its roots into your arm then feel free to grab them. They're the Verdigrasp Lily and they feed off the water in your body. By the time you're done, you'll be nothing but a corpse blooming with more of these flowers." Alice warned as she noticed the names above these flowers.

She had personally experienced the feeling of having her veins slowly being replaced by these flowers. The sensation of small writhing roots wiggling through her body and tugging at her flesh. Of course, it takes more than just a touch to have them invade your body but it was better to warn Ria in case there was an anomaly.

It's not a difficult beast to deal with even after it invades the body but the experience is definitely not worth it.

"!!!" Pulling her hand back in shock, Ria couldn't help but sigh in regret.

Such beauty yet the thorns hidden in the shadows were truly deadly!

Looking at Alice's back, Ria couldn't help but applaud Alice's knowledge on Abyss Beasts once more. Had it not been for her, she would've picked up the flowers without hesitation.

"It's mostly plant based beasts around here. As long as you are careful, it should be pretty easy to navigate." Alice warned while pushing aside the foliage.

The deeper they went into the forest, the stronger her mark felt along with a strange swirl of emotions that manifested in her heart.

'Is it memory of Allura's master?' Alice thought to herself.

There was a sense of bitterness within her chest as regret and sorrow gripped at her mind.

And at last, they discovered a path leading down to the next layer of the Abyss.

A small opening leading to the infinite void below.

Glancing down at her mark, Alice understood that this was indeed the path.

'Is it similar to the weird tree that Allura took us to last time?' She wondered to herself as her interaction with the Crystal Grove had awakened what remained of Cayla's master. Perhaps going down would lead to another awakening.

"Shall we head down?"

Nodding her head, Alice condensed a small orb of blood hovering above her palm and ignited it with the violet flames, acting as a light source to help them navigate this darkness.

One of the most fearsome flames that Ria had ever seen, one that could burn away the powers of the Abyss, was being used as a candle.

"What's wrong?" Alice asked curiously, noticing that Ria was staring at her flame.

"Nothing. Do you think it'll take us more than a day to get back? We seem to be going pretty far." Ria shook her head while making a small lightning bolt on her finger tips.

Flicking it into the darkness, she watched as the small speck of light was soon engulfed by the darkness.

"Yikes..."

"Well if it begins to take too long, we'll start making our way back since our ultimate goal is still to reach the next city. If anything, I can leave a mark here on the map and come revisit when I have time." Alice shrugged as she continued her way down.

The deeper they went, the more invasive the darkness came. Even with the power of the violet flame, it seemed as though the darkness was alive and fighting to extinguish the foreign flames.

As she took another step, her vision shifted as she was now surrounded by the flames of war. Countless cries merged with one another as the air crackled with power.

Widening her eyes, Alice could see the battlefield stretch across the Abyssal expanse as spectral figures loomed above the land, seemingly overlooking the world as though it was naught but a small orb within their palms.

These figures clashed as Abyssal power rained down upon the land, damaging it beyond repair while the skies split apart with countless cracks sending the stars themselves into oblivion.

In another blink, the scenery had disappeared as Alice stumbled to the side, almost falling off the steps but Ria managed to catch her in time.

"Are you okay?!"

"Ah... Mnm, I am. A weird vision appeared for a moment and I lost track of myself." Alice sighed.

Clenching her chest, she could feel the anguish buried deep within, taking over her mind.

Such overwhelming emotions that threatened to overrule her entire existence.

Taking a moment to catch her breath, Alice had to reassure Ria multiple times before they could continue.

Perhaps the darkness had numbed them to the flow of time but soon, they approached a cliff before a sea of mist that obscured the lands below.

"That's probably the Howling Depths..." Ria muttered.

She remembers vividly the dangers they had to face during their first visit to the layer. If they wish to proceed, they had to do with the utmost care as Allura was not here to assist them.

Alice was hesitant. The source of the feeling was so close yet it was deep within this mist. If she wanted to find the ruin, it meant traversing this foreign land and the dangers that lurk within.

Taking a deep breath, Alice calmed her mind and contemplated her options.

"Lets... Take a quick peak. If things get dangerous let's leave as fast as possible." Alice suggested as Ria nodded her head.

"Need my blood again?" Ria offered.

"It won't last long enough unless we plan to kill the danger."

Leaving behind an orb to mark the entrance, the two of them jumped down into the mist.

Chapter 162 - 162: Relic In The Mist

Jumping into this ethereal shroud, Alice and Ria could feel a chill invade their bodies while faint shadows slithered across the mist.

Keeping close to one another, they navigated the veiled lands.

Ria was on edge. Each step into the unknown was a risk and the moment she let her guard down, a beast could jump out and kill her before she reacted. This was the danger of the Howling Depths layer.

"There's nothing near us so far. Just be careful where you step. Some of the vegetation that aren't considered beasts can still kill." Alice warned while using the mark on her arm as a guide.

Within this realm of mist, a series of circular gates slowly revealed themselves. Each gate was broken and covered in vegetation while signs of carvings could still be seen etched upon the surface.

Approaching this gate, Alice could feel the link between her mark and the gate.

"Is this what you've been looking for?" Ria asked curiously.

"I think so..."

The circular gates were suspended in midair. Upon touching the gates, the etchings radiated a soft blue glow that bathed the mist in azure lights. The luminescence was not just decoration as the surroundings were enveloped in a strange power similar to Abyssal power that flowed through all Sigil users yet more potent and powerful.

With a connection formed between Alice and the gates, it now pulsed with an erratic echo. They could feel the push of power across their body as the two jumped back in surprise.

"It's turning on." Alice muttered, understanding that this strange device was now activating.

The stones crackled with Abyssal energy and the mist slowly dispersed as the energy stretched outwards from the gate.

With the veil no longer obscuring the floor beneath them, they now see the space for what it truly is.

A large platform decorated with the corpses of thousands.

Radiant tendrils of light burst out from the gates, stabbing downwards while Alice and Ria watched with a mixture of fascination and caution.

Alice in particular, could feel the gates trying to form with the realm itself.

Turning themselves horizontally, the gates layered upon one another, seemingly attempting to drill a hole into the Abyss.

*BOOM!!!

With a loud thud, two gates collided with one another as a pulse of purple light exploded out, lighting up the Howling Abyss.

*BOOM!!!

Another gate collided and once more, the lights exploded out.

Unable to pull their eyes from this spectacle, the two could only watch in silent fascination.

One by one, the gates continued to collide as energy started to gather within the core. Separating from one another, it winds up for one last collision.

An ocean of energy washed over the area as Alice and Ria felt suffocated by the presence of such power. Purple lightning crackled around the gate and Ria realised the power was now similar to what her grandfather had demonstrated in the battle against the White Death.

Before she could warn Alice of the build up in power, the gates slammed down.

***BANG!!!!!!**

It ruptured the space with the final collision as the air crackled with a volatile surge of power. The realm itself was torn apart as a gateway down to the depths of the Abyss was formed, a malevolent swirl of untamed energy roared out as both Alice and Ria collapsed on their knee, unable to stand against the pressure.

Alice widened her eyes as unfamiliar emotions surged from her body, a deep longing for the depths and darkness. A sense of desire and want.

The path pulsed with an unsettling rhythm as though they were hearing the heartbeat of the realm itself.

Tears began to form around the edges of Alice's right eye as she slowly reached out with her hand, wanting to reach into the void.

An influx of power roared out from the Abyss, sending chills down their spine as Alice could see a distant name, slowly manifesting itself from the depths.

A deep bloodthirst ravaged the realm as the name became clear. #

[Dreadmaw Harbinger - ◆◆◆◆◆◆]

'Six stars!' Alice paused in shock as her mind cried out for her to leave.

From the tear, elongated fingers slowly emerged, creeping and slithering around the edges of the portal, attempting to grab on firmly. The fingers were like long gnarled branches of a withered tree, crackled and dry. Each joint was pronounced and clear as it pushed against the thin layer of skin.

"We need to leave! NOW!" Ria shouted out but she knew it was already too late.

They could feel several pairs of eyes, locking onto them and preventing them from moving. It felt as though the gaze of a god had descended upon them. Their survival was merely mercy from such a being.

*CRACK!

Unable to support itself, the gate started to split apart with the edges fracturing the and realm restabilising itself. An invisible force crashed against the edges of the gate as the pathway to the depths collapsed in on itself.

The fingers, unable to hold onto the tear were unfairly pushed back as a deep guttural cry of anger pulsed out from the void before being sealed.

The swirl of power that filled the air dissipated, leaving only echoes and remnants of its presence.

Around them, the realm returned to normal as the gates lost their power and the mist rolled in one more.

Free of the presence, Alice and Ria paused in silence and shock while cold sweat covered their back.

"Let's get the f*ck out of here before whatever that was comes back." Ria shook her head and stood up, not wanting to spend another second in this place.

However, Alice wasn't responding.

The beast wasn't the only thing that tried to escape from the depths of the Abyss. In front of Alice, floated a broken crown of black obsidian. Countless splinters hovered around the diamonds that made up the spikes while a single fractured ring held the diamonds together to hold their shape.

Once again, unfamiliar feelings surfaced in her heart. The joys, the excitement, the fear, the sorrow and at the end of it all, nothingness. Coldness filled her heart as changes occurred to her body.

Just like what happened before, a similar crown manifested above her head while both of Alice's eyes turned black and purple.

"[My crown... A symbol of the peace I offered to my residents. Forever looked upon as safety in this realm. And yet... It now lay splintered and broken just like my kingdom, my subjects.]" Alice muttered but Ria did not recognise the tone of voice she was using.

Furrowing her brows, Ria was about to say something when 'Alice' reached forward and grabbed the crown.

"[May this be the sign. For a new inheritor. May you rebuild what is lost. May you lay claim to everything I have left behind.]" Alice smiled softly as the crown broke into several pieces before being embedded into Alice's chest.

As the pieces of obsidian melded with Alice's body, they slowly disappeared one by one and Alice was returned back to normal.

She knelt down with pain surging through her body. Gritting her teeth, Alice could feel something foreign invading every part of her body, overwriting and taking over but soon, a warmth washed over her as the pain faded away.

Pulling her shirt forward, Alice could see a black star on her chest.

'What did she do to me...' Alice thought with a frown.

Shaking her head, she glanced down at the mark on her hand. It now laid dormant and didn't react to the surroundings at all.

The gate was broken and unresponsive, the beast has been sent back to the depths of the Abyss and a broken crown was now merged with her body.

"Are you alright? What was that? Who was talking just now?" Ria frowned. She knew that there were secrets that she wasn't privy to between Alice and Allura and perhaps this was one of those moments. However, the fact that such a dangerous beast was this close to breaching the surface followed by a foreign entity taking over Alice's body, she's wanting some answers of her own.

"Mnm, I'm fine. Let's get out of here first. I'll tell you on the way back." Alice nodded, taking one last glance at the broken gate that lay in this world of mist.

"Alright."

Tracing their steps back, Alice started to explain the relationship between her and Allura.

How Kaden was the one who freed her from the Zenia family. How she was thrown into the Abyss to fulfil a promise she does not know the details of.

The existence of Cayla and Ayr.

Allura's old master who governed a kingdom in the Abyss.

Staying silent, Ria digested all of this information as more questions filled her mind.

"So... With that special Eye, you can see things in slow motion, see the names of the Abyss Beast and how difficult they are. But only up to six Sigils right now. Ayr is Allura's old kingdom, Kaden is her old friend who rescued you and dug out your eye before throwing you into the Abyss as a slave.

Zenia's have no connection to Allura or Kaden, you just hate them because of everything they've done to you. You can copy Sigil abilities by drinking their blood... Is that part of Cayla's power?" Ria asked but Alice shrugged.

"I don't know. It's something very recent to me."

"What the f*ck. Do you realise how absurd that combination of scenarios are right? You have a ghost in your body that might wake up whenever you come into contact with these... relics of the past. And considering the gate led to the f*cking depths of the Abyss, perhaps that past is filled with Abyss Lords like Allura.

Who the f*ck knows since the beast, for all we care, could be 9 star difficulty." Ria questioned while scratching her hair.

"Then we take into account the things you can do. Flames that burn away Abyss power that no one has seen, heard or known of. Not only that, but because this weird Raven guy, who dug out your bloody eye and implanted the Eye of a dead person into your body that's called Cayla, the Abyss is acting all weird?"

"Seems correct." Alice nodded.

". . . Can I have some of your mead? I need something to wash down what in the flying f*ck you have just told me." Ria groaned while Alice gave her the flask.

Ria had to admit that these circumstances scared her, especially the beast that was about to break out.

However, she couldn't deny that a part of her was intrigued.

This unknown history of the Abyss.

Chapter 163 - 163: Aura From The Terminus

After taking several mouthfuls of mead, Ria exhaled out in satisfaction and handed back the flask.

"I'm guessing this is not something people should know. Since if that Eye grants you so much power without acting like a Sigil, I can imagine that a lot of powerful people will want to dig it out of your skull.

Plus, if it can affect the Abyss in such a manner that it's better to leave it dormant, maybe it's something far more primal and ancient than we might expect... F*cking hell..." Ria groaned as her mind struggled to comprehend and accept all of the information.

"You are using quite the colourful language today." Alice chuckled while Ria rolled her eyes.

"You expect me not to swear after dumping this on me?" Ria replied while giving Alice a 'are you serious' face.

"True."

"So what now? Is there anything we should've done with the gate?" Ria asked curiously. If it had such a reaction towards Alice and tried to establish a pathway down, perhaps there was something Alice needed to find out.

But with such a beast guarding the entrance, going in would simply be suicide.

"I'm not sure... Cayla only said the relic might give me a boon or misfortune. I suppose this could be considered a boon?" Alice shrugged, showing Ria the mark that now appeared on her chest.

"I suppose we can always mark this place down right? Ask Allura about it when she contacts us."

"Mnm. For now though, let's head back." Alice nodded as she adjusted her outfit and started to climb out of the Howling Depths.

Tracing their steps back, they arrived back at the surface and eventually back to the camp.

Seeing that the Raven's Watch group isn't back yet, the two could only assume they were still collecting the Sylvian Essence.

Once they arrived at their caravan, Alice could feel fatigue washing over her.

She could feel a warmth seeping out from the mark over her chest as she was unable to keep her eyes open.

"I'm... Just going to sleep for a bit." Alice muttered.

"Alright. If it's Cayla again, say hi to her for me." Ria chuckled as she stood guard for Alice.

Nodding her head, Alice closed her eyes and fell asleep.

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[I must congratulate you o' master mine. You hath lay claim to the crown mine old owner left behind. The symbol of her sovereignty.] Cayla's voice rang out as Alice could see Cayla walking next to her.

"Was this what you wanted me to find?"

[Nay. I had not known that the crown would await thee. I merely sensed a connection. But with each interaction master has with mine old owner, her spirit would taketh over thee momentarily. Are you afraid?]

". . . A little."

Alice couldn't deny that the feeling and thought of having her body being taken over with her unable to do anything scared her. But aside from the anger and sadness that Allura's master seemed to harbour in her memories, her presence felt warm.

"She said that this is a sign. For a new inheritor, for me to rebuild what is lost and claim what she left behind. Do you know what her words mean?"

[Once again I must say no. Mine old master is... An anomaly to say the least. She is not someone people can be compared to nor is she someone that can be comprehended by the conscience of someone such as I. But if she hath giveth you her crown, she does not bare ill will.]

[If anything, she looketh upon thee with favourable intentions.] Cayla chuckled as she leaned down and pressed her finger against the mark on Alice's chest.

"Can you tell me what this crown does? What it changed in my body?"

[I know a portion of its capabilities. After all, I'm now far more awake than I was before, am I not? The crown grants thee power and sovereignty. While you may not know what it represents, it is something that many dream of obtaining. Just know that it is also a protection against the reaches of the Abyss.]

Hearing this, Alice paused and contemplated Cayla's answer.

"Are you saying you're fully awake now?"

[Thrice I must answer with no. You can consider this to be what humans considers to be... Sleep talking. You may rest assured that I have not fully awakened my full potential.]

"One last question Cayla." Alice asked as this was a thought that's been on her mind for a while now.

[Ask away.]

With the power that Cayla holds, how the Abyss has reacted to her awakening as well as the connection to the depths of the Abyss, Alice wanted to ask Cayla regarding Allura's master.

"Your old master. Is she... Is she an Apostle?"

Upon hearing this question, Cayla was silent. She simply stared at Alice, contemplating how she should answer without putting Alice in danger.

[Knowledge can grant upon thee mastery over life. Yet some knowledge is better left untouched and unknown. Mine answer to thee could bring you much danger. So I cannot verify the truths you seek from me and I know that Allura would not want thee to know too soon. But as you are my master, if you wish to know, I can only comply.] Cayla warned.

". . . I see. Alright, I will ask Allura when I see her again." Alice nodded.

[Thank you for your understanding. However, there are more pressing matters mine master. With the pathway formed between this layer and the deepest reaches of the Abyss, even if it's merely for a moment, the influence would reach out and corrupt the beasts on this land. It is not safe for the people to rest within the forest.

The aura emanated from the depths of the Abyss, Terminus, is one that drives the coldest grasps of death into even the hearts of Lords. If embedded into a beast, they will fight with the desire of taking everything down with them.

[This ravenous fervour is not one that Hunters can deal with.] Cayla warned.

Hearing this, Alice realised what Cayla was warning about.

"Ellie and her friends are in danger..." Alice muttered.

[Exactly mine master. But now that you have laid claim to the relic left behind, I will re-enter mine slumber to consolidate the power within your body.] Cayla smiled as she flicked her finger, forcefully sending Alice out of her mind realm.

[Mine master is such a curious soul. If she was to discover the true identity of my old owner and what Kaden expects of her, I wonder how she'll react? I know that in her heart, she prizes the connection between her and Allura. Perhaps if Allura was to ask she wouldn't hesitate. Yet to taketh on the role that was owned by my old master... is no ordinary task.

But to think mine master thought that she was an Apostle... *chuckle*] Shaking her head, Cayla slowly disappeared from within the realm as she gathered her strength to help Alice's body accept the crown.

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Jolting awake, Alice had a frown on her face but sighed as Cayla probably wanted to rest as soon as possible.

Standing up, Alice tapped Ria on the shoulder.

"We need to leave. Ellie and the rest of the Raven's Watch are in danger and so is his camp. The portal we opened was one that leads to the Terminus, deepest layer of the Abyss. Cayla mentioned that the beast will go into frenzy when exposed to the aura of Terminus." Alice explained as Ria's expression was serious.

"If Cayla is warning you then I'm guessing the beasts aren't something that the Raven's Watch can handle."

"Mnm. It'll be hard for us to convince the camp by ourselves so the best move would be to help the Raven's Watch. Once we bring them back, we need to leave this forest as soon as possible." Alice nodded while running out of the camp with Ria following closely behind her.

"Do you even know where they are?" Ria frowned.

"I do. Isabella is holding one of the blood orbs that I made. It holds my blood. We know the general direction they ran in, as long as I get close enough, I'll be able to sense where they are. Or at least, where Isabella is."

Since this was a direct byproduct of their actions, Alice didn't want any danger to befall the Raven's Watch party.

'Ellie is also not in the right state of mind to fight something that will stop at nothing to tear out your throat. If Ellie fumbles, the party will try to cover for her and that'll only lead them to more danger!'

Activating her first Sigil, Alice stomped down and dashed forward.

*BANG!!!

"What the!" Widening her eyes, Ria was shocked at Alice's speed as she didn't expect this kind of acceleration that rivalled her own in the past! The difference here was that her's was focused on speed while Alice's first Sigil was merely physical enhancement!

'Is it because of the crown?' Ria thought to herself while activating her own Sigils so that she could catch up to Alice.

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In the dim light emanating from the lake, Ellie's heart pounded in her chest as she stared at the swarm of monsters emerging from the shadows around them. The gnashing of their teeth, the grinding of their scales and their growls echoed through the air, sending shivers down her spine.

Each of their eyes were blood shot and hungry for flesh, each one radiated killing intent that chilled her to the bone.

Her bow quivered in her trembled hands as she desperately tried to notch an arrow only for it to drop on the floor. Fear gripped her mind as her once confident aim faltered. Her party were injured and exhausted having fought off the first wave but they kept coming.

"Ellie! We need some range support now!" Finn shouted while Isabella was trying her best to heal him using some Abyss Blood.

Griffin was the only one holding back the army of beasts and they were pressed against the wall, unable to retreat or run forward.

Without Ellie's support, they were going to die.

"ELLIE! HELP HIM!" Kaida shouted as he cleaved through the wave using a half broken rapier. His arm had been torn off during the first wave and his arm had been hastily bandaged up so that he could keep fighting.

Blood poured from his wounds as another beast sunk its teeth into his shoulder, causing him to cry out in pain.

Surrounded by screams and blood, Ellie found herself unable to move.

Chapter 164 - 164: Finn's Choice

Where did it all go wrong? When she accepted this mission with the others?

When she met Alice? When Alice demonstrated her power?

Ellie didn't know.

All she could think about was death and the inevitability of it. The gap between the talented and talentless.

The power difference despite having more Sigils.

She wished she had never met Alice nor asked her to demonstrate her strength. If she had never met her, she wouldn't have understood the meagre strength she possessed and lived in blissful ignorance.

If it wasn't for Alice, she wouldn't have fumbled against beasts that would've been easy kills for them.

'Where did it all go wrong?' Ellie asked herself once more as tears formed around her eyes.

Reaching for her arrow, she desperately pulled it back before letting go.

However, her aim was off.

"ARGGG!! Watch where you're shooting!" Griffin shouted in pain and anger while wrestling with a large armoured beast with four limbs.

He grappled two of the arms and held them at bay yet the other two dug its nails deep into his torso, causing blood to pour onto the ground.

Gritting his teeth, Finn turned around and grabbed Ellie by the collar.

"Get yourself together! We can't afford mistakes like this right now!" He lectured but he saw the fear deep in her eyes.

He knew she wasn't getting better and this fight could only rely on the four of them excluding Ellie.

Jumping up, Finn latched himself against a tree to look for a way out of this swarm.

However, the densely packed beasts of the Abyss refused to reveal a gap.

"Damn! Griffin! Keep to the walls and push to the right! Isabella! Take Kaida back and patch him up! He's getting eaten alive out there!

I'll open a way to the right! Make sure you run through when I tell you to!" Finn shouted as he reached into his bag.

Every Hunter owned one of these. A vial of blood for emergency use.

The power it granted was one that could turn the tides of battle, but the side effects were not something a Hunter dared to trifle with.

He was given two options. Either drink the vial or try to push out without its power. But he couldn't risk the safety of his companions on his desire to remain 'human'.

Taking a deep breath, he opened the vial and stared at the crimson liquid that shimmered from the lights.

The Abyss Blood, an ambrosia of forbidden might for a hefty price.

With no more time to waste, he swung his head back and poured the contents into his mouth.

The moment the blood touched his tongue, Finn felt an abyssal surge of power course through his body. It was as if the primal power belonging to the Abyss Beasts possessed his body, awakening a never before seen power from his flesh as changes occurred to his body.

His body convulsed as luminescent blue flames started to dance around him, the blood working its way deep into the core of his being.

Sharp elongated teeth pierced through his lips, transforming his once human visage into that of a fearsome half man half beast. Upon his head, twisted black horns erupted with demonic elegance and curved back.

His hair, once a mundane brown now erupted into a wild flaring display like the mane of a beast. Strands of white replaced his original colour while black scales emerged along the edges of his face, neck and arms.

Finn's body which was once human was now an amalgamation of human will and Abyssal might.

Yet, along with the surge of power came a sense of cruelty. Finn could hear the dissonance of the Abyss, whispering into his mind. Its thoughts and will polluting his own, urging him to slaughter. The boundary between Finn and the will of the Abyss blurred.

He staggered back, overwhelmed by the feeling before pulling himself together and wrestling his conscience from the depths of the Abyss. He now stood, understanding the price he had now paid for this power.

Clenching his fist, he rushed towards the swarm of beasts and slammed his hands down.

Luminescent flames erupted out as ice formed wherever they touched!

With a path of beasts now frozen, Finn created a blade of ice and slammed down with all of his might, shattering the statues and opening a path out.

"TO ME! RUN! DON'T LOOK BACK!" Finn screamed out as Griffin threw the beast aside, allowing it to tear a chunk out of his torso. With his remaining strength, he grabbed Kaida and Ellie who were out of commission.

Isabella followed behind as she was responsible for support hence she was still able to move.

Seeing that Griffin and Isabella ran past him, a smile crept up on his face as he turned around and slammed his fist into the chest of the beast that Griffin was fighting.

Letting out a roar to drag out as much strength as he could, Finn watched as blue flames and ice erupted from within the beast, ripping it apart as the blood was frozen before it could touch the ground.

"Finn!" Griffin shouted, noticing that Finn wasn't planning on leaving the swarm.

"LEAVE! DON'T LOOK BACK! LIVE WELL MY FRIENDS!" He shouted out, slashing the beasts that tried to get past him. He had to stall for as long as possible so that they could escape.

Gritting his teeth, Griffin turned around while Isabella hesitated.

"What are you waiting for!" He shouted as Isabella bit her lip and ran behind Griffin.

Seeing that his friends were leaving as per his orders, he smiled in satisfaction. Surrendering his mind over to the Abyss, he bit down on the neck of a beast and ripped it apart.

Allowing the primal urge to wash over him, Finn was no different to an Abyss Beast as he clawed away at the horde. There was no longer any reason to his actions, all he knew was that he had to KILL!

"ARG!!!" Letting out a cry of pain, he could feel the claws of Abyss Beasts piercing his torso as the last embers of his life slowly fizzled how. Gathering as much power as he could, blue flames erupted out with his body as the epic centre of the blast.

An ice age washed over the region as the trees and beasts were all frozen solid.

###

Griffin couldn't say anything. All he could do was carry Kaida and Ellie while Isabella followed. He could feel the vibrations through the ground, the expansion of power and his friends final shout in defiance.

However, the malevolent aura behind them continued to surge out. The beast swarm was not stopping.

"Go ahead without me! You need to warn the caravan! They have to leave as soon as possible!" Griffin called out as he understood his current state. He was running on nothing but adrenaline while blood continuously leaked from his body. But Isabella was different, she was naturally fast and as the assassin of the group, it would be an easy task for her to reach the caravan.

"I'll be fine. The sooner you notify them, the faster they can prepare." Griffin smiled softly after seeing Isabella's hesitance.

Clenching her fist, Isabella nodded.

"Don't fall behind."

"Who do you think I am? Now go!" Griffin chuckled.

Stomping down, Isabella rushed forward as fast as she could. There was only one hope on her mind, Alice! She had to find Alice!

The demonstration from the other night, if she was capable of such power, she should be able to help Griffin.

Finn had sacrificed himself to buy them some extra time, she didn't want to see more of her friends disappear!

###

"You... Can put me down..." Kaida muttered weakly as he could barely keep himself conscious.

"Shut up."

"I'm no help to... anyone right now. If you put me down, I can stall them for you. What else can a one armed swordsman do anymore?" He smiled before coughing up some blood.

Even though Isabella had patched him up, he could feel his wounds reopening as the healing blood was unable to heal the rest of his wounds.

Before Griffin could reply, Kaida mustered some strength and forced Griffin to let go of him.

"Hah... You can't even hold onto a dead man like me. Go ahead, I'll buy some time for you like Finn did." He groaned while forcing himself to stand up.

"And how much time can a half broken twig like you stall for?" Griffin scoffed.

"A few seconds give or take. But better than nothing." Kaida shrugged to the best of his abilities.

But despite his strong words, he could feel fear gripping his heart.

He didn't want to die but things have already reached this stage. He was broken and wounded, no use to anyone. Only dead weight.

"Then let me help. The longer we stall for the better no?" Griffin sighed while Ellie froze up.

"N-no!" She cried out as this was all her fault. If she didn't panic they wouldn't have gotten so injured. If she didn't screw up her role, Finn wouldn't have had to sacrifice himself.

She couldn't let these two pay for her mistakes.

"Just go back with Isabella will you? Try stay away from danger next time." Griffin chuckled as the roars of beasts slowly grew louder.

Grabbing Ellie, he mustered as much power as he could and threw her as far as he could, not wanting her to remain here as the beasts will soon arrive.

Widening her eyes, Ellie felt her chest tightening as she was unable to let out her voice. She could only pray, pray that someone will come save them.

***BANG!!!!**

From the skies, a bolt of radiant lightning crashed down as four motes of lightning transformed into a spear.

"I'll hold them off! Help me when you're done with them!" Ria shouted out as Alice caught Ellie before rushing next to Kaída and threw a vial of healing blood into his mouth.

"Here's your portion. Take them away." Alice threw a vial towards Griffin before unsheathing her blade. Running forward, she activated her second Sigil as violet flames appeared on her blade.

'Destroy as much as you want, I allow it!'

After receiving permission, the flames roared out in joy as the flames pulsed out with anticipation for slaughter.

Chapter 165 - 165: Stygian Shadow Drake

"What are we dealing with here?" Ria asked as she could clearly feel the bloodlust from the forest.

"Three stars and four stars. All of them extremely pissed off."

"Alright. I'll take the fours you take the threes." Ria chuckled as the first beast launched from the shadows in an attempt to claw Ria's head off.

But before it could reach Ria, a vertical slash cleaved the beast in half as violet flames burned on its wound.

"Alright. We don't need to kill them all, just enough so they can reach the caravan and help with the evacuations." Alice nodded while adjusting her grip.

"Need my blood or you good?"

"I'll be fine." Alice shook her head as she rushed towards the left side of the forest while Ria dealt with the right.

'Most of the ones charging at us are cannon fodder. Or at least what the 'leaders' consider them to be.' Alice thought to herself as she glanced into the crowd of beasts and noticed one beast in particular, not doing anything and merely observing the situation.

Knowing what the aura of Terminus could do to a beast, it seems as though it has taken advantage of the situation and assumed a leadership role.

'If we want to disperse the swarm, we need to kill it so the beasts lose their commander. But doing so means we'll be in the middle of the swarm. Just killing him doesn't mean they stop being blood thirsty.'

Pausing in her step, Alice bent her body back as a scythe like arm swiped above her in an attempt to separate her upper torso. In one swift motion, she twisted her body and slashed the arm while the violet flames roared out, spreading across the body of the beast.

Unlike the beasts she had thought when she was in the howling depths, the flames weren't hindered from spreading and Alice allowed them to do whatever they wanted. With this in mind, the flames spread freely from the beast, consuming everything and jumping to the next target.

'Letting these flames do things by themselves saves me some stamina. I can probably threaten the main beast with a long range attack and force it to back off.'

Narrowing her eyes, Alice snapped her finger and jumped onto of a tree branch.

Taking a deep breath, the violet flames started to converge towards the tip of her finger as Alice aimed towards the beast in the back.

She didn't want to unleash a full power Nova Core as doing so would exhaust her to the point she could no longer fight. What she needed was a warning shot.

Something that holds great power but didn't take her out of commission.

Fiery strands of violet flames swirled towards her as she took care not to absorb too much.

'I just need enough to form a stable orb.' Alice thought to herself as she noticed some of the beasts attempting to stop her attack.

Jumping down, she fended them off with the Bloodflame Blade. Each attack was slow and predictable as they were naught but bloodthirsty beasts devoid of intelligence.

In this aspect, Alice was grateful for the effects of the aura.

Adjusting the grip on her blade, she parried the punch of a three star beast that launched her into the air due to the force. But this is exactly what she wanted as she aimed her finger towards the leader.

The air around her crackled with energy as she fired the orb, allowing it to unleash the dormant power from within.

***BANG!!!**

The orb tore through the first beast of the swarm, shredding a hole through its torso while setting the remains ablaze with violet flames. Beast after beast succumbed to the power as they launched themselves at the attack in a futile attempt to stop it.

But with each beast that died to its radiance, its power only seemed to grow as it opened a path through the swarm.

The leader of the swarm, shocked at the display of power, wanted to dodge out of the way but it was too late. The flaming sphere of destruction was rapidly approaching its location as the beast roared out in defiance. Its blood shot eyes glared at the orb as black and red crystals formed a halo around its mouth.

At that moment, the beast released its own attack to fend against the Nova Core as crackles of crimson energy erupted from the gaps of each scale to form a breath of energy.

Jumping back, Alice sheathed her blade and started to run towards Ria as they should start making their way back to the caravan.

Her violet flames will stall the horde as it was allowed to spread freely amongst them, sustaining itself from the flesh of the beasts.

Upon arriving at where Ria was fighting, Alice couldn't help but notice the corpses of four star beasts strewn out around the forest as each had holes pierced through their heart and head with a bolt of lightning.

The echoes of thunder raged forth while Alice looked around for Ria and spotted her manifesting orbs before turning them into bolts of lightning to kill the surrounding beasts.

"Ria!" Alice called out, getting her attention.

"We're falling back. My fire is stalling the leader and the others. No need to tire ourselves out too much."

Hearing this, Ria nodded her head as the two started to run back.

Turning off her resonance, Ria panted heavily as keeping it on was exhausting. However, if she didn't use her resonance, killing four star beasts in the dozen would be far more difficult than what she would be capable of handling.

"How was your side?"

"I'm letting the fire do its thing. It still takes some power from me but as long as the weak beasts are dying to it, it'll keep burning." Alice replied while glancing towards where she had just come from. She could see the flickering purple lights signifying the movement of her flames.

"But if the leader is smart, they'll probably isolate those affected by the fire. It was able to counter a small scale Nova Core that I had fired off earlier." She sighed while Ria was shocked.

Even if it was a small scale attack, it was still shocking to hear that a beast was able to block it.

Before Ria could reply, she felt a surge of blood lust behind them as she immediately turned around and reactivated her Resonance.

*BANG!!!

From the darkness, a beast of awe-inspiring grandeur rushed out. Its massive form moved with unmatched ferocity as its black fur shimmered in the moonlight.

The beast's mane, a cascade of midnight black flickered like flames around its neck. Black horns and scales could be seen around its head and body as it seamlessly blended with the rest of its fur.

With a single swipe of its claw, it was able to send Ria tumbling back as the armour around her arms cracked apart while blood poured through the gaps.

"Ria!" Alice cried out in shock as she could see the name above the beast.

[Stygian Shadow Drake - ★★★★★]

"It's got five stars!" She shouted out while unsheathing the Bloodflame Blade.

Before she could even attack the beast, she watched as the tail appeared in front of her face. Widening her eyes, Alice knew that if she was to allow the attack to connect, the damage done to her would be unthinkable.

Tilting her head to the side, she was barely able to dodge the tail swipe as the Drake clawed towards her in an attempt to crush her under its weight.

Gritting her teeth, Alice relaxed her body before sliding out of the way.

*BANG!!!

The weight of the beast caused the ground to sink down as it pulled its claw back, ready for another attack.

"B*stard! Over here!" Ria shouted out from above as she gathered all of her lightning into a spear and threw it down only for the beast to disperse the lightning through its fur and redirect it with its tail, throwing the lightning back at Ria.

"!!!"

Twisting her body to the side, Ria was barely able to dodge the lightning as she understood this beast was not something she and Alice could deal with right now!

Taking a deep breath, she gave up on the offensive and threw a small bolt of lightning next to Alice and activated her fourth Sigil, teleporting next to her.

Even without saying anything, they both knew the dangers and had to leave fast!

"Go on ahead, make sure the caravan is ready to leave. I can stall it with my lightning. Once everything is ready shoot some fire into the air so I know." Ria smiled as she was the best one out of the two of them to stall this beast.

Furrowing her brows, Alice wanted to say something but decided not to. The resolve in Ria's eyes meant that she was not taking no for an answer.

"Use this powder. It should negate its power for a little bit. Be careful not to inhale it yourself." Alice nodded as she handed Ria a vial of powdered blood that she was experimenting with.

Giving the beast one last glance, she rushed towards the direction of the caravan while sounds of lightning could be heard from behind.

She needed to hurry them up as fast as possible so that they could leave without the beast catching up.

However, upon arriving at the caravan site, Alice paused in shock. All of the merchants were still packing their crap without a care while Isabella was arguing with them.

"We have to leave! Now! They're going to catch up at any moment!" She cried out, hoping that they would just leave.

"Not yet! I'm sure we can wait a little longer! Do you have any idea how expensive this is? We have to make sure everything is in order!" One of the merchants shouted back.

Griffin and Kaida were too injured and fatigued to act against them as the Hunters were employed by the merchants to keep them at bay.

Seeing all of this, Alice could only feel her anger increasing as these people cared more for their merchandise than danger. They weren't the ones holding back the swarm nor did they know the true extent of the danger.

Gritting her teeth, killing intent exploded out of Alice's body as she unsheathed her blade.

"Either leave now or I will burn everything to the f*cking ground!"

Chapter 166 - 166: Retreating From The Emerald Glade

"Either leave now or I will burn everything to the f*cking ground!" Alice shouted while raising her sword above her head.

The sudden surge of killing intent attracted everyone's attention as some of the merchants frowned at her threat.

"Who the hell do you think you are? You're just a standalone Hunter. Can you even pay for the damages caused to my wares?" One of them retorted. Just as he finished his sentence, a blade of blood appeared next to his head.

"I'm the person trying to save your lives. If you treasure your wares more than your f*cking life then keep packing! Everyone else who wants to live stop packing and prepare to leave! The swarm is right behind us, if we don't leave now we won't be able to leave at all!" Alice shouted.

"She's right. The swarm behind us is not something we can handle no matter how many Hunters we have." Griffin squeezed out as he forced himself to stand.

While they had plenty of Hunters at the camp, they weren't used to fighting as a group. The swarm would easily tear through them.

Cedric was hesitant before nodding his head.

He was already leaning towards the opinions of those from the Raven's Watch but it was hard to convince the others.

"Anyone who wants to leave come with me! We're packing up now! Drop everything you don't need!" Cedric shouted out as the Hunters under his employment started to follow his orders.

"Dammit Cedric! Do you know how much everything is worth here you bumbling moron!"

"It doesn't matter if we're all dead! You can stay behind and take my wares for yourself if you want." Cedric scoffed while having his Hunters carry Griffin and Kaida onto the carriages.

"Where's your friend?" Isabella asked as she rushed over to Alice's side.

"She's holding off a beast right now. It's not something we can handle with our power. Once we start leaving, I'll send her a signal so that she can catch up to us." Alice replied while sheathing her sword.

Just as she was about to make her way to Cedric's carriage, her path was blocked by two Hunters under the employment of the merchant she had just threatened.

She could clearly sense the hostility in their eyes as she took a deep breath and sighed out.

"If you want to die just say so."

Hearing her threat, their eyes twitched for a moment before one of the Hunters rushed forward with his blade to his side.

Taking a step back, Alice dodged his swing before twisting her body and kicking up with her leg, knocking him on the wrist and forcing him to drop his sword.

In one swift motion, she unsheathed her blade as black and red flames coated the edge. Slashing in a downwards arc, the blade tore through his arm with ease before cleaving through his torso.

She had coated her blade with a thin layer of her own blood so that the moment her blade caught aflame, it would produce the fumes to stop his Sigils from working.

It allowed her to kill him before he could fight back while the other Hunter stared in bewilderment.

Pointing her blade tip at his face, Alice glared in silent warning.

Raising his hands in surrender, the Hunter took a few steps back, no longer wanting to give her any trouble.

"Let's go. How many carriages are wanting to leave immediately?" Alice asked as some of the merchants were still ignoring her warnings.

"Four." Isabella replied. She wanted to thank Alice for saving them but this was not the time. They weren't in the clear yet.

"Alright."

Jumping onto the fourth carriage, Alice glanced back into the forest while Cedric ordered their retreat. They needed to leave this region and pray the beasts won't continue to chase after them.

With everything prepared, Alice took a deep breath and aimed her finger at the sky. Activating her second Sigil, violet flames started to swirl around her as it converged into an orb.

*BANG!!!

Firing the orb into the sky, Alice waited for it to reach the necessary height before detonating into a ball of violet energy.

"Was something about to attack?!" Isabella asked in a small panic but Alice shook her head.

"No, just sending a signal to my friend."

Clenching her fist, Alice waited while glancing towards the direction of the forest. Her heart wouldn't rest easy until Ria was back safe and sound.

*BOOM!!!

Hearing the distant thunder, Alice sighed out in relief as a bolt of lightning flashed across the sky. From within the light, Ria appeared, battered and wounded with blood dripping through the gaps of her armour.

Spotting the carriage, she threw another bolt of lightning before teleporting down and crashing against the carriages.

The sound of wood planks breaking startled the driver but Alice didn't care. She rushed next to Ria and rummaged through her pouch for any Healing Blood she had left.

Ria, once full of energy and life now lay bloodied and wounded in the midst of the broken planks. Cuts marred her skin, her clothing was torn and stained deep with her own blood. Her hair, now dishevelled and soaked with sweat, clung to her forehead.

Her gaze was blurred with fatigue and relief seeing that they were now leaving this forest.

Thankfully, there was one vial left and Alice quickly poured the contents into Ria's mouth.

"Took you a while... To send the signal." Ria chuckled weakly as she regained some of her vitality but she was unable to move freely. Despite the healing blood, she could feel pain from across her entire body.

"Sorry. Dipsh*ts cared more about their wares than their life. I can assume they should be coming face to face with the beast right about now." Alice scoffed while glancing back before focusing her attention back on Ria.

"We need to get you to a healer. There's only so much this vial of Healing Blood can do for you." Alice sighed.

"Erm... I have some healing blood if you don't mind..." A small voice called out as Alice glanced up, noticing it was Ellie.

Her eyes were dulled by the weight of guilt and sorrow. The sadness in her expression was clear to all as her shoulders sagged under the burden of her actions having caused a death in their party. The death of Finn.

Her hands trembled as she tried her best to hold the vial of blood steady for Alice as she understood that without Alice, Griffin and Kaida would also be dead.

Even now, the final stand continuously replayed in her mind, her mistakes and her lack of action.

Seeing this, Alice was silent.

'If I didn't touch the relic... Would the beasts have gone out of control?' Alice asked herself. Had she not followed the mark, perhaps they wouldn't be in this situation.

But what is done is done. All she could do was to apologise.

"Thank you. And sorry..." Alice sighed as she accepted the vial of blood.

Forcing a smile, Ellie walked away and sat down in her own carriage while the injured Kaida and Griffin were laying down on the seats.

Kaida cannot continue his life as a Hunter anymore. The healing blood needed to repair his injury was far above their pay and even if they sold everything, they wouldn't even be able to match a fraction of the price.

"I'm sorry..." Ellie sobbed as she clenched her fist. The tears rolling down her face as she wished everything was a bad dream.

###

Leaning against the outside of the carriage, Isabella was silent. Their party was now over, Finn is dead, Kaida is maimed and Ellie's mental is broken from her mistakes and her fear of death.

Looking down at the vial in her hands, Isabella sighed. She could no longer bring herself to keep researching as it was done for her party in the first place. She wanted the knowledge so that she could keep them safe and prepared but there was no longer any point to it.

Making her way back to Alice, she noticed that Ria had fallen asleep while Alice sat next to her, guarding her safety.

"Is something wrong?" Alice called out, noticing Isabella by the door.

"Ah no. I just wanted to give you my research results. I won't be needing them anymore." Isabella smiled bitterly as she pulled out a stack of parchment with her handwriting and diagrams scribbled across the surface.

"I have some theories that I've written about on the sheet but most of it is in my mind since this is just notes.

"But basically, the compressed orbs seems to have reduced effectiveness when ingested. Naturally, that accounts for the side effects too. However, if merged with some other blood with higher purity, it seems to be able to bring out the latent potential of the blood.

Boosting the effects while keeping the side effects low." Isabella explained while showing Alice an experimental vial of blood that she had created.

"I'm not sure if this is applicable for healing blood but that's my main theory on what you can do with these orbs. This vial of blood right here is made using the orb you gave me. Its effects are giving you heightened reaction and sensitivity while also boosting your physical power. Side effects have been reduced to the point where just drinking one vial won't do anything to you."

"Is that so... Thank you, I'll keep these research notes in mind." Alice smiled as she accepted the vial of blood as well as the parchment sheets.

Opening her mouth, Isabella wanted to say something but in the end chose to stay silent and leave the carriage.

It was something she also discovered in her experiments but didn't make any notes as it was unconfirmed.

There were traces of what could only be described as... 'life' in the blood orb. As though it was trying to reform itself. It seems to resonant with the realm and gain power from it. Yet something was limiting the power it could gain and eventually, it 'died'.

Isabella had too many theories but no evidence. She could only keep the thoughts to herself.

Looking up at the moon, she sighed and wondered what kind of life she should live now.

"Maybe I should be a baker." Isabella muttered, retreating to her own carriage and resting her mind while the howls of Abyss Beasts echoed out in the distance.

Chapter 167 - 167: Sealed Terminus

A desolate landscape stretched as far as the eye could see, a realm torn by relentless battles, dances of blood and the flames of war. The ground, once verdant and full of life was now charred and withered, littered with the countless corpses of man and beast alike.

The scent of blood hung heavy in the air, a reminder of the battles and violence that ravages on.

As far as the horizon reached, corpses painted the ground.

Despite the gruesome reminder, the sounds of battle continue to rage on. A symphony of clashing blades, desperate roars and explosions from Sigil abilities. The very ground trembled in response to the strife as each clash left another mark on the scar riddled realm.

Above the sea of war, the moon loomed closer than ever. Its crimson glow casting an eerie light upon the battlefield as though it was a giant unliking eye, witnessing the carnage below.

*BANG!!!

A serpentine beast erupted from the ground. Its scales gleamed with dark light and with a malevolent roar, it unfurled its wings that blocked out the sky and cast a deep shadow upon the field.

The beast ascended into the skies as bright blue energy gathered beneath the scales and snapped open its mouth. A torrent of searing flames rained down upon the approaching army. A waterfall of destruction engulfed everything in its path as the dragon reared its head back and let out a roar of triumph.

Yet from the flames, a single woman stood while smoking a cigarette. She took a deep drag and sighed out in satisfaction.

"Not bad for a lighter. The flames are just right." She smirked before tossing the cigarette aside. Raising her hand above her head, Allura snapped her finger as luminescent red energy flashed across the skies, forming countless crosses that hovered above the beast.

Yet before she could launch her attack, a blade of shadows erupted from the dragon's shadow, cleaving it in half.

"Dammit! Gin! That was my kill!" Allura clicked her tongue while Gin appeared next to her and shrugged his shoulders.

"You shouldn't use your powers on weaklings like that. Don't forget what we're here for." Gin reminded but Allura understood what he meant.

"I'm just trying to get back into shape you know? I've stayed a neutral party for far too long. I'm no longer in my prime." She shrugged.

"Speaking of which, seems like Alice and Ria ran into something pretty weird."

Hearing this, Gin furrowed his brows and paused.

"What do you mean?"

"A portal was opened to Terminus. I'm not sure how they got their hands on a gate but it was damaged so the path is incomplete. Good fortune on their end since something terrible would've been allowed to escape Terminus. But they haven't used the life saving tools we gave them so it should be fine." Allura explained as she glanced to her side and noticed that Gin was preparing to leave.

"You know even if you leave now at your top speed, you won't make it in time, right?"

". . .Tch. So will the path reopen?" Gin sighed as Allura shook her head.

"No. It collapsed on its own and can't be reopened anymore."

'Master must've left something for her successor. The fact that it opened a path to Terminus means it should be near the heart of Ayr...' Allura thought to herself as she didn't think Alice would come across something like this in her absence.

"That's good then. Terminus has been sealed for centuries, for good reason too. If any of the Apostles get their hands on anything that resides there, it could spell disaster for the others." Gin nodded in relief.

Information about the Terminus is not known to many. Those on the surface know it as the deepest layer of the Abyss.

However, the true identity of the Terminus is more akin to a prison. A realm to keep the Lord level beasts in check. Beasts of pure rage and instinct with an oppressive bloodline. Power with no chance of communication.

Just one of these beasts being allowed to reach the surface means the cooperation of several Abyss Lords to keep it in check. If an Apostle was to move, the others would follow as it means they receive a weapon of war.

But no one knows how or why the Terminus was sealed. No Lord can get in or out of the layer with only hints of its influence left upon the layers above.

Gin could only hope that Ria stays out of trouble. It was already unsettling knowing the Eclipse learned above his survival. As long as the Eclipse doesn't discover Ria, he could rest easy.

###

Keeping watch while sitting on the roof of her carriage, Alice sighed in relief after seeing no beasts chase after them. With the caravan now far from the forest, she could finally let her guard down.

'Hopefully the beast'll calm down after a while. If they keep maintaining their current state, the nearby cities will need to figure out a way to deal with them. I don't think that beast is something that can be killed easily unless you get several City Lords on the level of Lord Kallus.' Alice mused to herself as the toughness of that beast was no joke.

Ria's lightning was reflected with ease and she didn't even get a chance to attack the beast.

But the biggest question remains, what was its ability?

'It only used physical attacks against me and Ria... Why? Or was the reflection its ability?'

Tapping her finger, Alice couldn't help but wonder what kind of ability she could get if she was to drink its blood.

Licking her lips, a smile slowly crept up on her face before she quickly shook her head and dismissed the thought.

It was far too dangerous of an endeavour for her right now. Her Sigils, while strong, didn't provide enough physical reinforcement for her to match these beasts of higher difficulty.

Just reacting to the drake took everything out of her never mind trying to fight back.

'I think it's time for me to hunt for my third Sigil. I need an Anti Hunter type Sigil that works with blood, my flames and possibly enhances my innate potential.'

Once again, she is reminded of her desire to get her hands on the blood belonging to the Scarlet Winged Monarch.

A beast that could keep fighting for as long as its will held on. Killing the beast would be no easy task but it is not immortal. The fact that the Zenia's were able to get their hands on its blood meant that it was doable.

'Hardest part would be to track down the beast I want to kill. I have a benefit over the other Hunters in the Abyss since I can pick my bounty whenever I want instead of going to a communal point or asking a Shaman. But... Trying to find a beast while others are contesting it is going to be hard.' Alice groaned in her mind.

She could still remember Allura telling her how families would hire people to keep the Hunt secured or make sure no one could get close to them.

The information she obtains for the beast she Hunts will definitely be known to others. She'll always be one step shorter when it came to Hunting.

'Seems like we'll have to rely on rumours instead... If I look for rumours of beasts that have ties to blood, I can then choose it as my bounty. I need to be proactive for rumours rather than waiting for things to be confirmed. If I wait too long, the others will get the Bounties from the Shamans and I'll lose my greatest asset in Hunting.'

Sitting up straight, Alice knew what she had to do first once they arrive at one of the major cities. That was to immediately access the Underground and purchase any rumours regarding signs of beasts with relations to blood.

'If there are news for dried up corpses, it should provide me a good lead since most beasts that have blood abilities will seek to drain their victims.'

Making a mental note for herself, Alice made her way down from the roof and entered her carriage where Ria was still sleeping. Fatigue took over her as her adrenaline wore off. She no beasts threatening to take out their caravan, Alice was free to rest her mind.

###

The following morning, the entire caravan was exhausted as they had travelled without rest through the night. They decided to make camp during the day and let those who haven't rested rest while the others kept watch.

Breakfast was sombre as Ellie was unable to eat while everyone was present. Seeing Kaida's current state was enough to dissuade her from eating.

Griffin had recovered decently but Isabella still warned him from making any large movements. The wound he took to his torso had taken a large chunk out and their Healing Blood could only do so much for now. They needed to find more potent vials if they wanted him back in peak condition.

Griffin and Kaida gave their thanks to Ria who was still feeling rather exhausted having over exerted herself in stalling the beast.

As for Cedric, he decided to handle the fee for the healing blood they would need as if it wasn't for them, the beasts would've caught up to them and taken them out. Not only that, as a merchant, he knew that Griffin would be a great asset and protector with the Raven's Watch disbanding after this mission.

Thankfully, the rest of the journey was uneventful as they travelled peacefully to their destination. The city of Eldoria, a city focused on Abyss Engineering.

Chapter 168 - 168: Arriving in Eldoria

Nestled between towering spires of brass, iron, rails and countless towers decorated with gears and pipes was the city of Eldoria. A city of innovation and discovery in the blood arts of Abyssal Engineering.

Every inch of the cityscape was covered by numerous contraptions and vehicles. It was simply night and day in comparison to the other cities that Alice and Ria had visited.

Even from afar, they could see the skyline of Eldoria, a masterpiece of metallic towers and flying ships.

"What in the hell is that???" Alice blinked in sheer confusion upon seeing an airship powered by Abyssal Engineering.

A vessel of pulsating energy through the clear pipes and an array of ethereal power keeping the ship afloat in the abyssal skies. Wings, ribs and even the scales of a beast were used as reinforcement of the ship. A man-made construct in awe or perhaps mockery of the very beast that was slain to craft it.

"A flying ship. It's not even the most impressive feat of engineering that people have come up with you know?" Ria smiled after seeing Alice's childlike curiosity regarding the technical marvels of Eldoria.

She too was the same at the start and Luke was the one who educated her on much of the information on this topic. The notable inventors, the pioneers of such magic without Sigils.

"A flying ship... Do people use them to travel often? Like to hunts?" Alice asked curiously but Ria shook her head.

"There's no point. Stronger beasts can take it down in a heartbeat while the weaker beasts don't require such a contraption. It's more... A proof of wealth for the rich. In terms of actual practicality there's basically none. If anything, the rails are more interesting. They're already making tracks leading to some of the larger cities." Ria explained while pointing at the rails in the distance.

Small carriages with people inside could be seen being transported upon the rails leading to the different levels of the city.

Just as she was about to say something, Alice noticed a small figure running across the carriages while holding a bag in her hand.

Squinting her eyes to try get a closer look, she saw that the figure was being chased by a mechanical serpentine beast along with several cat like contraptions. Their bodies, a union of metal, bones and scales.

Snapping open its jaw, the serpentine beast shot forth a glowing green dart towards the figure who tried to dodge but was not fast enough. The dart made a cut across her leg as her body instantly tensed up and stumbled over the edge while the cat like contraptions transformed into a bird and caught her.

Seeing this, Alice was shocked that they were able to create man-made beasts of the Abyss using this Abyssal Engineering.

"Unlike actual beasts that come from the Abyss, these ones follow instructions without failure and you don't have to risk your life training them either." Ria shrugged.

'Well that's what Luke told me anyway. He did mention that he could hijack the controls of these beasts if he tampers with the inner workings should he wish. They work off blood so changing the blood within should change its master.'

"Heh~ Is that so... I wonder what's the strongest beast you can make. Having them guard the people without Sigils would make any place safer for living." Alice mused while her eyes scanned the city.

Each scan would offer her new contraptions to wonder about and theorise the uses of such items.

"Seems like we can buy some pretty interesting items here. They're probably going to be expensive though..." She sighed thinking about the cost of such contraptions.

"They're actually more affordable than you expect since they're mainly made for those without Sigils. The rich can afford to gain 'real' power from the Abyss while people usually just cope with these... imitations of the real deal. I think you can buy a mechanical beast with the same power of one Sigil for a months worth of wages." Ria shrugged.

Beasts on the low end of difficulty could be dealt with easily by slaves and mechanical beasts as they're essentially normal beast with some extra power. The higher difficulty beasts on the other hand couldn't be imitated so easily as they have an advantage in physical power.

These mechanical contraptions can only replicate the power of beast but was held back by the durability of the metal they were made from.

Hence some of the higher end products were fused with beast scales and bones to reinforce its durability.

As they approached the city, they showed their identification before going their separate ways. Cedric needed to report regarding the issue in the forest along with the deaths on this journey. Not only that, he needed to report the merchants that remained behind as missing. He couldn't confirm if they had died or not even though the answer was likely dead.

Meanwhile, the Raven's Watch party made their way to the Church of the Moon to see if there were any ways to help Kaida.

As Alice and Ria stepped upon the cobblestone streets of the city, their ears were assaulted by the clatter of mechanized carriages, the hissing of steam and the sounds of trains that passed above.

Covering her ears, Alice furrowed her brows as this city was far louder than what she had expected.

Meanwhile, Ria seemed used to the noise as she had visited many cities in the past with Gin.

"Let's see... The workshop district is down the main road and into the heart of the city. It's roughly a 30 minute walk but we can get there faster using the trains. The Hunters Guild is next to the workshop district and it seems like the Underground is pretty open with its ties.

There's a mark next to the Guild symbol showing that they're there too." Ria remarked while checking the map of the city that had been placed on a large board next to the main entrance.

"What do you want to do first?"

"I want to visit the Underground. I think it's about time to go for my third Sigil." Alice admitted while taking a sip from her flask. She was basking in the view while enjoying her favourite mead, a luxury.

"Oh? So soon." Ria paused in surprise as she didn't expect Alice to go for her third Sigil already. However, when she thought about what Alice would need to deal with in the future, it was no surprise that she was in need of extra strength.

"I want to look for some rumours first. If we just go for news on beasts that are discovered, there's a good chance that others are already on their way to kill it. Plus, I'm pretty sure they keep the good beast for those that pay a high price." Alice shrugged.

"Mnm... You're not wrong about that. Alright. But maybe we should replenish on some healing blood first. We pretty much emptied our supply after trip."

Looking into her pouch, Alice could see that she only had one vial of her own blood left and one vial of blood belonging to the five star Hunter. She wasn't sure if she could still use his blood as it has been quite a long time now without use.

She wasn't sure if it could expire or not but there could be dire consequences in relying on unknown factors. Hence she avoided using it even when her life was threatened since there were other options. It was only when all options ran out that would she even consider using the blood.

"Sure. We can also do a little experiment since Isabella mentioned that I could decrease the side effects if I use the compression method. Might make it safer for use since overdosing on healing blood wouldn't be great."

"True. I'm still feeling the side effects from Black Blaze Blood. Just a small increase in sensitivity to fire." Ria sighed. If it wasn't for how much danger they keep running into, she wouldn't need to keep consuming so much healing blood.

She was thankful that they've been drinking a variety of blood so the side effects could never stack up and leave a mark on her body, forever changing it.

Some weren't so fortunate as they would keep drinking the same type of blood. Maybe it was due to price or perhaps addiction but doing so meant the side effects would keep piling up until you were taken by the Abyss.

Hearing this, Alice couldn't help but feel a sadness creep into her heart. She understood that the longer a Hunter's life goes on, the easier it is for them to fall to Abyss Blood rather than the beasts that reside within the Abyss.

Ria was no exception.

Sooner or later, she too would show the symptoms of consuming Abyss Blood.

Thinking of this, Alice couldn't help but wonder if there was a way for her to share her resistance. But that was greedy of her.

'If the Zenia scholars couldn't figure out a way maybe I can't either...'

"What are you thinking about?" Ria asked curiously, noticing that Alice's mood had dropped after her mention of Abyss Blood.

"Sorry. Just thinking we should reduce how much Abyss Blood we drink or else the side effects could get dangerous. Especially for you since you drank a lot last time." Alice shook her head.

"Ahaha don't worry, I know. It's why I keep buying different types of healing blood. But there are only so many variants we can go for before we get duplicates or we fork out more money for the expensive ones." Ria reassured as the two made their way to the Apothecaries that is located in the same district of the Hunters Guild.

It was only to be expected as Hunters were the main customers of these Apothecaries.

They decided to avoid the trains for now as they required the funds for the healing blood and soon, they arrived at the store called Veridian Blossom Apothecaries.

Chapter 169 - 169: Veridian Blossom Apothecaries

As they approached the Apothecaries, the scent of flowers wafted through the air, surprising Alice. She had expected the heavy smell of medicine or iron, yet the fragrance of herbs and botanicals was all she could smell.

The shop was adorned with potted plants and hanging baskets filled with herbs. From the outside, it seemed no different from the residential homes used by the civilians, but the large sign above the door and the wooden emblem hanging on chains told a different story.

Pushing open the door, a melodic chime rang out as Alice and Ria stepped through.

Inside, the apothecary was a large open space separated in the middle by a worn counter. The counter showcased an array of delicate glass vials containing a myriad of blood and tinctures. Each bottle was hand-labeled, detailing the effects, side effects as well as the price of the vial.

Behind the counter, countless herbs, flowers, and fungi were displayed for the visitors to see. Immediately, Alice recognized some of the herbs used, often paired with the blood that the Zenia's would feed her. A selection of poisons and medicines aimed to make a vial of blood more effective or flip the effects to make it extra harmful.

Closing her eyes, Alice could distinctly recognize the different scents blended into the aromatic smell that filled the store.

'Most of these can be turned into powders that enhance the blood's effect and counter the side effects of healing blood. Seems like the owner has chosen to focus on healing and supporting type Abyss Bloods rather than the offensive types.'

Soft light from the street filtered through the large curtains, casting a mellow glow into the store as though it were daylight, illuminating the treasures of this apothecary.

Alice and Ria weren't the only ones inside this store, as a variety of customers explored the narrow aisles, seeking the right blood for their next hunt or simply exploring the options the store had to offer.

The air hummed with hushed tones and whispers as customers conversed.

Standing behind the polished counter filled with precious Abyss Blood, a man of quiet wisdom and a gentle demeanour welcomed them. He wore a crisp white long-sleeved shirt neatly tucked into his suit pants, complemented by a sleeveless vest marked by intricate floral swirls. His black wavy hair framed a pair of round glasses, hiding a set of kind yet tired grey eyes.

Despite the tiredness that lingered in his gaze, there was an undeniable depth of knowledge etched within. A bounty of wisdom.

"Ah... Unfamiliar faces. Welcome to my apothecary. What kind of blood are you looking for today?" He asked with a smile. His voice was a low, melodic rumble that carried authority within the establishment, each word comforting yet powerful.

"We're looking for some healing blood. We're trying to vary the ones we choose so the side effects don't stack up." Ria took the initiative as the man nodded and reached behind the counter.

Even in the simple gesture of reaching for a catalogue, he was measured and deliberate, emphasizing the professionalism he took in his work. There was not a single movement done without purpose.

In one swift motion, he retrieved a weighty catalogue from the counter. Its cover was worn from years of use. As he held the catalogue, his fingers moved with seasoned familiarity across the pages before stopping near the end.

"I believe these should fit the requirements. These are a little harder to procure than the rest, and not many apothecaries would have them in stock. Their price is a little on the high end when you take into account their potency. But if you are seeking rare healing blood to avoid side effects, these are the perfect candidates."

Placing the catalogue on the counter, he turned it upside down so that Alice and Ria could read the contents themselves.

Without even seeing the effects, Ria's gaze was focused on the price and felt a dagger pierce her heart. When they were buying Black Blaze Blood back in Zadash, it had only cost 5 gold per vial, high for the standard citizen but affordable for Hunters.

Yet here, the cheapest vial of rare healing blood costs an astounding 20 gold per vial. Essentially, half a month's worth of earnings for the common family for ONE VIAL.

It would take most of their current funds to just buy one healing vial, never mind restocking their pouches completely.

Seeing the smile on Ria's face twitch, the man understood that this must be above their current funds. However, there was nothing he could do about it. Due to the difficulty of obtaining these healing bloods, the price was set in proportion to the dangers.

"We have some variants that are less costly but carry a little more danger in the side effects. It simply means you cannot take them often unless you do not mind transforming a little." He interjected and flicked the pages a little, showing a new selection of blood that cost 3 gold per vial.

Despite being much cheaper, the trade-off was that they were all essentially one-time-use vials.

"Is it common for apothecaries to have such a large selection? Some of these are rather rare." Alice asked curiously while scanning her eyes over the names of these vials.

'Moonshade Lotus blood. A potent healing blood that can heal a variety of injuries. Side effects include making you extremely delectable for beasts and practically a come-eat-me sign for them.'

She had personally felt the regenerative ability of this blood and found it to be one of the least painful variants of plant-based healing bloods.

"We pride ourselves in our supply of supportive and healing-type bloods while most apothecaries are focused on offensive types. It will be hard to find a better apothecary that offers more healing blood nearby."

"I see..." Nodding her head, Alice looked over the selection with Ria, and eventually, they chose to buy 4 vials of Frostshroud Willow Blood with the side effects of decreasing body temperature, causing you to possibly fall into a short hibernation.

However, if you consume more than four vials in your lifetime, your blood will begin to freeze from within. If you continue to drink, the blood will eventually burst from your body and solidify into the shape of willow leaves. Hence the name Frostshroud Willow.

"Thank you for your purchase. Is there anything else I can help you with?" He asked while placing the catalogue back where he got it from.

"Actually, yes there is. Is there a way for me to tell if a vial of Abyss Blood has, let's say... expired?" Alice asked curiously as the man tilted his head at her question for a moment before nodding his head.

"Generally, it depends on the way the blood is stored. Most vials used to store Abyss Blood that is sold can keep blood 'fresh' so long as it is not opened. Naturally, external factors can still affect the potency and side effects of said blood, such as heat. But there is a trick to determine how much... Potency is left in said blood."

The man explained before retrieving a small sample of blood from the back.

"Of course, to use this method means you'll have to open the vial. If you get a small sample of the blood you wish to use, you should smear the sample over your Sigil mark then partially activate your Sigil so

that the mark appears. Once you do so, the blood should begin to boil immediately, even if your Sigil ability is based on Ice. If it does not boil, it has lost its potency.

If it only bubbles rather than boils, then it'll do more harm than good on your body."

Rolling up his sleeve, he drew a line of blood above his forearm before activating his Sigil, and a mark appeared. Immediately, the line of blood started to boil before disappearing.

"This is a sign of blood that can still be used. I don't have any bad samples on hand, but remember, if there are any traces of the blood left after you activate your mark, you probably shouldn't drink that blood."

He explained, showing Alice his arm that didn't have a single trace of the blood, as it had boiled completely.

"Hou~ I didn't think there was a method like this." Alice remarked in surprise, as she didn't think something like this existed.

"It's not surprising that not many would know. Since most would usually drink the blood pretty quickly for their Hunt."

"Thank you for the tip." Alice smiled, bidding farewell to the owner and leaving the store with Ria.

"Are you wondering if the blood you got from last time is still usable?" Ria whispered curiously since she knew Alice could 'borrow' the power of Sigils from others.

"Mnm. It's been several weeks since then. The longer it goes on, the less inclined I am to use it since it could give the enemy a chance to attack while I drink. And if it doesn't give me power, then well... I die." Alice shrugged.

She wasn't able to use a proper extraction kit when obtaining this blood, so it was clear that it wasn't going to be pure. However, she wasn't bothered about the side effects. All she wanted to know was if she could still gain the power belonging to the man she killed.

Taking the vial of blood from her pouch, she smeared a line on her arm before activating her first Sigil.

Little by little, the blood started to bubble but was unable to boil and eventually, left stains on her arm.

"Seems like the effectiveness of this vial is practically gone." Alice sighed heavily.

'It didn't even bubble a lot either...' She thought to herself.

"Well, I'm sure we can find some better blood for you to drink later." Ria comforted.

"Either way, let's make our way to the Hunter's Guild. After buying those four vials, I only have 19 gold left. We can also ask the Underground to see if there are any rumours for beasts that you're looking for."

Nodding her head, Alice put the vial away into her pouch for now. She was going to dispose of the blood at a later date since she couldn't just pour it out onto the road.

Chapter 170 - 170: Purchasing Information

As they arrived at the Hunter's Guild, Ria made her way to the missions board to see if there were any quests they could do that'll earn them some quick coin while Alice looked for the Underground.

With the map saying that it was in partnership with the Guild, all Alice needed to do was find where the symbol of the Underground was.

Thankfully, it wasn't too difficult as the sign was hanging above what seemed to be the bar.

The hum of conversation and the clink of tankards filled the air as several Hunters could be seen sitting around the counter, laughing joyously about their most recent successful hunt.

The kind of beasts that tore apart their frontline, how they were able to heroically land that final blow and watch the beast topple over, bathing them in its blood.

As Alice neared, the barkeep approached her with a smile. She was a unique presence amongst the Hunters around the bar. Two elegantly pointed horns, reminiscent of bull horns, protruded from the side of her head while a vibrant purple flower was nestled into her right eye socket.

Her blonde hair was being drained of its original golden colour as silver decorated the edges of her hair. She had carefully swept her fringe to one side in order to hide the flower as best she could but it was unable to fully cover the bright purple petals peaking out from behind.

Immediately, Alice froze up as the visage of a girl she had slain with her own hands overlapped the barkeep. Her smile, her advice, her sacrifice and her final expression as Alice tore the life from her body.

Her breathing quickened as each breath was taken with great difficulty. She pressed her trembling hand against her chest, hoping to alleviate the constriction she was feeling but it continued to persist.

Gritting her teeth, Alice closed her eyes and tried her best to calm her mind.

What was done had to be done. She had no other option, but Lilia's blood stained her hands.

'I'm sorry...'

Little by little, she regained her calm and took a deep breath. Opening her eyes once more, the visage of Lilia disappeared and all Alice could see was the barkeep who was suffering from a similar condition.

"Are you alright dear? You look a little pale. Did something happen?" The barkeep asked with concern. Originally, she was going to ask Alice what she wanted to order.

However, the moment Alice laid eyes on her, her gaze constricted and she started to breathe uncontrollably.

"Sorry just... thinking of old friends. I saw the symbol here, I wonder how I can order the services provided by the Underground." Alice shook her head and smiled.

She was here for a simple transaction, nothing more nothing less.

Hearing this, the woman paused for a moment before nodding her head and smiling.

"Of course, what kind of service are you looking for? Auctions? Black market? Or information?" She asked, gesturing for Alice to take a seat.

"Any information on rumours?"

"Oh? Depends on what kind of rumours you are looking for. We also offer our services for investigations if that is more in line with what you are looking for." The barkeep smiled while showing Alice a menu of drinks.

"Rumours on potential beasts. Blood based if possible." Alice replied while picking the option for mead.

"Interesting. Very well, I can compile some rumours for you. Let's see... As this seems to be your first visit to us, Miss Agnelia, it will be offered at a discounted price. There are no records of you having accessed any Underground branch personally while the City Lord reached out to us on your behalf." The barkeep smiled mysteriously as Alice paused in surprise.

She didn't know how the woman had enough time to find out about the things that have happened so far but that simply proves how much of an information powerhouse the Underground is.

"No need to be on guard Miss Agnelia. It's simply protocol for us to understand our patrons. Your master is a valued customer of ours so we must treat you with a certain amount of courtesy lest we incur her annoyance. As for the information, it will depend on the package you wish to purchase.

"We have the most basic package costing 10 gold, level 2 package that costs 25 gold, level 3 costing 50 gold, level 4 costing 1 platina and level 5 costing 10 platina. Your discount will halve the prices of these

packages." The barkeep explained briefly as she placed Alice's drink in front of her along with a sheet of parchment containing details of the packages.

Excusing herself for a moment while Alice checked what she wanted to purchase, the barkeep attended to the other patrons.

'Let's see...' Glancing over the sheet, Alice took a few sips of the mead and paused to enjoy the flavour.

After the initial burst of sweetness came a flood of floral scents then followed by the rising spice that warmed her up from within.

Appreciating the taste of this mead, Alice focused on the sheet that was presented to her.

The main difference between the packages was validity and variation. For the more expensive packages, the Underground would send their own trusted people to seek out rumours and information for you while the cheaper package would simply be providing you with a list of fresh rumours from reliable sources.

As their funds were limited, even with the discount, it was impossible to go for anything more than level 2.

Tapping her fingers on the counter for a little while, Alice contemplated her options before gesturing to the barkeep.

"Level 2. What kind of rumours can I expect with level 2?"

"We will give you a list of all the rumours and potential leads that match your requirements, even if they are a little far out in comparison to this city. For example, and this is a freebie for you, there are rumours pertaining a blood beast near the city of Whiteridge.

Several carcasses have been found with their blood drained completely and black string like residue left within the body of the victims.

"There are two candidates on what the beast might be. Vitalis Veilstalker or a Bloodscar Constrictor. Both leave similar marks and we have a map of where the victims are found along with potential areas of search." She explained as Alice raised her eyebrow.

The information given by just a level 2 package far exceeded what she had originally anticipated. They even provided names and a map of where it might be.

"Hmm... Alright. Then can you get me a list of rumours near this city or on the way to Isilvaria? Blood based and difficulty doesn't matter. Just give me as many as you can." Alice requested as the woman nodded her head.

"Payment will be given upfront and the total comes up to 12 gold and 50 silver pieces. Delivery of the information should be a few hours after payment or at the latest, tomorrow evening. If there are new rumours within 24 hours of receiving your list that match your requirements, we will provide it for free. After 24 hours, the service can be deemed as concluded. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes it is. Though you'll need to wait for my friend Ria since she carries the funds for us." Alice nodded.

"Then it seems like I don't need to wait too long."

Behind Alice, Ria was approaching while holding a parchment in her hand and had overheard part of the conversation.

"Did you get the information you needed?" Ria asked curiously, taking a seat next to Alice.

"Not yet, it's gonna cost 12 gold and 50 silvers." Alice shook her head as Ria paused before nodding.

Since this was in preparation for Alice's third Sigil, 12 gold and 50 silvers was a small price to pay.

Paying the required fee, Ria also ordered a quick drink as she presented the next contract to Alice.

"Three star difficulty killing contract. Kill the Unbound Demonette. The reward is 250 gold pieces!" Ria grinned with excitement.

"250 gold for a three star hunt? Really?"

Alice couldn't believe it. 250 gold was astronomical even if they took into consideration that it was a three star hunt. The usual price for a three star hunt was only 100 to 150 gold pieces but this was practically double!

Immediately, Alice felt like this was too good to be true.

"Are there any catches to it?"

"Aside from the fact that it's stronger than the average three star hunt, no. A few have tried to complete this contract but they either died or ran away. It's gotten to a point where the Guild has decided to offer some extra coin from their own pocket in order to raise the priority for this contract." Ria shook her head.

Furrowing her brows, Alice wanted some context on the Hunt before they risked their lives. But first and foremost, she wanted to know what kind of beast they were dealing with.

Closing her eyes for a moment, she retreated back to her mindscape as she immediately filtered through the spectral illusions of beasts until she found their target.

The Unbound Demonette looked no different from the average person you could find on the street. She was cloaked in an ethereal darkness that seemed to obscure her figure while her skin, devoid of any colour, stood out in the darkness.

Her entire body and facial features seemed to have been sculpted meticulously as her skin didn't 'look' like it had the texture of skin but rather that of porcelain while also being strangely organic.

One feature that stood out was her smile. It stretched from ear to ear, revealing the rows of razor sharp teeth. She smiled impossibly wide as if she could not contain the joy from within and with a loud crack,

blades started to erupt from her body with the sound of grinding metal mimicking the howling shriek of laughter that sent chills down Alice's spine.

That was what they were going to deal with.

The Unbound Demonette, a beast in the guise of a lady. A demon's smile and blades that shrieked in laughter.