

Abyssal A 221

Chapter 221 - 221: Becoming Arunya's Assistant

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Glancing up at the girl in front of her every now and again, Arunya couldn't help but wonder in silence.

She had posted her commission to get some help with her studies so she could be better prepared for the exams. The Department Head, for unknown reasons, has locked herself up in her lab and refused to come out.

Therefore, she could only request help from the Guild.

'She's fast...' Arunya thought to herself, seeing the efficiency of Alice. How she was able to pick the right tools and hand it to her. How she was able to deduct what needed to be done next and even make preemptive moves on the body in front of her.

'Where did she come from? Who did she study under?'

Even without saying what she needed at times, Alice had it prepared. To Arunya, it felt like she was working with someone who was extremely experienced with the physiology of an Abyss Beast.

It wasn't just blind luck either. There was an air of confidence and expertise about her that revealed more than what she was letting on.

As they continued their work, their speed slowly increased over time as Alice familiarized herself with Arunya's workflow and pacing.

What would've taken her a while to finish was done in just over two hours.

Walking over to the other table, Arunya started to document her findings and results before giving Alice a brief glance.

"When you said you had never been an assistant, were you the operator instead?" Arunya asked curiously but Alice shook her head.

"I was neither the assistant nor the operator. You can just think of me as a spectator."

It wasn't wrong. She was spectating her own operation after all.

"?" Tilting her head, Arunya wondered how a spectator could obtain such skills. But it didn't seem like Alice was lying either.

"So did I pass?"

"You have. Take this watch. It will inform you of the schedule. It'll also serve as an identification so you don't need to spend time getting a temporary pass from the office. We'll be doing 8 hours per day, maybe longer depending on the experiments but I doubt we'll be going into overtime.

If anything, we may finish earlier but I will pay you the promised 30 gold per day." Arunya explained, placing a watch next to her while scribbling down some notes.

"Are there any questions? If not, we're done for today... Since you did well, I'll pay you an extra 20 gold for today."

Taking the watch and small pouch of gold, Alice was about to shake her head when she remembered something.

"On the sheet, it said that I'll be able to use the equipment provided by the Academy. How would I go about doing that?" Alice asked curiously as she wanted to see the transformation of her blood during the one Sigil Resonance along with other changes in her body.

"Ah... you can use anything from my lab. Just put it back when you're done with it. Though... if you're looking for equipment outside of my lab, you'll need to let me know what you need it for so I can borrow it from the Academy." Arunya replied after a brief pause.

"Here's one set of keys to my lab. Once I finish noting down my findings for today, I need to go visit the Department Head. Just remember to lock the door when you leave."

Handing a set of keys to Alice, Arunya focused on writing down her notes and indicated that there was nothing else she needed to talk about unless Alice had any questions.

Seeing this, Alice simply nodded and started to browse through the lab. She was familiar with a lot of the equipment here but there were a few she wasn't sure about.

'I'll focus on the stuff I know. That way she doesn't know what I'm doing with the tools. If I ask for a specific tool, she might become curious.' Alice mused to herself. From what she's seen thus far, Arunya was someone who was deeply intrigued by Abyss Blood and how it affected the body.

Alice knew that if Arunya was to find out details about what she was planning to test, there would be questions.

'There are... three? No, four tools I need if I want to examine the changes in my body. Seems like she's already got two of them...' Alice thought to herself as she continued to look around the lab.

After a while, Arunya closed her notebook.

"Remember to lock the door when you're done. I'll take my leave." She reminded before making her way out.

Looking towards the opposite mountain, she sighed and made her way down before taking the train.

As Elara's assistant, she needed to check up on the Department Head often as she would forget to eat. Naturally, she wouldn't die from not eating but doing so would cause damage to her body due to the Sigils and Abyss Blood side effects.

Elara doesn't mind it much but the same couldn't be said for Arunya.

Her thought process was simple.

It would be annoying to redo everything if the Department Head was to die. She'll lose her role as an assistant.

Stopping by the food court, she picked up a few dishes before taking the final train to Elara's lab.

Upon arriving, she knocked on the door.

"Professor. I'm here with some food. You haven't eaten yet right?" Arunya called out with the same monotonous tone as usual.

Not hearing a response, Arunya sighed and pulled out a set of keys.

"Ah! Just give me a moment Runi~ Surely you won't intrude when I'm not even ready right?~" Elara's voice rang out from within.

Frowning slightly, Arunya could hear that Elara was struggling to catch her breath as though she was doing some intense exercises.

*Sigh...

"Did you find a new Abyss Beast that caught your attention? You didn't even respond to me last time I came to check." Arunya asked as she could hear the door behind unlocked.

Entering the room, Arunya was hit by a wave of humidity, causing her to take a step back.

". . .Professor, please at least ventilate your room properly if you're going to explore your body rather than an Abyss beast." Arunya sighed as she closed the door behind her and opened every window in the lab.

"Ara~ It wouldn't do if people heard such vulgar noises come out of my room. I know I may be like this but I still have a reputation to uphold Runi~" Elara's voice rang out as she leaned against her door frame.

She was only wearing her bloodied lab coat with nothing underneath. Her bandages were loose and covered with her sweat while Arunya didn't even bat an eye to Elara's condition since she's done this before.

She may have been surprised the first few times but due to her side effects, she was unable to express such emotions.

"So what's got you excited like this? Ah... Also here's some food before your body starts to eat itself." Arunya asked, placing the food on the table.

"Fufu~ Thank you~ Runi is always so thoughtful of me. Ah and it's not a beast that's caught my attention this time." Elara chuckled, hopping over to the table. Her wet footsteps echoed through the lab with each step she took.

"Not a beast? Then is it a special kind of Abyss Blood?" Arunya tilted her head.

She couldn't fathom the thought of anything other than Abyss Beasts or blood getting the professor into a mood like this.

"Nope~ It's a person this time. Someone's stolen my maiden heartahaha~ Just thinking about it makes me excited again~" Elara narrowed her eyes while Arunya chopping down against Elara's head with her hand.

"Please not while I'm here."

"Boo~ You're not the least bit curious about who it is?" Elara asked curiously but Arunya shook her head.

"Whoever made you like this must be rather abnormal. I'd rather not interact with them if I can avoid it."

"Well that's fine. I'm sure you'll run into them eventually since they'll be taking the exams to enrol in the Academy. They're quite the cutie too~" Elara laughed as she started to eat her dinner to replenish her energy.

"How are your preparations? I'll be a little... busy these days so I won't be supervising. Not that you need it to begin with."

"Going well. I got a new assistant today, she works fast and efficiently. Doesn't talk much thankfully. She seems extremely experienced for someone who claims she was never the operator nor an assistant to these kinds of experiments." Arunya shrugged while walking into Elara's room.

Looking at her clothes that were strewn around the room, Arunya sighed as she bent down and picked up the pieces of clothing.

Pausing momentarily, she could still feel the moisture on some of her underwear before tossing it into the basket.

"Heh~ Do you have enough funds for them? A good assistant doesn't come cheap."

"I do. And that is also why you should increase my pocket money. If it wasn't for me saving over the course of several months, I wouldn't even be able to hire someone decent to help. Plus... 30 gold per session is still low for the risks in the lab." Arunya replied as she cleaned up Elara's room and put everything in the basket.

"You know our department is spread pretty thin on funding already even with some of my discoveries." Elara coughed lightly on the mention of increasing Arunya's funds.

"Only because of how much research material you go through professor." Arunya replied when suddenly, she felt a weight on her back.

Elara hugged Arunya from behind as she wrapped her arms around her neck while resting her head against her shoulder.

"Runi~ Should I pay you with my body~" Elara whispered, biting Arunya's ear.

*Flick!

Flicking Elara's forehead and forcing her to hop off her back, Arunya simply shook her head and walked away.

"Getting entangled with you on a physical level causes more troubles than whatever pleasure you may offer in the moment. Between momentary pleasure and funding for my research, I'll choose the latter thank you. Only the results of my experiments will grant lasting happiness.

If there's nothing else professor, I'll go wash these and return them to you later." Arunya replied, causing Elara to sigh and shrug her shoulders.

"Okay~ I'm here if you need a break from your experiments~"

Nodding her head, Arunya left the building, leaving Elara to finish her food before resuming her... activities.

Chapter 222 - 222: Alice's Self Experimentation

Finding herself an empty operating table, Alice grabbed a seat and several tools and placed them next to her.

'First experiment. How the blood changes based on the activation of Sigils.' Alice thought to herself as she sat down and placed her hand on the table.

Strapping her arm down, she narrowed her eyes and grabbed the scalpel. Without any hesitation, she cut into her arm, carefully avoiding her tendons, veins and arteries.

Controlling her blood so that it didn't spill everywhere, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Recalling the sensation of the one Sigil Resonance, Alice tapped into the power within, controlling the energy so that only her first Sigil was activated.

'Stage one activation has no issues. Curiously, it seems like there is a tether being formed within my body. The tether reaches out and links up with the Abyss, hence the appearance of Sigils. They could be called the pathways where we, as the host, and the Abyss perform the exchange of power.' She documented in her mind.

Little by little, the Sigil started to branch out from its initial spot, making its way across the surface of Alice's skin.

'More pathways are being forcefully opened, allowing an influx of energy to enter the body. It seems to be giving the first Sigil... More priority.' Alice narrowed her eyes.

Now that she was observing the changes carefully, she understood why Resonances required three Sigils rather than being forcefully activated by one.

Each of the three acted as a counterbalance while opening new pathways to the Abyss. By having three conflicting powers, even if they synergise, it creates a stable foundation for the transfer of power. By having one side become more dominant than the others while opening pathways, the structure of power within the body collapses.

Thus causing the side effects that Alice had felt before along with the Sigil trying to for lack of a better word, 'consume' the rest of the body.

Making a note of this finding, Alice narrowed her eyes and clenched her fist, forcing the deactivation of her first Sigil. Having done so once, she knew what she needed to do in order to stop the activation.

'Compared to the partial activation that Allura showed, it seems like my version is more volatile but grants more power in exchange. Allura is like slowly opening three openings and allowing the water to flow in slowly while my version is turning one on full blast while the others are dormant.'

With her initial observation completed, she moved to stage two.

Reaching towards one of the lab equipment that she had borrowed earlier, she started to connect her arm to the device with several tubes going into her veins and arteries.

While she didn't know the exact name of this device, she had seen the scholars use something similar before. It was one that allowed her to observe the changes and purity of her blood.

For the Scholars of the Zenia family, this was one of their favourite tools as they could watch in real time how her blood recovered from being Abyss Blood back to 'normal' human blood.

'Unlike the full Resonance, I can use this multiple times. Though the trade off is still unknown for now except extra fatigue and the crown above my head.'

Taking a deep breath, she activated her first Sigil that transformed her blood into a hallucinogenic poison. Watching the numbers skyrocket towards the boundary between normal blood and Abyss Blood, Alice verified Cayla's claims from a while back.

Those who obtain Sigils have already stopped being 'human' in a sense. Their blood was merely in the stages of transforming into Abyss Blood.

Then what would happen if she were to activate her one Sigil resonance?

Upon activating the Resonance, the needle on the counter immediately broke past the boundary!

Through her one Sigil Resonance, her blood had fully transformed into Abyss Blood!

'No wonder it felt alive. Using the one Sigil Resonance is no different to overdosing on Abyss Blood and transforming. In that sense, my arm was trying to f*cking kill me!' Alice sighed, looking down at the Sigil that was trying to spread across her body.

Perhaps this was a power that was only open to her due to her special constitution.

Deactivating the Resonance, she watched as the numbers returned to normal.

There didn't seem to be any lasting effects thus far.

'It doesn't seem like people are able to emulate this power, thankfully. Without direct control of the flow of energy and the ability to perceive it, people are still bound to the three Sigil resonance. If this method of Resonance was to be discovered, some stupid idiot would probably try it and die in the process.' Alice frowned.

However, she paused as she realised she had indirectly called herself an idiot. Who would immediately attempt a method used by Abyss Beasts to power up on themselves without any prior experiments?

Only a reckless idiot would.

Sighing softly, Alice removed the tubes from her arm before condensing the blood in the machine into a blood bead so that she didn't leave any traces.

Setting the device to the side, she was now left to her final experiment. One that she wanted to test out the most.

How her violet flames are able to burn the influence of the Abyss. How it could cancel out abilities upon contact.

She wanted to find out if she could use this to 'purify' the people influenced by Abyss Blood beyond the point of saving. If she was able to burn away the influence in their blood, would they turn back to normal?

Alice could remember the expression Allura made whenever she saw someone who was on the verge of transforming or someone who had been transformed.

If she could solve this issue, Allura wouldn't have to feel saddened by the state of this world and its addiction to Abyss Blood.

She wasn't doing it for the good of humanity. No, she was doing it for Allura.

This last test required her to use both machines to see the changes of the blood along with observing how the flames attacked.

The first was to track the numbers while the second recorded the changes in the blood and transcribed it onto a piece of parchment.

With the combination of these two devices, Alice wanted to see if it was possible to return Abyss Blood back to normal while also seeing how it was done.

Pulling out a few vials of Abyss Blood, Alice poured a sample into the first machine and recorded the numbers before creating a small flickering flame above her finger.

It wasn't exactly how Allura was doing it but rather she was creating the same effect through her third Sigil.

By constantly providing the flame blood to burn, she could replicate the finger lighter that Allura uses.

'If I directly apply the flame, it'll burn up the sample without leaving anything behind. That's not what I want. What I want is to 'purify' the blood. So please, don't just burn everything connected to the Abyss.' Alice thought to herself as the flames had a mind of its own.

Unless their goals were aligned, it was extremely hard to control. Of course, there's been a semblance of understanding between the two of them hence why she was able to use it however she wanted but for more precise operations such as this, she needed more authority over her flame.

Meaning the violet flame needed to surrender itself to her control.

Taking a deep breath, Alice tried her best to slowly lower the flame onto the sample.

As the flame drew near, she could see the numbers on the machine fluctuating rapidly between the two values of human and Abyss Blood.

Meanwhile, the second machine showed that part of the blood had already been evaporated. The values shown before the evaporation revealed that the values had decreased slightly but it was barely noticeable.

Continuing until the sample was completely evaporated, Alice picked up the piece of parchment and read through the transcription.

'Hmm... Seems like it's possible to some extent.' Alice thought with a sigh.

There was a slight issue with this. The issue was that the flame was too volatile. Just exposing the Abyss Blood near the flame causes it to start dropping in purity before burning up. Even though it had shown the possibility of purifying the blood, exposing the blood to this flame would kill the victim.

Scratching her hair, Alice was glad she didn't try to forcefully purify the blood of Allura's old friend. Otherwise, it may have caused him even more pain before death and that was the last thing she wanted to do.

Destroying the parchment with her fire, Alice prepared the second sample.

This time she wanted to control the flames in a similar manner to how she achieved the one Sigil Resonance. By observing the flow of energy and feeling its movements, she wanted to adjust the flow so that the flames weren't as volatile.

There was another idea but she didn't want to try it out in an enclosed lab. And that was the one Sigil Resonance using her second Sigil!

Through the Resonance, the abilities of the Sigil were increased. Meaning theoretically, she could further enhance the potential of her blood.

The first enhancement granted her flames that cancelled out the Abyss, what would the second enhancement do?

Regardless of the answer, she knew that she couldn't do it here. So for now, the only thing she could do was practice her control using the observation method.

But as expected, trying to control the flame this way didn't seem to yield the results that Alice had wanted. In fact, it did the opposite. By trying to control the flame directly using her control over this abyssal energy, it became more defiant and unruly, refusing her commands and trying its best to burn up the sample before she could see the results.

Seeing this, Alice could only sigh.

"Hm?" Noticing something strange, Alice couldn't help but furrow her brows and double check what she was seeing on the machine. The numbers that revealed whether or not the sample was Abyss Blood or Human blood was... in the negatives?

If Human blood was 0, Abyss Blood was 100, the effect her flames caused had turned the number into -100!

She knew the flame countered the Abyss but she didn't think it was the complete opposite side of the spectrum. If that was the case, where did this flame even originate from? What was the secret of her body?

Chapter 223 - 223: Hall Of Champions

Looking at the numbers, Alice had a frown on her face.

Even though she had gotten the answers she wanted, it opened up more questions than what was answered on her end.

Scratching her hair, Alice sighed deeply.

Using these numbers, it was natural to assume that there was probably another realm similar to the Abyss but filled with an opposing energy. Possibly the same energy as the flame.

But if that was the case, why was she the only one thus far who's shown this potential against the Abyss? Were the others taken away like she was?

'I doubt such a realm could exist without others knowing. Plus, Allura and Kaden don't seem to know about the nature of my power too. Not to mention... If it really was a natural counter then why would it be able to exist in my body? Especially with it being invoked by the powers of the Abyss itself.'

What she was doing was akin to lighting a flame using nothing else but water as fuel. It was simply impossible to perform. Yet this paradoxical ability manifested in her body and was one of the reasons why she was able to survive thus far.

With no other test she could perform on herself right now, she could only pack away all of the equipment she used and clean up the lab.

Looking at the beasts that were sealed within the containers, waiting for the next experiment, Alice couldn't help but press her hand against the glass.

On the beast, she could see her own reflection. Had Kaden not freed her, she may as well be no different from them. And yet here she was, helping another researcher dissect a beast just like what the scholars did to her.

'I suppose I'm quite the hypocrite.' Alice mocked inwardly. When it came to her own benefit, she didn't mind doing the same thing she hated so much.

After locking the labs, Alice decided to try and find Ria now that her work was done.

She was carrying Alice's blood bead, making it easier to track her down if they ever wanted to meet up.

Closing her eyes, she realised that Ria's bead was a little further than what she had expected since it was out of her detection range.

'The Combat Department is located under the Inverted World. It should be relatively simple to get to her from here.'

Making her way down the mountain, she took a leisurely walk to the Combat Department as she wasn't in any rush. With the experiments being finished earlier than expected, she had plenty of time to herself.

'Ria should've passed the initial test pretty easily if she's still around. Either that or she's already gone back to the Inn, but I doubt that.'

When it came to fighting one on one, Ria wasn't someone that could be defeated easily. Even for those with more Sigils than her.

As expected, Alice was soon able to feel the presence of Ria's blood bead. It seemed like they were currently training in one of those private training rooms she had seen on the airship.

Understanding that Ria was most likely busy, Alice couldn't help but wonder if she could borrow the facility and enjoy herself to pass the time.

Walking up to the doors of the Combat Department, she used her temporary pass to get in for now since she hadn't returned it yet.

Seeing as how people weren't bothering with her nor was there anyone to guide her around, this was a place that allowed you to plan your own training and use the facilities at will.

Looking around her with curiosity, Alice couldn't help but wonder about the quality of this facility. It was provided by one of the best Academies around after all.

The building itself was a vast network of corridors and rooms with countless signs hanging from the ceiling, telling her where to go.

Scanning her eyes through the different signs, she couldn't help but notice a name that caught her eye.

[Hall of Champions]

Contemplating to herself for a while, she decided to take a look. After all, she was basically here as a tourist.

Following the sign leading to the Hall of Champions, Alice couldn't help but notice that the people who were walking around her had decreased the closer she got. A few of them gave her a curious glance after noticing where she was going.

Pulling down her hood so that others wouldn't see what was underneath, especially the floating crown, Alice continued down her path and soon, there was only a single set of doors in front of her.

There was no one around anymore and upon this door was the depiction of several Hunters, each with a different weapon and armour.

'If it was dangerous, they wouldn't leave it unguarded. It's probably like a museum piece or something.'

Pressing her hands against the doors, Alice tried to push it open but realised the sheer weight of these doors. With no other choice, she had to activate her first Sigil before she was strong enough to push open the gates leading to the Hall of Champions.

As she opened the door, a golden light surged from below, lighting up the room and causing Alice to pause in surprise.

The room was just as if not bigger than the airship she travelled on with a single arena in the middle. Surrounding the arena were towering statues depicting the Champions. Golden letters inscribed upon the base, revealing their name and title.

[Lady Lyra – The Blade Dancer]

[Lord Aldric – The Berserk Star]

[Lord Alexander – The Liberator]

[Lady Scarlett – The Dawnbreaker]...

Alice could see 13 statues in total with their names lit up while several others that were hidden by shadows seemed to be dormant for now.

She could feel a strange sensation wash over her, beckoning her to the arena. A challenge for the worthy.

It was as though instructions were implanted into her mind, unable to resist its commands.

Taking a step forward, she made her way to the arena as she understood that this was not just a museum piece.

No, the command in her mind told her that this was a fight. A trial of combat.

Unsheathing her blade from its sheath, black and red flames lit up as Alice placed one foot on the arena.

At that moment, her Sigils manifested around her body. One on her arm, one over her eye and the last on her back.

'Seems like it's detecting how many Sigils I have. Interesting.' Alice thought to herself as she couldn't suppress the smile on her face.

Standing in the middle of the arena, the ground started to shift as miniature versions of the large statues manifested around her.

It wanted her to pick her first opponent.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice decided to pick the statue of Lady Lyra, the Blade Dancer.

Upon selecting her target, all of the statues crumbled to ash as the larger statues around the arena had their eyes light up with a fiery glow. Observing and judging her every move.

Killing intent erupted around her as Alice instinctively jumped back and gripped her blade. Her first Sigil roaring at full power, enhancing her physical power to its limit.

In front of her, motes of red condensed into a single figure that walked calmly.

Lady Lyra took slow calculated strides forward as her hair fluttered behind her. Her tall slender frame was covered with a set of gleaming silver armour. Each plate, meticulously crafted and designed to protect her while giving her as much movement as possible.

Strange silk like veils hung from the edges of her armour, covering her with a strange ethereal dress that shifted with her movements.

In her hand, she held a large twin blade that radiated with an ominous aura.

Her body seemed to be made entirely from energy as Alice couldn't make out the colour of her hair nor her eyes.

But in her moment of observation, she disappeared from her sight.

"!!!"

Holding her breath in shock, Alice could see a single blade slowly approaching her head.

Had it not been for Cayla, she wouldn't have been able to see the attack coming!

*CLANG!!!

Slashing up with her blade, she parried Lyra's attack and immediately assumed a defensive stance to recover her posture but Lyra continued her onslaught of slashes and stabs.

Twirling the twin blade in her hands with ease, her footsteps made it seem as though she was dancing in the midst of this fight.

But as the recipient of these slashes, Alice knew it was far from a simple dance. Each step allowed her to maximise the power of her attacks as well as the speed. As it stands, Alice could only defend but found it difficult to fight back!

Gritting her teeth, she slammed her hand down as blood spears shot out of the ground in an attempt to force Lyra away but she evaded the spears with grace.

*CLANG!!!

Lyra's cleave was met with resistance as Alice parried the attack to the side before flicking her finger.

From the blood spears, metal spikes rushed towards Lyra as she managed to jump out of the way at the last moment.

Alice wasn't fazed by the fact that Lyra avoided her attack. She simply wanted to create some distance between them and compose herself.

'This place is called the Hall of Champions. She's not someone I can take it easy on.' Alice thought to herself.

Lady Lyra the Blade Dancer. If her being was immortalised in this place, it meant her fighting prowess was recognised by all!

'Calm the mind. Trust in my instincts but don't lose control. Use the hunger to my benefit. Let the hunt begin.' Alice thought to herself as a smile crept up on her face.

Narrowing her eyes at the armoured Hunter in front of her, Alice rushed forward without fear.

Chapter 224 - 224: Lyra, Blade Dancer

Rushing towards Lyra, Alice adjusted the grip on her blade before creating several platforms of metal with strands of blood around the Blade Dancer.

Jumping up, she swung on one of the threads before launching a flaming slash towards Lyra. It wasn't her Sigil power but rather the passive effect of her Blood Flame Blade.

Had it not been for her violet flames, this would've been her main form of attack aside from her Sigils.

Brushing off the flames with a single swipe of her twin blade, she brought her fingers to her mouth before exhaling.

*KRRR!!!

Sensing danger, Alice jumped back just in time to see all of her blood being frozen in an instant while a cloud of cold mist manifested in front of Lyra.

'Ice powers huh? Tsk.' Alice thought as she snapped her finger.

Immediately, all of her blood erupted into a brilliant violet flame that melted the ice before lashing out at her.

Surprised by the cancellation of her ability, Lyra twisted her body and twirled her weapon around her, creating a storm of ice to counter Alice's flames.

If the flames were normal flames, this would've been enough. Unfortunately for Lyra, her flames weren't normal flames!

Latching onto the ice, the fire roared out in defiance while Alice circled around, setting up the perfect environment for her hunt.

Landing on one of her threads she observed Lyra's fighting style carefully, engraving it into her mind.

The way she moved, how she swung the blade and how she reacted to the flame's attacks.

But the more she watched, the deeper her frown grew. Even though her flames were able to counter her abilities, she was able to weave herself through the swirl of fire with ease and even redirect it using the movement of her blade.

Alice couldn't find an opportunity to attack, and if she was to force it, she'd only be exposing herself instead.

"!!!"

Widening her eyes, a spear of ice speared in front of her as Alice immediately swung herself back using her threads. Watching the spear pass over her head, she knew that she couldn't stay passive.

Her instincts were telling her to go all in and disregard her safety.

In this battle, she must be willing to take hits if she wanted to defeat her!

If she gets hit, hit back 10 times harder. If she gets cut, cut them back! If she loses an arm, take both of theirs!

Eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth.

Landing on the arena floor, Alice stomped her foot down and a pool of blood manifested around her.

She had wanted to pull the Blade Dancer into an illusion, but it wasn't working. Perhaps it was because she wasn't 'alive' and couldn't be poisoned. But she was limited to two of her Sigils if she excluded her Resonance and one Sigil Resonance for now.

Feeling a chill down her neck, Alice realised that Lyra had disappeared from her entrapment and appeared behind her, blade ready to swing down!

'She's faster than before!'

Rolling forward to avoid the strike, Alice couldn't recover her posture before hastily parrying the next attack with her blade. Each strike that Lyra sent out caused Alice to stumble back some more, making it harder and harder to recover.

No matter how many blood spears she sent out, Lyra was able to avoid them effortlessly.

For Alice, Allura was an insurmountable wall that couldn't be surpassed even with technique. Alice could reassure herself saying it was a difference of Sigil.

But for Lyra, Alice was outclassed in every aspect. Technique, composure, movement, speed, power everything.

Alice knew that Lyra had only showcased one Sigil ability so far! Two at most but not more.

Narrowing her eyes, Alice decided to risk it.

Lunging into Lyra's attack range, Alice focused her senses to their limits. She needed to keep track of the twin blades movements, her footwork and how Lyra dodged. She needed to consider all of this if she wanted to land her first strike against her!

Reinforcing her arm with her blood and metal, Alice used it as a shield against the twin blade. Ignoring the fact that it had cut into her arm even with all the protection she prepared, Alice slammed her shoulder into Lyra's chest, forcing her to take a step back.

Slashing up with her blade, violet flames roared out as Lyra side stepped the flame. But her weapon was stuck in place.

Curling her lips into a grin, Alice took advantage of this moment and grabbed onto the twin blade! Using as a bar, Alice jumped up and twisted her body, slamming her heel into the side of Lyra's head.

***BANG!!!**

Crashing into the ground, Lyra recovered from the kick as she stared at Alice who was bloodied and exhausted but the fire in her eyes refused to extinguish.

But there was something else that surprised the Blade Dancer.

A strange black metal started to morph around Alice's wrist as it connected itself onto the handle of her blade.

At that moment, Alice created her own twin blade and twirled it around her body before entering a similar stance to Lyra.

Taking it as a challenge, Lyra stood up. Her Sigils appeared across her body as markings could be seen on her neck.

Staring at one another, the two had a rare moment of silence before all hell broke loose. Both combatants rushed towards one another as Alice mimicked Lyra's fighting style.

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Department Head of Garret. The most powerful combatant within the Academy and the man whom the students call the Mad Demon.

He is a tall Hunter with a muscular physique. Each muscle looked as though it was chiselled from the hardest stone. He had short, untamed white hair that flared outwards and a goatee. He wore a pair of round red-tinted glasses that hid his fierce eyes radiating with power that seemed to pierce through anyone who met his gaze.

He wore a simple black shirt without any designs, a pair of baggy pants with a long black ribbon around his waist. The ribbon was adorned with blood flowers that was printed onto the fabric.

Red rope is tightly wound around his ankles, leading to a pair of wooden sandals. And finally, bandages wrapped around his arms.

Sitting in his office, Garret watched the students train in the facility and yawned in boredom. Even though they were talented, far more than what he exhibited when he was younger, they couldn't interest him.

They lacked a certain flare to them that simply didn't get his blood pumping.

Thinking about this, he couldn't help but think back to the recording that Xinbei had showed him. The technique, intuition and eagerness displayed by the girl clad in lightning stirred something inside him.

No matter what, he wanted her to pass the exams so that he could watch a fine Hunter realize their potential. He wanted to see a new addition to the Hall of Champions.

*BANG!!!

Bursting into his room, a woman struggled to catch her breath.

"S-sir!" She called out in a panic.

"Calm yourself. Did some idiot hurt another trainee?" Garret asked as it was rather strange for her to be this nervous.

"No sir. Theres *Pant* There's an outsider challenging the Hall of Champions!"

"The f*ck did you say?" Garret blinked, standing up in surprise.

The Hall of Champions, the pride and hardest challenge within the Combat Department. A special trial left behind by their predecessors at the time of their graduation from this Academy. Each a legend of their time.

The room was left untouched and unguarded as there was no need to guard it. The door to the trial will not open to anyone who did not meet the basic requirements imposed onto the room.

The only requirement they have discovered thus far was that coming into contact with the doors allowed the 'room' to read your history and combat experience. This'll determine whether or not you are worthy to challenge the Hall of Champions.

The other requirements were still a mystery to them but those who reached the pinnacle of the Combat Department at the time of Graduation could challenge this trial.

There was nothing to gain within the Hall other than to prove yourself.

"Did they find a new requirement in order to enter the hall?" Garret asked, wondering if someone from the Theory Department had discovered something but the woman shook her head.

"Forget it. Look after these brats. I'll check out the situation myself." He sighed, taking a step out of his room and immediately disappearing with a burst of wind that sent the woman stumbling back.

He wanted to see just what kind of dumb b*stard would challenge the Hall of Champions without proper preparation.

And if things start to look bad, he'll need to intervene and take them out of the trial.

Upon arriving at the Hall of Champions, he could see that a few Seniors of the Combat Department was guarding the Hall, preventing people from entering the spectator stands while the woman earlier was sent to bring him over.

"I know the situation, make sure people don't come in. I'll deal with it." Garret nodded, stepping through the secondary door.

There could only be one challenger at a time while the secondary door led to the spectator stands.

Upon entering the Hall, Garret wasn't quite sure how he should describe the situation. He recognised the summoned Champion, Lyra the Blade Dancer. A Hunter who was close to the realm of Abyss Lord yet was just short of reaching that pinnacle.

A woman who could be called the upper tier of six star Hunters.

And yet... There was someone else who was able to keep up with her techniques!

Not only that, but she was even replicating Lyra's prized fighting style close to perfection. It was as though she was looking at a younger clone of Lyra. Her understanding was shallow but she was catching up.

Blood poured from her wounds, but the smile only grew wider.

Just seeing Alice's current expression caused a chill down Garret's spine. It felt as though he was looking at a beast, unafraid of death, wanting to take at least an arm with them before they succumbed to their wounds.

Would she be able to catch up to Lyra? He wanted to find out.

And if she could, he wanted to poach her into the Department!

Chapter 225 - 225: Alice Vs Lyra

As her blade continued to clash with Lyra, Alice found herself unable to suppress the surging emotions within her body.

This rush of adrenaline and joy flooded her body as she slammed her foot down, kicking the blade away from her chest and ignoring the cuts she suffered.

Twisting her body, Alice kicked her other foot into Lyra's chest before following up with a slash with her makeshift twin blade.

However, her follow up attack was blocked.

Alice understood that her replication of Lyra's fighting style was rudimentary. She needed to fill the gaps with her own flare. Integrate the moves into her own fighting style.

With a gap being created between them, Alice sheathed her blade before entering a low stance. Rushing forward, she pulled her blade out of the sheath as a wave of violet flames rushed forth.

***BANG!!!!**

An explosion of vibrant flames lit up the arena! A storm of flaming dragons rushed up into the sky before crashing back down.

Within this violent storm of flames, Alice dashed towards Lyra without fear.

The Blade Dancer was silent despite seeing how her ice was having no effect against the flames.

Looking up at the flames, the Blade Dancer raised her twin blade and stabbed it into her own chest, surprising Alice who felt a chill down her spine.

Three motes of light erupted from Lyra's body as black armour started to coat her body. An elegant black dress fluttered behind her while a black crown appeared around her head, covering the upper half of her body.

Pulling out her blade, Lyra broke the blade in half, turning her twin blades into dual swords instead.

Blood dripped from the edges and froze over upon coming into contact with the cold mist around her body.

Manifesting her Resonance, a burst of energy erupted out. A field of ice flowers bloomed around her.

Twisting her body, she slashed down with her sword!

At that moment, through the view of Cayla, Alice felt as though the world had frozen over.

A singular wave of ice energy, a cascade of frozen lights and countless reflections through the ice shards. Its crystalline tendrils extending outwards, parting the flaming sea and plummeting the temperature in the arena in an instant.

Within the centre of this wave pulsed an ethereal light that cast an iridescent glow against the flames. Even the air itself wasn't safe as shards of ice materialised in the air and floated down.

In the wake of this energy, all that remained was a frozen tundra of ice and snow. The one raging inferno was quelled by the woman clad in a black dress within this land of cold.

Holding her dual swords, Lyra finally curled the corner of her lips up into a small smile and gestured for Alice to respond to this attack.

A layer of ice had already formed across Alice's body and she found herself unable to move from her spot.

Glaring at Lyra, Alice simply laughed.

*CRACK!!!

Forcefully tearing herself from the prison of ice, blood poured from her body, staining the frozen crystal in crimson.

Seeing this, Garret widened his eyes in shock as this girl was crazier than he expected!

Just as he was about to make a move to stop this trial, he noticed all of the blood around the arena surging towards Alice, mending her wounds.

'What the...!' Furrowing his brows in confusion, Garret decided to keep watching.

###

Alice knew her flames weren't going to be enough to defeat Lyra. Even though it countered Lyra, she was still too weak to put it to full use. Therefore, she decided to not hold back anymore.

Controlling the blood to converge around her body, her Sigils lit up with an ominous glow as her left eye mirrored her right.

Her hair was now dyed in a violet hue while the blood that surrounded her body transformed into an elegant black dress with flames flickering around the edges.

Activating her resonance, the crown above Alice's head started to repair itself as she supported a cruel grin on her face.

"Yo~ Champion. I'll admit, I can't beat you in technique. But how will you deal with this?" Alice asked, her personality flipping to the other side as her restraint was removed.

Aiming her hand towards Lyra, Alice snapped her finger.

Two motes of fire flickered to life around Lyra as they collapsed into a single spark. Void Flux! Alice's personal skill, one that she could use freely while in her Resonance form.

Lyra wanted to jump back but her reaction was too slow.

Erupting into a blinding ball of light that destroyed everything around it, Lyra could only sacrifice her right arm in order to avoid complete destruction!

Tumbling back from the attack, she stabbed her sword into the ground to stabilize herself but Alice's face appeared in front of her.

She was hanging upside down from the thread and stabbed her dagger towards Lyra's mouth.

Bending herself back, Lyra managed to dodge at the last second but another mote appeared beside her.

*Click

Snapping her finger once more, Alice detonated the Void Flux before flipping through the air.

Flicking her wrist, a thread of blood stretched from one side of the arena to the other. Sitting down, she crossed her legs and glanced down at Lyra whose Resonance form was on the verge of being dispelled.

Yet despite all of this, Lyra regained her composure as she dropped her ice sword to the side. Biting the tip of her finger, she began to draw a ritual circle in front of her.

Seeing this, Garret was shocked. Lyra the Blade Dancer, a Hunter who can kill anyone she faces just by using her fighting techniques. Rarely could people force her to use her Resonance never mind a ritual!

'Even though this trial has been scaled down, Lyra is still not someone you can contest against easily. And yet... This gal has actually forced her to activate a ritual!' Garret thought to himself in excitement, his hands almost crushing the railing he was grabbing onto.

To force Lyra to use her ritual was making her admit that she was inferior!

Slamming her foot down, a garden of frozen flowers and vines bloomed as in the centre of the flowers, swords crafted from ice manifested themselves and shot towards Alice.

Understanding that this was a mere distraction, a wave of boredom appeared in Alice's eyes.

"If you want to use your move, go for it. Why would I stop you?" Alice chuckled softly, snapping her fingers.

In an instant, countless motes of fire appeared on the blades, each collapsing into a Void Flux and detonating all at once.

"So go for it." Alice gestured with her hand.

Pausing for a moment, Lyra took a deep breath and dismissed the distraction.

Around her, giant arrows started to manifest themselves as Lyra adjusted her posture.

A giant crystal bow appeared before her. Pressing her right foot against the grip of the bow, her hand pulled the bow string back.

Upon the manifestation of the bow, the ambient energy surrounding the arena surged towards her while the arrows acted as containers for this energy. Collecting, condensing and then amplifying the power that she could draw from the Abyss.

Struggling to contain the power, the arrows started to unravel themselves into thin strands of crystalline thread that coiled towards Lyra's bow.

While Lyra was charging her attack, Garret became was in a dilemma. The power that was being displayed right now could devastate the entire arena!

But if he was to interfere, he wouldn't be able to see what Alice had planned to do in retaliation.

His inner fighter was telling him to sit back and watch while his responsibilities warned him to stop this fight right now.

He had already seen the power hidden behind Alice's Void Flux and he knew she was already suppressing herself greatly!

Even six star Hunters would struggle to demonstrate the level of control that she had just exhibited.

Just as he was about to interfere, Lyra shot him a warning glare while the other statues in the arena all turned their gaze towards him, rooting him in place.

"!!!"

Alice's demonstration had invoked a reaction from the arena!

Never in the record of the Academy had this happened before and now, he was witnessing history being written before him!

With no other choice, he could only take a step back and watch.

As Lyra pulled back the bowstring as far as she could, fractures started to appear on her body as parts of her Resonance armour broke off.

Yet she continued to pull the back without care.

Reaching the apex, the ritual circle around her printed itself across the entire arena!

Alice couldn't help but let out a hearty laugh, spreading out her arms and welcoming this strike.

[Spirit of the Abyss heed my call, bring forth the power held within this vessel.]

[I offer my heart, my wisdom, my will and my soul to the dark mother.]

[All who value their lives should flee. All who watch in awe shall bow.]

[Hearken, sinner. The dark mother has heard your name.]

A feminine voice echoed throughout the arena as a simulation of Lyra's contract was formed! Upon the finalization of this contract, a secondary burst of energy erupted through the arena as Lyra released the arrow.

*BANG!!!

The arrow burst forth and, in an instant, shattered the arena and the parts of the walls around them. It was as though the realm itself was bowing before the might of the arrow as the space warped from its speed.

Without even touching the arrow, Alice could already feel her skin tearing apart from the energy it exuded but her smile only grew wider.

She had watched the manifestation and finalization of the contract. She had seen the steps required and the movement of energy. She has imprinted the instructions upon her mind.

'To show my gratitude for this lesson, allow me to give you my all.' Alice thought to herself and aimed her fingers towards the incoming arrow.

There was no need for her to reach out to the Abyss for a contract at this moment. No, there was a far better candidate.

Snapping her finger, her second Sigil flared to life as it stretched across her body.

Opening her mouth, Alice formed her contract. There was no need to revere the target. No need to sing its praises. All she needed was a simple instruction.

[Feast o' flame of mine.]

Chapter 226 - 226: Feast O' Flame Of Mine

Upon her command, flames erupted from Alice's body. An array of vibrant blues, reds and purples danced around her as they lashed out and merged into one.

The sound of shackles breaking could be heard followed by the deep roar that resounded throughout the arena.

From this flame, a single draconic head manifested itself. Unlike before, its form was not an obscure silhouette formed by the flames. Its form was shrouded by darkness yet one could tell the body was encased by a layer of black scales that seemed to devour all light that touched upon it.

Beneath the scales, an inferno raged with the pulse of life.

From its head, the dragon bore several piercing purple eyes, each one glimmering with malevolence, hatred and sadistic cruelty. Each one seemingly staring into the deepest parts of your soul.

At the centre of its chest, a swirling vortex of energy pulsed and thrummed, drawing the energy from the Abyss into itself like an unsatiable maw, hungry for more. It was a conduit for all the vast energy that encompassed the Abyss, channelling the flow through its own body with every beat of its heart.

Its wings that stretched into the darkness resembled parasitic ink, lashing out and latching onto the realm in an attempt to consume the space itself. Within the membranes of these wings, a kaleidoscope of coloured danced and shifted, crafting a prismatic reflection that embodied the nature of the Abyss. So full of beauty yet danger lurks beneath.

Tendrils, spikes and strange appendages protruded from various parts of its body and back, twisting and writhing in an unholy symphonic of heresy towards the realm.

Even Alice was frozen in shock beneath its shadow as the beast did not even cast a single gaze towards her. Instead, it looked at the frozen arrow and curled its beastly maw into a grin.

***BANG!!!!**

As the arrow collided against the dragon's chest, it was as though all the evils in the Abyss was released. Countless rows of teeth and claws erupted from its body, crushing the arrow into pieces while tendrils of flesh shot out in all directions. Coiling around the pieces of the arrow, it dragged the attack into its body.

Within the prismatic reflection sealed in its wings, the energy of the arrow could be seen being assimilated into the dragon's being.

The arrow crafted from Lyra's life having exchanged everything with the Abyss was consumed and absorbed with ease. Even Garret found himself not daring to even breathe in the presence of this beast!

Just as the dragon was about to take a step forward, golden chains burst forth from the flames, wrapping itself around its neck, wings and limbs.

The teeth that consumed the arrow tried to fight back but a golden stake burst through its chest, forming a hook and began to drag the beast back into the fires.

Letting out a defiant roar against its imprisonment, the beast found itself helpless against these chains. The last thing Alice could see was the beast's mocking gaze before disassembling into a wave of flames that extinguished itself.

A rush of fatigue struck Alice as the blood and obstacles she had set up around the arena disappeared one by one.

Falling backwards, Alice slammed into the arena and found herself unable to even move a single muscle.

Not far from her location, Lyra stood unmoving. The light that crafted her body was now dull and fractured as pieces of her crumbled away. Meanwhile, the damage caused to the arena slowly mended itself.

From within the selection of statues representing the champions, a new platform was created. Little by little, a statue started to form itself into the appearance of Alice. But as the final detail was placed upon the statue...

*CRACK!!!

A fracture appeared in the centre, causing the statue to shatter into countless pieces.

Recovering from his stupor of seeing the beast that Alice had somehow conjured, Garret looked towards statues and frowned.

He had a guess on why the Arena was acting like this. But the answer he came up with was simply outlandish! Yet it was the only possible conclusion.

'The Hall of Champions is unable to properly record her strength!' Trembling at the thought, Garret swallowed his saliva as his fighting spirit burned in his chest.

He could feel his blood rush from excitement.

Right now, the girl in the arena only has three Sigils! What would happen if she was to get more? Would she become a Lord? Was he seeing the first steps of a future Abyss Lord?

Shaking his head, he didn't want to get too ahead of himself just yet but the truth could not be denied. The Arena acknowledged this girl's strength. Lyra the Blade Dancer had acknowledged this girl's strength. And as the witness of her fight, he had also acknowledged her strength.

Jumping down, he landed next to her and kneeled down.

Reaching into his sash that was tied around his waist, he pulled out a small ampoule the size of his thumb and broke off the tip. Pouring the sample of blood into Alice's mouth, he watched as the countless wounds across her body started to thread themselves back together while she stared at him, unable to speak from the fatigue.

"Not sure if I should congratulate you or question you on who you are. Do you know what kind of place this Arena is?" Garret asked, maintaining a calm demeanour despite his excitement.

"Hall of Champions. That's all I know." Alice groaned.

Despite the healing blood, she could still feel pain in her body. A sea of fire raged within her veins. Her blood boiling with each passing second.

Looking at the man in front of her, she could see six floating Sigils above his head and understood that he must be someone rather high up within the Academy.

It was to be expected as the commotion caused by her fight with the Blade Dancer just now was something hard to conceal.

"How did you even get in? I can only assume you must've gotten a visitor pass considering you don't know much about this place. Otherwise, you wouldn't enter here recklessly."

"Visitor's pass. Came here for a commission, went to look for my friend. She was busy so I explored a bit and found this place." Alice answered truthfully.

"Do you have your Hunter's Guild ID on you?"

Nodding her head, Alice groaned as she reached into her tattered jacket and rummaged for her ID.

Handing over the card, there was only one thought that went through Alice's mind.

'Urg... I liked this jacket too. Now it's wast-' Upon thinking about her jacket, she realised something important.

Her flask!

Widening her eyes, Alice felt a sense of panic.

"Let's see... Alice Agnelia-ARG!!!" Garret muttered to himself when suddenly Alice sat up. Her crown stabbed Garret's nose, causing him to stumble back.

Hastily reaching into the other side of her jacket while ignoring the pain in her body, Alice felt the blood drain from her body. With a trembling hand, she pulled out the flask that had been slashed to pieces.

*Crack

Her heart broke in half.

Tears streamed down her face as she looked at her flask, the memories of her mead surfacing in her mind. The moments they shared, the joys she enjoyed and could've enjoyed. Yet the path of the future had been cut off.

Her flask was dead.

"???" Holding his nose, Garret blinked his eyes in confusion seeing Alice suddenly burst into tears while holding a broken flask.

Forcing herself to stand up, Alice stood in front of Garret.

"Can I have my ID back for now... I need to conduct a funeral." Alice held out her hand.

"Ah... Sure. You have my... condolences?" Garret tilted his head, handing back the ID and watched her limp away, cradling the flask in her arms.

Looking at her retreating figure, he finally recalled where he had seen her before.

The recording that Xinbei presented to him.

He had his focus entirely on Ria during the recording and ignored Alice. Even though she demonstrated good combat potential in the recording, it wasn't anything special. At least by the standard of the Combat Department.

But the fight he had seen today had proven otherwise.

Her Resonance allowed her to control a strange skill that looked as though it could destroy anything with a single touch. A flame that could melt away Lyra's ice and finally, a ritual that could conjure forth a beast he had never seen before.

Recalling the sight of the beast, Garret felt a chill down his spine once more as he couldn't help but let out a laugh.

'I don't think Xinbei truly knows what kind of beast that gal is. That last attack... Even with all of my power, can I guarantee I won't be hurt by it?' He asked himself.

But the fact that he needed to ask himself this question had already proven her might. The Department Head of Combat, the Mad Demon Garret found himself unsure of his defensive capabilities before Alice.

However, what he felt upon this realization was not shame, inferiority or anger. No, what he felt was pure unfiltered excitement.

Their powers were similar in certain aspects, especially that last Ritual of hers. If he could understand even a fraction of the foundation behind her powers, it might give him the key he needed to enter the realm of Lords.

Garret's laughter rang out through the arena as he stood up and stretched his body. Even though he had a reason not to miss the Exams before, he will now make sure nothing gets in the way of his attendance. Even if the sky was to fall, he will lift it upon his back and make sure he arrives on time!

Meanwhile, Alice made her way back to the Department of Theory and found the highest point where she could make a grave for her flask.

Digging out a hole, she grabbed a rock and carved it into a gravestone before giving her deceased flask a solemn prayer.

Chapter 227 - 227: Sir Bacchus The Second

Wiping away her sweat with a towel, Ria stretched her body in satisfaction. She had just finished the sparring session with her new client. As she exited the training room, she couldn't help but notice a large gathering of people around the facility.

'Is this to do with the quaking earlier? Did a big fight break out?' Ria thought to herself as an earthquake had interrupted their sparring earlier. It was brief so she figured it was probably a fight.

Looking at the crowd of people, she decided to eavesdrop.

"There's no way right?"

"Trust me. What the Seniors saw before the Department Head intervened couldn't be faked. An outsider actually passed the Hall of Champions but their statue couldn't be recorded!"

"Who did she even challenge?"

"They barely got a glance, but it seemed to be someone who uses Ice. Maybe she was challenging Lord Lucas or Lord Andrew but Lady Lyra is not off the table either."

"Lady Lyra? Are you serious? There's no way she would've picked her out of all the Champions unless she has a death wish!"

Listening to the whispers being spread amongst the students, Ria couldn't help but wonder who had challenged the Hall of Champions. She wasn't familiar with the term, but it seemed to be a trial ground of sorts where you could test your might.

'Could be interesting to take a look at later with Alice. She might enjoy it with all things considered.'

It would serve as a perfect chance for her to study the fighting styles of the Champions mentioned by the students. After all, Alice was someone who grew faster the stronger her opponent was.

Whether that be the technique that Allura showcased or the sword technique she stole with a glance when she was hunting her third Sigil, Alice was like a blank canvas that absorbed everything in her surroundings.

Leaving the facility, Ria figured that Alice would've looked for her if she had finished her commission. Meaning she was probably still busy.

Asking around for some directions, Ria eventually made it to the Department of Theory. Just as she got off the train, she noticed Alice coming down from the mountain peak. Her movement was sluggish and her shoulders were slumped.

Sensing that something was wrong, Ria rushed over.

"Alice! Are you okay? What happened?" Ria asked with worry. She could see that the corners of Alice's eyes were red while her outfit was in tatters.

Looking up, Alice saw Ria and bit her lip.

Tears started to form once more and she collapsed on the floor.

"Ria..." Alice called out, suppressing the tears.

Seeing this, Ria immediately hugged Alice, patting her back.

"What happened? Did someone bully you? Could you not deal with them?" Ria asked. The moment Alice drops a name, she will go to that peak and get revenge for her. How dare they make Alice cry!

"*Sniff* Ria... My flask *hic* My flask got destroyed..." Alice answered with great difficulty as tears streamed down her face.

Pausing for a moment, Ria felt as though her brain had just short-circuited.

"Pardon?"

"My flask... *hic* My treasure, the love of my life... It got torn apart while I was fighting. My flask got killed!!! Now I can't carry all my mead with me!!" Alice cried out, showing Ria the part of her jacket that was soaked by the holy water contained within her flask, mead.

Blinking her eyes, Ria understood why Alice was upset. For her, the flask was akin to her lifeblood. It was what kept her going. The mead within gave her fuel for the day. Yet if it got destroyed...

"Who even destroyed it? Did you ask them to pay?"

"I shouldn't have gone into that room *hic*... It was not worth it. I got nothing from it and instead got my flask killed. Do you want to visit its grave with me?" Alice asked, wiping away her tears using her sleeves while pointing at the mountain peak.

Hesitating for a moment Ria shook her head but she couldn't help but feel pity for Alice.

"Since we're earning some money... Do you want to buy a new flask? It won't be as good as your old one but it's better than nothing." Ria offered. If the flask was more expensive than what they had expected, then she didn't mind asking her employer for some extra funds early since they were extremely happy with her performance.

Hearing this, Alice's ears twitched as her eyes lit up. Ignoring the pain, she jumped up and landed on her feet.

"Let's go buy Sir Bacchus the second!" Alice declared, recovering from her sadness.

"Sir Bacchus... The second?"

"Mnm. Sir Bacchus the first is my flask. Originally, I wanted to keep a collection of Sir Bacchus' on me at all times so I have multiple sources of mead. But because Sir Bacchus the first died a horrific death, the next flask shall honour it by inheriting its name." Alice clenched her fist as she gave a salute towards where she had buried Sir Bacchus the first.

Still confused by everything, Ria followed up with an awkward salute of her own before the two of them made their way out of the Academy.

Naturally, Alice had countless eyes turn towards her due to the current state of her outfit but they ignored it.

"So... You still haven't told me what happened? What did you even fight for you to be injured to this extent?" Ria asked as the two of them handed back their visitor passes.

Both of them have gotten other forms of identification for entry and the visitor pass was no longer needed.

"Went to a room called Hall of Champions and fought Lyra the Blade Dancer. You should give it a go too. Almost f*cking died to her." Alice admitted as Lyra was truly on another level. Had she not learned and Modified Allura's skill, it was probably impossible to win the fight without some kind of sacrifice other than the energy held within that arrow.

Which only made her wonder what kind of beast that was and what were the golden chains that sealed it back into her flames.

"Wait... holy sh*t, really?" Ria froze in surprise. Not at the fact that Alice was the person in the rumours who challenged the Hall of Champions but rather the fact that she almost died to Lyra!

"Yeah. Her ice froze me in place and I had to forcefully tear myself from it to avoid her attacks. Even my flames were pushed back. You know how hard that is to achieve?"

Nodding her head, Ria regretted not being able to see the fight with her own eyes as she would've been able to learn something from it.

"So I'm guessing the earthquake was caused by you then." Ria asked as Alice shrugged.

"Yes and no. I decided to do something a little funky and conducted a ritual. Turns out I summoned a massive f*ck off dragon beast thing that ate the last attack before disappearing. Was it the best move I could've chosen? Probably not. But it was damn effective."

"Pftahaha, next time you should let me know when you do something fun like this. I would love to see it with front-row seats." Ria laughed.

"I mean it's not impossible. Seems like if we join the Department of Combat it should be available to us. Though I didn't ask much about it but I'm sure it'll be fine."

Agreeing with Alice, Ria wished the exams would arrive sooner so that they could enrol. Not only that, she wished Luke was here as well. She wanted to see his reaction towards her achievements and capabilities.

'He's always been composed with a few exceptions. If he saw what Alice can do... Would it break his composure?' Ria wondered to herself. If she could find the limit of his composure, then she could plan on ways to surprise him in the future.

Chuckling to herself, the two made their way to the shopping district in order to find Sir Bacchus the second.

Meanwhile, after recovering from his initial excitement, Garret had calmed down and focused on his duties as the Department Head.

Namely to report the incident to the principal and make adjustments to the exams. After all, one of their exam takers was now someone who had passed the Hall of Champions.

Thinking about a meeting with the principal, Garret couldn't help but scratch his hair and sigh.

If it was possible, he would keep the interactions to a minimum as she freaks him out. Even though he's called the Mad Demon by the students, he was helpless before her.

It wasn't that she was aggressive but rather unfathomable. The way she conducted herself, the way she talked, and her choices confused him at times. It was hard for him to understand the principal as a person.

But despite his thoughts towards her, there was one thing that would never change.

His respect towards her.

After all, one sentence could be used to summarise the principal.

Beneath the realm of Lords, she is invincible.

Even though there were many who have six Sigils imprinted onto their body, their powers differed greatly.

Contemplating on how he should approach the principal regarding this report, he paced back and forth before mustering up some courage.

If he struggled to do it alone, he'll drag others into it!

A grin appeared on his face as he went to look for Xinbei and Elara.

"There's no need for you to drag others in, Garret. I already saw what happened when the Hall failed to record her strength." A voice appeared behind him, causing him to jolt in surprise.

'Why is everything freaking me out today?! First is that gal and her dragon thing and now the principal!' Garret shouted in his mind while turning around to face the principal.

"Then I suppose I don't need to say anything." Garret forced a smile.

"Possibly. I need you to do something else for me. I need to make some adjustments to the exams and my hands are a little tied up at the moment." She smiled while Garret nodded and listened to her instructions.

With Garret leaving to complete the task she gave him, the principal made her way out of the room.

A mysterious smile surfaced on her face as she hummed to herself.

Chapter 228 - 228: Elara's Discovery

A week had passed since the incident of Sir Bacchus the first. After visiting the shopping district, Alice was able to buy a flask which she named Sir Bacchus the second. It could hold up to 3 bottles worth of Mead, a little less than the original 5 bottles worth but it was still better than nothing.

After her flask was sorted out, Alice decided to buy a new set of clothes as her current favourite ones had been damaged beyond repair.

She didn't want to keep replacing her outfit and thus decided to buy something simply while saving up money to get Hunter's gear similar to the one that Sera had given her all the way back in the Slaughter Docks.

The outfit she settled on for now was a simple black dress with a pair of black stockings and knee-high boots. Along with this dress was a large white jacket with the edges reaching down to her thighs and a hood to cover her crown if needed.

Of course, Ria had questioned why Alice didn't just use some of the clothes she had already bought but her response was that these were cuter.

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Finishing the final experiment with Runi, Alice gave her body a big stretch as this experiment was a lot longer than what the others were.

"Good work as usual today." Arunya spoke in her usual monotone voice but after a week, Alice could tell when Runi was happy or upset based on the slight variations in her body language and tone.

"Today's the last one. You've got your student exams to prepare for right? Is there any difference between the Theory tests and the Combat tests?" Alice asked curiously.

During this week, Arunya found out that Alice was taking the Combat exams, which she thought was a shame due to Alice's talent in the Theory department.

But regardless, she was going to respect her choice since it was Alice's life and not hers. At most, they could be considered acquaintances during this week of bonding.

"It depends on the topic during the exam. Usually, it'll just be a bunch of students crowded into a single room and show off the knowledge they have acquired and how they can put it to good use. As long as you study well and show off your intelligence, you can pass the Theory exams. Rarely would it require us Theory students to actually fight anything." Arunya shook her head.

"The last time that happened, the teachers wanted us to hunt down beasts using only Abyss blood and our understanding of their biology. It's also the exam that I failed when I tried to become a Special class student.

"As for Combat exams... I only saw one personally. That was the Special class exam for the current top student in the Combat Department. Though his situation is a little special, he's known as the Paladin. His exam required him to lead an exploration team into the depths of the Inverted World and find out more about it.

Some of the dangers he faced that day even garnered some respect from me." She explained while Alice nodded her head.

She found herself a seat and leaned back while taking a sip from her flask.

"Is he just called the Paladin? Does he not have a name?"

"I never bothered to learn his name. It's not like we have any interactions so it'll be a waste of my energy. I've already done plenty by remembering his nickname. Speaking of which, have you prepared for your exams? Some of the Theory students mentioned that this time was going to be a little different. There's been some last minute changes." Arunya asked curiously.

"Well... I didn't get told much. They just said to do my best and it'll be okay." Alice smiled remembering her second meeting with Xinbei.

He told her that her Special class exams would be taking place at the same time as the other students and that she should just try her best. He couldn't divulge any of the details or else he'll get into trouble with the principal.

Naturally, he knew about her little scuffle with the Hall of Champions and expressed his confusion as to why she still had to take the exams. Perhaps it was to keep it above the table as the students would be displeased if she was to be given the role of Special class without them knowing.

But he wasn't the person organising the exams so he didn't have much of a say in it.

"If the exams go bad, I'm pretty sure I can ask my Department Head to give you a free pass. With your talent in the Theory Department, she'll be glad to take you in." Arunya offered.

"I'll keep that in mind." Nodding her head, Alice received her final payment before giving Arunya a wave.

There was going to be a small party tonight as Luke sent them a letter saying that he'll be coming back from his special mission. He wanted to cheer them on for the exams and thus wanted to prepare a party for the three of them.

After Alice had left, Arunya cleaned up her lab and made her way to see Elara as per usual.

Today was going to be the final check up for a while since the Exam was just around the corner.

Arriving at her house, Arunya was mildly surprised that she wasn't hearing any strenuous sounds coming from the inside today.

Opening the door, she saw Elara sleeping by her desk. She was dressed up properly and had even cleaned her lab coat which was usually stained with blood.

Blinking her eyes in surprise, she couldn't help but wonder if this was a clone.

"Professor, if you're going to sleep you should do so in your bed." Arunya nudged as Elara furrowed her brows and slowly opened her eyes.

*Yawn~

"Oh Runi~ Have you finished your experiments for today?" Elara asked, stretching her body.

"I have. Though seems like you've been busy since last night. Doing your job this time too." Arunya praised, taking a quick glance around the house and saw that it was clean for once.

"At the end of the day, I'm still the Department Head of Theory. I still have responsibilities otherwise I would've been replaced by now." Elara shrugged.

Hearing this, Arunya squinted her eyes sceptically.

"Did the principal scold you?" She asked.

Seeing Elara freeze up momentarily, Arunya could only sigh.

"She didn't scold me. Erm... Merely a suggestion regarding disposition fufu~ She didn't want me to scare off the new students that we'll be getting." Elara forced a smile.

"So she didn't want you to be a bad example. Understood. By the way, I was wondering if you'll be able to maybe take in an examinee on the off chance they fail the exams." Arunya asked while placing some food she bought on the table.

"Are you talking about the assistant that you hired?"

"Yes. She has a lot of talent in the Theory department. If it wasn't for her, my experiments wouldn't have gone so smoothly. Though it seems like she's focused on joining the Combat Department." Arunya nodded her head, sitting down opposite Elara since there was no cleaning for her to do today.

"Hmm~ I could consider it if Runi dressed up a little cuter the next time you bring some food." Elara chuckled while unpacking her dinner.

"Please stop messing around professor otherwise I'll get the cheapest meal set from now on."

"Boo~ no fun. But fine~ I'll stop playing around. With my relationship with the gorilla, it might be a little annoying to have him accept the examinee if they fail but not impossible. But even a favour can only go so far if they're not capable enough. But if her talent in the Theory department is as good as you say then we have another option we can go for." Elara smiled while crossing her legs.

"We can enrol her in the Theory department while taking lessons from the Combat Department. I'm sure the gorilla wouldn't mind since he's a freak when it comes to helping people realise their potential. As long as they show dedication, he'll be satisfied enough to accept them into his classes.

"Do you have their details? I'll make a note about them so I don't forget. I'll be meeting the gorilla later so I'll bring it up to him then."

Reaching into her bag, Arunya rummaged through her belongings before pulling out the commission report that needed to be handed to the Hunter's Guild.

Handing it to Elara, Arunya watched as Elara's expression froze up.

"Something wrong?"

"Ahem... Your assistant has been... Alice Agnelia for the past week?" Elara asked with a forced smile.

"Yes. Was there an issue I didn't know about?"

"There is a big issue. Why didn't you tell me!? One whole week! One whole week that I could've spent talking to her but I didn't even know she was your assistant. Ahhh~ I could've prepared something nice for her too~" Elara lamented as her face started to turn red.

Looking at the way Elara was twitching and squirming in her seat, Arunya couldn't help but feel happy that she didn't say anything until now.

"Was... Was she the one you've been interested in?"

"Yep~ You've been with her for a week. What was she like? How did she act during the experiments? How did she look at the subjects? I want every detail! Actually, you might even have some of her hair on you hehe~" Elara giggled as she placed down her utensils.

Seeing this, Arunya decided to evacuate the building. If Alice was indeed the one that Elara had been infatuated with, then she was sure that Alice would have no issues regarding the exams.

Meanwhile, Alice who was walking home with Ria felt another chill down her spine, warning her of danger.

'Are my senses out of whack? Side effect from my resonance?' Alice frowned in confusion as she'd been sensing danger several times throughout the week despite nothing happening.

Once again, danger didn't show up near her as she could only shake her head and continue her journey back to the inn.

Chapter 229 - 229: A Party Between Three

"Did you wait long?" Alice called out as she opened the door to her room.

Inside, both Ria and Luke were waiting with several bags of snacks, food and different brands of mead.

Seeing the drinks, Alice's eyes lit up as she closed the door behind her and threw her jacket onto the jacket stand.

"Fufu~ Nothing beats having some mead after a hard day's workahaha." Alice laughed, picking out a bottle from within the pile just for herself.

"Usually, people would go for the food but I suppose it's only expected that you'll aim for the drinks." Ria sighed. In her hand, she had a chicken skewer that had been seasoned to perfection.

"Blehh~ Mead is my lifeblood. Naturally, I'll go for it first." Alice stuck out her tongue before looking over in Luke's direction. Seeing how he has four Sigils above his head, she knew that his hunt had been successful.

"So, how was your special mission? Was it dangerous? It took you a week after all." Alice asked with a grin.

'He probably doesn't want Ria to know that he was behind her in Sigils. Let's see how he handles this.' She mused to herself.

Today was a day of party, she wasn't going to hold herself back and enjoy it to her fullest.

"It was alright. A little on the annoying side but not that bad overall." Luke smiled, acting as though his special mission wasn't a scramble for his fourth Sigil.

"Oh hou~ How annoying was it? Were there others interfering with the hunt?" Alice gave him a smug grin while kicking her shoes aside and sat on her beat.

Hearing the word hunt, Ria sat up with a confused expression.

"A hunt?" Ria asked while Alice waved her hand.

"Ah sorry, I'm so used to calling every mission a hunt now. That was just a slip of the tongue don't mind me." Alice chuckled while opening her bottle.

As for Luke, he had choked on his food for a brief moment.

'Does she know? Surely not right? I don't think Xinbei told anyone. Not even Miki knew about my hunt for the fourth Sigil.' Luke thought to himself while giving Alice a slight glance.

"So what kind of annoyance was it?" Alice asked, seeing Luke sneaking a glance at her.

"Nothing much don't worry. It's too boring of a story for a party like this." Luke dismissed with a forced smile.

"Speaking of stories, have you heard the incident at the Department of Combat?" Ria asked while Luke shook his head.

He had been away from the Academy and had only just returned not long ago. He needed to catch up on everything that had happened.

"There was a brave gal who decided to challenge the Hall of Champions. She wasn't part of the department and had entered with a visitor pass. It stirred up quite the commotion too."

"Hm? Hall of Champions? Isn't that what they used to test the graduates? For an outsider to be able to access it... She must be rather talented then since that door doesn't just open to anyone." Luke remarked while picking up another portion of food.

Stifling her laughter, Ria simply smiled and pointed behind Luke.

"Huh?" Turning around, Luke simply stared at Alice who was drinking the bottle of mead at a visible pace.

"What? Who told them to leave it unguarded? Not even sure why I have to do the entrance exams when I finished their test for graduates." Alice shrugged while Luke could only massage his eyes.

"Do you realise, how absurd that sounds? The Hall of Champions, the greatest achievement that the students of the Combat Department could obtain. Their dream of having their fighting styles forever integrated into the history of this Academy was... completed before you even enrolled???" Luke asked while Alice simply shrugged.

"I mean... I'm not saying it wasn't hard. Just a tad annoying."

Hearing Alice call the test for Graduates a 'tad annoying' Luke felt like something had just broke within him. A sudden surge to throw whatever was closest to him toward her surfaced but he suppressed that feeling and reached for some mead instead.

He prided himself on being calm and collected yet a few simple interactions with Alice had already made him break his cool.

'Was Ria influenced by her? There was also the dress she wore last time...' Luke thought to himself while throwing his head back and drinking a mouthful of mead.

Just as he wanted to put the bottle down, he realised he couldn't move his arm.

"???"

Opening his eyes, he saw Alice in front of him with a grin on her face while holding the bottle in place.

"!!!"

"Hehe~ Drink! Drink! Drink!" Alice chanted while Ria laughed in the background before joining in the chant.

Shocked by her strength, Luke could only follow the instructions and try his best to drink the mead.

"BLERHH!!! What the hell!" Luke cried out.

"Pftahaha! There you go. You should loosen up a little if we're having a party." Alice grinned while Luke felt like a vein was about to pop.

"You want to play!? Fine let's play!" Grabbing the closest bottle to him, he removed the cap before shoving it into Alice's mouth, forcing her to drink the mead.

"Jokes on you b*tch, I'm an alcoholic!" Alice declared proudly as the party descended into chaos within mere moments.

Watching Alice and Luke forcing each other to drink mead, Ria was laughing hysterically on the floor while clutching her stomach. Tears formed around the corners of her eyes from the laughter as she enjoyed this kind of atmosphere. When she was travelling with Gin and Allura, it was always a serious environment. The complete opposite of what was happening here.

Seeing Alice enter a martial arts stance while dual-wielding bottles of mead and Luke doing the same but with a single bottle, Ria glanced over at their supply of drinks and wondered if they even had enough.

"Shall I go out and buy some drinks for us?" Ria asked while Alice and Luke were panting from trying to force each other to drink more.

"Fufu~ Don't underestimate me. Do you think I wouldn't keep a supply of my best mead for these occasions?" Alice smirked as she carefully took steps back, not turning her back to Luke as he'd take the chance to ambush her if she wasn't careful.

"Maybe you should watch where you're walking, would be a shame if you tripped over." Luke taunted while Alice scoffed in disdain.

"It's my own room, I got it memorised. But maybe you should turn around instead, you just stepped on some left-over chicken, it must feel gross on your foot."

"A small price to pay if it means you don't get the upper hand." Luke retorted.

"Shall we have a momentary truce then? After all, I need to unveil my collection of mead." Alice offered.

However, Ria noticed a flash of mischief in Alice's eyes while Luke was none the wiser.

Before she could even warn Luke, he nodded and dropped his guard.

'Gotcha!'

Creating two threads of blood to restrain his arms, Alice jumped up and latched onto his shoulder before shoving two bottles into his mouth.

"Mmnh!" Widening his eyes, Luke wanted to curse Alice's lack of honour in this duel but the surge of mead entering his body prevented this.

Dusting her hands after feeding him two full bottles, Alice skipped over to the wardrobe before opening the bottom shelf.

Stepping aside, Alice revealed the rows upon rows of mead carefully stored away.

"Behold, my mead." Alice grinned, grabbing several bottles before closing the shelf with her foot.

Walking over to the table, she placed the bottles down on the table while grinning at Luke who felt like he was about to throw up with how much mead he's drank.

"Fufu~ Seems like I'm the winner of this battle. Bow before the might of my addiction!" Alice declared while Luke only rolled his eyes.

"Urg... I'm actually about to throw up in a second." He groaned, feeling bloated.

"Oh~ you'll be fine. Just means you have more room in your stomach for mead." Alice laughed, opening another bottle.

Shivering from the thought, Luke couldn't help but admit defeat before this alcoholic. Her stomach for mead was truly unmatched.

"So what's up with the crown? I didn't want to ask earlier because it might've been rude but I doubt that's a worry anymore with you force feeding me f*cking mead." Luke asked, eating some skewers for a change of pace.

"Just a slight accident on my end. I thought it might disappear after a week but it's staying so I might as well embrace it. At least it looks pretty neat aye?" Alice smiled, glancing up at the crown that hovered around her head.

"I suppose you're not wrong. I'm sure the students in the Theory Department would be pretty interested in this crown of yours. Most side effects manifest on the body after all." He shrugged.

"Runi seemed interested but didn't ask so I didn't answer."

"Oh? You met Arunya?" Luke blinked in surprise as he didn't think she would've interacted with another assistant like him.

"Just a brief contract through the Hunter's guild. But enough of this talk, we should party. And I couldn't help but notice a certain someone who hasn't drank anything yet." Alice smiled as she slowly turned her eyes towards Ria.

Blinking her eyes in confusion, Ria was clueless about the danger that was about to befall her as she noticed both Luke and Alice staring at her.

"What?"

"Nothing~ Just stay right there Ria." Alice grinned.

Without giving Ria a chance to run, both Alice and Luke ambushed her with bottles of mead.

"W-wait I'm not an alcoholi- MNMF!"

Chapter 230 - 230: Exam Day

Clutching her head in pain, Alice groaned softly as she opened her eyes.

Looking around her room, she could see that it was a complete mess. Even with their alcohol tolerance, the volume of mead they drank yesterday was enough to scare professional drinkers.

Trying her best to ignore this headache, Alice forced herself to stand up and leaned against the wall.

She could see stacks of empty bottles, half eaten food and her mead stash completely emptied, which was to be expected.

Looking to her side, he could see Luke still sleeping soundly as his clothes were half pulled off from their scuffle last night.

After making Ria drink the mead, the two of them went back to forcing one another to drink.

But this time Ria joined in as a neutral third party whose only goal was to make the two of them pass out first.

As for Ria... She was passed out on the bed in a similar state.

Massaging her neck, Alice got to cleaning up the place since today was the day of the exam.

It took her around an hour to clean up when Luke woke up.

Sitting by the window, he didn't say a word and simply held his head in pain from the hangover.

"Mornin' How did you sleep?" Alice asked with a grin.

"Terrible thanks to someone feeding me mead all night. Urg..." Luke rolled his eyes.

"That's what partying is all about. But you can't deny it was pretty fun." Alice laughed as she made her way to her wardrobe and got out her new outfit for the day. It was the exams so she couldn't just turn up in her current wear.

"You're not wrong. But I'd keep this kind of drinking to a minimum. I still got stuff I need to prepare on my end since I'm a Special class Student. Along with the other Special class, we're required to observe your exam and give our opinions. Not that I think you would struggle." Luke shrugged, adjusting his jacket so it didn't look like he just slept on the floor.

"As for Ria... Well, I'm still worried even if she does have four Sigils now."

"Xinbei did mention that there were some changes to the exam. Probably because I cleared the Hall of Champions. It's safe to assume that like everything that me and Ria touch, it'll probably be much harder than the previous exams. Would the normal Students be affected?" Alice asked curiously.

"Wait... what?" Luke blinked his eyes in confusion.

"Yeah, apparently the principal made some changes due to me. Not sure why considering I cleared the Hall of Champions but Xinbei said he couldn't do anything about it."

Furrowing his brows, Luke sighed before standing up.

"I'll ask him about some details. Ah before I forget, I need to tell you something about the Inverted World.

"When you enter that world, be careful of everything around you. Even though they're technically 'moments in history', the world itself turns them against you. There are both physical and mental dangers. What you perceive as safe may actually be extremely dangerous." Luke warned.

"Alright, I'll remember that."

Nodding his head, Luke made his way out of the room and closed the door behind him.

With just her and Ria left, Alice gave her body a stretch before nudging Ria awake.

"Hng... huh? What time is it?" Ria asked, rubbing her eyes. Clutching her head, the last thing she could remember was being forced to drink more than usual.

"It's already morning. Well... as close to morning as constant nighttime goes. The exams will be starting in a few hours." Alice chuckled.

Sitting up groggily, Ria yawned while her hair was in a mess.

"I don't ever want to do that again. I can still taste the mead in my mouth." She complained while standing up and stretching her body.

"Oh don't be a big baby, it wasn't that badahaha."

"For an alcoholic maybe. I want to take a bath and then eat something before we take the exams." Ria sighed. She wanted to cleanse the alcohol taste from her mouth as soon as possible.

Agreeing with Ria, the two grabbed another set of clothes before making their way to the bathhouse.

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Following a quick bath in the bathhouse and some breakfast, the two made their way to the Academy. Compared to usual, the Academy was bustling with activity as airships could be seen coming in from the distance.

The trains were packed to the brim while countless young Hunters looked towards the Inverted World with hope and nervousness in their eyes.

Upon arriving at the foot of the Academy, Alice could see the courtyard being filled with clusters of students and examinees alike.

Whether they're here to take the entrance exams or taking the exams to improve their class, all were equally nervous after the rumour that this year was going to be many times harder than before due to an incident.

Rumours were spread that a split-haired girl with a crown was the cause. Due to her action of defeating the Hall of Champions, the principal of the Academy had made some adjustments to the test.

Tensions were high and it felt as though a single spark could set off the crowd.

Looking at this giant crowd, Alice couldn't help but feel grateful that she chose a jacket with a large hood. If it wasn't for this, perhaps everyone in this courtyard would've attacked her out of anger for making the test harder.

She was currently wearing a white shirt with a ribbon and a pair of black gloves. A black skirt with the back being longer than the front and reaching down to her calves. The dress had golden chains connecting the buttons and the underside was deep red in colour.

A pair of black frilled stockings connected by garter belts and a pair of ankle high boots with small heels.

Over her outfit, she wore a large white jacket and a hood that hid her face in shadow.

As for Ria, she wore a modest white martial arts attire with a black undershirt. A pair of silver armoured gauntlets for protection and a skirt that reached down to her ankles. The fabric of the outfit was light so she could move without being hindered.

As for her hair, she tied it up into a tall ponytail.

Looking over to Alice who was wearing a hood like usual, Ria couldn't help but chuckle since it was to hide the crown above her head.

With the commotion that she caused by clearing the Hall of Champions, she was basically public enemy number one right now.

"Do you have all the blood beads you need? I can make a few more if you don't have enough." Alice asked as she rummaged through her pouch to make sure everything was in place.

To prepare for this exam, the two of them had prepared 6 vials of healing blood each, 2 vials of Alice's blood beads, one berserk vial each and finally, one fresh vial of Alice's blood in case something dangerous was to appear.

Even if Alice didn't activate her second Sigil's ability, her blood still contained anti Abyss properties and would help in certain scenarios. Not only that, it'll allow Alice to potentially locate Ria if they were to get split up.

"I got everything don't worry. In fact, I even wanna say my pouch is too full right now. One hit and everything inside might breakahaha." Ria joked, showing Alice the full pouch.

Before they could continue their conversation, an oppressive aura descended from the heart of the Academy, causing everyone in the courtyard to shut up.

Even Alice felt a chill in her body as though her blood was warning her.

All they could hear was the sound of heels clacking against the ground.

Walking towards the podium, a tall woman could be seen with a soft smile on her face.

'Allura???' Alice widened her eyes before frowning. Even though the woman by the podium looked like Allura, it wasn't her. The feeling she got from the woman was completely different.

Not only that, but there were parts of her figure that were different as well.

She had a pair of deep crimson eyes, medium length ashen white hair, red markings running up the side of her cheek. A pair of pointed ears and a mysterious smile. She wore a brown turtleneck shirt, a black blazer with a belt around the waist, a pair of suit pants and tall heels.

Draped over her shoulders was a large jacket connected by a set of silver chains.

Stepping up to the podium, she reached out with her hand as blood mist swirled before her, condensing into a greatsword. But compared to her height, the greatsword looked like a normal longsword.

Stabbing the sword in front of her, she rested her hand on the pommel while sweeping her eyes over the crowd.

Noticing a small hooded girl staring at her in a mixture of bewilderment and shock, she couldn't help but chuckle.

"Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed examinees and fellow students, I wish to thank you all for making the journey here today.

"For the examinees, this is a time of challenge and opportunity. It is a chance to showcase your talents to the world and realise the potential hidden within your body.

"For the students, this is a chance. A chance for you to reach up and grab hold of opportunity with your own hands. It is a chance for you to gain access to the countless resources we have prepared for the Special class Students and those who wish to go beyond..."

While Ria listened to the welcoming speech, Alice couldn't help but be fixated on something else entirely.

That being what was above the principal's head.

She had expected to see six Sigils as she had done many times before but the Sigils could not be seen. Instead, it was replaced by something else.

[Crimson Witch of Ruin - ◆◆◆◆◆◆]