

Abyssal A 531

Chapter 531 - 531: A Chance To Grow Stronger

Clenching her fist, Alice had a small smile on her face. The applications of Void Steps unlocked the door to many possibilities, all revolving around the concept of blinking through space.

Now that she understood what allows her Void Steps to succeed, she could adjust the steps and change the overall composition of the skill.

Turning it from a movement skill to an attacking one.

Snapping her finger, Alice created a singularity above her finger and transformed it into a Void Flux.

Aiming her finger upwards, she then cast Void Steps.

***BANG!**

In an instant, the Void Flux disappeared from its location, flying high into the sky and out of sight.

By applying the 'faulty' Void Step and adjusting the targeting of the skill to only apply to the Void Flux, she was able to essentially squeeze it through the realms and cause it to shoot in one direction at ridiculous speeds.

To put it simply, the false Void Steps was acceleration. It's what caused her bones to break and her limbs to be torn off during the impact.

And the True Void Steps was teleportation, blinking through space and being squeezed out where she intended to appear.

That's why there was no 'phenomenon' of her arrival. No gust of wind or anything like that.

Exactly how Feris did it.

But the false Void Steps was not like that. It was far faster than her usual choice of ripping through the Void and running through it. If she wanted to, she could even make her Blood Mirrors far more deadly using this false Void Step.

All in all, understanding exactly why it could succeed allowed her a deeper insight into how she should use this technique of hers.

'Though... it's not exactly my technique is itahaha. It's stolen from Feris much like how my other skills are also stolen. My own skill is still in mid development *sigh.' Alice laughed inwardly.

When she unleashed the skill that was still in the process of being finalised, she felt close to grasping its true essence but fell short.

Perhaps, if she were to complete the technique, it might be able to harm the Doctor.

[There's no rush. You also have to remember that these techniques are taken from those at the pinnacle of strength. One is an Apostle and the other is the owner of a realm. They are people who've already completed the difficult task and crystallised it into an attack or technique that represents their struggles. You are going through that stage right now.] Cayla cheered Alice on as making a person technique was no walk in the park.

All of these techniques are made with a goal in mind and Cayla had her own theories.

For Allura, it was her desire to become an unyielding sword for Velouria. She might not have the power or raw strength behind her attacks but she'll cut through anything and everything with lethal sharpness.

For Feris, perhaps her identity as the owner of the Void was because she wanted to detach herself from the real world. Hence the Void Steps that allowed her to run.

Alice was still trying to figure out what she wanted to do with her life aside from taking revenge. After revenge, what's next? Rebuilding Ayr was done in mind for Allura.

She has yet to fully understand and grasp what she is living this life for. Perhaps when she does, her skill will finally be complete and a name can be bestowed upon it.

Making her way back to the camp, the scout soon followed behind her and she noticed that he was looking a little uncomfortable. Clearly, the quick demonstration of Void Steps startled him but Alice simply shrugged and moved on.

Even if he tells the others, she doesn't care since her only goal was to get to the port and make her way east. To explore the surface that has been out of her reach for so many years.

###

"Miss, may I ask you to evaluate us?"

Blinking her eyes, Alice glanced at the five people in front of her.

She had woken up early this morning to continue her journey and nothing out of the ordinary occurred. A few weak beasts roamed nearby but the aura of the guards was enough to scare them away.

But once they prepared to camp, the five of them finally approached her after giving her the occasional glance throughout the day.

"Care to clarify?" Alice asked, taking a sip from some cheap mead she had stocked up in her pouch.

"Allen mentioned that you were fast enough to the point he couldn't register your movement at all. And during our fight, you seemed to be judging how you would've done it better. In other words, please give us some pointers. Anything that can help our growth as Hunters will be appreciated." The swordsman requested.

Scanning her eye across the five of them, Alice could see that they were thinking the same thing and were being serious about it.

"I wouldn't say my pointers are suitable. My thoughts are entirely based on how I would fight and my own knowledge of my skill sets." Alice scratched her cheek.

She was still just a student herself, learning to master skills and fight better. She wasn't exactly in a situation where she could coach others outside of just sparring and trying to figure out their weaknesses.

Plus, there's also the case of the raw power difference between them. If the gap is too wide, Alice wouldn't be able to give effective tips seeing as how she could just kill them all in the blink of an eye.

"That's fine. I want us as a group to take every opportunity there is to learn and get stronger." The Swordsman replied almost instantly as Alice's smile twitched from his rather... bright and upfront personality.

Furrowing her brows, Alice thought about it for a moment but saw no reason to reject it.

Plus, she might even learn something from this.

"Alright, sure. Think of me as a beast you want to subjugate. Don't hold back since it's not like you'll be able to kill me anyway." Alice curled her lips up into a grin.

The shield vanguard frowned a little before accepting it with a nod.

"I'll give you guys some time to strategize. You don't need to tell me when you want to start, just attack when you're ready." She waved her hand and stood up.

Making her way into the forest, tapped her foot against the ground as briar thorns began to burst out from the ground around her.

A field of spider lilies bloomed amidst the snow and Alice made herself a throne to sit on.

Relaxing her posture, she closed her eye and stretched out her senses through the blood she spread through the ground.

'What's your plan?' Alyss asked curiously.

'The plan is simple. Don't make a single move and focus on casting. It should be rather doable and lets me focus on my control. Plus, I can put my new understanding of Void Step into practice no?' Alice smiled.

'Just make sure you control the speed of the projectiles. I don't think it'll be good if one of them was to die now would it?' Alyss reminded.

'I don't think that'll be an issue.' Alice chuckled.

At that moment, several strands of briar thorns jumped out from the ground, catching an arrow that was shot towards her.

"A little too predictable if you were to imbue this much energy into it. Even if you made an effort to hide its presence." Alice muttered before pinching her fingers together.

A swirl of blood gathered around the arrowhead before blossoming into lilies, preventing it from detonating.

"Now then, your opening attack from the archer is caught. What will you do?" Alice asked as her gaze pierced through the trees and locked onto the scout.

He felt a chill down his spine as sweat rolled down his cheeks. Despite this distance, she could still accurately track him down even though he was using a camouflage skill.

However, there was one silver lining despite being discovered.

She wasn't using her movement skill! Instead of going through the close quarters combat route, she's choosing to fight with casting instead. This was perfect for them.

After all, their biggest concern was whether or not they could even catch her in the first place!

With her attacking method now discovered, they jumped into action.

A surge of water rushed towards Alice like a serpent as it crashed into a barrier of blood.

Behind her, the Vanguard burst out of the bushes with a golden glow around his shield. He was already in his resonance form but much to his surprise, the ground suddenly collapsed beneath him as tendrils of blood grabbed his ankles.

Spider lilies and briar thorns began to wrap around his body as he could feel the energy leaving his body. Cracks began to form around his armour.

*KSH!!!

A flash of light tore apart the briar thorns as Alice raised an eyebrow.

While her briar thorns aren't exactly the toughest material that she had access too, they were still pretty tough by usual standards. Yet he was able to cut through it with ease.

A little outside her expectation but nothing that'll make Alice change her plans.

Tapping her finger against the arm rest, blood converged into a single bead as Alice activated Void Steps on it.

*BANG!!!!

The vanguard was able to raise his shield at the last moment out of instinct but the collision was far stronger than he thought.

It felt as though he was a piece of wood in a storm, thrown around like he weighed nothing.

Blasting the two away, Alice watched as they regrouped and the healer healed their wounds.

Since she asked them to treat it as though they're hunting a beast, she'll play her part.

Killing intent seeped out as the Hunters paled.

In front of them now stood a beast in the form of a human, flanked by a mass of briar thorns and blood. A beast of slaughter.

Chapter 532 - 532: Disparity In Strength

The sounds of swords clashing against 'metal' could be heard as the Swordsman struggled to close the gap between him and Alice.

Each of the briars was reinforced by a layer of metal, preventing them from being cut easily.

The Shield vanguard was occupied with keeping the healer safe since there were far more attacks targeting her than the others.

Above the trees, the archer tried to land some sneak attacks but with Alice already locking down on his location, it was hard for any of his attacks to breach the gap between the thorns.

The Scout was constantly trying to find a time to jump in but Alice didn't drop her guard. There was always a briar thorn pointed at where he was, making it impossible for him to just attack recklessly.

'The Healer doesn't seem to have any useful offensive skills at this moment, all she can do is sit back and watch everything happen. The vanguard is busy protecting her while the Swordsman doesn't have any buffs or useful skills to get past the briar thorns. The archer can't land a hit and the scout is too slow and

can't hide his presence.' Alice thought to herself as the results of this fight were clear as day for anyone to see.

With their confidence and determination, Alice had at least expected them to give her a little surprise. The bar for her expectations wasn't set high yet they still failed to match it.

And she was looking forward to potentially learning something from them as well. After all, they broke down the strong points of the Ebonfrost Warden one by one until the six star beast fell to their attacks.

With that kind of teamwork, Alice wanted to see how they would identify her weaknesses.

Letting out a disappointed sigh, Alice stood up and dismissed the throne.

Seeing this, they all went on guard as it was clear that Alice was about to make a move.

Raising her hand, Alice snapped her fingers as a blood mirror appeared beneath all of them, causing them to lose their footing.

Falling through the Void and then being spat back out into the real world, they saw that they were now on the floor in front of Alice.

She aimed her finger at them with a small spark dancing above her finger.

"Bang~ and you're dead." Alice spoke in a bored tone before flicking her hand, causing the Void Flux to disappear.

The briar thorns and spider lilies withered away and disappeared as though they were never there.

"Being able to judge whether or not something or someone is too strong for your current level is a skill in itself. After that comes retreating. Growing stronger is good but having a way to escape means you get to live another day. By living another day, you'll be able to get stronger." That was the best tip that Alice could give them.

This was also the mistake she made during the fight against the Doctor. She misjudged his power and exhausted herself trying in futility to kill him. If she had focused on escaping, she wouldn't need to owe Eryn the debt of saving her.

Plus, if she really wanted to run, there were a lot of methods available to her. Including the option of going into the Void and cashing in her favour with Feris to either kill the Doctor or escape.

Though she wanted to kill the Doctor herself with her own hands if possible.

Without waiting for their reply, Alice made her way back to the camp and sat down, enjoying a bit of mead.

###

After the fight, the guards didn't bother her anymore as they seemed to be contemplating what else they could've done against Alice.

However, it was simply the raw difference in strength that prevented the use of strategies.

With their current skill set, no matter how much they strategized, Alice would break it apart with power. That was a variable that they had to take account of.

The same applied to her.

The difference in power between her and the Doctor was simply too wide right now. She didn't have a method that would allow her to reach him and kill him.

'Let's think about something more useful for my sixth Sigil. My fifth Sigil is good but I can't get much practice with it without just risking being exiled. Honestly, I'm beginning to think it's a bit of a mistake.'
Alice sighed.

'Even if it is, we'll have to just live with it. The exile part is annoying to work around but you can't deny the benefits this Sigil gives. Not only does it slowly strip away your opponent's ability to use their energy, but it also gives you extra energy to use. Just that alone allows you to spam your heavy hitting hits like it's nothing.' Alyss reminded as Alice agreed.

The benefits of her Sigils were simply too good for her to give up.

For now, it was her trump card. An ability she'll only use once things get out of hand.

Therefore, for her sixth Sigil, she wanted to get something that'll synergise better with the rest of her things without risk of exiling her or something similar.

'I should probably think about a scenario where I can't swap Sigils.' Alice mused.

Her first Sigil was probably her most 'useless'.

The physical boost was now negligible and the main benefit was turning her blood into a hallucinogenic. But at this level, most of them had a basic resistance to effects like this.

On top of that, because she didn't focus on the poison side of her development, this hallucinogenic effect has stagnated.

Useful against weak enemies but useless against strong ones.

It didn't suit her at all.

[Now that I think about it... have you ever thought about how your First Sigil even works? Like down to the details?] Cayla asked as Alice was about to reply when she paused.

Blinking her eyes, she tilted her head.

'Well I did experiments with the poison side of it.'

[And what about the physical boost?]

'That... I don't believe I looked into it much. I just... kinda took it for granted.' Alice scratched her cheek and activated her first Sigil.

Clenching her fist, she felt a small negligible increase in strength but that was it.

[You have to remember that Sigils are created based on the capabilities of the beast and how their body functions. When grafted onto a human through a contract, the Sigil is adjusted and adapted to the individual.

[This is the case for all of your Sigils. When you copy the Jester's Sigil, you don't have a mirror like body like it does yet you can still disguise yourself. I've been noticing this but with you focusing on the wide variety of Sigils, you've been slacking on fully understanding the powers you've been given master.

[Right now, you're simply using Sigils you think are powerful and synergise well without fully understanding the 'why'. Perhaps it's time for you to reflect.] Cayla took this time to give Alice a quick lesson as this was one of the fundamentals that Allura focused on.

To make use of everything and anything.

For normal Hunters, their selection has always been limited. Thus when a choice is made, they do their best to understand everything there is to know about their power.

But Alice was different. She had a selection of every Sigil she'd taken from others. She could switch things out whenever she wanted so she didn't need to think about the consequences of choosing a Sigil like the others.

However, this also created one of her biggest weaknesses and that was not fully understanding what she could do with a Sigil before simply switching out.

A surface level understanding.

Closing her eyes, Alice began to observe her own body.

With the first Sigil still activated, she wanted to find the source of this physical reinforcement.

She could feel her blood pumping faster, the circulation of energy around her body. But most importantly, this blood that was circulating was 'dormant'!

Furrowing her brows, Alice activated her second and Third Sigil.

She created a swirl of blood before compressing it into a Void Flux.

She could clearly sense that the blood she used here was filled with energy, packed to the brim and forming a connection with her Spiritual Heart.

Yet when she used her first Sigil, this wasn't the case.

The blood was empty, it was simply flowing a little faster and reinforcing her muscles to accommodate the slight increase in strength.

However...

What if she was to 'activate' this blood of hers? What if she were to fill it with power from her other Sigils? Her artificial resonance?

Allura's words rang out in her mind once more. Words regarding a Hunter's growth being tied to their mind. How they need to think outside the box and how she should fully understand how each of her Sigils work before getting a new one.

Standing up, Alice closed her eyes.

She wanted to think about what would be useful right now.

The power of her fourth Sigil allowed her control over the Void. What kind of effect would that have if she were to pulse it through her body?

And what about her second Sigil? Her innate resistance to the Abyss? Of course, the passive effect of her blood already helped with this but what if it becomes the focus?

What if she were to actively surge it through her body?

Could she dispel abilities that manipulate perception and the mind? Could she make it so that she couldn't be targeted by Personal Realms?

If Alice's skills was a tree, new branches were now being opened up. New combinations and new ideas.

Her most neglected Sigil was about to evolve in a way that she never thought was possible!

Chapter 533 - 533: Testing Out New Possibilities

With a new branch of possibility now open to her, Alice dedicated her efforts to mastering it and seeing what was possible and what wasn't.

Even though she wanted to test what happens when her own blood is amplified through her body, it wasn't easy to get results.

She couldn't test if she could break out of a Personal Realm nor could she test the full effectiveness of the defences.

Alice couldn't test her fifth Sigil either since there were still some lingering after effects even though it's already been a few days since the fight with the Doctor.

She could instinctively tell that if she were to reactivate the Sigil, the likelihood of her being exiled was high.

Thus, this only left her with two Sigils that she could test out her theories with. Her third and her fourth.

The third wasn't unique by any means. It simply gave her the power to manifest and manipulate blood and metal.

Rather than a stand alone Sigil, she obtained it as a means to augment the power of her second.

The fourth might hold more interesting results though.

By pulsing the energy belonging to the Void through her body, could she freely step between the realms without taking the time to open a portal?

She wanted to test it out!

That night, Alice found another clearing to use. Though compared to before, there weren't as many trees around and mostly boulders.

Sitting atop a boulder, Alice closed her eyes and activated her first Sigil.

She could feel the flow of blood through her body, the slight boost in strength and an 'empty container' waiting to be filled with energy.

Activating her third Sigil simultaneously, Alice began to harmonise the two. It was similar to resonance yet at the same time, different. Rather than a resonance where the two are held in balance, the third Sigil is solely focusing on enhancing the powers of the first. Feeding itself into it.

She could feel her body temperature increasing as sweat dripped down her forehead.

Alice could feel her body crying out in pain from the unfamiliar sensation, her veins trying desperately to hold on as a wave of energy coursed through them.

*Drip... Drip...

Blood could be seen dripping from Alice's eye and nose as she furrowed her brows.

Her method wasn't quite right as her body couldn't handle the pressure being put onto it by the first Sigil. Even with the passive bonuses of the Sigils reinforcing her body, compared to the body of Hunter's who've consumed Abyss Blood over the years, she was still far too weak.

She needed to readjust her method of distribution so that her body could withstand the stress. Otherwise...

Alice glanced down at her arm.

She could see tears in her skin as her muscles snapped and her bones were crushed under the pressure.

"Yikes..."

Turning off her Sigils, Alice took her arm out of her outfit and cut it off before regenerating a new one. Her outfit was soaked with blood but that was a small price to pay for her experimentation.

Right now, her distribution of strength was too... slow. Wherever the energy passed through, her body would break down. She needed a way to immediately spread out the energy so that her body can withstand it as a whole.

However, this was much easier said than done. No matter how Alice tried to spread out the energy, her body would break apart before it could even reach the next area.

If she was to do this in the middle of a fight, the others would only see her losing limbs left and right.

It would be an effective scare tactic to some extent but that was not her goal.

Hours passed and Alice decided to leave it for now. She'll continue tomorrow and it's not like her outfit could handle it anymore.

It was completely soaked with blood and hardened thanks to the temperatures of the north.

Even if she could burn the blood away using her flames and control it so that it didn't burn her outfit, it still felt disgusting for her to keep wearing.

Looking through her pouch, Alice paused as she noticed that there wasn't any cloaks left. This was her last one meaning she had to keep wearing it.

Making a face of disgust, she let out a sigh and relented for now. As much as she wanted to buy new clothes, the money she had left was saved for travel expenses.

Scratching her hair, Alice shrugged her shoulders before making her way back to the camp.

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There was around 3 days left of the travel. The mountainous areas have reduced significantly and they were mostly travelling through the forest with a few small hills.

The roads here were well maintained and signs of the odd beast here and there couldn't be found anymore. The most dangerous part of the journey was over and it was a smooth journey to the port city.

Alice continued her experiments through the night and rested during the day.

As for her cloak... It was barely holding on with strands at this point. During the experiments with her third Sigil, rather than falling off, her limbs started to just explode at one point, hurling blood and shards of metal into the area.

If she was to drop her guard and funnel too much of her Third Sigil's power, she'll manifest the metal inside her own body.

With no progress being made on the combination between the first and the third, Alice decided to give the fourth a try.

And well... the first attempt left her nude with her clothes being forcefully flung off her body.

When funnelling the power of the Void through her body, she enters a strange state. Like a phantom, she was partially in both realms at the same time.

It was only for a split moment before her body showed signs of breakage and when she 'reappeared' in reality, that caused a displacement with her clothes that couldn't follow her into the Void, leaving her standing in her birthday suit.

Alice decided to not experiment with the fourth Sigil for now.

Not only was it embarrassing for her, but it also had a risk of a full body break down. At least for the third Sigil, it was mostly the limbs that she could regenerate. If her entire body was to break down, Alice wasn't sure if her regeneration could hold.

Setting aside the strange case of her experimentations, Alice noticed the weather was improving the closer they got to the port. It wasn't as cold as before, hell, it was even warm at times.

It was also during this that realised her favourite outfits might not be suitable for her journey onwards.

'Maybe we should do a bit of clothes shopping after all.' Alice muttered.

'Travel expenses.' Alyss interrupted.

'But it's hot ya know? I'll be sweating from head to toe and it'll be disgusting.'

'Travel expenses.'

'Surely you can't have a cute lady like me walking around covered in sweat right? It'll be embarrassing! Plus, I'll stink!'

'Travel expenses.'

'But-'

'Travel expenses.' Alyss was firm on this matter.

Aside from mead, clothes were the second thing that Alice bought the most. If their pouch was filled with 70% mead, the other 30% was composed of 25% outfits and 5% miscellaneous items.

'Caylaaaa, Alyss is bullying me!' Alice cried out to Cayla but she only gave her tearful master a side glance.

[If you're worried about the heat, you can always wear Alyss's outfits. You two have the same body after all.]

Hearing this, Alice coughed awkwardly remembering her twin's tastes when it came to clothing.

All of it was extremely revealing!

Crop tops, short shorts and shoes. It was practically showing off her entire body minus the important parts!

'Right~ There was that too. I'll let you borrow my clothes if you're really worried about the heat, it'll let us save some money for travel.' Alyss grinned.

'Urg...' Frustration filled Alice's mind as she began to pout and throw a tantrum by not talking to them.

All she wanted was some eastern outfits since she's travelling to the east anyways, why do they have to be so mean.

Seeing her twin throw a tantrum like this, Alyss rolled her eyes but she was firm on her decision.

Once they do a few odd jobs and get some money to spare, then she'll allow Alice to indulge herself.

But for now, they had to save what they could for travel.

In the end, Alice decided to combine bits and pieces of both of their wardrobes to make something more to her liking for now. Something that'll tide her over until she gets her hands on some eastern outfits.

Her new attire consisted of a sleeveless black shirt that exposed her back, a large white jacket that went down to her thighs with large sleeves unzipped just past her chest so that it revealed her shoulders. A pair of shorts that Alyss enjoys and a pair of white shoes. She also got some materials from some of her other outfits that were destroyed in battle and repurposed the fabric.

She gave herself an anklet, some belts to hold her jacket in place and a few silver ornaments around the belts.

Her hair had also been growing a tad too long for her liking so she gave it a quick cut. Previously, it was reaching down to butt but now, it only reached halfway down her back. She also adjusted her bangs a little so that it covered the scar on her right eye.

Looking at herself in the blood mirror, Alice had a happy smile on her face as she was satisfied with her look. It was a little revealing around the legs since she usually wears stockings or long boots to cover them up, but a change of pace wasn't bad either.

Naturally, the guards were shocked to see a pretty girl under the cloak but dare not say anything. After all, Alice was someone who could slap them to kingdom come before they even realise what was happening!

And soon, they arrived at the port.

Chapter 534 - 534: Port City Caethis

As they neared the port, Alice could smell the saltiness in the air. While it wasn't her first time at a port, it was her first time going without worrying about anything else. The last time she visited a port city, she was infiltrating while also worrying about whether or not she'd die from the injuries that she'd sustained along with the biting cold.

This time around, she was relaxed and could enjoy the warm weather and clear skies.

Originally, she was a little worried that the Doctor would keep chasing her. But seeing as how the journey was mostly uneventful and she didn't receive a message from the Void Hawk, the capital was safe.

With that in mind, Alice relaxed herself a little.

Naturally, to the guards, the image of seeing a cute girl swinging her legs back and forth while drinking mead was a little jarring. Especially when they consider that this was the same girl that kicked their asses solo just the other night.

After entering the port, Alice was immediately surprised by the vast variety of people that she saw. Most cities would hide those with a visible side effect, especially if it made them look 'less human'.

But everywhere she looked, there were people with gills or other aquatic details.

"It's not polite to stare. In this city, this kind of thing is common." The Scout spoke up as he slowed down and walked next to Alice.

"Oh? Why?" Alice blinked her eyes curiously.

"That's just how things are. It also makes their job of diving into the water much easier." The Scout shrugged. He didn't visit the port often enough to know the full details behind it.

Scratching her chin, Alice also noticed a thin layer around the gills. Probably because they weren't being used on land and they only needed it in the water.

Aside from the gills, there were also those that were walking around with fins around the side of the head. They wore makeup and outfits that seemed to mimic the look of scales, embracing the beauty of this side effect.

Of course, there was more than just aquatic side effects but they were the majority.

Compared to them, Alice's split hair didn't stand out as much anymore.

[Perhaps we should stay in this city for a bit master.] Cayla suggested. Clearly, she was also interested by the uniqueness of this port as this kind of thing was practically unthinkable in the Abyss of today.

Everyone hated the look of side effects as it was a clear sign of greed for more power. If you were living in the city and were seen to have side effects, you'd be reallocated to the slums and hidden from public view.

Alice had seen this often when journeying in the Abyss.

'Sure, we need a moment to earn some money after all. I don't think I have enough for boat fees to reach the east.' Alice nodded with a light sigh when thinking about their current financial troubles.

Since this was a port city, there's no doubt that there will be ways for her to earn a bit of money.

If anything, this place reminded her a little of her first 'visit' to the Abyss. Thrown into the deep end of the Slaughter Docks and forced to fight with her life on the line.

She didn't want to change any of the events that occurred but if there was one thing that she regretted, it was that she couldn't help her friend. Maybe... if she was able to save Lilia back then, the two of them would be journeying together right now.

Laughing, joking, creating trouble together.

If it was now, maybe Alice could've helped Lilia resolve her issue with the Vampire Lily.

To burn away the roots that are spreading through the body and help her recover.

However, what happened in the past couldn't be changed. The best she could do was to live a full and happy life. So that when she sees Lilia again, she can tell her that her freedom wasn't wasted.

Parting ways with the rest of the caravan, Alice decided to explore the city a little. She wanted to get a general understanding of where everything was as well as Inn prices. Surprisingly, the Hunter's Guild branch here was rather run down.

Most of the commission didn't need Hunters since they struggled with water combat.

It was much cheaper and far better to just hire local pirates or private companies that handle protection.

While exploring the city, Alice had also discovered a rather fascinating piece of news. That being the fact that this city was split into three layers.

Main Port, Pirate Bay and Mercia.

The main Port was self-explanatory as this is where most people reside. Traders from overseas and civilians all live here.

Pirate Bay is a little further away and offshore but is still considered part of the city. It's the home of the pirates and holds a different set of rules to the main Port. But despite the difference in rules, the two still live in harmony so long as one side doesn't violate the peace agreements.

Of course, Pirate Bay can't control all of the pirates which is why if any show hostility first, travellers are allowed to kill on sight.

And the last was what pulled Alice's attention the most.

The underwater city Mercia.

It's the home for those who can breathe underwater and is affiliated with the main Port. Not a lot of information can be gotten from there as most of the residents refrain from saying much. And getting permission to visit is difficult.

Originally, Alice thought that it would be pretty easy to just go anyway since she noticed that there were a few tools to help a person breathe underwater. But both the Pirates and the Guards protect Mercia, preventing invaders.

These three were the main factions that kept this city in balance.

On top of this, the port city of Caethis was independent from Verona despite being in the north. It's a neutral place that oversees trade between the North and the East.

But with the current war between Extalia and Verona, the port has declined trade vessels from Extalia from entering. After all, if they allow Extalia to land, that's practically telling Verona that they want to fight. And while Verona has respected their independence, showing such a case of hostility will have her sending Urigar to take care of them and that was something neither side wanted.

Chewing on a squid skewer she bought, Alice noted down everything she discovered while exploring this city.

But the best thing of all, there was a duelling arena!

Alice wanted to scout things out a bit first and disguise herself. Plus, she also wanted to see if she could fight any of the easterners who travelled from overseas.

If she were to get a taste of their fighting style now, she wouldn't be surprised when she visits the East.

Who knows, she might even learn something useful from them. According to Ria, they're professionals when it comes to utilizing their bodies to their maximum efficiency. To put it simply, martial arts designed around the usage of Sigils.

Alice wanted to get a first hand experience of these so called martial arts.

'Let's find a place to stay at first. We don't even know if this place allows gambling and betting on yourself since it's the surface. The rules here are different.' Alyss suggested.

'Fair point. Also, you should try these squid skewers, they're pretty tasty with the spices imported from the East. It should fit your tastes quite nicely.' Alice offered.

Taking over momentarily, Alyss took a bite and folded her arms.

'It's pretty alright but I'm not a fan of the squid. I don't think seafood suits me.' Alyss furrowed her brows.

'Shame. I'll take care of this then.' Alice shrugged. If Alyss didn't like it then it was more food for herself.

Finishing the skewer, Alice bought a map of the city and noted down where all of the Inns were. Because this is a trade hub, most of the Inns were a bit more expensive than the usual prices. Anything that was close to the port or even remotely close to the centre was beyond her budget.

At this rate, Alice might have to sleep on the streets if the arena didn't allow for gambling.

Letting out a sigh, Alice crossed out another Inn on the map as it was too expensive.

She thought she would at least have enough money for one night but that wasn't the case at all.

"I guess this is the last one..." She muttered, looking at a rather rundown building on the outskirts of the city. It was near the border and if it wasn't for the map, Alice wouldn't even know that this was an Inn.

If anything, it looked more like a bar than an Inn.

Pushing open the doors, her lips twitched as the door almost fell over. This kind of run-down place was probably the only thing she could afford if the prices were low.

But to her surprise, aside from the rather poorly maintained door, the inside was surprisingly high quality. Everything was clean and might even be better than some of the other inns she saw.

"Ah sorry! I'm still working on renovating the place. I'll sort out the door tonight." A voice called out from the back.

Furrowing her brows, Alice felt the voice was a little familiar but couldn't put a finger on where she'd heard it before.

But as the figure stepped out with a woman by his side, Alice realised who it was.

The youngest cardinal to be appointed by the Church of the Moon. Tristan.

A person who tried to figure out Alice's curse when they ran into one another at the port stronghold.

Chapter 535 - 535: Meeting Tristan Again

As the two stared at one another, Alice only had one question on her mind.

'What the f*ck is he doing here???'

Considering he was a member of the Church of the Moon, Alice figured he would've made his way south by now rather than appearing at the port leading East.

Was the Church planning an expedition East? If so, why was he dressed as a worker behind the bar?

Alice knew he was a high ranking member belonging to the church which only made the situation stranger.

"I didn't expect us to meet again, so soon at that. Seems like the curse is still holding on strong though." Tristan threw the towel over his shoulder as he revealed a small smile.

He had tried to dispel it last time but it only resulted in the curse fighting back and lashing out at him.

At that time, if the curse was designed to counter properly, he would've been inflicted with the same curse as the girl in front of him.

"It's not something that'll disappear overnight. Though I didn't expect you to be... attending a bar despite being a member of the Church." Alice gestured with a raised eyebrow while sitting down on the new seats that he installed.

"Well, this was kind of my profession before I became a member of the Church. It was coincidence that brought them to me." Tristan chuckled.

"Now then, how may I help a dear customer?" He asked leaning against the bar counter.

"I'm looking for a room. I want to stay a few nights but the other Inn's are a tad more expensive than what my budget will allow. I already spent a bunch of money travelling here." Alice shrugged, hoping that the cost of the rooms was going to be less than 5 Gold per night.

After all, most common families only earn around 10 Gold per week and could get by the week with 5 Gold.

With her travel expenses deducted from her pouch, Alice only had 3 Gold pieces left of her overall funds.

Though her hobby of mead and buying clothes were to blame as at one point, she had more than 5 platina together with Selen.

Yet now she was reduced to a measly 3 Gold.

If she didn't leave in such a hurry, she would've asked Verona for a bit of money. Shame be damned.

"It'll be 1 Gold per night, breakfast included."

"The f*ck?" Alice blinked her eyes.

It felt like a scam considering how the other Inns were five times the price of this one. Not only that, but due to Tristan's assistance, this Inn now looked far better on the inside compared to the other places.

"We're rather far out from the centre after all, it makes travelling a bit of more of a hassle. Plus, if the other Inn's are outside your budget, you can't spare more than 5 Gold. If you're travelling with so little funds, you probably want to find a side job while staying here. Meaning ideally, more than one night. And finally, seeing as how you chose this Inn despite how run down the outside looks, clearly you're hoping for something a lot cheaper than the other places." Tristan analysed as the girl beside him hit his arm when he mentioned the run down outer appearance.

"Ever thought of changing careers to being a detective rather than a member of the Church?" Alice's smile twitched. She couldn't believe that he deducted her budget despite not mentioning anything about numbers.

"I wouldn't consider myself a detective. I'm merely someone who gathered a bit of information and made an educated guess." Tristan gave a small chuckle as Alice placed two Gold pieces on the table.

"I'll take a room for two nights then. And since you know I'm looking for a side job, any recommendations? O' one who gathered a bit of information." Alice joked as Tristan handed the money to the girl next to him.

Folding his arms, Tristan closed his eyes.

"It depends on what kind of job you want to do. From what I've seen, there is no shortage of guards or strong Hunters acting as protection. Plus, there are also pirates when it comes to sea travel. So I don't think you can earn money that way.

"The Hunters Guild doesn't get many jobs here so it's a bit of a waste but you can certainly try your luck with it."

"What about the Arena? I believe you can place bets on yourself and win money that way no?" Alice asked but Tristan shook his head.

"Unfortunately for you, the three factions that run this place have prohibited betting when it comes to the arena. Instead, they sell tickets and earn revenue while putting on a good show. There are... methods to gambling but it's run by some rather dubious fellows that I wouldn't suggest. No matter how in need of money you are." Tristan shook his head.

Hearing that gambling was banned, Alice let out a deep groan as she practically deflated in front of Tristan.

"Well, I guess I'll figure out something sooner or later. So just out of curiosity, were you living here before you joined the church then?" Alice asked while looking at the assortment of wines, meads and other alcoholic beverages lined up on his shelf.

"Nope. I used to be a Vagrant before I joined the church. I wandered from place to place, doing odd jobs and learning skills, looking for somewhere to settle down with my sister. A few months back, the Church found me and saw that I had a high affinity for their blessings and I agreed to join." Tristan smiled as he noticed Alice's gaze and decided to make a quick drink for her.

"Once the money started to roll in, we decided to settle down in Caethis since it's a trading hub. The public safety of this place is rather high and with trade between the North and the East, merchants frequent this place often."

Bringing out a glass, Tristan began to measure out and pour in samples of different beverages before pulling out some fruit from under the counter.

Squeezing some juice into the glass, he cracked an egg and poured in some egg whites, confusing Alice.

However, he simply smiled and continued.

"So while I'm out on missions for the Church, Arwen can run the Inn. She'll be safe here." Tristan explained with a smile. With everything placed into the glass, he grabbed another glass and sealed the two together before shaking it, blending the mixture.

"Aren't you afraid that your enemies might come here and target your sister?" Alice asked curiously, glancing over at Arwen who was writing in a notebook.

"That was a concern at one point but I'd already sorted it out. I'm confident that she'll be safe here. Of course, I'd rather spend time next to her but I have my own responsibilities. It's thanks to the Church that we can do all of this after all."

Pausing his shaking momentarily, he threw in a few chunks of ice before continuing.

"Seems like you hold the church in high regard then." Alice smiled.

"That's simply how life worked out for me. Do you follow any particular doctrine?"

"Kind of but not really. I don't follow any of the three main Gods." Alice shook her head.

"Oh?" Tristan raised an eyebrow. He had a thought in his mind but he hoped that it wasn't true.

Because if it was, as part of his responsibilities as a Cardinal, he'd have to strike her down here and now.

"I follow my own whims. Let my own decisions guide me through life." Alice replied. She noticed a slight spark of wariness but after her response, it disappeared.

"I see. Most Hunters follow their own gut instincts so I shouldn't be surprised." Tristan smiled, gesturing to Arwen to bring over a smaller glass with some ice in it.

Pouring out the drink, he decorated it with a piece of fruit on the side of the glass.

"Give it a try, it's on the house." Tristan slid the glass in front of Alice.

Looking at the drink, Alice wondered if this was a type of fruit juice considering its colourful appearance. It was a swirl of blue and pink that seemed to shimmer with glitter with a layer of white foam on the top and a piece of fruit to match the colour.

However, she was certain he mixed in some alcohol.

Hesitating for a moment, Alice decided to give it a sip.

"!!!"

Seeing her reaction, Tristan revealed a grin.

"Seems like you like it."

"Like it? I love it." Alice gave a thumbs up while licking her lips. The initial taste was sweet and fruitful followed by a lingering aftertaste of alcohol that warmed her up on the inside. A blend of sweetness helped disguise the bitterness of the alcohol, allowing the fruity flavours to reveal themselves.

If it wasn't for the fact that it looked like it was a lot of effort to make, Alice would've been tempted to ask him for several bottles worth.

"I'm glad you like it. It's my own personal blend that I made when travelling around the West. I worked for a rather unique bar that blended drinks together and I wanted to make something a little on the sweet side." Tristan chuckled, happy to see a customer enjoying the drink he made.

Finishing the drink, Alice closed her eye and savoured the taste. At that moment, an idea appeared in her mind.

A way for her to earn some money and repay Tristan for showing her this drink.

"Say, I got a little idea. A way to drag a lot of customers to this place if you want." Alice grinned.

Chapter 536 - 536: Calista

"Say, I got a little idea. A way to drag a lot of customers to this place if you want." Alice grinned.

"Oh?" Tristan raised his eyebrow.

It felt a little suspicious with how she was saying it but he couldn't see any malicious motivations behind her eyes.

Additionally, he was thinking of doing some advertisements since the outer shell of the Inn was old. Arwen had bought this place with the money she had saved up during their travels as well as the money that he sent back to her.

But his original plan was to advertise it once he finished redecorating everything.

"What do you have in mind?" Tristan asked curiously.

"So you know how the arena doesn't allow for gambling anymore right? It means that the fights are more authentic wouldn't you say? More people will go right?" Alice began to lay out the scene.

"I'm thinking of joining the Arena and doing a little post fight advertisement. Of course, most of the people watching the Arena are wealthy enough to afford the inns closer to the centre. However, what if we were to suddenly add another event? A competition that's being held here?"

Listening to her suggestion, Tristan folded his arms and contemplated the idea.

"You'll have to run that by the Arena staff first. I doubt they'll like it if you were to suddenly do an advertisement. If anything, it might get you banned and make a lot of enemies for this Inn." He shook his head.

"I'm not afraid of them harming Arwen because of the things I put into place but it's likely that they'll play dirty and hinder things in other ways. If they can't arm Arwen then they'll turn their attention on anyone who decides to rent a room and so on."

Originally, Tristan was only planning on marketing this inn to travellers who were only staying here as a temporary stop. Common people who are travelling from one city to another and would rather not pay the exorbitant pricing of the other Inns.

If they were to advertise in the middle of the arena then that'll turn too much attention to them. In fact, the other Inns might even think they're stealing their customers.

"Then why don't we advertise this as a high quality bar rather than an Inn? I'd say your drinks are far better than a majority of the bars I've been to. Does Arwen know how to make them?" Alice asked curiously.

"She struggles a little with it. So I don't think she'll be able to serve customers with the difficult drinks while I'm away." Tristan shook his head.

"What a shame..." Alice tapped her finger on the table.

She wanted to help him out to repay him but she failed to take into consideration the consequences once she leaves this place.

If Arwen attracts too much attention, it would indeed be bad for the overall situation. She knew full well how petty people can be and if these Inns feel threatened, things will get ugly fast.

"Thank you for the suggestion though. Just the thought of wanting to help is appreciated." Tristan comforted.

Shrugging her shoulders, Alice spun around on her chair for a bit before standing up.

Bidding farewell to Tristan for now, she decided to make her way to the arena.

She wanted to check things out to begin with. And while it's unfortunate that she couldn't earn any money from it, she still wanted to see the various fighting styles from the East.

###

"Can you repeat that please?" Alice's smile twitched.

"If you wish to compete in the arena, you need to first pay the sign up fee and see if you're eligible. Once they determine whether or not they can allow you to fight, you'll get a small cut of the tickets if you win. If not, your cut is deducted." The staff replied as Alice was simply one of many who also wanted to fight in the arena.

"Not that part. I meant the part after." She shook her head.

"The fee is 1 Platina, non refundable."

Hearing this, Alice felt like a spear had just pierced her heart.

She was too broke for this place!

"So in the event that I'm not chosen, I don't get my money back?" Alice asked as the staff was beginning to get annoyed.

"Yes, the arena isn't a place that anyone can come and go as they like. How many requests do you think we get in a day? If you want to fight without paying this fee then go through the proper channels. A sponsorship that'll allow you to compete as a proper fighter. Now is there anything else?"

Opening her mouth, Alice wanted to say something but let out a sigh and shook her head.

Stepping aside, she glanced at the long queue of fighters and understood just how much the arena was earning in terms of revenue. It's no wonder they don't care about gambling when ticket prices, participation fees, snack fees and so on earned them so much.

The starting price was high but if you can win often, you'll earn a profit after a while due to ticket sales.

'So what's the plan now then twinnie? We're broke and we can't join the arena at all to earn money. Guess we'll have to do odd jobs for a bit.' Alyss asked as Alice sighed.

'Seems like it. What can we even do to get some money quickly? I can't pick a fight with someone random on the street as public safety will arrest me pretty quickly. The Hunter's Guild is practically barren and the same with trying to get a bodyguard job.'

[The lad at the Inn did mention some dubious folk running the gambling place. Maybe if you were to disguise yourself, you could fish for a bit of money there.] Cayla suggested as Alyss almost fell over.

The Voice of Reason has just suggested that they rob the underworld of this city.

'Oh hou~ I like what you're thinking Cayla. Alright, let's take a look at this gambling place shall we?' Alice licked her lips with a wide grin as she made her way down the alleyway and switched out her first Sigil.

She wanted to hide her skill set so that no one could link it back to her. With that in mind, there were three Sigils that she could work around.

Naturally, they all belonged to Abyss Lords!

The first and main Sigil she wanted to use was the Sigil of Duality.

The second that'll act as support was going to be the Sigil of Corrosion! The Sigil that belonged to Asur, the Lord of Corrosion that she made a contract with inside the Inverted World.

Lastly, the final Sigil that she wanted to make use of was the Sigil of Apocalypse, which belonged to Tiamat.

With these three, even if she's against people with six Sigils, winning will be a cakewalk.

She didn't want to switch out her second Sigil since it was the foundation of her flames. If things do go wrong, she still wanted a backup plan. Therefore, she was switching out her First, Third, Fourth and Fifth Sigils for this lineup.

First – Sigil of the Mirror Jester.

Second – Sigil of the Maiden of the Blood Moon.

Third – Sigil of Duality.

Fourth – Sigil of Corrosion.

Fifth – Sigil of Apocalypse.

Her body began to shimmer as she changed her outfit and disguise. As long as she doesn't take a hit outside of her expectations, this disguise will hold.

She now had light pink hair with hues of rose gold, a pair of sky blue eyes and a set of sharp teeth. There was a hint of insanity in her gaze as her outfit consisted of bandages peaking through the gaps of the tattered Doll dress and large sleeves. It was decorated with white frills and a headpiece.

A pair of striped stockings and black boots.

Her fighting plan was simple. She'll focus on using Duality to disrupt her opponents while Corrosion will burn away their abilities and their defences. Tiamat's Sigil will act as a trump card if needed.

As for her resonance, now that she understood properly how they work thanks to her artificial resonance, she had no doubt that she could make something work between the three Lord Level Sigils.

A resonance of the highest quality.

And since she's walking into the underworld of this city, it was a perfect chance to test if out as well if things go wrong.

###

The 'Underworld' of Port Caethis existed between the 'layers' of the main port and Pirate Bay. It was a second of the city that was off limits to most people not because of any laws but rather the lack thereof.

A lawless zone that migrated a few times throughout the city, appearing in different spots. The current spot was near a set of caves leading underground with a few passageways being created leading between the layers.

In the Underworld, one could find gambling, whore houses and even the black market that sold items that should be prohibited yet smuggled over from the port.

The main attraction of this location was no doubt the black market.

Recently, there's been a surge of unpurified Abyss Blood. While the side effects were violent, the effects were far more potent than the average vial. A perfect item for slaves to use if the owners felt threatened by any signs of danger or wanted to push them past their limits.

Yet these slaves that drank the blood were now sitting in a pile of corpses in the centre of the Underworld.

"How unrefined. Don't you think it's a little rude to send these brutes after a cute lady? No matter how much you find me attractive, at least take me out to dinner first." 'Calista' grinned as she made her debut.

Chapter 537 - 537: Lorien

Glaring at the girl sitting on a mountain of corpses, the slave trader found himself stepping back out of fear.

He thought luck was on his side after seeing merchandise that was far better than any. That delicate skin, that appearance, all of it was perfect. If he captured her, he could've sold her for a big profit.

Surely the battle slaves empowered by the new berserk blood would help him capture her right? These are slaves that not even the ruling body of Caethis dared to look down on lightly.

Yet this girl...

The moment he sent them to capture her, she burst into action. In one move, all of them collapsed on the ground and their insides burned away.

"What? Don't want to treat me to dinner? Such a disappointment. And here I thought you were a gentleman, bringing some escorts with you so that you could treat me to a decent meal. Or were these meant to be bodyguards? Aren't they a little... Weak?" She grinned, revealing a row of sharp teeth.

Colour drained from the slave trader's body. Weak? His bodyguards? No, they weren't weak. She was simply too strong!

"S-Stay away from me!!!" He screamed, turning around to run.

However, Alice narrowed her eyes and flicked her finger.

The slave trader's motor controls were flipped in an instant and he crashed into the ground. Red thread tied itself around his ankles as she dragged him back and suspended him in the air.

"Stay away from you? Didn't you want to capture me earlier? What happened to that? Can't handle me?" Alice asked as her finger traced his face.

A pink and purple energy manifested around Alice's finger, burning away at the trader's skin.

"ARGGGG!!!" Letting out a scream that attracted more attention than before, everyone could see Alice torturing the trader by drawing across his face.

One of the main traders that existed in the underworld was being killed in public!

"Little girl, can I ask you to spare him?" A voice rang out as Alice lazily glanced towards the rooftop and saw a silver haired man with a pair of elongated ears, crimson eyes and what seemed to be a pair of demonic black horns sticking out of his head.

He wore an elegant black tuxedo with golden highlights and red tassels.

"And who are you to request that of me? This waste of space wanted to capture me of all things. Didn't even want to treat me to a meal too." Alice crossed her legs as her finger slowly dug into the trader's left eye.

Ignoring his screams, she kept her eyes on the strange man standing on the roof.

Hearing her response, he furrowed his brows and disappeared from where he stood.

"Nope~ Don't go cheating now. There are rules to everything." Alice shook her head.

Around them, the threads that were disguised by the mirror jester Sigil revealed itself as everyone was trapped in a spider web of her making.

Even the strange man had to stop as the threads around him were reinforced by the same strange energy that she used to burn away the trader's flesh.

Currently, he stood a few meters away from Alice.

"The fact that you left him alive for this long clearly means there's something that you want." He asked as Alice nodded her head.

"Yep~ This is why I like smart people. However, even though I like smart people, I have to ask...

"Where did you get this blood?" She narrowed her gaze.

The original goal was to get money so that she could fight in the arena. But it was secondary to the blood that she saw them use.

At first, she thought it was part of the Zenia family's schemes again. But she couldn't sense her own blood in there at all. There was something else at play. It was eerily familiar yet also very different.

"Are you wondering about Fallen Symbiosis? It's a new type of blood that's being shipped from the East. Very potent in power but there's only so much someone can drink before they die." The man replied honestly.

He could sense the bubbling killing intent under her tone and decided not to test her patience for now.

"The East huh?" She muttered, giving the slaves beneath her one last glance.

"Now then, how much do you think this guy's life is worth? Please remember that he tried to capture me." She changed topics and pointed at the now one eyed trader.

Looking at the trader, the man thought for a moment before turning his gaze to Alice.

"If it appeases you, you can take his life. Instead, I'd rather the two of us talk business instead." He smiled, adjusting the cuffs on his wrist as the wires around him fell limp.

Raising her eyebrow in surprise, Alice wasn't sure what he did that caused her to lose connection with her threads.

"Depends, what kind of business are we talking about?" Alice asked. With one swift movement, she twisted off the trader's head and tossed it away. His body struggled momentarily before falling limp and she burned it away with the power of corrosion.

"Please follow me, business is better discussed in more private accommodations." He turned around as Alice shrugged her shoulders and followed him for now.

She had to admit that she was rather curious about this 'business' that he wanted to discuss but more importantly, she wanted to know the source of this strange blood in the East. She had a feeling that if it was already getting smuggled overseas, it was probably running rampant in the East.

It was better to gather some information so she doesn't travel blind.

"May I have the honour of knowing your name? I don't believe I've seen the young miss frequenting these parts before." He asked, giving her a side glance.

"It's only polite to say your own name first."

"Lorien. Now yours?" He replied with a smile.

"Calista."

Walking in silence, the two soon arrived at a rather inconspicuous building hidden off to the side of the main road.

The inside of the building was far better than what could be seen from the outside. Taking a few steps down, Alice could see a large gambling den with several paths leading elsewhere. Located in the centre was a large roulette table with several gamblers sat around it.

Around the roulette table were various tables hosting different games from blackjack to poker.

Alice wasn't familiar with any of them as the only gambling she'd done was with her life on the line or in an Arena.

This kind of gambling she didn't like as she had no control over the variables.

Entering a VIP room, he gestured for her to sit opposite her.

"Now, for this business that I want to discuss with you, may I know why you're in the underworld in the first place? People don't come here without a specific goal in mind. Whether that be losing yourself in lust, purchasing a slave or following your addictions. There is always a goal in mind." Lorien asked as he glanced down at the gamblers losing their money.

"Oh? And this is important because?" Alice crossed her legs.

"Because I have multiple business opportunities that I can offer you. Depending on what your goal is, I can give you something more to your liking." Lorien smiled, gesturing for a waiter to bring over some high quality wines.

Seeing the waiter approach with a collar around her neck, Alice's eye twitched for a moment as it was similar in design to her old collar.

Naturally, this didn't escape Lorien's notice.

"Seems like you're displeased with the purchase and selling of slaves." He smiled, raising the glass of wine to his nose before drinking.

"Perhaps. As for my goal... Let's just say I'm looking to line my pockets with a bit of coin." Alice swirled the wine in her glass but didn't drink.

"Some Coin you say? How much Coin are we talking about? For someone of your... abilities, I can only assume that you wish to work with Platina rather than Gold." Lorien asked, keeping his eyes on Alice.

"Quite the astute observation. Now let's talk business. What kind of transaction do you wish to get from my capabilities?"

"Straight to the point I see. Alright, the transaction is a simple one. You help me and I'll get you the Coin you need. You see, the Pirates have been quite the pain recently and they've been cracking down on things. Even if it's not smuggling illegal goods over, they're confiscating quite a few of our wares.

"What I want you to do is simply to scare them a little. Keep them occupied so the next few shipments arrive without any issues. You don't need to fight, simply acting as a deterrent is good enough. Do that and I'll pay you 1 platina for each shipment that arrives without any issues." Lorien offered as Alice rubbed her hands together in her mind.

"How many shipments are we talking about?" Alice asked, wanting to see how much she could make from this exchange.

"There are 10 shipments that are scheduled to arrive within the next week. If all 10 arrive without any issue, I'll pay you an extra 5 Platina."

"Make it 2 Platina per shipment and 10 extra if all of them arrive without issue." Alice made a counteroffer.

Furrowing his brows, he thought about it for a moment before shaking his head.

"I can do 2 per shipment but the extra remains at 5 Platina if all shipments arrive without issue."

Seeing as how he was agreeing with the price of 2 Platina per shipment, whatever was inside must be rather important.

All she needed to do was make sure they arrived without issue then she'd get paid. Anything that happens outside of that is technically not a part of their contract.

Chapter 538 - 538: Minerva, Darrow

After coming to an agreement, Alice accepted a Law of Agreement to finalise the contract.

In return for protecting his shipment from Pirates, she'll get 2 Platina per successful delivery. If all 10 are delivered in good condition, she'll be awarded an extra 5 Platina.

Once that is done, their contract ends.

But if some of the shipments are damaged, they will be deducted from her payment.

A simple arrangement that was to Alice's liking. While his choice to support slavery and business in the underworld rubbed her the wrong way, she could get behind the straightforward manner of his contracts.

Of course, this could also simply be his way of being careful after her little showcase in front of everyone.

Regardless, she was happy with the arrangements.

With the contract now finalised, Alice left the establishment without staying longer. Her job will start in two days and be finished before the week ends.

'Seems like our little trip to this city might last a lot longer than a week. Maybe two weeks? Possibly three.' Alyss sighed as she stretched her body across the throne.

'What makes you say that? We're only going to be here for a week to do the job.' Alice chuckled.

'Don't give me that nonsense. Information gathering and figuring out what's inside the shipments. Once you're free from the contract, you're probably going to rob them blind, aren't you? Change identities and steal a bunch of stuff.' Alyss rolled her eyes.

She was very familiar with Alice's thought process. If people believe that this gal here would just do a job and then leave without considering anything else, they're dead wrong.

Hiring Alice is akin to hiring a parasite that latches onto your coffers.

'Well~ No comment from me.' Alice chuckled. As Alyss may have guessed, her original plan was to only follow the arrangement as specified by the contract. Anything outside of that was no longer her issue.

Whether that be a strange girl attacking the shipments or anything else, 'Calista's' job was over and she didn't need to worry about the underworld anymore.

'Knew it.' Alyss rolled her eyes.

Once she was sure that no one was observing her, Alice dispelled her disguise and made her way back to the Inn.

###

"Welcome back, seems like you're in a rather good mood." Tristan called out as Alice could see him repairing the roof of the building.

"Hmm... Somewhat. I found myself a little job that'll last me the week. On the other hand, seems like you're making the final repairs. You're quite the handy man aren't you?" Alice chuckled while knocking her finger against the walls of the Inn.

Compared to before, it was now a lot sturdier and could probably withstand a decent amount of force.

The time she was gone was only a few hours yet Tristan was able to make this much progress.

"The sooner I fix this place up, the faster we can properly start the business. And as for my skills, it's only natural to pick up a thing or two if you travel a lot." He shrugged, putting another tile in place.

"That so?" Alice replied half heartedly.

Her attention was on something else. Something that caused the corners of her mouth to twitch.

'Is this dude for real? He's using his blessings to help him repair the damn place!'

She could sense the distinct energy belonging to the moon radiating from his body. With the sun slowly setting on the horizon, the blessing only increased in potency.

At this rate, Alice wouldn't be surprised if the Inn was turned into a bunker or something that could withstand large scale attacks.

If she were to unleash an attack with all of her Sigils in the middle of the city, this place would probably survive relatively unscathed. That was the feeling she was getting from this Inn.

[I think his role in the Church might be a bit higher than my initial estimation...] Cayla furrowed her brows as most members can't do this kind of task.

"Well, I'll leave you to it. Hopefully, things can be repaired quickly so you can attract some customers." Alice smiled before stepping into the Inn.

Looking at Alice's disappearing back, Tristan couldn't help but wonder if she noticed that he was using blessings. A large majority of people can't sense this kind of thing so if she could, she might be a good fit for the Church.

However, he wasn't the kind of person to force someone else to follow his path or religion because they have an affinity for it. That would be going against his code of conduct.

###

Since there was some time before her new 'job' started, Alice decided to explore the city a little and do a bit of research on the pirates. They were one of the foundations of Caethis after all, she couldn't slack off even if she was confident in her own abilities.

The pirates were primarily split into two factions. Their names are a little on the nose but they had better things to think about.

First was the Pirate Queen Minerva, a woman who focused on expanding their influence across the seas. She's the one mostly responsible for the ambushes at sea and aggressive actions.

As for her opposite, it was the Pirate King Darrow. He's rather old if they consider the longevity of pirates. He's someone who's fought in battles between nations before and survived.

As for his views, he's on the side of not breaking what's working and would rather keep the status quo. A keeper of peace if one was to dress it up with better words.

He makes deals with the port, lends pirates to act as guards and keeps Minerva in check.

However, his passive nature doesn't mean he's weak. In fact, it's because he's strong that he could keep Minerva from doing more. If he wanted, he could completely shut her down but that's not how he operates. He allows the pirates freedom while making sure they don't cross the line.

Between the two, Alice was rather interested in Darrow. He has the same title as Rosalyn, the principal.

Strongest below the rank of Lord.

Alternatively, he's also known as the undefeated Pirate King of the North and someone who guarantees the safety of the shipments coming in from the East.

'From what I've gathered, Minerva is pretty arrogant and stubborn. But even with her personality, she's resorted to trying to convince Darrow that her way is the right way. Seems to me like she knows she can't beat him.' Alice thought to herself while roaming the beaches while drinking from a small flask.

It was a little weird to see water so clear after being in the Abyss for so long. Especially since this is the sea and what she's standing on is a beach.

In the Abyss, the beach was composed of strange silvery sand that shimmered with a slight purple and dark water that'll corrupt you with a touch.

Here, that wasn't the case.

She saw the lake next to Kvia but it was still strange to see a whole sea of clear water. One that didn't corrupt through touch.

After all, it was considered a big hazard to travel by sea in the Abyss. The risk of beasts tearing apart your ship and throwing you into the sea was high.

But here... While there may be beasts in the sea, it was a lot safer in comparison to the Abyss.

[Abyss is a realm that favours the strong. If you're not strong enough, you shouldn't even think about going there. For the people of the surface, few rarely have the idea of descending. In fact, most would avoid it for the majority of their life unless absolutely necessary.] Cayla spoke up.

'Figures. Some of the beasts in the Abyss are pretty damn perverted when it comes to how strong their abilities are.' Alice nodded in agreement. She could still remember her first few interactions with the beasts.

Spectral Maidens that sucked out your soul, a tree beast that trapped you in an illusion and so on. For a normal person or even a normal Hunter, these were dangers that they wanted to avoid whenever possible.

Yet those were the first dangers that Allura exposed Alice to.

Thinking back, Alice felt maybe that was the turning point where she became a 'little' abnormal in terms of strength.

With her constantly being exposed to that kind of insane danger, it's only natural she'll adapt to it and destroy any sense of normality.

Just like how she'll struggle with how 'normal' people think and act, normal people will struggle with how she did things.

Perhaps the realm of 'normal' was now far beyond her reach.

###

"Darrow! You know what they're trying to bring in so why aren't you doing anything about it?!" A woman could be seen glaring at the aged man sitting in front of her.

She had wild black hair, a white bandanna and a pair of earrings. She wore two necklaces, both decorated with gold. As for her outfit, it consisted of a loose fitting white shirt, a belt, a pair of loose pants and long boots.

Minerva couldn't believe that Darrow was doing nothing about what the underworld was trying to pull.

"Leave them be. Disturbing the rat nest will cause a horde to appear. If it's just one or two, so be it." Darrow shook his head while looking over some documents.

However, his reply only made Minerva infuriated as she didn't understand why he wasn't making a move at all.

And while others may think that she's stubborn, Darrow is even more so. Once he made up his mind, even if the sky were to collapse, he wouldn't change his mind.

Kicking the table with her foot, Minerva left the room in a huff while Darrow could only sigh.

He hoped that things would settle if he just left it be, but that was probably unlikely.

Chapter 539 - 539: Concept of Duality

While Tristan was fixing the roof, Alice occupied herself by experimenting with the new set up.

There was still some time before the switch wore off so she couldn't experiment with her first Sigil just yet. However, that was going to be her main priority once she was given the chance.

Her first focus was the Sigil of Duality.

Her understanding of this Sigil was... a little lacking. So far, the only thing she has achieved with this Sigil has been reversing motor controls and inverting energy control.

With this Sigil being a more... conceptual Sigil, there was a lot more that Alice could achieve if she had the right mindset. The key being the mindset.

'Duality... Duality... What else do you think we can do with Duality? We didn't see much of her performance in the Inverted World. Do you think that maybe it's because there wasn't much else to see?' Alice asked.

Her theory was that in the original timeline, The Lord of Duality didn't have any trouble killing the Lord of Corrosion and her fight ended then and there.

Naturally, this meant that her capabilities weren't fully expressed and with the Lord of Corrosion suddenly gaining the upper hand, this surprise was enough for her to die before recomposing herself.

Had it not been for the sudden contract, the fight wouldn't have ended so fast.

But setting aside how she got this Sigil, Alice focused on its uses.

Depending on the title of the Lord, their abilities undergo certain changes. The more 'conceptual' the title is in nature, the better.

An example being Allura's title as the Apostle of Severance. It was an upgrade from her title as Lord, that being Execution.

With severance, it wasn't as simple as being able to cut anything. No.

Using her powers, Allura was able to cut away a person's thoughts, emotions, senses and even their connection to the world. That was the apex of conceptual titles.

Therefore, titles such as Ice, Inferno or the likes have a more... Limited potential when it comes to utilization.

Whereas titles such as Duality, Time, Apocalypse, Death have more freedom when it comes to interpreting their potential.

Closing her eyes, Alice sensed the flowing power of Duality.

There were only two paths laid out before her. One was physical and the other was energy, both of which she's tapped into so far. She had to adjust her thinking on a fundamental level.

Duality.

What is duality? It's an instance of contrasting concepts. The observation of opposing objects perhaps. Linked yet so very different in nature.

But Duality could then also be split further into simply having 'two' parts.

Inverted physical movement and normal movement.

Inverted energy control and normal control.

With this in mind, there is the thought that it had to be two concepts that can be flipped.

But Alice didn't think it needed to be limited to this.

For example, her blood.

Right now, in its base form, she is able to fend off the influence of the Abyss. What about the opposite of this?

Would the opposite of her blood enhance the Abyss? To make it more potent?

Then comes the question of her and Alyss.

They are no doubt a 'duality'.

Two parts of the same being, two souls in one body.

One prefers casting and the other prefers hand to hand.

It was easy to observe the dual nature of their existence.

But to put it into an ability was far more difficult than what Alice had expected.

To fully visualise her ideals, her theories into reality. To reject the rules of what's been placed onto her...
Difficult and challenging yet it spurns the heart!

Alice couldn't hold back the smile on her face as she opened the windows and took a deep breath of the cool night air.

While she may have 'borrowed' this Sigil from the Lord of Duality, she was fully intent on making it her own.

To make use of the fragment of the soul she stole from the Goddess of the Moon.

While Alice was basking in the cold wind, clearing her mind and putting her thoughts in order, Cayla stopped reading her book and glanced up at her master.

Now that she was awake more often, there was something she'd been keenly aware of.

That... adaptation.

It isn't just a case of adapting to the rules of this world, the rules of her abilities, her bloodline.

No, rather than adapting... It was far more accurate to call it cultivating. To cultivate her knowledge of this world, allowing it to grow and become the foundation of her understanding.

Despite having all of Alyss's memories, Alice was still technically a being of a blank slate. An empty canvas that breaks the fundamental rules of this world.

She takes the outside influence and moulds it into her own, to paint her own picture.

If the world was a finished piece, beautiful and complete with all its imperfections, Alice was the canvas of a young aspiring artist. Inspired by the world, drawing down their ideas and moulding a realm of their own.

With this freedom of mind, there is no limit to Alice's growth.

But this in itself is what's abnormal!

This in its entirety shouldn't be possible.

No matter how free the mind thinks, there are limitations that the mind instinctively accepts.

To understand that they cannot perform certain tasks.

That is to perceive oneself as 'human'. But perhaps, Alice is lacking that critical aspect.

As an artificial being, ever since discovering the truth of her existence, Alice's growth rate has skyrocketed.

[Perhaps it's because of this that she can bypass the natural limitations that the mind places on the body. Nyer has given her everything she needs to become a true monster. A body that can withstand any experimentation and the free mind that could draft up even the most ludicrous theories and bring them to reality.] Cayla thought to herself with a frown.

And after all this questioning, there is only one last question.

Why?

If it simply wanted to create a vessel for Velouria, then this should've been more than enough. If he can create a being like Alice once, he can do it again. So what's holding him back?

What's stopping him from making a second Alice to resurrect Velouria or did something else occur to change his mind? Why did he allow the Zenias to take control of Alice?

What happened in the last few hundred years that caused this change to Nyer? A person working desperately using everything he got to fight against the laws of this world.

Cayla simply couldn't understand his goal.

The more she found out about Alice, the more bewildered she became.

If Nyer's goal was to simply create a being that had the potential to become the strongest, even perhaps reaching the realm of God hood then he succeeded. But that was only on the surface.

Secrets loomed in the darkness and Cayla didn't even know where to begin.

Alice has now seen two instances of Nyer. The first, in the Inverted World. A young Nyer who's only just felt the beginning of desperation.

His panic and loss of composure when the world crumbled around him was proof of such.

The second Nyer was the one who granted her the body she now has. A far more mature Nyer who calculates everything he does. Every variable, every possibility, he has prepared for it all.

Even knowing that he's simply a phantom in the Inverted World was enough for him to adjust his plans and make modifications on Alice's body.

To push this race closer to the finish line.

And in the 10 years since the last time he's appeared, there's no doubt that he must've undergone another change. Something that'll make him change his priority and allow Alice to roam free despite her being the perfect vessel.

'If you furrow your brows so much, you'll get wrinkles.' Alyss spoke up, breaking Cayla out of her focus.

Massaging her eyebrows, she smiled and nodded her head.

'So what's gotten you so worked up? It's not often I see you space out like this.' Alyss asked.

While her twin was focusing on her theories of duality, it was up to her to make sure that Cayla was feeling alright.

[Have you... ever thought of why Nyer created Alice? What's his goal? Why isn't he making a move? What's he waiting for?] Cayla decided to be blunt as Alyss scratched her chin and saw on the table.

'Honestly, even if we see him, I doubt we'll get to find out. We'll be at each other's necks immediately after all.' Alyss shrugged.

Hearing this, Cayla nodded her head with a chuckle.

[Very true. And allowing him more time to speak might be part of his plans. It's better to seal with him as soon as possible. On a side note, what do you think about Duality?]

'The only duality I know is my left fist and right fist.' Alyss joked.

However, as they were joking with one another, they didn't notice what Alice was doing.

Recently, there has been once case of... 'Duality' that she has been considering.

The after effects of her fifth Sigil, one that expelled her from this realm.

If the normal activation was one that rejected her from this plane of existence, what if she was to overlay it with the power of Duality? To inverse the phenomenon and rather than burning away her connection, what if she was to reinforce it?

To anchor herself deeper into this realm, to use its laws and the energy that flowed through the land?

She had already sensed what it was like to be 'expelled'. She simply needed to tap into the same sensation while under the effects of Duality.

If being expelled was akin to having her anchor removed, she simply needed to insert more anchors for the inverse. To lock herself into this realm.

At that moment, the ambient energy around her began to stir.

Chapter 540 - 540: Inversing Tiamat's Sigil

Sensing the sudden change of the energy around Alice, Cayla glanced over and her pupils constricted in shock.

[Stop! Don't go any further than that!] She shouted out in a panic.

But Alice didn't seem to hear her as Cayla gritted her teeth and glanced at Alyss.

[You have to force Alice out of this!]

Not even taking a moment to question why, Alyss understood that it must be serious if Cayla was panicking like this.

Without hesitation, she slammed her palms down as golden chains manifested around her body.

Dark hands grasped at Alice and their position was switched.

Manifesting her consciousness into Alice's body, Alyss opened her eye and her entire body froze. She felt as though she was submerged into a thick viscous liquid that prevented her from moving at all. Her limbs were stuck in place and even her breathing halted.

She needed to breathe!

Alyss opened her mouth but her lungs refused to work.

With no other choice, dark limbs burst out from her shadow and punched against her chest, forcing her to collapse on the ground as she gasped for air.

Meanwhile, Alice let out a groan as she sat up in her mental space.

Clutching her head, she glanced up and saw Cayla's expression.

Immediately, Alice paled and sat on her knees, drooping her shoulders.

She knew she messed up with how livid Cayla looked.

[Pray tell, what were you trying to do master?] Cayla's smile twitched.

'I thought that... if my fifth Sigil expelled me from the realm, inverting it with duality meant that I could anchor myself further and get a buff from the realm.' Alice replied honestly.

Hearing her reply, Cayla was stunned momentarily as she opened her mouth a few times but no words came out.

[In all my time with you, this is probably the stupidest thing I've seen you attempt. I want you to run through your thought process with me carefully and explain why you even thought it would work.] Cayla massaged her nose bridge as Alice coughed awkwardly.

'Well... I just thought that maybe the inverse-'

[Master, listen to me. I don't mean the theoretical. I mean the logical, the rules of this realm. Something that could support your theories. Of all the things for you to do... I just praised your free thinking too.] Cayla sighed.

[When you reinforce your connection to the realm, USUALLY, this means harmonization. You resonate yourself with the nature around you, drawing power from the ambient energy.

[However, what you did wasn't harmonization. The opposite of exile is joining. To fuse two things together. By channelling the power of duality, you're not anchoring down and harmonizing with nature. Instead, you're becoming part of it. You were slowly disassembling yourself to become part of the ambient energy. And I don't believe I need to explain why that's a bad thing.] Cayla tapped her foot in annoyance but her reply made Alice blink.

If the inverse of exile means to fuse, then... Wouldn't that be perfect? She didn't need to fuse with the realm. No, this isn't what she needed duality for. If it allows the process of fusion, then it'll allow her to merge conflicting elements of her powers together!

Void Flux for example. Her attack drags in energy before combusting it in the spark. By applying the energy of the Void into this attack, a singularity is then formed in the centre.

However, what if she were to fuse her fifth Sigil while activating this attack? To merge the two together so that whoever is hit by this ability has their energy siphoned away at the point of impact? Even if they want to run, they cannot.

And if she was to push this theory further, what if she was to apply this to Tiamat's ability? Her power of the Apocalypse drags the energy from the world to fuel her attack. It's what causes the phenomenon of the world losing colour.

So if she were to inverse this, would it expel more energy initially and then follow up with an explosive absorption?

[No, I do not like that look in your eyes.] Cayla immediately shook her head.

She didn't even know what Alice was thinking about, but she knew that whatever she said had caused Alice to get another crackhead idea in that mind of hers.

'No no, this time it'll be safe for me.' Alice grinned as she switched with Alyss again and disguised herself.

Climbing out of her room, she made a beeline dash towards the beach.

'What the f*ck is twinnie up to now???' Alyss asked as she was still feeling the effects of almost fusing with the realm.

[If I knew, I would tell you.] Cayla let out a fatigued sigh.

Arriving at the beach, Alice could see the lighthouses reflecting light in the distance. There weren't many people on the beach either which was perfect for Alice.

Taking a deep breath, she focused her mind.

She repeated her understanding of duality in her mind as energy gathered around her hands.

Alice had an idea to link everything into a single sequence that could help her achieve a far more powerful attack than before.

But first, she couldn't allow the others to trace it back to her and so she disguised herself as Calista once more.

The first step was Tiamat's Sigil + Duality.

What would've been a convergence of energy now drew itself from within her body.

The reservoir of power from within her core began to leak out, transforming into a turbulent maelstrom of energy that shimmered with a myriad of colours.

Strands of energy soon manifested themselves into reality as a light show of radiance danced around Alice.

If Tiamat's power originally drained the world of colour, the inverse now expelled colour into the space around her.

Countless strands that are normally only visible to Alice untangled themselves from her body, latching onto the world.

Alice could feel her enemy being expelled out into the world as an explosion of light erupted from her back. Lightning crackled across the fabric of reality. Through the cracks, an infinite weave of energy pulsed out, creating a celestial array of dancing lights.

Streaks of electric blue and radiant gold manifested around Alice's hand as cold sweat dripped down her face but her smile only ever grew wider.

Behind her, ethereal wings of energy pulsed out one last time as it finished expelling energy!

***BANG!!!!**

A thunderous roar of a dragon could be heard with Alice in the centre as a pattern began to emerge in front of it.

It was no array, no ritual, no action of Alice's own will.

It was simply the natural manifestation of energy that was attempting to direct its focus forward. A natural array that enhances its power!

Circles of energy formed a ring in front of Alice with lightning chaining across each ring, empowering it with the same electric blue that danced around her.

Civilians evacuated from the beach, crying out in shock while Guards rushed towards her.

They wanted to stop her but the surge of energy was far too strong! If they approached any closer, they feared being turned to ash by the energy!

With the first ring, Alice could see the formation of the second, third, fourth and fifth!

As though a magnifying glass in the sunlight, these rings served to amplify and focus all of this energy that she expelled from her body!

As it reached the sixth ring, the sand around her began to turn to glass as the light around her as grew to the point it was akin to daylight on the beach!

Alice could feel it. This was one of the key missing pieces to her skill. A formation of a natural array like this to focus all of her power!

Just a little more! Just a little more and it'll reach the seventh ring!

However, her joy was short lived as the series of auras approaching her location was bad news.

She could sense the aura of Tristan in the distance as moonlight filtered down from the sky.

She wanted to let it reach the seventh ring but with the current situation, it was going to be impossible.

Therefore, she'll cut her experiment short.

Taking a deep breath, a maniacal grin appeared on Alice's face as the countless strands of energy around her converged towards her hand.

Artificial Resonance!

A singularity spun to life in her hand, forming a new variant of Void Flux that didn't require the use of her second Sigil.

A Void Flux that completely fed off the energy she expelled using the inverse of Tiamat's Sigil!

However, she wasn't done with just one Void Flux.

No!

For this kind of attack, just one was going to be a waste.

Waving her hand, five more Void Fluxes began to form simultaneously in the centre of each ring as chains of energy sparked between the six nodes.

As the energy reached its apex, Alice created a seventh flux above her fingers. She brought her middle and thumb together as she used her spare hand to grab her right arm.

With a single snap, she detonated her attack.

###

Standing on his boat, Darrow had a deep frown on his face as he watched the sinking waves trying to repair the damage. The entire sea, split in two. The seabed, scorched by the rampant energy and a bed of glass on the beach.

He wondered if he could block that kind of attack if he was given the time he needed to prepare.

While it was possible to keep himself safe to some extent, the same couldn't be said for his fleet or anyone he sought to protect.

The only thing he could remember was the figure of a girl standing within that torrent of light. That maniacal grin had permanently imprinted itself into his mind.

Since she didn't aim it towards the city, he could only hope that she had no hostility otherwise even with all three forces combined, they might won't be able to avert the disaster.