

Abyssal A 651

Chapter 651 - 651: 'Hunger'

Furrowing her brows, Alice glanced down at Jin.

A fully Eldritch being...

Whatever he does in the future, his power will always corrupt the surroundings.

That's simply the nature of this energy.

If she were to leave him be, there's no doubt that issues would be created in the future. But could she allow herself to get rid of him because of the danger he poses? He didn't choose this path himself.

In fact, both paths that he walked were forced onto him.

The path of becoming Kazira's vessel and the path of Eldritch.

Right when he was choosing his own life, he was dragged into a ritual that turned him into... this.

Scratching her hair, Alice let out a sigh as she wasn't sure what she should do.

She leaned back on a chair and closed her eye.

Alyss was injured and sleeping, Jin was turned into a fully Eldritch being, Nyer... She doesn't know what he's planning. And then there's the Will and the bounty he gave her.

It was clear where her next destination should be. To clear out the Eldritch Cultists that have invaded the east. The southern battlefield.

There was also the case of testing out her new Shell theory and how Duality can manipulate it. If the theory turns out to be true and her testing goes well, she wouldn't need to worry about not being able to harm the soul.

And not only that, but it'll also unlock more potential paths for her powers and how she modifies her own shell.

###

"She's woken up master." The sect master of the Abyssal Tyrant Sect reported with a slight bow as a shrouded figure could be seen reading a book.

"Mnm. Her condition?"

"Stable."

"Alright. Look after the people here. Soon, a battle will erupt in the southern battlefield. Be there if you wish." The shrouded figure instructed before standing up.

Turning around, a swirl of darkness enveloped his body as he teleported away from the city.

Beside him, another figure stepped out of his shadow.

"Are we really leaving just like this? I thought you wanted to observe your subject some more?"

"If I interfere too much, what makes the sample interesting will disappear. It's been that way since the beginning." Nyer shook his head.

Every time he had experimented on a new sample, his interference had always cut things short.

Whether that is because it kept triggering Velouria's memories or something else, this was the longest a sample had survived. The growth speed and reliance was exactly what he wanted to observe.

All he needed to do was make minor adjustments here and there, nothing major but something to ensure that the experiment continued.

To him, Alice was similar to a delicate rose in a glass case. He can observe but cannot touch. Too much and the rose will die. He can only appreciate its beauty from afar.

Though perhaps, he may have interfered too much already.

Shaking his head, Nyer glanced down at his hand and saw the cracks slowly spreading up his arm.

The speed of withering was progressing a bit faster than what he liked.

"You can consume this vessel if you want and make your way back to the lab. I'm going to pay my collaborator a little visit since it seems like he's unnerved by the recent events."

Hearing this, the man grinned as the shadows began to twitch.

Nyer closed his eyes.

*BANG!!!

Changing vessels, Nyer glanced to his right and saw an eldritch shadow on the wall. A figure out countless tendrils and crimson eyes.

"Voruth'Zal awaits." The figure squeezed out as multiple voices overlapped.

Nodding his head, Nyer stood up, following behind the figure.

And soon, he reached a chamber where distant echoes of Kazira's cries could be heard.

The two were locked in a staring contest as Nyer didn't say a word. He simply observed.

In the end, it was Voruth'Zal who broke the gaze and opened its mouth.

"While the failure to obtain... Sacrifices was rather unfortunate. Suffice to say the operations in the south are going smoothly." Voruth'Zal smiled as Nyer nodded his head.

"The operation in the south will be our last collaboration. Considering the state of your... assistant, I see no further benefits in lending you my aid. Let us end on a good note." Nyet nodded.

Hearing this, Voruth'Zal sat silently for a moment before nodding as well.

Watching Nyer leave, Voruth'Zal contemplated in silence.

This man has given them plenty of help thus far. While the Outer Gods have benefitted from his research and experiments, he had also gained plenty from them.

So what changed?

Kazira's condition was not enough to dissuade this man from further collaboration.

'Did he find what he needed?' Voruth'Zal wondered.

All this time, there was still something he needed from them. But now? With his sudden change in stance, he can only assume Nyer has lost his need for them.

"The next collaboration will be the last huh?" He muttered. Since that was the case, he was going to make full use of tools.

After all, if it wasn't for this man, they wouldn't even be able to inhabit vessels like this and walk around.

The Icons were also his creation.

Far better, stronger and more stable than the hosts of the past.

Their invasion of this realm is made possible thanks to him.

###

Leaving the chamber, Nyer glanced up at the darkening sky and let out a sigh.

"Last collaboration..." Nyer muttered.

He hadn't planned on ending the joint effort so soon. Yet... perhaps on impulse, he decided not to continue. Why?

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and regulated his emotions.

Perhaps it was because he saw the sample in person properly. Most of his... vessels work autonomously with a preset of instructions.

It's safe to say that Alice had come across some of these vessels a few times before now. Whether or not she was conscious of it was another fact. But this time, they met while he was in control.

'Am I feeling sentimental?' Nyer wondered.

But the thought of his final desire quickly erased these feelings.

No matter how much time passed, there was only one goal for him. One goal alone.

That has never changed and never will change.

###

Jin stood amidst a field of crimson. Withered trees and twitching branches.

The crimson moon hung ominously above while crows perched on the branches. Red eyes filled the crow's body as its head twitched with every eye focused on Jin's body.

Yet strangely, he didn't feel discomfort from this gaze. In fact, it felt almost soothing.

Looking down at his hands, he noticed strange vines bursting through his skin. Tearing it apart as blood rolled down his arm, gathering at his fingertips before dripping on the floor.

It was strange to say the least.

Everything in Jin's mind was telling him that something was dreadfully wrong.

That he had to do something.

But there was a disconnect between his thoughts and his actions.

His body, as though moving on its own, continued to wander this strange realm.

With each step, the field around him would begin to decay.

With each breath, life seemed to pulse in his shadow.

Everything he touched became a part of him, assimilated into something. . . greater.

Then, a large figure stood in front of him.

Dressed in black from head to toe, a veil covered its head as its long dangling limbs held onto a blade scythe like weapon.

Was this perhaps death?

No, it didn't feel like it.

Staring at the figure without backing, Jin watched as it phased through his body, entering his shadow.

He could feel something creeping through his mind, fingers tracing his arms and a dark whisper in his ear.

Dark obsidian spikes tore through his skin, connected to his bones. Every step he took, another piece of him disappeared.

Perhaps at the end of this journey, there would be nothing left of him.

Ah... Is this how his life ends?

To be at the mercy of it all...

But even if he wasn't at the mercy of this fate, what could he have done? What did he want to live for?

All his life, he was being prepared as the vessel for the Apostle of War.

Then when the coup occurred, he was given a brief moment of safety.

And now, he once again stood on a road in which he had no control, no power, no say in where he wishes to go.

'A bookstore...' Jin thought to himself.

If he could get away from all of this, perhaps running a bookstore would be fun. Something to dedicate his life to. A man's journey may end, forgotten by even those who watched him walk.

But if transcribed upon the page, so long as it exists, even if memories fade, his story continues to exist.

Yes. . .

If he had a choice, Jin wanted to open a bookstore.

He reached the edge of this realm.

Behind him, a path of corruption and decay.

Before him, the endless darkness.

One step.

Just as he raised his foot, Jin felt a pull from behind and turned around.

The moment he did, the realm around him disappeared and he found himself lying in bed.

Beside him, he noticed Alice sitting with her legs crossed. Her head bobbed gently with each breath.

Was she sleeping?

But. . .

Was there always this energy around her? This. . . delectable sight.

Furrowing his brows, Jin forcefully tore his gaze away from her as he clutched his head.

Behind him, Alice slowly opened her eye.

He could still control himself which was a good sign.

But the fact that he was already showing 'hunger'. . .

Alice narrowed her eye.

Chapter 652 - 652: Eldritch Body

In the end, Alice sighed and shook her head.

If she was to kill him simply because he's different, then by that logic, Feris would've killed her as well.

But by having a... 'safe' Eldritch being near her, she can potentially see how to counteract this energy. To make it safe and find methods of purification.

Granted, this could just be her making excuses to Jin. But this was her choice.

"Is there something on my face?" Jin asked curiously, wondering why Alice was staring at him before shaking her head.

Could it be that he made a mistake?

"Nothing. How are you feeling? Anything wrong with your body? Hearing any voices?" Alice asked with a small smile.

Lifting his arms and checking out his own body, Jin shook his head.

"Nothing feels wrong. Aside from being a little hungry, that's about it?"

"Nothing else? In that case then why don't we get you some food." Alice offered.

She wanted to see if this hunger of his can be filled with something else. If it can be contained, they'll have more time to figure other things out.

Leaving the tent, they made their way to the canteen where Jin got himself a hearty serving of food yet as he continued to eat, his expression slowly faded into that of disappointment.

Eventually, he put down his cutlery with a bitter smile.

"Seems like your hunger is not a normal one." Alice sighed.

She was holding on a small hope that it could be resolved through other means but that didn't seem to be the case for him.

In the end, they left the canteen as well and relaxed by some cliffs overlooking the sea.

Jin couldn't help but lean back and look up at the sky.

"Do you know what's going on with my body?" Jin asked.

He knew the answer with the way Alice was 'testing' him in various methods without making it clear, but he wanted to hear it from her.

"Somewhat. But at the same time, I'm clueless." Alice shook her head.

"Can you tell me about it?" Jin asked.

He wanted a clue to what he was going through. Small as it is, it at least gave him a 'floor' to stand on.

Folding her arms, Alice gathered her thoughts.

"How do I even put it. . . I don't know what Kazira was planning to do to your body but she essentially made you into an Eldritch being. At least in the body. It means that there's not a speck of Abyssal Energy in there." Alice pointed at him.

"And in its place, Eldritch energy fills your core. This energy is... Hmm... To put it bluntly, I don't know much about it. I just know that it merges with other energy, Abyssal, Holy and Void, corrupting them in the process."

"So like a cancer or parasite that latches itself to something?" Jin questioned.

Alice wanted to word it differently but perhaps that was the best description for it. At least from what she knew.

"To an extent. There's more to it but I'm not entirely familiar." Alice admitted.

"Since it's corruptive in nature, I'm assuming things are fine right now. What happens when it's not?"

"Let's just hope it doesn't become that way." Alice shook her head.

Hearing this, Jin paused. He contemplated for a moment before opening his mouth.

"Then. . . If the energy goes out of control, are you going to kill me?"

"Yes. Yes I will."

Surprised by Alice's lack of hesitation, Jin glanced up and made eye contact. HE could see the seriousness in her eye. She wasn't smiling nor was she laughing. It was no joke.

If this energy inside his body went out of control, she'd kill him without hesitation.

It wasn't the same kind of 'killing' that she'd do against people that harmed her. But rather, perhaps in her view, it was more of a mercy.

She wasn't trying to hide things nor was she trying to comfort him. Simply the cold hard truth.

Surpassingly, this truth comforted Jin. Knowing that despite being willing to kill him, since the energy was dangerous, she wasn't doing anything right now. Instead, she was trying to figure out the inner workings, giving him a chance to live.

What else could he ask for?

"Thank you." Jin smiled, causing Alice to raise an eyebrow.

"I think you took more damage to your head than we thought. Who thanks the person that says they're going to kill them? Weirdo." Alice rolled her eye, causing Jin to laugh.

"So since my body is entirely made up of this Eldritch energy, does it mean all the Sigils I had before are gone?"

"More or less, I can't really see anything inside your body right now. All I can see are the strands that are corrupting your pre-existing body. I mean, there's only one way to verify it, right?"

Nodding his head, Jin tried to activate his Sigils but nothing happened.

A long period of silence followed. Eventually, he let out a sigh and shook his head.

"Yep, I got nothing. Seems like I've returned to zero."

"Well it's not all bad. Silver lining is that you no longer have the Sigils that Kazira wants." Alice tried to comfort.

"Let's have a spar. Physical powers only and martial arts, how's that?" She suggested.

It'll also give her a chance to see what her current body could do considering her strange increase in physical power despite not being able to use her energy.

Nodding his head, Jin followed Alice to an empty spot and pulled out his chained blades.

Strangely, despite not being able to use his Sigils, these blades felt light.

Alice on the other hand, decided to use some spare swords that she had picked up in the past. The quality wasn't great but it'll suffice for a spar.

"Same rules as usual okay?" Alice smiled.

"Okay." Nodding his head, Jin immediately activated his Boundary, rushing towards Alice at surprising speeds.

'As expected. He might've lost his Sigils but his body got stronger. Eldritch energy? There's something in his shadow too.' Alice thought to herself, taking a step back and activating her own Zone.

Immediately, Alice felt as though a jolt of electricity shot through her body. The next thing she knew, she was already clashing blades with Jin. Neither of them were prepared for the sudden burst of speed as Alice widened her eye.

*CLANG!!!

Separating herself from him, she rushed forward once more.

Like a demon, she flickered behind Jin and slashed down with her blade.

Phantom Shift!

It wasn't a perfect copy of Alyss's footwork but with her strange physical condition, the effects were the same!

*BANG!!!

Twisting his body, Jin countered with a horizontal cleave upwards to block the blade.

As sparks flew, he could see the focus in Alice's eye.

The next attack was already on its way!

Gritting his teeth, Jin immediately relaxed his entire body, dropping down to the floor and narrowly dodged the slash.

Snapping like a bow on release, he whipped up with a kick of his own, forcing Alice to guard and jump back.

"I thought this was a spar master? Aren't you going a little hard on someone who's injured?" Jin's smile twitched.

"Oh don't be like that. You're holding on rather well are you not? This is a chance of discovery for the both of us." Alice chuckled softly.

Now that she was actively sparring, she could feel the changes in her body. It felt as though she was connected to the world around her on a deeper level.

This synchronisation, the 'breath' of energy through her body.

Tossing her blade up into the air, Alice twisted her body and kicked the pommel, sending the sword flying towards Jin who parried it off to the side.

However, Alice caught the blade immediately and slashed down.

*CLANG!!!

Blocking it once more, cold sweat dripped down Jin's back.

The only thing on his mind was the next strike. Where was it coming from? Left? Right?

'Behind!' Quickly turning around, Jin widened his eyes seeing nothing behind him.

"You keep forgetting about feints." Alice smirked, smacking him on the back of his head with her hand.

Pushing him on the back, she created some distance between them before re-engaging the fight.

###

"Where are we even going right now?" Ria asked curiously while Rosalyn showed her where to go.

Currently, she was sitting on Ria's shoulder, using her as a mount due to her shrunken form.

"Just someone I know. Don't worry about it. However, when we arrive, don't say a single word. Pretend you're objects." Rosalyn shook her head, causing Ria and Luke to stare at each other before shrugging.

They were currently walking through a large city with buildings flanking either side of them.

There were quite a few people staring at them but Ria did her best to ignore their gazes.

At this point, she didn't mind any location so long as it's not the desert anymore.

Soon, they stood before a restaurant with loud music playing and the laughter of people. Woman in skimpy outfits standing by the balconies while waving to the people that walked past the establishment.

Ria's smile twitched.

"Did you take me to a brothel???"

*SMACK!!!

Slapping Ria's head, Rosalyn had a vein bulge on her neck.

"Who the hell do you think I am??? Do you think I want to be here? And no, this is not a brothel, the workers here just like to dress this way. Go in." Rosalyn huffed as Ria stepped through.

Immediately, a waiter greeted them but before he could show them to a table, Rosalyn handed him a small coin.

Seeing the coin, the man paused before nodding his head and putting the coin in his coat.

"The master awaits above." He smiled as Rosalyn nodded.

Showing Ria where to go, Rosalyn eventually jumped off her shoulders.

Before she could even knock on the door, it creaked open, showing a man sitting behind a table, resting his chin on his hands.

There was a crafty smile on his face as he scanned Rosalyn's appearance.

"F*ck you." Rosalyn flipped him off, causing him to smile.

"After all these years, dear sister finally comes to visit and you've chosen such a cute form at that."

Both Ria and Luke froze.

'Sister???'

Chapter 653 - 653: Caelan

"And here I thought you hated that girl's appearance. Seems like you finally got rid of it but what happened for your body to be like this?" He stood up, walking over to Rosalyn.

Like Rosalyn, he too had long white hair and a pair of crimson eyes. The only difference being that he dyed the tips of his hair a light blue.

Wearing a black, red and gold suit, he adjusted his sleeves.

A vein bulged on Rosalyn's forehead as she jogged over, kicking him in the shin.

*BANG!!!

Looking at Rosalyn who was buckled over, clutching her foot, the man leaned back with his arms crossed and laughed.

"Did you really think I wouldn't have prepared myself for that you stupid b*tch? Every time you turn out like this, you always go for the shin. Why not something more original?" He taunted with a sh*t eating grin while Rosalyn glared at him.

Blood converged around her hand as she snapped her finger.

The man simply flicked his own finger to neutralise the first attack before shifting off to the side.

A blood spear narrowly missed his posterior.

*Yawn~

"Don't you get tired of trying the same things over and over again?"

"F*ck off Cael." Rosalyn flipped him off once more as Caelan couldn't help but laugh.

Right now, his sister looked like a rabid kitten trying to hurt him but to no avail.

"Alright alright, I do suppose a congratulations are in order considering my dear little sister finally reached the rank of Lord. Here, let big bro give you a hug." Caelan flickered from his spot before Rosalyn could even react.

Picking her up like a baby, he watched as she tried to wrestle free from his grasp and even trying to bite him, only for his tough body to hurt her teeth instead.

With Rosalyn clutching her mouth in pain, Caelan turned to the two waiting by the door.

"I am Caelan, the unfortunate older brother of this baby. May I have the pleasure of knowing your names?" Caelan 'smiled'.

However, neither of them answered as they simply stared at him.

Slowly, Caelan's smile disappeared with a sigh.

"Must you truly give them the same advice every time? Each time you bring guests to my place you tell them the same thing over and over. Oh don't talk, oh just act as an object. Is it really necessary?" Caelan rolled his eyes, staring at Rosalyn who lunged out and poked both of his eyes before he could react.

Stumbling back and dropping Rosalyn, Caelan's smile twitched seeing Rosalyn blow the invisible smoke from her fingers as though they were pistols.

"Of course. I still haven't forgotten what you did to my friend back then." Rosalyn glared as Caelan raised his hands in surrender.

"Point taken. But I don't believe you came to visit me out of familial love so spill, what do you want?" Caelan crossed his legs.

Most of the time, Rosalyn would prefer to avoid Caelan as much as possible.

So for her to turn up at his front door like this, something must truly be wrong.

Hesitating for a bit, Rosalyn scratched her hair.

"I need some help recovering. It's taking longer than I thought after using Allura's authority. Outer Gods are making moves in the south and someone seemed to have made a connection with one."

"I see. . ."

Rubbing his chin, Caelan was silent as Rosalyn slowly looked up with a frown.

"You knew."

"Yep, I did."

*RUMBLE!!!

A menacing aura burst out from Rosalyn's body with Caelan quickly creating a barrier around the room.

Blood weapons aimed at him with Rosalyn frowning.

"If you knew, then why didn't you do anything?"

"Rose, do you really think I can? A Lord I may be but the scale of this operation is far bigger than you can ever expect. It's not just one or two minor Outer Gods, no, it's a whole bunch of them." Caelan sighed, pushing a blood weapon away from his face.

"Plus, I'm a 'beast' by human standards. I see no reason to stick my neck out for them. Granted, having corrupt entities walking around is not exactly high on my priorities." Caelan shrugged, leaning back and grabbing something from his desk.

A stack of reports that he was looking at before Rosalyn even appeared.

"You can have a look at this." Caelan offered.

Giving Caelan another glare, Rosalyn started to read through the report.

The more she read, the deeper her frown became.

"See-"

"Shut up! I'm trying to read!" Rosalyn snapped, causing Caelan to shrug.

Then, at the end, she spotted a certain familiar face.

"Tch, of course that walking calamity is at the heart of it all. Why wouldn't she be?" Rosalyn grumbled, tossing the reports to Ria.

Confused as to why Rosalyn wanted her to read it as well, Ria began to scan through it alongside Luke.

The first few reports were simply the movement of trade ships to the other nations, spreading 'suspicious' shipments as well as merchant clans.

After that was the movement of the Cult. Rituals, attacks, kidnappings, missing people and so on. A lot of it had been condensed down into a single page but even Ria could tell that the scale of this was huge.

Then there was the report of the most recent attack where a large number of civilians were dragged into it. Their survival unknown, the sect Leader of one of the Sovereign sects in the north was injured in the process.

But to Ria's surprise, there was even a report of a certain demoness that was seemingly unaffected!

Widening her eyes, a wide smile appeared on her face.

Alice!

She was in the East as well!

Even Luke was surprised as they had parted ways during the Inverted World incident. But now they were finally seeing traces of one another.

"Walking calamity? Seems like you know of the demoness."

"I wish I didn't." Rosalyn grumbled.

If it wasn't for the fact that she met Alice, she wouldn't be strung around by Allura or Kaden.

But because she did, she was now doing favours and even looking after the two brats behind her.

Though perhaps it's both a curse and a blessing. Without Alice, she wouldn't have been able to reclaim her original form nor would she have been able to reach the realm of Lord.

"But setting that aside, can you see why I couldn't do anything?" Caelan chuckled as Rosalyn begrudgingly nodded her head.

Indeed, even for a Lord like Caelan, dealing with something this big was going to be difficult. He didn't have any information on the powerful figures on their end nor their full numbers. On top of everything, he's also going to have to deal with Outer Gods that are notoriously difficult to deal with.

"Well, can't you help us now?" Rosalyn asked.

The more manpower they could get, the better. And if the helper was her brother, she'd be put more at ease.

However, Caelan shook his head.

Rosalyn wanted to argue again but paused when she saw the apologetic smile on his face.

She knew that whenever he showed this expression, he was truly at his wits' end.

His ascension to Lord hood was more... restrictive than most thanks to their mother. Unlike the others, he had many rules and regulations that he needed to abide by. Chains that restrained his every action.

To begin with, had it not been for her brother sacrificing himself for her, she would be the one in his position right now. She would be the one having countless restrictions on her body instead of him.

Looking down at the floor, Rosalyn paused, feeling Caelan patting her head.

"Don't look so gloom. I can't help directly, but it's not like there's nothing that I can do. I'm still holding onto... mother's gift for you. I know you dislike her, but a good weapon shouldn't be left rotting in the storage." Caelan chuckled.

Smacking his hand away with an embarrassed blush, Rosalyn eventually nodded her head.

"Fine. It is a VERY good weapon."

Seeing this side of his little sister, Caelan chuckled and picked her up again while she scrambled around in his arms.

"In the meantime, will the two of you be spending the night here? If I want to return Rose back to her usual form, it'll take around a day." Caelan asked as Ria and Luke glanced at one another before turning towards Rosalyn.

"Yes, they'll be spending the night." Rosalyn answered on their behalf as Caelan sighed.

"So distrusting. I'll have my assistant arrange a room for you two. In the meantime, I'll take you to the storage for the weapon." Caelan smiled towards Rosalyn.

With his assistant taking Ria and Luke away, he brought Rosalyn to a secret passageway he had in his office.

A staircase led down into the basement.

Seeing the countless protective barriers in place, Rosalyn couldn't help but frown.

"Have you been keeping this weapon here all this time for me?"

"Of course, it's practically made for you. If I don't have it ready to give to you at a moment's notice, what kind of brother would I be? Also, you should stop frowning so much. You'll get wrinkles." Caelan laughed, pinching Rosalyn's cheeks while forcing her to smile.

Rosalyn tried to fight back but she couldn't beat Caelan.

Soon, they reached the bottom of the staircase and Rosalyn finally saw the weapon after many long years of separation.

Suspended in mid air with blood chains wrapped around it, a single white parasol emitted an ominous crimson aura.

Chapter 654 - 654: Crimsaria

The Crimsaria. A parasol crafted by her own mother with her in mind.

Forged beneath a rare naturally occurring Blood Moon and stitched together with silk from Lord Level beasts near the layer of Terminus.

This weapon was bound to her blood from its creation, waiting for the day she accepts it. But all these years, due to her dislike of her mother, Rosalyn had never accepted this weapon.

In fact, she even wanted it to be destroyed at one point.

Once again, if it wasn't for her brother, she wouldn't even be looking at this weapon right now.

As though seeing a long lost soul mate, the weapon hummed with an excitement as a deep crimson aura bled into its surroundings.

Caelan let Rosalyn stand on her own before taking a few steps back.

Accepting this weapon was Rosalyn's task, all he had to do was observe.

Reaching out, Rosalyn caressed the crimson aura of the parasol.

Immediately, she felt a warmth enter her body. A synchronisation between her and the weapon. A deep longing, hoping to be freed from its prison and allowed to roam the world with its master.

"You must be thirsty huh?" Rosalyn muttered.

Its crystalline white appearance was not how it looked originally. It's been starved of blood.

But Rosalyn didn't blame Caelan. After all, he wasn't able to use the weapon. If he tried, it would've attacked him instead.

Creating a blood blade, Rosalyn stabbed it into her forearm before dragging it across, slashing open a ghastly wound. Flicking her arm, she splattered some blood against the weapon.

She watched as the white folds slowly become tainted with red. Its form, trembling in excitement as Rosalyn held her arm over it.

"Drink as much as you want."

Obedying her command, Crimsaria shot a thorn into Rosalyn's arm, causing her to flinch.

It continued to drain Rosalyn's blood at an alarming pace but Rosalyn wasn't phased.

To be starved for so long, she'll allow its first meal to be a bountiful one.

###

Sitting on the bed, Ria couldn't help but think back to the image she had seen of Alice, and a smile appeared on her face.

"Ah~ I wanna meet her again." Ria chuckled while Luke nodded his head. He was currently working on some gadgets on the table.

Tools that'll help Ria focus her power a bit more. Different to the equipment that's forged by blacksmiths.

"How many Sigils do you think she's gotten now?" Ria asked curiously as Luke paused.

"Depends on what she finds. If she finds suitable ones quickly... Probably six right?"

Last they checked, Alice already had four Sigils. So, after all this time, having six wouldn't be strange.

"True... Maybe I should get my sixth as well." Ria wondered while crossing her legs. She's been stuck on five for a while now, trying to explore the different possibilities with her power. But after the run in with Enris, she felt like she needed something more.

Something that can bolster her attack power even more.

"I need to work on my stuff too." Luke let out a sigh.

Just buffing Ria or himself wasn't doing it anymore. He needed a method of cleansing debuffs or dispelling restrictions and barriers.

If he wanted to support the group from behind, he needed to be versatile.

Unfortunately, he's already reached six Sigils so his abilities were limited.

Currently, he can buff up to six people with Knight giving attack, Bishop giving spell range and power, Rook giving speed and defence, Queen giving overall buffs and multiplication. And finally, his King piece increases all buffs by 30% and Resonance Enhancement.

He's also able to summon the pieces by themselves in order to mimic an attack he saw.

'In terms of 'cleaning' or healing, the best option would probably be Queen.' Luke thought to himself.

The unique thing about the Queen piece was multiplication. If he were to assign a healer to the Queen piece, he'd be able to massively increase the healing output of the piece.

Hell, regardless of what he assigns, whether that be barrier breaking, dispelling or healing, the effectiveness essentially doubles and even possibly triples the effects.

He simply needed to find the right person for the right job.

"Are you still hung up about what happened at the ritual site?" Ria asked, noticing that Luke was struggling more than usual.

Placing his pen down, Luke leaned back momentarily before nodding his head.

"Just giving you buffs from afar doesn't cut it. If I'm ever targeted, like Kaden said, I won't be able to survive. I need a method to get the danger away from me." Luke muttered, tapping his fingers against the table.

All of his Sigil abilities are based on Chess and certain chess moves. Therefore, there were perhaps possibilities that he hadn't considered.

The harmony between pieces, sacrificial moves in order to general value and so on.

Primarily, Castling.

The move in which a King and Rook to move simultaneously and essentially trade places.

"I want to test something out." Luke spoke as he summoned his Grimoire and designated Ria as the Rook and him as the King without activating their abilities.

Closing his eyes, he sensed the connection between the two pieces.

This... thing tether, he could see it. All he needed to do was harness it yet the moment he tried, this connection broke.

What was he lacking?

Furrowing his brows, a frown slowly formed on his face as his fingers continued to tap against the table.

He was beginning to lose his patience.

However, he suddenly felt a finger tap against his forehead.

"Stop furrowing your brows, you got this, I know you do." Ria encouraged as Luke nodded his head with a smile.

Calming his mind, he decided to go back on his thinking for a bit.

First, Chess. A two player strategy game with sixteen pieces each. 1 King, 1 Queen, 2 Rooks, 2 Bishops, 2 Knights and 8 Pawns.

Objective is to checkmate.

Three special rules.

Castling, a one time manoeuvre to swap the King and Rook for safety.

En passant, a special pawn capture.

Promotion, to upgrade the pawn to any piece once it reaches the opposite end.

There are three conclusions that can be achieved in this game. Checkmate, Stalemate and Draws.

'Do I need to restrain piece movements?' Luke wondered as he'd eliminated the need to bind each piece to a certain movement.

Of course, if he was to keep these movements, they would get additional benefits.

'Though to create the restrictions, I'll need a board. . . !!!' Sitting up, Luke understood what he was missing right now.

The Board!

He needs to set up a boundary where all of these pieces can achieve their maximum effect.

When he achieved his sixth Sigil, the second Resonance was open to him. But he didn't think much of it since it was 'incomplete' in a sense.

When he activates his resonance, he had always used his pieces as a focus but never himself.

Therefore, now that he had every possible chess piece available to him. . .

Perhaps his Second Resonance can open the 'Board' that he was lacking.

"Seems like you found something out." Ria chuckled, sitting back down on her bed.

She rested her chin on her palm while looking at the excited look on his face and her gaze couldn't help but soften.

It's always nice to see him focused and excited about something.

"Yes I have. I've been too focused on the pieces themselves and have been neglecting my own body. All this time, all of my Resonances used my pieces as the target. But what if I used myself? To add myself into the formula." Luke continued to ramble on while Ria listened patiently.

She wasn't entirely sure about what he's talking about but she managed to understand a few certain key points.

Primarily being that if he was allowed to open his Second Resonance in a battle, he'll be able to control the flow better and even unlocking certain moves.

Though this was just theory, he needed to prove it first.

"If you want to prove it, you can certainly try tomorrow morning." Rosalyn's voice interrupted Luke's rambling as they turned towards the window and saw her sitting with an open parasol.

She was still in her miniature form which made it rather funning to see the size difference. But the aura around her sent a chill down their spines.

No doubt, with this weapon, Rosalyn had become much stronger!

"Is that the weapon your brother wanted you to get?" Ria asked curiously as Rosalyn nodded her head.

"What? Want to touch it?" She smirked, closing the parasol and pointing it at Ria.

Just as Ria was about to say something, she sensed a threatening aura from the weapon and shook her head.

"I'll pass. Can't help but feel like I'll lose a hand if I touch it." Her smile twitched.

"Good choice because it'll probably drain you dry of blood." Rosalyn chuckled.

'And you offered for me to touch it???' Ria felt the urge to smack this woman but stopped, remembering that she's a Lord.

"The Ritual to help me recover my body will happen tonight. Once I get my body back, we'll be making our way north to the Southern battlefield. It's good news for you since we'll probably run into that walking calamity if we continue down this path."

Hearing this, Ria felt excitement well up in her chest before pausing.

"Actually, before we go, do you think we have some time to get my sixth Sigil?"

"Oh? Finally made up your mind?" Rosalyn raised an eyebrow.

Seeing Ria nod her head, Rosalyn figured that it was probably because she was meeting Alice again that she wanted to get her next Sigil.

"You can certainly try your luck with a shaman tomorrow and see what you get. But make sure to rest up properly." Rosalyn nodded.

Having six Sigils were going to be a minimum going forward with the enemies they'll face.

Chapter 655 - 655: The Visionary

Heading up to the roof, Rosalyn could see Caelan with all the materials prepared for her 'revival'.

"Don't mess around with them too much when I'm passed out okay?" Rosalyn warned as Caelan raised his hand with a helpless smile.

Knowing her brother's personality, there was a high chance that he'd pull something once she was out of the picture. But she's already made it a point to showcase how important the two are to her so he shouldn't take it far... right?

Regardless, if she wanted to recover her body, there will definitely be a period of time where she can't protect the two.

The two can only rely on themselves for the moment.

Letting out a sigh, Rosalyn stood in the centre of the ritual circle as blood began to manifest around her, forming the shell of the cocoon.

With everything in place, Caelan clasped his hands together as crimson chains burst out from the ground, wrapping around the cocoon.

In an instant, Rosalyn felt her consciousness fade as blood tendrils stabbed into her body.

###

Waking up early in the morning, Ria gave her body a stretch along with a yawn. She was still feeling a little excited by the prospect of getting her sixth Sigil so she had quite a late night last night.

Thinking about the different possibilities of what she wanted and what kind of potential Second Resonance that she can get.

Did she want something to enhance her Raikiri? Or perhaps something that'll be more physical focused? Or maybe she wanted something that has a guaranteed hit.

There were many options and all of which would be good.

Finding Luke, she quickly woke him up as the two prepared to see Rosalyn.

However, only Caelan awaited them.

"Rose is still under the process of recovering her normal form. It'll take another... Hour give or take."
Caelan smiled.

Seeing the two not responding, he couldn't help but sigh.

"How are we supposed to communicate if the two of you are silent? I can't ask what you want to eat, I can't ask how the accommodations were, you hurt me as a host." Caelan waved his hands dramatically and stood up.

"But I have to say, you two really trust Rose this much to be following her words even after she's gone to recover her body. I must praise your dedication." Caelan smiled, clapping his hands.

"Although, as her brother, I can't help but have doubts of my own. My dear little sister, Lord she may be, drops her guard too often. She gets attached to fanciful 'objects' and cannot differentiate what's important and what's not.

"Do you know how dangerous it is for her to be in her current state? Her 'immortality' on the verge of collapsing. And all because of you two. To put her in such a state over the two of you. . .

"I cannot help but ask, are you really worth it?" Caelan dropped his smile as his serious expression bore into the two.

His piercing crimson eyes sent the two on guard as he stood up and held one hand behind his back.

"To journey with my sister is an honour you have no knowledge of. To have her gaze upon your direction is a reward you do not appreciate. To have her defend your safety is a boon your mind does not comprehend in its entirety. Should worms journey with my sister, it'll only place her in more danger.

"Therefore, I must ask, what are your qualifications to be journeying with her?" Caelan narrowed his eyes as he flicked his finger.

In that moment, both Ria and Luke couldn't comprehend what had happened as their surroundings shifted.

Above them hung a deep crimson moon and a large ominous castle surrounded by a glowing lake of blood.

A cemetery littered with torches, corpses hung up on crosses and a single man standing in front of the gates to his castle.

Second Resonance!

Both Ria and Luke widened their eyes as they didn't hold back.

Ria activated her first Resonance as all five Sigils lit up while Luke applied buffs to the both of them while summoning two guards.

"There's not doubt that you faced an enemy you could not handle. You forced my sister to harm herself in order to save you. Are you truly worthy of her blood?" Caelan spat out in anger.

That day, had Rosalyn not warned the two not to speak to him, he might've ended them then and there.

To dare force his sister into her current state, they deserve nothing less than death!

Snapping his fingers, blood tendrils appeared in front of Ria as her pupils constricted.

Yet right before it hit, Luke's knight intercepted, parrying it off to the side.

Opening her mouth, Ria was about to defend themselves but Luke stopped her, gesturing for her to keep quiet.

Glaring at the man who was observing them, Luke opened his Grimoire.

Promotion! Bishop!

'Alice' took form aiming her finger at the man.

Void Flux!

Unimpressed, Caelan looked to swat it away when the attack came into contact with his arm.

Furrowing his brows, he chose to swallow it whole, using blood instead.

Erasing the attack, Caelan glanced down at his arm that was smoking from the attack.

"Time and time again, I ask myself whether or not the allies that my sister makes is worth it. She decided to align herself with the human, creating an academy and even assisting their growth. The bindings they placed on her . . . Vile down to the very core." Caelan gritted his teeth, clenching his fist.

Blood hooks burst out from the ground, stabbing towards Luke as he tried to guard with the knights but he was a tad too late.

"Hng!!!" Muffling his own shout, Luke ripped out the hook embedded into his thigh while Ria broke the rest of them. Glaring at Caelan, She crouched down.

Understanding this sign, Luke opened his book and applied every buff he had!

Raikiri!

Her figure transformed into a bolt of lightning and shot forward.

Yet all Caelan did was shift his body to the side, catching her attack by her wrist.

"Is that all?" Caelan asked.

Without replying, Ria's body flickered out of his grasp as a golden mark appeared above his head.

Glancing up with curiosity, Caelan let out a sigh.

"Once again I ask you. . . Is. That. All?" Caelan enunciated slowly as his figure disappeared, reappearing in front of Luke and lifted him up by the throat.

"I care not for your strikes but can your friend withstand that power?" Caelan asked, his eyes accurately darting to where Ria was.

Before Ria could even make the next attack, a blood pool opened beneath her, disrupting her footwork.

*BANG!!!

Firing a point blank Void Flux in order to drag Caelan's attention back to himself, Luke gritted his teeth after seeing him block it with blood.

"A support who can't even protect yourself. You're no support, you're a hindrance." Caelan scoffed, slamming Luke into the ground, cracking it apart.

Shinsei Raikiri!

Ria's body appeared in front of Caelan as she slashed up with her strongest strike, making sure to aim it away from Luke.

Should Caelan have tried to use him as a shield, Ria would've cancelled the strike into something else.

Yet Caelan didn't do anything like that.

He simply caught her strike between his fingers.

There was a small cut on his palm but nothing else was affected.

However, this only caused Ria to smile since he pulled his attention away from Luke!

Second Resonance!

It was unfinished, an idea only. But right now, they didn't know what Caelan wanted to do so he had to gamble!

He didn't need to override Caelan's Second Resonance since he knew he'd lose in a direct clash. He'll simply have it affect the space they're occupying right now!

A black and white board began to manifest beneath them as a grid was carved into the earth.

Castling!

Furrowing his brows, Caelan glanced back and saw that Luke had been replaced by a rook piece.

Slamming his hands down, two bishop pieces manifested on the grid, lunging towards Caelan.

Both Alice's used Void Flux while Ria retreated!

*BANG!!!

Applied piece King!

Since a board was activated, they had to follow certain movement rules. By giving Caelan the king piece, even if he's enhanced, it'll force him to move only a single space!

Glancing down at the board beneath him, Caelan frowned and lifted up his foot before stomping down.

*CRACK!!!

A fracture split the board in half as Luke felt a shock shoot through his body.

Gritting his teeth, he summoned his grimoire once more.

He wanted to continue but Caelan had enough.

Aiming two fingers at the duo, he swiped up.

*RUMBLE!!!

A tsunami of blood burst through the board, shattering it as the restrictions were lifted. Surrounding the two in a cage, spikes were manifested.

"If you have last words, now's the time to say them."

However, Luke wasn't done.

Summoning all six pieces in front of him, Luke activated his original Second Resonance!

All six pieces broke apart and began to combine.

There were several 'modes' that this piece could take. But right now, he only needed one.

Second Resonance – The Visionary!

A strange piece manifested in front of Luke as he crushed it, gaining the buff. A golden circle appeared in his pupils before a smile appeared on his face.

The Visionary was a simple buff.

It didn't enhance the body nor did it enhance the user's casting.

What it did however, was allow the user to see certain events that were about to happen. A prediction per say based on the possible 'moves' and ambient energy.

Usually, he would give this to Ria. But as proven by Caelan, he needed to protect himself before he could give the buffs Ria needed!

Chapter 656 - 656: Caelan's Power

Luke's vision was split into two. A little hard to adapt to but it wasn't something he couldn't make sense of.

An overlay of the most likely actions roughly 2 seconds into the future. Of course, if he wanted to increase the time, he could.

But the predictions become harder and harder as they are also influenced by his own actions.

Rushing forward, Luke had the Knight assist him as he aimed a Void Flux at Caelan using the bishop piece.

'Left!'

Ducking under a grab that he couldn't have reacted to normally, Luke slammed his hand down, reestablishing the board once more!

Caelan raised an eyebrow at the fact that his grab had missed but wasn't phased. Once he saw the board, he let out a disapproving sigh before stomping down, shattering it once more.

Shinsei Raikiri!

With Caelan focused on destroying the board, Ria rushed forward to slash at Caelan with her strongest strike.

"If you missed once, what makes you think trying it again would work? Is this truly how you plan on journeying with my sister?" Caelan questioned, swiping up with his finger.

But to his surprise, Luke appeared in front of him with a forced grin, blocking the wall of blood thanks to his chess pieces.

Castling!

Behind Caelan, Ria finished her slash!

*BANG!!!!

"Tch!" Clicking her tongue, Ria gritted her teeth after seeing how Caelan's wings had blocked her attack.

Having unfurled his vampiric wings, Caelan twisted his body, unleashing a wave of blood tendrils that reached out towards the duo.

Quickly ducking down to avoid the grab, Luke snapped his finger, summoning three pieces.

Bishop + Rook + Queen!

Promotion – Sage!

Using Alice as a base, Luke, summoned the Sage who conjured a staff and slammed it down.

Immediately, four copies of the Sage manifested as each of them fired a Void Flux towards Caelan.

"This attack again. Seems like you hold this acquaintance of yours in rather high regard." He narrowed his gaze.

No doubt, this was the demoness he saw in the report. But her power...

*BANG!!!

Shielding the attack with a thin veil of blood, Caelan snapped his fingers.

Around each of the sages, a coffin appeared, slamming shut and crushing them.

"If this is the power of the Demoness, colour me disappointed."

Clutching his wrist, Luke frowned as he didn't expect all the Sage pieces to be crushed in one go. He knew that it wouldn't have been able to buy a lot of time but this was still ridiculous.

However, there was one more buff that he could place, not on himself but Ria.

A unique move similar to Castling and Promotion.

En Passant!

Shinsei Raikiri!

Launching another attack, Ria made eye contact with Caelan who tilted his head out of the way.

Just as he was about to say something, an invisible force struck him in the face, causing him to turn his head to the side.

'Chance!' Ria widened her eyes.

Lightning rushed through her body as her eyes radiated a neon blue.

Each move honed with the lethality to kill!

Shinsei Raikiri!

*BANG!!!

An arc of destruction cleaved up as Caelan wanted to block it.

But the moment he raised his hand, the wound had already been inflicted!

Furrowing his brows, he chose to dodge instead but it was no use!

Seeing all of this, Luke immediately summoned his grimoire and reapplied the Queen piece to Ria!

This was their best chance! Throughout the fight, this is the first time Caelan took real damage.

Multiplication!

Ria's slash began to duplicate with Caelan being forced to use different methods to defend himself.

But as a vampire and a Lord, what little damage Ria did to him was regenerated rather quickly.

En Passant, a move that allows a pawn to capture an opposing pawn that moved two spaces. But in this case, this buff allowed Ria to attack the 'past' of Caelan! The figure of him before he made a move!

Caelan quickly caught onto this as each of his moves were now protected with a layer of blood. No matter how Ria tried to strike at him, her slashes would be redirected off to the side.

Since that was the case. . .

She had to go ranged!

Jumping back, Ria dismissed her blade as lightning focused into motes around her. A mark appeared above Caelan's head.

"I think this has gone long enough." Caelan opened his mouth, tapping down with his finger.

"!!!"

Both Ria and Luke felt their gazes blur as an invisible force slammed into them from above, pinning them against the ground.

No matter how much strength they tried to exert, their body refused to listen.

They could feel their bones creaking as Caelan walked towards them and raised his foot.

"Goodbye." Caelan narrowed his gaze, stomping down towards Ria.

Wondering where the pain was, Ria slowly opened her eyes and saw that Caelan had disappeared.

In her place, Luke guarded using the Knight!

Castling!

Cracks spread across the piece as it was unable to withstand Caelan's attack.

Just as he was about to attack for a second time, a shadow flickered next to him.

*BANG!!!

Caelan's figure crashed into the castle as Rosalyn could be seen with an open parasol.

She had returned back to her normal form and rushed to see what was going on as quickly as possible.

"I thought I told you to not do anything to them!" Rosalyn huffed in annoyance.

"It was simply a quick lesson, nothing more." Caelan chuckled, stepping out of the dust as there was a shoe print on his cheek.

"And you call this nothing?" Rosalyn glared, pointing at Luke and Ria who were on the ground.

Both of them relaxed seeing that Rosalyn was here.

"I confess, I might've gone a little overboard. But it's rather impressive they held on for so long right?" Caelan smiled, appearing behind Rosalyn and tried to lift her up.

However, blood chains whipped around his limbs, stopping him.

"Aww, not cute at all." Caelan sighed, flicking his finger and dismissing the Second Resonance.

The pressure crushing both Luke and Ria had also disappeared as the two quickly picked themselves up.

"Do you wish to have breakfast?" Caelan asked but Rosalyn shook her head.

"We're in a rush."

Seeing that his sister was displeased, Caelan could only sigh with a helpless smile before turning to both Luke and Ria.

"Your gimmicks are interesting but they lack the durability to contend against a Lord. In cases like this, it's best to hide the true gimmick in a forest of deception. Let them guess where it's coming from, the false requirements and make them drop their guard.

"Only then, can you buy more time for a potential way out to appear. Know that as Hunters beneath the rank of Lord, your goal is not to kill but rather to survive. As you travel with my sister, I sincerely hope that you do not become the weak link that hurts her." Caelan chuckled with one hand behind his back.

"But to land a mark on me. . . Well done." Caelan nodded.

Hearing this, Rosalyn couldn't help but pause in shock before turning to the two.

"You heard it right, dear sister, they indeed landed a mark on me. Feel free to return whenever you want, I will always be waiting." Giving them a slight bow, Caelan disappeared.

With his disappearance, both Luke and Ria collapsed on the floor as their knees buckled.

"Oh my gods, I thought I was gonna die." Ria muttered.

"Yeah, it's almost as bad as Kaden." Luke grumbled in agreement while Rosalyn wanted to stop them.

Both of them felt their world turn dark as Caelan appeared in front of the two of them once more.

"When facing Outer Gods, never drop your guard. What you see might not be the entire truth alright?" Caelan smiled, holding his finger over his mouth before sending them back.

Blinking her eyes, Ria glanced up at Rosalyn who let out a sigh.

"Please let me tell you when it's safe to speak next time. He's actually gone now."

Nodding their heads, Rosalyn helped the two up as they made their way to the shaman.

"So you actually landed a hit on him?" Rosalyn asked curiously.

"Yeah, but my Shinsei Raikiri barely scratched him. Only a small mark and even with Luke's buff, all the damage he took just kept regenerating." Ria nodded while scratching her hair.

If Caelan was truly an Enemy, she couldn't see a way to defeat him.

"I'll admit, that is pretty impressive. I don't even think I can beat Caelan if I go all out." Rosalyn admitted while spinning the parasol in her hands.

Her brother, while restricted by countless bindings, were probably one of the strongest people that she knew.

Including Kaden and Allura.

"Really? He's definitely strong but you make it sound like it's impossible for you to beat him." Luke was sceptical.

For them, he was a wall that they couldn't cross. But surely for a Lord that can deal with his regeneration, it wouldn't be bad right?

"Yeah but that's only what he chose to let you see. Take a guess as to how many Sigils he was using if he was a Hunter." Rosalyn turned the question back on them.

Looking at one another, Ria guessed around four or five while Luke guessed around four.

However, Rosalyn shook her head.

"Three. He was only using the equivalent of three Sigils worth of power." Rosalyn frowned.

Had he truly wanted to deal with both Ria and Luke, the moment he showed up the two would be nothing but a pool of blood beneath his feet.

"Three???" Ria widened her eyes.

"I know what you're thinking. And yes, I'm being serious." Rosalyn interrupted. She knew about Ria forcing Allura to partially activate the Resonance in their spar. However, that simply shows how weak Allura had become.

"Then what about his title? How many 'Sigils' does he have?" Luke ask curiously.

If Caelan was truly as strong as Rosalyn was saying, he wanted to know more.

"He is the equivalent of a Nine Sigil Abyss Lord and he's been that way for quite a while now. He never went all out against me in the past either. As for his title. . .

"The Abyss Lord of Withering."

Chapter 657 - 657: Darrow's Message

The fight between Alice and Jin lasted longer than usual. With both of them only focusing on the physical elements, it allowed them to get a rough understanding of where they were in terms of raw physical power.

In this regard, Alice understood that her new 'body' offered her far more agility than before but the power was roughly the same.

Meanwhile, Jin was durability and power. He also had speed but compared to Alice who was completely skewed towards speed, he was still lacking.

Alice had wanted to continue but their duel was cut short when a Void Hawk tore through the realm, landing on Alice's shoulder.

Seeing a letter attached to its ankle, Alice realised it must've been Darrow.

Giving Jin the break he needed, Alice sat down and read the message.

[Alice, how are you? In the short time we've parted, it seems like you haven't held back your troublemaking habits at all. Even when I'm not trying to track you down, my informants still had information about you.

[But demoness? That's a new high I didn't expect to see. A bounty placed on you by the Sovereign sects, impressive as always. But as you expected, I've sent this message because I've gotten some new information that might be useful for you.

[Attached to this letter is a map of where the strange merchant guild with the three eyes in the flame has been seen. They mostly operate in the north of Sikha, away from the battlefield in the south. However, there has been ships going between the two sides. Presumably transporting the shipments they need before sending it out to the rest of the world.

[I'm already having parts of my fleet track down the remaining shipments with some help of our dear Cardinal who assigned some people to us. With his authority, he provided us with experienced guards that can help us deal with their strange regeneration.

[Aside from the movements of the Merchants, there have also been rumours spreading in the south. Demonic rituals, missing people and even strange anomalies where dark blood would appear in parts of the desert and so on. I can only assume that these two are connected after considering what we know about Eldritch energy. On the map, I've marked down where these rumours originated from so you might want to take a look if you wish.

[Darrow.]

Placing the letter on the table, there was a sombre expression on Alice's face as she glanced at the map.

As Darrow had stated, he had marked down every movement that he's tracked so far with a key on the side, telling her what the marks mean.

To put it bluntly, an obscene amount of shipments have left the ports. If all of them were the same level as what she had to face when she was with Darrow and Tristan, then there's a chance that there would be trouble in the North.

'Selen and Egil. . . They can probably hold their own. As for killing the Outer God's minions, that'll have to rely on Caera and the other Lords there.' Alice frowned.

Even though they can deal with it, unfortunately they were only few against the many. They'll struggle to cover all of the potential attack locations unless they were to have the cities retreat back.

But if they do, Extalia would no doubt take this chance to attack.

Alice knew that Nyer had some hand in this. After all, inside her body was the very same energy that flowed through these Outer Gods.

There's no telling whether or not the Zenia family is involved in this.

If they were, when combined with the Hybrids, a new twisted army would be formed.

Contemplating in silence, Alice concluded that it's better to deal with the source than it was to focus on the symptoms. If she cuts off the source of this. . . production, she'll stop the spread.

Tapping her finger against the table, she began to write down the information that she discovered.

The movement of the Outer Gods, understanding of their powers, hosts of these gods and so on. She didn't hold back at all and wrote down everything she knew and what Cayla had told her.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice also decided to let Darrow know of her plans going forward.

She wanted to investigate the South on the Cult's movements since there's no doubt they're tied up with the Outer Gods.

The only issue is where does she want to start.

'I suppose meeting Suyin shouldn't be put off any longer. It seems like her inventions are handy for travelling.' Alice concluded.

Finishing her letter, Alice tied it onto the Void Hawk's ankle and watched it flicker through the realm.

"What was that? Letter from a secret admirer?" Jin asked curiously as he sat down opposite her. However, Alice simply flicked him on the head, causing him to recoil back.

"Nope. Just contacting a person that I know. He's given me some more information on the movement of the Merchants and the Cult." Alice pushed the map towards Jin, allowing him to see the information that Darrow had gathered.

Seeing all of this, Jin's expression turned dark as the scale was beyond what he initially predicted.

He knew that after the coup, there's no doubt that they'd make full use of the Cult's resources. But on this scale? It was practically a life or death gamble with everything on the line.

They didn't think about the future at all. If this fails, the cult's done for.

"All the nodes around the coast are being handled by my friend. Our job is to investigate these rumours in the South. But before that, I need to meet Suyin so her inventions will stop blowing up the moment I touch them." Alice explained as Jin nodded his head.

In order for them to meet Suyin, they needed to go to the region of Fusha. The third and closest region to the southern battlefield. They were responsible for keeping the beasts away as well as the Cult out of the North.

Granted, it wasn't perfect since the Cult can still infiltrate but they keep the main army at bay.

"When do we leave?"

"Tonight. I'll also need to talk to Sect Leader Jian since I need some of his blood. Or maybe Old Man Mo might be better." Alice mused.

With Sect Leader Jian taking some damage thanks to the ritual, she wasn't sure if she'd get the full use out of his blood. Old Man Mo on the other hand, seemed unphased.

Though trying to get him to give his blood willingly was...

Packing up her stuff, Alice had Jin follow her as she made her way to the Sect Leader's tent.

"Yahoo~" Alice greeted, pushing open the tent as Sect Leader Jian glanced over in surprise.

"Back so soon?"

"Yep. I'll be going on a little trip down to the south now so just coming here to say goodbye. I'm also going to share some information that I just got from a friend of mine." Alice grinned.

However, Sect Leader Jian couldn't help but shiver seeing this grin.

This feeling... It felt as though he was talking to a merchant that was about to rob him blind.

Pulling out the map, Alice told them everything Darrow told her and Old Man Mo listened silently by the side.

The more she said, the deeper his frown became.

"It's as you say, this is no time to be sitting around." Old Man Mo concluded.

"If the Cult is involved with these merchants, then we need to create a more rigorous checkpoint by the southern border immediately."

"Old friend, you're in no condition to fight. Why not send a message instead?" Sect Leader Jian suggested, knowing that his old friend has been pushing himself in order to keep him alive.

"Do you really think those disciples of mine can deal with something on this scale?" Old Man Mo frowned.

Sect Leader Jian wanted to refute but stopped since it was the truth.

A movement on the scale of this size wasn't something the Disciples could handle easily.

"While you arrange that, why don't we talk about helping each other?" Alice smiled, causing Old Man Mo to furrow his brows.

"What do you want?" Sect Leader Jian interrupted before Old Man Mo could argue.

"Oh nothing much. Just some of his blood." Alice pointed to Old Man Mo.

A vein bulged on his forehead as his aura began to climb.

"Over my dead bo-"

"Why do you need the blood? I noticed that you extracted some of mine along with his during our fight?" Sect Leader Jian asked curiously.

"It just helps me fight against stronger opponents. Lord blood is the best I can ask for. Can't tell you the details though." Alice shrugged.

Observing Alice for a moment, Sect Leader Jian nodded his head.

"Old fr-"

"F*ck off! I'm not giving her my blood." Old Man Mo crossed his arms in annoyance.

Letting her go without a fight was already generous from him. Yet she's now wanting his blood?! Who knows what the hell she was going to do with it. What if she wanted to use it as part of a ritual?

"There is nothing in this world that can convince me to give her my blo-"

"Do you happen to have some good alcohol on you? He's a sucker for them." Sect Leader Jian looked over to Alice who already reached into her pouch.

"You better compensate me for this." Alice clicked her tongue.

She wanted to get his blood for free but clearly that wasn't going to be possible.

"Who do you think I am? Do you really think I'll give you my blood over mere alcohol-"

Opening the bottle, Alice allowed the fragrance to fill the room.

Rare Ayrian Mead that couldn't be made anymore.

"No more than a vial."

Alice couldn't even react before the bottle left her hand and Old Man Mo already had his arm out.

Her smile twitched furiously as this man was saying one thing but doing another.

However, since he was offering, she wasn't going to hold back.

One vial? Alright.

But he never said the size.

Chapter 658 - 658: Nyzel

With Old Man Mo not stating the size of the Vial, Alice managed to extract enough for 4 portions before he noticed something wrong. Once he saw the large vial next to Alice that was slowly filling up with his blood, he quickly stopped her in her tracks.

"Tsk, stingy." Alice pouted while separating the large vial into four smaller containers.

"Stingy?! You little sh*t I said no more than a vial! This isn't a vial anymore it's a f*cking mug!" Old Man Mo raged.

He wanted to smack her but held himself back since Sect Leader Jian was here.

"Yeah well who told you to take my most expensive mead? This mead can't be made anymore you know? I only have a limited supply." Alice rolled her eye.

"It can't be that bad." Old Man Mo scoffed while Alice didn't bother to clarify.

After all, now that he's tasted this top grade mead, he'd never be able to find another bottle unless it was through her.

Thinking about this, a grin appeared on her face while Old Man Mo shivered.

"At least tell me the name of this mead."

"Why should I?" Alice stuck out her tongue.

"You!"

"You what you? You're the one being stingy with just a bit of blood." Alice retorted.

Seeing this by the side, Sect Leader Jian couldn't help but laugh seeing a Lord being helpless against a girl like her.

Not even in battle as well. Simply an exchange of words.

In the end, by exchanging two more vials of his blood, Old Man Mo got the name of this mead.

Ayrian Mead.

With their business exchange now complete, Alice bid them farewell as she doubted she'll be returning here. At least not in a long time since she'll be busy in the south.

Now that everything was prepared, Alice had Jin find them a path to Fusha while she said goodbye to the others.

With the bounty now revoked, they didn't need to worry about being ambushed in the middle of the road. Of course, their worry was killing more people rather than their own safety.

After a while, Jin finally planned out a fast route to Fusha. Instead of following the main roads, they'll be taking a shortcut through the mountains and the caves.

Looking at this path, Alice was silent for a moment.

"Are you sure this'll work?" She raised an eyebrow as the path was. . . Interesting to say the least.

"Of course. These are the paths used by hikers and explorers. Guaranteed to be still around and it's the fastest to our destination. If we were to follow the main roads, it'd take us quite a few days by foot." Jin explained.

As he said, if they were to follow the main path, they'd have to go through quite a few bends and twists in order to reach the south.

But Jin's path was practically a straight line to their destination.

Thinking about this, Alice couldn't help but chuckle since if Ria was here and leading them, they would no doubt be lost should they pick Jin's option.

That's what caused them to wander the forest for the better half of a month when they were travelling.

"Alright, are there any other supplies that you need?" Alice asked.

She had prepared everything she needed to prepare. All that's left was Jin.

"Nope. I got the rations and other camping supplies." He patted his bag with a reassuring grin.

Nodding her head, they tagged along with a caravan for the first part of their journey.

###

Floating through the dark mire, Ria felt as though her senses were connected to something greater. This.
. . Weightlessness around her body.

She felt restricted yet free.

A paradoxical sensation that flooded her mind.

In front of her, several silhouettes began to flash as she understood those were her potential bounty choices.

Unfortunately, they were the same as the ones she's seen before. Nothing special.

But within this selection, there was one hidden in the back.

A silhouette with the icon of an Eclipse above its head.

Slowly opening her eyes, Ria frowned while the nearby Shaman transcribed everything onto a page.

As expected, everything was the same except for a new option at the very bottom.

Sky Sovereign Nyzel.

That was the beast that was given to Ria as an option.

Leaving the building, Ria saw Luke and Rosalyn waiting by the side.

"Did you get anything that's interesting?" Rosalyn asked curiously, shielding herself from the sun using her parasol while enjoying a glass of juice.

"Interesting is... accurate. Whether or not I want it is a different thing entirely." Ria scratched her hair, showing Rosalyn the sheet.

Seeing a bunch of familiar names, Rosalyn simply skimmed over it before her eyes lingered on the final option.

"A named beast?" She questioned as Ria nodded her head.

"Say, is it normal for the silhouette to have the icon above it? When I was facing the selection, the silhouette of Nyzel had the Eclipse icon hovering above its head."

Hearing this, Rosalyn tapped her finger against the table with a slight frown.

"First of all, do you know how the different religions work when it comes to bounties?" Rosalyn asked as Ria shook her head, sitting down.

"As you already know, there are certain beasts that these religions want their followers to hunt. A method to ensure that they have a certain skill set and so on. These are what's known as Sponsored Bounties. Targets suggested by the Gods themselves.

"For the Moon, the Goddess would suggest bounties on beasts that have close ties to the soul. Many of their Cardinals hold similar powers for this exact reason. I can only assume that the last beast was sponsored to you by Enris." Rosalyn furrowed her brows as Ria frowned.

"Does that mean she has direct control on what I can choose?"

"Not really. All she can do is provide an option." Rosalyn shook her head as Ria sighed in relief. She was afraid that if she were to stall this, she'd lock herself into picking Enris's option.

"Thankfully, just because a God has sponsored your bounty, it doesn't mean you're now part of their faction. It is, after all, an option rather than an obligation. You can choose to accept or you can choose to reject. It's up to you." Rosalyn handed the sheet back to Ria, confusing her.

"Wait wouldn't accepting it be bad?"

"I wouldn't say so. It's called a Sponsor for a reason, they get nothing out of it. It's merely to increase favorability. These Bounties don't normally appear and can only be given by the Gods. And the fact that she's given you a named beast at that, it's going to be a tough one." Rosalyn shrugged her shoulders.

"However, the only thing I'll tell you is that for a beast to be called by a Name rather than its species, it means that it's been recognised by the Abyss. It's also probably close to becoming a Lord if you give it some time. A beast favoured by the Abyss, granted to you as a bounty because Enris offered it. It's practically a gift left on your doorstep."

Staying silent, Ria contemplated her options.

On one hand, she wanted to get her sixth Sigil to get her second Resonance. That way, her combat power jumps up by another level.

On the other hand, it was an option given to her by Enris, Goddess of the Eclipse.

Accepting it left a bad taste in Ria's mouth.

"Don't be in a rush to make a decision. After all, you need to know what you're hunting first." Rosalyn stood up.

In the end, Ria postponed selecting her bounty for the time being while Rosalyn commissioned some informants to get information on the Sky Sovereign.

"What kind of beast do you think it is?" Luke asked curiously.

The title of Sky Sovereign sounded imposing. No mention of its species yet it's crowned king of the skies.

"Something that can easily kick your ass if you're not careful." Rosalyn answered.

"Sounds like you know something about it then." Ria glanced over.

Rosalyn was, after all, a 'beast' by strict definitions. As a beast, she'll have some insight on this matter.

"Beasts change the closer they get to becoming a Lord. Titles granted by the Abyss, implanted into their mind. A ranking of sorts. The stronger they are, the higher rank their title becomes. Sovereign is the highest with the greatest chance of becoming a Lord.

"I cheated a little to become a Lord thanks to the Inverted World but my title was only slightly above average. A good comparison would probably be my brother. He had a Sovereign title before he became a Lord so you can roughly imagine the power needed for it." Rosalyn answered, facing their expectant gazes.

Hearing this, Ria paused as doubt surfaced on her mind.

If the potential target was someone on the level of Caelan before he became a Lord, could she actually kill it?

"Caelan already approved of your power. There is no doubt that you can deal with this beast, you simply need the right preparation." Rosalyn reassured but Ria was still doubtful.

###

"Hmm... Seems like my gift arrived without issue. Yet she's not accepting it, how hurtful." A cloaked woman muttered while giving her body a stretch.

"I even picked one out just for her as well." Enris lamented before letting out a chuckle.

This vessel wasn't the best, but it'll suffice for now.

For a God that wants to walk amongst the mortals, this kind of inconspicuous vessel was the best.

Now that her interest has been roused, she would be a fool to let go of it so easily.

Chapter 659 - 659: Information On The Sky Sovereign

Information regarding Nyzel was. . . Surprisingly easy to get considering the fact that it's a sponsored bounty.

As a beast that can't be chosen normally, Ria had expected that it would've taken a long time to get what she wanted. However, due to Nyzel's. . . Unique status, it only took them a day.

'Nyzel the Sky Sovereign, Guardian for an indigenous tribe of the south. Worshipped as the bringer of storms and good harvest. However, due to the fact that it was worshipped by some as a God, it struck the anger of devotees of the Sun.' Ria read the information silently.

It was a beast that had been friendly with humans, even helping them out and driving away dangers in the south. But after the intervention of the devotees of the Sun, it became a beast of calamity instead. Wherever it goes, death follows.

A herald of bad omens.

"Quite the drastic flip isn't it?" Rosalyn tapped the sheet while eating some fruit.

"It's understandable though. It had been looked up to as a guardian but the people of the Sun became jealous and killed the tribes that had worshipped it. With all of its believers dead, it's no wonder it'll go on a rampage, killing everything and anything that's related to the Sun." Ria nodded her head.

"That's just how humans are. Have you ever wondered how many religions have come and gone? Yet the main three always remain. Granted, they are the only religions with Gods but certain beliefs have also been snubbed out.

"The words of the devotees go like this. 'Heretics who do not see the light of the true divinity shall not blaspheme this land no more~' or something along those lines." Rosalyn acted out while Luke organised more sheets for Ria to read.

"It's been happening for many years one. One or two more doesn't surprise me."

"Even so, it's still hard to read about it." Ria sighed. There were. . . pictures of the incident.

Humans hanging on wooden spikes, heads separated and corpses limp on trees. Villages burned to the ground and the icon of the Sun Church burned into the ground they walk on.

Corpses of mothers hugging their children, burnt to a crisp.

Even though she was not unfamiliar with horrific sights like this due to her time in the Eclipse, Ria still felt the urge to throw up.

Just thinking about the massacre made her angry never mind the Sky Sovereign who had personal connections with these people.

However, its anger was now directed towards humans as a whole. It no longer cared who it killed, destroying every city it came across, involving innocent bystanders.

It's been a somewhat elusive beast that's been hard to pin down due to its speed and aggression.

Even when they came close to killing it, they were unable to stop it from leaving, giving the Sovereign time to recuperate.

Perhaps it's because it's been rampaging in the south that Enris wanted her to hunt it. To kill two birds with one stone.

"Hesitating on whether or not you should hunt it?" Rosalyn asked, noticing Ria's silent debate.

"Somewhat."

"Well you should think of it like this. While it's anger is justified, it's now attacking anything and everything. After a certain point, it'll be forcing strong Lords to make a move. It's fate is set in stone unless it changes its actions. Here, look at this." Rosalyn pointed to another sheet of information.

"Look at the wounds on its body. The Sovereign isn't even taking the time to recuperate. It's merely lashing out the moment it has barely enough strength. Self destructive and suicidal. Perhaps my thoughts differ from a human's considering well. . . I'm a beast.

"But to me, Nyzel looks pitiful in that image. A wounded soul slowly burning itself out. At this point, it's either I kill it or someone else does and I rather I do it if there's a gain to be gotten." Rosalyn explained.

"But what if you can help it instead?"

"Help? Do what? I can't convince it to like humans again after they torched everything it stood for. Hell, if I can't forgive such an action, who am I to tell it to do the same?" Rosalyn raised an eyebrow.

If she were to try and convince Nyzel to forgive the humans, it would simply be hypocritical of her.

"Point taken." Ria sighed.

"But. . . Since it was fine with humans in the past, can't we reason with it a little?" She asked.

"You may certainly try. But. . . I doubt it'll go well since Nyzel will probably mistake you as a devotee trying to harm it like those in the past. Unfortunately, Enris has marked you to some extent." Rosalyn shrugged.

Staying silent, Ria continued to read about its atrocities committed in the name of revenge.

Perhaps at the start, it was targeted towards only those who had harmed it. But now, it's simply madness.

Even after killing those responsible, it wasn't able to bring back those it cared for so now it simply hates the world for what it did to it.

"If. . . You were placed in the same situation, what would you want?" Ria asked Rosalyn. As a beast, she probably has the best perspective in all of this.

"Are you stupid? Of course I'll burn the world. Why wouldn't I? I've got nothing else to lose. If the Sun bastards took everything of mine, I'll do everything I can to make sure that religion doesn't prosper. Rob their vaults, crash their ceremonies and kill their devotees. It's only natural." Rosalyn rolled her eyes.

"If I die while doing that, so be it. That's just how life is. Even if I'm not going out of my way to burn it down, I'll still be targeted and killed eventually."

It was why she decided to make contracts with the humans and run an Academy for them. To buy time for herself so that she can safely reach the level of Lord.

Unlike her brother, she wasn't that talented. She had to resort to these tactics to ensure safety.

"I see. . ." Ria sighed.

In the end, she decided to target the Sky Sovereign.

There were two goals in this.

The main priority was still to make herself stronger. After reading some descriptions of what the beast could do, it was clear that passing up on this would be foolish.

Second, was to end its madness.

Though Ria knew that this was simply self trickery. A justification for killing someone that had been betrayed by the world it inhabited.

First, there hasn't been accurate images taken of Nyzel, only blurred moments where wounds could be seen and old carvings. But from what they could see, it seemed to be a winged beast with blade like extremities and coated by blue lightning.

Its known abilities consist of summoning a halo of lightning to rain down judgement, after images that can explode and manipulating the surroundings to benefit it.

These three are the only known abilities that Nyzel had demonstrated during battle.

However, it's that third ability that caught Ria's eye and even reinforced by Rosalyn's recommendation.

"That third ability doesn't look like a second resonance. Instead, it's a pure ability that lets it generate an optimal battlefield wherever it goes.

"Usually, the second Resonance has that covered but if you can get an ability similar to your Resonance before you achieve it, your Resonance gains an extra large boost upon unlock.

"Think of it this way, your Resonance gives you the ability of personal realms. Great. Now if you already have a personal realm following you, what then? That Second Resonance becomes an additional upgrade to that realm."

With that in mind, if she were to take Nyzel's realm ability as her sixth Sigil, there's a high chance that her Second Resonance would further amplify everything to the next level.

"If that's the case, why doesn't everyone just get a realm ability before their Second Resonance?" Ria couldn't help but ask as the three of them made their way back to the Shaman's place.

"Excellent question. Now let me change it a little. How many people do you think are capable of killing a beast with a Realm ability? Remember, these are beasts that are abnormally strong. They carry the power to change the realm to suit their own needs.

"Any beast with this kind of power can achieve greatness. And on the off chance that you do kill this beast and get its realm ability, you need to make sure this is your fourth, fifth or sixth in order for it to get a proper upgrade. If you aim for a low level beast to take it as your second or third, you'll lose out.

"And at that stage, why should you take a realm ability over a new powerup when a realm ability is guaranteed on your Resonance?

"But the most important factor is that if you assign a realm ability as your fourth fifth or sixth, it basically locks you out of using it unless you use your resonance." Rosalyn shrugged as Ria's smile twitched.

"Can't you just start off with that?"

"Nope. Because I need you to understand both the benefits and the cons. If you only hear that it locks you out of the Sigil, why would you take it? However, I'm saying you already have plenty of power as it stands. What you need is a powerful resonance that can help you level the playing ground. To give yourself an edge against strong opponents.

"And here's a little secret." Rosalyn smiled.

"For walking anomalies like yourself and Alice, it's best you level up your Realm abilities."

After all, they were practically unbeatable outside of the realm. Being able to defeat those with more Sigils than themselves. If they were to maintain this power while having a stronger realm than most, wouldn't going into a realm clash with them be classed as suicide?

Chapter 660 - 660: Honored Guests

"Alice."

"Jin."

"Do you see what I see."

"Of course I do. I may have just one eye but I'm not blind."

"What should we do with it?"

"It's obvious isn't it?"

"I see. . . It is indeed obvious."

"Yep, obvious indeed."

Looking at one another, they nodded their heads.

"We ignore it."

"We deal with it."

""Huh?"" Both of them paused.

In front of them was what seemed to be a smuggling tunnel leading deep into the bowels of the Earth. While taking a break from the caravan, they came across it through coincidence and saw signs of recent use.

"What do you mean we should deal with it? I thought you were in a rush to get to the south?" Jin blinked his eyes in confusion.

"Well as the upstanding citizen and someone with lots of time on her hands, obviously I should check out something like this right? Who knows, maybe signs of the cult are in there." Alice coughed, standing up straight.

"Seems like a normal smuggling operation to me, there's no markings belonging to the cult." Jin furrowed his brows.

However, while observing the tunnel, he noticed a little something by the side and his mouth twitched.

"You're after the alcohol!"

"Psh nonsense." Alice waved her hand and glanced away.

Though. . . If this alcohol was being smuggled in from somewhere, surely it was going to be good right?

"I can see your drool. . ." Jin was speechless.

"A quick look wouldn't hurt. Plus the caravan said there stopping here for a bit anyways no?" Alice coughed awkwardly, realising that her desires were too obvious.

"Look, in and out. We'll be quick about it. Plus, I can't exactly fight properly right now, we're not gonna pull some crazy crap alright?" Alice grinned as Jin let out a groan.

"Fine, you're the boss. It's not like I can talk you out of it anyways."

"Hehe~ Follow me." Sliding down the hill, Alice scanned her surroundings before swiping the left over bottles of alcohol.

She gave them a light shake to make sure there were still stuff inside.

"What a waste. These seem untouched too." Alice muttered, observing the seal on the bottles.

All of them were in great condition and seemed to be rare alcohol.

Which only made it stranger that smugglers would've abandoned them like this.

"Untouched alcohol in a smuggling tunnel, definitely not sketchy at all." Jin rolled his eyes, reaching into his pouch and pulling out a stick.

Twisting it, the stick began to emit a light, illuminating the tunnel.

"Let's see. . . Weapons, illegal shipments, contraband. . . Yep something definitely happened." Alice narrowed her eye.

Her senses were tingling and she knew there were goodies to be gotten within this tunnel.

The further they went into the tunnel, the more messy it became.

There were blood but no bodies. Signs of battle yet no one was around.

Thought that wasn't Alice's focus. She was looting all of the shipments they left behind. Some were crates of money and weapons and of course, she wasn't going to let it go to waste.

"I feel like we should be more concerned about the fact that there's no corpses or blood around here." Jin rubbed his temples, watching Alice savaging everything she could get her hands on.

"Don't be like that. This is going to go to waste anyways if I don't pick it up so might as well." Alice waved her hand with a chuckle, picking up a rather fancy looking dagger with a jewel embedded into the guard.

Lifting it up to get a better look, Alice noticed an unfamiliar family crest shining through the jewel.

"Welp I'm definitely taking this. Who knows if I can get a reward out of it if I find the owners." Alice stored it away in her pouch.

Leaving no stone unturned and no crate unbroken, Alice continued through the tunnel while causing a loud racket.

The reward from. . . taking her reward from these shipments were quite substantial. Making Alice consider perhaps robbing every smuggling operation she comes across in the future.

It was smuggled anyways, so what if she took it.

Turning the corner, Alice was going to continue when she paused an a slight frown appeared on her face.

A broken building embedded into the tunnel. Signs of recent battle like the other places only this time, there were blood and corpses.

Through the gaps of the wall, Alice could see an operating table of sorts with innards strewn out everywhere.

Both of them became quiet as Alice grabbed a sword from her pouch and slowly made her way to the building.

Peeking her head over the side, she furrowed her brows seeing that no one else was there.

But surprisingly, the person on the table was still alive!

His eyes darted around with blood and tears blending around the edges. Each breath he took would cause a bubble to form on his open throat. The pulse of his heart, the contraction of his lungs.

He had been completely dissected while being kept alive but it wasn't going to last.

His breathing was already weak and soon, his heart stopped with his eyes rolling back.

"Dead." Alice muttered.

This. . . dissection.

It was fast and precise.

If it had been shoddy, Alice would assume the killer was still nearby.

But despite the victim being alive a moment ago, she could tell that the culprit had been gone for a while now. By their standards anyways. Which only makes her question how long the victim had been alive for in that state.

"Welp, let's keep going." Alice smiled, causing Jin to blink his eyes.

"I feel like seeing a corpse being opened like this should be a sign for us to leave no?"

"Normally yes. But our host has already found us so it'll be pretty rude of us not to go. Going back now would only lead it back to the caravan." Alice shrugged.

That last moment when the victim looked towards her.

There was a strand of energy that trembled, sending information deeper into the cave.

Whoever did this knew that they were here. Though at this point, even if they didn't see her, Alice still wanted to track them down.

Seeing 'scientists' that operated on the human like this brought back bad memories from the past, memories that she'd rather not remember.

'There doesn't seem to be a strong energy source nearby. Whoever did this shouldn't be hard to deal with.'

Continuing down the tunnel, they came across more victims that were hung up like 'art'.

People hanging by their arms with their back flayed open to look like a butterfly while their lungs hung out.

A rather ominous sight that even sent chills down Jin's spine.

After all, all of these 'art' pieces were still alive up until Alice saw them.

And soon, they arrived at a 'nest' of sorts woven with fleshy strands and tendons.

Covered by a veil of flesh, a silhouette could be seen working rapidly to dissect another corpse before hanging it up as a piece of art.

It had multiple arms that slowly retracted into its body as it brushed aside the veil of flesh, welcoming the two with a soft smile.

She was in the form of a nun with long white hair tied into a braid. She had blue and red iris' that reflected Alice and Jin's appearance.

A tattoo of a black cross could be seen beneath her right eye as she wiped away the blood on her face.

[That's a human.] Cayla frowned as Alice nodded her head.

"May I help the two of you?" She asked with a soft smile, flicking away the blood on her hands.

"Just a pair of curious folks wondering why must you torture these fellows before killing them? Clearly you aren't planning on save them since you ended them the moment we laid eyes on this. . . Art of yours." Alice asked, gesturing to the pieces around her that were no longer alive.

"Ah~ So you recognise that this is art as well? Delightful~ Is there nothing more beautiful than the visage of a sinner the moment they're about to meet the Lord above? The final moment of clarity before sweet release." The woman smiled, offering a prayer while holding the cross around her neck.

"And what exactly does it mean to be a sinner anyways? Because seems like you're just targeting anyone you come across." Alice narrowed her eye as she could see the strands of energy slowly extending from the woman.

Even though she wasn't moving, her eyes were clearly set on the two of them.

"A sinner? Well. . . A sinner is to partake in my Lord's blood yet do not dedicate to him your faith. These poor lost sinners needed enlightenment at life's end, to ensure that they reach the Lord's warm embrace." The woman replied as Alice grabbed her sword and swung at the air around them, surprising Jin.

"Then I don't suppose we count?" Alice chuckled, having parried strands of energy that lashed out towards them.

Tilting her head for a moment, the woman stopped smiling.

The silence was drawn out as Alice slowly frowned. The strands of energy around the woman were trembling, contemplating what must be done.

But soon, a wide creepy smile returned to her face.

"Of course not o' honored guests. I had been blind not to see your status therefore please forgive me. If you wish, I will pluck out these very eyes and offer them as apologies in hopes for your forgiveness." The woman bowed slightly, holding the edge of her skirt.

Hearing this, Alice furrowed her brows in displeasure.

Honored guests? Who's?