

Abyssal A 891

Chapter 891: Wasted Skill

Massaging her eyelids, Alice walked away for a moment. She didn't want to be entirely negative about the situation but there's no denying that Adela's Blood Blade was not the correct choice.

Since Alice didn't invest into the faith stat whatsoever, it's barely an upgrade compared to the mana cost she would have to do.

Even if she could enhance them with a 20% boost using the necklace, that 20% wasn't enough.

20% of 0 was still 0.

While that wasn't the exact situation, it was close enough.

The boost simply wasn't there to make this skill worth casting.

The easiest solution would be for Alice to increase her faith stat.

But... Increasing her faith towards an unknown god using unknown means... Alice didn't like it.

"Tch, no point worrying about it. The base cast should be decent to cleave a bunch of enemies spread out at this level." Alice scratched her hair, cutting her losses.

She'll use it for now.

The enemies she was currently facing could be dealt with using low level spells.

But as the enemies get stronger, this spell will see less and less use.

If she had chosen the vestments, at least she could make more use of it than this spell.

Hp could've been a spare stat she invested in if the situation called for it, thus allowing her to cast more than usual.

Not only that, but it'll also turn these healing grass into mana pills.

"Stupid stupid stupid..." Alice lectured herself.

She got too excited about the offensive option and didn't think things through clearly.

If Cayla and Alyss was here...

Pausing for a moment, Alice glanced up at the fog covered sky with a sigh.

Alyss she trusted to stay safe. But this realm was not a friendly one. There's no telling what kind of dangers awaited them.

And Cayla, she had already died a few times. If she continued at this pace... They'll need to find a solution for this phenomenon and fast.

Then there was also Elias. He has died the most.

Though with Karina's help, they were able to reduce that number.

The only issue was... what was Karina's goal? Was the help truly what it seemed? An act of mercy?

Or one using the disguise of mercy.

Gently slapping her cheeks for a moment, Alice calmed her mind.

'There's no need to overthink what I can't do at the moment. For now, I'll focus on clearing the areas. Even if increasing my insight on this realm will turn more of it 'real' it's not a process I can slow down.

'Worst come to pass, I'll do a quick surgery on myself to erase the insight I've gained.' Alice narrowed her eyes.

With her control over the soul, three powers in harmony, performing such an experiment shouldn't be an issue.

More than that, with these powers, she should be able to perform the contract removal that she had tried in the past.

So whatever connection this realm tries to tether onto her, she'll sever it should it become too invasive and dangerous.

"Did you finish despairing?" Rolo asked, yawning slightly.

"Just a tad. Say, are all blood magic Faith focused?" Alice asked curiously.

"Depends on what kind of spell you want to use. It's like asking if every spell is Blood Magic or Abyssal Magic." He rolled his eyes.

But feeling Alice's gaze on him, he quickly coughed.

"Most of the time, Blood Magic tend to fall into the category of Faith. But there are a few that have been modified by the scholars to use standard casting techniques rather than through ritual prayer."

"Does Abyss count as Faith too? Or is it scaled off something else?"

If she could figure out what kind of spell best suits simply increasing the Spirituality stat, she'll be able to plan what kind of fighting style she wanted to adopt later.

"Some do, some don't. Though it's a split between Faith and Spirituality, more than Blood Magic."

Tapping her fingers, Alice nodded her head.

"How long is it till sunrise? I should probably explore the new area and increase my stats a little more before I leave."

"Hell would I know. Sometimes it comes faster, sometimes it comes slower. Sometimes the night lasts so long some people might even forget they have to return to reality."

Alice wanted to say something but it didn't seem like Rolo was hiding information. In fact, he seemed just as lost as she was.

With nothing else, she nodded and made her way back to Adela's garden.

Sitting by the branch resting in the centre, she closed her eyes and harmonised with the tier 2 Embryos that Adela dropped.

Seeing her stats in front of her, Alice didn't hesitate to split it into two piles. 5 for Endurance, 5 for Speed.

Power – 30 (E-)

Speed – 35 (E)

Physicality – 30 (E-)

Spiritual – 30 (E-)

Endurance – 35 (E)

Faith – 0 (F-)

Once her stats have been allocated, Alice opened her eyes and hopped on the spot.

This feeling of sudden growth... Definitely intoxicating, especially if the receiver was someone who felt weak for most of their life.

People not chosen by the Abyss, civilians who couldn't get into the mindset of hunting down beasts.

This realm was perfect for them. They didn't know about the risk of death.

All they knew was that they couldn't die in here and whatever power they earn can be taken to reality.

With that kind of knowledge, who wouldn't do their best to thrive in this place?

Subtle changes to their thoughts, how they process things and ideologies would change without them even knowing.

And before they know it, they become frenzied Hunters seeking to kill their enemy even with the threat of death.

After all, they've become 'numb' to that sensation while inside this realm.

When reality and dream merge as one, how can they even tell?

Standing up, Alice made her way to the second exit.

One that led to the next area.

As she approached the exit, she noticed a gate blocking her way.

There was a single keyhole on the gate and Alice already knew what she must do.

Pulling out the key that Adela dropped, Alice inserted it.

As she did so, she felt a slight prick against her finger.

Furrowing her brows, she let go of the key and saw a small droplet of blood on her finger tip.

A spike had actually appeared on the key, drinking a bit of her blood and started to glow with a hint of crimson.

Veins spread across the door and it opened by itself.

The creaking of its hinges forming a strange creepy... laugh?

"Well that's not f*cking ominous at all." Alice mumbled, pushing the door open.

Clutching an Embryo, butterflies fluttered into the new zone, guiding her to the next camp.

Past the garden, there seemed to be only a single path that she could take.

Tall foliage and trees blocked the sides with thorns threatening to stab her should she try to force her way through.

Even trying to cut it with her rapier didn't work as her blade bounced back with a clash of sparks.

Were the thorns metal? Or perhaps they were a different kind of material.

Whatever it was, it's clear that the dream only wanted her to proceed down this path without any diversions.

Keeping her guard up, Alice ventured forth.

With the Fog blocking her view, it was hard to see if there were any lurking dangers in the fog.

Walking down this path, Alice felt the suffocating silence plague her mind.

Cayla was not here to listen to her rants, Alyss wasn't here to keep her in check.

Neither of them were here to joke around with her.

Hell, she even missed their teasing and bullying.

Now that she was alone in this silence, the lack of their presence was clearer than ever.

'Just a little longer... Just a little more...' Alice thought to herself.

Surely the sun should rise soon.

Once it does, she'll be back in the familiar company of her friends.

Reaching the end of the path, Alice was greeted with a strange elevator.

Similar to the one that she saw when looking for Karina.

A single caged platform waiting to descend.

Circling the cage a few times, Alice made sure there wasn't any other paths that she could take and stepped in.

With a click, the door shut and the platform started its slow descent.

The first thing Alice noticed was the growing smell.

It wasn't a putrid smell nor was it fragrant.

Rather... it smelled wet?

Like soaked stone or a forest.

This sense of humidity was present in the air and Alice could see condensation forming on her body.

The walls were soaked with water.

Furrowing her brows, Alice couldn't help but wonder if the place she was going to was a forest beneath the surface.

If so, with the fog obscuring her view, trying to navigate this place was going to be much harder.

But the deeper she dropped, the colder the temperature became. Water turned to ice and Alice could see her own breath in the air.

It wasn't a forest that awaited her but rather a land of ice and snow.

Reaching the bottom, a branch awaited her and Alice stepped out.

Like the time she stepped into Adela's arena, a butterfly landed on her shoulder.

"Welcome, little flame~ To the land beneath the surface. Monsters trapped in ice, shadows starved of food and famine that plagued the land. What you see here, is a splinter of reality. The dream of someone who had experienced such hardships.

"Welcome to the nation of Verona many years in the past."

Chapter 892: Land Of Famine

"Welcome, to the nation of Verona many years in the past." Monika announced as a frown appeared on Alice's face.

"Verona of the past? Is someone from the North here? Or was it someone who experienced it and left?" Alice asked.

With this realm being woven from dreams, in a sense it worked similar to the Inverted World.

Of course, despite functioning in a similar way, Alice doubted the accuracy of one's memory compared to the data bank of the Abyss.

The butterfly contemplated for a moment, its wings fluttering in the cold wind of the North.

"One of those answers are correct. Sometimes, the locations you visit are constructs of your own memory. Your home, your academy and so on. Sometimes, it's a reflection of what you deem to be the past, the history.

"A construct of the information you have gathered." Without saying any more, Monika's butterfly disappeared into the fog.

Letting out a slight sigh, Alice followed the trail towards the first checkpoint.

Thankfully, it wasn't too far away as it was only a short walk from the elevator. Sitting by the branch, Alice was glad she wasn't feeling much of the cold. But the moment she walks away, it's going to be a problem.

In her brief exposure to the cold, Alice noticed her movements slowly down significantly. It was harder to swing her arms or dodge like how she used to. And with each breath she took, ice would scrape against her lungs, making it hard to breathe and recover her stamina.

Unless she found a solution to this, exploring this area might become harder than what she initially expected.

Focusing on the crystal, Alice wanted to see if Rolo had a store nearby. But all she saw were golden butterfly trails.

'Seems like I'll have to explore a little more.'

Standing up, Alice gave her body a light stretch and made her way into the snowfield.

Even though this was the Queendom of Verona, it was still uncharted territory for her.

Keeping her rapier by her side, Alice ventured through the cold one step at a time.

Unlike the city earlier, there were no walls for her to lean against.

All she had to figure out her direction was her own footsteps.

And with her view being obscured by the fog, it certainly didn't make it any easier.

*BANG!!!

Just as Alice took a step forward, she heard an explosion way out in the fog.

Quickly entering a defensive stance, Alice wanted to see if anything was approaching her but that didn't seem to be the case.

The explosion settled and peace returned to the snowfield.

Alice frowned.

No enemies, no path.

Advancing forward towards the next camp with a frown, Alice was about to slide a few times as there was a layer of ice beneath the snow.

As she reached the first checkpoint, Alice's pupil trembled.

Before her lay a ruin with a single branch hidden inside.

Surrounding the branch were several people, bundled up and hugging one another.

Their wary eyes turned towards Alice.

Some reached for their weapons, clearly on guard.

Were these... people? Or were they beasts disguised as people?

Alice didn't know.

She took slow steps towards the branch, making sure not to alert the people for now.

She sheathed her rapier but made sure her spell could still be cast just in case.

"Stop. Don't come any closer." One of the malnourished men warned, aiming his broken blade at Alice.

Through the gaps of his clothing, Alice could see his skin stretched across his bones.

Even though he was warning her, she doubted he had the energy to actually fight back.

Alice opened her mouth and froze.

Should she even interact with them? What about the rules?

But these weren't familiar figures for her.

In a sense, they were similar to Rolo.

"I'm not here to hurt you. I... just want to know where I am right now and to take some shelter." Alice explained, keeping her distance.

The man frowned and glanced at the ground inside the ruins.

There were about 8 people here excluding him.

'Two- no, three able bodied men including him. Two women and the rest are children.' Alice creased her brows.

A pair of twins hugging each other tightly, an older teen crouching in front of them, his arms shielding them from Alice, preventing her from getting a better view of them.

And lastly, a young girl who simply stared at her with hollowed eyes.

She sat a little further from the rest, deep bags under her eyes with a tattered blanket covering her body.

"You... don't know where you are?" The men looked at each other in confusion before turning to Alice.

"Yeah. I just wandered here from that direction. My eyesight is a little bad so I can't see much at all."
Alice apologised.

She decided to play along for now, accepting the world for what it is while integrating herself into it for the moment.

With her view being limited by fog, saying that she has a bad eyesight was probably the best excuse she could use.

"Your outfit. Are you a Hunter?" One of them asked as Alice nodded her head.

As she nodded her head, the young girl stood up and walked up to Alice, surprising the others.

Her bony fingers tugged at Alice's sleeve.

"Miss... Hunter... Do you have food?" She asked. Even though most of her face was hidden by the tattered blanket, Alice could still see the desperation in her eyes.

"I... I have some healing grass." Alice offered.

In terms of food, she didn't have anything but this was the best she could do.

Without hesitation, the girl grabbed the grass and shoved it into her mouth, greedily consuming it while the others watched.

They wanted to get some too but she glared at them while letting out a low growl.

Feral and will absolutely fight to the death for the grass.

Alice felt a pang of pity towards this group.

According to Monika, this was a time when the north was ravaged by famine.

And...

Alice chose to ignore the silhouette she saw just behind the doors of the ruin.

The frozen bones discarded just barely out of view.

A ribcage...

Alice closed her eyes. She knew the truth of what they might've had to do during these desperate times. The lengths they had to go for the sake of survival.

"Let me rest for a little while. I'll... see if I can bring some food back." Alice offered.

Hearing this, a slight spark of hope appeared in their eyes before quickly dying out.

Food? Out in these conditions?

They lowered their weapon and allowed Alice to enter.

Sitting next to the branch, she closed her eyes and prepared to resonate with the checkpoint when the malnourished girl snuggled next to her.

"Hm?"

"You're warm..." She hugged her knees while leaning against Alice.

Alice could feel her shivers disappearing. A small smile crept on her face.

But this made her curious. If everyone else was huddled up, why was this girl left alone?

They didn't look like they wanted to be involved either.

Regardless, these are questions she can ask once she figured out what she needed to do in this place.

What kind of monsters she needed to kill in order to get the Embryos along with the boss of this zone.

Once she had the branch marked, Alice stood up.

"I'll go out and look for some food. I think I'll be back in... an hour or so?" She estimated.

The time it'll take for her to backtrack and find Rolo's shop again.

The girl was hesitant but nodded her head, letting go of Alice.

Stepping out of the ruins, Alice glanced back one more time before venturing off into the snow and ice.

###

Deep in Terminus, a portal closed behind a woman. She recalled the experiments she had just done, the potential of this new 'solution' that she had created with the help of her younger self.

It's not a guarantee to kill Nyer but it was certainly a foundation.

And despite being a foundation, it was far from enough.

Flickering through the landscape of Terminus, she returned to the main camp where Selen had gone back to help Alfva with healing the others.

Naturally, going to the Inverted World wasn't only focused on finding a method to killing Nyer.

But also a way to help stabilize Verona's condition.

With her soul splintered due to the false divinity, they needed a way to help her recover.

Sigurd and Frida noticed Caera's return and wanted to say something.

But seeing her stormy expression, they chose not to for the moment.

Caera entered the cave. She saw Verona leaning against the rock while sweat dripped from her forehead.

She was still hanging on thankfully.

"Seems like you're still holding on well my Queen~... Hm?" Caera tilted her head for a moment.

Creasing her brows, she kneeled next to Verona and lifted her eyelid slightly.

Seeing Verona's eyes being unfocused despite holding on, Caera's frown deepened.

Eldritch energy began to flicker from her body as her shadow began to twitch.

Forming a tether with Verona's shadow, Caera closed her eyes.

After a moment, she stormed out of the cave with a furious expression.

"Frida! Sigurd!" Caera roared as the two Lords glanced over with confusion.

"Huh?"

Without explaining anything, Caera grabbed them both by the collar.

"What the f*ck have you been doing while I was away?! Did you not even look at your Queen's condition?!" Caera questioned.

But seeing the confusion on both their faces, Caera clicked her tongue.

"What remains of your Queen's soul has been dragged away!"

Chapter 893: A Mother's Love

"What remains of your Queen's soul has been dragged away!" Caera glared at the duo.

Hearing this, their eyes widened.

While Caera has been away, they've made sure nothing could disturb their Queen.

And yet...

Her soul's been dragged away?!

Frida turned pale while Sigurd frowned.

"No one approached. We didn't sense anything either." He clenched his fists as Caera held back several curses she wanted to say and let the two of them go.

To be fair, she didn't notice either until she scanned Verona's body. With these two not wanting to disturb their Queen, finding this out would be rather difficult.

Biting her nail, Caera paced back and forth.

"Good news is that even though her soul has been dragged away, the connection with her body remains intact. It's not a complete severance of the soul and body.

"More like putting her soul elsewhere for safekeeping while her body continues to function." Caera explained.

The main question was... Where?

Where was her soul taken and who took it.

"Forget it, help me stabilise her condition for now. I have a way to supplement her soul but doing it now might cause this anomaly to strengthen instead. We'll preserve her body and trace the connection back to the soul." Caera ordered as Sigurd nodded his head.

Turning to Frida, he sighed and helped her up.

"Snap out of it. Verona needs us right now."

Opening her mouth, Frida hesitated before simply nodding her head.

###

When I was a little girl, trapped in the north, all I knew was the everlasting winter that haunt these lands.

The brutal winter that never seemed to end.

Snow filled my vision, the grey that painted the sky, the snow that swallowed my world whole. Layers upon layers of white stretched far in every direction I could see.

We didn't live.

Rather... we endured the harsh winters. We did what we can to persist another day.

"The storm should end soon."

"Tomorrow will be a warmer day."

"The wind slowed down, we should be fine tomorrow."

Promises of tomorrow felt ever so sweet. To the children of the north, 'Tomorrow' was a paradise free from the storms.

As children of the North, our first emotion, our first lesson, was the lesson of Hunger.

Our ever present companion that follows us with every step.

Hunger that makes the knees weak, Hunger that drives man insane.

With the storm that ravaged the North destroying our farmland, there was little food to be passed around. We had to do what we could.

My father was a Hunter and my mother a Farmer.

With the farms destroyed, my mother kept me safe while my father rushed out to get food.

The men in the village formed hunting groups, they hunted what little beast or animal that remained in these harsh winters. Some who had the blessings of the Abyss ventured deeper into the winter.

Some would come back, some were lost forever.

But we endured.

While my father was out hunting, those who remained in the village tried to ration food as best they could.

We ate whatever we could get our hands on. Trees, roots, dried leaves roasted by the camp fire.

How young was I when I first tasted the bark of a tree?

My mother taught me to scrape only the inner layer of the bark.

The outer layer was too tough, eating it would cut my gums, tear my throat.

We would spend days peeling strips from the wood we found nearby and boiling them in a pot of snow. Once the snow melted, only water remained and we made soup of the bark.

Biter, tough.

I chewed... Chewed and chewed.

Sometimes I would throw up, coughing up the water I had drank but I continued to eat.

Even now, I can still remember the taste of wood and dirt in my mouth.

My mother's face as she was forced to feed me bark.

When meals were done, I would spend the time next to the fire, looking out at the storm ravaging the world outside.

I would see flickers of light from houses opposite us. Silhouettes of people trying their best to survive.

There were a few moments where the storm would die down enough for us to go out without worry.

But no one did.

Playing would cause the hunger to increase.

The children simply looked at one another from behind the windows.

One time, I saw one of our neighbours walking through the snow.

A lady no older than my own mother.

She trudged through the snow before collapsing on the ground.

I simply watched as she struggled but eventually stopped moving.

The snow that piled on top of her...

I don't know how long it took. But when I tried to find the lady once more from behind my window, I saw drag marks leading to one of the houses.

Someone must've brought her away.

As we continued to use the wood for both food and fire, the forest nearby continued to retreat further and further away.

From quick trips to long hours.

It got to the point where going to the forest might take half a day.

And I waited for my mother to come back.

I don't remember much of my father. The Hunts always took the longest. They venture far and wide in search of any tracks they could find. Whenever they find prey, they would come back to the village to share the food with people.

But as the storm continued, even beasts became rare.

My father's face at that time... I don't remember it.

After the trees, we instead ate wild roots. We used what little tools we could get our hands on and dug at the ground.

We boiled the roots, tricking our body into thinking it's food. All so that we could live for another day.

Our village was a remote one. Trying to find hope from outside was impossible. Not in this storm.

When we couldn't find roots, we started to eat whatever we could get our hands on. Anything that could be boiled and softened enough to be swallowed.

Old shoes, belts, and scraps of clothing.

It was disgusting, it made me cry. But I continued to eat because I was scared of death.

My mother was worried. Worried about the food even though she was nothing but skin and bones. Her hollow cheeks, sunken eyes.

My father hasn't returned for a long time now.

No fresh wood, no bark to eat. No spare clothing.

We were even careful with when we used our fire. Only doing so when we couldn't stand the cold anymore.

Just for a little while.

Just for a short moment.

Comfort was a luxury, losing yourself in it meant death.

While waiting for my father, I found myself dipping in and out of sleep.

Well... Sleep wasn't accurate. My body was giving up. I simply didn't have the strength to open my eyes.

My mother would always hold me so I woke up comfortably.

We huddled together, sharing blankets and boiling what remained as food. Even though we needed the clothing to shield us from the cold, we were forced to eat it.

...

...

I woke up to the smell of meat.

My mother was making some soup.

"Your father came back last night with some meat. There aren't much so we have to be careful okay? He's gone out to look for some more for us."

I couldn't quite remember my mother's smile. I simply waited hungrily by the side.

And once the food was done, I devoured it with everything I had, not caring about how hot the soup was.

My mother patted my head while singing a song. Her gentle voice while watching me eat.

The taste of meat after all this time... I loved it.

My mother packed everything my father brought back carefully just outside the door of our house. Concealed under the snow so that the cold could preserve it.

Whenever hunger dominated my mind, whenever I couldn't hold on anymore, my mother would leave the house to retrieve the meat.

She would sing songs to me, promising me a better tomorrow.

A day where these storms end will come soon.

Soon.

Then... One day... My mother collapsed.

I stumbled to her side and tried to lift her up.

But she shook her head.

No more stories.

No more songs.

Her last words to me...

"Listen to me... When you're hungry and can't hold on anymore... use mommy okay? A little at a time... Only... Only when you can't hold on anymore... A little at a time... Just a little... When you can't hold on..."

She kept repeating these words and I saw.

Frozen blood against her clothes and... her body.

What remains of it.

Her final words...

She raised her hand and cupped my cheek.

Her fingers brushing against my hair.

"I love you."

Her tears froze against her cheeks.

...

I never heard anything from my mother since then.

I did as she told me.

A little at a time...

Just a little...

When I couldn't hold on.

Use mommy.

A little at a time...

Just a little...

A little...

Use... mommy.

My father returned.

He was injured but managed to return with three others. The other hunters from the village had died but he managed to return.

I didn't have the energy to welcome him back.

I simply stared at him from under what remains of my blanket. The bloodied knife next to me.

He collapsed on his knees with a laugh, a cry.

He didn't scream, he didn't shout. He simply cradled my mother.

I woke up the next day and followed my mother's advice.

I did as she told me.

A little at a time.

Just a little.

And when I couldn't hold on...

I used daddy who slept forever next to mommy.

Chapter 894: Plan To Escape Terminus

"Do I look like a charity to you? I sell weapons, I sell items that help you fight. I sell armour that keeps you safe. What part of my wares looks like food to you?" Rolo let out an annoyed sigh.

With how many times Alice had approached with weird requests, he was beginning to think she didn't quite understand the concept of an item store.

"Is there nothing? Honestly just some food would be fine. Like any food. At least something that'll fill more than just... this." Alice held the healing grass with an awkward smile.

"Do you even have money after spending everything on upgrades?" Rolo pointed his smoking pipe as Alice coughed awkwardly.

There wasn't any monsters she could kill in the second area so she couldn't get any Embryos.

"Use this. It's a damage boost item, but it should fill you up somewhat. I'll charge you double price but use tier 1 Embryos as payment. You've already unlocked the second store anyway." Rolo sighed, tapping his shelf.

Next to him, a stack of jerky appeared as Alice nodded eagerly.

Handing over her tier one Embryos, she thanked Rolo quickly and backtracked to the elevator. Unfortunately, she wasn't able to teleport between the camps otherwise this would've made the trip much easier.

Reaching the bottom, she glanced at the storm that seemed to have gotten worse and furrowed her brows.

Her tracks have been mostly erased but she could still remember the path she took.

The adjustments she made and the traps that were put into place.

Rushing through the storm, Alice found the ruins once more.

Thankfully, everyone was still there as Alice sighed in relief.

"You're back." One of the men glanced at Alice in surprise.

They didn't think she would come back. Hardly anyone did after seeing this kind of storm.

Not only that, but it had also picked up compared to earlier so finding them must not have been easy.

"I did say I'll come back. Do we have some water and fire? We can probably make some soup with this." Alice smiled, holding the stack of jerky.

Seeing food all of them regained a bit of life in their gaze as they quickly scrambled the pots together.

Thankfully, making a fire wasn't an issue since they have items prepared for it.

While waiting for the water to boil, Alice sat down next to the girl hiding herself under a blanket.

"How come you don't sit with the others?" Alice asked curiously while the girl hugged her knees.

"They call me devil child. But they keep me around." She replied, surprising Alice.

"Devil child?" Alice raised an eyebrow.

She turned her gaze to the rest of their group as none of them replied. They simply fell silent with an awkward cough, not wanting to look over.

Especially when Alice had brought the jerky and was now asking the girl about when they called her the devil child.

If anything, at least they brought her along so they won't get blamed for leaving her back at the village.

"Because I used mommy and daddy." She replied instantly, without hesitation.

Alice opened her mouth, she wanted to say something but held herself back.

What else could she mean? In the harsh north where famine is present everywhere. In the ruins where her parents are absent and... what remains of a human just behind the corner.

There's no need for Alice to ask more.

She simply lifted the girl up and placed her on her lap.

Patting the girl's head, Alice simply offered her comfort while the soup waited to boil.

Once the soup was cooked, they started to distribute it in makeshift bowls.

There weren't many wood bowls available since they needed to use it as emergency food if needed.

Watching the girl eat the softened jerky, Alice felt her heart ache.

Hugging the girl from behind, Alice was about to close her eyes when she felt the girl shuffle.

"Want some?" She asked, offering the food.

Alice smiled but shook her head.

"Don't worry, I've already eaten."

But upon hearing this, the girl froze. Her eyes trembled but no tears fell.

She simply ate the jerky soup without saying anything else.

Expanded her zone. The boundary wasn't wide by any means but it should be enough to keep them safe for now.

*BOOM!!!

Once more, an explosion sounded out in the distance.

"Do you know what that is?" Alice asked but the group glanced at her in confusion.

"Again, bad eyesight." Alice shrugged with a bitter smile.

"It seems to be a giant beast. We can't see it too clearly either but the silhouette is bigger than any we've seen. We had a group go ahead of us before, saying they'll pick up some of the beasts that monster killed for food." One of the men replied as Alice folded her arms.

If she wanted to farm this area for some stats, she'll definitely need to go deeper into this area.

'Is that monster the last boss of this area?'

"I'll leave the jerky with you guys okay? I'm going to scout ahead a little." Alice smiled but the girl clutched Alice's sleeve.

"Don't worry, I'll be back. I came back with the jerky didn't I?" She reassured.

She wasn't sure if it was the girl letting her go or if she didn't have the energy to hold on, Alice stood up and set the girl down.

Despite the storm ravaging outside, Alice simply adjusted her hood and ventured on.

This was simply a reflection of the past. Even if she were to show the girl pity here, it wouldn't change where she would be in the future.

IF she survived.

Taking a deep breath, Alice focused her gaze.

*RUMBLE!!!

A ghostly figure burst out of the snow dressed in all white. Pale blue skin, golden orbs that act as eyes and white hair matching her dress.

A snow woman of sorts.

Alice brandished her blade and prepared to strike but the monster let out a shriek!

Recoiling back, Alice covered her ears but frowned when she noticed the ice forming on her body.

"Shut up already!"

Pale Lance!

Throwing her spell, she stopped the monster from applying more debuffs onto her and jumped into the air.

Crashing into the snow woman from above, Alice pinned her down with her feet against the snow woman's shoulders.

Stabbing down with her rapier, Alice took aim with her finger.

Directly between the beast's eyes.

Pale Lance!

*CRUNCH!!!

The lance dropped down from above, destroying the monster's head.

From the ashes, a tier two Embryo dropped along with a piece of tattered cloth.

Picking up both items, Alice frowned, sensing three presences rapidly approaching her area.

'The earlier cry must've attracted them.'

Jumping back, Alice aimed her rapier.

*BANG!!!

Bursting through the storm, three snow women charged at Alice as she activated Adela's Blood Blade!

Moving back, Alice began to chant an unfamiliar prayer as blood converged around her.

Forming a ritual of sorts, three blood blades solidified and appeared around her.

Each one slashed at a different target.

As expected, the damage wasn't impressive but it's enough to stop them from screaming.

Hopping to the side, Alice narrowed her eyes and flicked her wrist.

Pale Lance!!!

The lance pierced them from the right, skewering all three together and pinned them against the ground.

Lunging forward, three slashes of her rapier was enough to finish the job.

Two tier two Embryos and one cloth.

Storing the drops away, Alice consumed some pills to regenerate her mana.

Clutching the Embryo in her palm, a new path opened ahead of her. The trial of butterflies leading to the next camp.

Her path was clear and Alice walked deeper into the storm.

###

Caera wiped away her sweat before sighing in relief.

They stabilized Verona's condition. Her situation won't get any worse but it won't exactly get better either.

They don't know what's tethering her away but the distance was rather... strange.

It was both far yet close. Impossible to reach yet she was connected.

Through the layers of the Abyss, through the realm itself.

'Is it the surface? Or somewhere else?' Caera frowned.

She tried to track the source but something was blocking her senses.

The presence of a Realm Ruler, barring outsiders from peering into her realm.

But last she recall... the surface is lacking a Realm Ruler and the one who rules the Void has now fallen into a deep slumber.

'A new realm...' Caera furrowed her brows.

This entire thing had Nyer's fingerprints all over it and I was clear he's moving his plans to the next stage.

But first things first, they needed to transport everyone out of the Abyss for now. The longer they stay here, the more the miasma starts to affect them.

'How will I even move everyone out of here... Piercing the barrier between Terminus and the other layers might be a bit annoying but I can find one of my old portal devices. Issue is energy...' Caera paced back and forth with a deep frown on her face.

To move this many people, the amount of energy needed to repair then activate one of her portals was enormous. Enough where even if she was to leave herself completely defenceless, she wouldn't have enough power to transport even half of them.

Lost in her thoughts, Caera suddenly lifted her head.

She had an idea.

One that should give them enough of an opportunity to move everyone out of here but...

It may also turn this portion of the Abyss into a dead zone.

'Forget it. Getting them out takes priority.' Caera shook her head.

It doesn't matter if they move only a single layer. So long as they're out of Terminus, a solution can be found.

"Frida, Sigurd, I'll need your help. We'll break out of Terminus once we manage to get Verona's soul back. And I also need you to make a vow, a contract." Caera frowned.

"Whatever I do to help us break out of Terminus when the time comes, I want you to erase that from your memory and soul. Erase all traces of what you see me do."

If they don't... Madness will take shape.

Chapter 895 Records Of A Never Ending Storm

Despite venturing deeper into the storm, the destination never seemed to arrive.

Always out of view, always beyond the fog.

Alice sat by the branch, a new checkpoint that she had unlocked having ventured through the blizzard.

Though unlike the first camp, there wasn't any survivors here.

Instead, Alice found what seemed to be a diary of sorts.

A record of survival. Fragmented and the writing was done using the ash from what remains of a fire pit.

Record 1:

Another storm.

Another bark soup.

Can't sleep, monsters outside.

Too many to kill at once. Maybe we can find a straggler.

If we do.

We have food.

Alice flipped the page. Some of the entries were damaged and couldn't be read properly.

The next entry she could read seemed to be several days later.

Record 4:

Food ran out today.

Though in reality it was two days ago but no one admitted it.

We couldn't find any stragglers again. The beasts walk in packs, they are afraid of the storm like us.

We're surviving on water but.

We need to eat something.

Alice tapped her finger.

There were several moments when the author's pen seemed to stop.

Like he was contemplating what to add into this diary. What should he add that people don't know about already?

The hunger? The lack of food? Warmth?

It's clear that the situation was terrible and the chances of survival seemed bleak.

And even that in itself was wishful thinking. They knew deep down that they were going to die hungry and weak.

Record 10:

People aren't talking anymore.

Don't know if it's because there's nothing to be said.

To sad to say anything.

Or simply conserving energy I suppose.

Caught myself staring at a crack in the ground. Hardly blinked.

Just kept staring for maybe an hour.

I'm hungry. Maybe I should keep staring.

Distracts me from these thoughts.

Record 13:

Managed to hold on. Some of us decided to recycle a little.

Those that couldn't go on.

Found a hobby in staring at the crack in the ground.

Better than sitting in this silence.

It's not like the crack was very interesting.

Record 15:

I started to forget the names of my neighbours today.

We lived next to each other for ten years. Before this winter storm.

I stared at his face.

If I stared long enough, maybe I'll remember the name.

Nothing.

He stared back and neither of us said anything.

Perhaps he's forgotten my name too.

Record 18:

I passed out today.

Woke up to someone trying to cut me up thinking I kicked the bucket.

He apologised.

I didn't get mad.

He went back to his spot and we sat in silence.

Record 20:

The storm lifted slightly today and we found a group of people.

They couldn't survive.

We got rations for a few more days. Happy times.

I'll keep writing in this note pad. Makes me feel human still.

Like I'm doing something meaningful.

Someone suggested that we should go out. Search for a better place, near a forest maybe.

No one agreed, no one rejected.

Walking out? In that storm...

I don't want to become someone else's rations.

Record 23:

I'm hungry.

Record 24:

I'm hungry.

Record 25:

I'm hungry.

...

...

Record 26:

There's only 3 of us left. A woman kicked the bucket. Said she smelled soup.

There was no soup but she smiled like there way.

She gone crazy.

But maybe we all did.

I'm not feeling the hunger anymore.

Not really.

I'm not feeling anything.

This storm will never end.

What's the point of this.

Even if the storm ended tomorrow.

What then?

I stared at the crack in the floor again. I wonder what kind of death I would prefer.

A quiet one. In my sleep.

That way I don't feel pain.

Just drifting off to endless sleep.

No dread. No fear.

How wonderful.

...

As Alice turned to the next page, her fingers froze for a moment before resting on the words printed onto the sheet.

Words that were a mix of ash and blood.

Record 27:

It's just me left.

I sent the others ahead of me.

They don't need to worry.

They don't need to stay hungry.

They don't need to fear.

They don't need to feel cold.

They don't feel any of this.

They get to sleep.

How blissful.

Maybe this is what the woman felt. She smelled soup and drank it with a wonderful smile.

I wonder what kind of face I'll make when I forget all of this pain.

...

There were no more words, but nothing else needed to be written.

Alice could figure out what had happened to the author of these notes.

That lies at the end of his journey. When he's given up all hope and forgot the hunger that drives him to survive.

He had accepted the end.

There was no name written down for the author.

He was simply one of many.

One man who's part of the countless who died during this period of time.

Looking at the cover of this book, Alice couldn't help but wonder.

About the mentality of those stuck in these harsh times.

Even though she felt her fair share of pain during the 10 years of imprisonment, it was never to the extent of famine.

She was never left hungry, she simply refused to eat.

But these people? The people who suffered the famine of the North? They were forced to eat tree bark and... even resorting to each other when there was no other option.

This kind of desperation... Alice can't say she has felt it before.

It was easy to judge this man for killing the other survivors then himself.

But could she really blame him?

She couldn't.

Not when she didn't feel the despair he has.

Not when she hasn't felt hunger so strong that she had to resort to eating bark.

Shaking her head, Alice stored the notepad away for now.

Based on her estimations, the night should be ending soon.

Last time she was in the nightmare, it was roughly around this time, hence why Alice was resting by the branch.

And as expected, a wave of drowsiness soon hit her as she slumped over in her seat.

She felt her soul being dragged away from this body and in the darkness, she slowly opened her eyes.

"Urg..." Clutching her head, Alice couldn't get used to the transfer at all.

The wave of dizziness that followed after was enough to make her want to throw up.

Looking around, she could see Suyin's contraptions still humming while recording the data.

The latest values showing a clear spike as they were brought back into their bodies.

Looking to her side, she could see Elias waking up as well.

“How was it? Was the training helpful?” Alice asked with light chuckle.

She leaned against the wall, slowly recovering from the transfer.

“Pretty useful. Though... I still died once.” Elias seemed a little dejected.

“Hey, at least it’s much better than before. Good job.” Alice praised. Being able to reduce the number of deaths to just one was a huge improvement.

At least they don’t have to worry about him racking up a huge amount of deaths.

Closing her eyes, Alice turned to Cayla and Alyss.

‘No deaths here. My zone seems to be just full of monsters. I think I’m about halfway done with the new tier two Embryo.’ Alyss made herself a seat and leaned back.

‘What the f*ck. Halfway done already?’ Alice blinked her eyes.

Her new zone hardly had any monsters around. With what she has killed thus far, she was only able to raise her stats by a little bit.

‘Seems like you didn’t have much luck.’ Alyss chuckled seeing Alice’s surprise.

Shrugging her shoulders with a slightly bitter smile, Alice nodded.

‘Yeah, my second zone is nothing but snow and ice. I... Saw a bunch of shadows of the past. The north wasn’t a friendly place in the past, nothing but famine and hunger.’ Alice glanced at the ground.

Even though she didn't go into detail, Alyss could tell Alice was clearly affected by whatever she saw.

Standing up, Alyss walked over and gave Alice a hug, surprising her.

'Eh?'

'Don't worry about it, just felt like doing it.' Alyss smiled.

Patting Alice's head, she eventually let go, leaving behind a confused Alice who turned to Cayla.

'How was your zone?'

[Hm? Oh it was fine. None of the beasts were really an issue. If anything, now that I have some stats, they were easier. I didn't die at all.] Cayla shook her head.

Before Alice could praise her, Cayla took a deep breath.

[And I was dragged away from the zone after a while. Nyer came to see me.]

The moment Nyer's name was brought up, both Alice and Alyss fell silent.

They both had a serious expression on their face and listened carefully.

[He asked some weird questions. Like what I hope for this world. A world filled with all its troubles and imperfections.]

Hesitating for a moment, she continued.

[He spoke about not wanting any of us from Ayr to die. He even spoke about the future. How there were only two paths for us. One where we fail and Velouria is resurrected and one where Alice continues.

[And... That Alice's death was required for Velouria's resurrection.]

Alyss frowned.

If Alice needed to die, why didn't he make a move? Or was it because there were specific conditions that need to be met before she is allowed to die?

With the information that Nyer met Cayla, the trio fell into the deep silence.

Cayla was still thinking about Nyer's actions. Why he spurred her on despite being on opposite sides. Why he told her to stand her ground.

Alyss wanted to figure out when exactly Nyer needed Alice to die so she could prevent it.

While Alice...

Alice couldn't help but wonder about the possibility.

Once again, she was faced with the decision she had to make back in the Inverted World.

In that moment, she turned the fake heart into real and 'killed' Velouria.

Before she could think deeper, Suyin's puppet stood on the table.

She lacked her usual friendly tone and with a serious expression, delivered the news of the strange feeling she got when observing their condition when the Nightmare occurred.

That invisible presence.

Chapter 896: Observing A Dream

"Once the nightmare began, a crimson moon appeared in the sky. Everyone who was walking around fell asleep. All of them faced it without exception.

"But..." Suyin trailed off.

She hugged her arms, unable to forget the presence that stared at her.

"Something was crawling around the city. Something was definitely here but I couldn't see it. It felt like... If I stared any longer, I would've died. Even from behind the screen."

Alice furrowed her brows.

Even through this puppet, she could tell just how fearful Suyin was. A sight she didn't think she'll see in the young genius. And yet here they were.

"Urg... Forget it. Nothing is normal in this place. Let's focus on the task at hand instead." Suyin sighed, trying to distract herself from this cursed feeling.

"First of all, good news is that all of the data transferred over to me properly without any issues. I have a full reading of every single change your body experienced while inside the Nightmare realm.

"Second of all, despite sleeping, your body was still 'experiencing' the movements you make inside the realm. Well... Maybe using the word experiencing is wrong. Your brain is registering the movements but your body is stationary.

"Running, walking, emotional condition, stress and so on. Everything got recorded as though you were performing them in real life." Suyin explained, walking over to one of her machines and pulling out a portion of the paper used to note down the changes.

Alice saw her report, the sudden spike of stress at one point before returning back to normal.

She figured it was probably the records of the man who went insane.

"If you mentioned good news then there should be bad news too right?" Alice asked as Suyin nodded her head.

"Yes. The bad news is more so for Elias rather than you because your capacity is just freakishly high."

Hearing this, Alice couldn't help but tilt her head in confusion.

"You're aware that too many deaths turn you into a drone right? That's not the only thing. I don't know what causes it but there seems to be a stream of corruption every so often. the data gets jumbled and well... I'm not entirely sure of the effects.

"What I do know however, it's linked to the soul. So Alice, who has 2 voices in her head and can house several souls isn't struggling that much. But Elias who's just a normal human should be feeling the effects a little." Suyin turned to Elias who blinked his eyes in confusion.

"I... don't feel any different." He frowned.

Activating his skills, he gave himself an examination but as expected, nothing was off.

Suyin folded her arms.

Her data wasn't lying.

Something definitely affected Elias. They just don't know what yet.

"What about retaining memory after leaving? Since you still remember stuff despite observing from the outside, I'm guessing it's something specifically done to the soul." Alice turned to Suyin.

"We can test that later. For now, I don't sense anything wrong with the body."

Organising her notes, Suyin handed everything over to Alice while Cayla made a copy on the side.

The more Alice read, the deeper her frown became.

With her time in the Nightmare realm, a new value was beginning to pop up.

A foreign energy that's threading together with her Abyssal.

It wasn't much and the values were low, but it's definitely there.

And...

Based on the time of the spike, it seemed to be around the same time when she upgraded her stats.

Folding her arms, Alice let out a deep sigh.

If she wants to reach the Zenia family, she'll have to explore this nation more and understand the true scale of what she's up against.

But the issue with this is...

The longer they stay here, the more the Nightmare will grab a hold of them.

Instead of letting this happen...

"What do you need in order to make this puppet of yours?" Alice asked.

"Hm?"

"I'm thinking we should investigate the next Nightmare. See what this invisible presence is and try figure something out." Alice suggested.

Blindly following the Nightmare was advised against, especially with Monika's information that she received.

The more they understand, the more insight they gain, the more the realm becomes real.

While they can't stop the others from doing this, as this world was now already deeply intertwined with Extalia, they can at least stop whatever effects this 'insight' might have on them.

"Hmm... Alright. But it's not exactly something I can just smack out in 2 days. Suyin Mk2 was something I was working on when you left. Now that I have the blueprints, work will be faster but it won't be done in time." Suyin shook her head.

It wasn't an issue of more manpower either since she has all the tools around her to speed things up.

It's preparing the materials and the time needed to do so.

Unless they have something that can speed up the time of the object, they won't be able to create the puppets quickly.

"Then do you have any faster alternatives?"

"By that you mean highly unstable prototypes then I have one that I haven't scraped yet. I wouldn't recommend it though. It's a prototype for a reason."

Alice was about to suggest it when she felt Suyin's stare.

As a researcher and inventor, she was all too familiar with pushing the boundaries and limits.

And when someone like Suyin is suggesting her not to try it, then it must be something truly dangerous.

"Alright. Focus on making two puppets for me and Elias. I'll try make a memory chip or library using the data you've given me and the data I've gathered. We should be able retain memory even outside of the country." Alice sighed.

"Alright. But what's our end goal here? I don't think retaining our memories will be enough to destroy whatever this Nightmare realm is."

"My personal end goal is to destroy the Zenia family. And that by extension is connected to this Nightmare realm. I would say... My... Brother might have more information on this but he's in the North. And you probably already know what happened there." Alice creased her brows.

Suyin blinked.

First time she heard Alice having a brother.

But considering her expression, it was probably a touchy subject and she took the hint not to say more about it.

"You have a brother?" Elias raised an eyebrow.

Suyin facepalmed as Alice glanced over at the doctor.

"Yes. Two actually. One left the Zenia family, the other is still there. I don't like either of them but the one who left might be useful." Alice had a stormy expression.

But if they're gunning after the Zenias, these two would probably find out in due time.

"Unfortunately, I don't know how recent this Nightmare is so he might not have any clues on it either."
Alice shrugged.

The group fell silent once more.

It's hard to trust their current sources of outside information since Karina is part of the Nightmare. What she says might be false in order to force a certain kind of action.

While Monika...

She was a whole different can of worms that Alice wasn't familiar with yet.

"Let's make the memory chip first then travel through the Abyss. I think reducing our contact with the Nightmare is top priority until we can get some better information." Alice suggested as Elias and Suyin agreed.

###

"Oh? Seems like a certain sleepy head is finally awake. Did you sleep well?" Caera glanced over with a smile.

Clutching her head, Verona let out a slight groan.

"You're back..." She mumbled, still feeling weak.

"I've been back for a while. But you... Where did you go?"

Verona furrowed her brows.

"What do you mean?"

"Your soul. It got dragged away but the tether remained with your main body. I reinforced it to make sure nothing bad would come to your body but... can't say seeing your soul being dragged away isn't concerning."

Verona looked at Caera and saw that she wasn't joking.

"I... had a dream. Of the time I was a little girl." She mumbled while Caera leaned against the wall.

"A dream? Were you observing in spectral form or something?"

"Not quite. It felt... Real. I won't ever forget that hunger." Verona shook her head.

"I was in my own body, observing my actions in the past. But... I couldn't change anything. I simply watched everything happen again. And..." Trailing off, Verona narrowed her gaze.

"I felt divinity."

Caera's ears twitched for a moment, her expression turned serious.

"Divinity?"

"Mnm." Verona nodded.

"Was it the false divinity that we had to cut off?"

"Similar but also different."

"What did it feel like? What did it look like?" Caera asked but Verona shook her head.

"It was hard to make out since I was observing my own dream. I couldn't go look for it either, it was simply 'there'."

Folding her arms, Caera was silent.

Perhaps the reason why Verona's soul was dragged away was due to the divinity they cut out.

Even if they removed it, the source and original connection couldn't be forgotten. In that regard, it was technically still an extension of Verona.

To properly cut it off...

'So I'll need to find Allura if I want to cut things cleanly. Unless the divinity is completely removed, even if I supplement her soul, she wouldn't be able to last.'

But doing so could... yield surprising rewards.

If the divinity is completely removed from Verona, it means whatever is done to the divinity wouldn't affect her. Even if it's 'killed' purified then recycled.

Verona wouldn't be harmed by it.

And with that, a plan began to form in her mind.

"My queen, I hope you can do me a favour of establishing a contract for me. In order to bring us out of Terminus, I might have to reveal things that might cause a few accidents if not 'forgotten'."

Chapter 897: Strange Gifts

Hearing Caera's request, Verona furrowed her brows.

She always knew that Caera wasn't an average person.

Even if she wasn't a 'Lord' she held power far above what a Lord should be.

During her time on the surface, Caera never really offered to fight. She was a simple observer, watching the times change. No matter the calamity, no matter the situation, she rarely moved her finger.

Only recently when she met Alice did she start making an active effort.

But despite her actions, Verona still wasn't sure about the source of Caera's power.

And now...

In order for her to bring them to safety, she has to form a contract that allows her people to forget everything they see.

"It's not impossible. But I can't guarantee how well it'll work since my missing parts of my soul." Verona sighed.

"Hmm, that's indeed an issue." Caera furrowed her brows.

"Though... If you don't mind a bit of collateral, I'll be able to establish this contract for you." She smiled.

"Collateral? From me or from the people."

"A bit of both. You see, my powers aren't exactly... Well. I suppose I can describe it as 'native' to our realms. And when you see something you're not supposed to, it'll obviously take a toll on your mental.

"I simply dampen that effect by making you forget. But for something of this scale, I'll require something bigger. When we do the ritual, I need everyone to have every sense covered. No sight, no hearing, no taste, nothing. This is the alternative to erasing memories." Caera explained.

Verona massaged her temples.

Erasing memories was easy enough with a contract but sealing all senses?

Even touch? That was going to be difficult.

"Difficult right? But not impossible. I think if we try something with Selen, we might be able to turn their perception elsewhere while I do the ritual. The choice is up to you."

Verona was silent. She's not unfamiliar with hard choices.

In order to survive the famine that once ravaged the north, she's made decisions that many would pray they never have to make.

Options they hope they would never have to think about.

"Have Selen block their perception. I'll get Frida to turn down their sense of touch and Sigurd will make for a good display to distract them, making Selen's job easier. As for everything else, we'll cover it with a contract. Make sure as there are multiple fail safes in case someone was to see whatever you're planning to do." Verona ordered as Caera nodded with a small smile.

"As you wish my queen."

###

"Hng!!! Ahh~ How long has it been since I gave my body a good stretch? Thanks Arys." Allura grinned as she took a deep breath.

Thanks to the conversion that Arys used, Allura was able to move without any hinderances.

She didn't need to smoke the medicine nor did she need to fake her relaxation. For the first time in centuries, she was feeling rather liberated.

"Don't push it. It's only a placebo effect, your body is still a complete mess. The moment you start fighting, you'll feel everything again." Karya sighed. Her face was looking a little pale from exhaustion and her mind was plagued by the fact that Allura now only had a year left.

After that year...

Not even the Abyss Lord of Life can save her.

"I know I know. It's not like I plan to fight anyone any time soon. I've already hindered Tiamat with Oblivion so the unsealing of the Old Lords should've hit a wall. Though some of them are still around so the Abyss is a bit restless." Allura chuckled, tapping her heel against the ground.

"And when you say I can't use any of my power, does that include just every day stuff as well?" She asked.

"Even your little trick of lighting up your finger for a cigarette exhausts your life force. Whatever energy you have in your body now is your timer. It won't regenerate nor can you add to it. The conversion blocks it off in order to draw out as much life force as possible.

"Every day, a little bit will seep out until the year is up." Karya nodded her head.

"So an hourglass huh?" Allura smiled.

It was only fitting as someone who's lived since the fall of Ayr to have her final moments dictated by such a concept. Time was now grains of sand falling through her fingertips.

"So much to do so little time."

"Don't get too greedy. Just do what you must and do what you want with the extra time you have left." Karya smacked Allura on the arm.

"Oh? You tagging along? How rare."

"Just being responsible for my patient. You're knocking on death's door, not knowing when the reaper will turn the handle. As a doctor and the Abyss Lord of Life, it's only right for me to observe your condition." Karya reached into her pocket and pulled out a cigarette.

"Want one?" She glanced over at Allura.

"Aren't you supposed to be a doctor? Why are you recommending cigarettes to your patient?" Allura chuckled but accepted.

"What difference does it make? You already have a terminal illness. What's a little poison going to do that the super cancer in your body hasn't done already?" Karya rolled her eyes.

"Fair point." Allura laughed.

Indeed, with the power of Famine rampaging in her body for several centuries, what's a little poison to her systems?

Just as she was about to light it up with her finger, Karya shot her a glare and tossed over a lighter.

Smiling bitterly, Allura caught it and lit up her cigarette.

"Gin, can you get in touch with some of your old contacts? I think it's time for us to look for Alice and Ria."

"About damn time. You've been doing nothing but dragging me to hell and back. If I don't see my darling granddaughter I'm actually going to go insane." Gin scratched his hair but just as he was about to walk up, Karya shot him a glare, causing him to pause mid step.

"Since when did this old b*stard have a granddaughter? Hell when did he even have time to get a son or daughter???" Karya turned to Allura.

"Heh~ are you curious?" Allura grinned.

Karya pulled back in disgust before clicking her tongue.

"Just wondering how this prick who's always working and never home even has time to plow someone and have a kid." Karya looked away and smoked her cigarette in annoyance.

"Wouldn't you know." Gin massaged his neck.

Allura smiled.

Karya ran over and dropped kicked Gin on the shoulder.

"Alright alright, let's stop that. Don't worry Arys, Gin never found anyone else after you. He picked up Ria and adopted her."

"Who the hell is worried?! I'm just questioning how the f*ck he would've achieved such a feat when this dumbass made a stupid contract back then." Karya rolled her eyes, walking away while Gin coughed violently.

"Oh? Now that's a first." Allura raised an eyebrow.

She knew the two were dating in the past but this contract, she never heard of it.

"This dumbass used a contract to prove he was dedicated to me in the past. He, in his infinite wisdom, decided to-"

"Come on Ary- Karya, let's not bring up the past." Gin tried to stop her.

"No no, this is interesting, keep going Arys."

Karya smirked at Gin before turning to Allura.

"He used a contract saying that if he went for anyone else, he'll lose his fertility. And the stupid idiot was so fast at making that contract I couldn't even stop him." Karya ranted, recalling how reckless Gin was in the past.

Just thinking about it gave her a headache.

"Ouch..." Allura looked at Gin in pity.

No wonder he chose to become old without looking for anyone else.

Even if he looked for someone else...

"F*ck off. I'm not the only stupid one." Gin let out a sigh before glaring at the two of them.

If Karya was bringing up his contract then...

"I have a list of the weirdest birthday presents I received and the one she gave me tops that f*cking list."

Karya's pupils constricted as she tried to get him to shut up but Gin dodged under her kick.

"It was the third gift she had given me."

Karya unfolded her wings as spectral light tried to bind Gin.

Flicking his finger, arcs of energy slashes at the bindings around him, dispelling them in the process.

"And in her 'romantic' gesture, she decided to-"

"SHUT UP!" Karya shouted, flickering behind Gin in an attempt to kick him into the sky but he caught her kick.

While Gin was trying to tell Karya's embarrassing secret and Karya trying to stop him, Allura was smoking her cigarette by the side enjoying the view.

"Grab the hair that would be lying around-"

"I said SHUT UP YOU OLD FART!" Karya was turning red. Sigils lit up across her body as light rays converged into several amplification circles around her.

Snapping her finger, a barrage of attacks rained down on Gin who dodged through everything.

"And make a doll using both of our hairs!" Gin finished as Karya pulled her jacket over her head while appearing behind Gin.

Hiding her expression, she kept trying to kick him while he dodged.

"That is simultaneously the cutest thing I've heard you do, yet also the most... strange." Allura forced a smile.

She couldn't quite figure out what to make of that information.

A doll made from both their hair.

If it was her...

'Nope. I see why Gin said it was the weirdest gift.' Allura shivered.

As much as she loved Kaden, having that kind of gift would most definitely raise a few questions.

Finishing her cigarette, Allura went to stop the two from blowing up Karya's house.

Chapter 898 Beyond Lightning

Looking at the two Lords acting like children, standing on either side of her, Allura couldn't help but shake her head.

On her left, the Abyss Lord of Life who is tough on the outside but soft and cute on the inside. Someone who cries out curses and glares at you but when healing, she makes sure you are reassured that everything is okay.

On her right, the Abyss Lord of Death who kills without mercy. Slaughtered an entire branch of the Eclipse cult on his own, but crumbles whenever his granddaughter requests something from him.

Though she couldn't blame them. No matter how old one gets, there's always their childish self hidden deep beneath the responsibilities.

They only get to showcase it because they're strong enough. Otherwise, they'll have to put up a front in fear of what the world would do to them.

Shaking her head, Allura brought the two in for a hug. Even though they're adults, they were still children to her.

"Come now, put a smile on that face. Karya, you haven't seen Alice yet but she's a lil cutie. Dangerous but a cutie haha." Allura laughed.

“Hah? Why would I care?” Karya furrowed her brows, trying to escape from Allura’s hug. But despite not using her energy, Allura’s strength was surprisingly high.

“Because she’ll probably copy whatever you show her if she finds it interesting enough. Did you know, she essentially copied and modified my Nova Core with one look? I did one demonstration and she used it in her next fight.” Allura smiled recalling Alice’s recklessness.

“What the f*ck. Did you warn her of the consequences?” Karya blinked her eyes in disbelief.

“Nope. How would I know she would give it a try immediately?” Allura shook her head.

“What about her body? Was there any lasting effects?”

“None. Perfectly healthy.”

Furrowing her brows, Karya folded her arms.

“So she’s good at grasping techniques. I still don’t see how I would be interested in that. I’ve seen my fair share of geniuses.”

“She’s not just good. But saying more would be spoiling things a little. Trust me when I say this, you’ll find her interesting when you see her.” Allura grinned cryptically.

Karya looked at Gin for some clues but he simply shrugged his shoulders.

###

Breathing out softly, Ria closed her eyes.

Clashing her fists together, she created a field of electricity before taking a defensive pose. The lightning slowly died away as she stood in the centre with her eyes closed.

*BANG!!!

From the distance, a bolt of metal was shot towards her, ripping the air apart but Ria remained composed.

*CRASH!!!

Shifting to the side, she dodged without issue.

With the first attack fired, subsequent attacks began to rush towards her.

Twisting her body, Ria slammed her heel against one of the bolts, crushing and melting the metal rod as lightning tore through its body, heating it up in an instant.

“Heh~” Astrelya rested her chin on her palm with an amused look.

Flicking her finger, she forcefully dragged more beasts into the surroundings and had them all fire at Ria!

“Don’t you think that’s a little unfair?” Ria noticed a change and frowned.

“What fairness? I’m just seeing how far you can go. Or... are you saying you can’t handle something like this?” Astrelya chuckled.

Despite all of their training and the dangers she’s put Ria through, Ria refused to use even a speck of the Eclipse’s power.

Instead, she started to reinvent the ways she could use her own Sigils.

By discharging electricity into the field around her, she created a field of static electricity. The prickling across her skin, the hair lifting with from the charge.

Whatever approached this field, she would be able to sense where it would land. Its speed and how fast she has to react and move out of the way. Or sometimes even how she should counter attack.

But this was simply the defensive technique she created. A foundation of sorts to her theory.

The next demonstration was going to be a test.

A test to see how far her body could push, the limits of her own potential.

She will push her 'speed' and application of power to the limit and beyond.

Astrelya paused for a moment, her smile faded. She raised her chin slightly, her eyes unable to look away from Ria.

Ria took a deep breath and slowly opened her eyes.

She could hear a crackle in her ear. A ringing that's slowly getting faster.

Lightning darting across her skin.

This numbness, the tingle in her fingertips.

She will reach it. The boundary beyond her own limits.

Ria's eyes began to shift. A gold and blue energy illuminated her iris. She wasn't in her resonance state but her body was beginning to push towards that level of power on its own.

In the first place, Resonance was supposed to be an amplification of your base power.

So when the base power reaches a level like Resonance, that amplification will naturally yield a greater result!

*BANG!!!

Metal rods shot from all directions as pushed her palms out.

Lightning began to circulate. It didn't discharge, it simply looped around her body.

In this moment, Ria has turned her own body into a living coil with energy coursing through every part of her.

As the metal rods were about to reach her, Ria shifted her palm.

A low hum echoed out as Astrelya held her breath.

Something dragged at every single rod simultaneously, all of them shifted without exception and were repelled away from Ria!

'That's right, keep your eyes on me Astrelya. I will prove to you, the possibilities that lie beyond lightning. Power of my own making. Witness and observe the moment I go beyond my limits.

'This is a demonstration, to prove that I don't need the Eclipse to reach my goals.

'So watch carefully. Engrave everything into your mind.'

Ria narrowed her eyes. She hopped into the air slightly as lightning crackled beneath her feet and the ground.

Then, in that instant, she disappeared.

“!!!” Astrelya widened her eyes. She sat up straight and her gaze darted towards one of the beasts.

*BANG!!!

In the instant that Ria had disappeared, she had punched a hole through its torso!

A clean shot with burns sealing the wound.

Snapping her finger, the beast was tossed away without ever touching Ria and she took aim with two fingers.

Lightning flashed through her body and a single attack was fired.

Activating her Sigil, Ria swapped location with her own attack before pushing her speed further.

‘I lost her again!’ Astrelya was unable to hold back her expression anymore.

The fake smile that turned into real.

This excitement pumping through her veins.

By the time she turned her gaze to the second beast, it was already missing its head and Ria moved onto the third!

Around her, fragments of her after image broke off before snapping back to her main body, enhancing her speed further!

Just because she couldn't achieve the highest level of Nyzel's lightning doesn't mean she couldn't turn it into something else!

Everything she's learned from using this technique, she'll put it to good use!

As Ria approached the fourth beast, her eyes locked onto the target.

Snapping her finger, a flicker of lightning jolted through its body as it found itself being slowly pulled towards Ria.

But that wasn't the key detail.

The key detail was that Ria's speed spiked and her body shot forth like a bullet!

*BANG!!!

Just as Ria was about to collide with the beast, she summoned her blade.

Raikiri!

*KRK!!!

The upper half was torn off without any issues as Ria shifted her body backwards.

Aiming her feet in front of her, she gritted her teeth and tried to slow herself down as much as possible.

She could feel her bones teetering on the edge of being broken. Each impact, each sudden stop, it was taking a toll on her.

However, this has also allowed her to break past a threshold of speed that she couldn't before.

Previously, she was limited by what she could handle as well as the speed of her lightning.

But now, that was no longer the case.

Her next evolution, the realm beyond her Sigils.

The power of repulsion and attraction, by using her lightning, Ria has achieved magnetism.

Through that, she eliminates the friction between herself and the ground, rushing forward and constantly increasing her speed through the application of attraction and repulsion.

As she came to a halt, Ria felt her vision darken momentarily and took several deep breaths to recover.

This was simply a proof of concept, a demonstration of her initial ideas.

The more she experiments with this weapon, the stronger she'll get.

And at a certain point, once her body can withstand the recoil from using her maximum speed, she'll be able to maintain that level of power consistently.

Just the thought of this made her tremble in excitement.

"Hm?" Ria paused, she noticed power flowing through her limbs.

Her injuries being healed.

Before she could say anything, she widened her eyes. A chill jolted down her spine and sweat began to roll down her face.

Forcing a smile, Ria glanced back.

“So it’s finally time for you to make a move?” Ria glanced at Astrelya who was giving her body a slight stretch.

“You’ve already tore apart the strongest beasts I can find in terms of defence below the rank of Lord. I’ve been patient enough waiting all this time. And now, I get to have an appetiser of the monster I created.” Astrelya grinned.

“Don’t be too excited, I’m still in the midst of development.” Ria clashed her fists together as another field of lightning was created.

Her eyes lit up and lightning coursed through her body.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

No more words were needed.

Reducing the friction between herself and the ground, Ria shot forward!

Chapter 899: A God’s Wrath

Stepping out from the aftermaths of the battle, Astrelya sat down by a boulder. There was a small smile on her face, happy but not quite satisfied yet.

Yet.

She placed her rusted sword to her left and tapped the pommel. The blade itself turned to ash, drifting off into the wind, leaving behind tiny motes of starlight that faded away.

Ria’s made great improvements in the short time she’s been trapped here.

In due time, her mastery of her new powers will make her a dangerous opponent for sure. But not quite there when it comes to her final euphoric battle.

Ria won't give her the focus and dedication.

Though... she had her methods.

For now, she'll stay patient.

Looking at her right shoulder, she couldn't help but chuckle.

In the aftermath of that battle, Ria had actually ripped through her barriers and tore off her right arm in its entirety!

The lingering lightning attacked her flesh, stopping regeneration and becoming an issue to most Lords.

Though... she wasn't an ordinary Lord.

Tilting her body slightly, a burst of energy erupted from her shoulder, erasing the lightning and thus triggering her regeneration.

From the energy, bone was first reconstructed then flesh and finally skin.

Clenching her arm a few times, Astrelya furrowed her brows.

Shaking her head, she looked at Ria who was passed out in a crater and flicked over a droplet of blood to heal her.

And while Ria was being healed, Astrelya walked away.

The starlight behind her continued to dim one by one until all starlight faded away.

In her shadow, rusted swords slowly appeared. Their blades ringing in the wind, harmonising to form a voice.

Enris's voice.

"You seem to be having a fun time. I'm jealous~" She chuckled.

"What is there to be jealous of? I thought I was going to be the one to test out Alice and you testing out dear Ria." Astrelya closed one eye with a shrug.

"That was the original plan yes. But who knew Nyer was crazier than I expected. How long has he been preparing that false divinity I wonder." Enris laughed.

"If anything, I'm jealous of you. You already made contact with Alice while I'm down here." Astreyla pouted.

"Hm~ How long do you think she realises it's me?"

"Why are you asking me? Shouldn't that be your issue if anything. Astreyla rolled her eyes.

"Why not ask you? Between the two of us, you're the one with power right now. I'm just a civilian."

After saying this, the swords began to disappear as Astrelya furrowed her brows with a sigh.

One's a civilian while the other is on a time limit.

###

Walking through the long white corridors, Gwen neither smiled nor frowned.

She simply thought this was over the top as with everything Solaris did.

Every pillar, every wall, polished to perfection.

But Solaris never set foot into this place.

No, he simply ordered his people to do so. A demonstration of their faith while he simply watched.

A slothful god who sat upon a throne he did not deserve.

A god who subjected people like her father to his whims.

Gritting her teeth, veins bulged on the back of Gwen's hand as she paused and took a deep breath to calm herself.

Thankfully, she was able to save her father. But it couldn't change the fact that he overexerted himself to create a barrier for everyone he could in the north. Those that remained anyways.

Even with her flames, the most she could do was sustain his life for now. Neither getting worse nor better.

As for her aunty... she's taken a break from her duties as well.

Having lost her eye in that battle, she needed time to readjust herself to the lack of depth.

Closing her eyes, Gwen felt the fire buried deep inside.

She could feel it burning yet she couldn't harness its full power.

If she did... Maybe she could've helped heal Shiera's eye.

But what's done is done.

And right now, Solaris wanted to meet her.

Continuing down the corridor, her footsteps echoed out until she finally reached a set of giant white and gold doors.

There were no guards needed.

Why would a God need such a futile thing?

Pushing open the door, Gwen held back her expression of disgust as she set her eyes upon the man who sat facing his city.

"Guinevere answering your summons." Gwen announced as she stood straight with her hands behind her back.

This was merely formality, a requirement for all who heeded the summons of Solaris. For a man who requested this from his people, he didn't bother acknowledging the effort yet would rage when people didn't perform as he had asked.

Solaris didn't answer and she couldn't leave until he did.

A demonstration of his authority, his control over his subjects.

He simply let her stand in silence while he overlooked his city bathed in radiant gold from the light of the sun.

This silence stretched on as seconds turned to minutes. Minutes turned to hours.

Solaris didn't speak and neither did Gwen.

It was only after the 12th hour did Solaris finally raise his hand slightly.

"What do you think?"

"Of what, your radiance?" Gwen answered, not showing any signs of fatigue despite being forced to stand in silence for 12 hours.

She simply treated this as a meditation.

"Of this city bathed in my light."

Gwen's eyelashes trembled for a moment.

"Pitiful." She answered truthfully, causing Solaris to laugh as the surrounding temperature began to rise.

"To call the city belonging to a God pitiful... aren't you afraid of divine retribution? Or has achieving the rank of Lord propelled your arrogance to divine status?" Solaris asked, resting his cheek on his fist.

"Why act when you already know of my thoughts from the time I sought you out for a bounty." Gwen's tone was neutral, sharp.

She didn't waste time joking around with Solaris, simply saying things as they are.

"Indeed. Aren't you going to thank me? For being merciful. To think I would give a precious bounty to one so devoid of faith towards me." Solaris smirked.

"It was not an act of mercy considering the fact that it was in fact a transaction."

"One that you have yet to fulfil." Solaris cut her off.

"And one where your ascension burned away the contract that we established. Now it has turned from a transaction to a gift, in such a situation, shouldn't you still show gratitude?"

Gwen was silent for a moment.

"The original intention is still that of a transaction. Even if the situation has changed, forcing you to gift this me, it does not change the original fact. Therefore, I need not give you my gratitude."

"And what if your God demands that from you?" Solaris narrowed his eyes.

The temperature at this point has started to warp the air around them yet Gwen stood unfazed, her fire protecting her from Solaris' wrath.

"Then I have no choice but to act against my own will." Gwen sighed.

"So you do know your place. To defy a God, who would walk away unscathed from such a heretical act?"

"One who defies the natural order." Gwen answered. In her mind, an image of Alice appeared and her lips curved up into a tiny smile.

Just for a split moment before returning back to normal.

"Yes. But are you such a person?" Solaris tapped his finger against the armrest.

"No." Gwen shook her head.

At least not for the time being.

But as the inheritor of the First Flame, she will become the second sun that overshadows Solaris.

With each tap of his finger, the temperature continued to rise. Each tap was done with more strength as a small cavity was formed on the armrest.

"Strip." Solaris narrowed his eyes.

Gwen furrowed her brows but made no such movements.

Solaris's tapping stopped, a flood of energy surged through the room.

"Are you pretending to be deaf or shall I destroy those ears of yours to make it a reality. Consider yourself blessed to receive my favour for tonight." Solaris glanced back coldly.

"I'll have to politely decline such an invitation your radiance. For nothing would disgust me more than having to serve you in body as a woman."

A vein bulged on Solaris's neck as killing intent flooded the room.

Gwen stood unyielding.

She would rather break than bend her knee and serve Solaris in such a manner.

"Seems like becoming a Lord has truly made you arrogant. Rejoice, I will teach you where you stand in this hierarchy."

"Then I will simply kill myself and apologise to my father in the afterlife. My body is not for you to touch. Unless you are satisfied by a corpse. If so, you are truly more depraved than I had originally thought." Gwen maintained her neutral expression despite sharp words coming out of her mouth.

"Do think yourself powerful enough to end your own life before me?"

Solaris's rage has reached its peak as he stood before her. His figure towering over her and flames roaring around him.

Gwen simply looked up in defiance.

"I will give up the chance of reincarnation if it means I don't have to endure the displeasure of feeling you violate me."

She was not going to back down, even if the man in front of her is the Sun God.

She had no back up plan, no fails safes. And even if she did, what is it going to do against a God? She'll simply put her trust in her first friend.

In the fact that Alice will no doubt avenge her should Solaris force her hand.

Gritting his teeth, Solaris glared at Gwen.

*BANG!!!

Gwen felt a wall of force slam into her as she crashed into the wall.

"Leave." Solaris ordered coldly.

"Thank you for your mercy."

Sitting back on his throne, Solaris tapped his leg in annoyance.

It was time for him to get some new Apostles and root out everything Gwen has done.

Chapter 900 Ria's Progression

"Let's see..." Rosalyn mumbled while looking at the compass.

After her brother left, she followed this compass to find where Luke and Isolde had gone. Ria's location was currently 'unknown' but according to him, she was safe for the time being.

An annoying situation but one that she couldn't do much about.

Behind her, Luke and Isolde were resting. She had administered some emergency first aid on Isolde for now but they need an actual healer.

'Cael mentioned that to the east should be there the people from the north have camped. A weak signal belonging to their queen.'

Furrowing her brows, she wondered if this dagger would be enough to drag everyone out.

He mentioned it wouldn't leave a permanent gateway...

But if there were a lot of people to transport, it might not be enough.

Regardless, it was best to do what they can.

Her brother was a man of many mysteries, lots of his advice may not seem like it at first but he's always thinking ahead.

So the fact that he mentioned the camp along with the dagger meant that there's a connection between the two. Something he wanted her to find or do when the time comes.

Looking back at the group that was still resting, Rosalyn decided to let them recover first before making the final trip to the east.

Once they're at the camp, they'll leave Terminus.

As for Ria... She'll have to trust his word that she's safe for now.

###

"Hng..." Ria groaned as she clutched her head.

The last thing she could remember was sparing against Astrelya.

She was still lacking in terms of control when it comes to her new power. Not only that, but she needed a method to make her body more durable.

Moving at those speeds, stopping then starting again, was too much for her to handle. Even after reinforcing everything with her energy.

Those speeds are above the limit that her body could comfortably handle. Once or twice was fine.

But trying to last a full fight with that was tough.

Then there was the attack she used to remove Astrelya's arm.

There were still some modifications needed to be done. Even now, she was still following Kaden's advice or slowly turning herself into a ranged fighter with a close ranged option.

Using her powers to create sniper fire from afar while constantly repositioning herself.

In a chaotic battlefield, her job might become the easiest if she could push the speed of this attack even further.

At that point, she didn't need to worry about hitting friendlies. She simply needed to aim and fire.

Even if they try to look for her, she would've repositioned herself long ago.

Though...

Ria picked up a rock from the ground next to her and reinforced it with Abyssal energy.

Once it was reinforced, she compressed and charged it with electricity.

Sparks began to jump from her fingers to the rock as it was held in place.

Taking aim at a random boulder not far from her, Ria flicked her finger.

*BANG!!!

Firing the rock at the boulder, she frowned after seeing it disintegrate before even hitting her target.

Just firing her electricity as an attack wasn't enough. She needed something with mass in order to deal the most amount of damage possible.

Otherwise, the attack will slowly dissipate the further away she is.

And to make matters worse, the mass needs to be durable enough to withstand the power of her attack as well.

“Someone’s excited. Already testing out new things after waking up?” Astrelya’s voice echoed out from above as Ria glanced up.

She was currently resting on a cloud and floated down lazily.

“What do you want?” Ria sighed.

“And here I thought I made my desires clear. Do you want me to repeat my desires?” Astrelya laughed, causing Ria to face palm.

“No thanks. Spare me the lecture. What monstrosity are you going to bring here now? And haven’t we been stuck here long enough? Can’t you just let me find a way out already?” Ria sighed.

“Nope~ As for what beast... I don’t think anything beneath the level of Lord will pose you any issues now. So instead, we’re going to hunt down some Old Lords.” Astrelya clapped her hands together.

“... Huh?” Ria blinked her eyes.

“The f*ck did I just hear?”

Surely she heard it wrong. Surely she didn’t just hear Astrelya suggest she hunt down some-

“Old Lords. Relics of the past that were sealed and forced to suffer till the end of time. Tiamat, one of the Old Lords managed to undo a lot of her bindings and started to free her brethren. Though her progress has practically slowed down to a halt.

“Maybe she got bored or something or maybe she’s occupied. Whatever the case, our focus is on taking down the Lords she has already freed.”

Ria had to stop her quickly.

“Not all beasts are the same. What makes you think I can kill Lords just because I’m struggling less against six star beasts? I basically died against Nyzel if she didn’t hold back at the end?” Ria creased her brow.

“The fact that you destroyed a portion of my arm is enough.” Astrelya reassured with a smile.

For Ria to grow more, she needed exposure on how Lords fight and their techniques. That way, she can steal their ideas and make it her own.

Of course, having a fight with a side of possibly death will make one grow to unimaginable heights.

Ria wanted to say something but stopped herself.

“Tch, fine. But can I at least get a break so I learn how to use this power a bit more? Yesterday was the first demonstration after all. A simple proof of concept.” She asked.

If she can just get one day to learn her powers, it might not become a one sided slaughter.

Astrelya rubbed her chin.

Thinking about it for a moment, she nodded her head.

“We have a bit of distance to travel anyways. Take that time to familiarise yourself with the power.”

Sighing in relief, Ria was about to stand up when she felt a hand grab her from behind and toss her onto the cloud.

“Uwahh!!!”

“B*tch please, you can travel and super speed but you’re surprised at me throwing you onto the cloud.” Astrelya yawned.

The cloud was a rather... strange object. It was both soft yet solid. Ria felt like she floating in the air, unable to position herself properly but she wasn't falling onto the ground.

"Just relax. Thinking of it as a really fluffy bed." Astrelya opened one eye.

Nodding her head, Ria slowly got used to the feeling of the cloud. After a while, she began to practice with her powers, occasionally firing projectiles into the air to test the speed and reach of her attacks.

The beasts that tried to jump after them would be dealt with by Astrelya with a lazy wave of her fingers.

She glanced back at Ria.

The focus in her eyes, the slight glimmer whenever she noticed her ideas working.

"..."

That feeling of progression and overcoming a wall.

She has long forgotten that feeling.

When she was born, Astrelya was already stronger than most. She moved faster, hit stronger.

What others took years to grasp only took her mere moments to master.

The movement of energy, the conjuring of spells.

At first, she too felt the joy of progression. That feeling when she saw something new and couldn't wait to do it herself.

Then she would show the others. Show them her progression.

Their expression of joy and disbelief, their praise.

Their attention.

But the more she showed, the more their smile faded.

People love praising a genius. Especially teachers who think the genius is a product of their efforts.

But that love disappears once they realise the truth.

That they were simply there at the right time, in the right place.

Their years of effort simply amounted to a drop in the bucket.

“Why do you keep arguing with everything I say!”

They would shout, throwing books onto the ground.

They stopped teaching the genius, they simply let her do her own thing.

“...” Astrelya’s eyelashes trembled for a moment.

And when the genius decided to gift the teacher a gift, all she got was scorn and hatred.

“Who told you to do this!”

In her naivety, she had disproven everything he spent his life working on. She had corrected every single answer, every single technique, everything without exception.

She gave him the 'correct' answers to the questions haunting him in just a single week.

She thought it would've made him happy, that it would've given him new ideas like it did with her.

But that never happened.

She saw human nature that day. The jealousy that burns in the heart whenever they see talent.

Such an ugly emotion.

But...

Even such emotions can be burned away in the fires of war.

Famine may drag things to the surface but war will make them blossom in purity.

In war, they will put everything on the line for the sake of survival.

No technique was off limits, no line too low to be crossed.

All will return to simplicity.

All will lust after the desire to survive.

That was beauty.

However...

She was not given that beauty. Battle after battle she survived. No one could light up the spark in her heart.

"There are more things out there than just battle you know? Hm~ I won't blame you for war and famine. That's just your nature isn't it?"

Astrelya closed her eyes.

'My nature huh?'

To others, that was an insult. A declaration that she brought nothing but disorder. But to her, it was an acknowledgement.

And in her greed for the feeling of satisfaction...

She lost everything.