

Abyssal A 991

Chapter 991: Faust

The moment the silver energy wrapped around his blade, Alice felt a chill run down her spine.

That energy...

That radiance...

Severance.

[Alice!] Cayla shouted.

"I KNOW!"

Gritting her teeth, Alice stabbed her sword into the ground.

Now was not the time to think about defense.

If that truly was Allura's Severance, unleashed by a Nine Sigil Abyss Lord, then no defense would be enough.

She had to overwhelm it.

Offset it.

Break it apart before it could even fully descend.

Her fist clenched.

Energy surged violently through her veins as the crimson crown above her head ignited like a dying star collapsing into itself.

*BANG!!!

Abyssal energy erupted outward.

The Crown, the Heart, and the Eye of the Abyss aligned.

Resonance!

Reality trembled.

But Alice was far from finished.

Forceful upgrades.

Stat siphoning.

Tiamat's power.

Inversion.

Void Fang.

Her personal artifact.

Bloodline release.

Every source of power she possessed ignited simultaneously.

The strange realm could barely contain it.

The hellscape around them began to collapse under the pressure alone. Rivers of lava surged violently, mountains cracked apart, and the skies above fractured like broken glass.

A calamity was unfolding.

Miki, watching from afar, could barely comprehend what she was witnessing.

Even the Leader of the Underground found it difficult to maintain an honest smile before this power.

Allura may have produced more energy with her attacks...

But was it as terrifying as this?

The man silently answered his own question.

No.

If Allura limited herself to just her authority, her attacks would not be as scary as this one.

After all, what he was witnessing, what he was sensing, went beyond simply power.

It was pure chaos.

Unnatural in all the ways yet so beautiful at the same time.

A fusion of forces that should never coexist at this level.

Abyss, Void, Eldritch, Holy.

Four dominions woven together and held within a single vessel.

Perfectly contained.

A bead of sweat slowly rolled down his temple.

For the first time since the fight began...

He realized he might have underestimated her.

He had wanted to test the girl. To see how far she could go.

But this...

This had gone far beyond anything he expected.

'Allura... What kind of monster did you raise?'

Taking a deep breath, he poured more power into the blade.

Originally he had planned to hold back, even while using Severance.

Not anymore.

Because if he held back now...

He might die!

Golden chains clasped around Alice's limbs as her shadow began to twitch violently.

Dark tendrils erupted from beneath her feet, linking with the wings of Tiamat.

Energy flowed through them like a raging storm.

Absorbed.

Condensed.

Refined.

Converted into something even denser.

Something even more destructive.

The air itself began to distort.

Alice slowly pulled her sword free from the ground.

She narrowed her eyes.

This would be her strongest attack.

No restraint.

No hesitation.

Everything she had.

Lifting her spare hand, a single slice appeared on her fingertip.

Energy condensed into her blood and a single droplet fell towards the ground.

Alice opened her mouth.

The final boost in power she needed to overcome severance.

"Second Resonance." She whispered.

That single droplet of blood fell against the ground and unfolded like a flower.

Petals of crimson spread across the ground, veins of dark energy branching outward like roots searching for soil.

Except the soil was reality itself.

A spreading darkness swallowed the hellscape beneath them.

The rivers of lava vanished first.

Consumed in the never-ending darkness.

The volcanic mountains followed next, their massive silhouettes disappearing into the tide of shadows.

The sky trembled.

Cracks spread across the heavens like fractures across a mirror.

From the cracks, darkness flowed forth.

The darkness was not empty.

It moved.

Slowly.

Like a living ocean beneath the surface of reality.

From the spreading darkness, a city surfaced.

A broken skyline clawed its way into existence, towers of scorched stone rising beneath violet flames that burned without consuming. Ash drifted through the air like snow, settling across streets drowned in crimson rivers.

Cathedrals twisted into jagged arches, their spires fused with writhing masses of flesh. Tendrils crept through shattered walls while spider lilies bloomed upon obsidian thorns that pierced the blood-soaked streets.

Gravestones rose from the river like ribs breaking through skin.

Each etched with Sigils rather than names.

Above the bleeding horizon hung a false moon.

Cracked.

Rotting.

Black ichor streamed from its wounds, and wherever the dark blood fell, fire erupted.

Then, on the reverse side. Through the reflections, the other city stood as always.

A flawless city.

Silent and lifeless.

Two worlds overlaying in one reality.

The Leader of the Underground found himself looking up at this place in awe.

How could a Second Resonance take such a form?

Reverie of Ruin: Litany of Dual Horizons.

The silent city boosted Void and Holy while this landscape of ruin bolstered Eldritch and Abyssal.

And for Alice's strongest attack, the focus of her energy shifted its effects.

For the current situation, Abyssal and Eldritch were fine!

The instant her Second Resonance revealed itself, she raised her blade and took aim.

Void Axis!

The moment she swung her blade, the world halted.

In that silence, the horizon split as a single line appeared across reality itself.

The Leader of the Underground barely managed to snap himself out of it before unleashing his own counter.

But against Alice's attack, it did little.

Everything was cleaved in half by an invisible axis that stretched beyond the boundaries of the realm.

For a moment it seemed as though the attack had missed.

But everything had already been cut.

Reality distorted and the line that severed the realm expanded.

Space ruptured, mountains collapsed. Blood rivers evaporated.

Despite being the owner of this realm, Alice realised in this exact moment that Void Axis was one that didn't care about the environment it was in.

It had only one goal.

Cut everything and anything!

Hovering in the air, the Leader of the Underground had five reflective cards held between his fingers.

Four were crumbled and withered, turning to ash while the last one was on fire.

A cut stretched across his chest as blood seeped from his wound.

"Sh*t... Well there's a second scar upon this body now." He groaned, falling towards the ground.

Alice didn't have a chance to care about the man as she was also exhausted.

The main drawback to her Second Resonance, despite its power, was the fact that it heavily drained her energy reserves. Not only that, but Void Axis had even destroyed the realm!

On top of the exhaustion, she now had to deal with the backlash of her own attack breaking her realm.

"F*cking hell... Yeah no this isn't something I can use without thought." Alice groaned, unable to feel strength in her limbs as she sprawled across the floor. Thanks to her attack, both of the realms were shattered and now they were back in the office.

The man had his back against the wall while blood continued to drip.

Just as Miki ran over to help Alice up, they heard a groan.

A sixth card was pulled out.

"Urgh... To make me burn through six backups. You're the real deal." He laughed, pulling himself up.

Despite looking better, a scar was now formed on his chest.

"No wonder Allura cashed in on some of the favour last time." He took a deep breath and pulled out a cigarette.

Lighting it up, he blew out a cloud of smoke.

Alice stood up with Miki's help.

A frown hung on her face but an idea of who he was had formed in her mind.

"I suppose it's time for some self-introductions. You can call me Faust. Abyss Lord of Mirrors."

"Alice. Alice Agnelia." Alice groaned.

Abyss Lord of Mirrors...

Direct yet also conceptual to some degree. Was his authority reflections?

Is that why her position changed and he was even able to hijack and steal certain attacks.

A troublesome opponent.

"Already thinking of ways to kill me if we fought properly. Aren't you just a joy to be around?" Faust laughed before coughing violently.

Even though he went through his backups, the damage was still heavy on his body.

"So what is it that you wanted? I have some idea but it's better to hear it from your mouth." He asked, glancing up at the portrait of Miki's father.

Alice and Miki stared at each other before nodding their heads.

"I want to reestablish the Nightingale family as a member of the Underground. I want to be able to access the resources like my father did." Miki requested as the man took a deep breath of his cigarette.

"That I can do. It's not hard." He nodded before turning to the two.

"But I wouldn't recommend that. Keeping things at a transactional level is the best thing you can do right now. You so much as dip your finger into this line of business, you won't be able to leave.

"Even if you want to. The hyenas belonging to the Underground won't let you go so easily."

Faust pointed towards the portrait.

"You don't know much about your father do you? Keeping a position in the Underground isn't as easy as you think. He simply proved himself as a key member. So for a little girl like you, I don't suggest doing the same."

He paused for a moment.

"You can't handle it."

Miki opened her mouth. She wanted to say something then gave up.

She won't say something like she could handle it.

Because the things that happen behind closed doors in the Underground, she didn't know anything about.

"However..." Faust grinned.

"We can make a different kind of agreement instead. One that won't give you the role of a higher up but allow you to use all of the services of the Underground."

Chapter 992: Deal With Faust

"We can make a different kind of agreement instead. One that won't give you the role of a higher up but allow you to use all of the services of the Underground." Faust offered with a grin.

Miki frowned.

These kinds of agreements were the most troublesome.

Organisational agreements had structure. Rules. Clear responsibilities between two parties.

Personal agreements were different.

They placed everything on a single individual.

They were built entirely on trust.

Or manipulation.

Sometimes both.

"And what exactly would you gain from this arrangement?" Miki asked.

Her earlier fearful expression now gone as this was the time for negotiation.

Faust leaned back slightly, elbows resting against the windowsill.

The light of his cigarette casting an ominous shadow against his face.

"As you know, the Underground remains as... Neutral as possible. It's how we're allowed to operate in the capacity we do. Should the Underground show favour to any specific faction or group..." He trailed off.

"Well that'll break the integrity of our organisation."

"Haven't half of you already defected to the Zenia family?" Miki narrowed her eyes.

"Yes, but that's only below the table. On the surface, everyone still thinks the Underground is a united front." Faust nodded.

He took a slow drag from his cigarette before exhaling toward the open window.

Smoke drifted lazily into the night air.

"And I don't believe I need to tell you what will happen if that illusion breaks." He shrugged. "We stop being information brokers and become just another faction. One of many."

Miki folded her arms.

"Bad for business, right?"

Faust chuckled, raising his hands.

"Very."

Finishing his cigarette, he flicked a reflective card and absorbed the trash.

"The Zenia supports understand that as well. Which is why they're operating quietly. Exposing the truth helps neither side so 'maintaining neutrality' is top priority.

"Unfortunately, this balance will not hold forever. At some point, either they will expose their hand or we will."

Faust was finally approaching the core of the issue and what he wanted from them.

"So you want someone outside the Underground to act in your place? So you can maintain neutrality?" Miki raised an eyebrow.

Faust smiled.

"Not quite. I want someone the world can believe in. Someone the people of Extalia can look up to.

"A hero." Faust revealed.

Miki froze.

"A rising figure who protects cities, hunts Nightmares and put an end to this calamity. Someone who will stabilise this region. Someone to rally behind when the situation turns dire.

"But it can't be just anyone. Someone recognisable. The young lady of the Nightingale family for example. Your background... is perfect for this kind of thing is it not? Your father died during this disaster and became your motivation to step up to the mantle." Faust laughed.

"Your father has cultivated quite a good impression among the people of Extalia. I'm sure his daughter will be received well. And while everyone is busy watching the hero..."

Faust clapped his hands together.

"The Underground remains neutral while we clean out the trash."

Miki dwelled on those words.

It's as Faust said. Her background would certainly make this easier.

"Do this for me, and you gain unrestricted access to the Underground's network. Whatever you need, we'll provide. Information, routes, brokers across multiple cities.

"Anything and everything the Underground can provide."

Before he could continue, Miki shot him a glare.

"In return, I become the spearhead. The one's moving openly and has all of my actions tracked. The one everyone blames if things go wrong, the scapegoat. If I succeed, I still owe you a debt. But if I fail, you can wipe your hands clean.

"Is that what you want?"

Faust blinked his eyes before breaking out into a loud laugh.

"Hah! Alright, you catch on quick." He grinned. "You really are your father's daughter."

"If you succeed, you won't owe me a debt. I'm not about exploit my friend's daughter."

Miki's smile twitched.

"Oh but you're perfectly happy with me taking the fall if I fail?"

Faust shrugged his shoulders.

"That's just the nature of being a Hero. When things go well, people praise your name. But if things go wrong, they need someone to blame. And the Hero is simply the easiest target."

Miki exhaled through her nose.

She knew it all too well. It's the same thing she's been telling Alice.

Not only that, but she also saw what had happened to Erwen.

"Can't I fill in that role? If people hate me, I don't really care." Alice spoke up.

She knew how much Miki disliked the idea so forcing her to be a Hero felt a little cruel.

"If you were literally anyone else, I might've accepted that offer. But..." Faust smiled helplessly.

"Zenja."

"Right, Zenja." Alice shrugged.

There's no denying that she was part of the Zenja family in the past. Their treasured daughter.

So if she acts the way she does, not caring about killing and so on, they could use it as an excuse to link her to the Zenja name and disregard everything she's done.

"You would be a terrible hero." Faust said bluntly.

Alice raised an eyebrow.

"That's rude."

"But you're not denying it." Faust laughed, causing Alice to grumble.

"So, what will it be? Will you take on the mantle of a Hero?" Faust turned to Miki.

To accept or not to accept.

Miki lowered her gaze slightly.

Hero.

The word alone left a bitter taste in her mouth.

"This is quite the price for your services." She smiled bitterly.

"Still cheaper than what it would be to remain as a member. I told you didn't I? You can't handle it."
Faust chuckled.

"And I'm guessing I can't simply hire you either." Miki sighed.

"Not unless you want the Zenia family to also know. As disappointing as it is, we are still in the process of figuring out who defected." Faust shrugged.

Trying to find the traitors without destroying everything they've built and halting the operations was difficult.

"How long do I have to think about it?"

"As long as you need. Though preferably not too long considering the way things are unfolding.

"However, I can help you sort out some of the things you need for now. Information on beasts and establishing contact with the other cities right? That's easy enough to do." Faust chuckled. "I can make sure they don't know about the beasts you want to track. But contact between cities will be a bit harder to hide."

"This will be all above table. I sincerely hope you don't say something like you'll do this for free." Miki sighed.

"Of course. This is a transaction. Once accepted, there will be no take backs." Faust reassured with a grin.

After a slight pause, Miki finally nodded her head.

"I'll send someone to meet up with your assistant later. What you require and the payment for it will be given to her." Faust clapped his hands.

"Now then, I believe it's time for me to clear out some debts." He turned his gaze to Alice.

She was still recovering from using her Second Resonance.

Sensing his gaze, she immediately raised her guard.

"Now now, no need to be so scared of me. If I kill you, do you think Allura will leave me alone?" Faust rolled his eyes.

"I owe Allura big time. And I think it's time for me to clear it out before she asks me to do something ridiculous."

"And what makes you think I'll be the one to cash it in? What if I reject it?" Alice narrowed her eyes.

"Because it's not something Allura would tell you. She will hide it until it's too late. But how about I give you a freebie first?" Faust smiled. "Allura is in Extalia and she's travelling towards the capital."

Alice's pupil trembled.

Allura is... In Extalia?

Memories appeared in her mind.

Their last farewell as she travelled with Ria.

How long has it been? How many days, weeks, months has it been since she last felt Allura's warmth?

The last head pat, the last hug.

How long... has she last heard her voice?

While she did see Allura in the memory... It wasn't quite the same.

It wasn't the same Allura who brought her out of the colosseum. Not the same Allura who comforted her when she felt weak.

Not the same Allura who taught her how to live.

Not the same Allura who gave her the surname Agnelia.

[Seems like our next destination is set.] Cayla smiled as Alice nodded her head.

She wanted to see Allura again.

She wanted to show Allura how strong she's gotten.

She wanted to tell Allura about the journey, about the friends she made.

To show her how much she's grown and receive her praise for it.

Alice wanted to throw herself into Allura's embrace, to get rid of the confident tough mask she's been keeping this entire time.

However...

There was one thing that was bothering her.

"What do you mean by something Allura wouldn't tell me?" Alice held back her emotions and asked coldly.

"Exactly what it sounds like. Call it a guardian's responsibility, I suppose. She doesn't want a kid she's looking after to learn of her current condition." Faust chuckled.

Alice opened her mouth before closing it.

This was Allura's favour with Faust.

Not something she should be taking, especially if Faust was this desperate to get rid of it.

If Allura was saving it, then it's clear that this was more than just a verbal agreement.

A binding one perhaps.

A contract.

And for a Nine Sigil Lord, that final favour could achieve something no money can buy.

Since that was the case...

Alice leaned forward, resting her chin on her knuckles.

"Why don't we do an exchange instead of using Allura's favour?" Alice smiled.

Faust let out a mocking laugh.

"And what kind of exchange could be equal to a fav-"

"Blood that can reject the Abyss, burn it away and even prevent others from using Sigil powers." Alice interrupted.

Faust's laugh was cut off.

His smile disappeared, and he stared at Alice dead in the eyes.

The two of them entered a staring competition.

After a brief pause, Faust narrowed his eyes.

There was no sign of falsehood in Alice's expression. She was telling the truth...

In her possession was blood that could completely overturn the foundation of their world...

Chapter 993: Faust's Offer

Abyssal energy.

The very foundation of their world.

It was the source of Sigils, the force that allowed Hunters to transcend the limits of humanity. With it, they could flatten mountains, tear through dimensions, and stand at the threshold of godhood.

But its influence did not end there.

Abyssal energy, and by extension Abyssal blood, could be refined into blood vials. Elixirs capable of preserving life... or extinguishing it just as easily, depending on the will of the one who wielded them.

It fueled their evolution.

Abyssal engineering had pushed technology beyond what should have been possible, fusing the eldritch with the mechanical in ways that reshaped entire civilizations.

Weapons that defied physics.

Cities that sustained themselves.

Networks that connected distant regions.

All of it traced back to the Abyss.

Everything they had built...

Everything they relied on...

Every system that governed their strength and survival...

All of it stood upon this single, dangerous foundation.

And yet...

The girl standing before him spoke of blood that could shatter it.

Faust leaned back slightly.

For a moment, he said nothing.

His hand rose to his face, fingers pressing against his eyes as he let out a slow breath.

"Ha..."

It wasn't exhaustion.

Not quite.

It was him trying to fully digest what Alice was telling him right now.

The deliberate pause of a man forcing himself to process something that did not fit within the logic he had spent his entire life understanding.

To slow his thoughts.

To reconsider.

To rebuild his assumptions from the ground up.

His fingers dragged down his face slowly.

And when his eyes opened...

They locked onto Alice.

"Is that what you used earlier?" He tilted his head slightly, gaze narrowing as he studied her. "When we were fighting. I was wondering why my reinforcement was being burned away."

Alice gave a small nod.

Miki's brows furrowed immediately.

This was the first she had heard of it, and the implications alone were enough to make her uneasy.

A power that could bypass reinforcement so cleanly... that wasn't something minor. Not something you simply revealed in passing.

At this point, Alice didn't bother hiding it.

There was no real reason to.

If this was the price needed to secure the full cooperation of the Underground, then it was a worthwhile trade. Secrets like this were never meant to stay hidden forever anyway.

"Yep." She smiled faintly, almost casually. "This blood burns anything related to the Abyss."

Her eyes narrowed just a little.

"Why don't we test it?"

With a simple flick of her finger, a droplet of blood condensed beside her.

Faust raised an eyebrow, interest clearly piqued now.

"It's an ability?" He muttered, more to himself than anyone else. "What kind of beast did you kill to obtain something like that?"

His thoughts were already moving ahead.

If this came from a specific Abyssal entity... if it could be traced and replicated...

It could become the countermeasure to everything that is the Abyss.

Something that could fundamentally threaten the very system Hunters relied on.

"It's half of an ability. Can't tell you everything without you agreeing to the exchange now can I?" Alice chuckled.

Faust nodded.

With a small motion of his hand, another reflective card formed between his fingers, stable and perfectly linked to him.

Alice didn't hesitate, she commanded the droplet to consume that card.

Violet flames spread instantly as it relentlessly burned through the Lord's power.

Faust's connection to the construct faltered, trying its best to hold on.

But in the end...

It snapped.

The card dissolved into nothing.

He didn't speak.

He simply stared at the empty space, his mind already simulating the possibilities. Making notes on all the assumptions that had just been proven wrong with this singular demonstration.

"...Interesting." He muttered.

Alice smiled slightly.

"That was just a small example."

She brought her hands together.

"Let's try something a little more noticeable."

A faint mist began to spread through the room.

At first, it was barely noticeable. Just a thin layer of crimson drifting through the air, light enough to ignore.

Then the feeling set in.

"!!!"

Both Miki and Faust reacted at the same time.

Something was wrong.

Not externally.

Internally.

Their bodies felt... off.

Faust's eyes narrowed as he immediately focused on his reinforcement. It was fading away, corroded by the blood mist.

The longer he stayed in this area, the less he could use his Abyssal energy.

Miki lifted her hand instinctively, trying to summon her spear.

It took more effort than usual to summon. Sluggish, inefficient.

The time it took to summon the spear could be fatal if they were in a battle.

Her pupils trembled slightly.

"What... is this..." She muttered, her voice unsteady despite herself.

A cold fear began to take root in her chest, subtle at first, but impossible to ignore once it settled in.

For the first time, she felt genuine fear toward Alice.

Not the kind born from strength alone, nor the caution one held toward a dangerous ally, but something deeper. It felt as though the person standing beside her was no longer entirely human.

There was something foreign about her presence.

Something that didn't belong.

Something that rejected every law established in their world.

"It's poison. If I want to completely shut down Abyss energy I can. But~" Alice smiled helplessly. "It prevents me from using it as well. At least with this, I make things harder while also being able to retain my skills."

Miki swallowed, her gaze fixed on the faint mist lingering in the air.

That wasn't reassuring.

Not even close.

Snapping her finger, Alice created an illusion using the mist.

It wasn't a violent distortion nor did it carry a sense of the space tearing apart and reforming.

One blink they were in the office. After another, they found themselves sitting around a lavish room filled with decorations and a table between them.

Faust frowned.

It wasn't a realm transfer like the one he does.

Rather...

"A hallucination?"

"Yep." Alice chuckled, tilting her head slightly. "Once you inhale the blood, I can layer a hallucination directly onto your perception. The more you breathe in, the deeper it sets in, and the harder it becomes to break out."

"And because this mist negates Abyssal energy to some degree, you can't just brute force your way out easily with your Sigils either."

Cold sweat rolled down Faust's back as he was beginning to realise how absurd this blood was now.

His reinforcement was weakening, His connection to his faltered. Unstable.

As though something fundamental within his body was being tampered with at its roots.

On top of that, his perception couldn't be trusted anymore either.

If they were in a life or death fight and Alice was to use this ability... could he differentiate reality to hallucination? What if she simply made him think he was fighting her?

What if...

She was slowly creeping up from behind, ready to take his head?

Every sense he relied on was now questionable.

A slow breath left his lips.

"How exactly will you be giving me this blood? Since you want to exchange this instead of using Allura's favour, I'm sure you understand that I would need a decent amount of it."

This was now a negotiation.

Alice didn't answer immediately.

She leaned back and crossed her legs.

The illusion around them breaking apart as they were returned to the office.

"First, I want you to state properly what you want. This blood is rather special after all. I've given you a taste of what it can do, it's your turn to show some sincerity." Alice smiled.

Faust reached into his pocket, pulling out another cigarette.

This was more of a selfish wish rather than something for the Underground.

Faust wanted access to this blood for personal reasons. For a sense of safety perhaps.

What if he could turn this blood into defensive equipment? Something that can save his life?

For that kind of exchange, he'll need it for research.

And because of that... he'll need plenty of it.

Question now was how does he acquire it?

With how potent this blood is, Allura's favour might not even be enough anymore.

Not for what he wanted out of it anyways.

After a pause, Faust finally opened his mouth.

"I will tell you everything I know about Allura, her current condition. The movement of Lords around her and perhaps even targeting her. The last known location of Kaden and the one he was travelling with. Hidden factions moving in the shadows. Full access to the Underground's services with no cost." He listed out.

But he was far from done.

"Equipment, consumables, even plots of land if you desire and other things that can be bought with money will all be discounted heavily for you. If there are materials that can't be gotten normally, I will personally seek them out and claim them if possible."

Faust took a deep breath.

"Personnel can be arranged as well. Guards, escorts, specialists. If necessary, I can call in old favours owed to me by Lords both within and beyond Extalia. Should you require their assistance, you need only ask.

"Maps of zones in the Abyss classified as unexplored, secret treasures and even personal artifacts not created by the Zenias.

"Not the false ones. True artifacts. This is what I can offer for full access to that blood. Using it for research purposes and perhaps even crafting gear if needed as well as using it to counter Abyssal energy."

Alice listened silently.

All of this for full access to her blood.

She tapped her finger, deliberating over what should be accepted and what shouldn't.

And after a brief pause, she came to a conclusion.

Chapter 994 Conditions For The Offer

"First of all, I cannot give you full access to that blood." Alice crossed her legs, narrowing her eyes at the Lord who sat in front of her. "I'm sure you understand why."

"Even if you are someone Allura once chose to grant a favour to, that was the past." She tilted her head ever so slightly, her gaze never leaving his. "Not the present. Certainly not the future. People change. Circumstances change. Intentions change. That is not something even you can deny."

"And to hand something of this... nature to you, of all people..." Alice lifted her chin.

"A Nine Sigil Lord."

"!!!" Faust snapped his gaze up.

How did she know?

He had revealed nothing. Not a single technique, not a single action, not even a fragment of aura that should have exposed him. He had been meticulous, restrained to the point of absurdity. There was no display, no slip, no evidence that should have allowed her to make that claim so casually.

At most, she should've only guessed his rank.

However... She didn't guess. She wasn't probing. She was stating a fact.

Her tone held no uncertainty, no bluff.

"To give someone who stands at the pinnacle this kind of power... Full access no less. Don't you think that would be a little excessive?"

Her eyes locked onto his.

Faust had stood before monsters, monarchs of old and ancient Lords who instilled fear into all who appeared before them. Yet the pressure Alice was giving off was unlike any of them.

And she was only a Six Sigil Hunter at that. A strange one who could use multiple abilities beyond six, yet lacked the aura of a Lord.

Someone who transcended that level of power despite not having reached it.

The thought itself felt absurd but it was with good reason.

That final attack of hers had not been something a mere Six Sigil Hunter should have possessed.

Even now, recalling it sent a faint chill through him.

If he didn't have his fail-safes... Faust didn't want to imagine what kind of fate would have awaited him had that attack truly landed.

"However." Alice continued. "That doesn't mean I won't give you access. Rather than full access, you'll be getting partial access. With conditions."

Faust's eyelid twitched faintly as he gestured for her to continue.

Alice lifted a finger.

"First. You'll receive a fixed allotment of this blood per month. No more. No less. It will be full concentration. No dilution. No tricks. So you don't have to worry."

She kept her gaze on him.

"You won't be restricted in quality. Only in quantity."

A second finger rose.

"Second. You are allowed to research the blood, refine it and integrate it into artifacts, consumables and defensive tools if you wish. I won't stop you from doing that."

Her eyes narrowed.

"But you cannot replicate, synthesize or mass produce it at the cost of civilians."

That was the key point.

If Faust got carried away and started using people as fuel for replication, then this deal would be no different from what the Zenia family had done. The method would change, but the result would remain the same.

Alice had no intention of allowing that.

"If your methods cross that line, the contract ends immediately."

A third finger.

"Third. Anyone you share this blood with will be subjected to the same conditions. No exceptions. You are responsible for enforcing that."

"If they breach it, then the fault falls on you. The contract is void. And all remaining blood is to be returned."

She lowered her hand slowly.

"This isn't something you get to spread freely. You control it properly. Or you lose access to it entirely. The risks of this blood spreading to unknown parties... I'm sure you can imagine the consequences."

Faust exhaled slowly.

Indeed. Knowledge about this blood should be kept to close ones that have his trust.

His eyes lingered on Alice. He contemplated the conditions that she proposed, the risks and the responsibilities that he has to fulfil if he wanted access to the blood.

Not only that, but it was only partial access too.

"You left me with very little room to work with." Faust sighed, resting his chin on his knuckles.

Alice simply shrugged.

"That was intentional. I left you very little room but it's also plenty for someone like you to work with right? And I'm sure you know exactly why I put those conditions in place."

Faust scratched his hair in annoyance before letting out a deep sigh.

"I do." He relented.

Of course he understood.

Every condition she stated was to make sure things remain contained. To ensure that he doesn't cross certain lines from the lust for power.

The easiest paths that required him to perform heinous deeds will be cut off.

No civilian harvesting. No quiet replication through disposable lives.

No careless circulation of this blood through subordinates and allies until it become impossible to track.

Tapping his fingers, Faust considered the proposal carefully.

"How much will I receive every month?"

"Depends on what you want to do with it. Enough to be used, not enough to be indulged and exploited." Alice waved her hand.

"You realise, that tells me f*ck all right?" Faust's smile twitched.

Alice let out a chuckle before nodding.

"Indeed. Let's do..." She paused before smiling.

"Six vials per month. That should be plenty to experiment with and be used for equipment if you wish." She offered.

"Six..." Faust mumbled.

It couldn't be called low, but it wasn't exactly a lot either.

Especially when they consider it to be on a per month basis.

"Why not eight? Two per week." Faust argued for but Alice shook her head.

"Who knows how much of your services I will use in the end. But the benefits of this blood is instant, don't you agree?"

Faust clicked his tongue.

"Yes but it's also too low. For proper research and development, six a month is hardly enough. Especially if experiments fail." He narrowed his eyes.

"You're the Leader of the Underground." Alice interrupted. "Are you telling me you need that much room for trial and error?"

"Rather than trial and error, it's more for safety precautions. Since your blood can negate Abyssal energy, it's true nature is most definitely far from normal. I'd even argue that it's probably more akin to a poison than some magical blood." Faust leaned back.

"To ensure a safe working environment for my employees who will be handling this blood, I need to know what works and what doesn't. And that requires blood to be used up, yes?"

Alice folded her arms.

His instincts were spot on.

Her blood can be considered to be a poison far more potent than the Abyss Waters which people are so afraid of. A concentrated mass of side effects and Abyss Blood all condensing inside her body.

Accidental exposure and allowing her blood to enter the body of those unprepared would be... rather catastrophic.

Even if they treat it early like Abyss Waters, the victim will suffer from side effects till the end unless she did something about it.

So having safety nets in place was important when dealing with her blood.

Faust caught that slight shift in her eyes.

"I'm not asking for eight so I can waste it or indulge in it." He clarified.

"I'm asking for eight because if this goes wrong, we're not just losing a sample. We could be losing one of my employees."

"Eight is still quite a lot." Alice exhaled slowly. "But I suppose your words do hold some merit. So fine, eight vials of concentrated blood per month. Treat it as a heavily concentrated Abyss blood that can corrupt you with the wrong move. Use it carefully." Alice nodded.

Snapping his fingers, Faust brought out a Law of Agreement and wrote down the conditions.

Alice read through it carefully, making sure everything matched up perfectly. No loopholes, no exploits.

She also had Cayla double check the contract to make sure it was fine.

Only after Cayla gave the greenlight did Alice finally sign it and the contract was finalised.

Looking at the contract, Faust nodded in satisfaction and put it away carefully while Alice did the same.

"With that out of the way, I suppose I should give you the blood first before we talk about the stuff regarding Allura." Alice shrugged.

Opening her pouch, she rummaged around before pulling out an Abyss Blood extractor.

"An extractor? I thought you summoned the blood with an ability?" Faust asked, confused by her actions.

"I do. But I told you full concentration right? Using my Sigil ability dilutes the blood somewhat. Its effects are reduced." Alice explained, pulling out eight empty vials.

Faust looked around the office with a concerned expression.

Since Alice was using an extractor, it meant she needed to bring out the source of the blood. And with her needing to pull eight vials worth, the source must be rather big.

Was this room even enough?

He watched her carefully. She pulled out a needle.

Was she about to summon the beast?

Where's the portal?

Alice stuck the needle into her own arm.

". . ." Faust blinked.

Miki blinked.

Blood started to flow through the tubes as it was siphoned into the vials.

"What?" Alice frowned, seeing the two stare at her so intently.

"The blood is... yours?" Faust asked hesitantly.

"Well... yeah. Why else would I be drawing out my own blood?" Alice rolled her eyes.

But this only caused more questions to appear in Faust's mind.

If this blood cancels Abyssal energy... how the f*ck was she using it???

How was she able to use Sigils at all when this is coursing through her veins?

But that didn't matter for now. There was a slight concern he has with the blood flowing through the tubes.

"Say..." Faust opened his mouth.

"Hm?"

"Do you drink a lot?" He asked.

Alice paused.

"...Why do you ask?"

"Your blood is a little thin. Could you maybe... drink less so your blood isn't so thin?"

". . ."

Alice didn't know how to respond...

Chapter 995: Dead Man Walking

After giving Faust the eight vials of blood, Alice couldn't help but grumble in annoyance.

How dare he tell her to drink less.

Sure alcohol may have thinned out her blood a little but it's not to the level where it would reduce the potency.

"My side of the agreement is done now. I believe it's time for you to fulfil your end of the bargain." Alice sighed, gesturing with her hand.

Faust stored the vials away and nodded with his head.

"As mentioned earlier, Allura has been travelling towards the Capital. With her are two Lords, one of which you should be familiar with."

Reaching into his pocket, Faust took out two pictures of the people travelling with Allura.

The quality wasn't fantastic but Alice recognised one to be Gin.

"One is the Abyss Lord of Death, Gin. The other, is someone who has history with the two of them but chose to seclude herself. The Abyss Lord of Life, Karya."

Alice creased her brows.

"In the past, I kept up with how Allura was doing in order to make up for the debt I owe her. But I never got the chance to cash it out completely. What I can tell you is that Karya only stayed with Allura in the past to keep her alive." Faust exhaled slowly.

"So the fact that she has reappeared, sticking so close next to Allura at that, means her time is coming to an end.

"Out of all of the Lords, only Karya can extend life forcefully."

". . ."

[Alice...] Cayla frowned.

Alice closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

It didn't take a genius to figure out why Allura was now travelling with the Lord of Life.

Her time was running out.

While she didn't know what Allura has been going through since the time they've been away, one key danger remains.

Famine.

They needed to capture Famine in order to dispel the curse over Allura.

Once that was done, she'll be able to finally recover.

"Anything else?" Alice turned to Faust who nodded his head.

"These are all the reports I have. A medical history if you will. You can see how Allura's condition has deteriorated. With... the most recent report I got, even if it's quite old, you can see how severe the situation has become."

Alice's fingers trembled.

Faust placed a stack of papers on the table.

The more she read, the worse her expression became.

While she didn't know the full extent of the damage, what little she gleaned from the reports told her one thing.

Dead man walking.

That's the best way they could describe Allura.

"Give me a map of their routes. I'm going to look for Allura." Alice frowned.

While the danger of Grand Cathia wasn't over... Alice trusted Miki to handle it herself.

"It's a little outdated. But wouldn't it be better to simply meet her at the capital?" Faust asked curiously but Alice shook her head.

Simply waiting at the Capital wasn't going to be enough. Who knows what kind of danger they might meet on their way there?

For her to have a peace of mind, Alice wanted to retrace Allura's path and catch up as fast as possible.

However, using her usual travel route might be difficult since Suyin hasn't fully stabilized the device yet.

If she jumps through realms in quick succession, the constant adjustment of her memories may lead to bigger issues than expected.

"I'll have it prepared for you then. In the meantime, I'll assign a handler just for you. You can contact them for any requests you have specifically for the Underground." Faust smiled.

There was much for him to do, in short time at that.

Once everything was sorted out, Faust wave them a slight wave before disappearing from where he was sitting a moment ago.

Alice let out a slight sigh and leaned back.

'To think Allura's body had deteriorated to this extent...'

"Leave the things happening in Grand Cathia to me. Allura... she's like a mother to you right?" Miki smiled as she stood up.

"Mnm. She saved my life and gave it meaning." Alice nodded.

It wasn't hard for Miki to piece together the clues.

Alice disappearing from public view as a child, coming back with this strange blood.

The Zenia's sudden production of Abyss Blood that would've taken countless experimentations.

While she didn't know Alice's exact role, she was definitely involved. And that involvement was the source of her dislike towards the family.

Once that was established, Alice's motivations became clear.

Miki realised that Faust must've figured it out as well, which is why he's going to give her a handler.

That way, Alice could also help root out the Zenia spies in the Underground.

"We'll make Grand Cathia our base of operations for now. Suyin needs the space to experiment after all. Not only that, but she can also serve as an intermediary between us." Alice suggested.

These were going to be her final preparations before leaving Grand Cathia.

###

Caera frowned.

This development... she had not foreseen it.

She had believed they still had time. Enough to prepare, enough to stabilize the situation, especially now that Selen had finally ascended and claimed her title as a Lord.

That alone should have shifted the balance.

It should have brought relief.

Hope.

Instead, when they returned, what awaited them was neither celebration nor reassurance.

It was unease.

Something was wrong.

In the short time they had been away, the Queen's condition had deteriorated far beyond expectations. This was no longer a matter of lingering injuries or delayed recovery.

Rot and decay now crawled across her body.

Darkened veins crept beneath her skin...

It was alive.

Feeding off her flesh, burrowing deeper with each meal.

But the worst part... was the fact that it wasn't stopping.

Everyone tried their best to purge the Queen's body of these parasites yet they refused to disappear.

Cut one off and two more take its place.

They were multiplying at an astonishing pace.

Something has taken root inside the Queen's body, something heinous.

Caera creased her brows. Corruption from whatever was stealing her soul away perhaps.

Just as Caera was about to cut away a few parts that were spreading too fast, she noticed something strange.

The flesh was twitching.

Ever so slightly...

But it definitely twitched.

An eye opened.

Caera froze.

It wasn't a human eye nor was it that of a beast. The eye itself wasn't even properly formed, as though something hastily constructed to mimic the shape of an eye.

It peeled open the Queen's flesh, glancing at everyone in the room.

Its pupils dilating, contracting, carving their appearances to memory perhaps.

Then another opened.

And another.

Across her shoulder, her collar bone.

Some blinked fast, some blinked slow. But all of the eyes were watching.

This lasted for a short moment but no one in the room could forget the sight.

"I think it's best we get Verona out of terminus first and foremost." Sigurd was the one who spoke first.

They had delayed their escape since Caera wanted Selen to get her title.

Now that it's been achieved, he didn't want what remains of the North to stay any longer.

"Mnm. I suppose the main question I need to ask you now is where do you want to exit? There's quite a few of us after all. The state of the North is unknown but it might still be tainted with the false divinity." Caera folded her arms.

This time, Rosalyn was the one to speak up.

"There are a few port cities we can go to. Even the East shouldn't be too much of an issue."

After discussing the potential locations, Caera came to a conclusion. They'll exit near the East so that the people can get some help from the healers there.

With how many injured they have, the only one who can and most likely to accommodate them would be Suyin, someone Alice is familiar with.

They felt a little guilty, trying to take advantage of their connection but not much else can be done about it for now.

Of course, they could also compensate for the trouble caused.

Not only with new research but also having a workshop prepared for Sigurd to start crafting some gear.

"Alright, we know what we have to do now. Let's start moving everyone to the teleport platform and I'll sort out the rest." Caera instructed.

It was finally time for them to leave this godforsaken place.

And hopefully, doing so would relieve the ailments troubling Verona.

Though the chances of that happening was unlikely.

###

"PLEASE!" Ria screamed, lightning crashing around her as she slams her fist into the air next to her.

A streak of lightning cutting the world in half flashed as blood spattered across the air.

"I BEG OF YOU!" She continued, ducking under a myriad of strikes before countering with her own.

"CAN YOU STOP!"

Jumping into the air, Ria wanted to use her second Resonance when her enemies countered by doing the same, effectively shutting down her personal realm.

With no other choice, she artificially created one before flickering through the lightning.

Making sure to never stay in one spot.

"BRINGING MORE LORDS! I CAN'T TAKE IT!!!" Her bloodshot eyes glared at the woman hovering on her cloud with a lazy yawn.

"If I feel like it." Astrelya cleaned her nails.

She watched as Ria fought with her life on the line against the Lords of the Abyss. They weren't exceptionally strong but for Ria, each one represented path towards death.

The moment her focus falters even a little, she'll die.

And with her being so focused on surviving, she hadn't noticed the shift in Astrelya's expression.

Despite seeing Ria fight well, despite knowing that she was getting stronger...

Astrelya pressed her hand across her chest.

". . ."

'Since when did I find battle so...'

Meaningless...

Her eyelids drooped as unknown thoughts flashed through her mind.

For a member of the Eclipse, especially herself...

This was akin to a death sentence.

Chapter 996: Astrelya's Boredom

Ria collapsed onto the ground.

No strength left in her limbs. How many Lords was it now?

They didn't hold freakish abilities like Mara but they weren't easy to deal with either.

All of them had defences beyond ordinary levels. So much so that if Ria wanted to even scratch them, she needed to put her all into the battle.

"You've certainly matured. Quite adamant on not using the Eclipse huh?" Astrelya rested her chin on her palm. Hearing the mention of Eclipse, Ria gnashed her teeth in frustration.

"Please stop mentioning it since my answer will always be the same. No, I'm not using it!"

Astrelya stared at the girl in silence.

"Even if you're about to die?"

Ria opened her mouth but paused. Lying to Astrelya didn't work.

In the times they've been talking with one another, Ria understood that Astrelya could read people very well. Freakishly well.

It felt close to mind-reading but at the same time not quite.

In another sense, perhaps it's telling whether or not someone is truthful to themselves or not.

"I don't know. It depends on the situation. But what I do know is that it's the last thing I'll consider." Ria replied truthfully.

She stared at the Abyss Lord of Stars, already calculating ways to counter her arguments.

Yet Astrelya didn't reply the way she thought she would.

Instead, she simply rolled over on her cloud.

"You're boring. You've made me feel bored." Astrelya finally spoke as Ria raised an eyebrow.

"Me? I made you bored? Who the hell decided to kidnap me!?"

Why was it suddenly her fault now???

"You're boring." Astrelya pouted in annoyance.

Ria couldn't believe what she was seeing.

Astrelya, Lord of Stars, was pouting like a child because she felt...

Bored???

"If you're bored then why don't you let me go now? Surely you can do that right?" Ria's smile twitched.

Astrelya flipped over one more and stared at Ria.

"No."

"Why not?!?!" Ria sat up in frustration before flinching from pain.

"You bored me. So you have to make things right again." Astrelya sighed in frustration.

How could she of all people lost her desire for chaos? How could she feel numbed by the sight of fighting?

It was impossible.

Yet it happened.

She found herself receiving no joy from such sights.

That along has left Astrelya more confused than anything in the world.

Ria wanted to counter but what could she say? Unless she could beat Astrelya, she could only play along with the Lord.

"Tch, what do you want to do then?" Ria asked.

Astrelya thought about it for a moment before shaking her head.

"I don't know. You decide."

Now that she found no joy in seeing people fight, it felt as though she had just lost her path.

All she could do is stumble around in this darkness.

Ria scratched her hair.

"Then... Why don't you help me track down a strong Lord for my seventh Sigil." She suggested.

"Will it be amusing?"

". . . I certainly hope so. Since you've been enjoying yourself with the sight of my struggles, this one will probably entertain you." Ria's smile twitched.

She wasn't sure what Astrelya was going through but this was the perfect opportunity for her to do a proper Hunt in the depths of the Abyss.

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

Reaching down, she grabbed Ria by the back of the neck and tossed it onto the cloud.

For Ria to find something she wanted to Hunt, they needed a natural communion point.

With how many Lord's she's defeated till now, their target will surely be something impressive.

". . . Hm?" Astrelya frowned, clenching her fist a few times.

'So it's begun...' She thought to herself.

She could feel it... she was desynchronising with the Eclipse.

If she sought neither war nor famine, what else is left for her?

###

A garden stretched endlessly beneath a silent sky, untouched by time.

Every petal, every leaf, every blade of grass suspended in a single unchanging moment.

No wind stirred the branches. No insects hummed.

A perfect garden with no signs of life.

Above, a pale moon could be seen casting a soft, silvery glow that bathed the area in luminescence.

Threads of light drifted through the air like strands of silk, weaving lazily between trees and arching over pathways.

Beneath everything, a narrow river flowed through the garden. The ripples upon the surface frozen as with everything else in this place.

It reflected everything in the garden with perfect clarity. The moon. The drifting strands of light. The endless rows of flowers drinking in its glow as though time itself had forgotten to move forward.

And amidst all of this...

A single woman rested.

Her figure lay near the edge of the river, untouched by the world around her, as if even this frozen realm dared not disturb her slumber. Silver light pooled softly across her form, tracing the curves of her body.

Griselda approached slowly.

Lumiria had kept this place quiet.

A sanctuary untouched despite the chaos unravelling across the world beyond its borders.

The destabilization of the Sun had fractured what once stood as a unified force, splitting it cleanly into two opposing factions. Alliances that had held for generations were now brittle, strained by conflicting ideals.

Then there was the Eclipse.

A threat that once loomed over the world like an inevitable end now lay silent, its presence reduced to nothing more than a distant memory. What was meant to descend and terrorize the lands had instead fallen into a strange, unnatural slumber.

War died. Famine could not be found.

Even Enris, who once responded to the desperate calls of her followers, remained distant. Rituals were performed. Offerings were made. Prayers echoed into the void.

And yet... no one responded.

It's as though the God themselves had turned their backs on the religion, on their followers.

If that was truly the case...

Then the Moon may not be any different.

Her eyes drifted back toward the resting figure.

She had chosen stagnation. No progression forward nor backward.

She simply remained suspended, watching everything as an observer.

Indulging herself in this garden with luxuries belonging to her. Rather than the world, her attention was focused on a single man and his sister.

"Are you... unsatisfied with my stance?" Lumiria suddenly spoke as Griselda felt a chill down her spine.

She quickly kneeled down as cold sweat rolled down the side of her face.

"I apolo-"

"No need. Your dissatisfaction are not uncommon. As the Goddess presiding over the Moon that governs immortality and spirituality, the expectations placed upon my shoulders are that of healing." Lumiria chuckled, waving her finger, dismissing Griselda's disrespect.

"People see the chaos around the world and beg for me to heal the cancer that has taken root. But how I can heal something that's not injured?" Lumiria chuckled ominously, causing Griselda to frown.

"The world is simply in its transition phase. A new blood moon will rise. That much is undeniable. That damn Nyer was a step ahead of us." She sighed.

Glancing back, she gestured for Griselda to take a seat.

But the Apostle didn't dare.

Seeing this, Lumiria simply shrugged her shoulders.

"The new goddess is simply waiting for the right time to be born. Faith is already being gathered in that strange new realm of his. One of Nightmares. It functions similarly to the Abyss but far more forgiving.

"Only if you look on the surface that is. It's no different to brainwashing people into becoming his supplicants." Lumiria chuckled.

Snapping her finger, a single stain of red appeared on the moon.

Against the white canvas, that tiny bit of red was extremely noticeable.

"By this point, even trying my best to completely wipe it away wouldn't work. It's rooted far too deeply."

Griselda stared at the moon.

"What are your orders?" Griselda exhaled slowly.

Lumiria smiled.

"Now now, let's not be too hasty. If the birth of a new god is inevitable, why rush and waste effort? Instead, why don't we focus on me getting into the right mood to 'save the world'?"

Appearing in front of Griselda, Lumiria lifted the girl's chin.

Griselda closed her eyes.

"Good girl." Lumiria licked her lips as her left hand reached for Griselda's chest.

Her fingers traced the Apostle's skin before slowly digging in.

Giselda flinched, holding back a cry.

"Shh..."

Reaching deeper, Lumiria plucked out a faint strand connected to Giselda's soul. She coiled her finger around the strand, tugging at it lightly as Giselda's shoulder started to tremble.

Even when suppressed, Giselda's reactions caused Lumiria to grin as she gave her soul a vicious tug.

"ARGH!!!"

Unable to hold back a cry, Giselda stumbled backwards as her body began to spasm.

Before she could fall against the ground, Lumiria caught her.

"If you keep wiping your soul clean, this will only get more painful for you." Lumiria narrowed her eyes.

Seeing the tears forming in the corner of Giselda's eyes, Lumiria leaned down and licked a droplet away.

"It hurts my heart to see my Apostle hiding secrets from me. I wonder what you saw that'll cause such a reaction? Perhaps... something to do with the sun? You wouldn't wipe your soul clean if it wouldn't cause me to believe that you've turned traitor."

Letting go of the strand slightly, Lumiria allowed Giselda to recover before plunging her hand deep into Giselda's soul, grasping at the core.

"!!!"

The pain so too much for Griselda. She couldn't even let out a scream as her back arched upward.

"I'll forgive you since you've done a lot for me. But with the world changing, I can't allow such a thing to continue, do you understand?" Lumiria whispered, giving Griselda a light kiss on the neck.

There was a cruel light in her eyes as her fingers continued to violate the core of her soul.

"Go call Tristan over for me. I think it's time for me to indulge myself a little before I correct this world back to its natural order."

Forcing herself to nod her head, Griselda panted heavily as Lumiria finally let go and allowed her to collapse on the ground.

Picking herself back up before giving Lumiria a bow, Griselda limped out of the garden while the Goddess of the Moon stared at her retreating back.

She looked down at her fingers before bringing up to her lips and gave it a lick.

"The taste of a traitor..."

Chapter 997: Lab

There are moments in life where you meet someone so absurdly strange that you're forced to stop everything you're doing and seriously question what the f*ck is going on in their life.

Elias was currently having one of those moments.

When he left the Abyss with Alice, his reasons had been simple.

He wanted to study her blood.

To understand it.

To dissect its properties, refine it, and eventually use it to eliminate side effects. If successful, it would become the magnum opus of his entire life's work. A breakthrough that could redefine everything they knew about the Abyss.

That was the plan.

A straightforward pursuit of knowledge.

But ever since he started following her...

Nothing had been straightforward.

Every step deeper into her world only seemed to drag him further away from anything he could reasonably define as "normal."

There was the Nightmare realm.

A place where death was considered a resource. A space that allowed you to die over and over again so long as your mind and soul could endure it.

In doing so, it granted you power. Power different to Abyssal.

Something... foreign.

But that wasn't even the worst of it.

Then came how many Sigils Alice could access.

As a six Sigil Hunter, six abilities should have been how many she could use.

SHOULD.

She used more than six.

In fact, with how many abilities she's been using, it wouldn't have been a surprise to hear that she was actually a nine Sigil Lord in disguise.

Perhaps even more. But that was impossible.

So how exactly does Alice access more than nine abilities?

It doesn't really matter. Because he was now being dragged away to the capital.

Capital of where you may ask...

The Capital of Extalia where the heart of the danger lies. Where Lords are common and the creator of the strange realm might be hiding.

People way out of his league.

"Why!? We haven't even settled things properly in Grand Cathia yet!" Elias protested.

"Why? Isn't that obvious?" Alice flipped her hair with a smile.

"NO!"

Alice sighed.

"Because someone I see as my mother is in danger. Happy?" She pouted.

Elias paused for a moment before nodding slowly.

"That... does make it a little better." He admitted. "But didn't Miki say you could intercept her on the way? You don't actually need to rush straight into the centre of everything."

His brows furrowed as he tried to make sense of her decision.

From his perspective, it was reckless.

Alice wasn't just heading toward danger. She was actively choosing the fastest route into it, ignoring safer alternatives that would achieve the same result with far less risk.

And that wasn't even considering the bigger issue.

Suyin's device still wasn't complete.

Up until now, Alice had been forced to maintain a stable portal whenever they travelled between regions. Not because it was convenient, but because it was necessary. At any moment, they could run into an unseen boundary. A cut off point that would forcibly reset their memory if crossed incorrectly.

So even if she was to enter battle, this portal must always remain open unless they were in a city.

With that kind of drain on her energy, fights have to be considered carefully less they want the portal to suddenly close mid battle.

"Because it'll take too long. And I want to see her as soon as possible." Alice shrugged.

"It's not like traveling will stop you from experimenting, right?" She added with a small glance toward him. "If anything, it should help. You won't be busy with other things."

Elias clicked his tongue.

She wasn't wrong.

Now that they were away from Grand Cathia, his time was no longer being divided. No more interruptions from medics, no more being dragged into unrelated responsibilities, no more distractions pulling him away from his work.

"Okay, that makes sense. But then..." Elias gritted his teeth.

He was now approaching the biggest issue.

"Why are we travelling with the Leader of the Underground?"

"Yo~" Faust grinned.

Elias wanted to curse so badly but...

This was a nine Sigil Lord! One wrong word and he'll be paste!

"Ignore him. Just treat him like a parasite." Alice let out a groan.

"Parasite? How mean." Faust laughed.

"Weren't you meant to assign a handler to me? So why are you here instead of them." Alice asked while glancing back.

"Handler? Well... yes. That's because I'm the Handler." Faust chuckled.

"Aren't you busy with the things happening in the Underground?"

"Oh that I am. Which is why I use this method instead." Faust grinned, snapping his finger.

Thin, mirror like shards began to spread across his body, crawling over his skin in jagged patterns. They reflected the surroundings in warped fragments. Alice. Elias. The road beneath them. The sky above.

Then they began to overlap.

Layer upon layer.

Until Faust was no longer visible.

Just a figure made entirely of broken reflections.

A pulse of light surged through the shards.

And then...

"W-WAIT! LORD FAUST NOT NOW!"

A woman's voice rang out in pure panic.

Alice blinked.

Elias froze.

The light shattered.

And the figure sitting where Faust once was... changed.

A woman paled, clearly caught off guard. One hand clutching at herself, covering her chest while curled up.

Her other hand summoned abyssal energy in the form of black flames to act as clothes.

They coiled around her body like living silk, wrapping around her waist and chest, forming a shifting layer of false clothing to conceal her body.

Her damp red hair clung to her face and shoulders, droplet of water still tracing her skin.

Elias wasn't even sure what he's supposed to say.

His brain, failing to process what he was looking at.

The woman's face burned bright red with embarrassment and anger.

"Lord Faust! I said not now! Give me a heads up if you're going to do this!" She snapped. "I just got out of the shower!"

After a slight pause, Faust's voice came out of her mouth.

"Ahahah... unfortunate timing."

But his response only seemed to anger her more.

Yet this was not the time to lash out since there were two spectators in front of her.

Trying her best to hide her embarrassment, the woman cleared her throat.

"I... apologise for this display. I am the Handler that Lord Faust has assigned to you. However, due to the current situation, he has decided to use a mirror clone instead. When Lord Faust is busy, I will be the one accompanying you on this journey while also relaying your requests to him." She introduced herself with a slight bow.

She kept herself professional, trying her best to ignore the fact that she was half naked right now with nothing but her black flames to cover her body.

Alice glanced above her head.

The Handler noticed this movement as well and smiled.

"Since this is a Mirror Clone, it won't reflect how many Sigils I have. You may call me Lab, I'm the Abyss Lord of Cinders possessing eight Sigils. Though this clone cannot replicate my powers fully, I assure you that I won't hold you back during this journey." Lab introduced herself.

Alice raised an eyebrow.

To think Faust was going to employ an Abyss Lord as a handler...

Someone who would be considered to be a trump card reduced to being a messenger.

"How indulgent." Alice muttered, causing Lab to chuckle.

"Indeed. My Lord is rather an indulgent one. I will dress myself in a more befitting manner for our next meeting Lady Alice."

With one last bow, mirror fragments splintered across her body and Faust returned.

"And there you go. While I'm away, Lab will be here to assist you on this journey." He smiled.

"Next time you can explain that rather than swapping out when she just finished having a shower." Alice sighed, turning her attention back on the road.

Next to her, Suyin's device was humming, warning her of any barriers or invisible targets.

"But that would be too boring." Faust shrugged.

"Boy, you're also researching her blood right? Why don't we help each other out a little?"

Elias's smile twitched.

Did he even had the option to refuse?

Noticing his worry, Faust chuckled.

"I'm not the kind to force someone to work for me. You're also wanting to figure out the secrets of her blood right? Surely if we compare notes, the progress will speed up." Faust clarified.

Elias glanced over at Alice who simply shrugged.

What he wanted to do was not her problem. It was a transactional relationship after all.

Elias was here to help so long as Alice could provide her blood so that he can figure out a solution to side effects.

They both had something to gain from it.

So if allying with Faust got him closer to his goal, who was she to stop him from doing it?

"I'll politely decline the offer for now Lord Faust." Elias smiled helplessly.

His response seemed to surprise both Alice and Faust.

Blinking his eyes, Faust let out a laugh before nodding his head.

"Very well. The offer is always on the table if you wish."

For a while, no one spoke.

Only the faint hum of Suyin's device filled the air, its soft pulses acting as a constant reminder of the invisible barriers scattered across Extalia.

Their next destination was the city of Thalmyra.

Thalmyra was different to Grand Cathia in that there weren't any nobles there. It wasn't that they didn't want to be there, rather the city itself refused. In other words, it could be classified as a 'free city' to some degree.

And it is also where a rather large branch of the Underground existed.

Chapter 998: Thalmyra

Thalmyra slowly came into view.

At first, it was just white stone in the distance. But as they got closer, more details began to surface, layering over that initial impression.

Greenery filled the city.

Not everywhere, but enough that it stood out even from this distance. Trees grew between buildings, their roots pushing into places they should not. Vines crept along walls, wrapping around the stone as though they had been there longer than the city itself. Patches of grass broke through the paths, uneven and stubborn.

It looked messy at first glance.

But the longer you looked, the less that felt true.

It was not wild. Not really. But it was not controlled either.

Somewhere in between.

The group could already tell this place was not built the same way as Grand Cathia. There was no single design holding everything together. No sense of uniformity.

Some buildings curved upward, smooth and deliberate, as though they had been shaped by giant hands before settling into place. Others were rough, stacked stone, clearly carved and reinforced without much care for appearance.

Elven work and human work.

Both sitting in the same space.

Not blending. Not clashing either.

Just... existing side by side.

Certain parts of the city felt organized, as though someone had actually planned them out. Others did not. They looked as though they had been added later, built wherever space allowed, without much thought for how it all fit together.

Thalmyra was not meant to be a city.

It started as a stop. A midpoint between the capital and the outer regions, somewhere people could rest before continuing on.

That should have been all it was.

But they gradually understood the value of the location. Because of its position, it was within traveling distance of several gateways into the Abyss. It was a good place to rest before determining the next stage of their journey.

Several elves stayed to maintain the land because there was a convergence of the World Tree's roots. With such a dense network, convergence points like this were treated as natural altars of worship.

As for the humans, they stayed because of trade and travel.

With many hunters and merchants traveling along this route, it was the perfect place to make a fortune.

And gradually, more and more followed.

Hunters, merchants, information brokers like the Underground. People looking to profit, to survive, even people who did not have anywhere else to go.

There were so many intentions, yet no guiding voice. Thus, the city grew into what it is now. No ruler, no banner.

Too dangerous for any one group to take control without risking internal war.

Thus, this delicate balance between elves, humans, and brokers was the only way the city could survive.

"Lord Faust wanted to take over the city before, but the backlash from the other factions was rather... intense. Afterwards, he decided it was not worth the risk and thus decided to leave the city in its current state." Lab explained as they approached the gates.

Compared to their last... impromptu meeting, she was fully prepared this time.

Lab made sure of it.

Gone was the half-damp, panicked girl whom Faust had summoned so suddenly.

She now accompanied them in a formal uniform befitting someone of her status.

She wore a dark, militaristic outfit. The upper layer consisted of a long black coat that stopped around the waist in the front but extended to her ankles in the back.

A high collar framed her neck, with gold around the shoulders.

A belt sat around her waist, its square buckle centred perfectly.

Below, she wore a skirt that allowed for easier movement, along with stockings that concealed her legs and boots that reached her knees.

The Lab they saw now was a calm, collected, disciplined Handler.

"If the backlash is severe enough for Faust to reconsider, then..." Alice narrowed her eyes. "How many Lords are in the city, and how strong are they?"

Lab smiled.

Alice pinpointed the issue directly.

"The elves have two known Lords, with one in the city at all times." Lab reported. "They take turns, with one being inside and one outside. However, we have yet to identify whether there are any hidden Lords.

"The humans have one Lord who has taken residence inside the city. It is unlikely that they have additional Lords. And finally, the brokers have three Lords in total."

"Three?" Alice raised an eyebrow.

"They are not united, though. Lord Faust has ensured that would be the case." Lab chuckled. "If any of the brokers tried to team up to take over the city, he would immediately side with the elves or humans.

"And if the reverse were to happen, he would instead side with the brokers to stop the others from taking over."

Alice paused for a second before turning towards Lab.

Suspicion was written on her face.

"Didn't you say Faust tried it in the past? And that the backlash was bigger than expected?" she asked.

Lab nodded.

"Lord Faust tried, and every faction turned against him. So in retaliation, this is how he is operating now."

"Ah, so it is just a massive middle finger to them." Alice rolled her eyes.

If anything, having one side win would only benefit Faust, since he could then take over the city easily.

But if he was actively keeping the balance, then something must have been up.

Turns out it was simply pettiness.

"They tried to stop Lord Faust from taking this stance before, but they could not root him out entirely. And if they tried, Lord Faust would instead attack their supply lines using the resources of the Underground. In his words..." Lab cleared her throat.

"Let them lay down and take it like obedient b*tches. How dare they stand against me in the first place."

*COUGH!!!

Elias choked on his saliva as he heard those words.

Even Alice's smile twitched, as Faust seemed to carry himself with a certain level of... composure.

Yet these words did not sound as though they had come from him at all.

"I know what you are thinking, but these are indeed Lord Faust's words. He gets rather... heated when people annoy him." Lab chuckled.

"I see..." Alice turned her eyes back to the city. "Speaking of which, how much about the Nightmare do you know? I assume accessing this information should not be out of my authority."

"Of course. Due to our agreement, and my appointment as your Handler, you hold authority equal to that of a High Elder. We understand the general structure of Nightmares, as they are typically divided into two broad types.

"The first is the personal type, where each zone is unique to the dreamer. Their placement is scattered, depending on how many times the dreamer has died or how deeply they are submerged in the dream.

"The second is the regional type. Much like the Grand Cathia Nightmare, these are shared zones that anyone within the region may access. If you are pulled into a Nightmare within one of these zones, and you have been residing in the city long enough, a branch option will appear, allowing you to enter it."

"And what type of Nightmare is Thalmyra?" Alice asked. Depending on the situation, she might have to ask Miki and Suyin to deal with this place.

"This place doesn't have Nightmares."

"!!!" Alice's head snapped back as she stared at Lab.

Elias did the same.

Yet Lab stood with a composed smile.

"It does not have a Nightmare in the traditional sense, in which people are dragged in every two days." She clarified.

"The Nightmare here is in a similar state to the one in Grand Cathia. The people here have been able to choose whether or not they wanted to enter from the beginning. My Lord believes that this place served as a testing ground of sorts."

"A testing ground?" Alice frowned.

"Indeed. You could even say it was meant to determine how humans would react to this kind of sudden change. What would they do if a realm were to suddenly appear that granted them strength? They could choose whether to enter from the very beginning.

"Would they fear the unknown? Or would they be overcome by greed? Or perhaps something unexpected. This is simply one of many testing grounds that have appeared."

Alice folded her arms.

'What do you take from this, Cayla?'

In her mental realm, Cayla had a deep frown on her face.

Her finger tapped against the table as she flipped through her notes.

[Nyer is probably figuring out the world's laws when it comes to divinity. What can be allowed, what cannot be allowed. Due to what happened in the north, it is safe to assume that making a mistake would cause the Divinity to become a corrupted false divinity that spawns something evil instead.]

'It is only recently that he has started to make big movements, after all. And like you said, the North is a good sign of that.' Alyss nodded.

'So he does not want to fail this time, huh? Taking his time to cover as many variables as possible with the new realm.' Alice narrowed her eyes. 'He is trying to properly integrate it into the world outside of just Extalia, right? Otherwise, it would not be a true Divinity, since the Three Gods hold influence in all realms, not just the surface.'

Of course, their authority in the Abyss was to a lesser extent, but they could still bring forth their own realms to enhance their abilities as Gods.

Sanctuaries that bolstered their innate authority.

However, the Nightmare was a little different. Its pull was limited because its birth was very recent. But if left unchecked...

[It is safe to say that this is his final gamble. The culmination of his work.] Cayla warned.

Alice could feel it too. The convergence of variables towards that singular future.

To determine whether or not his desires came true.

Taking a deep breath, Alice forced herself to calm down. She could not let the nerves get to her.

After checking in at the gates, the group entered Thalmyra.

Chapter 999: Exiled To Thalmyra

There comes a point in life when things begin to go astray.

You rarely notice it when it happens. In the moment, it feels small. Ordinary, even. A choice made under pressure. A path taken because it seems no worse than the others.

The world does not stop to warn you. No voice announces that you have stepped onto the wrong road. The sky does not darken. The ground does not split open beneath your feet. Life simply continues.

And so you keep going.

A day passes. Then a week. Then months. Consequences do not arrive all at once. It gathers. Stacking themselves one over another. Subtle at first, then harder to ignore.

A compromise leads to another. One failure forces a second. One wound festers beneath the next.

By the time you understand that something has gone terribly wrong, there is already too much blood behind you to pretend otherwise.

Only then do you look back.

Only then do you trace the events in reverse, past all the choices that seemed necessary until you remember that exact point and say:

"There. That is where it started."

The first mistake.

For her, it was that mission in the Abyss.

Issued by the King himself, at the urging of a family that had grown too powerful to ignore.

Too important to refuse. Too grand to question.

A woman clenched her fist in frustration recalling that mission.

Even now, she could still hear the words in her ear.

A collaborative effort between three nations. A search for knowledge. A study of a possible cure for the blight staining their world. It had been presented as duty wrapped in glory, the sort of purpose young knights were taught to crave.

And she accepted it gladly.

With the mission accepted, she departed for the Abyss. She had leapt into those depths in search of that hidden possibility, believing she was marching toward salvation.

The wind swept across the upper balcony of one of Thalmyra's watchtowers, catching her hair and drawing it back from her face in long strands of pale gold, exposing the fine line of her jaw, the sharp point of her ears, and her azure eyes that reflected the sky.

She stood with one hand resting against the pale stone rail, looking out over the city below.

Vines had climbed the tower over the years, curling around the balcony's edge and threading between the stonework with quiet persistence. A few had crept close enough to brush her fingers, their leaves dyed with the hue of the resplendent sun.

She looked almost gentle standing there.

Naturally, this was helped by what she wore.

Usually, she would be adorned by silver armour, an appearance befitting her station.

But she was not on duty right now. Not in the traditional sense.

Instead, she wore a dress.

Her dress was a deep forest green, elegant without excess, the fabric fitted cleanly around the torso, exposing her collar bone and shoulders. Delicate chains decorated with jewellery hung along the edges like solidified raindrops.

A gold sash wrapped around her thin waist, making her seem more delicate than normal.

This was not the attire that most would expect from an Abyss Lord.

One of the King's guard at that.

But that had little to do with why she was here.

Her posting in Thalmyra was decided due to her failures. The mistakes happening one after another.

The official explanation had been courteous.

Thalmyra was too important to be left in careless hands. The convergence of the World Tree's roots made it a sacred ground to the elves, while its position near several Abyssal gateways made it strategically vital.

It was a place where one had to be strong and diplomatic in order to survive. To ensure the other factions didn't take it over.

Someone of proven ability had to remain stationed there to watch that balance.

And so she was chosen.

That was the version spoken aloud.

The truth beneath it was far less flattering.

She had failed in the Abyss.

Not in the simple ways failure could be excused. Not the kind that could be softened by circumstance or buried beneath the usual lies, losing a skirmish, misreading the battlefield, returning with fewer soldiers than expected. Those failures could be forgiven, provided the explanation was elegant enough.

No, her failure had been far worse.

She had been sent to help seize the Inverted World.

Instead, it slipped through her fingers.

The entire effort collapsed inward on itself, all that planning wasted in an instant. What should have been contained, claimed, and brought under control had instead been lost.

And worse still, Rosalyn had risen from that failure.

She had absorbed the power released in the collapse and ascended to Lordship, taking hold of strength she had never been meant to touch.

Had the Inverted World merely been lost, the court might have forgiven her in time. A failed operation, however costly, could be endured.

What they could not tolerate was Rosalyn's ascension.

She had never been meant to rise that far. At most, she should have remained a Six Sigil Hunter. Dangerous, useful, but still within the reach of their influence. Still someone who could be pressured, directed, controlled.

But that possibility was gone now.

Because of that failure, the Lord of Scarlet Ruin had been born beyond their grasp.

And she had been the one who let it happen.

Clenching her teeth, she reached out for the bottle next to her and drank a large mouthful of alcohol.

With her dismissal into this city, there's rarely been cases where she actually needed to move.

Below, the city moved as usual.

Even with the Nightmare hanging over it, Thalmyra carried on beneath a false balance, every faction gathering strength behind closed doors while pretending restraint in the open. Merchants moved coin and supplies. Brokers traded whispers faster than gold. Elves maintained their shrines and watch posts with the same cold dignity they applied to everything else. Hunters came and went with fresh weapons, old scars, and the kind of eyes that suggested they had already decided what could be sacrificed next.

Everyone behaved as though the city was still stable.

An absurd arrangement.

She lifted the bottle again, only to find it lighter than she expected.

Her eyes narrowed for a moment before she set it down beside the others strewn across the balcony floor.

She was reaching for the next one when footsteps approached from the stairwell behind her.

The woman didn't turn around when the new arrival reached the top.

"If you are already up here, then speak. Stop wasting my time."

There was a brief pause. She could tell the new arrival saw the bottles around her.

A silent judgement.

The guard stepped forward at last and performed a formal salute. A young elf wearing silver armour along with a short cloak hanging from on shoulder.

She would've been dressed similarly had it not been for this 'exile'.

"Lady Renna." He called out.

To his credit, he did not let the sight of her in a dress, surrounded by empty bottles, loosen his discipline.

He knew how scary Renna was when drunk. Especially with a shorter fuse than usual.

Renna finally turned her head, just enough for one blue eye to settle on him.

"Well?"

The guard swallowed his saliva nervously.

"There is a situation at the gates, my lady."

"What happened this time?" Renna asked lazily. "Are the merchants trying to smuggle something and making a spectacle of themselves? Did a pack of Hunters get offended because someone bumped into their shoulders? Or are the Brokers once again unhappy with arrangements they themselves proposed?"

"No, my lady." He shook his head. "It is none of those."

That drew a little more of her attention.

Renna shifted, one shoulder easing back against the stone railing as she studied him properly now.

"Then tell me. You climbed all the way up here so make it worth the effort."

The guard took a deep breath.

"A new party has arrived at the gates. Three in total." He hesitated for only a moment before continuing. "Our watchers believe one of them is a Lord."

Renna furrowed her brows.

Holding up a hand, he stopped him from continuing further.

Then, with a flick of her wrist, emerald energy washed over her body.

Her eyes focused on the guard.

"Alright, tell me the details." Renna asked, no longer tipsy.

Now she looked like what she was.

An Abyss Lord.

One of the King's guard.

"Yes, my lady. The party arrived at the gate a short while ago. Three individuals in total. One of which is suspected to be a Lord level being. But rather than being the one in the lead, it seems as though she is serving a split haired girl with visible side effects."

Renna's eyes narrowed.

"Suspected?" She repeated. "So we are unsure."

"We are... reluctant to press further without your approval. The suspected Lord appears to have ties to the Brokers. The Underground, specifically. That is why I came to you first, Lady Renna."

Renna exhaled softly through her nose.

She didn't like it.

The balance of Lords has always been kept carefully in this city. Elves, humans, brokers... none of them could afford to let the other side gain too much ground without risking the entire arrangement collapsing into open conflict.

And now a possible new Lord had arrived.

Not only that, but one connected to the Underground.

People who reached the level of Lord did not 'serve' lightly.

"Alright, I'll go greet them." Renna made up her mind. "Have the others maintain watch on the other factions. Make sure none of them tries to take advantage of this before I know what I'm dealing with."

"Yes, my lady."

Chapter 1000: Renna's Headache

". . ."

Alice sat in the chair, one leg crossed over the other, her heel tapping impatiently against the stone floor. Each click carried a fragment of her annoyance. Each one causing the guard to flinch as the floor was cracking apart.

They tried their best not to show it but the presence of a Lord behind her was terrifying!

'Mama mia why did the captain tell us to detain them!?!?' One of them cried out in his heart, hoping, begging even, that nothing bad happens.

Praying that they don't offend the Lord behind the split haired girl.

But that prayer seemed to fall on deaf ears with Alice's expression slowly turning into one of anger.

"TCH!" Alice clicked her tongue. The guards around them flinched.

One almost raised his weapon but managed to hold back.

They had been stopped the moment they reached the gates. Not because they caused trouble. But rather...

The pressure of a Lord terrifying the guards!

A presence that made one feel like suffocating just being in the vicinity, the fear that comes with seeing an apex predator. The chill down their spine knowing death was around the corner!

Anyone with a hint of self preservation would find themselves in terror when Lab approached!

Therefore, the guards reacted immediately, detaining the trio before things could escalate further.

And the worst part?

Alice hadn't even noticed.

She had grown too used to this level of pressure.

Too accustomed to standing near people who could swat her down and turn her into paste.

Lords, sealed Abyss Lords of old, Apostles.

Even Gods!

So a presence like Lab was no longer registered as anything unusual or even dangerous. What should've felt overwhelming was... painfully ordinary for Alice.

Her fight or flight response was never triggered.

Which, in hindsight, was probably more concerning than if she had actually felt something.

A sign of the last remnants of her normality flying away.

As for Lab, she had already apologised.

This body was nothing more than a mirror clone formed from Faust's power. Even if she tried to suppress her aura as a Lord, it would leak regardless. And if anyone noticed her actively suppressing it, that alone would raise more suspicion than simply letting it flow.

So she chose the safer option.

Let it be.

From the Guard's perspective, those who never reached the power of Lord, they would sense something akin to a calamity slowly approaching the city gates.

By this point, none of the guards spoke. They could only hope that someone comes and fast.

"So." Alice stopped tapping her heel.

"How long are you going to waste my damn time?" She asked coldly.

The guards shot quick glances at one another.

A silent communication.

"You tell her!" One would eye.

"Me?! Why don't you go! I don't want to die!"

"Oh so it's okay if I die? You go the higher station than me, you go talk to the child with a Lord behind her!"

"B*tch! I'm the one who introduced you to your wife! Shouldn't you owe me!?"

The silent communication stretched between them and had it not been for Lab's presence, they would've started fighting already.

Just as Alice was about to say something else, she noticed a rather large presence approaching their room.

Not quite oppressive but not weak either. If anything, they felt harmonized with their surroundings.

She narrowed her eyes.

'A Lord.'

Opening the door, a woman stepped through as the guards collectively let out a sigh of relief.

A blonde elf adorned with silver armour.

Alice blinked her eyes.

She recognised that face.

"All of you can step out now." Renna ordered as the guards all left without hesitation.

"Renna, a Lord affiliated with Extalia, one of the- Never mind... May I know who I'm talking to?" Renna introduced herself, pausing when she was about to mention her role as the King's Guard.

Alice glanced back at Lab.

"Lab, a Lord affiliated with the Underground." Lab performed a slight bow. "Right now, I am assigned to Lady Agnelia."

Renna raised an eyebrow before looking at the split haired girl.

It was strange...

Something felt off.

The girl was calm... Eerily so. It wasn't the confident kind where they don't know fear.

The kind where they've been protected all their life so they don't understand the consequences out in the real world. Renna had seen that kind often enough among nobles and talented fools.

Instead... It seems to be a type of calm that can only be gained through confidence in their power. The kind that knows they can deal with whatever is in front of them.

Renna narrowed her eyes.

This girl...

'She thinks she'll be able to survive if we fight.'

With this kind of realisation, Renna couldn't help but feel a little insulted. Was it because the girl didn't know what kind of Lord she is?

Or was she that confident in her strength.

"Agnelia." Renna spoke.

"Just call me Alice." Alice smiled.

She had not expected to see a familiar face here.

Even now, she could still remember her first time seeing the three Lords who belonged to the surface during the Academy days.

"In that case, Alice. Is it safe to assume you are affiliated with the Underground? Or have you simply hired Lab for her services?" Renna asked.

"I didn't hire her no. She was assigned to me."

Renna creased her brows.

Wasn't hired but rather... assigned.

Either Alice was someone of high standing in the Underground or someone who's earned their favour.

"May I ask what your purpose is coming here?"

Having another Lord suddenly enter Thalmyra was a cause for concern. Especially when their presence could cause the balance to shatter.

"We're just taking a temporary stop here. A small pause in our journey to restock before making our way to the capital." Alice replied truthfully.

With a major branch of the Underground operating in Thalmyra, this was the most efficient place to arrange the transport of supplies back to Grand Cathia. Miki would need them.

It'll help stabilize the city and give them whatever they needed. Be that food or other necessities.

Not only that, but some materials that couldn't be normally accessed can also be bought here. Beast parts, rare ores, special metals.

Materials that Suyin would find very useful and difficult to obtain normally.

Renna tapped her finger against the table slowly.

"A temporary stop?" She repeated, wanting to make sure she heard things correctly.

"Indeed." Alice nodded.

"To restock?"

"That is what I said, yes."

Renna exhaled slowly through her nose.

It was hard to believe. Especially when Lab wasn't holding back her aura at all.

If anything, it felt more like a declaration of war. A giant sign saying, look here, a Lord has arrived.

With that kind of pressure, even if they are indeed just stopping here temporarily, the other factions in Thalmyra won't take things simply.

She studied Alice's expression for a few moments. Checking to see if it was a bluff or not. To see if there was any hints of the truth.

Yet there was nothing of the sort. Alice was completely relaxed, speaking her mind.

Renna clenched her jaw in frustration.

It was too good to be true!

Something this convenient won't appear so easily! In fact, it would've been better had Alice shown a sign of bluffing because at least then, her heart would be at ease.

But here they are, the three in front of her seem to be one hundred percent honest about why they were here.

Was it truly just a temporary stop? Really?

Then why the hell was the Lord behind her not holding back her aura at all?!

She held back the urge to hit the table. Her throat was parched and she desperately wanted a drink right now to clear her mind.

"So you're stopping here for some supplies and... the Underground has assigned you a Lord to help?" Renna calmed her mind and asked.

Alice glanced up at Lab who shrugged.

"Kind of? She's more here as an assistant for any services I may require." Alice chuckled.

". . ."

Renna really, really wanted to toss a table at Alice right now.

'What do you mean she's an assistant!? A LORD, as an ASSISTANT?! What standing do you have for the Underground to give you a Lord as an assistant???' She screamed internally. Confusion filling her mind as she couldn't comprehend the thought process behind something like this.

Lords, strategic weapons for factions to keep others at bay. And yet this one was reduced to an assistant...

Jobs like this was usually reserved for literally anyone who is NOT a Lord!

Renna took a deep breath and tilted her head back.

She stared at the ceiling...

'I want to cry...'

"How many days will you be staying?" Renna asked, massaging her temples.

She could already feel a headache worse than any hangover she's ever had.

"Depends on how long it'll take for the supplies to arrive. Maybe a day maybe a few days. Ideally no longer than 3 days if possible." Alice calculated. If they get the supplies to Suyin and she makes the improvements to the memory device, they'll be able to speed up their travel significantly.

"If that's the case... can you do anything about that Abyss Lord aura? I'm sure you don't need me to explain why having that completely exposed is a bad idea." Renna smiled bitterly.

Three days... possibly more.

Alice glanced back at Lab.

"I'm already trying to suppress it as best I can. This is the current limit."

Upon hearing this, Renna only had one thought in her mind.

'I need a drink...'