

Solar Ascension

Chapter 6: Kidnapped?

Growl

The creature threatened as it looked Warily at Astra.

The ground beneath its claws cracked as it lowered itself, its muscles tightening as it prepared to attack at any moment.

"Ah, that's right," Astra murmured, her expression completely neutral. "you're still alive."

The creature let out another snarl, threatening her to stay back.

"Mm. Impressive regeneration for a tier 2 Eclipsed," she added with a faint tilt of her head, sounding genuinely impressed, "You'd make a fine study sample for my students—if you weren't so damn ugly."

Well, it wasn't like it looks mattered if it was just going to be a study sample, but it'd be too much work to bring it back alive.

Besides, there was a more important specimen laying in the crater behind her.

Her hand lazily reached toward her belt, where a faintly glowing sphere was clipped.

"Let me introduce you," she said as she tapped the belt and the sphere floated beside her, "this is my Solar tech, Aur—"

BOOM!

Before she could complete her words, the Bound attack, kicking up a dust cloud that covered up both the Hound and Astra.

For a while, there was no movement from within before a subtle golden glow was seen from within.

The next instant, the dust was swept away as if by a gale, revealing Astra standing exactly where she had been and the hound right in front of her with its paws outstretched and its massive claws aiming for her head.

Between them was what looked like a golden barrier, with hexagon-like patterns on it, stopping the Hound's attack.

"Y'know, it's pretty rude to interrupt someone in the middle of a sentence, don't you think?" She said with a sigh as her eyes locked with the hound's red orbs.

It quickly jumped back as its instincts screamed at it to. Those pale violet eyes that held a subtle glow seemed a lot scary than its glowing red orbs right now.

"Don't give me that look," she sighed. "You attacked first."

The hound took an attack stance again, its growl getting louder. At this point it was clear enough that it held a loud bark but couldn't bite, especially against the monster in front of it right now.

"Now then," she said as the sphere transformed from a glowing barrier back into its original form, "let's end this, I've got a vacation to return to."

The hound lunged again, this time, darkness coating its claws as it moved faster than anyone could track.

Getting close enough, it extended its paw and slashed down again, this time with a force capable of cleanly cutting through metal.

"Solar Construct: Phase Barrier — Expand."

A wave of golden hexagons burst outward, forming a radiant field. The creature's claws struck it and disintegrated instantly.

The Hound howled in pain as its front limbs turned to glowing dust before it hastily pulled back, half its claws missing.

Astra exhaled lazily, brushing imaginary dust off her sleeve. "You see? That was a consequence of your actions."

She lifted one hand, and the barrier transformed into three rotating rings of light that aligned themselves around her.

"Now sit, doggie."

FWOOOM!

A beam of condensed Solar Energy erupted downward from the rings, heading towards the hound.

The attack shook the earth and the ground beneath the Hound melted away due to the pillar of golden light, vaporizing everything within a twenty-meter radius.

The shockwave blasted dust and debris into the air, but none of it reached Astra. When the light finally died, nothing of the Eclipsed remained except a slowly evaporating silhouette and the earth that had completely turned into lava.

"That takes care of that," she muttered and then turned back toward the crater, brushing off her gloves, the glowing sphere slowly folding itself back into a compact orb before floating down to clip onto her belt again.

The body still lay there, but instead of a burnt one, she was met with one that had not a single scratch on it.

If it wasn't for his burnt jacket, Astra would've doubted that it was the same body.

But the strangeness wasn't done yet. Her eyes took a slightly golden glow again as she observed the surrounding and sure enough, the solar energy lingering in the air was converging towards him.

Crouching, she poked it a couple of times only for her finger to get burnt by the heat coming from the kid's body.

But she didn't even flinch as she continued observing the boy, "how interesting."

Reaching into her jacket's pocket, she took out what looked like a transparent panel, with an interface that popped up when she tapped the circular area.

Astra pointed it at the passed out Nox and a couple of numbers started scrolling through before it finally resting at zero.

"Interesting indeed."

She reached out, brushing aside the dust clinging to his burnt jacket, and her eyes caught the faint glint of a necklace around his neck, a small pendant carved with a sun partially covered by shadow.

She froze for a while, recognition flashing for a split second before it vanished. "Huh. Now that's a symbol I haven't seen in a long time."

Standing upright again, Astra slung him effortlessly over her shoulder.

"Congratulations, mystery boy," she said, turning back, "you now belong to me, let's get you out of here."

"What do you mean I can't just take him?" She asked, "aren't you also curious about how he's just absorbing Solar Energy?"

There was a short pause.

"Of course, I know that" she grumbled, "but he's currently unconscious and I'm not waiting until he wakes up to ask him if he wants to come with me."

It seemed the voices had finally agreed with her logic as they went silent, letting her do as she pleased .

With that, she tapped her boots lightly on the floor and they released a subtle golden glow.

In the next instant, she vanished, leaving behind a scorched mark in the shape of her boots on the ground.

With that, the story of Nox officially began.... What would happen from this moment on? Well, we'll just have to wait and find out.

Chapter 7: A Change In The Nightmare

"This dream again," Nox let out as he reappeared in that dream same again.

Everything seemed to play out as it previously did with the only difference being, he was observing as a by stander this time.

He sat on the grassy meadow watching as his younger self laughed with the people he identified as his parents.

Nox never really observed this, but he realized no matter how hard he tried, their faces were not visible to him.

No matter how closely he looked, he couldn't seem to make out their features. Their outlines were clear but their faces were completely blurred to him.

So he just stopped trying and got comfortable on the grass as the dream continued playing out.

Soon enough, he watched his 'mom' and 'dad' disappeared into thin air, one moment they stood behind young him, the next, they were gone.

Nox watched the sky tear open and the Eclipsed dropping from it, he watched the sun go out and the ground swallow his younger self.

He finally stood up, from the now barren ground and gave a little stretch which was weird since he felt nothing here.

"Guess it's time to wake up." He muttered, waiting for his younger self to almost completely fall before he jolted awake like he always had.

"...."

Nox seemed to have forgotten one thing, this time he was watching the dream from an outer perspective, so things were bound to be different.

He waited for a while but there was no change in scenery.

But that wasn't the weirdest thing.

He looked towards the hole where his younger self had fallen only to realize that the golden glowing humanoid thing and the ground of Eclipsed were looking directly at him.

"H-huh?" Nox let out in question as he was genuinely freaked out before calming himself and saying, "maybe they're not looking at me?."

But the moment the words left his mouth, the golden figure tilted its head, exactly the way he had just done.

Nox froze.

"...okay, that's not creepy at all," he muttered, taking an instinctive step back.

But before he could take another step backwards, the golden figure disappeared and reappeared right in front of him.

It didn't give Nox the chance to say anything as it placed a palm over his heart.

That was more than enough confirmation that they really could see him but he didn't think about that because the moment the palm made contact with his chest, a pain he had never felt before exploded within.

He felt as if lava was being poured in his heart and set ablaze from the inside out.

"GAHH—!"

Nox screamed out in pain as he dropped to his knees, clutching his chest. If this was a dream, wasn't he supposed to have woken up by now?

But no, he continued in this nightmare, feeling every single pain of whatever the glowing figure had done to him.

"Wh—what are you—doing to me?!" he finally managed to let out, but the figure said nothing in response as it only calmly watched him.

The more time passed the greater the pain became and it reached a threshold Nox couldn't bare anymore.

He dropped completely to the ground , unable to move even a single muscle anymore as he felt his consciousness slowly fade.

The last thing he managed to hear through all the pain was, "...last light", before everything went dark and he felt himself falling in a dark abyss.

Gasp!

Nox jolted awake, his breathing completely ragged and his lungs fought for air to be pulled within them through his nose.

He felt like someone who had just resurfaced from drowning so it took him a couple of seconds to realize that he wasn't in pain anymore.

And that's when he started noticing where he was. The first thing he noticed was that he seemed to be in constant motion....

Or rather, he was within something that was in motion.

Nox frowned, realizing he was lying on some kind of soft seat, way too soft for anywhere in Zone 9.

His eyes darted to the side and he immediately realized that he was inside a vehicle.

Specifically, an enclosed jeep-like craft with faint golden lines passing through its interior, making it recognizable as a Solar-tech, a high-end and military grade one. Definitely not something that belonged anywhere near the slums.

His confusion only grew when he glanced out the window and saw a barren landscape moving by.

This definitely wasn't the slums.

"What... the hell..." he muttered under his breath.

"Oh good, you're alive," a woman's voice was heard from the driver's seat. "I was starting to think I'd have to dump a body on my way back to the city. That would've been awkward."

Nox head snapped toward the direction of the sound.

The driver, a woman with short silver-white hair and violet eyes that she could see from the rearview mirror, didn't even look at him.

She was leaning back with one hand on the steering wheel, humming a tune that made her sound far too relaxed for someone driving through an Eclipsed filled zone.

Or at least that's what Nox had heard from the people in the slums.

"Who... are you?" Nox asked his voice hoarse.

"Someone with terrible luck," she replied flatly, still a bit sour about her canceled vacation. "You?"

He paused, wondering whether to tell his name or not, but in the end, he just decided to just go ahead and say it, "Nox."

She nodded in satisfaction, before saying, "cute name, rolls off the tongue."

Nox blinked, completely thrown off by her tone. "Where... where am I?"

"In my jeep," she said simply. Then, after a brief pause, she added, "And unless you want to die to the tier 2 Eclipseds out there, I'd advise you not to jump out. Besides, you should probably stay still since, you were kind of... crispy when I found you."

Nox's hand instinctively went to his face, expecting to feel burnt flesh, but what met his fingers was smooth skin, perfectly healed.

His jacket, though, was a different story. It was completely burnt alongside most of his clothes.... So much so that it'd have been less embarrassing if he was just in his boxers.

"How much?" After a short pause, he asked.

"Hmm?" She asked back in confusion as she raised her head to the rear view mirror.

"How much is whatever you used to heal me?" He asked, his golden eyes locking with her pale violet ones.

He remembered exactly how much damage he had suffered from both the collapsed bridge and the capacitor exploding.

There was no way he would just shrug off both damages without the help of some kind of healing solar tech, hence the reason he thought she was the one that healed him.

Nox also knew no one did anything for free in this world, so if this lady, a complete stranger, had healed him, then she'd definitely be expecting him to cough up every single credit or even worse force him to work for it.

Embarrassingly though, he didn't have a single credit to his name right now, so the possibility of paying her back right now was zero.

"I know the kid thinks I healed him, I'm not deaf," Astra suddenly muttered, confusing Nox.

Realizing that the kid was weirdly looking at her, she sighed, leaning her cheek into her palm while steering lazily with the other hand. "Talking to myself, don't mind it."

"And for your question," she added, "no, I didn't heal you."

"Then how did I—"

"That's what I'd like to know too," Astra interrupted his words, "but it seems you have no idea either."

"Anyway, we might get some answers at the academy."

It took Nox a couple of minutes before his brain finally registered her words, "the academy?"

His surprise was evident in his tone as he asked.

"Oh, right," she reached for something at the compartment by her side before handing it to him.

Taking it, Nox realized it was an ID of some sort so he read through it only for his eyes to widen in shock.

"YOU'RE ASTRA DAWN?"

Chapter 8: I Want Your Body

It was almost impossible to live in Aureum without knowing about Astra Dawn, except you had been living under a rock.... Or with a tribe that had been secluded for the past twenty two years.

She was known in every corner of the world as one of the fastest ever to reach the Ascended rank, a feat that had been only achieved by barely over a hundred people.

And she was the youngest to do so, achieving it at the age of twenty, almost three decades younger than the age Solar knights normally reached that rank.

Astra had cemented herself as an undoubted genius.

You might be wondering, how great is this Ascended rank?

Well, Solar Knights in Aureum basically had six ranks, starting from **Embers**, the lowest, to **Transcendent**, the highest.

And Ascended sat at the top, just below Transcendent.

Nox still couldn't believe he was sitting in the same vehicle as such a power house.

"Your mouth's open," Astra's words snapped him out of his thoughts.

Nox blinked in surprise and immediately shut it, realizing he'd been staring. "S-sorry," he muttered, looking away, his ears slightly red in embarrassment.

"Don't apologize," Astra replied nonchalantly, adjusting her grip on the wheel. "You're not the first to gawk. It's one of the side effects of being famous and devastatingly pretty."

Nox turned to her, unsure if she was joking, her tone didn't help.

"Uh... right," he said awkwardly.

Silence returned between the two, as the jeep continued forward, crushing tier 0 and 1 Eclipsed in their way.

Since the largest Tier 1 Eclipsed they came across was no bigger than a house cat, Astra didn't need to stop as she just drove through them.

"Why are we going to the academy?" Nox asked after a few minutes of silence.

"Why else?" She asked in return, "to get you enrolled."

She said in a tone that made it sound like the answer she gave was pretty obvious.

"Why?" He asked again, a frown appearing on his face.

"Hmm?" Astra asked.

"Why would you want to help a total stranger get into the academy?" Nox asked, "what's the catch?"

Yes, his dream was attending the academy, but he had to at least know what the catch was.

Astra turned serious, a small frown appearing on her face as she kept her eyes on the road.

The sudden seriousness on her face made Nox tense.

'There it is,' he thought grimly. 'The part where she names her price. Maybe she'll sell me off, or make me some lab rat for whatever tech she used to heal me.'

He braced himself for the worst.

But instead, Astra simply reached into her jacket pocket, pulled something out, and tossed it at him without even looking.

The object landed in his lap with a soft clink.

Looking down, Nox immediately froze as he recognized the object.

It was his necklace.

"I don't know how or why you have that," Astra finally spoke after he picked it up, "but that's one of the reasons."

Nox frowned as he raised the necklace to eye level, observing it. Was it really that special that it was capable of getting him an admission in the academy?

Or maybe Astra knew his parents, that's why she was doing all this?

But before he could ask, Astra lost her serious expression, returning to a casual one before saying, "and the other reason is because of your body."

Nox immediately crossed his arms over his chest, and warily moved further into the seat putting as much distance between them as possible.

This made Astra chuckle as she looked at his reaction, "relax kid, I didn't mean it like that."

"Besides, you might be cute, but you're not my type."

Well, that successfully hurt his pride, but then again, he was glad that she didn't literally want his body.

But it seems his relief came too soon as she added,

"You're going to be my lab rat while at the academy," she said with a smile.

That was even worse...

"What?" Nox asked, just to be sure he hadn't misheard her words.

"Relax, kid," she said, leaning back casually. "You'll live. Probably."

"Probably?!"

"Look," she interrupted before he could panic further, "your body absorbed Solar Energy. That explosion should've turned you into a smear on the pavement, and yet..." She gestured at him with one hand. "Here you are.... Looking very much not dead."

"What do you mean, my body absorbs SE?" Nox asked, eyes widening, "that's impossible."

"Exactly," Astra agreed, "and that's exactly what I'm going to find out, how you had absorbed SE and lived."

Of course humans had tried absorbing SE directly before, but all attempts had failed, with each experiment ending with one less human.

That's why Solar Knights needed a Helion Core. Just so they could store enough Solar Energy to power their Solar tech.

So what was different about Nox?

And that's exactly what Astra wanted to find out, maybe it'll help answer a question of hers.

Before anyone words could be exchanged, the ground suddenly started trembling as if an earthquake was happening.

But the two knew that it was anything but an earthquake.

"Damn it," Astra said, a displeased frown on her face.

The earth continued shaking, and the jeep followed suit.

Her gaze moved to the scanner mounted on the dashboard, it revealed a red glowing dot approaching the car at an insane speed.

"Tier three," she muttered under her breath. "Of course it had to be a tier three this time."

"Shit," Nox let out in panic.

He had seen the devastation caused by just a tier 2, it was pretty easy to guess that a tier 3 would be a lot more dangerous.

He barely had time to hang on properly before she slammed the brakes, stopping the Jeep completely.

Astra stretched her neck lazily. "You can stay in the car if you want," she said, opening her door. "Or you can come out and witness my awesomeness... Though, I can't guarantee your safety."

With that, she hopped out, leaving Nox in the car alone.

Soon enough a dust cloud could be seen from the distance and before one had the chance to fully register, it was already in front of them.

It stopped right in front of Astra, revealing exactly what was responsible for the shaking earth.

The Eclipsed was a grotesque looking creature standing on four limbs. There were countless tendrils attached to it like hairs, each one wiggling around like they had a mind of their own.

Like the tier 2 Eclipsed, this one also allowed no light to reach it, making it seem like some kind of shadow in the daylight, but unlike the tier 2, its features were a lot clearer....

Which wasn't a good thing.

The creature let out a distorted scream that caused the Jeep to shake and Nox's instincts immediately screamed at him to duck and hide, but his eyes remained locked on Astra.

She didn't even flinch as she continued looking at it.

"Damn, that's ugly," she muttered, one hand resting on her hip as the other reached towards his belt, where the orb rested, "alright ugly, my future student and lab rat is watching, don't embarrass me."

Chapter 9: The Power Of An Ascended Rank

"Alright Ugly," Astra said as she tapped on the belt and the orb floated to her side again, "let's see what you can do."

Roar!

The Eclipsed let out a loud roar that shook the air itself. Nox felt his skin crawl even though he wasn't the one standing in front of the creature.

Its tendrils wiggled around, landing on the ground and kicking up quite a bit of dust.

But none of that phased Astra in the slightest. She just stood there, waiting for the creature to complete its theatrics.

"I know its just showing off at this point," she said to herself, "but we gotta let it have its moment."

The creature finally stopped roaring and turned towards its challenger.

Astra tilted her head, meeting the beast's eyeless face with an unimpressed stare. "You done?"

The Eclipsed responded by slamming one of its massive tendrils into the ground, sending a shockwave in all directions.

"Let's get started then," with her words, the orb floating by her side split into two smaller ones.

The sole of her boots slowly powered up, releasing a golden glow as Astra waited for the beast to make the first move.

And it soon did.

In the blink of an eye, the Eclipsed closed the distance between them, its claws outstretched and aiming to tear her to two.

Nox, watching the scene tensed up, it wasn't like he was worried about a lady he just met, no.

But if anything happened to her, he knew the creature wouldn't just turn around and leave, it'd come for him next.

And there was no way he would be able to fight or even escape from that thing, so his only hope at survival was Astra winning.

The massive claws inched closer and closer to her, but moments before it hit —

BOOM!

The golden glow beneath her boots got brighter, before it suddenly propelled her forward faster than his eyes could register. One moment she was standing there; the next, she was gone.

The Eclipsed's claws struck the ground where she had been, splitting the earth open in a massive crater.

But Astra was already above it, spinning midair, her right hand gripping one of the hovering orbs as it reshaped into a long, spear.

"Spear."

She muttered, before descending downwards at impossible speeds, thanks to the boost from her boots.

The creature, noticing that its target was above it, attacked with its tendrils. For any normal human, that would've been the end since humans only had limited evasion ability while in mid air.

But the same was untrue for a solar knight, especially one at a higher rank... Like Astra.

Seeing the incoming tendrils, she made no effort to dodge, her spear still pointing forward.

Nox held his breath as he watched the scene, unbeknownst to him, his golden eyes had taken on a slight glow, causing him to see the fight in eerie detail.

It almost felt like the appendages had slowed down a bit, but he was too focused to realize.

With a smile on her face, the other orb by Astra's side reformed itself into what looked like a circular blade.

The weapon spun around her in a perfect circle just as the tendrils reached her. The moment they made contact—

SHRRRING!

They were severed cleanly. The glowing blade carved through the incoming appendages like knife through butter.

The cuts were so precise that the creature didn't even realize it had lost half of them until its blood sprayed into the air a moment later.

The severed limbs rained from above, immediately disintegrating to ash as they touched the ground.

The Eclipsed shrieked, its body convulsing from the loss of its limbs, but Astra didn't give it the chance to recover.

She tightened her grip on her spear, before hurling it down with devastating force.

The spear cleanly went through the Eclipsed, coming out on the other end. After the attack, the spear took the form of an orb again before returning to Astra's, who had smoothly landed, side.

And the Eclipsed?

It let out a roar of pain before falling to the ground where stayed unmoving for a while, almost as if it was dead but Nox noticed the twitch in its form.

That's when it stood back up and turned towards her and let out an angry roar, its roar was accompanied by a faint black aura where the wound was. The flesh around it began to bubble and reform, knitting itself back together.

"Right," Astra said as she watched the Eclipsed heal. "I guess healing 's the norm now."

The Eclipsed lowered then itself, its newly regenerated tendrils burrowing into the earth. For a brief moment, nothing seemed to be happening. Then — dozens of black spikes shot upward, impaling everything in a wide radius.

Astra disappeared again, reappearing on top of one of the spikes midair.

"Ah, I see," She nodded her head in understanding, "you're a tier 3 that can harness its umbral energy."

Like humans had Solar Energy, the Eclipsed also had something of their own — Umbral Energy.

One that upped their danger from one to a hundred. Not every Eclipsed could use that energy but the ones that could were a lot more dangerous than their ranks would suggest.

Umbra Energy basically put them a rank higher than what they were officially classified as.

A Tier 3 that could use it effectively? That was practically a Tier 4 — a level of destruction that could level an entire kingdom if left unchecked.

And the one in front of Astra had just proven it could wield that corruption consciously...which meant it wasn't a normal one.

"Of course its not a normal one," she said to the voices. "With our luck, its impossible to ever meet anything normal."

"Alright then," Astra muttered, "let's end it quickly before more of these freaks are attracted to the Solar and Umbral energies hanging in the air."

She kicked off spikes, landing lightly on the creature's head.

The Eclipsed tried shaking her off, thrashing violently as its tendrils whipped and lashed in every direction, but it was useless.

Astra didn't budge, her boots clinging pretty well to the creature.

Stay still," she said with a chuckle , "my hands aren't exactly steady today."

The two orbs switched form again, becoming two sun shaped rings before aligning over each other and started spinning.

Nox, watching from the jeep, felt the pressure pressing down on his chest. The sheer power radiating from Astra made it hard to breathe.

The creature, sensing the impending danger, roared furiously, its tendrils stabbing at itself in a frantic attempt to hit the woman perched on its head.

But each strike stopped inches short — vaporized by the sheer heat pouring off the glowing rings.

"Let's see if you can heal from this," Astra said, with that she hopped away and before the creature had the chance to try and escape, a golden ray of heat descended from the rings, washing over it.

Visible waves, caused by the heat, appeared in the air as the blast continued. The creature screamed in pain as it thrashed around but nothing helped.

The ground below it, completely melted due to the heat and soon enough, it also succumbed to the attack.

When the attack finally receded, Astra stood atop what remained of the Eclipsed, brushing a bit of dust off her shoulder as if she had just finished a mild workout.

"See," she said, glancing at the dissolving corpse, "That gave you a better look after all."

Then she turned toward the jeep, raising an eyebrow when she saw Nox staring wide-eyed at her through the window.

"What?" she asked, hands on her hips. "You expected less?"

Chapter 10: Welcome To Solara Prime

After the Tier 3 Eclipsed, the two encountered no more obstacles....well more like they ran over most of the obstacles.

The two remained silent, with Astra going back to humming the tune she had been earlier without a care in the world.

She even sounded a bit happy, or maybe pleased?

Nox, on the other hand, was still caught up in the previous battle between Astra and the Tier 3 Eclipsed.

There were a couple of things he learnt from it, one, Solar knights were terrifying and two, Astra was **terrifying**.

And perhaps most importantly... she drove like she fought: with zero hesitation and an unhealthy disregard for the laws of physics.

"Is... is there a reason we're going this fast?" Nox finally asked, his grip on the 'oh sh*t' handle tightening.

Astra turned to him with a grin, her eyes twinkling. "Of course. The faster we go, the less chance something stupid decides to jump in front of us."

As if to prove her point, an Eclipsed no larger than a hyena crawled out from a crater just ahead, screeching as it lunged straight into their path.

Before Nox had the chance to say anything, she stepped on the gas, speeding the Jeep up and running straight through the creature.

The jeep jolted violently as they ran straight over it. The rear wheels lifted slightly before slamming back onto the ground, sending dust flying behind them.

"See?" Astra leaned back with a satisfied smile. "Obstacle cleared."

Nox just stared at her, speechless, his knuckles white on the assist grip. "You're insane..." he muttered under his breath.

If it was a suspicion before, then he was sure now, Astra definitely was a crazy woman.

"Hmm?" she tilted her head innocently. "What was that?"

"Nothing," he said quickly, turning to stare out the window.

She smirked faintly, eyes back on the road. "Thought so."

With that, the silence returned and Nox went back to hanging on for his dear life as Astra continued driving straight into craters and Eclipsed.

He had gotten used to it after a while, so much so that he was surprised when the vehicle wasn't mid air for a few seconds.

Sitting up straight, Nox realized that the road had transformed from a crater filled wasteland to a green filled one.

The transition was so sudden it almost felt unnatural, like crossing from one world into another.

"Wha—" Nox blinked, leaning forward. "When did the road... change?"

He could've sworn the last time he checked, there was a wide expanse of nothingness as far as his eyes could see.

Astra smiled knowingly, easing her foot off the accelerator just a bit. "Welcome to Solara Prime's outer perimeter. The light field keeps the corruption back. Once you're inside its range, no Eclipsed can cross the border."

From afar, Nox could see something that looked like a golden dome, one that blanketed a vague outline that looked like buildings

"And that's," Astra pointed with one hand towards the dome, "is Solara Prime."

"That's... Solara Prime?" Nox muttered, his voice almost lost in awe.

"Mhmm." Astra grinned proudly. "The biggest bastion of human civilization. Home to the Solar Knights, the Council, and the biggest pain in my ass....the academy."

He glanced at her sideways. "You sound... fond of it."

"Oh, I hate it," she replied cheerfully, "but I also have no choice but to love it."

The closer they got, the clearer the structures got, and soon enough, they were faced with a massive gate, one that held the golden symbol of the sun at the top.

Astra rolled down her window as they approached it. "Astra Dawn," she said casually, taking out her ID and giving it to the two guards stationed at the gate. "Zone Nine cleaned, one civilian survivor."

The guards exchanged a glance before straightening. "Ascended Dawn, ma'am," one said, his tone instantly turning more formal. "You were reported missing a day ago. The administration thought—"

"That I was dead?" Astra interrupted with a smirk. "Wouldn't be the first time....still, I feel hurt being underestimated this much."

The thing was, although she was received the order, **while on her Vacation**, she never really replied back to the order so the administration just assumed she went on with her 'Vacation', entered a rift.... since she was crazy enough to and died in one of them.

Which meant she could've ignored the order with little to no consequences?.... Damn it.

Also, Zone 9 was located in a place that would take passing through deepest in the wastelands to get to.

Even some seasoned Solar Knights rarely ventured that far without heavy support, and when they did, the survival rate was less than twenty percent.

No sane person would've gone in alone.

But Astra Dawn was many things. Sane wasn't one of them.

The guards hesitated, unsure whether to laugh or not.

Astra didn't wait for an answer, she waved a hand in dismissal. "Now, unless you want me running over the perimeter gate like I did the last one, maybe open up?"

This, they knew wasn't a joke. She had enough SE to power that vehicle to smash straight through the gates so they immediately scrambled to open them.

The gates let out a hiss as the mechanism pulled them open, revealing exactly how heavy they were.

The guards didn't even bother asking for Nox's information as protocols required since he was with Astra.

No sane person would dare question Astra Dawn.

She leaned an elbow on the window frame and flashed the guards a grin. "Good boys. You're learning." With that, she drove away.

The two knights at the checkpoint gave uneasy salutes only to let out a sigh of relief, Astra Dawn was an unpredictable person, and her actions was never in the world of normalcy, so they had been holding their breath all this while.

Meanwhile, Astra continued driving with a small smile on her face, raising her head to the rear view mirror which reflected Nox who was looking around in awe.

"You're drooling, mystery boy," she commented, causing him to jolt upright instantly.

"I—I'm not!" Nox wiped his mouth instinctively, even though there was nothing there. His face turned a faint shade of red, and Astra chuckled, clearly enjoying herself.

"Relax," she said with a grin. "Everyone looks like that their first time seeing Solara Prime, I'll show you around later, but first, let's get you changed."