

Abyssal A 801

Chapter 801: 'Control'

'Three above, Gwen's attacking from the left. Flares incoming right. Syrion preparing for physical counter.' Alice's eyes darted across the countless strands of energy surrounding her.

Reading, understanding, analysing the data and responding with the correct triggered cast.

Her brain was on fire, the world was moving both slow and fast.

Possibilities coming and going.

Pathways to attacks, dodges and even opportunities for her own retaliation.

But that was being greedy.

What she needed right now, what she intended to achieve, was the perfect defence!

Alice rolled across the ground, her hands gliding along the dirt and creating three nodes of blood.

Each exploding to form a spear, dispersing the flaming arrows that Gwen sends over.

Without even turning around, Alice snapped her finger, Tiamat's wings expelling a wave of energy to disrupt Syrion's attack.

'Don't be greedy for big attacks. Efficiency and speed, nothing more nothing less. Let my instincts do the work. Understand the attack that pose a danger!'

Void Step!

Appearing in the air, Alice narrowly dodged a field of swords that Syrion conjured up while Gwen appeared behind her.

Her blade in hand and preparing to strike.

She had also activated her Vision, capturing Alice's every move in those eyes of hers.

Alice knew she was slower when it came to capturing the physical information as well as any predictions.

But in the time it took for Gwen's attack to be fired...

She was faster!

*CLANG!!!

Void Fang intercepted Gwen's attack.

It wasn't because Alice swung it faster.

It wasn't because Alice had prepositioned.

It was because Alice disassembled its form, creating an ever shifting matrix of defence.

Gwen's flames lashed out, it struck against the obsidian weapon but it could not penetrate the defence at all.

The main difference between the Shard of Kara and Void Fang was the fact that Void Fang couldn't be destroyed by conventional means!

With Void Fang, Alice didn't need to worry about the incoming attack most of the time.

But with the shard, she had to be careful with its durability.

"I haven't forgotten about you." Alice's eyes darted to her right.

A formation of ice barred Syrion's way, forcing him to spend an extra moment to cut it apart in order to reach Alice.

That moment bought Alice the time she needed to create an array of blood weapons.

Void Flux Cleave!

She targeted the invisible threads extending from Syrion's body to the blades, forcing them to fly out of control.

Triggered Cast!

Gwen tried to follow up but was immediately blocked by Alice's triggered cast.

The requirements had been fulfilled and a wave of blood disrupted her casting process.

Right now, in this moment, Alice felt high. She felt like she could see everything that's happening, going to happen.

Her lips slowly curved into a menacing grin. Laughter escaped from her throat.

This... euphoric feeling.

Ah~ how she's missed this~

But now, she understood the source.

The truth of what boils her blood with ecstasy.

Control!

The feeling of controlling the world around her with her powers.

To be the one to put the collar rather than suffer it.

Alice understood it finally.

The desire rearing its head from deep within.

Her eyes were bloodshot, blood dripped from her nose but she smiled.

She smiled and laughed, dodging, weaving, countering everything that Syrion and Gwen were throwing at her.

This! This was the high that she was chasing!

Physical Resonance!

Her body suddenly transformed into a puddle of blood, shocking Syrion who watched his attack phase through Alice.

Her body reforming behind him.

*CLANG!!!

His blades were held in place by a cage created via Void Fang.

'I did it! I figured it out-'

Darkness.

"Argh!" Alice sat up, her eyes snapped open. Her head felt like it was about to split apart from the pain.

The world spun and it refused to stop, forcing Alice to lie back down again.

'What the hell...'

[Care to guess what happened?] Cayla cut in as Alice glanced over.

She could see Cayla staring at her with a set of neutral eyes. Calm, patient.

Neither angry nor happy.

But it gave Alice a chill.

She messed up.

'I don't know...' Alice sat on her knees.

She didn't know what she did wrong but she knew something bad must've happened for Cayla to be like this.

[Alice... *Sigh... Sometimes I don't even know. I've been influenced by you, in a bad way. All these reckless plans, adjustments on the fly. They've been working. Too well. Yesterday was a bad reminder.] Cayla took a deep breath and sighed.

Fatigue.

Alice stayed silent.

[You overloaded yourself. You couldn't hear me or Alyss warning you. Alyss tried to take over, but you snatched it back without even knowing. She didn't have the chance. Whatever you built was too much for your brain.

[Mush. That's what it was. You were healing but you were also burning yourself to ashes. Thankfully, the moment you lost consciousness, your body started to repair itself desperately. Otherwise... *Sigh... What happened to the safety, Alice? What happened to the limitations we set in place?] Cayla asked.

Alice was silent.

[Why did you turn them off? Pursuing whatever was beyond that threshold? We put it there for a reason. To keep your life safe even amidst a sea of unknowns and dangers. And you ignored me and Alyss, shutting off the limitations to pursue that high.] Cayla asked.

She wasn't angry, simply betrayed.

Alice was tunnel visioned. She was so focused on reaching her peak that she subconsciously removed all of her limiters.

Limiters that they designed to make sure they could back out if things didn't go well.

But Alice shut it off.

Alice wanted to say something. But what could she even say?

She didn't even remember Cayla or Alyss warning her.

She didn't remember shutting off the limiters. She didn't remember Alyss taking over and forcing her away from the controls.

All she remembered was losing herself in that moment of control. In that high before everything shut off.

'I'm sorry...' Alice clenched the edges of her skirt. Guilt flooded her chest.

[We can't just put these safety thresholds in place just for you to disable them when it matters most. That's not why they're there. They're supposed to be a sign telling you that it's time to stop. To reconsider. Not another barrier for you to smash past Alice.

[I can accept it if you try something reckless. Even if the results are bad. I can accept all of it since that's just who you are. You're curious, you want to experiment. I get that and I'm with you for this journey. And my job is to be the one to pull you back with Alyss if you go too far.

[But how can you expect us to do so if you just ignore our words or ignore the safety thresholds? Even our last resort of having Alyss take over was thrown back at us.] Cayla asked.

She wasn't blaming Alice, she just wanted her to know the core issue at hand.

Yesterday was an eye opener. For her and Alyss.

To truly understand the fact that Alice was the one in control of this body and her actions.

Even if they want to intervene with Alyss forcefully taking over, Alice can snatch it back if she desires.

It didn't matter whether or not she tried to keep things fair.

In that moment of pure focus, Alyss was a prisoner and so was she.

'Let's drop it here. All of us are still recovering from yesterday.' Alyss spoke up without turning around. She sat, staring at nothingness.

Thoughts clouded her mind.

Cayla looked like there were more things she wanted to say.

But after turning her gaze to Alice, she let out a sigh.

[Alright.]

Alice slowly opened her eyes.

She was still suffering from a headache but Cayla's words were far worse than the aftereffects of her rampage.

They hurt because it was true.

"What to do..." Alice muttered.

Mental limiters were one thing.

Disabling them shouldn't be easy, especially when they're tied to safety.

Not only that, but if she died, that didn't impact just herself. More people would be dragged into this issue and thinking about those that she would've left behind...

Alice clenched her fist.

There was a lot that needed to be figured out. But for now, the key thing was going to be for Alyss and Cayla to have a hard, surefire method of gaining control.

They were people that Alice trusted with her life so putting her life in their hands was something she wasn't afraid of.

As for how she'll achieve that... She had an idea.

Not a dangerous one, thankfully.

She needed to set up an array so that it could be accessed easily by the two of them.

". . . Never mind." Alice paused.

Her head was still spinning from a headache. The damage wasn't light.

She's an injured patient so she should act like one. Unless she wanted to get another scolding from Cayla.

###

After Alice collapsed, Syrion decided to halt the sparring for a day or so. One was to give Alice some time to recover.

And the other was for Gwen to digest everything that she saw.

She sat by the swing, gently pushing herself back and forth.

Of course, she was given permission by Syrion.

He thought that Gwen would be able to clear her mind and think about things carefully if she enjoyed herself on that swing set.

And to an extent, it did.

She recalled the motions during their spar.

The way Alice was reacting to things. The swinging arc of her blade, the formation of her spells. The patterns abruptly changing based on new information.

Through her Vision, she saw it all.

And it was...

"Beautiful." Gwen muttered.

Like free flowing water, Alice was adapting herself to the shifting landscape. To move herself in the best way possible.

Gwen closed her eyes.

She tried to imagine herself in the same situation.

How she would move and react to the attacks.

She couldn't move like Alice so she needed her own method.

A method unique to herself.

She needed to look at herself objectively, understand her strengths and weaknesses.

Then use those to her advantage.

She needed 'freedom' in her movements.

And with the idea of Freedom in her mind, Gwen began deconstruct her own fighting style.

Chapter 802: Introduction To A New Assistant

Alice decided to rest for a full day without doing anything. Simply allowing the headache to pass while analysing what had gone wrong.

The core issue is that she got drunk off the feeling of control.

A discovery that she made during her rampage.

While she knew that her time in the Zenia prison had changed her, she didn't think the issue would be so deeply rooted.

So much so that her core desire was to control everything she could get her hands on.

A reversal of what had happened to her.

When she was trapped and even stripped of the choice to end it all.

But now that she had identified the core issue, Alice understood that she had to be careful not to lose herself in that desire.

Although... the fact that she was already bleeding from the nose the moment she activated that technique was a sign of the insane burden on her body.

Just lining everything up and activating it damaged her.

Therefore, keeping it activated for a long time would no doubt break her body beyond what she's used to.

Scratching her eyebrow, Alice sighed.

The best option here was to break down the array she set up and rebuild it from the ground up.

She has to accept two things. First, this was no longer just 'Vision'. The fact that she could react to energy turned this from Vision to something else entirely.

Second, she still hasn't accessed Vision.

What she did was a poor imitation through brute force.

So she'll proceed with the same mindset.

Not mastering Vision was fine. Just like how she accepted the fact that she couldn't master Martial Arts like Alyss, she'll adapt in her own way.

Plus, she had always worked better with energy rather than physical powers. The fact that she could master Zone was simply because of Cayla and her natural reaction speed.

'To use the new Vision, I need to set a hard time limit based on what my body can take. And between uses, I need a hard cooldown for my body to recover.' Alice folded her arms.

She had to design the new technique in a way that minimises her risk while also providing the most benefits.

Automate it so that all she needed to do was to inject her energy into the array and the skill will activate.

Then deactivate once the time limit has been reached.

Easier said than done since she didn't know the full capacity of her technique. She was too drunk on her power to take notes.

Scratching her hair, Alice was about to let out a sigh when Cayla tapped her shoulder inside her mental scape.

[I recorded everything yesterday.] She handed Alice a stack of reports that she had written before walking away.

Even though she was still upset, she was still giving Alice a helping hand.

Accepting the stack of reports, Alice wanted to say something to Cayla but she had already walked away.

'Still upset.' Alice smiled helplessly.

She couldn't blame her.

Who wouldn't be upset?

But now that she had the reports from Cayla, she'll be able to turn the triggered casts, arrays and foundations into a skill that she can activate at will.

Similar to Void Flux but more complex.

Dangerous.

Which is why Alice will take extra care into placing hard restrictions. A fail safe that shuts down the skill no matter what.

No exceptions.

Thinking about it carefully, Alice decided to restructure her casting method.

Passive triggered casts and active skills that she can fire.

She'll keep a mental note to know what can and can't be used, timers on cooldowns and so on.

Through this regulation, she'll be able to create a new system that augments on what she already knows.

###

"So, what do you think?" Syrion asked as Griselda folded her arms. A deep frown on her face.

Based on what Syrion had described, the girl involved in the spar should've died.

No questions asked.

But she lived? Not only that but recovering?

Something was off.

There was a silent consent between them. Syrion trusted in Griselda and thus she'll keep this matter private.

He simply wanted clarification and as someone who understood how souls work, she was there to provide it.

"I don't know where to begin. But I suppose my main question would be how that girl is even alive. However, I believe that's not what you're looking for." Griselda sighed, turning her gaze to Syrion.

"I think there's a lot of potential in that new technique of hers. Something that's fundamentally different from everything we know about. Reacting to spells before they're even fired. Countering attacks even though she's not focused on it." Syrion praised.

Griselda was rather surprised.

While Syrion was someone who didn't shy away from giving praise, this was probably the first time she's heard him sound so impressed.

"Well, if what you said is true then yes, I agree. There's a lot of potential to be had in her skill. But without seeing it for myself, I can't really judge it well. But let's set aside the potential of things for now." Griselda shook her head, wanting to pull Syrion back before he got too excited.

"What you described to me was the girl overloading her soul. She put too much burden on her body and it broke. Usually, and I mean usually, the one who suffers this kind of injury would be dead. Soul wise. The body may live but nothing is attached anymore."

Syrion fell silent.

"I'm sure you're aware of the... implications of such a thing. So my question for you is 'who' is she. This girl that you're giving advice to. Though perhaps it's better to rephrase it as 'what' is she. Do you understand?" Griselda asked with a helpless sigh.

While she may understand how souls work to some degree, she can't exactly help if the target is someone who goes against conventional wisdom.

It's better for her to see the girl for herself, with her own eyes.

At least then, she'll be able to better understand what she was working with.

"You know, one of them is the daughter of an Apostle from the Sun right? Wouldn't that be..." Syrion scratched his cheek.

"And? I don't see how that's an issue. Plus, it's not like Lumiria is too bothered by what I get up to. She's more focused on trying to win over Tristan than anything." Griselda shrugged.

Though... if she could help it, she'd rather not get herself involved with the Order more than she already has. Unfortunately, it's only from within can she actually try to change things that matter.

So she's stuck in this role until further notice.

"Hmm... I'll have to ask the girls what they think about it. After all, you are from conflicting factions." Syrion chuckled while Griselda shrugged.

"Up to you."

###

"You what?" Alice's smile twitched.

Currently, both Syrion and Gwen were in her room. Well... calling it 'her' room wasn't quite accurate as Gwen has been sleeping here rather than her own room.

But that's not the point.

They were checking up on her physical condition, making sure that everything was okay when Syrion suddenly dropped the news.

"I'm thinking of inviting a friend of mine to take a look at your condition. Granted, my friend is from the Moon Church so this is why I'm asking you two. She's someone I trust, but I also understand if you two have your reservations." Syrion clarified while Alice folded her arms.

The Moon church was... an interesting subject. She wasn't exactly adverse to it considering her connection to Tristan.

But not everyone was like him.

What's to stop whoever Syrion brings over from reporting to Lumiria?

That was Alice's main issue.

"What do you think?" Alice turned to Gwen.

At the end of the day, she could disguise herself if needed. To hide the source of her energy and so on. But Gwen? She couldn't do the same.

Gwen deliberated it carefully.

Alice seemed like she didn't mind so the final decision goes to her.

After a moment of silence, Gwen made her decision.

"If she's going to be helpful, I don't see why not."

Scratching her hair, Alice nodded her head.

"Alright, I'll reapply my disguise then. Just in case ya know?" Alice shrugged.

###

"This is Griselda. She's an Apostle of the Moon but she's promised to keep things private and I trust her." Syrion introduced as Griselda gave a small wave.

Gwen was frozen with shock. She didn't think Syrion would bring an Apostle of all people!

As for Alice, she grabbed Syrion by the arm and dragged him away.

"Oi! Oi! You didn't tell us it was a f*cking Apostle you're bringing over here!" Alice whispered over with bloodshot eyes.

She already felt like she was going to have a heart attack after seeing Shiera. But now, it was Griselda of all people!

"Did I forget to mention she's an Apostle?"

"Yes! Yes you f*cking did! If I knew she was an Apostle, I wouldn't have said yes! This is very f*cking different from just hiding energy!" Alice wanted to smack Syrion over the head.

Against the other members of the Moon Church, even against Cardinals, Alice was confident she could do something.

But not against an Apostle! Trying to hide against an Apostle, one who specialised in the Soul was asking for death!

Syrion scratched his chin.

"Hmm, I looked for her since I figured it'll be good for you. Especially what happened before."

Alice groaned.

She looked back at Griselda who was talking to Gwen. She was acting rather casual with Gwen, even mentioning how she saw her when Gwen was younger.

Then she looked at Syrion who didn't see anything wrong.

Alice groaned.

"Are you SURE she'll keep things private?"

"I'm sure of it." Syrion reassured.

Hesitating for a moment, Alice returned next to Gwen's side.

Griselda stopped her conversation and looked at Alice.

Her brows creased for a moment before she looked at Syrion.

"I'm guessing this is the girl you want me to take a look at?" She pointed at Alice.

Alice wanted to retort but how could she? She could only stay silent.

"Yep, she's the crazy one." Syrion nodded.

"Heh~" Folding her arms, Griselda leaned close to Alice.

She didn't break eye contact at all. As though she was looking at something beyond Alice...

Something that couldn't be seen normally.

"Say, are you aware of how many times you have 'died'?"

Chapter 803: Death Count

"Say, are you aware of how many times you have 'died'?" Griselda asked.

A deep frown on her face.

Alice blinked her eyes in confusion.

Died? Since when?

"I mean... If I was dead, I wouldn't be standing here, would I?" Alice's smile twitched.

"Hmm... That's not what I'm seeing. You've died. A lot. Enough to fill a city with your corpses. This... No this isn't normal." Griselda took a step back, turning to Syrion with a frown.

"When you told me the girl recovered, you were wrong. She didn't recover, she died and came back to life. This isn't regeneration."

Syrion folded his arms.

He was confused but Griselda was the souls expert. While he always knew that Alice's regeneration had something off with it, he didn't think it was literal death.

"Wait no, that doesn't explain how Kaia is here. If she died, she wouldn't be walking around." Gwen furrowed her brows.

"Which is why I'm saying this isn't normal. I don't know what I'm looking at." Griselda sighed, turning to Alice.

Alice didn't say anything.

Her words kept repeating in her head.

This isn't regeneration.

Then every time she recovered from a heavy injury... that was death?

Was it similar to how Rosalyn clones herself? By creating an orb and reconstructing her body after killing her old vessel?

But... if she was dying every time she regenerated, how was her soul still in tact?

And more than that, it didn't explain how her regeneration had gotten stronger as time passed.

She was simply resistant to Abyss Blood back in the Zenia prison. Taking a day to recover from an overdose.

But now, she could regenerate half of her body with just a bit of time.

'Is it because of my Sigils?' Alice frowned.

Perhaps her regeneration factor was tied to how much power she could wield.

"Hello? Can you hear me? Are you deaf?" Griselda waved her hands in front of Alice with a frown.

"Ah! Sorry, what were you saying?"

"I'm saying, show me this regeneration of yours. Maybe I can figure out what's really going on." Griselda sighed, repeating what she had said earlier.

Hesitating for a moment, Alice nodded her head.

She raised her hand, detonating a Void Flux inside, not even caring about the pain.

Before the blood could splatter anywhere, it started to converge around the wound and a new hand appeared.

". . ." Grisela took a deep breath.

Clearly thinking about something.

"Again."

*BANG!

Blowing up her arm, Alice regenerated it.

Griselda's frown creased deeper.

"Again."

*BANG!

". . ." Griselda started to pace around, mumbling to herself.

"Leave her be, she won't react to you for a while. In the meantime, shall we do some more sparring? Gwen, any changes?" Syrion clapped his hands, turning to Gwen who shrugged.

"A little. I'm working on a little something but it's not going well." Gwen sighed.

"Oh? Let's hear it. Maybe we can pitch some ideas." Syrion suggested, gesturing for the two to move over to the table. That way, they give Griselda some time and space to figure something out, while their training session wouldn't get delayed.

"Well... I'm thinking of breaking down my attacks and movements into groups. That way, I can arrange it however I want based on the situation. But it's not flowing well, there's too much delay between each move." Gwen admitted with a sigh.

Alice folded her arms and looked inwardly.

'Twinnie, isn't this perfect for you?'

'Hm? Sorry, I wasn't listening. What's up?' Alyss glanced over.

Even though she was hiding it, Alice could see that she was feeling a little dejected.

'Are... you okay?'

If Alyss wasn't feeling well, training could wait. Alice wanted to make sure everything was okay with Alyss first.

'Yeah I'm fine, just brief me again on what's happening.' Alyss shook her head.

But Alice wasn't convinced.

This wasn't how Alyss usually acts.

No doubt the incident had stirred something in her, something that upset Alyss.

Alice clenched her fist.

She had some guesses but didn't want to say it.

Perhaps forcefully taking back control reminded Alyss of their time back in the Zenia prison.

While Alice may be free to do whatever she wanted, Alyss was still confined within her body.

A prisoner.

In the end, Alice sighed and put it on hold. She could tell Alyss didn't want to discuss this issue. Forcing it would only make it worse.

'Oh that's pretty easy then. She just needs to fill it with connecting moves.' Alyss replied after hearing about Gwen's situation.

'You know I'm not too great with these things. Why don't you take this time to explain it to her personally?' Alice suggested.

'Nah it's fine-'

'Come on, you know you teach martial arts better than I do. Plus it'll be a good change of pace wouldn't it?' Alice smiled.

Seeing this, Alyss scratched her hair and let out a sigh.

'Fine...'

"Gwen, I got a suggestion." Alice spoke up as the two turned to her.

"I'd like to introduce you to someone who might be able to help out with your issue. She's great with martial arts and she's already thought of a solution." She hyped up Alyss as Gwen's eyes shimmered with expectation.

"Who is it?"

"A twin of mine. Hold on a second, I'll bring her over now." Alice grinned, snapping her finger.

Energy coiled around her limbs before being hidden by her disguise.

In that moment, Syrion detected a shift in Alice.

"Yo... So Alice told me you were struggling with linking up your moves?" Alyss spoke bluntly.

Her tone was serious, different from the light hearted attitude at Alice would usually carry herself with.

"Have you considered making connecting moves?" Alyss asked.

"Huh? Ah, no I don't know what they are." Gwen stammered as Alyss began teaching her about the foundations of martial arts. How each move would flow into another, suitable skills and so on.

With Alyss being focused on teaching Gwen, Alice started to group up her abilities into individual skills.

Cayla couldn't hold back her curiosity and glanced over.

Only to see Alice's smug grin looking back at her.

[Urgh...]

'Hehe~ I knew you couldn't stay mad at me for long.' Alice grinned happily as she jumped over, swinging herself onto Cayla's back.

[Hey! I'm still mad!]

'Sure~ Anyways, help me take a look at this. What do you think?' Alice created an array in front of her as Cayla glanced over.

She paused in mild surprise.

Instead of being reckless... Alice had actually packed it full of safety nets! Ones that she can't disable at a whim!

She immediately sat Alice down and pressed her hand against Alice's forehead.

[Did you get a fever? Are you still injured from yesterday? What's going on?]

'Okay first of all, rude. Second of all, I'm not injured. I just figured what you said yesterday wasn't wrong. And... With Griselda saying that I 'died', I think it's about time I reinvent a few things. With safety in mind of course.' Alice rolled her eyes.

The new array that Alice had created was similar to her cell casts but different.

For cell casts, they weren't necessarily skills but rather fuel. Each cell is a unit of fuel and certain abilities would cost extra.

However, with the way Alice fought, that casting style was mostly ignored, favouring triggered casts instead.

The new array was a formation that activated the necessary abilities for the skill.

For example, if Alice wanted to use Void Axis, the new array would activate her resonance along with the other necessary components.

And with the array being largely automatic, Alice would be able to focus on other things during the cast instead of making sure everything was activated.

But the best function of the new array was its ability to perform a diagnostic on Alice's body!

Whenever she's about to cast, a quick scan would be performed internally. Measuring the stress, energy level and stamina.

If any of it was found lacking, the still would refuse to activate.

Then, if she were to run out of energy mid way through despite having enough, the skill would halt, transforming into a lesser version in order to prevent overexertion.

Cayla rubbed her eyes.

[Is it my birthday? Alice? Safety? In one sentence?] For Cayla, seeing this style of casting was a dream come true.

She wouldn't need to worry too much about Alice randomly blowing herself up with this array.

'Nah, it's just my way of saying sorry. I figured words alone aren't enough so... Something like this might be well... better.' Alice scratched her cheek.

This was something she should've thought about long ago. But in her pursuit of power, she forgot the lesson that Allura taught her at the very start of their training.

To treasure her body a little more.

To make sure that she was safe.

*Sniff...

Cayla wiped away her tears of happiness and hugged Alice, swinging her around.

'Blergh! You're choking me!!' Alice tapped out but Cayla wasn't letting go.

[Ah~ You really are cute Alice. Thank you for listening.] Cayla was beyond happy. Her greatest desire was for Alice to stay safe and here she was, presenting a casting style that focused on safety.

What more could she ask for?

'I'm going to die!' Alice flailed her legs as Cayla quickly let go.

[Ah!]

'Ah my ass! Keep swinging me and another death was going to pile up!' Alice grumbled, sprawling out on the ground.

'Anyways, I still need help grouping my skills up and programming them into the array.'

[Say no more. I got it covered.] Cayla grinned, flexing her arms.

Since Alice had taken the time to prepare the foundations, it's only natural for her to help out.

Grouping information? Organisation? Cayla was experienced in this department!

Seeing Cayla jumping behind her desk to array her skills, Alice sat up with a smile.

Next training session, Syrion will be in for a surprise!

Chapter 804: Final Embers

'When it comes to the attack skills, we don't really need to set them up into the array. Keeping my attacks flexible would be ideal.'

[Makes sense. I'm guessing you want to turn techniques that take long prep right? So physical resonance for the blood form would be one.]

'Yeah, it takes a bit long to activate everything in sequence. In battle, that gap would be pretty dangerous so the chances of me using it aren't high. But if we turn it into an array, it's a good panic skill to use in order to avoid direct damage.'

Alice and Cayla sorted out her abilities, turning them into skills with hard durations and cooldowns.

'The array is getting a bit big. Even with the automation, it might take a while to activate.' Alice frowned.

[No worries, we can layer them on top of one another. Different parts have different speeds. Just make sure they finish in sequence and the skill will activate regardless.] Cayla didn't even hesitate for a single beat.

Her hands worked while her eyes darted from array to array, etching them into the walls of Alice's mental scape.

Once it's finished, a single injection of energy would be enough. Then, if the skill isn't ready, it'll be dim. A visual cue.

Cayla took a break, leaning back and looking at the wall of arrays.

The skills that Alice had mastered over the course of her journey as a Hunter. A mural of her progression.

With each skill, Cayla could remember the stories that were tied to it. The lessons she received, the battles she had to fight.

Then she remembered Kazira's Sigil.

This time, Cayla had an idea.

[Alice.]

'Hm? What is it?' Alice glanced over curiously.

[Have you ever thought about perhaps turning these into something similar to a Sigil? To allow anyone inside your Second Resonance to use it?] Cayla suggested.

Alice was about to respond when she froze up.

She glanced up at the arrays.

While they require different Sigils to activate, they're only taking a portion of the powers.

If she were to dissect each Sigil then merge them together...

'An artificial Sigil... One where I can create a skill for someone to use...' Alice widened her eyes.

Ideas flooding into her mind, fresh inspiration.

Countless possibilities appearing all at once!

The potential was... limitless!

Say she was fighting Kazira again. If she was to read the history of Kazira's battle then transform the knowledge of her fighting style into a Sigil, she could bestow it to all of her allies!

Effectively, everyone would know Kazira's every move and options!

Alice's smile trembled.

'Cayla you're a genius.' Alice laughed.

[I know I am, so keep the praise coming.] Cayla flipped her hair.

###

With Alyss helping Gwen, Syrion took the backseat and sat by the tree.

Griselda took this chance to sit down next to him.

"Seems like you gathered your thoughts."

"A little. But she is a strange one." Griselda sighed.

Never in her countless years as an Apostle has she seen a soul so strange. Each major injury a rebirth of the entire body and soul.

To 'reset' her body into its prime condition.

"Is her regeneration stumping you?" Syrion asked curiously, surprised that Griselda was having so much trouble.

"This time it's not just her regeneration. You know about my condition right? My capacity of Spiritual Hearts." Grisela asked, sinking her puppet hands into her shadow.

The countless shadows tethered to the myriad of Spiritual Hearts she's gathered.

Syrion froze. He recalled a conversation he had with her in the past. An argument of sorts.

He criticised her acquisition and accumulation of Spiritual hearts at the cost of others. While she argued its beauty.

"Ah jeez, stop looking at me with those eyes." Griselda pouted, kicking Syrion on the ass.

"I've changed. If I didn't, do you think my supply would be slowly dwindling? I'm only taking it from those who are about to die on the battlefield. Not dragging anyone innocent into it." She revealed, hugging her knees in annoyance.

"Plus... It's what you asked me to do, right?" She snuck a few glances over to Syrion.

"Right, I'll be honest, I just remember how much of a bit-"

"How much a what now? Go on, finish your sentence." Griselda's smile twitched, raising her arm with a silent threat.

"Ahem, I mean I only remember how much you've changed over the years ahaha." Syrion laughed, scratching the back of his head.

Rolling her eyes, Griselda sighed and rested her chin on her knees.

Her eyes drifted over to Alice.

"She's going to be in danger. If Lumiria or Nanna finds her, things won't end well."

"You sound conflicted."

"Why wouldn't I be?" Griselda sighed. "A bundle of mysteries is exactly what Nanna likes. And what I used to like. Oh the lengths Nanna will go to get her hands on a prime subject."

"Used to? Man, more time must've passed than I thought. What changed?" Syrion asked curiously.

He knew how much Griselda loved to experiment with her ideas in the past.

To find power and potential in Spiritual Hearts.

But for her to give it up, something big must've happened.

Griselda scratched her cheek, eyes sneaking a glance at Syrion.

They made eye contact for a moment as Griselda quickly looked away.

"Well... I just... Mnm. I just found something else I like, so I lost interest in experimenting." She coughed lightly.

Syrion tilted his head. He folded his arms, contemplating before clapping his hands together.

"I got it!"

"Huh?" Griselda panicked.

"You must've enjoyed making puppets right? I mean, your vessel right now is carefully designed by your own hands. It must've taken a long time to do so." Syrion gave her a thumbs up.

The blush on Griselda's face immediately disappeared.

"Yeah... Puppets." She sighed.

"It looks a lot better than before. A beautiful vessel for a kind person." Syrion praised, unaware of Griselda's predicament.

"You... I swear..." Griselda hid her face in her arms.

One moment he's clueless and the next he says something like this. Does he want to give her a heart attack??? Griselda didn't know.

"Did I say something wrong?"

"No you didn't. But I'm still going to hit you anyway." Griselda sighed.

"Why?!"

After a quick round of beatings, Griselda felt satisfied.

"I'm going to create a new puppet for them to fight. Something that'll help record some details that I need. After that, I think I'll be able to solve the soul issue." Griselda glanced over to Alyss who was teaching Gwen some moves that she could potentially use.

The ideal way to shift her body, footwork and even mental warfare.

"Right now, from what you've told me, the girl doesn't know the limits of her own soul. Her capacity. For her to improve, she needs to first understand what she can or can't withstand." Griselda explained.

"But beyond that, there's not much I can do to help. She's probably the most familiar with her own condition. And I can tell you now, this is beyond the scope of what I usually work with."

"I see... So she's an anomaly even for you."

"Yep. I specialise in souls. But for this girl, souls are just a small part of it. Hell, even the soul that the Spiritual hearts are anchored to felt... artificial. No, that's not accurate. The soul has gone through natural growth, but a portion has been artificially modified." Griselda scratched her hair.

"I loathe to admit it, but whoever messed around with her soul knows more about it than I ever will."

Hearing this kind of response from Griselda was a surprise for Syrion. Especially since she's the Apostle of a religion that's all about the soul.

"Sorry." Griselda apologised with a downcast look. Even though Syrion had brought her over for some help, she wasn't able to resolve the issue.

"It's fine, you've been a great help so far. And soon, the training session will be coming to an end. Gwen's been steadily improving while Kaia is proving herself to be a monster of instincts. There won't be much left to teach them."

Griselda held her breath.

She had mentally prepared herself before but after seeing Syrion training with Alice and Gwen, she had forgotten about it.

She acted ignorant despite knowing what was to come. But now the truth was looking her dead in the eyes once more.

This was probably going to be the last few times she's going to talk to him.

Griselda struggled. She thought she was ready, she thought she had prepared herself.

But now that she was talking and laughing with him again, everything came crumbling down.

"I'll need a bit of time... alone. I'll get the puppet sorted by tomorrow and we can prepare for the spar." Griselda forced a smile, walking away before Syron could even say anything.

The longer she stayed around him, the harder it became for her.

She didn't know whether or not she would do something she'd regret. In a moment of weakness... lengths she'll go... Griselda sped up her footsteps.

Almost desperate to leave this place.

Looking at her back, Syron sighed.

"I'm already a dead man, why such an attachment?" He smiled bitterly, knowing that his old friend didn't want to see him go.

Turning his attention to Alyss and Gwen, Syron clenched his fist.

Even if the two girls weren't ready, his time was running out.

He could feel it. He was burning out.

Now that he finally reached his home, his journey was complete.

The next time he switches out with the pale knight within, he's not coming back out.

Therefore, while he was still himself, he hoped everything would come to an end.

Chapter 805: Griselda's Puppet

It took a day but Griselda presented a puppet to the trio. Alice had finished the creation of her array but never got the chance to properly test it out in a combat scenario.

Gwen got her training tips from Alyss and all that's left was to put it into motion.

But looking at the puppet, Alice was a little hesitant. With good reason as well.

"Are you sure... this is a puppet?" Alice's smile twitched, pointing at the monstrosity that stood before them.

The puppet stood before them like a fractured divinity. A monster sculpted from flesh, porcelain and bones.

Half of its body shimmered with marble white and gold, the other black obsidian with veins of crimson.

Its face split in two. On the marbled side, an eye of gold that burned with grace. On the other, a vertical slit like that of a dragon. Pulsing with rage and malice. Behind its head hovered a tarnished halo of gold, dripping with blood.

Yet despite his appearance, the puppet had a face of serenity. As though it was at peace.

"Yep, I made it myself. Looks good right?" Griselda puffed up her chest proudly.

Gwen was a little hesitant to give her praises though.

Same with Alice. Although, that was for a different reason.

She could sense the souls attached to the puppet, controlling it.

Rather than a puppet, it was more accurate to call it a vessel of souls.

"I'll be controlling the vessel to some extent so you two don't need to hold back." Griselda reassured.

Syrion had already stepped back while Gwen sighed and drew her weapon.

Thinking about it, Alice scratched her hair and nodded.

Regardless of what's being done, having a training session with an Apostle was something Alice didn't want to give up.

The lessons she learned in the Inverted World stuck to her till this day. And no doubt, she'll be learning more during this spar.

Seeing the two were ready, Griselda took a step back and her body appeared by the tree with the swing.

With a single snap of her fingers, a barrier was created around the house and swing.

"Just a little precaution since this one might be rougher than the others." Griselda chuckled.

Alice didn't really think it was necessary but who was she to judge?

Regardless, Alice observed the puppet in front of her.

Two limbs, one holding a sword the other controlling a orb surrounded by golden rings.

In a sense, it looked similar to her personal artifact.

'Is it a mixed fighter like I am? Hmm... setting aside the souls, he doesn't feel too strong. Not much energy surrounding him either.' Alice frowned.

Syrion raised his hand.

"Begin!"

*BANG!!!

"!!!" Alice's pupils constricted. The puppet's sword was mere millimetres away from her nose as Gwen intercepted at the last moment!

Her Vision surrounding the entire area as she parried the first strike.

'SH*T! IT'S FAST!'

Slamming her hand down, Alice was about to create a pulse of energy to push it away when the puppet swung the orb in its hands.

Immediately, Alice's world began to spin. A hallucination? No, not quite.

[Soul damage!] Cayla shouted, forcefully injecting energy into one of the arrays that Alice had set up.

Tiamat's wings unfurled from her back, absorbing the ambient energy. And in front of Alice, a single spark spun to life with the power of the Void.

The silhouette of a dragon manifested behind her.

In the instant where Cayla injected energy into the skill, six rings formed in front of the spark, compressing and pressing against the Puppet's body.

"Oh sh*t..." Griselda stopped leaning against the tree. She could see the sudden surge in energy around Alice, the power contained within that single spark.

A singularity spun to life in Alice's eyes as she fired!

*RUMBLE!!!

A torrent of burning white hot energy burst out, slamming against the puppet's body and sent it crashing into the distance.

The grown split in two, scorched by the heat of Alice's attack.

Gwen, who was parrying the puppet's attack moment ago, almost dropped her sword.

Her smile twitched in shock as she looked at Alice who had fired that attack with minimal preparation!

Wasn't abilities like this supposed to have a long charge up!? What the hell happened to it???

Alice winced lightly. Even though she had put several safety parameters into place, having that much energy gather in her body then expelled hurt.

A lot.

Her right arm trembled from the aftereffects.

'Yep, we definitely need to put a hard cooldown between attack skills. It doesn't matter if they're ready or not.' Alice made a mental note while Cayla adjusted the arrays.

As the dust cleared, they saw the puppet crouching in a crater. The obsidian flesh flaring out to form a shield of sorts but they could tell it was hurt.

Resonance!

Gwen didn't give it any time to rest. Immediately entering her resonance, she lunged towards the puppet with Vision at full power.

"Guess it's my turn." Alice grinned, injecting energy into another array.

Her variant of Vision.

Immediately, Alice felt the strain on her body. The silhouette of her soul manifesting behind her while the crimson crown loomed.

Forced level up!

Void Steps!

*CLANG!

The ground beneath the puppet fractured under the weight of Gwen's strike.

From behind, Alice came in with a Void Flux cleave!

The halo above the puppet began to shimmer as both Alice and Gwen froze.

Intent and action out of sync, their body not listening to their desires.

A synchronization between soul and body.

'Crap! No wonder he didn't have much energy. The fuel he uses is the soul!

'Cayla! Turn Duality into an array, full power! Normal controls!' Alice commanded as the Sigil of Duality lit up on her body.

Rather than inverting the physical controls, Alice forcefully wrangled it back to normal!

Not only that, but she deactivated her version of Vision for now. With the puppet using souls as fuel rather than energy, keeping the skill on wouldn't do much for their situation.

Absolute Zone would be sufficient.

Griselda creased her brows seeing the power of duality spreading across the area but said nothing.

Gwen coated her blade with fire, unleashing a two step combo against the puppet who parried both.

Alice tried to fire a Void Flux point blank but the orb constricted her casting once more.

'Let me.' Alyss spoke as Alice immediately tagged out.

Turning Void Fang into a set of gauntlets, Alyss took a step towards the puppet.

***BANG!!!**

The ground splintered beneath her step, the world losing its colour.

Sparks of red appeared across the body as Alyss pulled her arm back.

Destruction Point!

The puppet guarded with its hand.

But the moment Alyss's fist came into contact, fractures spread across its arm!

Seeing this, the puppet clenched his fist, destroying his entire body!

"What the." Alyss frowned, not expecting this kind of reaction.

'The soul is moving elsewhere!' Alice warned.

But rather than attack, the puppet started to reconstruct itself. The fragments reconverging but this time with a focus on the marble porcelain side.

"Remember, flow between moves. Let your instincts do the talking since you're more than familiar enough with your techniques." Alyss glanced over to Gwen before turning Void Fang into a spear.

Vaulting herself into the air, Alyss punched Void Fang's pommel, launching the spear towards the puppet!

Just as the puppet was about to parry the spear, the Alice stepped in.

The spear and Gwen switched places!

Purifying flames!

*BANG!!!

Gwen slashed down, the flames burning against the puppet's body. However, this time his defences had increased significantly!

She felt like she was hitting an immovable object and snapped her fingers. A false sun appeared overhead while a flaming phoenix grabbed the puppet from behind, dragging him into the air.

Radiant rays shot down from the sky, scorching the Puppet. However, the body was simply a vessel, a tool for it to carry out orders.

Disassembling itself, it was about to recombine when Alice appeared above where the soul was.

"Let's not do that shall we?" Alice narrowed her eyes.

Just as she was about to make a move, Griselda smiled.

"You don't know enough about the soul yet."

In that moment, the soul of the puppet coiled around Alice's arm and injected itself into her body!

"Overload." Griselda commanded.

Alice felt her entire body freeze up and crashed towards the ground.

Neither body nor energy was listening to her commands. A puppet with no string. A gun with no ammunition.

Before Alice hit the ground, Gwen caught her just in time.

"Did you forget you're in the middle of a fight? Careful what you pick up." Griselda sighed, flicking her finger.

The puppet expelled itself from Alice's body, reconstructing its body in an instant and grabbed Gwen by the head.

*BANG!!!

Tossing her away, the puppet quickly disassembled itself with Alice attacking from behind.

"Tch! Slippery b*stard..." Alice muttered.

However, cold sweat rolled down her back.

She thought this would've been a perfect chance for her to test her new skills. Instead, she was shown how much she was still lacking.

Overload.

Alice didn't know what kind of skill that was.

But in that moment, it felt far more oppressive than Nyer's space lock. Something Alice didn't have a counter for.

"I think that's enough." Griselda spoke up as the puppet appeared next to her.

"I've got the data I've needed and... well. It's a bit on the rough side." Griselda sighed, walking over with a frown.

"Rough?" Alice furrowed her brows.

The fight has just started, what did she mean by rough.

"Despite the things do you, your soul is surprisingly... fragile. Overload, do you know what it's mean to do?" Griselda asked as Alice shook her head.

"It's meant to hinder you slightly. Disorientation and so on. But you? It completely stopped you in your tracks." Griselda paused for a moment before opening her mouth.

"As a fighter, you are surprisingly weak when it comes to soul attacks."

Chapter 806: Weak Soul

"As a fighter, you are surprisingly weak when it comes to soul attacks." Griselda concluded.

Her words rang like a thunderclap on a silent day.

Weak? How?

Alice didn't understand.

She had countless souls attached to her, souls of the others linked through her spiritual heart.

She could take their abilities and use it as her own.

Hell, she could even manifest her own soul to help her fight.

So how was any of it weak?

Alice was about to retort when Griselda raised her hand.

"Before you say anything, yes, I understand you have a strong soul. Your strange usage of a beast's bloodline release proves it." She narrowed her eyes as Alice immediately held her breath.

Busted.

"However, having a strong soul doesn't mean you have a strong defence. Your soul is... flexible. It's adaptive, it can accept a wide variety of changes. Perhaps that's why you can use a beast's technique despite being a human.

"To put it in layman's terms, you are an extreme example of a glass cannon when it comes to souls. All attack, no defence. Even the weakest soul attack could become extremely debilitating for you." She sighed.

She had never seen a condition like Alice's before.

Because it wasn't a simple case of being weak.

Rather...

In a strange way.

Her soul was... receptive?

It was highly receptive to outside influence.

She could still see the confusion in Alice's eyes.

Scratching her hair in frustration, Griselda turned to Syrion and beckoned him over.

"Translate for me."

Whispering into his ear, Griselda told Syrion Alice's condition with her own words while the man folded his arms and nodded his head.

"Oh I see. Hmm, yeah that's not good. Wait, really? Damn..." Syrion looked at Alice with pity in his eyes.

He wondered how he should explain this, then had a great idea.

"Okay, picture this.

"Usually, for normal people, the soul is your house. People can see it but the doors and windows are locked. When a soul attack happens, they try and demolish the walls protecting it. Difficult right? And different souls have different defences.

"However, and this is a big however. Your soul doesn't work like that." Syrion pointed at Alice.

"While your soul is a house, you don't keep the doors or windows locked. In fact, there's no doors or windows to begin with. And when a soul attack happens, rather than letting them struggle against the wall, you motion them over at the empty door frame and windows, letting them in."

Alice face palmed.

With this phrasing, she understood exactly what Griselda meant by a weak to soul attacks.

Defences? What did that mean? Could she eat it?

Hell, even a child probably has a better defence than her!

And all of it most likely stemmed from the fact that she could steal the soul of others. To take their power and make it her own.

Cayla sat behind her desk in silence. Her eyes were blank and she couldn't believe what she had just heard.

[Ah... I just realised something.] Cayla's smile twitched.

'What is it?'

[You know how you only started to form your soul a while ago? As in it slowly took shape over the course of your journey?]

'Yeah... what about it?' Alice felt a little nervous.

[Do you think... You're still in the stage of solidifying your soul?]

Alice drew a blank.

[You keep adding more abilities to your arsenal so your soul is growing. Even now. Do you think... that perhaps solidifying your soul and forming a defence means that no more changes can be made?] Cayla's smile twitched.

'!!!' Alyss froze up.

She realised the implications.

'Ah f*ck.' Alice also came to the same conclusion.

In terms of soul growth, she could be considered to be stuck in limbo right now.

So if she were to solidify her defences... She couldn't deny the possibility that her resistance and ability stealing powers would disappear.

And if that happened, one of her greatest weapons would be gone.

The ability that she was born with was now both her greatest strength and biggest weakness.

Alice turned to Griselda.

"Is there a way... to artificially create a defence? I kind of need my soul to maintain this state." Alice asked, clutching at straws.

Griselda raised her eyebrow.

"Do you realise what you're asking for?"

"Yes, I know. But I really, and I mean really need my soul to stay like this." Alice nodded her head.

She couldn't give up her powers. Not now.

Griselda frowned.

To keep the soul in such a vulnerable state but artificially create a barrier?

"I mean... It's not impossible. But a natural barrier is always better." Griselda sighed.

Maybe the reason why Alice needed her soul in this state was because of the soul large souls stuck inside her.

Ignoring the... countless attached to her Spiritual Heart, these two could actually take over the main body when needed.

Alice didn't need to say anything and Griselda could already tell the girl was begging her to come up with a solution.

"I don't know. It's not something I specialise in." Griselda sighed.

Alice looked down with disappointment.

Syrion saw this and felt bad for Alice.

Reaching over, he patted her on the head, surprising her.

"Are you sure there's nothing you can do? If anyone can do it, it's you. I believe in your expertise."
Syrion pleaded earnestly.

Hearing this, Griselda choked on her breath.

Receiving this kind of plea from someone, especially Syrion...

Griselda coughed awkwardly and Alice noticed.

Her eyes darted between Syrion and Griselda. Griselda then Syrion.

She had seen this before.

Somewhere...

'Ah... young Kaden.' Alice realised.

A smug smile appeared on her face.

Could it be?

That the mighty Apostle of the Moon was actually... in love?

Griselda noticed a shift in Alice's stare. Her eyes shot towards the girl and saw her smug smile.

Alice mouthed some words. A message for Griselda.

"!!!"

Griselda's smile twitched. She snuck a glance at Syrion who didn't notice anything was wrong and sighed in relief.

"Look, just give me a moment with the girl okay?" Griselda motioned to Alice.

Thinking that this might be Griselda offering a solution, Syrion handed over Alice.

Immediately, Griselda snapped her fingers and created a barrier just between the two of them.

"Don't you f*cking dare say a damn word." She warned immediately while Alice shrugged her shoulders.

"Not quite sure what you mean." She stuck out her tongue.

"Oh real f*cking funny. How about we strike a deal. You don't say a word to him and I'll keep quiet about your use of Duality. Need I remind you that Esse was already searching for you because of the stunt you pulled at the port." Griselda warned.

Alice choked on her breath.

"Aren't you going to keep quiet about what's happening here in the first place? Why is Duality any different?" Alice's smile twitched.

"Because unlike me knowing your presence, you're a wanted person in the order. There will probably be a moment when Esse asks me for some help in tracking you down. Just because I don't say a word about

you being here doesn't mean the same applies to knowing you have her authority for some reason." Griselda poked Alice in the middle of her chest.

Perhaps Alice's use of duality is what caused the weakness in her soul. Griselda didn't know.

But what she did know, was that this situation was abnormally strange.

And keeping quiet about it goes above and beyond what Syrion asked of her. In fact, it's only because it's Syrion that Griselda was even considering keeping quiet. Had it been literally anything else, a crusade would be marching towards them.

"Tch, fine. I don't say sh*t and you keep your silence. We're even after that right? You're not gonna suddenly tell Lumiria or Nanna are you?" Alice creased her brows.

"It's a little unfair on my end but it's a deal."

To hide her... affection towards Syrion in exchange for keeping Alice's secret.

Griselda knew she might regret it but at this point, she didn't care.

The Church of the Moon is but a shadow of its former self. It has changed and so has she.

Griselda offered her hand and Alice shook it.

A contract has been formed.

A one sided one but still a contract.

Dismissing the barrier, Griselda pushed Alice back towards Syrion and Gwen.

"Again, it's not my expertise. But I'll look into it. And to be honest, the fact that you remained this long without any major issues has been a surprise in itself." Griselda scratched her hair.

"Argh, anyways, just leave it to me. I'll probably figure something out." She sighed.

It wasn't a direct confirmation. However, the fact that she said she'll look into it was enough for Syrion.

At least it meant that Griselda was willing to give it a shot rather than ignore the problem all together.

"Thank you, I knew I could count on you." Syrion gritted wrapping his arms around Griselda's shoulder.

"!!!"

Griselda widened her eyes.

Her heart slammed against her chest.

Despite not having blood, she felt it rushing to her head.

Without hesitation, perhaps out of self preservation, Griselda grabbed Syrion's arm and pivoted on her ankle. Breaking Syrion's stance with her other foot, she swung him over her shoulders!

By the time Syrion realised what was happening, he was already upside down in the air!

*BANG!!!

Crashing against the ground, Syrion was confused and saw the panicked Griselda.

"Ah sorry! You surprised me!" She quickly apologised as Syrion let out a laugh.

Meanwhile, Alice had to applaud in respect. That form, that posture, perfect on all levels. To break down Syrion's balance so easily and flip him over her shoulder.

A technique she should probably find a chance to learn.

However, the main task at hand was to deal with her weak soul. While Griselda said she'll look into things, Alice wasn't going to stay idle.

With Cayla, she'll tackle this problem head on.

[What's to say we can't use Duality to create a barrier right? Is that what you're going to suggest?] Cayla smirked.

'You caught me.' Alice laughed.

Picking up duality had truly been her best reward from the inverted world. Enough where she was even considering taking it as her seventh Sigil if Esse proved to be an enemy.

[I already have some ideas. That should give us a foundation to work with.] Cayla chuckled.

'I'm counting on you.'

High fiving each other, they got to work.

Chapter 807: Griselda's Solution

Since Alice wanted to sort out the issue of her soul, she didn't hesitate to ask Griselda for some help. Especially since she seemed like she was going to keep her word regarding Duality.

"How much of Duality can you use?" Griselda asked while Syrion and Gwen were sparring outside.

Ever since Alyss taught her some extra moves for her to link her combos together, Gwen's fighting effectiveness has soared.

"Pretty much all of it, I think. But specifically, I can use Inversion, some parts of synchronisation and restriction only really works on myself. I've tried to access more of it but... Well it didn't work." Alice stuck out her tongue.

When she tried to use her sixth Sigil, she realised that she only got a fraction of Duality's power as a whole.

Most likely the limitation that was stealing this Sigil from the Inverted World instead of the original source.

"You can use that much?" Griselda creased her brows.

She thought that perhaps Alice could use it due to a mimicry type Sigil.

Something that can emulate a small portion of the original host.

But this? This was beyond mimicry. It's like she has access to the original power.

Folding her arms, Griselda contemplated the options.

Duality was not really an authority linked to the Moon. Rather, it was simply a coincidence that Esse got this title.

With that in mind, even as the Apostle of Immortality, she wasn't exactly certain of the limitations with this power.

But based on what she had seen Alice perform, her greatest power would be inversion.

'Inversion... What can this girl do to make a barrier around herself?' Griselda sighed.

She said she'll look into things but this...

Griselda was beginning to regret her choice.

While Griselda was trying her best to figure out a method, Cayla was also beginning to regret her words.

Doing anything with the soul had a risk in itself. Hell, inversion came with its own set of risks, just look at what happens when they invert Exile.

Sure, they made it safe but that's only by constantly switching it on and off. The same couldn't be done for the soul since they needed a barrier to keep things out.

They needed to be able to choose when and where Alice should steal abilities rather than being forcefully bestowed it whenever she drinks blood.

What they had to do was turn this passive ability into an active one.

[We could try to invert the nature and make it so that we project souls outwards? No, that's a stupid idea. That's basically asking for your soul to shatter and break.] Cayla shot down her own idea before Alice could even say anything.

"Kid, what if you try to overlay the souls you have on top of one another?" Griselda suddenly spoke up with Alice raising an eyebrow at the word kid.

To begin with, it's not exactly wrong. Griselda was definitely older than her while she's not even in her twenties if you count when she actually appeared.

But still, it irked Alice a little being called kid.

"Overlay?" Alice ignored it for now and focused on the main issue.

Scratching her hair, Griselda sighed and reached towards her chest.

Tapping it twice, a compartment slowly opened as she revealed a strange crystalline heart.

"Watch carefully since I don't know to properly explain. It's probably better for you to get a feel of it instead of me trying to find the right words."

One by one, spectral phantoms started to hover around the heart. Chains that bound them to Griselda.

Making sure that Alice was watching, she snapped her finger and they began to merge. Each one being torn apart and rebuilt from the ground up.

A little brutal she'll admit.

But very effective when it comes to shielding against attacks.

"What happens to the soul after they're shredded?" Alice asked with a frown.

"You retain a portion that you don't use. But at the end of the day, you have to consider this to be a type of fuel. Say I defend against an attack, the pieces of the soul that absorb the attack is recycled into the great beyond, waiting for reincarnation I suppose." She shrugged nonchalantly.

But this only made Alice crease her brows.

Based on what Griselda is saying, so long as she has souls, she could defend against attacks. But to what extent?

What if they keep attacking? What if it gets to a point where Alice has no choice but to give up some of the more important fragments like Tiamat or Esse's soul?

And even if she makes this kind of sacrifice, there's no guarantee that the enemy would stop.

Hell, it might even encourage them to continue.

Alice needed a different method, one that didn't come with such a steep price.

Griselda placed her heart back into her chest once she noticed Alice's disinterest.

"No go huh?"

Alice nodded.

Griselda leaned back against the chair.

She glanced towards Syrion who's training with Gwen. The smiles, the laughter, the feed back after every brief exchange.

Despite fighting being involved, in a sense, it was peaceful.

"Why don't we take this moment to talk about something else first." Griselda spoke up, surprising Alice.

What would the Apostle of Immortality want to speak about?

"As an enemy of the Moon, what do you think of its current state?"

". . ."

"Just speak your mind. I'm not going to flip out on you because you say something bad about Lumiria. I can tell, you're an 'outsider'. I won't say it directly, but you don't feel like you belong to any of the three orders." Griselda continued. "Gwen over there is the same. Her beliefs are changing, there's doubt in her trust towards the Sun."

She turned back to Alice, staring her dead in the eyes.

"So tell me, what does an outsider like you think about the moon in its current state? Is it the order of healing it tries to make others perceive it to be or do you think it's something else?"

Alice folded her arms.

[Seems like after all these years, the Orders are slowly collapsing from the inside out.]

'Mnm. But if we're being honest, Griselda feels different compared to the her we saw in the Inverted World. If it was the her from back then, I don't think she'll be able to say these words. Something happened between then and now.'

[I mean, I got a rough idea. Perhaps a certain someone just outside the house right now.]

'Perhaps.' Alice chuckled.

If it was a cardinal or anyone else, Alice would be tempted to convert them. But not an Apostle.

Despite what she's saying, Griselda has still stuck with the order till now.

She probably has her own objective or...

Lumiria was able to maintain her control over Griselda.

In this regard, Alice was thinking it'll be more likely to be the latter.

"I'm not familiar. But if I had to say, I think major changes and shifts probably started to happen 10 or so years ago. And if I'm going to be blunt, I don't think the Moon should continue to exist. In fact, none of the Gods should. Not Solaris, not Lumiria and certainly not Enris." Alice leaned back.

Griselda's pupils trembled for a moment. A smile formed on her face as she let out a laugh.

"Yes... you're right. This is no longer the age of Gods. In fact, it hasn't been for a long time. They act as icons, doing nothing to help but simply indulging themselves in whatever catches their fancy." Griselda recalled Lumiria's obsession towards Tristan.

"But getting rid of them... Syrion told me about Gwen's desires. How she wished to overthrow Solaris if he puts her father in danger. It's a nice thought to have but a dangerous one." She shook her head.

"Even if I dislike the Moon, what can I even do? They're gods at the end of the day. Unlike Lords or Apostles, they don't die easily." Alice shrugged as Griselda let out a chuckle.

"Yeah, I suppose you're right. They relax on their lofty thrones, enjoying the luxuries of life. Yet despite their actions, they are blessed with such radiant and overwhelming power.

"But if a God has no subjects, what can they do? It's for this reason that the world hasn't been destroyed. With each day that passes, an invisible clock ticks down to the inevitable. We do not know how much time is left, just the fact that it's running out." Griselda muttered, thoughts dancing in her mind.

She had a few... ideas on who Alice may be. The knowledge she possesses and even the way she acts.

"Is a wall really necessary?" Griselda asked, surprising Alice.

"What do you mean?"

"At the end of the day, isn't it still YOUR soul? In Syrion's words, it's YOUR house. What you have inside is completely up to you, even if enemies attack it easily." She turned to Alice.

"I'm saying you should embrace the fact that you have little to no defence. Turn this weakness into a weapon."

Alice realised what Griselda was suggesting.

In essence, she should set up traps inside her soul. With this, her weakness stops being a non-existent barrier but rather a lure.

The main question now was how she would achieve this kind defence.

Alice froze before letting out a laugh, confusing Cayla.

'The obvious answer was staring us in the face all along.'

Alice licked her lips with a menacing grin.

'If they're in my soul, can't I just devour them? Who cares if I don't have a barrier.'

Chapter 808: Sealing Souls

When it comes to consuming souls and taking over their abilities, Alice wasn't strictly limited to drinking blood.

In the right scenario, she's able to do so with attacks.

Of course, the success rate of this was a lot lower not to mention the inherent risks of facing an attack head on hoping she had the resistances to consume it without injury.

But when it comes to a direct soul attack, Alice needed a method of locking down her enemy. To prevent them from running away so that she could digest the power and take it for herself.

Folding her arms, Alice opened her mouth.

"Let's set aside how I can attack souls. What if they try to run away? Since they decided to enter my soul, I want to use something to keep them there." Alice asked.

If they simply overload her soul then run away, they would've achieved their purpose even if Alice had the option of fighting them.

But if she were to trap them, she'll be able to fight on her own terms rather than subject herself to the enemy.

"Trap? Hmm, there are a few methods. Though... Nanna is more familiar with them. And I doubt you want her to find out about you." Griselda shrugged.

As the Apostle of Immortality, the way she fights was... unique. She didn't have high attack power or methods to seal the enemy. She's simply very hard to kill and will constantly overwhelm her enemy through sheer vitality.

Arax and Shiera had no way of killing her.

Kazira, while dangerous, lacked the proper methods to keep her down.

Deva was a slight issue.

Out of all the authorities, minus those belonging to... the Abyss, Famine was no doubt the most annoying to fight.

Especially for someone like Griselda who lacked the proper attacking power and focused on vitality.

To Deva, Griselda was equivalent to a gourmet meal.

"However..." Griselda trailed off.

Turning to Alice, she snapped her finger.

A tiny spark detonated in her hand, A pulse of energy and a barrier.

In this moment, in this instant, Alice's true form was revealed.

Her disguise peeled away little by little as her pupils constricted.

She was about to fight back when Griselda tapped her finger against the desk.

"Calm yourself kid, if I didn't make a move earlier when you showcased the power of Duality why would I do anything now?" She sighed.

She understood why Alice was on guard but even so, it was exhausting to talk with someone putting up a mask.

Especially when she could see Alice's true state in her soul.

"Interesting Eye. I knew you were an outsider but I didn't think you were THAT privileged." Griselda praised.

"But anyways, let's see... Hold still for me."

Leaning forward, Griselda reached towards Alice's neck.

But instead of listening to Griselda, Alice stepped back. Her hands gripped her own neck, refusing to let anyone touch it.

"Sorry, it's a bit of a touchy subject for me. Surely you can go for a different spot other than the neck right?" Alice's smile faltered.

Raising her eyebrow, Griselda nodded.

"Sure."

Circling around Alice, she kneeled against her shadow instead and tapped it with her finger. Then after a brief pause, she plunged her hand in!

*TSSS!!!

A hissing sound rang out as Griselda pulled out a set of golden chains.

The chains appeared around Alice's limbs and neck.

"This thing. It's been modified for... Eldritch energy it seems. But its sealing properties are exceptionally potent. Though I suppose this much can be expected for someone of Velouria's calibre." Griselda praised while letting go, allowing the chains to disappear back into the shadows.

"So if you want something to seal the enemy inside your soul, your best bet is to modify the properties of these chains. I can give you... tricks when it comes to manipulating souls. Though in this case, the most I can do is just tell you what things are. The rest you'll have to figure out on your own."

Finishing her sentence, Griselda leaned against the window and watched Syrion train Gwen with a small smile on her face.

Alice looked down before turning her gaze towards the Apostle.

"Why?"

"Why what?" Griselda glanced back briefly, unsure as to what Alice was asking.

"Why are you going this far? And what about Lumiria? Wouldn't she consider this to be well..." Alice hesitated.

"Treasonous? Probably." Griselda shrugged her shoulders with a chuckle.

"Then why?" Alice couldn't wrap her head around it.

"Because Syrion asked me to help you."

The answer was that simple.

Because Syrion asked for her help, she'll help.

If it wasn't for him, she wouldn't care about Alice.

Alice opened her mouth, wanting to say something but hesitated.

"If you're so concerned, would you be happier if I tried to kill you instead?" Griselda sighed, turning to Alice who wasn't sure what to say.

Biting her lip, Alice decided to say it bluntly.

"Syrion will die soon. Why are you doing this? Aren't you still putting yourself in danger? What if Lumiria does something to you because of this?" This was the question Alice couldn't quite wrap her mind around.

With Kaden and Allura, she could understand since both were still alive and living. Allura may have some issues but those can be resolved.

But Syrion...

He's a hunt target.

Once the training ends, once Gwen adjusts her fighting style, they will fight to the death.

So with Syrion about to disappear, why would an Apostle, one that has lived for so long and worked for the Moon go to such lengths? Liking a person would only go so far... right?

Especially since the Syrion was about to die.

Griselda lost her smile.

She was angry. Her eyes glared at the girl in front of her. Her neutral expression slowly turning into a frown.

"I was going to say that for a joke, it was a pretty sh*t one. But you're not joking are you? I'll overlook this because of your soul's age. But don't insult my kindness further than this." Griselda warned.

Flicking her finger, she opened her door behind Alice, clearly gesturing for her to leave.

[That was a pretty stupid question Alice.] Cayla massaged her eyes.

'You can't blame me for being cautious. There's no telling what Lumiria might do to her. The more she knows, the more danger she puts herself into.' Alice frowned.

[I know your question comes from a place of concern. But you have to understand, people in love do stupid things all the time. I never felt that way but I can somewhat understand where they come from.] Cayla explained.

[You didn't see it but man... Kaden was doing far worse back then than what Griselda is doing now. When he realised the state Allura was in, he searched everywhere for a solution.

[If doctors gave him a negative response... Let's just say a good scenario would be that they only got a few bruises.]

Alice was silent.

[This is especially the case for people who live long lives. Think about how hard it is for them to truly treasure something. They've experienced the erosion of time. So when that feeling anchors itself down deep in their hearts, it's far more potent than what normal people feel.]

Glancing back at the room, Alice scratched her hair and let out a sigh.

'Then what if she actually faces danger because of us? What then? I... It feels bad to receive someone's help only for them to suffer because of me.' Alice furrowed her brows.

Cayla couldn't answer.

It wasn't an easy question to answer.

###

I see a sea of flames. I see my brothers and sisters in arms fighting to the bitter last breath.

I see the heathens of the Eclipse revelling and rejoicing in this blood bath. This is exactly what they wanted.

As I walk along this path laden with death and agony, I come to realise that this was my final moment.

The final burning embers before my fire, my life, came to an end.

I saw hell.

I saw the end that came about because I lacked strength. I stubbornly clung to the belief that maybe I could still change things.

That maybe...

Maybe I could still make their deaths mean something.

To purge the enemy from the face of this world.

I swung my blade!

I stepped forth without fear!

I cut down anything and everything that was in my path!

The years of training, my efforts, it was so that I could make their deaths mean something!

I swung! I swung! I kept swinging!

My flesh ached. My lungs burned like an inferno. My hands numb with pain but I refused to let my sword go.

I... I had to keep going.

If I stop here... What would their sacrifice mean? Why did all of us die?

So I clenched my jaw and pressed forward.

Into the ruin, into the flames of destruction.

Blades pierced my flesh, arrows sank into my back.

But I could not fall.

Not now, not ever. Even if it wasn't for my comrades, my son was waiting for me.

My wife was waiting for me.

I promised them I had to return.

I had to!

What kind of father would I be if I didn't keep my promise?

My sword broke, so I used my hands.

My arms were torn off, so I used my teeth!

"Fa...ther..."

I heard my son's voice.

Out here? On... the battlefield?

No! Impossible... It's a hallucination! My son should be back at home, on his swing-

Before me stood a beast far bigger than I...

Grafted upon its head... I saw the face of my son.

Chapter 809: Soldier

"Syrion? Syrion!" Griselda nudged the armour resting by the tree.

"Hm? Ah, sorry what time is it?" Syrion clutched his head and looked over at Griselda.

"You forget there's not really a day and night in the Abyss. Did you work too much yesterday or what?" Griselda asked with a helpless sigh.

"Work?... Right... has Amy filed the report yet? I've been nagging her for the last few days but man, if only that girl worked a bit harder, right?" Syrion laughed.

But his... strange sentence made Griselda freeze up.

"You were training with Gwen yesterday." Griselda reminded hesitantly.

Syrion tilted his head in confusion.

"Gwen? Gwen... Ah, sorry, I must've still been sleeping. Jeez, I can't believe I forgot about thatahaha." Syrion laughed it off before standing up.

He gave his body a good stretch despite being a suit of armour.

"How was your time with Alice? Did you manage to figure something out for her soul yet?"

"Yeah... she's workin' on it. But let's talk about you first. What's going on? Why did you mention Amy?" Griselda pressed but Syrion waved it off.

"I was just dreaming about the past, don't worry about it. The sooner we finish things up, the better."
Syrion didn't let Griselda respond as he walked away.

Griselda clenched her fist with gritted teeth.

But all she could do was stand there.

Her chest tightened.

###

Today was another training with Gwen.

But it was a little different. Syrion limited himself to two floating swords and Gwen's goal was to tag his armour at least once.

"Flow... flow. Let my instincts do the talking..." Gwen muttered, unleashing a flurry of slashes towards Syrion that were all blocked by his blade.

Her vision flared, an attack from behind.

Without turning around, Gwen kicked her spear back, forcing the blade to miss.

Leaning to the side, she avoided the sword slashing down and aimed for Syrion's shoulder plate.

"Close but not quite. You have to be quick on your feet, use those eyes of yours to make predictions. It'll be tough but you have to weaponize this flow of information." Syrion chuckled.

Jumping back, Syrion was about to counter when flames erupted around him.

"I know! I already saw where you were going to land!" Gwen grinned, slamming her hand into the ground.

Purifying flames shot up with Syrion looking up with a chuckle.

"Not bad. But since your casts lack a certain intensity, you should stick to close quarters combat." Recalling his swords, Syrion twisted his body and cleaved the flames apart.

As the swords brushed past his vision, he found himself in the middle of a battlefield.

Enemies on the left and right.

"General! The Eclipse are retreating! Should we press!?" A voice rang out behind him.

His subordinates waiting for his next command.

Monstrosities throwing attacks from the air.

In the midst of war, hesitation could cost them their lives.

"I'll pave the way!"

Tightening his grip around his blade, Syrion glanced up at the sea of flames raining down from above.

A false moon spiralled into existence above him as energy coiled around his sword.

Twisting his body, he unleashed a silver arc, slashing the sky in half!

Following up on his motion, he lunged towards the closest enemy.

A cultist.

They were panicking.

Good.

Slamming his shoulders into them, Syrion grabbed their ankle and tossed them into the air.

Two swords manifested next to him as he took aim.

Above, the cultist quickly created a ring of flames and summoned a phoenix to parry his strike.

"Oh this one's got more spirit than the others!" Syrion took a step back.

He rested his sword next to him, energy flooding his body.

As the tip of the blade touched the ground, the world around them changed.

Resonance!

A land of water rippled out. Beneath the surface, countless blades rested.

Some so large they became monuments piercing into the sky.

Some tangled together to form a large hill.

Stomping down with his dominant foot, Syrion grinned.

Moonlight shot down from above, caging the cultist. In a panic, they tried to break out using the phoenix but it was futile.

Countless shards splintered from the blades beneath him. And as these shards hovered near Syrion's blade, a pure white energy connected them together.

*BANG!!!

An eruption of water and Syrion disappeared.

He was already above the cultist, his blade mid strike.

This was the end!

He blinked and saw Gwen's fearful expression.

"!!!"

He wanted to pull back his strike but even if he did, the damage was going to be severe!

Griselda was preparing to make a move, clearly not expecting him to go this far.

Gwen gritted her teeth.

Solaris's markings roaring across her body. Rather than a spear, her phoenix transformed into a set of arm and leg guards!

Flow.

Gwen reached out, pushing the blade slightly to the right before slamming her left fist into the face of the blade!

Enhancement!

The false sun burst forth, dispelling Syrion's moon.

Spectral hands manifested next to Gwen as they copied her motion! Each fist that slammed into the blade would force it off course a little more!

*BANG!!!

As the energy detonated, Gwen was flung back but she quickly adjusted herself.

Stomping down, she lunged after Syrion who was now forced on the defence!

A spear appeared in one of the spectral hands while a sword in another.

Gwen tugged at the air, flaming chains coiling around Syrion's waist and pulling him closer.

He summoned a sword, parrying her spear while catching her sword with his hands.

Gwen ducked, leading into a punch as her fist slammed into Syrion's ribs, sending his body tumbling back.

Stabbing his sword into the ground to stop himself, Syrion unleashed a horizontal slash behind him, dispelling the attack Gwen had prepared.

"Not bad... Not bad at all!" He grinned. He wasn't sure what that was earlier but seeing Gwen's improvement sent a rush of joy through his mind.

Four swords were summoned as he sent them after Gwen who was flowing through her moves without any difficulty.

Gwen tried to parry one of the swords using her Vision but it suddenly disappeared!

Appearing from below, Syrion grabbed Gwen's ankle and pulled her towards the ground.

Aiming her palm, Gwen created an orb of fire before firing!

She wasn't afraid of her own attack but Syrion had to be careful.

Two swords stabbed from the side, destroying Gwen's orb right as it fired.

*RUMBLE!!!

The two were forced apart with Syrion preparing to strike again but paused.

Gwen was kneeling in the dust cloud. The spectral arms disappeared as her phoenix landed on her shoulder.

Healing fire coursed through her body, healing her wounds.

She was exhausted.

In that final burst, she had used everything she could. Instead of conserving stamina, her only goal in that moment was to survive.

"Let's stop here for a moment. Try to remember that last feeling. If you can hone your offensive power a little more during that, it'll be perfect." Syrion smiled, stopping the fight.

Seeing that the spar was over, Gwen collapsed on the ground.

She had expected to be facing two swords. Then everything changed. The deployment of his resonance, that final strike...

Gwen raised her hand above her head.

She was trembling.

In that moment, she felt death staring at her.

But she's alive.

"I'm alive..." Gwen muttered, taking a deep breath.

She immersed herself in this feeling.

Syrion walked away without saying anything. As he walked past Griselda, she grabbed his arm, refusing to let go.

"Is there something you need?" Syrion asked.

"What the hell were you thinking? She clearly wasn't ready for your resonance or that last attack." Griselda frowned.

She wasn't worried about Gwen's safety. But rather, what Syrion would've done afterwards. What would he have done if his attack connected?

What would he have done if Gwen didn't survive.

"People aren't ready for the things that happen in battle. She saw the danger and faced it head on without fear. She trusted herself and left no regrets. Gwen is a fine soldier."

"!!!" Griselda's pupils constricted.

Soldier?

Syrion wasn't training her to be a soldier.

Soldiers... A word she hadn't heard in a while. They call those that protect the city policemen or guards. They call those that follow other orders heretics or believers. Priests and so on.

But soldier... this was only used during war.

'The wars that Syrion was involved in...' Griselda hesitated.

"Yeah, she'll make a fine soldier. Right... Didn't you also recommend Finn to be promoted before? Perhaps I'll take a look at that report." Griselda bit her lip.

"Jeez commander, you always slack a little when it comes to reports. Don't worry about it, Rachel has already sorted it out so you don't have to worry." Syrion chuckled.

"Is that so? Then I have nothing to worry about then. Speaking of which, how are things back home?"

"Ohou? It's rare of you to ask about my home commander. Mariel's been practicing some new recipes. They're... scary ahaha. But if I tell her..." Syrion shivered in fear.

"You trust in your sturdy body, right?"

"Of course. Once her testing is complete, I'm sure it'll be a recipe that makes me ask for seconds haha. As for Lucan, he's been complaining about growing up recently. Says something about wanting to become an adult fast." Syrion sighed with a smile.

"When you're young, you want to grow. But when you're old, you wish you could stay young. Isn't that how it usually is? I won't take up more of your time, you can go now. I'm sure little Lucan is waiting for your return." Griselda smiled as Syrion gave her a salute before walking away.

An old war salute. One that belonged to the past.

In that moment, Griselda's frame seemed smaller than ever. Her shoulders trembled as she couldn't bear to speak another word...

Chapter 810: Wrath

How long have I walked this path?

Steel clashing against steel, screams overlapping screams.

Pleading, shouting, vengeful curses. All melding into one.

To stand against the rising tide of Eclipse cultists... To carve a road of blood through them with my hands.

Hands...

My hands, bloodied hands. Soaked, nay, bathed in the corpses of countless.

Can I still even remember... The gentle touch of my son's hand against my palms...

No...

I know only the weight of the sword. The sword that hacks against bone.

How long have I butchered my way through hordes of people without break?

How many faces must I split open, how many guts must I spill?

How many more eyes will stare back at me in hatred, fear and loathing.

How long have I bloodied these hands I wish to hold my son...

Am I even qualified to hold my son? To taint him with these hands?

Am I even qualified to hold my wife? To pollute our house with the smell of blood?

"Is your son even still alive?"

Yes... of course he is! He's waiting for me! Waiting by the swings, laughing, smiling as always.

He'll be there, asking when I'll come home from my next expedition.

He would be there...

Wouldn't he?

"Does your wife wait for you?"

Mariel? Of course. She will always wait for me in our home.

She will...

I'll finish this march. I'll finish it!

I kill all the b*stards of the Eclipse! I'll make sure they can never reach my home, I'll make sure the fires of war never reach my family!

If these hands must be soaked in blood then so be it!

If I must fight for a year so be it!

A decade! Centuries! I'll accept it all.

So long as...

So long as I can come home.

So long as I can eat my wife's stew once more. Lift my son into the air...

"But that's impossible right?"

"Why?"

They're waiting for me at home. I just need to finish this march. I just need to-

"Look around you."

I just need to finish the fight. Once this fight ends, I'll go home.

I'll go home.

"Look around you."

Lucan is still waiting for me.

Mariel is still waiting for me!

"Look around you."

I won't ask for more, just let me go home.

"Are you still marching off to war? Pitiful pale knight."

"Go on, march. You have no son waiting for your return."

"Go on, run. You have no wife agonising in the night, wishing you'd be safe."

"Go on, shout. You have stripped him of his life with your own two hands. Your bloodied hands have finally spill the blood of your son."

"Go on. See the wife you love so dear burned to ash, slaughtered with the hands you vowed to protect her with."

###

"SYRION!!!" Griselda shouted, slamming her fist into Syrion's head and throwing him back.

"Huh? What's...!!!" Syrion froze.

Behind Griselda, Gwen was pale.

Her neck wounded and bruised. She was throwing up in pain, tears streaking down the side of her face.

Griselda was glaring at him. Anger, frustration... pain.

He glanced down at his own hands.

These hollowed hands were trembling.

Was he... about to strangle her to death?

Why? What was he doing?

In a flash, Syrion saw his own blood soaked hands overlapping his vision.

Shaking his head, the vision disappeared as he forced himself to stand up.

"I... Sorry, let's stop sparring here. I need to think about something." Syrion sighed, making his way over to the swing set.

Griselda glanced back at Gwen before back at Syrion.

Split between choices.

"Take this time to rest, I'll see what's going on."

After saying this, she ran after Syrion.

Syrion lowered himself next to the swing. His hands gently brushing the seat.

For a moment, he heard a giggle. A laugh bubbling with joy.

Lucan asking Syrion to him higher...

Syrion choked on his breath, his hands trembling.

Then, as he turned to the swing, he saw a seat of bones, chains of flesh.

"Argh!" Pulling hand back in a panic, Syrion panted heavily in fear.

But it was just a hallucination.

There was no seat of bones, no chain of flesh.

It was just a normal swing.

Clenching his fist, Syrion covered his eyes and let out a deep sigh.

"Accept it."

A voice rang out in his mind.

"Accept the fact that they are gone. I know who you are, who you really are. Pale knight who wanders. Accept that there is no one left waiting for your return."

"You killed them. You did. With these bloodied hands. With the sword you're so proud of, you cut down your son. You cut down your wife. So why deny the reality? Go on, march."

"Walk this path till the end. Walk the path of blood, the path of murder. Kill, kill! Kill some more! Keep killing until the b*stards who started this senseless conflict are wiped from the face of this world!"

"Syri-"

As Griselda tapped Syrion on the shoulder, his crimson eyes shot towards her. His hands snapping at her head before he even realised what he was doing.

*BANG!!!

As the fist collided with Griselda's head, cracks spread across her puppet shell, revealing the hollowed insides.

"!!!" Freezing in shock, Syrion widened his eyes.

But Griselda didn't shout, she didn't blame.

She gently reached out and held his head.

"It's fine. I am the Apostle of Immortality, I don't die." She comforted with a soft smile.

Syrion wanted to say something but no words came out.

What could he even say?

"The war is over. It's been over for a long time. You don't need to fight anymore. You can let go of that sword. No more marches, no more blood." Griselda whispered.

Syrion held her arm.

His frame trembling with emotion.

He wanted to cry yet he had no tears.

"Mariel... Lucan... They're both... gone."

Griselda listened silently.

"They're gone. And I... I cut them down. I cut them both down. With these hands... I kill them both."

Syrion clutched his own head.

"It wasn't"

"It was! I could've restrained them! I could've brought them back! I could've had you transfer their soul to another vessel! But I cut them down! I could not bear to see them disgraced in that filth!" Syrion interrupted with a shout.

That day, when he saw his son trapped in the husk of that body, why didn't he bring him back? Why didn't his sword hesitate? Why did he rush to kill his son without thought?

Why?

Syrion gritted his teeth before standing up.

"That day... I felt sorrow. But compared to my rage, my fury! It paled in comparison. Because I knew! I knew I had been abandoned by the God I worshipped!" Syrion clenched his fist.

For the first time, his killing intent erupted like a tidal wave of hatred.

Even Griselda had to take a step back.

The centuries of anger boiling within that hallowed armour.

Syrion clutched his chest, where his heart would've been.

"Lumiria had abandoned me! In her name I charged towards the Eclipse! In her name I butchered the countless! IN HER NAME! I THREW MYSELF INTO THE FIRES OF WAR!

"But all I got in return... Was my family thrown into a pack of wolves. THAT was my reward! I wandered, I walked. I slaughtered all those in my way.

"Not in search of home. Not in search of the family I killed with my own two hands. But in search of the goddess who betrayed my trust! I walk with the intent of slaughter! I walk with the intent of decide!"

Summoning his sword, Syrion reversed his grip and plunged it into his own chest!

A malevolent energy erupted out, corrupting his armour as obsidian shards coated the pristine white plating.

The false moon hung above him, its radiance darkening.

Raising his blade, Syrion pierced the moon, shattering its image.

And through the cracks, blood began to pour over Syrion's body.

The abyss trembled, energy coiling around Syrion.

Strands descending from above as dark clouds loomed over Syrion's home.

It welcomed the arrival of a weapon of vengeance.

Of wrath incarnate.

*RUMBLE!!!

Lightning crackled, a torrent of Abyssal energy tore through the clouds and flooded the space around them.

Griselda was forced back.

She could see the transformation of Syrion veiled within that energy.

The transformation of his soul... vengeful.

A soul so consumed by anger that it began to warp the very shape itself.

With the descent of such a large source of energy, the swing next to Syrion shattered apart, as did the tree.

The advent of a new Lord.

"Griselda! What the f*ck is happening!?" Alice rushed over with Gwen, both in shock at the sudden surge of power.

"Lordship. Syrion has remembered everything that happened in the past." Griselda bit her lip.

Alice widened her eyes.

If Gwen has to hunt a lord...

"Gwen! Are we doing it!? Are we fighting now!?" Alice shouted.

If they're going to fight, they have to do so with the intent to kill! To put their life on the line!

Gwen hesitated.

Within the calamity of energy, Syrion turned around, blood red eyes staring back at Gwen with killing intent.

"Gwen! Alice! This will be your final lesson! If you stand before me now, use everything you have learned to kill me! Destroy my core! End the burning fires that is my fury! If you cannot muster the will to fight, then leave! Watch as I burn down the wrecked order that is the moon!" Syrion shouted, stomping down as the world around them began to change.

Alice could see the seventh star manifest above Syrion's head.

He had attained Lordship!

[Syrion, Abyss Lord of Wrath - ♦♦♦♦♦♦♦]