

Abyssal A 821

Chapter 821: Second Dawn

Gwen hurried.

Her heart pounded with nervousness as she flew through the Abyssal skies.

Her eyes desperately searching for a portal out to the surface through the gaps of space.

Winged beasts lunging after her but she had no time to deal with such rabble.

With an explosive burst of speed, she turned everything around her into ash then transformed into a streak of radiant fire.

###

Gwen made it to the north after what felt like an eternity. Her eyes sweeping across the landscape as she felt her blood freeze.

The land itself was scarred and fractured, as if a giant invisible claw had dug its nails into the earth and torn up large chunks on a whim. Craters of charred dirt.

And worse of all, the fissures peaking through the gaps of the land.

Gwen winced. She could sense the black and red miasma polluting the land, the same miasma that originated from the Abyss.

Had she not become a Lord and spent a week in the depths, she might've struggled to breathe in this environment.

Even the remnants of what used to be the northern capital was now gone. No bloodied land, no twisted spire.

Just ruins.

Nothing more.

Corpses sprawled across the earth, twisting in grotesque ways. No corpse left intact, limbs hanging and twisted in unnatural ways.

Some were buried beneath the ground, insects eating away at their withering flesh. Some had eggs nestled in the ribs.

A few even had Abyssal plant life feeding off their blood, blossoming in corpse bouquets.

Petals of flesh, honey combs of blood.

Gwen even saw a few corpses meticulously brought together to form a mound on a hill. Their blood seeped into a pool where a single lotus floated happily. Beasts with small seeds and roots digging into their bodies doing the lotus's bidding, bringing in more nourishment.

A land of the dead where the bowls of the earth threw up the depths of the Abyss.

That's the best way she could describe it.

Clenching her fist, Gwen rushed towards the bundle of auras she could sense in the distance. What worried her was the fact that all she could sense was the remains of divinity strewn across the land from the remnants of battle and...

She shook her head.

It was probably the miasma and the remnants of battle that made it hard for her to sense the sources of divinity.

If she get's closer, she'll be able to find it.

She'll be able to find her dad.

As she approached what felt like a safe camp, Gwen could see 'living' people wandering outside. They weren't screaming or running.

Moreso dragging their bodies however they wished. Some kneeled in the miasma. But what they all had in common was their hollow eyes.

Some gave up and accepted their fate, others wandered in futility. But all of them knew that it was the end.

They had been assimilated into the Abyss.

Gwen bit her lip and pushed on.

Then, she saw it.

Sunken into the ground, a fluctuating barrier of radiant divinity. Weak but no doubt the work of her father.

Flimsy yes. But tenacious and worked in keeping out the miasma and corruption.

Despite the gloom, Gwen felt a ray of hope in her chest.

Gwen jumped down.

She could see what remains of the Sun Church's believers trying their best to salvage the situation.

They looked at her curiously but was more focused on solving their own issue than a stranger.

Some recognised who she is.

Gwen looked around. Where was her father?

She activated Vision but still couldn't find a source.

Not yet.

"Gwenmy..." A weak voice called out as Gwen looked to her right.

She saw Shiera leaning against a pillar.

"!!!" Gwen held her breath.

Shiera, the radiant Apostle of Preservation was...

Bandages soaked in blood wrapped around her body. Scars that still crackled with corruption and a gaping wound on the left side of her stomach. Yet despite the severity, it was preserved in its current state.

And... Through the gaps of the bandages on her face, Gwen noticed that Shiera was now missing her left eye.

"Aunty... what happened? Where's dad?" Gwen rushed over. Her heart slammed against her chest in worry.

Shiera opened her mouth before coughing violently. Her body stumbled as Gwen caught her.

Her breathing was weak.

If her body wasn't preserved in its current state... Gwen's blood ran cold.

Apostles, the strongest beings beneath the Divine...

Was wounded to this extent... Not to mention the fact that her Auntie should've been untouchable with her authority.

Yet she was now forced to resort to such methods to maintain her life.

"I'm... I'm glad to see that you're safe. A-Are you able to call some reinforcements over to get these people out of here? As you can see... Your aunt is occupied with something right now." Shiera forced a smile.

Gwen bit her lip.

It's clear that Shiera wouldn't tell her much.

Not right now.

"Alright. But where's dad? I see his barriers but I can't sense him at all." Gwen furrowed her brows.

She looked at Shiera's expression, desperately hoping that her worries were unfounded. That her worst thoughts didn't come true.

"He's... *sigh. Follow me." Shiera forced herself to stand up.

Gwen wasn't sure if she was glad to hear this response or fearful.

Helping Shiera walk, Gwen was led deeper into the temporary sanctuary. As they reached the heart, she paused in her step.

She saw her father sitting with his back against a wall.

Shield in hand.

His eyes closed.

Wounds frozen across his body along with a missing right arm.

"The enemy was beyond what we were prepared for... As a last resort, your father... he used his authority of protection to meld his life force into a barrier. So long as this wall persists, he is alive." Shiera explained.

"But his situation is a lot worse than mine. You need to call reinforcements, evacuate the people so that we can halt your father's duty." She ordered.

"At least then, we have a chance at helping him." Shiera clenched her fist. She opened her mouth but decided not to say anything.

In the time it takes for the reinforcements to arrive, the chances of Arax surviving are not high.

Gwen helped Shiera sit down slowly.

She walked up to the sitting body of her father.

Even now, he was a wall of defence for the people trapped within this hellscape.

Her throat tightened.

Maybe... Maybe if she hadn't been so dull. Maybe if she had grasped the key sooner. Maybe if she had completed her training faster and gotten her title earlier, she would've been able to help her father.

"Dad... I'm here." Gwen mumbled.

Clenching her jaw, Gwen glared at the sky and held back her tears from falling.

It wasn't over yet. The barrier is still here and her dad is still alive.

For what reason did she have to claim a Lord title? Was it not to support her dad in the first place?

Then what about Solaris? As a God, he can feel his two Apostles teetering on the edge of death. Yet he has not made a single move.

Why?

Gwen's blood boiled as from her core, the spark of the First flame began to rage.

Rage towards the Sun, rage towards the God who sits idly by and watches his loyal retainers approach death.

Rage towards this world that gave this kind of parasite the throne of God.

Since the Abyss has granted her the Authority of the First Flame, she'll use it!

Stomping her foot down, Abyssal energy blended with Divinity erupted from Gwen's core. A spire of red and blue flames pierced into the sky as Shiera widened her eyes.

Divinity...

Radiant, resplendent like no other.

A different kind of divinity from that of Solaris' Sun.

The light of a new dawn.

Gwen turned around, her eyes focused, serious.

Her tears evaporated in the heat as she reached out and clenched her fist.

Flames coiled around her fingers, transforming into a blade.

The First Flame is a power that redates all forms of fire. Older than the stars, older than the Sun. The ember of life and the spark that can set everything ablaze.

As the oldest power, as the primordial power that gave life to Solaris, it too is the crucible where all fire originated from.

Gwen swung her blade. Fire digging into her flesh, melding with her own blood.

Kindling for this roaring inferno that cries out from her core!

The purifying flame, the healing flame. The radiant flame.

All shall return to one.

***RUMBLE!!!**

The land began to tremble as Gwen's power started to climb.

The primordial ember, the root of all fire.

Burn!

"Burn!" Gwen roared.

*Badum!

A heartbeat originating from the depths of the earth.

"Burn!"

Around the barrier that Arax had created, rings of fire began to form.

Whips of raw energy lashing out at the abyssal corruption that plagued the lands.

"BURN!!!"

A tsunami of flames burst out, washing over the fractured earth.

Before creation must come destruction, with the ember of cleansing, she will wipe this land clean!

"BURN IT ALL AWAY!!!" Gwen ripped out her blade and transformed into a streak of fire that rushed towards the fractured sky where no sun could be seen.

She will become the Sun in this sunless sky!

###

Solaris, o' foolish god of the Sun. He who sits atop the divine throne drowned in the sin of sloth. Do you still remember the oath you took when you stood before the masses?

Do you still remember the noble deeds claimed under your name?

O' slothful god of the Sun, behold the creation of myth. Observe the embers of the first fire. Relinquish your title of the Sun.

Be the witness.

Go on, veil your folly with arrogance. Drape yourself in silken threads of pride and be the silent observer.

Be the foundation on which a new legend is born in this new age, this new order.

O' sinful god of the Sun, await the wrathful fire that burns away the pillars of your throne.

The First Fire will reclaim the Sun and crown her with a laurel wreath of solar radiance.

For the birth of the second dawn shall be adorned in radiant splendour.

Your blood cast down from the heavens will become the golden baths in which she cleanses the old order.

Thus spoke Yvael Velcarion.

Seer of Cogs, Observer of Fates

And...

The Watcher at the Axis of Time.

Chapter 822: Travelling South

Alice frowned.

She felt a portion of her soul stir.

A sudden chill, a sudden realisation. But she couldn't pinpoint the source.

It was... strange.

The moment when you leave, realising you had forgotten something but not sure what you had forgotten.

And, if you had forgotten it, how did you remember?

Her brows creased.

On top of this strange feeling, her three relics trembled.

Something major connected to the Abyss had just happened.

[I know, just give me a second.] Cayla spoke up before Alice could even request anything.

Nodding her head, Alice closed her right eye and activated Cayla's power.

The seal loosened momentarily and the world divided into two views.

And to give Cayla some assistance, Alice injected energy into the Vision array. A halo spun behind her and she was plunged into a world of information.

Countless strands carrying myriad information flowed past her as Alice focused her mind.

[Hmm... Something in the north. A portion of the Abyss has just... retreated?] Cayla creased her brows.

The Abyss had always been expanding thanks to the Will's interference. But in recent years, it had slowed.

Yet now... a portion retreated?

It didn't seem to be through the Will's commands either. Moreso forced into retreat.

'Isn't the north...'

[Yeah.] Cayla nodded.

Alice took a deep breath and sighed.

She wanted to look on the bright side of things.

Before leaving, Gwen had told Alice to leave everything to her when it came to the north.

With that in mind, Alice decided to trust in her friend.

Deactivating her skill, Alice shook her head and shielded her eyes.

Her next goal was to travel south towards Extalia, to see what's going on with the Zenia family and even end them.

But travelling through the surface was a little rough.

With so many people out to look for her, venturing the Abyss was her safest option unironically.

Even with all of these anomalies walking around.

'Now that we learned a bit more about souls, do you think I'll be able to pull off what the Will did with Arwen? Find the contract within the library and revoke it.' Alice asked curiously.

'I don't see why we wouldn't be able to. With our Sixth Sigil and even the forced level up, it should let us freely navigate the library. The only issue...' Alyss folded her arms.

[Duration. We can't keep the skill on for long since it'll force you out of commission if we do. At that point, it's dangerous for both you and the person you're trying to help.] Cayla sighed.

The biggest issue with Alice's Vision was duration. And even after consulting Griselda, they couldn't find an answer.

Therefore, Alice decided to keep things as they are for now. Any further without proper preparation might make things far worse than what they already are.

'No point overthinking things. For now, let's go to the closest city or town and find our bearings.' Alice suggested.

Cayla nodded her head.

Since she was collecting information anyways, she might as well see if she could find anything through the strands.

Due to the nature of the Abyss and Surface, they couldn't exactly travel south and expect to come out south. Certain... gateways may send them to opposite directions.

Some might send them back north, some might send them east.

Unless it's an established and guarded gateway, one usually can't tell where it might lead.

That's of course if you're a normal Hunter looking for passage.

But for Cayla, this was an easy task.

[Keep going roughly south east from now.]

###

"Oh? Ohya~ Well that's interesting~" Astrelya narrowed her eyes, looking up at the sky.

Subconsciously, she licked her lips as ideas flashed through her mind.

*Pant~

"What... What's interesting?" Ria panted heavily while submerged in a pool of water.

Transparent tendrils latched onto her body draining her of energy. She wanted to get out but she couldn't.

Trapped in a trap she didn't expect.

"You want to know? I suppose I can spare a few words while you get sucked dry by that jelly fish."
Astrelya laughed, hovering near Ria on a cloud of stars.

"Are you perhaps aware of the Cog theory?" Astrelya asked as Ria tilted her head.

"I'm not familiar." Ria shook her head, twitching and more energy was sucked away.

The moment she tried to retaliate through a skill, what little energy she built out would dissipate.

"Long ago, in the past, there's a genius who proposed such a theory. The Cog theory. One where our world is made up of invisible cogs. Countless tiny mechanical circles that represented an event.

"And one that transform the fate of our world are called the Cogs of Fate. Just trying to turn that cog isn't easy. You need multiple events to occur, linking up to one another before the Cog of Fate spins." Astrelya explained, transforming her stars into the shape of a Cog.

"When I met her, did you know what she called me?"

Ria couldn't respond, her body turning number. Only her eyes wandered towards Astrelya.

"She called me a blood thirsty monkey who only knows how to chase after a high. Unintelligent, ugly and a slave to my baser instincts. Pft~ And she meant every word. Even if I could kill her, she wasn't the kind to hide her true thoughts." Astrelya laughed, recalling her meeting long ago.

"She called me a loose Cog destined to crumble. Not one of fate no... Such a reward was too good for a monkey like me.

"Even now, I recall that she spoke something to me back then, perhaps a prophecy traced from the Cogs of this world. Yet strangely I do not remember it. All I remember is what she said afterwards." She sighed.

"O' transient Lord of stars, foolish and desperate. My eyes mock thee with a gaze of pity. May you find the crimson string hidden within the maze of stone."

“Nothing more, nothing less. And believe it or not, I was not even the Abyss Lord of Stars back then. It is only when presented by the choice of said title, did I realise she had foreseen where I would end up.

“As the one who could see Cogs, perhaps she skipped ahead and saw that lies at the end. Don’t you think?”

To see the end of the story before it even began. What would the reader do?

Would they change the events? To try and rewrite their own end? Or would they simply observe?

“Ah~ but I’m getting off topic. You see, earlier, I felt a stir. One of the Cogs she spoke about had just come true. And the consequences of such can be felt by all who... have a certain affinity with that woman.” Astrelya winked.

“And when one Cog of Fate turns, you are sure that the others will follow.”

Flicking her finger, motes of star light sunk into the pool of water as crackles of energy followed.

The tendrils latching onto Ria’s body let go of her as the main body was burned away in an instant.

Looking at the unconscious Ria, Astrelya sighed and pulled her out of the pool.

“How long would it take your Cog to turn? Assuming you have one.”

Tossing Ria onto the ground, Astrelya took out a blade and made a cut along her arm.

Forcing Ria’s mouth open, Astrelya fed Ria her blood as Ria’s wounds began to heal.

###

“ . . . ”

“Are you feeling unwell?” A girl with white hair asked curiously, looking up at the man holding her hand.

“No. Simply something unexpected.” Nyer patted the girl’s head before glancing back at the wounded man following behind him.

Even without his core, he was still damaged to this extent.

As expected of the Lord of Destruction. The ultimate spear as well as the ultimate shield.

“Did I not ask you to take things slowly when it comes to experimenting with the new prototypes?” Nyer asked as the Doctor creased his brows and shrugged his shoulders.

“When the opportunity presents itself, can you really blame a man for taking the plunge? But even with the results, I have gotten some much needed data. And did I not complete the task you assigned as per our agreement?”

“No, no you did not.” Nyer shook his head, surprising the Doctor.

“Huh?”

“The northern side has been completely cleansed. Everything you did was wasted effort. All that you gained was some data and the loss of precious prototypes.” Nyer frowned.

The new Hybrid prototypes, while impressive, were a far cry from the miracle that was Alice.

A false recreation of her blood to create new soldiers.

But this blood... the ingredients to create such horrendous knock offs was far too costly.

The performance to cost ratio was not worth it. They needed something better.

"Give me the research and have Luthor send me some of the prototypes. I'll take a look at it myself. And in return, have the Zenia family carry out these orders." Nyer tossed over a small pouch containing the orders and some samples of blood.

Catching it hastily, the Doctor handed over the some research notes and left.

The girl next to him climbed onto his back and looked the document curiously.

"Interested?" Nyer smiled, patting her head.

"A little. What are they doing?"

"They're trying to recreate your sister's blood. Even for me, there were variables that I couldn't control. She's a one of one with no one else like her." Nyer explained as the girl frowned.

She knew how much difficulty Nyer had gone through to create her. So seeing the attempts of these people, terrible attempts, felt like a mockery to Nyer.

"Stop frowning, creases will form. They can try all they want but they'll never be able to succeed. The cheap knockoffs traded too much for the power of regeneration. They're tools, weapons, not even remotely close to a living 'person'." Nyer smiled, tugging at the girl's cheeks.

There were more important things for him to think about than the failed experiments of the Zenia family.

Chapter 823: Changing Mindset

"ARGH!!!" Waking up with a scream of pain, Rosalyn felt her world spin.

Her eyelids fluttered, pupils darting around in panic.

Cold, so very cold.

Straps locked against her wrists and ankles, preventing her from leaving.

Her skin on the verge of tearing from the straps, poison seeping into her flesh. Her regeneration failing her.

In front of her, a metal table could be seen with different vials of poisons, rotting flowers and needles.

"Awake at last." A voice mumbled as Leoric stepped into the room with a pair of gloves.

There were bags under his eyes as Rosalyn wanted to step away but couldn't.

Her body was bound.

"Are you feeling more cooperative now? Or are you going to keep being stubborn? I see the cracks in your mind. I see your desire to walk away from this pain. So why not make it easier for the both of us?" Leoric asked, lifting a few vials of his poison and giving it a light shake.

He observed the reflection against the lights before putting it back down.

His fingers, gently caressing the different vials with such delicacy.

Rosalyn opened her mouth, hesitating but clamping her jaw shut in the end.

Despite her fear, her eyes glared at the Lord in front of her.

"Why must you force me so? But everyone talks in the end. It's simply a case of how much they can endure." Leoric picked up a needle and jabbed it into Rosalyn's neck.

Black veins bulged as she immediately began choking her own saliva. Her body convulsed as her bloodshot eyes glared at the man in front of her.

"Such a stubborn little bird. Let's just hope he's not the same." Leoric shook his head, stepping away from Rosalyn as he walked into the next room.

Jin's room.

He was chained to a chair that's secured to the floor.

There were countless incisions across his body, forced open with clamps and his blood being extracted one drop at a time.

Dark tendrils of corruption writhed in his body, trying their best to keep him alive.

Leoric's hand lifted Jin's head, his gaze hazy and blurred, unable to focus.

"He's very brave. Even after using the most effective poisons I had against Eldritch energy, he maintained his silence. So perhaps I must use a different approach when it comes to the two of you." Leoric scratched his chin.

Injecting a new vial into Jin's body to wake him up, Leoric melted the wall between them.

"How about I give you an offer? The first to tell me the answer I want to know will be spared from my most potent poison. It's a vial I'd rather not use against people as even for me, I'll pity your fate." He offered.

Instead of answering, Jin bit his tongue and spat corrupt blood at Leoric while Eldritch energy regenerated his wound.

He put on a forced smile.

No matter what, he won't tell Leoric about Alice.

After everything his master has done for him, helping him live with this body, he refused to sell her out.

The blood that came into contact with Leoric's body seeped into his pores. The skin darkening from corruption.

But it only lasted a moment before being neutralised by the power inside his body.

"And what about you? Are you of the same thought?" Leoric turned to Rosalyn who was still convulsing from the poison.

"F*ck... you... Kill me if you dare..." Rosalyn squeezed out.

*Sigh...

"Why must the two of you be so stubborn? Just because I can't kill you doesn't mean I can't make you suffer. And the tools I have at my disposal are numerous. Do you really think someone will be able to find you in Terminus?" Leoric asked as Rosalyn grinned.

"Yeah... My brother will."

Leoric scratched his chin.

"Then let's see if your brother can find you first before you break."

No matter what, he needed the information they're keeping from him.

If he finds out how to fuse people with Eldritch energy along with the other sources, he'll be able to conduct experiments on how to create a perfect vessel.

And when he does...

'Wait for me Marina.' Leoric sighed inwardly as he stepped towards Rosalyn.

###

Deep in Terminus, a pair hid within the depths of a cave.

A man and a woman.

The woman was heavily wounded with countless stitches across her body, haphazard but sufficient for now in an emergency situation.

The man, peered out of the cave, checking the beasts that ran past them.

"F*ck... there's no end to these things." He mumbled.

Both of them were exhausted and had a lack of sleep. Not that they could sleep in the first place.

With this miasma, their bodies struggled to properly adapt to the changes.

And in these depths, they couldn't drop their guard.

Climbing back into the cave, he checked out the woman's wounds.

They were beginning to fester from the mix of miasma and poison.

"I can hold out for now... We need to find the others first." The woman groaned, trying to stand up but he forced her to sit down.

"The others are fine for now. We need to sort out some help for you first." He shook his head.

"Ria has Astrelya with her it seems. Jin has Rosalyn. Both of them have Lords to cover for them while we're... I don't need to say more." He smiled bitterly.

He was already struggling with surviving even with others covering for him.

But now, they were stuck in the most dangerous part of the Abyss with no one else to rely on.

Isolde had already pushed herself to the limit in order for the two of them to escape a pack of beasts.

If they don't find some help soon...

Luke shook his head, forcing himself to think about something else instead.

In times like this, he shouldn't despair. He should be looking towards the different possibilities and actions he could be taking.

Every second he spent worrying about whether or not he'll die is another second that could be spent looking for a way out.

Isolde let out a soft sigh and nodded her head.

She rested against the cavern walls...

The feeling of blood slowly leaving her body.

Her eyelids were heavy and warmth faded from her fingertips.

'Is this where I die?' She asked herself.

Luke was trying his best but she looked at things realistically.

The odds of her surviving was low, especially with these wounds.

It didn't help that he was a supportive kind of fighter. If she's taken out of commission, he wouldn't be able to hold his own.

The chances of both of them surviving was probably lower than 5%.

And that's just surviving, it didn't include somehow getting out of this place.

Is this where her journey ends?

Falling short of her desires.

She wanted to kill Lumiria, to make her pay for everything that she has done.

To get revenge for the children that put their trust in her.

She had given up everything. She has even given up her own soul yet...

"It's not enough..." Isolde mumbled, tears appearing in the corner of her eyes.

What more does she need to give? What else does she have left to give?

Frustration.

That feeling dominated her heart.

A suffocating kind of sensation that made her want to cry out at the heavens.

To cry out at their unfairness.

She was even abandoned by the Outer God she had put her faith into.

Luke was silent.

He could see the light reflecting from her tears.

He gritted his teeth and clenched his fist.

He knew he wasn't reliable. Not in this situation. He wasn't unwavering like Alice, strong like Ria.

He was just there for support. Nothing more, nothing less.

Useless and a burden.

No matter what they might tell him, he knew that to be the truth.

What use is a buffer if the enemies can kill them immediately? What use is an ally if he can't carry his weight?

What right does he have to stand next to Ria if he couldn't even do the simple action of protecting himself?

How can he promise to keep her safe if he can't survive in this environment?

Luke glared at the cavern exit.

He could hear a slithering sound approaching them.

A beast had wandered in.

A Hunter's power is tied to their mindset.

That's the lesson Allura kept trying to teach him but he couldn't quite grasp it in the end.

What difference could it truly make? He tried thinking differently, he tried thinking logically.

But even so, even when he adjusted his approach for his powers, he found himself lacking.

He tried to copy Alice's strongest attack only for the rebound to destroy his arm when he tried to activate it.

He realised how much of a monster she is... And how much of a burden he had become.

Anger filled his veins.

Anger at himself.

Summoning his grimoire, he created a chess piece and applied it to himself.

A Hunter's power is tied to their mindset.

At this point, there was nothing else Luke could cling to.

Even if he wins, he still has to face the storm of terror that is Terminus.

And if he loses...

'Would Ria and Alice grieve for me?'

*Slap.

Luke slapped himself on the face, he couldn't believe he was already thinking of death.

He wanted to stand beside Ria not make her cry.

Yet in times of desperation, he was thinking about what she'll look like after he died?

"Pathetic." He mumbled.

Yeah, it was a pathetic sight.

How could he think of making her go through that.

A Hunter's power is tied to their mindset.

No matter what, Luke vowed to survive this ordeal. If he needs to change his mindset, then so be it. Even if he doesn't understand it properly, he'll force his body to learn!

Applying more chess pieces to himself, Luke dashed towards the beast blocking the entrance.

He'll learn it no matter what.

Or die trying.

Chapter 824: How One Should Fight

Luke gritted his teeth.

He deployed his chessboard and activated his second Resonance.

His eyes shifted as The Visionary took effect. His vision split into two. Predictions based on possible moves in his right, real time events on his left.

Creating a pawn, he threw it above the serpentine beast, transforming it into a rook.

Castling!

However, upon the beast's back, multiple eyes have already opened and locked him in sight.

Luke gritted his teeth and summoned a pawn. The piece began to disassemble itself, transforming into two before taking their final shape.

Bishop and a Queen piece!

Casting and Multiplication!

Silhouettes of Alice appeared beside him as they each fired a Void Flux at the beast!

Sparks of energy erupted, streaks of destruction slashing against the walls of this cavern.

Swapping himself with another piece, Luke slammed his hand against the ground.

The chessboard manifesting as dark chains burst out, injecting themselves into the beast's body.

Debuffs!

Attack Reduction, Speed and Defence Reduction, Overall power reduction!

Luke's debuffs were the direct opposite of his chess pieces. But in order to activate them, the requirements had to be met.

Yet even with this defence debuff, Luke saw the Void Fluxes bounce off the serpent's armour.

The old attack lacked the power while he lacked the body to sustain Alice's new attack.

Facing the barrage of attacks, the beast snapped its eyes towards Luke. Clearly annoyed, clearly losing patience.

Rearing its head back, a pulse of energy exploded out, slamming into Luke's body and throwing him back.

The silhouettes disappeared, the attacks stopped and the beast's outline began to twitch and writhe.

With a single stomp of its legs, the chessboard shattered apart. Its ribs, snapping open from the back as glowing red mounds burst open, unveiling a set of obsidian wings.

Barbed spikes burst out from its tail and body like thorns, just the act of attacking it was a risk.

Crimson lightning and fire crowned its head and spine.

Luke wiped the blood from his lips and stared at the beast that towered over him.

Indeed... What could he do?

When faced with such a situation, one couldn't help but wonder.

He wondered about the possibility.

If he had been infused with the powers of the Eclipse. If he had something special for himself.

But such a thought was unfair for the torment Ria had to go through.

Luke clenched his jaw.

'Are you going to keep being like this?' He asked himself.

It's easy to cling onto something else when faced with tribulations.

'Think Luke. Keep thinking. There's only one thing an average guy like yourself can do to keep up. Don't stop thinking of the possibilities.'

Applying the rook piece to himself, Luke buffed his speed and dodged the beast's tail slam.

*RUMBLE!!!

Upon impact, countless thorns began to burst out of the ground. Each had a crimson vein in the centre of their structure as Luke had a bad feeling about it. The fact that they remained rather than disappearing gave him some hints.

'A bomb? He's reducing the space I have to work with.'

Crushing several pieces together, Luke activated his resonance.

Promotion – Paladin!

*BANG!!!

An armoured figure dropped down from above, slamming its sword into the beast's neck yet it didn't budge!

"F*ck! What is wrong with your defence?!" Luke cursed, clasping his hands together and summoning two Bishops.

Void Fluxes fired into the beast's eyes, disorientating it. Its large body stumbled back, slamming into the cavern walls.

But... It wasn't enough.

Just blinding it for a moment wasn't enough against a beast of this calibre.

It wasn't enough against a Lord.

Wasn't enough against a God who would hold him hostage against Ria.

He needed more.

Luke contemplated on whether or not he should force himself to use Void Axis.

A power that Alice demonstrated that his body had no chance of sustaining.

Even with eight pawns boosting his casting along with the King and Queen pieces, he still fell short. And even when he fell short, his body broke apart and misfired.

That kind of obscene power... If he was able to sustain it then he'll be able to carry his own weight!

If only he had that kind of power.

Power!

". . ." Luke froze.

He didn't know what kind of expression he was showing right now but he knew one thing.

This was not the mindset he should have.

A never ending hunger for power only leads to dead ends.

Tunnel visioning himself into such lust...

Unacceptable.

Luke jumped back, avoiding the beast's next strike.

If such desire was acceptable, Ria would've accepted the Eclipse's blessings.

If such desire was acceptable, Alice would've stolen the souls of everyone she met.

If he was to fall for such desires, what right does he have to look at them in the eyes without guilt?

Brushing his hair back, he took a deep breath and calmed his mind.

This state of emotion was unbefitting of one who plays chess.

His powers have already paved the way for him. But seeing the tyrannical power wielded by Alice and Ria was the fuel for the envy in his heart.

Jealousy, what an ugly emotion.

Such vile jealousy that he even forgot why he took on this version of his power to begin with.

What is a master of chess but a master of control?

And if he could control the battlefield, the chessboard, then he could avoid any traps or plans that the enemy might have.

Lusting for power to that degree would only turn him into a mindless pawn that only knows how to move forward without any thought. Waiting for someone else to take control of his life.

By that point, he had stepped down from a player and become a piece on a game he couldn't control.

Allura always talked about the mindset. Through his ignorance, he presumed such mindset to be the kind where people are willing to throw away everything for the chance of victory.

But he was wrong.

The mindset that Allura referred to, was the mindset of making use of every possibility to their maximum effects. A mind that can comprehend and plan, a will that won't break. And the determination to carry everything out.

The mindset of one who trusts in their own capabilities, experiences and refuses to back down without a fight. One where they refuse to cling onto outside help such as Gods and hope that the other will resolve everything.

Right here right now, it was Luke against the beast.

There was no praying for help, no Ria to cover for his weakness. No Alice to end the fight in an instant.

No teacher to guide his moves.

In this moment, he needed to believe in everything he had learned up till now.

Luke stomped down with his foot, the chessboard reestablishing itself beneath the two of them.

*Badum...

He felt his heart beat. Not fast, not slow. Not angry, not happy.

Calm, collected and looking forward to the next move.

One step at a time.

While his body took things slowly, his mind simulated the battle ahead. The different variables, the different possibilities. Moves at his disposal, chess pieces that he could use.

As a chess player, his goal was never to hope that his queen piece can just barge through everything and take the enemy king. That's how the queen is killed.

Instead, it's countless little moves leading to a final check mate.

He was never suited for ending a fight in one go.

What he was suited for, what he had aimed for, was removing the enemy options one by one until they were left with nothing but a single king piece waiting for slaughter!

Paladin!

Luke snapped his fingers, summoning two Paladins that slammed their shields against the beast's tail.

Bishop!

Summoning two silhouettes of Alice, Luke had them fire Void Fluxes into the beast's eyes once more.

This time, flames began to burst out from the beast's body in an attempt to purge the pest around him.

Flicking his finger down, Luke applied the Queen piece debuff!

If the buff was to multiply, the debuff would be to reduce how effective their attack was!

The flames instantly died down as Luke applied the knight piece to himself.

Knight, Rook, Queen and King!

Four pieces stacked on top of each other as he aimed for the base of the wings where its flesh was still weak!

Queen + King debuff!

Chains burst out from around the beast, locking it in place while the opening on its back began to fester.

What he applied was a weakness debuff that allowed his next attack to be amplified!

En passant!

Twisting his body, he slashed at the base of the wings. Even with his shallow cut, when amplified by the debuffs, this shallow cut became a slash capable of severing the wings of this behemoth!

Landing on the ground, Luke didn't stop.

He could see the prediction of his Visionary buff.

A field of thorns around him.

Castling!

Swapping positions with a piece he threw out, Luke stacked both Knight and Queen pieces together!

Multiplied attack buff!

He could feel the power coursing through his veins.

Just as he was about to attack, he frowned and held back.

The beast was baiting him.

Dispelling the buff, he instead swapped it for Rook and Queen.

Multiplied Speed and Defence!

He shouldn't be hasty. Right now, he's the one in control of this chessboard. He dictated the pace of this battle and the beast has no choice but to follow.

For the beast was not a player.

No, it was simply a piece on the board, one of many, that can only watch as Luke surrounded it for a check mate.

This was how Luke fights. To strip away the enemy's option until only one move remains.

The move where he claims their head!

Chapter 825: First Meeting

"Momma? Are you tired?"

Isolde tried to focus but her vision was blurred.

This voice... she recognised it.

Alya...

The last child she sent into Lumiria's 'embrace'...

"Tired?..." Isolde muttered.

She could feel the weakness in her flesh.

But that wasn't all.

She was mentally tired.

Tired of it all.

Zal-Ka'Rith has left and Alice tried to help. Yet they were now split apart and she's stuck in the deepest depths of the Abyss.

Her wounds festering and miasma flowing through her body.

"Yeah... Momma is tired. But more than that... Momma is sorry." Isolde's throat tightened. Tears streaking down her face.

She couldn't do it.

She wasn't able to get the revenge she promised her children.

Even after giving up everything, she still couldn't do it.

"Is that the limit of your anger?"

Zal-Ka'Rith's voice.

Her Lord that abandoned her... Now questioning her desires?

How utterly humiliating.

“Of course it isn’t... But what else can I do?” Isolde smiled bitterly.

She was at her limit. She stood atop a crumbling pillar waiting for her death.

What options are even open to her?

“Rage. Rage against your fate. Struggling until your last breath. Keep fighting until your body crumbles, until your spirit disperses. Let madness take root and guide your hand to Lumiria’s throat.

“Was that not the tale you promised me? The tale of deicide written by your hands and sealed with divine blood?” Zal-Ka’Rith asked as Isolde clenched her fist.

“I had promised you support and power in return for the grandest of tales. Don’t tell me your ambitions end here?” He asked.

The Outer God’s shadow loomed over her and Isolde felt infinitely small.

Against a cosmic power like this, what could a mortal like herself do? Did she even have the right to choose? Or was she forced to be a puppet that danced to his tunes.

“Of course they don’t...” Isolde gritted her teeth.

“Good, remember that.”

###

“Oi... Are you okay?”

Isolde creased her brows, she felt a hand gently tapping her face.

Little by little, she opened her eyes despite feeling the exhaustion and pain across her body.

“Ah... So I’m still alive.” Isolde muttered, causing Luke to let out a sigh.

“Were you expecting me to kick the bucket because of that thing over there?” He gestured behind him, the corpse of the beast now butchered and harvested for useful materials.

Isolde paused and let out a sigh.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it. Instead, how do your arms and legs feel? Would be bad if your regeneration healed your wounds badly.” Luke asked.

He had created a set of braces for Isolde’s injuries.

A tip that he had learned from Gin.

Isolde moved her arms.

Painful but at least she could move them.

“Yeah it’s good.”

“Alright, we’ll rest up for a day while I sort out some food then we’ll keep moving. The smell of blood will attract more beasts so I need to sort that out too.” Luke mumbled.

Now that Isolde was awake again, he continued to sort out the carcass.

The only reason why he woke her up in the first place was because she kept mumbling in her sleep.

Isolde glanced at Luke's back.

Something was different about him.

"You can probably leave me behind you know?" Isolde looked up at the ceiling.

Even though she told Zal-Ka'Rith her ambitions don't end here, desires and reality are two very different things.

Right now, she couldn't fight nor could she help in anything else.

A burden, nothing more.

"Are you still half asleep? Why would I abandon you in the Abyss?" Luke frowned while hacking away at the carcass.

"I'm not half asleep. Just looking at the realistic picture." Isolde shuffled a little to sit up.

But feeling a jolt of pain, she slumped back down.

"You should've just told me if you wanted to sit up. You're an injured person right now." Luke made his way over and helped her sit properly.

Even making sure her wounds wouldn't affect her too much.

Thoughts flashed through Isolde's mind.

Perhaps this is what it felt to be cared after. All this time, she was always the one doing the caring at the orphanage.

Then, when everything had happened, she was responsible for herself.

Zal-Ka'Rith didn't speak much, only occasional peeps to check in on her.

It was only recently that he spoke more, then... He left.

"But I won't abandon you. If I do, how would I face the others? And..." Luke paused, a small smile appeared on his face.

"How would I face Ria if I were to abandon an ally in a dangerous situation?"

Hearing this, Isolde let out a small chuckle.

"I see... Humour me a little." She smiled.

"Can you tell me a little more about you two? You and Ria."

Isolde had to admit, she was curious. What pushes him to try so hard even when she's not present?

Perhaps it's due to her own history, or perhaps she gave Zal-Ka'Rith more than just her soul. But these... expressions and actions, she was unfamiliar with them.

Luke tilted his head, he wasn't sure what she meant.

"Care to clarify?"

“Hmm... what pushes someone to work so hard even when they’re not here. Sorry if it comes out wrong, but can’t you just hide it?” Isolde asked.

Surely it would be easy for him to hide the fact that he left her behind? Maybe she died in an ambush.

Or maybe they were separated and he couldn’t find her.

No one would blame him yet... he was still trying.

Luke scratched his hair and sat down next to her.

“Why not. It’ll be a good change of pace to talk about something else.” He chuckled.

“You know about our history with the Eclipse right?” Luke asked as Isolde nodded.

“Just a little here and there.”

“I see... Well, Ria was taken before me so I can’t tell you much about the events before it. Let’s se... I guess I’ll start when we first met.” Luke smiled.

Even though they were both stuck in the Eclipse, the memory of the two of them brought a sense of warmth to his heart.

###

“Argh!” A young boy let out a cry as he was tossed into a cell.

His small body slammed against the cold hard floor as the heavy metal doors shut behind him.

He turned around only to see his captor walking away.

“Ah! Let me go! I don’t wa-” He cried after the man only to be held back by another pair of hands, one covering his mouth.

“Shh! If you keep shouting they’ll beat you!” Another kid whispered, his voice trembling in fear.

Around them, the cell was crowded with different faces. Some pale, some calm. And some on the verge of tears.

They were all captives of the Eclipse Cult, every one of them caught and thrown into this cell waiting for the next ritual.

Some had been here for months, obeying the ritual and doing their best to survive. Some were new like him, fearful of what’s to come.

And Luke was part of the new batch.

When the sound of footsteps finally faded away, the older boy withdrew his hands and let out a sigh of relief. He gave Luke a glare and walked back to where he was sitting a moment ago.

Luke crawled to a corner and sat down, hugging his knees. He could still remember what had happened before being dragged here...

The sight of his parents...

*Hick...

Luke began to sob but kept his cries quiet, scared of what might happen if he was to cry too loud.

What if that man earlier were to come back?

“Erm... Can you stop crying? It’s annoying and I might tear my ears off.” A young girl asked. She sat down next to him as he looked at her in confusion.

She had a smaller stature than most, even considering their age. She had deep bags under her eyes with rough and messy hair.

But most of all, her gaze was cold.

Almost inhuman.

Luke shivered.

“Are you cold? If you want a blanket, wait for tomorrow. I’m sure you can just grab one from one of them when the ritual finishes. If you survive I guess...” She spoke.

Her voice was quiet yet her words were harsh.

Luke wanted to speak but no words came out. He simply kept sobbing while the girl sat next to him.

Even though she was complaining about his crying earlier, she wasn’t doing anything to stop it.

Opposite them, the boy who covered Luke’s mouth a moment ago stood up in annoyance.

“Stop crying already!” He shouted in a hushed whisper. Not wanting to alert the guards, yet wishing to show his frustration.

But Luke didn’t listen to him.

He continued to sob as the boy gritted his teeth in anger.

Raising his hand, he prepared to smack Luke on the head.

*Hick...

The girl next to him began to cry.

"It's... It's starting again tomorrow isn't it... I don't want to go..." She buried her face into her arms.

The boy who was about to smack Luke hesitated.

Indeed.

Who wouldn't be scared in this situation? Not to mention the new batch who only just arrived today. They don't know the hell they're about to walk into.

Letting out a frustrated sigh, he turned and walked away.

The girl lifted her head.

She wasn't crying at all. She had simply acted pitifully to make him go away.

Her eyes were the same as usual and she stuck out her tongue.

"If you make yourself stand out like you did, you'll be taken out early." She glanced over at Luke.

"Try your best to hide tomorrow." She reminded before closing her eyes to rest.

That was the first meeting between Luke and Ria.

Chapter 826: First Ritual

Sleep...

How wondrous. A moment of rest, a break from the world.

A time where you don't think, don't do anything.

You simply drift off into the darkness, unable to determine whether or not you'll wake up tomorrow.

A moment where you give up control of your life and drift off into the infinite void.

A period of vulnerability where you entrust your life to those around you.

But when you're stuck in this hellhole, in the depths where everyone around you was your enemy, could you really drift off into that peaceful nothingness?

Luke feared.

He feared what might happen if he didn't keep his eyes open.

The cold stares of the other children scanning the room.

None of them dared to sleep.

For sleeping in this situation meant death.

Luke felt as though he was in a pit of ravenous animals, waiting to tear him limb from limb.

He repeatedly bit his arm, forcing himself to stay awake. His eyes feeling heavier by the moment.

His focus drifting off only for it to snap back the moment he felt their stare.

He couldn't sleep.

He couldn't sleep.

He couldn't sleep.

"They're just trying to scare you. They can't kill you since it means one less sacrifice. If death must happen, it can only happen during the ritual." The girl nudged him from the side.

"H-How do you know?" Luke whispered back, scared.

He didn't know why this girl who seemed younger than he was so calm in this situation.

"Because I've stayed here for a while." She shrugged, yawning softly as her eyes closed.

"If they kill you, they risk dying themselves. So don't worry and sleep, you need as much energy as you can get tomorrow."

Luke tightened his fists around his pants.

"Why me... Why are you telling me this?" He wanted to know why she was helping him, especially if they might die tomorrow.

"Because you're sitting next to my spot. And the more you make a racket, the harder it is for me to rest." She furrowed her brows.

Luke became silent.

"Ria, we need to talk."

The boy opposite them came over. He shot Luke a glare before turning to Ria who groggily rubbed her eyes.

Her earlier coldness disappeared only to be replaced by a set of puppy eyes and a weak aura.

A weakling.

"A... talk? But..." She gave Luke a worried glance.

An actress waiting to captivate her audience.

The boy didn't care if Luke could hear.

"Tomorrow... You know what's going to happen tomorrow. If you help him you're just going to become the enemy of the others. I... I don't want that." He hesitated.

Even in the depths of this hell, they still formed communities to get by.

"Am... Am I going to die?" Ria bit her lip, tears forming on the edges of her eyes.

"No! I'll make sure of it." The boy leaned down, hugging Ria.

But the moment her expression was out of view... It changed.

Luke felt a chill.

Cold eyes like a predator. Her prey in her arms.

Right now, she could just bite down on his jugular and ravenously consume the bounty in front of her.

But she waited. She waited for him to lead her to their home.

And as he moved away, her expression returned back to 'normal'.

A fearful rabbit who could be killed by a light breeze.

Delicate, needing of protection.

The perfect specimen to invoke the feeling of guardianship.

"I-I don't want anyone to die..." Ria began to sob while the boy patted her back.

She hid her face in her arms but Luke saw her annoyance.

A face that screamed why won't this guy leave already.

Once he left, Ria sighed in relief and laid down.

"Get some sleep. And when tomorrow arrives, be prepared to run. Run because your life depends on it. A weakling like you... Will die if you don't run."

This time, there was something subtle in Ria's expression. The way she spoke.

Was she...

'Sad?'

Luke spent the night thinking about that last expression before falling asleep.

###

"ARGH!!!!"

"HELP!"

Luke ran as panic overwhelmed his mind. His chest heaving up and down in rapid bursts as he scrambled to run from the danger. Each breath scraping against his throat as the taste of iron lingered in his mouth.

Madness.

A ritual of madness and blood, a carnival of slaughter.

Shadows flickering from torchlight, weapons hurled across the sky.

Children screaming as blades dug into flesh.

Crunching of bones, tearing of flesh. Blood spraying into the air.

Luke screamed, tears stained with blood streaming down his face.

He held a dagger in his hand but he dare not use it.

He didn't want to approach the madness that surrounded him.

In the background, the chanting of robed cultists echoed out in unison.

He felt as though something was trying to dig its way into his mind, to change the way he thought.

Blood? Did he want blood?

Hungry? So very hungry...

Primal instincts streaming out over reason, the desire to survive dominating his morality.

Luke crashed into another boy and fell into the blood pool. He gagged from the blood pouring into his throat, the feeling of disgust dominating his mind.

He was pulled up by the throat so that the boy could get a better look at where he wanted to stab.

And just as Luke shielded his face, he watched as another child lunged onto the boy's back, stabbing repeatedly into his face and throat until the skull split open.

Everyone around him clawed at each other like hungry beasts.

Another girl shirked in fear, her voice piercing through the screams only to be silenced by a knife against the throat.

She fell forward, gurgling on her own blood while reaching out her hands for help.

Any help.

Only to contribute towards the pool that they were killing each other in.

Luke scrambled onto his feet, trying to run.

Then he spotted her, Ria.

She was cowering behind the boy that talked to her last night.

He fended off the dangers and right when people left them alone...

"ARGH!!!"

The boy screamed, a dagger stabbing through his lower spine.

He lost feeling in his legs and fell backwards.

A laugh of madness followed as Ria killed the boy.

No... it wasn't a clean kill.

A torture.

Slashes against the tendons, a prolonged death to feel the despair.

The perfect kind of death that the cultists wanted.

Luke noticed the one who stood in the middle of the cultists looking at her with great appreciation.

Her actions screamed for everyone to look at her.

Look at the sacrifice she had prepared.

But tears streamed down her cheeks.

In her smile, Luke saw sadness.

In her eyes, Luke saw grief.

In her actions, Luke saw hesitation.

But nevertheless, she still struck.

She killed the boy and scrambled away from the battle, hiding lurking, going after the next prey.

But between kills, Luke felt as though she was screaming a different message.

"Someone please stop me."

Just as Luke was about to run after her, another girl lunged at him.

Her dagger inches away from his face as he pushed her off, kicking, flailing in panic.

The dagger cut against his arm as he cried out in pain but she didn't stop.

No, she wanted his life.

He saw the girl's desperation, she too wanted to live.

And to live in this place, she needed to kill.

The same goes for him.

To live, he must kill the girl in front of him.

Clenching his fists, Luke threw out a punch and watched the girl stumble back.

Tripping over the corpse of another, she fell backwards, landing on a dagger that stabbed into her neck.

Her voice was muffled by her own blood, tearful eyes glaring at Luke as she gasped for air.

He stumbled back, averting his eyes from the final sufferings of a girl.

He ran. One step after another, he kept running.

That was how his first ritual ended.

Once a certain amount of kills had been obtained, they forcefully stopped the ritual. This was going to be a long ordeal that required hundreds of sacrifices.

Luke clutched his arm in pain, swerving left and right from exhaustion.

His foot was caught and he almost tripped.

Looking down at the culprit, he saw that it was tangled in the jacket of another boy. A victim of the ritual.

"Right... I needed a blanket..." He muttered.

Reaching down, he took it and walked away.

As they returned to their cell, Luke noticed that their numbers had roughly dropped by 80%. There were only a few who remained, some from the new batch who survived out of luck like he did. Some who killed their way through.

They sobbed to themselves, huddling in corners.

Luke sat down.

He didn't care that the jacket was soaked with blood.

"You found a blanket, congratulations." Ria spoke, sitting back down and faced the wall.

She laid down with exhaustion.

Even though she was covered in blood, she wasn't wounded.

He noticed some dried blood being wiped away from her mouth. Pieces of skin still clinging to the gaps.

He wanted to move away in fear but noticed her shoulders trembling.

Without thinking, he threw the jacket over her, surprising Ria as she turned to look at him.

There was no doubt he saw her killing those kids so why?

Her expression was one of surprise and confusion. Not the same kind of expression she put on when deciding her next target.

Luke hugged his knees and leaned against the wall.

"You were... crying."

Confusion.

That was the only thing on Ria's mind.

"So you gave me a blanket to remind me of what happened?"

"Ah... No that's not... give it back then." Luke panicked but Ria shook her head.

"You gave it so it's mine now."

Turning her body, she laid back down on the ground with the bloodied jacket over her body.

"So I was crying..." She mumbled.

As strange as it was... A small smile appeared on her face.

She was glad... Glad that she could still cry for the person she had become.

Chapter 827: A Killer's Smile

Over time, Luke started to realise how Ria hunted.

She was careful with her targets.

It was never random. Always planned, always after careful consideration.

After all, one wrong move meant that they could easily turn against her. She needed to find someone perfect. A person with a strong sense of empathy, those were her best targets.

Those who cared too much about others were ideal. To her, empathy was a string she could use to wrap around their necks. And when the time came, she'll pull it tight till their eyes lost its shine.

Patience was her best friend. If there were no suitable targets, she'll simply wait. Continue her façade while 'somehow surviving each day.'

Strangely, she never went after him. At this point, they were neighbours. Sharing the same corner and making sure not to bump into each other when the ritual began. He didn't move to help her, and she was the same.

Of course, the others didn't know what she was doing, how vicious she could be. They were too busy trying to survive, how would they have the time to observe?

All they saw were cowards who evade the combat. Eventually, they'll die, but that wasn't their focus.

One night, Luke woke up and saw Ria sitting in the dark. There was little light but enough to see silhouettes.

Her eyes, unblinking.

She was observing the new batch while they slept. Fingers tapping, eyes darting.

Luke realised she was calculating her next angle. Which one would be suitable as a target? Which one would she use as a shield? Which one would she kill.

They couldn't be too weak either. If they're too weak, they made a terrible shield for Ria.

While most didn't know what she was doing, some caught on. And during the rituals, they'll aim for her. But she had her own method of survival.

After all, even Luke could tell.

Ria wasn't just someone who survived long. No, she wasn't just a survivor.

She was a killer of the highest quality. Their finest butcher, their prized weapon.

"Tomorrow might be rough. They've brought over some tenacious and cautious kids this time." Ria whispered, not glancing at Luke as she was too busy scouting out her targets.

Ever since the first day, Ria was always like this.

Always giving him tips, warnings and suggestions.

Making sure that when she returned from the ritual, he would be there to sit next to her once more.

"You should be fine. Most of them seemed to have heard something from the other groups." Ria narrowed her eyes, wondering if she should just kill them now.

But no matter how favoured she was, the unbroken rule wasn't something she could go against.

What they wanted to see was a struggle. A battle to the death and grasping at lifelines as blood left the body.

They wanted to see desperation.

They wanted to see the will power for survival.

###

Luke ran.

He ran like usual but today was different.

It felt... safer?

No.

That wasn't accurate. Rather, it was because there's a clear goal.

He turned towards the centre.

Ria was surrounded.

"W-why me?" She flinched at the sight of the knife. Her trembling hands holding her own weapon in front of her, a 'futile' act of self defence.

"Keep acting! We know what you did!" One of the kids who surrounded her shouted.

Hatred in their eyes.

"You killed Min when he trusted you!" Another followed.

Five of them had banded together in order to deal with the butcher of these blood pits.

Others steered clear.

Even if they didn't know what was happening, they knew that the girl had to die no matter what.

So rather than joining in or stopping it, it was better for them to just step aside and watch.

To cover their own back.

Ria understood that no amount of acting was going to change things.

All five of them came determined.

They wanted blood. Her blood.

Her terrified expression faded away. The trembling stopped and she reached down to scoop up a handful of blood.

"Ah~ All that talking and begging has made me pretty thirsty. Feel free to take a drink by the way. Blood is surprisingly tasty once you get used to it." She giggled, lifting her hand up and pouring the 'drink' into her mouth.

Some of the blood spilled out but she licked it clean.

Her eyes turned cold, the smile of a killer.

A demonstration of power and to instil as much fear as she could into them.

She raised her knife in front of her body.

Her movements are calm, controlled...

Experienced.

Two of the kids moved first, they lunged with fury in their eyes.

Ria's gaze darted towards them as she immediately sprayed a mouthful of blood towards their eyes!

She didn't drink the blood at all!

With the two busy shielding their eyes, Ria struck.

She dove into the guard of the first boy, her knife shooting up as it pierced the underside of his jaw.

Stealing his knife while discarding her own, she sunk it deep into his gut and twisted it.

She made sure to hook some of the organs against the guard and gave it a vicious tug!

The other's widened their eyes in horror.

They had expected this but even so...

Ria didn't stop moving.

With the first one down, she aimed for the second. He had already wiped the blood away and opened one eye. His knife aiming for Ria's chest.

She stepped to the side, avoiding the stab while also missing her own.

But she had more weapons than just her knife.

She bit down hard against his shoulder, teeth sinking to flesh. Latching herself onto his back and stabbing repeatedly while he frantically pulled at her hair.

It was no use.

He died under repeated brutal stabbings.

Standing up with messy hair and a bloodstained outfit with crimson splattered across her face, she grinned maniacally at the rest.

An act that Luke saw through.

He saw the sweat around her face, the slight twitch of her smile. Barely noticeable but it was there.

She was nervous.

The first two kills were achieved through trickery and had the benefit of a surprise attack.

But the last three were now completely on guard, not daring to approach her lightly.

And in terms of pure physical power... Ria was weaker than them.

So the first thing she needed to do, was to make sure she wasn't surrounded!

She burst into action. Turning to the side, she rushed towards the weakest looking one.

"Get her!"

The other two chased but Ria will reach him before they'll reach her!

"Min spoke about you. Said that you needed to be protected like me. A weakling." Ria whispered as the kid gritted his teeth.

Out of rage, he swung with a wide arc, leaving his body open.

A fatal mistake.

Ria jumped, her shoulder blocking his arm so that he couldn't swing.

Opening her mouth, she sunk her teeth into his throat and twisted her head!

"ARG-!!!" He tried to scream but blood sealed up his throat.

Unfortunately, she couldn't finish off her target as the others caught up.

Jumping off, she threw her knife behind her in order to slow the others down.

One checked up on the wounded kid while the other continued to chase after Ria.

"Come on, you almost got me. Try a bit harder, just a little more. Then Min can sleep peacefully in the afterlife~" She taunted, grabbing a girl by the collar before swinging her body around and using her as a shield.

The boy widened his eyes in horror but he couldn't stop his swing in time.

His dagger stabbed into the girl's chest, her pupils constricting as tears streaked down her face.

"So close~" Ria smirked from behind the girl as her blade stabbed into the boy's guts.

But to her shock, he simply accepted it and grabbed her wrist, refusing to let go.

Wincing from how much force he was using, she glanced up and saw the shadow of a knife.

'Ah... He's going to stab me.' She thought to herself.

Was this the end?

Could she finally stop this performance?

This feeling that fills her chest...

How...

Liberating.

But something stirred in the corner.

A small worry.

Nothing major yet... it was akin to a black splatter of paint on a white canvas.

What about Luke? The boy who sat next to her spot.

She was like him at the start. Perhaps that's why she wanted to help.

If she was to die here, would he become just like her? A butcher of these pits. Or would he become part of the blood pools...

For some reason... Just the thought of that made her blood run cold. She didn't want the same to happen to him, she didn't want another butcher to be born.

She didn't want the victims of this blasted ritual to produce more products!

She couldn't change the fact that she had become their prized weapon, their favourite butcher. But what she could do was prevent more from being made.

Her rebellion against the cult would be to ensure that she is the last!

Ria raised her arm.

"ARGH!!!" The blade stabbed through her flesh but she was alive.

She felt her own blood splatter on her face but she was alive.

She felt the shock of being stabbed ripple through her mind.

But she was alive.

She held on but the boy kept pushing. The knife tip getting closer and closer to her face.

Ria was losing this contest of power but she still wanted to live.

"RIA!!!"

A shout. A tone she wasn't used to. The boy who spoke softly and whimpered like a rabbit had shouted her name.

He crashed into the boy from the side, pushing him off before running over to Ria.

"Are you okay?!"

Ria blinked her eyes.

The boy was concerned for her. Even after seeing everything she did to survive, he was concerned for her.

He observed her like no other, noticing the emotions she buried deep down. He worried about her safety even though he saw her kill the people around her.

"Pft..." Ria couldn't help but laugh.

"What a weirdo..." She muttered.

A smile appeared on her face. Not the kind she put on when looking for prey, not the kind she put on to act weak.

But a genuine smile.

Even a killer like her had someone who would worry about her safety.

Chapter 828: To Die Under Her Blade

"After that, she kept calling me a weirdo whenever we met. But I was just glad she wasn't feeling sad inside anymore." Luke smiled softly after finishing recalling the past.

Most of the days afterwards were pretty much the same and Gin found them soon after.

Ria was the one affected the most so Gin took her in while Ria refused to go unless Luke came along.

"You're making me feel like I wasted a bunch of my timeahaha." Isolde laughed.

"I am???"

"Having someone to share a past with, someone you can reflect and look back on the time you shared. I don't have someone like that. The kids I raised, the people I knew, none of them are around anymore." Isolde smiled while looking at the flickering fire.

In her pursuit of revenge, all she's been left with is loneliness and regret. Nothing more, nothing less.

"But having someone like that is also a weakness. It's a weapon for your enemies to exploit and force you to make bitter choices of sacrifice. However... it is also a motivation for you to work harder and get stronger." Isolde glanced over to Luke.

"So work hard young man."

"Mnm. But it seemed like we got intruders. Rest well, let me take care of it." Luke nodded with a smile.

Isolde watched the young man stand up. Strangely enough, his back seems wider than before. More reliable.

Right now, Luke has truly achieved the mindset that Allura had spoke about.

Walking towards the entrance, Luke had one hand behind his back while the other held a grimoire. His face was cold and a set of piercing eyes glared at the bestial intruder.

Around the cave entrance, 16 silhouettes could be seen. Each a manifestation of his chess pieces.

Before him stood a black armoured beast with two sets of violet wings. A crown of energy and a pulsing core.

Its armoured tail slammed into the ground behind it and shattered the earth and a devilish grin appeared on its face.

"I knew I smelled something delicious nearby. So it was a human after all." His voice hissed through the gaps of his teeth as energy burst out from his body.

Judging by the aura, Luke estimated him to be a six star beast on the verge of Lordship.

Perhaps, it was even a Lord but he doubted it. He had seen the power of Lords up close and personal, the 'essence' of a Lord wasn't there. While favoured by the Abyss, this beast has not yet gained its recognition.

"For a beast that's lived long enough to be on the verge of Lordship, I thought one would be endowed with intelligence. Yet you stand before me unable to judge the danger you are in. Seems like most of your life can be attributed to... Luck." Luke spoke calmly.

No fear in his voice.

Just pure unfiltered confidence and cunning.

Before the beast could even reply, Luke had appeared behind him.

"What are you waiting for? Were you not going to say that your strength is not luck? If so, why are you holding back?"

*BANG!!!

Swinging his arms back, the beast froze after realising his attack had missed.

Luke was already back in his original spot but this time, the grimoire was open.

"Cowardly beast lacking in intelligence, come. My neck is open for you if you can claim it." Luke raised his chin, exposing his own neck.

*RUMBLE!!!

Violet energy coursed out and the beast lunged. Yet the moment it did, chains burst out from the ground. Two Paladins pulled at the chains, snapping tight against the beast's body.

Just as he wanted to break out through brute force, Bishop pieces rushed forward, firing point blank Void Fluxes.

The damage was low but Luke achieved his intent of marking the beast.

Rook pieces took an offensive stance.

*CRACKLE!!!

With a flash of blue, lightning burst out from their feet. Their silhouettes disappearing while slash marks appeared across the beast's body.

"WORM!!!" The beast roared, pulses of violet energy bursting out in an attempt to push away the pieces surrounding him.

Slamming his hand down, four singularities spun to life behind him.

"Unfortunately for you, I have a friend who's far more experienced when it comes to using Void abilities. Your demonstration? Not even worth looking at."

"!!!" The beast froze.

Luke stood on his head while blades pierced the singularities, cancelling them out before forming properly.

Raising his foot, he applied buffs to himself and slammed his heel down.

*BANG!!!

Forcing the beast's head against the ground, several spears and chains pierced the body and strung up his prey.

Realising the danger he was now in, the beast opened his mouth.

But before he could say anything, Luke slammed his mouth shut with a spear.

"I have an injured patient inside that cave. Visiting hours are over so let's not call more guests." Luke narrowed his gaze.

One by one, he'll eliminate the beast's options.

And at the end of this sequence, there will only be checkmate.

Turning around, Luke closed his grimoire.

He wasn't worried about the beast.

The only thing he was worried about was where Ria and the others were.

###

"Why won't you accept it already. You've shown improvement and progress. But what use is it, if you don't take advantage of the power inside of you?" Astrelya asked with a frown.

Ria was currently strung up by a tree and her blood being slowly drained away. Her face was pale and she tried to break out.

"To what end?" Ria asked weakly.

She's been fighting none stop these days with Astrelya finding beasts to keep her occupied. And the moment she wanted to rest, an ambush type beast would always get her.

"To what end you ask? Hmm... Isn't it your power to begin with? Why reject it so." She scratched her chin.

She couldn't fathom why Ria would be so stubborn like this.

It's not like she's accepting Enris by using that power.

"Because I don't like it." Ria took a deep breath and focused her mind.

She couldn't ask Astrelya to break her out all the time. She wanted to get out of this alone.

"So if the power took on a different form, you'd be inclined to use it?"

"Law of equivalent exchange. To gain something, something of equal worth must be given up.

"So tell me, what would I have to give up if I accept Enris's power?" Ria chuckled.

She had enough of that. She was sick of it back in the blood pits. Sick of being their butcher.

Sick of Enris's whispers polluting her mind.

She was done with the cult and everything it stood for.

Astrelya leaned back.

"Didn't you accept bounties and Sigils without questioning what you were giving up? So why does it change when it comes to Enris. Don't you think that's a little... hypocritical?"

"Hah! When did I say it wasn't hypocritical? I know I'm not a good person. The things I did back then are enough to send me to hell." Ria laughed.

Lightning coursed through her body as afterimages appeared around her arm.

*BANG!!!

Activating two fold lightning, she broke her arm free.

"So then is it because you simply dislike the Eclipse? Why not usurp her power, her position. Change it from the inside out? Or maybe even use her power to dismantle the cult you despise so much?"

Converging lightning into a single spark, Ria tossed it into the air before detonating.

*RUMBLE!!!

Lightning bolts crashed down, splitting the tree.

Freeing herself from bindings, she summoned her sword, unleashing a flurry of attacks.

"I could. But only when I know that power is achieved through my own work. If I simply accept Enris's power, how am I any different to those that cling onto her? How am I any different from those I want to kill?"

Destroying the tree, Ria frowned after realising the 'core' of that beast had ran away.

"But what about you? For someone who wants to die an ecstatic death, why aren't you just fighting the Apostles or Gods? Or is it because you're scared? Scared it's going to be one sided and you won't be fulfilled?" Ria smirked, turning the question back to Astrelya.

She had been suffering these questions for multiple days now, it was time for her to take the lead.

"What trivial provocation. I don't seek them out because fundamentally, we are not compatible." Astrelya shrugged.

"Kazira was too focused on keeping herself alive in the past. She wouldn't have been able to give me the death I desire. And Deva... Dying to someone like that is kinda gross." She pulled a face of disgust.

"Arax is too busy with family, Shiera doesn't care about fighting to the death. Griselda has gone soft and looking for redemption while Nanna is teeming with jealousy.

"Allura is one foot in the grave while Kaden is busy trying to look for a cure. Tell me, which of those six come close to what I crave?" Astrelya asked with a dismissive wave.

"Then why don't you go after the Old Lords that Alice mentioned or even the Outer Gods like the Great ones? Hell, you could even take a jab at the Gods if you wished to die. Isn't your philosophy and Enris' rather similar?" Ria narrowed her eyes as Astrelya revealed a wide grin.

"The Dreaming One, the Ascended one and the Formless one. All of them have their own desires but I can say for sure that the Ascended one cares not. As for the Gods... Solaris is too busy putting up a mask for the people and bathing himself in their attention. Lumiria cares not for the world but is enraptured by her own lust. What use do I have for them?"

"You haven't spoke about Enris yet." Ria pointed out as Astrelya chuckled.

"Enris... Indeed. If I could have a battle with someone like her and die under that blade, I would be fulfilled. But unfortunately it's not possible." Astrelya sighed regretfully.

"But are you sure you have the leisure to ask questions? It seems like your prey has come back for round 2." She pointed at the countless roots surging towards them from the ground.

"Tch, annoying." Unsheathing her blade, Ria dealt with the beast while Astrelya watched.

Indeed, if she could die under Enris' blade it would be a dream come true...

If only it was possible.

Chapter 829: The Ferryman

The Abyss wasn't exactly a good place to stay. Most of those who chose to come here stay for three main reasons.

Number one, they're running from a crime on the surface.

With how big and dangerous the Abyss is, most criminals can escape and live however they want.

Of course, certain towns and cities in the Abyss have their own justice system and methods of dealing with criminals, but compared to the surface, it was much simpler.

Number two, Hunters who enjoy the feeling of the Hunt.

They crave the dance between life and death, fighting against beasts and the feeling of surviving through strength. Down here, strength was all that mattered.

And finally, the last reason why one would enjoy living in the Abyss despite the miasma and dangers such as Abyss Waters, was that they have a screw loose in the head and actually enjoy this perpetual darkness.

And before Alice stood a man with qualities of all three.

"What's wrong lil' miss? Do I got something stuck in my teeth?" The man grinned, revealing his sharp pristine teeth.

Alice sighed and shook her head.

A man who openly admits to killing royalty on the surface and ran to the Abyss.

A man who enjoys the feeling of the Hunt, even going as far as living out in the Abyss Waters despite the dangers.

And finally, someone who actually liked this place so much that he actively travels between layers in search of stimulation.

Clad in tattered black robes with a white hood, his piercing violet eyes shimmered through the darkness. He held a strange spear that he uses to navigate the Abyssal Waters while a single purple lantern hung on one side.

Bags under his eyes and an overall gloomy expression despite the smile on his face.

The 'Ferryman' or so he called himself.

An eight Sigil Abyss Lord with an unknown title.

Alice sat in his boat, old, worn and full of scars. Yet strangely, not a single leak. In fact, its durability was rather impressive considering the fact that Alice could sense beasts trying to break it apart from below only to fail in their attempts.

Originally, Alice was planning on travelling south east while looking for an exit. But a huge issue arose.

Syrion's old home, the land where Alice had landed with Gwen was actually rather detached from the southern parts. In order to reach south, she needed to cross a large 'ocean' as well as a few layers.

She could try to cross with her Void powers but if anything was to happen during the journey... She'll be plunging head first into Abyss Waters.

Even with her resistance, submerging herself for that long will affect her.

And while contemplating what to do, dark mist rolled in.

At first she thought it was a stray beast trying to kill her.

But then she sensed the power hidden in the mist and prepared for an attack. A Lord was approaching.

Then he came into view.

A skull visible through the hood.

"Weary traveller, what bringeth thou to such depths?" He asked, pushing his spear into the Abyss Waters to steer his boat.

"Beasts roam these lands, one wrong step and thou shall forever sleep in the embrace of the dark mother."

Alice stared at the man with a neutral expression.

"If thou grant the Ferryman two gilded coins, I can take you wherever you want within the reaches of this ocean."

Alice continued to stare as the man monologued.

In the end, she couldn't hold back and sighed.

"Old man, why are you pretending to be a beast with that skull? And what's with the way you talk?" Alice massaged her eyes.

The Ferryman coughed frantically as he didn't expect a little girl to see through his act.

How did she realise he wasn't a beast?

"So you're one of those that are no fun at all. But my question remains lil' miss, what is a girl like you doing down here? I don't think this place is very welcoming for the pristine goody types." He rested his chin on his arms while removing his skull mask.

"Came down here to sort out a bounty with a friend. Is it true that you can go anywhere these waters reach?" Alice asked.

She couldn't help but wonder why a Lord would lower himself to the position of a... Ferryman of all things.

"My words speak no lies. Where these waters lead I can go. Provided we form a contract and you hand over two gilded coins." He grinned, holding up two fingers.

If it's a contract, then Alice wasn't too worried. But at the same time, she couldn't help but stare at his boat.

A flimsy boat like this... carrying her through the Abyss?

She doubted it.

"Ah~ I know that look. Don't worry, this boat just looks like this because of my own tastes. You can attack it if you want." He cackled, pulling up to the shore and stepped off.

Scratching her chin, Alice contemplated for a moment and nodded her head.

"If it breaks, don't blame me okay?"

The Ferryman let out a loud laugh.

This girl who didn't even feel like a Lord was telling him that his boat might break? This boat that's stayed with him for centuries in these dark waters, travelling through beast infested waters and even surviving attacks from Lords was going to break?

"Alright. Lil' miss, if my boat does break, I won't blame ye. I'll even give you the ride for free." He challenged her.

"Hou~ Confident. In that case... I won't be polite." Alice narrowed her eyes and took a deep breath.

Resonance!

*RUMBLE!!!

A field of spider lilies blossomed as Alice's outfit and eyes shifted colours. Sigils flared across her body while briar thorns dug into the ground.

"!!!"

Immediately, the Ferryman lost his smile as a frown appeared on his face.

Who the hell was this girl? Why is there so much energy stored inside that tiny body of hers?

"Oi oi..." He muttered as a bead of sweat rolled down his face.

"Feeling scared?" Alice smirked.

Snapping her finger, a singularity formed above her palm as she condensed it into a single spark.

A spiral of energy burst out around her, converging at the spark.

Void-

"Ah alright alright, I got ye lil' miss. The boat won't break but it doesn't mean it won't take damage." The Ferryman coiled his fingers around the spark, erasing it.

Alice widened her eyes.

All of that energy she had built up dispersed all at once and was absorbed into his lantern.

And more than that, he managed to cross the distance between them in an instant.

She didn't have her Vision deployed but it didn't mean she wasn't on guard.

He's fast.

"Are you one of those that's stuck at six Sigils but can't get a bounty to become a Lord? The Abyss is rather stingy at times haha." He joked, sluggishly walking over to his boat and stepping into it.

"Well? Are you getting on? I promised ye a free ride did I not?" He asked, snapping his fingers and presenting a contract for Alice to sign.

Scanning her eyes through the contents, Alice could see that it was very thought out, ensuring safety for both sides.

While she's on his boat, he's responsible for her safety and in return, she cannot harm him at all.

Two coins for a single journey, extra stops need extra payment.

But in this case, due to the bet, the journey was free.

"Is this a hobby of yours? I figured a Lord like yourself would... be making factions or claiming land." Alice asked curiously as she sat down opposite the Ferryman.

"Hmm, what use is such material goods when I'm not at the pinnacle?" He smirked. "But rather than that, where do you wish to go lil' miss? I've roamed these waters for centuries now, there's not a single place I don't know about." He bragged.

"Then... send me to a city or town that leads up to the surface. Specifically, I want to find a gateway leading to Extalia."

"Extalia? A rather turbulent place you have decided to go. I ask you now, are you sure?" The Ferryman scratched his chin.

"Oh? Is there something you know?" Alice was interested.

She crossed her legs and narrowed her eyes.

"Nay. Merely a hunch. And in all my years, it's rarely been wrong. My hunches are usually spot on. Just like how my hunch for you is that anyone who becomes your enemy has a bad time." The Ferryman chuckled.

Indeed, now that he saw her preparing an attack, he could sense the wellspring of power dwelling within her.

It wasn't the full picture but it was enough to send a chill down his spine just thinking about it.

A dangerous girl who poses a threat to even Lords.

"So, I ask you again. Are you sure you want to go to Extalia? I know the location of ancient ruins filled with treasure, secret passages and even lands beneath the waves. And I am someone people struggle to bump into twice."

"Yep, a journey to Extalia please." Alice nodded with a smile.

These places are interesting but perhaps she'll check them out when she has time. Right now, her focus was to deal with the Zenia family.

"Ah~ I see how it is. A girl with a purpose in mind, a singular goal that has to be completed no matter what. Seems to be a matter of vengeance." He grinned, leaning towards Alice.

Furrowing her brows, Alice was about to say something when he pushed his spear against the shore.

"Then let us depart. Let this Ferryman take the blade of vengeance towards her target's throat."

With a deep echoing laugh, the two of them disappeared into the mist.

Chapter 830: Facing Death

There were occasionally beasts that would lunge out of the depths but the Ferryman dealt with them swiftly without Alice needing to raise a finger.

She was the passenger and he was responsible for her safety.

But the most shocking thing was that he wasn't even using his full strength.

Not a single Sigil ability was used. Just pure brute strength.

With a swing of his spear, beasts would be cut in half.

With a simple thrust, a cavity would appear.

It was as if there's nothing in this world that could block his weapon's strike.

'Do you think it's an artifact?' Alice wondered, eyeing the lantern hanging off the end of his spear.

The light wasn't bright, no. It was dim at best, barely illuminating their surroundings in this mist.

Yet he was able to navigate with ease, even humming a tune while travelling.

[Maybe. But I don't sense the kind of power from his staff like I do with your sword. It's probably sturdy if nothing else. He needs a weapon that can handle his physical strength after all.] Cayla shrugged.

"Lil' girl, your thoughts are practically written all over your face. Does my spear look that interesting to you?" The Ferryman let out a small chuckle, glancing back at Alice who blinked her eyes.

"I swear... Everyone I talk to say that my thoughts are written all over my face. Is that really the case? I thought I was pretty subtle when it comes to expressing things." Alice frowned, making a blood mirror and looking at her reflection.

She pinched her own cheeks, raised her brows but it was hard to figure out what's going on in her mind.

"It's not like that all the time. When you space out, your desires are rather clear." The Ferryman laughed.

"But this spear is nothing special. Simply a durable stick. Would you like to hold it?" He offered.

"Sure." Alice nodded. She saw no reason to reject.

Pulling his spear out of the Abyss Waters, he tossed it over to Alice.

The moment Alice caught the spear, she was about to say something when it slammed against the boat.

*BANG!!!

"Eh?" Blinking her eyes, Alice realised the spear refused to budge.

Her smile twitched as she pumped energy through her body.

While her physical strength was lacking, by reinforcing her body with energy, she was comparable to those who fully focused on physical strength.

Her veins bulged and the spear began to tremble. She was able to lift it, barely and only a few inches off the boat.

Forget combat, she wouldn't even be able to use this to navigate the boat!

"What kind of spear even is this?" Alice asked with a twitched smile. Even after going all out with reinforcement, she couldn't use this spear at all!

In the end, she simply gave up and tried to push the spear back to the Ferryman only to fail.

"It's an artifact I excavated from the depths. Originally, based on what the legends told and the carvings on the walls, this spear can't be used by the unworthy. In anyone else's hand, it becomes ridiculously heavy." The Ferryman laughed, picking up the spear with ease and twirled it around his body.

"An Artifact? It doesn't feel like one." Alice raised an eyebrow.

"Of course it doesn't. Since it hasn't been activated yet." He let out a hearty laugh, placing the spear back into the waters to navigate his boat.

Hearing this, Alice was about to question what he meant when she realised what he was implying.

"I pulled this spear out with brute force since I like it. Even if I can't use its abilities, it's still a ridiculously sturdy weapon." He answered before she could even ask.

Alice's smile twitched.

Indeed there were all kinds of people across the world.

People like the man in front of her, who, despite not being the 'chosen one', still pulled the spear out through pure brute force.

"What about you lil' miss? That bracelet on your arm doesn't feel like a normal artifact either. I doubt it's something you can find easily." The Ferryman asked without turning around.

Lifting her arm slightly, Alice glanced at the bracelet and smiled.

"I was gifted this by someone. I suppose... You could say he's similar to a father figure."

Alice realised that Kaden was the one who left this weapon to her when she was first thrown into the Abyss. With his habits of robbing places...

Thinking up to this point, Alice blinked her eyes.

'Say... How many artifacts or relics do you think he's stolen from the churches now?' Alice asked curiously.

[Probably enough to fill a vault.] Cayla shrugged.

'Do you think... We'll be able to give some to our friends when we see Kaden again?'

If he had a vault of treasures... Surely he wouldn't mind sharing a few with her right? It's not like he's going to use them all.

###

". . ."

"Why did you stop?" Nalem asked curiously seeing Kaden stop in the middle of the road.

"It's nothing." Kaden sighed.

For a split second, he felt like he was about to get robbed but there was no one around them.

A strange feeling.

###

[Maybe. Though I doubt he kept a lot of the relics. While they're annoying to destroy, it's not impossible. And as someone with the Grimoire of Original Sin, making use of curses to slowly corrode and destroy artifacts is within his realm of power.]

'Ah what a shame. It'll be pretty funny to kill the Zenia family with the power of wealth. Not the material kind like money but the real kind of wealth ya know?' Alice laughed inwardly.

But while she was joking with Cayla, she couldn't help but notice that Alyss was getting more and more quiet with each passing day, only speaking a few lines here and there.

Taking this time, Alice sat down next to Alyss.

'Hm? Is something up?' Alyss glanced over curiously.

'A little. Just a bit worried about you.' Alice nodded without hiding anything. She wanted Alyss to know that there are people worried about her wellbeing.

'Ah, sorry. I just got a lot of thoughts running through my mind.' Alyss chuckled, patting Alice's head.

Which was rather strange since they pretty much look the same except their demeanour.

'Is it because we're approaching the Zenia family?' Alice asked as Alyss nodded her head.

'Partially. I guess I'm just thinking about... where we go afterwards. And by we, I mean my current state.' Alyss smiled, raising her arm.

Little by little, the golden chain manifested.

'We know that I'm partially tied to the Eldritch power inside your body hence why Velouria sealed me when we found her in the Inverted World. I'm just thinking... No, never mind.' Alyss shook her head.

Just as she was about to stand up, Alice grabbed her arm.

'I know I'm not reliable but... If you don't tell me what's going on, how can I help?'

The fact that Alyss was the original had always weighed heavily on Alice's heart.

Not only did she usurp Alyss's body and her name, she even kept her prisoner inside her own body.

She had been trying to figure out a way to give Alyss a body but it was proving to be far more difficult than expected.

Especially since their souls were connected. Just like the aftereffects of Kazira abandoning her body, separating them could cause problems they didn't foresee.

Still, Alice wanted to do as much as she could for the one whom she called a twin.

'Right...' Alyss glanced down.

In the end, she relented.

'Alice... Have you ever thought about what might happen if you were to lose the Eldritch energy inside of you? If your vessel breaks and parts of our power disappear. With me being so ingrained with Eldritch energy... I can't help but wonder if I'll disappear.' Alyss smiled bitterly.

The closer they get to the end of their journey, their goal, the more she realises that time was running out.

Eldritch Energy couldn't be allowed to fester in their realm.

So with that in mind, once everything was done, they would need to deal with this foreign source of power.

And by extension, face the possibility of her disappearance.

In other words...

Death.

She never really thought about it. Trapped in that prison of the Zenia family, she didn't think twice about chasing after death.

But now that they've tasted freedom, there were so many things that Alyss wanted to try out. So many places she wanted to visit. Adventures she wanted to go on, clothes she wanted to try.

Food that she wanted to eat.

With all these desires running rampant in her mind, she became fearful of death again.

Alice glanced down at the ground.

'No matter what, I won't let you disappear. We lost so much of our life being stuck in the prison. I won't be satisfied until we get that time back.' Alice clenched her fist.

'I promise you.' Alice looked up at Alyss.

It wasn't exactly a plan. There was no guarantee.

Just pure hopeful optimism and desire.

Yet despite that, Alyss found herself smiling.

'Then you have to also promise me that no matter the method, it mustn't come at a detriment to yourself okay?' Alyss crouched down.

"Alright."

Sealing their promise with their pinkies, Alyss helped Alice stand up.

Fearing death was one thing. But she shouldn't let it dominate her mind until she can't move. No matter what, she would keep taking steps forward towards the unknown future.

###

Gin stared at Allura who was resting on the bed. In his hands was a towel soaked with her blood.

Her condition was getting worse and staying in the Abyss was no longer an option.

At this stage, even if Allura wanted to protest, she couldn't do anything about it.

That was how bad her condition had become.

"We'll make our way out of the Abyss tomorrow." Gin declared, turning around.

Allura wanted to say something but Gin wasn't hearing any of it.

Whether she liked it or not, they were leaving the Abyss.