

Abyssal A 861

Chapter 861: Strange New Catalyst

After making it back to the tavern with the severed head, Alice immediately began injecting it with her own blood.

Naturally, if she was to do so without care, the head would mutate and die because of the potency.

But once she adjusts it and activates her first Sigil, she'll be able to keep the hybrid locked into an illusion of her own choosing.

Of course, there were limits to this. She can only make hints towards the illusion and set up parameters for the brain to work with rather than curate all of the details.

But setting that aside, she was essentially forcing the hybrid to experience a peaceful village life with hopes and dreams of normal people. She would think everything was a lie and if she was to question the people around her, their response would be whatever she would accept subconsciously.

The answer the brain thinks up of when asked a question.

When the subconscious wonders, "what kind of answer would I accept?"

That's when the empty space is filled, trapping the victim in an endless cycle.

"Can't you make her answer some of your questions? Maybe we can get some extra information out of her." Elias asked curiously seeing Alice seal up the wound around the neck.

"Doesn't quite work that way. I only have a hand in setting things up. After that, all I can do is watch." Alice shook her head.

She gives a prompt and the brain creates the illusion.

Home for someone wouldn't be the same home for someone else after all.

And...

The best illusions or rather, delusions, are ones that the victim dreams up of themselves.

After she was done sealing the wound, Alice placed the head down.

With the head now dealt with for the time being, she opened their pouch of purchased goods.

There was still some time left till sundown, and wasting this time away wasn't what Alice wanted to do.

Rather than sitting idle, it was the perfect chance to test what each of the bloods did.

First on the list was the strange mixture of blood.

When mixing blood together, the dominant one will win, suppressing the effects of the blood that lost. But in doing so, it's own effectiveness will also drop.

So the fact that the Zenia family managed to introduce a new mixing agent that balances the two, keeping both effects, was practically screaming adaptability.

[With what we understand about your blood, you're the pinnacle of adaptability thus far. So if the Zenia's are introducing a new catalyst, do you think they're recreating your blood?] Cayla suggested, preparing some reading materials that might be needed.

'Possibly. They do still have a dwindling stock of my blood. Since they know it's going to be hard to capture me, their best bet is probably to try and reverse engineer something similar using my blood as a base.' Alice theorised.

The only question now was...

How much blood do they still have left? How many hybrids?

The one they captured seemed far too lacking for something achieved through Alice's blood.

The only impressive aspect was her tenacity.

As for everything else... that was the disappointing part.

So with this, she could comfortably estimate that this hybrid was probably a failure in Zenia eyes. Only useful as a scout rather than guard.

Holding up the first vial against the light, Alice closed her right eye before opening it, activating Cayla in the process.

She could see the myriad of strands contained within, the different combinations that make up the vial.

A few that were clearly from beasts. A few that were... abnormal.

Parts of the strand had been isolated and removed from the main source, grafted as an extension to other threads.

[Hmm... I'm seeing about eight or nine different beast bloods being involved, not just the initial two.] Cayla furrowed her brows.

'There's also... human? Nah probably hybrid blood involved. A few signs of Sigil powers at that.' Alice leaned back slightly.

Creating a droplet of her own blood, she watched as it made contact with the blood inside the vial.

She wanted to see what would happen if the fake touched the real.

Would it adapt? Get assimilated? Or try to assimilate the original?

Several questions flowed through her mind but Alice simply observed.

Elias was also testing the blood with his own tools that he carried.

Similar to the tools he found when she was still going to the academy. Only for him, it was far more specialized towards discovering the composition of the blood.

After a short moment, the vial in Alice's hand began to tremble.

The blood within the glass bubbled and boiled.

An exothermic reaction.

Something was happening for it to expel this much heat.

Through the view of Cayla, Alice could see that it was sucking a large amount of ambient energy to sustain this reaction.

After a moment, the sample no longer resembled blood at all. The liquid coagulated into a strange thick substance. Pulsing... twitching.

Countless threads were connected to the new substance as threads- no... veins of red weaved through the object.

It began to split.

First into two halves, then into quarters.

Then it split once more and continued without stop.

[Sh*t...] Cayla cursed in disbelief.

Sweat dripped down Alice's brow as she too understood what was now happening.

It was clear if she was to view this through Cayla's lens.

Through the lens of the Eye of the Abyss.

In her hand, contained in this vial, was an incomplete artificial life.

The reaction of her blood mixed with the harmonising component that the Zenia family had concocted actually fused together. Her blood was too dominant thus the catalyst gave up and submitted.

Allowing itself to be consumed but in the process, transformed into a form of parasite, a virus that infected Alice's blood.

And from within, it hijacked the adaptation and was now rapidly regenerating into something... new. Something vile.

Creasing her brows, Alice was beginning to worry when the new life stopped moving.

'It's... rejecting?'

[Your blood adapted to the parasite. Seems like it's splitting itself to purge the foreign object. But...] Cayla had a frown on her face.

Even though Alice's blood adapted, even though it was defending itself against the parasite...

'It's changed.' Alice frowned.

[Yeah...]

Moving her finger, Alice wasn't to try and manipulate the object but it was difficult.

Like her experience in the past when experimenting with what she can control, right now it felt like she was trying to use a single droplet of blood to control an ocean.

She felt movement but the object as a whole refused to listen to her command.

'What the hell are the Zenia trying to make.' Alice sighed.

Creating a spark of violet fire, she plunged it into the strange mass and watched as it burned to ash.

She had to stop it from progressing further.

But this was good data to work with.

Whatever they were creating, it was clear to Alice that she needed a form of defence against it.

If that thing was to reach the source as in enter her body...

Alice didn't want to imagine the consequences of allowing such a thing.

It simply proved that the Zenia family or rather, the doctor hasn't been idle this entire time.

Rather than trying to find something to counter her blood, they were using the adaptability against her.

By forcing her blood to adapt, it has fundamentally changed into something else.

But now that she's found this out, there were a few ideas she could test out in order to keep herself safe.

And the key lies in her sixth Sigil.

[Would that even work?] Cayla asked, clearly doubtful.

Alice's sixth Sigil worked through possession, souls and history.

To achieve what she wanted to do... it wasn't quite within the scope of her capabilities.

'Never say never. I'm thinking... there are ways to achieve it through everything I've learned thus far. Especially my time with Griselda. Without her teachings... I think I'll struggle.' Alice smiled.

But before she could put her theories to the test, she needed more data from the new catalyst.

She needed to know exactly how it was forcing her blood to adapt, how it transformed itself into a parasite and so on.

And why is it in the blood that the civilians are drinking. Did they plan for her to find out? Or was this... parasite, there for something else? A different plan to the one that Alice had theorised.

What if it wasn't targeted towards her at all?

She didn't know.

That was the danger of not having enough information.

But regardless of the truth, to better prepare herself, she needed to keep testing.

Meanwhile, Elias would often turn his gaze towards Alice and see what she was doing.

Her experiments were strange to say the least. But what he was seeing, the way the blood was moving, it sent chills down his spine.

It was not 'natural' at all.

Though at this point, he should've expected as much.

The main question though... the question he's come to ask after performing his own tests.

Was why did this new catalyst feel so... familiar?

It was both foreign yet familiar.

And this familiarity felt dangerous.

'Where have I felt this before?' Elias asked himself.

He scratched his chin, looked at the inverted reflection of his own face against the blood. He watched as it twisted and twitched under the microscope of his equipment.

Then it struck him.

Where this familiarity stemmed from.

It felt similar to the time when he was in that white realm.

The realm where the Will of the Abyss resided.

Chapter 862: Ticking Time Bomb

Of course, this feeling that Elias was experiencing was a little different.

It wasn't an exact match with the strange realm.

If anything, it was at best a gut feeling.

That sensation you feel as you enter a basement. It was a unique sense of unease he hadn't felt anywhere else other than the strange realm.

But saying it was from the realm where the Will resided wasn't enough.

He wanted to pinpoint the specific feeling.

What caused this discomfort?

Elias let out a deep sigh.

"Alice, can you have a look at this." He called out.

Between the two of them, Alice was more familiar with the Will's realm. So letting her figure it out was more beneficial.

"Hm? What about it?" Alice held up Elias's vial against the light but she couldn't see the difference.

Activating Cayla, she got the same data as she did when testing her own vial.

"Doesn't it feel like something familiar?" Elias asked, hinting for Alice to try and figure it out for herself.

If she can pinpoint this feeling on her own without his input, then it simply proves that it wasn't biased.

"Familiar? In what way?" She tilted her head in confusion.

Hearing this, Elias froze before leaning back.

He opened his mouth a few times before giving up.

"Does it not feel similar to the Will's realm? I don't know... it just feels off. The same feeling I got when I first saw the Will of the Abyss." Elias asked.

Alice raised her eyebrow.

Similar to the strange white realm?

She was sceptical. Raising the vial one more time, she recalled the sensations she felt, the memory of entering that desolate white realm.

The way the energy moved...

And yet... The vial wasn't a match at all.

She couldn't detect anything familiar.

Not one bit.

Elias didn't need Alice to say anything. Her expression told him everything he needed to know.

"Never mind. I guess I must be going insane." He scratched his hair, reaching out for the vial but Alice shook her head.

"I don't think so. Just because I can't detect anything doesn't mean you're wrong, you know? Gut feelings and instincts are important for a Hunter." She glanced over with a smile.

"No smoke without a fire. There must've been something that triggered this reaction. Be it a whim, a misunderstanding or a different factor. Something acted as a spark. It's not a waste to look into things deeply. It's why we're experimenting and researching after all." She reminded.

Even though she couldn't find anything, she didn't want him to give up. Not when they're desperate for clues and hints.

At this point, she'll spend some time on a whim if it could potentially lead them towards figuring out the truth.

Elias blinked his eyes in surprise before letting out a small laugh.

"Alright, I'll keep at it then. If I figure something out, I'll let you know."

Nodding her head, Alice handed back the vial.

Looking out of the window, she glanced towards the sun's position. It was slowly approaching the horizon and soon, it'll start setting.

Despite not feeling anything from the vial, Elias's gut instinct made her start wondering about something.

About the informant's words regarding the fourth realm.

What does one require to create said realm.

This question got her thinking.

What did the Will's realm count as? Despite knowing that it technically is a part of the Abyss, it felt too... different to be the same.

And the fact that linking a passageway towards that realm through her own methods could cause disastrous consequences couldn't be ignored either.

Not to mention the fact that if it did indeed count as the realm, then was the Will the Realm Ruler?

One question spawned many more.

Though this is part of what Alice enjoyed about experimentation and research.

The discovery of one leads to five more possibilities. Answers to puzzles you couldn't solve long ago. Pieces you may discover, not knowing the importance until much later.

No matter what they find, she'll document and store it away. And when the time is right, the answers will naturally fill the gap.

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After the initial question posed by Elias, their experiments continued as predicted. Alice tested how the blood would react based on external influences. How it tried to hijack, balance and even adapt to become a virus.

No matter how little the change, Alice documented it all.

How much blood was needed to induce a change? How much for her blood to completely overwhelm before it has a chance to force an adaptation?

All of this was information that she needed in order to protect herself.

Elias focused on seeing the composition of the vials along with why how the blood reacted under certain influences of energy.

While doing these experiments, Alice gave him a few eldritch crystals that she retrieved from Suyin's vault, crystals she had used in the past.

When exposed under eldritch energy, whether directly or indirectly, the blood showed extreme aggression. A violent reaction towards trying to assimilate, destroy and at times avoiding eldritch energy no matter what.

They couldn't quite pinpoint the cause however. As blood from different vials differed.

But the blood that assimilated did something similar to what it had done to Alice's blood.

Transforming into a parasite and changing the host on a fundamental level.

It was clear from this that this blood was 'alive' to some degree with its core command being to 'take over'.

However, its method of destruction is what truly shook them to their core.

When choosing the path of destruction, the blood would use two methods.

The first was simple consumption. If the source of Eldritch energy was small enough, the blood would consume it as a whole and adapt.

The corruptive nature of the Eldritch energy is shrugged off with the catalyst showing signs of inheriting said corruption.

But if it deems the source too large for consumption, it would turn itself into a parasite like before. Yet this time it didn't stop at simply transforming the source on a fundamental level.

No, it would make it specifically 'weak' towards the parasite, practically turning the host body into a source of nourishment. And while it devours the host from the inside out, the host wouldn't know any better.

Even as its last embers of life are snuffed out.

"Then do you think the civilians are being devoured as we speak?" Alice asked, peering out of the window using Cayla.

The people who walked past their room showed no hints of being devoured. Their energy was stable and no sign of corruption present within the body.

Though that's only if you ignore the strange perception issues such as completely ignoring the dangers of Elias's fight earlier.

"If you consider the fact that in its base state, the catalyst acts as a harmoniser, isn't it more probably for it to simply be dormant right now?" Elias folded his arms.

The only reason why the catalyst acted so violently was because they introduced a third, dominant and violent source that tried to directly harm it.

It's only when exposed to such dangers did the catalyst fight back aggressively.

So if they took out this third influence, the catalyst was rather 'stable'.

Of course, that's the good way of seeing it. The other way would be to consider it to be a form of a ticking time bomb, simply waiting for the right time to detonate.

"Dormant huh? Probably. Though this does bring up the issue of how the hell are we supposed to remove it from the body." Alice clicked her tongue.

This was unlike the case in the north.

During the wide spread outbreak in the north, it was simply a case of side effects that didn't necessarily attack the body or anything that tries to remove it.

And since that was the case, Alice was able to deploy a city wide 'cure' to resolve the issue along with a bit of follow up treatment.

However, this catalyst was violent. Trying the same method would be akin to sentencing everyone to death.

'If it's acting on the command of 'take over', do you think it's receiving a signal from somewhere?' Alyss suggested.

If the catalyst was acting dormant, then could the Zenia family be waiting for the right time to send the command? Were they simply waiting for the catalyst to infect as many people as possible?

'Going by this theory... It would answer why the blood is dirt f*cking cheap. Ignoring the fact that the Zenias don't need money. And of course, we're also going to ignore the fact that they might've done this out of goodwill.' Alice rolled her eyes.

[We could try to reverse engineer it a little. Place a curse and a few triggered casts to counter. That way, when the signal is received, nothing happens.] Cayla spoke up as both Alice and Alyss leaned back, contemplating her idea.

'It's risky. Just the act of placing a curse could set the bomb off.' Alice tapped her fingers while calculating the odds.

So far, their experiments have proven that the catalyst was far more sensitive than they initially expected.

Taking a deep breath, Alice let out a sigh.

Maybe it was due to the large number of experiments they've been doing but she felt more exhausted than usual. Tilting her head back, she couldn't help but yawn.

"Jeez... how long has it been since I've felt this tired." Alice mumbled, scratching her head.

Looking towards the sky, she saw a beautiful blend of purple and orange. The horizon bleeding with the fading rays of the sun.

For some reason, it felt almost hypnotic. The way the sky was shifting, the colours painted across the clouds...

"Elias, you should see this." Alice yawned once more, glancing back.

But Elias didn't respond. His breathing was steady as he rested his head against the wall.

He was sleeping.

Alice felt uneasy.

Flooding her body with energy for a moment, she realised the fatigue didn't disappear.

In fact, it only grew stronger.

"Ah sh*t..." She mumbled, crashing against the bed.

Her eyelids felt heavy and soon, they forced shut with Alice drifting off into the darkness.

Chapter 863: Nightmare Realm

The instant Alice's eyes shut, a sense of weightlessness overwhelmed her body.

That instant where the floor beneath you gives out. The world slows down and you can only watch as you start to fall.

Alice reached out to grab anything that could stop her fall.

But... she couldn't reach.

Despite seeing how close the edge was, no matter how she tried to reach out, it would always remain at the same distance.

The world folded inwards. Up became down, left became right and Alice tumbled downwards.

Alice tried to orient herself but it was no use.

She crashed through a corridor of screaming clocks, faces on the walls laughing, crying, shouting while the clock hands spun.

Her arms started to bend the wrong way, her skin turned to glass. Her heart visible through the layers, beating.

The blood that pumped through her body.

*CRASH!!!

Breaking through another clock, Alice saw her reflection within a glass shard.

Tidal waves surrounded her.

Though... it wasn't water. A vast ocean of feathers. The stars above were replaced by eyes and wherever their gaze landed, the land and whatever was on top would begin to melt.

From beneath the waves of feathers, featherless avian limbs began to dig through the layers. A single head burst out.

A bird's head with 4 sets of crimson eyes. A giant scarred beak and a throat lined with countless jagged teeth.

Alice tried to speak but a flock of birds burst out of her throat, dissolving into a mass of feathers falling towards the sea.

She tried to move but invisible shackles clung onto her limbs.

She tried to circulate her energy, to fire an attack against this monster.

But nothing happened.

The familiar energy that had followed her from the start of this journey, her sense of safety, it was gone.

All she could feel was emptiness.

Gritting her teeth, she stared death in the eyes and watched as the bird swallowed her whole.

Alice winced. She could feel the teeth tearing through her flesh but she was unharmed.

Falling through the darkness, she found herself falling towards a strange cathedral of bones.

The ground was made of flesh as blood seeped through the tiles.

Just as she was about to touch the blood, she fell into a world of crimson.

A blink.

The falling sensation disappeared.

A gentle breeze brushed against her body and pulled her hair back.

Alice found herself at the top of a mountain. A sea of clouds greeted her as the skies blinked between day and night with a stutter.

She furrowed her brows and glanced towards the base of the mountain.

Mannequins.

Countless mannequins stared at her, crawling towards her whenever the light shifted to night.

Alice turned, looking for an exit but they flanked her from all directions.

Little by little, the night stretched on and the mannequins started to pick up their pace.

Rather than staying in one spot, Alice would rather try and find an exit. Turning her body, she ran down the mountain.

The gentle breeze transformed into blades that scraped against her throat and lungs. She felt sweat dripping down her face and back.

Her limbs felt as though a thousand anchors were attached to them.

Her entire body was sluggish, slow and devoid of energy.

She realised this was her base strength. Her physical power without the reinforcement of her Sigils, without her energy.

This was the same body she had when she didn't have a single Sigil to protect herself.

Weak.

Gritting her teeth, she positioned herself and rammed her shoulder against the body of the closest mannequin.

She wanted to create an opportunity to break out of this place.

Yet the moment she came into contact with the mannequin, she found herself in another world.

Her perspective was... dragged out of her body?

She could still control herself. But instead of looking through her eyes, it felt as though she was controlling a character in a play. She could see things around the corner that she shouldn't have been able to see had she looked through her eyes.

A strange sensation.

The world around her had transformed into a large verdant forest. A blend of inverted trees and strange flesh like towers that dug through the world and the ground above like a giant worm.

And what's worse... the shadows weren't moving in sync at all.

There was a delay.

Waving her hand, Alice narrowed her eyes as the shadow slowly caught up to her movements.

Shaking her head, she made her way through the branches.

Currently, she stood on one of the inverted trees. In order to reach the 'ground' she needed to climb.

After a short while, she spotted a corpse resting against the trunk. It was decorated in Hunter's attire and on its waist was a firearm.

A pistol of sorts.

"Is there even bullets for me to use?" Alice mumbled. Her voice had returned to her surprise. She half expected birds to come out but this time that wasn't the case.

Leaning down, she salvaged the gun.

Yet the moment her finger came into contact with the metal, the corpse grabbed her arm before she could even move.

Alice's smile twitched.

She saw two eyes emerging from its chest.

"Motherf*ck-"

Before she could even finish her curse, a giant maw burst out and slammed shut, crushing the upper half of her body.

"!!!"

Her eyes snapped open and took a few steps back. Her perspective was back to normal and her body wasn't a pile of crushed flesh.

She could feel her heart slamming against her chest, the ringing in her ears.

'What the f*ck is going on?' Alice furrowed her brows.

Silence.

'Cayla?'

Silence.

'Alyss?'

Silence.

Alice creased her brows. Her connection with Alyss and Cayla... they haven't been severed. She could still feel their presence.

But she couldn't see either of them.

Something was blocking them from one another.

Scratching her hair, Alice let out a sigh.

She was rather confident that this was the realm of Nightmares and Blood that the informant talked about. Which meant that she needed to be careful of three things.

First, do not stare at the sentinels, the watchers of the realm.

Alice didn't think she spotted anything like that on the way here, at least not obvious ones.

Unless the weird bird and mannequins counted, this part should be fine.

Second, do not chase or delve after shadows of familiar ones.

She hadn't done this yet and she intends to keep things like that.

And lastly, no matter what, do not cause a scene. Accept the world for what it is, do not mention the abnormalities.

This part was probably going to be harder. If she says anything about it, it might count as breaking the rule.

But thankfully, thinking about it didn't count. Or at least that's what it seemed like thus far.

Looking around her, Alice tried to get a feel of where she ended up.

She was currently surrounded by an oppressive fog that obscured everything. She couldn't see more than 2 meters in front of her.

But if there was any saving grace, she retained the gun she took from the corpse before 'dying'.

Held in the chamber were 4 rounds that could still be fired.

'Four bullets and the physical strength of a wet paper towel. I can probably fire one shot before needing a bit of time to recover from the recoil.' Alice thought to herself.

Looking down at the ground, she saw road tiles. They were rather old considering the moss that was growing between the gaps. Either that, or people haven't been maintaining the state of the road.

She followed along the path. Despite the fog, Alice realised that she was in a commercial district of sorts. Shops lined her flanks but the windows were highly reflective. She could see her own reflection but not the wares inside.

Her disguise had been removed, her mismatched eyes and split hair were there for all to see.

As for her outfit...

Alice sighed. It was the same one she wore when she was stuck in the labs.

Thankfully, no collar in sight.

If there had been a collar involved...

Alice shivered at the thought.

She tried to break the glass to distract herself, bashing the back of the gun but the glass refused to shatter.

'I guess this realm lives up to the name. Nightmares... yeah this is a f*cking nightmare.' Alice scratched her head in annoyance.

Not only did she lose her energy and her physical strength but now it was even reminding her of her most hated times.

Travelling along the road, she kept her guard up. She held the gun tightly in her hands but made sure to keep her finger off the trigger.

Four bullets.

She couldn't waste that on a jump scare. She had to be sure that whatever she was about to use this gun against was a danger against her.

The other option was to find a sword but even if she got one, she doubted her physical strength could handle that kind of weapon right now.

In the distance, the toll of the bell echoed out in the fog. Lamps could be seen but their light was restricted.

Meandering shadows could be seen but Alice kept to her own path. Making sure not to go after them.

Then, she frowned.

A shadow turned around and started to walk towards her.

It limped on one leg, stumbling as its head leaned to one side with the neck unable to support its weight.

Alice tried to speed up but it was clear the shadow was going after her.

Raising her gun, she steadied her breathing and took aim.

But as the figure broke through the fog, Alice's pupil constricted.

The familiar face. That familiar short grey hair.

The... golden pupil and flower in the other eye.

The shadow walking towards her was... Lilia?

Chapter 864: Strange Embryo

"Lilia..." Alice muttered.

Her finger hovered over the trigger. Should she pull the trigger? Should she not?

'Lilia' limped. Her head swung from left to right with an ominous rhythm. The timing didn't match that of an injured person.

Rather, it was perfectly timed without a single fault.

The cracking of her neck sounded almost like the ticking of a clock.

Tick tock. Tick tock. Tick Tock.

Each step, each swing, perfectly timed.

And...

The closer she got, the more her form began to change.

Her flesh started to rip apart with large stitches appearing across her body. Her limbs separated from the main body as mechanical contraptions took the role of helping her keep her 'shape'.

Red tubes threaded through her skin, through her ribs as blood pumped through her body.

The hissing of cannisters protruding from her back, the gears that clicked with each subtle movement. Her torso split open to reveal the gears and metal that replaced her flesh and organs.

A visage of Lilia's final moments. A clockwork doll.

Alice bit her lip.

In the end, she stopped aiming at Lilia with her gun.

Do not chase or delve after shadows of familiar ones.

That was the second rule.

Was it because of her obsession? Or was it because of the revenge she had recently fulfilled?

Regardless... Alice closed her eyes for a moment. After that moment passed, her gaze regained its clarity. There was no sadness in her eyes, she didn't avert her gaze.

And as the mimic finally got within arm's reach, it raised its mechanical arms ready for an attack, but Alice was already a step ahead.

She had resolved herself...

To kill Lilia for a second time.

She raised her hand without hesitation, her gun barrel pressed against the underside of the mimic's jaw.

With a soft smile, Alice pulled the trigger.

*BANG!!!

The bullet tore through 'Lilia's' head and the figure dispersed into shadow and ash.

A soft breeze blew past, pulling away some of the ash to reveal a strange crystal of sorts hidden within what remains.

Raising an eyebrow, Alice knelt down and picked up the crystal before holding it against the light.

The crystal was transparent blue in colour. A swirl of different shades blending together like the waves.

And resting in the centre of this was a small curled up crimson embryo pulsing with energy.

Despite how little it was, Alice felt a sense of familiarity.

Not from the Abyss, Void or surface. It wasn't energy belonging to the realms nor was it Eldritch in nature.

But rather... A strange sense of...

"Divinity?" Alice muttered with a frown on her face.

It was faint and surrounded by an unfamiliar veil. But Alice could tell that it was similar to divinity to some degree.

Yet it was only when attempting this did she noticed the anomalies.

She had been so preoccupied with danger that she didn't realise she couldn't see the strands of energy anymore. Cayla had been deactivated for the moment.

It was truly as though she had returned to the state during her time in prison.

Alice sighed and put the crystal into her pocket for now.

She looked at her reflection against the windows once more to confirm.

The Eye of the Abyss was still there, her connection was still present.

But its abilities had been deactivated.

'How troubleso-!!!' Alice froze.

Despair dawned on her as tears welled up in her eyes.

Her throat tightened, her heart slammed against her chest. A ringing in her ear.

Air squeezed out of her lungs as she collapsed on her knees.

Since her outfit had changed...

Her pouch was gone.

Meaning...

*Sob...

"My mead..."

Alice lamented the disappearance of her treasures.

She leaned against the windows for an extended period of time, struggling to get over the loss of her mead.

While resting, she also observed the shadows flickering through the fog along with the crystal in her pocket.

There were a few things she noticed.

One was that there didn't seem to be any 'humans' aside from herself.

Whether this was an isolated space or not, she wasn't sure.

After all, even Cayla and Alyss were separated from her.

Second, the shadows didn't seem to care about her unless she was within a certain range of them.

Even if they were facing her and should be all means 'see' her, they didn't attack her.

They simply followed their path and continued their way.

As for the Crystal... Alice noticed that if she was to concentrate on it, the embryo would release a soft pulse of energy.

This energy seemed to stimulate something within her as crimson butterflies would appear in the air.

They were made of energy and were only about the size of her palm. Not exactly what she would call big.

But within this fog, their radiance was unmissable.

Alice took a deep breath and calmed her mind.

'I have no powers, no physical strength. All I can rely on is a pistol that now has 3 shots left. It killed the clone of Lilia in one go but there's no guarantee that it'll be the same for the others.' She spoke to herself, organising the information she's gathered thus far.

'The crystal seems to be leading the way to somewhere since the path doesn't change.'

Once her concentration faded from the crystal, the butterflies would disappear.

Every time they reappeared, the path was the same.

Of course, there's no guarantee that it truly is the same considering the fact that she only saw the first few parts of the path, but so far this was simply her guess.

'Well, it's not like I got anything else I need to do. Might as well check out this place.' Alice sighed inwardly.

With this thick fog blocking her view, it was hard for her to make out her surroundings properly. What she gathered thus far seemed to be an old city resembling some of the cities she saw in the Abyss.

Take Slaughter Docks for example.

The stone tiles, the way the buildings were shaped.

There was another theory though.

It could also simply be basing the surroundings on her memories.

Lilia appeared and the city resembled the Slaughter Docks. It might not be a coincidence.

Pulling herself up, Alice gave her body a stretch and groaned at the wrist pain she was feeling.

When firing the gun, she wasn't careful of the feedback from the shot.

Thankfully, it wasn't bad to the point of rendering her unable to shoot properly, but she figured she couldn't get away with another haphazard shot like that one earlier.

Focusing on the crystal, the path opened up once more.

Alice trailed behind the butterflies, careful not to step within the range of the shadows.

It wasn't hard to do since she remembered when the clone of Lilia had turned to her.

The range was roughly 5 meters or so away from her.

Carefully navigating through the fog, her eyes kept darting around.

In her mind, she constantly updated the position of where the shadows were. How they were moving, their speed and their route. Some would walk back and forth, others would follow a wide circle. A few travelled along the same path.

After observing and memorising their patterns, Alice snuck through them without too much issue.

If she considered her bullets to be extra lives, it meant that she could only make three mistakes right now. If she were to make a fourth... She'll have to run for it and hope she finds a weapon before the shadows catch up.

***BANG!!!**

Alice widened her eyes.

From her right, a shadow beast crashed through a stack of boxes. She hadn't noticed the beast hiding behind cover and walked into range!

"Sh*t!" Alice took aim but it was too late. She didn't have enough time to line up a good shot.

Gritting her teeth, she ducked down the lunge and rolled across the ground.

She ignored the rain and dirt splashing against her dress or her face. What she needed to do right now was kill this b*stard in one shot!

Alice aimed at the head, ready to fire.

But the shadow took the form of a hunched eyeless monster with flared ribs along its back.

Spikes turned outward, looking almost like the legs of a centipede.

With the way it was positioned, her view of the head was obscured and a perfect shot was hard to take.

"Tch!

Clicking her tongue, Alice pulled herself up and grabbed one of the wooden planks that had dropped earlier from the ambush.

Pivoting on her right foot, she threw the plank with the help of inertia.

...

Her throw was so weak the heavy plank simply clattered against the ground by the beast's feet.

Slowly, it turned its head towards Alice.

"F*ck me." She cursed while stepping back, her smile twitching at her situation.

The beast got onto all fours, the tiles cracked beneath its claws and it lunged.

Alice dove towards where the beast had burst out from, avoiding the charge.

It was a dead end with a single corpse strewn out on the ground.

In a way, this worked in her favour.

After all, the beast needed to turn into the corner.

She had one opportunity.

One chance to take the shot and kill the beast.

If she were to go out in the open, the chances of accidentally drawing the attention of another beast were high.

And if she were to run, it could quickly spiral and domino into a stampede howling for her death.

Alice got onto one knee and rested her left arm.

Using it as a stabiliser, she took aim towards the entrance.

Her eyes focused and unblinking.

She saw the shadow of the beast looming over the entrance, gradually getting bigger.

It was approaching.

She held her breath, her arm steadied.

The world seemed to freeze as the beast turned the corner.

*BANG!!!

Chapter 865: Monika

*BANG!!!

Alice fired the gun and watched as the bullet rip through the air.

*CLANG!!!

"F*CK!"

She was too hasty. By wanting to catch the beast off guard, she hoped the bullet would be able to pierce the head.

Instead, it hit the shoulder spike and ricocheted elsewhere.

The beast turned its head and lunged towards Alice who fired the gun.

Standing her ground, Alice took aim once more.

Its speed was much faster than what she could muster right now. Even if she wanted to run, she couldn't.

But what's faster than the beast was a bullet.

Alice narrowed her eyes and pulled the trigger without hesitation!

*BANG!!!

The second bullet ripped through the air, landing dead centre of the beast's head.

But even if the beast is dead, it doesn't mean the momentum has stopped.

Alice quickly dove to the right but her movements weren't fast enough. One of the spikes scraped against her leg, digging out a chunk of her thigh.

*CRASH

Alice didn't care about the beast that rammed into the wall behind her.

What she needed to care about was stopping her bleeding.

With no energy and no Sigil power, she has to stop her bleeding using another method.

Grabbing a broken plank nearby, Alice tore off pieces of her dress and wrapped it above her wound.

Creating a makeshift tourniquet with the plank, Alice began to twist until the bleeding stopped to some degree. She couldn't move her leg well but it's more preferable than dying from blood loss.

With the emergency first aid now complete, Alice let out a sigh of relief and glanced over to the crumbled wall.

The beast had already transformed into a pile of ash with the same crystal buried in the middle.

Limping over, she picked up the crystal and glanced at the corpse now buried in ash and debris.

Compared to the shadow monsters, this one looked fully human and equipped at that.

"Sorry but you're dead already. Don't hate me for taking things I need for survival." Alice apologised, kneeling down and rummaging through the corpse's pockets.

A smile appeared on her face before disappointment took over.

She thought she had found bullets, but it turned out to be just scrap metal too big to be used as bullets.

Rummaging through the other pockets, Alice grunted in disappointment.

In the end, the only useful things she could get from him were the jacket and some scrap metal. Nothing more.

At least with the jacket, she could cover herself up since she tore her dress apart to stop her bleeding.

While she didn't care about shame when life or death was at stake, she'd still prefer not to run around with a torn dress that's transformed into half a shirt.

Looking at herself in the mirror, Alice's smile twitched.

The jacket was much bigger than her. What should've stopped around the waist reached all the way down to her knees.

And the design... it wasn't cute at all.

Sure there were long sleeves, but it wasn't the cute kind of long sleeve. No, it was rigid and hard to move in. The annoying type rather than a fashion.

Swallowing her grievances, Alice focused on the crystals instead.

Despite having two, the path of butterflies didn't become any clearer. In fact, it stayed the same.

'Seems like quantity doesn't affect the path. They all still lead to the same place.' Alice thought to herself while limping along the main road.

While following the butterflies, she was careful not to be taken by surprise this time.

After using two bullets on the last beast, she couldn't afford another mistake of that level.

With only one bullet left, she had to make sure this bullet was used when nothing else can be done.

And as for keeping an eye out for ambushes, she was extra careful now. Above, below, behind cover. She made sure to check everything.

Naturally, her efforts paid off and some of the ambush spots left Alice rather... speechless.

Beasts hanging on the side of bridges overhead, waiting for someone to walk under them.

Beasts hiding under sewage covers, their fingers poking out slightly as they're primed to jump out the moment any sign of life passes them.

Even beasts hiding in trash bins. Had it not been for the sound of breathing, Alice might not have even noticed it!

All of these spots... Alice only had only one word for it.

Perverted!

All of these hiding spots were perverted to ridiculous degrees. If someone were to walk past, even when on guard, they'll still be ambushed if they weren't careful!

Only when she was moving at a snail's pace, making sure to check every nook and cranny, did she avoid some of these ambushes.

The more Alice saw, the more annoyed she got and the more careful she was forced to be. Each step was only taken once she was sure the coast was clear.

While walking down the main path, she noticed a few corpses like the one she saw earlier and the one she retrieved her gun from. But they were trapped as the torso would twitch every now and then.

Clearly a beast waiting for someone to salvage useful items from the corpse.

Thus Alice ignored it.

After a while, the butterfly trail started to grow in number. More and more butterflies were appearing and it was clear Alice was getting closer to where these butterflies were going.

Though despite this, she still kept her guard up.

Haste makes waste.

If she were to let herself be blinded by the sight of the goal, she might not see the ambush waiting for her to drop her guard.

And as expected, not far from her, there was another beast crouching in wait.

Making a wide arc around the beast, just outside its detection range, Alice finally entered what seemed to be an abandoned pharmacy with the walls busted open.

All of the butterflies were leading inwards and Alice followed.

Carefully, she descended what appeared to be a staircase.

'Light?' Alice frowned.

Below the staircase, there seemed to be a flickering light. One from a fire of sorts. And next to the light was a silhouette of a person wearing a large pointed hat.

Judging from the movements, Alice figured the woman was playing around with the butterflies.

Whether or not they were friendly, she didn't know.

Aiming the gun in front of her, Alice slowly descended the staircase with a limp in her steps. Still on the watch for any potential ambushes waiting for her through the cracks of the walls.

Thankfully, there was none and Alice saw the one waiting her arrival. A blonde woman that was only a little taller than her.

She wore what seemed to be a witch's attire with dark purple, almost black gothic dress lined with golden patterns and frills. The underside of the dress was a deep crimson, and her wide witch's hat matched the colour.

In her hand, she held a long wooden staff with a purple crystal on the end.

Within that crystal, a similar Embryo could be seen.

She had a pair of violet eyes and a soothing smile. Turning her gaze, she was surprised to see Alice.

"A traveller? No... Hunter? Or art thou a civilian?" She asked calmly. There was an accent to her voice that Alice wasn't familiar with.

"Let's just say civilian for now." Alice replied, keeping her distance.

"A civilian you say? I must say I rarely see such a calm and composed Civilian wandering the lands of nightmare. Come, take a seat. You'll find that this refuge holds many secrets." She gestured over with a laugh.

Alice creased her brow, on guard against the witch.

In response, she placed her weapon behind her.

"You proclaim yourself to be a civilian yet the wariness of a wounded Hunter. Had I wanted a fight with you, I would've done so the moment you entered this building." The witch reassured.

Hearing this, Alice let out a sigh and sat down opposite her.

Between them was a strange branch burning at the roots. On the branches the butterflies perched while their wings flapped every now and then.

The moment Alice sat down, she felt as though a wave of fog suddenly enveloped her body. Invisible hands were touching her from all sides and she quickly stood up and aimed her gun.

"It was not my doing don't worry. Why don't you have a look at your leg?" The witch crossed her legs with a grin on her face.

Alice was cautious.

She could still feel the pressure and numbness from her leg. What could've changed?

Looking down for a split moment, she froze.

"See? Like I said. This refuge holds many secrets. Follow the butterflies and you'll find camps like this. A place of safety and shelter from the fog. All injuries and fatigue are alleviated by the presence of this gentle flame." The witch explained, her finger softly brushing against the branch as the butterflies landed on her hand.

"Do you know where we are?" Alice asked.

She was still on guard but it seems like this witch wasn't going to attack her. At least not yet.

"A land of nightmares. Are you perhaps a traveller? You seem awfully unfamiliar." The witch asked, tilting her head in confusion.

"You're right about being unfamiliar. I just want to get my bearings and get out of this place." Alice smiled bitterly.

Hearing this, the woman started to laugh.

"Pft!!! Get out of this place? You? PFT!!!"

Alice furrowed her brows.

"Is it really that strange?"

"Aye, it is. You know not of the rules of this land of nightmare, yet you dream of leaving? You really are a traveller after all. Why don't we do some self-introductions?"

"I am a witch of these lands. You may call me Monika."

Chapter 866: Meaning Of Names

"You may call me Monika." Monika introduced herself as she stood up and performed a polite bow.

Alice opened her mouth and paused for a slight moment.

"Agnelia."

Using the name Alice, especially in Extalia was a little risky with the unknown dangers. In which case, it's better to use the surname that Allura gave her.

"Agnelia... My oh my. Agne, the flame, the spark that defies. Lia, the boundless that wanders the realms. Combined into Agnelia, the light that defies and wanders the realms."

"A name representing the strength of loyalty and persistence. You have a wonderful name, little flame." Monika closed her eyes with a smile.

Taking the moment to savour the meaning behind a single word.

"Are you... interested in the origin of names?" Alice asked curiously, sitting down.

The woman in front of her was rather strange. The only 'life' she has seen in the realm of nightmares thus far.

"Of course. Names are a wondrous thing don't you think? Some believe that the name one receives dictates the direction of their life. Whether they know it or not, they tread upon a path already laid out before them." Monika leaned back with a slight smile.

The light from the campfire causing her shadow to flicker slightly.

"What do you think the name Monika means?" She asked.

Alice shook her head.

"The roots of my name mean Advisor. The one who warns and the one who tells the truth. However, it also means the one who is alone. Moni, alone in darkness, the seer, the watcher. Ka, meaning the soul or the voice within." Monika explained, resting her chin on her palm.

"So when you combine it." She grinned.

"The lonesome watcher who warns."

"Is that why you told me what this camp was?" Alice asked curiously. Most of the time people would simply ignore one another, at most make small talk when facing a situation like this. But Monika was giving her clarity in her time of blindness.

Monika tilted her head.

"Perhaps. As a witch of these lands, I've come across many travellers. People of all shapes and sizes, personalities varying from one extreme to another. Souls that weep, souls that cry out for battle.

"And without exception, I've given them the bare minimum they should know. Perhaps whoever gave me this name had already foreseen my actions. Rather than trying to defy what might not even be true, why not embrace said duty?" Monika chuckled.

"It's not like I sit in one place waiting for travellers anyways, I don't have that kind of leisure. This meeting between you and I, perhaps it's ordained by fate. Who knows?"

Alice couldn't help but chuckle. She found it a little crazy though perhaps with everything going on in their world, it might not be too insane.

"So you're a big believer of fate? Do you ever think about the people that try to defy it?" Alice asked.

Since her wounds have healed in this place, it's not bad to take this moment to rest and converse with Monika. She's also the only living person thus far and her only source of information.

"When one sees the Cogwheel of fate turn, how can one not become a believer? The sequence of fate is simply a series of cogwheels connecting to each other. The choices change which cogwheel is placed as all options lead to certain possibilities.

"And when the wheels link up and turn, that's when fate is set into motion. I've seen the machinations of fate thus who am I to deny the truth that I've witnessed?" Monika laughed.

Grabbing her staff, she tapped it against the ground and opened a small portal. From within the portal, a table appeared with two tea cups filled with tea.

"Care to have a drink? Little flame." Monika offered.

It would be a little rude to reject thus Alice accepted.

She took a drink and to her surprise, felt a warmth spread through her body, invigorating her strength.

This... warmth.

She realised some of her strength has returned.

"Seems like the tea is much to your liking. I've offered this tea to all the travellers I've come across. Some accept and drink with glee, some reject with politeness. Some question what this tea is and some, like you, drink because you may find it rude otherwise." Monika spoke calmly while sipping away at her own cup.

"In this land of nightmares, it's not wise to take things as they are. What could be a cup of tea may in fact be a cup of blood and poison. What is a witch of these lands could in fact be a monster in waiting." She warned, her eyes glowing softly under the shadow of her hat.

"I don't see the reason why you would go for such a roundabout way to kill me. Especially considering I'm not all that strong right now." Alice shrugged, finishing the tea and placing the cup back on the table.

"You speak truth. Why would I need to go for such an annoying method when ambushes are just so much better? They save the time and conserve the effort." Monika laughed, placing her tea cup down.

"These campfires are your lifeline. Unlike humans, the beasts of these lands are moulded from shadows and fog. Their death is but temporary. But these campfires? They eternal.

"Even if a beast claws at your ankles, tears off your arm. So long as you can reach this safe anchor, they will dissipate to ash and fog, returning to whence they came. Your wounds will be healed but so too will the beast be ready for your return." Monika lifted a butterfly from the branch before leaning towards Alice.

Looking at the butterfly from up close, Alice was about to say something when she saw a vision of the Informant. The finger on her lips as she warned Alice of three rules.

And the third of which...

Accept the world for what it is.

"I see. Since the butterflies lead me to this camp, are there more scattered through this city? Will the butterflies lead me to them as well? Or would they focus on this camp only." Alice asked, glancing up at Monika.

A knowing smile hung on her lips and Alice felt a slight chill.

"Heeding warnings of those who came before are a good trait to have. You have a wonderful head on your shoulders little flame." Monika praised, holding her finger over her lips.

"And yes, there are many camps like this throughout the city. They serve as the keys to your vision. The more you find, the lighter the fog becomes. And eventually, the city will reveal itself to you." She nodded.

Raising her staff, she gave it a light wave and the butterflies showed a path leading out of the camp, towards the next destination.

"Are all destinations the same? Will I see others on my journey?"

Monika thought for a moment before shaking her head.

"Perhaps but I doubt it. This land is a vast one little flame. A delicate web threaded by the dreams of many. It's lands reach beyond your wildest expectations. What you see may not even account for a single morsel of what this land may have to offer."

"And yet you travel these lands without issue all the while." Alice smiled, cutting Monika off.

"Heh~ Indeed, you have a good head on your shoulders little flame. The butterflies of these lands show the way. They will guide you to where you NEED to go." Monika nodded her head.

"But if you wish to venture out to the far reaches of this land to find others... Well. You'll find out in due time. This is something I'll keep my silence on." She crossed her legs with an amused smile.

"Though... what happened to your proclamation of wanting to leave this place?"

"I assume it's going to be the same. I'll find out in due time and it's something you'll keep your silence on." Alice shrugged.

"You assume correct. Dreams and nightmares... they all end at a point. There is no eternal dream, not even in these lands."

"Since we've talked this much, are there other rules you can tell me about? To better help me navigate this city." Alice asked, placing the butterfly on her finger back onto the branch.

Monika folded her arms.

"I will let you know of two rules. All men are equal in the land of nightmares. We are all stripped down to our baser forms. Even if you lack the power in reality, you may earn what cannot be gained. And the method of doing so... is through the Nightmare's Embryo." She tapped her finger on the crystal embedded into her staff.

"This Embryo serves as both a guiding waypoint as well as a seed of power. Offer it to the branch and the path to power will open up. But you should always keep at least one with you at all times. For losing this Embryo means losing your path. And I don't believe you want to wander these lands aimlessly.

"At the borders, you may get away with it. But after a certain distance... You may step down a path of no return. The ever shifting corridors that only these beings of beauty can guide you out of." Monika warned ominously.

"I see..." Alice glanced down at her own crystals.

"And the second rule... Well. It's more of a natural instinct than anything else. Try to avoid death as much as you can. The... generosity of this land is false. It may feel better than the Abyss but..." Monika trailed off.

"There is a good reason why this is called the Land of Nightmares."

Chapter 867: Class Selection

"Isn't that just a given? To avoid dying as much as you can. Hell, you shouldn't aim to die in the first place, no?" Alice raised her eyebrows, slightly confused by the second 'rule'.

Death was the endpoint of all life. So why would an 'end' have a continuation?

"Have you ever had a dream when you suddenly fell from a great height? And as you are about to slam into the ground, you jolt up awake. Did your death in the dream kill you?" Monika asked with a knowing smile.

"No..."

"This is the Land of Nightmares. A place of confusing laws, different to the ones you are used to. Death is not the end here. It's merely a pause. But die too much... Well. There are consequences for that kind of behaviour." She chuckled.

"There are more that you'll find out whilst on your journey through this realm. You'll learn more about the Embryo, about what awaits your arrival. So why not take your time and enjoy yourself a little?"

"Careful not to trip while you're walking, little flame." Monika did a slight bow.

With her staff, she tapped the ground beneath her and disappeared with a swirl of butterflies and fog.

Alice sat there in silence. She blinked her eyes and scratched her hair.

Monika was a rather confusing woman. But in the end, she still received some useful information from her.

One of which is how to use the Embryos she got from the beasts.

"Offer it to the branch huh..." Alice looked at the crystal.

After a moment of contemplation, she held it above the branch.

To her surprise, golden strands of energy rose up from the soil. The tips of which sunk into the Embryo and began to 'drink' the crystal.

Seeing it shrink between her fingers, Alice then watched as the Embryo in the centre was dissolved into the same golden energy from that branch.

Blinking her eyes, Alice suddenly found herself in the middle of a strange space.

In a sense, it was similar to her mental realm whenever she used Cayla's power.

Around her, several silhouettes stood with different weapons. Their forms swallowed by fog with the only thing visible being the clothes and weapons.

'Is it asking me to choose?' Alice wondered.

Approaching the silhouette with a longsword, she felt a stream of information entering her mind.

A knight.

A fighter focused on resilience and confidence. To charge and exchange blows using masterful swordsmanship and dexterity.

Alice furrowed her brows.

Within this stream of information, she felt a sensation similar to her Sixth Sigil. An overlay of experience over her own body.

If she was to harmonise with this option, her fighting style would be one of clashing weapons directly and fast heavy attacks. Despite being focused on dexterity, strength was equally as important.

Alice looked at the different silhouettes.

She now understood what this first Embryo represented.

The choice of how she wanted to approach this nightmare realm, how she wanted to fight and survive.

The obvious answer would be to go for a caster route. After all, being a caster was what she was best at. But without knowing the exact casting rules of this realm and what she'll be able to do, choosing that was a little risky.

What was absolutely off the table were the silhouettes holding giant weapons such as greatswords or hammers.

And it was for two reasons. One, she didn't have the strength. Two, her small body wasn't suitable. Rather than her swinging the weapon, it'll be the weapon swinging her.

Walking through the choices, Alice rejected them one by one before landing on the last.

A hybrid class of sorts, one that uses a weapon as a casting focus. Being entirely based around dexterity and casting.

"A rapier huh... More suitable for stabbing rather than slashing. Well... it's better than clashing weapons I suppose and it still leaves the option of casting open." Alice mumbled while the information flooded into her mind.

Methods of using a Rapier and how she should fight.

To skirt around the edges of her enemy's range, using the lunge to bridge the gap and stab them in their vital areas. To parry then riposte enemy attacks through keen observation.

And if range was needed, there was a crystal on the pommel of the rapier that'll allow her to cast spells.

"I guess you're the most suitable option for me." Alice chuckled, harmonising with the class.

Of course, her weapon was not limited to just the rapier. So long as she can find weapons light enough for her to use, she'll be able to use it effectively.

Opening her eyes, Alice found that she hadn't moved from her spot. She was still sitting in front of the branch only this time, her outfit had changed and a new weapon hung on her hip.

Thankfully, her gun was still there. Even if there was only one bullet left, that bullet could still be a saving grace.

Her current outfit was somewhat similar to her first Hunter's attire that she received at the Slaughter Docks. An elegant leather jacket with some trousers and knee high boots. There was minimal armour on her body to ensure quick movement.

Her long hair had been braided into a ponytail while the front was left untouched.

The contrasting strands of hair still framing her face.

Set to her side was a tricorn hat with a tuft of feather attached to the side.

Picking up her hat, Alice curved her lips up to a smile.

"Since I need more Embryos to test out a few things, I guess now's a better time than ever to go on a little hunt."

Having chosen this hybrid of slashing and casting, Alice had a single 'spell' given to her.

Standing up, she made her way out of the basement and out to the streets of this fog filled city.

As Monika had mentioned, having linked up to the camp, the fog had retreated somewhat.

Before, she was limited to a visual range of two meters. But now, that range had increased to roughly five meters with silhouettes becoming clearer in the fog.

'Their positions haven't changed. If what Monika said is true, even if I kill them, once I rest at the camp again they'll reappear.' Alice thought to herself as she drew her rapier.

Inverting her grip to aim her pommel, she targeted the closest beast. A silhouette waiting in ambush above the opposite building.

Narrowing her eyes, Alice channelled her energy and cast the only spell available to her.

Pale Lance!

Energy converged into a single white lance that shot towards the beast's location.

Only...

It dissipated before it could reach the beast.

"Well that's disappointing." Alice mumbled. The range of the lance was around 8 meters give or take and with how much a single cast took out of her...

She estimated that she'll only be able to cast around 4 of them before running out of energy.

And as annoying as it is, her energy wasn't being replenished naturally either.

'Would it replenish if I rest at the camp like my injuries did?'

Being careful of her surroundings, Alice walked towards the beast until she was within the range of Pale Lance.

Activating the spell once more, she watched as the attack stabbed into the beast's body, causing it to fall towards the ground.

Like before, it was a hunched back beast with spikes covering its body.

It groaned in pain as blood seeped from its wound but Alice wasn't going to give it a chance to rest.

Lunging forward, Alice had one hand behind her back and stabbed it in the head with her Rapier!

Pulling her weapon back, Alice quickly ducked down to avoid the swipe while parrying the spikes using her weapon.

Then, as the danger had passed, she countered with a riposte and stabbed it in the torso, piercing the heart.

Slumping against the ground, it dissolved into ash and left behind a single Embryo once more.

'So two stabs and one spell is enough to kill these beasts.' Alice thought to herself while picking up the Embryo.

Focusing on the crystal, a path of butterflies appeared leading back to the basement.

But this time, there was a new path that stretched out through the fog. A path leading deeper into the city.

Alice thought about venturing deeper for now but it probably wasn't a good choice.

Since Monika spoke about gaining power through the Embryos, Alice figured it was probably better to kill a few beasts here and collect the Embryos before moving forward. If using one was enough to awaken some basic fighting prowess and techniques, she couldn't help but wonder what will be unlocked with more down the line.

What kind of techniques would this strange realm grant her?

And... most importantly, how long until she's transported back to reality?

She couldn't possibly spend her entire time in this realm after all. She'll need to find a way back sooner rather than later.

Backtracking towards where she came from, Alice started to take out the beasts one by one. She was careful not to draw the attention of more than one beast at a time.

Despite being able to kill the beasts without much issue, each fight, no matter how short, left her exhausted by the end of it.

She couldn't cast her lance often either since she wasn't sure if it'll replenish.

After killing eight beasts, she made her way back.

Embryos weren't always guaranteed to drop with two of them not dropping anything much to Alice's dismay.

With 10 Embryos in her possession, Alice decided to offer nine to the branch and was brought back into the strange space.

Rather than seeing the silhouettes that represented her class choices, this time she saw a reflection of herself against an invisible mirror.

What the realm was offering this time...

Was the chance of increasing the power within her body.

Realising this, Alice couldn't help but wonder what the Embryo was to offer this kind of boon...

Chapter 868: Enhancing Stats

Standing in this strange space, Alice observed the six options available to her.

There were no name for them but Alice could roughly sort them into the following categories.

Power, Speed, Physicality, Spiritual, Endurance and lastly, Faith.

These were the same stats that the North used when determining a person's power.

Only this time, instead of instincts, the last node was brimming with holy power thus Alice dubbed it as faith for the time being.

'If I remember correctly, when I visited the North, my stats came out to Power – D, Speed – C, Physicality – E, Spiritual – SS, Endurance – A and Instincts at S. Then I suppose the first step would be to get to where I was before.' Alice mused to herself.

Even if she was using a speed based weapon right now, going for something familiar was still the best choice.

Especially when venturing into the unknown.

But with this realm, the rules were all different.

If she was to increase her power, would her speed increase naturally? Or if she was to increase her physicality, which is technically her defence, would endurance rise?

Then there was the question of Faith.

If she was to raise the faith stat, how would it affect her as a person? Would she, as someone who dislikes the three gods, suddenly become a devout believer?

And if she does, what kind of god would she believe in? Velouria? Or would it be a new one that's unknown to all.

The final stat was forbidden territory for Alice. At least for the moment. Without knowing exactly how it'll affect her, she won't put a single point into it.

Regardless, with 10 'points' at her disposal, Alice split it between Speed, Spiritual and Endurance.

She needed the speed to navigate her fights, Spiritual to enhance her casting capabilities and finally endurance so that she can actually last decently long in a fight.

Running out of stamina was her worst nightmare, especially for someone who's used to running around a lot.

'Three in speed, three in Spiritual and four in Endurance.'

Confirming her selection, Alice shivered as she felt invisible hands crawling all over her body.

A gross sensation that almost made her lash out but it would simply be a waste of energy. She couldn't interact with them after all. However, with these hands, she felt as though her body was being modified like clay.

The strength that surged through her body, the coursing of energy.

She couldn't quite use the energy freely though. If she had to describe it, it'll be similar to the arrays she created. What little energy she had, she'll inject into an array to cast her spells.

And in this case, Pale Lance.

As Alice opened her eyes, a smile appeared on her face as she hopped on the spot a few times.

It's as though the shackles surrounding her limbs have loosened to some degree.

"Hou~ So that's what it feels like. This sudden growth... It's different to the steady growth that comes with training and hunting. I suppose it's similar to learning how to reinforce my body." Alice mumbled.

Landing in a neutral stance, she quickly unsheathed her rapier and stabbed it against the empty air a few times.

A rapid double swipe into a backstep stab.

She could still feel her stamina being drained but at least she could continuously fight for several combos rather than just one.

And as for her energy... her capacity grew slightly. Not enough for another cast of her skill but the difference could definitely be felt.

But now that she was practicing with the rapier, there was a large issue that she was facing.

Wielding the weapon with one hand and the flexible blade. Not to mention how thin it was, causing a constant risk of breaking.

'Limited cutting power, bad against armour. I'll have to be careful so the blade doesn't get trapped between the spikes otherwise I'll lose my main weapon. Though... having one hand free does feel a little wasteful.' Alice sighed inwardly.

All of the combos that she could think of right now limited her to one handed flourishes that kept her opponent at bay.

Against low level beasts like the ones she's facing, it'll work wonders. Especially since her reach was miniscule to begin with.

The length of the rapier helped compensate for this. But with this advantage, the disadvantages will be glaring once she begins to fight heavily armoured beasts.

'Well... I guess that's for future me to care about. The most optimal plan... would be to kill the beasts and gather as many Embryo's as I can.'

Pausing for a moment, Alice couldn't help but laugh.

This sensation, this feeling of pleasure, this growth.

"Jeez... I need to be careful." She narrowed her eyes, licking her lips.

"At this rate I might get addicted to this more than mead."

The dopamine of visibly feeling her efforts being awarded, the loop of killing and getting stronger... it was a dangerous sensation.

The claws of addiction digging deep.

Stepping out of the basement, Alice glanced up.

Like before, the position of the beasts were the same.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice couldn't help but wonder if...

Walking up towards the beast calmly, Alice didn't cast her spell at all.

Instead, she waited for it to try and ambush her from above.

Jumping back right before it lands, Alice lunged forward with two rapid stabs before stopping.

Making sure the beast was firmly aggroed to her, she turned and ran towards the next closest beast.

She wanted to find out how much she could optimise this method of farming Embryos.

Would her spell have enough power to puncture both beasts?

As the second beast burst out of the sewers, Alice jumped onto its head and flipped backwards.

Pushing her pommel against the beast's lower back, she poked her head out and made sure the other beast was in range.

Pale Lance!

*BANG!!!

The lance pierced through the torso of the first beast and through the second. Despite the injuries, they were still alive.

Jumping back, Alice made two quick swipes with her rapier against the beast's achilles tendon and went for a finishing stab.

Only for the beast to die before her stab even connected.

'One spell two slashes.' Alice noted in her mind.

With the first beast dead, she glanced to the second beast who died from the Pale Lance.

Both the damage of her Pale Lance and slashes have increased. It wasn't enough to kill in one go but it was a start. Which led to a thought.

What if... she was to aggro every single beast nearby and hit them with every Pale Lance that she could muster?

'No, I'm being too hasty. I need to test Pale Lance a little more before I do something like that.' Alice quickly shook her head.

Walking over to the piles of ash, she picked up a single Embryo.

The other didn't drop anything but there wasn't much she could do about it.

Swinging her rapier then resting it on her shoulder, Alice took a moment to catch her breath while planning out the route ahead.

Based on her stamina, outrunning more than three would be impossible. By the time she aggroed the fourth, the first would've caught up and crushed her against the floor.

So if she could find a method to kill three reliably, it should save her some time.

'The most optimal route would be to find a third near the camp. At least that way I can rest immediately after killing them.'

Following her previous route wouldn't work since there's too much space between the beasts. Opposite the camp was one, to the left was another.

Turning towards the inner city, Alice wondered if there was one nearby.

If there was...

At this point, Alice couldn't help but wonder.

These beasts that reside within the fog filled city, do they have a conscience? Would they feel fear after being killed so many times? Or were they simply mindless beasts with no thoughts of their own.

And if that was the case, could fear be introduced to their system?

Shaking her head, Alice kept her guard up and ventured deeper into the city in search of a perfect location for lots of kills.

###

"Heh~ Seems like little flame is enjoying herself. She might be a better fit for this realm than I had thought." Monika muttered while sitting atop a building.

She crossed her legs and observed Alice with amusement in her eyes.

From Alice's perspective, she was surrounded by fog. But through Monika's eyes, the city was clear as day. She could see where all of the beasts were hiding, the route she was taking and the turns she had missed.

Even the 'lurkers' trying to find an opportune moment.

Alice had adapted and accepted her situation rather quickly and taken the initiative to engage with the new laws put into place.

A feat that not many would accomplish as they struggled to get the first kill.

After all, they didn't have the calm or experience to kill without any powers. They would've died a few times before succeeding, thus allowing the realm to sink its teeth into them.

But Alice hasn't died.

Yet.

The question now was, how long until her first death? This realm was not a fair one.

The floor may suddenly collapse, poison may fill the air. A beast might even kick you into a chasm and let you fall to your death. The chances of dying was always high.

"I guess I don't need to keep an eye on her. And here I was being worried since her base stats are far lower than most." Monika stood up and gave her body a light stretch.

Turning around, she glanced at the dark spire against the crimson blood moon.

The tyrant of this city... That was going to be Alice's first roadblock.

Thinking about it for a moment, she tapped her staff and a butterfly landed on her finger.

"Let me know when the little flame reaches the tyrant okay?"

Seeing the butterfly fly towards the spire, Monika smiled and left the area.

Chapter 869: Limitations

Alice sat in front of the camp with her arms folded. A deep frown was present on her face.

Next to her, an obscenely large pile of Embryo's.

Turns out, she was able to store them by the camp if she chooses not to use them. Thus by repeating her farming route and coming back, she was able to keep her pockets empty.

Now came the large issue.

Having perfected her route, Alice was able to get around 3 to 6 kills per run which takes around 2 minutes to accomplish. While it wasn't perfect, the Embryo's dropped rather consistently.

After a few upgrades, she only needed one lance to kill them so she began to slack a little.

She hoarded her Embryo's, looking for the perfect time to use them all at once.

And this was where the large issue appeared.

Around halfway into her stack of wealth... She noticed that she couldn't upgrade her stats anymore.

No matter how much she tried to upgrade her speed and everything else, it refused to budge. Even after putting points into everything, these Embryo's only allowed a certain amount of points to be put into each category.

Meaning...

Alice looked at the giant stack. Her expression reflected on the crystalline surface.

"Urgh..." Alice let out a groan, using the stack of crystals as a beanbag.

A silent tear rolled down her face.

"I wasted my time..." She lamented.

Having fully upgraded everything she could within this area, her stats roughly shaped up to be around E- in every stat with around 30 points in each category. It took 10 to upgrade it from F to F+ then 20 to take it from F+ to E-.

'Physicality is roughly E-. Which is just a little weaker than my weakened state when I was in the north. My body was in shambles back then as well...' Alice furrowed her brows.

She didn't know her stats at her prime but her weakened stats were a good benchmark for now.

The main question now was... should she repeat this farming method for every new Embryo she came across? Recalling the crystal on Monika's staff, it was clear that there are different levels to each crystal.

By her estimations, the higher rarity crystals should let her upgrade her stats further.

But the question that remained in her mind was if there was a limit to how many of those rarities she could use.

Take for example she could only use 50 embryos of the next rarity? If she was to put all 50 into her speed stat, would the rest be off limits for upgrade?

If that was the case...

'Guess I'll be more careful with how I allocate my points. Focus will be... Speed, Spiritual and Endurance. After that... I guess I focus on Physicality more than Strength and Faith.' Alice finalised her plans as she stood up and glanced back at the stack of Embryos.

Once more, she felt an invisible knife stab her heart.

All that time she could've saved...

But discarding it would be a waste as well.

"I'll have to trouble you guys again." Alice smiled apologetically while gently tapping the head of a butterfly.

After saying this, several vines and butterflies began to land on the pile of Embryos.

Watching the pile melt away for the next time she rests, Alice gave her body a stretch and left the basement of the building.

She'll be walking past her farming route to reach the inner city, towards the next checkpoint.

Looking at the beast blocking her way, Alice decided to save on her spells for now in case something shows up that requires her to use it.

Approaching the first beast, Alice aimed her rapier.

She tried to expand her Zone but... the range was so miniscule it may as well not exist. Not to mention the fact that the boundary fluctuated due to her limited capabilities at the moment.

It was simply a case of her body not being able to keep up with her reaction speed as she had already trained to use Zone without Cayla's assistance.

The beast took notice of her and turned around but its movements had already been memorized by Alice.

To farm efficiently, she had to make sure all variables were accounted for. Naturally, that meant how the beast would react whenever she approached!

*KRK!!!

The instant the beast turned its head, Alice lunged into its range and stabbed her rapier up from below.

The blade pierced the lower jaw and into the head.

Quickly removing her blade before it got stuck, Alice dove through its legs and stabbed it through the chest from behind.

Kicking the beast away, she watched as it disappeared to ash.

With her speed now increased, all it took was two hits in vital areas to kill them.

If she were to miss, it would take about three to four hits in total.

"Hmm... I haven't tried to go to the rooftops yet..." Alice mumbled, glancing up toward the building obscured by fog.

But with her view limited to this extent, going up would only be exposing herself to potential threats from above.

She didn't know if the enemies above had their detection range increased.

If she was to accidentally aggro a whole pack of them...

Alice shivered.

She hadn't died yet but she wasn't planning on doing so any time soon.

Shaking her head, she followed along the path, killing beasts one by one as she went.

She carefully looked for the butterfly trail but soon ran into a problem.

There was a chasm in the road that she couldn't cross with her current power. Being careful with her steps, she peered over the edge to see if there was another path she could take but the fog obscured everything.

Since that was the case... the next best option would be to follow along the chasm hoping it'll end at some point and loop around.

Deciding on the right path, Alice took her time, making sure to kill any beast that might ambush her from above by baiting them out.

Sadly, all of them were dropping the same Embryos as before so she didn't bother picking them up.

She had no use for them after all.

Following along the path... Alice took a step.

*CRUMBLE!!!

"!!!"

Widening her eyes, she watched as the floor give out under her, leading to the chasm.

Gritting her teeth, she quickly threw herself forward, grabbing onto the ledge.

Hanging on, she managed to pull herself up as cold sweat filled her back.

Her heart slammed against her chest as she looked at the cavity that appeared on the path.

"You've gotta be kidding me... I almost f*cking died." Alice mumbled.

Taking the moment to catch her breath, she let out a sigh and stood up.

Now that she knew traps like this existed, she had to be careful with her next steps.

*CRUMBLE!!!

"ARE YOU F*CKING KIDDING ME!" She screamed, throwing herself forward once more and grabbing onto the ledge. Not far from the first trap, a second one appeared. This time, Alice was a little late in reacting and was barely holding on with her fingers.

Using her foot against the dirt to help pull herself up, veins bulged on Alice's neck as she looked at the path in front of her in anger and annoyance.

This time, she made sure to stamp her foot a few times to make sure the path in front of her was actually stable.

Just in case it might collapse when she stood on it.

There was a period of safety and just when she thought it was over, her next step caused a third pit to appear.

But since Alice was prepared, she didn't fall victim to it.

Her smile twitched.

If anything, the only saving grace would be the fact that there's no beast around to bother her with all these traps.

Though...

'Do I have to be careful with ALL of my steps from now???' She lamented inwardly.

If she had to be careful about all of her steps... how was she meant to fight? What if she's about to lunge at a beast when the floor gives out?

Following along the chasm, there were about six more traps waiting for her with varying gaps between them.

It's as though the realm was reading her mind. The moment she thought it might be safe, another would appear. And when she didn't think a second would appear so soon, it would be right after the first trap.

Finally, after navigating all of these traps, she saw the chasm narrowing as it would be short enough for her to jump past once she reached the end.

"F*cking finally. At least without a chasm I should be fine. I doubt there'll be more holes in the floor."
Alice sighed in relief.

As she turned the corner, she heard a stomping sound.

Her eyes snap to the right but it was too late.

A shoulder was in her view.

"You..."

"MOTHER!!!"

"F*CKERRRRRR!!!!"

Alice was slammed towards the chasm by a charging beast.

Twisting her body in the air, she wanted to see if she was in range of the other ledge but she wasn't even close.

Not yet.

And as she plunged towards the bottom, she braced herself to try and grab onto the wall to slow her fall.

She took a deep breath and her body stiffened.

"F*cking poison..."

She died.

Alice blinked her eyes.

She found herself back at the camp where she was earlier.

Her smile twitched furiously as she recalled the beast that waited for her to appear around the corner.

She revealed an angry smile and walked out of the basement with vengeance burning in her heart.

She ran into the beast blocking the way to the inner city once more.

"Piss off!"

Alice dispatched him with two brutal stabs to the head and chest.

She had one goal right now. To slaughter the beast that waited around the f*cking corner!

Chapter 870: Sister Adela

Huffing with anger, Alice glanced at the pile of ash in front of her. Despite killing the beast, her rage didn't settle at all.

After all, this charger was only going to respawn the next time she rested at a camp.

Yet despite that, it was still the cause of her first 'death'.

"Tch, how annoying." Alice scratched her hair.

There were quite a few close calls but this proved that the realm desired death more than anything. The traps, the beasts placed in certain locations.

All of them had one goal in mind.

To cause your death when you least expect it.

If her reaction speed wasn't fast... she would've died a few times due to the traps never mind the charger.

Then there was also trying to kill the beasts when she was making her way to the camp.

That first kill was the most annoying, especially with a gun that only had four bullets.

No matter how many times she rested, the bullets didn't regenerate unlike her energy.

If she hadn't been able to kill the beasts using her gun...

That would've caused even more deaths early on.

Shaking her head, Alice followed along the chasm until it was short enough for her to jump across.

There seemed to be no more traps and the opposite ledge looked stable enough to land on.

Alice glanced down into the fog.

When she took a deep breath, poison filled her lungs, paralysing her body thus killing her before she could even grab the walls to slow her fall.

Bracing herself, Alice jumped across the chasm.

As expected, the floor gave out under her the moment she landed and she quickly grabbed the ledge.

"Who the f*ck designed this f*cking place." She grumbled, pulling herself up.

Focusing on the crystal, Alice looked for the next camp.

There were a few paths that she could take, each with varying sizes. The ones with a brighter 'glow' were closer and thus Alice took the shortest route. After all, the more camps she harmonize with, the further she could see.

For her safety, she needed the fog to disappear and fast.

Carefully following along the trail, Alice frowned after noticing it was suspiciously quiet.

No beasts, no traps.

Was it waiting for her to let down her guard?

The closest camp was located in the middle of a public garden of sorts.

Looking at the back metal fences that surrounded the place and the lack of beasts, Alice felt her guts twist.

This was a trap.

No doubt about it. Every fibre of her being told her that nothing good would come from entering this place. Even if the camp could be seen flickering in the fog.

Alice stood at the gateway, wondering what she should do.

In the end, she decided to trust in her gut instincts. It has rarely failed and many times she even survived because of it.

Just as she was about to turn around, she felt a foot press against her back and kicked her forward. She glanced back to see a beast draped with tattered black robes. Its glowing golden eyes shimmering in the shade of its hood.

But she could see a set of crooked teeth arcing into a grin.

As she fell past the boundary of the arena, a wall of fog obscured the gateway.

"When I get my f*cking hands on you!" Alice got up and punched the fog wall.

But it refused to budge and strangely, the fog seemed to have a structure now.

Soft and compressed whenever she exerted force.

She was stuck.

Turning around, Alice frowned after noticing the fog retreating.

Her view now encompassed the entire garden.

Even inch of this place could be seen, including what she thought was the camp in the middle.

A lone branch sitting atop a mound of flesh and kneeling in front of the mound was...

A rotting woman.

Her body was partially intact with the gaps revealing her bones and withering organs.

Tattered clothing wrapped around her frame as she seemed to be wearing what Alice could only assume to be a mix between gothic and nun attire.

Sensing Alice's gaze, the rotting woman slowly lifted as the bones on her neck began to crack. Her remaining eye glanced back, shimmering with a purple light.

Her grey and purple hair fluttered as a gust of wind swept past them.

Even though her body was rotting, her face was untouched. A fragile beauty that shimmered beneath moonlight.

"Oh weary wanderer, you tread upon sanctified soil. I see the stains of my kindred upon thy hands, the sins that run deep in thy veins." She spoke, turning to face Alice fully.

"Come, let us pray. Let us pray and purify your sins under the hymn of righteous blood."

The mound behind her began to convulse as it spat out a giant black casket that slammed into the ground behind her.

And from the casket, two blades appeared suspended in the air.

A butterfly landed on Alice's shoulder.

"Sister Adela of the Blood Choir. She may seem human but I assure you she is no different from the beasts trapped in this fog. Her only goal is to kill whoever approaches this camp." Monika's voice rang out from the butterfly.

"Why don't you put her out of her misery?"

"Do you think I can even do that? I'll be honest, that casket looks f*cking terrifying." Alice's smile faltered as she unsheathed her blade.

Even if she didn't want to fight, she wasn't given much of a choice. Her exit was sealed off by a wall of fog and it seemed like the only option left was to fight.

Taking a deep breath to calm her mind, Alice narrowed her gaze at Adela.

She expanded her zone, as fragile as it was.

The woman was approaching her with slow steady steps.

"If you're not going to attack first then I will."

Taking aim, Alice fired her Pale Lance!

*BANG!!!

To her surprise, Adela had actually dodged!

Spinning to the side gracefully, she waved her hand as one of the blades hovering around her slashed towards Alice!

Looking at the speed and weight behind the blade, Alice knew it was going to be suicide to try and parry that strike.

Instead, she dove under the slash and lunged towards Adela, hoping to close the gap.

With Alice rolling forward, Adela jumped back.

Her second blade swinging down from above, looking to cut Alice in half vertically.

As it entered the edge of her zone, Alice immediately stepped to the side and took aim with her rapier.

Pale Lance!

Her spell pierced Adela's shoulder as she stumbled back with a grunt. But her wounds were healing rapidly.

Clicking her tongue, Alice lunged forward with a stab!

Her blade pierced Adela's throat. Pulling the blade back, she unleashed two quick slashes towards Adela's eyes before finishing off with a stab into the mouth and a vicious twist!

Alice felt a sense of danger and jumped back a few times. Her lungs begging for a break to get some air.

Taking a deep breath, Alice watched as the wounds she inflicted on Adela were healed.

She didn't even let out a cry as the casket behind her opened slightly.

A third blade manifested around her as blood began drip from the opening.

*TSSSS!!!

Seeing the blood hiss against the grass, Alice already knew it was bad news.

"Ah... poor lost lamb. You wish not for the blessing of the blood?" Adela asked, tears of blood slowly streaming down her face.

"Sorry but I'm not exactly someone with a lot of faith." Alice smirked before taking a note of where the three blades were.

Now that she caught her breath, Alice rushed forward once more!

"!!!"

Quickly jumping to the side, Alice was shocked at how fast the blade was swinging now compared to the first swing!

It wasn't over either as the second blade crashed down from above.

Using the first blade as a vault, Alice threw herself over it and used the blade as cover.

*BANG!!!

The second blade crashed against the ground and cold sweat filled Alice's back.

One indirect hit might've been enough to kill her if she didn't take cover behind the first sword!

Yet in front of her, the third blade came swinging horizontally.

Alice widened her eyes and laid flat against the ground.

As the blade rushed past her face, it cut a few strands of hair before slamming into the first blade.

The ringing caused Alice to wince as it felt like her ears were about to explode. The wind picked up by the blade didn't do her any favours either, pushing her against the face of the first blade.

But thankfully, after the three hits, Adela pulled back her weapons and Alice was spared for now.

Trying to stand up, Alice could feel her legs trembling.

Despite not being hit directly, she still suffered a bit of damage from being too close to the attack.

Without giving Alice a chance to rest, Adela clasped her hands together and blood converged into four spears that hovered around her.

Gritting her teeth, Alice flourished her rapier.

*CLANG!!!

She parried the first, pushing it slightly off course.

She dodged the second with a step to the right, parried the third then ducked under the fourth.

One again, she was reminded how important it was to train without relying on crutches such as Cayla's kinetic vision.

Kaden may not hear her but she was thanking him in her mind.

Noticing a moment of recovery for Adela, Alice aimed and fired two Pale Lances back to back!

Adela stumbled back from the hits, collapsing like a puppet without strings. With her damage, the casket opened further.

Mummified fingers coiled around the lid as Alice felt a shiver.

A pair of eyes stared at her through the gaps that had just opened.