

Abyssal A 871

Chapter 871: Leaving The Nightmare

Alice felt a chill. A sense of danger like no other. The bells in the distance began to toll as the creature started to pry the casket open.

'I've used Pale Lance four times thus far. With my capacity, I should be able to fire one more before running out.' She thought to herself.

She took a deep breath and prepared to attack but her body was rooted in place, unable to move, forced to watch as this monstrosity clawed its way out of the casket.

First came its arm. Mummified up to the shoulders.

It grabbed the slumped over body of Sister Adela and lifted her up.

Once Adela was standing up, it lifted a finger and blood began to pour.

Little by little, it coated her body and her body began to twitch.

Then came the second arm.

It pushed the casket open further and its head poked out from the darkness.

A hairless head with a strange mix of loose yet tight skin stretched over a monstrous frame. It had no lips and arced its mouth into a wide smile, revealing the row of disgusting yellow teeth. Its eyes arched into crescent moons from its smile.

A long serpentine neck and slowly turned to face Alice.

*Step...

Sister Adela took a step in the waterfall of blood.

She bent down and plunged her hand into the pool.

Slowly lifting her arm, a blood blade condensed from the pool while the monstrosity in the casket mimicked her actions.

A giant blood blade was held in its hand as Adela glared at Alice.

'I can move!'

Immediately running to the right, Alice observed the twin beasts.

Unlike before, Adela was now much faster and aggressive!

Jumping into the air, she slashed down with her sword as Alice stopped her run and jumped back, baiting Adela to land in front of her.

Just as Alice was about to stab with her sword, the second blade dropped down from above, forcing her to cancel her attack.

But with this hesitation, Adela took it as an opening and stabbed towards Alice.

*CLANG!!!

Parrying the blade to the side, Alice felt the force jolt up her arm, causing her to wince.

Jumping back a few times, her eyes darted to her left momentarily in order to capture the monstrosity's movements.

She saw energy converging around the mouth.

"F*ck..." Widening her eyes in shock, Alice gave up hitting Adela and made a sprint towards the casket!

With her speed right now, dodging the attack from afar wasn't going to be an option!

She wouldn't be able to cover enough distance.

Thus, the best option for her right now was to sit under the boss and limit the area where she'll be hit by!

Adela unleashed a flurry of attacks from behind.

A step to the side, duck beneath the horizontal slash, a light hop to avoid the leg stab, parry a stab to the chest. Riposte!

Alice countered, stabbing her blade into Adela's throat but she moved forward without care.

Her eyes bloodshot and unblinking.

Reaching out for Alice, she sought to grab her by the shoulder!

Alice relaxed her legs, dropping down instantly to avoid the grab.

Going into a handstand, she kicked Adela's wrist, forcing the hand away.

Despite this, Adela wasn't fazed. She simply slashed down with her blade as Alice rolled out of the way.

"Tch, you're really not giving me any chance to breathe here." Alice grumbled, glancing up to check the charging progress.

She could tell that it was about to fire at any moment now and quickly dashed towards the casket.

It didn't matter if her lungs were begging for a break, she needed to be out of the danger zone!

Once she's out, she'll take her time parrying Adela's slashes in order to regain her stamina.

*BOOM!!!

Just as Alice reached the base of the boss, she watched as a pillar of light burst out from its mouth, scorching the rest of the garden with the exception of a small area behind the base of a broken statue.

'So there are two safe spots from the beam attack.' She noticed in her mind, preparing to attack Adela.

"Eh?" Blinking her eyes, Alice noticed that Adela wasn't moving. She was staying at the edge of the beam attack.

Making sure she was out of danger yet as far away from the casket as possible.

"!!!"

A hand grabbed Alice by the ankle.

Small, withered, bloody.

Slashing down with her rapier, she quickly pulled her leg back and glanced up.

Her pupils constricting in shock.

When did the casket open so wide?

Within the darkness, she spotted several- no, hundreds of hands writhing like worms. Their joins were too many to be considered normal. Some were freakishly elongated while others crawled like spiders.

Alice wanted to back off but it was already too late. The hands shot forward faster than her body could move.

She wanted to duck down and avoid some of them but even if she did, another set of hands had cut off her escape!

There was only one realisation on Alice's mind.

She was dead.

The arm grabbed Alice by the leg and she flinched.

A strange corruption being injected into her flesh. Another grabbed her arm, her flesh rotting away and revealing the bones beneath the curtain of skin.

A third grabbed her by the mouth as blood poured into her throat.

The fourth, the fifth... the sixth the seventh...

Glaring at Adela, Alice was dragged into the casket and the doors slammed shut.

*BANG!!!

She died.

"ARGH!!!" Letting out a cry, Alice panted as cold sweat rolled down her forehead.

She glanced down, her body was back to normal. Her weapon at her side.

Death number two.

This time it was a proper death and not an accident.

She was lacking the speed and endurance to fight a monster of that calibre.

Not to mention... how was she even supposed to fight that thing? The beast in the casket.

Did she have to kill Adela? Or did she need to have a method for the monster. They seemed to be different beings yet attached in some way.

It seemed to puppet Adela through blood.

Killing Adela might make the fight easier but... the monster could simply revive her like it did earlier in the fight.

If so, how was she supposed to kill the monster in the casket? Fighting up close seemed dangerous. The hands were moving faster than she could move. Her eyes could see what was going on but her body failed to keep up.

In order to succeed in this fight, she needed speed and endurance to keep up.

Possibly new spells and weapons at that.

With that in mind, Alice figured the best way to do so was to explore the new area that she found.

Hopefully, with the new area, there will be higher rarity of Embryos for her to use.

Standing up, Alice was about to leave when she froze.

She clenched her hands a few times and fired a single Pale Lance.

Her smile twitched.

"You've gotta be f*cking kidding me..."

Having died to the boss, her stats have roughly dropped by a fifth of their original value.

Furrowing her brows, Alice harmonised with the branch.

Thankfully, it seemed like whatever she lost could be compensated by the Embryos she had stored away earlier.

But if she lost a fifth of her stats every time she died...

"Wait no... It's not every time. Dying to the cliff didn't decrease my stats. So is it just the boss?" She mumbled with a slight frown on her face.

Whatever the case was, it's clear that this might become a reoccurring issue. Especially since she couldn't tell how strong a boss may be.

Either way, it's clear that she shouldn't rechallenge the boss again until she was ready.

Standing up, she was about to leave when a wave of fatigue hit her like a hammer.

She felt herself losing control of her body, falling backwards into her seat.

Her eyelids felt heavy and no matter what she tried, her body refused to obey.

And soon, she closed her eyes.

###

". . ."

"Sh*t... So that's the nightmare you were talking about..." Elias grumbled, clutching his head in pain.

They were back in their room. Glancing out of the window, Alice saw that it's sunrise.

The time she spent in the nightmare realm amounted to around a few hours in reality.

Looking into her mental space, she sighed in relief seeing Cayla and Alyss there.

Both of them were also clutching their heads, clearly recovering from being dragged away from her.

[What the hell is going on in this place. Why did that realm have the power to drag ME away?] Cayla complained, slumping in her chair as she was forced to fight in that realm as well.

'F*ck knows. I don't like it though, the rules of that place are weird as hell.' Alyss gritted her teeth.

Alice wanted to consolidate the information they found but the important question came first.

'Cayla, Alyss, how many times did you guys die in that realm?' Alice asked.

Based on what Monika said, the less deaths they had the better.

[Deaths? I had like 4 or 5. The places is littered with traps and bullsh*t beasts hiding around corners.] Cayla spat in annoyance. Just the memory of it was enough to make her blood rush with anger.

'One. Died to a giant beast that seemed to be guarding a branch.' Alyss scratched her hair.

She almost died a few times to traps but her reactions were fast. Unfortunately, fast reactions didn't compensate for low stats against a boss.

'You?' She turned to Alice.

'Twice. One to a boss, once to a beast hiding around a corner that pushed me down a chasm.' Alice sighed.

Focusing back on Reality, Alice turned to Elias.

"Elias, how many times did you die in the realm?"

Looking up in confusion, Elias tilted his head for a moment then opened his mouth.

"I think... About 8 or 9 give or take."

"Sh*t..." Alice furrowed her brows.

She was fine, so was Alyss since they didn't die a lot.

But Cayla and Elias... Alice felt a chill. An ominous sense of foreboding.

Chapter 872: Obsession and Death

"I'm guessing that's a pretty bad thing... Well, dying once is bad but you know what I mean." Elias scratched his hair with a sigh.

Some of the deaths were... unavoidable as he didn't expect the ground to give out under him.

Not to mention the fact that he didn't have any of his powers, making combat difficult.

He was already struggling with fighting when he had healing powers never mind without.

"Hmm... It's hard to say. Did you meet a woman called Monika?" Alice asked as Elias furrowed his brows.

"I met a woman but they weren't called Monika. She was rather stoic and told me the bare minimum before leaving. She did NOT want to stay an extra second."

Alice folded her arms.

'What about you two? Did you meet a woman called Monika?'

[Nope. For me I got a guy who called himself the Scribe. Like Elias, I was told the bare minimum before he left.] Cayla shook her head.

'I got a woman who called herself Vene. I wouldn't even say she told me the bare minimum. Said I had myself handled and only told me how to use the Embryos and left.'

Hearing this, Alice frowned.

Based on the information, she was the only one that was told to be careful of death. The others weren't told anything aside from the basic information.

What made Monika different?

Shaking her head, she explained her interaction with Monika.

Her tips, her warnings.

What resonating with the camps do, the fact that the 'realm' was a land weaved by the dreams of many.

The butterflies that guide you to where you NEED to go and lastly, how the generosity of the land is false.

How one should avoid death as much as possible.

Hearing all of the tips that Alice received as well as the information, the group was silent.

What she learned was far more than what they discovered.

They only knew the basic mechanics of the realm in regards to the branch. The rest, they had to find out by themselves.

"Do you think the informant might know about Monika? She was also the one that told you to experience the nightmare before asking her for more information right?" Elias asked as Alice nodded her head.

"Most likely. To be fair, she wasn't wrong. Had she told us about the laws to this realm, I doubt we'll believe it." Alice sighed.

The rules were simply too different. An entirely new world.

If she was to tell them directly, how would she even be able to wrap her mind around it?

Embryos? Camps? Losing Sigils?

She might've made a note of it but definitely wouldn't take it too seriously.

It sounded too outlandish especially with Sigils being so ingrained into their society.

Yet after experiencing it for herself, she couldn't help but accept that this was the truth and that a new realm with new rules was being birthed in this country.

"Let's get some food first. I'm feeling pretty hungry after all of that. I didn't feel it while I was in the realm but fighting there definitely takes a toll out of you." Alice sighed, standing up.

Nodding his head in agreement, Elias led the way.

There was a restaurant he saw during his scouting that sold breakfast.

Seemed to be a rather interesting place.

Following behind Elias, Alice was about to say something when she froze.

"Elias." She called out hesitantly.

"Hm?"

"Don't be alarmed when I say this. But..." Alice pointed at his shadow.

"Is your shadow supposed to be missing a bit of your finger?"

Elias glanced down.

As she said, his finger was missing a bit of his shadow. Not a lot but once you stare at it long enough, you'll notice a little bit taken from the finger tip.

Alice quickly checked her own shadow.

But unlike Elias, nothing was missing.

"You don't think... it's because of the deaths do you?" Elias's smile twitched.

If that was the case then... either he stops progressing in the realm completely or he gets used to fighting without powers. There's no other way of going around it.

"Let's... skip breakfast and go straight to the informant." Alice suggested.

She turned to the table and glanced at the head of the Hybrid. Her eyes were slowly blinking while drool dripped from her mouth.

She was still in the state of 'dreaming' that Alice had put her in. Thinking about it for a moment, she decided to take it with her for now.

Making a portal to the Void, Alice set the head down and placed several security measures around the head in case anything was to try and steal it away.

Of course, leaving her in the Void for an extended period wasn't recommended but she was only going for a quick trip to the informant's place.

It shouldn't take that long.

Packing their stuff, the duo made their way out of the tavern and placed their 'order'.

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“With how many times you’ve come to my, shall I start calling you my regulars?” The informant smiled seeing Alice and Elias approach.

There was a knowing light in her eyes as she gestured for them to sit.

“It seems like your venture in the Realm of Nightmares was rather... rough. Especially for your friend.” She chuckled.

Leaning back, she reached into her mouth and began to regurgitate a package, causing both Alice and Elias to recoil in disgust.

Wiping away her saliva, she placed the package on the table.

“A little gift. Inside holds medicine that should help you recover the soul that you ‘lost’ while dying inside the realm.” She grinned.

Elias hesitantly pinched the package between his thumb and index finger. The surface still wet with saliva.

“I knew it. So that’s why she told me to avoid dying as much as possible.” Alice grumbled with a sigh.

She could’ve said more but that didn’t matter anymore.

What mattered was the fact that the informant knew what’s going on and even had medicine to counteract it.

“Oh? A guide actually told you that much?” The informant blinked her eyes in surprise.

“Yep. A woman named Monika. Had a strange addiction to names.” Alice nodded.

The informant's smile froze for a moment.

"Ah~ So you met her of all people. How unfortunate." She glanced at Alice with pity.

Alice creased her brows.

"Unfortunate? How come?"

The informant leaned back, folding her arms and clearly contemplating how much she wanted to tell Alice.

Alice took this as a sign that she needed to produce some payment but the informant shook her head.

"Monika is a strange one. Even amongst the guides. She's someone who places too much importance on the meaning of names and on fate. If you have a name she does not like, she may even go out of her way to sabotage you.

"She observes, she catalogues. She watches as they walk down their fated path within the realm. So to gain her attention, enough where she has told you this much, I don't know if I should call you lucky or unlucky." The informant sighed.

"Right now, you are being watched by her. Your actions, your thoughts will all be analysed while you are inside the realm. She won't let you rest easy, she'll be the invisible hand urging you forward."

Hearing this, Alice frowned.

Was the person who pushed her into the arena... Monika?

No, she doubted that.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice used a combination of her Sigils to create an illusion within a blood mirror.

“Do you know who this is?” She pointed at the reflection of the beast that pushed her.

The informant tapped the table and made a gesture for coin.

Rolling her eyes, Alice produced the payment she wanted.

“They are called Lurkers. Humans turned nightmares having lost their way in the dream for too long. They form... relationships with the bosses scattered throughout the realm. Keep track of where humans are and stalks from behind.

“Killing them isn’t difficult but the troublesome part is finding them in the fog.” The informant explained with a small smile.

“And what about this one?” Alice projected an image of Sister Adela and the strange casket along with the beast within.

“The land of nightmares is one woven from the dreams of many, how would I know information about every boss that is scatted across the lands?” The informant shrugged her shoulders.

“Monika knew. She called this woman Sister Adela. Said she was part of the Blood Choir, even told me to put her out of her misery.” Alice cut her off.

Once more, the informant’s gestures froze.

Her smile that she was maintaining began to falter.

*Sigh...

Letting out a deep sigh, she rested her forehead on her hand, massaging her eyebrows.

"Monika seems to like you. A lot. Enough where she's even telling you things you shouldn't be knowing. She's taking her job as a guide a little 'too' well." The informant complained, staring at Alice through the gaps of her finger.

This time, her eyes were serious as Alice felt a chill.

She immediately prepared to counter attack if needed.

"The realm of nightmares is one woven from the thoughts of those across this country. Nobles, normal civilians. The history of this land, forgotten figures. Everything is woven in some form, even if their shape has changed.

"And... As the realm of nightmares, manifestations of desires, dreams of the future will naturally be included. Sister Adela is one of those manifestations. A person who was consumed by their desires to the point it warps them into a guardian of the realm."

"So... obsession?" Alice narrowed her eyes.

"Indeed. Obsession is another thing you must avoid if you wish to survive in that realm. Death consumes the soul, Obsession consumes the mind. The realm of nightmare is one that will continuously take pieces of you away until nothing is left behind.

"And..." The informant trailed off.

She leaned forward, her movements faster than what Alice had anticipated. Before she could even move back, she had already lifted Alice's chin and stared deep into her eyes.

"That includes shaving away at the two souls tethered inside your body."

Chapter 873: Karina

"That includes shaving away at the two souls tethered inside your body."

Alice's pupils constricted.

How? She didn't sense the informant having any kind of power that interacted with the soul.

If anything, she wasn't using any power at all!

So how did she notice Cayla and Alyss?

"Surprised? Shall I tell you?" The informant grinned, sitting back down while tapping the table.

"Tch." Clicking her tongue in annoyance, Alice placed down more coins as the informant smiled happily.

"When you're in tune with the nightmare realm, you begin to unlock certain abilities that reflect in reality. One of the abilities I possess is the power to discern the state of one's shadow.

"How much they died, how much they gained. How much they've warped. For your friend, he should be careful with how much death he's experiencing. But when I look at your shadow, I see three layers overlapping one another.

"And that only happens when multiple active souls are residing within one body." She explained, 'eating' the coins that Alice offered.

"Of course, that only accounts for the active soul. In terms of dormant souls... You have the biggest capacity I've ever seen. How many have you killed?"

"That doesn't matter. Instead, I'd rather you tell me a little more about the realm." Alice shook her head, ending the topic there.

The informant already found out more than she wanted her to.

Giving her any more information like this would be stupid.

"Very well~ But I hope you understand that there are things that not even I can talk about. As long as we keep that in mind, this exchange shall be rather fruitful." She leaned back and smiled elegantly.

"So far, in the Nightmare realm, I've only found Embryos that stop upgrading my stats after a certain point. Is it alright to assume that they have rarities and the higher rarities will upgrade my stats further? And if they do, is there a limit to what each stat can accomplish?" Alice asked, going straight to the point.

Elias decided to stay silent for now since he didn't have much to add. He was simply here to listen and understand, especially since Alice had most of the information.

"Oh~ You really have a good head on your shoulders." The informant narrowed her eyes.

"Yes, it's as you say. Each zone in the Nightmare realm has an Embryo matching its difficulty. The first zone, without exception, grants Embryos of the lowest rarity. As you follow the butterflies, you'll reach zones that grant you further enhancements.

"There is indeed a limit to how many enhancements you can receive from higher rarity Embryos so it's best you use them wisely. Ah but make sure you don't slack on enhancing your vitality okay?

"There are certain unavoidable abilities that you have to endure if you wish to kill the guardians." She warned.

Alice furrowed her brows before nodding.

Since that was the case, she had already mapped out how she wanted to invest her powers. Primarily, strength was a stat she can completely ignore since she had no use for it. Based on her requirements, she needed speed and endurance the most.

As for the next question...

Having saw the weapon in Monika's hands, Alice couldn't help but wonder...

"Where can I find new weapons in the Nightmare realm? New spells included."

"Fufu~ that's a pretty expensive piece of information you're wanting there~"

"Is money really that important for you? Haven't you had enough already?" Alice grumbled, handing more money over.

"Of course my dear. This world of ours runs on money, you can never have enough. Those who say money can't buy you happiness clearly haven't felt poor before. With money, so much of your troubles can be erased." The informant swallowed the money and licked her lips.

"Yes, there are places where you can purchase wares using the Embryos you've collected. Weapons, spells, even consumables like Blood vials can be purchased there. And... if you defeat guardians like Sister Adela, she'll drop a unique Embryo. It crystalises their existence into a single crystal.

"You can either use it on a branch to gain their spell or you can use it to forge a weapon they may have used. The choice is yours." She explained.

'So a shop within the realm. Pale lance is good but I probably need something better to fight against Sister Adela. Not to mention the blood vials. Hopefully they can heal me if needed.' Alice made a note in her mind.

"Is there a way for us to find each other in the Nightmare realm? I know Monika said that the realm is large but surely there's a method of travelling around right?" Alice asked.

However, instead of demanding a price, the informant simply stuck out her tongue slightly.

"Can't say, sorry~"

Alice scratched her hair.

"Can you at least tell me about what the faith stat means? Does putting points into it suddenly make me a devote to a god I don't know?" Alice asked.

But instead of responding, the informant only smiled knowingly.

Alice clicked her tongue. She can't say but Alice could already guess what the answer was.

With most of her questions being answered and anything she didn't know about could probably be found inside the realm, she had one last question that she absolutely wanted to know.

"Is there a way to access or leave the realm manually? Or does it simply happen every night?" Alice asked.

"Hmm... You'll probably find this out anyways. The Nightmare realm occurs every other night. Tonight, there will be no nightmare, you can rest easy. As for accessing the realm freely... that I cannot say." She shook her head.

"I see... Final question from me." Alice nodded before letting out a small sigh.

"The anomalies we've seen in this city, the people who ignore the commotion happening... Are they still themselves?" Alice furrowed her brows.

The informant's smile widened to an uncomfortable degree. So much so that even Alice felt put off.

"Drones. They lose themselves in the Nightmare. Their essences consumed and worn as a suit to ensure order is maintained. Their shadows may not show signs at first, but if you look carefully... Ah~ Anymore and my head might be in danger haha~" She covered her smile with her hand.

"Please enjoy yourselves before the next nightmare arrives. I believe I will be rather busy... looking for Monika."

"Before I go, may I have your name? I believe we'll be meeting more often in the future after all." Alice asked, standing up.

"Picking up habits from the witch I see. Karina. That's my name." Karina did a small bow and a wave of her hand.

Without waiting for Alice's response, Karina waved her hand and an invisible force pulled Alice and Elias into the elevator as the doors slammed shut.

"Rude." Elias mumbled while Alice couldn't help but agree.

However, the information they've gained today left them much to think about.

The key being...

"We need to do something about your deaths in the realm. But with two days left..." She sighed, looking at Elias who was still staring at the saliva coated package in disgust.

"I know. But training my reaction speed and such isn't something that can be accomplished in a day or so." Elias sighed.

Now that he knew the dangers of dying in that realm... he couldn't deny that he was feeling a little anxious.

"If you want, you can head back to the Abyss for now. I assume the nightmare is unique to this country and this country alone since I don't see it happening elsewhere." Alice suggested.

But after saying this, she froze.

If the people who come here experience the nightmare, why hasn't the news reported about it? They reported something big like the disappearance of the North but why not the nightmare realm?

What caused them to stop the articles mentioning this?

Is it a recent occurrence?

Alice doubted it.

Then...

[Do you think the 'drones' that Karina mentioned are scouting out everyone who enters the country?]
Cayla frowned.

'Maybe... Unless... they die enough times that drones take over their body before they could write about anything.' Alice wondered.

[I don't think that'll account for the reporters that are stronger than usual though. Since some might be able to survive just fine like you and Alyss without accumulating too many deaths.]

Alice folded her arms.

Whatever the case was, the best thing she should do right now was spread the word. Spread the word so that people are careful about what's going on in this country.

"Elias, let's head back to the Abyss for now. I also have something I want to test once we're there. If we're not dragged into the Nightmare while outside of this country, she should be relatively safe." Alice suggested.

Nodding in agreement, the two made their way back to the tavern and packed their things.

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After bidding farewell to Alice, Karina rested by her tree. Fog rolled in from the edges as butterflies landed on her body.

Some sunk their teeth into her flesh, drinking her blood.

Others simply rested without doing anything.

Roots beneath to writhe beneath the surface as one slowly reached up and...

Pierced the back of her neck.

Veins bulged across her body as she held back a slight cry.

The glow in her eyes shifted and she opened her mouth.

In front of her, the fog started to manifest into the silhouette of a witch.

"Monika..." Karina sighed.

"Hm? Oh~ Elfie~ It's not often you come looking for me. Even going as far as to do this of all things. What is it? An emergency? Or~ Are you asking about little flame?" Monika hopped over with glee.

"Don't you think you're pushing the boundaries a little? Or are you saying you want to get erased by them?" Karina massaged her eyebrows.

"Ah~ That's what you're worried about. I got this all~ under control. The cogs of my fate don't end here Elfie. Just do what you think is reasonable. I got other things I need to do so take care~ Oh and, try not to pull any tricks with little flame." Monika warned.

"Play around with fire too much and you'll get burned~"

With that, she swiped down with her finger and the connection was severed.

Recoiling back, Karina furrowed her brows before sighing.

Chapter 874: Temporary Retreat

Back at the tavern, the duo quickly packed up their things. It's not like they had a lot to begin with so it wasn't much of a hassle.

"How do you think it's even possible? Modifying the realm to such an extent and even weaving in new laws? My body is now stronger than what it was in the realm. Even if I died a lot, I can still remember the fighting style bestowed onto me." Elias asked while sorting through everything.

"I assume having something stitch together the dreams of many would cause that kind of effect." Alice shrugged.

The... composition of the realm confused her as well.

Even for places like the Void, the rules are loosely tied and copied most of the rules in the Abyss and Surface. All three worked harmoniously and they could freely travel between them.

But the Nightmare realm...

It was different. Far too different.

Alice creased her brows.

While some of it could be chalked up to the fact that several dreams were combined, it only makes the situation worse.

How do so many dreams have the same direction? How did they all synchronise with one concept?

What she expected of a dream created from the collective was something more akin to what she felt when entering.

That maelstrom of confusion and rapidly flickering scenery. Random rules that had no correlation at all.

That's the kind of dream she expected rather than this... mimicry of the Abyss.

There was no doubt an underlying goal for this realm.

Was it the Zenia family?

Did they have the capabilities to pull this level of stunt?

'They have the manpower and influence. But power... I doubt it.' Alice sighed inwardly.

And if that was the case... the only one left who could possibly pull off an experiment of this scale.

[Nyer.]

'Mnm. The... sudden collapse of the North, I think we can't deny the fact that his actions are becoming bolder and bolder by the day. He's making leaps and bounds in his research.' Alice nodded with a slight frown.

When Nyer was unsure, his actions were subdued and hard to notice.

But with movements of this scale in multiple places, one could only wonder what he was doing.

'Even if it's Nyer, isn't he moving a bit too fast? How is he covering this much space across the world?' Alyss furrowed her brows.

Alice could teleport to the nodes she left behind but doing so still took time and energy.

'I think he's using something else other than teleporting. But I guess there's no use in dwelling on this. It's not like he's here to answer our questions to begin with.' Alice shook her head.

Checking in on the hybrid head, Alice made sure it was still holding up well enough against the Void.

And surprisingly, with the head's durability, it was adapting well and resisting the mutations.

'Seems like this one is a new gen after all. They're definitely testing out ways of recreating my blood.' Alice theorised. This level of adaptation was similar to her's only slightly weaker.

The recent hybrids that she's seen... They're mimicking her powers one by one.

If they can't do it all at once, they decided to split her power into categories.

'Do you think they're looking for samples that mimic your power so that they can merge them all together in the end? Similar to the new vials of blood with the new catalyst.' Alyss suggested.

Thinking about it, Alice nodded her head.

It was a logical and possible reason to everything they've seen.

'But wouldn't that catalyst act as a parasite like it did with my blood?'

[If they can make it, I assume they have a method of adjusting it. And even if they can't, we can't rule out the possibility of them looking for a method of adjusting the catalyst.]

Zenia family, Nyer, both were huge headaches with their plans for the world.

Then there were also people 'belonging' to the Nightmare realm like Monika and Karina. Both of them had unfamiliar goals and purposes that Alice couldn't pinpoint.

And with Karina being a member of the Underground...

'Her access to information is pretty worrying. Especially if she's working for this new realm.'

Making their way to the gateway towards the Abyss, Alice waited with Elias.

During this time, Alice took extra care to observe the shadows of those who walk past her. To see if its missing or if the shape has changed.

But everything seemed 'normal' to some degree. If she had to say one thing, it'll be that the outline was rather blurred. If everyone's shadow was blurred, it wouldn't be an issue.

However, her own, Elias and a few others had clear distinct shadows meaning it wasn't a natural phenomenon caused by the sun.

After eating the medicine given by the woman, it seemed to have 'undone' some of Elias' deaths as his shadow recovered.

Alice wanted to keep some of the medicine to test what it was and why it could do this, but there was a note inside the package specifically asking for everything to be ingested.

Leaving any may cause the effects to change or not take effect at all.

"Coming and going in the span of a day. What a hassle." Elias adjusted his sleeve while looking at the giant queue in front of them.

"Can't be helped. There are too many questions I want to ask and we might as well look for a reporter or something in the Abyss. They probably know more about what's happening yet we haven't seen a single article."

"Do you think they're being silenced?" Elias asked curiously.

"Doubt it. Do you think they would go after that many people? How do you even verify they're reporters in the first place? And if you kill too many of them, people will naturally notice the issue." Alice shook her head.

The likelihood of this happening was far too low.

Once they were at the gateway, they paid the toll and stepped into the 'shuttle'.

Stepping in, Alice could see the movement of energy, the protective layer that prepared them for transport.

But watching this, she felt slightly sick on the inside. A feeling that disappeared as quick as it had appeared.

Yet the issue was feeling this kind of sensation to begin with.

She didn't have this issue when travelling to the country from the Abyss. So why is it happening now? Her body was fine without major modifications.

Unless...

'Did my actions in the Nightmare realm cause this sickness?'

Alice glanced over to Elias. His face was a little pale as he too frowned at the situation. He wanted to investigate his own condition but with the shuttle about to activate, it wasn't safe to do so.

Alice checked her mental realm. Cayla was sitting behind her desk with her head resting against her palm.

'Do you think it's because they died a bunch? I only died once but I'm feeling some of the effects.' Alyss asked with a frown.

'Possibly. I'll do a quick examination of the soul once we get down.'

She needed to pinpoint exactly why they're having this reaction.

*RUMBLE!!!

As the shuttle shot down, the feeling soon disappeared with Cayla letting out a sigh of relief.

Elias was the same, he hurriedly stepped out of the gateway and gave his body a stretch.

"No place like home I suppose. This feels just right." He smiled happily.

He was no longer affected by the sickness and didn't bother checking up on his condition.

Even Cayla seemed fine now.

Now that they were in the Abyss again, she created a small bead of blood and had it scout out the city.

Just in case... a certain Lord was still around.

She even went as far as to check out the mansion prepared for him but he wasn't living there.

There were signs of repair but not signs of life.

An empty house.

'Seems like he left.' Alice sighed in relief.

She took him by surprise and even used his wife as a weakness but in an upfront fight, she'll probably lose.

With the basic scouting down, her next job was to examine the soul.

While Elias was getting their accommodation ready, Alice created a blood mirror and observed herself.

Her soul's outline was the same, filtering for adjustments and corruption came back fine as well.

The only difference was now that there was a tether connecting to her soul from afar. Not big enough to affect her but the connection was undeniable.

She checked Alyss, same as before.

Checked Caya, the tether was a little thicker, barely, but no other changes.

Then she checked Elias.

The tether, even after Karina's medicine, was about twice as thick as her connection.

She estimated that the medicine reduced his deaths by roughly half as he was now similar to Cayla.

"Hm? Is there something wrong?" Elias blinked his eyes in confusion.

"Nah, don't worry about it. I'm just making a few note on things after our return." Alice shook her head. Turning to the waiter, she ordered some mead so she could relax a little more.

"But I can't believe we're coming back after just a single day. Though I suppose these conditions are probably better when it comes to testing stuff out on that Hybrid head." Elias shrugged, leaning against his chair.

Alice raised her eyebrow.

"Huh? We're didn't leave because of that. I can test the head wherever I want." She corrected him.

"Wait really? Maybe it's the guards then. Having that many eyes would be rather uncomfortable after all." Elias frowned.

"That's not it either." Alice started to get a bad feeling. "We left because we needed to see if the Nightmare realm would drag us back in when we're not in the country."

Elias tilted his head.

A face of confusion.

"Nightmare realm? What's that?"

Chapter 875: Memory Manipulation

"Nightmare realm? What's that?"

Hearing this, Alice felt her entire body freeze.

The new realm they were just talking about, a place of new laws and monsters.

And he just... forgot?

"Huh? You don't remember? The Nightmare realm with the Embryos, guides, beasts, avoiding deaths?" Alice frowned but Elias seemed as clueless as ever.

She looked at Alyss who also seemed surprised by his reaction.

Then the two of them looked at Cayla.

[I'm just as clueless as he is. But I have made a bunch of notes that I don't even remember making. If you didn't mention it right now, I might've discarded them later.] Cayla held her hands up in surrender.

Alice massaged her eyes.

No wonder they didn't write a report on it.

No one f*cking remembered going into the Nightmare realm.

Was it tied to deaths? Or was it because of their unique constitution?

Alice doubted the latter. Her best guess was that memory was tied to deaths.

Was the threshold three or more? Or was it four?

Would the memory loss get worse as you die?

How long before you become a drone like the others?

"Sh*t..." Alice cursed.

Pulling Elias away for now so that he didn't block the entrance, Alice began to contemplate.

What could they do to retain memory if anything like that was to happen again?

It's clear that she wasn't immune to the effects considering she was dragged into the realm without resistance.

The rules that apply to them also apply to her, this was no longer a case where the Abyss showed her favouritism.

In the Nightmare realm, all was equal.

Including herself.

'We need to make something in order to prepare for the wipe. Otherwise if we ever need a break from the realm, how are we supposed to consolidate ideas? I'll be honest, with the way things are going, avoiding deaths till the threshold is going to be impossible.' Alice suggested as Alyss agreed.

[What do you suggest?]

'I thinking of making a memory capsule of sorts. We'll duplicate a portion of our souls and overlay it with my Sixth Sigil. That way, when activating it, I essentially experience everything I learned inside the realm all over again.'

[That's a lot to duplicate though. How will you even record what goes on? Or are you going to set it to a timer of sorts?]

Depending on how they approach this memory capsule, they might be able to modify it to be used with others.

[There's also the issue of recording everything inside the Nightmare realm. There's no telling if your Sigil will work or not.]

'You also can't forget about testing how the realm erases that memory to begin with. If we go back to the city, will we remember everything? If so, if you keep duplicating your memory like that, wouldn't you start overloading your soul?' Alyss spoke up.

The method of erasure was going to be important here.

Alice folded her arms with a sigh.

There were some... ideas but the moral implications were rather tough to swallow.

The first idea was to set reference points before and after entering the Nightmare.

And once the two reference points are linked up, what remains is the memory of her excursion into the realm.

Once that is done, the moment she leaves the city without her memories, this memory capsule will override and synchronise with her memories. If any overlap are detected, it will be shaved away.

But the issue with this is...

It's hard to determine whether what's being shaved away is a copy or the original. What if it's tampered?

If she replaces her memory enough times with this method, is she still the same person? What if a fault occurs during the synchronisation and the only thing she remembers is the time inside the nightmare realm?

Would she forget everything that came before?

Too many risks were involved with this idea. Risks that Alice would rather not take.

The second...

"I guess it's the second method after all." Alice sighed.

"Elias, we're going to be experimenting for a little bit before going back to the surface. I need to make a memory storage system for when we're outside of the Nightmare realm." She suggested as Elias furrowed his brows but nodded his head.

He could tell something was up but didn't know what.

And with Alice being this serious, it must be something major.

[How do you plan on doing this storage system?]

'Just a simple matter of storing knowledge into a capsule. It doesn't replace anything but rather it opens up similar to the library that I saw when accessing the contracts. The main difficulty with this is the method of storing. I need to create a space to store all of the information I gain from the realm.

'Either it updates automatically, or I have to do a manual synch every time we exit the realm.' Alice scratched her hair.

She needed to store it in a physical object so that it wouldn't be erased if her abilities are disabled.

And with the properties of her sixth Sigil, this physical object need to 'store' the history of her memories.

That way, it doesn't need a constant supply of energy to remain.

The good thing with her sixth Sigil is that the knowledge is only temporary unless she went out of her way.

Like the time she copied Rosalyn's movements and habits, the 'memory' faded away after a while since Alice didn't go out of her way to master it.

It was simply available in the moment.

Of course, it would be different if she used the syncing method since it would just duplicate everything in her brain.

And thankfully, she wasn't going down that route.

While Elias found a place to stay for now, Alice started to work on the first prototype.

Whatever she uses to store things can't be created by her power. So metal sheets and so on as they'll fade away after a while.

And the resource she could get her hands on all the time was naturally...

Making a cut on her finger, Alice extracted a single droplet of blood before snapping her finger.

The droplet was compressed into a single thin rectangular sheet.

Using her powers to solidify this wouldn't work as it'll run into the issue she mentioned before. Without her powers, holding its shape, it'll disappear.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice took out an old damaged outfit she had and cut out a stripe the same size as the sheet.

Creating a spark, Alice had the sheet dry up and harden.

"Now... How the hell do I even engrave information into this thing so my sixth can overlay it..." She mumbled.

Holding the sheet against the light, she began to humour a few ideas.

Creating a small tool for now, Alice started to carve away at the surface while talking about the discoveries they made in the Nightmare realm.

Once everything was carved and done, she held it against the light and smiled at the densely packed carvings across the surface.

Closing her eyes, she activated her Sixth and began to trace the 'history' of the sheet.

Yet... Her smile started to fade as she let out a sigh.

"Tsk, I guess that wouldn't work." Her idea was to talk about the information so that when she activated the overlap, she'll be able to know what she was talking about.

Unfortunately, all she did was mimic the mouth movements but not the sounds. The mimicry wasn't perfect either since certain words had the same mouth movement but different ways of speaking it.

Thus trying to decrypt the information using this method was too much of a gamble.

As for the second method...

'Since it only records movement, why don't you combine it with other Sigils?' Alyss suggested.

'True...'

Tapping her finger, Alice decided to test out her sixth Sigil + mirror jester.

The jester allows her to mimic a person along with their personality.

So what if she fabricates someone who's only purpose is to decrypt a certain code?

Noting down some letters to replace with code, Alice activated the mirror jester and began to memorise everything.

But halfway through, she realised an issue.

Using the mirror jester still required her to remember what the parameters were. If more of her memory was to be wiped, how did she expect to access this information?

[Can't you just use the vault? If you write down everything you learned then put it into the vault that Suyin gave you along with some notes, don't you think she'll help you retain the information?] Cayla asked curiously.

'True... But writing everything down still requires me to remember everything I've been through. What if after a certain point, my memory is wiped the moment I exit the nightmare realm?' Alice sighed in frustration.

While Alice was testing out new ideas, Elias returned after finding a place to stay.

She saw the dejected Alice sprawled across the table and ordered some mead.

"Thanks." Alice sighed, drinking the mead to cheer herself up.

She had a few ideas but it was hard to replicate without the constant use of her powers.

Half way through the cup of mead, Alice decided to ask someone else.

On the topic of Suyin's vault, Alice decided to seek her help.

She was someone who's been rejected by the Abyss yet still managed to navigate this world.

Through machinery and Abyssal engineering, she was able to bridge the gap despite being a normal human.

Writing down her request and placing it into the vault, Alice waited for a response.

With nothing else to do but wait, Alice drank the night away while throwing a few ideas that might work.

The next morning, Suyin's response arrived in the most unexpected form...

Chapter 876: Suyin's Gift

Groaning on the floor, Alice had a headache from how much alcohol she had drunk yesterday.

Letting out a yawn, she could still smell in scent of mead on her breath.

While experimenting with her ideas last night, her frustrations only grew as she continued to order mead over and over again. Thankfully, she wasn't violent this time.

Keeping herself focused on the task at hand rather than destroying the place around her.

Elias was more of a lightweight considering he stopped around halfway through the night.

Pulling herself onto a chair, Alice rested her head against the table.

So many ideas put to the test but none of them worked...

Well... that's not entirely true.

None of them worked the way Alice wanted them to work in order to cover the possibility of the memory being modified.

Letting out a sigh, Alice decided to open the vault again.

She sent the message over rather early so Suyin should've seen it by now.

"Oh but then again... I guess I haven't been keeping in touch. She gave me the vault so I can access the Eldritch Crystals easily if I ever face Outer Gods again." Alice mumbled.

Shaking her head with a sigh, she gave it a shot anyways.

Even if Suyin didn't respond, she can always wait.

As she opened the vault, she was surprised to see that most of the crystals were taken out to make room for something else.

Squeezed into the vault was a strange... puppet?

Alice saw a letter in front of the puppet and opened it.

[My heart is wounded from your lack of communication. Where were the samples you encounter on your journey? The eldritch abominations? Oh how I wait for your messages day after day while toiling away at the repairs needed for the city.

The people here aren't like you. They take one look at my babies and they turn away in horror. Such disrespect.

Ah how I miss the days of letting you test my inventions, making research notes and progress. Tell me, did you miss me as much as I did you?

Or am I simply a forgotten part of your life now? Such sadness.

However, glad I am that you still contacted me for assistance. And as such, how can I hold back? You'll find a gift I left in the vault for when you open it. And let's just say... I think I've outdone myself.]

Alice raised her eyebrow.

A gift?

But more importantly, this letter wasn't much help. It didn't answer the questions that she had posed to Suyin.

Showing a helpless smile, Alice glanced at the doll sitting in the vault.

It was roughly the size of Alice's forearm. Not big to the point where it would be a hassle to carry around but not exactly small either.

The doll wore a sleeveless eastern white dress with gold patterns along the edges and a pair of embroidered shoes with flower patterns on the top. The legs were exposed, revealing the mechanical joints around the knees, ankles and waist.

It also wore an off shoulder lab coat with appropriately sized sleeves that allowed the hands to move freely.

Had it been Alice's choice, she would've given her large sleeves in a heartbeat.

Lifting the chin, Alice examined the doll's face. Deep crimson hair with a slight glow on the underside of her hair. It was tied into a double maiden bun mixed with twin tails, the bottom of the hair reaching her waist.

A pair of golden eyes that seemed to flicker between pink, blue and gold every so often. But the most prominent feature of this doll was the black spikes protruding from just above her ear, some of which even wrapped around the ear.

In a sense, it made the doll look similar to a half dragon.

Alice held the doll up like a child, the limbs falling limp on the side.

She could sense a dormant storage of energy held in the chest compartment and wondered if she should inject some energy into the doll.

To jump start its systems.

Though... she couldn't help but wonder how it was storing energy. If it got damaged, how would she replace it?

She held the doll with one hand and tapped the chest a few times with her finger, wondering if it'll open.

"Oh gosh if you liked my chest that much, maybe I should've installed something bigger."

"!!!" Alice's eyes snapped up and saw a smug expression on the doll's face.

"Suyin???" Alice was in disbelief.

When did the doll activate? She didn't sense the flow of energy.

But more importantly, how was she here?!

No, she wasn't here in person but rather in doll form.

But... How??? She had no Sigils so how was this possible!?

"Wahahaha~ Yes! It is !! the great genius Suyin in my greatest creation! The Suyin mk2!" Suyin struck a pose as she broke out of Alice's grip and flipped towards the table, making a perfect landing.

"Gosh you took so long to contact me I actually thought you forgot about me." Suyin folded her arms in annoyance.

"Ah... Sorry about that. It's been somewhat of a chill journey... I think? There hasn't been too many anomalies until now." Alice apologised as Suyin chuckled.

"It's fineee~ I forgive you."

"So how come... you're a doll now? What about your job in the east? Aren't you busy with that?" Alice asked curiously.

"Fufu~ I knew you'd ask that. Give me a second." Standing up, Suyin shifted her body a few times before one of her eyeballs popped out.

Placing it on the table, a projection appeared as a flow of Abyssal energy was drawn in from the surroundings.

From the projection, Alice could see Suyin wearing a pair of glasses while in her lab.

"Hi~ the Suyin mk2 is made up of several preserved beast parts. As long as you can inject a bit of energy into it, one ability assigned to the body part can be used. In this case, this eyeball as the power of illusions. I simply synchronised it with the orb I created before and tada~ Long distance communication where we can see each other." Suyin explained, twirling her scalpel in hand.

Alice was taken aback by how fast Suyin was speaking but a smile appeared on her face.

"Seems like you've been busy huh?"

"Of course. I can't sit idly now after all. There's a few other features I've included on the mk2 but essentially I can travel with you for a little bit~ It'll need to come in for some maintenance every now and then as I make improvements of course.

"Ah and don't worry about touching it. The mk2 was made with the intention of not blowing up upon touch. It's a mix of my machinery, Eldritch energy and Abyssal energy. Basically the culmination of the research we did while you were here." Suyin gave Alice a reassuring wink.

"I see... So did you have a read of what I wrote down yesterday? What do you think about this problem?" Alice asked.

Popping her eyeball back in, Suyin jumped over and sat on Alice's shoulder.

"It's definitely weird. Sadly, I won't be able to see the realm since my soul isn't here. This is simply a communication device after all. But when it comes to recording your memory without using Abyssal abilities, I should be able to help." Suyin crossed her legs.

"I've attached a recording device into mk2 that can observe the changes in your body. While that doesn't account for the soul, I'm sure it's something you can handle right? So long as I get the data into my hands, I'll be able to solve the main issue for you."

Alice folded her arms and smiled.

"So you just need me to give you the 'data' of my soul as I go into the realm right?"

"Yep. Just link you and mk2 up and I'll get a live feedback. And if we make some extra modifications, 'seeing' the realm through your soul might even be possible." Suyin winked.

"So, what do you think of the realm?" Alice asked.

"From what I've read and some guesses of my own, I'm thinking... the realm is currently in a state of infancy or possibly it hasn't been fully 'born' yet. It's unstable, chaotic and the rules are being formed. The fact that you can only access it every 2 days is a clear hint towards the truth.

"My assumptions are that within these two days, the Nightmare realm consolidates the information it's gained along with the changes that people have brought. It's clear that the realm is operating completely differently to the Void and Abyss.

"A governing body is assigning 'guides' to everyone that enters meaning... They have access to a large work force or a method similar to mine with mk2.

"Then we have a look at the foundational rules of this realm. I'm guessing the first death acts as a trigger for the one sided contract similar to bounties for Hunters.

"And as you embark on your journey, using the Embryos they give, the connection is being reinforced.

"However, just like the case of the hunts in the Abyss becoming stronger should you fail to kill your target, each death acts as a punishment with the Realm sinking its teeth deeper into your soul." Suyin rambled with an uncontrollable glint in her eyes.

She was born too late to see the war of Realm rulers, too late to see the changes in the Void. Too unfortunate to explore the Abyss as not a single Sigil was granted to her.

But...

She was just in time to see the birth of a new realm. A new anomaly, the spiral of possibilities and the exploration of the unknown.

Sitting in her lab, she could feel her heart slamming against her chest in excitement.

Ah~ truly. To understand the unknown was the aphrodisiac to a researcher's soul.

This exploration of the Nightmare Realm...

Suyin absolutely cannot miss this!

Chapter 877: Preparations For Nightmare

"With everything said, how long is it before the next Nightmare? That way I can plan out my schedule a little. Even though I'm here in mk2 form, I still have to handle things on my end." Suyin asked with a sigh.

Oh how she wished she could just drop everything and come along for the journey. And even if she can't, she hoped to at least focus on the current situation.

But the east was still in the process of recovering from the Outer God's attack. The surge in Eldritch energy was a pain to deal with, even with her crystals.

Despite Kazira being dead, there were still spikes of eldritch energy appearing across the nation.

A few sects even got converted with everyone inside going crazy.

There were even signs of a new disease caused by the modified form of Eldritch energy. One that heavily enhances your power while sapping away at your vitality. Far worse than what the Abyss could do with less pay off.

Sure, obtaining the power was easy. But with that ease came danger like no other.

A few Lords were already working together to form a quarantine around the affected regions but... It's hard to tell how far the corruption had already reached.

"It should happen tomorrow night. It'll only last a few hours from sun down to sun rise." Alice replied as Suyin folded her arms.

"So a literal nightmare huh... Alright. I'll quickly sort out a few things so I can make time tomorrow. Just keep mk2 on you and I'll 'wake up' once I'm done. See you soon." Suyin grinned as Alice nodded her head.

Having said this, mk2 fell limp like a puppet without strings.

Alice quickly caught it before it could fall.

Looking at the lifeless doll in her hands, Alice shook her head with a helpless smile.

Though having someone familiar to journey with was good.

Not that she didn't enjoy journeying with Elias. But with the dangers in front of them, having someone familiar was reassuring.

Especially if she considered Suyin's expertise and genius. With her by their side, solving the mystery of the Nightmare realm should be much easier.

Setting Suyin on the table for now, Alice glanced towards Elias.

With a day left, there wasn't much they could do in terms of training.

What could she even do to help him increase his odds of survival?

Tapping her finger on the table, Alice had an idea.

"Elias, we're going for some training after all. I don't know the kind of beasts you fought against, but I do know what I had to kill. So with only a day left before the nightmare, we're going to do some emergency training." Alice suggested.

Elias tilted his head in confusion.

However, if everything she spoke about was true, then training was something he desperately needed to avoid dying more in the Nightmare realm.

Buying a bag in the marketplace, Alice stuffed mk2 into it before looking for a suitable location.

Closing her eyes, she activated Cayla's power and began to sense the energy ambient in the Abyss.

Attaching some of her own energy, she scouted out the nearby areas and found a cave that was relatively deserted.

There were a few beasts crawling around the place but if they were smart, they'll avoid them at all costs.

With the location set, Alice grabbed Elias by the shoulder and snapped her finger.

"Huh? What are you doINGGGGGG!!!" Elias' sentence was transformed into a scream as the floor gave out beneath him.

As they entered the Void, Alice wrapped them in energy and sling shotting them through the airspace before exiting where the cave was.

Collapsing on the ground, Elias immediately threw up as he wasn't prepared for that kind of rough motion.

The feeling of going from standing to being flung at max speed was something his body disagreed with heavily.

"Since you don't remember you time in the Nightmare Realm, I'll give you a rundown. First, you are set to your base stats. Meaning no reinforcement from blood or Sigils. Your base physical stats that can only be increased through Embryos.

"Second, there are an abundance of traps and sneaky beasts looking to kill you around every turn. We can't deal with this since we only have a day but we'll work on sensory training later if we have time.

"Right now, our main goal is for you to not die against these trash mobs. So you, my good sir, must learn their attack patterns." Alice explained with a serious tone.

Energy started to surge from her body as she activated her Sixth Sigil.

She overlayed it on herself. But more specifically, the memory of fighting against the beasts. Their movements, attack patterns, habits and even shape.

Replacing one of her Sigils with Mirror Jester, blood started to appear around her body before solidifying into the monstrous form that was the creatures of Nightmare.

Moving her arm around a little, Alice turned to the shocked Elias.

"These are the basic grunts I had to kill. I don't have a method of reducing you down to your base stats. So instead, I'm going to forcefully increase my own proportional to the difference I felt during my fights.

"You are not allowed to use your Sigil abilities, only your physical capabilities along with a single weapon. Memorise, adapt, respond. Those are your goals." Alice instructed.

Forcing a smile, Elias nodded his head. He was about to pull out his weapon when Alice flicked her finger and an assortment of weapons appeared before him.

"These were all the weapons that I could select for my class. I don't know which one you picked but take your time. You should also put some failsafe's in place so you don't die." She warned.

In order for him to properly hone the instincts and reaction towards these beasts, the sense of death must be included. The dangers, the nervousness, nothing could be left out.

Contemplating for a little bit, Elias made a choice.

To Alice's surprise, he actually chose a buckler and a sword. For a healer, she thought he would've picked something that kept his range advantage rather than something that went into close quarters.

But who was she to question his decision? All that matters is how effective he would be in combat.

"Let's do some light warm ups so I can get a judge of your power. So feel free to go all out, I'll match your pace then scale myself up." Alice gestured for Elias to prepare while massaging her neck.

Crouching down slightly, Alice took a deep breath.

*BANG!!!

"!!!"

Elias gritted his teeth, Alice was already in front of him.

Claws inches away from his head as he quickly slammed up with his buckler!

*CLANG!

Parrying the strike, he went in for an upwards cleave as a single bloody mark appeared on Alice's body.

Twisting her torso, she went in for a gut punch. Her recovery was clearly beyond what Elias had expected as he tried to parry but mistimed it.

*BANG!!!

Slamming against the ceiling, Elias felt as though he just broke every bone in his body.

Quickly healing himself, he fell towards the ground. But before he could land, Alice was already in the motion of a shoulder charge.

Bracing himself with his buckler, Elias was thrown back once more.

Instead of taking his time to recover, he quickly got back to his feet and ducked under Alice's next punch while also taking this change to land two slashes against her legs.

Despite her speed, Alice's movements were rather predictable.

Taking his time to observe then slash when needed, a smile eventually crept up on his face.

If the movements were this simple, how did he die so much? Or did he die to traps.

"Hmm... Alright. Your stats are higher than I expected. I'll have to sync it up quite a bit." Alice mumbled as Elias froze.

"Eh?"

Did he just hear that right?

She'll have to sync it up quite a bit?

He was already barely dealing with it now! How much stronger did she plan on makin-

"Why are you spacing out?" Alice asked as her massive frame charged forward!

"!!!" Widening his eyes, Elias raised his buckler but it was too late.

*CRACK!!!

He felt his bones fracture from the first hit as his body was flung away like a rag doll.

Before he could even land properly, Alice was already in front of him mid swing.

Kicking Elias' side, she launched him against the opposite wall.

To deal with the beasts in the nightmare realm, you absolutely cannot let them have the momentum advantage. Once they trap you in a cycle of recovery, death was almost guaranteed!

You had to kill them before they can reach this stage!

Slumped on the floor, Elias' sight was hazy as there was a constant ringing in his ear.

Alice had to face this kind of threat?

And she only died twice? Not even against these beasts at that.

What kind of monstrous fighter was she?

"Stand back up. We only have a day to get you ready. The beasts are fast yes. But predictable. Observe their tells, retain your calm. Adapt to the situation and make sure you take the initiative. You don't need to break the attack's momentum head on, divert it to the side with the buckler.

"If there are no opening, create one. Now get back up. Compared to the training I gave my first disciple, this is nothing. He had to fight me at my best without giving him forced openings." Alice stood opposite Elias with a harsh gaze.

Gritting his teeth, Elias healed himself and took a defensive stance once more.

Furrowing her brows, Alice sighed.

This was going to be a long training session. She needed him to understand when to take the initiative and when to be defensive. Unless he can grasp that, he won't be able to reduce the number of deaths he'll suffer in the nightmare realm.

Chapter 878: Operation

"Ha... Haa... Haaa..." Panting heavily, Elias gritted his teeth and kept himself on the run.

Around him, blood mist surrounded his body and blocked his view, mimicking the environment of the Nightmare realm.

Hidden within that mist, a silhouette dashed in and out of view.

The beast was 'hunting'.

There were countless wounds scattered across his body, healed to the point they wouldn't affect his movements.

How many deaths has he suffered now? How many times must this continue?

*BANG!!!

Rolling out of the way, a spiked claw dropped down from above as Elias quickly landed a slash with a moment of opportunity.

Recovering from his roll, he raised his buckler in preparation for the second hit.

*CLANG!!!

Parrying the second, he slashed up at the arm before going in with a stab, twist, pull.

Raising his buckler, he parried the response to the side of him before another slash under the arm.

A backstep to avoid the unblockable swing.

Lunge forward at the gap and another stab to the back.

Everything had to be calculated. What he can risk, what he can't. The feints, the traps. He had to memorise every move set.

And once the move set was memorised, he had to learn how to observe the changes in their body.

As a doctor, this wasn't too difficult. But reacting to those changes was the barrier he had to surpass.

"Alright, I think that's enough." Alice snapped her fingers and dismissed the mist.

At this point, Elias had thoroughly memorised the attack patterns of the basic grunts. This should let him survive a little better in the first area.

The issue now was everything after that.

The traps, the ambushes, the new mobs that he may see.

She had to prepare him for that.

Checking the time, Alice let Elias have a break for now.

"Phew..." Letting out a sigh of relief, Elias collapsed on the ground as sweat covered his body.

His arms were numb and he took this chance to heal himself to peak condition. The number of times he died during this training... easily over three digits.

Late parries, late dodges, early parries, early dodges.

Fell for feints, attacking when he shouldn't.

His death piled on and whenever he died to the same mistake over and over, his mental state would tank due to his frustrations.

"Good job. We still have some time so I'm going to do a quick demonstration of something called the Zone. I don't need you to master it. Just look at the principles at work and do what you can, okay?" Alice praised with a smile.

Sitting up, Elias tilted his head in confusion.

"The Zone? Isn't that something used by the Sun Church?"

"Oh? Well that certainly makes it easier if you know what it is. Yes, it's something used by the Sun Church but also slightly different. As for my connections to them, I have a few even if I dislike Solaris." Alice chuckled.

"I'll only use physical reactions and a few of my blood powers. Try your best to 'kill' me, don't worry about the damage done. I'll regenerate anyways." She reassured, causing Elias to frown.

Usually, Alice would prove herself by blowing up an arm or two. But since she hasn't told him about her connection with the Zenia family yet, it's best she kept quiet for now.

Showing him this level of regeneration straight up was practically telling him she had better regeneration than Hybrids. Man made monsters of the Zenia family so what was she?

Elias was still a little unconvinced.

Rolling her eyes, she pulled him up and simply waited for him to make a move.

Summoning his umbrella, Elias took aim.

Since she wanted him to try his best to kill her, using all of his abilities should be fine.

Opening his palm, a tiny dome of energy gathered.

"Operation."

As the dome expanded, he twisted his body and slashed towards Alice.

"I told you to come at me like you're trying to kill me. Is this the extend of your power?" Alice asked as she appeared in front of him.

Her hand already grabbing his face.

Sweeping her leg, she broke his balance and slammed him against the ground.

Lifting him up, she kicked him in the gut as he crashed into the wall.

Raising an eyebrow, Alice touched her own stomach for a moment and grinned.

"Hou~ Damage transfer huh?" She narrowed her eyes.

"Somewhat. Doesn't make the pain any better and yet I see you unfazed." Elias smiled bitterly.

He knew she could hold her own and even kill someone under the protection of a Lord. But wasn't she saying she was going to hold back?

Elias recalled Alice killing the Hybrid he had so much difficulty with in one go.

Simply ripped her head off and didn't care.

Yeah, it was stupid of him to take her lightly, thinking he would make progress without the intent to kill.

"Don't be too disappointed okay? At the end of the day I'm still just a doctor. My tool kit mainly focuses on healing rather than fighting." Elias stood up and dusted himself.

Alice simply nodded her head, gesturing for him to attack her when he felt like it.

Elias took a deep breath.

Operation, by designating an area where he would commence his operation, he's able to unlock abilities matching his Sigils.

Scalpel allowed him to ignore all defences so long as it's an extension of the body.

The hybrid's arrow and spear were all created from bone hence why he was able to bypass it.

Diagnosis allowed him to observe his opponent. To see their body composition and understand what they are. It also reveals the incision lines where he should cut for the most damage.

In a sense, Diagnosis worked similar to Zone only a little worse since it was limited to one patient.

Next, Sterilisation. A cool down based ability where he can expand a pulse of energy to the edges of his barrier, destroying foreign objects and keeping the operation room clean. A defensive tool that can be used offensively if the situation called for it.

And finally, Rearrange. Depending on how much he's able to understand about his 'patient' he'll be able to restructure their bones, organs and other parts of their body he deems fit.

It was mostly used to stall or make things harder for his opponent, enough where he could use scalpel to kill them.

Unfortunately, his power is also contract based. The effects remain permanent if they sign a contract with him.

Otherwise, it'll be temporary unless they die of course.

As for the abilities outside of his Operation, he only had damage transfer and self reconstruction.

Activating Diagnosis, his eyes shifted as rings appeared around his pupil.

The world shifted and his smile twitched.

There were... incision lines yes. But they kept shifting, changing locations, appearing then disappearing. Unless his speed far surpassed Alice's, landing those hits are probably impossible for him right now.

Then there was her body composition.

It was a strange sight. Did she have a body of a human? Yes she did.

He could see her organs just fine unlike the weird hybrids.

But... at the same time... there were strange ephemeral overlaps. Shifting in and out of existence.

He couldn't help but doubt his sight momentarily but no matter how he blinked or what he did, everything stayed the same.

However.

The strangest matter, despite everything, was...

The complete lack of side effects from Abyssal powers. Her body was 'pure', sparkling clean.

Not a single blob of darkness on a white canvas.

She had an ocean of abyssal influence in her body yet not a speck of side effect.

And if he was to look closer... He saw sources of energy that should be fighting harmonised in a single body.

Taking a deep breath, Elias lunged forward.

His eyes focused on Alice, ready to capture every movement she made yet she stood still.

This was a game of chicken and reaction speed.

Whoever made the first move lost the advantage. And if neither of them moved, they'll simply crash into one another.

Alice smiled and offered up her advantage without care.

She stabbed her fingers forward. If Elias didn't react, his eyes will be poked out.

Scalpel!

Twisting his head out of the way, he slashed towards her arm but Alice was already following up with a counter of her own.

She moved her arm out of the slash and went in for a punch against the chest.

Elias shifted himself slightly, contemplating on what to do but Alice was faster.

She had already rearranged her attack to match whatever he planned to do!

This was a constant game of rock paper scissors and he was slower! No matter how he shifted, Alice would match.

And by the end of it, he stood in front of Alice without making a single move.

Sweat rolled down his face as his smile faltered.

It was completely one sided.

And... the worst part of it all...

"Do you have to keep your eyes closed for the entirety of that?" Elias smiled bitterly.

During the entire exchange, Alice was relying on other senses rather than her eyes.

"If I had used my eyes, it would've been too slow." She shrugged.

It wasn't an insult, but the simple truth.

Even without Cayla, her standard Zone was far too strong for Elias to breach.

"But I'm surprised you have something similar. A slight downgrade sure, but it's not too shabby. Shall we work on getting you to use it outside of this barrier of yours?" Alice tapped her finger.

A spark of energy flicked out, shattering his operation room in an instant.

It wasn't a standard Sigil power after all...

But rather, an altered First Resonance.

One that targeted the space itself rather than the user, similar to a Second Resonance.

So with that in mind, breaking his control over this space was rather simple thanks to her connection with Ruinous Void.

Shrugging his shoulders, Elias sighed in defeat. He already struggled with her initial training, what was the rest going to be like? How did she plan on having him use Diagnosis outside of the operation room.

With Alice's back to Elias, her smile slowly curved up to match the sadistic smile she had when training Jin.

Chapter 879: Nightmare Observation Log 1

"Please..."

"Please?"

"Please can we have a break?" Elias begged as he couldn't even walk right now.

He had completely exhausted his stamina. Alice did not hold back at all. She could tell how much stamina he still had left, mixing killing intent into her attacks to force his fight or flight response.

Her attacks were just fast enough so that he had to anticipate them, but not too fast to the point where he couldn't react instinctively.

And whenever he felt comfortable with the speed, she would always increase it further.

A demon of training.

"Hmm... I suppose you earned a short break. It's not like we have a lot of time to spare anyways. We should start making our way back to the surface." Alice folded her arms with a sigh.

Looking at the state of the cave around them, a frown appeared on her face.

This place can't handle any more. If they were to go for another round, it'll probably collapse mid training.

Thankfully, since Elias had experience with using Diagnosis so his grasp of the key concepts behind Zone were good.

The only issue was trying to put that into practice.

'He has all the signs but...' Alice sighed inwardly.

Perhaps it was because he's a doctor, but his patience, calm, reaction and observation were all good.

His body was just struggling to keep up.

In this aspect, he's like the opposite of Jin.

Jin had the body but not the foundation.

He had the foundation but not the body.

Creating a portal for Elias to leave for now, Alice demolished the cave. Leaving it like this would be more dangerous than just destroying it.

Stepping through, Alice watched Elias repair his own body. His stamina was still gone but the wounds disappeared.

"Just be careful not to fight too often in the Nightmare realm. You don't get the benefit of Sigils in there." Alice shook her head.

They've done everything they could.

Elias nodded his head.

With nothing else they can do, the only thing left was go back to the city and wait for the Nightmare to descend.

###

"What the f*ck is all of this?" Alice's smile twitched.

Having returned to the city, they quickly booked a room and prepared for the Nightmare.

During this time, Suyin had returned and was now pulling out machine after machine from her vault.

Clearly something she had been preparing while she was away.

Countless monitoring systems were now present in the room, practically filling it to the brim with canisters of blood being prepared as fuel.

Eldritch energy crystals were inserted into several compartments, causing a flow of violet energy to pulse through the pipes.

It was also clear that this was now just one experiment but rather multiple.

Some of these had uses that wasn't clear from the initial observations.

"These are all my babies of course. These three are used to monitor you and Elias, these two are to observe the changes in your body, these are for recording everything that gets changed during this time.

"The tall one records ambient energy, the short one records fluctuations. The wide one records the environmental changes and the tiny one records the different sources energy at play. Abyssal, Holy, Void, Eldritch.

"This bad boy is to let me see if Eldritch energy reacts to anything in Extalia since I'm still working on my original experiments. This one is a recharging station and this one is an armoury for myself just in case anything goes wrong." Suyin explained, showing them her contraptions one by one.

"Why do you need an armoury?" Alice furrowed her brows.

"Why not? First of all, you're forgetting that behind all of my babies and darlings, I'm just a normal fleshy person. One breeze from anyone slightly stronger than normal and I'll fold like a stack of cards.

"Second of all, I'm not at my workshop. I can't just call forth my turrets, big f*cking swords and bombardments from the sky. Third of all, what do you think happens when everyone is dragged into the Nightmare realm?" Suyin asked while holding up three fingers.

"While all of you have your souls dragged away, I'm observing the situation as a spectator. I don't have my soul here since this is just a glorified communication device. If they were to realise that, don't you

think it's only normal that they'll send something to take care of the anomaly so that news of this place doesn't get out?" She reminded.

"Plus, your situation is abnormal to begin with. Had you not remembered this strange phenomenon the outside world will still be clueless on what the f*ck is happening here."

Alice was silent.

It's clear that Suyin had put more thought into this than her.

Since that was the case, she might as well just let Suyin do her thing rather than interfere.

Meanwhile, both Elias and Cayla had a slight headache as memories came flooding back the moment they entered the city.

They recalled everything they went through all over again.

And with the sudden surge, it was a similar pain that Alice had felt when Griselda overloaded her soul momentarily.

Completely disorientating.

"Anyways just sit tight while I sort everything out. Need to hook it properly along with the jammer so I'm not found out." Suyin rubbed her hands together with excitement.

"Jammer?"

"Yep. Unless you want the signal of around... a Lord level beast pumping out energy like they're about to kill someone in broad daylight, a jammer is needed for this much machinery." Suyin nodded.

"How does it work exactly?" Alice asked curiously.

If it was indeed as powerful as Suyin mentioned then learning this technique would be rather helpful for stealth.

"Are you aware of a person's blind spot? Ignoring that Zone of yours. When someone relies just on their eyes, there's a specific part of their vision that is blind. Total sensory silence. The brain fills it in using the surrounding visual information and pattern prediction.

"You can think of it as your own brain tricking you. This jammer works in a similar way. It obscures, camouflage and hides itself by matching the surrounding ambient energy. Of course, just because it camouflages itself doesn't mean the output is erased.

"Instead, the output is filtered out separately through several layers. They split the output that people can sense and weave them into the surroundings. So even if the machine is charging a powerful attack, unless you're looking directly at it, you shouldn't sense much.

"Of course there are more optimisations that can be done but desire one and you lose out on the other. This is the best balance I've found out thus far." Suyin shrugged with a sigh.

"So... if I was to use this filter, would a Void Flux be transformed into a simple weak attack?" Alice asked curiously.

Suyin paused and sat up.

Thinking about it for a moment, she shook her head.

"It's not as simple as that. Hmm... I doubt you want to listen to my ramblings all day long so it'll be easier to just show you. Here's a spare sheet, if you hold it in front of something and observe it directly rather than the 'area' around it, you should be able to see the effects." Suyin reached into her vault and pulled out a strange piece of metal.

Its surface seemed to constantly shift depending on how she angled it against the light. Ridges of different materials overlapping over and over to form a single unified object.

Snapping her fingers, Alice created a spark of energy and followed Suyin's instructions.

Holding the metal in front of her, she observed the spark and raised an eyebrow in surprise.

Rather than a mote of fire... it felt like she was projecting a piece of...

Wood?

Dismissing the fire, she created a mote of blood and infused it with Void powers.

Once again, her perception of the energy changed. The metal sheet filtered the energy and she was now sensing...

Rocks and metals in her hand.

If she was to just rely on her senses, it simply feels like natural minerals with more Abyssal energy than most. Definitely strange but not unheard of before.

Places deep in the Abyss would have similar minerals.

[Most people would just think someone brought up materials from the deeper layers and ignore it.]
Cayla mumbled, still clutching her head from the headache.

'Mnm. Though using it mid combat wouldn't be easy since they can see the attack that's being charged up. Unless their vision is obscured and I have enough of this material to hide the entire thing.' Alice nodded.

She wanted to mimic the properties of the metal but doing so wasn't easy. Especially since Suyin had retained most of the original qualities of the material instead of using energy manipulation.

"See? Told you it's probably easier for you to check it out yourself." Suyin accepted the metal sheet back as she tossed it into her vault without care.

She had more where that came from.

"How did you even come across something like that?"

"You know how it is. Just playing around with things until something interesting happens.

"Curiosity is the most important aspect of a Researcher just like how the mindset is important to a Hunter's growth. If a researcher isn't curious, their progress will stagnate. Being able to cultivate, protect and even encourage this curiosity brings out the biggest ideas.

"Though too much curiosity can bite one in the ass as you can expect with your... experiences." Suyin winked.

Even though she was directing that at Alice, Alice felt a flicker of bitterness in her smile. Slightly forced and her eyes showing a hint of pain.

Rather than saying that to Alice, it felt more like she was saying that to herself.

Before Alice could even dwell on this feeling, Suyin gave her machine a pat on the sides then jumped off the chair.

"Alright. Everything should be prepared now. Shall we see what kind of mystery this Nightmare realm holds?" Suyin grinned.

The sun was about to touch the horizon light and the moment of Nightmare was about to arrive once more.

Chapter 880 World Outside The Nightmare

Alice let out a soft groan. She had entered the Nightmare before she knew it. The moment the sun touched the horizon line, she blacked out and woke up here.

Compared to the first night, this was a far smoother experience.

No falling through several strange realms, no mannequins trying to kill her.

No parasite bursting out of someone's chest to kill her.

She was back at the camp having died to the boss.

The streets were the same, the placement of the beasts were also the same.

Nothing had changed in this realm since her last departure.

At least... nothing that she could see.

Picking up her rapier, Alice adjusted her head and stepped out into the fog filled city.

It's clear that she couldn't fight the boss right now. The risks were simply too high and she'd rather not stack up her deaths if she could help it. The beast dropped down from above but Alice leaned to the side while slashing up.

A swift cut against the throat before stabbing the temple, killing the beast without letting him attack once.

According to Karina, there were shops where she could use the Embryos she's obtained to buy spells, weapons and consumables.

With quite a few tier 1 Embryos at her disposal, purchasing a few items should be doable.

First and foremost was getting better spells and a method of healing without going back to the camp.

If she can heal during a boss fight, it'll certainly make her life a lot easier. To give herself more room for error if anything took her by surprise.

Picking up the Embryo from the ash on the ground, Alice stored it into her pocket before tracing the familiar path through the city.

Past the traps, the beast tried to ram her into the chasm once more but this time Alice took a few steps back to avoid it before circling around the beast.

With the roles reversed, she broke the beast's balance by slashing his tendons and kicked him into the chasm.

Watching the beast disappear into the fog, Alice hopped over the gap without any issues, even avoiding the trap set on the ledge in the process.

Once she was on the other side, Alice clenched the Embryo and glanced at the paths laid out before her.

The closest path was the path back to the boss.

Therefore, her goal this time was to venture deeper into the city.

This was uncharted territory once more so Alice slowed herself down.

Keeping herself close to the walls in case something was waiting for her in the centre of the road.

At least by staying close to the walls, she'll reduce the chances of drawing their attention.

Just as she took a step towards what seemed to be the centre of the city, Alice felt a sense of danger from her left.

Her eyes darted to the side and froze upon seeing a human face.

No... calling it human wouldn't be accurate.

The lower jaw split apart, revealing the rows of thorns and writhing roots. The face a pale imitation of beauty constructed by layering countless petals together.

Without thinking of anything else, Alice immediately relaxed her legs and dropped to the ground.

*BANG!!!

From the wall, the maw snapped forward, crushing the empty air where Alice's upper body would've been.

Some of her hair was caught in the jaw as the beast's saliva melted away the strands.

Quickly rolling back, Alice glanced at her pony tail that had been forcefully shortened with green saliva still melting away at the edges.

Cutting it off with her rapier to stop it from spreading, Alice glared at the plant beast that slowly clawed out of the building.

Taking a deep breath to regain her calm, Alice took aim with her rapier.

'Long root like limbs. Body mostly comprised of a bundle of them rather than a solid piece. Changes are it can probably cause a bunch of roots to expand in an instant. Thorns are an issue.' Alice analysed.

Sure, using Pale Lance could solve this but she only had a limited amount of casts per rest. She didn't want to waste it on a random beast like this unless absolutely needed.

There's no telling if there would be an abnormally strong beast guarding the main paths that respawns per rest.

Turning its head slowly, the beast slowly peeled away the petals that made up the human face, revealing 10 eyes lined up where the stamen of the flower would've been.

Its roots slithered like a snake as the beast turned towards Alice before slamming down with its vines.

Side stepping the strike, Alice flicked her wrist and slashed the vines quickly, severing them from the main body.

Letting out a hiss of pain, the beast hunched over for a moment as Alice frowned.

She made a few light hops in the same spot while maintaining a neutral stance.

The moment the attack flies her way, she'll be able to instantly dive towards any direction she wants.

***RUMBLE!!!**

A giant bundle of vines burst forth from the beast's stomach, seeking to swallow Alice whole.

Diving to the right, Alice adjusted her grip and ran towards the beast. A rapid upwards slash into two stabs then a downwards slash against the eyes.

And to finish things off, one final stab against the centre of the flower, causing the beast to crumble and wither before turning to ash.

Wiping the sweat from her brow, Alice calmed her heart rate and picked up the Embryo.

The fights were short but dangerous.

She had to prepare herself properly or else a single hit may become fatal.

To always keep herself ready for an attack while also being wary of her surroundings.

During that fight, Alice kept her Zone deployed, no matter how unstable the barrier was.

She couldn't risk the lurker taking her by surprise again like her accidental arrival at the boss.

From the ashes of the plant beast, Alice picked up another tier 1 Embryo.

But this time, there was something else mixed into the ash.

A small bundle of leaves tied together with a golden thread. Bringing it up to her nose, Alice was careful in case it was poison.

The leaves gave off a rather aromatic scent that calmed the nerves. Gentle, soothing and cool like the midnight breeze.

She could feel her fatigue being elevated to some degree. Barely noticeable but she could definitely feel the effects.

Storing it away in her pocket for now, she ventured deeper into the city. But with the fog covering her view from all directions, the only thing she can rely on was the butterflies that traverse this realm.

How many camps must she find before her view was cleared?

###

Suyin watched as her machines hummed to life.

The dials and hands spinning rapidly as ambient energy and information was being recorded down with each second.

Her eyes shimmered with excitement.

Sure she heard of the phenomenon from Alice but seeing it... it was a different kind of feeling.

To watch as both Alice and Elias suddenly collapse on the bed as though their soul had just been whisked away.

She poked, she prodded but they would not wake up no matter what.

Then there was the changes in their soul.

The countless information being updated in real time.

Movements, actions, emotional condition. Every fluctuation monitored and noted down in raw unfiltered data.

This much change shouldn't even be possible considering the fact that they were simply 'sleeping'.

But the notes don't lie.

This nightmare of theirs was very, VERY real.

"Iya~ What an eerie night." Suyin climbed onto the window ledge and glanced up at the night sky.

Rather than a calming midnight blue that most were familiar with, the sky was dyed in an ominous shade of crimson and purple.

It's clear that the thing hanging in the sky was dying the realm in its own colour. That pervasive red which obscures the calming blue.

The fractured crimson moon hung ominously, visible from all directions.

Turning her gaze away from the sky, she glanced down at the streets.

No one was walking around.

Not one civilian, not one guard.

Everyone had already gone inside.

Those who remained on the streets slept standing up while facing the moon.

Their eyes were closed but if it was open, Suyin theorised they might even stare at the moon without blinking.

A creepy sight no doubt.

And then...

But this unnerving feeling...

Something was in this city.

Crawling around, slowly...

Something was here, she just can't see it.

Was it because she's viewing things from a lens rather than her own eyes?

Had she been there in person, she wouldn't be spared from this phenomenon after all.

Or perhaps whatever was crawling around shouldn't be seen by human eyes.

A forbidden entity.

In that moment, Suyin felt the moonlight flicker momentarily and glanced up.

A wave of dread struck her body from behind the screen.

Her blood ran cold, sweat dripped down her back and she slammed her hand down to cut the connection.

All the camera showed was the night sky and the crimson moon...

But that flicker...

Suyin glanced down at her hand.

She could see her fingers trembling as that fear she felt was real.

She felt death stare at her for a moment.

Even from behind the safety of her screens, the reaper was calling her name had she not cut the connection off early.

Did they sense her? Sense the moment someone observed the strange country without being dragged into the dream?

Taking several shaky breaths in a futile attempt to calm herself, Suyin tried to walk over to the desk only to realise her legs wouldn't budge.

Her fear prevented her from moving them properly.

"Jeez... What the hell is even happening?" Suyin forced a brave smile and pulled herself towards the desk with difficulty.

She glanced at the data being sent over in real time and sighed in relief.

Whatever she saw wasn't harming Alice or Elias.

At least... for the moment.