

Abyssal A 921

Chapter 921: Aldric's Kindness

"Good job. For hanging on till now."

That was all he said. He sat next to me in silence, ensuring that I could rest comfortably.

But how could I?

This was someone who knew what I had done. The whispers I told the mothers who carved pieces of themselves over and over.

Why?

That was the only thing on my mind as I slumbered that night.

Why would someone like him act like this?

The next morning, we continued through the snow.

He didn't ask anything else, he simply stood at the front to protect everyone who was still alive.

What little signs of life they could find, he would chase.

If it's a beast, it was food for them to have. If it were other people, he would try to save them.

We had 3 more additions to our group since he joined.

More mouths to feed yet strangely... everyone was surviving.

There's no need to sacrifice for meat.

He simply hunted what he could, rationed carefully and distributed the food.

If this famine was darkness, he was the ray of light for others to cling on.

They soared towards that light like moths to a flame.

But I stood still.

Everything I learned, everything I sacrificed. Everything I've had to do...

They were imprinted onto my mind.

The longer I spent looking at this man, the more I felt blinded by his radiance.

And I...

Couldn't accept it.

I could tell the others were giving up on me. There was only so much my father's good will could do. And it was reaching its limit.

To them, the young me who couldn't accept Aldric's kindness was a parasite.

Someone who clearly couldn't fit into the new system.

And...

As someone who couldn't fit in, I didn't belong.

When they ate food, I sat away. When they slept, I made sure I wasn't a bother.

But Aldric kept sitting next to me. He kept bringing the conversation over, disturbing my peace.

They were beginning to warn him. Even when I was in earshot of the conversation.

In fact, they made sure I could hear, just like the whispers I gave to the mothers.

"It's clear she doesn't want your help Sir Aldric."

"She's not helping at all."

"There are others who need your kindness right now. We're in a famine, there's only so much we can do by hoping we find prey."

"She's dragging everyone down."

I turned away, tuning out the conversation to the best of my ability.

Of course I knew they hated me.

The roles simply reversed.

Before Aldric came along, I was the 'light' of the group.

A twisted one for sure, but one that allowed them to walk another day.

One that took on the sins for the decisions.

Any of them could've chosen to make the call.

But they didn't. They hesitated.

I made the call.

I made the choice to begin filtering out the weak.

I was the devil they pushed to the front.

And now that Aldric has come along, I wasn't needed anymore.

I wasn't needed...

They wanted to discard me.

. . .

I felt his hand brush my hair.

"Don't listen to them. This famine brings out the worst in people." He comforted.

I couldn't hold my silence anymore.

"You only say that because you are strong." I rebutted.

If my father had his powers, if the hunters had his powers, we wouldn't be in this state.

If someone like him appeared sooner, maybe I wouldn't have had to do what I did.

Maybe I wouldn't feel like I'm sleeping on a bed of needles.

Maybe I wouldn't be scared of being discarded like the ones I chose as my victims.

"That I can't deny. But I wasn't always like that. Even with this power, I was scared." I didn't turn around.

But I could feel a sadness from his voice, his slightly forced chuckle.

"Either way make sure you get plenty of rest okay? Tomorrow might be a little tough. We'll have to cover more ground if we want to find something to hunt."

I could feel his hand patting my back.

Even in this coldness... I felt warm.

But did I deserve this treatment? After everything I did.

I didn't know.

So many thoughts flying through my head. In that moment, I just wanted to close my eyes forever and stop thinking.

The morning came as usual. The same cold, the same hunger.

I heard someone muttering under their breath not far from me and glanced over.

Aldric kneeled in front of his sword.

He stabbed it into the ground as though it was a gravestone and seemed to be praying.

Was he hoping for a good hunt?

Whatever it was, he stopped after noticing me staring at him.

"Sorry, did I wake you up?"

I shook my head.

Standing up, he removed his sword from the ground and brought over some rations that he heated up by the fire.

I noticed the rations becoming smaller.

It's been a few days without a hunt and they're beginning to ration things even more carefully. To make sure that everyone still has energy despite the hunger.

And soon, they'll have to consider the solutions I had to.

Surely they had to... right?

I paused. I realised I was trying to use this chance to justify my choices. To prove that I was right after all, that the guilt I felt was fake.

All so that I could feel better about myself, that I could laugh in the faces of those that tried to abandon me.

Ah... How twisted I've become.

Would my mother and father still recognise me? What has become of the little girl they gave everything for.

With the decrease in hunts and the increase of careful rationing, the vibe of the camp began to change. They were beginning to whisper doubts whenever Aldric wasn't around.

The way their eyes scanned the camp to see who's weakest.

Wondering if it's possible to 'deal' with them out of sight to gain more rations.

I didn't say anything, I pretended not to notice.

When he returned, the camp fell silent once more.

With the decrease in rations, we fell back to our old ways.

Wood was now also being used as food in order to push away the hunger for as long as possible.

The rations we have are absolute last resorts.

Children are usually perceptive about the atmosphere around them.

And for me, I could see the shadows of death drifting closer.

If nothing is to be done-

"People will die right?" Aldric sat down next to me.

Was I speaking out loud? Did I leak my thoughts into my words?

But he shook his head.

"I'm familiar with those eyes of yours. In troubled times, you begin to see similarities between people. Eyes of those that are giving up, those that have given up. And those trying to find an answer even in moments like this." He explained, patting her head.

"Even though the road you paved towards hope is one covered with blood, I do not blame you. For that is the only road they could've walked for another day of survival.

"You did the best you could. Now don't worry, this burden is not one for kids to handle. Let the adult, me, take burden from now. Believe in me and I will push you to tomorrow." Aldric grinned.

That night I couldn't muster a single word.

My throat tightened. The words inside my head were stuck.

I simply clung onto him as he wrapped me under his cape to keep me warm.

I wish I could be like him.

The only thoughts in my head are ones where I need to sacrifice someone. But he was different. He was still trying to find hope.

I chose to believe in him. To trust that he'll carry us to tomorrow.

I understood why I felt sickened at first.

Because I didn't want to put my survival in the hands of another. I didn't want to rely on other people...

I was scared that I'll be abandoned like those who heard my whispers.

But with him... I felt like I could trust him.

Every time he spoke, I could feel my doubts floating away. Even in this famine, this endless snow, I felt myself believing that I'll reach tomorrow so long as he was around.

I felt that I could maybe go back to how I used to be next to him.

That night was one of the best nights I slept. No doubts, no worries.

Just blissful silence next to someone I knew would protect me.

After that day, I stayed close to Aldric.

I wanted to learn from him, learn how to become a better person. Even in this time of need, I wanted to be like him.

Where he walked, I would follow.

Where he rested, I would sit next to him.

When he gathered firewood with everyone else, I stood near him and helped.

It didn't matter how exhausting it got, I made sure I was near Aldric so that I could learn.

I felt that if I were next to him, this twisted side of me would disappear.

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Alice took a deep breath. Having made several laps around the zone to get as many Embryos as possible, she had finally reached the max capacity of stats in the second zone.

Speed, Endurance and Spiritual were all maxed out as expected. The rest of her points were split evenly between Physicality and Power.

Like before, she avoided putting points into Faith.

Standing in front of the arena, Alice could feel her heart beating against her chest.

She was slightly nervous.

Even with these stats, she felt dwarfed by the aura of the man kneeling in the middle.

The red haired knight who felt like an unsheathed blade.

Calming her mind, she stepped into the arena.

Chapter 922: Fighting Aldric

The instant Alice stepped into the arena, the boundary of this place was sealed. A fog wall appeared much like her fight in the first zone.

Aldric, noticing Alice's arrival, slowly stood up and placed his helmet over his head.

The golden helmet covered his entire face. Within the shadow that veiled the eyes, a pair of crimson orbs lit up.

*RUMBLE!!!

The instant his fingers wrapped around the handle of his blade, the world trembled from his presence.

Despite having her body frozen, Alice could feel her fight or flight instincts being triggered.

"What a freak." Alice mumbled with a forced smile.

This wasn't a fight or flight that came from the difference of power.

It didn't matter if she was in her strongest state.

This wasn't power...

This was technique, experience and his talent.

If they were equal, hell, even if she was stronger, she could tell that he'll be able to bridge that gap using technique alone.

That's the feeling she got from this man.

Zone!!!

The instant Alice regained her movement, she activated her Zone as her senses were instantly kicked into high gear.

Her blade unsheathed in one shift motion and she raised it to her left.

"Ha! What a freak." Alice couldn't help but laugh.

Had she not reacted, a blade would've definitely appeared next to her in an attempt to remove her head.

But because she was able to react in time and even prepare a parry, he conserved his energy and didn't attack at all.

His intent was enough for her to react.

And despite establishing her Zone, there was no clash. She couldn't feel the edge of his attack range.

Which could only mean one thing.

'This entire place is within his grasp. I need to treat him like I'm fighting another version of myself. Hell, since it's swordsmanship, it might be better to imagine him as Alyss.' Alice narrowed her eyes.

On her shoulder, a butterfly landed while Alice and Aldric were sizing each other up.

She was being careful about what he could do while he was surprised by this opponent.

"Sir Aldric, Knight of the North. A hero during the times of famine. Within this landscape of white, a streak of red represented the hopes of those who still breathed.

"To him, you are simply another beast that must be slain so that the people he protects can live another day.

"But for you, he's an obstacle that you must remove." Monika's voice echoed out.

Alice furrowed her brows. She wasn't saying it right now. This was prerecorded. This jovial tone was a mismatch with how they were speaking earlier.

So the likelihood of her still being occupied by the anomalies are high.

'But that's something I should worry about later.'

Positioning her blade in front of her, Alice covered as much of her defence as possible while priming herself to activate Pale Lance at a moment's notice.

Right now, Aldric had the advantage and she had to respect that fact. She had to allow him to expose his cards before she makes her moves.

But Aldric was disciplined, patient.

He took a step forward, just barely out of range from her Zone.

Light on his toes, ready to step back if needed so she couldn't surprise him by a lunge either.

His stance was stable, perfect. No gaps that she could exploit.

His focus, deadly.

A stalemate.

Each shift would be met with a response.

Each factor would be followed by several simulations on what could potentially happen.

Right now, this arena was a pot of boiling hot oil. One spark was all it'll take for everything to ignite.

Whoever loses their focus first will lose this battle of patience.

Should she make the first move? Should she wait?

Alice shifted her hand slightly to the right. Aldric adjusted his stance.

Aldric tilted forward slightly, adjusting his centre of gravity. Alice lowered her stance ready to counter or attack if needed.

The two circled each other.

Sweat rolled down Alice's face.

Her concentration was being tested. Her Zone held stable for now but for how long?

When this entire area is within his reach, how long must she maintain this level of concentration?

A noose slowly tightened around Alice's neck.

Their blades haven't touched, yet countless clashes have already happened.

Alice's back was drenched with sweat.

Her time was ticking. If she kept waiting, this Zone would collapse.

He was controlling the pace.

Therefore, the only choice for her right now was to disrupt this flow!

She held her breath. A lunge.

Sharp, precise, deadly. An arrow being let loose.

She dove down, kept her centre of gravity low and closed the gap in an instant.

Her blade was maintained in front of her, in line with her shoulder.

A thrust to test reaction, not to break his guard.

Yet.

*CLANG!!!

Her blade was parried. Not a single wasted movement from Aldric.

No panic in his eyes, just calculation of her trajectory and ideal blade path.

He stepped forward, following the motion of his parry into an upwards swing towards her face.

Alice leaned back and flicked her wrist, a strike to allow her thin blade to bend and slash against his face.

But Aldric didn't stop his attack.

Alice could feel the cold wing biting at her skin from the force of his strike. A shallow cut from the pressure ripped her chin despite the blade missing.

Aldric tilted his head to prevent Alice's blade tip from piercing his eye.

An exchange that Alice lost.

Putting strength into her legs, Alice flipped back and released a pulse of energy.

Pale Lance!

A strike forced from the snow that was kicked up, hidden and perfect for a sudden attack.

*CRACK!!!

'F*ck.' Alice cursed inwardly as she landed her jump and created some distance between them.

In front of her, Aldric had caught her spell mid flight and crushed it with his hands.

He stabbed his sword into the ground and rested his palms against the pommel.

Alice's smile twitched.

He wasn't impressed with what she had just tried to pull.

A provocation?

Narrowing her eyes, Alice started to take notes of his reaction speed.

Based on how long it took for her cast to reach him, trying to attack him that way wasn't realistic.

It'll just result in her wasting energy.

So unless she could set a trap using her spell similar to the casting method she uses outside of the Nightmare, this'll be a battle of swordsmanship rather than tricks.

Adjusting her stance, Alice took a deep breath and blinked.

"!!!"

Aldric disappeared from view and Alice immediately lowered her centre of gravity before supporting the face of her blade using her palm.

*CLANG!!!

From behind, Aldric's sword slammed into her rapier.

But because Alice had supported her blade and slanted it to the side, his blade slid off and she managed to avoid having her weapon broken in half.

Gritting her teeth, Alice twisted her body in order to follow up with a downwards slash but Aldric had already recovered from his strike!

Using his sword as a shield, he spun himself around and slammed his foot into Alice's stomach, sending her flying backwards.

Even with that giant sword, Aldric was fast!

Using it as a vault, he lunged into the air and dropped towards where Alice would stop.

Pale Lance!!!

Throwing her own flight off course, Alice managed to avoid the plunge from above but his string of attacks was far from over.

From the snow, his blade tore through with a wide arc that Alice ducked under.

Anchoring his sword into the ground to use as a pivot, Aldric threw his body towards Alice who countered with a Pale Lance!

*CRACK!!!

The lance was shattered in half as he landed an uppercut at the perfect moment to destroy the spell.

But during this gap where both his hands were occupied, Alice lunged!

Three rapid thrusts!

In order to win, she had to use every advantage she had.

And as someone who's using a rapier right now, speed and precision was key!

Stab towards the gaps of his helmet, the bundle of nerves running from his neck, through the armpit and into the arm.

Then lastly, a cut towards the inner thigh in order to induce as much bleeding as possible!

But...

The first thrust was dodged.

The second, he abandoned his blade and flicked the tip of Alice's rapier away.

The last thrust he trapped between the elbow and his knee.

With her blade trapped, Alice didn't hesitate to do the same.

Abandoning her weapon, she kicked upwards, aiming her heel at his neck.

Widening her eyes, she watched as Aldric caught the attack between his teeth.

Unable to pull her foot back in time, Alice was left open!

With a light lick to the back of her knee, Aldric was able to break her stance immediately as her defences crumbled.

Grabbing her ankle, he swung her over his head and slammed her into the ground!

*CRACK!!!

Feeling her bones giving up under the pressure, Alice held back a cry as she quickly stuffed some healing grass into her mouth.

Pale Lance!

A spell aimed precisely at his arm in order to force him to let go!

As Aldric leaned to the side to avoid the spell, Alice managed to break free and grabbed her rapier.

Sliding back to create some distance, she winced from the pain she was feeling.

She had lost that series of exchanges. If this continues...

Her death was unavoidable!

Dusting the snow off his armour, Aldric reached out with his hand and his great sword was recalled.

*BANG!!!

Catching his blade, the snow around him was pushed away as Aldric took an offensive stance.

Alice's smile twitched.

That entire exchange... He was simply gauging how strong she was. But now, he was going to take the initiative to kill!

'Freakish b*stard.'

Clearing her mind, Alice lost her smile and took an offensive stance as well.

After a moment of silence, both fighters lunged towards one another.

Chapter 923: Finding Food

During the time of famine, I kept watching the man in front of me. The red haired knight that lowered himself to do chores despite the power he wielded.

The kindness that he shows to everyone in this time of need.

Even if that person is me.

He didn't blame me, he didn't berate me.

He... Accepted everything I did and forgave me.

It doesn't bring back the victims, but people survived because of my actions.

Or at least that's what he keeps telling me.

Sometimes I have nights where the guilt comes back.

When I feel a chill because of my actions. When I feel them haunting me during the night.

But he would allow me to sleep peacefully.

I found myself reverting back to who I was before. At least partially.

I sat on the logs and watched him work.

Despite having a sword, he used an axe like everyone else. Cutting down trees and preparing them for firewood.

I wanted to help but he denied it.

Saying that it's better for me to conserve energy and hunger.

I recalled what he told me the other night.

That even with this power at his disposal, he was scared.

I couldn't imagine it. Not him.

Not Aldric who led this many people with a smile on his face.

Then, he threw the log down. The smile on his face faded and he recalled his blade.

"Stay behind me. Something is coming." He whispered, gesturing for me to take cover behind the logs.

I didn't want to be a burden and did what he said. I hid behind the logs and watched.

The snow began to fall.

What began as a small vibration started to grow in intensity.

The entire world felt like it was shaking and in front of us, a fissure began to crack open.

A gateway to the Abyss. Unstable, small but beasts began to pour out.

The other villagers won't be able to handle this. We struggle with just one never mind multiple!

Aldric made the first move.

I couldn't even see his movements as blood splattered against the snow.

The fluttering of his cape, the swing of his greatsword.

A dance of death, a blender of destruction.

I couldn't take my eyes off him.

With him making the first move, he immediately became the target for the beasts.

Tendrils of bone and flesh crashed down from above.

*CLANG!!! KRK!!!

An overhead parry into an instant counter that crushed the beast's skull.

But despite fighting a large group, he kept scanning his eyes towards me, making sure I was safe.

I found myself mesmerised by that power.

The way he handled the beasts, how he was using one as a shield from another. The way he pushed them back despite being one man...

I saw human tenacity in his shadow.

The will to not surrender. To fight to the bitter end.

Even though he didn't take any damage, he was being exhausted by the waves of beasts.

Yet he stood firm. A wall that the beast could not bypass.

I stopped thinking about food after a certain point.

This many beasts fleeing the Abyss wasn't normal. Food is only good for the living, what use if you are dead?

Panting heavily, Aldric stepped onto a beast and placed his foot on one of the corpses.

Using his greatsword as a crutch, he glared at the monsters through the gate.

"You're running from something. Step aside." His voice was different from the one I'm used to hearing.

There was anger, rage and malice in his tone.

Not directed at me, but at the monsters pouring out of the gate.

I should've been scared of that tone...

But I wasn't.

In fact, I found myself liking him more. He wasn't just all smiles. He was just like everyone else. Someone stuck in the times of famine.

Someone who had anger against the world for what it's done to the north.

He was human like the rest of us.

The beasts took a step back in fear.

Those with intelligence.

Beasts without intelligence lunged at him or tried to flee.

But he didn't let them leave.

Grabbing the handle of his sword with both hands, he tore his blade apart and transformed it into two longswords.

A crimson aura exploded from his back as red cracks spread across his body.

Above us, a spectral figure manifested. A demon of destruction. Its form veiled by the energy that erupted from its body. All I could see was a pair of crimson eyes that stared at the fleeing beasts.

With a swing swipe of the blade, a cavity was carved through the land while Aldric dealt with the beasts lunging at him.

The instant the job was done, he transformed his swords back to normal and the ghost disappeared.

Seeing this power, the beasts began to cower.

I felt like I saw something in the fissure.

A silhouette with a smile.

Without letting more beasts through, the silhouette flicked their hand and the fissure was sealed.

Leaving behind the remains of a battle.

Corpses strewn across the ground and a handful of beasts cowering in Aldric's presence.

He gasped for air.

Falling backwards, he slammed into the snow.

I wanted to run over but Aldric sat up and warned me not to appear just yet.

The crimson cracks have yet to disappear.

They continued to burn against his skin while the sword next to him pulsed with veins appearing within the metal.

A pulse to the rhythm of a heartbeat.

It was only after a while did he finally calm down and smiled like before.

"Alright, it's safe now." He gestured over to me and I finally crawled out of my hiding spot.

"Are... you okay?"

"I could certainly be better. But we don't have to worry about food for a while. As for these guys... I suppose we can put them to work. Can't have everyone else carry the food right? We should build some carriages and have these beasts haul them." Aldric suggested.

Since the other beasts have submitted to him, it's better to make use of them than to kill them for food. Sure, the amount of food they need will increase. But it'll also allow them to make large amounts of progress hiking through the country.

"This much food... won't some of it go to waste?" I asked.

With how many beasts he killed, even the ones that tried to flee, this was more rations than what we could carry.

One option could be for us to camp here but... this area was too empty and not suitable for camping.

It's better for us to find somewhere better.

"Don't worry, we'll take what we can and ration things out. We need to set aside a few portions for the beasts anyways." He shook his head.

I decided to put my trust in him.

After letting Aldric rest, we told the rest of the camp. Had people create bigger carriages so that we can carry the carcasses back after a bit of cleaning.

Aside from the food, we also got a lot of hide that we turned into warm clothing and blankets.

The overall mood of the camp improved, they stopped whispering things near Aldric and were all smiles when talking to him.

I felt my stomach churn. Just the other day they were clearly annoyed but now, they acted as though that never happened.

I couldn't stand it.

But before I could say anything, Aldric patted my head.

"Don't blame them. Famine brings out the worst in people, isn't that right? Just be happy that things didn't have to reach that stage and we managed to find food earlier." He smiled, handing me a large bowl of soup with several large chunks of meat.

I hesitated for a bit before nodding my head.

If he said so, then it must be right.

Regardless, we have food, we have transport and we even have warm clothing. The group was getting bigger but we can handle things for now.

###

Alice couldn't understand Aldric's goal.

There's been a few moments where she could've easily died to his attacks.

And yet, he held himself back.

They simply continued to exchange attacks even though she knew she couldn't breach his defence.

Not only was his technique on par and even superior at times, with the gap in their stats, it was hard for her to surprise him.

Through all of these exchanges, she was the only one losing hp.

An impossible fight.

If she wanted to beat him, she must have at least equal speed so her attacks can surpass his defences through trickery.

Meaning, zone two Embryos weren't enough. She'll have to backtrack and hope she gets higher tier Embryos in the other zones before fighting Aldric again.

But that doesn't explain why he wasn't killing her.

If anything, it felt as though he was buying time, waiting for something.

At this point, if she didn't do anything, he won't attack.

The two of them simply spent this time staring at one another and Alice was beginning to find things annoying.

"Warrior." He spoke, surprising Alice.

"What is your name?"

"Alice. Alice Agnelia." Alice replied simply.

She couldn't relax fully yet. Even though he hasn't made a move, she could feel her defences being probed right now.

"Has the great famine ended?" He asked as he lunged forward.

Quickly parrying his strike to the side, Alice twisted her body and kicked the guard, forcing the blade deeper into the ground before trying to strike his helmet.

Dodging the strike, Aldric grabbed Alice's hand, preventing her from using her rapier.

"Great famine?"

"So you're not one from the North... Or... You're from the past. Tell me, Alice. Where am I?"

Alice froze.

The boss in front of her...

Was trying to get information?

Chapter 924: Memory Into Reality

Alice found herself stunned by Aldric's question.

Why did the boss of a zone want to know where he is?

Why was he trying to get information?

For what reason?

Was it simply part of the fight? Or are they more than just spectres of the past?

In her moment of confusion, a gap opened up in her defences as Aldric slashed towards her stomach.

Widening her eyes, Alice quickly jumped back to dodge. She was a step too late as the blade tore into her flesh, causing her to wince in pain.

Thankfully, because she tried to dodge, she wasn't split in half.

"Don't you think that's a little unfair? Throwing out a question like that, then sneaking in a hit." Alice forced a smile as she tried to eat some healing grass but Aldric was keeping up the pressure.

A beast that tasted blood.

However, Aldric didn't respond. Even though there seemed to be a short moment of clarity in his eyes, that clarity had disappeared.

He transformed back into the same boss she was fighting earlier. One that wasn't holding back as much.

With her now wounded, he attacked with more ferocity than before!

Gritting her teeth, Alice kicked the face of his blade away and took the time to heal.

Slamming her hand down, two Pale Lances shot out as he crushed them with his hand.

Alice narrowed her eyes.

She could feel the necklace around her neck shimmering with energy.

It's passive had been activated!

[Adela's Necklace of Worship]

+20% cast speed, duration and potency when mana is below 30%.

Decrease maximum mana by 20%.

Increases the potency of blood magic by an extra 20% when mana is below 30%.

Now that the necklace had been activated, it was the perfect time to use the reward she gained from killing Adela.

Sure, it lacked damage due to it being faith scaling and her having low faith.

But the percentage boost was far better than trying to hit Aldric with nothing.

Sliding back, Alice activated the skill as an unfamiliar prayer escaped her lips.

Around her, a crimson ritual circle manifested and blood burst out from the ground, coating her blade with a thick sheen of crimson.

Her weapon now counted as blood magic and received the boost from her necklace!

While the enhancements felt weaker than Pale Lance, this was based on duration rather than an attack.

So if she could land her hits, the overall effectiveness will be far higher than Pale Lance!

Taking a deep breath, Alice lunged forward.

She still lacked the speed but every swing of her rapier was now enhanced by mana!

*CLANG!!!

Aldric was taken aback by the sudden boost in power from Alice's swings.

Having misjudged Alice's output, he was forced to stumble back as she took this change to follow up with several swipes of her blade.

Thin cuts appeared across his armour but all of them were shallow!

Even with her enhancements, she couldn't land a meaningful attack at all.

"Tch, is this what people feel when they fight me?" Alice couldn't help but complain.

With her regeneration, reaction speed and ability stealing, killing her was one of the hardest things in this world.

The wounds that she sustains will disappear after a few moments so long as her head is intact.

Granted, she wasn't sure about the limits of her regeneration but she for sure doesn't want to test it out.

If she was just a head, how would she regenerate?

Either way, unless someone could wipe out her entire body in one go or destroy her head before she can react, killing her was impossible.

Abilities that hinder one's regeneration would be burned away by her flames. Any gaps in physical power can be crossed through the use of her fifth Sigil.

If that gap can't be crossed, she has physical resonance to change the composition of her body.

Take for example the resonance that allowed her to transform her limbs into blood.

As long as she can sense the danger, she can transform her body in time.

A difficult defence to breach.

And right now, Aldric was equivalent to the wall that many have to face if they wished to fight her in reality.

Her attacks aren't enough to breach his defence in one go.

He wasn't tiring out nor was he slowing down. No gaps that she could exploit properly.

An impossible fight and a guaranteed death.

"Tch." Clicking her tongue in annoyance, Alice could feel herself losing patience.

She hated this gap.

This impossibility.

Even with all of the techniques at her disposal, the best she could do is maintain the stalemate for now.

If she had slightly better stats, just a bit more speed, maybe she'll be able to do something with close this fight.

But right now, Aldric wasn't struggling at all.

She was like a child trying to harm an adult.

However...

'If what I have right now isn't sufficient... I need to 'gain' something in this fight.' Alice furrowed her brows.

She needed to study, analyse and replicate. And once she's replicated his style, she needed to break it down into why it's good, why it's bad.

Find the weakness, exploit it.

Then, when she understands everything there is to understand about the foe in front of her, she'll craft the blade to end this fight.

And despite knowing the answer, it was easier said than done.

She was already pushing her Zone to the max and without her skills, she wasn't able to use Vision right now.

Had she mastered the use of Vision, it might've been possible.

But she was definitely pushing things if she wanted to achieve the same using Zone.

Regardless, she must grasp Aldric's 'Logic'.

Why he moves in this manner, the thought process behind his techniques.

*CLANG!!!

Parrying the strike, Alice focused entirely on the defensive, seeking to study and understand rather than kill.

Her primary focus was to survive as long as possible and gather as much data as possible!

Naturally, this shift was noticed by Aldric as he slammed his blade down and grabbed it with both hands.

Red cracks appeared across his body as he transformed it into a shield and spear.

Alice furrowed her brows.

Like her Void Fang, it seems like his weapon was one that could transform into different states.

With his weapon now transformed, a surge of energy erupted behind Aldric as he immediately dashed forward with the intent to kill.

A red shadow appeared overhead, mimicking his movements along with the weapon.

The shield came down from above.

Dodging backwards would cause her death thus Alice matched Aldric and lunged forward.

Face to face with the boss, she braced herself and rolled over his shield slam, preventing herself from getting thrown backwards.

Tossing her rapier up, Alice grabbed the spear and swung herself to the side, avoiding the follow up stab.

Before she could land, her view was blocked by the shield as Aldric tried to catch her during her dodge.

Timing her movements, Alice vaulted over the shield and grabbed her Rapier.

As long as she kept herself close to him, the red shadow overhead won't be able to move properly.

"Dodge." Aldric suddenly warned.

"!!!" Alice's pupils constricted as alarm bells rang through her mind.

She jumped back a step too late.

A slash faster than what her body could react to at the moment.

Aldric transformed his weapons into a set of dual blades and slashed the zone around him while the shadow above did the same.

Too far and the shadow will cut her. Too little...

Alice tumbled across the ground and tried to grab her healing grass but Aldric was on the offensive!

That slash left a ghastly wound across Alice's chest as she was forced to sacrifice her left arm to dodge the next strike.

"Just you f*cking wait. I'll be back soon." Alice forced a smile despite the pain.

With the cut across the chest and the severance of her arm, Alice knew that this fight was over.

Thus approached her next death.

Nodding his head, Aldric combined his blades and unleashed a net of slashes.

She died.

###

Sitting by the camp, Alice massaged her eyebrows and let out a sigh.

Now that she was out of danger, she quickly evaluated her first attempt at the fight and what she learned from it.

"I leave for a little while and you've racked up another death."

"As if I wasn't having a headache already. How was the anomaly?" Alice sighed, glancing up at Monika to sat opposite her.

"Nothing else can be done. It's not like I govern this realm after all, I'm just a guide." She stuck out her tongue in amusement.

"Then as a guide, I'm sure there's a few questions you can answer for me without any strings attached right?"

"Depends on the question. If it's a serious one, we can always play a game~" Monika chuckled.

"I'll pass. But answer me this, if we are in a memory... why did Aldric ask where he is?"

Monika rested her chin on her palm. There was a knowing smile on her face.

She knew the answer, she was simply thinking about what to say.

Alice stared at the witch, hoping to glean any clues from her expression but it proved to be rather difficult.

After a long extended pause, Monika finally opened her mouth.

"This may have originated from a memory. But... This realm is far from a simple recollection of thoughts from the past. It uses the Inverted World as a framework and inspiration."

Alice creased her brows.

If that was the case...

She recalled her experiences with Nyer in the past. The ideas that he had and a theory appeared in her mind.

There was an instant when the Inverted World was connected to reality for a moment.

The instant where the 'real' Abyss Heart was erased and fake turned real.

Alice held her hand over her own chest.

The beating of her own heart, the new Abyss Heart.

There was a chance... That this 'memory' might slowly be manifesting as reality.

To turn fake into real.

Chapter 925: Everywhere Yet Nowhere

Alice leaned forward slightly and folded her arms. Thoughts flying through her head as theories were being pieced together.

Hints and clues from her interactions in the past.

Her understanding of Nyer's attempts at resurrecting Velouria.

The connections he's formed and possibly why he needed this realm.

The guesses were all done with limited information but it served as a framework for her theories.

Naturally, she could only take these theories with a grain of salt since some of them were based on assumptions.

But it was still better than working with zero information.

Monika smiled, in her eyes, she could see a few cogs beings set into place.

Alice was... to put simply, someone- no, something strange.

Her entire figure was veiled in fog.

Despite letting her drink the tea, that fog did not diminish in the slightest.

However, what was revealed to her was the cogs connected to Alice.

The events that she can affect the outcomes of.

There are certain triggers that only react when enough of the unique cogs are in place.

In other words.

She is the key. The trigger to events that would drive the fate of this world forward.

Her actions in the past have acted as the trigger that allowed this realm to manifest.

The results that Nyer gained from his observations are what pushed the plans to the next stage.

She is the guinea pig and this was simply one of many testing grounds.

"Just because I like you so much, I'll do you a little favour. When you enter the nightmare again after a while, aim for the other zones. This one is constructed partially with divinity and was merged with memory. A zone that's a result of two people rather than one." Monika spoke up as Alice glanced up in confusion.

Before she could even hear Monika's explanation, the witch leaned forward and tapped Alice on the forehead.

Her entire body relaxed, strength leaving her limbs and her eyelids grew heavy.

Unable to say anything, Alice collapsed on the ground and scattered into rolling fog.

"Aren't I just the nicest witch around." Monika sat back down and crossed her legs.

With a flick of her hat, she momentarily obscured her own vision to allow a certain man to appear opposite her, sitting where Alice was sitting a moment ago.

"Hi~ Did you need something from me boss?" Monika asked with a smug grin.

Nyer simply sat with his legs crossed and in a relaxed posture.

He didn't say anything, he merely observed the woman in front of him.

When Caelan asked if his mother was dead and he answered yes, it wasn't a lie.

But it also wasn't the full truth either.

Yrael is dead, that was the guarantee.

No reincarnation, no incarnation and certainly no possession. She is and forever will be gone.

Confined to the consequences of her own actions.

The fragmented? The fractured.

A woman broken apart in such a manner that cannot be put back together ever again.

So when he told Caelan that the agreement was fulfilled, he was telling the truth.

But the current state of Yrael was one that cannot be defined by a simple truth.

She is dead. Yes.

But in another sense, she is also alive.

Forever trapped between perpetuity and nihilism.

Unable to return, unable to end.

Stuck at the start, yet her path has already been walked.

She who obeys time yet flows outside of it.

A woman who watches despite already 'knowing'.

Even to him, Yrael was a witch who met a pitiful end.

But it's clear that she didn't think so.

Yrael was fragmented. Not into pieces, but into outcomes, concepts, phenomena.

A state that flickers across the stream of time. Sometimes as a beast, sometimes as a calamity, sometimes as a human. And sometimes as a nightmare.

She is everywhere, yet nowhere.

She is not an entity. But the idea of 'Yrael' still exists.

Monika is simply one of those manifestations. One that he had only discovered once the nightmare took form.

How strange it is to see and discover a fragment.

Despite this realm having zero connection to Yvael, a trace of her still appeared.

And...

Even managed to let cogs infect this empty canvas.

Though when considering the ideal endpoint for this realm, escaping the cogs was never possible.

Letting out a sigh, Nyer opened his mouth.

"There was no need for you to send her away. She'll have to meet me eventually. Perhaps there was a question she wanted to ask. Either way, I don't plan on killing her. Not now, not this early." He shook his head while Monika rolled her eyes with a smile.

"Are you saying that because you want to start the conversation boss? Or do you really mean it?" Monika asked.

"Because if it's the latter, I'll need to start questioning what goes on in that brain of yours. Is it there for decoration?" She mocked him while Nyer showed no reaction on his face.

"Oh but let me guess what you're thinking. Blah blah bleh, this girl is just a product of the nightmare, I can deal with her whenever I want. Why does she think this tone is acceptable?" Monika mimicked his tone.

"I think you have severely misjudged my personality if you think that thought crossed my mind." Nyer answered calmly.

"Maybe. But the idea is there now. Either way, I can't have you meeting with her. The trigger is a little premature for the event that would occur. The variables aren't even in place yet." Monika shrugged, creating a file and began tending to her nail, making sure it was smooth.

"And~ You're far more satisfied having me in your sight than out of it right? Wouldn't want someone to tamper with the cogs too much and ruin your plans." She blew gently on her nails while glancing at Nyer who nodded.

However, he was also aware that there are probably more fragments of Yvael somewhere else in the world.

While not all of them display such a... striking similarity to Yvael in terms of behaviour, they all walk with purpose. Even if they don't know it.

Monika was simply a coincidence that had occurred within his experiment.

A fragment that merged with memory along with the traces that Yvael left behind. The foundation of casting and so on.

All of it merged to form the personality of Monika.

Therefore, it wouldn't be inaccurate to call a part of Monika the 'idea' of Yvael.

And once he considers her the idea of Yvael, that's when a volatile variable like this is better left in his sight than out of it.

"I had always taken you for someone who enjoyed watching and not interfering. Very rare to see the one conducting the experiment change the environment halfway through the test.

"Don't you think the extra interference will cause a fluctuation in results? Such experiments are a waste of time, effort and resources."

"Yes but that's only WHEN the experiment starts. Why wouldn't I tinker with the environment before the beginning? Have to make sure all of the parameters are in place don't I?" Monika chuckled before her smile faded away.

"And speaking of parameters, what's all this? I don't believe the nightmare is supposed to evolve in such a manner. I purged little flame out earlier than usual since we have to deal with his here and now."

Grabbing the air next to her, Monika ripped it apart as though she was tearing through wrapping paper, exposing the chaotic mess of energy hidden under the veil of nightmare.

The barely noticeable hint of divinity.

Nyer creased his brow ever so slightly.

This wasn't the same as the false ascension he tampered with.

No, this divinity is 'pure'. More refined, one with a purpose.

He hadn't expected it, thinking this Nightmare would've gone on longer without anyone noticing.

Solaris was too busy dealing with the growing popularity of Guinevere amongst the populace.

Lumiria was trying to win over Tristan's heart to no avail, despite everything she was trying to do.

Leaving just one.

Enris.

Kazira is dead. A new Apostle of War hasn't appeared yet.

Deva...

Well.

Deva has agreements with him and Enris hasn't mentioned anything about it.

Last he heard of her, she was still minding her own business, looking for a proper entertaining way to die.

But now? Why was she in the Nightmare?

And more importantly, where was she?

Enris's divinity and 'history' when combined with Queen Verona's past has spawned in this nightmare of the greatest Famine the north has ever endured.

Not only that, but this specific area was 'maturing' at a rate faster than the other zones as a direct result.

Resetting it may be the right call but...

Nyer had to admit.

He wanted to see what'll happen if he allowed this situation to progress outside of his control.

It can also serve as a blueprint on how he should carry out the other parts of his experiment.

"Leave it be. This mutation will bring new cogs right? I'm sure you'll enjoy the situation." Nyer shook his head with a smile.

"And here I thought you would've wanted a stable experiment." Monika raised an eyebrow. "But you're the boss. So if you say so, who am I to disagree? I'll just enjoy myself like always."

Nyer stood up and adjusted his suit.

"Stability isn't always a good thing. Letting things mutate, change, and morph beyond expectations is the path to move forward. It's what allowed Alice to exist after all."

In all of his experiments, they have always gone bad because he was too focused on control.

Yet the moment he gave that up, even if it was by accident, Alice was created.

The most successful specimen to date.

So once again, he was giving up control of this zone. To let it develop however it wants and simply observe the results.

Monika tapped her finger while watching Nyer leave.

There was a smile on her face but she didn't vocalise her thoughts.

Chapter 926: Strange Route Through The Nightmare

With Monika rejecting her from the Nightmare, Alice felt as though she was plunged into the deep sea.

The coldness invaded her body, seizing her limbs. Invisible pressure crushing her from all sides.

Gritting her teeth, Alice wanted to break out but found herself helpless against the currents.

One moment she was drowning, the next she was standing in a maze of stairs.

Up was down, down was up.

She glanced back and saw a giant figure of herself looking back into a recurring infinity. Subsequent versions of her getting bigger with each variation.

Looking down, she saw herself from above. The countless versions of her following through with the same motion.

She blinked.

She was in a standoff.

Strapped to her waist was a gun and opposite her, an inverted mirror of herself was stood in the same posture.

Only difference was that 'she' was ready to fire.

*CLICK!

She drew her weapon in a flash and the bullet tore through Alice's forehead.

She fell backwards and the ground collapsed like a blanket, wrapping her in darkness.

Alice pushed her arms out, trying to break free.

'Huh?' A frown appeared on her face.

The blanket was wet? Warm...

Skin.

Her pupils constricted as her fingers poked and prodded against the skin of a human.

She wanted to break free but a groan echoed out from all sides.

A deafening cry of pain.

Before Alice could do anything else, she was pushed forward with an unholy amount of force. Water crashing against her back and forcing her out.

Shielding her head, Alice was pushed out of the darkness as wind howled in her ears.

She felt her hair being pulled upwards and quickly opened her eyes.

"WHAT THE HELL IS GOING ON!?!?" She cried out in disbelief.

Falling from the sky, Alice tried to orient herself but the wind was too strong. No matter how she tried to position herself, a freak gust would always make sure she was falling in the most chaotic way possible.

Turning her head to the side, she could see the ground rapidly approaching but she couldn't do anything to protect herself.

With no other choice, she forced her eyes shut and braced for the pain that was about to hit.

"!!!"

Her entire body jolted but the pain never arrived.

She simply thought she crashed into the ground but that had never occurred.

Clutching her head, Alice let out a slight groan.

"Did she eject me out of the Nightmare or send me deeper? What the f*ck is happening." She complained, looking around her in confusion.

She wanted to make heads or tails of where she was but...

". . ."

". . ."

". . ."

". . ."

There were several figures staring at her in confusion.

Some with horns, some with fox tails. Others have mechanical parts sticking out of their bodies.

*CRACK

All of them snapped their heads 90 degrees as their eyes were completely focused on Alice.

"I also like to crack my neck but I think you overdid it a little..." Alice joked but sweat dripped from her back.

She wasn't out of the Nightmare yet.

She couldn't quite feel the flow of Abyssal energy.

Without hesitation, Alice slammed her hand down.

Pale Lance!

...

*Tss....

Her lance fizzled before it could even manifest in its entirety.

"F*ck."

The floor beneath her gave out just as the figures lunged towards her.

Their bodies cracking open to reveal myriad layers of teeth with long whip like tongues trying to split her in half.

Crossing her arms and legs, Alice fell through the air in deep contemplation.

If it wasn't for her hair, she wouldn't even know which direction she was facing.

It was a strange sensation. Seeing the world fly by her but not feeling any of the wind.

Her hair and clothes were being affected.

But... she was numb to that sensation.

She was beginning to feel a disconnect between her and the Nightmare.

This 'body' that the Nightmare provided was struggling to synch up properly.

"Hm?" Alice felt a tingle in her fingertips.

A sudden jolt so fast she almost thought it was her hallucination at first.

*Pomf...

Her world shifted once more.

She landed on... a pillow?

A strange but large room.

It was surrounded on all sides by walls that seemed to stretch on infinitely with no roof. A checkered pattern illuminated by the flickering lights of countless screens lay haphazardly across the walls.

Some of the screens showed viewpoints from butterflies that watched Hunters walk through the Nightmare.

Some showed first person perspectives of them desperately running away.

Others even showed Hunters abusing the system and gathering lots of beasts at once in order to kill them.

'Surveillance?' Alice furrowed her brows.

If Monika wanted her to leave the Nightmare, why send her here?

"Hng..."

Alice's gaze snapped over.

A voice from under the covers. A lump hidden under a blanket that started to wriggle.

"Monikaaa... I told you already... Stop using this route *yawn*." The lump muttered, clearly tired.

"I know this counts as a backdoor but if you randomly send stuff here I have to deal with them. Urg... I dun wanna... If the boss comes again... *shiver*."

Alice watched as a hand veiled in shadow reached out from the blanket and started to rub the eyes.

"He's scary... I don't know how to deal with him. Plus, aren't I supposed to make sure things are running fine in this zone? Why am I responsible for the guide's job too? Ah~ I wanna sleepppppp.

"I don't want to workkk~ Can't we make a clone of me? Ah I guess it won't work. My clone will also be lazy."

The lump started to toss and turn, rolling in a circular motion around the room.

"Actually... If I play dead do you think the boss will throw me out? Hehe~ I get to rest then. Ah wait... if he discards me, I'll be erased rather than thrown out. Urg... I guess death does mean I don't have to work...

"But it also defeats the purpose. I don't want to work because I want to be lazy. But if I'm dead I can't be lazy! I wanna be lazy of my own choice! Say, Monika, you're being understanding today. Shall I share my super secret, super duper warm super fluffy blanket with you?

"It's a one time limited offer since you're not scolding me today hehe~"

Finally, the figure sat up and opened her blanket.

She stared at Alice.

Alice started at her.

Alice didn't have a chance to speak considering how much she was talking.

The figure turned pale, not expecting another person to be in her private space. A hunter at that.

And Alice... Didn't expect to see a woman like her in a place like this.

The girl was barely taller than Alice and had light blue hair. A pair of elongated elf ears that pointed downwards and shining emerald eyes in the darkness.

Under the blanket, she only wore two pieces of clothing.

A thin strap loose tank top with one strap hanging off her shoulder while the other strap was barely hanging on.

And lastly...

Male underwear.

Clearly a size too large but at the same time, did look rather comfy to wear.

The girl's face turned red, her ears slowly pointed up as she slowly covered herself with her blanket once more, making sure not to alert Alice with fast movements.

As for Alice... She wanted to speak but that earlier performance...

She found it hard to make the first move.

"A-A-H-B-U-B-H-A-" The girl started to stutter, struggling to get a single word out as she became a trembling mess. Tears began to form in the corner of her eyes as Alice began to feel slightly guilty.

Even though she did nothing, it almost felt like she had just bullied this poor girl.

"Erm... Can you show me to the exit? Monika told me to leave the Nightmare." Alice massaged her eyes.

With Alice making the first move, the girl's ears shot up as she was visibly happy at the mention of a familiar name.

"A-ah, Monika t-told you to exit? Erm- I-I can make you a d-door! She must've... Been in a hurry since you s-shouldn't have appeared here." The girl replied while shuffling under her sheets.

Even without looking, Alice could tell she was getting dressed.

"Yes please. And... can I ask about these screens? Or is that not allowed?" Alice pointed at the displays around the room.

Depending on how this girl is, there was a chance that she could find out where Elias, Alyss and Cayla are located in the Nightmare.

The girl's eyes darted back and forth between Alice and the displays.

On one hand, a Hunter shouldn't know. But on the other... She must be close with Monika.

After all, Monika was using this route in order to send the girl out of the Nightmare.

So if that was the case, it shouldn't be bad right?

"T-these are the different dreams h-Hunters are having. W-we don't monitor things closely. Just making sure no rules are b-broken. The guides like Monika are erm... responsible for the detailed stuff." She pulled her best smile but it could only be described as wonky at best.

"I see... Are the dreams connected like the layers I jumped through to get there, or are they attached via one large collection of zones?"

"Ah erm... It depends on the zone. S-some are close. But others m-might be impossible for you to access since some dreams aren't connected." She explained.

Hearing this, Alice furrowed her brows.

She swept her eyes across the countless screens and began to note down the information.

Meanwhile, the girl opposite Alice found herself unable to sit still.

After all...

'I'm having a conversation with someone other than Monika!'

Her mind was cheering at her groundbreaking achievement today.

Chapter 927: Plume

Alice stared at the screens. Her eyes darting through the Hunter's perspective.

They were struggling as expected. Their reactions, even with the boost in strength, was slow. They made mistakes and died for it.

None of them cared and they continued to repeat the same mistakes over and over.

They were civilians to begin with. Sure they may get some power, but that was a trap.

As they return to reality with this knowledge, they begin thirsting for more.

The greed that invades their mind as they dive back into the nightmare with reckless abandonment.

They'll continue to fight knowing that death was not the end in pursuit of power. Then, without knowing, their consciousness is slowly stripped from them.

Their touch on reality wanes and they become the lurkers that are eventually replaced by nightmare drones. Their flesh made puppet.

"Based on what you said, some of the dreams can't be accessed. Monika said that these dreams each occupy a great deal of land and that I can't run into them. But it opens the possibility so long as I can cross this distance.

"Yet you're telling me that some are impossible?" Alice asked curiously.

Unlike Monika, the girl here seemed... Well, not to be rude but gullible would be one of the words in Alice's mind.

But that could be a disguise so she had to take the information with a bit of salt.

"Ah erm... S-she's not wrong. B-but it depends on the type of dream. The route you came f-from should've been weird right? A b-bunch of things happening all at once." The girl tried her best to hold back her stutter.

But even with her best efforts, her eyes wandered from side to side, unable to maintain eye contact for long periods of time.

“M-most hunters are in the second layer. They’re d-dreaming but have control and the environment is stable. What you fell through is t-the first layer. It’s a erm... chaotic mess of dreams all woven together. S-some flashes are yours, some belong to others.”

“So... the impossible ones are those that are in a deeper dream? I’m guessing belonging to those that reject the dream, where reality and fiction blur together. At that point, they don’t know whether they’re in the dream or reality.” Alice mumbled as girl wiggled her ears.

“Then if we follow this pattern...” Alice narrowed her eyes.

“There is probably a subconscious layer where it filters through everything. Their worst fears and even their greatest happiness. Death is the key to how deep one can go I assume... So if I want to find Alyss... It’ll be difficult since my level of dream is different to her.”

With so many theories flowing through her mind, it was better to vocalise them out so she could hear how they sound. Otherwise, if they’re bottled up in her mind, the theory might actually be insane and make zero sense when spoken.

“Death... Death? Hmm... What if each death doesn’t reset- no. With that kind of primal fear being shoved in their faces, people should naturally wake up in a panic since it’s not being diminished at all. I can still feel the aftereffects of... death...” Alice paused.

Her eyes began to widen.

“Is there another mechanism in place that instantly sends them back into the dream? Is that why the main nightmare is constructed at layer two instead of being deeper so it’s harder to wake up?” Alice frowned, walking through the room and scanning the other screens.

If her thoughts are right...

Then the people were being exposed to death on purpose and in its most raw form.

To inject that fear directly into their mind, to turn it into a chaotic storm of thoughts.

Then, when they see that death isn't killing them but simply giving them another chance, a sense of numbness is applied and attached to the concept of death.

They become fearless.

Only frustration remains at the fact that they died rather than fearing their safety.

And once that happens...

"Once they no longer fear death. They'll sink further and further into the nightmare until not even death can trigger their senses of panic and wake them up. They'll forever sleep. They're not dead physically but they might as well be dead." Alice concluded.

If that was the case, even if they accept the rules and progress, all of it leads to the same outcome! A blurring of the boundaries between reality and dream!

Reject the world and the nightmare tries to trick you.

Accept the world and the nightmare will try to keep you in the dream.

"A-are you sure you're just a Hunter?" The girl wiggled her ears in surprise.

She didn't think Alice would be able to figure out the structure of the dream so easily.

"Why wouldn't I be a hunter?" Alice blinked her eyes curiously.

"Ah! S-Sorry!" The girl waved her hand in a panic, worried that she offended Alice by that question.

". . ." Seeing the girl tremble in front of her, Alice truly felt like she was bullying the lass.

*Sigh

"I'm not that scary now am I?" Alice kneeled down as she lifted her own bangs and showed off her face to the girl.

Her split hair, the mismatched eyes.

But overall, not to be TOO proud of her own looks, Alice had to admit that she was a cutie pie.

The most adorable there is.

"Since you know Monika, you know how she treats names right? So why don't we introduce ourselves. I'm Alice, Alice Agnelia. Your name is?" Alice smiled, trying her best to be friendly.

The girl in front of her was nervous but the information she's given thus far has been very helpful.

"Ah! R-right. Names! Names... Erm... Your na- No! I mean my name is..." She took a deep breath. "Plumeaelivressandoria Sorynthel-Nessaevor."

"The f*ck?" Alice cursed out of instinct hearing a string of unfamiliar pronunciation, tones and simply the size of this name.

"Hiii!!! I'm sorry!"

"Ah no- I wasn't cursing at you." Alice massaged her eyes.

The girl in front of her was an easily startled rabbit. If she spoke too loud, the rabbit will get startled and scurry off.

"I-If it's too long... You can call me Plume. That's what Monika calls me even though she likes names a lot..." Plume peeked

"Okay Plume. I won't hurt you okay? I don't know why Monika sent me through this path but I don't plan on leaving behind a trail of destruction. I promise. I'm not going to scold you either, why would I? We've just met." Alice comforted as Plume peaked her head out from under her blanket.

Starting at Alice for a moment before averting her eyes, Plume had a downcast expression.

"R-really? B-but... People start hating me a-after a while. Aren't you going to be the same?"

"I won't. I just want to talk okay? Can you tell me a little bit about your boss, this Nightmare and why he's keeping you here?" Alice shook her head.

Hearing this, Plume's eyes began to sparkle as she hobbled over to a corner of her room, still covering herself with her blanket.

*Pita pata pita pata

Her footsteps echoed out in this silent room. After a moment, she came back dragged a bag of snacks.

"Monika always gave tea and snacks to her guests. I-I don't know if you'll like these." She offered her food to Alice.

"Since Monika sent me out this way, I'm not sure how much time I have." Alice smiled apologetically as Plume seemed disappointed.

'F*ck, my heart.' Alice winced upon seeing Plume glance down with tears in her eyes.

But Alice didn't really want to accept free food in the Nightmare, not after Monika and her tea.

“Instead, I can treat you to some food in reality, how’s that? It’s real food after all. Things like mead, spicy skewers, soup and so on.” Alice offered.

“R-right! You must be short on time. Erm...” Plume spun her body and tossed her food back where she got them in one fluid motion.

Ignoring the crashing noise in the distance, she sat down and thought deeply.

“The boss is scary. I dunno what goes on in his mind b-but when he does his thing. The thing where he sits down and crosses h-his legs and smiles. *shiver* That thing creeps me out. He j-just tells me to make sure people aren’t breaking rules too much.” Plume explained.

Alice wasn’t too surprised by the fact that Nyer was being secretive.

“And erm... You kind of figured out the Nightmare thing yourself.” She scratched her cheek.

It could’ve been the perfect moment for her to practice speaking more but Alice figured out the things herself, leaving her with nothing to say.

“Is there a way for me to find you even without Monika? I don’t think she’ll keep sending me through this path and I’ll be honest I don’t really want to travel through the weird layers again.” Alice asked.

Just thinking about what she had to go through to reach this place... Alice shivered.

“Erm... I sense that you h-have the guide’s privilege. S-since that’s the case...” Plume shuffled over to the side for a bit and placed her palm against the ground.

The creaking of wood sounded out and a branch slowly appeared. There were no butterflies on it but Alice could tell it worked similar to the other checkpoints.

“You should be able to come here now with your power.” She smiled happily as Alice resonated with the branch.

Closing her eyes, she could sense that, if she wanted to, she could travel back to the second zone if she wanted to and vice versa.

“Thank you.”

Hearing Alice’s thanks, Plume smiled happily and nodded her head.

Just as she was about to say something, Plume’s ear wiggled and she looked around for a moment.

“Ah! Erm someone’s coming. I don’t know if it’s the boss or someone else. Monika wanted you to run right?” Plume started to panic.

“I’m not sure what she wanted but I assume she wanted me out of the Nightmare.” Alice shrugged.

“H-here. T-this door will wake you up. You’ll visit again won’t you?” Plume showed a nervous smile as Alice nodded.

“I will, promise.”

Pushing against the door that Plume summoned, Alice found herself disappearing in a veil of darkness.

###

“Plume~ I’m back~”

“Ah welcome back.” Plume sighed in relief. She had dressed herself up and pretended to work in case it was the boss.

“I should’ve sent little flame-” Monika paused.

She stared at the branch on the floor.

Her smile twitched.

“Plumeaelivressandoria Sorynthel-Nessaevor. Why is there a branch on the floor?”

Plume paled.

Chapter 928: Suyin Mk3 Combat Form

Alice blinked her eyes.

Having stepped through the door, she wasn't jolted awake from the Nightmare. Instead, it was more of a natural awakening without any headaches.

Looking around her, Alice could see that Elias was still sleeping while the machine was hooked onto his body.

There was no reaction from Alyss or Cayla either.

'Seems like I exited earlier than when the Nightmare will end.'

Glancing up at the sky, she paused upon seeing the ominous crimson moon hanging above.

That moon wasn't the only thing that was strange, though.

Mixed in with the strands of energy that Alice usually sees within their realm, there was something else.

Strange strands that seemed to fade in and out of existence, all flowing towards the moon.

'Is that the energy from the Nightmare Realm?'

Alice reached out but found herself unable to interact with that energy.

As for the source...

There were small amounts flowing from her own body along with Elias' body. Therefore, it was a safe assumption to believe that this energy was a result of deaths or their connection to the nightmare.

Getting up, Alice gave her body a stretch and looked for Suyin.

*RUMBLE!!!

Feeling the ground tremble, Alice was immediately jolted to attention as Abyssal energy coursed through her body.

"There's that sense of power." Alice grinned.

The power that she was severely lacking in the Nightmare realm.

After experiencing the limitations placed by the Nightmare Realm, she wanted to cut loose right now!

###

Earlier...

"F*cking sh*t!" Suyin cursed as her puppet body was thrown back by the sudden explosion.

After the first night, she wanted to make sure that everyone was safe so she created a device to sense the Sentinels whenever night falls. By using the properties of Eldritch energy, she could send small

pulses of energy outwards and have it bounce back to the receiver. Whatever it hits, an outline would be formed.

It wasn't a clear view but roughly a sense of where they were, their size and movements.

The puppet's pupils shifted, the lenses focused on the blurry silhouette.

She hadn't expected for so many of them to appear when night arrived.

While the sense of dread was less than what she felt in the city, it still wasn't great by any means.

But that didn't mean she couldn't fight!

In the airspace above them, vault doors began to appear.

Deploying Attachment #5.

Deploying Attachment #6.

Since she couldn't be there in person, she designed weapons that could be used with her puppet! Weapons designed with Eldritch energy in mind. Since they were hard to get rid of, might as well use them then have Alice purify them later!

Her puppet's back opened up, revealing a set of thrusters as she launched herself into the air.

Meeting the attachments midway, countless mechanical parts began to combine as they interlocked with one another.

Suyin's body began to unravel.

Pannels came loose as tubes and machine muscle wrapped around her skeletal frame.

From what was a small puppet, it grew to the size of a grown adult.

A set of mechanical draconic wings appeared behind her with three strands of chain blades attached to act as defence.

Above her head, an eldritch crown manifested, the hybrid between machine and flesh.

"Suyin Mk 2 – Combat state deployed!" Suyin grinned, throwing a lollipop into her mouth.

This was the first test in a combat scenario. Based on the earlier experiments, it should be stronger than the babies she created and piloted herself.

Not only that, but it had full compatibility with all of the equipment she had created back in the stronghold!

Below, the silhouettes of the Sentinels lunged forward and Mk2 burst into action!

*BANG!!!

The air collapsed around her as she appeared in front of the Sentinel in an instant!

Suyin furrowed her brows.

'Performance increased by roughly 30% since the tests. What changed? Environment? Red Moon?'

Right now her eyes were connected to the puppet's eyes. What it sees is what she sees.

Flicking her finger, an inventory of contraptions lined up and Suyin immediately activated number 290 Kaleidoscope.

A device that injected information into her mind, allowing her to filter what's needed and what's not needed.

In this fight, the only variables she needed to observe were these strange creatures and the objects around them!

No colour was needed.

Twisting her body, Mk2 slammed her fist into the Sentinel while Chain blades shot forth!

The arm compartments hummed as machinery slammed into one another, amplifying the shock being sent to the Sentinel.

*CRASH!!!

Pushing the Sentinel back, Suyin frowned at the lack of damage and immediately, with her left hand, injected the information to the panel.

'Defences higher than expected. Will require attacks that destroy the insides perhaps. But if these are chimera like creatures, more piercing power is needed.'

Another Sentinel lunged from behind but a vault door opened behind her.

Number 25 deployed! Big f*cking sword!

A giant blade burst out of the vault, stabbing against the Sentinel but failing to pierce the skin.

"Tch!" Clicking her tongue, Suyin grabbed the handle of the blade.

Number 25 modification! Corruption injection!

Black veins appeared across the blade as Eldritch energy surged towards the Sentinel.

If things had gone to plan, it should've mutated the beast, thus converting it into a different kind of creature. Once that was done, she would be able to purge the Eldritch energy and thus kill her target.

At least if things had gone to plan.

*CRACK!!!

The Sentinel grabbed her blade as its fingers dug deep into the metal, crushing it!

The injection had no effect.

"Already Eldritch in nature huh? Or at least partially."

Twisting her body, she kicked the pommel of the BFS and created some distance between her and the Sentinels.

"Let's try this then."

Jumping up, tens of vaults opened as Suyin's eyes locked onto the many silhouettes she could see.

Number 100 Kinetic Bombardment!

As the vaults opened, several barrels loaded with metal rods aimed down and locked onto the Sentinels.

"FIRE!!!"

*BOOM!!!

Each of the cannons began to fire one after the other as a barrage of metal rods prevented the Sentinels from reaching her.

Yet despite that, despite the punching power of these rods, no harm was done.

She could set the number 100's to self destruct, but that'll do more damage to the land than the monsters.

As for some of the more powerful weapons that she created in the past... Well, they required more set up to activate which wasn't entirely realistic for this situation.

Scratching her hair, Suyin let out a slight sigh.

"Seems like I'll have to make some new weapons. Do I even have enough budget? No the better question is whether or not I can buy that much metal to begin with. Urg... the sects will definitely push back against such a large order of metals." Suyin groaned, imagining the headache she'll have.

In the past, when she created the weapons, she recalled going into quite a few arguments with the sects. Only after creating small prototypes and proving how effective they were, was she finally allowed to buy enough metals for her work.

Hell, even then, some of them still had a stick up their butt and refused to accept it.

Only after threatening to sanction them and refusing to sell to them was she able to do what she wanted.

A bunch of old men who can't adapt to the changing times.

Of course, there was also the option of scrapping some of her old weapons for spare parts.

"I guess the play is to keep delaying these guys for now. I can't kill them but they can't stop me either. Better focused on me than getting everyone else." Suyin folded her arms.

The reason she started this fight in the first place was because the Sentinels seemed to be getting overly curious. The moment she turned on her new lens, she saw them preparing to poke and prod at the others.

Thus the fight began.

Just as she was about to send in the next wave of bombardments, she blinked her eyes in surprise.

"Isn't it a bit late into the night for you to be awake?" Suyin chuckled as Alice stepped through the portal and hovered next to her.

"A few things happened and now I'm awake. Seems like these things are the source of the weird feelings you got earlier." Alice narrowed her eyes.

She could see bundles of this strange red energy being pinned under Suyin's bombardment.

"They are indeed. So you want a pat on the head, a glass of milk and go back to sleep?"

"Ha ha, very funny. I've been itching to let loose a bit. The nightmare holds me back after all." Alice gave her body a solid stretch as she stared at the closest Sentinel pinned under Suyin's bombardment.

Taking a deep breath, an uncontrollable grin appeared on her face as Sigils lit up across her body.

***BANG!!!**

In the blink of an eye, Alice had already crossed the gap with her fist shoulder deep into their stomach.

"Oh hou~ Sturdy one aren't you? How about this!" Twisting her wrist, a singularity spun to life within the body of the Sentinel and its flesh began to twist.

Its fingers clawed at Alice in an attempt to push her away but Void portals opened exactly where it aimed, preventing it from touching her.

Narrowing her eyes, Alice laughed as violet flames crackled across her body.

Sparks appeared around her arm as she took hold of the Sentinel's flesh.

'Concentrate the targeted area. Cut the flesh apart.' Alice reminded herself as she pulled her arm back.

Void Flux Cleave!

*KRK!!!!

The sickening sound of flesh ripping echoed out as the Sentinel was torn apart, leaving Suyin hovering in the air.

"I guess nothing beats good old power." She smiled helplessly.

Chapter 929: Faith And Myths

*THUD...

*THUD...

*THUD...

Alice continued to punch as the Sentinel beneath her finally stopped moving.

There were several corpses around them, invisible to the naked eye but their durability was far greater than what she had expected.

Without major shifts to the landscape, she wouldn't be able to kill them quickly.

Of course, there was the option of using attacks like the Void Axis but as mentioned earlier, that attack would change the entire landscape, causing damages later down the line.

One must be responsible for their power unless they have a way to fix things.

Wiping away the blood on her face, Alice saw the other Sentinels slowly fading away.

As the sun rose, the crimson moon overhead faded out of existence as though it never existed.

Alice could see the strands of Nightmare energy faded away with the moon.

"Welp that's the end of that I guess. Tsk, no corpse left to experiment with." Alice stood up while Suyin landed next to her.

On her puppet's wrist, numbers and notes could be seen flashing across a screen.

"We don't need corpses when I've collected a bunch of data. I think I'll be able to make some weapons that'll let me take care of these guys alone when you're away." Suyin smiled.

"You were recording all of that?" Alice blinked her eyes.

"Of course I did. I even got a point of view. Here, take a look."

Showing Alice the screen, Suyin revealed that she was actually recording via small drones that sent out when Alice was fighting.

Since she had the battle under control, there was nothing else that Suyin had to do.

"If I get enough data, I should be able to make a machine that replicates it to some degree. Of course the energy source is a slight issue but I'll be honest, I'm kinda hooked on using Eldritch energy. I mean it's WAY too adaptive, I can use it with anything." Suyin started to get excited while Alice quickly made a time out hand sign.

"Don't get lost in 'if you could' and think about 'if you should'. If you only think about whether or not it's achievable, you might make something you come to regret, ya know? Especially with Eldritch energy." Alice warned.

Just like the Zenia family.

They were too focused on whether or not they could and not if they should.

In their pursuit of greatness, they've created the monster that'll end them.

The hybrids, the blood vials.

Everything they chased after.

All of it should've been tightly sealed in a box and never opened.

And yet they did.

Suyin paused. She stared at the panel in front of her and shrugged.

"Fair point. What a shame. Because if you weren't around, Eldritch energy wouldn't be safe at all."

"If you want a weapon, there are other methods of getting one. And since I can still sense the contract between me and him, he should be alive and well." Alice smiled.

"Oh? You know someone who can make a weapon that matches my desire?"

"I mean... If he can't forge it then I don't know who can. Sigurd, Abyss Lord of the Forge. We have a slight agreement between us. I can offer him a bit of money and he'll craft me some of the best weapons using the rare materials he has on hand." Alice winked.

It's a shame with what happened in the north, otherwise she would've requested a full set of gear for Ria and the others.

But since Gwen was on the cast, the issue should be resolved sooner rather than later. Not to mention the others also being there.

"Heh~ Guess I'll have something to look forward to. Either way, this is going to be good data for my next weapons. I lack that last bit of piercing power after all." Suyin chuckled.

Deactivating her combat form, she returned back to her doll state and hopped onto Alice's shoulder.

Making their way back to the carriage, Elias could be seen slowly waking up.

The same went with Alyss and Cayla.

As for their progression, Alyss was the fastest, reaching the end of the third zone. She was about to challenge the boss when the Nightmare ended.

As for deaths...

She only had one more and that was due to the camp turning into a mimic.

A death that wasn't unique between them.

Alice suffered it, Alyss suffered it.

And so did Cayla and Elias.

As for Cayla, her zones had a strange change. The dangers they posed decreased significantly after Nyer's last visit. In fact, it'll be more surprising if she died at all.

Elias was still stuck in his poison swamp.

After the first zone, the second zone was an underground poison swamp.

Thankfully, with him being cautious and understanding how the swamp worked to some degree, he was able to reduce his number of deaths.

But even with that caution, he died twice. Once to the mimic, once to the swamp.

Once their reports were done, it was Alice's turn.

She talked about everything she learned about the nightmare, the structure and so on. Her meeting with Plume and the room she was in.

The group was silent during the entire thing.

Cayla noted everything down and... Considering Nyer's insanity for reviving Velouria, there's no doubt he plans on creating a vessel using the Nightmare.

To turn fake into real just like what he tried to do in the Inverted World.

Only this time...

"Do you think he's setting the foundations for an ascension?" Cayla suggested out of the blue.

Right now, she is sitting next to Alice as it was better for the others to hear her thought process.

"Ascension?" Suyin raised an eyebrow.

"Based on previous records and a few estimations on my end, there's a high chance that Nyer might be setting up for an ascension. As you know, faith and myths are core aspects to a God.

"It dictates their power and the level of influence they hold. Even if they're strong by birth. By using the properties of the nightmare and taking advantage of those that sink further into the dream, he could be trying to gather faith or create fake myths.

"Through this, if he were to turn the fake into real, wouldn't a God be born? Born of the Hunter's faith, of those stuck in the Nightmare." Cayla explained.

Alice folded her arms.

It made sense. With how the Nightmare is set up, it would explain why reality and dream becomes indistinguishable the deeper you fall.

To the point that death wouldn't even wake you up.

"So what's the play then? Shatter the nightmare and wake people up? But those who felt the power they could wield would never agree to it." Elias asked.

Civilians who were never able to cross the threshold of mentality, the Abyss that doesn't grant the next Sigil, they have suffered enough already. They would refuse the thought of putting their lives in the control of others ever again.

Thus, the nightmare solidifies its grasp on them.

Suyin glanced down.

If it wasn't for the fact that her contraptions have allowed her to stay relatively safe thus far, she would be no different.

Her fingers coiled against her arm.

She recalled the fights she had in the past, the bullying she felt from the sects when they realised she could not get even a single Sigil.

The girl abandoned by power.

Even when she created weapons to fight back, she had to prove herself over and over again.

The only thing she heard during that period was:

"You might be fine now but you'll never be able to beat-"

Every time she surpassed a wall, they would make more excuses to push her down.

Closing her eyes, Suyin took a deep breath.

"If you can't stop them from clinging onto the nightmare, maybe you should try rerouting the power to yourself. Steal the faith and create the myths with your own hands. Then the Nightmare can benefit you and not them." Suyin suggested.

Trying to fight the populace would never end well.

Alice nodded.

"I think I'll talk to Plume some more next time. Her info is limited but we can make certain guesses with the room that she's in. Not to mention the fact that she can tell me a bit about the structure of the Nightmare.

"If things go well, we might even be able to find one another." Alice recalled the strange layers that she had to pass through. The labyrinth of dreams that disoriented her completely.

If she could figure out a path through that like what Monika did, they'll be able to navigate the Nightmare with greater efficiency.

With their goals set out, they continued towards the next city for now.

After all, the Nightmare will be on cooldown for a few nights and it's their chance to make some preparations in reality.

###

"Tsk... Nightmare is finally over." A woman groaned as she sat up on her bed.

Around her, several people were in the same situation as each of them flexed their arm momentarily to feel the growth in power.

"Death count, report." She ordered.

One by one, each of them reported how many deaths they suffered and a tally was made on the board.

"You three, sit still during the next nightmare. No more deaths allowed. You two, explore, you have 3 deaths to spare. Map out the routes so that we're on the same layer.

"Kali, come with me. We're going to focus on the defences of the city." She stood up and threw a jacket over her shoulders.

Tying up her pink hair into a pony tail, she pushed the door open with a fierce look in her eyes.

Chapter 930: A Life Lesson

Travelling across Extalia, the group came across a few travelling caravans but they didn't seem to be the talkative type.

If anything, they were on guard against them.

On guard against a small group of two people and two puppet like figures.

Even with the guards following the caravan, they seemed ready to draw their weapon if Alice or Elias was to do anything suspicious.

"Do you think they were transporting illegal goods or something? They were a bit too tense." Elias wondered curiously.

This kind of cautiousness was rarely seen without good reason.

Either they want to protect something or...

They were afraid.

"They weren't transporting anything dangerous. I scanned it earlier. It was just provisions and standard wares. If anything, they were scared of what we might do to them." Alice shook her head.

She was already beginning to see the effects of the Nightmare realm on the civilians.

She was strong already, so was Elias. The 'rewards' they felt from the realm was limited.

But civilians who were weak before? The power will most likely get to their head and they become dangerous individuals with power.

And such acts would naturally put the others in a state of cautiousness.

"When everyone is scared and cautious, it essentially becomes a pile of gunpowder. One misunderstanding, one wrong move and it'll ignite the whole batch. I don't know if it's their intention but the Nightmare is certainly doing a good job of implanting fear into their hearts." Cayla spoke up.

"And with such fear, if a God like figure was to appear, their faith will also be heightened."

"So it's all foundational work for his goal then." Alice guessed while looking up at where the crimson moon had been earlier.

"Possibly."

Continuing down the path towards Grand Cathia, for the first time...

Alice was being robbed.

". . ."

Even Elias paused from his experiments as this was a new one for him.

He could comprehend the mutation of blood yet this... absurdity was beyond him.

Four men and a woman blocked the road ahead. Mask hiding their appearance under a hood as they glared at the duo with killing intent.

Alice could see the Sigils above their heads. All of them were averaging around one or two Sigils. But if they have the guts to do this... they must've been rather powerful in the Nightmare. Enough where they think this was an acceptable risk.

Immediately projecting the true scale of her Zone, everything within the area was captured by her senses and she noticed one more hiding far away.

'So six in total.'

'Gonna take them out?' Alyss asked curiously.

'Depends on the harm they've done. If they've killed before then the answer is obvious. If you're going to kill, be prepared to be killed. But if they're simply drunk off their power and have yet to cross that line, a harsh lesson wouldn't be bad either.' Alice shrugged.

She was cold and didn't care about killing. But that didn't mean she was a monster that'll kill wantonly.

They have to be either going after her life or have killed others.

Elias was about to speak when Alice leaned against the carriage with a confident smile.

"Are you sure you want to do this, brat? I know you're thinking things are different now thanks to the Nightmare, but doing all of... this? It's a little stupid when you can't gauge the power of your opponents." Alice rested her chin on her palm.

"I'm not playing around with you. Drop your sh*t now!" The leader warned, aiming his spear at Alice's face.

"I wouldn't do that lad. Don't aim a weapon at a woman's face. Especially when the woman is the girl in front of you." Elias spoke nonchalantly while resuming his experiment.

To them, this was simply amusement.

But to the people trying rob Alice and Elias, they were beginning to lose their patience.

"Let me ask you one thing." Alice flicked her finger, knocking the spear away from her face for now.

"Have any of you taken a life before? Killed a person under your mercy. Soak your hands in their blood."

Narrowing her eyes, Alice let a bit of her blood thirst leak out as the leader was clearly shaken.

Seeing this, Alice couldn't help but let out a small chuckle. They were still babies who had their first taste of power. If left alone, they'll either fester into a cancer that cares not for killing or become a victim of their own actions.

Standing up, Alice hopped off the carriage.

"I'll take that silence as a no. Let's see..." Alice mumbled.

Flicking her finger, a portal was opened next to her as she reached in.

"ARGH!!! Let go of me!"

Dragging out the person who was hiding from afar, Alice tossed them towards the group who quickly caught the girl.

"That's all of you. Now come on, do you still want to fight or are you going to behave like good children?" Alice smirked.

She flicked her finger, asking whether or not they wanted to fight.

"Children? I'm pretty sure they're older than you." Suyin spoke up while Alice shrugged.

"They're pretty much children to me, don't you agree? Harmless children that can't hurt me at all." Alice chuckled.

Now that she had gathered them all, it was now time for the 'lesson'. A lesson that'll stop them from repeating this kind of thing.

Taking a step towards the group, blood erupted from Alice's feet as it turned into a cage that prevented them from running.

Allowing her killing intent to seep out, she made sure it wasn't enough to make them pass out.

If they passed out, her lesson would go to waste after all.

The group paled.

This kind of pressure, they recalled their first night in the Nightmare.

When everything seemed impossibly strong.

Cracking her fingers, Alice disappeared from her spot. Reappearing behind the group, she grabbed one of the men from behind and punched him in the gut.

***BANG!!!**

Crashing into the ceiling of the blood cage, his body was suspended by blood chains as his intestines started to hang out.

The group was soaked in his blood and fear invaded their mind.

With bloodshot eyes, the leader lunged at Alice who pinched the spear tip and snapped it in half.

Disappearing from his view, she grabbed two others and slammed their heads together, crushing it into paste before tossing their bodies aside.

With three dead and three left, Alice licked her lips.

The leader should be left last.

As for the girls...

"H-help me!"

"I don't want to die!"

Clapping her hands together, Alice summoned two blood maws that slammed shut around the girls.

One of them reached out towards the leader as her arm was severed.

The limb slapped against the leader's chest as his knees buckled.

In a few short moments, he watched his friends die one after the other.

"And now it's just you." Alice crouched in front of the guy.

Curving her lips into a smile, she placed her hand in front of his head...

And flicked.

*BANG!!!

"ARGH!!!" Crying out in a panic, he touched his head several times as cold sweat covered his back.

For a moment, he could've sworn he felt his head explode from the flick.

Instead, he only felt a little sore on the forehead.

"Huh?" Looking around him, he saw the others clutching their bodies in pain while squirming on the floor.

The guy who had his guts ripped out was fine.

The two that had their heads destroyed? They only had small red marks.

Even the girls who were eaten by the blood maw simply had the air pushed out of their lungs from the impact. None of them died.

"What the..."

"That was a lesson, brat. This is the kind of people you could run into." Alice was still crouching in front of him with her cheeks resting on her palm.

"Lucky for you, I can make you 'feel' like you experienced death and not actually suffer it. Ah but don't let my illusions fool you. If I wanted to, I can make all those images a reality." Alice chuckled, snapping her finger as a surge of energy erupted from her body.

Above them, a singularity spun to life, threatening to consume everything in the area.

Waving her hand, Alice dismissed the singularity.

"So behave yourselves from now on okay? Either don't use that power at all or use it to defend yourself when you're in danger."

Giving his head two light pats, Alice stood up and wandered over back to the carriage.

With her blood mist, Alice made sure they felt the full fear of death, knowing that random people they try to rob could kill them within the blink of an eye.

Sure it may be traumatising but far better than actually dying. At least it'll stop them from making stupid decisions in the future.

But even so...

Scratching her cheek, Alice's smile twitched.

"Do you think I went a bit overboard? Maybe I could've gone with gentler deaths you know?" She glanced back.

Having them experience their guts pouring out might not be the best choice.

"It's all the same to me. They would've felt their fair share of deaths in the Nightmare. The real question is whether or not that numbness to death returned. And considering one of them cried about how they don't want to die, it should be fine." Elias shrugged.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice shrugged.

Regardless, they were beginning to see a slight hint of Grand Cathia in the distance.