

Abyssal A 941

Chapter 941: The City's Hero

When the first Nightmare struck Grand Cathia, no one talked about it. Everyone thought it was just a one off. Unique to them.

A strange dream.

It was normal for the following days after all.

Then the second one appeared.

Then the third.

At that point, people started to talk. They realised this wasn't normal and talked to the people around them, only to find out they too had this dream.

The power from the dreams transitioned to real life, they gained experiences they shouldn't have gained before.

Knowledge on martial arts they never trained it.

Powers comparable to Sigils.

There was trouble at first. Bad actors who took advantage of their new powers and confusion, breaking the law and running away.

Her father dealt with that. He was responsible for the peace of the city.

She only had one task, help research what was happening with this shared dream.

Miki could still remember how her Nightmare began.

Corridors folding into staircases, staircases opening into the sky. Air where land should be, land where air should be. A world turned on its head with the gravity pointing towards the sun.

Bells that tolled, transforming the world around her with each ring.

Perhaps it was a vision, perhaps it was her hope. But she saw a silhouette. A man, shining, confident, cutting down all the beasts around him.

It was a brief view before she got swallowed by the Nightmare.

Surrounded by fog and monsters, seeking to survive at all costs.

She fought, she died, she killed.

She met a guide who didn't give their name.

They simply introduced this game like realm to her, the rules she had to abide by.

Even with the Nightmare looming over their heads, they thought nothing of it.

All it seemed to achieve was to give power to the people.

But there was always this ominous feeling looming in her heart.

The first siege was the worst.

No one expected, no one was prepared.

No one understood why the monsters in their dreams bled into the waking world.

Their walls crumbled. Barricades meant to keep out men and beast did nothing against these monstrosities.

Civilians rooted in fear, doing nothing but watch as a nightmare beast lunged over the wall, crushing the guard's head.

When the first guard died, the city finally screamed.

Panic erupted and people started to run.

Her father led the Hunters to defend the city.

Within the group of Hunters that he led, there was a certain man.

One the city named a hero long before the Nightmares began.

A successor for her father, a man talented in all aspects.

He swung his blade with confidence. Power blinding the people around him. Always standing ahead of the formation, the mark of a hero who puts themselves first.

Every strike he made left streaks of light in the fog. Each attack lethal against the beasts.

Each one carving hopes in the hearts of those that saw him.

There were casualties, there was grief. But people weren't discouraged for within this tragedy rose a hero.

The first siege was averted, the city roared with applause.

Hero, protector, Sword of Grand Cathia.

They gave him all kinds of titles to celebrate his power against the Nightmare.

Miki was one of them. She too saw him as a hero of this city. the disciple that her father treasured, someone whom she watched climb from zero to where he is today.

Her father trained his martial talents, taught him how to survey the battlefield while she made his equipment.

She saw him as part of their family, a cheerful younger brother who wanted to save the world.

He was even invited to the upper layer. The noble men and women praising him for his deeds. Some even seeking to have their daughters married off to him but he rejected.

Some even thought that he might be the key to unifying Grand Cathia.

The second siege arrived. They were more prepared this time. Walls were reinforced, weapons were made. People understood the danger and prepared accordingly.

The hero charged forth to battle and the siege was averted. This time, with no casualties. An improvement from the first.

The upper layer used sky ships to observe the fight, turning this battle into a spectacle.

They clapped when he carved a beast in half, gasp when a claw narrowly missed him.

Cheered when he countered with confidence, knowing that he was stronger.

The city's morale rose to new heights.

And once the battle was over, he stood upon the walls and raised his blade.

The hero smiled and Miki remembered that smile.

Bright, confident, unburdened.

Her father would pat him on the shoulder, reminding him to rest.

The city saw him as a perfect hero.

Miki didn't know it then, but this call for perfection wasn't praise. It was a demand.

Once a hero achieves 'perfection', it must be upheld.

Always.

The third siege arrived on a quiet afternoon. Without warning.

Rifts clawed open just outside of the city and people scrambled to the defend. It wasn't as bad as the first siege but the signs of invasion were missing.

They couldn't predict when the battle would break out thus they were taken by surprise.

The hero was in the upper layer during this time and rushed to the battlefield.

Like always, he was ahead of the formation and cut beasts down without issue.

Then an anomaly appeared. A beast larger than others. It scooped up the creatures around it and with a twist of the body...

It threw the beasts into the city.

With the hero being ahead of the formation, he couldn't fall back in time. The beasts were keeping him occupied while the guards couldn't reach him.

He was separated from the city but thankfully, Miki's father was there.

He diverted the Hunters to take down the monsters in the city while ordering the hero to kill the giant beast.

Miki remembered the shriek of a woman as a Nightmare beast tore its claws through her.

By the end of the siege...

Casualties had appeared once more. A boy lost his mother, a husband lost his wife.

Guards had died, civilians lost.

Perfection shattered.

The city still celebrated the victory but there were whispers beneath the cheers.

"If he hadn't rushed ahead..."

"Had he stuck with the formation, they could've covered him."

"They died because of him."

Her father looked tired.

The hero didn't respond to them.

And for the first time, Miki saw his smile falter briefly.

###

"!!!" Miki jolted awake on her chair.

Sweat covered her back as she glanced around her.

She had closed her eyes for a moment, only to breathe yet didn't expect to fall asleep.

*Rumble...

Watching the glass of water ripple on her table, she let out a sigh and massaged her temple.

She had received a report that these tremors were a result of Alice forging Suyin's weapon.

Miki stood up from her chair and made her way to the window.

The tremors continued, steadily. Almost rhythmic in a sense. She found herself counting the seconds between the tremors.

"Alice sure works fast..." Miki muttered under her breath.

The walls have been reinforced with new parts lining the edges.

New weapons hidden between the folds. Vehicles transporting new barricades and devices to act as nodes around the city.

She seemed to be preparing a new barrier.

There was a knock on her door.

"Report." Miki called out, it was her assistant.

"We have confirmed multiple clusters steadily approaching. At this pace, our repairs and upgrades should be done by the time they arrive. Everything is as predicted through our simulations."

"So the approach is the same... what about density?" She narrowed her eyes.

This was where her assistant hesitated.

"Density is rising faster than last projection. There will be more enemies than our original estimations."

Miki tightened her jaw.

The upper layer had their own methods of evacuation and defence. She didn't need to care about them.

What she needed to care about were the civilians below.

"Raise the danger level. Move the civilians further from danger. Dismissed."

"Yes ma'am." He bowed and left the room.

Miki watched as the barrier hummed to life.

A multi layered defensive wall that'll help keep the threats from the air a minimum. The defences were a little weaker around the main walls but that's only to save power. Their weapons were concentrated around there after all.

Taking a deep breath, Miki calmed her nerves.

It doesn't matter if Alice becomes a hero in their eyes. As long as she is there to keep the city controlled, a repeat of the tragedy shouldn't occur.

Soon, the tremors stopped.

Giant portals started to appear across the city as newly improved cannons were mounted onto the walls, fitted with the latest parts.

The upgrades were finished just in time.

In the distant horizon, the enemies began to emerge.

"Outer watch confirms visual contact." The report echoed out through the radio.

"Cluster density, extreme. Composition, mixed. No titans detected yet."

'Good.' Miki thought to herself. They were just large in numbers, no anomalies so far.

"Activate surface artillery. Allow Bai Suyin to control the weapons she wants, don't displease our genius. Focus on doing what we can and not what we can't." Miki ordered over the radio as she made her way to the door.

They had to take out as many of the beasts as they could before they reach the wall.

###

Alice stood on the wall. She had changed out of her smithing attire and allowed her hair to flow freely.

Seeing the giant wave of Nightmare energy, there was a frown on her face.

Most of this energy wasn't connected to the horde. No, the horde only made up a small fraction of this energy.

Something else in there was the source of this unease.

Chapter 942: Siege Against Grand Cathia

Alice stood with her arms folded. There wasn't a need for her to make a move yet.

Right now, it was mainly a giant horde of enemies from the Nightmare. Waves of monsters that can be dealt with using the upgraded weapons, defences and the artillery that lined the walls.

Making a move here would defeat the purpose of having them fix the wall and validate Miki's worries.

Since they were guests here, Alice decided to not make a move unless absolutely necessary.

*BANG!!!

The first volley struck the horde. Streaks of concentrated energy spearing into the fog as monstrous howls erupted into the skies. The shock of each blast rippled outwards, causing the fog to dissipate to some extent only to fix itself soon after.

"Surface line holding steady!" One of the guards reported over the radio.

The volley was keeping the enemies away.

There was one thing that Alice couldn't help but notice though. Where the fog rolled over, it seemed to create a kind of spatial distortion. Much like the environment in the dream, any damages done will repair itself.

'No wonder I didn't see any signs of combat coming here.' Alice narrowed her eyes.

[They're carrying pieces of 'Nightmare' with them. You can safely imagine that where the fog crosses, the rules of the Nightmare will be in effect to some extent.] Cayla frowned, writing down a note of her observations.

'Suffice to say that we probably want to avoid entering that fog then.' Alice frowned slightly.

The question now was how far that fog will reach.

Will it encompass the city? Or would it simply stop after a certain point.

Narrowing her eyes, she could see some of the beasts regenerating within the fog.

Then, from within the horde, a deep guttural roar erupted from the back.

Large creatures with pale blue skin burst out of the fog. Each of them had what seemed to be a rope in their hands.

And with a small run up and a twist of their torso, they threw a group of beasts towards the city.

"Anti air!" Miki's voice shouted from the back.

"Uwah~ How scary. Is this what Miki is like during a battle?" Alice glanced back with a smile.

Miki's aura was completely different from the speech she did at the wall.

Even when they were arguing, it didn't feel as serious as she was being now.

She was practically radiating with hatred as her eyes held a glare that could kill a man by just looking.

Several guards moved to her orders as their Sigils lit up with energy.

Streaks of light intercepted the beasts being thrown, preventing them from crashing into the city.

Miki noticed Alice glancing at her from the wall but didn't comment.

She couldn't command Alice, she can only hope Alice keeps her involvement to a minimum.

Walking through the front gate, the Nightgale guards formed a formation behind Miki.

She stared down the fog that was approaching the city. Clenching her teeth, she closed her eyes.

A tendril shot out from the fog but her hand snatched it out of the air before it could hit her head!

Veins bulged on her neck as she gave it a vicious tug, dragged out a frog like beast from the fog.

Just staring at the beast was enough to cause her anger to reach a boiling point as energy erupted from her body.

A single step forward, twist the hips. Rotate the arm.

*BANG!!!

With a single punch, a hole was torn through the beast as blood and guts splattered against the wall.

"Get rid of them all! Do not let them approach!" Miki roared.

The artillery continued to fire with each blast creating craters within the fog. But with the land and beasts regenerating so long as they were within the boundaries, this was a stalemate that Miki couldn't break.

From afar, several spots of light started to shimmer.

Miki narrowed her eyes before realising what it was.

"SHIEL-" Before she could finish her command, the arrows struck the barrier.

A ripple of energy that spread across the entire defensive wall around the city.

The same was happening in the other defensive walls.

"Tch!" Miki clicked her tongue and pulled out the radio.

"Order to all artillery units. Focus on the archers! They're trying to break the wall!"

If they breach the defensive wall, they'll be able to start throwing monsters into the city.

Once that happens, they'll have to fight a battle on two sides.

But the bad news didn't end there.

*Thump...

Deep within the mist, heavy footsteps could be heard. Each one shaking the ground beneath them as some of the guards turned pale. After all, it wasn't just one set of footsteps.

It was several all overlapping at once.

A shadow could be seen. Taller than the others, practically dwarfing them even.

Muscles fibres covered by hard natural armour, a black chitin helmet and exposed sharp teeth.

They look like a mix between a human and beast, legs designed for speed and the bulkiness for power.

Miki's finger twitched.

"C-captain... 10 Titans spotted in the eastern wall!"

"5 were spotted in the south!"

Radio messages poured out one after the other. While the other walls were also dealing with these beasts, the western wall was facing more than twice that number.

Taking a deep breath, Miki calmed her mind down.

"Standard protocol. Focus fire on the titans and make sure they don't breach the wall." Miki ordered as the artillery stopped their volley and focused onto the titans.

The beasts jerked, their back burst open to reveal a cluster of flesh tendrils and bones.

After a moment, it reconstructed itself as fire ignited within their body.

*Thump... Thump... THUMP.... THUMP!!!

Their steps were slow at first but soon they broke into a full sprint!

"FIRE!!!" Miki roared.

All of the artillery available fired their attacks. Some of the attacks ricocheted off of the armour while others managed to destroy several plates.

Yet they refused to slow down!

*BANG!!!

As the first titan slammed into the barrier, the faint sound of cracking could be heard.

Then the second slammed, then the third.

Miki was about to shout another order when she sensed danger from above.

In that moment, she hurriedly jumped back.

*RUMBLE!!!

A pillar of light that connected heaven and earth. A torrent of energy that scorched everything within the area. Within the beam, the titans roared out in pain as their armour was melted into their flesh! Their skin charred as their eyes sizzled and burst under the heat.

Widening her eyes in shock, Miki glanced back and saw several identical pillars across every battlefield.

Then, through the loudspeaker, a laugh echoed out across the city.

Standing atop the command centre with her arms folded, Suyin had several wires hooked up to her Suyin Mk 2 combat form.

She was taking control of the new weapons she designed using the artificial focusing lenses!

"Doesn't she sound jolly?" Alice chuckled, hearing her laughter.

'If you think she sounds happy, you should hear yourself in battle.' Alyss smirked.

Out of all of them, Alice was the one who laughed the most, especially in battle.

Should an opponent that gets her blood pumping appear, she'll laugh like the happiest girl in the world.

"Fair point. But it's not often you see Suyin being this happy." Alice shrugged while glancing up at the sky.

Suyin had designed her new cannons to be able to move freely across the barrier. And having linked herself to the command centre, she could freely assist in any battle she wanted.

There was only one drawback though.

"Yo~ dear captain. Firing these babies are a little draining for energy so the artillery can't be used. It's either this or the other, what do you want?" Suyin asked over the radio while killing the titans with the new cannons.

She hadn't had the time to properly tune the cannons yet so the efficiency wasn't that great. This was a live test fire after all.

"Doesn't matter. Focus on the titans, they're the most annoying ones to deal with." Miki ordered as she gestured for the guards to intercept the incoming horde.

"Aye aye~" Suyin grinned as she locked onto the titans still hiding within the horde.

While pillars of light scorched the battle, Miki clashed against the first beast.

Jumping up into the air, she twisted her body and speared two beasts in the head, killing them instantly while another tried to lunge behind her.

Punching the ground, a garden of spears burst out of the ground, forming a defensive wall while the other guards fought their own battles.

Each one was an elite and none of them seemed to be using Nightmare powers.

There were a few that took damage but whenever they did, they would tag out with someone else, dropping back to get healed before going back into battle.

Whenever their weapons would be broken, a capsule would be shot out from within the city, landing near them as new weapons were supplied.

Alice had to admit, seeing everything work like this was indication of the effort the city put into their own defences.

She could see how they survived this long.

Especially Miki.

It wasn't exactly Zone but Miki had something similar. Something she developed on her own in order to survive the harsh combat of the horde.

Like the zone, Miki had a boundary where she exhibited absolute control over her own powers. Speed of deployment and reaction speed were all at their max within this zone, allowing her to fight without being hit once.

Technique born from desperation and experience rather than training.

If things continued like this, Alice wouldn't need to intervene.

'If' things continued like this, that is.

She narrowed her eyes, the large signature was starting to show movement.

Chapter 943: Abyss And Nightmare

Alice closed her eyes and activated Vision. Not Zone, Vision.

She wanted to scan the entire area and take note of the changes, even within the strange Fog.

The other walls were maintaining their defences thanks to Suyin's assistance.

There were still casualties but the medics and Elias were handling everything for now.

As expected, the Majority of attacks were still focused on the western wall.

'There's only one anomaly in this siege... If they wanted to take out the city, surely there's a better way than this?' Alice furrowed her brows.

With their numbers, even with Suyin helping out, their offensive power wasn't quite making sense.

There were plenty of titans, plenty of beasts who could throw long ranged attacks.

Yet most of them were observing the situation.

Why?

Was it to increase desperation?

Without opening her eyes, Alice flicked her finger and a spark of energy detonated in front of her, destroying the flesh spear that was tossed at her from afar.

"A little rude, don't you think? I haven't even participated in the battle yet." Alice opened one eye to glance at the beast.

Taking aim with her finger, Alice opened her mouth.

"Bang~"

A thin streak of light crossed the battlefield immediately as a modified Void Flux was fired.

She had tuned it for maximum speed and penetration, tearing a hole through the beast's head then emptying out its spine.

There was only a small smoking hole on its forehead as it collapsed, confusing the beasts around him.

But she wasn't finished.

She knew that they would regenerate thanks to the fog so this is where she began experimenting.

The flesh began to twitch, the beast slowly got back up but it wasn't a perfect regeneration.

Like consuming Abyss Blood that wasn't potent enough for your injuries, there were scars left over.

"Heh~ Well that's certainly something." Alice blinked her eyes in surprise.

She thought her flames would've cancelled it out.

But instead, it only caused the wound to heal unnaturally.

Scratching her chin, Alice decided to try something else.

What if they were injected with her blood? How would the nightmare react to concentrated poison?

Snapping her finger, several blood needles appeared next to Alice as she took aim and fired.

*Thunk

As the needles stabbed into the beasts, their flesh immediately started to bubble. Strange limbs clawed out of their body and they opened their mouth to scream.

"Ah.... ARGHHH!!! W-What isss... THIS?!?!"

Alice froze.

Cayla stopped writing.

Alyss sat up.

The beast began mumbling words as it clawed apart its own body. Fear? Confusion? Anger?

Alice didn't know why but its question lingered on her mind.

What is this.

The moment her blood began mutating the beast, it had asked what was occurring.

Without hesitation, Alice closed her eyes and activated her Sigil.

A soul.

Broken but it was there.

Parts of it was being forcefully reattached thanks to the mutation she introduced into its system.

Were these nightmare beasts the souls lost in the Nightmare?

Or were they artificial?

Furrowing her brows, Alice immediately glanced at the other beasts but all she could see were the remnants. Even with her mutation, it should've have caused such a drastic change...

Could it?

Alice hesitated for a moment before creating another needle.

Doing this might cause whatever soul inside to suffer but... it could be an important clue.

"Sorry." Alice apologised as she flicked her finger and sent another needle into the crowd.

*Tak-

The needle was caught before it could land on a beast.

A young man with a small smile on his face.

The main source of this nightmare energy.

"You know~ Experiments are better when you don't interrupt the process. Simply observing would be appreciated, especially for unrelated third parties." Alice narrowed her eyes.

With her not fully understanding the properties of this Nightmare energy, engaging in a fight, especially with someone radiating this much power, was risky.

"I would agree on that part but I'm afraid this is going a little beyond the boundaries of experimentation. So you have my full apologies but I have to return this needle to you." Pinching the needle between his fingers, he flicked.

"!!!"

*CLANK!!!

Parrying the needle strike with her sword, Alice slid back a few steps and frowned.

Curving her smile upwards, Alice was intrigued.

Just as she was about to intercept the fighter, spears rained down from above.

The man weaved through the attacks with light hops in his steps as Miki dropped down with a slash.

*BANG!!!

Catching the spear between his fingers, he smiled.

"Have you been well?" He asked as veins bulged on Miki's neck.

Miki didn't respond, she twisted her body, forcing the spear free while summoning more weapons to attack him from all sides.

Then, when a gap appeared, she lunged in, fast and precise.

*Crack!

Her spear snapped in half as the man landed a punch against the shaft.

"Must we do this?" He asked with a bitter smile.

Hearing this, something snapped within Miki's mind.

He spoke as if this was avoidable.

He spoke as if none of this was his fault.

He spoke as if she could forgive him.

"I told you already! I will cut off your head myself!" Miki shouted as Abyssal energy erupted from her body.

Activating her resonance, a piercing pillar of red shot into the sky before exploding!

Black red and blue rings expanded repeatedly, forming a strange eye that stared down at the battlefield.

[She must've killed a Tenebris at some point.] Cayla glanced up and recognised the skill.

Alice had the same 'offer' though it was different.

Based on what Miki has killed, the manifestation of the Anti Army skill must've changed as well.

However, all three could recognise the foundation!

Crimson Skies, Thousand Eyes.

A ritual that was activated on the battlefield. The more you kill, the more eyes appear.

And with the appearance of eyes, sanity will brain while the caster siphons their life force. Not only that, but perception will increase with each kill thus gaining a natural defence against sneak attacks.

'No wonder she had something similar to Absolute Zone.' Alice thought to herself.

Miki shot Alice a glare. A silent warning.

Do not interfere!

Raising her hands up in surrender, Alice took a few steps back.

The two of them shared some history together so who was she to stop them?

The man glanced up at the sky before turning to Miki.

There was a strange contrast. On one end, he who came with the Nightmare should be brimming with hostility while Miki should be defending the city.

But it was different.

Miki was wrath incarnate while his eyes were devoid of hostility.

Seeing Miki ignore his question, the man smiled helplessly and shrugged.

"I guess you won't listen to anything I say." He shook his head.

The moment he turned his eyes away, Miki burst into action.

Her spear stabbed towards his head but a sword parried it off to the side.

Without hesitation, she stabbed her spear into the ground and used it as a vault, landing two kicks against his guard before creating two spears and firing it at his legs.

Dodging back with a few light steps, he kicked one of the spears out from the ground and sent it back to Miki.

"Same as always then. Are we doing a point system or to the 'death'?" He laughed.

"Death!"

Catching the spear that he sent back, Miki imbued it with energy as red veins pulsed across the weapon.

"To the 'death' then." He nodded.

Miki adjusted her footwork and tossed the spear.

*RUMBLE!!!

Lightning burst out of the weapon as it disappeared from sight.

Dodging the throw, he smiled seeing the weapon circle back while Miki stabbed her spear into the ground and gritted her teeth.

*CRACK!!!!

A large chunk of the earth was dug out, disrupting the man's footwork as the second weapon was about to pierce his chest.

Spinning his body horizontally, he unleashed several slashes, destroying the spear while Miki burst out of the rubble.

Black and red energy coiled around her initial spear as she unleashed a flurry of slashes and stabs.

However, no matter where she targeted, he would parry everything without fail.

"It's always been like this. You've always underestimated me." Miki squeezed through gritted teeth as the whites of her eyes turned black.

*BANG!!!

The pommel of the spear slammed into his chest before he could react, causing him to widen his eyes in surprise.

Stumbling back, he saw Miki approaching and prepared to guard.

*KRK!!!

A spear slash from behind even though Miki was in front of him?!

"You've got more tricks up your sleeve huh?" He maintained his smile while knocking her away.

"I suppose I can't keep treating you like teacher's daughter anymore." His wounds regenerated.

"You have no right to call him that!" Miki shouted, capturing the man within her gaze as spears manifested around him.

Adjusting his grip on his blade, the man smiled before taking an offensive stance.

*CRACK!!!

With a slash of his blade, all of the spears were shattered and the burst of force caused Miki to slide back.

"You might not like it. But I still see him as my teacher. Everything I've learned, everything I know. I owe it to him." He walked towards Miki who plunged her hand into the ground.

Flames erupted from the cracks of the earth as lava seemed to spit out of the ground.

"You lost the right to call my father that. And you know it!" Miki ripped out a flaming spear as crimson cracks appeared across her arm.

The man who killed her father.

The man whom she treated as family.

The previous 'Hero' of Grand Cathia.

Chapter 944: Fallen Hero

With a new weapon at her disposal, Miki immediately intercepted the fallen hero once more as her attacks were more ferocious than ever.

Like a wild beast out of her cage, she ripped towards him without care of the damage she was doing to the world around her.

Chunks of earth was dug out and thrown to act as cover while sparks flew every time their weapons clashed.

Fountains of flames and lava surged forward as though she was wrath incarnate.

However, her enemy was composed. There were several close calls but he would always be a step ahead of her, dodging the attacks at the last moment.

There was only one difference though and Alice spotted it.

Miki was holding on because she's achieved a state similar to Absolute Zone while her opponent was clashing through raw physical power and reaction speed.

If they were on even playing grounds, Miki would have the upper hand.

But that's considering if this was everything he was capable of. He has yet to show signs of a Zone like state.

And with Miki being occupied, Alice decided to help out with the defence.

Snapping her finger, sparks manifested around the barrier.

Should the enemy try to throw anything towards the city, these sparks would trigger and get rid of them.

An automated defence thanks to her triggered casts.

The conditions were set and she didn't need to think about it anymore.

Instead, she kept half her focus on Miki's fight while the other half, she created portals for the medics to move around the battlefield quickly.

###

Sparks exploded across her vision as weapons scrapped against one another.

She felt the weight of his parry, the power he was holding back.

Even now, he wasn't going all out.

Anger pumped through her veins.

Fine, let him defend.

Miki slammed her foot into the ground as the earth shattered beneath her step, catapulting her forward.

Twisting her body, she carved a crescent of molten lava towards him, a flower of flames blossoming with each strike.

"You're still over committed on this step. How many times has teacher told you about this?" He said lightly, stepping into her range of attacks and cancelling her skill.

"And he would've kept telling me if you didn't kill him!" Miki shouted as her tears were burned away by the heat.

Her fist slammed into his wrist as her movements were linked up once more, finishing the skill!

Quickly jumping back, he tried to stabilize his footing when a spear stabbed into the base of his foot.

*CLANG!!!

The hero flicked his blade upwards, pushing Miki's ending strike aside.

His smile turned sad at the mention of his deed.

"I'm not your enemy. I never was-"

His sentence was cut off as Miki split her spear into two flaming whips that coiled around his arms.

Pulling the two of them together, she slammed her heel into his chest, sending him flying into the sky.

"Then why?!" She lunged, combing her weapon into a spear once more.

She could still remember it.

The times where he stood as the hope of the city.

The fourth siege broke out with a timing failure. They had tried to predict the moment it'll arrive, to plan out their defences and evacuations.

The siege had actually occurred during the night when the Nightmare didn't arrive. Thus far, the attacks have always been during the day so they thought the gathering of energy would stop at daybreak.

So when the alarms roared at full volume during the night mid evacuation, everything was rushed.

He stood with the formation as the people demanded.

He didn't go off on his own, he didn't make reckless decisions.

He allowed the others to dictate his actions.

Even when there was a clear gap that he could take advantage of, he held himself back in order to prevent an accident like last time.

In case a beast was to toss another group of monsters into the city.

This time, he focused on evacuation.

But without him on the front drawing the aggro of the strong beasts, the defensive line crumbled in three places.

Guards traded places too slowly, casters delayed too long.

There was no focal point to their defence, no spearhead.

They were originally reliant on him drawing the aggro, knowing that he could handle himself while they dealt with the stragglers.

He was their guiding light.

But now that everyone was sharing his burden, they realised how ferocious the beasts were.

Without him acting as their anchor, coordination lagged.

Screams erupted, people died.

The hero hesitated.

Should he move forward or defend the back?

To make matters worse, the beasts were adapting to his actions.

If he moved forward, they threatened to throw monsters into the city.

If he moved back, they put more pressure on the front.

By the end of the fourth siege, the casualties were greater than the third.

But none of the civilians died.

At the funeral held for the deceased, Miki could remember the hero standing in front of the graves.

Longer than anyone.

Even when everyone left, he continued to stand in atonement.

For letting this tragedy occur.

What floated on the minds of the people were simple as some even vocalised their thoughts during the service.

"Why did he let them die?"

Why did the hero, who thrived on the frontline, not make a single move?

Why did he watch his fellow men get cut apart?

Miki stared at his back.

During that moment, the strongest fighter in their city felt small.

She wanted to say something but... the words were stuck in her throat. She didn't know what she could say.

Later that night, she heard the sound of wood cutting the air. She saw him training late at night, a fire of determination in his eyes.

She thought he was fine.

But his condition only got worse.

Bags under his eyes, loss of focus during the battle.

He started to bait the beasts to throw monsters into the city in order to relieve the pressure on the front line.

The moment they threw, he would drop everything and dash back, killing the beasts that tried to target where the civilians were hiding.

His strategy worked for one siege.

The deaths were reduced but...

It's clear that that this was a losing battle.

They needed more people to gain strength from the Nightmare or else the defensive wall will collapse.

Once the battle finished, the praise started to return.

They praised his actions, his decision making.

But Miki saw his fatigue.

He kept training, only sleeping when his body collapsed.

She tried to get him to stop but he only waved it off.

As for her father, his words were also ignored.

###

During one of the later sieges, his fatigue caught up to him.

One movement too slow.

The beast reached one of the evacuation rooms.

He watched as people pushed others into the jaw of the beast in order to buy an extra second.

He watched as grown men trample over kids, their weight pressed against their heads and killing them in the process.

He watched as blood splattered the walls.

The beast died in the end to his blade but at what cost?

Around him, the same men who fled the fastest hurled insults at him.

Their spit splashing against his shirt as they howled at his mistakes.

He felt so very tired.

These were the people he was trying to protect.

He could still see the blood of that child against their boots.

By the time he returned to the frontlines after clearing out the beasts in the city, the pavement was once again dyed with blood.

They defended but their numbers were dwindling.

Yet the beasts didn't swarm them.

Why?

They were simply breaking apart their numbers.

"Do you need some time off?" His teacher would ask.

He shook his head.

If he took a break, who would defend the city? The frontline was collapsing without him there, the backline struggled without him there.

He needed to be strong enough so that Grand Cathia could continue to stand.

"You have some time before the next siege. Take this moment to rest. Your fatigue is catching up." His teacher warned once more.

Seeing that he was insistent, the hero finally relented.

He wore a hood and decided to take a walk around the city he defended. Being recognised would be rather bothersome at this point after all.

He wandered with no destination in mind. He simply wanted to observe.

He noticed a shop he used to walk by. Now empty and desolate. The owner died during the siege and...

A can rolled over to his foot.

A group of men was looting the place and taking the money for themselves.

Upon spotting him, they quickly covered up their face and ran before the guards could arrive.

There wasn't a hint of Abyssal energy.

No, they were using the power they gained from the Nightmare.

Were these the people they were dying to protect?

He recalled the sight of the safe house. The men trampling over people in order to survive.

All while guards were putting their lives on the line.

If they had power, shouldn't they help defend this city? Even if they don't want to be on the frontline, firing weapons from afar was good as well.

Instead, they were spending their time here looting stores.

Everything they've done...

Everything they've risked to keep this place safe...

All the sacrifices, his efforts...

In that moment, a single thought dominated his mind.

Trash should just die.

Chapter 945: Surviving The Siege

Miki's spear danced across the battlefield, cleaving the sky open while any unfortunate beast who got in the way was torn apart as collateral.

Flames twisted, transforming into a raging dragon as it rampaged through the horde.

No fear, no hesitation. The man in front of her was simply treating this as a daily occurrence, something not worth fighting to the death for.

Her hands tightened around the spear.

She lunged, drawing a burning arc through the fog while the Hero stepped to the side and smacked the spear with the back of his fist, diverting its path.

A light kick aimed to the back of the knee looking to break her balance.

But Miki was prepared for such a move and adjusted her footwork early, threatening to pierce her spearhead through his foot.

Taking a few casual steps back, he smiled looking at the burn mark on the back of his hand.

Even though he took the precautions to reinforce it, her spear still broke through his defences.

'How you've grown.' He nodded in appreciation.

Unfortunately...

The leash of the city was coiled tightly around her neck.

Clapping his hands together, a pulse of energy burst out, freezing Miki mid jump.

Then, from his own vault, he pulled out a single treasured blade. It wasn't anything fancy, no ridiculous embellishments across the face of the blade or the guard.

Simple in design with the only thing setting it apart from other weapons being the pommel.

A single crest and attached to it, a red tassel.

The weapon gifted to him by her father.

*SHATTER!!!

The sight of that weapon gave Miki another boost of adrenaline as she forcefully shattered the bindings around her, tossing the spear like a javelin.

*BANG!!!

Parrying the spear with his blade, he grabbed the spear out of the air, ignoring the damage he was taking for holding this weapon.

"I don't know how many times I must say it, but I never meant to cut down teacher that day." He sighed, casually tossing the spear back to Miki.

Before she could catch the weapon, he lunged with a slash.

Miki twisted her body, slamming her fist to the face of the blade in order to change its course.

The same move he used to divert her spear.

"Even now, I wish things could've gone differently. If I made my decision sooner, he would be next to you condemning my actions right now instead of you being here alone." He pulled a face of remorse.

"F*ck you. You had plenty of time to stop but you still went through it." Miki hissed as she aimed a jab at his throat that was parried.

An exchange of strikes and slashes with small cuts beginning to appear around Miki's body.

She was keeping up thanks to her Sigil power enhancing her sight but even that had its limitations.

The boundary of physical power couldn't be crossed so easily.

"Yes... I had plenty of time to stop but I didn't." He took a deep breath while flicking his wrist.

A diagonal slash faster than anything he released thus far.

"!!!"

The blade cut deep into Miki's chest as her pupils constricted. Pain tore through her mind but she quickly tossed a pill into her mouth as the wound stitched itself together.

"I didn't stop because that was my resolve. My choice. Had I stopped in that moment, I would've been forever chained down by the city. I made my stance clear and unfortunately, teacher died for it."

There was a look of liberation on his face. Of freedom.

How could someone who killed her father despite respecting him look so happy in this moment?

Miki couldn't understand it.

"Tell me this, had I not purged the city of the trash that day, would it still function as it is doing now?" He asked, a grin appearing on his face as he clashed weapons with Miki, causing her to fly backwards from the shock.

"Would the people who gained power through the Nightmare be scared of what might happen if you turned as well?" He asked again, intercepting her flight and slammed his foot into her back, sending her into the sky.

"Would you have the peace maintained by a common goal you have now?!"

"The trash that didn't deserve this peace, I cleared them out. I won't say you're wrong. Because the world is never black and white. People like you and teacher are needed. However..." He trailed off.

"A purge is necessary to root out the garbage. Otherwise, the rot will spread. Teacher was a necessary sacrifice. For me, for the city. It was for me to step on this path of no return and for the city to have a wake up call."

Gritting her teeth, Miki unfurled a set of flaming wings and raised her spear.

Fire intersected as countless flaming spears manifested in the air.

"They've been taking things for granted for far too long. Sacrifices are inevitable in battle. Yet they lose themselves in their dreams thinking nothing of the deaths that occur on the frontline.

"For them, it's just another statistic. Just another person they have no connection to.

"They didn't see the horrors, they didn't fight without knowing when their lives will end. All they do is sit in the back and talk with that mouth of theirs. When our brothers and sisters on the frontline died, they didn't think of the great sacrifice.

"No, the pigs inside the walls only thought about how incompetent they were to die. Blame was the only thing hanging on their mouths as they laughed at our misery." He lost his smile at this point, the anger he buried in his heart surging forth.

"We had to die for people like these?! They don't deserve it!"

Energy erupted from his blade, a swirl of nightmare energy that dwarfed the horde as a fake crimson moon appeared overhead.

Twisting his body, he unleashed a single slash that split the sky while Miki sent her spears towards him.

As the two attacks clashed, the skies were dyed in a deep crimson as though it was the end of days.

Under the fake crimson moon, the horde gained a surge of energy as they let out a ferocious howl and charged towards the city without care.

Crimson light poured down from the sky like blood from an open wound, staining everything in red. The fog surged forth and even Suyin's cannons started to lose their effectiveness as the fog acted as a barrier.

Everything caught within was subjected to the rules of the Nightmare.

Alice narrowed her eyes.

A natural barrier against the other sources of energy similar to what she seen when they were gathering their numbers.

[With the way the rules are being shaped within the fog, it's no exaggeration to say that it's being influenced by that man along with the fear of the people in the city right now.] Cayla spoke up.

[Like the three Sigil resonance, this fog is mimicking the authority of a God's domain. Setting rules that the outside world cannot interact with. Their own world.] She narrowed her eyes.

'Anything we can do about it? Or do we have to gamble with the flames like before?' Alyss asked.

The reason why it was a gamble was because her flames seemed to directly attack whatever was at the core of the fog. Without knowing anything... They could be provoking something far beyond their capabilities with this decision.

One that would doom this city.

"So far the fog is being held back by the barrier. We can't pierce the veil but it can't forcefully devour every defence we've worked up either.

"Since that's the case, let's stall things out for now. Miki might not like it but I'm making a move."

Activating her Sigils, Alice stomped her foot down as a pool of blood erupted beneath her.

From this pool, countless strands shot through the blood mirrors, stretching to every corner of this city, every battlefield.

Then, before the fog could envelop their soldiers, Alice snapped her finger.

*RUMBLE!!!

Pillars of metal erupted from the blood as energy surged. A trinity of Abyssal, Eldritch and Void connected and a blood veil was draped over the city's barrier.

A thin blood mirror that gained the adaptive properties of Eldritch energy.

Should this fog try to forge its way through, it'll have to contend with three sets of laws and not just the laws of the surface.

Laws of the Abyssal energy, the Void that sits between and the Eldritch that adapts and mutates.

As expected, due to the nature of the fog, it was struggling to bypass the veil. While their attacks couldn't harm it, the energy they used became a 'solid' against this fog.

It prevented the beasts from crossing over.

The moment they do, they lose the protective veil and will be cut down without hesitation.

They knew this as well, resulting in a temporary stalemate. The soldiers stared at the beasts while the beasts stared back.

The only thing separating the two were two sets of defensive barriers.

"Howl all you want, you're not getting through." Alice yawned because narrowed her eyes at the approaching figure.

A man carrying Miki's heavily wounded body on the other side of the barrier.

"She'll live." He spoke calmly.

Alice wanted to make a move but he was being protected by the fog.

"I had expected to cultivate more fear today but... I hadn't accounted for a variable like you to protect this city. I look forward to our next meeting." He smiled, placing Miki on the ground.

Turning around, he walked away as the fog and beasts disappeared into the horizon.

Chapter 946: To Be Treated As A Weapon

"Argh!!!" Miki let out a shout as she bolted upright. Breath ragged, hair stuck against her face.

Cold sweat covered her back as her eyes darted around in confusion.

Her hands pressing her chest to check for wounds and her waist for a weapon that wasn't there.

She spotted Alice sitting by the window with a surprised look on her face, not expecting Miki to shout immediately after waking up.

Realising that she was in the hospital, Miki let out a sigh before collapsing back into the bed.

"Well that's certainly a way to wake up." Alice shrugged, sipping away at a flask.

"Can you not drink in the presence of a patient?" Miki sighed.

Alice stuck out her tongue in rebellion.

"Bleh~ It's not like I'm drunk anyways. If you can blame me for playing hero, I can make a call on where I drink." Alice huffed.

Staring out of the window, she glanced out at the city that was recovering from the siege. The defences were struggling and the initial barrier was cracked. Had she not deployed the blood veil, the city would be barrierless right now.

"So, what's the deal between you and that guy earlier? He seemed to be the one controlling how the Nightmare moves against the city. But... It also seems like he used to be part of the city." She asked curiously.

Miki froze at the question.

It was not Alice's intention to overhear some of the conversation between them, but it was hard not to notice.

Plus, during that exchange, Miki was fighting for personal reasons rather than for the defence of the city.

After a brief pause, Miki finally let out a sigh.

"He was my father's disciple. Someone I looked towards as family. He was also the city's hero when the Nightmare siege's first occurred. But that's all in the past now. He's an enemy I must kill." She clenched her fist.

Alice took another sip from her flask.

"Because he killed your dad?"

Miki nodded.

She didn't say much else but Alice could already figure out most of the history between them.

The reason why she hates heroes, the examples she gave during their reunion and the questions she asked.

They were all worries stemmed from the fact that this guy turned his back on the city when it needed him.

"What happened at the end of the siege? Did you kill them all?" Miki asked.

"Nope. Honestly I didn't even do that much since you guys seemed to have it handled. I only made a barrier so the fog couldn't creep into the city. After you were defeated, he ordered their retreat.

"Mentioned something about cultivating more fear or what not. But since I appeared, a variable he didn't account for, he decided to go back." Alice explained.

Hearing this, Miki furrowed her brows.

"Fear..." She mumbled quietly. "That fits. The Nightmare has never tried to completely wipe us out, even when our defences are broken. They're treating us like cattle."

Crawling out of bed, Miki ignored the pain she was feeling inside her body.

"You sure you're supposed to start walking around already? Shouldn't you rest for a bit longer?" Alice asked, following behind her leisurely.

"The Nightmare doesn't wait for me to recover before hitting the city again."

"Oh I'm aware. But you're going to break your body apart like this if you don't stop." Alice nodded.

Her wounds were rather ghastly after all. Even with Elias's help, it wasn't a full recovery.

"They need someone at the helm. Someone the upper layer can blame. Without me being there, they-"

"And you lecture me about being a hero." Alice smirked.

The comment irked Miki as she turned around with a glare.

"Taking on all this burden by yourself, making decisions thinking you're at the core. And when it matters, you dump it all to chase a personal vendetta. What happened to your earlier philosophy? Where did it go?"

Miki tightened her jaw.

She looked ready to bite back for a moment but soon, her anger simmered and faded.

"It didn't go anywhere. I'm no hero, just a captain. Nothing more. And I don't make decisions thinking I'm at the core, I make decisions thinking I'm another pawn, disposable in the grand scheme of things.

"How many leaders do you think needed to die for the call of command to fall onto my lap?"

Miki turned around.

"Probably a few. What do I know? I just came here after all. But this kind of defence can't last. And you know that far better than I do. When the Nightmare stops farming for fear, what then? I won't say you need a hero. But you need a spearhead to pierce the core of this issue, no?" Alice tried to convince Miki but she shook her head.

"This kind of thought was what made... Erwen turn his back on the city. Even heroes are people. If all of the burden is placed onto one person, they break."

Miki lowered her gaze.

"And yet you're still gunning after him with the intent to kill huh?"

"Understanding something doesn't mean you agree with it. I can understand why he ended up the way he is, but it doesn't mean I agree with his methods. That's the same as saying I agree with him killing my father." Miki clenched her fist.

"Fair point. Now let's resolve another issue shall we?" Alice chuckled.

"Another issue? What happened?" Miki frowned. Did something else happen while she was out cold?

Alice pointed at herself.

"Me."

"You?"

"Yes me. Let's be honest, I'm going to be helping out while I'm here no matter what you say. So wouldn't it be better to put me to good use? Just treat me as a good weapon you picked up for now."

Miki turned around and stared at Alice, searching for a catch.

Alice just smiled and sipped her flask.

"What kind of weapon drinks during the day?" Miki asked with a sigh.

"How long are you planning on staying here?"

Alice thought about it for a moment.

"Not sure, depends on if my goals are met. The main one is thwarting the Zenia family. As you know, I used to come from that family and in the 10 years I didn't make an appearance, it wasn't sunshine and rainbows." Alice narrowed her eyes, a bit of her killing intent seeping out.

"And since they're gunning after the Nightingale family along with Varyn and Serathei, I figured I'd come here first since it's connected to you." She admitted.

"So a rebellion against the strongest family in Extalia right now. One that even the Royal family is worried about but can't do anything against them at this moment." Miki clarified as Alice nodded her head.

"Bingo~ With the Nightmare being a product of the family, learning and dismantling it will help with my goals so that's another thing I want to do."

Where she stays will be dependant on the kind of information she finds. If the core of the Nightmare is discovered, she'll naturally adjust her journey elsewhere.

Of course, that didn't mean she was going to abandon this place either. There were always things she could do, triggered casts she could leave behind should anything happen while she was away.

Miki folded her arms, contemplating the various factors before nodding her head.

"Fine. I'll treat you as a weapon for now. But there are certain things I need to make sure of." Miki relented.

"That being?"

"Orders. Can you follow them?" Miki knew what kind of person Alice is.

She's the kind to do whatever she feels like in the moment. So if there is an order, the main issue isn't whether or not she could complete it but if she would follow it.

Even if it meant retreating from a foe she can kill.

Alice blinked her eyes.

"Orders you say? Hmm..." She paced back and forth for a moment.

"I can follow orders." Alice nodded.

"But?" Miki pushed, knowing that there was issues with that statement.

Being caught, Alice stuck out her tongue.

"But~ they need to make sense for me in the moment. I'm a weapon that you throw in their general direction and watch things explode. I might come back in time, I might not. I can't make guarantees since weird stuff happen around me all the time."

Miki furrowed her brows. A little unreliable...

But if she was going to treat Alice as ammunition to throw towards a zone then...

"Alright. I can deal with that."

Alice grinned, gesturing for Miki to raise her hand before giving it a high five.

"There we go. Now loosen up a bit, being serious all the time must be exhausting."

"I am relaxed already." Miki shook her head.

"Now follow me. I'll give you a run down of what we've found about the Nightmare thus far and what we've been doing to map it out. Since you're also investigating, am I correct to assume you know the basic structure?" She asked as Alice nodded her head.

"To some extent. It's mimicking a little bit of what the Abyss is like. Only thing different is that the layers are accessed by death than standard traversal."

"Yes but also no. While death is the easiest thing to use when it comes to moving across layers and finding others, it's not the only way. The 'depth' of the Nightmare is another method of sinking deeper without dying."

Alice raised her eyebrow.

"We're essentially using the rules of the Nightmare against it." Miki dumbed it down.

"If our speculations are correct, there is a 'core' for the different zones within the Nightmare, including one for this city.

"If we play our cards right, we might be able to dismantle the dream hanging over our heads."

Chapter 947: Third Arrival

Fear felt different when you stopped drowning in it.

Erwen stood at the edge of the fog. A mirror that reflected the Nightmare.

He took a single step forward, falling through the fog as his world spun.

And as he fell, gravity inverted in ways that defied the natural order. He closed his eyes, anchoring himself to where he wanted to be.

The sense of falling disappeared.

There was no impact.

Instead, he was now standing before a fractured reality.

The cosmic sea beneath his feet, constellations etched in the depths while the earth hung above.

Fog retreated behind him. There was no reason for it to act as a gateway now.

The harvest this time was far less than what he had originally anticipated.

Perhaps it was due to the intervention of a new variable.

Not only that, but there was also the mechanical girl controlling the cannons around the city.

A part of him was happy. Happy that the city managed to find fighters of this calibre to help out in their time of need.

But another part of him felt frustrated.

Frustrated that the harvest was cut short.

Of course there was always the option of force. But...

From what he noticed, doing things by force while the split haired girl was there won't be easy.

There seemed to be a conflict between powers when she attacked the fog but even so, he could tell she was holding back a lot.

Despite seemingly being a caster type, her perception and physical power seem far superior to most close quarter fighters.

Like himself.

In order to defeat her, fighting upfront wasn't going to cut it.

He'll need to do some preparations if he wanted a good harvest for the next siege.

Preparations that can force the laws of the Nightmare on the battlefield if they clash once more.

He descended into the cosmic pool beneath him.

The world folded downwards, layers peeling back like pages in a book.

He continued to step through the empty zones devoid of Hunters. Only the beasts who roam aimlessly and the Lurkers who await their next victim.

After a moment, he arrived at Grand Cathia's spiralling nightmare.

Fully intact and undisturbed.

Good.

Erwen straightened his sleeve and continued onwards.

The Nightmare was a combined effort of everyone within the vicinity of Grand Cathia.

Observing the structure of the Nightmare gave him hints on what was happening in reality, the thoughts hidden in their hearts.

Their fears.

And...

It was rather easy to spot the zones that were constructed by those who lived above.

The privileged ones who did nothing to help the city, ready to flee the moment things go south.

Just staring at the Nightmare Zones gave him the urge to destroy everything.

This sickness plaguing the city, this disgust clogging up his chest.

He wanted to purge it as soon as possible.

But keeping this place intact had a use. He needed the parasites to be alive and well. He needed them to cause unrest within the city.

Erwen paused in his step, a frown on his face.

"I wasn't aware that a guide was sent to help me."

This place should be entirely up to him after he defected.

There shouldn't be anyone sent to help.

"Oh I wasn't sent, you don't have to worry about that." An elegant laugh echoed out as butterflies began to appear.

Fog gathered and a witch appeared sitting on her floating staff with her legs crossed.

"Then why are you here? I believe the guides have their own jobs to worry about rather than concerning themselves with farming fear during the day." Erwen frowned.

There was a warning that everyone attached to the Nightmare received.

A warning about a certain witch.

"Hm~ I do have my own job but... I have a bit more free time than others." Monika giggled, narrowing her eyes on Erwen.

"Just don't interfere with my job."

"I wouldn't say I'll be interfering. Just a small request since you met one of the subjects I'm observing." Monika followed behind Erwen.

He frowned.

If Monika was observing someone and only appeared just now...

It must've been someone he saw during the siege. A new face.

Was it the mechanical girl?

No, the nightmare didn't have tether on her. She was observing from elsewhere.

Then...

The split haired girl.

The one he was cautious about.

"!!!"

Widening his eyes, he immediately summoned a blade and turned around.

*CLANG!!!

He blocked an invisible strike.

"Ohya? Hmm... I'm starting to think I'm losing my touch." Monika tapping her chin.

"First it was Vene, then the others and now you. Everyone is on guard against me now." Monika pretended to shed a tear.

"And to think we used to be on such good terms."

"What's the meaning of this?" Erwen frowned.

Whatever she had just tried to do, he couldn't allow her to succeed! Every fibre of his being was warning him against her.

Especially within this Nightmare.

"Jeez, I just want a small favour. The others are still alive aren't they? The more you struggle, the more annoying this becomes." Monika tapped her finger, looking to restrict Erwen's movements.

However...

Taking a single step back, a boundary formed around him where everything was slashed in an instant. A perfect defence to stop attacks from breaching.

"Gosh, you're really not going to make this easy are you?" Monika sighed.

Hopping off her staff, she tapped her toes against the ground.

*BANG!!!

Erwen unleashed a slash behind him that tore up the ground as cold sweat covered his back.

"So annoying, just let me make a small~ modification okay? You won't die." Monika pouted.

Erwen's slashes were surprisingly 'accurate'.

It wasn't just a simple matter of slashing apart the area. But rather, it was targeting her directly.

Even if she turns herself into fog, his slashes will no doubt land.

An attack to cross any distance so long as it 'collides' with her.

"Even a small modification may stop me from being myself. This job, it has to be done by my own hands. So I politely ask you to refrain from doing what you seek to do." Erwen narrowed his eyes.

They were still 'playing around' for now. Neither of them have even showed a fraction of their abilities.

Right now, he could only hope that she steps back with this.

"Hmm... that won't do." Monika stopped smiling.

She wanted to 'know' which meant taking matters into her own hands.

Information gained from others are subject to bias and perception. And imperfect transcript of what had actually occurred.

She couldn't allow that to happen.

Monika tilted her head, her eyes losing their playful shine.

The butterflies around her froze and the world seemed to halt.

Erwen took a deep breath.

He focused his mind, his body gradually fading into a state of zero.

His only goal...

Prevent Monika from tampering with his body!

In that instant, several hands breached his defensive line.

With a single motion, countless slashes were woven into a net to defend against the onslaught.

And through the gap that was created, Monika's hand slipped through, aiming for his chest.

*KRK!!!

Erwen stabbed forward, his blade piercing her palm, up her arm, through the elbow and into the bicep, finishing at the shoulder.

"Aren't you the perceptive one." Monika praised, ripping her arm free and reconstructing it with fog.

A deliberate show to prove that she was unharmed but it was rather difficult to trick his gaze.

Moving her arm, Monika let out a sigh.

Dealing with Erwen was possible. Killing him wasn't an issue.

But modifying him without killing him? When he puts up this kind of resistance?

"What a pain." She groaned in annoyance.

Pausing for a moment, she made eye contact with Erwen.

"!!!"

"Should I just erase you?" She asked, face to face with the man.

He tried to slash at her, to prevent her approach but his wrist was held by Monika's hand.

Her spare hand tried to touch his chest but her fingers were grabbed by Erwen's hand.

A stalemate. He couldn't prevent her approach but she couldn't make the modifications she wanted.

Kicking her in the stomach to force her away, Erwen flicked his wrist and a crimson moon appeared overhead.

Monika narrowed her eyes.

*Clap

"Okay~ That's enough." A new voice interrupted their conversation. A girl wearing nothing but a simple white dress. Nothing else.

"Let's not fight okay?" She smiled happily.

If Monika made him worried, this new arrival made him want to flee no matter what. He sheathed his blade and glared at Monika who seemed annoyed yet helpless at the girl's arrival.

"I just wanted to turn him into a camera for me. You didn't have to show up you know? Does the boss know?" Monika sighed, regaining her joking tone while sitting on her staff.

The girl tilted her head and stuck out her tongue.

"Nope. I snuck out hehe~"

"Then you should go back before he scolds you. I'm leaving, it's too much hassle if you're getting involved." Monika turned to leave through the fog.

A pair of fair, cold hands cupped her cheeks.

The girl's smiling face in front of her.

"You shouldn't lie like that."

Letting go of her face, she placed several invisible butterflies into Monika's hand.

"Bu bye~" She waved happily.

Monika glanced back at the two. Without saying anything else, she left the zone, causing Erwen to let out a sigh of relief.

But the danger isn't over yet.

The third arrival.

"Erm... if Nyer asks don't tell him I was here okay?" She held a finger over her lip and quickly evacuated, leaving Erwen with questions flying through his mind.

Chapter 948: Harvest

Miki lead Alice down a narrow corridor reinforced with plating.

What used to be a war room sat at the end of it, thick doors marked with old scars, emergency defences half broken and replaced with newer designs.

Above the door, a simple metal sign told them what the room was used for.

Nightmare Research.

As they entered the room, the tension could immediately be felt as no one was idle. Everyone had a job to do and a limited amount of time to do so.

Tables pushed together to form long workstations clustered with an array of different contraptions, relics and stacks of handwritten notes bound with thread.

Plastered on the walls were layered diagrams, city maps overlayed with small sections that depicted what was underground. Charts revealing the density of enemies, information gathered through scattered notes, items, even the entities that reside within the Nightmare.

Shopkeepers and so on.

In fact, Alice even found a small tab on Rolo. It wasn't hard to recognise considering he was the only fat cat.

Not only that, but overlayed on the map were certain zones with red circles. Puzzles they couldn't pass, doors they couldn't open, gaps they couldn't cross. Depending on what they see on the other side, they've been exploring the different passages open to them.

"You've certainly done your research... Damn." Alice mumbled.

Death was unavoidable but they're making the most of everything they've got.

"Unfortunately, we're slowing down in terms of what we can explore. Most of this was done through the sacrifice of the soldiers. Even if we get new recruits or refugees from other cities... We can't demand that they put their lives on the line." Miki tightened her jaw.

Alice was silent.

The ratio between soldiers and civilians were awfully skewed. Most of the defence was done through weapons that could be controlled.

If they're suffering casualties in the Nightmare every so often after a person's limit has been reached, soon they'll run out of people to explore the depths.

Several researchers straightened instinctively upon seeing Miki.

"Captai-"

"Just pretend I'm not here. This isn't a test, I'm just gathering some information on the Nightmare." Miki dismissed with a wave of her hand.

They hesitated. It was hard to ignore the presence of the Captain after all.

But in the end, they returned to their work with a few stray glances occasionally turning to Alice.

Miki stopped near the map and turned to Alice before leaning against the table.

"I don't know how it is in the other cities since there's been a few reports that contradicted what we've found, but the Nightmare in Grand Cathia is like a giant labyrinth."

She tapped her finger against the map.

"We realised this after noticing that several landmarks were lining up. As long as the number of deaths is relatively synched up, we'll be able to use an item bought from the Shopkeeper to link up to one another.

"Four people can link up at most at once and form squads to explore the place." Miki explained before looking for a document by her side.

"Of course, death isn't the only method of linking up in Grand Cathia. You can still link up without death but that method is a bit more risky. There's a higher chance of you being lost in the Nightmare, sinking too deep and being unable to escape."

She handed a report to Alice.

A graph of neural activity suddenly dropping and being marked as Signal Lost.

There was no need to question what had happened to the operator. It was obvious.

"Does the density of the monsters change as a group?" Alice asked curiously.

She hadn't come across any items that would've allowed her to synch up with Alyss, Cayla and Elias.

If she knew about this, she would've done it earlier.

"Depends on the area. Sometimes it changes, sometimes it doesn't. It seems like the Nightmare recognises what we've explored. Once we clear an area, the density falls back down to solo numbers and squads can easily breeze past.

"If anything, it feels like provocation. For a realm that's demanding our deaths, it's making things awfully easy for us." Miki frowned.

It was suspicious. Too suspicious.

"An invitation to explore further huh?" Alice raised an eyebrow as Miki nodded.

"Exactly. It's an invitation for us to dive deeper. But doing so risks our operators. We have to balance how much we can explore along with defending against the siege after all." She sighed.

The Nightmare demanded death while the Siege demanded fear.

A battle on two fronts.

After a moment, Miki let out a sigh.

"Another thing we found out... Is that there is a 'host' of this Nightmare." She folded her arms.

Alice frowned.

"Someone is currently the centre piece for Grand Cathia as a whole. And within this, there are smaller zones hosted by other people with their histories scattered in the clues.

"If we can kill the guardian of the Zone and figure out the history from the clues, we should be able to figure out the host with a bit of effort. Once we do, the location becomes a safe zone of sorts. In other words, a hub."

Alice was silent.

If this was true, then the Nightmare in Grand Cathia wasn't that different after all. Her current Zone, one of the Famine in the north was created by weaving together two hosts it seems.

Part divinity part memory.

The main question is which divinity? She doubted Solaris having any connection with this. If he did, Gwen would've notified her by now.

Lumiria... There was a slight chance but she wouldn't be able to verify.

The most likely would be Enris. If she was to consider the nature of this period from the North, the great famine, it would make sense that the Apostle of Famine, Deva, was involved.

But this was divinity they're talking about. Something Monika didn't seem to be joking around.

So rather than Deva, the likelihood of it being Enris making a move personally was also high.

Revenge for the death of war perhaps...

Either way, she still needed to find the original host of the memory.

The one who experienced the famine of the north.

Someone with a connection to that red knight.

"I'm guessing you're using the hub as checkpoints while progressing to the core of the Grand Cathia Nightmare?" Alice asked, moving on from the Northern famine for now.

"Yes." Miki nodded. "If the other Zones became hubs, there are some theories floating around hinting that resolving the main Nightmare could possibly dispel the dream."

"Theories huh? What's your take?"

Alice doubted things would be simple like that. Nyer wouldn't allow the Nightmare to be dismantled so easily unless it served a goal. Or was it false hope?

When they think everything is going well only for it to be futile in the end.

"I think it holds some degree of truth. I'm sceptical but it doesn't change the fact that the Nightmare needs to be dealt with." Miki sighed.

"I suppose the question now is how do I link up with you guys since my Nightmare seems to be in a different Zone." Alice scratched her chin.

They speak of the item from the shopkeeper but since she didn't see anything like that, maybe she hadn't unlocked it yet.

There was also the option to ask Plume since she seems to be one of the many monitors of the place. Though thinking back to that shy girl...

Alice couldn't help but feel a little guilty.

It felt like taking advantage of her after all.

"The item was available to us once we found the third variant of the Embryos. If you haven't seen it yet, you haven't cleared enough of the Zones. I suppose that'll be your priority for now.

"I'm surprised though. I thought someone of your talents would be far beyond what we've discovered so far." Miki commented.

Alice was freakishly strong after all. Someone that people could hardly compare to.

"Yeah well unfortunately it seems like my zones are stupidly hard. My base stats are f*cking weak b*tch levels of low." Alice shrugged helplessly, unable to hold back a few curses.

"Not only that, but the bosses are outclassing me in raw stats to the point even with my techniques, it's not enough. Hell, the boss I'm facing right now is matching me in terms of technique, not just overwhelming me in raw stats." She grumbled.

"Wait, how many times have you died thus far?" Miki asked curiously.

"Hm? Oh erm... Like four times?" Alice recalled the deaths she's suffered thus far.

Blinking her eyes, Miki stood frozen.

Four times?

Just four times?

In the Nightmare realm where one misstep was death? Where Lurkers were waiting around corners to push you into boss rooms?

Not only that, but the boss kept changing every time you enter unless you figure out the story of the zone.

Dying only four times was... frankly insanity.

An absurdly low number.

"Why do you ask?" Alice wondered. Was she perhaps curious about how deep she's fallen in the Nightmare?

"Because every 10 deaths, there is a slight drop in difficulty. A slight boon if you will to help you progress the zones. It's not uncommon to be in the double digits by the time you reach your first boss." Miki shook her head.

But just like how her death count shocked Miki, Miki's answer shocked Alice.

If it's double digits for the first boss... How many times have they died?

How much of the Nightmare has invaded their minds?

Was that the reason why the Nightmare has started to siege rather than letting things happen?

Alice held her breath. The Hero's words now made sense. Farming fear he said...

Yet she didn't see this when she first entered Extalia. No siege of any kind.

They've already planted the seeds in Grand Cathia, all that's left was the harvest.

Chapter 949: A Guide's Authority

Alice stared at the map. At the red circles, the overlays and small handwritten notes pinned in certain parts.

All of their collective efforts and sacrifices all on display in front of her.

The parts where people ended their journey...

Signal lost.

Then there's the Nightmare's system. One where you wanted to avoid death as much as possible yet rewarded you for dying. Their goal is clear.

You couldn't really say it was unfair either as clearing it with low deaths is clearly possible.

"The real question now is how are we going to meet up with you in the Nightmare." Miki sighed, pushing herself off the table and started to walk while Alice followed behind her.

"I think I have a few methods of doing so. But there's no guarantees. We'll have to wait and see." Alice shrugged.

"Plus, I'm only in the second zone right now. Perhaps the other zones that become open to me will have me connect to Grand Cathia."

In her Nightmare, there were several paths that she could take in order to reach the new zones. Monika even mentioned for her to go to the other ones before trying out the northern zone.

"I see... Miss Bai also had methods of tracking progress in the Nightmare. I believe in the days we have free from the Nightmare, we should be able to make a better tracking system. But tracking was one thing, communication was another." Miki frowned.

There were moments in the Nightmare where zones shifted because they didn't anchor it down properly.

If they could communicate the changes better, their progress will no doubt speed up.

Alice hummed lightly.

Tracking was only one problem they had to deal with. The other would be... Monika.

If Alice was to help out, wouldn't the witch turn her attention to Grand Cathia?

Right now, Alice didn't know what her goals are. There was an above zero percent chance that Monika could sabotage Grand Cathia.

Thankfully, there were a few things Alice could try.

One being communicating with Plume.

With her being connected to the branch within-

Alice paused her steps.

She blinked her eyes and realised something.

Since Karina gave her the guide's authority to travel between branches freely, doesn't that mean she could directly interfere with the Nightmare of others without the need for the item?

Based on what Miki has mentioned, the summoning had its own flaws such as increasing monster density.

But if she was to simply teleport there, would she count as a natural resident?

[That's... it'll probably work.] Cayla spoke up, realising what Alice was hinting at.

[The guides don't make the zones harder after all. They observe and their presence doesn't change anything.]

"Something wrong?" Miki asked, noticing Alice suddenly stopping in place.

"Nothing, I just got a slight theory." Alice grinned.

"Theory?"

"If it works the way I think it does, and I manage to link up to a branch in someone else's zone, I might be able to find a few loopholes." Alice explained.

Hearing this, Miki immediately walked up.

"Explain."

If there were loopholes to be found, the lives of her soldiers could be spared.

Seeing her desperation, Alice gestured for Miki to take a seat and explained her run in with Karina.

Of course, in the process of this, she made sure to leave out Plume and Monika for now.

Miki sat with her arms crossed.

To think they could hand out authorities within the Nightmare like this...

"Are you able to transfer parts of it to anyone? Or is it just you?"

"I haven't tested it yet so I don't know. But based on what I know about guides, travel between zones should be possible." Alice shook her head.

"If the only requirements are that you link up to a branch, you should be fine. When summoned, the others who traverse the Nightmare share the same checkpoints as the current 'host'.

"When they rest, they all rest. And after going back to their own Nightmares, whatever they've explored remains available to them." Miki explained.

"Let's keep it as a possibility for now. Suyin can monitor my condition along with the others so let's see if we can translate that into the map. There's no guarantee so we should put everything into this basket." Alice reminded as Miki nodded her head.

Watching Miki walk away to make some plans, Alice chuckled before looking for Suyin and Elias.

'Say, Alyss. You know what this means?'

'Hm?' Alyss raised an eyebrow while relaxing in her bed.

'If we can move to the other zones, this'll be the first time we'll be fighting side by side rather than swapping in and out of control.' Alice grinned.

Hearing this, Alyss blinked for the moment as the realisation settled in.

Once it did, her eyes widened and she sat up on the bed.

'Sh*t, you're right...'

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' Alice asked.

'Depends. Are YOU thinking what I'm thinking?'

The two of them grinned at each other before high fiving with a loud clap.

Cayla stared at the two idiots and sighed.

[What nefarious plan are you thinking about now?] Cayla rubbed her eyelids.

'Hehe~ We're gonna jump the sh*t outta whoever shows up.' Alice gave Cayla a thumbs up.

[. . . Was that the master plan you were cooking up?] Cayla stared at the two and rolled her eyes.

'Well duh, what else would we do?' Alice tilted her head.

Cayla opened her mouth before giving up.

She needs to remember that in a fight, Alice was all instincts and hardly any thought. She does whatever comes to her naturally.

And Alyss was the same. Only instead of brute forcing things with casting and instinct, she does so by beating the crap out of whoever they're fighting.

If the two of them were to team up...

Cayla could already imagine the beat down the enemy would get.

The moment they focus on Alyss, Alice would start blasting.

If they turn their focus on Alice, Alyss will start wailing away at their body.

Two rapid animals gnawing at their ankles, making it hard for anyone to fight back properly.

###

Arys had her eyes closed while two radiant tethers were connected to both Allura and Gin.

Due to the situation, she begrudgingly scanned Gin as well.

"Tsk, I can't remove it. Not while we're still in the vicinity of Extalia." She sighed, removing the tethers while pulling out a cigarette in annoyance.

"Does it pose any danger? Or is it simply dormant for now?" Gin asked, clenching his fist.

There was a hint of displeasure in his face, this new foreign energy polluting his veins.

"No danger. But it serves as a beacon. One that was immediately installed the moment we stepped foot on this land. Now whenever there is a 'call' our bodies will naturally react and we'll be sent to that place." Arys lit up her cigarette and took a deep drag.

Allura was silent during this.

Her eyes were closed and she sensed the flow of this energy.

Within her body, there was now three reservoirs.

One from the remaining authority and divinity bestowed upon her by Velouria.

Another that was slowly leaking with no signs of stopping. Her abyssal energy, her life force. The hourglass counting down the time she has left.

And now, this third reservoir.

The storage of Nightmare energy that coursed through her body.

It was seeking to replace the Abyssal energy in her body, to hijack it and override everything.

To bind her using new rules.

She thought it was going to be a source unique to the strange realm she was just in.

But...

Considering it's presence, it won't be an exaggeration to say that it's trying to expand its influence across the world, not just the nation of Extalia.

"If I was to use this energy, how much damage would it do to my body?" Allura asked, glancing up at Arys.

Gin creased his brows.

He wanted to say something but Arys was faster.

"Lua." Arys glared.

"Didn't you ask me to extend your time? So why are you fighting again?"

Allura opened her mouth before letting out a sigh.

"Sorry, force of habit."

Scratching her hair, Arys clicked her tongue.

"I expected as much. Someone like you can't sit still in the first place." Finishing her cigarette in one go, Arys folded her arms.

"I'll need to examine a few subjects before I can say anything. But what I can say is that as long as you're in Extalia, this energy will act similarly to Abyssal energy before you basically got super cancer.

"It'll replenish naturally. And as long as you don't over cap on usage, you should be able to fight to some extent without using your Abyssal energy. And before you ask, no, it can't replace the Abyssal energy keeping you alive." Arys shook her head.

"The operation I did on you can't be resolved so easily. You wanted time, I gave you time. It's a contract, the final one that's eating away at your life force. Even if you fill the gaps using energy from the outside or Nightmare energy, it will continue to eat away at what remains.

"Anything you use will be permanent." She warned.

This final contract wasn't something Allura can find loop holes in. If she was to keep testing the limits, she'll die.

"I see... Thank you." Allura smiled.

Her sentence confirmed one thing for her though.

While it can't replace the energy being used to sustain her, it can be used for combat.

Thus, if her reservoir grows large enough where the Nightmare energy can offset whatever Sigil power she was to use...

Glancing down at her hand, Allura snapped her finger and a flame lit up on the tip...

Chapter 950: Web Of Lightning

Within a strange world, Ria slid back as her back crashed against the invisible walls of this realm.

Lightning crackled along her skin, her boots leaving marks against the ground that was quickly swallowed by ink.

"Tch!" Clicking her tongue, she slammed her fist into the ground as lightning rippled across the surface, scattering the wave of ink that burst out of the ground.

Astrelya wanted her to learn from Mara, to steal his techniques of utilizing his authority and powers.

But how can she focus on that when her life is about to be forfeit?

'The battle is a simple one my ass!' Ria cursed, applying the properties of magnetism to her feet and ground.

Her figure flickered out of view, circling the Lord who was standing in the middle.

Mara narrowed his gaze. He thought the fight would be over much sooner.

But even with a boundary sealing off this space, her speed was proving to be an issue.

Not only that, but she has filled this entire space with nodes of electricity. Ones that she can travel through and swap places if necessary.

He was stronger but only if he could land a hit on her.

During the start of the fight, she was taken by surprise hence why his attacks almost landed.

But now, she was focused completely.

***BANG!!!**

A streak of lightning shot towards him from behind as a waterfall of ink slammed down, blocking the strike.

She was fast but her attacks couldn't break his defence.

A stalemate.

If that was the case...

Mara closed his eyes.

The ink across his body started to shift, coming alive almost.

"I've fought beasts who focus on speed. Old Lords who believe that they have the upper hand just because they can't be toughed. Do you know what they all struggle with?" Mara asked, confusing Ria who was trying to find a way to breach his defence.

Clashing his hands together, Abyssal energy erupted from Mara's body.

The boundary holding back the zone disappeared and Ria immediately took this chance to create some distance.

But that proved to be a mistake.

From the core of this new world, a myriad of mountains and valleys started to appear.

Countless twists and turns blocking the path to Mara.

And as this fortress of mountains was created, a giant ink like beast rested on the top, staring at Ria.

A giant ink dragon with crimson veins across its body.

Ria frowned.

But since they've created some distance...

Condensing her energy into a single node, lightning coursed through her body.

Afterimages manifested and several lightning circles appeared above the mountains.

She was going to shatter everything in one hit!

But...

Her energy refused to consolidate above her target.

Astrelya watched from afar.

Mara's authority as the Lord of Ink was unique. Whatever he designated as his canvas receives new laws of his choosing. A second resonance that doesn't allow for interaction outside of specific counters.

And this boundary of his has a natural barrier against ranged attacks.

Unless one can target this space in its entirety, they'll have to adhere to his laws of combat.

Meaning...

Ria had to close the gap through the mountains if she wanted to reach Mara.

Naturally, Mara had to follow the same laws but this is where his application of power overcomes this gap.

By creating the ink dragon that rests upon the mountains, this entire domain becomes an extension of his body.

Range attacks are now classified as melee!

*RUMBLE!!!

Ria skated across the landscape as countless ink arms tried to grab her ankles. Twisting her body, she bend backwards, avoiding a claw strike while glaring at the dragon who was tracking her every movement.

Wherever she stepped briefly, its eyes would snap towards her.

Clenching her fist, lightning crackled but the moment Ria tried to project it forwards in order to teleport, it fizzled out.

"Tch!"

This couldn't continue. She was running out of patience.

At this rate, the only way a victor can appear between them would be when one of them runs out of energy.

And as a Lord, it was clear that Mara has an advantage over her!

She had to play into game.

'I can't project lightning out of my body or else it fizzles. I can't reach my top speed either without this.'
Ria created a whip of lightning, clashing against the ink.

As long as the lightning is still connected to her body, it'll maintain its form.

But at the same time, doing so meant that she'll exhaust her energy much faster than usual.

'Think. Don't stop thinking. What is the path to victory here...' Ria took several deep breaths to calm her mind.

She knew what Astrelya wanted from her.

The 'easy' way out of this predicament.

To invoke the Eclipse, to override this realm with Enris's power.

But Ria didn't want that.

She thought back to all the times Alice has shown her combat smarts. The way she changes her approach and adapts her casting methods to fit the situation.

Ria narrowed her eyes.

*Crackle...

Lightning began to spread from her feet. Each step causing a web to expand that fizzled out the moment she stepped away.

However...

With each step, something started to change.

*Crackle...

A smirk appeared on Ria's face.

She stopped her sprint as the Ink claw missed.

'10 meters. That's how far I can expand this range. The rest is up to my own reactions huh?'

Lightning pulsed through her veins. Ria's hair shifted to that of a gold and blue.

***BANG!!!**

Ria disappeared.

A web of lightning streaks expanding in a 10 meter radius around her like a flower.

She teleported to the edge and the web followed her movements, maintaining their connection so that it didn't fizzle out.

There was a brief pause between the teleports as she had to calculate the new coordinates.

But with each shift, she adapted to the sensation.

This feeling of flickering to the boundary of her lightning.

Her form continuously flickered through the realm, faster than the dragon could track.

Ink crashing down where her silhouette was moments ago.

'Keep refining. Don't stop thinking.' Ria turned into a blur, her entire body becoming the manifestation of lightning and beyond.

Her figure blurring into a single streak that rushed through the realm.

Astrelya crossed her eyes.

A smile disappearing from her face.

It was clear with this. Even with her life on the line, Ria will never use the power of the Eclipse.

Forcing her to accept the power of the Eclipse was impossible.

If so... then what must she do?

Astrelya tapped her fingers.

it's clear that she'll have to adjust her plans in order to achieve her goals.

As Astrelya made her choice, she could see the flash of light approaching the mountains.

No matter how Mara adjusted the mountains, Ria maintained her speed.

Each turn, each shift was done at such a tremendous pace it's a wonder how Ria was keeping her body in tact.

But the secret lies in teleporting at the right angle.

The way she is facing, the way she shifts parts of her body into lightning.

Despite turning at harsh angles, Ria's movement was technically done in a straight line!

She streaked across the ever shifting ink terrain, her lightning web carving a path through the labyrinth as Mara struggled to keep track.

He was trying attack her before but now he was stuck with defending himself!

Each teleport was also followed up with a straight against the landscape.

She was trying to dismantle his domain so that she could land a strike against him.

Mara's gaze sharpened, if things are like this, he'll have to adjust the laws he put into place.

But doing so also opens up the possibility of a long ranged attack from Ria.

His greatest advantage right now has been lost.

He exhaled slowly, the ink across his skin rippled.

Tattoos shifting in position as symbols were created along his ribs.

Since he could stop her speed, since he couldn't prevent her from adapting to the laws.

He can only try to stall things out!

Slamming his fists together, a pulse of energy rippled out as Ria widened her eyes.

She noticed her finger tips slowly turning to ink. Her hair doing the same and her lightning being converted.

This was a timer.

If Mara can stall things out, if Mara could survive till the end, she'll get converted to ink and subjected to the laws of his domain.

Whatever he wanted to do, she won't be able to reject!

'A last resort.' She narrowed her eyes.

The end of the fight was approaching and Ria grit her teeth.

"So you noticed." Mara folded his arms.

The world seemingly caving to his will as the heavens and earth inverted.

Ria didn't answer.

She continued to accelerate.

If time wasn't on her side then she has to end things as soon as possible.

The final strike.

###

Selen stood before the temple.

She could sense the storm of energy roaring above.

Miralith also had the frown on her face.

The King was not in a good mood.

Not onlyt that, but it felt like something else was merging with the King's aura, a parasite even.

"Are you sure you want to talk to him?" Selen asked with a forced smile.

It felt like they'll be struck down for just trying to approach the temple.

"A discussion must be had. I... Wish to speak to my old friend." Miralith sighed.

"Well you should definitely hope he's open to discussion. Otherwise a few of us might return in bags."
Caera joked despite the worry on their faces.

Without hesitation, she took the lead and approached the temple.