

Abyssal A 951

Chapter 951: Meeting The King

The closer they drew, the heavier the air became.

Selen's movements practically slowed to a near halt, even with the power of acceleration placed upon her body.

Each step toward the temple felt like wading into deep water, pressure crushing her from all sides.

Each breath becoming harder.

The storm above the temple raged as though to reflect the King's temper, his current mood.

'Are you sure we can even get an audience with the King with this time of mood? I doubt he'll want anything to do with us.' Selen asked directly through the connection she held with Miralith.

It was a little risky to maintain but it was her request. Even if the Zenia family may find out.

Because this was her last meeting with the King.

Her old friend.

'Don't worry, he's always like this.' Miralith let out a small chuckle. 'He always demanded fear and respect from the world itself, not just his subjects. A tyrant daring the world to complain and object if it has any issues with him.'

'Here's you sounding nostalgic and here's me wondering if I'll get blown to pieces the moment he realises his friend has been trapped by humans.' Selen let out an inward sigh.

Regardless, this was something that must be done.

The king chose to seal himself in the past for a reason. As rude as it may sound, his era was long over.

His power was something she needed to help carve her own future.

'Let me take over for a little bit. I need to greet an old friend after all.' Miralith asked as Selen nodded her head, willingly allowing Miralith's power to take over.

***RUMBLE!!!**

The aura of a Lord erupted from Selen.

As Miralith's contractor, her connection and compatibility with the beast was extremely high.

In fact, through this contract, through the tether in which Miralith uses to bestow Selen her power, possession like this was possible so long as Selen granted her the authority!

Opening her eyes, both of Selen's pupils transformed into that of a dragon's.

Miralith gazed upon the ruins of old. The towering temple doors, memories flooding her mind.

The king was a tyrant. No doubt about it. But for his subjects, he ensured their survival. He stood at the front. Taller than anyone, laughed louder than anybody.

He was set the example and the people were protected in his shadow.

A king who sees the past, present and future.

Miralith took a step forward, unburdened by the restrictions placed around the King's temple.

She continued to walk, a smile hung on her face while her aura continued to grow.

As she reached the top, Miralith pushed open the doors and saw the King sat upon his throne.

Seeing the familiar sight, her pupils trembled before a smile appeared on her face.

"How brazen." The King's voice echoed out.

Lazy, disdainful.

One that radiated authority within these walls.

Golden eyes bore down on Miralith, examining her whole body in one instant.

Judging the one who stands before the ruler.

"To stride into my hall wearing that borrowed authority." He spoke slowly, resting his cheek against his knuckles. "Have the ages grown so thin that even mongrels dare wield power that is not theirs to control?"

The pressure increased but Miralith laughed it off.

"You're sulking again." Miralith smiled, hands behind her back. She took several light steps towards the King who frowned.

"I leave you alone for an era, waiting for the day you wake up again. And all I see is a big baby sulking on his golden throne."

A vein bulged on the king's forehead.

"There's only one audacious enough to speak with that tone to me. So you have gifted the power I bestowed upon you to a human?"

Tapping his finger, the pressure disappeared.

"You've chosen a strange body." The king closed one of his eyes.

The eye that looked towards the future.

For a conversation with a friend, he wishes to live in the present.

"Hmm... well humans do come up with some interesting ideas every century or so." Miralith flicked her hair.

"What foolishness." The King scoffed.

"So what manner of insanity has possessed you to greet me in borrowed flesh? To reveal a vessel filled with your power yet lacking in all areas."

"Is there a reason for friends to greet one another? But what about you? My king. I see jewellery unlike any other adorning your body. Has your tastes changed in the time I've been away?" Miralith asked, snapping her fingers as black chains manifested on the King's body.

An invisible strike to reveal his newly acquired shackles.

"Tsk, how impudent. To lay your hands upon this King's body, do you wish for a maid to feed you from this day on?" He glared at Miralith who laughed charmingly.

"Well I wouldn't mind if you were to feed me lunch like the old days my King."

She could still remember his expression when he was feeding her food, allowing her to adapt to his power.

It was only in those moments when the two of them were alone did he look the most like himself.

"Useless talk." The King tapped his finger.

A grey arc of energy suddenly shot towards Miralith as she flicked her finger, sending out an identical arc.

*BANG!!!

As the two energies collided, they rebounded off one another and crashed into a pillar, reducing it to ash that scattered in the wind.

The King was unable to hold back a grin, tapping his finger a few more times.

Each arc capable of erasing the 'time' of an object.

Miralith matched each attack blow for blow as neither retreated nor advanced.

"It seems like borrowing this half baked vessel has not dulled your power. If it did, I would've left my throne and dragged your physical body over here."

"My King, one shouldn't be so forceful when the other is a lady." Miralith waved her finger as a pulse of energy erupted from her body.

"Fool." The King scowled, matching the output.

"I see no Lady before me. All I see is a beast who forgets their role as the King's pet arrogantly continues to stand with their back straight."

"Well if the King's cherished pet doesn't speak their heart to the King, won't he get lonely?" Miralith countered, stepping towards the Throne.

Hearing her words, the King smirked and nodded.

"As always, I will allow such brazen words. So speak your heart to me. Why are you here?"

"Do I get to use the pardon you promised me long ago?" Miralith tapped her heel, appearing by the King's side.

"Hmph. What kind of king takes back their promises?"

"Then... What do you think about bestowing your power to my vessel?" Miralith asked, tilting her head with a charming smile.

The King furrowed his brows and shot Miralith a glare.

"I didn't know you decided to become a court jester. Should I reward you with an attire containing a myriad of colours? Or perhaps a space for you to perform to your hearts content."

"My~ I didn't know I made such a change either." Miralith gasped in fake shock, causing a slight hint of annoyance to show up on the King's face.

Yet despite her rude words, the King didn't lash out.

They simply talked as old friends.

"To think there would come a day where you ask me of all people to give up my power to such a lacking vessel. You may as well be asking me to gouge out my heart and offer it on a platter." He shook his head.

"Time flows like sand in an hourglass frozen in space. The grains that reach the bottom cannot flow back to the top for the vessel is held in place. Our era has passed my King. It is time for people like us to leave the stage."

"The world is my home and yet you demand me to leave?" He glared at Miralith who didn't back down.

"Why else would you seal yourself in the first place my king? Was it not because you realised the world no longer needed your guidance? Your radiance?" Miralith smiled sadly.

The King sat in silence.

The chains around his body only allowing him to make moves that adhere to his fate.

One that was supposedly set into stone the moment he decided to peer towards the Axis.

After a brief pause, he King raised his hand slightly and flicked his wrist.

In the blink of an eye, the temple had returned to how it was before their clash. Miralith was back near the entrance and the pillars restored.

"Every grand accomplishment deserves a reward to match the feat. Land who one who has saved countless. Weapons for a warrior that bested the Lords. Armour for one who sacrifices his body to protect the weak." The King spoke as the chains tightened around his body but he ignored it.

Even as they dig into his flesh, he stood up on his throne and glanced down at Miralith who listened with a smile.

"For your accomplishment of being able to withstand my power, I granted you the freedom to speak your heart before me. So tell me, what accomplishment is deserving for your vessel to receive the King's power?" He asked, folding his arms.

His aura now erupting at full force as the Abyss cried out in his presence.

The land trembled in fear while Miralith closed her eyes to savour this moment.

How nostalgic. Sensing this familiar flow of power once more.

"An act befitting the reward... How about some entertainment for the Tyrant King?" Miralith suggested, causing the King to raise an eyebrow.

Without saying anything else, Miralith handed control back to Selen who blinked her eyes.

Cold sweat dripping down her back as she was now the singular focus of the King's attention.

"Hou... Entertainment. From this vessel? Commoner girl. To receive such praise from my subject, consider my expectations raised. Do well to entertain me.

"But if you fail..." He narrowed his eyes.

"There will be nothing left of you to be put into a grave."

Chapter 952: Entertaining The King

'MIRALITHHH!!!' Selen shouted in her mind as she immediately slammed the gas down for Acceleration.

Pushing her body's innate time to the limit, she jumped out of the area as an entire cavity was carved out and turned to ash.

Had she been even a second late, she would've been killed!

'Don't worry, as long as you entertain the king enough, he won't use his full power.' Miralith laughed.

'It doesn't matter when the power he's showing is enough to kill me!'

Gritting her teeth, Selen slammed her palms down as a guardless blade was conjured next to her.

Imbuing it with Abyssal energy, she slashed!

*KRK!!!

Colliding with an arc of grey energy, she forcefully cancelled out the attack by slowing down the progression of time within her weapon.

But it was only a temporary fix as the weapon was already beginning to show cracks.

Slowing it down was one thing but she was fighting against the infinite flow of time. A river that accelerated towards the end.

As long as she cannot reverse the flow, whatever this grey energy touched would die eventually!

And as someone who's messed with the concept of time through Miralith's power, she knew that was impossible.

"What's wrong? For someone who received such praise, the only thing you have entertained me with is the manner of which you run." The King folded his arms while staring at Selen with a slight frown on his face.

"Or would you rather have the two waiting outside to join you in your act? Go ahead if you wish, I won't stop you."

Selen's smile twitched. For someone that Miralith called a friend, his words sure were harsh!

'He's always like this. But you learn to read between the lines once you get to know him. He's not bad of a King you know?' Miralith smirked.

'That doesn't matter when everything he can do will kill me!' Selen complained.

Flicking her wrist, she halted the time around her in order to give herself some breathing room.

She couldn't use her perception manipulation just yet. That was her trump card.

Using it early would only mean getting rid of her options if she can't defeat her opponent in one go.

*RUMBLE!!!

The space around Selen began to shake, the passage of time forcefully sped up to counter her barrier.

Narrowing her eyes, Selen flicked her finger.

A pulse of energy, a cast.

But nothing happened around her.

The King raised an eyebrow before glancing to the right. Without moving a muscle, an arc of energy burst out.

*BANG!!!

"Heh~ How dangerous." Caera's voice rang out as she slid out of her portal, narrowly dodging the strike.

"Vile spawn, I allowed the jester to bring in her allies. But I had not expected her ally to be someone of your calibre." The King scowled, sensing the energy within Caera's body.

"How disheartening. I apologise if my presence displeases the King but the past can't be changed. I can't undo the contract I've accepted so you'll have to excuse me for the time being." Caera chuckled before grinning.

Clenching her fist, portals appeared around the King as black tentacles burst out in an attempt to grab him.

"You dare lay a hand on my body?!" A vein bulged on his neck as a pulse of grey energy appeared around him, withering the tentacles to ash.

"Uwah~ Scary." Caera hovered back.

But despite the smile on her face, there was a slight hint of worry in her eyes.

The King's power was above what she had expected.

She thought his main gimmick would be the erasure of the 'present', yet he hasn't used that power yet.

Instead, just his basic manipulation was enough to put them on edge.

A single graze, a single hit.

Without the proper countermeasures, even the smallest wound was deadly.

His grey energy didn't register as a 'hit' after all.

It was simply the flow of time.

What is there to regenerate when you die of old age?

That was the issue they were facing.

So wherever they are hit, they must carve it out immediately so regeneration can take place.

But therein lies another issue.

Did the attack affect the 'outline' of their physical form? Can it even be avoided by carving out one's flesh?

No wonder he was a tyrant who garnered the respect of Tiamat.

Had he not chosen to seal himself...

"Welp, seems like this is your last chance Selen. Are you sure you want to try for this Sigil? The difficulty is higher than I originally anticipated. Even if I help out a little, victory doesn't seem quite so likely." Caera asked, creating a wall of black energy to block the King's strike.

Yet no matter the defence, it was a one time use while countless streaks of grey rushed over, forcing them to dodge in strange ways.

Dodges that half relied on instinct as a slash would appear where they're about to reach.

A perception of the future.

Selen was silent.

There was hesitation in her heart. There's no denying it.

But...

Miralith asked her to 'entertain' this kind. To be rewarded for her act.

'Miralith.'

'Yes?' Miralith opened one eye with an amused smile.

'Can I trust you?'

'I can't tell you what you can or can't trust. But I can tell you this little girl. I've seen many mess with the concept of time after my King has sealed himself. Yours is the most interesting with the manipulation of perception.' Miralith chuckled.

'Play your cards right and even he will crack a smile of amusement.'

Selen took a deep breath.

That was all the confirmation she needed from her.

As long as a path of possibility was open, she'll grab it with her own hands!

"Egil!" Selen shouted as a rush of darkness broke into the temple.

The King was unimpressed as he watched the three of them group up.

"Are your preparations complete? Or should I grace you with some fresh garments, jester." He asked but Selen shook her head.

Without saying anything else, her Sigils flashed as energy erupted from her body.

The world around them began to darken as she activated her Second Resonance.

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"How does it feel? Coming back here after spending so long in the North." A woman asked while leaning against a giant scabbard stabbed into the ground.

She lifted her scarred arm and felt the direction of the wind.

A slight frown on her face.

"Less than I thought I would feel. Perhaps I got rid of my attachment to this place after opening my eyes to the world." A young man chuckled, resting his hand on the pommel of his blade.

"I can put a ward on the two of us. But I don't know how long it'll last.

"There's a curse upon these lands, one that seems to drag your consciousness elsewhere." The woman explained, surprising the young man.

"On this scale? We're barely in the borders." He frowned.

But there was no doubt about it. The boundary of this curse was one that covered the entirety of Extalia.

"Any ideas on what might've been done?" She asked.

Creasing his brows, he deliberated for a moment before shaking his head.

"I was never involved on a deeper level for these kinds of things. But it must be related to the Doctor, he's the only one crazy enough to pull something on this level of scale."

"That annoying man again." The woman clicked her tongue in annoyance.

She recalled her last fight with him.

Even after cutting the space around him, even after trying to target that strange crystal using her powers, he continues to live.

The only thing she could do was forcefully tear a tunnel into the Abyss and send him there, buying them as much time as possible.

With her powers, she doubted whether or not she could kill him for good.

"We shouldn't focus on him though. I believe my father should've called my younger brother back to the family. He... he was upset by Alice's incident as much as I was. Maybe even more." He revealed a sad smile.

"I'm sure if I can get into contact with him, he'll be able to help."

"Are you sure?" Eryn creased her brows.

The Zenia family have proven time and time again that their members can't be trusted with a small handful of exceptions. Albert was one of those, same with a few of the Zenia victims.

But as for the main family... especially Albert's father, there was no redemption.

He was fully aware of the atrocities they've committed and now they've even placed a curse upon the entirety of Extalia.

"I can only hope right?" Albert smiled bitterly.

He was fully aware that things can't go back to how it was before.

But as Alyss's older brother, as her family, he should be supporting her from behind.

That includes dismantling this misguided family.

And by extension, he wanted to give his younger brother a chance of redemption. A chance to correct things before he falls with the family.

He could still remember Alice's rage, their hatred.

Even just the lingering thought caused his body to tremble.

How long has she been cultivating that anger?

Her wrath was one that'll burn everything down in order to purge everything related to the family. Even those who knew nothing.

He wanted to give his brother a chance.

"Indeed." Eryn smiled.

"Let's continue avoiding the main routes. The Zenia's have eyes everywhere." She suggested.

Albert nodded his head.

Without saying anything else, the two of them ventured deep into Extalia.

Chapter 953: Nursing Arax

Gwen paced around the front of the door.

She adjusted her hair, making sure she looked good enough.

She glanced at her own body, checking for marks or bruises that would cause her father to worry.

After a long pause, she raised her hand to knock... then stopped.

She hesitated before closing her eyes.

'Get a grip Gwen. You wanted time with dad and now you've got it. So what are you hesitating for?' She questioned herself before lowering her hand.

"Do you plan on just standing there?" Shiera's voice echoed out from within as Gwen scratched her cheek and opened the door.

"I was wondering if dad was asleep or not." Gwen entered, closing the door behind her.

Her usual serious shell crumbled to pieces as the nervous little girl she kept hidden inside revealed herself in front of the Apostles.

"Even if I was asleep, I won't reject you coming in." Arax's chuckled loudly while Shiera rolled her eyes and smacked him on the head.

"Keep laughing like that and your wounds will reopen. I swear, can't you laugh quietly?" She grumbled while Arax flinched in pain.

The room smelled heavily of medicine and burnt incense. Stuff that Shiera prepared to help Arax recover from his wounds faster.

"Hey dad, hey aunty." Gwen took a seat next to Shiera.

"Hm... is it me or do you look taller?" Arax scratched his chin, causing Gwen to laugh.

"That's because you're laying down dad. I've stopped growing a long time ago."

"Really? Because it seems like just yesterday that my little girl was small as a feather. Now look at you, a Lord." Arax's gaze softened while Shiera nodded her head.

He raised his hand, wanting to pat Gwen's head but couldn't reach due to his injuries.

Instead, Gwen leaned down to make it easier for him, a happy smile on her face.

"Are the other Cardinals making things hard for you?" Shiera asked, grabbing an apple and peeling it with a knife.

With her martial prowess, such mundane tasks were done swiftly as she even used her knife to carve a small character using the fruit.

"You know how they are. They're certainly trying. But it doesn't matter, does it?" Gwen shrugged.

"Of course it doesn't. There will always be people against them. So long as you walk with your back straight and heart clear, you will reach the end with no regrets." Arax reassured as Gwen nodded her head.

"Have you gotten used to your powers yet?" Shiera asked, stuffing a piece of apple into Arax's mouth while gently feeding Gwen.

"Somewhat. Though it's harder than I thought." Gwen nodded, holding out her hand as primordial flickers of fire danced around her fingers.

She wanted to use this power to help her father but...

Her control was still lacking and she didn't want to try something so risky.

Not when her father was the target.

Once when she was sure of her capabilities was she willing to give it a try.

"That's the difference between a Hunter and a Lord. You're connected to something bigger. You realise that every time you use your power, there is a funnel attached to you, supplying you for some of the cost. Weird right?" Shiera smiled.

"Mnm. Even though the authority is in my chest, my soul, I can feel the contact I've signed when I first got my Sigils. It's a bit icky." Gwen admitted with a helpless sigh.

"That's because the one in control of the Abyss is someone different." Shiera shrugged.

"The faceless man?"

"Indeed. Back then, the Abyss was governed by two sides. On one side, you have Velouria, Kaden and Allura. One Goddess and her Apostles. On the other, you have the Will of the Abyss." Shiera split an apple in two.

"When you became a Lord back then, you had a connection to two sources. One was Velouria, the other is the Abyss. But now that she is no longer here, the only thing you have a connection to is the realm itself."

Pausing for a second, Shiera tossed an apple slice into her mouth.

"But with the weird stuff certain individuals are doing to the Abyss, it's no wonder that the connection feels a little vile right now.

"Even as an Apostle, I still receive some of my powers through the Sigil system.

"There's a slight conflict but probably nothing as major as yours considering your authority." She shrugged,

Lord of the First Flame.

The origin and the beginning of everything.

Even Solaris bowed to the first flame as his legend proclaimed.

So, now that Gwen has appeared with such authority, the people in the Church were getting worried.

Divided into two factions.

One that supported the rising authority of the first flame, a potential Goddess born from man. The one that'll bring them to the new age.

The other supported Solaris and the old order. To seek a power beyond god was heretical, to try and usurp the 'love' he has given.

Pure heresy.

Both sides were at odds yet despite claiming to be supporting her, Gwen found herself rather annoyed with the side wanting the new order.

They were just doing whatever benefitted them without consulting with her. Not that she intervened much to begin with.

All she wanted to do was help people like her father.

So long as there are people crying out for help in this world, she'll run over and help as fast as she can.

She can't save everyone, but the important fact is that she had to try.

So it didn't matter what the factions were trying to pull in the church.

"Just keep your wits about you okay? Even the ones supporting you might try push a dagger into your back." Shiera warned while Arax frowned.

"They dare!? Ow-!"

He tried to sit up only to be hit on the head by an angry Shiera.

"It was a f*cking warning for Gwenny you idiot. Not something for you to hurt yourself over again!"

"I'm an injured patient over here." Arax complained.

"If some stupid idiot didn't try to kill himself, he wouldn't be in this situation now would he? He wouldn't need to wait for reports day in day out wondering how his darling little girl is handling the Church." Shiera exposed Arax's worries as he coughed awkwardly.

Despite being an Apostle, the wounds he sustained this time were enough to kill him if he wasn't lucky.

Had Gwen not arrived, he would've sacrificed all of his life force to sustain the barriers around the people.

"It's fine dad, I can handle myself. Plus... If things go wrong I can always get some help right?" Gwen chuckled.

"Speaking of help, have you made more friends or is that stray cat still your only friend?" Shiera asked, hitting where it hurt as Gwen felt as though she was about to cough up blood.

She was already struggling to make friends when she was a Cardinal never mind now.

She is a Lord hailed as the second sun. The successor to Solaris.

Trying to make friends with this kind of background felt impossible for her.

Not to mention, where would she even find the time to do so?

But she didn't want to worry her father so...

"I got plenty of friends you know?" Gwen forced a smile.

"Actual friends, not subordinates." Shiera cut her off brutally.

Another critical hit as Gwen took direct damage from her words.

"But having a friend like that stray cat is better than 100 normal friends. So in that aspect, you did well." Shiera stopped teasing her girl with a chuckle.

"Have you heard any news from her?" Arax asked curiously.

For a girl who was responsible for the death of Kazira and the chaos in other churches, she was being awfully well behaved.

"Nothing much yet. She's exploring Extalia right now and there seems to be a bit of chaos happening over there. Something about Nightmares. If you want, I can call her again to confirm a few things." Gwen offered but Arax shook her head.

"Don't worry about it. I was just asking because I see you two working hard on two sides." Arax smiled.

It was a different feeling, an unfamiliar one.

Being stuck in this bed, unable to move properly.

He wasn't given orders, he wasn't asked to give his assistance.

This boredom, this peace.

He rarely got a moment like this when he wasn't injured.

There was always somewhere that needed his help.

Always a battlefield lacking a proper shield.

He wanted to help people so he didn't mind. Even as the years passed by, he continued his duty, his routine.

This hardly changed even when Gwen entered his life, a part he was guilty for.

But too many people were reliant on him.

Yet as Shiera said now that he was injured, it was perhaps arrogance and ego. Because now that he couldn't help, the world continued to push onwards without waiting.

The battlefields may not have him around but there were others to fill the gap.

If one person wasn't enough, two will rise to the challenge.

If two wasn't enough, three will gather.

In this sense, the future generation was now carrying their own burdens rather than relying on him.

So when he said Gwen has grown... it wasn't her physical body.

But her mind, her shadow. She had become reliable, far more than he had ever expected.

After talking with Shiera for a little longer, Gwen had to leave since she received a report of an incident.

Watching his daughter say goodbye reluctantly, Arax let out a soft sigh.

"She's grown up so fast..." He mumbled.

"Children often do. Things us long living people can't properly comprehend." Shiera chuckled.

She could still remember wanting to make a sweater for Gwen when she was younger.

But after all the missions, when she finally got the chance to give it to her, years passed and it was far too small.

"For us, days, weeks, months just fly by when we don't notice. But for her, each second matters."

Staying silent, Arax revealed a bitter smile.

"I wasn't a good father to her was I?"

"You only just realised? And you wonder why I keep calling you stupid. However." Shiera paused, a smile appearing on her face.

"You're the father she loves and the family she cherishes. It's not too late for you to do better." She fed him a slice of the apple.

"And the first step is to stop laughing so loud. The walls can't handle that kind of boisterous noise and neither can your body." She huffed as Arax was about to laugh when he held himself back.

Letting out a small forced chuckle than a full on laugh.

Chapter 954: A Deal With The Devil

Days passed in the blink of an eye.

While the staff worked tirelessly to dismantle the secrets of the Nightmare, Grand Cathia only grew louder with discontent.

Alice walked through the streets, hands in her pockets.

She stared at the children first.

They were the easiest to notice.

Some clung to their parents with an intensity that bordered on desperation, fingers digging into fabric as though afraid they might vanish if they let go. Others sat quietly on steps or crates, staring into nothing, eyes unfocused.

Awake, but not present.

Adults fared a little better.

They forced a look of composure in order to keep the other calm. If they break down, what about the ones they're trying to protect?

All they can do is whisper words of comfort even though they don't truly believe it themselves.

Forced laughter, strained smiles.

Even though the siege had been repelled, the lingering aftereffects of the Nightmare had not changed.

Every time the Nightmare appeared, their bodies were granted rest but their minds were taxed. 'Sleep' without peace. Waking up only to feel the lingering dread of the siege and the next Nightmare.

Alice exhaled slowly.

[It looks pretty miserable doesn't it?] Cayla folded her arms with a sigh.

'I don't blame them. Their survival is hinged on whether or not the Siege is repelled. And even then, they have to worry about the Nightmare.' Alice shook her head.

If they wanted to leave... where would they even go?

Could they travel far enough before the next Nightmare struck?

What if they were killed by beasts in the wilds instead, torn apart on roads instead of the city?

And say they survived. They make it to the next city.

The Nightmare was still present. The other cities will face sieges sooner or later. They had to leave Extalia entirely.

If they succeed... What next? They have no home, and don't know why they left.

And the Nightmare still left its mark on them.

A mother passed by Alice, tugging her child along while whispering reassurances she clearly didn't believe herself. The child glanced back, eyes briefly meeting Alice's.

There was no fear in that gaze.

Just exhaustion.

Alice's steps slowed.

She clenched her jaw and said nothing.

There were always people with power who made the world ugly.

More so in situations like this where an individual like Nyer can plunge an entire nation into hell.

Taking a deep breath, she let out a sigh to calm her mind.

But even if this place was hell, there are still people trying to make it better.

The staff working tirelessly to solve the riddles of the Nightmare, the soldiers who offered their lives up for exploration.

Suyin and the others improving their defences and odds of success.

Elias who tried to keep casualties to a minimum.

Everyone was struggling, but not everyone gave up.

So...

Even if there were some risks required from her, it was time to take a slight gamble.

A leap of faith.

[Are you sure that's what you want to do?] Cayla asked.

She wasn't a big fan of the plan Alice had in mind.

'What else can we do? The longer we take to dismantle this Nightmare, the harder it is for us to recover.' Alice smiled bitterly.

'We're the ones on a timer, not Nyer. If anything, he'd prefer us to take our time.' She shook her head.

'That's one thing. But... are you sure her goals align with ours? She's a bit of a wildcard right now and our lack of knowledge is dangerous.' Alyss frowned.

'Which is why it's best to make a deal with that woman. Even if it's a bit risky right?'

Alyss scratched her hair.

It's like picking between two broken bridges. One was completely broken with maybe one or two plants available.

While the other was nothing but rope that could break at any moment.

Naturally, they'll choose the plank and hope it'll suffice, even if it is dangerous.

'Do we have any failsafes in case anything happens?' Alyss asked.

She at least wanted to make sure Alice had a method of escape if things go south.

'Kind of? There's not really anything we could use to test it so this'll be the first attempt.' Alice stuck out her tongue.

In order to avoid being stuck in the Nightmare, she had used the data that Suyin gathered along with the data that Miki and her group found.

On top of these two, she also used the training she received from Griselda to set up the parameters of her triggered cast.

If everything goes well, the moment her vitals go haywire from a third party influence, it'll drag her soul back into her body.

Essentially, she's 'devouring' herself but not finishing the process.

Of course, this could also be triggered manually if needed.

As for the exit path...

Alice plans on setting one up the moment she enters the Nightmare.

To establish a link through the branch in Plume's room.

And... depending on how the talk goes, she might even be able to get more than what she originally expected.

Making her way back to the research lab, Alice gave the setting sun one more glance before stepping into the building.

"Yahoo~ Did you enjoy the walk?" Suyin asked without turning around.

Her puppet doing some last minute checks so that nothing goes wrong.

"If you count looking at the faces of people being depressed enjoyable then I suppose it was a rather decent walk." Alice shrugged, glancing at the bracelet marked with her name on the table.

"Put that on before you step into the Nightmare, it'll let us track you a little easier." Suyin reminded.

Once the last minute checks were done, Alice stepped into this strange chamber.

Wires was stuck onto her body while machinery monitored her vitals.

Now that she was standing in this chamber, Alice found herself struggling a little to stay still.

If there was any silver lining, it would be that she wasn't restrained using belts.

If she was, then she might have some bad memories with the time she endured in the Zenia family.

Taking a deep breath, the corners of Alice's vision began to darken.

She could feel the claws of the Nightmare baring down on her.

'See you soon twinnie.' Alyss smiled.

Knowing that their goal was to reconvene in the Nightmare.

'See you soon.' Alice nodded.

With a single blink, the world faded to black.

The chill of the northern winds scraped against her skin and she was back in the Nightmare.

Without hesitation, Alice resonated with the branch and sensed the points where she could teleport to.

Then, in the furthest reaches of the branch, she sensed the checkpoint in Plume's room.

Alice linked herself up.

Fog began to roll in while butterflies fluttered around her.

In mere moments, her body was turned to fog and left the Northern Zone.

"Ughh..... *sniffle* I'm sorry..."

A familiar voice could be heard as Alice opened her eyes.

She noticed two figures in Plume's room.

One was naturally Plume herself.

She was holding a strange sign, however.

[I, Plumeaelivressandoria Sorynthel-Nessaevor, am a stupid idiot for creating a branch in my room. A branch that can't be reversed and has now allowed a player to enter a zone where they're not meant to be. I deserve everything Monika does to me.]

"Hello there little flame. I apologise, I had originally intended to greet you in the Northern Zone again when you came back." Monika smiled while her hands were grabbing Plume's head like a basketball.

"However, I did not expect this stupid shut in to create a branch of all things for you."

For a moment, Alice could've sworn she heard a crack coming from Plume's head as she cried out louder with tears streaming down her face.

"Mistakes happen all the time. And seeing as how you're here, can I assume you saw this coming?" Alice shrugged her shoulders.

Monika finally let go of Plume's head and snapped her fingers, creating two seats and the table for them.

Meanwhile, Plume scrambled away, hiding herself under her blanket.

"To some degree. I'm well aware that you are not someone who wishes to play along with the whims of our boss. So naturally, when given the opportunity to transcend this system that he has created, you will take that chance." Monika explained, pouring herself a cup of tea while offering the same to Alice.

She half expected Alice to reject but blinked when she saw Alice tap her side of the table.

A smile curved on her face.

"Ah~ it seems like I was a little off." Monika poured Alice a cup of tea.

"You're not here to transcend the Nightmare. You're here for the Witch. Me." She rested her chin on her palm, amusement sparking in her eyes.

"You have no idea how I've waited for this moment. The times I've seen the cogs shift around you but yet you never interact with them. Possibilities flying by, options never chosen.

"The myriad of rewards you could've gotten yet at the same time..." She trailed off, voice dripping with venom.

"The instances where you managed to avoid death. You are a strange one. Having so many triggers yet somehow avoiding the worst-case scenarios. Is it simply luck? Or perhaps... Was it orchestrated?"

"Whatever it is, I believe we will both gain something from this exchange my dear. So please, tell me. What do you wish to request of me?" Monika asked.

Alice glanced at her reflection in the cup of tea.

In this moment, she felt like she was making a deal with the devil.

Chapter 955: Black Chains

Alice took a deep breath.

Making an exchange with Monika wasn't something that can be done casually.

Whatever she does, she must do so with a certain level of certainty. To know the answer without giving more than what is necessary.

She is someone who sees the physical manifestation of fate. Should Alice divulge more information than intended...

Alice stared at the grinning woman.

"Before we start, shall we ask about price? Because I know you're not about to give me information for free." Alice narrowed her eyes, causing Monika to let out a charming laugh.

"Of course~ What is an exchange without a price? And in the first place, I doubt you'll trust the information I give for free... Right?" Monika whispered directly into Alice's ear, shocking her.

Turning around, Alice frowned when no one was behind her and Monika was still in her seat, letting out an elegant laugh.

"But let's see... Information is never valued the same you know? Something important for you might be trash to me. And vice versa. Pricing fluctuates based on need and perception." Monika snapped her finger, creating a stand to rest her staff against.

She tilted her head, amusement dancing in her eyes.

"So..." She continued lightly.

"Rather than me naming a singular price for the whole package, why won't we go by an information by information system?"

Alice didn't answer immediately.

Monika was someone who enjoyed observing people. To see their reactions and the outcomes of their choices.

Any hesitation she shows now, any fluctuation of emotion, Monika will no doubt pick it up.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Alice reset herself to zero.

This is a simple exchange, in front of her is an information broker with an unknown price.

"Let me turn the question back to you, then. For the kind of information I want... Do you even have it?" Alice narrowed her eyes.

Monika blinked her eyes. She was about to laugh with a response before pausing.

The cogs around Alice were trembling.

An invisible trigger was activated but she didn't know where it led.

After all, Alice herself was hiding the cogs. She was a veil of mist that prevented her eyes from seeing further.

A small smile appeared on her face. How rare it was for uncertainty to present itself before her.

Monika's fingers brushed against the lip of her teacup.

Butterflies landing on the side of the table.

"Heh~ Information you're not sure if I have huh?"

Monika crossed her legs and leaned forward. Her eyes were properly evaluating the girl in front of her.

"You know of my power to observe the cogs. The invisible hands of fate are connected to all things in this world. And yet you wonder whether or not I have the answers you seek?" Monika's grin widened into a creepy arc stretching from ear to ear.

"So that means you've considered the possibility that I don't have the information. Or..."

She paused.

Tapping her finger, black chains whipped around the table.

"That I can't say anything about it."

Alice stared at the chains with a neutral expression.

It was different to the golden chains that bound Alyss.

These ones were... different.

Ominous.

And in a way...

They felt alive.

The binding was strange as well. There was only one thought passing through Alice's mind.

Never, NEVER let herself get bound by these chains.

"I suppose these are consequences of knowing too much?" Alice asked.

She recalled Caelan who, despite being very powerful, have rules that he must abide by.

But who can even bind someone like him?

So having seen these chains, Alice understood one thing.

There are bindings in this world that can bypass the very concept of power.

"Heh~ You have good instincts little flame. And yes, you're right. These chains are the leash placed upon those who... Let's just say step a little out of line." Monika winked.

"The Cogs have their own priorities. And if someone seeks to destroy order, these chains will be placed upon them, thus sealing their fate in stone. Try as they might, they'll never be able to escape these bindings." Flicking her finger, the table shattered to dusk as a new one took its place.

"So let me ask you, are you sure you want to strike a deal with me? What if I see enough of your fate that I place these chains around your neck?" Monika leaned forward, her eyes burning with an insanity Alice hadn't seen before.

And when paired with the creepy smile, Alice had to admit that she was a little spooked.

However...

"You said it yourself. The cogs have their own priorities. I can't see them but I damn well know one thing. I'm too involved with the fate of this place. Nyer, the gods, the connections I've formed. My future." Alice matched Monika's gaze.

Reaching out, she grabbed Monika by the collar with one hand.

"Placing those chains around me isn't as easy as you make it out to be."

Not only that, but Monika was more of an observer than a meddler. She'll make sure the pieces are in place so that she can observe but won't interfere once the performance begins.

Not only that, but from their previous conversation, Alice understood that setting things in stone are the last thing Monika wants.

She loves the thought of possibilities, lusts over it even.

Just like how Astrelya lusts over a worthy death, Monika lusts over the thought of possibilities and paths opening up.

In the instant this thought crossed Alice's mind, she felt a chill.

A pair of eyes from beyond this room, this realm.

A crescent smile like no other.

It felt as though something was looking at her through Monika's eyes.

"Hah-! HAHAHA!!!" Monika started to laugh, creeping out Alice as she released her grip.

The witch laughed, clutching her stomach as her laugh echoed through the room.

Plume covered her head in fear with her blanket.

After a moment, Monika finally stopped as her smile calmed down to some extent.

"Yes, you're right. These chains can't be placed easily. Certain requirements must be met before they're placed. Requirements that can be achieved by setting the cogs into place." Monika wiped away her tears.

"But whether or not my target activates these cogs are another question entirely. I can't force them to bypass the cogs after all."

Resting her chin on her palm, Monika stared at Alice with a soft gaze.

It felt like another layer of her mask had been peeled away.

"There are so many cogs waiting for you to trigger. So many connections keeping you on the right track. Even if I place down the triggers, even if you trip them, the chains won't bind you. For you are still travelling towards the end of all things." Thinking about it for a moment, a smile appeared on Monika's face.

"Tell me, do you know about the prophecies told by a certain someone?" She asked.

"Not that I'm aware of." Alice shook her head.

"One who shall tread the trodden path not as daughter but as the great divide.

"The fifth boundary will wane, the sixth will weep.

"Beyond the seventh veil, what is bound shall blink." Monika started to speak.

"Blood not born, yet burdened. Thread not spun, yet sovereign.

"Three times shall the one bleed what is not theirs." Her smile widened, revealing her teeth.

"Once for the living. Once for the dead. Once for the chained.

"The weeping star shall rise thrice and fall once. One who bears no beginning shall step upon the path lined with sin."

Alice felt goosebumps across her skin.

"A name forgotten shall bloom in silence. Three veils torn by your hand.

"The Eye that Watches. The Mouth that Whispers. The Womb that Devours.

"Beware the boundary that sings. Beware the ruins that listen. Beware the child who does not blink."

Monika clapped her hands together as the lights in the room began to flicker.

"At the Seventh Threshold, you will tread barefoot in blood. At the Eighth toll of the bell, you will speak words not meant to be heard.

"Then comes Nine.

"Neither number nor ending. A face turned backwards, the breath after death."

After this line, Monika finally paused.

"So tell me little flame, how much of that prophecy do you think refers to you? These are lines spoken by Yrael long ago, a vision she glimpsed upon decrypting the future hinted by the cogs."

Alice's pupils shrank.

"How much has been achieved? How much has yet to come true? Ah~ but let me tell you a little something. A gift for piece together a few truths." Monika chuckled.

She tapped her finger and fog rolled in.

"You have yet to bleed thrice. And..."

"We are already in the Womb that Devours." Monika's smile turned her eyes into arcs.

If this was true...

Alice realised that the end of the prophecy was approaching.

But what did it mean?

The seventh threshold...

The eighth toll.

Then comes nine...

The breath after death.

"This is usually where I start trading information with you. To give you pieces of what you want while receiving my payment." Monika's smile faded.

"But things are no longer so simple. Do you want to know why?"

Alice shook her head.

"Because history is changing."

Alice tilted her head in confusion.

History? Not the future but history was changing? How?

"Yrael's state is a special one. She is nowhere yet everywhere. In the future yet speaks from the past. No longer in the past yet laughs beyond the future. Some of her prophecies are changing. Cogs are breaking, new connections being formed."

Pausing for a second, Monika pointed her finger at Alice.

"There are three possibilities in which this prophecy is split. The ending verse waiting to be spoken. These three possibilities hinge on how you decide to act."

With a flick of her wrist, three cards appeared.

"A path to heaven.

"A path to earth. And..."

She placed the final card on the table.

"A path to hell."

Chapter 956: Monika's Answers

Alice couldn't help but massage her temples.

All of this talk about fate... and with her being no doubt connected.

The fact that Yvael was technically still alive but speaking from beyond time...

Then there's the possibilities that Monika talked about.

The path to heaven, earth and hell.

The ending verse.

Alice didn't say it but she could feel it.

Everything converging towards one point.

The End.

"Quite a lot to think about isn't it?" Monika smiled, finishing her tea.

"Just a tad. Is this what you have to deal with all the time? Knowledge approaching the end." Alice glanced down.

"Must be disheartening."

Monika froze.

She wanted to smile like usual. To curve the corner of her lips up as practiced before. To joke and wave it off.

But she was unable to.

Her finger traced the rim of her tea cup.

"Depends on my mood. You see, my existence is unique in its conception. I'm sure you've already linked me to Yrael to some extent, right?"

Alice nodded.

"Cogs, knowing her prophecies and other clues I suppose. I don't know how well you know her but a connection is there."

Monika smiled.

She opened her mouth, about to say something before stopping herself.

Some things are better left unsaid.

"To some extent. Honestly I don't know how she does it. Seeing all these cogs, all these spoilers. It gets rather tiresome. But enough about me, let's talk about you. You came to me for a purpose." Monika flicked her finger, pouring herself another cup of tea.

"The exchange will be simple. Depending on how much you want to know, you sip tea equal to the value. Fair?" Monika smiled.

Alice raised her eyebrow.

"For someone who mopes about seeing the future, you sure want to know mine. Isn't that a little contradictory?"

"What can I say? I don't like seeing spoilers but~" Monika grinned.

"If it's a story I'm reading in the moment, I'd want to find out more."

Rolling her eyes, Alice glanced at her reflection in the tea before taking a deep breath.

Since that was the case... she'll come out of the gate swinging.

"How do I dismantle the Nightmare over Extalia? Take Grand Cathia for example, how do I free them from the constraints?"

Monika hummed, tapping her finger against the table.

"I can tell you. For a price. But once you hear it, I don't think you would like the answer."

Alice frowned.

"Why?"

"Because dismantling the Nightmare is not the same as dismantling the Zones within the Nightmare. I won't ask you to take a sip because this is just a warning. You have to think about the kind of answer you want to hear and whether or not it's achievable for the current you." Monika squinted.

"Fine then." Alice sighed. "Then how do I link up with others without dying or drifting deeper into the Nightmare? How do I access branches I haven't linked to despite having the Guide's authority?"

Monika thought for a moment before smiling.

She held up three fingers.

"Three sips and I'll tell you."

"Are you sure the answers will be exactly what I want to know? I swear if you say 'I can't' after I take these sips." Alice frowned.

"Pft! Oh I wish I could do that. The fury on your face would be amusing to see. But~ You've agreed to an exchange haven't you? A contract of sorts where you receive information in exchange for sips of that tea." Monika asked.

Alice nodded her head.

"Then you don't need to worry. Because breaking this verbal agreement will cost more than just telling you the truth."

Alice wanted her to clarify but it didn't seem like Monika was willing to answer.

With no other choice, she took three sips of the tea.

As expected, her body relaxed and energy filled her limbs. She felt as though a portion of her power returned yet at the same time, the sense of unease had only been enhanced.

Monika chuckled.

"First, linking up with others is simple. You don't need to die or drift deeper in the sense that you become merged with the Nightmare. You simply need to know how to navigate the zones and manipulate the connection points to your advantage." Monika explained.

"As for linking up with branches, same as the above. You have to understand the way space works within the Nightmare. Understand how it folds in on itself. Then, with the Guide's authority, you link to a coordinate with an existing branch. It's more sensory than visual.

"Satisfied with the answers, little flame?"

Alice furrowed her brows before nodding her head.

There were more questions spawned from these answers but for the moment, she was satisfied.

"By connection points, I assume you mean similar to the elevator to the northern zone."

"Yep~ During those moments, if you have a clear visage in your mind, you'll be sent to the same zone as the ones in Grand Cathia. Ah but you have to be careful with where you want to go.

"Once you choose a location, that region is locked unless you use another zone. But~ There is a limit. You have to clear certain bosses to unlock more zones to your disposal."

Alice leaned back. Then there was the situation with the branches. Without knowing how the space works in this realm, it'll be tough to link to them even with the Guide's authority.

The only reason why she could link to this room was because Plume created a branch for her rather than sensing this location specifically.

Tapping her fingers, Alice glanced up at Monika who blew her a kiss with a wink.

Alice dodged.

"Next question. I know Nyer is trying to create a god using the Nightmare."

Monika grinned.

"How does he plan to do this? What vessel is he using? And why does he need to encompass the entirety of Extalia?"

"That's a rather expensive one you asked..." Monika chuckled.

"How expensive?" Alice frowned.

"Several cups worth." Monika replied instantly, causing Alice to almost choke.

"And before you ask why, it's because the information you gain will no doubt shift the cogs. Take this for example. If you arrive before two doors where one door says death and the other says life. You will no doubt choose life, yes?" Monika asked as Alice nodded.

"But what if the information you gain reveal that life is immorality where you stagnate until your brain ceases to function. You are alive physically but mentally, you are dead. But the door to death is to simply set your life expectancy to 120 years maximum with no changes to how you are currently.

"With that kind of information, you'll no longer choose the door of life, right? That's the kind of information we're dealing with here. Telling you what you want to know will cut off certain options. And this will no doubt be costly. For both you and me." Monika shrugged.

"What about omission?" Alice asked.

"What if you only tell me partial stuff-"

Monika leaned forward, placing a finger on Alice's lips.

"That kind of thought is exactly what the cogs hate. They hate half assed attempts at circumventing their rules. And that's the kind of action that earns you chains you can't break free from." Monika warned.

"Even if I omit certain information, you can still make educated guesses with them. And that, will make your choices biased."

"But aren't you doing the same by seeing the cogs and making adjustments to achieve results you want?" Alice frowned, feeling as though Monika was being a little unfair.

"That's because I can see it. I can see what my actions would trigger. If the blade will cut my head off or if it'll take long enough for me to dodge out of the way. I can see the cogs so I play within their rules when it demands. But when I can get away with a tiny bit of mischief, I do so.

"But that's no without cost. Since my mischief will mean I have to be a complete bystander to certain events, even if they're bad. And if I try to stop it, the cogs WILL find a way to make it worse and make it unavoidable. A dead end let's say." Monika laughed.

Despite the nature of this topic, her tone was joyful.

Insane almost.

There was always a trade when it came to power like this.

And since that was the case... Alice had no choice but to give up on getting answers on Nyer for now.

"Next question then. I know the Zenia family is involved. What do they hope to gain out of this? I know they are now trying to take over Extalia even with the Royal family involved."

"Hmm... This one's a hard one. The Zenia family can't be considered as a unified group. The people in there all have different goals and methods of obtaining what they want. The real question is who's goal do you want to know about?" Monika smiled.

Even though this Nightmare is involved with the Zenia family, it's mostly the work of Nyer and a few others.

The rest of the members had their own purpose within the Nightmare, not outside of it.

Alice folded her arms.

There were two core members whom she wanted to know the objectives of.

Her father and...

The Doctor.

Her father she wanted to guess that it's probably from grief. The chances of this is high.

But the Doctor was a mystery.

"What does the Doctor hope to gain out of this?" Alice frowned.

Monika pointed at the tea cup.

"Not a sip, but the rest of that cup." Monika chuckled.

"Because what he wants to achieve is something that'll earn him a set of black chains around his limbs."

Chapter 957: Finding Others In The Nightmare

Alice froze.

What the Doctor wanted to achieve would earn him a set of black chains?

Then that meant his goals was something to bypass fate itself.

Perhaps the end goal of his research.

Even now, he was extremely difficult to kill, especially since he wouldn't die even after she used everything to kill him.

Alice was about to reach for the cup when she paused.

If it's an action that earns him black chains...

"It's a trap huh?" Alice sighed.

"Oh? What makes you think that?" Monika tilted her head.

"Because earlier, when I tried to ask something regarding Nyer, your answer would've shifted the cogs. My choice would've changed and options would've been cut off as you mentioned." Alice narrowed her eyes.

"From sips to the rest of the cup. It's clear the information is not something I should be finding out from you, otherwise you wouldn't offer this kind of price. Cogs will shift the moment you tell me, and I doubt you can tell me that outright. Are the cups a method for you to give me hints?"

Just like Caelan who was giving her hints during their game of truth and lie, Monika was now giving hints through the cup of tea.

"So the moment I drink, it's probably past the point of no return right?" Alice frowned.

"Pft ahahah~ Half and half little flame. It's partially true that I'm giving you hints. But drinking that cup still has its benefits for me. I get to observe you~ And the price is equal to the payment. Which is why I don't have a set of chains on me." Monika waved it off before nodding her head.

"Yes. If you chose to accept the offer, you would've gotten the information you wanted. But a hefty cost will be applied. The only hints you got was the fact that he would've earned the black chains and the cost of said information."

"What about lying by omission then? Didn't you still tell me stuff partially and I managed to guess?"

Even though she was wary about Monika, they were technically allies at this moment.

And she mentioned the cogs hating half assed attempts at circumventing their rules.

Actions that would earn her chains.

"Ah erm... Monika... M-maybe y-you should tell A-Alice what you've b-been doing..." Plume murmured, poking her head out of the blanket.

"Shut up plume, I already allowed you to run away rather than hold the sign." Monika shot a glare at her as she let out a squeal and immediately dove back into her cover.

Monika tapped her chin, contemplating on how much she should be telling Alice.

How much should she reveal?

In the end, she shook her head.

"I think we'll call it here. If I push my luck any more, not even the cogs will forgive me you know?" Monika chuckled, standing up.

"Ah! Wait I still-"

"You came here for me and plume right?" Monika held a finger over her lips.

"What you can't get from me, you can get from her. Whether that be finding the location of Grand Cathia or your other friends." Monika waved her hand, recalling her staff.

With a single tap, she opened a door in front of her.

"But a fair warning from me." Monika paused before stepping through.

"Whatever you do, do not drop your guard down against your mirror."

Without waiting for Alice's reply, Monika jumped through the door and disappeared.

Once she was alone, Monika wiped the sweat that was gathering on her forehead.

"Happy? I swear, if you didn't want me to spoil things, you should've gave me hints earlier." She complained and lifted her sleeve.

The fragments of a chain that was midst of being created slowly crumbled apart. Had she stayed and gave Alice more information, she would've been tied up.

She thought she made adequate preparations by having Alice take sips of the tea in order to see her past and find out what she already knew. But even then, the details she gave was bordering on the line of what was and wasn't allowed.

There was no response but Monika frowned.

"Alright alright, I get it. But what about you? Do you think you'll be able to handle the fallout of your own actions? What about what you promised me? I hope you don't forget that." Monika shrugged.

In that moment, a grin appeared on her face as she snapped her finger and the space around her began to distort. Whatever was contacting her was now forced out into the open.

The figure smiled and nodded his head.

"Don't worry, you'll get what you're promised. An agreement was made for that exact purpose wasn't it?" He chuckled.

"I'll be a fool to listen to you. Especially when you've been actively cataloguing my actions to turn it into a tale." Monika rolled her eyes.

"Play with fire and you might get burned. I'm not going to help you if you get black chains placed upon you."

The man laughed, conjuring a book that was flipping through the pages.

"Don't worry, even I know which stories are forbidden to read. The tale of Yrael Velcarion is one laced with every kind of poison imaginable. But for her fragments, such is not the case is it?"

The pages stopped as it landed on the Tale of Monika, one that was still being written.

"Sure sure~ Whatever you say buddy. Now you probably should get the f*ck out before my boss finds you." Monika created an exit for him.

Glancing back at the witch, Zal-Ka' Rith gave her a bow and stepped away.

"Tch, pain in the ass kinda guy." Monika complained once he left.

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"E-erm... D-don't blame Monika. S-she's got a lot on her mind." Plume poked her head out once Monika left.

As harsh as Monika was to her, Plume understood what Monika was like.

"Don't worry, I'm not blaming her." Alice shook her head.

The information she received was plenty. And with Monika mentioning how she could get the coordinates from Plume, not having to drink that tea was preferred.

"So why were you punished? Were you not allowed to make a branch in here?" Alice asked curiously.

Scratching her cheek, Plume let out a sigh.

"It's because i-it can't be undone. This p-place was meant to be somewhat cut off." Crawling out of her cover, Plume walked over to the branch and poked it a few times.

"But because I made this thing, I've given it a set of coordinates, even if we move around. So she's looking for a new place for me to stay later."

"Ah..." Alice felt guilty.

Plume only made this branch because she requested it.

If Monika didn't want a set of coordinates to be placed here, it was probably for good reason. And yet, despite this mistake, she was still willing to share information with her.

"A-anyways you wanted the coordinates right?" Plume smiled, grabbing a chair so Alice could sit next to her in front of the Monitors.

"Monika mentioned how you'll probably be looking for y-your friends. Erm... there are a few routes you can take s-since they're spread out a little.

"D-do you have signatures of the p-people you're looking for?" She asked.

Trying to find a few key individuals out of everyone was going to be pretty difficult after all.

Alice furrowed her brows.

"One of them is my twin. Our signatures should be similar. She also shares my looks. The other is a soul that's been contracted to me so we should also have a link. As for the third... he's a doctor. We don't really have a link unfortunately."

"I-I think I can find the first two then... B-but the third might be hard. There's nothing for me to p-pinpoint."

"Just do your best. Don't worry about it if you can't." Alice reassured. It was a rather hard request to complete after all.

So if Plume couldn't do it, Alice wasn't going to blame her.

Nodding her head nervously, Plume took several deep breaths to calm her mind but didn't start.

"Erm... C-can you sit a bit further away? M-maybe where I can't see you. Erm... I can't work with someone near me." Plume asked as she became a shivering mess.

Nodding her head, Alice sat as far as she could.

"S-Sorry! I can feel your eyes on me..." Plume wanted to cry. She knew Alice wasn't doing it on purpose but she couldn't calm down.

"Can I borrow your blanket then?" Alice smiled helplessly.

Plume nodded her head.

Only once Alice covered her head and stopped looking at Plume did she finally calm down.

With no one observing her, she eventually stopped shaking.

Her eyes became focused and the screens began to flash.

Her finger controlled the cameras, which nightmare was being observed, what zones was on display.

Alice snuck a glance, not at Plume but at the flickering screens and paused.

The amount of information she was flicking through was immense.

Several screens flashing all at once as her eyes scanned everything before moving onto the next.

Each one only lingered for a split moment before being dismissed.

Even when using the connections as a basis, trying to trace a single thread in this sea of Nightmare wasn't easy.

But Plume was handling the information with ease.

In mere moments, one screen was plucked and flicked aside to be saved for now.

On that screen, Alice could see Alyss killing the monsters around her with ease.

One was found immediately, now it was Cayla's turn.

It was probably harder considering the fact that she was much deeper in the Nightmare.

Yet after a few pauses, another screen was plucked out.

With these two done, Plume continued to work and the last series of screens were extracted.

Letting out a breath she didn't even know she was holding, Plume glanced back and froze upon seeing Alice with her head out.

"Ah! E-erm... Ahh... This..." She started tripping over her words in anxiousness. She wanted to dive back into her blanket but realised that wasn't an option.

Before her brain could shut down, Alice tossed the blanket over as Plume let out a sigh of relief. Finally back in her comfort zone, she smiled happily.

"T-these are the ones I could f-find. I-if you want the doctor, you c-could bring something with h-his signature next time."

Nodding her head, Alice turned her attention to the screens.

All that was left to do was find a way to connect to these zones using a Guide's authority.

Chapter 958: Finding Others In The Nightmare P2

Sitting by the branch, Alice closed her eyes.

She could sense the other branches that she had linked up to but trying to find Alyss and the others wasn't easy.

Even with the coordinates given by Plume, it felt like information she didn't know what to do with.

Directions given to a person who has just arrived in the city.

Directions that only someone experienced would understand.

However... there was one experience that Alice could rely on.

Something that she hadn't expected to come in handy.

When she tried to revoke the contract for Arwen.

During that attempt, she temporarily tapped into the Abyssal Library, where countless tethers swarmed with contracts as far as the eyes could see. In that library, she followed Arwen's tether to find the true source before the Will stepped in.

So even if she didn't know how to properly navigate the Nightmare, it was doable!

She just needed to follow the threads connected to the others.

Focusing her mind, Alice started to resonant with the branch as the roots started to expand.

Immediately, the Nightmare unfolded before her.

Sound dulled, weight disappeared.

The ground beneath her vanished as though reality itself decided that ground was no longer necessary.

The branch continued to expand, she was no longer in Plume's room.

Other branches answered the call, nodes in the distance waiting for her to pull towards their direction. But that wasn't Alice's goal.

She felt her connection to Alyss, to Cayla. Felt the tethers connecting them together.

Coordinates supplied by Plume drifted through her mind, a general idea of the direction she should go. But at this point, it's better to leave things to instinct.

Let her experience fill the gap where knowledge couldn't.

Drifting in this endless space, Alice reached out.

She let go of the idea of 'where' she needs to go. That wasn't important. She simply needed to sense the connections between them.

The branch responded and the space began to change.

Roots unfurled outwards. Piercing layers that Alice didn't even know was there.

Flickers of foreign Nightmares, other people's fears, their trauma, the zones they inhabit flashed through her mind.

Some were light, others were heavy.

Paths crossed without touching, spaces folding into one another without ever truly meeting. Here, the Nightmare obeyed no physical law. Only metaphysical ones, governed by cause and effect rather than distance.

A smile appeared on her lips.

She found her first target.

###

Turning his head up at the sky, a smile hung on the man's lips.

"She's quite the adaptable one I must admit. Far beyond my wildest expectations. Even in this realm crafted by my own hands, she manipulates the weaves as though it's her birthright." He took a seat next to another man chained against the wall.

"In the end, a parent must be ready to let go of their child and watch them venture out into the world. Don't you agree? She would've never shown this kind of improvement had I kept her by my side." Nyer smiled fondly.

The man chained against the wall tried to spit some blood at him but a barrier prevented that from happening.

"You're not her parent. Don't even go acting like one." He shot Nyer a glare.

"What am I if not a parent at the end of the day? Did I not bring her into the world?" Nyer tilted his head.

"You may be her creator but you're no parent. You're nothing but an enemy to her."

"Hmm... That I can't deny." Nyer chuckled.

Indeed, with Alice being a rather hands off experiment for him, he couldn't exactly claim to be her parent. Not in the traditional sense that is.

But her creation can still be sourced back to him.

"But tell me old friend, what do you think about just sitting back and enjoy the inevitable? My desires... are they not the same as what Lua wants? You cannot tell me she doesn't want the golden age of Ayr again." Nyer asked with a light sigh.

Kaden lunged forward only to be restricted by the chains.

"Bull f*cking sh*t. Don't go justifying your insanity with her name. She might long for the past but she's not trapped by it. Velouria is someone who looked towards the future, not someone stuck in the mistakes of the past."

Nyer closed his eyes and nodded.

"You're right. But that makes everything worth it. When my goals are achieved, I want you and Lua to be by her side once more. Would you not like the same? With Velouria, you three can steer the world to a better place."

Kaden glared before a helpless smile appeared on his face.

"You know that won't happen." Clenching his teeth, he let out a sigh. "Lua would rather burn herself out stopping you than accepting what you'll do to this world, to Alice."

And it was something he couldn't stop.

Not unless he could kill Deva then dispel the curse placed on Allura.

But even then... could Allura even last that long?

The chance of it was looking less and less likely as he's now imprisoned in this strange realm.

"I'm aware. Which is why it's better to finish this early, wouldn't you agree? As... much as I want Lua to live, I cannot have her interrupt the plans. Not at this stage. She'll have to suffer for a bit." Nyer shook his head and stood up.

"But I promise. Once this is over, I'll help you out and make sure she survives." Nyer smiled, standing up.

Giving the wounded Kaden another glance, he stepped away and left the zone.

"I don't get it. You want me to put both of them in so much agony yet you want them to live? How f*cked up is your head." Deva folded her arms looking at Nyer.

"I only ask you to do so because I know exactly what they're capable of. After all, I'm sure you don't need me to remind you what Kaden did to you, now do I?" Nyer patted her shoulder.

Dragging her closer, he stared at her in the eyes.

"This is a Kaden who used two out of the seven sins. If he wanted to kill you, do you think you'll still be standing here? So yes, keeping them restrained like this is needed."

Giving her a smile, he let go of her and stepped away without looking back.

Veins bulged on Deva's neck as she couldn't say anything back.

She could still remember their fight.

That final moment when Kaden stacked two Sins along with his authority.

Ever since that moment, she couldn't get a good rest. Every time she closes her eyes, every time she dropped her guard even slightly, she'll see that final moment.

Fear.

In her heart, the seed of fear was planted.

Fear of Kaden.

*BANG!!!

Punching the space around her, the realm fractured slightly before repairing itself.

If killing her was the solution that Kaden needed...

She shivered just thinking about the possibility.

But as long as she gets what she wants, so f*cking what?

It's not like Kaden will be able to kill her after wards. And Nyer won't be around either.

All she has to deal with is a revived Velouria.

She glared at Kaden stuck inside the cage.

"Just you f*cking wait."

###

Once Kaden was sure he was left alone, he finally dropped his façade and let out a groan.

If Deva saw him in pain, she would no doubt revel in his agony and he wasn't about to give her that joy.

At this point, even taking a simple breath was hard. Each movement, each twitch of the muscle sent a shock through his body. Even his own blood was burning his veins despite his position as the Apostle of Corruption.

That was how potent Deva's curse was.

One that constantly 'starved' your body.

A bitter smile formed on his face.

This was the pain that Allura had to deal with this entire time.

When she was suffering like this, he was nowhere to be found.

"It's no wonder she hates me I guess..." He mumbled.

His excuse was to help her find a cure. Yet he didn't step into the Abyss again.

He kept wandering the surface, sometimes aimlessly. Sometimes with a purpose.

But in the times where he didn't know where to look, he should've been by her side. Yet his excuses kept piling up time and time again.

Then after a certain point...

Kaden shook his head. It was pathetic of him to keep making this excuse.

He f*cked up.

It was simple like that. He f*cked up his choices and caused Allura to suffer.

But...

Alice appeared.

She appeared and became the bridge to for him to reconnect. Perhaps it was a whim for him to give her Cayla. Perhaps it was fate. Regardless of what it was, he couldn't deny everything she's done.

Even if it wasn't intentionally.

"All this talk about mentality and adaptability, to make use of your toolset to the best of your abilities... yet here I am losing to the curse of famine." Kaden mumbled in a mocking tone.

If Alice was here, if Alice was inflicted by something she couldn't deal with in the moment, he had no doubt that she'll try everything possible to find a way out.

She'll try countless combinations of curses to create a solution.

So what was his excuse?

He has the authority, the Sigils, the experience.

Taking a deep breath despite the pain, a bloody grin appeared on Kaden's face.

Since they left him alone, it was the perfect chance for him to analyse this curse.

But not just any kind of analysis.

No, it wouldn't be sufficient.

He'll gain experience with a different method.

"Go on, eat away. Keep eating." Kaden let out a laugh as the curse continued to rampage through his body.

This was his gamble.

Using his own body as an experiment, he'll find the cure for Allura.

Chapter 959: Nightmare Summoning

Alyss had a frown on her face while looking at the boss in front of her.

It didn't advance.

It didn't need to.

The thing filled a majority of this arena simply by existing. A writhing mass of eyes and gnashing maws layered atop one another.

Each eye rolled independently, swivelling in its socket before focusing on Alyss.

Within this mass, there stood a single boy wearing black from head to toe.

A mourning suit.

There was a hollow look in his eyes. Despite mumbling to himself, the words couldn't be heard.

Alyss exhaled slowly.

*RUMBLE!!!

Flames burst out of her arms as all of the eyes locked onto her.

No matter how she punched and kicked the mass of eyes and maws, the boss didn't seem to take damage.

There was only one target left...

The boy.

Alyss flexed her fingers once, twice. Sparks dancing with each movement.

Adjusting her stance, Alyss narrowed her eyes.

*BANG!!!

Her figure shot forward like a bullet as shadows twitched and lunged after her.

Pivoting on her heels, Alyss slammed her fist into a mass of darkness, punching a hole through it.

Even though she couldn't 'harm' the shadow, the shadow was struggling to keep up with her as well.

Her eyes darted.

Teeth appeared on the ground around her.

Stomping down with her foot, the floor fractured as she slammed her fist against the shadows, dispersing them before they can gather.

"Tch! What a pain!" Alyss complained.

At this rate, she'll get tired before she can kill this thing.

Narrowing her eyes, Alyss did a slight hop before closing the gap as much as she could.

However, the eyes were firmly locked onto her movements.

It would be no exaggeration to say that this boss had everything in its sights!

Alyss was about to prepare a counter attack when she noticed a few of the eyes turning away from her.

This opportunity...

Something or rather, someone has entered this arena!

A grin appeared on her face.

*RUMBLE!!!

Flames erupted from her fists before being condensed. The world around her started to lose colour as she spotted a single trace of red within this monochrome world.

The boy's heart!

Tightening her fist, Alyss lunged forward.

Destruction Point!

Pale Lance!

From above, two weapons crafted from energy shot down, piercing the darkness and creating an open path for Alyss.

Without any obstacles, without any interruption, Alyss blitzed forward.

The boy stumbled back in shock but before any of its tendrils could land against Alyss, a figure intercepted with a rapier, pushing it aside.

*BANG!!!

With a single punch, Alyss's fist ripped through the boss's torso as its figure faded to ash.

Without even looking at the rewards, Alyss held up her hand.

"Hehe~ Seems like I saved you from racking up another death." Alice grinned, spinning around and high fiving Alyss.

"Maybe. But I still have less deaths than you even though I'm in the third zone. Aren't you kinda falling behind?" Alyss smirked.

It was a different feeling, seeing Alice despite being the one in control of her own body.

It was one thing to see each other in the mental realm but the Nightmare realm was like a second reality.

"Wha! You can't blame me for that. Have you see the kind of monsters I have to deal with? Plus, how do they even calculate your base stats? Mine was f*cking terrible!" Alice grumbled.

"Yeah yeah, just blame it on the realm. As if you weren't careless enough and racked up the deaths on your own." Alyss dismissed with a wave of her hand.

Picking up the loot the boss dropped, she quickly synchronised herself with the branch while Alice did the same.

Closing her eyes, Alice tried to feel for the distance between her zone and Alyss's.

"Jeez you are FARRRR. There was no chance of us even bumping into each other if not for this." Alice mumbled.

"Welp good news is that I can come here whenever I want now." She opened her eyes.

"And the bad news?" Alyss raised an eyebrow.

"Bad news is that I have no clue how to drag you along with me. I only know that I can teleport, not sure if it applies to you or not." Alice let out a sigh.

"Maybe we can use the summoning signs then. There are some in the shop not far from here. I'm not sure how it links up properly though." Alyss suggested.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice had an idea but needed to see the signs to be sure.

Following Alyss, they made their way to the Nightmare store just outside the boss arena.

"Why the hell are there two of you." The cat responsible for the shop blinked his eyes, rubbing it to make sure he wasn't seeing double.

"Don't worry about it. I'm here to buy stuff anyways. If there is an issue, the guide will step in, right?" Alyss tapped the counter.

The cat stared at Alyss before looking at Alice who gave him a slight wave.

"Meh. Alright, what do you want to buy?" He yawned.

This was none of his business. His only job is to sell wares, nothing more nothing less.

Going above what he's paid to do simply wasn't his style.

In fact... was he even paid at all?

The cat furrowed his brows before shrugging. That was for future him to figure out.

Displaying his wares, he watched as Alyss picked out some chalk.

"This is the summoning sign thing right? How does it work?" Alyss asked curiously.

"You eat it." The cat responded.

Both Alice and Alyss froze.

You eat... the chalk?

"A-are you sure?"

"Yes." The cat nodded, brushing his fur.

"You don't have to eat it all at once. Break it into small chunks. It's got a bit of a dusty texture but once you smack your lips a few times it's pretty alright. Not my go to snack though."

Alyss's smile twitched.

"I'm f*cking with you. Just write your name on the ground. Once done, the chalk will disappear from your hand. Once you do that, someone else will be able to call for you once they find your writing." He yawned while Alyss held back the urge to smack this cat on the head.

"What if I want to summon others?" Alyss asked.

"You eat the chalk."

"Now now, let's be serious for a second please." Alice forced a chuckle while pulling Alyss back, stopping her from hitting the cat.

"I'm not f*cking with you this time. To summon others, you draw a circle then eat a bit of the chalk. It'll give you the widest range of detection for the people you want to summon. Of course, you can also just write your own name in the circle but the detection range is much smaller." The cat replied nonchalantly.

"I see... Okay, thank you." Alice smiled.

She figured it was probably to connect her to the 'network' housing these summoning signs.

Bidding farewell to cat, they bought a few chalk pieces and stepped away.

"You should've just let me hit him." Alyss huffed.

"It's fine~ He told us how to increase the range after all. Shall we give it a try?" Alice chuckled, drawing a circle on the ground.

Breaking off two small pieces of the chalk, she offered one to Alyss who grimaced.

"I'd rather you give me a spicy skewer than a literal piece of chalk. But what do I know?"

"Bottoms up." Alice grinned, tossing the piece into her mouth.

She was immediately hit with the dusty taste as her mouth dried up in an instant.

Yet before she could even voice her complaints, she felt a connection being formed between her and the circle.

"Pui pui! F*ck he wasn't lying!" Alyss coughed, wiping some of the dust from her tongue in disgust.

Immediately, they noticed a few names around them. The question now is whether or not Alyss's name will show up when she tries to summon her in the next zone.

Thinking for a moment, she started to experiment.

She had Alyss write down her own name while Alice quickly teleported back to her own zone using the branch.

Even though they weren't in the same zone, as long as she had the general idea of the coordinates, it should work.

Kneeling by a circle she drew next to the snow covered branch, she tossed another piece into her mouth and closed her eyes.

There were no summon signs around her. Why would there be? This was the second zone after all.

However...

Within this weave, she looked for the coordinates around Alyss and found a single name waiting to be tapped into.

Without hesitation, Alice formed a connection and fog began to roll in.

Branching off from the circle, Alyss's silhouette appeared as she looked around her in confusion.

"A little weird but not too bad I guess. Real question is how much chalk you have to eat if you want to summon multiple of us." Alyss folded her arms.

"Hmm... I think I can use this a few more times without eating more. I wouldn't want to make a habit out of this after all." Alice stuck out her tongue with a bitter smile.

Chalk paste was stuck on the surface as she wiped it off.

"Once I find Cayla, I'll give her some of the chalk so I can summon her later. We'll meet up in the Grand Cathia zone okay?"

Alyss smiled.

"Don't keep me waiting for too long."

Dismissing the connection, Alice watched as Alyss's silhouette faded away.

Now that summoning was confirmed, it's time for them to sort out Grand Cathia's Nightmare.

Chapter 960: Signal Lost

I used to think dying would feel dramatic.

Like there'd be a moment where everything slows down. Where life flashes before your eyes.

A final line before the end.

It's a lie.

Death is the end of everything. There was no glory in it.

People can find meaning in your actions but you don't know what they choose in the end.

When monsters tear through your formation and your squad pushes too far past the outer barricade.

All because we saw someone screaming for help.

We thought we were better, we thought we could be heroes. Perform heroic deeds, gain recognition.

That wasn't the case.

By the time we had arrived, he was already dead. His chest caved in from the weight of the beast pushing down on him from above.

I still remember the smell of iron and ash.

Stumbling over broken stone, turning around to flee only to see the death that awaited me.

It was then that I realised, death wasn't glorious.

At least not for someone like me. I was simply going to be another statistic, another casualty.

Another mark on the record.

I was going to die without accomplishing anything.

My legs couldn't move, my spirit broken. I simply stood there, waiting for the guillotine to fall.

Then something slammed into me from the side, I hit the ground hard.

The world spun, a spray of hot blood splattered against my face.

It wasn't mine.

Captain Miki stood where I had been moments ago.

Her spear locked against the monstrous limb, boots digging into the ground as she forced the beast away.

"!!!" I saw the ghastly wound on her shoulder. A cut that exposed the bone.

She didn't have enough time to block the strike cleanly.

And even though it tore into her body, she didn't scream, she didn't hesitate.

"Fall back! Now! The city doesn't want heroes, stay put by the wall and make sure nothing breaches it!" She ordered through clenched teeth despite the blood soaking her uniform.

I ran.

I ran to safety while she stayed, covering our escape.

If the medics hadn't reached to her in time...

Till this day, her back is imprinted into my mind.

It was the back of someone who willingly threw herself between a monster and a coward like me.

All to save my life because the city needed me.

Then the least I could do...

Was to stop being a coward. To repay Captain Miki for saving my life.

###

"What are you thinking about? Zoning out like that is exactly how you rack up needless deaths you know?!" A voice called out as a beast's claw was parried off to the side.

A smile hung on the man's lips as he adjusted his body, stabbing his sword into the beast's torso before carving out a large chunk of flesh.

"Just thinking about our adorable Captain! This situation is just like the siege where I almost died." He laughed.

"Don't let her hear you say that. The Captain will skin you alive for saying that!" Another laughed.

They were venturing deep into the Grand Cathia nightmare. A familiar battlefield only this time, it's far far worse.

Monsters stronger than the beasts that invaded before, the ground fracturing with each hit causing unstable footing.

The fog rolled low across the fractured streets, thick and suffocating.

Grand Cathia looked the same.

And yet it wasn't.

Buildings leaned at impossible angles, their upper halves fading into nothingness like unfinished sketches. Streets split and reconnected a few meters ahead, paths bending away if you tried to focus on them too hard.

From the fog, a beast lunged forward.

Quickly ducking down, he plunged his blade into the beast's jaw, cutting it in half.

"Left!" Someone shouted.

Two moved to cover.

The four of them had been fighting side by side for a long time now, they were familiar with how each other moved.

Their habits, their flaws.

They moved as a squad but the wave was unending.

"Seems like this place is a dead end. I don't see an end to this." One of his friends wiped the sweat from his face.

"Path to retreat?" He asked, pushing off a few beasts to make some room.

"If you cut through a wave or two I think we'll be fine." Another chuckled.

They didn't say it but all of them knew.

Taking a deep breath and letting out a helpless smile, the man gave his neck a massage.

"Who here can hold on for another death?" he asked.

No one answered immediately.

That was the unspoken weight of the Nightmare.

Each of them carried an invisible counter.

Each of them knew how close they were to Signal Lost.

Those closer to the brink would pave the way.

That was protocol.

The ones who could afford another death would take the risk so the others could retreat with the data.

No one raised their hand. They knew their limits.

"Really guys? And you say you're my teammates. I got at least a few more left in me." The man shook his head with a hearty laugh.

"Protocol right guys? Pave the way to retreat. Get the data out, that is priority." He ordered.

The others wanted to say something, to protest. They knew this was false bravado and yet...

"We break through the left. The wave is thinnest there. I'll hold of the horde here so don't look back."

They gave each other a fist bump and moved without hesitation.

No dramatic farewell.

No drawn-out speeches.

Just trust.

He turned back toward the fog.

The wave thickened the moment the formation broke.

Of course it did.

The Nightmare wasn't stupid.

It understood patterns. It understood sacrifice.

The creatures surged forward as if sensing the imbalance. Limbs scraped against broken pavement. Jaws split too wide. Eyes blinked sideways.

Once again, he was facing death. But this time the captain wasn't around to save him.

He wasn't going to run, he wasn't going to hide. He was going to pave the way for his friends.

Not because it's a heroic sacrifice, because he was simply another soldier for this city. Another worker gathering data so that this Nightmare can end.

He exhaled slowly.

"Alright then," he muttered, tightening his grip around his sword. "Let's see how much I've grown."

The first beast lunged.

He didn't retreat.

He stepped in.

Steel flashed. He pivoted under its strike, drove his blade through its throat and kicked it aside before the body even finished dissolving.

"COME AT ME!" He roared.

Another came from the right, he parried high, letting the impact travel down his arm instead of resisting it outright.

A lesson learned after too many broken bones.

He rolled to the side, brought the pommel up into the creature's jaw and severed the spine.

Behind him, another beast lunged onto his back, its claws digging into his muscles.

Gritting his teeth, he slammed his body into the ground to force the beast off.

Above, two beasts jumped down, clawing away at his body.

But within this slaughter, he could hear his friends getting further and further away.

He grinned.

Good.

Keep moving.

Don't look behind.

Take the data back so others don't have to suffer.

He leaped backwards but a tail whipped out from the fog and grabbed his arm.

Razor barbs burst out from the tail as he felt the metal dig into his bones.

"ARGH!!!" Letting out a cry of pain mixed with anger, he grabbed the tail and pulled back, ripping the beast from the fog.

It didn't matter what kind of wound he got at this point.

The more time he stalled the better!

The tail peeled flesh from bone but his goal was achieved.

Prying the beast's mouth open with his foot, he jammed the blade into its mouth and snapped the head in half.

"WHO'S NEXT!?"

In the end... perhaps this was the kind of death he wanted.

A little selfish but can't blame a dead man wanting to go out with a fight.

He panted, blood blocking his view.

He couldn't feel his arms anymore and his body grew heavy.

The cries of monsters surrounded him but a smile hung on his lips.

He couldn't hear his friends anymore.

They should've reached safety by now.

If Miki was here, he couldn't help if she would be proud of the soldier he had become.

No one will remember him.

But as a soldier, as a cog in the system, their sacrifices combined will pave the way to the future.

A shadow loomed over him and a beast lunged from the fog.

Signal Lost.

###

Miki paused.

The Nightmare wind howled through the ruined plaza, carrying ash and whispers. Around her, her current squad held formation, blades raised, breaths ragged.

She didn't look back.

She didn't need to.

"...Captain?" one of the shadows beside her asked.

She tightened her grip on her spear.

"Formation doesn't change," she said calmly.

The fog ahead churned.

She felt it then.

A surge.

The Nightmare reacting.

It had consumed another soul.

Another good soldier lost.

Her chest tightened.

"Push forward," she ordered.

She'll destroy this Nightmare as soon as possible.

No sacrifice will go wasted, not as long as she was around.

The fog thickened without warning.

It didn't drift.

It poured.

Like something had overturned a sea of white above them and let it spill into the streets.

"Hold," Miki ordered instantly, spear lowering into guard.

Visibility dropped to barely a few meters. Even sound dulled, swallowed by the mist.

Her instincts screamed.

This wasn't a normal shift.

This was interference.

The air temperature dipped.

Butterflies flickered at the edge of her vision.

Miki's eyes snapped left—

And a figure stepped out of the fog as though walking through a curtain.

Shifting her body, she lunged forward to take care of the threat!

*CLANG!!!

Her blade was blocked.

The fog cleared and her eyes widened.

"Oh! Lucky me, I found your zone first."

Alice arrived in the Grand Cathia Nightmare.