

## **Abyssal A 961**

### Chapter 961: Exploiting The Nightmare

Miki blinked her eyes, staring at the woman in front of her.

When people are summoned to different Zones, they appear as silhouettes that aren't fully visible to the main 'host'.

Not only that, once summoned, fog would roll through, 'refreshing' the monsters and causing their numbers to increase.

However, the only thing that happened was the fog obscuring Alice's arrival.

There was no reset, no increase in monsters.

And more than that, she wasn't a silhouette. It's as though she's the joint 'host' of this zone.

"Heh~ how did you dispel so much fog? I can actually see a decent length ahead of me." Alice spun around, glancing at the Zone around her.

In her Original Zone, she had to fight carefully since she couldn't see much of the battlefield.

Traps that were hidden until the last moment and so on.

But Miki's zone wasn't like that. With this much visibility, defending against enemies shouldn't be an issue.

Miki let out a sigh.

"That's because I'm in Zone 4. The boss to Zone 5 should be rather close."

Before Alice could even respond, something breached the edge of her detection. Turning around, her pupils constricted seeing Miki grab a spike out of the air.

"This isn't like reality. The monsters here are significantly stronger, especially if you've just come from the second Zone." Miki narrowed her eyes.

"Items, stats, you are lacking both. You may have found a way here but you won't be able to keep up."

With a flick of her wrist, she sent the spike back to the beast while ordering her squad to take care of the threats around them.

Once the area was secure, Miki turned to Alice.

"I'm going to assume since you're not a silhouette, you've become something akin to a join host right?"

"Somewhat. When I found Alyss and Cayla, the monsters didn't change either and I could buy stuff from their stores." Alice nodded with a smile.

Folding her arms, Cayla thought about it for a moment.

"Try using this. If it works, we're going to cheat."

Alice blinked her eyes, catching the Embryo that Miki gathered from the later zones.

With the branch next to them, Alice decided to sit down and tried to use it.

One second.

Two seconds.

A minute passed as Alice raised her hand.

"Shame, doesn't work. I guess maybe I have to tag a monster?" Alice tossed the Embryo back.

Thinking about it for a moment, Miki made a decision.

"I guess if we have to cheat, we have to do so properly. Gina, Sam, I'll dismiss you two for now. Don't venture too far into your own zones and risk death." Miki turned to two of her squad mates as they nodded their head.

Breaking off a piece of chalk, Miki drew a circle and summoned two others in their place.

"Farming again?" Once of them yawned.

"You should raise our wages you know? Doing this over and over again gets boring." Another sighed.

"This time it'll be easier. We're going to raise her stats from zone two to zone five." Miki gestured to Alice with her chin.

"The f\*ck?! You call that easy???"

"Stop complaining. We just need her to be able to defend herself in this zone. If things go well, we might be able to do something about this Nightmare."

The instant they heard that his could potentially resolve the Nightmare, their gazes sharpened.

"Where do we start?"

Miki glanced at Alice.

"Well my second zone Embryos are maxed out so I suppose the third zone?" Alice blinked.

Without hesitation, Miki hoisted Alice onto her shoulders and began to sprint with the others.

Since they didn't have a Guide's authority like Alice, they had to backtrack all the way to the previous zones.

Of course, they didn't let this opportunity go to waste.

Handing Alice a cross bow, Miki had her tag every beast they saw on the way back.

A single shot would suffice to test if tagging them worked.

Alice had to admit, this was a rather... strange experience.

Not only was she being carried like a sack of loose potatoes, but there was nothing she could do the beasts around them.

Not even a single scratch.

Her Zone was picking up their presence and their attacks but her physical stats were far too low to react.

Therefore in this instance, she had to completely rely on the people around her for her own safety.

This sense of helplessness was a little different from her time in the prison.

Yet it was still unpleasant all the same.

With the beasts rounded up and Alice tagging as many of them as she could, Miki had her stand back while the rest of the squad, especially the two new arrivals, rained down large scale area of effect bombardments to kill everything.

Alice hugged her knees, chin resting lazily atop them as another distant explosion erupted.

"Do you have groups of people you summon for specific tasks?" She asked, voice absent of awe or excitement.

Seeing them destroy the wave like this made her way to move as well.

But she couldn't.

"Naturally. It's for efficiency. If everyone did whatever they wanted, we'll never progress through this Nightmare." Miki folded her arm. "We have scouting units, boss killers, resource farmers, mappers and experimenters."

"Experimenters?" Alice blinked.

Scouting, boss killing and resource farming are all self explanatory. The two that Miki summoned must've specifically tuned their skills to kill large waves as fast as possible, as efficiently as possible.

But she wasn't sure about the final group.

"Experimenters gather as many combinations as possibles. To figure out what synergises and what doesn't. What is allowed and what isn't. Take blood magic for example, there are certain combinations that should work in theory yet when put into practice, fail." Miki explained.

"Their responsibility is to find as many of this as possible so that our main fighters can choose the most efficient combination without wasting time or resources."

With their limited number of combatants, they have to be as careful as possible when it comes to selecting roles.

The most dangerous of the bunch would be the group responsible for mapping.

It is simultaneously the most dangerous yet at the same time, the most important.

They are the ones that have to explore as many paths as possible and bring the data back.

Scouters have similar roles but different objectives. Mappers are to find out about the terrain while scouts find information on the beasts.

This entire system was one that allowed everyone to contribute in order to resolve the Nightmare as soon as possible.

As for Miki's role in all of this, she is part of the boss killing group.

Not because she wanted to be, but because she had to be.

She originally wanted to be part of the scouting group.

A commander who pushes her soldiers to die should have the resolve to do the same.

Hiding in the back, commanding others to die... Who would want to follow?

To rally soldiers, one must give them something to rally behind.

What Miki gave them to rally behind was not herself. But the idea of liberating Grand Cathia.

If one day, she becomes Signal Lost in this Nightmare, she knew others would take up her mantle.

But if they lost this drive from relying on heroes, how can she step onto the front line without worry?

When a fighter is resolved to die in a fight, that's when they can exhibit their fullest potential.

"Once you're around the same level as us, I'll have the others form a proper group with you included. Scouts, mappers and boss killers. We'll cover as much ground as we can and clear zone five." Miki explained.

Alice tapped her chin.

"Since I'm sharing this zone temporarily with you, I think I can summon people on my own too. Depending on the composition, do you think we'll be able to go through the Nightmare faster?" Alice asked.

Miki furrowed her brows.

Four was the limit.

But if Alice was here... That rule could be broken. It was already strange that she was sharing this zone with her after all.

"I'm going to assume you're talking about your friends. Can their stats keep up?" Miki frowned.

"Hmm... It'll take a while. If they tag it as well, do you think they can level up in time?" Alice tapped her chin.

Miki creased her brows.

"Depends. You're an anomaly, you can level up in this zone. I hope. But I'm not sure about the others. If you can, then yes, we can give it a try. Even if we don't journey today, ideally we start progressing tomorrow."

Alice nodded her head.

"Once we get your level up to speed, I'll summon the experiment group and we'll test some of the interactions with your new ability." Miki exhaled slowly.

She didn't want to get too ahead of herself. That's how you trip and fall.

One step at the time.

Towards the goal of liberation.

###

A girl could be seen skipping through the fog covered streets of an unknown zone.

Sensing her presence, the beasts retreated deeper into the Nightmare.

She hummed a tune, spun around with soft laughter.

Then paused.

"Is... sister cheating? Well... Nyer allowed her to do this." She mumbled.

Sitting down on a bench, she kicked her legs back and forth, wondering what she should do about it.

Of course, regulating the rules are a must. You can work within them but exploiting certain factors were strictly off the table.

But these were exploits allowed by Nyer.

After all, Alice was only given the authority as a gift because Nyer allowed Karina to do so.

If he didn't give the green light, Alice would still be stuck in her zone.

"If that's allowed..."

The girl paused, her smile widening.

"Maybe I should go and say hi?"

Chapter 962: Hope And Survival

When I was a little girl, during the great famine, we found a single ray of hope. A single path to survival.

No matter what, Aldric stood at the front, shielding us from as much hardship as he could. When we lacked food, he would search further than anyone. When we lacked shelter, he would work harder than anyone, carving out a mountain if he had to.

He became a leader of those fleeing the famine.

But one day, I noticed a change. When people were celebrating, he excused himself. He was still smiling, distributing food as per usual. Making the routine checks where they were needed.

But beneath all of that, I noticed a slight crack.

A worry.

After following him all this time, after trying to learn from the man I saw as an ideal, I noticed his worries becoming worse. He spent his time looking out toward the horizon.

At the sky. The earth. The falling snow.

While everyone was celebrating, I walked over with two cups of warm milk, products of livestock we managed to keep thanks to Aldric's efforts. Farming was... still difficult. But we could keep two animals around while finding food to keep the others happy.

"Thank you. Did I let my worries show?" Aldric accepted the cup with a helpless smile.

I nodded, saying nothing. I simply sat down next to him and shared his warmth.

Even now, I can still remember my mother, who used herself to keep me alive. The way she put up a strong front so I wouldn't worry. I saw the same in Aldric.

I didn't want him to go.

He let out a soft exhale and brushed my hair with his hands.

"You're more perceptive than the others. As expected of the mini leader who carried everyone before I arrived."

"I wasn't a good one..." I mumbled.

But that wasn't the point. And he knew it too.

He didn't drink the warm milk immediately. Instead, he stared into it.

Like he was searching for something far, far away.

After a long pause, he finally spoke.

"Verona. Do you know why I plant my sword into the ground to pray?" he asked.

I never asked in the past because I didn't believe in the gods. The sun that didn't break through the snow. The moon that didn't give them serenity. And the famine that belonged to the Eclipse.

None of the gods deserved my worship.

But even so, I didn't want to deny Aldric what he believed in, so I never commented on it.

"I don't do it for the gods. Believe me, they're the last ones I want to rely on." Aldric let out a laugh.

I blinked in confusion.

"What do you pray to then?"

His gaze drifted past me, past the fire, past the tents. Past the people who were laughing and celebrating.

It settled on the sword buried in the snow several steps away from the celebration. Snow had already gathered on its guard.

"A promise," he smiled.

"That sword didn't belong to me," he continued. "It was given to me by someone who sacrificed themselves for me. Someone who should be alive in my place."

I saw pain in his eyes and recalled our previous conversations.

"Before I met all of you, I was much, much weaker. More cowardly. Someone who should've died when this famine struck." Aldric scratched his cheek while I listened intently.

He was opening himself up to me. The only thing I could do in that moment was listen.

"But... I didn't. I kept surviving." His eyes lowered.

"You'd think survival is the only thing that matters. I thought that was the case." He turned to me.

"But people cannot live on survival alone. They survive, yes. But they do not live. When they only rely on survival and nothing else, how is that any different from death?"

Aldric let out a deep, heavy sigh.

"To borrow my friend's words... humans need more than just survival. They need hope. With hope, they can live."

He wrapped both hands around the cup, feeling the warmth but still didn't drink.

"I survived... but I didn't understand why I was surviving.

"For a long time, I thought survival itself was enough. That if I simply endured, I was 'living'." He shook his head.

"My friend taught me otherwise."

He took a sip of the milk.

Aldric didn't need to say the rest of the story for me to understand what had happened. Since the start of this famine, death had always been my companion.

"So I pray before my friend's sword. A promise to myself that I won't just survive. I'll find hope. I'll give others hope. I'll give them the will to stand on their own two feet and survive this harsh winter."

Aldric's smile faded into something more serious. Something he wouldn't usually show in front of me, or anyone else, for that matter.

"This famine isn't natural," he said with certainty.

No doubt in his face.

My fingers tightened around my cup.

"This endless snow and storm. This cycle of life and death repeated under stress over and over again. Someone is manipulating this nation and its climate."

"Someone... is doing this?" I asked.

I was mature for my age — more mature than the others. But even so, it didn't mean I was without emotion. Rage burned hot in my chest.

The realisation that all of this death, all these sacrifices, happened because of someone.

Aldric nodded slowly.

"Someone is reshaping the North. Not destroying it... They're trying to cause something through this famine. To extinguish hope."

He finished his cup of milk.

"Whoever is doing this does not care about the deaths needed to make it happen. And I think they're getting close to succeeding."

This was the source of his worry.

"If this famine were natural, we would simply need to endure — to keep the fire in our chests alight and look for a better tomorrow.

"But it's artificial. There is no path out if they are allowed to do this without consequence."

It was at this point I realised what he wanted to do.

I glanced down at my knees. At the cup in my hand.

"What will you do?" I asked quietly.

Aldric didn't answer right away.

An apologetic smile. A hand upon my head.

"Sor—"

"I'm not blaming you," I shook my head.

I knew what he wanted to do. What he must do.

"Are you taking anyone with you?" I asked.

If he had allies, this journey would be much safer for him.

"Depends. I can't take all of the capable people with me. This place will crumble if I do. I'll move across a few groups and see if there are fighters willing to embark on this quest with me."

I wanted to go as well. I wanted him to take me along.

But I knew he would never allow that.

So I put up a strong front. Just as he had done for me. For the people of this group.

"I'll look after this place while you're gone," I said, glancing up at him. "I'll do it properly this time. Like you taught me."

He was surprised by my declaration before a grin appeared on his face.

"Alright then. I'll be counting on you, okay? As long as you remember that people need hope as much as they do survival, I'm sure you'll do just fine."

He ruffled my hair.

That was the last time I saw him.

That night, I cried my eyes out knowing he was leaving this place.

The morning came quietly.

No announcement.

No farewell.

No ceremony.

###

"It was hard for you, wasn't it? To rally the people after he left."

Verona glanced at the snowfield before her.

At the crimson knight kneeling in the snow, waiting for the next battle.

Her chest tightened.

How long had it been since she last saw that silhouette?

Even now, even after all these years, she felt like a little kid next to him.

She wanted him to ruffle her hair again. To teach her the tricks to hunting.

To praise her for doing well.

Even though she knew it was impossible.

But within this nightmare, across this distance between them... she could just reach out and...

Verona clenched her jaw.

"The famine never ended, even after he left. It stuttered and stalled, giving you the moment of respite you needed. But it never stopped, did it?" Enris stood beside Verona.

"No, it didn't. Aldric managed to gather a small group to fight the one causing all of this. But it wasn't enough." Verona's eyelashes trembled.

She closed her eyes.

Every day. Every night. Every week. Every month.

She prayed and prayed that she would wake to the crimson silhouette returning to camp.

Even when things felt tough, she held onto hope.

When the famine ended, she didn't know it was only temporary. She thought he had done it.

That he had paved the way forward.

She did everything she could to stabilise the situation in the North.

So that he could come home and not have to do anything. That he had done enough.

Then the second famine struck.

That was when Verona knew Aldric had failed.

He had sacrificed his life to pave the path forward. To give them hope. But he wasn't able to finish the job.

She remembered what the camp was like when people realised the second famine had arrived.

They didn't panic. Not immediately.

Because all of them survived the first one.

And because Verona had taken over.

"You inherited his will, his hopes, and his desires. By ending the source of the famine, by carving your way through this disaster with your own hands, you became the Queen of the North and established this nation," Ennis grinned.

"You built it from the ground up, just as he had wished. You gave the North hope so that they could live. And now..."

She trailed off.

"It crumbles away."

Verona tilted her head back and stared at the sky.

False divinity that ruined everything she worked for.

Verona collapsed to her knees.

Her breath trembled.

Her hands sank into the snow.

Cold bit into her skin, but she barely felt it.

All she could feel was the crushing weight inside her chest.

The North.

The people.

The kingdom she built.

Everything she tried to protect.

Everything she tried to become.

All of it...

\*Crunch...

A footstep in the snow...

Verona slowly glanced back.

The crimson silhouette she had hoped to see, but never did, stood behind her.

Her lips trembled. She couldn't even force a smile.

Not even in front of him.

"Aldric..."

Tears rolled down her cheeks.

"I failed..."

## Chapter 963: Figuring Out Secrets

"Did it work?" Miki asked with a slight frown.

After spending a while helping Alice get some easy kills, they wanted to see if it's possible for her to follow them to the fifth zone.

However...

"I... I think it's a little stunted." Alice frowned.

The limit of each zone's Embryo arrived much sooner than what she had expected. Not only that, but levelling up didn't give her any new spells either.

She was still stuck with Pale Lance and the skill she gained from Adela.

"Stunted? In what way?"

Before responding, Alice threw out a punch towards Miki and she tilted her head to the side.

"Tell me, does this feel like the stats of someone who should be at the limit of tier four embryos?" Alice smiled helplessly.

Miki froze.

The speed of the punch that Alice threw out just now... it was barely enough for the mid ranges of the fourth Zone...

How can that be the limit?

Clenching her fist a few times, Alice let out a sigh.

"Stunted isn't the only thing either. This feels... Fleeting. Fake strength that'll disappear the moment I step back into my own Zone."

It was a similar sensation to drinking blood. When she expands her Sigil limit and stole someone else's strength.

The timer that kept ticking down.

Alice could feel it.

Perhaps this was a way of them balancing the fact that she can travel to other zones. Or perhaps this system was never meant to accommodate such an anomaly.

Another theory could be the fact that Zones are also created based on the host.

Even though she was here, she wasn't the 'real' host. Killing monsters here doesn't advance her own zone.

However, with this discovery, Alice couldn't help but wonder.

With this fleeting strength, this sensation that was oh so familiar...

Was there a chance that she could steal the power of others in this nightmare?

What if, she was able to 'drink the blood' of the bosses.

Would she be able to steal their essence? Use their power for herself?

"Seems like you have a few ideas." Miki noticed the look in Alice's eyes.

"Just a few. Bosses don't respawn right?" Alice glanced up as Miki shook her head.

"Bosses and mini bosses don't respawn. Their arenas become a sort of safe zone for people."

Since that was the case, it'll be hard for her to test out her theory.

She didn't exactly want to expose her unique constitution either.

Though...

At this point in time, what was more important?

Her secrets of getting help in figuring out how to best make use of her talents?

Alice tightened her fingers.

She enjoyed the process of discovery but now wasn't the time.

Miki has a dedicated group of people prepared for experimentation.

Therefore there was only one right choice...

"I have a theory." Alice opened her mouth.

"Hm?"

"You're aware of my connection to the Zenia family right? At least... my old one." Alice sighed, leaning back.

"I'm aware yes. What theory are you thinking about?"

Alice hesitated.

"What do you think... About the possibility of me stealing stats from monsters or bosses and their skills?" Alice scratched her cheek.

". . ."

Miki froze.

Alice waved her hand in front of Miki's face a few times but there was no reaction.

It was only after Alice started to poke her did she finally react.

"Sorry, hang on. I'm not quite sure what you're talking about." Miki massaged her eyes.

"What do you mean by stealing stats?"

"Hmm... how do I even explain this urgh..." Alice groaned.

In the end, she decided to reveal the fact that she can siphon power from other beasts due to an experiment within the Zenia family. The existence of hybrids and downplayed herself as somewhat of a 'prototype' of the hybrids.

It wasn't wrong but it wasn't the truth either.

However, with this, she's able to explain some of her abilities without directly revealing everything.

Miki had to take a seat.

If everything Alice said was true, and that this place was partially caused by the Zenia family, then it would indeed make sense that Alice's body would have a unique reaction to the location.

If so...

"How much do you want me to reveal to the experiments group? I can have them see if they're able to figure out how to stimulate this ability and activate it in the Zone."

Since this was a private matter, Miki didn't want to reveal too much without Alice's permission.

"You can tell them everything I told you. We lack the time after all, the sooner we start figuring this out, the better." Alice shrugged.

"Alright, give me a second then."

Standing up, Miki started to summon and unsummon her staff.

She would bring whole groups, brief them on the situation, order them to inform certain members before summoning a new group.

In this moment, Alice saw the entire network that Miki had worked hard to create within the Nightmare.

Scouters looking for bosses, mini bosses and elites to test on. Mappers to find the perfect routes to get to each monster as quickly as possible.

Even people to get into contact with any civilians who have bosses available to be killed.

She was putting the entirety of Grand Cathia to work in order to figure out the most optimal usage for this information.

And within moment, Miki has already gotten report after report.

A route that kills as many bosses in as little time as possible while also avoiding stray beasts.

Nearby civilian zones where they haven't departed from zone one yet, thus giving them entire areas to work with.

Possible item combinations that can be gained without needing any skills, natural traps and even merchants with unique loot.

All of it was documented and soon they had a guide in hand.

"We have a bit of time before the Nightmare ends. If we can get through half of this list, it'll be good progress.

"And if it doesn't work... We can still use someone of your experience." Miki mumbled while flipping through the reports.

"There are builds that only require you to use items rather than skills, armour or stats. Just buying items and throwing them out should be fine since they don't scale off of your stats. The only question is how much we can carry and if that's enough."

She had even given Alice several 'build' options to see which suited her best should this test come to a failure. If she couldn't steal a boss's stats then this was their best option.

But before Alice even settle on one that she liked, Miki has already summoned the main group.

Two experimenters and one caster.

With Miki and the caster focusing on clearing out the mobs, it gave them plenty of leeway to test out their theories against monsters and even bosses with no risk of death.

"We're not done yet. Alice, you can summon people as well right? How many people can you bring?" Miki asked as Alice blinked her eyes.

"Probably the same as you since I'm technically a co host."

"Perfect. Bring this guy to help clear out monsters and these two for testing." Miki wrote down three names for Alice to summon.

With her commanding aura, Alice found it hard to reject and did as she was told.

Once everyone was gathered, Miki did a final role call and a quick refresher on their roles.

The four people responsible for experimenting wasted no time and began barraging Alice with a bunch of questions to try figure out the details.

Alice was overwhelmed in an instant and looked towards Miki for help.

"We'll travel down this route. There are four ranged units on top. Can you deal with them? I'll target the elites on the bottom. With those guys gone, I should be able to round up the stragglers without issue." Miki glanced at the map.

"Can you deal with them?" She looked at the caster who gave her a thumbs up.

"Alright! Everyone! We're setting off! Alice, answer the questions while we make our way to the first boss!" Miki shouted once everything was confirmed.

Without getting the chance to protest, Alice was hoisted up once more like a sack of potatoes and dragged along.

It was in this moment that Alice realised what she was feeling.

This dread.

It was just like when Velouria dragged her away for clothing!

Her eyes widened, she glanced up at the experimenters who had the same grin as Velouria did on that day and paled.

"W-WAIT!"

They didn't.

###

Enris sat upon the peak of a snow capped mountain, a grin plastered on her face.

She was originally planning on messing with Alice when she invaded this place a while ago.

But who knew the Queen of the North would also be dragged here.

With their combined presence, this zone was created.

An anomaly within Nyer's realm.

But within this anomaly, she found something rather interesting.

A hint to what Nyer was trying to accomplish.

The laws he was trying to put into place and...

The potential waiting to be claimed.

Depending on how things go... she might even get what she wants.

But to reach that stage, she had to wait.

Yet waiting didn't mean being idle. She can still move however she wanted.

"Ah~ I wanna mess things up." Enris chuckled.

She wanted to sow chaos as much as she wished but that's a mistake.

She had already learned the consequences of losing herself in short term pleasure.

In the moment, she felt euphoric.

But the emptiness that followed was torture. She won't repeat what happened with Velouria again. This time, she'll carefully cultivate a maelstrom of chaos that will give her the most beautiful end.

Chapter 964: Experimental Combination

Alice sat on a rock with a defeated expression on her face.

In this world of colour, she alone felt like a black-and-white image.

All life drained from her body.

Every time the boss fight started getting exciting... she was pulled back.

Every. Single. Time.

Not because she was in danger.

But because they wanted data.

Different combinations. Different triggers. Different reactions.

Test this. Try that. Don't kill yet. Wait. Observe.

It's like having mead presented in front of her but not being allowed to drink it.

When the mug is in her hands, she could smell the charm of the mead, place her lips upon the corner and then...

They rip it away.

When the boss's neck was this close to being cut, she was pulled back with a skill.

"Stop sulking already. We need to figure out how your ability works." Miki sighed.

Right now Alice was like a child who wasn't allowed her favourite toy.

"I know but... Arghh!!!" Alice flailed her limbs.

"At least let me land a solid hit against them!"

"If we kill them too fast, we'll run out of bosses to test on. But come on, didn't we figure it out in the end?" Miki smiled helplessly.

She had to pacify Alice so that she would be more cooperative.

Pouting her lips, Alice held up her arm filled with crimson marks.

Each mark signifying a boss ability that she had siphoned.

Like her original power, killing a boss allowed her to steal one skill they used. On top of that, she absorbed a portion of their dominant stat.

If a boss cast spells a lot, she would gain the spiritual stat.

Spell-heavy bosses granted spiritual stat.

Physical ones granted strength.

The gains were small, only a few points at a time.

But over many kills, the difference would add up.

Still...

It was inefficient.

So instead, they changed their approach.

Alice had showcased how fast she can react as well as her awareness of her surroundings.

Therefore, they crafted a build tailored for her.

A little different to her usual set up but it'll be perfect for what they wished to accomplish in the fifth zone.

To clear as much of the area as fast as possible.

If they have more people summoned with them, the number of beasts will quickly rise up to unrealistic standards.

So they needed to keep the battles short and with low numbers.

During this time, Alice wasn't the only one being helped.

Alice wasn't the only one being trained either.

She insisted on fighting alongside Alyss.

Partly personal reasons.

Mostly because Alyss was terrifyingly strong.

If she was to raise her stats, she would make a fierce vanguard to help them.

Miki agreed. If Alice wasn't lying, Alyss had hardly died despite reaching the third Zone.

That level of power wasn't something that can be found easily.

So another farming unit was accelerating Alyss's growth separately.

As for Cayla, even though she'll be helpful information wise, her capabilities as a fighter were a little... weaker than some of the other candidates.

It was hard for Alice to convince Miki using the same method she used for Alyss.

In the end, the final group they decided to go with was Miki, Alyss, Alice and a flexible spot.

Depending on what they need in the moment, this fourth slot will be adjusted.

"Alright, I think that concludes the experiments for now. We'll run some live tests for you to get used to the set up." Miki clapped her hands, stopping everyone in their tracks.

Hearing this, Alice's ears perked up as she sat up with a glimmer in her eyes.

'So simple.' Everyone thought upon seeing her reaction.

One of the experimenters even looked like she wanted to desperately ruffle Alice's hair but tried her best to hold that desire back.

"Finally! I thought I was going to die from boredom." Alice rubbed her hands together with a grin.

"It wasn't like you were idle. How could you be bored?" Miki rolled her eyes.

"Don't worry about it. Anyways, I just gotta hit them with the bow right?" Alice held up the new weapon they gave her.

Even though she originally wanted to be a mix of casting and melee like how fighting style in reality, they figured it wasn't going to be efficient in the Nightmare.

Not with her downsides.

Therefore, the best option would be to take advantage of her reaction speed.

Their build for Alice takes into account of certain skills she gained from bosses along with some stray items that didn't look like they would synergise.

Items belonging to different sets with no correlation whatsoever.

However, when put together...

Jumping onto the roof, Alice pulled back the bowstring.

Azure flame converged into a single arrow as the fog around them dispersed momentarily, increasing how much they can see into this fog.

"Hou~ six targets." Alice grinned.

Her eyes turning demonic as one of the markings on her arm started to glow.

Boss skill – Pavi's Hunt.

When activating Pavi's hunt, Alice's detection range greatly increases while also slotting critical strike spots around their body.

Striking these spots granted increased damage.

A second marking lit up.

Boss skill – Combo Master.

Linking up strikes without dodging increased damage. Perfect for short bursts of rapid strikes.

But when paired with Pavis' Hunt, so long as Alice can hit the targets, it'll become a multiplier to increase the damage of the crits!

A third skill was activated.

Item skill – Rapid Fire.

By activating this ring, Alice was able to significantly increase the rate of which she can fire her arrows. Briefly removing the limiter of how many attacks per second she can perform with this weapon.

Fourth, fifth, sixth.

Six skills were all activated simultaneously as Alice took a deep breath.

The world was slow.

She could see the exact spots she needed to fire her arrows. The paths open to her, the obstacles, the enemies lying in wait.

All of it was open to her view. A different sensation compared to her Zone or Vision but regardless, this entire area was exposed to her.

It was a shame that most of these skills came from items and boss skills rather than spells you can take back to reality.

If they could, maybe Grand Cathia wouldn't have that hard of a time defending against the siege.

Alice fired three arrows before firing three more into the air.

Like magic, the arrows began to curve around the buildings.

\*THUNK!!!

Each shot perfectly struck dead centre of the critical spots.

Six arrows fired, six crits. Zero misses.

The hard part was landing the shots and Alice succeeded.

Now was the easy part.

The delayed explosion of her skills.

\*BANG!!!

From each arrow, a Pale Lance burst out and carved a hole through their body!

Usually, firing this many Pale Lances would have issues.

Range, consumption and damage.

But thanks to the combination given to her by the Experiments department, all of that was solved!

So long as her arrows hit the crit, a Pale Lance would trigger, affected by the combo streak and deal extra damage.

A guaranteed one shot one kill if the requirements are met.

Some of these even gave Alice a few ideas for her own trigger casts.

To put conditions that automatically boost strikes that meet the requirement.

"How is it?" Miki asked with a smile, proud of her department.

"It's good. No, it's better than good. How the hell did you even figure out this combination so quickly???" Alice praised.

Since it wasn't a combination of item skills, they had to think of everything from scratch.

How the boss skills interact and so on.

One of the experimenters grinned, feeling pride in their work.

"Once you understand the logic behind certain skills, it becomes easy. By that point, you understand how the designers have designed their puzzles, the habits and so on."

There were other combinations they could've tried but this was by far the most effective in terms of getting easy kills. Of course, using this method against bosses in a solo instance won't be easy.

Alice will need someone to tank for her so that she can land the strikes.

With a combination now figured out, they made their way to the fifth zone.

Alyss was still farming so they'll be joining next time.

In the meantime, Miki led the charge.

She took care of anything that got too close, rounded up monsters to be killed by the caster.

And anything too far out, annoying to round up or too fast, was dealt with by Alice.

Even with the support skills of the items helping her out, Miki was surprised by how proficient Alice was with the bow.

Especially for someone who usually uses swords.

"It's not that hard. It's just a matter of replication for the initial movements. After that, I'll take notice of the wind and other crap like that. But I do more mental calculations for my spells outside of the Nightmare anyway. So this is easy."

That was Alice's answer.

A single shot of the bow was all that she needed to figure out and calibrate her motions. Like a machine, she repeated the perfect motion over and over without deviation.

It didn't matter how far away they were, Alice's arrow always met target.

"Honestly, you should just use bows from now." Miki chuckled.

"Hell no. Bows are a little unreliable when fighting people stronger than you. Anyone with half-decent reaction speeds can swat away an arrow without an issue." Alice rolled her eyes.

Though...

Her sense of scale wasn't what many would consider to be 'normal'.

After all, the ones she's been fighting are those stronger than her. Beings that the common man considers to be untouchable.

Lords, Apostles.

Beings like that.

In such cases then yes, a bow would be a little unreliable.

But so would everything else.

Of course, Alice didn't tell Miki that. There's no reason for her to know that it was Alice who killed Kazira.

If she did, she'll probably pass out from shock.

Soon, they reached a boss arena within the fifth Zone.

Chapter 965: Airia

The fog curtains of the boss arena peeled open.

The arena this time was not a battlefield ruin. Not a corrupted territory.

But strangely...

A stage?

The group frowned simultaneously.

This location hadn't looked like a stage when they were outside. It had been a simple ruined courtyard with a lone woman standing in the middle.

But the moment they stepped in...

...it was as if reality had been replaced.

A circular stage stretched beneath their feet, polished obsidian reflecting pale light from nowhere. Rows upon rows of empty seats rose into darkness, an all-encompassing amphitheatre that disappeared beyond the fog.

No audience, no performers.

Yet...

\*clap clap clap

An applause echoed through the empty space.

No hands moved, no source for this sound.

But it continued.

And at the centre of the stage, a single figure stood.

She waited beneath a soft spotlight that shone down from above.

A smile hung on her face, welcoming.

Like a host greeting honoured guests. Long black hair flowed behind her like ink drifting in water, threads slowly transitioning to a deep crimson around the tips.

Stiches traced across her pale skin. Some scars, some were deliberate, holding the pieces of her body together.

Roses bloomed across her body. One at her throat, another at her finger.

One faintly visible beneath the translucent lace of her sleeve.

Nestled in the centre of these roses... was a single eyeball that stared at the group.

Alice immediately frowned.

She felt as though this entire space was now out of her control. Invisible hands that orchestrated every movement within this stage.

The source of this feeling was naturally the woman standing in the middle.

"Well well..." She hummed softly, her voice carried perfectly through this vast arena.

Gentle yet clear, powerful yet soft. A voice that made sure it could reach to every audience member, no matter how far they sat.

"It seems like you are late for the main performance. The fans have already left." Her gaze drifted across them one by one.

Reviewing their worthiness to witness her act.

Miki stepped forward as the vanguard.

Her spear rested loosely in her grip, point angled toward the floor. Her posture relaxed, her breathing steady.

Gaze focused.

There was recognition in her eyes, of the danger in front of them.

"Airia?" Miki asked lightly while the others got into position.

Alice in the back, caster in the middle and another frontliner with Miki in the front.

The woman blinked her eyes in momentary surprise before her smile deepened.

Clearly pleased.

"Ah... Someone remembers me." She tilted her head, hiding her mouth while laughing gently.

"How rare. How many years have passed? How long has it been since my death? I had always believed I would die a nameless person. Fame forgotten through the sands of time and yet...

"A girl who remembers my name now stands before me."

Alice had her finger on the bowstring, ready to fight when Miki makes the call.

"Your name is one that is taught through books. A demonstration of what not to do." Miki took a deep breath.

"I figured as much. My end was not one radiant with glory nor was it one of a great evil. It's simply a pitiful end of someone who failed to accomplish anything despite trying everything." Airia nodded in understanding.

"Now then, children of the future. I stand before you as a phantom of the past. I shall do as I have done in life." Airia smiled, flexing her fingers as puppet strings burst out from the stage.

"And turn everything into the greatest performance I can muster."

Threads immediately shot towards the group as the caster was already prepared. With a wave of his staff, a wall of flames circled them, cutting off a path for the string.

The few that managed to slip through the gaps were shot down by Alice while Miki and the other front liner lunged forward.

Roses started to fall from the sky.

"Alice!" Miki shouted.

"Roger roger." Pulling her arm back, Alice nocked four arrows and fired at the same time.

\*BANG!!!

The roses that would've landed around Miki and the other frontliner blew up in the air as Alice pierced their core.

Miki didn't slow down. She stepped through the minefield of roses with full faith that Alice will take care of whatever would be in their path.

And as expected, Alice achieved just that.

"Don't let the threads touch out body." She ordered.

That was the only order she needed to give to Alice.

Twisting her body, Miki threw her spear.

"Tsk."

Before it could even reach Airia, it was stopped in mid air by puppet strings pulling against the spear shaft.

Miki's eyes darted.

Twisting her body, she avoided two slashes while the other frontliner blocked it with his shield.

Airia, a prominent figure in Grand Cathia's past.

Someone who abandoned this city, its people, her fans, everything.

Miki jumped, using her initial spear as a platform while bringing out a second weapon.

With a tug of the strings, Airia grinned, manifesting a puppet to block the attack for her.

"Since you know who I am, are you not afraid of what I'll do to your allies?" Airia asked with a chuckle, brandishing her own rapier.

"No I'm not. Because I have Alice covering for everyone and overlooking this battle." Miki replied without hesitation.

Threads that tried to stab into the back of her neck was instantly warded off as an arrow came in front of her, cutting them off.

Miki continued her onslaught while Airia began to frown.

Whenever she tried to counter, an arrow would fly over.

And if she was to continue her motion, she'll be hit directly, forcing her to back off.

On the other hand, even though she was trying to target the overs, Alice was still keeping them safe.

Airia had an ability that allowed her to 'convert' attackers into her allies as long as she plants threads into their body.

But these threads were unique in their construction, making it harder to land. But by mixing them with false threads, it should've been easy.

At least, in theory.

It didn't matter how many false threads she used, Alice was able to pinpoint the exact thread that would take over the fighters.

Raising her hand, Airia unleashed a storm of rose petals as Miki jumped back.

The caster slammed his staff into the ground as flaming whips lashed against Airia's ability, keeping the group safe.

Threads burst out from below but he simply smiled, snapping his finger as a pulse of ice detonated, freezing the threads around them.

With a twirl of her staff, Miki destroyed the threads with ease before going on the offensive once more.

Alice had to admit, this fight felt rather easy. Especially when everyone knew what they were doing.

She was controlling the battlefield by countering the dangerous threads and long ranged attacks.

The caster cleared out large scale spells so the melee fighters can focus on fighting one on one.

Every time Miki showed a gap in her defence due to her movements, a shield would cover for her.

And whenever Airia focused on the shield, Miki would come in with a dangerous flurry of strikes.

"Ah... how sad. This sadness that fills my chest." Airia detonated a rose field around her, pushing back Miki and the other frontliner.

They wanted to move but their body refused to listen.

"Phase 2. In life, Airia was extremely dangerous on the battlefield. She excels in one vs many kind of fights. Keep shutting down her skills, I'll keep her occupied up close. Alice, when crits reveal themselves, take the shot. You are also responsible for a portion of the damage." Miki ordered calmly.

Even though this was the first time they're fighting the boss, Miki knew partially what to expect.

Guesses formed after extensively studying the history of Grand Cathia. The notable figures, their habits.

Their skills and fighting styles.

This maze was a reconstruction of Grand Cathia after all. A nightmare belonging to the city.

The moment they could move their body again, Alice drew her bow.

Her skills activated in tandem and six targets appeared around the boss.

With a grin, she fired her arrows, shattering the targets in one go while her spells detonated inside the body.

Heavy damage was inflicted straight away, staggering the boss momentarily while Miki lunged in. This time, she wasn't going to deal damage. Instead, since Alice managed to stagger, it was the perfect time for the caster to shine.

Stabbing her spear beneath the boss, Miki gritted her teeth, throwing Airia into the air.

As though predicting this outcome, several single target spells was firing from a distance. All precast with the notion that Miki will no doubt see the opportunity, trust formed through countless battles with one another.

Just as the boss was about to fall, the other frontliner slammed his shield into her back, lifting her once more.

Arrows and spells shot over without the boss being able to retaliate. Instead, all they could do was hurl curses over and over.

As the barrage ended, Miki tightened her grip on the spear.

An opportunity!

Adjusting her stance, she stabbed the boss in the back right before they could hit the ground. Her spear pierced through the stomach as Miki slammed her into the ground before digging her heel into the boss's body, kicking them away.

\*BANG!!!

Airia crashed into the wall of the stage as dust and rubble hid her body.

Phase two was ended before Airia could land a single strike. And within that dust, her body began to twist and mutate...

Chapter 966: A Simple Life

With the boss entering phase 3, the group adjusted their strategy as well.

The caster was now fully responsible for covering them from large attacks along with the other frontline while Alice and Miki focused on damage.

Airia now had a bigger hitbox and so more targets could be placed.

More targets also meant more Pale Lances that would detonate inside the body.

Fighting this boss as a group, Alice now truly understood how efficient Miki's group was.

With these tailored builds, this Nightmare became a walk in the park.

Of course, there was still the key detail of being capable in the first place, but these builds helped drastically reduce the number of deaths that would've been incurred.

She couldn't help wonder if this was usable against Aldric.

Though... with how fast he was moving, it'll be difficult to land a strike.

Not only that but her strength was temporary. Next time then enter the nightmare, she'll have to farm up her stats again.

A fleeting power boost unless she accomplishes it in her own Zone.

Aiming up into the sky, Alice pulled her arm back as seven arrows were shot out all at once.

If the Nightmare realm allowed them to create builds that make this place easier...

Then what was their main goal?

She knew that the purpose of the siege was to harvest the fear they planted into the victims hearts.

While not everyone can pull off these builds skillfully, it gave the common person a chance to overcome said fear.

A little contradictory to what they're trying to achieve.

Which meant that there's something else in here that Nyer wanted to harvest, not just fear.

Perhaps fear was simply the easiest one to get, a primordial emotion that people are guaranteed to have.

Then was it hope? Faith?

To trap a man inside a confined area with no chance of getting out. Danger approaching from the distance, the grip of death tightening around their neck.

And right before their fears are made real, a single ray of light comes down from above.

A rope that will pull them out of the Nightmare.

The only path out.

Naturally, the man will take that rope, to escape his fears.

But once he reaches the end of that rope and the light disappears, what does he see?

What if it was not the way out but the tongue of another beast. Smiling, waiting, laughing.

He would then feel despair.

Alice didn't know.

Everything in this Nightmare realm was urging them to rise up against their fears so that even the common man can take fate into his own hands.

Yet his desires speak otherwise.

Then... Perhaps this was a reflection of their world.

A domain of contradictions that seemingly go against one another with no hints of what's right or wrong.

Morality lay in the hands of the victor. Should Enris take over the world, then murder becomes good. Heresy is praised and stillness is evil.

Then this Nightmare...

Alice ducked down as Miki slammed her spear into a claw that was trying to swat them away.

Pulling her bowstring, Alice's eyes shifted as more targets appeared. More shots landed against the boss's body as she continued to whittle down the health.

There was also the matter of Aldric becoming conscious. When he started to ask her questions.

Airia was similar in the fact that she understood that she's dead.

She understood that this is the Grand Cathia of the future.

Alice furrowed her brows.

Was Nyer anchoring the Nightmare realm to an Inverted World? They were gateways to the 'history' of their world.

A door to everything that had happened in the past.

Could it be possible that he wants to pull Velouria's soul from the past?

No, if it was that easy, he would've done so long ago.

Living beings being pulled in from the past isn't easy. Dead items like the mead and so on was possible to some extent.

But at the same time, it was also because a link had been formed when she entered. A door to turn fake into real appeared and Velouria would've taken her body.

Without that opportunity, Alice doubted she could even bring over some Ayrian mead.

In this moment, Alice couldn't help but imagine if she was in Nyer's shoes.

If it was Allura, Kaden, Alyss or any of her close friends, what would she do if they were to die due to betrayal?

What if they died and she had the opportunity to bring them back?

Would she dwell in the past like Nyer? Or would she keep walking forward.

Alice tightened her fingers around her bow.

\*BANG!!!

Her arrow curved, piercing the boss on the back as a Pale Lance pierced its chest.

If Alyss died... Alice knew that she would try to find a way to get her soul back no matter what.

To break the loop of life and death.

After all, it was too cruel and unfair otherwise.

She has yet to find a way to properly give Alyss her own body as well. To allow her to move around freely without chains binding her every movement.

To siphon the Eldritch energy away so that she's no longer considered a harm to this world.

But would she go as far as Nyer?

She only knew the surface level of everything he's done.

The countless experiments over the years, the countless victims.

He watched empires rise and fall, eras pass in the blink of an eye. Sometimes it was due to his actions, sometimes it was the natural course. Regardless, ever since the fall of Ayr, Nyer has continuously walked towards that singular goal.

It was no exaggeration to say that the goal was his entire reason of being.

His desire that consumed him from the inside out.

Without this goal... he was nothing but a husk.

An empty husk who didn't know where to go.

Is that the future waiting for her if she did the same as him?

If Alyss died and she spent her life trying to bring her back...

Then should she just accept the death and move on? No matter how unfair it may be?

Alice paused.

Allura didn't try to bring Velouria back. She simply tried her best to make sure this world didn't fall to ruin.

Kaden didn't try to bring Velouria back either, he just wanted Allura to be safe.

They both dedicated their efforts to help the living while remembering the dead.

So if anyone close to her died...

Alice wasn't sure how she'll react. She may lose her mind, come to hate this world.

At least right now, she wanted to be like Allura. She wanted to act in a manner that will earn her praise from Allura rather than disappointment.

She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled.

This world is for the living. Those who died should rest peacefully. It is the duty of those that come after to make sure they're not forgotten.

However, so long as the option exists, people like Nyer will always appear.

This unfairness that spreads through the world, it corrupts people. Makes them do things out of desperation.

Taking aim with her bow, Alice found herself in a moment of tranquillity.

The world slowed to a halt. A calm spread through her mind.

Perhaps it was because she took a step back in this fight that she had the leisure to think about everything that had happened.

And in these moments, she couldn't help but ask...

What did she envision for the end of her own path?

She didn't know what was in store for her but what did SHE want to do with her own life?

What did she want to accomplish? Not on other's behalf. Not what they requested of her.

But simply...

What did Alice Agnelia want to accomplish with her life.

Outside of Ayr, outside of the wishes placed on her.

What did the person inside, the soul controlling this body, desire?

Alice pulled back on her bowstring.

She didn't desire grandeur. She didn't desire godhood. She didn't even foresee herself as a wise ruler like Velouria.

It simply wasn't for her, standing in front of everyone, leading them to a future.

It wasn't a lack of drive nor was it a lack of ambition.

She had plenty of those.

If she wanted to, she could dedicate every second of her life into achieving this goal.

To learn the myriad of techniques across the world, to hunt the strongest beasts to reach Lordship.

But... the world in her heart was simpler than that.

If anything, it felt like a far cry from what people wanted her to accomplish.

But it'll be a life she enjoys, one that she wanted to carve for herself.

A simple life. A fulfilling one.

A simple cabin on a cliff overlooking the sea perhaps. A miniature farm so that she could harvest some wheat or even raise some bees for honey.

Allura and Kaden fit and healthy. They don't need to be powerful, Alice didn't want them to fight world ending threats.

Alyss relaxing by a hammock by the tree perhaps.

The taste of the first harvest, some homemade mead.

Her friends will visit, they'll laugh, they'll talk.

They'll look out at the sea.

Alice smiled.

Who knew such a simple dream would fill her with such satisfaction?

But it was also this simplicity that was so hard to obtain.

Alice finally understood what Nyer felt.

Should any of them be missing from this dream, should Allura be absent, or Kaden, or even Alyss...

It'll feel incomplete. Like a part of herself had just been ripped away.

This sweet dream will become nothing but a torturous image of what could've been.

And that pain would've sent her to the pits of hell to achieve it.

'So this is the pain you've been dealing with...'

Smiling helplessly, Alice fired the final arrow that killed the boss of the fifth zone.

Chapter 967: Unending Nightmare

The boss glanced down at the hole in her chest.

It wasn't regenerating anymore.

So this was the end.

Once again... she stood on the losing side of the stage.

A bitter smile curved across her lips as she looked up toward the hanging lights above.

She had thought this was a second chance.

A chance to perform again.

To try again.

To exist again.

And yet...

It had only been another futile act.

"Children of Grand Cathia, can you humour me?" She asked with a sad look in her eyes.

Her voice, tired.

"Do the nobles who live up high still exist? Do they continue to look down without care

Miki hesitated.

She knew Airia's story.

Knew the bitterness carved into her bones.

Knew why she left.

Knew why she became something the city feared.

Airia had never been meant to become anything important.

She was not noble.

Not a warrior.

She had simply been a girl.

A girl who loved the stage.

Before Grand Cathia knew her rage... her despair... her power...

She had only been another performer beneath the lights.

Born where music never stopped.

Raised beneath painted backdrops.

Fed by applause instead of affection.

And she had loved it.

The stage had been her heart.

Her soul.

Her entire world.

She had never learned how to perform.

She simply stepped into the light...

And her body knew what to do.

Talent.

Relentless effort.

Morning rehearsals.

Afternoon rehearsals.

Night performances.

Her worth measured in ticket sales.

Her identity in how beautifully she moved.

And she had loved every moment of it.

The people loved her, they loved the way she looked when on the stage.

"The nobles still exist. Even as we are besieged by nightmares, they refuse to move." Miki nodded.

Airia froze.

An expression of pain appeared upon her face.

"Ah... how unfair..."

She remembered the crowd.

Endless faces.

Endless applause.

Endless noise.

But there had always been one person she searched for.

Always.

A man who had watched from the beginning.

When she had no fans, he was there.

When she gained recognition, he was there.

When the theatre filled, he was still there.

Never in the front row.

Never shouting the loudest.

Never throwing flowers.

Just watching.

Quietly.

Warmly.

As if he saw her... not the performance.

She imagined the conversations that never happened.

The confessions that never left her lips.

Wondered what his voice sounded like.

Sometimes they crossed paths outside the theatre.

He never approached her.

Never demanded her attention.

He simply smiled... and stepped aside.

Respecting her world.

Respecting her distance.

Airia wanted to be the one to call out at times.

Many times.

But dancers do not step off stage to chase dreams. So she kept performing, waiting.

Telling herself that she'll speak to him after the next performance.

Then the next.

Then the next.

But she never did.

She became famous. Radiant. Untouchable.

A beauty who lives on the stage.

Not the kind that fades quietly with time. But the kind of beauty that attracts hunger.

Possessiveness.

Ownership.

One evening, a nobleman attended her performance.

He did not clap.

He did not smile.

He did not admire.

He simply watched.

The next day, he made an offer.

Not to Airia.

To the theatre.

The amount of money he offered was so large it did not feel real.

Enough wealth to rebuild everything.

Enough to secure their future for generations.

Enough...

To sell one performer.

The theatre accepted.

Even if they had wanted to refuse...

They could not.

They told her it was an honour.

A patron, a sponsor.

A private contract, an opportunity they would kill for.

She gets to attend to a noble.

But Airia refused.

She refused to perform for she longed for the stage.

He tried persuasion, pressure, threats.

But she didn't budge. Her pride as a performer, her longing for the stage.

And that man who always watched her performances.

The noble stopped asking.

Her limbs were broken first then set in a manner that didn't allow her to perform.

An act meant to preserve beauty while removing her will.

Then he scarred her face.

Not enough to kill, enough to make sure she can never stand beneath the lights.

He stopped treating her as a performer, as a person.

She was simply an item that he had bought. One to be violated in whatever manner he saw fit.

By the end, she was no longer a dancer.

No longer an item worth displaying.

No longer valuable.

Discarded.

Tossed away.

Like broken equipment.

Like a torn costume.

And the man she had once searched for in the audience...

Was gone.

She never learned his name...

###

Airia turned her back to Miki and the others.

She walked towards the centre of the stage and closed her eyes.

Her body turning to ash.

She tried her best to destroy the very thing that ruined her life. And yet...

Even in the future, nothing has changed.

What did she even use her life for?

"I truly... Hate this city." Airia closed her eyes.

Unable to give a response, Miki watched as Airia turned to ash, leaving behind her Embryo and items.

Another soul in the history of Grand Cathia was gone.

The stage fell silent after Airia turned to ash.

No applause, no music.

No spotlight.

Just the emptiness after a performance.

For a few seconds, no one moved. They watched as the stage faded away, returning them back to the fifth Zone as a single branch stretched out in the centre.

Miki stepped forward first, lowering her spear as she scanned the arena in case there was any hidden ambushes waiting for them.

"Keep your guard up. We'll make some final checks before the Nightmare ends." She ordered while Alice stepped towards the ash.

She closed her eyes, fingers brushing through the fine grey ash.

The marks upon her arms began to pulse as energy was being absorbed.

"Anything useful?" Miki asked curiously while Alice shook her head.

"Not really. The skill I got from her were the threads. Range attacks that does lots of damage if all of them hit but they don't travel that fast."

Folding her arms, Miki made a mental note.

"Could be stored in your arrows I suppose. I'll let the experiment department know and see what they think."

Hearing this, Alice shivered.

The experiment department again.

"So what about Airia then? It seemed like you knew her story with the way you were looking at her near the end." Alice asked once they gathered all of the loot.

"There's nothing to be done. At least not right now." Miki shook her head.

They had seen too many stories like this to linger on one.

Grand Cathia's history was built on corpses.

Nobles. Commoners. Soldiers. Dancers. Rebels.

Airia was simply another entry.

Another consequence.

Another proof of the flawed system within Grand Cathia.

However, that can only be done once the Nightmare was over.

For now, they moved on and didn't linger.

History and justice could be argued later.

The mission came first.

Since the fight ended faster than originally calculated, they had some extra time to explore the sixth Zone.

Stepping through the pathway that opened up in the arena, the fog retreated a little more, giving the a better view.

This time, the sixth Zone was a direct reaction of modern Grand Cathia.

It wasn't history this time, it was the present.

Miki frowned.

Were they getting closer to the core? Is that why it was now showing the modern city?

If so, who was the host of this zone?

Regardless, it was good information to have.

The group sat by the new branch and waited. Miki pulled out a pocket watch.

Once the hand strikes 12, the nightmare will be over.

There was less than a minute left and they've made great progress today.

Thirty seconds remaining.

No ambush, no monsters in the distance.

Silence.

Ten seconds left.

The nightmare was about to end then they have to prepare for another siege. To defend the city once more.

But this time, the enemy knows Alice and the others were around to help them.

The casualties... may be greater than before.

However, with Suyin helping out with the defence, it shouldn't be that bad.

Five...

Four...

Three...

Two...

One...

Silence. No tremor, no distortion.

No wave of dizziness.

Miki frowned.

She watched as the clock hand tick past twelve and continue.

"...Miki." Alice creased her brow.

"I know."

She tightened her grip around the spear.

Once the clock hand struck twelve, the summoning was cancelled out so it was just Miki and Alice in this zone. The others have gone back already.

Taking a deep breath, Miki stood up.

Could it be an issue with her timing?

Nothing was changing.

Alice closed her eyes and focused on the branch. She located the other branches and...

Nothing.

She couldn't teleport.

At least... Something was blocking her from accessing the other zones.

An anomaly was occurring.

'Something' was anchoring her to this spot.

"Can you summon?" Alice opened her eyes, looking towards Miki but she shook her head with a frown.

"No I can't. The others have already left the Nightmare. There are no names for me to summon."

Miki could feel her heartrate increasing but she had to stay calm. Even if she had to force herself.

They didn't die so they couldn't have drifted deeper into the Nightmare.

So why weren't they expelled?

In the distance, they heard a bell toll.

Over and over...

Again and again.

Alice stood up and pulled back on her bowstring, aiming into the fog.

Someone is here.

Her hairs were standing on their end.

This unease...

Different to hybrids.

This discomfort... Like looking into a mirror reflection of yourself smiling.

Only...

You weren't smiling.

But the reflection was.

A silhouette slowly appeared in the fog.

Chapter 968: Playing Tag

From the fog, the silhouette started to hum a tune.

Her footsteps were light, she twirled in the veil.

Her hair fluttered in the wind while the monsters around them backed away.

Even from this distance, Alice felt a sense of unease like no other.

Her instincts warning her, telling her to run.

But to where?

They haven't escaped the Nightmare. No names can be summoned nor could she teleport.

Clenching her jaw, Alice pulled back her bowstring and aimed into the air.

"What are you doing?" Miki frowned.

She too saw the silhouette and humming but it seemed to be a human.

At least for now.

Shouldn't they see what was behind the veil before attacking?

"Act first talk later!" Alice fired the bow as it rained down from above.

A wall of flesh and blood was constructed in an instant, blocking the path between them.

Without any hesitation, Alice grabbed Miki by the wrist and turned around.

"Huh? Wha-!"

"F\*CKING RUN!" Alice shouted, not wanting to spend another second in this place.

They couldn't teleport so the only thing they can do was backtrack! As fast as they could, as far as they could.

They ran.

It wasn't a tactical retreat not was it repositioning.

It was a full on sprint for their lives.

Just instinct and survival.

Alice's boots slammed against the cracked stone as she threw three arrows into the air.

She grabbed the first one before it fell, firing an arrow into the head of a monster waiting on the roof.

As the next one fell, she fired it towards the beast lurking behind the alleyway.

With the last one, she turned her body once more and fired it behind them, setting another flesh wall hoping to slow the thing chasing after them.

Yet behind this mound of flesh, they heard a giggle.

Soft, light...

Childlike even.

"Hehe~ Are we playing tag? Or would it be hide and seek?"

Miki didn't look back.

She couldn't feel the anomaly Alice was feeling.

However...

When the strongest person you have ever seen starts running as if their life depended on it, Miki was NOT going to question why.

Only fools ignored the reaction of the strong one and stayed behind to question things.

She was no fool.

Stabbing her spear into the ground, she used it as a vault, catapulting herself into the air as flames twisted around her arm.

"HAH!!!" Tossing her spear like a javalin, she cleared a path out in front of them as Alice continued to set barriers behind them.

Yet doing so only served as a reminder that whatever was chasing them was keeping a consistent distance.

They could hear the walls crumbling in the distance.

One by one, slowly, methodically.

"FASTER!" Alice screamed, sweat dripping down her back.

"I'M RUNNING AS FAST AS I CAN!" Miki snapped back. Her lungs screaming for air as she vaulted over a collapsed pillar without breaking her stride.

Yet no matter how they sped up, the sound behind them never changed.

Same distance, same pace.

The same soft skipping footsteps and childish giggle.

Tap...

Tap...

Tap...

The girl continued to hum, continued to dance.

Alice clenched her jaw, loading three arrows into her bow.

This time it wasn't for a barrier.

When her fight or flight instincts kicks in and flight didn't work...

There was only one choice.

FIGHT!

Three arrows ripped through the air as it sunk into the fog.

\*Giggle...

Right behind the ear.

A shiver ran down Alice's spine.

So far yet so close.

Alice watched as her arrows were snatched from the air.

"Hehe... You missed~ Are we not playing tag anymore? Is it time to hide and seek? Or shall we play a different game?"

Her voice was delighted, ecstatic.

Like a child who had finally found someone willing to stay and play.

The girl skipped towards the boundary of the fog.

Light steps, excited.

Alice couldn't breathe.

Her body refused to move.

She wanted to fire another arrow, to disrupt the approach of this thing but couldn't.

Her instincts screamed louder than ever before...

But she stood frozen.

The girl lifted her foot.

Just one more step.

One more before she breaks free of the fog.

Then...

\*Clap.

The sound was soft.

Not loud, not violent. A simple clap and reality fractured.

Neither Alice nor Miki had time to react as the world folded around them.

The sound of breaking glass in their ears as the ground gave out beneath them.

A spiral of different nightmares converging into one.

Both of them fell. It was neither downward nor upward. Their bodies were thrown around like a hurricane, through countless scenes that flashed by too fast to process.

A burning city, a sky filled with screams.

Blood rain, the beasts erupting from the ground.

Layer after layer after layer.

Nightmares nested inside nightmares.

Each one trying to overwrite the previous.

Each one more unstable.

When the world around them turned crimson, when the space was filled with water, a single ominous moon hung overhead, shining down red light that broke through the water's surface.

They felt a violent pull, their body being dragged under then out of the water.

###

The girl stepped out of the fog.

The smile on her face slowly fading away seeing the empty streets.

"Nyer!" She shouted, stomping her foot in annoyance.

"I told you not yet." Nyer sighed, his hand patting the girl's hair.

Yet the moment it came into contact, his arm was removed up to his elbows.

"I was playing with sister! Why is everyone else allowed to have fun but I'm not!?" She glared at him, clearly upset by his intervention.

"Sorry, I know you want to play with her. But if you meet her too soon, you'll trigger the wrong cogs. Why do you think she started running?" Nyer kneeled down to eye level with the girl.

He wasn't bothered by the fact that he was now missing a right arm.

It could always be replaced.

The girl wasn't convinced, causing Nyer to sigh.

"In the first place, shouldn't you be at home? Why are you wandering out here?" He asked.

Her shoulders jolted up.

She had actually snuck out while Nyer wasn't looking.

"Tha-... That's not the point right now. Why did you stop me from playing with sister?" She changed the topic though sounding less annoyed and more so wanting to divert his attention.

Nyer smiled helplessly.

What a wilful girl.

He picked her up with one arm.

"If you had met your sister just now, there was only one outcome that would've occurred in that moment." Nyer started to speak.

Waving his finger, the surrounding area started to change.

"That singular outcome would've killed one of you. Unfortunately, at this moment, the one dying would be her. And we can't have that." He shook his head.

"Eh?" The girl blinked, a frown forming on her face.

"But... But I didn't want to kill her. I wanted to play with her..."

"I know. I know you don't mean harm. But humans are very similar to dolls. With the wrong move, they'll break. Your sister is durable yes, but humans die in more ways than just one." Nyer nodded.

"They say humans die three times throughout their life. One is physical death. The second is spiritual death. And the third, is existential death. The kind where people are forgotten forever.

"Had you met your sister just now, it would've resulted in the second death. And we can't have that can we? So I sent her out." Nyer pacified the girl as she reluctantly nodded her head.

Nyer rarely spoke about the cogs to her. The times when he mentions these things are when it's very serious.

So the fact that he had to stop her just now...

She felt a pang of guilt in her head.

"I'm... sorry..." She mumbled in a low voice.

"Don't worry, I'm not blaming you. I just don't want you to regret seeing your sister too early. If you find her later, you'll have more time with her." Nyer shook his head.

Hearing this, the girl nodded happily before pausing.

She couldn't help but look at his missing arm.

"It can always be replaced. Your happiness is more important to me." Nyer reassured as the girl hugged him with her arms around his neck.

"Sorry... I'll behave..." She apologised as he smiled.

The two of them walked through the fog and back to her room.

###

Alice sat up slowly on the bed.

Her clothes soaked with her sweat.

She could feel her heart slamming against her chest...

"What happened just now?" Suyin asked with a frown on her face.

Alice and Miki woke up later than the others.

Not only that, but the mental and physical stress she felt near the end spiked to levels Suyin didn't think was possible. In fact, it even broke the scale as the numbers flatlined.

"I don't know." Alice replied truthfully.

Whatever it was, she didn't want to go through it again.

It felt as though something would've broken the moment she saw whatever was on the other side of that fog.

That something would snap inside her mind.

Clutching her head, Alice let out a slight groan.

"Setting that aside, I think I got a piece of good news for you." Suyin spun on her chair with a grin on her face.

"Hm? What kind of good news?"

"The kind that'll let you fight properly in the Nightmare."

Alice paused as her eyes turned serious.

"I don't know what kind of experiment you were doing in the Nightmare, but I could track some of your abilities activating in reality. Skills and energy flowing through your body." Suyin handed Alice a few reports.

"Whatever it is, I think with the right preparation..."

She grinned.

"We should be able to artificially import your Sigils into the Nightmare."

Chapter 969: Importing Sigils

"We should be able to artificially import your Sigils into the Nightmare." Suyin grinned.

Alice found herself in a daze.

How?

What link was there that'll allow them to import the Sigils? What about the Nightmare abilities? The Embryos?

"As you know, abilities and stats you gain in the Nightmare can be reflected in the waking world. Civilians who find new strength, Hunters breaching their bottleneck." Suyin started to explain.

"A vessel can only hold so much. So where do they find the space? When you gain new Sigils, your body is reshaped to accommodate that Sigil."

"The contract that's formed between us and the Abyss." Alice frowned.

"Exactly. Previously, you made a separate contract with the Nightmare. By partaking in its systems, you gained power. Not a lot, but you still gained power."

"I don't see how that would change things though? If it did, wouldn't you have noticed earlier?" Alice tilted her head.

The only thing that changed...

"Yes but you did something differently this time. You tried to use your Sigils in the Nightmare didn't you?"

Alice paused.

She managed to trigger her passive ability.

"Seems like you know the root cause then. Either way, that action triggered something inside you. The contract with the Nightmare shifted and a bridge has been formed between the two. Now, whenever you're in the Nightmare, it seems like your Abyssal energy is also being stimulated.

"With a bit of trial and error, it wouldn't be an exaggeration to import your Sigils over."

"Can it be done?" Alice asked seriously.

If they can do it by the next Nightmare, clearing this zone wouldn't be an issue at all.

Not when the skills she's used to is by her side.

"That's for me to find out right? I need to do some experiments with the other departments and see if we can figure out this connection." Suyin shrugged, hopping off her chair.

Alice suddenly shivered at the realisation.

"Don't tell me..." Her eyes slowly widened.

"I heard you had a good time with them in there."

Before Alice could even protest, several familiar silhouettes entered the room. Only this time Alice could see their faces.

"AH SH-"

###

Miki leaned against the table with a cup of coffee in her hands.

It was a strange state. To be mentally exhausted yet her body is awake.

Regardless, time waits for no one. There was work to be done and she had to be around to do it.

Casualties were... lower than before.

A good sign.

They also managed to map more of the Nightmare thanks to their sacrifices...

Miki tightened her jaw.

She stared at the names, burning them into her mind. Making sure their efforts were not forgotten.

All them were proud soldiers who sacrificed everything so that the common man can live.

"I promise you. Your efforts will not go to waste..." Miki mumbled.

An operator walked up to her.

"Captain."

"Mnm? What is it? Have we gotten the estimates for the next Siege?" Miki glanced over.

The operator hesitated for a moment, a frown on her face.

"Erm... That... We don't know."

Miki's finger twitched.

"Pardon?"

"We've been desperately scanning our surroundings but... there's nothing. No sign of Nightmares bleeding into reality. No signs of gathering monsters. It's completely empty." She answered, handing Miki the report.

Placing her coffee down, Miki flipped through the pages.

". . ."

A frown hung on her lips.

It's as they say...

The surrounding scans were too... normal. So normal to the point it felt artificial.

Off putting.

Miki couldn't calm down this bad feeling in her chest.

"Keep scanning. Keep me updated if there are any changes. We'll continue to prepare as if the strongest siege is coming. Don't loosen up on preparations." Miki ordered as the operator nodded her head, relying the information to the others.

Exhaling through her nose, Miki stepped out of the room for a moment.

During the last moment in the Nightmare... That silhouette chasing after them.

Miki frowned.

Why did it remind her of Alice...

###

"Urg..." A man groaned as he held his head.

Once again... Nothing.

"What a mess you left me... How am I supposed to find you." He mumbled, standing up.

The Nightmare realm was exceedingly strange.

Even after comparing it to the similar attempts in the past, it was difficult to achieve what the Nightmare realm has accomplished.

The way it was bleeding into reality, hijacking the laws to supplement its own existence.

The entire realm felt... alive.

If the Abyss had the Will... Then the Nightmare had something similar.

But that being wasn't Nyer.

He may be the one who created and operates the Nightmare. But he isn't the existence that acts as an extension. He was not the 'Will' of the Nightmare.

Whatever it is... it lay in the heart of Extalia.

Disrupting it may interrupt the function of the Nightmare.

However, it will also serve as a distraction for Nyer.

Ideally, giving Kaden the chance he needs.

Nalem scratched his hair and let out another sigh.

He much prefer to be a librarian. Even when helping Kaden scout out for information, he wasn't someone that was suitable on the frontlines.

But there was something he hadn't expected.

Familiar traces that couldn't be mistaken.

The people converging in Extalia...

Clicking his tongue, Nalem made his way to the capital.

It was time to call in a few old favours. One of which belonged to the elves that he helped in the past.

Pausing in his steps, a bitter smile appeared on his face.

He couldn't believe that a favour he gained from stopping Leoric will come in handy now.

###

"How are you feeling?" Arys asked as Allura clenched her fist a few times.

Pivoting on her right foot, she slammed her fist forward as flames erupted.

"It's alright. The output is a little disappointing though. Different to the Nightmare." Allura frowned.

"That's to be expected. The skills gained from the Nightmare isn't being supported in reality. There are some link to your Sigils but not enough where it'll take Abyssal energy as fuel." Arys replied while scanning Allura's condition.

"However..."

"I know. Be careful right? If I tap out of Nightmare energy I'll be using my life." Allura smiled as Arys nodded.

"You don't have enough energy to use your other skills yet. Just fighting with some passive enhancements are the most you can do. And only for 3 minutes. The more intense the fight, the shorter the time." Arys warned.

Allura's energy consumption was far greater than normal people. A byproduct of her fighting style that's been ingrained into her instincts.

However, it used to be supported by her large reserves so Allura probably didn't think much about it.

But now that they were stuck with a low battery, she had to learn how to control her output.

This kind of delicate control wasn't something that Allura could get used to easily.

Just that punch right now was enough to siphon a large chunk of her energy away.

Was it strong? Yes it was.

Could be it stronger? Yes it can.

But it was not efficient.

The enemies they want to face would dodge a strike like this with easy.

Allura nodded as she sat down by a rock.

"Gin, have you found some of your old contacts?" She asked.

Gin nodded his head.

"I got a few hints on where they can be. But..." A frown hung on his face.

"Forget it. Let's keep moving south. We'll run into Alice sooner or later." He shook his head, dismissing his worries for now.

He didn't seem to tell Allura about the additional piece of information yet.

Not when she was still this weak.

If he tells her...

She'll no doubt drop everything to try and help find Kaden.

Gin tightened his fingers.

Allura raised an eyebrow before shrugging. If it was nothing else then so be it.

The only thing on her mind right now was what kind of gift she should get Alice when they meet again.

Knowing her...

She'll probably want mead right?

But they haven't found anything worthwhile yet.

###

Ria collapsed onto the floor.

Left over ink staining her clothes as she faced the sky.

More than half of her body had been turned to ink at this point.

Had she waited even a little longer...

Ria shook her head.

She didn't want to think about that for now.

What mattered...

Was that she won.

A smile hung on her lips.

Opposite her, the Old Lord of Ink was slowly fading away.

Their surroundings ruined by lightning and ink.

She managed to defeat a Lord.

Ria forced her hand up.

The proof of her efforts.

Clenching her fist, she let out a laugh as her hand fell against the water.

"Congratulations. This fight was a fruitful one, don't you agree? You managed to learn something from the way they applied their authority." Astrelya hovered above Ria on her cloud.

There was a lazy unamused look in her eyes.

"For the love of... Please don't tell me you want to fight again. Right after I've already fought?" Ria frowned.

She was still tired from that fight, not ready to go another round against Astrelya of all people.

Even on a good day, she'll be struggling never mind now.

"Do I look that cruel to you?" Astrelya frowned.

"Yes! Absolutely yes!"

Clicking her tongue, Astrelya flicked her fingers.

Ria found herself being carried onto the cloud while healing energy started to flood her body, stimulating her natural regeneration.

"Not today. I don't feel like fighting today. Instead, we'll have a break." Astrelya sighed.

Ria blinked her eyes.

She couldn't hold back the urge to touch Astrelya's forehead.

"Did you get kicked in the head while I was fighting?"

". . ."

Astrelya started to smack Ria while they drifted through Terminus.

Chapter 970: Multiple Pillars

"See anything down there?" Miki asked with a slight frown.

"Nope. It's as the reports say. Even with my eyes, I don't see anything. Not a single speck of Nightmare energy." Alice shook her head.

Currently, they were on a mechanical mount flying through the sky in order to scout out the surrounding area for any potential signs of a siege.

But it's as though the world fell silent.

Of course, Alice took the opportunity to scout in a heartbeat since she'd rather be out here than in there where Suyin and the others start testing their theories.

"What do you think about this?" Miki asked, taking a deep breath along with a sigh.

"Hmm... Not sure but I wouldn't drop my guard. Especially when the Nightmare is involved." Alice yawned, resting on the metal mount lazily.

"How much do we even prepare?" Miki clenched her fist.

This couldn't go on. Explore the nightmare, wait two days. Explore the Nightmare, repeat.

Sooner rather than later, civilian moral will completely break apart. They'll question whether or not this can truly be resolved.

Once they give up, it's harder to rally people together.

And if that happens, it may as well be the death of this city.

"Why don't you call for some reinforcements. Maybe if you combine a few cities together it might help."  
Alice suggested because pausing.

"You realised already yeah?" Miki smiled bitterly.

There were only three families left against the Zenia's. Calling for reinforcements elsewhere is just inviting disaster into their own walls.

Alice scratched her chin.

"Shall I be brutally honest with you?" She asked.

"When have you not been honest?"

"That's being honest. This is me asking to be brutally honest." Alice sat up with a serious look in her eyes.

Miki hesitated.

"Go for it."

"This city is going to fall if I didn't arrive with Suyin. You would've died during the last raid because you got fixated on one opponent. The power of the collective is great and all, but think about what you're fighting against." Alice didn't hold back.

"The power of the collective only works when you're on even footing. That siege can be classified as a natural disaster. If I wanted to wipe out the city, do you think everyone combined can even stop me?"  
Alice snapped her finger.

Above them, a singularity formed in an instant as an obscene amount of energy burst out from Alice's body.

"Even with this level of power, I'm not convinced that I can take on some of the enemies I might face. What can you possibly do against them as a collective? I need to ask you one question." Alice stared Miki in the eyes.

"How much help have you turned away at this point because you dislike heroes?"

Miki didn't respond. The state of the city was enough of an answer.

"Call in old favours. Get help from others. When disaster strikes, you need an equal force. There's no shame in calling for help, what matters is what the things you want to protect are safe."

"But won't they just crumble again once that pillar breaks?" Miki sighed. She wasn't aggressive this time, even when Alice was refuting her beliefs.

She was simply...

Tired.

"When... he left, the mess he left behind... Do you know how long it took for us to get back on our feet? To try again against the Nightmare?" Miki smiled bitterly.

"Hm... I suppose so. But must you go out of your way to only get one hero? Who said each city was limited to just one?" Alice scratched her hair.

"What do you mean?"

Alice thought about it for a moment before activating her Sigil.

A small metal pillar appeared.

"This is your hero yes? And this pillar supports the city." Alice asked as Miki nodded.

"He left and it crumbled. Am I correct?"

Miki nodded once more.

"So what's stopping you from replacing that pillar with more?"

Alice created three more identical pillars.

"But how's that different to what I'm suggesting? Power of the collective." Miki frowned.

Alice rolled her eyes.

"How can you be so smart yet so dumb." She groaned.

"Wha!?"

"Who said this is the same? Normal people can become the pillar for heroes. Look closely." Alice sighed, enlarging the pillars.

Miki spotted it on the bottom.

Countless tiny sticks supporting the main structure.

"Yes, not everyone can become a pillar. But if you reject everyone who can become one, you'll never start on making the foundation. And if you think about it... aren't you a pillar already? So if you can have one, why not have more?" Alice pointed to Miki.

With Miki at the front of everything, this city continues to function.

"Huh? Me?" Miki blinked her eyes.

"Yes who, who else but you? I know you used to have a connection to the Underground. Even if it's split right now, shouldn't you be able to rally the half that isn't on the Zenia's side? I don't know the state of the other cities, but I'm sure the information you've gained from the Nightmare is precious." Alice yawned.

"If you share that, wouldn't that give their sacrifices more meaning? It'll give the other cities a spark of hope as well. Not just Grand Cathia." She waved her hand lazily.

Miki frowned.

There were other issues in doing this. Inviting others into the city, unrelated ones at that may break the moral she's been carefully maintaining this entire time.

How would the people feel if the blood sweat and tears they put into this was just taken by others without care?

They'll rage, they'll feel anger.

They won't cooperate.

If she wanted to call for help, she had to be careful with how she does it.

One that doesn't jeopardise pride of this city.

Alice knew this issue as well but that's something for Miki to figure out.

She didn't want others to lead Grand Cathia so she must lead it herself.

Make the decisions, the calls.

The alliances.

At most, Alice can be there to help her solidify things but Alice can't be the one to do it.

If she did, it'll be no different to what the hero did. Once she leaves, this city will crumble again.

But if Miki makes allies, create more pillars to support the city.

Even if one falls, another will take its place.

That's the only way this city survives.

'We can't stay here for long after all. We also need to travel.' Alyss chuckled.

'That we do. Helping the Nightingale family is only one step along the way.' Alice nodded.

It was a shame they couldn't fight properly during the last Nightmare. But now that the foundations are put in place, they're ready for the next.

Miki exhaled slowly through her nose.

"Heroes are symbols of hope. And people need that. With hope, they're able to walk towards the future. I can't deny that my role in this grand machine has become something akin to that. Even if it may be arrogant of me to say so." Miki glanced down.

"Let's go back. There's a bunch of things I need to sort out now and not a lot of time to do so." She sighed, turning the mount around.

"Need some help with that?" Alice offered.

"Perhaps. There might be a few hard headed individuals that I struggle to reign in."

"So you need strength, is that what you think you're lacking?" Alice raised an eyebrow.

"Strength is one thing. I don't prefer to use it, especially not at the negotiating table. At that point, it's not a request build on connection but rather coercion. Something that weak can be broken on a whim." Miki shook her head.

"But that doesn't mean strength isn't needed. It's what allows you to partake in the discussion. Without sufficient strength, no one will give a damn to the words I say."

Alice grinned.

"And you're exactly right. It's a cruel world after all. When everyone has a chance to become godlike in strength, who gives a flying f\*ck about what a grain of sand tries to say to you?" Alice glanced up at the sky.

Of course, not everyone was like that. But the majority get drunk off this power.

It's much easier to sin and get drunk than it is to uphold honour and pride.

And power is one that leans towards sin.

"Unfortunately it does seem to be that way." Miki nodded before hesitating.

"When it comes to physical fighting, you're one of the best that I know of. Stronger than my father, stronger than... Erwen. But I can't have you defeat him. This is Grand Cathia's problem and it should be solved by the people here. Once he is gone, then things can change."

"But if someone else defeats him, we lose our identity."

Alice rested her chin on her palm.

"So what do you want from me?" She grinned.

"I want you to teach me how to fight. Properly fight. I want to defeat the dangers approaching this city."

'Ah~ Another poor soul lost. Do you think she can handle the training like Jin? At least he had the foundation.' Alyss smirked.

'It doesn't matter if she doesn't have the foundation. We just have to lay it out for her right?' Alice narrowed her eyes.

Of course, the other reason would be to escape that damn experiment department.

Their methods felt more like mental torture than actual experimentation.

Seeing Alice's grin, Miki felt a shiver.

"There's only one thing I can teach you in short time. Something that'll significantly help you boost your strength."

Miki swallowed her saliva.

"I'll properly teach you about Absolute Zone."