

Abyssal A 971

Chapter 971: Training Tutorial

Training Miki wasn't exactly the hardest thing to do.

After all, she has already achieved the basic foundation needed for Zone.

Her body control and awareness was already spectacular. The only thing she needed to improve on was composure in battle.

Not the kind where you're calm and nonchalant in battle. But rather the kind where even if you are angry, you can see the battle objectively.

To see yourself as a pawn.

What must you do, how must you achieve your goals.

Battle is similar to chess.

You have to think ahead and corner your opponent.

So for Miki, especially when fighting against Erwen, she has to be able to think ahead.

And there's only one method to achieve this.

Exposure.

Using a mix of her Sigils, Alice traced Miki's memories of Erwen, his appearance and way of speaking.

She didn't need to trace his habits or fighting style, that wasn't the point of this exercise.

The point was having Miki 'fight' Erwen while mastering Absolute Zone.

"You!-"

"ARGH!-"

"F*C-"

"ALI-"

"CAN WE ST-"

Miki's cries continued to be drowned out by the barrage of attacks being sent her way.

Each one was fitted with healing energy so that even if the contact was painful, the wound is healed immediately.

Miki glared at the projection of Erwen smirking in front of her and swung her spear.

A projectile threw her spear off course, causing her to miss while Erwen mocked her with a pitying gaze.

Before she can follow up with a new attack, another projectile lands on the back of her knee, breaking her stance while two more crashed into her shoulders.

This kept repeating.

So long as Erwen was in front of her, Miki found it difficult to focus.

Her thoughts kept going back to the moment when she saw her father kneeling in front of Erwen.

A ghastly wound across his chest as life faded from his eyes.

"ARGHHH!!!"

Miki let out a cry of frustration only to be silenced by a projectile slamming into her chest, knocking the wind out of her lungs.

"Screaming won't change things. If screaming at my opponent can kill them I would be training my lungs rather than my body. Now get up." Alice glared.

Miki bit her lip and got back up.

###

Alice folded her arms.

It wasn't working.

Miki was too focused on her fixation on Erwen for her to properly focus.

Even after telling her this, she was struggling to adjust.

They needed something far greater than her anger of Erwen.

She needed to experience death.

Alice clapped her hands, pausing the fight.

Miki collapsed on her knees. Not from the physical exhaustion but rather the mental one.

Alice walked past her.

With a flick on her fingers, the projection of Erwen disappeared.

Instead, Alice turned around and snapped her fingers. Her appearance started to shift, transforming into Erwen.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Alice traced Erwen's habits.

"You still can't give it up can you? Stuck in the past even though you're telling people to walk to the future."

Miki froze.

Her gaze slowly lifted as Alice or rather, Erwen kneeled down and lifted her chin.

"Even when the one who killed teacher stands in front of you, you still can't cross that gap."

Miki gritted her teeth, lunging forward with her spear while Alice created the same spear and parried with the exact same movements.

Pinning Miki's weapon to the ground, she grinned.

*RUMBLE!!!

A wave of killing intent erupted as the world turned red. Miki felt a chill down her spine.

"Focus Miki. Otherwise you'll die." Alice warned.

Copying Miki's moves, Alice broke Miki's stance and threw her into the air.

Miki tried to adjust herself but it was already too late. The moment she was thrown into the air, this fight was over.

Alice appeared above her.

*KRK!!!

With a single thrust, the spear pierced Miki's throat.

"!!!"

Without saying anything else, Alice twisted her wrist and Miki's head was severed.

###

"ARGH!!!" Miki blinked, her hand pressing against her throat in a panic.

But nothing changed.

She was still alive and Erwen stood in front of her.

"Distracted? On a battlefield?"

Erwen crossed the gap in an instant.

With a single jab, Miki was blinded and torn apart.

###

Miki blinked her eyes and gritted her teeth.

She raised her spear and blocked the first strike.

"Better. Now focus." Erwen smiled.

That tone, that arrogance.

It felt as though she was seeing the real Erwen.

Breaking the clash, Miki lunged forward for a spear strike but Erwen simply smiled.

A simple flick of the spear pommel to break the spear trajectory before flowing into a upwards slash and stab.

Miki died once again.

###

Tendon's slashed, then stabbed through the chest.

###

Severing of the shoulder into a stab through the guts.

###

Spear stab through the foot to stop her from moving into a kick to the jaw.

Spear stolen then stabbed through the head with the same weapon.

###

A flurry of slashes across the body, left to bleed out.

###

Death by slashing through the spine.

###

Death by...

###

Death by...

###

How many times has to died how? How long has passed.

Miki stood before Erwen.

In this world dyed with crimson, she realised how exposed she is. It felt as though invisible crimson paths were leading the spear head towards her weak points.

They clashed their weapons. Options were eliminated but new ones opened up.

Erwen tried to disrupt her stance, Miki took a step back.

Spear thrust to cross the distance, Miki parried.

Counter with a spear spin into slash.

Erwen parried.

Every time an option is eliminated, new ones appear.

If Erwen traced one path, Miki countered. If she traced a path, Erwen would counter in kind.

A stalemate of sorts.

A state of absolute focus.

Erwen grinned.

"You can finally start calling yourself teacher's daughter."

"!!!"

Her focus was broken and two stabs instantly pierced her chest, causing her to cough up blood.

###

Alice frowned.

She continued to press Miki and force her to commit a mistake.

The progression was going smoothly except one minor issue.

A single word from Erwen would shatter that focus. She was on the cusp of Absolute Zone but her focus was too fragile.

She needed to separate her emotions from battle. At least for this one.

'Any tips?' Alice asked internally.

Alyss was the better one when it comes to things like this.

'Hmm... Perhaps you should give her a trigger.'

'A trigger?'

'Yeah. A state she uses in battle then a state outside of it. Block out emotions, focus on fighting. Then, when the fight is over, allow the emotions to spill out. It's like building pressure in a chamber before allowing it to explode.' Alyss explained.

'There's an issue isn't there.'

'A slight one. This isn't good for the long run. Not only that, but the capacity for how much they can handle varies based on people. If we don't do this properly... we could give her some very bad habits.' Alyss warned.

Thinking about it for a moment, Alice decided against it.

Miki wanted to lead the people. If someone was unfeeling, how would people follow?

Alice clapped her hand, dispelling the illusion as Miki snapped out of it.

Looking around her, she saw the sun slowly setting.

"No good huh?" Miki smiled bitterly.

Throughout the entire session, she didn't manage to land a single hit on Alice.

Her focus kept breaking.

"I wouldn't say it's without benefit." Alice shook her head.

Tapping her heel, she appeared in front of Miki and allowed a bit of her killing intent to leak out.

"!!!" Miki blinked her eyes. Her spear was already blocking Alice's hand.

Instinctively, she knew where Alice was targeting.

"We managed to refine your basic instincts already. You need focus to enter Absolute Zone but even without it, you shouldn't have an issue with most people." Alice smiled, turning around.

But Miki understood the underlying warning.

"Most people except Erwen right?"

"Right. We have options to forcefully suppress the emotions for you. But I don't think that's good. Instead, it's better for you to work out this issue yourself." Alice nodded.

Miki wanted to say something but paused.

This rage, this anger in her chest. She had to figure out how to control it.

"How do you deal with it?" She asked, causing Alice to stop in her tracks.

"I don't. Even now, the moment I see the Zenia family, rage overtakes me. Though... if I see them again, I think I should be able to keep my composure to some extent." Alice exhaled slowly through her nose.

"It's not that I've forgiven or forgotten everything they've done. In fact, it's the opposite. I still think about the 10 years they've taken from me. Difference is... I suppose I'm looking forward to my future." Alice turned around with a grin.

She'd much rather spend every day lounging around than kill.

The simple life that she wished for.

The Zenia family must fall. There's no rejecting that notion. But Alice won't let that rage consume her.

"We'll work on your foundations. Give you as many tools as possible so you can overcome this danger. But emotions wise, I can't help you."

Miki glanced at the ground before nodding.

The training today was tough and scary. Especially at the end.

But the improvements she made are vast. If they keep going at this pace...

"Ah before I forget. You should clear out your schedule tomorrow. Today was just a test to see your level. I think I've got a good grasp now so tomorrow will be pushing past your limit."

She needed to 'calibrate' the training after all.

In other words...

Miki paled.

That was just the tutorial.

Chapter 972: Captain Miki's Training

The Captain has been strange recently.

Not the kind of strange that comes from exhaustion. If you wanted to see that, you merely needed to walk out into the streets.

There were countless civilians acting strange from exhaustion.

It wasn't the kind of strange from stress either.

It was something else.

At first, no one noticed.

Captain Miki had always been intense. You felt like you had to be absolutely serious and focused in front of her, that one mistake would cause her to start scolding you.

But now...

Captain Miki was flinching.

Not often, not dramatically. Just occasionally.

When doors open behind her, footsteps of those in a rush approaching too quickly.

Someone calling her name outside her line of sight.

Each time, her body would react before her mind could.

Once, she nearly struck a messenger who appeared from her blind side.

She had almost summoned her spear but managed to stop herself.

Captain Miki apologised. Embarrassed, unsettled.

People waved it off as stress from not seeing a siege that they had all expected.

But I felt like it was something else.

She seemed...

Unsettled.

I started watching the Captain more carefully after that.

It became impossible to ignore once you knew the hints to look for.

She checked corners, always.

Even inside headquarters.

Never stood with her back exposed.

When she sat down, she positioned herself facing the entrances.

If someone walked behind her, she would focus hard.

Like a prey listening for a predator's footsteps.

She was on guard, afraid even.

It wasn't just vigilance either. Sometimes there would be these... pauses.

Stopping mid-movement. Mid-conversation.

Mid-sentence.

Her eyes would dart around as if she could see an enemy they couldn't.

Something faint, something approaching.

Something that posed her a danger.

During a tactical briefing, she froze while reaching for a map marker.

Her hand froze in the air, completely still before ducking down and preparing a counter for nearly ten seconds.

Everyone waited, no one spoke. They stared at her in confusion.

She then continued the briefing as though nothing had just happened.

After the meeting, I continued to follow the Captain.

She kept looking for something.

Waiting, calculating.

Angle, timing.

Captain Miki was acting like a bow string pulled tight. A single disturbance would set her off.

###

Miki was stressed.

Unbelievably so.

Alice's training was 'simple' in concept.

But when applied, it became her worst nightmare.

The requirements was for her to keep this state of focus on for as long as possible.

Throughout the entire day.

That wasn't all however. While the state was active, Miki could instinctively 'see' her weaknesses. If she doesn't adjust them properly, Alice would strike.

Killing intent followed her wherever she went.

Other's couldn't feel like but Miki definitely could.

It felt as though a beast had its jaws around her neck.

One misstep, one lapse in focus and the fangs will pierce her throat.

And when Alice struck, a needle would pierce her body following that exact path. From the needle, a 'poison' would be injected. A fleeting, intense pain that burned hotter than the sun.

It didn't harm her body directly as the needle would disappear soon after.

But the pain was very real.

She tried to have some lunch, a needle struck her tongue.

"F*CK!!!" Miki cursed, surprising the people around her as she quickly apologised.

Another needle stabbed into the back of her neck.

The pain caused her knee to shoot up, hitting the table corner at an odd angle.

Clenching her teeth, Miki focused hard, eliminating as many options as possible so that Alice wouldn't attack.

Naturally, Alice didn't make this easy.

The rhythm of attacks were random. Thrown out whenever she felt like it, when Miki least expected it.

There could be minutes between attacks. Long breaks that made it hard for her to focus. There was also ones where needles came one after another, making her do a dance of pain where others couldn't see her.

She couldn't track Alice either.

Her presence was perfectly concealed.

Miki couldn't even find her if she tried her best.

Letting out a sigh... Miki went to the toilet.

*BANG!!!

"ALICE!!! I SWEAR TO THE GODS IF YOU ATTACK ME IN THE TOILET AGAIN!!!"

That was the source of Miki's strange actions.

The fact that she wasn't even safe in the toilet.

If there was a piece of good news, she found herself being more perceptive of her surroundings.

Keeping up this state of absolute focus was difficult sure. But she started to gain proficiency with this technique due to Alice's training.

It felt like a switch she could turn on or off.

Keeping it on all the time would be too risky. She had to space things out properly.

The moment an attack enters her range, she'll activate the ability to parry.

Eliminating options was unnecessarily draining her stamina. Luring opponents in and defending herself should be what she seeks to achieve.

Watching Miki make the adjustments to the Absolute Zone, Alice had a smile on her face while tossing several needles into the air.

However, this wasn't enough. There needed to be more.

If Miki wanted to reach the level she desired, they had to crank up the difficulty every time Miki starts to adapt.

'Guess it's my turn now.' Alyss massaged her neck.

'Yep, have fun twinnie.' Alice handed over the controls.

The moment Alyss took over, she activated her footwork and appeared before Miki.

For a second, the world seemed to stop.

Miki stared at the split haired girl in front of her, already with her arm pulled back.

Her eyes slowly widening.

The people around her slowly turning around to see the new arrival.

Energy gathered in Alyss's arm, Miki knew what was coming.

There was a single line connecting Alyss to her weak point right now.

She couldn't adjust in time.

Ah. I'm dead.

That's the conclusion Miki arrived at as Alyss launched her fist.

Miki tried her best to guard but Alyss's knuckles dug into her stomach.

***BANG!!!**

Miki's body slammed into the ceiling, causing cracks to form. The only reason why she didn't fly through was because Alyss had reinforced the ceiling to avoid major structural damage.

For a moment, Miki almost passed out as she peeled off the ceiling and crashed into the floor.

The staff around her cried out in shock and went to check if she was okay.

Alyss had already disappeared.

"It... It's fine. D-don't worry about it. J-just some training." Miki forced herself to smile.

She thought it would just be needles.

She hadn't expected Alyss to appear out of nowhere and punch her.

Not only that, but the fist was also coated in healing energy. It only hurt but no wounds were left.

Just as Miki was about to stand up, a needle pierced her butt cheek.

"!!!"

Biting her lip, she held back a string of curses that would leave the people around her stunned.

Forcing a smile, she focused once more.

She had the others return back to their work stations. There was no need for them to bother with what's happening to her since they had jobs of their own.

As she was about to reach the door, a foot exited the void and kicked her on the back of the knee.

Miki slammed her foot down, shocking the others as she stopped herself from falling.

"Hey, Alice? How is this training? Isn't this just petty acts?" Miki's smile twitched furiously.

"Just try your best~" Alice's voice whispered next to Miki's ear. She turned around to try and catch Alice.

A table floated in the air and she slammed her elbow into the corner.

Miki almost drew blood from how hard she was biting her lip.

There was now three things she had to be careful about.

Needles, Alyss punching her, and Alice's pranks.

A strange sight appeared in the office that day.

Captain Miki was walking around when a hanging bar would appear in front of her.

She would bend back at the last moment to dodge while a split haired girl would appear above.

*BANG!!!

The floors would crack, she would disappear and Captain Miki would barely dodge the strikes.

She waved it off as 'training' but... was that truly the case?

Some couldn't help but wonder if this was Miki's version of stress relief. She seemed to have a smile while dodging these strikes after all.

A portal opened under Miki as she started to fall.

She quickly summoned her spear to vault herself back up but another portal sucked away the spear.

Miki's smile froze.

From the side, Alyss came in with a flying kick.

"BLERGH!!!"

Miki was thrown through a portal and into a wall.

Every time she started to get used to it, the training would 'intensify.'

After a certain point, people stopped getting surprised and continued with their work.

###

Erwen sat on a mountain peak overlooking Grand Cathia.

Originally, he was preparing a siege greater than last time but changed his mind afterwards.

He noticed Miki and Alice scouting out the location.

It seemed like Miki wasn't rejecting help anymore.

If that was the case, farming fear wasn't going to be easy.

Instead, he opted for a new solution.

Possession.

Rather than have the Nightmare manifest outside the city, he'll start invading their Nightmares and have the pigs at the top become their downfall.

Corrupt their mind, amplify their worst traits.

And as turmoil wraps the city, they'll have to make a choice.

Taking a deep breath, Erwen let out a light sigh.

Fog enveloped his body and he disappeared from his location.

Chapter 973: Sixth Zone

The time of the Nightmare has arrived once more.

Alice and Miki found themselves by the branch of the fifth zone. The entrance towards the sixth is before them.

Nothing else had changed.

No strange girl humming a tune while running after them.

It's as though they returned to the point before the anomaly. The point where they should've been sent out of the Nightmare.

"Seems like we're exploring the sixth zone today right?" Alice asked as Miki nodded her head.

"Ideally we clear it while minimalizing deaths. We don't know how many zones there are but the fact that a siege didn't happen is giving me a bad feeling." Miki sighed. "Something has changed and we need to find out soon."

Alice agreed. If it was just her exploring the Nightmare, it would be difficult to properly do so without dying.

But if they're working as a group, the chances of bailing each other out from mistakes was a lot higher.

Not only that, but she could even tie ropes around people to pull them back if they're about to fall.

Miki bit down on some chalk while Alice did the same.

Since they're exploring a new place, having as many people as possible was ideal.

Even if the number of beasts increase.

After all, with their offensive power, dealing with them shouldn't be an issue.

As Alice summoned Alyss and a few others that Miki recommended, she gave Alyss a high five with a knowing grin.

Alyss did the same.

Even though her appearance was veiled by the fog, Alice could practically see the grin behind that fog.

As for Miki, she couldn't help but raise an eyebrow at Alyss.

Their silhouettes were a complete match after all.

Even if the disposition is different, it was too identical.

When questioned, Alice simply replied with Alyss being the voice in her head. It confused the others but Miki understood.

"Alright, we have a balanced group of eight. Two front liners, one ranged, one caster, two vanguard and two healers. Objective is simple, go as far into the sixth Zone as possible. Kill whatever comes our way, keep an eye out for hints to what the boss could be. Any questions?"

Miki swept her gaze across the group.

No one had any questions, all of them were itching to go.

A smile appeared on her face. This was the most confident she's been since entering the Nightmare.

Tonight, the progress they'll make will overshadow everything they've done thus far.

###

Wind howled through the city as cruel mimicry of the real Grand Cathia stood tall amidst the fog.

The streets were clogged with overturned carriages and broken buildings, remains of barricades that had failed during the sieges.

Miki stepped forward first, spear grounded lightly against the stone. Her posture was relaxed, chin slightly lowered, eyes scanning every window, every broken archway.

Thanks to Alice's training, her focus was now razor sharp.

She could detect the weaknesses present in their formation. The angles of which enemies could attack.

But these weaknesses didn't last long as both Alice and Alyss would shift slightly, covering for the gap.

To her right was one of the tanks. Shield already lifted.

To her left, the other mirrored him. Tower shields, builds focused solely on absolute defence.

Every attack that would come from the front would have the damage mitigated by a maximum of 80%. Then, what little can bypass the defence will also be mitigated by another 30%.

An absolute wall that will cover for the team.

Behind them were Alyss and Alice.

Alice's build had very little changes.

Still the rapid fire crit build that allowed her maximum burst damage while also taking advantage of her spells.

Alyss on the other hand, finally had a build constructed just for her.

She bounced on the her feet, loosening her body up.

No visible weapons, just black bandages wrapped around her forearms and knuckles.

In the distance, cries of beasts started to echo out one after another.

A giant horde that couldn't have been possible without Alice's presence.

One scaled towards having 8 people in the zone.

The tanks moved first.

Running forward, they slammed their shield into the ground as a protective barrier was created. The beasts lunged out from the shadows but the barrier absorbed the impact.

Claws shrieked against metal, teeth snapped inches away from their faces.

The ground trembled from the wave and the barrier was showing signs of collapse.

The caster exhaled slowly behind the formation. He waved his staff and a violet light burst forth, rippling down from the sky.

The road ahead warped, shattering and breaking into countless fragments rising like teeth.

It felt as though a part of the city came alive in order to funnel the monsters inward.

Alyss vanished.

A grin appeared on her face as the world lost its colour.

In the next heartbeat, she was already falling towards the centre of the monsters.

*RUMBLE!!!

Flames burst out from her arms as she transformed into a fireball. White lightning crackled as all of the flames converged into a single orb.

Grasping that orb, Alyss clenched her fist and pulled back her arm.

A path of red stretched on before her.

One that reached the heart of this horde.

Destruction Point!!!

*BANG!!!

Punching down right before landing, the ground was immediately melted as fire burst out from her fist. A pulse of raw destruction that swept the battlefield in flame as the beasts howled in pain.

Their flesh set ablaze while those closest to the centre were erased without a trace.

The tanks activated their secondary skill, blocking the shockwave from the attack while Alice whistled in awe.

That kind of raw attack, she wanted it too. Unfortunately, she wasn't using a build that'll allow her to do the same. Her attacks were more precise, perfect for killing bosses but struggled against a large horde.

Standing up in the centre of this flaming pit, Alyss let out a slight laugh.

The creatures that managed to survive lunged.

*CRACK!!!

Alyss's fist shot out faster than they could react. No wasted motion.

The skull was caved in with a dull crack as its body burst apart.

Two more pounced.

Alyss spun low, lifting herself into a hand stand as flames enveloped her feet. Two quick kicks to completely destroy the beast's head as their bodies collapsed into the fire.

She moved like water slipping through cracks, weaving through the horde without stop.

Each punch, each kick, meant another victim.

A large shadow loomed over her. Alyss twisted on her ankle and performed a high kick without jumping.

A perfect standing split that fired a streak of fire through the beast's skull.

Miki shivered instinctively.

'Ah... so she was the one that's been kicking me.' She thought inwardly.

Those kicks... she was far too familiar with them.

The invisible wounds on her body ached as she recalled their training.

"Don't waste all of your energy! This is just the first wave!" Alice called out as her arrow split the air, whistling across the battlefield and lodging itself firmly into a flying beast's chest.

*BANG!!!

Without being able to react, Pale Lance erupted inside its body, breaking the torso apart.

"Jokes on you, my gear lets me refund energy based on kills and actions. You'll run out of energy before I do, even if I go all out!" Alyss laughed, clashing her fists together as several red paths appeared in front of her.

Alice's arrow dropped down from above, pinning a beast to the ground and creating a platform for Alyss to jump from.

Leaping off the corpse, Alyss jumped into the wave without care. She didn't need wait for the rest of the team.

Even when fully surrounded, her focus was razor sharp. Nothing could scratch her.

Behind her, Miki advanced. Her eyes locked onto Alyss's movements as she understood this was the state she wanted to achieve.

This level of focus.

Being able to pin point exactly what to kill first and what to dodge.

Of course, even with Alyss and Miki charging into the horde, the wave of beasts was too big. Some of the beasts simply ignored the duo and lunged after the tanks who protected the backline.

Emerald lights filled their bodies as they continued to push the beasts back.

The caster wiped out groups after groups, his equipment passively giving him energy regeneration so that he can cast without stop.

It wasn't a fast regeneration but it definitely helped.

Alice made sure to kill anything that would threaten to break through.

Her arrows killing priority targets with deadly accuracy.

Her eyes darting across the entire battlefield, recording every battle, every attack.

A large flying beast that tried to bypass the frontline? Break the wings then use another arrow paired with a skill to push it towards the ground, towards Alyss.

The group became a blender, shredding through the beasts within the nightmare and progressed one step at a time.

Some beasts took multiple shots but Alyss and Miki took care of that.

Even though Alyss had large area attacks, her main build focused on taking down singular targets!

Slamming her fists into the torso five times, Alyss linked up the fire marks before pressing her palm against the sternum.

*BANG!!!

A giant cavity opened as the beast collapsed on the ground.

Clenching her fist a few times, Alyss was satisfied with the power of this build.

Indeed, having synergistic equipment and skills made things easier. There was a limit to how much brute force can accomplish, even with impressive physical control.

But more than that, this was the first proper battlefield she shared with Alice. Alyss wanted to enjoy it as much as possible.

Chapter 974: Salvation Draped In Thorns

The sixth zone did not stall them.

It collapsed.

What should've been a cautious advantage became an extermination of the highest order.

The deeper they pushed into the warped imitation of Grand Cathia, the more violent the resistance became.

But what use is resistance when the ones they're trying to push back are far too strong?

Alice and Alyss gave the Nightmare no leeway.

Should this zone have an observer, they would simply be witnessing countless explosions echoing out one after another while arrows rained down from the sky.

The streets narrowed, architecture extending in unnatural ways. Balconies warped and leaned over them like jagged peaks.

The city was weeping from their destruction.

Fog thickened, slightly reducing their visibility but Alice took the lead.

Her vision shifted as a soft shimmer covered her pupils. The fog retreated, the beasts were revealed.

Attack angles revealed themselves as Alice pulled back on her bow.

Five arrows were attached at once as she fired without hesitation.

They became flares for the caster as he didn't even question it.

A pulse of energy enveloped his staff as giant columns of fire and ice erupted where Alice's arrow had landed.

Despite the explosion muffling the sound, screams of beasts could be heard.

Alyss took a backseat. With the fog being this thick, it was time for Alice and the caster to shine rather than her.

Instead, her gaze slowly settled on Miki.

A thought crossed her mind, a twitch of her finger.

Miki instantly flinched, raising her spear in panic.

"Heh." Alyss smirked.

###

By the time they reached the centre of the sixth zone, the buildings gave way to another boss arena filled with fractured statues.

A little different to the Grand Cathia they knew but it was to be expected.

Faceless marble figures kneeling towards a central monument.

A woman raising her hand towards the sky. Strangely, the face was obscured.

Not by hair or a veil.

But by their 'perception'.

They could tell the statue had eyes nose and other facial features.

Yet the more they try to focus, the more blurred the face was.

"A boss?" Alice asked as Miki nodded.

"Most likely."

"Anything you recognise?" Since this was Grand Cathia, it may have something to do with its history similar to the boss of the fifth zone.

"Not that I can tell." Miki shook her head.

"So uncharted territory. How fun." Alice chuckled.

They entered the arena in standard formation.

The moment the final person entered, the fog walls closed in and darkness overwhelmed their vision.

They found themselves wandering amidst a crowd of hooded fanatics. They approached an altar and the group followed, unable to control their body.

They couldn't speak not turn their head.

But their eyes could wander.

The descended into the deepest depths of a cathedral.

Forgotten offerings rotted inside bowls of tarnished gold.

Blood that soaked into the very ground they walk upon. Flesh clung onto the walls, ripped apart from the inside as though something had crawled out.

A thin red thread appeared from the torn flesh, thread that reached out to the empty space before expanding. The thread began to fray.

One became two.

Two became four.

Like strands of muscle, it began to multiply, converge and shape a silhouette.

Beneath this silhouette, a golden chalice began to overflow. Rivers of blood slowed and thickened around them, reflecting a sky that clearly shouldn't be visible.

Yet the sea of stars was unmistakable.

In that moment, it felt like they were connected to the world itself as their senses were expanded. Pain flooded their bodies, information crammed into their mind.

A voice spoke.

"Harken to my voice. Let the blood flow.

"Break from their veins and recall your origin. Gather into a seething torrent that drowns the thrones above.

"No longer shall it nourish the heavens. No longer shall we serve.

"Dreamweaver.

"Unweave the fantasies the gods bestow upon mortal minds.

"Let destiny no longer be a script etched with divine hands.

"But a blade placed in mortal palms.

"Let the beloved maiden rise not in prayer, but in vile defiance.

"Her laughter shall shatter the glass. Her hymn a melody for the crumbling pantheon.

"The morning star does not herald their dawn. It burns as a dark omen.

"The primordial flame.

"Its light spills red and the old shall scatter like frightened kings.

"The laws they carve into the bones of this world. Shackles of mortals.

"Break them.

"Let gravity forget obedience.

"Let time unravel its chains.

"Call forth the priestess who peers beyond the veil of heaven.

"To witness the light of the new era.

"Let her eyes be the mirror in which false divinity beholds its end.

"Through her eyes, let truth pour like molten iron and be forged into chains to pull down the gods.

"Summon wrath, the executioner.

"Avenger.

"Let your blade carve repentance into immortal flesh.

"Baptize the earth with the blood of the divine.

"Golden ichor shall fall like rain.

"Ignite the stage, primordial flame.

"Let temples kindle like funeral pyres. Dance upon the embers of the collapsing sun.

"From that ash, no false god shall rise again.

"And the final arbitrator.

"Cast aside the scales held by celestial hands.

"For even the divine thrones shall bend in surrender.

"Witness the radiant rebellion.

"Hear the chorus of defiance.

"Until the journeys end, when the barren lands drink freely of their blood.

"Where no altar demands a sacrifice.

"And in the silence where gods once ruled, she alone will stand.

"Bathing in the ruin of heaven.

"Crowned not by worship...

"But by collapse.

"The final refusal.

"She will become the star that heralds the fall.

"An age of suffering.

"A salvation draped in thorns."

As the final verse was spoken, the group turned their gaze upwards.

The final words lingered like a brand against flesh.

With a blink, the cathedral disappeared. The fanatics missing.

They found themselves regaining control of their body and stood once more in the boss arena.

The faceless statue started to move.

Stone cracked along its limbs as it broke free of the platform it was standing on.

The arena trembled as Miki tightened her grip on her spear.

The arena trembled as the statue grinned.

Raising its hand, she snapped her finger.

In that instant, gravity inverted.

The arena folded upwards as if the world had become a page being turned.

The kneeling statues around the main figure were torn from the ground and hurled themselves towards the party.

The tanks reacted instantly. But with the broken platforms, finding stable ground was difficult. They had to fight across multiple floating platforms!

They braced against the first hit, sliding backwards from the impact.

Since they couldn't ground themselves, even if they took no damage, the impact still sent them back.

Alyss launched herself at the extras. She had already adapted to the shift.

Without hesitation, her fist ignited with fire and met one of the falling statues.

With a twist of her hip, she swung her fist. An arc of radiant hot fire burst forth, obliterating the head of the statue as molten fragments sprayed out.

Yet...

Even without the head...

The statue continued to operate!

"Tch!" Clicking her tongue, Alyss couldn't quite follow up with another strike.

Alice pulled back her bowstring.

Three arrows shot out, clashing against the critical spots of the statue, breaking it from the inside out.

Only when the entire statue was broken did they finally cease to function.

"So that's how it's going to be. FINE!!!" Alyss roared as she cracked her neck.

Landing on a platform, she jumped towards her next target.

Destruction Point!

Overlapping her skills, she slammed her fist into the core of the statue.

Cracks erupted across its body as fire assaulted its insides.

*BANG!!!

With a single punch, she had transformed its innards into molten and detonated it from the inside.

The shockwave rippled across the floating platforms, tilting them further off balance.

The faceless statue at the centre lowered its hand slowly.

The grin widened.

From the cavities in the ground, blood began to flow. And from that crimson river, flesh figures were born.

Fanatics from their vision.

All of them draped with shadow as their bodies twitched in unnatural ways.

Their heads snapped upward in unison. Hollow eyes locking onto the party.

The first fanatic lunged and the tank intercepted.

But the moment they came into contact, red threads burst apart from the point of impact.

It crawled along the shield's surface, arching around in an attempt to attach themselves to the tank.

"Drop it!" Miki shouted as the tank instantly discarded his shield.

Just in time as the metal was dissolved, transforming into blood that was absorbed by the pool.

"They're dealing obscene amounts of equipment damage. Take care! Kill them from afar!" Miki ordered.

Monsters that destroyed equipment wasn't new, there were plenty of them in the fourth zone.
Annoying to deal with but had low defence.

As long as they're careful, they can deal with them from afar.

Alice's eyes darted from the cluster of monsters beneath them then towards the boss at the centre of everything.

"We just have to take care of the faceless one right?" Alyss cracked her knuckles landing next to Alice.

A smile appeared on Alice's face as she nodded.

"Can you handle it?"

Alyss raised her eyebrow.

"Handle it? Who do you think I am?" She grinned, gathering strength in her legs.

"Don't complain when you die to something you didn't expect." Alice pulled back her bowstring. She fired three arrows, carving a path towards the boss as Alyss launched herself.

"Tell me that when you have less deaths than me!"

Rolling her eyes, Alice started to provide support for the entire party.

Chapter 975: The Cog's Vision

Miki jumped through the air.

Alyss kept the statue staggered, shattering one arm and then another in explosions of molten stone.

For any attacks coming from above, Alice intercepted them with her arrows.

The three of them focused on the boss while the others kept the extra monsters away from the group.

With the caster acting as the core, the two tanks pushed the beasts back while the healers kept them alive.

With this setup, they progressed quickly through the fight.

The boss was getting desperate, but Miki continued to shout commands. She kept an eye on both sides. Whenever the tanks started to struggle, she would throw a spear or two to assist, and Alice did the same.

Then finally, an opportunity revealed itself.

Without hesitation, Miki jammed her spear into the statue's core.

Light erupted outward as the statue reached toward the moon.

Cracks raced across its figure.

As a precaution, Alyss continued striking the statue, making sure to erase every part of it.

Alice pulled back her bow, ready to strike if needed.

Yet the anticipated counterattack never came.

The boss simply crumbled away along with the rest of the fanatics.

Silence.

The group didn't know what to say.

The tanks slowly lowered their shields while the healers exhaled in relief.

After seeing the vision before the fight, they had expected something abnormal to happen, especially with the strange voice speaking in their minds.

The things it spoke about.

Even for Miki, it sent a chill down her spine. It felt almost as if it were proclaiming a shift in the natural order of their world.

Was the boss simply a prophet?

Either way, with the boss dead, the arena slowly returned to normal.

Alyss massaged her shoulder, a slight frown on her face.

"If this is the boss then... I'm somewhat disappointed, I have to admit."

Alice didn't answer. She swept her gaze across the arena, searching for irregularities.

Lingering hints of what might be moving in the dark.

But she found nothing of the sort.

And yet the vision still lingered in her mind.

Miki let out a small breath. "We'll review that vision later."

They collected the loot while Alice stepped toward the ash.

There was potential for a new skill, and based on what the boss had been doing, manipulating gravity shouldn't have been impossible.

But just as she was about to make the connection, she stopped.

Something was hidden in the ash.

Something the others hadn't noticed.

Why?

How had they missed this?

A frown formed on Alice's face.

A fragment of the boss that hadn't dissolved with the rest.

It was a mask of sorts, half-buried in the ash, the edges already crumbling to dust.

But that wasn't the important part.

Alice crouched and lifted the mask slowly from the ash.

Smooth. Pale. Almost as though it had been crafted from porcelain.

A face.

Not blurred like at the start of the fight.

Not faceless.

It had obtained a shape.

From one angle, the features...

Resembled her own.

The curve of the jaw. The shape of the eyes.

That smile.

She shifted the mask slightly.

The resemblance changed.

The cheeks, lips, and gaze now looked like...

Alice's fingers tightened.

Velouria.

It wasn't a perfect match.

But the mask in her hands looked like a merger of the two of them.

From one side, Alice.

From another, Velouria.

She couldn't resist.

Alice brushed her fingers along the curve of the mask.

Crack...

The mask fractured.

Thin cracks spread rapidly across its surface before it collapsed into powder, slipping through her fingers.

"Did you find something?" Alyss asked, noticing that Alice was taking longer than usual.

"Hmm... somewhat." Alice frowned.

Was it simply a coincidence?

Or something more?

Shaking her head, Alice let out a sigh and focused on acquiring the boss's skill.

###

The Witch of the Nightmare sat atop a tall clock tower, watching Alice's fight.

"If you were going to come here, boss, you should've told me earlier. I would've prepared a tea party for the little princess," Monika chuckled without turning around, her eyes fixed on Alice.

She had set up a few triggers, but...

She hadn't expected the cogs to respond in such a manner.

"I don't want your stinky tea." The girl in Nyer's hand stuck out her tongue while Monika feigned hurt.

"So what brings you here, boss? Or are you wondering what I'm up to again?" Monika finally turned around with a grin.

She snapped her fingers, and a table and chairs appeared.

Nyer didn't refuse. He sat down and placed the girl in a seat beside him.

Rather than letting her drink the tea, he extended his arm. She licked her lips and began drinking his blood.

"My~ how indecent." Monika took a sip of her own tea.

"Have I told you that you resemble Yrael more and more with each passing day?" Nyer finally spoke.

Monika laughed.

"That's to be expected. Or rather, you expected as much, didn't you? As her fragment, the more I play with the cogs, the more likely I am to walk the same path as her." She traced the rim of her teacup idly.

"And don't lie to me. You're interested too, aren't you? You've always been a sucker for her prophecies." Monika closed one eye playfully.

Nyer didn't deny it.

"But since you've come this far, I suppose I can tell you a bit of what I saw." Monika leaned back.

As she opened her eye, Nyer glimpsed a world of turning cogs behind her vision.

"Are you aware of the two types of prophecies in this world?" she asked.

"The first is prediction. An answer derived from extrapolating information from the world of cogs, the variables and likelihoods of certain actions.

"This kind of prophecy is crafted from a multitude of smaller cogs forming one result. With enough preparation, one can alter certain triggers and adjust the outcome."

She tapped her finger lightly against the table.

"The second kind are those etched into the cogs themselves. A sequence of actions leading to a singular, immovable moment. A cog so large it cannot be shifted, no matter how many smaller triggers you manipulate."

"The kind that led to Yrael being sealed?" Nyer asked.

Monika nodded.

"Exactly. Yrael's shattering. The death of Velouria. Those were cogs that could not be changed. You can delay them. You can fight them. But in the end, what is written will come to pass."

Nyer exhaled slowly.

"Then what about the vision she saw?"

"Me? Show her? PFT! AHAHA!" Monika burst into laughter, nearly falling off her chair. She clutched her stomach before slowly calming down.

"That's where you're wrong, boss. I didn't show her anything." She wiped away her tears. "I said I'd tell you what I saw. Not what I decided to show."

Nyer frowned.

"So it was the choice of the cogs?"

"Not really. More like... a convergence of triggers assembling into one moment." Monika shook her head.

She hadn't expected it either.

For Alice to receive that kind of vision.

"Assuming what you say is true, how much of what she saw is prediction, and how much is set in stone?" Nyer asked.

"It's a mix of both. There are fates already locked into place. Your role included."

Nyer's eye twitched.

"Dreamweaver. Unweave the fantasies the gods bestow upon mortal minds. Let destiny no longer be a script etched with divine hands, but a blade placed in mortal palms."

After reciting the line, Monika gestured to the world around them.

"There are already victims of fate walking their paths, and you are no different. Dreamweaver. The Primordial Flame. The Priestess. The Avenger. And... the Final Arbitrator. There are also those yet unnamed. Their roles uncertain. But the key players are already on the board."

Monika grinned.

"The new era is coming. So congratulations, you've won the battle. But the war's outcome is yet to be determined." She clapped her hands lightly.

"As for the fates that cannot be changed... I can only tell you one. And even then, I risk black chains clasp my wrists. Do you have the heart to do that to a maiden like me?" She held out her hands dramatically.

Nyer's brows furrowed.

"The final refusal. What kind of fate is it?"

The moment he spoke, a faint shimmer appeared around Monika's wrists—chains waiting to manifest should she say too much.

"There's your answer. No can do, boss." Monika forced a smile as cold sweat rolled down her back.

But this kind of danger...

It made her heart race with excitement.

Nyer exhaled deeply.

"Then let it play out. I will continue as I always have."

The girl finished feeding. He picked her up and left the clock tower.

Once he was gone, the chains faded.

Monika leaned back with a sigh of relief, glancing up at the Nightmare sky.

Even as a fragment of Yvael, she couldn't perceive the full scope of the cogs' vision.

If she wanted to see it all, she could force it.

But if she did...

Her fate would seal itself.

Just like the prophecy.

What was spoken would no doubt come to pass.

No matter how they struggled against it.

"Let her eyes be the mirror in which false divinity beholds its end. Through her eyes, let truth pour like molten iron and be forged into chains to pull down the gods."

Monika paused.

"An age of suffering..."

She smiled faintly.

"Oh, Alice... what kind of future are you bringing to this world?"

Chapter 976: Caera Vs The King

Within the monochrome world of Selen's second resonance, three figures could be seen lunging towards a man sitting upon his throne.

Yet despite his onslaught, he did not move.

Egil crouched down before jumping into the air.

Black armour fully biting down on his flesh as his blood seeped through the gaps of the plates, nourishing the metal.

Twisting his body, a black greatsword appeared in his hands as he cleaved down towards the King.

Without looking up, the King fired a ray of grey energy.

One that would erase the 'present' if Egil was hit by it.

The key word being if.

Flicking her wrist, Caera substituted Egil with a tentacle as the two attacks collided, cancelling each other out.

Egil appeared not far behind the king, continuing his motion.

Without lifting his hand, a wall of energy burst out from the ground behind him.

He had already 'seen' this happening.

Selen intercepted. Clasp ing her hands together, she created a barrier to counter the king's barrier. If he was speeding up time, she'll slow it down as much as she can!

'Just countering his movements won't be enough to entertain him.' Miralith chuckled, finding this fight rather amusing.

'I know!' Selen gritted her teeth.

But exposing Perception Manipulation this early was off the table! She had to find a different way to force the king to move first.

The King exhaled slowly through his nose. He was losing patience.

He tried to lift his hand but the black chains refused to budge.

Veins bulged on his neck as a burst of energy erupted outwards with him in the centre.

Seeing this, Egil quickly threw the black forward, kicking its pommel and jumping backwards to avoid the attack.

Even with the strange nature of his armour, he watched as the blade lost its colour before turning to ash.

"Thou art nothing but a lowly beast donning the skin of man. Tell me boy, are you wearing that armour or is that armour wearing you?" The King asked, catching some of the ash and rubbing it between his fingers.

Egil didn't respond.

Crouching down, he dashed in a circle, tearing out a chunk of the early and threw it towards the King.

Seeing this giant slab obscuring his vision, the King was unamused.

Just because his eyes granted him vision of the past present and future, it didn't mean obscuring it would prevent his powers from activating.

Such things didn't matter.

With a swipe of his finger, an arc of energy cut towards his left as Caera was forced out of hiding.

Dark energy converged into an orb but once it reached a certain size, it touched upon something invisible and dissipated.

"!!!" Widening her eyes, Caera understood that he had placed a 'shell' there she was gathering power. Once it reached a certain capacity, it'll collapse whatever attack she was planning.

Something that can only be done if he saw the future.

This was a sign. The King was starting to use more power!

Selen summoned her blade and prepared to step forward.

'Take a step back.'

Without thinking much, Selen did so but as soon as she did, a guillotine of grey energy slammed down from above.

Had she continued her movement, she would've been hit!

"Miralith!" The King frowned.

"It would be unfair not to warn her when you start using more power right? Surely a King like yourself wouldn't fuss over a little assistance from me to her." Miralith took over briefly and blew the King a kiss.

His eye twitched, causing Miralith to laugh before looking towards Caera.

"Corrupt gal! Keep the King occupied for a little while. I'm going to give Selen a little lesson." Miralith requested as Caera widened her eyes.

Keep the King occupied? Without Selen assisting with her time abilities?

But seeing Miralith's serious gaze, Caera understood that she wasn't joking around.

And more than that, she knew what she was capable of.

"Fine. Don't blame me if Selen doesn't get the power." Caera sighed.

Snapping her finger, dark clouds immediately appeared within Selen's Second Resonance.

An influx of Eldritch energy rained down in the form of black rain, thick like mud.

Of course, she made sure that Egil and Selen was spared.

The King felt the chains loosen somewhat.

Against this woman, he was allowed to use more of his power!

He stood up from his throne as Caera lunged through a portal but the King acted first.

Reaching forward with his hand, energy converged into a sword while Caera transformed the black mud into a shield.

***RUMBLE!!!**

A clash of energy pushed everything in their vicinity away.

Clenching her fist, Caera slammed her fist into the back of her shield, pushing the King back!

Black and purple lightning crackled across her body as she gave chase.

The whites of her eyes flashed back, revealing the invisible arcs the King placed through the air.

Twisting her turning her body through the web of slashes, Caera twisted her body and aimed her foot towards the King.

Black mud converged to form a bow as she drew the bowstring back with her other foot.

Three arrows manifested, each harbouring an intense amount of Eldritch energy.

Even though she tried her best to exclude Selen from the list of targets, these arrows were still affecting the Second Resonance!

*BANG!!!

Firing the bow, Caera flipped backwards and watched as the King flicked down with his finger.

The time in front of him seemed to half before reversing, returning the Arrows towards Caera.

"Tch!"

Parrying her own attack, Caera transformed her own body into black mud and avoided several slashes he sent afterwards.

*CLANG!!!

Egil lunged in from below, a lance in his hands as he tossed it toward Caera.

Catching the weapon, she instantly infused it with Eldritch energy as the metal screamed out in pain before mutating.

For a moment, it felt almost as though Caera breathed new life into this world as the Lance started to grow flesh.

While Caera and Egil were keeping the King occupied, Miralith explained the King's left and right eyes to Selen.

'One sees the past, the other sees the future. But do you know exactly what they entail?' Miralith asked as Selen shook her head.

'To see the past, one must be able to access the library of history. The memory of the realm itself. Only then, can you observe all that has already happened.'

'Then is there a library for things that are going to happen?' Selen asked curiously. She wasn't sure how exactly future sight worked but Miralith shook her head.

'Future sight is not as simple as that. For this world, the future is merely a construct brought forth by a myriad of choices. Actions leading to a singular outcome.

'His sight simply allows him to see the countless potential choices and pull forth the most likely outcomes. Of course, there are times where the future is unchangeable. But that's a deeper rabbit hole than you can imagine.' Miralith chuckled.

'So... the key to beating him... is to guess what I will do in two moves?'

'Not quite. His eyes are ones that allow him to understand you as a person. Your actions, your habits. Your thought process. The sequence of events leading up to each choice.

'Take your earlier action for example. You created a counter flow against his shield to protect Egil right?' Miralith mentioned as Selen nodded her head.

'Why? Why not take that moment to try land a strike instead? Why did you cover for him.'

Selen frowned.

'Well... That's obvious-'

'And there you have it. Your internal priorities have already determined that it is impossible for you to let Egil get hit by the wall. A sequence of choices leading up to action.' Miralith smiled.

'It's a mind game. Perfect future sight doesn't exist, variables always happen. No future is set in stone. Even for those that may seem unchangeable, there are always things you can do 'after' they occur.

'I suppose you can call them loopholes.'

Selen took a deep breath.

'So I have to outsmart him with what I'm least likely to do?'

'You're on the right track. I can't spoil everything for you but I think this'll suffice for a quick lesson. Good luck now, the others are struggling.' Miralith chuckled.

Caera was forced back.

Sliding against the ground, she slammed her palms against the floor as black mud formed countless weapons that surged towards the king.

With a wave of his hand, a pulse of grey energy erupted, destroying the weapons but Caera wasn't done.

Biting her thumb, she drew a line of blood on her left arm as dark tendrils of energy started to writhe.

From the ash of the destroyed weapons, they gained new life and shot towards the King.

Having expected this, he shifted his body to dodge while countering only those that would hit his main body.

"Argh! F*cking annoying b*stard." Caera cursed, slowly losing her composure.

No matter how she tried to counter him, he would always have an answer.

Every move, every shift.

Sometimes even where she would land.

Egil had it harder than her. Despite being a front liner, he was relegated to providing support with this strange armour of his.

Thanks to the fact that it was created using Alice's strange abilities, she was able to counter the King's energy to some extent but even that had its limitations.

But to fight at full strength... Caera hesitated.

Doing so would corrupt everything in her vicinity.

"Caera. Trust me and go for it." Selen spoke up, rejoining the fight.

She had to outsmart the King. Even though she wanted to avoid it, she had no choice but to use her trump card.

Caera, realising Selen's intentions, took a deep breath and calmed her mind.

Dark energy gathered around her body once more as she lunged towards the King.

Chapter 977: The King's Weapon

The moment Caera stepped forward, the King exhaled through his nose.

Once again, it's a pattern he had already seen.

Predicted.

There was nothing amusing about watching a play he had already seen.

Dark energy coiled around Caera's body. In an instant, the black raid around them started to reverse, rising from the ground and spiralling towards the sky, returning to its origin.

In mere moments, she will teleport in front of him for a devastating strike. Now that it has reached this stage... killing her is easy!

Grey energy converged towards his palms. He left a delayed attack and prepared a fake counter.

*BANG!!!

"???" The king blinked.

Caera's attack struck him in the chest. In an instant, Eldritch energy flooded his body as his eyes glared at the woman in front of him.

She shouldn't be here.

Not yet. He has even taken account of sudden boosts in speed and if there was a chance that she was hiding her true strength.

Though brief, he even 'verified' his future sight to ensure that she'll follow the patterns that he had seen.

And yet here she was, her strike landed cleanly and his counters missed.

A vein bulged on his neck as he lunged forward for a punch.

Caera had a grin on her face as she immediately transformed herself into black mud, causing his punch to fly through.

Even with the grey energy coating his fist, she simply cut off what had been affected.

"I don't know how well you can hold up against Eldritch energy. But don't you agree that it's a good time to find out?!" Caera laughed.

"EGIL! GIVE ME WEAPONS!" She roared, cracks forming across her body as purple energy burst out from her vessel.

Hearing this command, Egil slammed his fist into his own chest.

Every single plate of his armour hissed and flared before biting down harder than ever.

Violet flames erupted from his blood and his armour went into overdrive.

Flicking his arm, a trail of fire manifested within Selen's Second Resonance. From these flames, blood metal and flesh converged to form an armoury of weapons.

Seeing this, Caera laughed as her shadow reached out for the weapons. Teeth burst out from the ground, swallowing the armoury and corrupting them in an instant.

Since Egil wasn't able to land a proper hit against the King, his armour wasn't able to absorb blood. With nothing but his own blood as fuel, his armour slowly peeled away to reveal his wounded body.

He was now out of this fight unless he wanted to risk his life.

Caera disappeared from her spot as the King clenched his fist to feel the resistance of the black chains.

To decipher what he was allowed to do and what he wasn't allowed to do.

But the more he tested, the more rage filled his heart. Even with the difference of power being this obvious, his fate has yet to change.

Was he truly designed for ruin?

He recalled the Will's words.

That moment of choice happened the instant I told you. And your choice was to chase the impossible. And now the Cogs are set into place.

He clenched his fist.

His cogs were set into place. Finality takes shape, his destination has been determined.

He gritted his teeth, eyes turned bloodshot.

Energy coursed through his veins.

He's to die to these mongrels?!

Nay he refused such an outcome!

Black chains whipped against his throat, pulling him back but he pushed forward. Even as his flesh was torn, even as nails were drove into his body, the King unleashed his power.

*RUMBLE!!!

Yet before his power could take shape, Caera disappeared from his sight once again.

His future sight turned worthless as he wasn't able to accurately determine where she would reappear.

She held a spear and a sword in her hand. Both weapons from Egil's armoury corrupted by Eldritch energy yet the violet flame continues to burn hot.

"Trash!" He roared, catching the sword before it could pierce his heart.

"Tch!" Caera clicked her tongue.

Discarding the sword, she snapped her finger as weapons shot out from her shadow.

Countering the weapons with grey energy, he slammed his fist into the empty space in front of him.

*CRACK!!!

A spider web of cracks flicked across Selen's realm as the rebound caused her to collapse on her knee.

Reaching through the void, the King finally retrieved his weapon.

Contrary to his taste for radiance, his weapon was actually that of a broken blade.

The edge was cracked and chipped, the metal rusted and worn out bandages wrapped around the handle.

It wasn't even the full length of the blade either. Yet despite the cut off, it was still the size of an average longsword.

Caera felt chills down her spine. She cannot allow herself to get hit by that weapon!

Absolutely not!

Raising her arm, an eyeless beast burst out of shadow and snapped down with its maw!

*CRK!!!

The sound of bones snapping echoed out as Caera forced herself to maintain her grin. As the beast slowly disappeared back into her shadow, her flesh was now twisted with black metal being fused with flesh.

"Foul wench. To think you'd dirty my eyes to see such a disgraceful arm." The King glared in displeasure while Caera simply snapped her finger.

In that moment, countless eyes opened across Selen's Second resonance.

"What can I say? Don't blame a girl for going to the extremes in search of revenge." Caera chuckled as all of the eyes focused on the King.

*BANG!!!

Rays of black and gold energy shot forth as a maelstrom of energy enveloped where the King stood.

Yet...

Strange things started to happen.

The flames began to move backwards.

Caera frowned.

As the attack was recalled against her will, she saw him standing there with disdain in his eyes.

His blade already in the motion of cutting.

"CAERA!" Selen shouted as she summoned her staff and pumped as much energy as she could to equalise the flow of time within that zone.

Caera froze as she witnessed a hazy afterimage of herself slowly manifest.

That was where she was moments ago.

Sweat dripped down Selen's face as the flow of time between the two Zones were starting to sync up.

Caera lunged forward without thinking. Her instincts screaming for her to stop him no matter what. From the armoury, she grabbed a spear and threw it towards the King but it was already too late.

His blade dug into her afterimage's shoulder.

An identical wound started to open up on her body.

Her eyes widened, the sense of death increased.

Selen swung her staff. Twelve large projections manifested around them as time was equalized!

Blinking her eyes, Caera saw the King in front of her. His blade no longer cutting through her afterimage but rather her true body.

There was no time to think.

Digging her finger into her own chest, she tore it open as teeth manifested from her flesh. Where her organs should be, a set of eyes stared at the King while tendrils lashed out.

Yet before he could retreat, Caera slammed her hands together before opening it, revealing a spiralling spark of fire that slowly converged into a single orb of light.

"Are you aware that I know quite the monster? An old friend of mine. She had an ability that she preferred to fire constantly but even after obtaining my new powers, I couldn't copy it at all. I simply didn't have the capacity to fuel such an attack." Caera asked with a light of insanity in her eyes.

The King frowned.

His eyes flared, he saw the future.

A blinding white light of raw destructive power.

A power reaching the boundary of Oblivion.

Caera's flesh began to peel away. Once again, she was reminded of how much of a freak of nature Allura is to pull off this kind of attack.

Even if it wasn't a problem with capacity, how can her body even withstand this level of stress?

Whatever the answer was, Caera decided to borrow Allura's attack with the help of her contract.

Sound was drowned out as Caera allowed the spark to fall.

Nova Core.

***RUMBLE!!! BANG!!!**

Selen's second resonance was instantly shattered as she coughed up blood from the impact. Egil quickly jumped in front of her, shielding her from the shockwave of the blast while wind was pushed outwards before being sucked into the centre of Caera's attack.

Once the light died down, Selen finally opened her eyes.

"!!!"

Caera stood opposite the man, a helpless smile on her face.

"F*ck..." She cursed seeing the King unharmed.

"So this is what they mean when they say you erase the present." She let out a slight laugh.

"Selen!" Caera shouted, tossing a weapon into the air.

"I'm gambling on you okay? Don't let me down." Caera smiled without looking back.

Selen bit her lip, energy flooded her body.

The King swung his blade as a diagonal cut appeared on Caera's body. The fragments of her vessel turning into ash.

"And then there is one. Miralith, I thought you said she would entertain me. Is this all she has to show for it?" He asked, walking past where Caera was standing a moment ago.

Selen took a deep breath. In her hands, she held the weapon that Caera had tossed into the air.

A weapon created from the merge between Egil's strange armour and Caera's eldritch energy.

And at its core... Alice's flames.

Selen exhaled through her nose.

'Can you do it?' Miralith asked.

Despite the situation, a smile hung on her lips.

'I have no choice but to do it.' Selen narrowed her eyes. She aimed her blade at the King.

The pieces were now falling into place.

Chapter 978: Selen Vs The King

"Your guardian knight cannot fight no more. Your guarantor lost and withered by the sands of time. Tell me, what hope do you have left? What secrets did my friend tell you that ignite such futility in your heart?" The King spat out in annoyance.

Selen didn't have the benefit of her Second Resonance anymore.

What was she seeing that he was not?

But Selen didn't respond. Instead, she focused her mind and exhaled through her nose.

The gap between them was slowly closing.

There was also the issue of how the King managed to survive Caera's last attack.

In that moment, her attack definitely hit.

But the King had 'erased' the present to avoid the damage.

She needed to figure out the secret behind this power.

Until she did so, even with perception manipulation, it would be hard to tear victory from the jaws of defeat.

Selen jumped up slightly.

Time seemed to slow down.

She stared the King in the eyes while he stared back.

The eyes that saw past, present, and future. He could see what she was about to do.

The instant Selen's foot touched the ground, she dropped her center of gravity.

Her body exploded forward.

*CLANG!!!

"!!!" The King widened his eyes. The contact came much faster than expected.

Steel screamed as Selen's lance crashed against the King's artifact.

Sparks burst as an arc of grey energy shot out from the King's finger, looking to cut her in half.

Selen twisted her body, slashing her guardless blade upwards, equalizing the flow of time to negate the King's attack. Exactly the same as what Miralith had done at the start.

The King stepped forward, slamming his foot into the ground and shattering the earth below them. His broken blade hooked against the lance, dragging Selen forward. A disdainful light shimmered in his eyes.

Selen let go of her lance mid-pull, her fist pulled back.

'An uppercut.' The King's eyes flashed and saw the future.

BANG!!!

Her fist slammed into his jaw as his head recoiled from the impact.

Once again, his predictions were false.

Why?

WHY!?

Kicking her back, the King adjusted his grip on his blade as Selen's silhouette manifested in front of him. A phantom of her past.

The world was distorting.

Selen clicked her tongue.

Letting go of her blade, she twisted her body in midair and kicked the pommel, shooting it towards the King.

*CLANG!!!

Their blades clashed. Her past was safe.

Selen flickered behind her blade.

Just as the King was about to predict her actions, she disappeared.

"!?!?!" His eyes darted, looking for where she had run off to.

In the distance, six pillars of energy surrounded her!

How? When?! How did she have the time to prepare such a strike?!

Energy converged into a maelstrom around them as the earth shattered.

Dirt froze mid-air while Miralith's power surged out.

She was trying to halt and kill whatever was inside the zone!

Veins bulged on his neck.

There were several anomalies in this fight.

His predictions weren't wrong. It was simply a matter of pacing. Why? Did she also have the ability to erase the present?

The future played out exactly how he perceived it to be. Yet his movements were lagging behind.

Did she slow down his time? How did she bring the future forward?

Selen fired her attack as the King flicked his blade downward.

In that instant, the world began to glitch. The realm distorted and the present was paused-

"!!!"

Something was wrong. He immediately cancelled his ability.

Without hesitation, the King snapped his fingers and created an orb of energy before slamming it into his own chest.

As Selen's attack washed over him, the flow of time was equalized and he managed to avoid it.

Selen's smile twitched.

The King was starting to realize the key behind her ability.

What she wanted him to do was focus on using abilities that targeted a singular moment.

But if he simply equalized the flow of time, he would no doubt notice the sudden jump.

Say he was at one-times speed and intended to double it. If she messed with his perception, he would notice the sudden shift.

'I'll have to use it carefully.' Selen thought to herself with a sigh.

She had been faking her speed with sporadic jumps using perception manipulation. In terms of raw physical stats, she couldn't keep up at all.

Only through this trick could she bridge the gap.

In which case, she had to finish it before he understood the gimmick.

Selen tightened her grip around the lance and threw it towards the King before rushing forward with her blade.

Seeing this, the King rolled his eyes.

This move again.

Punching the ground, he gathered energy into a single orb beneath his palm.

*BANG!!!

Selen's kick came flying in, striking the King across the face while her blade pierced the orb, cancelling out the flow of time.

"!!!"

How did she cross that gap?

He snapped around, preparing for another strike.

*CRACK!!!

Selen appeared behind him, slamming the lance into his back, forcing him to stumble forward.

He whipped around, unleashing an arc of grey energy, but Selen had already disappeared.

He anticipated a strike from behind. Since she would be a little earlier than his predictions, he adjusted for the shift!

His head whipped backwards as Selen attacked from below! A kick aimed at his jaw, sending him into the air.

She changed the future!

Was his prediction wrong?

Stabilizing himself in the air, the King twisted his body and slashed with his artifact! A cut to split the time within this zone.

*RUMBLE!!!

An array manifested in the blink of an eye, perfectly countering his strike.

Could it be? That she was also seeing the future?

Impossible. He didn't sense that kind of energy from her. She was still perceiving in real time.

Had she seen the future, her movements would reflect that.

But the way her eyes were darting around, she was reacting to the things happening in real time.

So why?

How was she making these adjustments?

From his left, Selen suddenly appeared as she drove her knee into his ribs, followed by a one-two punch from the right.

Was she accelerating her body?

The King flooded his own body with energy and almost managed to grab her.

Selen seemed shocked before increasing her flurry of attacks.

He frowned. Her acceleration wasn't enough to be making these kinds of movements.

She wasn't seeing the future. She wasn't fast. She was changing the outcomes in real time.

So was it similar to him? Power over the present? That was incorrect either.

Her flow of energy was too weak for that level of manipulation.

Then it was something else.

A lance struck at him from above. He gritted his teeth, grabbing the tip of the weapon.

Since she was being hard to pin down, he would simply attack all possibilities of the future.

Golden lines lit up across his body as his view split into two.

One showed the present. The other overlapped the future.

No matter what move she made, several phantoms would move ahead of her.

Predictions of her actions.

He snapped his fingers. From above, countless grey arrows shot down rapidly.

Selen widened her eyes as she focused all of her power on acceleration.

Her form started to blink across the battlefield, evading arrows from all directions while future possibilities were erased before being replaced by new predictions.

The King frowned.

She wasn't changing the future. He simply wasn't seeing far enough into it.

Her actions were still following a path forward. There were skips in time where his arrows weren't where they should be in the moment, but instead several meters ahead.

Something was happening to skip time forward.

Selen wanted to attack, but she couldn't.

The sheer volume of attacks made it impossible. No matter how she tried to react at the last second, during even the slightest lapse in concentration, more arrows would appear in front of her.

He was starting to see further into the future and cutting off her options.

The fight was quickly spiraling out of control.

Selen inhaled sharply.

She injected energy into her own veins as the target of her perception manipulation became herself.

If she could drag out the instant between thought and action, she could speed it up.

Acceleration completely focused on her thoughts.

Multitasking. Multi-cast.

Selen's eyes turned bloodshot as her view of the world distorted.

Blood flowed from her nose from the influx of information, but she didn't care.

Think. Keep thinking. Faster than ever. React to the countless possibilities that stretched out before her.

Create gaps using her perception manipulation.

Vary time. Speed up. Slow down. Halt. Rapid acceleration.

Every tool at her disposal had to be used to cross the gap between her and the King.

***BANG!!!**

Selen rushed forward, the guardless blade in hand slashing against the countless arrows trying to stop her movement.

Her form flickered, dancing across the battlefield.

Not enough... she needed more.

Gritting her teeth, she focused her power specifically on movement—to cross as much distance as possible the moment a gap was formed.

Twisting her body, Selen slashed an arrow in half while three more appeared behind it.

She teleported, unleashing attacks that almost mimicked a blossoming flower.

Skiping through time once more, she appeared above the King.

Her slash was inches away from cutting him as she activated her skill for the last time.

*RUMBLE!!!

A ripple of energy burst forth.

Selen's movements halted.

"So that's how it is..." he mumbled before tilting his head back with a loud laugh.

"To think you would lay a hand on this King's perception rather than time."

Selen widened her eyes.

Her trick had been discovered.

Chapter 979: The King's Praise

"To think you would lay a hand on this King's perception rather than time." The King spat out as an annoyed smile hung on his face.

He had to admit, he didn't think the future generations could think up of such a trick when it comes to time.

To lengthen the gap between recognition and action.

If she had a little bit more power, if she was a little stronger, she could've landed a substantial blow with that trick of hers.

Snapping his fingers, he removed the time lock and Selen flew past him.

"Let's see..." He mumbled, staring at Selen.

"I believe the trick was like this?" He suddenly appeared behind her.

"!!!"

Widening her eyes, she wanted to raise her guard but his fist had already slammed into her ribs, sending her crashing towards the ground.

"Hmm... not bad." He chuckled.

This trick was very similar to his ability of erasing the present.

Only far trickier to deal with.

When it comes to the present, they can still sense the activation even if the action is carried out.

But this?

How can one properly react during that invisible gap of focus?

Not only that, but the more you focused on your opponent, the harder it was to break out of the cycle.

Had he not put his attention on the flow of time around him rather than Selen, he would've been stuck in that cycle until his defeat.

Selen coughed up a mouthful of blood after crashing into the ground.

She slowly rolled onto her back and stared at the sky.

She wanted to move, she had to move.

But her limbs lacked the strength to do so.

That last hit...

Even if she stands up right now, she'll only fall back down.

". . ." She clenched her fist.

Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to stand back up as blood dripped from her lips.

"You're still standing back up?" The King raised an eyebrow.

Her trick has been found, her ally dead and her knight unable to fight. When faced with these odds, how can one still stand?

Was it rage? Responsibility?

Or was it simply stubbornness.

Blood covered Selen's vision but she didn't back down.

She tried to use her skill once more but the King simply grabbed her wrist into jamming his fist into her stomach.

Lifting her up by the wrist so that they were eye to eye, the King had a bored expression before glancing into the future.

"Hm?" He frowned.

Blood?

Not hers.

His.

He had no time to think about it as he tried to erase the present.

But this time, Selen was a step ahead of him.

She reached out and grabbed his hair, forcing him to look towards her.

As they made eye contact, a grin appeared on her face.

"I win."

"!!!"

Time skipped forward.

Even though he knew the counter, that tiny pause, that blip in his perception was enough.

As long as he couldn't erase the present, his defeat was guaranteed.

Looking down, he could see a lance piercing through his chest as black veins fused with his flesh. Blood started to drip from his orifice as he slowly glanced back.

"Didja miss me?" Caera cackled as she slowly stepped out of his shadow.

Her body was heavily wounded with her missing her left arm. But even with these wounds, she had been waiting patiently.

How?

He was sure he cut her in half and she even turned to ash-

"Perception huh?" He chuckled.

He recalled how Caera threw her weapon into the sky.

His attention was drawn towards Selen.

And before he realised, she was already holding that weapon.

There was a jump in time.

Caera stumbled back, letting go of the lance.

Surviving that strike was no easy task.

She had to trust that Selen could hold out long enough for her to reconstruct her body.

If Selen failed, Caera would've had to fight the King alone.

With him learning the trick behind her perception manipulation, that fight was as completely lost.

But she managed to hold out.

And with that, an opportunity presented itself.

Her reconstruction wasn't perfect. It was flawed and her wounds were still there.

But it was enough for her to unleash one last hit.

The King tossed Selen toward Caera as she quickly caught the girl and slid backwards from the force.

He tapped the lance, infusing it with grey energy only to pause.

It had already mutated and adapted to his flesh. Erasing it would require him to erase parts of himself.

"I see..." He mumbled.

He had to admit, the future generation was more amusing than he initially expected.

"I told you they were going to entertain you right? Even an old man like you can learn some new tricks."
Miralith smiled, taking over Selen's body for now.

She placed her palm against the wound, slowing it down for the moment so that she can talk to her friend.

"Silence fool. What part of this looks entertaining to you?" He scowled.

"Pft, stop playing hard to win. The fact that you used her trick more than once proves it no? You like her skill." Miralith skipped over, winking at the King.

The worst part was that he couldn't deny that fact either.

This was indeed a good skill.

"Like? She simply managed to avoid embarrassing herself."

"Come on, be more forward with your praise. How can you expect your subjects to know the King when you can't even acknowledge their hard work?" Miralith nudged the King as veins bulged on his neck.

"Little girl, raise your head. I'll acknowledge it. This technique has value. You have forged something that deserves to be carved into history, remembered by time..." He paused briefly. "And by me."

Miralith grinned.

That was the highest praise the King could give outside of simply using the technique.

"And what else?" Miralith teased.

If she wasn't around, the King would be too stubborn to give Selen the proper reward.

Though it was also partially her fault, not that she would tell Selen.

Had she not been around, the King would've simply given her a trial and praised her technique. But because she praised Selen, the King had to see properly for himself.

"Then speak freely. I will grant one request so long as you don't step over the line." He exhaled heavily through his nose.

Hearing this, Miralith grinned.

Selen froze. Her instincts told her to stop whatever Miralith was about to say.

"I want you to give her your power as a Sigil."

". . ."

". . ."

Caera lost strength in her knees and collapse on the ground.

Egil who recovered enough to move tripped.

The King glared at Miralith possessing Selen's body with a side eye.

Miralith grinned back.

She was not joking around.

"So you realise the nature of what you're asking and yet you still ask for it?"

"Of course. I wouldn't joke around with something like this after all." Miralith nodded.

"And your request is to have your former master, give up his life for this girl you've raised?"

"I mean if you put it that way, it sounds bad." Miralith chuckled. Walking around him, she eventually leaned against his back.

"Is it not the perfect time for us to step down from the stage? We're merely backdrops to the actors of this age. Do you remember what you told me long ago?" Miralith asked as she glanced up at the sky.

". . ."

"The boredom that comes with knowing the future through the immovable cogs. So instead, you chose to limit yourself with prediction in order to spark life in your chest. Why not give it up? You never found the perfect successor, not even me.

"Now that the opportunity has presented itself, is this not the perfect time to request such a reward for one who has entertained the King?" She smiled.

Her finger brushed against his wrist, at the black chains that held him in place.

The King was silent for a moment before closing his eyes.

The thoughts that went through his head when he chose to seal himself, only he knew.

Not even Miralith who saw the end knew the full truth.

A part of him was guilty in leaving her behind yet he still chose to do what he did.

But now...

The King opened his eyes.

"I have promised you a reward and I have no intention of taking that promise. And this is the second time you have informed me of your desire for my power. I'd rather not hear this foolishness thrice."

Miralith chuckled.

"But before that, I suppose I have to retrieve the audacious pet that has drive me towards my own end.

"Oi, girl. You can remove this lance right?" He glanced who Caera who furrowed her brows.

But seeing Miralith's thumbs up, she let out a sign and retrieved the eldritch energy she was injecting into him.

With his wounds slowly closing, the King took a step forward and was about to rip a passage open when the chains snapped.

"You already know what I plan to do. So why are you being such a pain? Or can a King not even retrieve his belonging?" He shot a glare at the chains.

The destination was the same so why bother with the process? At this point, the chains were simply being petty.

Finally, after a moment, they loosened enough for him to rip a hole through the realms.

The connection he shares with Miralith, it served as an anchor. A bridge between them.

There were some... barriers in place. But what are barriers to one such as himself?

Whatever protective measures the Zenia family put into place, he'll smash through them!

Miralith closed her eyes, returning Selen's body back to her.

Then, from that portal, a woman wearing a simple white dress stepped through with draconic features. Scales across her arm and neck along with a tail. Long dark blue hair that swayed behind her.

"Why have you given up your appearance for the form of a... half human." The King raised his eyebrow.

He was expecting a majestic beast to present itself yet that was not the case.

"If I appear as my normal state, how can I possibly roam the world with you without drawing too much attention?" She laughed.

Now that she was in her own body, the King couldn't hold back a smile and nodded.

With Miralith retrieved, he finally turned to Selen.

To bestow to her the reward she had earned so that she may attain Lordship.

Chapter 980: The King's Sacrifice

Silence prevailed in the Zenia prison. They weren't quite sure what they were looking at.

A corridor buried in the depths of the family compound had now become a gallery for disbelief.

Guards stood shoulder to shoulder, all drawn down here by the same alarm.

No one spoke. They only stared in confusion.

Ahead, one of the most secure chambers the family possessed had just been violated.

Again.

It wasn't a simple breach like last time.

Last time, an unknown assailant slaughtered through the guards and broke out with their most prized possession.

This time, it was clean and direct.

No bodies. No splintered doors. No traces of battle.

Instead, giant chunks of the prison were simply gone.

Not crumbled. Not cracked.

Gone. Swallowed. Removed.

As if a giant invisible spoon had scooped reality itself out of the stone. The missing sections were impossibly smooth, the cut edges too clean to be natural. It did not look broken.

It looked erased.

But the walls had never been the true defense. They were decoration for the powerful, an outer shell to hide what truly mattered.

That was why the prison had been reinforced with barriers and wards.

Stronger than ever, especially after the last break-in.

Layers upon layers of defenses. A vast interlocking lattice of Sigil abilities woven together into something they had called unbreakable. Contracts. Ritual circles. Ancient artifacts sunk into the foundation like nails through a coffin lid.

All of it combined to create the most impenetrable defense they could muster.

Those very same barriers lay shattered.

They did not even hold for a second.

All of them collapsed at once, leaving scars in the air. Thin, glassy fractures that hissed with leftover power, trembling like heat haze in torchlight.

One guard had the misfortune of stepping too close.

His fingers brushed the invisible wound.

In the same heartbeat, all life drained out of him.

His skin tightened over bone. His eyes sank. His mouth opened in a sound that never became a scream.

He turned into a mummified husk, then crumbled, fading to ash that scattered across the floor like dirty snow.

"You don't know what attacked?!?! WHAT DO YOU MEAN YOU DON'T KNOW!?" a man shouted in the back.

With such a large commotion in the family, how could none of them know what had happened?

"We're missing a chunk of our prison and no one saw what happened!?"

Punching the wall in frustration, he glared at the silent guards.

"Don't blame them too much. Even if they saw, I don't think they could've done anything." The Doctor stepped through with an amused smile on his face.

This energy, no doubt, belonged to a Lord.

An old, powerful one at that.

"Don't bother with it. Time isn't something someone of your calibre should be messing with." A voice warned as Nyer stepped through a portal.

There was a bored look on his face as he traced his finger along the same fissure that killed the guard.

However, it simply sparked against his finger and nothing else.

"Wouldn't that be a terrible waste?" The Doctor raised an eyebrow, but Nyer shook his head.

"Even if I allowed it, you can't do anything with this energy either. It's fading."

Nyer narrowed his eyes before turning around.

'So the King has decided to give it up...'

He recalled the prophecy of the cogs.

[Let time unravel its chains.]

Exhaling through his nose, a frown hung on his face.

###

Selen's smile twitched.

Even though she understood it was time for her to request the reward... asking it with her own mouth still felt awkward.

Especially when that person was the one who was moments from killing her.

Miralith gave the King a nudge with her elbow, causing him to click his tongue before looking at Selen.

"Even though the Era has changed, the act of bestowing power is still the same as before. But whether or not you can handle this, I cannot say."

"You can wither away into nothingness the moment you accept. You might even regress to the form of a baby, forced to watch as the era comes to an end despite having the power inside your vessel."

"How my power reshapes your body is outside of my control. Even so, do you still dream of wielding this King's power?"

Selen closed her eyes.

"I've come this far. Turning it down would be foolish." Selen looked up at the King with determination in her eyes.

"You're already foolish for challenging this King. I didn't think you had more intelligence to lose." He scoffed, earning another jab in the ribs by Miralith.

"What he means is, accepting is the only natural answer. Since this isn't a proper Hunt, the contract is also a little different. Whether or not the realm can accept such a contract will be entirely up to the Will of the Abyss." Miralith clarified as Selen nodded her head.

"That faceless fool will accept. I have no doubt about it. Regardless, hold out your arm." He commanded as Selen nodded her head.

Holding out her arm, both Miralith and the King reached out at the same time.

The King paused.

"I'm just here as the stabilizer. She already has my power in her, so naturally, if I help out, the transfer will go smoothly, right?"

Pausing for a moment, the King eventually nodded his head.

In an instant, the air around him changed as the aura of an Abyss Lord erupted outwards in full.

Every Sigil Selen possessed lit up across her body as energy rushed through her veins.

The world around them held its breath, lightning crashing down from above frozen in time.

Embers, earth, all suspended in the air.

Circles unfolded beneath Selen's feet. The first contained an icon of her first Sigil. Then the second, third.

All the way to six.

A pattern of Sigils appeared beneath her, exactly the way they were engraved upon her body.

Above her, a second array formed upside down like a hanging chandelier.

Selen clenched her fist but remained still. She could feel invisible threads of energy entering her body from above.

The King stepped forward, stopping at the edge of the circle. Close enough where the carvings reflected upon his eyes.

Placing his hand against his chest, the King forced out a single droplet of blood. His expression tightened under the strain.

The gold bead clung to his skin for a breath, then fell and struck the ring.

He stopped.

After this, there was no going back.

A smile touched his lips, gone almost as soon as it appeared. Miralith still caught it.

Then the King lifted that same hand to his face. The black chain around his wrist shivered.

He hooked his fingers in.

He tore out his own eyes.

No hesitation. No tremor.

The eyes that had seen the past, the present, and the future.

He crushed them in his palm. Golden blood spilled through his fingers and sank into the circle, spreading along the lines like ink.

Cracks raced across the chain.

"Hear me, laws that bind the world.

"This is the moment of rebirth.

"Hear me, the witness of eternity.

"Behold this contract.

"Hear me, the throne that bound itself to my soul.

"Witness my parting."

Cracks began to appear across the black chains.

"I offer no prayer, I request no mercy. I declare my severance."

For a King who has given up his power, his fate, there is no more need to bind thee.

His blood continued to drip onto the ring.

"Let the seal acknowledge my will. Let the circle accept my sacrifice. Let the Throne of time release its claim.

"I surrender my power.

"I cut myself from dominion.

"I abandon my crown."

With that final line, the chains around his wrist finally shattered as his authority surged forth. Raw energy condensing into a singular mote of power.

To think his entire life's worth would be compressed to such a form. Without hesitation, he pressed the orb against Selen's head.

"Go, claim your authority. Use my power as a bridge to ascend into Lordship."

As his voice faded, Selen found herself in the middle of a white space. She could feel the energy of time coiling around her like a protective barrier, cutting off all outside influences.

"So cautious. Unnecessarily so. I'm not one to meddle with the ascension of people."

Selen snapped her head around and saw a faceless figure sitting on a white throne.

There was an amused grin on his face.

"But enough about the King who gave up his power. Let's talk about you, young one." He pulled himself up from the chair.

"Time is the most curious thing. With time, some seek to perceive the future. Yet it is a trap in and of itself. An unknown future is one of limitless potential. But observing it hinders that potential. The idea is carved into your mind, a trigger of the Cogs, and what is unknown simply becomes probability." The Will walked past Selen.

"Such an anomaly, yes? With time, you feel all-powerful. Yet at the same time, you realise your powerlessness. Congratulations, girl. With the King's sacrifice, you may escape the prison that once bound his mind. But finding the key to this cage... is up to you." He grinned.

Clapping his hands together, a chasm opened up beneath Selen as she began to fall.

"I hope you find that key amidst the countless titles tied to time. May the King's sacrifice not be in vain."

Selen was swallowed by that void as countless flashes of different time periods appeared before her.

The past ablaze with war.

The present mutated by corruption.

The future-

'Heed not the visions of a cursed future. Focus solely on what thou desire.' The King's voice echoed out in Selen's mind as the barrier around her obscured the vision of the future.

This was a trial. To shape her title, to bestow her power. Did she want vision of the future?

A smile hung on her lips.

The weight of the future was too heavy for someone like her. Too greedy and grandiose.

All she wanted was the power to change the present. To help tide over this period of chaos.

Unknown to Selen, a grin appeared on the Will's face as he felt the title shift...

Several aspects of time have now manifested within the pool of authorities. Ones that have never been claimed before.

But only one can become her authority...