

Abyssal A 981

Chapter 981: Selen's Title

How long had it been?

Seconds?

Minutes?

Hours?

Perhaps even years.

Selen had lost track. At first, she was simply falling through the darkness with visions flashing across her view. But after a certain point, she started to black out.

This cold, endless fall that didn't seem to stop.Ever.

The wind howled in her ear, reminding her that even now, she was still falling.

She tried to count the seconds.One, two... Three...

After a while, she would start losing count.

No sight, no sound.It felt impossible for her to find an anchor to ground herself.

Her Sigils pulsed under her skin.Six familiar lights.

And beneath them... a shadow-shape that didn't have a name yet. A slot in her soul waiting for something to sit inside it.

In this darkness, strands of light began to form. Coiling around a black sphere, a sun that had forgotten how to shine.

A hole in this endless realm, given form by the strands of light. Pale blue radiance raced along its outline.

Selen couldn't look away.

The moment she focused on it, the fall changed.

The void stopped being a drop and became a pull.

Gravity had found her again.

As she drew closer, she realised the black sphere wasn't smooth. Countless faint branching fractures were woven together to form these strands of light.

Not only that, but they were familiar...

The feeling of time. Each of these strands was records of the past and present.

Turning her gaze to the edge, she noticed new strands being introduced.

She was watching the present being recorded down and becoming history.

Out of curiosity, she reached out. As if controlling the space itself, the distance between them closed in an instant and her fingers brushed against one of the many branches.

"!!!"

Her eyes widened, her vision flickered.

She saw the past.

A vision of a man standing against an army of hundreds.

Spells filled the sky so that even night looked like day. Yet he didn't retreat.

He didn't bend his knee, he didn't falter.

There was only one path for him and that was forward.

Selen flinched and the distance between her and the orb lengthened once more.

Indeed, these branches were the markings of everything that had happened before. Everything that had been recorded.

If so... what was the black sphere in the centre?

A vault?

A core?

A grave?

She couldn't stop herself from staring at the pale-blue radiance racing along the outline.

The longer she stared at the sphere, the more energy flowed through her body. Taking shape, obtaining form.

Six sigils lit up across her body, the seventh still empty.

And at the centre of her being, the slot for authority.

Selen clenched her fist.

She understood that this was her final question.

What form her authority would take.

If the branches represent the past... then the sphere they were coiling around...

Was that the present?

No, that wasn't it either.

The darkness around them was the present. The strands being woven in real time from this darkness.

Then there was only one thing this sphere could be.

The source of everything.

The Origin of Time itself.

Sweat rolled down her cheek.

Curiosity was a dangerous thing.

A gamble.

Was this foolish greed? Or was this a gamble that could overturn everything.

She swallowed nervously.

In the end, she reached out once more.

This time, it was slower.

Careful.

Aiming for that sphere.

The space bent to her desire, the distance shrank.

Facing this endless void of a sphere, Selen came face to face with herself.

Her own reflection upon this surface.

She was nervous, her reflection was smiling.

Like someone smiling because they already knew the ending.

The reflection lifted a hand.

Selen did too, instinctively.

Their palms hovered a hair's breadth apart, divided by nothing but that pale-blue sheen crawling over the sphere's skin.

Then the reflection spoke.

A voice echoing within Selen's skull.

"Do you know... where you are?"

Selen paused.

"Time."

The reflection's smile widened just a fraction.

"The Origin of Time." She corrected. "The place where your mind has observed and thus given it form. To allow you to comprehend what is incomprehensible so that your mind doesn't shatter under forbidden knowledge."

"The King who gave up everything is rather fond of you to surrender his authority so that you may survive."

Selen frowned.

"Who are you?"

The reflection tilted her head, as if that question was a strange one.

"I'm you." She replied simply.

"I'm your Origin. One that only appeared because you have reached this space."

She paused for a moment.

"And because I am your Origin, I know what you desire." Selen's Origin stared into her eyes, directly into her soul.

"So I will only ask you one question. The only question that matters in this moment."

She leaned forward, stepping out of the reflection before intertwining her fingers with Selen's.

Her hand wrapped around her waist and pulled the girl close.

Contrasting Selen's nervousness, she was completely calm. Numb even except for the small smile that hung on her lips.

"What are you willing to give up to reach the Origin?"

Selen narrowed her eyes then mustered up some courage. She took the lead and spun her Origin around so that she was the one looking down on her.

"Then let me ask you... What can the Origin give me that's worth my sacrifice? Can it overturn tides of chaos sweeping this land?"

"Such is the nature of the human mind. Always wanting to weigh up the odds so that it can compare the benefits." Her Origin chuckled, fading away before reappearing behind Selen.

"This is a demonstration. A show of faith. An act to prove your dedication."

She glanced back, eyes gleaming with an unknown light.

Just as Selen was about to respond, a broken sword shot through the void, stabbing into the Origin's head, throwing her back into the sphere.

"Useless. To think the Origin can exhibit such greed. Are you no different from the humans you wish to trick?" The King's voice echoed out as the last fragments of his power protecting Selen manifested as a fading silhouette slowly burning out.

"To give up her life's work so that she may reach the origin. Yet the price of opening that door is to give up everything. If so..." The King narrowed his eyes and folded his arms in annoyance.

"When standing before the Origin, what else can she give if not her life?"

This revelation sent a chill down Selen's spine as her Origin smiled a cruel smile.

Wide and stretching ear to ear.

"The price of opening that door, I have paid. So step aside foul wench. Her destiny is not something a b*stard like you can interfere with." He glared.

Even with his power fading, being used as the price to open the door, his arrogant aura still remained.

The Tyrant King who looked down on everything in the world.

Selen's Origin chuckled softly before fading away.

Within that dark sphere, a single line of light appeared.

"Go. Claim your prize." The King ordered as Selen glanced up at him.

"Th-"

"Did I ask for your thanks or did I ask for you to claim the prize? Useless sentiment. Who gave you permission to thank me?" He snapped, causing Selen to blink.

Even though he was helping her, his words were still harsh as ever.

With no other choice, Selen walked towards the light.

"Run! Who told you to walk!" He roared in frustration as Selen quickly broke into a sprint, fearful of what the King would do if she lingered.

"I have promised you a reward befitting the entertainment you have given me. For one who has presented me with a skill that even I, the Tyrant, had not expected to experience, this is the only outcome that can be allowed.

"I will not allow the gatekeeper to stop you from reaching the power you desire. So run, go towards your Origin. Claim its authority."

A smile appeared on the King's face before his expression turned serious.

"Let the past become your foundation!

"Let the present become your blade!

"And let the future become your hope!

"This is the final command of the King who has bestowed upon you his grace! Reach out with your hand and seize the Origin!"

Selen gritted her teeth and reached for that line of light.

Even when an invisible force pushed back, she continued to reach out.

Cuts appeared across her body, blood evaporated in an instant. Selen could feel time itself flowing through her veins.

The closer she got to the light, the more dangerous it felt.

As if a single fragment of hesitation would cause her life to be extinguished.

But she continued to push.

For that King had ordered her to seize the treasure of Time.

Her fingers brushed the light and the darkness around her was pushed away.

Countless bands of blue surrounded her, demanding a sacrifice.

The price for power.

The door had been opened and now it was time for her flesh to bleed.

Collapsing on her knees, Selen struggled to lift her hand.

The King paid the toll. But the last step was still needed. The cost to accept the power of Origin.

She could see that mote of blue hovering in the air, waiting for her to claim.

Yet reach out for it she couldn't.

"Does this not remind you of the time you entered my cage? The young cry baby Selen who lost strength in her knees."

A familiar thread tugged at the contract.

The stabiliser's mark, Miralith's, burned through the void like a needle and found Selen.

Selen widened her eyes.

"My King has given you the key. Now it's my time to pay the final tribute for the power you seek to claim.

"Once again, I am reminded of how fast children grow when you take your eyes off them. Don't you agree?" Miralith brushed back a strand of her hair as she walked towards that blue node.

"I was not your parent but... at the end of everything, I was still the one who watched you grow up to become the lady you are today." She turned back.

She saw the past, Selen struggling to use her power. Her pouts, her cries. Her tantrums.

It filled her heart with such warmth.

"This is the final gift I can give for a youngling leaving my nest..." Miralith closed her eyes.

"Selen, may your journey lead you to paradise."

Before Selen could say anything, a flash of light enveloped the space and her title was forged in the fires created by two Lords.

Selen - Abyss Lord of the First Hour.

Authority - The Origin of Time.

Chapter 982: Power Of Origin

Pain.

Not sharp.

Something deeper.

As if her mind had been pulled apart and then stitched back together with unsteady hands.

Selen groaned as her eyes opened.

Light flooded in.

Blinding.

Far too bright.

She squeezed them shut immediately. A dull pressure pushed against her skull, throbbing behind her eyes like something inside them had shifted.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Slow.

She forced herself to breathe.

She was back.

Back in reality.

Not the endless void.

Not the final white room.

Selen paused. Her fingers twitched.

That's right, Miralith.

What did she do? What did she sacrifice?

'Miralith? Miralith?! Where are you?' Selen called out through their link but no one answered.

Selen gritted her teeth and opened her eyes again.

The ceiling above her came into focus piece by piece.

She was back at the camp. Someone must've brought her back.

Either Caera or Egil.

But before she could think further, her vision started to distort.

At first she thought she was dizzy.

Then she saw them.

Cracks.

They were faint at first, barely visible hairline fractures crawling across the ceiling like scratches in glass. White and pale blue lines stretching across the ceiling.

She blinked again but these cracks didn't disappear. They started to multiply.

Connecting, getting bigger.

They branched across the room, moving like a thunder strike in slow motion.

Confusion filled her face as she glanced to her side.

The table next to her bed started to manifest these cracks, flowing across its entire structure.

What was she looking at?

Did something go wrong with her ascension?

Her eyes traced one of the cracks and in that moment, flashes of light appeared in her mind.

The history of this table. Where the materials had come from.

She couldn't stop the vision. And as the scenes finally finished, there was a single blue orb at the centre of its being. One that she could just reach out and...

Touch.

It's Origin.

Every thread began somewhere. Every existence had a starting point.

And what she was looking at...

Was the core essence of this table. Of its existence.

Selen's gaze drifted across the room. The longer she looked, the more she could see the Origin of this room.

Walls, the floor, even the pillars holding this place up.

Countless cracks filled her vision as she could feel her eyes straining under the pressure.

The headache only grew.

She leaned against the table to stabilize herself.

But the moment her hand came into contact, even without touching the Origin, the cracks began to glow and the table split apart, causing Selen to crash onto the ground.

Selen inhaled sharply, forcing her eyes shut as the pain in her head continued to slam against her skull.

Carefully, she pushed herself upright and sat on the bed.

Outside, a person knocked on the door before stepping in having heard the commotion.

Light footsteps.

Not Egils nor were they Caera's.

"Who is it?" Selen called out.

"Is me. How you feeling?" Alfva asked. She had deep bags under her eyes while chewing a small white stick to invigorate her spirit.

Though it did little to help.

"A bit rough." Selen smiled helplessly after hearing Alfva's voice.

"Tends to be the case. Lord Sigurd mentioned that newly ascended might find it hard to adapt to their new authority. But it seems to be especially bad in your case." She shrugged, glancing over to the broken table.

"Erm... Did you see a blue haired girl and someone who looks like royalty?" Selen asked after a brief pause.

"Nah. Caera mentioned the two of them left while she had Egil carry you back. Said they wanted to explore the world or something. But honestly, what is there to even explore? It's a bit of a sh*t show right now." Alfva grabbed a chair and sat down opposite Selen.

Green energy shimmered from her body as she scanned Selen, making sure everything was okay.

A frown lingered on her face.

"They left huh?... Not even a goodbye." Selen smiled bitterly.

But at least they were still alive. Her worst fears have disappeared.

"Anyways that's enough of them. You're the main focus. Can you open your eyes for me?" Alfva asked as Selen paused before nodding.

The moment she laid her eyes on Alfva, her body fractured instantly.

Cracks spreading across her body, splitting her form into layers.

Flashes of her past, too fast to fully digest yet the pain didn't care.

Selen flinched. Her eyes widened and at the centre of Alfva's being, a small sphere started to converge.

She quickly shut her eyes, fearful of what might happen if she stared too long.

"Hm... a tis a tricky one. You're constantly funnelling energy into your dominant sense. In this case, sight. Can you turn it off?"

"If I could, I wouldn't be closing my eyes now." Selen sighed.

Alfva was about to reach out when Selen flinched backward.

She raised an eyebrow before turning to the table, realising it's probably best not to touch Selen right now.

"Lordship and crap like that are outside of my expertise. I'll call Caera over and you can talk to her instead." Aflva stood up as Selen nodded.

"Much is appreciated."

With Alfva leaving the room, Selen finally leaned back and let out a sigh of relief.

She truly didn't want to imagine what might've happened if Aflva touched her in that moment.

This... power...

This authority...

It was beyond what she had expected.

Being able to trace back the history of anything she was looking at then finding their starting point.

In a sense, it was similar to the King's power when he used the sword.

To bring forth the past and cut it.

Only this was far more oppressive.

If...

If she set aside the obvious problems, then the questions remaining will be how can she utilize this power properly? What were the limitations? How long does it take to activate?

And most importantly, can she even handle it?

Just using this ability on the room, table and even Aflva briefly felt like she had just fought several battles back to back.

The headaches that accompany this power was not something she wanted to happen during a battle.

On top of that...

Does this mean there was nothing she couldn't kill as long as she had time?

As long as she could trace their origin without interference, she'll be able to erase them.

"Ah..." Selen frowned.

What about her other skills? Could she still use her perception manipulation with these eyes? Or was that now unavailable since she couldn't keep her eyes open for long periods of time.

Letting out a sigh, she felt a presence enter the room.

Not from the door but...

Above her?

A pair of hands wrapped around her eyes.

"!!!"

"Peekaboo~ Guess who I am~" A woman grinned while Selen let out a sigh.

"What are you doing Caera? I'm sure Alfva told you about not touching me right?" Selen asked with a frown.

But if Caera was ignoring that warning, then she must've been confident that she wouldn't get hurt.

"Oh I'm aware. But~ Even if you were looking at me, you'll lack the power to trace my origin and blow up your eyes instead." Caera let out a laugh.

Yet the subject of her sentence was rather... grim.

"So you know what authority I got." Selen exhaled through her nose.

"Somewhat. I've heard of it but it's more theory than actual possibility. However, the King and Miralith did give me a briefing of what's possible." Caera chuckled.

"What I can say confidently is that you should be careful with how you use your eyes now. Get used to them, adapt to them. You can't turn them off much like how the King can't turn off his visions of the past present and future.

"And speaking of him, he left you another gift. Something he used in the past to control his powers." Caera reached for her vault and pulled out a single strip of white fabric.

Getting Selen to sit up straight, Caera tied the bandage around Selen's head, covering her eyes.

"You can open your eyes now. How is it?"

Following her instructions, Selen opened her eyes. The world was now obscured by a faint layer of white. Not enough to block her view but enough for her to notice.

But the most important part was that the cracks were forming very slowly. And if she looked away, they'll start to fade.

"He said this cloth was a special one in that it blocks ocular abilities. He originally wanted to hire the craftsman to make something that allowed him to fully control the eyes but that was impossible.

"So he settled with a compromise and that was this bandage. And he also gave you a message along with this present." Caera chuckled, resting her chin on her palm.

"Girl who now wields the Origin. I bestow upon you one of my great treasures. Use it however you see fit. And most importantly, I grant you the permission to worship this bandage for it has been personally used by yours truly." She relayed the message as Selen couldn't help but laugh.

"It sounds just like him."

"It does. Truly makes you think how Miralith can even cope with such an arrogant King. Honestly what does she even see in him." Caera waved her hand lazily.

"And... don't worry about them. The King didn't want to linger around a reminder that he gave up his powers so he left and Miralith followed."

Selen glanced down and nodded with a smile.

Even now, after helping her out in the Origin of Time, the King still bestowed a gift to help her.

He's harsh with those he's unfamiliar with. But once you prove yourself to him, he will grant you the finest treasures.

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"Are you sure you wish not to bid farewell to the girl? Didn't you see her as a daughter of sorts?" The King asked, resting lazily while sitting on a boat. A pair of brown eyes looked out towards the horizon as he now saw neither past or future.

Only the present.

"If I did, she would've noticed wouldn't she? And once she does, I don't think I'll have the heart to leave." Miralith chuckled.

"Plus, didn't I promise you already? I'll observe the world with you." She smiled while the King closed his eyes.

A smile hung on his lips.

"You finally set your priorities straight. About time."

"What's a little bit of waiting for the King who sealed himself." Miralith stuck out her tongue.

"The audacity."

Miralith let out a laugh before leaning against the King.

The whole world was now open for them to explore.

Chapter 983: Seventh Zone

Erwen stood within the heart of the Grand Cathia Nightmare. The swirling sea of nightmares beneath his feet rippled gently.

Different zones. Different Hunters drifting along as he took in a top-down view of everything happening right now.

Without the fog, he could see the groups of monsters waiting in ambush.

The people who fell prey to these ambushes and those who overcame them.

He then raised his gaze toward a certain group.

Flashes of fire and arrows tore through the horde without any difficulty.

Even from here, the violence of their attacks could be felt against his skin.

Each punch. Each kill.

Erwen watched in silence.

The two split-haired girls following Miki.

He knew they were anomalies, but he did not expect them to be this oppressive.

Had he not decided to turn his attention elsewhere earlier, things could have become disastrous.

However, that was not the only thing.

He could see Miki weaving through the enemy without any difficulty.

Twisting her body. Adapting to the situation.

Her awareness of her surroundings had increased dramatically, to the point that he almost could not recognise her.

In fact...

If they were at a similar power level, he was not sure he could beat her when it came to raw perception.

Exhaling through his nose, Erwen continued to watch.

He was never able to reach that state.

A moment of pure concentration like the one Miki was demonstrating.

Each twitch of muscle from her enemies was taken into account.

Every potential move.

Every form of danger.

If it were him, there would be hesitation.

But she had none.

It was almost as though hesitation meant death.

Why? What kind of training did she do to reach this stage in a few short days?

Regardless...

The seventh zone posed no difficulty for the team.

He understood that even if he created more zones, they would blitz through them with ease.

Claiming the heart of this Nightmare was inevitable.

It was simply a matter of time.

But creating zones haphazardly yielded no benefits either.

Just a waste of effort.

A faint smile appeared on his face.

It did not bother him.

If anything, their strength was reassuring.

Strong Hunters meant the Nightmare would end cleanly.

The more confident they were, the faster they cleared.

The faster they cleared, the better it was for him.

However...

This also made him think.

If people of this calibre had been around when the horde first struck...

Would he be where he was now?

Would he have resolved himself to walk this path?

To kill his teacher.

To kill the pigs who hid behind the sacrifices of others.

Or...

Would things have been different?

Would he have changed his mind?

Would he have abandoned this path?

Would he have admired them as heroes?

Just like the many who once looked up to him.

That confident smile on Alice's face...

It was confidence backed by strength.

And clarity of heart.

Such mental fortitude was something every hero required.

Unfortunately...

He lacked that exact trait.

It was his weakness that sent him down this path.

That much he would never deny.

It was this weakness that allowed the corruption to fester and grow.

He could blame no one but himself.

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Compared to the sixth zone, the seventh was essentially more of the same.

Beasts waiting around every corner. Ambushes from below. Monsters bursting from the walls or dragging themselves from the broken ground.

The difference was the density.

There were more of them.

More claws scraping across stone. More bodies crashing through the corridors. More beasts throwing themselves at the Hunters as though sheer numbers would slow them down.

It did not.

Even without pausing too often to enhance their stats, they breezed through the challenge without any real difficulty.

Alice's arrows tore through the frontline of monsters before they could even close the distance. Each shot punched cleanly through skulls and joints, forcing openings in the horde.

Alyss followed behind Miki, dealing with any beasts that could not be killed outright by Alice.

With more practice using Absolute Zone, Miki was now like the centre of a storm. Her spear carved wide arcs of blood through the battlefield as she did not even have time to shout instructions.

She was in a trance-like state that helped her comprehend the exact actions she needed to take to make the most of her current abilities.

No wasted movement. No hesitation.

Only when the monsters disappeared did she finally snap out of it.

Miki blinked.

The battlefield that had been filled with claws and teeth moments ago was now empty.

She glanced around in confusion, only to realise they were standing before the boss arena of the seventh zone.

Alyss rolled her shoulders, stretching her arms above her head before staring at the empty arena.

"Do you think we'll get any more freaky visions?" she asked curiously.

Alice let out a groan.

"I certainly hope not."

The last vision was already giving her more than enough to think about.

She did not need another piece of someone else's trauma forced into her mind.

Miki did not respond. Her eyes remained fixed on the centre of the arena as she rested her spear against her shoulder.

Joking around for a little while longer, the group stepped forward.

The moment their feet crossed the invisible threshold...

Fog rolled in.

It gathered around the edges of the arena, forming a dense wall that sealed the battlefield shut.

No one was entering.

No one was leaving.

The ground trembled faintly.

Then darkness began to pour down from above.

Not shadows.

Not smoke.

Something thicker.

Something that moved like liquid.

It poured down from the fractured sky and swallowed the arena whole, coating the floor in rippling black waves.

Alice instinctively raised her guard.

Her mind braced for another vision.

But strangely...

Nothing happened.

The darkness lingered for a few seconds.

Then slowly receded.

Like a tide pulling back.

The arena cleared.

And standing at its centre...

Was a figure.

At first glance, it looked like a statue.

Not the same kind as the boss from the previous zone.

A tall pillar of stone stood.

Black tendrils spiralled outward from its body like living ink, twisting through the air in slow, hypnotic movements as though it were underwater.

They stretched outward, forming massive arcs behind the figure, converging into the form of a halo.

The creature had no clear face.

Only a single white light surrounded by darkness, pulsing where its head should have been.

A heart.

Or perhaps an eye.

But no vision accompanied the creature's appearance.

It was a simple fight. Nothing more.

"Well." Alyss creased her brows.

"I suppose we should be grateful that we didn't get shown something weird again."

Alice nodded as she pulled back on her bowstring and prepared the first arrow.

Yet when she did, the boss mimicked her actions and did exactly the same.

Raising an eyebrow, Alice fired, and both arrows met in mid-air.

"Hou~ Let's see how many of us it can copy!" Alyss lunged with an eruption of fire.

Preparing to strike, she was surprised to see a section of the boss split off to mimic her attack.

The tendrils twisted.

Ink-like darkness gathered and shaped itself into a mirror of Alyss's movement.

Flames burst forward.

A mirrored blaze answered it.

The two attacks collided in the middle of the arena with a violent explosion.

Miki took this opportunity to circle around.

Yet the moment she was about to launch her attack at the boss, a clone was created from the darkness.

Their spears collided.

Every movement they made. Every skill they used.

The boss copied it perfectly.

"Let me try!" the mage shouted, raising his staff.

Energy started to converge, but the boss was occupied with the melee fighters.

The tanks joined in to cover.

Strangely, the boss did not copy the tanks, causing Alice to frown.

Once the attack was charged, the mage fired.

It was only after targeting the boss that it responded with a clone to cancel out the ability.

"Try aiming away from the boss! It's not copying until we target it specifically!" Alice shouted.

Aiming into the sky, she fired a single arrow that erupted into a shower of lightning.

She was not aiming at the boss, merely the airspace. Everything else was collateral.

Forced to dodge the lightning, the boss wanted to attack when flames erupted around it.

Alyss detonated a wave of fire beneath them.

"Don't give it time to think!" Miki lunged.

Since the trick was now discovered, it was time to kill this boss quickly.

Miki closed the distance first, her spear igniting as she drove forward with a burst of speed that cracked the stone beneath her feet.

The boss reacted immediately, darkness gathering to form another mirrored copy of her attack.

But this was a distraction to break open its guard.

Lightning fell from above while flames burst out from below.

The mage unleashed a control spell, one that did not centre on the boss but was slightly off to the side.

As the strands of energy shrank, they naturally dragged the boss into the air.

This fight was completely in their favour.

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As the final strike landed against the boss, the tendrils coating its body collapsed.

There was nothing special except for the gimmick. An annoying boss, but one that was not difficult.

They simply needed to be patient.

But as they were about to collect the loot, a spiral of light formed at the centre of the arena, swallowing the party.

They quickly raised their weapons in preparation for an ambush.

The world shifted, and the darkness and fog were dispelled.

Cold wind brushed against their faces as Miki blinked in confusion.

They were no longer standing in a twisted Nightmare landscape.

Stone battlements stretched endlessly to either side of them.

Below lay the vast plains beyond the city.

This was the wall that surrounded Grand Cathia.

And standing at the edge...

Looking out to the distant horizon...

A man stood.

Erwen.

Chapter 984: Sacrifice For A New Age

Miki's eyes widened.

Her grip tightened around the shaft of her spear, instincts screaming as she prepared to lunge forward. But before she could move, a hand caught her shoulder.

Alice.

Alice's expression was flat, her eyes cold and unimpressed. Without a word, she drew an arrow.

The arrow whistled through the air before colliding with an invisible wall.

"How lacking in confidence must you be to resort to something like this." Alice scoffed in disdain.

"Can't blame a man for taking precautions." Erwen shrugged with a laugh, leaning against the battlement.

"Especially when it comes to such a powerful group. No matter how strong I may be, I still want a sense of comfort."

Miki's fist clenched.

Her nails dug into her palm as she forced herself not to charge forward.

"What the hell are you doing here? Shouldn't this be the eighth zone?"

Erwen tilted his head back, gazing lazily up at the sky, counting the clouds that drifted across his view.

"Indeed. The Eighth zone should've been here." He replied lazily.

"But I deemed it unnecessary. No matter what I throw at you lot, you'll kill with ease anyways, right?"

Despite openly admitting that he couldn't stop them, Erwen looked completely at ease.

There was no tension in his posture. No hint of caution in his voice.

Was it because of this invisible barrier? Or was it something else?

Why did he seem amused by everything that was happening instead of being worried? Or was this part of his plan?

For Erwen to be this relaxed against them, something was dreadfully wrong.

"So you decided to change your approach?" Alice asked, her gaze slowly sweeping across their surroundings.

The area was unnervingly empty.

Aside from the invisible wall blocking their path, there was nothing.

No beasts lurking in the shadows.

No creeping fog rolling across the ground.

No boss preparing to descend upon them.

Nothing.

It was just Erwen.

Standing alone atop the battlement as though he were hosting them rather than confronting them.

"Somewhat," Erwen replied with a casual shrug. "I simply decided the best way to use the remaining time is to stall you from reaching the heart of Grand Cathia."

"Does the rules even allow that? I believe this Nightmare is a rather 'fair' place no? Denying us of progression should be impossible." Alice aimed another arrow high into the sky.

Yet no matter how high she fired it, the invisible wall was still there.

"Hou? And what makes you say that?" Erwen raised an eyebrow, folding his arms.

"Because I know the b*stard who made this whole thing." Alice rolled her eyes.

Based on her understanding of Nyer, as well as Cayla's encounter with him before, he's someone who welcomes the challenge.

In fact, it's safe to say that he WANTS them to try and stop him.

To struggle, to resist.

All so that, in the end, he could prove that his path was the correct one.

That his choices were justified.

That what he was doing... was undeniable.

Alice clicked her tongue softly.

Or perhaps...

Perhaps it wasn't just arrogance.

Maybe it was something else entirely.

The faint, stubborn fragment of humanity still lingering within him.

The part of Nyer that still understood one simple truth.

Velouria...

Would never have wanted this.

"I see..." Erwen hummed softly, tapping a finger against the stone railing.

"While you're figuring out the exact conditions," he continued, "why don't we talk? I believe that once you understand the goal behind the Nightmare... you'll be far less reluctant to oppose it."

Alice glanced sideways at Miki.

Miki gritted her teeth before letting out a deep exhale.

"Fine." Alice clicked her tongue softly.

"Talk."

Erwen's smile widened slightly, as though he had been waiting for that answer.

"Since you already know the one who created this place," he began, resting his elbows against the battlement, "I believe you should also understand his goals."

Alice gave a small nod.

"Naturally."

Her gaze sharpened.

"But I don't believe I need to explain why the lengths he's going to are complete insanity."

Her voice carried little emotion, yet the disdain was unmistakable.

At this point, after everything Nyer had done...

Calling it obsession no longer felt appropriate.

It's beyond even insanity.

"Perhaps," Erwen admitted with a light shrug. "But since when has a shift in eras ever come without sacrifice?"

He tapped the stone railing beneath his fingers.

"Every turning point in history, every event that reshaped humanity, came at a cost."

His gaze drifted toward the distant horizon.

"Empires rise and fall."

"Wars erase entire generations."

"And yet those sacrifices become the foundation for the next era."

Erwen looked back at them.

"There is always a price to actions that shape the timeline of humanity."

Miki scowled but said nothing.

Erwen could understand their rejection.

To most people, Nyer's actions looked monstrous.

Cruel.

Unforgivable.

But Erwen was not most people.

He was someone who could see the logic behind Nyer's path.

"The result you're focused on," Erwen continued calmly, "the revival of the one true goddess... is merely the final outcome."

His smile deepened slightly.

"You may find yourselves blinded by the sacrifices required to reach that point."

"But the journey itself, the transformation it brings to humanity, has already been taken into account."

Alice raised an eyebrow.

"Oh?"

She slowly stepped forward.

"Ohou~"

Her tone turned mocking.

"Then tell me."

Her fist slammed into the invisible wall separating them.

*BANG!!!

Ripples spread across the air like water disturbed by a stone.

"What exactly is this journey Nyer is planning?"

Her eyes burned with cold anger.

"To make everyone unafraid of death?"

"To trap them deeper and deeper inside this Nightmare?"

"To strip them of their souls until they become nothing more than hollow shells?"

She struck the barrier again.

Another ripple spread across the air.

"People dying again and again."

"Being broken and rebuilt until they forget what it means to live."

Alice's voice dropped lower.

"And you call that a path toward salvation?"

Erwen let out a laugh.

Raw amusement.

"You misunderstand." He wiped the tears from his eyes.

"The Nightmare isn't meant to destroy humanity. It's to sow the seeds of those who stand above the rest. The ones who can adapt and rise to the challenge. You stand here where countless have fallen."

Raising his hand, he snapped his finger and the scene changed.

A bloody massacre that he orchestrated with his own hands.

"It's a selection process that divides the weak and powerless to those who are truly strong. The seeds worth planting." Erwen smiled softly, unphased by the corpses that littered around them.

Miki's eyes turned bloodshot.

"You see, dying in this Nightmare isn't the end. All of your actions, all of your choices. Every death... it is compiled into information. Information that will be carried into the new world."

Inhaling the blood mist to remind himself of his actions that day, Erwen lifted his head towards the sky and gave the ground a side glance.

"Pigs who don't deserve mercy. Insects who can't work up the courage to move their own limbs even as death approach. B*stards who simply watch, pushing past other innocents to save their own hides. That day, I witnessed the ugliness of Grand Cathia.

"I understood that this was merely a fraction of what happens in the world. So I ask you, what is your solution to this sight? What about the nobles who live atop Grand Cathia, looking down as the city suffers yet give no help?" Erwen snapped his finger once more.

This time, they were in a golden banquet hall high above the city. While the siege was happening, they dined on food while laughing at the deaths occurring below.

None of the group could respond as that was indeed the case.

"So I ask you, what is your solution to all of this? Nyer is someone who showed me the possibility. He showed me the path forward. What can be achieved through this Nightmare.

"And he entrusted Grand Cathia to me. But here we stand..." Erwen sighed.

"Why must you make things so difficult?" He asked.

In that moment, Miki couldn't hold back and lunged forward. Her spear ripped through the veil as Erwen grinned.

He quickly leaned back and parried her strike.

"!!!"

Miki realised she was allowed through and attacked!

Alice tried to support but her skills were blocked, so was everyone else's skill. It was a barrier that only allows Miki to step through.

"Tell me. What do you think teacher would say if he saw the end result? Wasn't he always bothered by the nobles who restricted his actions despite providing nothing for the city?"

"Maybe their ancestors earned some merit. But them? The pigs who are drunk off of our suffering? They don't deserve such benefit." Erwen struck the spear from below and aimed for a pale strike against Miki's chest.

However, with her recent training, she was able to react.

Jumping up, she went into a handstand and kicked her heel toward Erwen's head, forcing him to create a distance between them.

"Father would've never accepted this choice. This Nightmare that drags the innocent into everything."

*RUMBLE!!!

Igniting her spear, Miki unleashed a flurry of strikes that cut off Erwen's path of retreat.

"Maybe so. Teacher was always soft hearted. Towards me, towards you. Towards the soldiers. But he was someone like me."

Miki creased her brows but there was no hesitation in her movements.

"He was willing to burn down the world if it meant keeping you safe." Erwen stomped the ground, shattering the floor as energy burst out and coiled around his fist.

"Shut up!" Miki slashed horizontally.

Yet before her strike could land, Erwen smiled.

"What if you could see him again? Alive. Reborn through this Nightmare."

Chapter 985: Invisible Domino Effect

"What if you could see him again? Alive. Reborn through this Nightmare."

It was only after hearing this did Miki's spear hesitate and Erwen moved towards her for a strike.

His hand shot forward, striking the shaft of her spear and knocking it violently downward. Before she could recover, he stepped in close and drove his fist straight into her stomach.

*BANG!!!

The impact forced the air from her lungs.

Miki slid backwards across the stone floor, boots scraping as she struggled to regain her footing.

"Don't listen to him. Focus, he's trying to ruin your mental." Alice frowned.

They haven't figured out how to let Miki focus properly when facing Erwen yet.

As it currently stands, this fight was not one that'll end well!

"Ruin her mental?" Erwen blinked in mock confusion before pointing to himself.

"Who? Me?"

Then he laughed.

"I have no need for such crude strategies."

His gaze returned to Miki.

"No... what I'm saying is simply the truth."

His smile sharpened slightly.

"If Nyer intends to revive a goddess," he continued calmly, "don't you think bringing back an ordinary mortal would be trivial in comparison?"

His voice carried absolute certainty.

Not a hint of hesitation.

Not a trace of deception.

Only unwavering confidence.

Miki's pupils trembled.

Her grip weakened slightly around the spear.

She could feel her resolve faltering.

If her father can be brought back...

Erwen watched the change in her expression and smiled faintly.

"Allow me to put things into perspective," he said, brushing his hair back before clapping his hands together.

In an instant, the scenery around them shifted.

They now stood at the edge of a massive pit.

Below them, dozens of humans wandered aimlessly across the dirt floor. Their clothes were ragged, their faces hollow with exhaustion.

"This," Erwen said, gesturing downward, "is a rather unfortunate situation.

"These poor people have been trapped here.

"No food.

"No resources.

"No escape."

His voice remained calm while the group frowned.

"Now," Erwen continued, clasping his hands behind his back, "let us imagine a solution."

He pointed toward the people below.

"If you were to kill a number of them...

"The remaining survivors could stack their corpses.

"Use the bodies as a ladder.

"And climb out."

His gaze shifted toward them.

"In doing so, they overturn their fate.

"They escape."

He tilted his head slightly as a grin appeared on his face.

"So tell me... Would you accept this solution?

"Sacrifice a portion of them so the rest may live?"

He asked before his grin disappeared.

"Or... would you refuse to kill anyone...

"And allowed them all to slowly starve to death?"

Miki clenched her fist.

"Because unless someone from above descends to save them, the outcome remains the same." Erwen raised his hand, snapping his fingers.

In the next moment, the pit was now filled with corpses.

"They all die."

"Well?" He asked, seeing as how no one was answering. "What would you choose?"

"Sacrifice a few so the rest may live. Or will you cling on your morality, arguing that killing a few for the benefit of others is wrong and watch them all die together?"

Miki bit her lip.

"How is that any different from what the nobles are doing?" she forced out.

Even as the words left her mouth, she knew they rang hollow.

She didn't truly believe it.

Erwen burst into laughter.

"Hah!"

He wiped the corner of his eye as though the question genuinely amused him.

"The difference?" he repeated.

His gaze sharpened as he looked down at her.

"The difference is that the ones I'm sacrificing are pigs who don't deserve to enter paradise."

"The nobles of Grand Cathia sacrifice the innocent so they can grow richer." He gestured vaguely toward the city beyond the walls. "They drain the lifeblood of the people day after day, all so their banquets grow larger and their mansions taller."

His smile faded slightly.

"But what we're doing..."

He tapped his chest.

"...is very different."

"We're not sacrificing the weak. We're sacrificing the tyrants."

"What Nyer wishes to accomplish is simple. To drag those sitting on the divine thrones down into the dirt. To become the fertilizer for the new age, the new Goddess."

His gaze then lowered to the city.

"And for Grand Cathia..." His smile returned.

"It will be the nobles who have been feeding on it like parasites. Every drop of suffering they've forced upon the people, every act of greed and selfishness, it will all become the very thing that buries them."

Erwen's gaze settled on Miki.

"So tell me again," he said quietly, "how exactly is that the same?"

Silence hung between them.

After a moment, Erwen let out a soft breath and lifted his shoulders in a casual shrug.

"But this is a discussion we could drag on forever," he said. "You have your beliefs, and I have mine. I'm not here to force you to accept them."

His tone shifted slightly.

"What I came here to tell you is something much simpler."

A faint smile appeared on his face.

"The Grand Cathia Nightmare has already served the purpose I needed it to."

Miki frowned.

Then Erwen spoke the next words as though they were the most ordinary thing in the world.

"There will be no more sieges."

Miki blinked.

"...What?"

Her mind struggled to process what she had just heard.

No more sieges?

The entire reason the Nightmare had spread across Grand Cathia was because of those attacks. The constant threat had driven people into desperation, forcing many to enter the Nightmare in search of strength.

If the sieges stopped...

Then what was the point?

Erwen chuckled softly at their reactions.

"The stage has already been set." He glanced back at the city.

"What happens next no longer requires force."

He turned back to them.

"From this point forward, everyone will be given a choice.

"If they wish to enter the Nightmare and obtain power, they may do so."

His smile widened slightly.

"Because now that the door has been opened... People will walk through it on their own."

Taking a deep breath in, Erwen exhaled in satisfaction. As though he's watching the machine he worked so desperately on finally working on its own.

No more mistakes, no more malfunctions.

Everything going as planned.

"When given such an opportunity, how many people do you think will reject that chance?"

No one answered.

Miki stared at him, her grip tightening around her spear again, though the doubt in her eyes had yet to fully disappear.

People had once been forced into the Nightmare.

Forced to fight for survival.

Forced to struggle against a grim fate they had no control over.

But now that the immediate danger had been removed...

Would they still avoid it?

This was no longer a matter of survival.

It was a matter of power.

When you knew the people above you were stronger, when you knew your life could be crushed beneath their whims at any moment...

That was the kind of pressure that drove people to change their fate.

That was the kind of desperation that pushed people to challenge the Nightmare.

And at that moment, Miki came to a chilling realization.

If Erwen was truly allowing people to enter the Nightmare by choice...

Then the restrictions were gone.

No more waiting two days between entries.

No more looming siege forcing them to prepare.

The door had simply been thrown open.

Even if she ordered the guards not to enter...

How could they possibly remain calm when civilians were willingly stepping inside?

What if one of those civilians returned stronger than them?

What if someone they had once protected suddenly possessed power that could threaten their lives?

What if...

Someone died because they underestimated that difference?

The moment that happened...

Everything would change.

It would begin slowly at first.

Suspicion.

Unease.

Fear.

But soon that fear would spread.

A guard entering the Nightmare just to keep up with the civilians.

A civilian entering because their neighbour had grown stronger.

A noble sending people inside to maintain their authority.

One person after another.

A chain reaction.

A domino effect that could no longer be stopped.

The floodgates had already been opened.

People would enter the Nightmare out of fear.

Fear of their neighbours.

Fear of the nobles.

Fear of falling behind in a world where strength decided everything.

And when tensions rose between people who now possessed power...

Lives would inevitably be lost.

Erwen's grin widened as he watched the horror unfold in Miki's expression.

"If the pigs who waited at the top were no longer there, would this kind of domino effect occur?"

"If the people knew that the guards could properly protect them, would they take matters into their own hands?"

"This is a demonstration Miki." Erwen walked up to her.

"To kill the few so that the majority can survive and enter paradise. But this is not a senseless killing. This is a carefully prepared culling of the underserving. How people act, how they operate. Everything will be remembered by the Nightmare.

"And when time comes to enter paradise, everything will come back as karmic debt. Whether that is good karma or bad, only time will tell."

His gaze lingered on Miki for a moment.

"See you around. I do hope you can survive the chaos that is about to unfold."

Erwen clapped his hand and an ocean of fog rolled over them.

All of them were ejected out of the Nightmare ahead of schedule.

It was not yet dawn but the Nightmare ended.

No, that was incorrect. Rather than ended, a door was now present in their mind. If they wished for it, they can simply choose to renter the Nightmare.

Miki paled.

She sat up and was about to leave the room when she heard a knock on her door.

"Come in." She frowned as her assistant entered the room.

There was a panicked look on her expression.

"There's been an announcement. Everyone in the Grand Cathia Nightmare received it."

Miki held her breath.

"The sieges are over."

Invisible dominos were now toppling within Grand Cathia.

Chapter 986: Noble Council

The announcement spread through Grand Cathia like wildfire.

At first, people thought it was a mistake.

A malfunction of the Nightmare.

A misunderstanding.

Something had to be wrong.

But as the same message echoed again and again within the minds of those connected to the system, doubt slowly gave way to realisation.

It was real.

The sieges were over.

No more beasts crawling out from the fog.

No more desperate defences along the walls.

No more looming dread hanging over the city every two days.

For the first time since the Nightmare had begun, Grand Cathia was quiet.

The change was so sudden that many found it difficult to accept.

Clusters of people gathered throughout the streets, forming small circles of restless conversation. Their voices were low, uncertain, as rumours spread faster than anyone could control.

"Did you hear it too?"

"The announcement. It said the sieges are finished."

"So that means we're safe now, right?"

Some remained sceptical, wondering if this was some trick of the Nightmare itself. Perhaps it was a way to make them lower their guard before something even worse arrived.

A few people laughed nervously, trying to brush away the unease.

Others kept glancing toward the towering walls surrounding the city, their eyes scanning the horizon as if expecting the familiar fog to begin rolling in again.

But nothing happened.

No horns sounded.

No alarms rang through the streets.

The gates remained closed.

The guards on the walls stood watch, but there was no enemy to face.

The city was peaceful.

Unnaturally so.

There hadn't even been a siege earlier that day.

Normally, the absence of danger would have brought relief.

But instead, a strange tension settled over Grand Cathia.

Because the people had begun to understand the other meaning behind the announcement.

The sieges might be over.

But the Nightmare itself remained.

And now the rules had changed.

They could enter it whenever they wanted.

Even during the day.

There was no longer a waiting period.

No two-day cycle.

No looming attack forcing them to prepare.

The door had simply been opened.

If someone wanted power, all they had to do was step through.

A farmer standing beside a well slowly clenched his hands.

A merchant stared at the door leading to the Nightmare.

A young guard lowered his spear as the thought crossed his mind.

Power.

Strength.

A chance to change one's fate.

It was no longer something reserved for those desperate enough to face a siege.

Now it was available to anyone who dared to reach for it.

And once that thought took root...

It was impossible to ignore.

###

Miki sat on her chair as a deep frown hung on her face.

The atmosphere was not good, even for the people who have been following her.

The guards knew full well that the announcement was real.

The experiment department tested it out and entered the Nightmare.

Now, whenever you rest at a branch, there was the option to leave.

Miki exhaled heavily as she massaged her brows.

Standing up, she walked over to the windows and looked down on the city.

Groups were gathering everywhere.

Markets.

Plazas.

Street corners.

Behind her, several guards stood around a long table scattered with reports that were still being delivered.

One of them cleared his throat.

"Captain..."

Miki didn't turn around.

"Mnm? What is it?"

"We're receiving reports from across the districts. And... Well..." He hesitated before finishing his report.

"People are... testing the system. They're seeing whether or not they can enter the Nightmare and they're getting positive results."

A brief silence filled the room.

Miki already knew that.

She could see it too.

That door staring at you from within your mental realm.

Waiting.

Power, authority. All of it was waiting so long as you can prove yourself in the Nightmare.

Since there was no time constraint, you can be as careful as you want. Take as long as you need.

"People are fainting in the middle of the streets when they enter the Nightmare. We're moving them to safe areas whenever it happens, but..."

He hesitated again.

"...I don't think we can stop them anymore."

Miki slowly closed her eyes.

"So what do you suggest?" Miki asked, already knowing what they were suggesting.

For them to enter the Nightmare themselves.

They have the resources, the information. The necessary departments.

They could navigate the Nightmare far better than the civilians. With enough time, they'll guarantee domination.

The guard didn't answer.

"Hold off on it for now. Let's see how the situation develops." Miki sighed.

He nodded but there was a layer of doubt in his eyes.

Everyone else in the room felt the same.

How can they be expected to maintain order when civilians could get to the point where they kill guards with a single punch?

Before anyone could linger on that thought, another guard ran into the room.

"C-captain!"

Miki turned around.

"The noble council has sent a message."

The room grew quiet.

"They are requesting your presence at the council hall."

Miki narrowed her eyes.

"So eager. They didn't even wait a full day." She sighed.

There was no surprise in her voice.

Of course the Nobles would move now. During the sieges, they had tolerated her authority because they had no choice. But it's not like she could drive them out either since they had guards stronger than her.

Stronger yet they didn't make a move to help the city.

To them, she was simply a useful tool. They tolerated her authority because someone needed to coordinate the city's defence.

To make the decisions and take accountability for them.

But with the sieges being over, the justification for her authority was gone.

Even if she was classified as the head of the Nightingale family, with her father dead, the standing of her family has dropped significantly.

"What bullsh*t reason did they give this time?" She asked.

The messenger hesitated slightly.

"They claim that since the emergency has ended, the temporary command structure should be dissolved."

A few guards immediately muttered in irritation.

"Of course they did."

"They hid in their estates while we were fighting on the walls."

"And now they want control again."

Miki raised a hand, silencing them.

This had been inevitable.

The Nightmare had opened its doors.

And now everyone wanted control of what came next.

Miki grabbed her coat from the back of the chair.

"Prepare a small escort." She ordered.

"Captain... you're actually going to meet them? They're just going to find excuses to push you down."

Miki shrugged.

"Even if I don't go, they'll look for me eventually. It's not something I can avoid." She sighed.

Not only that, but avoiding the Nobles would only create a bigger scene.

Alice was waiting outside the door.

"I would offer my help. But the only thing I can do is help you kill the noble guards if they step out of line." Alice smiled helplessly.

"That would only give them justification. Calling me a tyrant or something along those lines." Miki chuckled.

"Mnm. Let me know if there's anything I can do."

Miki nodded her head before leaving the command room behind her.

###

The council chamber was already loud by the time Miki arrived.

Voices overlapped one another in irritated arguments as nobles filled the long hall, their expensive coats and polished rings glinting under the chandelier light.

Many of them were standing rather than sitting, as if the mere act of waiting had already insulted them.

When the doors opened and Miki stepped inside, several heads turned.

A few expressions immediately soured.

"Well," one noble said loudly, leaning back in his chair. "She finally decided to grace us with her presence."

Another scoffed.

"I was beginning to wonder if the Captain had forgotten who actually governs this city."

Miki ignored the remarks and walked toward the centre of the chamber.

They were always like this.

An older man seated near the centre of the table tapped his cane against the floor.

"At last."

His voice carried easily across the hall.

"Captain Miki."

The way he said the title made it sound like an insult.

"We appreciate you attending our... little gathering."

Miki stopped a short distance from the table.

"You requested an assembly."

"Yes, yes." The noble waved his hand dismissively. "Let us not waste time with pleasantries."

He leaned forward slightly.

"The sieges have ended. Fortunately, that means the danger is over for the city. Don't you agree? Martial law is no longer necessary."

Miki exhaled softly.

"Frankly, they should never have been granted in the first place."

A woman wearing a necklace heavy with jewels folded her arms.

"This city has always been governed by its noble houses."

Her gaze swept over Miki with open disdain.

"Not by soldiers."

Another noble chimed in immediately.

"You were tolerated because of the situation."

"Now that the crisis has passed, it would be best if authority returned to its proper place."

Miki remained silent.

Across the room, one of the younger nobles leaned forward eagerly.

"Besides, shouldn't you stop playing soldier and actually do your duties as a noble?"

Several others nodded.

Even though the head of the Nightingale family had passed away, it was still difficult to fully root out the foundations that the family had created.

Which was precisely why the nobles found Miki so irritating.

She was not supposed to still be standing here.

A thin noble with slicked-back hair clicked his tongue.

"Really, Lady Nightingale," he said with exaggerated patience, "the war is over. There is no need to cling to borrowed authority."

Another noble laughed softly.

"You've had your moment of glory. The walls didn't fall, the city still stands. Congratulations."

He leaned back in his chair.

"Now you can return to your proper responsibilities."

His smile widened slightly.

"Leave governance to those actually qualified to handle it."

"Someone like you should be looking to get married so that the Nightingale family can continue. It is both your responsibility and duty as the daughter of the previous head."

Miki closed her eyes.

Perhaps this is what Erwen felt.

The urge to just...

Silence them all.

Chapter 987: Justification

Miki closed her eyes and took a slow breath.

The urge faded.

She dispelled the urge. Killing them would validate everything Erwen has done. To commit a slaughter not unlike the one he did.

Not only that, but the city was in a fragile state.

If she turned this chamber into a bloodbath, panic would tear through Grand Cathia like wildfire. Fear would drive people into the Nightmare even faster than before.

For now, there was still room to talk.

A thin, fragile balance.

But if she killed the nobles, that balance would break.

The citizens would fear her just as much as they feared the nobles.

And fear without safety only led to one place.

The Nightmare.

Miki opened her eyes. Her face had already settled back into its usual calm.

Across the chamber, the old man raised his cane and tapped it once against the marble floor.

"Now then. Since we all agree the emergency has ended, we should begin discussing the transition back to normal governance."

Miki held back a sigh.

So they wanted their power back.

One noble leaned over the long table, fingers pressed together.

"The temporary command structure put in place during the siege will naturally be dissolved."

He gave a lazy wave of one hand.

"Not at once, of course. There is still the possibility that this announcement is some kind of trick by the Nightmare."

Several others nodded.

Another noble farther down the table joined in.

"But keeping the military at this level of readiness is unreasonable. The strain on the city's resources is far too great."

A heavier man adjusted the rings on his fingers before speaking.

"The city guard should be reassigned under the supervision of the Noble Council."

More nods.

As if the conclusion were self-evident.

A woman draped in jewels lifted a folding fan, concealing the lower half of her smile.

"After all... the security of Grand Cathia has always been the responsibility of its ruling houses."

Miki almost laughed.

Security?

Responsibility?

Where had that responsibility been when the Nightmare first appeared?

Where had it been when the sieges battered the walls?

Where had it been when soldiers and civilians alike were dying in the streets?

Her gaze drifted across the nobles gathered around the table.

Expensive coats.

Perfumed air.

Not a single scar among them.

'Did I really expect anything different?' Miki thought to herself.

Even though these nobles were also dragged into the Nightmare, they didn't do anything. They simply waited and didn't bother progressing.

Why work hard for power when they have guards to help them resolve everything?

Even if the city falls, as long as they live, things will be fine.

The only thing she could be grateful for was that none of them have sided with the Zenia family.

Yet.

Rather, they were too small for the big family to notice.

The only one worth mentioning was the Nightingale family but that was in the past.

The nobles never accepted her authority as the family head. They only endured while the danger persisted.

Now that it had passed, they wanted everything back. No need to put up with this farce any longer.

A thin noble with slicked back hair cleared his throat.

"There is also the matter of the Nightmare. With the gates to that realm now open, it will require immediate regulation."

Several heads turned towards him.

"We cannot allow people to enter freely. Chaos would be inevitable."

The old man with the cane nodded.

"Precisely. Now that the siege has ended and free access is given, the Nightmare must be properly administered."

Miki couldn't hold it back anymore.

"And how exactly will we achieve that? The Nightmare has left a door that can be opened by anyone. How will you stop citizens from freely entering?"

A few murmurs echoed out in the hall as the old man tapped his cane.

"Access should naturally be organised by the noble houses. Each house can sponsor appropriate candidates to focus their resources on for each district. Capable individuals. People who can be trusted with power."

The nobles nodded while giving praise.

"As for making sure the civilians don't enter, we will use a surveillance system. I'm sure with the technology that has been developed during this time of crisis, Captain Nightingale has something of that nature, right?"

All eyes turned to Miki.

"Unfortunately, with the tech we have, it is simply not realistic to deploy large scale in order to monitor the entire city." She shrugged.

"But with the Nightmare now over, you have plenty of time to develop it do you not?" A noble cut in.

"Then you'll have to ask the research department rather than myself." Miki dismissed.

These nobles always assuming they knew everything despite not moving a finger to help.

They don't know the hours upon hours they've had to put in just to make something barely usable to monitor the Nightmare.

The noble was about to counter when the old man raised his hand, calming down the hall.

"We may talk about the issue of time in our next meeting. I'm sure Captain Nightingale will need time to discuss this with her team. But the goal is clear. We must ensure that the Nightmare remains under proper supervision."

The nobles started to talk amongst themselves.

One of which even whispered a line about making sure commoners don't imagine themselves equal to their betters.

"Now, we must talk about you, Captain Nightingale. Or rather, let us address you properly, Lady Nightingale." He smiled. "You have served your purpose during the crisis. But henceforth, this is a matter that requires experienced leadership."

He paused for a moment.

"Leadership that understands governance."

Miki narrowed her eyes.

"And frankly, your situation should be addressed as well. Properly."

A few nobles exchanged knowing glances.

"Your father is gone. The Nightingale family no longer holds the influence it once did. Of course, that's not to discredit everything your family and yourself has done for the family.

"But you are young, unmarried. And occupying a position that was never meant to belong to you."

Miki's guards wanted to shout in protest but Miki shot them a glare.

For them to stand down.

"Perhaps it would be wiser to focus on securing the future of your house."

His smile was thin.

"A proper marriage alliance could stabilize your family's standing."

"Several houses would certainly be willing to assist."

Letting the silence drag on for a little while, Miki finally spoke.

"Is that all?"

The old man thought it was Miki asking whether or not that was everything they wanted to say.

"Since you have a lot to think about, I'll keep it simple for now. Emergency command will be dissolved. The noble council will assume oversight of the city and Nightmare access will be regulated through the appropriate houses."

His eyes settled on Miki. "You may step down from your current authority and think about your future. The council will send you a list of your potential marriage partners at a later date."

Miki looked at him for a long moment.

No anger showed on her face. No hurt. Nothing they could use.

"Finished?" She asked.

The old man's smile faded ever so slightly.

Miki swept her gaze across the hall. From one face to the next.

"You want authority? Sure. I can wave around a paper and give it back to you. But can you ensure that people will follow?" She asked with a mocking tone.

"You speak as though this is something that can just be picked up from the floor the moment danger passes. But the city is no longer like that. The Nightmare has shaped people in ways you can't imagine.

"Their desperation. Their resilience. If you want to carry out the orders, by all means, go for it. But if danger has truly passed... know that I don't need the safety net of your precious guards anymore.

"I don't need to think about whether or not I can manipulate the situation to force you to make a move, if the city is truly about to fall." Miki narrowed her eyes.

"Instead, all I need to do is watch as you carry out your orders. Impose your desires onto the people. Then watch as they tear down this upper layer and decorate it with your corpses. To pain the walls red and allow the city to be reborn through your sacrifice." She smiled creepily as one of the Nobles jumped up.

He was about to shout when a spear slammed into the wall behind him.

A cut appeared on his cheek.

Blood rolled down and stained the carpet.

"I've had the courtesy to listen to your garbage. As nobles, surely you have the etiquette to listen to what I have to say." Miki asked as their guards lunged towards her.

"Or need I remind you what Erwen did when he cleared out the noble houses that he could get his hands on before leaving?"

Without hesitation, Miki wove past their strikes and grabbed them by their face.

Compared to the dangers she had to face in the Nightmare, against Alice, this was nothing!

*BANG!!!

Slamming them into the ground, the floor cracked beneath them.

They weren't dead, but they couldn't fight either.

"For people who claim to have the intelligence of governance, all of you act like ignorant children. F*cking pathetic." She spat in disgust.

A part of her listened just in case. On the small chance that a miracle occurred and they spoke some sense rather than this garbage. But she was proven yet again that these people were beyond saving.

"I will do as I have done. Ensure that the city is safe. If you decide to sabotage this city on its way to recovery, by all means..." Miki narrowed her eyes, allowing her killing intent to seep out.

"Give me the justification I need to kill you where you stand."

Chapter 988: Mobilizing Grand Cathia

Having said her piece, Miki did not linger.

She turned and walked out of the council chamber.

The doors closed behind her with a heavy thud.

Shouts erupted immediately on the other side. Furious voices overlapped as the nobles vented their outrage, but Miki did not slow her steps.

The noise faded as she moved down the corridor.

"You should've done that earlier, Captain." One of the guards grinned. "I swear those people think they're invincible even though you're around."

Miki shook her head.

"I wouldn't be so certain."

Her gaze drifted briefly back toward the council chamber doors.

"There were several strong ones hidden in the shadows of that hall. The ones I knocked out were merely for show." Miki exhaled slightly. "Let us focus on what we should do instead."

She gestured to another guard.

The man immediately handed over a small device Suyin had developed.

"First, we need to calm the civilians. We cannot force surveillance over them, but that does not mean we are powerless."

Miki fitted a small earpiece into her ear.

A press of the device triggered a faint click.

A projection flickered to life above it.

"Captain. Awaiting instructions." Her assistant greeted her.

Taking a deep breath, Miki focused her gaze.

"We are pausing Nightmare research for now. The realm remains largely unknown, and chasing power blindly will only worsen the situation. Our resources will be redirected."

The assistants raised her eyebrow.

"Should I relay this to the command centre so preparations can begin immediately?"

"Please."

A brief pause passed as the connection shifted.

Moments later, the command centre appeared within the projection.

Dozens of guards, officers and researchers stood ready. All waiting for Miki's orders.

"We now have three objectives if we want to maintain order in Grand Cathia." Miki's gaze swept across the people.

"First, we reestablish contact with the Underground. That will naturally be my responsibility. However..." She paused. "We are not approaching so that they can help us quell in chaos. No, we'll commission their network to locate and track Abyss Beasts for us to eliminate."

A few of the guards looked at each other with uncertainty.

"Do not trust in the Nightmare for it is an insidious trap. One that is designed to exploit humanity's hunger for power."

When the easy path appeared, people naturally fixated on it.

Tunnel vision.

Not her.

Not while she still had a say in how this city survived.

"Nightmare abilities are easier to obtain than Abyssal ones." She continued. "However, they are far more restrictive. The builds our department have created heavily rely on the synergies between abilities and equipment."

"Unfortunately, items cannot be brought outside the Nightmare. Which means many of the builds we have developed are effectively useless."

A small smile appeared on her face.

"So what do we do?"

The room remained silent.

"We will venture deep into the Abyss as Hunters. We will hunt and claim our bounty. That is our next goal. We will take advantage of all of the resources we have at our disposal.

"Form connections with the surrounding cities. Exchange information for resources and travel. It doesn't matter if our memory are temporary erased when we leave the boundaries of Extalia.

"Miss Bai is already in the process of creating a device that'll allow us to retain our knowledge."

Clenching her fist, Miki took a deep breath.

Now that the Nightmare wasn't hanging over their heads like a guillotine, it's time for them to act.

Information, resources, power.

Obtaining these three are the keys to their success.

"We will claim power through Sigils. Power many struggled to claim in the past due to the risks involved."

Her eyes sharpened.

"But now you possess experience and knowledge granted by the Nightmare.

"So tell me... what exactly are you afraid of?" Miki chuckled.

"Safety remains our highest priority. The research department will conduct final evaluations to ensure all hunts are carried out as safely as possible."

Her gaze settled over the projection.

"Now then..."

A small pause followed.

"I don't believe there are any questions."

For a moment, there was silence before cheers erupted.

Officers began relaying orders across their stations. Messages were drafted. Routes were reviewed. Departments that had been focused almost entirely on Nightmare research began reorganizing their priorities.

Grand Cathia was moving again.

But this time, it was not reacting to a siege.

It was preparing for the future.

Miki lowered the device slightly as the projection faded.

"Mobilization will begin immediately." One officer announced from the fading projection.

Another voice followed.

"We'll notify the logistics division."

"Research will prepare Abyss encounter reports."

Finally, it dimmed completely as Miki exhaled quietly.

For the first time since the Nightmare has begun, their actions were not dictated by survival alone.

With the knowledge they have gained and the freedom they've been given, they can help the other cities stabilize their situation.

"Send word to the guards around the city walls. Full mobilization. If the Nobles want to play governor, let them. Focus on what we need to do right now."

"Yes, Captain."

Within minutes, Miki could see the guards running around the city.

Messengers hurried past them in the corridors carrying sealed letters. Clerks running between rooms carrying stacks of documents.

The Nightingale family had always been meticulous with logistics. Her father was someone who had rather high standing within the Underground after all. This much was the bare minimum.

Miki closed her eyes.

Even now, it felt like just yesterday when her father was still petting her on the head.

A small bitter smile hung on her lips.

'Don't worry dad. I won't fail you.'

Making her way down from the upper layer, Miki noticed Alice staring out at the city.

"So this is what the whole city looks like when the Nightmare isn't an immediate danger. It's quite the sight." She smiled, glancing towards Miki.

"It's only a fraction of what could've been. Should you come visit the city sooner, you would've been awestruck." Miki chuckled, standing next to Alice.

She dismissed her guards, allowing them to carry on with their orders.

"That so? Shame indeed then. I heard your orders earlier. Suyin is trying her best to shrink the device down but it'll be difficult."

Miki shrugged.

"That's fine. No need to rush a genius when she's already working hard."

"So it's time for you to link up with the Underground again right? Need a personal body guard to help you out?" Alice offered.

Thinking about it for a moment, Miki nodded her head.

With the Underground being split into two. The side that stands with the Zenia family and the side that stands against.

Standing by Alice's side was probably the safest place in the world outside of Lords who stand at the pinnacle.

"There's quite a few things we need to do. Linking up with the Underground is just one of them. The closest city when it comes to Abyssal access is Cyradil. Helping them resolve the Nightmare will be important." Tapping her finger.

"Will you be meeting up with the ones in charge there or are you going to focus on the Underground."

"Underground comes first. The sooner we do the better. While the enemy doesn't know what we're doing, I need to raise the power level of the guards in the city. That way, we can maintain order from the threats both inside and outside."

Alice nodded her head.

"Just let me know when to set off for the Underground. After that... We'll see what happens."

###

Erwen had a smile on his face. He watched the entire exchange between Miki and the nobles.

To think this was the same girl he used to know in the past...

She was truly shaping up to inherit the role of the Nightingale family head.

If he left things as they are, even if the Nobles wanted to intervene, things won't pan out the way he wanted.

Standing up, he sank into his shadow and disappeared.

At the same time... One of the nobles received a message.

###

A man could be seen lounging around in front of a garden.

He sat facing a small pond while abyssal beasts swam around.

These beasts were small yet deadly. Able to pierce through most defences in order to take over a host body.

Yet despite that, there was no safety measures in place. Just an open pond and him resting before it.

He smoked a long pipe and blew smoke into the air.

"Seems like the Nightingale kid is kicking up a storm." A grin appeared on his face.

"Hm? Hah! Yes you're not wrong. If it's just that kid alone I wouldn't move. Her father was the one I had the agreement with. She needs to prove herself. But the girl next to her is a different question." He laughed, looking like he was talking to himself.

"She's an anomaly. One with too many ties to the players of this game. A history with the Zenia family while also having a bunch of ties to powerhouses, including the sleeping gal in the Void. Then there's that woman Allura." He blew out a cloud of smoke. "I still haven't cleared my favours with her yet and you know how much I hate owing people."

Just thinking about the debt he owes to Allura caused him to grumble in annoyance before sitting up.

"She's in Exatlía and the girl she's looking after is also here. And soon, she'll be coming here with the Nightingale kid. Don't you think it's a wonderful time to clear out some debts?"

Despite no one else responding to him, the man nodded before standing up.

The leader of the Underground will personally make a move.

Chapter 989 Nightingale Estate

The Underground was a strange presence in their world.

No one could point to a single place and claim it as their headquarters. It had no capital, no banner, no territory that truly belonged to it.

Yet everyone knew it existed in one way or another.

Perhaps through word of mouth.

Perhaps through coincidence.

But once people discovered it, they quickly found themselves relying on its services.

The Underground was a neutral network that dealt in information for the right price.

Hunters relied on them to locate Abyss beasts.

Merchants purchased knowledge of rare wares and profitable trade routes.

Nobles paid for secrets that would never appear in public records.

If a piece of information existed, the Underground either already knew it or had a way to obtain it.

Their reputation had been built upon competence and an unparalleled information network.

Long before the Nightmare appeared, when hunters risked their lives exploring the unknown reaches of the Abyss, the Underground had already established itself as a guiding light.

They mapped safe paths through dangerous territories.

They tracked hidden settlements scattered throughout the frontier.

They even documented the patrol routes of Abyss beasts within their domains.

With the right information in hand, hunters could navigate the Abyss with a degree of safety that would have otherwise been impossible.

Of course, such knowledge never came cheap.

Information, after all, was the most valuable currency in a world filled with monsters and uncertainty.

But that was only on the surface. Most people only knew of the front that the Underground wanted them to know. Rarely do they know the operations that occur behind closed doors.

And next to Alice was someone who had a slight peak into that world.

"We need to reestablish ourselves as a member of the Underground rather than just a client. There are certain privileges and benefits that only come from being a member like my father rather than simply hiring them." Miki explained while Alice followed behind her.

They were now on their way to contact the Underground.

"I don't think they'll be happy to just let you back in without any conditions attached to them. It's very much a give and take relationship, no?" Alice asked curiously.

"Which begs the question of what we can even give them." She shrugged.

Miki smiled helplessly.

"All of the research we have on the Nightmare as well as potentially using Suyin's invention to retain memories from the Nightmare. Though I'm still not sure if that's enough."

As this was a transactional relationship, they needed to provide something of value.

"How did your father even become a higher up of the Underground in the first place?" Alice scratched her hair.

Depending on what her father did, they might be able to copy the same method.

Miki scratched her cheek.

"I'm not familiar but... My father apparently treated the leader to a meal."

Alice blinked her eyes.

"He what?"

"He treated the leader to a meal. After that, the leader found him enjoyable and gave him a high ranking seat in the Underground."

Alice paused, it felt as though she had just been hit with a sledge hammer.

One of the most mysterious organisations in their world, one that could gather information like no other...

And Miki's father got a seat by... treating the leader to a meal?

Alice massaged her eyes.

It was probably a hidden test of some sort and Miki's father had passed.

"Do we even have a way to contact him? Or are we stuck with those working below him?" Alice asked.

"I have a method that I can try. If it doesn't work... I'll have to contact those below him instead."

They made their way through the quieter districts of Grand Cathia.

The streets here were wider, the buildings taller, their stone walls bearing the marks of history. Before the upper layer was constructed, this was where the nobles would've lived.

Among them stood the Nightingale estate.

It had been some time since Miki last returned here.

After her father's death, she had moved most of her operations to the command center. It had been easier to stay busy there than to return to a home that suddenly felt far too quiet.

Yet despite her absence, the estate had not fallen into neglect.

The tall iron gates were polished.

The garden paths remained trimmed.

Lanterns still hung along the walkways, their warm light illuminating the front courtyard.

A handful of attendants were moving about the grounds.

Some swept fallen leaves from the stone path. Others were tending to the plants lining the entrance hall.

They paused when they noticed Miki approaching.

Surprise crossed their faces.

"My lady, you've returned." One of the older attendants bowed immediately.

Miki nodded her head.

"Sorry it's taken this long. I've been a little busy." She quickly stopped him from bowing.

Even though she was now technically the head of the Nightingale family, she didn't quite feel like a leader of a noble house yet.

"I thought I told everyone they could take time off." She asked.

Since she planned on staying in the command centre, there was no need to keep this house in good condition. Not when no one was living here.

The attendant straightened, offering an apologetic smile.

"This is still the Nightingale residence. We should be here to maintain it. And..." He sighed, looking back at the house.

"This place hold many precious memories for us as well. The Lord treated us like family, giving us work and shelter when we needed it. Even though he is no longer with us, we will continue to carry out his will." He turned to Miki.

"As long as the Nightingale name still stands, this house will not be abandoned."

For a moment Miki did not respond.

She simply looked past him at the estate.

The stone building had not changed.

The same pillars stood at the entrance.

The same lanterns illuminated the garden paths.

Memories began flooding back from her childhood. The days she spent running through the garden with her father. The attendants who watched her grow from a curious child into the person standing here now.

For a brief moment, it felt as though all the pressure weighing on her shoulders had disappeared.

She wasn't Captain Nightingale anymore.

Just Miki.

"You have some loyal people." Alice smiled.

Miki nodded.

"My father had a way with people."

The older attendant smiled faintly.

"The Lord always believed that loyalty could not be bought. It had to be earned."

He glanced toward the estate behind them.

"Now that you have returned, I imagine there is something you require from this place."

"Right..." Miki exhaled softly. "I'm looking to reestablish our connections with the Underground. My father's office should still be the same as before, correct?"

The attendant nodded without hesitation.

"Of course. Nothing in that room has been touched since the day the Lord passed."

He stepped aside and gestured toward the entrance.

"If you are looking for something he left behind, you will find it exactly where he placed it."

The attendant stepped aside as the doors to the estate opened.

The interior was quiet.

Lantern light reflected softly against polished floors as Miki and Alice stepped inside. The familiar scent of wood and old parchment lingered in the air.

Nothing had changed.

They walked deeper into the estate until they reached the study.

Miki pushed the door open.

Her father's office had been preserved exactly as it was.

Shelves filled with books and documents lined the walls. Maps of distant regions and Abyss territories hung neatly beside them.

But the most striking thing in the room was the portrait above the desk.

A painting of her father.

He looked exactly how most people remembered him.

Noble.

Serious.

His posture straight, eyes calm yet firm. The portrait captured the quiet authority he carried without needing to raise his voice.

Alice walked closer to the painting.

While Miki searched the desk and drawers.

Documents.

Sealed envelopes.

Old reports.

"So that's your father?" Alice asked as Miki nodded.

"He never liked posing for portraits. Said it felt awkward for him to keep looking at a picture of himself."
Miki chuckled. "But this one he couldn't exactly reject since it was a gift."

"Indeed. I commissioned a good friend of mine to make this portrait in honour of your father."

"!!!"

Alice widened her eyes.

Without hesitation, she spun around and swung her fist infused with Abyssal energy as a singularity was aimed at the third party.

*BANG!!!

Catching Alice's fist, the man ducked under her follow up strike before flicking his hand and their surroundings changed in an instant.

Instead of the office, they were now in the middle of a strange lake surrounded by white mountains. A single island with a tree rested in the middle and pink blossoms fell from the branches.

'Second resonance? No, this is just a standard ability!' Alice analysed. She couldn't feel the displacement caused by a resonance not to mention the fact that the deployment time was too fast!

Miki took a moment longer than Alice to react but her spear was summoned and she stabbed towards the intruder.

But in the next second, he was gone.

"What the..." Alice immediately activated Vision as her Sigils burned to life.

Snapping her finger, several singularities spawned only to be swallowed then extinguished.

Since that was the case...

Alice summoned her artifact. Switching forms, she was about to shatter the realm when a hand held her wrist.

"Now now, we wouldn't want to be breaking my dear old friend's office now do we? But then again, knowing you're the kid that Allura looks after, I wouldn't be surprised."

Upon the mention of Allura's name, Alice froze.

"Nice to meet you two. I believe you were looking for me."

Chapter 990: Leader Of The Underground

The man standing before them looked nothing like the leader of the most mysterious information network in the region.

He looked like a traveller.

A beggar even.

His dark hair fell loosely around his face, slightly messy as if he had little interest in maintaining a noble appearance. A thin scar ran across the bridge of his nose.

Stubble covered his jaw.

Clear signs of neglect.

His clothing was simple despite the wealth he should have commanded as the leader of the Underground.

A dark coat hung loosely over his shoulders. Beneath it was a plain shirt tied with rough lacing at the collar. No symbols. No family crest.

And yet the moment he appeared, Alice's instincts screamed at her.

Danger.

His posture was relaxed.

Almost lazy.

But that was merely a cover for his true strength.

A crooked smile rested on his lips as he casually held Alice's wrist, stopping her strike from shattering the realm.

And no matter how Alice tried to pull free...

Unless she went all out, she wouldn't be able to move.

Most importantly, her gaze flickered upward.

To the Sigils hovering above his head.

Nine.

This man stood at the very pinnacle of humanity.

A power that bordered on the Apostles.

"How did you get here?" Alice narrowed her eyes.

Even if he was a Nine Sigil Lord, she wasn't about to allow him to grab her so casually.

*BANG!!!

Flames erupted from Alice's wrist.

The sudden burst of heat forced the man to release his grip as the fire began burning through his skin.

He raised an eyebrow slightly, clearly surprised that the flames were eating through his passive reinforcement.

"Hou hou~ That's quite the spicy flame." He chuckled.

"Hurts a lot more than Allura's chicken sh*t fire."

He slammed both palms into the ground.

In an instant, the world shifted.

The lake surface vanished.

They were plunged into the depths of hell.

Volcanoes erupted in the distance while rivers of lava carved through the cracked landscape. Flaming serpents burst from molten lakes, lunging toward the two of them.

"Since you're stronger than you look." He grinned.

"Why don't we put some of it to the test before we talk?"

His finger snapped.

"!!!"

Alice's eyes widened.

Danger.

She twisted her body just in time as a beam of crimson energy tore through the space she had occupied a moment earlier.

Her left arm, despite not being hit, began to distort.

Muscles twisted.

Bones cracked.

With a sickening tear, the arm ripped itself free from her torso.

"Tch!" Clicking her tongue, Alice no longer held back.

Summoning her sword, she stimulated her blood to force the regeneration to activate immediately.

"How many times do you think I've faced supposedly immortal people? At this level, countering regeneration is a basic requirement or else you cannot stand at the top." He spoke calmly from behind Alice.

His hand already grabbing her face before throwing her to the other side of the realm.

A smile hung on his lips and he leaned forward.

***BANG!!!**

Alice burst from a blood mirror, unleashing a Void Flux – Cleave.

But the man tilted his head slightly.

The blade missed by a hair.

Alice's Vision activated fully as she analysed every movement.

He didn't have Zone.

He didn't have Vision.

It was something else.

Something allowing him to predict and evade her attacks.

Was it raw physical ability?

Regardless, this was no time for her to take things easily! Just that first attack alone told her everything she needed to know.

She had to prove herself before they can talk!

First Resonance!

A violent maelstrom of energy erupted from Alice's body.

The shockwave blasted outward, sending Miki flying backward.

Flipping through the air, Miki summoned her spear and stabilized herself.

Her pupils trembled as she watched the battle unfold.

She knew Alice was strong.

But she had never seen her fight seriously before.

Alice stepped out from the pillar of fire.

A white dress formed around her body.

Her hair fluttered behind her as spider lily patterns spread across her skin.

With a snap of her fingers, the restraints placed on her arm shattered apart, allowing her regeneration to complete instantly.

He folded his arms in amusement.

'What a freakish regeneration.'

As expected of someone trained by Allura. If she wasn't capable of at least this much, would be concerned about her legitimacy. Her performance here will dictate how much he is willing to share with her.

*BANG!!!

Alice disappeared.

Not through abilities.

Pure speed.

Physical Resonance!

She appeared above him, her crown burning with deep crimson light.

Cayla activated alongside it.

The man opened his palm. Above it hovered a strange black orb that expanded in an instant.

Alice recognised this sensation and immediately backed away.

A frown hung on her lips.

"How do you know that technique?" Alice questioned immediately, slashing the space around her, cutting the invisible strands that would've locked up her body.

Space Lock.

Nyer's technique.

"Same reaction as Allura. Don't worry, it's not something that I was taught. It's merely something I copied after seeing it once when I was younger."

Then, in the next moment, he grinned and summoned a sword.

Exhaling through the mouth, his eyes focused.

*KRK!!!

Alice immediately raised her guard.

After the first clash, she was pushed back as he followed up with two more.

Unable to counter in time, Alice swiped her finger, creating two void rifts to swallow the attacks.

The man let out a slight laugh before diving into his shadow.

Alice's eyes darted before detonating a singularity above her, blocking his strike.

'Is that...' Alyss frowned.

'So you also noticed.' Alice sighed inwardly.

'Cayla, do you have a guess on what his powers are?'

[A few candidates. But I'll need to see more.]

Taking a deep breath, Alice swapped out her Sigils.

***RUMBLE!!!**

The world lost its colour as she activated Tiamat's power, surprising the man.

This was no doubt the power belonging to a Lord!

But Alice wasn't done.

Jumping into the air, she activated Duality along with false Resonance!

Wings unfurled behind her. Strands of energy connecting Alice to this realm.

And above her hand, the power of Tiamat gathered into a single destructive orb.

Alice half expected the man to try and interrupt her but he was simply watching.

Confident in his defence.

Or did he had something else up his sleeve.

Amplification loops appeared in front of her as Alice took aim.

Sparks crackled along her arm as a single mote of blinding light formed at the tip of her finger.

Void Flux!

The man smiled.

A single reflective card appeared between his fingers.

It captured everything Alice was about to fire within its surface.

Then, just as Alice released the attack, he flicked his finger and turned the card around.

". . ."

Alice's eyes widened.

Why was her Void Flux aimed at her?

Why was she on the ground?

Why was the strange man the one firing it?

The questions flashed through her mind in an instant as she immediately recognized the danger.

Without hesitation she slammed her palms together.

The Void was ripped open as she then activated Tiamat's ability to supplement the energy needed to block her strike!

With a blinding light, Void Flux was fired.

There was no erupted, no sound. Just the visuals of Alice's attack firing towards the ground.

"To have this level of power despite not being a Lord, Allura did a fantastic job. But~" The man's voice echoed out as the light slowly died.

"Knowing her, I also doubt she had much hand in your growth. Maybe just some tips at the start. She's also been moving around a whole bunch so where would she find the time?

"Seems like most of this is your own talent. Good job." He praised.

The dust settled and Alice could be seen bloodied and bruised, having forced herself to block her own attack.

"Aren't you just f*cking annoying." Alice spat as her wounds slowly regenerated but the speed was slow.

Even though it was her own attack, 'ownership' was ripped away from her.

She could no longer control the energy used, even if it originated from her powers.

"I've been told that a bunch." He grinned, scratching his chin as he landed on the ground.

Alice resummoned Void Fang as she walked slowly. Her eyes capturing everything the man would throw at her.

He did the same, mirroring her movements.

How uncanny.

He was copying her every move but with better specs since he was a Lord and she wasn't.

"Seems like you figured out my title. Must be that eye of yours. How fascinating."

"Despite how you look, you know an awful lot." Alice frowned.

"I'll have you know, some women prefer this look." He smirked.

"Then are you married?"

"..."

"Che, how can you claim people like your look when you don't have a partner. Based on what you said earlier, you're an old friend of Miki's father. Single at this age? Really?" Alice spat out, provoking the man while Cayla took this time to analyse everything there is to know about him.

"Your tongue is just as sharp as Allura's. Let's see if you can handle this then." He shrugged, changing his stance.

"Since you have an idea of my power, can you guess who landed this scar on my face?" He pointed at the bridge of his nose.

Even though the mark had faded with time, a nasty sword slash was left behind.

"The only woman to land a permanent hit on this body of mine, Allura. I flirted with her and this was my reward for it. Her anger... that glare... The way she slashed without hesitation. How beautiful. I can't forget it even to this day." He closed his eyes, immersing himself in the memory.

"She stole my heart that day."

Alice's eyebrow jumped up.

If Kaden heard him say that...

"But let's set aside my preferences for now. Defend yourself well, kid." He grinned as a strange silver energy wrapped around his blade.