

Undead 411

Chapter 411: For Good Measure!

Demion's Dance whistled through the air as it descended, Skullius pushing in his focus as a steady straight slash bore down on the far from innocent space, slicing the air while releasing a dreadful amount of power at an equally dreadful speed that rocked the Discount Human's entire body!

This was it!

What he had been half-assing when he used this sword against the carp and the Devouring Lantern Alpha Wolf (Ferex) back then!

What he had thought was the limit of this sword imbued with death, yet it hadn't been!

This was freaking IT!

A clean slash that bore all the strength he could muster, his own and that afforded by [Jagged Merger]!

One that he felt suck up more than just his stamina, but also grip tightly around his <HEART> and soul!

Sila grunted at the grip!

What was this?!

Even when he had used Demion's Dance, it wasn't like this!

'What happened to this bastard?!' the aged piece of soul wondered in angst.

This suddenly awakening of resolve that was responded to in kind by Demion's Dance...!

It wasn't sponsored by anything that had happened since Skullius reached the Sacred forest or during his lengthy walk to the Ground of Communion. No, Sila was certain.

Was it something else then? Something Skullius had been doing for the past few days that prompted this?

Something he had been exposing himself to?

In Bassbion's view, a darting straight line flashed for a brief moment, carrying with it a vengeful howl of the air which she promptly prepared for with a serious visage!

However...

.....!

The ridiculously quick line carved by Demion's Dance rushing towards her with absolute greed was followed by the desecration of the Ground of Communion!

All around Skullius who was puffing his cheeks while his sockets flamed with darkness, his movement which was carried out at super speed with after images leaving a trail of magnificence, a dark red flow of darkness spewed out, tarnishing the air and tainting the ground with the sickening hue!

This sacrilege painted over a hundred meters within a breath, Bassbion who had maintained much of her calm until now gritting her teeth as her mana flared with fury!

She successfully put up her sword as the mad incoming rush of power rammed against it with mildly refined finesse that forced her back while causing the ring of colliding steel to sound when it clashed with the Spirit Blade of Cessation!

CLAAANG!

The bellowing force exploded out, the wall behind Bassbion shuddering as it was finely carved from top to bottom, the statue in the way also meeting the same fate!

The guardian stumbled when the cruel force finally died down.

She had managed to block it but not without consequence.

Drip! Drip!

From her jaw to her neck, all the way to the first half of her chest plate, a thin line could be traced, what seemed like white blood dripping from the wound on her pale skin!

Yet Bassbion didn't pay this any heed as she instead faced Skullius whose hand popped like a balloon after this attack!

"Vile filth, you dare sully this sacred place?!" she called out in fury as her mana flared, causing the Ground of Communion to tremble.

Skullius ignored her outrage.

Rather, in his mind, he kept count.

"That's two."

He then solemnly gazed upon Demion's Dance, running his hand over its green, curved blade.

Back when this fight began, when Skullius had first erected the [Perfect Night Domain], he had attempted to mimic how Sila used Demion's Dance against Bek, but had failed as all he did was slash with all his mortal might.

During the week in Inhone when he had refined most of the skills he was using now, he had learned swordsmanship from Oliviana but his skill in it wasn't enough to allow him to get the [Basic Sword Mastery] he wanted.

Now, however...

[You have acquired 'Basic Sword Mastery']

After the very short exchange with Bassbion, with [HYPED] active, Skullius had finally qualified for the most basic of mastery for the sword which was prompted by Demion's Dance giving him a taste of another level to [Epic Memory].

A different look flashed in Skullius' eyes as the red aura around the blade continued to funnel into him, bringing with it innate knowledge on how to Swindling Death's Dance worked.

Each strike was packed with an aversion of death as a requirement, or rather the embrace of the possibility of death. As only when one accepted that they could die, could they evade death.

Skullius was growing to understand this.

Sure he had dreams. Sure he was doomed to a horrific fate if he died.

But what if he fought without fear of that eventuality, letting all the power and potential he had run wild while testing out every single idea he had without a care?!

After all, just like Sila had said, he was wasting all this power!

Fuuuuuu....

Yet, this was also not all.

"I think I have more than enough for one last attack," Skullius thought as the 30% focus which he had apportioned to his core all this time since [HYPED] activated finally bore fruit.

'Tomato flinger! Your body i—'

"Be quiet, I'm on a fleshing roll right now!" Skullius cut off Sila who was giving a warning.

He already knew what the aged piece of soul wanted to say.

His body was finally reaching its limit with [Jagged Merger], the red cracks over his flesh starting to widen as they broke apart his body.

This didn't matter to Skullius though, as he knew this was going to end with the next move.

Either he would fall or he would land the last move hit on Bassbion and win!

Still, regardless of what happened, he knew... he wouldn't lose, even if death fell on him.

It was illogical to think this way, but to the skeleton donning flesh, it made all the sense in the world!

Bassbion was still in a fit of rage as she saw the mess that tainted the sanctity of the Ground of Communion. The previous battle scars were excusable but this...

She ground her teeth as she lost her cool, a set of the pristine white chains that held her armour snapping breaking apart, a ferocious wave of power like an abrupt storm igniting from her body as a result!

Skullius squinted his eyes.

In his sight, the image of the greyish, black spotted Bassbion became more contrasted, matching the prickling feeling of her growing power that he felt through his senses.

'Her strength is growing. She broke some of those chains over her armour. Heh. Isn't that cheating?' Skullius thought as he felt his last option reaching its peak, almost ready for use. 'The rules did say not to mess with this place. Assuming it is the Ground of whatever.

That's probably why she's angry.'

With Skullius taking in all that was happening at ten times the speed, the final clash was merely a breath away.

And...

FWOOOSH!

BOOM!

Bassbion's mana flared as she used [Hyperfocus Motion Counter] again, but this time, she barely took a second to charge it up and launch herself towards Skullius who didn't see her figure until the Spirit Blade of Cessation had already lopped off his right arm which held Demion's Dance!

The speed was atrocious and way grander than what Bassbion had exhibited moments ago, as in addition to striking away Skullius' powerful weapon, her [Hyperfocus Motion Counter] began mutilating his body brutally!

The Spirit guardian slapped away the hand which still held firmly to the green sword and watched the Discount Human carefully.

'This time I'll purge his soul!' Bassbion thought with a fierce expression that leaked malice, her sword which moved faster than her initial attack slicing off the rest of Skullius' limbs while her overbearing might slammed into Skullius, burying into the hard ground without mercy!

She didn't go for the kill just yet, as killing this bastard instantly would be waste giving what he had done. She wanted him to know how he died.

Absolutely dominated to death!

Skullius' felt the sensation of being pounded down thoughroughly by heavy mana at rapid speed vividly, but a grin etched itself on his face as he truly felt alive!

'I felt my soul shiver! I could have died right there!' he thought.

This expression unsettled Bassbion but after a brief pause, she held her long sword erect for a stab, a staggering murderous intent bursting over her as the sword's effect on the soul fully activated!

"You'll pay for desecrating my master's memory!" Bassbion proclaimed before thrusting down at the limbless Skullius who kept getting dug into the floor!

The sword brutally tore through the space between Bassbion and Skullius, the entire Ground of Communion quivering at the wrath propounded by the raging guardian!

SHHHH—

...

Yet..

The Spirit Sword of Cessation came to a halt.

Only for a brief moment.

...!

Bassbion donned a look of shock as even with her bearing down all of her current might, her sword simply stopped right before piercing Skullius' skull!

The Discount Human whose body was breaking down with the cracks over his body growing more severe, shedding a light on some abnormal damage, spontaneously grew his legs and arm back in the blink of an eye, using up almost all of the remnants of the mana he had left!

[Scramble Binding], at least its paralysis effect, once again wore off, this no doubt being a limitation on the technique as a result of how Bassbion was currently bound to only a small portion of her strength!

Indeed, being able to indefinitely paralyse the entrants to this place would be unfair, after all.

Skullius' legs stretched with thick veins as in an unnatural motion he lifted off the ground without the support of his arms, a strange halo of mana that constantly produced a sound akin to crumpling paper and crumbling rock flickered over his body!

His dark sockets gazed at Bassbion in this brief moment as he exclaimed.

"I'm really not going to lose, am I?!"

BOOOOOOOM!

The guardian who couldn't make sense of what was happening suddenly felt a stubborn push that could more aptly be described as 'the area around Skullius rejecting her'!

...!

Her figure sped so fast away from Skullius' body that she couldn't even process where she was for a fraction of second as her surroundings were an indecipherable mash of ooze during her souring journey up!

'Wha—'

BAAAAAAM!

Bassbion smashed into the face of the statue she had been nested in at the beginning of the fight, the visage of the rock humanoid exploding and sinking in as Bassbion herself shook when she realised it!

As if this wasn't enough of a shocker, a figure darted before her only to halt in mid-air a distance away as if floating, or slowly rising, she couldn't tell. His body was upside down as he stretched out his hands with a jovial and partially manic look on his face!

No, it wasn't a face!

It was flaming skeleton!

The Discount Human was moving at a speed his body and armour couldn't take again, his figure igniting with flame as a result!

But he didn't care!

He fully took the wondrous feeling of being suspended as crazy waves of mana that were close to dwindling, lingered in the paths from his core where... his Refinery had grown!

From a bit more than 4% to 15%!

Pure mana streamed through this small finished Refinery, the little that remained, as it coursed through the channels that were empty, gushing into where Skullius needed it to be!

His fist!

'What in the world is this, vile filth?!' Bassbion thought in fury at the rapid succession of events that continued to anger her, another set of chains breaking from her armour!

Mana had begun to blare from here body as she extricated a bellow of genuine fury, her sword ready to devour Skullius when...

BOOOOOOOM!

Skullius' figure zipped out of existence and appeared right into the thick of Bassbion's blazing mana where his body promptly started to get shredded, his burning skeletal fist that glowed with an unusual signature of mana hitting its mark without fail!

A nasty hook blasted Bassbion's face from the side, knocking her helmet off in the process as her head was forced to tilt from the force, the wall behind her cracking from the point of impact all the way to the ceiling where mana reinforced stone ruptured and started to collapse!

In the thick of this, Skullius' voice echoed as he spoke without triumphant glee...

"That's four. For good fleshing measure..."

Chapter 412: Resolution?

GRRRRRRMMM!

The Ground of Communion shook heavily as the powers that had been fighting here, despite the huge disparity between them, had tested its integrity quite a bit.

This wasn't built to be battleground per se, especially when this Temple served as a home for the Order of the Trodden Rose. After the passing of the twelve, it now served as an execution ground, as with the staggering amount of bias as well as the clearly depicted favour of a feminine host to inherit the legacy of the Order, leniency was to be expected on female entrants while for the male ones...

One could guess.

The challenge they had to face was clear.

Skullius, after making his snarky comment, let the flood of mana released from Bassbion's figure push him away, his body flying from the guardian as it crashed onto the ground!

The Discount Human quickly rose as he felt [HYPED] die down. He also cancelled [Jagged Merger], the Elimparidis Stone Staff appearing in his hands once more with a little over a 70 points of mana remaining.

Skullius didn't focus on this however, as he gazed up high at where the torrent conjured by a mad guardian kept streaming forth.

'Fuuuu... I ran out again,' Skullius thought as he felt within his core, but with a smile on his face.

If the status quo from the beginning of the battle had been maintained, he would be relaxing right now as he had actually won according to the stipulated rules.

In fact, he had gone above and beyond, as him blasting Bassbion across the Ground of Communion was the third clean hit, with his last punch on her helmet covered face counting as the fourth blow.

Unfortunately, he was sure even when he landed the third blow on Bassbion that she was really pissed off and expecting her to stay true to the earlier rules was probably a stretch.

Before considering all this though, one would probably be more inclined to wonder, how on Aigas Skullius was able to win!

The speed.

The power.

All that ridiculous power that matched this Spirit.

Where the hell did it come from?!

Well, Skullius had utilised the makeshift properties of the mana he was developing in his Refinery.

Distorted Gravity!

In all truth, he barely had knowledge about this high level concept and the way he mimicked its flow was flawed to say the least, but... his efforts had been rewarded!

The feel of Distorted Gravity was at his fingertips, at least with how best he had interpreted it.

The flow of it grew more familiar the more he had tasted its might on the stout mountain and now, upon unleashing it for the first time, he had discovered that as long as long as there was a surface that he could use, he could draw himself towards it at ridiculous velocities!

Weight constituted attraction and repulsion effects towards a selected solid surface, and that was all he had been doing all this time!

Containing the unique mana in his body caused an attraction towards a selected surface while pushing out the mana created a repulsion effect!

Seeing that he had been in pinch, the Discount Human had decided to bank all his hopes on what he could achieve with the 4% finished Refinery, funnelling pure mana into it and emptying some of his mana channels to give it room to work its magic!

The result was an uncontrollable pull that had dragged him in what he had thought was a random direction at first after he distributed the unique mana in his body, his entirety speeding so fast towards said direction that he wouldn't have been able to hit Bassbion that time if weren't for [HYPED]!

After the first hit, Skullius grew more confident, giving some of his focus towards continually building the crown-shaped Refinery around his Centre, the process of which was way faster with the blood rushing skill, as he had surmised earlier.

If he weren't fighting a dangerous guardian at the same time, he would have even advanced further!

Fortunately, Demion's Dance had acted as his supplementary means of attack while he waited for mana to pool from his Centre, allowing him to have a reserve that he then channelled into his Refinery to obtain the current result, though it quickly dried up as there was only so much he could do with a such a small Refinery.

At the current moment, Skullius had [Elevated Mana Manipulation] active as he didn't want his work to go to waste with the constant expulsion of mana from his Centre.

"YOU!" the voice of Bassbion boomed, gushing out with the support of her mana which matched her current emotion as it washed over Skullius like a hurricane!

Bassbion, who had her helmet blown off, her delicate Spirit features that were no different from a human's, asides from being eerily pale and partially see-through, dug her armoured hands into the wall as she pulled herself out!

Her eyes were revealed, having a turquoise blue hue, the almond shape of their make, as well as the pointed nose she had turning ugly from her fury!

BWAAA!

She landed on the ground with the force of a meteor, her gaze remaining on Skullius as she firmly held her long sword.

"You think you have won?! You think I'll allow your insolence to be rewarded after you release your murky filth onto this sacred ground?! You were warned of this and I will not forgive it!" Bassbion growled.

'It's just a dark stain. Though I guess the statues are a different story,' Skullius thought as he sighed inwardly, his mind churning for more ideas.

Yet, he wasn't afraid.

First, his dark sockets turned to check over Ferex but the Hound was no longer there.

Skullius narrowed his eyes as he then sent a mental message to his Apostle, only to sigh in relief a moment later.

Because of the dangerous battle ongoing, he hadn't had the luxury of checking on Ferex's state.

Now he could rest assured. For that concern at least.

With that done, Skullius slipped some mana into his ring and a scroll appeared.

He doubted he could catch Bassbion with it now that all his buffs were gone, with Demion's Dance out of reach, but he was determined to try his best anyway.

'Are you watching Sila?' Skullius thought while unfurling the scroll which was naturally the All-Eater scroll, yet to his question, he received no answer.

Bassbion hastily set to attack at the same moment and...

"Hold yourself... Sister Bassbion!" a voice called from a distance, demanding both Skullius and his opponent's attention.

The moment the fair Bassbion saw where this voice was coming from, the flaring mana around her died down instantly and she huffed her rage inward, culling it for the time being.

"Yagrina..." Bassbion murmured in a soft voice as she flashed away and appeared at the base of one of the twelve statues, her hands tenderly holding the face of a broken stone figure, much like she had been before she started this battle, but this one had a series of cracks that while not as excessive as the ones on the others, spelled that she had been greatly injured.

"Why have you awakened? I thought I told you to rest and I would take care of everything else."

The figure of Yagrina, which was also feminine (obviously) but with a slightly plump build along with thick armour over it, coloured white from this state she was in, did not move at all. Not even its lips.

"You and I are all that remains. But with you taking on a burden left for the twelve of us, I couldn't help but open my eyes to see if anything had changed. Thankfully, I did just in time," Yagrina's voice sounded with a mellow hint of sorrow. "You're losing your honour faster than this Temple is falling apart.

Even if you are angry on our master's behalf, this Ground was meant for blood to be spilled. Such damage was eventually going to deface it. But for you to break your word and even forcefully break your bindings in a fit of rage... it is not indicative of what you represent."

Bassbion had a lot to say, but she withheld her words. She didn't feel guilty one bit and a sense of agitation could be detected on her face.

"Besides, we are merely waiting for the host to return. We are guided by hope after all. We should strive to keep it, lest we end up like our masters. The host is supposed to represent the fullness of what the True Rose Mother intended. Keep that in mind before you lose yourself." Yagrina scolded.

Skullius watched at this dumbly, his figure inching towards his severed hand which held Demion's Dance and retrieving the weapon.

'Hey Sila,' Skullius called to the aged piece of soul in his mind that had grown silent since he had told him to shut the flesh up.

He got no response though and he didn't continue pursuing the matter.

"You."

Skullius turned as he heard the voice of Yagrina call to him, even if he didn't understand it.

"What are you doing?" Bassbion questioned Yagrina with a dissatisfied tone.

"Let him pass. What harm can he do? He earned that much, as vile as he may be. As... strange as he may be..."

Yagrina had witnessed much of the battle and she had to admit that seeing Bassbion being blasted into the wall so suddenly had caught her off guard, along with that last hit.

This little vile filth was either very talented or deviously conniving. She couldn't tell if he had an awakening right here or if he was hiding his powers before.

Still, it didn't matter.

No matter his motive, no filth had ever escaped without following the rightful procedure that allowed so.

If he misbehaved, he would be dealt with by the Temple itself as he could not even begin to fathom the dreadful things hidden within it just for such circumstances.

After calling for Skullius' attention, Yagrina was about to speak when...

"I don't think he can understand us. He speaks a foreign language I'm unfamiliar with," Bassbion said with a hard face, relenting to Yagrina's logic.

She was older and wiser, after all.

For this, she decided to trust her judgement.

"That's right. I did feel that you were not communicating well. How about a gesture then? Let him continue to Depth. He might just get tempted like the rest and be punished for it. Even among those favoured, some couldn't contain their greed.

You would love to see him fall, wouldn't you?" Yagrina said to Bassbion who grumbled before snapping her fingers.

Skullius grew alert at this gesture as he knew it to be for an entirely different purpose but...

GRRRK!

From behind Bassbion, a layer of the thick rock used to make the walls, chock full of intricate mana weavings, rose, creating a large arched doorway into a dimly lit corridor.

Bassbion then moved to the side and gestured for Skullius to pass with a threatening look.

This threw Skullius off for a few seconds but he then realised that if this monster wanted to kill him, she would have done it already.

His guess was that she was being reprimanded by the other weird figure that had called to him, as perhaps that was the purpose of her frown.

'Are they letting me through to wherever I can go next?' Skullius thought. Without Sila, he couldn't be sure but heck, he really wanted to get the flesh out of here.

"Let's go see what's next then," Skullius said as he walked forward, his steps ringing around the silent space until he reached the doorway, facing Bassbion who gave him a murderous glare.

The Discount Human merely smiled with his burnt and crackled body, before passing through and entering into next atrocity.

Or was it?

Chapter 413: Drawing Close To The Edge

With a loud thud noise, the opening behind Skullius closed and he was only too happy to see the face of Bassbion looking constipated as she really didn't make a move on him.

Well, she wanted to, but she could only watch this burnt up bastard walk away free.

Skullius appeared in a narrow corridor that had small lights overhead, like micro lanterns, their illumination so weak that if Skullius relied on sight alone, he might not have noticed that there was a steady downslope as the path went on.

Fuuuu...

Skullius breathed out.

And then, he slumped to the ground.

'Gaaaaaaaaaah! That was insane! And fun!' he screamed in his mind as a wave of both relief and apprehension blew from him. 'I did it! I can't believe I actually did it! Though with some minor inconveniences at the end there but I did it!'

A wide smile etched itself on Skullius as he replayed everything he had done. The battle he had fought.

This wasn't one of those times he simply needed to kill.

He couldn't even do that as the opponent had been way beyond his capability to kill, though strangely not having an Aura or Genuine Incarnation to show for their absurd strength.

If they had such, the ending might have been different, especially considering the latter.

Skullius had noticed this detail and thanked flesh for it!

This was probably something to do with how Bassbion was a Spirit, but the Discount Human didn't know much about that in general and thought he'd research more after exiting this place.

Hopefully he would.

His skeletal hand which he had yet to heal, with the deadly red glowing cracks over it as a consequence of [Jagged Merger], rose to scratch the tiny Ferex over his head who vigilantly looked ahead.

'I'm sorry I couldn't protect you that time, bro. But I'm working on fixing that,' Skullius sent a mental message to the Hound.

The little thing raised its head, its sockets producing a dull light of what Skullius mistook for innocence.

Given how short his fight with Bassbion had been, he hadn't actually noticed that Ferex had recovered after the horrendous blow to his body rather quickly.

In fact, the Hound had finished repairing himself with [Lanterns of the Pure] right before Skullius used his Distorted Gravity for the first time, as the damage he had received merely took longer than normal to heal given how the remnants of the mana he had been blasted with kept eating away at his Unliving Thread.

From that point though, he had been free to intervene and help his master but... he didn't.

Through their link, Ferex had felt it.

His master's switch and shift in drive.

The Discount Human had been having a breakthrough, which to Ferex wasn't a surprise as he knew why, for only he had been with Skullius for the past few days and thus knew why this man was suddenly starting to breaking free from his constant fears and limitations.

From the moment Skullius decided to take more risks, it had been a limited habit that he practised only when it was safe to do so.

Like in Harifrast when he opened up a shed for healing people under the pretence of genuine kindness.

That had been his whole theme.

But, Skullius had taken it up a notch since... the stout mountain.

He took the risk and gambling a step further and walked into a field of dangerous elements he couldn't fully understand, at first taking it safe when he discovered the existence of how powerful these concepts were.

After losing his core though, Skullius had turned even bolder and determined, taking Tulnas' idea of gambling for the better result even further, as after discovering that his mana core as a Discount Human had been garbage, he had the conviction to make a better one...

By walking further into the nest of powerful and deadly concepts, all of which punished him from time to time yet through hacks from his Fulgorant Bone Penetrator form, he found himself surviving, Skullius had started to get used to living on the edge even if it was for a limited amount of time.

Now that the Discount Human had been thrust into another life or death scenario, something in his mind had just clicked, switching him to his attitude on the stout mountain where he'd either go bigger or go home... to Somanda's prison.

This was why the Limitless Null Demon Hound didn't interfere.

To not distract his master.

Now that he had been discovered twice while covering himself with the Pseudo-Spirit Walker's Hide, Ferex had lost a bit of confidence.

His master had experienced a mental awakening while Red Rage was busy powering himself up.

Yet he, was yet to prove how unique he was.

Fortunately, he wasn't sulking as he knew his weaknesses.

His body had limited functions even if he could go full blown werewolf. There was only so much he could do, especially when he was discovered by a powerful opponent. His defence was weak and his current use of Unliving Thread left much to be desired.

But he was working on it.

He wouldn't be a generic wolf Summon that was only good for rides for long. He was going to mix it up soon and given the fact that this and the previous battles could barely count as 'hard battles' for him, he didn't need to RESET, losing all this insight and his skills.

Growth was to be expected.

At this point, Skullius himself was starting to understand his shift in mind-set and he greatly appreciated it. This experience was going to stick to him. In fact, he was already prancing with a skip in his step. He finished his apologies to Ferex who obviously didn't feel that he needed them and sighed.

He held Demion's Dance and found the sword to emit a light, thick aura around it as soon as he paid his attention to it with his blind white eyes that swiftly returned once he shut off [Crude World Projection].

As the coil of energy wrapped around the weapon, Skullius felt a tight ribbon of energy grasp around his <HEART> and his soul. It seemed with his usage of the real [Swindling Death Dance], even though it still said incomplete, something akin to a bond was established between him and the sword.

'Hmm. I didn't think you had as much value as you do now. But then I guess it's fitting,' Skullius said before swishing the sword around. It felt a bit more natural to wield now that he had learned [Basic Sword Mastery].

The charred Discount Human faced ahead as he took a step, ever vigilant towards what he could find.

His armoured body strutted through the darkness with his senses stretching up and about to take in the surroundings.

As for this armour he wore...

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[Stacked Series of the VergeRider]

<Unique>

An armour made by a famous traverser of the Null Verse who crafted this piece in order to cater for the varying degrees of battle and diverse levels of power needed for said battles. A fitting armour for those that wish to stay at the boundary of life and death.

-Defense-

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-Durability-

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-Special Effects-

- Can repair itself from damage through the use of Null Life.

- Adjusts to the body of the user.

- Can change the signature of its presence.

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[First Set: Casual VergeRider]

A more casual set within the series that morphs into the likeness of whatever clothing that the user has seen or wishes to wear, as long as it is only casual. Not much is offered in the way of defence, as this set mainly supports disguises.

Defense: 1000; Durability; 3000

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[Second Set: Diehard VergeRider]

A sleek combat armour that allows for better mobility with improved defence granted to the user through the compressed plating while also being stylish at the same. It is more suited for assassination, as it is equipped with traits that assist with the appropriate line of murder.

Defense: 23,000; Durability; 30,000

[Skill: Zero Face]

A mask is afforded to the Diehard VergeRider which blocks magical probing and makes being perceived without the aid of powerful appraisal nigh impossible for enemies up to a certain level. Can be equipped twice a day, with each use lasting two hours.

[Skill: Instant Clipper]

A hidden blade can be called upon from anywhere on the armour. It has a 30% chance of inflicting the <Heemos Poisoning> effect on the target.

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-Caution-

The last two sets require Null Life Essence to call upon.

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[Third Set: Demented VergeRider]

Requires 10,000 Null Life Essence

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[Fourth Set: Boundless VergeRider]

Requires 20,000 Null Life Essence

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This armour was something else.

Skullius currently was using the Diehard VergeRider as he didn't have enough Null Life Essence to call for the last two sets.

Unfortunately, this armour wasn't exactly suitable for confrontations with powerhouses but it had been all that he had at the moment.

Skullius forged ahead down the lengthy corridor that didn't have anything in particular other than the arrays on the walls that seemed designed to respond to anything at all that could occur within the Temple.

Luckily this duty seemed to be left for the guardians in the Ground of Communion, otherwise the nasty patch of dark red he had left in the place would have gotten him screwed.

'I really wonder how this is a Temple. It's way too creepy. Or is it different for females who enter this place,' Skullius said, clearly not appreciative of the silence or the sombre atmosphere.

As he trudged on, his Refinery once again growing at a slower rate, he came across a circular opening where the corridor passed through, continuing on the other end.

'Hmmm?' Skullius voiced in his mind.

This circular space while not very big, was not empty.

Chapter 414: Loot! Bountiful Loot!

A light that seemed to have been paid to do its job well, unlike the previous ones lining the corridor that Skullius had been walking through before reaching this ring-like section on the Temple, swooped down from above, giving sufficient visibility.

Not that Skullius needed it, but Ferex surely did.

It came from a window high up, designed to match the exact shape of this space.

"Oh..." Skullius murmured in surprise, his senses picking up a variety of shapes within this spot that housed beautiful patterns of mana!

Numerous full sets of armour and robes were neatly arranged in a circle, some having toppled over but in great condition nonetheless, before them a plethora of weapons and tools that brimmed with power and various effects on display to show that they were not some hunks of junk!

One particular robe drew in Skullius' attention immediately, dragging his focus from everything else around. It was made from a thick, rich fabric that vibrantly exhumed a charming yet powerful authority, the mana in the walls and air seeming to constantly be drawn to it.

In front of this set of robes, a lengthy staff which had double the charm and authoritative presence bellowed with power while floating in mid-air, with a faint halo over it that traced its build all the way to the orb dug into its end, as if to show both dominance and holiness!

"Woow. This is... beautiful..." Skullius said as his blind eyes sparkled. He couldn't appreciate this with sight but [Elevated Mana Manipulation] did an equally impressive job in making sure he did.

In front of the other sets of protective regalia were powerful weapons as well, some dug into the clean floor while others floated like this staff, the rest being wielded in the hands of the armour sets.

There was so much here!

Skullius could even sense a magnificent crown that didn't release bursts of mana but pure Aura!

Thickets of golden, suffocating Aura that created multiple layers around it in a gorgeous, rainbow fashion.

Ferex's lit sockets flickered.

Even he was TEMPTED.

Skullius couldn't help it as well.

After the hard fought battle, to see this glorious set of loot presented readily before him surely made him smile.

This was a grand reward.

One could even say TOO grand.

"Let's see this staff first!" Skullius said with his usual enthusiasm. "I can't appraise it without using [Crude World Projection], but... screw it, I want feel how the mana is woven inside it!"

Skullius reached for the staff, his grubby hands tou-

"STOP YOU FOOL!"

The Discount Human shook as he hadn't expected to be interrupted by the aged piece of soul who had been ignoring his calls since he exited the Ground of Communion!

Skullius almost stumbled to fall on the staff and robes before his attuned body caught itself.

"What the flesh is wrong with you, Sila?!" he barked.

"You're the one with the problem, tomato flinger! You were just about to doom our fate! You trust that bloody mana manipulation skill of yours too much! It's not so powerful that it can't be fooled!"

"What are you talking about?! I just saved us back there, didn't I?! And also, where on earth were you all this time?!"

"...."

Sila grumbled silently, rage puking out of his soul.

"Saved us your tomato flinging ass! You were reckless! We could have died because you suddenly threw away all reason!"

"Well yeah! Of course I did, bro! If whatever I do, whether hidden or not gets me in trouble, wherever I go something just has to follow up because of this damned atrocious luck, then what's the point of acting safe?! Unlike you, I've had to walk around fearing death since I got here, and guess what? It works best when I just dive in without fear! So bite me, you sockethole!"

"Wh... bite you?! Forget it, tomato flinger. You're as stubborn as ever. However, you should know we could have died countless times over in that fight. Maybe you couldn't see it because it is so much easier to regenerate your flesh but our souls could have been destroyed by that damn Spirit's blade from the very first moment it touched us."

This revelation caused Skullius to pause.

In truth, it wasn't outlandish and Skullius had thought that he wouldn't get off without a few more percentages in Doom Factor 2 but now...

"Really? How are we alive then?" he asked Sila seriously.

"Hmph! For that, you have the Reflection of your soul to thank," the Tower General said with a scoff.

"My what?"

"Right. You don't know this. Of course! And I have to be the damn teacher," Sila shook with annoyance. "The Reflection of the soul is an entity in your soul that resembles you and grows along with you. It protects the soul against external influence, or at least it should.

Everyone with a soul has one, but it's not something you can consciously groom."

Oh.

To Skullius this was news.

And indeed, one would recall that this was what Ferex came across when he was charged with founding out details about Skullius in his soul. Ferex couldn't quite articulate his experience with the thing, as mental communication wasn't image sharing or inherently more apt when compared to speech, especially when considering that Skullius' Apostles were a boar and a wolf.

Mental communication dealt with intent, at least as far as the specific Apostle to Skullius channel was concerned.

Yet, indeed.

The burly skeleton with both the powers of Null Life and Insurgency...!

That was Skullius' Reflection!

Of course, its state back then was insufficient when it came to even dealing with the invading will of Damilla for instance, allowing her to extract much information.

As such, it seemed inconsistent to assume that this same Reflection had negated soul damage from a beyond Legendary weapon, but then, hadn't Skullius changed?

Hadn't his soul been quivering, copying the progress that he had been making all this time and imprinting it on itself as seeds of information that could later be replicated?

Would his Reflection remain weak when it was the first to devour this progress?

Obviously not.

But how strong had it gotten?

Well...hehe.

Furthermore, the Spirit Blade of Cessation dealt with souls to a lesser extent than it did with life energy, cutting off an individual's life. Thus this effect wasn't as exaggerated.

Sila explained much of this to Skullius who mulled it over, finding the concept interesting.

"I had thought that hiding with your Reflection would be safer than to indulge your reckless charge but... that bastard... Anyway, don't touch anything you see here, tomato flinger!" Sila warned.

"You still haven't mentioned why," Skullius said.

"It's obviously not real! It's a cheap trap to take advantage of your recklessness after the victory from the Ground of Communion! It's another cruel test to see if the successful entrant is not obsessed by outward beauty or material treasures! You're still underestimating this order of psychopaths, aren't you?"

"It's not real?" Skullius focused his senses on every single detail.

On the treasures that were lined up and those that had fallen.

It all felt real to him. Even his [Elevated Mana Manipulation] told him so.

Was Sila fleshing with him?

Skullius couldn't tell, but the cons of it turning to be true after he stubbornly resisted the warning were too great.

Thus he let it be.

"<Sigh>. You have much to learn, tomato flinger," Sila said with a pitying sigh.

"I don't want to hear that from the sockethole who tried to backstab once again! You really thought I'd give you my body if you pushed me far enough, didn't you?!"

"I could have! Besides, you are very well aware that we're enemies! Expect a knife in the back of your soul from an old relic like me every time!" Sila hissed. "Now get moving, we're almost there."

Shameless!

Skullius slapped his forehead before he and his roasted self trudged on, continuing with the narrow corridor after giving one last glance at the many treasures he could have salvaged.

Unfortunately, Sila was right.

It was all a lie.

The arrays on the walls made sure to hide traces of the blood and bodies of those that fell for this trick to remove a certain degree of suspicion from new entrants.

Most fell for it.

For those that managed to see beyond this, a greater reward awaited ahead and Skullius had finally reached it after a short, nearly pointless interlude.

Chapter 415: Hope and Shock

A clearing of the throat.

A hoarse voice cracked.

And then the tune.

...

"Food itself, is life itself,

Feed yourself, don't eat yourself,

Guts may pull, but I'm no fool,

Yet here I drool, I drip a pool,

<sniff, sniff>..."

A brief sob.

Then the tune continued.

"Drink itself, is life itself,

Drink yourself, don't... No that's not right...<sniff> I'm so hungry."

The song that had been echoing from beyond where Skullius was currently, suddenly stopped as a voice with a sad tone rang.

Skullius stopped his advance through the narrow, dark corridor temporarily.

"What is that?" he asked the aged soul within, his question being about what he was hearing and where it was coming from.

'I don't know. It's obviously a song. A terrible one at that, but... Hmm. Just keep moving,' Sila responded.

The Discount Human wore a look of suspicion before treading tightly through the darkness lit up by a lazy circular luminescence.

Forty minutes of travelling without a sound or a change in what appeared in his senses had stripped him of the edge he had before, but now, the tension had been restored.

With a bit more of the mana in the Elimparidis staff being restored, barely 40 points, Skullius had healed some of the damage he had sustained before but the red cracks from overusing [Jagged Merger] persisted.

It really seemed like a hefty price had to be paid for such power that had not helped him much but Sila assured Skullius that it would probably fade with time.

A normal human would have been damaged for life though, especially if their body didn't have any special properties.

Skullius tread further ahead into the darkness when finally, he felt the corridor that had temporarily receded its slope when he had reached that spot with the fake treasures, as Sila had said, become flat as it led to what was definitely the destination that he was striving for.

The experience of entering into a larger space from a narrow one reminded him of the journey to face the Evenfall cultists, at least where the layout of the venue was concerned.

Skullius' senses spread as soon as he was free from the cramped space.

"Another large place..." Skullius said without much excitement or surprise. Open spaces were becoming quite annoying for him for some reason.

This time however, he couldn't say he was annoyed per se, but acutely intrigued.

The hard floor made of hard tiling that was rapidly degraded over the years, the colour taking a dive into brownish grey from a healthy granite's hue and with deep, lengthy cracks over its mass displayed its sturdiness.

Faint grooves in a complicated shape could be seen on the floor starting from at least fifty meters away from Skullius, a detail that the Discount Human missed while focusing on everything else in this place as no mana could be sensed from it.

To the side was what Skullius thought was previously a large lake as an extensive hole that stretched quite the distance from the centre of this place and beyond could be seen.

The only indication that this was once a water body was a pitifully small puddle of sparkling water that remained in the shallow depth, its visage as it was struck by the lazy light that stemmed from the window strategically placed far above to barely show anything around here, mystical to say the least.

'Well this is problematic,' Sila remarked at this specific detail. A puddle remained? How... inconvenient.

"What?" Skullius asked.

Sila's response was sadly, a simple sigh.

All this was pretty interesting, but what laid directly in front of Skullius however, jolted the Discount Human's senses into realising that this was quite an important space.

A set of steps rose at the very edge of this enclosed space, leading up to what seemed like an altar, a stage surrounding it in a semi-circular shape, atop it a stone pedestal that attempted to stand out with jewel-like stone accounting for its build.

On the wall, acting as a background to the human sized pedestal was an immaculately design of twelve eyes – one large one surrounded by eleven others with their respective colours glowing to give a sense of distinction.

Yet, this wasn't the thickest of it all.

Once again, a voice was heard.

"Food itself, is life itself,

Feed yourself, don't eat yourself,

Here my gut, is now my heart,

Fill it up, I want to far-... No that's not right either..."

Skullius' senses picked up on more than just the voice now.

A figure lay face down on the stage, on the altar, beside the stone pedestal.

A live figure.

However, there were multiple others around this individual.

Thousands of them.

Most of them were dry skeletons that looked aged beyond belief, the rest looking like mummies with greyish hairs over their heads, their expressions showing a sad glimpse of their demise.

These were sprawled over the altar and all over the floor up to a hundred meters away from the altar, covering up the likeness of the floor from this point in their piles.

These were all corpses, one way or another, but their presence didn't hinder Skullius from detecting the vibrant air and mana produced by the living being among this unmoving entourage of the dead.

When looking at this being among the corpses, one would see very long, dirty lime coloured hair that covered its extremely thin naked figure.

As the individual lay face down, it was hard to see their face but the misery they had was all but hidden, as this was obviously the source of the atrocious song.

"What the heck is that?" Skullius said with a brow raised.

'Hmm... if I am correct, tomato flinger, then this is the host. The one who received the legacy of the Trodden Rose,' Sila explained.

"Huh?" Skullius voiced with confusion and doubt .

At his reaction, which brought a much needed change in acoustics to this place which had been silent for quite a while, the naked figure laying flat on the floor with the only covering to them being the long hair, shook.

The head of this individual rose as it followed the sound of the voice, its face revealed to be a dehydrated mess that barely showed much flesh but advertised the bone underneath it instead.

Dry lips that looked like they could fall off at any moment, a nose deprived of moisture so much that it looked like it would turn into a raisin sooner rather than later and cracked facial skin used to draw shock, was evident.

Tufts of hair covered much of the face but this much could be appraised and grimaced upon.

This was a feminine face.

Obviously it was, if one took Sila's conjecture as true.

If this was the host, then it was naturally so.

"Thank the Deities!" the female figure said, the effort she put to yell these words being vivid, but the result dismal. "I... I can't believe it! Someone finally reached this place!"

Skullius waited for the old piece of soul to translate, to which he did but also showing his confusion towards this.

'It seems she's been here for a long time. From the way she speaks, it seems that she hasn't met another person in a while but then... What are all those corpses?' Sila said. 'Some of them are fresh.'

"Hmmm... that is strange..." Skullius said.

The female figure crawled from the top, her thin body which barely showed any femininity instead embracing the universality of the insides of humanity through bone, scraping against the steps as she pulled her way towards Skullius through the mess around her.

"Is this really the one with the legacy?" Skullius asked, unsure of this.

Sila shared the same sentiment.

"Mister Sir, Can you please help me get out of here?!" the woman pleaded.

'Mister sir?'

"I know you have your own mission here but please... spare me some of your strength. I... I will compensate you in the future."

The woman shook quite a bit as a firm determination was brimming within her

Determination and desperation.

Determination!

After Sila translated, Skullius wasn't all that interested in this.

There were too many unknowns and even Sila was still evaluating the whole thing from his experience.

'Hmmm. Let's see. Go to that altar there and see if there's something you can find,' Sila said to Skullius.

The Discount Human wasn't in favour of this, but he was at the mercy of Sila in terms of information.

The Discount Human took steps forward with caution.

The being before him grovelling for mercy had a vibrant blue core that seemed like it was condensed to its limit so he wouldn't get careless but his instinct whispered that she wasn't a danger to him at all.

Was she really the host if she was in such a pathetic state?

Didn't becoming a legacy holder guarantee that you'd have a Hidden Class?

Oh well.

Skullius continued on when...

"Mister sir! Don't come any closer, I beg of you! You'll be killed!" the woman screamed with all she had as a look of dread appeared in her visible eye.

She wasn't oblivious to the state of Skullius; his burnt skin, the cracks over his body and all else she could see which he had suffered.

She desperately wanted this man to help her, but these wounds, in her mind were from his struggling to reach this place.

Beside the self benefit she sought from Skullius, her innate personality drew hints of compassion.

For this man to die just like that after facing such impossible odds to reach here for whatever reason...

It would be too cruel.

Skullius immediately stopped, but his foot was already hovering over the dry groves woven into an expansive array that partially ate into the extensive crater that he presumed was a lake!

With merely his foot over it, a change was prompted, a bright light igniting in each of the curves of the groves that made a four-pronged array around the altar, almost covering half of this space!

Skullius was quick to react, his attuned body reacting immediately after he noticed this!

The terrified tone of the woman as she warned had alerted him quick enough.

A terrifying amount of power had been gathering in this brilliant array that had gone past his notice with its previous mana dry state!

Fortunately, it died down again as it seemed Skullius had avoided certain death!

"Keep going forward, huh?! Are you insane Sila?!" Skullius bellowed with irritation, having almost been led to death by Sila's instruction.

'How was I supposed to know that would happen?!' Sila barked back.

The woman who remained unharmed, her body lying on the ground, sighed in relief.

She had managed to save this man in the nick of time and-

"ARRRRRRRRRRGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!" a gruelling scream shot out of her mouth, startling Skullius who had begun bickering with Sila!

The woman wriggled as she emitted an inhuman scream, her body beginning to sizzle.

"Oh this is just perfect," Skullius said, evidently realising that this woman was biting the big one from UNCoddled.

'...'

The Discount Human watched the woman melt, only her bones remaining along with a faint echo of her horrible scream afterwards, a pool of human soup oozing to complete the disgusting scene.

"Now I just lost a more believable source of information than you," Skullius grunted.

'Like I said before, it's not my fault!' Sila hissed.

Skullius grumbled while slapping his face.

"Fine! Where's the place I'm looking for then? Let's get this over with. This is obviously the last place I can reach right?"

'Ummm... about that...' Sila began, nervously dragging his words while the hot headedness he had displayed a few moments ago ran out a metaphorical window.

This was awkward because it wasn't exactly a hopeless situation, but an uncertainty ridden circumstance.

"What?" Skullius asked, fuming.

"Aaaaah! I've never died like that before! Mistsr sir, what did you do?!"

A familiar voice suddenly burst the conversation between Sila and Skullius, the two turning shocked at the figure among the thousands of corpses, lime coloured hair draped over her body....!

Chapter 416: The Puddle

...!

Skullius couldn't believe it!

Sila couldn't believe it!

How?!

The Discount Human shifted his focus only to find a sizzling puddle of human flesh right beside the lime haired woman who seemed relatively shocked but not alarmed.

Her demeanour hadn't changed, and even the feeling she gave off told Skullius this was definitely the same person!

But... that didn't make any sense!

No human he knew, especially those whose presence didn't tell anything of grand strength and power, had ever survived UNCoddled!

Helping him with the intent to benefit him had culled quite a lot of good people on his journey!

Hundreds!

Hmmm. Hundreds?

Skullius looked around the woman, his mind churning to think...

'Are all these... her corpses, then?!'

This was a dreadful thought, especially when he saw that her previous body, with molten flesh and bone was still there!

"Mister Sir! I'm not that gifted in sensing energies but... I felt it. Why did you kill me, just now?" the woman asked innocently, her head rising to look straight into Skullius' with anxiety and trepidation while at the same time, her other eye which had been hidden behind her tufts of hair showed.

A blue eye with a golden slit as the pupil!

"What is she saying?" Skullius quickly asked Sila.

'What do you think?! Obviously she is wondering why you just killed her!'

"I didn't! She played herself!"

'Tell that to her not me! The words are-'

"Shut up!"

Amidst the bickering between Sila and Skullius that definitely looked weird to any third party, as it was just Skullius arguing with himself in a foreign language, the woman struggled with her thoughts.

'He can't understand me, perhaps? I better not ask more meaningless questions. I just need to get out of here and figure out the rest later!'

Skullius frustratedly looked at the woman after having an ugly exchange with Sila.

"So... she's definitely the host right?" he asked.

'Undoubtedly. If that weren't true, she wouldn't have survived the Arch-Lich's curse,' Sila responded. 'She's valuable.'

Skullius thought the same.

His attitude towards this woman had just now shifted because of this odd scenario. He was starting to take her more seriously. It turned out she wasn't just some collateral damage from an epic battle as he had thought.

"Please Mister sir! Forgive me for questioning you! Please get me out of here! I'll do anything! I don't want to die from hunger and thirst again!" the woman begged, her figure crawling closer but remaining within the bounds of the now dimmed array.

Skullius noted that this woman was probably restricted from leaving by the array given that she couldn't just crawl out. At the same time, he was restricted from entering its bounds.

So essentially, the array prohibited entry and exit.

That sucked.

On the other hand, Sila grunted as he had a wild thought from what the woman had just said.

'Did she drink the entire lake, then?'

"What?" Skullius questioned the rambling piece of soul.

'Argh! Tomato flinger, let's not focus on this woman for now. What we're here for, is thankfully still here but in very limited supply,' Sila said, directing Skullius' attention towards the puddle.

The Discount Human shifted his focus over to the small water body, giving a blind glance towards the woman whose heart was beating so fast as the suspense in relation to the result was killing her.

What would be her fate in the end?

Skullius walked over to his right, dropping into the large, wide hole as he soon reached the puddle.

Because part of the former lake penetrated into what was the bounds of the array, Sila hypothesised that she had been able to drink half a city's worth of water!

This was insane to think about at face value!

"Uhm... Mister sir, you can take your time... I will be right here... whenever you're done..." the woman said with a feeble voice.

Skullius on the other hand crouched besides the puddle.

The water twinkled, having this distinct attention pulling charm in his senses that also carried with it a heavy and firm feel.

He couldn't sense mana from it but something that gave the impression that it was greater than mana. Yet he couldn't tell what it was.

The only problem was, there was so little of this easy-on-the-senses water.

'During the one time I was able to reach this place with...' Sila paused. '... this used to be a vibrant lake that almost seemed to want to overflow and cover this entire space. Bathing within it, drinking from it, whichever you chose, would swiftly condense the mana you produced to the bare minimum of the next progression. I was weaker when I came, but this one boon groomed my power many times over.'

Sila reminisced of old times. He indeed did not come here alone which is why, different from how Skullius was pardoned by Bassbion because the legacy was already claimed, he had been allowed to reach this place.

He had been a mere escort for a special someone.

The lake back then had spotted a large tree that grew from it. An Eximo tree. Its branches had partitioned the light from above over the waters, giving the illusion that there were crystals over the water.

Now, the tree couldn't be found and he was tempted to think that the woman behind the array had eaten it too.

If only he knew...

Skullius listened without a word.

'Now, I am not sure if the same effect can be achieved with a puddle.'

The Discount Human took a deep conscious breath.

This was quite the predicament but...

He swiftly reached down and scooped up some of the water, watching it twinkle in his hands from the dull light above.

"Will this affect my unfinished core in a bad way?" he asked.

'Probably not. The source of your mana in the core is what is getting the fundamental change after all. The... Centre, as you call it,' Sila explained.

This made sense to Skullius even though he dissected it critically given the source.

The Centre, as soon as it was anchored to his body and soul had started funnelling out pure mana on its own nonstop, so it was obviously the most important piece for this.

"Let's hope that all of this wasn't for nothing then," Skullius said as he brought the water to his lips.

Over behind the array, the woman with lime-coloured hair looked at what Skullius was doing with immense focus.

'Oh, this is what he was here for. Now that I think about, my core did change after I started drinking the water... I hope he doesn't leave immediately afterwards... Please...' the woman pleaded in her mind as the tension in her thin body grew.

Skullius gulped down the water and drew in his focus to the potential changes in his body.

Unfortunately, nothing seemed to change.

He scooped up more water and swiftly drank it, the feel of the liquid down his throat being indistinguishable from drinking regular water, which was a complete turn off, as there were no special effects.

What was the problem?

Was it just not enough?

Skullius swooped down for another scoop.

'Hey! Take it easy, will you, tomato flinger?! While I did say I didn't know if this amount is enough or not, the water is still potent! Bathing and drinking are two different experiences. I did both for the fun of it. You should be careful,' Sila warned.

Skullius paused for a moment but drank anyway.

Still, no change.

"Don't tell me it's really not enough!" Skullius grumbled as he scooped up more water and splashed it on his face.

Nothing.

Seriously?

"Flesh this! Ferex!"

The Apostle who had been strangely quiet and inactive all this time leapt off of Skullius head and manifested as a large wolf, beside him!

The woman beyond the unseen array was shocked by the Hound's appearance as she feebly yelped, yet no one paid her any mind.

"Can you store some of this water? I won't give up on this after coming so far," Skullius said with a deep frown.

Ferex nodded as the Unliving Thread over his body formed a container that he used to scoop in all the remaining water in the puddle.

Skullius patted the Hound while wondering if the water would be shrunken down when he miniaturised too.

"I guess I'll have to deal with this when I reach Genhuis. Maybe someone can help me use i—"

Skullius, while in the middle of speaking about future prospects, suddenly plopped to the ground!

VWOOOOSH!

Within him, a deep torrent of highly condensed mana dragged his body down!

His Centre!

It grew bright and shook vehemently!

[Elevated Mana Manipulation] that had been constantly holding back the pool of mana produced was driven away by the force of powerful energy that raged from this tiny blot at the centre of his unfinished core, Skullius losing focus for a bit!

"This....!"

A change was happening rapidly as if rushing to reward him!

His mana was... condensing!

Chapter 418: Unlimited POWEEEEEEEEER! (1)

"..."

Wow.

Skullius and Sila were both rendered speechless.

For real?

Yuyui gazed intensely at Skullius, her eagerness pinching at Skullius' skin which was relatively sensitive to this kind of thing.

There was no hesitation in her eyes. Truthfully, it seemed that the only reason she paused before answering was because she really did expect worse than this, whatever that was!

There was only a solid devotion to a cause that could be detected within her right now and she cared for little else.

A delicious cause, with freedom as the side dish.

'She's crazy,' Skullius thought aloud for Sila to hear.

'Is she now? While leaping at the opportunity like that isn't... dignified, I can understand it, tomato flinger. Though you should also consider that she may have hidden motives. She still has the legacy after all. Don't let your guard down,' Sila responded.

Skullius' opinion on Yuyui kept slurring down the disappointment hole as he once again wondered if this was worth it.

From his point of view, the instinct in him that made him guess that Yuyui was probably as simple as she looked seemed to be selling more truth than Sila's.

But hey, at least this woman wasn't useless.

She was pretty much immortal from the looks of it.

That said though, even as Yuyui had agreed to his terms very quickly, Skullius had yet to see his guidance field show that the First Task had been completed.

'Why isn't the Task done? Is she not fully committed after all?' Skullius asked Sila.

'I'm assuming there needs to be evidence that she is willing to be enslaved by you, tomato flinger.'

Skullius grimaced.

No, he cringed.

'Please don't use such a word.'

'That is essentially what's going on here, tomato flinger,' Sila said with scoff. 'I propose using a Tie of Exchange.'

'Oh,' Skullius mentally voiced with intrigue.

Once again, a Tie of Exchange was brought up as the solution to this problem, but another problem rose from this solution.

'I don't know how to use that. And I'm certainly not handing my body to you if that's what you're thinking!'

'I'm not that shallow with my scheming, tomato flinger. I can would teach you how it's done, but it would likely not work because of certain elements about you.'

'What elements? What do you mean?' Skullius asked.

'The Binds of Fukal for instance. They essentially eradicate the root of what a Tie of Exchange stands for. Also, you're not even born of the Deities. You're a foreigner, so this poses a challenge.'

Indeed.

The Tie of Exchange was said to originate from the crust of Aigas, the Giants having claimed to have learnt it from the Deity Quintess. As such, it was inherited from Divinity, with humans and Giants whom Quintess had a hand in creating being the prime users.

But Skullius....

'I see,' Skullius said.

He felt Yuyui grew more nervous as from her viewpoint, Skullius was just silently standing there with his large wolf keeping its eye on her.

But she remained patient, though wondering if she had showed too much desperation.

Perhaps she should have been subtle.

Too late though.

'What do we do then?' Skullius asked.

'Humans and Giants possess the innate capacity to use the Tie of Exchange rather easily. At least that was the case back in my day but from the looks of it, people of this age doubt so much that their belief wanes even towards the Deities,' Sila complained.

'So, I will do it. You just have to follow what I tell you,' Sila said.

'What exactly will you do?' Skullius asked sceptically.

'Relax. Just cut off a few locks of your hair and hold them out.'

Skullius pondered for a second before doing as he was told.

He held out the locks of auburn hair, much to Yuyui's confusion and waited for the next step.

A strange feeling suddenly rippled in his soul, evidently being from something Sila was doing. It was faint and weird, going to somehow link to the ground under his feet too as with this confusing phenomenon, a part of him became rock solid temporarily.

Firm and immovable.

'What are you doing?'

'Quick! Inject your mana into the hair!' Sila directed, ignoring Skullius' anxiety.

Skullius funnelled bit of the mana from the staff, coiling it around the lock of hair and...

[You are initiating a 'Tie of Exchange'. Please select the target]

"Oh," Skullius voiced in surprise as he saw the notification.

'Don't waste time, tomato flinger. Give her the hair.'

Skullius gazed at Yuyui who also gazed at him.

He didn't know if this would work because of the array but he tried it anyway.

He threw the bundled stands of hair towards Yuyui and thankfully, the array didn't activate, allowing the hair to land before the woman.

"If you agree to my terms, take that and inject some of your mana into it," Skullius instructed accordingly.

'Hmm?'

Yuyui held the bundle of hair and looked at Skullius again, not sure what this was exactly.

'Is this some kind of contract?' she asked herself while puckering her dry lips.

Still, she followed the instructions and inserted her mana into the hair.

She had accepted her fate already. Anything was better than this cruel, seemingly meaningless bandage.

..!

Almost immediately, a powerful, unseen grip made her shudder and grunt in pain!

Deep within her, in her soul, she felt something akin to a searing imprint get planted, the sensation being something she couldn't shake off even after a few moments!

It was a constant reminder that she truly had sold her soul.

Yuyui firmly touched her chest as she breathed out, taking in this reality.

'I guess this is it. I really sold my soul in the name of food,' she thought with a hint of regret that travelled way back to more than a century ago.

None of that mattered now however.

Skullius on the other hand was looking at the details of the Tie of Exchange that were depicted on his guidance field.

~~~

[Tie of Exchange: Hair from Festos Dawn]

The individual Festos Dawn has pledged locks of hair coated with his mana as a medium for the exchange. He is the prime attendant for the Tie of Exchange and is not bound by any rules stipulating any fair terms.

The lesser attendant, Yuyui Yuyui Yuyui has agreed to offer herself in his service for life in exchange for freedom under Festos Dawn's stipulations.

~~~

It was done.

This was Skullius' third Tie of Exchange but it was different from the rest as unlike the others, he was the prime attendant. The initiator.

Whatever Sila had done had not undermined the fact that the aged piece of soul was a part of Skullius and thus, the Discount Human was now Yuyui's master.

The moment this was finalised...

[Congratulations, you have successfully completed the First Trial!]

[You have reached LV11!]

[You have passed a large milestone, transitioning from the Foundation Stage and into the Advancement Stage!]

[A phenomenal change has begun...]

"Yes!" Skullius exclaimed while brimming with excitement. A wide smile showed on his face as he felt a sense of achievement.

Things were going as he had initially thought.

A twofold progression in a single day!

A powerful feeling rushed through his body, beginning a magnificent switch in his power when...

[Interruption detected...]

...!

Skullius' <HEART> almost stopped at this!

In his experience, when this happened, nothing good ever came of it!

[The 'Luminant Seed' buried deep within you awakens!]

[Progression into the Advancement Stage has been postponed]

[The 'Luminant Seed' begins to adjust the 'Discount Human' body]

[Please wait...]

Skullius gulped hard.

This was far from the atrocity he expected.

This was going to be... glorious!

Chapter 419: Unlimited POWEEEEEEEEER! (2)

The Luminant Seed.

This was a reward that Skullius had acquired after defeating Dezrael back in the Labyrinth of the Yoke, apart from the choice at the skills that he had been given.

Its description had also been interesting.

~~~

[Luminant Seed]

The soul of Dezrael has condensed the essence of his race and it has been passed to you. As a higher ranked existence, Dezrael's peak strength in relation to his racial abilities has found its way to you in the form of a seed from which you can extract the benefits of being a Luminant to a very limited degree.

~~~

He had absorbed the Seed into his body only to find that it would only awaken, bearing its full benefits, when he had reached the Advancement Stage.

This was something Skullius had been looking forward to, at least before he had received the First Trial which had gunned down his hopes of ever advancing from the Foundation Stage.

Now, as he suddenly got the opportunity to finish the Trial, he was reminded of this motivation of his as he saw the blinking notification... as well as the blinding golden light that erupted from his body, pumping him full of an outrageous amount of energy!

Without warning, Skullius' body started to disintegrate as the light washed over him, the Stacked Series of the VergeRider falling off of him as his flesh and bones turned into a mass of red matter that coiled around the radiant luminescence!

"Mister Sir!" Yuyui called with concern.

She was just getting used to the feeling of swallowing her pride, stuffing it down her throat when her master... suddenly broke down!

Literally!

After a few seconds of watching this unfold though, she got the sentiment that this wasn't as she thought. Perhaps her new master was doing something beyond all she could understand.

He was a man powerful enough to seemingly battle a guardian and win after all. At least according to what she could vaguely remember what the tests to reach this place were, it was so.

As the bright light stormed her vision, she saw something appear amidst the chunks of her master and the golden brilliance.

A mana core?

It floated amidst the red matter, a lens flare like tiny dot of blue light being surrounded by what looked like a partially finished crown.

It pulsed with strange power, a sound akin to crumpling paper and crumbling rock echoing from it!

"Woow..." Yuyui marvelled, her blue eye as well as her normal one reflecting the scene before her.

On the other hand, Skullius, who had just had his entire body destroyed and reduced to unfamiliar shit stuff partially sank in the feeling of seemingly endless power that roiled from Luminant Seed.

He felt his mind get clearer.

His awareness of everything around him grew infinitely more robust.

With all this, he recognised that he was currently only existent as a soul.

His short figure, patched up with other coloured pieces of soul showed but no one here could see it other than him.

'Unlike before... I feel... free...' Skullius thought, comparing this to when Somanda had pulled his soul out.

The Seed seemed to be gushing energy into his soul as he could feel certain bits of information being integrated into him while his soul nourished.

They were not memories or anything of the sort, but like brief flash with a sense of individuality about them that rang all across his soul with resounding fury, etching themselves onto it!

With this came a feeling of freedom and strength that Skullius had never known.

It was refreshing.

After revelling in this, Skullius turned to his core which was suspended above ground, waiting to be told how to proceed.

He felt every inch of it without the obstruction of his body, something he thought his [Elevated Mana Manipulation] was currently able to but frankly, that didn't seem to be the case.

'Phewww... I can feel the pure mana yearning to be wound and weaved. Unlike with my skills, it seems so.... obedient...' Skullius thought.

His core and the mana he produced were harder to control before but now, it seemed like they submitted to his soul's will especially with the outpour of energy from the Seed.

When he thought over it for a while... the Luminant Seed...

It was created from the remnants of the soul of Dezrael. Dezrael who was at the Incandescent Stage?

With all that he knew now about the soul, he could at least guess what was happening.

Some of this being's power, along with all the potential he held in his soul was condensed into this Seed and used to elevate Skullius.

Those at the Incandescent Stage were very much aware of their soul and proficient in manipulating and using it.

Skullius could swear he felt a little of what this entailed, a grand boon indeed.

With that came this temporary feeling of freedom and satiation that he would absolutely not waste!

Skullius moved his soul form, bringing his hands around his unfinished core.

With what he was capable of now with the energy funnelling into him, he was sure his proficiency in wielding his core was vastly superior to his [Elevated Mana Manipulation]!

The mana that leaked from his Centre was grasped under his control firmly as he willed, this bringing Skullius quite the surprise and quite the bit of wonder.

'The core anchors itself to my soul and body, right? If its the body part, I can guess that it has to do with its relationship to my skills and techniques that reside in my body but what about the soul?' Skullius questioned.

Seeing as an answer wasn't coming, with Sila once again uncharacteristically quiet during such a momentous occasion, Skullius went on to forge his core.

He was going to finish it this time and with a vastly more elegant level of design and finesse!

After having tasted what the mana formed with the specification for Distorted Gravity was like in practise, he could fine tune it as he wished even more!

The pristine mana was moulded elegantly as Skullius even began making adjustments to the portion of the Refinery he had already completed, his hands going as far as to even finish up with a portion of the Shell of wherever he was done.

When he reached this part of the core however...

'I see. The Shell determines how much mana leaves the Refinery and into the mana channels...' Skullius thought, his mind taking him back to what he had been able to do to the first creatures he had met in this Sacred Forest, the Burdened Ice Trolls!

He had caused their mana to rage out of their cores at absurd quantities which ruptured their mana channels as well as their bodies.

This was definitely terrifying as he witnessed it first hand but, for a brief moment, the bodies of these creatures had screamed of toughness and relief, as nourished by the abundant supply of mana before it got too much for them to handle.

Hmmm.

'What if I can channel all that outputted mana into strong mana channels that can handle that much power in one go?! Reinforcing my body with a lot more mana than normal would give me a greater edge in defence as well overall ability if I consider just the effect of Gravity!'

How Skullius had caused the ground to reject Bassbion came to mind.

If that effect, as well as the one that pulled him towards other surfaces at ridiculous fair speeds was heavily determined by how much output of mana he could muster from his core at one time then...

Skullius' chibi soul grinned.

With more time spent in this form, he had rapidly realised that his body was about to be reformed anew with grand features from what the Luminant Seed had to offer.

What was likely causing the delay was how he was apportioning some of the power given to tend to his core manually and he was glad that was the case.

With this idea in mind, Skullius would only want his new body to be as per his own specification!

'Let's do this!' Skullius roared in the silence!

Chapter 420: Unlimited POWEEEEEEEEER! (3)

"Sss. Fuck, it's cold!"

"It is, sir."

A carriage was trudging on the cold snow that stained the road to Genhuis City along with several others that were equipped with stellar designs as well as heating contraptions.

Within this particular carriage was a man who looked quite a bit younger than his actual age, over his body a freakishly thick blanket-like jersey that served to shield him from the cold... on top of the premium grade magic arrays that heated the interior of the locomotive to a perfect set of degrees.

Yet, this man with a particularly pale face and long, white hair with streaks of blue on both sides of his head tied into a ponytail, shivered as his body seemed to be on the verge of freezing over.

Opposite him in the luxurious carriage was a beautiful but stern lady with brown, braided hair coiled into a bun at the back of her head.

She was dressed formally, her hands on her lap as they grasped onto a cup of tea. She paid excruciating attention to the man before her as she took a sip.

"I hope this isn't the occasional anxiety kicking in, sir. The Premium Age Royale is bound to be full of strong opponents garnering for a position in the EverSword House. If your enemies manage to succeed in getting a place in the EverSword House and you don't, that would be disastrous, would it not? This isn't what's bringing on this seasonal excessive shivering, is it?"

"Fuck no! What's bringing about this shivering, is the cold!" the man lightly lost his temper before he blew into his hands pitifully.

"I beg to differ, sir. I know quite a bit of your odd behaviours and this isn't an impossibility," the woman said with a caring yet still stern gaze as she leaned over and lightly rubbed the man's oversized jersey. "Do calm down, sir. You're hailed as the strongest after all. No one will touch you or your Family."

"Yeah? You'd think that'd come with some degree of immunity to this Boron-sent cold, especially for a native to the region like me. Sss. Is it my age? I'm barely in the category of old and look at me. It's like I'm a reptile!"

"Actually, you ARE quite old, sir," the woman said with blunt tone.

The white haired man glared at the woman as he shivered but she didn't flinch.

"Fuck you."

"Fuck you too, sir," the woman said casually as she sipped her tea with dignified mannerism.

The man with the outrageous jersey scoffed and turned to side.

"Sss. I better not have come here for nothing. If not for the promise of that Diviner that I will meet someone like me here, I wouldn't bother with this... and YOU!"

"I'm sure you'd still have to deal with me, sir. Consider me the lovely pair to your strong manhood," the woman said with a rarely seen smile. "It would hurt to rip me off."

Six hours had slowly passed.

They were extraordinarily agonising for Yuyui, interesting for Ferex who kept watching the entire time while keeping his master's belongings - spatial storage ring and armour - and extremely fulfilling for Skullius!

He had taken his time, understanding the intricacies of his core and the taste of his mana, along with freely interpreting everything that had to do with this power of his as he wished.

A few days ago, he hadn't thought that he would sculpt his mana core with this level of accuracy and speed and... rightfully so.

Skullius estimated that he would have taken until the beginning of the Premium Age Royale, which was supposed to start three days after the designated time for his return given by Silrat, to finish his Refinery and Shell, completing a sub par version of what he wanted.

Now, however, he had taken infinitely less time and while producing a vastly better result!

It wasn't a spot on imitation of Distorted Gravity as he didn't even have the lesser fundamentals of the concept, but it was... quite something.

At least Skullius had made it according to his own interpretation and he was...

Satisfied.

[You have completed your mana core]

A guidance field notification bloomed in front of his vision which was available in his soul form.

'Finally...' Skullius said while taking his time to offer a silent 'Thank you' to Sila who would never hear it.

The old soul's deeds was what birthed this eventuality and from here on out, Skullius would never be the same.

[Reconstruction of the body begins...]

[Taking note of special traits...]

[Special mana property detected - Inferior Distorted Gravity]

[Special body property detected - basic level attunement]

[Special body property detected - enhanced alternate senses]

[Special property detected - hold of Death]

[Resource distribution into augmentation and integration of detected properties begins...]

After the flurry of notifications gushed before Skullius, the swirling pieces of red matter that were his body halted their lackadaisical swim in the air, the golden light that had been prevalent all of this time becoming dim as it transferred a huge amount of its power to the production of a new body!

'Hold of Death, huh? Must be from Demion's Dance. Let's see what this will do,' Skullius thought.

The red matter crunched and curled as it started to form a shape.

A skeletal shape.

Before the shape fully formed, the completed mana core exploded with immense power as its build, which had been very small suddenly grew to almost five times its size!

What had been the pin sized Centre grew to be a bigger blue orb that pulsed with not a dull blue but a vibrant blue light while the elegant Refinery, weaved up to the Shell looked like a work of art!

[Mana increases by 4500]

A portion of the power from the Luminant Seed was granted to the mana core, shooting up its capacity immensely!

With that, the skeleton started to form.

It was pristine white, the mana from the core flooding into it to enhance its properties as it appeared!

It gained a powerful and sturdy build, one that could be ascertained just by looking at it!

Over this, a mesh of flesh hurriedly started to form, creating nerves and muscles that strung around where they needed to be, blood vessels being forged along with them.

[The previously termed <RUSH BLOOD> has become <CURSED BLOOD>]

[The previously termed <STEEL BONE FRAME> has become <HEAVY PILLAR FRAME>]

[You have attained <Medium Level Attunement> as a result of previous basic level attunement]

'Oh,' Skullius thought as the coil of flesh and bone covered his soul!

Blood vessels that carried blood with a very, very dark red pigment within them appeared, coursing through every inch of his formed body while a complex pattern of nerves ran through his flesh and touched over his bones.

Amidst all this, the Fruit of World Myths could be seen being buried in all of it, and making sure its hold was firm.

A heart began to form, its beating quite powerful as it thrummed menacingly, bringing a rare vivacity to the body!

[The previously termed <HEART> has become the <CURSED HEART>]

[The previously termed skill <HYPED>, forcibly evolves to <BEYOND THE HYPE>]

The rush of power from the Seed continued as it finished the limited number of innards and then started to form the skin!

'Right here! Let's make the adjustments!' Skullius thought as he got to work.

He had made quite the fine piece with his Shell, but creating with very large outlets of mana from the Refinery.

Now, he needed the mana pathways to be capable of holding such amounts of mana.

He appropriated a large amount of energy into manipulating the mana network that was forming within his flesh at this moment, first growing the size of each individual path to three and a half times what was currently being forged!

This caused his flesh and muscles to make the necessary adjustments to accommodate this, which was good!

Next, he started working on the interior, pulling on some of his mana and mixing it with the golden energy to create pathways that understand the mana they would carry and had the durability necessary to handle large bursts of the mana!

'That should do it!'

With this finished, Skullius' flesh wriggled as over it, ivory toned skin plastered over the flesh of Skullius as it was also pooled by the mana from the core, completing this perfect image of a new entity!

Skullius' body, which was more athletic than bulky, chest pads and abs visible in an enticing show was then wrapped by two dark chain tattoos that crossed over his torso.

The Binds of Fukal.

On his head appeared an abundance of clean, light auburn hair that streamed over his shoulder, almost reaching his waist.

Over his face, his eyes which had had some semblance of irises and pupils became almost completely white, giving the image of more than just a blind man, while full cheeks, thin cherry lips and a button nose complemented them nicely.

[Your body is complete]

[You have gained 5000 to all stats]

[The <HEAVY PILLAR FRAME> grants an additional 1000 to Strength and Endurance]

[Your musculature grants an additional 800 to Agility]

Skullius was taken aback by all these notifications.

Considering that he had a blue mana core now, these stats were... extremely relevant unlike before!

[The basic effect, <WEIGHT>, applies to your mana]

[You have gained the skill, 'Son of Luserus']

'Oh, I also got a skill?!' Skullius thought in surprise as he wasn't familiar with unearned skills anymore. That was a very, very foreign concept to him at this point.

The last time he gained a bunch of skills was after accepting the legacy of Fulgardt and...

'Wait a minute! This skill... isn't this-'

Before he could finish, Skullius was interrupted by a phenomenon that he hadn't seen coming which caused his body to jerk back and forth against his will as the remaining golden light around him gathered on his back!

'Huh?!'

The stream of light formed something Skullius wouldn't have imagined.

Detached from his body, the stream of golden energy remaining from the Luminant Seed formed... the shape of a wing!

Like individual strands of light that were stretched out by some divine forger, the makings of this wing were breath-taking!

This wing didn't leave room another, as with its golden white luminescence, faint blue symbols etched onto its almost ethereal structure, it rested directly at the centre of Skullius' back, announcing that it was the only one.

With its appearance, traces of small lights, like glitter were seen over Skullius' skin, a ferocious wave of power gushing from him as a result!

[Your race has been finalised]

[You have manifested a <Wing of Embrace>, a feature that confirms your race]

[The previously termed <Discount Human> has become the <Hybrid Luman>]