

Undead 571

Chapter 571: Surprising Answers

Magecraft was founded many years after the main practises of other classes were long established.

The nation of Emeradis was the pioneer for this diverse and powerful form of combat and it became their a form of culture introduced into their society as a whole; their political structure, economic makeup and social norms were governed by Magecraft.

Magecraft had strict rules and prerequisites which made it very hard for many who wanted to be Mages to become practitioners, the first being that all aspirants needed to cultivate COMPLETE control over mana while also being able to partially manipulate other energies – not all – even if they didn't understand them.

No beginner was expected to start bending things like spatial essence on their first day, but should it find its way inside their range, they were required to be able to manipulate special forms of energy to some degree because this showcased where their talent lied with the many categories of Magecraft – affinities.

This was the criteria to be met when one went to an Academy with lesser standards only existing with few freelance Mages in the world.

After any aspiring Mage was seen to be adequately equipped with the above, the next stage was to establish something known as the Reflexive Sigil Matrix.

This was what separated Mages from other Energy Formers.

There were different variations of this Matrix, but at the end of the day it possessed one main purpose; to make a Mage's core as flexible as possible while ensuring that they had complete control over it.

By combining massive amounts of mana along with portions of other energies and essences that were then compressed and woven in a pre-established mana – according to the Matrix instruction – over the course of four to eight months, the Reflexive Sigil Matrix would be formed over the mana core.

Once established, several changes would occur to the Mage.

Significant changes that would be appreciated more with time and practise.

.....

Skullius frowned.

It seemed like none here had sympathy for the blind.

Sigh.

He was about to get schooled.

As if!

He wasn't an idiot!

After absorbing the knowledge of many through [Basic Evil Sanction], he had come across bits of information that were applicable to this very moment from knowledgeable individuals.

Since Arch-Mage Ryte didn't seem to want to disrupt the pending humiliation that could have easily shattered his esteem, he decided to spill what he knew.

"I know a few things. I know there are six ranks that a Mage can achieve by improving their skill in Magecraft. Apprentice, Prime, Master, Grandmaster, Arch-Mage and Realm Source. I also know that there are many forms of Magecraft that are called Patches. The most basic ones reserved for Apprentices are the Elemental Patch, the Transmutation Patch and the Consolidated Patch. Also—"

"That's enough," Arch-Mage Ryte intervened. This wasn't as funny as he thought it would be anymore. This young man was knowledgeable.

The young woman who had asked Skullius was furious, her face hardening as she had expected the Hybrid Luman to fumble on his words before being kicked out for not respecting their art form.

Mages were proud beings because they owned their history and the effort it took to merely reach the Prime Mage rank, when one officially became a Mage!

"Hmph!" the woman folded her arms with a cross look that made Skullius giddy inside.

Ah, yes.

That was the reaction he was looking for.

"I see you are know quite a lot. I'm growing more inclined to acquiesce to her request the more I know about you. Brilliant! I'm surprised you know about the Realm Source rank however. it was officially stripped from our books since not even the progenitor of all Magecraft, Arch-Mage Remos managed to achieve it," Ryte said with a chuckle.

"Oh, I see," Skullius said. He didn't know about this. He assumed there was a Realm Source rank Mage out there somewhere but what he took from Arch-Mage Ryte proved that it wasn't easy to...

"Uh... excuse me, Arch-Mage Ryte?" Skullius suddenly said, turning his attention from his previous line of thought to something else. "Did you just say Arch-Mage Remos?"

"Indeed. Arch-Mage Remos, a man from Emeradis who introduced the entire Magecraft curriculum. Before his mysterious disappearance, he invented the current known peak of Magecraft, Absolute Magic Runes," Ryte said with hints of pride.

The highest form of Magecraft. It was not easy to reach it, especially while integrating the basic forms of power – Cores, Classes and Stages.

Yet, Ryte had achieved it.

While he and the students all wore knowing looks when they spoke about this Mage, Skullius froze.

Remos.

Remos...

Remos!

How could he forget that name?!

He mysteriously disappeared?

No he didn't!

He knew this guy! He had met him before!

The memories weren't from years ago but from merely a month's time, their cruelty still vivid in Skullius' mind!

Once again, there was a tie to that place.

The Labyrinth of the Yoke.

In the Hall of Fulgardt, there was a man named Remos, a powerful individual who had indeed used something the guidance field had identified as 'Absolute Magic' to carve away Skullius' Supreme skill, [Flesh It Like You Mean It], revealing him to be undead!

Was this a coincidence?!

Same name, different person?

No way!

If he thought about it, the timeline could make sense. Someone who invented Magecraft really should be from Fulgardt's time!

'Is everyone in that hall...?' Skullius thought with drops of sweat leaking from his brow.

Was everyone in that hall, trapped for all eternity truly responsible for helping Fulgardt in his life?

That's what it seemed like.

If Remos was there, then he must have at least been an acquaintance of Fulgardt before... well, before the Immoral kept him as an ever joy fossil.

'This is big... I was only thinking about finding a way to make everyone in that Hall join me because I thought they'd be decently strong but...' Skullius thought, immense excitement overtaking him.

Ba-dum! Ba-dum! Ba-dum!

[You are HYPED!]

He grew hyped just thinking about this!

'If I can offer Remos in particular a chance to get out of that hall, as desperate as he and all those others are, I could force him into a Tie of Exchange! Or better yet... I could make him into an Apostle! The greater the sample for [Apostle Summon] the more ridiculous the evolutions that pop up!' Skullius gulped, this entire thought process happening within miniscule dashes of time.

Having someone like that under his control, especially with how easy it could be to claim him if he played his cards right – mastering [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light] to a sufficient degree...!

Whether he remained a human or turned into a humanoid Apostle, it didn't matter!

Skullius wanted him!

This information was immediately sent out to Replicus who was barely in range for communication with Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman's thoughts were concluded before Ryte finished savouring his words.

When he did, he then gave Skullius what he wanted.

"What do you want to know? The students may enlighten you. I'll allow you only two questions," Ryte said.

Skullius nodded as he then turned to the Apprentices.

"The techniques someone learns in their lifetime are carved onto the body. The only way to influence them is through mana that travels through mana channels which pass through regions of the body where these techniques are imprinted, activating them when the user wishes. This much I understand," Skullius said with a dark smile, purposely showing off his knowledge.

He wasn't shabby!

"What I want to know is how to combine two or more techniques into one more powerful one? Mana doesn't seem to work."

"..."

Unfortunately for the Hybrid Luman, the entire class looked at him as if he was an idiot, the same young woman from before bursting into laughter as she heard his question.

Did he say something wrong?

Arch-Mage Ryte didn't have any particular reaction towards Skullius' words. In truth, it was a good question... for someone like him.

Outside of Energy Forming, Arma Using and Form Using didn't explore such things consciously. The answer to the question was basic knowledge for Mages though.

An older Apprentice gracefully answered the Hybrid Luman's question.

"Combining skill forms requires a bonding agent. As humans we develop by finely manipulating mana into different shapes and forms. One of these is Aura. It can act as a substance to attach things that only exist in... let's say abstract forms together, strengthening them," the Apprentice said with a typical geek energy.

"Aura?" Skullius voiced in intrigue.

"Yes, Aura. For humans, entering the Advancement Stage and then the Master Stage means our bodies passively grow. One of these ways is by moulding similar and similarly ranked techniques together. Beasts can't produce Aura like we can, which is why most of them, as they grow stronger, naturally develop a knack for essences – tapping into concepts.

Those that don't are left with a large quantity of useless techniques and eventually die pitifully."

Skullius' mind spun. By the time this student finished speaking, his mind had already processed what he had said fully.

So Aura was the key!

Fortunately, Skullius was at the Advancement Stage and was now legible for the use of the once per day, Full Body Aura!

"This is interesting. A bonding agent, huh?' he thought.

"Beautifully explained, Bayl," Arch-Mage RYTE said with a smile. This student, like all others was trying to impress but he had done well. RYTE then looked to Skullius once again. "Last question."

Skullius had a lot of inquiries sitting in his chest, all needing answers but since he had limited time, he resorted to asking something he had wondered about after attaining his Nature-Bound Malleable Form Core.

"Is it possible to form a mana core that can adapt to any type of concepts? A core that can perhaps... learn every kind of concept and allow the user to switch between those concepts as he wants."

...!

This question, unlike the last wasn't received with mockery.

The answer was there but it was a sort of dream that every Mage shared!

Arch-Mage Ryte was even surprised by this question.

The same irritable woman from before gave the answer Skullius was looking for, though begrudgingly, as if she was provoked into defending their kind.

She sounded offended.

"For now it's impossible but it can be done with more years of research. The Reflexive Sigil Matrix is the key. The best a Mage can do, is shatter their core, maintain its connection to the soul through the Sigil and then reforge another core while exposing themselves to whatever concept they want to learn," the young woman said with ambition.

"Unfortunately, this takes too long and even Arch-Mages can suffer damage if they do it too many times. The body can only handle so much unless it's being recreated after every change."

The female Apprentice then gave Skullius a sharp look.

"This isn't something a mere swordsman can learn, even if you have an Advanced Class," she bit poisonously.

'Oh...'

The Hybrid didn't pay attention to her attitude.

With fifteen times the processing power at his disposal right now, he was sucking in all the information and matching it with what he knew.

'Interesting. So it's not only about the core but the body too,' he thought. 'No wonder...'

It seemed the Luminant Seed made things very easy by forging a new body for him back then.

Chapter 572: Consolidated Trust

Velanqi Family Residence.

Aurolio, while rolled up in a thick, purple blanket with a fuzzy texture, sat by the fire burning in the hearth. He shivered as usual as he sat on the stool, the light from the flame illuminating his face with an orange hue that dyed his skin and white hair.

Strangely, he was roasting a fish that was penetrated through by a rod, his shaky hand controlling which parts of the well prepared fish he wanted to get a nice, delicious tan.

"Ah..." Aurolio voiced in both satisfaction and displeasure. The smell of the fish was good but....

"Fuck this cold..."

The temperatures that existed around him alone never seized to amaze, even in the presence of fire.

Footsteps clapped against the floor, a formally dressed woman walking into the clean lounge and watching Aurolio with unfazed but slightly disturbed eyes.

"If you were hungry, you could have just told me so..." Idline said.

She sat on a chair near Aurolio, her eyes continuing to watch him cook.

"No offense but I'd rather drink lava diluted with toad piss than have you cook any meat dishes for me. We've already established that," Aurolio replied while pushing his stool closer to the fire and away from Idline.

"I find that very offensive. You ate what I cooked last time," Idline said with a smack to the back of Aurolio's head with the book in her hand.

The white haired man didn't flinch, only clicking his tongue without changing the placement of his head.

"Last time, you didn't cook meat," Aurolio pointed out. "Any updates?"

Idline put away her simmering opinions about her expert level cooking and got to business.

"It seems Vali is on the move. Moreso than all the other contenders," she said.

"Hmm?"

"There have been suspiciously frequent visits by contenders to her mansion. Male contenders."

"Oh... so I might have been right then," Aurolio said, withdrawing the fish from the fire and taking bite. "<Crunch>. Someone like her is bound to be exploiting the Royale. My guess is she's forming contracts with various Families in exchange for a chance to win big with her bloodline."

"But... doesn't that make her a whore? What kind of advantages are in that?"

"No. She's not pleasuring contenders, my brainless little Idline. She's likely selling off her sisters and cousins. The Kinn Family's most unique trait is the specific genetics in their bloodline. Any child born from anyone with Kinn blood will have an extreme aptitude towards healing, even before acquiring the Healer Class.

Most Families, mostly the lesser ones, will jump at the opportunity to attain heirs with such qualities, even at the expense of their own pride," Aurolio explained while nodding at his basic culinary expertise.

"That seems a bit extreme."

"Not for the desperate. There's constant challenge over territory with the lower Families. Proper conflict over land ownership isn't illegal. The weak will do what the weak do best. Besides, coming under the Kinn Family isn't all that bad of an idea, you know? That Kinn bitch is rich."

Idline nodded slowly.

It was a sufficient reason perhaps, more than she thought at least. Not all Families were privileged after all.

"What about Gabel?" Aurolio asked with another crunch coming from his mouth.

"He seems to have left the city. He moves quickly. If I hadn't placed a marker on him we wouldn't have been able to trace his location."

"Hmm. Everyone I had written off as not worthy of my interest is suddenly proving me wrong. I like it," Aurolio said with a chuckle.

"Do you think that Gabel is the one you've been looking for now?"

"No. My interest increased a bit but the revelation that he has mastered a Veneration art rules him out completely. Besides just raw power, you know what having a Veneration art means, right?"

Idline nodded. Of course she did. Despite that though, she had thought Gabel was the one they had come all this way for.

"Do you have anyone you suspect to have been the target of that Divination then after watching the recent matches?"

Aurolio pursed his lips absentmindedly as he gave it some thought.

"There is one..." he said.

In his mind, he recalled a certain man he had marked.

A certain man with a race identified with as 'Hybrid Luman' in his vision. He had a Hidden Class. Him and his green haired girlfriend that is.

In his battle with the Wardlock, he had launched a sword slash livid with mana, clean essence of death and.... something that he felt closely related to what he knew.

'It wasn't Voided Essence and if I hadn't been paying attention I would have missed it...' Aurolio thought.

'Hmmm.'

Aurolio had imprinted this energy signature into his mind when he felt it. There was need to find out more about this man.

Maybe...

Just maybe...

Skullius once again entered the Bryne Family Mansion, a sigh escaping from his mouth.

That was heavier on the heart than it looked.

He had nearly lost his chance to gather significant answers from a high ranking Mage. If not for [Beyond the Hype], his mood would have been a few hundreds degrees lower right now.

'At least I got what I needed and some...' Skullius thought.

After getting the answer to his last allowed question, Arch-Mage RYTE had expelled him from the Academy with the words 'TELL THAT BRYNE BRAT NEVER TO BOTHER ME AGAIN!'

The man's personality was volatile.

One needed to constantly entertain him it seemed, and Skullius didn't know just how much butt-kissing those Apprentices had to do to get much instruction from the man. Clearly he taught by whim.

As Skullius pondered, a maid walked towards him and gave a light bow.

"Master Festos, Master Silrat wants to see you. He's waiting in the first study," she informed. "Also, Lady Stylla told me to inform you that she will be leaving soon. The carriage is ready."

Skullius nodded.

'It's finally time, it seems,' he thought.

The trip to the Bryne Estate wasn't the concern here.

It was the real pending matter.

The time to face Silrat and have to explain what in the world had caused his soul to be torn apart yesterday night had come.

Judging by Yuyui's current condition, he and Kenno were probably fine but unlike those two...

"Let's just get this over with."

The mansion had several rooms other than the excessive number of bedrooms. In total, there were three studies which came with a wide assortment of books and comfortable spots for one to sit while reading, much like mini libraries.

In one of these, Skullius found Silrat seated with a stern look on his face, the subconscious expression one got when reading.

Silrat raised his head and gestured for Skullius to sit as soon as he saw him. He closed the book on the table in front of him and gave the Luman a very obvious questioning gaze.

"I wanted to check in on you yesterday but you weren't here," Skullius said, immediately defending himself.

"Of course. What a kind soul you are, Festos?" Silrat said sarcastically. "And after a rough search in the mansion, you gave up and went to sleep?"

"Hey, I knew you were alright. I would turned every stone in Genhuis just to find you if I didn't."

"Phenomenal strategy! Except you wouldn't have to turn every stone in the world if you just visited the most obvious place in the city that I'd be!"

"Oh, come on! What are we, lovers?! Besides, you look fine to me. Just like I predicted.... You are fine, right?" Skullius asked that last bit with genuine curiosity.

Silrat gnashed his teeth and clicked his tongue.

"Thank the Deities I am. And Alaris too. He took care of me after that tragedy! Would you like to tell me what that the hell that was? I felt like my soul was being ripped to shreds! And I tell you, it wasn't a particularly enjoyable experience to, 'scream like a goat midway through slaughter', as some of the more funny mercenaries put it, in the Guilds Association lobby."

Skullius grimaced. That must have been humiliating.

"Sorry about that," he apologised genuinely . "Alaris took care of you? I met him yesterday night. To think he would have told me about your condition."

"I asked him not to. While I would have appreciated a little care from you, I wanted to avoid attention to you with the situation at the Association. That wouldn't bode well for the image I'm trying to create."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Nevermind. You're not smart enough for it anyway," Silrat said waving off Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman shook his head. Even after the immense pain that came with having the soul damaged, Silrat still had enough strength to plan for the future.

Admirable.

"Well? Care to share what happened?" the former Association branch head asked eagerly.

The Hybrid Luman scratched his head.

"I'd rather not," he said much to Silrat's shock.

"But, before you kill me, I can tell you the good that came after the... incident. You'll be pretty happy to hear, I guarantee it."

Silrat folded his arms, his eyes showing nothing but suspicion. This only lasted a few seconds though, as when Skullius told him the good news, his face beamed with optimism!

"This is magnificent!" Silrat almost leapt out of his seat. "If the curse is gone.... Do you understand what this means?!"

"Trust me, I understand that way more than you do," Skullius said with dismissive energy.

"Yes well, perhaps that is the case but the obstacles to what I had planned for you, for us, have been removed! I can finally climb up the ranks in the Guilds Association!"

Skullius raised his brows.

He hadn't seen this much enthusiasm from Silrat before. The man was rubbing his hands with a lost gaze, much like a villain who had finally acquired their McGuffin!

"I suddenly feel like I'm no longer that important here," Skullius said.

"No, no! You're still the central piece. I... Ah, you will leaving soon with Stylla right? There's no time to lay out what I intend in such a short time. But this is amazing news!"

"....Right..." Skullius said, honestly a little weirded out. "By the way, Alaris told me there's some matters that require my attention. Bad news?"

"Indeed there is," Silrat said, the fires of his excitement dimming. "You remember the location of that mission he took? The Creeping Chill?"

"Yes. What about it?"

" ... "

Silrat gazed intently at Skullius, detecting not even a sliver of realisation after five seconds.

The gall on this man!

"I'm surprised you didn't think blowing up the small town on that tourist location wouldn't come back to bite you where it hurts. The Guilds Association could have protected you if it was just the word of the townspeople against yours but someone who holds a grudge... took it upon himself to help these people's voices scream louder."

"Hmm? I did get that town destroyed, didn't I?" Skullius said with a bit of a chuckle. Fighting the Grand Flame Bringer outside the Cluster was a fond memory. "Who is this new enemy?"

"I'll give you a few hints. Show off, barriers and lover boy."

Skullius face palmed without a moment's delay.

"That guy?"

Indeed. It was that guy.

The Wardlock he had fought in his Preliminary match!

Kurtish Oldd.

Of course there was just enough pettiness in that man for him to want to go after someone even if he won the match.

Talk about a sore... winner?

"Yes. He pulled some strings in the Guilds Association to find information about you, including some pending dirt. Your current rank has many holes. It seems high but it allows things like this to happen," Silrat said with a scoff. "I'm working on a plan for this though. You'll probably be summoned soon for a hearing but don't worry about it."

Skullius nodded.

This was actually quite the predicament.

As far as he knew, the Oldd Family was a really powerful Family with vast wealth. If they could pull strings from the exclusive side of the Guilds Association, that meant Skullius' higher crutch wasn't as sturdy anymore.

Thankfully, Skullius had Silrat.

Somehow, hearing that Silrat had his back without the trepidation brought on by UNCoddled was... soothing.

"Alright. I'll trust you with it," Skullius said with a subdued smile. He had always wanted to say that to someone who wasn't an original bone bro or an Apostle.

Silrat smirked and extended his hand towards Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman shook it without hesitation.

Chapter 573: Journeying, Training, Stalking

Following the talk between Silrat and Skullius, the pre-established journey to the Bryne Family Estate began.

Silrat had seen off the four individuals – Stylla, Setkh, Karrun and Skullius – as they boarded the carriage that swiftly left the city without making any stops.

The journey wouldn't take long as the four would likely be back by the next afternoon at the latest, but what seemed like a casual visit home brewed a lot of tension within the carriage.

Skullius could feel it.

Something was up and this something had to do with Stylla who sat near the open window, gazing outside of it with a melancholic expression.

There were burdens on her mind but no one could tell what they were. She hadn't told anyone. She kept them to herself as she believed she should, though she had been on the cusp of telling one of these troubles of hers to someone in the past few days.

"Now that we have left the great city, would you mind telling us what sparked this little journey home dear sister?" Setkh who sat beside Stylla asked, his face leaning in towards his sibling's in a creepy manner.

The same flirtatious look was on his face with a hint of lust burning in his eyes.

"It's nothing. I just thought we should visit OUR father is all," Stylla replied without shifting her line of sight or flinching at Setkh's disregard for personal boundaries.

At this, Setkh and Karrun gave each other knowing looks, as if they had an inkling of an idea as to what was going on.

This subtle behaviour didn't escape Skullius who sat with Karrun opposite the two siblings.

'Am I the only one who doesn't know what's going on?' he thought.

Perhaps it was best to keep these two under surveillance. Maybe he could get clues too.

Though, given the fact that Stylla had said she could handle it herself last night, the Hybrid Luman decided not to take this too seriously.

After all, he had better things to do.

Skullius closed his eyes and focused deep within himself.

'The answer is Aura...' he thought.

In order to combine skills, he needed Aura, which acted as a binding agent.

Thankfully, Skullius' experiences had lead him to the knowledge that the existence of skills wasn't tied to the core, but the body. If he hadn't known, perhaps there was a different outcome waiting for him in the end.

For now, he decided to test out how this worked and determine the efficiency and limits of it at his level.

He breathed in and out.

Aura was generated by compressing mana in a rhythmic way that was naturally coordinated by the strengthened body when one reached the Advancement Stage. In other words, the body 'told' the core how to compress mana into Aura.

If that weren't the case, beasts, which didn't rise in strength the way humans did, would be able to produce Aura too.

This wasn't simply layering mana over mana.

The experiences of the Advancement and Master Stage experts Skullius had used [Basic Evil Sanction] on were proving very useful right now.

The information derived from this Special skill was usually scattered and hard to sift through which lead Skullius to pack it all in his subconscious mind but now, after taking some time to sort through it all...

'I get it. Generating Aura is similar to how I created the Refinery to my mana core. There is a sequence in which mana must be compressed in order to generate Aura. Attaining a blue core or higher is important for this task it seems. A white one can't handle the stress,' Skullius thought.

'Hmmm. Oh... there's so many different ways in which someone can push themselves into generating Aura faster.'

The bandits the Hybrid Luman had killed had varying experiences with this. Most people weren't aware of the intricacies involved with the process of generating enough Aura. Some were taught while others learned naturally.

For the latter, it wasn't strictly a conscious action. The body slowly taught the mana core how to do it with time.

For Skullius who currently felt like he had devoured tens of years worth of information on the experiences of Advancement Stage experts, reaching the point where lumps of Aura bobbed from his mana core didn't take long.

Only twelve minutes into the journey from the walls of Genhuis, Karrun, Setkh and even Stylla noticed a change around Skullius!

...!

A false light seeped from his body, swimming over him dimly.

Karrun frowned.

'Is that Aura?' he thought while distancing himself, a shiver of disturbance racing through his skin.

The Aura coming from Skullius... was a sickening shade of dark blue that was masquerading as the colour black!

It twirled around his margins as if it was alive before pouncing on Karrun seemingly of its own free will!

...!

Karrun had been about to defend himself when the vicious threat suddenly disappeared, leaving no traces of its existence at all!

What the heck?!

Karrun wondered with just his dark expression.

What kind of Aura was that?!

Skullius kept his eyes closed.

A small smile appeared over his mouth.

'That felt good...' he thought.

He had managed to generate a lump of Aura which surprisingly ran wildly through his mana channels to cover his entire body!

This Aura was very... greedy!

When it saturated his body, he felt a grand surge of power that fuelled the WILLS that had integrated into his soul!

For that brief moment, Skullius felt like... killing everyone here!

Quite random and overly maniacal but... that was how he felt.

At the same time, he felt a false sense of omniscience and clarity had ballooned within him, making him feel like everything was in the palm of his hands!

It felt fleshing good.

But...

'I better be watchful about how I use this. I should have known my Aura wouldn't be ordinary given this body,' Skullius thought rationally, but remained proud of this fact nevertheless.

He retreated into the folds of his mind once more.

This time, he made it a point to practise caution and absolute restraint. He wouldn't let this Aura do what it pleased.

Setkh and Stylla unconsciously looked at each other, both with different opinions over what they had just seen.

This man...

Both of them didn't say anything but within, they had many thoughts.

'For some reason I'm starting to take for granted the fact that I quite literally begged this man to join my Family and participate in the Royale. I really saw him as something special then. And he is...'
Stylla thought.

Perhaps she was just used to how much more special Skullius was compared to how she imagined before?

Perhaps.

Back then, Stylla had been choked with doubt after having him sign the contract to join the Family. She had questioned herself if there was truly no one else she could have bought into the Family.

Maybe there was but since her father was cursed, many nobles and allies they had cut off their connections with the Family, especially after realising that his condition was quite serious.

The months that followed were harsh, especially since Setkh had left the Family and everything was left to her to deal with.

All she could do was try to relieve stress and find allies by pretending to be a mercenary with the help of her Uncle Jac. After all, they wouldn't know who she was at first.

Then again, she did tell them her real name.

Such times.

Despite the fondness she felt for Skullius though, there was still what the old man from the tower said.

Setkh on the other hand didn't start reminiscing of events past.

'I feel uneasy. Unlike what Karrun believes... this man has too many secrets. Such unknowns could jeopardise everything...' he thought before withdrawing his gaze while killing the curious glint that had been aglow within his eyes.

At this moment, Skullius' eyes suddenly shot open and he exclaimed, "Stop the carriage!"

The trio riding along him with were perturbed!

What was wrong?

An enemy attack?!

The carriage came to a stop and Skullius opened the door.

"Excuse me, I'll be back in a bit," he said as he dashed out and sped a distance away, leaving everyone dumbfounded.

The Hybrid streaked past a mile's distance quickly, making sure that there was a lot of cover behind him and no settlement in close proximity.

After he was sure that there were no eyes on him, he looked up at the cloudy sky.

'Give me the stuff,' he thought, his message carried across the exclusive connection between him and a certain being hidden high above in the form of a massive dark cloud too far and hidden to be seen.

'Sure,' a reply came, the voice being clear this time as Skullius and Replicus were much nearer to each other, their means of communication – mental – being bolstered!

From the white clouds visible in the sky, a streak of silent Levin dashed, hopping from cloud to cloud before it speedily dived right before Skullius and smashed into the ground!

There was a soft boom and a hiss of dirt sent flying but something was left within the crater created just now, delivered by the Levin.

It was a sack. It was bulged, hinting at its contents openly.

"Heh. [Storm Rider] is more useful than I thought," Skullius said as he picked up the sack and stored it in his storage ring.

'I tell you to stay close, yet you come up with a crazy counter mission to travel all the Belvion Union to hunt bandits immediately after?' Skullius asked Replicus through their link.

'I'm you, you sockethole. I decided to do something productive instead of waiting around for hours. It paid off in the end, didn't it? You need those Plasma coins,' Replicus replied with a scoff at... himself.

'Fair point. I'll say it again, this is not something I'll get used to anytime soon. You have to understand. And by the way, how was it? Were these guys difficult to beat?' Skullius asked.

'A little. But Ferex took care of them.'

'I see. Well... Good work, bro. I better get back. Make sure you make a good impression with the new group. Oh and don't forget that thing about the profile,' Skullius reminded.

'I won't forget and I'll do just fine. I'm you, bro.'

The pending mission Skullius had, had been completed by Replicus from the time he separated from Skullius to a few hours ago. He had delivered word to Skullius soon after he reached Genhuis about starting this mission, which is why Skullius had decided to go with Stylla to the Bryne Residence.

That way, he could meet up with Replicus on the road and collect the evidence for the completed mission before the two had to split up for a very long time.

It was a shallow reason at face value but there was no way Replicus would come to deliver the package in Genhuis or even send Yuyui for it. The risks were too great.

The Hybrid Luman dashed back to the carriage.

Besides convenience, he was looking forward to going to the Bryne Family Estate for one reason alone.

Apparently, that's where the treasury was according to Stylla. This had been the primary motivation before Skullius scraped it midway when he reconsidered going with Stylla. However, meeting up with Replicus as a motivation was the final push.

Right before Skullius reached the carriage, his senses led him to quickly turn his head to the left as the presence of one... no... tens of powerful creatures registered near him rapidly before... getting sapped away?

...!

That was a creepy feeling!

Skullius literally shivered at the vast number of threats yet he couldn't tell their position anymore. All of them seemed to have been sucked away by something extremely quickly, leaving him alone with gnawing caution.

'What in the world was that?!' Skullius asked himself.

He keenly checked his immediate surroundings but found nothing, which was unsettling for Skullius who trusted his senses.

With even more caution, he retreated back to the carriage with a dark face, turning his head sporadically in an attempt to focus on anything suspicious but there was none.

"What is it?" Stylla noticed his unusual behaviour and asked.

The Hybrid took a few calming breaths.

"It's nothing. Let's go," he said.

Chapter 574: Making An Impression! (1)

Hours ago...

A man was screaming bitterly as ethereal strings penetrated his body and played with his delicate insides. All around him, there were corpses of people he knew but he couldn't even recognise as right now, the pain he felt exceeded any other he had ever known.

Above where he laid, a fearsome opponent was gazing down at him from a helm like face, two blue lights acting as his eyes while the wolf like appearance he had gave the situation a grave tone.

For it truly was.

"Please.... please... make it... stop..." the man begged as saliva, mucus and tears spilled from his face.

Unfortunately, his enemy did not entertain his requests and continued twisting something within him as he pleased.

His soul.

Ferex was immensely intrigued.

The skill he had acquired through Skill Amalgamation, [Dark Soul Bending] was incredibly fascinating.

~~~

[Dark Soul Bending | Lv.3]

The user is able to affect their soul and those of others through contact. Souls without wills are easier to manipulate for the user while those with mortal consciousness are theirs to twist and toy with.

Mana Requirements: 1000 Mana Points, 100 Mana Points every minute following activation

Duration: ---

Cooldown: None

~~~

This skill rendered the skill [Spirit Touch] from his mutation, the Pseudo Spirit Walker's Hide, completely obsolete!

With his Unliving Thread, he was capable of manipulating the soul of an individual, though doing so while they were alive was extremely difficult. If he managed to kill them first and latch his Unliving Thread over their soul before it left, he could manipulate their body via said soul!

Ferex had learnt how to use the skill more efficiently from the time he and Skullius had merged to form Ogwulf just yesterday!

A truly powerful ability.

This was good and all, but it was no easy feat.

Manipulating the soul was difficult and Ferex found that doing anything other shifting it around within a corpse was his limit right now.

Other than a soul being an individual, one without a will was powerful source of energy after all.

'I need to remind Master about his promise. We need to kill millions after all,' Ferex thought. He wanted to grow [Dark Soul Bending] immensely.

What he was doing to this man right now, was nothing more than torture. It didn't help much when there was only so few samples anyway.

The Apostle didn't have a moral compass but he was dedicated to learning. From this experience alone, he had found out plenty.

"Good work."

From behind him, Replicus emerged in the Penetrator form, applauding the excellent work.

The area they were in was an abandoned town.

A destroyed and abandoned town near the Belvion Union.

This had been the headquarters of this group of deceased men and women who had called themselves the Ascendant Hunters. From the looks of it, this group had destroyed this town recently as there were a lot of signs of fresh struggle and destruction.

According to the information Replicus retrieved from one of these guys – through pain related means – they believed in harvesting a lot of cumulative mana experience. At least their leaders believed so.

Even though gathering an outrageous amount of EXP without completing tasks was pretty much a waste of time, their leader told them to adhere to the rule.

Strange.

The fact of the matter though was that this group was very large and these guys weren't important members of it. The executive or more important members were... 'shockingly' connected to the objective Replicus was hunting down.

This mysterious organisation called the Severed Union.

It was at this time that Replicus really wished he had access to [Basic Evil Sanction] but sadly...

"For now..." the Penetrator said as he reached with his bony hand from under the sleeve of [Defiant Raiment of Perversion] robes where the lights from 212 balls of compressed mana collected from

the slaughtered bandits were humming and released bursts of violent Levin that burnt the corpses completely save for a few heads that needed to be sent to Skullius.

Present time.

Yuyui was wolfing down stacks of food that Ferex had retrieved for her inconspicuously from within of the settlements in the Belvion Union.

The Belvion Union was like the Isise. Cities and towns joined together for a common cause. In this case, there had been restructuring in order to build a close knit society, much like a small nation within Pelian.

This setup was governed by one figure, a man by the name Dionas. He was a devilishly greedy noble who rose in order to resist the incompetence of the Family that ruled the small lands encompassing the settlements fitted here.

Because the land owned by this particular Family wasn't large or even special, no other Families bothered to contend for it.

As mentioned before, proper challenges were allowed between Families and the loser would relinquish their lands. However, because this Family did not see such things, they grew reluctant and did nothing but reap the share of coin owned to them by their inhabitants without putting in extra effort against threats such as the Ascendant Hunters.

Truthfully, they lacked the means to, an exploitable weakness.

Still, the lands suffered even as Dionas rose. He did what he could to seem like the hero but behind the facade, he was more interested in acquiring power, using his campaign to fight the fools governing the land as the key.

The Royal Family wouldn't care, as always.

Upon reaching the Belvion Union, which wasn't as guarded as Genhuis, Skullius had done his research before heading for the kill earlier, one of the things he discovered being the growing hate for this Dionas character.

His true nature was starting to show over the years of having to hide it.

'There are some really ambitious people in this world,' Skullius had thought.

Right now, as he looked at Yuyui stress eat while they sat within the same large house the bandit group had used, he couldn't help but attach the word ambitious to Yuyui's bottomless pit of a stomach.

"How are you feeling now?" Skullius asked.

Yuyui took the time to masticate the food chunks inflating her cheeks before daring to look sullen. The messy kind of sullen where food stains clung to her lips unpleasantly.

"I don't know," she said with a weak voice.

"I thought you'd say 'full' at least," Replicus mocked lightly, his thunderclouds as he sat in the far corner, away from the girl so as to not distract her meal with the flash of his sockets, spawning endlessly.

Yuyui gave him an 'I'm not in the mood for that' look.

"If...if what you say is true then... I'll become a fugitive won't I? This profile your other self told us about... They must know what I look like now right? So how will I be able to travel anywhere?" Yuyui asked with genuine worry.

"You won't need to travel much for a while. Worst case, we'll settle in the Belvion Union from time to time. They have only a single Temple among all the stacked towns, a small branch of the Association with pitiful mercenaries and their security is average. I bet they keep hiring mercenaries from Genhuis whenever they get bullies," Replicus said. "The best way to hide is to do it in plain sight."

That worked.

Yuyui nodded and took another bite of her food. Her resolve was still under construction and her will to go back to the Temple of Unlusted Tears to 'negotiate' with Bassbion again was slowly climbing back up.

She still needed to get stronger.

The Penetrator rose from his seat and walked outside.

"Our guests will be arriving soon. I gave Kenno a specific time hoping that I'd be free enough to both meet him and take care of these... Ascendant Hunters. Looks like I wasn't wrong," Replicus said as he summoned the guidance field and had it expand, showing a map of everywhere he had been to, including his current location.

There was dot representing Kenno, as Replicus could track him. He had become his <Attachment> because of the lent guidance field and thus, even without a <Marked Spot> he could trace his movement on the map. Likewise, there was another dot representing Yuyui who was with him right now.

"Now. All that's left is to setup a location. My other self was right. I have to make a good first impression on Kenno and his group. They'll be the first additions to Operation 'Living Solutions' after all. Hehehehe!"

Replicus looked up into the sky.

The sun was shining bright. A little too bright actually.

It was nice still.

Wait...

'Right! A sun!' Replicus thought with a jolt as he took out the Brilliant Dent, the storage pouch claimed from the Grand Priest and peeked into it.

Its description was made Replicus think.

~~~

[Brilliant Dent]

<Mythical>

A special storage pouch that can carry the weight of multiple continents while preserving the life of anything that is kept within it. The Dent can duplicate concepts observed by the user within its space, allowing them freedom in manipulating them as well.

-Special Effects-

- +50% to all stats for all inhabitants
- +90% energy regeneration for all inhabitants
- Can easily erect safety mechanisms the user desires
- Remains hidden until used or called by user
- Devours whole anything the user desires, but cannot guarantee permanent enclosure for special cases
- Filters energies

~~~

Everything about this thing was extraordinary, fitting the grade of Mythical but one thing interested Replicus most right now.

'Can duplicate concepts observed by the user within its space...' Replicus thought.

It had suddenly struck him.

The inside of the Brilliant Dent while inhabitable was still just a barely lit blank space. There were the mountains from Fortune yes but...

There needed to be more... vibrance.

A sun would do right?

The sun...

Could it be counted as a concept when dealing with this storage pouch?

The only way to find out was...

Replicus extended his fingers into the air and pinched at the far away sun while opening the mouth of the Brilliant Dent in his other hand.

He then withdrew his fingers with the image of the bright sun between them and...

...!

It never left!

A shocking brightness descended over the entire ruined town with an unforgiving light and fierce heat that...

VWOOOOSH!

Fire!!

Yuyui fell over from her seat from the light and flame that suddenly engulfed the entire town in an instant before Replicus hurriedly chucked the sun fitted between his fingers into the Brilliant Dent!

Everything returned to normal... for the most part, but Replicus' body was burning ferociously under red flames that were then quickly suffocated by the [Defiant Raiment of Perversion] before doing any form of damage to him.

"Well... crap!" Replicus said with his sockets flashing madly.

The entire town had turned black, charred beyond belief!

"That was incredible! This thing can recreate what I see! The result might be far from the real thing but at least I can control it as I see fit," Replicus said while analysing what had just happened.

This was insane!

This was the might of a Mythical grade tool!

Intriguing!

He peeked into the Brilliant Dent and saw the replicated sun he had just created lively resting high above the mountains while providing much needed light!

The Penetrator couldn't help but chuckle to himself.

"This should make a pretty fleshing good first impression."

Chapter 575: Making An Impression! (2)

Kenno and his group of roughly 30 bandits trekked outside a small town, the man donning a Pseudo-Mythical armour sighing continuously as throughout this entire time, he didn't know exactly where he was going.

He only knew he was supposed to be in the Belvion Union today but nothing more.

His followers were looking quite discontented as ever arriving here, they had not been allowed to enter any town or city to rest.

They had been wandering aimlessly for so long and without hearing anything specific from Kenno, which was very, very infuriating.

A few days had passed since the death of many of their members during their attempt to raid the Isise and this along with the boss' mysterious battle – that was never explained to them – against some kind of super reinforcement to the city of Evic that Kenno had claimed he could handle, left a lot of suspicion floating in everyone's heads.

The established trust was quickly breaking down and Kenno could feel it.

Day by day, he was losing his men's trust.

"Alright, I can't handle this anymore," a man by the name Udo said as he came to a halt.

He wore a deep scowl as he gazed at Kenno. The man with the true sapphire armour also stopped, his intense breath afterwards showing that he was expecting this to happen.

It seems like this was the final straw.

"If this continues, I'm walking away. As a leader you have the right to have your secrets but as of right now... I can't tell if you're the same person I decided to follow," Udo said, his words seeming to represent what everyone else was feeling.

The looks on everyone's faces mirrored how Udo's did.

Dissatisfaction and disappointment.

What were they even doing?

"You've been acting too strange. It's as if something has a leash on you, telling you what to do. All these random actions. The sudden order for us to retreat back then. How you suddenly had us go back to the Union to hand in our spoils. How you suddenly screamed like you were being bewitched or something that day...

All of this... You either explain it now or we take a walk..." Udo said with a determined face.

The others in the group silently nodded.

The tension grew to a terrifying high instantly, which made nearly everyone grip their weapons.

They understand their boss pretty well.

'There is no honour among thieves...'

This was what their boss believed. He was willing to make the most unsightly of decisions on the fly if the situation called for it.

The only reason the unsightly decisions hadn't involved any of the group members so far was because Kenno played the game smart, prioritising the gains first instead of taking losses for the great good.

But still... the situation could change.

Kenno scoffed, his eye twitching as a subtle rage built up within in for a brief moment, but he stomped it out.

He couldn't just kill these bastards.

They were needed alive.

'You wouldn't understand...' Kenno thought while grinding his teeth.

These fools wouldn't get it.

In the span of a few minutes, days ago, he had been killed and humiliated with the same threat of death until he submitted, not knowing that once he did, there were no windows for escape.

The sensation of dying over and over again...

The sensation of a sword plunging into his brain...

None of these fools understood it.

Skullius had forced Kenno into a Tie of Exchange that made him his property.

He was to do exact as Skullius said.

He was to obey every one of Skullius' commands.

He was to never scheme against him.

At first Kenno had thought this was a basic contract with loopholes but after feeling a deep, heavy weight in his soul after the Tie of Exchange was made, he knew this was different.

He didn't even know if telling his men about this was safe.

Kenno's gauntlets creaked as he frustratedly balled them into fists.

"You are ALL following me until the end. If you resist, I will kill you right here. Your pathetic lives will end and not even a bone will be left to testify that you once lived, even as a fucking bandit. That, I swear to you," Kenno said as a chilling bloodlust bled from his body, several white cards blooming rapidly as they were generated by Perfect Aura to float around him.

...!

Kenno threat was a lie of course but...

Unconsciously, everyone, including Udo gulped hard. They believed it.

Kenno's Genuine Incarnation was terrifying.

His technique was pretty basic, its lethality mainly depending on the properties of his armour but these cards... were incredibly dangerous. They were extremely deadly because of their ability to fly ridiculous quickly towards their target and they were also extremely powerful as defence tools as they were Object type Incarnations.

No one here, including the Shamans, had confidence in dealing with this.

"Uh... you must be the ones! I'm so glad I found you!"

As the tension turned the air rock solid, a cheery voice interrupted, making everyone turn to its source.

A lime haired girl stood behind the group, smiling affably while waving at them.

On instinct, Udo who had been on edge lunged at this individual!

Amid the normalcy of common folk passing by, someone suddenly appearing without them realising was... suspicious!

Udo's senses were alarmed and by instinct, he had already launched a hook chop with his hand to the back of Yuyui's head meant to incapacitate her!

...!

Suddenly, as the casual might of a First Phase Master bore down on the girl, the look in her eye changed momentarily, her arm whipping through the air with the swift motion of her body in a turn!

She exposed her elbow to Udo's wrist and with the other hand, she jabbed with a dagger that hissed with strange flame, lightly stabbing at Udo's armour!

The man paused, his eyes opened wide!

What... This woman...!

Even though she was nowhere near as fast as him, she had launched a perfect counter right when he had limited room to change the form of his attack, her dagger which was definitely Legendary grade threatening to rip him apart through his armour!

Fortunately, she hadn't intended to harm him.

Rather, she stopped herself.

Yuyui looked to snap out of whatever trance she had entered just now, the look in her eyes shifting to a friendly one once again.

"Oh... I-I'm sorry. Hahaha! That was just a reflex. I'm getting too used to being knocked around. I didn't actually hurt you, did I?" she said, carefully looking where she had nicked Udo's armour.

The man dumbly shook his head, hints of shame suffocating him from Yuyui's cheery and kind attitude.

Did he misread the situation?

"No... no. I am fine," he said much to Yuyui's delight. She breathed out a sigh.

She then turned to Kenno who looked to be getting the gist of who she was already. Her next words confirmed his thoughts rather quickly.

"You're the one, right? Blue armour, ugly face, stiff torso... Yep. Master is waiting for you," Yuyui said with a smile.

'Ugly? Is that the profile she was given by... Uh! Forget it,' Kenno thought.

"Where are we supposed to meet him?" he ignored the insulting profile and asked.

"Wait? Meeting who? What's going on?" Udo asked, a chorus of the same question ringing from the others in the group.

Kenno side glanced Udo.

"You'll get the full picture soon enough," he said.

Yuyui smiled and pulled out the Brilliant Dent.

"In here," she said.

Immediately, the figures of the group were skewed and pulled into the pouch forcibly with wails of fear!

There was a dark space where the group seemed to streak through as they were swallowed into the storage tool but before long, this stopped, colour and structure restored to what they saw.

A storm of mana bashed against the faces, making them groan.

It was a heavy mana-infused wind.

A warm, bright sun rested above while giving light to this scape.

Kenno and everyone appeared to be standing near the top of a mountain.

A stout mountain.

Kenno frowned.

'A storage space of this level...' he said to himself, looking around as did the others.

Crackles could be heard beyond, along with sounds of heavy things pounding against the ground, causing light tremors through the mountain.

What was this...?

Kenno took quick steps forward, scaling up the mountain until he reached the top.

When he did, he saw a bizarre, yet majestic sight.

A figure was seated on a throne set in a pool of boiling lava.

A terrifying figure.

It wasn't human. It didn't seem like it at least.

Behind its gracious throne that visibly pulled on vast colours in the surroundings, as if to feed them all to its master, the background of lightning, fierce white light and rising stone pillars added to the majesty of this creature which spoke in deep voice.

"Welcome, dear guests..."

Chapter 576: Making An Impression! (3)

Kenno gulped.

His instincts egged him to attack, but he held himself.

He needed to understand the situation first.

Who was this?

What was this?!

His crew rapidly followed after him and upon seeing the figure of Replicus, they all turned pale and took on defensive stances!

"What in the name of Listafelle is that?!"

"Boss...! BOSS what is that?!"

"Argghhhhh!"

The reactions were different but pretty tame compared to what they would have been if Replicus had not done a little tempering on himself.

Because of this, the thoughts rampaging through the minds of these bandits were all the same. They mostly the generic form of fear and the occasional brave soul calling in their hearts to 'kill it with fire.'

Right now, under the [Defiant Raiment of Perversion] Replicus' bones were not exposed. The only thing that could be seen were thick, dark clouds swirling within his hood, the same filling his robes as even within the sleeves, only bursts of the darkness of cloud saturated the confined space.

Four torching lights bled through the clouds from his hood, gazing at his guests as blinding flashes of Levin glared the eyes every time they struck, making some of the bandits grimace.

What on earth was this thing?!

A Cluster beast? A high tier beast from a Sacred Forest?

"Relax," Replicus said with his sockets flashing brightly.

He stood from the throne, walked through the boiling pool of lava that it was set in without getting harmed and emerged on the same ground his guests stood.

"Kenno. It's me. What you are seeing is my true form, unbound by flesh and firmly set in powers you can't even imagine," Replicus said, his voice oozing mystery while the storm clouds around him swirling madly around to hide his full figure even more, save for the perfectly exposed white cloud above his head.

'This is pretty cool. Who knew broadening vocabulary could make every sentence sound so... cool?!'

Kenno's face darkened.

It darkened even further when his guidance field involuntarily popped up in front of him with the words, 'It's really me' shown on it.

His doubts were erased immediately.

The Penetrator had learned to do this after messing with the guidance field enough where <Attachments> were concerned. He could manipulate the guidance field for Yuyui and Kenno as he wished!

The armoured man nearly buckled under the shock.

His group was the same.

They all looked at Kenno while expressing incalculable levels of astonishment and amazement.

Kenno was in leagues with this creature?

Was this what they had been dying to know?

"Now, now. Don't look at him like that. I gave him no choice. I'm sure the sting of being killed is still ringing in his head right now," Replicus said as his figure zipped towards Kenno, much to everyone's alarm but...

They all found that they couldn't move to attack!

It seemed like... this entire world forbade any move against this being seemingly made of cloud!

This was a feature of the Brilliant Dent – enacting defences of various kinds.

Replicus' body circled around Kenno who took deep breaths, trying to cope with the situation.

As he did, he addressed the rest of the group.

"You are all minor figures that I spared that day. Had I wanted to, I could have killed every single of you after killing your boss. But... you're here today because I find you to have the potential for both use and growth," Replicus explained, a stream of Levin carving its way out of his body to carve into the ground menacingly as he spoke.

Silently.

Powerfully.

"I am not a beast. I am a fully sentient, evolved species much like you. I feel that should discourage some moral ethnics you may try to push against him. That said, as you stand here now, I present you with two options. Heed me and follow me till your release or die here and now. I'm make it a painful send off for wasting my time."

...!

Gulp.

The world turned darker as Replicus said this, the sun dimming considerably under his command to give his Levin more shine. Literally.

Heavy breaths could be heard, sweat running down pale faces.

Some looks of rage were targeted towards Kenno who didn't utter a single word but they were few and their ferocity dwindled quickly as Replicus spoke again.

"You seem to think you have all the time in the world to ponder over this..." he said as he pointed towards one of the bandits who was shaking excessively in fright.

"Break."

...!

Crack!

An inhumane howl escaped the mouth of this bandit as he fell to the ground, clawing it at miserably!

His mana core had been cracked and the pain this brought was nothing short of excruciating!

The Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator let him scream and cry bitterly for a full two minutes without showing him any mercy.

It was quite entertaining to watch for him, though not for the rest. Even Kenno shut his eyes and turned away.

Skullius snapped his fingers and the man's mana core exploded with a light shatter that everyone heard, the mana contained within it bursting through the bandit's mouth, eyes and nose before streaming to Replicus where it was compressed into a shining white ball that the Penetrator tucked in his sleeve, adding to the 212 he already had.

The corpse fell to the ground, silence returning to the space.

Once again, desperation and fear clutched the bandits madly, this time a tighter grip!

Replicus pointed at another one of the bandits.

"I'll do it! I'll do it! Please spare me!" the bandit, a short man immediately dropped to his knees and begged.

With his action, the others followed suit, falling to their knees, some begging while others simply shook while touching the ground.

Soon, all were submitting. All except for Udo.

He stood with a fierce expression diluted with terror, refusing to simply bend and take this.

"Oh? You have a differing opinion?" Replicus asked.

Udo, with heavy panting looked to Kenno with disgust.

"So.. so this is what this was about? You really did stick to your... code till the end," he said before gazing sharply at Skullius. "I refuse to do this. I may be a thief...

a murderer... but I won't be manipulated like this. I'd rather die!"

The mass of storm clouds decked in robes shifted in amusement.

"Is that so?" Replicus asked as he moved closer to Udo who shivered intensely as sparks of Levin tickled his body. "I know a thing or two about not fearing death. However, I don't see that in you. Sadly, for you, such a strong individual, I won't take no for an answer."

From behind Udo, ethereal strings appeared and injected themselves into his body viciously, the man jolting to an aloof stance before a guttural scream came from his mouth!

The image of Ferex swiftly appeared out of thin air, overlooking Udo's convulsing body. His screams were much louder and more goosebump inducing than the ones from earlier!

The scene of his torture but nigh invisible string was so terrifying that some of the other bandits closed their ears and shut their eyes.

The pain of having one's soul toyed with was too much.

Thus shortly after...

Udo folded, just like everyone else in the end, looking very unsightly as he twitched on the ground.

Four bright lights gazed down at him as he begged.

"Please... make it stop. I'll do it. I'll follow..." he said while gripping a handful of soil with his hand. It had been his ticket to not turning mad from the pain.

"Wonderful," Replicus said as he backtracked, ordering Ferex to let the poor man go in the process.

With clouds gathering under his feet, he floated over back to the throne and shifted the tone of the conversation casually.

The sun grew brighter, giving a nice shade of sunlight to the lands while erasing what had been a morbid situation.

It was still... but the light gave the illusion that it wasn't at least.

"Now let's talk about the deeper prospects of this little project of my mine in detail," Replicus said without waiting for the new followers to recover.

"I understand there are some strict requirements when dealing with this Union, your secret organisation. You're my ticket to understanding and infiltrating it. You'll also be my elite team that I will groom, feed and deck in the most top quality equipment. After all, I'm looking to set my standards a bit high."

His words confused the bandits.

Feed them?

Groom them?

What was he talking about?

What kind of relationship was this creature proposing?

Even Kenno was surprised.

"As of today, consider yourselves part of something big. A large operation. No. A large project. I don't care how you see me. I don't care what you will say behind my back.

All that matters is that you follow. At the very end, when I take you somewhere horrific, I'll expect you to plunge with me without fear."

Replicus snapped his fingers and a small mountain of Legendary and Legendary + grade equipment appeared, shining bright with unnatural elements tied to the Purity!

With the glow of such high quality loot, the eyes of the bandits were attracted, as was their nature nurtured through many years of thievery.

All this...

It was so...

Woow...

As some from the group began to wonder if they had misjudged this seemingly unfortunate event, the Penetrator's sockets flashed again.

"But before all the benefit... Your allegiance means nothing when it is mere words. Each of you will bind yourselves to me in the best of ways that I've come to know..." Replicus said with a cold tone.

Chapter 577: Out of the Loop

The Brisk Storm Avatar was a copy of the Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator bearing half of its stats and a majority of the original abilities.

The soul it bore was a replica of what the original had, indistinguishable by means within the bounds of normalcy. However, when it came to finer details, especially for Skullius, not everything was retained.

A replica of Sila's soul couldn't be made within Replicus' body. The skill wasn't strong enough to copy two souls, especially with the fact that Sila's soul was leagues above Skullius' in quality.

Why was this relevant?

Replicus, at this moment in time couldn't use Sila to help him form multiple Ties of Exchange with these bandits. This had been something Skullius considered way back, before acquiring the [Brisk Storm Avatar]. Back then, with UNCoddled still a threat to him, he had considered that once he split, he would need new allies.

Since a Tie of Exchange wasn't something he could do himself, he had chosen something else.

When Skullius acquired his rewards for the missions he had taken, he had been entitled to claim one Legendary grade item as well as one Unique grade item from the first Treasury through one of said missions. Therefore, on top of the Simmering Cloud and Plasma coin rewards, he had taken a Unique grade Prompt Spell and a Legendary grade dagger which he gifted to Yuyui.

The Prompt spell he took was something he selected for its ability to act as a discount substitute to a Tie of Exchange. At the very least, it gave him some form of assurance.

After extracting the skill held within the scroll, Skullius had decided not to use [Unbound] on it then because he had decided to save all 12,000 units he had saved to use them on his mana core and since then, he hadn't had time to entertain the idea.

~~~

[Ungential Bind (Special) | Lv.1]

The user is able to give any living target one restriction which they cannot break. A bind is placed on the target's heart and should the target break the restriction placed on them, they will die instantly.

<Limit – 0/10>

Mana Requirements: 200 (I) Mana Points

Duration: 1 year

Cooldown: 7 minutes

~~~

"Hmmm..." Replicus hummed.

He contemplated.

The restriction he gave lasted to for one year. That was more than enough time.

The Penetrator chuckled while stretching out his bony fingers towards the group.

He pointed at Udo and activated this skill.

This man would be the first victim of [Ingenial Bind].

A golden thread snuck from Replicus' finger and stabbed into Udo's chest.

The bandit tensed as he felt around his heart, something winding to eventually strangle it lightly.

After, this words of the Penetrator came out.

"You will not disobey anything I command."

The moment he said it, the golden thread around Udo's heart squeezed hard before loosening and disappearing from his body.

Udo shook.

The impact of Replicus' words smacked against his brain like a hammer, constantly ringing in his head.

No one needed to explain what was happening.

It was obvious.

This one order was profound as with it, given that this was coming from everyone else, there would be no easy means of escape.

'It will take too much time to form a bind with everyone else with this skill,' Replicus thought. He made the decision to 6,000 Null Life Essence Points to enhance it with [Unbound]. Using 10,000 for the Special Bonus was risky in his opinion. There was a downside to having the skill become so strong as that meant he wouldn't be able to use it.

If it evolved into a Super skill, which could only be activated with mana from a purple core, then it would have been a waste.

As he upgraded [Ingenial Bind], Replicus' sockets flared.

'Might as well make conversation in the meantime,' he thought.

"Now, tell me. How do we get to the Severed Union?" he asked the group.

Soon after binding everyone, he wouldn't waste time with more irrelevant stuff. The next order of business would be to go this mysterious place and uncover its secrets.

The four disembarked from the carriage.

A massive, well maintained space was all that could be seen.

Stylla wore a small smile as she saw the wide gates to her Family's estate, with guards adorned in high quality armours waiting to receive her and her everyone else.

A lean but fit man with one of the most ordinary faces in existences walked up to Stylla from the line-up of guards, his steps leading him to the woman who lead the group's march from the carriage.

From this man's appearance, however normal it seemed, one could still perceive an unusual firmness about him.

His golden eyes burned with integrity while his medium length amber hair made a conscious effort to hide them with low bangs.

This man bowed deeply before Stylla.

"Welcome back, Lady Stylla," he said to which the red head in question smiled.

"It's nice to see you, Ed," Stylla reciprocated the warm greeting. As the guard stood straight, Stylla's eye twitched a bit as her gaze fixed into the man's eyeballs without a blink.

The guard didn't show a reaction to this.

He only smiled.

"I was beginning to contemplate coming to Genhuis City after you didn't contact us for so long, Lady Stylla. My duty may be to protect your father but surely, he'd devour me whole if any harm found you."

Setkh snorted at the hearty conversation.

His reaction attracted the guard, Ed's attention, and he gave a perfunctory bow coupled with a greeting laced with an indifferent tone to Setkh.

The red headed male didn't mind. His choice to leave the family had earned him no shortage of loathing from everyone here, no doubt.

Conversely, it earned Stylla a lot of respect as the one who remained, taking care of things despite how terrible the situation had gotten.

Ed turned to Skullius.

"This is...a new member of our family. Festos. He's with me. That... is Karrun," Stylla gave introductions that depicted openly how much she disregarded Setkh's inducted choice.

Karrun didn't mind though, and neither did Setkh.

Ed nodded before having the large black gates to the estate opened.

"We'll walk from here," Stylla said as she lead the journey once more. She urged Skullius to keep up with her which he did, though with a suspicious hum.

From the gates and extravagant decorative white fence around the massive estate, a clear pathway followed, its direction into a beautiful arrangement of exceedingly tall trees that looked like a mix of eucalyptus and weeping willow marvellously layered on by splendid masonry.

It was classy.

The lined up trees on both sides of the road stretched for half a mile, making the slow walk quite a long one.

As they trekked, Stylla turned to Skullius.

"You know, I believe my family has always had a knack for finding beautiful things. I rarely ever indulge myself in such a thing but... father did. As did his father and many that came before," she said, her gaze turning up to the draped branches of these trees that offered shade. "Dizzy Lowtides are rare but father managed to secure them and insisted that we added them from the house to the entrance.

I can barely remember, but it was funny how he was so adamant about it."

"I see," Skullius said.

'Lady, have you forgotten again?' he thought while gazing blankly at these trees.

Why was Stylla suddenly interested in talking about something like this with him?

That was unusual.

"The rarest thing my family has ever collected is something that gave us the opportunity to grow from common folk. The origin of our technique. Hmm," Stylla explained as she gave a subdued laugh at the end.

She looked straight at Skullius, her gaze making the Hybrid Luman a bit uncomfortable as it literally pinched at his skin.

'Hmm?'

Skullius... got the hint. A little bit.

She wasn't just expositing for no reason?

"That item, regardless of how rare it is, served its purpose and is no longer of use to us. Once used many years ago, it altered our bloodline and that was it. Still we've kept it under high security storage. If it ever finds different hands, we may no longer be the only ones with our technique. Thus father was particularly... adamant about its safety."

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

As he and Stylla were walking ahead of everyone else, with Ed following close behind... the distance between them and the rest grew continuously.

Additionally...

'What's going on here?' Skullius thought.

He sensed Ed spewing bits of mana and Aura that occasionally brushed against Stylla and himself regularly as light breezes.

The piercing gaze.

Stylla's gait.

And now this...

Sure, this information was important.

As Skullius had read and learned from many sources, most Families discovered their techniques in the Age of Patkmas Yujgi. Some mimicking beasts while others learned from other phenomena.

So what...?

Stylla didn't say anything after this which puzzled Skullius a great deal.

He spend the rest of the way from the trees mulling it over until finally, the group reached an enormous mansion sandwiched by three smaller ones.

From here, it was easier to see the other works going on beyond the houses.

A large farm.

Multiple gardens.

Several orchards.

An expansive field being tended to by both male and female tenders dressed for the job could also be seen but there were many other sites in this place.

Setkh wore a bit of a melancholic look as he looked at the mansion, a mix of emotion raging within him.

He emitted a sigh that would have tasted bitter if a flavour was something it could churn.

This place.

How he had missed this place when he was in that dreaded cavern.

No one knew the worst of it.

"Ed," Stylla said with a slightly broken tone as they all gazed at the face of the mansion. "He's still the same isn't he?"

Ed merely nodded with a stern face.

Of course.

Nothing had changed which was both good and bad news.

"Would you like to see him before anything else?" Ed asked while paying attention to Stylla's face.

He understood Stylla quite well as someone who grew up tending to her. To her, he was more than a guard. He was a friend.

Stylla nodded.

She didn't intend to waste time. She wasn't here to continue gazing at the weakening of the Family from its remaining comforts. She just had to see her father again.

Skullius felt a bit of tension rising.

Ed was tense.

Stylla was tense.

Setkh was tense.

Even Karrun was tense.

This wasn't a casual visit to show-off poor cursed daddy, was it?

Chapter 578: Luke-Warm Welcome

The interior of the main mansion was glorious.

A line-up of maids could be said standing from the doorway as they all bowed at the entrance.

"Welcome back," they all said in unison. In light of Setkh's presence, it seemed like they expressed this welcome as vaguely as possible in order to not offend everyone or openly express their disapproval.

This was the Head Maid's idea.

She stood between the two rows of maids and bowed as well, her hearty smile and attitude as she welcomed Stylla who was in the lead, depicting how much she cared for this lady.

The fiery haired woman patted the maid's shoulder with a cheery smile.

"It hasn't been that long Arisa," Stylla said with muffled laugh.

Setkh would have loved to scoff at this too, but that wouldn't do him any good.

Ever since he returned to the Estate, many months after his father was cursed, he had been met with the most basic of care. Unfeeling care. While Stylla accepted him back in father's stead, none of the auxiliary staff ever showed him the warmth they had portrayed before.

There were no accolades for deserters, as he was seen.

Ed led the way into the house while everyone including Arisa followed.

The dark red carpet with black streaks travelling along its length gave the procession a majestic feel to it.

The large, winding staircase to the right that led to other floors, the massive chandeliers decorated with red gems that would light up with a golden glow when needed, the spacious halls and multiple closed rooms...

All this was the basics where a Family house was concerned.

Skullius, allowing himself to be distracted from the gnawing feeling of tension just now, appreciated the lavishness of this home.

Sadly, there was no time for that.

As Stylla had said, she wanted to see her father first and that was where Ed lead everyone as per her request.

The mansion was mostly empty.

It was hard to say but the little family Stylla had, had deserted when her father was said to be incurable by normal means. Most of them at least. Some went off to find a better living elsewhere because of the decline that followed while others just couldn't bear to stay in the silence.

It was disheartening.

This why Stylla opted to take only the weaker combatants within the Family with her to Genhuis and left the rest to protect the estate, and her father.

The silence made her feel that perhaps... all was lost.

The echo of steps was brutally vibrant in an hollow house.

How crippling.

The group was led to the end of one of the many hallways where a plain wall could be seen.

The tension grew even thicker.

Tens of guards patrolled this area and when the group arrived, they joined in as Ed gestured towards Stylla who stepped forward.

If her father was to be kept safe, then where he was hidden wasn't to be obvious.

This wall was the entrance to the protected space and it could only be opened by someone of Bryne blood.

A lot of resources were expended to make it as well as the space within as keeping her father safe from concurrent attacks from whoever had cursed him had been her goal.

Setkh's eyes gave a sheen of displeasure. Only his blood wasn't registered on this mechanism. If he wanted to see father, he needed to beg Stylla, the only one who entertained him quite a bit after his return, to help him.

Stylla walked up to the white wall decorated with picture frames as well as pedestals where vases with flowers could be seen leaning against it.

She touched the wall and a ripple of mana ran through it with a nigh imperceptible light. A small puncture appeared on her palm as a bit of blood was drawn which revealed runes that swam through the solid wall to create... the shape of a door!

Indeed.

Runes.

Stylla took a breath and walked through the shape, her figure sinking in seamlessly.

Ed followed.

Skullius hesitated a bit before walking through.

It was like passing through cool shade.

A very interesting experience, especially for someone as sensitive as Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman's senses expanded and he felt a rather massive space all around with his expansive Machi.

A stretch of steps leading downwards appeared and he found Ed and Stylla already scaling down them.

Weird.

There also seemed to be a foggy darkness. It wasn't effective on him but to others, it obscured the view very efficiently, showing only bits of structures all around and the immediate surroundings.

Setkh emerged from outside, his eyes still showing a weird mix of emotion. He hadn't been to this place often but it's creation... sigh.

The group scaled down and up as the stairway shifted in direction.

With more time passing, Skullius found that this place lacked the presence of mana.

On top of that, there were multiple stairways criss-crossing against each other everywhere as if to misdirect any who didn't know the way. Following Stylla seemed to be only way to reach the destination or more aptly, following the one who opened the mechanism to this place.

The clomp of the tens of combatants as well as the main group was all that could be heard and once again, the Luman felt tension rising.

'This must have cost an outrageous amount to build. There are runes everywhere,' he thought.

Of course arrays wouldn't have been enough if you thought someone was trying to kill your father, their means of doing it so powerful that they didn't leave traces that could be found by powerful Diviners.

Skullius wondered.

'If this person is so powerful or at least so resourceful that they can fling a curse like this... why not finish the job? I don't think even runes can protect against the means he is using if every source Stylla has tried to secure hasn't worked Maybe that wasn't the goal?'

Peculiar.

Peculiar indeed.

Soon, the group arrived at another end.

This time, there was a door.

A rather plain door over an expansive wall masked by the foggy darkness.

Once again, Stylla stepped forward, took a breath and placed her hand on it.

A pulse of mana ran through the door and Stylla's palm was pinched once again for a sample of her blood. It seemed her hand was required as well to verify if it was really her opening the door.

In this dark space, the door creaked open, revealing a very small room where a large bed was laid.

Asides from a small table where several picture frames of Stylla's mother and father were displayed and a chair set beside the bed, nothing else could be seen.

Skullius narrowed his blind eyes.

A wafting dread brushed against his Koten.

A curse.

The sensation such a thing gave out was something he could pick up on, despite the nature of the curse being different from what he knew.

This spoke to one thing. It was a powerful curse.

This curse latched onto a man laying on the bed while dressed up in casual shirt and pants, his feet bare and his body motionless.

He had medium length fiery red hair and a stubble, the remains of a beard that looked to have been shaved recently.

A cylindrical wall of light covered his bed, nurturing his body with an absurd amount of mana while also guarding him from any potential harm.

Skullius could tell, thousands of runes made up this light, their source being the bed the man laid on which was some sort of magical artefact. He didn't have much interest in studying it though. At least not now.

Stylla held herself from succumbing to emotion at this sight.

Hope deluded her into thinking that if she just stood here and watched long enough, she might just see her father open his eyes and rise.

Sadly...

Head Maid, Arisa wore a solemn and sullen expression.

"Lady Marie was here to tend to him a few days ago..." she explained.

"I see. Explains the stubble..." Stylla said with brief smile. Her father's sister had come by.

Setkh gave his father a lifeless gaze, as did Karrun beside him.

Skullius merely remained silent. This felt like latest his experience with Serenity where she allowed Somanda to tempt him with the image of the missing part of his soul.

He felt he had no right to say anything here.

"Lady Stylla, we will leave you to—"

"No need," Stylla interrupted the Head Maid as she was about to exit the room and wait outside. Ed who had walked in with everyone was about to do the same but stopped as well at the lady's words.

Why though?

"There's no need for all of you to leave," Stylla said as she walked over to stand by the bed. She gave her father a loving gaze before her eyes turned cold, turning to everyone in the room.

There was a vicious murderous intent in her eyes!

Everyone tensed.

What was it?

The redhead's eyes locked onto one person and one person only, giving off an unfeeling and deadly air as she did.

"Did you find pleasure in it, Setkh?!" she asked as her teeth gnashed together, their prints nearly showing from her cheeks.

Setkh's expression turned dark.

"Did you find pleasure in cursing our father?!" Stylla barked as unconsciously, Aura burned from her body in a malicious explosion!

Chapter 579: Twisted Truths

...

For a moment, only the brimming of Stylla's Aura could be heard as silence tore through the contained space.

Her words just now had been clear but everyone, for a moment, couldn't make sense out of them.

Setkh...?

Ed, Arisa and even Skullius turned to Setkh with hard faces plastered with contusions of shock, however they coloured their differing skin tones.

The most trusted guard and the most trusted maid were particularly shaken.

The guards outside were astounded by this detail as well, hearing it through the open door.

But... no...

"Lady Stylla..." Arisa began with a shaky voice, her feet subconsciously drawing her away from Stylla's brother.

Ed clutched the hilt of the sword at his side but burdens of disbelief could be seen through his eyes.

"Lady Stylla..." Arisa called again, her eyes gazing at Stylla whose glare refused to leave her brother's face. She ignored everyone and with a voice like a howl...

"Look at me."

She said.

Setkh's eyes, lacking any particular intense shock or awe, rested on his father's body instead.

"Look at me."

Stylla called again.

Setkh didn't respond.

The Aura bursting in the room, causing the air to become stifled and thick with its force grew even more disastrously tumultuous as Stylla's face twitched while her hands balled into fists.

"Look at me, you fucker! I said FUCKING look at me!" she screamed at the top of her lungs, her voice paired with her Aura smashing into Setkh's face, literally!

The long haired man was bombarded cleanly, his body nearly sent flying had an indifferent Karrun not supported it!

Setkh bled from the nose, but he didn't look to be concerned with the pain.

Still, his eyes finally turned to the furious Stylla whose face had reddened so much it was nearly reaching the colouration of her hair, steam hissing from it as her technique subconsciously activated.

As the two locked eyes, Stylla reached into her pocket and showed a small piece of paper.

A sullen smile appeared on her face, its curve restricting the tears that fell from her eyes to continue their course to her chin.

"Tell me... tell me this is just a lie, hmm? Tell me.. this was someone's idea of fucking with me and trying to make us turn on each other. Tell me... this is just some...

I don't know... some bastard you met during your time away who wants to frame you..." Stylla said with a series of expressions that utterly broke Arisa who clasped her mouth with terror.

This was... this was real, wasn't it?

Setkh's eyes remained without the lace of any emotion.

He didn't respond.

He didn't even blink.

"ANSWER ME!" Stylla bellowed.

Setkh wiped the blood from his nose.

"Why should I try to convince you otherwise when you already believe everything on that note?"

Stylla's eyes shot open.

Of course.

She knew.

In fact, when she struggled over this message since the latest batch of matches in the Royale, she had found that... it was not impossible.

When her father was cursed, Setkh had already taken off. He returned a few months ago, Stylla begrudgingly welcoming him back because... at the end of the day, her father would have done the same.

They were blood. They had to stick together.

But... she had never suspected him. There was no reason he would do this... After all...

"But, Master Setkh..." Arisa spoke, her voice choked and her eyes leaking profusely. "No... it can't... He was so good to you. He loved you and you... you loved him just as much..."

Setkh didn't spare a glance to the Head Maid.

Instead, he glanced at Ed whose eyes burned with a growing, unveiled light of hatred, not the concealed disdain from before.

He then spoke once more.

"It's easy for you to put it that way, isn't it?"

Setkh's sight returned to his father.

"You're right. He loved me and I loved him. But in the end... I guess fear was just that much stronger," he said.

...!

Suddenly, Karrun grabbed his shoulder and the two vanished!

Skullius who had been listening to this reveal silently, stormed over at a magnificent speed where Setkh and Karrun had been standing!

He threw a mighty straight punch at the air and...

BAM!

He felt something fly and knock against the wall from the force of his fist!

'I knew it!'

Ed heard the sound too after being disappointed a split second earlier that this treacherous young Master had escaped but now...

"They are here, just invisible to your eyes!" Skullius yelled.

Ed drew his sword and slashed where he had heard the impact, but his sword merely clashed with the reinforced wall, giving a loud clang!

'Damn it! It's a pretty effective technique!' Skullius thought as he bolted out of the room.

None of the guards standing there could understand what had just happened at all. Given the fact that the only light source came from within the room, it was easy for someone invisible to escape them.

Skullius pushed them away and focused his senses but still... nothing!

'I'd always been wondering since that day when he first showed it...' Skullius thought, recalling the day he first met Karrun.

Setkh had announced for him to show himself after the small conversation that night and out of nowhere, Karrun had appeared, revealed to have been sitting among them the whole time and yet, they hadn't noticed his presence!

This had bothered Skullius quite a bit. For someone like him who relied on his senses, it didn't make sense for him to be unable to feel the shape of someone present, even if they were invisible.

Perhaps this opinion of his was brought on by Silrat who claimed that Karrun wasn't actually that strong when compared to him which had led to this great suspicion.

Had Silrat been mistaken?

Silrat of all people? Unlikely.

His entire role revolved around seeing the worth in people, particularly combatants.

This matter had eluded Skullius for long but now, he had gained a subtle hint.

His awareness had spiked since Stylla had dropped the massive reveal and in the moment Karrun had touched Setkh, a barely discernible itch had pinched at the innards of his head. It was easy to forgo but not for Skullius who had a great level of consciousness to his body.

When he felt the itch, that was when he suddenly couldn't sense Karrun or Setkh anymore.

And then he realised it!

That sockethole was a powerful Mind Caster with the ability to mess with perception of seemingly any kind!

A hand suddenly pressed against Skullius' shoulder from behind.

It was a seething and broken Stylla who gazed at him with feverishly wrathful eyes, her face so close to Skullius' that he could taste her skin with but a shift of his lip.

"Get him! I beg you! Please, don't let him get away!" she implored.

The Hybrid Luman's face shifted as a wave of emotions flooded him from this...

He felt his soul churning.

"He won't," he found himself saying.

*

Loud panting could be heard as Karrun and Setkh dashed up the stairs at full speed, their Auras wrapping around them fiercely.

They couldn't be perceived but this wouldn't last long.

"You should have guessed that she had found out," Karrun said.

"Yes. But I couldn't have. I suppose they saw it fit to make me hurry it up by tipping her off on this. Damn it!" Setkh said, a rather dark look on his face that was smeared with pain.

Emotional pain.

He thought he had more time.

He had asked for it.

Sadly, they couldn't be reasoned with and neither could their motivation.

"This is not what we agreed on. I can't fight against all those guards, especially with Festos among them," Karrun pointed out while looking back but the darkness was just way too thick and he couldn't sense the presence of anything from the distance they had covered.

"I hired you specifically for things like this, didn't I? Besides... you won't have to fight," Setkh said while pulling from his spatial storage, a maroon ring which he slipped on his finger. As he did, his face hardened with unwillingness as he thought about the dreadful consequences of using it.

She would definitely die.

Stylla would definitely die if he used it.

He could save himself but...

No, Festos would definitely save her and it would all be alright in the end? Right?

All things he considered, he really did love her.

He loved her so much.

Her reproach against him leaving the Family back then, along with the memories of all the time he had spent with her was what he had used to hold on to sanity in that place.

That cavern.

How many years had it been? 5? 10 years?

He had held on for as long as he could, thinking about his sister and wishing he had heeded her words.

Regret.

Longing.

Pain.

His love for her had twisted over those false years of torture, desire and the only source of entertainment he could conjure.

Imagination.

Tsk.

"How much is your technique's limit range?" Setkh asked.

"Ten miles, give or take. I'm extending it that far with my Aura though and... DAMN IT! Something's coming!" Karrun's eyes bulged as he found that behind them, over the darkness already within this space, a darker, deeper darkness exploded towards them like a horrendous sand storm, hiding the glimpses of other sets of steps that could be seen with keen sight!

Setkh saw it too as he turned, his face depicting astounding horror.

What was this cascading darkness?!

Why was it so ravenous, devouring everything it came across and shielding it within its appallingly dark depths?!

Setkh panicked and infused mana into the maroon ring on his finger but immediately after, he too was devoured along with Karrun!

Within the darkness, a deadly suppression crushed his will and consciousness as he floated, burying even his Aura back into his body forcefully!

It was ruthless... but the ring held something....some things worse than the grip of darkness...

Chapter 580: Invited Monsters

Perfect Night Domain.

A skill forged by Skullius during his time in captivity in Inhone City. It was a skill primarily for capturing a target and RESTRICTING their abilities while bolstering Skullius' own for what could be called, a genuinely unfair advantage.

This is what had been used just now.

The Hybrid Luman had sent a wave of darkness that blasted forward and caught up to the speeding culprits. Even if he couldn't sense them, they would be trapped within the enclosure. Of this, Skullius was sure.

Behind him, the figures of Ed, the other guards and Stylla looked at him, baffled at the tremendous power behind the cascade of darkness that voraciously ate everything up!

What manner of strength was this?

What nature did it hail from?!

Stylla especially was pretty rattled.

She had been under the impression that Skullius had lost his first match in the Royale because he was simply outmatched and outclassed, with no further deliberation on other factors. Now, a possibility spawned in her head.

Was Skullius actually holding back some of his powers?

"Keep up!" the Hybrid Luman called to everyone following behind him as he shot forward.

The [Perfect Night Domain] he had conjured had been erected from ahead of his position to the entrance that lead to this hidden space – the direction most likely to be where Setkh and Karrun were escaping to – thus Skullius wasn't actually in the domain itself.

He dashed towards the massive wall of darkness.

'Karrun's technique is pretty strong. Does he have an Advanced Class? Even with [Perfect Night Domain], I still can't sense his or Setkh's presence! Did I catch them on not?' Skullius wondered while sinking within the dark enclosure.

In this dark space, the floating bodies of Karrun and Setkh completely submerged in darkness were barely conscious, yet the former's technique was still active. Setkh was drowning in drowsiness as

his will was crushed, regret pounding on him like a hammer. It seemed all he had persevered through, was about to turn meaningless all because he had failed to commit to one choice.

That seemed like the case.

However, his maroon ring flashed, a radiant light suffusing from it as in the next moment, three streams of what looked like dark red mist shot from it, charting their way through the thick darkness in different directions!

One knocked soundlessly against a stairway masked by the darkness while another swirled in the pitch aimlessly, as did the last.

The streams coagulated, their fumed masses dispersing to outline three human figures.

This elaborate view was only for Skullius who watched on in surprise as the only one capable of seeing through the [Evil Darkness], even while blind.

He frowned.

One of these newly arrived figures spoke, but his voice was muted by the effects of the [Perfect Night Domain], once again, its only audience being the master of this domain.

...!

"What a stifling night..." it said.

Following those words, the darkness disappeared as if it were never there in the first place.

...!!!

Skullius reeled in genuine shock!

No way!

What surprised him wasn't that his darkness was dispersed. That could be done by sufficiently strong combatants as his affinity with [Evil Darkness] was still only at the B rank.

What took the breath out of his false body was the fact that his darkness... hadn't been dispersed at all!

It was...

"Queer..." the same voice that had spoke within the darkness sounded again.

It came from a man adorned in a black and blue coloured robe that reeked of mana, a glittery beauty over its tough exterior advertising its quality. A grey scarf was wound around his neck, somehow matching well with his long, draped grey hair and handle bar moustache.

In his right hand, as he stood on one of the many stairways, was a wooden sceptre housing a black gem atop it, as well as a peculiar little creature.

A lizard?

No.

It was a small salamander the size of a man's palm!

Its scaly body was darker than the night and around it, reality seemed to deconstruct itself into tangling lines, the very origin of the world!

The little salamander's large, yellow eyes looked unblinkingly at Skullius who still wore a flabbergasted visage because he was certain that...

That was his darkness...!

The darkness making up [Perfect Night Domain], had been transformed into that little salamander!

This was...

"Transmutation..." Skullius said as his guard peaked in an instant.

This meant... his opponent was a Mage!

"Indeed..." the man with the robe and sceptre confirmed Skullius' words with an unamused wink. "I thought that darkness was merely some kind of... basic elemental application but I confess myself sorely mistaken."

The Mage ran his finger over the little creature on the sceptre before turning his gaze turned to two individuals.

Karrun and Setkh.

The latter was breathing heavily... anxiously as he also looked at the Mage. Karrun merely kept his eyes wide open, his feet arranged for action any time.

"Don't even think about slipping away," a voice crept from beyond Karrun's shoulder and he felt himself get bound tightly from behind in the blink of an eye.

A freakishly muscular man was standing behind him, his one hand binding both of his wrists.

Setkh turned to this man as his anxiety grew, along with his regret at using the maroon ring to summon this bunch.

"It was ingenious on your part to hire such a valuable asset. I still can't believe this little runt can escape even leader's eyes with his technique."

The human shaped muscle mass clutching Karrun chuckled. His drooping red eyes and abnormally large grin were unsettling, contrasting adversely with his pale blonde hair in a mullet-like style.

"Because of that, I'LL hang onto them..." a third voice said, followed by the emergence of neon, yellow coloured nooses that gripped Setkh and Karrun's necks tightly!

The two grunted.

The man responsible for this stood a distance from them, in his hand a yellow coloured Genuine Incarnation in the shape of a short rope, its end tied into a noose.

This man looked ordinary – stern face with sunken cheeks, chapped lips, bored ocean blue eyes and short, glossy brown hair.

He raised his hand with the Incarnation of a noose and the replicas of it around Setkh and Karrun rose too, lifting them off the ground!

"Take them. It's about time we get this over with. Have them show you where IT is quickly," the Mage said as he swiped the air with his hand.

A distortion popped through the space, large and small black particles forcefully emerging to cause sparks that stretched the firm air in order to open a portal!

The process wasn't easy though.

'There is some interesting runic infrastructure here. It's obstructing my control. Hmmm, the absence of mana is also makes this difficult. Queer... This is only enough to stop mere Master Mages though,' the Mage thought as a flood of refined mana bubbled from him, causing a ferocious blast wave to creep from his body and knock back everyone except his partners!

Even Skullius was sent tumbling down the steps but he quickly recovered, his senses showing him the man with the noose pulling Karrun and Setkh through a bright portal that had been successfully created!

'SHIT!' Skullius cursed as he forged a [Bead of Malevolence] and sent it hurtling towards Setkh's body!

Sadly, the robed Mage noticed its shockingly fast approach and opened a mini portal right when it was about to knock against the oblivious Setkh!

...!

PCH!

One of the guards grouped up on the steps suddenly had their head blown off, their body falling to the ground as a quick dark object darted across him!

The Hybrid Luman sensed this and wore a dark face.

'He teleported my attack that easily?'

Things had gotten really bad.

Ed stood before Stylla who was still reeling in shock and fury, his long sword steady in his hand. He called to the other guards to keep formation and not to get distracted as they keenly looked to the threat while also guarding Arisa the Head maid.

Skullius clicked his tongue.

Setkh, Karrun and that other man swiftly vanished through the portal.

"Setkh, you coward!" Stylla roared madly as she watched this traitor disappear.

'Damn it!' Skullius cursed again.

Well, there goes his promise. But it wasn't too late.

"What's the point of this? There's so few people to fight here," the muscular man said with disappointment, his eyes scanning over everyone before zooming in on none other than Ed.

Aha!

A Master Stage expert!

At least a high level one!

His interest was peeked somewhat!

Skullius' body burned with thickets of mana subconsciously.

As he saw the half naked hulk readying his large limbs for a high speed pounce, he reflexively raised his guard even further.

'He's no pushover," he thought with caution, many plans racing through his mind.

His mind worked on overdrive but even while preoccupied, it registered something.

...!!!

A strong breeze fettered against his skin before a heavy fist nearly as large as his head pounded into his face and sank in!

"Out of the way, weakling!" a boisterous voice called at the same time as Skullius flew with a series of after-images, his body smashing against the ground forty meters away, bounced up violently and crashed into three other stairways a hundred meters away!

The sound of the impacts as well as the shockwaves of the incredible force and debris only showed themselves moments later as the one of the receiving end disappeared into the darkness!

The hulking pile of excitement guffawed as he darted towards Ed whose stance changed, a daring look as cold as snow and as sharp as the edge of a blade sparkling in his eyes.

A menacing, precise energy surged from him, exciting his opponent who didn't stop his charge!

This was good!

This was very good!

Being summoned like this was worthwhile when an equally dangerous opponent was the prize!

The muscular beast of a man cocked back a tight fist and hurled it with all his might while Ed's sword moved, leaving a pristine trail of reflective light!

Both attacks met in the middle... but only one prevailed!

It was a fist forcing its way into the hulk's thick face with a terrible force.... and weight!

The delivery was so fast that Ed, his opponent and the onlookers had missed it, the previously awaited clash of brawn and sword rendered meaningless!

However, what everyone didn't miss was the shrieking of the air as tens of thousands of tonnes worth of weight hammered cruelly into the enemy and sent them flying rapidly, their appearance shrinking in everyone's sights!

BOOOOOM!

The reinforced walls of this place received the man who had just eaten this attack within them, their solid stretch crackling as bits of themselves fell!

The Mage smiled in amusement as he glanced at his partner and then at Skullius who healed himself while wiping away the blood from his face, licking some of it with his tongue.

"Who the flesh are you calling a weakling?" he said with an annoyed visage.

Ed was dumbfounded.

As were the others.

That was speed was unreal!

Even if they were distracted, that kind of movement was on another level!

They didn't see Skullius until just now!

The Hybrid Luman began to address while keeping his focus on the enemies.

"Stylla, I don't think Setkh is escaping yet. He and that other man who took him are looking for something. Something precious that's like in this... I see. They are looking that thing you told me before, right?" Skullius said, coming to a realisation mid sentence.

Of course!

This had been Stylla's conclusion when she told him, hadn't it?

Stylla was about to respond after pushing away her tumultuous thoughts and emotions but Skullius cut her off. She just needed to listen and act.

"You can leave this place the same way you came in, right? Go now. Take everyone with you. I'll keep these guys busy. I trust that you and Ed can handle that rest outside."

Ed paused and smirked.

"We can," he said as he grasped Stylla's shoulder.

"Then go."

Stylla had much to say but she didn't argue.

She had sealed the entrance to her father's resting room which had all the most powerful runes around it so her concerns about that were lessened.

She could hardly believe these unexpected guests cared for her father anyway.

She bit her palm and touched the floor, a door made of runes appearing on the ragged surface with a spatial qualities.

"Don't die, you hear?" Stylla said to Skullius with an emotional huff to which Skullius responded with a thumbs up with his back turned still.

The group vanished into the door quickly while Skullius kept his attention on the movements of the unresponsive villains.

When everyone was gone, he finally spoke, directing his voice to the Mage.

"You don't mind them leaving?"

The Mage shrugged as he caressed the salamander on his sceptre.

"Whether they are in here or out there, I could care less. They will die anyway. Seddrik always kills. Innocent or guilty. What's more surprising is you remaining here to fight us on your own. Are you that confident?"

"WOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

A heavy noise shook the space.

It was the beefcake.

His face was bleeding profusely and his nose was broken but a fever was burning on his visage, bleeding into his reddened eyes as he gazed at Skullius with eagerness!

"I was so wrong! You! You're the one I want!" he yelled as his body just now produced a radiant neon light.

Skullius breathed out exasperatedly.

'I knew it. This man took a full force punch from me without defending with his Perfect Aura and he's barely harmed...' he thought.

If that didn't scream danger, he didn't know what did.

