

Undead 811

Chapter 811: The End of Household Errands

Moments later, Pherdanta, Kenno and Grim were back by Replicus' side on the shore of Deign.

"Good work, Grim," Replicus complimented the Unlimited, but the recipient of the praise didn't look too satisfied.

"Boss, what was that thing? And what did you do with it?" he asked.

"It's related to what the call to all Factions is all about. Something caused by that trembling from earlier," Replicus said before pointing at the spot where the darkness had tainted the sea.

"I saw everything from your armour. My theory is that these beasts are acting as surveillance and are also, to some degree forms for conquest. That bird was like a scout meant to call a stronger unit somewhere with anything worth taking."

"So the entirety of Feinheath has these creatures running around? Will they be turning the entire world black?" Pherdanta asked.

"I'm not sure. What bothers me, is the possibility of an enemy that can manipulate Primus for all forms of attack at will. That will be hard to deal with. What you faced in there, Grim... if it fully showed itself... we might have gotten a better idea of it."

The three Unlimited looked to mull things over.

The only beings who could use Primus energy well, were accomplished Priests, and even then, their forte wasn't combat. Using Divine energy like that for attacks, would be akin to using Nitros with each attack.

If all their enemies could do that, it would be like fighting dozens of Pseudo Incandescent Stagers. The numbers told by Timmit made the scenario even worse.

"As for what I did with the thing..." Replicus said before turning to the Sacred Forest. "...I had a friend deal the finishing blow. I wanted to extract what I could from the threat before putting it down. Let's go see."

Replicus began walking towards the forest when Pherdanta pointed to the inky darkness on the sea.

"Shouldn't we deal with that?" she asked.

"No. I'll let Yuyui handle it."

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For some reason, Replicus insisted on having the group walk to the forest, which took a little more than ten minutes. When they arrived though, the clamour and the view of what was happening somewhat explained why the Penetrator had chosen such a mundane method of travel.

The severely torn up and shredded figure of the large stone bird lay on the ground amid the chaotic rearrangement of some of the forest's elements, which had been the result of its flapping wings.

More than that though, a large, red stork was standing on the corpse of the large stone bird with what was most certainly a proud look, represented by the twinkle in its eyes and its raised beak.

Around it, several dozens of different creatures were celebrating, and some merely gazing in awe at Timmit. From the looks of it, most of them were ones that had had their habitats destroyed. It was rather shocking the amount of damage the simple flight of the enemy had caused.

What had been a dense part of the forest, had been turned into a ragged plain.

Instead of mourning though, most of the beasts had to give praise to their guardian for finally bringing the beast down.

"Yes, yes! And don't forget it. If I hear another disrespectful roar, peep, or tweet again, I will migrate to another forest! I have friends over seas!" Timmit called while flapping his wings.

Pherdanta and Kenno turned to Replicus.

"It was a favour," he said simply.

Earlier, he had instructed Timmit to retreat to his Territory and ready its Secondary assault function because he was going to teleport the large bird beast directly into the stork's Territory – as he did with the grey lightning.

Spatial Lightning.

After a long time of using the Kindling Heath to absorb the essences of the stout mountain, Replicus had gained an affinity with Spatial lightning. This high concept could teleport anything it hit to another location.

One had to have a very high affinity with the lightning to purposefully direct the target to a chosen location though, and more than that, Spatial Lightning had to be learned in tandem with Stagnant Space in order to prevent complications between the time in which a target was hit by the Spatial lightning, to when they would reappear in another location.

These principles were what Replicus used to teleport himself, and he had used them when creating the Limited Granted Warp skill of the Granted Armament.

Timmit saw Replicus approaching and he flew over to him.

"Well, that works as compensation, right?" the Penetrator said to him.

"Hmph! Are you sure you just couldn't take care of it yourself?" Timmit ridiculed.

"Don't push it," Replicus said with a sigh. "Where is Yuyui? In fact, where is your Territory?"

Timmit shook his feathers.

"I couldn't maintain it after that last attack. I overdid it. I suppose I could have turned it dormant again, but the strain my Secondary assault causes got to me. I'll project it later. As for that freak..." he explained, before pointing his wing to the right.

Yuyui was seated a far distance away on the ground, playing with the little creature that seemed to have begun seeing her as its mother.

Grim hurried to her.

Replicus looked at the beasts all around. Some of them were keenly paid attention to them.

"I suppose you've earned enough respect for us to come visit as we please without earning you doubts?" the Penetrator asked.

"Don't push it!" Timmit said with narrow eyes.

Replicus stifled a laugh.

"I would really appreciate it if you left. We have a lot to take care of for now. I can hear whatever you found out later. Let me maintain positive morale for a bit longer," Timmit continued before going away.

Pherdanta wore a frown.

"It's quite insolent," she said while glaring at the stork.

"It's a bird," Kenno remarked, rolling his eyes.

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A little while later, the group had returned to the Honing Fortress. As they entered the lower most floor, the Penetrator addressed his Unlimited.

"My errands here are done. I'll be heading to the Severed Coliseum soon," he said. "Because of the possibility for further incidents, I'll leave three of you here."

As Replicus said this, Pherdanta wanted to protest, imagining that the Penetrator was opting to travel without proper escort, but...

"You'll be coming with me, Pherdanta. Allora counts as an Unlimited, doesn't she?"

To that, the woman gave a curt nod, as did the others.

'I suppose Baddan also counts now,' Replicus thought. Pherdanta had told him that the Sky Watcher had awakened moments before the bird beast had attacked, and she had followed his instructions for him.

Honestly, Baddan had exceeded his expectations.

Replicus had thought it would take hours for Baddan to take in the technique he had granted, especially since he would be wrestling sentient creatures in his mind.

But no.

The Sky Watcher had been that eager and that driven.

Replicus' sockets flashed excitedly.

'Good. Now I can focus on what's next.'

It was time to go to the Severed Union.

Chapter 812: Served and Server

"The invitations you requested me to deliver were all received. What would you have me do now?"

In the bright, cool silence, a voice asked with a reverent tone. The one to whom it belonged knelt down without daring to raise his face. He dreaded catching even a glimpse of the one he served. He hadn't been allowed that in millennia.

No reply came for the inquiry that had been made for a while, but then...

"Be my company for now. That is all I need at the moment. It will be some time until you must leave my side, correct?" a voice that could have crawled out of the lips of a man or woman came, along with the soft ruffle noises that indicated lazy movements a few paces away.

"Why, of course," said the first voice in joyous tone.

An awkward lull followed. It seemed there was no particular subject that came to mind for either party. Thankfully, after minutes of thorough thought, the easiest of topics finally found its way to the lips of the second party to speak.

It was easy, yet heavy.

"It baffles me, you know? Every so often, there always rises someone who would see the world turn to flames, crushed of its beauty and people. Someone that doubts the might of the Deities, seeks to taint its reputation with course tradition and activity, or even to thwart the benevolence provided each day. However, I've never seen one who wishes to abuse it. Never. How ambitious."

"I-I see. The man you wish to stop right now..."

"Yes. Yes it is. Hmmm. But see, the problem isn't always the person who causes terror. The problem is that long durations of peace exist in between each tragedy, causing the ignorant masses to grow soft. The fools they get caught at their most vulnerable every, single, time!"

"Oh yes. We have seen that together, haven't we?"

"Yes," an agitated click of the tongue followed. "Do you know how many Incandescent Stage experts there are between Feinheath and Opungale?"

"No. I could never—"

"Only 275. A measly number like this would have been laughed at back in the day. Those beyond Incandescent... Oh, I can count them on one hand. This is the price of peace. It deludes and erodes the wills of even the strongest.

They are forced to make the choice to idle by each day, feeling their strength slip away. I remember the years where only Pelian had more than 300 Incandescent Stage experts. Guess how many Opungale had in those days."

"Uh... 8—"

"More than a thousand! After the Second Grand War, vicious monsters casually roamed Aigas. True firms powers. I was proud to see my people get something profound from the years of suffering that had finally ended. Well, they blundered later on with their relations, but at least their skills had been sharpened."

"Surely that must have—"

"Oh, you wouldn't underrated. It ached me to see them all fall. It was especially harrowing when they fell to age. As did those in Pelian, Emeradis and Maqi. I swear I could have... <Sigh>.

Worse yet, when I ascended to where I am now. I watched and learned, yet all these beings who termed themselves intelligent, didn't get it. Fiends always rise. They always do!"

"I can only imagine ho—"

"I blame the Purity. They give the commonfolk too much peace of mind. Even my own kind were fooled into relaxing... into thinking that collaborating with these posers could bring out long sustainable peace. What they needed was constant harassment to help them get it through their heads. The constant conflict of the Grand Wars.

But manufacturing such a thing would make me no different to the likes of Fulgardt."

"Of course, that's why—"

"Yes. That why I made the tough choice. The Severed Union. I had to make my own hub of the strongest that kept those who were willing to maintain their strength stimulated. Man and Sif alike."

Afraid to be cut off while making a decent attempt at receiving the monologue, the owner of the first voice paused. His counterpart didn't continue raging on, however.

It had been a long time since he had heard this person furiously reminisce, and in actual fact, what he had heard were details that he had started to forget, so he wasn't pretending to be interested.

"The others. Do they know? Have they already caught on to what is happening now? Are they prepared?"

The second voice maintained several moments of silence before answering.

"Oh they know. Just like me, they are already aware, but I doubt that they are prepared. I have more eyes than both of them combined. More hands. One of them can only flee at times, and the other has pride so fat it could weigh successfully on the seas. I may have chosen to stay hidden, but I play a valuable part in keeping Aigas safe far more than them."

"So... your decree..."

"You will know when it is time to open it, and read it along whomever concerns. Just make sure they all make haste. You will find out, along with them, that I have prepared everything they need for the journey. It is terrible news that I can no longer divine the presence and actions of that fiend, but very well, I cannot be reckless either."

The owner of the first voice nodded, and bowed.

The piercing gaze of his counterpart turned to him, and his spine creaked from the sensation.

That person's eyes were always cold, in the literally sense.

"Thank you. While watching, I often forget to speak. We'll speak more when I know things are going as I envision. For now, serve me a drink, will you?"

Obediently, the owner of the first voice turned and disappeared to accomplish what had been asked of him. He delighted in it, and he only exposed that he did, when was in front of the one whom he served.

Chapter 813: Unpleasant Welcome

Yuyui had just finished dispersing the dark ooze that had turned the waters black when she saw Replicus and the Unlimited appear on shore. Her Eye of Dispersal quickly closed up, and she wore a complex expression.

This duty that Replicus had delegated to her instead of passing it on to the Unlimited, who could have just as easily cleared up the mess, had been easy for her. Yuyui couldn't help but think, however, that perhaps the Penetrator had given the task to her just to show that despite what she chose from the options available to her, he still needed her.

She looked up at Replicus.

He looked different right now.

Instead of being a vague shape that was engulfed by clumps of dark cloud, a proper shape could be seen of him now, and it wasn't that of a pitch black skeleton laced with Levin.

A classy metallic clink rang with each step Replicus took, as he was decked in a gorgeous, slim armour – a dark one that had the nebulous design of innumerable foggy stars sparkling on its exterior, which made it look as though it had been carved out using the night sky.

The hints of blue and puce that swirled on the mean-looking armament made it difficult not to stare, though the ever bright flashes of radiant Levin certainly did, as did those that came from Replicus' horned helmet which had four narrow slits that reflected only a portion of the Penetrator's four glowing sockets.

Over the armour, an abundant, ghostly dark blue robe that was partially transparent could be seen, its long sleeves unoccupied, and left to float lazily in the air, just like the rest of it – as though they never knew gravity.

Replicus truly looked like one who conquered kingdoms.

Beside him, Pherdanta with her two swords strapped to her waist, followed the Penetrator closely, her stoic face, and pointed nose both hinting at how serious she took the task she adamantly stressed for herself.

"Master, I know you probably know what you're doing, but are you sure the two of you are... I mean, will whoever this Emissary of the Immortals is, take the two of you as enough to represent our faction?" Grim asked from behind.

"We are enough," Replicus replied succinctly, confidently.

Kenno strode to Replicus' other side. It was evident that he had an inquiry, but before he even opened his mouth to speak, the Penetrator answered him.

"I trust you enough to do it for me, Kenno. I will not change my mind. Your Hidden Class abilities are the most suitable for dealing with the current threats on the main land. Besides, your job isn't to fight them. Just reach the Bryne Family Estate, and inquire as much as you can. If you are lucky, you'll come across a flamboyantly dressed knight."

Kenno breathed out a sigh.

He wasn't exactly about to express doubt in his role for the task, but...

"Are you sure this doesn't break the accord of the Severed Union, boss? Approaching territories of Families within Pelian might just be... Especially for someone like me," Kenno said with visible concern.

"You'll be fine as long you don't fight anyone from there. You're going to infer about a part of me anyway," Replicus said calmly.

"Alright then..." the former bandit leader relented.

The task he had been given truly was rather troublesome on two fronts, but he was being entrusted with it. Well, to be more apt, it was the nature of his powers that made Replicus trust him so much. Be it with spars, and with missions that dealt with numerous opponents, everything seemed fair game with his powers.

"Could I go with him, boss? With my Armament alone, I'll be more than a big help," the energetic voice of the latest Unlimited, Allora, rose above the rest.

Her tall figure was adorned in her very own Granted Armament, and she was beaming incessantly, showing it off with every chance she got.

The moment she had been given it, she had gone for a dive to replenish it with both mana and Null Life Essence, and she wished she could get to try it out with something. Anything.

"No, Allora. There needs to be at least two Unlimited here, just in case. Do not be so overconfident that you forget the competence of other Factions. They would exploit any weakness of ours in a heartbeat," Replicus said.

Allora deflated a little.

The boss was right.

The Severed Union had a certain degree of unruliness to it. There had been tales of stronger Factions obliterating and taking the possessions of other similarly strong Factions in a single night.

No one was exempt from such an experience if they relaxed a tad bit too much.

"Got it, boss," Allora said, and then she turned to Grim. She and him would be the ones in charge after everyone else was gone.

Grim rolled his eyes at her intense gaze.

Replicus reached close to Yuyui.

The lime-haired girl pursed her lips.

"I—" she began, but was cut off.

"I wasn't going to ask. Wait till I return," Replicus said as he placed his beautiful, starry gauntlet, which was rather thin, on her shoulder.

Yuyui have a hollow smile.

Replicus turned to the rest.

"I don't know how long this will last, but I assume it won't take more than several hours. Kenno, make sure not to overstay your welcome. Allora, Grim, I expect to see the Honing Fortress intact when I return. And if a certain red stork comes looking for me, relay to him what we talked about concerning that odd creature," he ordered.

The Unlimited all acknowledged.

"Good."

With that, Replicus placed his hand on Pherdanta, and a staggeringly bright flash turned them whitish blue, sending them into the sky as a singular burst of Levin that leapt into a cloud overhead, then hopped into another, then another and another.

Moments later, the speeding bolt had crossed tens of kilometres East through the skies.

Kenno was the first to dislodge his sight from the boss' departure.

"I'll be off then," he said. From out of nowhere, a blue, silver and white helmet covered his face.

Kenno then hunkered down and took a great leapt that shot him far into the south distance.

Grim sauntered up to Yuyui.

"Looks like you and the boss had a heart to heart. Finally. Want to tell me about it?" he said with a smile.

Soon, the two, along with a curious Allora were walking back to the Honing Fortress.

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While hopping from cloud to cloud at an extraordinary speed, Replicus and Pherdanta didn't have tangible forms, but they did have their sense of individuality.

Quite like Skullius' [Boundless Evil], this was an efficient means of travel that Replicus had acquired when he became the Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator at the second Tier – a racial skill.

It was called [Greatest Storm Chaser], and with it, Replicus could travel vast distances at a very low cost as long as there were clouds in the sky that he could propel himself with.

Every single one of the Unlimited had experienced travelling like this one way or another, especially in the earliest days, when Replicus had been striving to earn them a good place in the Severed Union.

Pherdanta didn't have many memories of those days in their purest form, as she wasn't from the original group that Replicus that started with, yet she was just as committed.

As they crossed the four hundred kilometre mark, Pherdanta broke the silence.

"Aren't we a little early? It will be hours before the meeting of the Factions begins. Do you have more errands to run?"

"I always have errands. The one I intend to deal with first is the most important of all," Replicus answered.

"I see," Pherdanta said. "If you would allow, I also have an errand I wish to complete."

"Well, we have an excess of time."

More than several minutes later, a barrier that only the select could see, appeared before the two, guarding against travel, tracking, and visibility.

Replicus immediately deactivated [Greatest Storm Chaser], and he and Pherdanta dropped to the sea. The moment they landed on its surface, a man with a body so dark it looked as if he was wearing armour appeared before them.

It was like he had walked out from thin air.

Replicus turned vigilant.

'These guys again? Looks like things are getting serious...'

The dark figure stared at the two for a half a minute, and then...

"We are glad you answered the call so early, Bright Storm."

Chapter 814: The Severed Union

Replicus was greatly annoyed.

If not because of the thing standing before him, then because of this name that had been attached to him.

Pherdanta was also visibly irritated behind the helmet she now wore, but for her, it was mostly because of this unwanted reception.

The barrier into the Severed Union didn't require any form of security. All one needed to do, was shut off any hostile or aggressive abilities, and they would be allowed to pass through easily.

"Will you let us pass now?" Replicus asked the black humanoid shape before him. He did not even bother to hide his hostility.

The thing tilted its head.

"Why, of course. Verification has been requested since the world has suddenly become a more dangerous place in the last few hours. Who knows who, or what may try to invade our safe space," it said.

"Hmmm," Replicus hummed.

From this side of the barrier, nothing could be seen except the open sea that extended far into the horizon. This mechanism, aside from barring unwanted attention, also acted as a screening mechanism, since it took a lot of effort to sense where the barrier was.

It was also equipped with a function that swept those who couldn't perceive it, a far distance away, warding them off from the Severed Union.

And of course, as said before, only the select were allowed to learn how to perceive this barrier.

"You may pass, Bright Storm. Again, I'm pleased you responded very quickly," the dark humanoid bowed, and did a gesture for the two to pass.

Replicus didn't waste any more time.

He walked forward, seemingly to cross the endless sea on foot.

Yet, in the next moment, it was as if his body was swallowed by the air, and he emerged elsewhere.

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A dark blocky sky – as though made of bricks – appeared, as far up as the skies of Aigas. Thickly woven ropes as bulky as baobab trucks hung from this sky, and at their ends, vast, innumerable and astonishingly bright lanterns could be seen, giving light to the enormous space below.

What was under these lights, was quite the sight.

It was like a massive continent split into four portions that floated above the sea while keeping close proximity to one another.

Creating a series of connections to these four parts, were rickety-looking bridges that also seemed sturdy.

Currently, Replicus, and Pherdanta who had walked in from behind him, were on a portion that had a plethora of cramped, oddly decorated buildings and a shocking number of people interacting everywhere in loud voices.

These people didn't look like the usual common folk. Each and every one of them had an experienced air about them, and most looked like typical brigands.

Assortments of wares, weapons, poisons, and various artefacts were being sold by shady-looking characters who hollered at anyone who passed through the streets. Several nasty altercations could be seen around these makeshift shops, and it was obvious that centered around breaches in honesty – all its various forms accounted for.

Replicus walked forward and Pherdanta followed.

Seeing the crowds in her master's way, a burst of killing intent flooded from her body so abruptly, and so abundantly that the hundreds in the narrow streets all felt it at the same time, and grew pale.

Immediately, they scrambled out of the way.

Even those who had shoddy tables that held their portfolios, drew them away, and pressed against the walls.

A path was cleared in a breath.

Replicus passed through the clear street.

Several voices began whispering from all sides.

"Is... is that Bright Storm?"

"Of course it is, you fool! Couldn't it be more obvious?!"

"Dear Quintess! What is he doing on this side?! Shouldn't the likes of him be playing on the brighter sides of the Union?"

"Watch your tongue! You never want to jab even a little at a Faction leader. No legal process can save you from being cut down for it."

"Damn it. Look at that. What grade do you think the armour he is wearing is at?"

"Who knows? Rather than wondering that, I've been trying to join his Faction for a month. Or get contracted at least. I've heard he has one of the strongest and fastest rising Factions ever!"

"Of course he has. See that woman by his side? I heard she left one of the other Factions to join Bright Storm!"

Replicus could hear everything being said about him and Pherdanta, but he didn't pay it any mind. He didn't come here for compliments and theories, after all.

This quarter of this large arrangement was often called the Depraved Side. It was where common bandits who were yet to get properly attached lived.

But what did that even mean?

Well, the Severed Union, was similar to the Guilds Association.

Replicus had the suspicion that one took inspiration from the other – though it was likely the Guilds Association that was fashioned out of the concept of the Severed Union... maybe.

The Severed Union was an organisation with no ties to Feinheath or Opungale. This was to say, it was not aligned with humans or Sif specifically.

Even as Replicus passed the parting crowds, more than a few Sif faces showed. Some even ran various stores that he passed on the way.

The Union was said to have been created by the Nine Immortals, beings everyone considered a myth. The Union's purpose was an odd one. All combatants of some kind of value were invited, branded with the Union Seal, and sent out to... well, cause as much havoc on Feinheath and Opungale as possible.

It was a bit more complex than this, but this 'havoc' wasn't in the name of malice. In fact, it was supposedly meant to spurn varying degrees of tension, which Replicus had found odd and dark.

He wasn't at all convinced when he first heard this, because only low level bandits were sent to various regions of each nation, to kill and steal. He admitted that as Skullius, he had found the number of bandits wandering around to be very annoying, but it was hardly enough to stimulate something even in Pelian.

Or perhaps it wasn't some kind of growth that was being targeted, but awareness?

In any case, most bandits on the mainland were tied to the Severed Union. If they proved useful in some way, either by acquiring rare items or proving to have unique, valuable abilities, they would be attached to a Faction – which meant being contracted by one of the 34 leading organisations in the Severed Union.

This was what Kenno had been doing back when he met Skullius.

Being under contract with a Faction meant you got to serve them while gaining very profound rewards. Procuring important items in exchange for tools or money was usually the arrangement.

This was why Kenno and his men had been stealing relief meant for the Isise. Aside from foodstuffs, they hoped to intercept important artefacts that may have been supplied by the Purity.

With enough time serving as contracted brigands, it was possible to be conscripted into a Faction, which was the highest honour one could get. But what was the purpose of a Faction?

Well...

Replicus, after passing through a series of streets in this crowded space, finally found what he was looking for. A portly building that looked aged to imperfection stood between two shacks that had ancient-looking conmen advertising suspicious jewels and trinkets.

At the sight of Replicus, the old men fled, but of course, the Penetrator didn't care for them.

He walked over to girthful building, which sent a rain of rust from its metallic roofing falling to the ground, and entered through the unguarded doorway.

It was dark inside.

Threateningly so.

A carpet with a colourful sigil... no, a complex rune network, that shimmered with a furious surge of Aura, was the first thing Replicus saw when he 'squinted' down at the floor.

He stopped, choosing not to go any further.

Pherdanta immediately held the hilt to the sword on her waist.

"Hahahaha! Bright Storm, can't you fall for it even once," a deceptively joyful voice crisply rang out.

Replicus merely scoffed.

"Oh, goodness. I can only imagine why you are here. I might be seeing the Yormuness today depending on how I play my cards right now. Am I right?" the voice came again.

"That's exactly right," Replicus said in a chilling tone.

Chapter 815: Riba

A chortle came from within the dark space, which was fitting, because the atmosphere had turned dark too.

Murderous intent burned from Replicus as he stood a few paces from the door to the shoddy place, and as her master switched to hostile, Pherdanta did too.

"Come on, Bright Storm. It was just one mistake. Wait, it wasn't even my fault. I didn't know," the voice came, still quite playfully jovial, yet a tad bit anxious.

"Oh, is it? Let's say that's true. What is going to make me kill you, and everyone else you have ties to, is the fact that you have been avoiding me. An innocent man wouldn't run, would he?" Replicus said.

"He would! He would! Especially if he knows how terrifying a dissatisfied Bright Storm can be! I've seen it, you know? You are very hard to Divine, different from any other creature I've ever desired to look into, but... I can see flashes of how monstrous you are!

You think I would just sit back after all I've seen?!" the voice again.

Replicus grew more enraged.

He raised his hand and pointed it to the darkness.

"Well... Thank you for the compliment, and the excuse... but it won't be saving you this time."

A fierce wind blew from Replicus.

It was expelled so rapidly and so viciously that everything within a 100 meter radius with the capacity to feel, became entranced in a faint sensation of lightness.

Even Pherdanta was affected.

However, unlike everyone else, she knew this was no wind.

It was Null Life Essence!

In smaller quantities, it couldn't even be detected, but when in terrible abundance, and with the fierce hostility coming from Replicus, it felt like an odd wind.

Pherdanta dreaded what her master was about to do.

Was he going to destroy the entirety of the Depraved Side just to get rid of the person in this run down building?

"WAIT! WAIT! WAIT!" a loud voice called, followed by the thumping of little feet.

Before long, the darkness clinging to the interior of the dilapidated building vanished, and a short man with extremely long, sky blue hair that hid his entire body emerged, racing towards Replicus.

Pherdanta flashed before the Penetrator, and she got into a dreadfully frightening stance that caused the short figure to squeal and kneel down abruptly, his face slamming into the carpeted floor.

"Please don't! I can't die yet! You win, alright?! Let's just talk about this!" the short man screamed with a cracking voice.

Pherdanta was surprised.

Replicus wasn't.

He withdrew his hand and his gaze fell on the shivering man bowing in such an unsightly fashion.

This man seemed to feel Replicus calm down, and he raised his head, revealing a deathly pale baby face with large silvery eyes and a thick, bun-like nose.

A look horror was plastered on this face.

Replicus didn't feel even an ounce of pity.

This face was very good at fooling fools.

He had almost been caught in it as well, admittedly.

"Well. Let's talk then," Replicus said.

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A minute later, the Penetrator was seated on a lavish chair with Pherdanta standing behind him. The midget was seated on his own, custom made chair which was rather cute, not only because of its size, but because it had a watery texture that kept whoever sat on it wobbling in a funny way.

The little man twirled his long, flowing hair nervously while twiddling his feet which failed to reach the floor, waiting for Replicus to speak, but the Penetrator said nothing.

This made the atmosphere a lot more awkward.

Finally...

"I apologise, alright? I assumed all the four maps which I sold to you would lead to sites that held Hidden Classes. I was even sure of it. My Divining can be a little... inaccurate. You're a prime example.

Somehow I can't—"

"You assured me, and swore by your dead mother that all of them had EXACTLY what I sought, Riba."

The short man, Riba, cowered when he was cut off.

Things weren't looking good.

"I know I did. But Bright Storm... we aren't really into honest work. Forgive me for being so rude, but a small deviation like that... I'd say you got your money's worth. Three Hidden Classes and a unique Advanced Class, right?

That's not... too... bad..." Riba said, but his voice was quickly choked by the growing suffocating pressure.

"Interesting. You still have the gall to defend yourself after all that? Honest work? All I know is gave you 700,000 Plasma Coins as well as 15 Pseudo-Mythical grade treasures in exchange for that information. And I only devoted myself because a trusted source vouched for you," Replicus said.

He drew closer to Riba from his seat.

"You know what's more demeaning? This trusted source of mine claims that you have NEVER swindled them, but me... despite being a Faction leader like this source of mine, you saw it fit to drop your standard, huh?"

Riba sank deep into his chair in fright.

Indeed. Riba was an accomplished Diviner who supplied interested parties with the locations of ancient relics, and olden structures that held Hidden Classes.

Of course, no ordinary Diviner could do this, as most ruined constructs of the past were guarded by powerful beasts and seals – like the Labyrinth of the Yoke, and the Temple of Unlusted Tears.

Riba was only able to do this because he too held a Hidden Class.

His abilities had allowed him to gain a profound amount of wealth, but they were especially draining. It was also not that easy to find these odd places.

Ever since he began this venture, he had only managed to Divine fifteen old structures.

Riba scrambled to find the best words to say in this circumstance.

In truth, he had indeed attempted to swindle Replicus after seeing how much wealth he had, and the ravenous desire he had for information about Hidden Classes. Three genuine, and one that he knew was just a mysterious ruin which held something several degrees less enticing...

It was very rewarding at first.

Riba had assumed he could get away from Replicus by Divining each movement he took. He could prepare for the Faction leader's rage before he even found out he had been played.

But... it didn't happen as he planned.

"Well?" Replicus said, causing the short man to flinch.

"I, uh... I don't have any money at the moment. Not enough for a refund!" Riba said in a panic.

Almost immediately, a streak of grey lightning flashed from Replicus' body and smashed violently into air!

The ear-splitting noise that surged made Riba think that the world had shattered, and he howled in fear!

In the next moment, piles of glinting Plasma Coins that numbered in the hundreds of thousands filled the entire building, drowning Riba!

The short man turned pale.

At first he didn't understand what had just happened, but when he saw familiar artefacts he had procured in the past swimming in the sea of coin, his heart almost stopped.

All of this...

All of this was from his treasure caches!

But how...?!

"You want to hide your lies and coin behind such thin space? I'm afraid that won't work with me," Riba heard Replicus' voice.

He was too stunned to pay too much attention to the Penetrator. He couldn't even see him with all the sparkling wealth.

'What did he do?!' he screamed in his mind.

But more than that, how was all his treasure, with as much as it was, fitting inside his worn shop? It wasn't that big!

Unsettlingly, Riba soon found that indeed, his shop wouldn't have fit all his treasures.

They were no longer in his shop.

They were in a silent, dark void too vast to measure the dimensions of.

Riba pushed away the Plasma Coins burying him, and soon he emerged on top.

He looked up at a particularly tall hill of his unique artefacts and gold, and saw Replicus – his lone Unlimited at his side – seated over it, his armour sparkling with stars, and his abundant robe softly billowing as if peppered incessantly by the wind.

The Penetrator then spoke.

"I don't want a mere refund. I want something more substantial. Unfortunately for you, it may cost you your life, but well, it's not honest work, so who cares?"

Chapter 816: Obstacles

One hour later.

The dark void that had been filled with treasure dissipated, leaving the shabby shop that Riba chose to make the centre of his business. The Plasma Coins and the unique artefacts that had been drowning everything vanished too, presumably sent back to where they had been before being exposed.

Thud.

The short body of Riba fell to the carpeted floor.

The Diviner convulsed violently with voluminous stains of dark blood covering his face, making it impossible to tell what terrible expression he had on. The only thing that could be seen from his visage – after squinting for focus – were his wide open, bloodshot eyes that had a semi-lifeless look to them, with tears, pus and other fluids unknown to common men leaking from them also.

Riba's mind was in disarray. He could hardly think.

At best, he saw a backstory on his childhood play on repeat in his mind, with a splitting headache following his disoriented self which interacted with these past memories.

As it turned out, Bright Storm hadn't been fibbing.

The payment he wanted... actually, payments, were extraordinarily fatal. The short Diviner had attempted to use every artefact he had available to make sure he wouldn't be left in the state he was in now, but alas... here he was.

His subconscious self couldn't help but feel something he hadn't felt in a very, very long time.

Regret.

A fierce hue of red highlighted Riba's convulsing body, making the blood all over him look black.

It danced fiercely, emanating from the tall figure standing a few paces from him in the shop.

Replicus was covered in a fierce, red flame that violently swirled, making a cruel attempt at devouring him.

It was no ordinary flame. Heck, some would even say it wasn't even a flame at all, after all, it had an atrociously sickening presence to it. A presence loathed by the living.

Indeed, it was Undeath.

Pherdanta stood at the side, watching with bated breaths. She couldn't do anything in this circumstance for two reasons. One, because Replicus had told her to keep still no matter what she saw. Two, because she did not know how she would even go about helping her master.

In the next moment though, her worries turned out to have been for naught.

Replicus swiped his hand across his torso, and a furious blast of Null Life Essence swept away the vicious Undeath energy in a blink, causing it to vanish without a trace. The starry armour of the Penetrator was revealed to be whole, though with a few networks of cracks on the helmet which healed as quickly as Replicus had dealt with the flame over him.

The robe he wore over his body resumed its unusual flutter, and thick clouds again began to swirl around him.

A course breath came from behind Replicus' helmet.

He gazed at Riba's poor figure, and scoffed.

With a wave of his hand, a small vial with a thick golden liquid emerged in his hands. He gestured to Pherdanta, and the Unlimited grabbed and fed it to Riba.

An intense glow flourished around the nearly dead dwarf, and true to the reputation of the potion that spawned this effect, Riba slowly withdrew from the draw of the Yormuness.

....

Minutes later, Riba, still rather pale, but with his body – hair and all – looking rather dashing, as though the goddess of beauty and health had granted him an undeserved blessing, sat down, a bloody cloth in his hand.

Replicus sat opposite him, his keen, glowing sockets appraising the short Diviner.

Riba opened his mouth to speak, but only a murmur leaked out. He was extremely disturbed, but it almost impossible to tell because of the state of his body currently.

"Is there... anything else you want?" he struggled to say.

Replicus kept staring at him without an answer.

When he finally spoke, Riba was already sweating buckets.

"The better question is whether you have questions for me about what you have just seen," he said.

Riba hesitated and then vehemently shook his head.

"No. None."

"That so? Then good."

Replicus stood.

"Keeping you alive was a favour. I've taken 800,000 Plasma Coins from your stash, and returned the rest. I hope my generosity isn't taken for granted," he said before turning to leave.

Riba didn't have anything to say. Who was he to argue?

Before Replicus walked out of the shop though...

"That desire you have for finding Hidden Classes..." he said, prompting the Penetrator to stop.
"...I've hesitated a lot you know... in the past. Hidden Classes are powerful wells of ancient strength. They lure the strong everywhere... But...

they are just means olden fighters used to preserve themselves. In the worst case scenarios... those who inherit them... are consumed by the ego stored in that power..."

Silence pervaded.

Then Replicus spoke.

"Your hesitation doesn't matter. Everyone who comes to you understands the risk. You're neither righteous for thinking better of it, nor evil for ignoring your conscience."

With that, the Penetrator exited the shop followed closely by Pherdanta.

The Unlimited was greatly concerned about her master.

She didn't fully understand what happened during the hour long detention in the dark void, but she could tell that it wasn't anything safe.

Replicus had tasked Riba to Divine two things for him.

The short man had the capability to share what he 'saw' with anyone he was in contact with, so Pherdanta had seen Riba lightly press his hand against Replicus' greaves, but...

What Riba saw must have been extraordinarily terrifying. His reactions were rather terrifying. His blood-curdling screeches...

Pherdanta stifled a shiver.

At the end, was when the chaos truly occurred, with Riba getting mauled by something unseen, and Replicus getting devoured by the flame that spawned from nowhere.

But to what end?

The short man, unlike many Diviners, could see far into the future, and Pherdanta was sure her master had wanted to see something crucial. Something yet to come. Though how that turned out, was a mystery.

"Are you alright, master?" Pherdanta asked, a worried expression behind her helmet.

Replicus didn't answer.

She saw his sockets flashing continuously, dipping from dim to bright rapidly.

She panicked.

She had only ever seen this happen once before, and it didn't mean anything good.

Her master was either fiercely angry, or terribly shaken.

The truth was, he was feeling both.

'Damn it! If finding Diviners who can see into the future clearly wasn't such a hassle, I would have done this ages ago,' Replicus thought.

He clutched the face of his helmet.

The first vision he had seen had left him with the most to worry about, despite its scale being dozens of times inferior to the absurdity he had had Riba look through the second time.

Riba's parting words just now enraged him, since they mirrored exactly what he had seen from that first vision.

'I'll have to deal with the Skullius issue soon, otherwise...'

Otherwise...

~~~

[Doom Factor 2: Existential Crisis]

<Progressive Soul Confusion>

Your distinct perception and absorption of mana throughout the years has caused you to start awakening what should have been lost a long time ago. If you fail to recover and remember this in time, you will suffer a crisis of your own existence and descend into madness.

Time till DF2: 19 days

~~~

Yes, haste was needed.

Only 19 days remained, and Replicus had created the perfect schedule for leaving to go confront Somanda for his soul a week before the time limit ended.

But now...

Replicus looked ahead. That dreadful image he had seen wasn't leaving his head.

He never thought he would ever see his Hybrid Luman form wearing such a sickening smile, and exuding such a dreadful presence....

Chapter 817: The Answer Is Fulfilment

Replicus insisted that he was fine after Pherdanta kept pestering him. Soon, the Unlimited had no choice but to cease her nagging, even though she could tell that something was bothering the Penetrator immensely.

As they kept walking through the streets of the Depraved Side, seeing deceptively dilapidated buildings, and overly luxurious ones – which made distinguishing between which ones held genuine products that wouldn't turn out to have been hoaxes days later – Replicus spoke.

"Do you feel you were cheated by not gaining your own Hidden Class?"

The question came so abruptly to Pherdanta, that she couldn't scrounge up an answer immediately.

It went without saying that she was indeed the one to be hurt the most by Riba's conscious folly.

All she gained for her hardwork – mainly the trials Replicus constructed for people within his Faction that he considered to be worthy of entering the Unlimited circle – her reward had ended up being an Advanced Class.

Her circumstances were somewhat convenient, though.

Pherdanta had already been a swordswoman, so the fact that the mysterious advanced class she acquired happened to be related to the sword too, was some consolation.

The Unlimited herself felt that if the secrets of a mere Advanced Class were hidden in the same way as a Hidden Class, they had to be worth it.

"I'm happy about it, master. I feel... complete. I don't think I needed more than I gained. Truly. And it feels more satisfying to be an Unlimited with just an Advanced Class," she said.

Replicus didn't say anything to this. The fact of the matter was that he knew. It was obvious really, that Pherdanta was appreciative of what she got. She had always been. He just felt some shade of guilt for it.

"I see," he finally said. "How do you feel about Hidden Classes in general? You were part of a different Faction before joining us. You must have seen a few other people with them. Do you believe they are... evil, in a way?"

Pherdanta thought about it.

"Not necessarily. I do feel that Riba is somewhat right. I don't think all those powerful people from the Grand Wars left the formulas to their power just for generations to come, but I also think it's only fair that if you manage to acquire that power, you have to overcome the will that comes with it. And if you can't..." she said.

Replicus nodded slowly.

"I... see..." he said in a terribly cold voice that Pherdanta felt in all its fullness. "Do you think your peers are strong enough to overcome these wills... these egos attached to their powers?"

A question of faith.

A question of how Pherdanta saw the other Unlimited.

It was indeed a mystery.

She didn't know much about Kenno, or Grim, but she did think Allora had changed, influenced by the power of her new class. While that didn't mean she would succumb to it the more she grew into the power, it did bring to light the possibility of ceasing to exist as your original self after the influence.

And that said...

"I believe so. I don't think any of them lack what they need to make the power their own," Pherdanta said.

"Oh? And what's that?" Replicus asked.

"Fulfilment."

Replicus hummed.

Fulfilment. Fulfilment, huh?

This current conversation somehow led him down memory lane, to the first instance where he had been told about the truth behind Hidden Classes.

This information had come from none other than Frock, the shady merchant he had met in Inhone. The man had referenced the tale of Demion and Escus, which Replicus had gone on to learn about in full later, much like Skullius.

In truth, that story had bothered him a great deal.

He had hoped to learn more about it, different from the diluted pieces he often heard about its end – mixed falsities about who forged Demion's Dance, the sword that Irisa gifted to Demion, and about how Demion's conduct, his behaviour, had been before he was ultimately killed by a man from one of the Six Houses.

In any case...

"Good. I like that," Replicus said. "Let us see to your errand, shall we?"

Finally cutting the subject, the Penetrator regained his usual temperament and attitude, which was only noticeable to Pherdanta who was usually with him.

The two finally left the loud, and disorderly bounds of the Depraved Side after a full twenty minutes of walking. The land mass was vast, similar to an entire region in size, after all. Aside from that,

Replicus and Pherdanta weren't in hurry. It wouldn't be too soon until what they were truly here for began.

The two crossed a long, rickety bridge made of a peculiar type of wood that felt like mud upon stepping into it. It made running across impossible, and instead enforced slow, steady steps. This was a kind of regulation, and a safety mechanism, given how shaky the bridge was, yet firm.

After all, it wasn't pure waters that lay below the hanging bridge, but a deceptive corrosive material impersonating the clear sea.

Replicus and Pherdanta emerged on what was called the Bright Side, another of the four portions of the Severed Union that was next to the Depraved Side.

Instantly, the differences showed themselves, first by the drastically lowered population. Furthermore, the way people dressed was far removed from common brigands, at least for the most part.

The Bright Side could be likened to the Guilds Association headquarters, in some way. Only higher value – and better dressed – criminals who had contracts with the Factions were allowed here. Of course Replicus hadn't had any trouble at all with the screening happening at the end of the bridge.

A great mansion that rose up to a height of forty meters stole the eye on first setting foot on the Bright Side, its entirely fitted with glowing bulbs that flickered rhythmically advertising its existence. Several entrances could be seen from it, all leading to its interior.

As Replicus looked at this building, he couldn't help but feel nostalgic.

It felt like years ago when he was still scrambling to achieve several missions from a Faction he had contracted with.

'Ah, those dreadful days,' he thought.

Chapter 818: Pherdanta's Errand

The Severed Union was very secretive, and quite obviously extremely effective in their ability to hide their traces. The ones that mattered, at least.

The imposition of what was called a Union Seal, had allowed the organisation to keep its existence a secret even from Arch-Mages and Diviners.

Union Seals were inconspicuous brands that anyone who ever set foot in the Severed Union had planted on their bodies.

The main purpose of the Seal was to lock all memory, and immediate thoughts about the Severed Union from intruding egos.

Replicus had found it ingenious that unlike most constructs of similar nature – restrictive binds that acted on live targets – what made the Union Seal effective was the fact that it left room for implications about the Severed Union, but barred all specifics.

It was a kind of trade-off. When individuals who could scour the mind attempted to trace any information about the Severed Union, the mind of the target would willingly give signs that indeed, they were part of a large collective – one that was extraordinarily vast and powerful – but nothing more.

The individuals with the Seal could even confess that they were part of a secret organisation, and could even be strained to a point of giving out its name, but nothing past that would be revealed. In fact, if anyone got them to admit it, the Union Seal grew stronger in its resistance.

Whoever had introduced the idea of the Seal, as Replicus had surmised, had likely implemented a series of Creeds. The Penetrator didn't yet understand in full how Creeds work, but so far he was sure that they had the function of facilitating a transaction of give and take.

It was a power that only Incandescent Stage experts and above had.

The Union Seal also had the function of allowing one to reach the Severed Union, but this didn't mean they automatically could. Practice was required to be able to perfectly sense the hundreds of locations all over Aigas that led to the Severed Union, unless one had an ally that could already do it.

And indeed, there wasn't a single way to reach the Severed Union.

Replicus, much like the other Faction leaders, merely preferred to travel there directly because he was close.

...

As the Penetrator saw the distinct, bright building ahead, he recalled asking Kenno and his group about the Severed Union. The former bandit leader – as he had become an Attachment – had lead Replicus to one of the entrances to the Depraved Side, and from there, Replicus had gotten acquainted with the Union, and branded too.

New arrivals were immediately vetted. If they were a threat, it wouldn't get to show because the security measures the Severed Union had stacked all over, were extremely thorough.

Growing from scratch hadn't been easy, but luckily, Replicus hadn't begun as a common criminal harassing the wealthy nobles on Feinheath. He wouldn't have allowed himself to do that in the first place.

Instead, he made himself look appealing.

His experiences with people who were able to recognise how... special, he was, like Tulnas, Stylla, and hmmm. That was odd. There was someone else. Anyhow, those experiences helped him quickly become attractive to one of the Factions.

'I did rise pretty fast, didn't I?' Replicus thought while recalling the murmurs he had heard from that crowd earlier.

He and Pherdanta passed the bright building. The Unlimited's errand had nothing to do with it, apparently, and Replicus merely followed. He didn't ask Pherdanta about it. It wasn't that he wasn't even a little bit curious, but because he felt like asking, when he was following her to the location anyway, was pointless. He'd know eventually.

The Bright Side had a completely different atmosphere, which, apart from the lesser crowds was inspired by the neat, wide streets that had smooth, grey tarring.

Mini-walls separated one building from another , and it helped that every structure here didn't look like it had been in a fierce wrestle against endless, uncaring time.

Additionally, unlike the scurrying and scrambling of the people following his appearance in the Depraved Side, only respectful acknowledgement came Replicus' way.

Thirty minutes later, the duo had arrived at the destination of Pherdanta's errand.

It was a modest building, neat, but mute of any decor that would make it stand out. Pherdanta gave a knock to the door, and soon a handsome young man showed to the door.

He was so shocked to see who had appeared on his doorstep that he gave a yelp and then hurriedly apologised, especially to Replicus who stood firm behind Pherdanta.

"I'm sorry... I didn't..." he stuttered.

"It's alright," Pherdanta said. "Can we come in?"

"Uh, sure, sure!"

The inside of the building had the makings of a proper home, and as it turned out, the man was living here with his family.

The Bright Side featured safe residential areas for anyone who worked at the bright building or another important establishment that Replicus and Pherdanta had passed on the way. It went without saying that this man was an important something somewhere.

When the man had led Pherdanta and Replicus somewhere private, the former finally shed some light on the situation despite her master not inquiring about it.

The handsome man was someone Pherdanta had been close to before, though they had grown distant because their relationship had hinged on the fact that Pherdanta usually needed a favour from him – the same favour each time – and Pherdanta hadn't had much time for escapades outside Deign.

As for what this favour was...

"I see. You're back for that," the handsome man said while rubbing his neck with a complex expression. "Alright. Give it to me. I'll see what I can do."

Pherdanta – who had removed her helmet – gave a weak smile and produced a letter in a neat violet envelope which the handsome man received it.

"I greatly appreciate this," she said.

"I'm just passing on a message. It's not that hard," the man said with a shrug. "Of course, it would become difficult if the one supposed to receive it refuses to take it."

"I know," Pherdanta said in a sullen tone.

Given her history, as she hadn't been tied to Replicus originally, Pherdanta had ties she had left behind. After leaving her previous Faction, she had known it would be akin to betrayal.

This wasn't the fact that haunted her though. She could care less about everyone else she had left behind... except one.

Because visiting other Factions was practically a declaration of war, and that it was extraordinarily difficult to find out the activities of another Faction, Pherdanta hadn't been able to directly communicate with the person she intended.

Only this method would do – using a third party.

Pherdanta wished to resolve the issues she meant to explain before it was too late. She had the sinking feeling that she had to do so quickly.

Unfortunately, things weren't looking good.

This was the second letter she had sent so far.

She had confirmed that the recipient received it, but there was no reply.

That was already a bad sign, and so too was her desperation which manifested with this current letter.

Chapter 819: The Mad Bishop

"They're late. Doesn't anyone know to arrive on time? Seriously, it's been long since someone got a VISIT," the old woman said with a scowl.

"Technically there's a full ten minutes before this meeting is scheduled to begin," a mature, burly man standing by the old woman's right said.

"Really? That's odd. I thought the sky was falling," the old woman said while placing her palm on her cheek.

"What?"

"Yes. And I lost dozens of my Plasma Coins too! It's like being full and starving at the same time."

"Uh..."

"Right, right. It's all here. By the way, I think we're late for the meeting. Let's get going boys!"

"..."

The old woman scrambled to stand up, but the other, similarly mature, chiselled men standing around her – those who weren't the one who had been engaging with her – quickly pushed her back into her seat.

The old woman blinked a couple of times before laughing hysterically.

"You got me there, you got me there. Oh, as I was saying. They are all late!" she screamed with a delighted look on her face.

The well-built man by her right, still looking on in shock, gaped. The other three looked at him, and one of them gave him a pitying gaze.

"You'll get used to it, new guy," he said.

The voice of the old woman as she continued to spout nonsense after gibberish, echoed throughout the enormous Coliseum which was made from dark rock which spotted innumerable points of glassy quartz. The space at its middle had a massive patch of fresh grass – a neat field – that looked to have been mowed recently, its deep green hue impressively appealing.

In typical 'severed' fashion, the Coliseum walls featured countless, clean cracks that ran down its vast size, making it a mystery as to how it was even standing.

It truly looked as though it had been severed countless times.

From these cracks, piercing lights flashed, seemingly coming from around the Coliseum where absolutely nothing could be seen, the same being true for the sky. A deep darkness, like one you'd see on dark paper, took over from the end of the Coliseum's height.

It had always been a mystery as to where the light flashing from the cracks came from, as it was the only luminance that could be found here.

At the moment, the old woman with her pack of shirtless, tall, and handsome men was the only one seated in the Coliseum. As one of the men had pointed out, it was ten minutes before the meeting was supposed to begin – that was ten minutes before the half a day duration all the Factions had been given to travel here.

Most of the Faction leaders didn't quite enjoy arriving early. Everyone loved to make last minute entrances.

Suddenly, a bright doorway-shaped glow lit up the green field in the middle of the Coliseum, and two figures emerged from it before it disappeared.

The old woman leaned forward with staggering speed, a look of absolute joy on her face. By the time her guards made the attempt to push her back into her seat, she had already travelled the three hundred plus meters to the field, confronting the new arrivals.

She screamed with a wide, youthful grin unbecoming of her age, beating several stereotypes attached to her age along with way.

"Bright Storm! You're here!"

Replicus looked visibly exasperated by the sudden approach. He had already had it with these sudden and unwanted welcomes.

"Mad Bishop. Good to see you," he said to the woman, looking at her attire which seemed to never change. She was adorned in thick gold and white robes, with a long sash around her neck. Over her perm, fashioned with long, pale hairs, was a tall hat... wait no, it was an odd crown about a meter in length, jammed into her bunched hair.

The Mad Bishop's narrow, hollow sockets focused on Replicus. Everyone else loathed the idea of glancing for too long at those eyeless holes, but Replicus could tolerate it. What he couldn't tolerate, was having the knowledge that she had gouged out her own eyes years before just to make her life 'more challenging'.

Quite the woman.

As her guards made a hurried approach towards her position, the Mad Bishop frantically engaged Replicus.

"How long has it been, Bright Storm? It feels like just last week when we last bumped into each other," she said while forcefully shaking Replicus' hand.

"It WAS last week, and we didn't 'bump' into each other. You attempted to tackle me in the Depraved Side," Replicus said exhaustedly.

Normally, Pherdanta would have acted against anyone touching her master wantonly, but she knew not to be hasty when Faction leaders were involved.

Besides, the Mad Bishop wasn't just any Faction leader as far as she, and their Faction were concerned.

"Is that right? Goodness, we also broke bread together last week, didn't we? I took you to that expensive food outlet, and you forgot to pay the bill. You owe me 15,000 Plasma Coins, Bright Storm," the Mad Bishop said.

"Is that so?" said Replicus as he began walking towards the countless rows of stone seats. He felt like if he didn't move around while getting fed all this bullshit, he'd start to slip himself.

The Bishop and her guards followed.

"You know I was thinking, Bright Storm," the old woman said while patting Replicus' shoulder. "I've been concocting a scheme... an adventure for the both of us to partake in."

"Hmmm. Tell me more."

"You, me and the big proud sea for the next ten years. We'll scour every bit of it, replace the continents with treasure troves, glaciers and bread! Loads of bread!"

"Nice idea. I don't have ten years though."

"Ah, as if that isn't enough, we can sail past Aigas. Imagine what we will see. Maybe a reverse of Aigas? The lands are the seas and the seas are the lands? Fish people, Bright Storm! Imagine it!

They fish for mammals like us!"

"Great idea," Replicus said unamused. The Mad Bishop's guards looked rattled but how much she was speaking.

Clearly, she had gotten worse.

The suddenly...

"FRIENDLY FIRE!"

The Mad Bishop pointed her fingers at Replicus helmet... and there was a massive explosion of red fire!

The abrupt ignition caused the entire Coliseum to tremble, a large, red fireball surging where Replicus and the Mad Bishop were positioned.

A bright flash appeared in the seats high up. Pherdanta and Replicus appeared from it, and they watched below as the glow of the fire died down.

The Mad Bishop emerged from the aftermath, which left no traces of damage on the field. She looked appalled to see no traces of Replicus, and began scouring around while calling his name.

Her guards couldn't remain as composed as they had been before.

Pherdanta was the same. She turned to Replicus.

"Master, do we really have to continuously put up with her?" she asked.

Replicus sighed before answering.

"Sadly, yes. She's the reason we managed rise up the ranks and create our own Faction quickly, after all. I can think of worse things than promising to entertain a mad woman for as long as she lives."

Chapter 820: Familiar Enemy

Moments later, Replicus and Pherdanta were seated a couple of meters away from the Mad Bishop and her guards. The old woman had insisted on positioning herself close to the Penetrator, and starting dubious conversations with him despite abruptly attacking him earlier.

It was an all in good fun, after all. At least that's how she put it.

The Mad Bishop reminded Replicus of Sila a lot, at least how he was before he retained a modicum of his sanity later on, following his takeover of Skullius' body.

No one knew exactly what caused the Mad Bishop to switch between madness and sanity so spontaneously, but shockingly, it had worked in her favour for the last hundred or so years. Despite how the other Faction leaders felt about her temperament and behaviour, they had respect for her. It wasn't as though she was stupid after all.

Deep within that ocean of dark, abysmal thoughts – bread and all – was a level of lucidity that most of those allowed to set foot in the Coliseum, had grown to acknowledge as not to be trifled with. It could only be expected of the supposed oldest Faction leader there was.

"Isn't it fantastic, Bright Storm? It's been a while since we all gathered like this?" the Mad Bishop said.

"No it hasn't," Replicus said with a distant voice. "What do you reckon we've been called for?"

The Mad Bishop bobbed her head childishly before putting on a thoughtful look that also contested against her aged visage.

"Who knows? Perhaps it's to give us compliments, bread, and send us on our merry way!"

"How optimistic."

"Is it?" the Mad Bishop wore a sly smile, and swiped her hand to produce a large loaf of bread which she began to eat without the slightest impression of etiquette.

Replicus only gave a glance and looked away.

"That obsession will never end, huh?" Replicus thought.

The Mad Bishop was the one responsible for Replicus' rapid progress from being contracted to owning his own Faction. Indeed, the method he had used was based on his experience with people who could smell talent from miles away, and thus Replicus had made himself very attractive – skill wise.

Since he commandeered Kenno's operation, which had already been under contract with the Mad Bishop, the speedy way in which he accomplished all jobs assigned, mostly by delegating them to his subordinates – mainly Ferex – had earned him an audience with the old woman very quickly.

She just had to see the one responsible for the progress in the tasks she set for her Faction.

A short while later, Replicus had gotten well acquainted with the Mad Bishop, her madness, and her suspicious obsession with bread.

When dealing with the old woman, things became rather easy for him. Unlike other Faction leaders, who were more likely to apply too much logic, the Mad Bishop had an easy chord to fondle. All one needed to do was get on the same wavelength as her, and it wouldn't be too hard to get into her good books.

Maintaining this connection was the hard part though. Even the Mad Bishop's guards couldn't stand having such odd, lengthy conversations.

But Replicus could. It took a whole month, but the Mad Bishop became so enthralled by Replicus' presence that she asked him – as a mutually insane friend – a desire of his. Not wasting the chance, Replicus had spoke up.

He wanted his own Faction.

The Mad Bishop wasn't against it, but it wasn't she who got to decide that.

It was the Head Faction – the oldest and strongest Faction – which oversaw the 33 other Factions, as well as the Severed Union itself, which decided that.

As Replicus wondered about the Bishop's lust for bread, a doorway shaped from light appeared on the field below, and several figures walked out.

Another shapely light appeared on another section of the field, then another and another.

The other Faction leaders were arriving, all having different kinds of shapes, genders and varying degrees of company.

Replicus looked on with keen sockets.

Unlike the Mad Bishop, most of the other Faction leaders weren't as sociable. There was no chatter and greeting. All of them simply scaled the stairs at various points around the Coliseum and reached suitable spots to sit.

Speaking of the odd structure, the Severed Coliseum was a special location outside the four portions of the Severed Union. It could only be accessed by a Faction leader's Union Seal, which was different from the Seals gifted to common combatants within the Severed Union.

Replicus would have felt like he had earned a grand achievement by being privileged enough to access spaces like this, but here, he had to manage his ego.

Each of every one of the Faction leaders were Incandescent Stage experts, and powerful ones at that.

The only reason Replicus had been deemed worth of a position as the 34th Faction leader, was because he had exposed powers that could contend with the might of Faction leaders and even explained how they worked to the Head Faction.

It was terribly dangerous, but he considered it a necessary sacrifice. Before this, he had been subjected to a series of trials, which, while he completed well, had been insufficient. In order to capitalise, Replicus sweetened how attractive he was, and exposed how useful he could be.

Yes. It was worth it.

The amount of resources open to him as a Faction leader helped with his cause, and almost offset what he had to reveal.

Furthermore, when he finally fused back with Skullius, his first order of business was going to be cutting ties with this organisation.

He believed the power he would get then, was enough to make him powerful even enough to contend with most forces on Aigas.

'Tsk...' Replicus was disgusted when his mind drifted back Skullius.

He turned his attention to the new arrivals. There was one he was especially eager to see. Since the Factions didn't get to interact much, this was one of the only chances he had to see that person.

As expected, this individual showed up.

Among the last Factions to show, a man dressed in a strange attire – robes that were almost as stiff as wood, along with tall-sole slippers that looked as though they made of clay – appeared. A strange, round, smooth edged crystal with hues of black and white hung around his neck, and it seemed to be in use, as the light glow of mana around the man interacted with it.

Four guards walked beside this man, an extremely bulky man with large hands, two thin and masked figures with the exact same body proportions... and a man with draped grey hair and a handlebar moustache.

Replicus' focus fell on this grey haired man in particular.

And...

[An Assigned 'Marked Spot' has been detected]