

## Undead 821

### Chapter 821: Emissary

Replicus' existence couldn't double the number of guidance field functions, and thus these functions were limited.

Because of this, the Penetrator hadn't used any <Marked Spots>. Unlike Skullius, he had a lot of subordinates to help him keep track of locations and targets, so he didn't bother to use the guidance field for it.

That said, during a summons some time ago, Replicus had seen this grey-haired man escorting the 'bejewelled' Faction leader flashing with a <Marked Spot>, which meant this was the work of Skullius.

Again, because of distance, Replicus couldn't inquire about this from his counterpart, but he had a feeling that there was a reason Skullius had marked this man.

By the looks of his dressing, demeanour and the behaviour of his mana, the man was definitely a Mage, likely a Grandmaster or higher.

If Skullius hadn't grown in strength with the Hybrid Luman form to a degree that matched the current Replicus, then there was definitely no way he could beat an opponent like this.

'How did you even have a run in with a Faction member, Skullius?' Replicus wondered.

This was truly curious.

A set of rules governed the Severed Union; an accord known as the Severed Code. The rules got stricter the higher one rose within the Union, and for all Faction members, their activities on the main continents were heavily restricted and monitored.

Most intrusions on the continents normally warranted executions by the Head Faction, and as a result, unless there were reasonable causes for Faction leaders to get involved, or if a Faction leader used their name – if it had any worth – to try and earn a pardon, such a thing was unforgivable.

Replicus watched the various groups get seated. His sockets' glow followed the grey haired Mage with interest for a little bit before his attention was dragged away by the bellow of a vicious, swirling, dark wind on one of the stone seats.

A moment later, when it cleared, a feminine individual was seated on it, with four dark humanoids that had slightly crooked shapes surrounding her.

Several other whirls of darkness, but much more limited in scale, appeared close to where every Faction was seated, and 33 human-shaped figures overlaid by darkness were revealed when they dissipated.

Replicus loathed these things.

They were the signature swarm force of the Head Faction, and its leader was the dazzling woman seated on the other side of the Coliseum, her body covered by a lone piece of silk, velvet cloth whose ends seemed to be pulled by the heavens constantly.

It suddenly became quiet, with no one speaking at all.

This didn't change for a few minutes, until finally...

"Hey! Tell me we didn't come all this way for a hoax. I thought it was the Immortals that summoned us! Wasn't that what the letter said? Am I senile then?" the Mad Bishop yelled at the woman with the velvet cloth.

The woman glanced at the Bishop, and a modest smile crested her face.

"I'm in the dark too on this, I'm afraid. I received the exact same summons," she said with a shrug "I increased the defences and surveillance around the Severed Union just in case someone was messing with us, but..."

"Just shorten it to 'I'm just as clueless', will you?" the Mad Bishop said with a harrumph.

The velvet clothed woman only gave a wider smile, but didn't engage any further, and thus another stretch of silence followed.

Replicus sighed behind the helmet.

Typically, meetings such as this, with various powerhouses who had stacks of ego would erupt into berating, appraising, and the usual brash mettle sizing matches, but the Factions were different. At least this brand of them.

This was how it always was.

It was as if everyone was trying to reveal as little about themselves as possible, even their habits.

Of course, this behaviour was understandable.

Factions were allowed to declare war against each other for resources, so in a sense, they were all enemies, and they didn't look down on each other. At least most didn't.

A couple of minutes later, at a time that Replicus calculated to be the exact moment that half a day finally passed, there was a loud gong that caught everyone on guard, even going as far as to mess up their cognitive status for a few milliseconds.

By the time everyone recovered, there was suddenly a figure standing in the center of the field below.

Oddly, this individual... had no face below its locks of brown hair.

Its torso was bare, and below it, a pristine white cloth covered its midsection.

Everyone silently appraised the figure.

'What is that?' Replicus thought, a little weirded out.

Was it a man?

Was it even a living creature?

The figure took two steps forward, and spoke in a calm voice.

"I'm glad you all arrived before the designated time. You have my thanks."

Everyone remained silent, keeping their thoughts to themselves.

The attitude of this being put them on edge.

It continued.

"I assume you've all been eager to know who has summoned you, and whether or not he or she truly is the Emissary of the Immortals?"

"YOU'RE DARN RIGHT!" the Mad Bishop screamed and threw a loaf of bread at the faceless entity. "WHERE'S YOUR FACE?!"

The Mad Bishop's guards hurried to stop her from doing anything else.

The faceless entity destroyed the bread before it could reach its face, and provided an answer to the question.

"I apologise if having no face bothers you or makes you feel as though I am not taking you seriously. That is not the case. I've simply had to devote myself to series of harsh conditions after amassing Creeds for a purpose related to my appearance. Bear with me for the limited time I'm here."

This captured a lot of interest from the numerous Faction leaders.

Soon, one of them broke the silence that had begun to pool again.

"Is that right? Well, can you confirm that you are an Emissary of these Immortals? As far as I know, they are only old myths. The only authority recognised here is that of the Head Faction," a man with skin as pale as that of a corpse, and a bright coat around him that gave the impression that he was wearing light itself, said.

The faceless entity raised its head, and put its finger under its chin.

"That is a challenging thing to do. There is no true base to work with, as I'm sure there was thousands of tales about the Immortals. All of them are false. Aside from completely destroying the entire Severed Union and rebuilding it in the span of two seconds – which I'm sure you wouldn't want – there isn't a way to prove who I am," it said.

Everyone surprisingly remained composed, keeping their thoughts on this absurd claim behind calm faces.

This creature essentially meant that beyond showing its strength, there was no way it could prove itself.

The faceless entity looked amused.

"Instead of trying to prove who is who, how about we just get to the part where I give you an assignment to catch and kill a certain fiend for a captivating reward?" it said with an eager voice.

This time, the woman in the velvet cloth was the first to speak.

"An assignment?" she asked curiously.

The faceless creature turned to her.

"Yes. An assignment. All you need, as far as transport goes, has been arranged. All you need to do, is chase one enemy across the seas, and catch kill him before he reaches Edagon."

Chapter 822: Inevitables (1)

The name Edagon caused a visible reaction from the Faction leaders and their entourages.

The land of the Giants.

The Emissary was saying that there was an enemy that they were supposed to pursue before they arrived there. Such a strange mission, rather, assignment, couldn't be accepted without a lot of questions asked, and each of the Faction leaders wanted answers.

"Who is this enemy?"

The one who spoke this time, was Replicus. He leaned in forward, his sockets fiercely glowing through his helmet.

More than why this enemy was going to Edagon, he, much like all the others wanted to know if this enemy in question, was someone he was familiar with. There was little doubt in his mind that it had to do with the conclusion of the Premium Age Royale, and the dark, stone-like beasts that were running amok in Pelian.

The faceless entity, along with all the other Faction leaders turned to Replicus. Some of these powerful figures spared only condescending looks at the Penetrator, while others – the Mad Bishop – grinned gleefully at him.

"That is indeed the best part to start with, isn't it?" the Emissary said. "This enemy is a dangerous necromancer. I believe he heads the organisation known as the Green Neolists. I'm sure you've all heard of a masked man at one time.

His notable feats – which have spread out as rumours around Pelian – include the mass murder of civilians in the Isise, and the disappearance of one of the five most powerful Paladin Champions."

Before the faceless entity finished speaking, most of the Faction leaders had already recognised who he was talking about. Because of the many eyes they had on Feinheath, most of these Faction leaders heard most rumours of substance.

The story about the Isise had spread far and wide when it had occurred. It truly was a tragedy.

Then again, most of Faction leaders didn't care too much for this masked man, but Replicus...

'Of course. I should have known...' he thought.

The last memory he had of the masked man was that from the time when he went on a mission with Tulnas and his bevy to combat the Evenfall cultists. He recalled Somanda burning that masked man alive, but he had always gotten the feeling that the man was still kicking. But maybe it wasn't that same man this time.

Replicus wouldn't be able to tell unless he got close to this person again.

"HA! The Isise! A couple of my contracted fools failed to raid the place! It was getting all kinds of good stuff from the Purity, and I wanted to sink... my... teeth into it!" the Mad Bishop cried.

Replicus sighed.

The faceless entity seemed amused.

"If you recall this man, then I'm sure you also recall a event that was held in Pelian for the past two or so months. The Premium Age Royale. This masked man was involved in it, and he seemed to have had the assistance of one of the Six Houses of Pelian, House EverSword. The Premium Age Royale concluded hours ago, with the death of roughly fifteen million people, common folk and combatants."

...!

A reaction more than simple surprise burst from the faceless entity's audience.

Fifteen million?!

The number paled in comparison to the total population of Pelian as a whole – which was more than double this value – but...

The woman with the velvet cloth of silk sat upright, a light frown on her face.

Replicus couldn't wear a grave face, but his sockets flashed to show his sentiments instead.

'I see. So I was right. It ended badly...' he thought.

Even as a Null Lifeform with no flesh, he felt that this was wrong.

But what was all this for?

"What was the purpose for this?" the Head Faction leader asked.

"It's hard to give a coherent explanation. And I don't think you need to know," the faceless entity replied.

"Is that so? How do you know about all this anyway?" the Head Faction leader asked.

"I saw it happen."

...

The woman in velvet gave a laugh.

"You saw it happen and you did nothing to stop it?" she said with agitation. "For someone who claims to be an Emissary of the Immortals, you seem to lack the quality that demonstrates your adherence to the very fundamental value of the Severed Union."

"The Head Faction has overseen the Union for millennia, and while I believe it to be a myth, the purpose of the Severed Union – to keep Feinheath and Opungale alert, and to be an external force that deals with calamities like Fulgardt before they fully grow – was founded around the idea of the Immortals. How are we supposed to perceive you if you see such a catastrophic event and let it happen?"

The Faction leaders seemed to agree with the woman in the velvet cloth.

"DARN RIGHT! You are too suspicious!" the Mad Bishop screamed with a finger pointed towards the Emissary.

Even Replicus agreed.

Millions of people died here. Unlike the other sorts of problems that the Capital Service and Purity could deal with, this particular one warranted the Severed Union's intervention.

The faceless entity scratched its cheek, and then spoke.



"I don't need children like you reminding me of that," it said in a calm tone peppered with hints of frustration. "You all have power, but there are deeper concepts you don't know of. Let me enlighten you so you don't embarrass yourselves further with this ignorance."

While still paying attention, the Faction leaders were slowly garnering a negative, hostile view of this entity.

Had he just called them children?

The Mad Bishop threw another loaf.

"Like the Purity, I'm sure you're all unaware of the true nature of the Deities. Quintess, Listafelle, Suzamete and Boron. You only know them as the earth, the seas, the skies and the Under. You believe that Boron is the traitor who was sealed under Aigas because he did not agree with the view of the other three, don't you?

That the Deities, while probably not as benevolent as some common folk think, are truly exalted brings? Well.... All of that is skewed."

Everyone tensed.

It was illogical to simply believe the word of a stranger, but somehow, the way this Emissary spoke inspired them to re-evaluate what they thought. At the very least, they were made to compare what they knew to what the Emissary said.

"The four Deities were mortal like you and me once. They were all friends who grew together, fed each other and lived together on some poor rock ways away from Aigas. Even as they ascended into Divinity and beyond, they remained friends. Even as Boron truly did refuse to acknowledge Quintess, Suzamete and Listafelle, they still regarded him a lifelong friend.

Therefore, even though they subdued him, and used him as a dark plate that supports Aigas from below..."

Many faces had begun to frown at this tale, not sure if it was truly worth even considering.

But Replicus was intent on hearing the rest.

"...Quintess, Suzamete and Listafelle left him a key. A simple key to turn in order to free himself should he play his cards right. This was a deliberate act of mercy, as such the location and nature of the key was never told even to the worshippers of the Deities – the Purity – so that the time when Boron rises again should come.

Before that time came, and because of a certain grudge, Quintess and Listafelle left, leaving Suzamete, along with a select few to handle the inevitable aftermath."

Chapter 823: Inevitables (2)

Several faces turned dark, and some adopted frowns of disbelief.

The man with the crystal of black and white around his neck scratched his chin with a thoughtful expression.

The Mad Bishop puckered her lips and produced a strange smooching noise.

The Head Faction leader leaned against her seat and tilted her head.

Replicus let out a sharp breath of mana.

"I see..." he said. "So three Deities really are gone from Aigas."

Pherdanta by his side looked astonished, and her eyes under the helmet shook when she realised that her master was buying into this story.

She didn't know, of course, like Replicus did, that this was true. The Penetrator trusted Serenity as an information source. She had never really lied. Her only crime was withholding information.

"You expect us to believe that?" another of the Faction leaders spoke up, a curvaceous lady with her skin turned blue from her neck to her feet which were bare, her body covered to the thighs by a blanket-like dress. "That doesn't make any sense. How could mortals become Deities? The strongest among us can reach Divinity but that is not the same as acquiring the power to create worlds!"

Another chimed in, his voice like a whisper carried in the wind.

"How can the Deities leave when they make up this world? Odd, isn't it?."

Another one also spoke.

"There's drama even among the Deities? That's one I've never heard."

The general consensus among individuals outside Pelian about the Deities, was that they were more like rigid forms of existence that followed simple sets of rules instead of sophisticated beings that constantly monitored – with great, complex scrutiny – the world they made.

This belief came about because aside from granting blessings which allowed individuals to become Foundation Stagers, the Deities didn't do much else. Perhaps even this was like an automated mechanism that did not even require them to be involved. Many had stopped believing in the Deities, and some outright insulted them, yet no judgement came.

Those same people could go to the temples and have a Priest read their Direction without consequence.

The message from the Purity about the Deities mainly fell on deaf ears, and this story which the Emissary had told, seemed just as ridiculous. In fact, it sounded more like a deviation to the topic.

"What does all this have to do with why you didn't intervene anyway?" another one of the Faction leaders asked with an impatient tone.

The Emissary looked displeased, but somehow it maintained a sturdy level of patience.

"Well, the choice to believe or not is yours. In any case, there are two reasons I chose not to intervene. One is because this enemy – this masked man – has created a lot of countermeasures against Divination and invading perceptions. Even my eyes are limited in what they see of him and his activities.

He has probably been alive for hundreds of years, and a great understanding of how various enemies of his could thwart him."

"He was prepared. I have no idea how many Creeds he implemented to ensure that once whatever he planned began, it couldn't be stopped, but I can tell, it was a lot."

"I also managed to just barely discern that he has multiple countermeasures against his death, especially during the process he carried out. I believe he almost died whilst siphoning the power of millions of souls."

This time no one hopped to speak when the Emissary took a pause.

Another thing had become clear.

The millions of lives were reaped in order to gather souls.

"The second reason was because he was tied to another man. The one who caused the calamities occurring in Pelian as we speak."

Replicus' sockets darkened a little.

"Guissepo..." he muttered.

The faceless entity continued, seeing as everyone was still paying attention.

"The Immortals, and those left behind by Quintess and Listafelle, were told not to interfere with Boron's unsealing. They could watch other uninvolved parties make attempts, but not directly attempt to stop it. It was only a matter of time before Boron found someone good enough to unlock the key left for him, and now it has happened.

However, the man responsible for this required the masked man's aid in order to accomplish his goal. Therefore, in a way, the Immortals couldn't act against him either. All that to say, this was inevitable."

This, to most of the Faction leaders sounded like a cheap excuse with a sound backstory, but some of them did stop to think.

So what was happening now, was Boron's unsealing?

Wasn't that extremely bad?

What did it entail?

Was a Deity walking on Aigas right now?

Wouldn't it be better to deal with that first?!

The Emissary felt the wave of confusion and frustration and answered before the flurry of questions came.

"For now, Boron's unsealing is not the most immediate concern. Boron's body is the Under, a course layer under us. He can't dismantle himself from Aigas. At least not so quickly. However, a Deity is not limited by a physical body. They can manifest their soul as physical concept or attach themselves to something strong enough to hold their soul – even if it severely limits their power.

This has yet to happen, and if it does, all of you together won't be enough to stop it anyway. That is why, I need you to chase after the masked man instead."

While some semblance of belief had begun to show among those present, the fact that the Emissary thought it wiser to ignore a Deity and chase after a man seemed preposterous.

"You make out this masked man to be some kind of terrible threat. What is he after?" the woman in the velvet cloth said.

The faceless entity turned to her.

"When Quintess and Listafelle left, they bestowed three individuals with sets of tremendous power. These three are called Heralds, and their powers as well as memories have been passed down to their offspring through the years. I believe the masked man wants to take these powers and combine them to achieve something. At the moment, he is headed for Edagon, where one of the Heralds is.

That is why I need you to stop him. He is already plenty powerful as he is right now. We cannot afford to see him get stronger."

Replicus' sockets flashed.

"The power of the Deities...? By the manner you're speaking, it seems he's already on his way. The Premium Age Royale must have ended more than 12 hours ago at least, and he must've left for Edagon soon after. Why did you delay telling us this if you want us to catch him so badly?" he asked the Emissary.

As the only person who believed most of what the faceless entity was saying, Replicus engaged with the creature.

The other Faction leaders looked to him, some surprised at the urgency of his response.

The Emissary looked pleased. At least someone believed his words.

"Because it is not easy to reach Edagon," he replied.

"To reach Edagon, you have to pass the Central Boundary, the point that splits Aigas into the northern half and the southern half," the Head Faction leader said while looking at Replicus. "And on this Central Boundary, the Purity has stationed their strongest Paladin Champion to stop all voyages further north."

...!

From the looks of the other Faction leaders, this wasn't common news.

They all looked surprised to learn that the Purity had such a thing in place.

The number one Paladin Champion...

Replicus couldn't imagine how strong such an individual was.

He had only ever met two Paladin Champions.

What would their Divine Blessing be like?

Something ridiculous, probably.

Why would such a heavy unit, such a valuable force be placed there?

Did the Purity not want anyone curiously poking at the Giants, perhaps?

"There is another reason," the faceless entity said.

Everyone turned their attention back to him.

"The skies and seas past the Central Boundary are hard to traverse. Flying, levitating, spatial warping, time flow... all of these are twisted the further north you go. Even with a headstart, he's not getting far."

The Head Faction leader frowned.

"I've never heard of this. What makes the skies and seas there so different?" she asked.

The Emissary chuckled for the first time.

"As I said, you are mere children, yet I'm sure you know the answer," it said before taking a seat on the field.

"Because of the Ashing of Time, of course..."

#### Chapter 824: The Ashing of Time

In ancient times, tragedies stacked between the centuries. Misery and terror copulated to breed countless variations of death and suffering which fell over both the innocent and the guilty, the old and the young.

Many had assumed that with some stroke of luck, the Second Grand War would be the end of it; that the fall of Fulgardt would come, and a new age of peace would follow to douse the persistent burn of scars to the flesh, and gashes of the soul among the people.

No such thing occurred.

The great battle between Fulgardt and the vessels of the Deities did not end with a victory.

It merely served to awaken the menace bred by Maqi – who came to be known as the Immoral – bringing him to Divinity.

In the years that followed, Fulgardt did as he pleased.

He travelled outside Aigas and brought back calamities that needed none other than the Deities' vessels to overcome. Many champions from the Purity were sacrificed, and Rayne – who was the only one to have a body that could persist – had led the lot to their deaths.

It was a time of fear then.

It felt as though the war would never end.

Generations passed.

And even those faded too.

...Until one day, when the light from the sun became so blissful, it was almost chilling.

It was quiet that day.

Too quiet.

The world's sky suddenly depicted something more than the clouds and sun in the day; and the moon and stars that night.

The enormous canvas showed things past them.



Things outside Aigas.

Things common folk, and those that were weak in soul and mind were never meant to see.

The Rules that barred Aigas from outside forces... became terribly weak.

The suffering grew worse.

This phenomenon kept on for several months.

Many, whether from Feinheath and Opungale, descended into madness from the things they saw.

Mortals couldn't resist the urge to look up and satisfy their curiosity after all. And even if they hid under thick covers, it did not help.

For otherworldly entities never known visited.

Some only to look.

Some to invade.

The thin veil around Aigas allowed it during this time.

And in that time, the people of Aigas, Sif and man, felt that their world had lost much of its lustre. Something had left.

Something was missing.

There was one saving grace though.

The threat of the Immoral was finally thwarted in the wake of the disaster.

Common men and weak combatants never saw it, but they did hear and feel the great gusts pushed by massive pairs of wings, as well as the shattering blows that rang across Aigas' lands, seas and skies for days. And after they ceased...

The Immoral was no more.

He was driven down to his dark lair, never to be seen again.

But none could truly celebrate, for the skies still showed things normal men were not supposed to see.

Millions died because of it.

Some snatched by cruel creatures, or shocked to death by skinless men marching the lands and into Sacred Forests.

The protection of the Deities seemed less potent in those days.

And it was.

However, not all of it was lost.

It was now in the hands of three beings.

A simple man from Emeradis.

An El-Sif from Opungale.

...And of course, one of the two Elders from the land of the Giants, a dragon by the name JIGGORRHAX.

He was young, easily agitated, impulsive, and full of energy, traits that man would relate to adolescents among their own, not to a two thousand year old dragon.

Yet it was this dragon that was blessed to become a Herald of Listafelle, burning with power far, far more fierce than that of a human vessel.

He took it upon himself to end all the problems of the world.

The world was yet to recover from losing two of its governing Deities, after all.

It would in time, but would common man and Sif still be alive by then?

He and his fellow Heralds had taken care of the Immoral, with Rayne and a few surviving vessels from the Purity by their side, but everything was falling apart.

Even the Yormuness was bleeding into Aigas, causing Spirits to run amok, terrifying the living.

This could not stand.

Immediate action was required, but the others encouraged patience and sought solutions that stalled too long – at least for Jiggorrhax.

This, without conferring with the other Heralds, or with the lone Suzamete, the dragon moved.

From his perch in Edagon, the great dragon sucked in a fourth of all the mana in the whole of Aigas, and unleashed a mighty burst of dragon breath so potent that it lit up the entire world.

Perhaps it was simply skill.

Perhaps it was coincidence.

Jiggorrhax seemed so sure of himself.

With the great heat of the fire, he scorched all enemies that reached in from above to sink into Aigas.

With the light from his flame, he glazed the translucent skies such that they hid their contents from the eyes of mortals.

With the force of his breath, he drove back the Yormuness to its right place, and banished the Spirits it held along with it.

For thirty days, the Herald kept on until the world recovered enough of its Rules through Suzamete, and learned to defend itself.

Yes.

It was a great job indeed.

Truly majestic work.

Only... Jiggorrhax's breath did a lot more harm than the dragon had intended.

The Herald's power had been so great, that it burned away a lot more than just his enemies.

Mana fell as soft ash from the skies for hours. The potent energy had been drained, and diluted – moreso burnt really, and never to fully recover from what Jiggorrhax himself took.

Several spots in Aigas had been turned into cruel magical omens that harboured unfavourable magical effects.

...And most important of all, Jiggorrhax's breath had carved time itself, bringing the future closer to the present.

Several millennia blurred through the minds of living things faster than the other Heralds could act.

They were empty millennia that rolled past without history, and without substance. Because of Jiggorrhax's will, his breath could never burn the sentient existences of Aigas, but the forced time sifted through their minds, bearing confusion and delusions of millennia in just thirty days.

All this was true for most living things, yet among the exceptions, were the Giants.

Unlike all other races, they had had one more Scaled Elder with power enough to shield them through Jiggorrhax's righteous might.

And it was the Giants that then gave the Herald the name, Jiggorrhax, the Abiding Madness.

Chapter 825: Game On!

When the Emissary finished telling this rendition of the tale, he garnered the greatest reaction yet.

What he had just told, was a hard to pill to swallow, especially to individuals who thought they knew far more than the average person.

It was sort of humbling, yet also completely unbelievable.

Most wanted to reject it, but somehow, they found themselves wrestling against the notion that... maybe this was true.

It conflicted against what they knew, but it filled in several gaps they did not have answers to.

Replicus was stunned the most out of everyone here.

Through his separate journey from Skullius, he had found that history, as far as texts and word of mouth went, didn't have a definitive conclusion to Fulgardt's story. It was almost as though someone had written out an abrupt end to a story that was at its climax each time he inferred how exactly Fulgardt had died if he had grown stronger after losing everything.

Now, he knew.

And he understood why everyone seemed so oblivious.

The Ashing of Time.

Several things instantly began to make sense to him now, especially with how he received this story, unlike the others – everyone with the exception of the Bishop was visibly shaken.

The Head Faction leader leaned in from her seat, and laid her chin on a net of her locked fingers.

"This certainly differs from what I know the Ashing of Time to be..." she said while staring at the faceless Emissary.

The individual was amused.

"Of course it does," it said.

The man with the jewel around his neck finally spoke, adding on.

"I was under the impression that the Ashing of Time was a phenomenon that occurred when the Yormuness collided with Aigas, causing the natural mana quality around us to dim, and distorting time itself. I'd heard it's why we have weaker warriors, and are less developed despite living through tens of millennia. But from this view..."

The low groans and grunts that permeated through the air, confirmed the fact that most of the other Faction leaders knew this version of the story too.

"A mere half-truth. Even less than that," the Emissary said as he pressed his palms on his knees in the cross-legged position he sat in. "The reason living beings outside Edagon even have knowledge of this is because of the Heralds. They intervened in order to make sense of several things for humans and Sif alike, altering histories that you don't know and shuffling memories of what you do know.

"As such, you celebrate a happy ending to the Second Grand War and Fulgardt's fall, and you also remain oblivious to the fact that your races haven't actually lived through 80 millennia since then. Most of them were just a blur that passed in a blink. Thankfully, the brain is the greatest deceiver of all. It is very proficient at fabricating lineages, families, victories and love that never existed."

There was silence for a stretch of time.

Could this really be true? That was a dark, dark story. Twisted even.

It was a terrible blow too.

To say that much of history was fake...

Did this mean some events didn't happen as far back as people thought.

Just how long had it been since the Second Grand War then?

When minds reached this particular point, some things just didn't make sense.

Weren't there beings that were twenty to forty millennia old?

What came to mind for most of the experts here were the beasts that usually guarded olden relics that stored legacies.

How did this story fit in with them?

The Emissary piled on.

"You'll find that the Purity has always been ahead on this as well. Because several vessels chosen from among the Purity's champions existed during the time, and were not affected by the Ashing of Time like the Heralds, the Purity has known for a long time the truth about history."

"Because of this, they monopolise information they know the wider public that submits to the Deities do not know. Like the existence of the Yormuness, for instance. Why tell believers that there is no distinction after death for the righteous and the fool? They would obviously fabricate lies about reward and punishment."

...!

This particular detail smote Replicus hard.

What was common knowledge to everyone around him wasn't so clear for him. He had been wondering what would become of a person who died for a long time.

The last time he heard anything remotely close to substantial was when he talked to the Stray Knight Bek Dworth back in Harifrast. According to the Knight, who was also a Spirit Warden, there was a place for those who abided by the Deities and those who didn't, but he didn't seem to believe it myself.

He was detached from his own words.

This was one of the factors around which Skullius had chosen to spare Sila. If he could combine their souls, then even if he died, his soul would go wherever the Deities banished unworthy souls. That was far better than what Somanda had planned.

Yet...

'The Yormuness, huh? And Spirits? Like Bassbion?' Replicus thought to the guardians of the Temple of Unlusted Tears.

Darn, there was so much to unpack.

The bit about Rules.

The bit about an actual dragon.

The bit about... pretty much everything else!

The velvet clothed woman spoke again.

"You said Heralds can pass on their power right? I don't know how long dragons live, but—"

"Yes," the faceless entity swiftly cut her off. "The Herald the masked man is after, is a dragon. And no. Jiggorrhax and his mate were the last dragons to exist on Edagon during that age. Way before the First Grand Wars... that was the prime of dragons' existence.



Jiggorrhax and his mate's offspring is all that's left. And once again, no. I fear that no Herald alive right now, can handle the masked man alone. While a Herald as a dragon is more than a hundred times stronger than any other... that's still a no."

Amid the many thoughts, a truly sombre mood crawled its way around the Coliseum. Hints of doubt were still swirling persistently, especially with this added information.

What monstrosity was this masked man?

How had he become so strong?

No one among the Faction leaders assumed they could take on a dragon, even if it wasn't blessed with the might of the Deities.

Silence pervaded for the umpteenth time, but the Penetrator broke it minutes later.

"I see..." he said, causing several faces to turn to him. He then pointed at the Emissary. "So, if I'm to make a guess, one of the Immortals or whatever... is a Herald, right?"

...!

Shock sprang about.

It wasn't that this was a severely shocking reveal.

It was just that most of the Faction leaders had been so busy digesting this story after allowing themselves to believe bits of it, that they didn't even think of this.

The Immortals being a myth barely held if their mysterious nature was so because among them, there was a Herald!

It had to be.

Otherwise, it wouldn't make sense why the Immortals – or whoever sent the Emissary – knew all this. Of course, this whole thing could also be a lie, but Replicus didn't think so.

The Emissary stared at Replicus and a chuckle scurried from its figure.

"Let's talk about the assignment, shall we?" it said, brushing off Replicus' question. "Whether you choose to believe me or not about several things, is up to you, but ALL OF YOU are going to follow after the enemy."

Several grunts of dissatisfaction rang out.

The arrogance!

Some even asked the faceless Emissary what would happen if they refused, but most turned to the woman in velvet. Regardless of how they felt, she had the final say on their actions.

She had the highest authority after all.

The woman seemed to ponder for a while.

Replicus wondered what her decision would be.

He didn't forget that the faceless Emissary had said something about destroying the Severed Union and rebuilding it again to prove a point. He was sure she remembered that too.

That hadn't sounded like a weightless declaration.

Soon, the Head Faction leader spoke.

"The Herald's breath – according to you – is what caused the way to Edagon to become unstable, right? I recall you saying something about transport. I assume you're providing ships for us?"

It didn't take a genius to figure out what the woman in velvet had decided.

A lot of the Faction leaders weren't happy with this.

Just like that?

"Of course," the faceless entity confirmed.

The woman in velvet nodded before standing up. The cloth around her seemed to adjust itself according to her posture.

She faced down the faceless entity, and the air around her shifted from the cool calm to become as frightful as a thunderstorm unseen by the eye.

"Interesting. It truly is all interesting. However, Mr. Emissary, for me to send out every pillar of this organisation – which you seem to think you can twirl around your finger – there has to be a fitting reward. A prize enough for me to entertain even the possibility of the collapse of even a single Faction on this assignment.

Even if this is the end of the world, NONE OF US are honourable or noble enough to work for free."

The Emissary seemed stunned for a moment, and then it gave a laugh.

"Of course there's a prize, but only one of it exists," it said. "Given what and who you all are, this might turn into a race."

The Head Faction leader scoffed and a cold smile appeared on her lips.

"We wouldn't have it any other way."

Chapter 826: Clearing Doubts

A full seven minutes of nothing but silence passed in the Coliseum.

The field at its middle was empty now, and only the rows of dark, stone seats remained occupied, some of them illuminated directed by the sharp streaks of light oozing from the cracks.

The Emissary had left, and that gave room for the Faction leaders to finally express themselves in full, only, nothing much needed to be said for this.

The general feeling everyone had was pretty much the same, and experts at high levels, whether they were enemies or otherwise could convey sentiments like dissatisfaction, doubt and solid enmity without words.

That being said, the Head Faction leader had much to say, rather, she wanted to answer several questions that she knew were igniting bonfires within certain individuals.

She sighed, her modest velvet cloth whipping around her as she stood.

"Best not to waste anymore time. If our enemy is using the same means of travel as us, they might be close to reaching the Central Boundary by now," she said, before her eyes set off a menacing gleam. "And since we're all leaving for this voyage..."

The attention of all sharpened.

"...you're free to express your personal grudges as you see fit on the way. I only hope you kill in moderation."

The mood turned darker than it had already been.

Replicus scoffed inwardly.

'Well, I didn't expect this turn of events...' he thought before scratching the rim of his helmet. 'This stalls a whole lot of my plans.'

At that moment, one of the Faction leaders spoke, directing a far from enthusiastic sentiment towards the proud Head Faction leader.

"Are we so powerless that we need to be ordered around by that... thing? All of us here have heard what's going on in Pelian, and it is concerning. What if this Emissary or whatever seeks to divert our attention with a wild goose chase? Can we even verify his identity? Why take his word for it?

You do realise, Eaniss, that we're leaving the Severed Union wide open, right?"

A moment of silence followed, and then another spoke.

"This is true. I'm surprised you didn't give it that much thought. Were you truly that frightened by words? If so, then the Head Faction is falling from grace. Even if the world is ending, I'd rather die with the Union than submit to the command of another."

No one followed with the same remarks, but the two Faction leaders stood their ground, which was quite bold.

Replicus would have applauded.

"Foofz!" the Mad Bishop suddenly barked, a crooked twist of an expression on her face.

Everyone turned to her, but were instantly forced to groan in exasperation – inwardly – as they saw her swipe an excessive amount of jam with a fine knife, on half a loaf of bread, before opening her mouth wide and devouring it with barely any resistance showing when it fell down her throat.

"Fools!" the Mad Bishop reiterated after sliding her tongue around her mouth. "You dishonour the very idea of dishonour itself! What use is dying for the Union? We may not be heroes, but I'd rather die, slowly getting ripped apart by the fangs of a Tier 300 rabid beast for the prospect of a gorgeous reward, than to sit here and do nothing!"

"Sure we'll kill each other on the way, but WHO CARES?! Isn't danger our entire purpose?! Risks! Fatality! Blood! You want to seek peace and begin bringing logic into everything now of all times?!"

Replicus stifled a laugh.

'Damn. Is that supposed to be a motivational speech?'

As to be expected, there was no outward welcome or adverse reaction to the Bishop's words. It did seem as though her stance was intriguing to most though.

The two Faction leaders who were opposed to the idea of this voyage weren't motivated to back down in the least. They glared at the Mad Bishop, and then back at the Head Faction leader, Eaniss – as she was called.

She stared at them in return and smiled.

"The Head Faction has existed long before all your Factions did. Leadership is passed down by blood, and it has been my turn for several decades now," she said. "I've often wondered how exactly it was created. Such records don't exist in any information stores that we have, after all.

That spells to me, that even if it isn't the Immortals, someone equally as mysterious – borderline mythical – raised this organisation. I believe the time came for us to finally get hints as to who."

"It's not coincidence that this... creature, whatever it was, has some form of knowledge about the inner, most powerful security means employed a very long time ago to safeguard the Union and even this Coliseum. I'm inclined to believe to some degree."

'I knew it...'Replicus thought.

There was no way Eaniss would ignore simple facts for pride. That faceless existence had a shroud of mystery, but certain aspects of him were abundantly clear.

Or maybe they were just more clear to Replicus who saw a pattern with all extraordinarily powerful individuals he had faced before.

"So you also believe that ridiculous version of the Ashing of Time?" one of the two opposing leaders asked.

"Not so much. It would be a lie for me to admit so. That is too great of a stretch for me to digest immediately," Eaniss said with her finger on her chin. "However, that doesn't discount the danger Aigas currently is in right now."

"Hmph!" a scoff from the other Faction leader who had been standing up. "Working off of faith and uncertainties. Pitiful."

"It's probably true. I've met this masked man," Replicus suddenly chimed in.

...

The attention turned to him, along with the burden of piercing eyes. Even Pherdanta turned to look at her master with surprise.

"What?" the Faction leader with a blue tone to her skin from her neck to her feet asked with a condescending tone.

"I faced this man before in Pelian. He had the strongest presence of Undeath I'd ever felt up to that point. He's pretty dangerous," Replicus said relaxedly.

"Hah! Dangerous? And yet you're still alive? Does that attest to his strength?" another of the Faction leaders said, unfriendly ridicule in his voice.

"Oh yes it does," Replicus said with a chuckle, his sockets under the helmet flashing like suns.

When it became clear that most of the Faction leaders were not taking him seriously, the Penetrator added on.

"He was extremely difficult to handle on his own, but the fact that he's in contact with an Arch Lich made him even more deadly."

...!

Chapter 827: Believe Or Not

"An Arch-Lich?"

"What in the world are you talking about?!"

The two Faction leaders who had been arguing against Eaniss' decision, roared in Replicus' direction.

The Penetrator's words had truly caught them off guard, stunning the majority of the Faction leaders present, most of whom didn't have too high of an opinion of him. This showed perfectly when the woman with the blue skin frowned, and spoke indignantly:

"Aren't Arch-Liches ranks of undead that have never set foot on Aigas? How would someone like you even know what they are like?"

"Indeed," another of the Faction leaders glared at Replicus. "They are fables made from the assumption that the undead that have managed to force their way into our world before, had superiors. No one knows for sure."

This was no lie.

Many beings on Aigas carried testimonies of how undead had invaded, led by terrifying Liches, but that was all. The only semblance of the lifeless creatures to be seen came from the Green Neolists, an organisation of humans from Aigas that somehow acquired the power to resurrect the dead.

Given the added news from minutes ago though, the invasion of the true undead seemed to be getting recontextualized. How many years back did the undead invade?

Was it during the time when the Rules of the world turned weaker from Quintess and Listafelle's departure? That long ago?

The Faction leader who had just spoken was suddenly smitten with these thoughts and he grew silent.

Seeing as his counterparts all wanted him to elaborate and shut up at the same time, Replicus laughed.

"Well, if you want me to exaggerate a little bit, I'll even tell you that I fought an Arch-Lich months ago. And of course, this masked man was the one who kindly let me know what I was up against, though he and the Arch-Lich didn't have too intimate of a relationship," Replicus said.

This didn't make the glares coming his way from the experts who saw him as a jester without a clear understanding of the gravity of what he was saying, go away.

Eaniss had a different reaction to everyone else though.



"Is that so? Do you have evidence of this? If you are correct, then this only emphasises how critical our intervention may be," she said as she set one leg on top of the other.

Hostile eyes pinched at Replicus, daring him.

If he couldn't produce any evidence, his reputation and the credit to his name would plummet tremendously.

"Well, do you?" the woman in the blue skin asked with smirk and scoff.

Replicus nodded with his sockets flashing twice as bright.

"Naturally, you sockethole," Replicus said while facing the woman, which garnered him a single instance of terribly fierce and razor sharp killing intent that shone on him like a laser. Replicus chuckled at it.

Perhaps he was starting to get too comfortable teasing Incandescent Stage experts.

Anyway...

"I'm sure all of you are aware of rumours that began a few months ago, after the sudden proliferation of Clusters all around Pelian. It was a pretty popular event, termed the Mass Cluster Incident or something. If any of your sources are actually accurate, they would have told you that the one to identify the cause, was a man named Tulnas, from a small city called Inhone," Replicus explained.

He pointed up with his finger, and a burst of mana soared into the air and created a rather vivid image of a man with dark hair tied into a bun, blue eyes, and a dashing smile.

"I was pretty weak during that time, and was imprisoned by the Capital Service for crimes against public property. I was given a chance to earn a pardon. I joined this man, Tulnas, on an excursion to solve the matter of the Clusters. He and I found that the cause for incident were the Evenfall. The cultists who believe in Boron."

Replicus chuckled lightly when he reached this point.

It seemed extremely convenient then – perhaps because his atrocious luck was still rather potent – now that he thought about.

"Believe it or not, I met both the man who has finally managed to free Boron – as the Emissary said – and I also met the masked man. Tulnas and I figured out that the Evenfall and Green Neolists were working together shortly before the masked man conjured a tool he used to rein in the consciousness of an Arch-Lich. Perhaps 'fight' is a misleading word, but I did come face to face with an Arch-Lich.

Barely escaped with my life..."

'And soul,' Replicus finished the statement in his mind.

Ah such times.

Replicus remembered getting one up on Somanda that time. The Arch-Lich had claimed that he wanted the powers that his soul now held. Powers that could contend against Deities.

Fortunately for him, he hated Somanda enough for [Pseudo Evil Veneration] to activate and break the Lich's vessel.

'Good times...' Replicus thought with an inner smile.

...

His audience stifled their hostility. His explanation, to their surprise held substance.

"Hmm. I remember that. There was some commotion about it. Though, there was no mention of you," one of the Faction leaders who opposed the voyage said sceptically.

"My reward was freedom, not recognition. I was a side kick in that story, actually," the Penetrator said.

Eaniss was visibly intrigued.

"Fascinating. You have seen the one who supposedly freed Boron too?" she asked.

"Yeah. He was the same man playing Game Master through duration of Premium Age Royale. I had suspected he was up to no good, but what would the word of someone like me had done," Replicus shrugged.

"The Premium Age Royale?"

"The same man was involved? How can you be sure?"

A flurry of questions were sent Replicus' way.

"I have my ways. Besides, it's not that hard to remember a face you hate, even if from a simple description, right? Especially with.... certain verbal habits," the Penetrator said.

Pherdanta was just as shocked as everyone else to hear about this. She had never known that her master had such exploits under his belt. No wonder he readily accepted what the Emissary had to say about the masked man and all.

Her respect for Replicus grew ferociously in that instance.

She did wonder what Replicus meant when he said he was very weak months ago though. He couldn't have been as weak as he made himself seem, right?

"Well, you've definitely made it hard to deny your story entirely," one of the Faction leaders said after a brief stretch of silence. "This masked man... Does he still have the tool you mentioned?"

The thirty and some heavy gazes enticed Replicus.

'Heh...' he chuckled inside.

"I assume so," he lied.

The above Legendary grade tool SoSei was in his possession, but he wouldn't give everyone that much peace of mind. Even if they didn't buy that the masked man was connected to Somanda, Replicus wanted to make sure some of them would be on edge when they faced the enemy.

'The race has already begun, hasn't it? I'm just using all the advantages I have at my disposal,' Replicus thought deviously.

#### Chapter 828: Unexpected... Reunion?

It seemed to Replicus that he had given the other Faction leaders a lot of things to think about at the very least. Perhaps they weren't agonizing over this just yet, but he felt assured that they were already a bit tense.

This acted as enough confirmation that there truly was an enemy headed for Edagon, and one that was indeed formidable. While the Emissary had stressed that the masked man was very powerful, some of the Faction leaders became convinced that he might only be so strong because of this tool Bright Storm mentioned, which allowed him to summon an Arch-Lich, in whatever limited capacity.

In that way, some believed Replicus and the threat at hand.

The other menace brewing in Pelian... well, the Six Houses and the Capital Service were likely already mobilising, though the fact that one of these pillars of Pelian was a traitor, was disturbing.

The EverSword House that hosted the Premium Age Royale...

Eaniss in particular was very disappointed by this.

For one of the most relied upon forces of Pelian to be responsible for its demise.

She bought that the major event had truly ended with millions dying. There were already telling signs from her sources detached from the Emissary's words.

What was the purpose of it though?

As Head Faction leader, Eaniss had many privileges which were far and beyond those which she imposed on the other Factions. She could manage things on Feinheath if she wanted – well except for Maqi.

Just before the Premium Age Royale had begun, she had had one of the most prestigious Families in Pelian wiped out because they had begun hidden operations that would sabotage life in the region they were settled in.

It was nothing they didn't deserve. That was what the Severed Union was for anyway.

...

Moments later within the silence, the Faction leader with the circular jewel around his neck stood.

"There should be nothing more discuss. The grade of the threat has been evaluated. Our means of transport already await us. May we be excused?" the man looked to Eaniss and asked.

The Head Faction leader gave him a short stare before waving her hand dismissively.

One of the 33 dark humanoids standing close to the man and members of his Faction, took steps towards him and grasped the air with a thick hand, as though there was something hidden under the canvas of open space.

With a pull, a doorway-shaped glow emerged.

The Faction leader swiftly went through with his guards, and as they passed into the glow, Replicus gave a last look towards the grey-haired Mage with the <Marked Spot>.

'That's another mystery to solve on the way...' he thought.

Soon, other Faction leaders rose and were granted exit by the dark humanoids.

Surely, there was nothing more to talk about. In fact, if not for Replicus introducing the idea that he was acquainted with the current major enemies, this gathering would have seen its end sooner.

Speaking of the end, only the Head Faction leader could dismiss a gathering. It was impossible to leave the Coliseum without her say so, different from the ease of entry.

As everyone was leaving, Replicus felt the Mad Bishop approach. She had a wide grin on her face – along with jam painted breadcrumbs.

"That was a good meal. You should joined me, Bright Storm," she said.

Replicus didn't know if the Bishop had been listening to the rest of the discussion, especially the part spurned on by him. She had been quiet throughout, however, he didn't let the thought deceive him into thinking she had zoned out the entire time.

"Well! I can't wait to have some friendly firing on the journey! It's going to be fun, don't you think?"

"Maybe. I'd rather make some wagers. Concessions, actually, if you will," Replicus said.

The Bishop's grin grew wider. She drew close to him and nodded viciously.

"What are you proposing?! Oh Bright Storm you always know how to make everything fun! Tell me! TELL ME!"

The Penetrator saw the deep frowns from the Mad Bishop's guards, and gave a light laugh.

"Let's see..." he said, pretending to be thinking carefully. "I propose to set three terms."

"One, if we both come back alive from the voyage, we'll split the spoils gained from the Factions we kill off."

"Two, if we happen to be close to each other – let's say within a fifty meter radius – only then can you and I clash. However during said clash, we can't kill each other's subordinates. We'll leave them to sort each other out."

"Three, if one of us dies outside of a battle between us, the other must kill the one responsible and claim all the loot. How's that?"

The Mad Bishop's eyes shone.

"Interesting, interesting, Bright Storm! I'll avenge when you die for sure!" she cried as her visage twisted in glee.

"I will too," Replicus said.

Pherdanta and the Mad Bishop's guards had mixed feelings about these terms. Both sides could tell... these were well calculated moves, though the purpose of all three exactly, was unknown to none but the Penetrator.

According to the Severed Code, if a legal duel between Factions ended with defeat or destruction – mainly that of the Faction leader – ownership of the losing Faction's property was transferred to the winner. The remaining Faction members would be at the mercy of the winning Faction too.

"Let me add a fourth term," the Mad Bishop suddenly said... and the look of senseless joy disappeared from her face, making her ancient visage a lot more wise than it was whimsical.

Replicus' sockets darkened a little. Pherdanta and the Bishop's guards grew incredibly tense.

"If I get the better of you during any of our battles, you and your subordinates will join my FAITH."

There was a pause.

Replicus chuckled.

'You're not interested in killing me, huh?' he thought.

"Fine by me," he said.

The Mad Bishop switched back to a giddy juvenile wannabe.

"Great then! I can't wait."

While marching with glee, raising her knees high from under her robes, she and her guards then walked to an exit and disappeared into its glow.

"Was that a good idea?" Pherdanta looked to Replicus. Concern was written all over her hidden face.

"It will be fine," Replicus said with a reassuring pat on his Unlimited's shoulder.

He was sure it would be.

He beckoned to her, and then led her to an exit prepared by the humanoid standing before them when...

"Bright Storm."

Eaniss called to Replicus from the other side of the Coliseum.

The Penetrator sighed under his helmet. He should have expected this.

If anyone at all was interested in what he said earlier, it would have to be Eaniss, of course.

Replicus didn't really like her very much, and he certainly wasn't a fan of her dark creations which had begun to make their way towards her location after they finished sending everyone off.

Replicus, with Pherdanta following after him, soon arrived before the velvet clothed woman.

She smiled at the Penetrator.

"I'm glad to find that you're proving more useful than I initially imagined when I granted you the Faction leader designation," she said.

"I'm proud of that myself," Replicus replied.



Unlike the others, he couldn't really afford to act too haughty or rebellious. As far as even Eaniss was concerned, Replicus' Faction was the weakest.

The Head Faction leader remained silent for a while, her sharp eyes appraising the Penetrator.

She then stood.

"Let's have a chat somewhere else. Somewhere less...formal."

...

Moments later, Eaniss, Replicus and Pherdanta emerged someplace else.

Because they immediately appeared within another building, Replicus couldn't tell where they were, but the richness of the mana told him that they were out of Severed Union bounds.

Currently, the group was in a lavish, wide, mostly empty lounge with a sky blue and silver theme to its floor, high ceiling, walls and tiled floor.

Eaniss settled on one of fifteen, large and fluffy couches in this lounge, and then beckoned her guests to do the same.

As she did though, a dark humanoid – separate from the ones she had come with from the Coliseum – appeared by Eaniss' side and bowed as it spoke.

"My lady, he has returned."

Eaniss raised a brow, a light frown appearing on her face.

"Send him here now," she instructed, and the humanoid vanished.

Replicus curiously wondered what this was about as he sat down, with Pherdanta opting to stand behind him.

Soon, the dark coloured creature returned, but with not one, but two individuals.

One was a man with partly lifeless eyes and a broad frame. He had a small notebook in his hands which he scribbled in without pause.

Eaniss looked both relieved and furious at the sight of this man, but before she addressed him, she turned to the other figure.

"Who are you?" she asked.

Replicus turned to this figure too, and with a lot more than a little surprise showing from his sockets.

'Isn't that...'

It was a man with long white hair tied into a ponytail, and a very pale face below where it began. He wore a large, fuzzy jacket and shivered a little even while wrapped by its warm embrace.

This man had been about to answer Eaniss' question when his eyes suddenly shot towards Replicus before they bulged.

He expressed just as much shock as Replicus with a nasty contortion on his face.

"The fuck?!"

Chapter 829: A Glimpse At The Ridiculous

A suspiciously potent silence suddenly turned the atmosphere in the wide lounge heavy.

The look on Aurolio's face suggested that an assortment of thoughts that utterly boggled his mind rampaged in his dome.

Replicus had the benefit of a hard helm and an inscrutable face – thankfully – which left the pale man to look shocked alone, but deep down, the Penetrator's mind, rather minds, were racing.

'What in the world is going on?' Aurolio thought as the contortion on his face switched to a light frown.

He sensed it so openly.

Null Life Essence.

It freely flowed around the figure of the armoured entity several paces from him.

But... how?

Wasn't Festos the only one who had Null Life Essence in this world?

Last he had seen that man, was when he had been watching from a distance the climax to the Royale's entire purpose, when a masked man, an extremely powerful Undeath user, had summoned a treacherously powerful soul, and Festos had somehow reacted to this summoned soul by turning into.... something else.

Aurolio hadn't had the gut to interfere or draw too close, but he had found that he needed to do so in order to save Gabel's soul from being absorbed.

Managing such a thing, had only been a benefit of being a somewhat uninvolved spectator who was confident in at least surviving the mere aftershocks of the great battle than had been taking place.

Yes. That was the last he saw of Festos before fleeing.

Aurolio would have thought that this was some kind of unusual humanoid beast that Festos had conjured and let loose.

However, he wasn't so sure.

Instead of guessing, he used his guidance field to check its status and...

...!!!

A nervous smile flashed on Aurolio's face while his eyes shot open.

Unconsciously, his hand balled into a fist.

'Seriously.... What the heck?' he thought.

~~~

[ Name : Skullius ]

[ Tier : 3 ]

[ Level : 78 ]

[ EXP : --- ]

[ Core : Blue ]

[ Class : Vehement Bone Nullmancer ]

[ Race : Titan World Storm Penetrator ]

[ Inv. Status : Doomed ×2 ]

-----

[<Stats>]

[ DUAL MANA-SOURCING FORCE (I) : 95,940 ]

[ ASTRAL BLIZZARD MOTION (I) : 78,000 ]

[ SUBJECTIVE PHANTOM INFERENCE (I) : 4 ]

[ TRIGGER DEVIANT BUILD (I): 7× ]

[ LUCK : Atrocious? ]

-----

[ PRIME PERPETUATION : 60,750/60,750 ]

-----

[ MANA (I) : 351,670/351,670 (On Sage Strain + Sage Save) ]

-----

[ Mana^ : 899,900/899,000 (On Sage Strain + Sage Save) ]

-----

[ Null Life Essence : 24,000/24,000 ]

~~~

Aurolio didn't know what to make of all these numbers and terms.

What kind of stats were these?

Astral Blizzard Motion?

Subjective Phantom Inference?

Sage Strain?

He had never met anyone with stats like this. Even the more unusual beasts in the Tier 20s didn't have such bizarre terminology for their base physiques.

Yeah. That's right.

This really was a beast.

There was no demotion of Tasks or Stage.

Strange.

Aurolio's face twitched as he slowly relaxed it, but his eyes didn't leave Replicus.

As for the Penetrator himself, he felt like the pale man's sight had lingered on him for a little too long. It was as though the man was seeing things that he shouldn't, and he didn't like that one bit.

Strange.

"Could I ask what's so enticing about my armour?" the Penetrator said to Aurolio, whose frown immediately intensified.

Eaniss had been watching silently for the past ten seconds, drawing some conclusions on the two.

"Are you too acquainted?" she asked.

"Not quite."

"Hell no."

The two responded almost simultaneously.

Gabel and Pherdanta were a little puzzled. Given the slightest cues the latter had learned to perceive from her master who generally didn't react like the average... anything, she had started to believe that Replicus perhaps knew the white haired man.

Despite what the two said, she couldn't buy that they had zero history.

"I see..." Eaniss said. She also had her suspicions, but she suspended them for now and instead gave her attention to Gabel.

"You've become too famous for your own good, Gabel. I didn't think the little job I gave you would lead to your renown growing in Pelian. Even common folk know you now. Has that gone to your head? I didn't give you permission to participate in the Premium Age Royale, and yet you did anyway. I sent a messenger to bring you home, and you resisted, likely killed them, I presume.

You're looking to be executed, aren't you?"

Gabel sighed.

He slotted his notebook into his pocket, and stared straight into Eaniss' eyes.

"Not exactly," he replied simply. "But I did manage to get you important information."

Eaniss raised her brow, and turned to Aurolio, who had allowed his gaze to wander to Replicus again.

"I suppose this unbranded man has something to do with it?" she asked.

Aurolio turned to her and wore his signature smile.

"Well, yes. That is true. It's all thanks to me that this guy is alive. He was in quite the fucking pickle, I'll tell you that," he said.

"Oh is it?" Eaniss said, unamused at all. She then shook her head. "Very well then. Gabel, take your guest somewhere else. I'll deal with you later."

The dark humanoid that had brought the two immediately gestured for the two to follow it out of the spacious lounge. Gabel followed with a sigh and a twitch of the eye that hinted at the deep pain he was feeling within. Aurolio on the other hand...

He gave a last glance to Replicus – which the Penetrator met with his own – and then went along.

'What's his deal?' Replicus thought. It was rather curious.

He did find it interesting that Gabel was with this man though.

Gabel was a member of the Head Faction, one with a lot of privileges that extended to duties on Feinheath. He was like Eaniss' conspicuous assassin, responsible for maintaining low to medium level threats that she charged him to deal with.

The common bandits who didn't know the role he served called him a bounty hunter, which wasn't a stretch since he did do jobs like that – in a way.

Both Gabel and Aurolio had been contenders in the Premium Age Royale, and the fact that they survived, or that Aurolio saved Gabel, rather, must mean that they had quite the useful information indeed.

'Hmmm...' Replicus thought. 'Hopefully Kenno returns with more relevant news.'

"So, Bright Storm..." Eaniss stole the Penetrator's attention. She leaned close from the couch and looked him straight in the socket.

"I'm curious about this story of yours. About the masked man and this... other fellow. Can you share it in greater, more... unlimited detail?"

The Penetrator gave a short laugh.

"Of course," he said... with a certain level of delight.

Chapter 830: Free Thoughts



Eaniss asked Replicus to retell his story several times while interrupting him with a plethora of questions at various points during his narration. She did this while maintaining an unblinking stare, and with a high voice each time she interjected.

Pherdanta was awestruck.

She admitted that if it was her that was being interrogated like this, she probably would have slipped a few times under Eaniss' intense presence.

She wasn't Head Faction leader by name only, after all.

At the end of the day, in order to command god-like fiends like the ones in the Factions, you had to be something of the same yourself, or far beyond that.

Eaniss was easily the latter.

Pherdanta withered under her presence, and the only way she would find strength to act, would be if Eaniss assaulted Replicus, something that seemed imminent given how she looked at the Penetrator... but that was just an illusion.

Different from Pherdanta, Replicus could identify this illusion.

Aside from the fact that the Penetrator had no fear of death, he feared none of the Incandescent Stage experts in this organisation, including Eaniss' herself.

Having two months to do nothing but grow and account for most things that could go wrong in various situations, had allowed him to create failsafe and contingency upon failsafe and contingency.

Even now, as Eaniss asked, "And you say this man – the Evenfall cultist – miraculously escaped from the prison in the city?", Replicus answered as he had done the last nine times without the slightest hint of inflection.

Eaniss retreated deeper into the soft fabric of her couch.

"Interesting. Very interested..." she said while digesting the story Replicus told.

The Penetrator had retold it the exact same way several times despite her asking about details only mildly related to the main story tens of times. It was impressive that he stuck to the same version without deviation.

Admittedly, Replicus would have stumbled at least a handful of times regarding some of the things Eaniss inquired.

Like what time of day it was exactly, when Guissepo escaped?

Who had contacted the Purity Knights to come and collect him?

How many Cluster beasts he estimated were unleashed on Inhone?

The nature of his participation in the ensuing chaos.

And so on and so forth.

The reason Replicus didn't stutter even once, or show some hesitation, was because, unseen by anyone else but him, four little figures swam in the air around his helmet.

There were small, royal blue skeletons with four sockets on their skulls. Wispy trails of Null Life Essence followed their every move, and said movements presented a very exaggerated degree of freedom.

"What do you think she's about to ask now?"

"Beats me. If she's up for a tenth round, I wouldn't mind. It's not like ol' Sockethole McThunderson is in a hurry or anything."

"Quit it. He can hear you?"

"So what? We are insulting ourselves. Or he's insulting himself? Themselves? Myself? Flesh it, you all know what I mean!"

These four were the result of Replicus' mental attribute, which should have been 'Intelligence.'

Now, it was called SUBJECTIVE PHANTOM INFERENCE, a result of Replicus using [Unbound] on his Intelligence stat and getting a rather surprising Special Bonus Random Upgrade.

As one might guess, this wasn't a skill, but a magical manifestation of superior thoughts. Each of these four skeletal apparitions were like boosted individual minds that held specific portions of Replicus' memories, and their job was to ensure that the Penetrator could account for everything he knew and everything he was in the process of learning when making decisions.

Of course, Replicus himself had a mind of his own on top of this, but it was only half as capable. Still, regardless of that, he usually didn't like the ruckus these phantoms made. So, if he didn't feel the need, he dismissed them.

The four spoke among themselves while also paying attention to Eaniss who seemed to have finally had enough of the current subject.

"How do you plan to handle this assignment?" she asked. "Besides the actual threat, which you have warned us all is a little beyond our pay grade, you have more than a few Faction leaders looking to take over the land I gave you, and the wealth you have accumulated."

Replicus skeletal processors exploded.

"What is she insinuating? Does she actually care about our fate?"

"Don't be ridiculous! She's trying to gauge our stance. Even if we give a half hearted answer, we will probably be revealing something she could evaluate!"

"The optimal answer is the actual truth. You know... we know we have a few names we want to kill so badly! Let's show her a little bloodlust!"

"All of you are correct."

Replicus gave a sigh and locked his fingers.

"I'm not really that interested in the other Faction leaders for now. I had several problems that needed dealing with as soon as possible before the Emissary came with this annoying job, and my mind is still set on them. It wouldn't be too bad to get rid of a few faces though," Replicus said calmly.

Eaniss smiled... and then she laughed.

"I thought you'd be more careful around me as you've been since I appointed you. It's good that you're settling into your role well enough to be honest."

"I TOLD YOU!" one of Replicus' thought phantoms screamed to the others while jumping off Replicus' shoulder.

"No one doubted you, sockethole."

"I said you were all correct."

"We heard you the first time."

Eaniss continued.

"Since I'm coming along on this assignment, what would you do if I attacked you?"

...

Replicus didn't show any hint of surprise but Pherdanta did, though only under the cover of her helmet. She frowned.

"Didn't see that one coming. Does she do this with all the other Faction leaders, or are we the exception?" one of the Penetrator's thought phantoms said thoughtfully.

"She thinks we have hidden motives, I think. She's pretty blunt, all things considered. Flesh her for that."

"How do we answer that? More honesty? Like saying 'I'll attack you back?'"

"All of you are correct."

"Aren't you supposed to give helpful input, sockethole?" an annoyed phantom asked.

From the outside, the lengthy bursts of conversation only took a second, a second where outsiders saw Replicus perform slight gestures that suggested some form of consideration.

"Since you could attack me now all the same, I'd probably fight back. If you wanted to kill me, you could do so easily with the Union Seal," Replicus answered.

And he was right. The Union Seal gave Eaniss tremendous advantages over everyone in the Severed Union. It didn't invade privacy – at least the Seal that Faction leaders had didn't – but it did allow Eaniss some degree of control over everyone with a Seal.

This was why Replicus ultimately wanted to rid himself of the Seal and cut ties with the Severed Union. But that wasn't possible with his current strength.

Eaniss smiled at his answer.

"You're right. Truth be told, ever since you showed me the secrets of your 'eye', I have been very intrigued by you. Certainly, a power like that, along with the results to your trials were enough for me to consider you Faction leader material, but my instincts are telling me you are so much more.

I've been tempted to imprison you and study what's behind that armour you always wear to ward off prying eyes countless times. I guess your desperation to be noticed worked too well in the end."

"What you demonstrated today tells me I have been right all along."

Replicus' sockets flashed a little brighter than usual.

This caught him a bit off guard.

Pherdanta grew even more nervous.

Eaniss' smile grew wider, and a furious blush painted her cheeks.

"Don't worry. I wouldn't dishonour a Faction leader like that. I wouldn't resort to such tasteless methods either. That's why I want to take full advantage of this voyage. With peril, fatality and desperation all around... I'm sure you'll naturally show me everything you are."