

Undead 881

Chapter 881: The Messenger

Before Aurolio knew it, two fingers were pointing at him from behind and in front, those who owned them looking be inches away from shedding restraint.

Allora and Grim were indeed ready to fire if necessary, and Baddan had a cold look to him as he remained where he was, making a meaningful hand gesture that caused mana to ooze out of him.

Pherdanta would have loved to join in, but she had to keep the ship steady, otherwise one Scorching Tear would end them all.

Aurolio whistled.

"Relax. I come in peace," he said.

"Is that so? I didn't hear a kind knock before you spawned in," Grim said coldly.

"It's cold outside. I thought we could settle the pleasantries later," Aurolio smirked.

"That's not how common standards of courtesy work."

"You pointing a finger – that's not really just a finger – to my head also doesn't apply as courtesy now, does it? I thought us men bred with the same white feathers on our heads would understand each other. Oh, there's another one," Aurolio said with a glance at Baddan.

"What's your purpose here?" Pherdanta asked malevolently.

Aurolio was stunned to see her emerge out of nowhere.

"This is an interesting group," he said, looking around before his eye fell suspiciously on the pale – sickly, really – creature sitting by the bowsprit, minding its own business. "Interesting indeed."

"Don't make me repeat myself," Pherdanta said as she drew the large, merged blade behind her back – and eerily – with her eyes faced towards the sea.

Aurolio grinned.

"No need to be so tense. I'm just a messenger. Eaniss has something for your... leader, Bright Storm. Everyone's calling him a show off. The name certainly gives it away—"

"You can give us that message. I'm afraid only a few white-hairs are allowed to waltz in on the boss. You're not one of them," Grim said with his red eyes pulsing with emotion.

He and the others would have lunged at Aurolio by now, but they resisted the urge simply because Replicus had warned them against being careless with opponents who could bypass the umbrella-shaped barriers.

Breaking the barrier wasn't easy, but it wasn't too difficult. It just took a little time. Those who could act as though it didn't exist were to be automatically judged as very powerful.

This man before them was one such opponent.

Aurolio looked at Grim with amusement in his eyes.

In a flash, he vanished from their midst, and there was there was a horrendous crashing noise, as though something fast and solid had hit a sturdy wall!

Aurolio had rushed towards the small cabin in what would have been the quarter deck, but a bright barrier had appeared around it just when he had been about to burst through the door!

Grim had his hand pointed in his direction from the distance, looking cockily at Aurolio.

"I told you. You're not meeting the boss on your own terms..." he said chillingly.

Aurolio had on a look of wonder as he pressed his hand on the barrier that had just blocked his entry.

'It's Null Life Essence...' he thought, his eyes glowing delightedly.

Right then, he quickly spun around when a tall woman appeared right on top of him and sent a drop kick to his head which he dodged easily, whizzing back to stand between Grim and Baddan.

"Let's not make this harder than it needs to be. I would prefer to deliver the news to your boss personally. If you aren't going to be kind enough to let me through, I could just humiliate you all – leave you seconds away from death – and then see your boss. It would be quite the sight for him, wouldn't it? Especially with what I have to tell him," Aurolio said with a calm smile.

"Let's see you try," Grim growled as strings of gold fur rushed over his face while his eyes rippled.

Everyone else on board – except Araeyn – was ready to remove that easy-going smile off Aurolio's face as well. Even Pherdanta looked to be close to abandoning the ship for a hot moment.

A set of long fingers wrapping themselves around Aurolio's neck changed the mood, however.

The starry armour made its appearance in that moment, diminishing the sense of dominance Aurolio had had over everything.

The pale man grinned as he looked at the tall figure before him, with four super bright lights shining from its helmet which threatened to turn him blind. His hand whipped towards the figure's neck also, and for a few moments, the two were stuck in place, applying atrocious grip to their opponent.

"Is it some kind of tradition for Eaniss' dogs to behave so boldly?" Replicus said in a deep voice.

"Hahaha! If I'm one, so are you," Aurolio replied, his face turning fierce, with a certain degree of bloodlust that made the Penetrator suspicious.

"Hmmm," Replicus hummed. "I won't let assaulting my subordinates pass without punishment, even if it was just intent, and even if you are just a messenger. I hope you understand. Eaniss will have to as well."

Aurolio was baffled by the sort of finality hidden within Replicus' statement, but it became clear what he meant when a familiar energy – vastly larger in volume and much more precise in its application than he was used to – descended across his body!

...!!!

Everyone on the ship felt.

They didn't feel what suddenly hit Aurolio, but they sensed the mighty drag it had on the atmosphere when it slashed across him from the right side of his neck to his left side!

Aurolio wore a look of befuddlement as a splash of blood sprayed from him and onto his large, fuzzy jersey!

He seemed to turn a bit paler, and he backed away rapidly, creating great distance between himself and the Penetrator.

He then gave Replicus an odd look as he hunched, pressing his hand over his large, and deep wound.

"Oh, you survived? I suppose you weren't really an ordinary Master after all, Mr. Strongest," Replicus said.

Aurolio chortled with an openly triggered look on his face.

" | I vastly underestimated you too, I think.|" he said.

...!!!

At once, Replicus was forced to kneel on the ground, as though a massive orb of Distorted Gravity had dropped on his head and pushed him to deck's floor! The force of his knees crashing on the ship was so great that it nearly bore a hole into it, as the old Undead Incandescent Stager had done!

"Boss!"

"Boss!"

"Master!"

The Unlimited were startled to see Replicus buckle, with two of them rushing to him while Pherdanta left the ship's control and gripped her swords' hilts.

'A Veneration Art. It's the same one he used yesterday. A Verbal-type, like [Pseudo Evil Veneration]!' Replicus thought.

He was currently only restricted physically, with no damage being done to him at all, which made him surmise that perhaps Aurolio's Veneration art was inferior to his own. Both of them, in fact!

He looked up at the pale man, seeing him don a large smirk at seeing Replicus kneel.

...But that smirk suddenly vanished in the next moment.

...!!!

To everyone's surprise, the gash in Aurolio's chest suddenly adopted a vicious, dark glow, and an ungodly amount of blood spewed from it and onto the deck in a literal flood!

The hell?

Replicus was shaken.

That... wasn't his doing.

What was happening?!

Aurolio gave a harrowing roar of pain as he looked to the sky, his face getting stained by his blood which flew erratically.

'What is this...?' he thought in agony.

What treachery was this?!

Even if Null Life Essence could do much more harm to him than mana...

This didn't make any sense!

But then it did.

His guidance field revealed why, explaining his folly. A mistake he couldn't have guessed.

Aurolio looked in horror at the notification flashing before his eyes.

[You are breaching the terms of a 'Tie of Exchange'....]

Chapter 882: The Same?

'A Tie of Exchange?!' Aurolio thought in shock. 'A Tie of Exchange?! What Tie of Exchange?!'

[You are breaching the terms of your 'Tie of Exchange'. Any further harm against the prime attendant 'Festos Dawn' will result in dire consequences]

...!

Aurolio turned paler than the word itself. His skin adopted a pearly white hue when this guidance field notification was coupled with a set of words – his words – rang through his mind, making the process of piecing together the truth much quicker and yet... much more confusing:

"I'm not one for hostility, but I like to keep my ego on a high pedestal above Lady Aigas' ass where it belongs. So I won't hesitate to kill if it's challenged or ridiculed. That said, as I mentioned earlier, I will refrain from doing you any harm if you help me procure Null beasts to raise my level."

Yes.

Yes indeed he had said this.

But that was to Festos!

The blood jutting out of Aurolio ceased its flow and he stumbled to his knees, much like Replicus, dipping himself in his own blood while panting heavily.

Everyone had frozen, but with caution stacked over all else.

It was clear that this hadn't been what the pale man had in mind, something that had struck the others – with Pherdanta being the first – when she noticed that Replicus' sockets weren't adapting the same look they usually did when everything went according to his plan.

He had a certain flash to his sockets when things went as he wished.

This wasn't it.

This was anomalous.

"What the hell?" Grim was the first to break the silence, his eyes bulging at the sight of Aurolio.

If it wasn't the boss who did this, then...

Replicus twitched and slowly stood up.

The influence over him had suddenly vanished, likely because of what had happened to the pale man. While reassuring his Unlimited that he was alright, he took light steps towards Aurolio.

When he was merely two meters away, Aurolio's blood-stained face rose to face the Penetrator's. The pale man's eyes were livid with a kind of wrath Replicus hadn't expected to see.

How curious...

Aurolio looked like someone who had been swindled, losing a great deal of money as a result.

The tone of his voice betrayed it all the more.

"It's you..." he said darkly. "You. Fucking..."

He paused while Replicus waited for him finish speaking, but with an assurance prepared that what happened earlier wouldn't happen again without an immediate reply.

Aurolio fumed.

"You're the same person... The SAME! FUCKING! PERSON!" he barked before pinching his skin where his wound had grown much more ghastly, opening further with every movement he made.

Replicus remained silent for a while.

His thought phantoms became restless. They collect every string of, weaving a large sock of information.

"You've met him?" Replicus stated vaguely, baiting a response.

Aurolio shook his head, chortled, and then laughed.

It was a laughter of self-ridicule.

"You address yourself as HIM? That's hilarious. I was convinced you were a little too weak for a... Right. You probably don't know what he knows, do you?" Aurolio said mockingly. "I thought you were just another Null beast he created without my knowledge or something.

Or perhaps a separate entity – oh I was hoping so. To think... You got me. You really got me. Your other self is rather modest then."

"I've heard," Replicus said. "I suppose all this blood has to do with something you had with my other self then? Like a contract. A Tie of Exchange perhaps?"

Aurolio scoffed with a hateful look towards Replicus.

He hadn't thought the Penetrator would come to that conclusion that quickly given that he and Festos didn't seem to share information through some kind of invisible network. If they did, the Festos before him would have been more guarded against him.

Aurolio had seen various cloning abilities, but this seemed extra. Perhaps it made sense that they couldn't share information with how far they were away from each other.

Yet still...

To think that this is what was going on the entire time...

Of course, Aurolio didn't know that Replicus knew the trends with his past self. He had formed a Tie of Exchange twice to save his life with powerful or influential people. Thus it wasn't that surprising to Replicus for Skullius to have forged another Tie of Exchange after getting into a tight spot, especially with how Kenno had reported of how much weaker Skullius seemed to be compared to him.

When Aurolio didn't reply to Replicus' question, the Penetrator shifted the conversation to the obvious.

"Since you know about Null Life, that not only confirms to me that you had a rather crushing relationship with... Festos. He wouldn't reveal such things casually. You must be aware of some other things as well. You also seem to have some kind of resistance against my Null Life Essence. I slashed you with the intent to kill, you know.

But there was effective resistance. Even Territories can't guard their users against raw Null Life Essence, which means you're quite special. What are you?"

Aurolio raised a brow.

"I think I've divulged enough," he said while licking his lips of the blood that had splattered on them.

'The Tie of Exchange considers them to be the same, huh? It's really another Festos under that armour? Or rather a... Skullius. This is too fucking strange,' he thought, rationalising.

"Is that so?" Replicus said. "That's fine. I'll figure everything out eventually."

"Heh, sure! Though you're reluctant to kill me now, huh? What happened to punishing me for the sake of your precious subordinates?" Aurolio sneered.

Replicus placed his fingers on his chin, as if thinking carefully about a relevant comeback.

"Reluctant is misleading. You also had some sharp bloodlust oozing out of you before I carved you up. You intended to kill me at some point too, right? We're both just postponing a death match further than we intended. There's no foul in that," he said.

"I supposed that's true," Aurolio said while standing up with some difficulty. "I volunteered to be Eaniss' messenger just to learn a bit more about you since our first meeting. And speaking of that..."

Replicus' sockets dimmed when Aurolio took a pause.

"Eaniss wanted me to tell you something. That damn woman is freakish about you," the pale man said.

"What did she want to tell me?" Replicus asked.

Aurolio shrugged while conditioning his breath.

"'I loved your lightshow. Stir things up again soon.' That's her message."

Chapter 883: Only The Results Matter

The contents of the message almost made Replicus feel a thick dose of exhaustion. When he had heard that Eaniss had a message for him, he had actually expected a revelation, or some useful information or at least a threat for his flashy attack earlier.

But as it turned out...

'She wants more chaos? What a greedy woman. Everything around us isn't enough?' he thought.

"Typical," he voiced.

"Isn't it?" Aurolio said as he smirked and turned. The wound across his torso didn't look like it was bothering him anymore, at this point. Whether it was because of a natural healing factor or the work of some equipment, Replicus couldn't quite tell.

"By the way..." the Penetrator said before Aurolio left as mysteriously as he had arrived on board. "Since you were participating in the Premium Age Royale, I reckon you know what happened to my other self?"

Aurolio did a half turn.

This brought him to think of everything he had witnessed between the masked man, the terribly powerful force he resurrected... and the horrible creature Festos became.

He snorted.

"So you know that about me at least?" he said to the Penetrator. "Yes, I do. I guess it's one of the answers you'll want to pry out of me, isn't it?"

"Of course..." Replicus said with a hint of malice.

Aurolio snorted again, and disappeared without another word.

Replicus let out breath of storm clouds that seamlessly passed through his armour and dissipated in the open air.

His Unlimited immediately flocked him.

"Boss. Are you really alright?" Allora said concernedly.

Before Grim could express his own version of worry, Replicus replied to all their spoken and unspoken concerns.

"I'm fine. You did well. I feel much better knowing that you didn't engage him much. Things could have ended badly. He's not someone you want to fight while blinded with notions of responsibility and duty, especially not with where we are," Replicus said.

Grim and Allora knew the boss was trying to cheer them up, but they both felt a flaring flame burning at their chests. It wasn't empty words though, what their leader said. The pale man even survived a might slash from Replicus' Null Life Essence, which the Unlimited knew was quite frankly impossible for Masters of any type.

But still...

Being given the tile of 'Unlimited' and not exhibiting traits that matched it, bruised the three's egos. Even Allora, who could give the excuse that it was her literal first rodeo with the high-ranking duty, felt the sting of defeat.

If only...

If only...

Pherdanta held the greatest weight of these words among them all and she didn't hide it.

"Don't stress yourselves. Like I said. We're going to settle the score and not just with that man," Replicus said.

"But... didn't he discover your secret? Isn't that really bad?" Grim asked with a deep frown.

"My secret was never a trump card. So what if other people know?" the Penetrator said as he strode from where the deck was stained with blood. "Remember our goal. All you need to do on this mission, is to not die. Whatever leaves you on the brink of the death, and fails to finish you off, make it pay later. Whatever discovers your secrets and powers, make sure it dies with them.

Whatever deals you heavy blows, make sure those blows do nothing the next time they come around."

"I'm not concerned with how you look when you do all these things. Failure now doesn't matter. I don't care for it. I'm only concerned with growth. This is just our prelude to what we have to face,

so don't let it get you down. Think of it as an exercise where a certain degree of misses are allowed."

The three Unlimited seemed to brighten up a bit.

Replicus always did have a way with words when he really wanted to make them mean something.

It occurred to them from what he said, that they subconsciously set expectations for themselves and judged themselves harshly in Replicus' name.

Their boss didn't care for it.

He didn't care that they could have gotten themselves bashed just now by the pale man.

As long as they survived it, he was fine.

He was only concerned with the results.

Without words, all three Unlimited wrote sets of resolve behind their eyes.

Yet they also didn't forget the pale man.

Replicus, who assumed that matter was done, looked to Baddan who had been watching from the side.

"This applies to you as well," he said, to which the Sky Watcher gave a dignified nod. "And speaking of you, and your talents. It's about time I put them to use. It's time to go for our targets before it's too late."

"What? We are moving on with—"

"The plan, yes," Replicus said to Allora who looked rather surprised.

"Are you taking Eaniss' advice?" Grim asked with a grimace.

"No. It's just a coincidence," Replicus replied, but Grim heavily doubted it. "I'll give you the details of it later. For now, make sure you're ready. We might be doing away with the ship for a while."

Everyone was stunned.

Doing away with the ship? What?

Replicus then pointed a finger at the bowsprit, and a bolt of grey lightning struck Araeyn and transported him to the Penetrator.

Naturally, the Reverse Clusters obstructed teleportation, but their effects were limited to long range spatial movement and especially for anything that was within a hundred meters of them. Thus, a simple feat like this was still possible.

The pale Apostle, donning a similar pale armour appeared before the Penetrator. It looked blankly at him.

"I'll be implementing what you've learned so far. You better not disappoint," Replicus said, and of course the creature did not offer a reaction.

Everyone was drawn to the Apostle.

What is it that it had been learning all this time? Hadn't it been sitting dazedly on the bowsprit without doing a thing?

Grim and the rest had been freaked out by Araeyn during their expedition within the Cryptic Axiom Chasm, Nedalia's Territory. He had acted dully to anything, even what they considered dangerous, like the ghost which had many eyes. Grim, Allora and Pherdanta had thought looking into its eyes would lead to something bad, but Araeyn hadn't been affected at all.

It was as though he couldn't appreciate anything around him.

The look he gave back to Replicus also told that his feelings towards his master did not have reverence mixed in.

"Master, what about the Cluster? Does it factor into what you intend for us to do?" Pherdanta asked with a stern face as she returned her full focus to managing the ship.

"It's impossible to imagine what is going to come out of it, so factoring that in is difficult. However, I do have another shaky variable that I want to employ to my plans. To spice things up."

"What variable?" Pherdanta asked.

Replicus' sockets blazed.

"I think it's time to give the Bishop what she wants."

Chapter 884: Inviting Curses! (1)

The mention of the Mad Bishop made the Unlimited's faces turn funny. Employing that lunatic into even the most profound tactic wasn't something any of them would have opted to do, but well... they trusted their boss.

Given the details of the previous plan, which was the foundation of whatever this was going to be, the three Unlimited had to admit that Replicus seemed to have things under control.

It would have been unthinkable that someone like him would be able to beat two Incandescent Stagers, with one of them even being a Faction leader, but Replicus had done it anyway, against the odds.

Still, all were reluctant to ask about the details. Some things were best told in due time, instead of giving them the opportunity to stew in the mind and make it all the more anxious.

In the meantime, with Replicus among, the group watched the Cluster which became bigger and bigger with each thirty meter stretch they passed. The thought of what could spring out of large crack in space, which was constantly chipping, as though sensing the approach of the fleet and trying to time it complete break with their arrival, made the Unlimited, especially Allora nervous.

Replicus on the hand was more concerned about Aurolio and the Paladin Champion.

'I have an advantage over that man, it seems. At least Skullius left me with something to work with besides an enemy that's interested in killing me for no reason. He can't hurt me, but I suppose finding people to do the job for him won't be too difficult if he wanted, especially if his relationship with Eaniss isn't so doggyish in the end," he thought.

"On the other hand, I can't really settle for killing him quickly. I need more information about what happened to Skullius. Riba's prediction didn't make clear what kind of damage did him in, only the consequences."

Having to be step lightly with an enemy who wasn't easy to kill was the worst thing any combatant could have to deal with.

In that regard, it was hard to tell whether Aurolio's appearance was a good thing or not. The circumstances surrounding their eventual clash had now become more convoluted, and one might argue that they had much worse than they needed.

Or maybe not.

'Now that I know he isn't normal, even by Union standards, I can take him much more seriously with each hit. I wonder how much he knows about Null Life. Skullius couldn't have possibly told him everything there is to know, right?' Replicus thought.

He would have been glad to know that Skullius hadn't been at that bad of a disadvantage in his Tie of Exchange with Aurolio, after all he had gotten priceless artefacts and knowledge in exchange.

No. Perhaps he wouldn't have been glad to know at all.

If the current Skullius knew a lot of things that Replicus didn't – offense-related things – then that was again a problem.

Riba's prediction would be all the more harrowing and dark if he knew such details. It wasn't like things weren't already hard as things were, after all.

Thankfully, that burden of knowledge wouldn't be his for a while. For now, the Penetrator was free to focus with the problems at hand. They weren't few and far between after all. Every ship he saw

sailing in the same direction as his, was his problem – and that was only a prelude to the real dangers.

The so-called truce the Factions had enjoyed until now because of the disasters would probably end soon.

BOOOM! PWAAA!

In the still far distance, the crack in space shook, rocked and a certain portion of its tall mass shattered, setting shards of hardened essence flying into the sea which rippled wildly in response!

Oddly, the Reverse Clusters around reacted to the phenomenon by shifting slightly, as though they were constructs that could be bullied by winds, shockwaves and such.

"Is a Cluster of that level supposed to do that?" Allora asked, though without her anxious visage from before – likely to not show more weakness in front of Replicus.

"No. I haven't seen something like that," Grim said with his red eyes taking on a more luminous glow. "Maybe it's because that crack is just huge."

Replicus remained silent.

Grim's analysis was quite accurate. Clusters didn't normally behave as though the creatures within them were breaking free on their own, exerting force of the breach to Aigas.

As far as Replicus knew, that barrier – the streak of colour over the crack – disappeared on its own, and no amount of force from the inside could destroy it.

BOOOM! PWAAA!

It happened again.

If a common man was here, seeing the Scorching Tears fall, the hundreds of Reverse Clusters, the partly boiling ocean and the towering, crooked line of purple that threatened to reach the broken skies, they would have been driven to despair.

This same Cluster seemed to have driven lurking beasts away, as the Penetrator couldn't sense any of them closeby.

However, his focus wasn't on all this at the moment. In fact, the issue of the ocean...

'What did that creature tell me to dumb back the Paladin's body into the water? That wasn't a throw-away detail like I thought...' he thought hard with his phantoms chiming in.

"We can only grasp at vague clues at this point if we're really intent on not grabbing Wider Causality as a concept," one said with an agitated set of sockets.

"Are we really sure there isn't a way we can make increase our affinity with Lambent Phosphor? Maybe that would do the trick," another suggested.

As it sounded, Lambent Phosphor had given no results in the end. There was nothing to decipher from the body of the Paladin. In fact, all of Replicus' probing didn't trigger the Definer of Causality at all, which both unnerved and annoyed him.

How odd.

'There's something really bad going on here...' Replicus thought as the phantoms debated. 'Really bad.'

He wondered if he was the only one who could see it among the Faction leaders.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM! CRACK!

Right then, the Cluster finally erupted wholly, leaving behind an open, tall gap into a broad world.

A broad world that lit Aigas in gold through the crack.

Chapter 885: Inviting Curses! (2)

The grand shade of gold was annoyingly bright and exceedingly ominous. Every Cluster had its own unique traits, with higher level ones more often than not having particular traits that aimed to

benefit their denizens much more than lower ones. This fact made everyone wary of what this golden hue represented.

Replicus felt the ambient mana constrict and grow thin in the next moment, which made him prepare for an unusual phenomenon – as that was normally the case when the surrounding essence suddenly became less abundant.

It happened very quickly.

Replicus' ship crashed against something that rendered its forceful momentum completely useless. The Penetrator looked below at the sea, and saw that it had turned to gold.

Swathes of thick, shiny gold that glistened mesmerizingly now surrounded the vessel, keeping it absolutely still despite the vicious bellow of the runic propulsion behind it.

There was barely a dent where the keel of the ship met the gold, and anyone who took a closer look below could determine that the mineral was extraordinarily thick. The oceans around them had been transfigured to gold, and perhaps this phenomenon continued at least halfway down the depths of the waters.

The same fate was wrought upon all the other ships around Replicus'. They all stood in place, facing the massive crooked channel cutting the space.

The Reverse Clusters persisted above the gold, untamed, and as for the Scorching Tears...

One fell at that very moment, landing on the spot of gold. The mineral was of course unable to handle the absurd heat and it melted instantly, relenting inward, and onlookers could see an orange glow dipping down the deep swathe of gold, as though it had no end.

A moment later however, where an unshapely hole had been made, the gold regenerated itself, bringing its shape, suspended in what the previous waves had been doing, back to normal.

"Boss..." Grim said with a frown.

"Yeah," Replicus said. "Looks like we were always meant to abandon the ship. We can't teleport it past this area, unfortunately," he said.

Pherdanta had left the control port and had joined the Penetrator at the edge of the deck, along with Baddan and Allora.

They all looked where the mouth of the Cluster had shattered. The night helped them to keep track of its edges quite well.

Seconds later, figures, tiny in comparison to the gap in space, emerged, three in all.

The gold behind them cast their shadows in an unusual manner towards the fleet of ships.

It made the beings to emerge seem greater than they were.

They stood on the platform of gold beyond the ships, and as their details came to focus – to those whose vision could overcome the glare that made them look like copies of their elongated shadows – several among the Factions grimaced.

Hideous was the wrong word to use.

Beautiful wasn't fitting either.

The creatures before them existed somewhere in-between the two adjectives, though 'inspiring' could have served as a good enough description for their looks.

All three of these figures were adorned in large, light cloaks that looked as though they were made from ancient lingual characters sown together by dark string. The first had one with a white colour, the second owned a cloak with a purple hue, and the last wore one in deep maroon.

These creatures had oddly humanoid bodies, but with four arms each, all accommodated by their cloaks with an excess of sleeves. In one of their four hands, the creatures wielded what looked like short, exquisitely decorated rods carved from different shades of gold, a terrible pulse of energy radiating from all three.

Their faces were smooth, devoid of bumps, which also meant they had no noses. They did, however, have an excess of mouths, one where a human mouth would normally be, and the other where a human set of eyes would be.

Replicus and those that could see well confirmed this peculiarity because these marks over their faces opened as they addressed the lot.

"Residents of the other world..." said one of the three – the one in white – with a thoroughly jovial tone that seemed friendly, "...we come in place and give fair greeting. Please, come and meet us. We mean no harm. We simply wish to converse."

There was a stretch of silence. Evidently, no one seemed to believe it.

The fact that the beasts could communicate fluently didn't make anyone believe any better.

Replicus certainly didn't.

Most Cluster beasts were hostile towards humans, or rather, as they called them, invaders.

"Do you think they are friendly?" Allora asked, looking at Replicus.

"I'm not sure, but I'm not ready to commit my faith into believing them just like that. It all depends on what they know," Replicus replied while looking around.

Allora didn't understand what he meant, and neither did Grim who looked at the Penetrator quizzically.

Pherdanta understood it though, and she studied the edges of the Cluster's mouth.

Unexpectedly, someone disembarked from their vessel to go and meet with the Cluster beasts.

Replicus' sockets flashed.

It was Eaniss.

She was decked in a ferocious peach-coloured armour with each of its parts modelled after fierce faces of terrible beasts that were likely slain by her. It was somehow both slender and bulky, fitting the woman very well, though there was something that made it stand out even more.

A ghoulish emerald flame wreathed every part of the armour, highlighting portions of Eaniss' gorgeous, solemn face magnificently.

The Head Faction leader took steps over the gold, with Aurolio – all healed up and with a change of clothing – following behind her.

"Let's get down," Replicus told his crew.

Because the Reverse Clusters squeezed the life out of large scale spatial manipulation, the boarding mechanism of the ship was unsafe to use, thus the group merely jumped from the deck onto the rugged surface of the gold.

Afterwards, Replicus stored the entire ship in an special storage space of his that allowed living things within – much like the Bottomless Dent and the Elimparidis Stone Staff.

He then led his crew forward and watched other Factions disembark and head towards Eaniss as well, though most chose not to safe keep their ships as he did.

Eaniss didn't wait for anyone to draw closer before she began conversing with the Cluster beasts.

Fortunately, they did not talk in whispers, allowing everyone to hear.

"What do you call yourselves?" Eaniss broke the ice.

The Cluster beast in white smiled with its bottom mouth – which lacked any lips – and replied:

"You may call us the Ardent Curses. I myself am Thrill, and these are Dander and Musing," Thrill said as he then named the Curses in maroon and purple respectively.

Eaniss raised a brow.

"You are named after some kind of emotion?" she asked.

Thrill chuckled and answered with his top mouth.

"We ARE emotion."

Eaniss nodded lazily.

"You can call us humans. We have much in common appearance-wise, it seems. One of us must be based on the other," she jabbed and only Musing returned a somewhat fitting reaction in a stifled laugh.

"Indeed," Thrill said, his smile diminishing.

"What do you want from us? We are in the middle of something. Might I ask for you to transfigure our ocean back to how it was?" Eaniss said with a chilling tone.

"Oh, of course, of course," Thrill said in a friendly manner while stroking the pale golden, almost crystalline rod in his hand. "As we said, we come in peace. We would rather settle things without violence. But you see... we need a new home to inhabit. We three are the last of our race and it simply wouldn't work for us to remain as we are.

If you could settle with us or perhaps even journey with us, showing us your world and designate a place for us to live..."

Eaniss tilted her head.

"You three are all that remains of the... Ardent Curses?" she asked.

"Indeed. Just us. Musing, Thrill and Dander."

"What happened to the others?" Eaniss asked, though while expecting the answer already.

This time, it was Dander who answered.

"We killed them."

Chapter 886: Inviting Curses! (3)

Replicus' feeling of something being terribly wrong somehow intensified when he heard the contents of the conversation between Eaniss and the Ardent Curses.

He assumed Eaniss felt the same way, but of course, she didn't show it. She wouldn't.

Other Factions had harsher reactions to what they had just heard, but the hiss of their whispers could not affect the ongoing conversation between the Head Faction leader and a potential enemy.

"I see," Eaniss said, her face unreadable. "I don't much care for your histories or their contents. Trust me, I've killed relatives too over trivial squabbles. But, I do have a qualm."

"Do tell," said Thrill who had just expressed a subtle quiver at Dander boldly telling the other party the reason their race was nearly extinct.

He stroked his wand again.

"I'm not sure if you've noticed, but we're not the types to do charity work. Besides that, why should we be the ones to help you when you dug your own graves? If you still had allies among your own race, you would have had an easier time navigating this place, right?"

You likely wouldn't have bothered being diplomatic either if you had the numbers, would you?" Eaniss testily before taking a step towards Thrill. "Why should we play along?"

Thrill seemed to smile.

"You certainly do seem like the kind to ignore good folk," he said. "We didn't kill our own because we wanted to. It was because we had to. Our genetics makes it so that twins are very common. Similar Curses embodying the same idea becomes very common as well. But you see, we are emotions."

Volatile and prone. Wars broke out over who was the true representative of a specific emotion with some banding together to kill those they called naive and irrelevant. We lost the Jollies. The Weepers. Believe me, we are the better of those that had risen. Better than the Jaundice society, certainly.

Because of that, I assure you, you are dealing with better Curses than you would have otherwise, and we mean no harm. We will trade with you for precious artefacts if you wish."

Eaniss remained unmoved. The summary, rather the justification, given as to why she should consider helping, was barely complementary to the question she had posed, and seemed to be constructed in order to draw on her sympathy and understanding.

Hmm.

Sympathy?

Eaniss felt uneasy. More than she had been.

She looked at the rod Thrill was stroking.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Oh, this? It is my wand. It's a conduit for every Ardent Curses' power," Thrill said freely. "We could make one for each of you in exchange for your service. In fact, we welcome you into our home. It's a bit bright, but it is quite pleasant.

Eaniss remained silent for a while.

Aurolio behind her, gave her a sceptic look.

The daring woman didn't normally act so... cautious.

Eaniss frowned and looked to all three Ardent Curses. Then she took a step back with her eyes flaring dangerously with mana.

"You killed them, huh?" she suddenly said, her face turning fierce. She then shook her head and let out a snort. "Hahaha, you almost got me."

"What?" Thrill said with surprise. "What do you mean?"

"It's always about technicality, isn't it?" Eaniss snorted and took three more steps back, which immediately made all the Faction leaders all the more anxious. "What are you? Earnest? For someone who lies so much, you sure do tell a lot of truths."

"What are you talking about?" Thrill said, seeming genuinely unsure and confused.

Eaniss turned behind her and barked to everyone.

"Don't let these bastards get close to you! They'll toy with your emotions!"

...!

The Ardent Curses looked bamboozled, but only for moment.

"How sharp," Musing said with a chuckle. "You stroked your wand a little too openly," he added to Thrill who sighed doubly before looking to Eaniss.

"Are all humans this hard to deal with?" he asked as he raised his crystalline gold wand.

"Just me," the Head Faction leader replied before pointing at the crooked gap behind the three with a jarring smile. "How long are you going to stall before summoning all your other Danders, Musings and Thrills?"

The three scowled simultaneously. Thrill immediately shot his wand at Eaniss, but before he could do what he intended, she was gone.

"Kill them!" Thrill cried to his fellow Curses who bolted ahead.

Aurolio zipped back as Dander charged at him, raised his wand – which was a shade of harsh reddish gold – but instead of attacking, the Ardent Curse pointed it to the sky and called, "To me!" in another tongue.

At once, dozens of shadows stretched from the mouth of the cluster, their masters being figures that looked like Dander, but with relatively less impressive cloaks and body proportions!

They cried incomprehensibly and rushed towards the Factions, all wielding golden wands.

As they emerged, Musing and Thrill also pointed their wands into the sky and called to dozens more that looked much like them!

As it were, Dander hadn't lied when he said he, Thrill and Musing had killed everyone.

They had, and only three emotions remained.

Thrills who enjoyed toying with others, Danders who were always furious and Musings who saw the humour in odd things.

THEY were all that remained.

Thrill, with an army behind him, pointed forward with his wand, and a great bellow mixed in with unknown words came from his mouths.

A jet of silvery fire, thick and branching like a lightning bolt, shot from it and smote the enormous golden platform.

At once, just like when the Scorching Tear had fallen on it, it melted, but attained a luminous glow as steam and thick smoke rose from it. The gold turned to a pulpy liquid and began to boil, splashing about every chance it got.

The ships began to sink the gold, which prompted the Factions to rush towards them in the wake of the assault while attempting to make sure they wouldn't sink themselves.

But that was hardly the end of their perils.

The steam and smoke that spewed from the hot gold was so hot that it melted several Masters who hadn't been able to guard against it in time. They screamed bitterly as they died, and as valuation would have it, most of them were seen to be unworthy of revival.

Replicus frowned.

'Is it as I thought...?'

Somehow.

Somehow the Ardent Curses knew about the outside world.

They knew that if they immobilised the ships, the Factions would be vulnerable because of the Reverse Clusters which caused spatial means of travel as well as flight to be rendered useless. They also mimicked the reaction between Scorching Tears and the ocean to produce severe heat that was fatal on contact.

Replicus had theorised that the steam was so potent because of the ocean water's poisonous properties. That property... seemed to be contained within the gold as well.

Had the waters been transfigured while leaving them with the poisonous quality? Most likely.

This wasn't a coincidence.

Replicus had suspected the Cluster to be unusual ever since it had begun to break as it before – as though someone was banging against it from within.

Maybe...

The Penetrator looked at Thrill who grinned as he called for his Ardent Curses to charge at the enemy.

'What is going in here?' Replicus thought.

"Boss. What's the next move?" Grim asked. While using his mana, he managed to keep himself atop of the melting lava, as did the others including Baddan. The Unlimited had donned their helmets for extra protection as well.

The Penetrator looked at Araeyn whom he was carrying under his arm, afraid that he would be so dazed he would sink, and then spoke:

"Might as well add to the chaos."

Chapter 887: Invulnerable, Indomitable!

At once, Replicus made a large storm cloud crackling with Levin appear far above them in the dark sky. He then urged his subordinates to leap towards it and soon they stood over its surface, watching the pandemonium that ensued below.

"Boss... I thought we couldn't fly here because of the Reverse Clusters..." Allora said while looking at the colourful rays shooting in every direction from the Curses.

"We can't. That's why I didn't manifest the cloud under us and have it float us up. It's just fixed in place like the natural clouds above," Replicus explained. "The space is very rigid and unstable with Reverse Clusters around.

My Distorted Gravity and Stagnant Space might get really hard to use even for menial tasks while we are out here, unless of course, I either increase the output for each and add extra penetrative power, or create a stable space of my own before using any of them. A firm Territory would do."

As Allora nodded in understanding while confirming that indeed, the natural clouds over them were stiff below the cracked sky, an awed look hidden behind her helmet, Replicus pointed his finger forward and manifested a large network of small clouds all over the boiling gold.

While completing the task, he saw a pretty interesting exchange down below.

Dander, the Ardent Curse adorned in a maroon cloak zipped with ridiculous speed towards a gathered group of Faction members and their Faction leader.

It happened to be the same group where Nedalia had come from.

A Master with a lanky build from the group, while supported by a young lady who began to sing in a blissfully sonorous voice, prompting several cog-like symbols to appear behind his legs, burst ahead while splattering the gold below!

Around him, an ugly mix of red and blue with a neon glow drained from his body and formed a large axe with a surprisingly reflective edge!

With the agility boost from his teammate who was obviously a bard, and the boost from Genuine Incarnation, few classifications of enemies could have handled the attack without absolute caution.

However, Dander did not even raise his wand for a counter when the attack came. The red and blue axe swung heavily at his neck... and was contorted into an immensely different shape!

It rolled and twisted like a serpent... and then somehow grew so hot that its Master roared in pain as it melted his gauntlets!

The axe then shook violently as though furiously agitated, and then exploded like a firecracker, disorienting its summoner!

...!

In the split moment where the precarious implication of attacking Dander was established to the Master – who was halfway through immensely dazed – and those watching around him, the Ardent Curse then jabbed his wand at the Master's chest and a shrieking golden light pierced into him with a beautiful, rainbow-like flare!

At once, the Master buckled... and started laughing in a bitter sort of way.

He knelt down, and laughed so hard that tears came from his eyes, whatever made him feel such intense emotion completely incapacitating him.

Dander didn't bother with the Master any more, however, there was a thin cord now linked from the Master to the Curse's wand.

Several other combatants rushed to their fellow's aid.

One sent a jet of concentrated water zooming towards Dander, but like the Genuine Incarnation, it whirled, boiled and even evaporated before it could touch him, and Dander retaliated by skilfully sending bolts of golden light that seemingly couldn't miss, towards any one who fled, dodged or attacked!

Soon, several of the members of this Faction – those that the Faction leader didn't whisk away from danger immediately – were overwhelmed with emotion. Some began crying terribly, some laughing like the first Master and some stricken with a kind of sorrow that might as well have been a plague because of how much it changed their appearance.

Cords linked from all of them to Dander's wand.

In another section of the battle, Musing cackled humorously as an Incandescent Stager bolted towards him, the gold around with its smoke and steam bellowing at his mighty approach.

The Incandescent Stage expert seemed privy – after glancing at the collisions between the Factions and the Curses so far – to the fact that Curses had some kind of obscene protection from all attacks. Dreading what might happen if he actually went for a physical blow, he decided to go something else.

"Stand still!" he commanded.

If attacking the body was difficult, wasn't it better to strike the soul?

Compulsion normally didn't work offensively, unless the soul of the user was much stronger than that of the target and the Incandescent Stager. Having accounted for this, the burly Incandescent Stager opted to restrain his opponent and figure out how to kill them afterwards.

However....

"Hihihihi! I see, I see. What an amusing attempt. It's far weaker than I expected!" Musing said in a way that his opponent could hear and then pointed his wand forward with gusto.

...!

It didn't work!

The compulsion didn't work!

The Incandescent Stager dashed away as a series of golden and green beams roared from Musing's wand attacking anything and everything the man was close to in addition to him!

The gold ones raced after the Incandescent Stager without pause, turning fluently around every obstacle he rushed past.

The red ones bombed everything they touched, creating massive explosions on the boiling gold that left striking chasms, and causing the humans they struck to ignite into fiery, blood pulps!

The lesser Ardent Curses, seemed capable of the same feats as their superiors.

They too were impervious to attacks and while their own attacks seemed incapable of locking on to their victims, they were able to achieve the same shocking results if they managed to come into contact!

Elements and simple, but powerful beams littered the battlefield while thin white cords, much like spider webs, drew from helpless humans that were taken by the gold they stood or lied on, bawling out or laughing out loud.

'They are really immune to all attacks?' Replicus thought, feeling the same degree of shock that his subordinates were feeling. Even Baddan wore a befuddled look. 'Every attack that reaches close to them simply bends... no, perhaps it also becomes susceptible to emotion. The same emotion that that Curse represents?'

But that was absurd!

A Genuine Incarnation, made of Aura – an energy form – boiled and shook with rage?!

How was that even possible?

Short of perhaps using Creeds and Territories, there was no way to harm these bastards then?!

'No. There must be attacks that can reach them. They can't be invincible...' Replicus thought as he watched dozens of the Curses clump together and fire golden beams at Faction squads that dodged and kept attempting to attack with long range abilities.

It wasn't working.

Faction leaders seemed to be sizing up the threat with disposable members of their Factions, but with how things were progressing, they would lose everyone if they didn't step in. It was unthinkable to lose so much just for these inexplicably troublesome Cluster beasts who didn't even seem to be accompanied by a Cluster General.

'The bulk of their abilities seem to be centred around making others feel certain emotions, emotions different from what they represent. How does that work? And what are they doing to those that remain alive?'

Replicus was forced to postpone the plan he had with the clouds currently set up around the battlefield. If he didn't figure out the mechanics of the enemy's power, he would be sending his Unlimited to their deaths.

He was willing to let them risk it all if they wanted to though.

After all, the threat that he needed their help with in the future was worse than this.

"Let's call the nectar of the heavens!" a voice suddenly while staring up at the group.

It was Thrill.

He wore two grins and raised his wand toward them from below.

...!

"Damn it!" Replicus cursed, preparing a counter to whatever attack would come their way.

However, they were not the target.

A jet of silvery flame spawned from the tip of Thrill's wand with an unreal girth and force behind it!

It raced past a few meters from Replicus' cloud, and shot beyond the clouds above to the dark, torn sky.

Replicus' sockets flashed brightly.

"No way!" he murmured quickly and summoned an outrageous portion of his mana.

That silvery pillar of fire... It wasn't imbued with mana.

It was actually fuelled by Nitros!

The ability to imbue Aura into skills, making them more powerful, was known to the Penetrator, but he hadn't been sure if the same was possible with Nitros.

Now... he had it confirmed.

And the potency...

Oh, the potency...

Perhaps it was the nature of the ability used by Thrill, or perhaps because his Nitros was just so much stronger...

Regardless of which one it was, the result was godlike.

The sky seemed to burst open with a rumbling noise that resembled that a whole continent would express when caving in on itself, its massive floating bits erupting under the silvery searing impact of the beam!

In that moment, the reddish orange light that was suddenly cast over everything and everyone almost seemed to pause time.

After all, the flood of Scorching Tears that descended like molten sun to the open gold ocean, threatened to bring an end to the Severed Union's forces all in one instance of time...

Chapter 888: Dive To Safety

The only thing to be thankful for, was the fact that no one on the battlefield was slow enough to actually be caught by the searing sea of scorching death.

Even with a boiling, unstable footing, the weakest Master around could race out of the range of the disaster with medium difficulty. However, the problem was that Curses were unlikely to give up their pursuit of them.

The gold, as everyone had noticed, would recover even when damaged, which meant travel by ship was impossible as long as the Curses were still alive. At the end of the day, the real threat wouldn't be neutralised by escaping.

The current flood of Scorching Tears could very well be replaced by another one in an unending sky, and as evidenced by the past half a day's worth of voyage, they were no nectar from the heavens.

In the heat of the moment (pun intended), most of the Faction members and their leaders – those that weren't incapacitated – looked to the most optimal place to flee and secure some form of advantage.

The tall crack in space which had been spewing the vibrant golden hue.

A moment later, those that hadn't recovered their ships from the trap of solid gold did so, and then flashed into through the crack hurriedly.

The Ardent Curses curiously didn't make any substantial attempts at stopping them. They all didn't seem bothered by idea of the falling Scorching Tears at all.

Thrill, who had caused their descent, was guffawing while gazing up. His inexplicable sight met the fierce reddish yellow that had dyed all things with its colour and heat... as well as the odd cloud nestled just below the torrent of destruction.

Upon this cloud, Skullius, who had amassed a massive amount of mana worked quickly.

While expelling this mana, such that it encompassed his subordinates within its grace, he activated [Classic Storm Striding] – the ability that allowed him to hop from cloud to cloud as a bolt of Levin – and in the next inch of time, everyone, including himself turned stark bright and quick, violently pierced through the rigid space and crossed the distance to one of the clouds Replicus had made to appear around the area, then another and another and another!

Silently, the streaking flash zipped away from the last cloud which was closest to the Cluster and penetrated it before carefully rushing upwards!

Before long, another cloud appeared, harbouring the figures of the Penetrator and his group.

Allora buckled with a "Whoa!"

She wasn't used this yet.

Grim and Pherdanta were quite fine. They had accolades in keeping their insides intact from trips like this, and Baddan wasn't too surprised.

In any case, the feelings of shock and awe didn't have much room for sustenance, after all, the new venue the group had arrived in nearly took their breath away.

Gold.

It was all blinding gold.

Beyond the large, oddly placed tear in space, came a rugged land of gold that stretched as far as the eye could see.

Hills, mountains, soil, trees, shrubs, fruits.

Everything had a blinding golden sheen that soon caused those that had infiltrated the Cluster to squint, whether they were Incandescent Stagers or Masters.

It was too bright in this world, so much so that it barely made any sense whatsoever.

The longer one looked, the more... uneasy they felt, with their bodies – more aptly, their brains – having a rather aggressive reaction to receiving the light through the eyes.

Right beside the crack into the Cluster – where most of the Faction members and their leaders ended up – was a great ravine, both its tall edges predictably glowing with a right shade of slightly less prickly gold.

Several plants grew from them, but were hard to give detail to because they almost seemed merged with the walls.

Astoundingly, a river of what looked like liquid diamond flowed in between the rises, barely making a sound, which made it clear that its thickness was certainly not the sort a mere river of water would have.

A mere glance trapped several greedy eyes into its mesmerising allure, moreso than the abundant gold. Amidst the incredible value of everything here, it seemed even the most anxious of combatants were able to appreciate anything that broke out of the norm of gold.

The only other natural thing without the curse of being likened to egg yolk, was the clear, blue sky, but there wasn't much value in it, unfortunately. Its rainbow-like aurora cast a sprinkle of diversity over select gold landforms, a harsh, silver sun planted on it filtering its moon-like glow over everything.

'What is this? Is there any living thing here at all?' Replicus thought darkly.

He half-expected to see the corpses of millions of Ardent Curses or at least their graves.

There were traces of massive settlements in the distance though. Cities and towns of gold.

The dozens of Factions darting here and there seemed to be questioning the same as they felt the rough and slippery surfaces of serrated gold grass, lanky mud and flowers under their feet.

How could everything be made of gold?

And what about this gold was so irritating to the eye?

At that moment, a shuddering boom with a moist quality to it sounded from the gateway into the Cluster, followed by a surge of heat, smoke and steam that leaked through.

The heat represented by the plumes was so intense that the heavy mirage they carried made the crack into the Cluster look as though it was spinning.

Bits of charred, molten gold spat into the Cluster as well in mini-waves, making some of the weaker combatants here imagine what would have happened if they were still standing anywhere near the fallen Scorching Tears which had just fallen.

Whatever was going on outside wasn't good.

Several moments later, the Ardent Curses – those that hadn't already followed the Faction members – marched in, led by Thrill, Dander and Musing.

As soon as they all came in, something several had expected, happened.

The crack to the Cluster was sealed off.

Thrill raised his wand, and a dark blockade was slapped onto the entrance, masking it as though it didn't exist an instant after its visually warped form was closed off.

Replicus' sockets flashed.

'I'm guessing they really were hoping to have us all in here,' he thought, recalling that Thrill had invited Eaniss in. 'That confirms what I imagined. This Cluster was already open before, and these beasts pretended as though it wasn't, in order to sell us their – probably false – story. That's why they knew about the Reverse Clusters, the poisonous water and the Scorching Tears.'

Replicus was sure most of the Faction leaders who urged their subordinates in, were not oblivious to this fact. At least the former one rather than the latter.

The stinging of the eyes from the gold may have been one reason for this, and perhaps there was another.

However...

'Even if they have some kind of advantage in here, we do too,' the Penetrator thought as he made the cloud they were standing on float a little lower. 'Space is stable here. We have an advantage here rather than out there.'

The tension between the Curses and the Factions seemed to deepen.

Thrill only made it worse.

Donning a double grin, he raised all four of his arms beneath his pristine, lettered cloak while welcoming everyone.

"Thank you for accepting our invitation after all, despite your earlier reluctance. We were told you serve us all well, and I'm glad so far you do not disappoint..."

'Told?' Replicus thought.

"There is no escape, unfortunately. You must understand, everyone must take care of their own. This is all in the name of tradition and safety. Our safety."

Right then, the wands of all the Ardent Curses began to spew out of cords of scintillating light which rose and curved into the distance over the ravine.

Hundreds in all, they sped and vanished just as soon as they appeared.

Those who could trace where they were going turned to see.

Replicus and company who were best positioned, were the first to perceive it.

Somewhere far off, tens of miles away, was a large triangular crystal that looked much like the diamond river flowing in the ravine. It was nestled in what looked like a fancy, ancient gazebo with its entire face removed so as to show the crystal inside it.

While perched on a conical hill that had colourful veins visibly dipping into its core, it wasn't all that difficult to see. In fact, as soon as one spotted it, it was easy to get reeled in.

'What in the world...?' Replicus felt a dreadful uneasiness while looking at the crystal in particular.

Something was trapped within it.

Something that looked quite similar to an Ardent Curse, yet all the more terrifying.

Chapter 889: Weakness and Advantage

Replicus turned aghast at the sight.

The figure trapped within the crystal, was humanoid, spotting sandy skin. It seemed to be an Ardent Curse indeed, but with six arms instead of four, and three mouths instead of two – two above and one below – evidenced by the dense lines on its face.

It was adorned in a cloak, much like Thrill, Dander and Musing, but its own was made of the three colours. Blue, gold and silver.

As if any of these features, signals rather, weren't foreboding enough, Replicus could see that this trapped figure had not one, but SIX wands, each hand it had wielding one with a firm grip.

If it weren't for the fact that the Curse was frozen while seated on a gorgeous chair larger than its own body, the Penetrator would have thought this figure was frozen while in the midst of battle because of the how its arms seemed to aim in different directions.

'Is that the Cluster General? Are they trying to set it free?' Replicus thought.

The cords of white sprung from the wands rallied towards the large crystal and were absorbed into it immediately.

Those who could see grew more nervous than before.

What now?

Would that treacherous being suddenly break the crystalline casing and emerge with its full strength, invulnerable and invincible like its kin?

The moment the cords made contact, the large crystal... grew by at least 1.5 times before groaning, as though it had solidified further than before. A pulse of energy shot from it, announcing the completion of a milestone unknown to the non-natives.

'What?' Replicus could have frowned deeply if he could.

The Ardent Curses sensed the pulse of energy and an unmistakable look, and sound of relief registered from each of them.

Thrill gave a nod, and Musing punched the air.

The Faction members and leaders were confused.

Scattered as they were, some hadn't even gotten the slightest idea as to what was going on.

BOOOOF!

A loud noise stole the attention away.

A massive ship had materialised within the ravine and fallen to diamond river below which held its weight well.

Upon its bowsprit, Eaniss emerged, still decked in her peach-coloured, flaming armour. Aurolio stood behind her.

She looked up at the Curses who had curiously reached the edge of the ravine to look down.

"You're a crafty bunch, but I reckon you don't know the value of this place in our world's terms," she called with a smirk. "Or perhaps you do. How much did the masked man tell you?"

...!

Thrill grinned doubly at her words while those who hadn't realised from the tidbit hint he had thrown in his declaration moments ago, scowled.

'Of course,' Replicus thought darkly.

Of course the masked man would have put them up to this and shared some information with them, but...

'How in the world did he have the time? There's no way he's more than a few hours ahead of us. Did he patiently stop to talk to them... No. Damn, it's obvious. He just sent an undead.

The Curses probably tried to pull the same trick they did on us on him too and took the chance to set a greater trap for us...'

Thrill cackled.

"Ah, he told us more than we needed to capture his pursuers. Your Auras, your Genuine Incarnations, your potions, your compulsion, your Territories. We have a lot in common, yet there is also an equal measure of things you have that would certainly prove effective against us. Thankfully, we prepared adequately."

"I see..."

It wasn't Eaniss who spoke this time.

It was a man with a circular jewel of black and white around his neck. He and his crew stood on the opposite side of the ravine, away from the Curses, much like the others.

"If the masked man sent you, he might be content with merely buying himself time. He isn't underestimating us as I initially thought..." the man said with a cold look at Thrill who laughed and pointed his wand at him.

"Some of you are still delusional enough to believe that you have the upper hand, it seems. This is our home ground. You are yet to feel it perhaps, but there is a reason we evolved to replaced our eyes."

The man with black and white jewel wore a smirk.

"Upper hand? Why, we have more than that. Not only are we finally free to use space as we wish, you've just shown us a weakness of yours."

Thrill frowned deeply. He immediately read what the Faction leader meant.

"You must truly be terrified of that thing you've locked up in there," the man pointed vaguely the direction of the gazebo with his thumb. "You store emotions with your wands – from everything you attack – and use them offensively... or feed them to that entrapment, right? Is that also the real reason you killed the rest of your kind?"

A portion of the colour in Thrill's face drained quite a bit and his frown... frowns, turned deeper. Dander looked particularly red at the moment while Musing chuckled nervously.

Their reaction confirmed the bejewelled Faction leader's words, which caused no small stir among the other Factions.

"They collect emotions?" Allora said with unease.

"I was kind of buying that previous story, but with what we've seen now..." Grim said with his red eyes constricting to focus on the crystal far away through his helmet, "...it makes a lot of sense."

Replicus merely pondered silently.

"HA! Friendly fire! They did friendly fire!" the Mad Bishop, who hadn't made a loud, senseless comment in a while screamed with joy while being held back by her heavily masculine guards.

"SO WHAT?!" Dander raged furiously, his voice echoing over the gold. "You're going to try and free HIM? Don't make me laugh! Have you any idea how much effort it took to create the Inviolable Crystalline Prison? Not even all of us combined could break it at this point!"

Musing laughed nervously.

"We may be enemies, but trust us, you don't want to free HIM. He's a devil. He could destroy your world in a heartbeat," he advised.

The man with the jewel chortled.

"We specialise in killing world-ending devils," he said before turning to the crystal. "And we have yet to meet something we couldn't break."

Despite the confidence Dander had expressed in the integrity of what he called the Inviolable Crystalline Prison, the Faction leader's words shook him.

He, much like the rest of his kind, then felt an immense sense of foreboding when two men – one with a fine robe and the other, a smirking beefcake – beside the Faction leader reached in close, grabbed his shoulder... and warped away from the spot.

"Kill them!" Thrill shrieked for the second time in the last few minutes, causing the Ardent Curses to desperately start shooting off jets of multi-coloured energies everywhere!

They were frantic.

They were panicking.

If... if these madmen actually managed to free that... that....THING, then it was all over.

They had to harvest their prey's emotions and then kill them before it was too late.

Dander shockingly soared through the air, attaining the power of flight after waving his wand, behind him dozens of his fellow Curses who shared the same desperate motive.

Musing headed instead for the rest of the Factions, most of whom shot long ranged attacks at him to not avail.

Thrill leapt down into the ravine to face Eaniss.

Chaos ensued tremendously.

Bits of gold were blown apart every millisecond.

The precious minerals slowly lost their allure in the squinting eyes of the Severed Union participants. The threat of the Curses was too immense to handle with a half-hearted stance.

Replicus and his group were not spared this time.

The Curses that could fly hurtled towards them with malevolent intent, aiming to steal their emotions as well!

Chapter 890: Winding Back...

Replicus was still frozen in thought, tens of debates occurring in his head every inch of every moment when the calm voice of Pherdanta called to him, inquiring what they should do with a simple word.

"Master..."

The Penetrator's sockets flashed glaringly, and with his finger under the chin of his helmet, Replicus offered a response contained gloriously in a single word as well.

"Araeyn."

At that moment, the pale Apostle in the pale armour, with somewhat long tufts of pale, sickly hair was spurred into action. He looked ahead with his hollow, eyeless sockets at the rapidly approaching enemies that then blasted out streams of energy with their wands and he remained calm.

Rather, he retained his dazed, couldn't-care-less look.

Something wrapped tight around his arm unravelled, and whipped out just before the attacks could reach anyone on the cloud.

It was a long and large vermillion ribbon that wound excessively around the group with smooth motion, as though it was animated at a higher frame rate than everyone else.

The ribbon then suddenly turned still, as though frozen in place and the many jets of energy sent its way smote it heavily, with some erupting into colourful explosions of violent that caused gusts to roll outwards!

The dozens of attacks were certainly powerful, but the Empyrean Ribbon was just fine.

It resisted them all without issue.

The Ardent Curses who now spun around the group like a bunch of vultures anxiously looked at the silly ribbon.

How was it so resilient to their attacks?

It didn't make any sense.

It looked thin and fragile.

Araeyn expressed a mild appreciation for the surprise in the eyes of the enemies.

He then stepped off the cloud Replicus had made, and began walking over his Fond Calamity which widened further to accommodate him and sturdily whipped forth at his will.

The Unlimited were stunned by Araeyn's usage of what they had assumed was a mere decoration around his arm, given that they couldn't sense any mana from it.

The Curses that zipped around screeched and sent jets of energy towards the Apostle again.

This time, Araeyn didn't use the Empyrean Ribbon to block.

He allowed the attacks reach him, which almost made the Curses that sent them grin.

Almost.

It hadn't occurred to the Ardent Curses that their thick beams of specialised skills cast from their powerful wands... would simply disappear before they reached Araeyn, as though they had drowned into somewhere before him and appeared elsewhere!

Naturally, they didn't know what the Titan World Storm Penetrator knew.

That Araeyn had two ridiculous defensive skills, with only one of them currently being enough.

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[Inverted Boundary | Lv. 1]

A cubical space that constantly masks itself by taking the likeness of surroundings, passively encases the user, and transports all that approaches to a place of the Duke of Transversal's pre-set location.

...

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Baffled, the Curses kept on trying again and again but it was the same result each time.

More of them appeared, with some attempting to fire at Replicus and company, but the same Empyrean Ribbon Araeyn stood on swirled and protected them too, covering them in its deceptively silky enclosure.

While all this occurred, Replicus organised his thoughts.

'Is that man really going to break that Cluster General out? Maybe, but I bet his main objective is to make the Curses restless. They have turned frantic. They want to finish us off quickly now and are prone to making mistakes...' he thought as he turned to look between the gaps in Araeyn's Empyrean Ribbon.

A treacherous battle had begun yonder, with Dander attacking fiercely at the bejewelled Faction leader and his two subordinates, the Mage who had a <Marked Spot> on him, and a bulky Form User.

'I intended to use the Mad Bishop to sow chaos and get rid of my targets, but there's too many volatile elements on the battlefield right now. First, this stinging gold...'Replicus thought.

Even he wasn't exempt from the sting of the excessive light the gold spat from everywhere.

Everyone was braving through the pain, but there seemed to be the possibility of some long lasting effects, something Replicus didn't want to find out.

'Second, is the Ardent Curses and third is that Cluster General. The former are impervious to all attacks. Or perhaps direct attacks? What about...?'

Replicus looked between the gaps in the Empyrean Ribbon again and swished with his fingers.

Unseen by all except Araeyn, a thin line of Null Life Essence made its way towards one of the Ardent Curses and slashed at it.

To Replicus' mild surprise, the recipient of his attack wasn't harmed and didn't even notice that they had been attacked.

'Even Null Life Essence doesn't work. This means this is not some kind of barrier around them, like Perfect Aura. It's some other kind of supernatural phenomenon... Aggrante likely won't work either...'

The Penetrator sighed.

His original plan had to do with his human targets and he wasn't willing to abandon it for the sake of these ridiculous Cluster beasts. Still, that didn't change what he had to do.

With a snap of his fingers, a large number of storm clouds appeared in the sky and close to the ground.

With another snap of his fingers, white clouds appeared over his Unlimited's heads.

Before any of them could inquire anything about this, and their boss' plan, the storm cloud they were standing on zoomed forth, going towards the fiery battlefield near the ancient gazebo.

As they went, more and more clouds appeared at varying altitudes.

Araeyn followed steadily while discouraging the still growing mass of Ardent Curses that hurled bolts, jets and streams at him.

"I need to make sure I understand the circumstances we are in correctly if I'm to salvage the situation," Replicus said to his subordinates. "I've created footing for you. I need you to do something for me while I..."

The Penetrator paused.

He felt something ominous make forceful way into the Cluster, seemingly from the outside.

It appeared from right above the ravine, where he and his crew had just left.

He barely saw a glimpse of what it was when it whizzed down at vehement speed.

'What?' the Penetrator paid immense attention to the figure.

As he focused his sight, Replicus was appalled to see the figure reach Eaniss who had just dodged a bolt of silvery flame from Thrill that looked like the one he had used to conjure the outpour of Scorching Tears before.

'Is that one of Eaniss' creations?' Replicus wondered.

When he saw that indeed, it was one of Eaniss' dark, humanoid mysterious servants – evidenced by how it bowed as it handed her the object in its hands – Replicus felt uneasy for the umpteenth time in the last five minutes.

The object Eaniss was passed, was hard to describe.

The Penetrator couldn't quite see what it was, actually.

In the next moment, however, he got an idea.

Eaniss seemed to sense his gaze, and turn to him even with the great distance between them.

She raised the object as though to toast to him with a sweet smile.

Replicus didn't know if it was his imagination or not, but he could have sworn he perceived the Head Faction leader say...

'You were taking too long, so I decided to go first...'

Replicus shook.

At once, between Eaniss and Thrill, a large rupture opened in the stable space and towered over the ravine.

...!

Replicus was alarmed.

All the other Factions were too.

The look of that rupture...

The way it blinked in and out of existence desperately, as though disliking the idea of being contained...

"Is that—" the Penetrator had began when all went white.

Everything he thought important.

Everything he thought dangerous.

Everything was devoured by a familiar stench, and energy signature that oozed from the Reverse Cluster which suddenly emerged!

[Author's Note]

[Empyrean Ribbon]

<Mythical>

Four thousand enslaved Sages of the Musing Embroider were tasked to carefully create this beautiful piece over seven years, by an ambitious fiend that sought authority. Soon after it was finished, tales of its profound abilities, as well as its exploits in the hands of the ambitious fiend called upon powers that coveted it so much, that they killed the fiend and each other for it.

-Special Effects-

- Responds to the user's will
- Can find anything that the user's desires
- Can heal itself with Null Life Essence

- Embodies traits of the user to make itself stronger
- Extremely resistant to physical and elemental attacks
- Can stretch as far as is needed

[Skill: Suffocate]

Whoever this Empyrean Ribbon wraps around will be flooded with Null Life Essence from the body to the core until all their active abilities are shut down.

[Skill: Crossition]

By expending the user's Null Life Essence, the Empyrean Ribbon can create alternate versions of received attacks and send them back to their source.

[Skill: Gluttonous Bringing]

Once a certain number of substantial sacrifices are fed to the Empyrean Ribbon, it gains the ability to draw restricted essences, their bodies, essences, and weapons are mutated and fed directly to the user. This skill works in combination to [Imbued Fester Blights].

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