

Undead 891

Chapter 891: Incarnation of the Six Wild Exigencies! (1)

The inside of the Cluster was as some would have at least guessed.

There was gold, gold, and more gold.

The horizon was brimming with a pale golden hue while everything from plants to landforms exhibited a sheen akin to that only fine ornaments could exude.

The view was absolutely precious, especially to those that buckled easily whenever monetary value could be attached to something they could see.

Replicus too was astounded by the sight as soon as he emerged with his subordinates as a thick bolt of Levin that exploded to then reveal their figures, and create footing for them in the air – a wide, dark and brimming storm cloud.

Allora wobbled, but the rest were fine. They were used to it. What baffled them instead was the ravine down below, which looked to have been carved by the river of liquid diamond flowing within it, however it could have possibly been processed into such.

Replicus spotted the other Factions, most of which created distance from each other while looking at the large opening beyond the ravine.

He could see the Mad Bishop muttering something while in the company of her beefy guards, Warding Pride with hers, several others he didn't care for and...

Hmmm.

'Where's Eaniss?' Replicus thought.

He last saw her when she had been conversing with Dander, Musing and Thrill outside the Cluster.

Wait...

Strangely enough, two more Factions were missing.

The man with the crystal of black and white – the Harmonic Amber – was nowhere to be seen and another Faction Replicus considered to be a bastion of the Severed Union was lost to his sight and senses too.

Where they stuck outside? Perhaps.

For some reason, Araeyn became uncharacteristically restless. He turned towards Replicus with an oddly enraged face.

He established a mental link to the Penetrator, but all Replicus felt from it was jumbled emotion.

"What's your problem?" Replicus said with a side socket, irritated.

A searing smoke and steam followed a loud boom that signalled the descent of the Scorching Tears on the golden ocean outside.

Replicus' attention was stolen away.

The Ardent Curses marched into the Cluster and Thrill sealed the crack in and out of it and made it impossible to perceive with a wave of his wand.

Replicus snorted.

'They really intended to trap us in here after all. It wasn't a kind invitation. But what for?'

Donning a double grin, Thrill raised all four of his arms beneath his pristine, lettery cloak as he welcomed everyone.

"Thank you for accepting our invitation after all, despite your earlier reluctance. We were told you would serve us all well, and I'm glad that 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."

Replicus and the rest watched as the Curses' wands released the same cords they had seen drawn from the Curses' victims outside. The cords, as Replicus saw were sucked into a distant object that housed...

'What is that? A Cluster General?' he thought when he took at the full grandeur of the figure trapped within the large crystal tens of miles away.

That thing...

His thoughts were interrupted by another mental connection from Araeyn who looked strangely irritated as he faced Replicus.

Replicus was annoyed.

"If you have something to say, just say it," he told the Apostle.

"Boss, what's wrong?" Grim asked.

"Nevermind," Replicus said as he turned from Araeyn who shockingly moved to stand in front of him on the cloud and opened his mouth.

Nothing came out at first.

The Apostle looked to struggle as croaking and wet groaning noises came from his mouth.

They were somehow chilling instead of cute.

Replicus was taken aback.

What was this?

Was Araeyn already beginning to rebel against him?

This turned out to not be the case, thankfully.

The Apostle finally spoke. However, he only managed a single word in a language none other than a Null Lifeform could understand.

"Past..."

The Penetrator was puzzled.

Araeyn almost looked as though he had run a marathon. In fact, he almost keeled over from just the one word.

Yet, Replicus had no idea what he meant.

"KILL THEM ALL!" Thrill screamed with an elated look before hurtling into the sky and sending jets of silvery flame flying at the Factions.

Dander and dozens of those under him took flight towards Replicus and his group while Musing headed straight for the Mad Bishop.

Replicus turned cautious.

A massive amount of clouds appeared everywhere, nearly blocking out the light from the silvery moony sun overhead.

'Will Eaniss join or what?' Replicus thought, sparing only a single look towards where the crack in space had been sealed and cloaked.

Turning himself and his subordinates into bolts of Levin, he darted from cloud to cloud with immense speed, while Dander gave chase.

Unfortunately for the Curses, even when they split up and tried to shoot jets of energy from their wands in an attempt to cause the odd storm clouds to dissipate, they could not have expected that the Penetrator's fluffy stairs would only grow in number despite their efforts.

They could only give chase while trying to aiming at the rapid bolt itself.

While in the bright form, Replicus began to brain storm.

What was he to do with these Ardent Curses? Would Aggrante work on them? Would raw Null Life Essence work on them?

He didn't have enough time to stop and experiment, especially when he was carrying his subordinates. Setting them loose on a threat they had no way to defend against and defeat was sure to kill them.

Thrill, Dander and Musing had purple cores and were of the same Tier as the Definer of Causality, as far as Replicus could see.

He couldn't afford to be lackadaisical in his approach.

They were bigger threats than Nedalia.

If he couldn't stop to test whether Null Life Essence worked or not, how was he to...

Wait.

"Baddan. I think you have something that can solve our problems..." Replicus told the currently transmuted Baddan.

Moments later, he then spat out and sent him hurtling down as a smaller bolt that smashed into the golden ground with a hoarse impact!

The Sky Watcher emerged, morphed into his normal self again.

Oddly, when in that Levin form along with Replicus, it was easier to share thoughts and ideas, as though they were no boundaries between him and the Penetrator.

He knew what to do.

As a set of Curses split from Dander's charge towards him, Baddan wore a solemn look as he raised his hand above his head.

With a light clink as that from a cymbal, two thick disks – one twice the size of Baddan's head, and another half the size – appeared, floating over the Sky Watcher's head.

At once, a staggering amount of mana flooded from Baddan's core and fuelled the two disks.

The Sky Watcher burdened himself into a complex stance where his hands were brought together in a gesture where it seemed as though he was about receive something that would fall from the sky.

Then he spoke in a stern voice, initiating the mechanism of his granted technique.

"Grant me the chances."

Chapter 892: Incarnation of the Six Wild Exigencies! (2)

The two disks above Baddan's head were called Forechance Deemers.

The larger one had six indented slots over it that had bold outlines of six different creatures – one for each.

The smaller Forechance Deemer, which floated below the larger one, had three slots, but instead of outlines of creatures, it had symbols drawn on it which Baddan couldn't read, but could comprehend.

As soon as the two disks emerged, a small, shiny metallic ball emerged as well, and it settled on the topmost disk, which began to wobbly around, moving it through the six slots and over the borders that separated them.

Moments later, the disk became still, and the ball stopped moving as well, positioned in one of the six slots which attained a dull glow.

The ball then phased through the larger disk and fell onto the second one, which wobbled around as a metal rim dropped to the ground would, before turning still. Once more, where the metallic ball sat, a modest glow appeared in the selected slot.

Baddan felt a fierce amount of his mana drained as the two Forechance Deemers activated in accordance to the selection made by the metallic ball.

As it were, Baddan's granted technique was called Incarnation of the Six Wild Exigencies, a technique that allowed Baddan to summon six terribly powerful, mysterious beasts that Replicus had called and modified with a great deal of experimentation.

At the moment, the glowing slot of the larger Forechance Deemer turned bright then brighter, and a pool of thick, dark blue clouds gathered around the Sky Watcher's feet as he looked calmly at the wildly flying Curses that were moments away from reaching him.

The clouds bellowed forth and towered behind him while attaining modest traces of both luminance and darkness, the latter giving the suspicion that something massive was stowed within.

The slot on the second Forechance Deemer, also attained a bright glow, and the mound of clouds grew fiercely, tripling in size, the thing hidden within them also following suit!

But it wasn't just size.

From far and wide, everyone felt a sharp smack of dark, ominous power that caused a light rhythmic tremble in the surroundings, as though something was crying at a terribly low frequency.

In the next moment, Baddan was devoured also by the clouds, his figure obscured.

His assailants didn't care that they couldn't see him, however.

Wielding their golden wands, they sent jets of elements and emotion at the billowing clouds without pause, causing intense eruptions and reverberations to roll across the gold plastered ground!

The twenty and some Curses flew in circles and continued the bombardment of their crazily efficient attacks, their double grins depicting their utmost faith in the fact that none... absolutely none, could resist direct hits from their powers!

Dander, who still chased the Levin form of Replicus across the sea of cloud in the sky made a turn, however, and he donned a deep scowl.

His inexplicable sight turned to where the blue clouds were roiling and he suddenly got a terrible feeling that he couldn't imagine or comprehend what it could be for.

As though to answer his worries, something happened in the next moment, validating his warning instinct.

From the clouds, thick, pristine ivory arms shot out with the flexibility of whips, their lengths unbelievable unnerving; roughly twenty meters each, with a spindly quality, as though they did not have any bones within them!

...!

Their numbers were also unnerving. As they swished about in the air, it was almost impossible to discard the idea that they could very well be the tentacles of an albino squid without a closer look, for fifty in all, was a hard number to imagine any single creature to have for limbs!

The Ardent Curses were mildly alarmed by the emerging arms as they flew in wider arcs.

What were these?

What abomination had appeared?

The source of this flailing limbs was yet to reveal itself.

Despite the curiosity, and more than a bit of hubris added on, the thing the Ardent Curses discovered first was how royally they had underestimated these arms.

At once, twenty three of the limbs, with six large fingers at the end of each, suddenly pointed erectly at the twenty three Ardent Curses whizzing through the air.

...!!!

Similarly at once, all twenty three Curses with a different finger gesturing towards each, paused in place, their frames turned slightly illusory.

All their momentum and confidence was frozen without prelude!

...!

Dander was appalled.

"What?" he cried in shock before abandoning his fruitless chase against Replicus. His followers did too as they then looked down at their kin.

Mysterious didn't cut it.

Ominous didn't cut it.

The Curses had never dreamed that besides their own wands, anything else could harm them, especially after their exploits when their Cluster first opened genuinely.

What was this then?

The blue clouds faded first from Baddan who stood before whatever conjured the many arms.

He... had changed.

Instead of the baggy, long-sleeved, low-necked top he wore and similarly baggy pants, now, he was adorned in a dark purple, sleeveless coat with trimmings, vents, and glowing writing that suggested intricate, untold ritualistic tradition.

His fur was no longer entirely white, but had adopted a sacred shade of silvery blue.

His face was veiled by a cloth featuring simple rows of white markings, its soft fabric rustling lightly as he took easy breaths.

A clump of dark blue clouds clustered in his hands, and barely visible within them, was an oddly small dagger with two blades before and after its hilt, both gleaming like polished mirrors to their singular, sharp tips.

Baddan raised his hand, and the clouds obscuring the beast behind him vanished.

As soon as they were swept from sight, the thing that had been hidden all along screeched hoarsely, and this time, the sound that came out was as moving as a hurricane and as treacherous – in fact moreso – than thunder!

Everyone stopped at its call.

And everyone gritted their teeth as they covered their ears or at least showed mild irritation.

Replicus and his crew, devoid of flesh form at the moment, were immune – thankfully.

They watched as the summoned beast brought pause even to the chaotic battle that had been taking place between Musing and Thrill against Warding Pride, the Mad Bishop and the rest of Factions.

Silence pervaded for a moment.

Replicus while darting from cloud to cloud was amused.

'So they aren't immune to all attacks after all. Null Life Essence is one way, it seems...' he thought.

The Ardent Curses halted in space with a simple point from large fingers told the Penetrator much.

After several moments of everyone else skewing their faces from the horrendous noise, which seemed to penetrate the ear even after energies were supplied to bolster their protection, the sound finally came to an end.

Everyone summoned back the desire to glimpse around, and they finally got a good look at the beast.

It was hideous... yet also beautiful.

Standing behind its master, it boasted a height of eighteen meters, beginning with two curtains of very long, dark hair that might have well been two pools of black oil streaking down the sides of its face, which was covered wholly by what looked like tens of ancient, brick-coloured talismans.

It had two arms that draped from its shoulders, long and ivory like the ones that began at its waist to flail around... only, these two had no hands, as they were joined together, to create a loop from shoulder to shoulder.

Its torso was nothing but black, with a semblance of feminine features – curves and a bosom that swelled from the black skin – before its fifty arms began.

This creature... she, was gracefully named the Masked Facade, Lippitis.

Baddan raised the hand holding the small dagger, and it darted fiercely from his grip, taking aim for the twenty three Ardent Curses that stood still in place.

It then... disappeared from sight.

However, from how the Ardent Curses were simultaneously branded with a dark mark on their illusory foreheads which looked very much like the small dagger, it seemed the weapon had actually its mark as intended.

Against the odds that had made everyone nervous until now!

In the next moment, the twenty three hands of Lippitis withdrew from the Ardent Curses and they turned corporeal again and plummeted to the ground where they lay motionless.

The brands on their foreheads caused them to begin to bleed from their two mouths and ears incessantly, and vaguely, one could see their faces trembling, as though something was harming them from within.

Dander, Thrill and Musing turned aghast.

The former of the three growled in rage and bellowed:

"What did you do?!"

This didn't make any sense.

How were they harmed?

Baddan remained silent.

He raised his hand again and within it, the double bladed dagger appeared.

The brands from the Ardent Curses disappeared, along with the cumulative mana experience from their bodies and souls, all of which rushed to Baddan.

Except for the portion that was sucked into the Penetrator's body.

[You have killed (IX) LV70 Ardent Curse. 7,000 EXP awarded]

[You have killed (XI) LV121 Ardent Curse. 10,210 EXP awarded]

[You have killed...]

The Penetrator grinned.

Just as he had done with the Granted Armament, granted abilities with connections to Null Life also gave him a portion of experience.

Just as he had showed his subordinates the way, they were to reciprocate.

And now...

'You all aren't impossible to handle...' Replicus thought.

He watched with amusement as Dander trembled with rage and darted down towards the still Baddan, his wand raised.

The Sky Watcher remained calm behind the veil on his face, and he simply readied his small dagger.

Chapter 893: Incarnation of the Six Wild Exigencies! (3)

Unbeknownst to all but Baddan and Replicus, the Incarnation of the Six Wild Exigencies, was a technique Replicus forged, first and foremost, by using [Unbound] on the unhatched eggs of Cluster beasts.

The Special Bonus Random Upgrade worked wonders with procuring rare creatures within the Null Verse, though admittedly, most of them tended to be akin to the Chubby Remnant Child of Polarity – 'living' creatures that weren't exactly living creatures. Some turned out to be consumables, others turned out to be accessories and some... were more like plants.

Some seemed to have souls, and others didn't.

It was only after many trials that Replicus managed to get genuine beasts which he then used [Wealth of Spoils] on to grant abilities in their infancy before grooming them. For some, he merely enhanced those they already had.

These same beasts were what made up Baddan's technique.

The Incarnation of the Six Wild Exigencies began with two Forechance Deemers being summoned upon the user's head.

The larger one selected randomly on which beast would emerge – thus the metallic ball – and the smaller one selected randomly at three additional properties that could result after a beast was summoned.

At the moment, Masked Facade Lipptis was currently enjoying one known as Magnification, which tripled a summoned beast's size and doubled its strength!

Dander raised his wand, and a calamitous jet of golden flame streaked towards Baddan who stood still!

The attack was unavoidable, as he had seen along with the others, so he didn't bother to dodge.

Instead, he gripped his dagger firmly, caused Nitros to billow around his body, and lunged forth to meet it!

Baddan's Incarnation technique, in addition to summoning beasts, granted him a different weapon and outfit that possessed qualities tied to the beast he summoned, complementing their prowess.

The dagger was one such item, and the attire was as well. His dark purple clothing opened up his body to the surrounding environment, allowing him to sense it all well even with the veil over his face covering his eyes.

The moment Baddan's polished blade met the jet of flame, the surrounding gold gleamed all the brighter as flakes of fire were cut apart. The dagger pierced through the sharp, penetrative zeal of the flame which had already begun to melt the surroundings all around him and Lipptis.

The Masked Facade quickly whipped its hands up, directed them at Dander who stubbornly remained sending his stream of golden flame at Baddan.

The moment the Arden Curse noticed the attention of the hideous creature, he retreated and flew fast and away, streaking across the sky to avoid being pointed at.

'He's wary. Of course he would be...' Replicus thought as he watched, with rest of the Ardent Curses having resumed the chase after him without their leader.

Just now, he had confirmed that the Ardent Curses were not entirely invulnerable.

It made sense really.

They were completely immune to attacks that needed physical contact to apply damage or had to travel.

Or perhaps it more apt to simply say, the less material an attack was, the more likely it was to affect an Ardent Curse. Whatever protected them seemed to grow with how powerful the Curse too, it seemed.

As Replicus had surmised before, they weren't protected by some kind of barrier. It was a filter of sorts that manipulated anything that it could come into contact with.

Apparently, this didn't extend to conceptual attacks.

'It's good that he's rattled. If he knew he probably won't be affected by this particular ability of Lipptis', he would be a bigger problem to deal with.'

And indeed that was the case.

Lipptis had the natural ability to freeze anyone she pointed at and then turned them incorporeal, rendering their salvation impossible unless someone disrupted her hands. The ability was similar to Replicus' [Static Limbo], which froze targets in place, the duration depending on how big the difference in strength between him and the target was.

The same thing applied to Lipptis. While she was strong, she couldn't hope to immobilise beasts past Tier 20 like she did those below Tier 15.

Of course, this only applied to this primary ability of hers.

Replicus paid close attention – and so did his Unlimited and the still restless and nagging Araeyn who were travelling with him – as Baddan kept sending his dagger to bash at the golden flame Dander sent while soaring into the skies.

Each time, tongues of flame were spat out as the dagger collided with the fierce fire, resisting its further charge towards Baddan's body.

The Sky Watcher, after resisting the fifth jet of flame, suddenly hurled his dagger at Dander who was alarmed and attempted to rush away.

However, like before, the dagger vanished, as though it didn't exist, and it appeared on Dander's forehead as a dark brand.

...!!!

As the Ardent Curse felt it stick above his upper mouth, he heard an ungodly, loud voice screeching horribly in his body!

It was as though a million untalented vocalists were screaming at different tones of voice at the same time, and with their mightiest effort!

But that wasn't all.

It couldn't be all.

This effect was bolstered several fold by something Dander couldn't feel.

It was bolstered by Null Life Essence!

Blood sprayed from his mouths and ears and he roared in agony!

The pain was great!

Dander's brain shook and his face tumbled!

No wonder...

No wonder his kin had perished...

That same screech he heard from that abomination before, was being played wirelessly in his head, without having to enter through his ear!

How cruel!

Dander wouldn't have known, but the dagger Baddan held allowed the user to project Lipptis' deadly screech within the body of the target. When flung, the dagger would cease to exist until it hit the target – provided that the aim was perfect – but it wasn't impossible to dodge in that circumstance.

Only when the target was frozen by Lipptis' finger gesture beforehand, would the blade become impossible to evade, and it could manifest its effect on all frozen targets simultaneously!

Dander roared, and spat blood continuously.

Bad!

This was bad!

It was hard to think!

It was hard to breathe!

The noise in his head and body was quickly damaging his innards, and there was nothing he could do about it!

He and the other Ardent Curses were adept at using elements and emotions with their wands, nothing more. These two powers were normally as powerful as the Curse itself and the wand they used.

Everything else they desired was supplied by the golden world they lived in.

"NO!" Dander bellowed, and with strenuous effort, he resisted the urge to keel over and submit to the pain.

In that moment, his rage surpassed the agony he was feeling, and with the meaningful point of his wand at Baddan, he cried:

"Majestic Territory Casting, Fuming Singularity!"

...!!!

A bizarrely abundant amount of energy gushed forth from Dander as a dark stream of power that barrelled towards Baddan!

It travelled rapidly, and smote right before Baddan who instantly coated himself and Lipptis in Nitros!

The jet of dark energy gathered before the Sky Watcher and formed a dark, irregular spherical mass blinking momentarily with flashes of white!

'That's...' Baddan thought behind the veil, his face hardening.

Immediately, he retrieved his dagger from Dander in a decimal of time before using it to strike at the rugged of partial darkness, but the edge of it merely cast sparks upon contact!

It wasn't enough!

Unfortunately, that was the only instance the Sky Watcher would get to strike, because in the next moment, the massive spherical shrank to become the size of a pinhead... and then tugged at everything that made Baddan who he was!

Chapter 894: Incarnation of the Six Wild Exigencies! (4)

The brightness of the world was partly drowned in the wake of the great suction, and Baddan, who was closest to the tiny dark ball was the one who felt its might best.

What had spawned before him didn't pull apart the inanimate objects close to him, or gouge out everything in sight in order to satiate a bottomless appetite.

No.

He felt something deep within him get drawn out, something he apparently couldn't defend entirely with his Nitros perhaps because it stood separate from what he was allowed to protect according to the sucking sucker before him, or because Dander was just much stronger.

His emotions....

They were getting pulled on!

Baddan felt a mixture of rage, delight, happiness sorrow, despair, relief, indifference – just to mention a few – all at the same time surface within him.

'Is this really...' he thought with great difficulty, '...a Majestic Territory?'

Indeed it was so.

The scope of the tiny irregular sphere was not to be underestimated.

It mirrored the scale of what a Territory was capable of.

Figures far off, including even the Factions and other Ardent Curses who had resumed their battles were forced to draw farther away as they felt their emotions tugged!

Warding Pride frowned and zipped through the air to cast more than a kilometer's distance between – with her crew – away.

Only then, and with her Nitros lightly active, did she feel the effect lessen.

It was true for others as well.

It was astonishing that something so far away had such a profound pull.

A good amount of both humans and Curses who weren't quick enough had their emotions whisked away in a moment, and they bodied dropped the ground.

Trails of white cords drained from them and were fed into the tiny ball before Baddan!

Their sources, pitifully turned into empty faced husks that did not respond to anything and anyone; a rather chilling sight.

Were emotions really that important?

Replicus felt the fierce tug from the tiny ball too and he immediately accelerated upward.

Without Nitros, he and his subordinates were easily susceptible to the danger.

Replicus only stopped when they were so high up in the sky that mundane sight wouldn't be able to differentiate what was human and what wasn't even with the canvas of gold around making things easier.

He dipped into a cloud he had just made, turning it dark and shiny, and immediately began trying and define what the hell he had just seen

'What kind of a Territory is that?' he wondered darkly.

A Territory cast from a wand and not around the user?

That was absurd!

The purpose of a Territory was to create an environment where you held the advantage against enemies, and were able to completely dominate them.

What then was this?!

"Could it be that instead of creating a large space with complex features, that Dander character instead chose to invest his Nitros into something like a Primary attack function that works outside the borders of the actual Territory – which, shockingly, is that small ball? If he sacrifices everything else for that...

it would be extremely powerful, right?" a thought phantom of the Penetrator theorised.

"How many years would it take to master something like that? A Territory that expresses its powers outside, sacrificing the resources needed to create a GeoScape inside, for that singular function. That's insane!" another said.

"Years? Isn't that something that would only work with a Creed? Beasts don't have the ability to store Creeds! Is it just talent?"

Indeed, it was bizarre.

The range of the ability that Dander chose was vast and incredibly potent.

But then, what was this ability?

What exactly did stealing emotions entail?

Why did it leave victims slack?

"I bet emotions are part of the soul," a thought phantom said with a worried look. "Remember when we lost our body temporarily in the Temple of Unlusted Tears? We were still able to feel as a disembodied soul. I think emotions are elements of the soul that are expressed through a body.

They may not be integral parts of it, but I think losing them is as good as losing the very heart of a soul, and some of its strength!"

It was quite the theory, and the other thought phantoms mulled over it, some agreeing that it indeed made sense and others posing questions that seemed to contradict the assertion.

Unfortunately, there could be no confirmation for this.

Right then, as Replicus was stuck debating with himself, Baddan moved.

He brought his hands together while combating the singularity.

A canvas of solid white bloomed around him, Lipptis and the tiny Territory firmly before beginning to gain an abundance of colour.

He was going for it.

He was going to defend with his own Territory!

Baddan then bellowed out:

"Majestic Territory Expulsion—"

...But in that instance, the tiny sphere before him enlarged abruptly, as though feeling threatened, and let out a world-shaking force that broke the solid foundation of Baddan's Territory, making it crumble to pitiable shards!

The Sky Watcher was shocked, and in his momentary surprise at his Territory being blown up, he felt the tug at his emotions grow stronger and ultimately overwhelm his coat of Nitros!

"Lipptis!" he roared, and the Masked Facade lurched forth, placing itself between Baddan and the Singularity.

Unfortunately, this didn't stop the now large ball from drawing on Baddan who barely managed to erect another shroud of Nitros around himself.

In fact, with its size now large, the ball begun to drag physical matter towards it, as though hoping to fetch its true targets along as well. Great chunks of the gold land were ripped from their collective and hurled towards the dark hole.

The manner in which it happened was frightening fast!

Lipptis was a creature devoid of emotion, without a soul. It was much like the Apostles, with something akin to a source that perpetuated its existence. Because of this, it was immune to the drawing of emotion, however, the moment its huge limbs touched the singularity, they were shredded into bloodless bits!

For Baddan, the opposite occurred. The pull on his body was less exaggerated because Lipptis made herself a blockade between him and the vacuuming danger, but that which applied to his emotions persisted. Soon, he could feel himself turning... dull.

Only the loose shade of Nitros around him was stalling his demise.

As though watching his beast get obliterated to the waist – most of its limbs gone in mere seconds – wasn't enough to cause adequate despair, the hundreds of chunks of golden land flying at speeds faster than sound towards the dark ball smashing against Baddan only turned the situation more precarious!

The power of the complex, shrunken Territory was so great now that all the conflicts in the vicinity stopped entirely!

Several Ardent Curses had been dragged along by the invisible intangible might, their emotions and bodies devoured when they slipped past Lipptis!

In the distance, the Mad Bishop, Warding Pride, Musing, Thrill and the other Factions had ignited their Nitros at greater output in order to resist the force.

Some had even employed Creeds to fixate themselves and their subordinates in the sky, much like Replicus and crew.

A moment later, the great ravine was no more, and the diamond river within it was drawn on too.

The world was quickly getting dismantled.

In four seconds, a massive crater four kilometers wide and at least double that in depth had emerged.

Dander, who was immune to the effect of his Territory roared in laughter from his bloodied mouths while soaring through the sky!

He looked at Baddan who continued to persist with Lipptis who existed only up to her shoulders now.

"HAHAHAHA! Stop hanging on! Perish already!" he cried jubilantly and hesitated a little before sending a jet of golden fire that blasted Baddan, pushing back against his grown coat of Nitros!

Up in the air, Grim ground his teeth and lurched forth.

"Don't."

Replicus forbade him.

"But boss! He's going to die if we keep standing here and doing nothing! I know he's a new guy, but..." Grim argued.

Pherdanta silently shared the same sentiment, as did Allora, but both of them felt it wasn't their place to question Replicus on this matter, unlike their white-haired peer.

"He's not a fool. I was worried at first too, but he seems to have a plan of his own. A risky one. It would be a shame to not let him try."

"But boss...if he dies..."

"Just observe."

This was a terribly risky move on Replicus' part for many reasons that contradicted what he even hired Baddan for, but he saw a glimpse of the victory that the Sky Watcher was aiming for and soon...

Only Lipptis' head remained, her neck being torn apart by the millisecond.

She showed no emotion still... and waited.

Baddan on the other hand, on seeing Dander placing his full focus on him and the beast...

'Good. Keep your eyes on me...' he thought before clutching the veil over his face... and removing it.

His mostly calm but sweaty visage was revealed.

Dander saw it and scoffed.

However, the next face he saw, had him donning a different kind of expression.

Once Baddan's face was revealed, Liptis' was also shown in full as the brick-coloured talismans on it were ripped to shreds.

"Close your eyes. Quickly!" Replicus commanded his Unlimited who immediately obeyed just in time for neither their full focus or peripherals to gain an inkling of an idea as to what was behind Liptis' talismans.

Even Replicus' sockets turned dim. He too wouldn't look.

Of course, for Dander, it was too late.

...!!!

He had seen it.

That face.

That wretched face.

The moment he glanced, he couldn't look away.

And when seven breaths passed with his eyes locked onto those details that both fascinated and turned him pale with fright...

He had already lost.

Chapter 895: Closing In On The Grander Play

The Fuming Singularity died instantly.

When it vanished, Lipptis barely had half a face, but she was still alive.

Baddan would have plopped to the dark depths beneath him if he didn't climb onto Lipptis' large facial remains and push against them to cross a large stretch of distance and reach solid, gold ground.

As soon as he landed, he watched Lipptis' head drop into the darkness. He raised his hand, and the remainder of the beast vanished into dark blue cloud that soon faded.

The Six Wild Exigencies could indeed be killed, with each having its own weakness. The Masked Facade Lipptis, had no such thing on its lower body, which was why Baddan had readily ignored it being eradicated from the neck down.

Thankfully, all six beasts could heal from any damage they took when unsummoned, as long they had not been dealt heavy blows to their weak points.

Baddan gave a sigh.

"Thank you..." he silently thanked the Masked Facade. It was the first beast he had ever summoned into the real world. He could communicate with all six inside his mind, and knew all that they were capable of already, but still... achieving victory with one in actual combat was quite a high.

The long, ritualistic coat he was wearing vanished, replaced by his baggy attire once more, his hair and furs turning white again.

Across the large pit that stood before him, Baddan looked over to Dander.

The Ardent Curse was standing on the ground, still and rigid like a statue.

Baddan sped to the creature and stood before it.

Dander wasn't dead, but he might as well have been with what Lipptis had done to him.

"Magnificent," Baddan complimented Lipptis.

The beast had a fine set of abilities.

Its ability to stop those it pointed at was merely primary.

Its main object of attack was much more mystical and inevitable the moment it was 'aimed' well.

The veil Baddan wore was linked to the talismans Lipptis had on its face, sealing it until it was needed.

The moment its face was revealed, it would draw any who looked at it directly with a sharp degree of mystical guile. Depending on how strong the enemy was, the effect would take as long as needed, and if there was no resistance or disruption – an unhindered, continuous stare – the target would have everything that took in Lipptis face – eyes and brain – taken.

Not destroyed.

Not gouged.

Simply, taken.

Even Baddan didn't quite know what the implications fed into, but the results were spectacular nonetheless.

He looked at Dander's face.

There's wasn't one.

Only a hole remained, bloodless and exceptionally well-carved to leave a fleshy, clay-like rim.

The Sky Watcher sighed.

This ability of Lippis' was rather powerful, but it could only be used once. Whether it succeeded or failed didn't matter. After use, Lippis would withdraw back to the realm from whence Baddan had summoned her whether he liked it or not.

This was why the Sky Watcher had been waiting for the perfect moment to use it, though admittedly, he didn't have a one hundred percent assurance that it would work on a beast of Dander's calibre.

Thankfully, it did, which confirmed to Baddan how useful Lippis was and what manner of opponents he should be comfortable having her face.

Because there was indeed a disparity in power between his beasts, Baddan believed that in future, it would be wise to return Lippis if the situation was too dangerous and try for another summon instead.

His hand billowed with mana, and shot it out in a projectile towards Dander.

The mana bubbled and disappeared as soon as it reached the Curse.

'There's no way to finish him off for now...' Baddan thought with regret.

How unlucky.

He looked up and saw far, far into the sky, Replicus and crew staring down at him.

"You were right boss. He... he really did it..." Grim said with a weird smile.

"Like I said, it was a gamble. You weren't wrong in trying to intervene," Replicus said, his sockets flashing towards the commotion below.

It seemed they weren't the only ones looking at the result of what had just happened with Dander and Baddan.

In fact, Musing was already making his way towards Baddan, and the Sky Watcher had only just now noticed.

"Araeyn protect them!" Replicus commanded the agitated Apostle who looked at him with a frown, as he whipped out his Empyrean Ribbon from his arm.

The Penetrator then grabbed Pherdanta and turned into a bolt of Levin and charged at ridiculous speed where Musing was screaming hysterically with his wand housing baleful arcs of light.

Several others Ardent Curses raced towards Baddan along with him, sharing his rage at their fallen comrade.

Dander might have still been standing and even breathing, but the hollow in his head said a lot.

Thrill screamed for the third time, "Kill them all! They have to pay!" but there was doubt in whether he truly felt as much about Dander's defeat as the rest of the Ardent Curses. After all, he still had on two maniacal grins and continued to attack the Factions with sullen forces behind him.

Baddan frowned as he noticed Musing leaking saliva in both his mouths as he flew in with killing intent.

He was vulnerable right now.

There was a ten minute cooldown after every use of his technique, not to mention that every minute a beast remained summoned guzzled a massive portion of his mana.

He had also had a large portion of his mana wasted after his attempt at a Territory failed miserably.

Thankfully, he wasn't alone.

The Penetrator and Pherdanta appeared before him on a cloud, and the former extended his hand forward, and uttered:

"Static Limbo."

At once, Musing, who was Replicus' target, turned a shade of blue and paused in place!

His sudden stop prompted his forces to turn wary and fly in arcs around him confusedly.

The guidance field appeared before Replicus right then.

[You have activated the skill 'Static Limbo'. Your target has been affected by Serenity. Due to level and Tier difference, effect will last for four seconds]

Four seconds.

Perfect!

Any enemy that Replicus was able to appraise with the guidance field was normally one he had a chance to defeat, even if they had a higher Tier.

Such opponents were viable targets for [Static Limbo]!

"Master..." Pherdanta called, a little anxious.

"Kill the rest," Replicus said simply.

The gears in Pherdanta's mind spun, and in a split moment she found herself holding the hilt to the merged blade she had forged before – the combination of the white scimitar Grim gave her, and her large, red sword.

She felt her confidence in Replicus' command lead her on to the solution.

Her eyes turned sharp and murderous and she hunched as she drew the merged sword... but didn't swing it.

A master Swordswoman, or at least one aiming to become one wouldn't swing, lest they gave the enemy an attack they could see and dodge.

Instead, right as a neon glow suffused from her, drowning her figure within the glowing green look alike of the individual she adored the most, starry armour and all – a more majestic figure of Replicus – an unseen malice with insurmountable edge flashed from her!

It was unbelievably greedy.

The living type Incarnation Pherdanta had summoned bolstered her offensive power by over 600% of her normal peak, and this, plus the special effects of her merged sword – increased critical damage, and the power to ignore defences – flipped off the uncanny protection of the Ardent Curses!

Each of them was severed into more than twenty bits that left blood spraying everywhere!

Even the stunned Musing wasn't left unscathed, despite his more impressive durability!

He had deep gashes all over his body that bled profusely!

"Nicely done!" Replicus said with his sockets flashing, an odd twitch of his head representing how he didn't approve of Pherdanta's Genuine Incarnation. It was a bit much.

Still, it seemed the combination Pherdanta used had actually managed to cut through. If it was only her skill as an advanced Swordswoman at play, it likely wouldn't have been enough!

Just then, Musing was relieved from [Static Limbo] and screeched horribly.

Replicus dropped off Pherdanta beside Baddan and as a bright force of Levin, he hurtled towards Musing who seemed to have turned mad.

The Curse shot jets of light at the Levin, but Replicus merely darted around and away.

Musing followed after him.

His attacks couldn't be avoided, and thus Replicus kept going, trying to outspeed and outlast them as he did before, when Dander had been the one chasing him.

He burst to where the ravine had been and dived down with Musing on his tail. He then began to wonder:

'Concepts... concepts...' he thought. 'That's what works best on these creatures. I wonder if I have anything of my own that... Well, I guess I can always unleash Araeyn, as I intended to before...'

As he reached down to where the remaining bits of the diamond river were dripping from the degraded golden land, Replicus shot up, but Musing still followed.

The Penetrator scoffed.

He was about to make a sharp turn when a single notification threw him off.

[Rule level concept detected. 'Integral Time'. To learn the lesser fundamentals, an investment of 5,812,000 Null Life Essence Points is required]

...!

[Author's Note]

[Static Limbo]

Suspend a target at the corridor of life and death. The duration is dependent on the level and overall strength difference between the user and the target(s).

Mana Requirements: 50 Mana Points

Duration: Dependent on level difference

Cooldown: 5 minutes

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Chapter 896: An Ugly Turning Point

Integral Time.

Replicus couldn't believe his eyes. He almost got so lost in the idea that he had gotten into contact with such an absurd concept, that he forgot to make a sharp turn to avoid the crazed Musing whose figure almost caught up in that moment.

Skilfully, he dodged and darted to the side while keeping track of where [Epiphany] supposed detected the flakes of Integral Time.

'What in the world...?' Replicus thought while enabling his thought phantoms to take the theorising wheel from him as he focused on outmanoeuvring Musing.

The Ardent Curse had taken to hurling jets of explosive might while cackling bitterly... sombrely, more like.

"What is that? How do these creatures even have access to a Rule level concept? What even is a Rule level concept? Is it what I think it is? Are we missing something? Does it have something to do with that sealed Cluster General?" a thought phantom wondered while circling over Replicus' helmet, bombarding the others with a flurry of questions.

"I don't know about that. If that thing had anything to do with these Curses, then they should know about it. From the looks of it, they don't seem none the wiser. I think it's something else. Besides, Rule... If it is what we think it is...

creatures of this calibre shouldn't have something like the ability to manipulate time, right?" another said.

"You know what, that makes sense. Right there..." the phantom who spoke said while pointing at the remnants of the diamond river, "...where the river was... and close to the entrance to the Cluster that that Thrill character closed off and masked... I believe that's our biggest clue."

"That's not a deduction, you sockethole! We can all see that! Do you reckon it has nothing to do with the Curses at all?"

"Well, let's swivel by that position and see. This Integral Time or whatever is unrealistically expensive and powerful. Whatever its origin is must be ridiculous!"

And so, Replicus, while avoiding Musing, turned and headed towards the deformed land, carved in by Dander's Territory effect, and once again, the notification he had seen before appeared:

[Rule level concept detected. 'Integral Time.' To learn the lesser fundamentals, an investment of 5,812,000 is required]

'Right here,' he thought, and a glaring glow ignited from his luminous body.

"Incismic Flurry!" Musing suddenly called out from behind Replicus.

Four large, white, sharp-ended objects came rushing towards the Penetrator with astounding speed, and a peculiar, ghostly outline that one of Replicus' thought phantoms was certain would be able to damage him – and heavily at that – should it touch him, even if he remained assuming his Levin form for travel.

The Penetrator wasn't too concerned, however. In a blink, he actually went ahead and restored himself to physical form, and darted out of the way of the teeth-looking objects!

No. Perhaps darted wasn't the right word.

He had been pulled out of harm's way!

Replicus had summoned a ball of Distorted Gravity that sucked him towards it with impressive speed, and at the same, he made another one appear right above the Ardent Curse, Musing.

With a flip of his fingers upward, something strange happened to the Ardent Curse... something it hadn't been expecting.

The chunks of rock and stone – great and small – left in the wake of the earlier devastation, rose up quickly, as though Dander's Majestic Territory had reincarnated to wreak havoc again.

They flew so fast that anyone paying attention would have mistaken them for rather athletic black holes jogging upwards.

...!!!

At the same time as when they all disappeared into the ungolden skies, the orb over Musing attained a modest, lilac-purple tinge, and the Curse, along with everything close to him – except Replicus – was forced to plummet via a harsh force that threatened to strip skeleton from flesh!

Musing let out a bellow of pain as he fell, stricken without mistake.

Replicus scoffed while watching his figure crash heavily against the indented gold crust of this world and continue to sink further without pause!

'Yeah, guess I was right. No one is immune to gravity, nomatter which form it takes...' Replicus thought.

The true power of his Distorted Gravity, was something he had only been able to demonstrate after he raised his affinity to the concept to rank C. Before that, all Replicus had been able to do, was use an amped version of normal gravity, much like Skullius.

Distorted Gravity allowed the user to channel stronger gravitational forces by fuelling them with their inverted applications. For instance, he had made the rocks nearby to fly up through the gravitational orb, just so he could channel the upward force they each generated into a single, opposite effect through said orb.

Naturally, this would call into question why Replicus wouldn't just use the Distorted Gravity orbs to create the directional gravity he wanted, as he had been doing before, to which the answer was simple.

Applying Distorted Gravity in this unique manner... didn't use additional mana after that which he used to create the initial, opposing effect. In this case, the mana Replicus used to speed the rocks up, was all there was to use his expenditure.

Additionally, the inverted effect generated this way, was more than twice as powerful and as intrinsic, meaning it would work up to the cellular level if Replicus truly put his back into it.

Replicus had done this so that he could buy time to study this oddity in space.

Integral Time.

What was its origin?

How could Replicus find out?

The Penetrator, still clinging to the Distorted Gravity orb, considered rapidly.

Strangely, the sting of the surrounding gold to his sockets suddenly worsened.

He had been spared for a while because he was travelling as Levin all this time, but now, when his body settled for more than a moment without changing form again, the irritation of seeing the gold returned.

'Nevermind that for now...' he thought as he stretched his arm forward. 'What I need to focus on, is this...'

Replicus' hand became encased in a foggy light, Lambent Phosphor, which he had acquired from Nedalia.

'This concept can show the truth. Nedalia had a broad interpretation of what the 'truth' was. The ghosts, the mirrors, and that Secondary Territory function, Rage of Truths. I can't be too sure, but the reason why she was free to interpret Lambent Phosphor like that, was likely because of its source, her Hidden Class. I probably won't be able to summon ghosts like her but...'

And without wasting any more time to thought, wisps of foggy light sprayed over the spot were [Epiphany] continued to cry out that it sensed Integral Time.

At first, the Lambent Phosphor Replicus released was slow, and lazy, but it soon became powerful, and unabashed.

Regardless of whatever Lambent Phosphor was capable of, if he willed it, it should be able to reveal to him the source of the disturbance, right?

What's more, much like Dander, Musing and Thrill's attacks, it couldn't be avoided, meaning as Replicus gave it a target, it shouldn't miss.

The Penetrator was unsure of how exactly the source of this going to be revealed to him.

Depending on how you split it, Lambent Phosphor could be used as a tool for Divining – looking into the past... or maybe even the future.

'Will it work?' Replicus thought.

It now started to occur to him that the odd shapes the ghosts took when Nedalia extracted them from living bodies, were likely reflections of how the victims saw themselves, or what they aspired to become – though perhaps warped a little because of Nedalia's Hidden Class.

If only Replicus had such a firm grasp of...

There!

It happened just as he was starting to doubt.

A vague image appeared blindingly in his head, taking what he was currently looking at, and plastering it with the details it was missing now!

Unfortunately, perhaps because Lambent Phosphor in Replicus' hands simply couldn't be as absurd as it had been before, or because it was only rank B currently, the image lasted only for a second and a half.

...!!

Replicus reeled.

That had been plenty.

"No way!" he exclaimed as he imprinted the image he had just seen in his mind!

He saw Eaniss on her ship, in the diamond river.

He saw her holding something... odd, which he couldn't quite describe.

He saw something familiar appear before her.

A Reverse Cluster!

"It's the same Reverse Cluster that we saw before. The one that messed with time!"

And indeed it was. It had looked different aside from behaving oddly.

An anomaly among the Reverse Clusters which had a terrible habit of hopping from spot to spot, until it caught prey.

So far, the Factions had only seen it devour a ship of their own which then emerged on the Reverse Cluster's nether side looking as though it had cruised through lifetimes at sea!

'Did Eaniss... somehow harness its powers?!' Replicus thought... but then his mind trekked back further to a greater clue.

'Past.'

He recalled the nagging Apostle, Araeyn constantly try to tell him this.

Past.

The past?

Replicus was awestruck, and somewhat frightened by the idea.

Did that bugger mean... it wasn't just about Eaniss simply attaining something like that... but she actually used it?!

Had she actually been in the Cluster with them before... as the image he saw suggested?!

No way!

The Penetrator couldn't believe it.

Unfortunately for him, whether he believed or not in anything didn't matter to the current course of events.

He felt strangely sacred light bathe the entire Cluster world.

It was, to him, unmistakably a blessing in action.

Quickly turning and spreading his senses, Replicus was appalled at its source.

If he had a tongue, he would have clicked it at the sight of the Mad Bishop rising into the sky like a holy angel, a demented look on her face.

Chapter 897: Sacred, Demented Powers

The Mad Bishop had been a factor that Replicus had initially intended to take advantage of before the chaos with the Ardent Curses, in order to create a steerable chaos of his own that would to several accomplished objectives.

He had been hoping to use her usually crazy, and unfocused temperament, capitalising on her desire and interest in him to rein her in.

Unfortunately, she threw all plans of this out of Replicus' head. On top of not being able to find time to process the very real possibility that time had been wound back without him or anyone else knowing, he was forced to consider how exactly the Bishop would act and how his scattered subordinates would fare because of whatever she did.

The first instance of the crazy Faction leader's actions didn't inspire Replicus to feel anything but a dreadful sense of unease.

As the Mad Bishop ascended into the sky with the Ardent Curses and everyone else watching her, she activated her blessing.

Reaching the Incandescent Stage allowed one to fully awaken the dormant blessing they acquired to enter the Foundation Stage, and the range of what this blessing could do ranged from fairly useful to absolutely inapplicable.

For the Mad Bishop, it turned out that she was blessed with the former.

While donning a grin that expressed both a lacking sense of lucidity and recklessness, the ancient Faction leader made a sacred glow shower everything in sight from her body, as though she had become a complexly shaped sun.

Replicus, as well as everyone who was bathed in the light were cautious of touched by it, but few could react to its absurd speed.

The momentary panic turned out to have been unwarranted.

The light did nothing to anything that lived and breathed.

Instead, when it touched the golden land... it made abundant greenery flourish at an absurd rate, as though someone had accelerated time on the display of a farm where seeds for various greens had been planted!

Great green trees; thick, proud shrubs; tufts of resilient, lustrous grasses that didn't care whether the land they were born into was rich or gold...



All emerged and quickly overrode the glare of the golden plant life – which hadn't quite seemed living, in Replicus' opinion.

As the nature the humans were used to sprang forth, covering kilometers under the mysterious, shocked sights of the Curses, the Penetrator made a quick deduction.

'Is she trying to stop whatever is causing the sting in our eyes the longer we look at the golden land?' he thought as he noticed that the buried gold didn't affect him as much now.

Brilliant.

It was quite brilliant!

As Replicus had thought before, he didn't wish to see what the final consequence of that particular feature of this Cluster was; why the Ardent Curses evolved to not have eyes and the usual form of perception.

He didn't relax though, for the Mad Bishop didn't stop by offering this service to her fellow invaders.

She looked down at Thrill who had readied his wand in her direction while donning a look that ironically resembled one a priest would don when a heathen defiled his beliefs.

A blinding shot of greyish flame blossomed from the tip of his wand towards the Mad Bishop, but it was extinguished by one of her guards – a literally bulbous fellow, shirtless and firm – who, with the might of a cloth-shaped Genuine Incarnation blasting the streak of energy off course with as much grace as a matador fooling a charging bull!

"UNORIGINAL!" the Mad Bishop bellowed at Thrill who wore a frown. "You lack more tricks! New tricks! Is this all you've got?!"

Thrill looked agitated.

He beckoned for the other Ardent Curses to leave those they were currently assaulting, and surround the Mad Bishop, which they did.

The old Faction leader merely scoffed at this.

She looked at Thrill and clasped her hands together in an odd manner, her purple quality mana surging from her core.

The look on the Mad Bishop's face changed.

Replicus noticed it and quickly teleported over to Araeyn, Allora and Grim in the sky.

The old woman had lost her fickle and eccentric expressions, but only for a moment.

And that moment, was when she mumbled something unheard and incomprehensible under her breath.

The expulsion of her mana shook the ground below her raised feet, and in quite the unexpected showcase, something emerged.

It was unclear whether it rose from the ground or if it materialised out of nowhere because it happened so fast.

Too fast for Replicus to see.

Too fast for Thrill.

Too fast for Warding Pride and all the other Faction leaders and their members.

A grand cathedral now settled below the Mad Bishop as she hung in the air.

Caramel embossed its slightly glowing stature, with four, bold turrets fitted around its seven-storied build. The narrow windows were tinged in a blueish silver that drew the eye pleasantly, in total contrast with the gold from the Cluster that stung.

At the peak of every turret, an exaggerated, frankly unappealing symbol of blueish silver stood, crafted to mirror the Mad Bishop's face in an oil painting style, could be seen, highlighted excessively in order to sell an unclear idea.

Or perhaps it was obvious.

Replicus would have scowled if he could. He didn't like this one bit.

Warding Pride, who knew better than him of the Mad Bishop's prowess seemed to begin to activate counters to whatever this cathedral was.

The conjurer of said cathedral readopted her demented look and cackled in a voice so loud it reached all boundaries of the Cluster. It was likely that the summoned construct bolstered the volume of her speech, making it sound as though it was the call of an unseen authority.

"Won't any of you join me for the service? There will be retribution to those that don't join willingly!" the Mad Bishop said ominously.

Around her, her male guards became encased in a profound light that bled into their eyes, turning them luminous.

It bled to their torsos as well and had them don glowing tunics with a single end strapped over the shoulder; and they obtained the ability to fly.

All nine of them floated, their hairs tinged in a bright colour and standing on end, as if supercharged.

Everyone gawked at the sight, Replicus moreso, because he felt the boundless surging of Primus energy within the Mad Bishop's guards!

That's right!

She had a Priest class, rather, Priestess. Replicus didn't know whether it was Advanced or Hidden, but the fact that as a Priest, she had access to the low level Divine Energy, should have been straightforward.

What flabbergasted Replicus though, was how was she was able to command it into others and seemingly make them very powerful.

'But what does this even matter? These guys still can't harm the Curses without conceptual abilities or something similar...' Replicus thought... just before he got a ridiculous answer.

The nine guards around the Mad Bishop, opened their mouths, and began to sing with as much grace as a renown choir from a Purity Temple.

The melody had great, prevailing tones of bass ultimately dominating its chorus which seemed to jut out of the nine with splendorous arcs of light that shot outward.

The song was mesmerising.

The lyrics were horrendous.

...And the effects were a mix of both.

Chapter 898: The Collective

"Listen to the collective,

The collective of pure thought,

This indeed is collective,

The collective of lull thought,

The fire burning in the senses,

Let it cool and simmer down,

The fire raging to the sword,

Let it cool, let it simmer down,

The collective thought, the collective,

Come together quiet just as one,

The collective thought, the su-um,

Come together, lay hate down~"

The melody blossomed and flourished throughout all, bringing with it, first a degree of confusion, and then an almost graceful sense of ease within the hearts of all who heard it.

"Listen to the collective,

The collective of pure thought..."

Ardent Curses and humans alike, high shouldered and tense, began to relax, as though the reason for which they were engaged in the hostility suddenly vanished.

"The collective thoughts, the su-um,

Come together, lay hate down..."

Thrill's sight lost a large degree of focus.

The immense negativity he had felt towards the flying cathedral, the one who floated above it, and the nine in brilliant tunics singing the sweet melody that threatened to calm him down, lessened a great deal.

He felt himself turning heavy. His body wanted to lie down. To relax.

He found his wand, which he had been holding up and firm, drop, its accusatory point slackening.

At first, he couldn't believe it.

He was losing his will to act upon his hostility.

His will to extract every bit of emotion from the ensnared victims and feed it to the prison ways ahead.... it was drifting off.

While the effects of the melody were more or less taking their time to fully grip him with more of the tune travelling in fickle arcs of light he heard, his weaker kin had fallen prey completely.

They had visibly relaxed, with some even having dropped their wands to the ground while gazing upward with twofold smiles of appreciation.

'Fools!' Thrill growled in his mind, finding that even this tone of aggression expressed only in the confines of his mind, was hard to completely pour out.

All around the green flora-covered land, many of the Faction members from different Factions had also fallen prey to the melody, and it seemed conventional methods of barricading the body to effects like this were ineffective.

Many were quickly losing their will to fight.

All they wanted to do, was to slump to the ground and look at the gorgeous cathedral while enjoying the ministrations of the Collective song.

High in the sky, Replicus and his crew were met with the same feeling.

Replicus felt his body begin to rebel against his rightfully placed tense mood.

His subordinates – Grim and Allora – were hit particularly hard, as their eyes glazed over, reflecting the magnificence conjured by the Mad Bishop.

Down below, where Replicus had dropped Pherdanta by Baddan, the Unlimited had also drooped lazily, while the Sky Watcher looked to be making attempts at resisting.

Replicus' sockets blinked rapidly.

'Dammit! That's shockingly effective!' he said while allowing his thought phantoms to manifest, and boost his mental capacity. 'This attack isn't like compulsion which works on the soul and in turn the body... no. It's appealing to our bodies directly. Soon, my mind might just collapse...'

It was freakish indeed.

To think a song with not-so-good lyrics was ending the strife, and in such a childishly fantastical manner!

It seemed the Mad Bishop had the perfect ability to counter the Ardent Curses.

Replicus didn't know how they were able to skirt compulsion – which wasn't relied on much by the Incandescent Stage experts in the Severed Union because there were public ways of avoiding it – but it came as a surprise to him that sound was effective against them.

Was it because it wasn't exactly harmful, like the scalding heat of the Scorching Tears for instance? Were there other stipulations to the protection around the Ardent Curses?

The answer hadn't come by the time Replicus felt himself buckle.

He was an inch close to beginning to subscribe to the belief that he was here on a mining excursion with a few pals, some of whom were friendly men with twice the amount of mouths; the better to gossip and giggle with.

However...

He suddenly stretched his hand towards Allora's abdomen.

The tall woman didn't seem to even notice while admiring the Mad Bishop who feigned directing the angelic choir she had created, what with the instrumental music pouring to back the vocalists from nowhere.

The Penetrator's hand was set alight with a brilliant blue hue, and there was a crack!

Allora's mana core broke, and her face transitioned from displaying peaceful bliss to deathly agony. She screamed hoarsely, which actually forced her to regain her senses!

At the same time, her mana blasted out like a flood, causing a miniature tornado around her.

"Reinforce our minds. Hurry!" Replicus gave her the order when her slightly bloodshot eyes turned to him in shock; she realised what had been happening to her, and that her master had delivered her from it.

Allora didn't take long to comprehend what Replicus meant.

The command was clear, but she knew as much as he did, that she was likely unable to execute it as potently as needed.

After all, she was still new with her powers.

An unseen blanket surged from Allora as she grunted with effort. It wrapped around her, Grim and Replicus in an instant. When she tried to extend it to Araeyn, who stood on the Empyrean Ribbon, she found it all warded away mysteriously.

"Don't mind him," Replicus said, seeing how puzzled she was when looking at the Apostle. "Try to reinforce our minds so we don't become completely helpless. I know you're still growing into your abilities, but you can do it!"

Allora nodded immediately.

Replicus was right.

She wasn't efficient yet with this, but regardless...

What he wanted her to do, was to use her Mind Casting to enhance their mental strength against the Bishop's song.



Indeed. Her Mind Casting.

Allora didn't only gain Unlimited mana with her class, the Charmed Illimitable Rounder. She also acquired the ability to tap into every basic – normal – class there was.

The only downside was, she wasn't allowed to use her original class abilities – Shaman – in the process, as doing that would forcibly bring a hold to the Unlimited mana she could produce and her ability to Class Branch to the extreme.

Just as she had done during her spar with Kenno, Allora forced the massive amount of mental energy first into her own mind in order to discard the impeding thoughts and the weakness brought about by her entranced body.

It worked!

Her mind became clearer, and she wasn't constantly being assaulted by the notion that the Mad Bishop was some kind of Chosen of salvation surrounded by holy beings.

Right after securing herself, she went on to do the same for Grim and Replicus, the former of which blinked a couple of times and looked at himself with a strained face.

"What's going? Why do I feel so... heavy?" he asked.

Replicus spoke over him.

"Can you keep this up for the five of us?" he asked Allora.

The tall woman looked unsure.

"I can try."

Right when she answered, she found their group reunited with Baddan and Pherdanta on the ground.

Sticking to her word, Allora gave it her all, and tried to stimulate the twos' minds as well.

It wasn't easy.

The difficult could be compared to attempting to fill five small, waters bottles with narrow openings, using a bucket.

Allora managed, however clumsily.

That said, it wasn't as though she made everyone immune to the Bishop's frightening tactic.

She only made sure their bodies, which continued to heed the melody, didn't become so entranced that they made the mind follow suit.

This was good for now.

Replicus thought so at least.

It was certainly better than what many had to endure.

All the weaker Curses were practically incapacitated at this point, and among the Factions, only Warding Pride and four other Faction leaders had managed to protect their members from being turned into believers; some of them probably used methods similar to what Allora was doing.

Thrill was starting to kneel down, almost as though surrendering.

He looked up with the remnants of his rage, brimming, flaring like living torch flame and the Mad Bishop looked down at him too.

He didn't know it, but things were about to get much worse than he could have imagined.

Chapter 899: Are You Insane?!

"Hahaha! I didn't think I'd FRIENDLY FIRE so soon!" the amplified voice of the Mad Bishop came, resounding against everything; living and unliving.

With her old face, made to turn wrinkly because of her demented grin, she looked down at Thrill whose wand was only a few hooked fingers away from falling from his grasp.

"Curious, you Bread haters! How can your wills be so weak?! Have you ever tried to taste Bread?! I expected the seas to hold something that could challenge my desire for soft fluff! To make me feel that I was worthy of my title, but no! I meet you sorry excuses for obstacles!

Buckle up! Have at me!"

The contents of what the old woman said were quite provocative, albeit completely incomprehensible.

Perhaps those from the Factions could at least understand that the old Faction leader had a formidable bread fetish, but Thrill couldn't. He didn't understand a word of what the Mad Bishop was saying.

At least, until she started to make sense.

"Your methods of avoiding even compulsion must be something, but to think an alluring voice is all it took to make you kneel. Tut tut. I'm not sure if I'm disappointed or fascinated," she said, with the voices of her nine guards mellowing a little, acting as strangely perfect background music to the Bishop's declarations.

With a crafty look in her eye, the Mad Bishop focused on Thrill's wand.

"Ah. Of course. I didn't think of it. I couldn't even see it until now. Maybe you are wise after all! You are storing your souls in your wands in order to make sure even if they are compelled, they won't dictate what your bodies do!

Splendid!" she cried.

...!

Thrill frowned deeply, scowls marring his face.

Replicus was astounded.

What?

Wait!

That actually made sense.

It made sense not because it was straightforward, but because he was familiar with a concept where an object became extremely close to its user.

Fond Calamities.

Much like Araeyn and the Empyrean Ribbon.

It wasn't too strange if the Curses had something similar with their wands, where they could actually use their wands as vessels for their souls!

The look on Thrill's face confirmed it that the Bishop was right.

'Still. Even if we discovered it earlier, we can't approach the Curses without being exposed to the emotions they represent. Touching them also isn't easy, especially when intending to steal from them, rather than to harm.'

The Mad Bishop didn't seem to have mentioned this in order to act upon it though.

She seemed to enjoy the hostilely baffled look on Thrill's face, and that on Musing's face as well.

The second Curse of the main trio had emerged from where Replicus had sent him flying only to be caught in the melody which was playing from around the cathedral.

With an anguished grin, Musing knelt down, but much like Thrill, he refused to drop his wand.

"Hmmm. Bread haters, I don't understand you. Surely you could leave this place if you wanted to. The Cluster is open. Why are you so stubborn? You insist on keeping us here and harvesting our emotions.

Curious. You hate that creature locked up over, but when given the chance to escape it... you still stay? Why? That doesn't make any sense! Where's the logic?

Is it because of the gold? Are you actual gold diggers?"

Thrill and Musing didn't answer.

The Mad Bishop wasn't pleased about it.

In her opinion, she was being as polite as she could be here and they were being rude!

What was wrong with answering such a simple question, and without that deep of a frown... frowns?!

The Mad Bishop gave a deep sigh.

"I'm crazy, and I carry grudges, you know. You're making me so angry here, I could just... I could just... ask someone else!" she said, beaming, and with a look of being enlightened.

"I bet that old creep with the six arms will be dying to have a chat with me about what's really going on. Over a loaf, of course."

...!!!

At the vague mention of the beast trapped in the crystal, Thrill and Musing jerked and turned pale.

"Hmmm, it should be difficult to set him free though, huh? But, no! Who says you only need brute force to break out of a prison, huh?!"

At once, the Mad Bishop, under the eyes of everyone who wasn't close to bowing down reverently towards the cathedral, shot into the sky and flew towards the direction of the Crystalline Prison!

"NO!" Thrill cried desperately, his face turned drastically paler than just a moment ago, veins throbbing from his neck. "WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING?!"

Musing looked just as deeply terrified, and the momentary rush of adrenaline – if he even had any – allowed him to summon enough strength to move his arms and legs!

He barely realised that he had managed to temporarily void the effect of the melody as he called out to the Bishop:

"ARE YOU INSANE?!"

"ABSOLUTELY!" the Mad Bishop replied blissfully.

Without a thought, and without doubt that indeed, the Mad Bishop was one twisted entity, Musing pointed his wand at Thrill and a jet of red light smashed into him.

"AUUUUUUUGHHHH!" Thrill screamed ear-piercingly, seemingly being torched by an outlandish degree of agony from the attack.

Brutal though it seemed, it helped Thrill overcome the steady feelings of ceasefire he had been feeling and he rose, his body unreceptive to the vibrations of the Collective song.

It was only temporary, but it was enough.

He and Musing soared desperately, going after the Mad Bishop as arcs of space boomed loudly around them!

Replicus wasn't sure what to make of all of this.

He had options on the table, contingencies, but they would miss their mark if he remained under the constant bombardment of the Mad Bishop's Collective song.

Even then though, what would he do against what the Bishop was aiming to do?

Watching closely, he saw Thrill and Musing shockingly catch up to the cackling Faction leader and hurl jets of elements and emotion at her.

She dove down elegantly and weaved between each of their attacks unbothered, making steady progress towards the gazebo in which the large crystal was housed.

Thrill and Musing roared in anguish and kept blasting what looked like tangible agony at each other in order to not fall for the singing after few breaths!

They didn't accomplish anything.

All they did was stall.

And the Mad Bishop embarrassed them for it.

"FIGHT HARDER, NOT SMARTER!" she called when the two Curses combined jets of silvery flame from their wands and shot them towards her.

"LET ME AT 'IM!" she cried when Musing fell prey to the Collective melody and was shielded by Thrill who then restored him for the umpteenth time since they began to face off against the Bishop.

The old woman didn't go on the offensive, but somehow, she managed to swindle her way past Thrill and Musing a few times, reaching closer and closer to the Crystalline Prison.

The two Ardent Curses didn't know why they were so afraid of letting the Mad Bishop through.

They had confidence in the fact that the Crystalline Prison could withstand attacks from all the Ardent Curses combined.

Even the sheep they had brought in couldn't destroy it with their strongest attacks... right?

'It won't break! Nomatter what! It's been here for generations! Why would it break today?!' Thrill thought to himself.

All they needed to do now, was crush this woman and get rid of her cathedral.

Yes!

That was the way to end this!

Even now, they were making it very difficult for her to proceed any further.

The distance to the gazebo remained at roughly four hundred meters, and they would keep it that way or even make it bigger!

They would watch out for any strange attacks she threw!

Thrill and Musing glanced at it each other.

There was only one way to settle this.

...!

The Mad Bishop caught on to what the two intended.

Her eyes bulged... in joy.

Bursts of white shot out from Thrill, Musing and her old figure at the exact same time!

"Majestic Territory Expulsion, Musings of Fate!"

"Majestic Territory Expulsion, Taxing Danger!"



...

"This is my CREED..."

The Mad Bishop, didn't call the name of her Territory like the two, much to their confusion.

Nitros rose around her, bashing against the other two's own, but she wasn't going for what they thought.

With a ridiculing and maniacal look of distorted condescension, the Mad Bishop looked at Musing and finished her sentence:

"...take THAT THING'S place in the prison."

...!!!

And it happened as such.

Thrill hadn't processed what kind of evil had just happened until he felt its results standing where Musing had been – close to him.

Colour drained from him, and he dropped his wand finally, his will to fight extinguished at the return of the thing he – and countless generations – had worked to keep frozen and trapped.

An abomination with six arms, six wands, three mouths... and two purple mana cores.

Chapter 900: In Good Faith

Thrill did not need to take a look at the Crystalline Prison to realise that within it, was the frozen figure of Musing with his wand pointed outward, his mouths ajar.

He did not even have the time nor the gall to dwell on how easily centuries of hard work were erased in a matter of seconds, but a power he and his people had never accounted for – not that it was their fault.

The presence of the anomaly among the Curses wafted ruthlessly from beside him, and all sense of defiance and confidence drifted away with its continuous pulse.

HE was finally free after all this time.

"Great Father Hope..." Thrill squealed in a subdued voice as his knees gave out, and not because he was succumbing to the song of the Collective again.

The thunderous presence of the Curse with six arms, six wands and three mouths turned more tumultuous.

"Oh..." the Mad Bishop keenly voiced as she looked at the creature.

It wasn't only she who gazed at the Curse.

Its presence wasn't so expansive that all could feel its treacherous thrum, but everyone looked this way nevertheless.

They were drawn to the creature subconsciously.

The Curses who had been caught by the Collective song, were forcefully shaken awake only to age by several decades as they saw the ancient Curse, named Great Father Hope by Thrill, free.

Replicus was more than a little fascinated.

He could feel the two genuine purple mana cores within the creature as it made movements to flex its innards; it almost seemed funny that after what was hinted to be centuries of imprisonment, the six-armed creature only felt slightly stiff.

The Penetrator knew high Tier beasts seemed to be immune to basic necessities, like the Grinning Jester Fox which had guarded Fulgardt's Labyrinth for thousands of years without moving, though that time frame was brought into question given what Replicus now knew about the Ashing of Time.

The freed Curse wound its arms and craned its neck as an "Ah" left its mouths after several cracks.

Its multi-coloured garb – spotting gold, blue and silver – seemed to shine all the brighter... and then it spoke for the first time as Thrill's Nitros, initially intended to erect a Territory, dissipated.

"The one to free me seems to be a foreigner," Hope said in an even voice before turning his head to Thrill who shrank. "I've felt that prison grew stronger many times and the same happened recently. I take it you had no hand in my release."

Thrill shuddered.

Hope tapped one of his six wands with another, and took a deep, audible breath. He seemed to then turn his sights towards the greenery, and an unmistakable look of displeasure showed on his face.

"What is this? Why cover the gold? Why hide it? It provides you with your beloved wands, it sustains your existence and you dare sully its dignity in this manner?" Hope spat, the target being Thrill.

"Oh no, I'll take credit for that, thank you. That would be my work," the Mad Bishop pointed out in a proud manner.

Hope turned.

"You and your... many friends, I presume," he said, referencing the many Factions he could see around and behind a distant cathedral.

The Mad Bishop nodded eagerly.

"I see. I presume the nasty scratches in my ear are also your product," Hope said as he raised one of his wands; one with the darkest shade of gold among the rest.

It seemed the Collective song was ineffective against him.

"That is very true," the Mad Bishop answered hurriedly, "Erm, if you don't mind, I had questions that your fellows wouldn't answer. An old timer like you must not be aware, but this world just got a

rift that leads outside into a much bigger world. A very fun world. Your little friends here refused to leave, and would rather continue to work to keep you trapped while keeping this world as a habitat.

Why is that?"

Thrill looked as though he was about to turn into a worm and sink underground.

Hope was evidently surprised by the carefree manner in which the Mad Bishop spoke. She could have been easily asking about a job vacancy at a bakery.

The Curse's mouths moved, expressing different variations of motion.

"You seem rather curious," he said as he drew closer to the Mad Bishop. "We are born of the gold. It is our mother, and once in many centuries, one of us is deigned as the Father of all those born from it. We have an aggressive attachment to our mother, see, and we perceive it with obsessive adoration. Our yearning for it grew too vile when we were like you, creatures with eyes.

We only obtained sanity after losing such sight, moderating our love for gold. Still, we cannot live without it. Is it the same for you creatures?"

By the time Hope finished speaking, he was already face to face with the Mad Bishop who kept nodding childishly.

Completely unconcerned by the enemy's position, the Mad Bishop then beamed.

"Of course! The irony!" she said thoughtfully. "Another race born in a Cluster, evolving much like humans and their lust for gold. Curse you, foul Deities and your disgusting proclivity for creativity!"

Hope did not react to the Mad Bishop's words.

He instead pointed his wand behind her.

BOOOM!

Without delay, something distant crumbled like a towering mass of rock!

As it turned out, it was the exit to the Cluster which had been covered up and concealed by Thrill earlier!

Now, it was open once again – a large crack in space that led outside, where a massive platform of gold had replaced the poisonous waters of the ocean.

A different kind of air wafted from the outside world into the Cluster. It had a strangely comforting 'taste' for those that had grown used to the voyage on the ocean.

"Go," Hope said. "In exchange for setting me free, I will allow you and your people to leave."

The Mad Bishop looked appalled.

That thing was letting them go?

...That was it?!

While anyone else who could feel the dreadful energy from Great Father Hope would have nodded timidly and put the heel to the back of the head, the Mad Bishop didn't.

Her face turned graceful rebellious.

She took a step closer towards Hope, which made it very suspicious why she remained immune to getting overtaken by the emotion he exuded.

"Ah, how generous. But you see, short of a lifetime's worth of bread, there's nothing you could give me that would quite be comparable to me saving you from your prison," she said. "Certainly not freedom. Do I look like a caged bird to you?!"

Hope didn't look too surprised. He was a little puzzled by wording.

"What is it that you want, then?" he asked.

The Mad Bishop grinned.

Her right hand attained a soft glow, and she extended it towards Hope.

"How about you join my Faith, hmmm? Shake my hand, and we'll call it even," she said.

Before Hope could even begin to show the expected degree of scepticism, nine figures flashed above him and the Mad Bishop, their brilliant tunics glowing as bright as the bows and arrows they held, aiming at the Curse.

At the same time, Great Father Hope found that he and the Mad Bishop were enclosed within what looked like a courtyard to a massive structure – a layered cathedral that looked exactly like the one he had noticed far off.

"Unfortunately, 'No' isn't an option. I'd have to label you insane in that case," the Mad Bishop added.