

Undead 911

Chapter 911: Break The World! (2)

Terrible, multi-coloured lights that seemed like severed cords, flailing and dazzling out after their function was disrupted, boomed from the sky as well!

Some of their remnants fell as balls of light – in pink, scarlet, orange, blue – onto the ocean only to explode or cause blindingly thick waves of vapour that threatened the lives of everyone here, much like the Scorching Tears that fell alongside them!

In just a moment, the situation had turned from being a scenario where the Severed Union had cornered the masked man, to a situation where they were scrambling to find safety amid the rain of malevolent colours!

The skies groaned deafeningly, adding a pinch of existential dread to the faint of heart!

Truly, the world seemed to be coming undone.

Who was this man to be capable of such things?

Who was the necromancer?

And why was he even doing this?!

Only people like Eaniss, who squinted at the necromancer amid everything, her hair changing from velvet to havana brown, could be bothered to wonder things like this at a time like this.

She took the time to look at the sky and ocean break apart, the space in-between warping as the two parts of Aigas that now existed, drew further away from each other!

'Incredible...' she thought, but there was no tone of excitement or admiration.

The Factions who were on the side that seemed to draw away – along with Feinheath and Opungale – were either two puzzled or frightened to attempt to leap towards the rest who were stuck with the necromancer and his gigantic monster.

In all fairness, after learning that the enemy they were after was capable of not just summoning thousands of undead, but also doing something like breaking the so-called bodies of the Deities – Suzamete the Skies and Listafelle the oceans – was it cowardly to just want to stay put?

It was madness.

The pitch black void in which the falls on either part of Aigas fell into were another reason to stick still. They could be seen in the sky as well.

They looked as though they would spill unspeakable threats at any moment, and with each passing breath, they grew wider.

Many were terrified.

This was absurd.

Is this what they signed up for?!

Replicus didn't find anything deterring about the circumstances, however.

Amid the falling Scorching Tears and the balls of light that whistled elegantly only to explode like bombs and cause the ocean to turn more chaotic, with sparks and hisses flying everywhere, the Penetrator raced forth, his figure streaking across absurdly quickly.

The boons of [Sage Save] and [Sage Strain] were rather useful right now, since the Reverse Clusters hampered even his ability to utilise the Astral Blizzard tunnel for extra speed.

'I need to get to the ship!' Replicus thought, leaving his phantoms to exclaim and express his shock towards what the masked man had done, and finish his immense surprise at the fact that he had been charitable to the wrong person all this while.

The sheer ridiculousness...

The world being cleaved...

It could all wait.

Otherworldly as the phenomenon seemed, Replicus had experienced things comparable to it.

Because of the many variables right now, Replicus lifted his hand into the air as he blasted forward, and with his mana churning, fifty spots of intense light ignited all around the battlefield.

This was the skill, [Brilliant King's Adoring Stars], a skill Replicus used to heal himself and enhance his attack power by 210%!

As if to spell that his decision to summon this skill was spot on, a downpour of Scorching Tears splashed in a wide range, a net of liquid heat that Replicus couldn't have dodged unless he could teleport or use Astral Blizzard Motion, spilling forth!

Half of the Penetrator's right side was molten through instantly, and it couldn't put up a fight!

However, one of the fifty stars hanging in the air shot a bolt of glinting light at Replicus and he, as well as the Hollow Dusk's Prison were restored to perfection immediately!

Replicus dashed towards the beast coiling around his ship and a burst of fury lit up in him.

This bastard...

'You dare take my ship!' Replicus thought.

Ever since he heard the narration from Kenno, he had grown more eager to meet the masked man.

Unlike others, watching the necromancer tear the world wasn't enough to intimidate him into cowering.

He drew closer, intending to fling himself against the unmasked man when...

A fist that seemed to carry the force of seven others of its kind slammed into Replicus' abdomen!

The Penetrator's fist – which was itching from release since the infuriating ordeal with the Ardent Curses – countered a fraction of time after Replicus received blow, and he felt something groan under the odd immensity of his jab!

He and the assailant drew back, but between the two, it was clear that Replicus was practically unharmed.

The old undead Incandescent Stager was bleeding from his nose, a dark bruise visible on his chest, even though Replicus had hit him only once on his face.

"You never learn, huh?" the Penetrator said coldly before shooting forth.

His Trigger Deviant Build had once again returned most of the force of the blow to his enemy!

The old undead sucked in a deep breath, and with his eyes showing an annoying degree of composure, he sent a lightning fast palm strike towards Replicus, but when it reached his armour, its momentum died.

Replicus was alarmed.

This time, the old undead wasn't aiming for a crushing blow.

The Penetrator's body became unresponsive, as in a moment too miniscule for the average perception to perceive, the old man's Aura invaded his body and temporary shut it down!

'Crafty, but stupid!' Replicus thought.

Who said he needed to move to attack?!

His sockets flared bright.

Brighter than usual.

As he faced the old undead, Replicus' four sockets crackled and a four glaring beams smashed into the old undead Incandescent Stager quickly, sending him flying!

The old man managed to block with his Aura, and soon, he found his footing.

However, a great, shattering blow struck him in the back of the head, a torrent of purple fuming behind it!

There was a boom, and the old bastard sank into the ocean so fast that there was a hole over its surface for a moment.

The figure of Aurolio emerged. He cracked his knuckles and grinned at the water as it closed up, then at Replicus.

"You're welcome," he said.

"Spare me," Replicus who felt his ability to move restored quicker than it should – because he had employed [Sorcery of Essence] to drive out the old undead's Aura – said. "He's not going to go down that easily."

Sure enough, the two found the old undead emerging from the water before them, sizzling and burnt. He was blocking the last few thirty meters to the unmasked necromancer.

"I'm not dense," Aurolio said with a relaxed smile. "You got done in good, didn't you? You reckon your little simps are dead?"

Replicus didn't reply to the insult immediately.

Their enemy looked to be going for a bigger move.

The Penetrator had the impression that when guarding his master, the old undead was a lot more capable, but he didn't want to waste more time with him.

He doubted the necromancer was going to stick around after what he had just done, and it seemed he had every intention of taking his ship.

"Yeah, they're alive," Replicus said, and burst ahead.

Chapter 912: Complete

A Scorching Tear dropped between the odd duo and the old undead Incandescent Stager.

The Penetrator turned into Levin and shot past the enemy right when the Scorching Tear caused a huge splash and generated steam so potent that it could melt the skin off Masters with ease!

The old Incandescent Stager dashed back while coating himself with a thick layer of Nitros, and Aurolio dashed back as well – in the opposite direction – and coated himself with a large blanket of Voided Death Essence.

Within the blinding white and deafening hiss, the old Incandescent Stager didn't miss Replicus' figure trying to zip towards Actuass in a large flash!

That wouldn't do.

His whole purpose was to stall.

With rapid motion befitting a Form User, he pointed a finger at his forehead, touched it and then pointed the same finger to the ground, mana weaved in a complex manner igniting at its tip.

He then declared quickly, his voice only sounding after his intent had already left his mouth.

"I invoke KUTHMUK."

At once, Replicus' Levin form which was only two meters from the great, huddled black beast ahead smashed against an invisible barricade and bounced back. The Penetrator was forced to return to his original form.

"The hell?"

He pressed his hand forward, and it was impeded by something he could not see.

"It's no use," the undead Incandescent Stager said as he looked back at Replicus. "This is a battle vow. Even though it is only half-invoked, the KUTHMUK will keep whoever I challenge within the bounds I set. The only way to escape, is if I will it, or to face and kill me, the invoker."

Aurolio who passed through the remnants of the pristine steam which still remained thick on his side sneered:

"That old Maqi tradition, ey? I didn't think we were dealing with an enemy of that origin."

The old man didn't have a response to this.

"Kill you? You're already dead, sockethole," Replicus said as he turned. After several attempts at pressing through the hindering force, he found that he wasn't faced with a barrier. He was simply not allowed to pass.

"All things face a true form of death given the right circumstances. If you do not have the means, then I pity you," the Incandescent Stager said, and then his body abruptly swelled to twice its size, getting thrice as shredded as he had been before such that even as a pale undead, he looked to be full of vibrant vigour!

White Nitros formed patterns over his skin, making him look like a beefy, paper cut-out of extravagant design!

As if all that wasn't enough...

"This is my Creed. My might strikes only the soul!"

...!!!

Replicus felt it before he saw it!

A crushing blunt force slammed into him, but it did nothing to his armour or his body. It hit something deep within instead!

His soul!

Another piercing blow smashed into him, and abused his soul with such brutality that Replicus felt it...crack.

Through his peripheral vision, he saw that the old Incandescent Stager was performing vehement movements while standing in place, yet their effect was all but clear!

On the other side, Aurolio seemed to have been fed a few harsh blows as well. From what Replicus could see, he was affected and had been flung back, grunting muffledly in pain!

The old undead Incandescent Stager was resorting to using attacks that didn't trigger Replicus' rebounding effect!

The Creed he used was to skip a few steps and harm the soul without physical contact!

It was the ideal strategy against someone like Replicus.

However...

"Haha... hahahahahaha!" the Penetrator suddenly guffawed. "How inconvenient for you!"

The stars he had set up with [Brilliant King's Adoring Stars] shot multiple beams of light that turned the Penetrator luminous, boosting his attack power.

He didn't need healing.

He wasn't harmed, after all.

If he were Skullius, he would have been dealt some degree of damage, but Replicus... Replicus only had a copy of Skullius' soul – a projection of the original!

The one who would suffer from the damage he just received, was Skullius, not him, a replica!

WHUUUUUUUP!

Where the old Incandescent Stager stood, showing slight signs of confusion as to why Replicus was unharmed, a sharp thread of faint, blue light dove down from his left to split him in half!

WHOOSH!

The Incandescent Stager managed to dodge it!

Behind him, Aurolio who seemed to be recovering from the hit he just took, let out a "Wooo!" before dashing to the side to avoid the Null Life Essence condensed into a slicing attack, boosted to 120%!

Replicus felt the Incandescent Stager's attack bash into him again, but of course, he felt nothing – if not pity for Skullius.

The bastard was moving quickly.

He was barely visible.

Replicus sent another attack, and it missed.

Another. It missed. Another, another, another.

He followed up by immediately turning into a bolt of Levin that darted around the area, yet somehow, he and the Incandescent Stager didn't collide once.

He sent another slash, and as it travelled, Replicus thought he saw it nick flesh.

It went on to pass towards the distant Faction members that retreated from falling calamities with their ships!

'Hmmm. It passed through?' Replicus thought only for a micro moment.

Right then...

"|You're holding back on us, aren't you? Go all put already!|" Aurolio roared from the surface of the ocean, looking up at the two who were moving at hyper speed.

BOOOM!

A might force, one akin to concentrated gravity applied directly onto the old undead and he was smashed into, pummelling straight into the ocean!

It was Veneration again!

Replicus didn't miss it.

The force of Aurolio's attack and the old undead's descent were so great that waves of ocean water splashed around them violently!

In that moment before the enemy was completely submerged though, Replicus' slashes, finally reached the old undead! The blasted combatant's head was severed in three with little resistance!

Replicus' sockets flashed as he gazed at where the old undead had sunk.

He then looked at Aurolio and Aurolio looked at him.

The two imagined that they hadn't accomplished anything really.

The undead probably alive.

That said, the reason for this was that both of them were reluctant to show off too much about their abilities.

Aurolio wasn't in a hurry like Replicus, and seemed to be committing to his tight lip protocol, which extended to him only using abilities he didn't value that much. This extended to his Veneration art which Replicus was - unknown to Aurolio - deconstructing.

Replicus on the other hand didn't have anything that could one-shot an Incandescent Stager as of yet. He needed a several stage attack strategy and revealing all those steps to Aurolio didn't seem ideal.

He would have done so without a thought, if he hadn't already confirmed that indeed, his crew was alive... somewhere, after Actuass' green pulsing field was taken down.

But still...

BOOOOOOOM!

The world trembled again.

The trembling had a sense of finality to it that made everyone turn towards Actuass again.

Under the shadow of the great black lizard-mantis, he seemed to relax and take a breather.

Behind him, the other side of the world which had broken away, drifted faster, further from this side.

Under the lights and steam, it looked terribly disturbing.

Then, a wall of darkness rose from the deep, dark chasm that existed between the severed world, and rose to meet that which came from the sky!

When the two harmonised in black, the instability that had been evident – the falling destruction, the chaos and all – disappeared.

"Complete," the voice of Actuass came crisply in the next moment, audible to all. "Now..."

Chapter 913: The Overview

Everything turned to an almost sickening degree of calm after Actuass took a breath and visibly relaxed, now paying attention to the numerous opponents before him.

The Scorching Tears stopped falling, and the booming noises quickly hushed up, leaving only the slowly fading hisses of steam and waves which also quickly died down to make way for total silence.

The dark rain had also ended between the chaos, and the bursts of multi-coloured lights which had concerning weak flickering that seemed to signifying – more than anything else – that something was discombobulating the nature of the world, were nowhere to be seen.

As the ebony waters calmed, it almost seemed as though they were intimidated by the absolute back drop of darkness behind Actuass, which stretched far West and East, no end to it in common sight.

Actuass spoke while craning his neck, his vibrant hazel eyes looking at the Faction members and leaders who also stared his way.

"I expected a much more impressive number of forces to be chasing after me, though, seeing as some of you were easily killed earlier by the simplest push, a fair bit of you must have perished along the way," he said, and rubbed his large, hooked nose. A bit of the crusty, charred part of his face chipped on contact. "Let me make things clear..."

As he spoke, the great lizard-mantis which had continued to sizzle while making contact with the ocean water rose slowly, and so did the ship Actuass stood on, ensnared in its winding embrace.

"I won't entertain you, any of you, until I reach Edagon. I encourage you to give up on trying to stop me before then. I see none among you tied by binds to national service. You have no reason for heroism.

I see only greed, ambition, selfishness among you – the formula for living as a human, a true human, and transcending the mortal binds of this world, which, as you have seen, is a lot more fragile than you think."

The silence persisted.

Actuass' words were crisply conveyed, and they carried a strange degree of truth to them.

"As far as I'm concerned you're just trying to appear as someone who doesn't identify as a scrounging thief, murderer obsessed with their own gain, just like the rest of us."

It was Replicus who spoke, his sockets blazing as he faced the unmasked man. An itchy sort of fury was burning in his soul every moment he felt the potent Undeath energy sweeping from Actuass.

"The world is fragile? It's not. You, as a human, strived for many years to achieve something far beyond your own ability, right? That doesn't make your accomplishments – even the one behind you – special. That just makes you look pathetic. I've seen a greedy fellow like you before, keen on going beyond the norm for stupid reasons."

Many heads turned to Replicus, including even Aurolio.

It came as a surprise that Replicus would dare say this after what the necromancer had just done. More than a few were starting to feel uncertain about continuing to press Actuass.

He was a lot more... ridiculous than what the Emissary had made him sound.

But then again, wasn't it Replicus who claimed to know him as well?

It was him.

He claimed to have faced Actuass, and that the necromancer had the backing of the undead, of an Arch-Lich.

The degree of personal stake perceivable in Replicus' tone urged many to finally believe that indeed, the Penetrator hadn't been speaking out of his non-existent ass.

Actuass turned to Replicus, his face undisturbed at all.

The two stared at each other for a while.

Replicus drank in this face which had finally been revealed. A face he was beginning to loathe very much.

Actuass seemed to consider something and then speak.

"I suppose you do know someone like that. I do too. We have that in common," he said. "However, whatever you say or believe about me is irrelevant. After all, at the end of the day, the one who still stands, living and breathing, nomatter how pathetic, is the one in the right, by the standards of the living world."

Replicus scoffed. Standing a few meters away, he was pressing his hand on an invisible impediment that still refused to budge.

"You're every bit as driven as I expected," Aurolio chimed in with a big smile, looking up with eager eyes.

"Am I?" Actuass said.

"Indeed. In fact...." Aurolio grinned. "I'm not sure I have a—"

"Save it. That won't work on me as long as you are trapped in KUTHMUK," Actuass sneered.

Aurolio narrowed his eyes.

'So this guy can sense Veneration art too?'

That was a good bit of information that he and Replicus individually took into account.

There was whoosh of waters as several vessels drew closer to Actuass and his lizard-mantis stone creature.

"You sound pretty reasonable for someone who has a massive bounty on your head – perhaps notoriety is more apt," Eaniss spoke flutteringly from the approaching ship's deck. "You're a little handsome too."

Actuass turned to her.

"What part of my reputation implied that I was a terrorist?" he asked casually while raising his hand.

"You know, the millions of people killed during your little tournament," Eaniss smirked.

"I suppose a substandard perspective would have you think that. But then... what makes you think the people I killed wouldn't have died when Boron was inevitably freed and rampaged on Aigas in an attempt to get the other Deities' attention?"

...!

A small spark of thought was ignited in the collective.

The Emissary's tale about the Deities and how Boron was always meant to escape the Under, his prison.

How Quintess and Listafelle had long left Aigas...

Eaniss' smirk turned faint.

Actuass scoffed.

"Yes. That look right there. You lot, existing outside the propaganda of the Purity, the blood thirst of Maqi, and the ignorance of Pelian know about the bigger picture, don't you?" he said. "You know about the overview. In the same way, death isn't necessarily a bad thing for a living thing – that is my belief – and my objective isn't as tragically simplistic as you comprehend it to be."

The wreckage bound by the red hue had become an afterthought since the breaking of the world. However...

Beside Actuass, a figure garbed in a long, dark, hooded robe appeared on the ship, on his face a white and green mask.

With everyone watching, Actuass pulled on the mask from his face, revealing a dazed, sallow-faced man with vacant eyes.

Actuass covered his own face with the mask, hiding it.

The lizard-mantis creature squirmed.

"I'll warn you again. If you truly intend to follow, I'll entertain your greed and ambitions only after I reach Edagon. I advise some of you to wait here, and you'll be spared. The world won't be split for much longer," the masked man said.

From the water, a figure fuming with pungent smoke and burnt flesh leapt out and appeared onto the ship. It was the old Incandescent Stager.

...!

Replicus felt the blockade hindering him disappear at the same time.

'It's gone!' he thought.

However, before he could act, the masked man glanced at him and sneered:

"Thanks for the ship."

And then the giant lizard-mantis opened its dark maw and swallowed said ship before quickly diving into ocean and causing a catastrophic turbulence as it swam forehead at breakneck speed.

Chapter 914: Far From Falling

Replicus watched with heavy bones as the massive creature disappeared in a moving hump of the surface ocean water, travelling at about twice the top speed of his ship – when it wasn't bolstered by his skills.

His sockets flashed brightly, and then turned dim.

A sigh then came out of his mouth.

'I did think things were going a bit smoothly...' he thought to himself while taking seemingly aimless steps over the water. 'I also thought that man would be more secretive about his face since we literally have to refer to him as a masked man. Guess I was wrong.'

His exchange with Actuass had sparked a lot of contention and speculation that he now had the time to process.

One of these was, Actuass had an air about him that was almost as detestable as Somanda's in Replicus' eyes. This wasn't simply because he had the power of Undeath, or because Replicus knew the two had a connection.

No.

It was something deeper.

Which was strange because Skullius didn't know Somanda all that deeply.

"You aren't even going to chase after him?" Aurolio said, shattering Replicus' bubble of thought.

The Penetrator hoped he would leave him alone sooner.

The bastard seemed to have started resorting to verbal forms of annoyance since he couldn't harm Replicus without paying dearly for it.

"No, I'm not," Replicus replied simply.

"Hmmm. Odd. I thought you'd be the protective type. The kind who cares for his subordinates dearly. Weren't they aboard that ship? Have you given up on them already?"

Replicus sighed once again.

Instead of answering, he turned towards the remaining vessels.

Some were already turning to chase after Actuass, others with hesitant Factions, made to doubt by the masked man still waiting for a definitive verdict.

Asides from Eaniss' ship, Replicus recognised the Bishop's and those of the others prominent Factions in the Severed Union, like the man with the Harmonic Ember.

He turned to the wall of darkness.

'Is this some kind of luck? The strongest forces of the Severed Union are still here on this side.'

And indeed they were.

However, different from Eaniss who was always outspoken, this part of her surging in the interaction with Actuass just now, the Bishop, Warding Pride and the others had not spoken a word to or about the masked man.

Replicus hadn't even seen the Mad Bishop pop out.

Only Warding Pride and the bejewelled Faction leader showed themselves.

Strange.

The Penetrator imagined Eaniss would call of these Faction leaders to talk about their next plan, if she didn't have one already.

Would she reverse time again?

Replicus wasn't sure.

The cube Eaniss had – if she had been telling the full truth about it – couldn't be used indefinitely.

So...

"Suit yourself then. I thought we could offer you a ride if you cared much for your ship. Would you have a problem with that, Eaniss?" Aurolio said as he walked away from the Penetrator, looking up to face the Head Faction leader who had been staring down at the two of them this entire time.

"Are you sure you want to pass this up, Bright Storm?" Eaniss asked curiously "Have you given up?"

Before Replicus could answer, Warding Pride blubbered first, her mocking tone brazenly sound.

"How can he not have? Look at him. He has nothing. He might have outlived other Faction leaders so far, but it was all just luck and it has finally run out," she said, on her face a mix of fury and triumph. "You got your underlings killed and you don't even have the gall to avenge them. That should speak for itself."

Someone aboard Warding Pride's ship flinched at the last two sentences.

Replicus scratched the chin of his starry armour.

"Only fools hurry to speak in their enemy's stead. I have a voice of my own, thanks," he said. And then...

"Araeyn."

At the call of the name, a small, green glowing sphere only Replicus, and Aurolio – who turned fiercely when its initial light poured, enticing his peripherals – spawned a couple tens of meters away.

It grew large, then larger and with a vibrant flash of light, it disappeared, in its place five figures emerging.

Araeyn was at the forefront, a long red ribbon coiling around him and the group.

"That... was weird!" Grim was the first to speak, his eyes bulging as he took several breaths, his hands on his knees.

"We're finally back. Thank goodness. That place was—ahhh ahhh ouch!" Allora who had attempted to sit down without grasping where she was, accidentally met a bit of ocean water to her face.

"Master!" Pherdanta cried as she dashed for Replicus.

Baddan merely looked around with caution.

Warding Pride wore a look of disgust at the sight of Pherdanta rushing to stand by Replicus' side.

A certain blonde on her ship looked partly relieved but also disgruntled.

"Looks like you didn't lose everything after all. Commendable," Eaniss said in a pleasant tone.

"Indeed," Aurolio, who had boarded echoed her sentiment while looking closely at Araeyn.

That creature...

Replicus stared deeply into Warding Pride's hateful eyes, then turned to Eaniss.

"Fortunately for you, this minor setback hasn't destroyed my will, Eaniss. We'll be alright. We'll find you soon. Though, I'm guessing you won't be making a thorough move on the masked man until you reach Edagon, as he said, right?" the Penetrator said.

Eaniss smiled strangely, and didn't answer his question. Instead...

"Where will you get a new vessel? I'm sure we've both learned through that necromancer's example that not just any vehicle will do on this side of the world," she inquired.

"Let me worry about that. I'll be giving you the thrill you asked of me soon, when I catch up," Replicus replied.

Eaniss nodded, but her gaze lingered. She looked to be considering asking about something she found odd.

Replicus knew what it was. He had thought that she would ask, sooner at that. If anyone would think it was a strange hole in logic instead of a simple slap in Replicus' face, it would be Eaniss.

How did the necromancer they had surrounded just now, emerge so suddenly on Replicus' ship?

In the end, the Head Faction leader didn't ask. She merely turned away, along with Aurolio who gave a last deep look at Araeyn.

'Guess it really doesn't matter anymore at this point,' Replicus thought.

Warding Pride gave him a nasty look before she also turned away, and the man with the black and white jewel merely smiled before disappearing as well.

Soon, the great, bright runes from the great ships ignited and the vessels streaked across the ocean at top speed, disappearing into the distance.

It seems those that had been hesitant to continue with the expedition summoned courage and followed the rest in the end as well.

Finally, the Penetrator and his company was left alone.

"Master, I'm sorry. It was so sudden. We couldn't—"

"Don't worry about it," Replicus cut Pherdanta off and patted her shoulder. "I couldn't possibly expect you to handle something that caught even me off guard, could I?"

Allora grit her teeth secretly, while Grim wore an uncharacteristically serious face.

"Still, boss. We really messed up. We're supposed to be surpassing our limits. Getting the better of stronger enemies. If it wasn't for Araeyn..." Grim grunted.

The Penetrator glanced at his Apostle and chortled. He would have to have a 'chat' with the pale bastard. Maybe reward him, if possible.

"Well, killing a few Incandescent Stagers did get to our heads a bit. We were playing the game with our own rules until now. Uncharted territories and smart enemies... a combination of these would have destroyed a weaker group. We're fine as far as I'm concerned," he said cheerfully.

"What about our ship? How are we supposed to follow on?" Allora asked, deeply convinced that her boss was only saying all these encouraging words to not make them all feel terrible.

The Penetrator chuckled, and the Hollow Dusk's Prison disappeared from his body, leaving a cloud-covered, dark skeleton.

In the next moment, a fancy leather armour appeared over Replicus' body, though, for obvious reasons it didn't quite fit.

But then, he uttered...

"[High Cosmetic Body]. Didn't think I'd be using it on this voyage."

At once, the Penetrator's bones began to turn white while being covered by a powerful layer of flesh.

Auburn hair grew on his newly created scalp.

Two eyes devoid of irises and pupils appeared, along with a handsome face around them.

His frame grew a little shorter, and slightly wider, quickly fitting into the leather armour he had on perfectly.

As the Titan World Storm Penetrator turned into the Hybrid Luman, a massive swathe of darkness exploded out from him, drowning his subordinates who gawked in shock, before taking a steady, solid, shape.

Chapter 915: Mysteries of the Masked Man

A great vessel made of lustreless, unfathomably deep darkness pushed through the ebony ocean like a shard of the night, following behind those that had left its passengers behind.

It was quite large, its size comparable to the vessels given by the Emissary, but its design quite different.

It had no mast or sail, and neither did it have dozens of strange creatures attached to its keel that enhanced the ship's movement. It also lacked the umbrella-shaped golden barrier which shielded the deck of the ship.

It did, however, have great spikes protruding from its back, which fired great orange-pink flames that propelled the ship forward at a decent speed.

It was Grand Flame, an element Replicus had in his repertoire whether in flesh or in bone.

The deck was pitch black, and at its rear end, there was a large trapdoor with golden white steps leading into the bright space below. It was only from an aerial view that the glinting glow of the elegant space under the deck could be seen.

"Boss... Are you sure you can handle this for long?" Grim asked while hammering his foot onto the deck to confirm that it wouldn't collapse.

It wouldn't.

Unlike the deck of the ship lost to Actuass, this one had several large, comfortable chairs, rather, they looked like thick, cushions of darkness that one could just sink into blissfully.

Replicus, in his Hybrid Luman form was seated casually on one of these while looking blankly ahead.

"Yes. I'm sure," he replied.

Grim marvelled.

Because of the tense situation from before – when they had had to keep a lookout for powerful monsters – he was hesitant to sit on the seats Replicus provided and simply relax.

Allora was the same, and Pherdanta preferred to stand beside the Hybrid Luman.

"What about the ocean? It's poisonous, and it eats away anything that isn't guarded. How long can you maintain this thing under such circumstances?" Allora asked nervously.

Replicus shook his head.

"My [Evil Darkness] can't be destroyed. Only dispersed. If I keep my control of it steady, it will hold," he explained.

Speaking of this reminded him of his battle with Kenno back in the day, when the Priest from the Temple in Genhuis had sent him to Evic for 'volunteer work'. It was then, when fighting against Kenno and his armour which disintegrated his targets to dust, that he mastered using [Evil Darkness] to protect himself.

Ah, it seemed like so long ago.

And to some degree, it really was far into the past.

An indicator of this was the fact that Replicus' affinity for [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light], had risen.

Back when he split from Replicus, he was charged with increasing his affinity for these Insurgent Magnus elements. He had done just that spectacularly.

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[<Affinities>]

Evil Darkness – A

Just Light – B



...

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A lot of work had gone into [Evil Darkness] in particular. Replicus used his spare time – however little – to spam all his darkness skills. To finally reach the A grade affinity from B, was more pleasing to him than his attainments in Just Light – from D to B.

That said, unlike when Replicus first reached the B grade in [Evil Darkness], there was no special guidance field notification, which was strange.

Still, it was quite the achievement since controlling the darkness now was as simple as saying "Sockethole". Furthermore, he could see through the darkness he manifested, and make it as sturdy as Legendary grade armour or above if he wished. It was all standard growth.

What he had to look forward to most in light of this development, was acquiring some of Fulgardt's powerful trinkets.

The PHANTASMIC RETAINERS.

...And the weapon Fulgardt used back then, which by now, Replicus knew was locked in that chest he had recovered from the Labyrinth of the Yoke. The one he hadn't been able to open.

Ah. Sweet prospects.

"Sit down, will you? I made these seats for you. You don't need to steer the ship or keep watching for enemies anymore," Replicus said to his subordinates.

Hesitantly, they all sat down, except for Pherdanta and Araeyn who was back to sitting on the outstretched bowsprit.

The looks on the Unlimited's faces were quite funny. It had been a very long time since they had seen Replicus in his flesh form.

Baddan's face looked even more hilarious. He couldn't quite grasp that he was looking at the same being. Not only was the change in appearance jarring, there was a vast difference in the presence and power.

Also... this man really did look like...

Of course, that was understandable, since Replicus never did anything in his Hybrid Luman form other than practice with [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light]. Aside from these two aspects, nothing else about this form had grown.

"First, I suppose I should explain what happened with the necromancer and the Paladin Champion," Replicus said and he swirled his tongue around his teeth.

"I don't know all the details, but I think that man transferred his soul into the body of the Paladin Champion during or after their battle. What you saw, Grim, when you thought he was unwell, was correct. It was his body we've been trying to tend to all along, not the Champion's. I knew it was weak, and frail, but I was wrong about the reason. It wasn't the Undeath that was weakening it.

The Undeath was sustaining it – burrowed deep within the flesh. It belonged there, which was why it was so hard for me to 'cure' him."

Grim wore a strained face.

"But boss... when could he have done that? Transferred his soul, I mean. I know what I saw. The two were fighting bitterly till the very end and the Paladin Champion had an edge for a while," he said. "How did that end with the masked man switching souls and switching what they wore too?"

Replicus remained silent for a while and then spoke.

"When you told us what you saw before, you said you were watching from a distance, and you couldn't tell how the masked man won because the two were moving too fast, didn't you?"

Grim wrestled with reason.

"Well, yes..." he said. "And I guess the Paladin Champion had his helmet on until... until I saw him get thrown into the water by the masked man. That was after he whispered something in his ear. Are

you saying the masked man said something to an empty body? Or did he switch the soul of the Paladin Champion into his body after switching attire?"

All these questions cracked Grim's mind as he spewed them.

"No. You weren't there to see it, but the Paladin Champion was the one wearing the necromancer's mask. I believe he was in the wrecked ship we saw earlier. He looked dazed. Not dead. He must be alive.

I believe he's still in his body. The masked man must only be able to fully control one body at a time, and thrall the other if necessary," Replicus said. "But why he didn't just take his own body along instead of dumping into the ocean back then..."

"It is a bit weird," Allora chimed in, and then looked to Grim. "You said he whispered something to the body he dumped into the ocean... his body?"

"I have no idea what that was about," Grim said while flinging his hands into the air.

Replicus, on the other hand...

"The Definer of Causality..." he mumbled.

That must be it.

He was speaking to the Definer of Causality!

"What?" Grim asked for clarification, but Replicus didn't give it.

Instead, with a heavy frown, he said:

"This man considered even the most absurd of details..."

Could the masked man have possibly used the Definer to Causality, or conferred with it, to gain a straight path toward solving one of the problems he couldn't have known he would even face.

Lack of a proper vessel.

That would explain the Definer's warning to some degree.

Was it some kind of impartial entity though?

Who knew?

'Was there another significance to keeping the Paladin Champion's body in addition to his own, which was failing for someone reason?' Replicus thought.

The image of the world breaking apart flashed in his head.

The timing...

This all seemed connected, but it was too complex for him to grasp so easily.

Chapter 916: The Hard Way

The subject of the masked man and his conniving soon dwindled as there were no apparent answers.

It was especially hard to speculate about it now that Replicus didn't have access to the thought phantoms while in his Hybrid Luman form.

Grim and Allora had promptly excused themselves after the lull, as they went to explore the space Replicus had created under the deck while Baddan and Pherdanta remained, the former seated on a soft cushion while the latter stood aloof behind the Hybrid Luman.

Replicus shifted his mind to planning how he would approach the latter half of the journey. Given the estimated time of seven days to reach Edagon, he surmised that in the next few days, the tension was going to reach its peak.

He was convinced that the masked man was getting to the land of the Giants nomatter what – regardless of whether or not Eaniss and the others launched several attacks on the way.

If the plan to corner him using Integral Time from the Reverse Cluster failed to catch him off guard, then how else were the Factions supposed to beat him swiftly. Perhaps there were other remarkable treasures that the higher tier of Faction leaders had that could stall the masked man?

Perhaps, but he also had swarms of undead of different calibre that he was intentionally holding back, not to mention his own strength, which, at base, Replicus thought was greater than anything any individual Faction leader had.

So many variables.

'I wonder... what is this Edagon like anyway?' Replicus thought.

Many of his thoughts about the voyage had been centred around the danger on the way, from both the environment – the ocean and skies – and the Factions. He had given little thought to Edagon itself.

The land of the Giants.

This was where Sause lived.

According to the Emissary, Edagon was the only continent that was spared from Jiggorrhax's breath which incited the Ashing of Time, as another dragon that existed during that period had shielded the continent.

This piece of information was a little terrifying.

Replicus had thought about it before, but...

'Just how large is this Herald that the masked man is after. Can he even beat it?' he tried to imagine a clear picture of a dragon covering a continent with its wings.

He got the impression that this was how it happened.

For the first time, Replicus felt like the masked man, in spite of his mysterious, unfathomable presence was biting a little more than he could chew.

And still, his goal was unknown. All anyone knew was the path he was choosing to take.

'Well. That doesn't matter for now. I should worry about myself and my subordinates. For that, I need to see if I can truly make something impressive out of this...'

Indeed. Speculating wouldn't help.

He would reach Edagon and see for himself how things would unfold.

For now...

The Hybrid Luman drew the wand he had acquired from Hope – the Flawless Flail of Ruin.

Its mesmerising shade of golden was pleasing to the eye, though of course, Replicus couldn't see it right now.

He sank further into his seat.

Because he was stuck maintaining the ship with his [Evil Darkness] for the time being, he couldn't experiment as much as he would like. That would be for 24 hours later. By the time [High Cosmetic Body] timed out though, he wanted to have a concrete plan on how he was going to use this wand.

~~~

[Flawless Flail of Ruin]

<Mythical+>

Born from the abundant, sacred gold close to attaining vibrant consciousness, born for the Ardent Curses, children of the gold, the Flawless Flail of Ruin – a name inspired by the rich world – can disrupt and restore guarded energy mechanisms at the whim of the user...

...

...

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While the properties of the wand, the stats it gave and all were impressive, Replicus was more interested in its individual trait.

To disrupt and restore energies.

This was rather loose, but Replicus had seen Hope disrupt the Bishop's perpetual revival through the summoned cathedral. It had been disrupted, perhaps even destroyed.

This ability, to Replicus was heavily flawed though. His Nullmancer powers could do something similar, and to some degree even better.

The Flawless Flail could be dodged, for starters.

Hope had to find the target, aim and release the attack.

This wouldn't help Replicus against faster enemies, even if he managed to extract the power of this wand and use it without needing to point the wand, but his finger instead.

He needed something that went beyond what he currently had.

That was the whole point of growth.

If this was going to be an upgrade, it needed to be bolstered to a terrifying degree.

After extraction, this skill would no doubt be a high tier Special skill or a Super skill, which he could use to a decent degree with the effects of [Sage Save] and [Sage Strain] active for the next eight or so days.

But, how to make it even more powerful...

Replicus stood from his cushion and paced around the deck for tens of minutes while his senses, shared through the darkness, told him of the surrounding Reverse Clusters, nearby monsters and all.

'Hmmm... that's actually not half bad...'

It finally came to him.

Replicus had begun perusing through his arsenal of abilities when he thought about... Lambent Phosphor.

A smile ripped through his face.

"That's it..."

Lambent Phosphor.

What if he combined a skill he developed from Lambent Phosphor, which, from his experience, couldn't be dodged, with the extracted ability from the Flawless Flail of Ruin?

Yes. Yes.

That would work.

If he managed to combine these in some capacity, he would be guaranteed of a 100% hit rate, even if the depending on the target, the effect may not always be successful!

In fact, perhaps that latter doubt could be solved as well!

Depending on which method Replicus chose to use to fuse these abilities, the power of Lambent Phosphor to reveal truths, could potentially be defined in a way that opened up his targets to his attacks!

But...

'Let me hold that one off. I don't have Nedalia's Hidden Class, so perhaps stretching the interpretation of 'revealing truths' to that, may be impossible...' Replicus calmed himself with a breath.

A Scorching Tear fell from the sky and landed in the nearby waters.

The Hybrid Luman raised his fingers and a shroud of golden white cloaked every individual entity on deck.

The steam that hissed through the air towards them contended hard against the [Just Light], but it couldn't get through it to harm the ones protected. The worst it did was raise the temperature to an almost unbearable degree, but even then, everyone was alright.

Replicus resumed his thoughts.

'So, how exactly do I fuse a skill I create through Lambent Phosphor and the one from the wand...'

The answer came almost immediately.

Ever since Kenno came and gave a detailed breakdown of what happened in Pelian and at the Bryne Family Estate, many of Replicus' thoughts continued to whirl around every subject the Unlimited spoke about.

And one subject that Replicus had sworn to look into, was that of the Harmonic Ember that was currently in the hands of one of the most prominent Faction leaders.

According to Kenno, the Harmonic Ember was a crystal capable of combining elements together. It was how Stylla got her steam-centered swordsmanship – combining water and heat.

'Well elements, huh? Lambent Phosphor could fall under that category, but the skill from the wand... That could be tricky,' Replicus thought while leaning against the top edge of the hull. 'To turn the Flawless Flail of Ruin into something akin to an element or a concept at the very least... I will need to rely on [Epiphany]... not [Wealth of Spoils] to extract.

Urgh. I dreaded this...'

Using the wand on himself to acquire an affinity towards whatever concept gave the Flawless Flail of Ruin its power...

This was the method that would work if he wanted to use the Harmonic Ember.

The other method he could try, was using Aura to combine skills... but the powers he needed were in a different body – Lambent Phosphor.

Thus, it was back to [Epiphany].

It was risky. He had argued against it with his phantoms, but there was nothing he could do about it.

'I'll have to bring out Thrill, I suppose, and try it out...'

Hopefully.

Hopefully this would be worth it.

"Master..."

Replicus was a little startled at Pherdanta's voice.

In this form, he didn't have the ability to sense the Unlimited, so he was prone to forgetting she even existed like the others.

"Yes?" he tried to compose himself quickly.

"Our mana reserves and Null Life Essence reserves... can you still access them?" Pherdanta asked with a concerned look.

Replicus sighed.

"No. I can't, unfortunately."

Replicus and company could only replenish using the pools of mana and Null Life Essence when they were on the ship, or inside a stable space, like when they were stuck in Nedalia's Territory, which warded off the effects of Reverse Clusters.

Pherdanta shrivelled visibly.

Replicus smiled.

"Don't worry. Call the others."

Soon, Allora and Grim were by Replicus' side, and he addressed them all.

"Our first order of business for now, is to recover our pools of Null Life Essence and mana. I have already constructed storage containers below deck," he said before facing Grim with his white eyes. "Your current Task requires you to kill water-based monsters, right?" He looked to Pherdanta "Yours is something similar. We will be working hard to recover our reserves the hard way.

You will kill, and bring the corpses here in under a minute, and I'll extract. Allora, I'll be working you to the bone too. By the time we catch up to the others, you should be proficient with many classes."

Grim grinned, Allora wore a bright smile and Pherdanta gave a dutiful nod.

It seems that the boss had really meant it when he said their setback was nothing.

Now, all that was needed, was a decent attitude towards the arduous tasks ahead.

"You got me itching for some good fights, boss. Though I hope I won't have to dive into the water for too long," Grim said vibrantly.

"We'll see," Replicus smirked and then he turned to Baddan. "Come with me. I have a task for you and Araeyn. It will be very integral when we get back to the conflict."

And indeed it would be.

For three days later, Replicus' nameless Faction made waves that echoed into the near future, and that which was looming a distance away.

Chapter 917: Rising and Return

Ashema had spent the better part of a day flying across the skies, behind thick, misshapen pillows cloud. As boring as it quickly became, it was far better than waiting along with the Herald for their Deity to finally surface.

He wasn't quite sure all of what would happen when Lord Boron rose, but he was certain that he wouldn't be able to move as he pleased. Perhaps their Lord's first order of business would be to destroy this world.

That seemed likely.

The Herald of their Lord had for so long preached about the tale of Lord Boron's banishment from the beauty of the surface, from the glow of the sun.

That three of his old friends, pretentious saints all, had thought him malicious, and imprisoned him below the world called Aigas; it all in order to make great names for themselves when they told an alternate tale of the whole ordeal among their own creations.

They would paint themselves as symbols of justice and goodness.

The tale filled every denizen of the Under with rage and hate.

Ashema was different though.

He wasn't particularly inclined to be hostile towards the race that lived on the surface – the humans – as those of his race were.

He had attempted to converse with humans but they were either so feeble they exploded into a bloody mess when he spoke, or they were hostile and wouldn't hear a word of what he intended to say.

He tried to be reasonable, even going as far as to use magical means to break the language barrier, but no.

Sword, sword, sword. Die, die, die. That was all the so-called strong among these humans thought about.

It was pathetic.

Thus, it was with a clear conscious that Ashema had begun tasting the innards of the humans only to find them particularly sweet.

At least there was some good to these humans.

Of course, there were enemies among these humans that gave him a bit of a hard time at some point.

After all, these creatures had strange powers that he had never seen before.

Yet, they were all narrow-minded.

The same was true for the ones that were far below him, sailing on seven ships that were headed towards another land east of where he had spawned.

A little cautious eavesdropping had netted him a bit of useful information about them.

Apparently, these people – quite a lot of them in number – were going to a place called Opungale.

From their tones, it didn't sound like they were going for a picnic. There was a lot of hostile intent in their every movement and word.

Every single one of these humans had a sharp presence quite different from the humans Ashema had seen so far. Worse yet, there were a handful among them that had controlled, heavy pressures that made Ashema believe that in a one on one, in a contest of physical power alone, he would likely lose.

Besides that, these humans had odd powers.

Perhaps they couldn't match his own, but his evaluation of these creatures soared.

These findings of his where why Ashema was tailing these people – as he had been given permission to by the Herald – from a distance. He had almost been caught by an ancient-looking human the last time he wasn't too careful.

He didn't want to alert them just yet.

Despite all these factors, Ashema had hopeful prospects.

He endured the long, slow journey because he had a feeling he was going to witness something truly exciting a day or so from now.

Hopefully, Lord Boron wouldn't rise before then.

Ashema had his fingers crossed.

Not too long after indulging in fantasies about what was to come, the image of an enormous, lively verdant continent peeked from the far distance.

Soon. So, very soon.

Twitch. Twitch.

Darwel had a complicated look on her face.

"It's strange to see you still commit after..." Seville said hesitantly.

"I've already accepted it, Seville. There's no need to tiptoe around the subject. It is what it is," Darwel shrugged as the two walked down the long corridor leading to the secluded room up ahead. In her hands was a large basket full of clean clothes.

Twitch. Twitch. Twitch.

Seville looked at the basket the El Sif was carrying from behind her veil.

"Are all these... really necessary, Lady Darwel?" she asked.

Darwel took a glance at the pile.

"That man, Elton, said he might wake up any day now. He burnt his clothes when he... Well, I know a thing or two about how uncomfortable it is to wake up naked."

"Does that apply to him?" Seville asked, unsure.

"...Maybe. He's had a human body for a while now."

Twitch. Twitch.

[Just Light' affinity has been promoted to C rank]

[Just Light' affinity has been promoted to B rank]

[Just Light' affinity has been promoted to A rank]

Darwel and Seville smiled both humorously and sullenly.

"You've really held on to the fact that he's a true Luminant, haven't you, Lady Darwel?"

Darwel smiled.

"I have. Erlton said he is still the same person, didn't he? I didn't want to believe it after all he said, but... I suppose my hopes are stronger than my doubts."

[The remnants of Fulgardt within you gush with heavy applause]

[You have inherited the <WILL OF THE CHOSEN>]

[You have inherited the <WILL OF ISOLATION>]

Sevill smiled as the two approached the double doors which were partly hidden by thick, royal blue tree branches.

"I believe he's still the same as well. Perhaps he will be relieved to hear we won't chase him out as an undead. I couldn't imagine how he would have explained to us about his body on his own."

[You have inherited the <WILL OF UNFEELING>]

[You have inherited the <WILL OF ABANDON>]

Darwel laughed in a true ladylike fashion.

"Yeah. Maybe this is our chance to get closer to him and preserve the legacy of our people."

[You have inherited the <WILL OF THE WANDERER>]

[The Insurgent Magnus grows...]

As the two stood before the double doors, the branches sank into the floor. Sevill then pushed the doors open, revealing the depth of the mostly unused dark room.

The fourfold barrier Erlton had set up around the large, broken bed in the centre of the room could be seen vaguely obscuring what was nested within.

However...

Darwel dropped the basket in her hands and Seville froze.

Behind the layers of potent prison, a human figure stood, his back to them.

He was naked, but that was hardly an object of concern at the moment.

The pulsing energy that blazed from him was monstrous, vast like the sea and sweeping like a desert sandstorm.

It was unseen, yet real.

It staggered even Seville, who couldn't imagine how... how...

"Festos... Festos, are you... alright?" Darwel asked timidly.

She hadn't known what to say.

She wasn't sure she had wanted to say anything.

This presence was so unlike the one she knew from Festos, that the cheery dialogue she had planned fizzled into... whatever had sprang out of her mouth just now.

Slowly, the figure before the two, behind the barrier – his hair clearly auburn with orange at its ends, though with new hints of pitch black; his clear, ivory skin, and slightly muscular frame – turned.

As he did, a long robe of darkness so solid it fed into the shadows around him appeared over his body, its ends lined with a gorgeous, golden texture and clover pattern that enticed the eyes.

Festos grabbed the opposite ends of it covering the X-shaped tattoo on his chest – the Binds of Fukal – and pulled lightly, straightening them.

Then a cold, greedy and sickening grin appeared on his face, as he spoke:

"Yeah, I'm fine. Very much so."

Chapter 918: New Confidence

There was an almost tangible, firm sort of silence after Skullius replied to Darwel's inquiry. It wasn't inspired by the Hybrid Luman to persist, after all, he felt as though he had been drowning in darkness and unwanted tranquility for years. He would have loved for the two arrivals to continue to speak, but they continued to gawk at him without a word instead.

Skullius tilted his head curiously.

He took steps forward, his intense presence melting as though it had never existed, and placed his hand on the innermost portion of the fourfold barrier trapping him.

"What's this all about? Mind removing it?" he said, his pristine white eyes facing Darwel and Seville.

The two were stumped.

Darwel wanted to act at once, adhering to the natural request to free Skullius, but her guard grabbed a hold of her wrist, pulling her back.

The El Sif turned to Seville with a stunned, slightly pale expression.

"What?" she said.

"Hold on, Lady Darwel..." Seville said with visible strain.

Skullius raised a brow.

"Is there a problem?"

Seville looked him square in the eye and gathered her previously molten wits.

"No, but I have to ask something first, Lord Luminant Festos," she said in a respectful, yet stern manner.

"Fire away," Skullius said with a light smile that was both cool and calm, different from the frenzied one from moments ago.

Sevill's eyes behind the veil could see things that she wasn't sure were as welcome, especially in such a circumstances... after what she had seen Skullius endure days ago, after the Premium Age Royale served its purpose.

For starters...

"Have you... reached the Incandescent Stage?" she asked in a harsh voice.

Darwel trembled.

From the massive pressure she had felt moments ago, she had wondered the same, just for a little while.

Skullius chuckled.

"Ah, so that's what's gotten you all tense..." he said casually. "Not quite. My soul has undergone several changes is all."

"Is that... right?" Sevill said. Her eyes peered into Skullius body and she saw a different kind of soul from the one she had witnessed get burned in that powerful Territory days ago. A foetus-like soul that looked terribly broken.

After taking on the Secondary attack of that Territory, Skullius' soul had gotten even more damaged but...

But now... it was large and whole, fitting his body perfectly while emitting a vibrance that only an Incandescent Stager's soul could exude!

Worse yet... Sevill saw two sparks of pretty light swimming in Skullius' soul and-

"You don't need to feel so wary. Just please... open this up for me, will you?" Skullius said again, a smile on his face.

This time, Seville didn't stop Darwel from approaching the barrier. While the El Sif was quite determined, and hopeful, she did approach with caution. She stared at Skullius for a couple of seconds before stepping on something on the floor, just before where the fourfold barrier began.

Erlton had set up this barrier, but he had created a mechanism which could be used to take it down by anyone with the right level of energy when Skullius awakened.

The barrier ruptured and disintegrated into sand-like particles, leaving the Hybrid Luman free.

Darwel didn't know what exactly she expected to happen, but when Skullius approached her with an unusually alluring smile, she found herself blushing in a mix of fluster and bashfulness.

It was odd.

Since when...

Those white eyes staring blankly down at her own made her freeze.

"Hmm. Seeing how awkward you're both still being around, I presume you know about my secret, huh?" Skullius said. "My recovery would have made you both more happy than cautious. Lord Luminant and all."

Darwel opened her mouth to speak but no words came out.

"It is as you say, Lord Luminant," Seville was the one to carry Darwel's intent. "We know a lot about you now, but only because someone explained it in great detail and made us understand."

"Oh, is that so?" Skullius said with a hint of surprise. "Good then."

Without asking for clarity, he walked past Darwel and crouched to pick up the clothes she had dropped.

"Now please. I'm quite modest, could you please excuse me. I need to wear proper attire," he said.

Sevill and Darwel awkwardly nodded and exited the room, leaving the Hybrid Luman adorned in the luxurious robe alone.

Once he was alone, Skullius took a deep breath and looked at his body. He flexed his fingers, feeling the pulse of energy that ran through him.

There was a slight contradiction.

The strength of his soul contended against that of his body, but the latter still held. After all, Replicus' body wasn't natural. It had quite the capacity for unordinary proportions and soon, he would be able to elevate even that.

He grinned.

'You've outdone yourself, Sila.'

Indeed, he had.

Replicus grabbed the best clothes among those provided and began to wear them when he felt sharp throbs, remnants of sharp, blunt pangs of pain within his soul.

He grimaced a little.

What had awakened him wasn't simple chance or choice. It was sharp blows of pain, like immaterial fists that struck only his soul.

Strange.

Still, the pain was reaching its end and he could endure that much.

*

Skullius exited the room under the gazes of the two beauties.

He was wearing a long-sleeved shirt of fine, white, linen that loosely hung over his torso and thick, leaf-patterned black pants that hugged his legs with passion.

Over this pair, the dark robe he had summoned could still be seen over shoulders, nearly reaching his ankles.

The colours of this getup made quite the attempt to match the two streaks of pitch black now visible among his locks of auburn hair, and the tone of his skin; they did quite well.

Darwel, who seemed to have composed herself smiled grandly.

"You look good. You picked the ones I hoped you would! Certainly matches your new... confidence," she said, attempting to restore a bit of her natural snark.

Skullius laughed.

"New confidence, huh? Glad to hear it." he said.

Sevill led the two back up the corridor as Darwel tried to start a casual conversation with the Hybrid Luman. She tried her best to not mention anything to do with Skullius' true form but...

"Do your parents know as well? About my true self, I mean," Skullius asked.

"Uh, yes. They know. I'm sure they'd want to see you right away, but with the current situation... I don't know if they have the time for it just yet."

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

"Current situation? What's going on?" he asked.

Darwel wore a serious visage as she looked at him.

"Everyone is tense. Hours ago, Maqi suddenly declared war of us. A force of 1,000 of their combatants is on the way, along with the Ode of the First Horn. The Prince."

Chapter 919: New Perspective

A force of 1,000.

At face value, it didn't sound quite as grandiose, at least to the average common man who didn't quite understand Maqi's reputation.

The grave tone in Darwel's voice, however, would have been enough to spell out just how big of deal this was, despite Opungale having millions of combatants at its disposal, all very strong and firm.

To realise such a military force, which had a startling degree of unity and discipline was only possible for Opungale, because the entire continent was also a single, united nation.

Because of the importance placed on tradition and culture by every individual Sif, a sense of uniformity and unity persisted through generations of life on the continent – stemming from the universal belief in the sacred of natural elements of the world and the purity of water which sustained all life.

A firm belief in Listafelle of the seas.

This advantage that the Sif had over humans extended to many aspects of their lives, even their fighting force on a mental level, yet, despite that uniqueness, Opungale trembled at the mention of Maqi's forces.

"So that's how it is..." Skullius said with an even voice. "If they announced this less than a day ago, they must be taking their time to get here. They are giving you time to prepare as much resistance as you like. That sounds like them for sure."

Darwel wore a dry smile, though she questioned Skullius' last sentence a little.

"Yeah," she said. "They have a lot of pride and confidence. They believe that even if we prepare, they will win. The sad thing is... none of us can confidently refute their confidence."

Skullius emitted an airy laugh.

As they turned right from the gloomy, narrow corridor leading to the odd room Skullius had been sealed in, they stepped into a wider one which had the view of a gorgeous courtyard to its right.

Three fountains could be seen positioned in a triangular shape, cool water swirling and spraying from them. Large rocks, similar to the ones used to make the floor of the corridor – glistening, shining and even – could be seen around the fountains and the huge sycamore tree at its centre.

Skullius ignited a pair of dark pupils in his eyes and he saw the monochromatic version of this picturesque view.

It inspired nothing in him at all.

The left wall, which spotted thick, neat vines rising to the ceiling with pretty, glowing flowers blooming in perfect rows along their girths... also did nothing to touch him.

It was merely... tastelessly nostalgic.

"Why is it that Maqi is attacking?" Skullius asked as they turned down the end of the corridor.

"The message they sent only said 'Your penance is overdue'," Darwel said sadly. "We think it's because of the alliance Pelian signed with Opungale, but... my parents have a feeling there's something else. Not just brutish hatred."

"Needlessly dramatic..." Skullius commented with a twitch of his lip and again, Darwel found his words a little odd.

It did indeed seem like the matter with the alliance was what brushed Maqi's feathers the wrong way, but if that was the case, their attack would have come soon after the Pelian Royal Family agreed to a pact with the Sif.

Not more than two months later.

That didn't make any sense.

As the trio passed a group of servants who bowed, Skullius faced in their direction for a moment.

'Hmmm. Now that I have more than one case study, the comparison tells that every Sif has a flow different to that of a human. It is phenomenal and apparent even in servants,' he thought, but the subject flitted past in his mind.

"How well have you prepared?" Skullius asked.

"Well, we've convened with the trees and gathered up a lot of mana and life energy for our warriors to use. It's more than likely that we're going to fight even if my parents do wish to talk to the Ode instead. The best we can do is at least limit our real losses and use our numbers advantage to our benefit. We're not exactly weak, especially in a battle of attrition," she said.

Skullius processed what she had just said several times.

"Life energy?" he finally said curiously.

"Yes. Oh, I forgot. You wouldn't know. We have a deep connection to nature, you see. It is more profound than humans realise. To those truly in tune with nature, it is possible to share life with the trees and heal with their gathered energy."

"Is that so? I presume your peopl... our people, learned of this when the Giants took a trip around the world and educated them about Listafelle?"

Sevill and Darwel felt a brimming sense of pride when Skullius said 'our people' and the latter nodded eagerly with a bright smile.

"Of course! Water is life and that life is better manifested and stored through plants than other living species. We just learned to appreciate and borrow it," she said.

Skullius wore a small smile and nodded.

"I'll have to participate in that appreciation soon, won't I?" he said.

The three finally reached their destination – a place where Seville had thought would be most fitting for Skullius as his first stop.

Seville gave the large, arched door bordered by lovely green vines a light knock and soon it opened, revealing a pink-haired lady with focused, downturned eyes.

She was adorned in a simple silver vest that made apparent her underwhelming chest and loose, white, linen pants.

As she saw who was at the door, she shook, and her first instinct, as it were, was to cover her chest with her arm as though it was bare.

"Relax. It's just blind ol' me, Maxim," Skullius said with a haughty smile.

Those few words caused discord within Maxim, who had gotten used to not seeing any men since her stay here began, causing her to relax her habits; she had almost felt betrayed just now.

She softened and blinked a couple a times as she looked at the Hybrid Luman.

"It's you..." she said softly, a frown of deep set conflict on her face.

Not that many things had happened between her and Skullius that day, when they were participating in the Royale, but even though they were few, they were meaningful.

Skullius walked toward Maxim and reached within a few of inches of her face. She narrowed her eyes at his and they stood frozen for a while.

She then smirked and shook her head.

"So, you're a divine, charcoal, prodigious, sort-of-undead, lightning skeleton, huh? Never would have guessed. Explains a lot, really," she said.

Chapter 920: Cool Banter

The room was quite pleasant.

While it was simply a guest room, it would have been the master bedroom for a prestigious Family mansion in Pelian. Maxim should know, she was the one who compared the room she was staying to the one her parents owned.

The thick, four-poster bed with a thin, silvery net around it, its size comically large, yet its comfort so unmatched that Maxim was always trying her damndest to resist its call. Even the current situation in Opungale didn't serve as much motivation for her not to lay down and cast her worries aside.

The pleasant scent that wafted from the walls which were draped with coiling roots that bore orchids; the sod-like carpet, purple in hue with a godly feel to the feet; the floral lanterns hanging overheard; the faint music playing from a strange plant growing from a white vase in the corner...

All of it...

All of this...

"You've been living in luxury," Skullius commented. He felt, heard and smelled all except the wonders of the bed, and he couldn't help but admire the high standard. "Wish my bed had been like that."

Darwel and Seville grimaced.

The bed that Skullius burned with his reversion into the Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator after the Premium Age Royale... had been the same one he had woken up on minutes ago. No one had been able to move him into a different bed before Erlton sealed his body in order to contain the chaos that would have ensued. Besides, no bed sheets could survive the storm of Levin.

Awkwardly, the two Sif pretended as though they hadn't heard what Skullius had said.

Maxim, Skullius and the Sif pair sat on comfy chairs with a pretty table in their midst, elegant, pretty-faced servants serving them refreshing drinks in wine glasses.

"It IS luxury," Maxim said as she thanked the Sif servants who then took their leave. She raised her glass to her nose and swirled its contents. "I doubt even the crown prince of Pelian – if there even is one – gets better treatment than is."

She sipped her cool juice and smiled.

"Well, we take hospitality very seriously. My parents insisted on it all the more since we have an alliance with Pelian," Darwel explained as she too took a sip.

Skullius nodded.

As soon as he also grabbed his glass and put it to his lips, however, he felt everyone's attention on him. It was so bizarre and abrupt that he paused and lowered the glass.

Darwel gave him a sharp, subtle glance while Maxim showed her curiosity blatantly by leaning forward and staring intensely. Seville was the same, though she depended on her veil to hide how rude her gawk was.

"What?" Skullius asked with a raised brow.

Darwel and Seville staggered through their words but Maxim, of course, answered.

"We're just really curious if you're actually drinking and savouring or... well, faking it," she said with a shrug.

Skullius was puzzled.

"What... Wait, you mean... you think this body is fake?" he shook his head and downed his juice.

Maxim nodded.

"Erlton told us you used this body to fit in. That it isn't exactly... you know."

Skullius chuckled.

"That used to be the case. I couldn't really do much with this body back, when it was just a husk I wore to blend in and not be found out," the Hybrid Luman said with a hint of melancholic nostalgia.

Strange.

He had taken a trip to Deadmanland and relived the monotonous life of being a Moronic Undead sometime before the Royale, calling out the nostalgia too.

While Maxim nodded with a funny smile at the explanation, Darwel looked a bit concerned. Empathetic really.

"It must have been difficult. I was honestly a little... angry after I saw your true form. It was only after Erlton explained that I realised that I was being narrow-minded. The fact that you hid around so well without being found out is both incredible and... a bit sad," she said with a look of sympathy.

Skullius took another sip of his drink.

"This Erlton person must have done a fine job at explaining my circumstances if your takeaway from my story is feeling sorry for me," he said.

'...And that person knows a little bit too much. How much did he tell?'

"I laughed," Maxim said with a chortle while gulping down. "The picture of a large skeleton walking around Genhuis City with no one realising is hilarious."

While Darwel gave Maxim a scolding look, Skullius returned her chortle with a laugh.

"Oh, you should have seen the public opinion when I lost my flesh in the middle of a library in Inhone. The looks on everyone's faces were priceless. But then again, so was mine," he said. "I did end up getting the last laugh though. Killed everyone there and did a little bit of lying to handle the aftermath. I actually did a lot of that, now that I think about it."

"..."

"..."

"..."

"Hmmm?"

Maxim shrugged.

"Well, with the way you killed some of those Masters during the Royale... I'm not too surprised. I should have realised you were more demented than I am," she said.

Darwel sighed.

"You're warping my view of you too much," she said with a false tear. Seville patted her shoulder.

Maxim sniggered.

At that moment, the door to the room opened and another beauty, this one more voluptuous and unafraid to show it, walked in.

With her navy blue hair wildly wiggling down her scalp to her shoulders and then all the way to her butt, peppering the short, silk robe she wore, Valiant waltzed in.

"The dead man walks again..." she said with a vibrant smile.

Skullius sighed as he looked from her figure that took dainty steps, revealing generous portions of her blameless thighs with every step, to Maxim.

"Looks like everyone prepared some terrible line to throw at me as an icebreaker," he said and turned back to Vali.

She shrugged and found a chair to sit on, setting it right beside Skullius, much to Darwel's slight displeasure. A part of her thanked Listafelle that Skullius was blind... or pretty much a eunuch or... however his atrocious resistance to having such beautiful women at his side worked.

"It's the only way for me to feel as though I'm not crazy for sitting beside a former undead," Vali said with a sharp look in her eyes.

Skullius flinched a little. No one noticed.

'That man...' he thought, a little annoyed.

"What's with the robe?" Vali asked, pinching it to find that it felt like real, black fabric, which surprised her.

Skullius smiled.

"I'm going for a new look. Tired of the old," he said and sipped.

"How old is old exactly. For you, I mean," Maxim held down a laugh.

Skullius shook his head.

"If this Erlton hasn't already told you that too, you probably don't want to know," he said.

Darwel perked up.

"Your age would probably be the least worrying thing about you," she said with a smile.

"Speak for yourself," Vali said while grabbing the El Sif's glass.

Skullius drew back in his chair and leaned against it, hiding his hands in the sleeves of the robes.

"I admit, it's refreshing to see you all, though it hasn't been that long," he said, and the four women reciprocated similar feelings in their own ways – Maxim by raising her glass, Darwel by donning a brighter smile, and Vali by folding her arms and saying "That statement has odd context now, but alright."

Skullius then turned serious.

"Now tell me. Who is Erlton, and how much did he tell you about me, exactly?"