

## Undead 381

Chapter 381: See How Smart I Am?!

Skullius shook his head in disbelief.

'And here I was expecting something extraordinary,' he thought before swinging his arms, multiple orbs of darkness flashing towards Hafuman!

Behind the Bookworm, the feminine figure of his companion, the one who had been called Kotaman rushed up to him with ridiculous slithering motion before the orbs could arrive and opened up a purple cover Holder twice the size of that of Hafuman!

She ripped from it a page and threw it in the air above them, her voice calling out in a language Skullius couldn't understand.

"Reinforcement Magic, Mighty Shell!"

The page shone, the array imprinted on it glowing with a bright blue intensity. The wave of light fashioned from the bright light then shaped a transparent dome of neatly arranged pentagons that covered the two!

Skullius' orbs struck heavily against the dome but asides from shaking it vehemently, no damage was done to it!

'Its sturdy,' Skullius thought.

Within the dome, Kotaman looked to Hafuman with an enraged expression before growling at him.

"Doesn't your Holder have any useful magic?!"

"My magical property is creating random spells! Deal with it!"

"Whatever, just use another spell!"

Hafuman grunted before tearing another page from his Holder.

"That better be a good one," Kotaman said.

"I don't know what it is! That's the whole point!"

Hafuman flung the page at Skullius, the object brightening up with a stream of light before vanishing into thin air with a smooth transition!

Skullius who had been drawing away from the page suddenly felt a peculiar sensation wrap around his Projected body.

'What's this weird feeling?' he thought.

Strangely, his body then started to spin, his Projected image swirling in the air with ever growing speed!

'What the- Am I going somewhere?!' Skullius thought with his vision whirling into a mess.

He could barely see anything with his body seemingly having lost the ability to steady itself and rotating while stuck in one position!

"What kind of magic is that?" Kotaman asked with a weird expression.

"What part of 'I don't know' don't you understand?!" Hafuman grunted as he tore another page from his book. "Let's finish this... hopefully.

He threw the thick page which hurtled towards Skullius and shone, revealing its effect on the target.

The large... inflatable... thing was conjured.

It appeared almost weightless with a simplistic see-through body that mimicked the appearance of a human but with no fingers or toes.

This giant creature only had two black spots on its face and a simple arching smile at the base of its head.

It floated behind Skullius who kept spinning and stretched its hands around, beginning its descent to the ground thereafter with the Projected form of Skullius following obediently.

Skullius who kept spinning couldn't even tell what was happening and the same was true for his enemies.

The dome around the two shattered with the Bookworms who were under its protection looking at the floating figure of Skullius that spun with amusement.

"I'll admit that's pretty funny," Kotaman said with a giggle.

"I know," Hafuman said with a smug look, owning up to credit he didn't really deserve.

Suddenly, Kotaman felt a heavy force crash against her lower worm half from the front, her figure flying off far as blood sprayed from where she had been struck!

She landed violently over the mud, her body feeling a dangerous vibration all over.

...!

A large gash that bled had been formed on her transparent worm tail and yet Kotaman didn't even know how she had been attacked.

Instead of panicking, Kotaman ripped two more pages from her book and dropped them to the ground.

"Reinforcement Magic... Big Clunky Armour! Reinforcement Magic, Fortified Skin!"

With two bright lights that wrapped around Kotaman, a large, brown bulky armour with balled joints and loosely attached parts that made noise which each movement appeared over her entire body, her blue skin turning rough to the extent that its shade grew lighter!

Even as she bled with her face showing the agony she was feeling, Kotaman tried to save her own life!

"Kotaman! Are you alright?!" Hafuman who was a distance asked with concerned as he ripped another page from his Holder but...

Unfortunately for him, darkness covered his vision, blinding him from everything else.

...!

"Hafuman!" Kotaman screamed as she saw her companion be devoured in a cube-shaped mass of darkness!

She was about to rush over to him when another burst of horrific force hammered her into the sludgy ground with atrocious might forcing up dirt and watery ooze!

While her armour did shield her from much of the force, Kotaman was still bleeding from the nose when her body crashed against the hard ground underneath!

Because of how sudden the attack had been, her Holder had fallen from her hands and onto the muddy surface a few meters away.

Two seconds after it fell through, dark blue strings that emerged out of nowhere wrapped around it, twisting unnervingly for a couple of seconds before withdrawing from the Holder!

Kotaman tried to reach out of the hole she had be pummelled into but another bout of force smashed into her, then another and another and another and...

It barely took ten hits for Kotaman to be crushed under the force and weight of whatever was attacking her, her life being squeezed out of her body.

At the moment of her death, the Holder half-sinking into a small distance from his exploded into cute spots of light.

On Kotaman's side, his sudden appearance in the cube of darkness rattled him quite a bit.

He immediately felt a horrendous weakness that stunted his ability to move and fought against his magic!

He wasn't aware, but a spinning Projected figure was with him in this mass of darkness, now being aware of any and all things that were touched by [Evil Darkness] within this domain!

The puppet behind him was instantly destroyed by three orbs of darkness, leaving him free!

The Projected Skullius had utilised all the orbs he had to create this cube of darkness after seeing his visual capabilities being impaired and it was working like a charm!

Having to spin in one place was detrimental only to those with physical bodies as it would disorient them by confusing their bodily fluids.

This wasn't true for Skullius in his Projected form but he preferred to know what was around him.

Hafuman gnashed his teeth as he tried to summon the strength to move but ten objects which he couldn't even perceive within the darkness around flashed through him without remorse, turning him into a bloody mess!

Immediately after, the domain of darkness was dispelled and Skullius regained his steady, flying stance.

'That was easier than I thought..' he mused in his mind.

Seeing that the other Bookworm had been taken care of as well, Skullius rushed towards Sila who was massacring the weaker Cluster beasts.

However...

"YOU DARE KILL MY TWO GENIUSES?!" a loud voice bellowed from a hilly pile of mud, a powerful Bookworm being seen as it wore a ferocious expression, a crude but chilling wave of mana storming in every direction from its body!

It was the Cluster General, Bragmaster!

Sila halted his massacre as he looked at the creature that bellowed, opening up its Holder which had a dull golden glow around it, a beautiful mix of gold and red adorning the cover.

"IT TOOK YEARS TO CULTIVATE SUCH SMART STUDENTS! HAVE YOU ANY IDEA HOW SMART I HAD TO BE TO TEACH THEM HOW TO USE THEIR HOLDERS?! THIS SMART!"

Bragmaster tore two pages from his Innate Holder and flung one into the mud and the other into the air.

Two powerful spells had just been used.

Two spells from a rather powerful source.

Transmutation Magic!

Both pages glowed bright, one in the mud and the other in the air with two phenomenal aspects occurring after!

Transmutation Magic, Floodful Vortex!

Transmutation Magic, Vile Poison!

The mud within a 400 meter radius swiftly turned into a flood of clear water, beginning to swirl around as first, it created a whirlpool and then rose while forming a massive vortex!

The still air within the same range started to gain a dark hue, promptly turning into a corrosive poison that was drawn to the water vortex that had been conjured!

Sila and the other Bookworms within range were swept up by the ferocious vortex of water, their bodies being flung into the thick of the poison.

"YOU SEE?! YOU SEE HOW SMART I AM?!" Bragmaster called.

#### Chapter 382: Still Not Over Yet

The large water vortex swirled with great strength while lifting up the Bookworms who screamed and Sila who looked intrigued more than anything, even while the ordeal of being raised up high posed threat.

Bragmaster's face did not hide how he felt about the death of his two treasured students.

With how he had been the sole Bookworm with a fully useful Innate Holder for the longest time, he couldn't describe the joy he felt when Kotaman and Hafuman were able to learn their first spells under his tutelage.

Grooming them so that they began shaping up as proper, powerful Bookworms afterwards was a chore, but it was worth it and he had thought that with time, hundreds more would follow.

Sadly, such a thing would likely not happen, given how the majority of his Bookworms had been killed by the individual with the green coloured sword, others being slaughtered by Ferex while the rest were panicking in his poison infested water vortex.

"I HONOUR YOUR SACRIFICE MY BROTHERS AND SISTERS! MORE OF YOU WILL BE BORN AS LONG AS I REMAIN, STANDING BY MY SIDE ONCE AGAIN!" Bragmaster said, addressing the Bookworms caught in the flood and poison.

At this point, he couldn't bother with his weak peers.

Skullius shot towards the powerful Bookworm who already had three more pages in his hands, actively anticipating the worst from the foes he was facing.

Only two remained of the three, one of them with a golden glow around him rushing in the opposite direction as if chasing something. Something that Bragmaster could not see.

Three orbs of darkness rushed towards the Cluster General at extreme speeds as per the Projected Skullius' command, but Bragmaster narrowed his eyes as he activated one of the spells in his hands.

Transmutation Magic, Self Spiritualisation!

The page imbued with this spell shone, the hidden light it produced rushing through Bragmaster within an instant!

The result shocked Sila who was swirling in the vast waters after having deactivated [Revenant Flames of Ecstasy] layered on top of [Null Life Aura].

This was incredible!

As someone who understood to a degree the classic intricacies of ethereal beings, he was fascinated by the concept presented by Bragmaster!

The Cluster General's blue body became hazy, the colourful vibrance over it becoming muted in an unsettling way. It now looked transparent, with the shocking development of steady flight accompanying this change!

'Has it become a Spirit?' Sila thought with narrowed eyes.

Skullius orbs passed right through the creature that turned to grin at him, its Holder and the rest of the pages it had torn floating above its hand.

"DO YOU SEE HOW SMART AND SKILLED I AM?! DO YOU?! I WILL MAKE YOU PAY THE ULTIMATE PRICE FOR CULLING MY RACE, RIGHT HERE AND NOW!" Bragmaster called in a loud voice.

In truth, this new form was different from a Spirit, contrary to what Sila thought. It was actually merely changing to a transparent and permeable state of being.

While this couldn't exclusively be chalked up to transmutation as most knew it, it went to show how advanced the Cluster General's powers were, nearing a breakthrough into a different realm of power entirely!

'If I use my [Perfect Night Domain], will I be able to hit him?' Skullius thought, very much doubting the prospect.

He looked to Sila who hadn't made a move yet, merely riding the waters that were now littered with dead Bookworms as a result of the poison. Such a thing couldn't affect him when he was hidden in his [Null Life Aura], the convenience of this skill being proven all the more.

Another page from Bragmaster's Holder shone, the Cluster General grinning wide as another spell was activated.

Transmutation Magic, Turn light into dark!

As if some switch had been turned off, the world around the Cluster General, encompassing the swirling water vortex and Skullius who floated turned dark!

...!

Skullius gaped at this unexpected move!

Given how he understood that [Evil Darkness] and mere darkness were different, he knew he was at a disadvantage.

He couldn't see jack!

His black, white and grey vision was seemingly ineffective in the presence of basic darkness! How ironic!

'Well, I don't think that thing can attack me I any way still. The only problem is, I don't have a way to retaliate. If only I could do some dam—'

SHIIIIIIING!

...!

Skullius heard a familiar sound.

The cutting apart of air by a sword meant to harness death!

"ARGHHHHHHH!" the Projected Skullius heard the Cluster General shriek in pain.

It had been hurt by Demion's Dance?!

Quick movements over the raging waters sounded as Sila, who with his incredible senses and use of [Elevated Mana Manipulation] could actually still 'see' the Cluster General in the darkness, rushed over the swivelling tide as if it was the most natural thing to do!

He focused on the Cluster General which had the hand holding the pages it had torn from its Holder sliced clean off and wielded the Elimparidis Stone Staff, pointing it at the creature!

Bragmaster gritted his teeth.

As the caster of the spell, he could see everything despite the veil of darkness and the image he saw was terrifying.

This man who didn't even have a worm tail had managed to attack his ethereal form successfully?!

"RIDICULOUS! WATCH ME! I'LL SHOW YOU THE HEIGHT I HAVE REACHED WITH MY TRANSMUTATION MAGIC! AFTER BEHOLDING IT, YOU WILL HAVE NO CHOICE BUT TO KNEEL!" the Cluster General said as he planted mana into the very last page at the end of his Holder, the page glowing bright as it activated the spell buried within its face!

This was another way to use the spells etched into the book's pages but it was more convenient for spells that did not have any need to be directed manually.

As such, this new spell did not need to be directed at a specific point as it affected everything within Bragmaster's range!

Once again, the Cluster General grinned as it truly believed that it was checkmate for its enemies!

"TRANSMUTATION MAGIC, ENERGY RECONFIGURATION!" Bragmaster bellowed out the name of the spell with an immensely presumptuous sense of triumph!

The page on which this spell was etched popped into spots of light, a vicious peculiar force, like thick, moving jelly exploding outwards!

"Hmmm?" Sila hummed in great surprise as the effects of the spell reached him!

The mana....

The mana all around bubbled as if boiling, all things that held this energy starting to warp like mirages, bending in every which way uncontrollably, including the Elimparidis Stone Staff!

Skullius was just as surprised at this phenomenon as while he didn't have access to [Elevated Mana Manipulation], he could still feel some changes all around!

'The mana is changing! Its turning into....!' he thought as he felt the resulting change being something he knew but didn't expect at all.

Primus!

The spell cast by Bragmaster changed all mana in the vicinity into Primus, a low level divine energy form!

'Casually using such power... This Cluster General would have been a dangerous being to deal with given more time...' Sila thought, his surprise waning.

The Elimparidis Stone Staff in his hand started to curl unnaturally as the mana it was supposed to provide changed, becoming Primus instead which was hard to handle for the weapon!

Sila dropped it, resuming his charge toward Bragmaster who floated higher, avoiding Sila.

As the surroundings warped around the Bookworm, Bragmaster frowned, noticing something he hadn't before Sila let go of the staff.

"You don't have a mana core?!" he questioned with an incredulous look.

Sila grinned as he leapt up, his body floating at an angle from the jump. Demion's Dance in his hand was raised, the look upon the aged soul being languid.

"This was an unexpected detour. Unfortunately, it ends here," Sila said as he brought down the sword.

SHIIING!

A diagonal slash crossed the distance between him and Bragmaster, cutting the ethereal form of the Cluster General cleanly!

"ARGHHHH!" the creature exclaimed with wide open eyes, a hateful expression etched onto its visage.

Its ethereal form did nothing to protect it from this sword that tonnes more mystery than most expected!

How cruel!

How unfair!

Life quickly faded from the Cluster General's body which started to reform back to its original state.

The Holder that had floated in its hand shone bright and popped into specks of light, signalling the death of its owner.

The Primus replacing mana all around also receded, bringing back stability to everything around. The waves fell down, their shape and form becoming muddy again while the air turned normal from its poisonous state.

The darkness transitioned into a clear view of the space as it was before, affording back Skullius a chance to see everything perfectly again.

He saw the body of the Cluster General falling from a height, a clean slice separating it diagonally from the shoulder!

Soon after, a series of notifications appeared in his vision.

[You have killed (VI) LV78 Bookworm. 36,543,000 Exp awarded]

[Congratulations, you have killed a Cluster General]

[The Cluster General fueling this space has been killed. Cluster will commence collapse. Please exit immediately]

These notifications appeared before both Skullius and Sila but the aged soul wasn't focused on them. He dropped as the vortex died down, picking up the Elimparidis Stone Staff which had recovered its shape after the effects of Bragmaster's latest Transmutation spell had worn off with Bragmaster's death.

He turned as he noticed that Bek wasn't anywhere near vicinity. His senses stretched out, covering a large distance but because of how large the muddy platform was, he couldn't cover it all.

'Without a doubt, he is probably still here. As for that woman, finding her will be difficult now that the Cluster General has been defeated. She probably has a way to escape this place though,' Sila thought as he then focused on Skullius who was floating high up.

"Here we are again, tomato flinger. How shall we settle this?" he asked with coy smile.

Skullius frowned.

He honestly didn't know how to fix this and return to his body.

A distance away, the impenetrable crack on the space tore open, revealing an exit out of the Cluster but none of the two moved.

'I don't know if he has any charges remaining with [Jump] but he can still easily create distance between himself me with this new speed of his...' Skullius thought the worst.

Sila could just run away and keep manipulating the Fruit of World Myths to keep Skullius out of the Discount Human body.

Between the distance created and what Sila was somehow able to do with the treasure left behind by Fulgardt...

Wait.

Skullius suddenly had a thought!

Distance!

Creating distance!

That's was it!

At that same moment he came to a realisation, a mental message coursed through his mind from Ferex who had successfully evaded the chaotic rush of spells by the Cluster General, mainly by staying outside of its range, a feat he had managed after studying the range of Bragmaster's first two spells!

Skullius was delighted to hear from the Apostle and he immediately gave an instruction.

'Don't lose sight of my body, no matter how fast he runs. I'll back soon. Hopefully.'

With that Skullius bolted out of the Cluster at full speed under the surprised gaze of Sila who had been prepared for a fight, his experienced mind expecting Skullius to not be his only opponent.

'Where is he going?' he questioned himself with genuine surprise.

Away from this suspenseful occurrence, Bek had finally reached within range of the woman with the carriage.

She seemed to have purposefully waited for him, which made him vigilant.

Her smile irked him but he didn't have the slightest thought to let her leave without answers.

Chapter 383: Odd Soul

Traversing through the sludgy mud had been annoying for Bek. Even with his speed, he would get caught in the mud trap at several points with Sera having to pull him out each time.

The inconvenience-ridden journey for him to catch up to the dark skinned woman who was merely four meters away from him now, made him wonder how on earth she had reached the end of the mud platform so fast and without sinking.

Such mysteries had to be delved into at some point.

Behind him, he felt the massive wave of mana flowing erratically into a body, a powerful beast evidently having been slain but he didn't pay it any mind.

Even if this meant that the Cluster would soon be destroyed, he was sure this woman before him had ways to escape danger.

This group of people had many strange abilities and tools. Like those dolls from before.

And surely, he was proven correct.

The mash of colour that constantly hummed, as if showing the edge of this world which was yet to be painted with the rest of the image of the Bookworms' world, something that now would never be seen, suddenly opened up to reveal an oval shaped breach with nothing but abstract lights tainting a widespread fine darkness within.

Seeing this spontaneous change, Bek grew even more vigilant but he didn't back away.

Instead, he decided now was as good time as any to probe for answers.

"Who are you people?"

The woman didn't render Bek an answer. Instead, she grabbed the bars at the sides of her carriage and pulled, her face turning to the former Knight once more before she entered the oval breach to the colourful space!

"Hey!" Bek yelled as he rushed forward, hesitating only briefly before he jumped in after the woman.

Entering into the dark space sprinkled with lights was a more terrifying ordeal than Bek had initially thought. His dull eyes showed a lively fear as what he beheld seemed to once again paint over a new picture from what he knew!

Just like that time when he had 'died'.

WHOOV!

WHOOV!

WHOOV!

His body and even Sera's was pulled by a shocking suction, the lights around the two turning into colourful elongated displays that kept them company all the way through the seemingly endless journey!

After a certain chunk of distance travelled, Bek would feel something akin to an electric jolt of power painfully wash through him, as if spelling how he wasn't supposed to be here or that he had crossed some sort of boundary!

There seemed to be many such boundaries as each caused Bek so much pain!

This was beyond terrifying.

The woman and her carriage were nowhere to be seen and before Bek, the only thing that could be viewed was a white light that kept getting brighter and brighter, its shape like that of an obscure multi-point star!

WHOOV!

WHOOV!

The jolts kept growing more and more painful, Bek gnashing his teeth as he held back an agonised scream!

When it felt like this trip would keep going on forever, Bek felt his firmly feet set on solid ground, his eyes which had grown accustomed to the lights quickly focusing to take in everything around him.

It was a new space that he had appeared in.

Somewhere different.

Somewhere far and yet near.

Yet to him, all he could say to describe the aesthetic of this place was...

SKY.

The next thing Bek saw was the dark-skinned woman and her carriage. She wasn't looking at him as he expected. Instead, she faced the opposite direction, her figure.... bowing down on both knees.

Right after this second worth time from Bek's arrival and his notice of the woman, the former Knight felt his body willingly buckle down, kneeling in what he felt was involuntary reverence.

His head rose on its own to gaze upon something that literally took his breath away.

A gigantic figure sat in the air of this space!

It remained perfectly still but it exuded a presence that eclipsed that of a world, something that made Bek feel extraordinarily insignificant.

His life, his powers, his experiences, even of that place from before.

All of it.

It all felt... like nothing.

What was this?

Who was this?

No amount of words could do justice in description or inquiry.

The figure, as enormous as it was, was even harder to perceive at a basic level or wrap one's mind around and for a few moments, Bek was for the most part thoughtless and speechless, his mind trying to convince him that this was just a dream.

After all, what else could be the explanation for all this!

All around this space, men and women with carriages and carts behind them were bowing to this gigantic figure without a word but Bek didn't even register it.

It wasn't worth diverting his attention from this.. this... marvel.

Surely, it had to be dream.

<Ah... another one appears. Colete, I applaud your efforts. For you to find me one of the rare Odd Souls that HE made. Hmmm. Predictably he's also biased towards HIM.>

A voice that sounded like the echo of a song being sung by the world's greatest female bards sounded, its melodious tone almost pulling out Bek's soul!

Literally!

Bek would know!

Yet the man couldn't find the words to say back, if they were any.

<Come closer, child. I have never touched one of HIS creations before.>

Bek's body immediately vanished from his position and appeared right before the massive figure's face, all of its features being so imposing that he would have lost consciousness several times over if it weren't for some kind of intervention that he could feel.

<A pity. You became fully realised by bonding with the love of your life. Such a strange concept HE made. An Odd Soul's greatest strength is turning loved ones' souls into artificial Spirits that join natural Spirits in the Harrowing Well. And yet you all do it without knowing. A shame.

You in particular seem to have overcome death as a result.>

That was right.

The powers of a Spirit Warden were as such.

With the little Bek could hear as he summoned focus, he expressed his shock silently.

<Let me trouble your soul no further. Even if those TWO left me with their duties temporarily, I am not one to take what still lives before its time, however many technicalities are stacked on top of the word 'alive'. Yet, I will unburden you of this. You sort with hope that my children here could help you relieve her, did you not?>

Bek's mind whirled.

Indeed. What had started as a simple excursion to find missing people had developed into a hopeful chase to correct something he felt was his fault for a long time.

He had heard rumours that these people who abducted the sick and the healthy, locals and outsiders alike, were masters in their understanding of the soul, something he had confirmed after seeing one of them for the first time.

How even his eyes which could clearly see the soul of an individual were barred from seeing the souls of these people.

Even though he didn't understand what was happening here or what or who this gigantic figure was, he still held hope after hearing it speak about him as if it knew him very fondly.

It wasn't a conscious reaction all things considered.

Bek felt as if he was speaking to a distant mother.

Sera who was floating above Bek was suddenly yanked from him, her hazy figure being drawn towards the enormous being Bek was facing!

...!

'Sera...!' Bek thought instinctively.

<Do not worry. I will not harm her. I will give her the peace she deserves.>

A massive hand grasped onto the Spirit of Sera, its entirely being hidden in the palm of this hand.

As he saw this unfold, Bek strangely felt a sense of relief.

<As for you... Tearing away your memory of this poor soul will be a cruel thing. Keep your memory of her. However, you shall forget setting foot in this place. You shall continue with your life and grow before taking part in the INEVITABLE CHAOS, in the EVER-GROWING SHADOW that is about to overwhelm Aigas. Oh, dear me.

I almost forgot. You shall also forget having met THAT LITTLE ONE. May your paths never cross again.>

These words felt like a breeze that gushed into Bek, entering his body through every pore that could be found on his skin.

The world around him began to turn bright, his vision of this world, like a giant sky full of pristine clouds beginning to vanish.

<Do your best, Odd Soul.>

...

Bek's mind was overwhelmed with emotion and memory.

The remnants of the what he could still remember from this odd space before it would be deleted from memory, linked quite heavily to what had happened before. Memories he never thought back to for the sake of moving on with his life.

'LIAR!'

These were the first words he had heard Sera say to him when he found her after his death as a Capital Order Knight.

When she had been dancing with an atrociously ugly Spirit in that strange place.

He could almost see it right now, as if it was happening again.

He had wept bitterly at seeing the woman he had loved being reduced to... this.

Half of her ugly and the other half beautiful.

It was as if after death, Sera had failed to let go of the thoughts crammed into her by the people she grew with. That her blind eye made her look weird.

That it sullied her beauty.

That if only it could be rectified, she could be seen as acceptable by everyone else.

When Bek had stood before her, he couldn't handle the feeling of guilt anymore. Part of this was his fault.

He was the one who had left Sera in that state of doubt which focusing on his merit.

She had been all alone as she tormented herself with insecurity.

That pain lead him to kneel before Sera and apologise with his eyes shooting tears down the ducts nonstop.

A genuine plea of forgiveness.

"I'm sorry, Sera..."

Bek did not know himself at the time but he doubted that his simple word formed apology could be what warranted what happened next.

Sera's rage at that time, in that space, had immediately died down and she had rushed over to him to cradle him, her words soft as she begged for him not to cry.

"Bek....don't cry... please. I didn't mean it. You're not a...liar. No. You're not a liar.

You came back for me. You found me here. Just like... you did before..." she had said, making Bek tremble as he felt a pang of pain.

He had held the hands of the Spirit for the first time, feeling the cold that traced through it with an aching heart before responding.

"Yes. Yes I found you again."

This was as far as he could remember that memory going however, as after that, he had found himself lying on the ground with the dead bodies of his fellow Knights strewn about, his previously pierced heart beating with a lively thrum.

At this current point in time, Bek opened his eyes, finding himself standing at the entrance to a place he knew very well, his mind configuring his memories hurriedly.

"Urgh... What happened? Did they escape my grasp again?" he said as he clutched her forehead, feeling a sensation akin to a hangover.

He felt hollow. As if something was missing. His emotions were all over the place but before he could fully recall what he had lost, he wondered...

"Hmm? Am I in Okenden?"

Chapter 384: Never Again

Pat. Pat.

Sila exited the Cluster, finding himself standing on the snow again as the crack behind him vanished.

A Conqueror's Halo was around him, its light thick, almost blinding to an ordinary eye but he paid it no mind as it meant nothing to this body as long as he had the Binds of Fukal.

Sila felt around but couldn't ascertain the shape of Skullius' Projected form.

'I know he didn't just run away. There must be something he realised that could potentially lead him to back into his body. Hmmm. With all these memories, most of them being a thousand years worth of nonsense, I can't pinpoint what that tomato flinger is thinking. Still, the Fruit of World Myths should buy me some time for a while.

No matter what he is thinking, it won't work!' Sila thought with a determined balling of his fist.

The truth behind his ability to take over Skullius' body and inherent use of the finer things that the Null Lifeform possessed like access to the guidance field and memories all spawned from two things.

The stage of his soul and the simple fact that Sila's soul was patched onto Skullius' own.

Unlike the Master Stage, as broad as it was in relation to the two stages prior to it, the Incandescent Stage started to refine one's soul in preparation for the power they would then receive.

Taking over a body was child's play for a soul at the Incandescent Stage especially when it was practically one with the original soul of the body it possessed.

Streaming in some of the power in the soul into this body was also easy, just like what Sila had done with the Creeds but he wasn't able to expand his soul's information into the Discount Human body because his soul was damaged.

That added to the fact the the Discount Human body couldn't use some of the higher level concepts he knew without getting smashed to pieces governed Sila's limit.

The aged soul had used the words 'my body' in the process of his declaration of Creeds because he technically qualified to be the owner of the body as a result of the aforementioned circumstances.

Now, with Skullius' soul which he was feeding on. One without a will, he could revive himself with these new powers all left for his use, though some factors were rather unfavourable. Like having to claim the rest of Skullius' soul by fighting an Arch-Lich.

Tsk!

'Still. There's no need to be nervous. There's that card that the tomato flinger has in his reserve. I will just use it for myself. Haha. There's no way that he will repossess this body.

Now, I should probably head for a safe place to retire for the rest of the night. This cosmetic body will revert to that... Penetrator form soon,' Sila thought.

He stored the Elimparidis Stone Staff and Demion's Dance in his storage ring which he wore on his finger before shooting towards the North.

WHAM!!!

A familiar force bashed against the Discount Human body right then, causing Sila to fall down on his back with a harsh boom!

'Ah. That damned Hound!' Sila thought as he kipped himself up and drew away.

His inability to sense this creature was very detrimental to him escaping and there didn't seem to be a way around it!

'Seriously?!'

The staff was summoned once again, Sila using the item to shoot a few [Jolt Rays] all around him in an effort to try and pinpoint the creature's location!

Milky white streams of energy that contained distorted mana mixed with chaotic spatial effects caused horrendous explosions over the snowy ground which hissed intensely as billows of smoke and tendrils of steam poured upwards!

Yet...

Nothing.

Sila's blind eyes moved around, moroso showing where his focus was than anything else.

He waited, expecting another whacking but...

Still nothing.

'Hmmm...'

With caution, Sila darted in another direction, hurtling forward at full speed to ensure that he would at least create some semblance of a distance between himself and the Hound.

His incredible speed echoed through rapid steps over the snow as he turned into a dark shadow that ran without pause.

For a full minute, Sila didn't experience any opposition.

'Did I lose it? Probably not. I wouldn't be able tell. Apparently these... Apostles are better at pinpointing my position than I am theirs. Pathetic, tomato flinger!

Pathetic!' Sila raged.

Unbeknownst to him, Ferex was obediently fulfilling the task he had been ordered to by Skullius in the simplest way possible.

He merely settled in the auburn locks of hair on the top of Skullius' head in his miniaturized form while waiting for his master who seemingly had a plan to return to his body.

Said master right now was flying through the air at rapid speed, creating distance between himself and Sila.

The same could be said by the latter though.

'The distance that was between us before when entered the Cluster was probably less than 10 miles. With how I used up all those Enriching gems days ago, I'm sure I'm able to travel greater distances away from my body. Now... I just have to exceed that distance limit!' Skullius thought.

It had occurred to him that there was a way to forcefully return to his body. Something that had happened before on an occasion he had thought back to earlier.

This was during his attempt at clearing the Tenth Task which was to cross a distance of 10 miles in his Projected form!

At that time, he had failed, over a certain distance, a powerful force dragging him back to his body!

If it worked the same way, then distance must be one of the heavy influences for his prolonged duration in his Projected form!

Skullius at this point had crossed a distance of over 21 miles, his dark figure still going on strong!

"More!" Skullius boomed with a hard expression.

Several minutes passed by, another stretch of distance being covered.

"More!"

Another stretch, amounting to distance of 40 miles!

Still, the tug that Skullius expected was nowhere to be found!

"Mooooore!"

The Projected form flashed over 55, 56, 57 miles then 58 and 59, the imagery beneath him turning wild and white when....

CLINCHK!

...!

Both Sila and Skullius felt it!

To Sila who inhabited the Discount Human body, he felt a massive dark chain spontaneously jut out of his chest, its origin being the Fruit of World Myths!

As he saw this thing, the relevant memory attached to it surfaced, making him realise what Skullius was up to!

"TOMATO FLINGER!" Sila screeched with anguish.

Skullius on the hand felt the chain which had crossed the vast distance between himself and Sila in an instant sink into his back and yank him backwards!

The Null Lifeform couldn't be happier!

He was pulled back with the same speed that the chain had travelled, his figure reaching Sila in an instant!

"NOOO!" Sila screeched as he tried to manipulate the Fruit of World Myths again, something that he was he was able to do because he had tinkered with many treasures at Legendary rarity and above in his olden days!

Unfortunately, this didn't work.

The item he thought was simple to understand refused to listen to him, bringing the dark figure of Skullius into the Discount Human body seamlessly!

As soon as Skullius felt himself enter his body, he fought back!

Sila's soul which had grown roughly 25% bigger from consuming and integrating with his put up a fight, with the aged soul's will wrestling for control!

"TOMATO FLINGER, I WILL NOT YIELD! I AM WAR DRIVEN SOUL, UNLIKE THE LIKES OF YOU! I WILL NOT FALL LIKE THIS AGAIN!" Sila yelled.

His pride which had been reaffirmed by his temporarily showcase of the power and knowledge hidden in his soul was slowly getting overwhelming again!

Why?!

He was a soul at the Incandescent Stage, so why was Skullius' weaker soul able to smother him and his will?!

Why?!

Was he truly some unnamed General whose worth was merely overstated?!

"Shut up you, sockethole! I'll lock you up for who knows how long and you'll never use this body again!" Skullius hissed as he once again detained Sila who screeched hateful words until his voice was no more.

Then, silence.

Skullius opened his eyes.

A lot of good that did.

He couldn't see anything.

However, in exchange, things were different.

So much was different with his other senses.

"So this is who I am now, huh?" Skullius begrudgingly said with a frown.

Blind and without a core a few days before the Premium Age Royale.

What luck this was...

Chapter 385: Allies and Bastions

Genhuis City.

"What a journey," Oliviana said as she disembarked from the carriage, her short figure stretching out to release the physical tension that had built up in her body from having to sit through a rather long, journey to get here.

A very bright sun that looked almost too close for comfort could be seen directly overhead, almost taking the shine away from the distant, 'real' sun that provided limited light and heat to the cold region.

Besides the curiosity over what this phenomenon was, Oliviana couldn't be happier to be in another environment. One where she could start afresh and not be tied down by the confines of the word 'small.'

Silrat followed after the female assassin and took a deep breath.

The air was different.

The mana was different

The tension was growing along with great opportunity.

This was his kind of environment and he had a history with it.

Once again, he had created an opportunity for himself to rise, a gamble that had paid off, as opposed to the one he had made a long time ago, netting him a fair share of misery.

"I'd say what a view instead. We're here. Better not focus on anything else," Silrat said, his eyes hiding caution and a plethora of plans.

Oliviana gave Silrat a strange look.

"Loosen up, will you? You dodged the heavy duty of having to oversee most of the reconstruction of the Inhone along with dealing with the aftermath of that terrible incident. If I were you I'd do more to celebrate," she said with a quick punch to Silrat's arm.

The man didn't know whether to laugh or cry when dealing with this carefree attitude.

Was this payment he had agreed to for training Festos to Oliviana going to be beneficial?

"Well, I've noted that in times of premature celebration... atrocities usually follow. Maybe it's just that we have different motives. You're finally free from having to sit burdened by small duty and can see the bigger world while I on the other hand..."

"Have a large role to play," the voice of Stylla who exited out the side of the carriage reached the two, finishing Silrat's sentence.

"Precisely," Silrat said with a shallow smile.

Two guards walked with the young lady as she approached Silrat and Oliviana, joining in on their conversation.

"I'll leave the option of where you'd like to start with you. You're welcome to come to our estate with me and formally introduce yourself to my Family as a partner or settle some of your affairs first," Stylla said.

Silrat nodded.

"How generous. I believe our collusion isn't going anywhere so I might as well start with the Guilds Association. I have a few records to set straight," the former Guilds Association head said before turning to Oliviana who was still stretching. "What about you?"

"Hmm? I'm coming with you, of course. Nothing spells freedom quite like the Guilds Association. I'd like to see how I'll fair in that environment not as some small time tutor with barely anything to do," Oliviana said while looking with shining eyes at the high structures all around.

This place was huge.

"Good then. I can at least count on some company while my ace is out there probably endangering his life," Silrat lamented, noticeably causing himself stress.

Stylla partook in that thought as well, wondering when Skullius would arrive.

She had given him a token which would make passage through the strict city security much easier but that was an element she could only focus on when she knew Skullius was alright wherever he was.

She much preferred to have all the pieces she needed under her control but...

"I'm embarrassed to say this but I barely know Festos on a personal level or even on a professional one. Our last meeting made me realise that he's not the same person I once raided multiple Clusters with and frankly, I've had quite the bit of trouble trying to convince myself that this is the only card left for me to play," the young lady from the Bryne Family said as she emitted a nervous sigh.

"Festos is....reliable, right?"

Oliviana and Silrat looked at each other for a bit, the latter giving his honest and most sincere answer.

"Eh..." he shrugged.

\*\*\*

"To think this day would actually come," a middle-aged looking man wearing a fine, formal suit said as he looked at the figure standing in front of him.

It was a familiar man with a face he had seen only thrice before. Now, the circumstances were different, literally dictating that both of their forces be rallied together.

The man who had just spoken shook his head while rubbing the monocle on his left eye which seemed to block a fierce reddish gold light that brimmed from the respective socket, his right eye being focused on the Paladin Champion he faced.

"Yes, yes how surprising. The Purity has finally relented. We will be working together to protect this city. Hopefully you don't mind too much," the Champion decked in the distinct, shining armour said with a false smile.

"Relented is a strong word, Ruhrees. I wouldn't even use it to describe the chaotic process that lead to this... collaboration being deemed as valid by the Governor and the emissaries from the Royal Family," the man with the monocle said with a refined chuckle.

"A bunch of emissaries? Try having to deal with overconfident old crones debating over the fate of the continent by measuring hubris. If the Evenfall and the Green Neolists did not decide to collude, our next meeting would probably be in the Tunatsche."

"Hahaha. Interesting assessment," the man with the monocle said with another chuckle. "I am a believer of the gospel of the Deities. Why would you bundle me up with you, a chosen Champion of the Deities who already sees himself being cast aside?"

"We both know why. No matter how good you are, there's no such a thing as a reward after death. If you don't mind, I'd like to rest after my journey. I'm sure you won't need me take over babysitting the great city in your stead this soon."

"Ha. Glad you're aware of that fact. What use is a City Guardian if not to be the first line of defence for the city?"

Ruhrees grunted as he walked past the man with the monocle and into a lavish building where a line of guards and maids stood respectfully at the sides.

He was truly serious about resting and lazing off for the day.

For the bright sun in the sky, wasn't a mere decoration, but a symbol of the might that Genhuis already had, a bastion of hope that he didn't bother to replace.

Chapter 386: Worldly Matters

Tremur Forest.

A seemingly endless plane littered with all manner of abstract shapes that trembled randomly as if struck by bolts of lightning, covered the vast space. These shapes took on many different colours as they floated by, as if spectators, swimming in the darkness around them with no sense of direction.

The tranquil presence within this plane was so intense that one could go insane just by being set within it for a limited amount of time, but luckily, shapes and darkness were not all that populated this place.

While the owner of this space valued silence, he was welcome to company, provided it was worth his time.

A massive black-furred ape could be seen within the space, a mass of light above its head in the form of a simplistic, revolving crown. It had a thick mane around its neck, golden streaks of lightning sparking from its bulk. In addition to this, a thick golden glow covered it, as if warding off the darkness from the plane as it sat with its arm over its knee.

Opposite the ape was a large aquatic serpent with resplendent blue scales that took every opportunity they could to show off their shine, above its coiled body a crown also being seen with a thick blue energy matting around its mass.

Its green eyes looked reverently to its right where a somewhat less imposing animal figure could be made out, sitting over a pile of some of the abstract, colourful shapes that were bountiful in this place.

This figure was short but with long arms, thick black and white fur in strips covering its entire body.

"Azila. State your purpose," the figure that sat upon the mound of shapes said, its voice rippling through the darkness authoritatively.

The Ape nodded as it released a mana-saturated breath, its sharp eyes turning to the forth individual within this meeting space for a brief period.

"Weeks ago, I encountered a strange creature that wandered into my Territory. An undead. Or at least I thought it was at first," Azila said, his mind springing forth that bothersome encounter. "Its presence was thick with the energy of Undeath at one moment and plain as air in the next, leaving me torn for what to believe. Then, this creature told a tale that ultimately lead me to leave it alive."

"Oh," the forth figure expressed mild surprise.

"You tend to overthink matters at times, Azila. What could a creature with the presence of Undeath possibly tell you for you to let it leave?" the boisterous voice of the figure mounted on the pile of shapes said, its arms that hung over its thighs rippling with strange muscle spasms.

Azila sighed before looking at the creature opposite him, the Aqua Ripper which he shared a portion of the Tremur to defend.

The massive serpent merely shrugged, clearly not interested in helping the Ape postulate his case.

"Elder Karima," Azila said. "This little creature claimed that it was sent on a mission to investigate the lands of the dead under the guise of one. It said that it had escaped from its Lich and had returned to report to the important personage that had sent it."

Azila's gaze once again fell on the forth figure within this domain, a man with long, silky light cool brown hair that was combed back, settling at his shoulders.

He wore a long sleeved white shirt, its texture strangely like mithril with a pair of reddish brown pants that could easily have been identified as part of a leather armour set.

As he sat in the darkness, slung around his shoulder a sword sheath with a leather strap, a dreadful red blanket of energy around him pushed away the influence of this space.

"An important personage, is it?" the man said with interest. "I don't know anyone in this world brave or strong enough to send their forces to Deadmanland for simple information gathering. Could it be someone from outside Aigas? Hmmm. Did he give a name?"

"He titled this personage Emperor Bonet. In truth, I was under the impression that this individual who could mask away the presence of Undeath even in my Territory had to be a real figure at the very least," Azila replied. "Was I fooled?"

"That's hard to say. I understand your dilemma though."

"Is this even worth looking into, Elder Karima?" the Aqua Ripper said, its green eyes shining as it beheld the figure of the owner of this plane. "One measly undead infiltrated the forest but that doesn't mean anything grand does it? Shouldn't we be talking about something that actually matters? Like that wild fox that has finally been let loose?"

"Leave him be. The forest will replenish in a few years. I owe him this much at least for what he had to endure. What I am more interested in is who claimed the legacy he was guarding. Hopefully, he will tell us after his childish tantrum," the being known as Karima said, his voice intimidating the darkness once more. "Back to the previous subject, how should we conclude it?"

Azila turned to the man with the white shirt.

"There's an additional detail. Perhaps I sensed wrong but I am confident in my ability to perceive such powers," he said.

"Hmm? What is it?"

"This little skeleton I encountered, was bound by the Voice of Worlds..."

"Hooo...." the man in the white shirt said while nodding with a light in his eyes. "Interesting."

"That is quite the claim, Azila. Are you sure? If that is the case, we have a very complicated matter on our hands."

"I'm very sure, Elder Karima."

"Hmmm. You should have continued to monitor this little creature for as long as possible then."

"I intended to, Elder, but you see... I have reached THAT limit."

...!

The figure atop the pile of shapes trembled, its flesh spasming with excitement!

"Is it really so, Azila?!" a burst of exhilaration boomed from the creature.

"Indeed, Elder. That was the main reason I came today. I can no longer walk freely in the world, even for limited amounts of time without using my Territory. I am ready to ascend," the Ape said with pride.

"Hahahahaha! And here I thought you had only brought speculation and conspiracy! Good! I shall prepare everything within the day!"

The Aqua Ripper showed jealousy while the sole human in this space stood, evidently excusing himself.

"The matters of beasts aren't my concern so I'll leave you. I'll keep an eye out for the Emperor Bonet and the little skeleton you spoke of. With luck perhaps I'll be able to sniff them out," the man said before his figure vanished.

He appeared within the dense vegetation that had rivers of white flowing in air and breathed out a sigh.

The air was rich, energy condensing beautifully.

"Allies like these are always troublesome. They are ultimately concerned with personal matters over the bigger picture. Looks like I'll be acting alone for now."

Chapter 387: Not As Upset As You Think

One hour.

One whole hour had passed with the figure of the Discount Human down on the ground as his head was set forward, his blank eyes seeing nothing of the beauty of the waters in the world held up on the Elimparidis Stone Staff.

A soft breeze brushed past him and his body picked up its velocity and consumed everything there was to know about it.

The sensitivity possessed by the Discount Human's flesh now was ridiculous as with this same breeze, he could identify everything within a 100 meter radius, everything this same breeze smashed into.

Grass, soft bursts of dust, the ground...

Every slight movement, every little vibration on in ground, told him everything about most things in this hundred meter range, his ears perfecting the image atop all of this through the soft and hard sounds.

This was phenomenal... but Skullius didn't pay it any heed. At least at this moment.

He subconsciously took in breathes as he thought back to everything that had occurred.

How Sila used his Discount Human body.

How he had used these strange things called...Creeds, to sacrifice his core, his sight and some of his important skills, like [Greater Communication I] for gains that were probably meant for short term purposes.

The other sacrifices were quite troublesome but for Skullius, losing his core was quite the blow.

He didn't know much about the core but he understood its importance.

Feeling it vanish as if it was never there during that fight with Bek had been a tragic experience. Almost tragic enough for Skullius to rage out and yell bone expletives into the sky.

Yet, he did still feel a raging sense of unfairness.

He had lost quite a lot, disrupting what he thought was a phenomenal path to growth. His own path to growth.

"Tsk..." Skullius clicked his tongue.

In all honesty, he wasn't as upset as one would think.

Heck, he wasn't even as upset as he would have liked.

At this point, expecting things to somehow go wrong was his daily bread and now, it was starting to stick.

His life was never going to be easy.

Whether it was atrocious luck behind it or something else, Direction seemed to dictate that hardship was his portion.

Even something VOW had said to him way back rung in Skullius' mind, making him scoff and feel like that was some nasty foreshadowing.

'...True strength is forged when one is alone and resolute...'

That's right.

Because of UNCoddled, the feeling of loneliness was always drilled into Skullius and he was forced to grow alone for the most part.

Even his new goals, like risking more and digging into his past through different means were things that he had set to do himself.

All alone and resolute.

"Yeah... all alone..." Skullius mumbled.

The memory of Doom Factor 2 reaching 52% scaled up in his mind but he quickly suppressed it. He didn't even want to know how much time he had left. At least not now when he was trying to figure out how to move forward.

At this moment though...

[The skill 'High Cosmetic Body' has timed out – 00:00:00]

Skullius' flesh began to recede, his frame growing taller as the Penetrator emerged, four blazing sockets being lit aflame by a fierce blue fire.

Skullius' vision returned and the sensation of mana rushing through him palpably brimmed through his body.

"As I thought..." Skullius said.

His Discount Human body was an additional body he had, with its own characteristics even though he shared things like Null Life Essence and some skills between it and the Penetrator body.

Whatever had happened to the cosmetic body did not apply to the Penetrator.

What a unique state of existence this was. Skullius could truly appreciate this right now of all times.

Still... he felt sullen.

There were a great deal of things that he needed to wrap his mind around first as he didn't really have the luxury of sulking in what he had lost.

"So using [Crude World Projection] isn't an option anymore, huh?"

This skill which had been quite important to him had suddenly become something he couldn't use now. If he did, he would probably be met with the same circumstances he had had to suffer through for past few minutes.

"My awareness goes with my Projected form and I leave my soul and body without any control. That's fleshed up but I get it now. Though this one mistake caused me a lot of problems."

Yes.

The biggest one, besides losing his mana core was that Sila knew everything about him now!

Skullius' privacy was now completely gone while he barely knew much about Sila, which could be even more detrimental.

All that said, Skullius was already in the process of digesting it all. There was no going back now.

An internal enemy had ingested all his memories.

It was a frightening thing indeed.

However, once again, Skullius didn't have the luxury of dwelling on it. Instead...

Skullius inserted mana into his spatial storage ring, two objects falling to the ground.

Demion's Dance and the Lord-Slayer spear!

One was a blade meant to slash with death while the other was a weapon Skullius had crafted with [Unbound] in order to use as his Penetrator body's signature weapon.

This along with another item he had used a large chunk of Null Life Essence on were two items he had been looking forward to using in the upcoming battles between his two bodies.

The Lord-Slayer spear was meant to cover for his inability to inflict any other damage outside of penetration damage while the other item would ensure he wouldn't have to suffer from losing armour after armour.

These aside though, Sila's use of Demion's Dance and the spear in the previous battle had been insane, especially the green bladed sword which Skullius had not been able to use even half of what Sila had been able bring out.

If there was a way to put what had happened behind him, Skullius thought it would be by mimicking Sila and making the most of what he had set.

'Now that I think about it though, would Sila really resort to fighting without a mana core for rest of his life. I mean... he probably responded to what he needed at the time to defeat Bek,' Skullius thought.

This seemed like a safe assumption or rather, the Discount Human was trying to figure out a convincing argument towards possibly restoring his mana core.

'I should be able to do it, right? I don't know how long it will take, but it should be possible!'

There was no way Sila intended to live the rest of his life without a core!

While this had been a concern of Skullius', he decided to cast it aside and believe that his mana core could be reforged!

Skullius balled his hand into a fist with determination, casting his worries aside.

He had to do it!

He had no other choice!

From his side, the figure of Ferex leaned against him as strings of Unliving Thread streamed from its body and wove themselves into.... a book!

No.

It wasn't merely a book!

It was an Innate Holder!

The cover and the old pages that constituted this unique item immediately drew Skullius' attention and he couldn't help but be awed.

"How did you get your hands on this?" he asked as he touched the book, feeling the rough cover and sensing the profound, intricately woven mana within it.

After a quick mental message, Skullius grasped the basic idea of what had happened.

Apparently, Ferex had used [Amorphous Sampling] along with another one of his racial skills called [GENIUS!] which granted him a temporary 'enlightenment' into unclear or abstract concepts. The more complicated they were, the harder it was for Ferex to understand them.

However, if the Hound understood it, the Unliving Threads could, to some extent, mimic the effects!

For such an innate ability like creating magical books from which spells could be spammed nonstop, [Amorphous Sampling] was not enough, and even when coupled with [GENIUS!], Ferex did not get all the spells in the book he had sampled.

Within this Holder with a dark blue cover and yellow orange pages, only five pages had the imprint of an array for a spell.

"This is really good, Ferex. Great work. At least one of us got something good out of this," Skullius said as he patted the large creature's head.

While Skullius was awed, he couldn't really say he was shocked. Red Rage was able to do something similar with his obscene blessing, copying skills from Advanced Classes with ease.

Ferex's ears swayed this way and that, his hollow but luminous sockets lighting up brightly.

This wasn't merely an expression of excitement from the praise but an indication that the beast had several plans it aimed to execute, all of them geared towards making life easier for its master.

By the time Ferex was indulging in his thoughts, Skullius was already conjuring the necessary resolve to begin reforming a way ahead that incorporated the aftermath left by Sila.

"This could be an opportunity in disguise if I keep the right attitude. Maybe it will help me find some insights about the mana core and for that..."

For this, a certain skill which had come off cooldown way before its time because of a strange technicality was needed.

If Skullius intended to reforge his core, he needed...

Chapter 388: Opportunity In Disguise! (1)

The mana core was different from the soul.

It was quite important, no, very important and essential, but at the end of the day, it had the tendency to grow rigid and basic from the most mundane of uses.

In fact, for most humans and beasts, their cores were formed naturally, having basic traits that usually involved the same general formation of mana and the function of storing said energy crudely.

Such a start was already non-indicative of a powerhouse in the realm of combat.

Mages and skilled fighters from powerful Families and Houses were groomed from their cores, avoiding this basic setup of the core that would eventually stick with time, becoming difficult to change.

Once a specialised flow and formation was created, specific techniques could be used along with more advanced applications of mana.

For Skullius who had devoted himself to the 'study' of mana for a thousands years, such a thing had obviously slipped his notice because of the conditions he had grown in but now...

[Depths of the Core].

A skill Skullius had only ever used once before was activated, but...

"OH!" Skullius exclaimed as he had completely forgotten an important detail!

[Epiphany]'s passive effect of a 90% increase in proficiency and power to all used skills washed over [Depths of the Core]!

VWOOSH!

A wild gush of mana poured from Skullius' core!

The Discount Human's vision shifted from the world atop the staff, digging deep as it sank within him, through bone and other substances before arriving at his core!

Only this time...

...!

"Is this really... my core?" Skullius thought as he saw a massive construct below him in a unique sectional view.

This wasn't how he had seen his core before!

Last time it was as if he had been seeing a puzzle of seemingly innumerable joins that he had to complete before the then time limit of [Depths pf the Core] ended. He had struggled to achieve a blue core within a short span of time, hanging on the description of the skill but to no avail.

Now, the view was vastly different.

What he saw was a three-sectioned sphere that had numerous paths connecting to it and spreading outwards towards a vague, dark mass that Skullius thought to be his body.

At the very centre, on the innermost part, was an extremely bright small white sphere that surged with super condensed mana!

Next came a larger sphere that held what Skullius could only identify as parallel rings of white mana with the outermost part being a thin, shell with a silvery hue.

These segments to the core were open for Skullius to see through, though he imagined that this was a layout that most people wouldn't be able to see unless they could dissect a core.

"It's beautiful..." Skullius said as he looked ahead. It was a gorgeous view and he felt a rush of power tumbling within him eagerly!

An effect of this empowered [Depths of the Core]!

The numerous paths linking to the vague darkness connected to the silvery outer shell of the core, seemingly drawing mana from it to supply to the body in a controlled manner.

Actually, no.

This wasn't a mere assumption or speculation.

Skullius could feel it!

The more he looked at the core, the more information about it naturally stormed into his mind, making him understand every aspect of it!

The effects of [Epiphany] were incredible!

Skullius couldn't even imagine just how much levelling he'd need to get [Depths of the Core] to this level otherwise.

"I see... I understand..." Skullius said as he dug deep into the detail that was brashly exposed before him.

The Centre of the mana core.

A sort of origin where the purest mana of an individual was concentrated. This pure mana's purpose was to act as the raw material for all changes and attributes that an individual would want to attach to their mana after it exited the Centre.

It was like a blank canvas. One was free to draw on it as they liked but if a canvas which was already something drawn on was used, amendments and corrections were either extremely difficult to input or flat out impossible!

"Ah... so that's what it is. But then, there's also levels of purity to the mana. I can't imagine that when my core finally formed in Deadmanland, it was anything good. There's barely any mana in that place so all.

It took so many years just to get it to the size of a fist," Skullius said to himself while indulging in these bits of information that he crammed into his own theories, further making his churning mind understand.

The Refinery.

The section between the Shell and the Centre where Skullius could see the tightly packed rings of bright mana.

This was where any modifications to the mana exposed from the centre would be made. The blank and clear mana was morphed into a malleable state, its shift by external means being very possible.

As Skullius looked at this setup, he understood exactly what was wrong.

"This is... way too simple..." he said as he gazed at the rings.

There was nothing special about them. Their form was basic, meaning that this was simply a naturally formed mana core without anything unique (he knew this). The limitations were boundless as a result and it was only now that Skullius was noticing it.

"These rings are the ones that carry basic mana which is then fed to the paths that lead to my body, huh? I see now," Skullius said with piles of disappointment weighing his voice.

The Shell enclosing the Refinery and the Centre was in charge of both containment and distribution.

It literally spelled the entirety of the core in a nutshell.

This was it.

The setup of the core.

Skullius sighed.

After all that he had learned right now, he couldn't help but feel like losing his core wasn't something to cry over anymore.

"This basically means that both of my cores didn't have anything special about them at all," Skullius said.

If cores weren't just batteries as he was learning now, then...

"I was right... Maybe losing my core wasn't such a bad thing after all. Sila probably knew this and intended to form a better one after escaping from Bek."

This was merely a thought though as Skullius didn't intend to ask Sila about it. The old piece of soul was probably still angry from losing his freedom again and probably wouldn't answer his inquiries.

Skullius' vision descended, reaching the Refinery where the multiple rings were arching around the Centre.

These rings weren't merely piles of energy.

They actually had a distinct signature and pattern, different from the pure mana flooding from the Centre.

Still however, this signature and pattern could only be described as basic as well.

Skullius scoffed.

How pathetic.

"Its clear now. This wasn't a loss. This just served to show me that if I want to grow stronger, I need to forge a better core!" Skullius said as he flared with resolve.

#### Chapter 389: Opportunity In Disguise! (2)

With the renewed resolve, Skullius breathed in, further studying the mana core for a few more minutes before he came to a realisation.

"This is lasting a lot longer than I thought. Should I try to push my core to blue again?" he thought.

Given how his trial of the activity had gone last time, Skullius had doubted that turning his core from white to blue would be something he could do with two or even three tries of [Depths of the Core].

Up until now, he had been so enthralled by the information about his core which he had been gathering at the moment that this thought didnt even cross his mind until now.

The fact that there were no interlocking pathways within this core that he had to connect like last time had also driven his mind further away from the thought.

However, as soon as Skullius' mind whirled to this, a familiar field of criss-crossing blue lines, some that met at one point and some that didn't, their number in the thousands, appeared over the layout of the mana core he had been seeing this whole time.

"There it is..." Skullius said, his words dragging on as he lost himself in the beautiful and chaotic arrangement.

While gazing at it, he could even tell that there was a continuity from when he last tried as some of the lines he had joined were depicted here in the order he recognised from last time.

Seeing this as an open invitation to give going for a blue core another try, Skullius dug in, his consciousness drawing onto the lines and exerting a non-physical force over them that tried to pull them together.

As Skullius expected, this wasn't an easy process even with the effect of [Epiphany] but the difficulty had been toned down from nightmare to hard.

As such, the motivated Null Lifeform worked, putting his proverbial and hypothetical back into it.

At the back of Skullius' mind, he kept expecting there to suddenly be a convenient timer that ran out when he was starting to get into the mood for this but surprisingly, that turned out to not be case!

He strenuously pulled on the rigid lines overlapping the structure of his core with all his might, making sure to go in a systematic manner this time so that wherever he left off, he could pick up from there.

The blue lines were connected one after the other, creating thrums of power with each link!

The progress was exhilarating!

Skullius had gone over a little more two hundred of these when...

Nothing.

No timer, no push, no hurry.

"Can I just keep doing this forever then?" Skullius thought as he kept joining the lines over and over again.

With time, he started to note a change while also gaining an understanding over the effects of some of his skills through this experience.

This line work wasn't an inherent part of the mana core. Instead, it was a mechanism conjured by the skill [Depths of the Core] in order to make the process of obtaining a blue core easier!

The same was true for other skills like [Spirit Walk].

Sure it was tough but it definitely beat having to condense mana repeatedly mana for a decade or more.

Skullius linked a hundred more, his pace getting faster as under the line work he was working on, his mana core started to glow with a brighter shade!

"Am I getting close?" Skullius asked himself, but the evidence of hundreds more lines left clearly told him that this wasn't exactly the case.

Unfortunately for Skullius, his vision suddenly drew away rapidly, the image of the ground he sat on being what was laid before his sockets.

Finally, [Depths of the Core] had finally timed out.

"This skill lasts a few minutes instead of one now?" Skullius said as he balled his bony fist which crackled with sparks of Silentburn Levin in excitement.

With the progress he had made so far, he was sure that he could obtain a blue core the next time he used the skill, which was after he used [Bringer of All] with Ferex again to remove its cooldown.

"Well, I don't know what to do to change an already existing core but for a new one, there's room to experiment. At least I now know how the mana core works. Wait... It's actually similar to THAT, now that i think about it! Could it be that the same thing applies?!" Skullius wondered before rising up and looking to his right where an expansive forest was laid bare.

...

Three hours... and a few minutes later...

The image of a Discount Human stood in the thick of literal wetlands, his feet almost completely submerged in a sludgy mud that oozed of fine porridgey dirt.

A very cold breeze sifted through massive trees that rose for dozens of meters, their girth being hundreds of times that of Skullius and more.

They had bulky barks and firm exteriors that gave the impression that they never missed trunk day, the leaves and variety of fruit they produced being so much larger than the norm that it was freaky.

Skullius took in a deep breath.

FUUU!

<Cough>!

<Cough>!

...!

This single breath caused Skullius to emit a chilling cough and his body to kneel in the muddy ground, his body quivering violently.

'Yeah... I was right. It's almost the same thing,' Skullius thought as he staggered to a stand.

Even though he couldn't see, his hyper sensitive body felt the absurd amount of mana casually worming around this place like rivers.

Vast rivers with a thickly white mass.

This was the very centre of the forest within the world atop his Staff. Vibrant and heavy waves of mana ran through everything, giving all things living or not a rather, fresh vibe.

The cool mud at Skullius' feet was the same, the chill it invited into his body being an indication that there was an abundance of pure mana here!

'All three places within this world possess their own rules, I guess. In the water, mana gets denser with depth. In the mountains, mana experiences the same but with height instead. And then here...'

Here.

The concentration of mana grew as one approached the centre!

Asides from the coolness that was propounded with this phenomenon, Skullius felt something else other than mana. Something that encouraged LIFE.

What was the mystery behind this?

'Well... if this really is pure mana, then I guess I can try to make the Centre to my new mana core. I wonder if it will be as hard as I imagine,' Skullius thought as he felt for the void in his body in need for a mana core.

With this body of his, he could sense mana at a more advanced level without [Elevated Mana Manipulation] unlike before.

However, that skill was still needed.

"I've never had to use skills without my own mana. How do I use the Staff's mana when its out there?"

As Skullius mentioned this, it seemed as if the staff heard his conflict and it responded to his will, giving him what he needed, the mana pathways in his body that reached over to the void where his core was supposed to be flickering as mana eventually lit them up!

"Oh...that's convenient," Skullius said as he felt this strange sensation for the first time.

Mana that did not originate from his core!

With him being able to activate his skills now, a passing thought coursed through Skullius' mind.

Where did the skills he learned inhabit then? Was it the soul?

Was there another construct that made up a body?

He didn't know.

It was merely a thought as with what he needed accounted for, Skullius got to work.

"Hopefully this works... [Elevated Mana Manipulation]!"

Chapter 390: Opportunity In Disguise! (3)

Deep within Skullius' soul, the will of a certain individual was held captive in what most would likely call a bubble.

A cute word, though.

Prison was more astute.

There was nothing to be felt and nothing to be seen from within the bubble.

Whoever would be sentenced to such a fate of being stored as a mere consciousness was bound to grow insane or writhe in negativity until they snapped.

Anyone but this man, however...

Sila silently coiled within the silence.

If he hadn't been imprisoned for thousands of years prior within the Labyrinth of the Yoke, a darkness that seemed to carry boundless evils being his company for the longest stretch of time, he could have gone insane.

No. Perhaps not.

That was an unfair assessment.

To live that long without needing sustenance, his body having been relieved the need to excrete waste, was naturally credit that belonged to the master of the Labyrinth, Fulgardt.

Sila in his inaudible rage and pain was forced to think back to the good, the average and the really bad times during the course of his actual life.

Growth.

Belief.

Love.

Defeat.

Misery.

The age he had lived in had plenty of these.

Because of the horrors of war, people loved like there was no tomorrow.

Because beliefs were warped by behemoths with the power to topple continents, cults flourished.

Because no one pitied the weak, or even considered them in the grand scheme of collective life, growth was more prominent.

And yet, to those who were not in Fulgardt's camp, misery and defeat seldom missed its mark.

Sila was unfortunate to still be alive even after that humiliation from the day the Grim Tower fell.

Worse yet, what preceded it was a torn heart as a bold and unwavering sense of grief which was constantly portrayed in the form of blood mixed with pale red juices of fresh tomatoes...

For him, the worst loss of his life.

'I am bottled up once again. Hmph! Pathetic! Will I slowly grow mad once more?' Sila thought.

THRUM!

'Hmm?'

THRRUUUUUM!

Sila's thoughts were disturbed by a loud boom that seemed to bang against the dome of the bubble he inhabited!

THRUUUUM!

Waves of energy blasted against it, but to Sila, only a muffled shudder reached his consciousness.

Such a thing. What was Skullius doing?

Sila's thoughts went over to how he had temporarily attained freedom earlier.

That complex treasure within Skullius' body...

If he had had more time with it, perhaps he could have worked something out.

He had sacrificed Skullius' mana core because there was little to gain from it if he were to fight Bek whom he had estimated to be at the Master Stage. Basic mana attacks wouldn't work against him but immense physical prowess would.

'His core... is he trying to restore it?' Sila thought.

A reverberation that reached even to the soul.

Indeed.

It had to be Skullius reforging his core and his soul spectating to etch the action deep within it.

'How fortunate you are, tomato flinger, that we are separate existences. Otherwise, you'd have been unable to forge it alone,' Sila thought before resigning himself to listening to the dull tunes of the banging against this bubble for the rest of imprisoned time.

A Creed with oneself forbade the reversal of what one sacrificed with another Creed.

For that, an external Creed or something of an equivalent level of influence was needed.

However, Skullius was not Sila. And with the aged piece of soul now buried in Skullius' own soul, it was as if he never existed.

A special circumstance occurred where Sila's actions were seemingly ignored in addition to him not being counted as the same being as Skullius.

Therefore, Skullius could reforge his core as if it was the first time for his body to contain one.

Sila settled in the silence as he waited once more, the record to his life accompanied by the thrum against the barrier to his bubble.

\*

The large forest within the world atop the staff was mesmerising to behold.

From its fringes where the vegetation was sparse to the tangled mess that existed at the centre, one couldn't simply look away from this marvel, especially when visible 'rivers' of condensed mana could be seen cruising between and above the trees, nourishing all things.

Spots of reddish green could be seen, rare gems mounted within strange plants or growing over the barks of trees.

Enriching gems of a higher calibre.

The blot to this scene however, was the large indentation near the edge of the forest where this world ended, a big chunk of this place having been gouged out without tact.

Yes.

This was indeed the portion of the land that had been taken off by the Galemonger back when it attacked Inhone, though it had barely amounted to anything consequentially important.

Back to the mesmerising centre of the forest however, Skullius who stood with his torso bare took in a breath consciously, this action being something he was doing while absorbing mana in order to see how it interacted with his body outside his pathways.

He was no longer choking on it like before, his body having grown a bit tolerant to it.

The result was not exactly anything ground breaking though, or so he thought.

Because the mana was pure and condensed, his muscles screamed and tightened which he imagined would have been painful if he were anyone else.

After that reaction, nothing else would ensue.

This wasn't his main objective so Skullius didn't mind as what he cared for the most was what was happening where his pathways met.

It had been five hours since he had begun absorbing the pure mana within the forest, the process being dreadfully annoying and cumbersome.

The pure mana he absorbed was... heavy and wild.

To Skullius, this explained the mess of vines, tall grasses and behemoths of trees that clustered around this place.

The fuel for such was evidently abundant.

The first hour of his exercise had been the worst as Skullius had spontaneously been planted on the ground with his knees sunken in the mud the whole time!

He had been unable to lift himself up because of the sheer weight of the mass of mana he was carrying.

How it turbulently resisted his control with [Elevated Mana Manipulation] had also been tremendously difficult to deal with, leading the skill to level up six times following his struggle from then on!

Skullius' torso had ruptured multiple times, but obviously, it wasn't anything worth crying over as he regenerated promptly.

Even though after prior heavy usage, the Elimparidis Stone Staff had a little more than 2000 mana points left before it had to recharge back to 10,000, it was more than enough to heal Skullius for the next bursts of damage he would receive later on.

Said next few hours of this exercise of drawing mana had led to the Discount Human gradually improving in his control and by the third hour, he had been able to stand again.

The mana stormed towards one point in his body, creating a bright light the size of a pin head.

When this had finally appeared instead of an unsteady vortex that constantly tried to escape his grasp, Skullius had been elated, however, any lapse in his focus promised to disassemble the hard work he had suffered through.

Now, after two additional hours, Skullius breathed out a sigh.

'Finally. Its stable. It seems there's parts to the Centre of the core too. This little thing needs to be established otherwise you can't gather mana properly. The centre to the Centre, I guess,' Skullius thought with relief washing over him.

He halted his absorption of mana to this small structure and surely, nothing went wrong.

It remained ever bright without showing any signs of dispersing.

Finely condensed mana that formed a sturdy point where the rest of mana would cloud around perfectly!

'Good. Now I just need to create the rest of the Centre. Gah, this is going to take quite some time, but there should be a limit.'

Mana was drawn in droves once again, the masses of white hurrying to devour the small point that calmly sat in the void where all of Skullius' pathways met.

As Skullius began this, it became a more natural thing to do as he could even focus on other things while pulling on the mana which is was very much abundant. Focus wasn't needed when there was literally highly condensed mana everywhere.

'Now, I guess while I gather the mana necessary for my Centre, I can try to understand the limits of this body of mine,' Skullius thought as he stretched his fingers.

There were a lot of intricacies attached to his body now and it was best for him to understand them as aside from him not being able to see, he was extraordinary gifted with his physical stats now being extremely high on top of other properties that were now a part of him.

'Hmm... let's see my status.'