

Undead 661

Chapter 661: The Race

The glow in Stylla's eyes was suffocating.

Ed almost fainted when he glimpsed at the their unfamiliar image, foolishly assuming initially that they belonged to the woman he knew.

Realisation set in moments later, following this glimpse, the strings of his relation to Stylla proving their adequacy in making him understand that the determined lady of the Family he knew, and even the dead eyed ball of gloom he had been seeing recently, was gone.

Only a shell remained.

The extraordinary beauty that Stylla had suddenly adopted as well as the unfathomably boundless well of strength she had inexplicably attained would have mislead others, but not the loyal Knight.

Ed drew back.

He watched as Stylla gazed hollowly past the light of runes guarding the man she called father, and stretched out her hand towards the bed.

An indescribable stillness instantly superimposed itself over the brilliant scenery, the tension brewing among the Family auxiliary staff as well as the free air.

At the same time, the clouds directly above Stylla parted, pulling themselves back to form a circular hollow in the partially overcast sky that expressed the respect of the world for the power being demonstrated below.

Ed gulped.

The parting of the sky was a significant phenomena as far as experts and their level of power was concerned. As such, the Knight couldn't for the life of him believe that Stylla had reached such a level... somehow.

The redhead of the hour did not pay attention to anything else other than her task which was powered solely by past ambitions struggling against the loss of her mental clarity.

Her vision seemed to see something no one else could, a menace that had brought her pain, grief and sorrow.

It was a stirring pool of darkness twisting and turning within her father's body.

The curse.

Stylla had consulted with many Healers and powerful Mages – ones that she could afford to have an audience with – in the past, and they had all failed to purge this dreadful curse. Watching her father be forced into this coma, one that overstayed its unwarranted visit, had been crushing, moreso when Stylla knew who was responsible for it.

But now, with powers geared towards combating something like this...

Stylla's father's expression changed.

He strained and frowned with his eyes still shut tight.

Before long, he groaned and gnashed his teeth, his body convulsing violently.

Stylla, as if struggling quite a bit, frowned and reached in, pushing her hand through the glow of runes effortlessly to place it directly onto her father's chest!

Immediately, the Head of the Bryne Family opened his eyes wide and screamed aloud, the agony he felt more obvious than otherwise!

Ed and the rest watched silently, their hearts beating quickly from fear... and hope.

Certainly, Stylla's appearance had startled many of them – the webbed wings, her sudden growth in height as well as the shift in her facial appearance – but none of them doubted, as soon as she arrived near her father's bed, that she meant him no harm.

Even if sentiment wasn't the prime reason for it.

As Stylla exercised unseen and firm power over the curse within her father, the resistance offered by the damned corruption finally waned.

A dark, cold stream of fog that began to freeze the surroundings blasted from the man who had been imprisoned to his bed for too long.

It streaked erratically, seemingly attempting to escape but Stylla contained it with a simple fist gesture in her palm.

All the biting cold and dark, pervasive fume was trapped in her hand.

She then wordlessly took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Her father, coming out of the instinctive reaction to express his agony, lost consciousness and slumped to the bed again.

Truly...

Ed stared... surprised, for lack of a better word.

There was a torrent of emotion flooding through him right now, but surprise was definitely atop that mix.

Truly, it seemed Stylla had finally overcome the biggest hurdle for the Family!

She had removed her father's curse... but at a cost.

She opened her eyes and glanced at her father... one last time.

Her dark, webbed wings, the majesty of their span fully unfurled, blew out a cold breeze around her.

Without warning, she then shot into the sky, rising as quickly as lightning drops from the heavens.

"Lady Stylla!" Ed screamed at the top of his lungs, but the redhead was long gone before he even thought to raise his voice.

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The Null Devil King leisurely gazed at the new arrival and the returned Gillewart.

The conflict on the man's face made it chuckle.

This was because it was clear to the City Guardian that this being before him was not something he could beat on his own, especially with that damned sword by its side.

Naturally, Gillewart's assessment was not entirely correct.

Unlike Skullius right now who clearly understood what the crimson bladed sword could do, how overpowered it was, he failed to comprehend the stipulations behind its outrageous effects. Not that it would help much.

Sevill helped Skullius up while continuing to watch the enemy closely.

"Lord Festos. What is this creature...?" she asked with a look riddled with suspicion under her veil.

It was strange.

When gazing at it, Sevill felt like her unnaturally keen perception abilities as an Incandescent Stage expert were the ones being used to give her the image of this being. Without them, she doubted she would be able to see this creature or even feel its serene, yet viciously abundant presence.

The distinction between Stages, Cores and Classes was made more apparent here.

The reason why Stages were deemed superior to Classes and Cores, was because they did not merely give abundant increments to physical capacity or even new abilities in the conventional sense. They granted unnatural, powerful properties which integrated seamlessly into the practitioner, the results of which rivalling and exceeding even Hidden Class abilities in some cases.

This was especially so when the last two Stages above the Incandescent Stage were introduced.

The Transcendent Stage...

The Beyond the Veil Stage...

Even millennia ago, in the most trying times of Aigas' history, only a total of fifteen beings had ever touched on these realms of power while Hidden Classes and the peak of mana quality and quantity, the golden hue, were touched upon by close to a hundred experts.

"I have... no idea..." Skullius strained to answer Seville's question.

The Null Devil King scoffed.

"Lies. You know exactly what I am..."

It suddenly turned its head to the left.

A rolling breeze and the quaking of the air resounded.

Something had burst into the open sky.

"My guide is leaving, it seems. Fascinating creature... Well, I suppose that's my cue to leave as well," the Null Devil King pulled up the Bastard Sword of the Hedonist, its gesture making everyone tense.

Seville had already begun to gather her Perfect Aura while wondering what the creature was saying... and why it seemed to be addressing Skullius.

The creature then looked at its gauntlet.

There was a shallow scar on it from Skullius' previous attack.

'Hmph.'

The Bone Tender disregarded this detail and instead felt its body underneath the armour.

It seemed inhabiting the body of the Null Devil King gave it more time than expected.

That time, especially in a Rich World like this, needed to be used wisely... whether Serenity liked it or not.

The bastard sword faded from the Null Devil King's hand.

"The race begins, bearer of Serenity. I'm sure other bearers may have already begun contesting over this world. Hmm, it has to be so. Whether you know what all this means or not, matters little. I look forward to the near future. Maybe we might even collude if you're so inclined," the Bone Tender expressed with a serious face.

Right after, a burst of Null Life Essence, another variety Skullius hadn't seen before, burned like a flame over its figure with a royal blue hue.

"I'll leave my unwanted followers, six Null Badubs for you to deal with. Surely YOU can take care of that much."

In a flash, the Null Devil King vanished.

While seeing its figure disappear, Skullius just knew this world was about to turn chaotic... more chaotic than it already was.

Chapter 662: You'll Only Get In The Way

Reacher Academy.

The Magic Academy was the only place that remained untouched by the light from Ruhrees' Beacon of Ardour.

Its entirety already had a layer of protection cast by the Headmaster of the Academy, a Mage who was considered to be the strongest Arch-Mage of the age. Granted, his skill as an Arch-Mage only relayed his progression in Magecraft. In terms of stages, he was no more advanced than Ruhrees or Gillemart.

Still, his mastery of the combat form was enough to resist even the effects of a high tier Divine Blessing, which said quite a lot about how strong he was.

Currently, in the tallest and grandest tower within the Reacher Academy grounds, Tallo was looking out the large, trapezoid window with his teacher, Arch-Mage Verys at his side.

The rather picturesque scenery of the extensive, beautiful glow, coupled with strings of rainbow-like flares over every structure within the city, could have been a simple, relaxing image. However, the quake of the ground, followed by the fragments of the glow from Ruhrees' Divine Blessing breaking off from Genhuis' infrastructure brought on an ominous sense of foreboding instead.

In addition to the horned, blue creature that had infiltrated the city since the unrest began, another had crashed the wall, bypassing the formation of Capital Service Knights and Mages.

It was short with burly arms and legs that stressed the amount of physical might built into it. Unreasonable physical might that defied logic.

From a glance, one could tell it was extremely resilient too because of its skin which almost seemed like armour, given its cobalt sheen.

Fortunately, to prevent the continued march of this creature into the city, a determined figure streaked through the air and bashed her shield into its face.

The attack while completely nullified by the short stack of bulk, succeeded in making it stop moving.

That could be considered a win in this situation.

Ornamont's sharp gaze, brimming with inhuman levels of attention could be felt even from this distance by the two Mages. It seemed the woman had learnt a lesson she wasn't willing to go through again.

"Are we not going to help them? This is our city too," Tallo turned to his teacher and asked.

"Good question," the older man said.

There was pause following this promising response but not a great follow-up. Actually, there was none.

"But...?" Tallo said with a slightly frustrated gaze.

"But what?" Arch-Mage Verys asked, confused.

A thick, blood vein bobbed on Tallo's temple.

"Why aren't we helping?!" he questioned through his teeth.

"Oh. There are many reasons. For one, Mages aren't known for jumping straight into dangerous situations without performing extensive analysis. You have been able to see past the walls, have you not?"

Most Magecraft Patches rudimentary and otherwise are proving ineffective against these monsters, even when taking into account the fact that the Capital Service Mages involved are only Prime Mages," Verys said.

Tallo's face hardened.

His teacher chuckled at his reaction.

"I know you're dead set on achieving the impossible but sometimes, you must trust your eyes and wait," Verys advised.

Ever since Tallo the young Mage had expressed his intent to join the Premium Age Royale, Verys had been skeptical. He knew the young man to have conflicting, or more aptly, contradicting outlooks on life and he himself acknowledged it, but he had wondered a great deal.

Tallo was kind-hearted, unwilling to see innocent and even guilty people suffer in any way. He'd even feel remorse when witnessing a death sentence being issued for a murderer. Visible pangs of empathy itched in his heart. He'd propose to stake his life whenever he could to defend even common folk when disasters befell them.

However, when Tallo was not a mere bystander, an onlooker, or a mere third party to an event...

When he was the one doling out punishment or facing an opponent in a simple spar or duel, he tended to be... ruthless. He could be cold hearted where he had empathised, when his role was changed.

It was a bit hypocritical.

However, this could be explained by his drive, which was the same as what most Mages had, though perhaps a bit excessive. Tallo intended to elevate his skill in the combat form by pitting himself against powerful opponents. This, according to the young Mage, was his reason for joining the Premium Age Royale.

The fights he would get to participate in would be a great learning experience for a combat Mage like him, but he was also looking forward to what the EverSword House had to offer the victors.

He wasn't naive enough to believe Rearren's speech at the beginning of the event, but he knew there was an endgame and sadly for Verys, the young man was counting on him should something go wrong.

The keener minds were extremely suspicious of the Premium Age Royale, after all.

Tallo sent his focus back to the violent exchanges.

"Can we try using more preventative measures instead? Like sealing? Arch-Mage RYTE is pretty proficient in the Binding Patch, right?" he suggested.

"That is true. If things go so far out of hand, we'll make a cautious attempt. I do confess I'm quite curious about these creatures and their origins. If we manage to catch some of them..." the Arch-Mage stroked his chin with a couple of nods, letting his eager mind run wild.

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Guilds Association.

Alaris keenly watched Ornamont's stand off against the short creature she was cautiously eyeing behind her mangled shield.

When the commotion had begun, he had quickly appraised the situation and found it rather... dire. This was especially apparent when he found that Ruhrees', another Incandescent Stage expert was unable to harm the enemy, which gave him a similar feel of hopelessness to seeing Ornamont get sent flying across regions with a single blow from one of the enemies.

His assessment led him to cull the foolish, adrenaline-induced choice by most mercenaries to dash head first into a fight where the city's safety was concerned.

Thus, at this moment, the doors to the Guilds Association were sealed by his orders and he was standing before them with a stern visage, his sword at his side.

'Well, might as well try to help milady,' he said as he drew his gladius from its sheath and knelt on the ground.

Alaris seemed to meditate for a few seconds while his eyes were closed shut... and then he opened them.

He raised the gladius and held it horizontally, as if preparing to stab with it, his other hand supporting its blade lightly.

A light green Perfect Aura dreadfully rose from his body as his eyes pierced through the glowing infrastructure to lock on Ornamont and then the beast before her.

With a calm breath, Alaris thrust his sword, the motion to this action being strangely slow but undoubtedly... lethal.

From the tip of the gladius, an unseen trail of sharp intent made its course in a straight line, passing through obstructions like an apparition to reach Ornamont's back where it seamlessly pushed past without doing any harm and then...

When the unseen strike reached its true target, a crisp noise, like a saw's teeth scraping against hard wood sounded!

The short, stout and sturdy blue creature jerked back and paused.

It then reached in to touch its forehead, where a long, jagged but shallow cut had manifested out of nowhere.

Ornamont blinked, surprised while Alaris from the distance shook his head dejectedly and sat down.

"That's confirmation then. It'd take days at my current level of strength to hack through that thing. And here I thought I was bit strong..." he said with self ridiculing chuckle.

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Ruhrees dodged another blow from his opponent and landed on the roof to a small tavern protected by the light from his Beacon of Ardour.

This was hopeless.

The two Beacons he had just used were the only forms of his Divine Blessing he wasn't reluctant to employ during battles where fragile lives were at stake.

The rest... the rest were too dangerous.

That said, the fact that the Beacon of Extirpation, the offensive arrow of light he had used earlier had failed to even scratch his opponent, made him nervous.

That Beacon in particular was guaranteed to destroy enemies that wished to do harm specifically when he was guarding innocent lives. The arrow grew stronger in such circumstances, thus when it failed in such an ideal situation...

'What's worse, this thing packs enough power to break through the protection from the Beacon of Ardour. Even if five Incandescent Stage experts banded together and attacked with their full raw physical strength, they wouldn't be able to do a thing against it. But that creature...'Ruhrees thought.

The thought of the blue, horned menace taking slow steps towards him cocking back its arm filled him dread. He had to dodge, otherwise he would die if he took such a blow without guarding fully.

What to do?

What would he do?

He had never encountered such a situation.

At some point, Ruhrees believed that being at the Incandescent Stage guaranteed that he could at least hold his own against any and all foes in the world but that was proving to be very presumptuous. In a wrong way.

To add insult to injury, there were five more enemies probably as strong as this thing, four still being held off outside and another having invaded the city moments ago.

This was a treacherous situation and...

"Hey, why don't you hang back. I'll take care of this," a confident voice suddenly shattered Ruhrees' shaken mental innards.

Along with the voice, a hand pushed him back as if he was some kind of maiden in distress and this... this struck a bit of a nerve with the Incandescent Stage expert.

"What are you—" Ruhrees began but he was cut off by the pale man with white hair tied into a ponytail.

"I said hang back. You'll only get in the way," Aurolio said without sparing the Paladin Champion a glance.

Chapter 663: Easy and Disgusting

Aurolio had been convinced after using his senses to scan what made up the enemies that had attacked the city.

What had acted as a better form of evidence was the identification offered by the appraisal in his eyes, which labelled these creatures as, Null Badubs, or more specifically, Fledgling Null Badubs.

The Head of the Velanqi Family had been convinced that what he felt from these beings, was the same sharp sliver of energy he had felt from that young man he had marked at the introductory gathering to the Premium Age Royale.

The fact that the young man had a strange race, the Hybrid Luman, and a Hidden Class – both him and his green-haired girlfriend to boot – had been surprising, to say the least. However, those details weren't what truly hooked him onto that man named Festos Dawn.

His display against the pompous show-off Kurtish Oldd where he stacked mana and another unfamiliar energy onto his sword, had been what truly caught his attention.

Even then though, he hadn't been too inclined to follow up on just this. That was too vague a thing to look into.

At the time, he had figured that this Festos guy and Gabel, the bounty hunter who he had found to possess Veneration, were the two main suspects attached to the objective of his journey.

For the past month, he had been leaning more towards Gabel being why he had been directed to this city... until now.

The energy that made up the six invaders was similar to the one he had sensed from Festos that day.

Of this, he was very sure.

There had to be a link between Festos and these monstrosities which, quite frankly, gave him a distant sense of... kinship, for whatever reason. All this pointed with blaring instinctive alarms that what that walking fossil had divined, had to do with Festos.

Definitely.

"I said hang back. You'll only get in the way."

Aurolio's words were not pleasing to hear for Ruhrees.

His eyes sparked with a furious light and he grabbed the pale man's shoulder to push him away before he got hurt because of idiotic hubris.

However...

Aurolio opened his mouth and spoke.

"| Old men seldom listen to genuine advise, don't they? |"

...!

Ruhrees' body suddenly lifted off the roof where he and Aurolio were standing.

It made a sharp ascent with each word the pale man spoke, as if triggered into flight by the complexity of each individual piece of speech.

Well, that was the case actually.

Ruhrees' mouth opened wide.

"What... what's going on?!" he called, his face turning as pale as Aurolio's when he discovered that him exerting his mana or Aura to control his body didn't help at all.

Thankfully, when Aurolio stopped speaking with the same authoritative tone, Ruhrees' body did not continue to rise.

"Since you decided to flaunt your pride, I retaliated. Try anything else and I'll send you into the clouds," Aurolio warned apathetically before dropping from the roof.

He murmured a few curses in the process.

"That ate up a bit of my mana... but it was worth it just to see that face. Ah, fuck it's cold!" he thought.

He made his way towards the blue Null Badub with skin like tree bark. The creature spared a glance to its previous opponent before focusing on Aurolio who walked towards it with the same calm, slow gait.

A different expression etched itself on the thing's face.

'I thought as much,' Aurolio confirmed what had been a minor suspicion of his. He stopped moving and crossed his arms as quickly as he could.

As soon as his arms formed an 'X' in front of his face, a screaming blue fist layered with a dull blue glow had already reached him, pounding against his arms violently!

"Hngh..." Aurolio gave a muffled groan as the heavy rush ran through his body, coursed through legs and passed on into the lit ground!

The protection from the Beacon of Ardour was ravaged ravenously, crumbling in a wide radius around the Null Badub and Aurolio, along with everything it had been protecting!

Thankfully, because the encasing of light acted as a connected network that shared the strain, the damage did not extend over more than twenty meters, but whatever came before that was obliterated.

Everything except Aurolio.

The fuzzy coat he had been wearing was torn at the sleeves.

...And that was the extent of the damage he took.

Ruhrees who was positioned firmly fifty-six meters above ground gawked.

No way!

He was sure of it!

If he guarded with all the Perfect Aura he could muster, he might be able to survive given the added benefit of his physique which was stronger... but a mere Master Stage expert?

How?!

Unfortunately, the answer was elusive even to an Incandescent Stage expert with his eyes attuned to seeing extraordinary phenomena.

A pale purple glow created a spiky, light stroke around Aurolio, its texture similar to the one around the Null Badub's fist!

This protective purple layer was the secret behind Aurolio's impressive feat just now and... also why the Null Badub had suddenly turned feral, acting more violent than it had been before encountering him.

'I was right not to go give in to curiosity and rush over to that crazy presence. If this Fledgling whatever is this strong... I can imagine what that thing is capable of,' Aurolio thought with a toothy smile.

He was proud of his judgment. If he had chosen to head straight to the Bryne Family Residence... he'd rather not continue down that line of thought.

The Null Badub glared at him with an ugly visage of pure hatred.

While Aurolio had guessed that something like this could happen, he hadn't been too sure. He still didn't know the REAL reason why he was cause for such fury from this creature but this occurrence at least confirmed some pieces of information he had that didn't tally.

"For now, this will do," he said.

At the same time, his opponent threw another malevolent attack, a vibrant hook that Aurolio didn't hesitate to dodge by flashing backwards only to watch a long stretch of the city get utterly demolished by the shockwave from his enemy's punch alone!

The pale man grinned at the showcase of power.

He had to end this thing before it levelled the city all on its own.

For that, he opened his mouth to speak.

" | You're monstrous beyond belief! That second punch would have broken my arms if I guarded for sure. |"

As soon as the words left his mouth, the Null Badub seemed to get smacked by something unseen right in the head, its body getting forced to kneel before being pushed into the ground by a terribly heavy force!

With each word that Aurolio spoke, it grunted as if mountains of weight slammed into it continuously – contrary to the effect Ruhrees had suffered.

'Good. At least this works on these things too,' Aurolio thought.

While the Null Badub was subdued, he sped forward, the purple glow around him growing more ferocious.

As soon as he appeared in front of the blue beast whose head was arching down towards the ground in an attempt to lessen the brutal effects of Aurolio's speech, the pale young man raised his leg and gifted his enemy a flamboyant axe kick to the noggin!

It was swift, tracing a purple line down towards the Null Badub's head silently, but in the next moment an unsightly ripple rolled out from where Aurolio's heel descended, followed by a great implosion on the ground!

The rugged ground was tormented once again.

Ruhrees was left to doubt his eyes when the glow of his protection was erased further by another monstrous combatant as if it was nothing!

And this time, when the vibrant effects of the attack faded, Ruhrees' heart almost skipped a beat.

The Null Badub... the Null Badub's head... it had been squashed, its indescribable insides sprawled on the abused ground for all to see!

'No way!' Ruhrees thought.

With just one attack? Something as tough and powerful as that...

The Paladin Champion couldn't believe it.

Meanwhile Aurolio frowned when he saw the internal makeup of the Null Badub's head.

He swiped away black blood from his shoe and scoffed.

"That was easier...and more disgusting than I imagined. I expected brains at worst," he said.

Six figures rolled in his sight as a reward for defeating his opponent, which made Aurolio lick his lips, a rarely seen dose of excitement burning his eyes.

He quickly gazed in another direction where Ornamont was having a tough time with another Null Badub.

"Might as well deal with all of them then," he proclaimed with passion.

Yet...

A silver glow that sifted from the Control Seal on his arm shot down his enthusiasm.

"Well, damn."

The timing was indeed impeccable.

Chapter 664: It Is Time

It was time.

On Alaris' arm, the Control Seal shone brightly, covering him with a familiar silver glow. Immediately, the examination officer was reminded what time it was and the prospect didn't please him one bit.

For the first time, he regretted his decision to participate as a witness in the Premium Age Royale and he was sure a few others were sharing his unpleasant sentiment. If several combatants of his calibre were forcibly transported away during this crisis, that could prove dire.

The numbers were needed, especially for strong forces.

Thankfully, few among the Capital Service personnel – relevant folks at least – had not made the casual decision to entertain themselves in the so-called greatest event of the century, so at least, once everyone vanished, there was going to be someone left to deal with the enemies.

Additionally, the Mages and other high level Energy Formers of the Reacher Academy whom he was sure were not all that interested in wasting several weeks worth of time by attending the EverSword House event would help. Probably.

'Oh well, I'm just a mercenary. I shouldn't think too much,' the Bloodless Steel Phantom thought with a sigh.

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At the very heart of Genhuis City, in the Governor's Manor, Viccil clashed with the tall assassin who relentlessly kept up the energy despite being horribly outmatched. Her only advantage was her Mythical grade treasure which granted her an outrageous amount of physical boons like enhanced speed, strength and resilience.

Possibly, the idea of her grinning wider and wider after eating blows that would have smashed the average Master into unrecognisable bits without going insane, could be classified as another one of the more potent strengths that deserved praise. Her willpower was inhuman and it did not ease Viccil's nerves at all.

With her innate powers, other than her raw physical qualities shut away because of unfortunate circumstances, she was only left with drastic options she didn't favour to implement so casually.

'I knew Maqi had insane characters but this is madness. This woman even came equipped to deal with compulsion. That axe of hers must defy it effectively on top of everything else it can do,' Viccil thought exasperatedly.

When she had asked who the assassin was at the beginning of the battle, she had expected the tall woman to be forced to answer at least because her words compelled the soul. However, even that had failed.

Normally, peak Master Stage experts, especially when fused with their Genuine Incarnation could resist compulsion to some degree, but a request that required mere word of mouth should have passable.

Sadly... this wasn't the average Master.

Viccil checked up on Darwel and saw that she was still hanging on, though only barely.

The plant she had forcibly awakened was quickly running out of pure mana and the effects of the assassin's axe, which were quite effective on living things, were accelerating its expenditure, leading it to its inevitable collapse.

Soon, both the plant and Darwel would turn into rubbery goo and die if Viccil didn't end this quickly.

A bright glow, flowing out of the veiled guard like paint had already begun to exert itself within the dark space where she trapped with the assassin.

The tall woman knew what Darwel was about to do but she wasn't at all fazed. Either she had something up her sleeve or she didn't mind dying right here.

Viccil was almost sure it was the latter.

In any case, the guard, while recognising that within the large manor were several important figures as well as tens more lives she would end if she projected her Territory, did not see enough reason not to burn everything down for her sworn lady.

Her duty first and foremost was as a guard for royalty!

Everything else was secondary.

She crossed her arms and balled her one hand into a fist before her knees and called...

"Majestic Te—"

Unexpectedly, a silver glow suddenly covered her body, interrupting her flow of energy.

Immediately, Viccil was forced to remember.

Of course!

The tension had made her forget that it was time.

The same look of realisation appeared on Darwel who was also overtaken by the bright light that gushed from her Control Seal, signalling that the hours belonging to the EverSword House's event demanded attention.

She had to contend and Viccil had to witness.

The tall woman watched the spatial glow with exasperated eyes.

The timing was both a blessing and curse from her view. Unfortunately, she had no control over this. Her whole strategy had been based off the lucky situation she had found herself in and now... she had lost it.

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While millions of flashes of the silver glow flared all throughout the city, witnesses and contenders alike pulled in by the authority of the Control Seal, Skullius hid his tools back in his storage.

Sadly, the unwanted surprise had come and gone without him being able to do anything but be left with the lock-on of curious eyes that seemed to ask the same question.

What was that?

One would be a fool not to realise that amidst everything that happened, Skullius seemed to be target and object of interest for whatever that terribly powerful thing was.

It gazed at him and spoke in a language that everyone else could not understand....except the Hybrid Luman.

While the relationship between them didn't seem friendly, Seville and Gilweart at least knew who to turn to for answers.

Unfortunately for them, the Hybrid Luman didn't have the first clue on what on earth had caused such a thing to happen. With enough thought, he was starting to get closer to reasonable theories and conclusions, but the look on his face suggested heavily that right now wasn't the time to ask.

Skullius grumbled and clutched his head.

'Why does a large scale disaster always follow whenever I visit a new city?' he thought while trying to cool his heating mind that was sharing processing qualities with the Omniscient Thought Cracker.

He had to give props to his atrocious luck though, it didn't seem to run out of ways to screw him over. Admittedly, things had been going smooth, a bit too smooth for the past month and a half, making Skullius remember that he did in fact have this active, accursed attribute.

Was this a return to form or was what Serenity had told him back then during their first encounter starting to come to pass?

Whichever it was, Skullius didn't get the chance to think it over.

In the moments he took to contemplate all of this, he and Seville were transported to the venue for the Premium Age Royale, leaving Gillewart standing alone in the messy remains of the Bryne Family Residence.

The Hybrid Luman appeared in the familiar tent within his own separate, comfortable space as a contender.

Immediately, concentrated bursts of noise blasted against his ears from the millions occupying the stadium, some relieved and some still in a bit of shock – mainly the common witnesses.

At the top layers of the stadium, the Governor, his son, Alaris, Ruhrees as well as other distinguished individuals just spawned in their seats as well.

Rearren who was seated with his son and wife at his sides at the zenith looked down, an infuriating smirk appearing on his face.

"I understand your apprehension against the event..." he said, garnering the attention of the Governor and Ruhrees in particular who had been with him in the meeting to discuss the termination of the event.

"...But look at this. This same luxury that many are coming to watch for free is what saved the city's folk from destruction, is it not? Don't let bias cloud your judgement. You know I'm right. Millions has been saved today because of me. The least you can do now in appreciation, is to stop barking and let the event see its conclusion."

An undeniable declaration was made.

Chapter 665: A Lot To Take In (1)

Silrat among millions of others could not have been more glad to find himself on a comfortable seat within the well guarded stadium. Even though he knew the partial truth behind this event, the former Association Branch Head was happier to be here than in the city where an endless streak of bizarre phenomena beyond his mental capacity continued to casually transpire.

For now, he knew he was safe.

...Until it was time to go back at least.

The thought made him shiver.

What had happened to Stylla...

The look on Skullius' face...

The advent of an Incandescent Stage expert who seemed to be doing his very best against... Silrat didn't even know that man and Skullius were fighting?!

Speaking of another one the victims of what happened – other than himself – Silrat turned to his left, searching for Stylla's figure.

Her seat was empty.

As was Setkh's.

The Supervising Overseer narrowed his eyes. Now that his mind wasn't rampaging, looking for unseen details to connect together for a larger picture, he could think clearly.

'Is it possible to reject the transportation to the Venue for the Premium Age Royale?' he thought.

Turning his head and looking up at where all the big wigs were seated, he was forced to frown.

Everyone who was supposed to be there was there.

Hmmm.

When he had been taken away from the Bryne Family mansion by Skullius' Conforming Trickerteer, he had gotten a glimpse of the crisis currently ongoing within Genhuis and outside it. It had not been limited to the bizzareness he had just seen before him after all.

Something, or somethings had invaded the city or were in process of doing so, which meant that powerful combatants would be dealing with them.

Yet, Alaris and Ruhrees were here, and on the latter's face, frustration was apparent.

This told Silrat what he needed to know.

Things hadn't been going well in Genhuis City and from the looks of it, the Paladin Champion he was looking at would have preferred to be back in Genhuis, fighting off the enemy.

But he couldn't.

The Control Seal couldn't be defied even by an Incandescent Stage expert.

So... what was happening with Stylla and Setkh?

The Supervising Overseer got a really bad feeling about this.

Something wasn't right.

*

After the initial outpour of confused noise, the general vibe within the stadium seemed to calm down a bit.

Unlike seasoned combatants, common folks' only stress and mental exercise had much to do with mental terrors and local drama, thus when it came to reacting to situations where the status quo was continuously shifting because of the supernatural elements, they were rather slow.

That said, the amount of cheer within the air was not as palpable.

In fact, this had started to become the general trend since the Second Round of Preliminaries. Of the 234 contenders participating, it was becoming clear who was relevant and who wasn't, leading to most battles becoming stale, even for common folk.

The Mage who had surprised everyone in the first match of the entire event.

The crazy woman who could turn things flat.

The man with the eerie glaive.

The man widely recognised as the strongest among the Family circles.

And last but not least, the Sif princess who had already gotten her turn in the Second Round of Preliminaries as well.

She hadn't gotten a chance to show off what she could because... well, her opponents simply refused to fight her for their own sakes. Who knew what would happen to them if they so much as tore a strand of her hair.

For the common folk, the displays by these five were the most prominent, though in the eyes of the Families and the contenders, the list of worthy combatants was longer.

Of course, the depletion of stimulation wasn't the only reason for the subdued excitement.

The rumours about the Control Seal somehow killing people had spread as quickly as they had surfaced.

The thousands of witnesses who had died within the last stretch of days, all of them said to have been in possession of a Control Seal on different parts of their bodies – mainly the arm – had caused quite a bit of an uproar.

It was the main subject of discussion within taverns and inns, the gatherings of people among which it circulated brewing dark and twisted negativity that led to several unsavoury incidents.

More than a few overly concerned witnesses had demanded the owners of the stalls that disseminated the Control Seals to have them removed from their bodies, but of course... this wasn't possible.

Everyone knew the rules.

Once you decide to participate as a witness, especially, you had to fulfill your role and WITNESS everything to the very end.

The Capital Knights who usually looked out for these kinds of things – the position of the general public on certain topics, along with the trending bits of gossip and news – had caught onto this swiftly and reported to the Governor.

This, among several other reasons had caused the meeting that was being held today on the subject of the Premium Age Royale's cancellation.

All this said though...

"Thank Quintess! I couldn't bear to keep standing still around other sheep as scared as I was for dear life!"

"You said it. I thought I was the only one who thought things actually... weren't looking good for our Knights out there."

"Well, we get a chance to relax but... will they really be okay? Things won't just change because most of Genhuis' population suddenly disappeared right?"

"It could. The Capital Service should prioritise our lives over the infrastructure. Maybe now they can fight without worrying about the people, you know?"

"Maybe..."

The conversations going on among clustered groups was similar to this.

Even though everyone was growing anxious about the Royale, for now, they were glad they had gotten a chance to escape the tension.

Among these was Darwel who was panting heavily as she sat in her own space within the contenders' tent.

Her body had returned to normal, even without the roots of the sunflower expending large amounts of pure mana to keep her body stably solid.

'That was getting a little too uncomfortable,' she thought with a sheepish smile while wiggling her fingers and toes. 'This saved us a lot of trouble. Besides possibly dying, the hassle of having to deal with Viccil's projection of a Territory in such a place... would have been... Urgh. Is this how those two feel whenever I tell a joke?'

Since she was here, Darwel was sure Viccil, Seville and Festos were here too. The latter, hopefully safe.

As for the person in question, he was deep in thought while paying little focus to the platform where a glass pane descended from a height, on it an enthusiastic Game Master oblivious to the crisis going on elsewhere.

"Welcome my extravagant contenders and witnesses...!" Guissepo called with a big smile on his face.

As his voice blasted throughout the stadium, the Hybrid Luman couldn't help but click his tongue.

"Too many enemies all at once..." he murmured to himself.

"Which enemies would you be referring to?" a voice interrupted the rugged flow of his thoughts, startling the Hybrid Luman quite a bit.

Skullius shook and turned, almost getting ready to go on the offensive when he realised to whom the voice belonged to.

"Calm down. I just want to chat. I think we have a LOT to talk about," a pale man with long, white hair said with a shiver.

Chapter 666: A Lot To Take In (2)

"Uhh..." Skullius stammered.

"Don't 'uh' me," Aurolio said as his eyes twitched. "You can tell who I am, right? Of course you can, you wouldn't be alive otherwise with that visual impairment."

The pale man shivered before summoning a luxurious chair from a storage space whose location Skullius couldn't identify. Aurolio sat annoyingly close to Skullius and even scooted his chair even closer, leaving a very narrow gap of suggestive proportions between them.

Aurolio then blew a warm breath into his pale hands that looked to genuinely be stricken by a biting cold and locked his eyes on Skullius.

"Uh... is this allowed? I thought you couldn't just... I don't know... invade people's private spaces. Literal metaphorical and including this one as well..." Skullius said, blitzing past the last sentence in annoyance so as to not be...

too direct.

"I heard that," Aurolio said with snort. "It's not against the rules, so why not move as I please."

'Really?'

Now that Skullius thought about it, the rules really didn't specify anything about this being illegal. Not that he had anyone to visit during the matches.

"You're not what I expected. My first impression of you is already pleasant," Aurolio said.

Skullius didn't offer any form of snarky comment, as much as he was itching to.

Instead, he used [Graceless Hunter] to scan Aurolio thoroughly.

The pale seemed to be aware of it but didn't mind.

The Hybrid Luman had been interested in this guy since his first fight in the Preliminaries. No, even before that. Stylla had warned him, after all.

The man who was hailed as the strongest among the Families of Pelian.

Of course, Skullius had not truly cared as much about him until he saw his 'fight' in the Preliminaries.

This pale man truly was strong and right now, the silent presence he exuded was making the Hybrid Luman uncomfortable. His mangled thoughts had been slashed apart as soon as he had showed up.

This was both terrifying and highly inconvenient for Skullius who hadn't even had enough time to properly digest everything that had just happened prior to being transported here, especially everything to do with Stylla's fate.

But that could wait.

Beside Vali, the cunning woman who expressed interest in him, going as far as to outright declare it to his face.

Besides Gabel, the poetic maniac who seemingly only practised literacy in a murder and murder-related capacity, Skullius was wary of this man before him.

What did he want?

"How can I help you?" he asked cautiously.

Aurolio shivered, emitting a funny sound in the process.

He sized up Skullius before poking his head suddenly, as if the Hybrid Luman was some toy.

"You had me fooled for a while. If it wasn't for the guidance field and that split second from that day, I would have believed you're actually a normal human. Wait, scratch that, you're not even a fucking human," the pale man said in the most monotone voice Skullius had ever heard.

...!!

Skullius shook.

Goddammit!

He visibly tensed.

"I'll say it again. Calm down," Aurolio slammed his hand onto Skullius' shoulder. "Don't make me use 'respectfully dangerous words' now. Like I said. I just want to chat."

Many thoughts sprawled within Skullius, causing a mental storm that the Omniscient Thought Cracker, the small, but terrifyingly efficient brain he had acquired after attaining [Great Celestial Counterfeit], compartmentalised.

How the hell did this guy know that he wasn't... human?!

Wait!

How much did he know?!

Dammit! Why so suddenly?!

"Talk my vague ass!" Skullius thought furiously.

In the real world, where all his internal thoughts were hidden, the Hybrid Luman wore an innocent smile.

"What do you me—" he began...

"Don't you dare play dunce with me! <Sigh>. Maybe I'm going a little too fast here. Let's start with something simple. Argh. I swear you're almost as exhausting as Idline," Aurolio said with a harsh breath leaving his nostrils.

"You know what a guidance field is, right?"

The Hybrid Luman remained silent for a while.

In a short span of time, he managed to rein in his scattered thoughts and consider what to do pragmatically.

Guidance field?

Guidance field.

Well... this confirmed it then.

'I knew it wasn't just Elita who knew about this but...' Skullius thought before gazing blankly at Aurolio.

"Yes. I do," he replied.

The moment he did, it was as if a mini explosion rocked madly within his body, forcing him to hunch over a bit!

There it was again!

That was a reaction from Serenity, just like before when he was facing off against the Null Devil King!

What the hell?!

Aurolio pretended as if he didn't see Skullius struggle with something and nodded.

"Good. See? We're making progress here. Now, do you know what it means to possess a guidance field?"

Skullius paused.

"No. I don't," he answered honestly.

He truly didn't know.

It was still a mystery to him why the damn thing even existed.

Why Vow existed.

Aurolio took a short-lived glance at Skullius' abdomen before his gaze returned to the Hybrid Luman's slightly strained face.

"Do you want to?"

'Why does that question sound so ominous?' Skullius questioned himself.

As if to add to the dramatic flair, the same burst of heavy energy grumbling within him forced him to hunch over some more.

'What's happening? What's Serenity doing?! Ever since I evolved, our connection has gotten stronger, but... what's this all about? Is she...Oh, is she trying to prevent me from hearing what this guy has to say?!' Skullius hypothesised.

Indeed, Serenity's connection to Skullius had grown stronger.

An instance that represented this was back when Somanda manifested before Skullius through their former master-servant relationship, the last remains of which rested with the Lich's hold over half of Skullius' soul. Serenity had also manifested through Skullius' connection to her, coming to his aid.

The Hybrid Luman doubted the powerful entity could appear the same way again since she had been flickering the entire time when it happened during that instance, not until he grew stronger at least. Was that why she was resorting to blowing up his unidentified insides?

Wait, that was a terrible way to describe this.

If this was the case though...

"Yes! I want to know," Skullius eagerly answered Aurolio.

Flesh Serenity!

She had been withholding what was happening; the purpose of his powers, their background and so on, while insisting that he reach Tier 4 first. But now, Skullius had a third party willing to tell him.

For now, he threw caution out the window.

He couldn't brush this person off anyway. He was stuck with Aurolio until he got what he wanted.

"Alright. But first," Aurolio said as he reached in to touch Skullius' abdomen. "Let's take care of that nuisance."

"Huh?"

What did this man mean by nuisance?

Before Skullius could even comprehend what and in what way Aurolio meant, the pale man's hand ignited with a furious purple glow that dyed both of them in its infectious embrace!

"Temporal Void Lock," the pale man softly named what he was doing, as if saying it helped him focus.

Following the initial gracious tinge, a like-coloured fiery storm burned against Skullius' abdomen lightly and the Hybrid Luman couldn't help but open his eyes wide.

He... he felt it.

This energy...!

What was it?!

Why was it so similar to Null Life Essence... yet also, different?

The way Aurolio applied it showed that he had a deep understanding of it, but its nature was a lot more rugged and coarse, without the serene and tranquil attributes Null Life Essence possessed!

'What in the world... what is this?!' Skullius thought, appalled.

As the surge of this foreign energy continued, he felt Serenity's rampage somewhere within him die down slowly.

Moments later, he felt fine, as if there hadn't been anything troubling his unspecific innards in the first place!

"How are you feeling now?" Aurolio asked while shaking his arm.

The Hybrid Luman remained awestruck for several moments before answering weakly.

"Fine... I'm... fine now," he said as he felt for his abdomen and then turned to Aurolio. "What... what was that just now? And how did you..."

Bro, what the hell is going on?!"

Aurolio chuckled.

"It seems we have similar questions for each other. Thankfully, I figured you wouldn't be as hostile as I came here imagining you to be. Who would have thought you're just a dense wanderer," the pale man said. "Since we're talking things slow..."

A sharp light appeared in Aurolio's hand for a split moment before being replaced by a book.

Skullius scanned over the book with his senses, as well as Aurolio's own for a brief moment through [Graceless Hunter], and... froze.

"Aah. You have some idea as to what this is, don't you? Well, in case you don't have the full picture, this... is called a Book of Alignment. It's a rare piece of runecraft that carves into you an affiliation, among other things."

The Hybrid Luman opened his mouth to speak but couldn't find the words.

To think he'd see a book like this again.

Chapter 667: A Lot To Take In (3)

The familiar allure of mana appealed to Skullius.

The book in Aurolio's hand felt like it was made by expertly condensing mana and weaving it into a solid, permanent object. The beautiful cover with a different insignia from the one he had seen on the two books that had helped him begin his twisted journey – the book that granted him [Lifeless Evolution] and the one that granted [Flesh It Like You Mean It] – was on this variant.

Different from those he knew also, this one had a barely noticeable red glow around it, as if announcing that it had in fact been used.

A Book of Alignment.

So that's what it was called.

Aurolio was considerate enough to let Skullius' thoughts stew in a pot of nostalgia for a bit before continuing to speak.

"This book, a Book of Alignment, changes the entire physiology of the user when they accept its offer. The only way to answer its call, is through a guidance field, a mechanism created by the Voice of Worlds," the pale man explained. "Makes sense so far?"

Skullius was too surprised to give a proper nod but what he gave was enough for Aurolio.

"The process to earn the favour of the Voice of Worlds... I don't know what it is, but I do know that the Book of Alignment comes along with the guidance field you're given after being favoured, qualified... however you want to say it."

Skullius scratched his chin.

Was that right?

Wait... no.

That wasn't quite right. It was different for him.

He had attained the qualification of the Voice of Worlds after he had acquired the Book of Alignment or... Books of Alignment? Technically, given what Aurolio had said, only the one book that gave him the [Lifeless Evolution] package should count as a Book of Alignment, right?

Also, Skullius had to struggle to get those books.

Well, working hard for a minute or two still counted as a struggle, given how tense the situation had been back then.

Of course, Skullius knew that Somanda and Serenity had been embroiled in some kind of conflict concerning the books, which is why they were in Somanda's possession in the first place.

But then, his odd circumstances aside... did this mean everyone else just received the guidance field along with the Book of Alignment as a free add-on?

"Do you have your Book of Alignment?" Aurolio asked Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman shook once again and clutched the bridge of his nose.

The pale man could already tell that the answer wasn't at all positive.

"How in the world can you lose something like that?" he asked with a deadpan expression that somehow conveyed heaps of strangely... paternal disappointment.

"It wasn't my fault, alright?! Some of us weren't handed these powers on a silver platter? Silver plate? However you say it!" Skullius defended himself.

Unfortunately for the Hybrid Luman, he had left the books back in Somanda's tower after using them!

"Besides, isn't the book useless after you accept whatever it offers?" he said.

Aurolio gave a mocking laugh.

"Nevermind ignorant. You're actually several degrees denser than I thought!"

Skullius scowled.

The amount of emotion Aurolio was causing him to spill in such a short span almost made him forget how ridiculous this entire scenario was.

He had found someone else other Elita who had the guidance field!

But wait, more than that just that...

If he were to take Aurolio's information as the truth, then this meant that...

'Elita... She didn't seem to know about any of this Book of Alignment stuff. If she did, she hid it pretty well. So... does this mean she hadn't figured out or used her Book of Alignment when we met?' Skullius wondered.

He cooled off and decided to milk the seemingly willing Aurolio for more information.

"What kind of powers do you have then?" he boldly went for the most important question.

"Ohoho, look who's hopping in a bit too close to my personal details now," Aurolio chuckled while lazily resting on the backrest of his chair.

"You started it," Skullius called him out.

"I guess I did. Oh well, I didn't intend to hide it anyway," the pale man said playfully as a purple glow radiated around his body in a spiky, course outline.

"Like you, I'm not a human. Not anymore. I became a Voided Deathform after accepting this Book of Alignment. That's to say the nature of my powers is called Voided Death. What you can see.... feel, around me is Voided Death Essence.

It's the primary energy that I can use since assuming this deathly power..."

Voided Death.

Aurolio... was a Voided Deathform.

Was this some kind of parallel?

Such a subject had never entered Skullius' mind. At least in the capacity of something like another power similar to his since the guidance field had said he was the first user of Null Life, however that was supposed to be interpreted.

He looked on with rapt attention at Aurolio, abusing his senses to feel along this power which he was sure no one else but him and the pale man could see.

'I see. This is definitely one piece to the puzzle Serenity keeps refusing to put together for me...' he thought.

'Voided Death Essence, huh? It's very different from Null Life Essence.'

Skullius was intrigued. Heavily so.

However...

"Hmmm?"

Aurolio didn't keep expositing.

Skullius guessed that this was going to be an exchange of information and it was his turn to spill some beans now.

It felt weird.

He had no choice but to reveal secrets he had kept to himself all this time. No one other than Sila knew this part about him. Not even his bestie, Silrat!

But, he had to admit that so far, what Aurolio said made sense, and was likely true, especially when coupling it with the conversation Somanda and Serenity had on that fateful day when he broke the UNCoddled curse... among other things.

Skullius remembered a specific portion of the conversation that vouched for what he had heard right now.

Somanda had taunted Serenity with the words:

'Shall I tell the Eminence of Undeath that the youngest of his kin has finally shown herself?'

And Serenity had replied:

'Do as you like. Unlike Void, I play smart.'

'I think I'm starting to get a rough idea,' Skullius narrowed his eyes.

"I'm not an information merchant but my lips don't open for free on matters like this..." Aurolio said after the brief silence that crawled between him and the Hybrid Luman.

"I get it, I get it. Well..." Skullius hesitated.

Then he relented with a sigh.

"Like you, I'm not human either. Uh... I'm actually what's called a Null Lifeform, with my powers obviously being Null Life... Does that suffice... as a introduction?"

Aurolio crossed his arms.

Before them, the battles had already begun and subdued bursts of cheer had been ringing all around them. Yet, the two had been too absorbed in their conversation to care for it. Skullius most of all.

The pale man ignored the fact that on his guidance field, Skullius was actually represented as a 'Hybrid Luman' instead of a 'Null Lifeform'.

He chose to dig for that later.

"I see. So that's what it's called? Interesting. I knew there were supposed to be three but I didn't know what the third was or what it was called. Until now that is," the pale man said.

Skullius frowned.

'Could it be what I think...?'

"What do you mean three?" he asked.

Aurolio raised a brow, and then sighed with a bit of fury tinting his skin.

"Most of what I've just said is either stated or implied in your Book of Alignment. That's why it's important. The stronger you get, the better you become at comprehending what's written inside it. But you... <Sigh>. We're taking it slow.

We're taking it slow."

Skullius listened while dodging the thin insults he was thrown which reminded him of Bek a great deal. He bore with Aurolio's frustration, anticipating the answers he needed.

"To your stupid question, by three I mean the three Existential Parallels. Undeath, Voided Death and, I guess Null Life."

Chapter 668: A Lot To Take In (4)

Undeath.

Voided Death

Null Life.

Skullius' mind raced when he heard this.

The Existential Parallels.

While not exactly clear on what the term meant, Skullius tried to recall the feel of undeath. He had been stuck as a Moronic Undead for a thousand plus years as a servant of Somanda... at the very bottom of the barrel that was this nature of power.

It was kind of funny really. Skullius had existed as two of these three Existential Parallels and it would be a lie to say that he hadn't compared Null Life and Undeath before. Of course, even if he hadn't tried to actively feel the difference, the distinguishing features of the two were shoved down his through back then, when he was at the mercy of the Great Mane Mountain Ape Azila.

Heck, even the powerful beast had sensed the difference.

Besides his own experiences, the Hybrid Luman recalled what the Voice of Worlds described Null Life as, boasting that Undeath was the defective version of what Null Life was supposed be; the purity that was in death turned into a sickening rebirth mechanism.

Yet, Null Life was the purity and serenity of death before it got corrupted. In a way, it was neither death or life, but at the same time... existence detached from the concept of generic life and death.

Skullius didn't quite understand it, but when he thought back to his battle with Bek, the Spirit Warden who was supported by the tragic spirit of his lover, he picked up hints. His existence as a Null Lifeform allowed him to see that half ugly, half beautiful existence even though he wasn't supposed to.

That was one boon he hadn't fully realised until after he had let everything that had happened to him stew for a bit. From then, the Hybrid Luman had started to notice more of these seemingly ordinary feats.

Null Life was somewhat clear. Barely, but he got the idea.

But then... what about Voided Death?

The name, to Skullius, implied that there was a contractual arrangement that was being rescinded or terminated. As if... as if death itself was rendered... meaningless.

This was complex.

Though, given that Null Life Essence was serene and tranquil, and that Voided Death Essence was rough and restless – as far as he could tell – the bare conclusion that the Hybrid Luman came to was that these powers were probably based on the general temperament of the beings that represented them.

Yes, this made sense. If he compared Serenity to Null Life Essence and Voided Death Essence to what Serenity had said, giving heavy implications about this... Void, he had reason to believe he was right.

After all, it was all but confirmed at this point that Undeath, Null Life and Voided Death had progenitors. Or perhaps they could be identified as embodiments of these concepts.

Serenity for Null Life.

Void for Voided Death.

...And lastly, the Eminence of Undeath for Undeath.

Skullius' thoughts were interrupted by Aurolio right when he thought he was figuring out a lot about these so-called Existential Parallels.

"We're battering here, so it's your turn again," the pale man said with a serious look on his face. "What were those things that attacked the city? And I mean including that terrible thing that appeared at your mansion. It's clear that everything to do with this has uh... Null Life written all over it."

Skullius' nose twitched.

"Those things were called Fledgling Null Badubs and from what I could gather, they were made almost entirely out of Null Life Essence. A more sturdy and sustainable version of it at least. They were incredibly resilient, so much so in fact that even Incandescent Stage experts couldn't scratch them. I can only imagine the kind of abomination you were facing off against in that mansion.

Anyway, this is still a question."

The Hybrid Luman's face constricted.

Yeah. Aurolio could only imagine.

That thing...

At this point, Skullius was unwilling to spill out any more than he had to.

The steady gaze from Aurolio seemed seasoned enough to be able to distinguish even half truths from full truths, and instead of risking it, Skullius kept his mouth shut.

Why?

Because he had slowly begun to realise what caused that crowned creature to appear in this world. That reason, was too sensitive to share with a stranger, nomatter how much 'goodwill' they had shown. One way or another, telling Aurolio would reveal a lot about his powers.

As for this reason, Skullius was pretty sure that it all had to do with Ferex.

There were three ways Skullius knew which could invite other Null Lifeforms into this world.

The first was by using [Unbound], like how he had done with the egg that had ultimately birthed the Chubby Remnant Child of Polarity.

The second was by using the skill he hadn't touched in a long time. The [Ungodly Flames of Debauchery].

The last... had to do with Flaws.

Often, during options for evolutions, Skullius had seen that some Flaws promised to turn him or his Apostles into something from the 'Null Verse', as the guidance field called it, if they did not adhere to the stipulated restrictions,. He had seen this more than once.

...And now, Ferex had a Flaw like that.

Since Skullius hadn't used the first two options, it had to be this.

Something had happened to Ferex, turning him into the Full Deck BoneTender.

While Skullius wasn't sure if that thing with the crown fit the title of 'terrorist', he was sure that it had to be the Bone Tender.

When all this conjecture which had solved the mystery had crossed his mind minutes ago, ultimately spelling out how that disaster in Genhuis came to pass, Skullius had cursed unceasingly.

Did Replicus know about this?

Was he pursuing that damn thing right now?

Skullius' did not have the means to know.

If he hadn't used [Celestial Hack] already, maybe he could have found out.

What he did know right now though, was that he couldn't shed too much light about this.

Thus, his response to Aurolio was...

"I'm not sure what that was either, but I can tell you, that thing isn't friendly," he said.

Aurolio's gaze lingered on Skullius' face before it turned cold, making the Hybrid Luman suppress an unconscious flinch.

The pale man knew he was withholding information.

"I see. I don't expect you to be entirely honest with me, Festos. In fact, I advise that you always be guarded around me. I did come here hoping you'd have more basic knowledge to share – about that, I am deeply disappointed – but, I'm not here to coerce you into telling me everything you know. I'm not so weak that I'd need to know every single scrap of detail to kill you."

Skullius' face hardened.

'There it is!'

"Kill me?" he asked.

"This is exactly what I'm talking about. Of course you don't even know that much."

Know what?

There was more?

Skullius tensed.

Aurolio locked his fingers at his thighs.

"I'm feeling very benevolent today. Is it because I earned so much experience from that one kill? Maybe. It probably is. You should know, that's why I'm being friendly," he said with a dark smile. "You're probably the first and last Null Life User in Aigas."

It's a reasonable assessment given all I've seen so far. From the moment I became a Voided Deathform, I could sense that there was something like me in this world somehow. It was very weak at first but as I grew stronger, I felt it better, though not enough to pinpoint its location."

"Its presence suddenly grew stronger months ago and disappeared without a trace, meaning my advantage is probably gone for good."

"Advantage?" Skullius' frown deepened.

"That's right. This is a race, Festos. We're here... we have these powers because we represent the Existential Parallels. We are supposed to secure Rich Worlds for them, as many as we can while killing off the competition. You, and some Undeath user or users out there are my enemies," Aurolio said, his face turning darker.

...!

Skullius gaped.

What?!

Race?

"But don't shit your pants yet. For now, I'm not willing to follow through with that fuckery. I never have been on board with it from the beginning. How about we make a deal and seal it up real nice hmm? That way, both us gets something and none of us can back out."

Chapter 669: A Lot To Take In (5)

Skullius' face was still a bit pale from the revelation he had just heard, but Aurolio didn't stop for his convenience.

"I've had stagnating growth for a while now. The terrible thing about having a guidance field is that when calculating experience, it takes into account all your abilities, not just your level. And sadly, I happen to have a technique that guarantees that I will never lose, even if I can't always win. That makes things a bit hard for me, even when fighting powerful monsters of the world."

Aurolio's expression brightened and he sank into his seat lazily once again.

"So, for what I propose... since you had something to do with those six monsters in the city – obviously – I want them. All of them and more. Each one can help me get closer to meeting my experience limit for my levels and then... I can finally touch the Incandescent Stage. I assume they can do the same for you..."

if you don't die along the way. Hmph. I'm very interested in seeing if a concept like Direction even affects Null Life, Undeath and Voided Death... If there's something else beyond this race other than participating in it. For that, I need more strength."

...A pause followed.

Aurolio was considerate enough to let Skullius think.

And the Hybrid Luman needed that.

His blank eyes rapidly moved to and fro as he processed all the information he had been fed and then... he spoke.

"All this... is just to conquer worlds?" he said with a scowl.

Aurolio sighed. It seemed he had gotten too far ahead of his counterpart.

"It sounds so simple when you say it like it, doesn't it? But no. It's not about worlds. It's about Rich Worlds. The number of Rich Worlds. I don't understand what that term really means.

I can't read everything in my Book of Alignment yet. However, what I understood is that Deities, Ascended Divines, have a role. It's not about being strong and lounging around for them."

"Being a Deity means that you have a DUTY to create a world. Some Deities are so strong they can make one out of nothing, while others have to use their own bodies to accomplish the same feat. At the end of the day, the mandate has to be fulfilled. I'm not sure what makes a world a Rich or what even demands Deities to do this, but Void, Undeath and Null Life seek something in these worlds.

Aigas is a Rich World too apparently, and there's something to find here... but I've been in the dark about that for a long time."

...

Rich Worlds.

It wasn't about conquering worlds but about finding something within Rich Worlds?

Skullius went from furious to confused.

He remembered the higher level undead from Deadmanland talking about going to other worlds – this was the very first time he had heard the subject of traversing to other worlds – but... those seemed more like casual conversations, not some serious stuff like this.

Maybe those had been different missions altogether?

Here in Aigas, there were records of undead spawning in the Sacred Forests multiple times. The timelines, from what Skullius had heard, dated back to after the Second Grand War.

After Fulgardt died.

This seemed like a tangent from the subject of what Rich Worlds were, but when the Hybrid Luman coupled that information with the piece of knowledge Serenity had dumped on him back when she had manifested physically, and some of the more casual rumours from back when he discovered all about the Deities...

"There's only one Deity on Aigas right now. That's what Serenity said. And I've often heard stories from the common folk who don't believe in the Purity, that the Deities abandoned them in the olden times. I thought this was just some excuse from the non-believers, but... what if all this is...'

What if it all had to do with what a Rich World was?

The Deities left the world they had created, and after that undead began raiding it... and then what?

What was after... and frankly, bits of what happened before, were missing.

Skullius raised his head and focused on Aurolio.

"You have no interest in finding out what makes this world rich?"

"I'll figure it out when I get stronger. Eventually, I'll be able to read the entire Book of Alignment. That seems to be the whole idea behind us having the books. You can only know what's important when you're strong enough to do anything about it," Aurolio replied nonchalantly.

He then gave a sharp eye to Skullius.

"That's as much sharing as I'm willing to do about this... for now. Like I said, we can make a deal. To be honest, it's in your best interest."

Skullius breathed out his built up frustration.

"Your proposal sounded more like a threat to me."

The pale man shrugged.

"Yeah, it was but there are benefits. Unless you want to push me to do what I should, you can choose to see reason. I told you, I don't intend to kill you or even the Undeath user just for Void's sake. I have my own ambitions. And you can help me get to them. I'll even add perks.

I'll teach you things you don't know, and there's plenty of those by the looks of it. Better than that, I can find out for the both of us what the endgame of all this is."

Aurolio didn't react to Skullius' words with hostility of any kind. Everything he said seemed to be based on pragmatic reasoning.

He exerted the fact that he was much stronger than Skullius to appeal to his objectives, but not without giving an offer in return.

"Won't you get stronger by... you know, hunting down stronger opponents from high ranking Clusters? Or even Incandescent Stage experts?" Skullius asked.

"When I said I can't be defeated, I meant it. Ridiculously powerful opponents usually lend me with a draw, and I can't have that if I want to get experience. Only by killing monsters with attributes like yours... that is the loophole I need," Aurolio explained with a smile.

Internally, he was finally giving the geezer or hag, whatever they were, the credit they deserved. Only moments ago, did he realise that the Divination he had gotten was for profit, not struggle, like he had imagined before!

It was all for this moment!

Opposite Aurolio, a gloom was suffocating Skullius in contrast.

He admitted to himself that he had forgotten amidst all the revelations in the short minutes they had begun talking to each other.

So this guy's technique was that he couldn't be defeated?

That certainly was convincing enough for the average Joe to take up Aurolio's offer immediately but for Skullius... this only served to make him wary.

Sure, perhaps he could learn things about the guidance field that he didn't know yet. He could even learn about how to channel and use Null Life Essence with Aurolio as his teacher... and more.

But what he had to give up...

"So all I have to do is make sure you have more Null Lifeforms to kill?" he asked.

"Yes."

'That's complicated,' Skullius thought himself.

Making them wasn't hard but creating these Null Badubs...

He had sensed their presence in the city and confirmed what they were when the Null Devil King mentioned them but...

This was not an easy thing to think about quickly.

Suddenly, a razor sharp burst of killing intent blasted against Skullius!

He was jolted to a stand when it grazed his figure, but Aurolio at his side merely looked to its origin with amusement.

Across from them, a distance away, a man seated within the same tent reserved for contenders was glaring at the two. His gaze made the mediocre battle happening on the white platform between him and the negotiating duo seem almost non-existent.

"This guy..." Skullius said with a frown.

It was Gabel, staring with his deathly eyes directly at Skullius as if he wanted to devour him.

As always, a notebook was in his hand, the inspiration he had to endlessly scribble down a mountain of death and death-related semantics seemingly inexhaustible even now.

"Oh, you are acquainted?" Aurolio asked with genuine surprise while turning to Skullius.

"Hardly," the Hybrid Luman gave a succinct answer.

"I see. That doesn't stop him from chasing you does it? He's marked you, right?"

"Marked me?" Skullius raised a brow.

"It's this weird thing he does. He writes something for you... and then he kills you."

The Hybrid Luman instantly thought back to the note the scribbling bastard had left him back at the Inn where they first met.

Well... this was turning out to be most enlightening day ever.

Chapter 670: Vali's Technique (1)

The match that had been in progress ended with one of the two contenders dead – naturally.

With the fighters being cleared from the platform seconds later, the view between Skullius and Gabel became untainted, not that either of the two needed it anyway.

The Hybrid Luman cursed for the umpteenth time today.

Weirdly, he had been drawn to Gabel when he had first sensed his unrestrained presence – back when he had to get evaluated at the Guilds Association.

He had searched for Gabel, surmising later that it was one of Fulgardt's wills, the WILL OF BRUTALITY that drew him to this madman. The reason remained unknown, but he found that Gabel was also interested in him.

Well, he was interested in killing him, but that counted as interest too right?

Before Skullius knew it, there was a whole mess in front of, all of it being drawn by who-knew-what.

He sat back down and sighed, enduring the selective killing intent radiating from Gabel.

Aurolio laughed.

"You are full of surprises, you know?" he said before his cheery smile vanished, replaced by an indifferent one. "You should be careful. He's pretty dangerous. It wouldn't take a moment for him to kill you, but it would take more than the same amount of time for you realise that you are dead."

Skullius turned to the pale man.

"Are you two acquainted?" he asked.

"Very much so actually. He tried to kill me once. Didn't work out well for him, but with what I assumed was dumb luck back then, he managed to escape with his life," Aurolio replied.

The summary of events made Skullius shudder a bit.

He didn't picture Gabel as someone who would scurry away from a fight but that was what Aurolio was implying.

The image of Gabel was quite inflated in Skullius' mind so to hear the man being talked down on like this...

On the other hand, his view of Aurolio was also inflated, tragic as that was, which created a dilemma that depended solely on what the Hybrid Luman chose to believe.

"So it wasn't luck that he survived?"

"Nope. I only realised some time ago that he just might be as dangerous as what those spineless fools from strained Families find him. Maybe not for me but certainly for my partner."

Aurolio softly patted Skullius' back with a friendly smile.

'Partner? Who? Me? I haven't decided dammit!' Skullius fumed within.

Aurolio was sure Skullius would agree to his proposal and the Hybrid Luman was edging more towards seeing this deal positively.... if it was sealed with a Tie of Exchange that is.

The problem with that though, was that if Aurolio didn't know what a Tie of Exchange was, as most people didn't, he would need Sila to create it.

Perhaps it was just excessive paranoia but Skullius wasn't sure he would be able to have the Tower General extend his tendrils close to Aurolio without the pale man noticing it.

That would essentially be revealing one of his hidden cards.

Thankfully, simply asking Aurolio seemed safe. Probably.

Tearing part of his attention from Gabel, Skullius asked:

"If we are going to go with this arrangement, what kind of contract do you propose?"

Aurolio's smile grew devious.

"Do you have any requests?"

Skullius silently cursed.

"Do you know what a Tie of Exchange is?"

Aurolio sized him up.

"Yes, but I'm not too good at using it," he said. "Are you?"

Skullius' face strained.

He didn't know if Aurolio was telling the truth or not.

Lying that he couldn't use it was actually to the bastard's benefit.

The one to enact a Tie of Exchange was usually the one with the heavier burden when both parties had terms for the contract. For instance, when Silrat had been the one to initiate a Tie of Exchange between himself and Skullius, he, as the prime attendant, was specifically stated by the guidance field in the Hybrid Luman's view to be bound to his word but... Skullius wasn't.

This wasn't to say the lesser attendant of the Tie of Exchange could simply not hold up their end of the deal, but there was some kind of leniency afforded that Skullius hadn't yet gotten a proper understanding of. After all, he hadn't failed to deliver what he promised... yet.

In this case though, he wondered if that leniency would be afforded to Aurolio if he were to breach their Tie of Exchange.

And if the pale man knew more about Tie of Exchange than Skullius, that detail included, then this could end very badly.

That said, if Skullius answered with a 'no' right now, that gave Aurolio the chance to use a magical contract that he wasn't familiar with. It could be a dud and Skullius would have no way of knowing since he didn't have much experience with magical contracts outside of Ties of Exchange.

Argh...

This was frustrating.

Aurolio seemed to be benefitting either way.

Of course, Skullius could just ask Sila for help.

...And that is what he opted to do in the end.

"Give me some more time to think about this. At least until after the matches," the Hybrid Luman said, dodging Aurolio's question entirely.

There was no need to rush. By the time the seven matches were over, Skullius was sure he would have a solution.

"Alright. Let's do that then. I'll pretend I'm that reasonable," Aurolio said with a playful smirk.

He didn't pursue Skullius' decision to dodge.

'What's that supposed to mean?' Skullius thought to himself.

At the same time the two were starting to reach some form of partial conclusion – one that seemed to already have Skullius and Aurolio's confirmation to the agreement – two flashes of silver light shone over the white platform as Guissepo rose up, giving up the space for the next two contenders.

Aurolio's eyes narrowed.

"Well then, partner, since you're guaranteed to be participating in the Royale, provided that you don't mess your Second Preliminary match, let me extend my goodwill further," he said to Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman checked to see who was fighting next on the platform, as it seemed to be what Aurolio was alluding to.

He sighed exasperatedly.

Was this some kind of sick joke to line up the three specific individuals that he had been told to be wary of?

He couldn't help but believe that it was.

It was Vali's turn to fight!

As if that wasn't enough, opposite her, the spoiled, pampered and pompous figure of Kurtish was standing ready, a little apprehension leaking from his fragile, confident facade!

"You're familiar with this woman, right? You have to be. The rules allowed for her to mess around in the First Preliminary Round but I'm sure she'll be fighting for real this time to secure her place in the Royale. Watch closely, partner. She has a rather treacherous technique. It's no problem for me but for you, it could be problematic."

Skullius could have gone without the annoying 'partner' additions in Aurolio's exposition but he couldn't help but pay attention to the battle about to take place nevertheless.

He knew Vali was the Head of her Family, the Kinn Family, which was renown for always producing youngsters with high aptitude for Energy Forming, mainly healing.

So, was her technique... healing?

Or maybe some messed up variant of the concept of healing?

Outside of this, Skullius knew that Vali had an outrageous amount of mana. Even while considering his recent growth, her total quantity was close to seven times his own and none among the contenders even came close to that amount.

There was a cap to how much one person grew per each stage and mana core, which was why the peak of the Master Stage had several individuals with similar limits to their mana quantity, IF they had the same mana core level.

But Vali shattered that established rule.

Did this have to do with her technique perhaps?

As Skullius wondered all these things, Vali, who was on the white stage gave an alluring smile.

Aurolio was right.

This time, she wasn't planning on throwing away a match for strategic plays outside the Premium Age Royale.

She was going for the kill.