

Undead 671

Chapter 671: Vali's Technique (2)

"Are we really going to kill each other?" Kurtish asked with a bit of sweat rolling his forehead.

He had already begun to construct a barrier around himself as a precaution against a speedy introductory attack. Even if he was adept at close quarters combat, he wouldn't have wanted to be close to Vali without any protection.

That would be suicide.

His style was more suited towards creating an impregnable defence that his opponent would lose hope against. That was, if he wasn't too inclined to go on the offensive for several reasons, like during his match with Skullius.

Vali's smile grew brighter, and with the cute tilt of her head, she gave a chilling response.

"Only one of us has to die and it's not going to be me."

Kurtish gave a sheepish smile, his mana raging according to the spike in his emotions.

There was fear, anxiety and the tiniest bit of excitement.

The latter emotion was sponsored by the feeling Vali's overall image invoked. There was something about her words, coupled with her voluptuous figure that was intensely provocative.

Her dark battle dress that only reached above her knees, its immaculate golden shoulder pads and the circular opening over her belly which revealed Vali's toned abs accentuated by the taut, light beige skin, traced her perfectly.

Her dark blue hair was made into a very long French braid that ended in a golden ball and hook, like a scorpion's tail. It was clear, to someone like Kurtish, that it wasn't a simple accessory. It was a Legendary grade artefact.

All this, along with the open toed, battle grade sandals she wore made for an alluring, yet deadly image, and Kurtish almost got impure thoughts from it.

If it wasn't for the dangerous presence Vali exuded, along with the fact that he knew her quite a bit, he might have been inclined to enjoy the view.

Glancing at a specific position within the crowd though, gave him some hope and respite. With his advanced eyesight, he was able to spot the love of his life who waved a handkerchief at him in classic noblewoman fashion. This forced him to remember the humiliating incident he had yet to swallow, where the situation he set up to put Festos and the Bryne Family in their place blew up in face.

Oh, he could never forgive it, nor could he bear to recall the embarrassment his fiancé had had to face because of it.

No.

He couldn't allow himself to let that whole thing happen again.

Never!

As a crystalline white barrier with an irregular shape appeared around Kurtish, he wore his game face and glared straight into Vali's eyes.

"Bring it on!" he called with determination.

Vali offered no words to retort.

She simply got into a simple stance, her open palms extended before her lowered body. The look in her eyes which gave the full range of her intent, unlike her smile, somehow increased the tension for everyone that saw it.

Skullius, who was seated alongside Aurolio had to admit that even with Crude Vision, which didn't graft a clear picture of faces... the simple shape of Vali's eyes caused him no small amount of anxiety.

Just like Aurolio instructed, he watched closely.

Suddenly, it was as if the pristine white platform was slammed on by a heavy giant that fell from the sky!

But no such thing had happened.

It was merely Vali letting her enormous reserves of mana run wild, laying waste to the tranquility that had existed within the bounds of the platform!

That sheer volume....!

It left many gobsmacked, even causing an intrigued smile to appear on Rearren's face.

Slowly, Vali pulled back one of her arms, and balled her hand into a fist.

Skullius felt a large portion of the woman's mana gather into her hand, and as it did, her muscles wriggled, attaining many, strange contours that constantly shifted every second. Then, the skin around her hand grew darker, the flesh buried within swelling in a way that Skullius didn't think could simply be given the designation of good or bad.

'What the hell is happening to her body? Is that just reinforcement with mana?' Skullius asked himself.

No.

That didn't seem like it.

This process continued for a full three seconds before Vali's arm grew to be 1.5 times its usual size!

Kurtish flinched and added another white crystalline barrier around himself while with another hand hidden behind his back, he was preparing a mess of tangling, conflicting barrier formations that were still small enough to fit within his closed palm.

This was looking more dangerous by the second, and it didn't seem like he had the luxury of playing passive.

As Vali's outrageous mana stiffened the air, her voice came, causing a moment of total doubt within Kurtish's mind.

"Are you sure you're confronting me with the right attitude, Kurtish?"

The Wardlock's heart thrummed wildly, and for a moment, he too wondered...

What was he even doing here?

Why did he join the Premium Age Royale again?

Before he could get an answer from his conscience, a straight line of radiant mana streaking from Vali to his position appeared within splits of flowing time!

Its edges were riddled with erratically branching, crooked lines that spilled flakes of thin, excess mana into the air!

'An auxiliary technique?!' Kurtish gulped. 'It's a speed enhancing ty—'

The anxious man was startled to find a blurry smudge that was a speeding Vali already upon him before he finished his rapid thought, her fist coming into contact with his first barrier!

Skullius watching from the tent shuddered and clenched his fist.

'She's fast! Incredibly fast!'

In a fit of panic, Kurtish who was on the receiving end of this alacritous motion withdrew the barriers around him and placed them closer to his body, maximising the amount of mana he could funnel into them. They touched his skin, becoming thicker and brighter!

While doing this, he extended his hand which held the chaotic barrier formations in an attempt to make her collide into them due to her speed, but...

Kurtish overestimated his ability to read the movements of a close quarters combat master like Vali.

He didn't understand how she moved, how she turned or perhaps pivoted to change her attack.

All he knew was that he felt a nasty shot of blunt force smash into his sternum, its force tactically directed downward!

...

Kurtish's vision became a spinning mix of colours and trails of light for a moment, while the agony that accompanied this beautiful set of highlights grew so intense that he could taste it in his mouth!

His bones rang, some of them fractured heavily. His flesh met a cool, rapidly moving breeze somehow, and somewhere along his torso, there was discharge.

It took some time for Kurtish to gather his thoughts and figure it all out but...

"Urghh..." he found it difficult to express his pain and surprise in words.

He was lying on the opposite side of the platform to where he had been standing before. A quick look with his dampened vision showed him the network of messy, blood covered cracks a few meters from where he had eaten Vali's fist and the healing web on the thin barrier that surrounded this stage.

Had he...

Had he been hit so hard that he bounced off the platform, smashed into barrier and ricocheted to the other side of this white stage?

Kurtish vomited blood at this realisation. Literally.

Skullius while spectating narrowed his eyes.

That was some monstrous showcase of physical strength.

That one blow could be compared to roughly 120,000 tonnes of force that he could pack casually... added with highly condensed mana.

Also, it wasn't just the strength that was to admire here. It was the efficiency at which it was used. This was because it was clear that if Vali wanted to, she could have killed Kurtish with that one blow.

She managed to smash past both his barriers, but didn't aim for his head because she wanted him alive.

The fact that she maximised Kurtish's barriers' defence while also controlling her physical strength to be just enough to keep him from meeting his makers, was extraordinary!

Kurtish rose and used the regenerative properties of his damaged armour which Skullius remembered well. Kurtish could replenish his mana and heal superficial wounds with it, making him an annoying person to fight.

After all, in this event, one was limited in the number of artefacts they could use and most wouldn't rely on healing type tools only if they could help it.

Sadly for Kurtish, things were different this time.

He was up against someone with a vast pool of mana... and a dangerous technique.

Said lady was casually standing where she had decked Kurtish from, waiting for him to stand up... with something in her hand.

As Kurtish fully stood, recovering a bit, he set to erect another barrier around him with his right hand when... a dull sense of déjà vu smote him. A sharp pain almost as extravagant as the one in his chest assaulted him from his shoulder.

The man shuddered.

This feeling, just like when he faced that loathsome worm...!

Kurtish didn't need to look to see that... his right arm was gone!

Vali was holding it for him with a smile.

"You... No! I...!" he stammered as rage built up within his body.

Again!

His arm had been torn off again!

This time by Vali.

The realisation that she had the luxury to lop off his arm at the same she delivered that cruel punch... made what the beautiful woman did next even more impactful.

"I enjoy crushing people like you. Men like you, with great talent but the wrong mind-set for it," she said with a casual expression while a burst of mana coursed through the hand she used to hold Kurtish's arm.

Kurtish's arm suddenly became bloated, its flesh first sagging grotesquely and then beginning to weave into a different shape.

An enormous amount of mana flowed from Vali going into it, quickening the process that the Kinn Family Head intended.

The cells within the flesh and the bone were broken down, replicated, recreated and enhanced. With every second, millions of them were fashioned, all laced with Vali's extraordinary mana!

Soon, a human shape appeared, half Vali's height.

It took on a likeness... Kurtish's likeness, but without the decency of clothing and without the modesty of not showing off vague depictions of the man's more delicate features!

Skullius gaped.

The witnesses gaped.

The stadium fell silent.

A clone of Kurtish had been made, its focused eyes staring back at him but without mirroring the absolute horror the man himself was experiencing at seeing this ludicrous scene.

Yet Vali was not done.

This was actually a new extension to her technique she had been practicing, and it was not limited to mockery.

No.

The clone exploded with nearly a third of Vali's total mana quantity and an array of colours shone over it, all with different textures!

All of them were barriers from the Oldd Family that Kurtish recognised.

Those were his barrier abilities!

The clone had cloaked itself in at least five different types of barriers that didn't encircle it like Kurtish usually used them, but they all appeared on the clone's skin as blips of light that glowed occasionally!

...And after that was done, the clone brought its hands together and formed tangling ribbons of barrier formations that threatened to rip the world open upon meeting rejection...

Chapter 672: Vali's Technique (3)

The palpable shock did not seem to have any favourites. It had varieties and each settled within most of the witnesses in equal measures. The story for the contenders was different though.

For most who were witnessing Vali's technique for the first time, especially with such a high level application that she was just testing out, their emotions were not limited to mere surprise.

Fright joined the fray.

Skullius on the other hand, was smitten with disbelief.

The moment he saw the technique in action, how it worked clicked in his mind almost instantly because the principle it adopted was something he had been focusing on for the entire month and a half that was his rapid growth phase.

Replicating flesh and cells, bolstering them and acquiring the techniques within them...

This was someone's technique?!

But who could be more appalled and terrified than the man looking at a crooked replica of himself, juiced up with more than double his total amount of mana and applying a portion of his barrier techniques to itself while charging one of his favourite offensive moves right at him?!

The man's face was drained of colour and he couldn't even find the words to express his emotion.

What was this?

His eyes shook.

"You...My..." he said, his hands rising shakily.

His words crisply rang throughout from the platform because of how silent it had become, more so because now, everyone was paying rapt attention to what was going to happen next more than anything else.

Kurtish turned from fright and shock to fury and madness.

He glanced at a specific position in the crowd and found his fiancé sinking into her seat from a mix of fear and embarrassment!

His heart and ego sank into a pit of darkness.

He gritted his teeth and faced Vali who relaxedly funnelled more mana into the clone she had created.

"You think you'll get away with this?! You think you'll walk out of here alive just because you can use a sliver of my power?!" he growled while bringing his hands together like the clone and creating a mess of barrier formations that looked like ribbons with incomprehensible symbols.

Vali shrugged.

"A sliver, you say?" she said, and gave the clone a command.

Despite its distracting nudity, the next movements and actions the short clone made, almost gave Kurtish a stroke.

The mess of barrier formations it had been creating, seeming as if they could explode at any moment, suddenly dimmed.

The strips that represented the barrier formations unfurled in numerous directions, creating a web-like network in the air with several central points where two or more of these strips met.

At these points, a surge of energy ruptured fiercely and created a miniature barrier.

One of the five types of barriers the clone had shrouded over its body were reconstructed at each of these central points. The web network extended far and quickly enveloped where Kurtish, who was flabbergasted by this application, stood.

What was this?

He had never seen anything like it!

The barriers forged at every intersection grew and grew until a multi-coloured, multi-texture dome of hundreds of barriers covered a large chunk of the platform!

They shone with different lights and expelled different effects, passive or active just waiting to be given a command by their user.

Their arrangement was mesmerising and at the same time, extraordinarily sturdy, to that even Kurtish could attest.

"What..? How are you... how are you doing this?" he murmured while his prepared volley of conflicting barrier formations lost its vigour.

"How, you say?" Vali replied to the shaking man. "Beats me. This thing is actually doing this all on its own."

...!

Vali's words created a massive stir.

The flesh clone she had created was actually using the techniques Kurtish knew but in a way he didn't know, and she had nothing to do with it!

That was incredible... for the onlookers.

For Kurtish, despite his want to call this a lie, he found that it may be true and more dangerous than he expected.

Why did this clone suddenly erect this type of complex barrier that was likely as strong as his most powerful barrier formation?

The answer was dreadful.

The clone knew what Kurtish's next move was going to be; exactly which type of conflicting barrier formations he would use for attack, how he would use it and at what moment!

The arrangement of the barriers might have seemed erratic to everyone else, but to Kurtish...

He looked up with a deathly pale face.

"This... this witch...!" he cursed.

At this point, it became abundantly clear to everyone that Vali hadn't simply intended to win this match. She wanted to exhibit her strength for unknown reasons.

Perhaps simply to impress the EverSword House?

Aurolio who was seated next to Skullius chuckled, discovering what the true reasons were in a flash.

"I see. What a cunning woman," he said with the shake of his head.

The Hybrid Luman turned to him.

"What?"

The pale man smirked and gave Skullius a short side glance.

"What do you think of her abilities?" he answered with a question far removed from what the Hybrid Luman wanted to hear.

Skullius went with it.

"I didn't expect something like this. I'm assuming that by after off a piece of Kurtish's flesh, she used some type of advanced healing factor to recreate his body and attain a portion of the techniques carved into Kurtish through it. That's what she is using, along with her large amounts of mana to even improve upon the barriers but... this technique is way too complex," he explained.

"Recreating an entire body from a single arm... That's something for Super and Supreme tier potions, right? Not to mention, she's replicating Class abilities... all this with one technique?"

The concept of skills being carved within the body and their activation being linked to mana channels within an individual's flesh that transported mana from the core...

Skullius had been hard at work with using his Aura to combine skills so when he saw Vali use her technique, he understood what she was doing immediately and frankly, a wild spark of inspiration lit up within him from seeing it.

For now, he could only douse it.

"Yeah. Crazy, isn't it? But I have to say, this is new. I haven't seen or heard of this ability before. It has its advantages, but she actually can't maintain it for long, especially if she takes on opponents with more complex abilities. Also, you noticed right?"

She didn't attempt to cut a large portion of his body to extract more abilities. It isn't sustainable even with her mana quantity. Creating clones is great and all but frankly, it pales in comparison to some of the weird shit she can do with her technique at base. I hoped she could show some of that instead," Aurolio said with a disappointed smile. "Well, we'll probably see it all in the Royale."

Skullius breathed out a sigh.

To think he hadn't considered this woman as much of a threat after his explosive increase in power.

The fact that he was unwilling to use his Insurgent Magnus abilities, the more flashy ones at least, in the Royale, was also going to make his battles difficult. More difficult than he had imagined.

He had to think of ways to counter Vali if he was unfortunate enough to meet her.

'Actually, it is guaranteed at this point. It would be a miracle if she didn't hunt me down. Probably to make up for the whole time I dodged her for the past month,' Skullius thought with another sigh.

It seemed even Gabel had turned his attention from jealously eyeing the Hybrid Luman as if he thought Aurolio was trying to steal him as a kill or something (he actually was), to watch Vali's match.

That said a lot.

Back on the platform, Kurtish's breathing increased rapidly.

He didn't know what to do.

Everything so far caused his ego to deflate. He couldn't even find the generic words to shout at Vali as death throes.

"Tell me," the Kinn Family Head's voice sounded, garnering his attention as he was sealed in the large dome.

"I'll give you a choice. Do you want to die by my hand or by your own?"

Kurtish shivered but failed to give an answer.

By Vali's hand?

Like that punch from earlier?

Or by his own hand, as in the clone?

The former was likely the quickest and the latter, would be slow. He should know.

But he couldn't decide.

It was over.

It was just as Vali had said.

One of them was going to die, and it wasn't going to be her.

Kurtish turned and stared at his wife-to-be one last time, his body trembling.

She looked away, dodging his gaze for several reasons.

One of them, was so that she didn't have to see the gruesome scene that followed.

...

Seconds later, a headless corpse could be seen on the platform, blood and a litany of creepy crawlies that grew in the skull sprawled messily everywhere.

Vali gave a cold smile to her opponent's dead body and then stretched out her hand to the clone.

The short version of Kurtish leapt up onto her arm and dissolved into her skin after turning into a sea of sand toned flesh, that melded perfectly into the gorgeous contender's proportions.

Vali shivered a little before taking in a relaxing breath.

Shen then glanced at Skullius who didn't flinch at her gaze which he had expected, before disappearing from the platform when a green light encircled her.

Chapter 673: Observations and Moods

"The Royale is promising to be a spectacle, isn't it?" Rearren asked.

"Yes," Rias replied, his gaze lingering on Vali before she vanished from the bloody platform. "That woman is bold. She revealed what could have been an ace against strong opponents."

Rearren chuckled.

"That is only under the assumption that she has many contenders who can even challenge her to a mild degree. I count only a few. Besides, her intent in showing off something like this has quite an ingenious reasoning... Well, provided that she survives what follows," the man said.

"I know. It wasn't to impress. It was to reassure and intimidate, wasn't it?" Rias explained while turning to his father. "While she has been recruiting a lot of small Families under her wing through the event, she showed off some of her abilities to strengthen her image and deter any who might have second thoughts on whatever they agreed.

She also wants to intimidate her opponents in the Royale too, doesn't she?"

"Indeed."

Vali and the Kinn Family rarely showed themselves in public. Even among the close knit communities built for creating connections and familiarity among Families, she was never one to be seen. Thus, the Kinn Family maintained as much of a sacred presence as that of a House.

Only people like Aurolio had interacted with Vali much and even then, their encounters were few and far between, mainly because Aurolio considered Vali disgusting and the Kinn Family Head considered Aurolio a freak.

That said, they knew much about each other to stay clear of anything to do with the other's business.

In contrast, many were witnessing Vali in action for the first time and the image she had just painted, especially to those that had come under her broad influence, letting themselves fall prey to her attractive offer so as to raise the lifespan and prestige of their own households, had their egos as well as ambitions tamed.

At the same time, the less rebellious ones had their hearts reassured that giving up a large degree of their freedom was worth it.

"Do you think she has an idea of what the Royale will entail?" Rias asked his father.

"Most of the contenders have probably already realised that this isn't what I said it would be. Some most likely don't care either way for our extraneous purpose for the event and are hoping for the reward at the end. Hmph. Well, depending on how the world reacts AFTER, there might actually be one."

Rias nodded.

After a short pause, he then asked something beyond the scope of the event.

"So... What really happened in Genhuis City? Was the chaos there your doing, father?"

"Goodness no. That was merely a coincidence. An opportune one. I only took it by the reins and steered it in my favour, nothing more. You know that I'm invested in only one big, crucial show, son. Show some respect," Rearren defended himself while eyeing the Paladin Champion Ruhrees who still had bits of distress on his face.

Thankfully, he could only hear what Rearren wanted him to hear, otherwise he would be burdened with tonnes of suspicion than he already had now.

He had considered that the monsters that appeared in Genhuis City were the EverSword House's doing, but that didn't seem right.

If Rearren had a force like that under his belt, why would he choose to reveal it now, worsening his situation? Even with it, there were still monsters in this world that could crush him within moments if they so wished.

Monsters that happened to be past the level of Incandescent.

...And Rearren, much like ALL the Incandescent Stage experts, knew this.

The EverSword House Head was more cunning than that. Whatever surprises he had were likely reserved for later, but regardless, this suspicion Ruhrees had was still going to be investigated, whether or not it was unlikely.

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Within the crowd, sparks of heated discussions had begun soon after the match between Vali and Kurtish ended.

Before anyone knew it, the mundane folk had added another potential powerhouse to look out for in the Royale, and bits of their excitement were piled up within boiling hearts.

Truly, the Preliminaries weeded out the weak, leaving only the strong, or rather, the competent.

Most of the common audience didn't understand the mechanics of high level powers, but visual effects and impact did leave an impression on them. Even though both of these did not always mean the source was a powerful combatant, in this event, it more than often did.

It was funny how easy it was to capitalise on how easily derailed normal minds could be.

With just a few bursts of stimulation, many had already begun to push away the atrocities that had happened back home. Suddenly, they invited their trust in the Capital Service, beginning to believe that when they went home, things would be alright.

After all, they had powerful, trustworthy powerhouses that could host such large scale events in a dangerous Cluster and still make them feel safe.

Where was the faith?

These thoughts spread like an infection, bringing about an absurd sense of ease.

Sadly, a lone figure in the crowd didn't share the same enthusiasm. She sobbed bitterly while being comforted by maidens at her side.

How could she be at ease when the remains of her fiancé, the last bits of him that remained, were wiped away, incinerated into nothingness in order to clear the stage for the next contenders?

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As another round of tussling began, its impact and feel in no way a match for the previous, Skullius turned to Aurolio.

"Well, thanks for the generous tips. Any other free pieces of information for me?" he asked.

"Not really. First, we finalise our arrangement and then we can talk all you want," the pale man said.

"About the... Null Badubs... Are you sure they won't already be dealt with by the time we return to the city?"

"Pffft. No way. They are not indestructible, but to kill them, a lot – and I mean a lot – of effort is required. I doubt any of that effort can be applied anywhere close to the city. Divine Blessings don't have much of an effect on the beasts so I'm pretty certain chances are... at the very best, we may find them contained somehow.

Brrrr," Aurolio explained with a shiver so intense it almost startled Skullius.

"Are you... alright?" the Hybrid Luman asked, a bit nervous.

"Yeah, I'm fine. What? Your opinion of me shook just because I'm getting slammed by the cold? Think again! I can still hold on my own!" Aurolio suddenly growled, on his face cautious apprehension.

'The flesh? What cold?' Skullius wondered.

Aurolio's temperament, his usual confidence and spunk has vanished all of a sudden, leaving a pair of eyes that reflected his unease while looking at Skullius, as if he expected the Hybrid Luman to suddenly lunge at him.

What was wrong with this guy?

Aurolio snapped his finger and beside him, a beautiful woman in a formal outfit appeared out of thin air.

She calmly gave a surprised Skullius an appraisal before turning to Aurolio.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Did you bring my blanket?" Aurolio asked with a scowl.

"You know I always do," Idline answered with wisps of anger burning in her voice.

"Good. Let's go. I'm done here. You better have the flask and biscuits too. If I have to watch anymore of these shit excuses for entertainment, I'd rather do it with sugar on my tongue!"

Idline sighed and turned to Skullius again who wore a strange expression on his face from what he was hearing. If Idline had to give this visage a name, she'd call it, express tier confusion.

"Sorry. He gets like that sometimes," she apologised and gave a bow.

Before Skullius knew it, Aurolio grumbled and made the two disappear, leaving the Hybrid Luman alone once again in his portion of the extensive tent.

Phew...

Being left to his own thoughts for now, was a great relief.

He could at least begin processing everything that he had experienced without restraint.... starting from the top, but also without any particular order.

Chapter 674: Fairly Morbid Thoughts

First, Skullius gathered everything he knew about Ferex's Flaw. The Apostle was not supposed to engage in tough battles. Or more aptly, Skullius had interpreted this Flaw as meaning that Ferex had to have the efficiency in combat to dispatch enemies without effort.

When the Apostle was still the Limitless Body Null Demon Hound, he had quite the inflated stat for Intelligence and truly, if it wasn't for the fact that Skullius' journeys never went in a linear pattern of difficulty according to his growth, Ferex would have been more than adequate with just this.

At least, he was smarter than what Red Rage had been in the beginning.

When Skullius thought a lot about Ferex, he even considered the fact that he had wanted the Apostle to be a speed-type combatant by his side with Red Rage being the brawn. After all, he himself had a wide array of diverse abilities that could complement the two's speed and strength in battles.

Unfortunately, Skullius hadn't been able to do it.

It was all because of circumstances.

When it came to choosing a race for Ferex when he acquired his corpse, he had seen a better mutation, [the Pseudo Spirit Walker's Hide], which was, in his opinion more valuable than the alternative that had been there at the time, the [Inorganic Null Burst Engine] which facilitated what he had wanted for the Apostle in the beginning; speed.

The [Pseudo Spirit Walker's Hide], as Skullius recalled, was something related to one of the Classes he had been offered at the very beginning, which was the Spirit Walker.

At that point, the Hybrid Luman had judged that it would be more useful for Ferex to adopt this assassin-esque mutation to grant the Apostle incredible stealth. He had hoped it would lead him to the promised full potential of what the Spirit Walker was said be capable of by the guidance field.

'It wasn't a bad decision. It worked pretty well. I think it was the best choice back then,' Skullius thought, but couldn't help but become bitter.

His aspirations for his Apostle... his hopes and dreams for the growth of the loyal Hound...

Were they all gone now?

Could the Apostle return from his transformed state, the BoneTender?

That much wasn't known. But it had to be, right? What kind of Flaw led to his Apostle's demise after one mishap?

That wouldn't be fair!

If he waited long enough would that creature revert? And if it did, would Ferex be the same?

Once more, this was unknown.

Yet, what Skullius knew for sure was that another enemy had come into this world and he partially understood what it was after.

The race.

So that's what it had meant. After having a close chat with Aurolio, he was able to comprehend what the race the BoneTender mentioned was about.

The creature had also said that what he was right now... that was what it had been before...?

Did this mean that the statement Vow showed him was incorrect?

Was he not the first bearer of Null Life, or was there a clear distinction between him, an outsider and creatures born from Null Life from the very beginning?

In any case, the BoneTender was likely going to try to claim this world. Or rather, to find whatever it is that had to be found within a Rich World.

But Skullius was sure that there was no way of doing that without invoking the forces of this world.

For one, as Serenity had said, two of the three governing Deities were gone but there were individuals entrusted with things to do with the world in their place.

These beings... they had to be extremely powerful and knowledgeable.

Additionally, Skullius assumed that they were mortal. He didn't know how many they were, but perhaps, since history mentioned that the Deities created all the races on Aigas, there was one of these beings among the humans, one among the Sif and also...

'Sause... he couldn't be one right? But... well, If we are talking about knowledge alone, he seems to be aware of events and occurrences that even the history books are oblivious to. Also, he was captured by Fulgardt. Maybe that was the reason?

No, it doesn't seem like it. There was that man, Rayn, who had something similar. I doubt Sause scales up to that guy, but... Ah, this is confusing...'

Rayn's tale was a popular one.

The man born with a body and potential profound enough to house the consciousness of a Deity.

Skullius assumed that these elects of the Deities... they had to be at least as strong as this Rayn guy or maybe a little weaker, though their role was unclear to him.

Still, the Hybrid Luman was sure that they wouldn't remain idle if this Null Terrorist poked its head into sacred places, after all, he was sure his presence on Aigas wasn't a secret to whoever those people were either.

The closest bit of evidence was the fact that whenever Skullius cleared a Cluster, he couldn't attain a blessing, something he noticed during the time when he defeated the lucky gremlins.

Whatever mechanism the Deities had in place, must have already picked up on this. Even when he was in his Penetrator from which was unburdened by the Binds of Fukal, he still didn't receive a blessing, meaning that... something was afoot.

This depressing issue aside, Skullius turned to other harrowing matters that bled into the previous topics as well.

There was the pale man, Aurolio.

Never in his wildest dreams had he thought that there were parallels to Null Life. Undeath, sure, but he had been baptised to the fact that it was just an inferior version of Null Life and had thus thought he was... special.

Apparently, he wasn't.

In fact, he was embroiled in a struggle that wasn't his own at all.

The Eminence of Undeath.

Serenity.

Void.

Who would call themselves lucky when they were being forced to take on a mission where much of the detail was highly reserved. Above that, it also seemed like Serenity was a different case altogether. She actively tried to stop him from hearing what Aurolio had said.

What was the reason?

'Argh. Thankfully, I have a better idea of what's going on now. Regardless of his methods, I'm grateful to Aurolio. Some competition to harvest vague McGuffins...Oh, that's a nice one! While it really seems like a big deal, I need a choice of my own. Whether or not I participate shouldn't be by Serenity's whim.

Now if only I could share this information with Replicus. I wonder, does he also see Serenity when he evolves?'

It would be disastrous if he and Replicus had differing opinions. Since they had differing experiences, Skullius imagined that the replica could become its own different version of him. Since he was sure Replicus would reach Tier 4 before him, Skullius was worried the story Replicus would be told by Serenity was different from what he had heard.

But wait...

Was he sure that Aurolio was telling the truth?

He had been so enthralled by the new information which fit perfectly into some of the things he knew that he hadn't doubted it that much.

But now...

'Nomatter. If we end up sealing the arrangement we are about to make with a powerful contract, I will just add transparency into the clause. And If push really, really comes to shove, I'll just have to use the Tie of Exchange after all.'

This was Skullius' solution to this. In any case, he'd confer with Sila first.

There were two other matters Skullius wanted to digest.

One... was about Stylla.

He couldn't even begin to process what had gone wrong and what she had become. He hadn't had the luxury of gaping in awe at her newfound power in the heat of the situation, but he hadn't ignored it.

What did the BoneTender do to her?

As if what she was experiencing wasn't enough, she had to have this added onto it all.

Skullius face palmed.

Since the Null Terrorist seemed to follow after her, did that mean that if Skullius chased after that thing, he would find Stylla?

Possibly.

Deep down, he felt like she was his responsibility, after all.

It was because of him that this creature had come here, wasn't it?

While he couldn't come out and pronounce to the world that the assault on Genhuis was his doing too, he chose to claim this one task, as impossibly hard as it seemed.

The rest... could go to hell.

The more Skullius thought, the more he sank into despair.

He cut off this line of thought and reached the last, which was not as morbid.

'Now, about Vali...'

Chapter 675: Successful Detention

Genhuis City.

Gillewart breathed out a sigh of relief.

It wasn't much but he could rejoice a little in the fact that for now, he didn't have to fight hard.

The rising smoke and untamed, scorching heat within the city was telling of the effort he had invested in keeping the infrastructure of one of Pelian's three greatest cities intact. He and a group of other devoted combatants, that is.

Rebuilding was definitely on the agenda now, but one step at a time was the way.

Yet, just in case...

Gillewart sent his gaze upward and wore a solemn look.

He brought his hands up, as if in prayer.

"Gracious omen of the enduring crust, see the rise of my vigour and that of my fortitude," Gillewart chanted.

Immediately, ripple rolled through the ground and swept through him. As it did, the City Guardian felt rejuvenated, the fatigue he had accumulated from straining his senses while applying his technique relaxing quite a bit. His reserves of mana were also hurriedly filled back up, bringing him back to full strength in a blink.

Though for now, the situation had been resolved, Gillewart felt better being at his best once again.

To achieve this, he had used his blessing, which became accessible to him with an extensive boost when he became an Incandescent Stage expert. Although it could only be used once every three days, it shone in times like this where a great number of uncertainties were lurking around the corner.

"You're that nervous? Do you distrust my work? They are detained, and as far as I can tell the City has suffered its full share of misery for the day. You no longer need to be on guard, Gillewart."

An elderly man adorned in a lengthy Mage robe, which, from the scaly fabric, could be identified as one created specifically to weather through rough battles, was by the City Guardian's side.

In his hand was a white staff crafted from whitewood of unknown origins, and beyond its extravagant look, the item complemented the older man's status as an Arch-Mage.

This was Arch-Mage Ryte whom Skullius had sought at the Reacher Academy some time ago.

Several Mages, some at the Grandmaster level and others at the Prime were assisting the Capital Service personnel with dispersing the adverse remnants of what had been a terrible show.

Since all the Fledging Null Badubs had ended up invading the city, a lot of buildings and solid land had been devastated, but the rest endured.

Thankfully, while most offensive spells had failed to put down the blue coloured beasts, Arch-Mage Ryte's intervention with his mastery of the Binding Patch, which mainly consisted of formidable sealing spells, had saved the day.

At the moment, all five beasts – excluding the one Aurolio killed – were trapped within circular vortices of spinning fumes, obscuring the view of the creatures trapped within.

This was the effect of a high spell called Shocked Time.

As the Binding Patch was a section of magecraft outside the rudimentary applications like Transmutation, Elemental and Consolidated, it employed diverse concepts to create spells that defied natural logic. They were mostly impossible to cast for anyone under the Incandescent Stage and anyone with a purple mana core because of the sheer burden they exerted on the user.

Not to mention, one needed talent to master such a patch, and an affinity to this field of magic could be detected from the very beginning, with how sensitive a Mage was to abstract concepts.

After all, a spell like Shocked Time required applications of time related concepts, though minute. This was not to say the ability to control Time was readily available to a Mage.

No.

It only meant that a Mage needed to be able to feel the essence of 'time', not its effects like age, for instance.

In fact, Gillewart and Ryte were close, and their relationship was what had sparked Gillewart's obsession with understanding the true essence of 'fire'. It was him following after Arch-Mage Ryte's teachings.

Currently, each of the entrapments of Shocked Time were scattered around the city and being prepared for transportation to the Reacher Academy.

Before then, artefacts that helped manage the consumption of mana used for the spell which was keeping the enemies immobile, needed to be setup and it was this process that had halted much of the progress, causing anxiety to remain steadily concentrated in the air.

Unlike Ryte, everyone was as on edge as Gillewart, it seemed.

"It's not a matter of distrust. You're the only one who is able to contain these creatures, right? If by some chance they escape or the mana being fed into your spell is disrupted..." Gillewart voiced his concern.

"Don't look down on us. The other Arch-Mages are capable of similar feats to what I can do, but in a more destructive capacity. Unfortunately, since these creatures resist spatial manipulation, I was left as the only candidate to deal with the crisis. We have to minimise damage, don't we?" Ryte said, switching his tone to a lighter one with the last sentence.

Gillewart did not relax at all.

"I know you are hellbent on keeping the City safe, but you have to learn that this responsibility doesn't fall on you alone. Previous circumstances... the more you hang onto them for strength and resolve, the more they weigh down your rationality. They cloud common sense and obvious answers. Look at all this now..." Ryte continued his attempt at bringing up Gillewart's spirits.

He gestured before them were a large portion of the city remained more or less untouched, Capital Service Knights and Mages being seen moving around to assist each other with various tasks – mainly to disperse the harmful elements still clinging to the air.

"Asides from a few lives that were lost, and a few injured, the City was still saved."

Gillewart nodded hesitantly.

He had no choice but to accept what Ryte said. Though he had experienced a rather impactful loss at the hands of the monster he had gone after at the Bryne Family mansion, he couldn't bring it up and indulge in a bitching session... sadly.

Instead, he turned to another subject.

"Are you sure keeping these things at the Academy is wise? Wouldn't it be better to transport them somewhere else?" he asked.

"And where would that be? There is no prison in the nation that can handle these monsters. Even the vast oceans are not enough to kill or contain them. Besides, we don't intend to merely keep them as living trophies. We are going to study them, learn their weaknesses and then destroy them," Ryte said.

Gillewart paused and then spoke.

"I see."

Ryte scoffed and patted his shoulder.

"I'll say it again. Relax. If you are that concerned , you can come with me."

The City Guardian thought for a bit.

"No. I think it's better if I investigate a lead I have on this matter. There's a definite connection."

"Oh, there's someone who you think is connected to this? Do tell."

Thousands of miles from Genhuis, a certain man was shuddering in pain, fury and passion.

He bled profusely, and groaned endlessly while looking with pleading eyes at the feminine figure that had him and his friend trapped in a strange space that he couldn't understand.

"Please....I told you why... I explained why I did it... Is the pain I also suffered meaningless... Was I so wrong that I deserve... death?" he strained to speak with tears in his eyes.

Sadly, the red haired beauty before him was not moved.

She simply looked at him with an apathetic figure while a kingly presence watched on from behind her, fulfilling the Divination that had been told long before for the umpteenth time...

Chapter 676: Cold Vengeance (1)

It had all happened too fast for Setkh to glimpse, or even gain a sliver of comprehension as to how or why it had all gone down.

All he knew was that he had been sitting in the lounge of his new home, awaiting the silver spatial light that would take him to the Venue for the Premium Age Royale when a torrent of pain suddenly assaulted his body in fragmented bits of time.

Or, was it that he experienced how his body got diced in spaced out intervals of time?

He didn't know which was which.

It was a pity, really.

Here he had been, anticipating another uncomfortable stretch of hours where he would have to sit with Stylla who would be carrying clouds of gloom, most of them stabbing at his skin from a seat away.

The sheer tenacity of Stylla's hatred was impressive. It had persisted with the same muscle for six straight weeks. Actually, it grew stronger as time passed, while for Setkh, he had grown used to its intensity. Honestly, he didn't expect Stylla's rage to simmer down anytime soon, so he had tempered his tolerance. It wasn't too hard.

By now, the number of excuses, reasons and justifications he had piled up had thickened his skull considerably, and he was getting more and more convinced that he... that he had been in the right.

Unfortunately for him, an unforeseen dose of reckoning had suddenly descended upon him before the monotony could continue, with Karrun whom he kept at his side just in case, being caught in it too.

Unfortunately for the Mind Caster who was very good at tweaking the minds of his opponents, making them fail to discern his presence with their senses, the reckoning, which was the advent of a seriously super powered Stylla, had been particularly aggressive towards him first.

By the time Setkh's mind had begun to dissect everything that had happened, all that remained of Karrun was an eviscerated corpse with barely any bones or flesh left to its name. It was as if Stylla in this form remembered that the bugger was annoying if given time to use his technique, and had thus crushed him first... and then gotten to Setkh.

At the moment, the male redhead was groaning in pain, with all his limbs torn from his body and sprawled on the floor, his torso forced to lay on its belly while he grovelled for mercy.

What seemed more phenomenal about Setkh's dismembering – and even the pleading young man had noticed it – was that it wasn't just his body that was cut up.

His soul had been split too!

Something alien seemed to have turned Setkh into this legless, armless thing attempting to roll on the floor, but there was nothing in Stylla's hand. In fact, she had barely moved since suddenly spawning here.

Yet, with all this damage, and the excruciating pain, Setkh remained alive and conscious, much to his own disbelief.

The radiant redhead with a taller frame and a more bombastic presence, while dishing out this cruel justice, had erected a glowing barrier around Setkh's house which effectively changed its entire appearance, making it look like they were somewhere else entirely.

As soon as this barrier emerged, an devastating force so mighty that Setkh had felt all the air in his lungs vanish, as if he had been hammered violently on the back, masked this entire area from the world with frightening efficiency.

It was only when Setkh saw the Control Seal on his severed arm glowing but with nothing happening that he realised... Stylla was trying to prevent him from being saved. It wasn't just a powerful mechanism to resist the Control Seal, but it shut off all artefact effects and left no room for intrusion by any good Samaritan... or even a convenient one.

Stylla's new powers were ridiculous, but one was perceptive enough could tell that it was taking all she had to maintain such a powerful construct.

But still, she held on.

...And then Setkh truly went into despair.

"Stylla...!" he called. "Stylla!"

His sister offered no response. She only gave a cold glare which weakened Setkh's bowels.

It was as if he was talking to a beautiful porcelain doll that reacted on the whims of someone else, but Setkh didn't have the luxury to make an analysis of how Stylla had become this way.

He took deep breaths while tears streamed from his face, his heart pounding like a drum. He shivered in fright when he met Stylla's uncaring eyes that promised his death and looked back down, searching what to do.

Finally, when he confirmed that Stylla didn't want to end him quickly, he thought to try and appeal to the loving and forgiving nature he knew she had.

"Stylla... please understand. I never asked for any of this... I, I was just unfortunate is all. I left the Family thinking that I could make a name for myself. I was never that impressive with the Family technique..."

and I was never as well liked as you... I didn't want to live in yours or father's shadow! I thought if I explored the wider world... I would find something that you all hadn't seen before and... and then... I could....

I could..." Setkh glanced up at Stylla, the stinging pain slightly impairing his speech pattern. The redhead merely looked down at him without changing her expression.

Setkh shivered and gritted his teeth.

"I thought I could then return as someone worthy of all your respect, alright?! What was so wrong about taking all I owned and setting out to...to make my own path?! It wasn't my fault that I got mixed in with the wrong crowd and used every... every single bit of information I had to try and bargain for my life!"

The man sobbed as he remembered aching regrets that weighed him everyday.

He cared for Stylla a lot and was glad that she was as strong as she was. Father always favoured her because she showed talents that he never manifested in his life. Yet, Setkh was never jealous of Stylla. In fact, he was pleased that she was strong. While he lacked a great deal, he didn't look down on himself and actually looked to the future.

When the day came for him to rise, he wouldn't be growing alone.

That had been his sentiment.

However, his growth wouldn't work in the Bryne Family environment. That was what he had thought, coming up with the idea to take all that was his and leave, forging a path for himself outside the Family.

He remembered Stylla pleading with him not to go from a sentimental perspective and from a rational one.

There were too many dangers that could befall a stray noble born young man without his Family to support him.

Yet, Setkh ignored it all and left anyway.

This was his first regret, and now, it had lead him here, back to Stylla, but the difference was... she didn't see him as someone she cared for anymore.

Only the cold call of murder was brimming in her eyes.

Chapter 677: Cold Vengeance (2)

Setkh could only feel sorry for himself.

No one was here care.

No one was here to pity the fact that after he left the Family, he was stricken with the most twisted shot of bad luck he could ever imagine.

A month after his lone traversal began, he found himself captured by a renown group of bandits who had been tipped about him wandering with half-assed purpose by someone he had done business with earlier, hoping to build something.

His red hair did not do him any favours. He was easily recognised as someone from rich blood, especially in the region close to his Family's lands.

And so, he had been detained for a long time in a cave and treated like a dog.

He didn't know why he was simply kept there, with barely any food or drink, but he remembered the experience.

Oh, he remembered it vividly.

The immobile time.

The maddening silence.

The bandits who captured him didn't seem to care about getting ransom or anything. Some simply enjoyed watching him go insane while naked in the small, dirty space. Some occasionally coming down to beat the ever-shining daylights out of him.

The burning rage he felt each time...

Perhaps that was the point.

Not all bandits were brainless pricks in search of money.

Some were spiteful bastards who enjoyed watching the rich and privileged suffer.

Setkh groaned as he remembered the experience. It almost made him forget that he had more pain to deal with right now. He breathed heavily and screamed at Stylla when he recalled that she didn't know all this.

"Do you know... what... what kept me going? What kept me sane? It was the thought of you... I..

it just did. Your face... the last words you had said to me. Words that father didn't bother to say to me!"

A sad smile crept up on his face.

"I wanted to get back to you so badly... that I... I told them everything. I was betrayed, beaten and kept in a dark cave... and, and to get out... I had to them everything.

Our secrets... about father, about the Harmonic Ember... everything. And... I was supposed to give that crystal to them in exchange for my freedom but... when I got the chance to see you again after so long..." he paused.

After he told them that he had something that they may fancy, Setkh discovered that this wasn't a simple group of bandits. They were a powerful organisation that hunted unique items but by some, strict rule... they couldn't saunter over to the Bryne Family Residence and take everything he had told them.

Thus, first, they used a powerful artefact – one so powerful that just stating the name of the target and their description would guarantee its efficacy – to curse his father so as to ensure that when he left, he would return with what they wanted, since only they had the method to remove it.

Stylla knew more than anyone else how true that had ended up being... until now at least.

The next thing, the bandits sent him off, and in case he faced problems, they gave him a ring that he could use to summon some of them.

But Setkh hadn't done as he was told, as they had expected. Upon seeing Stylla after so long... he discarded everyone else and simply chose to enjoy her company and the prospect that there was only him and her.

They owned the Family now.

Be it bickering with Stylla over what path the Family needed to follow, or simply flirting with his sister... Setkh sank into the new life, feeding the twisted love he had for his sister.

If only those bastards hadn't chosen to slickly tip off Stylla, telling her that he was the one who cursed their father, which ruined everything, forcing him to follow the plan in the end...

Argh.

And now, there was no way they would honour their end of what had been a deal. They would never remove the curse on his father.

But he could barely give a damn.

While he cared for his father, and the man had cared for him... Setkh was not concerned about that at all.

It was all about Stylla. That's all he cared about.

And now, he hoped his love for her could save his life, if he just professed it.

"I love you Stylla. Please... don't let it end like this... I'll find a way to cure father...I'll atone for what I have done... I.. I..

I'll do anything..." Setkh pleaded solemnly.

...But still, Stylla still have him a cold glare without a shred of emotion showing on it.

Setkh began to think that she wasn't even listening to a word he said, and he couldn't help but be overtaken by an overpowering anxiety and fear.

"Please....I told you why... I explained why I did it... Is the pain I also suffered meaningless... Was I so wrong that I deserve... death?" he cried.

And to his surprise...

"No. Death is too merciful an end for you."

The chilling voice of Stylla finally came.

When it did, Setkh felt his torso and his severed parts turn rigid as a wild gush of Aura funnelled into them, turning his skin and flesh as hard as clay.

Setkh's face became bloated, his eyes rolling back with blood streaming out of them as thick blood vessels pressed against the viscera. The agony he felt couldn't be expressed in sound. He merely shook as his body changed.

His torso turned rough, its colour changing to a chocolate brown shade and merging with his strained face. His limbs floated over to join the ominous shape he was being sculpted into, his arms bending at the elbow to create what were two dark brown handles to Setkh's rough skinned torso that had the clothes burned away and crafted into the full likeness of a large jar.

His legs were broken at numerous points and used as even stands that melded under his body, while from the top of his head to his interior, a large open space was made to give this container... containing capacity.

Soon, the young man from the Bryne Family had become a large, dark brown jar, but from the look of his face merged into the exterior, one could see that he was still alive... barely.

The cold Stylla extended her hand onto the opening of Setkh's body and a fog made entirely out of darkness was expelled from her palm into the jar.

This was the curse Stylla had extracted from her father!

"You will carry this for the rest of your life," she said, her voice completely devoid of emotion.

Vengeance was exacted, just as Stylla had desired, but it wasn't really her doing it with her right mind.

Her true consciousness was buried under an influence she could not shirk away on her own.

"How cruel. Was this truly the actualisation of the ambition that was burning in you? Fascinating," the being who had been watching the sentimental and brutal show said, causing Stylla to turn.

The Null Devil King smiled.

Stylla extended her hand to the creature, but the kingly being swiped with his finger, swatting away a devastating blast of Aura that tried to smash into him.

Said blast of Aura, while nothing for the Null Devil King, actually levelled the house and everything within a mile's radius of it with ease after being stricken off course.

"Sit," the BoneTender said.

Stylla was overwhelmed by a furious authority that slammed her onto the dusty, rubble-ridden ground – the remains of the destroyed house.

She couldn't get up.

She scowled and glared at the Null Devil King.

The creature laughed.

"Be at ease. I only want your help with something. Even for you who has lost your mind, navigating this world should be a simple thing, no? Ah, my words fall on deaf ears. Of course! Of course!

Thankfully, my host had an understanding of the common tongue in this world," it said before drawing close to Stylla.

It then switched from speaking in an unknown language and addressed the beautiful redhead while running its long finger on her cheek.

"Taming beautiful things is the work of Kings. I would confess myself baffled if I didn't have you as a servant journeying with me to retrieve the hidden marvels of this Rich World within the week. Baffled!"

A lengthy grin stretched on the Null Devil King's face.

Chapter 678: Making Haste

The simultaneous return of everyone with a Control Seal called for a blinding silver spectacle within the partially dilapidated city of Genhuis.

While the eyes of the returners first saw the damage to their favourite places within the massive settlement, many were fortunate enough to glimpse the blissful sparkle of a second sun resting in the sky first, which strangely gave them a broad sense of reassurance.

Beyond that, the patrolling units of Capital Service personnel also calmed the collective hearts of the citizens. It was apparent that the threat was no longer burdening their policing force for them to be taking care of menial tasks with the assistance of the Mages.

While an infectious calm spread through the common folk and weaker experts as a whole from all this, a certain Discount Human couldn't help but feel agitated instead.

He had spawned right where he had been teleported from – the remains of the Bryne Family mansion.

Skullius clicked his tongue.

A few hours away from all this hadn't made his memory of the unexpected atrocity any duller. It was still vivid and frankly, it was all he could think about... among other related things.

"Lord Luminant Festos..."

A voice called from Skullius' side, prompting him to turn to its source.

It was Seville who had been by his side too before the transportation to the noisy venue yonder.

"Ah, Seville..." Skullius said.

The Sif guard gave a short bow and checked if he was alright. Her assigned task had been interrupted by the spatial glow earlier, after all.

When she saw that he was unharmed, she wore a look of hesitation behind her veil and finally asked.

"Lord Festos... That creature from earlier... Do you have any knowledge of what it was?"

Skullius' face relaxed and he emitted a faint breath. The 'mask' he wore was so realistic that Seville was nearly startled by it.

"A little," Skullius answered. "But right now, it's of no concern to you."

Seville nodded, choosing not to ask on this any further. Clearly, the Hybrid Luman didn't want to discuss the subject.

"I have a task for you, however."

Seville looked curiously to Skullius who gestured for her to follow him. He then walked in brisk steps a distance away where a gathering of the Bryne Family auxiliary staff and guards could be seen.

Since most of them didn't have Control Seals, they had been here in the city for the entire duration of the Preliminary Round matches. From the looks on their faces, which were pale, and with some showing inhuman levels of stress, Skullius could only imagine what they had seen.

No doubt, from the terrifying remnants of mana and other essences he could sense in the air because of [Greatest Mana Crafter], many of which he didn't even recognise, Skullius could only guess what kind of a battle had ensued.

There were also no traces of the Null Badubs from the city, which made him wonder if they had been disposed of, contrary to what Aurolio believed, but for now, he didn't have the time to think about that.

He had to make haste.

He arrived where Ed and the rest were, and when the loyal combatant saw him, a look of subtle relief registered on his face.

"Sir Festos..." he called.

"Is everyone alright?" Skullius asked.

"Yes. None of us were harmed, but..."

"Stylla. I know," Skullius said with a hard look on his face.

The atmosphere turned a little more sombre.

Skullius sensed the bed where Stylla's father was placed and he couldn't help but feel a pinch of pity.

Following Skullius' line of 'sight', Ed found the Hybrid Luman's attention taken by the image of the man on the bed shrouded by a glowing runes and decided that this was as good a time as any to spill the news.

"Sir Festos. Lady Stylla... I think she removed the curse from him."

"What?" Skullius donned a look of shock.

"Yes. She reached in and pulled out something dark and vile from him before taking off to who knows where," Ed explained.

'No way,' Skullius thought.

Just like that?

He had his assumptions about what happened to the poor redhead, but they were all shattered by what Ed said. If she managed to do that then...

Skullius unconsciously glanced at the man laying on the bed once again and breathed out a sigh.

It was fascinating, but he couldn't give it too much focus right now.

"I see," he said.

From the side, Silrat rushed up the group with a double of Skullius following beside him.

The Hybrid Luman turned to the Supervising Overseer and gave him a wink and a shake of the head which the latter understood quickly. After developing quite the strong bond, the two had a series of gestures to communicate without speech, after all, both were secretive and had grown accustomed to the fact that straining circumstances needed efficiency and succinct information conveyance.

The Hybrid Luman collected the Conforming Trickerteer and packed it his ring before turning to Seville who had been silently observing the whole time.

"Our house was destroyed, so for now we have nowhere to stay. Can you help them find somewhere to rest? Maybe if you can talk to the Governor..." he said the Sif guard.

"At once. But, what about you Lord Festos?" Seville asked, recognising that Festos was leaving himself out of the equation.

"I'm going to leave the city for a bit. I'll be back soon. I'll meet with you when I get back."

'If I'm not hijacked before then,' Skullius said this last part in spirit.

Sevill nodded.

Skullius gave a brief explanation to Ed before grabbing Silrat and rushing away.

Without saying a word, he activated [Absolute Zero] and a purple haze covered him and the Supervising Overseer, masking their presence as they pushed through the crowds of people yet to settle anywhere because of the state of the city.

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[Absolute Zero (Special) | Lv11 ]

With the exception of your voice, mask your entire body and presence perfectly from most forms of mundane and magical detection. If you will it, anyone you touch will be enshrined by the same absolute layer of stealth as well, obscuring them from view.

Mana Requirements: 100 (I) Mana Points, 10 (I) Mana every minute.

Duration: ---

Cooldown: ---

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Quickly, Skullius had the two pass by numerous patrols and wandering Knights and Mages who were preoccupied with many tasks until they reached one of the massive holes made into the city wall.

Soon, when the two had reached quite a great distance away from Genhuis, Skullius removed the veil of [Absolute Zero].

"Can I talk now?" Silrat asked.

"Not yet. And you might want to tense up your insides."

"What?"

Before Silrat knew it...

"WOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHH!"

...he and Skullius had shot into the sky in the most unnatural way possible!

The Hybrid Luman had turned into a massive blanket of darkness that featured elongated, dark tattered rags which rustled in the wind, giving the flying entity a more frightening look.

Silrat found himself trapped within it, without as much comfort as he would have hoped from a flying mass of rags.

At the very least, he was guaranteed to not fall.

As Skullius soared higher into the sky to avoid being noticed, he felt his mind turn a bit less tense. Flying like this, in this form facilitated by [Boundless Evil], loosened most of his burdens temporarily.

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[Boundless Evil (Special) | Lv.25]

Transfigure yourself into a dark wraith capable of travelling at immense speeds while ignoring gravity, adverse inertia and limits from friction.

Mana Requirements: 350 (I) Mana Points, 120 (I) Mana every minute.

Duration: 1 hour

Cooldown: 15 minutes

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After some time passed, Skullius finally spoke to the human trapped within his body.

"We can talk now."

"I know, I was just... trying to keep my guts in place," Silrat replied with a hoarse voice. "Would you mind telling me about what was going on back at the mansion?"

"I don't think this is a good time for me to explain it but... Basically, there was something there that you couldn't see. It did something to Stylla and turned her into... I honestly don't know... and now, I have bigger problems to deal with," Skullius responded.

"All I heard from that was problems times more problems. <Sigh>. And why are you running from the city?"

"Because... I'm pretty sure that Gillear guy is going to come to ask some questions. I don't need that right now. Besides, we have that meeting Stylla managed to arrange."

"Should we even be concerned about that right now?"

"Yes, we should. The meeting's being held at the Bryne Family Estate. We can't afford to just flake on them. Besides, most of the Families involved aren't participating in the Premium Age Royale and don't know that Stylla is gone. We can take advantage of that while we can. Even...

even when things are as messed up as they are..." Skullius explained.

Aside from this, he also needed to time to figure out what to do with his arrangement with Aurolio, and for that, he planned to have Silrat take care of the meeting while he solved his problems.

"Stylla is gone?" Silrat asked.

"Yeah. She just flew away, and I don't think she'll be dropping by anytime soon."

There was a pause.

The subject of the redhead plunged Skullius' mood down the drain every time it was announced.

In fact, when he recalled that Stylla had been trying to push her responsibilities onto him just yesterday...

'Damn you...' he thought with a bitter click of his non-existent tongue.

With how fast the [Boundless Evil] form was, the journey to the Bryne Family Estate was going to take three minutes at most, and thus, Skullius decided to squeeze in a short subject of conversation.

...A curious little one that he had been reminded of when he had been debating with himself earlier.

"Hey Silrat. How did you come to know about Ties of Exchange?"

Chapter 679: Obvious Secrets

Silrat didn't give a response for a while.

He couldn't imagine how such a topic had suddenly popped up into Skullius' mind, but it wasn't like he was hesitant to answer about something like this.

He just didn't know where to start.

"Well, you know how mercenaries are always being looked down on by the Capital Service and the Families? What you've seen in Inhone and Genhuis pales in comparison to what happens in other cities. Mercenaries and even the board members are usually treated badly outside the Guilds Association environment," Silrat said.

"My father and some of his peers were eager to gain the respect they deserved from the Capital circles, so they worked their asses off to earn it. They collaborated with some Families to gain what was assumed to be 'basic' knowledge among circles of Families, which they used to their advantage. One of these pieces of 'basic knowledge' was about Ties of Exchange and how to use them...

How to exploit them. My father didn't think they were too useful but kept the information anyway. I stumbled on it, being the information worm I am... and that's about it."

Skullius would have loved to nod his head at this explanation, but for obvious reasons, he couldn't.

He began to think that it should have been obvious to him from the beginning that this had something to do with Silrat's father. The two shared a powerful relationship that Skullius and Silrat hadn't delved into in its entirety, mostly because the former didn't know how exactly to engage in a conversation like that.

He did know enough to understand that Silrat's greatest motivations came from the man though. They challenged each other over many subjects, it seemed.

'I suppose this means that the Families have knowledge about things most people don't, which is pretty obvious but I never thought that included Ties of Exchange too,' Skullius thought.

That made the possibility of Aurolio telling the truth about knowing of Ties of Exchange high, but didn't confirm whether or not he could perform one.

The reason why Skullius brought this up was because he wanted to confirm something through Silrat first before he ultimately spoke about it in length with Sila.

"I see. How much do you know about Ties of Exchange? When you first proposed it back in Inhone City, I thought you knew something I didn't. Actually, I still do. Do you know something?" he asked.

Silrat hummed.

"Well, Ties of Exchange were passed on from Giants. They were usually made by those who wanted to surrender or were caught in tight situations where they were at a disadvantage – as I understand

it. That has changed though, since time has passed, but the one who needs something is often the one to facilitate. And that means they have greater responsibility in the exchange," he said.

"Yeah I understand that part already. What else?"

"Rude... The other party is usually gifted with being able to summon the facilitator, but this can be by-passed."

'Sounds about right!'

This was what had gotten Skullius suspicious back in Inhone. When the Tie of Exchange manifested through the guidance field, he was denied the ability to summon the prime attendant, Silrat Veins. But why?

"How do you do that?"

"Ah, Festos... Have you tried to summon me through the Tie of Exchange?"

"Of course not, but I want know why I can't do that. How did you do that?"

Silrat groaned.

"It's simple really. It depends on the demands. If the lesser attendant demands anything drastic from the prime attendant, then they gain the ability to summon them. Since you didn't ask anything that profound from me – I admit I made sure you didn't, honestly – you couldn't, or rather can't summon me. Just to make sure though... do you do still have my lock of hair?"

Skullius nearly face palmed. Well...

So it was that simple?

Comparing the terms from his Tie of Exchange with Silrat to the ones he had with Sause... there was a great contrast.

From Silrat he had demanded items to boost his power – Enriching gems, information etc. – while from Sause... he had asked that the giant help him retrieve his soul... from an Arch-Lich.

That was drastic alright.

"Ah... makes sense. And yes I have your hair!"

This gave Skullius more of a reason to be careful with Aurolio. If the pale man's terms were larger than life, then he would be at his beck and call. And from what he'd seen of Aurolio's attitude, the man didn't shy away from acting on a whim.

Ah, what a hassle.

Soon, the two reached the Bryne Family Estate and Skullius deactivated [Boundless Evil] while they were still a distance away... just in case.

The duo then walked to the entrance... to the grand gates that were guarded quite well, only to find a rather comical scene.

"I've been meaning to ask this for a while but... why does he always do this?"

"I think you should take this up with him instead of asking me," Skullius said while pinching the bridge of his nose.

In front of them, on top of the large wall they had made around the Estate, a figure decked in a pristine armour could be seen. His body was turned to the left, his left leg angled while its greaved tip lightly kissed the surface of the wall. His gauntlet covered hand masked his face which was hidden under a dazzling helm and tilted downwards for some reason.

His freakishly long cape bellowed in the wind serenely like always, inspiring most who saw it.

Skullius and Silrat could tell.

The guards standing by the gate seemed more energetic than usual.

They were being affected positively by this!

"Master..." Red Rage said before doing away with his stance and flying down slowly towards Skullius.

Somehow, the flare of the sun behind him seemed to lean a bit low just so it could make the Apostle's image more glorious for those who could see it.

Absurd!

"THAT damn skill!" Skullius groaned inwardly.

Bitterly, he dispersed the heroic mood.

"Has anyone important arrived here?" he asked with an annoyed tone.

"No, Master. There haven't been any guests," the Apostle replied.

Skullius nodded and took steps into the Estate with Silrat and Red Rage following after him.

"So, I imagine you want me to handle everything whenever our guests show up?" Silrat asked.

"Well, yes. How did you know?" Skullius was mildly surprised.

"I just figured. Also, since the status quo has suddenly shifted, I'll leave it to you to manage it for us. After all, we have different strong suits."

"Fair enough. Glad I didn't have to bicker about it with you."

Silrat chuckled.

As they passed through the stretch of large trees, Skullius began to sense the 'defences' this place had. Their sheer abundance was quite staggering and they seemed pretty aggressive to changes.

An example was the beast with large, curled horns that Red Rage called Bull 1. Apparently, it patrolled all the grounds, especially those leading from the entrance to the estate.

Skullius hoped this mighty beast wouldn't crush their visitors when they showed up. It had too much energy to spare.

Since he had the free time now, Skullius got to business.

He reached in deep within his soul and called to a familiar piece that wasn't his..

'Tomato flinger...?' Sila said, his voice sounding weaker than usual.

Skullius almost felt pity, but what he was about to offer was likely to make the Tower General a little lively. He had thought quite a lot about this, evolving his intention from simply using Sila as a free information store to something else.

'Hey there. I have proposition for you,' Skullius told the piece of soul. 'How does having a body to use from time to time sound?'

Chapter 680: A Body (1)

Skullius waved for Silrat and Red Rage to go on without him while he conversed with Sila.

Since the Tower General had started heaving deep breaths – however that was possible – after hearing Skullius' proposal, the Hybrid Luman was left with a few seconds of silence to spare while awaiting the response, which would likely be favourable.

'Tomato flinger... You would truly do that?' Sila asked.

'Sure, but first, I need information. Hmm, or rather let me say... an edge,' he explained.

'I've usually been at an advantage with all the Ties of Exchange I've had to make so far because Yuyui and Kenno didn't have terms of their own, and because Sause and Silrat were, for the most part, desperate to get something from me. But now, things could go sideways with the latest person of interest. Is it possible to be a prime attendant to a Tie of Exchange and still retain the advantage?'

Sila, who had yet to quell his boiling hope, his hungry imagination already giving him daydreams of walking through grass, eating, drinking and fuc.... ahem.... he was excited. So excited that he reluctantly cast away the grudge he felt towards Skullius for keeping him in an eternal dark bubble, which he was slowly growing used to after spending millennia in idleness actually.

To the Hybrid Luman's point, he answered:

"That would defeat the purpose of a Tie of Exchange. Even though its use has changed, it still remains as a rigid contract that benefits the lesser attendant, tomato flinger."

"Ha... I see. Do you know any other forms of magical contracts that can guarantee that both parties will be held equally liable for not fulfilling what they promise. I mean, it sounds to me like lesser attendants, under normal circumstances, can get away with breaching the contract, right? A slap on the wrist type of thing?"

"You are right. The punishment is fairly light. Sadly, as a Knight back in my day, magical contracts were not my strong suit, tomato flinger. I only know of Ties of Exchange because of the trying times I spent my last days enduring.

You could never trust anyone who wandered into your camp without reason, and the remnants of enemy forces had to be dealt with Ties of Exchange as a mandate from the Commander," Sila explained.

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

'So that's how it is?'

So did this mean that he was going to have to leave the magical contract of choice up to Aurolio? Because Skullius couldn't bear to have Aurolio have an additional hold over him. He was willing to fight for it, even if this man had an ability that made him undefeatable, which even now remained a concept too broad for Skullius to even care to dissect.

There was an alternative solution though. It was more dangerous, and relied on whether or not Aurolio was a man of his word, something Skullius wasn't willing to bet on.

He could simply leave their arrangement as a verbal agreement.

But the problem with this was, now that Aurolio knew what Skullius was, wouldn't he be intimidated if the Hybrid Luman grew stronger? What was to stop him from killing him after he got what he wanted, just to make sure he didn't have any nuisances to deal with in the future?

It was quite the debacle.

'However...!' Sila suddenly said.

'Yes?'

'I think there might be a way to obscure you from the rules of the Tie of Exchange.'

Skullius grew suspicious.

'How?'

'Tomato flinger... we talked about this. Ties of Exchange are so profound because they are derived from Deities and passed on to the Giants. They are effective when one believes in the Deities and are born of them. But since you are a foreigner... it might be possible to...

swindle your way...partially... out of the terms of the Tie of Exchange,' Sila said with a degree of unsureness.

Skullius' memory was jolted.

He remembered him and Sila having this discussion back when he wanted to establish Yuyui as his servant in the Temple of Unlusted Tears.

This was the entire reason why Sila was the one who set up the Ties of Exchange between Skullius and everyone he wanted to have a contractual agreement with. It was because Skullius was foreign, with no ties to the Deities neither by birth or blessing!

'I see. Keep talking,' the Hybrid Luman said.

....

A few minutes later, a devilish smile was etched on Skullius' face. He couldn't believe he could be so fortunate. To think he had despised the Binds of Fukal which condemned anything to do with the Deities of Aigas!

How foolish he had been!

'You've outdone yourself, Sila!' he complimented the piece of soul. 'Now I'm looking forward to meeting that pale bastard!'

'I don't care for your enthusiasm! Make do with your promise! I gave you your solution, tomato flinger!'

'You're right. A reward is in order, Sila,' Skullius grinned.

He had put some crucial thought into this. He always had the incident where the Tower General stole his body in mind whenever he dealt with Sila so that he wouldn't let his guard down, nomatter how pitiful the piece of soul sounded.

Why he was giving the poor man a body?

Well, there was mutual benefit involved, but it wasn't permanent.

'Incandescent Stage experts are good at manipulating their souls and the souls of others. You taught me that when you invaded Damilla's soul and impersonated her,' he said to Sila.

'Yes... I enjoyed that quite a bit, tomato flinger...' Sila said with a distant voice tinged with fondness.

'Right. Since you are technically a part of me, but cannot overwrite my soul even if yours is stronger... I suddenly got an idea.'

It had been a troubling thing for Sila who was clearly stronger as to why he was suppressed by Skullius all the time. He had thought it weird... until he saw Skullius' Reflection of Soul.

When the Hybrid Luman had summoned Sause in the Temple of Unlusted Tears, Sila had found himself bound on an island full of flowers, with a skeleton and a giant looking down at him.

Skullius' Reflection featured too many forces.

The dreadful presence of an Arch-Lich.

The serene powers of Null Life.

The mighty, suffocating power of a human who reached Divinity.

...And the unforgettable, sharp, zealous pressure from a powerful sword.

All this manifested as stifling power for the guardian of Skullius' soul.

Sila had imagined in that moment that all these forces simply wouldn't allow him to take over Skullius' body even if he was stronger. Unless of course, Skullius' will was elsewhere, like what happened during the only instance where he had taken control.

But what did this have to do with him having a body?

Was the Hybrid Luman taunting him?

'What of it, tomato flinger?'

Skullius smirked.

'On two occasions, the energy from my soul has bled into yours, bringing us closer to becoming one inseparable entity. The first time was when you took over my body and started to absorb my soul into yours and the second, was when I encountered Somanda recently... and voluntarily fed your soul with my own. You know why I did that, right?'

Sila paused for a bit. Hints of anguish flared within him.

He knew why.

Skullius had spared Sila even when Sause had given him the option to permanently erase the piece of soul from his body – with no harm to his own soul. The Hybrid Luman kept the Tower General within him while claiming that Sila was going to be useful.

At that time, Sila hadn't understood why.

Why had he been spared?

It was only when Skullius who was facing off against the High Lich Somanda a month ago, a Divine undead, funnelled his soul energy into him, that he finally understood the role he was supposed to serve.

'Yes, I know. You planned to completely merge your soul into mine, so that if you died, you wouldn't be pulled to Somanda, as you are supposed to. Instead, you would count as a soul of Aigas, and be taken to the afterlife the Deities created... right, tomato flinger?'

Skullius chuckled.

'You're smarter than I give you credit for. Yes. That was the plan and still is, if things go south. But enough with the morbid facts. Why I'm telling you this is because I need to exploit your ability to manipulate the soul.' Skullius said explained.

He summoned something from his ring which immediately stood on its feet upon emerging.

It was the Conforming Trickerteer, the slender armour that could take on the appearance of its user.

'Now, get ready,' Skullius said before extending his hand and touching the chestplate to the armour.

A dull light was projected from his entire body, highlighting the armour.

"And finally... a perfect use for THIS skill."

