

Undead 681

Chapter 681: A Body (2)

The Conforming Trickerteer was useful as an artefact upgraded through [Unbound], the features it inherited allowing it to qualify as an item beyond the realm of Legendary. However, the guidance field still identified it as Legendary, keeping to its tradition of marking items embraced by Null Life to a higher standard.

Skullius was fond of this armour, but admittedly, when he got it, he had expected it to have an ability similar to [Brisk Storm Avatar].

Essentially, a powerful double.

Unfortunately, it wasn't capable of something like that on its own.

It could assume the user's likeness and copy their abilities to a degree, but it barely counted as a second Skullius. To achieve that, the Hybrid Luman had to take extra steps to make its functions more up to par with what he desired, like during his battle with Hobbu Bobbu.

Creating a mana core like his for the armour, using the Precept of Light to control the Conforming Trickerteer more efficiently...

The need for these extra steps was what made the armour a bit less... impressive, in Skullius' eyes.

That said...

Skullius became hopeful when he received a new skill from the latest Cluster run.

[Lucent Apparition].

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[Lucent Apparition (Special) | Lv.1]

Project a soul light from your body that can carry a portion of your consciousness and solidify it anywhere within a range of 5 miles. In the solidified state, your consciousness' only limit is the strength of your soul, and the mana required to perform complex actions in such a fragile state.

-Caution-

It is possible to receive damage through the projected soul consciousness.

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Mana Requirements: 275 (I) Mana Points, 110 (I) Mana every minute

Duration: ---

Cooldown: ---

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[Lucent Apparition], which had been [Lost Wraith] before [Just Light] had favoured and transformed it, matched very well with the Conforming Trickerteer... provided Sila was efficient enough with his innate abilities as an Incandescent Stage expert.

As the light prompted by the skill shone from Skullius to the Conforming Trickerteer, Skullius willed the slender armour to assume his likeness, which it did in an instant.

A copy of his Hybrid Luman body with light auburn hair featuring a dark orange hue at the tips, a handsome face with clear, white eyes and blameless skin appeared. It donned the same outfit Skullius was wearing – the dark leather armour with a hood he had always worn with the Chains of Damnation around his waist.

Skullius smiled.

'You're up,' he said to Sila.

The Tower General realised what he was supposed to do.

'So that's what all that talk was for...' he murmured to himself.

The exposition about how the two were practically the same soul, and all that by Skullius...

It was simply to tell Sila that he wasn't getting a way out. Nomatter what he did, there was no way to separate himself from Skullius without harming himself as well. Therefore, his only ticket to getting a body, was to use the channel provided.

Projecting the consciousness of his soul onto the Conforming Trickerteer!

As an Incandescent Stage expert, he could do this very efficiently, but he was completely at the mercy of the Hybrid Luman since the skill [Lucent Apparition] was controlled by Skullius... the Trickerteer too.

At any point, Skullius could just cut off the mana supply to the skill and the Tower General would be back in his bubble since his soul would have never left.

'I see now. You're too cruel, tomato flinger...'

Reluctantly, Sila projected his senses through the light guiding a path from Skullius' body and soul into the double.

The feeling that followed was quite extraordinary for the old piece of soul.

He felt a sensation in his hands, though it wasn't quite as humane as he would have hoped. Then he felt the sturdy balance from his legs, the stability in his torso and the rational mental focus from his head.

He finally inhabited a body again after so long!

A vain breath was pulled into his nostrils and he raised his head and screamed into the air.

"Haaaaaaaaa!"

Skullius face palmed.

"I can feel once again!" Sila growled, his voice so powerful that it caused a faint ripple through the air. The raw physical power afforded by the Conforming Trickerteer was not to be trifled with after all.

The Tower General took more deep breaths with excitement. He clasped and unclasped his hands repeatedly, ensuring that he had a good grip.

The Conforming Trickerteer in the transformed state was a like a hollow human body, which was why he fit so well.

Marvellous!

The only downside to this experience was that Sila couldn't see since the armour copied aspects of Skullius but that wasn't a problem. He was the one who took away the Hybrid Luman's sight so that he could reinforce his other senses in the first place!

"You better behave. One wrong move and you're back to that darkness again. Worse yet, I could simply not deliver on what I promised," Skullius warned.

Sila's zeal was immediately dampened a great deal.

That's right.

Skullius had said that they would venture to the Labyrinth of the Yoke to look for comrades of Sila. That had been how he had convinced the Tower General to help him find the Temple of Unlusted Tears after their spat. While the task of going back there was now left to Replicus, it wasn't impossible to fulfil what the Tower General wanted still.

In truth, Sila should have been grateful that Skullius sparing him meant that he could still look forward to this, and in part, he was.

Wait... Besides him being a dormant trump card, maybe Skullius was trying to keep his word on what he promised too. Was that the other reason the Hybrid Luman had spared him?

"What can I even do? You've shut off access to all your powers from this armour haven't you, tomato flinger?" Sila said.

"Yes. And most of your physical strength too. For now, I'll give you a few minutes to enjoy the outside. From then onwards though, I'll only be calling you when I need you."

Sila slowly nodded.

It was better than nothing.

Besides, his hopes of seeing his comrades from the Second Grand War were revitalised!

Skullius began walking towards the mansion and the Tower General followed while appreciating everything within his sensory reach.

As they passed the trail of trees, Skullius was baffled to find the vast menagerie of beasts guarding the mansion.

The Terrors in armour standing guard at the doors.

The giant flies floating above the mansions without swaying even a little from their fixed position.

And the...

VWOOOOOSH!

A large pillar of flame spawned from the sky and hurtled down towards Skullius. Before it reached five meters within his aerial range though, it slowed down and landed in front of him without the aggression it had begun with.

"Well damn. Already?" Skullius said as he saw the flame take a humanoid shape.

A tall, muscular goblin made of orange gold fire was formed, its glowing white eyes staring directly at the Hybrid Luman.

It was the Tier 9 Imperial Elemental Goblin that Skullius had defeated in the Cluster!

It was shocking to think Red Rage had already tamed the thing since it was only yesterday when they captured it!

What efficiency!

"Does it remember me?" Skullius wondered.

The way the creature kept staring at him implied that it recalled him who had frustratingly weathered through all its attacks without getting hit.

In any case, there was no way it was going to do anything to him.

Skullius passed it and entered the main mansion.

The lavish design that had been within before the refurbishment had been elevated several fold. Now, when merely entering the mansion, one would be dazzled by the fine quality of materials used to make the interior and the skill of the people who refined it.

It was like a palace.

Maidservants gave short bows as Skullius entered the house – all of them, some old and some new, acknowledged who was responsible for bringing back the grandiosity of the Family Estate.

The Hybrid Luman went up the lounge which was spacious and decorated with various forms of relaxing furniture and luxuries.

'If only Genhuis offered this kind of generous extravagance. Ah, damn that word,' Skullius thought bitterly.

Behind him, Sila couldn't see all this but he could feel it, a whistle of marvel being forced to escape his mouth.

"To think this is what you have been up to, tomato flinger..." he said.

Skullius ignored the Tower General and sank into a large, comfy single couch, emitting a harsh breath afterwards..

A maidservant immediately brought him a refreshment which he sipped on as many thoughts ran through his mind.

'Now that I have a partial counter against Aurolio, I can relax a bit... and deal with more pressing matters.'

Chapter 682: Enchanting Level 100!

An hour and a half later, the awaited arrival of the promised guests finally came to pass. A trail of carriages featuring different, but mostly extravagant designs passed through the procession of trees that led to the Bryne Family mansions.

The whinnies and neighs of numerous powerful horses freely dominated the usually tranquil environment, with each individual beast seemingly competing for attention.

Seven carriages reached the open space right before the lavish environmental foreplay to the grand buildings ahead, and parked a distance away from the two hosts.

Silrat was one.

He had changed his clothing to better match the occasion, as everyone knew; clothing contributed to the effectiveness of what one asserted among others. This was especially applicable if said others were noble born.

Thus, the Supervising Overseer had donned a dark green old style formal suit with a high collar, which made him look like a rich, royal blood vampire.

His gaze was as firm as the sheen on his short, slicked back crushed garnet hair – one of the pieces to an unshakeable facade Silrat had fashioned for himself over the years.

Beside him, acting as an assistant host was Red Rage who kept his dazzling armour but did away with the long cape. The way his golden attire looked new with the glossy sparkle exacerbated by the sun's afternoon glow had already begun to make a faint impression on the guests, much to Silrat's surprise.

As different kinds of people disembarked from their carriages, the first thing they turned their sight to was the Knight standing respectfully beside the finely dressed gentleman.

'Would you look at that? Festos was right to let this walking tin can accompany me,' the former Association Branch Head thought.

The guests scanned the surroundings, some with appreciation, some with unreasonable critique... and some with apprehension.

Above the mansion, a giant white fly was silently floating, its figure mostly immobile. If not for sight, one wouldn't be able to discern its presence, which was strange since its wings could be seen flapping rapidly at its sides.

Also, behind Silrat and the dashing Knight, a large beast with the body of a bison and the head of a ram could be seen seated regally on the ground, its head bowing down as if giving a respectful gesture.

A few other beasts could be seen circling around the grounds, but in an orderly fashion that was actually quite pleasing to the eyes. Yet, this peculiar setting still caused surprise.

At the last minute, Silrat had urged Skullius to do away with the excessive security. He feared that the guests might be more afraid than impressed when they saw the Terrors and other terrifying beasts guarding the place in addition to the human guards.

Thus, in the end, only a few beasts remained cooperating with the extensive human personnel for the security related duties.

This was more acceptable.

The first of the numerous people to arrive within the Bryne Family Estate was a short, old man accompanied by three beautiful ladies who carried themselves with a level of class Silrat could only dream of.

The Supervising Overseer was almost overwhelmed, but when he thought to how his father struggled to earn the respect of these people, he didn't break.

"Greetings, dear guests. It is a pleasure to have you here. Finally," Silrat said with a dignified smile.

"The pleasure is all ours. It took quite some convincing, but I have a feeling I will not regret travelling from so far to get here," the short old man said with a friendly smile that hid a plethora of connotations.

"I'm sure you will not. My name is Silrat Veins. I shall be your host and will be handling negotiations on behalf of the Bryne Family," Silrat introduced himself.

The old man gave him a dark look.

"Is that so? I was under the impression that Lady Stylla would be with us. Quite frankly, I had thought she simply chose to not receive us, as a proper host should."

"Ah, I apologise for the confusion. Lady Stylla is currently... indisposed. We can speak at length about that inside," Silrat gave a succinct explanation.

The old man did not seem to be convinced but he tucked away his apprehension. By the time the others reached them, he was already wearing his cheery, seemingly oblivious smile.

A tall woman adorned in a long, dark dress with purple tassels at the rims was the next to reach Silrat. She sized him up with her sharp, upturned eyes and then raised her chin.

"I've seen quite a lot of beasts around. What is the story behind such an unsightly presentation?" she said with an obnoxious tone.

"Ah, forgive us if they startled you. This is the work of our loyal Knight Prisma. He's a Tamer and he handles security by exploiting his fine skills in Energy Forming," Silrat responded with an impermeable stance that both showed respect and firmness. As he addressed the subject, he gestured to Red Rage beside him.

In light of the earlier conversation, he had been ignored, but when he was highlighted again, he seemed to grab everyone's attention in an instant.

The Apostle gave a short, respectful bow that the entire world seemed to support by adding several degrees of exposure, cropping out unnecessary details from the background, adding masks to enhance the vibrance, saturation and shadows, as well as finishing it off with a gorgeous filter...all in the eyes of the onlookers, of course.

"Welcome, most treasured guests, and dare I say, potential allies. Please pardon the outlandish design of our security. It is more reliable than you think. Before it is a place for interacting in a formal capacity, it is a home, and to guard the sanctity of this home, I employ my very best to make sure that everyone who steps in as a friend to the Family, is safe," Red Rage declared.

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His voice seemed to turn into music that was too sweet for the ears... and his words...

How noble!

How bold!

How Knightly!

The tall woman's disdain turned into a genuine, positive surprise.

"Well... what can I say against such pure virtue, Noble Knight Prisma?" she said with a radiant smile.

"You flatter me," Red Rage said, maintaining his bow.

"Nonsense! I feel safer already!" the old man said, the women he was with looking positively towards the Apostle as well. "Sir Silrat, please lead us in and let us talk."

Silrat nearly froze.

'Dear Deities...'

The uncertainty and strained air that had been present had vanished instantly when the Apostle stepped in!

'He's coming with me!' Silrat said.

Who knew he had the key to unlock max level in persuasion at his side all along?!

Skullius heard the exchange outside with his extensive senses and smiled.

'That little bastard really knows how to steal a show,' he thought while shaking his head.

He moved from the lounge and positioned himself somewhere up a spiral of stairs where he could watch the procession of guests below be lead to a beautiful room more suited for formal discussions.

Thank goodness he wasn't going to be a part of it.

Even if Stylla was here, he wasn't going to be pitching in much.

Skullius smiled.

After the meeting ended, then he would consider going back to the mess in Genhuis. He honestly hoped he could buy himself a few hours in the peaceful environment afforded by—

"Hey," a voice abruptly killed off Skullius' train of thought.

...!

His <CURSED HEART> beat faster upon recognising the voice and he turned his head with a look of utter shock.

There, behind him, the figure of a pale man with white hair tied into a ponytail could be seen, at his side the formally dressed Idline.

"The hell! How the hell are these two here?!" the Hybrid Luman shuddered.

"Don't look so surprised. Shortly after the matches for the day... That's what we agreed on, right? Are you ready to establish a healthy, mutually beneficial relationship, partner?" Aurolio said with a weak smile.

It took a few seconds for Skullius to regain his cool but when he did, he wore his regular game face so as to not succumb to acting like the typical background character, the lesser among the two.

Casting aside the shock as to how this guy suddenly appeared here without him sensing anything, Skullius shot a serious look at Aurolio.

"Yeah. Let's make it official, partner," he said.

Chapter 683: Anomalous Offer

"Oh. I like the change in attitude. Glad you're shaping up to become a competent partner, Festos," Aurolio said to Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman merely snorted at the pale man's words. The more he got to know this man, the more he got irritated by his personality. Then again, it was to be expected if this guy was so powerful he really couldn't be defeated.

What a cheat!

He couldn't react to that fact enough.

But then what about the nervous wreck Aurolio had become before they ended their conversation a few hours ago?

Skullius didn't know what to make of that part.

"How did you get here?" the Hybrid Luman asked.

"Hmm?" Aurolio raised in brow in confusion before realising what Skullius meant. "Oh, that. I marked you a while back. Back at the.. uh.. gathering or whatever before the Premium Age Royale began.

You must not have an advanced guidance field if you don't know that it can do that."

Skullius frowned.

Back at the gathering?

Well, he understood marking pretty well. This was one of the functions he had received after his guidance field was upgraded to Patronage Rank 1, <Marked Spots>. There was also another feature linked to the <Marked Spots> called <Quick Spawn>, that he couldn't access yet. It allowed the user to teleport to any of the <Marked Spots>.

So that's what it was.

But as for when exactly he was marked...

Oh well.

The pale man just got even more annoying in Skullius' eyes.

He seemed to have everything in the palm of his hands.

"Now, why don't we go somewhere more appropriate hmm?" Aurolio said.

Skullius shook his head and led the pale man and the silent Idline to a private room within the grand mansion.

Aurolio whistled at the decor and offered a few compliments which Skullius disregarded with vain appreciation or simple nods.

As soon as they got seated, Skullius got to business.

Might as well get this over with.

"So, let's lay out the terms clearly and seal them with a Tie of Exchange," he said.

The pale man nodded.

"Of course. Right to the point, I see. However..." Aurolio said while leaning a bit closer to Skullius from the comfort of the couch he was seated on which was opposite the Hybrid Luman, behind a smooth, wooden table. "...I do hope you know the severity of the contract you're invoking. Sane human beings don't usually opt to use a Tie of Exchange so casually."

Skullius kept his straight face.

"Luckily both of us aren't human... or sane. Besides what part of this says 'casual' to you?" he said with monotone voice.

Aurolio gave a boisterous laugh.

"Too true. Then let me go first. I'm not one for hostility, but I like to keep my ego on a high pedestal about Lady Aigas' ass where it belongs. So I won't hesitate to kill if it's challenged or ridiculed. That said, as I mentioned earlier, I will refrain from doing you any harm if you help me procure Null beasts to use to raise my level. Starting with ones in Genhuis, of course."

"I see. Then I... Wait. The ones in Genhuis? " Skullius asked, confused.

"Yeah. Like I told you before. There's no easy way to destroy those things. They have been imprisoned at the Reacher Academy for research and extermination. We'll start there. Right partner?" Aurolio said with a sly smile.

Skullius rubbed his chin.

So that's where the Fledging Null Badubs were.

But then...

"How are we supposed to get to them there? In fact, why should I help you with that? You could just get those ones on your own, right? You clearly have enough connections to even know confidential stuff like where they are. That's not public knowledge. In any case, it doesn't have anything to do with me," Skullius said.

"It's true. If I expose to the Academy that I was the one who killed one those beasts, they might be intrigued enough to humour my requests. Actually, they will be. However, I'd feel a bit more reassured if you were there."

"Why?"

"That information is too sensitive for me to just give you without a guarantee that you'll help," Aurolio said, his face turning serious.

Sensitive?

Skullius grumbled.

His tagging along with Aurolio for this one would complicate things. But he was going to have to face the music at some point. Said music was the fact that Gillemart was likely to spread word to a few people that Skullius was someone they should take in for questioning regarding the event.

If he appeared with Aurolio at the Academy and the two destroyed the beasts, that would call for questions. Maybe it was different for Aurolio since he had an overpowered technique and widely known reputation but for the Hybrid Luman...

"That's out of the question. I'm already in a tough spot because the City Guardian sees me as a suspect. Take that risk on your own," Skullius said firmly.

Aurolio nodded slowly with his eyes losing their glow for a seconds.

Then he spoke.

"Fine. Perhaps that was a little considerate. Even I probably wouldn't be able to help if you got tangled up by someone like that. But... I do have strong reasons for wanting you with me. So, let me sweeten the deal a bit.

One time offer on the table here. In exchange for the risk – added up with my help in lessening the consequences of what may happen with the Capital Service – I'll gift you something other than information concerning the guidance field and all. I'm talking delightful trinkets."

How dramatic.

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

"Define trinkets," he said.

Aurolio smirked.

"I've cleared enough high level Clusters to earn some absurdly powerful tools and mysterious treasures. For instance..."

The pale man turned to Idline who nodded, stepped forward and placed her hand on the table. The ring on her finger shone and a large object appeared, making the wooden furniture piece groan.

It was a large, curved, ancient silver horn.

...!

The moment it appeared, Skullius zipped away from his seat and only stopped when his back smashed against the wall.

His breathing hastened and his eyes were wide open!

A look of horror was plastered on his face!

Perspiration leaked from his face, soaking it in an instant!

It wasn't just him though.

Even though Aurolio remained seated, he was sweating too, though with a smirk on his face as he looked at the horn. Idline took a few steps back and tried her best to maintain composure.

"Pretty intense, isn't it? I'm afraid of using it myself," Aurolio said before turning to Skullius. "Check its status and confirm how valuable it is."

Skullius hesitated but eventually, he took reluctant steps forward and activated Crude Vision.

Just the sheer ominous pressure gushing out of the large, curved thing in his sight, was enough to make him buckle.

He didn't get any closer than he needed to.

Its archaic nature, with the fractures and corrosion on its surface from age, and multiple rings around it like a tree, filled him with too much dread.

What was this?

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[Half-Dragonite's Bone]

<Mythical>

A piece of a Half-Dragonite's outer bone shell torn in battle.

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-Special Effects-

- Can cause rapid spawning of powerful beasts.

- ???

- ???

- ???

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[Skill : To Ash]

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[Skill : ???]

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What was with this thing?

What was a Half-Dragonite?

Skullius remained dumbfounded at what he was looking at. He was only dragged back from speculation by Aurolio's voice.

"I'll admit there isn't much to show even with my eyes but it's just an example of what I have to offer. This one is not up for grabs though, I must say."

Idline quickly retrieved the horn back into storage and the atmosphere returned to normal.

Skullius relaxed noticeably.

"What is a Half-Dragonite?" he immediately asked.

"Just a kind of creature I encountered in a Cluster before. Apparently, it's a beast with only a quarter of the essence that makes up a real dragon. You know, the creatures that have been extinct for ages. Former rulers of Edagon, the lands of the Giants?" Aurolio explained.

Skullius nodded with apprehension.

"Took everything I had to beat it – techniques and artefacts – and even then... I did not particularly enjoy that victory. This horn is a piece of the Cluster General's natural armour coating that I managed to salvage. Anyway, I have a lot more useful things like this. Just say the word and I'll give... one, two..

three... Three! Three treasures."

This was undoubtedly tempting.

While Skullius was already acquiring Mythical grade treasures on his own, it wasn't through a stable network yet. If a blue-purple Cluster had contained creatures like Hobbu Bobbu, what more Clusters above that.

He was hesitant to enter more blue-purple Cluster willy nilly to be honest. They were just that dangerous, and he barely had the time to do so.

Of course, the offer of treasures alone wasn't enough to sway him to risk his life.

But...

When Skullius fully calmed down. He spoke.

"I'm willing to consider it. But I need specific items. For instance, do you have something that can... fix other treasures? Preferably broken Mythical grade treasures."

Chapter 684: The Ancient Page

Aurolio himself had admitted that it would be hard to help Skullius if he got embroiled with the higher status figures within Genhuis City. He might help to offset the effects of what they would do but that was it. This meant that the pale man wasn't willing to add a clause that guaranteed that he would help Skullius in times of need.

Since that was the case, the Hybrid Luman wasn't willing to leap into trouble if he didn't at least get something that he needed. Something extremely convenient for a very, very important piece he had within storage.

For this, he wouldn't budge.

The look in Aurolio's eyes changed.

He puckered his lips and sniffled.

"Hmmm. That's tricky. I do have something with that kind of effect, but the problem is... I have use for it. You don't find things like that lying around everywhere."

The gleam in Skullius' eyes dulled.

If that was the case, then he wouldn't...

"But, I can offer something else," Aurolio said.

Skullius was once again dumbfounded.

Why was this guy so persistent?

The more he thought about it, the more hesitant he became about this.

Why did Aurolio want him to be there when he ventured to kill the Null Badubs at the Reacher Academy so badly?

The Hybrid Luman had a sneaking suspicion that this had to do with things Aurolio had learned from the Book of Alignment. Things he hadn't employed during the first kill he made.

Yes!

That one detail was what had Skullius getting suspicious.

Aurolio must have learned something from what Skullius had revealed to him hours ago, which he hadn't been able to apply when he killed the first Null Badub. After all, if not that, then why was this suddenly an important thing to him?

In any case, this was getting too fishy... and there were no aquariums nearby!

Maybe Skullius was better off just outright rejecting regardless of what the man had to offer.

Yes. Playing it safe was probably better.

The Hybrid Luman had begun to raise his hand to formally put an end to this specific request of Aurolio's, when something else was laid on the table by Idline as per Aurolio's wish.

It was a glowing, worn paper page.

Its edges were so jagged that it was a miracle how the page was still intact. In fact, one would be led to think that the glow on this page was some kind of magical effect keeping the frail piece from turning to dust.

Another ancient artefact!

What was this? The first paper ever to be crafted by man?!

Aurolio had a strained look on his face whose noisy implication he tried to hide with a playful tone in his words.

"I'm reluctant to part with this. Believe me, I am. But I really need your services on this one," he said as he pushed the page to Skullius. "The value of this item can not be understated. Take a look."

While indeed Aurolio had intimidated Skullius into agreeing to this entire deal, he wasn't willing to take it too far. He'd much rather prefer relations based on mutual respect. A first impression couldn't create such a thing, that's why he had chosen force, but further interactions where it was genuine negotiation between two kinda equal parties could.

Skullius frowned and took a glance at the page with the guidance field.

'What could this be?' he wondered.

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[DO NOT TAKE THIS RELIC LIGHTLY, SKULLIUS!]

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...!!!

Skullius jerked back.

What the hell?

Did he see that right?

Instead of the details he expected, a prompt in bold, a warning, had suddenly popped up in front of him!

The look of shock in his eyes was misinterpreted by Aurolio who sighed.

"We share that look in common. I couldn't believe my eyes too when I first saw it too," he said.

Skullius froze.

He hadn't seen what the page was yet!

His eyes turned back to the glowing box displaying the text.

It shifted.

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[THINK CAREFULLY BEFORE DECIDING TO KEEP SUCH A THING... SKULLIUS!].

...

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[Please note, (1) piece of Counsel has been used]

Skullius swallowed hard.

Wait. Counsel? What?!

What was...?

Was this...?

Was this a warning from VOW bro?!

It was, wasn't it?!

After so long...!

No! This wasn't the time!

Before he knew it, the warning prompt vanished and allowed Skullius to see what exactly the page was.

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[%##@]

<???

A page from the [%##@] which contains within it the bound soul of the Corrupted Deity Nunax.

...

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...!!!!

Skullius forgot to breath. He had only read the first few lines of the description, but this was already too much for him to handle!

The b... the bound soul of a Deity?!

No way!

How... how did Aurolio have this?!

Was this real?!

This wasn't some kind of joke, right?!

Would something like that be lying on a table in a mundane human mansion like some simple scrap?!

The Hybrid Luman clutched his forehead.

What had he gotten himself into?

All of sudden, even VOW bro had suddenly appeared to warn him about this, and he had a feeling that the entity had gone through quite a bit of trouble to do something like that, given that it didn't speak to him directly?

Ah, that must have been the guidance field <Counsel> function being exploited, but that was a matter he could consider later.

Before allowing himself to panic further, Skullius read everything else.

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Whoever binds themselves to this artefact will receive the chant to summon and enslave the Corrupted Deity Nunax.

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-Caution-

The soul of a Deity is not so easily bound. Six Trials will be given to the bond. Each, upon successful completion, increase the chances to completely subjugate the sealed Deity.

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[Sealed beings – 1/100]

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Ah...

Before Skullius could even consider the preposterous implications behind this, he stood up and glared at Aurolio.

"Why in the world would you be willing to give this away?! How did you get it?" he barked.

Aurolio's expression didn't change.

"How and why indeed. Everyone has special traits, Festos. Everyone touched by Existential Parallels. I just happen to have some outstanding ones. I'd love to tell you all about it, as a partner, but I can't do that until we're on the same page," the pale man said.

He wasn't smiling or wearing his usual playfulness.

He was dead serious.

Skullius plopped to the couch.

This...!

What was he supposed to do?

None of this made linear sense at all.

Ever since he met Aurolio, everything he knew was spinning uncontrollably. The progressive nature in which he understood things... how things should be... it was all turning upside down.

Why?

Was this because he and Aurolio, bearers of the powers of Existential Parallels, were anomalies in general?

Regardless, of the reasons, Skullius couldn't help but feel like a bit of trickery was involved here. Trickery and extreme convenience.

'Damn it!' Skullius looked at the description again.

The warning from VOW was gone, but it still kept appearing in his mind. He would be a fool if he didn't take it into account.

But then...

Seriously?

There was really the soul of Deity trapped within the seemingly feeble page?

All signs pointed towards the fact that this was likely true.

And to Skullius, this was too grand!

If he somehow managed to subjugate the soul of Deity, according to the instructions, the Six Trials, then he would have an edge in his endgame.

The inevitable battle against Somanda!

Replicus was building a sufficient force for that purpose. That was the end goal, as far as Skullius was concerned. There may be side quests between and grander objectives after, but Skullius was getting ready to retrieve his soul from the High Lich in the last stretches of time that were left before Doom Factor 2 activated.

That was his goal.

That had always been his goal.

The time crunch was real, and Skullius always tried to not let it impede his morale, but everything was in place.

Planning and caution.

...And when confronted with something like this..

The Hybrid Luman gazed at the pale man.

"I'd be lying if I said this didn't peak my interest. But I thought you said trinketsssss. What more do you have to offer?" he said while feeling the turmoil burning within him.

The debate.

The warnings.

The apprehension.

The logic.

He shut it off and faced Aurolio with a fire in his eyes.

The pale man saw the glow in the Hybrid Luman's eyes and was pleased.

'There's always a right price. I knew it. This man is as mad as I am. For him to even consider it...' he thought, a smile reappearing on his face.

Chapter 685: Swindling A Tie of Exchange

A brief pause prevailed within the room occupied by the trio.

The two negotiating parties each had their fair share of thoughts, though differing in the emotion and intent behind them.

The Hybrid Luman, even while trying to avoid getting too negative about his interest in the page within which the soul of a Deity – a Corrupted Deity, whatever that meant – was sealed in, was forced to think over the catastrophe that could ensue if he somehow messed up when dealing with it.

It might have come off as reckless of Skullius to even consider accepting this thing in exchange for diving into a situation that was likely to screw him over, but it wasn't like Skullius intended to bind the atrocious artefact to himself immediately.

He wanted to keep it and study it until such a time came where he was ready to try out these so-called Trials that allowed to him to increase his chances of taming a Deity.

Dear powers above that still sounded absurd!

Skullius deigned to attempt such a thing after the Premium Age Royale was over and whatever it was leading to in the hands of Guissepo and the Green Neolists. It wasn't out of choice, as after that time, his deadline would be getting dangerously close.

All this to say, Skullius had to acquire this item. One way or another, it was going to help him if he used it properly.

As for the issue of helping Aurolio with whatever he wanted him to be there for, he was willing to risk it. After all, while he was terrified of what it could unfold into, he had support.

Yes.

He had Darwel, Seville, Viccil... and Alaris.

While the last point of security was shaky, the Sif trio surely wouldn't let the last Luminant alive be tried for wrong doings he had actually committed, right?

"I have a great many other things I can offer, Festos. But I think we've discussed enough for now. I'll give you a chance to pick two more items like this after we are done with the stuff at the Academy. For now, you can keep this. That's goodwill personified," Aurolio said as he gestured to the ancient page.

Skullius eyed him vacantly out of habit.

That was reasonable.

Though, as he stored the page in his spatial storage, he couldn't help but wonder...

Did Aurolio have more terrifying items like these, since he was willing to part with such an absurdly overpowered artefact? Or was he lying, and actually glad to be rid of this?

After all, why hadn't someone so strong already used this thing to gain a Deity as a subordinate?

Skullius was sure Aurolio was as anxious as he was about using this.

He was likely torn on wanting to keep it and wanting to use it to trade for something he was guaranteed would give boons instead. That seemed to be working out perfectly for him.

In that, Aurolio could be called shrewd, but it wasn't like Skullius was stupid.

"Fine then. Let's seal the deal," Skullius said before his eyes turned sharp.

"This is it. The next important step!" he thought as he signalled to Sila who had been deemed to have had enough hours outside and swiftly barred within the Hybrid Luman's soul.

"I'll help you acquire Null beasts to kill," Skullius said simply, declaring his terms that he was bound to.

Aurolio smiled and nodded.

"I already said my piece," he said with a shrug.

Thankfully, his terms had not been ridiculous, so Skullius, as the prime attendant would likely not be attached with a convenient summonable function.

What followed was for Skullius to provide a part of his body that Aurolio would inject his mana into, confirming that he agreed to the Tie of Exchange.

As the pale man waited patiently for Skullius to get on with it, the Hybrid Luman... injected Null Life Essence into left arm discreetly, saturating his mana channels and blood vessels with it!

Next, a shallow red light wrapped around his the limb, leaving weak, similarly coloured marks that bound it tight.

Aurolio frowned.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

Skullius wore a deadpan face, ignoring the pale man.

He then gathered mana in his right hand and slashed away his left arm in instant!

The limb fell on the table with a dull thud.

Both Idline and Aurolio were mildly surprised by this gesture?

What was this man doing?

A Tie of Exchange required something as little as a hair or a nail to be validated. Why was he using his entire arm?

Before a second could pass, Skullius' left arm had already been restored through [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc]'s passive regenerative qualities, in the next moment, the Hybrid Luman handed the severed limb he had chopped off to Aurolio.

Just like Sila had instructed.

A guidance field prompt appeared in the Hybrid Luman's sight.

[You are initiating a 'Tie of Exchange'. Please select a target]

Skullius then looked to Aurolio.

"You're up."

"A whole arm? Seriously? Why?" the pale man narrowed his eyes with caution and confusion.

"I was taught to be thorough by the man who taught me how to use the Tie of Exchange. This is a religious mechanism, you know? You need to show adequate respect by fully committing. So, if I were you, I would just accept it," Skullius lied through his teeth.

Aurolio paused for a bit, his face showing hints of contemplation and honestly, disbelief.

He then sighed exasperatedly, and took Skullius' severed hand.

The marks on it looked a bit strange, but they seemed to clutch on the flesh of the arm very tight.

"Is this to keep it from decomposing?" the pale man asked.

"Of course."

Aurolio nodded. In the back of his mind he was surprised that Skullius had a mastery in runes.

When he began to inject mana into the arm though, he felt a semblance of an elusive presence that was hanging within it, and then it vanished, as if sensing his conscious notice of it.

'Hmmm?'

Aurolio glanced at Skullius, but then chose to ignore the fleeting presence he felt. He fully setup the Tie of Exchange, feeling something grasp at his depths tightly afterwards.

"I guess it's done," he said.

Skullius smiled and nodded.

"Yeah. It's done."

And it was for sure.

Using the method Sila proposed, Skullius had secured a bit of leniency for himself with the Tie of Exchange.

As Sila had said, Ties of Exchange worked best when one believed in the Deities, and the basis for which punishment was given, hung on the fact that everyone was born in Aigas and made through them.

But Skullius was different.

He could skirt the punishment of failing to achieve the terms he proposed to Aurolio. For that, he needed to ensure that the object he was using to create the Tie of Exchange was clear, and not easily lost.

According to the piece of soul, there were times within their camps when more devout soldiers were actually dealt less aggravating punishment for breaking the Tie of Exchange. They did this by making an offering to the Deities, and offering up large pieces of their flesh as conduits for the Exchange.

Though, Skullius noted that this probably wouldn't in his favour.

For one, while he didn't know what the Ashing of Time Serenity mentioned was, which was the last time Aigas was supposed to have enjoyed having all three Deities, he knew that things were likely different then.

A lot of the things associated with the Deities right now, were likely to be... automated in a sense, since only one of the Deities was left. At least that was what Skullius thought. Handling everything in this world wasn't a simple task right?

Maybe he was wrong.

In any case, offering a larger piece of his body, was Sila's idea and he went with it just in case.

The real idea behind what he had done, laid in injected Null Life Essence into the arm from within and sealing the arm using the Gravel Runes he had learnt from Hobbu Gogo.

He didn't know how long, or efficient they were at holding in Null Life Essence, but they would have to do.

Sila's idea was that since Skullius wasn't of this world, it was likely that he wouldn't be treated the same by the Tie of Exchange, as once again, according to the Tower General, there were many instances where Ties of Exchange... turned void in the past, mainly due to the fact that the user did not believe in the Deities.

In this case, by using a larger portion of his body, Skullius ensured that he wouldn't appear as vain, but the Null Life Essence would void the Tie of Exchange... at best.

At worst, he would likely also get a slap on the wrist.

It was unknown which he would get to enjoy.

'If the bastard tries anything, I can at least guarantee that I won't be forced to die or keep supplying him with Null Beasts, which is already going to be tough to do,' Skullius thought.

Aurolio stood up with a heavy breath. He had stored Skullius' arm in his storage, and since the arrangement was finally set up, it was time to make use of it.

"Alright! Let's get going," he said.

"Now?" Skullius asked with a frown.

"Yeah. We don't have all day," Aurolio said as he grabbed Skullius by the shoulder and pulled him up.

"Wait!" the Hybrid Luman tried to stop Aurolio, but before he knew it, he was standing in the streets of the partially dilapidated grand city of Genhuis, the anxiety-inducing light of the second sun overhead making him groan uncomfortably.

Chapter 686: Facing The Music (1)

'Damn it. I wanted to get everything to do with the grand mansion and Red Rage done before coming here. But oh well,' Skullius thought with a hand over his face.

His targets had been demolished and now he had to deal with this.

"Don't look so down. We'll be in and out before you know it," Aurolio said.

Skullius shrugged off the man's hand from his shoulder and wore a scowl.

"Unless you're super lucky too, I guarantee you that's not going to be the case," the Hybrid Luman said with the click of his tongue after his salty remark.

Aurolio was amused.

"You're pretty pessimistic, aren't you? Have some faith."

"Bro, there's never been a reason for me to be otherwise. Anyway, let's get this over with. I'd prefer to deal with the Academy business before encountering Gillewart."

Aurolio chuckled.

"Alright. Let's go," he said before grabbing Skullius' shoulder again and turning to Idline. "I can do without you now, Idline. Go back to the mansion."

The formally dressed woman nodded silently before watching the pale man drag Skullius away at a tremendous speed.

As a breeze blew against her from the force of their take-off, she sighed.

The trio had appeared near the entrance within the walls of Genhuis where a lot of the damage that had been dealt earlier was slowly being masked by large scale human activity. It was actually pretty impressive that in less than three hours, the city was already bustling with the usual clamour and enthusiasm.

The masses already felt a bit more relaxed.

Was this the famed collective emotion crowd influence?

As Idline set out to go back to the Velanqi mansion, Skullius and Aurolio had just arrived before the grandiose, imposing and isolated view of the Reacher Academy.

"You know? I can move on my own," Skullius said while swatting away Aurolio's hand...again.

"Oh, I didn't. I'm used to doing things my way," the pale man replied nonchalantly. He gazed ahead at the entrance to the institution, the interior of which was riddled with magic towers, and smiled.
"You ready?"

"Kind of," Skullius said with an anxious scoff.

"Stop."

...!

Suddenly, a third voice disrupted the two's flow. Skullius' body trembled involuntarily as he felt a familiar clutch on his soul that moved to his flesh and bone, turning them rigid.

Aurolio felt the same and stopped moving, but he grunted a bit and shrugged a bit violently... shattering the effect from his body completely!

He then turned behind him.

"It's pretty impolite to impose your filthy grip on my soul without warning, asshole," he said, much to the surprise of the man behind him.

It was Gillewart.

The City Guardian glanced at Skullius who was rendered immobile, and then to Aurolio.

"So it's true what I've heard. A young man at the Master Stage capable of resisting compulsion," he said with a snort. "I have no business with you. Not now. All I need is for this man to come with me."

Aurolio glanced at Skullius who could only move his eyes in a strained manner. The look within them screamed quite loudly, and fortunately, Aurolio could hear what they said just fine.

'I get it. I get it,' the pale man thought.

He then gave a menacing glare to Gillewart.

"Sorry. I'm in need of him too. So I would appreciate it if you fuck off. Sound good?"

The look on Gillewart's face didn't change. He smacked his lips as a bright glow boiled behind the monocle he had once again placed before his eye.

"Ruhrees told me that you were the one who killed one of the monsters that attacked the city. Don't let it get to your head. Each and every one of us could kill those things with enough effort, but our priority is the safety of the people and the city as a whole. With that in mind, this man has ties that concern that very matter of safety.

So, let me say it again..." Gillewart said as he flashed over to Skullius and gripped his arm. "...I'll be taking him."

Aurolio laughed before raising his chin and looking at Gillewart with the most condescending eyes the Incandescent Stage expert had ever seen.

" | Legendary powerhouses do get to do what they want, huh | "

...!

Suddenly, Gillewart felt his entire body get blasted with an overbearing force from above that seemed to sit on his shoulders and force him to kneel, his knees ploughing into the ground!

The City Guardian gnashed his teeth and groaned.

'What in the world... what is this?!' he wondered in awe.

He couldn't resist with his physical might, and even when he pumped mana into his muscles, he was still unable to move an inch!

Impossible!

Was he really facing off against a Master Stage expert?!

Was this some kind of compulsion?!

On the side, Skullius too wore a look of awe.

He, unlike Gillewart, knew that this wasn't compulsion.

This feeling...!

Wasn't it way too familiar?!

From the moment Aurolio spoke, he felt a wild gush of mana blast from him, along with an invisible, intangible force that hurtled towards Gillewart!

This...!

This was similar to [Evil Veneration]!

This was a Veneration art?!

Aurolio walked over to the incapacitated Gillewart and stared him down.

"Now let me not appear as if I'm the type of ignorant asshole who doesn't appreciate that it's your duty to keep the city safe. It's your job. I get it. But what we're doing is the exact same thing. We want to get rid of the monsters being kept at the Academy since we can do it more efficiently. We'll even give some intel on them.

Alright?" he said with a semi-respectful tone.

Gillewart struggled to look up at the pale man and saw his serious visage. There was no ridicule or condescension within his eyes. He was being serious.

Soon, the crushing force pounding against Gillewart receded, allowing him to move freely again.

He gazed at Aurolio again and then at Skullius.

He then sighed and stood up.

With but a thought, he freed Skullius from his grip, giving him a sharp look as he did.

"Fine. I'll join you then. There was someone else at the Academy who was interested in having a chat with you anyway," he said.

Skullius stretched his body uncomfortably and asked.

"Who?"

"Arch-Mage RYTE."

The Hybrid Luman kept a straight face.

"I see," he said with a heavy tone.

Of course it was.

Aurolio nodded to Gillemart's words so Skullius felt like he had no say in anything else.

Even though he had much to say to Aurolio after witnessing another aspect of his power, now wasn't the time.

*

The trio, after clearing everything they had to about their objectives entered the Academy after being granted admission by the man at the gate.

Soon, under Gillemart's guidance, they reached a tower Skullius was familiar with where upon reaching the entrance into it, an elderly man appeared out of thin air and gave a smile to Gillemart before traversing with his sight all the way to Skullius.

"Well I'll be. To think it was actually you? Haha. Interesting," Arch-Mage RYTE said.

"It's good to see you again, Arch-Mage RYTE," Skullius said in a respectful tone.

"Hmmm. I'd like to say the same but... hmmm," the Arch-Mage paused and studied Skullius' body suddenly. "Dear levered greens!"

The Hybrid Luman was startled by the old man's reaction, as was Gillewart.

"Ryte?" he said, but the man ignored him.

"To think it's possible for one to grow so profoundly after such a short time! The mana buzzing around you is quite literally screaming!"

Gillewart and Aurolio both looked curiously at Skullius who remained dumbfounded.

What was this guy talking about?

Ryte drew himself from his focus on Skullius and coughed awkwardly.

"In any case, come in. Gillewart's told me fascinating things. Let's talk inside."

Chapter 687: Facing The Music (2)

Before long, the group had reached the same place where Skullius had been 'invited' to when he came here before. The only difference was that there were no students – Apprentice Mages – around.

Skullius had been expecting the taunt of the students once again, but thankfully, he'd get to not have several people trying to prove he was ignorant simply because he wasn't a Mage.

Arch-Mage Ryte picked up on the hints of relief on the Hybrid Luman's face.

"Your friends are out there helping rebuild the destroyed structures in this city. It's good for them to have a more practical use of the Elemental Patch. In fact, doing such tasks that most Mages view as beneath them is a great way to humble those fools! They've grown too used to my valuable, benevolent instruction!" the man said to Skullius who was surprised that he was figured out so easily.

But friends though?

He was not friends with those fools!

Skullius smiled sheepishly at the Arch-Mage, approving of whatever he said.

'At least it's someone I know who I'm talking to about all this. He seems to be softer than the last time we met. I could be horribly wrong though,' he thought. The tendrils of white hair saturated with mana over the robed man's head made him think that he was probably wrong.

"This is quite the teaching space," Aurolio commented while looking around.

"Isn't it? I arranged everything splendidly. State of the art apparatus, the finest benches, exotic plants... Ah, what else would an Energy Former want?" Ryte said with a bit of pride.

Aurolio nodded before glancing at Skullius with a cheap smile.

Gillewart stepped in to disperse the casual atmosphere.

"These two say they want to help destroy those monstrosities. Efficiently," he said.

"Oh, I see. Is that so?" Ryte asked while alternating his gaze between Skullius and Aurolio.

"It sure is. In fact, we are actually willing to do it right now, without wasting anymore time," Aurolio said while swinging his arm.

Arch-Mage Ryte was amused.

He took a seat on a chair nearby and gave a soft hum while doing so.

"I feel that's too rapid a progression of events. Why don't we have a relaxing chat first?" he said with a big smile.

Skullius turned to Aurolio who rolled his eyes.

The duo sat down.

It seemed like there was no escaping offering up an explanation concerning their endeavour here. Both had known it was inevitable anyway.

"So I hear one of you managed to kill one of the beasts with a single physical blow while another was actually conversing with one of them. Their leader perhaps? Care to explain? I'm a reasonable man. Well, reasonable within the bounds of my skill, that is. Thankfully!

If it were any other Arch-Mage, they'd have imprisoned you in their tower and forced the answers out of you," Ryte said.

Suddenly, in his hand, from out of nowhere, a glass carrying a sparkling, silver wine could be seen.

The trio could have sworn there wasn't such a thing splits of a second ago.

"It seems to me you're doing the exact same thing to us, no? We wouldn't be able to escape this tower even if we wanted to, right?" Aurolio pointed out with a toothy smile.

A Mage's tower was practically their limb. This was a fact. For an Arch-Mage, especially an accomplished one, escaping their territory would be impossible without godly outside factors.

"Of course you can! Once I'm satisfied with your answers that is," Ryte said, first turning to Skullius with a glow in his eyes. "Ah, first let me ask. How is your mana already bordering on that of a Prime Mage? It's so controlled and refined. Has your skill in fondling mana increased that much?"

'Fondling?' Skullius wondered before answering the man's question.

"I wasn't lying when I told you I'm very interested in Energy Forming. I've always been talented in controlling mana so I just kept on practicing."

None of what Skullius said was a lie despite it being a shallow response. Ryte gave him a keen inspection and nodded.

"I can believe that. It's not unheard of. There are many out there who do not want to risk choosing Mage as their class. After all, being stuck for life with a class you have no talent in is disastrous. I feel that you made a mistake in choosing anything other than this."

Skullius strained, but inwardly he was smirking cheerfully.

"Maybe," he said with a sullen outward appearance.

"Maybe indeed. Perhaps I didn't give your act of resisting spatial trans-positioning that day with just your mana control enough credit. I might not be opposed to entertaining sporadic visits from you after all..."

Skullius' eyes beamed.

Really?!

That would actually be a big help! Arch-Mage RYTE had only entertained his presence and questions that one time when he used the letter from Stylla but now, if he was really going to allow him more chances to interact...

"...of course, that depends on how this current matter ends."

The Hybrid Luman's mood plummeted immediately.

It was foolish to get too excited before this whole incident and all its tie-ins was cleared.

"So. How were you able to converse with this creature? From what I've seen and heard, they speak in a different tongue. Was it targeting you specifically?" RYTE asked.

Skullius sighed.

He wore a serious face and hesitated a little before answering.

Unfortunately for everyone here except Aurolio, they were oblivious to the throngs of bullshit swelling in his skin.

"It wasn't after me specifically. At least that's what I think. It established a connection with me mentally and requested that I hand over something I had. Something that's likely related to it," he said.

"Oh," Arch-Mage Ryte said. "What could that be?"

"This," Skullius said as he summoned a shield from his storage.

Gillewart and Ryte closely observed the item, and for a moment, they were stricken with surprise.

The elaborate design on the item... and the sheer presence it radiated was horrific!

It was probably at the peak of the Legendary grade or slightly above, but its presence seemed to want to mimic that of a higher tier treasure!

What was this brass shield?

Skullius continued.

"I don't know how it sensed that I had it, but... I couldn't surrender this thing. If by some chance me giving it back caused problems within the city or elsewhere..." he said, pausing mid-sentence for dramatic effect.

Arch-Mage Ryte closely analysed Skullius' face.

"Hmmm. This artefact..." he said as he sent a pulse of mana that encircled it and pulled it towards him through the air. His eyes gleamed and he looked to read something on the shield that no one else saw.

In the next moment, he chuckled.

"You may have been right. This shield is actually very offensive in nature. It's packed only with extremely destructive abilities. I can understand if you also couldn't give it up because its power is so alluring," Ryte said while giving the Hybrid Luman a knowing smile.

Skullius pretended to be embarrassed.

In his mind though, he was wondering how Ryte could tell what the item's abilities were.

Did all Mages possess such a power?

An appraisal ability maybe?

Well, that actually worked well for him!

After all, this was an elaborate plan he had crafted in the two hours he had been left alone. He had used [Unbound] on a Legendary shield he possessed, upgrading it significantly by expending 5,000 Null Life Essence points!

If push came to shove, he was ready to bullshit his way out of this.

And lookie lookie, push did come to shove

So far, it was working too!

Aurolio at the side was impressed by Skullius' acting. With his guidance field, he saw the shield's properties and the significant degree of intimidation it gave when powered by Null Life Essence. With this, it was possible to make his story believable.

The pale man held in a chuckle.

"Where did you find this?" Gillewart asked.

Skullius sighed with a sheepish smile.

"I ventured into a Sacred Forest a while back. I found an.. old, underground stone sanctum which happened to be a place holding within it a legacy. I think the dozens of traps and terrifying mystical creatures in it proved that. I tried to retrieve the legacy within in but... it was beyond me.

I was too weak to attempt it. Somewhere along the way, I found some dried corpses, one of which had this shield and I considered it enough reward instead of risking my life by going further."

...!

Gillewart and Ryte's interest was piqued.

"A legacy, you say?" Gillewart in particular leaned in and asked.

"Yes. I could show you if you want? Well, maybe point it to you on a map or something. I'm not going back there," Skullius said with a shiver.

Gillewart seemed truly taken by the idea while Ryte expressed mild enthusiasm.

Skullius grinned inwardly.

It was actually true that he found an underground fortress in a Sacred Forest he had gone to. He had done a lot of adventuring in the past six weeks after all.

However, the sanctum was nothing special. It was just an old structure upon which a Sacred Forest grew it seemed.

And Gillewart seemed to have completely fallen for it.

It might have even derailed his mind from the topic.

How gullible!

Chapter 688: Hurtful Questions, Hurtful Worship

Skullius paid keen but veiled attention to RYTE. The Arch-Mage didn't seem to be caught in the tangent of a potential spot to gain power like Gillegart. Instead, he completely ignored it and continued focusing on the topic at hand.

He didn't even entertain whether or not Skullius was lying about the legacy. It seemed that he believed that at the very least, the shield Skullius had presented was something the Hybrid Luman found in a special place.

Nothing else other than that mattered, apparently.

"What drove that creature away in the end?" Arch-Mage RYTE asked.

Skullius wore an even more deeply disturbed face before offering an answer.

"It said if I refused to give it the item it needed, it would take something from me in exchange. So... it did something to Stylla and left afterwards. I assume it has her as we speak. It's probably waiting for me," the Hybrid Luman spat lies that actually pinched his heart.

The mention of Stylla still scorched him with guilt, sadly enough, and more than that, him saying the Null Devil King was waiting for him was more like a stab to his feels.

The Arch-Mage nodded.

"Hmm. Theurien wouldn't be happy to hear about this, provided he awakens that is. The curse placed on him... I'd never seen an enchantment so potently vile. Not even a Supreme Potion could make him open his eyes," he said with a regretful tone.

'Theurien? That's right! RYTE did say something about this the last time we met. Theurien is Stylla's father's name...' Skullius was made to recall.

"Alright. Gillegart tells me this creature was able to overpower even him. How did you manage to brave through its powers?"

Skullius subtly swallowed a lump of saliva. He had dreaded to be on the receiving end of this question, but he had an obvious answer.

"I have a Mythical grade weapon of my own. A sword. Gillegwart saw it," the Hybrid Luman said while turning to the City Guardian.

Gillegwart nodded to RYTE. Regretfully, he couldn't seem to forget the treacherous wave of sharp energy that exploded from Skullius when he slashed down with the zhanmadao!

It was more than a little menacing!

Objects of the Mythical grade could make an impactful difference in a contest where the contenders were largely unbalanced in terms of powers. So, it wasn't strange that Skullius survived the short confrontation with the Null Devil King with that long sword, especially with that showcase.

At least in the eyes of people who had no true idea how powerful the BoneTender in that kingly body was.

"I see. I'll leave it up to the Capital Service to judge you on possessing a Mythical grade weapon. But surely, you wouldn't be so cruel, right, Gilly boy?" RYTE said with a calming smile to Gillegwart.

The City Guardian sighed.

It was prohibited to own Mythical grade weapons without permission, and Gillegwart knew for a fact that Skullius owned it outside legal means. He would have known since very few actually had licenses for them, and he knew them all. And also, for those who entered with them in the city... the qualitative presence of such an item would draw Gillegwart's attention immediately.

RYTE seemed satisfied with Skullius' answers. He only had one last question though.

"Do you intend to pursue Stylla?"

Skullius was torn on this in truth.

Following after her when there was a great chance that she and the Null Devil King were together was... suicide.

Finding her was probably not hard since there were items and Diviners specialised towards that field, but he didn't have the means to help her or kill her enslaver.

While the Null Devil King had left Skullius alive, he had no delusions that it was because it couldn't kill him. It was likely because it had some form of reverence towards Serenity, whom it knew was currently supporting him. If he used this a crutch... he was likely to find that it wasn't as sturdy of a support after all.

But as to Ryte's question...

"I might," he simply said.

Arch-Mage Ryte's gaze lingered on the Hybrid Luman before turning to Aurolio.

"What's your story?" he asked.

The pale man had huddled against himself throughout the entire back and forth between Skullius and the high level Mage, shivering subtly while blowing into his hands. It seemed that whenever he wasn't actively doing something, the chill only he felt would catch up to him.

"Hmm. I can't really explain it," he said, much to Gillewart's displeasure.

But Aurolio continued.

"However, I can show you. I reckon giving up one of those things for a demonstration wouldn't be a loss for you, right? You can learn as much as you can then."

The Arch-Mage remained silent for a bit, his piercing eyes seemingly discerning Aurolio's intent.

"Very well. Let's go see it," he said.

Soon, the group appeared outside the tower and Ryte led them towards the Wormworld Spiral, the largest construct within the Academy grounds, its height which was hundreds of meters somehow smothered by an illusion that made it seem like it sank into the blue sky.

Arch-Mage Ryte didn't teleport them all there because of several rules that governed the Academy grounds. One of them forbade the use of magecraft outside designated areas of practise by Mages.

Therefore, the four had to manoeuvre to the large, shiny construct as mundanely as possible.

Skullius drew Aurolio back, the two then trailing behind both Gillewart and Ryte.

With a serious face, Skullius finally decided to present his curiosity.

"What you used on Gillewart earlier... What was it?"

Aurolio turned to him and raised a brow.

"Oh that. It's called Veneration."

Skullius frowned.

'Add something dammit! I know that much!'

"What is it? I thought you were able to compel people like Incandescent Stagers," Skullius lied.

This was probably the best way to ask about it without revealing that he had a Veneration Art of his own. Two actually.

One being [Evil Veneration] and the other being the Veneration that came with his Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator race.

He was sure Replicus had been abusing it but he couldn't, especially when he spent most of his time as the Hybrid Luman.

For now though, he really wanted to learn what a Veneration art was. He had never encountered anyone else who could use until now and all of the channels he searched through had no idea what it was either.

Aurolio gave him a lazy glance.

"Veneration is actually pretty simple, though uncommon among most people in the world. It's simply a... kindle you receive after coming into contact with a higher, FOREIGN power. A Deity, or something else on that level... or higher. Of course even the relatively strong people in this world wouldn't know about this since they don't even know there are other worlds," Aurolio explained.

Skullius did his best to maintain his composure.

"A foreign power?" he asked.

"Yeah. Think of it as like a protective charm you'd wear when going into an unexplored, dreadful land. But it's not yours and it was forced on you. Something that exists outside the natural forces of the world."

"So... it's like a blessing, but just from another Deity who isn't of that world?"

Aurolio laughed.

"A blessing? No. It's an affliction. Verbal, optical, auditory... It's never given for the purpose of benefit. It infects a part of your body like a virus and never lets go.

Before you know what it is, you struggle and it corrodes your mind and soul. It only takes the strongest of the strong to turn it into a weapon. But to do that... you often have to spend years pleading and begging the Deity who inflicted it for mercy. Veneration," the pale man explained with his face turning from playful to sombre for a few moments.

"Your scribbling stalker has one too, so you should watch your back."

"What?" Skullius was caught off guard.

Scribbling stalker?

As in... Gabel?

Skullius covered his mouth and grit his teeth.

Once again, he felt like Aurolio had expanded his world view with only words.

So Veneration... Fulgardt was touched, afflicted rather, but a foreign Deity or...

'The Wanderer Who Seeds...'

Skullius' eyes widened.

This had to be it.

Was this the origin of [Evil Veneration] which actualized anything the user said out of pure, unadulterated hatred?

And his other Veneration...

Was its source Serenity, or something else?

To add on to this, Gabel had something like this too?!

So many questions were left in the wake of these answers?

Like how did the dormant blessing within everyone react when they got a Veneration?

How would one even encounter a foreign Deity in a world bound by powerful Rules?

Skullius would have loved to ask but Aurolio suddenly swished his hand and something only Skullius and him could see shattered around them.

"Next time you want to ask something like that in public. Be tactful," the pale man said.

He had erected a barrier made of Voided Death Essence without Skullius even knowing, guarding their conversation against many ears!

Skullius wanted to say something to this, but it seemed his limited window for questioning Aurolio before the big show had closed.

For as the four entered the Wormworld Spiral, everything changed.

Chapter 689: Wormworld Spiral

The interior of the Wormworld Spiral was like a completely new world swallowing anyone who entered through its door so suddenly that almost always, a dreadful look of shock would appear on their faces.

As it turned out, except for Arch-Mage Ryte – obviously – everyone else in the group had never set foot in this tall tower, and they all gaped at the vast pool of mana, assorted abstract energies and aesthetic sacredness that blew against their faces as they gazed upon the pristine innards of the tower.

They were forced to suck in a sharp breath.

The beauty.

The grandiosity.

The structural genius.

Even though Skullius, Aurolio and Gillewart had no idea what they were looking at, they were smitten silly by it all and lost their cool for a couple of seconds.

It was a privilege to enter this place, really.

Prime Mages and below were not allowed to enter, and there was never an induction for Apprentices to go inside the spiralling structure and glimpse its magnificence. They had to earn it by sharpening their skill.

So, for three non-Mages to simply obtain the privilege of entry and see its brilliance while escorted by an esteemed Arch-Mage no less.... It was more than a bit uncommon.

"Flesh me..." Skullius voiced in awe.

Before him was an endless space with a stone tiled floor of smooth, grey marble, with the individual squares of the masonry rippling with mana.

Above, a silver sky with swirls that resembled clouds and colourful gaseous bodies fettered with stardust and bits of rainbows sheltered the space, its entirely giving both a flat and three dimensional feel depending on how one tilted their head. Spots of vibrant luminance like large stars acted as the lights that illuminated this unbounded ground floor, which also seemed to be a lobby of sorts.

After all, dozens of Mages who entered just like RYTE, Skullius, Aurolio and Gillemart, didn't seem to have much business here. And it should have been obvious, since a clear mind could tell that this was just the first floor.

While looking in all four cardinal directions didn't give even a glimpse to where the end of this floor was, certain structures obstructed much of that view and brought intrigue instead. Tens of rectangular pillars with the same shade of colour as the floor rose from below and sank into the cosmic flavoured ceiling.

Twisting swirls of energy like mutant lemniscates that kept spinning at a ferocious speed could be seen before each and every one of these pillars, the colours of each being either of three; yellow, silver or indigo.

Above these twisting swirls, on the pillars, a tag formed by a faint print of mana gave a designation as to where the quivering menaces of energy lead to, after all, they were portals which led to different sections of the Wormworld Spiral.

The colours had no particular meaning.

What was important was deciphering what the print of mana read, and the skill to do that was beyond those of the Prime Mage level and below. This was why entry into the large tower was exclusive. Mages by nature loved to apply themselves, and this setup within the lobby was indicative of their desire for magical challenges.

Needless to say, for that reason, the portals were constantly changing positions, and the designations too by extension.

It might have seemed inefficient and time consuming, but there was a finite number of locations to go to within the Wormworld Spiral, thus after some time, it wouldn't even take a high level Mage thirty seconds to find the portal to the place they wanted to go.

Witnessing this arrangement gave Skullius a weird sense of excitement. He had noticed one of the prints changing through his [Greatest Mana Manipulation], followed by the respective portal, which gave away the idea of what was going on here. While he couldn't even begin to decipher what any of the prints read, he was infatuated by the mechanism still.

Arch-Mage RYTE noticed Skullius' beaming enthusiasm and chuckled.

"If this is something that excites you this much, then you truly should have become a Mage," he said before leading the way towards one of the portals.

"I should warn you, however excited you may be, that warping may not exactly be a pleasant experience on the first try. Well, I am talking to anomalies so you might not need the warning but just in case... do be prepared. Also, try to keep still, otherwise you might get torn to shreds if you flail around in panic."

RYTE's warning only seemed to be taken seriously by Skullius, while AUROLIO and GILLEWART didn't seem too fazed. Perhaps they believed they had experienced worse.

Looking at the portal that was like millions of luminous indigo coloured strings bundled together and tangling in swirls endlessly against themselves was intimidating, but beautiful at the same time.

For Skullius it was even more profound since he could feel the complicated, systematic mess of 'spiced' up mana churning in this outlandish mechanism.

Space.

There was mana immaculately arranged in a pattern that induced heavy spatial effects. A different arrangement of this basic energy, like the layout in which he created the Refinery for his gravity centered mana core could be deciphered from it.

This was fascinating!

Ryte was the first to set foot through the portal, his figure getting swallowed by the indigo mass.

Skullius followed after him and heeded his warning.

Unlike Gillewart, an Incandescent Stage expert and Aurolio who seemed to defy general notions of the world easily, the Hybrid Luman wasn't willing to act tough in an established, yet uncharted territory.

As he sunk into the portal, Skullius felt... nothing.

Stepping into the artificial warping construct was no different from walking through open space, as he still felt the flat ground under his feet and the same terrifying flow of mana everywhere. Even the activation of the portal which he had expected; a surge of specially woven mana or the imposition of a higher authority over him... didn't happen.

What was the warning for then?

Did Ryte simply overestimate the effects?

Who knew?

'This is...sophisticated. I guess high level magecraft can't even be compared to my clunky use of mana,' Skullius thought with a sigh.

In the next moment, the Hybrid Luman found to himself in a completely different area.

Unlike the lobby, this place felt finite and... dark.

Everything just seemed gloomy and heavy, and with good reason.

Arch-Mage Ryte waited for everyone to appear behind him from a similar pillar before which an indigo mass of squirming spatial strings endlessly coiled.

He gave the group a cautious glance.

"This is a very...rigid place. The rules and spells here are unforgiving and intolerant to any contradictory and undesired actions. So, I urge you to not touch or do anything that I do not do," Ryte said, his eye falling on Aurolio in particular.

The group acknowledged the Arch-Mage's warning and followed after him as he walked ahead.

Skullius was once again smitten with surprise and awe when he felt the surroundings.

Towering, dark cubes rose into the high, pitch black ceiling, their arrangement around the finite space growing outward in a circular formation.

Over these cubes' faces, more fine prints constricted with mana could be seen, but they were not nearly as hard to decipher as the ones in the lobby. They seemed to give an idea of what was inside.

What was captured inside.

Indeed.

All the cubes here were prisons, and from the pillar in the centre of this space going outward, the cubes grew in size, as well as the concentration of other energies that Skullius couldn't comprehend surging around them. There were nearly endless combinations of powers that he guessed were supposed to counter those of whatever was stored inside!

And to think that even though some of the most vile of monsters were being detained here, no signs of struggle could be detected from the dark cubes... Was it because the captives were unable to express their rage or was it that they were constantly doing so... but just couldn't be heard?

Such a thing made Skullius smile sheepishly.

'That's dark.'

The awkward silence made the Hybrid Luman a bit uncomfortable, and he decided to try out the privilege he had been handed by Arch-Mage RYTE earlier, even though it might have been a bit too early.

"Arch-Mage RYTE. What exactly do you keep here? Monsters that you can't kill or creatures you are just fascinated by?" he asked.

The elderly man was amused.

"It's funny that you think there's a distinction between the two."

'Huh?' Skullius thought.

"Creatures that we can't kill are among many wonders that we would love to study exhaustively. But that isn't all we keep here. It's not only living things that captivate our interest but with certain degrees of danger to them. After all, when you think about it, truly powerful weapons or artefacts have a consciousness," Arch-Mage RYTE explained.

Skullius needed no expansion on that topic. He had learnt this through the grand aspect of [Unmatched Sword Sense]. He couldn't imagine what some of the stronger Mythical and even... Transcendent Grade treasures with consciousnesses could pull.

No doubt, such things were worthy of these cubical entrapments.

Chapter 690: Convincing Ancient Scholars! (1)

Several Arch-Mages could be seen within the vast space, each tending to a cube that housed something which had taken their interest. Some seemed to have disciples that they entered within the cubes with, and some looked anxious as they prepared calamitous spells with which to deal with the captives... just in case.

There was usually a price to pay for venturing into the unknown, and sometimes, it was unforgiving.

The group watched several of these scenes from the distance while Arch-Mage Ryte led them elsewhere – deeper into the formation of tall cubes.

"Gilly my boy. You had concerns about those monsters being secured here at the Academy?" Ryte asked without turning back to the City Guardian.

"Not anymore. I think you know what you're doing," Gillewart replied with a relieved sigh.

"I wouldn't go that far. One of the reasons I'm even entertaining the idea of bringing you here is because so far, short of using Ascended Magic, there's no way of killing these things," Ryte explained. "It hurts my ego to declare such a thing. I can practically feel the bruises."

"Ascended Magic?" Skullius asked with intrigue.

Ryte chuckled.

"It's a bit complex to explain, but since you already know that there are basic magecraft forms... Patches, like Transmutation, Elemental and Consolidation, you must have guessed that there also higher Patches, right? Asides from rare forms of magecraft that pop up every now and then, there are a finite amount of higher class Patches that any average Arch-Mage can learn. We call that Ascended Magic."

Skullius nodded repeatedly.

"I see. There's something called an average Arch-Mage, huh?"

"Of course! Those satisfied with scratching the bare surface of higher bounds of power! We call them all average, even if they have tasted the highest Stage of power; Beyond the Veil! Cheap the lot of them!" Ryte ranted.

"Never thought I'd hear it," Aurolio chipped in with a comment.

Ryte glanced at him for a moment before turning back to Skullius.

"On this little... pardon me, grand ambition of yours, I understand you have secrets. I would call myself a hypocrite if I ridiculed you two for keeping your own. However, do note that the five beasts we have captive here are not mine alone to allocate to you.

I will try to squeeze you in, since I want those things ridden of given how resistant they are to almost all types of power we can imagine, but if I fail..." Ryte said.

It had been a tad bit strange to Skullius that Ryte didn't argue much about them claiming to be able to kill these beasts that everyone else had trouble with.

The Arch-Mage hadn't even asked where these beasts had come from, but Skullius assumed that the older man figured they were the entourage of the bigger bad Gillear had told him about, and thus, had seen it unnecessary to ask about their origin.

The Hybrid Luman had initially attributed Ryte's willingness to take them to where the Null Badubs were being held, to Ryte favouring him that much and also to his curiosity, but these seemed like lesser factors to the Arch-Mage.

Ryte simply wanted the Null Badubs gone.

He seemed a bit...tense.

To Skullius this confirmed that higher calibres of Null beasts could resist the effect of normal magic and physical assault nomatter how powerful it was, which was probably why Ryte was against keeping them for further research.

It also had to be applauded that such a conclusion had been derived so soon. After all, it had only been a few hours since the creatures had assaulted Genhuis.

That said...

'How come I needed to exploit the capabilities of my class to gain such abilities? I only ever earned the right to ignore the damage from skills of a certain level when I acquired the [Defiant Raiment of Perversion]. Yet these Null Badubs had something like that from the jump?' Skullius wondered.

When he put it this way, it definitely seemed unfair, but this was likely because of the distinction between natural Null beasts and him, a bearer of Serenity's will.

Speaking of the otherworldly being, since Aurolio had done whatever he did with his Voided Death Essence fingering to shut down her interference, his connection to Serenity turned dim, as if it didn't exist.

It was nice not be pestered by it, especially when he figured out that Serenity was trying to stop him from learning the truth, but he did wonder how long this would last.

It wasn't permanent, right?

Skullius turned his attention to Aurolio and felt a shiver.

No way.

Soon, the group made a turn with Ryte's lead and found a massive cube the size of a small mansion surrounded by seven Mages; five Grandmasters and two Arch-Mages.

Uneven gaps that looked like distortions on the surfaces of the dark cubes could be seen, allowing the scholarly looking gentlemen and ladies to peer inside for reference and then argue among themselves.

Their conversation leaked to the approaching group, as it kept up its furious tempo.

"... because I am unmatched in the Fusion Element Patch! Certainly, a combination of true ice and star light powered by finely controlled Aura would be enough to penetrate the 'hard' armour of these monstrosities! Just let me give it a try!"

"The spell Dire Space was rendered ineffective against these things! Do you know how absurd of a feat that is?! It can be compared to... to attempting to keep a leaferie in place!"

"Then what do we do? The older geezers are insisting that we get rid of these monsters. That there's nothing to study about them except the failures we keep encountering when trying to damage them!"

"Not to mention RYTE is burning through his aged bones by having to cast and dispel Shocked Time every time one of you wants to try out a new spell. Poor bastard. If coming down here required climbing down flights of stairs... Pfft. I could laugh."

"...."

"Hahahahahahahahaha!"

"Hahahahahahahahahahaha!"

The boisterous laughter at RYTE's expense resounded loudly within the great space.

"So I'm the poor bastard with creaking bones, am I?" Arch-Mage RYTE responded to the joke from the distance.

Skullius tensed up.

He had pretended he hadn't heard the joke from this close a distance. He shuddered at how unlucky these Mages had to be to place a joke like this at such a time.

But as it turned out...

"Oh relax, RYTE. I could hear your crackling bones from the first floor. Our time here hasn't been as pleasant, neither has yours... so what's a little funny hurt?"

The other Mages chuckled and greeted the Arch-Mage.

"That's not funny. I've damn near worked as hard as all of you combined in the past few hours simply by casting the same spell, and you all have nothing to show for it," RYTE retorted. "Luckily for you, I have brought some good news."

The Mages all looked at RYTE's guests, but none made demeaning comments against them.

These experts had grown out of their itching-for-a-face-slapping phase hundreds of years ago, and would never undermine the actions of an Arch-Mage without seeing the results.

"Do tell or better yet, show us," one of Arch-Mage in front of the vast cube said.

Ryte turned to Aurolio.

"As you said, I'll give you one for demonstration first," he said before sending a stream of mana that interacted with the face of the cube and opened it up to reveal the silent space inside.

Five spherical shapes could be seen, seemingly made entirely out of a dark fog that spun to create an intangible prison within which the Null Badubs were shocked in time.

The entire cube housing these spheres had no additional aesthetics for looks save for dozens of collections of runes that could be seen on each side up to the ceiling, their functions still active but faint, because Ryte's Shocked Time was already incapacitating the Null Badubs.

The mana to power the runes was being used to keep the spell Shocked Time active instead.

Aurolio stepped forward under the eyes of the Mages and fearlessly entered the cube.

As he did, Ryte waved his hand at one of the swirling orbs, dispelling the effects of the spell and releasing the Null Badub held within it.

As the large creature held within shook, coming to from its frozen state, it maintained an indifferent expression.

...Until it saw Aurolio.

Suddenly, it wore a wrath filled face and snarled, lunging at the pale man in the next moment!

The creature's hostile behaviour, which it hadn't exhibited at all whenever the Mages had had Ryte dispel Shocked Time so that they could try out their spells, startled everyone who was looking from behind.

However, for the pale man decked in a fuzzy jacket, a smirk appeared on his face as he pulled back his sleeve. He formed a fist and concentrated a wild gush of Voided Death Essence...