

Undead 871

Chapter 871: Nullmancer's Unforgiving Lancet!

The released weapon quivered slightly while floating under the palm of the Nullmancer, every moment of spontaneous brightness it took inspiring fear and awe!

Grim grinned from the distance.

He gave Allora a knowing look that she quickly understood.

'So that's one of the boss' heavy-hitters he mentioned...' she thought.

By looks alone, it didn't disappoint. Its length and shape didn't allow room for long-lived delusions about escaping from it alive.

Nedalia certainly felt so.

Her face was drained of blood, her reflective eyes fixated on the crooked, gleaming menace.

She knew she had to defend with everything she got.

Before her mind even thought to be wary, to be afraid and to guard, her arms had already burst into motion, beckoning the mirror shards around her to form a spherical cage that couldn't be broken through; a fortress that would lead what smote in another direction while burying her figure protectively in its determined mass.

At the same time, Nedalia greedily absorbed the ghosts she had called forth, making sure the physical benefit she gained strained her capacity to the limit of the limit!

She even withdrew the energy from the Secondary assault, Rage of Truths, since it had proven ineffective, and used it to further refine the Primary functions of the Cryptic Axiom Chasm!

'I can't afford to waste any more Creeds! That thing can't be strong enough to completely break through this shield! I'll strike right after it hits!' she thought as her body screamed from the enhancement she had acquired.

In the darkness she was stowed away in, she looked like a crazy bodybuilder made from revolting mirrors – save for face – her balled up hand billowing with unfathomable physical might!

One hit from this fist clad with her most refined Lumbent Phosphor would knock the ghost right out of the pretentious Bright Storm!

Yes!

That's what was going to happen!

However...

She couldn't have been more wrong.

There was a reason why the nine meter long crooked beam with a singular edge was called a Lancet instead of a Lance.

Much like [Epiphany] which was a skill born from another skill taken from the Galemonger's Elimparidis Stone Staff, and [Nullmancer's Royal Raiment of Acclimation], which was born from the Grand Flame Bringer's Cross Pyre sword, the [Nullmancer's Unforgiving Lancet] was a skill Replicus acquired after using [Wealth of Spoils] – another Nullmancer exclusive skill – on the Mythical grade spear of a treacherous Tier 19 Cluster General.

These four Nullmancer skills – with the exception of [Wealth of Spoils], which Replicus had from the very beginning of his journey in the Tremur – were tailor made for the Nullmancer to be able to burn through concepts, whether they belonged to a man or to an artefact.

[Wealth of Spoils] to extract skills from godly artefacts.

[Epiphany] to master varying degrees of concepts and enhance the Nullmancer's own abilities.

[Nullmancer's Royal Raiment of Acclimation] to render the Nullmancer invincible to all mastered concepts.

...And [Nullmancer's Unforgiving Lancet] to strike with the greatest efficiency when dealing with said mastered concepts; creating perfect, albeit not so grand weaknesses in any defence and any counter any enemy had!

Thus... Replicus pointed at the unshapely, mirror mass of hubris and naiveté before him.

The Lancet shook vibrantly at the assigned prey, only awaiting the command.

The Penetrator gave it.

"Strike."

...

What happened next was a spectacle of otherworldly proportions.

The Unlimited, Baddan and even Araeyn were reined in by the momentary display and surge of thousands of bolts of Levin darting out from under Replicus' palm silently, and knocking everything that stood in their way!

It was hard to see anything in that moment, but Grim and Allora wore ecstatic visages while braving the brightness, the former even cheering!

However...

By the time this lightshow appeared, the Lancet, which had hurtled forward with a velocity that surpassed anything that had been achieved by anything and anyone on the voyage so far... was already hundreds of miles in the sky... in the Aigas sky.

Everything settled only a moment later, bringing to view from the glare just now, the amassment of mirrors Nedalia had made to protect herself.

Was it intact?

Yes it was, save for a small, diamond-shaped hole in it, that started a trend of terrible cracks all over the mass in the next second, quickly stripping all the mirrors away in order to reveal the pseudo redhead inside.

When her figure came to view, she looked to be frozen, and it was hard to tell whether it was merely because of shock, or whether she had died while standing in the dark space of her Territory.

A disgusting wet cough that featured a ghastly spray of dark blood from the gruesome hole that spanned from her neck to her chest confirmed that she was still alive... though barely.

To an Incandescent Stager, this wouldn't have been a fatal wound by any means, but the [Nullmancer's Unforgiving Lancet] was hardly that unspiteful.

At once, the Territory fittingly released a cracking noise as it broke apart, applying back the rules of the world to those that had been trapped in it.

Soon, the clear sky spotting the light of day began to show as Nedalia fell down towards the sea.

Right before she could sink into the depth, however, Replicus caught and carried her as though she was his betrothed while walking over the ocean surface.

The remnants of glass over his armour, the Hollow Dusk's Prison, disappeared and he looked whole and impressive once again, with the ethereal robe he wore adding a sense of majesty.

He looked at Nedalia's face.

She was as pale as a ghost, trembling while attempting to move her arms and legs.

Unfortunately, she couldn't.

Her body was quickly turning numb.

"I'm sure you realise that from the moment you showed me that you could see snippets of my life, and spy – I suppose to some degree – what I was, I couldn't let you live. In fact..." he said, his sockets turning as bright as suns, "...when you showed me you even knew about Camilla, I wanted to hurt you very badly.

You see, I may not have a deep connection with that part of myself yet, but that only serves to make a bit more upset when people try to use it against me. That was some nasty foul play. But I suppose this isn't honest work now is it?"

Nedalia's eyes depicted an amalgam of emotion.

It was an apparent mix of hatred, fury and dire fear.

She would have called Bright Storm insolent if he was monologuing over a hole in her chest and neck, but there was something far more sinister running around in her body... ever since that crooked bolt smote her.

That was probably the reason for his confidence that she was indeed done for.

Replicus seemed to see through her as he said:

"Ah, don't worry. Your fate is much worse than you think. I would have wanted your cumulative mana experience, but oh well..."

And indeed it was.

For the thing she had dreaded being hit by returned from the sky – where it had hurtled to after boring through Nedalia and breaking through her Territory – and struck her right in the heart!

Nedalia spat out blood and looked at the lancet in horror.

Scarier than the pain she felt, was the heavy pull she sensed as soon as she felt the glowing bolt within her.

The hurt that followed was excruciating, agonising ... and it didn't end.

It only grew worse as her soul was drawn from her body and devoured by the lancet as she screamed bitterly.

Her call of indescribable pain was so loud that far into the distance, even a certain masked man heard it, and felt the tiniest bit of pity.

...

[Author's Note]

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[Nullmancer's Unforgiving Lancet | Lv.4]

A majestic tool built from various kinds of Null Life Essence in order to maximise its response to the Nullmancer's command for retaliation. It is easily the best and fastest tool a Nullmancer can attain, and is irreplaceable, even when considering the benefit of Racial benefits, and the loyalty of Fond Calamities.

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-Effects-

- When applied after opposing concepts have been acclimated to, the lancet gains added striking power depending on the grade of the acclimated concept, with the current upper limit being 500% at S grade affinity and 100% less per each lower grade.
- When applied after opposing concepts have been acclimated to, the lancet is able to inject Livening Pulpous Venom into living targets which turns them numb and swells up their mana channels, blocking mana flow.

- When the lancet hits a target incapable of defending themselves, it devours their souls and increases its efficiency at harming ethereal forms of existence. <Current efficiency – 5%>

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Mana Requirements : None.

Duration : ---

Cooldown : None

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Chapter 872: Potential For Limitlessness

"Job well done, boss!" Grim said with a sagely nod of approval.

Replicus merely nodded back and dropped the body he had been holding to the deck. He faced ahead and noticed that they were trailing behind the majority of the other ships.

It seemed even Warding Pride hadn't stuck around to find out whether Replicus would live or die. She must have figured she would see him return if he were to survive and perhaps then, she would settle the score she had with him.

Replicus was curious if the barrier master had informed anyone about his appearance yet, if there was anyone who would even take her seriously. No one would think, for instance, that they've had an undead right under their noses this whole time.

When necessary, Replicus had switched to his Hybrid Luman form in the past two months in order to form a convincing narrative against probable suspicions like the one Warding Pride probably had. The disparity in height was something he would explain by saying it was a feature of his armour.

Whether anyone found him suspicious or not after that didn't truly matter, since no one could actually prove anything, especially after he became a Faction leader.

While he had been annoyed that Incandescent Stagers' sight was so powerful it could see the souls of his crew despite even the presence of the umbrella-shaped barrier around the ship's deck, he had gotten more confident that the Hollow Dusk's Prison limited the view for them.

The armour was new after all, and previously Replicus had used varying degrees of artefacts to try and block Incandescent Stagers' annoying visual acuity. Given how reserved and crafty most of the Faction leaders were, it was hard to tell whether they saw his odd soul or not. Some could know but be holding it as a trump card against him.

For now, he was more willing to believe that he was in the clear, though while reserving his doubts.

The Mad Bishop would have been a great candidate to ask for help in ascertaining whether he was perfectly hidden or not, but she was also one of the reasons why Replicus hastened the process of finding a good counter against unwanted scrutiny and even compulsion.

Replicus looked to Allora, who, on the now massive ship looked to be faraway.

"Are you still able to maintain the supply of mana?" he asked.

The tall woman proudly puffed up her chest.

"Oh yes! I'm good for another few hours. The armour you made me works like a charm! If I was to use my other abilities, I feel like I could easily fight at my peak for a five hours at least," she said

Her Granted Armament, constructed recently and fitted with a plethora of Endurance boosting additives in the forms of skills and stats, complemented Allora very well. She wasn't just wearing a tough front. She truly felt herself brimming with energy.

"Good. Let's maintain the size too then," Replicus said. Planting his hand on the ground, he made the nine ethereal cannons recede. There was no use in looking as though he wanted to start a fight with anyone the cannons pointed at. Besides, he hadn't removed the skill he had placed upon the ship. On command, he could have the cannons out in a micro-moment.

"Master, will we still be going on the offensive when we catch up to the others? Going through with the rest of the plan, I mean," Pherdanta asked. She had taken back full control of the ship as Baddan was settled on the deck, restoring the massive amount of mana he had used. He too had been granted access to the ship's reserves, after all.

"If the conditions call for it. The further we travel, the worse the conditions are going to turn out. We might be seeing more action soon or not. Still, it's best to keep refilling the ship's Null Life Essence and Mana reserves while we can. And don't forget your own," Replicus said and Pherdanta nodded with understanding.

Speaking of the reserves...

Replicus flashed down to the area under the deck and entered one of the ten large rooms.

Two vast pools, one which seemed empty for anyone but him and Araeyn, and another filled with mana, could be seen.

These pools, when quantified numerically at their full capacity had roughly over 100,000,000 Units of blue quality mana and over 500,000 Units of Null Life Essence.

For now, Replicus didn't have much need for the former since he was enjoying the benefits of [Sage Strain] and [Sage Save] which granted him a pseudo-purple core for mostly Special Skills. This core gave him a tremendous amp to his physical capabilities even if it wouldn't work as desired for Super Skills.

This was the main reason Replicus had been confidently facing off against Nedalia in a contest of physical ability. After all, much like the last Incandescent Stager Replicus he killed, she had a blue mana core.

Replicus quickly refilled the reserves by tapping into the storage back in Deign and returned to the deck.

The vessel was practically flying ahead with the immense mana flooding through it right now.

Soon, the other ships crept into view, though it seemed the resistance offered by the waters grew worse and worse, slowing most of the vessels noticeably.

Up ahead, Replicus recognised a vessel he had marked in order to keep track of who it belonged to.

It was the Bishop's ship.

If it was possible, he would have rolled his sockets.

He told Pherdanta to shift course slightly in order to sail in huge arc, avoiding the mad woman entirely.

Naturally, he was making it obvious that he was avoiding her, but it hardly mattered. As long as he postponed their fight.

The Penetrator wasn't sure he would be able to beat the Mad Bishop in the same way he beat Nedalia. In fact, he hardly knew what the Mad Bishop's abilities were. He only knew that her class was related to the Energy Forming category of Priest. Whether it was Advanced or Hidden, was still a mystery to him, but either way, he knew she was a problem.

He was particularly anxious about how his [Nullmancer's Royal Raiment of Acclimation] and [Epiphany] would work against her.

What counted as concepts to [Epiphany] wasn't just anything magical in nature.

As far as he knew, elements counted, and abstract phenomenon also counted, but he doubted that every unclear force in the world could simply be mastered through [Epiphany].

One of his doubts stemmed from the fact that all his Nullmancer exclusive skills, those he acquired via extraction, didn't have a tag revealing their Tier – whether they were Normal, Special, Super or Supreme.

Replicus imagined that they were somehow extraordinary, since he actually had to work hard to get them, unlike [Apostle Summon], [Depths of the core] and the likes, but that didn't make them invincible.

Did them having no tag mean they didn't have a limit? That perhaps he was free to have them evolve endlessly even past Supreme? That seemed possible, given that Serenity had given Replicus hints at a purpose that surpassed merely Aigas, a world.

Still, even if that was true, the skills weren't at that level yet and they were criminally hard to level up. [Epiphany] was a prime example of this. [Nullmancer's Royal Raiment of Acclimation] evolving past its initial Tier was a product of Replicus exposing himself to pure treachery, which he thought would have worked best for the former rather than the latter, but here was, looking at the result.

He theorised that [Epiphany] was harder to level because it acted as the lynch pin for the clean victory he was able to deal after using his three Nullmancer exclusive skills!

'I've done well to hide my trump cards until now. Some are better saved for Eaniss, and that masked man,' Replicus thought.

He then looked to the new trophy he had acquired.

Nedalia's corpse.

After killing her, he unfortunately hadn't been blessed with cumulative mana experience because her soul – which possessed most of the cumulative mana – had been devoured by his lancet.

The cumulative mana experience in her body, much like that contained in the corpse of Replicus' other victims, would be sucked into the soul as it left the body. This was the drawback of using the lancet, but Replicus saw it as a boon.

There were some enemies he just couldn't kill by aiming at their bodies. Though the masked man was a candidate worth considering with his quickly developing lancet, Replicus had been preparing more for Somanda instead.

Since he had transcended the boundary of the norm, Replicus needed contingency after contingency in the 18 days he had left to prepare.

To that, he had thankfully acquired another useful, unique card.

Looking at Nedalia's corpse, he scoffed.

Her Lambent Phosphor truly was something else.

Though...

As crude as her attempt to trap him in a reconstruction of his life's past events had been, did it actually adopt a certain degree of... truth?

Thinking about Yuyui, Replicus couldn't help but think...

'Do I somehow superimpose Camilla onto Yuyui? Does it affect how treat her?'

Back then during the Fire Breeder Cluster...

Did he treat Yuyui as he would have Camilla?

Replicus didn't know the girl personally – right now at least – but more than once, he had acted as though he knew her subconsciously. He had said things, done things unbecoming of the skeletal him.

'Hmmm. If it's true... maybe even now I care much more than I realise...' he thought, not knowing that the original version of himself, had experienced the same debacle a day ago.

Chapter 873: Unravelling

"So, Pherdy..." Grim said while sliding up to Pherdanta who had a stern, no-nonsense look to her as she stared straight ahead.

"Don't call me that," the female Unlimited declared tartly while twitching uncomfortably.

Grim's face brightened. She finally came to full view.

"Come on. You're always harsh when I try to make small talk or make us bond. We're both Unlimited. The elite among the elite. Let's share some moments," Grim grinned and boldly tried to sling his arm around Pherdanta.

That, as expected, did not bear sweet fruit.

A quick blow landed on his face before he could register its approach, and he waddled back a step while holding his nose.

With a silent wince, Grim shook his head and pretended to be fine, flashing a smile at Pherdanta despite the blood leaking down his incisors.

Given that Pherdanta's figure always seemed to disappear if she didn't do or say something – or more aptly react to anything in general – Grim had had to guess exactly where she was. What had been a more or less obvious spot before had become obscure when the ship expanded, and the Unlimited had silently asked for Replicus' help in determining where Pherdanta was.

After that was done, making her show herself wasn't too difficult for someone like Grim, whose tongue was both sweet and incredibly sour when needed.

"Nice jab," he said to Pherdanta who glared at him with a dark scowl, her pointed nose making sure to give the same accusing aura it always had.

"I get it. You're no Yuyui. You're no fun. All serious. I get it. Feeling detached because you weren't originally with us.

Such a shame, hmmm. I know you have trouble connecting with the others, but if you feel wiry, you can lean on me. You can even cry on my shoulder," Grim said while maintaining his distance.

Seeing Pherdanta's increasingly wrinkly, much like... actually exactly like a scrotum, Grim stifled a laugh.

While always intent on showing a tough exterior, Pherdanta was actually rather soft, and quick to buckle when she wasn't defending Replicus. She couldn't handle jokes... or mildly infuriating insults.

Grim could have sworn he was close to getting an Aggrante in the face by the time he decided to stop teasing Pherdanta.

"I'm joking. If you kill me, the boss will just bring me back anyway. Doesn't he always say we're a bit more useful dead than alive?" he said, but Pherdanta's face did not soften one bit. "Anyway. I wanted to ask. Who is that fellow on Warding Pride's ship?"

According to both her and you – yes I saw how you gave that longing look to that person when we first devoured by the Territory – he must be someone important, right?"

Pherdanta's fury mellowed.

It helped that Grim was asking this with a more serious tone, and a less hilarious face.

Before the female Unlimited could say anything, Grim added:

"I'm not trying to invade your privacy, but if you're likely to not be as efficient as you've been so far when facing that person, it is our right to know. Besides, you wouldn't us to kill him as we would an enemy, right?"

Pherdanta's face didn't change.

She assumed a straight, unfazed visage, but Grim could still tell that she was burning inside.

Allora, even while far off towards what would have been the forecastle, had her ears twitch, eager to hear. She too had been curious since their first encounter with Warding Pride, but because she was a new Unlimited, with Pherdanta being her senior, she hadn't found guts enough to allow her to ask.

Baddan and Araeyn couldn't quite care less though.

Pherdanta sighed.

Grim was right.

At least for their sake...

"I suppose I never told anyone but the boss the reason why I escaped Warding Pride, and everything surrounding that," she said.

"I'll be kind enough not to make a joke about that," Grim said in response to which Pherdanta gave him a quick look of loathing.

"Warding Pride is an abusive woman. I guess all the Faction leaders have a few screws loose, but she's just a bit..." Pherdanta said. "Anyway, I had two brothers when I joined the Severed Union some years ago – both of them older than me. We were 'recruited' by Warding Pride. One of my brothers was a Stray Knight, and the other was a mercenary.

They had some value and apparently they had potential in her eyes. I was dragged along because they pleaded with Warding Pride that I not be left behind."

Grim nodded. Despite the reserved details, he was still happy Pherdanta was opening up to this degree.

"We spent the next five years enduring harsh trials and exercises, all made to 'bring us out of our comfort zone', as Warding Pride said. My brothers had always been power hounds.

The older among the two Ken, had been driven out of the Capital Service because of it, and the other, Poul, had always desired an environment where he would be able to earn strength without being expected to follow much morality."

"So they were both at home, in a way. The younger brother more so," Grim said.

"...Yeah," Pherdanta said with a stiff tone. "Warding Pride's Faction is exactly what Poul imagined. You can get what you want, whenever you want as long as you're strong enough. Besides respecting ranks and not killing each other every other day in our camps, Warding Pride allows anything to go. She... even participates at times."

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Allora shook her head lightly.

"My brothers were promoted a little later, but I was just a slightly powerful, determined swordsman then. I could barely fend for myself against the creeps that tried to climb onto me every night, and my brothers were usually too preoccupied to help. Poul just told me to get stronger if I didn't want to become 'the unwilling whore' whenever I told him what happened.

Ken, on the other hand, had some sympathy, but couldn't do much either."

"I resolved to flee one day. I told Ken, and he decided to help me, but not before asking for Poul to cover for him. That was a big mistake.

Warding Pride was very particular about the whereabouts of all her strongest combatants, and Ken needed Poul's help with it, after all, he was going to bring me to the Severed Union on the pretense that he was bringing me along to help check on our contracts in the Bright Side."

"Poul ratted you out?" Grim asked with a dark look.

"Yeah. It hadn't even been a few minutes since we arrived in the Bright Side when a few of the Warding Pride's elites surrounded us. Ken told me to escape while he held them off, and I ran as fast as I could and crossed the bridge into the Depraved Side. Moments after I was wrestling with the crowds, I felt myself getting followed. I realized then that things hadn't ended well for Ken.

Killing outside headquarters, and with good reason was passable to Warding Pride after all. I thought I was going to die too, but... I saw Master coming out of a small shop far away."

"He was just beginning to gain the attention of the Severed Union as the new Faction leader, advertising personally that he needed members. Master's robe at the time—"

"Made him easily recognisable. Yeah. I remember. Didn't do much to hide the clouds and lightning.," Grim chimed in.

"Yeah," Pherdanta said with a straight face. "I asked for help, and he willingly gave it."

Despite the look on Pherdanta's face, however, she was feeling very light inside. She simplified the last part of the story, but she remembered begging the Penetrator to either save him or kill her right there.

Admittedly, while she had developed a prejudice against Faction leaders, Replicus' behavior – going out of his way to interact with people in the Depraved Side and personally advertising that he was looking for members for his Faction – made Pherdanta feel intimidated by him.

And what she described as Replicus merely helping her was the Penetrator killing those that were after her – two men with high ranks in Warding Pride's Faction – and taking her under his wing.

Pherdanta recalled Replicus defending himself on the matter when Eaniss demanded compensation for what Replicus had taken from her, by saying:

"Two idiots rushed me when I was in Depraved Side and defended myself and this pure soul whom they intended to kill," he had said to Eaniss and then coolly addressed a fuming Warding Pride. "...and let's not pretend to care for discarded goods now that they are glowing, held by someone capable of actually making them shine."

The thought made Pherdanta smile a little.

Grim scratched his chin.

"Effective storytelling. You not only shared the habits of Warding Pride and her Faction – giving him more than enough reason to hate her – but I'm guessing you're also making your stance clear, hmmm?"

Pherdanta nodded.

"I've been trying to contact Poul ever since, but he won't reply. I wanted us to patch things up. I don't think he intended for Ken to die. But I suppose he hates me for leaving," she said. "Ken had a part of him changed by the Capital Service. He even played a hero to me in his last moments, something I never thought he would do.

But I don't see any redemption for Poul."

"If you see him, you're free to kill him. But if I engage first, let me finish what I started."

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Ken, on the other hand, had some sympathy, but couldn't do much either."

"I resolved to flee one day. I told Ken, and he decided to help me, but not before asking for Poul to cover for him. That was a big mistake.

Warding Pride was very particular about the whereabouts of all her strongest combatants, and Ken needed Poul's help with it, after all, he was going to bring me to the Severed Union on the pretense that he was bringing me along to help check on our contracts in the Bright Side."

"Poul ratted you out?" Grim asked with a dark look.

"Yeah. It hadn't even been a few minutes since we arrived in the Bright Side when a few of the Warding Pride's elites surrounded us. Ken told me to escape while he held them off, and I ran as fast as I could and crossed the bridge into the Depraved Side. Moments after I was wrestling with the crowds, I felt myself getting followed. I realized then that things hadn't ended well for Ken.

Killing outside headquarters, and with good reason was passable to Warding Pride after all. I thought I was going to die too, but... I saw Master coming out of a small shop far away."

"He was just beginning to gain the attention of the Severed Union as the new Faction leader, advertising personally that he needed members. Master's robe at the time—"

"Made him easily recognisable. Yeah. I remember. Didn't do much to hide the clouds and lightning.," Grim chimed in.

"Yeah," Pherdanta said with a straight face. "I asked for help, and he willingly gave it."

Despite the look on Pherdanta's face, however, she was feeling very light inside. She simplified the last part of the story, but she remembered begging the Penetrator to either save him or kill her right there.

Admittedly, while she had developed a prejudice against Faction leaders, Replicus' behavior – going out of his way to interact with people in the Depraved Side and personally advertising that he was looking for members for his Faction – made Pherdanta feel intimidated by him.

And what she described as Replicus merely helping her was the Penetrator killing those that were after her – two men with high ranks in Warding Pride's Faction – and taking her under his wing.

Pherdanta recalled Replicus defending himself on the matter when Eaniss demanded compensation for what Replicus had taken from her, by saying:

"Two idiots rushed me when I was in Depraved Side and defended myself and this pure soul whom they intended to kill," he had said to Eaniss and then coolly addressed a fuming Warding Pride. "...and let's not pretend to care for discarded goods now that they are glowing, held by someone capable of actually making them shine."

The thought made Pherdanta smile a little.

Grim scratched his chin.

"Effective storytelling. You not only shared the habits of Warding Pride and her Faction – giving him more than enough reason to hate her – but I'm guessing you're also making your stance clear, hmmm?"

Pherdanta nodded.

"I've been trying to contact Poul ever since, but he won't reply. I wanted us to patch things up. I don't think he intended for Ken to die. But I suppose he hates me for leaving," she said. "Ken had a part of him changed by the Capital Service. He even played a hero to me in his last moments, something I never thought he would do."

But I don't see any redemption for Poul."

"If you see him, you're free to kill him. But if I engage first, let me finish what I started."

Chapter 874: The King's Timid Decree

Agmold, the Royal City, one of the three large cities in Pelian, welcomed a host of guests that were not entertained by the millions of anxious commonfolk and nobles that it housed within its walls, different from an event that occurred months ago.

The Royal Mansion seated in the very midst of the great, powerful city, looked as though it had been given a new neon paint job, because of the barrier stuck to its grand, clean walls, which, in contrast to the magnificent walls, were unsullied by cracks, caves.

Despite the city remaining relatively untouched during the great trembling a day ago, the hexagonal tower – dark, and with ancient sculpting on its exterior – its height a staggering hundred meters, cast an ominous shadow into the city.

It was horrendously, thick, its base torn to reveal the hollow within from whence a cruel and mighty creature had emerged to assault the city, only to be beaten black and blue until it fled.

The battle had caused no small amount of panic, but there were no casualties, thankfully.

Be that as it may, the unrest continued to grow thicker from the rumors about how this was going on all over Pelian. Rather, it had been a rumor, until surviving merchants and nobles had landed in the city after the dark creature had been driven away by the Capital Service.

It was harrowing for those with family outside these walls.

Unlike Agmold, what were the chances that others were still standing?

Hadn't there been a tragedy yesterday as well, which took a large chunk of Pelian's population?

Yet, that seemed to have not been enough as news came that told of the fall of many cities.

Inhone.

Benegogue.

Eofel.

Dihjhal.

All of them, even though they were small cities, were confirmed to be gone, their populations erased.

The panic, unfortunately, was not only limited to the common folk and nobles.

.....

A man adorned in funny clothing marched freely between the rows of Royal Knights expressing appalling degrees of power. All of them were accomplished Masters bred to be the finest of the fine, but they all gave bows when the oddly dressed man passed between them, walking through several sets of open double doors in the castle.

The colors attached to his outfit made anyone untrained to keep a straight face at weird sights grimace, as even to one without any attainments in fashion, what the man wore was blasphemous.

The man did not care though.

In fact, the less every bit of him made sense – even his clothing – the better, after all, it was part of his Technique.

The man finally crossed into the last set of double doors, guarded on both sides by four valiant Knights of the Incandescent Stage, over their figures that flared with ready-to-surge volumes of power, what was likely Mythical-grade armor...or perhaps higher.

"My King!" the man called as he skipped into a vast hall; what was called the throne room.

He wore a big smile at the sight of the King's throne, ever encrusted by rare jewels and gems, and the two smaller, only slightly less impressive seats on either side of it. Those who sat upon it – the

King, his wife to his left, and his daughter to his right – did not look so offended at the antics of the funnily dressed man even as his colors clashed against their eyes.

"Shannazah. Please sit," the King spoke in a demanding... yet pleading tone, his hand gesturing below the rise onto which his and his family's seats were placed, where five extravagant chairs – set opposing each other with three on one side and two on the other – could be seen.

Four of them had already been occupied.

"Very well, very well!" the man addressed as Shannazah said before skipping towards the empty seat.

He gave a quirky salute to the others with a giant smile, but unfortunately received no reciprocation.

"Thank you for responding as quickly as you did. To the threat, I mean. The damage would have been much worse if not for your intervention," the King said timidly.

None among his guests said anything.

The King looked to his wife and daughter who remained as stiff-faced as rocks, before giving a light cough.

"H-how has been the progress in finding out the cause for all this?" he asked. "Surely, the great Houses, fine calamities such as yourselves—"

"We've found him," one of those seated said coldly. "The one responsible for all this, as well as his location wasn't that difficult to find. I managed to convene with someone who survived the Premium Age Royale, the event YOU allowed to occur without a thought, and he told me as much as I needed to know."

The King gulped at the unsubtle accusation.

"Y-yes. Yes. G-good work! Please do tell. Who is this person and where are they?" he said in a dodgy manner.

There was no response, however, which made the King all the more nervous.

"Before that, I would like to know how you intend to deal with EverSword... Your Majesty," the one who spoke gave a piercing glare to the King, who shook. "Our losses because of them are far too many to ignore. As of right now, only two great cities remain. Genhuis has fallen, along with its people, and a great degree of our collective interests."

The King was startled.

"Genhuis? Genhuis fell?"

"Indeed. Of course, most of its inhabitants had already perished beforehand, but there were further losses. The City Guardian managed to escape with only a hundred or so people. Surely, this must have you seething... Your Majesty."

"Oh don't tease his Majesty, Desmonn," Shannazah chimed in with a laugh, slapping his thigh while at it. "The King is also furious. He even called us to gather and discuss everything."

The one addressed as Desmonn raised a brow at Shannazah, wondering if the oddly dressed man was being sarcastic.

However...

"Well, as it so happens..." the King suddenly said with an anxious face. "...it is indeed imperative that we get to the bottom of our current predicament, but there is another reason why I called you all."

The five looked I'm surprise at the King.

Another reason?

His Majesty was speaking as though the current situation was paled in comparison to what he had called them for.

What could it be?

The King cleared his throat, looking at his wife and daughter nervously again, and then spoke:

"Maqi has declared war on Opungale. Their forces are already on their way."

...!

The five expressed silent and almost imperceptible shock at the news. It was absurd and ill-timed!

However, the King wasn't done speaking.

"I have been torn for the past few hours, but...since we have a formal alliance with Opungale, I would like two of you to sail there, and help defend them."

Chapter 875: The Portals

Guissepo hadn't moved an inch since yesterday.

The circular gap before him which continued to spill out a resplendent light, had brought forth something astoundingly formidable, and that same something had kept him in entertained and gaping for hours without end.

"To think you creatures were granted powers like this but hardly know what to use them for..." a loud, feminine voice that seemed to sound from the very world itself spoke with a pitying tone, came.

Guissepo shuddered a little.

He craned his neck up for the umpteenth time to look at the massive, dark figure seated to his left, occupying a huge chunk of the space around the interdimensional gap before them.

It looked to be made of black stone – still roughly 20 meters tall even now – having a shapely figure and perfect face that spotted dazzling red eyes like jewels. It had its legs crossed, while its left hand wound around a large and long lance that was planted into the solid ground.

Before it was a terrified man who was bathed in the massive figure's shadow, having to endure its overbearing gaze from above. He looked to be seconds away from dying of a heart attack, as quite honestly, none of his kind had quite seen or felt something like the Herald.

It was magnificent yet dreadful at the same time, and all that were like him – sitting quietly behind Guissepo – shared the same feeling.

"Uh, dear Herald, oh extravagant Herald," Guissepo said with a respectful tone that barely hid his excitement. "You see, this lot has been ostracised in this nation, like I said before. No one – at least in Pelian – has made any attempts at uncovering what sort of extravagant powers lies in the Summoner class.

The extravagantly foolish King has always been wary of where the summoned creatures come from. I'm not entirely certain many people know. Or any for that matter."

The massive figure turned from the quivering man before it, and to Guissepo who welcomed the powerful, suffocating gaze.

"How stubborn: both whoever this King is, and this kind who continue to choose a power they know nothing about," the Herald said, an eternally placid expression on its gorgeous face. "It seems those bold Traitors created several avenues for our Lord to see past his prison at least, before his release, but were thwarted by a fool on a throne."

Guissepo reeled back.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

The Herald didn't answer immediately. Instead it turned back to the shivering man, and commanded:

"Do it."

The man instantly made a faltering attempt at holding himself together, and shot his hands before him.

While adopting a thoroughly serious face, so much so that it looked grumpy with the excessive grooves of a frown, the man conjured a portal in front of him, a whirl of silver around its wobbly, oval shape.

From it, a beast that looked like an odd cross between a pig and a rhinoceros emerged, sky blue scales all over its chunky mass.

The man looked at the Herald for approval, his face turned pallid, however the Herald was not interested in the beast. Rather, it stared at the portal.

Summoners, unlike Tamers, could send their consciousness to a different space – one they did not understand – and make contracts with a seemingly unending number of different beasts.

This was why the King had ordered for Summoners to be killed on sight, passing the decree with an unnerving degree of aggression.

"This..." said the Herald, "...is empowerment of astounding proportions. The ability to create gateways outside Aigas given to the undeserving."

"Outside Aigas?" Guissepo said, stunned. "These gateways lead outside Aigas?"

The Herald turned to him.

"They could. Unfortunately, the portals can only be more... diverse, when their wielder is stronger and firmer than this coward, otherwise the portal will only support a specific place; one where I assume his kind summons these strange creatures."

The man standing before the Herald shuddered at being called a coward before appreciating everything else the Herald had said.

Guissepo drew closer to the Herald.

"Then... where do these extravagant beasts summoned from these portals come from?" he asked with deep curiosity.

Before the question could be answered, however, the arrival of a certain something... someone rather, interrupted.

Guissepo was a bit taken aback by the creature's appearance: its twisted horns; rugged skin; spiked armour and the excessive hints of red on its mouth. It looked like it belonged to the Herald's breed, but while also being completely different.

However, it too could not compare to the Herald's massive size, though it did try to prevent having to look up at the majestic being by simply flying.

It looked curiously below, at the glowing gap for a moment and then stared the Herald in the eye.

"Ashema," the Herald said with its mighty voice.

The odd creature being addressed looked to have been about to say something in response, and with a rather snarky tone, but glancing down at the humans presented, it desisted.

"The wait is too long and our forces are quickly being pushed back. Can't we just summon more of our kind through this gateway instead of resorting to our old temples as transport? There's probably not that many left," Ashema said.

"More of us? What will that accomplish? The only reason I allowed the few of us that have risen so far is to sow discord and stall for our Lord's emergence. He will bring everyone else, if he sees fit. If those that I have granted the honour of rising fall to the enemies here, that is their own fault," the Herald said tartly.

Ashema looked more annoyed than reassured.

"Really? Wouldn't you alone be enough to 'sow discord', if that's the case?"

"I am the vessel for our Lord. I must keep myself in the perfect condition. I would have thought you would enjoy having more of the chaos-driving to yourself."

"I would, but I want to explore this world while I'm at it. I can't stand being restricted to this as those bastards you put in charge are ordering us to!"

"It's only for a little while," the Herald said.

Ashema scoffed.

"Well, how long is 'a little while'? I spotted several vehicles travelling across the sea while I was scouting for that dark storm earlier. They are headed to some place east. Don't you think I should investigate? What if they are going to bring allies to fight against us? With our current numbers, the last thing we need is to be blasted by an army of these pink skins before Lord Boron rises," he said.

The Herald looked to consider.

"Allies, you say?"

"Yes."

An exasperated grunt left the Herald's mouth.

Ashema would just not let the matter go.

"Very well. Go and investigate."

At once, a creepy grin, like a lengthy crescent was drawn on Ashema's face.

Finally.

Chapter 876: Voyage Perils

Half a day later, the calm had passed and only a turbulent experience remained, fighting viciously against the 29 vessels that sailed ahead.

Massive waves that towered up to a hundred meters in height or more, became a commonality that required those aboard the ships to use their abilities to fend them off, after all, it wasn't simple waters that made up these waves.

The ocean which had taken a darker colour scheme hours ago, when the last specks of sunlight still lit it up, had now taken on a dreadful shade of ebony which had potent, poisonous properties.

Many among the Factions derived that this was likely because of the mysterious ash that fell after Jiggorrhax burned the skies and the mana. It must have mutated the waters, making them harmful even to the Mythical grade vessels if they were soaked in them for too long – especially the hulls and deck.

The keels were rather resistant though, because of the congregating, lifeless figures that defied the ocean's resistance against the ships' movement.

The relevance of the ship's was finally showing.

However, the virulence of the ocean was only the tip of the iceberg when it came to what concerned its striders.

The sky acted as an indicator as to just how deep the voyagers were into the terrifying territory. It was much darker, and rather than looking like it had scars, like before, the sky looked as though it had been shattered to pits that would have fallen into Aigas if not for some unseen force that kept them suspended in the air.

Beyond these absurd mass of separate chips – which insinuated the existence of a second sky – there were uneven, mouldy smears, like burnt plastic, as if deadly gaps in Aigas had been patched by a poor plastering job.

What made this sky troublesome to deal with, was that at irregular intervals, droplets – as large as the ships or more – of what looked like liquefied sunlight would fall from the sky, sink into the sea, light portions of it up, and release a scalding vapour that thankfully, was warded off by the umbrella-shaped barrier perfectly.

However, the droplets themselves, if they happened to fall directly over the ship... melted it with ease.

Two unfortunate case studies existed for this, setting an example for everyone else.

It didn't put anyone at ease to discover that only a single Incandescent Stager from both these ships had survived, and that was after he activated his Territory in the nick of time.

Eaniss had been kind enough to invite him aboard her ship, though he was likely to be an additional force of hers now, at least for this journey.

All that said, there was still one more threat.

As the Emissary had said, spatial abilities of any kind were hampered intensely, but the cause hadn't been as anyone had thought at all.

In fact, it was a bit more dangerous when having finally come into contact with it.

Replicus had decided to call the cause of the odd spatial restrictions and distortions, Reverse Clusters.

Indeed, there looked much like Clusters, only without the distinction in colour, and there was no shortage of them. They were large cracks in or above the sea that scrambled space at a moments' notice.

They could infinitely elongate a given stretch of space, pull on it, push it, or simply eradicate it, which had led to another of the Factions' ship suddenly being slowed into one of the large cracks, never to be seen again. This tempering of space outside their bounds, served as an apt reason to why the word 'reverse' was added to these Cluster-like existences.

As they first appeared, they marked the point where Replicus could no longer retrieve refills for his Mana and Null Life Essence reserves from Deign to the ship through the spatial means he had employed, meaning that the need to use their reserves wisely arose.

Unfortunately, there existed more fearsome examples of what these pseudo-natural oddities were capable of beside restricting spatial manipulation, which gave further credence to what the Emissary said.

A sort of Reverse Cluster that had kept disappearing and reappearing in random spaces had shown itself merely half an hour ago. It had successfully caught one of the Unions' ships, but didn't swallow them for eternity, as many had dreaded.

Those aboard, as well as their vessel emerged on the other side of it, but...

The ship had aged.

It looked to have lived through a hundred millenia in a deep sea, and had suddenly surged, hull torn apart and soggy, half its keel gone as well as the sanctity of its deck which had been covered by a now deceased umbrella glow.

The crew had turned into what seemed like wet mummies, with lively seaweed and coral growing over them... somehow. Oddly, there were absolutely no traces of mana from them. Replicus had even ventured to think that they weren't the same people.

With all these disasters afoot, there had been no more conflicts to rise among the Factions. For some time, there even seemed to be some form of truce between them, after all, apart from the passive threats, there actually existed monstrosities in the ocean born and bred by the calamities.

They would attack the ships while skilfully wading through the Reverse Clusters and Scorch Tears – as Replicus had named the liquefied hell glow – seeking to destroy the ships and devour those on them. Some of these monstrous beasts turned out to be Cluster beasts with their own Cluster Generals.

It should have, by all accounts, been depressing to have an assortment of beasts of different abilities hurrying towards them with the cruel conditions at hand, but each surviving Faction was actually relieved and rejuvenated.

Their purpose was to hunt down the excessive abominations that plagued the southern half of Aigas, and so seeing willing objects of their job description swim and leap towards them was a great, bloody pastime.

Grim was especially ecstatic, as well as Allora, who after finally getting tired of feeding her infinite mana to the ship, was released from duty. She had been practicing how to use the other aspect of her Hidden Class abilities on the unlimited range of enemies, and had seen positive results.

Pherdanta was satisfied with steering the ship, while retaining the responsibility for spotting everything that could do them all harm.

Baddan continued to meditate while Araeyn resumed dazedly looking ahead from the bowsprit, seemingly unbothered by the effects of the Scorching Tears and the peppering of poisonous ocean water.

Replicus on the other hand, was busy working on the fallen Paladin Champion, attempting the various means of revival and recovery that he could think of.

As for the result...

Chapter 877: Battling The Champion's Demons

Replicus didn't really feel like wasting another Supreme potion on the Paladin Champion. He had surmised that the one he had given the poor man would keep him alive for 24 hours, but would ultimately be unable to heal him. More than half of that time had passed, and he had dedicated a portion of it to attempting to find a solution to the plague that was deep set within the man.

Ordinary healing skills – and Replicus had recovered many from treasures and tools – didn't work even with his powerful surge of mana from [Sage Save] and [Sage Strain], which bolstered the effectiveness of his skills by virtue of them being used via a higher grade of core than was necessary.

Replicus had expected this outcome though, and could only resort to more drastic means than before.

Killing the Paladin Champion would be easy right now, and earning him as a corpse for a potential Apostle – one that would likely be more terrifying than Araeyn because of the quality of the corpse – was enticing, but with how Grim narrated the end of the battle between this man and his masked opponent, Replicus imagined that his Divine Blessing could be extremely useful.

'That certainly is a dilemma. The Boneman me would have dived at the chance to earn such a powerful opponent,' he thought, reminiscing about the old days.

Goodness, those had been a vibe.

When there was danger at every corner, and very little reason to survive said danger.

Most victory felt so satisfying, though the burden of the Doom Factors usually doused the joy he had had.

'I really wish I had a year, as it was originally...'

Thinking back to when Doom Factor 2 had initially had a counter that spanned to a year. If Replicus had progressed with the same pace for a whole year, how powerful would have been then?

Right now, he was coming up with desperate plans for his battle against Somanda because he truly felt he was far from matching even the Arch-Lich version of him, nevermind the Divinity version.

Asides from going back to the Labyrinth and perhaps seeing if Skullius had found something else that could be useful, Replicus was stocking the bodies of Incandescent Stagers he had killed himself in order to take full advantage of the Nullmancer's other set of abilities.

Ten Apostles.

When he reached Tier 4 and merged back with Skullius, Replicus expected every single skill he had between the two bodies to evolve, some perhaps to their very limit.

The [Apostle Summon] skill, which he had managed to get to level up decently after all this time, was likely to reach its limit as well. When that time came, he wanted to have the resources necessary on hand. This was why he was collecting the 'trophies' – the two Incandescent Stagers he had killed.

'For now, we wait...' he thought as he looked at the man laying on the bed before him.

His face had severe burns which obscured his handsome face and made his cherry coloured hair less of a neat spread of fibre, and more of a crinkled spam of dark yarn.

The right side of his chest was pulverised with spots of Undeath that persisted against anything that tried to ease the harassment that bore on his flesh.

"Let's see then..." Replicus said as he activated one of his Penetrator exclusive skills.

Huge spots of what looked like Levin condensed into dazzling globes, appeared in random spaces over the Paladin Champion's bed, creating a glaring light within the room that left only Replicus with the ability to see well.

Nineteen globes in all had appeared, and they suddenly started a contest of passing along a particularly beautiful, sharp bolt, rather, throng of Levin which was somehow brighter than all of them.

Replicus narrowed his eyes.

He had to be careful.

The state of his patient was awfully fragile at the moment. If he was careless, he could end him, after all, the skill he was using was tailor-made for healing a Penetrator, rather than a human.

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[Brilliant King's Adoring Stars (Special) | Lv.5]

Levin blossoms in a humble form – blissful stars – in as many a number as the Penetrator desires, and constantly heals and enhances them with jets of full purity packed with an immense amount of rejuvenating Null Life Essence from the domain of the Crippler.

As long as the Levin continues to bathe the Penetrator they may surely never die, while stars for the jets of Levin – fifty at once – enhance the Penetrator's attack power by 210%.

Mana Requirements: 112,000 (I) Mana, 100 Null Life Essence every minute active; double the cost for another set of stars.

Duration: ---

Cooldown: 30 minutes

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This skill had existed initially as [Silent Revelation of the Bright King], a skill Replicus used to heal himself on many occasions, most notably against the Fire Breeders. After evolving, and gaining an upgrade, it was much more powerful.

Replicus' aim was to try to use the rejuvenating Null Life Essence spawned by the skill in order to stave off the Undeath that was infecting the Paladin Champion.

The bolt that was dancing between the globes ricocheted against them furiously before diving down at a tremendous speed when Replicus' commanded it.

It struck right where the damage on the Paladin was most severe, and a sizzling sound was heard, its rhythm an indication of tender work as opposed to desperate effort.

...!

Right then, however, a mass of greenish black flame flared from the Paladin Champion's wound, and attempted to contend against the bolt!

Replicus scoffed with his sockets flashing condescendingly.

"Crafty..." he said, and thirty one more globes appeared over the Paladin, strengthening the bolt immediately which had begun to lose in the tug of war!

At once, the Undeath manifesting as a flame was overpowered with ease, and the Levin dipped into the Paladin Champion's flesh, resuming its work which remained intricate and precise still, despite its size.

However...

'Really?' Replicus thought when he saw the results.

The Undeath might have lost the battle just now, but it persisted in the war, it seemed.

Where the Levin from [Bright King's Adoring Stars] hit, the flesh bubbled, turning into a nasty shade of greenish black, as though reinforced!

Immediately, Replicus deactivated his skill.

He had expected this work to some degree, but it had failed.

What kind of Undeath plague was this?

'How about using it raw then?' he thought and extended his hand over the Champion's wound.

Null Life Essence gathered around his hand, decking it in a light blue hue.

It then turned to a whitish-green and he planted his hand on the Champion immediately.

Replicus had learned how to imitate different kinds of Null Life Essence, different from his own standard form by summoning different kinds of Apostles – the very way in which he managed to level up [Apostle Summon].

For instance, he had learned how Null Life Essence could be extremely sharp by imitating a skill he had acquired a long time ago, [Serration Zone: Baneful Edge], and now, he didn't even need to use the skill to achieve the same effect.

The Penetrator wasn't cutting anything right now though. He was doing something different.

This time, when he made contact, he saw and felt his energy sink deep into the Paladin Champion's flesh without the Undeathly green being able to do anything about it.

However...

...!

The Paladin Champion's entire body became wreathed in a great, towering flame of green and black that took on a frightening form, and hurled itself at the Penetrator!

Chapter 878: Definer of Causality

Replicus wasn't as surprised to see the odd shape suddenly surge and lunge at him as it did. He had begun to imagine that there was something awfully wrong with the Paladin Champion from the moment whatever stopped his wounds from healing began to actively guard against his Null Life Essence.

Without even bothering to dodge or block the attack that came his way, he infused his mana into a particular concept, and in a blink, he, the bed and the Paladin appeared somewhere terribly dark.

The burst of Undeath then finally arrived to smash against his armour, but did nothing.

Replicus looked at it closely.

It looked like a caricature of a typical evil spirit: great horns over its head, large eyes fuming with a red light; a jagged mouth curved into a grin; thin limbs that ended with sharp claws.

The most impressive thing about this thing was how much energy it had. Its form constantly switched between firm and unstable, wobbling about as though it would explode at any second. Because of that, Replicus had taken his work to Stagnant Space.

"You don't like Null Life Essence very much, do you? You let the Supreme potion pass because you knew it wouldn't work, right?" Replicus said, more to let some manner of sound eradicate the chilling silence than to actually address the creature.

Naturally, it didn't respond.

In fact, it remained still, floating from the Paladin Champion – from right above the cavity on the right side of his chest – looking at him with a fixed visage.

Replicus raised his hand. It still retained the glow of whitish-green.

Through the Null Life Essence skill he had finally managed to acquire, [Greatest Null Weaver], he not only learned to how to control Null Life Essence, but got a knack of how other forms of Null Life Essence worked.

Quickly, he learned how to imitate certain forms of Null Life Essence – some without the need to use [Greatest Null Weaver] – like for instance, the properties of this whitish-green variant, which was extremely quick and much thinner than the standard form.

The moment he drew closer with it, the bizarre of incarnation of Undeath lunged at him violently. Replicus enhanced the glow in his hand, turning it into a vicious ball of the energy that he used to smack the Undeath creature to the side!

The fierce form of Undeath screeched, seemingly genuinely hurt by the Null Life Essence. By the time it recovered, Replicus had already planted his hand back on the Paladin, infusing more Null Life Essence into him.

"NOO!" the creature suddenly let out a hoarse scream that made the Penetrator turn to it with mild surprise.

It grew larger and broader and desperately attempted to skewer Replicus with its sharp ended hands, but...

Three nasty, violent slashes tore through its body from nowhere, making it let out a deafening screech!

It couldn't see, it couldn't have seen, but Replicus had propped the fingers from his free hand towards it, striking it with Null Life Essence, as he had done to Nedalia!

Like her, the creature wasn't easily killed – if it even could be – but Replicus had bought himself enough time to see if what he was attempting would work or not.

The Champion's body became engulfed in a blaze of whitish green that almost made day in the Stagnant void.

'Is it working?' Replicus thought as he looked closely.

As his Null Life Essence travelled through the body of the Paladin Champion, he felt the activity within his body.

It was chaotic.

It seemed as though at least a third of his cells were somehow infected with Undeath energy that took the form of a greenish-black flame, but there was no actual harm done to them.

It was almost like whatever was happening to him was biding its tim-

...!

Suddenly drew back.

His Null Life Essence which had sunk deep into the Paladin Champion's flesh was pushed out firmly by a rather powerful influence that resisted with a passion.

However, that hadn't been what caused him to take steps back.

That honour belonged to the fact that the Paladin Champion, while visibly incapacitated, had suddenly raised his left hand and made an odd gesture with three of his fingers!

"Causality Vector."

Right when a voice without a visible source sounded, a determined, transparent bubble flushed out of the Paladin Champion's chest, widening with every micro moment until it reached the Penetrator.

Shockingly, it drained the colour out of everything – the bed, the Champion's features – however Replicus got the feeling that its effect was worse.

So much worse.

As it expanded staggeringly quickly, the only thing Replicus managed to do was expand a sphere of a cobalt blue Null Life Essence around him, which shook vehemently as the bubble from the Paladin flashed around it, evidently eager to touch the one inside it.

Replicus felt the influence of the thing spread out viciously into Stagnant Space, almost seeming to intend to devour it all.

At that moment, something represented in a series of grey tones materialised from the remnants of the manifestation of Undeath energy Replicus had just sliced.

It looked like the carcass of a massive bull raised on prime feed to maturity, with large horns and a particularly unfriendly look to its face which spotted an unnaturally crooked snout, under its rows of sharp teeth, much like a shark's.

It stood upright, the excessive amount of bones it had giving it a very intimidating stature.

This creature then spoke.

"If you know what's good for you, throw this man back into the ocean, and turn back."

Replicus merely looked at the creature for a while. Even while limited in the expressions of its colour, it still featured a greenish-black flame in its dry sockets.

'It's a reanimated beast. One with impressive stats...' Replicus thought, staring at the information given by his guidance field, distinctly categorising the creature as a Tier 25, Definer of Causality.

"What does your master want with this man?" Replicus ignored its warning and asked.

The creature let out a bellow of visible steam.

"Causality will descend as I have guided. Heed it or ignore it. Your choice counts, but only for a limited time," it said.

Replicus didn't like what he heard.

Worse yet, the creature turned back into a burst of stability and instability forged into a cruel shape, and was drained back into the Paladin Champion's body.

As that happened, Replicus felt the field the energy that had been cast just now recede from wherever it managed to reach.

Curiously, he poked his finger out of his sphere of Null Life Essence, and made his starry armour reflect his properties.

Replicus' finger was only exposed to the colour-dampening energy for two seconds, but the result was already stunning.

[Higher-Level concept detected. 'Wider Causality'. To learn the lesser fundamentals, an investment of 80,780 Null Life Essence is required]

The Penetrator's sockets gushed with visible surprise.

Chapter 879: Overthinking

A moment later, Replicus had returned the Paladin Champion to the ship. He slumped back into his seat and took several minutes to process what had just happened.

"Looks like this is going to be harder than I initially thought. That sockethole has a plan with this man," Replicus said.

Oddly, the Paladin Champion looked to be at peace, not knowing that he – as Replicus surmised – was bonded to a particularly powerful Undeath creature for whatever reason. Or perhaps several?

The creature that came out of him insisted that he drop the Champion back into the ocean and make a U-turn for home.

'What's his plan?'

Indeed. That was the question.

What was the masked man's plan?

As things looked now, it might be impossible for Replicus to heal the Paladin and attempt to make him an ally as well as killing him and making him an Apostle.

He had the distinct feeling that as long as the man had Undeath energy within him, even if he died, [Apostle Summon] wouldn't work. Of course, this had only become clear after Replicus verified the man's circumstances.

They were way worse than he had thought.

'Definer of Causality. That's quite the name. To think the masked man has something like this up his sleeve. Does he also have other ridiculous beasts with absurd powers as his undead? Is he saving them for a last wave attack when he inevitably catch up to him?'

Replicus had already considered the masked man a problem, but it seemed his assessment of him was still too reasonable. What made him even more tense was the fact that the masked man probably had creatures like the Definer of Causality before whatever boost he acquired from the millions of souls he had got from the climax of the Premium Age Royale.

Perhaps the Paladin Champion seemingly fighting on par with the masked man wasn't because he was as powerful as the masked man, or perhaps not even because of the peculiar sickness Grim mentioned the necromancer had, but because he had wanted the Paladin Champion intact. Or mostly so anyway.

"I can't believe this is turning out to be as dire as the ascent of a god onto Aigas," Replicus said.

He killed this line of thought and traced his way back to the Definer of Causality.

His thought phantoms were especially rowdy about that topic.

"Higher level concept? This is our first time seeing this right? Higher than Spatial lightning and Stagnant Space?" one of his phantoms said while scratching its skull.

"The word Causality doesn't sit right with me. Cause and effect. The flow of events. Does that mean that creature can control the result of others' actions? Are we already trapped by it in some way?"

"No, no. You're both wrong. First of all, this isn't our first time seeing a Higher level concept. The thing is, I think what determines a higher level concept for [Epiphany] is how long it would take us to learn it, not how just how strong the concept is. And besides, just because a beast has a power with the name Causality doesn't mean it controls what others do and how they are rewarded for it.

It might just be like a... uhm...a medium or a mediator!" a particularly riled thought phantom explained with vigour.

"Wait. You're saying there's no link between a very strong a concept and the difficulty involved in us learning it? Those two aren't separate things, they're related!" another accused suspiciously.

"No, no, you sockethole! Listen to me! It's all about relevance. Think about it. Remember how it's easier for us to handle Distorted Gravity when we are in the Hybrid Luman than in the Penetrator form? I think that if our flesh form had [Epiphany], the cost to learn the penultimate secrets of Distorted Gravity would be very low.

Why?"

There was a pause.

"Because... the Hybrid Luman form has a core we crafted specifically for adapting Gravity?"

"Exactly! Exactly!" the riled up phantom said, looking deranged as it hung Replicus' shoulder and then began pacing in the air. "So I'm thinking, what if this doesn't just apply to reasonable tangible factors that makes a concept easier for us to learn.

I mean, maybe we managed to learn Grand Fire quickly because we were already pretty good at using fire – with the whole [Ungodly Flames of Debauchery] thing – rather than just because we sit in that pool of lava all day. What if this Causality thing – which I'm sure isn't as ridiculous as it seems – is harder for us to learn because well..."

One of the thought phantoms jerked.

"You can't mean..."

"No way. That applies?"

"Yes, yes! What if it's hard for us to learn because we – as it pains me to say – aren't really a prime example of someone in control of their life's trajectory? I mean, as much as we've progressed, our

goal leads us back to where we started. To Somanda. Before we beat him, it doesn't really matter what we do if we go and get ourselves killed in the end."

"I don't know. That's a little far-fetched. By saying this, you're already making this Wider Causality concept into something really powerful," a thought phantom argued. "And why would the skill become harder to learn instead of being impossible for us to learn?"

"Look! [Epiphany], [Nullmancer's Royal Raiment of Acclimation] and [Nullmancer's Unforgiving Lancet] are broad skills. They practically have no limit and we own them. We just discovered that our Class may be mirrored after some big shot in the Null Verse, so obviously its abilities must also be ridiculous. We have theorised that these three skills and [Wealth of Spoils] simply have no limit.

So perhaps [Epiphany] sets its bounds according to the user, as a sort of restraint mechanism. Like the Flaws..."

There was another pause.

"I still think this is a little too...odd."

"Me too. That would mean our other three Nullmancer exclusive skills have these restrictions too. [Nullmancer's Royal Raiment of Acclimation] can't h—"

"Hold on. [Wealth of Spoils] doesn't allow us to pass on skills to living things. We've had to be shrewd about it, mixing in [Sorcery of Essence] to do that. Would that count as a sort of caveat? A restriction, I mean."

Another one of the phantoms sighed exasperatedly.

"You know what, we can easily find out if [Epiphany] has a restriction for us or not by simply learning Wider Causality and seeing what it does. Maybe it is just more powerful than our other concepts."

"I don't think it's worth it. 80,000 plus Null Life Essence points just to get it t9 sit ungraded in our status? That's a waste we can't really afford right now. To get it to the D rank, we'll need a figure above 100,000. We're cut off from Deign, and it's not wise to hog all that reserve Null Life Essence for something like this."

That seemed fair.

"Damn those Reverse Clusters."

"So do we just remain in the dark about this Wider Causality? It might come to bite us in the back."

"Actually..." it was Replicus who spoke this time.

His finger glinted with a foggy light as he looked at the Paladin Champion.

"Let's see if we can glimpse at the truth with this."

Chapter 880: Distant Terror

Pherdanta made the ship hit a sharp right, dodging a massive Scorching Tear that made the dark sea groan and sizzle, releasing a terrible burst of steam unseen by the naked eye.

She made it turn left again, avoiding a Reverse Cluster, and another Scorching Tear right after that as it sped full tilt ahead. The degree of concentration in her eyes spread to even her face which became unusually stiff, not to mention her body which didn't budge at all.

Allora and Grim were overlooking either side of the ship, keeping watch of beasts that may assault the ship. A series of them with unnatural powers had shot out of the ocean, attempting to sink their ship more than a dozen times in just the last hour, but quick reactions from the two Unlimited had swiftly dealt with them.

Baddan also begun to participate from time to time after finishing his meditation. His physical strength was enough for most beasts that sprang up. The even stronger ones seemed to prefer to stay deep underneath the water and rise up only occasionally.

Fortunately, the crew had only encountered one instance of such horrendously powerful creatures targeting them, and it wasn't all that difficult to deal with. However, this, along with the threat of the Scorching Tears had made Replicus return the ship to its normal size.

After all, the bigger the target, the greater the risk of being hit by either or both of the disasters local to this side of the ocean.

Allora reinforcing the ship had its benefits, but they didn't do much in these circumstances. Worse yet, her infinite mana couldn't be stored within the vessel. It disappeared as soon as she released her abilities. Therefore, keeping the ship large without her input had no merit.

Right now, with the boss shut in below deck, the crew were left to their own devices while keeping what he had said – the plan – in mind.

As Pherdanta was swerving masterfully, Grim decided to make small talk with Baddan who was close to him on the right side of the deck.

He found to his surprise that when he asked Baddan about his race and how they lived within their Cluster, the Sky Watcher was rather open and quite visibly excited to give details. His stern and unapproachable air seemed to have been because it hadn't been more than two days since he was forced to join a bunch of humans – a different bunch of them, actually.

Of course, Grim was the perfect person to speak to, in order to make him feel at home.

"You were really satisfied with this clothing though? If you wanted, the boss would have made you a Granted Armament like ours," Grim said.

Baddan wore a shallow smile that turned reminiscent and melancholic when he looked at the newer version of his traditional garb fashioned in Deign at his request. He had washed off the bits of blood left at its chest from the attack of the old Undead Incandescent Stager.

"No. Or rather... not yet. I can't move past my past that quickly. Maybe a day will come when I cast aside my old traditions.... but it is far into the future.

For now, I will wear this in memory of who I originally was," he said.

Grim nodded.

"That's deep. I wish I had some complicated past. The only thing that makes my life worth living is what I've become now," he said.

"I've noticed. You are rather... obsessed with each moment."

"I am! As a common thief, I never had my sights on anything but survival, but now, I get to live each moment without worrying about that. I can afford to. The boss made it so it would be possible. My past self would have never imagined dying without regrets."

Baddan looked far into sea with the tall Reverse Clusters exerting their influence on the world. Even within the ocean, it was common to see bulges, whirlpools or simple dark gaps. It was a tragic, and unnerving sight but...

"I suppose I understand that a little. The previous me would have never imagined being one of the few to travel this far into the 'real world' despite the... obvious perils involved," he said before looking behind him, where Pherdanta should have been but was hidden from view. "She's awfully dedicated. And skilled."

Grim laughed.

"You're not confident you would have been able to steer the ship with all these obstacles, are you?" he said.

"I am not. I've only been bred to lead and to fight. I am not gifted in much else."

"Being gifted to be able to handle yourself in fights isn't all bad. That's right..." Grim said, his eyes sparkling. "You couldn't use any of your abilities before because they were tied to the Cluster, right? What did the boss give you? He must have given you a pretty powerful ability, right?"

Baddan gave a sniffy sort of laugh. He looked a little proud to be asked this question.

"Well, yes," he said. "It was... difficult for me to come to terms with before but I've grown fond of it. It also—"

"Up ahead!" Pherdanta suddenly called, breaking down the relaxed mood.

The three individuals she could actually count on looked forward and saw way ahead, into the distance, something mostly masked by the darkness of night.

Grim saw it better than the rest, but he was a little disappointed he didn't sense it sooner despite it being very far away.

It was an enormous crack in space, towering over the Reverse Clusters – and even normal Clusters of blue or white that had appeared around them here and there.

It had a matted shade of purple that almost seemed black, which wasn't at all the best thing one would want to see.

A purple Cluster.

The idea of it wouldn't have been so bad if Grim hadn't added some dark context to it.

"There's cracks on it. It likely won't be that long till it opens..." he said, and his fellow Unlimited turned a bit grim.

The beasts that managed to call this ocean home regardless of how poisonous it was, were either very special cases with intense immunity to poisons, or very powerful beasts with centuries of age under their belt if not more.

Both kinds of beasts would normally emerge out of a Cluster of this calibre.

"Wouldn't it be better to destroy it before the beasts inside come out?" Allora asked anxiously while turning to Pherdanta who became more than a figment of her imagination after directing all their attention to the Cluster. "You did something similar a while ago."

"That wasn't a purple Cluster. And besides, the power required to destroy it, for me at least, isn't something I can spare at such a critical stage in our journey," Pherdanta replied while avoiding another Scorching Tear.

"What about using an Aggrante? A Triplefold would do the trick, right?" Allora said.

Grim gave her a weird look.

"Why are you so afraid of the Cluster? It's not like we absolutely have to fight whatever comes out of it. Even if we do, it would be a problem for all the Factions, not just us. Wasting an Aggrante on it isn't worth it. That's not even mentioning how the boss would react to us using a Triplefold," he said.

Pherdanta concurred, especially about how a Triplefold Aggrante wasn't necessary and wasn't to be used lightly.

"If you say so," Allora said, but clearly not entirely convinced. Perhaps it was because she hadn't been on missions with the boss like Grim and Pherdanta, facing calamities that only Unlimited were allowed to brave with the Penetrator, gaining confidence against those odd powers along the way?

Yeah. That should be it.

"Such a worrywart," a voice suddenly said. "There's an awful lack of liveliness on this ship."

...!!!

At once, all eyes turned to a pale man with similarly pale hair who had just appeared in their midst.