

Undead 921

Chapter 921: It's Not The Pity

It was only when the smile disappeared from Skullius' face that the casual atmosphere around the room disappeared.

Darwel, Seville and Maxim were once again flung into thoughts they had had about Skullius when they first saw him. For Maxim, it was merely fleeting, as she only knew the Hybrid Luman from the Royale – a tense battleground where they had to cooperate to survive – but for Seville and Darwel, it was different.

It went without saying that the Sif duo had noticed the odd bit of change in the current Skullius much more because they witnessed the heaviest sense of it. When they began conversing with him, however, the suspicions had died down temporarily.

Now, they rose again.

Vali was only a little curious about the superficial change in Skullius' choice of attire as she knew him the least among the people here. Thus, she was the first to answer his inquiry.

"Erlton is a Herald. Apparently, the Deities appointed several people like him; people they bestowed upon a portion of their power in order to monitor and protect the world," she explained while setting one tantalising thigh on top of the other.

Darwel kept a close eye on Skullius' face. When she first mentioned Erlton in the corridor, the Hybrid Luman hadn't shown any interest in asking who he was. Now he was curious.

When Vali explained, he didn't show much of a reaction. He simply nodded.

She found that strange.

"I see..." Skullius said as evenly as possible.

Vali tilted her head.

"That's as bland a reaction as I've ever seen," she said with an unintentionally seductive smile. "I expected the concept to make you ask a follow up question at the very least."

Skullius gave a small smile.

"Well, my latest battle desensitised me to surprise when dealing with anything of the same level," he said calmly.

...!

Maxim was the first to lunge slightly closer to Skullius from her end of the table, her eyes livid with curiosity.

"You mean... you remember everything you did? You remember fighting that man who was summoned by that necromancer?"

Darwel, Sevill and Vali were the same, albeit more restrained.

"Is it true? You remember?" Darwel said, a hint of desperation in her voice. "You remember... what you became?"

Skullius remained silent for a while. Something about his white eyes staring at nothing in particular made everyone a little anxious.

"You could say that," he finally responded, knowing full well this wouldn't satisfy the group's nigh palpable greed for information. "I suppose this Erlton isn't all knowing, is he?" he continued, adding no substance whatsoever. "Now. Continue. What did you tell you?"

While slightly irritated by Skullius', the four women shared quick glances.

It was Maxim who then spoke.

"He told us that you're not from this world. From Aigas. I admit, that took a lot of time to process when he said it," she breathed the latter end of her sentence while taking another swig at her juice, hoping it would turn into something bitter instead.

Her face turned stern as she continued.

"The only way that that became easier to digest, was when he told us you were an enslaved skeleton that happened to escape and find itself here with a bit of fortune. He said you were human once, and that part of you exists in the body we see now, and another is trapped elsewhere. That it's the longing for this other half of you that drives you, changing you, leading you back towards it...

through any... means... it can..."

A cold silence pervaded.

The four ladies didn't dare flinch or speak when it oozed its way from the Hybrid Luman, but they did all seem to share something as they looked at Skullius, not with fright, but a sort of serious consideration.

Skullius' face seemed to be made of stone at this moment.

"A part of me, is it?" he said in a sharp voice that made the souls of Maxim, Darwel and Vali quiver. "He said that?"

Skullius emitted a rough sigh.

"Makes it seem so... touching, like I'm some lost idiot searching for a long lost love who completes me. Lies. It's the opposite," he said and looked to the four women.

They all showed subtle degrees of surprise and concern.

"But then again that doesn't change how the story goes, does it? I suppose you pity me now? The story you've heard follows my hurdles, does it? Obstacles I've had to overcome, the challenges that have pressed me down and the loneliness I've had to endure? That makes me appear feeble to you, does it?"

No one answered.

But it was clear to Skullius already.

Only a sob story of his life telling the tragic parts would have made man and Sif accept what he was.

Was that Erlton's angle? To use his status to draw the sympathy of these people for his sake?

Skullius didn't need to hear anything else. He confirmed where the tale the Herald told began and where it ended. Its limits.

Honestly, he wasn't too fond of him.

His thoughts began to skew in a bloody direction.

"You've got it all wrong," Vali suddenly spoke up.

Skullius turned to her.

"You've never struck me as someone who entertains weakness. It was fascinating to see an Advancement Stager show more grit and ingenuity than Masters. I was drawn to you because of that and believe me...

I've been fed up with weak fellows with no spine; content with selling their Families to me in order to survive the Royale and bed my sisters and cousins," she said with a smile that, for a moment, showed disgust.

"You're misunderstanding our views. I for one am looking to repay my debt to you with something meaningful. Something personal. So forgive me if Erlton's storytelling gave me the impression that I'd found the perfect problem to help you solve in exchange for my life."

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

Right.

He looked at Maxim who nodded with a sigh.

"I did as you told me. I gave her the Supreme Potion, which ended up saving her life," she said. "And on the note of not having our souls stolen, I also owe you. If it weren't for the Glass Units you gave me, I would have died too back then. But even before that, I considered you a comrade in arms. We fought side by side; I suppose Tallo as qualified as well.

It's only natural that I put in some effort to understand you."

Skullius hummed.

Darwel immediately chimed in despite her conflicting emotions.

"You and I had an arrangement. I'll admit, I did pity you, but I also felt better knowing that even if you are someone else, you're still the person I know as well. You're the Luminant whom I found, and you are important to me and my people. In that, there's no pity, only love and care. You said it yourself.

The Sif are your people as well, and none of us care if you acquired the Luminant blood halfway through this life," she said. "Even my parents have processed that much."

...

Skullius said nothing.

Moments passed as he looked blankly forward and then he raised his glass and finished the juice within it.

Goodness.

"I see," he said.

Deep within, he felt a contradiction that overwhelmed the emotions he should be feeling right now.

In another time, another eventuality to what occurred in THAT place this time, he would have felt his soul churn at the prospect of having more boons post UNCoddled.

He would be touched.

Perhaps he was, a little bit, even now.

"Good. I suppose something good did come out of that mess that day," he said and smiled, his lips having an unsettling curve to them which Darwel noticed more than anyone else. "I will be looking forward to some favours then, friends."

A lighter atmosphere bloomed, carrying away its heavy predecessor.

As that occurred, Darwel immediately took the opportunity to ask:

"Also, as friends, I think you should do us the favour of explaining how exactly it was that you survived. You probably don't know this, but your body and soul were in shambles after your battle with whoever that man you fought was. Something strange had started to happen to your soul when... well... we all got distracted."

"Erlton assured us you would live, but aside from that, we didn't know anything about your state," Maxim's intense gaze fixed on Skullius, almost threatening him to answer lest she supplex him to the ground.

"Ah, that..." Skullius said, his smile growing more radiant.

Chapter 922: Prospect For Double Ascensiom

Skullius vaguely recalled hearing Sila's voice days ago, when he lost control to the rage that overtook him the moment Rayn emerged, summoned by the masked man.

It was when he was being tortured by the Majestic Territory, Deific Moonlight Paradise when Sila had expressed his intent.

"Someone sacrificed their soul for mine. Because of previous circumstances, our souls were already a mix of each other, made compatible with the time we spent bonded in one body. That is gist of it," Skullius explained with a light smile.

The four women around him were surprised.

A sacrifice?

"When you say your souls were already a mix of each other... Do you mean this metaphorically or..." Maxim said while squinting, flabbergasted. It almost seemed as though she hoped obscuring her vision would better her comprehension.

Skullius folded his arms.

"It's a long story. I was carrying an unwanted piece of soul within in my body. It was trapped within my own soul. It was stronger than my own and older. Feeding itself into my mine stabilised and recovered what you saw when you looked within me soul," he said, speaking more to Seville than the others.

Vali, Maxim and Darwel remembered not understanding how the situation with Skullius' soul was even possible when they had congregated around him days ago.

It seemed ridiculous just how much activity was present within it, and now, as they got their answer as to what exactly happened, they didn't find it any easier to understand.

So not only was Skullius an otherworldly being, he also had a mystery to his soul?

Skullius was amused by their reaction.

If they knew what else was amiss with his soul... what it was tied to...

"Well, I'm stumped. I don't even know where to start to get more clarity," Maxim said with a hoarse sigh.

"I do," Vali said with a suspicious glint sparking in her eye. "When you spoke just now, I felt my soul tremble. Did this soul you said sacrificed itself for yours...happen to be at the Incandescent Stage?"

"Yes," Skullius replied casually, which shocked Maxim.

"Really?!" she exclaimed while balling her hands into fists and slamming them on the table.

"Really," Skullius replied.

"So it really was... just as I felt..." Darwel said meekly. "But you said—"

"I know," Skullius cut her off. "My soul is comparable to that of an Incandescent Stager, but my body is not. It's an interesting contradiction that I will have a little fun trying to understand."

"I don't believe I've ever heard of something like this, Lord Luminant," Seville said, her tone of apprehension and concern unmistakable even with her face hidden. "Is it not... dangerous? Usually Tasks and Trials not only temper the mind to best fit the Stage an expert proceeds into, they also temper the body, easing it into the newfound power earned when someone advances. The Incandescent Stage...

is different from the Master Stage, Lord Festos. Your soul should have been modified along with your body's instinctive capacity to understand the changed soul and accommodate it. But..."

Skullius nodded.

"I know," he said.

Darwel shook lightly.

This was the third time. Once again, Skullius expressed an unsettling degree of acknowledgement that she found suspicious.

The Hybrid Luman continued.

"I'm currently battling with my Second Trial. I'm not sure what will happen if I complete it. My body might simply grow into that of a Master or... it will shoot right up to Incandescent."

A thrilled grin flashed on his face.

"If this process was solely judged by the Deities – for me that is – I would have believed I was probably going to experience the former. However, I'm not from this world. I have no roots to it. I have no blessing or curse that comes from the Deities of Aigas. They don't decide what Tasks or Trials I accomplish. So...

the latter might just happen if I play my cards right."

A thickly silence came after the explanation.

Skipping the Master Stage to reach the Incandescent...

That was unheard of.

Sevill didn't know how to feel about it.

She would have been happy for Skullius, if not for the unnerving feeling he gave off when he spoke of the Deities. There was a hint of loathing.

"It was already embarrassing that you were keeping up with me in the Royale while being a full Stage weaker than me, but now, you're about to eclipse me by a mile," Maxim said, though with a refreshed smile on her face that contrasted the bitterness her words implied.

"It just makes repaying my debt all that much harder," Vali shook her head. "You seem confident about your Trial though. Is it something you can accomplish easily?"

Skullius shrugged.

"With the right tools. I have a feeling I'm going to need to complete it within the next few days," he said. "Ah, that reminds me. What became of the masked man. Seeing as several days passed, I expected some kind of chaotic event. What happened after our encounter with him?"

Maxim wore a heavy expression. As did Vali.

"Right. The calm here probably gives the illusion that everything is well. Well, shortly after we left, the world started trembling and from what I've heard, Pelian has become a den of dark monsters that keep coming out of the ground."

Skullius' remained stone-like.

"Is that so?"

"Yes," Maxim frustratedly rubbed her temple. "We have no idea if the situation has changed much in the last few hours. We hoped Erlton would give us an update, but he's been gone for a while. <Sigh>. I wish I could confirm if my family was alright or not."

Vali seemed to share the same sentiment, but didn't voice it.

As for Skullius...

"Well, I do need to confirm if some of my people are alright too. If worst really came to worst, I believe all of them will be safe in the Chieftain Screens. Hopefully, Silrat didn't..."

The Hybrid Luman stopped.

His eyes sharpened at once.

"I see. I did set it to around this time...."

Chapter 923: Not Yet

While the four ladies were wondering about what he was mumbling, Skullius suddenly stood up, his long robe of [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light] whipping about.

"I'd like to take care of a few things while there's still time. If Maqi is attacking, it's best to have several trump cards in reserve," he said firmly.

"Several?" Vali asked. "It almost seemed like you have a few answers to the coming assault already."

Skullius grinned.

"I do," he said before scanning blankly the faces of the four. He gave a sigh of acknowledgement.

"I'm aware that you all have many questions for me. Erlton no doubt took many liberties with the amount of information he divulged about me. If you stick around, I might satisfy your curiosity."

The looks on the women's faces expressed varying emotions at these words.

Indeed. They held off on asking much about subjects that truly seemed too deep to be asking someone who was coming from that treacherous experience.

"How reassuring," Vali said with a smile. She also stood up and looked at the Hybrid Luman. "You've become many times bolder."

Skullius merely smiled with his eyes.

"I have, have I? Then allow me to be even more so. There's a favour you can do for me. Consider it as the first step to paying me back," he said.

Vali tilted her head.

"What would that be?" she asked.

"You learnt Rias' Imaginary Technique, didn't you? At least a portion of it."

Vali's smile grew even deeper and more alluring.

"What of it?"

"I'll need your help me with something soon. It might be challenging, but still possible."

A chuckle left the Kinn Family head.

"I don't have a choice, do I?"

Skullius chortled and turned from her.

Before he could speak to her, Maxim had acted.

From a storage ring on her finger, a sheathed blade emerged. Only the luxurious golden hilt could be seen from it, and the curve of the blade through the way the sheath bent.

"I kept it safe after you lost control," she said as she immediately passed the sword to him. "And you're right. I have many questions. What happened with that savage form of yours is something I'm dying to know. I figured it'd be something you're not too keen on sharing... since Erlton didn't speak about it either."

Skullius grabbed the sword Maxim extended to him.

Demion's Dance.

He felt the sword shiver when he handled it, even if it was masked behind the sheath.

It was eager to explode out and complete itself in his hands.

'Calm down...!' Skullius thought merrily. 'Not yet...'

He then faced Maxim.

"All in good time," he responded to her light pout face with a smile. "Now. Darwel. You remember our agreement, right?"

Darwel became flustered.

"What? You want to do that now?" she asked, surprised.

"Is there a better time?"

Darwel couldn't find a reasonable 'No' to that. The look on her face displayed that she struggled to find an excuse for why she shouldn't show it to Skullius right now. Perhaps this really was the best time, but she dreaded that what he wanted... what they wanted... would take some time.

This was not to mention the fact that Darwel's parents hadn't approved of this and would have loved to chat with Skullius first before introducing him to the ancient object that her people hailed as sacred.

Unfortunately, they didn't have the time.

They all didn't have time on their side.

"Alright," Darwel stood up. Her long ears wiggled, a red pigment spreading across them. "Let's go."

"You going somewhere we can't follow?" Maxim asked lazily. Perhaps a little jealously.

"Unfortunately, only my people are allowed where we are going. Sorry," Darwel said to which the pink-haired woman waved her off.

It was true, nevermind humans, the regular Sif could only go to that place on fixed dates and with a stringent set of rules and regulations on how they should behave. Only El Sif had the privilege of going as they pleased.

Sevill was a little apprehensive about this, as she too wondered how Darwel's parents would react, but the authority that Skullius as a Luminant could command was too immense for her to even voice her doubts.

She simply went along.

As the trio exited Maxim's room, Skullius pulled Demion's Dance out of its sheath.

The green, curved blade was as lustrous and intricate as ever. Now that Demion's Dance had transformed from a Rare grade saber to a Legendary grade hanger, Skullius couldn't help imagine what its finally form was going to be.

The sword had unexpectedly evolved during the Premium Age Royale, only stopping at Legendary because the rules of the Royale – prohibiting the use of any items above the Legendary grade – were still in play.

Despite this, the sword had phenomenal enhancements, but they would only get better soon.

It was also quite interesting to Skullius that the sword showed some degree of intelligence already.

Well, given how old and mysterious it was, it was likely to have a consciousness like some powerful objects out there.

The fact that Skullius had met Irisa, the woman from the tale that bound Demion and Escus when he died in the Royale, convinced him of this.

There was definitely more to this sword.

Sadly, because he was uncertain what would happen if it evolved fully, he didn't want to do this while inside this mansion. Thus, he sheathed it again.

Speaking of this building, its dimensions were absurd.

His senses could not completely comprehend where it started and ended. Of course that could be attributed to the fact that it had some heavy runes applied to it for differing means of defence.

Every corridor was lined with vines, branches or roots from trees unseen, all providing aesthetic and lighting.

More than that however, Replicus started to notice that they served greater purpose than that.

It was extremely easy to miss, if not for his [Greatest Mana Manipulation] which picked up mana flowing up some vines from the floor they were in, going downward. That one instance told Skullius much.

The roots and vines were alive.

They were surveillance.

They also helped carry energy needed to keep the mansion's functions afloat.

The fact that it was so hard for him to figure out had stunned Skullius, so much so that he grinned.

"Astounding," he remarked.

Darwel smiled at him as they finally reached the ground floor, scaling down a wide set of stairs lined with young, sweet-smelling cherry trees on either side. The stairs formed at a junction that led into three halls within the mansion.

"This is nothing compared to what's out there," she said as she gestured towards the grand entrance which gave a spectacular view of outside, swallowed by night.

Chapter 924: Mild Exploration

The Wonderfall Torrents.

Hazes of moisture hissed from the three waterfalls that bled into the large pool into which the vast mansion was built within.

Skullius was stunned.

The moment he, Darwel and Seville exited the mansion and were met with the blissful night, he felt as though he had entered a Cluster.

The humidity and the shockingly soothing sound of the tall falls, dropping into the surrounding waters like pristine, sacred cloud, was all too abrupt of a change from the calm of the mansion.

Indeed, Skullius couldn't see it all, but that was the point.

His other keen senses hadn't noticed the sounds or a glimpse of the environment outside at all. His best guess had been that they were in the middle of lush forest, which was a stereotype that ended being... mostly untrue.

The three falls, called the Wonderfall Torrents by the Sif, were no ordinary geological features. The waters they carried had incredibly valuable properties such as the ability to heal, to ward away harmful intent in any objects or living creatures, and they influenced the minds and souls of whoever was contact with them.

Additionally, the falls were as noisy as Skullius expected, but while within the area of their effect, it was impossible to hear anything but a distinct, almost distant-sounding hum.

"Remarkable..." Skullius said.

Darwel wore a radiant smile.

As did Sevell.

From the entrance to the mansion, which was nothing but a large, arched frame made from tough, neatly woven roots, a platform of dry, straight stone led through the misty humidity, towards a distant destination that was, as of yet, obscured rather tenaciously.

Skullius' [Greatest Mana Manipulation] couldn't penetrate the mist to see past it.

After a few more failed tries, he relented.

He might as well let Darwel lead and follow.

It wasn't a bad thing to sightsee in the meantime, was it?

The trio walked over the stone platform – much like bridge – which glinted with shine, though untouched by the moisture.

"This is the Wonderfall Torrents. It's my own little slice of Opungale. Honestly, the mansion is the least impressive highlight. I'm sure you can already tell that there's rich mana here and the waters from above are not so ordinary," Darwel said proudly.

"Your own slice, huh? Interesting. It does seem relaxing and extravagant. Fitting for a princess..." Skullius said.

Darwel twisted her lips.

"I've always tried to not appear as if I'm some kind of spoiled brat. Your tone suggests that you still think of me as one," she said, pouting.

"Well, you are quite sheltered in my opinion. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing," Skullius chuckled. "By the way, is this water the equivalent of a healing potion?"

"It's better. More versatile, I should say. Rather than a potion, it'd be more apt to say it is like blessed waters with a wide range of uses. It can better both living and non-living objects. We use it for cooking as well. You might want to have a meal cooked with it.

It's delicious. Even someone like you would enjoy it."

Sevill recoiled at Darwel's playfully sharp look which accompanied her words.

"You're taking a crack at me now?" Skullius said.

Soon, the three saw the end of the white obscurity.

A wide path with rich, reddish-brown soil made a straight trail forward, with massive trees that made unending rows on either side making their presence known with an absurd, nigh uniform, green vibrance.

The coos, caws, and crawls of animals were in abundance despite their sources being hidden behind collections of thick trunks. They made rhythmic noises that were almost as soothing as the bellows of falls, which, now that Sevill, Skullius and Darwel were out of the range, were annoyingly loud.

The vivaciousness of the animals living within the thick forest didn't inspire anything but appreciation.

It was an odd feeling to Skullius.

To him, forests were associated either with bandits or malicious beasts.

Because of that...

"Is this some kind of Sacred Forest?" he asked.

"No. It's just a normal kind of forest. I helped groom it. Many strong creatures do come to live within it though," Darwel replied. "I call it the Wicker Forest."

Skullius expanded his senses and felt the massive expanse and its inhabitants proudly boasting their mess of liveliness.

Yet...

No.

After the setting of the Royale, it was impossible for Skullius to completely relax around large bales of forestry.

Thankfully, the long road which didn't entertain many changes this night, slowly branched while the rows on either side of him thinned considerably.

The trees grew sparse, as did the grasses, but in no way did that suggest that the green came to end.

Skullius felt the presence of thousands of Sif in the area that opened up before them.

He frowned.

"What is this?" he asked curiously.

The things standing before him were oddly... odd.

Darwel was amused by his reaction.

"When I said we understand nature, I meant it," she said.

Perhaps the El Sif princess had truly described that well.

Tens of thousands of shelters were erected ahead, but instead of being built of processed wood, or brick, they were made of well... living, intact trees.

Absurdly thick trees wound themselves into feature shapes bloated enough to house tens of Sif in lower or upper decks; or perhaps in one grounded stretch of space.

The leaves and branches spun and grew to form decorative aspects on the exterior or to create bushy roofs that would protect or open when necessary to let more sun and air in.

The most impressive structure Skullius discovered was a great tower woven out of spiralling roots that had a beautiful tan to them, rock solid and with a consistent dotted pattern. Sorts of golden, glowing fruits were hung from each twist of root, casting an immense glow on the smaller houses around.

From the great presence of mana and other energies Skullius couldn't fully comprehend, he could tell that this stalwart structure, which featured Sif going in and out at its bottom, was a checkpoint of sorts with quite the impressive defensive functions.

The amount of activity surrounding it also suggested that the masses were not oblivious to the danger that was afoot.

While many could be seen interacting peacefully in their homes, or taking walks in the neatly demarcated pathways that seemed more like complex arrays from above, their unrest was palpable to Skullius.

"This is beautiful..." the Hybrid Luman said as he came to a stop.

Darwel smiled, following suit.

"It is. And it never changes. The people. The homes. It's so comforting to see it all continue like this," she said.

She quite liked coming down here to look at the people from afar or to interact with them. Over the years, she had explored every single house in this small settlement, getting to know everyone who lived within it.

"Hmmm," Skullius nodded. "What's that river?"

Cutting across a rather spacious, winding plot within the settlement was a great body of extraordinarily clear water. A great number of people converged towards it or sat beside it, some even bowing.

"It's no mere river. It's the presence of Listafelle herself," Darwel said heavily, with hints of reverence.

Skullius nodded once more.

Right.

Where there was the Purity was heavily involved in Feinheath, preaching the doctrine of three Deities, Opungale was devoted to one Deity in particular.

Listafelle of the oceans and seas.

Ah, but it made sense.

The figures looking gloomily and hopefully into the clear water which looked deceptively like that from a spring...

Their devotion was coming into play once again.

They hoped to be saved.

Chapter 925: Celebrated, Demeaned

As it turned out, the water from the river was channelled from the ocean directly, filtered, consecrated in some manner, and then passed through various cities and towns within Opungale.

Cities within the great continent were known as Auroras, and when Skullius perceived one, he was flabbergasted by its scale.

The settlement he and Darwel had passed before was nothing when compared to the grandeur that an Aurora possessed. He could have sworn that the one they were passing through now was several times larger than Genhuis, though, to his surprise, its actual population was greatly controlled.

Perhaps it was the fact that the typical scammer stalls selling varying types of merchandise, information and ludicrous crap about future predictions, were nowhere to be seen, relieving the streets of crowding.

Instead of wimping brothels and inns, there were classy amalgamations of great trees and colossal roots forming enormous structures that accommodated all, with great degrees of hospitality, saving from the need to erect smaller buildings over vast stretches of space.

More of the land was left for great farms, more of the great rivers that sometimes branched within the Auroras and of course, somewhat fancy food outlets that drew fine, controlled dining.

The lighting, which also came from shining fruit erected at every significant high, not to mention the fireflies that decided to give a burst of diverse colour to the dark night above as they flew through, was dazzling.

Where Skullius couldn't see, Darwel made sure to explain in express detail.

The Hybrid Luman was stunned.

He thought of it was amazing.

However, he did not quite like the fact that Darwel insisted that they pass through the Aurora so he could get a better feel for it himself. After all, unlike the last settlement, it was extremely lively even at this hour.

The relenting Skullius sensed the instant reactions to Darwel's presence.

They were more exaggerated than he could have imagined.

All kinds of people rushed to her and gave great bows and gifts as greeting.

Darwel reciprocated their enthusiasm in kind, throwing back genuine thanks and deep, meaningful smiles.

'Seems to me that she's perhaps sheltered, but with a twist. Her months' long absence must have been felt real bad around here,' Skullius thought.

The general vibe suggested something like that among the people.

Curiously, he didn't sense many experts among the gathering crowds throwing flowers wherever Darwel set her feet, and handing her fresh fruits, silky cloth and processed gems that Seville sometimes received in her stead and stored in spatial storage.

He sensed numerous, massive constructs like the one from the other settlement, equipped with a plethora of offensive and defensive functions, and perhaps several tens of stationary figures that gave the same vibe as Seville and Viccil, albeit weaker than the two.

But that was it.

Could it be that the usual bigwigs didn't reside in Auroras like in Genhuis city?

That was the conclusion Skullius came to.

As the trio walked – slowly, much to the Hybrid Luman's subtle annoyance – Skullius' dark robe didn't fail to attract attention his way, and not all of it was good.

While some were merely curious about him, others gave him malicious looks while talking in subdued voices.

Unfortunately for Skullius, he didn't understand them.

Unlike how he was able to learn several languages by using [Basic Evil Sanction] on humans in the past, he had yet to find Sif prey. All the same, he could tell that they recognised him as a human and didn't have a particular stellar opinion on the race.

A dash of fury tempted him to nab one Sif the next chance he got, but he didn't like his chances.

As he felt from the great mansion in the Wonderfall Torrents, nature in this land, seemed alive and sentient. It monitored the goings on. He doubt he could escape notice in such a place if the surveillance was as extreme as he imagined.

Darwel wasn't oblivious to the whispers about Skullius. Instead of finding them ill-mannered and annoying, she relished in the fact that a lot of those responsible for them would be eating their words once Skullius' identity was revealed.

Wouldn't that be something?

Thus, like Skullius, she pretended to not hear anything.

As time passed, the three reached the edge of the Aurora. It wasn't walled off like most cities in Pelian, but an expanse of forest resumed dominance a hundred or so meters away from the dense populace, with guiding paths through it to different settlements.

Unlike the Wicker Forest Darwel helped groom, the forests around Auroras weren't at all home to great, powerful beasts.

Skullius found it odd.

"How does that work?" he asked as they passed one of the stationary figures Skullius had sensed, a man in armour similar to Seville's but without the veil; he was easily a Peak Master.

"Beasts are a part of nature. Those that don't come from Clusters, that is. The stronger ones usually lead flocks or packs of their kind and in most cases we can communicate with them, warding them from Auroras. If that is too difficult, El Sif like myself can ask the forests to assist us in getting our messages across. Since beasts are beasts at the end of the day, the messages do sometimes end up...

bloody," Darwel explained.

"Hmm. I underestimated what you meant by 'nature'," Skullius said. "Since El Sif can communicate with things like trees, am I capable of the same?"

Darwel beamed.

"I'm not sure. It's not about talking to just any tree, mind you. The nature in Opungale is overall different from that in Pelian. If they were the same, perhaps some of our ancestors may have been tempted to take Feinheath with the help of nature," she said with a broad smile. "I have a feeling you might be able to do that though. You didn't give me much time to explore ideas like this with you."

Skullius smiled blankly.

"I did not," he said.

Darwel then unceremoniously took the time to run her ideas on Skullius' full capabilities as a Luminant by him, and she had a shocking amount them.

Skullius wasn't too invested in her theories, though.

He listened to some and ignored others as they made their way to an unpopulated region of the continent.

A solid hour passed and Skullius didn't sense a soul around.

No Sif or beast seemed to have traversed the path they had taken in a very long while, and the general air about the pathway they took, which was hard and brimming with mana, and an energy Darwel identified for Skullius as life energy, was surprisingly ominous.

"We're close?" Skullius asked.

"Yeah," Darwel replied, though her disposition changed to a more serious one.

After they took numerous steps, Skullius stopped and so did Darwel.

Sevill immediately rushed before them, and in the next moment, three figures fell from the sky like radiant shooting stars and landed on the hard ground with vicious tremors, cocking up a generous amount of dust.

When the thrum of their landing died down, one of them spoke with authority and a frosty tone.

"You're getting ahead of yourself, Lady Darwel. His and Her Majesty have ordered your immediate return."

Chapter 926: Oath of Mourning

The figures that stood before them needed no appraisal. From their looks alone – as even their features were especially vivid to Skullius' extreme senses – it was easy to tell that they weren't the ordinary Sif guards assigned to Auroras.

If anything, the fact that they were so daring when speaking to Darwel, even if they were just delivering a message, spoke volumes about their position.

Sevill grew a little tense.

These were her peers.

The one of the two who had just spoken was a tall, muscular Sif male, only identifiable as such because of his voice was deep. His face smoothly coated with sandy skin was so beautiful and delicate that it could have easily belonged to a woman. His spiky dirt blonde hair was cast back, frigid, as though frozen in ice.

His eyes were so sharp and small that it looked as though he was squinting, yet the caramel glow from his irises was prominent.

"Benyn," Seville said tensely. "Lady Darwel is allowed to visit the shrine as she pleases. She will meet with His and Her Majesty shortly."

The bulky Sif, Benyn, retained the sternness of his face as he stared into Seville's eyes. He then turned from her dismissively and looked at Darwel.

"Your Highness. I won't repeat again. Your parents are calling for you. There is hardly any need to debate over this. You can come and honour our long passed legacies another time," Benyn said strictly.

Darwel frowned.

"This isn't a casual visit. There's something important we have to do," she said as she gestured towards Skullius. "It's for his sake. You might not have been told, but he's—"

"We know exactly who he is," the other Sif spoke a bit testily. "That doesn't change a thing."

Unlike Benyn, he was tall and slightly skinny with a face that was as masculine as it could be with a heavy stubble. His flowing black hair, sparkling but coarse, gave him a cold appeal, especially when coupled with his large, frosty blue eyes.

Darwel was heavily displeased.

She had informed her parents about who Skullius was excitedly, expressing every detail about him.

'Didn't they believe me...?' Darwel thought.

Back then... did she perhaps she mistake her parents' shock as belief.

Perhaps they weren't convinced. They had told Darwel that they would wait for Skullius to awaken and confirm it themselves, but then...

'News about Maqi came...'

Perhaps her parents were so busy with planning for the coming war that they pushed the matter aside entirely.

It was already hard to believe that a human with Luminant blood existed, and if her parents hadn't been given time to process that information before a possible calamity introduced itself right after...

It would make sense why Benyn and Cosycn didn't really care for Skullius' identity. They were probably told he was some special human Darwel was interested in.

'My enthusiasm got the better of me,' Darwel clicked her tongue.

She wasn't willing to just turn back yet though.

Sevill felt her intent instantly.

"Please. Just give us a few minutes and we'll follow you back," she pleaded with the two experts before her.

Benyn and Cosycn didn't even look at her. Their eyes were Darwel and Darwel alone.

"You're Highness?" Benyn said evenly.

"Fine, we can go. Can Sevill escort Festos here to the shrine then?" Darwel said.

"You have claims about this man. Why not prove them before their Majesties before sullyng our precious historic relics with his human presence. Their Majesties wouldn't be pleased with what you want to do anyhow," Cosycn said coldly, his eyes looking to Skullius who remained silent, his hands hidden in the linked sleeves of his robes.

Darwel flared.

'I knew it! They didn't believe me!'

What was she to do now, ask Skullius to go back after that wonderful prelude she had set up in order to make him appreciate Opungale?

That would ruin everything!

...

Then again, it wouldn't take much time to prove who Skullius was to her parents.

In fact, it wouldn't take Skullius long to prove who he was to Benyn and Cosync!

If an El Sif like herself had been overwhelmed by Skullius' presence when he manifested the Wing of Embrace, what more regular Sif like these two!

Sevill and Viccil had been rendered completely docile back then!

Darwel turned to Skullius.

She hoped she didn't need to say what she was thinking for him to know what to do.

She was right.

Skullius understood her sentiment.

However...

"It seems this is getting a little difficult," the Hybrid Luman suddenly said before stepping forward. "You're in the way."

Benyn, with a straight face turned to Skullius with a demeaning look.

"Pardon me?" he said dangerously.

Cosycn didn't look as tame. He sneered.

"Guests shouldn't be too comfortable in foreign lands, even if they have royalty as escorts. I advise you to watch your tongue, human."

Sevill's presence exploded out like a hurricane immediately. From behind her veil, a coarse voice livid with hostility shot out.

"You should watch who YOU are talking to, Cosycn!"

Before the tall, thin Sif could retort, and before Sevill could add on to her already firm stance, Skullius raised his hand.

Strangely, the tense exchange lulled.

Sevill calmed down.

"It's alright," Skullius said to her, a small smile blooming on his face. He then turned his head a little to Darwel who was similarly fuming at the gall of these two. "Making your parents' personal combatants disobey their orders would be easy, but I'd rather be a little humble." Skullius then tilted his head and continued. "You said we were close, right?"

Before Darwel could fully comprehend what the Hybrid Luman meant... he was gone.

...!!!

A blink later, Benyn and Cosycn vanished as well and then Sevill followed.

Darwel saw sparks of light dart in and out of existence as they zipped ahead at unreal speeds.

She couldn't see any evidence of the four individuals at all after only a second had passed.

She couldn't see that Skullius was the one in the lead, zigzagging erratically in the air as he pushed forth with [Destined Warp Steps] – a skill that enhanced his speed by 12 times his base maximum.

She couldn't see Benyn and Cosycn clawing at him and missing by subtle millimetres each time, and she sure as hell couldn't see Sevill keeping one of the two at bay every micro moment, giving Skullius a chance to pull ahead constantly!

It was a chaotic mess within the folds of the dark sky.

Booms and crackles exploded out violently along the wide path whose concentration of mana and life energy increased as the greens around it progressed forth.

The further up the path the four went, the closer IT got.

IT, was a large, circular piece of scaly, blue parchment stuck in mid-air, hiding nothing but an identical extension of the road that preceded.

It was so out of place.

However, the sight of it made Benyn scoff.

'To pass the Oath of Mourning takes at least ten seconds. Even if he's some kind of special human with a Sif bloodline or whatever, he can't rush through! We'll catch him right then!' he thought as Sevill flew into him like a boulder and knocked him a bit off course from Skullius!

Indeed, it was as he said.

The Oath of Mourning was a seal that, in addition to everything it was supposed to do, ensured that whoever approached it had the required degree of respect towards what it hid.

As such, whatever got near it would be forcibly made to calm down in every sense of the world; and that included slowing down.

The group of speedy figures reached the floating parchment and Skullius, with a broad grin suddenly turned into a massive pillar of pitch black smoke with dark, elongated rags fitted into it!

...!!!

"Fool!" Cosycn roared, agitated. In this form, he couldn't simply grab Skullius when he reached him.

Benyn grunted.

'He'll still be slowed down! We'll contain him them!'

Skullius' figure rushed forth, reaching the Oath of Mourning first.

Under the eyes of the three genuine Incandescent Stagers inches behind him... he sank into the large parchment seamlessly.

Unrestrained.

Unbothered.

Unrestricted.

Chapter 927: The Shrine

Skullius hadn't known what the Oath of Mourning was, or did.

The moment he sensed it, he knew that it was what he was looking for and went for it.

He didn't know that it would slow down anyone who approached it, whether they were the humblest of Sif or the most pureblood El Sif.

He also hadn't known that it hid the actual location of the thing he was looking – something that the scroll Darwel had given him back then mentioned.

A shrine.

She had said that the Luminants had a some kind of supreme being they revered. Her scroll had then revealed to Skullius that there something built by the Sif in the past. Something that represented this divine being whom he had been speculating about.

Yet Skullius' ignorance was still rewarded.

Upon touching the large parchment in the middle of a standard, Opungale road while in his [Boundless Evil] form, he felt as though his body had breached through six layers of fragile space; or maybe these layers had willingly opened themselves for him, he couldn't tell.

The sensation lasted an instant.

Skullius came to a halt immediately after, returning to his human form from the mass of darkness and rags. His robe still fitted over him, Skullius took in the new space that opened up around him.

'Magnificent...' he said with a bright smile of wonder.

There was no greenery here, or rather, no green.

For some reason, while there was an abundance of trees on both sides of the wide path he stood, they all felt as though they weren't real. They shook constantly partly obscuring their features. The barks to them were a pale gold and their leaves a pristine white.

The same was true for grasses and the wide path which mirrored the bark.

'Strange,' Skullius thought.

This place...

He felt as though he was standing in an alternate version of the wide path he had been traversing on before.

Was this another effect of that scaled parchment?

Besides the quivering vegetation, there was also the sky above which didn't depict night, but a sullen version of the day, as though the sky was heavily overcast.

Interesting and bizarre.

Skullius took steps forward.

That wasn't his intent. He wanted to use [Destined Warp Steps] again, but it didn't activate.

'Fair enough.'

He wasn't allowed to move as he pleased in this place, something he imagined was true for everyone else given the context of what the shrine was, and what it meant to the Sif. Thus, he walked briskly instead.

The wide path went on, and dipped gradually into a downward curve.

It was obvious that something was at its end.

Skullius was burning with anticipation.

When he had taken ten steps, he felt the presence of three individuals appear behind him, but he didn't turn back.

A pale Benyn looked at Skullius' back with a deep frown, as did Cosycn.

They both couldn't believe it.

That man had suddenly disregarded the rules they knew to apply when anyone approached the Oath of Mourning.

That man should have been stalled by the Oath, slowly sinking within its unfathomable borders, which would take some time, but he passed through instantly.

This didn't make sense.

While they took unintentionally slow steps forward, Seville sniggered at them from under her veil.

"Is it starting to click for you now?"

She received glares that she welcomed with sneers. "He can even move as well as the El Sif in here, unlike us. Do you still doubt that he is special?"

The two Incandescent Stagers watched as Skullius quickly disappeared down the path.

Indeed. He moved better than them. He moved as well as each member of the High Family.

"Let's follow him," Cosycn growled at Benyn and they took slowed steps – one average pace every two seconds.

Skullius on the other hand, was getting a glimpse at something phenomenal at the same time.

'So that's it?' he thought as his senses spread wider.

All his skills were impossible to activate here, including [Greatest Mana Manipulation], but thankfully, the Hybrid Luman was still very sensitive even without it.

He was twenty meters from his target.

The shrine began where the road turned dark; everything in its immediate vicinity was dyed black.

All the trees were eaten away by the beautiful, unconventional shadow that was cast outward, even onto the very air itself from the construct.

Then came its actual design and hue within the wad of soft black.

Its heavy blue tint was awfully glaring, but equally as excessively engaging was its manner of construction. Winged figures marvellously sculpted using a light, see-through material, its texture like jade, were conjoined at weird angled in the hundreds, forming an arching shape.

The oddly mixed, humanoid creatures rose in a cone shape, but never met to cover the top. The erratic wings from their individual, linked designs came closest to accomplishing this.

Strangely enough, even with its cone shape and half-circle curve, the shrine still managed to look – in its whole – like some, great, terrifying beast with great spines all over it.

What calmed its implication, was the large number of flowers, straw and feathers methodically placed on it, making it look a lot more pleasing.

'Just like Darwel described...!' Skullius thought.

Within the gap left behind within it, was a sort of pedestal onto which two sets of wings pointing upwards could be seen perked atop, their hue not blue like that of the others, but a luminous white.

It was splendid creation, this shrine.

It easily exceeded Skullius' expectations with its visuals alone, which he could see a limited amount of.

However, the greatest takeaway, was how menacing it felt.

It was unwelcoming by nature.

He felt feelings of rage, disdain, sorrow and distrust from it, but he was convinced he was the only one who could detect them. If these emotion were constantly expounded by the shrine, then the Sif wouldn't visit it regularly, would they?

Also, it didn't seem like the feelings were expressed towards him specifically.

'You wouldn't reject me. Not with what I am...!' Skullius thought confidently.

He drew closer to the shadow around the shrine.

"Stop! You'll defile it!" Cosycn barked.

But of course, Skullius didn't listen.

He increased his pace and he passed where the path ended.

Benyn felt his heart race.

How dare this man...!

So casually...!

Why was he exempt from everything that everyone else was subject to?!

Could it be that...

FWOOOOOSH!

A burst of light attracted the eyes of the three onlookers.

From behind Skullius' back, a single wing stretched from the very centre.

It looked like a shard of light stretched out by a pair of divine hands to form an unorthodox wing of golden white!

It contrasted beautifully with Skullius' dark robe which had not dissipated, bringing with its emergence spots of light, glitter really, that floated around the Hybrid Luman, completely changing the air around him.

Benyn and Cosycn gaped.

That was...

But that was...

No, that didn't make sense!

Again, Skullius could care less about their crashing reasonings.

After all, immediately after his [Wing of Embrace] or rather, for him, [Wing of the Just], appeared, the negative sentiment droning from the shrine disappeared.

Instead, a boundless desire unfurled with a greedy undertone.

It was as though the shrine had become a living organism, attaining the ability to feel a staggering sense of desperation that made it yearn for the intricate blood of the one who stood before it, slowly penetrating its shadow.

Skullius felt the shrine's desire vividly. Twofold even.

The guidance field immediately expressed it as well.

[A divine will calls for you from beyond the stacks of wings cast before your feet]

[The divine will promises unfathomable blessings, gifts that your body has never tasted in this realm]

[Your blood pulls upon this birthright from the side, the divine will pulls upon you from the other]

[Are you willing to interact with the divine will?]

Chapter 928: The Hard Bargain (1)

"Amusing," Skullius said with a very broad grin.

Something from 'another side' was clawing at him, desperately trying to come into contact with what he bore in his veins.

A divine will.

Well, as tempting as the word 'divine' was, there were many dangers involved with dealing with such a thing.

This was not as simple of a matter as conversing with someone who reached DIVINITY. Skullius had speculated before that the thing behind the Luminants, the thing behind the skill [Son of Luserus] – a skill tied to his race, to the Luminant side of him – which he had been trying to activate, was actually a Deity.

Would this be too dangerous?

Skullius laughed.

"It'll be fine."

He knew that for a fact.

As for how he knew, well...

While giving his consent promptly to the notification swimming in his dark vision, Skullius touched the wing-infested jade wall to the massive, towering shrine and in an instant, a flood of radiant light blew away the boundless void of his blind sight, making him squint for the first time in months.

"Hooo..."

Skullius felt himself get surrounded by a vast, inexplicably domineering presence.

In fact, rather than a presence, it felt like a world was constructing itself around him rapidly, starting with a pool of unfathomably dense energy much more potent than anything he had come into contact with so far; then the grating noise of dry lands forming; the rigid rising of great mountains; the loud splashes of waters from broad seas; and the gusty echoes of windy skies.

Well, Skullius could only guess that this was what was happening. The activity around him was too phenomenal in scope for him to discern it all at an accurate micro scale.

The gist of the matter was, something unbelievably powerful was trapping him in its vast expanse.

Yet, as all this happened, Skullius could tell that he was also still standing before the shrine with little no chances around him, and all this was happening some space else. In another, perhaps, hypothetical reality where he also existed.

As ridiculous as that sounded, it was no doubt possible for a Deity, a being that could create a world.

And thus...

"Is this your way of making an impression? It's too long-winded and wasteful. Show yourself already," Skullius spoke to the wide, broad world around him that still cluttered and boomed, its features rippling, dismantling and building.

The sounds turned dull, but didn't cease.

It became muffled background noise instead.

There was a stretch of silence which lasted for a little more than half a minute, then the voice that Skullius expected emerged, as boisterous and powerful as he expected.

<You boast part of the charm of my creations, but you lack all of the reverence, daring one.>

The voice skewed the definition of everything Skullius could sense around him in this obscure world, and he could feel even his body touching the shrine twitch, and contorted at the voice's immense strength!

What power!

It was incredible!

Yet, a relatively unbothered look persisted on the Hybrid Luman's face.

"That's quite the attitude coming from someone who was desperately calling for me just now," he said tauntingly.

There was a pause.

Then a grinding force pummelled Skullius from above, forcing him to kneel. It felt like the weight of the world had just been hypothetically planted onto his shoulders, giving him the hefty task of carrying a staggering amount of virtual mass!

His body in this plane was fine... but that which was near the shrine buckled, its bones breaking, blood flooding out in multiple springs opened up from his flesh; where his bones protruded like javelins grotesquely.

<I beseech you. Say that to me again.>

The voice came again with a mocking and testy tone.

However, even as Skullius knelt, buckling, he grinned, and even laughed.

"I'll say it again! You have quite the attitude for someone who is so desperate for what I have!" he cried out and then, with his fingers brimming with a massive torrent of Null Life Essence – all he had at the moment – Skullius plunged his hand into his gut and broke – with immense difficulty – something that had been placed there a month ago by another bearer of an Existential Parallel!

CRACK!

At once, the harsh pressure thundering upon Skullius ceased as though it had never existed in the first place, and right after, a bluish flame sprang forth for the Hybrid Luman's belly and gathered by his side as he stood up.

The great flame turned ferocious and then took on a slender, humanoid shape. Well, rather than slender, it was very thin, as though it was struggling to keep itself alive.

Skullius turned to the flame with a sigh, and chortled.

"I didn't think you'd take so long to free me..." a voice from the flame. "It's only now when you need me that you break that seal?"

Skullius shrugged.

"Well, it's all about convenience. Don't worry, it won't happen again anyway. I won't be needing you much longer, Serenity," he said before turning ahead, leaving the humanoid flame visibly pondering what he had just said.

"Now, can we have a civilised discussion?"

There was no response from the boundless world for a while. All the arrogance had faded ever since Serenity showed up.

<I see. You are one of them.>

"Indeed," Skullius said.

The focus of the great presence abound could be felt turning to Serenity whose flame body blinked in and out of existence.

<Unfathomable. To think one of my own is possessed by one of you. What are the odds?>

There was a hint of irritation in the voice of the divine will.

Serenity, her expression indecipherable, spoke.

"You are quite dull for a Deity. I sense great vulnerability from you," she commented before turning a flaming head to Skullius. "Yet, I suppose it's better not to get involved in this one."

The great will remained silent once again. It didn't seem bothered by Serenity's demeaning remark.

Skullius scoffed at it.

"I was promised blessings and similar sorts of delight that my body has yet to taste," he said. "Then again, you didn't know I wasn't a full Luminant before you reached out with that promise, right?"

There was no reply.

Skullius was unbothered. He cackled, in fact.

"You're the Deity responsible for creating the Luminants, right? I wager there's a reason why you were so desperate to come into contact with another one of your creations in Aigas," he grinned.

His words sounded more certain than curious.

"There aren't anymore of them on that side, are there?"

There was no reply.

Skullius imagined he was right on this one.

That yearning which flooded twofold, detected by his senses, by his very blood, and by the guidance field was too authentic.

Deities were powerful enough to create worlds, living organisms and power structures, as Skullius had seen in Aigas, but Aigas as an example was probably not that common among those who transcended Divinity.

Three Deities making a world likely went against the very nature of most Deities.

Given that knowledge, what if a world was made by one Deity.

It wouldn't be as intricate as Aigas.

It wouldn't be a... RICH WORLD, as Aurolio said, would it?

It wouldn't be as vast as Aigas, would it?

It wouldn't have diverse species, millions in number of each kind, would it?

And what if a great number of these already limited creations were suddenly stolen by a madman who attained Divinity one day, whisked away to another world; another set of them used for heinous tasks; a staggering few then left behind in a world dying after an intense battle?

How long would that world last?

Skullius relished in the silence and he was elated when the voice of the divine will finally came.

<I sense a great similarity in your depths to that fiend who ravaged my creation. The man who killed and stole my work>.

Skullius laughed coldly.

"It's good that you remember him. You're about to reward that same man's effort. After all, this body you see, is the last that remains of your precious Luminants."

Chapter 929: The Hard Bargain (2)

Serenity had been bound for quite a while.

It was on that day when Skullius had conversed with Aurolio for the first time, getting enlightened on what was truly going on: the value of the Book of Alignment; the complexity of the Existential Parallels; the obscure, but essential prize buried in Rich worlds.

That was day when Serenity's presence had been sealed by Aurolio.

She had been trying to warn Skullius about interacting with another bearer of an Existential Parallel.

Skullius had met one before, well two, and Serenity knew, but because Skullius was so weak back then, she couldn't intervene.

Even if she could, Elita was just like Skullius at the time. She knew nothing about Null Life Essence and Voided Death, was thus, harmless.

The other, well...

The pale man's presence screamed of danger, and Serenity had tried to interrupt the interaction, but Aurolio got the better of her. He had an especially good grasp on his Voided Death Essence than Skullius with his Null Life Essence.

For the past month, Serenity could only watch as many atrocities were drawn to Skullius, and how overcame or succumbed to them.

It was tedious and annoying, especially when he confronted them with his Insurgent Magnus powers instead of his Null Life powers.

The former, her dislike of it aside, had tragic consequences that grew without Skullius knowing. Well, she couldn't warn him of them in her imprisoned state, which she regretted.

In the meantime, she chose to look in on the golden child, the other Skullius, who grew his Null Life prowess splendidly.

Even though he was far, she could still discern everything to do with him.

Her pride at his growth aside – just one Tier away from the prime he needed to reach – she also noticed a positive in Replicus grooming this power, which far exceeded her expectations.

'Magnificent...' she had said.

...

Right now, though, as Serenity stood by Skullius' side as he faced off the invisible will with a confident, mysterious grin, she couldn't help but pin together all her previous deductions with what the Hybrid Luman had just said.

'...I won't need you for much longer, Serenity...'

Serenity sighed silently.

'I thought as much.'

She chose to watch the proceedings without a word.

Skullius spoke again, haughtily, but his tone was devoid of baseless arrogance. He seemed to know a lot more and have a lot more than he realistically should.

"It's good that you remember him. You're about to reward that same man's effort. After all, this body you see, is the last that remains of your precious Luminants."

Serenity grew tense at those words.

The world around Skullius and her shook vibrantly.

The Hybrid Luman's declaration struck many cords with the Deity.

<All of them... are gone?>

The chilling might droning from the voice descended, but Skullius no longer felt his body get skewed by it, courtesy of Serenity by his side. It was just like when she stood between him and the ascended Somanda months ago.

"Come now, Luserus. Surely you should have known."

<YOU DARE SPEAK MY NAME SO CASUALLY!>

The world twisted as though spun violently by a gargantuan calamity twice its size!

Skullius neither saw nor acknowledged it. He continued to smile and speak relaxedly.

"Please, don't waste your energy," he said before pointing ahead of himself at the empty air.

In the real world, his battered body pointed at the shrine with a broken finger.

"Every world has Rules. They are both a privilege and a duty for Deities, you know. I know even you, as a Deity like Quintess, Listafelle, Suzamete and Boron can't breach into this world as you please. I know that much already, so you can stop your feeble attempts at scaring me," Skullius chuckled.

"The only reason you are able to reach into Aigas is because the Luminant who built this shrine was devout and so were his peers. Their blessings and prayers to this shrine over millenia amassed bits of the powers you gave them into it, creating a tether that allowed you check in. Of course, no one but a Luminant could detect your will and the power held within the shrine until I came along.

You're wasting your limited window into this world with all these theatrics. You wanted to bless the remains of your dear Luminants, right? Well here I am."

A bolder, more potent silence took over this time.

Everything Skullius said was true.

Strangely so.

Rules were created by Deities to protect a world from turning chaotic either from within its own bounds or from outside forces.

One of the more common Rules was that no outside forces could simply come in uninvited and it was, for the most part, absolute, depending on the Deity, or Deities who created the Rule.

Of course, there were ways to bypass this. Very specific loopholes that were, by all accounts, uncommon.

Skullius himself was the best example.

Creatures from the outside could latch onto beings with great connections to them, but they themselves had to be extremely powerful to utilise such connections. Somanda had been able to do this after transcending into Divinity, using the tether that was Skullius' soul.

Serenity was also the same. Though, in her case, the more Skullius grew, the stronger her ability to resist Rules became.

Of course, with regard to Somanda, he had even been able to breach Rules prior to becoming a divine Lich: once, with the mysterious skeletal artefact, SoSei; and also, with the mysterious portal that sent Skullius into Aigas in the first place.

Both, were tied to a being the Lich – and all others of his kind – idolised, a creature with a higher standing than most.

...

Skullius waited for a response.

He was quite patient.

Luserus indeed had limited access to this world. The powers that remained in the shrine from his loyal Luminants facilitated this event, but too bad for him, it wasn't what he expected.

Instead of meeting his beautiful creations, he was met with this conniving being who eerily reminded him of the greedy monster that fought Dezrael back then.

He could tell that there was a connection, but it seemed more than that even at glance.

It almost seemed as though...

<You are too confident in the fact that I would give you everything intended for my children. They prayed to me everyday even after being forcefully exiled, asking for nothing, and committing only to me for the sake of love. You are nothing like them. Why should I reward an empty vessel like you?>

The seething fury in the voice was unmistakable.

Indeed. It was foolish to assume a god could turn over for something like this.

Unless...

Skullius shook his head.

He raised the linen shirt he wore under the robe of [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light], exposing his torso.

On it, was an X-shaped black tattoo that crossed his chest immaculately.

The Binds of Fukal.

Skullius pointed at it.

"I'm not a fool, Luserus. As powerful as you may be. As powerful as Deities may be. You are all bound to create worlds and living things for a reason. It's not a mere excursion born out of boredom, is it?" he said. "Do you know why this brand exists on my body?"

It's to deny you strength. I rejected every blessing and curse your kind gave. I rejected it all. It works the other way too, doesn't it? Giving you Deities nourishment. Your precious Luminants may not be the reason you are alive, but they sustain something about you, don't they?"

You may be a god, but you were moral once."

Skullius scoffed at the silence that followed.

He knew he was right.

Serenity was immensely surprised that he knew all this.

"A Deity like you can't create another world and an entire race so casually, can you? You would have made another set of Luminants, if you could. Let me help with that," Skullius said and pulled his shirt down. "Let's make a deal. I will sire you an entire generation of Luminants who will know, love and be faithful to you, customs, traditions and all. I have prime selections of willing females here."

The Hybrid Luman then grinned and raised three fingers.

"In exchange, you will grant three measly – well, bold – wishes of mine without question."

Chapter 930: Three Measly Wishes! (1)

Sire?

Serenity had to admit that even with her greater understanding of what was at play, she hadn't expected to hear Skullius talk about bearing spawn at all.

If she had a face, she would have donned an expression befitting of how ludicrous she thought the idea was, however, what shocked her more was still the fact that the Hybrid Luman, regardless of his circumstances, understood the nature of Deities so well.

Deities were indeed bound by something grand, a binding authority, to create something phenomenal when they amassed enough energy – a world.

It was just as Aurolio had told Skullius that day, after the Fledgling Null Badubs attacked.

However, even the pale man, with all his knowledge from his Book of Alignment, didn't know why Deities were driven to do this.

It would have seemed, to a normal man, that reaching Divinity and surpassing it meant a greater degree of free will, but that wasn't the case at all. At least not entirely.

To put things into a clearer perspective, taking into account what Skullius already knew before this point, the Deities of Aigas – Listafelle, Quintess and Suzamete – not only created a vast world, but they became that world, binding themselves to it by forging their bodies into its oceans, its crust and its skies.

It was bizarre.

Even if two of them went on to leave Aigas with their soul forms, they left a vast chunk of themselves in Aigas.

Why?

That was quite the profound question.

However, that tangent was irrelevant.

What mattered was the fact that, as Skullius said, Deities did indeed stand to gain a lot from creating living organisms in the worlds they formed, and to forge strong connections with them. Doing this didn't sustain the Deities directly, but it served a great function.

Growth.

Indeed, growth.

While normal mortal experts grew by using whatever power system was established within the world they inhabited, past Divinity, no such thing bound that same expert.

Past Divinity, it was one's ACTIONS that spurred an increase in strength. Their deeds.

Everything was loose outside the boundaries where Rules applied – worlds.

Creating your own pocket of consistency, was the greatest way to ensure that you grew, especially if, for instance, you were not quite as strong or as driven.

A great example, was Luserus.

He had been seen through thoroughly by Skullius and couldn't say a word against anything the Hybrid Luman had said.

He was indeed right.

Back then, when a certain Immoral razed his world and nabbed his creations, he had been left without enough energy to create everything from scratch. The time it took to do it the first time was beyond what a mortal could ever imagine.

It was infuriating.

It was unfair.

And much like how the Deities of Aigas couldn't interfere directly in the Grand Wars because of the Rules they set in their own world, Luserus had been the same.

He could only watch as his children lost.

He had yet to recover from it.

Right now, he was astounded by how Skullius knew any of this. Few in any world would even know that there existed an expanse farther than their skies, yet this little mortal before him, who had a scent eerily similar to that Immoral whom he hated so much, knew.

He knew too much.

...

What was Luserus to do?

Cling to his pride and wait for another annoyingly endless sequence of eons to replenish his strength while bearing the RISKS involved with remaining so passive through that time?

Or, should he swallow his pride and accept the proposal before him?

What did it offer again?

A chance at restoring the beautiful creatures he made without using any of his own energy?

How long would the wait be?

A couple of decades at worst for thousands of new born Luminants?

And what, a couple of centuries to start harvesting meaning volumes of energy from their devotions?

Furthermore, as long as he had a tether imbedded in this world, he would be able to connect to the new Luminants and receive their devotion as strength.

What had he to lose?

Well...

After a while, the Deity named Luserus spoke to Skullius with hints of suspicion.

<Assure me. I have some concerns with this proposal of yours.>

"What would those be?" Skullius asked with a annoyingly confident smile.

<Your body. It is strange. I know a thing or two about mortal physiques. Yours seems incomplete. Abysmally lacking, even.>

Skullius tilted his head and scratched his chin.

"It's been a while since I've heard that criticism. I had been called fake or strange in the past, I suppose," he muttered to himself before addressing Luserus. "You don't need to worry. My body used to be worse than this. It has improved. And thankfully, by tapping into the memories of thousands of other humans, I managed to figure out what some other...

upgrades, on my body were for. I didn't see a need for them back then, but it's different now. I can reproduce just fine."

There was a pause.

Luserus and Serenity shared the same sentiments and they both hid them behind unseen visages.

<Very well. Then assure me all the more. How will you sire me pure Luminants if you are the only Luminant who remains?>

"Do you need pure Luminants for this to work?" Skullius asked. "As I said before, you have quite the attitude for someone so desperate. You should accept what you stand to gain for now. There are several El Sif, half Luminants, on this continent.

I'm quite confident that at worst, perhaps half of the offspring I sire will be El Sif, and the rest will be the next best thing – worthy of the title of Luminant."

<How can you be so sure? You yourself are diluted!>

Skullius chuckled.

"That's true. But not for much longer. If you grant my first wish, it will be in both our interests."

There was a short pause.

<And what wish is that?>

Skullius pointed at his back in this hypothetical world and his body before the shrine did the same, gesturing towards the long, singular wing protruding from behind him.

"My primary goal for wanting to see you was to get the key to unlocking an ability that I assume all other Luminants in the past had. For some reason, it does nothing when I use it. [Son of Luserus]."

A strong wind rolled from all around the vast world to pester Skullius' skin and clothing. It was a sigh, apparently.

<Of course that skill would do you no good. As I said, you are diluted. You exist outside my influence. I would need to acknowledge you for that power to awaken. It's an ability that brings out the best in a Luminant. A masterful blessing I gave them to defend themselves>

Luserus paused.

<That flimsy wing of yours is a cheap imitation of the real thing. I assume these El Sif did gain a bit of the strength of my Luminants. I've glimpsed my children mating with those long-eared folk.>

Skullius folded his arms.

"So? Will you accept my terms? If you allow me to use [Son of Luserus], I'm quite certain you won't even need a shrine to remain tethered to this place."

Luserus seemed surprised, shown by the trembling skies.

"Just trust me on that," Skullius grinned. "You'll even get to keep a watchful eye on me if you doubt I will meet my end of the bargain too. All without needing a physical conduit."

Unnerved to see a mortal who seemed more mysterious than a divine, Luserus turned silent to ponder.

The moments ticked by, each one that came more chillingly suspenseful than the last.

The Hybrid Luman knew he had cast sufficient bait though.

There was no way Luserus could resist.

Knowing deep secrets that most wouldn't, came with quite the hefty advantages.

<Very well.>

There it was.

Right then, Skullius felt the skill [Son of Luserus[inscribed in his body churn and became engulfed in a ferocious torrent of energy!

It was happening!

The skill that had been stagnantly frozen in his body, was coming alive!