

Undead 171

Chapter 171: A Bullshit Account

The amazing art of bullshit.

An art Skullius was quite good at for as long as he could remember. Tricking others and telling false stories in convincing ways was a gift he found himself to have and with each subsequent increase in his intelligence, he found that it was quite easy to fabricate stories as even in this new world, with all the experiences he had so far, he knew how to appear genuine.

Frankly, he was proud of himself.

At this particular moment, he was reviewing his earlier stunt as he sat down while having his wounds treated within the College of the Esteemed.

His biggest takeaway from the earlier event was the fact that the [Revenant Flames of Ecstasy] were a powerful tool that he was going to enjoy using.

This skill had failed to show any significant feats when it was still in its infancy as [Bitter-Sweet Hell's Inferno] because it had been pitted against vastly stronger opponents whose bodies were enough to tank its effects entirely like Eldris or those that merely coated themselves with mana like Benzard.

Now however, the skill could get past mana and obliterate targets even if they had blue cores.

One would wonder why this skill which was born from [Unbound] was accessible to Skullius in his Discount Human form, though.

The answer was simple. Its background stemmed from the short magic staff from which it was extracted – it was normal skill initially, which gave Skullius a window to use it outside his Null powers.

Skullius had confirmed that the three Knights who had resisted being burnt while using Full Body Aura had been killed, burnt to ash after being hacked to pieces by his thralls.

He had collected the Null Life Essence from their bodies after discovering that the [Revenant Flames of Ecstasy] didn't do any harm to him!

He could move within them without a problem as he leisurely collected his prize along with a bunch of experience.

What he had used to create the gruesome injuries that were now being washed and bandaged, was the lava born from the heat.

Since he couldn't feel pain, he languidly dipped his hand into the molten floor, watching it catch fire and burn before severing it roughly.

Afterwards, he had commanded one of his horny thralls to carry him out, creating a scene that looked like a valiant Knight had saved his life!

For the most part, it seemed like his attempt had been accepted as it was but many questions were still left answered.

Such questions were the ones that the old man and middle aged woman outside the door to the room where he was receiving treatment, awaited to get answers to from him and naturally, Skullius' common sense had told him that this would happen eventually.

After he was sufficiently treated, the improvements he had from his previous state merely being the fact that he did not look horrendous and was washed with herbs that killed the pain, disinfected the wounds.

Healers were rare, especially in small cities as most of them were usually mages with an amazing level of mana manipulation that could reconstruct body tissue or those that had learned spells for healing.

The other small portion of those known as healers were individuals with blessings that were geared towards healing and such a blessing wasn't all that common either.

The women who had been treating Skullius had not objected to the two at the door's plea to ask Skullius questions about what happened.

They had let them in while almost bowing fully as if they were seeing the Deities themselves and this made Skullius a little nervous.

Who were these guys?

They didn't look like some small-time desk sitters for sure.

Even with all the pressure though, Skullius had worn a determined look as he said, "It's okay. That bastard must pay. The sooner I tell you, the sooner he can be caught," in response to their polite inquiry on whether he could entertain a few of their questions.

With that, he had not only garnered some form of levity from the women healing him, but from the two who wanted to question him as their suspicions were lowered somewhat.

"Again, I must apologise for disturbing you, Mr Dawn at such a critical time," the old man said with wise smile on his face. Naturally, the first thing he had asked for was Skullius' name.

"Not at all, br- sir. I'm more than glad to help," Skullius said, mimicking every single expression he had learned off that showed both remorse and determination.

The middle aged woman by the side didn't look convinced though, as with her indifferent expression, she immediately bombarded Skullius with her doubts.

"There are people who were at the scene and are claiming to have seen you being the one who sparked what happened at the public library. They say you started screaming something and then something peculiar appeared at your side."

'<Sigh>. I should have killed all the witnesses at the beginning to make sure no one would escape. I hope my story will be believable,' Skullius thought as a hint of panic was sprinkled over his already existing doubt omelette.

"Yes. That is true. However, those two things are not related at all. As someone who stayed behind, I can tell you what really happened," Skullius responded.

The woman raised a brow as she then nodded.

While looking at the two, Skullius couldn't help but acknowledge that they were powerhouses. Their robes made him suspect that they were Energy Formers, mages like Vijak, but he was only half right.

With that in mind, he had to be careful.

"As you can probably tell, I am at the second level of the Foundation Stage. I wanted to find ways to improve my strength outside my earlier practice at the College of Battle Arts. Looking into history for motivation, I guess. In the process, I had been trying to manipulate my mana at a finer level as I had been taught even while doing simple activities like walking but somehow...

I exhausted my core and felt a terrible pain. That's why I screamed."

The two who were listening digested this information.

The woman looked intently at Skullius. She was a Diviner. Given any item belonging to an individual she sought to find out more about, she could determine their actions, but to a limited degree.

She wanted to use her divining on Skullius and clear this up but her partner had insisted on not showing such distrust to someone who had willingly postponed their full rest and treatment to answer their questions.

"Very well. We can verify your enrolment to the College of Battle Arts after this. What of this... thing that the witnesses fail to adequately describe? Where does it come into play?" asked the old man.

"Right. To those that remember well, they should have seen that it was a dark armour with these long chains coming out of its body. At least that was what I thought at first. But it then stood and started attacking people left and right... before...before it produced these hot flames that burned the whole place!"

"How on earth did you survive then? The Knights didn't arrive immediately, did they?" the middle aged woman asked with a frown, recalling the scalding remnants of heat that remained after the fire.

Indeed, this man was still at the Foundation Stage and even though he had a slightly bright white core, that didn't explain how he survived until then.

Even the Knights themselves had been burned to ash, with nothing remaining.

"I was near the entrance when the fire started and..." Skullius looked at the bandaged stump of his hand with a sorrowful look. "...that's when I got these burns. The Knights came just in time before my whole body could be devoured and though some of them died instantly... some used this...uhm... bright light that covered their bodies, different from mana..."

"Full Body Aura?"

"I think that's it. While the others fought whatever that thing was, the Knight who saved me...he.. he got burnt in the process and... you probably know the rest since you were able to find me..."

The old man breathed out a sigh.

While some accounts told the story differently, claiming that Skullius was the cause, he just couldn't buy it when seeing Skullius' level. When he would go to confirm what exactly Skullius was training at the College of Battle Arts, he was sure he would remove Skullius as a suspect entirely.

He and this woman served the city. The City lord would no doubt demand the culprit but that didn't seem like something they could find.

Skullius as a scapegoat was not enough too.

He found believing in this mysterious armoured intruder more plausible than anything else as Skullius was the only one left who was actually there when everything else happened.

He turned to his partner who merely shook her head.

The fact that what happened was blocked even for her made him believe all the more that something terrifying had visited the city.

"Thank you for your time. After verifying a few other things we won't be bothering you any longer."

The old man bid farewell as he and his partner then went out the door.

"It's hard to read that young man's face but I wager he's telling the truth. Or rather his own truth," he said.

"Something isn't right. I can feel it."

"Of course something isn't right. What I can't figure out is the motive of this perpetrator. What could they want to find in a public library?"

While the two hypothesised, Skullius rested on the bed as he sighed in relief.

That wasn't exactly smooth but it got him off the hook. Mostly.

He had made prepared for many things, including the potential search for his spatial ring that would probably get him killed.

He had hidden it... in his stomach!

The experience with his Discount Human body had taught him that he didn't have any organs and anything that went into his stomach as food would be broken down and turned into energy but anything else would stay there and he could regurgitate it at will.

The basis of [Flesh It Like You Mean It] was the fact that it hid Skullius' internal structure well, except for his core since he didn't have organs.

Therefore, anything within his body was also invisible, so to speak.

'I should really give Doom Factor 1 its three day fee and make sure to keep track of its time. I don't want this to happen again,' he thought. 'I got lots of books to read for free. That was unexpected. Now, to visit a certain sockethole... again.'

I really thought I wouldn't need to see him again.'

Chapter 172: For The Love Of Money

Skullius left the College of the Esteemed despite his 'nurses' insisting that he take some time to rest and receive further treatment for his gruesome injuries.

Seeing the awkward smile etched upon the unnatural face they had grimaced at when he was first admitted for treatment made them reluctantly let him go as unlike most people he was someone who was actually trying to contribute to the nation by fighting the monsters from Clusters.

Of course, the reason they were still alive even after helping Skullius was because they had been called to deal with a man who was grievously wounded so suddenly when they had been trying to find out if any of their relatives were harmed in the fire.

Some of them even had a uncles that had been killed but the terms of their agreement with the College stipulated that they had to respond to and all duties.

So looking at this bastard who had managed to survive didn't exactly make them feel dandy and some of them even suspected Skullius.

What had slowly changed their minds was how this man wasn't whining even when he had just lost an arm.

He didn't ask for anything of them as for the hour he had been here, he looked to be lost in thought instead.

They all chalked it up to trauma but that obviously wasn't true. Skullius had merely been concocting responses to the questions he had seen coming his way.

Following such an attitude, the women did their job properly afterwards, dismissing their negative thoughts towards him.

It was their job to help whether they liked it or not after all.

They gave Skullius more herbs to apply to his wounds along with some medication and let him off seeing as they couldn't keep him at the College.

The Discount Human waved goodbye as he proceeded to walk out of the College, his face covered in bandages save for his eyes and mouth his stump in his pocket to disallow anyone from seeing that he didn't have a hand.

He attracted a few glances and gazes from the College where people were still attending, especially those that were formally enrolled.

Skullius increased his pace and rushed through the streets, soon reaching his destination where he was once again stopped by a lovable sockethole who asked him the purpose of his visit as he didn't recognise him.

The bandaged man only had to give the man a few silvers before he was let into the fake residential area that still had a weird vibe to it.

Strangely, there were a lot of people walking on the streets this time around, the chatter and mix of colour making this place look like a genuine neighbourhood.

The image of a stall where a certain man was selling fish popped up in Skullius' vision and he leisurely walked up to his beloved Frock who was roasting fish as usual.

Once again, there was no one at his stall, which prompted Skullius to open up a conversation with a question centered around this peculiar, recurring phenomenon.

"Am I the only customer you have?" he asked.

Frock looked up with brow raised. He didn't recognise Skullius at first but the voice, the hair and the eyes...

"Oh, Dear Quintess, what are you doing here?" he muttered in annoyance while turning his eyes back to the sizzling fish.

"What else would I be here for? I want to buy something," Skullius replied.

Frock's face showed unease as his eyes turned back to Skullius.

His last encounter with this guy had been very rewarding but... extremely suspicious. He just couldn't find it within himself to just trust that Skullius was a normal customer.

The fact that this bastard seemingly didn't know anything was one thing, but what followed after – the ability to appraise and him being in possession of a dead core was... too unnerving.

In this world, there were skills prompted by one's class. A class once chosen, would make it much easier for an individual to master certain concepts. Things that would take years could take months or weeks depending on who was attempting them.

Skills like appraisal though, were different. There were many types of appraisal skills and the methods of developing such skills were mainly found in large families that had the power to dictate politics or organisations of similar stature.

An example was the House EverSword, where Reon was from. One of the six major families in all of Pelian, controlling a vast amount of resources in the nation. Reon had used this utility to prove his worth above the fact that he was a wielder of the Imagining Sword Technique, in the Ideal Ark.

When it came to dead cores, there were the third most valuable goods in the Feinheath, behind natural treasures which were formed by the moulding of energies from the lands, seas and skies similar to how Clusters were made, as well as enriching gems which were found in Clusters.

Enriching gems and dead cores were more valuable than silver and gold and were the main products of trade. This was very true for non-combat civilians who saw any dead core as a treasure.

For Skullius to casually give it to him...

"So... Will you help me or not?" Skullius asked after seeing Frock space out.

The hesitation in Frock's eyes lifted somewhat as he decided that he would wait and see. He always had a plan for when things went south anyway. Besides, Skillius didn't seem like he was consciously trying to screw him over.

"What do you want?"

"I have a few questions. First. Do you still have any equipment that can add mana to my own... like the uh... the mana band?"

Skullius had seen how essential this item was. It allowed him to cast skills that required a whole lot of mana than he currently had. But unfortunately, he needed more as the skill that he found himself falling in love with, [Revenant Flames of Ecstasy], bottomed his total mana in one cast.

"Of course not! You think it's easy to have that kind of thing crafted? The situation in the country is really jumping over your head isn't it? Trade between us and the major cities has been stunted of late. Everyone is preparing for something big, slowly cutting off supplies and such. Many of the best Blacksmiths fled the city and many others like me.

Surely you know why?"

"Uh..."

"<Cough>.. <cough>...<cough>..."

"Tch!"

CLNK!

Skullius threw a few silvers this time as he was low on gold.

"The whole deal with the Sif. Ever since the royal family publicly announced that they would be getting into talks with them for a possible alliance, things have gone downhill. Even now, everyone is waiting for the result. Anxiously might I add!"

"Ohhhh... that?"

Skullius recalled that he had heard of this in the city. In the many scenarios when he had been eavesdropping, trying to locate certain places, he had heard the conversation of these long eared people from commonfolk, common political fanatics and common degenerates.

"So you have heard of it? In any case, the few who can forge such equipment en mass are gone from this city, seeking safety in other bigger cities."

"Safety? What will happen when these Sif bros form an alliance?"

"War."

"War? With whom?"

"Maqi. The nation that's considered to hold the strongest forces in Feinheath. They are hot blooded and prideful bastards who will most probably wage war in that case. Their whole Ideal is that humans should form a single nation and prevent colluding with outside races again. You can see where I'm going with this, right?"

"I see..." Skullius thought. That sounded terrifying. Just how powerful were these guys that everyone was afraid of them?

Actually, that wasn't fair. This was only Frock's opinion.

"Alright then. Since I can't get another mana band, can I get a map that shows major places in the city?"

"Heh... that I can provide," said Frock with a subdued smile.

Skullius had a few things to do before resuming his lessons with Oliviana. Getting a map would solve one of them and helping a certain bro to his feet was another.

"Also, I need two sets of armour. A strong leather one and one made of steel. Throw in two swords, a bow and arrows aaaaaand a spear too."

"What in the world...?! Are you going to war or something?"

"Someone will. Not me. Also... I want to trade one of my dead cores for coin. Can you do that?"

Frock gulped down a lump of saliva as his body both cheered and agonised.

For the love of money, he was willing!

'Who the hell is this guy?!'

Chapter 173: All About Clusters

The bandaged Skullius walked into 'Big Bosom Betsy's' with a sickly skip in his step, attracting the attention of the ever present champions of food and ale that were chattering endlessly.

Most of them laughed at him as he limped while Betsy who was behind the counter as usual gave him a curious gaze.

As he was passing by her, going up to his room, she suddenly spoke.

"Is the city proving to be a bit too difficult for you, love? Did you get into a brawl with fire or what?" she asked as she saw the patches of burns that were peeking from under the bandages on his face.

Naturally, because Skullius was evidently bothered by the heat, all the locals could tell he was new.

"Kind of..." Skullius replied.

"You know, it wouldn't hurt to commit to being a part of the Inn. No need to feel like you don't belong if you haven't even tried to fit in. Being alone is an experience that takes much away from you, you know? Chips at your soul instead of adding to it," Betsy said with eyes that twinkled, hiding a loneliness of her own.

Betsy's words poked Skullius quite a bit.

What Serenity had said about him, about his soul and True Undeath. How his yearning for friends was merely a reaction of him missing the other half of his soul.

The loneliness.

Indeed, it seemed to fit.

Just like he had been in Deadmanland, making friends with other undead, a part of him sought that comfort in having others around him still. To fill up what he didn't have.

Unfortunately, because of UNCoddled, the only people he could associate with were those that didn't give a damn about him.

Those whose objective wasn't to see him thrive.

A lonely road full of passive fellowships.

"I know. But some of us don't have a choice," Skullius said before continuing up to his room.

Betsy kept looking at his back as she kept replaying the glimpse of Skullius' true emotions that she had seen just now.

'I remember that look. A despair that you hide in your very guts. A despair caused by loneliness. Hmmm... I guess I still have some of it left...' Betsy thought as she gazed at the cheering men and women at the tables.

She had done what she could ensure that even if she felt lonely, she would never be alone.

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By the time Skullius arrived in his room, he was already focused on his goal.

His Discount Human body was nothing like his Penetrator one. He would grow 'tired' easily, thus he needed to do what he wanted to quickly especially after the days' rich activity.

The timer for [Flesh It Like You Mean It] would clock out in the morning, but he didn't intend to do nothing until then.

He sat down on the floor and took the books he had stolen from the College.

There were many, numbering in the hundreds.

Skullius quickly skimmed through the pages, finding to his disappointment, that he couldn't read most of them.

The language mostly used for speech and writing among universally or rather with interracial interaction was the Known Language.

It was said that it was developed during warring times, many races adopting it for diplomatic relations over centuries until it became what it was today.

This was what most individuals used.

[Greater Communication] had evolved a few hours prior, reaching the next level which actually didn't change its name or description by much.

It remained as [Greater Communication] with a 'T' at the end, but its scope was enhanced. Where it could understand some low to mid level languages, now it could understand all of the languages in these categories, dialects and all, along with beginning to tap into high level languages.

On top of this, the description implied that it now covered literacy too, but to a limited degree.

The 'Great' series among skills was always the highest level in the tier of skills, which made it more convincing when thinking back to who gave Skullius this skill in the first place.

The fact that such a skill would delve into literacy was not a surprise but this wasn't what Skullius was focused on as he hadn't even noticed that the ability to read was provided by the upgrade to this skill.

The issue was, most of the books here couldn't be read.

They had advanced language and intense jargon which was too much for [Greater Communication I] to handle.

These books were mainly from the shelf he had stolen.

Fortunately, the ones from the stall, were readable though possessing surface level information.

For an organisation with a monopoly over information, it was no surprise that they would sell limited knowledge.

But who cared? Definitely not Skullius!

He began to absorb the knowledge stored within, finding different topics to read through, the one that intrigued him the most being the one about Clusters.

It was only natural that Cluster awareness was one of the more significant things that people talked out and were made to learn as they were an issue concern, especially with the sudden increase in their appearance which was not exactly known by many.

The more Skullius read, the more he realised that he had underestimated these things quite a bit.

Their origin was something he knew already, the clash of the Deities' power forming mini spaces where monsters were born with unnatural powers.

However, their scaling was something he hadn't been able to learn yet.

There were essentially, three levels of Clusters, with six categories.

Every Cluster was distinguished by colour, with Low level ones usually being white and white-blue.

The Mid level ones were blue and purple-blue.

The High level ones were purple and red.

Some Clusters usually had distorted time.

The theory around them was that Clusters existed all around Aigas. The cracks that appeared in space served only to represent that the space within was about to break apart but didn't always happen. In fact, Clusters rarely collapsed on their own.

The regions in every nation, bearing the temperatures ranging from high to low were the the ones with most Clusters, the degree of rise or decrease in temperature acting as a marker for how many Clusters would appear in said region.

This was the distinction between places like Eofel and Inhone, where one experienced Clusters and the other didn't altogether. Even the Tremur Forest which existed in the same region as Eofel didn't experience the issue of Clusters, the temperature in the region being moderate all year round.

Sadly, the reason for this was unknown, with most that had been gathered merely being baseless speculation.

Monsters within Clusters were unique and different from the ones in Aigas as they usually possessed extremely dangerous powers.

'Yeah... those gremlins were definitely a problem...' Skullius reminisced about his first Cluster.

What was even more menacing was the fact that in every Cluster, there was one or more Cluster Generals, a monster with power equal to the sum of its underlings or more.

It wasn't merely a final boss to fight as it also had an absurd level of mana.

This mana was what it used to keep the Cluster stable as the appearance of a Cluster in Aigas meant the Cluster was close to breaking apart.

The Cluster General kept the Cluster space stable until all the monsters within could exit, a time frame that was determined to vary greatly, but with the average time being 3 days.

When a mercenary entered the Cluster, they would be unable to leave as well, the only possible way to leave being to kill the Cluster General.

All this made sense to Skullius as he read through it. He had been unable to exit the Cluster back then until he killed Jackpot.

However, even with this knowledge that made him wonder how dangerous Clusters above the white level could be like, he was excited.

He wanted to enter one and he was going to.

But this wasn't all about Clusters as the last bits he could find detailed the benefits of venturing into Clusters.

First, there was the resources mainly found in Clusters, Enriching gems.

After reading their description, Skullius' eyes widened as he pulled something from his spatial storage ring which he had regurgitated earlier after meeting the two Energy Formers.

A purple gem with dim, starry lights swirling within it appeared in his hand.

This was an Enriching gem!

Skullius had collected these from the walls of the Cluster he had been in a few days ago!

He had a little over 200 of these in his spatial storage!

As for their significance...

...!

Skullius became excited as he read through it!

Chapter 174: This Discount Human Looks Acceptable!

"Let's see if its true," Skullius mumbled to himself after reading about what these Enriching gems could do. "The Binds of Fukal shouldn't interfere, right?"

According to one of the books he read, Skullius learned that Enriching gems boosted constitution.

How much they actually boosted depended on where they were extracted from but still... it seemed like the benefits were evident nonetheless.

The term 'absorb' was used when referring to the how these gems were used and the only way Skullius could think of to actualise the benefits he foresaw himself getting, was to focus on the Enriching gem and use [Advanced Mana Manipulation] to wrap around it, feeling for something to pull towards himself.

The faint starry lights glowing within the gem reacted instantly as Skullius felt an excitement in his body that drew the energy from the gem into him almost instantly!

It trickled into the finer parts of his flesh all at once and Skullius vaguely felt a difference in his body.

Then...

[Your flesh and bones are augmented. A factor of 0.1 applies]

"Hmmm?"

The glow from the gem died down, the starry lights within no longer being visible.

Such a fascinating phenomenon. The energy that trickled into his being was vastly different from mana, carrying a more chaotic yet pure feel that was very attractive to the cells in his flesh.

"Let's see how much I can absorb!" Skullius excitedly exclaimed as he pulled out more gems from the spatial storage ring.

He held two of the Enriching gems in his hands as he poured his focus, letting [Advanced Mana Manipulation] lead his sensations as he drew on the energy trapped within the gems.

His body hungrily slurped it all within moments, a cascade of notifications from the guidance field flourishing within Skullius' sight as he rapidly absorbed the energy from the gems in twos!

[Your flesh and bones are augmented. A factor of 0.1 applies]

[Your flesh and bones are augmented. A factor of 0.1 applies]

[Your flesh and bones are augmented. A factor of 0.1]

With each purple gem dimming to release the energy it held, Skullius saw developments to his own body.

His frail and weak looking body had experienced quite the attractive change. His short, auburn hair had gotten longer, the colour becoming a bit richer. His skin became more toned, traces of actual muscle contours becoming visible when he lifted his clothing.

On his bland, cartoonish face, cheek bones became highlighted, as if they had been hidden by fat all along, his face becoming... slightly more acceptable as other features... distinct features appeared; soft eyelashes that gave his eyes more appeal, a slightly pointy chin that said NO to the overall, unnatural round face he had as well as a certain roughness befitting of a masculine visage.

All this occurred under Skullius' bandages and even though they were changes, Skullius didn't actually feel them. He could only rely on his sight to cite some of them.

The Discount Human felt stronger and sturdier as even with his inability to feel sensations largely, he could tell his cosmetic flesh was reacting pleasantly.

This prompted him to take a look at his status to ascertain whether or not there were any changes yet...

There were none.

"What? But I feel stronger. Shouldn't that count?" Skullius questioned himself as he double checked. All his stats remained the same."

He immediately turned back to the texts as he tried to find out more but the detail was unclear. At least to him.

The refining of the fibres of one's existence.

The flesh and bone were purified and strengthened, creating a quality body.

That could mean anything though.

To Skullius, it sounded more like evolution.

As he read more, there didn't seem to be any more exploration on the subject of Enriching gems, with the only other texts mentioning the different colours of Enriching gems with stronger effects on the body, the difference going from purple, red, green and blue.

Quite the odd colour sequence.

The last of the subject matter about Clusters was the fact natural treasures were more easily found within them but Skullius' mind remained rooted on Enriching gems.

Even now, his body remained quivering in excitement and as he looked at it, all bandaged and burnt, he couldn't help but think of the dilemma he was stuck between.

The whole reason why he had chosen to willingly damage his body was because he had the skill, [Luminant Healing].

However, he was sure those two Energy Formers were not done investigating the incident at the College and him as well.

Should he heal himself?

Wouldn't it be... suspicious?

Unless of course, he could claim that he was healed by someone with that kind of ability. Still, the fact remained that he would have to find them and possibly bribe them as a witness.

That could be organised.

'It's funny. I thought I wasn't going to need Frock anymore but here I am relying on him again,' Skullius thought.

Still, he couldn't complain. He immediately activated [Luminant Healing] and healed his wounds, regrowing his hand in the process.

Crusts of dry and burnt skin fell off as new skin replaced them.

Soon, the Discount Human was as good as new, waving his new hand joyfully.

With this, he continued to flow through the books, almost literally inhaling all the information trapped within.

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Next day.

Skullius came out of his room a little later than the previous day as after [Flesh It Like You Mean It] had timed out, he had waited for the cooldown before activating it again.

He rushed out of the Inn, not giving anyone the chance to notice him.

This early, unlike yesterday, many people would be coming in and out of their rooms, others flooding the counter to make requests and orders. This gave him the opportunity to flicker through like a ghost, unnoticed.

The Discount Human donned a slightly thick leather armour that bound his figure quite nicely.

Apparently, it was made from a Treehog Kill Deer's hide, bearing a golden-brown furry exterior, thin steel plates layered within it and on the shoulders where pads of a material Frock refused to mention were laid.

Fuzzy fur jutted from the neckline of the armour in an elegant while Skullius' legs were covered in a dark brown, sturdy pair of pants that had a rough and wrinkled texture, evidently hard when one touched it.

Steel bracers adorned his arms with some form of leather underneath them to cushion the hard steel and possible force of blows, from Skullius skin, the whole aesthetic looking quite good on the Discount Human with his now slightly toned image.

He didn't dawdle as his first order of business was going to the blacksmith that Frock had recommended.

Skullius had intended for the map to help him scout out Blacksmiths but alone, it didn't help him that much, thus, he had to begrudgingly rely on Frock who pointed out a blacksmithing shop to the North West within Inhone, run by an aged brute who called himself HammerDown Gruff.

It didn't take long for Skullius to find the place as he had a map, seeing a surprisingly large shop where the clanging of metal, the hissing of water when it was invaded by hot metal along with the smell of several types of garnish could be detected.

Skullius could also sense wisps of mana even as he stood from a distance, looking at the shop made of thick, sturdy blocks, a large chimney smoking jutting out the roof and an open space in its middle where several people who looked to have a high social status awaited service.

Skullius goal was obvious. He intended to get [Demion's Dance] fixed.

He didn't know the first thing about blacksmithing and he knew the sword was high level which could potentially attract the Screwed Over effect by socketholes but Skullius had prepared quite a bit for potential problems.

It seemed quite strange to Skullius that there were few people here and all of them didn't look like common folk.

Some of them looked at him with disdain, some shaking their heads as if he didn't belong.

'Is it because they think I don't have enough money for it?' Skullius asked himself. 'Well... who cares what you think?'

Skullius ignored the gazes he received and instead focused on the other information he had learned from the books.

Skills.

The term referred to any complex application of mana and was a broad term, covering spells, combat arts and other applications outside of higher level concepts.

As he had read through this, Skullius had thought back to the skill he had seen Jackpot use to absolutely wreck Red Rage.

He wanted something like that too and it was soon going to be his area of focus.

With the fact that most mercenaries had absorbed tonnes of Enriching gems, had blue cores that allowed them to cast Special skills along with the possibility of having Advanced Classes, Skullius now understood why humans were such monsters even if they were a measly 10 or 15 levels in their stage progression.

Besides, this was just a small city. Who knew what the monsters that lived in major cities were like.

After waiting for a few hours, it was Skullius' turn.

A young man with bags under his eyes, a dirty apron and a pair of soot covered gloves appeared with a weak smile on his face.

"How can I help you, sir?" he asked in a fitting weak voice, swallowing his judgement of this character before him who didn't seem to belong.

The shop was prestigious and many a commonfolk had been rejected on their requests as Gruff didn't accept any negotiations when it came to money.

The 'Ironbound Fool' had a reputation to uphold and thus, usually only those with bulging pockets and seven hearts of steel could afford to buy Gruff's services.

Skullius took the [Demion's Dance] from the spatial storage ring and carefully presented it to the young man.

The young man frowned as he saw the aged and cracked sword that seemed to have been pulled out of a history textbook.

The hell was this?

Was this even a sword or some family decoration?

He didn't even bother to hide the demeaning look on his face as he glared at Skullius, preparing to dish out a flurry of insults for wasting his time with what he thought was a prank.

"Listen, sir. My master is a very busy man! He doesn't have time to-,"

"HOLD IT!" a loud roar came from within the shop, carrying a hint of both anger and excitement!

Chapter 175: With Great Curse, Comes Great Sacrifice

A burly man with a portly belly that pressed outwards against the dirty apron he wore emerged from behind the young man.

From his appearance, one didn't even need to guess to know why the last part of his nickname, 'Gruff' was relevant.

A rough grey beard with hints of ash and soot along with darkened skin with wrinkly textures could be seen on his face while his eyes brimmed with a light blue shade.

At this moment, there seemed to be fury building up within him as he looked at his apprentice from a height of almost two meters, the young man shrinking back and moving to the side.

What could be the possible reason for such hostility from his teacher?

Had he come to denounce Skullius himself?

The Discount Human was perplexed, not by the bulky man's stature, but by the fact that this man, had a blue core!

A dull blue core to be exact and while it didn't have the same brightness as from those he had felt within strong opponents and mercenaries, it definitely put this hunk on his map.

HammerDown Gruff.

The best Blacksmith in the city at this current point in time.

He didn't spare Skullius much of a glance as he went on to take [Demion's Dance] from the hands of his apprentice and inspect it with shocking intensity.

In this instance, Skullius truly hoped that this man didn't turn out to be a sockethole who would run off with his blade.

That would leave him regretting why he hadn't just used [Unbound] to fix and transmute it into a new one.

"Where did you get this fine weapon? I could sense its ancient and unique aura from out back," Gruff said, his eyes never leaving the blueish curved blade that had shallow circular groves with a glossy shine about them.

The elegantly made golden hilt with mini designs of swirls and curls that enhanced friction made Gruff nod his head as his brows alternated the duty of showing his immense interest.

"I got it from a certain merchant," Skullius lied through his teeth.

"Is that right?" Gruff questioned as his fading blue eyes gleamed dangerously but Skullius withheld his stance.

'He must think me a fool. The level of smithing, etching and artistry behind this piece is way beyond my capabilities. Yet he claims a mere merchant let him walk away with it?'

"Hmph! Nomatter how much you remain composed, I can tell that you're not from the circle you're trying to fit into. My interest is in this weapon. What would you have me do?"

"The weapon has lost its durability. It can no longer do what it was meant to do. I was hoping you can restore it," Skullius said.

Gruff scoffed as he placed the sword on the side.

"First. Tell me truthfully. Where did you acquire this blade?" Gruff asked with a sizable amount of threat saturating his voice.

Skullius didn't back away.

"Like I said. I got it from a merchant."

"From where?"

"On my way from Eofel to this city. Bastard must have not recognised its worth since it is all worn out now, bro. But still, I had to pay him three Tier 3 dead cores before he was willing to part with it."

Gruff frowned slightly and harrumphed like a beast.

Perhaps it was true. Only seasoned merchants who were well versed in the sale of weaponry would recognise their value even if they were damaged or worn out.

If the man before him was telling the truth, then perhaps the merchant still had enough brain to see the eagerness within Skullius' eyes and exploit it.

"What do you fancy about this sword then?" Gruff asked. Perhaps he had misjudged this determined young man.

Skullius grinned under his solemn facade. He could tell the guy everything about the sword but he refrained from doing so as that would likely increase his chances of getting screwed over.

From the looks of it, Gruff didn't see the sword as the legendary construct it was. Hell, he probably couldn't decipher everything about it.

"I can tell you it's a very rare weapon. Maybe even legendary. Or least it was. The fine work on it probably means it has two or more skills that can be activated. Of course I won't be the one using it but that was what all I was able to find about it," Skullius explained.

The tall man before the Discount Human paused for a bit with a hint of shock peeking from his face.

In the next moment, Gruff began to laugh heartily as a smile finally broke free to his face!

"Hahahahaha! Splendid! To think I'd finally see another customer with good appraisal skills!" he said as he grabbed [Demion's Dance], his apprentice being puzzled out of his mind. "Good, good! Come! Let me see what I can—"

"No!" Skullius suddenly exclaimed as sweat visible trickled down his face. This had escalated too quickly.

Maybe he had sold the idea too well and his affable broship had revealed Gruff's good nature.

Whatever it was...

His mind raced as he thought of how to solve what he saw to be a problem merely seconds away.

Soon, he thought of the only way to possibly redeem the situation.

He pulled out two dead cores from his spatial storage ring, one being Tier four and the other Tier five and set them down.

Gruff was confused and awed at the same time. To casually pull out such high quality dead cores.

"I'm not here to have a good chat, you bloated sockethole! I just want my weapon fixed! All I need are your skills. Now tell me, when should I return for it?" Skullius feigned being angry.

The burly man couldn't believe his ears.

The transition sounded unnatural. What had gotten into this man?

Slowly, his hearty cheer receded as a professional and cold look appeared on his face.

No. He had misjudged. This man was no different from the stuck up fools that thought as long as they had money, they owned the world.

Even though it was a hypocritical thing when he himself shied away from those that couldn't afford his expertise, that was because he valued himself.

While others had abandoned the city for bigger cities, he had stayed in order to be a pillar for the community of Inhone City. At least a major one.

The Capital Knights who needed greater equipment approached him along with many others and he would put his full effort in crafting the best weaponry and armour that saved lives.

But, he would never allow himself to be undervalued.

His philosophy was simple.

'If you can't afford it, someone else will. And that someone is going to do it for you.'

If a commoner visited his shop with a request to get a powerful sword but without the means to pay for it, he wouldn't acquiesce. A Knight with the means to pay for such would come with the same request and adhere to the threat that plagued the very commoner the next day.

It was faulty belief but he firmly held onto it. It made sense to him.

This was what the existing system was for.

"Frankly, this craftsmanship is quite beyond my level. All I can do is restore a fraction of its capabilities. Do you still accept?" Gruff said in a rough tone.

Were it not for the fact that he was interested in the sword, he probably would have chased Skullius out. But then again, this was his job. Forming friendships was only a bonus that wasn't guaranteed. Yet this one truly disappointed him.

"How long will it take?"

"Roughly 4 days."

Skullius grimaced. It was better than nothing at least.

"Alright. I'll come back then."

The Discount Human immediately turned and left, slapping his own face with a crisp smack after walking dozens of paces away.

Aside from the fact that he was disappointed that [Demion's Dance] couldn't be fixed fully and that the little it could be restored would take days, he was also bummed because he had deliberately cut off a potential, budding friendship.

The reason was obvious.

UNCoddled.

Contrary to how HammerDown Gruff looked, he wasn't a sockethole at heart.

The moment Skullius saw the hearty cheer and friendly gaze, he knew that he had almost screwed himself. He would have loved to befriend the burly man but that would end terribly.

Besides the fact that he would turn the man into a gooey mess, killing a well-known blacksmith like HammerDown would make his life hellish.

'<Sigh>. Let's cheer up. We're about to resurrect Red bro anyway. Won't be alone for much longer,' he thought to himself.

With the issue of the sword done for now, Skullius headed to his semi-secondary destination, the National Guilds Association building.

As he was familiar with the path, it didn't take Skullius long to reach the place.

Upon arriving though, he was met with a burst of activity in and out of the Guilds Associations building. Many mercenaries were walking in and out with urgency in their steps, fully decked in armour and most heading out of the city.

Skullius spotted a few mercenaries who were going into the building covered in Conqueror's Halos which he hadn't gotten used to seeing.

This was his first time seeing the light akin to flares surrounding a bunch of mercenaries with some having brighter ones and others having layered Halos that circled around their figures!

'Woow... it does look cool now that I think about it.'

It was unfortunate that asides from decorative purposes, it didn't have much value but Skullius groaned as he called that it was only him who didn't benefit anything.

He couldn't gain the other benefits for clearing Clusters.

Still though.

'Alright! That's enough of the negative. Let's go get that mercenary license.'

The Discount Human marched into the building as he aimed to take his first step into becoming a mercenary.

Chapter 176: The Evaluation (1)

Upon entering into the Associations building, Skullius was blasted with the chatter of many Guilds discussing among themselves, most of them either crowding the board to the left where the requests were pinned or registering their Guilds for taking up a selected request.

Once a Guild chose to travel to an area reported to be haunted by beasts or Clusters, they would register to one of the men and women sitting on desks at the ends of the building hall.

Once registered, they could leave the city to deal with the issue.

Naturally, there were rewards for requests.

Aside from the payment the holder of the request had to make, the Guilds Association also issued out payments provided the Guild in question brought in proof that they had indeed slain the threat.

The more obvious evidence was the Conqueror's Halo but it usually needed to be accompanied by the head of any one of the beasts slaughtered. Preferably the Cluster General in terms of Clusters or the strongest beast if the case was for related to beasts.

Depending on the level of threat posed, a reward would be issued by the Guild.

It was a common case for some requests to remain untended to.

In these cases, the Guild would ask for any volunteers among the Guilds and if none still took up the request, it would be given to the Capital service.

Skullius was curious as to why it was so crowded today.

It looked like all the Guilds were busy and even with the many that swarmed the board of requests, there were still too many of the pieces of paper pinned, showing that the threats outnumbered the mercenary Guilds.

Obviously, the majority of these requests had been written by the Guilds itself pinpointing where most of the Clusters would be as it was impossible for such a large number of requests to have been made in such a short time.

Thankfully, most of them were low level.

Skullius walked forward as he squeezed through the crowds, listening to the conversations as he went.

"How do so many Clusters appear in such a short time? Is this happening everywhere in Pelian?"

"I don't know. I heard the City Lord advised Guilds to form smaller groups of stronger mercenaries to cover more ground. Heh! Like that's going to happen!"

"But... it does seem to be the more reasonable course of action. There's just too few of us to deal with this many Clusters, even if they are low level."

"Still, can you imagine fighting a Cluster General alone? Even if it's from a low level Cluster? A white one might be manageable but a blue-white would be difficult for even three or four of us. I'm not ready to die."

Skullius narrowed his eyes in thought.

The City Lord did not control the Guilds Association or its mercenaries. The Guilds Association itself couldn't even push around its mercenaries unless they broke specific rules. Thus, the City Lord's recommendation for how to operate was falling on deaf ears.

'Many Clusters are showing up?' Skullius thought. 'Well... that's interesting. And terrifying.'

From several positions within the crowd of individuals, Skullius spotted a few mercenaries requesting to make temporary teams to clear Clusters.

Some were lucky. Some not so much.

Skullius ignored this for time being as he went straight to the desks where the individuals dressed formally behind serving counters were working their butts off, registering accepted requests for Guilds.

The Discount Human had to wait for a while before getting the chance to be served.

When it was finally his turn, he found himself looking at the very same woman who had served him that day.

Shockingly, she still had an annoyed look on her face which was multiplied when she looked up to be see Skullius' face.

She grunted before unpleasantly asking, "How many I help you, sir?"

"I would like to get a mercenary license please," Skullius answered.

The woman was a bit taken aback.

She looked like she had a whole lot to say to Skullius as she scanned him top to bottom before shutting her mouth.

The long line of mercenaries waiting to be served behind Skullius made her swallow her length sermon and instead, she chose to give this man what he wanted. Or was it?

This man had been clueless about the basics just a few days ago and now he walked in as if he was mercenary material already?!

She could tell from his core that he was nothing special but who was she to tell him what to do?

People didn't even listen to the will of the Deities these days, how would her case be any different?

Without wasting time, she called a certain man who was standing at the far corner of the hall, leaning against the wall as he watched the scenes taking place within the Guilds Association with sharp eyes.

He was decked in a bulky silver and white armour that complimented his burly physique, short grey hair and a goatee along with sugar grey eyes visible above his neck.

He walked up to the woman from behind the counter.

"He wants to apply for a license," the woman said as her left eye squinted a little, a hidden signal being conveyed to the man who nodded and then looked up at Skullius.

"Follow me," Skullius nodded and followed the bulky man who stood gave him the same vibe as HammerDown Gruff.

They walked through a door at the end of the hall, appearing in a very confined space where the only thing of note was a flight of stairs that went down through a sizable trap door.

The bulky man descended followed by Skullius who wondered where exactly they were going.

As they descended, bright gems could be seen on the walls giving a sufficient amount of light to the surroundings.

"So, you want to be a mercenary?" the man before Skullius asked in a rather hollow tone.

"Yes," Skullius responded succinctly.

"What motivates you to do such a thing when you have such a weak core? Is it money? Fame? Women? Self validation?"

"Uhm... none of those."

"What is it then?"

Skullius remained silent for a while as he mulled it over. It's not like he didn't have an answer. He most definitely did but...

"It's something I'd rather keep to myself," he said.

"Very well. But let me warn you. I'm more inclined to reject your application. You're too immature. Your body is nothing special. I can see with the way you walk that you lack proper training.

Such lack will get only you killed."

Skullius remained silent.

This man was an Evaluation officer, tasked with evaluating whether or not applicants were deserving of a license. The requirements weren't that steep but not that low either.

"I'm merely attending to you as a formality. I won't be granting you a good evaluation for a license."

The Discount Human frowned in displeasure.

'Seriously?!'

The burly man, as if sensing Skullius' bitterness went on with his reality check.

"I've worked long enough in the Guild to know people like you. If the death toll increases for mercenaries, especially if someone like you registers, we will be the ones facing the wrath of the main Guilds Association branch. I hope you understand."

The woman at the counter had told him all he needed to know. After his own inspection, he had verified it. This was another one of those wannabes that didn't know what it took to be a mercenary.

As he finished speaking his piece, the two arrived within a rather spacious room approximately 80 meters wide and 60 meters long.

There was rough, hard ground under the twos feet along with a series of weapon on almost all sides of the grey walls, runic markings like the ones he saw at the library being visible all around this room too.

"This one of the many Evaluation Rooms. You can pick up any weapon you want to demonstrate what you can do. I hope you remember what I just said though. I will NOT be granting you a license. Perhaps if you show something interesting, I might recommend you to the Capital training instead. Half off.

Sounds good doesn't it?"

The man said with an infuriating level of indifference that showed his utter disinterest and lack of expectation from Skullius.

In his mind, there was nothing that anyone else of this generation could show that surpassed what he had seen from Tulnas.

That level of power and talent, it wasn't something that spawned casually, especially within smaller cities.

His power bubbled as his bright blue mana core expelled vicious waves of mana that shook the room, locking in on Skullius who was forced to kneel from the pressure.

The force that fell on him like an anvil caused fizzy blood to drop from his nose!

"Now. Show me what you can do. If there's any anything at all."

Skullius' cosmetic muscles tensed up as he was pressed down.

He had scripted what he would show, thinking that it would be easy for him to get a license but now...

It seemed he was wrong.

He grinned as he looked up, his eyes showing feverish zeal!

"Oh, I'll show you what I can do!"

Chapter 177: The Evaluation (2)

The man in the bulky armour raised a brow as he felt Skullius gather up his mana to strengthen his body.

A thin layer of it surrounded him with quite the excellent level of distribution as he crookedly stood up with his grin still showing, his eyes gazing intensely at his opponent.

"That's quite the fine mana coat. I'm impressed. But that's not enough," the man said as he increased his output of mana which forced Skullius back on his knee.

The Discount Human before him was really finding it difficult to even stand.

'What's the point of trying so hard when I have already told him that I won't be giving him his license?' he thought. 'I'm even doing him a favour.'

After a short few moments, the man saw Skullius rise up again, this time with a look of intense focus as he...

Pointed at him?

Skullius' index finger jutted out from his hand as he pointed at the bulky man, his grin no longer visible.

The look in his eyes had changed.

A faint white glow whirled as something the burly man didn't understand manifested on Skullius' index finger!

A small, round sphere of darkness.

The sphere quivered on the tip of Skullius' finger, its deep black colour causing the burly man to narrow his eyes with just a hint of caution.

'What is that? Some kind of skill?' he thought. Ultimately, he wasn't too worried as at most, it was just a powerful normal skill which he was probably invulnerable against.

The small sphere, which was the size of an eyeball started to spin as Skullius funnelled his full focus into it!

Naturally, because it was so dark that it didn't reflect light, it was impossible to tell but light bursts of hot air that revolved around showed that it was spinning at a ridiculous speed!

Skullius wore a satisfied smile as his mana raged within, already preparing for future moves.

'That should be enough,' he thought.

Then, he released it.

The burly man was wondering what was going on when...

WHAM!

A staggering force pummeled his armour, lifting him off his feet with a powerful shockwave rushing through his body!

'THE HELL?!'

The man's eyes almost popped out of his sockets as he saw the eyeball sized dark sphere spinning against his armour while releasing a series of sparks with its collision against his chest plate!

His armour wasn't damaged but what shocked him was that he didn't even see the sphere move from Skullius' finger to his chest!

On the other side, Skullius disappointedly clicked his tongue as he thought that this was enough to at least it knock the burly man over.

He had condensed [Evil Darkness] into a ball and launched it at the man, a trick he had been practising for a few hours a night since he had taken an in interest in it after the fight with Jackpot.

He had learnt it in his last ditch attempt at surviving, while the Fruit of World Myths projected him with [Crude World Projection] in the strange world of black, white and grey.

Condensing darkness, forming it into a ball and launching at his enemy.

He had liked the simple concept as it became an attack he wanted to master.

Now, he had mastered it to a considerable degree, but it was nowhere near as fast as it was when he used it with [Crude World Projection].

This wasn't his only plan though.

'Alright then. Let's get on with the next.'

At this time, the burly man had settled on the ground with his feet, looking curiously at the ball of darkness that was finally losing its spin. He reached his finger to touch it but then...

WHOOSH!

It suddenly lost its solid shape and became a cloud that covered his body!

...!

A rigid force restricted his movements instantaneously, with the man being trapped in the darkness from which he couldn't see anything!

A hint of panic caught him as he wasn't familiar with something like this!

His mana surged as he strengthened his body and forced himself to move!

His legs stomped forward as he exerted his strength over the hold of this darkness, though strenuously.

'What in the world is this?! Is it some kind of forbidden art? Illusion?! No! Or is it...'

The man was just about to exit the layer of darkness when a brilliant light with a shocking speed and power pierced through the air with a goose bump inducing whistle!

The burly man was momentarily blinded as while his movements were still downgraded by the cloud of darkness he was close to escaping, a force several times stronger than the one from the ball of darkness smashed into his upper chest!

This time, the man was launched back, his body flying as it returned to the cloud of darkness! His armour produced a sizzling sound as it was heated and slightly dented!

Before he could pierce through the darkness in his flight from the impact, he felt something wrap around his arm and pull him back!

The darkness which had only covered his body before exploded in quantity, but he couldn't see it or feel it!

He was dazed and lost in thought.

The moment he touched the ground, his natural instincts warned him of possible danger as he then immediately whipped his hand forward, swiping to the side a sword that had been slicing through the darkness, aiming towards his neck!

His body brimmed with mana as he grinned, finally taking this seriously!

With his mana racing through his body furiously, the restricting effect of the darkness couldn't bind him anymore and he flashed forward, even without the ability to see, pushing his palm ahead with a controlled force of power!

PAA!

The open palm met leather as the individual donning it was pushed back at bullet speed from the darkness!

The burly man followed as with a single step, he zoomed and appeared out of the thick cloud of darkness just in time to watch Skullius knock against the wall on the other side of the room!

After a crisp echo of collision with the wall, the Discount Human slid down to the floor.

"Hah~" he sighed as he looked ahead of him, a sword in hand. He was pretty disappointed.

"Hahaha!" the burly man laughed while shaking his head. He looked back at the darkness behind him that began to dissipate.

Fascinating!

Intriguing!

As he saw the disappointed look on Skullius' face, he couldn't help but feel even more jovial!

"Why didn't you say it from the start boy?!" he roared with a zealous intensity while walking up to Skullius, pride oozing from him.

Skullius stood up. What he had intended to happen from the beginning had fortunately ended up happening anyway.

Though now, he had probably blown what he intended to do before hearing the demeaning words of this man at the start out of proportions with his improvised display.

Either way, he knew what this man was going to say.

"Why didn't you tell me you were an Energy Former?!"

Chapter 178: The New Mage

The burly Evaluation officer patted Skullius' shoulder with a pride, awaiting his response.

"I wanted to be evaluated just like everyone else," Skullius replied.

"Heh! Good, good! That's the right attitude! I even got the sense that you are quite experienced in battle. Restricting my movements before going in to attack. You're quite sturdy for an Energy Former too.

I must admit, if I wasn't me, I probably would have been killed while still trying to figure out what was going on. Haha! Now tell me. What is that darkness and that flash of compressed mana that hit me?"

Skullius smiled coyly as he kicked away the sword he had used to almost slash the Evaluation officer's head.

Ah~. Slashing. A job that Skullius could only enjoy in his Discount Human form.

The tactic he had used was something he had formed after the man had told him about the evaluation.

Naturally, with someone like this, he had chosen to keep his distance as he was well versed in long range attacks.

Using [Evil Darkness] to restrict the burly man's movements after striking him with the condensed ball had been a combo he had thought fitting as in the next moment, he followed up with [Manassault], shooting a powerful, speedy strip of compressed mana that had hit the officer just as he was trying to exit the dark prison.

It hadn't come as a surprise to Skullius that this guy would be able to move inside the cloud of darkness. His affinity with [Evil Darkness] was still low and he had to rely on its more rudimentary effects rather than its actual abilities for the time being as he didn't know what they were yet.

After knocking the man backwards with [Manassault], Skullius had condensed some more darkness to form a whip that pulled back the man from being flung outside the dark cloud's area as he then rushed forward with the passive effects of [Great Rush] which boosted his speed.

He had drawn a sword from the walls with a whip darkness, courtesy of his improved mana stock which boosted his reach capabilities.

Unfortunately, as he was about to land a critical blow, he had been struck by an open palm which effectively ended the evaluation.

"The darkness is uh... an element I can manipulate. It has special effects like holding down weaker opponents. That flash of mana was just a condensed attack of mana. Nothing much about it," Skullius replied to the man's question.

He figured he might as well reveal tidbits of his abilities. Even if they were shared, they weren't anything too amazing from what he had seen others do over the past few days.

"Is it? That is incredible! I have not heard anything about manipulating darkness. Your expelling of mana in such an intricate way is also splendid. Emitting raw mana with such control and over such vast distances is something Arma Users like myself cannot do easily, especially short term. That's something mostly seen with mages.

Are you a mage or a shaman?"

"Mage," Skullius said with a smile.

After witnessing how much value was placed on Energy Formers, he gladly took the opportunity to fool everyone as one.

He was an Insurgent Magnus. A hidden class not bound by class categories. He could be anything he wanted! Though they were possible repercussions due to his stunt yesterday, he would figure that out later.

The evaluation officer burst into laughter again as he struck Skullius' back multiple times, making the Discount Human very uncomfortable.

"Come, let's get you your license! I thoroughly misjudged you. You deserve that much right away!"

The two walked up the stairs again with Skullius bearing a nervous face. The jolly man beside was quite proud as he had scouted Skullius, who would no doubt be a wanted man by every Guild.

Skullius had been hoping this man was a sockethole. He couldn't afford to be as brutal with his words as he had been with Gruff though, as it could obliterate his chance of getting a license.

He also felt like pulling out more high quality dead cores wouldn't work on this guy.

Then again, this man didn't seem like he was merely being kind to him.

The Capital service and the Guilds Association always had an unseen rivalry when it came to the quality of the combatants under them.

Naturally, Energy Formers were the prime indicator for quality.

There were only six Energy Formers in the city. Three belonged to the Mercenaries Guild and the others to the Capital service.

With this, Skullius would break the tie! At least that was what the officer thought. When everyone realised that the idea Ark was gone, along with its two baby mages, that would all change.

"Could you not announce publicly that I am a... you know?" Skullius asked as the two reached the door to the hall.

"Well. I cannot exactly help with that as it's not my decision in the end. At best, I can delay it. You won't hear your name for the entirety of today at least."

Skullius nodded as the two re-entered the hall that was thinning out as people went on to carry out requests. Few were already returning, but the space was clearing as much work remained.

The two returned to the woman behind the counter who, upon seeing Skullius' face, had a bad feeling.

'Why do I feel like something isn't right?! Did Jac get bribed or something?' she thought as she turned to the man whose name was Jac with a frown depicting how betrayed she felt.

The burly man reached her behind the counter, leaning in and whispering in her ears.

As he did, Skullius who waited behind the counter received a sly glance from the man as he told the woman what he had seen.

'Hmm? I have really bad feeling about this.' Skullius thought as he narrowed his eyes.

Upon hearing what Jac had to say, the woman's eyes ballooned as she looked at Skullius in utter shock and surprise.

She shot up from her sit before pointing at Skullius and screaming in a loud voice, "You're a mage?!"

"..."

The Discount Human could only open his mouth in a dumbfounded gesture, slapping his own face mercilessly afterwards.

It was his turn to look at Jac with eyes that depicted how betrayed he felt, the man he glared at wearing the same sly smile as he shrugged.

"I tried to tell her but... as you can see..." Jac loosely defended himself, his words clearly a lie as he hadn't even bothered to stop the woman.

Then... the real mess began.

Every single mercenary in the Guilds Association building turned as they looked at Skullius with greed and wonder!

Chapter 179: More Of A Loner

"There's a new mage joining the Association?!"

"Look! There he is! The one with the funny face!"

"But the way he's dressed. It doesn't seem like what a mage would wear."

"Who cares?! Let's get to him before the others!"

The entire hall was torn into a mess as smaller Guilds rushed towards Skullius while the larger ones tried to approach in dignified steps.

It didn't take long for Skullius to be swarmed by a wave of mercenaries that sought to rope him in!

He couldn't believe he had been betrayed like this. Perhaps he should have expected it. Unlike Knights and such, the concept of honour was a mild suggestion buried in the lazy folds of conscience when it came to mercenaries.

What a sockethole.

"Sir, mage, please join my Guild! I'll make sure you're the new Vice!"

"No, no! Join our Guild, we'll make you live like a king!"

"Hey, look over here please~. You won't have to worry about your face in our Guild! We're open minded~♡!"

Skullius shook his head from within the tide! The fact that UNCoddled didn't activate here meant that no one gave a damn about his benefit. Only his skills.

This was a good thing in that he didn't have to deal with the possible charge of mass murder.

But deep within him though, it made him feel quite lonely.

"Alright! Alright! Let's give the man some space!" Jac pushed through the crowd and exerted his pressure as a powerful mercenary.

This pushed away the riff-raff, Skullius being left untouched after the chaos.

He sighed and turned back to the woman behind the counter who, along with her co-workers, were both excited and shocked.

Skullius glared at her and asked, "My license?"

"Right, right!" she hurriedly scrambled and rushed towards a door to the her right, disappearing into its space before coming back three minutes later.

She rushed over, wearing a gentle smile, wishing she hadn't been so harsh before. Her hopes were to at least not end up being the enemy, should higher personnel trace Skullius' steps.

She handed the annoyed Skullius a glossy plaque that could mostly fit in his hand.

It bore a cream colour, neatly arranged rows of texts being at its front showing the Association name, branch, his class and rank.

His class was obviously written as 'Mage' and the rank was D+.

Ranks among mercenaries were distributed after an officer had an evaluation test with the applicant.

The ranks went from E to S, the considerations being combat experience, stage, class, core and potential. Stage and combat experience was mainly handled in follow-up evaluations called re-evaluations.

Re-evaluations were retakes of the evaluation tests done after someone had accumulated strength that transcended their current rank. They were heavily encouraged as they reflected growth while also being used as instruments for motivation.

There were wide chasms as one moved from each rank, with the C and above ranks being infinitely superior to the lower ranks of D and E.

As Skullius looked at his rank, he didn't find it outlandish or lacking at all.

'I wonder what rank my Penetrator form would be?' he wondered.

He then noticed something amiss with his identification plaque and inquired.

"Why isn't my name here? There's just this space that's blank."

"Oh, sorry. I almost forgot, hahaha," the woman before him laughed nervously in a high pitched voice. "You insert your mana and say your name into the plaque. It will register your mana and apply your name to itself."

"Oh.."

At this moment, the entire hall grew silent as everyone keenly listened.

This was incredibly uncomfortable for Skullius but he bore with it. The dignity of the mercenaries that remained in this hall, as few as they were compared to just a few minutes ago, seemed to be rather low.

Skullius did as he was told, a small stream of his mana flowing into his license as he then felt it vibrate slightly while sucking in his mana.

He then pulled the plaque to his lips and spoke.

"Festos Dawn."

Across an empty space at the bottom, his name faded in with a dark and bold text, the entire plaque releasing faint light as if depicting that it was finally whole.

The clamour returned to the hall as the chatter continued, everyone confirming that this fish was now theirs.

Jac couldn't hide his grin.

His intention had been to make sure that Skullius wouldn't be second guessing his decision to join. Providing an incentive to stay so to speak as two of the Energy Formers in the Capital service had fled the Association some time ago.

Fortunately for them, they had been wise enough to initiate contracts that provided confidentiality upon evaluation from their respective teachers who were quite well known but from within the city.

This wasn't the case for the Discount Human unfortunately as now he had to deal with the fact that fleeing from the Association would incite him possibly becoming an enemy of the Association.

Luckily, Skullius didn't have any intention to join the Capital service.

He proudly held his plague and smiled slightly.

He nodded at the woman before him who rushed to stop him as he was about to walk away.

"Wait! I should probably tell you the perks of having a license. As long as you can clear a Cluster or officially finish a request, you can gain full citizenship within the city. You won't have to pay for entry after your pass has expired. You can also apply for weapons and resources from the Guild too. We have some quality materials!" she said with a wide smile.

"Okay," Skullius answered hollowly before he proceeded to walk towards the request board, some of the mercenaries following after him.

Jac got in the way unfortunately as he patted Skullius' back.

"You're not still mad about that are you?" he chortled.

"<Sigh>. It doesn't matter anymore does it, bro?" Skullius said while shaking his hand. He looked at the requests, finding many of them to be issued by the Guild itself. Most were for Clusters. Mainly white and blue-white, a few being blue.

"Can I take up a request and go to clear it alone?" he asked Jac.

"It's possible but that depends on your rank. For you, that won't be allowed as you're only a D rank. I advise that you join a party to raid with. You're still a fledgling that we would like to keep alive after all," Jac replied.

This response made Skullius feel dejected. He had hoped he could go alone as he didn't want to be responsible for other people who could possibly die from being exposed to UNCoddled.

It was strenuous, trying to figure out who was a sockethole and who was not.

Right then, a young lady with curly, red hair that reached her shoulders along with bright, scarlet eyes walked up to Skullius with two men followong behind her. A middle-aged one and one who looked to be in his twenties.

"Hey Uncle Jac," she said to the burly man who turned and wore a bright smile upon seeing her.

"Ah, my little apprentice is already back from her trip? I didn't expect to see you here so soon," the burly man responded with a tone befitting of an uncle.

"Well, what can I say, I got done what I needed to pretty quickly," the redhead said before turning to Skullius. "Hey mage. You wanna join my party?"

Chapter 180: Setting Off!

All the attention turned to Skullius who was unsure how to respond.

Jac gave Skullius the ol' double brow raise twice with a sly smile plastered to his face.

Skullius obviously didn't know what that meant as he had come from a humble background where everyone didn't own skin or hair, much less eyebrows so he ignored.

The young lady with the curly red tilted her head before walking up to Skullius and standing just short of a meter in front of him.

The view of her and her equipment became all the more apparent to Skullius who, frankly, hadn't had the thought of entertaining her at all.

She wore a gorgeous mix of leather and steel plate armour which looked both sturdy and fashionable.

Shiny plates with several scratches were perched on her shoulders, with similarly coloured bracers on her arms with a thicker and more savage appearance devoid of unnecessary decoration.

A sheathed sword was at her side, awaiting her next adventure which would be wrought with bloodshed.

A thick, bodice-like leather armour could be seen on her upper body along with tight, leather pants overlaid with steel plates, a pair of sturdy battle worn greaves adorning her legs.

Her crimson eyes fixed onto Skullius' own as she boldly spoke.

"Are you hesitating because of you don't think highly of our skills? If that is the case, my uncle can give an unbiased opinion," she said.

Jac nodded to Skullius who opened his mouth to speak after.

Before he could give a reply, she cut him off, answering to another unsaid hypothetical.

"Also, this isn't a Guild. It's a party. A temporary one. I can see that you aren't into joining groups given how you're waving off even more the more prominent Guilds here. I also like to ride solo. After clearing a few Clusters, we can go our separate ways.

No strings attached. There's no argument you can give to dispute that this is a win-win situation."

Skullius wasn't used to facing such outspoken people. Nevertheless, this woman seemed genuine. She didn't hide her objectives and her proposal would be beneficial for Skullius.

He didn't doubt her strength as he could already tell from her blue core that she was powerful, the same being true for the two behind her.

'Blue cores are becoming very common lately. Or rather I've just been meeting a lot of strong people.'

With a sigh, the Discount Human finally relented.

"Fine. I'll join," he said.

"Good," said the young lady.

"But... I have a few conditions."

"What would those be?"

Skullius looked to Jac who was listening attentively from the side and shook his head.

"I'll mention them later. They are not anything problematic."

"Alright, then. As long as they aren't too difficult I'll agree to them. With that settled, I have to catch up with my uncle for a bit and then we'll set off. By the way, my name's Stylla. May I know your name?"

"Festos."

"Nice to meet you."

With that, Stylla walked off with her uncle while Skullius, in order to avoid needless conversation and to consciously be a jerkish sockethole who didn't qualify for any broship, turned his back and walked in the opposite direction the second he saw that the two other young men from the party were about to talk to him.

He had seen the look in their eyes. They were really happy to have his presence in the party and for him, that wasn't exactly a good thing.

Still though, the fact that Stylla thought adding him as the fourth member of the team didn't warrant any more additions to this party proved to Skullius that these guys weren't slouches.

Surely Stylla wouldn't stake their safety solely on him right? Right?!

They were all probably strong, was the more plausible statement.

As he slowly walked away, Skullius pulled up his status and looked up a development he was looking forward to besides the more significant mission of saving Red Rage by amassing Null Life Essence.

The Third Task.

Skullius had an overabundance of cumulative mana experience but he couldn't spend it efficiently.

His Discount Human didn't allow rapid levelling up because of Tasks and his Penetrator form demanded absurd amounts of experience at this point.

The same was true for Red Rage.

Besides, he only had to worry about raising the level of his Discount Human form for now.

Skullius punched in the amount of experience required, which was double that of the previous, at 2000 Exp.

A familiar notification popped up, with details he had expected. Not specifically at least.

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Exp : 2000/2000

Third Task : Obtain the core of a Cluster General

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"Hmmm... doesn't seem too hard. As long as its a white Cluster I guess. It doesn't specify which so it should be fine."

It seemed like he had to add this to the conditions he had for Stylla. Claiming a Cluster General's dead core.

Skullius had intended to go clearing low level Clusters alone but the Association's system limited him.

This arrangement was not too bad and as long as Stylla agreed to his conditions, UNCoddled probably wouldn't murder anyone.

Probably.

After a few minutes Stylla returned having finished speaking to Jac and registering a few requests for their party which she showed to Skullius and the rest. There were no grumbles among the others as except for one, all of the Clusters were white. A simple task.

The four exited the Association building.

Skullius followed the three as they went up to the stables which were right round the corner from the Association.

Several thick horses neighed while being tended to by a few of the local workers.

This wasn't Skullius' first time seeing horses but he was a little nervous when seeing them up close. Perhaps it was an instinct instilled by his cosmetic body which tried to give him an authentic human experience at 90% off.

A human who was uncomfortable around horses that was.

Stylla paid for the horses, the workers being very friendly to her. Skullius realised that she was probably a regular here.

The inevitable issue of concern finally showed when upon distribution of the four horses, Skullius made a confession.

"I don't know how to ride these things."

"...."

Stylla's reaction wasn't as dramatic as that of the workers or the other two in party but she was indeed surprised.

"Well. Alright then. You can ride with me. It'll be faster than giving you a crash course along the way."

Skullius smiled sheepishly at this.

Stylla returned one horse and climbed atop of her own.

She then pulled up Skullius to sit behind her to which the Discount Human unconsciously wrapped his arms around her waist.

Stylla jerked a little with a brow raised as she turned to Skullius before smirking.

"Well this is gonna be fun."

