

Undead 31

Chapter 31: Intermission: A Glimpse

Tremur Forest.

A middle aged man was gasping for breath as he held a sword with a blade akin to a mirror. It had cracks over its face, which was branded with numerous runes that flashed with a light glow as he pushed what remained of his mana within it.

The man had sunflower blonde hair and hazel eyes that reflected the images of his opponents.

Blood oozed from all over his body, scrapes and deep wounds noticeable on his flesh through the mix of tattered robes and dented armour that he wore.

His opponents were people he knew quite well, some of them holding high quality staves, swords, shields and bows as they remained vigilant towards any move that he would make, on their faces traces of disappointment, pain and struggle.

One of them, a woman with red hair, looked a bit more sympathetic and conflicted than the rest, but she subdued her emotions as best as she could.

At the forefront of the group, was a vivacious-looking man with havana brown hair that was combed back, a glossy sheen sparkling over it. He had determined sugar grey eyes which he narrowed meaningfully as he looked at the blondie.

He too exposed a deep sense of hesitation.

He tightened his grip on the sword which he held.

"Eobald..." he said with a rough voice.

"Don't you dare say my name after you've done this to me. All of you! To think what I thought was a genuine motivation for something greater... was nothing more than a lust for power... You are blind! Blind, the lot of you!" the man with the blonde hair barked words that, for the most part, the people standing against him couldn't be bothered to think over.

His name was Eobald, a great adventurer, rather, mercenary, who had travelled the world and faced many mythical beasts, absorbing knowledge from different cultures and races.

He had attained great fame for his work.

"You mean ambition. You taught us that. You mentored us about it. Yet... Things have only reached this point because of your deceit. You wanted power, used us to get to it and trusted us with that knowledge.

That was your biggest mistake. Give us the Key," the man with the brown hair hissed.

Eobald was infuriated.

"I told only you...And you dare say all this after you slaughtered my trusted men? Ha! You're no more than a fool! A hypocrite! What you believe... what I believed...

We are both fools, perhaps! But... it's too late to regret our choices. No. We can't go back. But, I will not fall this way.

Not with everything I've worked for!" he shouted.

"You stand here alive because I will it! Because I called you a brother and I still have much respect for you! Despite everything! Now, give me the Key and you can keep your life!" the man with the brown hair growled as irritation and impatience burned within him.

His grey eyes lit up with a bluish white glow that shook the surroundings.

Eobald hung his head and took in deep gusts of air.

"A Key is bound to the person who found it. Don't you intend to kill me to relinquish my ownership of it?" he said with a stern gaze and sheathed his cracked sword.

The woman with red hair sighed in relief, but the rest were shocked that the man with the brown hair was considering letting Eobald live.

"Not if you follow me and help me find the legacy. At least then... if you have a heart at all..." the man with brown hair said, straining.

"I had no issue with I intended to do. I had no choice. I still don't. In fact..." said Eobald as he pulled out a silver, circular object with a rings of indecipherable text on its surface.

The people around him grew vigilant, with the man who stood at the forefront frowning as he saw what he desired in the hands of his so-called brother.

However, the previous words Eobald had said hinted at the fact that he wasn't going to hand it over.

"...I visited the Saint's Chamber before I came here," Eobald continued, the saddest grin appearing on his face.

The man with brown hair frowned, not particularly pleased with where this was going.

The Saint's Chamber?

Before he could voice out his thoughts, Eobald spoke.

"Of course, you wouldn't know them, would you? They helped me with placing a seal on this Key that prohibits anyone other than me from owning it. If you kill me, the Key will be destroyed and you'll need to find other means to get that legacy. Of course, I could choose another person to be the owner of the Key, and the same rules would apply to them as well," he said with a light scoff.

"I was sure you would kill me. And I'm sure you still planned to."

The man with the brown hair grit his teeth as a deep bloodlust bloomed within him.

Was Eobald telling the truth?

Was he bluffing?

Should he try his luck and hope for the best?

No.

Keys were tools used to open the resting places of great heroes and legends. At least the prettiest of descriptions limited their descriptions to that.

Some of these heroes and legends created artefacts that would select people worthy of their legacies - inheritances that were usually magical in nature. Many sought these.

Universal Keys were used to open these places which were usually sealed with powerful magic.

They were normally forged by the rarest of individuals, but other objects capable of equally powerful magic were lumped into the word 'Key' as well, their known sources being strange, outlandish dimensions that bloomed all over the world.

While Keys were hard to find, legacies were even moreso, which made both tasks incredibly arduous for the average adventurer.

When one acquired a traditional Key, it would be bound to them and only they could use it. This feature of Keys had brought about a lot of pain and betrayal between many partners and friends.

"So that's how it will be?"

"That's how it shall be, brother," said Eobald as in the next moment, he pulled out an odd scroll out of nowhere!

Everyone around was alarmed, one of the people surrounding Eobald, the girl with long, red hair, nocking a white arrow on her dark bow before loosening it towards Eobald with a pained face!

The blonde-haired man saw the incoming arrow and barely managed to dodge it. It streaked past him like lightning.

Eobald opened the scroll in his hands, and pumped it with the remnants of his mana which churned from his core that released a bright blue hue!

On the white, sleek parchment was inscribed the text, 'Arcane Teleportation, Scorch.'

The scroll suddenly released a burst of light and energy that temporary blinded everyone and illuminated everything in the dark night, then...

BOOOM!

A ferocious explosion razed the ground and everything within the surroundings with a mash of yellow, orange and red, a scorching heat disintegrating the surrounding trees and life in a 300 meters radius!

The heated air remained while the ground which was left molten by the sheer amount of heat sizzled.

The man with brown hair was panting as he looked at the aftermath of this explosion. A thick film of bright blue mana was surrounding him, yet the silver armour he wore had signs of heating up with a portion of it missing.

He had managed to protect himself from the majority of the damage, but the same couldn't be said for eight of his comrades whose remains couldn't even be seen.

The only living figures he saw were those of the girl with the bow, who had used an artefact to protect herself, a bulky man who had a large tower shield and a young man who was also covered by a film of mana.

"TRAITOR!" the man with brown hair roared in anguish.

He didn't think to mourn his losses as he turned to the survivors.

"Let's find him! With the mana he had left there's no way he has gotten far!"

He pulled out his key which was also circular like Eobald's but with a golden colour and extended the hand that held it.

He would find Eobald soon enough and when he did, he wouldn't show mercy!

Chapter 32: Witnessing An Epic Fight (1)

Skullius hid in a corner as he anticipated the arrival of the last two goblins who were coming for him after he had hacked away at their staff wielding buddy.

Admittedly, it was hard to manoeuvre with a sword and two staves when you had one hand, thus why he was resorting to more... cowardly, tactics.

As he heard the approaching footsteps from the goblins, he quickly checked the information on the new staff with his guidance field. He hoped it would be as useful as the one he already had.

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[Short magic staff]

<Common>

A staff for the basic manipulation of the element of fire.

-Damage-

20-40

-Durability-

28/40

-Special Effect-

[Skill: Flame Shot]

Release a burst of condensed fire at the target.

Mana Requirements: 70 Mana Points

Cooldown: 30 seconds

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As he saw the information, Skullius instantly appreciated the difference between the two staves he had, starting with the mundane.

The short magic staff was indeed shorter than the crooked magic staff. It had a darker shade on its surface which fit well with what it represented. These physical details perhaps mirrored the difference in calibre between the staves.

A staff for wielding fire.

This was a great addition to his collection and he couldn't wait to test out how it fared when he used it against strong enemies. Who better to test this out on than the two goblins that were rushing towards him.

'Funny. These guys don't make me as anxious any more, even though they are stronger than most of the enemies I've faced so far,' Skullius thought.

The footsteps stopped by the entrance to the hut.

Skullius' pursuers were being vigilant in their malice, choosing not to enter immediately, in case they got slaughtered in one unexpected attack. They didn't know who they were fighting after all.

'Tktktktkt. Stall all you want bros. It gives me enough time for the cooldown,' Skullius thought as devilish thoughts of slaughter swirled in his mind.

While Red Rage was off killing the archers, Skullius was dealing with this and it had barely been twenty-five seconds since he and his Apostle had split up.

The goblins didn't stall much longer, rushing in with one facing left with its sword while the other faced right with an arrow nocked on its bow!

As the two scoured the interior of the hut, scanning the crude ceiling and uneven walls of mud in their view, they felt a burst of heat that made their skin crawl!

From the corner, in their sights, a skeleton with the light of blue flames flickering in its sockets pointed their companion's staff at them, a bright red flame condensing at the staff's tip!

Tktktktktktk!

The two heard the unsettling sound of the skeleton's teeth clacking as in the next moment, the bright red ball of fire shot towards them!

The heat it exuded was already potent despite not even singeing them yet. The speed of the fireball was great that the two only responded a moment later, when it was merely an inch away!

The goblin with the bow loosened its arrow which was dodged by Skullius as he leapt to the side. He had expected it.

But then...

BOOOM!

A scorching explosion rocked the hut with the screams of the two goblins ringing out at the same time!

The floor was charred and red, the temperature rising scaldingly in a matter of moments!

Skullius knew the two were not dead as one of them had dived to the side while the other jumped back as it loosened its arrow before the [Flame Shot] hit.

As such, he dropped the short staff and raced towards the two who were quite gruesomely injured!

With his sword, he aimed for the archer first, leaping above the still smoking floor and stabbing at it as it coughed hoarsely!

Skullius' steel sword plunged deep into the goblin's neck and he viciously slashed it through the side to rip out a large chunk of flesh!

Blood gushed out as the goblin screeched.

He immediately turned to the other goblin which had already stood up and struggled to hold its sword properly as its arm was charred.

Skullius jumped up and brought down his sword again, exerting the majority of his strength downwards to overpower the goblin which could only watch as the figure of a tall, robed skeleton descended upon it cruelly.

It barely cost Skullius a few seconds to kill the goblin, numbers of experience gains gushing into his guidance field!

Afterwards, the tall Boneman reached for his staff and began to extract the Null Life Essence within a large range, the two goblins he had just killed included.

Before long, 820 points of NLE in total were his to splurge.

Skullius nodded in excitement as he saw the numbers, but his joy died down after he saw the figure of experience points he required for the next level. He could only sigh as he wondered.

'I first thought that I would manage somehow to reach Tier 1 before 24 hours passed, but this "triple the amount of experience" thing is really... Argh! I need hundreds of thousands of experience points to reach Tier 1! How am I supposed to do that?! Is becoming Tier 1 for me that big of a deal? These goblins are just so weak even as Tier 1s!

Will it be that different for me?' he thought in frustration. 'It better be worth it.'

Even with this thought, Skullius didn't let the seemingly impossible task encourage him to go jump of a cliff. He was patient.

He could probably scrape something up, right? Atrocious luck aside, of course.

Soon, Red Rage popped into the hut having finished his mission.

Skullius instructed him to grab the arrows from the goblin he had just killed which seemed to have some kind of poison.

The two walked out of the hut and felt a terrifying shock on the ground with muffled booms that originated a short distance away!

"Right! There's that fight!" Skullius thought as he rushed through the space between the huts hurriedly followed by his trusty companion.

Strewn on the ground were dead bodies and blood amidst the raging smoke and fires.

Soon, they hid within a burning hut once more as they watched the fight from closer up.

A goblin with a saber and one who fought bare-handed were facing off.

If Skullius could swallow lumps of saliva, he would, as when he checked the statuses of these goblins, plus the one of the goblin which had a looming hazy figure , he almost dropped his jaw...

Chapter 33: Witnessing An Epic Fight (2)

The exchange between Shirota and Vijak was intense and Skullius who was witnessing it from the 'safety' of the mud hut could barely tear his socket flames off it.

He brought up the status of Ukur and gasped.

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[ Name : Ukur ]

[ Tier : 2 ]

[ Class : Shaman ]

[ Level : 14 ]

[ Race : Humanoid Goblin ]

[ Inv. Status : Regretful ]

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[ Stats ]

[ Strength : 50 ]

[ Agility : 51 ]

[ Intelligence : 77 ]

[ Endurance : 56 ]

[ Luck : 4 ]

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[ Health : 195/200 ]

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[ Mana : 415/450 ]

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"Bro, look at those stats!" Skullius exclaimed at the sight. The Bloated River Clan leader's Intelligence was even higher than his, which, quite honestly, was his main takeaway!

There was no mistaking it, this goblin could obliterate him and from the looks of that hazy figure that floated above him, Skullius knew that this guy had a vast amount of experience.

His sockets then moved to the goblin with brownish skin, grinning as it dodged the blade of Shirota.

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[ Name : Vijak ]

[ Tier : 2 ]

[ Class : Mage ]

[ Level : 18 ]

[ Race : Vile Ilk Goblin ]

[ Inv. Status : Ecstatic ]

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[ Stats ]

[ Strength : 56 ]

[ Agility : 58 ]

[ Intelligence : 83 ]

[ Endurance : 50 ]

[ Luck : 5 ]

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[ Health : 220/220 ]

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[ Mana : 550/550 ]

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Skullius grunted at the figures on these creatures. They were...powerful.

The amount of mana they had was incredible. While he wasn't a slouch in mana capacity, the fact that these creatures were bunched up in one place would spell doom for him if they somehow found him.

The status for the last goblin popped up in Skullius' view and he couldn't help but squint his bright flames.

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[ Name : Shirota ]

[ Tier : 2 ]

[ Class : Mist Swordsman ]

[ Level : 10 ]

[ Race : Foul Goblin ]

[ Inv. Status : Focused ]

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[ Stats ]

[ Strength : 60 ]

[ Agility : 61 ]

[ Intelligence : 60 ]

[ Endurance : 57 ]

[ Luck : 5 ]

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[ Health : 250/250 ]

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[ Mana : 380/380 ]

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"Ohh. That one seems even more dangerous," said Skullius.

Through the information packet, he had managed to understand about the different types of classes, which made him appreciate his own.

Special classes, which were anything that wasn't a normal class - Advanced and Hidden, aided in getting bonus stats.

On the subject of stats, such a thing as permanent stat reduction had been made known to him. It was when stats were subtracted from an individual by factors such as the environment or by high level skills imposed by a higher existence.

Skullius had noted some of the inconsistencies between some of the goblins' stats and recognised that this might have been this issue.

Were these goblins actually living in an environment that was adverse to their growth?

Possibly.

Skullius recognised the figure of Shmeija who was being tended to by Ukur.

"That's the goblin from that orc place," he said. That goblin was the weakest among the four, which made him stand out a bit.

Vijak opened his arms wide and a large influx of mana compounded in-between his hands.

Slowly, a bright orange sphere formed, emitting a scorching heat that made Shirota back away.

"I see you have enhanced yourselves, giving yourself quite the durability. Good! Let's see how you handle this!" growled Vijak.

The bright orange sphere stifled the air and then, something else was added to it. It was a dark substance that oozed from Vijak's body and somehow assimilated itself into the growing ball of flame, giving it a darker shade.

Shirota furrowed his brows and took a stance.

He spread his legs, cocking up dust with his feet, and sheathed his sword.

Skullius paid rapt attention, mesmerised by how Vijak was manipulating the flames.

This was wholly different from how the short staff released the [Flame Shot]. This was a true mastery of fire and this attack which was about to be released by Vijak was many times stronger than the one from his staff.

Unbeknownst to Skullius, Red Rage was also paying attention, but not to Vijak. The boar's sockets were gazing deeply at Shirota's stance as he seemed to be extremely confident about himself.

Red Rage's sockets then moved to Shmeija who was starting to look better under the healing of Ukur, yet, the Bloated River Clan leader looked anxious.

Contemplating how the exchange between the two before him would pan out stressed him deeply.

Vijak was stronger than Shirota level-wise with a large mana pool while Shirota was stronger stat-wise, his class being a special one.

It was hard to imagine who would win as Vijak was a veteran.

They had met up once after escaping from the Goblin swamp, a short war erupting before Ukur fled again.

Ukur wasn't sure what Vijak had been doing all this time. He was probably stronger than he looked.

Vijak finally finished with his preparation.

He grinned as he brought his hands to both sides of the sphere, almost touching it and then...

[Rancid Scorching Sphere]!

The sphere shot towards Shirota without warning, becoming a glowing orange streak like a laser that oozed of dark smoke at its tail!

Shirota's image brightened as the attack approached, but he never broke his stance, remaining with one hand on the hilt while the other held onto the sheath!

"Shirota!" Ukur screamed, fearing for the goblin.

The attack reached Shirota and consumed him whole!

Tongues of fire blew outwards with a earth shattering explosion that decimated the nearest huts as well as the remaining goblins who ran for their lives only to ultimately be devoured by the fire!

To those that were out of its range though, they found that breathing became difficult, their flesh starting to change as their noses felt blocked.

Poison!

The combination of fire and poison had taken everyone by surprise, except for the Black Scorn Clan goblins who were immune. They had backed away when they saw Vijak about to cast this spell, escaping the flames.

Vijak guffawed, reveling in the destruction he caused.

It was magnificent!

A certain Boneman and his companion who had been out of the attack's range marvelled at the display of power as well. Indeed, it was magnificent.

"Mastery of fire..." muttered Skullius.

Ukur could be seen as the smoke cleared, wheezing and panting as the image that stood above him had erected a barrier to protect him and Shmeija.

Barely.

Some of the poison had penetrated before the barrier came up and was absorbed into the two's bodies.

Ukur was faring better as a higher Tier existence, but Shmeija was grasping at his own neck with bulging eyes.

Vijak paid the two no mind. Instead, he glared at where he had flung the [Rancid Scorching Sphere], hoping to see Shirota's remains.

He did not advance, being cautious even when he assumed victory was at hand.

Suddenly, droplets of water started to rise from the river next to the goblin settlement. They were felt and seen as they surrounded the entire area, falling onto the burning huts and corpse-covered ground like rain.

Vijak backed away with a frown.

As the dust cleared, Shirota appeared, still in his stance as he glared ahead.

There was no damage visible on him and he didn't look to be affected by the poison!

'What...!' Vijak thought with rising anguish.

More droplets poured from the river, rising into the sky and falling like rain. They put out the fires and gave the scene a more ominous look.

Strangely, around Shirota, the droplets changed, becoming a mist that roiled around him as he finally fidgeted, looking to be prepared to make his move.

The mist grew thicker until Shirota's figure was almost invisible under its cover.

Then, the powerful goblin's voice rang out with a hoarse tone, his movement following a moment later, under the gaze of a particularly attentive Bone Boar whose sockets greedily absorbed the scene.

"First River Dance, Condense!"

Chapter 34: Bro, What Are You Doing?!

Shirota's figure burst forward, his saber's blade looking like it was made of mist as it hissed, streaking across the air!

The speed with which he moved was inspiring.

Vijak failed to pick up on Shirota's image until it was right in front of him, the cold saber in his opponent's hand slashing down at him!

With incredibly quick reflexes and a terrified look on his face, Vijak brought both his hands in front of him and expelled all the mana he could gather in a short time, activating a skill at the same time!

[Flame Rupture]!

A bright flame with a disgusting amount of heat blossomed between Vijak's hands and exploded towards Shirota whose eyes remained nailed at the target with a fierce expression.

VWUUSH!

The flames roared with grandeur and when they came into contact with the mist that surrounded Shirota's saber, a burst of steam exploded outwards, distorting the visibility of the encounter between these two Tier 2 goblins.

"Woow..." Skullius muttered in awe.

His focus remained on the way the fire was being used.

It was masterful work.

Not long after the battle against moisture and heat...

"ARRGHHHH!"

A scream was heard as Vijak shot from the gust of steam with a large gash that ran along his robes and torso, blood spraying out!

Shirota's figure bolted from the white as he sped with another glint of murderous intent flickering in his beady eyes!

His sword meant to finish off Vijak!

"Second River Dance, Flow!" Shirota called as he sliced through the air with his blade laterally!

If one looked closely, his sword became covered in droplets of water that ran along its cold surface with a brisk speed!

Vijak who was backing away could only look on in horror as Shirota closed in.

'They have someone like this among them as well?' Vijak questioned in his mind as the sword approached.

Even those without the guidance of the Voice Of Worlds could recognise special classes as the attributes depicted by a special class usually went over and above what a normal class could display.

Elements, unknown energies, significant surges in efficiency and power...

All these could be noted to tell what sort of enemy one faced.

As Shirota's saber was merely inches away, a quick object hurtled through the air and planted itself between Vijak and Shirota, the latter withdrawing his attack as he backed away.

'That speed...' Shirota thought as he looked at the spear that had spawned to impede him.

It had travelled at a speed faster than he had swung his saber.

A short goblin leapt up from above one of the huts and landed in front of Vijak protectively.

Many other goblins with brownish skin appeared from all directions as they surrounded Shirota, Ukur and Shmeija.

One of them supported Vijak to stand up straight while another began applying a special oily mixture to his wound.

Vijak looked at the three who were surrounded with glee and began to speak triumphantly.

"Ha! I was surprised that you had a warrior like this, Ukur. I admit that besting him alone would be impossible, but look around you! You're surrounded. Haha! And you're not the only one with a warrior who has a special class."

Vijak pointed at the short goblin which stood before him.

"This should even out the fight. Attack!" Vijak shouted to which the dozens of goblins that had finished killing the Bloated River Clan members raced forward with their weapons to attack!

"Red bro, this is insane! Are you seeing this?!" Skullius said as he peeped through the hole he had made.

Red Rage was also looking attentively at the fight that was breaking out.

Five goblins rushed towards Shirota, yelling and screeching with annoying high-pitched voices. As they got within two meters of him, Shirota swung his saber, the blade striking nothing but air.

Yet...

The five goblins that had rushed to attack were split in half, their blood splashing over the goblins that were behind them!

"Don't attack him you idiots, leave him to Tikika!" barked Vijak.

The rest of the goblins who weren't about to die meaninglessly like the five, headed for Ukur and Shmeija!

Ukur watched the goblins as they rushed towards him and the hazy figure that was above him turned to them.

It stretched out its hands that had a texture like tree bark and mumbled what sounded like gibberish.

A few of the goblins suddenly stopped and began quivering!

Their eyes rolled back and they fell down immediately, dead!

The others that followed were perturbed, but kept moving forward, those that had skills beginning to cast them as they approached the enemy!

The goblin whose name was Tikika pulled out his spear from the ground and whirled it in the air before heading for Shirota who was already prepared to receive his attacks.

Skullius, as he wielded the crooked staff saw notifications pop in his vision.

[Felled prey lies before you. Would you like to extract the Essence of Null Life? Remaining time 45 seconds]

[Felled prey lies before you. Would you like to extract the Essence of Null Life? Remaining time 45 seconds]

[Felled prey.....]

....

Tktktktktktktk!

He...cackled.

Who knew someone with atrocious luck could reap gains while hiding in a burning hut?!

He wielded the staff and watched as streams of energy flew from the dead bodies and rushed into it!

[Basic Mana Manipulation has levelled up!]

Skullius rejoiced. His inference had been correct. His mana sensing range was used for increasing his range for [Null Extraction]!

"Great! Things are looking up. At this rate, I can finally get to test what I can get from a [Permanent Random Upgrade]!" Skullius said. Streams of energy kept rushing into his staff as the intense fight continued.

All he had to do was hide and collect as many Null Life Essence Points as he could, then sneak away from the goblins if those that remained afterwards were the Tier 2 monsters.

"We don't have to do a thing Red bro, can you imagine? Red bro?"

Skullius looked beside him only to discover that there was a blank spot where a short Bone Boar was missing.

"Red bro?" Skullius anxiously voiced...

FWUUP! FWUUP! FWUUP!

BOOM!

Arrows flew from above the hut Skullius was hiding in, then a burst of orange flame that flew as a small ball following after the arrows, blasting a few goblins on the battlefield!

...!

Skullius looked to the floor and saw that the short staff with the [Flame Shot] skill was gone!

Red Rage was attacking the goblins with arrows and his staff!

Skullius glared at the ceiling in panic.

"BRO! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" he screamed.

Chapter 35: Atrocious!

Arrows flew and pierced through the necks and heads of the goblins. These were the arrows that Red Rage had been told to retrieve from the archer that Skullius had killed in the hut earlier.

The poison smeared on the arrow heads didn't have any effect on the Black Scorn Clan goblins, but the pointy ends did the trick.

As death was running around with a scythe among the goblins, most noticed the assault and turned to see the silhouette of the short figure that immediately jumped down from its position and returned to the 'safe' interior of the hut.

As soon as Red Rage came down, Skullius gripped him by the head, his socket flames burning with rage-filled intensity.

"You...!"

Red Rage shrank back from Skullius' gaze.

"What were you thinking?!"

Red Rage pointed in the direction of the goblins and made a fist gesture, his arm quivering.

"You just wanted to kill them?"

Red Rage nodded.

"That's it?"

Red Rage nodded fiercely.

"BRO, GO FLESH YOURSELF!"

Skullius was extremely disappointed, not to mention enraged!

However, he didn't forget to use the staff to collect the Null Life Essence from all the goblins that Red Rage had killed.

"We're leaving...now!"

Skullius grabbed the short Apostle and ran out of the hut with him.

Vijak who was being treated looked in the direction of where the arrows came from and then turned to one of the goblins that remained at his side, addressing him.

"Go find out what's going on. Kill anyone you see."

The goblin nodded and rushed towards the direction along with a few others. They split as they sought out the enemy whom they assumed was a Bloated River Clan survivor.

Skullius weaved through the huts with Red Rage in tow.

As he ran, he couldn't help but clack his teeth in anger. He looked at Red Rage and for a moment he remembered that this guy had been a nemesis of his... for a couple of minutes.

Yesterday.

Now, he had no choice but to run for it. He knew that he would be in trouble if he were to be identified as an undead. These goblins could stop fighting among themselves and hunt him down first. VOW bro had made it perfectly clear how much undead were despised after all.

The consequences would be dire if he were to seen.

Atrocious even.

Therefore he had run away before...

"UNDEAD! OH DEAR! THERE'S UNDEAD HERE! AARRGHHHH! IT'S AN ARMY! HAVE MERCY!

THEY ARE GOING TO KILL ME! ARGHHHH!"

...!

An injured goblin who was leaning against the side a broken down hut screamed at the top of its lungs upon seeing Skullius and Red Rage rush by!

It yelled hysterically with a loud voice that was unbecoming of its state.

Skullius paused for a moment, barely believing what was happening.

Red Rage acted quickly and shot the goblin in the head, but the damage was already done.

'Any army?! What's wrong with this goblin?! Gah! I hope no one heard,' Skullius thought before he resumed his sprint.

But of course someone heard.

Everyone heard.

Physics bent just to spite the Boneman.

From either side of him, weaving through the cluster of huts, came the figures of the goblins that were rapidly closing in!

'Things were going well so far! What's with this selectively atrocious luck?!

Skullius turned to Red Rage again.

Why was it that all the highlights of his bad luck featured this partially loyal sockethole?

Skullius accelerated to his limit.

Soon, he saw the edge of the settlement where the steps were located.

The goblins that had been told to find the enemy got a clearer view of the figures of Red Rage and Skullius.

A glaring skull, flickering flame in the sockets, bony limbs.

...!

One of them immediately made a U-turn and rushed to inform the other goblins while the others paused in fear.

Meanwhile, the goblins who had been charging at the three remaining Bloated River clan members halted as they had heard the boisterous voice of the goblin who had yelled.

"Undead?"

The goblins shook and started faltering.

The mention of undead was a mortifying thing in the Tremur Forest as there was a grand history involving these malicious creatures.

Through the tens thousands of years of its history, the Tremur Forest had been ravaged by the undead an uncertain number of times. The stories from olden beasts persisted, fractured and unclear, but they were true. So true in fact, that they diffused into the very essence of the Tremur, getting passed on through more potent means than word of mouth.

The fear of these creatures was deeply rooted in every creature within the Tremur Forest as during the times of invasion, it was said that all the beasts of the forest joined forces to fight, the tradition of this occurrence being carried down as a sort of mystical treaty that was engraved in their bones and blood.

Vijak frowned and so did the other Tier 2 goblins.

"We have to pause our feud. Earlier, I had been about to lead a group of goblins to investigate a report on undead. Let us look into this first," Shirota said as he gazed at Vijak and then at the goblin he had been fighting, Tikika.

Vijak was silent for a while, deliberating on what to do.

Could it be a ruse?

There was a possibility, but if it turned out to be true...

The goblin who had rushed to inform his clan leader appeared and explained to Vijak with a terrified expression on his face.

Vijak frowned even deeper than before.

"It seems it's true. We'll hold off on our fight and chase them down. Apparently they are fleeing. There may be more of them," Vijak said hesitantly.

Shirota nodded and vigilantly backtracked to Ukur.

"It's better if you stay here. Escape with Shmeija if possible."

Ukur nodded.

Soon, the goblins who had been slaughtering each other began rushing in one direction, Shirota and Tikika included.

Three of the goblins from the Black Scorn Clan remained, Vijak among them as he would not leave a window for Ukur to escape again.

Shirota noticed but chose to leave it be. The only threat among the remaining goblins would be Vijak anyway. He trusted that Ukur would be able to take care of himself.

...

Skullius was already a distance away, running for his life when he heard the movements behind him. Numerous goblins were rushing towards him with zealous intent.

They were still far, but what scared the doomed ghost out of him were the two figures in the lead, bolting with immense speed and rapidly approaching!

"FLESH YOU, RED BRO!" Skullius cursed Red Rage who kept up his pace and then...

[Apostle 'Red Rage' has activated the skill 'Dash in Dust']

Red Rage's short figure flickered out of existence for a moment before he appeared several meters away, sprinting much faster than his master!

"Get back here, you traitor!" Skullius barked.

Chapter 36: Poor Bastard

Skullius could only growl in rage as he witnessed his own Apostle leave him in the dust.

Furthermore...

[Skill 'Dash in Dust' has levelled up!]

"I get it!" Skullius yelled as he dismissed the notification that appeared before him. He turned to see his pursuers rapidly closing in on his location, and could only hope that his selectively atrocious luck would have a few ounces of mercy and somehow deliver him from this situation.

"There's no way I'm fighting those socketholes and winning!" Skullius thought.

One of the perks of being able to sense the mana from over a hundred-meter radius was that you could also sense the strength of the cores of creatures in said radius.

The power within the Tier 2 monsters that he had seen was incredible. They had white cores that released a literal burning sensation that did more than tickle his senses through [Basic Mana Manipulation].

This gave Skullius a bigger dose of unease as he recalled the issue of different coloured cores once again. So far, he hadn't managed to see another coloured core other than the standard white that every creature he'd come across had.

The only exception was possibly Azila, but Skullius didn't have the luxury of inspecting him then. He doubted that that big ape was in the same class as the goblins.

A certain skill of his teased the eventuality of him being able to get a blue core, but the disparity and meaning between every core colour was still only an object for speculation.

~~~

[Depths of the Core | Lv. 1]

To attain great strength, one must understand their own source of power. The core. The more one understands the more they can evolve their strength from the standard to the elite boundary where very few reside. When this skill is used, the user can alter their core in the direction they want.

<Current limit: Blue>

Mana Requirements: 500 Mana Points

Duration: 1 minute

Cooldown: 100 days

~~~

Skullius couldn't wait to use this skill when he had sufficient mana, but that depended entirely on one thing.

If he could escape this current predicament.

He raced forward with even more fervour, passing dozens of trees as he almost lost sight of Red Rage who suddenly made a turn and ran into the parts of the forest with thicker trees.

Skullius followed.

Running in a straight line would be a literal one-way ticket to hell anyway. He doubted that the goblins could see his figure clearly from their distance and better yet, they couldn't sense him which spelled a possibility for him to somehow lose them in the distance.

After covering a bit more of a distance, Skullius saw lights ahead. They were quite a few of them, all moving rapidly towards him.

'What is it now?!' Skullius questioned the full capacity of his rotten luck.

Was it another enemy that was coming from the front?

Did they know about and were specifically coming for him?!

Red Rage decelerated. He had run out of mana sometime ago, but was already ahead so the gap between him and his master barely shrunk.

The lights got closer and Skillius got increasingly anxious.

'This is some fleshed up stuff! What do I do?!'

The lights in the distance turned into torches in Skullius' vision as they drew nearer.

The light illuminated the figures of large creatures that Skullius knew quite well.

"Gah, it's them! Red bro, we have to hide!"

Red Rage nodded and rushed up to a tree.

He grabbed the tree trunk and started climbing.

Skullius was dumbfounded!

"Bro, since when did you—"

[Apostle 'Red Rage' has learned the skill 'Climb']

"Nevermind. I'm a sockethole for asking."

The short boar scaled the tree like a pro while leaving his master again.

Skullius wondered just how much favourability he would need to get for this guy to stop ditching him like a used tissue.

Wait, what?!

As the figures of the creatures coming from his front approached, the many goblins behind him also approaching, Skullius clacked his teeth as he sought for a plan.

Rummaging through all his available options gave Skullius a few bad ideas that had basically no guarantee.

He looked at his robes, then at the tree at his side.

'Maybe...'

A large creature sat upon by a burly orc rushed forward with a visible air of pride.

It had brownish-red fur and tusks protruding from its mouth. It boasted a height of almost two and a half meters, its girth being even more impressive.

An untameable rage could be seen within its eyes as it snorted.

Gu'Smashka rode this beast, a few of the strongest warriors from his clan following behind him with brisk paces.

"You better be right about this. If we find ourselves getting attacked by both goblin clans, the blood of our race is on your hands," Gu'Smashka said to the orc that ran along at the side with a threatening tone.

The orc trembled and hurriedly reassured Gu'Smashka.

"Uh...n-no worries, Gu'Smashka. I'm certain. It was a fierce battle. I'm sure that even the invading goblins have sustained some casualties. We can win, especially with this," the orc said as it eyed the beast that Gu'Smashka was riding.

A Dead End Apocalypse Boar!

It was a larger one that was close to evolving into the second Tier. Its power was frightening, clearly evidenced by the air around it.

This was the only one that this clan of orcs had. Gu'Smashka may have wanted peace to avoid casualties on his side, but he wasn't stupid.

He had groomed this Boar by himself and kept it hidden from the goblins. He planned to use it in special cases, the more relevant sort of circumstances being when the goblins suddenly attacked them.

A good leader always had a plan for unforeseen events.

Gu'Smashka sincerely hoped that this move of theirs was a wise one. He chose to put his trust in this scout whom he had sent to check the situation with the goblins.

After he had heard that there was a battle among goblins with the ones he knew being on the losing side, he decided to act quickly.

He had sent for help from the other orc clans, but that wouldn't come in one night and attacking himself was his best shot, especially with all the urging by his fellow orcs to make a move on the goblins.

"Don't let your guard down. We still need to be careful," Gu'Smashka said with a stern gaze planted on the orc scout.

Suddenly, one of the orcs saw something that made him vigilant for a second before he relaxed.

"Did a human wander around here recently?" the orc asked in passing.

Other orcs, including Gu'Smashka, turned to him with inquisitive gazes and he simply pointed at a tree where something could be seen leaning against it.

It was a skeleton with a funny colour. Its lower torso was missing, its skull hanging low while its jaw was nowhere to be seen.

In its sockets was nothing but hollow darkness, on its body a very crude leather armour that was conveniently ripped on the shoulder to show the burnt portion of its ribs and missing arm.

"Poor bastard. Must have died a cruel death. That's what they get for trespassing in our forest," one of the orcs said.

Chapter 37: How It Ends (1)

The orcs showed their disgust and disdain as they passed by. Generally, it wasn't too common to find humans, especially on this side of the Tremur Forest.

It was also a known fact that humans could be exceedingly dangerous, but finding the skeletal remains of one meant one thing.

That they were weak.

At least in most cases.

As the orcs moved on, Gu'Smashka saw the presence of light ahead, figures of goblins appearing as they neared with an urgent rush.

Gu'Smashka raised his hand, signalling for the orcs to stop.

"It seems our enemies are coming to us."

A certain Boneman who was playing dead by the tree shook slightly as he noticed that the orcs had come to a halt near his position.

From his dark sockets, a tiny blue glint appeared.

'Gah! Move you socketholes! Why are you just standing there?! Duke it out with those goblins and let me escape!' Skullius complained silently.

He had thought of an odd plan that seemed to be working just fine. He had dismantled his jaw and disjoined himself from his lower body to give the illusion that he was a harmless skeleton.

He had taken off the robe and several leather armours that he wore to leave only one that looked the most pathetic. He also hid his steel sword and staves in the long tufts of grass that were on the ground to make his pitiful image more convincing.

As for his socket flames, extinguishing them was the equivalent of blinking or closing eyelids, and he had to keep it up otherwise he would be noticed.

Moving right now was not ideal, especially with both the orcs and goblins being here.

Shirota and Tikika who were leading the goblin charge stopped as they faced the orcs.

For a few moments, there was a deep silence that froze the air, making Skullius nervous.

"What do we do? We haven't come across any undead and the ones we were chasing aren't anywhere in sight," Tikika said to Shirota.

"We'll look further. It ran in this direction. Kill these orcs and let's move on," Shirota replied.

Gu'Smashka didn't understand what the goblins were saying, but he didn't need to. Before the goblins could make their move, he roared as he pulled the large battle axe that was on his back and pointed with it forward!

"RAAAAAAR!"

The orcs immediately rushed forward, going in to clash with the goblins who outnumbered them with battle cries!

Gu'Smashka noticed the two powerful goblins in the lead and decided to take them on with his boar and avoid his men getting killed needlessly!

He heaved his axe, cocking his arm backwards before flinging the weapon with all his might!

The boar charged with a bubbling red aura building around its body!

Gu'Smashka's axe flew through the air, its metal head spinning as it barrelled forward!

It aimed for Shirota who ducked to the side and allowed the five goblins behind him to eat the axe's staggering force instead!

All of them were brutally split apart, blood and guts decorating the haphazardly spaced grass on the ground!

Tikika wielded his spear and charged towards the incoming boar. Shirota also charged ahead, running parallel to his counterpart.

Tikika's spear became coated with his mana as he prepared to unleash a powerful skill, however...

A burst of red clouded his vision for a split second and he heard rough, intense breaths!

The boar before him suddenly increased in size and lowered its stance before charging with its blazing red aura illuminating the surroundings!

It sped ahead with a speed that made it impossible for both Shirota and Tikika to attack as they wished.

Tikika switched to defence, bringing his spear in front of him while pumping mana into it!

Shirota rolled to the side, evading the boar's charge entirely!

The ground trembled as the boar mercilessly struck Tikika with its large head, the short goblin feeling a tremor run through his body that cracked a few bones!

A shockwave erupted from the clash, yet the shroud of red around the boar persisted.

Yes!

Indeed, it was skill!

One that had been partially introduced by Red Rage before his death.

The skill, [Dead End]!

It was a charge type skill that increased the user's stats by 130%!

Of course, this figure could be lower or higher depending on the level of the skill.

Tikika was blown away. He knocked against the ground with a powerful crash before rolling along it till his momentum died!

He coughed blood and hurriedly tried to stand, which proved to be extremely difficult for him.

Shirota vigilantly gazed at the boar whose radiant red aura was fizzling out, and prepared to attack it.

Three orcs rushed towards him, swinging their weapons with relatively admirable skill!

Shirota slashed with his blade, slicing one of them from the belly up before it could swing down its axe, and he swiftly turned, his blade producing wisps of cold air as it tore through the other enemies!

Gu'Smashka frowned and made the boar turn to Shirota who was just finishing with the orcs that attacked him.

The three entered a staredown with the image of goblins and orcs slaughtering each other in the background making for a rather epic scene of carnage and blood!

Skullius saw the fighting to have started in kind and decided to make small movements, aiming to reach his legs and equipment.

He slowly pulled himself with his one hand and grabbed his crooked staff first.

'Might as well harvest some Null Life Essence while I'm at it,' Skullius thought.

The staff emitted the light of Null Life Essence that only he could see and began to draw in the Null Life Essence from the dead bodies.

As he did, he noticed something peculiar. The bodies of the orcs produced a brighter stream of Null Life Essence than the goblins.

Unfortunately, he couldn't quite tell how much he earned from a single orc as he received all the Null Life Essence at once.

'I see. It's not about how powerful the creature is...' Skullius thought.

He tore himself from this train of thought and sneakily reconnected his split body. He then grabbed all his stuff before crawling away, afraid that he might trigger his luck to do something more profound.

When he was a far enough, he hid behind a tree and watched. A moment later, Skullius remembered Red Rage who was still in the tree.

'Hey, come on! Let's go!'

Red Rage didn't budge.

He staring attentively at the chaos below the branch he stood on. His eyes were on Shirota who was in a staring contest with the orc leader Gu'Smashka.

His eyes then shifted to the figure of Tikika who was struggling to stand.

Tikika rose and coughed up more blood. He used his spear as support and glared at Gu'Smashka and the boar.

He desperately wanted to kill them, but his body would need to recover for a bit.

Yet...

FWUUSH! FWUUSH!

Two arrows sped through the air and lodged themselves into the head of the goblin.

One moment had led to his death under the watchful sockets of Red Rage.

Skullius was once again... dumbfounded.

[Apostle 'Red Rage' has killed (II) LV11 Vile Ilk Goblin. 4200 Exp awarded]

[Your prey emits...]

'Is killing all this sockethole ever thinks about?! He needs salvation, fast!' Skullius shook his head.

He literally felt a shiver of satisfaction from Red Rage before the Apostle scaled down the tree and stealthily rushed to him.

Once again, he didn't stop, overtaking Skullius as he went.

Skullius ground his teeth and followed, giving one last glance behind him where the remaining goblins were left in panic at seeing Tikika's corpse.

Due to the low visibility provided by the night and how they all had to discard their torches for the fight, they hadn't been able to see the arrows shoot towards Tikika, thus his death was a surprise.

The killer was running off with his master while they fought.

The two ran down a gorge where the section of the forest they had escaped became a history they couldn't see. They went on to rush forward at full speed seeking somewhere to collect themselves.

Meanwhile...

"You lasted a lot longer than I thought from this. You have indeed changed for the better," Vijak said while sitting down and gazing at Ukur who remained vigilant.

The Bloated River Clan leader merely squinted his human-like eyes without a word.

Chapter 38: How It Ends (2)

Ukur sat on the ground as he tended to his apprentice, Shmeija, who had been healed sufficiently, but not to the best degree. He couldn't afford to give him a full treatment when they were in the middle of a war - even if there was currently a ceasefire.

He gazed at Vijak who wore a look of disdain and triumph, no bits of mercy traceable on his visage.

The situation had devolved into this and he couldn't do anything about it. The goblins that were dead on the ground, killed by arrows, swords, poison or all of the above made him grimace and wonder if what he had done years ago had been worth it in the end.

Was trying to flee from the short-lived and doomed nature of the goblin existence a bad thing? Was fighting for a better life in this forest, in this world, the wrong thing to do?

It became apparent to Ukur that his face reflected his sorrow when Vijak answered to it.

"You believe that goblins are a cursed existence, right? You used to babble on and on about it ever since we were back in the swamp. Which do you feel more strongly about? That we are a bigger threat to ourselves, or that because we are all very low on the food chain, we are destined to be swallowed up by something stronger?"

This question did not impede Ukur's thoughts from reaching dark places. Yet, he already had an answer for it.

"Both are equally true. As someone who has lived both lives in and out of the swamp, I can safely say it's a miracle that I'm still alive right now. However, I'd still make the choice to flee from that hell and into this one any day."

Vijak narrowed his eyes.

"Aren't people like you who go on to steal what belongs to others the very disease that makes the swamp such a terrible place?" he asked with a deep frown.

Ukur did not respond, his gaze hovering over his apprentice.

"Don't pretend to be righteous! At the end of it all, we are all born selfish! Whether you do something vile for yourself or your clan, you still leave someone in a worse position! That's nature!

You're not the hero who left to save his clan, you're the goblin who sacrificed a hundred lives for another hundred! Just like me!

Just like all of us!" Vijak suddenly burst, saliva spraying from his mouth as he screeched.

Ukur once again did not reply. He merely kept looking at Shmeija who began to open his eyes.

The goblin saw his master's face and recalled what had happened prior to his loss of consciousness.

"Master... you were right... I should... have been... patient," he said with a bitter expression.

Ukur merely grimaced.

Vijak stood, his expression ferocious. He disregarded the thought of waiting for his goblins to return and decided to end this long feud right here.

He had waited for so long.

For revenge.

And it burned at his soul to see his enemy pretend as though he was going out for a just cause.

As though Vijak was the villain.

The Black Scorn Clan leader gathered his mana and prepared to finish Ukur once and for all.

"Let's end it! Like it has always been! Goblin on goblin!"

Ukur looked at Vijak, realising that there was no way he was avoiding this fight. The hazy figure of an old goblin appeared, hovering above him as he prepared to fight as well.

The resolve from both sides was thick and radiant in the night.

However, something even more radiant appeared.

It emerged unannounced.

Unexpected.

Unwelcome.

A lean pillar of orange fire sprang within the forest outside the goblin settlement. Its light was quite bright, highlighting everything with its overbearing luminance.

The trees hindered some of its grandeur from reaching Ukur, Vijak and the others who were almost a hundred meters away and down the slope in the ravine, but each of them felt something that made them lose their will to fight.

A vast amount of mana!

The pillar of fire that was in the shape of a slit, suddenly flickered as if it was going to fizzle out, repeating the cycle multiple times while the goblins held their breaths.

Then...

It shone bright and expanded outwards with immolating beauty.

A grand, fiery blast that erased the vegetation wherever it passed without any resistance.

The fire spread outwards in a massive circular radius that moved at quick speed!

Ukur saw the trees, grass and even the ground disappear as the fire approached. He breathed out an exasperated sigh and felt strength leaving his body.

Vijak also had a similar feeling. The light of rage in his eyes died down before the unrelenting might of the truly powerful existence that had brought down unwarranted, undeserved judgement.

He looked at Ukur and wore a grimace before he had his last thought.

'You were right in the end... A cursed existence.'

The expanding radius of scorching flame descended down the slope and went on to sweep the remnants of the goblin settlement, ending the lives of the goblins that watched on hopelessly.

Master and apprentice.

Enemy and friend.

No one was spared.

The fire devoured the water in the river next to the settlement before it stopped spreading and then, it died down immediately.

Only billows of smoke and a dark land with spots of crackling orange remained.

From where the fire had originated, a lone, human figure stood, heaving as he then knelt on the ground from exhaustion and pain.

Shirota was winning.

The boar and its rider were suffering wound after wound from his constant and careful movements as well as sword strikes!

He swung his sword to remove the blood, his eyes focusing on the panting Gu'Smashka who was grunting while wielding his battle-axe.

The weapon had done him no good against such an opponent and the reason he was even standing right now was because he had a tenacious build.

The boar was grunting and snorting, anger brimming within its body in the form of a flickering, red energy. Gashes and wounds were all over its body, staining its hide.

It was frustrated after having failed to get the agile and smart Shirota with its skill, [Dead End].

Now, its mana had run out and it didn't have its strongest and only weapon against a Tier 2 opponent.

Shirota maintained caution.

As a Mist Swordsman, he had an advantage anywhere a potent source of moisture could be found. This was why he had been so overbearing during the fight in the goblin settlement.

He was usually confident even without a source of water nearby as he could absorb moisture from the air with his First River Dance and coalesce it around his blade for added damage.

Moisture was not quite as prevalent here, unfortunately, therefore he had been quite careful with his moves and now they had paid off.

He was confident he could finish off Gu'Smashka as well as the remaining orcs that had shockingly been able to overpower the goblins despite being outnumbered.

Whatever. These goblins weren't really his allies so he didn't care.

The death of Tikika was more reassuring to him than his life.

A bright flash of light suddenly spawned from where he and the other goblins had come from.

Shirota and all the other creatures turned and marvelled at the phenomenon, watching the bright light turn into a fire that burned fiercely and expansively before dying down abruptly.

Shirota's heart skipped a beat.

'Ukur... Shmeija!' he thought before he sheathed his saber and raced in that direction, hope propelling his body.

Gu'Smashka breathed out as he lay down his axe. In his mind, what was happening there could either be really good for him and his orcs or really bad.

Whichever the case, he didn't want to know or stay behind to find out.

Chapter 39: How It Ends (3)

Shirota was different from any other goblin within the Bloated River Clan under Ukur. He was diligent and ever since the clan moved away from the swamp, he had vowed to make the most out of the new opportunity for survival.

He was timid by nature, but was immensely devoted to the clan and his training. He loved the way of the sword. It was all he ever practised, this obsession having been born after he discovered how easily it could cut down enemies within the swamp.

Therefore, he would always use a sword wherever it was an option he could use for anything, as its versatility was also a great ally.

He didn't slack off when it came to work and silently bore any fatigue from strenuous exercises that he and his brethren had to endure during their journey to find a safer place to live.

The name Bloated River came from Ukur's belief that one day, there would be bountiful gains to be had after the initial portion of their lives where they had to struggle to survive.

He believed that if one fought hard enough, they could escape a tragic destiny which was a belief that Shirota also clung onto religiously.

Shirota worked himself to the bone. He always went near rivers to train, or jumped into the knee high streams to practise his sword movements. This was so he wouldn't get discouraged. By looking at the water than danced near on his feet, he would be reminded about what he was fighting for.

Bloated River.

As a timid introvert, his thoughts were his paradise and after a while, he cemented his resolve, not allowing himself to be shaken by anything from the outside.

Perhaps his unrelenting devotion was the cause of a miracle that bloomed within him. Or perhaps it was him merely fulfilling the conditions required unknowingly.

Typically, all creatures of the forest could awaken a class after they reached Tier 1 - after putting in the work of course. Intelligence played a major role in this as well.

Shirota had acquired the Swordsman class after he reached Tier 1.

Then, after years of more arduous hardwork and devotion, he had managed to acquire an Advanced class. With this class, he could amplify his stats and damage output simply by synchronising his sword with moisture.

It was easier said than done, but he was extremely happy that he had learned this.

This strength he acquired brought pride to the clan. He was praised as a genius who managed to ascend to greater heights, and a great responsibility was laid on his shoulders by the clan.

Ukur had been even more proud of him, teaching him the best ways he could think of that could make his application of the perks provided by the Advanced class more potent!

As he ran, all Shirota could think about was his master and Shmeija. He had not shown it before because he still clung onto hope, but now, with the possibility that he may be the only one who remained from the Bloated River Clan, the depression finally showed on his face.

Tears started rolling down his beady black eyes.

A human figure knelt down on the dry and burnt ground. He took in deep breaths, struggling to keep himself alive and enduring the excruciating pain.

He had sunflower blonde hair and hazel eyes that seemed to be dimming, losing vibrance rapidly.

This man was Eobald.

He coughed up blood and dropped on his back to the ground. By his side was a sheathed sword that released a dangerous pressure, but it had been stained with the blood that oozed from his body.

Eobald had multiple deep wounds that ensured that he wouldn't live for too long, but he refused to die just yet. He had managed to flee with the one piece that would stop THEM from impeding his... goals.

Hmmm. His goals? Was this all what he really wanted?

As he lay here, they were probably on their way as they could track his Key with their own. The only piece of reassurance he tried to believe was that he was farther away from them.

'Urgh... I was careless. I used all my mana to fuel the Scorch Teleportation scroll, but... in the end it was barely enough. Had it been even a little short, I don't think I would have made it through the Stagnant Space...' Eobald thought.

He remembered those that provably die when he took off.

Did he feel guilty?

He didn't know.

He used his arm to pull himself towards a standing burnt trunk of a what had been a large and healthy tree.

He leaned against it, sat down and controlled his breathing.

He looked up and around, seeing a ravine, or what remained of it a distance away with his enhanced vision.

"Where am I... exactly? I hope I didn't bring my myself to a dangerous area."

Slowly, he went on to close his eyes and began to draw in mana from the surroundings. A faint distortion could be seen in the air as Eobald exerted his pull on the ambient mana.

"The mana is relatively thin here. I must be closer to the edge of the forest. That's good... it will take them some time to reach me. Perhaps I can recover and decide what to do next..."

Mana began to swim from the air and into him, Eobald controlling it to effectively strengthen his body and begin to fill his core.

After two minutes passed, Eobald coughed another mouthful of blood, bits of it straining his face!

"Well... it seems they were prepared. They weren't going to let me live no matter what."

Eobald pushed away his armour, revealing a stab wound that kept gushing out blood while a reddish purple discolouration could be seen on the skin surrounding it.

He slumped against the tree again and kept the mana coming to try and make himself last a little longer.

At that moment, Eobald's keen ears heard footsteps of something running from the forest ahead. He turned his eyes and saw a goblin that was a distance away rushing down into the ravine.

'Hmmm...' he thought as he watched the goblin hurriedly search for something. 'It's been a while since I've seen one of those...'

Skullius was jumping for joy as he saw the notification on his guidance field. This was a discovery that made him envision a brighter future where with his growth, he would definitely find this feature to be even more ridiculous than it already was.

"Finally! Tkktktkt! Something is going my way! You see this, Red bro?! I've got some good stuff too!"

Chapter 40: Bolstering The Nullmancer's Offense (1)

Several minutes before...

It all started when Skullius received a reward in light of his previous 'hard work' from the guidance field.

[Due to repetition of the action of 'Running Away', the skill 'Artless Dodger' has been acquired!]

Skullius had scratched his head when he first saw it. It was great that he had finally attained a skill from repeating an action, but it was one he was not exactly proud of.

This was more so true when he read its description.

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[Artless Dodger | Lv. 1]

When the odds are stacked against you, enemies of epic proportions coming for your life, summon a 25% increase in agility from the fuel of cowardice, to leave them all in the dust.

Mana Requirements: 30 Mana Points

Duration: 1 minute

Cooldown: 2 minutes

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"It's not always....cowardice..." Skullius meekly defended himself.

He had escaped into a rather shallow gorge after a lengthy sprint from the conflict between the goblins and orcs. Now, he found himself getting genuinely curious about how the fight had ended. He assumed that Shirota would have the upper hand given his tier, but nothing was truly set in stone, even among the weak.

He had scaled up to see what lay beyond the slope on the other side of the gorge and found another expanse of forestry even more lush than where he had been.

Given the possibility of finding stronger enemies, Skullius decided to take a break and evaluate himself in the gorge.

He sat down on the hard ground, Red Rage sitting beside him silently.

"Hmm... so now you obediently stay put? As long it doesn't affect your own intentions, huh? You'll never be satisfied with me just patting your shoulder anymore, will you? Flesh you, intelligence stat! Give me back my loyal Apostle!"

Skullius finished his outburst under the emotionless sockets of Red Rage.

"Come to think of it, its been a while since I checked our statuses. Let's see."

Skullius opened the guidance field to check his and Red Rage's progress, nodding and shaking his head as he read the contents.

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[ Name : Red Rage ]

[ Tier : 0 ]

[ Class : None ]

[ Level : 5 ]

[ Race : Null Lifeform (Bone Boar)]

[ Inv. Status : Murderous tendencies on hold ]

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[ Stats ]

[ Strength : 30 ]

[Agility : 30 ]

[ Intelligence : 21 ]

[ Endurance : Infinite ]

[ Luck : 5 ]

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[ Health : 50/50 ]

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[ Mana : 1/60 ]

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[ Skills ]

[ Null Life Aura | Lv. 1 ]

[ Storming Charge | Lv. 1]

[ Dead End | Lv. 1 ]

[ Flash Throw | Lv. 2 ]

[ Swift Stab | Lv. 1 ]

[ Dash in Dust | Lv. 2 ]

[Climb | Lv. 1 ]

[ Basic Bow Mastery | Lv.3 ]

[ Blessing of Serenity ]

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"Hmm... hmmm Red bro, you have some skills that you haven't used before. Why?" Skullius asked his short Apostle.

All he received was a shrug.

Typical.

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[ Name : Skullius ]

[ Tier : 0 ]

[ Class : Vehement Bone Nullmancer ]

[ Level : 5 ]

[ Experience : 1600/8100 ]

[ Race : Null Lifeform (Boneman) ]

[ Inv. Status : Doomed (Adverse) x2 ]

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[ Stats ]

[ Strength : 60 ]

[Agility : 30 ]

[ Intelligence : 75 ]

[ Endurance : Infinite ]

[ Luck : Atrocious? ]

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[ Health : 50/70 ]

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[ Mana : 100/270 ]

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[ Null Life Essence : 1470/3000 ]

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[ Skills ]

[ Basic Mana Manipulation | Lv. 2 ]

[ Flesh It Like You Mean It | Lv. 1]

[ Static Limbo ]

[ Null Extraction ]

[ Unbound | Lv. 1 ]

[ Null Life Aura | Lv. 1 ]

[ Greater Communication | Lv. 2 ]

[ Artless Dodger | Lv.1 ]

<Class>

[ Apostle Summon | Lv.1 ]

[ Apostle Armament | Lv.1 ]

[ Depths of Core | Lv. 1 ]

[ @%#^\$% ]

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"Oh, I have some skills that actually levelled up. I guess I have been using [Greater Communication] a lot."

Skullius analysed everything, once again almost collapsing face down to the ground when he saw the amount of experience he needed to reach the next level. Triple the amount!

Goodness!

Also, while looking at his stats, he couldn't help but remember that he truly was a mere Tier 0 at the end of the day.

His stats and power just weren't growing as fast as he wanted. Perhaps it seemed that way because he had a Doom Factor waiting for him tomorrow which he was less inclined to believe he'd survive as time raced forward.

"Wait, wait, wait! What's up with my luck?! Is even the guidance field confused or what?! Gah! I wish VOW bro was here!"

Even the information packet he had didn't have anything that mentioned anything about oddities in luck. Perhaps he was a special case.

"Well, let me see if I can dash my hopes even further. Might as well try to recover my arm now with the current streak of annoyances," Skullius said exasperatedly. It was just an attempt. Maneuvering with one arm was too inefficient.

Mana flowed from Skullius' white core and bathed his bones. The cracks began to vanish and the lustre of foggy grey returned from the black side that had been burnt.

When the mana reached his shoulder where the arm was missing though, it stopped. It didn't proceed to regenerate his arm as he hoped!

"Ah, of course! I can't regrow it. Flesh you all. Flesh you too, Somanda. Might as well," Skullius said calmly while slumping down and he allowed the lonely breeze passing by to wash over his bones. "This is...

maybe fair..."

He had been expecting too much. Almost all of his mana was used up now and he felt that he might as well sulk in place, one armed.

Could an evolution fix this? The thought made Skullius yearn, but he didn't have the strength to experiment.

In a mash of boredom and loss of faith, Skullius picked up the crooked staff and scrutinised it. The phenomenon where his range for [Unbound] was increased was truly interesting.

The staff ignited with Null Life Essence. This time, Skullius paid attention to every detail that it gave off.

Strangely, when the Essence in the form of a dancing light flame that emitted no heat appeared on the staff, he noted that his sensitivity to the staff grew.

"Oh..."

He began to immerse himself in the feeling of the staff. He felt like his mind was sinking into the structure of the object.

He couldn't quite see in the literal sense, but he could 'feel' what made the staff a staff and not an ordinary stick.

There was a network of connections of mana within the staff that were not very complex when Skullius felt for them.

They were simply straight passages that sometimes intersected like a maze. A very basic one.

As he navigated through this connection of tiny passages, Skullius felt the Null Life Essence fill them. As soon he found a new passage to navigate through, the Null Life Essence followed greedily into it.

Several minutes passed as Skullius engaged in this activity trying to find what would be at the end of discovering all these passages and lacing them with Null Life Essence.

He got his answer soon enough, as a notification popped up when all the passages he discovered were teeming with Null Life Essence.

[You have mastered the skill 'Mana Bolt' from the crooked magic staff. Your understanding of the compounds of the world and mana increases!]

...!

Skullius was drawn out of his trance-like state immediately!

He had mastered the skill within the staff?!

He immediately pulled up his status screen again and saw an additional skill sitting within his status panel!

Furthermore...

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[Mana Bolt | Lv.1]

Release a burst of highly condensed mana towards a target to deal damage that disrupts mana flow for a miniscule amount of time.

Mana Requirements: 20 Mana Points

Cooldown: 5 seconds

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The skill had changed!

Its mana requirements had been reduced along with the cooldown. It could be levelled up now, and the biggest boon was that it had been enhanced.

Or rather, fully realised!

"Finally! Tktktktkt! Something is going my way! You see this, Red bro! I've got some good stuff too!" Skullius yelled while pointing at the Red Rage whose sockets were glowing intensely.