

Undead 451

Chapter 451: Unexpected Baggage

The light of morning came with vigour, becoming a glare that annoyed the freak out of Yuyui who squinted.

She lay sprawled on the bed with a heavy sensation of weakness crippling her usually vibrant and energetic self.

"Urghhh..." she moaned, feeling terrible through everything that made her up – flesh, bone and a gaping gullet.

"Good morning," Skullius' voice drilled into her ear, giving her a sharp jolt of adrenaline that allowed her to heave herself from the bed.

"I'm up!" the lime haired girl yelled with a groggy face, the fatigue she was experiencing being ungodly to say the least.

She would never forget the rough eight hours of being used as a test subject for Skullius' experiments. She had passed out after a while and now, her being sprawled on the bed had probably been Skullius' doing.

While that could be seen as a sweet gesture, Yuyui saw it as no more than Skullius treating her like a undying pet.

Then again, she couldn't really complain when that was what she signed up for.

"Come on," the figure of the Hybrid Luman said while donning his hood and leather/hide pants. "I have an important test today and I think I'm already late."

Yuyui sighed.

She was already dressed in her clothes which were also just as unkillable (technically) as she was so they were good to go but...

As Skullius saw Yuyui yawning endlessly as she moved up with heavy steps, his brow twitched.

"If you're that tired, you can stay here and sleep. I don't really need you there anyway," the Hybrid Luman strangely said, turning his back to Yuyui who was zapped by his words, her cheeks puffing up as she felt emotion.

"Wait!" the lime haired girl yelled.

Skullius stopped and turned wondering what she wanted.

"What?"

"Oh, uhmm... since I'm getting more time to sleep, can I sleep in Fortune?"

This request surprised Skullius, who frowned.

"Why?"

"Uhmm... master, you promised me food today remember?"

A throbbing vein popped on Skullius' temple.

Seriously? He never said it had to be today!

He thought he was being charitable here but this undying food hole was thinking ahead... in terms of food!

She wanted to stay on his person so that she could annoy him for something to it when she woke up!

Skullius breathed out a hot breath chock full negative emotions.

"Fine," he said as he whipped out the Elimparidis Stone Staff, zapped Yuyui into it and returned it into his spatial storage ring.

The Hybrid Luman then wordlessly shook his head before exiting the room and following the path he had been taken by Daggs yesterday back to the lounge.

Upon entering, he saw a short figure with pigtails being attended to by several maidservants who brushed her hair and served her biscuits while she sipped on a cup of tea.

Skullius' entry caused everyone to turn their heads, with the girl, Terese giving the Hybrid Luman an indifferent glance.

"Finally decided to show up, have you?" Terese asked with a mocking tone.

Skullius wasn't provoked so easily, especially when he had employed a green haired parasite to do so unknowingly. He was on his way to cultivating the Super Dao of Anti-tolerance to Cliché Young Mistresses from Yuyui's nagging at this point.

He was growing invincible!

"Did you need something?" Skullius asked.

Terese frowned deeply, her brows furrowing.

She pushed aside the maidservants tending to her hair and stood up.

"Are you serious? I've been waiting for you!"

"For me? Why?"

Terese fumed at this.

This bastard was acting all casual when she had the patience to frustratingly wait around calmly for his ass?!

"What else? Your evaluation, you idiot!" the girl yelled.

Skullius nodded in acknowledgement, an 'Ah, I see' expression written all over his face.

"No one told me you would be coming with me. Why do you care?" he asked with a straight face.

A few minutes ago, Daggs had informed him that he needed to get to the Guilds Association as soon as possible but he hadn't mentioned this detail about a pigtailed piggy backing spectator.

In all truth, Skullius thought that this test would be taking place earlier than this time.

If he hadn't bumped into the terrified attendant in the corridor, he wondered if he would mustered the courage to come tell him this at all!

Terese narrowed her eyes.

This guy wasn't easy to see through. He didn't respond the way she wanted. He behaved as if he was talking to a tree.

Terese clicked her tongue before indulging Skullius' question.

"My sister chose you because she has faith in your... talents, which may very well be extraordinary or because you were the last averagely talented fighter she could find before coming to Genhuis City. Whichever it is, I want to see if there's any worth in entertaining you at all."

"Oh..." Skullius said as he rubbed his chin.

He hadn't thought about this quite as deeply as he thought but he was willing to wager that Stylla didn't have any other choice.

Perhaps Silrat even slipped in a word for him to advance his own fortune, which was currently working wonders.

"If you aren't at least half as strong as the man my older brother employed, I'll have you hanged," Terese said with a fierce expression.

Given the reactions of the maidservants who were waiting quietly behind Terese, Skullius imagined that this little girl was serious.

A smile came up on his face as he said with relaxed eyes, "As you say."

Using [Elevated Mana Manipulation] to hide any leaks in his strength was working just as he wanted.

This was why Silrat and the others couldn't tell much about him aside from a vague...unease.

Terese scoffed and stomped back to her seat.

She had heard that this man was blind from Daggs which made her opinion of him plummet even more.

It wasn't that she was discriminant towards blind people but...

What a waste?

Why not use all the resources they had to just appeal to any of the Houses for help with their father's condition?

It was highly unlikely that even all their fortune was enough for this but... what else could they do?

No organisation did things for free and those that were cheap didn't have the means to cure the curse.

Terese felt frustrated.

Their only hope seemed to be to invite strangers into the Family and hope they did well enough in the Premium Age Royale. The lack of powerful allies finally showed detriment for the Family.

Great!

Daggs walked into the room with an exaggerated smile, giving a light bow to Terese and a nod to Skullius.

"Master Silrat will be waiting at the Guilds Association. I have been charged with escorting you there before noon. Please, let us make our way there," the attendant said to which Skullius smiled.

He was starting to look forward to this.

Chapter 452: Wisp of Danger On The Road

The ride was a bit bumpy, especially with the hired carriage.

Since the custom Family carriages that had been brought to Genhuis City had been taken by Stylla and her brother who were going about their individual business, Daggs had had to resort to finding a replacement.

One that was above a certain set of standards at least.

Skullius was fine with it, but Terese...

She kept throwing a fit, cursing at Stylla and her brother.

The two guards in the carriage could only remain silent and wear serious expressions to mask the uncomfortable presence that this spoiled brat leaked with each and every one of the gripes she hurled at Daggs about the carriage.

The poor man could only nod while accepting that it was his fault. It was indeed his fault that he made do with what he could find for this trip to happen.

It was his fault for trying his best to do a job he felt he was lacking in.

Yes, he was at fault.

As an attendant, his duty was like that of a steward but more lax.

What he was doing currently wasn't his inherent job in the Family as managing the affairs of the house and those of the children of the Bryne Family, was the duty of a middle aged man whom they had left at the Bryne Family estate to tend to the bunch of pending matters.

It was a sad experience to be underqualified for a post but luckily, there were two other attendants that were with Stylla and her brother.

This alleviated Daggs' pain somewhat.

Contrary to the attendant's pain, Skullius enjoyed the view outside.

From what he could sense, it was quite lively out there, and as the carriage went on, he began to understand a bit more of the structure of this city.

From the entrance onwards, only the most credible and visually pleasing buildings were erected to give a better first impression of the city, an illusion of a complete beauty being propounded.

However, after a few hundreds meters of this, came a transition into the lesser, more unrefined districts that sprang from here, spreading their roots into the inconspicuous parts of the city, but they didn't taint the streets as much because of the patrolling Knights.

Still, they remained at large but hidden from main streets that would normally be treaded by important personages.

Within Skullius' Kōten which kept moving as the carriage barrelled on, many individuals with blue cores and strange energy signatures kept getting scanned, the Hybrid Luman testing the uniqueness of the different forms of mana, with some that seemed evolved from the same generic setup that most people had.

Even as he felt the differences however, Skullius felt that his current level was far from adequate.

His [Elevated Mana Manipulation] was lacking in giving him some of the more hidden details he desired.

He really needed to evolve it into the next version of itself.

When he did, everything of his would become drastically more powerful.

He was sure.

It was actually surprising how many people in this city had general presences rivalling those of the mercenaries from the Guilds Association in Inhone City.

Most of them were probably lone wolves with a variety of reasons fo—

...!

Skullius suddenly jerked up from his relaxed position in the carriage, his mana almost exploding out as he sensed...a threat.

An incredibly dangerous presence suddenly peeked out from a certain man who was walking on the street thirteen meters away from the carriage!

His slowly moving figure entered a small shop, becoming masked by the passers-by but not to Skullius.

This man...

Skullius, furrowed his brows as he condensed his Kōten to get a better feel for this individual, his mind instinctively drawing out a memory of something he had been warned about by Stylla.

There were three individuals he had been told to be wary of in the Premium Age Royale.

Even before all the other participants had been decided, the rules and venue for the Royale still unknown, there were rumours going on about these individuals participating in the event.

One was known as the strongest.

One known as the most dangerous.

The last known as the most unpredictable.

Skullius was almost led to believe that the presence he had felt just now belonged to one of these three.

However, that was too presumptuous.

What were the odds?

'Whoever that man is... I hope I'll get to meet him at least,' Skullius thought. It wasn't because of a hostile sentiment.

"Hey! Don't do that so suddenly! You almost gave me a heart attack!" Terese who had been startled by Skullius' reaction yelled.

The guards had also been prompted to high guard as they thought that something was wrong but it didn't seem that way.

Skullius didn't pay Terese any mind.

His focus was on the remnants of a dangerous air that slipped from his Kote as the carriage went on.

....

Daggs, Skullius and Terese disembarked from the carriage along with the guards, coming to face the massive building with a very welcoming board on its face reading 'Genhuis Branch, Guilds Association'.

A reddish hue was plastered over the building with white adorning the frames of every door and window in sight.

A large set of steps preceded the expansive doors to the building where hundreds of men and women decked in powerful armours were spat out or fed in.

To Skullius, this was reminiscent of the Association Branch in Inhone, but this was much better as a fortress for mercenaries. It gave them more dignity and pride just from how magnificent the building was from the side.

'It feels a bit more intimidating,' Skullius remarked.

Daggs led the way in, a colossal space being exposed, its size as if compensating for a possible Giants' visit.

A clean shiny floor in a pale yellow colour and white walls in the foyer, which was the most common place in the Association could be discerned, civilised clamour sounding from all around as hundreds of mercenaries went about their business.

At the very end of this foyer was a wall made of something akin to light wood, behind it dozens of men and women who sat on desks tending on the mercenaries on this side with all their enquiries and requests.

There were organised queues where mercenaries received remuneration, where they handed in requests for dealing with various issues, formally known here as quests, and some that dealt with registration in general.

"Hmm?" Skullius hummed quizzically when he felt some coins in the pouch of one of the mercenaries.

"Is that...mana?"

These coins emitted hints of mana like pixie dust and they were not exclusive to this man who chuckled to his friends as stored the coin pouch.

Many people had them!

"You're still going to persist on being late, Festos?" Silrat's voice came from the side, the former Branch Head of the Guilds Association walking towards the group with another man in tow.

Skullius' attention was immediately drawn to this other individual but shockingly, when he tried to probe the man's mana core... he was pushed back!

"Oh?" Skullius said while raising a brow.

"He's as curious as you said, Silrat. I wouldn't dream of letting my guard down in the presence of a Mage," the man said with a smile under his moustache.

Chapter 453: Evaluation Officers

The man walking with Silrat had quickly drawn Skullius' attention.

Being resisted like that wasn't something that had happened to the Hybrid Luman a lot, if ever.

In most cases, he was able to probe the mana core of his opponent without any obstruction, which had made him relax, not accounting for situations where he couldn't.

This was a dangerous level of confidence in his skills.

When it came to mana cores, everyone with a combat capacity above the mundane level could identify what kind of core another person had simply by feeling the innate domination or suppression that their core had in relation to another in close proximity.

Every trained individual was naturally aware of their core and the cores in their surroundings but the intricate details were hidden from them.

For Skullius who had [Elevated Mana Manipulation], his perception of the core was a lot more established but now, even with that, he was still pushed back.

'Another reason to evolve this skill,' Skullius thought.

"Let's get this over with immediately before you cause me trouble," Silrat said to Skullius before turning to Daggs and Terese.

"Lady Terese, you... really came?"

"Of course I did. I never go back on my word!" the young girl said. "I was going to attend because it's a family matter but I'm getting even more curious with you and Stylla giving this blind man so much attention."

"Blind man?" the man beside Skullius asked with a strange expression as he scrutinised Skullius.

Silrat, as if shaking himself out of a reverie, gave a swift introduction.

"Festos, this is Alaris, one of the Guilds Association's evaluation officers. He will be spearheading the Aptitude Evaluation Test," he said. "Alaris, this is Festos."

"I see..." the man identified as Alaris said, the friendly look in his eyes dimming somewhat.

Skullius gave most of his focus to this man, his Koten making sure every aspect of Alaris was vibrantly clear to him.

The most notable feature on Alaris was his handlebar moustache made of well kempt caramel hairs and the topaz blue eyes of his that had a masculine allure to them.

His figure was full of distinctive contours of taut muscles against honey coloured skin, a beige, short sleeved loose shirt covering his torso while being tucked into tight dark brown pants.

Alaris also wore black steel greaves over his legs that reached up to his knees, this being his signature clothing style as every regularly visitor the Guilds Association knew.

He was highly ranked and highly regarded among all the executive combatants of the Guilds Association, a trait that led him to have many benefactors in Inhone City.

"It's good to meet you, Festos," Alaris said as he stretched his hand to shake Skullius', the Hybrid Luman doing did the same.

"Follow me. I had other errands to run since you were a bit late but I'm also intrigued by Silrat's choice, as the young girl said."

Silrat glanced at Skullius before smiling, praying silently in his heart for there to be a positive outcome to this.

The group, led by Alaris, ventured from the foyer and headed up a flight of stairs to the fourth floor.

They passed entire floors dedicated to different things, one for storing trophies of slain Cluster beasts and another for detaining common thieves before they could be punished.

On the fourth floor was a wide space with vacant rooms that looked to be quite small.

Several individuals who nodded to Alaris as they passed, with what looked like amateur mercenaries behind them could be seen on this floor, Skullius guessing that this floor was reserved for evaluations only.

This certainly beat that shabby cramped space he had been taken to by Jac that time.

As they moved through the passage on this floor, seemingly going to a predetermined space, two individuals joined them.

One was a fit woman with an athletic body, her hair brown tied up into a messy bun. She didn't have a face that would strike most men as beautiful, but her presence was very vivid, as if to make up for it. She wore leather armour on her torso, but a plain pair of pants below, this combination emphasising her body immaculately.

The other was a haughty looking man with spiky black hair cut into a fade at the sides. He looked agile because of his tall and lean frame, his long arms that had braces like steel rings on them folded before his chest.

These two were Lemorine and Stephin respectively, the other evaluation officers for the Aptitude Evaluation Test.

Alaris introduced the two after leading everyone into an extraordinarily massive room that certainly didn't look so from the outside.

On average, it could fit up to six hundred people with tons of space to spare!

"Lemordine and Stephin are going to be helping me evaluate your potential and whether or not you are fit to enter the exclusive circle of mercenaries along with your recruiter, Silrat," Alaris explained as his gaze remained planted on Skullius.

"Unlike normal evaluations, as I'm sure you've already been told, Aptitude Evaluation Tests measure how far above the standard of high quality mercenaries you are – your potential, your attitude and even your goals. All this can be ascertained through this evaluation where you will fight all three of us separately."

'Silrat didn't mention any of this!' Skullius complained internally.

'I was busy!' Silrat screamed in his mind as if hearing Skullius' complain, justifying himself righteously.

"Additionally, unlike normal evaluations, you have to win against all three of us. That is the official setup but it can be overruled by special circumstances. You're supposed to be special in some way considering you've been regarded for this test and nothing short of a win is required.

Outside of fighting to kill, every one of us will be battling seriously, so make sure to give it your all," Alaris concluded to which Skullius nodded.

This was going to be interesting.

As Alaris no longer spoke, Skullius guessed that this was all he was going to receive in terms of information.

Classes, Stages and Cores...

All this was probably left for him to guess.

Of course!

If one wanted to be regarded as an elite, they had to be aware of their opponent without receiving a monologue!

Daggs, Silrat, Terese and the guards were led to one end of the room where a compartment, like a very thick reflective glass with sparkling texts glowing on it could be seen, its size accommodative of only a few individuals.

These texts were runes and this compartment was meant for spectators.

On the other end of the room was another large compartment, but within it, dozens of weapons of different kinds could be seen hung on racks, as if on display. One could freely choose whatever they wanted to use in the test.

"Who would you like to fight first?" Alaris asked Skullius. He was concerned that Skullius would need help but...

With barely any delay, Skullius pointed at the long armed man with an arrogant look on his face that shifted to a sneer a second later.

"I'll flesh this one up first," Skullius said with a smile that leaned towards being a smirk.

The tall man cackled while shaking his head at this. He didn't understand the phrase, but he could tell it was a taunt.

A horribly misplaced one.

"Ha. I don't know whether to feel flattered or grossly underestimated," Stephin said while walking to the centre of the room.

The first bout was about to begin.

Chapter 454: Show Off!

One could tell from a glance that this room was made specifically for explosive battles. There were no flowery decorations to make it look pleasing to the eye nor was there a design to give a sense of comfort, aside from the safety compartment.

A dull grey shade was what made up the entire room, its entirety made with refined rough cast in order to not waste resources on giving it touches of beauty.

Forty eight bulbs on the ceiling produced vibrant bursts of light that made sure every nook and cranny of this place was untarnished by darkness, completing the indoor battlefield.

Skullius and Stephin stood at the centre of the room while Alaris and Lemorine stood at the edge.

This first bout would start only after Alaris declared so.

The evaluation officer had felt something about Skullius. Something vague that he wasn't sure if it was good or bad.

The fact that he was blind was already something he deemed to foretell that this man had his secrets and was probably unique as a fighter in his own right.

'Let's see if Silrat picked up something worth noting this time,' Alaris as he got ready to announce for the battle to begin.

Silrat had his hand over his mouth, breathing nervously as he watched the two figures of the combatants.

He was burdened by the thought that maybe he had been too desperate.

Maybe he was risking all this for nothing...

Maybe Skullius would lose terribly and be deemed nothing special, his gamble not paying off at all...

There were some outrageous talents out there after all. Damn it!

The anxiety was thick.

'I was banking on the fact that even if Skullius loses, if he shows his talent as Mage, with his unusual abilities, he might be considered for something else!' Silrat thought. 'But now...'

He wasn't sure.

Damn it!

Again! He was feeling stiff again just like... last time.

All he could do was watch.

"Hmph! How is someone blind supposed to fight people like this? Won't he just get pummelled silly without doing anything? Mister Silrat, your Festo- whatever will probably get beaten up and you won't be able to free load at our house," Terese said with mischievous smile.

Silrat ignored as he huffed in air.

Damn brat!

If he had enough status, he would bash her head in!

This wasn't the time to yank the strings that kept his cool online.

As the tension had begun to grow, Alaris' voice finally came.

"BEGIN!"

...

Skullius and Stephin remained rooted in their positions, a gap of nine meters between them.

Stephin's body started to ooze of condensed mana that rose in swirls above him, like smoke. His eyes looked relaxed as he gazed at the figure of Skullius that also paid close attention to him.

Stephin smiled inwardly.

People often mistook him for an Assassin because of his body but he wasn't.

He was the owner of an Advanced martial Class.

The Configured Warrior!

'I'm sure this man can sense my presence very well despite being blind. Hmph! That could be a heavy disadvantage if he assumes me to be an assassin and focuses on where I might scurry to for an attack from behind. Heh! I prefer confrontation!' Stephin said as his body bellowed with frightening waves of mana that caused a turbulence in the air!

His slim body started to grow muscular, his arms and legs growing to be twice their size while his mana exploded out all the more!

Who cared about hiding his strength so that his examinee could slowly figure it out?

That was boring!

Stephin's neck grew thick with veins bobbing from it, the spiky hair on his head rustling upwards as if blown by a rising draft!

FWOOOOOOOM!

A halo of protective mana clearly displayed itself over him, a thick body with muscles stacked upon muscles dripping with sweat and might twitching under it!

FWOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

A ring of misty mana caused a rough thrum through the room, blowing Skullius' clothing and hair back.

This show of strength was incredible!

This was the Configured Warrior Class on display, the boons provided by this man's Stage yet to even be used as for now, to test what this blind man could do, it was enough.

His Class allowed his body to trade physical points for others – extreme speed, extreme strength or a balanced fit!

This bulky size with mana flooding from it was enough to frighten most, the endurance packed into it being even more so.

"You better not be intimidated. I'm just getting started. I want to see where that confidence of yours is com—"

Suddenly...

Like a wave of overwhelming cold suppressing the persistent heat and light from a flame...

Like an avalanche burying an entire nation under its cascading descent...

...!

Everyone's hair stood on end.

Everyone's eyes almost leapt out of their sockets!

A terrible suction draw in everything for a brief moment, then came an atrocious pressure!

It manifested as a mere vague feeling at first but then became a soft breeze, along with a deafening noise that normal people like Terese and Daggs mistook for thunder!

BWWWOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

A heavy blast against the solid material that made up the room caused the non-combatants present to scream as their bodies involuntarily left the ground for a moment!

Something had crashed into the wall at a speed so fast that even Alaris couldn't quite follow. It wasn't that it was impossible for him to have seen it if he really tried, but the sequence of events had been so unexpected that he hadn't been able to keep up!

Dust jutted from the wall where someone was imbedded in, crumbs of the rough surface hitting the floor.

Drip. Drip. Drip. Drip.

Blood trickled from this figure... pooling on the ground.

It was Skullius... who had given a one shot punishment to this man, Stephin, who was lodged rooted to the wall, unconscious.

His body which had bulked up was still as so, but the layer of mana that had protectively hugged his figure was all but gone.

Right below his twitching chest pads, was a deep depression the shape of a fist, the skin around it having been bruised to a blackish-purple shade, its surface broken to leak blood.

Stephin's mouth was the major source of the pouring blood however and his eyes were rolled back in a shiver-inducing manner.

"...Ah..." Daggs was the first to make a sound, his voice cracking as he almost stumbled to the ground in horror, buckets of sweat leaking from his brow.

Dear Quintess...

Terese shook like a leaf.

Her eyes were bulged ridiculously and she could barely breathe, her face turned pale from fright.

She reached out to grasp one of the guards for reassurance, this guard who quickly tried to retain his composure as he sweated, gulping up a load of saliva.

The little girl stared blankly at the figure of Skullius that now stood where Stephin had been standing, his body oozing softly of condensed white mana.

He seemed to be gazing at his own hand, thinking about something, but just this visual crept out Terese.

"Well I'll be Boros' cousin..." Silrat who was also shocked beyond belief said while plastering his hands on the glass before him, his eyes alternating between Skullius and Stephin.

BWOOF!

The wall crumbled a bit, Stephin's body falling to the floor.

As it did, the stifling air in the room finally seemed to vanish.

"Hmmm... remarkable..." Alaris' voice rang as he walked towards the unconscious Stephin, picking him up. "Simply remarkable..."

This was remarkable indeed.

Stephin was an expert in reinforcing his body, adjusting it for extreme strength and durability or ridiculous speed and agility.

He was also at the Master Stage, nearly at its middle phase, meaning his body had started to approach the REFINEMENT.

Yet... he was beaten in a single punch?

By a Mage for that matter?

The fist shaped depression on Stephin told Alaris a lot.

He was right.

Skullius was anything but ordinary.

Alaris turned to the Hybrid Luman who also turned to him.

'He's sharp and so is his mana. His control over it is incredible, as expected of a Mage, but... he lacks the presence of one at the same time,' Alaris thought.

On the other hand Skullius was assessing his attack just now.

'So that's my limit for now, huh? Maybe I can push a bit more but that's probably as far as I can go,' he thought.

The limit he was referring to was the amount of weight he could muster with his mana's special property, the effect he had used just now, along with a few skills to break through Stephin's defences!

At the moment, It seemed that something like 30,000 tonnes was his limit!

As for how he speed blitzed Stephin..

Hehe.

Skullius refocused on the task at hand.

He wanted to speed run through this thing so he could get to raiding a few Clusters before the Premium Age Royale began.

"Let's begin the next one," Skullius said, much to no one's surprise. There wasn't the arrogance one would expect though, but urgency instead. "You."

Skullius pointed to Lemorine.

Alaris put Stephin against the wall before sighing and turning to Lemorine.

The woman had a bit of an apprehensive look on her face but she walked up to face Skullius immediately.

"You have me feeling a bit nervous here," she said with a friendly smile as she got into stance.
"Mind taking it easy on me?"

Unlike Stephin, Lemorine did not have a habit of looking down on people. She had already intended to fight Skullius while giving her all and showing that she was doing so.

Skullius smiled at her words and brought both his hands in front of him in a casual fighting stance.

The moment his fist landed on Stephin, he had surmised that this man was above the Advancement Stage as he was incredibly sturdy.

With that reasoning, Lemorine and Alaris were probably at the Master Stage too.

"Begin!" Alaris called, signalling for the second bout to begin.

Immediately after he said so, Lemorine's body exploded with mana, her eyes turning sharp as she fixed them on Skullius, her right hand rising quickly as on its palm, a bright golden orb emerged!

...!

Skullius drew back a bit.

This woman was going all out from the beginning and from how the texture of her mana felt – less brutish and raw – Skullius imagined she was definitely...

VWOOOOOSH!

A burst of golden flame hissed from the golden orb on Lemorine's palm, from within the fire, a giant lizard emerging!

...An Energy Former!

The massive creature just now appearing, rushed behind Lemorine and hugged her torso with its front legs before turning its head to Skullius and producing a vicious hiss!

Following this, Lemorine pointed at Skullius with her other hand, from her palm a larger orb of gold appearing as it glowed brightly as with another burst of flame, a towering figure emerged!

Its one step into this room caused a loud shudder, a suffocating presence burning from its body as it bore down on Skullius!

The Hybrid Luman smiled at this.

Now this was a challenge!

Chapter 455: Real Challenge

The summoned lizard that hugged Lemorine had thick green scales that could be mistaken for stone at a glance, its most distinctive feature being the thick red, webbed fins on the sides of its neck!

Its yellow eyes kept their slit pupil focus on Skullius, as was its master's orders, its primary duty being to guard her.

As for the hulking mass that had been second in Lemorine's summoning, it was a marvel among marvels.

A humanoid figure with pitch black skin and thick hairy arms it was.

It stood at over three meters with a hideous face plastered with large, red eyes, a bun-like nose and a mouth from which two large canines rose up, climbing over its upper lip.

It had fairly long dark hair and red tattoos on its chest, on its waist a piece of dirty white cloth covering its privates.

'Oh, she is already using that? She only recently tamed this creature,' Alaris thought.

The spectators had barely recovered from the limited but explosive action of the first bout when they were exposed to this massive monstrosity with a dominant presence that glared at Skullius and growled, balling its hands into fists!

"Go," Lemorine ordered, the massive beast shooting forward suddenly as unlike one would expect, it was alarmingly fast!

'Well, shit. Is she a Tamer?' the Hybrid Luman thought.

Skullius was surprised at the speed the creature burst with towards him, its full figure which was reinforced with mana being clear in his Kōten!

'Interesting...' he thought as he used [Elevated Mana Manipulation] to try and intrude into its core which, as he expected, was blocked from his influence. 'Ha, of course.'

Skullius' body suddenly flashed bright for a brief second before....

VWOOOOOOOOSH!

...!

With the loud sound of crumpling paper and rock, the Hybrid Luman's body burst with the white energy essential for all living things to evolve, its untamed shroud extending to over four meters around his body!

The mana caused a mini storm as shot out freely, its intensity causing those who felt it to subconsciously move back!

This amount of mana... all at once?

Was this man emptying his core?!

"What is that man...?" one of the guards beside Terese found himself murmuring.

The usually uptight girl couldn't even find the words to scold the guard as she too was wondering the same, Daggs who was at the side swearing to himself that he wanted nothing to do with Skullius again.

Silrat didn't say a word, refusing to jinx it. He wouldn't celebrate, or curse until this was over!

The black humanoid from Lemorine's mysterious flame reached within a two meters of Skullius who didn't move an inch, its gaze turning serious as it brought its arms together in a meaningful gesture.

'Hmmm?' Skullius felt mana pooling into the creature's arms as it then crossed them against its chest and...

...!

Skullius' glanced behind himself and found...

A second creature like the one approaching him suddenly appeared in his Kote, barrelling towards him at the same speed that the first one was rushing to him at!

This one was white skinned, with long white hair over its head as well but with black tattoos and a black cloth tied around its waist!

'Where the hell did that one come from? Is this a skill?' Skullius questioned himself.

The white creature also crossed its arms against its chest as it lowered its body in its run and charged faster!

Lemorine gave a smirk at this, as now, her flurry of nonstop attacks to keep her opponent from one-shotting her began!

Pooling mana signalled the activation of an ability that was anything but ordinary as in the next moment, Skullius felt a restriction imposed upon his body!

As if he was suddenly trapped in a confined, box-shaped space, Skullius' body felt pressure piling on from all sides nonstop, his flesh and even his mana being squeezed against him!

...!

What was even more terrifying about this affair was that even though the two enemies he was supposed to face were moving at a speed that should have allowed them to reach Skullius in less than a second, the Hybrid Luman felt like they were moving merely an inch with each breath!

Yet, the pressure stacked on as Skullius' mana, his senses and even his skills were included in this uncanny compression, as if to make him implode!

This was a dangerous skill!

At this rate, the Hybrid Luman would be squished into paste before these bastards reached his position, which seemed to be the point of the skill.

'Brutal...' Skullius thought while feeling his mana which had extended four meters from his body be pushed back to just a meter away from him!

Yet...

'But that's not enough.'

Suddenly, Skullius' mana burst rebelliously with a rippling edge, creating multiple spike like shapes at its ends that pointed in every direction even as it was being pushed back!

The Hybrid Luman increased his output even further, his mana bombarding from his body as he fully exercised the large mana channels he had created for himself!

The spikes all over his raging mana grew with this temporary outburst of mana that lit up the room like a white flare causing surprise and fear!

This was Skullius' first attempt at using this technique but he more or less achieved it well enough.

[You have learned the skill 'Hyperfocus Motion Counter']

Yes!

A familiar mana technique that the Hybrid Luman had seen and experienced multiple times while under the influence of [HYPED].

A technique used by the Spirit guardian, Bassbion, one that could even dispel his [Perfect Night Domain] casually!

Lemordine's eyes went swollen in her sockets.

'What is that? An auxiliary technique?' she thought.

The restraining effect that had been stomping over Skullius was pushed back at the same time as well, the two creatures rushing at Skullius having nothing but shock in their eyes!

The Hybrid Luman's mana found enough leeway to spread out in a larger range with just this, and as right then...

VWOOOOOP!

Both man shaped beasts were suddenly launched up high at breakneck speed, their backs slamming onto the ceiling with a crisp slap that once again caused the entire room to shudder!

The black creature growled in pain, as did its white counterpart, its senses yet to even comprehend how it had flown to the ceiling just now!

Unfortunately, that answer would remain a mystery as within its vision, a grinning man with white eyes blurred from the floor, from his body, mana flooding out in frightening levels!

Skullius sent a deadly straight punch to the black creature's face, with the horrifying amount of mana funnelling into his balled fist!

BOOOOOOOM!

A terrible weight squashed the creature's entire head and part of its torso into nothing but a red skid mark on the ceiling, the carnage only noticed a few seconds after it had happened by the audience which was gaping after every second!

[You have killed (V) LV81 Dark Matted Ogre. 200 EXP awarded]

[Your prey emits the Essence of Null Life. Would you like to extract it? Remaining time 59 seconds]

The white man beast which remained, still plastered to the ceiling as well, vanished, as if it had never existed, Skullius nodding as he moved, crouching upside down on the ceiling as if it was the most natural thing to do.

The remains of the creature he had just killed fell to the floor for dramatic effect as silence ensued.

'As I thought. That other creature was summoned as part of this ugly bro's skill. If I didn't have something to counter with, it would have been problematic. I'd have to reveal cards I don't want to show yet. Fortunately, that mana skill works in the same way that I imagined,' Skullius thought.

[Hyperfocus Motion Counter] was a mana technique that was used to counteract the effects of skills and techniques in a single dash of movement.

It mainly relied on speed, but even without motion, one could temporarily counter the effect of an imposed technique with the edged mana, a characteristic of the technique, which what Skullius had done, giving room for his mana to spread out to a large range!

As he had done against Bassbion, Skullius' mana which contained gravitational effects, had spread onto the floor, causing rejection, in a way, a reverse gravitational effect that shot the two creatures away from the floor and onto the ceiling.

Skullius could also do the same with himself, attracting himself on any surface that had been touched by his mana or the opposite, which is how he had moved so fast that Stephin hadn't had the opportunity to even react!

He had also used his mana's additional weight property to make himself light as well as attaching [Great Rush I] on top for good measure.

The Hybrid Luman suddenly turned his head as within his Koten, a large creature skittering rapidly on the ceiling where he was appeared, dashing at what was literally super speed!

The green lizard that Lemorine had called upon was fast approaching, on its back the Tamer who was holding out both of her hands as a dazzling golden light was being prepared.

"Mage my hairless ass!" she yelled at Skullius with a genuine look of 'this is ridiculous'.

How was this man a Mage?!

Even combat Mages weren't this vicious!

The lizard she rode shot open its mouth as with blinding speed, several dozen black beetles flew from it while releasing shrill noises from their wings!

Immediately after they were released, the distance of the closest one merely a meter from Skullius...

POOOOF! POOOOF! POOOOF!

The beetles exploded, releasing a pale powder that Skullius felt a horrendous danger from!

The powder covered the view as it spread rapidly, but from within, Lemorine's figure darted out as she left her amphibious mount, a golden light gathering in her hands!

'How many of those does she have?!' Skullius thought as he passed his mana into the ceiling. The moment, it reached beneath Lemorine who was 'airborne' and her lizard which was clawing at ceiling behind the powder, Skullius activated the rejection effect of his gravitational mana!

Yet, in the moment he did so, an expected yet unexpected occurrence caused him alarm!

A neon light flashed around Lemorine, in the shape of a tall golden box with glittery swirly lines like fancy window!

This was something Skullius recognised!

A Genuine Incarnation!

Refined Aura that far eclipsed Full Body Aura, its shape being malleable enough to produce a variety of shapes that the user willed, and with the special property of countering mana and basic Aura effects!

The lizard Lemorine had summoned was shot to the floor where it slammed hard, releasing a pained screech as a result!

But Lemorine... she remained afloat while in her box!

Her Genuine Incarnation had countered the effect of Skullius' mana!

Chapter 456: Not Down Yet!

'I knew it! It's his mana. He can apply some weird effects with it! I'm guessing that's how he defeated Stephin so easily. The arrogant idiot didn't bother to take him seriously,' Lemorine thought as she sweat, her figure fast approaching Skullius from her leap!

As an Energy Former, Lemorine was sensitive to energies and she had immediately activated her Genuine Incarnation when she got near Skullius.

The box shaped Genuine Incarnation around her expanded to cover Skullius within it as well, Lemorine's figure reaching the Hybrid Luman as she wrapped her long legs around him and hugged him tight with her glowing hands!

The Hybrid Luman instantly felt his mana get suppressed, thought it struggled to break free. Lemorine also felt the push of the mana, which wasn't surprising.

She wasn't exactly sure what Skullius' mana could do specifically, but it wasn't basic and she could only keep its effect on her and the surroundings suppressed by giving her full focus!

'Well, I thought my mana would be able to resist this but I guess it isn't technically a high level concept like Distorted Gravity. The Master Stage is a problem...' Skullius thought.

Him and Lemorine finally started to fall to the floor, the weaker individuals who were spectating now being able to see what the heck was happening from the beyond fast events on the ceiling.

The large glowing box descended while Lemorine hurriedly extended her arms behind Skullius, a golden flame being spat out which struck the floor, swirling in its fiery might as it started to spin rapidly.

Skullius grasped Lemorine's arms but she quickly set herself loose, her strength being higher than Skullius' without his mana reinforcement!

"It's too late," Lemorine said with a smile that assumed triumph. "Just remember, I did take it easy on you."

With those words, she kicked down Skullius who flew out of the falling box and into the golden flame swirling on the floor!

Within this flame, a huge maw suddenly appeared, jutting up to meet the falling Skullius who barely got even half a second to rest between being ejected from the Genuine Incarnation and being swallowed whole!

Lemorine spun in the air and landed a distance away.

The flames on the floor cleared to reveal a giant toad!

It was bluish purple in colour, its skin riddled with warts and bumps that oozed of dark pus.

The creature gulped disgustingly, and remained in place, its five meter tall mass just lazily standing there.

Lemorine calmed her heart.

Even though she hadn't confronted Skullius for that long, just being in his presence had been intimidating.

Right now, despite knowing the extraordinary natural ability of the toad she had summoned, she was still unconvinced that Skullius was down for the count.

During the fall just now, she felt like the Hybrid Luman hadn't even put up a fight. As if he wanted to see what Lemorine would do.

'I've been using beasts that I was sure would counter his abilities ever since I heard he was a Mage but... if by some chance he manages to escape... My other heavy hitters can't even fit in this room,' the Tamer thought as a golden light started to gather in her hand.

Within the belly of the massive toad, Skullius was constantly being squeezed by tough muscles that forced him down, rivers of ooze trying to make him slip in well.

It was disgusting.

At the same time, he also felt his mana being sucked into these juices!

It freely flowed from his body at a rapid pace, flooding into the walls of whichever organ he had started to slide through now, and in the process, as it gushed out, controlling it became progressively harder!

'No wonder I felt so much mana in this thing's body. Anything trapped inside it will lose its mana as time passes,' Skullius thought while narrowing his eyes.

This was truly a predicament.

The Tamer he was facing was definitely prepared.

In just the few seconds he was trapped in here, Skullius could already feel 30% of his mana gone.

He needed to act.

'Well... since I decided not to use my Magnus abilities...' Skullius said as he grinned, his hands coming together as he cast a skill while forcing his mana to obey.

Indeed.

That was one of the things he had decided on before engaging in the evaluation.

Using darkness and light was too risky, for a variety of reasons he had thought out, mostly to do with the history between Fulgardt and the three nations that he was slowly dissecting.

Lemordine had begun to relax when she suddenly felt from within her tamed beast, as she was linked to it, a sudden ignition!

'I knew it!' she thought as her Genuine Incarnation grew bright once again.

She extended her hands, a golden glow pulsing within them, tamed beasts ready for summoning at her finger tips.

On the toad's belly, an orange hue manifested with a light sizzling sound in the shape of an oval, spreading rapidly as the giant toad croaked in the next moment!

The creature stomped down with its legs in pain, smoke jutting from its mouth as it gurgled and spat out a voracious red flame that dyed the entire room in its bloody hue!

The heat warped the air as the flame seemed to want to engulf everything in sight!

The figure of Skullius shot up also from within the flame, finally freed, as the fire had no effect on him, the Hybrid Luman looking down at the grumbling toad the he was a sufficient height!.

'This thing is incredibly durable! I thought [Revenant Flames of Ecstasy] would be enough to fry it from the inside but clearly not!' he thought as he brought his hands together again.

The Flames that brushed against everything in sight were pulled to the hands of the Hybrid Luman, under the command of an expansive aura that no one but him felt!

An aura of Null Life that he had witnessed Sila use to spam and mould the fires that dwelled within extreme pleasure and excruciating pain!

They were all pulled in as Skullius brought them between both his hands, shaping them as he desired.

Skullius truly loved having a blue core!

Since the mana generated by such a core could support the activation of Special skills, normal skills barely cost any mana to cast and with each cast, they were slightly stronger!

For the Hybrid Luman, because he had such a godly output of mana, this effect was further increased as each activation of a normal skill was akin to an explosion!

As the flames gathered, Skullius compressed them into a ball shape with simplistic wings at the sides!

The flame bubbled and bobbed, its colour shifting madly as it seemed to be trying to resist capture but Skullius held it firmly.

He had always been casting this skill while in his Penetrator form on the stout mountain, [Epiphany] passively increasing its efficiency and power by 90%.

As a result...

['Revenant Flames of Ecstasy' has reached LV20. Would you like to evolve it into its next form]

"Flesh yeah!" Skullius roared as he glanced to his side in a slight alarm and immediately let the flame which started to change loose!

['Revenant Flames of Ecstasy' has evolved into 'Ungodly Passion of Debauchery']

The once red flame, midway towards its enemy flared, becoming thrice as large with a blinding golden centre between the red which turned to a creepy bloody crimson, its descent calling upon a heat so great it sucked in the air and mana violently!

Lemordine who had been on her way towards Skullius, riding her lizard on the ceiling again, screeched to a halt!

She had thought there was a chance to save her toad, but that flame...

She watched as it descended onto her tamed beast with blinding light and atrocious heat that licked at her skin even from here!

She and everyone here, including Skullius were flabbergasted when...

...!

Chapter 457: Harbinger of Passion!

[Ungodly Passion of Debauchery] had evolved from the skill [Flame Shot], which was then upgraded with [Unbound] to form [Bitter-sweet Hell's Inferno].

After that, it had been upgraded once again as it became [Revenant Flames of Ecstasy].

Skullius had laid off on upgrading skills with [Unbound] because he had had many uses for the Null Life Essence before. He had sought protection through armour, he had had to help Red Rage recover that one time and he had also needed enough Essence for [Bringer of All].

When [Ungodly Passion of Debauchery] evolved just now, he was reminded that anything attained through [Unbound] was leagues above anything of the same level in this world and this skill was no exception.

Even this evolution was no joke as when the blinding gold centre of the winged flame touched its target, everything within a twenty-meter range instantly melted!

The floor hissed as the same runes that were on the glass compartment which shielded the spectators appeared, shining with astounding brightness to depict how they were fully activated!

At the very last second, the integrity of this room was kept intact but the radiation produced made Lemordine and her tamed lizard back away quickly as ungodly fumes roared from the molten side of the room that now looked like the diseased insides of a volcanic mountain!

This, alongside the thick black smoke that raged from the glowing, bubbling and molten floor and ceiling with bits of golden sparks within it gave the visage of true horror.

This smoke was also dangerous. It would likely insta-kill even an Advancement Stage expert if they were careless.

All this considered however, Skullius who was on the ceiling after causing the devastation didn't look away from this scene.

This wasn't the limit of this new skill.

No.

Far from it.

There was something else buried within the smoke.

Something huge!

Something powerful!

Alaris who had been watching silently from the side took a step forward.

This new skill had caused him no small amount shock but...

Something was off.

His keen eyes could see the vague image of something massive in the cloud of smoke but strangely...

He couldn't sense its presence at all.

And its sheer size was a problem.

Everyone held their breaths while Skullius received an unexpected notification from the guidance field.

[The HillyKilly Glutton Toad has successfully been baptised to the 'Passion of Debauchery'. Its racial features have temporarily shifted]

"What?" Skullius questioned with surprise.

Baptised?

BOOOOM!

...!

Before Skullius could wrap his mind around what this notification meant, a huge creature emerged from the smoke!

No!

It was the one emitting the pitch black smoke with golden sparks from its body!

This enormous creature resembled something of a cross between a lizard and a toad, its skin tinted with a sky blue hue!

Warts and zits were all over its lengthy body which spanned to almost fourteen meters, the crazy feature that was its twenty extremely long limbs that pressed against the walls of the room on both sides causing Terese to scream in horror!

The creature's bulged eyes spun in its sockets insanely while saliva constantly spilled from its mouth, sizzling when it fell to the hot floor.

The behemoth released a shrill scream that prompted Lemorine to cover her ears!

The spectators were safe from this effect but Stephin who had been unconscious was jolted awake as he grunted at the blaring noise.

Skullius was unaffected but his eyes opened wide in shock.

This shrill noise...

It wasn't just a scream.

It was a sound amplified with... Null Life Essence?!

The heck!

Even before considering this however, the moment this toad lizard thing appeared, he had felt a sense of... kinship with it!

'Shit! Is this creature from...?' Skullius dreaded the thought.

What was he to do now?!

The creature didn't seem subservient to him.

From the looks of it, it was thoroughly enjoying itself in some weird way however.

The enormous thing suddenly darted ahead, causing the integrity of the room to crumble partially, while its move generated a storm!

At the same time, Skullius felt the damn thing shroud itself in Null Life Essence, though quite superficially.

EEEEEEEEAAAAAAAAAAIIIIIII!

Like a sheep's bleat but with a strangely distorted acoustic tune, the creature shrieked, the smoke coming from its body filling up the room!

This smoke had a scorching heat to it, that started to melt off the different parts of the room!

Alaris darted forward instantly while activating his Genuine Incarnation which manifested with a green hue.

This wasn't within the bounds of a simple test anymore!

Something was terribly wrong!

Unfortunately, while he, Lemorine and the spectator crew were safe, the same couldn't be said for Stephin who had just started to make sense of what was going on before being blasted by the smoke!

The moustached evaluation officer bolted in front of Lemorine who had been about to summon a tamed beast to protect her, a silver sword, a gladius, appearing his hand which became decked in the green neon light of his Genuine Incarnation.

Tssss....

Alaris exhaled a stream of hot air before he swung up his sword in an elegant arc, a jade green after-image left after each frame of movement the gladius' blade made!

...!

Skullius' senses tingled!

A flash of green light quicker than the luminance of lightning blasted everyone in the face, disappearing as fast as it appeared even from the thick smoke that covered the entire room!

Skullius who was the only one capable of 'seeing' everything happening at this moment, was amazed to feel the enormously beast he had unintentionally called upon be split in half before he could draw a quick breath!

Its scream died as its two pieces that slogged down began to burn away!

Alaris stood straight from his executed stance just now, and narrowed his eyes.

'Strange. I didn't get even an ounce of mana from it...' he thought.

He chalked this up to the weird nature of the ability Skullius had used and moved on to more important things.

The smoke within the room started to disappear, leaving the clear but unsteady structure of the room visible, its charred and molten state on full view.

Alaris breathed out as he looked at Skullius who dropped from the ceiling and landed on the floor.

"Let us stop here. I have no doubt in my mind that you qualify as a special existence," Alaris said before turning to Lemorine who was still dazed and quite frankly, terrified. "Don't you agree?"

"Uh... of course," the Tamer said as she broke her Genuine Incarnation.

"Good. When Stephin recovers we can ask for his opinion but please consider yourself—"

"OOOH YEAAAAHHHHH~" a disturbing moan that came from a corner of the room tore everyone from Alaris and his words.

When everyone turned, they found the figure of Stephin shaking vibrantly while its hand held a long protrusion from his crotch.

Something flowed out of this protrusion as the man moaned and groaned disgustingly.

After he was done, he felt the gazes from behind and with eyes that rapidly spun like wheels within his sockets, he wore a fierce expression and shouted.

"The fuck are you looking at?!"

Chapter 458: Request

A man without the look of shame or worry was a terrifying existence to see, especially when his body was partially set alight, with burns and dark patches over his skin.

Who knew beating off in front of a group of people couldn't bring one to even show some level dignity by hiding themselves afterwards?

The juices were gone after all.

Within the safety of the glass, one of the guards hurriedly covered Terese's eyes while the other rushed in front of her as backup. This wasn't child friendly content after all, and they would rather suffer the consequences later. Inevitably.

Alaris gaped in subdued shock while Lemorine grimaced while vehemently shaking her head.

She gave a command to the large lizard, the creature opening its mouth as it spat out three black beetles that rushed in the done-jerking-off jerk's direction and exploded into fine powder that rapidly spread through the air!

Instantly, the image of Stephin was engulfed in the powder, being obscured from view while a second later, his gut wrenching scream was heard.

The lizard followed after the beetles it had sent towards the evaluator's way and stomped its foot at the man!

Lemorine fully expected Stephin to resist but surprisingly, as the powder cleared, Stephin's body was revealed unconscious under her lizard's suppression.

'He didn't fight back?' she thought while relaxing, a portion of her thoughts wandering to the hope that she hadn't squashed the tall man's erect gentleman.

"Thank you, Lemorine," Alaris said as he sighed out in relief.

Unfortunately, he couldn't say this with a smile as this... was unprecedented.

What the heck was that?!

A quick analysis told him that this probably had to do with the smoke that the creature he had just killed released and also, with the image of that enormous creature having spinning eyes...

It was definitely connected in an unsettling way.

But all this wasn't the thick of it.

Alaris turned to Skullius who also looked to be surprised, but with no concern whatsoever.

His white eyes were as blank as could be and right now, he was deep in thought.

'The effect of this weird skill seems to have evolved again and I really don't know if its for the best or the worst...' Skullius thought while looking at the description of the new skill of his with the guidance filed.

~~~

[Ungodly Passion of Debauchery | Lv.1]

A flame generated for the righteous goal of granting a blurred line between agony and ecstasy rests at your fingertips, with the capacity for unimaginable destruction.

Every use of the skill can generate up to 40 allies out of the burned targets, with a 50% boost to their overall power. In addition, among the affected allies, there is a possibility for one who accepts the prodding will of DESIRE to be baptised to the Passion of Debauchery, attaining a temporary shift in their racial characteristics to that of a FITTING denizen of the Null Verse.

-Caution-

Differences in strength and level of skill determine success or failure.

Mana Requirements: 3000 Mana Points.

Duration: 10 minutes

Cooldown: 30 minutes

~~~

This was certainly a peculiar technique.

One geared towards increasing the army of burning allies he could create and even inviting a creature from the Null Verse.

It had a longer duration of effect and a halved Cooldown, which was definitely a big improvement.

'Even with this explanation, I still feel like a lot is missing. The guidance field just won't give me the entire detail,' Skullius thought while analysing everything he could.

Still though, among all the things that happened in the end there, he was more interested in Alaris' sword move than this new skill of his.

"Would you happen to know what happened to Stephin?" Alaris asked, breaking Skullius from his vault of thought.

He had a concerned yet... intrigued look on his face.

Frankly, bringing Stephin for the Aptitude Evaluation Test wasn't so much based on deep rooted sense of camaraderie than it was strategic, for Stephin's benefit and, or for the examinee.

With the long armed man's personality, he was more likely to be caught by surprise or beaten outright, though such was yet to happen, until now.

Alaris felt that being walloped one time would be good.

Perhaps that would break his prideful streak.

"I'm not sure. I didn't intend for that to happen. I too was surprised," Skullius answered truthfully.

Alaris paid attention to his facial details.

"I see. And that giant creature...?"

"I don't know either..." Skullius said.

"Hmmm. Very well," Alaris said.

'Maybe I should have asked that young Mage to join us after all. Perhaps an battle between Mages with such different strengths would have benefitted both of them,' Alaris thought as he turned.

One might find his casualness when dismissing the atrocity that Skullius had 'summoned' just like that weird, but he had every right to.

In truth, Mages who focused on the Transmutation Patch could do worse and Alaris attributed this... to that.

If the young Mage who was more talented than he thought wanted to keep his secrets then so be it.

Lemordine turned to Skullius and gave a smile that spelled that she was glad to have battled against him, though regrettably losing some of her tamed beasts in the process.

"Wait..." Skullius suddenly said, causing Alaris to turn. "Can I have an exchange with you?"

The evaluator was surprised and frankly, a little disappointed.

"I've already announced that you have passed. Is your ego so large that you won't accept a win like this?" the man said.

"That's not it," Skullius responded. "I've taken an interest to your sword movements. Can I have one exchange with you... in swordsmanship?"

The group within the frame of glass had been in the middle of getting out, a certain spoiled brat screaming at the guards claiming that there wasn't anything shown that she had never seen when Skullius' words reached them

Silrat's mood had been soaring, his juices rising up when he stopped, his heart almost leaping from his chest.

What the heck was this man trying to do now?!

'You've passed damn it! You've passed! Leave it be!' Silrat called in his mind while giving an intense glare to Skullius.

Alaris was dumbfounded.

"An exchange in the sword?"

"Yes," Skullius said as his figure flashed to the other side of the room, over to the compartment with the bunch of weapons.

He grabbed three swords and flashed back to where he had been standing under everyone's gaze.

Among the three swords he had taken, was one double edged one and two curved ones.

He gave the double-edged sword to Alaris and held one of the curved blades.

"I have assimilated many sword movements and tricks into my mind and body but I have yet to see them produce any effect I want..." Skullius said as he held his sword in both his hands, its bladed length in his palms.

Alaris couldn't tell whether Skullius was serious or not.

Incredible reflexes.

Good form.

Outstanding awareness.

Willingness to engage in close combat.

And now swordsmanship?

This wasn't a recipe for creating a Mage!

Lemordine couldn't believe the Hybrid Luman's words.

This was absurd!

Alaris said nothing to discouraged Skullius however.

Now, if Skullius would show him anything remotely close to elite swordsmanship, he would now fully understand why Silrat supported this man.

"Very well," Alaris said. "One exchange."

Skullius smiled as he backed away with both swords.

The tension rose once again with Lemordine warning the spectators to get back behind the glass.

Skullius held out his sword and breathed out.

With one hand holding the handle, he swiped his other hand over the blade of the sword as he coated it in mana.

The white energy hissed as it engulfed the weapon, saturating it.

But then...

PWAAAA!

Like a glass breaking, the entire blade shattered into bits.

...!

Everyone looked at this with a weird expressions. Most didn't know what had happened but Alaris did.

He chuckled briefly.

'I knew it,' Skullius thought. 'This isn't Demion's Dance. I'll have to learn proper mana appropriation for lesser weapons.'

Correcting himself from the earlier mistake, Skullius grabbed the second sword and swiped his hand, mana pouring over it.

This time, the sword didn't break, as the mana applied seemed just enough.

'This is beyond fascinating...' Alaris thought as mana started to billow from his body, on his face, an excited smile appearing under his moustache.

Skullius focused ahead, his breath blasting from his mouth as he crouched down, handling his sword at his side with his right hand firm on its hilt while his left hovered over its blade.

His senses which experienced everything at twice the norm passively as a result of [Beyond the Hype], focusing on nothing but the man ten meters ahead of him.

With his stance and control set, Skullius finally let it loose before the approaching clash - a dark crimson hue that poured from his <CURSED HEART> and <CURSED BLOOD>, coursing through his arms and hands until it infected the simple sword he held...

Chapter 459: Severely Lacking

Ever since Skullius had felt the sensation of a deathly grip that had wrapped around his <HEART> back during his fight with Bassbion, his flesh had never felt the same.

Even without wielding Demion's Dance, he felt the coil that promised death whenever he was using the [Swindling Death's Death]. Each one of his strikes couldn't be lacklustre, otherwise he could suffer dreadful consequences.

When his body was reforged with Luminant Seed, it seemed that this deathly energy that manifested as a dark red, borderline black ooze which leaked from the green sword, was now a part of him, tainting his flesh and bone.

This was something that primarily came with the [Swindling Death's Dance] technique.

The <CURSED HEART> and <CURSED BLOOD> were products of this and ultimately, without even holding Demion's Dance and even with [Swindling Death's Dance] being incomplete, Skullius could wield this pure death energy to a limited degree.

Even if he could manifest it though, it was not very strong, but it did give him a little bit of a boost.

VWOOOOSH!

Skullius' mana spiked insanely, leaking out to cover over five meters around Skullius in an epic white show, yet the Hybrid Luman kept the flow constant on his steel, curved sword.

Sharp edges began to form around Skullius' mana, in all directions as he planned to fully exploit [Hyperfocus Motion Counter].

His senses focused on Alaris who didn't budge or show any reaction on his face.

Yet, in response to Skullius' preparation however, the officer's figure blazed with his own mana which leaked from a super bright blue core that shone with a luminance that put Skullius' to shame. This man had lived longer and had a steady foundation after all.

He was renown for a reason.

The mana that jutted from his figure didn't wash over him for maximum reinforcement.

No.

Its pristine light morphed to create a thin film around him that outlined his figure while numerous protrusions, cylindrical in nature and with flat, bulb like ends formed on this thin film.

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

This was a very purposeful shaping of mana.

Was it something like [Hyperfocus Motion Counter] too?

This peculiar design of the mana could also be found on the man's sword which he held without a stance, his arm merely extended to hold the double edged weapon.

This was something Skullius had yet to learn about.

An auxiliary technique.

'Nomatter. I'll just have to use my speed to quickly close the gap and strike,' Skullius said as splatters of the thick, red energy billowed over his sword along with controlled flow of mana. 'When I reach him, I'll increase my weight for additional strength. Until then...'

Skullius' mana which was flowing rapidly began to manifest its weight property around the Hybrid Luman.

Soon Skullius grew lighter and lighter until he was almost starting to float.

This was it.

He was ready.

Keeping Alaris' figure within his focus, he crouched even further, gathering up the energy for extended movement and then...

VWOOO...

Skullius blasted ahead...

But stopped.

His right hand which was ready to strike with his sword felt numb as with two horrendously powerful impacts that ran through his frame, it lost its strength.

A cold sensation rested on his neck, a sharp and prickly itch of mana tingling over his sensitive skin with the peculiar moulding of mana.

Alaris' sword was already at his neck.

Skullius sighed frustratedly as he gazed blankly at Alaris, the figure of this man not showing an ounce of sophistication in his stance.

Just like that.

Just like that... it was over.

The Hybrid Luman didn't even know what to attribute this to.

Timing?

Strength?

Speed? Maybe speed.

Right now, he was merely holding the handle to his sword as he couldn't quite tell how his sword had been shattered at all, even from his Koten. It probably had to do with how much his arm had turned numb.

"It's certainly not about speed," Alaris said, as if answering Skullius. Actually, he was.

Skullius frowned.

"It's obvious from the look on your face that you think that what just happened is because I was faster. If that was all there was to it, you would have stood a chance."

Alaris withdrew his sword from Skullius' neck.

"Are you satisfied?" the evaluation officer asked.

"It's my loss. I can swallow that," Skullius said as he threw down the handle he was holding.

"That's a good trait. Acceptance is a rather difficult stage for many people to pass. I thought it would be difficult for someone like you who seemingly wants to touch upon well... everything . You're very greedy."

Skullius gave a short laugh.

That he was.

"If you turned out to be prodigious in the sword, I would have had to re-evaluate myself as an individual. But your talents are extraordinary all the same. In my books, you can qualify for Rank 4 easily but that's not for me by my lonesome to decide," Alaris said as he motioned for Skullius to follow.

Rank 4?

Skullius didn't quite understand this.

As they approached Lemorine, Alaris swiftly gave her an instruction.

"Please get Stephin some to the Healers and do warn them about his...situation," he said.

"Sure thing," Lemorine said as she in turned commanded her lizard to carry the unconscious Stephin. She then turned to Skullius and wore a friendly smile.

"It was nice meeting you. Hope to see you around often."

Skullius nodded to her while ensuring her inwardly that he wouldn't do that.

She was a non-sockethole from a glance and a peak with his [Crude World Projection] vision which he had aptly named Crude Vision, he was proven correct.

The crew from the glass finally exited again as they all looked at the Hybrid Luman differently.

Even Terese didn't run her mouth.

She simply stared at Skullius while her heart rate increased, her eyes blinking every second.

Skullius noticed her piercing gaze but ignored it. Instead, he focused on Silrat who breathed out a heavy sigh as he held the Hybrid Luman's shoulder.

"You had me there. I can't believe you pulled it off," he said with an exhausted visage, as if it was him who had been fighting.

"I thought you were the one who believed in my strength for this in the first place," Skullius said with a strange expression.

"Yes well, I didn't realise how the weaker areas pf the nation polluted my view of talent and strength. It's been a while since I have settled here and had the time to follow up on REAL levels of strength," Silrat said while once again rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Wait, what do you mean it—"

"Festos, Silrat..." Alaris' voice interrupted Skullius' inquiry, "...Please go to the fifth floor. I have to hand in a report for the repairs to this room."

"As for your entourage, I'll have someone lead them to the first floor and offer them refreshments while they wait for you."

Silrat nodded and gestured for Skullius to follow.

They exited the room and were met with many faces all looking towards this room with concern and curiosity.

It seemed the destruction caused by Skullius' [Ungodly Passion of Debauchery] had called for quite the attention.

Silrat who was quite familiar with the layout of the Guilds Association building led Skullius to the staircase hurriedly, escaping the gathering evaluation officers and the likes.

"You're sure to become well known around here with that," Silrat said.

"That'll be very bad. I didn't think that room would buckle so easily," Skullius said with shrug.

"Easily, huh? You've changed quite a lot," Silrat said with a drop of sweat trickling down his face. "Why didn't you use your more...unique abilities? That is what I was counting on the most."

"I just recently learned that it might not be a good idea to use them, though I'm in the process of confirming whether I'm right or not."

"Is that so? Well, as long as you passed. Though your ranking will be a bit lower. All you did was show the power of a combat Mage with unique perks."

"About that. What did Alaris mean by Rank 4?"

"Ah, right. Grading of mercenaries here is different from what you're used to. I should explain it from the top. The Guilds Association grades the grading system itself according to where the

Association Branch is. For instance, having the rank of B here is very different from having the rank of B in Inhone.

If Tulnas were here, he would be considered a C rank or perhaps lower depending on the circumstances. The idea of having the grading system differ between regions is to raise morale. If within a Branch, no mercenaries even qualify for a B or C rank, that would be tragic. Thankfully, there are next to no events that require mercenaries from different Branches to come together."

Skullius nodded.

This made sense. Mercenaries were mainly random individuals looking to make money. They could easily be motivated by ranks. If the Association grew too strict for them with uptight grading systems for even those in poor areas, it would be disastrous. An increase in rank meant more than just prestige after all. Money was involved.

The Capital Service and the grading system created by the Families and Houses were different though. They remained the same.

"As for the Rank 4 Alaris assigned to you, it's for the exclusive mercenaries chosen through Aptitude Evaluation Test. It goes from 1 to 10. 10 is the weakest, 1 is strongest. Your rank isn't bad at all."

Chapter 460: Perks and History

Fifth Floor of the Guilds Association.

A rather formal space with one large desk near the entrance which was open, on both its sides a beautiful door with an arch where it peaked could be seen.

A pretty woman with caramel hair that fell to her shoulders could be seen writing on a clean sheet of paper on an elegant, curved desk, a thick, beautiful glass in the shape of a cube surrounding it.

Further into the floor were numerous individuals walking about, going in and out or speaking to the variety of ladies who served them from these cubes.

Skullius and Silrat sat on the other end of the First desk one would see when entering this floor, with the Hybrid Luman receiving the basics of knowledge of what he was about to be signed into, as Silrat had promised before.

"Your showcase earns you quite a bit of merits. Assuming your Rank is finalised as Alaris said, you will get a payment of 100 Plasma coins in an addition to getting to choose anything from the first treasury as a gracious welcome.

After that, you will earn a consistent flow of 60 Plasma coins each month," Silrat said while sipping on the cool refreshments that were set on the nice table before the two.

"Plasma coins?" Skullius asked while sipping away at his drink too, his eyes showing a pleased look. The sweet taste was still new to him.

"They are coins more valuable than gold ones. Each is worth a 100 gold. They are made from high level beast dead cores."

"I see," Skullius said recalling the coins he had seen that one man from the foyer carrying. Those must've been Plasma coins. "That's pretty good. And the first treasury?"

"It's one of three treasure caches of the Association. The one ranked least among all of them."

"Oh. Hmmm. I'm not getting all this for free right?"

"Ha. Of course not. As an exclusive mercenary, you get permissions into claimed jurisdictions and get the support of the Association in tough situations. To continue earning this, you'll be given one mandatory high ranking mission every month which will have an equivalent rank of rewards. You may also receive other missions but you can choose to ignore. So no.

It's not for free," Silrat said.

"High ranking missions, huh?"

"Among these missions may come the call to act as a Designated mercenary. You'll be dispatched to other regions to take care of threats that no one there can. Tulnas was gambling on the effort of such mercenaries when he withheld the detail of how to deal with mass Cluster incident from the Capital Service back then."

"I see," Skullius said while stroking his chin.

He truly did see.

This was a pretty good deal.

"Can I get Legendary weapons as well among these rewards?" he asked.

"Legendary? Those are the standard for any true powerhouse in Aigas. Legendary items aren't that rare and frankly, they aren't too valued. Blue Clusters and above are guaranteed to have one or more of those and more as natural treasures. It's Mythical and Transcendent items that are rare and dangerous. They can shift the scale of a battle instantly," Silrat explained with a scoff.

"They are practically illegal to use without a licence or special permission."

Skullius raised a brow at this.

They were that dangerous huh?

He had yet to come across such, or rather he hadn't seen such a title on any item yet.

Silrat's explanation explained a lot.

His first Legendary item was handed to him pretty early on this new journey of his.

The All Eater Scroll.

Though he hadn't come across a lot of Legendary items, they didn't seem as sacred as one would expect them to be, though their usefulness couldn't be debated.

"So what do you get out of all this? You said something about it being a long time since you've been here," Skullius asked with a hint of suspicion.

The perks and benefits for him were more or less clear but those for Silrat were not apparent yet.

Silrat sighed and leaned back on the comfortable seat.

"Well, I guess this does help with our relationship moving forward," Silrat said, looking reluctant to share. "My father was one of the executives in the Guilds Association Headquarters. His...methods, when raising me were unusual. He wanted me to follow in his footsteps. 'Focus on the strong. No one with enough power and potential to stand at top of the whole of Aigas will hide themselves.

They are all selfish bastards who will demand respect. Leech off of them and rise alongside them,' he would say."

"I disagreed. Since he raised me in the Guilds Association, I got to see a lot of people. Those considered strong, those considered weak. I thought there was a fine line between the two. My father didn't see it that way. He insisted that I stay and learn instead of going home to see my mother on most occasions.

Slowly I got used to it, and thus came my ideology that differed from his."

Skullius listened silently, trying to empathise. This half of the story explained a part of Silrat's personality at least.

He was also surprised that Silrat didn't even seem to come from a wealthy background. He didn't act like it.

He seemed more like a sneaky rat.

Was it simply humility?

Did anyone else know?

"What finally drove us apart was me wagering that I could recognise buried talent even from the most remote and unimpressive area in Aigas and well... he took it more seriously than I thought, throwing me away from the luxuries that I was used to. In the end, I couldn't prove him right or wrong. He passed on a few years ago before I could have a chat with him."

"Must've been difficult..." Skullius scrounged out words of comfort from his cache of stolen knowledge through [Basic Evil Sanction].

He did feel a bit sorry for Silrat but much of it didn't even mean anything.

"Yeah it was. Bastard didn't give me a chance to prove myself," Silrat said as he exhaled a slightly frustrated sigh. "As for what I get from all this, it's the chance to build myself to his level and try out my ambitions."

"That much is obvious, bro," Skullius said with a smirk. "You're very greedy."

Silrat laughed at this.

At that moment, from the door to this formal space, a fine gentleman in expensive formal wear entered.

Behind him was Alaris and the woman sitting at the desk stood and gave a short bow when the two entered.

This man reached where Skullius and Silrat were, his eyes scanning over them.

"Festos and Silrat, I trust?" the man in the formal wear inquired.

Silrat promptly stood while Skullius relaxedly did the same.

"Indeed," the former Branch Head replied as he quickly appraised the man.

He had fine vanilla coloured hair and large bottle green coloured eyes. He had a rather tall frame and his demeanour reeked of experience and seriousness.

"I see. Let's get to business," he said. "Silrat, I hear you were involved in the operation and intel verification process to solve the... mass Cluster incident as it has come to be known?"

"That's right," Silrat replied with a serious expression. "However, I had that achievement stripped from the Capital Service record, so its value is practically non-existent on my part."

"Is that so? I suppose that is problematic. However, it was merely a detail of note," the man said as he then turned to Skullius. "You were involved too, were you not?"

"I was," Skullius replied.

"Hmmm," the man hummed as he gauged Skullius in his own way. "Alaris tells me that you are combat Mage. A unique one."

"I suppose," Skullius said, his blank eyes narrowing.

Alaris smirked under his moustache. Mages were all so arrogant. Did this young man know who he was talking to?

The green eyed man didn't seem to mind Skullius' relaxed attitude however.

"I trust Alaris' evaluation along with Lemorine's confirmation of it. You have joined the ranks of exclusive mercenaries as a Rank 4. You may learn all the corresponding benefits and perks from any one of the officers along with meeting your mates. Sadly, most of them aren't present."

"I will have Alaris handle your introductory remuneration if he doesn't mind..." the formally dressed man said as he glanced at Alaris.

"Of course," the evaluation officer said.

"Good. Your identification should be ready in a few minutes. Rist will hand it to you on your way out."

With that, the tall man briskly but stylishly walked out, taking his strict atmosphere with him.

Alaris watched him leave before he turned to Skullius and Silrat who were obviously wondering about what this man's deal was.

"Forgive his attitude. He values his time. If you were Ranked 2 or 1, he would have been more polite," Alaris said with a chuckle. "Shall we handle your remuneration now?"