

# Undead 501

## Chapter 501: 'Living' Solutions

Within the Bryne Family Residence, bright flashes of silver light tainted the space briefly as seven individuals appeared in the lounge, standing where they had been before they were transported to the Venue.

They all looked around, most of them at least, Setkh going on to ruin the silence.

"Well, I'd say that was a sight I didn't expect," the redhead said with a jovial tone while slapping Karrun's back.

Everyone else felt the same way but agreeing with Setkh verbally felt... wrong.

Skullius instantly turned to Silrat who also turned to him.

They were on the same wavelength.

In the rarest of scenarios, both were being choked by the same paranoid sentiment.

How were they to communicate safely about what they had just witnessed?

Was there surveillance?

Did the Control Seals have information gathering functions which obviously hadn't been stipulated in the Rules and Regulations?

This was tricky.

Before more than a few seconds could pass as the two thought about this though, Skullius found something in his hand.

"Hmmm?"

He could have sworn he wasn't holding something a moment ago.

A beige envelope was between his fingers, and strangely...

"Oh! Where did this come from?!" Karrun exclaimed as he raised an identical envelope to the one that Skullius was holding, up!

The Hybrid Luman's senses grew keen.

There actually wasn't anything unnatural about the envelope. In fact, it was a perfectly normal, soft piece of paper, with another clean sheet within it that seemed to have writing on it.

Skullius passed the paper to Yuyui who stood by his side, the girl who was used to this already aware of what her master wanted.

"It's an address. I think," she said, reading the lines of text over and over again.

"Indeed. It seems to be where the gathering will be held and everyone closely related to the Contenders is allowed to go," Setkh said while reading the paper he had taken from Karrun.

"Do we really have to attend?" Stylla asked as she plopped on the couch.

Silrat took the paper from Yuyui and began reading, his brows furrowing as many thoughts collided in his mind.

"I'd say it's a must to go. This is being hosted by the EverSword House and since there's a possibility they are in the city, they may show up at this party," the former Association Branch Head said with a conflicted voice.

Stylla's perceptive on the matter changed instantly. She understood what Silrat was implying.

Her goal was to have the EverSword House help her with the issue with her father. If by some chance her or Skullius' absence was registered, it was possible that they could jeopardise the entire plan before the Hybrid Luman even had a chance to show what he was capable of in the Royale.

"Ugh..."

Still, it was a drag.

Stylla wasn't the type of enjoy gatherings filled with posh and prideful versions of lesser royalty and nobles.

Such a shame.

Silrat suddenly held Skullius' shoulder.

"Excuse us for a moment," he said as he dragged Skullius out of the lounge leaving the others to their individual concerns and thoughts.

\*

Skullius and Silrat sat opposite each other in the latter's bedroom – the former on the bed, the latter on a chair.

"So...?" Silrat voiced.

Skullius' blank eyes didn't show much emotion or concern but he was doing a lot of thinking. More than usual.

"It shouldn't be a problem if we speak vaguely right? Unless this thing detects our actual intent and thought instead..." Skullius said.

"Right..."

Silrat concurred even before Skullius finished speaking.

Either way, they needed to talk about this.

"What happened with that man?" the Hybrid Luman inquired.

"Well..." Silrat began while swiping his face with his hand, removing the bits of sweat over it.

He gave a brief explanation of the situation with Guissepo without stating any names or laying some obvious implications or accusations, most of which Skullius caught on to.

"That's... unexpected," Skullius commented.

The Galemonger seemed to have been a more important piece than he thought. It hadn't been a simple Cluster General.

Could that thing's purpose have been to save Guissepo all along?

But then... that implied that a predetermined set of events were anticipated from the very beginning.

All that said, this meant the Premium Age Royale was most definitely another one of the pieces closely linked to these predetermined set of events that Guissepo was linked to, right?

"We can't withdraw from the Royale and I reckon informing someone from the Purity about this will be unwise too. The safest bet would be to see this through to the end. If the EverSword House is involved with the Evenfall and potentially the Green Neolists then.... you'll have to fight your way to becoming someone they can value," Silrat said while his gaze remained stuck on Skullius' white eyes.

Unfortunately, even attracting the attention of the House wasn't guaranteed to work.

Who knew what the victors were going to be used for or even the loser?!

"The EverSword House, huh...?" Skullius said.

He couldn't help but recall the glass panels that showed Rias EverSword. He couldn't see the details of the boy's face clearly but he etched what he could in his mind.

That boy was said to have cleared the Cluster beasts in the purple Cluster on his own!

That was just the power of that one kid.

What about to other members in this Family?

The uncles, the aunts, the cousins... the Household Head?

If everyone had power similar to that... it definitely wasn't worth it to antagonise this House in any way or be found out to have attempted to do so.

Above the general strength, it was clear that the EverSword House had the backing of someone who was extremely proficient in runecraft, not to mention the two groups they were associating with.

If anyone else knew this, all they could think of was how to suck up to this powerhouse and lay low.

It would be better to act oblivious and give it your best in the rounds, right?

Right?!

Yet...

Skullius grinned.

Silrat was greatly unsettled.

This should be a very undesirable situation for them so why was Skullius relaxed?

"What do you think?" Silrat asked nervously.

"This event is supposed to take a few months, right? That should be enough time."

"Enough time for what?" Silrat questioned, very lost on what Skullius thought.

"I told you about the Labyrinth of the Yoke, didn't I?"

Silrat silently nodded.

Indeed.

He had been told a lot about Skullius, his journey and his powers, the Labyrinth included, yesterday.

It had been a lot to digest and saying that he slept well the previous night would be a grand lie. He was still trying to process all of it even now.

The revelations that had been laid before him cleared up a lot of questions he had but also made a doorway for a swarm of more questions.

"There are hundreds, if not thousands of LIVING solutions there. It may take a while but I'm sure they can be of great help with some persuasion," Skullius said.

The intricate details were lost to Silrat as he hadn't been told every single bit of information there was and frankly, he didn't want another dump of convoluted knowledge just yet.

"Fine but if these solutions of yours require time, how will you participate in the Premium Age Royale while also simultaneously dealing with them?" Silrat launched a very good question which had a very good answer.

One that he wouldn't receive yet.

That line of knowledge was still lost to him.

There was no way he would be told about Skullius' double life.

Not yet.

"I'll take care of that," Skullius said with a mysterious smile. "For now, you're the better of us two when it comes to networking and collecting information. You should be able to gather some details that can help us in any way. You could hint at how bad this is to Stylla too. She needs to know."

"Right," Silrat said as he felt like boulders rested on his shoulders just now. "And what will you do?"

Skullius clicked his tongue, a little annoyed with his next immediate mission.

"I have to deal with a certain chance at horrendous luck."

#### Chapter 502: Temple Run (1)

The bustle, chatter and excitement over the still fresh memory of the Venue and Premium Age Royale in general, resounded vibrantly within Genhuis City.

All of sudden, most people couldn't help but lose the motivation to continue with the day's activities as all they could do was look forward to the matches that would begin in kind tomorrow.

The convenient setup of the Royale was what made those who had initially been reluctant to join eager, as the fact that Control Seals would simply teleport everyone to the Venue at a predetermined time gave the witnesses no reason to not attend.

Delicious food was offered.

Comfy seats were abundant.

There were several measures of protection.

Why would one even choose to not go?

Rearren's speech at the very beginning of the event was rather impactful as even now, many of the witnesses were determined to truly enjoy the experience even without appreciating the greater goals involved.

All over the city, Control Seals on the arms were like a fashion trend as nearly everyone had them tattooed on their bodies. In the span of a few hours, it quickly became a taboo to not have a Seal of your own.

The stalls where the kind and smiling servers were still dishing out Control Seals could be spotted throughout the city, displaying the fact that indeed, the windows to join the event as a witness were still open.

Thus, why wait? Why stall?

All of a sudden, the idle minds had something to think about, talk about and get excited for instead of sitting on their butts. This could definitely be designated as a plus for the Governing parties.

Under the dual light of the suns in the sky, the adrenaline and clamour, the Hybrid Luman could be seen heading towards a familiar building.

A pristine, towering structure with a three-point star on its white face.

Three faceless statues were erected before it as usual, with an extensive set of steps that lead into its entrance.

It was almost unnerving how each Temple for the Purity was the same in every city and town, along with how there was always an occupied space of more than 50m around each Temple as a show of reverence for the Deities.

Still, Skullius couldn't afford to pay much attention to this as it was merely a passing thought.

Right now, he wore layers of clothes to cover Jo's figures and a hood to partially cover his face.

Small groups of people were entering and exiting the Temple through the expansive entrance with polite, pretty and smiling Priestesses giving out free and heart-warming greeting as if it was a Friday.

'They all look the same,' Skullius thought as his Crude Vision sparked for a second, allowing him to get a better view of the path ahead, as well as the people.



Ever since Inhone, his mind couldn't feel at ease whenever he saw a lady wearing the sacred raiment of the Purity. He always knew what would come next.

As Skullius reached the entrance, he figured burying himself in the groups of people would minimise his chances of being singled out by the good intentions of these holy maidens, either by some manner of grace or some manner of atrocious luck.

His strategy had been bearing fruit when...

Skullius felt his whole body grow stiff when he was an inch away from the entrance!

...!

It became harder to move.

His muscles and bones grew heavy.

'Damn it!'

On his chest, a searing heat bloomed with the force of a geyser, nearly ripping his clothes apart!

The Binds of Fukal that were tattooed over his chest...

They radiated defiance and a powerful WILL that sought to pull him away from the Temple.

All of sudden, Skullius stood out, contrary to how he had been fitting in just fine with the crowd, standing firmly at the entrance to the Temple.

Unfortunately for him, this garnered the attention of the four Priestesses on both sides of the entrance, two of them rushing up to him.

Skullius frowned.

'I anticipated some resistance, but not this much. The Binds react even to a Temple?' Skullius said as he forced himself to move, finding it extremely hard but not impossible.

He pulled up his arm as he expected to thwart an inevitable play that could lead him into some trouble.

"Sir! Are you alright? Can I h—"

A finger quickly plastered beautiful Temple Priestess' lips together.

"Ah, there you are," Skullius said as his hand wondered over the Priestess' face.

At first the pretty woman was bewildered but when Skullius turned his face so that she could see his eyes clearly...

"Bless the skies! You're blind, sir!" the Priestess exclaimed, garnering the attention of the other three.

"What's wrong?!"

"What is it, Sister Fey?!"

"Oh dear!"

The other Priestesses had varying reactions but they all stemmed from seeing Skullius' eyes. Instantly, their hearts were driven to feel pity for Skullius, a proverbial axe appearing over them as they felt the urge to help this man.

However, the Hybrid Luman wouldn't allow it.

He staggered to the side, drawing himself from the entrance and to a distant corner, away from the excess attention.

The Priestesses followed him but before they could do or say anything else...

"Please do not pity me. It is not what you think. I was... a vile man. I was punished... lightly, if I might add, for doing atrocious deeds," Skullius said with a trembling voice as he leaned against the wall.

The Priestesses looked at each other before the first, who had rushed up to Skullius before the rest spoke.

"Sir, we will not judge you for your past. Whatever it was, the Deities forgive and so do we in the light of their teachings. Please come an—"

"No," Skullius said with palpable guilt practically leaking from his tone. "The Deities did not forgive. They punished me. My sins were too grave. I.... I...

I was once in league with the heathens... the Evenfall, after all."

...!

The moment Skullius said this, all the kind and warm compassion that had been watering him from the hearts of the four Priestesses vanished.

All of them looked at him in shock.

The Evenfall?

The enemy of all that they stood for?!

This man...

"You dare set foot on holy ground when you carry such a foul sin on you?" the chilling voice of one of the Priestesses boomed, as a serene energy fumed furiously from her, reflecting her emotion.

She was genuinely upset, disgusted even, as were the others.

"Leave..." another one of the Priestesses said with an ugly frown, her face dark. "Or else we will be forced to take action."

Hmph.

'Action, huh?' Skullius thought.

"I know... I know..." the Hybrid Luman said, with a self depreciating stance. "But please, hear the rest of my story. I have grave sins but... is it not your job to help those who want to turn away from evil? Is that not what the Deities want?"

The Priestesses did not reply. Nearly all of them had experiences with the Evenfall and they were not pleasant. Losing themselves in the moment wasn't outlandish.

No retort came and neither did any of them spill more accusation.

Skullius took the chance to elaborate on his situation.

"I was never a member of the Evenfall but I assisted them by... leading innocents to them for their sacrifices..." Skullius paused, showing immense guilt on his face.

The look on the Priestesses' faces turned darker as all sympathy and pity vanished from them, a terrible hatred overtaking their usually kind airs.

"A few years ago, as I was continuing my deeds, I was suddenly struck with blindness. My sight was gone without warning. I couldn't continue my work without the ability to see. I thought... this must be the judgement of the Deities but, my life only got worse from there. The cultists I worked with came for me.

They were angry, as I wasn't giving them what they wanted and they laid a curse on me. A curse that... Ah... AGHHHHH!"

Skullius suddenly screamed, his body convulsing!

A shuddering presence suddenly blew out from him like a storm!

It was manifested as a blackish red aura that spurned from him, rising eagerly from his flesh while emitting a terrifying bloodlust that caused everyone to freeze!

One of the Priestesses almost rushed up to attack Skullius on instinct as this... this presence was truly evil, prompting her subconscious to want to purge it!

After a few seconds, Skullius returned to normal, slumping on the ground as he took deep breaths, his face which was partially covered showing unlimited terror!

The Priestesses drew back, most in horror and some of the others in caution while the civilians that had been streaming in and out of the Temple bore the worst of it.

Some had fallen on the ground, blasted out of consciousness while others were still shuddering in fright while lying on the ground.

"Please... please... help me remove this curse..." Skullius murmured.

The Priestess who had first turned her attention to Skullius sweat buckets. She swallowed hard, her face ashen as she turned to one of the others.

"Call the Grand Priest immediately!"

#### Chapter 503: Temple Run (2)

In the hierarchy of the Purity, at the very bottom were the Priests or Priestesses, then came the Grand Priests and at the very top, only behind the pinnacle of the entire organisation, were the Higher Order Priests.

Valis, the old man Revia had gone to protect in the Isise, was a Higher Order Priest, gifted with a treasure that held a Divine Blessing within it. Grand Order Priests under Valis could borrow the treasure for limited amounts of time or beckon to the Higher Order Priest for other treasures with effects required for a specific task.

All this bled into the purpose of the Priest class.

It was an Energy Former class that demanded one to be capable of handling Divine energies in the lower forms from the get go.

Things such as Primus would quickly become a part of a Priest once they chose the class, but to gain the full functionality of this class, one had to be ordained by the Deities for it or else they would be stuck with the Priest class by name only.

In this case, one had to believe in the Direction of the Deities and stick to it.

The criteria to become a Priest was as strict as that of becoming a Mage, as severe, mostly uncontrollable stipulations existed to weed out the unworthy or incapable. Thus choosing either of these classes depended on either Direction or talent.

At this moment, the doors to the Temple were closed, all those who had been coming for varying reasons temporarily turned back as an issue needed to be attended to.

An aged man with a sharp and wise look in his eyes stood before Skullius who hugged himself against the wall, surrounded by the Priestesses.

The old man wore a large robe and held a cane in his hand to support his body - not that he was excessively weak due to age, but more or less due to habit.

"This man..." the old man said. "... is indeed cursed."

"Grand Priest...?" one of the Priestesses voiced with concern.

The old man, who was indeed the Grand Priest had an unsettled look over his face that caused the proliferation of more wrinkles than he already had.

"There is something around him, warding off all the light from the Temple and the energy from my body," the Grand Priest explained.

The Temple was a sacred place, its exterior and interior overflowing with serene energy that was meant to put everyone at ease. Dull hints of Primus energy that the Grand Priest exhumed also had the same purpose, an effect of his class.

Even though the man was quite powerful, wielding Primus energy that flowed from his class, channelled from the Deities presumably, took a huge toll on his body. Most of the Priests had to have a powerful tool around them to handle the power that grew as they served within the Temple and completed Tasks.

"Please... help... me," Skullius murmured once again.

The Grand Priest failed to churn out sympathy from his old heart. He had been told about what this man had done.

The fact that he was covering himself, hiding his face because of shame told the Grand Priest quite a lot.

"Do you truly wish to be saved?" the Grand Priest asked Skullius with a serious tone.

"Y...yes," the Hybrid Luman eagerly agreed.

The old man held a scoff.

Such desperation...

It felt lacking. False even. He knew a sorry and troubled soul when he met one. This wasn't one such soul.

'Strange,' the Grand Priest thought. 'I cannot hear anything for this man. The Deities have gone... silent.'

This feeling was unsettling.

High level Priests or Priestesses could ascertain the Direction of any individual as well as communicate with the Deities. Unfortunately, communication did not mean a two way channel, as most only heard a voice that spoke in their heads.

This usually occurred when a Priest could handle enough Primus. Enough Divine Energy. The more they could hold, the more they could hear.

This strange network was why some Priests had gone rogue, proliferating the belief that there was no such thing as the Deities, but merely a supernatural system that mechanically gave instruction without emotion, hence the lack of proper divine punishment. This was why many were quickly losing belief.

This Grand Priest still believed however, even as he couldn't hear anything at the moment.

"I see right through you. You are only desperate to get rid of the curse the cultists cast on you. You have no desire to change at all," the old man said with an accusing glare.

"Despicable," one of the Priestesses spat.

Sadly, letting someone like this go, with his curse in tow...

"For someone like you, I will not grant your salvation for free. I will give you a task to accomplish before I remove your curse. Something befitting of a hypocrite who only calls on the Deities when they have nowhere else to go," the Grand Priest said. "Only after you accomplish it, will I remove your curse."

\*\*\*

"Jeez. Talk about harsh words. Not what I expected at all but it will do," Skullius said as he moved through the streets.

His hands were slotted in his pockets as he strolled along, the rigidity in his steps displaying how he felt that exchange was a resounding success despite the old bro's task and words.

All he had done was to secure a chance at culling the horrendous luck before it showed using the information he had gained from Tulnas some time ago.

The Harem Guild Master had told Skullius sometime after their expedition that the artefact he had used to cleanse the disease from the people in the town and also by extension, attempted to use to get rid of Skullius' curse – the Seed of Quintess' Eye - belonged to the Purity.



He explained that the Purity could lend such objects to someone, especially if they had a good relationship with them.

The artefact had almost worked on Skullius but the Binds of Fukal had come in clutch, refusing to allow any of Skullius' curses to be purged.

While this had been unfortunate, Skullius had thought long and hard about it and discovered a loophole.

If he used an artefact like that while in his Penetrator form, it was highly likely that it would work, as he wouldn't have the binds restricting him!

Naturally, the impending doom with the horrendous luck aspect wasn't really a curse but given its source and nature, it should be considered adverse by all accounts and thus qualify as a target to be quelled by an oh so good high level artefact!

As simple as that.

Sadly, Skullius didn't have the time to cultivate a relationship with the Purity, so he improvised.

As he had planned, he turned himself into a crude villain with a bullshit story in order to ensure that none of the Priestesses would feel the urge to help him initially.

He then made sure that this curse story was convincing by using the strange ability that came with his flesh becoming entangled with the death energy from Demion's Dance, the blackish-red energy which he could summon and imbue into weapons even without the green sword.

The feeling of this power did feel like a dreadful curse and Skullius using it out in the open, in spite of dreading the second sun in the sky, was a gamble on his part to ensure that the Purity Priestesses would still consider it dangerous enough to warrant intervention.

His plan had worked.

The do-gooders, enslaved by the chains of duty to assist anyone who sought for help, were forced to attend to him, the Grand Priest having given Skullius a task outside the city to do first though.

'There was a tragedy in the Isise not too long ago. Many people were killed. A dangerous man toyed with thousands of lives and kidnapped one of the Paladin Champions. Of course, you wouldn't care,' the Grand Priest had said. 'The Temple in the Isise is highly revered but it was subjected to heavy damage. The cities and their residents there also are in need of assistance of any kind.

I will send a message there and register you as a volunteer. If you serve hard enough and earn the merit of Priests and people there, I will help you.'

That was the task.

While at first, sending someone with a curse to a recovering city was strange, the Grand Priest had elaborately cleared on that concern.

A Paladin Champion was stationed in the Isise just in case and his ability fit perfectly with Skullius' nature.

'It shouldn't be a problem to get such merit. I'll rebuild the entire Temple myself if I have to,' Skullius thought with intense determination.

He had wanted to send Stylla to do this for him but unfortunately, the lady wasn't really pious and neither was her brother. If they asked for something that could cure a curse, they would probably get something generic. Silrat wouldn't be any better as the only connections he had were in the Guilds Association.

Yuyui would be a much worse candidate.

If she were to kill herself and revive, claiming it was a curse, she would probably be captured and purged.

In the end, all this was left to Skullius' wits.

'I've added this to the long list of things I have to do. Procuring my rewards at the Guilds Association, the Premium Age Royale, re-checking my spoils from the last battle with that fiery bastard and then...'

Then came the objective Skullius was most excited about.

In just more or less three days, [Bringer of All] would be off its cooldown and he could achieve two things.

Finally getting his hands on a blue core for his Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator form and getting an avatar that could move all around Aigas separately from him!

From then on, he expected his progression to be insanely fast!

"Speaking of objectives..." Skullius said as he summoned his guidance field to check his new Task for Level 12.

Right as he was about to focus on the text...

...!

His body quivered!

A familiar, dreadful presence registered in his Kōten!

It was... it was the same he had felt on the way to the Association before!

It had showed up again!

Chapter 504: Him

Once again!

The dreadful presence of an individual that Skullius had spent hours searching for two days ago had resurfaced!

The Hybrid Luman's brow couldn't help but twitch as he expanded his senses, trying to pinpoint the exact location of this individual whom he could tell was moving.

He wouldn't let whoever it was get away this time!

The Hybrid Luman zipped from his position and stormed towards where he felt the presence of this figure. He strayed from paths that had heavy patrols of Capital Order Knights and continued to tail his target, this whole endeavour leading him on into the sunset.

At the end of it all, his target settled into one of dozens of taverns that were lined in a narrow district within the city, its streets chock full of drunks and whores, some of whom were powerful despite the depravity.

Skullius stood before the half closed doors to the tavern that held what he desired.

What was all this for?

It was a force of attraction.

In this establishment was someone with a presence that caused Skullius to pursue without knowing why.

It was clear that this individual wasn't in a habit of controlling their terrifying presence, at least the residue of it, otherwise many like him would be felt moving throughout the city while releasing bursts of bloodlust, but this further characterised this person as someone of interest.

At least to Skullius it did.

The Hybrid Luman opened the door to the tavern.

Contrary to what he expected the overall atmosphere to be like, there was a subdued atmosphere, hushed tones and normal voices dabbing the air.

It was almost like a civilised setting, with the scantily dressed waiters that would have been seducing the customers walking around with stiff steps while those who had clearly come here for a

good time took controlled sips from their cups instead of the chugs they would have on any other day.

A serving booth was directly positioned opposite Skullius from the door several paces away, a nervous man behind the arched table where an assortment of drinks were placed drawing further and further away from the sole existence that sat on the abundant stools placed for customers' convenience.

One existence.

One man.

Tables and chairs had been moved away from him, making his seated figure stick out like a sore thumb.

It was clear why.

Ordinary or not, no one could entertain the suffocating energy this man leaked which couldn't exclusively be tied to bloodlust, now that Skullius was close enough to examine it.

Skullius was intrigued all the more. He took a few steps towards the man on the isolated stool before a hand whipped from behind him to clutch onto his wrist!

A rather gruff and skinny old man who donned a horrified expression pulled on Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman turned to him with a passive visage, having allowed this since he didn't detect any hostility.

"Boy. Where are you going?!" the old man exclaimed in a hushed tone, looking to have dreaded in Skullius' stead this bold action of his.

"Isn't it obvious?" Skullius asked. "To get a drink."

"Are you daft?!"

The old man tried to forcefully draw Skullius back but was shocked to find the young man not budging an inch.

His mates who sat around the table with him gave Skullius a strange look, one of them adding on.

"I advise against it, boy. Can't you feel it? Ever since this man came in here... the air just changed. By Listafelle's tears, no one besides the waitresses has had the gall to stand up and move about. I fear that if we do..."

The man didn't finish his sentence but he and his collective group stole a glance at the man who sat on his lonesome, his presence dictating the movements of hundreds of men, some of whom were powerful experts.

Skullius narrowed his eyes and pulled his hand away from the old man who squeezed on it.

The group thought the change in the Hybrid Luman was him understanding the situation but unbeknownst to them, it was something else.

"Let me go about my business," Skullius said as to the group's surprise, he began again, walking towards the arched bar table.

"Get back here! You could get us all killed!" the gruff old man barked, keeping his volume down but to no avail.

Skullius relaxed upon hearing those words. Thank goodness these guys were only looking out for themselves.

As he moved forward, many gazes darted towards him, some utterly stupefied, some incredibly furious and others pitying him.

All the men and women watching as he reached one of the stools at the bar and sat on it trembled, anticipating the worst.

The barkeep wore a hopeful but anxious look as he saw Skullius arrive.

Maybe... just maybe...

Skullius didn't turn to the man that had everyone petrified immediately. Instead, he whisked out a gold coin, planted it on the table and pointed towards a bottle behind the barkeep.

The barkeep being experienced at his job quickly took the bottle and silently poured its contents into a glass for Skullius despite wondering, with how his new customer looked, how he was able to see.

The Hybrid Luman took the bottle and finally turned to the man a stool to his right.

His Kote which was continuously refined with constant usage picked up on the man's features.

He was a bit bulky, his size being larger than Skullius' own by a bit.

Medium length hair draped over his temple somewhat gracefully, its leather black colouration which was lost to Skullius, looking smooth under the light from the crude, candlelit chandelier high up. Similarly coloured, small, slanted eyes rested on his face, fully focused on the task he was engaging in at this moment as his thin lips rapidly moved while seeping small bits of sound.

He wore a thin vest that showed his powerful, well contoured arms that were riddled with callouses and scars. With his left hand, he was scribbling in a small book thoughtfully, while his other kept scratching unsettlingly on the table.

Over all this, Skullius shockingly discovered that this man was producing an extraordinarily constant stream of mana from every part of his body, a ridiculous feat!

This was something he had discerned from anyone before.

Every single part of his body harmoniously carried the same flow of mana, save for one.

Mana coiled around a spiral shaped tattoo on his arm which made Skullius grow vigilant.

A Control Seal!

Was this guy a witness or a contender?

The Hybrid Luman raised his glass and took a sip from it.

A bitter yet satisfying taste washed over his tongue, bringing a special, overpowering choking effect that didn't actually affect Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman merely raised his brows in surprise and nodded his head.

'This is good,' he thought.

"Ah, friend. Mind reading this for me?" the man to Skullius' side said, passing his notebook to the barkeep.

The man's words caused the entire tavern to turn silent as everyone was drawn to his voice.

Dark eyes which didn't show any wisp of emotion rested on the barkeep who was temporarily frozen in utter terror, dictating that this ask wasn't actually an ask.

The barkeep gulped hard and secretly turned his gaze to Skullius as if calling for help but the Hybrid Luman didn't lift a finger.

The man was left to hold the little book up with trembling hands, lubricating his rapidly drying throat as he read out loud what the seemingly emotionless customer before him had written.

"The mistress of the empty lands called me to her dry bed,

She adorned herself in silky red that bled on her skin,

I was forbidden from racing on her curves and abiding in her warmth,

She had none such comfort after all, yet her cold heart had a soothing beat,



Her fingers five were pressed on my lips as she raised her silky veil,

Underneath was naught but the dark and a welcome that drew away my breath,

A taste and sight than now hangs on my blade,

In my hands,

In my eyes,

On my tongue,

The mistress with silk's unending voice is constantly on my ear,

O how she loves my brisk dance that sends more silk red to her veil,

O how I yearn for her tide that favours me and me alone,

For me and me alone that she favours has she prepared a grand stage,

One with ambitious cloaks that loathe my mistress and her veil,

Yet I remain to abide by inevitable veil, feeding it for eternity."

...

As a freakish silence ensued, Skullius couldn't help but feel like he was drawing closer to why he was pulled to this man.

Chapter 505: 'Friend' and Tasks

It was strange. The tension had grown as the barkeep read more and more of whatever it was that was written by the dark eyed man seated next to Skullius.

What was even more strange was how everyone more or less understood who this mistress in silk was, even Skullius.

The realisation even for the slowest of minds brought a chill up the spine as everyone was now even scared to breathe.

The man with dark eyes took back his book from the barkeep when he finished and exhaled a seemingly proud breath.

He then then turned to Skullius, his eyes, tone and mana not flinching or fluctuating even slightly.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" he asked.

There was a genuineness in his words that caused Skullius to both raise and lower his guard, reaching an optimal state of vigilance that wasn't provocative.

"It sure is," Skullius said with a half-meh tone.

"Hmm," the man hummed as he raised his glass emptying whatever was inside and pushing it towards the barkeep.

The poor man who had been standing for several dozens of minutes without much activity quickly refilled the glass.

"You're a Contender, aren't you?" Skullius asked a question of his own as he sipped on his own drink.

"As are you," the dark eyed man replied with a slight, unsettling smile... directed towards his little book.

The Hybrid Luman scoffed under his breath.

It was really hard to ascertain how strong this man was and what exactly made him tick but one thing was for sure.

'It's the WILL of BRUTALITY...' Skullius thought.

He had sort of figured it out.

What kept drawing him towards this man.

It was one of the WILLS he had received upon reaching the Advancement Stage.

The WILLS of Fulgardt.

Of these, the WILL of BRUTALITY was the one responsible.

It didn't take a genius to dissect this man's written thoughts.

This man had written about a mistress from the empty lands. Death, as he characterised it. It was no secret that he might even go as far as to idolise... death.

Such hidden and deep nuances were something Skullius could only read because the WILL of UNDERSTANDING helped him to.

As mentioned before, the WILLS didn't boost his stats or even his body, but edged him towards concepts that were relevant to what their names specified, especially in relation to anything to do with Fulgardt. Subtle hidden meanings could be discerned therefore.

"You have some interest in me," the man stated as he started to write down on his book again, his dark eyes following the thread of scribbles from left to right.

"Yes. Kind of," Skullius said with a breath.

"That's unusual. Most people steer clear of me. I have only ever gotten along with corpses... or soon to be corpses," the man said, giving Skullius a dead glance.

The Hybrid Luman wasn't fazed but he had to admit that line had some unsettling implications.

Instead of indulging the provocative air, Skullius instead inquired.

"What is your name?"

"Gabel," the man said without hesitation. "Though my birth name has long been overshadowed by the many nicknames Pelian has given me."

"Nicknames?"

"Yes," the dark eyed man said as he chugged the contents in his glass. "Of the many, I am especially fond of the least popular one. Restless Mute. Hmmm. Mute."

Skullius nodded his head as if understanding.

The dreadful presence he had been feeling from this man, Gabel, grew weaker and weaker as he conversed with him. He wasn't sure if Gabel was doing this or if he was just getting used to it.

"Restless Mute, huh?" Skullius said as he also drank.

'Mute my flesh!'

There was a silence between the two, everyone else in the joint seeming to hold their breaths as the chilling atmosphere did not wane one bit.

Skullius and Gabel continued to drink in silence for a few minutes before Gabel sniffed, another look of pride appearing on his face as he looked at the page he had been writing on.

He ripped it up from the small book and then turned to Skullius as he slid it his way.

"How's that?" he asked.

The Hybrid Luman couldn't help but wonder what this guy's deal was. It seemed he was more comfortable with writing than he was speaking. Maybe that was why he liked the name Mute?

Skullius took the paper and sighed as he prepared to tell his 'friend' that he couldn't read but he was interrupted by a fairly powerful presence that rapidly broke apart the stale and chilling atmosphere in the tavern.

With loud clanging and heavy steps, a Capital Order Knight entered the establishment.

It was about time someone noticed something was wrong.

The customers all seated and otherwise cheered within their hearts, their bodies going on to quiver with relief when the Knight spoke.

"Please, may you all leave."

The hundreds of drunks and sobers quickly rushed out of the joint, even the barkeep.

When all had gone out, the Capital Order Knight walked up to Skullius and Gabel before focusing his sight on the latter from behind his helm.

"Please exercise restraint with your presence. As powerful as you are, you may cause harm to the ordinary men and women who share this city with you. Are we clear?" the Knight said authoritatively.

It looked like he knew who Gabel was and from how he held the hilt of his sword with every drop of strength he had in his body, prepared for a fight, it seemed he also knew what he was capable of.

Gabel's feeble smile collapsed, only to be replaced by an indifferent and frosty visage.

He stood up, Skullius discovering that this man was way taller than he had initially thought.

Gabel ignored the Knight and instead faced Skullius.

"Let's meet again on the new stage," the dark eyed man said as he packed his little book and walked off, his overbearing dread diminishing until there was none.

The Knight who was now left with Skullius only relaxed when Gabel had left. He then turned to Skullius with a questioning gaze.

The Hybrid Luman pocketed the page he had been given and gave the Knight a shrug.

\*

'That was strange. I guess I was right. This guy definitely had the presence of a contender,' Skullius thought.

Still, Gabel hadn't been what he had thought.

He was certainly a bit more tame than the aggressiveness he had expected. But that was probably a facade, a persona that hid the true characteristics that earned him the moniker of Restless Mute.

He marked the man as a potential danger as he continued to wonder why the WILL of BRUTALITY had drawn him to Gabel, besides the obvious answer that they perhaps shared... killy tendencies.

Also, was he right about him being part of the three Stylla had warned about?

In any case...

"Let's see those Tasks," Skullius said as he switched focus, pulling up his guidance field.

~~~

EXP : 500/500

Twelfth Task : Absorb 1,000 pieces of darkness.

Sub Task : Create your own Precept of light.

~~~

"Oh."

Skullius scratched his chin.

'Sub Task?' he thought.

So this was why it was so hard to rise up in the Stages. The existence of Sub Tasks.

'1000 pieces of darkness? Does this mean I have to use [Basic Evil Sanction] to collect... anything related to darkness?'

This must be it.

[Basic Evil Sanction] could collect anything that was dark and extract whatever it had. If that was what the Task meant then this wouldn't be difficult.

The real problem was the Sub Task.

'A Precept of light?'

What was that?

This Task was looking to finally force Skullius to invest more time in [Just Light].

The element was just so hard to learn and with time pressing him, he had temporarily given up on investing time in it.

But here he was.

A precept in general was something of a doctrine or a rule of conduct.

If this was related to light...

'I really have my work cut out for me this time,' Skullius said as he neared the Bryne Residence. He would focus on this after the hosted gathering which was about to begin.

Chapter 506: Attendance!

"You're bold, Rearren," a young man with a quiff, his almost square, masculine jawline that was brought to the spotlight by his scowl and constant trembling, said.

"Let it go, Brenn. There's nothing we can do about it now," a young beauty at this man's side said as she nudged him.

"This bastard organised a party in my father's house without letting him know!" the young man, whose name was Brenn shouted before holding himself back and taking a deep breath.

The two stood in a very large hall with a polished floor that looked like a still blue sea.

Chatter was prevalent as many were already in attendance, sitting on the lovely chairs and dining on the expensive food and drink placed over the small but numerous circular tables or standing by the large pillars in this hall as they held refreshments.

The diamond crusted chandeliers above gave beautiful light and a few dashes of class that many of the individuals in this hall would have never imagined to see. It was exquisite.

"This is not right!" Brenn angrily said as he drank the fine, green wine in his glass.

Why was this young man angry?

Well, that was because this was his father's house.

The Governor's house.

Finding out that Rearren EverSword had issued out invitations to all the contenders and their respective Family members with this address as the venue for the gathering that the Game Master had mentioned, was a heavy blow.

All the decorations and foods were supplied by the EverSword House but this... this...



"Let it go, Brenn. Father already accepted it and you should too," the girl beside Brenn, his sister said.

As of now, only ten Families had registered their attendance and the great hall was barely filled up to the eighth mark.

Still, the night was young. The sun retired to its nest behind the horizon merely twenty minutes ago. Most were going to show in time.

Brenn turned his gaze to the man responsible for this and his family.

They were all seated on raised platform at the end of the floor, their sitting arrangement being the same as it had been back at the venue of the Premium Age Royale - Rearren at the centre, Rias to his right and his wife Millisa to the left.

A few extra seats could also be seen on this platform, their owners yet to arrive.

The three EverSword House members sat while overlooking the still fairly silent hall, with many choosing to avoid locking gazes with them.

Such a powerful family was difficult to approach.

At this moment, the Knight stationed at the vast entrance that looked like it was made to accommodate a giant, spoke in a boisterous voice.

"The Bryne Family... in attendance!"

The Bryne siblings walked in at this moment with Karrun and Skullius following on either of their sides.

Yuyui and Silrat also followed from behind, the entourage that they all had come with being left behind at the entrance.

It was customary for most events involving people of high standing to announce the arrival of each and everyone expected to come, though differences in status applied, modifying the nature of presentation.

This was an informal event so dressing wasn't something strictly stipulated but as well groomed children of the Family, Setkh and Stylla dressed formally.

Karrun followed Setkh's example while Skullius wore what he usually wore. In fact, the Hybrid Luman was barely concerned about clothing and more so focused on the green haired lady walking a few steps behind him.

'If she dares...' Skullius thought, keeping track of Yuyui's roaming eyes as it seemed whenever food was involved, this undying brat's brain would be replaced with a food flavoured vacuum.

Skullius wasn't that concerned with appearances, but given the fact that Yuyui's powers seemed to be triggered by her emotions, as shown when she awakened the Eye of Dispersal, he was convinced that one of her other eyes would come from her orgasming over some food flavour.

The six walked into the hall while feeling several dozens of eyes stabbing at them keenly.

This was natural.

The whole point of this gathering was to know who was who after all. Names could be inquired or discerned through the Control Seal when they had returned to the venue which a major plus also.

As they all approached one of the tables, Skullius pulled on Yuyui and dragged her aside.

She was wearing a dress that Stylla couldn't fit in anymore – frankly it had had to be worked on for a few minutes to fit her still fairly frail structure as well – and it looked good on her, its make revealing her knees and sandal wearing feet.

By all accounts she didn't deserve to be manhandled while in this attire but Skullius could care less.

"Behave yourself. I don't want incidents that will cause more work for me than necessary," the Hybrid Luman ordered.

Yuyui nodded while her eye quickly darted towards the splendours erected on the table.

"I'm serious. I won't hesitate to kill you otherwise."

"But master, you can't kill me here. There's too many people. And besides, you don't want anyone to notice that I can come back to life right?"

Skullius' eyebrow twitched. This little...

She was growing bold.

"Let me eat as much I want. I won't do anything embarrassing," Yuyui said as she patted Skullius' shoulder reassuringly.

This only served to make Skullius angrier as he swatted her hand away.

"Is that right?" Skullius said as he inched towards Yuyui who backed away.

"I promise, I promise! Can't you just trust me, master?"

"Not when it comes to food!"

"Well then... I also can't trust you when it comes to cute babies!"

"What the flesh are you talking about?!"

"You know exactly what I mean!"

"That CHILD was meant to be eaten! If I didn't it would have been a waste!"

"That's just an excuse!"

"Is this why you're starting to become rebellious? I eat one baby and all of sudden I'm the bad guy?!"

"Yes!"

As this heated but hushed discussion went on, Silrat who heard bits and pieces of it couldn't help but shudder. Whatever it was these two were talking about, he didn't have the stomach to even attempt to digest it.

"Fine! You can eat as much as you want BUT I'll be monitoring you," Skullius finally relented.

It seemed Yuyui was still upset about him eating the Chubby Remnant Child of Polarity thus her questions and refusals.

What an annoyance.

"Fine evening to dine with the beacons of Pelian, isn't it?" a young man who looked to have come from getting a breather appeared next to Skullius and Yuyui, his voice garnering the attention of Silrat, Stylla and Setkh.

The three rose and reached Skullius and Yuyui, evidently having recognised this man who had just arrived.

"I'd like to extend my welcome. I hope everything is to your liking," the young man who was Brenn, said with a kind smile.

"Thank you for the hosting. It is an undeserved pleasure to have the Governor's son welcoming us personally," Stylla quickly chimed in as Skullius and Yuyui who were at the forefront failed to entertain the man's kind words at all.

"Ah, please. I have nothing to do anyway. The EverSword House has practically taken over at this point. Haha," Brenn said.

"Still, it is refreshing to see someone of your status walk among us. The hall is exquisite. Never thought I'd dine in it all my life actually," Setkh joined with refined delivery as he wore a pristine smile.

'Neither did I, 'Brenn thought begrudgingly with a gnash of his teeth.

Skullius was reminded that the two Bryne siblings were born in luxury and high custom as the way they spoke, entertaining the Governor's son contrasted their behaviour behind doors.

They were really good.

Amidst the casual chatter Brenn turned to Skullius, noticing his blank eyes.

"Who might this fine man be?" he asked.

"Ah, this is Festos Dawn Bryne, Lord Brenn. He is a contender in the Premium Age Royale," Stylla hurriedly introduced Skullius.

"Oh, I see. Pardon me if I may come off rude but—"

"Yes. I'm blind," Skullius said with smile, culling the rest of Brenn's sentence.

"Fascinating. I've been told many a time that one lost sense compensates the others. With the way you walk and talk, I'm tempted to believe it," Brenn said with a friendly tone.

Setkh, not wanting to be bested in this mundane setting called on Karrun who had been seated on the table as he dined (elegantly) on the food and introduced him.

"Lord Brenn, this is also a contender for our Family, Karrun Niel Bryne, recently signed into our fold. Prior to joining us, he was stationed at the Carpet Keep near the Isise as a Contract Knight."

"Really?" Brenn showed genuine, pleasant surprise.

"It is, Lord Brenn," Setkh said proudly while eyeing Stylla who gave a roll of the eyes.

The Carpet Keep was a fortress erected by a neutral facet of the Capital Service that handled Contract Knights.

As opposed to Capital Knights, Contract Knights were individuals that signed contracts with the Capital Service for short bursts of time in order to deal with specific threats and attain rewards before safely returning to whatever business they were doing prior.

This system was indeed copied from the mercenaries but it was also different as strict screening and vetting was involved.

The Carpet Keep housed and gave duty to thousands of Knights and it had been responsible for aiding the various settlements near the Isise during the mass Cluster incident.

The fame of the Carpet Keep extended beyond this as they also helped with defending against the recurring attacks of the Evenfall around the Isise.

"Remarkable. The Carpet Keep has no shortage of renown," Brenn said with a big smile.

"You flatter me, Lord Brenn," Karrun responded with a small bow.

The boisterous voice of the Knight at the entrance to the hall rang once again as an esteemed figure seemed to have arrived.

"Trueborn of the High Family of Opungale, Her Highness Darwel, in attendance!"

...

#### Chapter 507: Strongest. Unpredictable

The entire hall seemed to turn silent as the presence of a gorgeous figure walked in, completely disregarding the gazes of everyone and taking dainty, graceful steps from the short flight of stairs and onto the beautiful floor.

Her crimson-gold eyes and long cherry hair that hung on her naked back, accentuating her fair skin that was revealed by the especially unusual dress she wore – open at the back to the waist, was tantalising to the eyes.

Her slender, curvy figure and upright stance was both provocative and confident, cancelling out the half-assed wills of most men in the hall that had started to get the intention to walk up to her.

Another deterrent to this was the two veiled guards on both of Darwel's sides. Their eyes were sharp and so were their sheathed swords.

Only Darwel had had the honour of bringing in her guards into this place.

Her status was so much higher than that of others, so much so that the many arriving Families behind her had been pushed aside for her to get her share of shine.

Brenn unravelled himself from the Bryne Family bind and briskly approached Darwel who wore a look of familiarity as the two met.

"I feel violated," Setkh said with a drink, his discussion with the Governor's son having been axed as soon as Darwel appeared.

"What did you expect? We don't hold a candle to her in terms of importance and potential influence after all," Stylla said while taking a seat.

"Who is that?" Skullius asked with a frown.

The long ears he sensed were the first things to throw him off along with the vastly different way in which Darwel's energy flowed.

It was as if she was from a different world altogether with how her mana seemed to seep from her skin and create a cascade of condensed spots around her.

"That, is Darwel. Daughter of the High Family of the Sif," Silrat explained, repeating what the Knight at the entrance had said.

"I see..." Skullius said. The news of the alliance with Opungale was not lost to him after all. He had just never 'seen' a Sif before.

"Why is she here though?"

"Why wouldn't she be? She was probably invited as a privilege to scout interesting contenders. Analysing us must be intriguing for her. I've heard that her parents are a special breed of Sif unlike the others. Something special and unique. She might be interested in seeing the contenders up close for the fun of it.

Then again we haven't shared ties with Opungale in millenia so who knows? Maybe it's all a lie."

"She's so beautiful," Yuyui remarked with wonder while munching on a golden brown biscuit that no soul here had seen her retrieve. Even Skullius was a bit perturbed.

"The way her mana flows is so different from what I'm used to seeing," Skullius commented while folding his arms.

"Of course it is. Remember how in Inhone most mercenaries and Knights prioritised their cores over their Stages? The opposite is true in Genhuis. If we make the scale a bit bigger, Pelian, Emeradis and Maqi have different ways of harnessing strength despite the basics being the same.

It stands to reason that on an even larger scale, things are even more so when different races and continents are concerned," Silrat pointed out.

"Fair enough," Skullius said. If he remembered correctly, Oliviana had mentioned something similar.

Speaking of...

"Where is Oliviana by the way?" he asked.

"I have no clue," Silrat responded.

As everyone was distantly fawning over Darwel who was speaking to Brenn and his sister who had hurried to join, more Families began to arrive.

The Kream Family.



The Dobj Family.

The Flatbed Family which was represented by a profoundly flat chested woman whose gaze darted to and fro with a menacing swish, daring anyone who ogled hollowly at her chest to try and make a comment.

The Bust Family.

The Oldd Family which was represented by a rather expressive middle aged man who carried himself like a celebrity, waving here and there while hugging the waist of a woman he proudly announced as his fiancée without anyone asking.

The Goard Family.

The Tret Family.

The Jill Family represented by a group of very short individuals – genetics – save for one man who had an indifferent gaze, on his body a long robe that painted him as someone not to be taken lightly.

A Mage.

Only a few names and faces garnered the attention of the ever growing crowd. At some point, even Skullius had gotten bored of trying to keep track of everyone and having to guess who was the contender and who wasn't. After all, everyone had the Control Seal on their arms.

He was also looking for Gabel among the many arriving individuals.

As this continued, another name and presentation garnered the attention of everyone in the hall.

"Pelian's pride in restoration and quality, the Kinn Family, represented by Lady Vali Kinn, in attendance!"

Shortly after the announcement, five figures walked into the hall, two on either side of one individual who looked and dressed differently from the rest.

While the other feminine figures were dressed reservedly in humble robes that disallowed any part of them to be guessed save for their faces, the drop dead beauty at the centre, with her long navy blue hair that was tied into an exquisite Dutch braid that reached her thighs, wore a dangerously seductive minidress.

Every single one of her trained motions drew the end of the dress to reveal more of her unblemished thighs, her signature step which stood somewhere between whorish and Queenly causing a few weak minds to fantasise depravity.

Thankfully, a stylish cobalt blue cloak that reached down to her knees saved everyone from the snare of her plump cleavage but the damage was already done.

Her steps were powerful yet classy and her relaxed gaze as she slid her eyes left and right exuded a quality seductiveness.

"I hoped I'd steal the show. Looks like someone beat me to it," Vali said with a sweet smile on her ideal pink lips. "It's so lively already."

Swarms of men that recognised her and her Family and the few that didn't, fawned over her. Some offered drinks, some offered a seat while smile asked for permission to simply stare at her from a distance.

Such behaviour from the weak willed was nauseating to say the least but nothing could be done about it.

"She's the one," Stylla drew close to Skullius and said while swirling her glass.

"Oh?" Skullius raised a brow.

"Of everyone here so far, you should be mindful of her," the redhead warned.

"She's the one you say is called the most unpredictable?"

"Yes. Besides her bloodline, she's really crafty and extremely powerful. Only a handful of Families are raised on a pedestal above all the others and her Family is one of them."

The strongest, the most dangerous and the most unpredictable.

These were the titles that Stylla had told Skullius about some time ago, along with the names of the individuals attached to them.

He had finally 'seen' one of them.

Save for one name, Stylla had notified Skullius of the identities of these three. This exception had a moniker instead of a real man.

One down.

Skullius wandered where Gabel fit among these.

Surely, that man... if he was contending, he had to have a title of his own, right?

It only made sense.

He had asked Stylla about Gabel after arriving at the mansion, mentioning his real name and nickname, Restless Mute, but she claimed she didn't know it.

As if to indulge Skullius' restless curiosity, another announcement was made.

"The most esteemed and respected among all the Families, the Velanqi Family, represented by Lord Aurolio Velanqi, in attendance!"

A respectful lull ensued as many acknowledged the presence of someone who was regarded as uncontested in terms of strength among all the Families in Pelian. Someone who had never tasted defeat since his birth in any circumstance – duel or ambush.

A man with long, white hair tied into a ponytail, its pristine colour tainted with blue streaks on both sides of his head, walked in. He wore a white, oversized blanket-like jacket with a fuzzy exterior, his figure shivering under it.

He had a hunched posture that depicted a lack of confidence and his furrowed brows as he anxiously looked at everyone displayed unease.

Next to him, a formally dressed woman with a straight posture and calm gait turned to him, already expectant of...

"Idline. Look at them! Some of them are so strong! Far stronger than me! They could fuck me up very easily if they wanted to! I told you we should have investigated some more!" Aurolio nervously exclaimed while leaning over to his attendant.

...her master's panic attacks.

'Here we go again,' Idline sighed.

Everyone made way for the two with some giving respectful greetings, verbal or nod.

Others even shuddered a little but the general vibe was of respect.

"That man..."

"I get it," Skullius cut off Stylla. He immediately attached the name to this individual as soon as he heard what the Knight had announced.

Furthermore, Skullius had grown wary of individuals who lacked any form of a presence.

Aurolio was the same.

There was practically nothing to discern energy-wise from him.

No mana.

No Aura.

Nothing.

That said a lot.

'So this guy is the most powerful, huh?' Skullius thought as he sensed Aurolio and Idline getting a seat on a less attention-grabbing table.

Interesting.

The rhythm and clamour continued as many continued to arrive while others continued to enjoy themselves.

Unfortunately for Skullius, it seemed that Gabel wasn't going to show.

It fit his personality from what he had seen anyway.

After tens more minutes, the sharp ring of a glass echoed as Rearren EverSword stood from his seat and gathered everyone's attention.

It was time to begin.

Chapter 508: Hidden Regulations, Surprise Contender

Rearren standing from his seat warranted everyone to start moving to their own seats if they weren't seated already. The tables were placed for groups of four to sit comfortably after all.

Soon, the hall had grown silent as everyone keenly paid attention to what the Head of the EverSword House would want to say.

What was this gathering for anyway besides the obvious introductions and conversing?

At the end of the hall where the prestigious host Household members sat, Darwel could also be seen, along with Brenn and the veiled guards.

They couldn't be mixed in with everyone else, after all.

"A fine evening, isn't it? I have every reason to believe that many of you will remember this night quite fondly, regardless of the results at the end of the Premium Age Royale," Rearren said. "No doubt however, for some, the next stretch of days will be their last. There are many feuds among your Families that many of you will no doubt seek to settle in rather... blood ways.

As stated by the rules, that is permitted."

"That aside, besides fellowship, I organised this gathering to speak about the hidden rules and regulations of the Premium Age Royale. Rules that have no reason to land in the minds of civilians."

Most Contenders had thought about this.

Surely all that they had received in the way of rules wasn't the entire package, right? Besides some reveals, the rules didn't specify details about some very, very concerning matters. One such matter was...

"First, allow me to elaborate on the barring of all experts above the Master Stage from participating. As you know, the population of powerhouses at that level rests only at a measly few hundred or even less in Pelian. Something that I would say is owed to the Ashing of Time. But I digress."

"As there are so few, our community is close knit. Bandit, Mage, Family Head, whatever they are, we have our appetites in check. The only ones to control us is us. I ensured that my peers understood. As such, that is why you will find no Incandescent Stage experts or higher in this event. That would be unfair wouldn't it?

Hahaha," Rearren explained.

Many nodded.

This made sense.

There were a few Family Heads that were actually at the Incandescent Stage and they were barred from being anything but witnesses in the Premium Age Royale.

The others were among the ranks of the Capital Service as Honoured Level combatants, a rank above Capital Order Knights.

It was sad to see that throughout the years, the number of mighty powers that transcended Master did not grow by much, but then again, as Rearren had stated, this was owed to a phenomenon that only a handful of individuals in the entirety of Aigas understood.

The Ashing of Time.

"Beyond this, I also wanted to formally introduce a contender in the Premium Age Royale that has not been given proper welcome, Her Highness Darwel of Opungale," Rearren said as he gestured towards the gorgeous Sif who sat on this platform.

A lull ensued in the hall as the previous topic had caused hushed discussions to occur but this...

As Darwel stood with a smile on her lips, everyone was shocked!

"She'll be participating?!"

"What! That's absurd!"

"Why?! That just makes the event unfair! Who would risk fighting her?!"

"Damn it! Is this some kind of joke?!"

It wasn't a secret that most humans did not favour the Sif at all.

Racial issues were prevalent in every continent.

For the most part, everyone could tolerate Darwel's presence as a witness but the fact that she was participating...

"Well that, is so... very... interesting."

Vali Kinn who sat on one of the tables said with a sly smile as she set one leg of hers over the other while sipping on her drink.

She was one of the few who wasn't really shocked, but more so intrigued about this revelation.

Her reaction was closely followed by Aurolio's.

Somewhere between the frames of this reality, he had gotten a grip of himself. He breathed into his hands while quivering as he eyed Darwel calmly.

"What a surprise but she isn't the one either. I'm running out of surprise contenders to pin THAT identity onto. Tsk. I sincerely hope this wasn't all for nothing. I hate public spaces," Aurolio growled to himself.

"Please be patient. You can take your time scouting later," Idline who sat beside the white haired man said.

Silrat had nearly choked on his wine when Rearren announced this shocking burst of news. What he had told Skullius earlier was blown out of the water, proven to be false. Darwel was a contender not a witness!

Skullius folded his arms.

The competition kept growing and growing.

"Please calm down," Rearren struck his wine glass with a spoon, the ring causing everyone to hush down. "I know how it seems, but I assure you no one will come to harm simply by trading blows with Her Highness Darwel. I give you my word. Instead of counting her out as a combatant since she is of a very high standing, I would take her seriously if I were you."

The crowd seemed to relax a tad bit but everyone noticed how Rearren phrased his statement.



No one would come to harm simply by trading blows with Darwel.

That meant doing anything else, perhaps wounding her would cause problems?! Obviously!

Unfortunately, Rearren did nothing to quell the concerned hearts of the contenders above this and many started to wonder...

Who were the unlucky fools that would have to face off against her in the Preliminaries?

"The last issue I would like to address is the match ups. Unlike the popular method of random selection, the Game Master will decide who will battle against who in the Preliminary rounds. Granted, he does not know most of you by name, so it might as well be the same as random selection."

This announcement didn't bother many as much as there was nothing to draw from it.

Bottom line, all matches were going to be pre-planned by the Game Master but ultimately it was all left to the mercies of one's Direction whether or not they would face up against someone absurd or not.

Unlike the case with Darwel, most were willing to accept that they could be unlucky enough to battle with Vali or Aurolio or perhaps even the other individual that everyone had not spoken about who had publicly announced his interest when this event was announced months back, at least the rumours said so, since win or loss didn't have nearly as much terrifying external consequences.

"Ah. Enough with the sombreness. All the formal talk ends here. Beyond this, please enjoy the company," Rearren said. Everyone was relieved.

At least there were no more hidden surprises.

The EverSword House Head turned to his right where Rias was sitting.

"Go on, son. Socialise and mingle with the other. You deserve it," Rearren said with a fatherly smile, if it could be identified as such.

"Yes father," Rias said as he rose, everyone gazing towards him with a mix of emotion as he began walking among them.

#### Chapter 509: Insecurities

The figure of Rias which wasn't at all as one would expect from a teen – tall, firm and strangely assertive – moved with a sort of rigidity that unsettled most.

This boy had a sharp presence, as if knives were exhaled with his every breath and from every one of his pores.

As Rearren had alluded to, the Houses were very secretive, mostly stuck in the tradition that they only had to show when things went wrong.

As such, nothing much was known about the Houses. Perhaps some minor details about their techniques and some of their customs which had been documented in history books but those questionable and insufficient bursts of detail left much to be desired.

The name of the EverSword House technique was known though.

The Imagining Technique.

Very few knew how it worked but everyone would imagine it transcended all the crazy stuff the Families could pull off.

Rias didn't make an attempt to socialise as he simply poured himself a drink and strolled around, appraising everyone he saw.

A distance from him, someone else was doing the same.

Aurolio was shivering as he sat on his table, his eyes roaming about with a calm, purple glow.

Surprisingly, in his sight, everyone he could see had strands of green flowing from their bodies, some rising up to even touch the ceiling above. There were variations in amounts and even the shade of green, but pretty much the results left him cursing the cold and his dumb luck.

"Fuck, its cold! I can't find whoever this person is supposed to be. Maybe I'm overthinking. Maybe that's not what that old bastard meant. Could he have wanted to tell me I would meet a special, regular combatant instead?" Aurolio questioned.

"I doubt it. He isn't exactly astute in speech but I doubt he would lead you off that badly. Gender? Maybe. But not this," Idline said as she maintained her straight sitting posture, her eyes also appraising everyone here. "None of them have any unique traits, classes or names though.

Perhaps this individual didn't attend?"

Aurolio furrowed his brow.

The green glow he could see right now, was life energy.

Some had outrageous amounts of it, somewhat correlating to their strength while some had limited amounts of it. Curses, illnesses and sometimes even unique techniques caused such variations.

"Tsk. No Void type. Definitely no Undeath type either... I hate this."

On the other side of clustered attendants, Skullius was looking over Yuyui as she elegantly stuffed her face. She looked very happy while eating, her face contorting in ways that made the Hybrid Luman wonder where her mind belonged exactly. Mature or childish.

"Hurry up. We'll have to leave soon. My time is almost up for the day," Skullius said to the green haired girl who nodded without turning her head.

Surprisingly, Silrat had already gone to start mixing and mingling with the crowd.

Apparently, this was a perfect place to gather information, as they had talked about before.

Setkh was also doing some mingling but for completely different reasons. Flirty reasons.

Skullius noted his position in the crowd, monitoring how he was behaving and turned to Stylla who was seated as he and Yuyui were, looking disinterestedly into the chatty crowds.

"What's the deal with your brother? We haven't gotten to talking about that," Skullius asked.

Stylla glanced at him before twisting her lips and lazily raising a glass.

"He's an idiot whoremonger. An entitled one who thinks the past is the past and all can easily be forgiven," she said.

"Must've done something really terrible for you to hate him that much," Skullius said.

"Terrible is an understatement. He's the prodigal son who even when he abandoned the Family, leaving me to tend to the tragedy of father's incident alone, was welcomed with open arms when he returned. I got no such privileges unfortunately. Apparently, running the Family from a young age in father's stead didn't count as deserving to inherit the Family.

We still have to fight for it," Stylla said with calm but broken tone, her eyes sinking into her wine.

"...I see," Skullius said. He couldn't relate unfortunately but he could see that there was a heavy burden on Stylla and a deep grudge that she didn't bring up nearly as much as one would expect.

"Oh my dear. I pity you," a voice sounded from behind Stylla.

The redhead turned to see a lady who looked her age but was clearly older, her presence having a texture akin to liquid as it brushed against her.

She had pink hair and vibrant downturned purple eyes that in this moment showed pity. Her oval face with high cheekbones that made it look like she was about to smile every time anyone looked at her, made her visage addictive to gaze at but...

Her chest...

"Do you mind if I sit?" the lady asked Stylla who nodded.

After taking a seat, this lady introduced herself with a radiant, borderline comical smile.

"My name is Maxim Flatbed. Pardon me for eavesdropping but.. I have a similar history with my brothers so, you know? My mind quickly picked up on your story. Silly me," the lady named Maxim said with a flurry of hand gestures and giggles that made Stylla smile.

"It's no problem at all. I appreciate anyone who can understand," the redhead said. "I'm Stylla Bryne and this is—"

Stylla was cut off as she was gesturing to Skullius across from her, Maxim's face suddenly turning ugly with fury, a jagged, dagger-like frown appearing on her face as she pointed at the Hybrid Luman.

"THE FUCK ARE YOU LOOKING AT?! YOU OGLING MY CHEST?! YEAH? YEAH?! WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT IT, HUH?!"

Maxim exploded with a bunch of questions all directed at Skullius without room for answering them all save for one!

Her other hand which had been placed on the table burst with mana that rapidly covered everything over it – food, drinks, decor – and...

ZWAAAAP!

With a strange noise, the table and its contents all turned... flat.

PWA!

The table which had been standing on a single leg that branched at the base, turned into something akin to a large disk, or rather a glossy picture of a cloth-covered table with food, drinks and vases that then fell to the floor!

Skullius frowned.

He had pulled Yuyui away at the first sight of aggression.

This flow of mana caught him off guard though. It was extremely complex, culminating into something as strange as... this.

The yelling and noise drew much attention.

Frankly, it wasn't that outlandish to find conflict at gatherings like this but people were a bit surprised nonetheless.

Maxim still glared at Skullius, looking to be completely oblivious to everything else around her.

Stylla hurriedly chimed in as she pieced what was wrong together quickly.

"Uhm, hey Maxim. It's just a misunderstanding. Festos wasn't ogling. He's actually blind," she said, making sure to choose her words carefully.

Thankfully, Maxim heeded Stylla's words and checked Skullius' eyes. She blinked a few times before smiling innocently as her murderous intent vanished.

"Oh! I'm so sorry about that, hahaha. I misunderstood the situation completely. That would have been soo embarrassing. Thank goodness you're blind ahahaha," Maxim said in a cheery voice.

'Riiight...' Skullius thought.

Thank goodness indeed.

Chapter 510: Marked

"I'll be taking my leave," Skullius said as he patted Yuyui's back.

The lime haired girl was snapped out of the trance she had been stuck in for a couple of seconds as she gazed at the atrocity done to the food she had been enjoying, a slight burning emotion that made her forehead twitch tingling within her body.

Maxim tilted her head, her smile growing wider as she was ever so happy that Skullius had decided to leave, 'clearly' intimidated by her prowess. Her technique.

Stylla wore a strange face.

She didn't want Skullius to go.

To be left with this... lunatic..

The bastard was also pulling Yuyui away so that she had to endure this newly arrived character alone and with the crowd that was gazing this way, bunching her and Maxim together in their gossip...

'Kill me,' Stylla said to herself as she clawed on her dress.

Yuyui regretfully stood and followed after Skullius. The Hybrid Luman had had enough of this.

'I think I've gotten just about everything I can salvage from this gathering. Besides, it would be no good to risk transforming back into the Penetrator here. I'll let Silrat finish up on the rest,' Skullius thought.

As he walked, he felt someone walking in the opposite direction, going towards Stylla's table.

He and this person passed by each other and Skullius was led to frown for the umpteenth time.

'How many dangerous people are in this damn place?' he thought.

He paused.

It took a bit of focus but he eventually recognised who this figure was.

It was Rias.

He had never actually been close to him before.

The young man walked up to Maxim who had begun to chat with the annoyed Stylla as if they were old friends and looked at the table which remained flat, it and its contents like a high resolution photograph lying on the floor between four chairs.

Maxim and Stylla turned to the young man, with the former gazing warily at Rias.

"Can I help you?" she asked.

Rias ignored her and moved his foot, planting it over the flattened table.

The attention towards this area that had begun to wane was restored as everyone curiously turned back to it again, their eyes focusing on this mysterious young man from the EverSword House.

What was he going to do?

There was small burst of mana from Rias' foot and...

With clinks, a rough scratching noise and a crude wobble, the table, the food, the drinks and the vase over it were restored to their original, forms!

...!

A few gasps were heard but in actuality, very few could appreciate what this really entailed besides the shock factor.

At the top of the list was Maxim who furrowed her brows as a bit of colour was lost from her face.

'That shouldn't... That doesn't make sense!' she thought. 'My technique is different! It can't be dispelled! Unless... unless...'

As her thoughts reached some conclusion she shuddered a bit.

The crushing sensation of both defeat and shock was further reinforced when Rias finally gave her some attention.



"Try not to vandalise our property next time. Father and I will not forgive any more than this," Rias said with an indifferent and cold look in his eyes.

No.

That was an overstatement. It was too generous to say.

That would imply Rias even saw Maxim as someone of interest.

It seemed more like he was perfunctorily warning Maxim without the slightest bit of seriousness. As if she was way beneath him.

Skullius who had paused to watch this felt an even more complex weaving of mana being released for the briefest of moments when Rias set his foot on the table. His mana unravelled the effects of Maxim's technique easily!

'That's terrifying,' Skullius commented internally as he turned.

He was one of the people who could appreciate how complex the feats occurring were. Then again, he needed to face the techniques he was glimpsing at to fully understand how mana was being implemented here.

It was like how his new core worked. As if these people's mana already had effects from their techniques.

Mana cores forged to be proficient in specific techniques... this was Skullius' conclusion.

'We should be thankful that this kid isn't participating in the Premium Age Royale otherwise...' Skullius thought as he pulled on Yuyui who cast a melancholic reach with her arm towards the restored food she had left behind. She then helplessly drew it back with a forlorn expression and murmured to herself.

"I'm sorry. It's too late for us..."

On the other side of the attention, Brenn could be seen walking over to the seated Vali Kinn who greeted him with an unnaturally seductive gaze.

The man took a deep breath and imprisoned his desires that tempted him to let his gaze wonder over Vali's body and instead, he spoke.

"You chose to participate in the end it seems."

"You didn't offer any incentive for me not to," Vali casually replied, bringing a wine glass to her lips.

"Unfortunately, my father had bigger concerns at the time. He sincerely hoped you would see the bigger picture."

"That says quite a bit about your priorities and where I fit among them, doesn't it? Besides, I don't like the bigger picture. Responsibility, for the greater good... those are concepts only people with a shallow sense of self would strive for. People like me have a big ego, you know?"

You should have put in more effort," Vali said with a 'mature' giggle, her gaze that remained on Brenn's face not flinching as she spoke.

She genuinely believed of what she said.

To some extent, Brenn even felt like she would have preferred that he and his father begged her not to join the Royale than offer her literally anything else.

Meanwhile, a disappointed, pale skinned man in a blanket-like jacket contemplated leaving as the social spree wasn't doing it for him.

"I've had enough. Let's go," Aurolio said to Idline who nodded.

"Should we...?"

"No. I'm too tired to walk. Use the <Marked Spot>," Aurolio said with a tired yawn.

Being around people was exhausting, especially when all of them were irrelevant.

As Idline nodded once again and prepared the means of their leave, the white haired man looked around for the last time and caught sight of a young man with light auburn hair walking towards the entrance with a lime-haired girl.

'Hmm?'

The two's life energies caught his eye.

The girl's was ferocious, blazing like a torrent of green flame that would never to burn.

Frankly, this was among the top ten strongest life energies within this room and possibly because of where Aurolio sat, along with the even more ridiculous pillars of life energy that he had been keeping track of that stole his attention, he had missed this girl.

'Interesting. Oh, is that a Hidden Class?' Aurolio asked himself while his eyes continued to follow her. 'Who is handing these out for free?'

Weird.

The man's gaze then turned to the other individual.

His life energy...

Aurolio's eyes narrowed.

His body stopped quivering and he paid extra attention.

There was barely any life energy leaking from this man.

Furthermore...

"Hybrid what?" Aurolio thought before Idline interrupted him.

"It's ready. Shall we leave?" she asked.

The white haired man watched as the two peculiar individuals walked out of the hall, disappearing from sight.

He then remained silent for a few minutes.

Why did something interesting only have to appear when he was about to leave?

"Wait," he finally replied before rolling in his thoughts.

'Peculiar...'

Aurolio stood up from his seat.

Up.

With a single step he had reached right before these two individuals outside the hall and with another step he was back in his seat.

Idline blinked a few times, not sure what her master was up to.

"We can leave now," Aurolio said as he rested his table pivoted hand on his cheek, his wandering eyes showing that he was in deep thought.

The formally dressed woman by his side cast aside her curiosity and held her master's shoulder, the two vanishing into thin air.

\*

A millisecond later.

Skullius came to a sudden halt as his entire body grew stiff, mana leaking dangerously from him without warning!

There were many Knight outside the hall, most of them Capital Order Knights that formed rows to the entrance while others organised things beyond the hall.

One of the Knights who was closest to Skullius and Yuyui looked their way and questioned.

"Anything the matter sir?"

"Uh...no," Skullius thought as he retracted the mana that had been oozing from him.

Yuyui also turned her master as she saw a strange expression on his face.

"What's wrong, master?" she asked with concern.

Skullius resumed walking while pushing Yuyui to do so as well so that they wouldn't continue to attract attention.

"You didn't see or feel anything just now?"

"Huh? See what?" Yuyui responded with a confused, duck face.

Nothing?

The Hybrid Luman upon hearing this response didn't press any further.

Just moments ago...

No.

For less than a fraction of a breath...

Even though he couldn't see...

He could have sworn someone had been standing in front of them.

And maybe because his mind was always actively trying to paint an image of what he sensed, it had forged an picture of two pairs of large eyes that had been staring right at him in that very moment...