

Undead 51

Chapter 51: They Can Flesh Me Up!

[Name : Onumbassssss]

[Tier : 4]

[Level : 30]

[Race : Light Streaking Death Weaver]

[Inv. Status : Annoyed]

[Stats]

[STRENGTH (I): 140]

[AGILITY (I) : 370]

[INTELLIGENCE (I) : 99]

[ENDURANCE (I) : 119]

[LUCK : 10]

[HEALTH : 5320/5320]

[MANA (I) : 790/790]

....

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What was this?

The...the layout of the status had suddenly changed, adding bold and (I) to this monster's stats!

What... what was this?!

Skullius slowly drew back as the intimidating presence of this monster got to him. Benzard's words immediately rang in his mind as he noticed that this creature was a Tier 4!

Just like that man had said, there was something about the fourth tier that made these beasts glow up!

The Light Streaking Death Weaver raised its head up high, its long body following until it towered over the five individuals even more. Its eyes gleamed as it watched these little creatures, noticing that they were not weak at all... with the exception of the curious existence that was frozen a distance behind the others.

"Curioussss...." the Weaver spoke, Benzard and the others frowning as they heard its words travel to their minds. "What brings you to my territory, humanssss... and friend...?"

Maybe it was because the four were on edge, focusing more on the Weaver's movements than its words that they didn't understand what that last part meant.

However, Skullius was momentarily caught in a panic as he thought that this creature might have recognised that he wasn't human.

Could that be?

Benzard didn't relax his guard.

This wasn't the first time that he had faced a creature of this Tier that could speak. Many Tier 4 and above beasts could not converse, but those that could, were a problem, as that implied that they were older.

And if they were older...

"We're just passing by," Benzard responded while his crew didn't shy away from showing that they were ready to engage at any moment.

"Issss that sssssoooo? Where would your destination be, with those relics in hand?"

...!

Benzard's expression flickered. Had this creature discovered that he had the Keys in his possession?

These were the only objects of great value he had and they were rather precious.

Irlen gripped the handle to his shield steadily as his role was quite important for what could possibly come next.

"This serpent is pretty observant. Or rather, it can see hidden things,' he thought.

"Would you be discourteous to a couple of sentient, respectful travellers by asking such a question?" Benzard asked as he prepared to make his move in the next moment.

"I have no such tendenciessss, as you humansss do. Perhaps I should Indulge myself since it'ssss been a while..."

Benzard waited no longer.

His body exploded with mana as he wielded his raised sword. Reon also held his sword which was a dark coloured katana with a red hilt, preparing to back Benzard up.

Benzard darted forward, his body leaving a trail of thin bolts of lightning and after images as in the next moment, he appeared right in front of the Weaver, his body hunching forward in a low stance as he then sliced with his sword upward!

The fearsome blade turned white as it was charged with lightning, a force to be reckoned with threatening to rip the Weaver into two clean halves!

Unfortunately, the massive snake turned into a swift shadow that dashed through the air around Benzard and his sword as it headed for Denille!

Its form looked ethereal, the background visible through its large, swiggly mass by those who could even keep up with its movement.

Of the five, one such person existed.

It was Reon whose wide open eyes followed the large shadow that had crossed a vast distance in a second!

Reon gathered mana in his sword and legs as he then raised the katana and slashed elegantly in a vertical line!

'All-Imagining slash!'

A blue slash raced towards the shadow that almost reached Denille and grazed its figure!

The massive snake pulled back on its momentum which allowed the swift Denille who was quick to pick up on the flow to draw back and launch her own attack!

On her rather large bow which had a well furnished special, golden wood as a base for its design, an arrow with a sharp head was also nocked!

Denille pumped her mana into it, and it shone with a deep purple glow!

'Bursting velocity shard!'

She released the arrow and the air reacted to the release with a loud crack. The arrow tore through folds of the elements in the air and bore a hole in the Weaver's chest and bolted through it!

Surprisingly, the Weaver didn't react or show any signs of injury. It merely darted to and fro at ridiculous speeds while Reon who could follow its movements saw that where Denille had borne a hole with her arrow, the Weaver had already healed!

The Weaver suddenly materialised with its grand solid body!

While it seemed to be capable of flying through the air in its ethereal form, it seemed to lose that ability when it reverted back, which was evidenced by the loud boom that came after its body landed.

Its figure still speedily moved along the ground though.

It cocked its head and hissed. From its wide open mouth, a stream of purple-coloured poison that seemed to drain the light from the surroundings pouring out!

From a distance, everyone felt an immense heat waft from it as it barrelled forth like a sandstorm towards them!

Irlen charged ahead and planted his hexagonal shield with a mix of silver and blue forward.

"Defender's Sphere!" he cried.

A burst of silver light exploded from the shield and covered everyone in its circular area of effect!

Spots of light danced within the space of the protective skill.

Skullius gaped in awe.

The poison failed to penetrate the shield, affecting only the surrounding vegetation and land.

What happened next made the five grimace.

The poison made everything melt!

Trees, grass and even the ground!

The poison broke down everything, changing their composition into sludge!

Benzard while in the [Defender's Sphere], wielded his sword again. He hadn't been idling this entire time. He had been charging his mana ever since his upward slash had been dodged by the massive snake.

His body radiated bolts of white lightning that ran along his body and made his figure look like a divine being!

He then became covered in a thick film of lightning, and in the next instance, he shot up and penetrated through the stream of poison in a bright flash of white!

His sword blitzed through the Weaver's neck, bolts of excess lightning from the swift attack erasing the surrounding forestry; this left only a collection of charred stalks!

The Weaver hissed in pain!

This time, blood flooded from the portion of its neck that had been cut through!

Before it could even think to retaliate, arrows that travelled like shooting stars bore through multiple portions of its body without much resistance and the figure of Reon darted forward for another attack!

Benzard too didn't let up, a noise like thunder erupting as his shining figure streaked across the air without touching the ground!

He attacked the Weaver from behind while Reon used his [Imagining Slash] to strike from the front!

"Wow..." Skullius mouthed at the sight of these monsters tearing through another monster. "They are... strong..."

The Weaver, Onumbassssss' eyes gleamed as it saw that it was in a precarious situation. It turned into a dark shadow that tore through the air and rose into the sky.

"It seemsss I still have shortcomingssss..." Onumbassssss said before it flashed away.

Benzard frowned.

"It's fast... but it won't escape," he said before he turned to Reon who nodded and breathed out a gust of hot air and swung his black katana with a super fluid motion that also packed his full strength!

Skullius saw the blade leave after images as it swiped through the air, a dense blue line being expelled from it and racing through the air towards Onumbassssss' direction at breakneck speed!

'Divine Imagining Slash!' Reon called in his mind.

Onumbasss who had been retreating was suddenly split in half from the tail to the head!

Blood flooded from the split portion of his body and the massive snake had a dumbfounded sort of gape as it reverted back to normal and fell to the ground!

If Skullius had been in his Boneman form, his jaw would have dropped. Literally.

He was so amazed by this show of power that he didn't hear Denille calling to him.

"Hey!" a powerful smack to the back almost made Skullius vomit his nonexistent lungs.

"Huh?"

"We're moving ahead, you idiot. Don't slow us down," Denille said with a scowl.

Skullius nodded and followed. The group reached the corpse of the Weaver where a section of the forest was stained in purple blood entirely.

[Felled prey lies before you. Would you like to extract the Essence of Null Life? Remaining time 6 seconds]

Skullius immediately absorbed the Null Life Essence from the massive beast, finding it to be 90 points!

However, he couldn't find it within himself to celebrate as the fact that he was among such powerful monsters that could end him very easily was once again reiterated.

"This thing was strong. It knew to retreat even before it sustained fatal damage. There may be fights like this ahead with even stronger opponents, so be on high alert. Let's salvage what we can from this corpse," Benzard said before giving Skullius a glance.

Skullius didn't need 70 points of intelligence to understand what the man meant with his gaze.

'If you try anything funny, we'll flesh you up nomatter what you have up your sleeve.'

Chapter 52: The Doom Factor Approaches (1)

'I should've known just how big the gap was. I thought I understood it, but I was wrong. Even Onumbas had his status displayed by the guidance field to me, but these guys...' Skullius thought as he watched the four before him get down and harvest important parts of the creature.

'I wonder. What will kill me first? I thought I could scrape two more levels but... I guess the rush from killing that Eobald guy got to me,' Skullius sighed in his mind and pulled up the invasive status that showed his Doom Factors.

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[Doomed Factor 1: Disowned]

Your master, Undead Lich Somanda has cut off his mana supply to you. Under normal circumstances, you would cease to exist. However, the benevolent VOW has granted you time to decide your own fate. If you cannot do that in the time given, you will meet your end.

Time till DF1: 6 hrs

Doomed Factor 2: Existential Crisis

Your distinct perception and absorption of mana throughout the years has caused you to start awakening what should have been lost a long time ago. If you fail to recover and remember this in time, you will suffer a crisis of your own existence and descend into madness.

Time till DF2 : 1yr]

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Only six hours remained until he had to sustain himself with mana and with his new form, Skullius didn't know how he was going to pull through.

He didn't know how exactly he would perish after failing to circumvent the Doom Factor, but it probably wouldn't be pretty.

Unfortunately, Skullius couldn't level up as a Discount Human at the moment as even though he had fulfilled the cumulative mana experience requirement, he hadn't completed the Second Task to achieve the next level.

What was this Second Task that he had to accomplish, one might ask?

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[Exp : 1,000/1,000]

[Second Task : Obtain the cores of two Tier 2 monsters]

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Even though the Task didn't seem too difficult, Skullius didn't have the opportunity to finish it as none of his 'companions' were willing to waste time helping him level up when he was doomed to die anyway. It was called efficiency.

Which was reasonable.

"Hey! You're nothing but deadweight and you just stand there while we do all the work? Get over here and make your miserable life useful before it ends," the ever abrasive Denille said with a scowl.

Skullius didn't even have the will to refuse as the energy she radiated commanded his weak body to obey.

Was her grudge that aggressive?

'Ah... I wish there was a future where I could strip you naked, strap you up to a tie beam, grab a chainsaw, slowly cut through your belly and retrieve your insides.. Wait, that's another one isn't it?' Skullius thought before he moved forward.

He didn't receive much help from the party of four, having to follow what they were doing and failing miserably at it. It seemed they didn't particularly care about his help as they knew that Denille was venting out her frustration on him.

None of them would bother to help unless Skullius was about to die anyway. At least two of them.

The Discount Human watched as Reon dug into the flesh and organs of the Weaver and pulled out a large diamond-like crystal that was the size of his head.

It was light blue in colour, a dense coagulation of mana that formed a bright ball glowing within its centre.

Skullius' eyes sparkled in wonder and he couldn't help but subconsciously ask.

"What's that?"

Reon responded with a generalised answer. It was obvious he hadn't wanted to explain in the first place.

"It's what's left after any creature that has formed a core dies. A dead core."

As soon as he finished explaining, Reon put the core close to a ring that was on his finger and Skullius watched the large crystal turn into a stream of energy that vanished into the ring.

He was about to ask what the ring was when he received a warning glare from Reon that shut him up.

The ring was a spatial storage. An expanded space where a person could store their stuff. It was bound to the wearer using mana, with their death meaning that it could be owned by someone else.

After a short while of scraping off the scales, dislodging the bones and harvesting some organs and fangs from the large creature, it was time to move on.

"Let's get going. If we stay too long, we might encounter other powerful creatures that have been drawn here by the scent of blood. Something as powerful as this would be a treat over here..." Benzard said.

Skullius took one last glance at the Weaver, which had been a victim of several mutations that boosted its health and other stats to a dramatic degree especially after it reached Tier 4.

When all creatures that used the Tier system reached became decently powerful, their mana cores would turn compact, becoming an object that could be interacted with using physical means.

When they reached Tier 4, however, the core would be changed from a myriad of different parts to a singular, powerful component. Of course, not all beasts would receive substantial boosts to their cores, as only those that had done much in the way of gathering knowledge and taking powerful portions of defeated foes in the form of consuming or merging would benefit the most.

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Soon the group continued on.

Benzard who lead the way held the two identical Keys together while muttering something in a hushed tone. This was the way to navigate the way to the hidden labyrinth. It was a complicated process that wouldn't exactly guarantee an easier time finding the place, but it gave the opportunity to do so.

This was one of reasons why it was so difficult to find legacies, especially when using Keys that didn't belong to the labyrinth.

Fulgardt the Immoral's legacy was one such without a clear Key that was left for someone to be able to find its location. Benzard and his group knew that there were going to be some rough challenges ahead considering the nature of the owner of the labyrinth.

Time flew as the group travelled. They found many powerful creatures the deeper they went into the forest.

The deeper one went into the Tremur Forest, the more one would find places where a variety of these beasts spawned, along with encountering powerful creatures that preyed on each other.

The layout of the forest usually emphasised chaos in the middle, with relative order around the edges where pairs of high tier beasts chosen by a 'King' resided.

Hours ticked by as the cycle of fighting, looting and running continued with the unfortunate Skullius missing his infinite endurance.

The exhaustion he felt wasn't exactly real. It was merely an imitation where he felt his body getting heavier and hotter, making it impossible to keep moving.

He was also struck by a hunger so great that he almost felt like he had reverted back to his Boneman form on account of the feeling of a gaping emptiness in his abdomen constantly gnawing at him.

As if his atrocious luck had turned upside down, Irlen stopped and requested they take a break and eat as he was starving.

"All this work, keeping your asses safe has me beat. Whose turn is it to cook? I'm beginning to digest myself here," Irlen said, emphasising his bulky shield.

The natural choice was usually Reon who was the smartest and most diverse to the extent that even most work outside of combat was usually known to him.

However, to everyone's surprise...

"I'm not doing it this time. I've been doing just as much work as you and Benzard. If there's anyone who should be candidate to make us a meal, it's Denille."

The pretty red-haired lady was about to burst into a storm of expletives when she suddenly looked at the pale figure of Skullius and gripped him by the neck of his robe.

"You, I'm sure you're hungry too. Get cooking, we have all the meat in the world," she said.

Skullius wanted to laugh, but he knew it wouldn't end well.

Him?

Cook?

Food?

Since he couldn't refuse anyway, he decided to make the most out of it. It would also be his first time eating and he didn't know how that would feel like.

He literally had no knowledge on cooking but since no one refused to give him the chance, he didn't mind giving it a go after being given a few pointers.

Fire. Meat. Meat over fire. Meat burns. Good stuff.

Skullius checked his Doom Factor, seeing that there was two hours left, with the sun reaching the spot where he had seen it yesterday when he arrived.

Nice.

What could possibly go wrong?

Chapter 53: The Doom Factor Approaches (2)

Salt.

Spice.

And every meat that's nice.

These were the perfect ingredients to make a simple but filling meal for a couple of eager souls who had a long journey ahead of them.

However, the peculiar Discount Human with no name messed it up by including something that turned the whole thing upside down.

Atrocious luck!

Irlen, Denille, Reon and Benzard had taken a single bite of the meat that had been roasted over the fire by Skullius when, in the next moment, they had all felt their stomachs churn before the food even reached their oesophagi!

Denille spit it out and gave Skullius a rage-filled gaze.

Benzard set down the meat and took a walk.

Irlen sat down with a dark look in his eyes while Reon looked at Skullius with a flabbergasted expression.

How?

This bastard literally had nothing else to do other than to watch the juicy fat fall from the meat as it roasted over the fire and add the spices that he had been given!

Reon had been watching closely. Skullius followed all the steps, but somehow...

Somehow!

The meat had turned bad regardless.

Skullius grabbed a portion for himself, not bothering with these fiends that didn't appreciate his work. He tried it.

He bit into a piece of the skewered meat - which belonged to a deer-like creature called the Butter Willow. The meat had been tender, giving off a scent of freshness even when the creature was being skinned.

This animal was well known all across Aigas as a delicacy that many wouldn't get the chance to enjoy as it was usually found in dangerous places. By some miracle, it always managed to evade death from some powerful creatures, being allowed to roam among the territories of beasts that no one would dare to travel close to.

Skullius assumed that it was likely because of the creature's outrageously high luck stat that it managed to survive. He had seen it alive.

As he sank his teeth into such a creature that was roasted to perfection with a splendid choice of spices, the expectations of Skullius' four 'companions' who were watching with keen eyes were dashed.

Skullius merely chewed and chewed.

And chewed, then gulp.

He swallowed.

There was no change in his expression. He went on to take another bite of meat without glee or horror.

Reon slapped his forehead.

'Does this guy not have taste buds?! Is he some country bumpkin that can tolerate anything with fat?!' he barked in his own mind before giving up. He couldn't even bring himself to be mad at Skullius.

He simply grabbed more portions of the remaining meat and cooked them himself, which soothed the hearts of his companions as they got to taste the full majesty of the Butter Willow after it was cooked by the right, averagely lucky hands.

The chewy flesh with hints of faux heat introduced to the tongue after blissful moments meaty goodness, was spectacular.

Reon wore a satisfied look and turned to look at Skullius who had been given the entire portion of the Butter Willow he had cooked as no one wanted it. He expected the Discount Human to be yearning for his version of the meat after smelling the aroma and hearing the cheers from those that enjoyed it but...

Skullius was sitting on a log with one foot on top of the other. He was using a stack of grass to remove the remains of the meat that was stuck in his teeth without a care in the world!

Reon was infuriated. He wanted to rush up to Skullius and stuff him with the Butter Willow he had cooked then wait to see his surprised expression, but he held back.

That would be unbecoming of a powerful warrior who had inherited the Imagining Technique. A technique, that in his hands, was capable of cutting through ethereal and real objects by weaving mana in a complex pattern only known to those that inherited the technique.

Once again, contrary to his inferences, Skullius didn't have the ability to taste anything. When he had eaten the horrible version of the Butter Willow, he had not been able to taste it at all. It had slid down his throat and then, a strange grip held down the food, burning it into fuel for his body!

Literally!



He had eaten to make the heaviness he felt go away and it had worked.

He had regained the feeling of normalcy and it was good, but unfortunately, after the entire fiasco with the Butter Willow meat, Skullius discovered that he had a few minutes before the Doom Factor, Disowned activated.

'Well, flesh me...'

Benzard stood to tell everyone that it was time to move on. Soon the camp was left behind as everyone followed the man with havana brown hair.

Skullius gulped as he felt the clock tick.

Everything that happened around him didn't seem as vivid anymore. He was about to be erased. What else could hold a candle to that?

This time, there didn't seem to be a miracle that would happen to save him.

So much for freedom.

So much for a long adventure with Null Life.

So much for a journey with his best pal, Red bro.

Did it all have to end here, while he was looking at the backs of the people who had treating him like garbage.

He didn't get to kill Denille yet. To really flesh her up nice and good.

He didn't really have a particular grudge against the others except for them wanting to kill him and all, but he wanted to have an epic fight with them once he had reached a higher tier.

"Oh well..." Skullius voiced defeatedly. "Maybe I was doomed for the start..."

His words attracted the attention of Reon whose eyes blazed a millisecond after he turned to Skullius.

[The Doom Factor 'Disowned' has reached its time limit]

[Assessing target's situation...]

[You have failed to grab a hold of your own fate within the time that was given by the benevolent Voice of Worlds]

[You have failed to sustain your own existence with mana]

[Attempting mana reduction...]

[Mana insufficient!]

[You shall now meet your end...]

The other three in front of Reon felt something peculiar and turned.

They saw Skullius' body fall to the ground like a log!

"What's happening?!" Benzard yelled with wrath filling his face.

"I'm not sure... I saw mana leaking out of him and now... I think he's dying," said Reon as he analysed Skullius.

Benzard reached Skullius' body and placed his hand on the chest.

"Mana, is it? Let's just supply it to him then!" the man said and turned to the others. "Maybe we can still save him, or at least find what's wrong with him!"

Irlen rushed to Benzard and placed his hand on Skullius, mana beginning to burst from his hand and into the small figure of the Discount Human.

Benzard saw that an extra pair of hands was missing while he and Irlen supplied Skullius with Onia.

"Hey, hurry up before he dies! I don't want to lose this when I'm so close!" Benzard barked to Reon and Denille who looked back at him without the slightest intention to come forward and help.

"He was right," Denille said with a tremble in her figure as if she didn't believe what she said and was about to say. "Eobald was right. All you want is strength. Wherever it can be found is where you are. Where your heart is. That's why you'll never be as good as he was..."

...!

Benzard's face twisted into a scowl. He didn't believe what he had just heard. Did he hear clearly? Was this bitch still defending Eobald after finding out who he was?!

"So that's how it is, huh? Even when your lover turns out to be a psychotic maniac who wants to bring about the end of the world, you will always defend him against someone you consider to be the lesser counterpart. Now isn't that mighty wise of you, Denille," Benzard said with a cold tone that made Denille shiver.

"And you feel the same way too?" Benzard turned to Reon who wore his usual calm expression and nodded.

"Yes. Let this obsession end here. I'm tired. We're all tired. People died and we haven't even mourned them. Let's go home and process this first before diving headfirst into certain danger."

Benzard looked at Irlen, asking if he felt the same way, but the burly man shook his head and resumed pumping his mana into Skullius.

"I see."

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Skullius felt like he had been put to rest just like the old days in Deadmanland after the last notification from the guidance field had disappeared from his vision.

Now, he found himself floating in a pitch black void with nothing of a body to be seen on him. It seemed like only his eyes existed, peering through nothing in particular.

'Where am I?' he thought.

He had intended to speak, but only his thoughts resounded in his mind.

'Hmm? What's going on?'

As if to answer his question, a figure immediately emerged from the darkness!

...!

It was terrifying!

To Skullius, it wasn't scary because of its appearance, but because of its identity!

It was something that he knew all too well.

An overbearing presence.

A dark green skeletal structure that looked several millenia old.

A deep red socket flame that burned maliciously!

A cackle that would have made his bones quiver!

All of this appeared before Skullius and before he knew it, he voiced out a word in terror.

".... Somanda..."

Chapter 54: The Hall Of Just Ice...

Skullius couldn't believe his eyes. Was this truly happening?

Was this the end that was promised to him by the Doom Factor?

Then why didn't VOW say something? Maybe he would have taken more risks and... maybe not. That would have gotten him killed a lot sooner, and perhaps he'd end up here anyway.

Or perhaps he would end up somewhere else entirely.

A place of rest from his centuries upon centuries of untiresome work.

But no.

He was here, facing his summoner with a gloom that transcended the borders of life and death.

As if this wasn't enough, an image bloomed behind the cackling figure of Somanda. It appeared like a colourisation of the darkness into a gigantic hall that stretched further than his vision could make out.

It was dim, lit only by the occasional skull plastered on the wall that held a bright green flame in its sockets, illuminating the space where Skullius could see solid materials layered in blocks to make up the entire hall.

Ice!

They exuded a slow moving steam that was barely perceptible.

Massive pillars of this ice which looked to be expertly sculpted into eerie images were evident, rising to touch a ceiling that couldn't be seen.

The most distinctive feature when looking at this view, this hall that looked to be made as a residence for a powerful majestic giant, was the multitudes of lights that were screaming while being trapped in the blocks of ice that made up the walls!

White lights of different intensities and shapes; some bright with a shape like that of a man, some extremely dim with the shape of a spear or a ship, or a house.

Oddly, each of these shapes of light screeched miserably. The blocks of ice they were trapped in rattled each time, but as they were held down by dense chains, they didn't move much.

"Ah..." Somanda voiced, a dark wisp of energy flooding from his mouth to surround Skullius who shivered. He saw himself get drawn to his former master slowly.

The image of Somanda grew more vivid each second, and the terror that his figure wrought mounted.

His deep red socket flames raged with an intensity of interest and joy as he saw this poor servant of his return to spend a lifetime of pain among the countless that came before and after him.

Authentic schadenfreude indeed.

"You don't seem to understand the true grandeur of Undeath. Even after you sell yourself to another master, your soul will always belong to Undeath. To me. To a prison of ice made especially for you," Somanda said with the coldest voice Skullius had ever heard.

He knew?

He knew that Skullius had become a Null Lifeform?

It was to be expected since the books that contained the skills were in Somanda's possession when Skullius took them, but...

"It seems you failed in the end. I waited for you to return some day. Whether the day came soon or after a stretch of infinity, I would have waited nonetheless. A master of Undeath is not bound by time. And here you are... Skullius."

Somanda's figure hidden under a dark robe moved while Skullius who didn't know how he looked on the outside followed, tugged on by the dark energy that had come from Somanda's mouth.

The crisp steps of bony feet rang across the icy floor as Somanda walked a long distance in silence, Skullius not making a single peep as the suspense was killing him.

What would happen now?!

After a while, the Lich stopped and pointed on a certain block that was high up on the wall. Although pointing would be considered useless when dealing with a wall of this magnitude, Skullius felt his vision being forcibly directed to the block that Somanda wanted him to look at.

As soon as he saw the block, something within him shivered, trembling as it sought to break through and race towards the bright light that was frozen within the ice!

A bright light in the shape of a curled up human being could be seen.

Its figure looked feminine. The young sort without any distinctive features of note yet.

Skullius trembled but nothing came to mind.

He only vaguely felt that this figure was familiar.

That this... was very familiar.

"Have you ever wondered why you and your crew of Lesser Undead have emotions. Why you feel things that a bunch of bones and mana shouldn't?" Somanda said coldly.

Indeed Skullius had wondered. But this wasn't the situation that was ideal for him to be a chad and retort boldly.

He simply waited for the answer.

"It's simple really. The subtlety of pain and sadness that is revealed when you work for eternity is unimaginably enjoyable to see. How even after your death, your emotions carry more emotions and show the sorrow that your soul bears through the camaraderie that you try to cultivate among yourself as dead! Worthless vestiges of even more worthless vessels. This... brings joy to my aged existence!"

For amusement.

A pastime for an aged creature.

That's what he was?

Skullius' thoughts raced.

Somanda's words brought to the surface all the encounters that he had with his friends. Bonet, Fractures and the rest.

It was just a clinging to the past induced by the remnants of their souls?

It was all just pain that manifested as pitiful fights in the mines. A yearning for a friend when he and his pals would push the stone from their bunk tombs and get to work?

It was all to share a collective pain that they all didn't remember?

"..."

Skullius felt unsubtle resonance between him and the bright image of girl that was locked in the large block of ice.

'Why didn't I try harder?'

'Why did I give up like it was the most obvious thing to do?'



'Is it because I never knew that there was something about me that existed before I was summoned by Somanda? So I just didn't care deep down?'

But that cant be! He had tried to stay alive. He had tried, for a whole day!

"Oh, Skullius! Come join your 'friends' and share this suffering while bound by a deathly fate! I will so enjoy seeing that even the light of fate that was always on you can't content with the might of someone such as myself! I'll make you remember it all and let you 'enjoy' it countless times over!

Come and suffer so that I can feel ripples of joy knowing that you were always under my feet, nomatter how much favour you have!"

Skullius trembled in fear.

And in rage.

This was it?

This was how he ended?

When he didn't even remember the beginning?

It couldn't be!

Somanda's flames burst with a bright red light as he saw the emotion that was bubbling in Skullius.

"That's it right there. The fire that I want to see and trample! I want to see it within billions of lives and see it die out the same amount of times over! You shall bear witness like all the others!"

Skullius felt a ridiculous push that launched him towards the block of ice that he felt a deep resonance with!

He felt with ever fibre of his consciousness that if he reached that block and got sealed, then it was all over. He wouldn't be able to get out nomatter what!

His rage wouldn't amount to anything while he was locked behind those chains.

He had failed.

Red Rage was gone.

His Null Life... an opportunity meant to further him as a second chance, was gone.

Was he that much of a failure that he lost even with so much potential?

The pain that roared from within a depth that Skullius didn't even know, munched on his will until he spoke, pleading...

'Please! I need another chance! I can't let it end like this! I have to know! I have to get back and make the most of it! Even with the full might of atrocious luck!'

Skullius saw the block draw closer while Somanda's demeaning laugh echoed through him with a raucous intensity.

Then...

CLUNK!

A large chain with an azure glow suddenly grabbed a hold of Skullius!

It emitted wisps of mana that almost seemed to have a searing heat about them!

'What?' Skullius thought.

"Hmmm?"

Somanda looked on with a passive gaze at the chain.

Another one appeared from nowhere to grab onto Skullius too, holding him from being dragged into the block. Then another.

[Timely intervention detected]

[Inserting of mana detected. Your existence is being supported by an external factor. Additional mana costs added...]

[Mana sufficient for mana reduction. 'Piece of soul' return processing...]

'...?' Skullius was confused.

He was saved?

How?

A dramatic pulling force acted upon him, drawing him back under the gaze of Somanda.

Something had intervened. If it was the case of mana, then perhaps his 'companions' had saved him?!

Skullius hurriedly gazed at Somanda.

The Lich gazed at him as well without much of a reaction and pointed his finger at him.

"I shouldn't be surprised at this point. Fate always sided with you when it counted," Somanda said with a disappointed scoff.

Skullius was concerned by how he didn't seem all that shocked at all.

In fact, the Lich cackled.

"We will meet again eventually. Maybe I'll find you first. But even if I don't, you will come to me. Even if you reach DIVINITY, you'll seek me out on your own," Somanda said as his mouth released plumes of darkness, his image also sinking into the hall which dissolved to black.

Then, from his bony finger, a streak of red shot through the void and struck Skullius, sinking into him.

Skullius groaned, feeling genuine pain!

"Heheheheheee..."

The last of Somanda's cackle was deeply ingrained into Skullius' memory.

[An additional curse has been inflicted on you by Higher level Undead 'Arch Lich Somanda'...]

Chapter 55: The Tale of The Ideal Ark

A talented and adventurous man once walked on the crust of Aigas. He was bold. He fought powerful beasts and had his name included in the records of many cities as a hero, a legend, a teacher.

His exploits were bedtime stories for children of all ages, and his tales inspired young men and women to become 'true adventurers'.

Explorers.

Mercenaries.

This man was named Eobald.

He was dashing and handsome. A calm and collected character who loved to wear a flashy smile that would make women swoon and bend, tickled by his charm.

This one of the perks of having a deep understanding of mana that transcended the Foundation Stage. Well, among the common folk, it was.

After seeing that going at his adventures all on his own, being a one-man show, was getting cumbersome, predictable, he put out a call to those with a powerful resolve to join him on his thrilling excursions.

A single piece of paper with his signature and message caused chaos to ensue as many hot-blooded youths sought to join him.

Most adventurers, mercenaries, or those aspiring to be such, were usually at Foundation Stage. Transcending past this was not quite common in most regions of the human continent.

From the thousands that responded to his call, fifteen particular individuals managed to get picked after Eobald approved of their resolve, strength and determination for what was to come.

Among these were Irlen, Denille, Reon and Benzard who didn't know each other at the time.

This party grew under the leadership of Eobald. He taught them how to improve their strength, removed their weaknesses and gave them a greater appreciation of the full capabilities of their bodies.

He also taught them his philosophy. That after his many years of being a thrill-seeking wanderer, he had discovered that all life was precious, but not all sentient things had the capacity to keep thriving. He said that through his travels, he always found the suffering to reside in the same places, nomatter where one went.

Those that died of hunger while the rich fed themselves and slept on full bellies.

Slaughter was condoned in many places without defence for those that faced it.

That a new order was needed where equality could be established and that it started with the Ideal Ark, a beacon that would indoctrinate the entire world and save it.

It was inspiring. The grand view of a man who had travelled the world.

All who heard him believed, enthralled.

In Eobald's party, the one who hungrily devoured this knowledge most, taking it to heart, and mind with so much devotion that he might as well have been aspiring to be Eobald's twin, was Benzard.

He and Eobald became close after he was chosen to become the vice-leader of the party that became famous across the region, calling themselves the Ideal Ark.

Denille, like every other woman in the group, fell in love with Eobald's charm and ideology that promised a better tomorrow if only she followed him. However, she was the only one who managed to reach his heart, becoming his lover.

Reon who came from a powerful, stuck-up bastion of the nation - a mighty family where the heirs who awakened the sacred Imagining Technique were sentenced to decades of isolation to groom their strength to perfection - was glad to have cool, basic company and be part of something better than strict family tradition.

Irlen was a normal shield bearer who grew to be the lead tank, being especially reliable and having a loyal character.

For four years, the Ideal Ark thrived, becoming more like a crusade of endearing, battle saints as they did performed one grand deed after another.

On one expedition spearheaded by Eobald, the growing group had managed to secure two Keys that were divided between Eobald and Benzard. The former suggested using the Keys on a legacy he knew the location of immediately after their excursion.

It seemed like this was the next grand thing that the Ideal Ark would accomplish.

Yet...

It was not.

A single day proved this, when Eobald invited Benzard to his abode. After grooming him the most out of all those in the Ideal Ark, Eobald expected Benzard to understand.

He wanted to entrust something to Benzard.

He knew of Benzard's tragic past; that he was a life spared only by luck after the privilege razed everything he knew.

Such a man, who now sought strength and fairness above all else...

Surely that, coupled with his idolisation of Eobald.

Surely... he would understand.

Eobald began by coming clean.

He exposed his affiliation and who he truly was first.

Perhaps, that would earn Benzard's trust first before he explained what he aimed to do.

The risks involved.

Who he would be defying.

Unfortunately, it did not go as he planned.

Eobald watched as trust burned away from Benzard's eyes just when he thought it was safe to speak.

He was enraged.

He was furious.

He had tried to hear the rest of the story, with the urgency with which Eobald told it, but....

The Green Neolists? The necromancers that constantly killed thousands every year?!

The notorious organisation whose origin was unknown and whose activity dreaded throughout all the nation?

That was what Benzard had been invited to?

And what was this... Eobald was actually tasked with finding something that would allow the Green Neolists to Slaughter more people?

No.

Benzard didn't wait to hear everything else.

All this time....

The deception....

Benzard was ready to cut Eobald down, but he was outnumbered. He opted to escape instead, with what he knew.

He told it all to his fellow Ideal Ark members.

If the treachery had come from anyone else, it might have been very hard to believe... but coming from Benzard....

It took time... but eventually, even Denille, broken most of all, was forced to believe it.

All this then culminated into a confrontation which led to Eobald being forced into a corner after being besieged by his entire group.

...And it was only when he was cornered that revealed it.

The sword he used... didn't mark him as a swordsman.



Eobald's class was...

Necromancer.

With it, he slaughtered hundreds from the group he built from the ground up until only a few of the strongest remained. These few pursued him into the Tremur Forest.

And that was when he and Benzard cursed each other for the final time... before he fled with the Arcane Teleportation Scroll.

Benzard had had to summon inhumane spirit to resolve himself to killing Eobald.

All those years together...

They might have been a lie, but Benzard still felt a twang of pain when he saw Eobald's dead body.

There were unresolved feelings.

No closure.

The efforts of a certain fake-faced man made sure of that.

Yet, Benzard no longer cared. He had merely wanted the Key that Eobald possessed so that he could get the 'weapon' that could aid him and the remnants of the Ideal Ark in fighting off the horrifying plan that the Green Neolists intended.

Yes.

Only a legacy would do.

\*\*\*

Benzard faced the two who refused to assist him and wore a scrunched up expression. Even after all that they had seen. After all they had learned, they still...

"Hypocrites..." he muttered. "I'm trying to fight against the problem that Eobald propagated and all you can say is 'you're tired' and start demeaning me when I'm the one who fucking saved you the trouble of having to discover that we were on the wrong path before it was too late?!"

"So what?! He... told me that he wanted a better world! I believed him! He truly cared and he was genuine! We forced his hand!

That's why everyone died... that's why..." Denille said with a broken voice.

Benzard's eyes flared with a hot and bright flash of lightning.

"Piss off! You turned into an idiot the day you believed everything he said! Just like me! The difference is, I woke up from it, because I never lost sight of myself!"

Reon slid over to stand before Denille with a pained expression. He then glared at Benzard.

Irlen stared at the confrontation with a complicated expression.

"I never would have thought that you, who were the smartest among us would justify this? Why did you stand by and fight with me if this is how you felt?" bellowed Benzard, his face turning red.

"I never cared about all that. About Eobald and his philosophy. I was only happy to be part of a family that didn't have some messed tradition just because I awakened a rare power. I was willing to fight Eobald because I hoped... we would still be the Ideal Ark after this, but... this is all that's left.

So yes... I'm tired," Reon said with a soft, yet deep voice.

Denille pushed him away and pointed at Benzard angrily as she exploded:

"You...! A least we actually cared about this family. We had attachments that we believed in and would never give up so easily on, but you... all you've been thinking about is that damned legacy instead of anything else! We are grieving! I don't want to do this!

Eobald was right! At least he truly wanted things to change... maybe... but you... you're obsessed with nothing but strength... admit it!"

Benzard's eyes sparked dangerously.

"That's right. I'm obsessed with strength. I've always been. But unlike a pretty bag of roses like you or a prodigy from a famous family, I grew up in the worst place a 12 year old boy could ever grow up in."

"I sought strength because I wanted to free myself. None of you fools know the true evils that humanity can resort too. Even wolves will look pretty by comparison. Unlike you, I came into this knowing that life isn't some pretty ideal where you fight and kill monsters while the world sings your praises all the damn time. That's why I believed Eobald more than every fucking one of you!"

"I believed that what I had experienced in my youth would be a thing of the past when Eobald actualised his plan, but look at us now...!"

An expression and tone that was unbecoming of the calm Benzard normally exuded surfaced.

Benzard's presence became even more intimidating as he took a single step forward, which made Denille shrink and back away.

"Now I don't give a damn about your sentiments. You can cry and regret all you want after we are done with this. You can quit for all I care, but right now, you're going to get your asses RIGHT THERE, and pump every last bit of mana you have to keep that man alive! Or so help me, I'll send you to Eobald..."

There was crippling silence afterwards as the argument drew to a close.

All that was left was to oblige.

Chapter 56: Into Harm's Way

Skullius opened his eyes and saw the figures of four people above him, their hands outstretched over his chest. They were releasing bursts of mana into his body steadily.

'Ah... I was right...' he thought.

Two of the figures looked particularly unhappy, but Skullius felt even more so despite escaping a tragic end once again.

He couldn't bring himself to be cheery when all that happened within the place that he had been taken to by Somanda kept brushing against his mind in an unsettling way.

Something kept blaring against a memory that he was sure he could almost taste. The outline of a figure that was identical to the girl he had seen within the block of ice kept flashing before him incessantly.

'Who is this...? Why does an emotion that I haven't felt before try and squeeze through my bones whenever I focus on it?! Damn it!'

The revelations made by Somanda were quite frustrating to the Discount Human, especially when he considered that maybe he had taken Undeath too lightly. It had bothered him at some point why he was still leashed under Somanda through the first Doom Factor if he was no longer an undead and was a Null Lifeform.

Why was he still being tormented by that bastard?

If he died would he actually go to that place again?

He still didn't know the reason why, but the last notification that spoke of how Somanda was actually an Arch Lich spoke volumes about just how powerful his former master was, and why he was still bound.

Skullius found himself questioning whether his escape that time through the portal wasn't because Somanda was stupid, but because something else entirely was at play.

Somanda had said something about fate after all.

The whole encounter had stripped Skullius of his previous misconceptions.

He had truly tried to save himself in the past hours, but the sense of futility had never really gone away.

Perhaps his surrender at the end had been because he didn't truly understand what was at stake.

Eternal imprisonment however, was a concept that changed his perspective. It wasn't enough to try hard. He had to give it his all, and then some!

That said, the little 'gift' that Somanda had given him before he left, was quite... concerning.

~~~

[You have been afflicted by the curse 'UNCoddled']

[UNCoddled]

[The Arch Lich Somanda wishes you well on your journey to eventually return to him. However, in light of your previous attachments, he has decided to give you an additional 'incentive'. A curse to follow you till the day you face him. You shall be bound to walk alone. Only with your strength.

Any help from the outside will promptly attract FATALITY, leaving you alone till your destination has been reached]

~~~

Skullius gritted his teeth.

He hadn't missed the fact that the notification he had seen had actually said that he was cursed a second time?

When was the first?

...

Upon seeing that Skullius was back, Benzard breathed a sigh of relief. His imposing air vanished as he regained his cool.

All was not lost yet.

The rest felt pretty much the same way, but for different reasons.

Skullius sat up but he didn't show much of any reaction as he simply stared at the ground with an angry expression.

"What happened?" Benzard asked.

"I don't know," Skullius replied with a hollow tone.

Denille gripped Skullius by the throat and wore a ferocious visage, carrying her agitation from the previous verbal altercation with Benzard onto Skullius.

"You ungrateful son of a bitch! We just saved your life! You should at least be grateful for that! You know exactly what happened! Did you try to commit suicide or something?" she bellowed in Skullius face.

Skullius didn't shirk away from her thunderous presence this time as the feeling that he had gotten from Somanda was way scarier and still fresh in his mind.

'You're going to kill me anyway.'

"Like I said, I don't know."

"Stop that, Denille! He's still leaking out mana. We have to continue supplying it to him," Reon said while holding back the rage he felt. "It doesn't seem like he needs much. We probably went overboard last time. One of us supplying him with mana should be enough."

Irlen."

The shield bearer nodded and kept releasing his mana into Skullius while everyone pulled away.

"So you really don't know what's happening to you?" Benzard asked with a threatening tone.

"Nope," Skullius replied as undramatically as possible, the dangerous mana coiling around Benzard not fazing him one bit.

Benzard looked at Reon for any revelations about the situation, but the results spoke of nothing that progressed the issue forward.

"I don't know either. I thought he had cracked his core, but it's still intact. Maybe it's not his doing," said Reon.

"Fine, let's go on," Benzard said with a click of his tongue. "Let's pick up our pace. We're close and we won't be stopping until absolutely necessary. Irlen, can you carry him while supplying him with your mana at the same time?"

"Sure," said Irlen with a solid nod.

Soon, the group had set off again, going at full speed towards the direction that the two Keys in Benzard's hands directed.

Irlen had Skullius under his arm as they went. Surprisingly, he found Skullius to be ridiculously light but paid it no mind. Reon would have noticed if something was amiss anyway.

The question one would ask when considering the unexplored relationship between Benzard and Irlen was why the bully shield bearer was loyal to Benzard.

The reason was simple. Irlen had always been a man of substance. He believed in seeing people doing something of note for them to deserve titles and recognition. This could be chalked up to him being a shield bearer, someone who defended and allowed others to attack without worry. After many years of living by the shield, he had become sensitive to different characters.

That said, he respected Benzard over Eobald solely because of substance. Benzard, as the vice leader of the Ideal Ark was usually the man at the forefront, while Eobald was a sacred figure that only joined the fight when they had major issues to deal with.

That's why, because of his time spend with Benzard, he respected him more. The man who told him to lift the shield while attacking most often, proving to be someone he felt connected to. Someone he could call a comrade in arms and not a figure that was meant to be revered.

...

The journey took quite a while as the four on foot zipped through the forest, which kept changing. Their speed did slow down a bit after they went deeper into the forest.

More powerful creatures began to appear.

The group had to hide from overly powerful beasts most of the time while taking care of monsters that were as strong as Onumbasssss.

Each time, Skullius would absorb the Null Life Essence, seeing higher figures with the difference in the creatures that he saw.

Soon, he had for the first time seen the Null Life Essence bar filled with 3000 points that he wasn't going to be able to use until the next morning.

After almost four hours of constant travelling and witnessing the terrifying fights that the four with him had to engage in, Skullius couldn't imagine how he could survive this.

He had seen enough to know that these guys were powerful, but were still holding back.

All for the legacy.

The terrain began to change again after another stretch of distance that was marred with the monotony of battle.



From the large trees and dense vegetation, a valley appeared after a desert-like plateau suddenly emerged ahead of them.

It was unnatural. Golden brown soil that suddenly replaced the verdant green abruptly to make a massive opening that covered over a kilometre's distance with a girth just short of two hundred meters.

The group marvelled at this.

The sun seemed especially hot above here, absurdly so.

What made matters worse was that there was a transition of colour on the soil, which made everyone, including Skullius, grimace.

The golden brown soil that reached in from the forest side slowly turned into a darker shade while descending into the valley; shifting to a dark brown that was littered with dark stones and extremely sparse plant life that looked phenomenally poisonous.

"You've got to be shitting me!" Denille roared.

Chapter 57: Enter The Labyrinth! (1)

A Majestic Territory.

A profound level of power that was open to all creatures as long as they met the required level of strength and a sufficiently strong core.

The ability to create a separate realm that was advantageous for the user and extremely dangerous for the target.

For a Majestic Territory, the ranking for how strong it was, wasn't usually how powerful the boosts it gave to the user were, but how many unique lifeforms would be spawned from it.

For instance, Azila's Majestic Territory spawned the StarGold Clusterflies which Skullius had miraculously used to level up to a standard undead.

When a Territory reached this stage, it was safe to assume that when the user used it to attack, there was ZERO chances of coming out alive unless the target was of similar strength.

Just the fact that Skullius had survived such a thing was a feat that deserved to be told to the world, but even the Discount Human didn't know its worth.

"We'll rest to recover our mana," Benzard said as he sat down and took a breather.

Denille was about to complain about how dangerous this was, but she realised how futile it was to try and dissuade Benzard at this point, especially after their little spat.

"I don't think it's wise. Encountering a Majestic Territory right now while we're this deep into the forest is just courting death. We can't defend against it even if we go all out," Reon said, trying to reason with Benzard.

Benzard remained calm. He took steady breaths as he grasped onto the mana in the air and recovered the mana in his core.

"I know it's dangerous. However, I wouldn't lead us to our deaths. Eobald told me about this place. He said he had records of people that had tried going in. It was only after he revealed himself that I figured out that his organisation probably tested the result of entering with live specimens. Either innocent people or with their Necromancy," Benzard explained.

"The fact is, the guardian who is protecting the labyrinth doesn't attack with its Territory. It merely vets who it deems to be worthy of giving the Labyrinth a try. You'd have to be hostile for it to attack you. So, going by that, we should be safe."

Reon ground his teeth.

'Why are you so goddamn stubborn?! You still put trust in Eobald's words when they benefit you but disregard everything else?' he thought.

Denille also looked disgruntled while Irlen merely sighed.

"We're here anyway. We might as well check it out. If worse comes to worst, we'll just use the Arcane scroll that Eobald left. You have it right, Denille?" Irlen said.

He was referring to the scroll that had been confiscated from Skullius.

Denille nodded. At least they had some assurance. That was if they could use the scroll faster than the beast within that Territory could attack.

It was still a major gamble.

Skullius was not feeling good about this. He had lived his life in this forest while keeping an eye out for Territories and it could be said that he was the first to notice the change when they arrived here.

'Damn it! Another Territory?! At least I'm not alone this time, but still...'

Skullius had been thinking of ways to save himself. There was basically no way that he could escape before they reached the Labyrinth but maybe when they were inside, he could pull something off.

But now, there was the issue of the Territory. Depending on how much it influenced the entire area, it could be even more dangerous for him.

'I'll try! I can't be erased just yet! I won't give that bastard what he wants! I've survived this long, I should be able to pull off one more escape and reach Tier 1. Though... before then, I still need to be supplied with mana or else Doom Factor 1 will activate again.

Damn it!' Skullius thought before pulling up his status.

~~~

[Name : None]

[Level : 1]

[Experience : 1000/1000;]

[Class : None]

[Race : Discount Human]

[Inv. Status : Still doomed ×2, Cursed]

[Stats]

[Strength : 10]

[Agility : 10]

[Intelligence : 5]

[Endurance : 10]

[Luck : Atrocious?]

[Health : 30/30]

[Mana : 20/20]

[Null Life Essence : 3000/3000]

[Skills]

[Basic Mana Manipulation | Lv.]

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

[Bitter-Sweet Hell's Inferno | Lv. 3]

[Artless Dodger | Lv. 1]

[Mana Bolt | Lv. 4]

[Null Extraction]

[Affinities]

None

....

~~~~~

"The curse is also on my invasive status. How much more of this can I take?" Skullius thought sombrely.

This current situation really made him feel lonely. If he could somehow squeeze through it, however, he knew that he wouldn't be held back by anything else.

With all that he had witnessed and experienced, he wouldn't be the same if he managed to survive.

A few more hours passed, giving a chance for the sun to start descending down the horizon.

Then it was time. With everyone fully rested and recovered, it was time to enter the realm of a powerful beast.

The group walked forward until they reached the boundary and then...

They all entered at the same time, Skullius still being held by Irlen.

Skullius' vision warped, changing from the view of the strange valley where solid rock and sand thrived, to a peculiar place that made his cosmetic eyes widen!

It was like an alternate version of the forest that he had just left behind!

Large trees could be seen and long blades of runner and tufted grass all with a shade of black abounded!

The trees swayed as if there was a gust of wind that continuously blew while being outlined by what looked like a white sun in the sky.

All this was nothing compared to the bizarre element that truly made this a truly wondrous, alternate space.

Everything was upside down!

It took a second for all five individuals to realise this, but as soon as they stepped into the Territory, they fell... up? Down?

When their feet entered the space of the Territory, all there was, was a dark sky with particularly bright, white clouds under.

All the vegetation, not to mention the ground, was below!

Reon and Benzard quickly managed to steady themselves while falling and landed on their feet, but the rest fell hard on the dark ground.

"Urgh..." Irlen grunted as he tried to stand up, feeling the smaller figure of Skullius squashed under him.

"This is.. some Territory," Reon said as he looked around.

Benzard already had his sword out.

"Stay close!" he ordered, to which everyone huddled while looking at the surroundings.

However, nothing seemed amiss.

At least according to the rules of this world.

[Congratulations! You have royally screwed yourself by entering a Higher Tier beast's 'Majestic Territory']

'This again?' Skullius questioned as he saw the guidance field notification. At least there was no corresponding notifications of overpowered skills that made him feel like he was already done for.

He felt the difference in the air. This was a few notches below the Territory of Azila as far as he could tell, but the realm of power was the same; well it was a guess.

"Greetings, Challengers."

A voice boomed from just a few meters away, making the team turn towards its source.

Upon seeing the creature that spoke, everyone swallowed a lump of saliva and looked more cautious, prepared to fight.

What was before them was a giant white fox that swayed its tail this way and that while sitting on the ground. Its pitch black eyes that heavily contrasted its spotless, white fur gazed intently at these brave humans that had thrown themselves into its Territory.

"No need to be cautious. My job isn't to fight. I merely want to see how capable you are," the fox said.

Benzard and the rest didn't let down their guard, waiting for what more the creature would say.

The creature's left eye sparked with an orange hue as a complex symbol that looked like a Japanese kanji character appeared in its eye for no more than a second before vanishing

"I see. You barely fit the lowest requirements to attempt this place but who am I to meddle in your affairs? I've long stopped caring for how capable who wants to challenge this place is but... I shall tell you something that I tell all whom I allow to pass," the fox said as on its mouth, an unsettling grin appeared while its eyes looked to Skullius for a split second.

"The human that owned this labyrinth was a powerful creature that had reached Divinity! He had no tolerance for morals nor sentiments and was a simpleton who sought only for power! He didn't acknowledge the weak but he never bothered with them, never putting them in his sights. He was greedy, arrogant, selfish and evil!

The one to inherit the power he left behind, the Insurgent Magnus, must also abide by these!"

"He wished for the one to find this place to be someone who could open his labyrinth despite there not being a Key customly made for it. One that goes against odds and seeks strength to a demented degree! Welcome, dear humans... to the Labyrinth of the Yoke!"

The grand presentation given by the fox came to an end as it did nothing to reassure the group about what they would find inside!

The ground began to tremble, behind the fox that had taken back its passive expression, a massive gate appearing.

It was circular, covering the view behind the fox and giving off an imposing air that made all the trees in the soundings stop swaying and stand absolutely still while an eerie silence enveloped the world.



A grand design was sculpted upon the grand gate which was made of thick stone with a setup like that of a double door.

A design befitting of the legacy of Fulgardt the Immoral!

A design befitting of the Insurgent Magnus!

Chapter 58: Enter The Labyrinth! (2)

An immaculate carving proudly stood before the five pairs of eyes of the group.

It was the image of an extremely muscular man with his arms outstretched and his hands forming fists that exuded a powerful presence even from the image.

Wild hair that was spread out to the very top of the boundary of the gate as if blown by an untamed wind could be seen, at the front of his head, a solemn face with eyes that were closed shut, a button nose and ideal lips; everything was greatly detailed, giving off the impression of a seasoned and calm warrior.

Yet, behind this gorgeous image, a contrasting one could be seen, floating above it as if to portray that this was the true self behind the facade depicted at the forefront.

A malicious grin that spreads from ear to ear upon a face similar to the one of the man at the forefront was apparent. Open eyes that look like they belonged to a devil gazed down at something that was within the individual's hands.

It was a large ball that was divided into two halves.

Benzard was the first to come back to reality as he turned to his group.

"Listen up. This is it. We don't have time to waste," he said, causing the others to snap in his direction. "We don't know what we're going to find so let me tell you this. If one of us manages to find the legacy before the others, they are to wait for at least three hours if there's no immediate danger. If no one else shows up, me included, then take the legacy and make it your own."

Everyone was surprised by this.

Denille couldn't believe what she was hearing. This guy was willing to let go of the legacy just like that?

"Even though I'm the one who seems more interested in this than any of you, it defeats the purpose of us coming here if we fail to get it in the end. So if you find it, go for it. Understood?"

Everyone nodded.

Benzard pulled out the two Keys and motioned for Skullius to come and take the one that was bound to him.

The Keys were only useful when the individuals bound to them used them, after all.

Slowly, Skullius walked up to Benzard who gave him the Key and put his hand on his shoulder to supply him with mana.

They walked up the giant fox which gazed at them, its sight pinned on Skullius.

The beast then released a low growl that made everyone uncomfortable.

'Curious.'

The fox stood from its languid position, but did not remove itself from the way.

Benzard pushed Skullius to go for the gate from under the creature.

Skullius murmured hatefully.

Passing from under the fox's belly certainly made him and Benzard all the more cautious as the shadow that engulfed them even in this dark world had a certain, creepy depth to it.

The two reached the gate and Benzard gave Skullius a nod before placing his Key onto the gate.

Skullius did the same with his Key.

The the moment the second Key touched the stone gate, it caused the great structure to shake vehemently!

Both Keys glowed with a white light as they exerted their power on the gate, forcefully prompting it to grunt and begin to open, albeit very slowly.

The two figures carved onto the stone were split in half as the two parts of the gate diverged, a bright, circular portal being revealed behind them!

This portal's light caused the four humans and Skullius to squint their eyes. Nevermind the jarring radiance, the beauty of it was overbearing!

"You may pass," the fox said as it then turned to the other three who rushed over to Benzard and Skullius.

The bright portal made everyone hesitate. They had all expected a gaping black hole which would have be glad to just swallow them whole instead of this welcoming-ish glow.

What could it look like inside the actual labyrinth? Could it be that their perception was biased and Fulgardt had different tastes?

There was only one way to find out.

Denille looked at Skullius and voiced out a thought she had been wanting to expel for a long time.

"Isn't this shitface useless now? We can kill him, right?"

Skullius turned to this woman with a hard expression.

'I completely forgot that there might not be any use for me since they've already opened the gate! Gah! I was hoping they'd only kill me when they had gotten the legacy or whatever, just in case. Can they take that chance?!' Skullius thought with an audible gulp.

This woman really wanted him dead.

"That's true. Having to continuously supply him with mana when in such a dangerous place would be a hustle," Reon posed his own view.

Benzard turned his gaze to Skullius.

The bastard was was considering it!

Skullius wouldn't allow it!

His mind raced as he used all the processing faculties he could muster from his mind to fabricate a fairly convincing argument while keeping a somewhat calm temperament that no one believed in the slightest.

"It's not that I'm afraid of... meeting my end or anything. I've actually died before you see, but killing me now won't benefit you," he said with a slight tremble of his lip.

Denille walked right up to Skullius, a dagger in her hand.

"Oh yeah? Why is that?"

"Because you might still need the Keys to open wherever this legacy is being protected. It's obviously guarded, right?"

Denille stopped and everyone else mulled it over. It wasn't that they hadn't thought of it. They had all obviously considered that, but what made them hesitate to carry on with Skullius was that it was known that each legacy location had a different structure from the other. It was usually not the same as legacies could be found just about anywhere.

What if there were more gates beyond this one that needed the Keys?

Wouldn't killing Skullius destroy the Key as Eobald had said? They had all believed his remark about the Key when they saw that it was functional and in possession of Skullius after Eobald's death after all.

"But what if it doesn't need the Keys?" asked Denille with a frown.

"But what if it does?" Skullius posed his own question.

"What you're saying is just a possibility to make us more anxious about killing you! Stop trying to look intelligent while you're the one who's desperate to keep your sorry life!" an unveiled disdainful look appeared on Denille's face as she glared at Skullius.

"Even so, it's this possibility that could make you all walk out with everything or nothing? Maybe you'll need the Keys to get out after you have the legacy or after you've failed. What will you do then? Rot while trapped in there?"

'Oh crap! That's actually a good point!' Skullius thought sneakily.

...!

Benzard wore a grim expression. The last point that Skullius had made actually made sense. This wasn't merely any legacy. It was the legacy of a man who was known to be unpredictable and valued strength without much in the way of honor.

He could literally put up anything as a challenge. This assumption wasn't too far fetched.

The others felt the same. Denille couldn't deny that Skullius was right. There were too many variables.

The giant fox watched on in amusement.

"He's right. We still need him alive," Benzard said. "If we, by any chance split up, whoever gets stuck with him needs to keep him alive at all costs. Got it?"

Everyone nodded. Denille did so bitterly.

"Don't hesitate to use your full strength when you're in a tough spot. Let's go."

Benzard was the first to walk up to the light and take a deep breath.

'I have every reason to be obsessed with gaining more strength. Those who feel differently are those that have never needed it,' he thought before walking into the portal.

Everyone else quickly followed, a ripple running through the portal as each one went in.

As Skullius passed through the light that disrupted his mana core for a moment, he felt a hard surface under his foot.

His senses which had been temporarily dulled, focused sharply as they took in what was around.

A dark and narrow corridor that stretched into the unseen distance was all he could vaguely see. Skullius could barely make out sturdy walls on both his sides and when he took another step forward, he bumped into something!

He drew back in surprise as he realised he had bumped into someone.

A blue light was released from this someone's finger, their image revealed swiftly.

Skullius almost passed out when he saw who it was.

The same could be said for this person as they released an agitated 'Urgh'.

"I can't believe I have to be stuck with you, shitface," Denille said as she looked around. They were the only two in this narrow corridor that barely fit them both when they stood side by side.

Skullius was about to retort when...

KRRRRSHHHHH!

A scrapping sound was heard along with the sight of sparks that sprayed as a certain object brushed against the walls.

The little light provided by the sparks gave glimpses of a horrifying image that made Denille and Skullius tremble.

Unfortunately, the appearance of this creature was only a secondary concern.

The shiver-inspiring image of a creature that held a large sword which scraped against the walls was terrifying but...

The core that it held within it was...

Chapter 59: Counter

A muscular figure walked towards the two with a large odachi-like sword that rested on its shoulders. The weapon was so long that its rusty blade could barely fit within the narrow corridor.

The creature wore nothing on its torso, revealing grey skin that looked decayed, worms and thick ooze pouring from several orifices that had opened up in its flesh.

On its face was a old looking cloth that wrapped around it, making sure no detail of its head was shown to Denille or Skullius.

Its feet produced no sound as it moved, drawing closer to the two terrified souls.

Denille swallowed a lump of saliva and almost forgot to breathe. A drop of sweat trickled down from her temple, as with her greater sensitivity to mana, she felt even more than Skullius just how much of a monster this thing was.

A blue core with wisps of purple!

For Skullius, this was different from what he felt from the fleshlings he had been travelling with. The thing before him seemed to be on a whole other level.

What's more, he had almost thought it to be an undead from its appearance, but it gave off the feeling of a living creature!

Well, sort of.

'This...'

Skullius didn't even bother to try and check its status. If it was stronger than Benzard and company, he wouldn't be able to check anyway.

While this was the extent to which Skullius could see, Denille noticed something else that made feel her relieved and terrified at the same time.

'There's no such thing as partial awakening of cores. A blue core will always be a blue core while a purple one will always be purple. This means this creature was actually stronger, but its core has been losing strength over time! That would explain the mix of colour...' the thought made Denille shudder.

This was how it was with cores. Even when one was ready to power up to the next core level (the next color), there was never signs like strange discoloration that would appear, but the same couldn't be said about devolving. It was rare occurrence.

The creature before them took its time, but the movement of its feet showed that it was experienced.

Denille suddenly grabbed an arrow from her quiver and jabbed it into Skullius' stomach before the Discount Human could react!

Skullius was shocked by the sudden action, thinking that Denille had made the split second decision to kill him as he would only be a burden, but...

"I won't be princess-carrying your useless ass just so you mooch off my mana. That's a special arrow. It'll insert my mana into you," she said as she stepped in front of Skullius.

She gnashed her teeth as Benzard's words about making sure Skullius was kept alive resounded in her mind.



'Annoying!'

Skullius felt a surge of mana continuously flow into him.

'She could have done this before, though,' he thought.

The creature in front of them suddenly stopped and remained motionless for a few seconds, creating a deadly suspense.

Denille who had nocked an arrow in a flash and aimed it at the creature, gathering her mana as she took a deep breath to calm herself.

She had an Advanced Class called the Trinity Archer which allowed her to give arrows one of three abilities.

[Arrow to the Heart] which gave the arrows access to her mana or skills.

[Spade Arrow] which granted them additional attributes like speed based on her own stats.

Last but not least, there was [Union Arrow] which gave her a once-in-a-day chance once to combine three arrows with separate abilities into one, making for a ridiculously powerful attack.

This was all on top of all her other loosely related skills.

At this moment, she had decided to use [Spade Arrow] to test just how powerful this creature was.

She loosened the arrow which released a low boom as the air was unable to hinder its flight!

It pierced through the air and arrived at the creature's head in a flash!

SHIIIIING!

...!

Skullius saw blood flying in his vision and as he took in the scene, the sequence of events that had just happened didn't line up.

Denille screamed in pain as blood sprayed from her shoulder!

She forced herself to remain conscious as even though her wound wasn't too deep, the amount of pain that rang through her body from it was too sudden and too immense!

She leaned against the wall and looked at the figure that was now behind her.

Skullius gaped!

A light blue overlay was just dying down from the creature's body like an after image. It still had its sword on top of its shoulder, the blade dripping of blood.

'What...?' Skullius turned to see the creature, whose movements he had been unable to follow just now.

It seemed that Denille was the same. She had shot an arrow at the monster, but right before it could impale its head, she found herself with excruciating pain on her shoulder.

The entity grunted as it once again stood without making a single move and waited.

Denille was both terrified and enraged.

What was this?

This difference was huge despite this thing being rotten like a corpse. It smelled so. It sounded so.

Her mana surged as she poured it into another arrow and nocked it on her bow.

'There's something strange about this. I won't be able to beat this thing if I don't find out if that movement was just its speed or a special technique,' she thought before she leaped backwards, her arrow shining brightly.

It then went on to blast towards the target in the next instant!

The arrow flew with more than double the speed of the first arrow, arriving before the creature's chest in an instant!

But...

BAAM!

Denille found herself flying!

For a second she thought she had been split in half, as this time, she noticed that she had been hit with the blunt side of the creature's blade, the force carrying her into the darkness of the corridor ahead while she coughed blood!

Skullius didn't see anything!

He only later heard a body colliding with the floor a distance away while the creature's body which was surrounded by a dying light blue overlay stood imposingly!

He froze.

What on earth was happening?

Was this creature just flexing its strength?

Why did it only counter attacks that it received instead of actively attacking... and doing so to kill?!

Right then, a flurry of glimmering arrows shot through the air with an immense amount of mana!

They sped swiftly and purposely, aiming at separate parts of the creature's body!

Right before the arrows could penetrate it, an overlay of light blue enveloped the creature and it suddenly swung down its sword!

The air in the narrow corridor blew outwards from the sheer force that was exerted by the creature as it swung down!

Skullius was swept against the wall!

The corridor shook as a horrifying force travelled towards Denille in an instant, carrying a staggering momentum that threatened to rip her apart!

Surprisingly, Denille's figure appeared bolting with a thick film of mana around her body while her eyes flashed with white!

She held a dagger in her hand, and raced forth with her body hunched, a frightening frenzy drawn on her face!

She leaped and stabbed tens of times in a second, but the enemy brought forward its sword with its face directed at Denille!

Denille's rapid attacks bounced off the sword and she angrily backed away, shooting three more arrows backed by the great augments of [Spade Arrow] after a quick weapon switch!

The moment the arrows reached the creature, Denille's heart almost stopped as fractions of a second later, she felt the air pulse with movement, the large odachi-like sword cleaving through the dusty air as it aimed at her neck!

Denille pushed all her mana into her body to enhance her agility!

She then expelled mana from her back like a rocket which pushed her down, saving her from being beheaded!

She tore herself from the prospect of how she could have died just now and launched a straight punch towards the creature that caused the corridor to tremble from the rippling force!

She had finally managed to land a hit!

Yet... there was barely any damage!

A bright flash of light blue crossed her eyes and before Denille knew it, she was slammed against the hard ground, digging into it like a plough!

'What is this?! There's something wrong! I can't land any decisive blows. It just counters, attacking with something I can barely avoid!' Denille thought before she rolled and backed away.

Once again, the creature stood, its sword on its shoulders as it waited for Denille.

The woman steadily herself and frustratedly looked ahead, panting.

This was merely the beginning of the Labyrinth, right?

Or did she somehow stumble upon the final boss?

Unlikely.

For the Labyrinth of someone who valued strength so much, it didn't seem too far fetched to think that this would be the first challenge they would find, but still...

"Hmm?"

Denille noticed that something was amiss.

Rather, something was missing.

She turned and looked from side to side.

Where was Skullius?!

## Chapter 60: A Discount Human's Resolve

"Did that bastard just ditch me?!" Denille barked as she sensed from the arrow that was lodged into Skullius, that he was getting further and further away from her!

The nerve!

Her natural instinct was to follow and bash Skullius' head in, but the battle instinct forged after years of combat and honing her skills immediately alarmed her of the danger that she was currently up against!

One wrong move could lead to a disaster even though she had noted that this creature basically didn't attack without being attacked first. Well, for the most part.

The humanoid stood motionlessly, its figure looking to have many openings, but Denille knew better, or rather, she was beginning to understand what was going on with it.

First though...

'Should I just cut off my mana supply from that idiot? No, I can't. We really might need him to get out of here,' she thought before she took another arrow and placed it on her bow with the seething fury within her almost spilling from her mouth like vomit.

Denille couldn't imagine that she was already forced to use her full strength right here, which made her feel utterly helpless. The thing about using her full strength right now, was that she probably wouldn't be able to fight when it came to the upcoming monsters that she had to face.

'Barely meet the requirements, my ass! We aren't qualified for this! Screw you, Benzard!' she cursed in her mind.

Denille took a step back towards the direction that led to the rest of the labyrinth.

As soon as she did, the creature with the odachi took a step forward, following her.

'I guess I can't make a tactical retreat. Why does that bastard get a free pass then?' she thought as her body began to bubble with a thick blanket of mana that lit up the surroundings.

In as much as the situation was disadvantageous, Denille refused to lose.

She was going to have to pull out her biggest guns if she wanted to leave here alive.

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Skullius was jogging lightly as he traversed down the dark corridor, his feet creating echoes that resounded all around.

Flesh light!

Who needed it anyway?

His eyes were already beginning to adjust to the darkness, the view getting more vivid as time passed.

Was running away from someone who was more capable of fighting than he was a wise choice?

Well, for Skullius it was the better choice. His fate was practically sealed if his team got what they wanted. Why would he give them that satisfaction?

'I'm not going to stand around and wait to be hacked to pieces. How can I feel reassured when my 'partner' is being thrashed right in front of me?!' he thought.

Seeing how Denille was getting the pretty whacked off of her, Skullius had decided to dip. There was no use cheering for the losing team.

His sudden leave wasn't a choice based solely off of fear, though. It was also tactical. Well, barely.

As he ran, Skullius checked the mana supply from the arrow that was in his body. Even with the distance he had covered, there was still a steady supply that streamed into his body, but it was reduced by an somewhat.

Apparently, he was still in range of Denille's technique, and it seemed that she wasn't going to kill the supply of mana to him just yet as his words eariler had gotten to her and the rest.

"Hehe..." Skullius gave a less-Bony-than-normal chuckle.

He went on while being mindful of the supply of mana that he immediately manipulated with [Basic Mana Manipulation] to rush to his core instead of raging within his body.

For some distance, there was nothing new, the smooth grey walls that surrounded him being as plain as they could be. It was almost demotivating for Skullius as he expected there to be something that added a bit more of a unique aesthetic to the place, like skulls and gems, just like how Somanda spiced up the look to his abode.

Add a few skeletons lying around, some blood, winds that sound like screams, roaming ghosts and you'd have yourself a true labyrinth!

That's how they did it in the Deathly Hood!

Soon, Skullius sensed something that made him hit the brakes. The narrow corridor had suddenly expanded, widening to form three paths whose openings bore nothing in the way of visibility.

They were equally dark with an ominous air about them that caused Skullius to get even more anxious.

Such situations weren't his forte, as he barely had the right to choose anything back in the mines. It was all predetermined after all. A choice like this almost made him feel uncomfortable.

The Discount Human didn't hesitate for long, however. Since he had decided to take more risks in the name of his own preservation, he had to move forward and choose what he thought wasn't a spiked room full of Azilas and Onumbassssses.

Of the three paths, Skullius chose the second one which faced the main path that he had been on.



Why?

Well, why not?!

With non-existent confidence, Skullius walked in and focused his vision. The darkness here seemed to be of a different quality than the simple lack of light he had been in since he walked into this Labyrinth.

As he took a few more steps, Skullius felt something beating against him like a heavy wind. It carried a certain weight to it, like dense moisture, but he couldn't see anything in this darkness.

The sensation began to get heavier and heavier until Skullius could barely handle it. He pushed himself forward, dragging his feet as in the next moment...

[You have been exposed to 'Evil Darkness'. Your righteousness is being challenged...]

[No righteousness detected]

'What? Righteousness? What does this mean?' Skullius thought while persisting against the tide which he now realised to be this... Evil Darkness. What was it? Some element?

An ancient power? An illness? Wait! What was an illness?!

As he took a few more steps forward, the intense darkness suddenly vanished, replaced by an extremely bright golden white light that completely blinded him!

Skullius covered his eyes.

The heavy sensation he felt vanished, a feeling of weightlessness overcoming him as he steadied himself.

As if the barrage of surprises wasn't enough, another marvel happened!

Skullius' body flickered, a tall bony frame overlapping with his human form continuously!

He looked at himself, seeing his Boneman form occasionally popping up, and he felt a deep sense of longing.

[You have been exposed to 'Just Light'. Your hidden evil is being challenged....]

[No hidden evil detected]

'Hmm? Now it's hidden evil? Am I evil?' Skullius thought. 'It says I'm not, right? I guess the constant killing I've done isn't really bad, huh? Though I did enjoy the flesh out of it.'

The fact that this light was able to uncover his hidden Boneman form was something that Skullius took note of as it spelled how strong it was.

What was this darkness? What was this light?

Another notification appeared in front of Skullius.

[Fellow... human. You have been judged to not be conformed by the concepts of evil or righteousness. You are motivated by unbiased desire. You have been nominated to be a carrier of both 'Evil Darkness' and 'Just Light'. Do you accept?]

"Ohhh...." Skullius said, watching the blinking notification before his eyes. "To be a carrier? Of what? An illness? Gah! What does this mean?!"

Caution spun in Skullius' mind as he thought. He wasn't really biased towards having either light or darkness. What were they but things that existed? Could being a carrier of them be a bad thing?

Probably not.

"Might as well see what it's about, right?" Skullius thought before giving a hesitant 'yes'.

As soon as that word left his mouth, he felt a burst of two extremely different powers invade his body!

One was overbearing and heavy, exerting its dominance over his flickering frame while the other was extravagant, giving him a light sensation as it planted itself into his very being!

Soon, the surge of energy stopped and Skullius found himself standing at an intersection where only two paths could be seen before him while the usual darkness persisted.

[Congratulations! You are one of the few, rare challengers capable of carrying both 'Evil Darkness' and 'Just Light'. The vestiges of Fulgardt grin with approval!]

[You have gained 'Evil Darkness' affinity]

[You have gained 'Just Light' affinity]

....

Skullius hurriedly checked his status and saw two new affinities plastered into his panel.

"Hoo... I wonder what they can do. Does everyone who comes here get these Affinities? Can I use them even now?" Skullius thought as he then looked at the darkness that surrounded him with the two paths awaiting his choice.

Unlike the last time, Skullius felt a difference between the paths.

One had an overbearing aura that threatened to choke him to death while the other had a relatively weaker presence.

However, with [Basic Mana Manipulation], Skullius could feel a prickling hostility coming from a relatively weaker presence while from the other, he didn't feel such.

If mana was leaking out from whatever was in these two paths, it must have carried a sliver of their emotions.

Should he choose the path with the stronger presence but no hostility, or the one with the weaker presence with the heavy killing intent?

There was an invisible 'wants to kill you' floating above the path with the weaker presence, but Skullius was willing to bet his money on it.

But then, what about having to face a docile powerhouse who would give you a short nod while you went on ahead without a hitch?

That sounded promising.

Without further ado, Skullius made his choice...