

Undead 511

Chapter 511: He's Gone?!

Fortune.

"Impossible!"

Skullius cried out loud.

There was just no way.

"How does that even work...?!"

Ferex who was at his side shrugged, unable to find a response.

Even he was surprised but not more than Skullius.

How could something like this happen right under his nose?!

The Hybrid Luman could not believe it.

As his senses stretched out over a vast region, his dark sight penetrating the into the depths of the sea within Fortune, he was forced to believe it but...

"He's really gone?!" he exclaimed in shock.

Indeed.

Red Rage was gone.

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Fifteen minutes ago.

Skullius eventually cast aside his suspicions over the peculiar feeling he got after leaving the hall.

He was still convinced that he wasn't mistaken. Something had happened and it made him vigilant.

His first thought was that perhaps the horrendous luck was starting to manifest and he had started to mobilise his prepared card which was the patch on his soul but...

Nothing followed after that strange feeling.

Slowly, he had put a pin on this and warily rushed back to Bryne Residence and entered his room with Yuyui.

Since Yuyui was clueless about anything related to this issue, he decided that alerting her would not do him any good. If anything, making her worry would be to his disadvantage.

Therefore, after arriving at the mansion, Skullius had instantly jumped into Fortune, Yuyui following after him as she said she also had matters to attend to, no doubt in the Temple of Unlusted Tears.

The two had left Ferex in Fortune, the Elimparidis Stone Staff being kept in a safe spot within the room, when attending the 'launch' of the Premium Age Royale as he seemed to be really interested in the corpse of the Grand Flame Bringer.

Even as they appeared minutes ago, the Limitless Body Null Demon Hound was still staring at the corpse. At least that was what he looked like he was doing.

"I need to talk to Bassbion about something," Yuyui said with a serious face. Skullius was the control freak type and for good reason, so she had to state where she was going.

Not to mention he literally owned her.

"Alright. Don't forget that you'll be teleported to the venue tomorrow. Don't get caught off guard," Skullius instructed sternly.

"Right," Yuyui said with a nod before she rushed towards the large building erected atop the white pedestal.

Skullius then turned his attention to Ferex as he asked.

"What are you doing?"

The Hound turned to him with its luminous sockets before releasing tendrils of Unliving Thread from its body that wrapped around one of the scales of the black corpse before it.

With the activation of [Amorphous Sampling], the Hound was able to create a replica of the scale but then came the wait.

"You're waiting for the cooldown of the skill?" Skullius asked before checking the Hound's status.

The skill [Amorphous Sampling] and [GENIUS] were closed to evolving while all the others were past the halfway mark. This may have seemed slow compared to how Skullius had consistently levelled up but given the timeline, Ferex was fairly quick. He was roughly eleven days old after all.

The Apostle also seemed to have some grand plans that occupied his time so he decided to leave Ferex to his own devices. He had his own plans, after all.

And come to think of it...

"Speaking of Apostles with grand plans, there's that little bastard who has been in retreat. What's he still doing down there?" Skullius said as he walked over to the expansive sea that reeked of condensed mana.

Ferex followed after him.

He was really interested in seeing his senior after all and without permission he wouldn't just swim down to the bottom of the sea where Red Rage just to take a look. He could disturb important activity.

As Skullius was about to call out his first Apostle, he suddenly realised...

His link with Red Rage... was severed.

The flesh?!

This would only happen when the Apostle was too far away or if perhaps if he was dead but Skullius doubted something like that would happen without him getting a notification.

Also, given how close he was to where Red Rage was before i.e. the sea, there was no way he wouldn't be able to register the presence of the damn Pelvis Boar-Man!

"No way!" Skullius said as he dove down into the sea, his mana bursting out as he used his special property of weight to make himself extremely heavy, his figure sinking rapidly until he reached the bottom.

After a quick and thorough search, Skullius found nothing.

Red Rage wasn't there.

Furthermore, the eggs the Apostle had sought to protect were gone too!

A dreadful thought suddenly swam into Skullius' mind.

Did Red Rage leave Fortune then?

But how?

Not only would he have to get out of Fortune, he would also have to leave the spatial storage ring that the Elimparidis Stone Staff was stored in!

Skullius exited the deep waters and stood on the dry ground.

His mind churned as he thought of possibilities upon possibilities.

The only thing that he knew about Red Rage that gave him peculiar abilities beyond his understanding was his control of Null Life Essence!

With it, he had been able to, as he explained it, 'watch the outside world through Skullius' eyes while within the spatial storage ring'.

Surely that was unique but breaking the rules of spatial storage networks within the Staff and ring purely with Null Life Essence...

"Impossible!" Skullius tried to convince himself.

"How does that even work...?!"

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In the current time Skullius slapped his face.

Just thinking about that golden bastard marching as he pleased within Genhuis City...

With those Diviners...

With the second sun which would rise in the morning...

He shuddered.

Maybe Red Rage was still in Fortune...somewhere.

Maybe he just couldn't establish a mental link right.

Skullius zipped from place to place within Fortune at a ridiculous speed, with each spot he searched leaving with a darker expression on his face than the last.

Red Rage wasn't here.

Skullius' last stop was the mountain range.

At this point, he had completely given up on Red Rage being here but...

Hope.

With a furious expression he exited Fortune and was about to race outside, searching the streets thoroughly when...

His Hybrid Luman form gave out with the notification that [High Cosmetic Body] had timed out.

The fearsome form of the Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator emerged and Skullius cursed as he sank himself back into Fortune, flaring flame dancing in his sockets!

His appearance in the already well lit space of this mini-world, made the area around him four times brighter as the glowing sheen in his sockets dominated!

Levin in its most condensed and sharpest form raged as storm clouds appeared and disappeared around Skullius, his lone, powerful presence painting him as the exalted of this space.

The partially ethereal robe he wore, tattered around its glowing blue rims and billowing in a non-existent wind, contrasted Skullius' fury right now.

The Penetrator looked up and furiously roared into the skies...

"RED RAAAAAGEEEEE!!!"

Chapter 512: The Kindling Heath

Skullius found it difficult to calm down until a considerable amount of time had passed.

Seriously, he didn't think he would have another blob of worry to pester his peace of mind, especially from his own abilities. What were the repercussions of this?

While the second sun in the sky was absent, the Diviners could possibly track down Red Rage. Or maybe they could not. Perhaps the job of the Diviners wasn't a twenty four hour gig. But the night...

The night was when most of the heinous activity took place right?

The Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator slapped himself in the skull.

"Is this it? That lovely stroke of horrendous luck?" Skullius asked himself.

Maybe. Maybe not.

The Penetrator looked around and found himself on the stout mountain. He had appeared exactly where he had been before he exited Fortune in order to go and look for Red Rage seconds ago.

With his mood simmering down from a rage filled high, Skullius decided to use this time in a more beneficial way than figuring out ways to chew out Red Rage whenever he eventually found him.

"I had rechecking my spoils as part of my objectives. Didn't get enough time to properly appraise them all. Might as well do that now," he said as he shot out a burst of hot air that coiled in the atmosphere while releasing thin bursts of Levin.

The Penetrator began to scale the stout mountain in order to reach the top which was saturated with multiple high level concepts.

During the night of the previous day, before the Premium Age Royale's commencement, he had setup and researched superficially all his gains from the battle with the Grand Flame Bringer.

Right now though, before the three hour cooldown of [High Cosmetic Body] came off, he intended to explore two, less complicated spoils that came from that.

It would do well to pass the time.

As Skullius reached the top of the mountain, on his bones cold mana heavy with unnatural effects registering, familiar prompts began to appear from his guidance field.

[High level concept detected. 'Distorted Gravity'. To learn the lesser fundamentals, an investment of 15,100 Null Life Essence is required]

[High level concept detected. 'Spatial Lightning'. To learn the lesser fundamentals, an investment 24,900 Null Life Essence is required].

[High level concept detected. 'Stagnant Space. To learn the lesser fundamentals, an investment of 31,700 Null Life Essence is required]

The skill [Epiphany] registered the high level concepts present atop this mountain, one of which Skullius could now learn the lesser fundamentals of provided he drew Null Life Essence from Ferex and coupled it with his own; if the Apostle had the full 3000 he could hold right now that is – with an additional 100 on top.

Skullius had recognised this opportunity when he came here yesterday and it was only a matter of time before he made his Hybrid Luman form stronger by learning more about Distorted Gravity but that wasn't what he was looking to focus on right now.

With another stretch of steps, the gravity that used to bully the Penetrator being significantly less aggressive because of his higher stats, Skullius reached IT.

His fury was quelled just by seeing this thing.

This was undoubtedly a contender for the greatest thing he could have looted from his latest Cluster raid.

A large, magnificent throne surrounded by a pool of ever boiling lava stood before his sight, looking to not fit as well with the chaotic atmosphere and messy design of this platform – the fractured and torn pillars of stone, some of which shot into the sky randomly around thick bolts of lightning that caused the disappearance of some of them.

This Legendary object, along with the large sword stuck within the hot pool around it... these two misfits gave a powerful presence.

On the back rest of the throne, two dark scaled eggs could be seen wedged within its thick, solid material – one of the eggs twice the one to its left and evidently the one that would have been to its right.

Skullius emitted a proud burst of hot mana.

He walked up to the pool and used [Greater Mana Crafter] to lift himself up with mana and sit on this throne that he didn't fit on at all. Still, his arms reached the armrests. That was enough.

The Penetrator languidly rested his back and relaxed, Levin bursting from the mass of clouds that would spontaneously appear around him, its streaks smashing against the throne constantly.

"Ah...."

As he sat, he felt it.

A massive surge of familiar essences being drawn, condensed and fed into him in relatively safe proportions.

Tinges of white, light blue and grey ran over the surface of the throne and streamed to Skullius and the eggs above, feeding them the essence contained within four concepts – Spatial Lightning, Distorted Gravity, Stagnant Space and Grand Fire.

The thick mass of power within the boiling pool was yet to wane and it was the source of the last, one which wasn't on the level of the other three given that it wasn't exactly a concept. The unbelievable resilience of the energy within this pool was exactly why Skullius had looted it along with throne after all.

Speaking of the throne...

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[Kindling Heath]

<Legendary>

A throne forged from the remnants of the voracious flames spat out of the land, their pursuit to devour everything fused with the sediments of the power of gods to form a seat for a long awaited king.

-Durability-

71,230/120,000

-Special Effects-

- Increases any affinity by one rank.
- Increase Mana by 12,000 with absolute conversion
- Absorbs any energy form nearby and feeds it to the user with cautious guide
- Increase ability to receive and comprehend complex energies by 50%

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[Skill: Genuine Womb]

The throne is a protector of its user and the perfect bearer of his new kin. The throne will nourish anyone the user wills with the essence it absorbs.

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[Skill: Unlimited Utility]

The throne saves 20% of absorbed essences to use for other functions that the user may desire – flight, defence, attack and per the user's will, giving allies a boost along the lines of the aforementioned aspects.

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The more Skullius thought about this throne and its previous owner, the more he realised that it was underutilised.

Or maybe it was just that the Grand Flame Bringer hadn't used the throne in the final battle. He couldn't.

Whatever the case may be, Skullius was going to use this thing to the fullest. In fact, the concentrated surge of mana with 'spices' made him feel a little overwhelmed but this feeling was offset by [Epiphany]'s passive ability to slowly dissect these concepts.

The process was much faster now as the essence wasn't scattered anymore. In a few minutes, Skullius could get the equivalent of what he had attained days ago when trying to find the core of Distorted Gravity but for all concepts that he was exposed to.

The only problem would be that he didn't have a convenient conduit to exploit in order to utilise the little he gained from these concepts like before - with a new core that wasn't imprinted with a Refinery.

He needed to work harder.

Looking up, Skullius saw the egg directly above him. The largest one.

The space between its scales was beginning to turn from the bright shade of red to a greyish white hue.

It seemed the creature within was slowly graduating from Grand Fire to one of the high level concepts contained here on the stout mountain.

'Whatever the creature born from this is must be really greedy. I probably shouldn't use [Unbound] on this egg otherwise I may impede the birth of something phenomenal,' Skullius thought with hints of excitement burning in his four sockets, one of which held an absurd power that he was proud of. One that he wouldn't expose unless absolute necessary.

Piggy backing on his growing enthusiasm that slowly chased away his anger, the Penetrator focused on the next thing on his agenda.

The new guidance field functions.

Chapter 513: New Guidance Field Functions!

Following Skullius' evolution, the guidance field had shown a notification depicting how it had changed.

The specifics were that it had reached a threshold called Patronage Rank 1.

Thankfully, Skullius didn't have to figure this out himself as an information packet, something he hadn't seen in a very long time, was also gifted to him in order to explain more about the guidance field in general.

This information packet was called the Guidance Code and similar to the information packet he had received from VOW bro long ago, it was a golden text on the guidance that Skullius just had to poke in order to activate.

As such, the Penetrator did just that, the Guidance Code text brightening up to flash with immense light.

The Penetrator had held off on using this as the night before the Premium Age Royale had been packed with too much already. Between talking to Silrat and planning his steps in the grand event, he had decided to not oversaturate himself with information. That was simple logic.

'Now, let's see what this is all about,' Skullius said as a stream of light rushed towards his skull and penetrated, turning into a vast well of information that was greedily absorbed by his mind.

The first thing Skullius was fed, was the basics in a simplistic order.

<The Voice of Worlds qualifies who it deems fit by way of specified criterion from the three '&#%^\@!'. Once an individual has been chosen, the guidance field is given in a crude state to allow for their growth.>

This was not news to Skullius. VOW bro had mentioned it when he first dropped into Aigas.

The exact criteria for one to be chosen remained hidden from Skullius even with this though as even as his mind hurried to draw a conclusion, he couldn't discern what he and Elita had common.

They both had guidance fields but... nothing.

<Every guidance field issued is different and initially starts without a Patronage Rank, meaning that it does not offer any specific benefits other than reserving certain information about its user from other guidance holders.

Naturally, depending on a variety of circumstances, there is a high chance for a holder with a higher Patronage Rank to gleam the hidden information of one with a lower Patronage Rank.>

Now this was news.

It seemed Patronage Ranks determined how much more benefit one would derive from the guidance field, something Skullius didn't know. Of course he didn't.

This answered some of his questions though.

During his encounter with Elita, she had been able to tell his name. His real name.

However, she hadn't been able to tell that he was.. well, a Null Lifeform. Over that, she hadn't been able to tell his class as an Insurgent Magnus, given that he was in his Discount Human form at the time. Hell, she hadn't been able to tell that he wasn't even human.

It was likely that this had to do with this universal, though Skullius didn't know what Elita's Patronage Rank was.

<In their base state, all guidance fields offer a piece of (Counsel) – an answer to a burning query that the user may have. With growth however, multiple pieces of Counsel will be available for the user along with more features that allow for the user's rapid growth such as (Attachments) and (Marked Spots) in Patronage Rank 1.>

The Eternal Storm Veil Penetrator laid his hand on his chin as he thought deeply about this facet.

Counsel?

Thinking about instances where the guidance field had answered his questions...

There didn't seem to be any.

None that he could remember at least.

Wait...

'Maybe that time...?' Skullius thought. It wasn't that long ago when he was about to exit the Tremur Forest, his anxiety leading him to question if transforming into the Discount Human would cause his Apostle Red Rage to go into slumber once again.

(A/N: Refer to Ch.108).

That was the only instance he could recall where the guidance field responded to anything that wasn't his command.

'So...now that the guidance has reached Patronage Rank 1, I get more chances to get answers? Hmph. I doubt I would get anything too important though. Like what the heck Serenity's plan with me is, for instance but oh well...'

<Counsel> along with <Marked Spots> and <Attachments> were represented at the bottom of his status on the guidance field along with their limits.

Skullius eagerly looked into what the next two benefits were all about.

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<Attachments>

A unique authority has been granted. You can give guidance field privileges a rank below your own Patronage Rank to anyone you please. Anyone you designate for this benefit will not be able to escape your eyes, all their activity open for you to track with your guidance field.

[Limit – 0/2]

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<Marked Spots>

Every place you have been to is registered on the maximised version of the guidance field to form a map that you can use for tracking anyone you have marked or instantly travelling to an already marked spot through exclusive <Quick Spawn>.

[Limit – 5 marks]

<Quick Spawn is not available for Patronage Rank 1>.

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Skullius shot from his seat as he gaped at the new functions of the guidance field!

"I can... I can do that?!" Skullius questioned himself.

He could grant anyone he wanted the ability to grow through the guidance field?!

That was...

"Unexpected! To think such a thing is possible!"

Beyond this, Skullius could get a map of everywhere he had been so far and to see how this worked, Skullius called on the <Marked Spots> function immediately.

The guidance field that was usually a small, rectangular panel before his eyes expanded, growing into a large floating plaque that depicted a disjointed, incomplete map of Aigas!

It was true!

With a key at the side that showed the variety of symbols denoting, Forest, City, Town, Village, River, Hills, Mountains, Gorges and the likes, a detailed resource was formed before Skullius' sockets!

The Penetrator shook his head.

"Hahahahahahaha!"

With a burst of laughter into the thick air, Skullius wondered how things had suddenly begun to take a turn away from the usual misfortune.

All these new functions served his plethora of agendas too well.

A way to help his mule grow faster.

A map to make his journey to find the place where his many 'living solutions' were being held captive much, much easier.

Unfortunately, the [Quick Spawn] function which was incredibly overpowered, allowing to instantly travel anywhere he had been to on the map was not yet available but that was it, wasn't it?

Yet!

If he grew some more, he would definitely get his hands on it!

Oh how convenient that would be.

'Giving Yuyui the privilege should be the obvious choice but who is the other one going to be?' Skullius thought.

His many plans for the future had begun to tremble and shuffle with this. Even he was almost finding it difficult to get them all in order with these new features at play.

'I'll figure that out later,' Skullius thought as he absorbed the rest of information from the packet.

It seemed he wasn't fed anything outside his Patronage Rank as all the benefits for other ranks were not mentioned.

That was fine though. One step at a time.

Another little piece of information that tickled his fancy was the answer to why the guidance field had showed lesser detail for his Discount Human form and more for his Penetrator form.

The answer was....weird.

Apparently, the guidance field was supposed to naturally show more about opponents and more powerful items the stronger Skullius grew, but since there had been a large disparity of power between the Discount Human and the Penetrator before, this effect only applied to whichever was stronger.

It was already difficult for the guidance field to manage two different individuals in its crude state thus this... 'malfunction.'

Since Skullius hadn't been using the guidance field much to appraise his opponents since losing his sight, he hadn't seen the change that had occurred with his Hybrid Luman form now that it was much stronger than the Penetrator form.

This was a minor detail though.

Skullius' mind baked and grilled up numerous short and long term plans as he absorbed the essence from the throne.

"Alright. If I finally get the lesser fundamental knowledge for Distorted Gravity and the other concepts while increasing my proficiency with darkness and light to clear that Trial for my Luman

form, I should grow at a faster pace. I guess...hmmm...oh! I could also get more Prompt Spells from the Association to convert into powerful skills with [Unbound] but thisss...could cause problems.

I don't want to have too many skills. I guess I'll have to cash in on that favour with Stylla to meet a Mage who can help me combine my skills," Skullius said with a blank gaze on the pool of lava.

"I can focus on developing my skill in the Insurgent Magnus class on the way to get that mission from Purity done and when I come back, hopefully, I can nip that bad luck in the bud before it manifests. Hopefully. That. Works. I don't need all my plans to come crumbling down. That's right!

Three days should have passed by the time I come back from that mission. I guess that's the two days after tomorrow's matches. I will likely be able to create an avatar that will go on its way back to the Tremur Forest, to the Labyrinth of the Yoke. Amidst some other small missions I guess," Skullius said scrambling in thought.

Information gathering was another part of Skullius' plan along with helping his team grow stronger, Yuyui in particular. Ferex seemed to have impeccable focus on that task but Yuyui needed a push.

Or so he thought.

Chapter 514: A Glimpse of the Real Host!

The lime haired girl opened the doors to the Temple and walked in with a less than cheery step.

She was anxious.

It seemed that finally having her freedom from being shackled to one place wasn't entirely as refreshing as she had thought.

Skullius had jogged her memory, making her brain recall that mankind wasn't the most benevolent race. In fact, her new powers wouldn't do her any favours unless she learned to harness and used them to protect herself. Before that, if anyone discovered them...

Yuyui gulped.

This sentiment, coupled with the fact that she was walking in the most gruesomely designed section of the Temple of Unlusted, the Slurred Grounds, where the bodies of men flayed, disembowelled and disembodied could be found, didn't make her journey any more pleasant.

"Come on, it's just a bunch of dead bodies. You've seen your corpses thousands of times, haha. This isn't new..." Yuyui tried to cheer herself up but the looks on the faces of these persistently 'fresh' bodies made a chill run down her spine.

If it wasn't fury permanently sculpted onto their visages, it was unbelievable agony and terror.

The stench of unpure death reeked from them as well.

It was only recently that Yuyui discovered that she had a sort of kinship with death. It was enough for her to realise that she wasn't exactly scared of death in the conventional sense. She more so feared the type of death and even then, this fear was comparable to preference – like how some people dreaded servings of live seafood but would still eat them for sustenance if there was no other choice.

To calm her mind, Yuyui began to sing a song while walking through the narrow corridors of the Temples.

Her voice bounced off the walls and echoed in the rooms that she came across.

Along the way, she began to recall the glimpse at her past that she had remembered after Skullius said a set of words that mirrored what her father had said.

She sighed.

At the centre of it all, there was Skullius.

Their relationship was supposed to be master and servant but most of the times, it felt like she was talking to a parent or... an older brother, her being killed multiple times by said brother or parent aside.

She had resolved to become anything possible to leave her prison in the Temple back then, thinking that she choosing one evil over another but...

She smiled.

Her face turned from forlorn to determined.

'That's why I'm here right? To learn how to become more useful. If I continue to do what I did against those terrifying fire creatures, I'll definitely grow stronger in no time,' Yuyui thought.

That was the purpose of this visit, along with another integral mission that she felt was possible with the help of the two guardians.

As for the other, related spur for all this...

Yuyui pulled out a piece of paper from her pocket.

It looked to have been taken from a small book.

Skullius had asked her to read it to him before they had attended the gathering, claiming that its origin wasn't Yuyui's concern.

The contents had been cryptic, written in a poetic fashion.

Fortunately, Yuyui was a bit of an expert in this form of art as a bard. Creating songs with hidden meanings along with composing long strings of lyrics about different subject matter had been what she lived for in another time, thus dissecting what the writings meant had been easy for her... and for Skullius as well.

Upon reading through them however, Yuyui felt... danger.

'Do you see the bashful dancer in the square?

You do not.

Do you see her elusive steps traced through man-shaped shadow?

You do not.

Do you see how closely she performs near your stage?

Possibly not.

Can you see her ripped frown as she twirls about you?

Of course you can't.

Can you meet her eager gaze with your own?

Of course you won't.

Have you felt her nigh approach, her sinking voice?

No you have not.

Did you know she sent her faithful crow?

No. Yet you will.'

It had said.

Yuyui couldn't put a finger on it but... this was a threat.

After reading this to Skullius, his expression hadn't changed but the air around him flinched, as if his emotion had soared for a brief moment.

Yuyui had never seen Skullius fazed in that way before. Even death didn't scare him.

She should know as she had been obliterated along with him when fighting the Grand Flame Bringer but he hadn't shown anything other than excitement and mild frustration.

Whatever could cause Skullius to behave that way...

She wanted to be able to handle it for him, somehow.

Maybe if she awakened more of her eyes, she could defend Skullius from the unknown.

Motivated by the sentiment, Yuyui walked faster, reaching the large double doors to the Ground of Communion quickly.

She pushed them open and entered the large open space populated with the statues on the walls and marred with a very distinctive deep red stain on the floor.

Yuyui walked towards two of the statues and gazed at the stone figures of Bassbion and Yagrina with a partially fearful and brave visage.

"What's with these visits? Do you all think we're counsellors or something?" the stone figure of Bassbion wedged into the tall statue of her previous master said with an annoyed tone. "First that odd thing and now you?"

Yuyui took in a deep breath and spoke with a determined voice.

"I... I have awakened another eye," she declared.

"Oh..." Yagrina expressed mild surprise, her stone figure shifting a little. "It is true it seems. You awakened the Eye of Dispersal, a weaker eye than I hoped but progress all the same don't you think, Sister Bassbion?"

Yuyui was uplifted by Yagrina's encouraging tone, gaining a few degrees of courage to speak more of her mind when....

"So what? She's still nothing of the ideal image that our masters intended," Bassbion said, her stone body folding its arms in front of its chest.

Yuyui furrowed her brows.

"What? Did you think this was enough for me to suddenly respect you as a host? Ha! You have it all wrong, girl."

Bassbion's words pinched Yuyui's fragile heart but they were not enough to break her spirit.

"I don't care about your respect. That's not why I came," Yuyui said steadfastly.

"Why did you come then, host?" Yagrina inquired.

"I want you to train me. I want to know how to fight. I want to protect myself. I.. I can't fight to protect someone else before I grow my own vision of a stronger, more confident me. That's what I want."

A brief silence ensued after Yuyui's words echoed through the Ground of Communion.

The seriousness of the lime haired girl's words was palpable but a certain degree of fragility could be felt in them, as if they were forged out of glass.

A burst of laughter came from Bassbion's stone form.

Following its raucous release, the spirit guardian stormed out of her wedge like an especially turbulent hurricane and appeared right before Yuyui's face!

The violent mana blasted mercilessly against Yuyui, sending her flying and tumbling messily on the floor a distance from the source of the attack.

"Look at you. I can tell you scrounged up some feeble will to finally take your position seriously. Because of it you feel invincible, emboldened by the powers you are awakening. Now you storm in here as if you weren't the weak-willed idiot who didn't even have a shred of fighting spirit before and command something of me?" Bassbion said in a cold but calm voice.

Yagrina seemed to disagree as she remained wedged in her hollow silently, not intervening or rebuking Bassbion as she would when she felt that the tall guardian had gone too far.

"We are not bound to you yet and the Deities forbid I wouldn't obey you even if you awakened the third eye. You are nothing like my master—"

"I don't care!" Yuyui suddenly yelled, cutting off Bassbion.

She slowly rose, her body bloodied from the fierce mana that had shredded her skin.

The lime haired girl took in a deep breath, her eyes glassy as she indeed felt that she was fragile.

However, she was starting to break out of that cocoon of weakness.

Was it not natural to hold onto every opportunity for change and ride it out to the very end?

She could feel that she was growing out of her comfort zone.

More importantly, Skullius felt that way too.

"I don't care what you think. I'm not doing this for you. I'm doing it for myself and my master," Yuyui said as she stood.

"All the more reason for me not to care then," Bassbion said.

Yuyui huffed angrily and stomped towards Bassbion with an angry expression.

As she did, her forehead throbbed, the skin parting to reveal an icy blue iris surrounded by dark matter which focused on Bassbion.

The spirit guardian frowned.

She immediately felt something around her start to fade, her body growing weaker and dimmer.

The chain riddled armour she wore started to fade as well and she realised...

'The array used to keep me in Aigas is getting dispelled!' she thought in horror as she switched her gaze between her body and Yuyui.

Bassbion knelt down, feeling a severe, dreadful fatigue overpowering her mind and body.

No!

This was bad!

If she dissipated without fulfilling her purpose... how would she face her master in the Yormuness?!

Yuyui looked directly at Bassbion with what could only be described as an adorable fierce expression.

"I'm the host and you will do as I say. I don't care how long it takes. I will make you do it. I'll keep coming here until you do," Yuyui declared with a shaky but determined voice. "If you don't like it, you can kill me as many times as you want. That won't stop me."

Bassbion was outraged but there was nothing she could do.

She was quickly losing her strength and if this went on for long enough, she would disappear.

This brat!

She had the gull to...

ARGH!

And yet strangely...

Both Yagrina and Bassbion couldn't help but start to see a glimmer of what they hoped the host to be.

What their masters hoped.

Chapter 515: Sweet Innocence

In the same spirit of growth, as Yuyui was asserting her blooming courage, Ferex was gazing and nodding his head at the progress he had made.

Coincidentally, two of his skills had evolved just when Skullius had exited Fortune, no doubt in an attempt to find his senior again after [High Cosmetic Body] had come off cooldown.

[Amorphous Sampling] which allowed him to copy the likeness of objects with his Unliving Thread had evolved into [Smart Mimicry] which allowed him to more easily copy all complex forms of existence like ethereal and intangible objects while applying small boosts to draw the result as close as possible to the original and even beyond.

[GENIUS!] had evolved into [DETAIL!] which allowed gave Ferex the ability to focus on hidden intricacies through clarity over what it had been able to do before.

Ferex wished he had had these before going to meet Bassbion back then.

During that trip, he had used [Amorphous Sampling] on Bassbion's sword. Its form was hard to copy and the material used to make the sword, which could harm the soul had only been mimicked to a lesser extent.

Unlike many other tools and artefacts, Bassbion's sword didn't rely on arrays or runes for its effects, which made it perfect for Ferex who couldn't have derived its effect and forge himself into a sword that could replicate its unique traits otherwise.

If he had evolved his skills first, there would have been a better outcome but Ferex wouldn't change the past even if he was given the chance. His action was what eventually led to a clean victory after all.

Besides, there was no way Bassbion would allow him to touch her sword again. She was already suspicious of him the first time.

Now, the Hound circled around the corpse of the latest Cluster General to be defeated by his master and him.

Thinking about it now, the experience for killing the creature narrowly landed in his pocket during that final stretch. His effect on the creature's soul was just barely weaker than his master's attack on the creature's mana core which had caused its victim so much pain that it died.

Still, he would have surrendered the experience to Skullius anyway if that had happened.

Now, though he didn't exactly have the perfect sample of flesh and artefact, what he had sampled from Bassbion and this corpse should be enough.

When Skullius saw him again, he would no doubt be pleasantly deeply surprised and maybe even proud.

The Hound's sockets lit up with resolve as it activated [DETAIL!] and [Smart Mimicry] to finally execute its plan.

Dark blue Unliving Thread was churned from glowing red spot on its abdomen, the millions of strings wrapping around the corpse of the Grand Flame Bringer and taking in every aspect of its existence – exterior and interior – analysing and copying it to create a perfect replica... with a dash of Ferex's own touches that he thought would optimise its overall functionality and originality.

The doors to the Kinn Residence were opened by two women who were adorned in white robes, their heads bowed as a show of respect.

There were no Knights to be seen around as the only security that the Kinn Family had brought to Genhuis City for the event, was Vali Kinn herself.

Contrary to popular belief spurred by her looks and well... words, Vali rarely entertained the company of men, especially if they were the empty minded sort.

She hated weak willed men who fell for charm so easily, losing sight clear cut objectives as a result.

Men were supposed to be dominant species, the leaders and all. They had to act like it.

She had been groomed to respect men and the idealistic values attached to them. So far, unfortunately, she had been disappointed.

Her flirty visage and figure acted in opposition to her personality traits as well as her ideals, something she didn't strive to change still. The more feminine she was, no matter how extreme, the better.

As she walked into the mansion, Vali had her cloak taken from her body by one of her attendants, who just so happened to be a Family member, as were the majority of these women in white – cousins, nieces and... sisters.

Vali sat on a bloated couch, sinking into its soft embrace as she breathed out a heavy sigh.

'What a shallow event,' she thought as she swished away the shoes at her feet that were hurriedly collected by an attendant on standby. 'The only interesting thing to surface is that Sif. I wonder...'

Darwel's participation had shocked many.

It was unexpected.

Many of the contenders were still of the mind that her participation was unfair but Rearren didn't seem to have any intention of retracting her participation.

'This whole thing reeks of hidden scheme but one thing is clear, uhmm... All the big moves will happen outside the event itself. The EverSword House... they are planning something. Short of plunging the entire continent into chaos, I can't think of a good reason why they would do this though,' Vali thought.

To hell with that inspiration and for the good of the nation crap. Only fools would believe it.

If these Houses truly cared for the wellbeing of Pelian, they would have started making big moves to secure public safety long ago.

Pelian remained the weakest nation in Feinheath because they kept to themselves all this tune.

Millenia of inactivity caused these behemoths to grow bored instead and start looking into infamous ideas more closely. That was usually the trend.

Vali should know.

After all, she had everything that a normal person could ever ask for. But her needs and desires had started to encroach on territory she had once thought to be immoral and illegal. She now thrived on it.

"Hmm. Well, if they are hellbent on leading by example, I'll follow in their footsteps. There are several opportunities in this anyway."

As Vali got lost in the thrill of what she could achieve with a smile, a small dog ran over from one of the rooms and reached her position, wagging its tail while sticking its tongue out.

Vali's cheery expression vanished, replaced with indifference and a tinge of discomfort.

The small dog stood on its hind legs, clearly gunning for the part where it would be picked up but the blue haired beauty denied it such.

She brought her hand down to the dog's level and grabbed its paw instead, a smile returning on her face as through it, Vali emitted a burst of killing intent momentarily.

SNAP!

The sound of bones cracking was heard, making all the attendants on standby grimace with pity.

The dog's leg had been broken, the jagged bone protruding from its flesh while blood stained the floor.

The small dog whimpered and barked madly in pain while convulsing and struggling to get away from Vali's grip but she held it firmly.

Her expression changed once more, an uncaring one replacing the one before. Vali picked the small dog and sighed as she swiped her hand over its broken leg elegantly.

All of sudden, it was as if the dog hadn't been brutalised just now, its paw appeared to be normal, not a trace of blood, bone or torn flesh on it.

The wound was gone.

The small creature shivered as Vali ruffled its fur.

It looked up at Vali and licked its nose, its body slowly relaxing as the look in its black, beady eyes showed nothing more than sweet innocence.

"Still innocent, huh? I thought for sure you'd hate me this time," Vali said as she cuddled with the small creature.

Somehow, keeping this innocent little pup by her side made her emotions settle, a semblance of a long gone desire for peace gradually flooding her mind.

Chapter 516: First Match!

Next day.

A burst of cheer exploded in the stadium as the masses were once again gathered, eagerly awaiting the commencement of the real matches.

Some of the empty seats, thousands in number, had had been filled with new witnesses invited by friends, family and even foes.

The emotion was palpable.

The trays of food had appeared for all who were present, the hungry already feasting while thanking the Deities for being alive in this age.

"We get to watch seven matches, right?"

"Yef I finkh fo. Imfo efuffuf. I fan harfly fait," one chump with his cheeks overflowing with bread and meat eagerly answered the witness at his side who had asked the question.

"Ugh, you're allowed to chew and swallow before answering, you know?"

At the very top, where the more distinguished figures were seated, Rearren could be seen along with Millisa and Rias. However, another individual with what could only be described as weirdly artistic dressing with a tens of colours smashing against each other to almost form an ugly colour singularity could be seen.

He constantly whispered something to Rias who didn't entertain his company but that didn't stop him at all.

In the tent below, Skullius sat in his seat while looking ahead with a blank but annoyed gaze.

It was all for naught.

He still couldn't find Red Rage.

The Apostle was still at large, which gave him no peace of mind at all. The Hybrid Luman had not entertained the heavy drowsiness from his cosmetic body that sought to make him sleep as he continued his search into the morning yet he was rewarded with empty hands.

'Is it so bad to just tell me 'Hey bro. I'm going out!' ?. I'm suddenly starting to feel that this bastard hasn't changed at all,' Skullius thought.

He tried to quell his once more anxious heart by wondering if he would get to fight today but that barely helped. In fact, it didn't help at all, especially when a certain dangerous individual was floating right before him and everyone else.

The Game Master was already present, waiting for a set amount of time to pass before he announced the beginning of the day's matchups.

This set amount of time just so happened to pass right now.

"My extravagant audience! Welcome back to the epitome of thrill and entertainment. Are you ready to witness our contenders battle it out with everything they have?!"

"YEAAAAAH!"

A wave of pure noise baptised with adrenaline and sweat cascaded down towards Guissepo who wore his enthusiastic smile and spread his arms out.

Once again, it was the witnesses that were truly hyped about the event while the Contenders were more reserved.

They had much to think about after all.

As Guissepo floated over the plates of glass that a variety of functions, he garnered the attention of the crowds once again as he raised his hand.

"Now, let the first match begin!"

With a snap of his fingers, two bright silver lights flashed on the platform before him within the thin, see-through barriers around it.

A man with well kempt dark golden brown hair appeared on one side, his close set, almond coloured eyes with a serene blue flavour of colouration carefully focusing on the opponent opposite him.

His frame was what most women would call average but how he whipped up a balanced stance with his two fists before his torso immediately after appearing on stage spoke volumes about his capacity as an elite.

A bright blue armour with golden butterfly designs on its gauntlets and greaves sat over his body steadily, assuming his stance along with him.

'Just my luck,' this young man thought with a dark smile.

Before him stood a man with a thick, golden white robe.

He had short, leather black hair and nut brown eyes that did not possess a shred of concern over the fight he was about to partake in at all. In fact, both his hands were hidden in his sleeves, a slight, dissatisfied frown spotting his round face, contorting his uneven lips and button nose.

"Seriously?" the man asked. It was evident that he felt insulted. The moment he had appeared, his refined senses had already told him much about his opponent, save for his technique and he had to say...

"Are these matchups really random?"

In the eyes of the witnesses and contenders, information about these particular individuals showed above their heads in glowing text.

Name : Nekst Dodj

Stage : First Phase Master

Core : Blue

Family : Dodj

--

Name : Tallo Rashen Jill

Stage : First Phase Master

Core : Blue

Family : Jill

Nekst was the man with blue armour. He was a First Phase Master but he was still confident in his chances because of his Technique and Class.

An Advanced Class.

He was an Elemental Warrior, though the name was quite misleading.

Advanced Classes always spotted an extension to the original class, which gave them a specific focus. In this way, they were easy to recognise over normal Classes.

Nekst narrowed his eyes, lowered his centre of gravity, whipped out a fine layer of mana around his body and shot forward!

'When fighting a Mage, strike first before they cast a spell!' he thought, reassuring himself that he could win this fight.

The Elemental Warrior's steps were unbelievably quick as the large distance between himself and his opponent, Tallo, was crossed in a few breaths.

No.

That wasn't it.

...!

Nekst's eyes bulged as before his eyes, the figure of the robed Tallo met with his sixty percent of the way to his target!

'What?!'

Nekst was shocked to see Tallo, a Mage, react seamlessly to his speed and not just that!

The air cracked as if slapped by a whip, a blurring fist shooting from Tallo's robe as it snaked its way towards Nekst's face!

'Damn it! Is he combat Mage?!' Nekst gritted his teeth as he responded with both arms flashing over to his face in a guard.

The crisp impact with his sheltered limbs that he expected didn't happen as instead, a turbulent, blunt force blasted against his chest a millisecond after he had used his arms to guard his face!

"Urgh!" Nekst grunted. A mana reinforced fist had knocked hard into his armour, cracking it!

This...!

This was embarrassing.

To be beaten by a Mage in close quarters combat was... demeaning!

Nekst, without shifting the position of his arms, suddenly launched a fierce kick towards his opponent's neck. Tallo, his eyes showing no urgency at all, sent his hand to block casually, however...

Nekst leapt up, spinning in the air as he raised his other leg, switching his attack to a drop kick with a heavy burden of mana supporting it!

Tallo scoffed and responded by churning out more mana from his body and bringing both hands up to guard his head.

The impact was staggering. The sound effect which was amplified by the barriers around the platform caused a vibration throughout the entire stadium and fortunately, for the weaker witnesses...

They had seen the entirety of this very short exchange with extreme clarity!

"OOOOOOOOHHHHH!" a burst of cheer cascaded down the concave arrangement of seats. This was incredible!

Just this bit was better than the exhibition match from yesterday!

To Nekst though, these cheers served to worsen his mood. The Elemental Warrior quickly retracted his leg and did a series of backward flips as he created distance between himself and the Mage. But...

"Hey, where do you think you're going?" a shockingly close voice forced the Warrior to guard randomly while he was in mid-air!

Unfortunately, It was a reflex that did not serve him well when a deadly hook dressed with mana that spun in a vortex motion around Tallo's fist blasted against his side!

Nekst flew a distance away with a sharp velocity, his body spinning as he then crashed onto the ground, rolling around for a moment before picking himself up.

The Warrior looked before him with a disgruntled expression and spat out blood onto the platform.

"Hmmm?" Tallo raised a brow.

Around Nekst was a covering of mana with a fence-like design, sticking close to his entire body. The Warrior had manifested this peculiar shaping of mana at the same time he had the beauty knocked out of him.

"A defensive auxiliary technique?" the Mage thought with a mocking smile. 'A rather weak one. My attack still got through.'

Among combatants from Families, there were two types of recognisable techniques – Family techniques and Auxiliary techniques.

Family techniques were the main practise exclusive to individuals within a Family while Auxiliary techniques were shared skills with basic utilities that Families and Houses knew. These were mainly developed during warring times and disseminated to give just the slightest bit of an edge to even the weakest of characters.

The peculiar mana shape around Nekst vanished and he took a deep breath.

'I thought Fencing Gate would block much of the damage since it was just basic mana application but...' Nekst thought and looked to his side where his armour was cracked, blood oozing out slowly.

Nekst's armour was a Unique grade treasure. For it to be broken through by a measly punch...

'I have to go all out,' Nekst thought as he spread his legs to ensure he had more stability while preparing to end this fight by revealing his Family technique.

"You're probably thinking its time to take me seriously. Almost makes it seem like you haven't been defending with your dear life all this time," Tallo said with a smirk.

"I can't blame you though."

The Mage raised his hand as he finally assumed the role he had spent decades trying to master. Mana bubbled from him while Nekst, who furrowed his brow ground his teeth, a vibrant red neon beam of energy bursting from his body and soaring through the air!

The witnesses all grew silent.

Not from fear, but from paralysing excitement.

Somehow, everyone could tell that this battle was about to end even though it had just started.

Chapter 517: Without Honor

Skullius' sockets were lit with [Evil Darkness] as he watched the match. He had to say, he was surprised and intrigued.

The moment he had seen the Mage, the man who had made his Class stand out due to his dressing last night at the gathering, he hadn't been expecting to see good close combat skills from him.

Class Branching was a very common practise, even for Mages. A branch of these Energy Formers even devoted a significant amount of their time into learning different forms of close quarters combat skills, others going as far as to use weapons.

These types of Mages were dubbed combat Mages.

The first Mage Skullius had seen had also been one of these, though he hadn't been able to witness it until his last few days in Inhone City.

It was only during Terian's battle with the Galemonger, as he assisted Unbreakable, that Skullius had witnessed a Living type Genuine Incarnation for the first time and a hard boiled Mage who had extreme fire power as well as the will to get close to a physically superior opponent.

'Could I disguise myself as a combat Mage then?' Skullius had a passing thought before refocusing on the battle. Silrat had once assumed him to be that after all.

Nekst's Aura burst out ferociously as from this, everyone could tell he was going all out. Unlike with Full Body Aura, a Genuine Incarnation could enhance its user's abilities by up to 800% at maximum, with few outliers exceeding this state.

Sadly, Nekst was a First Phase Master, so he couldn't find such a boost as his Incarnation didn't even have a form yet.

However, the boost he got was exactly what he needed.

Tallo paid rapt attention to the glowing red around Nekst that settled closely to his body after the initial uproar.

'You think I'll use my own Incarnation too? Ha. That shallow level of thinking is why you can't beat me,' the Mage thought as with the mana that had just streamed from his body, he conjured something immensely terrifying.

VWOOOOSH!

As if a living furnace had incarnated within the air, the temperatures rapidly rose and swiftly, hundreds of white balls of fire the size of human heads emerged around Tallo!

They spun, spun and spun some more while attaining an eerie mix of purple, blue and white with each rotation that warped the air, creating some freaky mirages!

Almost instantly, Nekst started to sweat as he gulped down, but the steady will in his eyes remained.

While the crowds cheered, he felt as if this might be his last battle.

But no, he would persevere.

"You're probably thinking you can fend off these fireballs since they are basic mana attacks. Hmm. Interesting thought. But..." Tallo said with his eyes showing a menacing gaze. "... are you really confident in your ability to do so?"

Nekst furrowed his brows even more.

What was this man trying to say?

Was he simply trying to scare him?

Wait. No. Maybe...

Nekst cast away doubt and his many other thoughts as he locked his two gauntleted palms, a massive surge of his mana pouring out of him as activated his Family Technique.

It was now, or never.

...!

Tallo felt Nekst's mana colliding against itself over and over again until its form changed and then...

Before he knew it, everything was covered in a dark fog.

No.

Rather than a dark fog, it was like mist that barely reached Tallo's ankles.

It didn't suffocate or cover his view.

It merely danced at his feet while covering the entire platform.

In the distance, Nekst didn't move an inch, remaining in his position as he kept his fingers locked.

The image of Tallo's surprise reflected in his eyes and he could pretty much guess what the Mage was thinking.

This was the reaction of everyone who saw his technique for the first time after all.

He expected it.

Tallo didn't drop his guard but his eyes clearly depicted his confusion about this technique.

'Is there something else or is this not?' Tallo thought. 'His situation hasn't changed at all.'

Of course. Everyone who saw Nekst's technique, would wonder where the punchline at first.

The hundreds of fireballs in the air remained and Tallo was yet to even take this fight seriously. He was still using the basics of what any Mage could do.

The Elemental Patch.

The starter pack for every aspiring Mage who desired to qualify as a basic practitioner for the Class.

Tallo narrowed his eyes and moved his hand which was still raised, holding the fire balls in the air.

No. He didn't.

His hand refused to move.

...!

Tallo frowned.

Wait. His entire body refused to move!

He was stuck in place!

'I can't move an inch!'

There it was! The punch!

Nekst donned a victorious smirk.

"Looks like you figured it out," Nekst said before smothering himself with every bit of Aura he could produce at this moment and launched himself like an arrow right over to Tallo!

...!

The dark mist that covered the platform was the core of his Family Technique, Holy Anchor.

It was simple really.

As long as the dark mist covered the target's shadow, the target would be left unable to move.

This Technique worked on living and non-living things. Even techniques with a form that had a shadow could be subjected to this paralysis, though the difference in strength dictated whether or not the effect would hold and for how long as well.

'Right now, every aspect of him is held in place, even his mana. Still, I don't know how long I can keep him still, so I have to finish him with one full power strike to the head!' Nekst thought as with a single lunge he had reached right in front of Tallo and thundered down a cruel overhead punch brimming with his red Aura!

The uncharacteristically shocked image on Tallo's face which was REFLECTED in Nekst's eye told him that he had already won.

Don't underestimate someone just because they aren't a Mage, you bastard!

The punch connected cleanly. A crisp impact that was amplified by the barrier causing waves of noise!

Tallo's body flew so hard and so fast that it knocked against the thin see-through barriers that covered the platform, rings of air that was broken through showing during the flight!

The Mage then dropped to the ground, blood leaking from his nose and mouth, his eyes rolled.

The fireballs in the air vanished, much to Nekst's relief as after giving it another few seconds of vigilance without anything happening, he became fully convinced that he had really won.

The Elemental Warrior plopped to the ground breathed out. Such a short exchange had taken a lot out of him.

He could still feel the sharp pain from his side which told of how strong his opponent was but thankfully, he had dealt with him before the inevitable loss he would have gone through if strong spells were used.

The picture of a defeated Mage brought down by his hands was...

Not real.

"<Sigh>. He must be taking his victory very well," Tallo said as he watched Nekst who had dropped to the ground, smiling as he looked at a distant, empty spot over the platform.

Everyone was confused, witnesses and contenders alike.

At some point during this fight, Nekst had started acting in a very bizarre way.

He was facing opposite his opponent and flinging a decisive punch at the air all of a sudden.

Now, he had sat down with a relieved expression on his face, as if he had won the battle.

What the heck?

Get up and fight you idiot!

Tallo was standing right behind him the whole time and the threat of hundreds of fireballs was still at large in the air, waiting for his command.

And Nekst... was just sitting there?

Tallo gave a pitiful look at Nekst while the crowd went wild with a mix of emotion.

The Elemental Warrior was under an illusion.

'Most people aren't used to fighting Mages it seems. He really thought that punch to his side was simply me trying to knock him out. Shallow indeed,' Tallo thought as he raised his hand.

He never had the intention of exposing himself to Nekst's Family Technique at all. The moment he had felt the Warrior about to use it, he had activated the stream of mana he had injected into the man's body with that punch he had landed on Nekst's side, allowing for his rare specialty in magecraft to take over.

Everything Nekst had seen from there, was what he wanted to see.

How he expected Tallo to behave after seeing technique.

How he interpreted his technique.

How he believed the match would go.

Unfortunately, the spell Tallo had used didn't allow him to peer into Nekst's thoughts to see what his technique was but that wasn't as big of a con.

Using spells was vastly different from using techniques after all and Tallo had just recently discovered this new facet of magecraft that he was talented in.

"This is why I asked if you were really confident in fending off these," Tallo said as he commanded the hundreds of fireballs in the air to mercilessly bombard Nekst.

What followed was a terrifying series of vibrant explosions that rained over the figure of an oblivious, smiling Nekst who would die without even knowing it.

Chapter 518: What Is It Now?!

The horrendous, chilling and shiver-inducing lightshow caused a deafening silence.

Over the unblemished platform's surface, Tallo stood looking over the remnants of flames that had completely devoured any traces of his opponent.

The fire reflected in his eyes showed how indifferent he was to killing Nekst. In fact, indifferent could be considered a form of respect. Tallo showed nothing of the sort. It was as if he was looking at a distant void that invoked nothing but, well... nothing.

A flash of green surrounded his figure and in the next instance, he disappeared from the stage and appeared in his seat within the tent.

The contenders very well expected such an outcome – one where someone would die.

The witnesses however, had not.

At least a great number of them.

Some covered their mouths while turning pale. The clarity towards the events happening within the platform served to make some of them nervous as the picture of a man being torn apart by the force of condensed fireballs and then burnt to a crisp as he was completely oblivious to his demise was... cruel.

Fortunately, the atmosphere within the stadium was returned to cheer by the men and sparse number of women who enjoyed the gore, not at all off put by the death!

"YEAAAAAH! GIVE US MORE!"

"MORE! MORE! MORE!"

There was usually a multiplicative effect, or rather a contagious spread of emotion and when a lot of people were gathered in the same place. It didn't take long for those who were pro death to cast a favourable air over those who had mixed feelings over the current incident.

The liveliness returned to the stadium thereafter, Guissepo floating down to a lower altitude with a grin.

Within the tents...

"Brutal..." Skullius said.

Now that seemed a bit more like a Mage's style.

He, along with the other contenders had started to figure out what exactly had happened and it was pretty unsettling to think that there was an opponent like this in their mist.

One who had not shown much of his cards.

That onslaught of fireballs only seemed conservatively powerful because it was contained by a sturdy infrastructure inlaid with runes but Skullius could tell, the fire power released from that attack rivalled the output he had felt from the Grand Flame Bringer's greatsword, the Cross Pyre, a Legendary object.

An even more terrifying notion was that Tallo wasn't even trying to fight seriously with those fireballs.

If he used his Genuine Incarnation...

'There are still things about the Master Stage that I'm yet to understand. Regardless of how powerful I am, I'm still at the Advancement Stage. In terms of raw physical power, there are many that far exceed me and in terms of techniques, there are too many unknowns as well,' Skullius thought.

A quick look with his guidance field had showed him that both Tallo and Nekst had stats somewhat higher than his especially in certain specialty related aspects – Skullius was an abnormality after all, post Luminant Seed infusion – but there were others among the contenders that blew this difference out of the water for various reasons.

Over the platform, Guissepo stood.

"Your hearts should have been prepared my dear, extravagant audience. The strong do with the weak what they will. It is nature. You're not expected to celebrate it, but do not feign extravagant pity and empathy for someone who made the choice to enter the ring. Lives are traded through choice and this, is the stage for such transactions," Guissepo said with a cunning glint in his eye.

"If your hearts are feeble, close your eyes but the thrill will pass you by. This is just the extravagant beginning!"

Guissepo snapped his fingers, a sound akin to breaking glass smothering the ears of everyone present.

"The next opponents await their turn!"

Two silver flashes of light assaulted the eyes of contenders and witnesses alike, two figures quickly taking their place in the next moment.

Skullius focused his discoloured gaze.

A figure he hadn't been expecting was in for the next round.

As the two stood with a significant distance between them, their information was revealed, the more knowledgeable witnesses and contenders eagerly anticipating this one.

Name : Vali Kinn

Stage : Second Phase Master

Core : Blue

Family : Kinn

--

Name : Rudric Piyece

Stage : First Phase Master

Core : Blue

Family : Piyece

Like Nekst, the male contender to appear on the platform cursed under his breath as he saw who his opponent was. His muscular figure twitched a bit and he couldn't decide what he was going to do.

His eyes failed to show sturdy determination when he saw the voluptuous figure of his opponent as well as what she wore, which added to his complicated emotion.

No!

He had to fight still.

He had a reputation to uphold as the first son born to the Piyece Family!

Opposite him stood Vali Kinn. Her long navy blue hair had been tied into a French braid, at its end which was directly above her ass, a glossy golden artefact with a ball and hook, like a scorpion's tail.

She wore a royal battle dress that was made out of a scaly but flexible fabric, on the shoulders, metallic golden pads in the form of elegant spikes. The dress had an opening over Vali's abdomen, revealing her bare unblemished skin around soft abs and a cute belly button.

The fact that this long sleeved battle dress reached just above her knees made everyone wonder if this was really a good outfit for combat, but those who knew this woman well understood that whatever Vali wore didn't replace her combat prowess one bit. Despite her dressing told, she wasn't the type to deceive her opponent with her body. That was just an unconscious side effect.

Rudric took a deep breath.

He saw Vali take a stance – her open palms stretched before her torso, one before the other - a simple smile etched on her face as her relaxed eyes gazed into his.

Vali didn't intimidate him consciously. She hadn't even layered herself with mana but Rudric already felt like he was hard pressed between a rock and a hard place over how to respond.

Guissepo floated up, signalling for the match to begin.

Tp!

There was an absurdly fast dash that denied the idea of an after-image, making the act of tracing it almost impossible.

Rudric, who had been about to assume a stance was petrified when he found his wrists already in Vali's powerful grip, her pulchritudinous form standing an inch before him!

...!

A sweet fragrance and a weakening smile assaulted this man from the Piyece Family and for a moment, he forgot that he was facing an enemy and not a girl to bed.

As that moment passed, he quickly tore himself out his reverie, thinking himself to be halfway towards death already because of this lapse.

"Let's have a small chat~."

To his surprise, death was on vacation today.

Outside the platform, everyone was appalled by the absence of the expected hostility.

Why was there no clash of powers again?!

What now?!

The last fight had ended anticlimactically too.

This one couldn't possibly end the same way, right?

As everyone observed, Vali whispered something into Rudric's ear. For a second, the man was lost in his fantasies from this one action of Vali's but then, his face turned pale, his eyes almost popping out of their sockets!

He was beyond shocked by what he heard. So much so that he slowly turned his head to face this woman, temporarily made immune to her charm by her words.

Vali smiled and dashed away, created distance between herself and Rudric.

The man began to sweat, almost hyperventilating as he cast his gaze towards Vali who met it one last time, winked, and then raised her hand.

"I surrender," she declared.

Chapter 519: Speculation and Suspicion

"Huh?!"

To say shock was palpable would be an understatement.

Not again!

This was even worse than the first match!

As a red light flashed around Vali, declaring her as the loser of the round, those who had expected to see her prowess first hand as well as those who had expected to scrutinise her body in high resolution, wore looks of disappointment and confusion.

Why did this woman surrender?

What did she whisper into her opponent's ear?

The sonic amplification effect of the thin barrier did nothing to let anyone hear even a little of what she had told Rudric.

What was this all about?

Rudric took deep breaths to calm himself. He cast his gaze away from Vali, as if ashamed to look at her right now.

Their agreement...

It wasn't what he expected.

Hell, no one would believe him if he told them.

Soon, silver lights teleported the two off of the platform, returning them to their seats.

Vali crossed her legs and laid her hand on her titled chin.

The rambunctious disapproval and accusatory disappointment that boomed from the spectating stands, most of it directed at her and her decision didn't bother her in the least.

She didn't lose anything from her decision.

According to rules of the Preliminary Rounds, surrendering didn't disallow participation into the second Preliminary round. Each contender had two chances to show their prowess in the Preliminaries after all and as long as they were still alive, they could participate in the Main event that came after.

'Sweet...' Vali thought.

Skullius in his seat was a little disappointed too.

He too had expected to see this woman who had the moniker of Unpredictable fight but well... at a superficial level, she did seem to live up to that name. He certainly hadn't expected her to surrender when faced with an opponent who was obviously nervous about fighting her.

Heck, he too was also vigilant.

This was because of a single factor he had noticed with [Greater Mana Crafter].

Vali had an enormous amount of mana!

Even the Mage didn't have half as much as she did.

It wasn't surprising that he hadn't sensed this at the gathering as most of the contenders seemed to be capable of manipulating how much mana leaked from their cores.

As experts, this much was to be expected.

No matter.

There were still many chances for Skullius to see her in action. He was willing to face her in a bit too.

The glass pane over which Guissepo sat on descended.

The Game Master had a funny smile on his face as he announced.

"I certainly didn't see that one coming. This day may just be full of second long fights. Extravagant it is!"

With a snap of his fingers, two more participants showed and thankfully, these two were seemingly evenly matched and had no intention of backing away from the fight.

What the witnesses had been gunning for finally happened. An exciting exchange between powerful opponents that didn't hold back at all.

For at least thirty five minutes, the two swordsmen who were summoned to fight this time exchanged blows and showed some incredible techniques.

As First Phase Masters, they weren't capable of giving their Incarnations complex forms but they battled it out without the need for showy natured abilities.

The crowds were heavily entertained, as were some of the contenders.

The winner of the fight was also decided without any fatality. Only an unconscious contender was left lying on the ground, completely defeated.

To this, the witnesses felt a deep sense of satisfaction. They were getting their money's worth, though they technically paid nothing.

The same result was true for the next four rounds that followed.

Some were short, some were absurdly long, nearly reaching the match time limit but winners and losers were decided without kills, surprisingly.

Still, all the contenders fought as if their lives were on the line. The desperation was vivid in each strike.

At the end of it all, Guissepo gave an enthusiastic show of applause, prompting almost everyone to do the same.

"Good show! Extravagantly good show, do you not agree? The adrenaline, the racing of hearts! The combatants in our nation still burn with the love for a good fight!" he said.

"However, this brings us to the end of the first day's matchups. What will be in store for the next time we gather? Who knows. Surely, something even more entertaining."

With the snap of his fingers, everyone was dismissed back to where they had been before the day's event.

Bryne Family Residence.

"So, did you find anything?" Skullius asked Silrat.

They hadn't seen each other since the gathering last night as Skullius had retreated to his room after his long search for Red Rage. He was teleported to the venue of the event from there.

"Nothing much. My guess is the only ones who know about that man are the EverSword House and whoever they are collaborating with. There are some suspicions here and there though. The Families are not stupid. While they are all fighting for a position in the EverSword House, they do know that something is fishy," Silrat answered.

"I see," Skullius nodded.

"I fear that the other Houses are involved in this. If they are, this thing may evolve into something catastrophic. A possible invasion by Maqi and Emeradis would be the least of our problems then."

"You think this EverSword House really wants to bring about some terrible disaster with the Evenfall though or that they are colluding for different goals?"

"Who knows? What I fear is the former. Houses, as you've seen have tremendous resources at their disposal. If they provide those heathens with artefacts and tools... I hate to think that the pride bastions of our nation can be benefactors to such... evil," Silrat said with a pained face palm.

"Yeah, well. I'm glad I was never attached to you people to be begin with," Skullius said in a small voice.

"What?"

"Nothing."

Skullius stood.

"I have to make a quick stop at the Association and then go to the Isise afterwards."

"Hmm. Might as well go togethe- wait, wait, wait! The Isise?!" Silrat shot up with a look of shock and puzzlement.

"Why are you going there?!"

"Right, I didn't tell you. I'm not used to telling people things about me. Let me fill you in. So..."

Skullius began to describe the situation.

As for the specifics about his powers that he had told Silrat before, he had explained the fact that he had a Hidden Class (leaving about the part about its ties to Fulgardt) and demonstrated much of his powers while in his Hybrid Luman form. He had left out everything to do with his true self and ties to undeath but explained in detail about UNCoddled.

"Another curse?" Silrat donned a constipated look.

"Yes."

"And it has to do with bad luck?"

"Horrendous luck."

"Ah... of course. Because bad luck is not enough."

"Apparently."

Silrat sighed.

The explanation on this curse wasn't that Skullius had eaten a baby of course, but his bullshitting did serve him well.

The former Association Head decided this matter wasn't worth focusing too much of his attention on. Skullius seemed to have a solution so he'd leave him to it.

"So uh...where is that green hair girl?"

"Yuyui? She rushed off to do something she said was important as soon as we returned."

"I see. So she really... doesn't die?"

"I can kill her to prove it you know?"

"..."

Silrat froze at Skullius' nonchalance.

"Let's just go to the Association."

Chapter 520: Claiming Mission Rewards

The Guilds Association was an organisation founded, as was the trend, by an ambitious man who despised the systematic tyranny of hierarchy that the Capital Service dominated with under the incompetent Royal Family.

As a someone of high standing, featuring the rank of Honoured in the Capital Service, this man's decision to detach from the system to form his own was met with opposition, then cautious, reluctant approval but building his own format and overlaying it onto the pre-established structure... proved to be nigh impossible.

Who would let him do as he pleased?

This man's efforts were not for naught though.

After gathering several dozen individuals with the same mind-set as him as well as similar levels of power, he managed to broker a deal with the Capital Service, taking advantage of all lands unclaimed by Families and Houses, as atrociously few as they were, and making them territory for his fighting force.

Mercenaries.

Because of this man's growing power, his opinions grew to be respected. He did not overreach his growing authority however, choosing to engage in mutually beneficial talks with the Capital Service and Families to propose how they could both benefit from his arrangement.

Because the threat of Clusters, criminals and the rare beast hordes that strayed from Sacred Forests was ever present, sometimes its might unbearable for weaker Families, this man managed to convince the nation that he and his forces were needed.

The setup which was arranged was simple.

All the unclaimed lands would not feature the establishment of a Capital Service base and all criminals as well as Clusters emerging within them would be for his mercenaries to clear.

Such a condition was taken advantage of by city Lords such as Yugefet of Eofel, who setup his own mini empire in one of these unclaimed lands. Due to how heavy the responsibility could get though, he tended to blame the Capital Service and the Guilds Association for poor management, but the latter usually sent mercenaries to his region whenever a significant threat arose.

In addition to the aforementioned strategy, Families who were incapable of dealing with threats in their own boundaries, could request the assistance of the Guilds Association while offering something of equal value in exchange.

They wouldn't turn to the Capital Service instead as usually because of the fear of owing favours, thus transactions were more acceptable.

As mentioned before, this was something only weaker Families entertained.

This system was why some of the rewards for certain missions were not displayed until after a mission was completed – to indicate that the Association was not sponsoring said missions.

This was the case with some of the Hybrid Luman's mission rewards.

"You've come to collect your rewards, sir?"

"Yes," Skullius responded.

The lady serving him, Rist, smiled as she processed what looked to be a receipt that Skullius could use to claim his spoils. Since he had already handed in the evidence for his completed missions, the process was quick.

So far, Skullius had completed two of the missions he took.

The first was the one where he had to clear the Cluster that had appeared on the unique landmark, the Creeping Chill, which had featured the Grand Flame Bringer as well as the Fire Breeders. The reward for it was 200 Plasma coins in addition to one Unique grade treasure and one Legendary treasure of his choosing.

The other was the one with the Cluster Beasts that had already escaped their Cluster, inhabiting a forest as their home. Skullius had accomplished that one easily after taking up his Hybrid Luman form and the reward for it was 280 Plasma coins in addition to something called the Simmering Cloud, the details of which he was about to find out.

Silrat had answered some of his burning questions on the way here and the secrecy of these rewards didn't bother him as much anymore.

What did start to bother him though was the knowledge that there were a total of 121 exclusive mercenaries, 30 of which were Rank 4 and above, higher in ranking than him.

Furthermore, he had never see them. These parts of the Association were usually devoid of human activity.

'I don't think I'll be meeting them anytime soon from the looks of it. Besides that idiot from that day of course,' Skullius thought, thinking back to that man who had started flirting with Yuyui from the blue.

Tsk.

480 Plasma coins were laid in front of Skullius in a simple spatial storage ring that he established a connection with through his mana. The receipt he had seen Rist produce was also placed through the slot from her desk which he quizzically felt over.

"One of the evaluators will be coming to lead you to the First treasury soon," the woman said with a smile, choosing not to say more.

Skullius blinked.

'Right. Silrat said he already informed everyone up here about UNCoddled in a 'less terrifying way' as he claims,' Skullius thought with a subdued chuckle.

*

With the guidance of an evaluator who wasn't Alaris, Skullius found himself inside the First Treasury once again.

He skimmed over the items in this treasury once again.

'One Legendary item and one Unique huh?' he thought.

Armour and swords weren't something he was too concerned with. The Bryne Family had their own treasury which he was sure had stuff like that. That was one of the stipulations he and Stylla had agreed on back then after all, though Skullius hadn't tapped into that yet.

The Hybrid Luman walked over to the Prompt Spells again. According to Alaris, the ones in the First treasury were Unique grade at best, though they held powerful skills. This would make one wonder what could be found in the other treasuries and what it took to get the clearance to them.

Skullius had thought about it but for now, he focused on what he could get his hands on.

The Prompt Spells were more interesting than any armour or weapon because they could be used to create more terrifying skills like [Serration Zone: Baneful Edge] with [Unbound].

Come to think of it...

'Now that I have a maximum of 12,000 Null Life Essence, it's possible that [Unbound] can grant items past the Unique grade!' Skullius thought.

With how [Serration Zone], which was birthed using 6000 Null Life Essence points, Skullius couldn't help but wonder what would be born from double that amount...

Damn, he needed to kill more and see.

The Hybrid Luman grabbed one Prompt Spell after careful analysis with Kōten and [Greater Mana Crafter]. He also grabbed one of the few Legendary items in here which had some pretty unique effects – a neat dagger.

He didn't pick it for himself though.

Yuyui would probably find more use out of this if she focused on combat.

Skullius and the evaluator exited the First treasury before the latter told him to wait on the fifth floor as he went to collect his other reward.

It didn't take long for the man to return, finding Skullius seated before the pristine seat that faced Rist at the desk on this floor.

"The Simmering Cloud," the evaluator said as he presented an ordinary box that was the carrier of the mostly undisclosed reward.

Skullius took the box and opened it to find...

"Hmm?"

A inverted triangular glass container was in his palm.

It was roughly half the size of his hand, its colour a pretty shade of lilac with a black cork over it.

There seemed to be something liquid inside this container.

"Let's see," Skullius said as he exited this room through the doors and ignited his Crude Vision so that he could use his guidance field.

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[Simmering Cloud]

<Legendary>

The graceful waters within are as clear and as pristine as the will of the lady of the waters. As soon as they meet with the open world, they sift out as a blessing of vapour that offers clarity, strength and precision to the holder and their allies and the opposite to their enemies.

-Special Effects-

+80% mental clarity

+85% soul clarity

+65% to all stats

+60% precision

--

-Caution-

If enemies exceed the level of the user, effects will be affected.

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Skullius nodded.

This was a pretty cool treasure, undoubtedly acquired from whoever either couldn't be bothered or couldn't deal with the creatures that had escaped from a Cluster and landed in their territory.

Skullius didn't have that many allies in battle But he looked forward to seeing this in action against enemies.

All those numbers in buffs would turn into nightmares for whoever was opposing him.

"Hehe," Skullius chuckled before realising something.

The Plasma coins.

Silrat had also informed him about something akin to a store that he could buy basic supplies from in the Association.