

Undead 601

Chapter 601: Aurolio's Turn

"It's finally this guy's turn. I wonder if I'll get to see why everyone thinks he's the strongest," Skullius wondered excitedly while leaning forward from his seat.

On the white platform encased in a thin barrier, a man with long white hair tied into a ponytail was standing on the platform. He wore a comically plush sky blue jacket with a fuzzy exterior, shivering as he stood.

He blew into his hands as he felt cold, cursing the chill every chance he got.

For to him, it was definitely more than a bit cold.

This man was regarded as the strongest individual among all the Families. He had never known defeat. Every tale told about him ended with him catching victory.

Very few had ever seen him fight, which made many doubt the prospect of whether or not he truly couldn't be defeated but his very air made everyone believe that at the very least, he was immensely powerful.

While no one could feel anything from him, the silent wind around him gave an empty but vast sense of foreboding.

Like a desert.

"Quite the young legend, this one," Alaris folded his arms and smiled.

He sat among the most highly regarded witnesses watching the matches while analysing the contenders as all the others did.

A few years back, he had heard murmurings about this young man and had sought him out only to find a rather humble person instead of the proud combatant he had been expecting.

He could see through the genuinely pitiful face he made when he was feeling 'insecure' about his strength, struck with anxiety, to see the strangely crafted strength he had.

His shifts in mood weren't facades.

When he was confident, he was incredibly proud of who he was.

When he was feeling insecure, he berated himself constantly.

But all this aside, in terms of power, he was the real deal.

It was as if this young man wasn't human but a concept instead.

The concept of strength.

Alaris had never gotten around to fighting him but he knew he probably didn't stand a chance. If he were younger, he would have charged in head first but... no. That wasn't worth it.

He was not alone in his thoughts.

All of the contenders paid rapt attention to this match.

They had been waiting for it.

The Mage, Tallo, soaked his eyes in mana in order to better perceive what was so interesting about this man. His reputation was so profound that even Grandmaster Mages had approached him just to see what the hub bub was all about.

Maxim narrowed her eyes. She wanted to see if her technique would be enough against this man who was placed on a high pedestal, even when compared to her Family.

If she was to fight him in the Royale, best to get a grasp on his true abilities.

Kurtish OIdd leaned back and waited for the show to begin.

Vali wasn't as concerned with the match. The result was already clear. Besides, she had met Aurolio before and found him distasteful.

Aurolio considered her the same.

"These humans have some funny notions," the Sif, Darwel said with a smile. "Strongest is a larger word than they realise."

On the platform, Aurolio took deep breaths as he set his gaze on his opponent.

It was a man with a stern, triangular face that promised to portray a strict demeanour and personality. Tufts of well combed dark blue hair stood on his face, contrasting his like coloured eyes.

He stood at attention, over his body casual leather armour. A faded silver pauldron – shoulder cover piece of an armour – could be seen on his shoulder, with marks that looked to have been added by a sharp object carved on its surface.

To Skullius who used Crude Vision for a better view, this was familiar.

The mark on the pauldron was highlighted vividly in white.

'Hmm? This is the same thing Bek wore,' Skullius thought.

The pauldron with the marking on it.

This was how Stray Knights dressed.

These types of Knights were usually Capital Knights who had done something disgraceful, resigning by themselves as a result or being forced to by the Capital Service.

It was customary to continue to wear the pauldron from the armour they had worn in service and carving this mark on it. That way, they could be acknowledged to have served the nation and could be re-hired provided they spent enough time wearing the pauldron in public, announcing that they had shamed the name of the nation.

This served as a kind of a punishment. One that wasn't mandatory though.

Some Knights preferred to move on.

Guissepo rose, giving the two opponents space to battle it out.

Those who were eager to see how Aurolio fought completely disregarded the Stray Knight and focused their eyes on every single one of the Velanqi Family Head's movements.

Even Rearren was interested in seeing what was so fascinating about this young man.

Even while locked up in his home for years, the title given to this young man had never changed at all.

It was... consistent.

"What do you think?" Rearren asked Rias.

"He is... a little tough," the young man gave his assessment with a serious face.

There was no bias in his opinion at all.

He genuinely considered Aurolio to actually be... a little tough.

Perhaps there was a little underestimation.

The air nearly hardened as the witnesses and contenders awaited the beginning of the match with bated breaths.

Name : Aurolio Velanqi

Stage : Second Phase Master

Core : Blue

Family : Velanqi

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Name : Estrange Rill Moon

Stage : Second Phase Master

Core : Blue

Family : Moon

This was it!

Let it begin dammit!

As the information was fed to all, Aurolio, while clutching himself for warmth, suddenly raised his hand.

...!!!

What?!

No way!

Was he going to surrender as well in an epically disappointing 'flesh you' to everyone watching closely?!

Even his opponent, the Stray Knight Estrange who had signed into a mid level Family was surprised.

"Are you surrendering?" he asked, hints of disappointment on his face.

"No. I just have a question," Aurolio replied.

Phewwww!

A collective sigh of relief was heard throughout the stadium!

Thank goodness he wasn't giving up. That would have killed the hype a bit too much.

Estrange was relieved too, strangely enough.

'He's dramatic,' he thought.

"What would you like to ask?"

Aurolio's gaze grew firm.

"Are you really going to fight me?" he asked.

This wasn't a taunt or a question loaded with pride.

He was genuinely curious.

"I will try," Estrange replied, unfazed.

Aurolio nodded.

"Well, for your sake, I hope coming at me barehanded isn't your strong suit. I happen to be so much better at it."

Estrange chuckled.

UUUUUUOOOOOH!

The crowds grew excited.

The Stray Knight held his breath and got into a simple stance.

BOOOOOOOOOM!

A pillar of reddish pink light engulfed him before exploding upwards with a hasty shudder that startled the platform, making it quiver madly!

The platform cracked.

Veiny networks ran along its surface, surrounding Estrange's image that was drowned in the light that nearly blinded the common witnesses!

...!

This power...!

It wasn't merely at the Second Phase of the Master Stage!

It was at the very peak of it!

'Magnificent...' Alaris said as he felt the well refined Aura lighting up the entire stadium in a clear reddish pink.

Aurolio's expression did not see a change and neither did his shivering. He faced the full brunt of the roar of Perfect Aura, watching it coalesce around Estrange and form a very vivid image!

"Ohhh! Look at that!"

"Woow! He looks so beautiful!"

"Amazing!"

The witnesses were drawn to this clear image while the contenders were inspired.

Estrange's body had changed.

His torso remained the same, the only difference being a harsh outlining stroke of reddish pink that splattered like grains of sand at its edge.

What actually caused the marvel was his lower body!

From the waist down, he no longer carried himself with two human legs.

No.

Four legs carried him up, the image of a horse's frame being seen – powerful, thick legs with a lean build for speed as well as power. The same reddish pink hue made this form of his, completing the look of a vibrant centaur!

Estrange stretched out his hand and a coil of darkness wove itself within it, forming a black lance!

This lance looked like smoke, its one sharp end looking like recurring cones that stabbed into each other repeatedly.

Estrange looked at the unfazed Aurolio and smiled.

The space around him became bloated from the strength he exuded.

The full 1000% increase in power that a Master Stage expert could attain could only be reached when they were able to realise the ability to merge seamlessly with their Genuine Incarnation!

THAT was the Peak of the Master Stage!

"Please. Receive my lunge just this once," Estrange said to Aurolio whose gaze remained firm.

The white haired man gave a smile.

"Sure. Do your best."

"Gladly."

Estrange breathed in one long fresh breath and held it in.

...!

Without notice, everyone was forced to cover their ears as an earthshattering noise broke out, spelling the commencement and... end of the 'fight' they had been anticipating!

The contenders felt the brunt of the effects the heaviest, with the weaker ones bleeding from the ears while grunting lightly!

Skullius was one of these victims but he didn't feel any pain. His focus remained unhindered.

What the heck was that noise?!

On the platform, a lengthy trench had torn through the surface, digging its way towards Aurolio while fuming, the remains of the horrendous friction just now having crippled its beauty!

Goodness!

Skullius had had his full focus on these two contenders but he was embarrassed to say...

'I can't believe I couldn't even...' he stammered.

He hadn't sensed any movement from Estrange or Aurolio!

It was as if both had been standing motionless when a completely unrelated force had struck, causing all this damage!

But Skullius along with the other contenders knew better.

That was the speed of a Peak Master Stage expert at work. Close to none of them had been able perceive it.

Even Tallo was left smiling sheepishly at it!

'Ridiculous,' he thought while sweating.

All this was impressive, but after the overwhelming show of power, many were left wondering something.

Something strange, other than the cataclysm needed answers.

"Hey... where's that other guy. Estrange was his name, right?"

"What? I only see one person on the platform."

Within the bounds of thin barrier, only Aurolio's figure could seen.

There were no traces of Estrange at all.

Absolutely none.

Where had he gone?

Wasn't he the one to launch a strike?

Amidst the confusion, the more perceptive individuals, mainly the contenders, like the Tallo could see the remains.

Dust like particles of ash hung in the air, softly swimming in the embers of the turbulence from just moments ago.

Chapter 602: Do Your Best

"Mildly fucking ambitious," Aurolio said as a green light circled around him, announcing him as the winner, much to the confusion of most.

His thick jacket had a large hole on the chest, revealing the pale and nearly porcelain skin over his firm, taut chest.

He had let Estrange strike him with all his might as requested.

In the process, he had not covered himself with mana or Aura, receiving the attack in its entirety without flinching.

From the fearsome blow, Aurolio had been able to tell that his opponent had tried his best but his arm failed to capture the truest form of his ambition.

Not that he lacked enough power, as that aspect was impressive.

Perhaps he didn't have one to begin with as from the start, he must have been prepared to die.

Estrange had understood that Aurolio wouldn't let him live if he chose to fight him, which was why the pale man had asked if he truly intended to fight him.

After contending against so many powerful individuals, especially ones with reputation, one would understand the stakes involved with having a public fight.

In the end, during the split of a fraction of a second it took for Estrange to land his attack, Aurolio had responded with a simple attack of his own.

Those capable of following the quick progression of events had seen Estrange's centaur form blitz past Aurolio at first, only to then crumble into dust, Aura and all, in several quarters of a breath later.

A truly tragic end to a powerful combatant.

Aurolio was teleported back to his seat with a flash of silver.

"Did you see anything?"

"Of course not."

"...Scary. It seemed like a mercy killing. I doubt Estrange even felt anything."

"It's not how you die. It's about the legacy afterward. Estrange just served to display how invincible Aurolio is to the world. Apparently, this is how most of that man's battles end."

The council of ever discussing contenders laid comment after comment following the fight, as did the other contenders who didn't see anything concrete about Aurolio's abilities either.

On the other hand, the witnesses in their seats started getting a faint idea as to what had happened.

Though this had been yet another short exchange, it had been a bit exciting.

After all, it was likely that this terrifying man was going to cause a delightful scene when the royale finally began.

Skullius sighed as he healed his ears.

'Against someone like that, I don't stand a chance right now. I wonder what the rules of the royale will be. If I somehow find myself facing him, will I be able to survive?' he wondered with a smile.

Only the rules of engagement for the Preliminaries had been shown. Those for the royale would be announced by the Game Master shortly after the Preliminaries ended.

'Hopefully when the time comes, I'll be ready for conflict with fighters of that calibre.'

High above, Rearren's amusement soared.

He turned to Rias, his gaze questioning what his son thought about Aurolio now.

"He's strong," Rias said with a blank expression. "But there's something off about him."

"Indeed. I would have liked to find many like him with this event and truly induct them into our family. However, I underestimated the Immortal Nine. They discouraged wanton involvement into the Royale from the fiends they house in that Union. The number of contenders is relatively low as a result." Rearren said.

By all accounts, 234 contenders were not that many and initially Rearren had been surprised by the number given what he promised to be the reward for the winners and those deemed as unique talents even in the Preliminaries.

"That young woman from the Kinn Family brings the real progress of the event to a snail's pace with her meddling, making the already few numbers we have less cooperative. Hahaha. Is this direction speaking?" Rearren chuckled.

"Shall I get rid of her, father?" Rias asked.

"No. That would be terribly unwise. It would rouse suspicion. Given the fact that she is holed up in Genhuis City, it's likely she understands the risks of her actions and is using her high position as a valuable asset to Pelian as a crutch. We can't touch her."

Rias nodded silently.

Vali was precious to Pelian.

All born with her blood always became Energy Formers, mainly Healers of high quality. This was why the Kinn Family bloodline was so valuable.

'Hmph.'

As Rias watched the witnesses joyfully discussing as they awaited the last two matches, a small smile appeared on his face.

The contenders weren't that important.

Yes.

All that they truly needed was this massive amount of witnesses.

It's good that they were enjoying while they had the chance.

The matches for the day ended uneventfully since the conclusion of the exchange between Estrange and Aurolio.

Skullius had his fill of a lot to think about since that match and as they returned to the Bryne Family, Silrat nudged him.

"It rattled you that much, did it?" he asked with a lightly mocking chuckle.

"Smacked some more reality into my head, that's for sure," Skullius replied with a playful eyebrow dance.

"By the way, I saw Yuyui. She's easy to miss but I remembered I haven't seen her for some days. Where is she?" Silrat asked curiously.

"...Don't mind her for now. She's doing an important errand away from the city," Skullius hushed out the story before turning to Stylla.

He knew Yuyui wouldn't tell Silrat much and the man didn't need to know about her and Replicus' business.

Sadly, the lime haired girl was doomed to still appear at the Venue for the Royale because of the Control Seal.

Mildly inconvenient.

As Skullius focused on Stylla, it didn't take long for him to realise that her mood was dark and though he had been planning to talk to her, he didn't have the stomach to face the fury hidden within her visage.

The red head left for her room afterwards with everyone silently watching her walk away.

"It was that bad?" Skullius asked Silrat.

"What do you think? She would have killed him right then and there if I hadn't spoken some sense into her. She is dangerously succumbing to her emotions. I'm afraid she may as well snap without company by her side," Silrat said.

He turned his gaze to the silent Daggs.

"In my absence, make sure she's being monitored constantly. Don't let her out of your sight," he instructed.

"Yes, Master Silrat," Daggs acknowledged.

Silrat nodded.

"Now, let's go, Festos. Best to hurry about it."

"Wait, what? We're doing this now? Shouldn't we wait for him to settle or something? We just came from the matches. Doesn't he need to rest?" Skullius asked with a brow raised.

"Trust me. Being annoyingly persistent is how we get through to Alaris. Best to get this over with now as the hearing is soon," Silrat said as he lead the way.

Skullius sighed.

Would this really work?

A re-evaluation.

Would it truly be that beneficial as Silrat claimed.

Who knew?

At least Silrat an elaborate plan.

That gave him some assurance.

The poor man had gone through the trouble of reserving Alaris as his sole examination officer so he might as well do it and give it his all.

"You said he's some kind of legend who prefers to remain in the shadows?" Skullius asked as the two walked out of the Bryne Family Mansion.

"Yes. Far more than you know. Now, since I've worked my ass off for this, try to do as much impressing as you can, alright? For both our sakes," Silrat replied.

Impress huh?

"I'll try."

Chapter 603: A Plan For Vengeance

Next day.

Oldd Family Residence.

"I have him just where I want him!" Kurtish said with nasty guffaw.

He sat within his luxurious bathtub full of sweet scented foam erupting from his bathing soap. He gazed at the letter he had just received from his steward with a grin.

The news was too good!

He sat up and whipped back his wet chocolate brown hair and wiped the bits of foam settling over his anchor shaped beard and re-read the letter again.

"The hearing is finally happening! She will be the representative from the Capital Service that will be there to mediate as well! This couldn't have been any better!" Kurtish excitedly wiggled his knees, splashing a bit of water on his steward who looked a bit concerned.

"Master Kurtish... to my understanding, she is an Honoured level Capital Service representative... Despite the strings you pulled to have that much authority present at the hearing... is it worth it? Even if you are successful in this conflict, the Capital Service's view of you may... lessen considerably," the steward voiced.

"Lessen? Because my demands look and sound petty? Let them think that way!" Kurtish hissed. "That idiot humiliated me in my first match. Do you know how much misery this caused Aliyah? She not only watched me get my arm sliced off but she had to suffer through the gossip about me winning that match because my 'formidable' opponent surrendered!

Do you know how pathetic that makes me look?"

The steward wore a grim face.

His master had fought an unknown contender during his first match within the Royale a few days ago.

As always, Kurtish had tried to use this man as a stepping stone and sacrifice for his own good, displaying his romantic feelings for his fiancé, Aliyah, by dedicating a swift win to her.

This would have been an incredible display of love... if that was how it had played out but this unknown contender had not only thwarted Kurtish's first plan. He had even survived an attack meant to kill from the Wardlock, managing to lop off his arm and ear in the process.

It was only after Kurtish proved to have better equipment that blended well with his barrier techniques, him being clear winner if the battle had devolved into an attrition war, that his opponent, who went by the name Festos, had surrendered.

This left Kurtish with a pretty unsatisfactory win.

For that, he just had to get revenge.

"Look. I still stand to benefit from this. The people and Family I am supporting will view me favourably. I am advocating for a fitting punishment. The bastard destroyed not only a long standing tourist sight but a town that made its fair share of income from housing tourists who came to see the Creeping Chill. He destroyed shelters and livelihoods!" Kurtish said.

"That is indeed true..." the steward said with a nod.

He understood his master's point and to be fair, he seemed to have everything well thought out.

A few days ago, Kurtish had him investigate Festos and his affiliations. Once he found that he was an exclusive mercenary, Kurtish used his connections to draw everything about Festos.

Since he was a rank 4 mercenary, his status was not that well protected from outside forces and with a bit of pushing, he had found out everything!

When he registered, his evaluation, the number of completed missions he had and so on.

Among all these details were the complaints from the residents of the town over the Creeping Chill that were yet to be tended to.

This was the dirt he needed.

A cry that needed to be answered.

Even though there were no casualties, since the people had been evacuated before the Cluster nesting on the Creeping Chill's icy side released the Cluster beasts it bore, Festos still had a lot to answer for.

"This is a solid plan, Master but are you sure the Association will not stand for him? He is an exclusive mercenary, after all. I doubt even the Capital Service will be willing to have a prolonged fight over this if a Supervising Overseer or higher supported Festos," the steward voiced his concern.

"You and I both studied his files and information. He has no connections within the Association save for his lowly scout and a few favourable interactions with some nameless evaluation officers. He is ours!" Kurtish said with a grin.

"First, I'll have his position in the Association revoked. Then, if I want to, I can chain the damages he caused to be compensated using the Bryne Family's wallet. Hahaha! I can't imagine that girl and her brother running the Family can fork out hundreds of Plasma coins to rebuild an entire town in their current state!"

Kurtish's ambition made him look maniacal.

He could see Aliyah smiling as his reputation soared from helping victims of vile mercenaries exercising their unrefined mannerisms on the population's resources!

That's right!

Mercenaries were uncouth savages!

This Festos disgraced Families just by having a hand in each of the two.

He must pay for it and so must the Bryne Family that signed him into their fold!

The steward nodded.

This was probably going to work if the motivations and case were stated clearly.

"The Capital Service is constantly at odds with the Association so you will definitely have the upper hand here, Master," the steward said.

"Of course! Ahahaha," Kurtish said before realised something. "Grab a parchment, will you?"

"Right away, Master Kurtish!"

A few minutes later, the steward returned with a parchment, a pen and some ink.

"Write this down," Kurtish said, prompting the steward to scribble down.

"Dear Aliyah, the few days we have been apart have been immensely crippling. Since you return from your trip tomorrow, I would like to invite you to a righteous hearing where I will be defending hundreds of townspeople from a menace who exploited his power, destroying their home. Please honour me with your presence..."

Kurtish smiled as his steward wrote down.

Even though Aliyah lived here with him, she loved these formal invitations so much and he obliged to her desires.

'This is going to be very satisfying.'

Chapter 604: Let's Begin?

Next day.

Guilds Association building.

"I've been hearing some peculiar rumours since I wasn't here yesterday. What happened?"

"Oof. It felt like the Association was going to collapse. There was this boom and then it was eeeek then kakakaka, like the building was going to lean on its side then vrrrhmm! It was terrifying! Then the ground went aar—"

"I've heard enough! Hey you. Can you tell me what happened yesterday?"

"Oh, right. There was some slight disturbance caused by an evaluation that happened yesterday."

"Oh, I see."

"..."

As succinctly explained, the Association had suffered some level of disturbance yesterday. It was only after a formal announcement was made as to what had caused the shuddering of the massive structure that the mercenaries and all other personnel within the Association had calmed down.

Then again, most still hung on the thought of how an evaluation could cause something like this.

The rooms built for evaluations were reinforced and had a high tolerance level to impacts both physical and magical. Even in the event that they were breached by some uncanny power, the damage wouldn't affect the rest of the building.

Yet that had been the case.

All everyone heard were loud rumbles that barely lasted for twenty seconds and everything returned to normal afterwards. However, the point still remained that such a disturbance was rare.

Just what had happened in that evaluation?

Who was being evaluated in the first place?

Who knew?

Somebody, presumably.

From the open entrance to the Association, a group of people made their way in.

They were five in total; four Capital Order Knights with capes draping behind them and one woman who seemed to be of a different rank, no, a different league than them altogether.

She had short velvet hair gelled into playful curls, and sugar grey almond eyes that pinned themselves on nothing but the most important person she could find within a specified range – this was all according to her subjective view though.

At this moment, none caught her attention, so her eyes focused on nothing in particular. It even seemed like she was spacing out from not finding something that she could find interest in with her eyes.

Her focused gaze was too valuable, after all.

She wore a sleeveless white shirt, dark blue pants and high boots, giving her the guise of an ordinary person but the large, thick shield on her back said otherwise.

"Dear Listafelle! That's Lady Onarmont! She's a high ranking Capital Service official who rarely shows herself to the public!"

"High ranking?! She's Honoured level! What is she even doing here?"

"Beats me."

From the stairs a short distance from the foyer, a young lady briskly walked over to the woman with the shield behind her back, Lady Onarmont as was her name, and respectfully welcomed her to the Association.

Shortly after, she then lead the prestigious Capital Service representative to the venue for what she was here for.

.....

Onarmont was led to a large room, its decor and quality of furniture depicting that it was mainly for highly important gatherings.

Notably, it was one of four main distinguished spaces within the Guilds Association building.

The room was not empty as a fair number of individuals were already present within, seated at predetermined spots around the large, wide table. Each set of seats fit specific roles in this event.

Roles concerning this general hearing.

On one end of the table, Kurtish could be spotted with four individuals that sat behind him; his steward, his two most trusted guards and of course, a lovely woman whose gaze cheered him on silently.

On the other end, a formally dressed middle aged man sat with three figures behind him. These four were the leadership of the town that had been destroyed, Creeper's Hide-In.

On another end, there were five people, the delegation from the York Family, the relatively small Family that owned the lands. They had initially decided to let this matter slide because it concerned the Guilds Association... until Kurtish rallied the victims, forcing them to join in.

With the entry of Lady Onarmont, all three groups turned, their faces lighting up as the mediator for this hearing had arrived.

"Good afternoon," Lady Onarmont said before she found her seat and sat down.

"I sincerely hope we can hurry this up."

"Thank you for coming, Lady Onarmont. Rest assured we all wish to see this case settled as soon as possible as well," Kurtish assured, standing up as a gesture of respect.

Beyond her rank and power, Lady Ornamont was an older woman too after all.

The shield bearing woman only spared Kurtish a side glance before scanning the room.

"Where is the representative from the Association and the so-called condemned?" she asked.

"I'm sure they will be here shortly after scrounging up some flimsy defensive excuses, I'm sure," Kurtish chortled.

He then took his seat.

'Her attitude is already... sour,' he thought.

"This man... He has no feasible support from the Association, correct?" Lady Onarmont asked without setting her eyes on anyone in the room.

"No. With your word, I'm sure we can have him pay for his crimes without any problems. Hehe."

"Pardon my tardiness," a sharply dressed man with an expensive set of spectacles walked in with quick steps that spotted both urgency and formal finesse.

He hurriedly reached a spot where everyone could see him and smiled.

It was no mystery that he was a Supervising Overseer and with his entry, the event was bound to be closer to reaching its start.

"We may begin," he said, much to everyone's surprise.

Begin?

But they were still one person short.

This hearing was about Festos and he wasn't here!

Where was the man that everyone here wanted to have judged?

Chapter 605: Simple Resolution

"Excuse me but how can we begin when—" the spokesperson for the destroyed Creeper's Hide-In began when he was harshly interrupted.

"We can begin. If I'm not mistaken the expected form of remuneration that the victims want is funding for the rebuilding of their town and sustenance until they have found ways to consistently earn their living, correct?" the Supervising Overseer asked while locking his finger behind his back.

"Well... yes but—" the middle aged spokesman wanted to speak up again but was cut off once more.

"I assume you would also like compensation for the destruction of the Creeping Chill as well, is it not?" the Overseer directed this question to the Head of the York Family who meekly avoided eye contact.

"Please stop!" Kurtish stood and angrily slammed his hands against the table. "This is highly irregular! Yes we want compensation but the man supposed to give it, Festos, isn't here to hear these costs and face his crimes against the concerned parties! This is barbaric and uncivilised! Show some respect for Lady Ornamont!"

Kurtish turned his eyes to the velvet haired woman who refused to spare anyone a prolonged look, emphasising her presence to the Overseer.

The sharply dressed man set his eyes on this well respected woman, as did everyone else.

Feeling the attention on her, Lady Onarmont reluctantly decided to speak up, as her agreement with Kurtish through their deal demanded.

"<Sigh>. I agree. This IS irregular. Invite the condemned in so that we can have a confirmation as to his position on the matter and how he intends to pay what he owes," she said in a strict tone.

Kurtish turned his gaze back to the Overseer.

Deep within, he was grinning devilishly.

'Even you can't brush off the word of someone like her, can you?' he thought, ridiculing the Overseer. 'Festos has no choice but to face his crimes! I'll watch him and that pathetic little Family sink today! They'll have to beg and grovel, in which case I may choose to forgive them if Aliyah desires!'

Kurtish slid a glance behind him, smiling at Aliyah who blushed.

The Overseer nodded.

"As you wish, Lady Onarmont," he said.

There were two Association guards standing by the door, along with the lady who had escorted Onarmont to this room.

The Overseer turned gave her a gesture which she quickly understood and walked off hurriedly to enact.

"I was under the impression that another Capital Service representative would be mediating. Not you. It seems I was fed false information," the sharply dressed man pointed out with suspicion in his eyes. He alternated his gaze between Onarmont and Kurtish while pushing up his fancy glasses.

The Oldd Family head smirked.

He didn't feed false information. He just didn't mention that he had invited someone of a high level whose commands couldn't be ignored by a mere Supervisor.

From behind, he could feel Aliyah getting giddy from watching him take charge and 'outsmart' the opposition, the vile guardians of mercenaries.

Heh!

This fuelled his ego.

"Did you honestly think that a hearing could be done like this? Is the Association turning so rotten that it would disregard civilians who have suffered?" Onarmont asked, her voice saturated with hints of disgust.

What was this?

Did the Association want to simply want the list of damages so that they could sit on it and do nothing as the homeless victims suffered?

Was this truly how this would work?

Were there going to be means put in place to discourage things like this?

"That is not the case, Lady Onarmont. There's just been a new development with the... condemned," the Overseer explained.

"A new development?" Kurtish asked with a frown. A look of realisation then flashed on his face, followed by a thrilled one. "Has he run away?!"

Gasps were heard in the room.

Festos had run away?

Was it true?

Ornamont raised a brow.

"Is it true?" she asked the Overseer who chuckled.

"Hardly, my lady," he replied.

The clip clopping of feet on the floor coming from the hall garnered the attention of everyone in the room.

When it reached the door, three figures appeared, their presence causing a cascade of reactions among the onlookers.

...!!!

Onarmont's eyes flashed, their grey hue reflecting the face of one of the three.

Kurtish grinned at first but then... his feelings of triumph were held back by a suffocating feeling of foreboding.

Wait. What was going on here?

The three individuals to walk in were Skullius, Silrat and... Alaris.

The examination officer locked eyes with Onarmont.

He stopped.

"So you're the mediator," he said with a chuckle.

Onarmont stood from her seat.

Her figure zipped past the table bordering her and Alaris, reaching him immediately.

The two stood face to face without a word for a few seconds.

What the heck?

This was unexpected.

What was going to happen?

Kurtish in particular grew tense.

Before long...

Onarmont... gave Alaris a big hug!

"Hahahahaha! You slimy bastard. Hiding in plain sight!" she laughed while slapping Alaris' back harshly.

Alaris who hadn't expected the embrace clumsily wiggled and chuckled.

"Who said anything about hiding? I'm not the one who's constantly travelling," he said with difficulty.

Everyone looked at each other in confusion, Silrat and Skullius included.

Kurtish's face turned pale.

'What's going on? Why are they hugging?' he asked himself.

This...

Onarmont split herself from Alaris and gave a smile.

"You've reduced yourself to this, have you? Why are you even here?" she said while glancing at Silrat and Skullius who had stepped a safe distance away.

"<Sigh>. I'm here to represent Festos on behalf of the Association. He is an extremely valuable member that the Board agrees should be placed under special protection like the rest of the 'special kind' they want to keep so eagerly," Alaris explained with a tired breath.

He had spent half of yesterday evening scrambling to gather and discuss Festos with General Board.

...!

"What?!" Kurtish fumed.

"Impossible!" the spokesperson for the Creeper's Hide-In also shot from his seat and exclaimed with a deep frown.

"Oh..." Onarmont voiced. She turned to the two Alaris had walked with, her eyes automatically settling on Skullius. "This one?"

"Indeed. Don't let him fool you with his unimpressive exterior. He's monstrously talented."

'I'm not trying to fool anyone,' Skullius defended himself from within.

Onarmont's gaze unblinkingly remained on the Hybrid Luman for a time before she smiled.

"Fascinating," she said while turning her eyes back to Alaris. "Isn't he merely a rank 4 mercenary still? Why is the Board interested in him?"

"He was. But after another evaluation..." Alaris corrected. "...You wouldn't believe it."

"Excuse me!" Kurtish roared.

Everyone in the room turned to him in the next instance.

The number of gazes nearly made him freeze but remembering that he had someone important watching, he powered through the paralysis.

"What is the meaning of this?! This is supposed to be a formal event! Why are you all chatting casually instead of dealing with the matter at hand?! Isn't that the reason we are all here?! Why is Guilds Association supporting a mere rank 4 mercenary anyway? He should pay for his crimes!" Kurtish voiced loudly.

The spokesman for the town and his group vocally expressed their support while the Head of the York Family remained silent.

Alaris was the first to speak up. Sadly, his words weren't a reply or an acknowledgement to Kurtish's outburst.

"Why are you here? Since when do you mediate anything at all?" he asked Lady Onarmont.

The velvet haired woman shrugged.

"I had a favour to pay off. You know how it is," she said. "But now, I can't say if intervening is necessary at all. Personally, I'm glad I'm being saved the trouble."

Kurtish gaped.

"You-!"

"Festos, as of yesterday was promoted to a rank 3 mercenary. The General Board agreed that he is an asset worth protecting and may I say, the destruction to the town was indeed a tragedy but Festos here's report gave more of a reason to reward him than to punish him. The Cluster General to the Cluster escaped and the catastrophe caused was by its whim.

It was terribly powerful given our findings from the remnants of its signature that we studied. The Board and I are willing to back his case," Alaris cut off Kurtish with a lengthy but solid defence.

"But... but...!" Kurtish shivered, his eyes dashing behind where Aliyah was lost for words, looking to him agape.

The town spokesperson huffed.

"This is what you people do?! You make excuses while we suffer?!" he pointed an accusing finger at Alaris.

The examination officer sighed.

"If you hadn't been so rude to this Overseer..." he said while pointing at the sharply dressed young man who had been facilitating the hearing, "...he would have already told you how the Association plans to not only compensate the victims individually but to also fund the recreation of a better town for your people.

The Family governing your region will also receive a fair amount of coin for the trouble."

...

"...Well, in that case..." the spokesperson gulped, his face softening as he sat down. "Pardon my hastiness."

He had been under the impression that the coin needed to be funnelled out of Skullius' pocket, which was why he was sour about Skullius not being here earlier.

But with this...

Compensation by the individual...

Rebuilding of a better city...

Hahaha! This was too good to be true!

There were no casualties so why would keep pressing on the matter about Festos anymore?

"Huh?!" Kurtish was appalled by how quickly the person he had decided to support had turned on him.

His eyes twitched and he glared at Skullius who had been silent the entire time, letting Alaris do the talking as he had been instructed.

"If the victims are satisfied, Bil will handle the formal paperwork," Alaris said in closing. "You have no objections right, Mr Oldd? After all, there are no person stakes of yours in this matter."

"I...I..." Kurtish stammered with a constipated face.

"I thought so. My dear lady, let us catch up," Alaris said as he gestured for Lady Onarmont to lead the way out of the room.

Thus the matter was solved so simply.

Chapter 606: Something For Alaris To Consider

Just as one would expect, the hearing ended immediately after Alaris and Lady Onarmont walked out of the large room.

"That was better than I thought," Skullius whispered to Silrat by his side.

"All according to plan," the former Association Branch Head said with a smirk while taking in Kurtish's distressed face with glee.

"He doesn't seem too happy."

"Well, he must have realised his involvement was suspicious and decided to act anyway. It would have worked in his favour IF...." Silrat looked to Skullius with a cheeky smile that demanded he finish the sentence.

The Hybrid Luman sensed the desire and sighed.

"If you hadn't arranged a re-evaluation and told me how exactly to impress Alaris. I get it already. You're a cool sockethole or whatever," Skullius said with a shake of his head.

"YOU!" Kurtish suddenly roared at Skullius, hurrying his way to the Hybrid Luman... by trekking hurriedly around the massive table which took him a good six seconds, enough time to make whatever else he had to say awkward after the brief silence of travel.

When he did reach Skullius, his face having so many anger-induced wrinkles that folks from a different universe would have recommended that he ironed it, he exploded... verbally.

"Do you think this is over?!" he voiced loudly but while monitoring his volume in order to not sound too petty in front of his fiancé. "This is just the beginning! You should have just taken the fall for this incident and paid for your crimes on your own! You're nothing but a coward!"

"Coward?" Skullius neared laughed.

"Exactly! A coward! We'll see if the Association will be able to help should we face each other again in the Premium Age Royale. Mark my words! You won't get away with this twice!"

Silrat stepped back to give the two some space.

The Hybrid Luman grinned menacingly.

"You're on. Let's make it official, shall we?" he said as he took a step closer to Kurtish. "If we should face against each other again. Whether in the Preliminaries or the Royale, only one of us gets to live. No backing away. No surrendering."

A dark blue Aura rose from Skullius subconsciously as he spoke, causing Kurtish to summon a circular barrier around himself on reflex.

The Hybrid drew back and turned.

He didn't need a answer and Kurtish didn't need to reply anyway.

There were also enemies willing to kill each other the first chance they got.

Kurtish silently watched as Skullius and Silrat left the room and disappeared from sight while grinding his teeth.

*

"I haven't noticed until now but you really get bloodlusted easily," Silrat commented.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Skullius played dumb.

These were some of the details he was uncomfortable sharing. Seriously, how would he even continue the subject of the WILL OF BRUTALITY that was always trying to push him to revel in murder and cruelty?

Blood lust? Pfft!

He wished.

That was too tame of a word.

Down the hall, the two could see Alaris and Lady Onarmont chatting heartily.

From this distance, the two seemed like lovebirds from a different age. Or perhaps war buddies? Maybe both.

Skullius and Silrat slowly approached, yet instead of secretly cutting off the conversation as they expected, Alaris and Onarmont included them in their chat.

Onarmont's rare gaze fell on Skullius once again.

"I knew the only path to Alaris' heart was through swordsmanship but never did I imagine that a Mage would carry such finesse in the sword that even the Bloodless Steel Phantom would take it seriously," she said with intrigue.

"Funny enough, his magecraft is the one I find lousy and unrefined. Ahahaha!"

"Hahahahaha!"

"..."

Skullius frowned as the two laughed at Alaris' description of his Magecraft.

'Well, the joke is on them! I'm not actually a Mage!' Skullius secretly chuckled.

"Pardon me. I almost forgot to make proper introductions. This is a very dear friend of mine, Onarmont Rose. She's a master at a rare form of combat and the adopter of a very powerful class, the Shield Master, An Arma Using type. She is very well known," Alaris said while gesturing at Onarmont.

'A Shield Master, eh?' Skullius thought. It seemed there were lots of crazy classes out there, some that most wouldn't choose.

He could see why this class would be looked down upon by many.

Yet, he had no doubt that this woman was probably deadly with that heavy shield behind her back.

"Onarmont, this is Festos Dawn Bryne. A very talented Mage whose Class Branching secrets must be revealed to the entire world, haha," Alaris introduced Skullius. He then gestured to Silrat. " This is Silrat ... a recently joined scout who brought this young Mage in days ago."

Onarmont spared Silrat a short glance before turning back to Alaris with a frown.

"Wait. A few days ago?" she asked.

"Yes," Alaris responded.

"You mean to tell me this young man moved from rank 4 to rank 3 in a matter of days?"

"<Sigh>. I wish I could say otherwise."

Alaris smiled.

Looks like he wasn't the only one baffled by this.

Onarmont turned to Skullius once again.

"You must quite something," she said. "How proficient are you with hand to hand combat?"

Hand to hand?

Skullius jerked in surprise.

"I'm not that good at it," he gave a succinct, honest answer.

"He mainly excels in speed related skills and unique abilities that, as I gather, are not related to Magecraft," Alaris gave an analysis hewn from the two times he had experienced Skullius' prowess.

Yesterday's evaluation had been quite thrilling, so much so that he had ended up getting a little too excited!

Skullius' beautiful swordsmanship had ignited his desire to fight!

"Speed, is it?" Onarmont said as she sized up Skullius.

From the blue, she then said something that surprised all three gentlemen.

"His build is flexible. Power, speed and precision. I can see how his body can perform excellently in all these areas, Alaris. Have you considered taking him under your wing?"

Chapter 607: Strength Against The Rush of Time!

"Under my wing?" Alaris asked in surprise.

Both Skullius and Silrat hadn't expected this either.

Well, Silrat had been thinking about how to make something like that work since having Skullius learn the ridiculous swordsmanship Alaris was known for would make him atrociously powerful.

This was inspired by him now knowing that Skullius wasn't a Mage at all!

Thank goodness once again for the correction!

"Yes. Why don't you try it? If I didn't have several talents I'm training myself, I would ask if this young man wanted to learn under me as well," Onarmont said with a wink to Skullius. "And to be fair, stealing someone from right under you would be underhanded."

The Hybrid Luman cringed a bit.

He wasn't used to such things – winks and the sort.

Alaris wore conflict on his visage.

"I've never been interested in teaching. It's just not in me," he said.

He seemed to take Onarmont's words rather seriously, considering he wasn't being forced or anything.

The velvet haired woman laughed.

"You've earned legends that you've hidden. You've learned skills that you buried, letting them accumulate mortal rust. What exactly do you think life is for? If you're not interested in them, pass them off to someone else. Let them do something with them," Onarmont said with a light punch to Alaris' shoulder.

"You're not getting a younger and even if you reach my Stage and gain a vastly longer life, you'll discover that age will creep in still, eating away at everything you are."

These words gave the entity known as time a fearsome name.

It was one of the monsters that chased some of the more power hungry experts, making them claw and hunt for power beyond the normal mortal bounds.

Power at the level of Divinity and beyond.

Yes.

With that, even time would hesitate to sink its fangs.

Alaris was not at this stage yet but these words that he thought were a substance he knew already as a master of a craft, hit harder when said by someone superior.

Perhaps the solitary and lonely lifestyle he had resigned himself to where he was satisfied as a watcher was killing him silently.

Maybe...

Why had he decided to shut off himself from the world again?

Alaris couldn't say he actually remembered?

Was the burden of having a reputation, one known so far and wide, scary?

If it fell... where would that put him then?

Wouldn't he end up right where he was now?

Alaris debated in his mind briefly over what it was that caused him to sink into this life but soon, he found himself laughing self-mockingly.

Onarmont smiled.

"Your heart still isn't settled, is it?" she asked.

"Apparently not. However, I will consider your words. I just might change," Alaris said with a strange glint in his eye.

He then looked to Skullius.

"Give me your sword."

"Hmm?" the Hybrid Luman questioned this request.

"I will not give you false hope but for now, give me that sword of yours. You can't dance as you did yesterday if it breaks. I would like to spar with you some more, that's a guarantee, but I can't stand to see that green sword suffer any longer. You need it," Alaris explained.

Oh.

He wanted to get the sword fixed?

Yesterday, Skullius had followed Silrat's plan during the re-evaluation.

He had used Demion's Dance and the [Swindling Death's Dance] as his primary form of attack.

He had shown bits of it during his first evaluation but this time, he went all out, the graceful but erratic movements of the actual sword dance that he hadn't used since his fight with Bassbion causing no small amount of surprise in Alaris.

This definitely wasn't the last time these two would exchange blows with the sword and that was an exciting prospect but...

Silrat nudged Skullius, knowing that he was hesitant to part with the sword. His trusty nature wouldn't be extended to all freely after all, even to Alaris especially where Demion's Dance was concerned.

The Hybrid Luman reluctantly retrieved his sword from storage and passed it to Alaris who handled it with great care.

When it reached his hand however, the green blade seemed to lose all its presence, as if all the vibrance it had only existed when it was in Skullius' hands.

'A Unique grade weapon like this is bound to someone?' Alaris wondered as he caressed the sword's cracked edges and surface. 'Interesting...'

"Do you plan on having the man who forged that hateful sword of yours repair it?" Onarmont asked with a playful smile, this one question causing Alaris to shiver uncomfortably.

"Never!" Alaris hissed. "I got away with it once and that's enough for me. I know a good enough blacksmith who can do a great job at mending it to perfection. That's enough."

Onarmont chuckled.

"See me off, would you?" she said as she pulled Alaris down the stairs to lower floors.

Skullius solemnly grimaced as Demion's Dance was sucked into a foreign storage. It was strange to not have his sword around. Hopefully it came back safely.

It was coming back, right?

"Relax. It will be fine. I doubt Alaris has the courage to harm or betray even swords. He values swordsmanship that much," Silrat comforted.

"You're right," Skullius finally relented.

He breathed out one big breath for good measure and calmed down.

"Since this is all done now, shall we get on with the other plans? There's no time to waste."

"Yes. Someone I know is working really hard out there. I better get to work too as we discussed," Skullius said, referring to Replicus whom he knew was probably doing some heavy grinding, growing his strength immensely!

He had his own tasks to speed run.

Accomplishing as many Tasks as possible.

Absorbing as many Enriching gems as possible.

Fusing as many skills as possible.

Taking on as many exclusive missions as possible.

Upgrading as many skills and stats as possible with [Unbound].

All this had been properly arranged in a marvellous sequence by Skullius and Silrat to ensure that the Hybrid Luman would grow freakishly strong in the next few weeks now that the main disturbances were done with.

A grind was on the horizon and Silrat couldn't help but grin at what its results would bring.

Alaris accompanied Onarmont back to her residence within the city.

Soon, they had reached a large mansion where several men dressed in red armour welcomed Onarmont.

"I hope you make the right choice. I'm glad you're not power hungry but sometimes, it's a detriment. Reaching your full potential is not a bad thing," the velvet haired woman said as she kissed Alaris' cheek.

The evaluation officer smirked with a muffled breath.

"There's a lot of experts who have sought to reach their full potential. I personally don't like how they ended up. Is it wise to take up the sword again if fame and power are subject to time in the end? Even if I reach Divinity, what will have been the purpose?" he asked Onarmont who drew away slowly, backpedalling into her home.

"I for one, would like to see for myself how far man can break Divine rules. If they are too much..." Onarmont tapped on the shield on her back, "...I'm prepared to defend my ideals to the very end."

Alaris watched as the woman disappeared behind the door.

Power.

Legends.

Time.

He dreaded these things.

Apparently, there was a time where having such a lack of ambition meant death.

Alaris dreaded that time.

If he was alive during those days, he might have died meaninglessly.

Yet, a man similar to him had rammed past the fear as the motivation he had, valuing it more than his dread for concepts or... even the gods themselves drove to the edge.

To the brink.

To victory and to loss.

Chapter 608: Highlights of A Feared Age (1)

The Second Grand War.

Ambition ran rampant, stimulated by the darkness of the times.

Shallow ambition.

Deep ambition.

There was a clear definition between the two in those days. Those who had been waiting for a shift in their lives rode the wave of chaos to either better themselves or to burn down everything they loathed in the world, thus creating a split.

Fear had been dominant for a long time but then, news of vessels that carried portions of the consciousnesses of Deities spread throughout Feinheath and reached even Opungale, giving people hope.

Suddenly, the image of the greatest symbol of calamity in history didn't seem so scary anymore, especially after a specific rumour, one that was true, was told.

A man, a Royal Knight close to the King's side had been ordained to be a perfect vessel for a portion of the most revered Deity, Quintess.

A man by the name Rayn.

His BODY, SOUL and MIND were washed with incredible power and even with the might of a Deity within him, he retained his consciousness, immediately setting out to turn the tides of the war.

The people cheered as waves upon waves of Fulgardt's armies were pushed back and eradicated with the intervention of vessels mainly crafted from the bodies of Paladin Champions.

It was glorious to fight by their side.

The war cry of an otherworldly being, their might unreasonable...

Yet, sorrow could still be seen as none of the Deities took pleasure in carving away at their creations. It was sickening.

But what they loathed even more was the dark ambition trapped within each and every one of the men and women under Fulgardt. It was not natural.

It was unyielding.

The direct armies under the Chosen of Fulgardt, the Unions, were particularly powerful and resilient, so much so that the vessels couldn't last much longer after battling them for several days without end.

A vessel quickly depleted with constant battle.

Some of the vessels survived even after reaching their limit and releasing the consciousness of the Deity within them while others turned to ash afterwards.

Sadly, for those that survived, a terrible fate awaited them.

The first Paladin Champion to become a vessel, Logma, had a strong enough body and will to show the trade off for what he had been able to accomplish.

His blood became cursed.

His body and those of the other vessels were not strong enough to come off without any backlash. Such was the effect of trying to circumvent a Rule of the world inefficiently.

Anyone with blood ties to him felt it. Their blood rippled with an unseen chill yet it was obvious that they were no longer the same.

The common folk within Logma family died after a year. Children, Foundation Stage adults, the sick....

The curse exploited every bit of weakness it could find, unless one had sufficient protection or a sufficiently powerful body cultivated by a greater mana core or a higher Stage.

This phenomenon discouraged more Paladin Champions from offering themselves as vessels. If it were only them at the risk of facing death, they would gladly accept their duty but...

What of little children in their line? Did they deserve to die for Feinheath?

What of parental figures who had their blood, satisfied by living as common folk away from complexity? Why should they have to suffer?

No.

This method proposed by the Unnamed Keepers wasn't right. It couldn't be allowed to exist!

The hesitation and conflict on this caused the armies of Fulgardt to gain another foothold, their power regaining another chance to grow within the continents.

Yet, Rayn was still there.

He rose at this time to single-handedly obliterate four Unions numbering 10,000-40,000 each, completely freeing Pelian from the grip of chaos!

When he accomplished this feat which rejuvenated those fighting for their homes and loved ones, two of Fulgardt's Chosen appeared to challenge his might!

Such a man couldn't be allowed to roam free.

He had to be stopped.

The incredible battle that ensued was so great and devastating that it was given a name, becoming the first marker of the long stretch of horrible times to come.

The Battle of Countless Blizzard Shatters.

For seven whole days, this battle endured, the sky turned dark and gloomy from it.

For seven whole days, it rained heavily and the clap of thunder as well as the flash of lightning continued nonstop, yet its call could never overwhelm the vivid blows that echoed where three tremendously powerful beings clashed.

Children could only cradle in the arms of their parents who were also terrified beyond reason.

Even well established combatants could do nothing but sit within their bases and try to shut off their senses.

It was terrible time to be nothing more than a mortal man.

After the seventh day, the battle ended.

All three calamities lived.

The two Chosen made an escape with grievous wounds, having suffered a loss, while Rayn emerged as the victor but with a severed weakened body.

This news was not as inspiring as many had thought.

The evils were still among them.

The Chosen were yet to fall and so was Fulgardt himself.

Was even the might of the strongest Deity not enough?!

Perhaps. Perhaps not.

Morale fell and the number of combatants willing to continue to oppose what they called 'the inevitable' dwindled.

Was it worth it?

Wouldn't their deaths just leave their families unprotected?

This was absurd!

Thankfully, there was a lull for a full two years after the Battle of Countless Blizzard Shatters.

The Unions of Fulgardt did not attack as relentlessly and Fulgardt himself was not seen or heard from throughout that time.

However...

Strange rumours ran amok through the nations of Pelian, Emeradis and Maqi.

Unique individuals vanished little by little over these two years.

These individuals were all key figures in their respective nations.

Hundreds of them seemed to disappear and not be heard from again even to this day.

This caused a subdued panic.

Nation leaders could only attribute this to being one of Fulgardt's works.

But why would he have these people taken all of a sudden?

What was the purpose?

Or perhaps... were these people kidnapped at all?

At the end of this period of relative peace, Rayn emerged once again, his BODY and SOUL fully recovered, his strength having grown exponentially from what it was two years ago.

Even with this though, the fragment of Quintess within him still whispered to him a dark truth.

<It is not enough.>

A lot more than this was needed.

Fighting Fulgardt, especially with his Chosen around was a fool's errand, even with this newfound strength cultivated by taking advantage of his highly adaptive body.

What to do?

What could be done?

Brute strength was not the way.

There had to be another path.

When all hope seemed to be dwindling further into the gutter, a solution appeared.

An unexpected one crafted by the will of direction itself!

Chapter 609: Highlights of A Feared Age (2)

"We do not have anymore men to spare! They are all drained of will and strength! Pushing them out there will accomplish nothing, Your Majesty!" Rayn bellowed with a hard face.

His jade eyes pricked the furious and frightened King's face, causing him to back away with his contradictory thoughts.

King Edricus then huffed and slammed the table in their midst angrily.

The small models on it that he, Rayn and a few Commanders were using to plan out their next course of action leapt down and fell to the floor as a result.

"You're naive, Rayn! A delusional fool!" the King hissed.

Rayn sighed.

"Your Majesty, I cannot allow for anyone else who doesn't want to fight to join in. It's a waste of our strength. Our nation is still just beginning to grow and it will be millennia before it develops the kind of power that Maqi has now. Let's save our armies," he said while leaning forward with his hands anchoring over the table.

King Edricus scoffed.

"Is that right? You've never had to sound this noble with me Rayn. Is it because your body enjoys the might of a god now? I know exactly what you are," he said while pointing at the Royal Knight. "The only reason you were ever born was to fight and you enjoy it above all else.

Even now, you make excuses yet your only desire is to have another bleeding battle that almost tears at the very foundations of this world!"

The Commanders gulped and decided to step back.

This wasn't about the war anymore. It was growing personal.

Rayn gave a piercing glare at the King, shocked that he would bring up such a thing when they had more important matters to discuss.

"Is this how you speak to the man who has been fighting legions that no mortal army can contend with for you, my King?" Rayn asked with a calm voice.

"Yes. It is. The will of the Deities disguises you as a hero but in the beginning, you were mine and mine alone. I will not have you burn for a lost cause, even you find thrill in it. Let the forsaken armies of Pelian perish instead," King Edricus declared.

"Your Majesty..." one of the Commanders began with a pale face, completely bewildered by the words of his King.

What was King Edricus saying?

"Be quiet!"

The other Commanders shivered in rage.

They had always known that their king was petty, ruthless and possessive.

He was an unfeeling bastard who saw only benefits in keeping himself alive and he always resisted death somehow for so many years even before he found Rayn.

He had felt nothing when his wife had three miscarriages.

He had not felt anything after hearing that his only son had perished after facing off against one of the Unions of Fulgardt at the Tattered Serpent's Throat.

And now, he did not care if the entire nation burned.

He would rather keep Rayn by his side as he always had.

Such a fiend for a King!

One of the Commanders bellowed and unsheathed his sword, a murderous glare in his eyes.

If it had come to this...

King Edricus turned to him with a look of shock and rage.

"You would dare?!" he roared with spit flying from his mouth.

"I would!" the Commander yelled with a darting wave of his mana.

From the window, a small black bird flapped its wings and settled on the window sill, watching the events happening curiously without drawing attention.

Rayn turned to the Commander who intended on killing Edricus but said nothing.

The tension spun madly.

No one knew what was going to happen.

Would this Commander truly set his blade against the King?

Would Rayn intervene?

The other Commanders decided to say nothing as well and stay out of it. They secretly support their fellow Commander but it was best not to join him.

"You would turn against each other at a time like?" a voice suddenly intruded on the tense scenario.

Everyone turned to find a man wrapped in a dark cloak standing a distance from them.

...!

This man's entry was incredibly suspicious and so was the air around him.

The bird by the window turned its head and blinked a few times before flapping its wings and flying away.

"Who are you?" Rayn asked with narrowed eyes.

This sudden entrant sized up Rayn and snorted.

So this was the one...

A look of hesitation then flashed in his eyes but it vanished when he spoke a reply.

"I would have wanted to declare my disappointment with what I'm seeing but I don't have the luxury of comments or time. Listen to me and listen to me very carefully," the man said.

"I can help you kill Fulgardt and his Chosen."

...!

"What?" King Edricus voiced his disbelief. "How would yo—"

"Silence! While you quarrel among yourselves, Fulgardt is about to enter a Realm of strength that will make it nigh impossible for you to defeat him, do you understand?! If you waste anymore time, the world as you know it is over so just listen!" the man in the cloak cut off the King with a furious, insecurity-ridden bellow.

"Very well then. What can you share?" Rayn stepped forward calmly.

The cloaked man sighed and grit his teeth hiddenly.

From his cloak he pulled out a gold and white cylindrical artefact which he threw at Rayn.

The Royal Knight caught it and examined its surface carefully.

"This is...?"

"A Transcendent grade artefact. It's one of the things you're going to need," the man explained. "Find three volunteers at the Incandescent Stage for this object and recruit at least two more people to become vessels for the Deities. You alone are not enough for this. But with two more vessels backing you up... yes.

It should be enough. He's weakened right now."

The Commanders looked at each in confusion wondering if they were missing something.

The only one among them to accept all this without showing suspicion was Rayn.

His eyes flashed with a sharp light that made it clear that he was assessing the validity of this.

The artefact he was holding was indeed Transcendent grade and this man didn't seem to have any malicious intent as far as his abnormal sight could tell.

But more than that was needed in these times.

The Royal Knight walked closer to the cloaked man who didn't budge or show fear.

"You seem so sure that we will trust you," Rayn said.

"You have to."

"And if we don't?"

The man smiled hollowly.

"Then the world YOU made will become a desolate field of black and white. Haha. Even I don't understand what he intends to do anymore," the cloaked man said with hints of exasperation and sorrow.

Rayn frowned.

It was obvious that this man had some kind of inside information but the more he talked, the more he realised that his thinking was too shallow.

"You.... you're one of his Chosen aren't you?"

"Hehe. That I am," the cloaked man admitted.

...!

The King and the Commanders were appalled, the latter drawing their swords in wariness.

The man in the cloak wasn't fazed.

In fact, he disregarded the atmosphere and stared straight into Rayn's eyes as if seeing salvation in them.

"I'm sure Quintess knows but since I might be dying in the next few days, I might as well register my man as whatever the world decides I died as," he said.

"My name is Quilforg."

Chapter 610: Highlights of A Feared Age (3)

I was there.

Two months after meeting King Edricus and the man whom the Deities ordained as a vessel for Quintess, Rayn, I was standing there, gritting my teeth and steeling my resolve.

I forced myself to look at it.

To savour it.

The faces that wore different expressions at this betrayal.

Their eyes were nearly set ablaze with hatred.

As their bodies were bound and intoxicated with poisons no man on Aigas could withstand for single breath, I looked down them.

All three of them called upon the power heavy within their veins. The powers they were given by HIM in order to spread his agenda.

Powers that set them very close to the boundary that separated the norm and the Divine.

I knew their individual strengths and weaknesses.

I knew how much each of them trusted me.

Both served as tools for me to bring them here and have them erased. Their bodies had become too strong after all. Even this poison barely did anything but paralyse them.

Minobu, Mezatee, Joyyse...

I begged for their forgiveness in my heart.

Of course they would never let forget this, even after passing on but...

Yes, this was just my way of making myself feel better for betraying them.

Sadly, I was the one to make them kneel while they were held down by multiple experts under Rayn as well as two vessels. Three Incandescent Stage volunteers knelt before each of three Chosen, their hearts having prepared for what I had told them would happen.

For I was the one who operated the Otherworldly Synchrony Spear, the Transcendent grade artefact that I had given to Rayn to hold on to before.

Its effect was cruel but it was just what we needed to end these friends of mine.

Instead of targeting their bodies, we had to target their souls.

The Otherworldly Synchrony Spear grabbed the souls of the volunteers and those of the Chosen and entangled them together, letting their essences bleed into one another.

Slowly, the Chosen and Incandescent Stage experts went mad from being mixed together, their bodies trembling even in the absence of their souls.

Their screams were gruelling.

I was almost driven to vomiting both my physical and immaterial self-righteousness, to justify this and somehow convince myself that I was different. How I was the only one undeserving of seeing the same fate.

Rayn and the others who saw the crushing scene grimaced.

The portion of Quintess in him never spoke or presented itself to the masses like the others, but I was sure it and the rest of the other Deities could not stand to condone this.

Thankfully, while within mortal vessels they did not possess the extraordinarily power that they normally did, else they might have been forced to perform such a cruel task themselves.

Heh... I spared them the need to.

With the Otherworldly Synchrony Spear, I stored the entangled souls into the bodies of the Chosen and watched them writhe, their minds corroded by madness to the extent where their vessels held nothing but raving voices that I and my new allies buried under heavy mounds of dirt and had sealed.

Sigh.

A fitting end, I'd say, but a far cry from ending the entire problem.

There was something Fulgardt had been up to behind closed doors.

What had driven me to act this quickly.

He ordered the best assassins in his Union to travel far and offer propositions to certain individuals in exchange for their very select services, much to my and the others' confusion. Fulgardt never mentioned any details about this to anyone, which gave me grave suspicions that he was getting ready for something unexpected.

All I knew for certain was that Fulgardt had a meeting with a giant.

He had revealed this bit of information to me briefly through our talks, though I'm sure it was unintentional.

He always felt safe in my company.

...

This revelation had been shocking but it opened my eyes to what was possibly happening now.

Those who were abducted were very important individuals.

Among them, I only knew of a few.

A man from Emeradis, Remos, who quite literary invented the form of power called Magecraft.

A wanderer of legends, one of the few renown globally for his prowess because of his interventions in the First Grand War, his name, Ijiin.

And lastly, a fearsome woman from Pelian recognised as the greatest Tamer alive.

I had wondered what purpose they served in Fulgardt's grand plan and what they had been offered in order to come of their own free will.

I would never know until much later, the inklings of my realisation beginning on that day three months after the sealing of the Chosen, when while acting as a double agent, the time to lose the facade turned ripe.

My act had been convincing. As a trusted friend, I had not garnered a reason for Fulgardt's suspicion to come my way. I had acted as shocked as he was when so much time passed without a single sight of the Chosen, only for a conclusion to be drawn about their deaths.

I had acted surprised at the prospect of our 'enemies' somehow knowing when and where our Unions would strike. Fulgardt had many counter measures even against Divination of the highest level.

I had also made distressed faces at our next failures and declared that something was indeed amiss while trying to figure out what Fulgardt was trying to do behind the scenes.

Sadly, before I could figure it out and find a way to stop it, my luck ran out.

There was no one else left to blame but me for the suspicious goings on and I will never forget how Fulgardt glared at me upon realising it.

Strangely, it wasn't bloodlust that first exhumed from the corridors behind his eyes.

It was immense sorrow conveyed solely through the dilation of his pupils.

The realisation... that he was all alone.

Thankfully, as someone treading along the footpath nearest to death, I had realised the coming atrocity of being found out and summoned Rayn and the other vessels.

Fulgardt hadn't expected this.

To suddenly find that he and the remnants of his Unions were surrounded by armies of the most powerful combatants in Aigas, was crippling to him. He bit down with a furious face, his eyes looking loathsomely at the vessels of the Deities that he had always called imposters.

False Divines.

Hypocrites.

Fulgardt had the strength to back up his claims, proving that he truly meant what he represented with his mouth. Even against thousands of beings far beyond the Incandescent Stage and at the same level of power as him, he didn't get overwhelmed.

I always knew he was powerful beyond reason but... Fulgardt's fury fuelled his power even further than what I expected.

Before he killed the armies from the two continents all by himself, Rayn and the other two vessels intervened, cutting him off.

The battle that ensued was brutal.

It dissuaded external clashes between the other armies that had been going at it, pushing them away.

The Battle of Countless Blizzard Shatters paled in comparison to this madness.

The land could not hold such a battle and thus the sea had to be the venue. At least it wouldn't crumble to dust.

I, along with all others watched as the massive ocean between Opungale and Feinheath was brought to ruin, the vast waters within it rising and falling, freezing and liquefying, vapouring and steaming grandly with its reach seemingly encompassing the entire world!

The sky couldn't decide what shape or form to take.

It couldn't decide what mood to wear for the occasion.

Some wagered there wasn't even a sky at this point.

In my heart, I hoped that my actions would not cause the world to die that day, otherwise my plans would have been worse than what Fulgardt had aimed.

I stayed close to witness the result.

I wanted to be there should Fulgardt surrender or fall or perhaps... win.

I owed him one last conversation, even if it killed me.

As my heart burned, anticipating either of three results, something worse occurred.

As Fulgardt's torn body was sent flying, its bulk smashing into Pelian, I witnessed an incredible horror.

It was only now that I started to that it was grief and a terrible amount of sorrow that caused this phenomenon. Or at least it was the final ingredient.

On Fulgardt's half naked body, a kilt made of darkness appeared to cover his midsection, tufts of light forming furs that wrapped around his wrists.

His hair grew comically long, its dark hue turning even darker while a mask... no, rather a second face bloomed over his original one.

This form I knew as Seramoro, Oblivion's Edge, had awakened... seemingly freely this time.

Oh dear...

Fulgardt, my friend, roared, his voice nearly causing the very foundations of the world to shatter and in the process killing hundreds of thousands effortlessly... cruelly.

His might grew by what seemed like hundreds of thousands fold, though it was likely more and kept rising, garnering trepidation even on the faces of the Deities!

This was it.

It was a vivid moment.

The sky was covered by a darkness so dark the word dark didn't do it justice.

At the same time, a vibrant golden white light swirled around this darkness, marking the heavens.

I sucked in a deep breath while watching this and turned to my friend fearfully, only to see a strange weapon appear in his hand.

The sky and its emergence served to date the beginning of immensely dark times.

The times when Fulgardt became regarded as the Immoral.

When he reached Divinity.