

Undead 701

Chapter 701: Effortless Care

As hard as it was to believe, Theurien was still holding Jadin and Somwell captive within a room in the grand mansion. Skullius had expected a different premise for their story, but it seemed the three really went way back, and with quite a bit of unsavoury history.

He met up with Silrat who had a hollow look on his face, as if the conversations he had heard had punched an indentation into it.

According to the former Association Branch Head, his self-introduction – who he was and his role – had been well accepted by Theurien, Red Rage's too. Even the short discussion that Theurien had had with Silrat in Jadin and Somwell's presence had been pleasant.

It had turned sour, however, when the fiery haired stallion had shifted his perspective to the guests whom he didn't address with any kind of warmth.

The more Theurien spoke, the more Silrat sank and even Red Rage got uncomfortable with how things were going.

As it turned out, Jadin and Somwell had been friends of Theurien long ago, but they grew apart from each other when they had a rather complicated disagreement that mainly involved Theurien wanting their three Families to create a large, influential network.

Jadin's territory was to the west of the Bryne Estate and Somwell's to the north. Theurien had proposed that they create a triangular trade route spilling to the west that exploited the lack of large, older Families within the three-pointed enclosure.

It would include all interested Families within it. If they wanted to participate they would, and if they didn't, the three Families would not bother them or even interact within their demesnes.

There was little risk, and acceptance pretty much guaranteed more benefits than otherwise.

Theurien's inspiration for this had come from his studying of the more popular arrangement in the Isise, and the lesser and largely unimpressive one that was the Belvion Union. The difference

between what these cities and towns had built, and what he proposed was the scale of operation, which was much more vast.

To this grand idea, Jadin and Somwell refused.

Their reasons, put as bluntly as could be because they had been close friends with Theurien, largely revolved around fear.

Fear that success would attract larger Families and unknown organisations.

Fear that none of them had the capacity to defend the route.

Fear that Theurien's vast connections would lead him to eventually ignore his lesser partners.

Yes!

The last fear was no secret! Theurien was well connected. Be it with great Mages or with great common noblemen. The only hole in his tight network, was his Family, which depended massively on what he had build and his individual power.

This carrot shaped pedestal that Theurien sat upon was what made Jadin and Somwell hesitate.

In the end, the two friends claimed that they saw no merit in diving into any projects that, at the end of the day, would largely be based on his personal prowess but with no substance from his Family as a whole, or from theirs as well.

In the long-run, what would probably be driving the route, and innovating interested parties within it, were people attracted to Theurien and his largely set networks.

This had hurt Theurien more than he imagined.

There was some element of truth in what his friends said, but that was only with the idea that he would somehow forget them when things really got moving.

Would he really?

Did they think their friendship meant nothing to him?

Nevertheless, the three's relationship had never been the same since then, and it drifted unsteadily until Theurien was suddenly made one with his bed.

Before then though, Theurien had deeply considered if he was the only one who was strong within his Family. Was everyone else weak?

Had he failed at the most basic principle in the world, that one's own home was where the building began?

Perhaps.

Yet, that conversation from the past had come up today and the result, was ambiguous.

"Well... maybe he won't enjoy my gift as much after all," Skullius said with a heavy sigh, slumping on a thick, buff grey couch.

"Gift, huh? It sure is," Silrat said while looking out the window.

Outside it, a gorgeous semi-transparent curtain, as if woven using the scales of the corpse of the Incandescent Silver Trout god – maybe it existed – hung up in the air, improving the view of everything far and wide.

"You really did have plans, after all."

"I told you I did!" Skullius snapped.

Silrat chuckled as he drew his eyes back to the Hybrid Luman.

"Well, at least the racket you were making outside allowed me an opening to leave that dreadful conversation," he said while also taking a seat. "Even this one's charm was killed within it."

Silrat pointed to Red Rage who was silently seated on a wooden chair in the corner of the room, his gauntlet on the chin of his helm. He sat with his legs spread apart, his elbow on his lap, and with an unnatural, serene glow around him.

The profundity of a Knight clad in the finest gold and pristine white armour, an aegis that in majesty was close to one that a King would don in a war of ages, seated on a mundane wooden chair, would have had the Aigas version of Shakespeare – Shakenknife? – writing tens of plays with a grateful tear on his cheek.

"I thought it was getting too positive in here. Knock it off!" Skullius snapped again, causing Red Rage to sit up straight.

"Sorry."

"Speaking of plans, I still have stuff to do with you. Urgh, the wording," Skullius said in disgust, but while keeping a finger pointed at the Apostle still.

Before he segued to the next plot point though, Silrat intervened.

"You know, I've been thinking..."

"Yes?" Skullius turned to him.

"The recent events... We enjoyed a full month and more of peace, but today everything just seemed to turn disgruntled. In all honesty, ever since I met you, my life has picked up its pace. There were many things I didn't even dream of doing yet that I've already accomplished. Things are changing, Festos. Quickly.

The status quo never stays still and usually, something bad happens, a brief respite, and then something worse comes..."

Skullius frowned.

"So? It's not exactly too strange. It can happen to anyone," Skullius felt that statement had all sorts of utter bullshit when he said it, and thus added onto it. "I mean, not everyone is lucky all the time, right?"

"I know, of course. But... I just really have a bad feeling. The Royale begins close to a month from now. If the previous patterns are to be considered, it'll be peaceful until then. But the Royale...

its likely to be a disaster. As we speculated before," Silrat folded his arms with a grave look on his face.

Skullius began to understand what he was getting at.

"You haven't fought your second match in the Second Round of the Preliminaries. So you haven't secured your spot as a contender for the main event, the Royale. Why don't you drop out? It's possible for contenders right? If you lose in the match, you'll be disqualified, and I'll just wait out the Royale. No doubt a battle of everyone that remains may last for at most a day or two."

"...I see."

"Better yet, you could just use a weapon above Legendary grade and get yourself out of the contention if losing isn't too good for you in the face of the public. You know as much as I do that you could be in danger."

Skullius remained silent for a while.

Silrat was right.

It had only been made apparent that contenders, unlike witnesses could be expelled from the games and the Venue altogether after losing to their opponents in the Second Preliminary Rounds or striking a draw.

Skullius had this option to bail on the Royale, since he was suspicious of what it was leading up to. He had been for a long time.

Many were as well, but they participated anyway, with the thought that the EverSword House couldn't do anything too insidious since it was, at the end of the day, just one of the many forces in Pelian and Feinheath as a whole.

Yet...

"Do you really think the Game Master will allow it?" Skullius said.

Silrat sighed.

He too had thought about this.

Guissepo.

The two knew for a fact that the extravagant man knew about them, that they knew him, and that they knew what he knew, that he knew a lot of like-minded people who knew the real, impure purpose of the Royale that remained in the largely unknown.

As a result...

"I doubt he would let me out of sight. Me being bound to the game is probably something he can control. Even if that isn't the case, many people I care about are still entangled in the game. People I'm bound to by responsibility to take care of, and people I need no force, mandate or effort to want to be safe," Skullius' hand landed on Silrat's shoulder, a rare meaningful smile on his face.

The end of Silrat's lip trembled a bit and he shook his head.

"Seeing it to the end then?"

"Seeing it to the end."

That was the conclusion.

Instead of possibly bailing and leaving everyone else – Daggs, Terese and Silrat who were witnesses – to an ambiguous fate, Skullius decided he'd be right there as a contender at the Venue until they reached the result of the Premium Age Royale.

"Fine then," Silrat said.

"Now!" Skullius said with a sharp tone, before rushing to Red Rage, swinging his arm around the Apostle's neck and dragging him away.

The Hybrid Luman, while he had a mission to complete, was in quite a bit of a hurry to hide his glassy eyes.

Somehow, when he said what he said to Silrat, he felt an irritation deep within the bowels of his soul that made him feel...vulnerable.

He meant what he said, but he didn't want to feel this strange feeling.

It reminded him of what he felt when Darwel talked about parents.

It reminded him of his supposed adopted sister, Camilla.

It reminded him of Somanda's words. That his fellow Moronic Undead were needy attachment hogs because of Undeath.

He didn't want to feel this right now.

Not when so many things were cascading down his little valley of life.

The Null Devil King, Aurolio, the mysterious ancient page and now Theurien's awakening.

To cope with it all, he wanted to do something that made him feel in control.

Unbeknownst to him though, the skeleton clad in a pristine armour that he was dragging to the open fields behind the mansions knew exactly how he was feeling.

He felt the turmoil his master was feeling but chose to pretend he didn't know.

The truth was, Red Rage knew it all through his mental connection with Skullius. With his growth, he was able to exploit its reverse function, unlike a weaker Apostle like Ferex. Or perhaps also...

For now, all he could do was make sure Skullius was distracted, as he wanted.

That he could do.

As they reached a sufficiently clear space, Skullius expelled a massive cauldron from his spatial storage.

The Hundred Foils Edifying Cauldron.

It was massive and ancient-looking, with rust and an archaic air about it.

Its basic function was to refine natural products of the earth, extracting their nutrients to create temporary and supernatural effects that could be applied to living bodies.

It was time to put this function to use.

Skullius remembered that Hobbu Gogo used a set of runes on the floor to her place to heat up the contents of the cauldron. Since that entire city was in Red Rage's cape, Skullius felt it would be a drag to go there just to brew potions.

Maybe he wouldn't even be able to ignite the runes, since he wasn't able to use the Conjuring Gravel Runes yet.

Thus...

"[Ungodly Flames of Debauchery]," Skullius said.

A deep flame burned under the cauldron, and Skullius, with a big smile collected a large amount of materials; herbs, seeds, branches among many others which he had collected from Hobbu Gogo's quarters and laid them on the ground in relevant portions.

The Hybrid Luman laughed.

Before Red Rage knew it, Skullius had placed a palm on his chestplate, pushing him back enthusiastically.

"Back up bro. Let me cook!"

Chapter 702: Fated End, Imminent Comeuppance

Maugor was considered a talented assassin.

She had considered herself the same too.

For someone to be able to endure restricting their instincts and taking to patience, striking in quick, quiet and efficient blows... it was a feat to be commended.

Unlike everyone else, except her teacher, Maugor had to suffer through having a Class that was despised all throughout Maqi.

Stealth.

Patience.

Swiftness.

None of it was rewarded or regarded with any form of prestige or respect within the large, eccentric nation. After all, in Maqi, the form of combat everyone considered to be worth any attention at all, was that which disregarded all else to heed raw instinct.

This was why the nation had been recognised as the bastion of humanity and the hub of the strongest humans alive in the entire world.

The men and women there were a far cry from being worthy to be termed as barbarians, but the induction of their motto since the founding of Maqi, called for everyone who was proud to be part of it, to carve it in their hearts with an almost maniacal level of devotion.

FACE AHEAD, NOWHERE ELSE.

Not your body, regardless of how torn it is.

Not your weapon, nomatter how worn it is.

Not your allies on the field, nomatter how much they call for help.

The motto was obnoxious and idealistic in a very, very tragic way.

Indeed.

Even the First Horn, the current King of Maqi, had recognised the flaw in it as well. It was unrealistic and ancient.

His intervention and mind-set, was why Maugor was here right now.

The tall woman sat on the dry ground and exhaled.

"Mission failed," she said as plainly as she could in her normal bestial voice.

Somehow, it had mutated, as she spent fifteen years of her life training in silence, being punished torturously for spilling even a decibel of sound during her ruthless 'Five Segments To Calm' training. She had become a legitimate mute for a long time during this exercise, which was crafted to hone her ability to remain silent and to wait for opportune moments to strike.

She took deep breaths.

The air in this nation, Pelian, was stale.

There was too much human in it. Human, mixed in with a lot of things she couldn't quite recognise.

When she had been younger, she remembered drinking up the fresh air of home greedily whenever she returned from a trip outside Maqi. The minty flavour that she often detected in its migrant body near the lush forests, the aquatic scent it gave when it passed by rivers and falls, the dry and crispy grit it would carry when she passed plains...

The air was empowering.

It was enriching.

Maugor often thought that maybe... maybe Maqi still retained a semblance of the glory of the olden times, where mana was air and air was mana, within its embrace champions being spurned every year.

It was nice to think about.

From the distance behind the tree she leaned on, a familiar rhythm of footsteps came, crushing slowly yet detestfully on the dried grass.

"How crushing," a voice came.

"I already said it for you to hear. Do you have to remind me?" she said without turning. "You were watching weren't you?"

A harrumph was heard.

Beside her stood a short, stout man.

In truth, this was an understatement. He exceeded that parameter by a fair bit... to instead look like a pear. The fact that he wore nothing but a pair of long pants made of a thick, black, shaggy hide with white ends, made his shape even more apparent. His torso which had no traces of firm flesh, looked like a small castle of pudding, atop it, a perfectly round head.

That said, he had fairly wise looking face, fitted with small, ruby-like eyes that looked to peer through the soul.

"You've gotten very talkative since your training. I should have known you were a subpar candidate to begin with. Unravelling as you please," he said mockingly. "And yes, I watching. That was not the way of an assassin."

Maugor turned to him with the same kind of bile sponsored scowl.

"Your honey plastered comments from years ago have finally showed their true, dung flavoured colours, huh?"

"With this, they definitely have."

The two stewed in their hostility for a while without a word between each other.

In all honesty, no words were really needed between them; between student and teacher. They both had the same habits, mannerisms and Class after all.

Maugor hung her head.

"I thought I had more time," she said in a low voice.

"You did. The First Horn was merciful enough to give you TWO weeks."

"..."

"...But that's a lie. Even you know that," the man said with a deep sigh. "The moment he said that to me, I knew his mind had already taken to other ideas rather than my own. All things considered, he did give me a fair chance."

Indeed. He had been given quite a bit of time.

"When I first went to him, asking that he expand the nation's caste by adding the Wordless Division, as I deigned to call it, I had thought he would have me hanged for even suggesting that we turn back against the old ways. But he didn't."

Maugor kept her head hung low.

Only she knew how much it hurt to grit her teeth so fiercely. So hiddenly.

"The First Horn is different from the past rulers. He recognised what most others couldn't. That a nation's strength, while committing to tradition, can be nuanced. Just because we was open and forthcoming, doesn't mean we can't have assassins for assignments that require a less bombastic approach! He... he understood that!"

Hints of frustration showed in the man's voice; in his eyes and in the bulging columns of blood vessels on his neck as he strained through each word.

"He gave me a chance, and when I set to create what I hoped, oh, fortune thought it too fortunate and made my spine as fickle as a twig. Alas, I had to.... manufacture replacements and prove the worth of this division through YOU."

Maugor remained silent for a while, as did her teacher after saying all this.

"So, after all my wasted years, this is how I die...?" she asked.

"It's either you or me. I can only benefit from the one. TWO WEEKS. Two choices," he said with a hard face.

Maugor finally raised her head.

Her face looked as perfectly bratty and rebellious as the man remembered, with not a single tear in sight.

To that, he gave a brief smile.

At least she wasn't going to serve up a cacophony of worded weakness before passing.

"What about the mission?" Maugor asked. "That Sif Princess? Will you sent the others to finish her off?"

The man looked into Maugor's eyes curiously before answering.

"I doubt the First Horn cares for her much. He just wanted to be courteous to our allies who proposed the idea. My suggesting that I could have you do it quickly probably extended his wish to try this uncharacteristic plan, but now..." the man paused. "...I'm sure he'll just want to raze Opungale to the ground with a full army, once and for all."

Maugor gave it some thought.

"He understands nuance, you said?" a mocking tone escaped her lips.

"Tradition and history are two separate things," the stout man said as a sharp ray of mana clad his hand, its sharp edge slicing off the thick trunk of the tree inches from it.

"Comeuppance must be served as the main dish to History, while Tradition... Well, it's more like a one course meal."

Maugor gave a laugh.

"You always told the worst jokes. I guess I'm just the one that never came from your lips."

Another micro smile shot from the man's face before he replied.

"Hmmm. You're right. Maybe the others won't be. I'll give them your regards."

In the secluded space, a head rolled.

Chapter 703: Unease and Ripe Time

As the days trickled by, the snow that always followed the ground-smothering tradition... persisted. In this region at least, even when the sky decided to turn brighter, its warmth elevated by several tens of degrees, the cold fought back.

It was as if time was moving slowly, but the terrible news that had spread throughout Pelian, about the fall of the Belvion Union after one of its cities suddenly erupted with mysterious phenomena, some cataclysmic and some hysterical, but magically cynical, made all feel the pace of world grow more sombre.

Tales of a man who carried above him a treacherous thundercloud that spilled dazzling and destructive bolts of lightning; a mad boy who wreaked havoc with his immense physical strength and resilience, killing indiscriminately with a large smile on his face; a haunting ghost that spat out curses, turning the commonfolk pale...

these were but a portion of the mysteries, all of them that at first seemed too ridiculous to be true.

...Until each of them walked amongst those who claimed to have the most sense.

Pelian knew another great bout of unrest.

Just a few months ago, the Isise had suffered a similar incident that crippled one of its cities, Evic. The story had been more subdued initially, but the fact that it had ties to the undead fanatics, the Green Neolists, gave it great weight within the gossiping circles of citizens.

But this current collection of stories had no need for relevant pretext. The evidence was more pronounced, and no one had any idea what had caused it.

The more superstitious and religious among the commonfolk screamed in the streets that the Deities were upset, while some claimed that this was a mysterious punishment aimed at giving a much needed jolt to the hibernating Royal Family.

To make them know that aligning with the Sif was a terrible choice.

Everyone wanted to find something blame, regardless of how ridiculous it was.

Everyone was restless.

The same could have been said for Genhuis City which was the same throughout the year, but no, after the rebuilding, life went on as usual.

Even the stories of these mystified human beings did not cause much of a stir.

After all, if there was any place on Aigas where time seemed to keep endlessly still, it had to be here, where the bright suns kept the grand city alight in the eternal winter.

Even with the atrocity that had happened weeks ago, the rebuilding had strengthened the hearts and minds of the people. None of them had died after all, and with the passing time, they were as good as new.

The snow remained, after all, giving them a firm sense of permanence.

That said, it was no mere fable that the world seemed to be turning stiff, as if preparing for a rough trouncing that was to come, and who was to feel it better than its inhabitants, even if they remained unshaken by anything else that had happened in the nation.

What was coming?

Even the common noble folk and street rats could tell.

The sparks of dormant blessings in their bodies, attached to the Divine seemed to warn dully.

The throng of rattling events seemed to cry out for preparations.

But... perhaps it was just an emotional ruse.

Hmph.

Things like this happened all the time.

Besides, there was the Royale to look forward to. With time, it had drawn so close, peering around the corner.

The finale of the contest for the ages.

The abodes and estates of Families were gorgeous and heavily designed, excessively fortified with visible obstacles and guards donning enchanted armour.

Being showy about the prowess they held was a way to deter being challenged, or being looked down on by anyone from the outside.

It worked at times, and sometimes it didn't.

Different from the Families however, the Houses preferred to stay out of sight.

Most among commonfolk and exalted men did not even know where these legendary bastions of Pelian resided.

This had been why the announcement of the Premium Age Royale had been so marvellous and shocking, because none had seen it coming or even imagined that it would happen in their lifetimes.

The Houses were like phantoms, and even to this day, the most widely known, were House EverSword and House Shannazah. The latter was mostly recognised for their appearances twice in history to intervene where the common Capital Service personnel had been challenged for long durations; one well-known, the other less so.

The former, well, they were as secretive as the others, but this time, they had become a pillar, acting as an example of what the Houses were.

"It's finally come time."

A voice spoke, seeming relieved that the long wait was over.

"Yes. The day after tomorrow... it begins, Rias."

Deep within a massive forest, a SACRED FOREST with sparse vegetation that endured under the harsh sun, umbrella shaped canopies being shared traits among its trees, and a golden shade of leaves being a familiar feature among coupled shrubs, an enormous castle with multiple towers on and around it could be seen.

It shone in a blinding gold, as if it had been birthed in the womb of the dirt like a giant valuable mineral.

It was beyond mystical to see, as if one added on the fact that it was floating over a still lake that looked like a smooth disk of polished steel, their jaw would sway agape.

Two men sat at the edge of the lake side by side, looking at the castle.

"Did he say it's ready?" Rias asked with a dead tone.

"It's been ready for a week now. All that's left is to let the Royale run its course and leave the rest to them," Rearren replied with a smile.

Rias nodded.

"That... council, they didn't give you trouble again, did they?"

"Well, they tried again after that strange incident in Genhuis City, but they couldn't refute that the Control Seals saved them from a great deal of trouble – maybe casualties – by transporting the common civilians to the Venue. They did not have that situation under control.

We singlehandedly limited the uproar and mess they would had on their hands if the millions of people in the city weren't distracted from what had happened. So... they owed me."

Rias nodded once more.

It was actually funny that the Governor and the others who wanted to shut down the Royale allowed it to end after admitting that Rearren was right.

They had first investigated whether or not Rearren was involved, but seeing as there were no traces of the EverSword House's involvement, and quite honestly, little belief that Rearren would do something that stupid, they released him as a suspect.

Rias had been concerned that the Governor and his support would pin this on them and use it as leverage to shut off the Royale, which would be difficult to deal with.

If both the Purity and Capital Service actively tried to stop the Royale in full force, it would be a losing battle, not because the EverSword House couldn't fight back, but because the setup of the Royale itself wasn't that hard to dismantle.

That fragility was one of the Creeds used to keep the game and its intended result afloat after all.

Thankfully, there wasn't any evidence that supported the Governor's accusations, so Rearren managed to buy time. Also, the game was almost over anyway, which helped his case.

The Governor could attempt to plead with the Royal Family to stop Rearren if he got too desperate, but on this end, Rearren was confident.

Even if the Governor managed a timely audience, the Royal Family of Pelian, the Royan line, was like a headless giant. All authority but no voice.

They never did anything.

They were the ones who allowed the Premium Age Royale to be conducted in the first place.

Rias turned back to his father.

"Is HE ready?" he asked.

Rearren turned to his son, and wore a grin.

"Oh yes. He's been ready for centuries. I believe we are about to witness something VERY interesting."

Chapter 704: Keep Your Guard Up, Swordsman!

The crisp clang of steel sent an unwilling gush of wind across the medium length tufts of fresh green grass in a ring.

To the common eye, only yellow sparks registered in sight every second as the noise persisted, a certain weight and depth to them.

The background of three mansions, with the one in the middle looking oh so grand, was captivating, but if anyone was here to witness this ongoing spar in all its exceptional glory, they would have blurred out all the surroundings to focus with rapt attention on the participants.

A second later, two figures seemed to emerge from a particularly frightening spark akin to a tongue of fire, and stand in opposite directions, both their stances low.

On one side was a chiselled man adorned in a simple white shirt dripping with sweat. The most notable things about him were his thick handlebar moustache of clean caramel hair and his black steel greaves which reached up to his knees. They were a signature look for him that was recognised far and wide.

In his hand was a beautiful sword that he held with its tip facing ahead. He knelt on the ground, as was one his fighting stances, locking his topaz blue eyes on the opponent.

On the other side, was a young man with slicked back light auburn hair that had deep orange tips. He was wearing a dark, long sleeved shirt that pressed against his well-sculpted body as he crouched down, his white eyes facing in his sparring partner's direction.

At his waist were two sheathes; one very long, the other about the length of a normal saber. The latter still held in it a single-edged sword with a golden hilt, but the other was empty, for he was currently using the chipped zhanmadao that it usually housed.

He held the long sword in such a way that gave the impression that he was about to strike upward with a slash, the length of the blade showing extended from behind him.

"Don't get lost in it again," Alaris called to Skullius as he knelt. "The goal is to try and last for more than ten seconds in that state."

"Easy for you to say," Skullius said before taking in sharp breath.

His mana spiked, enveloping his body like a large spiked cocoon that swelled three meters around him.

The Hybrid Luman always did have a strangely large output of mana, didn't he?

Alaris laughed.

"Or, we could try THIS again, i guess," he said, realising that Skullius wasn't up for prolonging this exercise again, instead opting to master launching a single, perfect blow in his heightened state as he occasionally attempted during their spars.

The Bloodless Steel Phantom prepared.

A green glow rose from his body like a ghostly gush of steam.

Immediately, the blades of grass around him stood still, their tips pointed towards the sky like colourful statuettes.

Skullius felt the overbearing Aura and struggled to keep his nerve.

Alaris was ALMOST getting serious for once during their 'exercises.'

"You're starting to make me nervous here, Festos. Good on you. I'll use one of my three main favoured Sword Styles. Stilled Hallow. With it, I can make everything around me unbreakable... unshakeable even.

If you can make all the grass around me move despite it; rustling, shuddering – anything at all – you'll be just a step shy from becoming a master Swordsman. A real one."

Skullius' scrunched up his face.

That didn't seem too attractive. Failing to do what Alaris dared and succeeding barely sounded different on the surface, but he believed it. Ever since Alaris began tutoring him, this was the first time he had used his Aura against him.... and it wasn't even the Perfect version.

What was this man's limit?

"Fine," Skullius said as he activated the skill [Swordmaster's Quiescence].

Unlike weeks before, activating it didn't make him lose his consciousness.

Instead, a sharp focus overtook his mind, and everything around him became... alive. No, that was a wrong way of describing it. It was as if all things were drawn towards him, making themselves known... making their make and weaknesses known.

Skullius didn't even need to stretch his senses to find out where what was. Even the grand mansions seemed to be reaching out to him.

Worse yet, even the Bashful Abomination in his hand, felt alive to him.

It seemed like it was trying to become one with him, something Skullius was sure the sword wished to do despite not voicing it. Well, he had instructed it not to talk when he was fighting, so...

All this however, was what Skullius could handle in ten seconds.

He was fighting off every other sensation he was supposed to feel while using [Swordmaster's Quiescence], otherwise, it would make him lose consciousness again.

He couldn't handle it all yet.

'Here goes!' Skullius urged himself on.

He focused all his strength while crouched down, his knees brushing against the waving blades of grass on his end, and instead of launching a slash, as a lesser swordsman would believe he would judging from how he was holding the Bashful Abomination, Skullius pointed the edge of the sword against Alaris... and zoomed towards him!

His figure, with the swollen garb of mana around it, moved like thin strips of colour that invaded the area infected by the pale, green, ghostly Aura of Alaris.

As he moved within this range, a portion of Skullius' senses registered the blades of grass he stepped on not being trampled under his boots like he had expected.

Instead, they remained standing at attention, their shockingly resilient masses actually boring through Skullius' feet cleanly!

Ridiculous!

And the Hybrid Luman was covered by a sturdy layer of mana!

Yet, he ignored and maintained his thrusting motion towards Alaris.

'I'll do it.'

When he was two meters away, he stabbed with the end of the sword, even if a zhanmadao would be terrible to use for such an attack.

The Bashful Abomination screamed as mana raced through it, turning its pale blade brilliant white.

Alaris remained still, kneeling on the ground with his silver gladius extended motionlessly.

Then...

A ear-piercing noise exploded out like a sharp siren when the zhanmadao met the pale green Aura!

There was no shockwave to speak of.

There was no shuddering impact.

Only a still zhanmadao's curved point, its momentum lost completely could be seen.

Alaris tilted his head and gave Skullius, a 'sucks to be you' face.

"Still ways away, it seems," he said to Skullius.

Indeed.

So it seemed.

But...

"Keep your guard up, Swordsman," Skullius commanded, much to Alaris' mild surprise when he realised that... the sword that had smote against his Aura... wasn't real...?

It faded, along with Skullius' whole figure which appeared again like a recurring animated frame behind the fading one!

A second zhanmadao flashed with the same stabbing motion, but within it was grave depth of skill and power, imbued with fierce mana!

The look the blind Swordsman who held it gave was different from that of the ghost that had come before, crafted by the [Ghost Rending Divine Sword Art]...

No.

It was different.

Alaris kept still... still.

His smile grew as the tip of the long sword drew near and... pierced his Aura.

Just by a pinky finger's worth of distance.

Once more, there was no shockwave and the zhanmadao lost its momentum immediately, but... a few bundles of grass leaned back before once again standing perfectly still.

Skullius groaned.

"That's it?" he asked.

"That's it? You've improved by several leagues from last week, and without relying much on your sword's properties," Alaris said with a cheery smile as he stood up.

Skullius wasn't convinced.

"But I barely moved the grass, unlike what you said. What does that mean? Am I still close to becoming a Sword master?" he asked.

Alaris stroked his moustache.

"Maybe, maybe not. The truth is, I expected this result, Festos. Or something close to it. Unlike anyone I've ever seen before, you seem to be... missing something. Less whole.

Perhaps you're not even aware of it yourself. Every extremity needs a wholeness to it. Whole desire. Complete devotion."

"Listen Festos. The vile scum that walks the world make up their minds and commit wholly. The strongest of the strong accept certain truths that come with power, as well as the bitterness it brings without batting an eyelid. Those who stand for justice without prejudice accept that the journey may not have reward and fight for what in conscience is to them how the world should be."

"Everyone who chooses a sturdy path with a wall at its end commits. But you... it's as if you can't, not by will, but because you've lost bits of yourself. After speaking to you, clashing swords with you and witnessing what stands as your resolve, I cannot see what I see in everyone else who transcends some threshold. Maybe it's truth you're missing? A tangible goal maybe?

Whatever the case is, the sword cannot handle it. It requires you wholly in it, even if you may die by it."

Skullius froze a bit.

Well, it wasn't a mystery that he wasn't whole, but to think Alaris who didn't know what he was actually lacking could tell.

That was the mystery.

So, to reach the epitome of the sword, Skullius needed to be whole?

Not even the sword only, but all forms of power?

"That look on your face... You know what you lack don't you? Ha! Good! You're not quite as lost then. Maybe, if you commit a bit more to the Guilds Association I'll even help you find whatever you need some day," Alaris said with hearty smile towards Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman smiled back.

Maybe he would take up Alaris on that offer.

A journey was coming soon when he would probably need Alaris' strength after all.

That said, the man's words had brought plates of food for thought to his mind.

The epitome of strength, huh? An extremity.

What did it take to reach it?

Suddenly, the Bloodless Steel Phantom swung his arm around Skullius.

"Don't think about it too much. A hard bone prodigy like you can spare the stress," Alaris said.

He didn't know how literally true that statement was.

"In any case, let's go check on that stubborn fire head."

Chapter 705: The Second Trial

The view as the two walked from the fields seemed to widen. In fact, this seemed to be true for anyone who walked from around the mansion to reach the plain fields, the gardens, the orchards, farms and other facilities featuring around this estate.

Indeed, it was the Bryne Family Estate.

A lot of workers could be seen tending to the magnificent, wide and rich fruits and vegetables, as well as the other infrastructure around the estate, making it thrice as lively as it had been before.

A lot of hiring, building and expansion had happened in the past few weeks, and Skullius was almost as proud of it as Silrat and Theurien were.

Patrolling every significant and insignificant portion of the land were a menagerie of beasts.

There were many of them.

Most radiated subdued pressures that could cripple normal folk upon reckless exposure, but thankfully, Red Rage trained the beasts well.

From Terrors, to giant flies, beefy wolves, crows, just to mention a few, the security around the estate had grown to be so effective and organised that it couldn't be dispersed temporarily in order to not frighten guests anymore. Red Rage had been particularly happy about this.

As a streak of lightning caused a shudder in the sky above Alaris and Skullius, this being one of the patrolling beasts, the older man gave a sigh.

"Coming here frequently... I'm beginning to think twice..." he said.

Skullius chortled.

"Why? The ram?"

"Of course it's the ram! I feel like he doesn't like me very much. It's like he's itching for the chance to bash me down," Alaris said with a shudder.

"He can't even hurt you!" Skullius said with mocking laughter.

Even after Skullius erected the Chieftain Screens which showed above them, the single large animal that Red Rage called Bull 1 kept to its job as a patrol around the entrance.

Alaris was unnerved by it and its large curved horns, not because it was powerful – not that it wasn't.

He was actually scared of it because he had a rare phobia. He was afraid of horned creatures. At the very best, he couldn't fight them up close and worst, he would turn tail.

This was weird for someone as unbelievably powerful as Alaris, and as soon as Skullius discovered this weakness, he couldn't help but laugh every time Alaris brought it up.

By the time the two turned toward the main mansion though, Skullius' mirth had died down, and the words of Alaris had begun to sting him again.

The pinnacle of strength required wholeness.

But perhaps Skullius wasn't only lacking in one department.

He had two sets of powers that he had yet to learn to completion, and both of them literally made up who he was.

Fulgardt's legacy was branded to his soul, steering it considerably, and Serenity's powers made up his body.

Yet, Skullius was no closer to completely understanding them both than he was to obtain the other half of his soul.

'If all this counts, then I'm still very far. I'll probably fight with Somanda without understanding even one of them fully,' he dejectedly predicted.

Speaking of outlandish powers, Skullius opened his guidance field to view his status and focus on one particular aspect.

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Exp: 7,000,000

Second Trial:

Forge one of Fulgardt's PHANTASMIC RETAINERS

~~~

One of Skullius' current headaches.

He had been at Level 18 weeks ago, but since the Royale was coming up, he had decided to rise up in his levels in hopes of managing to reach the Master Stage.

Crossing past the last two levels and Tasks left in the Advancement Stage hadn't been too hard since they focused on things he could grind – the Insurgent Magnus Class skills and all.

He had hoped he'd get a similarly easy-ish Second Trial and miraculously complete it by the time the Royale began, just to boost his chances of surviving whatever he had insisted to be there with Silrat and the others to face.

However, as one would expect, the Second Trial was much, much harder than the first.

The PHANTASMIC RETAINERS were the objects or creations, he had seen on the three plaques which he had read after receiving the WILL OF UNDERSTANDING.

They were individually complex, and the plaques he had read through contained the blueprints for creating them; precise portions of darkness and light needed to model each perfectly.

The PHANTASMIC RETAINERS, according to Fulgardt's instruction were vessels more suitable for holding the Nine Seeds.

The seeds, like [Crude World Projection] and [Seramoro, Oblivion's edge], were abstruse powers that came from the object that allowed Fulgardt's powers to even be possible in the first place, the Fruit of World Myths.

All this was attractive and made one want to get to completing the Trial, but there was a huge problem. All of them required a quality of connection to both [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light] that Skullius had yet to master.

His affinities to darkness and light were still B and C respectively, which made the task of even attempting to create the retainers impossible currently.

The only potential spark of hope Skullius had at mastering these things was the fact that Replicus was also in charge of raising the affinity of not only darkness and light, but all other essence forms that Skullius had come into contact with as well.

Maybe, soon, when he and Replicus were far enough apart with their powers, and had each accomplished their goals, he would be able to step into the Master Stage finally, with a PHANTASMIC RETAINER, a terrifying conduit of the Insurgent Magnus' full power that the world had long forgotten.

'I wonder how powerful they are. I've never heard them referenced in anything at all. Come to think of it, I haven't heard many tales about why Fulgardt was really called Immoral or how exactly he died either,' Skullius thought.

Indeed, there was still that mystery.

Way too much was unknown to him.

Soon, the two entered the main mansion from the back and entered into a secret space where a man with fiery hair was seated with his torso bare, his fingers locked on his lap and his eyes closed.

He turned the rectangular space around him rigid with the restless pressure that stormed from his body.

There wasn't only this unseen power around him though.

No, there was something else.

Bits of ice were circling around him, but they vanished before touching his skin. Bits of flame also orbited, following an opposite trajectory, but they also vanished before liking his skin.

But that still wasn't all.

Tongues of a cold, blue flame also flickered around Theurien for measly moments before being devoured by something else that whirled abundantly around his figure.

Plain space.

Chapter 706: Clandestine Glow

Skullius had found that Theurien was even more cheery than he had imagined. They got along very well because the man did not tactlessly impose himself regardless of context, like ordinary people of his status would. He eased Skullius into how he had run the Family before, and learned all the changes Skullius made, appreciating and complimenting him genuinely about them.

This had warmed Skullius' heart. For some reason, he had been meeting gems of people for the past two months.

His horrendous luck seemed to have strayed from its path of ruthless persistence. Seemingly.

Theurien was a sign of it.

While his character was affable though, other parts of him turned out to be completely different. Some would even say contrary.

When Theurien had asked Skullius to spar in order to gauge how strong he was, the latter had been flabbergasted how terribly powerful the fiery haired man was.

His hand to hand combat was vicious, yet refined, contending with his own at a frightening level. Whether or not Theurien held back with just his physical skill was something Skullius didn't know

yet, but in terms of supernatural applications of mana, the Hybrid Luman had to admit that the man was a true monster.

In the weeks that came after his recovery, Theurien took the official reigns to the Family back from Skullius, which was no surprise, and Skullius hadn't been foolish enough to think he was now the Head. Neither did Silrat. They had no such delusions.

Following that, Theurien began training his body back to tip-top shape, and each time, he called Skullius, suggesting that it would do well for both of them to understand each other's strength since, at the end of day, Skullius was like a second Head to the Family.

The Hybrid Luman had no reason to refuse, and frankly, he didn't have the testicles for it either.

Thus, in the past three weeks, he divulged some of his abilities, while Theurien also exposed his own powers – his own application of the Bryne Family Technique which relied on the Harmonic Ember, the Twin Contrast Sword Technique.

Yes, indeed.

The original use of the technique revolved around swordsmanship, and it had remained as such until Theurien decided to deviate, different from Stylla.

The fiery haired man had been able to use the Harmonic Ember to perfectly combine fire, ice and space into what he called Clandestine Glow.

What was born was a blue flame that could vanish into the folds of space, hiding its extraordinarily potent and cruel effect until it emerged on the target secretly.

The flames froze the target into an ashy white popsicle while burning everything under their skin thoroughly within seconds.

It was a scary technique, and Skullius would know.

Oh, he would know.

It wasn't common in the current timeline for Brynes to be able to combine three elements, but that was what made Theurien special.

What was even more astonishing was that Theurien had chosen a Shaman Class!

It went well with his application of the Contrast Technique, making him even more powerful... above the fact that he, like Combat Mages, Class Branched into Swordsmanship and physical combat techniques.

"What a powerful man!" Skullius had been left saying after the first day he engaged with Theurien for real.

Now, as he felt the same effect of Clandestine Glow softly rage around Theurien, he couldn't help but feel proud to be close to this man.

Though... right now, it was likely not the best of times to smile and act carefree.

"You're here," Theurien said, his words directed at Alaris.

"Of course I am," Alaris replied while taking steps closer to Theurien. "I heard you were meditating again, so I took young Festos here for a light spar."

Skullius' brow shot up.

'LIGHT?!' he screamed inside.

"I've been worried about how you would be holding up. Don't think I'm... we, are oblivious to it. Your face leaks sorrow very easily, even if you put on the widest smile," Alaris continued.

As it turned out, Alaris and Theurien were acquainted.

They didn't have the same level of friendship that RYTE had with Theurien, but it was close enough.

Alaris, on hearing news of Theurien's awakening had visited the Bryne Estate with haste. He had even stayed for a few days to keep Theurien company.

The fiery haired man had decided shortly after that it was best for the whole Family to move back to the Estate, since most of them did not have any business in Genhuis City.

The Association examination officer had spent his time with Theurien on plenty of occasions, looking to want to build a stronger relationship with him. Apparently, they had had a half-savoury, half-sweet history that Skullius didn't feel comfortable asking about, courtesy of Silrat Veins. From the looks of it though, it was unlike the one involving Jadin and Somwell.

That was a darn good thing, after all, Alaris seemed sincere and his worries were perfectly warranted. It would be good if he stood by Theurien's side as a familiar face since Theurien still had the burden of two missing children haunting him.

That was why Skullius was reluctant to bring a cheer 'hello' to the table right now.

Theurien rose from the floor and breathed out a sigh, the flakes of snow, fire and Clandestine Glow vanishing from his person.

"Can a father not brood in peace?" he said to Alaris.

"In my experience, it's ambiverts like you who start to slip when alone. Now, as I said last time, we are both doing our best to find your children. You are using your own means, I'm using mine. The result has yet to turn up. So quit thinking about the worst and save the brooding for when you, your daughter and son are having a hurtful heart to heart."

Theurien shook his head and wiped his face with his palm.

"If only it was that simple of a switch."

At that moment, there was a knock on the door, then another in rapid succession.

Before the trio knew it, a short girl with ash blonde pigtails bounced into the room and rushed to hug her father's leg.

Theurien stripped his wry face away and wore a bright one that showed no traces of anxiety or sadness.

"Hey there little mouse!" he said as he heaved Terese who smiled brightly. "How did you know I was done?"

"I heard voices," the little girl replied. "You never talk when you're meditating, so I thought you must be done."

Theurien chuckled.

"Clever girl. Or should I say, clever, naughty girl," the fiery haired man said as he placed his youngest daughter over his shoulders.

Skullius gave a subdued smile.

If there was one person to react quite violently to Theurien's waking up, it had to be Terese.

The little girl had shaken uncontrollably as if having a seizure when she Theurien walking about. It had taken hours before anyone could pry her off him, as she feared this was a dream, and her father would drift back to unconscious on that loathsome bed.

Unfortunately, news that Stylla and Setkh went missing dampened her cheer by a bit.

She had expected to at least see them at the Venue for the Premium Age Royale, but shockingly, they were nowhere to be found.

So, when Skullius saw Terese being all clingy, following her father everywhere, he felt a hint pity. Worse yet, for a brief moment, he saw his past self and former bony mates in her behaviour.

Sorrow and loneliness.

Or was it just a feeling of longing.

Who knew?

Theurien and Terese left the room, and Alaris followed, telling Skullius that he still had things to discuss with the Bryne Family Head.

When left alone, Skullius sighed and walked outside the room and the mansion.

Before long, he found just who he was looking for.

Red Rage was floating high above, close to the peak of the inner Chieftain Screen dome.

He had his arms spread out wide, a halo created around him from the reflection of the sun that made his armour look twice as luminous, as if it was being supercharged by the solar energy.

Skullius scowled.

This again.

It was getting more and more frequent.

'Did he level up that skill or something?' Skullius wondered.

In any case...

The Hybrid Luman sent his Apostle a mental message to come down.

It was that depressing time again.

Time to keep his end of the deal.

Chapter 707: Sorry, Kin

The freakishly long cape fluttered in the wind, drawing closer to Skullius with each passing second. If the Hybrid Luman didn't know any better, the exaggerated image before him would have led him

to believe that he was about to be graced by a divine fashionista giving an exhibition on quality cloth and cloaks.

Actually, perhaps the thought did cross his mind.

"What were you doing up there?" he asked Red Rage despite expecting an answer that he already expected.

"I was giving Goblin-Man 3 permission to fly outside the Screen and seeing him off. He wanted to explore outside some more, Master," the Apostle explained with pride.

Skullius cocked his head to the side.

The Chieftain Screens – inner and outer – had been equipped with authority settings.

Basically, their functions could only be controlled by Red Rage, Skullius, Silrat and Theurien. Without these four individuals, no one could get in or out. Thankfully, Red Rage who was permanently stationed here unless Skullius had dire need of him, could accommodate all immediate needs pertaining to the Chieftain Screens.

"Really?" Skullius asked with genuine surprise. "You're comfortable letting your precious beasts wander outside the Estate?"

The precious beasts in question were the goblins Red Rage had tamed from the Hau Kaka goblin Cluster. The Goblin-Men, as Red Rage called them. Their variety in classes and high tiers made them extraordinarily valuable, and it had taken a long time to tame them all.

A sound akin to a snuffle came from behind Red Rage's helmet.

Skullius could have sworn Red Rage was turning into mother bird with how he actually viewed all his tamed beasts as his own children. Worse yet, they all seemed to radiate the same creepy fetish, treating Red Rage not as their master, but their parental figure. Skullius hadn't quite understood this until he saw a few sneaky interactions between Red Rage and Buzz 0, the original giant white fly.

Hell, as he was talking to the Apostle at this very moment, the giant ram with the body of the bison neared their position and showed a sickening neediness that Skullius tried to ignore.

"Anywaaaaay... I'll be going back to Genhuis City very soon. I need to prepare for the Royale. I would feel safer if I arrived in the city a day before it starts," he told Red Rage who was scratching the underside of Bull 1's chin.

"I see, Master. So... you want that, already?"

"Yep, it's time," Skullius spat, a bit annoyed.

Red Rage paused before giving a reluctant nod.

"You're not even attached to the damn thing. You collected it for this very purpose, didn't you? Don't get all sappy on me now," Skullius said.

"I know, Master. I know."

Before long, Red Rage and Skullius had reached a fairly secretive portion of the Estate within the veil-like, wispy inner Chieftain Screen.

Red Rage extended his cape with his right hand, and with a thought, he made a large creature come out, phasing through the solid underside of the fabric of the cape as if it was permeable.

The creature had a tall, thin frame, gaunt really, with small and narrow arms, hands, legs and feet. It looked like a starving man with furry skin. Perhaps 'Thin foot' was a suitable name, as most of its features resembled a human's.

It was fairly strong, but didn't have any special quirks that made it irreplaceable.

As Skullius had completed another set of missions for the Guild's Association as an exclusive mercenary, he had once again ventured into high tier Clusters, on occasion with Red Rage.

A few beasts that Red Rage wouldn't tame for the purpose of keeping had been captured for another objective along the duo's adventures. One such beast was this one, Thinfoot.

"You should probably look away," Skullius encouraged Red Rage.

The Apostle shook his head, his stance firmly set on seeing this through to the end.

"All right," Skullius shrugged before facing the tall, lanky beast that didn't know what was about to happen.

Skullius extended his hand, and a cruel red flame that tore away at the moderate weather appeared, raising the temperatures considerably.

Thinfoot felt his fur burn instantly and drew back in fright without taking his eyes off the ball of flame in front of Skullius' palm.

The Hybrid Luman sighed.

What he was doing was keeping his end of the deal with Aurolio: giving him Null Beasts to kill.

Since the pale man revealed that he didn't actually need the beasts to be as strong as the Null Badubs since he was after their souls instead, specimens born from weaker beasts were usable.

To create these Null beasts, Skullius had two options.

Either to use [Unbound] or to use [Ungodly Flames of Debauchery].

The former, as he discovered with some practise after the incident with the Chubby Remnant Child of Polarity, couldn't quite affect sentient living things as well as it affected non-sentient living creatures. For instance, [Unbound] would work on a tree before it worked on something like an infant.

The reason it had worked on the egg he had used it on back then was because the creature within the egg was barely sustained – barely alive and developed – especially after being torn away from the supply of fire which it needed.

This discovery has a lot implications, but ultimately it wasn't helpful for the current situation. In any case, [Unbound] wouldn't help.

[Ungodly Flames of Debauchery] on the other than hand...

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[Ungodly Passion of Debauchery | Lv.27]

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

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

-Caution-

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

Mana Requirements: 3000 Mana Points.

Duration: 10 minutes

Cooldown: 30 minutes

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Since he began creating monsters for Aurolio, Skullius had levelled up this skill, which increased the chances of a Null Beasts baptised to the Passion of Debauchery being born.

Thus...

Skullius shot the ball of flame at Thinfoot who was devoured instantly, screaming at the top of his lungs while Red Rage shuddered at this injustice.

The Apostle felt like he was walking on a thin line, with either side of him featuring the stipulations of his Flaw. While he wasn't the one killing, and Cluster beasts didn't count as innocent since they were enemies of Aigas' inhabitants, it was as if something in his bones defied the logic.

Skullius couldn't be concerned with Red Rage's excessive morality though, as he was busy watching expectantly as Thinfoot was consumed.

And then...

The guttural scream from the beast suddenly changed, becoming a hoarse, furious growl.

From the wall of flames, something else emerged.

Unlike Thinfoot, it walked on four legs.

It was akin to a wolf with snow white fur, if said wolf was beaten with huge logs and dumped into a river first, that is. It looked misshapen and damp, with the fire not having any effect on it. On its face, hollow sockets could be seen, with a wrinkled snout that quivered as much as its open maw from where the furious growl came.

"Well, what do you know..." Skullius said, but without cheer.

He had succeeded on the first try.

Without wasting any time, he snuck his hand into the open space where it vanished, disappearing for a split second before he pulled on it, revealing the Elimparidis Stone Staff in his grip. With a whirl of the item, he sucked the Null beast within the inner world of Fortune and then doused the growing flames.

After this was done, Skullius walked over to Red Rage and gave him a pat on the shoulder.

"Cheer up, will you?" he said, struggling to find a follow-up that could possibly make Red Rage feel better.

Skullius hated to admit it, but this deal between him and Aurolio turned out to be more beneficial than he imagined.

Besides the fact that there was no hostility between them... for now, Skullius was surprised by how generous Aurolio was with the information he promised to share.

He divulged many things that helped the Hybrid Luman understand many concepts better, like his manipulation of Null Life Essence, for instance.

After so long, Skullius had reached a level of Null Life Essence control that exceeded the rudimentary level. He no longer had as much trouble funnelling it wherever he wanted, and above that, he now understood the base functions of Null Life Essence as an energy. Suddenly, it was all quite clear why Red Rage was able to do the things he did.

To add honey to the sweet mixture, Aurolio had also kept his word about the other two items Skullius could take from his extensive inventory besides the page containing the Corrupted Deity's soul.

The Hybrid Luman had found two, extremely useful objects that he was quite thankful for. He had even gritted his teeth as he thanked Aurolio, just because of what they meant to him.

What he was going to use them for was very, very important to him.

Skullius sighed.

'Sorry...kin. I've got things I care about on this side of reality,' he said a silent prayer for the beasts he was sacrificing in an attempt to make himself feel better.

And he did.

Chapter 708: Saying Goodbyes

"Red bro," Skullius said as the two reached the end of the line of trees. "I don't know what's going to happen at the Royale. For all I know, we may not be able to see this place again. Maybe I'll be the one in trouble and you'll still be here. If that happens, keep this place safe and anyone who comes wanting to be protected."

"I'm probably too untrusting for it and so is Silrat, but you... Protect our partners if something goes wrong and the people in this territory under the Bryne Family wing."

Red Rage once again felt a pulse through his connection with Skullius.

His master was unsettled.

Perhaps like the entirety of Pelian, he too felt a thrum in his body that warned of the possible calamity.

Red Rage was worried too.

He would have preferred to have a Control Seal and be a witness or contender in the Royale, but they were way past that point.

It was unlikely that a creature like Red Rage, without a soul, but a Source, could even be inducted into the system of the Premium Age Royale anyway.

Well, the Apostle understood his role still. He was a follower of Skullius, yes, but...

"Don't worry, Master. I'm an Apostle. I carry your will and I will execute it. I've grown stronger and less... zealous, since the beginning of our travels. Leave it all to your golden prodigy," the Apostle said while beginning to strike a cool pose.

Skullius stopped him with an almost desperate level of physical tact.

"Good," he then said. "I'm sure you'll have Theurien to help you. But don't count me out just because I'm proposing what to do in the worst case scenario. You may just see me back here three days from now."

"Of course, Master. It would be a cruel joke if you returned alive after that valiant speech about leaving it all to me, but I'll appreciate it still," the Apostle proclaimed... before Skullius attempted to give him an intimate choke slam.

"You've finished the Enlightening Ill right?" the Hybrid Luman asked, deciding to change the subject.

Red Rage nodded.

"Yes. Even though it was limited, all of the beasts whom I gifted it to managed to evolve spectacularly!" Red Rage declared proudly.

"Well, that's good. That's the only batch I'll ever be able to make. Ever. So make sure those bastards stay alive."

The Enlightening Ill was a Potion that was made by using the Hundred Foils Edifying Cauldron, the item Skullius had taken from Hobbu Gogo. The ingredients to make this Potion could only be found within the world of the Hau Kaka goblins which was destroyed after the Cluster Generals died.

Thus, the remnants which Skullius had collected on his own and from Hobbu Gogo's place were the very last there was.

The Enlightening Ill had to boil for 47 hours before being cooled and then distributed to candidates of the seventh tier or higher to guarantee success. Success in this case was the acquisition of unique forms of power, mainly through unique, unheard of Classes.

The Potion didn't work on goblins alone, but it was hard to use it on animals with a massively different biological structures to the green humanoids. Skullius had made a batch consisting of 15 potions of the Enlightening Ill, which Red Rage carefully distributed.

The results were supposed to show after 15-25 days, and Red Rage had managed to get 13 of his beasts to manifest unique powers during the almost month long time span since the making of the Enlightening Ill batch. The Apostle was pleased and confident with current success.

If Skullius had the time, he would have showed him the—

"Ah, they're coming out," Skullius suddenly said.

Alaris and Theurien spawned from the door to the main mansion, Terese following behind them while trying to listen in on the sediments of their conversation.

This was perfect timing.

While Skullius didn't know how exactly Alaris got here, he was willing to bet he could hitch the means of travel which he used.

He wasn't willing to use [Boundless Evil] with people that weren't within his inner circle after all.

As the trio got close to the duo, Skullius heard a bit of their conversation.

"...I'd know you're the only close, friendly contact I have in the Guilds Association. I don't take that for granted, Alaris. But, I think we'll need more drastic means to find them. I'll tell you whether they are ready or not in a few days," Theurien said with a firm expression.

"Very well. I'll be looking forward to hearing it. I didn't think you'd be receptive to my help so readily though, after..." Alaris said, hesitantly.

Theurien harrumphed and looked the moustached man dead in the eye.

"For someone who likes to help so much, you sure can linger on meaningless histories. I wanted to avoid asking, but... you're still not working to reach the Incandescent Stage, aren't you?"

Alaris' gave a shallow smile.

"I'm satisfied with offering assistance that is within the bounds of my current strength. I don't see the need to strive for more than that," he answered simply.

As Skullius heard this, a jolt went through his mind.

He didn't think Alaris had such restricted resolve.

After he went on about him not being whole and all that? He seemed to have something holding him back too.

Theurien didn't continue with the subject. It wouldn't be fair for him to press on with this when Alaris, just a few minutes ago had stopped pressing him about his own way of dealing with his anxiety and grief.

Instead, he turned to Skullius. Seeing the two long sword sheaths at his waist, he asked:

"You're leaving?"

"I've got to prepare," the Hybrid Luman answered.

"I see," the fiery haired man said. "If I had any more treasures of my own to spare, I'd give them to you, but well..."

"I know. But I don't need those. I'd be grateful for just your guarantee that you'll be alright alone."

"Hahaha. Everyone's nursing me like a child here. It's been a whole month, I'm fine. And I've catered for this place for over half a century," said Theurien. "Besides, I expect you back very soon. We have quite a lot of projects to work on right?"

Skullius smiled.

"Right."

This was weird.

Why was there such a tingly feeling within his soul when he received some sort of approval from Theurien?

'Blah! Come off it!' Skullius urged himself.

He then turned to Alaris.

"Shall we go? If you're headed to Genhuis that is."

"Sure."

The two said their goodbyes, leaving Theurien and Red Rage waving at them from the dome of the Chieftain Screen.

"So um, how did you get here in the first place?" Skullius asked when they were some distance away. "It wasn't by jog or sprint I hope."

Alaris laughed.

"No, but that would have been faster than by carriage, no?" he said before summoning something from his spatial storage.

It was like a large blob of colourless jelly that wobbled as it touched the ground. One could see its thick, pink tubular insides that looked like intestines, giving the impression that it was a living thing, which was actually incorrect.

Before Skullius could ask, Alaris spoke.

"It's actually very comfortable, and less disturbing when you let it eat you for the second time."

"..."

Skullius was still shaken.

With the guidance field, he found that the... object, was actually a Mythical grade artefact with a twin body that could be placed anywhere around the world for limitless range transportation!

In short, if you let one eat you, you'd pop inside the other, nomatter where it was.

Skullius smiled sheepishly.

"To casually use a Mythical grade item like this..." he began when Alaris interrupted him.

"Oh please, I'm the one who gave you the license for that sword of yours. You think I can't abuse my authority and fame?"

Skullius had no retort to this.

Fair enough.

With Alaris taking the lead into being devoured by the blob, Skullius followed.

The two were dissolved harmlessly within the interior of the artefact, their bodies dispersing like a drop of ink in the sea before the large blob bounced up and vanished without a trace.

Chapter 709: Life-Saving Errands

This was an astounding means of travel.

Walking out of the transparent, squishy innards of the blob made Skullius hold in a laugh, a laugh he didn't expect to come out of his mouth, churned by his usually hard-to-funnify gut. The unique system behind the Mythical grade treasure was quite unusual, and in more ways than one.

The efficiency couldn't be denied though. It was as if Skullius had taken a single step and appeared inside Alaris' office from the Bryne Family Estate – that's exactly what had happened actually, in a sense.

That got him wondering, besides probably beings that had reached Divinity, were there any experts capable of such a feat with just their physical speed?

That would be incredible.

Surely Skullius wouldn't meet someone like that in the near future as an enemy, right?

Probably not.

"And here we are," Alaris said as he stored the blob. It seemed both the blob bodies could be retrieved or transported somewhere safe after serving their purpose, which was good since if such a feature was missing from its repertoire of gimmicks, the user would have to leave one blob where they had teleported from.

"And here we are," Skullius voiced as well.

Spreading his senses, he figured out where they were and relaxed, helping his bottom to a comfy seat.

"You know, I didn't think you'd make a trip to the Bryne Family Estate just to have a five minute conversation with Theurien and then return just like that. I mean, you having such a convenient means of travel is good and all, but what's up with that?"

"Are you having trouble believing that I actually care for my friends that deeply? I ended up having a spar with you, so you should be grateful that you gained something from it."

Skullius waved his hand.

"Of course, of course. My point is..." he said. "...are you also expecting the worst? You wouldn't have made this particular trip right before the Royale, right? Your visits to Theurien have already been frequent. I thought you'd give the man some space after what?"

8 days? Like me, you seemed to be saying some goodbyes, just in case."

Alaris leaned against the desk that faced the open door with a curve to his lips under the moustache.

"Ever since you told me about that Game Master, I've grown to constantly be on edge whenever we are teleported to the Venue. I only grew more anxious with the fiasco going on with Rearren, and the allegations against him. Something is coming."

Silrat had talked Skullius into sharing the information about Guissepo with Alaris, just in case. Initially, the two had decided to keep it amongst themselves, because revealing it to higher authorities would probably have doomed them, since Guissepo knew them and probably their whereabouts at all times because of the Control Seal.

Informing Alaris, who they trusted, wouldn't change much, but the Bloodless Steel Phantom had a much more credible voice, and was capable of issuing subtle warnings that wouldn't be traced back to Skullius and Silrat. That said though, Alaris didn't seem to have screamed from the rooftops that something was up.

Without any substantial evidence or a concrete blueprint on the possible dangers, or the result that could occur, and with him being in just as much of a risky position, there was nothing he or anyone else he warned could do but prepare for the punch line.

"Hmmm..." Skullius hummed in approval.

"Are you prepared? You're likely to be in the direct line of fire," Alaris asked him.

"I'm mostly ready. I just want to get this over with."

A bout of relaxed chatting persisted between the two afterwards before Skullius remembered something important.

"That reminds me. Wasn't there supposed to be some kind of event... like something mirroring the Premium Age Royale that the Association wanted to enact?"

"Ah, that. The General board still has it in their minds, but for obvious reasons, they chose to postpone it. Who could have anticipated that the Royale would have such a sombre effect in the long run. That and the incident a month ago."

Skullius nodded.

Made sense.

He had been looking forward to it though.

At that moment, there was a knock on the door.

With Alaris' consent, someone entered the office.

A woman garbed in scarlet, baggy robes that hid her figure excessively, refusing even a modest peek at her body, confidently sauntered up to Alaris. On the way, she wordlessly gave Skullius a side glance with her narrow grey eyes that were partially blocked by the bangs from her bushy, sunflower blonde hair. She seemed to lose interest in him as soon as she recognised who he was.

Skullius recognised her as well.

'They're all really prideful. I guess it's to be expected,' he thought as he rose from his seat.

"Lady Clannara. Didn't expect you so soon. How may I help you?" Alaris asked the woman with a light smile.

The woman remained silent, and gave Skullius another wordless glance.

He instantly knew he wasn't welcome to hear their conversation.

Typical.

This woman was an exclusive mercenary. A Rank 1 exclusive mercenary. One of the very best there was in this Branch of the Association.

Finally, Skullius had met one of these elusive powerhouses that seemed to never return home. He had often wondered what kind of missions kept them away, but when he met this woman, Clannara Banes for the first time, he kind of understood.

She was a fiercely formidable Energy Former. A Mage. The pressure she exuded was that of the Incandescent Stage, and her skill, as far as Skullius could judge by the mana around her, was boundless.

Strangely, it seemed like other mercenaries kept in touch with new entrants within their circle even if they were far from the city, and as soon as Skullius reached Rank 3 after a re-evaluation, other exclusive mercenaries took interest in him.

Clannara though, didn't see Skullius as someone worth talking to.

Typical 'I won't interact with someone so weak' behavior.

Skullius didn't mind.

He scuttled out of the office while waving his hands and then went several floors down to get one of two vital jobs done.

On the way, with his [Unmatched Sword Sense]'s trait, he heard the long sword at his side whisper to him, as if not sure if even that much was allowed.

"Dear Master, I can talk now, right?"

"Of course."

"Oh good! Then... have you chosen what you want to be able to do? I promise to do my best!"

Skullius sighed.

This again.

The Bashful Abomination was always fussing about Skullius' choice to not yet use its only skill, [Make A Wish], which allowed him to specify a ability that the sword would imprint on itself. An affix.

Even after so long, Skullius had not yet decided. He was saving it for when it really counted. The ability couldn't be ridiculous after all, and he wanted something that he couldn't do on his own or procure with other, cheaper means.

"Relax. I'll say when I'm ready. Alright? Besides, you'll be out of the action for the next fight. Weapons of your calibre aren't allowed in the Premium Age Royale," Skullius said.

He felt the sword's spirits turn dull.

For the Royale, Skullius was going to have to rely on Demion's Dance and none of the other immensely powerful tools in his arsenal – the Conforming Trickerteer, the Medial Whisperer of Charms or the King's Matted Glory... tools that were likely to be recognised by the Control Seal to have beyond legendary level effects, unlike what the guidance field showed.

"Soon, alright?" he tried to cheer up the sword.

This short bout of presented desperations almost made the journey to Skullius' destination a bit shorter. He arrived to a familiar arrangement of what the Guilds Association termed as basic supplies. One of the two stores in the entire building.

"Welcome back, Mr Festos," the keeper greeted Skullius with a smile.

Skullius nodded with a delightful smile of his own before, with a heavy breath, he expelled a pouch full of Plasma coins and set them on the table.

Pouch was probably a terrible way of describing the fat sack that smothered the entire counter where the keeper was about lay his hands.

"Dear Quintess..."

"10,000 Plasma coins. Can I have that Supreme Potion?"

The keeper froze for a moment before his friendly smile turned sheepish.

"S-sure. You really came for it, huh?" he said before grabbing a vial with a thick golden liquid and gave it to Skullius. "Thankfully you managed to book one for yourself beforehand this time, otherwise you wouldn't have found one available this month too. The others are pretty desperate for one all of a sudden."

"Can't blame them," Skullius said as he felt over the potion for a moment before storing it into his Temporary Storage hiddenly. He had collected many lesser potions over the past months, but had always found acquiring the Supreme one very difficult. As soon as a batch of these golden magical supplements arrived, they would be bought immediately, or already be stored for pre-orders.

Thankfully, this time, it was different.

Too bad there was a limit as to how much of the Supreme Potion one could buy from the store.

Skullius then briskly left the Guild's Association, his cheery attitude melting away with each step he took towards his second destination.

It was time to make a delivery.

A sour one.

Chapter 710: Interests, Opposites, Theories

Aglow in the air between the three figures within the room, each stuffed within their own thoughts to the point of almost ignoring anything else – almost – was a small soul that had just escaped the body of a snow white furred creature that looked like a wolf. Its body lay sprawled on the floor, beside it a man wielding a bloody zhanmadao.

The soul floated slowly up, as if reluctant to part with the flesh it had inhabited for barely a few hours in this world. Tragically, there would be no escape, for it was gripped by a pale man with a slight smile on his face who then devoured it while.

Aurolio gave a pleased moan as the energy dissolved within his body.

A crushing force bellowed from his body, representing yet another increase in his strength.

Skullius and Idline could only watch, or rather observe, the former with more rapt levels of attention each time this phenomena occurred.

"Satisfying," Aurolio said as he released a light breath from his nostrils. "I'm approaching something revolutionary. Something extraordinary."

"Good for you," Skullius said hollowly while storing back the Bashful Abomination in its sheath.

Idline took the corpse away while the pale man gestured for Skullius to sit. They were in the luxurious space of the Velanqi Family mansion after all.

Skullius obliged.

"So, do you want to know anything in particular, or should I just random fire away at my own pace" Aurolio asked while setting one leg onto of the other casually.

Skullius took some time to think it over.

After committing to the Tie of Exchange, he and Aurolio had ironed out the finer details on how Skullius was to deliver the Null beasts and what Aurolio would share with him in exchange.

What they ended up agreeing on was that Skullius would bring 'living packages', as they termed them, to Aurolio twice a week. In exchange, the pale man would teach Skullius anything from what was written in his Book of Alignment, to things to do with Voided Death.

Aurolio didn't seem to hold anything back.

It seemed like lying or telling half-truths was beneath him. If the two reached a subject that he wasn't particularly comfortable speaking about, he would simply refuse to tell Skullius about it. This was rare though.

During these interactions, Skullius managed to dissect Aurolio, finding that he was very much human still. Inside at least. His hesitation to speak of some things was the main reason for this sentiment. He wouldn't let his guard down or trust the pale man's words easily, but most of the things he learned made sense both logically and 'illogical.'

"I have a question of my own," Skullius replied to him with a rather serious tone in his voice.

Aurolio gestured for Skullius to speak up.

The Hybrid Luman leaned from the back of the chair he was seating on.

"Regardless of how I feel about our relationship or about you individually, I can tell that you're strong. Very strong..." he said before his face turned slightly depressed. "You clearly seek more strength for different reasons, but... do you feel you are... whole?"

Aurolio was a little stunned by this question.

"What do you mean 'whole'?" he asked.

"I mean to say, with this power, do you feel that you are complete. Full of purpose, and direction. Or that having a purpose and being certain of where you're going is what is fueling your strength and desire to get stronger?"

The pale man stared at Skullius for a while.

"That's quite the question," he said with a muffled chuckle. "If I had to say... maybe it would be the former. The circumstances surrounding how and why I got the Book of Alignment are, as you would expect, first and foremost, personal. But they WERE also a driving force for me in more ways than one."

"I can't say they helped me get stronger though. If anything, after getting these unique powers, I hardly remember what or who I used to be. My motivations changed wildly, and before I knew it, I was hunting down intangible concepts, detached from Aigas, or the past me."

Skullius listened quietly.

Aurolio was very different from Alaris. The latter seemed to have powerful sense of self, but that same individual trait limited his desire to grow while Aurolio fuelled his desire for power almost insatiably.

"I see..." Skullius said.

Aurolio looked at him and grinned.

"Why are you so philosophical all of a sudden? You want to lose your mind before the main event? If I were you, I'd be asking more about Essences in preparation for the big fight," he said. "Unless of course, you don't want to show off as much as you did in your Second Preliminary Round match."

Skullius gave a mocking laugh.

"Big fight is an understatement. And I wasn't showing off."

Like everyone else, Aurolio was also a bit wary of the Royale, but probably not as much.

Probably.

'Ah, yes. I'm beginning to regret turning into a this show-off...' Skullius thought to Aurolio's fib.

His Second Premium Round match had left the audience cheering more than they did in his first.

To make sure he would get his ticket into the Royale, and appear as a sufficient enough threat to the other contenders, Skullius had decimated his opponent embarrassingly, leaving them on the verge of grovelling for mercy.

Of course, he didn't spare them in the end.

He had to display that he wasn't a push over, otherwise the remaining contenders, most of whom were not small fries, would target him.

Even with that display though, he still refused to admit that it was much of a show-off as what Darwel, Silrat, Alaris and now even Aurolio said it was.

"Any more questions?" the pale man asked as Idline returned to the room.

Skullius paused.

"You said Veneration is kind of like an affliction that forces the user to worship a foreign Deity so that they gain the ability to use that affliction as a kind of beneficial power, right?"

"Yes."

"So, if I wanted to reach out to another Deity who isn't one of the three... four in Aigas... then it would have to be with Veneration, right?"

Aurolio tilted his head.

"You seem to have a keen interest in Veneration. Do you despise the Deities of Aigas?"

Thinking of the Binds of the Fukal, the marks on his chest that resisted Deity blessings and curses, Skullius cringed inwardly.

'Kind of.'

"No. It just seems like an interesting subject. Veneration is the most out of place power I've ever seen someone have."

"In that you're right," Aurolio said as he locked his fingers. "And to your question, yes. Veneration is the only way to reach out to outside Deities. Unless of course, you have touched upon Divinity."

Skullius nodded.

He wasn't lying about considering Veneration an out of place power considering what was already firmly established power-wise in the world – Blessings, Classes, Cores and Stages – but this wasn't why he was asking about this.

To Aurolio's reply though...

'Reaching Divinity, huh? It makes sense how Fulgardt was able to travel to other worlds then, capturing beings like Dezrael and bringing them here,' he thought before focusing on Aurolio.

He wondered.

At this pace, was he helping to create a monster who touched Divinity very quickly?

Maybe...