

Undead 781

Chapter 781: The Great Trembling

Millennia of peace had the habit of dulling the senses, inhibiting cautionary stimuli and steadfastness. Sadly, this was true for both common folk, and those who claimed to stand at the heights of power.

For when the world shook so fiercely, and so certainly that most, even if for a moment, were led to believe it was about to crumble, and somehow manifest a wide chasm in its midst, all that erupted was the most primal fear that clung from flesh-stripped bone.

The quaking.

The rumbling.

The shaking.

Human life had not experienced such a wide scale disaster since the Grand Wars, since the Ashing of Time, and the conquests led by self-proclaimed Kings and Warlocks spread out through history.

Now something similar had begun, when the hearts of man had experienced the longest years of peace yet.

Humans and beasts scrambled everywhere, fleeing from shelters that fell apart, from unsteady ground that decisively sank inward, taking with it those who were mere moments late in responding to its manoeuvre.

Tides and stampedes rang about, those responsible for them donning pallid faces that prophesied faith in the likely future where being unsubscribed from life in the next minutes wasn't impossible.

And when the mind accepted that life could very well end, the truest forms of individual souls bashed against the facades living beings wore when all was bright, flat and still.

No further could all this be seen, than in a town called Harifrast, a little settlement that housed a lot of tourist sights as well as the gift of a unbearable cold. Quite like Genhuis, even when the season

shifted, snow and ice remained within and around it however subdued, and the continent-wide shaking turned the mostly clear day white.

Snow flew everywhere, like the leaves of autumn strewn violently about by the wind. Visibility was murdered, and so were many when tens of thousands rushed about in a flurry, seeking shelter, loved ones or the more common option... sanity.

Many were trampled underfoot, and none of those inflicting the harm could be made to care. The chaos outward – with the wind and shaking – seemed almost comparable to that going through the minds of the citizens of Harifrast. When things got worse, some who had nobly wrestled against the tides of panicked men seeking their spouses, children and kin gave up.

Each for themselves and the Deities for them all.

What was this condemnation?

Who had brought on this disaster?

As if this madness was insufficient, a more tame grumble added to the quake from the ground, its advent heard faintly from the distance before it brought on its true nature.

It was a nigh on endless wave of beasts that passed, rushing from nearby forests, Sacred and otherwise.

Like a thick, coloured wave from the ocean, they crashed through Harifrast with the same fear, blindness and resilience as man were stricken with. None of the Knights and guards stationed around the town made a difference, for they too had been smitten silly by the sudden turn of events, some making attempts to rush to their own loves ones and others simply fleeing.

The brave ones were drowned under the paws and hooves of different beasts sharing a once in a lifetime journey to safety despite previous hostilities, and a lot of blood was shed.

The wails of fully grown men, the cries of children and the coos of infants could be heard amidst the loud shudders of Feinheath.

It seemed like the end of the world.

But it wasn't.

No yet.

For the quaking reached a pause – following a less than smooth transition from its loud roar.

All seemed to settle, revealing the carnage that had been left behind in the wake of the strongest fear possessing living-kind – ripped, torn, shredded, mangled and trampled flesh mostly. Structural redecoration where top became bottom, side becoming up and floor turning oblique could be found everywhere.

Prized mansions were shattered, historic relics were devoured by the ground underneath, and most common of all, everything was bathed in white and frost.

Those who fled had not gotten far, and those who hadn't were far into the afterlife.

Harifrast truly mirrored the scenes in more than a few settlements within the human continent, yet it seemed like the people who settled here were somehow chosen to be more worse off compared to others.

Those who survived this ordeal, however, could afford to emit breaths of relief.

The earthquake. It had passed.

Those who had managed to escape with most of their families intact – whether man or beast – were most grateful and held them so tight it might have been impossible to pry them apart. Those who lost everything but themselves could only embrace their own arms and tremble at the thought of rebuilding life and love again, if that was even possible.

Those of strong hearts and minds, couldn't help but think more over what was going on instead.

Why was there such a sudden quaking?

It seemed far from natural.

It had never happened before in most people's lifetimes.

So why?

To this question, the world seemed inclined to give a response. One not very soothing, reassuring or truly satisfactory.

The survivors in Harifrast felt the ground shake again, but it was not to flip the world about again.

Instead, it was merely for ominous ambiance.

A great tower rose in the sights of the miscoloured humans, casting a dreadful shadow onto their images. As it soared in height slowly and thoroughly, it cast a darkness in those whom its shadow touched, chasing away hope, relief and even breath.

Never had such a thing existed in Aigas.

Even the beasts that looked on could testify.

The tower looked out of place, and from its design, none had the insanity to commit to delusions that would have even attempted to hope that this meant anything but bad news.

How could that be when the conical behemoth before them featured mangled images on its surface that seemed nothing like artistry, but more like vile sorcery meant to banish monsters?

How could relief not flee when the sheer presence of the tower seemed toxic, breathing out in low whispers an energy denser than air and mana, its silent waves so hostile, that they killed several with the first touch?

Unlike with the great trembling moments ago, none saw it fit to scream or run.

The leaf green tower marred with what looked like dark, exotic algae aged to filth through eons, demanded silent demise. The Primus it emitted offered it to the common folk with momentary ease, and then to the awakened combatants in minutes.

By the time the tower rose to its full height at a staggering four hundred meters, with a similar girth, nothing remained to gaze at its magnificent figure with the backdrop of the arching sun darkening its face.

Gillewart wore a grave expression.

His monocle reflected light from the second sun in the sky that for once, shone brighter than the natural one. He expelled a great deal of mana which flushed down to Genhuis City, quelling most of the effects of the great trembling around the large settlement.

The vibrations coursing from the city were no greater than the ones that would make a water glass wobble lightly because of this, and many of those within the city seemed largely settled.

The City Guardian's eye scrolled across the settlement from his height over a large, broad building – a popular Inn – and he only felt partially grateful that he had responded in time. The minute or so it took him to react to the violent quake of the continent had cost quite a lot of Plasma Coins worth of damage to important infrastructure, not to mention lives.

That said, the opposing feeling Gillewart felt was because... the city was mostly empty compared to its full capacity. Everyone had vanished to the Premium Age Royale as always, which would have made him entirely grateful, but he wasn't sure the fates of the people were any better there than here.

After all, that old hag had left him a message before she suddenly fled along with all of her six colleagues from the tall, lean towers of Genhuis City.

'This city is no longer worth guarding, boy. It will have a new lord soon,' she had said.

This had greatly angered Gillewart at the time, but right now, he felt more frustrated and frightened than anything else.

What did she mean?

Why had those seven Diviners suddenly decided to run away?

Did they know that something bad was going to already? Then why not share it so that it could prevented?

Gillewart grumbled.

Now that he thought to it, could he count on Ruhrees to have taken care of the situation at the Venue for the Royale given what he had just been told?

He didn't know anymore.

Gillewart looked over to the Mages scattered around the city to assist him in stabilising the foundation of the settlement. Since most Capital Service personnel remained to back him up, this whole ordeal turned out much easier, though he would have appreciated a few more helping hands from the mercenaries that had burst out of the Guilds Association building when the great trembling began.

Some of them were scattered around the city, doing what they could to help, but most were only focusing on the quaking, wondering where it was coming from. The same was true with the Priests from the Temple, and of course the Mages from Reacher Academy.

Both groups had people stationed in the sky or tall buildings to search for oddities outside the safety of Gillewart's veil of stability-inducing mana.

On any other day, Gillewart would have yelled at them, but today, all he could do was keep it all in thought.

The shuddering suddenly stopped.

At this, the Priests reacted first.

Several of them dashed towards the wall to Gillewart's left, much to his confusion.

He understood why seconds later, when a great tower started to rise from outside the city wall, a malevolent air flowing from it quietly while its dark shadow cut across the large settlement.

Gillewart shook when the cylindrical structure, partly leaning to the side, horrible symbols carved onto it, rose to a height of six hundred meters in seconds. The Priests expelled bursts of a radiant Primus energy out of their hands, and it quickly rushed to counter that which seemed to spread through the city through from the tower's shadow.

Still, the cruel presence smote many, even if not as hard as intended.

Gillewart mobilised his sense and rushed to the great tower, Nitros already colouring an outline around him.

That tower was incredibly dangerous. Whatever it was for, he couldn't allow it to see fruition.

As he reached the top of the city wall, however, Gillewart found that he was too late.

Down below, at the foot of the tower, the vile green exterior muddled with dark algae had already partly collapsed as if made of stacked cards, and something treacherous had walked out, taking its first steps into the light.

This something then turned its head up and gazed into Gillewart's eyes with a crimson pair of its own.

Chapter 782: Grudge

"Do you think they are purposefully spawning wherever is decently populated?" a feminine voice said concernedly.

"That seems to be the case. Which is all the more reason to HURRY UP, BRADD!"

The great bear made of golden brown sand galloped with even more pronounced heft following the bellow of its master. It shot across the warm ground with immense speed, a light grumble escaping its black lips while its dark snout emitted a breath of frustration.

At this point, the tamed monster would have hoped that the many glittering spots of blue over its sandy body would have been good for something other than pretty aesthetic, but sadly...

"If we don't arrive in time..." Tulnas said with a dark expression. His body leapt up and down because of the movement of the tamed beast upon which he sat along with four pretty ladies.

"We can still salvage what's important from the residence and leave, right? Maybe the others are already on it! We really don't have to play hero and try to save the whole city like last time, right?"

I personally don't care enough for that," a gorgeous beauty with animalistic features – fluffy ears and a tail – who clung to Tulnas from behind said, though her whine had a tone of dread instead of playfulness.

"You are a disgrace to the Harem's Guild if you don't realise by now that the Guild master has a hero complex. At least it applies mostly to the ladies," a blindfolded woman interjected with a stern voice. "That hasn't changed even after he became Branch Head of the Guilds Association."

"Natalika!" the fluffy-eared lady turned with a sharp stare.

Tulnas didn't pay the two much mind, as did the other two. He would give the women a spanking any other day as punishment, but right now, the competence of a responsible leader crushed his tendency to provide levity in harsh situations.

What he had seen... those dark towers...

"Focus. We're close. You might not have seen it all as I did, but that's all the more reason to stop messing around. This is much more serious than you think..." Tulnas told off the ladies and they stopped glaring at each other – one more so than the other of course.

Tulnas, with Bradd the sand bear as his 'steed', had seen up close what happened to the small towns and villages close to where they had been dealing with a band of thieves – the organised kind who had good equipment and surprisingly firm fighting experience.

Large towers suddenly rose from the ground and as they did, it was as if the life from every living thing was smacked away simply because of the sheer presence of the structures.

And the sculptings on them...

Tulnas' face grew grave.

Something about those symbols just churned his core. He had immediately told his group to leave without waiting to see what would happen next.

Yet still, even while far from the towers and their symbols, Tulnas felt as though he should have washed his eyes after looking at them, or perhaps even gouged them out.

If something like that was waiting back home, back in Inhone City...

"What do you think those things were?" he asked in a small voice.

"What?" the fluffy-eared lady behind him asked quizzically.

"I'm not asking you," Tulnas said, annoyed, and then proceeded to listen to a voice deep within him.

Past the clearing and hills that hid the distant figure of the small city, Bradd seemed to expect some semblance of approval from his master. He had done quite a good job with getting them all to Inhone from the distant location of the Guild request in under fifteen minutes after all.

However, the large sand bear felt a tremor of shock from his master instead.

Tulnas had stood from Bradd's back, as did the four women.

"Damn it..."

It wasn't a pleasing sight, even from so far.

Right in front of the gate to the city, a massive tower had risen, its dark, filth-layered exterior full of jagged, and sharp edges that made it look like a coarse star from above. It cast a sharp shadow into Inhone, but nothing could further be discerned about the state of the city, save for the tens of corpses in armour laying sprawled across the entrance and...

"Bradd, stop!" Tulnas ordered.

The giant bear came to halt.

The blindfolded woman, Natalika hurried to hold the hilt to her sword while the others, urged on by a suffocating instinct to harden their resolves, prepared for battle without knowing why at first.

Over a kilometre and a half still remained to the city, but the group knew that this distance was insignificant.

Insignificant to the thing that was lurking behind what they could see of the large tower, at least.

They had realised now.

There was a thing there.

One of the corpses Tulnas saw laying on the ground was suddenly pulled towards the tower, and disappeared behind it, where he could not see.

Then, a long, nasty claw inched from the long tower, then a crimson eye, as well as a glittering beak looking to be made of a crystalline gemstone.

...!

"Run!" Tulnas screamed at Bradd who had already made a U-turn and started sprinting back to where they had come from.

Tulnas didn't dare look back, and his Full Body Aura was already flaring.

He didn't have an ounce of faith in their ability to escape the creature that had quite obviously noticed their presence.

And sure enough, the beating of wings audible even from far off, blasted against the group's ears.

The odd creature... had taken flight in their direction.

Maqi.

A bald man dressed in oversized robes was locking gazes with a bulky man seated on the throne. They each seemed to be making attempts at reading the most minute shifts behind each others' straight faces.

But ultimately...

"So these two events are linked?" the First Horn said.

"I can only imagine that the same individuals responsible for stealing historic relics that were agreed upon by all to be stored in our secure archives more than two months ago, are the same that have caused that annoying quake. I believe that the... Premium Age Royale was also something related to them. I sent some spies to join in and look over what Pelian had in store. They are dead now.

Their souls lost, as are their bodies..." the bald man said.

"What good are the corpses of Fulgardt's Chosen? Do those measly necromancers – if they are indeed responsible – think that acquiring rotting bodies will help them control the world?"

"Perhaps, but their motives don't strike me as that dull."

"Hmmm," the First Horn groaned. "And once again, this all began in Pelian."

"Indeed. Apparently strange towers are appearing everywhere there. The death toll continues to rise as we speak because of them, I imagine the Six Houses will move now that there's something to do," the bald man said before narrowing his eyes. "Will you lend Pelian your aid?"

The First Horn looked at the bald man as if he had said something terribly insulting, and that was answer enough.

"Very well, then," the bald man relented. "As for THAT matter..."

"Yes. I've spent a month preparing a select number among my forces for Opungale," the First Horn said.

The bald man chuckled.

"That is quite the lengthy period for a simple military selection," he said. "Your manoeuvre spells to me that you did not truly intend to heed my advice. Killing the young Sif princess would have given you a better excuse to crush Opungale when they came for revenge. A close shave will not do. And all this brings me to wonder..."

Why did you not lead with that in the first place, if you did not intend to take my courteous advice? In fact, why did the previous First Horns not strike Opungale before?"

The giant of a man scoffed.

"Brash men can also exercise restraint. The previous First Horn told me of a blonde haired man with a lute who often appeared whenever he even had the thought to strike at the Sif. Meddlesome cretin. I imagined the same would happen to me. But no. The fact that my assassin served her purpose to some degree, was reason enough for me to believe that I am exempt from this..."

arrangement. I will not be deterred."

"A man with a lute, eh?" the bald man said with a strange twinkle in his eye. "Interesting." Amusement cradled his less than innocent smile, and then he continued. "Well, the grudge from the Second Grand War still burns within my people as well – though probably not as much as yours. I'll have a few of mine join your ranks for the assault. I quite expect something entertaining to erupt from this."

"As do I," the First Horn said as he leaned against his throne.

Chapter 783: Inevitable Fiend, Inevitable Voyage

Sause knelt down, an uncharacteristic seriousness adorning his usually carefree face. He wore a simple yet enchanted set of linen clothing – which accommodated his size quite well – and the ever short tufts of hair over his head hung as much as they could because of his posture.

It was quite impressive that the space he was in, a massive cavern that would have fit the whole of Genhuis City, along with a cluster of towns, was so tranquil, not a sound reaching the ear.

Yet this wasn't too odd.

An audience with the Scaled Elder often took patience, even if you found yourself in his abode.

An hour had almost passed with Sause stuck in the bow, when a great stomp rocked the cavern.

The dramatic falling of weak points in the cavern, making a statement as to the loss in the integrity of the space... did not happen.

How could an area deigned by the Scaled Elder himself as home be so structurely unsound, however primitive it looked for such an ancient, powerful being?

Sause did not move.

He heard another mighty stomp, and then another, and another.

With each, it was evident that the Elder drew closer, and by the fifth stomp, Sause felt a scorching breath that travelled along with a choking dark smoke bathe him thoroughly. The hoarse cry from a pair of massive nostrils also blasted his ears... but he had grown used to it.

He raised his head.

What had been a dark cavern now had the great shadowy overlay of an enormous lifeform whose eyes were bright enough to give significant lighting to the surroundings.

The air swooned as heavy movement rocked it. A massive head turned and focused on Sause. A turquoise blue eye with a neon glow illuminated the giant, the slit-like pupil at its middle dilating slightly.

A wide mouth below a long snout covered in rough, stone-like, foggy grey scales opened to reveal two arching sets of long teeth akin to the erect stalactites in the cavern, and then...

"HOW OFTEN DO YOU HAVE TO VISIT ME, SAUSIFILLIS?" a booming voice shot from the great maw with striking intensity, and Sause groaned as it rattled his bones, as if each word was stab to his vitals.

"Forgive me, Elder," Sause said respectfully, his eyes unblinkingly staring into the large, blue circular glow. "This is unlike the times when I brought to you Benzard or when I came for your aid two months ago. I simply—"

"I AM AWARE."

With Sause being cut off, there was another thunderous noise as the great creature moved, passing where Sause was positioned.

Its body, visible to the giant's eyes in the dark, crossed past his vision as it tremored its way to another portion of the cavern that could barely contain its size. In fact, the Great Elder was so massive that Sause had never seen the Elder's tail even when the great beast moved about.

And when the great creature moved, he would be compelled to silence each time.

For very few could act haughty in the presence of a dragon.

Even fewer could withstand the resting might of a Herald of one of the Deities.

Jerthrax, the Vision of Misery, was both of these things.

"IT HAS FINALLY COME. THE BEGINNING OF THE TRAGEDY THAT THEY FORETOLD. THE PENANCE FOR PROMISE THEY MADE, AND THE INEVITABLE RISE OF A FIEND," the great dragon said in what sounded like a forlorn voice.

"What promise do you mean, Elder?" Sause inquired.

The great lantern of an eye turned to the giant, and another boom resounded across the cavern as it seemed that Jerthrax had settled.

"YOU WILL FIND THAT MAKING FRIENDS WHEN THERE ARE FEW CAPABLE OF COMPREHENDING YOUR NATURE, IS A RATHER DIFFICULT AFFAIR. FRIENDSHIPS BORN AFTER SUCH TRIALS... THEY PERSIST PAST TIME AND PAST BETRAYALS. EVEN GODS HAVE A TENDERNESS OF THE HEART."

Sause couldn't quite follow these vague words, but the gravity within the Scaled Elder's voice turned him even more sullen than he had been. He had come here because he had sensed a great disturbance from afar, way past the Central Boundary, and wished to learn what it meant from the Elder but...

"NOW, WE WILL PAY FOR IT," Jerthrax said before emitting another scorching, smoky breath.

"PREPARE YOURSELF, SAUSIFILLIS. AS THE PROMISE UNFOLDS, THE FIEND IS SET ON HUNTING ME, AND THE OTHERS DOWN. THEY WILL TRAVEL HERE SOON."

Sause nodded.

He knew who the fiend was, or at least which affiliation the fiend was from. He was prepared for it. It was only a man, after all. But the promise, he had no idea what it entailed. It probably wasn't something he should worry about right now, as the Elder had warned him of a more immediate threat.

He rose, preparing to leave while mulling over how the enemy would get here, given the difficulty involved, when...

Jerthrax took in a great whiff of air, and Sause turned, surprised at the sound.

"Elder...?"

The blue flares that were the dragon's eyes turned into miniature suns and the air churned along with this change.

"AN UNFORESEEN ENEMY HAS ARRIVED. HIS PRESENCE IS TRANQUIL, SAUSIFILLIS. EERILY SO..."

Pelian.

"It is ready," the sailor said.

A masked man standing by the shore, looking at the large ship that allowed the eager waters to bash into its hull, nodded at these words.

There was no time to waste.

The disappearance of the seven Diviners in Genhuis City made it evident that he was 'seen' despite the many contingencies he had employed to avoid his plans leaking to opposing parties.

"It won't be easy, will it? Getting there I mean," Fulina who stood at Actuass' side asked.

"No. The Paladin I will have to face is the least of my worries. One of them at least," Actuass replied.

"Would it not be better to acquire the Herald in Opungale first then? To increase your chances of reaching Edagon, not to mention beating THAT Herald?" Cyne, another of Actuass' most trusted, asked. "He is human, right? He is certainly weaker than the one in Edagon?"

Actuass didn't answer immediately.

He clenched his fist.

The power coursing through him right now was unlike the one he attained from Stages, Cores or Classes. It wasn't simply physical or exclusively spiritual. It seemed all encompassing.

Absorbing Rayn's soul had ended up being the best option, after all, it granted him the ability to sense all the Heralds, the ones gifted with the power of the governing Deities.

Those who steered this world in the absence of two of the Deities.

While he hadn't become a Herald, he too now held traces of the Deities' power from Rayn's soul, and thus could sense pools of similar powers all around Aigas.

Hours ago, Actuass had sensed one of the Heralds move from Pelian to Opungale in the blink of an eye, which was why Cyne was urging him to go after this particular Herald first.

However...

"That one isn't an option for now. Playing a game of cat and mouse will only waste time. This particular man is not above fleeing from me, and he is very good at it. It is better to head straight for the Herald who is least likely to run away," the masked man answered.

"Alright, then let me come with you. You need faces you can trust by your side," Cyne said with a firm face.

Actuass turned to him.

"No. You two have important tasks," he said to the two. "Fulina securing Genhuis City, and you acquiring Gritgot City is imperative. In the likely event that Guissepo tries to take over Pelian, I need you to hold him off until I return. I have the feeling that this nation will receive no outside aid, and the Houses may not all be inclined to assist."

Fulina and Cyne wanted to argue, but they accepted their tasks. They trusted Actuass, and more than that, they had faith in his resolve to accomplish his goal.

They both sympathised with it, after all.

"Relax. I have acquired a few interesting monstrosities to help me on the way. As for the rest of the men I'm taking, they will do their part well," Actuass said before pacing on the muddy ground towards the ship, the stamps he left with his boots getting drowned with sea water moments later.

Chapter 784: Guilty Sorrows

"...the stadium was transported elsewhere after that man disappeared from our sight. All of a sudden... we were somewhere different. Some kind of safe storage space, I assume. Just us and millions of corpses..."

It brought Alaris no degree of pleasure to narrate his experience. His moustache that was always so firm was crippled and withered now, dabbed with some of the perspiration scrolling down his face.

He looked less like the Bloodless Steel Phantom, and more like a broken, lingering ghost.

His face almost shared the same pale pigment as that which showed from the several corpses laying between him and everyone else in room.

A little girl with blonde pigtails could be seen laid over the tarp on the floor, along with a sharply dressed man whose attire made starkly clear that his occupation was related to servitude.

One pair of eyes kept staring at this young girl with twice as much emptiness as that which was swelling from Alaris' own. On top of that, it seemed the sight took away from the owner of this particular pair, all desire to live.

Theurien had been in this dire pose for fifteen minutes.

The image tore Alaris apart all the more.

He had done all he could to explain what had happened, but he didn't believe any of it mattered to Theurien. At least most of it.

There was a deep silence now, and it hadn't been the only one to persist.

Beside Alaris, was seated Red Rage, in his starkly pristine armour. He had not said a word since Alaris arrived, and with a guest. Said guest finally broke the silence.

"I sympathise..." Ruhrees said meaningfully. "...I never dared to believe that a bastion of Pelian would help orchestrate something like this. There was a point where we could have stopped it, but we relaxed at the last moment..."

No one said anything, or even reacted to the Paladin Champion's words. Ruhrees hadn't expected anyone to anyway. He simply set his eyes on the other set of corpses on the tarp.

The Governor and his son.

He had retrieved these, and then used his Divine Blessing to escape the stadium with Alaris and a few other survivors without taking the time to investigate where they had been transported to.

"I hate to take away your time to grieve, but... things are about to get worse. On our way here, we saw a lot of dreadful things happening all around Pelian. There are two mad men causing all this terror, and at the very least, we have to fight against their continuous triumphs. People are dying. We need to stop that first before succumbing to our pains..."

Ruhrees had half expected Theurien to intercept his words with an outburst, but the Bryne Family Head did no such thing. Still, the Champion wanted everyone here to know that the worst was yet to come, as he and Alaris had seen.

The dual transparent veils – Chieftain Screens – around the Bryne Family Estate, as Ruhrees had noticed, blocked the effects of the great trembling from the entire caged in area, and he imagined that it would be easy to miss the end of the world because of this protection.

Alaris was hoping to get Theurien to break free from his sorrow too, only for a little while, but the guilt he felt at not being able to save the last of Theurien's children close at hand, was too great.

Thus, he kept quiet.

But...

"What of Festos?" Theurien suddenly asked, surprising Alaris and Ruhrees. "What became of him?"

Alaris didn't have an answer. The screens had shut off when the event took a turn for the worst.

"My master is alive," Red Rage answered simply.

His answer was so firm that no one ventured to doubt it immediately, and as Theurien's bloodshot eyes stared at the Apostle, he seemed to gain further confirmation that it was true somehow . Whether it was simply a coping mechanism born from Theurien's immense grief at losing everyone that caused this or otherwise, was unknown.

It didn't really matter. Theurien rubbed his eyes, even though he had shed no tears.

He rose, and gave out a great breath.

Ruhrees looked at him anxiously.

People stricken with crippling grief seldom retained reason, especially if they were powerful, in some cases.

"You are right. This is not the time to drown in my sorrow. Terese wouldn't have wanted to see her father's face so dark," Theurien said, though with a tragic frown. "I'll think about saving the living for now."

Red Rage stood up sharply in support.

Theurien seemed to appreciate the gesture.

"Rally your beasts. We have a territory and a nation to defend," he commanded.

Red Rage nodded. His tamed beasts would certainly appreciate the opportunity.

Deep down however, despite his resolve, he could feel that Skullius was not exactly well, even if he wasn't dead. He seemed closer to perishing than anything else, but the Apostle believed that his master would pull through.

He had to, and he would.

Far from Pelian, in the middle of the ocean.

Ever since the disturbance hours ago, the cool waters had turned rather feisty, rising in high waves to beat against each other while storm clouds had begun to form above.

This would have been a terrible experience for one stuck on a ship or boat, but that wasn't the case for the man currently seated atop the surface of the violently swaying waters.

Droplets of water, and vapours splashed onto his armour constantly, but he retained an unbothered attitude. In fact, he quite liked the cool sensation that they brought, after all, it warded off, even if a little, the often stifling feeling conjured by the pressing innards of his Granted Armament.

"This... is getting too boring. Hurry up, why don't you?" the man said, and then pushed his head through the water below to look around with his vibrant red almond eyes.

His wild tufts of snow white hair danced within the cold, swooning wet as he turned this way and that.

Still no sign of her.

The boss wouldn't be mad if she took another day, would he?

The man pulled his head out and sighed.

He crossed his legs as the water attempted to move him further away with its waves. His blue, white and silver plate armour allowed for flexible mobility of that degree, at least, plus more. On the chestplate were long, glass-like pads attached that seemed to house some form of flowing energy. Different kinds of energy. On the greaves and gauntlets, this seemed to be the case as well.

The Granted Armament was no simple armour, after all.

The boss only gave it to the most exceptional.

An hour passed, then another.

The white-haired man had turned to entertaining himself by testing out how quickly he could summon a set of large, white and curled claws from the finger ends of his gauntlets, which were custom tempered to fit his abilities, when he turned to his right.

The dark pupils drowning in the sea of his red irises turned into narrow, horizontal slits as he focused his sight.

Hundreds of kilometres away, the man saw vicious blazes of white.

'Well, that's either a group of Incandescent Stagers or some unique Cluster beasts. The latter seems more realistic...' he thought.

A blast of excitement ignited within him.

Well, it wouldn't hurt to check it out right? Hardly anything was keeping his attention right now anyway.

Clusters erupting without being dealt with was a common on this side of the world littered with small islands.

"Don't mind if I..." the white-haired man had begun when he felt the waters he was sitting on turn mildly hot.

He quickly turned back his focus, and with his keen sight found that the person he was waiting for, was finally rising up.

'You have the worst timing!' he grumbled.

Seconds later, a tall, wiry looking woman popped out of the water and stood over it while panting.

She had a series of bruises, gashes, burns and sores, but a satisfied smile soon crept up on her face.

"How was it?" the white-haired man said with a dash of agitation in his voice.

"Good. Great even! Barely survived but... woooo!" the woman cheered. "Looks like we'll be partners now, Grim."

"Don't count on it just yet," the man, whose name was Grim, said with a half scoff. "Allora, an Unlimited. Who would have thought?"

Grim pointed to the top of his head.

A bolt of Levin streaked from his finger and exploded to form a thick, white cloud above his hair.

Grim then gestured for the woman, Allora, to draw closer to him, which she did, and pointed below them. With another spark, a bigger cloud formed under their feet.

Soon, the duo was flying up on the cloud, completely unfazed by the fact that they were about to sink into the thunderclouds overhead.

Chapter 785: Idiots and Friends

Gerrie, Wellie, Willoe had a pretty willy home,

Gerrie, Wellie, Willoe had some pretty tasty wine,

And once a month, they'd take it out POP,

And the neighbours would scream HURRAY HEY!

Jumble your words, buh-huh, it's fun,

Stumble your feet, guh-huh, it's dumb,

With drink in the gut, grape swell in the heart,

The light ones will be down in a POOF HEY!

Gerrie, Wellie, Willoe, had a pretty, willy home,

...

Grim first heard the numerous voices singing this dumb song just when he and the tall, thin woman, Allora rose with the cloud.

By the time he was high up in the sky, close to reaching a distinct thundercloud that, unlike the many others around, wasn't moving, he had already buried his fingers deep into his ears.

He hated this merry song.

Why did SHE have to incite the others to sing it right now?

Allora had begun to hum subconsciously while tending to her more serious wounds when Grim gave her a sharp glare that made her turn her head and transition into an innocent whistle.

Moments later, Grim and Allora had borne into the larger cloud above from below and emerged atop it.

The scene that met them... was atrocious.

The twenty-six experts that Grim had been told by the boss to take with him, along with Allora who was gifted the chance to attempt raising her rank, were, while adorned in beautifully crafted golden plate armours of high grades, linking arms, dancing merrily and slugging large cups of wine.

They did a stupid dance where they did sequential high kicks into the air while revolving in a circular motion, singing loudly and irresponsibly, and with paper hats on their heads.

Where had those even come from?!

To add a layer of ridiculous to this, there were three respectable – at least Grim had thought until a second ago – experts who were splashing the others with wine from three huge barrels. Two of them were male and the last was female.

Grim was irritated by the fact that he instantly understood what this arrangement meant.

Apparently, these three were playing the role of Gerrie, Wellie and Willoe dishing out the best wine.

Grim strangled his urge to explode. After all, there was another more outrageous detail.

It was... HER.

The idiot standing outside the circle of fellow idiots with a ukulele that she strummed happily while leading the sing along into the twelve verses of this iconic song she had composed.

Right now, Grim was almost embarrassed to call her his best friend.

"YOU IDIOTS!"

Grim's loud cry killed the fun immediately.

The tens of shocked faces that turned to Grim dumbfounded would have made anyone else laugh hysterically, but no one did.

There was a moment of silence and then the experts withdrew their bottles and hats and stood in neat rows over the cloud at attention, the sternness of their faces almost making out everything they had been doing to be a lie.

Grim sighed.

He didn't even know what to say, and for good reasons.

One, because he couldn't really blame these fools.

And two, because before he was promoted, he had been one of these fools.

"Anyway," Grim said, not sure how to segue from this dignity-straining tragedy to other important news. "Ahem, I'm happy to announce to you, that our very own Allora has successfully raised her rank. She has overcome a crucial trial, and will... probably, be named the fourth Unlimited."

The eyes of the experts were the only things that shone, yet their faces remained stern overall even as they gave a particularly cheerful round of applause.

This was very good news!

Allora smiled.

It was a pretty big step to graduate from being a normal ranked expert within the group.

Most of the time, it was the boss' keen sight that made it apparent that one had incredible potential, but other times, as Allora had experienced, it took a step a faith and rigid grit to rise above others.

She was proud that she didn't wait for her turn silently.

The twenty-five experts gave her a short bow, and she beamed.

This was the least she should get for earning herself a Hidden Class.

"Yeah, yeah. Now let's get moving," Grim said with a sigh, and a pat to Allora's back. The cloud under him and her disappeared.

The one over his head shifted as he expressed his will, and then...

The grand cloud they were all standing on started to move, departing from its previous position in the air.

Doing something like this didn't require that much focus though, as Grim noticed the rapid escape of a certain green haired figure and quickly grabbed her shoulder.

"Oh no you don't, Yu. We need to have a little chat."

Yuyui shrank a little, a last sad, short-lived tune leaving the strings of the ukulele in her hand.

...

The wide thundercloud escaped the trap of others of its kind around.

Naturally, this was no ordinary cloud.

While it was a hundred meters of pure fluff, people could stand on it and move freely.

Each time they made contact with the clouds, sparks of Levin activated to make their steps firm among the clouds, nomatter how rapid and how heavy they were.

Because of this feature, it wasn't strange that a large house had been set up on the far corner of the cloud where the twenty-eight experts had been living for the past two days.

They had gotten used to the sheer ridiculousness of this, as seen with how tables, chairs, umbrellas and other different sets of furniture were strewn about, standing comfortably on the clouds.

The only one with the authority to steer and manipulate this cloud, was Grim. This ability belonged to his boss, and he could gift control over the thundercloud to any one of the three, now four Unlimited, to use for travel, attack and defence. Of course, on their own the Unlimited would have trouble maintaining the cloud, but the Granted Armament helped them sustain it.

After all, the cloud required a large amount of mana to keep active for long periods.

At the moment, Grim was sure he could only sustain the cloud for no more than five more hours, which was to be expected since they had been in the sky for a while.

"So, care to explain?" Grim asked the girl sitting on the cloud beside him.

Yuyui had grown quite a bit in the past month. Her lime coloured hair had grown out once again, and she had let it flow as it pleased. It curled at the ends on her shoulder, and perhaps because of habit, she allowed the now longer bangs to cover her Inhumane Eye, which, unlike the Eye of Dispersal, she couldn't shut off.

Since being freed by Skullius, she hadn't gotten used to flashing the unnatural eye around, even among familiar company.

Her cheeks had grown plush, but her body retained a normal distribution of fat everywhere else, which was odd... for others, but not so much for those who knew Yuyui's favourite sport; binge eating. Perhaps her cheeks were mutating for convenience.

"We were just singing. Having a bit of fun. We can do that outside Deign. We always do," Yuyui said while avoiding Grim's sharp eyes.

"Yeah? As I recall, we only do silly stuff while keeping a close eye on the surroundings. Gliding in the sky doesn't make us immune to all forms of enemy detection," Grim said sternly. "Your music has a way of taking everyone's attention so well..."

Yuyui shrank again.

"I'm sorry," she said sullenly.

Grim sighed and then comfortably dropped his head onto her lap.

"Now tell me the real reason you did it," he said.

Yuyui wore a duck face.

"W-what do you mean?" she asked nervously.

"You must be an idiot if you think I buy that you just started singing and having everyone dance just for fun, especially when we are on a mission like this."

Yuyui cast away her gaze and pursed her lips.

Grim grinned.

"Well? If you can't tell whatever it is to me, good luck telling anyone else," he said, his gaze unmoving from her face.

Yuyui took a few moments and then finally relented.

"I just... We haven't talked a lot since he split," she said meekly.

"We? You mean you and the boss?"

Yuyui nodded.

"We just grew distant. He's been working so hard to make our band work, building Deign and all, that I..." Yuyui wore a rather sad frown. "I haven't been able to forget, you know? It's like our relationship grew worse when I told him that... Ferex was lost. I don't think he even so much as looks at me since then.

I mean... Yeah, it was my fault. I wasn't a good partner. If I was, Ferex wouldn't have had to struggle as he did before..."

Grim said nothing as Yuyui battled with keeping her voice choke free.

He knew a lot about the boss and Yuyui, things that most didn't, even among the Unlimited.

Because of that, Yuyui could confide him in.

"I dream about all this. If I stay idle it haunts me even in the day. It's all I can think about. Doesn't make it better that I have barely made any progress since Ferex... and... I don't know.

I just wanted to distract myself a bit. Happy faces do the trick sometimes. A bit of recklessness. Too bad I finished all the food I stored for the journey."

Grim laughed at Yuyui's last sentence.

"What's so funny?" the lime-haired girl asked.

"Oh nothing," Grim said. He pushed back his hair and gave an exasperated sigh.

"You're really putting yourself in the wringer aren't you, Yu? The boss is many things, but he isn't what you just described. I think I might know him better than you do at this point. You don't really make the effort to talk to him, do you? I mean, you're the only person in Deign who can talk to the boss as much as you please, but you just don't."

Yuyui made a defensive face, but then deflated.

"I'm right, aren't I? Well, the boss isn't really the type to chase after you for a talk, I admit. Believe it or not, he doesn't take a break – not that he needs to – and he's constantly doing something, making himself stronger. He strikes me as a guy who doesn't know about human relations any more than a weirdo like you."

Yuyui gave Grim a glare which he scoffed at.

"If you don't want to be thinking about this all day, talk to the boss. He'll listen. You two go way back."

"That's an overstatement..." Yuyui shifted uncomfortably.

"Whatever. I'm not going to listen to another sob story from you if it's about this," Grim said before flicking Yuyui's forehead.

She yelped and rubbed where it hurt.

"I... I can try. He's just... so different from before..."

"That doesn't matter. He's still...OH! We're here!" Grim got up and looked down from the edge of the thundercloud.

"We are where? Have we already arrived over Deign?" Yuyui asked while following after him.

"Nope. I just want to see if the things that attracted me earlier are worth checking out. Who knows, maybe they will be useful, or at least be good sparring partners..." Grim said before leaping from the cloud and dropping down to the open waters close to the drifting chunk on a island.

Chapter 786: Deign

The thundercloud finally descended after spending a few more hours over the raging sea post Allora accomplishing what she had intended.

The twenty-eight experts found themselves on a small, familiar island once again, one devoid of any living being for as far as the eye could see. But that didn't mean there was none on the whole.

No high land contours sprang from the ground. Instead, the flat ground was livid with various assortments of vegetation, most of them keenly rising up so high, one would have thought they were in a contest to taste the sunlight first. This was mostly true for the thick forest near the other end of the island.

Brooks and streams that fed into one, small lake could be spotted from most places around, and they all boldly declared their clarity with shimmering glares over their colourless, moving bodies.

The view of them was better accentuated by the colourful spectacle from meadows a, and the experts couldn't help but smile at the picturesque scenery.

This place hadn't always been like this.

Only when they settled here, did it become a paradise.

The group walked forward, going through some scattered trees to a definite position just ahead.

Chatter was minimal between them, but it was cheerful. Discipline was one thing they all had to exercise, especially when they were here. It was a crucial rule, and everyone honoured it without question.

Among the twenty-eight, four could be seen carrying large, yellow boxes that looked to be made of a material similar to refined glass, but murkier. Perhaps it was more akin to quartzite, actually. They held the boxes with a suspicious level of care.

Six minutes later, the group was standing before a structure unlike the natural elements on the island.

It was a tall, wide archway made of painted wood.

The intricacy of its designs was overwhelming, and its proportions, with 4,6 meters of height and 7 meters of width between its two, thick shining, red posts, was intimidating.

A trail of meaningful groves traced from the foot of one post to the arch, which was crafted with a myriad of frightening, fleshless faces, and then to the feet of the other post. These groves were not there for mere decoration, however – though they were that enticing to gawk at – as they were the only means through which one could interact with this archway.

For that, an Unlimited was needed.

Grim stepped forward and lazily placed his gauntlet on one of the posts. Here, he didn't need to do anything. His Granted Armament reacted to the groves, and passed on what was needed to activate the archway; an unseen, serene energy that was stored within the armour.

The groves lit up vibrantly in white, and then, between the posts, a wide, sharp flare appeared with an 'ohm'.

Grim led the way into this bright light, and it blinked as he passed through it.

He did not emerge on the other side of the archway.

The others quickly followed after him, and when the last passed through the flare, it vanished quickly, leaving the red archway alone in the midst of the greenery.

...

The experts devoured by the light felt, for a moment, as if they had been trapped in a dark space, and then, a familiar scape emerged before their eyes.

A sharp burst of mana filled their lungs, as well as an astounding sense of freedom and power.

They were home.

Only Deign could make them feel so welcome.

The world the boss had made for their operations.

They stood on a grassy ground and before them, a stout mountain stood, waiting for them to scale. Atop it, a treacherous storm that always persisted with an endless flavour to it, darkened its peak, and above it in turn was a dark sky that refused to be lit up by the lone sun.

Thankfully, the graceful light of this sun bore down brilliantly – as it should – on everything under the black sky, and the experts were so used to this that the blue sky of Aigas was almost becoming an abnormality to them.

"Up we go," Grim said, though deep within, he wished he could climb this mountain in a different fashion.

It didn't take long for the group to reach the summit, a journey which has seen the experts feeling a greater increase in the influx of mana into their bodies.

A minute later, they stood before IT.

The Honing Fortress.

Its magnificent girth was so wide, it almost exceeded the width of the summit of the mountain, and it rose up to a height of twenty meters.

Strangely, its exterior seemed to be made of round, obsidian poles as thick as an elephant, their ends lined with two golden rings each. A total of 124 squares from which intense lights burst out could be seen from the face of the fortress, giving the illusion that they were windows exposing light from within the building.

Longer poles exceeding the length of this giant structure settled close to the top jutting from the sides. Strange bone bodies hung from them, not looking quite as dead as a common man would hope.

Naturally, the eyes of most would be stolen first by the Honing Fortress, but it was preceded by two large, cubical pools of clear water, between which was a stone pavement that led into it. Strange

flowers grew at the rims of the pavement, and as the twenty-eight passed over it, a few stopped to smell them – as most always did.

There was no end to the beautiful sights before the Fortress, but the group was used to them. They entered the mansion through a doorway shaped opening at the centre that also beamed and with light, and emerged on the ground floor.

"Never get used to that," Grim said as a mash of essence blasted his face with the second, swift change in scenery. He took an agitated whiff and stepped forward.

Yuyui agreed with his sentiments. She had her Eye of Dispersal open to ward away some of the more intense essences from her body.

It was always like this. After all, the ground floor was arguably one of the most uncomfortable places to be in within the Honing Fortress.

The space was wider than what the external view of the fortress would have one believe; at least twice as large.

An obsidian floor made of exquisite marble stood below while playful, floating were most of what made up the ceiling. More attracting than these, however, was the end of floor.

Whenever one entered, their eyes were once again stolen by the view at the very end.

First, was the fact that the end of the floor, didn't have a wall, thus things happening past the mansion could be seen; storms, and lightning of an unnatural shade sparked in the distance, along with strange, thudding noises. This was the source of the tangle of energies that most experts couldn't even comprehend.

The most outstanding thing to show from this floor however, was a great throne surrounded by a pool of what looked like ever hot lava that partially obscured said throne... and the figure that sat on it.

Then again, this figure was already difficult to make out.

Not only was he constantly being smothered by thick, stubborn clots of dark cloud, his four 'eyes' seemed to shine as bright as suns, disallowing a perfect view of him. On top of this, sharp bursts of Levin played tag within these clouds, their appearance so bright they almost dyed half the entire floor white each time they emerged.

Grim lead the group forward until they were four meters before the throne. He gave a light bow, while the rest, excluding Yuyui – reluctantly – gave a deep one.

The 'eyes' of the figure on the throne flashed sharply, and then he spoke.

Chapter 787: The Boss

Replicus' form was as needlessly lethal-looking as always, but despite what his looks suggested, he was actually a bit sullen.

No, rather he was a little agitated.

He could not show it though.

Instead, he focused on his returned subordinates led by Grim, his emotions sparked to a more cheerful state.

Already he could tell, as he gazed at Allora, that she had succeeded. A boundless sensation eagerly flared from her, enticing his immensely sensitive perception.

'Something about her has become inexhaustible. Intriguing. She quite literally embodies the title of Unlimited...'

Allora's confidence had not been vain, and that was a sight for sore sockets.

"Congratulations. You did not disappoint," a voice like a gust of wind trying to stifle the bellow of thunder escaped from Replicus' mouth behind the clouds.

The lesser among the experts shuddered at this voice, but Grim retained his relaxed posture, Yuyui looked to the side, and Allora beamed.

"Of course I did not, boss!" she called loudly, much to Replicus' amusement.

His sockets continued to study her, and then he spoke again.

"Do you wish to become an Unlimited?" his heavy, authoritative voice came.

"Absolutely!" Allora answered without a moment of hesitation, her tall frame turning rigid. Grim seemed a little disturbed by her enthusiasm. He had half hoped that the boss wouldn't see her as worthy of joining the elite circle. Still, all hope wasn't lost yet.

It wasn't that Grim hated her, but in his view, she was a bit... extra.

"Good."

Replicus seemed to shift under the layer of cloud of lightning.

"I shall test you, and then... we will see if you can claim the honour of donning your own Granted Armament."

Allora wasn't disheartened at all. She knew for a fact that the boss already knew how strong she was now, and while that sentiment could have alluded to the fact that he wasn't confident in her abilities, Allora knew the other three Unlimited had undergone a test.

It was routine.

She gave a bow while donning a grin, and inched closer to Grim whom she dwarfed slightly. The white-haired man expelled a light sigh.

Being an Unlimited didn't work that way, damn it!

Replicus surveyed the group. The glow from his sockets made it hard for anyone to perfectly pinpoint who he was looking at, and frankly, the Null Lifeform liked it that way.

He gazed at Yuyui, and alas, she didn't know it.

A strange emotion burned within him.

One of the sources of Replicus' agitation, stemmed from what he had been sensing for a while now. Ever since the world shuddered vehemently – more specifically Feinheath – he had felt that his original body, Skullius, had sustained a great deal of damage to the soul.

Obviously, this was terrible news, but what interested Replicus more was the fact that this sensation he felt from Skullius, registered a few minutes before the great trembling.

Given how his luck was, even though it wasn't as tragically motivated anymore, it wasn't a stretch to think that once again, Skullius was somehow involved in this.

Thankfully, Replicus had a copy of Skullius' soul and didn't share the original's. While they were linked, soul damage dealt to Skullius didn't affect Replicus, though the opposite was not true.

Still, this was bad news, and Replicus wished he could talk about it with someone meaningful. That would have naturally been Yuyui, but...

"We have been called," Replicus addressed the group while quickly killing off the growing sentiment.

Grim and the others turned serious.

"It's because of that quaking, isn't it?" Grim asked with a grave face.

Replicus didn't answer. Instead, from the dark clouds around him, a pitch black phalanx laced with thin traces of Levin pointed to his left, and then he called, "Pherdanta, if you would..."

"As you wish."

The eyes of the gathered turned to Replicus' left and focused on the figure of a slender woman, decked in armour similar to Grim's. The only difference was, from the waist, it turned into a plaited battle skirt, and continued with high silver boots that had a metallic sheen.

This woman had dark hair tainted with green at the ends, tied into a ponytail. She had a pair of hostile, narrow eyes and a pointed nose that seemed to accuse anyone it faced.

Grim shivered a little, more weirded out than afraid.

This woman, Pherdanta, was also an Unlimited, and she had a creepy ability that made everyone oblivious to her presence as long as there was a big enough distraction. And well... the boss matched the requirements for that perfectly.

All this was to say, she had been standing here the entire time.

'Another thing I can never get used to,' Grim thought exhaustedly.

Pherdanta exposed a scroll from her storage. It had a velvet coloured paper onto which a message was written in white cursive.

She read it out:

A tragedy worth our attention has risen. All registered factions are to travel to the Severed Coliseum in half a day's time. Failure to do so will be met with a VISIT.

-Emissary of the Nine Immortals

Grim's face turned dark and his red eyes bulged.

"The Immortals are calling? They are actually real?" he said.

Allora's excitement also dimmed significantly.

"A summon. Usually it comes from the Head Faction. They wouldn't joke around and say it's the Immortals right? It's been a fable for so long," she said concernedly.

The others seemed confused and a little frightened as well, but they hardly showed it. Only the Unlimited had freedom to express themselves before the boss.

Replicus didn't speak for a while, but then...

"All that doesn't matter. We will leave as soon as I am done with a few errands. As you said, Grim, this is likely to do with the trembling, and I too am curious as to what happened," he said.

The calmness in his voice seemed to infect the others.

"Alright then," Grim said with a sigh. "Will we be using the cloud?"

"That won't be necessary, " Replicus said, and then his focus which had already perused over the group, settled on the boxes a few of them were holding. "What have you captured this time?"

Grim cleared the sediments of thought from the previous conversation and wore a wide smile.

"I found some interesting Cluster beasts, boss. One of them is even of a very high tier. For some reason, he can't use his mana, but I thought he and his hairy friends would be useful to us," he said before gesturing for the boxes to be presented closer to Replicus.

"Is that so?"

A phalanx extended from the clouds and pointed at the boxes that were set a few meters from the pool of lava around Replicus' throne.

In an instant, the boxes were disassembled into separate plates, and from within them, the living beings that had been miniaturised grew to full size.

There were many beasts, much of them looking the same, except one.

This one looked like a man with silver fur around his face and over his head as hair. It wore a baggy long-sleeved shirt and similarly baggy pants. Its eyes, unlike those of the others, dark and deep, focused on the strongest individual around.

Both Replicus and this beast were smitten with surprise, but for two completely different reasons.

...

Suddenly, a fierce burst of mana poured from the Null Lifeform and his clouds swarmed to fill half of the floor, the Levin that struck from them growing several folds more terrifying.

Replicus bellowed, excitement and awe livid in his voice.

"Hahahahaha... Is it fortune or chance that you have leapt from my right hand only to fall into my left?"

Chapter 788: An Account

As ferocious as the swathe of dark cloud was, along with its livid flashes, it did not do any harm to Replicus' men. In fact, aside from the visual spectacle, they all did not feel the hostile excitement contained within the immense mana their master had just exposed.

All of it, was instead meant to thwart the burning resistance in Baddan's eyes only.

Indeed.

The Sky Watcher and his riders were the guests that had been captured by Grim, and now, in a striking stroke of chance, and perhaps fortune, Baddan found himself before Replicus, a variant of Skullius whom he had met hours ago.

Baddan had been surprised by the depth of power that Replicus held even while sitting in silence. The cloud with sunny flares for eyes postulated a presence of immense strength... and a vast pool of nothingness at the same time, however that was possible.

It was like being placed in an empty vacuum. There might not be anything within to appreciate, but the suffocation would definitely be overwhelming.

Baddan buckled.

Amidst the black, he found torchlights illuminating his figure.

Replicus had swiftly left his throne and was now staring down at him menacingly, or rather it looked that way.

"Tell me. Do you recall meeting a human with auburn hair and a green sword?" Replicus asked, his voice several times more vibrant and intimidating. Without a perfect view of the floor, Baddan was almost left to believe that Replicus' voice was juggling the whole Fortress.

The dark eyes of the creature expressed a firm apprehension.

The situation was not at all favourable for him.

Even if he could use his mana right now, all his abilities were pretty much useless since he and kinsmen were no longer in their world. The blue clouds that Baddan commanded were no more. The great Appairitoni had been destroyed, along with all else that he called home.

He had been lucky to survive at all, and flee with what remained of his clansmen across the seas.

"Yes," Baddan answered. "I met... one such as you have described."

"Hmmm. A communication skill. How rare. I see. Is he the one who halted the movement of your mana?" Replicus asked.

Baddan looked straight into the bright lights.

From what this creature had uttered before dyeing everything black to now, it was obvious that he knew what had happened to his core, as well as the one who had done it.

What was going on here?

"Yes. It is... as you say."

"Ah, I see. You are one of the beasts from the place the Royale... the competition among humans was being held, aren't you?"

Baddan frowned, but confirmed this too with a nod.

"Hmm. Good," Replicus said.

A few moments passed, and then, as if the view hasn't been tainted in dark cloud just now, everything cleared.

Replicus was back on his throne – to Baddan – in an impossibly quick transition.

Some of the armoured experts gulped. Nothing seemed to have changed.

Baddan was the only looking a little pale, while his clansmen and their Retrievers lay docilely on the floor.

"Looks like I will get a good account of what truly happened out there," Replicus said. "Now, please do narrate everything that happened to you and around you, ever since your world was used as the venue for killing sport, Baddan."

...!

Baddan was alarmed at having his name called out. He hadn't mentioned it. How did this creature know?!

'What foe is this? Was not killing that man and his partners immediately what lead to all this misfortune?' Baddan wondered.

Sadly, asking questions to Direction did not award a response, and Baddan did not need a Divine messenger to tell him that aggravating this being before him wasn't wise.

He could confidently tell on his own that he was outmatched here. It wouldn't do to have his clan wiped out after managing to escape the cataclysm prior.

"Very well," Baddan said. "It all started when a young one of your kind.... with a fierce energy of life entered our world..."

.....

The fact that Replicus knew his name somehow discouraged Baddan from lying, but he hadn't really been keenly intent on doing so. The humans, their nature, as well as their world had rules he was unfamiliar with, so perhaps what he thought were shrewd lies would appear to be funny, childish attempts that would be seen through easily.

Therefore, Baddan told the truth.

He began from when he had suddenly spotted an innumerable number of dark crows that flooded the sky months ago, and had then seen a blood covered Rias whom he hurried to battle, only to lose almost immediately.

He explained the orders Rias had given him to follow while threatening to wipe out his clan, and what he had been told about the Royale so that the concept wasn't too lost to him. He told of his kills when the game started, until he met Skullius, and had had him and his companions play a game.

He explained how he lost through some witchery from the Hybrid Luman, and how he was escorting them to the mountain when they were suddenly separated.

"After that.... I spent some time trying to find my kinsmen. Thankfully, my bond has a good of sense of smell so within minutes I had gathered.... a majority of them, but then, a nauseating pillar of fire suddenly rose. I saw it rise and devour many, many souls... fresh from death.

I led my men towards it, urged to extinguish it by instinct but... I saw that young one there, and I abandoned the thought. I fled with my own. The next thing I recall.... are powers so great they humbled the skies, tore apart the ground from its foundation and spun the world around us. Our world was destroyed, as simply as that.

Thankfully, we survived, and distanced ourselves from your kind as quickly as we could..."

Replicus listened to the tale with interest.

"I see..."

He gathered a basic, but helpful picture.

The nauseating pillar of fire...

Cluster beasts, in his experience, unlike beasts from forests and Sacred Forests, did not know about Undeath. They only instinctively hated it without knowing what it was.

So, with Baddan's account as reference, it was safe to assume that the Green Neolists made their move. The souls that Baddan spoke of...

Many, many...

These couldn't belong to the finalists of the Royale if even Baddan expressed just how many they were.

Replicus' sockets flared.

'The witnesses. It has to be, especially if my original body is alive. Did all of them die?' he thought.

Ultimately, there were still a lot of pieces missing from this story, but at least Replicus understood a bit of it.

The Premium Age Royale was used to harvest souls. The purpose? He couldn't imagine, as Baddan had fled from anywhere close to Rias and what was happening around him.

It was also unfortunate that Replicus couldn't fill himself with Skullius' memory since the two needed to be close to share anything other than cumulative experience.

In any case...

"Your tale has been quite helpful," Replicus declared. "You resisted the urge to be difficult. I commend that. If you desire, I will grant you a splendid opportunity."

Baddan maintained a straight, but cautious face.

"What opportunity?" he asked.

Replicus leaned forward. A dark phalanx protruded from the clouds, and conjured a white string that floated before Baddan, emitting a sacred glow.

"Serve under me loyally. Join my cause. If you do, I will keep your kin safe, feed you and defend you. I will even undo what has been done to your mana core as well," the windy voice came.

"Grasp that cord, and I will give you a home and a purpose."

Chapter 789: Truly Unlimited (1)

The reason why Replicus had known that Baddan had come into contact with Skullius, was because he had felt the traces of the original's mana in the 'gears' of Baddan's core. He was sensitive to such things; residuals.

He had asked a few questions for confirmation, just in case, but ultimately, he was already sure Skullius had met the Sky Watcher.

Now, Baddan's account had interested Replicus in more than one way. He was surprised by how reasonable Baddan was. Of course, that could have been a lie, but he imagined it must be true. His narration also accounted for the loss of his abilities since the Cluster was destroyed, but to Replicus, it didn't diminish Baddan's worth.

Not in the least.

The skeleton under the dark cloud waited for Baddan to make a choice. Given what he could tell of the Sky Watcher's personality, he saw equal opportunity for either response; positive or negative.

Baddan spent a few seconds thinking, or at least looking to be doing so.

All throughout, everyone kept silent. The experts maintained tight lips because there was no need to interrupt, and Baddan's kinsmen did not interfere because... well, they were simply lost to the whole situation. They continued to docilely settle on the floor while their leader pondered over whether they should live or not.

Soon, Baddan spoke.

"What do you gain from adding us to your ranks?" he asked, suspiciously. "You have no doubt already noticed that even with my ability to use mana, I am worthless."

Grim paid close attention to Baddan.

He had been caught off guard when Baddan had started to speaking to him hours ago, but that surprise had paled in comparison to how much of an underwhelming battle he had got, when compared to what he had expected from the high tier Cluster beast.

After Baddan's account, he understood why.

Replicus chuckled hoarsely.

"What do I gain? I lack among my ranks combatants who can use high level abilities. For instance, a Majestic Territory," he answered.

Baddan wasn't sure how, but he knew this was an honest answer.

The faces he saw now, and those he had seen before...

Even the frightful young one who had killed nearly 90% of all living, sentient beings in his Cluster...

None of them portrayed a significant grasp on the concept of Territories. Even the white-haired man who had defeated him did not seem to be capable of it.

Baddan wondered if it was that rare among the kind outside his world, to manage a Territory. Even Beckoned Retrievers could manifest one as long as they had enough tails and a ripe tier.

"You seem to understand my circumstances already," Replicus added. "Finding Incandescent Stage experts – those capable of expelling Territories – to join me is far from easy. There are a limited number of them already. I am not above turning to beasts as recruits."

"What about my kin?" Baddan asked.

"How many assurances do you need? If I wanted to kill them, I would have. However, I have found good uses for them instead. Uses they can manage while living."

Baddan still showed a great deal of hesitation. In a perfect world, he would have loved to escape and run far with his kinsmen, away from all these treacherous races, but alas...

As long as he at least got confirmation that they would not die. They was certainly a better way to kill them, for this being, than having all this chatter.

The Sky Watcher grasped the glowing string before him.

In a breath, a strand of light that peeked from between his clenched fingers, hurried its way to Baddan's heart while another raced towards the mess of clouds over the throne.

Baddan felt something within him constrict slightly, and then a painful jolt rocked his body for a moment.

The gleaming sockets of Replicus pulsed with light at that same moment.

"Good," he said. "We are now bound to our word."

Baddan felt his chest. He didn't know it, but because Replicus had developed a habit of making magical contracts whenever unfamiliar faces were involved, he had ended up perfecting the art of trade and negotiation, forging the ultimate skill for it.

It was simply called [Tried Bond]. It had a simple function too, when it came to mediating, making sure that he and the target – should he desire – both benefitted according to their promises.

However, devastating consequences were set to follow, should the conditions he proposed, or imposed on the target were not met. This was all to replace his inability to abuse a Tie of Exchange.

Replicus extended his finger from the clouds, and pointed at Baddan. The Sky Watcher felt sharp pain, and then great, cool relief as mana gushed from mana core freely.

Wait!

It flowed even faster than before, and saturated his mana channels speedily!

The Sky Watcher was shocked, and he gawked at Replicus.

"As I promised," the Null Lifeform said, before turning to Grim. "Assign our guests rooms and organise them food according to their preference."

Grim nodded.

"Yes, boss," he said. He had been expecting to be assigned responsibility for these beasts since he was the one who had gone out of his way to bring them here.

With meaningful gestures, and help from the other experts – one of which was Yuyui who scrambled to leave Replicus' presence – Grim lead the group of creatures from the throne.

Baddan took one last look at the cloud form of the terrifying being.

Never had he imagined that his fate would be to meet this monster and be conscripted into his organisation. What kind of creatures were these morally? What would he be assigned to do?

Baddan didn't know.

"I wouldn't think about it too much if I were you," Grim who walked beside Baddan said, prompting the Cluster beast to turn his head to him. "You made the right choice, and you get to live comfortably from now on. There was a time when I doubted the boss' words. He said something eerily similar to us back then, and like you, we only had two extreme choices."

Baddan remained silent, but listened keenly.

The group reached what seemed to be a large, circular marking on the floor with grove marks similar to those that were on the archway which teleported people to this place. Grim gestured for everyone to stand on it.

"You're probably the luckiest you've ever been. If you had met anyone other than us on this side of the world, you would have been dead in a heartbeat," Grim said with a grin.

With a bright glow from the marking on the marble floor, the group was transported to a higher floor.

*

Allora had remained before the throne, and the breeze washing from behind it due to the absence of a wall.

She kept gazing at Replicus with a proud, and confident pair of eyes.

"Of course," Replicus said with what looked like a sigh. He rose from his throne.

"Come. Let us see what the legacy you acquired is capable of."

Chapter 790: Truly Unlimited (2)

To leave any floor within the Honing Fortress, a circular mark at its centre on the floor, with charged groves in it that responded to a variety of signals, needed to be occupied and activated. Replicus, Allora and Pherdanta stood on it, and Pherdanta uttered, "Third floor."

In a brilliant flash that temporarily transmuted their bodies, the trio was transported to the third floor, where they materialised in their original forms over a circular marking similar to the one on the floor they had just left.

As soon as they appeared, Replicus gave Pherdanta an order.

"Bring Kenno to me."

"As you wish," Pherdanta said before she zipped away.

A vast corridor with the same shiny, dark marble extended forth, along with several wide paths leading to different places around this floor. Numerous faces could be seen in the corridor as Replicus and Allora passed.

Replicus had grown his operation by recruiting a variety of decently talented combatants, and at the moment, in total, they all numbered around 114 – 47 Masters and 67 Advancers.

Most of them were outfitted with golden armour, and if one recalled, this was the same armour that Yuyui had retrieved after killing a Grand Priest in Genhuis, and securing his Mythical Grade storage pouch within which stacks of legendary armour were packed.

Said storage pouch was now the headquarters of Replicus' group; the entire space in which the Honing Fortress was placed, but since the pouch had a variety of functions, such as being able create different entrances and exits to its inner space which was habitable by living things, Replicus had decided to abuse that function in order to establish some degree of professionalism and security.

It wouldn't do to be seen packing 114 people inside a small pouch.

The experts gave deep bows as Replicus passed before they went about their business.

Said business, had to do with why this mansion was called the Honing Fortress. Most of the day for these souls, was spent honing skills that Replicus demanded them to be familiar with. For instance, mana manipulation.

The third and fourth floors were used for different sets of exercises, and as Replicus and Allora passed by an adjacent corridor, they saw a dozen cube-like rooms with glassy doorways.

Pure bursts of mana flitted around experts who were sitting the rooms in their own comfortable position, making great attempts at sensing mana. The rooms were a mechanism to assist in Class Branching into Energy Forming. Skullius had seen similar spaces in the Harem's Guild Residence way back, in Inhone City. Tulnas had explained how they worked.

Unlike Energy Formers Class Branching into more physicals styles of combat, Form Users and Arma Users required spaces where energies were concentrated so that they could try to understand them better.

It was very expensive to erect such spaces, but for Replicus, it hadn't been a problem. He had created these himself. The current him not only understood mana to a terrifying degree, he also understood Null Life Essence, and its different forms extremely well now.

After passing by several corridors with several experts trying to perceive energies, the duo reached an isolated room at the very end of the floor. It looked like the ones at the Guilds Association in Genhuis City used for examining prospective mercenaries.

It was massive, with a reinforced floor and wall, and no other opening but the luxurious door.

Allora beamed.

"I never imagined I'd be here one day," she said as she felt for the dark floor, and took a strange whiff at the air, as if it was any different from that she had been smelling throughout the corridor.

Replicus remained silent for a while.

"How do you feel about your life now, compared to before?" he asked.

Allora was a bit surprised by the inquiry, but she answered almost immediately.

"I'm glad you forced us under your wing back then. Being a common bandit wasn't really to my liking. Realising my full potential on the other hand, has been a blast. I'm truly living," the tall woman said brightly.

"I hope you feel that way till the end."

"As a bandit, I was always prepared to die. As a weak Shaman, I couldn't do much even then, and had to accept that I could be killed quite easily if not for the others. I'm still prepared to die. As long as it's a good death."

Allora grinned. She swiped her wavy jet black hair away from her brown eyes as she spoke with solid confidence.

Replicus didn't give a remark her declaration.

At that moment, Pherdanta walked in with a man adorned in a Granted Armament.

It was the familiar face of Kenno, the bandit leader who Skullius had fought against back when he went to defend Evic, a city in the Isise. He had been the leader of the bandit group which had now been brought under Replicus.

Kenno had been the first to become an Unlimited, and be granted an Armament, so in a way, he was a senior to the others, but not exactly the strongest among them.

"You called, boss?" Kenno asked after giving a modest bow and a light yawn.

"Yes," said Replicus. "I need you to put our very own Allora to the test. She has acquired a Hidden Class."

Kenno turned to Allora who gave him a broad smile. He sighed exhaustedly.

"Congratulations..." he said weakly, and she laughed.

It was customary for a new prospective Unlimited to be tested by her soon-to-be peers, and Replicus had chosen Kenno to do it because, well... according to his knowledge of the individual traits of his elite squad, Kenno was the most qualified.

His Hidden Class abilities were... the most tame.

"I think it would be better if you battled without your Granted Armament, Kenno," Replicus expressed to Kenno.

Kenno looked at his blue, white and silver armour. That was fair. His armour in particular gave him advantages that were better used when fighting with enemies rather than friends.

With a thought, the armour unfurled from his body like the petals of a flower in bloom, and Kenno stepped out, leaving the hunk of several measures of special material standing.

His slightly bulky body pressed against his casual shirt and pants as he flexed his muscles and gestured for Allora to follow him to the very centre of the room.

Soon, the two were standing six meters from each other in their stances. Replicus and Pherdanta stood close to the door, watching closely.

Allora paid keen attention to the slightest shifts in Kenno's muscles. He had been a very capable Form User before awakening a Hidden Class, and when one awakened to that, their former abilities were not lost.

Traces of weak mana showed in Allora's eyes around Kenno. The moment any of the twisting energies swelled, was when Kenno would attack.

However...

Allora's advanced mana manipulation hadn't helped in the least. She had barely taken a half a breath when Kenno's body covered her view. In a panic, her instincts lead her to duck down, spread her arms try to tackle Kenno and lunge against him.

"Would you look at that?" Allora heard Kenno's voice flit by her ear as she dove to embrace him. Somehow, Kenno had already moved past her while she was busy chasing his after image.

She felt her neck get trapped within Kenno's arm and a moment later, she had slammed into the floor harshly.

Allora didn't wait for the pain to subside.

She sucked in a deep breath, blasted her knuckles heavily against the ground to push herself up, and in the next second, she stood firm and scanned around her till she found Kenno.

The man's mighty forearm whacked against the side of Allora's neck, and she felt as if she had been smitten by disorienting thunder. She staggered, only to be struck by a fist in the gut, which sent her speeding to the other end of the room.

Allora pounded against the wall which remained unharmed despite the atrocious force.

"You're trying a bit too hard to master Form Using in such a limited amount of time. Is that what your new Class can do?" Kenno asked.

Allora rose and sat against the wall.

"Not really," she said with a heavy breath. Kenno's hits were rather casual, but they were effective. After every hit he landed, he could have dealt a killing blow if this was a real fight.

Allora admired that. Her past as a Shaman could never entice her this much. In fact, her personality slowly changed as she attempted to branch into Form Using.

Her eyes sparkled as she analysed Kenno's movement, and then she rose.

"Let's try this again," she said, but didn't move away from the wall.

Kenno immediately understood why.

'Hmm. She's trying to make sure I can't speed past her and attack from behind again. Decent strategy,' he thought. Never did he ever imagine that one of the Shamans from his former band would be showing some potential in hand to hand combat.

'I can still beat you just as easily though.'

Kenno dashed towards Allora in a straight course.

He arrived before her so quickly that she hadn't been able to guard or prepare adequately by the time his attack came.

...!

Kenno dug an upper cut into her gut and the force of it travelled through the walls. Allora groaned loudly in pain. Pinned by Kenno's fist, she found it hard to move. It was as though a great nail bore through her, and into the wall.

Was this natural?

Her strategy was working against her.

But...

Replicus' sockets flared.

'There it is...' he thought.

...!!!

A torrent of mana suddenly gushed from Allora's body without warning.

It brightened the room, and devoured her figure along with Kenno's.

'What in the world...?' Kenno's eyes bulged.

He felt Allora's mana spew at him like water from the floodgates of a large dam, and strangely... shockingly... appallingly...

It did not stop.