

Undead 721

Chapter 721: Fleeting Pioneer

The Hexer's Inheritance floated a great distance in each direction slowly, mirroring Sila's apprehension. Bit by bit, Skullius had delivered the constant bombshells of hazards that potentially awaited him, which made the Tower General move around at a snail's pace.

Sudden bursts of lightning?

Immortal beasts?

Sila grew silent, preferring to not hear anymore.

This worked well either way, since if he headed in the direction of the mountain, but without any clear destination in mind, he would still be forced to hover very slowly.

'Absurd!' Sila cried to himself.

If he could exhibit some of his strength in this orb body, he would have felt safer, but he was merely imposing his consciousness onto a floating, round object which, like [Lucent Apparition], was dependent on Skullius.

This was a foul way to spend eternal free time.

What made it even worse was the thick storm of clouds that had rushed from out of nowhere, dipping even lower than their normal altitude.

This made it difficult for even Skullius to find the distant glowing GOAL for the next stretch of time. After a while, he had started following after Sila, having given up on following the treacherous, or maybe sacred mountain for a while.

Perhaps exploring more would do some good, even though it was so quiet all around that the experience didn't get any better.

Thankfully, with the link between the Hexer's Inheritance and Skullius, Sila and the Hybrid Luman could converse about matters great and small to pass the time. It wasn't like they didn't have anything at all to talk about.

'You know I remember a time when Aigas was dangerous in its own natural way – Clusters were a bonus. The abundance of powerful natural beasts from the forests was what kept accelerating our own growth. While this is certainly terrifying, I recall several creatures that roamed the lands of Pelian unrestrained, with prowess exceeding that of the ones here. They couldn't revive after death though.'

'Really? And you survived so long despite that because...?'

'I was, and still am a devout minister of the Deities, tomato flinger! Like none has ever seen!'

'Flesh you. Didn't you curse out Quintess some time ago? When you finally decided to give in to a "blasphemous existence, an undead like me"?' Skullius mocked with a raised brow.

'That was before I knew you would betray me.'

'I remember you stealing my body!'

'I RECALL YOU MAKING A DEVIOUS DEAL TO PURGE ME WITH THAT INSUFFERABLE STRAY KNIGHT FIRST!'

The back and forth was suddenly cut short by a pause from Skullius.

'...Fair enough. I'll give you that,' he then said.

Sila wasn't wrong. Back then, while he probably would have taken over Skullius' body anyway, it didn't help that the Hybrid Luman (Discount Human then), had accepted when Bek, the only Spirit Warden he had met so far, offered to remove Sila from within him.

This was after he had promised the Tower General a chance to see his wife.

In any case, Skullius had apologised for it and tried to make up with Sila after beginning on his rough endeavour to reforge his lost mana core, assuring the Tower General who was prepared to fade away, that he would at least help him find out if any of his comrades were still alive, detained in the Labyrinth of the Yoke.

'We already solved that one though, didn't we? We hugged it out and everything.'

'Hmph!' Sila grumbled.

Another pause ensued before the Tower General suddenly said solemnly.

'I'm not thick, you know, tomato flinger...'

'Hmm?' Skullius responded, confused. 'What is it now?'

'I mean it. That second time when you were offered a chance to get rid of me, by that Giant.... You could have erased me, but you didn't. You kept me alive to keep your word, didn't you?'

Skullius' expression remained unchanged, and neither did anything in his mind show a shift – emotion or thought.

'You could say that. We all learn with time. Besides, something in me kept stabbing at the fact that keeping my word was better than breaking it. So rather than choosing the easy way out...' he said. 'Maybe I chose to build some character.'

Sila kept silent.

'Then again, I did also keep you as a failsafe for if I ever die. But you already know that.'

A spark of agreement registered from Sila's consciousness.

After that, he didn't seem interested in talking to Skullius anymore, regardless of the tonnes of baggage he had planned to spill.

Damn it.

That was the extent of what both seemed comfortable conversing about. Skullius had wanted to ask about historic events from the past, but he lost the urge.

The silence suddenly became a bit more comfortable.

The fruitless expedition – with one orb, and one man, not man – went on until... so sudden that it caught Skullius off guard, Sila screamed in his mind.

'Tomato flinger! There's something here! Hurry!'

The Hybrid Luman shot towards the Hexer's Inheritance at once, reaching it in a few breaths. He swept everything with [Graceless Hunter] and found what Sila was talking about.

There, high up in a tree, so close to the hanging clouds, was a creature staring at the two curiously.

Skullius instantly went on alert, though while wondering what kind of monster this was.

It had strong arms and legs, the feet and hands showing no distinction from each other. Skullius was sure they were interchangeable. Short hairs grew on the creature, which was humanoid, a human-like, long face added to its long head. Black sclera filled its eyes, around them reddish, wrinkled skin that smothered a thick nose.

The Hybrid Luman had been looking for a tail on its body, but couldn't find out, which he couldn't tell if it was a good or bad sign.

Thankfully, the creature didn't seem to exhibit any hints of irrational hostility like the Retriever, but this also added to his anxiety.

He had never not been met with confrontation or some form of hateful reaction when encountering a Cluster beast.

In fact, he had never seen a Cluster that had multiple types of species. At least ones that seemed so different.

From the guidance field, he could tell this wasn't like the Beckoned Retriever, because a different name was shown.

[Fleeting Pioneer].

The creature was only Tier 7, but Skullius didn't feel any more relaxed by knowing that. For all he knew, it could be worse than the Retriever if it also gained some sort of ability from the environment.

The Fleeting Pioneer put its finger beneath its chin, looking to be wondering about Skullius, and the strange jade orb floating beside him.

'Probably shouldn't take any chances,' Skullius thought after scanning around him to make sure the creature was alone. They may be more of these... Pioneers, and if he didn't deal with one of them when he had the chance, he felt he might regret it.

In a blink, Skullius had brandished his sword and swept past the stretch of distance between him, and the enemy. Before a second could tick, he had struck to turn the Fleeting Pioneer into cubes, and prepare for a possible reanimation, which would require other drastic means to inhibit.

Yet...

...!

Skullius felt in his concentrated senses, the beating sensation from the Fleeting Pioneer's heart, the warmth from its flesh, the sturdiness of its bones, and the fierce thrum of its blue core.... all the signs of a living, existing creature he had sensed micro moments ago, disappear when Demion's Dance had its edge to the creature's head!

Only an image remained, one that allowed his sword to pass through without doing any damage.

'What?' Skullius thought, astonished.

He was still suspended in mid-air when he felt the vital signs he had missed just now emerge just below, on the ground.

The Fleeting Pioneer was somehow now on the ground, picking its nose disinterestedly.

Skullius frowned.

'What the hell was that?' he wondered. 'I used [Destined Warp Steps] just now. Even the Retriever couldn't keep up.'

As dazzling footprints appeared in front of him, leading another trail to his swift victory, Skullius attacked again, but by the time his sword was ready to fillet the Fleeting Pioneer, only an image remained once again.

This time, Skullius had paid closer attention.

'Sila, what did you see just now?' he asked the Tower General who had been spectating all along.

'...I'm not sure how to explain it, tomato flinger. It's not easy to see, but it seems your attacks aren't doing the damn thing any harm. After you strike, it appears in another location, perfectly fine.'

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

It seemed even Sila couldn't tell what was REALLY happening here. Sight wasn't a reliable sense with this.

The Hybrid Luman could tell.

It wasn't that this creature was faster than him. Its stats, agility-wise, were a little lower than his.

It wasn't moving out of the way on its own. Something was automatically keeping it out of harm's way. It was like the core features of its existence were transplanted elsewhere right when it was about to be injured, and only an afterimage would remain.

'Dammit. Is it another mutation? No, this thing is humanoid. It must have a Class,' Skullius thought.

When rechecking its status, he found that it indeed had a Class, but it was called... Fleeting Pioneer.

'Huh?'

While sorting his thoughts on this creature, the Fleeting Pioneer suddenly raised its head. It looked past the clouds with such an urgency that resembled that which one would get when having forgotten something important.

Before Skullius could say 'sockethole', the long faced creature stormed away, leaping from branch to branch impressive like a famous, hide-adorned man-child from an otherworldly reality.

Skullius immediately gave chase, Sila following behind him. He decided not to approach too close, or use any other offensive means since this creature seemed to have a different influence from the environment, which seemed to mirror its strange, non-violent nature.

'Maybe attacking it isn't the way,' Skullius thought.

But what had it seen that had made it run so suddenly?

Even now, it was still looking up, as if seeing something Skullius couldn't.

For a few minutes, Skullius, with Crude Vision couldn't understand.

However, when a patch of thick clouds that had been fogging the skies split off a little, his eyes widened.

In the distance, was the tall mountain and the GOAL, both of which had been obscured completely by the clouds earlier.

That's where the Fleeting Pioneer was headed?

But then...

But then...

Skullius' eyes opened further when he realised something, and felt his racing feet.

Then joy spread across his face.

Chapter 722: Flower, Barrel, Snow

"For greed is me,

Benevolence is you,

When you devour me whole,

I perish from sight,

Cruelty says I,

Kindness says you,

When you speak your name,

I crumble in fright..."

Gabel recited with passion a set of words that those who heard elsewhere couldn't understand at all.

It was the genuine look of solemnity, and enlightenment he wore that made the audience feel as if they were the ones who were insane, and too ignorant to understand.

Even the fundis among them who understand deep facets of hidden messaging, obscure poetry, and contradiction, couldn't quite place what any of this could relate to.

Worse than this was what came before, with veils, lady of the veils, crimson silks and whatnot.

Even though there were other contenders having more interesting endeavours, adventures, and battles which were shown all around on the screens, a few of the witnesses couldn't help but dedicate a few moments to try and understand this man.

Since the Royale began, he had encountered two creatures of the same type. They both looked like jaguars, one with two tails, the other with three. From previous viewing – as at this point, several of the contenders had exposed the special abilities of these beasts – the witnesses had expected Gabel to be surprised by their reanimating gimmick.

The surprise didn't show on Gabel's face however. It had remained hung low, tracing the pages of his small book, with a large glaive leaning close to it, on his shoulder. The audience had instead been blasted aghast when the creatures had simply been left stuck in place, mid-lunge in their effort to attack him.

No exchange had occurred.

No scuffle.

The second Retriever hadn't fared any better.

Seeing the intruder who didn't even bother to look at it had fuelled its rage, but it was bound to keep its emotions to itself, because it was left stuck in place as well, as if paralysed while Gabel passed.

This little bit of showcase had left the witnesses wondering, and eager to see and understand Gabel. Sadly, all they could lean on was his muttering, which made as little sense as his powers.

The chase continued.

Even though Skullius was sure the Fleeting Pioneer wasn't interested in him, or at the very least didn't even know he was pursuing it, judging by its slacked jaw in tandem with its dazed eyes, he remained cautious.

His urge to kill it had vanished ever since he had discovered that these beasts were likely one of, if not the only way to get to the GOAL quickly!

The principle of the clouds still stood.

As long as Skullius wasn't targeting the mountain, he could move quickly, provided his target was close even if directly aligned with the GOAL. Initially, he had thought to exploit this, exchanging close target after close target in order to get closer to the mountain, but it didn't work that way.

Not exactly.

Sooner or later, the intent to reach the mountain showed when one followed through with this idea.

Keeping the mountain in sight, making sure you were headed in the same direction for thousands of kilometres, maybe more, was ridiculous. The intent to reach the GOAL, as hot as it would become, would cause hiccoughs in speed, since, as it seemed, the clouds above could discern one's intention.

Approaching carelessly, with how 'sacred' the mountain seemed to be, was a taboo.

However...

A solution had shown up.

The Fleeting Pioneer!

As Skullius had been chasing after the damn thing on its unclear journey to the mountain, he found that his speed of travel wasn't restricted!

If he wanted to, he could even use [Destined Warp Steps]!

Suddenly, the name of the creature began to make sense!

'Fleeting' because it would vanish when close to being harmed, and 'Pioneer' because it showed the way!

Skullius was convinced it was impossible for any hostile creature in this place to play the same role as this one. After all, he didn't think any other monster was dying to reach the mountain as quickly as this one – for whatever reason.

Perhaps it was like a sacred messenger of sorts.

Following it as a target, worked wonders. Even the clouds didn't bother him, even if his focus on it slipped.

'So, I assume there are more of these creatures out there. Do they only live in the forest? I could try to capture a few of them, just in case. But wait, would that even work?'

'Tomato flinger...' Sila called.

'What?'

'Are you sure this is safe?'

'Of course not! But this is my first lead since getting here, and it could be my last. I just have to follow for now. Who knows? Maybe your better luck allowed me to actually find the thing.'

'You tend to be more optimistic than I imagine, tomato flinger,' Sila said.

'Is that a problem?'

'...no.'

The journey seemed to turn smooth for a while. Skullius' biggest worry was that the Fleeting Pioneer would fleet its way out of sight, disappearing for good somehow – because why not?

Every unfortunate possibility had to be accounted for.

When the Pionner had gotten side tracked once, Skullius had panicked, and followed after it only to find it relieving itself, something he somehow always forgot happened for normal living creatures. This, semi-fortunately, turned into a marker that confirmed for him that an hour and sixteen minutes had passed since he began racing after the Fleeting Pioneer.

All this time had flown completely over his head!

Skullius stayed hidden for a while after the Fleeting Pioneer finished its business, and sat down, seemingly having forgotten about its mission.

Then, in a comical scene he would never forget, the creature had rose, stumbling like an idiot left and right while almost – and Skullius could have sworn he saw right – checking its wrist, whatever that meant.

The Fleeting Pioneer raced this way and that before looking past the clouds – an extraordinary visual ability it had perhaps – and started for the mountain again, completely oblivious to Skullius following a few meters behind it.

Perhaps 'fleeting' also referred to its memory.

A few other instances of this had occurred again, but Skullius had gotten used to it, his and Sila's concerns mellowing a bit.

It had been baffling how large this forest was, and when Skullius had finally started to see pointed spots of light in the distance, expressing that the close knit arrangement of trees was about to end, his heart had leapt.

Finally.

The dreadful surroundings were about to disappear.

However, the Fleeting Pioneer didn't seem to share his urgency.

It and Sila, almost at the same, were attracted to something to their left that Skullius couldn't see, or rather had been too distracted by the prospect of freedom to notice.

It was only when the dark haired creature turned its head, and stopped that Skullius looked to where its face was directed.

A surprising sight caught him off guard.

About a dozen Fleeting Pioneers were huddled around something a few hundred meters from the trio.

The one Skullius was following suddenly dashed towards them at full speed, much to his frustration.

'Damn it!' Skullius scowled, and followed after it.

He couldn't continue without it, or he'd start on a slow journey all over again. Maybe it would be distracted for a longer period given that these were its buddies.

That said...

Since there were a few more of them, perhaps Skullius could find a way to control them all, releasing them one at a time in order to ensure that he always had his ticket to the GOAL despite any other unexpected distractions.

'If capturing them doesn't trigger their powers, sure...' was Sila's response to this idea of Skullius'.

The Hybrid Luman slowed as he approached the group, with the latest Fleeting Pioneer joining with an even more dazed look to it.

What were these creatures looking at?

....

"What... is that?" Skullius voiced as he saw the odd thing in the midst of the group of long faced creatures.

It looked like a large, plum coloured flower, with a dull, ghoulish pink glow coming from the inner parts of its curved petals that were open wide, revealing what seemed like a... fat barrel within.

Yes. Barrel was the right word.

The shape seemed to match, only, the thick thing had multiple holes all over it, and seemed to be taking in deep breaths that showed with its expansion and contraction!

A dark shudder bolted through Skullius' body as he stared at it. He had followed the first Fleeting Pioneer until he reached within fifteen meters of the huddled group it joined, perfectly entranced by the flower.

But it wasn't a flower.

It couldn't be.

It was so out of place given the environment, which now lacked even a blade of grass near the end of the forest.

Something wasn't right.

Even if [Primal Caution] didn't give a warning, Skullius was sure this wasn't a good thing to be around.

'Tomato flinger.'

No Skullius couldn't get close to that thing. Ever. Not him. Especially not him.

'Tomato flinger!'

If he let himself get drawn like the Fleeting Pioneers, it couldn't possibly do someone like him any good.

'TOMATO FLINGER! STOP!'

Skullius heard faintly Sila's voice that rocked his mind, mildly clearing it of dark thoughts, and stretched his senses that had somehow gotten restrained along the way....

Along the way to the strange flower... huddled around by the Fleeting Pioneers with an enthralled look on his face that bordered on insane.

Skullius was among them.

He was already looking at the fat barrel that grew and shrank, the pink glow, while dark in his sight, possessing his interest all the same.

How had he gotten here?

He didn't know.

'...FLINGER!'

And for a moment, he was startled as Sila kept raving, and screaming at him from somewhere.

'Wait. What am I doing? Right! I have to get away from the... from the...' Skullius thought, trying to resist a sharp pull. An unrelenting draw that went in so deep.

Too deep in fact.

As he tried to resist, though, the view around him changed when he blinked.

Somehow, it was all snow now.

Thick ropes stretched taut from a large... mansion, if he could it something, that stood at the top of this height, connecting to another place hundreds of meters away, appeared in his sight.

Surprisingly, he couldn't see too far. How strange.

'Where am I? Genhuis? How did I...?'

Skullius paused, appalled.

First, because he realised that he could see perfectly now. The colours registered perfectly in his view; white with hints of green for the snow, the gold and blue 'mansion' he was looking at from below...

Second because...

"Brother..."

A voice called from behind him, making him turn while stricken stupid by the outrageous rush of unexpected events.

Brother?

A few paces from Skullius, stood a girl, naked in the cruel cold, flakes of snow beginning to pile on her hair and shoulders, turning her into a pale ghost.

Chapter 723: Trigger

The corner of Skullius' lip twitched, and not in a good way. His emotions swelled while his proper senses returned from the looseness imposed by that strange flower.

Something deep within him ached heavily as he looked at this young girl before him, making it so that he completely ignored the fact that he could see properly.

None of it was important, especially when he started to get what was happening.

This wasn't the first time this had happened.

When he entered a Cluster for the very first time, and fought against the Lucky Gremlins and Jackpot, it had happened.

When he was with Stylla, Fore and Bron, fighting against the Sage Monkeys, it had happened.

Right here, and right now, it was happening again.

Camilla, was standing before him, the very same scene he had seen before re-enacting itself again before his eyes, but this time, he seemed to be in full control of his actions. For now, at least.

Skullius gulped unconsciously.

Camilla had long, dark hair with tinges of light brown at its ends. Her hazel eyes were piercing, her skin, which was supposed to be a neat shade of ivory, an object of admiration, now mimicking the paleness of that of a corpse, with some of her blood vessels showing from it.

It was easy to see, what with her not having any clothes on, not that Skullius paid it any attention. Even if he did, the result would have been the same.

The Hybrid Luman was overwhelmed by the situation. He didn't know what to do, or say.

Unlike previous instances, Camilla's stare felt... real. The chatter he heard from the 'mansion' that was now behind him, brought too realistic of a feel to all of this, and for the first time in a while, Skullius felt utterly powerless.

After all, just like how he had discovered that he couldn't see too far right now, he had found that he didn't have a mana core, that his body was extremely frail, and that the biting cold was battling heavily against the thick coat, and warm hat he was wearing.

He wasn't a Hybrid Luman right now.

Heck, he wasn't even a Discount Human.

He was... human.

A hot breath sprang from his mouth.

Camilla shuddered, and inched closer to it seemingly to absorb some of its heat, and warm herself a little during the pause.

A surge of instinct made Skullius want to take off his coat, and give it to her, but like thunder bursting from within, a torrent of cruel pain hammered through his body... or maybe his soul.

Skullius clutched at his chest, and staggered forward, his face turning pale.

'What was that?' he asked himself.

It was like something deep set viewed even the thought of helping this girl a taboo, vehemently rebuking him.

But...why?

Camilla's face quivered exaggeratedly, and she spoke again.

"What are you waiting for, brother? You wanted me to die so badly, didn't you? I just made it easier now. I'm powerless right now. A few more minutes in this.... ssssss...

snow, and I'll be gone for good. Or you could just get it over with quickly, and then dump me off this hill. Easy enough, don't you think?"

Skullius' face turned darker the more Camilla spoke, trying to smirk even with her freezing face. She could barely open her eyes.

That's right.

Skullius felt like he was supposed to hate her for something, but couldn't remember. Trying to do so made his soul ache terribly, so terribly in fact, that without his body being strong enough to handle it, tears were swimming so close to his eyes.

'Oh damn! It hurts!' he cried inside, and faced Camilla with a strained face.

What had happened?

What was so important that of all the things he remembered, it always had to be this scene with the snow?!

"Do it," Camilla said as she spread her arms wide, with terrible difficulty. The cold didn't feel particularly good under the arms. She heaved in deep breaths with a forced smile. "You scared I'll kill you too? Just rip your head out from here? Haha.

Like I said, I've got nothing right now. Even the pistol in your hand could take me out."

Skullius' mouth fell open, and he grew more confused, but to Camilla's last sentence...

He felt something in his hand.

It was a strange contraption, black in colour, with a handle, and barrel that pointed in another direction.

Did he have this the whole time?

Before he knew it, Skullius pointed the thing at Camilla, and sucked in a deep breath.

Camilla also seemed a bit startled, but she kept up her daring expression.

"That's it. Don't hesitate now, brother. This is exactly what you need. A chance to exact your own stubborn sense of control over everything, including me. Studying law didn't do shit, did it? In the end, you found that it takes using your own two hands to get what you want done, huh?"

Skullius shuddered.

His body... his arm had swung up on its own.

He didn't quite understand what he was doing, but he knew that right now, he was about to kill Camilla.

What the hell?!

What was this?!

What did she mean?

Why was he here?

Who was he?!

All these questions stretched Skullius' emotions to the limit, and finally, he squealed.

"No!"

With an inhuman jerk, he forced himself to pull down the gun, and fell to the snowy ground.

Whatever was steering him from the inside did not like that he resisted its control however, because a burst of horrific pain burned from within him.

Even while in a memory, or in another world, Skullius knew the taste of soul damage, even if it was significantly less impactful than whenever he had actively lost time for Doom Factor 2.

He groaned, and shook violently.

What made it so unbearable was being in this body that grew several degrees colder just by touching the cold on the ground, forcing a hiss out of him as well.

"Argh!" Skullius rolled in the snow, and grit his teeth. The bluish sky above, tainted by the falling snow flakes remained indifferent to his suffering.

He tried to pull himself up, and on the side.

He found himself looking at Camilla.

She had a disappointed look on her face.

She seemed angry even.

"I knew it," she said with a huff. "You never change. You're still insufferably two-faced. You can't ever decide on anything. You can't ever give up on things you are attached to. You think you can control everything with your own words...

your lies. You always want to play both sides, while trying to shut away what you consider unimportant! You—"

Skullius' mouth, to these accusations, suddenly flew open on its own, and he screamed.

"You're wrong!"

"You're a fucking hypocrite! When mom and dad died, you said I could cope in any way I wanted to! You said staying at home like a good little girl, and watering her favourite flowers everyday would make me feel better until I eventually accepted that she was really gone! Dad too! You told me things you didn't believe yourself!"

"I... That's not..."

"You can't judge me for doing what you told me! <Sniff> I was happy! I was finally happy! When mom, and dad took me in, I felt safe! I was...actually happy! And when they died, I felt like everything was collapsing again!

I believed your stupid lies, and kept doing what you told me to, but you left too! You forgot all about me and went to 'follow your dreams'!"

"No... I... I just wanted to..."

Camilla drew close. Her rage had painted her face back to a warm ivory, but she was still freezing.

Yet, she couldn't care less right now.

"Be goddamn honest for once in your life! Just admit it. Because I was never really your sister to begin with, you didn't feel guilty leaving me alone... going on to deal with your own pain somewhere else right? Just admit it. Admit it, and tell me it's okay that I coped with my own pain the only way I could after...

after turning into this.... this.... freak..."

Skullius' head pounded.

A freak?

Just now, he vaguely recalled.

Right.

Unlike him... unlike how he had been for so long, she was different.

And...

Skullius reeled as the pain grew the more he resisted the gushing burst of wrath growling from within him.

He let it slip for a second, and in the next moment, he found himself holding the black, barrelled object again, pointing it at Camilla who backed away slightly.

This time, he too felt a surge of rage, and could barely hold himself as he took a step closer.

A vivid voice bellowed from within angrily.

"Kill her! She killed them all! Kill her! Kill her! It's only right!"

Skullius grit his teeth so hard he felt them crack.

"That's it! Just finish it, you asshole! Do it! Do it!" Camilla screamed with a tremble in her voice that Skullius noticed, but could hardly care for.

He didn't understand anything at all.

It felt too real.

He was already forgetting what Aigas was.

What a mana core was.

All he felt was the cold, the rage, and the murderous intent blinding, and drowning his sanity.

Camilla screamed louder, and louder, urging him to pull the 'trigger', whatever that was, yet he knew he was close to doing so.

Hurried footsteps sounded in Skullius' ear, shuffling the snow, but his bloodshot eyes stole all his focus, firmly keeping Camilla, who seemed to have gone mad, groaning horrible words from deep in her gut at him!

Just shoot!

Just shoot!

Skullius roared, as everything turned hot, atrociously painful, and too much to bear.

Then a loud noise blasted through his ears, rattling his body.

BAM!

Chapter 724: Don't Think!

The loud noise came with a sharp pain that was barely a tickle when compared to what Skullius felt aching within, but the force it carried was so profound that it knocked Skullius on his side!

For a few moments, Skullius felt a ringing in his left ear, and he could barely see anything with his vision whirling about so furiously that he thought he had finally lost. The heat boiling from within subsided significantly, but he was still in pain, a cacophony of voices that sounded much too loud making it hard for him to focus.

His mind was his own again for now, but his body felt terrible.

Skullius wasn't used to this.

Was this what pain felt like? Bodily pain, that was.

He wagered that when it was focused in the right places, it compared to soul damage.

As his mind started to process things correctly, the foreign grip snatched away his sense again, and he found himself wondering.

Right!

Camilla.

Did he shoot?

Was she dead?

Skullius begrudgingly turned to where Camilla had been standing, and... she was still there.

Her face was scrunched up in fury as she stood, unharmed.

Yet, her fierce emotion was not directed at Skullius, it seemed.

It seemed there was someone else here.

Skullius turned his head, and saw that to his left, an elderly man with a thick woollen hat, a swollen blue fur jacket, and baggy, khaki pants that seemed to have been stolen from a giant, was standing next to him, interchanging his gaze between him, and Camilla.

He turned strictly to the naked girl after a while, removed his jacket, and threw it at her before she could say a word.

"I don't know what games you young'uns are playing these days, but if this has to become a common sight, this world will be lost faster than you can say 'millennial'," he said with a grave face.

"This is none of your fucking bus—"

"It better be my business from now on, because you know what, around these parts we won't care if you're a wee little girl or not. If you've lost it, you can't roam free around innocent folks," the older man cut off Camilla. "Better wear the jacket... and perhaps a better set of lips. Cussing anyone, but me out won't do you much good here either."

The man gave a terrible stare into Camilla's eyes, and she found herself reluctantly pulling on the jacket to cover herself.

He then turned to Skullius, and pulled him up in a not-so-gentle fashion before giving him crisp punch across the face. When Skullius yelped, and fell back down while feeling like his head was about to shatter into fragments.

"The first one was so that you didn't have to spend the rest of your life behind bars. Must have lost your darn mind bringing a gun here. The second was to bring out the sense."

As these words rang in Skullius' ear, the burning rage returned, but he didn't do anything drastic. He merely glared at the man from below.

The man harrumphed.

"And there's the sense."

He took the gun which had fallen on the snow, put the safety on, and hid it in his pants. He then crouched down, and lifted Skullius before turning to Camilla.

"Best follow me."

With that, he began pushing Skullius towards the large building ahead.

The blind rage that burned within Skullius didn't fade. He was so blinded by it in fact, that he missed the older man's face twitching weirdly before it turned to him with multiple blinks.

With a jerk, the man forced Skullius to stop.

"What?" Skullius said through his teeth.

"Tomato flinger..." the man said.

...!

Skullius froze.

His body was still unwilling to let go of this ridiculous grudge, but he found it in himself to look at the older man, and whimper...

"Sila...?"

"Yes, it's me. You wouldn't believe the lengths I went to... Nevermind that. We have to get out of here. Right now!"

Skullius was at a loss.

How was Sila here?

What...?

Wait, rather than wondering about that, he should be glad!

He barely had enough mental reason to distinguish reality, and not-reality as it is.

He wanted to say a lot, but couldn't. Sila recognised this instantly.

"We can deal with this later. For now, you just have to follow my lead. Alright? Just—"

"Stop."

From behind the two, Camilla, who hadn't moved even an inch from where she was standing glared at the two darkly.

Skullius' heart sank, and Sila, somehow manifested in the older man's body, turned back, and swallowed a lump of saliva.

Around Camilla, the snow flakes that had been falling from the sky had all stopped, seized by an unknown force that compelled them to remain suspended in mid-air.

"Tomato flinger...?" Sila flavoured the words questioningly, hints of fright added in.

"You think you can tell me what to do? I went through all this trouble to confront him, and you just ruined it!" Camilla screamed in a way that made the hill hum.

"Dammit!" Skullius cried.

Sila immediately realised that he did not have a proper handle on the situation, and from the looks of it, neither did Skullius.

What was coming for them also didn't seem like something they could control.

Camilla, with bloodlust burning in her eyes suddenly thrust her hands forward!

Sila and Skullius, as they sensed the invisible atrocity rushing their way, turned pale, but the former gripped Skullius' right hand, which was suddenly overcome by a terrible sting of pain, and hammered it on the ground!

Just in time...

Maybe a little bit too late...

A loud bang ruined the two's ears, just before everything around them seemed to disappear, the wrathful shriek of a young girl being the last thing they heard.

"ARRRRRRRRRRRRGGGGGGGGHHH!"

Skullius found himself screaming, his vision now dark, but his other senses unimaginably keen.

Something was oozing from around his right hand, but he barely gave it as much focus as he gave the torrent of pain that was burning from his soul.

It was too much.

It was unbearable.

Even now, as he felt his body many folds stronger than it had been seconds ago, he didn't feel the agony turn to become less of an excruciating experience.

Worse yet, his mind was a complete mess.

He didn't even remember where he was.

He wasn't even sure why he couldn't see.

He wasn't certain why his skin felt of a sensation akin to countless hands spreading from it to molest everything around him, and why he perceived eleven creatures scurrying away from where he was confusedly.

What was his name?

Why was he here?

Where was here?

Why did he hear a voice in his head?

'Tomato flinger! Clear your mind. You don't need to think. You can feel the things around you, right? Don't think. Just feel.

Questions won't make you feel any better. Trust me!' the voice encouraged.

Skullius wasn't sure what to do.

He couldn't think of a better way to stop his mind from inevitably approaching the state where it collapsed in on itself like a dying star.

So he stopped trying to think, and began to feel.

It was easy.

His ability to feel things with his skin was better than sight, but just without the colour.

The cold, humid wind.

The swirling, ambient mana.

The crisp sound of tree leaves.

All of it...

Somehow, all of it was pleasant.

Skullius had never truly taken the time to enjoy the mundane abundance of it before, but now, as he did, he found it to be soothing.

He almost felt as if the trees were taking in deep breaths along with him, and as the inconsistent currents of wind beat against him, he welcomed them.

His muscles, which had been unimaginably tense relaxed, and his mind poured out the messy contents to rearrange them neatly on its own as soon as he wasn't consciously influencing it.

The stabbing sensation in his soul persisted, but it didn't seem like his ethereal body was going to implode as Skullius had feared.

Soon, he was in the right mind, his sense having returned.

Unfortunately, he wasn't in a good position mentally still.

Skullius hunched over himself, and buried his head within the enclosure of his arms, his feet unknowingly kicking away a jade orb that had been resting close to him on the ground.

'Tomato flinger...?' Sila voiced.

"Please. Leave me alone for a moment."

"...Of course."

And then there was silence.

Chapter 725: Coping With The Echoes

'You're still insufferably two-faced. You can't ever decide on anything. You can't ever give up on things you are attached to. You think you can control everything with your own words...'

These accusations seemed to have been engraved into Skullius' soul now. He still couldn't understand what that scene he had just gone through really.... or rather where that scene really fit in his previous life.

As strange as it may have seemed, buried underneath the persistent remnants of the intense rage he had been feeling towards Camilla, there was an equally intense degree of love, and care, struggling to resurface and push away the malice.

Skullius, it seemed, loved Camilla.

He cared for her.

Now that he wasn't pressed by the tenseness of the ordeal anymore, he was able to ask himself why Camilla seemed hesitant to pull through with what she had been doing.

He had seen it in glimpses.

What did it all mean? A large chunk was missing, and he only had the bitter part.

What had happened between him and Camilla?

What she screamed at him...

Insufferably two-faced?

Indecisive?

Were these just accusations, or had Skullius really been such a person in his previous life?

He couldn't tell.

Was that re-enactment of the past which he had just lived through accurate? Did he struggle to hear what Camilla had said, and throw a few words of his own to defend himself when it originally happened, or was it modified?

Had he... had he actually ended up killing Camilla, or did that old man intervene just in time as it happened just now?

There were so many questions, but for a while, each time Skullius heard Camilla's accusations, he felt himself shrink further and further into a hard shell that shut off everything around him.

The searing fury which clearly wasn't his own... at least not the current him, continued to burn him from the inside. He couldn't stop it. If he were to open his mouth right now, he felt like he could breath out fire.

'You're a fucking hypocrite! When mom and dad died, you said I could cope in any way I wanted to! You said staying at home like a good little girl, and watering her favourite flowers everyday would make me feel better until I eventually accepted that she was really gone! Dad too! You told me things you didn't believe yourself!'

Skullius groaned.

He started to feel a sliver of the chaotic sensation that had ravaged his mind start to return, and he took a pause, and began to take sharp breaths to alleviate it while taking in the environment through his senses.

Slowly, he calmed down again.

But how could he stop thinking about Camilla's face, and her words when they kept reverberating through his body, rippling like an audio spectrum.

So his parents...

It was safe to assume that they died in the past, and it hadn't been something he or Camilla had taken too well. It must have been sudden.

From how the girl phrased it, it took a very long time for either of them to deal with it, and that seemed to be where the conflict between them began.

The rift that eventually led to her doing something so terrible that Skullius couldn't forgive. But it didn't seem like Skullius was innocent either.

He had done something to her.

Had he abandoned her?

Lied to her?

Skullius frowned deeply. He wasn't above doing things like that now, but there was context.

But then...

Did all this relate to why the subject of parents had become very... heavy for him?

But, he'd seen, and heard a lot of familial bonds before it started to ache him, starting with his conversation with Darwel. Heck, he had even absorbed tonnes of memories from all kinds of people with [Basic Evil Sanction], and saw many interactions with parental figures...

So, why?

'When Somanda evolved...' Skullius thought.

That must be it.

Somanda transcending into Divinity had pushed Doom Factor 2 to another level. After it occurred, Skullius had gone with Stylla to the Estate where she exposed Setkh for cursing their father, and after that, the Hybrid Luman had had his first interaction with Darwel where he first felt the pang of pain when she asked about his parental figures.

These two events were definitely indicators of how much Skullius was starting to get a lot more... vulnerable.

Stylla's situation with her father and Darwel's question...

Skullius clutched his head.

A dreadful breath shot from his mouth.

He scoured with [Graceless Hunter] around him, and activated Crude Vision. The flower that had caused all of this was no more than a meter away from him.

The living barrel at its centre was squashed into goo, and its petals were torn.

Right.

Skullius remembered that his right hand had crushed the thing in oblivion, but it hadn't been his own choice. It was Sila's influence from when he invaded, grabbing his arm, and using it to slam down on the thing.

With a close look, Skullius checked the description of the flower.

~~~

[Smouldering Soul Seducer]

<Mythical>

Any living, sentient creature that perceives the Seducer, will be lured into its embrace, and even if they aren't, the best and worst, the greatest and most tragic, the most beloved and most loathed of their memories are triggered to emerge before them for as long as their mana reserves can last.

-Caution-

The seed of the Smouldering Soul Seducer requires a massive amount of mana to germinate. Afterwards, it will take care of itself.

~~~

'I see...' Skullius thought. 'I guess this is his idea of 'can't kill you' huh?'

The Hybrid Luman was certain that this was one of the items Guissepo mentioned would be in the Royale. It wasn't mentioned among what he said would be 'common', but there was a reason he felt the need to tell everyone that all items he had placed couldn't kill the contenders.

That said...

'Sila,' Skullius called from within.

The jade orb at his feet told him that for whatever Sila had to do, he had retracted his consciousness from the Hexer's Inheritance to help him.

'Yes, tomato flinger...'

'How did you do that? I mean the whole...'

'Well, it wasn't easy! But, even if my soul has been reduced to this, I'm still capable as an Incandescent Stage expert. Everything to do with souls comes easily. Add that to the fact that we are in some ways one soul, I had a better chance. However, your soul is incomplete, and has... obstacles.

Unlike every soul belonging to the Deities, it is strained, and getting through the dreadful undeathly bind around it to reach you was a tall task,' he explained.

Skullius silently nodded.

That made sense.

Sila was always good at things to do with souls, as was everyone at his Stage.

'And that thing about not thinking, so that I could calm myself down?' Skullius asked vacantly.

Sila paused for a bit.

'Well, this isn't new to me. Madness. I've struggled with it over my millenia of immortality in Fulgardt's Labyrinth. Sometimes you find solutions that keep your mind straight, other times you find that you can't stop raving about tomatoes still, after so much time has passed in the darkness...' Sila said. 'Maybe us humans are just that weak.

I figure other stronger, non-human prisoners were able to keep their minds intact though.'

Skullius didn't offer a reply.

Sila sighed, and continued.

'I remember enjoying the natural, open spaces, and the beating of the breeze with my wife everyday in the past. Those mundane memories have stuck with me with so long. The prospect of just feeling the clear air makes me relax.

When I stole your body that time ago, I mainly took away your ability to see in exchange for greater sensations so that I could calm down, thwart the erratic madness, and use the opportunity wisely. I figured since you still had the ability to keenly perceive sensations, doing as I did would help you out as well.'

Skullius wanted to grunt, but he couldn't.

Well, that explained a lot.

Also made sense.

Just Sila mentioning the incident with his body had caused his nostrils to flare up maddeningly, after he let the rage brewing in him slip for a moment.

'Thank you...' Skullius said to the piece of soul. What he left unsaid was that he was also thankful that the Tower General didn't try to take advantage of the opportunity to take over his body again.

It was definitely possible if he wanted to, he imagined, especially with how the influence of the flower seemed to last for as long as the affected had mana. Range didn't matter either. As long you had seen the flower once, it was over.

Sila was likely immune to something like this, which was probably the point.

There were no Incandescent Stage contenders in the Royale, thus none could resist the Seducer. And with none allowed to bring in Mythical grade treasures of their own...

Sila didn't reply to Skullius' gratitude, but Skullius knew he had been heard. Their conversation ended as such, with both unwilling to say any more.

Skullius didn't want to sit here any longer, and wallow in the stress. The rage in him was turning more and more chaotic with such depressing thoughts. Besides, there was a pressing matter at hand, looming over his current thoughts still.

If 24 hours passed with Skullius still stuck in this place, he would revert to his Penetrator form. No words were needed to spell how dangerous that was.

Skullius struggled to stand.

He didn't know it, but his body had turned pale, with dark rings under his eyes.

He certainly didn't feel good.

Expanding his senses, Skullius found traces of the Fleeting Pioneers in different directions. Some must have headed for the mountain, and some must have still been distracted.

The Hybrid Luman didn't have a choice.

He had to power through all the rage, the weakness, and turmoil to reach the GOAL.... but it wasn't going to be that easy.

Not in the least.

Chapter 726: First Instance

A rush of wind caused the waters to ripple madly, and bash against the innumerable dome shaped rocks rising from their collective, repugnant body. One forceful gust was enough to disturb the tranquility that had been here before, but unfortunately, the one causing it made it spawn many times as they jumped from one rock to the next in rapid succession.

Vali had grown impatient.

Simply walking at such a terribly slow speed – as much as the clouds overhead allowed – towards the GOAL, was not ideal.

Sitting still, and doing nothing had never been a favoured non-hobby of hers.

She had wasted thirty minutes adhering to this unrelenting phenomena before bursting towards another goal that had to do with her own selfish desires.

An arrow shaped glow was streaking ahead of her in a direction detached from the mountain, and she was speeding to keep up with it while decked in a brilliant glare of mana that reinforced her strength.

Each time she lifted off one of the innumerable rocks peeking from the dark water, it exploded from the intense force, and Vali would be shot tens of meters towards another one she had set her sights on beforehand.

The navy blue haired beauty gave a rough sigh.

She was making steady progress, but she wasn't going as fast as she would have liked. Hopping wasn't as fast as running, after all, and she would be damned if she let herself touch the dark waters below.

Worse yet, the item she was using wouldn't last much longer if things didn't improve.

She had taken a potion called Finders Leavers.

Its function was to determine the direction, and distance between her, and a target of her choosing. Once consumed, the user had to keep a steady concentration on how they recalled the mana signature of their target to be like.

It wasn't easy, but with consistent focus, an orange coloured arrow would appear, showing the direction of the target, as well as the distance between them – its size grew smaller the closer one got.

Of course, this was merely a Unique grade item, otherwise Vali would have employed the use of something far more efficient, but since there was a limit on Legendary grade tools – the highest tier of tools allowed in the Royale – she opted to bring the golden hook tied to the end of her French braid as her favoured high grade artefact.

'How much longer? I'm getting tired of this,' she thought with a slight frown.

While she did ask herself this, she couldn't help but be grateful that in the far, far distance, the waters seized, giving way for dry land that exploded into all other directions – besides this one, of course. From there, she could hurry on her way to her escapades much faster while also looking for means to travel to the GOAL more efficiently.

Vali was sure there were a few ways to go about doing that, either sponsored by the Game Master, or the Cluster itself.

That was one piece of good news.

As for the other...

Vali temporarily switched the target for the Finders Leavers. The arrow grew almost three times as large, and pointed in a different direction from where she was currently headed.

'Thank goodness I don't have to run into that bastard any time soon,' she smiled, returning the arrow back on course.

'Tomato flinger...' Sila called after a lengthy silence that had grown too uncomfortable, given what had happened earlier.

Skullius merely grunted in response, to which Sila continued, assuming it meant he was allowed to speak further.

'That young lady... Your sister... How was she able to... to uhm... You know...'

Skullius was silent for a while. A long while. By the time he answered, Sila was already preparing to take a mental nap.

'I only got to understand it better when I was facing her. Something... some sort of recollection occurred when she was shouting at me, and also calling herself a freak.

I remembered a little...' he told the old Tower General as he paced about in the forest, following one of the Fleeting Pioneers which was steadily rushing through the plain that had sprung forth, expanding outward fifteen minutes ago, after the line of trees ended.

'Previously, in my original world, strange things happened. I now know that much. Camilla must have been one of the abnormalities in it. One of the first. That's all I remember. It wasn't magic, or anything like that.

I'm sure...'

Sila thought over this.

It was an impressive display really – how Camilla had made the snow stay still in the air. In Aigas that wouldn't have been quite as impressive though, even when pairing it with the fact that the young lady had probably demolished a sizable section of the snowy mountain with but a thrust of her thin hands.

What had made it terrifying at the time, was that both Sila, and Skullius were powerless to do anything about it. They were both facing that might as regular humans. Common folk. Additionally, they hadn't known what would have happened if they were caught in the attack.

That, in particular, was strange.

Sila had to ask.

'That flower is supposed to show the best and worst memories. How come you only saw something like that? There didn't seem to be signs that a wonderful memory would have showed in time, tomato flinger. You... do have good memories, don't you?'

Skullius' nose twitched irritably.

He was still holding in a lot of frustration that had been slowly mellowing out with time, but refusing to disappear completely.

To Sila's question however...

'I do have good memories. But, I think anything that pokes my soul right now is bound to mess me up, and bring out a lot about my past. Besides, from everything I know, Camilla is supposed to be this greatest joy of mine, and most bitter sorrow at the same time. The other half of my soul is represented by her outline...

her shape...' Skullius said before taking a quick leap through a large distance with [Destined Warp Steps] to catch up to the Fleeting Pioneer.

'What I've seen so far... I'm sure it's just the worst memory I share with her. There has to be more. I doubt that encounter on the mountain was where we last saw each other. There are things that come after... and before.'

Sila also shared the same sentiment. Since he had stolen Skullius' body before, and absorbed all his memories from the time, he knew about these memories to a fair extent.

He also felt the same.

A flicker of interest sparked within him.

He wondered what was so special about Skullius before he received the Null Life abilities. Before he became an undead.

Serenity had mentioned it.

Somanda had hinted towards it.

He imagined that if Camilla was special, Skullius was too.

And the Hybrid Luman was probably also coming to the same conclusion.

In the end, they would have to find out what that-

...!

Skullius stopped moving, and Sila, while also feeling IT, was jolted out of his thoughts.

Before either of the two could voice their thoughts and apprehensions, Skullius' body was lifted off the ground, and whisked away by something unseen!

Something pulled on him so eagerly, that Skullius barely had even a micro moment to act, trying to resist whatever it was that had set its sights on him, and stolen his figure from the barely inhabited plain he had been walking in.

Once more, [Primal Caution] had not reacted, but the Hybrid Luman was already setting up [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc]'s active function for when he reached the destination.

What was this?

A Cluster beast?

A contender?

Skullius prepared for whatever it was, the rage he had been suppressing beginning to froth through his defences once again.

Then... it happened.

Skullius' feet finally touched the ground, safely.

No harm had been done to him. He was perfectly fine.

He had simply been transported to another space within the Cluster, it seemed.

This one looked different from the others – not that Skullius had any right to speak on variety when he had been stuck in one place for hours.

An assortment of wide, deep maroon pillars were scattered haphazardly... yet in a rhythm manner around him, all featuring sequences of height that also seemed to have a profound meaning. Each gave a low hiss of mana saturation, and great hollows were at their centres, giving soothing, almost hypnotic whistles when gusts of wind passed.

At the centre of all these pillars – where Skullius was – a large, sacred-looking, crystalline amber rock stood boldly. Its great height was imposing, its egg shape less so. Bones of various kinds, as well as fresh fruit, and dirty roots surrounded it in great number... in an arrangement akin to offering.

The rock made Skullius uneasy.... but it didn't bother him quite as much as the eleven living beings scattered around this place with him.

Contenders.

All of them seemed to have arrived here in the same way as he had, given their readying stances, and some of the looks on their faces. All of them, except one.

A rather short, well built man was looking around in awe, glee, and hints of indignation. In his hand was a weird, spherical object that barely looked real given its ghostly, transparent appearance.

It had begun to break apart, and disappear by the time Skullius placed his focus onto it.

The Hybrid Luman narrowed his eyes.

'I see. That, must be a Draw Bubble...' he thought.

The observant ones around him were already beginning to figure this out too, and among them, Skullius recognised two contenders of interest.

One was man donning long, cream scaly robes that hid everything of his except his long neck, and firm face. His short, dark hair, and nut brown eyes insisted on giving him a relaxed, unbothered look, but Skullius knew he was every bit as cautious as everyone else.

This was Tallo Rashen, the only Mage in the Royale.

The other was a woman with a suspicious glint in her downturned, purple eyes, her wild, long pink hair making her stand out. She was adorned in a tight, minimalistic black half plate armour with many sections of it – chest, elbows, wrists, ankles – encircled with beautiful silver, steel rings, on her waist, three long crimson cloths trailing behind her in the wind.

It was Maxim Flatbed, the crazy bitch, as Skullius had dubbed her in light of their first meeting.

These two were dangerous.

It was some quirky luck that placed these two on the roster for first opponents for some of the contenders here.

Bad stuff, this was.

The tension among the twelve contenders soared after the two second duration that most of them had taken to gather what was happening around them.

Then, to the others' surprise, one of them threw caution out the window, and carelessly exuded a fatal hostility that instantly spurred the first instance of a truly devastating battle royale...

Chapter 727: Culling Elites!

The Draw Bubble.

It was one of the items that Guissepo had mentioned when he introduced the rules of the Royale. As all in this area had just noticed, it truly was a harmless little thing, however, its effect, in this context was beyond fatal, because it drew contenders together, seemingly over a vast range given the current number of them gathered around here.

Suddenly, it all became clear what the other items the Game Master had spoken of were; the Scatter Crystals, Revival Stars, and such. Each had effects that could prove useful, but for some, the effect propounded depended solely on the user.

The one who had been holding the Draw Bubble which had now faded after accomplishing its task wore a grin, and scanned across the other contenders. He had already counted how many they were just now, and was keeping tabs on them all, especially the Mage who stood calmly with his hands hidden behind the large sleeves of his robes.

"Hahaaa! This is too damn sweet! Hacking all of you to bits will get me 11,000 added Units! How fantastic is that?!" the short man said as he pulled from a scabbard at the back of his waist, a black sceptre with a floating coarse cube at its head end.

Everyone grew tense as the man spoke, readying himself to kill everyone as an amber neon glow started to boil around him.

The man grinned nastily, figuring in his mind, that he was intimidating to everyone else except the Mage.

"Here I com—"

But he stopped.

His constant attention to every one of his opponents' location, stopped at a vacant spot where a young man with an edgy outfit had stood a fraction of a millisecond ago.

It wasn't just him who noticed this.

Tallo looked up, and then everyone did.

A hole had appeared in the mass of clouds roughly ten meters above, and it was painfully clear that whoever was missing among them had shot up into the sky for some reason.

Not even a moment later, the livid mana bustling around them in this ritualistic settling... suddenly vanished.

No. To the lacking contender, it seemed like the mana had suddenly grown thin to the point of non-existence, but Tallo deduced what truly happened instantly. The mana had been sucked up to where the figure that was among them had flown up with such brisk, and masterful technique that he was almost made to applaud.

Then, fractions of a moment later, Tallo smirked before his figure turned into a mash of colour that got out of the way hurriedly.

The story wasn't the same for everyone else.

They only realised how dangerous the situation had gotten, when an invisible, overbearing mass had bashed against them from the cloudy heavens, forcing them to grunt, and hunch over.

But that wasn't all.

That wasn't the thick of it.

It was just a prelude.

A foreplay to the devastation that came a split of a moment later, before most could react... before most could even register that the figure that they thought was far beyond in the clouds had just shot down like a living torpedo of infinite mass among them, disregarding the sanctity of this place... and disregarding their lives.

A few died before they even knew how.

A bombastic weight of 155,000 tonnes, powered by the heavy dose of ambient mana that had been stolen fragments of time before, and a harsh force of gravity that bore down at breakneck speed over a wide radius with the descent of a mad Luman crashed down.

The auditory impact of the mess that cascaded outwards was left in the dust by the erasure of the proud stone pillars, the decimation of the hallowed ground, and the fierce arc of controlled mana that made its way in all directions with razor sharp cutting intent!

The explosion of the calamity only came after a ginormous dust mushroom had risen heights upon heights into the dark sky, sinking into the clouds, the pillars that were a bit of a distance from the ninety meter wide chasm that was forged by the disaster, leaning back with chips of damage on them, and their hollows.

The large, oval shaped crystal in the middle was nowhere to be seen, as were the offerings around it.

If there were legends to be written of its collapse, they would tell the tale of how it had been erased without a trace of it left behind, in its place, a wide, dark depth where chunks of crust fell into.

A dull silence ensued.

After a few seconds, agonised gasps were heard.

A slender woman who had the right side of her body shredded into a red fleshy, mangled sludge, with sprinkles of her off-white coloured bones sticking from it, pulled herself across the torn ground. Half her head was barely connected to the other, and saliva mixed in with blood poured pitifully from her ripped mouth as she crawled within the dust-covered field.

Above her head, the spinning, ethereal square animatedly shattered, and reformed, on top of it the number of Glass Units she had changing to '100'.

It seemed the attack that had left her in this state counted as more than one lethal hit, leaving her at a tenth of her original Units.

But not for long.

A heavy foot smashed into the back of her head, popping it like a melon.

Skullius, with a cold, pale face, dark rings under his eyes, scraped the bloody remains under his boots against the dry ground, and moved through the barely visible environment.

Above his head, was the number '4,800'.

Four kills, including this woman, had netted him 4,000 Glass Units. After all, if a contender died, all their Units would be transferred to their killer, if they were also a contender.

Skullius didn't seem to care for that though. He drew Demion's Dance from its sheath, and reverse handled it.

His figure darted with certainty through the flying dust, heading towards one direction in a breath.

A thick-faced man with a quiver behind his back, and a large bow was hiding behind one of the distant pillars, his heart beating like a drum.

'What- what the hell was that?! If I hadn't drawn myself away at the last second, I would have been dead! Is anyone else still even alive? Am I the only one left?!' he wondered in horror as he gulped down a mouthful of saliva, though the salty taste hinted at the fact that he was perspiring so hard he had sucked in some sweat too.

'Come on! I knew the risks! It's just dumb luck that I landed upon a monster first! What do I do?! Ah! I could use that arrow to haul myself far away from here, right?!

All I need is an opening!'

The man shakily peeked from behind the pillar while focusing his unsteady senses to try, and discern if there was anyone else who was still alive.

There was nothing he could sense.

Was he truly alone? Or was everyone else left good at hiding their presence?

As he planted himself against the pillar again, feeling a bit more hopeful, he found a silhouette in front of him that wasn't there before he decided to take a peek behind just now.

At first, he was alarmed, and hurried to nock an arrow on his bow, but then he realised...

This figure was walking away from him, his back turned.

What?

Why?

What was... going... on?

The thick-faced man suddenly felt his thoughts get displaced and jumbled.

Weird.

His body felt of numerous ringly stings, and then it slid off into nineteen slices of archer that plopped to the ground... along with thirty slices of the pillar he had been hiding behind.

Skullius' figure dissipated into the dust again, but a figure came rushing towards him at an astonishing speed, a neon glow around it that boosted its physicality.

Yet, none of it could stop the Insurgent Magnus.

Before this random figure could reach within Skullius' range, they found themselves being pulled by the hair roughly. Their target had somehow swept past them, drawing them in the opposite direction.

A green blade slid to lightly touch the throat of the figure who immediately stopped squirming, a dark, horrified look on their face. Their eyes darted to Skullius' face, and they were nearly turned to stone, petrified by the rigid, and uncanny coldness on it.

Skullius stopped.

[Primal Caution] sprung a warning this time, and not a moment later, a large, spiked glow of white appeared before him. It was a tightly condensed ball of mana, rigged to shatter outward as soon as it appeared!

It wasn't the only one that Skullius sensed in the brief moment he had to process things.

The one who had created these was extremely capable.

Dismantling this would take too long, and even activating [Destined Warp Steps] was likely just as inefficient, as Skullius wouldn't be able to escape completely, much to his own surprise.

Thus, he just stood there.

BOOOOM!

Simultaneously, loud bursts of explosions swept in different directions, clearing the heavy dust around, but not without doing damage of their own to the ground... and to their targets.

While not nearly as destructive as what Skullius had done – harnessing the full might of the WEIGHT property of his mana, and the Gravitation property of his mana core – the force of the blows came quicker, meaning defending oneself fast enough was extremely difficult. Possibly impossible.

The results showed themselves when everything seemed to clear.

It seemed only five figures remained on this presumably hallowed ground.

One was a tall man with a single braid of blonde hair trekking across the centre of his head. He wore a white cloak that had its sleeve burnt, and smoking, the hand under it having a charred, dark skin tone that spoke to the efficiency of the attack just now. A dull neon glow was surrounding him though, as he had learned his lesson.

The other, was the man who had used the Draw Bubble.

He had been wearing a heavy, diamond scale armour, but now, his torso was bare with a few bloody marks on it – he was tearing the remains of the armour which had borne severe damage. A Unique grade item wouldn't have stood a chance. He held his black sceptre firmly in his hand, and looked around with a rough glare.

Different from the two, Maxim stood confidently.

One of her hands was over her hip, while the other was flirting with a thin, glass-like rectangular object that depicted at its centre a large, spiky glow of mana, the same thing that had blown up in everyone's face just now.

She had turned it flat, and rendered it useless, the annoyed look on her face showing that she felt insulted.

Last, stood Skullius.

He too was completely unharmed, but the random figure he had been holding was barely discernible on the ground beside him, having taken the full brunt of the exploding mana attack.

A thin film of blue was layered around him. It had always been around him from when he had dropped down like an emissary of the divines, and began slaughtering the other contenders one by one, but they all couldn't see it.

"I'm glad you all survived," Tallo called, causing everyone to turn to him. No, rather look up to him as he stood atop one of the pillars, looking down at the four.

"Arma Users, Form Users... I've always wondered if your existence is necessary at all. Are you even able to push an accomplished Energy Former to the mildest brink? To cause a rush in their blood that awakens something profound? Something deeper, and primal?" he asked sincerely.

The four looked at him with thinly veiled rage, their bodies blazing with taunted might.

Tallo's nut brown eyes shimmered, a pitiful look on his face that barely matched what he said next appearing.

"Please... please make my wasted time here worth while."

Chapter 728: Battle of Masters! (1)

Despite Tallo's taunt, and in as much as it seemed like everyone was about rush him, none of the four moved.

They remained rooted in place, while their various different powers surged, a cluster of emotions showing on their faces, some more vague than others.

In the end, all of them knew that Tallo was a tricky opponent to beat – the assault on all of them just now depicted that much.

Not only that, the conventional team up one would expect in this situation to get rid of him first, didn't seem like it would work here either, because no one was willing to trust the other, especially not the young man auburn hair who had delivered that first devastating attack which had marked the beginning of an all out fight.

It was everyone for themselves.

The fact that each of them was still standing pointed to the fact that they were elites among elites, despite the damage some of them had taken.

Caution billowed between them, as well as a general sense of focus, and bloodlust.

Before they all knew it, the five were standing on opposite sides, eyeing each other coldly.

Even Tallo wasn't acting too obnoxious now that the dust had cleared, and a gracious appreciation of the situation was donned by all. One could never be too careful.

That said...

Who was going to make the first move now?

Skullius, with a pale face that seemed to scream that he wasn't in his usual state of mind, twirled Demion's Dance, and swished the air with its curved, green blade. Tallo glanced at the sword, as did the short man who had used the Draw Bubble.

Of course, this auburn haired man.

He had expounded such a fierce pool of bloodlust, and subdued rage that had killed three of the contenders instantly just barely a minute ago.

What was his deal?

Was he going to start things off again?

The answer, was no.

The man with the singular, blonde braid on his head suddenly scowled in focus, and a ripple of sound shot from his mind like a distant church bell, smiting everyone heavily!

...!

The other four felt like they had been smacked in the back of the head with a sledgehammer, and even Tallo was caught a bit off guard, his body swaying a bit.

For a short moment, everyone lost their balance, and their control of their active powers, but they had enough sense to recognise a crucial fact at the same time.

The braided man... he was a Mind Caster!

While everyone was vulnerable, the braided man shot his burnt arm in a gesture towards a target he considered to be the most volatile threat.

Not Tallo.

But Skullius!

An unseen force brimming with incredibly potent restrictive ability smashed onto the Hybrid Luman like a great boulder, immobilising him firmly, and doing nothing else – not even the ground beneath Skullius' feet was affected.

Such precision!

As if on a predetermined cue, the short man who was opposite Skullius exploded into action, an expansive red glow shrieking from his body as he stormed towards the Hybrid Luman while extending his sceptre outward. A beam of peach coloured light shimmered erect from the irregular cube floating at its end, refining itself into a long, odachi blade!

Indeed. This man was an Arma User, a Swordsman of a high calibre preferring to use a blade that wouldn't be useless when its steel was shattered.

Before he could finish his sharp breath, his sword was already at Skullius' neck, hissing with a desperate intent to kill.

However...

An inch away from what he thought would be a swift kill, a knee planted itself so deep into his bare torso that he thought all his organs had been turned to mush. As blood leaked from his open mouth, the short man was propelled into the sky with a staggering explosion of the air, Maxim watching her work with a sneer.

She, just most out of them all here, wasn't going to let Units go to waste, nor let the satisfaction of a worthy kill escape her.

"A crude bastard from the outlaw dumps shouldn't get so eager," she said with a high lip.

Of course, she had noticed that the short man wasn't from the circle of Families. In fact, among the five of them, he was the only one without a prestigious backing.

Speaking of understanding status, and such...

The still scowling Mind Caster sternly gazed at Maxim who was standing beside the immobile Skullius.

"Lady Maxim. Please kill him," he said firmly.

Maxim gazed at the braided man, and then at Skullius who looked as if his body, and mind had been shut down. He stood, his pale face barely showing emotion.

"You're ordering me?" Maxim frowned.

"No," the Mind Caster replied simply. "His mind... it's in a terrible place. However you want to commit it, end him before we all regret it."

The braided man was from a lesser Family. He knew Maxim was from the prestigious Flatbed Family, and was a tough opponent to be matched against. To the pink haired lady, it certainly did sound the Mind Caster was handing over this kill out of respect, and convenience.

And it wasn't at all a bad deal.

Maxim gazed at Skullius.

She had met him before, and she had seen him fight. His last battle in the Second Preliminary Round had been quite the outrageous show off, but she knew he was definitely no small fry despite only being at the Advancement Stage.

It was sublimely curious how he was so strong.

Maxim snorted.

Perhaps the Mind Caster was right. A volatile component was never a good thing in any setup.

Thus, she stretched her hand towards Skullius, its fingers brimming with mana as her Family Technique was prepared.

"Fine."

However, an unexpected stab came to fend against her nonchalant reply.

"You're very bold."

Skullius spoke.

Maxim frowned even deeper when she felt that the heavy influence from the braided man's powers had been lifted as soon as Maxim consented to kill Skullius. She shot a cruel side glare towards the Mind Caster who smirked, and drew back.

She had been tricked!

With Skullius released from his bonds, and with one of the contenders near him, declaring that they would kill him... this had been the perfect setup to eliminate one of the five, or to at least lock two of them in combat before reaping their lives... as the Mind Caster had planned.

He had witnessed Skullius' atrocious speed when he killed the woman who was crawling on the ground, and the archer. He had also noticed the unstable pulse of mental energy coming from the Hybrid Luman, as all other Mind Casters could, though he was able to do so much more.

And all that analysis piled onto this little scheme lead to...

...!!!

The braided man felt alarm bells clang loudly within him, and with cold sweat trickling down his body, he funnelled more mana into the production of his Perfect Aura instinctively, which buried him in a thick blanket... at the exact same time he felt the tip of a sword pierce his throat!

His eyes sprang wide open, but he didn't pay the pain, or the surprise any more focus!

Skullius was before him, his blade extended to dig a few inches into the Mind Caster's neck.

The man had saved himself by erecting his Perfect Aura just in time, which hampered the force of the Demion's Dance!

That speed!

He hadn't been mistaken!

It was outrageous!

Maxim was left with boiling fury a distance away where she had expected Skullius to lunge at her madly. The braided man's plan hadn't gone as he thought it would – Skullius had attacked the Mind Caster first – and she felt conflicted about it.

Skullius' eye twitched, and he withdrew his blade quickly, smothered it with mana, locked down both his feet on the ground with a weird bend to the knees, and then brought it down in a beautiful slash!

The Mind Caster felt the hairs on his body stand on end. It was merely a single strike with a Unique grade blade coated with mana, against his Aura, but he felt a dangerous sense of unease.

Maxim felt it too. Her skin shuddered a little as Skullius sliced down, the edge of Demion's Dance on the wind causing a menacing, ghostly shriek.

SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIII-

But its fierce fall onto the Mind Caster at a deathly speed... was cut short.

The green bladed sword, suddenly turned limp, as did its golden hilt which grew thick, fat and scaly.

Demion's Dance turned from a beautiful sword... into a large green serpent with golden, gleaming eyes that faced Skullius with immeasurable hostility!

...

The Hybrid Luman was stunned.

What was this?!

In that brief moment of confusion, the Mind Caster who also didn't know what to make of the serpent, focused his Perfect Aura to form a Genuine Incarnation in his hand that he used to blast Skullius away with a loud, crisp wave of mental energy that blurred the surroundings!

Skullius soared before suddenly disappearing from the air, and appearing on one of the pillars, perfectly still.

The braided man breathed out a sigh of a relief.

The Genuine Incarnation in his hand, was a tall staff that squirmed vivaciously, at its end a large, bumpy bulge. A set of small, white wings fluttered on either side of the bulge, and even more strange, was a pair of large eyes that blinked on its surface!

With this in his grasp, the Mind Caster felt confident.

Maxim glared at him hatefully, but just as she was about to move against him, a short man roared as he flew down from the sky, his figure dyed in a red neon cloud that expanded to cover the battleground, his sceptre sword stabbing into the field.

Another Genuine Incarnation had appeared, causing Maxim to hurriedly mobilise her own Perfect Aura.

This was her first time seeing an Incarnation like this – a cloud – and as her enemies were ramping up the level of the battle, she followed suit.

Now, only Skullius remained, and Tallo who hadn't moved an inch since the bustle began. The Mage turned to Skullius, and the Hybrid Luman paid close attention to him too.

A neon glow gushed around the former, and he smirked, as if daring Skullius.

What was the Advancement Stage Hybrid Luman going to do when his opponents were about to ignite the flames of battle to another level.

All with Genuine Incarnations!

What would he do when his sword had 'mysteriously' been turned into a snake that seemed to his guts?

Did he stand a chance?

Chapter 729: Battle of Masters! (2)

Skullius could still hear, and feel.

He could still think, however truncated his mental capacity was at the moment.

But...

An intimidating storm of unseen energy caught him off guard as he had taken a moment to entertain Tallo's taunting stare.

At first, it felt like a regular hit from a Mind Caster, like the one the braided man had knocked him away with just now, but he soon realised that he was wrong.

This attack, was like the very first he had received from the braided man, only, it was much, much stronger!

It was so strong that the glass pane above him indicated that it was a heavy hit, and 10 Glass Units were taken, transferred to the Mind Caster responsible for it!

It shut down his movement with incredible efficiency, and stunted his thoughts more than his own brilliant rage effect on them.

As such, he couldn't mobilise enough focus to use [Destined Warp Steps] in order to flash towards another different position and stand firmly, ready for the heavy onslaught from four Masters. He merely streaked over, and through the erect pillars all around like an arrow, no reaction registering from him.

Then... it came for the umpteenth time.

A loud call that he had been hearing ever since he came to this place through the Draw Bubble's effect.

'Tomato flinger! Get a grip! You're wasting your advantages without your full focus! Tomato flinger! Tomato flinger!'

The moment Skullius had spawned among the eleven contenders, the rage he had holding back slipped out again, its strength to give the heavy, deciding pound against his deterrence, coming from the snarky comment of the short Swordsman.

He had lost his restraint instantly.

The yet unreasonable fury clouded his usually sharp judgement, culled off his hesitance, and made sturdy his intent to just kill everything here.

To kill everyone... in place of Camilla, whom he had been so desperate to shoot down earlier.

As soon as this rage took hold, he couldn't think straight. He felt a sensation of rising heat, as if he was burning from everywhere, and his body didn't fight against it, since, in the end, this was an emotion of his, merely placed erroneously.

'Tomato flinger! Remember! Use your senses! Take in the air, and force yourself to relax! Feel everything around you! Get in touch with the serene clouds!'

Don't fall into the meaningless anger!'

Skullius struggled to resist, and tried to force his body to calm down... angrily, but given the unseen restraints on him at the moment which prohibited him from moving even an inch, it didn't help.

He ended up trying to shut out Sila's voice which encouraged him to head towards futility, resolving to continue to sink further in the burning pit, hoping against hope that he could somehow get back to killing even Masters that had a heavy counter against most of his abilities, but...

The sound of fluttering wings caused him alarm.

Even without the crisp processing quality and control of his body needed to activate his skills as quickly as he normally could – which he found to also cause the shroud of Null Life Essence around him to disappear completely – he was able to discern the surroundings.

The braided man flew at triple his current soaring speed towards him, his Genuine Incarnation, the staff, in hand!

The bastard was actually flying, a steely matte of Perfect Aura around him!

As soon as he reached the Hybrid Luman, the Mind Caster wore a victorious smirk, and swung madly with the bumpy bulge of his staff at Skullius' head. Skullius made a 90 degree turn into the dirt below with a voracious force, digging up a large crater with his fall.

"Without your sword, and your speed, you're not really that threatening, are you? I almost didn't recognise you to be an Advancement Stage expert at first," the braided man in the white cloak chortled, before extending his staff towards Skullius who was immobile within the depth he had made.

"Unfortunately for you, I'm not in the habit of prolonging conflicts more than I need to," the Mind Caster took a quick glance into the far distance where the rumbles of a fierce battle droned from. "Besides, I pissed off that bratty bitch from the Flatbed Family. Might as well have commented on her lacking chest. I'll feel safer when I'm away from here, but not without taking a few Units with me."

Skullius' body was raised from the crater along with the movement of the Mind Caster's staff. He floated in mid-air, his face as pale, and rigid as ever.

Sila still called to Skullius, trying to jolt him into some form of action, but there was no response.

The braided man's staff twitched like a restless toddler, and he injected mana and Aura into it, seemingly to deal a finishing deal. But...

Suddenly, the Mind Caster grunted, and turned the staff in a different direction.

A gleaming peach-coloured blade struck against the staff with a powerful force from above, causing the braided man who had just blocked in time with his Genuine Incarnation, grunt. He was far from

being physically as strong as most Swordsmen of his Stage would be, and thus, he swindled himself out of the clash, skidding on the ground to stand before Skullius who was still hoisted in the air.

The short man, his armour having been torn from his torso, stood facing the Mind Caster. He emitted a sharp breath, before spitting out blood. A thick red, cloudy Aura bubbled around him, this being the Genuine Incarnation he had revealed moments ago, to unknown effect.

"Too much for you too, huh?" the braided man sniggered.

The Swordsman snorted, but it was evident this was true. While he had stuck around longer than the braided man where Maxim and Tallo were, he too had rushed away from what was almost certainly... death. Yet, he still put up a dignified face.

"I see you're trying to leave with some kind of prize," he said.

"So?"

"You really think I'm just gonna let you have it? I'm the one who made this all possible. All of it didn't work out as I hoped, but I'll at least reap from the one who benefitted the most here."

The Mind Caster guffawed, as he secretly massaged his hand which had been burnt by Tallo's first attack.

"Haha. You have the same thought I do, it seems. 'Better him than those two freaks. I can at least beat YOU'."

The Swordsman clenched his sword hard, and a moment later a massive cloud of neon red blossomed from his body to overwhelm the area!

The Mind Caster super charged the staff which lividly shivered with mana, and unseen by all, a blurred dome extended a dozen meters around, encompassing Skullius in it!

At the same time, the Hybrid Luman felt himself released from the restrictive hold, and his instincts flared. A rush of rage caught him, and he immediately activated [Destined Warp Steps] to go kill the braided man.

However...

His first step towards the white cloaked man came only three seconds after he thought to do it, and his second came six seconds later. The leap he planned came twelve seconds later, and the fist he planned to throw after saturating his arm with mana, came twenty-nine moments after he intended.

What was this?!

They was an outrageous delay, and his mind felt muddy!

As all this time passed under Skullius' shocked perception, the Swordsman, and the Mind Caster had been clashing heavily, quickly, desperately.

They weren't stalled like Skullius was!

The short man couldn't see the blurred dome around them, but it didn't matter, because it didn't have an effect on him anyway. The braided man on the other hand was annoyed greatly by this fact, and had to avoid the cloud swirling around the Swordsman as best as he could. He would dip into it to reach the short man here and there, but wouldn't overstay his welcome in it.

What a peculiar Incarnation.

For someone who wasn't from the Families, it was truly impressive, but the Mind Caster couldn't afford to praise his opponent right now.

Skullius was still finding his body responding later than he intended while trying to keep up the Mind Caster, and Swordsman's movement. Somehow, they seemed dozens of times faster, even if they were bolstered by Genuine Incarnations!

What was going on?!

He had taken another step, when he saw the Swordsman several paces away, stop after having blasted the cloaked man a distance, and....

The Swordsman's eyes suddenly constricted, and he held his sword up with both hands, its hilt – or rather sceptre handle – stuck to his chest.

...!!!

[Primal Caution]'s passive effect rung wildly in Skullius' head, but there was nothing he could.

With his delayed, stunted thought, he felt a familiar sensation. A sharp... whisper that called the sceptre sword, travelling the distance between it, and him in fragments of time he couldn't discern!

....Then, he was hit.

Somewhere in the background, he felt the Mind Caster bash heavily into the Swordsman, as if to stop him, but Skullius was already feeling something slide off his body.

His shoulder, from the right side of his neck to corner of his right hip....

It had been cut down, and had fallen to the ground.

Skullius' rage boiled again, but then, he noticed something.

A glow of cloudy, red neon was smothering his armless right side which was bleeding profusely!

It did not budge.

Furthermore, as it persisted, Skullius found that the passive effect of [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc], was not activating to heal him!

Chapter 730: Battle of Masters! (3)

Genuine Incarnations.

A Master could create Perfect Aura, which boosted their abilities and stats, on a higher level than Full Body Aura.

However, to truly be considered accomplished as a Master Stage combatant, one had to have the ability to shape the Perfect Aura into a Genuine Incarnation, which extended a Master's arsenal of utilities, and made way for said combatant to reach the 1,000% ability boost they could achieve when they were at the Peak of the Stage.

Incarnations had two types. Living, and non-living types, or object types.

Living type Incarnations could boost the offensive abilities of the user; the user's technique, attack power, and so on. Object types could boost defensive properties; durability, toughness, resistance, among other similar traits.

However, as one perfected their Incarnation, and got close to the Peak, the interpretation of offensive, and defensive became more nuanced. Being a Master meant defining what your Incarnation's limits are... what your own limits were, in preparation for ascending into the Incandescent Stage, which opened a path to being limitless by nature.

In this current situation, the braided Mind Caster, with his staff, which, with the constantly whirling eyes, persistently twitching body, and fluttering little white wings counted as a living type Incarnation, could boost the effects of his Mind Casting techniques to a stupendous degree.

The short Swordsman on the hand, with his red neon cloud, which was quite the unique object type Incarnation, could defend himself from enemy attacks.

This defence however, came in the form of weakening anyone who was touched by the red, neon cloud. The effect wasn't as potent on other Masters – even if it still restricted them, and their abilities to a large degree – since even if their Incarnations were living, they still offered protection by concentrating Perfect Aura around their users.

When the glowing cloud was matched against others however, say Advancement Stage experts...

Skullius struggled to get his balance right, now that he had lost a large chunk of himself, an arm included.

'Tomato flinger!' Sila called out, feeling that Skullius in this moment, had been rendered a little sober by the shock. He had been tickled the wrong way too.

'Wake yourself up dammit!'

Skullius staggered, and a low groan came from his mouth.

Sila saw this chance.

'Sockethole, wake the flesh up!'

...

Perhaps it was because two of the words in this sentence were very close to Skullius' soul, or because he was surprised by the prospect of another him suddenly spawning out of nowhere.

Like clockwork, a grunt was heard within the clouded mental space. A voice that seemed to have been buried in sand yelled, its volume rising higher with time.

'Sila...?' Skullius said unsurely.

'Who else, you fool?! Get your thoughts straight! You could died just now! Your body isn't regenerating! And you don't have many options to defend yourself here! You should run when you get the chance!'

Skullius blinked a few times. It almost seemed like he hadn't been the one steering his body all this time, but that truth was, he had been. He just hadn't cared much for context, reason, and restraint while feeding his rage with murderous intent.

His thoughts were still sluggish outside of talking to Sila, which was much like talking to himself.

'Wha—'

He had been about to ask something when he felt a heavy boom in the ground.

A distance away, the braided man had pointed his staff at the Swordsman, and sent him soaring among the pillars with a shriek of enhanced mental energy outside the blurred dome.

Without wasting any more time, the Mind Caster turned to Skullius.

Surprisingly, he left his staff floating in the air, and rushed to the Hybrid Luman with just a halo of his Aura around him. He arrived before Skullius who was thinking to run, but couldn't make his body respond, in a blink, and his one hand which was in good condition shimmered with a fierce, radiant light!

Then he threw it in a fist with full force into Skullius' face!

A crackling noise like that of thunder resounded as Skullius ate the punch, his face appallingly sinking into itself. The Mind Caster didn't allow the force of his fist to carry Skullius away. He dragged the Hybrid Luman into the dirt, and drew back his hand.

The number above Skullius' head went from '4,690 to 4,590' – the lethal hit he took from the Swordsman included.

Skullius' face was heavily damaged, but not smashed into paste, much to his own surprise.

'Tomato flinger! You have to run! You'll surely die here!'

Skullius didn't have a response to this. It wasn't that he could feel the pain from having his face mashed up, after all, unlike where his body was still being affected by the wisps of red neon clouds, [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc] was already starting to heal his face.

It was because he realised the gravity of the situation he was in.

Both he, and Sila had begun to realise that this dome the Mind Caster had erected, was a field of highly condensed mental energy that stalled thoughts, making the body react way later. Even while blinded by rage, it wasn't that hard to notice.

A technique like this was on a similar level to Karrun's – Setkh's bodyguard – and equally as tricky to deal, if not more so.

He was stuck here indefinitely!

Strangely though, the Mind Caster's punch which Skullius had imagined to be able to bore a hole through his head easily, hadn't managed to kill him.

Why?

As his thoughts accelerated with the influence of the Omniscient Thought Cracker, Skullius remembered that this man was one of the many contenders who had resorted to killing his opponents in the Royale... with a weapon instead of his abilities.

Now he realised why.

It was to fool everyone by hiding the fact that he was a Mind Caster.

Also, perhaps he was incapable of killing with his raw strength since most Mind Casters didn't have impressive physical stats, even as Masters. Skullius rivalled many Masters with his own stats right now because of his race, after all.

But why wouldn't he use his weapon then?

Skullius couldn't see it, but the braided man's damaged hand had a cracked ring on it that had suffered brutally because of Tallo's first attack!

"I didn't think you'd be this hard to kill! You have a pretty strong body, and even some decent healing abilities," the Mind Caster said as he huffed down at the Hybrid Luman.

His body was suddenly saddled by a vicious glow that Skullius sensed to be coming from the staff floating away from them.

His body grew quite a bit muscular, and a bit bloated, his face turning fierce.

"I hate relying on brawn, but I have no choice. I just need a little bit more to pop your head in," he said before looking at Skullius' hand which, after he intended it to happen ages ago, shot a charged shot of mana at the braided man's face.... to absolutely no effect.

The Mind Caster snickered.

"As long as you're in here, your thoughts will begin to stray, and your body will continuously become unresponsive. Even your skills. But don't worry, I'll kill you quickly. Maybe."

A heavy fist smashed into Skullius, prompting the ground around him to rise high in a plume of dust.

This punch was more than twice as strong as the last, and...

'4,490.'

His face instantly began to heal, restoring to perfection.

Another fist covered his face, a little stronger than last.

'4,390.'

But he healed still.

Another fell before a moment could pass.

'4,290'.

Skullius healed, but slowly, his face almost turned to mush.

'Damn... it...!' Skullius thought begrudgingly as he pushed his body to move, his thoughts turning into a mess the more he remained here.

This was really bad!

There didn't seem to be a solution, especially when his emotions were wrestling his sanity!

Maybe because he thought about how easily he had beaten beasts at double digit Tiers, compared to the current situation, Skullius finally understood.

No wonder.

No wonder beasts in many cases couldn't measure up to humans.

Even if a beast was at the tenth Tier, as long as it had a mana core that matched its human counterpart, it wouldn't win... if they were a Master.

All mana related skills wouldn't work, and beasts couldn't use Aura.

Right now, he was like a high Tier beast, facing a full counter.

Skullius felt his rage rising again, and desperately tried to tuck it away.

'Calm down!' he thought with hints of panic in his mind.

From before the Mind Caster had started wailing on him, he had used most of the mental focus he had left to position his Temporary Storage below his body.

He didn't know when his intent would become a reality, but right before another loathsome fist could smash into his head which was barely hanging on, a gush of mana exploded from the narrow mouth of the Temporary Storage, and blasted him several dozens of meters into the air!

It worked!

The braided man was caught by surprise.

He saw Skullius escape his dome, and frowned.

The Hybrid Luman had used the excess mana stored in his Storage to propel himself outside the stalling influence.

As soon as Skullius felt the sluggishness of his mind, and lapse in his bodily response fade, he activated [Destined Warp Steps], and appeared a distance away from his enemy.

His heart was pounding.

He had barely escaped that.

His head healed, and he was about to desperately run away when...

A cloud of red surrounded Skullius in that instance, and he felt the presence of the short man a few paces away, his sword held up, and against his chest!

....!!!

Alarm bells rang in Skullius' head!

'No!'

He felt the cloud Incarnation weaken his body furiously, and at the same time he felt once again.... a sharp whisper from the man's sceptre sword, which soared toward him!

This time, Skullius had activated [Destined Warp Steps] at the sign of danger, and was thirty meters away from the short man in a blink, but as he shakily stood on the ground once again.

He felt a deep gash that had nearly split him in two carved across his chest.

Skullius huffed with sweat dripping from all over, feeling the trepidation he had, start to turn into... fright.

Had he been a second later in reacting, he would have been carved cleanly, and like the first strike from the short man, he could feel the red neon clouds swimming where this large gash was.

It wasn't healing!

And it went without saying that he had lost another 100 Units.

Skullius gritted his teeth, but he didn't have the time to stew in this... because just as he landed, his enemy was already close, his cloud Incarnation attempting to close him in!

Unlike the Mind Caster, the Swordsman had great physical stats, and was well versed in using them.

What's more, he was able to match [Destined Warp Steps], which increased Skullius' speed by twelve times his usual base maximum!

With the amplification from his Perfect Aura, he was just a little slower than Skullius!

But that didn't mean the Hybrid Luman was safe.

He felt the familiar sharp whisper when the Swordsman went into his stance, and before he knew it, his body staggered forward, and fell to the ground!

...!

His leg had been lopped off!

What kind of swordsmanship was this?!

This man wasn't even swinging his sword!

Was he... was he a Sword master?

What he was doing felt familiar to Skullius, but he couldn't place a finger on what it was with the state of his mind at the moment.

Not when he was beginning to get swarmed by desperation.

Skullius thought of what to do.

Should he use everything he was holding back? His Insurgent Magnus skills? His darkness, and light, his Precept of Light?

Would that even help?

All these skills were mana based, and didn't have direct offensive abilities anyway!

He might as well reveal them for nothing!

He could use [Boundless Evil] to escape though, but would he be able to run from the Swordsman who was close to matching his [Destined Warp Steps]?

The fear started to set in.

Skullius had long escaped the fear of death, but that didn't mean he wasn't afraid of dying in such a hopeless situation.

The rage started to close in.

Skullius was holding it back as it urged him to move forward, and kill everyone, but he couldn't.

He was losing.

It started with Demion's Dance being turned into a snake, which he assumed was Tallo's doing with Transmutation, something he had experienced before.

Then when all his opponents exposed their hard counters to him as an Advancement Stage expert...

...

Skullius gritted his teeth.

He had resolved to use [Boundless Evil] to escape when, a sharp whisper rang in his ears.

At the same time, this sharp whisper made him recall a set of words he had stopped mulling over ever since he started preparing for the Royale.

'...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 gasped.

...And then a sharp sensation swiftly took his head.