

Undead 731

Chapter 731: Interpretation (1)

The Mind Caster rushed to where the short Swordsman was standing, and disappointedly gazed at Skullius' beheaded body.

The Swordsman didn't turn to him.

"We have no reason for conflict anymore. Or should I remind you that you're only alive because you have a pesky, persistent technique?"

The braided man frowned, but he also noticed that the number of Glass Units above the Swordsman weren't as inflated as they were supposed to be. A few hundred had been deducted from Skullius' own even though he lay still, his leg at another place, his right quarter at another, and his head under the Swordsman's blade.

"Is he still alive?" the braided Mind Caster asked apprehensively. "After all that?"

The short Swordsman had a grave look on his face. He jabbed his sword in Skullius' head viciously, and waited for a moment.

His Units only increased by a hundred.

He grunted unpleasantly, and then spoke.

"All I can say is... you were probably right to target him earlier..."

The viewing for the witnesses had become very exciting, as several large scale battles had begun. The assortment of them left different waves of emotion, as some took long, and some were over before they even begun.

The thrill most acquired from watching, mainly came from betting on the contenders, and though very, very few could see it, an invisible swarm of shapeless intent was crawling about all the witnesses, though it failed to catch them all in its clutch.

The stronger among them resisted its charm, and remained with their minds accommodating the possibility of something huge happening today, before or after the Royale ended.

The way things were going, it wouldn't be long before most the contenders were dead.

The large number above the glass panels now showed that only 22 contenders remained in the designated battle grounds after only a handful of hours since the event began.

Many had begun to wonder if this event would even last half a day, or whether or not there would be a single contender to reach the GOAL. So far, no one knew, and everyone could only look to the screens to try and predict what the end looked like.

Speaking of the screens, a terrible battle had begun a few minutes ago, and it had a large chunk of the witnesses absorbed into it.

In reality, calling it a battle was likely not the best way to put it.

It had started off quite bombastic, but had developed in a way no one had expected.

One of the contenders was getting brutalised, by not one, but two other contenders who seemed to be fighting for his Units.

Soon, the crowds gasped as he was killed, and among the shocked masses, a young girl with blonde hair, and the man next to her felt a heavier weight to this than anyone else.

Terese buried her face in Daggs' chest.

She had seen a lot of deaths since the Premium Age Royale began, but this was entirely unexpected. She hadn't thought, with all that this man who had joined their Family could do, that he would fall like this.

Daggs hadn't expected this too, and as it happened, his mind drifted over to how Theurien would think of this, and how... how...

He looked to his side, where there was an empty seat.

He couldn't think of anyone else, but this was devastating.

Maybe it had been a bad idea to join the Royale!

How would Stylla feel if she found out?

Many brutal thoughts sprang hard between the two, and in the mind of one other.

Alaris was seated with his body leaning forward, a contemplative look on his face.

He was thinking hard on the image he saw; two contenders standing before Skullius' body, their discussion which was heard only just now starting to cause a stir.

An expression of realisation crept on his face, but he subdued it. He wanted to hope in THAT, but he wouldn't believe it until he saw it. Frankly, he barely knew the fullest extent of Skullius' skillset outside his swordsmanship, hand to hand technique, and support skills.

'Don't tell me you're going to die that easily, after all that time I invested...' he thought, half regretting that he had started to get attached to the young man with two, piercing blind eyes.

The voices sounded in Skullius' ears.

[Graceless Hunter] helped him feel everything around him, including the air, the pillars which spread out to a wider range than he, and the other two had thought, and the reverberations of lightning, fire, and mana coming from where they had all fled.

Skullius took it all in even with his head severed, even with the panic still shrieking through his mind.

He was indeed alive, but not because stabbing him in the head couldn't kill him.

No. That wasn't it.

Since he didn't really need to breath, his image right now was quite bizarre, and with his <CURSED HEART> not really being essential for him to keep existing, him stopping it from pumping threw off the short Swordsman, and the Mind Caster.

If not for the fact that there was no cumulative mana streaming from Skullius, they would believed he was dead, and that the indicator above him was just glitching.

A sigh blew within Skullius' mind, as he tried to calm himself.

'T-tomato flinger... How are you alive right now?! Shouldn't you... we be dead?!'

'We should...' Skullius replied simply.

'Then...'

'Be quiet,' Skullius commanded.

A pause followed. A gentle silence.

His mind was starting to settle from the panic, and the rage was subdued. It wasn't that he was holding it all back desperately, like before.

No. That wasn't it.

Alaris words... they dunked a bucket of cold revelation onto him just when he got his head chopped off.

'...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, without using all his abilities right now, didn't stand a chance. Unless he was resolved to run away from all these high level Masters every chance he got, he was going to die. Like he would have just now.

Moments ago, a deep set fear had started to overcome him.

In the face of a Swordsman who could cut him without swinging his sword.

In the face of his speed being matched.

In the face of none of his attacks being effective against his enemies, his mind had started to grow stunted, limiting itself, and giving in to the unfortunate rush of emotions he was feeling from the incident with that damn flower.

But.... was it because he REALLY couldn't kill all these bastards with his current powers?

Was it?

No. That wasn't it either.

He DEFINITELY could.

As Skullius was about to wholly die by the sword, as Alaris said, he finally started to understand a bit about what Alaris meant the day he asked him:

'... Am I close to being a Sword master?'

The answer was surprisingly buried within the same thing that had almost killed him just now.

The sharp whisper that came whenever the short Swordsman raised his sceptre, and simply stood in his aloof stance.

That was it!

Skullius opened his eyes, much to the short Swordsman's apprehension. His red neon cloud Incarnation immediately billowed around Skullius, and the Hybrid Luman felt his body getting rapidly weaker, his connection to his skills, and their effect also turning mellow.

It was frightening to encounter such a thing for one like him, and it had nearly been his undoing, but the glittering, purple liquid flowing through his body right now, resisting his death, and very slowly, regenerating his limbs, had worked wonders. It had given Skullius a chance to find the right mind to counter his doubts about what he could do.

To fight against what limited him from becoming a master at a craft.

"Crafty! He somehow drank a potion!" the Mind Caster cried, and he pointed his staff towards Skullius, ready to once again expand another dome of mental energy!

However...

Discreetly, a jade orb spawned from the space behind the two contenders who were both ready to take away Skullius' Units at all costs.

The Hexer's Inheritance.

With Skullius' command, a massive amount of mana he stored within his Temporary Storage was expended by the orb, and in flash, it glowed, and became engulfed by a crimson flame that beckoned a hellish heat, like the sun!

The Mind Caster, and the Swordsman were surprised by the sudden emergence of the giant ball of lustre, and scorch which threw itself at them right away.

A great explosion of flame devoured the two, and as it did, Skullius, with [Greatest Mana Crafter] used the ambient mana to push his head towards his body.

Around his neck, another swarm of red clouds could be seen. They greatly resisted the healing properties from the Super potion he had transported from his Temporary Storage, and directly into his body before he was decapitated, but Skullius' body was still regenerating.

The Swordsman's Incarnation was powerful indeed.

As Skullius' head attached to the stump of his neck, it was only loosely connected, but he still managed to transport his entire body away.

As soon as he landed on his feet... he felt another sharp whisper!

...!!!

Skullius' torso was ripped to shreds, and he nearly toppled over once again!

The two contenders began to emerge from the hot flame unharmed, but he didn't allow the panic he had escaped moments ago grip him again.

He had to keep calm for what came next.

Sadly though, his remaining arm was cut apart too, and even though his body was trying to recover because of the potent effect of the Super potion, the process was very slow.

Skullius took a breath.

His ripped torso, which looked comically like a checkered shirt with a red, misty neon glow, didn't dismantle into pieces that fell to the ground.

Instead, a bright blue glow held the individual pieces together such that Skullius stood sturdily!

Even his minced arm was brought to firmly set on his shoulder, despite looking like a bloody mess!

It took his utmost focus to keep this up.

But this was just the beginning.

"You think taking a potion will save you?" the Swordsman bellowed after fully emerging from the crimson flames. "I'll hack you every which way until you die, just like any other man!"

Skullius offered no response, but he was attentive. Both to the Swordsman, and the Mind Caster who was trailing, walking in another direction with an apprehensive look on his face.

'We'll have to see...' he thought.

The Hybrid Luman reached in for a pillar close to him, and pretended to lean against it for support.

Then, he skilfully crashed his fist into it, breaking it into pieces that fell to the ground.

Under the gazes of the two enemies though, Skullius caught one of these shattered pieces, which just vaguely... very vaguely, looked like a misshapen, thick sword.

Skullius' blank eyes gleamed, and he held the sword out with a concentrated breath of hot air.

...

A hiss came from his body, like pulse of wind shuddering from his skin.

...!!!

The short Swordsman opened his eyes wide, as Skullius flexed the torn muscles in his arm, somehow kept together.

'Huh?' he wondered first in surprise, then in shock.

It was his turn to hear a sharp whisper that hurtled towards him....

Chapter 732: Interpretation (2)

It had been a long time since Skullius had had an epiphany.

Instead of accruing a bunch of skills, realising truths about oneself without a plethora of external factors, crutches really, like techniques, weapons, and all, was the key to utilising said crutches to the fullest.

As Skullius held the chunk of rock shaped – vaguely – like a sword, while making sure his control of Null Life Essence kept his diced body intact, tough, and firm, his perception of everything seemed to increase.

There was a momentary wobble, because he had hurriedly drawn, and connected his severed leg to his body clumsily so that the healing effect of the potion could attempt to reconnect it properly, but he soon steadied himself.

Skullius' direction of growth wasn't wrong. It was merely a bit misguided, and he had been missing a lot of hints along the path... until now.

One of these hints, was Alaris' actions, and words from that day they sparred.

The other, which quite blatantly screamed in his sight multiple times, was [Unmatched Sword Sense].

However, this revelation Skullius was beginning to understand, was not solely related to Swordsmanship, which was why he himself, was a bit overwhelmed by it.

What was its limits?

Null Life Essence briskly coated Skullius' 'sword' and he gave himself up to the idea that yes... it was a sword.

It crisply serrated the rugged edges of the sharp shapely rock, and as the short Swordsman watched, first in confusion, the Hybrid Luman looked to become like a vacant shell that was inhabited by a concept.

His presence turned hollow, yet vast for a moment.

Standing with his damaged clothing, in a still, but frightening position, a menacing whisper rang loudly, turning the short Swordsman's face a little pale, and paralysing him.

Or was he entranced instead?

Skullius had sunken into [Swordmaster's Quiescence].

...!!!

Horror swept by.

Chip!

The short Swordsman felt a nick on his cheek, and he began to bleed from a narrow cut.

"..."

Yes, he was guarded excessively by his meddlesome red clouds.

Yes, he was fully on guard the entire time.

...And no, he had not seen this coming.

As he ran a finger on his cheek, letting the blood stain it, he immediately dashed towards Skullius with a murderous flare in his eyes!

How?!

What was this?!

Did this wannabe Swordsman actually... copy him?!

By the time he reached Skullius' location though, the Hybrid Luman had already vacated to another distant spot, a large distance away. He had immediately set to flee before the short man even finished accumulated the idea to attack, and cull his existence before he conjured something else absurd.

This time, his enemies found that it was difficult to locate Skullius.

His presence had suddenly turned dim, nearly indiscernible, but it wouldn't take them long to find him.

Skullius was counting on that brief gap in time to fully grasp this tether at a realisation.

Alaris had told him that reaching the level of a master, a true master in any craft, required committing wholly.

That the evil scum of the world, committed, and that's why they could touch on their goals.

The just also committed, to the notion of risks and reward.

But Skullius wasn't whole in the first place, so perhaps that was why he was lagging in Swordsmanship.

The Hybrid Luman had also theorised that this lack extended to all his powers which he had yet to fully understand.

And that's why now, he remembered, and realised.

'That day, Alaris said he was about to get serious in our spar, and told me that if I could move all the grass with a swing of my sword, I would be close to becoming a Master, but I couldn't...' Skullius, whose thoughts were rapidly segmented by the Omniscient Thought Cracker, recalled.

Yes, that day.

Skullius hadn't questioned how Alaris made the grass turn still, and erect without even moving. He had assumed it was just an advanced sword technique that he could learn by using [Immoral Authority] on some fool in the future. Granted, Alaris didn't teach with words that much, so Skullius was justified in being a little confused.

But now, he understood it a bit.

He almost slapped his own face.

No wonder.

Sword Sense! It was just Sword Sense!

The very same damn thing he had!

The same thing Skullius had a skill, called [Unmatched Sword Sense].

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Unmatched Sword Sense (Special) | Lv.40]

You attain a passive extreme understanding of any sword. How to wield it, how to care for it, how to hear its LIVING SOUL and how to swing it. In addition, you gain the active ability to bring out 200% of any sword's potential, even if its durability is gone.

Mana Requirements: 1000 (I) Mana Points, 100 (I) Mana Points every minute

Durability: ---

Cooldown: None

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That was all it was!

Those who intended to master the sword had an affinity with swords, and could in some way, understand a sword, as well as its intent. Not all swords had consciousness, but every sword had a purpose.

To cut.

To pierce.

A high understanding of the sword, allowed one to manifest a sword's purpose without moving it.

Sword Sense.

That was what the short Swordsman was doing in order to strike from a distance.

However, this level of mastery, required that the Swordsman actually communicate with their blade, listening to its intent, and making it comfortable in his or her grasp.

But Skullius...

The Hybrid Luman slapped his own face this time.

In that same spar with Alaris, he had reminded the Bashful Abomination to keep quiet as he used it. He didn't like the rattle of its voice, and even though the sword very much liked him, he didn't use it the way it actually preferred – besides, the Bashful Abomination was still too entranced by the promotion from being held by a smelly, large goblin, to a human who bought it a nice scabbard.

As for Demion's Dance, Skullius barely paid attention to its quivering, and humming which usually rang through his hand when he used it. He hated that too.

And now, as he looked at the description of [Unmatched Sword Sense] once again, he felt a shiver of shame.

Why didn't Alaris just tell him?!

Well, that didn't matter right now anyway.

Skullius was not only looking for a thread of breakthrough in Swordsmanship.

...!

A warning made him dart away, and while he kept a keen focus on the Mind Caster, who could once again immobilise him, Skullius stopped, and held up his 'sword'.

As the pillar he was hiding behind shattered, sharp whisper cried towards him, and this time, Skullius... could perceive it!

He stood still, and kept a firm belief on what he was holding.

In the very depths of his soul, he felt himself believing...

'It's a sword...'

It was a sword.

It had to be sword.

And so it was.

Thus [Unmatched Sword Sense] didn't have a choice, but to recognise the strangely shaped rock as a sword!

A sharp whisper scurried from the Hybrid Luman, and carved against the one which came from the short Swordsman!

The short man was appalled to see Skullius unharmed, and when he saw him wearing a ghostly face, another crisp shriek calling in his ears, a sign of something approaching, he dived to the side in horror!

However, more than a nick that came last time, a large gash appeared on the short Swordsman's chest, even though he thought he had gotten out of the way!

What was this?!

Even if Skullius was using swordsmanship on par with his, how was he able to ignore his defences with mere mana coating his blade?!

Well...

Skullius took a breath, and traced the Mind Caster's whereabouts. Naturally, he was moving on his own, hunting the Hybrid Luman in his own way.

'Just a little more,' Skullius thought before rushing away again while the short man looked puzzled by the conundrum that was 'how'. Like before though, he quickly recovered, and started running after Skullius again.

The Hybrid Luman hid behind another pillar, and took a breath.

With how his mind, and soul were now feeling, he couldn't help but be proud of himself for buying the Super potions. He had about 16 stocked up in his Temporary Storage!

They could heal a person even if half their body was ground to dust, and cure recent soul damage. Moreover, their regenerative effect lasted 24 hours!

The one Skullius had consumed was the reason why his emotions were quickly settling from how hard his soul had been rattled by the Soul Seducer. Honestly, Skullius wished he had thought to use them sooner, but using it right now, actually made him feel better.

Perhaps if he hadn't found himself in this predicament, he wouldn't have found this hint towards the next step to growth.

...And now, he could figure the rest out.

Swordsmanship wasn't Skullius' main goal, but it was a gateway. The key to the gateway, lied in one skill from his Swordsmanship corner.

[Swordmaster's Quiescence]

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Swordmaster's Quiescence (Special) | Lv.31]

A sword master, after reaching a certain calibre can enter a state of flow, peace and immersion within their mastered craft. This state is only a once in a lifetime opportunity for most practitioners but for a true sword master, it is an ability used through simple choice.

Mana Requirements: 20,000 (I) Mana, 1500 (I) every minute.

Duration: 10 minutes

Cooldown: 20 hours

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A state of flow, peace, and immersion.

That was this skill induced.

In the past months, Skullius had learnt to control this state of immersion, but only for a very brief period – ten seconds. He would be immersed in the feeling of giving in, in order to heighten his capability as a Swordsman.

It was handy, but... was it really ONLY limited to Swordsmanship?

Since he had window where he could think properly, and move for himself while in this state, couldn't he steer this state of immersion, towards any idea he wanted before being swept into becoming a manic butcher?

To reach an extremity, one had to give themselves wholly to it. To the benefits, and the risks.

Yes, Skullius was not whole, and would probably never be until he found the other half of his soul, but he could cheat that with [Swordmaster's Quiescence]. Just for a short time.

...!

Once again, Skullius felt that his enemies were close.

A thick red cloud began to envelop the area around him, covering a distance that exceeded [Destined Warp Steps]' maximum range.

It was time to stop running, and act on this idea anyway.

Currently, Skullius was the Hybrid Luman, the Insurgent Magnus.

From the legacy, he had awakened the WILLS of Fulgardt.

CUNNING.

UNDERSTANDING.

BRUTALITY.

BLOODLUST.

If Skullius didn't know any better, he'd think that Fulgardt had reached the extremity of each of these, and they seemed to be the very thing he needed to overcome his enemies.

Well, as a start.

Though, he wondered, was the ten second window enough for this?

Perhaps. Perhaps not.

But more importantly, as he had questioned himself before...

Was the current him REALLY inadequate in dealing with these two fools?

Flesh no!

He just needed to immerse himself wholly in things that were already a part of him; cunning, understanding, brutality, and bloodlust!

'And of course, in the midst of it all, is Null Life Essence!' Skullius thought.

The short Swordsman bellowed as he dashed towards Skullius who immediately used [Swordmaster's Quiescence] while a rush of excitement bubbled within his torn, bare flesh that oozed of red clouds wherever he had been cut.

The Mind Caster also saw the opportunity, and attacked from a distance, reluctant to enter the stewing red mass.

Micro moments before the short Swordsman reached him, Skullius seemed to once again turn into a hollow shell possessed by nothing except the concept of a body.

But... right before his opponent who was desperate to kill him, heaving his glowing odachi sceptre (?) down, the Hybrid Luman wore a blissful grin, and looked up.

The manifestation of something so profound, it was bigger than Skullius simply learning to accept that death was an inevitability, bloomed, darkening the fates of his enemies....

Chapter 733: Interpretation (3)

[You are HYPED!]

[You are HYPED!]

...

It all happened in the blink of an eye.

Right before Skullius could taste the sceptre blade which was coming at him, not with its harnessed intent, but its full, sharp form, he used [Destined Warp Steps].

But not to dodge.

He accelerated his movement forward to face the cleaving wrath of the short Swordsman, while extending his one hand forward, as if to embrace the sword!

A burst of blood thirst washed from his figure, causing a little flinch to creep from his opponent!

The piece of rock he had been wielding had disappeared from his grasp, and with his open palm, Skullius boldly reached in, and made a gripping gesture at the luminous odachi falling on him!

'Is he mad?!' the short Swordsman asked himself, but to his absolute horror...

His sword, made of energy seeping from an irregular, floating gem atop of the sceptre, came to a silent halt as soon as Skullius gripped it!

All the momentum, and the bloodlust this special sword carried from its master, all vanished without a trace, and the Hybrid Luman responsible for it, still donning a grin, launched his foot right suddenly at his opponent's face!

Lost in the experience for a moment, the short Swordsman felt the hard, terrible bash, and groaned as he tumbled to the side. Yet, his grip on his sword didn't wane. He pulled it with him!

Skullius scoffed and took a sharp breath at the same time.

He almost sunk in what he was feeling right now.

He hadn't just grasped the sceptre sword for fun.

Without warning, a beam of mental energy streaked towards Skullius, but with him processing all the information from his skills at fifteen times the norm through [Beyond the Hype], he was already out of the way, creating more distance between him, and his opponents who immediately began to mobilise against him again.

The short Swordsman was livid as he dashed towards him, his body clad in red clouds! The kick hadn't done anything except transpose him, but he was questioning why his Incarnation was suddenly ineffective against Skullius.

Why wasn't it weakening him?

Skullius was amused at the subtle twitches from the short man which told him that he was struggling with the logic.

'Good.'

[Swordmaster's Quiescence] was still active, and he had a few more seconds to channel it into whatever he pleased with his consciousness intact.

Fulgardt's WILLS.

He felt them all surge, desperately gushing towards him.

Cunning, Understanding, Brutality, Bloodlust!

All these sank into him, and he readily devoured everything they infused in him as he was lost in them.

Lost not in Swordsmanship, but in the ideals of Fulgardt the Immoral!

'Right. Null Life Essence is the key...' Skullius thought as he bolted to meet his enemies.

Through his deal with Aurolio, he had learned to better manipulate Null Life Essence, and get to understand its properties. And through various experiences of his own, Skullius had discovered that Null Life Essence had many forms, but so far, he could only use the basic form of it freely.

Null Life Essence was very invasive, and dominant by nature, but unlike Voided Death Essence, it wasn't aggressive. One of its uses, was to reinforce the body to an incredible degree, ramping up hardness, and toughness.

As Skullius took rapid steps towards the Swordsman, he reinforced his body with a lot of Null Life Essence, channelling it quickly into his veins. He began to feel compact, and immovable.

Right before he met the short man, he recognised a change in the Swordsman's eye, and immediately, the curved rock appeared in his hand from the Temporary Storage, a cloak of Null Life Essence wrapped around it.

Then a clash came.

Skullius with a simple rock, and his opponent with a Legendary grade tool!

A crisp clang resounded, but neither of the two gave in to the other, much to the Swordsman's surprise. He ground his teeth viciously.

"How?!" he growled, but Skullius ignored him.

Instead, he turned his focus, and stamped his foot into the ground, breaking it apart. In the next moment, he kicked up a large chunk of stone, sent a ripple of Null Life Essence into, and swiped it with the tip of his boot towards the Mind Caster who had been about to sneakily take another shot at him!

The stone soared quickly, but the braided man didn't take it too seriously... until it ignored the cloak of Aura around him, and pelted him cruelly in the gut, which knocked the wind of him!

The Mind Caster groaned in agony, and above him, 10 Glass Units were visibly deducted, and transferred to Skullius!

Skullius returned to locking swords with the Swordsman who immediately drowned them both in his non-living Incarnation.

But Skullius didn't budge.

Instead, he did something that made the short man's hope turn grim... after he said something extraordinarily chilling.

"You know, your sword has switched loyalties..."

...!

The glowing odachi which was facing Skullius and his curved rock, rebelled.

Even while its sharp edge faced the Hybrid Luman, it was the short Swordsman who suddenly got a long, vertical cut on his face from where a stream of blood slowly flowed.

...!

He shuddered, and drew his sword from the clash to strike at Skullius again with quicker speed.

Skullius easily parried each of his erratic strikes.

The Swordsman drew back, and got into his aloof stance from a distance. Skullius knew what he was trying to do, a desperate gleam in his eyes.

....

Nothing happened.

A sharp whisper didn't rush towards Skullius like the other times, and the short Swordsman only grew more appalled, and pale.

"What did you do?! What did you do to my sword?!" he screamed, red with rage.

Skullius grinned, his white eyes full of a controlled malice.

He held out the rock sword, and gave a ridiculing reply.

"I don't know. My sword... is right here."

As if spurned by these words, a hiss like that from a great serpent loudly shrieked from the stationary Hybrid Luman, echoing around the pillar scape – though only the two Swordsmen could hear it.

It blew towards the short man like a gust of wind, reaching him in a blink.

The sickening sound of bursting flesh was heard, and the short man's face was ripped open, a wide wound showing on it!

10 Units flew from his cache.

The man shrieked in pain, but he didn't realise that his enemy wouldn't give him a moment to breath. He blinked, and Skullius was right before him, bare handed, his arm cocked back!

Through his bloody eye which was half carved through along with his skull, the short Swordsman saw a fist dart into view, an ungodly force behind it that pulled on the air like a canvas!

This sensation...

This feeling of unimaginable weight...

He remembered it.

BAAM!

A force of 155,000 tonnes struck him point blank in the face, and decimated everything that received even a sliver of the impact through vibration!

The man's face sank in grotesquely, and he took off, speeding through the sky, disappearing out of sight!

Skullius frowned.

His duration of controlled [Swordmaster's Quiescence] usage ended right here, and he cancelled the skill altogether.

He had to say, he wasn't quite as pleased.

10 seconds was barely enough for him to get a feel of what he imagined an extremity was.

He had yet to fully feel the full effect of the WILLS of Fulgardt.

'My 'sword' can't do that much damage, even with Null Life Essence around it. I managed to value it as a sword, which allowed even [Unmatched Sword Sense] to view it as one, but it's not enough to kill these guys, especially when they are on guard...' Skullius thought. 'Maybe the Mind Caster..'

While using Null Life Essence, Skullius could bypass Genuine Incarnations, since they couldn't defend against it, only mana. But the damage he could do with a reinforced rock was only so much.

Sure it was a sharp rock, or rock sword. But it wasn't a proper sword with any properties attached to it

Also, Skullius only had access to the very bare type of Null Life Essence.

His next option was to use the weight property of his mana. However, if he coated his limbs with mana externally, the effect would be neutralised by Genuine Incarnations. So, Skullius channelled the mana within his body so that it wouldn't be erased, and his arm would genuinely be 155,000 tonnes.

Doing this, unlike the former, had the side effect of making Skullius' feel the full weight he would be exerting as well – 155,000 tonnes. Though, he could mitigate it somewhat by making other parts of his body light.

'This is still not enough. I'm not where I need to be yet,' he thought.

In a rare moment of fortune, the red clouds rising from his body suddenly began to dissipate, and soon they vanished completely.

Skullius grinned.

He doubted the Swordsman was dead, but he must have suffered quite a bit of damage.

Almost instantly, his whole body was healed through the effects of the Super potion, and he felt really good. With a pinch of Null Life Essence, he recovered his gear to fully cloth himself again.

...!

A spark of alarm cut Skullius' jovial moment short.

A large blurred dome expanded to net him in.

While Skullius couldn't see, or even sense its outline, he did feel the rush of mental energy gathering.

There was still one other opponent.

Honestly, he didn't know how the Mind Caster had managed to avoid being sliced apart by the short Swordsman. He had heard the short man compliment his technique, and had realised that there was more to it than stalling thoughts.

The braided man was standing fifteen meters from Skullius, a large pillar behind him. His lively staff was in hand, and he was focusing his mental energy through it.

Skullius got ready.

He had held off on finishing the Swordsman because this man was still darting around, and he was just as dangerous as the former.

'Well then, I'll have to—'

...

A square-ish thin, transparent plate flew in between the two.

Both Skullius and the braided man looked at it, puzzled, as it fell.

Its outline, which highlighted its shape, and made it look more like a clear glass, at its centre, an erratic, branching swarm of lightning that seemed frozen in time, showing.

Skullius who could process things faster right now, opened his eyes wide in realisation, and was gone as soon as he remembered what this was.

The Mind Caster was a little slow, and as a result....

He got caught in it.

Chapter 734: Beat You To It

Master Stage experts, as they grew stronger, awakened the ability to activate their skills with Aura, instead of mana. Since Aura was a product of mana being condensed finely, it was easy for it run through mana channels, igniting the carved skills branded to the body.

The effectiveness of skills used with Aura would be ramped up by the margin of enhancement the Master was at in their Stage.

If they were halfway through the Master Stage, they could enhance a skill efficiency by 500%. Though, the strength of their mana core could hinder higher numbers from being reached – white cores couldn't cut it.

If the Master was at the Peak of the Master Stage, with a sufficiently powerful core...

....

The grandiosity of the radiance, and the stupendous outbreak of torrents of electric destruction struck the braided man silly, even as he held on to dear life; dear life being his Genuine Incarnation.

The burst of branched lightning that escaped from the hold of Maxim's flattening Technique nearly razed his body into oblivion.

Thankfully, the Mind Caster had setup his dome beforehand in an attempt to capture Skullius within it. He hadn't known it would end up saving his life.

The mental energy dome had three functions.

It crippled the thought process of targets, which in turn limited how they could use their skills. This was what Skullius had seen it do so far. The second, was to enhance the movements of the user, since the area acted as a boosting territory.

The third function, was to expose the mental energy from the target, and interpret it, which allowed the Mind Caster to see his enemies' moves before hand. Against other Masters, all other functions could fail him, but this usually kept him at an advantage.

This was why the Mind Caster had been able to evade being harmed by the Swordsman, but using this ability drained a lot of energy.

Now, as the glaring calamity had spawned a few meters from him, he had escaped with only several gruesome burns, and mild losses in his flesh, which, in his mind, was an absolute win.

'Dammit! If only my storage wasn't destroyed by that bastard!' the braided man thought begrudgingly while massaging his arm which had the broken spatial storage ring.

There were healing accessories in it that he couldn't reach now.

On the other side, Skullius who was completely unharmed, watched as Maxim's figure, which looked slightly dishevelled, landed in the spot between him, and the Mind Caster.

She took a few deep breaths before giving a glare to the Mind Caster who flinched, and backed away.

Of course, she hadn't forgotten what he tried to pull, and she looked dead set on killing him.

A moment later, a mash of colour appeared atop one of the hollowed pillars. Tallo emerged, a bare bones smirk on his face as he looked down at Maxim.

"That was a mildly enjoyable waste of time," he said before turning to the Mind Caster, the Swordsman in the far distance, and then at Skullius.

A few marks, along with smudges of dirt could be seen on Skullius' face, depicting that he hadn't had an easy time fighting his two opponents.

"Looks like that green sword of yours was a heavy crutch. You aren't holding up too well without it, huh?" he taunted, much to Skullius' snort. "What are you? An Arma User? A Form User? You seem to be allying yourself with too many facets of strength."

"Well, wouldn't you like to know?" Skullius replied.

Tallo smiled.

"I was hopeful that I'd seen much from all of you as you fight amongst yourselves. I'm currently not impressed."

Skullius frowned. Was this guy keeping tabs on him, the braided man, and the Swordsman while fighting Maxim? It seemed so.

Maxim didn't take this too well.

It made her feel like a sparring doll.

"You're nothing too hot either. You've just been flinging elements is all, and keeping your distance. Why would I bother to entertain such a coward?" she shot.

Tallo's smile grew wider.

"Yes, well, the light show had a purpose. I was attracting company. Or rather, making sure our guests arrive earlier. We are currently trespassing on what you may call, an open temple. Common sense can tell you that much. And we have been wrecking the living hell out of this place.

They are already on their way. I've always preferred chaotic battles. They bring about the inspiration tame powers like myself desire to burn brighter. Maybe it's the same for you too," he said.

His words struck Skullius, Maxim, and the braided man like thunder.

Of course, at the very start of this battle, they had imagined that this place didn't look like this for no reason. It was definitely built by creatures from this Cluster that had some form of religious belief, but from Skullius' perspective, he couldn't imagine that the Beckoned Retrievers, and Fleeting Pioneers had made this.

Was there another type of creature in these lands?

"In the meantime, why don't we continue the horseplay, hmm? Maybe you haven't noticed, but I was really only here to obtain an alternative form of enlightenment. Perhaps it starts by making you all turn desperate enough to reveal your hidden cards..."

As Tallo said this, shots of lightning zapped towards everyone!

Skullius, who had been on guard all along, [Beyond the Hype] empowering his dissection of anything that could happen, wasn't fazed.

As the bolt of frightening blue came, he first intended to block, or dodge it, but at the last moment, he allowed it to hit him. When it did, he activated [Swordmaster's Quiescence], and shifted his focus from the WILLS of Fulgardt, to [Greatest Mana Crafter]!

What would happen if he lost himself in the embrace of something that was more dear to him instead of something that he only started to appreciate after coming to Aigas?

What would happen, when Skullius sank into the wholeness of crafting mana?

...

For a moment, the mana around Skullius turned still.

Tallo noticed in the crawling time within his perception.

When the lightning exploded upon coming into contact with Skullius, grinding the ground with shots of heat springing everywhere...

...!

A burnt hand that was rapidly healing emerged from the dirt, and its fingers clasped tightly as if it was taking hold of something violently.

....

Tallo couldn't believe it.

The mana around them all turned stone-like hard, as if it had all been used to create a solid, compact cube within which everyone was trapped in!

For a brief moment, Tallo himself found that he was a bit restricted from moving, but he easily broke free. The same was true for the Mind Caster, and Maxim who easily used their Perfect Aura, and Incarnation to bust out of the hold.

But it seemed the play was far from over.

The massive amount of mana around them gathered up very quickly, and sprang up, and about to form... to form...

Tallo eyes went wide with wonder!

"Runes!" he cried.

A cascade of runes jutted from the flowing mana every millisecond until hundreds emerged, all flying about erratically. In no time at all, they formed a veil-like dome that trapped everyone in it!

The speed of this development was unprecedented, yet only Skullius could appreciate how extreme this feat was, when matched against how he had done this before!

He had just created a Chieftain Screen in less than 1.5 seconds!

Maxim was surprised, and so was the braided man.

Skullius scuttled out of the aftermath of the streak of lightning that he had allowed to hit his body, already healed up.

'Let's see what I can do if I put I my all, connecting one craft to another!' he told himself, as he sped forward, opened his Temporary Storage right between him, and his opponents.

He emptied out half of the mana stored in it, and compressed it, restricting it to where he desired.

...!!!

The sheer volume of it as it poured out intimidated Maxim, who instantly began to form her Genuine Incarnation. Her instincts were flaring madly!

Something really bad was about to happen, and she had to shield herself. She doubted she'd be able to leave the barrier around them as quickly as she needed.

And she was right, on both accounts.

"What... what is this bastard doing?" called the Mind Caster as he used his staff to take to the sky with its little white wings.

But this wasn't going to help.

Skullius clasped his hands, compressing the massive volume of mana further, and then, with a breath of hope, he used it all to do something wild.

Something crazy.

BZZZT! BZZT!

Tallo wore a manic expression of excitement as he saw it.

Sparks trickled from the large ball of glaring mana in the first second, and in the next, the white ball sent out thousands of thick, blue bolts of lightning that dashed everywhere before spasming, wriggling... and urging their source to ignite outward!

How this was possible for Skullius who had never used elements with his Luman body, only the horse himself could answer.

He too wore a thrilled look on his face.

...

A flare-like torchlight led the way. It was so bright that it rose like a divine pillar, and could be seen from everywhere within the Cluster!

What followed behind it was the shattering of the Chieftain Screen Skullius like millions of fragments of a silver sky outward, as it couldn't bear the apocalypse he had set loose within its bounds!

Skullius began to think he had overdone it.

But no, it was alright.

Because he was still not done.

This wasn't a light show!

With his perception, and processing of information being so extreme, and with his use of [Destined Warp Steps] for mobility, the Hybrid Luman dashed through the chaining bolts that vaporised everything they touched!

A large mass of light still blinded all who could see, and the explosion of mana, and lightning rendered most forms of perception useless, and this what Skullius wanted!

In the wake of the noise, light, and saturation, he was invisible, and he could strike as he pleased!

Dodging the chaos was incredibly difficult, but Skullius used all support skills at his disposal – non-Insurgent Magnus skills – and zipped his way through the slowly flying rubble, madly darting lightning and all, to reach right the spot right below the Mind Caster, his target.

The man had been flying away, but even now, as Skullius could perceive him slowly using everything he had to defend himself, and cover his eyes, he grinned.

His rock sword appeared in his hand, and this time, he put his back into it, Null Life Essence flowing around its edge.

He held the object with care, and carved the air with it as he slashed from the distance, a swelling confidence that ignited the rock sword through [Unmatched Sword Sense] beaming out.

A scream that only a Swordsman could hear shot ear-piercingly from the rock, and Skullius watched the result with cruel glee!

....

When all that was left was a black wasteland, devoid of the cultish structures anyway nearby, dark smoke dyeing the air, Skullius held the head of the braided man, and threw it to Maxim, who was covered by a strange Incarnation.

As the head rolled to her feet, she frowned, and glared at Skullius who smirked in return.

"Beat you to it."

Chapter 735: Them

"Are you trying to piss me off too? What was that for?" Maxim snapped with an absolutely disgusted look on her face. She was so mad at the sudden lull after Skullius' attack that her Genuine Incarnation collapsed, and she began to take eager steps towards Skullius.

Skullius raised both his hands in surrender.

"Hold on. I had my reasons for killing him. Goes way beyond wanting his Units," he defended himself. "Besides, look on the bright side, you won't have something else to distract you when we take on this high and mighty Mage."

"We?" Maxim snorted, beyond surprised by the audacity.

Clipping away at the tension, a surge of palpable excitement exploded from the third party in their midst, who, much like Maxim was completely unharmed after the devastating showcase. He looked to be minutes away from dragging Skullius off to a dark cave, and dissecting him, given the way he was staring in wonder.

"How did you do that? The way you controlled the mana... Those runes... You're not an Arma User, or even a Form User, are you? There's no way! No Form Using technique could achieve something like that!

Tell me! How did you do it?"

Skullius looked a bit amused.

He allowed the remaining seconds from [Sword Quiescence] to run out, since he wasn't intending on taking the first step with these two opponents.

Tallo's rush had successfully doused the fiery instincts they all had going moments ago, and Skullius felt the same.

Awakening it when he wasn't sure he could win was unwise.

He had used the opening provided by his latest display to kill the braided man because... he could. He was hundred percent confident he could pull it off, since he knew a lot about the man.

As for these two; a woman with a Family Technique that turned anything flat, and could seemingly shut down the captured target's function, and then a Mage – likely a Prime Mage fresh from Apprenticeship, as far as Skullius could guess – who was also at the Master Stage.

It would be too reckless to attack. Unless of course, Skullius had Demion's Dance, which was probably still where Maxim and Tallo had been fighting, wiggling on the ground in a serpentine form.

Skullius gazed at Tallo, and smirked before repeating his answer to the Mage's previous inquiry.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he said, much to the curious man's frustration.

Maxim cut their exclusive interaction short. She faced Skullius, an eager gleam in her eyes.

"Unlike him, I've very interested in your Units. If he hadn't stalled me for the entire time you idiots were fighting here, I would have killed you all. And here you are, fattening yourself up with Units, and then having the gall to say we should cooperate."

Skullius smiled sheepishly.

He had been fattened himself up. He had almost forgotten that right now, he had earned back all the points he lost to the Mind Caster, and earned his own, thus left sitting comfortably at over 6,000 Glass Units!

Certainly, he must have looked appealing, especially with this numeric figure constantly displayed above him.

Skullius was about to retort, when he felt the presence of someone closing in on them at a mild pace. The three turned, and found that it was the short Swordsman.

His face had healed, and so had every part of his body that had been damaged by Skullius. Traces of heavy bleeding could be still seen however, and it wouldn't have been accurate to say he still retained the same confident snark from a while ago, dripping from his expression.

He was also pale, and didn't look to be able to recover his confrontational zeal any time soon – the sceptre sword, which he held weakly in his left hand, added to the observation.

'I knew, but still... I wanted to doubt that he'd survive that punch. He must have had some means to heal himself immediately after taking the hit,' Skullius assumed.

Maxim looked at the man with interest, and the Hybrid Luman discerned that she was likely about to kill him before anyone else did. This at least pointed to him that despite her threats, Maxim didn't take Skullius as lightly. Not after his latest display.

It made Skullius feel kind of proud.

The Hybrid Luman daringly drew his rock sword.

He wanted to reap the Swordsman too. For grudge's sake, of course. As for the consequences...

Well, the fires of confrontation were going to ignite back sooner or later.

In the next moment, Tallo smirked.

Something fast whipped towards the short Swordsman, and sped right through his head!

It had moved so quickly that its target didn't realise that he was already dead until a few seconds later, and as adverse fortune would have it, he was the first to see what had killed him.

It was lodged on one of the pillars a distance from the blackened, desolate land they were all standing in.

It was an arrow. A rather long one, with pristine white, feather fletching, and a shiny greyish body.

Skullius, and Maxim instantly went on guard despite the disappointment on their faces, which grew even more pronounced when the Glass Units the Swordsman were destroyed, this told by the illusion above his head.

"Looks like your fireworks drew THEM here even faster than my own," Tallo said.

He had sensed THEM just now. Just barely.

They were cloaked hiddenly, but his sensory capabilities which extended past the range of only mana, caught their figures which had surrounded the trio half a minute ago.

Skullius frowned.

[Graceless Hunter] had only hinted towards the fact that there were indeed enemies around them, hard to notice even with his powerful senses.

[Primal Caution] also issued severe warnings of danger looming around him, but it was unclear.

'What am I about to face this time?' Skullius thought, recalling that after facing the Beckoned Retriever, he had begun to pray for contenders as opponents instead.

Well, that thought had become debatable with time, but now, he was back to wondering if this was going to be a simple 'running unto Cluster beasts'.

He never forgot, after all.

This was a purple Cluster.

Maxim smacked her lips aggressively.

The new arrivals began to revealing themselves, and Skullius groaned.

Beckoned Retrievers.

About two dozen of them appeared from all around, edging into the charred zone the trio were standing in. They were bigger than the one he had faced off in the creepy forest, and more terrifying than that, was the fact that most of them had four tails, or more.

To add paper, paraffin, charcoal, and blend to the furnace, there were riders atop these beasts.

The moment Skullius noticed them, his face turned grave.

After Cluster diving countless times in the past two months, Skullius could recognise creatures' Tiers without the need of the guidance field, particularly double digit Tiered monsters.

The riders, all were.

They were humanoid. Somewhat. Maybe? A plethora of weapons covered their bodies.

They had so much dark, soft fur around their bodies, that it was hard to tell what they looked like underneath. Furry arms? Were those legs? A torso, and a full head of fur, in the most literal sense of the phrase?

It was honestly bizarre.

Skullius leaned in close to Maxim, and whispered.

"You know what these four-legged creatures are, right? You sure you still don't want to team up?" he asked.

Surprisingly, Maxim didn't reply with another forced threat. She looked to be greatly annoyed at the sight of the black, jaguar-like beasts that were the rides for the fuzzy bears, spelling aloud that she had run into them before.

The pink-haired woman harrumphed.

"And you?" Skullius asked Tallo.

"I haven't met any of these since coming here. If you're that apprehensive of them, then maybe their worth the time," was the Mage's reply.

"Worth the time my foot."

The beasts and their riders stood, surrounding Skullius and crew in a perfect circle.

They didn't move an inch even after that, and only stood staring (?), at the group.

It was when they had gotten this close, that the trio noticed that something was in each of the mouths of the Retrievers. Large chunks of crystalline amber rocks could be seen.

Maxim, and Tallo recognised the colour, and texture of the rocks to match those of the large, egg-shaped amber mass surrounded by what looked like offerings, which had been standing proudly where they had appeared after being drawn by the Draw Bubble.

What was this about?

What was that rock anyway?

Was it a bad thing that Skullius had turn it to dust?

Skullius was prepared to pounce, but he didn't forget his experience with the clouds, and thus he kept a keen focus above for the slightest trace of mana convergence. Tallo, and Maxim seemed prepared too, not daring to underestimate the situation enough to ignore it.

Then...

Tp. Tp. Tp.

The sound of heavy, grating footsteps pounded on the ground, increasing the tension further.

Another Retriever emerged, its size quite a fair bit larger than the rest, and its dark fur riddled with white stripes all the way to its six, long tails.

Atop it sat a rider.

Skullius whispered to the duo as if it had become the most natural thing to do.

"I do not like this."

Disregarding the fact that none of the three could discern his presence, or his power as casually as they could with the rest, his appearance had already spoiled the fact he was a menace.

Unlike the other dark furred riders, he had a more modest amount of lustrous silver fur on his body. Most of it was covered by the whitish grey, baggy outfit he wore, which looked strangely traditional – a loose, long sleeved top with a very low neckline which exposed his furry chest, and thick pants with three deep maroon sashes tied around its waist.

There was nothing at its feet, but this allowed one to appreciate the evenness of the skin tone of the rider. Its face, which could be seen, surrounded by thick, silver furs that united beard, and hair into one, two dark eyes without pupil, or iris gleamed darkly, and a thin lipped mouth, matched its feet – tonally.

The rider disembarked from his beast, and took slow steps towards the trio fearlessly.

The group turned tense.

But things got worse when the silver furred beast opened his mouth.

"Distant kin... Are you the ones we were told to slaughter?"

Chapter 736: Mercy?

"Distant kin... Are you the ones we were told to slaughter?"

Skullius' face turned comical, as he turned to Maxim instinctively, who also turned to him, as if suspecting that he was somehow in league with the Cluster beasts.

Distant kin?

Slaughter?

What was going on?

Within each other's eyes, past the question of what the beast's statement meant, Skullius and Maxim could see the confusion glowing within.

Did this Cluster beast just speak to them in the Known Language?

Skullius had never experienced this before with Cluster beasts, not even with Generals.

But... wait. What about the Great Mane Mountain Ape from the Tremur Forest?

...!

Was this creature using something like [Greater Communication] to communicate with them?

Different from Skullius and Maxim however, Tallo didn't seem quite as surprised by this.

He actively gave a response after walking towards the silver-furred rider.

"Who told you kill us?" the Mage asked.

The rider didn't answer him immediately, and instead kept staring at him with eyes that seemed to have absorbed all the darkness in the world. Its thin lips then parted again.

"One of your kind... A lean creature with a youthful life force..." the rider replied with the best deadpan face Skullius had ever seen. He spoke with brief pauses in between, which gave his voice a sagely tone.

'Is he... talking about Rias EverSword?' Skullius asked himself.

"The young creature spared only my clan among the tens that used to thrive here, but...."

The creature's head turned, looking at the destruction around without a shift in its expression.

The deep maroon pillars around the three had been decimated, the land had been scorched, and far off was the worst of it. While the rider wore a poker face, Skullius, Maxim, and Tallo knew what was up.

Tallo had been right.

This was definitely some kind of sacred ground.

And as soon as they arrived, they had begun to desecrate it without a care.

What were the consequences of this?

Well, maybe slaughter, but was there a better way forward?

'I don't like where this is going?' Skullius thought. He had thought to share this sentence with his 'buddy' but held himself back.

"He warned us that heathens... bloodthirsty demonic incarnates would be sent here, but I never imagined... you all, as distant kin to be as evil as this... to diminish the little we have left even further... while in the presence of the All-Guiding Appairitoni..."

'Bloodthirsty incarnates...? You mean contender?' Skullius asked in his heart, afraid to voice his words. 'We were misrepresented!'

Could everyone in the stadium hear this?!

Skullius looked to Tallo, hoping that the man – since he had taken the role of spokesperson – would smooth the matter over by explaining their circumstances at least. Wrecking the place – an open temple, as Tallo himself had described – wasn't intentional.

While explaining that probably wouldn't change much, maybe, they could at least clear the hostility a little.

To Skullius and Maxim's shock though...

"What are you doing to do about it?" Tallo said, not forgetting to add the intimidating, taunting tone that always seemed to tune the antagonist of a cliché fantasy tale into a killing frenzy.

Skullius leapt up to speak.

"Don't listen to him! We are not what you think we are!" he cried, spreading his arms out.

The rider closed his eyes calmly.

"I've heard enough," he said, and Skullius could have sworn he saw – with Crude Vision – what could be spotted of his ears under the fur, get tucked in, in order to consolidate his stance.

"Regardless of who you are... We were promised that if we slay you all, we may keep what remains of our kind... I am inclined to believe he who has a leash on our fates..."

Skullius looked dumbfounded, then angry as he turned to Tallo who smiled.

"What was that?!" he whispered.

Was there really a need to aggravate these beasts further?

Tallo didn't reply.

The rider raised his hand up, and the clouds above churned. The three looked up, and saw everything that could be seen past the clouds before get hidden.

The sky suddenly looked like a painting of electric blue.

"I assume you are smart enough to know... the sky's agents govern motion here," the rider said apathetically, "But I... govern these agents in turn. You cannot flee from this place without my permission..."

Maxim was the first to ignite her Perfect Aura again. As things had escalated so suddenly, she opted to get ready. Her eyes went to Skullius, and surprisingly, she said:

"You better be as useful as I hope."

Skullius sheepishly smiled...again, and prepared for the worst. Tallo remained rooted in place, a casual look of happiness on his face.

This was really what he wanted, huh?

The other riders on their Beckoned Retrievers finally moved, and rushed out in different directions. They each stationed themselves among the pillars outside the charred zone, across different stretches of distance.

Then, they raised their hands, and in a flash of light, large, curved horns appeared in their grips, a luminous orange-crimson looking to be burning within them, which admitted a strange glow. They put the horns to their mouths – everyone had to assume, since their faces were nothing but fur – and soon after, a cacophony of groans with an immense depth rang out from all around the sacred place.

It was strangely rhythmic, but the musically illiterate soul wouldn't have caught the 'genius' in this music.

The horns being blown didn't only bellow out with sound, however. A rush of wind began to slowly blow along with the long running tune, picking up speed with each second.

Moments later, a full blown hurricane had assaulted the hallowed space, and at first, Skullius and the rest thought this was the beginnings of an attack on them, but they were proved wrong right away.

As the deep tune from the horns roared, another tune, certain to be categorised by any music fanatic as an acquired taste, rang out in high and low notes. It sounded like someone was playing a gigantic flute.

It dawned on the human trio that the pillars with gaping hollows on them, were the ones responsible for the second tune.

Their purpose was to create this... delightful melody (?), while the wind, which wasn't all that intolerable, blew on every living thing among them.

This seemed like some sort of ritual.

The silver furred rider looked pleased, even though Skullius could tell he might have been sour from the song obviously not going as it usually did, a courtesy offered by the contenders' destructive services free of charge.

Skullius inched closer to Maxim.

"Why are we waiting around? Shouldn't we just get this over with?"

He had decided to let the heavy hitters do the hitting first. Frankly, having them as allies – however temporary – with their Incarnations, was bliss. It was safer to act as support for them.

At the same time, on instinct, both Maxim and Skullius had decided to wait on the maniac who had intended for this situation, to act, so that they could confirm whether or not they were on the same page.

As it so happened, it was Tallo who answered Skullius' question.

"Hold on," he simply said.

"..."

The rider, who had silently been appreciating the music, disregarding them, turned to face them again.

"This was the time for the seasonal celebration of Appairitoni. We.... hold this ritual to give Appairitoni praise for his guidance, and... protection. When there were many of us, we used to feast together with other clans, and the loyal Pioneers. Having drinks, playing games, and....

making peace with enemies..." he said before bringing his palms together, and making a strange symbol with his fingers.

...!!!

Skullius and Maxim were alarmed, and found themselves dashing far away from the Cluster beast, but Tallo remained.

The terrible howl of an astounding gush of mana fiercely swam from the pillars around them, and sank into the ground, drawing three, large, bright, circular outlines on the ground, each wider than the last.

The first, in which Skullius, Tallo, Maxim, and the silver furred rider were in, was roughly eight hundred meters in diameter. The second, was two kilometres, and the third, in which the maroon pillars still featured, was five kilometres.

The rider continued to speak as the fierce wind billowed, his fingers unclasping.

"I sense the gazes of innumerable eyes on us, distant kin. Your people... must be watching. Thus, I fear that if I were to slaughter you unfairly, I might put my kind in a difficult situation if.... hmmm.... whoever you are, and whatever you have done," he said, hints of suspicion showing in his eyes.

"Therefore, I have chosen... to introduce a game my kin play. If you emerge victorious, I shall be generous, and fulfill any of your wishes. I alone. If you lose, I shall slaughter you... as it was requested of me..."

'Great another game,' Skullius grunted unpleasantly, an uncertain look on his face.

Something about this didn't feel right.

Was slaughtering them the only thing these beasts were told to do? If that was the case, it seemed weird that it was willing to let them live, and even introduce a game.

It was weird indeed.

However, his focus was brought right back when the rider manifested two deadly weapons as mysteriously as his kin had with the horns.

He held them, and then made a formal introduction.

"Baddan is my name... distant kin. Baddan of the Cruel Spears. Please acknowledge, and brand this name to your souls... before we begin..."

Chapter 737: Baddan (1)

[Name : Baddan]

[Tier : 14]

[Level : 344]

[Core : Purple]

[Class : Beckoned Sky Watcher]

[Race : Beckoned Sky Watcher]

[Inv. Status : Barely holding in murderous thoughts]

...

This had been all Skullius had chosen to look at before listening to the rules that Baddan explained.

While the rules of the game were simple to understand, generally speaking, the fact that he was about to face a Tier 14 Cluster beast... which, judging by its class, and race, was also 'Beckoned', like the Retrievers...

Skullius almost lost the remnants of composure he had.

What was worse, he cursed the Cluster beast Baddan for pretending he was a sagely, composed, reasonable creature when he was itching to kill them!

This added to Skullius' anxiety on how everything was going to play out, and from the looks of Maxim's face, she too was quite unsure of what the outcome was going to be. She was more briskly giving in to the fact that they had to work together to get out of this, even if this was supposed to be an everyone-man-for-himself Royale.

Tallo seemed relaxed, but he was feeling a rush of emotion. Perhaps there wasn't much concern in this rush, but he had to be feeling apprehensive at the very least. Skullius hated that about him. If this guy just wanted a challenge, why didn't he just get out of Genhuis City, and hunt himself a purple Cluster instead of coming here?!

Thinking about this turned meaningless rather quickly though. It soon became time for Skullius to give his all into thinking about how best he could contribute in this... game.

As Baddan had said, the game was simple.

Apparently, in its traditional form, it started with a Sky Watcher like himself, going up against a hundred or so of his kin – the name of which became more confusing when he saw Baddan's status. The Sky Watcher was supposed to herd the participants away from the first circle, until they were outside the bounds of the third circle.

Said participants were supposed to prevent that from happening through any means at their disposal. Any at all.

The Sky Watcher had handicaps which were lifted as he herded away the participants from circle to circle.

While in the innermost or first circle, he could only use his physical abilities, and his bonded weapons. When he herded the participants to the second circle, the Sky Watcher could use his

racial, and class abilities in addition. In the outer ring, he could use everything else without holding back.

That said, he couldn't use the abilities he was allowed in any ring, unless he had driven participants into it – any number of them.

The game lasted for roughly 10 minutes – translating the unit of time became difficult during the explanation – and by the end of it, only those who were still standing in the innermost ring were deemed victorious.

All simple, generally speaking, but Skullius wasn't too hopeful.

He and the others managed to read in between the lines, as Baddan didn't specify everything for them.

First of all, they had a chance in the first, and maybe second circle, but in the outermost, Baddan would be able to use every other ability beside his weapons, and techniques.

That meant, he could use his Majestic Territory.

It was obvious that the Cluster beast had one.

Second, as Baddan had mentioned before, motion was indeed under his control. Any other movement that had nothing to do with playing the game, was met with the slowing effect, as per his will.

Lastly, the time limit on the game spoke for itself. Participants couldn't last long against the Sky Watcher.

"Hopefully we can trust that he will actually do as he promised, if we win," Skullius had whispered to Maxim.

"I'm prepared for disappointment..." she had replied.

Now, as they stood, facing the humanoid beast in his clean, greyish, baggy attire, in his hands two short spears – assegais – one in gleaming gold, the other in charcoal, lustreless black, Cruel Spear's words seemed to have a bit more depth.

"We can begin... at any time you wish..." Baddan the Cruel Spear said in a mellow voice, as if he couldn't care less about all this, but Skullius knew otherwise.

Tallo was about to say they could begin when Skullius dived at him and covered his mouth.

"Wait!" he hurriedly said before glaring at the Mage. "You're so eager to die?!"

"What's there to wait for?"

Skullius scowled.

"You realise we can work together right? Just this once."

"We don't need to. I just need to remain in the innermost circle. I could do that on my own, if I'm capable enough."

"Really? You want to fight, ALONE? Weren't you the one crying about wanting to see what our limits were, or if we could grow together?"

"I never said that."

"Semantics!" Skullius raged, somehow keeping his voice low. "What are you even after anyway?"

Tallo gave Skullius a strange look, a bit of a frown flourishing on his face.

Maxim interjected before he could answer.

"Leave him. I don't want to waste anymore time. The two of us can find our way just as well," she said while popping something into her mouth.

Skullius sighed. Tallo looked to have been about to answer his question when Maxim butted in, but that look of vulnerability was gone now.

He reluctantly left the man's side, and was about to let him start the game when he remembered something crucial.

"Dammit! Wait! Wait! Wait!" he said, and zipped his way towards the corpse of the short Swordsman.

He took the sceptre sword which had fallen to the side – though its peach-coloured blade had retracted into the irregular cube.

As he held it, the odachi blade of energy streaked out, and Skullius found a warm sensation invading him.

This Legendary item counted as a blade, and he could feel its emotions, and its humming.

When Skullius had clutched it earlier, during his fight with the short man, he had finally taken advantage of [Unmatched Sword Sense]'s impressive ability to make swords become like open books to him.

Manipulating them, and turning them against their lesser users became possible after his epiphany. Also, since his sword didn't have as powerful a sense of consciousness as the Bashful Abomination, swaying its loyalty was incredibly easy. One with an inferior Sword Sense wouldn't even begin to understand what Skullius had done.

Skullius looked a distance away to where he imagined Demion's Dance was, still in the form of a serpent. He wasn't sure if he could venture that far away to look for it while Baddan was so eager to get the game started.

'We are definitely going to be pushed that far. I'll look for it then,' Skullius thought.

Shortly after, the game began.

Baddan was aware that Skullius was the one holding back the commencement, and thus, when Skullius held the sceptre sword, he urged them to begin.

Skullius used [Destined Warp Steps] to rush over to Maxim.

Baddan didn't attack immediately.

He still wore the convincing facade on his face, and looked steadily at the trio.

In the next moment, he hunched over, as if readying for a sprint.

The trio cautiously prepared counters.

Was it charge, or a dash that was coming?

Skullius remembered Hobbu Bobbu's outrageous speed and gulped. To raise his own morale, he reminded himself that he was still not yet done dissecting the epiphany he had had earlier. There was still plenty of room to grow, especially in this battle.

...

Maxim who was by his side seemed to have said something that Skullius missed because of the tension. He partly turned to her, and asked that she said it again, but the response that came was a blaring scream.

Or it sounded like it.

It took a sizable chunk of a second for Skullius to realise in horror that... what he heard wasn't a scream.

The first thing he had heard, assuming it to be something Maxim had said, was the nigh imperceptible groan of Maxim who had been carried away by one of the spears Baddan had just thrown!

Neither Skullius nor Tallo had perceived when Baddan had done this – in their perspective, he was hunched over, preparing for what seemed like a charge in front of them!

The scream Skullius had heard afterward, was the sound lagging behind Maxim's impaling, and she was already a quarter of the way into the second circle by the time Skullius turned to her figure.

What the heck kind of logic was that?!

Was that just raw speed?

How could a short spear carry anyone like that?!

The moment Skullius made the move to go and help her, he found, with Crude Vision, that Baddan was already with Maxim, his foot stamping on her chest as soon as she landed.

The gold spear was sticking from her lower chest, surprisingly, and she wheezed, trying to catch her breath.

'Shit!' Skullius thought as he darted faster.

What was more terrifying about Maxim's position right now, was that she was in the second circle!

Baddan could use any racial, and Class techniques he had in this area!

The still face of Baddan rose to meet Skullius' and the Hybrid Luman caught what the Sky Watcher intended.

This was a display to thoroughly stamp their resolve!

Was this creature really looking to appear considerate before the millions watching this or was that a lie?!

Baddan made a series of hand gestures, and uttered four chilling words as soon as he was done, a stream of high quality mana bustling from his purple core!

"Descend, Storm Tainted Kiiyataka!"

...!

Above, the clouds became incredibly restless, and furiously dove down. A cascade of booming noises raged within their blue tinged masses, as if to unite with the howling winds below, as well as the music.

A great shadow moved within the clouds briskly, and not a moment later, where the clouds had dipped, something massive dove down, its form ethereal, glazing, and gorgeous!

Skullius remembered hearing a desperate scream, before even he had to shut his ears, planting himself down because of what followed...

Chapter 738: Baddan (2)

The twinkling of abrasive, 'spiced' mana from the explosive attack, as well as chips of rapidly flying debris, with hints of cloud lazily gliding all the way from the second circle, blasted against Skullius' skin.

This kind of attack power was unreal.

It certainly would have scared the average contender shitless, and driven away their hope before Baddan could drive them away from the three circles.

The obscurity bellowing from the distance was quickly washed away by the mild hurricane, and strangely, the tunes still whistling from the ritualistic setup, gave a sombreness to the whole ordeal which Skullius didn't like one bit.

It was like a melody of futility, announcing that the three, had already lost, and were already dead.

Skullius was still alive, and Tallo certainly was, but Maxim's fate wasn't looking too good. After all...

'That was definitely a Super Skill...' Skullius thought gravely.

The colour of one's core determined what kind of skills they could use. White mana cores only supported Normal skills, Blue mana cores supported Normal, and Special skills. Purple cores could

heave both the previous, in addition to Super skills, and Gold ones could activate all including Supreme skills.

It went without saying that there was significant jump in strength, as well as versatility and efficiency, with the ascension of a skill's rank.

However, as Skullius had been hoping, Genuine Incarnations could counter mana, and mana-based skills, though, if the skills casted by the enemy had a higher quality of mana, for instance Super skills, against a Master who only had a blue core, the advantage wouldn't last long at the very best of cases.

Skullius sped towards the rising heaps of dust, and devastation. He had to see if Maxim was alive. She was likely his only hope, since Tallo had his own agenda, and wouldn't cooperate.

That said, he doubted that Maxim had survived an attack like that.

What had descended from the clouds, was a giant fish made of said dark clouds, the whitish coil of drops of rain, and sparks of thin bolts of lightning around it.

It resembled a large swordfish, and its many, cloud formed teeth looked more dangerous than the blade of the Bashful Abomination. Watching it dig down, and melt the ground with a flash of heat spreading wildly from the impact, was mesmerizingly heart-breaking. If not for the effects of the Super potion Skullius took, he doubted he would survive it himself, and even with that, he had little hope.

Flakes of mana manipulated to create such a violent effect touched his skin as he drew close, discovering, to his surprise, that all the pillars which had been in, and near the attack radius, were unscathed.

The ground had been dug in comically deep into bowl-like shape, a nasty scorching glow that spanned to cover almost all of the second circle area overpowering the eye, but beyond that, everything else was intact.

'Tsk...'

Skullius scoured around, first for Baddan, but he couldn't find him.

That made his stomach churn, even though he didn't have one.

A cloak of Null Life Essence was around him, hardening his body significantly, but he wasn't sure it would hold if he took a hit. After all, it was the most basic type of Null Life Essence.

WHAM!

[Primal Caution] belatedly warned Skullius when he was already half way through the second circle, flying at a speed that jumbled his senses!

Before even considering what had hit him, Skullius used [Inferno Burst] – a skill which allowed him to travel short distances quickly by generating sharp bursts of heat – to reduce his momentum, and then flashed to the ground with [Destined Warp Steps]!

Sadly, the ground turned elusive for a moment because of the rapid whirling from the flight, and when Skullius landed, he had barely found his balance when he barely perceived movement to his right!

He wanted to summon the sceptre sword, which he had slotted in his storage after deciding to rush for Maxim, but that would be too slow!

As Null Life Essence rushed through his blood vessels, Skullius focused an outrageous amount of mana into the mana channels all over his body with vicious speed, gave himself the full 155,000 tonnes of weight through said mana, and planted himself to the flat ground with the full effect of gravitational force he could conjure!

A blow he couldn't understand hit him, but he didn't know where exactly it struck, because his whole body seemed to explode with a harshly vibrant sensation that punished the earth beneath his foot as well!

Skullius imagined this was what swords might feel like when they were forced to clash against each other.

He managed to survive the hit, remaining whole, with his feet to the ground.

But then...

....!

Blood burst from Skullius' ears, eyes, nose, and mouth in large quantities.

His body couldn't take the wrestling match between his rigidity, and the external force of the blow, and in addition, his bones seemed to shatter like wood!

Thankfully, Skullius couldn't feel pain, and as soon as he incurred the damage, he was already healing.

'Was that a raw punch?! I didn't sense mana from it!' he thought quickly. If all his effort just now was what it took to not be disintegrated by Baddan's raw strength, then this was a lost cause!

"You are... sturdier than I imagined. I had thought you were the weakest... in your group. Offering you to Appairitoni will be worth while after all..." Baddan's voice came from all around. Or so it seemed.

"I shall use an adequate portion of my strength... against you as well..."

'Flesh that!' Skullius thought as he used [Destined Warp Steps] to flee immediately.

Unfortunately, in the midst of following the starry footprints that turns him into a breeze over a vast distance, his neck was suddenly gripped with a cruel force!

Skullius didn't think at all when this happened.

[Swordmaster's Quiescence] was activated, and like before, he channelled it into his immersion within mana!

As it activated, Skullius felt the point of a spear dig below his chin, going upward!

When the mana he called from his core had reached the mana channels close to his ankles, the tip of this spear had sunk close to eye level within his head. When the gravitational effect he intended finally roared out in full force, pulling Baddan to the ground, the spear had almost shot through the top of his head.

...!

Baddan felt the pulling force, and crouched down. But this was only because he was caught off guard!

Skullius didn't care for reasons why though, and had already sent a full power, full weight punch right at the creature's head!

PWA!

Skullius' hand exploded into bloody, bone chipped chunks, the desperate effort he had put in to at least damage Baddan, being insufficient when matched against the creature's raw toughness! It was like punching an iron mountain!

This was cheating!

He couldn't be this tough, right?!

"Curious..." said Baddan as he rose, stabbing Skullius again with the dark, lustreless assegai ten times in a moment. "You feel no pain... don't you?"

Skullius' body whirled, and he found himself smashed to the ground, Baddan's foot on his chest.

"A spear through the head.... and you did not flinch. Truly... I need you in this circle to even dream of killing you..."

Baddan started making another set of hand gestures, and the wind blowing around hurriedly flowed towards the two, becoming intense, with blade like shapes whipping through its body as it accelerated.

Then, Baddan spoke again, as [Primal Caution] pleaded for Skullius to run away before he was sliced to infinitesimally small bits!

"Flow, Tyakuta the Mournful..."

...!!!

As a mass of noisy wind vaguely shaped the dusty form of a large bear-like creature, the interacting gusts turning more chaotic as it moved to drop over Skullius, which, as he could tell, meant his dicey doom, the Hybrid Luman was finally ready to stop holding back for safety's sake.

If his body was eviscerated in a instant, only a Supreme potion had any chance of saving him, not a Super one.

'Flesh it!'

A golden white light had started to rise from his body, when Skullius felt that Baddan's foot was no longer pressing against him.

The silver-furred creature had risen into the air!

A set of mangled hands had wrapped tightly around his waist, and heaved him up, a loud, but muffled voice screaming furiously.

"You could have stabbed me anywhere else! Anywhere! Why the chest, you asshole?!"

Then a nasty boom shook the ground.

Baddan had been supplexed into the ground by Maxim!

She was alive, but, well...

Not a moment later, she screamed at Skullius.

"Kill him!"

Skullius once again, didn't think.

The bear-like creature of gathered, blade like winds collapsed – most likely because Baddan had lost his focus on it – and the Hybrid Luman, holding the sceptre sword had flashed to where Maxim still held Baddan's inverted body which was stuck in the ground from the neck up!

The sword carved through the air with a shriek, its blade sinking through the Sky Watcher's neck cleanly, decapitation him!

'Damn it...!' Skullius cursed as Baddan's neck stump spat out dark red blood.

That was too easy.

Even Maxim, who was incredibly disfigured, felt the same despite her rage-stricken face.

She rolled away immediately, and Skullius prepared to use the [Ungodly Flames of Debauchery] stored in his Temporary Storage to burn the body, just in case it was in fact, the real one when... it turned into a clump of dark blue clouds!

The Hybrid Luman's face turned hard, and he turned to Maxim briefly.

She was panting heavily.

While not his intent, Skullius noticed how terrible battered she was.

Her hair had turned black with traces of pink, part of her head bald. Her face was molten, but a few patches of fresh skin slowly – very slowly – appearing on it, told of the fact that she was healing. Her sleek, black armour, with silver rings around the joints was caved, torn, molten, and mangled everywhere, some parts of it becoming one with Maxim.

Her legs and arms were like those of someone who had had them hammered down, before dipping them in acid.

Yet, she was alive.

Skullius didn't know what to say to her.

He didn't have the time to either.

From around them, clumps of clouds began to pop up, and they dissipated a second later revealing something where they had squirmed a moment before.

Baddans. Tens of Baddans.

All of them looked exactly, and felt like Baddan!

"You're kidding me..." Skullius said with a dark expression. Maxim smacked her lips and spat out a shot of blood.

With a closer look at the many enemies, Skullius managed to deduce that each of the Baddan clones weren't the exact same as the Baddan original. They felt slightly... slightly weaker.

He couldn't even tell by how much.

That didn't cheer him up at all.

One of the Baddans opened his mouth to speak.

"Please, do not assume me to be... complacent. I take all my opponents seriously..." he said, as all the clones dashed towards the duo.

Skullius grimaced, and shot to Maxim.

With a heavy tone, he then said:

"Hold on."

And in a flash, Skullius turned into a dark mass of elongated, mist-like ribbons that crawled speedily up high into the sky, Maxim hidden within it!

It was [Boundless Evil]!

Over large stretches of distance, it was more preferable, and much faster than [Destined Warp Steps], though it took a few moments to reach full acceleration.

The distance back to the innermost circle was covered in the blink of an eye, and Skullius and Maxim landed on the ground safely.

The latter had a surprised look on her face, but Skullius had a dark one.

While [Boundless Evil] was a skill only influenced by his Insurgent Magnus powers, making it stronger, and giving it a look a little reminiscent of [Evil Darkness], Skullius still hadn't wanted to reveal it.

Giving the circumstances though; against the fearsome Tier 14 Sky Watcher, he didn't seem to have the luxury of holding all his powers back.

Chapter 739: Back and Forth

"Are you alright?" Skullius asked Maxim after a short pause since their landing. The pink haired woman, with her face that looked like it had been chewed by a dog, and then invaded by reddish measles, scowled.

"You could say that," she replied.

It seemed, as Skullius hypothesised, that the thing Maxim had eaten while he had been arguing with Tallo before, was what had saved her life. Whatever it was, must have had a stronger effect than that of a Super potion, because Skullius was quite certain he would die, even though he had drunk one.

When it came to special consumables, they weren't counted among artefacts, so naturally, they were allowed in the Royale, without limitation. During the Preliminaries though, many contenders had started to get suspicious.

Many of them drank potions before their matches so that they wouldn't die. Losing was one thing – killing wasn't a requirement – but dying, was another. However, they found that while wounds could be healed during the fights, powerful consumables like Supreme potions, couldn't revive you once received a fatal injury.

The news didn't spread too much since most contenders didn't have the means to wrestle death, but those who noticed were conflicted.

Seeing Maxim heal so slowly, Skullius imagined that the thing she had eaten had different priorities, and was likely weaker than a Supreme potion.

"Thanks," Skullius said to her. "I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't showed back there."

Maxim raised a brow, though she had none currently.

"Sure. But I was really just trying to get one good hit on that bastard for..." Maxim paused, realising that she was about to vent on a topic she didn't appreciate talking about with men. "Anyway, how do you reckon we stay alive. Barely a minute has passed since we began, right?"

"Yeah..." Skullius said with a dragging voice, and turned to Tallo who was a bit of a distance from where they landed. He had been watching what they were doing with his hands hidden within his long, large sleeves, a calculating look in his eyes. "The both of us would have died in that minute if not for dumb luc-... ahem... if not for our resourcefulness. I guess."

As Skullius finished his sentence, Baddan appeared, taking steps towards into the innermost circle from the direction they were facing. His two spears when in hand, and as Skullius perceived them, he kind of understood why this rider was dubbed, Cruel Spear.

"Here we go again..." Skullius said tensely, unnerved by how slowly Baddan was approaching.

Was this simply confidence, or had he given up on breaking their spirits with rapid, flashy shows of strength?

"I might have some idea about his abilities..." Maxim suddenly said.

Skullius turned to her.

"What?"

"It'll take too long to explain it like this. I'll tell you as we attack... if I get the chance. At least here, we only have to worry about his spears, and physique," she said.

Skullius nodded, and activated [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc].

A pillar of light shot into the sky, and created a wide, circular halo that lit up a large area, close to half the size of this innermost space.

This was the active effect of the healing skill, and it had faster, and more potent healing effects than the passive. It also gave an 80% overall boost to Skullius, and those whom he deemed as allies, as long as they stayed within the bounds of the halo, which was kind of adversely ironic to the entire game situation.

Maxim's appearance was rapidly restored because of the light, and given that most of her serious wounds had been healed beforehand, it barely took two blinks of an eye for her to look gorgeous again.

She took a moment to look at herself, and wore a rare smile.

"Thank you. I hate looking ugly. It almost makes me feel more self-conscious about—" Maxim paused again, and frowned before focusing on the approaching Baddan. "Let's take the offensive first."

Suddenly, Maxim's body ignited with a spiky, watery Perfect Aura. She launched herself at Baddan, with Skullius following after her.

Midway, she suddenly manifested six thin, transparent plates in her hands, which she flung at Baddan like shuriken! On them, was depicted obscure images of explosions, branches of lightning, swirling flames, all seeming to be frozen in time!

As they drew close to the Sky Watcher, they shattered, and began creating a cacophony of noises as what they had trapped was released!

A series of different flavoured bursts of damage buried Baddan's figure!

Skullius beamed.

'What a useful technique!'

Maxim had been storing some of the elemental attacks she had received from Tallo during their short bout!

The Hybrid Luman caught up to Maxim, and they both sank into the obscure veil of dust, and heat to attack Baddan.

As Skullius had thought, Baddan wasn't looking to overwhelm them quickly anymore, like last time.

He waited for them to arrive.

"Brave souls..." he said, before his arm whipped forward towards Maxim, who didn't even see it before it dug deep into her belly, shattering the remnants of armour on her back!

She groaned hard, and bitterly, but quickly clutched Baddan's arm, pulled him close, grit her teeth, and gave him a crisp header with a loud 'Rar!' leaving her mouth!

Skullius was shocked when a little, bubbly shockwave blew from the impact. Baddan frowned, and staggered a little, meaning he had actually felt that!

Despite his toughness!

'No way...' Skullius thought.

He didn't waste that momentary opening though, and slashed with his sword at the bastard's neck with impeccable accuracy!

The sword carved through Baddan's... after-image, much to no one's surprise. Maxim was already following after the silver furred creature where he had dashed away to, but a few crisp, unseen blows sent her flying away, with Skullius taking her place for the attack.

'Physical attacks won't do. So...' Skullius once again became a blanket of darkness that blasted into Baddan who hadn't quite expected it. He rose with the Cluster beast high, but midway, his form was shattered into hundreds of pieces of cloth-like darkness with a horrific pulse of mana from Baddan!

What remained began to form Skullius' figure as the two fell.

"Curious powers you have..." Baddan said, as he somehow flashed through the air, clutched Skullius' head, and flung him out of the innermost circle bounds with three rings of air crying out!

The silver-furred creature landed, and was about to follow after the Hybrid Luman when a powerful arm tackled his neck in a lariat, the shocking force which hailed from a tough, veins arm actually pushing him down!

It was Maxim again.

As soon as she saw that Baddan was off balance, she circled around him, grappled his waist, and swung him viciously on his side into the ground!

Baddan's face grew hard, if not a little annoyed.

'This distant kin... Just like before... she suddenly appeared. I couldn't sense her presence until she was knocking against my neck. And even while I have a vastly superior body, she exploits key moments to take me down...'

Maxim locked her legs firmly around Baddan's, and used her arms to pull his own back as they were stuck to the ground!

At that moment, Skullius appeared, and rushed to grab Baddan's chest when Maxim turned him, such that she was the one against the ground, while he faced up!

'Let's hope this works!' Skullius thought before activating [Immoral Authority], and [Greatest Mana Crafter]!

In the spirit of not holding back, but not using everything in his arsenal unless it was actually useful, he exposed another ability he had intended to hide. Like [Lucent Apparition], which he had used earlier, [Immoral Authority] couldn't be tied back to legacy just by seeing it.

In this case though, Skullius didn't give a damn if he couldn't extract anything from Baddan, but if he could at least incapacitate the high level beast, it would certainly be worth it!

Tendrils of darkness shot into Baddan's surprised face, and struggling body which had been about to forcefully rip away from Maxim's grip.

Skullius' consciousness sank into the creature's mind, and the skill searched for the evil that could be found within this beast. Like [Basic Evil Sanction], [Immoral Authority] gave a tangible representation to evil, which strengthened Skullius' influence. The more evil a target had, the easier Skullius could invade said target's body.

Within Baddan... only a sliver of darkness could be found, with the rest of what Skullius could discern being a brilliant, almost glaring light!

'Come on! Is this guy actually a saint?!' Skullius cried out.

He pushed forward, and grasped at the darkness he could find while facing immense resistance. But he was determined!

He dove down, with the wisps of darkness he found, and tasted the crowded memories that were buried, protected, and sealed behind a unreasonable defences!

FLCH!

Skullius' body was impaled by a spear straight through the head!

Maxim screamed as Baddan had pulled out her arm, setting his own free, grabbed his golden spear, and jabbed it into Skullius' head.

It must have been a reflex, because Baddan had started to get a dazed look when Skullius used [Immoral Authority]. Such a reflex was uncanny though, because Baddan's spear had shot into his hand after he dropped it when eating Maxim's lariat!

Skullius' invasion was interrupted, and his body suddenly froze.

'What?' he thought in horror as his consciousness slowly returned to his body.

His frame turned stiff, so stiff that would have been convinced he had suddenly turned into a steel pole. Everything from his flesh, bone, blood vessels, and mana channels turned rigid, and he fully returned to his body, Skullius' mind also completely shut down.

Maxim's arm was quickly restored by the halo of light above, and she backed away, before glancing at Skullius' statue-like body. The spear in his head made her grimace.

Right.

That was what she had felt when that golden spear had impaled her. She had only gotten enough time to let out an agonised scream before she was frozen, and her freedom only came when Baddan took back the spear back, shortly before the Kiiyataka, the large cloud fish, had fallen onto her.

'Damn it!' Maxim thought before mobilising her Perfect Aura to form her Genuine Incarnation.

She didn't like using it often.

As she did, an unholy force smashed the back of her head, and she sank face first into the ground with a grunt.

When Baddan was really trying to out speed them, and not give them a chance, Maxim and Skullius couldn't do anything at all. Not that Baddan slowing down had helped them much.

The Sky Watcher heaved Maxim, and dragged her by the hair as she tried to refocus her senses.

He then grabbed Skullius, and rushed with them both far, crossing the second circle, and into the third!

The raging breeze forced Maxim to feel the danger of losing rather than see it, and she struggled heavily, but to no effect. Seeing that her full physical strength wasn't doing much, she roared, and manifested her Genuine Incarnation quickly!

...!

Its appearance alarmed Baddan, but he was fast enough to throw Maxim, and Skullius who had his brain shut down, towards the luminous outline of the third circle a short distance away!

"No!" Maxim cried with a scowl.

Her Genuine Incarnation floated above as she whipped through the air.

It was a very long centipede, roughly twenty meters in length, with a watery texture to it. It boosted Maxim's offensive features greatly, bathing her in a beautiful stroke as she flew, with Skullius in the lead.

The Genuine Incarnation glided.

After all, its most unique feature was that it was flat!

A fraction of time later, Maxim was turned flat, her body encased in a thin, colourless frame. As this occurred, all her momentum died down instantly, and she fell to the ground, a few paces away from the third circle outline.

The same happened to Skullius, and by the time he fell, Maxim had already returned to normal, the centipede Incarnation descending to swirl around her.

"Tsk. I already feel my reserves of mana dwindling..." she remarked.

Skullius was still impaled by the golden spear, and she would have loved to remove it, but her instincts told her that touching the assegai was a very bad idea.

As her senses were stretched taut, she felt a breeze, and a quick shadow barrelling towards her registered in her further strengthened sight.

Unfortunately, she was still powerless to stop it.

She, and Skullius were barely three meters from losing the game, so why wouldn't Baddan finish them off?

Maxim grit her teeth, and channelled a massive chunk of mana into her Incarnation.

It was do or die.

If they lost, she had full confidence that all the other lurking riders, and Retrievers would pounce on them, commencing the slaughter!

Her Incarnation surged, and...

The mother of bizarre seemed to have suddenly spawned.

The scenes around Maxim, which she had kept a close eye on, suddenly dissipated, replaced by the pitiable ground of the first circle where she had grappled Baddan down!

A blink, and the scene changed!

Now, Tallo was standing at her side.

Maxim stood flabbergasted .

She was lost for words.

Skullius was on the ground too, and Baddan was nowhere to be seen.

"Relax," said Tallo, whom Maxim was sure was an illusion. But as it turned out, he wasn't.

He turned to her.

"And you're welcome," he continued.

Chapter 740: You're Not Going To Like It

Maxim took a sharp breath, half a scowl on her face.

"Teleportation," Tallo answered her most obvious, unexpressed question. "Any decent Mage, Prime or higher can do it."

He then turned to Skullius, and revealed one of his hands from beneath his scaly robes which he used to flick his fingers. As he did, mana gathered around the spear in Skullius' head, and pulled it out.

Maxim wore a dark expression as blood trickled from the Hybrid Luman's head.

"Do you have anything that can save him?" she asked.

She had saved Skullius' body from falling out of the bounds of the game, but the truth was, she wasn't sure he could be saved. She had several Living Pellets that were produced by her Family so that they didn't have to rely on common means of revival, and restoration, but they were only effective when consumed before death.

And as for other, stronger means-

"I don't think I need to," Tallo said nonchalantly.

As soon as he removed the golden spear, Skullius' wound healed, and he blinked a couple of times before shooting up in a bit of panic.

Maxim was beyond surprised.

"I think I heard that man in the white cloak scream out loud that you had taken a potion. I guess it really was true," Tallo said.

"Yeah..." Skullius said, a bit dazed. He gave Maxim who showed a bit of relief a nod.

It was weird. It was like he had fallen asleep for a moment, before waking up now in Maxim, and Tallo's presence.

"Look alive," the Mage said as he gestured ahead.

For the second time, the three saw Baddan return to the first circle.

"This is most certainly frustrating..." he said, while trying to keep up a calm face. He raised his hand, and his golden spear shot from the ground right into his grasp.

Tallo spoke in a low voice to Maxim and Skullius, ignoring Baddan.

"Let me honest. Defeating this creature is close to impossible, and killing it is a fantasy. None of us with all our combined efforts can do it.

Baddan raised a brow, and spoke with a slightly frustrated tone.

"What? Did I not explain the rules thoroughly? I am allowed to use anything I wish in the last circle... the outermost one. Are you that inattentive?"

Skullius was a bit confused at the silver-furred creature's words, but Tallo continued to speak so he gave focus.

"I've been watching. Observing. Baddan's skin is too tough, and it takes effort to affect his frame even in the lightest sense. I'm sure you both felt that for yourselves."

Skullius recalled his hand turning into chunks when he used the absolute best physical strike he could muster against Baddan. Maxim remembered her full power lariat with Perfect Aura barely knocking him off balance.

However, the Hybrid Luman did notice that while Baddan didn't flinch in the face of blunt, physical attacks, when it came to his sword strikes...

'He dodged that one time... And when I slashed that clone, his head came off. Maybe I'm being too optimistic.' Skullius thought.

Baddan sighed in exasperation, and began to exposit, re-explaining the rules as he faced them.

Maxim and Skullius frowned, and turned to each other.

What the heck was this bastard doing?

Yet, Tallo continued speaking, drawing a part of their focus to his voice again.

"According to my own understanding of this Cluster, all ordinary beasts here gain their powers from the environment, and are at its mercy. However, Baddan, and several of his kind that he claimed were all slaughtered by that boy, Rias EverSword, had the ability to control the environment, and exploit it. We can't fight against something like that. Not when we don't know what Baddan's limits are.

Our Incarnations won't help when he's using Super skills either."

This was certainly was true.

Another thing Tallo had omitted, according to Skullius, was the fact that Baddan could likely revive through the clouds even if they managed to deal a fatal blow. And as long as he was up and running, they were pretty much screwed.

This really made Skullius wonder...

What kind of monster was Rias EverSword?!

Was he really just a Master Stage expert? A teenage one at that?

Did a good technique simply overpower the significance of mana cores, and Stages?

"Wait. I didn't get to tell you earlier, but I think I know his limits," Maxim said. The centipede Incarnation drifted lower, and turned dim as the pink haired woman reduced the amount of mana she converted to Aura to supply it.

Baddan kept re-explaining the rules of the game with emphasis on certain parts while gazing at them. Skullius couldn't take it anymore. He had to verify if he was perceiving this right.

"What is he doing?"

"Oh, I cast an illusion around us. Its enough to stall for a little while as long as it doesn't carry on for too long. Right now Baddan thinks we are genuinely asking for him to re-explain the rules," Tallo answered. "And no, it won't work for stalling him for the entire 10 minutes of the game. He's too strong to be fooled that easily. In any case, you were saying?"

Maxim, and Skullius looked a little relieved, but also exceptionally anxious. They both recalled that Tallo had done something like this during his first match in the Preliminaries, and caught the crowd off guard. He had never used that again though, which was why it slipped their mind.

How convenient!

Putting aside that thought, Maxim explained her theory.

"Baddan mainly uses clouds as a means of attack. But, the most important thing, is the shapes he creates. They aren't random. I've seen fish, and bears in this place. It's just a thought, but I think he can call on individual beasts with different elemental affinities – some even mixed together. Like taking inspiration from the fauna here.

I have every reason to think that there's only a few types of animals here, so he can't have an unlimited amount of techniques..."

"I see... I did spot monkey-like creatures with long heads somewhere. Could he have an attack inspired from that too?" Tallo asked while paying Baddan some attention.

"Possibly," Maxim said, also keeping her eyes on the Sky Watcher.

Skullius agreed with her observation.

The giant cloud fish.

The large bear that wanted to hug him, and turn him into mince meat, or worse...

The clones of himself.

He hadn't seen the fish or bears around, but he believed Maxim.

All the Sky Watcher's attacks had beastly shapes, with some involvement of the clouds.

Maybe all that remained for Baddan to show was a technique with the shape of a Fleeting Pioneer, and one with a shape like a Beckoned Retriever.

Perhaps that was his whole arsenal.

But...

Skullius grimaced, and fattened his cheek before letting out a breath.

"Well. I might have an idea about how to beat him, but you're probably not going to like it."

Tallo, and Maxim turn to Skullius, clearly not having expected him to say this.

"I've lost too many Units already. Spill it," the pink-haired woman urged.

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As Baddan finished explaining the rules, in roughly a minute and a half – time he didn't mind wasting since he knew that eventually, his enemies would tire themselves out enough for him to just fling them lazily about without much effort, as their attacks barely did anything to him anyway, the Sky Watcher saw a surprising sight.

Skullius gripped Maxim, and used [Boundless Evil] to soar ridiculously quickly overhead. Tallo turned into a mash of colour that zipped in their direction as well, but not nearly as fast.

Baddan narrowed his dark eyes.

'What scheme are they conjuring...?'

The answer to the Sky Watcher's question, began with a head-tiltingly strange detail.

The trio was headed towards the second circle on their own!

Baddan hummed in suspicion, and blasted his way towards them, arriving just in time to see them land perfectly, all close to each other.

Skullius, with an uncertain look on his face, decided this was an appropriate time to question Tallo about his sudden change of heart.

"I must say I'm a bit surprised you decided to work together with us in the end."

Tallo scoffed.

"I only do things that have an educational benefit. This isn't a friendly team up. You owe me answers to my earlier questions. I did save your life," he said.

"Sure."

Baddan, with the clouds bubbling above him, as if to spit yet another giant fish, spoke.

"I never would have thought... you'd deliver yourself to death without my help."

"Says the hypocrite who has failed to kill us four times in the last three minutes," Skullius taunted with a drop of sweat trickling down his brow.

Baddan gave a low grunt which Skullius couldn't tell if it was a subdued cough, or rising hostility.

"Well, two of you are leaning on external sustenance to survive... and I... am trying my utmost to suppress the cruel burn in me, that desires to do to you.... terrible things, unbecoming of a warrior."

Skullius didn't have any other retort.

At least Baddan was honest. Maybe that was why [Immoral Authority] depicted him as mostly a saint.

Speaking of [Immoral Authority]...

"Let's do this!" Skullius urged his temporary partners.