

## Undead 741

Chapter 741: All In!

Baddan expelled another clump of dark blue clouds, and the trio was not surprised to once again find a number of Baddans surrounding them. They numbered exactly thirty-six, and the group immediately stood back to back, even though the plan didn't involve them sticking together.

"We might as well have delivered ourselves to death, like he said," Tallo scoffed.

"Yeah, well..." Maxim said, her reluctance on full display.

"As long as you do your part, we'll be fine. Like I said. 100%. Remember?" Skullius said, more to himself than the others.

Tallo sighed, and suddenly turned into a mash of colour that streaked in one direction, and Maxim did the same, in another direction. The clones of Baddan split themselves, and followed after them, catching up in no time, of course.

Skullius was left in the same spot, a hard look on his face. The level of focus required for his part of the plan now was not be trifled with, but at the same time, it was a luxury he couldn't afford. After all, splitting his senses and thought when he had his share of Baddans closing in on him was courting death.

Skullius was the one who had laid out the whole scheme – though in reality, it wasn't a concrete plan – with the others following his lead. Maxim had started warming up to him, displaying signs of trust, and in the last three or so minutes, which felt like an eternity, he began to think she wasn't the crazy person he thought she was before.

Granted, when someone said they were glad you were blind, you would be inclined to think of them in a darker light. But now, he had a growing respect for her.

Tallo seemed to only be following through because it was the only play available, and because it had educational value, or so he claimed. To the Hybrid Luman, this plainly confessed that despite how skilled the young Mage was, he was only a Prime Mage indeed, a beginner, as far as true Mages were concerned.

In any case, it went without saying that Skullius started taking the beating of his life, and unlike the previous times, Baddan wasn't too keen on letting them leave the second circle.

Maxim stopped trying to create distance when she found ten Baddans zooming towards her at speeds she couldn't perceive with her eyes, despite the enhancement given by the full manifestation of the Incarnation floating above her.

'Here we go!' she thought, hyping herself up.

With a thought, a net-like spherical barrier of cerulean blue covered her protectively, but after she set it up, she also put her arms up to guard, the beautiful stroke of light around her, which enhanced her physicality growing brighter.

Not even a mini-moment later, the net-like barrier shattered as three heavy wallops crashed into it with deep thrums, but one with enough perception could see that the raw force which had been applied to break it had been reduced, some of it being deflected up to the sky!

This barrier was an advanced application, an Auxiliary Technique that focused on redirecting physical impacts. Maxim was very proud to have mustered it.

While its effect was made to look shallow by the calibre of opponents, it worked as much as Maxim expected. Several blows she couldn't see violated her, causing her puke blood, and get blown away, but she didn't feel them as intensely as before. She had also saved herself from some of the force with the barrier.

It was no surprise that the Baddans were not holding back, and before Maxim landed, she found another Baddan waiting for her at the exact spot she was about to fall onto, his hands making several seals with incredible speed!

'Here it comes!' she thought before a blow smote her head from above forcing her to fall to where the technique was being activate. A technique at the Super level.

As Maxim descended, she barely gave herself room for hesitation before turning herself into a large, thin frame which halted in mid-air, its momentum killed off.

Several Baddans scaled the sky as if there was a set of stairs, their forms unseen to the naked eye.

Maxim waited until her instincts screamed that they enemies were too close before returning to normal, pumping a frightful amount of mana into the generation of her Aura, and feeding it all to the paper-like centipede above!

"Eat this!" Maxim roared.

A flash of bright radiance dyed the air white, illuminating the Baddans that were coming her way, including the one three meters below her!

When it died down, seven Baddan clones trapped in paper thin clear panes appeared!

She had turned them all flat!

Contrary to the emotion most would feel from this, Maxim did not show any signs of triumph. This had only worked because she had utilised the exhausting Incarnation of hers to the fullest, exploiting her boosted Family Technique, Planate High.

Planate High was a Technique that allowed the user to turn everything within their effective range flat. While in this state, it was as if time was frozen for the targets, and even living things would find themselves unable to move, or think. Forces acting on trapped items, or beings would also be halted, depending on their calibre.

That said, Maxim could release the effect, restoring whatever she had trapped.

There was practically no limit to what Planate High could turn flat, but naturally, stronger beings, artefacts, and all, could resist. This Technique could evolve as well, becoming stronger, but Maxim was only capable of using it at the very summit of the Special level, and she understood that limit very well.

That was why, as soon as she saw that she had succeeded, she focused mana to her feet, shot herself to the nearest frozen Baddan in mid-air, and shattered the thin plate he was trapped in with a heavy punch.

Indeed.

When her target was trapped with Planate High, Maxim could destroy them, but depending on how strong they were, the glass-like pane keeping them frozen could become harder to break.

Maxim shattered two more in the blink of an eye before she saw the rest of the stationary panes quiver, the Baddans they held forcefully restoring themselves!

'I expected this... but damn!' she cursed before diving to the ground, and using the fraction of moment of reprieve as the Baddans returned to their senses, to use another Auxiliary Technique.

Her presence, and figure vanished, along with the Incarnation that followed her around.

The effect didn't last very long, but that brief moment of not being targeted by the Baddans gave Maxim enough time to take a breath, and then she launched an offensive of her own, in the name of stalling.

It started with her grabbing one of the maroon pillars, and turning it flat.

'You better be right about this,' she thought.

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Tallo was having a better time than Maxim.

It went without saying that he had activated his Genuine Incarnation to avoid being caught off guard by mana-based techniques that he could defend against easily. However, this didn't mean that Tallo had managed to remain unharmed in the past forty seconds.

The young Prime Mage, was a combat Mage, which was to say he Class Branched into Form Using, developing semi-advanced combat techniques he could apply along with his Magecraft.

His robes fluttered as his eyes gave a glaring glow in a luminous blue which had saved him from eating several fatal blows.

As a heavy punch that appeared as a shadow in his sight came for him, Tallo swung his right arm, and deflected it down with his elbow before pushing with his shoulder heavily to shove away the Baddan clone that came his way!

He then turned into a mash of colour, narrowly dodging a fierce wind bear that fell devastatingly where he had been standing prior, the chaotic winds which made it swelling to spread and eat away at the ground, crushing it all to dust.

Only a large, dark crater was left in the wake of this technique, and Tallo had survived it for the third time.

'That was... incredibly close...' Tallo thought before ducking down, narrowly avoiding a shattering blow to the face; with another one of his precise movements, he evaded a heavy tackle; with another, a cruel kick to the neck, and more in less than a second!

His body turned unbearably hot, his flesh throbbing in pain. His glowing eyes began to bleed, and he groaned.

The reason he was able to narrowly avoid such terrifying blows that even Maxim, a proper Form User wasn't capable of doing, was because of the Consolidation Patch.

Magecraft had three basic forms that one was supposed to master before graduating from an Apprentice, into a Prime Mage; Elemental, Transmutation, and Consolidation Patches. Consolidation allowed a Mage to enhance their physical aspects by sacrificing a large amount of mana, a feat only possible because of the Reflexive Sigil Matrix Mages placed on their mana cores.

Consolidation is a Patch that those who desired to be combat Mages would continue to focus on as they grew, and their mastery of it improved its effects.

At the moment, Tallo's glowing eyes were telling of his use of Consolidation, empowering his ability to see what he normally couldn't see, and react to what he normally had no chance of reacting to physically.

When opponents were too strong, it took a heavy toll in a short period, and that was why he was bleeding.

Using this had saved him a lot of trouble, but now, as he was reaching his limit, Tallo switched back to pure Mage forms of combat, but not before he was hammered in the back by a Baddan clone!

The frame over his head shattered, and reformed, and the number of Units he had decreased by 10.

Tallo soared, but empowered his Genuine Incarnation, which allowed him to land safely on the ground.

His Genuine Incarnation was a tiny little humming bird that perked on his shoulder with a white, and velvet colour mix – white for the whole, velvet for its tail feathers and beak. A surge of energy had wrapped around Tallo, and he sucked in a breath with a calm face, and called.

"Rapid Fire, Incendiary Quirk Flame."

All around, searing balls of flame appeared in the dozens, and immediately shot towards the Baddans, or wherever Tallo thought he perceived them. Madness scorched the lands, with funny shapes rising where the fireballs ravaged, and in a short time, a multi-coloured smoke screen was made.

As Tallo did this, he swiped his hands before him, as if smearing the air with something. Not a millisecond after he did, several shadows swept past him, as if ignoring his figure. Tallo had cast an illusion, but he immediately cancelled it after he sensed that the shockingly fast figures of the Baddans were successfully fooled – he had given them a false depiction of his position.

He dispelled it immediately after because he didn't want the Baddans to realise that he could use illusions yet. Quick usages were perfect for quick distractions.

These illusions were the sole reason why Tallo was called talented. He had awakened the capability to master a rare Patch of Magecraft. The Deception Patch. Illusions like he was doing, were the very least of the full potential of the Patch, even though he was already proficient at fooling all five senses.

As soon as Tallo was in view again, his enemies pounced, but he didn't given them a chance.

He looked to the pillars around, and smirked.

Suddenly, a maroon pillar a few meters away from him twisted unsettlingly, as he extended his hand towards it. It fell to the ground still twisting, and in the next instance, it leapt towards Tallo, transforming into a large bullfrog that swallowed him whole, and leapt high, away from the Baddans without delay!

'And now...' Tallo thought as he waited with bated breaths in mid-air.

A suffocating pressure swept from above as he sped while within the creature's mouth. The sensation of such a massive amount of mana bellowing down, and the force he felt tearing the large frog in an instant almost made him freeze.

The Kiiyataka had descended once again, causing the furious battles all over to stall for bit, because visibility was skewed, and the vicious effects were not at all pleasant!

Another shattering rumble sounded as the cloudy fish smacked the lands, but thankfully, Tallo was safe. He had teleported from the frog's mouth the instant he felt the mana surging above it, preparing to take it down.

He wasn't unscathed though, a part of his had turned dark, nicked by the force of the Super level technique.

When Tallo landed, he gave a breath to calm his heart.

'Looks like he was right...' he thought.

None of the pillars were being destroyed by Baddan's attacks, as Skullius had said, which should have been obvious, but Maxim and Tallo had hardly cared for it.

The Prime Mage extended his hand, and the pillars he could see through specks of flame, dust, cloud, and moisture, started to wriggle and transform with his use of Transmutation!

A variety of creatures, and inanimate objects appeared in place of the many pillars around!

Large, snorting pigs, scaly lizards, wolves, gourds, large spoons, large pieces of cloth!

Tallo didn't stop, making sure that he was in clear view, since at this time, he had wandered from his share of the Baddans.

Sure enough, it didn't take long for him to feel it.

Unbridled hostility.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

For the first time, Tallo saw Baddan – even though it was a clone – wearing a deep, deep scowl which made his face look like a twisted towel.

He was angry. Very angry.

Many clones had rushed here, most of them seeming to not be the ones he had been facing, but drawn by the heresy.

"This..." said Tallo as he pointed to another pillar which began to twitch and change, "... is the battlefield you chose. Unlike you, I can't stop myself from creating collateral damage. I only care for my life, not this place. Besides, your rules said nothing about not damaging the pillars."

The Baddan who had inquired hostilely looked to turn insane.

"Rules... Rules you say..." he said, his eyes turning as large, and as round as saucers, his lips twitching.

His core flushed a large amount of mana, as did the ones from the other Baddans.

The clouds above rumbled, and the wind blew faster.

A drop of sweat fell down Tallo's temple.

'I didn't overdo it, did I?' he thought readying his teleportation.



Judging by the clones that were looking more eager than ever, the plan was likely to work if they survived another minute, prayed, and actually believed Skullius, whatever he wanted to do exactly.

And right now...

"TALLO!"

A loud voice called unexpectedly.

It was Skullius, in the far distance looking worse for wear.

He was holding in his hand a long, thick green serpent that was resisting his grip, wiggling nonstop and trying to bite him.

The Mage put on a sour face, and extended his hand. He had thought Skullius was ready, but no. It was just his side-quest.

With an 'Ah', Tallo extended his hand towards the Hybrid Luman.

In a blink, the legless creature in Skullius' hand turned into a green sword that fit firmly in the Hybrid Luman's grip and...

....!

Somehow, Tallo was left thinking differently the moment Skullius held this green sword.

He gulped.

He and Maxim were swept by a bit of relief, and a hint of trepidation from what came next.

Chapter 742: You Are The Exception!

Two minutes ago.

"What do you mean you saw all this in his mind?" Maxim asked with an uncertain expression on her face.

"I mean exactly that," Skullius replied, limiting how much he actually said out loud. "It was only for moment before he... you know... pierced my head."

"What did you see?" Tallo asked, disregarding the how. "This is the basis for your plan right?"

Skullius sighed, making a funny noise with his lips.

He had indeed seen into Baddan's mind when he used [Immoral Authority]. It was more of a touch that fed him a scoop of information, but it wouldn't have lasted even if his body wasn't violated during the process. He didn't have the means to invade Baddan's consciousness that easily because of the whole 'saint' revelation.

Unfortunately, most of what he got from the experience wasn't useless at all. It was only surface level information, except for one thing.

"Yeah. As I said, I know it seems obvious, but Baddan is very, very protective of this place. He REALLY cares for it. I'd even wager that it's the only reason why he's been keeping his cool – because it's still standing."

Maxim narrowed her eyes.

"So you want us to... wreck it more than we already have?"

"Precisely. Baddan is barely keeping his urges in – trust me – but even with that, with all his power, he skilfully prevents any of the pillars from being destroyed. If we start destroying them, it will throw him over the edge..."

"Why would we want that?" Tallo frowned.

"Because... unlike his held back attempts at taking us down, I need him to use his techniques more. Baddan is a beast. His skills use mana-based, and I... may be able to deal with him – stall him – if I feel and experience his abilities... his limits.

Make him expose all his powers. Trust me on this."

"Hold on. The only way for him to use his techniques against us, is if he is in the second circle..."

"Exactly. That's the part you're not going to like. We need to go to the second circle, rile him up, and get him to use his techniques. Maxim, you already used something to keep you alive for more than ten minutes, right? Tallo, I'm sure you can do the same. Just hold out for as long as you can, and make him use his techniques as frequently as possible."

Maxim and Tallo of course did not like this idea. The pink-haired woman was especially not so confident because she tasted the Kiiyataka first hand. She wasn't sure she liked the prospect of potentially eating another Super skill. If Baddan had something stronger...

"You're withholding a lot from us. I'm not particularly trusting, you know," Tallo said with a sigh. "But fine. I can understand why. Answer me this first though."

Skullius nodded.

"How confident are you that you can pull whatever it is you are saying off. Can you guarantee that at the end, we'll be able to cruise through the remaining minutes of the game after you 'deal with' Baddan?"

Maxim was surprised that Tallo seemed almost be ready to dive into what Skullius was suggesting. She wasn't sure she was up for it. But then again, Baddan would be finished re-explaining the rules soon, meaning she didn't have the luxury to take her time.

Like Tallo, she stared at Skullius with reluctance, waiting for his response.

How confident was he?

The Hybrid Luman stared vacantly at the two, and gave a brief pause.

Alaris' words kept grinding down his Thought Cracker.

Committing wholly, and accepting both reward, and possible risk.

This left no room for doubt.

Not in his powers, not in himself.

That was what made one a master of a craft. One didn't need to believe for a year, or a month, or even a minute. It took one instance of belief, and Skullius decided that while he wasn't sure how everything would pan out, he had faith in this half of his soul that was struggling to reach the other.

He had faith in himself.

"I'm 100% confident..." he said with steely resolve, and a smile.

His two partners were surprised. He didn't waver like they thought.

"Before that time though, I have to find my sword. Without it, unlike you guys, I could die before we do the deed."

With an accusing glance at Tallo, Skullius had declared the end of his thoughts.

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As Maxim and Tallo were facing hells of their own, Skullius had been the one facing the worst of it all. As proven with his battle against the short Swordsman, powerful Masters could out speed him when using their Incarnations, and Perfect Aura.

He didn't have something like that, or at least something of that level, and he couldn't afford to squander what he had meaninglessly with how limited it was.

Baddan calling out his clones had been something the group had expected, but the beat down Skullius had experienced, was beyond logical.

It was all in roughly 50 seconds, but Skullius was barely alive.

The plan he had pitched to Maxim and Tallo didn't involve him riling up the Baddans like they were supposed to, because he knew that if he did so, it would take one Kiiyataka to end him, even with the Super potion still in effect.

What made it even harder for Skullius to bear the attacks, or fully manage to dodge the lesser abilities the clones used, mainly the wind bear attack, was that he was busy doing something else at the same time, dividing his attention.

The Hexer's Inheritance, which he had last used to distract the Mind Caster, and the Swordsman before, was still functional, and when he had gotten within its range – when was flung off by Baddan – it had turned responsive, and since then, he had been secretly moving it around.

Skullius could share his senses with it, though to an unimpressive degree. Still, it was enough for him to use to look for the serpent, his sword which had been transmuted by Tallo, who claimed he couldn't keep tabs on it.

With the high concentration of mana, moisture, and elements, it was difficult for even [Graceless Hunter] to find the elusive creature, but right when Skullius had had his body shredded by a wind bear for the fourth time, narrowly escaping with [Inferno Burst], he had finally found it.

With the Hexer's Inheritance, he had found the bugger slithering towards the third circle, and using his [Greatest Mana Crafter] through the jade orb, Skullius had lifted it off the ground, and drew it towards him.

It was a pity that the halo Skullius had erected with [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc] couldn't be moved, and thus had been wasted. It could have accelerated his healing, but his current restorative effects worked just as well, and his mood improved when the serpent vivaciously struggled in his grip.

And then, without wasting time, Skullius called to Tallo amidst the chaos, and the Mage had restored Demion's Dance to its original form.

The moment Skullius held it, he felt a rush of relief. Even if he had parted with the sword for no more than 10 minutes, it was good to have his rightful blade.

...

As his body healed though, Skullius' desperately grateful smile dimmed as something astonishing happened.

He hadn't expected it.

His different outlook on swords, his comprehension of their intent, and how they wished to be treated on a primal level, the reasoning that the interpretation of what a 'sword' was lied with its user...

All of it, which he started to understand by exploiting [Unmatched Sword Sense] correctly, changed his relationship with Demion's Dance as he held it.

Suuuu....

The sword felt the different cradling feeling from Skullius, that was both caring, and considerate, urging it to express itself instead of shutting away its profound, conscious intent, which was far greater than that of the sceptre sword.

The green blade quivered, and expressed an emotion Skullius had never known it to express.

Joy.

Then...a sensation Skullius had forgotten gripped his <CURSED HEART>.

He had last felt the grasp – last truly felt it – when he fought Bassbion, the spirit guardian from the Temple of Unlusted Tears, defeating her in her challenge.

This feeling... that if he did not strike with Demion's Dance perfectly, he would die, resurfaced.

But this time, it was different. The green blade wasn't threatening Skullius.

It was rewarding him.

It was expressing its fondness.

Expressing its will fully.

In the next moment, Skullius saw notifications pop up in the void of his non-existent sight.

[Swindling Death's Dance (Incomplete) has been released from its shackles. It is no longer incomplete]

[Demion's Dance has for so long remained degraded from its previous glory, worn to its steel, and lost its mythic power in the hands of incompetent users]

[Aside from Demion himself, all who have held it have turned out to be fools]

[But you are the exception...]

Skullius felt his blood boil.

Literally!

It wasn't painful, and he remembered with half delight, and half anxiety that the reason his blood and heart were <CURSED>, was because right before he attained his new body in the Temple of Unlusted Tears, the coil from the Swindling Death's Dance, which he had started to understand better, was becoming a part of him, tied to his <HEART>, as it was termed back then.

'I see...' Skullius thought.

The blade of Demion's Dance cracked.

Skullius wasn't fazed. The blade was sending him its sentiment on why.

In the next moment, his blood which had begun to boil turned into a dark crimson flame, seeping from his skin harmlessly.

It began to burn the VergeRider armour, and Skullius didn't stop it. The blade was sending its sentiment on why.

This dark red flame which had started to burn from him was what deterred the Baddans from rushing to kill him. They were not intimidated by the heat.

Not at all.

What intimidated them was the fresh smell of pure death which blew from it, flirting with them, calling them to its embrace.

The real Baddan, who stood with his spears at a distance turned a little pale, different from the rage he had felt moments ago when Maxim and Tallo had started desecrating the open temple all the more.

This was different.

This was the advent of impermanence, rising from a mere mortal!

How could he not stop and gaze, a little disgruntled at the sight?!

As Skullius' VergeRider armour was fully burnt away, with the Hybrid Luman feeling a little regretful that he didn't explore all its other forms which could be unlocked by inserting Null Life Essence of various amounts, something else began to cover his body, emerging from the deathly flame.

It looked like a studded leather armour, mixed with agile half plate armour, light, narrow pauldrons of a lighter shade of crimson resting on his shoulders, a high steel, semi-circular collar of pure darkness rising to his chin. Everything else was slender, fitted to accommodate speedy movements, the deathly blackish-red hue over it all inspiring horror.

The dark crimson flame persisted, cloaking the armour, and outlining its wearer's head.

Skullius felt safe in it.



Once again, he had yet to understand what death in itself was, and how it could be manifested by a sword, but he could care less right now.

Demion's Dance, in Skullius' grip finally shattered, but only its former appearance was shed.

The air around Demion's Dance changed as it took on a longer form, its beheld nature changing slightly to become more of a hanger, a hunting sword, than a saber.

Its green blade gleamed brightly, becoming darker, as did the golden blade.

Skullius held the sword with both hands and shared the sorrows it sent his way. All which he never considered or listened to.

'I really couldn't understand you at all before... Sorry,' he thought.

Demion's Dance wasn't Unique grade anymore.

It wasn't as lost anymore.

Neither was Skullius.

He held out the sword while Maxim and Tallo watched, his air commanding attention.

With a cold, but excited look on his face, he swung hard with the awakened Swindling Death's Dance, keen on seeing the difference with how it was now.

And there was one.

An unfathomable chasm worth of difference.

#### Chapter 743: Courting Death

Skullius hadn't realised that wielding Demion's Dance, brandishing it the proper way, while this new suit of blackish crimson armour sat on him, fiercely amplifying the aspects of his unique body – the great physical attunement left in the wake of Sila's prior body-napping, his unique mana core, abnormally large mana channels and all – would make him feel so... invincible.

For a brief moment, even if he knew it wasn't true, the Hybrid Luman allowed himself to sink into this divine ecstasy as he brought Demion's Dance down, an action that seemed so mundane, yet... inevitably catastrophic.

....

It was only Skullius who felt it.

Regardless of what the circumstances may have looked like, it was undoubtedly vivacious around here, with the fighting and clash of powers bursting about.

Yet, when Demion's Dance stopped after the straight swing, the Hybrid Luman felt as if he had split open a thick, dominant force that had been engulfing them all in its clutch.

A force called liveliness.

Where Skullius cut, a dark, sombre, and withering sensation ate away at the fierce hope, at the prospect of thriving ideas like righteous anger, or furious determination trying to cement themselves.

All that left, was a brooding weight of cessation that made all living things around slump.

It took Skullius a few moments to understand it himself.

The effect of what he did didn't start to show until... the pillars standing around began to crumble away, as if eaten by a sickening rot.

The ground turned dark under Skullius' feet, turning dead, and unhealthy, incapable of cultivating anything rich.

'I see...' Skullius thought with a simple smile.

The dark flames formed by his blood were still burning over his body, outlining it beautifully, and with each leap and bounce, Skullius felt empowered.

Upon seeing the destruction to more of the pillars in this hallowed ground, the Baddan clones turned livid, and zoomed towards Skullius, ignoring his intimidating presence which had kept them away before.

In Skullius,' perception, the Baddan's were still shooting blurs that he could hardly pinpoint, but under the thin, sturdy armour, his muscles tensed as the enemies approached.

Demion's Dance empowered him some more, and Skullius held out the green hanger.

A line of weak, scattered blackish crimson flames created a vague shape that was neither a circle, nor a psychopathic polygon. They extended roughly a meter from Skullius, and as they appeared, the image of the Hybrid Luman from a distance looked to be marred by a vicious mirage that constantly warped his figure, and made the flames outlining the top of his head look like a crown...

or a cluster of horns.

His face looked to be grinning viciously in one instance, and in the next, it would look deadly serious in the most threatening of ways.

What was this fiendish power?

Was it deliberately making his enemies confused over which he was?

A saint, or a devil?

Upright, or evil?

The extremely brief lull was broken by a clone of Baddan that whipped through the air, reaching the Hybrid Luman first. He stepped into the encirclement of flame with his wrathful face, drawing so close to Skullius that one would think he wanted to ram his head against the Hybrid Luman's!

Indeed, Skullius could hardly perceive this speed.

The average Master, or a combatant of Skullius' level would have been killed if they were also being blitzed by such speed alone.

However, Skullius was an exception.

Before everyone's eyes, the Baddan clone seemed to... dissipate, and once again turning into a clump of clouds that hardly stained the Hybrid Luman's figure.

...

Baddan's face stiffened as he clutched his spears.

What was that?

What had happened to his clone?

The corner of his lips twitched, and he groaned.

Was... was his technique forcibly cancelled?

No. No that wasn't it.

If that was the case, all of his clones would have disappeared too.

But... how could this young man beat a clone of his made through a Super Skill?!

The clones which had been hurtling at Skullius stopped, and flew back after witnessing what happened to one of their own.

As they gave the Hybrid Luman space, Skullius scoffed, hunched over and spread his legs very wide. He sheathed Demion's Dance, and hung his head low – so low that his face couldn't be seen. With his legs dropping his height, one would think he was about to fall over, and suddenly burst into a sprint, but the Hybrid Luman kept still.

Then...

The weak flames over his body burned more viciously, towering over twice his height and flaring like arrow tips into the sky as if to lick the clouds above!

The image of Skullius became even more warped within the small encirclement of flames which widened to an average of three meters away from his body. The Hybrid Luman raised his right hand to his chest, atop it flames keenly rising, while his left clutched the mouth of Demion's Dance's sheath.

A commanding voice then came from beyond his lips.

"What you see, is Courting Death, Baddan. I dare you come close."

.....

A deathly silence cradled the passing seconds.

What was even more deathly, was the air, which seemed to turn stale, and stuffy. The colour seemed to be fleeing from where Skullius stood, as did all liveliness.

Maxim stood, stunned.

Tallo watched closely.

He was sure this wasn't what Skullius expected to happen. He had simply wanted his sword back to defend himself until he was ready, but now...

Baddan narrowed his eyes.

"Impressive..." he voiced, before pointing at the Hybrid Luman.

His clones, which were very self conscious, dashed towards Skullius once again. Some attacked physically, while some began making gestures with their hands, readying techniques.

Those that approached Skullius directly did so with caution, being mindful of the zone he had drawn.

On setting foot into it, two clones... turned into fragmented bits that immediately exploded into clumps of clouds a moment later!

Once again!

They had so suddenly...!

The next few came, a large burst of mana around them to guard against whatever treachery was killing them, and...

They met the same fate. It made no difference whether they had mana covering them, or not. Whatever culled them, did not seem to care, mirroring Skullius' unmoving figure at the centre of this zone he had erected.

The remaining clones didn't waste themselves.

If they couldn't attack directly...

A large bear made of shrieking winds that had cocked up dust, and dirt bellowed and took heavy, ground-breaking steps towards the odd encirclement of weak flame, its unclear face not showing even bits of rationality!

It rose when it got near, and then made an effort to pounce, rushing through the three meter distance to Skullius!

This effort did not bear fruit.

The bear... couldn't pass through the marked area!

Its transparent body was blocked, as if some form of invisible barrier kept it out, and nomatter how loudly the creature roared, it was not allowed to get in.

Baddan frowned deeper.

'So he can't... fight the wind with the sword. Then he's not as terrifying as I imagined?' the Sky Watcher thought, just a little bit amused. If that was the case...

The clouds overhead rumbled, something within the dark blue mass swimming eagerly before diving down with an especially phenomenal combination of elements that gave it a regal, majestic appearance.

The Kiiyataka had fallen, the lightning, flakes of flame and gusts of wind that streaked around and within it eagerly waiting to unleash yet another controlled session of devastation!

As if this wasn't enough, several wind bears, and several more Kiiyatakas were beginning to fall from the sky, nearly drowning the world in cloud, element and mana!

Baddan's face turned a little more calm as he watched this.

The sight looked barbaric to him.

This place wasn't supposed to be a battleground, and he had done all he could to hold back, but against an opponent like this... whatever he was doing to his lesser abilities, he couldn't pull his punches. Or at least most of them.

The first Kiiyataka to descend fell directly over Skullius, who still stood firmly in his stance.

Baddan felt uneasy somehow.

How could this distant kin keep his cool when his death was near?

Unless of course...

....

A sudden, blinding glow sprang from nowhere, as if in response to the opposing effort.

It looked like how watching a balloon pop after filling it with too much air, felt.

Its emergence came with a wild flush of mana that sprinted outward through the air at a perverse speed, knocking everyone who felt it push them back, into more than a simple state of surprise!

Before anyone had any time to appreciate this glow, and what it meant, a roar, mixed in with a determined hiss screeched out deafeningly from where Skullius stood, and with the indescribable noise, came an absurd force that nearly forced everything alive to believe that hope, strength, worth, and happiness... were all lies.

Suddenly, Maxim had forgotten all about the multiple Kiiyatakas falling from the sky, and why they were terribly bad.

Tallo had forgotten to protect himself against the potential effect of the incoming destruction.

Baddan... Baddan had almost forgotten why he was here, wrestling outsiders as he had been commanded by Rias.

It was surreal.

But...

Maxim, Tallo, and Baddan seemed to have their senses restored a moment later, and they all started panting heavily as they were withdrawn from the state they had been dragged into.

What... what was that?

What was that fierce, sombre gush of power that came with a stale smell?

These was a good question.

But the better question was...



Where had the Kiiyatakas, the winds, the music, Baddan's clones.... and the heavy clouds gone?

Chapter 744: Hopeless

For the first time, Tallo, Maxim, and even Baddan saw the clear sky.

There was not a cloud in sight for a large stretch.

The GOAL, and the mountain could be seen a distance away, plastered to a starless sky that simply had a glowing lens flare, which was the source of all light, limited as it was in this world.

The Kiiyatakas had vanished, as if they had never existed in the first place, and the Baddans clones were no more – the other attacks they had been conjuring included

One couldn't be more dumbfounded than in the context of this moment. Baddan especially.

His face had turned pale as he looked up, and when he turned his eyes to the ground, he found the Hybrid Luman still standing in his stance, his right hand ever-ready to draw his sword, it seemed.

A silence followed.

Then, unexpectedly, Skullius spoke again.

"I'm still waiting, Baddan."

Baddan's dark eyes quivered.

What kind of power was this?

No. What kind of madness was this?!

The air was turning so stale, and damp while a chilling uncheeriness burned away at his faith, and his reasoning, but Baddan held on.

"What... are you? How can you... how can you command..."

He didn't finish the sentence with word of mouth.

Yet, in his mind, he continued.

'... how can you command death?'

Yes! How could a mortal being hold death in their hands?!

There was no mistaking it!

The All-Guiding Appairitoni had consumed the dead for millenia, and Sky Watchers like Baddan had overseen said dead too many times to not be familiar with the stench, the stale, dreadful stench of vessels without the winds of life!

Baddan gritted his teeth, and looked to the mountain high, and far.

No.

This was unseemly.

How could he look so weak now that his exalted was in full view?

Baddan took a step, his assegai in hand, and walked towards Skullius.

Towards the Courting Death.

As he approached, the air turned more, and more unhealthy, and Skullius' figure was skewed into a variety of forms by the mirage.

A literal devil; a firm, regal master; a commanding king....

A lesser being would have lost themselves at the sight.

Tallo, and Maxim drew close – yet still far from the Skullius – to watch what would happen wordlessly. They had been left awestruck by the disappearance of the surge of obstacles, but their focus didn't relent.

Baddan stood just a step away from the Courting Death, as Skullius had called it.

He looked at the weak flames, and then... a shuddering burst of mana of a profound quality raged from his mana core to stack itself many fold over his figure. The sudden flash of the mana burrowing out, caused a forceful blow of wind, but everything before Baddan within the Courting Death, remained unshaken.

The brilliant, crispy layer of energy he donned was the first to taste the interior of Skullius' attack zone.

...!

Baddan's eyes opened wide as he slowly went in.

He felt as though something taut... no, many entities stretching tight were pressing against him so firmly, that casually walking forward wouldn't work. His body wouldn't budge if that were case.

The Sky Watcher pressed with more of his strength, and finally passed into the gleaming, slightly dark area.

Tens of thousands of extremely thin depressions appeared on the coat of mana, pushing against it so hard that it almost reached Baddan's skin.

Baddan was struck with a realisation instantly.

'So that's what it is!' he thought, half relieved.

This entire space... even though he couldn't see it with his eyes, now that he had come into contact with it, he understood what had happened to his clones!

Then had been shredded to pieces the moment they tread into this space!

Tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of super thin, taut threads were haphazardly decorating the Courting Death, and they were so strong, and resilient that Baddan's clones couldn't defend, as their power was a bit limited, the mana they could draw from Baddan himself even more so!

What's more, strangely enough, he felt a slightly hot sensation tickling his skin as his mana wrestled the threads, and even more than that... Baddan felt... little by little – so very little a lesser combatant wouldn't have noticed – his mana getting sucked away!

No!

It wasn't getting sucked away!

It was... dying!

Withering away like plants to a scorching sun!

Skullius' voice suddenly interrupted Baddan's horrifying realisations.

"Good. Right there is fine," Skullius said in a cold voice, and Baddan heard the hiss of a sword leaving its sheath.

With all the strength he could muster, he moved, aiming to get ready to block whatever was coming, most likely a quick draw at astonishing speed!

But...

A mighty force shocked his right hand which held the golden spear, and before he knew it, the assegai had flown out of his hands, speeding outside the Courting Death!

...!!

Baddan didn't understand what happened.

From what he could see right now, Skullius was still drawing his sword out, something he could make out because he was still faster than the Hybrid Luman by a large margin!

And yet...

Something was terribly wrong!

He had dared to walk into Courting Death so as to not desecrate his image before the blatant presence of the All-Guiding Appairitoni, but perhaps, caution was a wiser move now.

Baddan's figure blurred, as he used all his might to resist the grip of what he perceived to be thousands of threads, and in a blink, he had dashed right to where he had been standing before his approach towards Courting Death.

As he landed, the tip of his toe licking the ground... dark blood exploded violently from the centre of his chest, all the way to his lips!

A deep, clean gash had ravaged the Sky Watcher from his open, furry chest, to the left corner of his mouth, and the look on his face couldn't be more exaggerated.

'What.... But, but I got away in time...' he thought in horror, only to look forward, and see the Courting Death vanish, Skullius who was now standing straight, caressing his sword from hilt to end with his left hand, darting toward him!

He reverse handled his grip on the hanger, before holding it right again.

Just when Baddan was turning even more wary, fearful of making the first move, Skullius darted to the left, stopped, and took three steps to the right, then pounced at the Sky Watcher again, his sword whirling viciously... unrealistically in his grip!

What was this movement?!

As Skullius approached, his speed being nothing Baddan couldn't handle, the Sky Watcher, for a moment, saw innumerable flashes of light – radiance bouncing over Demion's Dance's shiny surface, which wasn't unusual. But....how did one sword make a hundred reflections of light in a moment?!

Baddan grew tired of this, and stabbed with his dark spear, his speed which far outclassed that of Skullius allowing him to stab the bastard directly in the head!

The Sky Watcher felt the force of his assegai pass through flesh and bone, but then...

Like a passing apparition, Skullius' body continued towards him as if nothing had happened!

...!!!

Baddan's guard soared, along with his shock, and he saw Skullius about to slash at him, a move he hurried to prepare against long before it was close to fulfilme-

The robed Sky Watcher found himself carved through once again – another large, and long gash to the chest, crossing over the previous one!

'What is the meaning of this?!' Baddan was genuinely astounded.

He was guarding his body with mana, but it did not help at all.

He saw every one of Skullius' moves, but somehow, he was successfully cut anyway.

He had stabbed Skullius at a vital point just now, and expected him to at least take a moment or two to heal the damage, but he passed his spear like a ghost!

What in the world was this?!

...

Skullius was dancing, as Demion's Dance lead him to do. One couldn't tell that all he was doing was a dance, unless they were seeing it from the distance, as the irregular movements were incredibly bizarre.

If he had been wearing the VergeRider, Skullius doubted he would have been able to perform this series of moves as perfectly as he was now. Only while in this slender armour could he do so – one forged using his own blood, and incredibly adept at reinforcing his unique traits!

Demion's Dance had burned away the VergeRider, because, as Skullius had soon discovered, the sword was very attentive.

Moments ago, the green sword had finally found a worthy wielder, and after so many years since Demion died, it had managed to rupture the old, dying shell it had been trapped in, shedding its previous appearance.

Doing so however, raised its grade high, reaching the Legendary.

But that wasn't its summit.

For convenience's sake, it had limited its awakening to this bare level so as to not make things difficult for Skullius, who was in a death game where one was allowed only one, Legendary grade tool, and nothing of a higher grade!

The VergeRider had acted as Skullius' Legendary grade entry for the Royale, so Demion's Dance had burned it away, replacing it with itself.

From there, Skullius allowed the sword to lead the way, and in doing so, he found Demion's Dance manifesting its advanced intent; the multiplication and refinement of Mortal Ruin into a zone where anything that entered boisterously would be cut into ribbons, a draining skill which allowed him to KILL phenomena he desired over a specified range, and finally...

A deathly dance so profound, and mesmerising that it blew death away from his body, and onto the atmosphere, poisoning his enemy instead.

The more he moved in this seemingly erratic, unfathomable pattern, the more he swept away the potential of receiving fatal damage; and by harnessing Null Life Essence onto the tip of the blade...

Skullius stabbed at the Sky Watcher who hurried to perform an incredibly quick series of hand gestures for the activation of a different technique, but when he set to incite the last ritualistic symbol, he found that his fingers were gone....

They had been cut up cleanly.

Worse yet, the muscles on his shoulders, his eyes, and his throat were slashed so horribly in the same instance, that Baddan felt the invasive hopelessness swimming about finally win against his defences...

~~~

[ Demion's Dance ]

-Legendary-

A beautifully crafted sword given to Demion on his birthday by his lover, Irisa, to commemorate his legendary battle with Escus.

-Damage-

235,000-239,000

-Durability-

125,000/125,000

-Special Effects-

•65% increase in speed

---



[ Skill: True Memory]

Regardless of the user's level of power, they are able to fully replicate the raw movements and a quarter of the attack power that Demion demonstrated in his battle with Escus.

---

[ Skill: Irisa You Whore ]

The remnants of the unfaithful Irisa shower the user with supporting, trust-infused bliss, which is able to restore your mana, and stamina to its best thrice a day.

---

[ Skill: Impermanence ]

Death is the destination of all things. As the user of a shard of death, you are allowed a single instance a day where you can create an expanding field that KILLS mana borne phenomena of your choice, as well as its source. A minimum of 1,000,000 (I) Mana Points required, and increases depending on the scale of the feat.

---

[ Skill: Courting Death ]

A field of malevolence born from mass producing, and refining Mortal Ruin is erected around the user. The density is dependent on the user's desire, and amount of amount.

Chapter 745: Turning The Tide

Gaining the ability to be able to erase, no, to KILL mana-based phenomena of his choosing within a wide range, had been a very grand surprise for Skullius who had only expected a boost to his swordsmanship. Technically it was, but such a thing had shocked him almost as much as it shocked Baddan.

And the look on the Sky Watcher's face was what made the Hybrid Luman's day. The look of horror, the firm, religious conscience he held onto wavering.... it gave Skullius a swollen sense of confidence which he hurriedly suppressed.

What added to Skullius' feeling of triumph was knowing that Demion's Dance had suppressed its reawakening to only Legendary grade for his sake, and there was more to its abilities and strength.

Perhaps when it furiously ignited its potential, once this was all over, he wouldn't be limited to being to able to KILL phenomena once a day, and with such an outrageous requirement of mana – as the one which he had paid just now, nearly cleaning out his reserve in the Temporary Storage because of it.

Still, what he got right now, was perfect.

[Courting Death].

[Impermanence].

[Irisa You Whore].

The last skill had been altered to fit his needs better. Instead of being another full recovery skill, the skill had turned to replenishing his mana... and stamina, which Skullius had yet to experience in a while.

This body of his actually grew tired – unlike the Penetrator – but he usually finished battles before they could drag on. And with that, one would assume [Irisa You Whore] was facing a downgrade, but Skullius wasn't too sure.

He looked at Baddan who had a ghostly pale look on his face, his dark eyes looking to be close to adapting a brighter hue. He held his fingerless hands as his sight quaked, the wounds over his chest aching terribly.

He was shaken. He was beyond shaken.

A mix of dreadful fright, rage, and doubt were swimming in his head, and through [Greatest Mana Crafter], Skullius could sense his mana erratically bubble up and down, mirroring his emotions.

This, along with the severe wounds on the creature's body, led him to several conclusions.

'While this guy really is powerful, he is not as efficient at using his mana outside of his techniques. Its quantity and quality is usually enough for him to be viewed with respect. Typical of a Cluster world. Very few are different...' he thought.

'Then again, he has a decent level of mana reinforcement, and that, coupled with his natural physique, gives him an extremely resilient body.'

Indeed.

While Skullius was dominating Baddan right now, there was a consistent problem, along with certain factors that Skullius had taken this one second to consider before piling on attacks.

In that brief pause however...

Something flashed from the distance, hurtling towards Baddan with incredible speed.

It made way in a straight, uncompromising streak before nabbing Baddan out of sight, and retreating with him to a safe distance.

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

He recalled the shape of this figure, and its controlled cloak of mana that extended to its numerous tails.

A large Beckoned Retriever, dark-furred like the rest, but with white stripes impeding on the black whole, stood with Baddan, who was taking deep breaths at its side.

What was this now?

Baddan's trembling, bloody hand fell on the creature's furry body, and to Skullius' surprise, a thick shot of strangely soothing mana flowed into the Sky Watcher, mixing in with his own. The tussling

mana of the Sky Watcher suddenly started to calm down, and on the hand that wasn't hiding in the Retriever's fur, Skullius saw fingers regrowing rapidly!

The Hybrid Luman was spurred to voice out:

"What is all this? Is this an unspoken rule? You can just welcome another fighter on your side against us?"

Baddan took several moments, his shaken emotion finally settling.

"Rules...? A rider, and his beast are one. We are bonded by flesh, mana and life force. It is natural instinct for him to rush to my side when I'm injured," Baddan answered, the 'him' in his sentence referring to the striped Retriever.

Skullius didn't know if this true or not. It didn't matter actually.

Two figures bolted to his side. Close enough.

"Is it safe to approach? This could be the perfect instance of friendly fire," Maxim said with a deadpan face. She was referring to [Courting Death], which she thought would likely slice her up if it was still active.

"It's fine," Skullius replied, and the two drew closer.

Both Maxim and Tallo looked a little worse for wear, but they were breathing, with sparks of curiosity brimming in their eyes.

"So, in light of this new... whatever it is, are we still going forward with the original plan?" Tallo asked while swiping dust off his robe's sleeve.

"Yeah. THIS doesn't change anything. It can't. I've been striking with all the power I can muster, but..."

Skullius felt his muscles spasm violently, almost pulling him in different directions from the powerful jerks.

'Right.'

This was the effect of [True Memory] from Demion's Dance, which had formerly been [Epic Memory]. Unlike before, the skill allowed Skullius to replicate fully how Demion had danced with the sword in the past, and in addition, it granted him a quarter of the original wielder's power from back then.

Unfortunately, Skullius, even with how much he had grown, couldn't handle that quarter. He could move well, dance well, but his body, apparently couldn't take the specified fraction of Demion's might. It was trying, but a great deal was missing.

It wasn't just about his body's inadequacy.

In fact, the description for [Swindling Death's Dance] which he had yearned for so long – now showing on his guidance field since Demion's Dance's awakening – hinted at many things he needed.

~~~

[Swindling Death's Dance | Lv. None]

Death is pure, and several have tried to interpret it in their own ways. Some have succeeded. Some have failed. Some have learned. But those who are born from it, fondled by it, and dance within its embrace can send forth Death's emissaries, and ward off its whole from themselves, donning an ever-evolving aegis afforded by Death's mercy.

~~~

That was it.

Quite vague, Skullius could say, but he thought on it for a bit still.

Tallo pretended not to notice the strange micro movements from Skullius' muscles.

"You can't inflict fatal wounds on him, right? Well, with that partner of his, I assume this isn't going to get any easier if you continued trying," he said instead.

"So... With the plan from before, are you ready?" Maxim asked.

"Not yet," Skullius frowned. "I need two more attacks from him. Just two. And then we'll need to immobilise him for a short time."

As Skullius had been led to believe with his epiphany from before, swordsmanship alone wasn't the only thing he could grow in. It opened the way, but he was still on track to enlightening growth. Giving his all to awaken facets of ability from all aspects, some never touched on before....

Yes, that was the goal.

Tallo rolled his eyes.

"You make some absurd demands. We just barely managed to survive that cluster of attacks from the sky. I honestly thought I was done for," he said before looking up. "And we might just be in line for another swarm of techniques."

Maxim looked up too.

Skullius had already sensed it.

The clouds above were returning, covering the sky again. He hadn't thought they'd stay gone forever anyway. They weren't parts of Baddan.

"You can't get rid of them a second time, can you?" Tallo asked.

Skullius didn't respond, which affirmed Tallo's suspicion.

"Well, whatever. We've managed to afford ourselves a breather, though I'm not sure if it's going to help much," Maxim said while whirling her arm.

Baddan seemed to fully recover.

The Retriever beside him stepped back as soon as he wore his cool once again, and it handed him the black spear which it had collected after nabbing him away, following his loss of the ability to hold it in his grasp.

The golden one had been knocked too far by Skullius.

"You have pushed me quite well... You have even managed to instil in me doubt... Distant kin..." Baddan said as he spread his furry arms. "...but as you can see, the All-Guiding Appairitoni prevails even over death, and against natural powers."

Tallo had a sparkly glint shine in his eyes mysteriously.

"Who is this Appairitoni you keep mentioning?" he asked, a strange look on his face. Something like a desperate attempt for knowledge that was backed by a bellow of his mana flashing out.

Baddan seemed to be pleased with this.

"You have no need to know... to fathom who I worship. All you need to do... is lose," he said with a deep voice, his fingers speeding, tangling and locking into themselves several times over for the most complicated seal he had done yet.

Skullius frowned. As did Maxim.

The clouds above screeched, but unlike the previous times, they didn't show something large moving within them.

Instead, in one spot, which was between Baddan and the group, a large black dot emerged.

The trio noticed a fearsome volume of mana gathering into it, and for a brief moment, they all directed much of their focus.

What was that?

Baddan untangled his hands in that time, held his black spear vertically, with its point directed against the ground, and then dropped it.

The spear descended the short distance, but then stopped a mere inch away from the dirt. It was floating.

As this occurred...

...!

Skullius, Maxim... and then Tallo a moment later than the two, rose from the ground involuntarily!

"Huh?" Skullius thought, surprised. A similar sound came from Maxim's mouth, and Tallo's, but the trio didn't have enough time to marvel at this sudden shift.

The instant they were lifted from the ground, the large black dot in the clouds drooped down like a water droplet, and fell. Then another dropped from the same point, and another, and after a second, a thick black liquid was pouring from the skies!

The liquid didn't make a sound as it fell to the ground. It drowned the entirety of these grounds in its pooling dark, rapidly!

Skullius and crew were lifted a little higher into the sky again, as they watched the building lake of darkness that roiled, whooshed and whirled, covering everything they could see!

Then, the black tide, unceremoniously blasted towards them like compressed water from a pipe, before taking shape as it approached.

Three humongous jaguar-like heads with their maws wide open, a shrill scream coming from each of these maws, smashed unforgivingly into Skullius, Maxim and Tallo, a wrathful onslaught of mana punishing them along with the fatal force.

Chapter 746: Not In Vain (1)

Baddan's spears were not strictly meant for violence. In fact, they weren't actually meant for violent actions at all.



The golden spear, Hefty Peace, cut off familiar sensations, and consciousness for those it touched, or vice versa – aside from Baddan – leaving them in the most perfect state for advanced meditation within the hallowed grounds, something that was done before the gleaming amber rock.

The dark spear, Hefty Rebuke, could sent those whom Baddan deemed to have broken the sacred rules of his society, within his own clan, past the clouds, and into what all his kin called the Benevolent Wrath – a place past the ordinary pitch darkness that the normal eye could see.

Those who had been sent there, claimed that the only thing one could see that far up, was the tip of the mountain, and that everything else seemed to be lost in a ungodly nothingness.

There, they claimed Appairitoni would state their sins over, and over, and over again for what seemed like an eternity, before they were finally pulled down.

Only those who were among the worst of the worst would be sent to the Benevolent Wrath, and only that breed of sinners could reach that high into the sky.

But for the three currently trapped by the Hefty Rebuke's hold, Baddan intended to do something worse than let them see their god.

...

For Skullius, being smashed into by the dark liquid was like being rammed into a bunch of Hobbu Bobbus running at full speed!

The sheer force alone was enough to shatter his flesh about, but the firm, almost solid mana pooling within the liquid pounded on Skullius even rougher, ripping his body into smaller bits regardless of how much he tried to keep them together!

The Supreme potion's effect tried to collect the parts of him for reassembly, but they were split too far apart, and creating new ones didn't work, as the waters still possessed enough of a punch to rip through Skullius again!

It seemed Tallo and Maxim had a better time.

The dark flood was strangely silent, barely making a noise with its movement, thus Skullius had heard Maxim shriek loudly, her mana exploding phenomenally within the onslaught, which helped the pink-haired woman bear the first, full assault.

Her body, with the tattered and torn armour already looked terrible, but as time went on, things got worse for her.

Tallo had suffered horrific damage too, his robes cruelly torn, and his flesh oozing blood as he teleported from place to place, sometimes over the pillars that were more or less left erect over the wave.

A large number of them had been torn down and swept away by the tide however, which was surprising, but none among the trio had the time to marvel, or think about it for long.

When the wave finally died down, seemingly sinking into the ground as quickly as it had fallen from the clouds, Skullius, Maxim and Tallo appeared.

Finally, Skullius could heal. As his flesh was restored, naked, his blood bellowed out of his veins, and turned into a blackish crimson fire that dressed him in the like coloured attire in an instant.

A few, ragged breaths came from Skullius' mouth. He felt weak. So weak it was infuriating.

Was this the effect of that black tide?

Maxim and Tallo didn't seem to be sucking in air as desperately as he was, and they were actually, wholly human.

Then it hit Skullius.

His armour was made from his blood, a mutation caused by the [Swindling Death's Dance] as it was a part of this physical body. He could manifest it through his blood, but it seemed, as he was, it was difficult to maintain, especially when he was just barely starting to understand Demion's Dance and this sword art.

Too many pieces were missing, and one was experience.

Speaking of [Swindling Death's Dance], Skullius spotted Demion's Dance clutched in a severed hand of his hundreds of meters away beyond the...

...!

Skullius' face turned hard.

Demion's Dance was beyond a luminous outline.

Beyond the edge of the third circle!

"Damn it!" Skullius cursed.

"Looks like we're back here..." Maxim who was closest to him said as her body slowly healed from the intense damage she had received. A watery veil of Perfect Aura was around her, as well as a flat centipede Incarnation.

Skullius aimed to use [Greatest Mana Crafter] to retrieve Demion's Dance, but a thick-furred rider emerged from out of nowhere beyond the luminous outline, and stood close to the green sword.

"Do not extend your reach outside the bounds. Do that.... and you will be legible for slaughter, distant kin. As you can see... I'm willing to make sacrifices I normally wouldn't just to get rid of you..." the voice of Baddan came, as did his full figure.

He rode his striped Retriever, and stood quite a distance away. He was still wary of Skullius even if he didn't have his sword.

Tallo vomited a mouthful blood, and slumped to the ground while his right hand tightly gripped his bleeding side.

He looked deathly pale, and so miserable, it was almost out of place.

Baddan gave him a condescending look.

"I regarded you quite highly... when I first saw you, but it would seem...."

Tallo's eyes showed a barely subdued glint of fury, but before he could retort, Baddan had placed his hands together, but this time, not for a technique.

"I hope you find some comfort in knowing... that you survived a little close to half the duration of the game. An impressive feat," the Sky Watcher said, as a tremor struck, a dazzling light shooting all around the four... five, counting the striped Retriever.

....!!!!

"Shit!" Maxim cursed first with her downturned eyes bulging, and before Tallo and Skullius knew it, she had fiercely destroyed the ground she had stood on as she charged ahead at terrible speed.

Skullius and Tallo knew why.

Baddan... was using his Majestic Territory!

A glaring white rapidly surrounded the group, as if they were being encircled by a swarm of baby suns!

This was it.

When the glaring light fully covered them, trapping them in, Aura, Mana... every type of energy they had access to would be locked down, as well as the prospect of activating techniques!

This was the basic function of an active Majestic Territory!

Maxim had reached close to two meters from Baddan when the Retriever under him bellowed, its stripes glowing in an electric blue. A towering wall of lightning straightened into tens of straight bars that reached to the clouds appeared, protecting the two!

Yet Maxim didn't stop.

She raised her leg, sucked in a deep breath, and stomped her foot on the ground so hard, a shockwave whistled and grumbled in every direction!

Then...

...!!!

Baddan was surprised to find himself falling backwards, as if the world had suddenly tilted on its backside!

But no. That wasn't it.

The ground... the ground had been turned flat – a large, rectangular glossy slice over a large, wide distance, some of the pillars which were close included!

A dark void could be seen under, but a few large rocks seemed to be balance the plate, making a pivot like that reminiscent of a see-saw, and since Baddan and his Retriever had the larger weight, the massive plate swayed more in their direction, leaning into the darkness!

The Sky Watcher couldn't believe it!

His focus was stalled when it came to the Territory, though only for a few moments.

His Retriever couldn't climb on the tilting, slippery pane which was as thin as anything could get.

Maxim didn't wait for Baddan to find a solution. She swept her hands forward, and sent her Incarnation soaring rapidly through the air, towards the Sky Watcher!

Since Baddan still had a line up of lightning rods around him, Maxim saw it unwise to attack by herself. Thus, she sent the centipede, which easily passed between the bars, and with a sharp focus of Aura...

The surprised Retriever had been turned flat, and Baddan awkwardly fell from it.

The protective cage disappeared around Baddan who growled in rage – a common sight now. Maxim charged, skilfully focusing her Aura under her feet to do what few else could do as effortlessly; moving freely on the thin, dirt themed pane towards Baddan without shifting its sway!

She dived at the Sky Watcher, intent on tackling him into the void that was close behind him, a darkness brought on by how much land had been dug up by Planate High!

However...

Baddan suddenly shot into the sky.

Maxim discovered belatedly, that his dark spear was floating where he had stood, its point facing against the flat, shiny pane!

'Dammit!' she cursed.

To make matters worse, the striped Retriever was released from her technique, and it bashed her away!

Baddan floated higher and higher, before coming to a stop, five meters into the air. He could not judge himself into the Benevolent Wrath, but he could use his own Hefty Rebuke to float up.

Skullius and Tallo watched as they sped up towards him, barely a second a half after Maxim had charged, and almost bested the Sky Watcher on her own.

"Tell me that attack earlier was enough for whatever it is you plan to use against Baddan!" Tallo growled, wincing in pain.

"I'll have to try. I'm not very sure. If we can do it before he fully manifests his Territory..." Skullius said, much to Tallo's displeasure.

"Fine. If I hold him place, don't hesitate to strike. Even if... even if you have to get rid of me too," he said with a determined face.

Huh?

"What?" Skullius turned to him with a shocked face. "What are you talking about?"

"Make sure he is out for the count. No matter what happens to me! This is exactly what I have been looking for! An opportunity to break past my limits... and to do some good with that!"

Skullius grimaced.

Double what?!

Had Tallo lost his mind. Do some good?

"It's not like—"

Skullius was interrupted by a heavy bellow.

The mass of light around them grew too bright, and rapidly continued to close in on itself from where it had left off!

Tallo and Skullius cursed at the same time.

It was too late.

Before Skullius knew it, he was completely trapped... and all his mana was quickly trapped within his core, the remnants he had been using outside his body being burnt away by an unrelenting force!

Skullius this too well.

It was Nitros, the energy that derived creation!

Now, he was helpless.

Even Maxim who had been struggling against the striped Retriever looked to become an infant as it quickly stamped her to the ground, now that she wasn't as powerful as before.

'Dammit it! We wasted too much time!' Skullius thought, almost turning to blame Tallo

He spilled the sceptre sword into his hand from the Temporary Storage, but he could feel that using any sword intent would be worthless. It wouldn't work.

Now that they were enclosed, a splash of colour began to worm its way, decorating the interior while Baddan stood in mid-air, fully expressing his Majestic Territory.

Was this really the end?

Skullius couldn't believe it.

Being caught without anything he could use like this...

He would surely be done for!

"Hey! Like a said! Don't waste the opportunity I make!"

Skullius turned to Tallo who had a desperate, almost maniacal look on his face. He almost seemed to be asking Skullius to swear on it!

But... swear on what?

Couldn't they all not use their abilities now?

As a weird image sprang forth, seeming to solidify into something Skullius assumed a fully projected Territory would look like – as far as his experience told – he couldn't see what Tallo was banking on.

But then...



The Mage screamed as he pushed his arms forth violently towards Baddan who had his arms spread wide.

The Sky Watcher was in his element, basking in his power when a glaring light battled against his closed eyelids.

What was that?

He was just beginning to project his Imaginary GeoScape within the enclosed Territory, but it didn't have this kind of bright radiance to it.

So what was emerging overhead?

As he looked, he found a massive magical array stacked six times against itself with shimmering, terribly skewed runes at the edges of its six, spinning wheels!

What?!

Mana was livid within it, terribly desperate to unleash a kind of calamity he had never seen!

But how?

How could this...?

Baddan looked down, and saw Tallo spitting blood as he extended his hands, his eyes wide open.

It was him?!

How was he doing it?!

How was he not affected?!

Skullius who was at the side was puzzled beyond belief.

'How... what?' he thought with a low 'uhm' escaping his mouth.

"ARRRRRRRRRRRRRGHHHHHHHHHH!" Tallo screamed, and as he did, the array above came crashing down on Baddan who once again turned ghostly pale. He was smashed by a heavy force that broke his skull, much to his horror, and forced him to the ground as he roared in pain!

All he had seen was a flash of light, and then a world of agony had rocked his bones!

This had happened within his Territory, where he was supposed to be a master of a mini world he created?!

Skullius was awe struck as Baddan plummeted so suddenly.

He was speechless.

Around them, the colour was stripped from the world, and the radiant white returned, which also peeled itself from the surroundings, restoring the images of the pillars and dirt.

"Do it now! You wanted him immobile, right?! Now's your chance!" Tallo screamed at the Hybrid Luman. "Don't let... don't let my sacrifice be in vain!"

Skullius didn't know what to say.

Indeed, his mana wasn't locked within him anymore as the Territory was collapsing.

He sensed the feverish emotion from Tallo, and felt a little... heartfelt, tiny bits of inspiration coursing through him. Despite the uncharacteristic fire in Tallo right now, he couldn't help but respect him, even without knowing what he had done to Baddan.

Thus, Skullius shot towards the downed enemy.

He quickly reached Baddan who looked to be foaming from the mouth, and without wasting time, he touched his abdomen and...

"[Greatest Mana Crafter]!"

Chapter 747: Not In Vain (2)

Skullius had used [Greatest Mana Crafter] on Baddan before, along with [Immoral Authority].

The latter had yielded a brighter result, while the former had rewarded Skullius with nothing quite as tangible. However, it wasn't the same as gaining nothing, because a theory had emerged from what he vaguely felt.

The Hybrid Luman sensed the chaotic pulse of Baddan's purple mana core, finding that even with more time afforded to him, he couldn't break it. Doing such a thing to beings well versed in using their cores, and guarding them, was ridiculously difficult, and attempting it on a purple core with a normal skill was foolhardy.

However, Skullius wasn't looking to shatter the Sky Watcher's mana core.

Once again, Skullius activated [Swordmaster's Quiescence]!

Thankfully, like [Destined Warp Steps], the skill remained viable for use until all the minutes allowed in its specified duration were spent. With Skullius having been turning it on and off since his epiphany, he had a lot of time left for spamming it as he wished.

'My growth will not only be limited to Swordsmanship!' Skullius thought as the overwhelming feeling imposed by the [Swordmaster's Quiescence] clutched him firmly. He steered it – in the 10 second window free-roam he had – towards his capacity for understanding mana.

Yes.

This is what he needed.

As he successfully did so, he felt as if he had entered another plane of thought higher than that of normal, established elites, with his Omniscient Thought Cracker helping him settle all spontaneous thoughts and sparks of inspiration!

Baddan's gurgling and twitching as he seemed to have been stormed by damage Skullius had not seen...

The growl of the striped Retriever as it galloped towards him only to be pounded into the ground with a grunt that belonged to Maxim...

The shivering of Baddan's mana core as he forced every fibre of his being to invade it. Just a little bit...

Taking all this in, was a herculean task.

Just by attempting it, several notifications popped up in Skullius' view.

['Greatest Mana Crafter' has levelled up!]

['Greatest Mana... ]

He ignored them all and focused wholly on what he needed.

There had been many clues ever since Skullius had begun to think of Baddan, and what was represented on the guidance field about him.

Both his race and class were shown as Beckoned Sky Watcher, like the Fleeting Pioneer.

This, to Skullius, meant the creature's powers were not varied. His whole existence was tied to one thing, and by some interpretation, lacking in versatility.

What did this say to Skullius about how he should deal with Baddan then?

The Hybrid Luman dove into the creature's mana core, and vaguely saw the three parts that made it whole.

The mana core resisted terribly, but Skullius forced his way in with treacherous difficulty.

The Centre, the Refinery, and Shell...

He saw them a bit clearer.

Within the Refinery, he spotted...

'Right... there it is. The pattern is just as I was hoping for...' Skullius thought.

When he had his mana core destroyed, Skullius had made a new one, and got to learn how a mana core was created from scratch. The Refinery was easily the most important part of it, for combatants at least, because it governed what one could do with said core.

High level techniques required mana with a certain pattern, said pattern having been nurtured by the layout of the Refinery. An example of this, was how Skullius could produce the gravitational effect because of how his mana flowed, refined specifically the Refinery he personally forged.

When it came to Baddan...

All his skills; the Kiiyataka, the wind bears, the clones, and the recent dark tide.... all of it reeked of a pattern because of how centralised it all was

This was it!

This was why Skullius had insisted to Tallo and Maxim, that he needed to feel the attacks from Baddan more, so that he could figure out the pattern of how the mana from his core brought on these effects.

Of course, it was too complex to figure it out from just the attacks he ate alone. Upon activation, a technique only carried a vague semblance of how the mana used to ignite it flowed.

It was possible for Skullius to discern this from simple attacks just by being struck by them, and even replicate their effect. However, given how advanced, and at least idealistically nuanced Baddan's powers were, Skullius needed to look into their source for additional understanding to eventually find the missing pieces.

As profound as the mechanisms behind his scheme sounded, he could only execute them fractionally, or more aptly, tweak just a little portion of Baddan's mana core.

'I got it. Now all I have to do is...' Skullius thought, as with his consciousness diving into the Sky Watcher's core, [Greatest Mana Crafter] empowered by his [Swordmaster's Quiescence]... he grasped cruelly, and turned what felt like a gear in the Sky Watcher's mana core!

He tuned one thing, and one thing only.

...!

The Sky Watcher stop twitching, and a hoarse scream fled from his mouth.

Skullius backed away and tumbled back.

He had felt it.

Baddan's mana core lost some of its lustre, and it sparked like a malfunctioning machine!

The splatters of light from it didn't last long though, and he soon just laid on the ground taking deep breaths while feeling that something was very wrong with his mana core and body.

'Hopefully, that worked,' Skullius thought tensely.

He found Maxim looking at him with a questioning expression, under her foot the striped Retriever which was flattened up by her technique. It returned to normal in the next moment, only for Maxim to flatten it again.

Tallo was laying motionless on the ground, blood pooling around his head.

Skullius hurried to him, and placed his hand on his back. He felt complex rhythms and vibrations within his body, as if multiple cords were snapping continuously.

The man was barely alive, and it didn't look like he was going to stay that way for long before he turned worse.

Whatever he had done just now had probably taxed him extraordinarily.

What was it?

Could Mages dismantle Territories? Even Prime Mages?

The thought sounded absurd.

Baddan rose uncomfortably.

He looked to be in a torrent of pain and could barely sit up right.

He clutched his belly, and shuddered.

He tried to perform a few hand seals, and to his horror, not even a breeze whirled about.

He tried again and again and again.

Nothing.

His mana core seemed to reject what he set in motion; a sequence for activating the abilities branded onto his bodies!

"What... did you.... do?!" he looked at the three multiple times with a ferocious face.

Skullius stared at him, but said nothing.

They were halfway through the ten minutes required for the game. He wouldn't tell the Sky Watcher anything that could help him out of his predicament. In fact, he was looking to use the solution as a

bargaining chip in case – in the likely case – Baddan didn't commit to what he promised at the beginning of the game.

The Sky Watcher screamed again.

"What did you do?!"

No one answered him.

He tried to stand, but it felt like thousands of thorns, as well as a heavy weight nailed him to the ground.

What was this?!

His trusty beast was being 'taken care of' and couldn't come to his aid.

Skullius watched, keeping an eye on the other riders Baddan had come with, whom, until moments ago he had forgotten existed. They didn't intervene, which gave him hope.

Now, all that left was Tallo.

Skullius tried to heal him, but nothing happened. The condition of his body didn't change at all, as if rejecting [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc].

"What did you do?" Skullius voiced to the Mage.

Did this guy use some forbidden secret art to save his and Maxim's skins?

Did it reject all healing as a consequence then? Even potions perhaps?

It seemed noble for Tallo to have used such a thing, and it was, but...

It didn't make sense.



Why?

Regardless of what Tallo's reasons were, first the group needed to win the game. As far as the rules told, the participants were supposed to be in the innermost circle by the end of the game to qualify as victorious.

Thus, Skullius lugged Tallo as well as the raging Baddan, and together with Maxim, and the striped Retriever, they walked to the ringly destination.

....

Before long, 10 minutes passed.

Baddan had on a pale, but furious face as each minute had elapsed.

He didn't understand how this was possible.

Skullius walked up to him.

"You lost. Will you keep your end of the bargain?"

The Sky Watcher looked to be ready to bark insult after insult at Skullius. He wasn't at all pleased. His ego and religious stance had been bruised.

"You desecrated the grounds as a means to rattle me! How... can I even consider this game valid?!"

"Flesh you, sockethole. You did it too, and with that whole thing about willing to make sacrifices and all. Besides, you were clearly lying about that Retriever of yours! It didn't just heal you, it started participating too!"

"I will be punished for how I desecrated the grounds even if it.... was to beat you all... but how will you be punished?! Me and my beast are one! Where I am, it is permitted also. I did not breach the rules!"

Skullius shook his head.

"Underneath that saint facade was a sockethole like you, huh? Look, even if it is within the rules that you can bring your Retriever in, you NEVER told us that! That was way too convenient from our perspective, and unfair! And it doesn't help that even with your beast, you lost to us! We beat you, and ended the game in the first circle. According to the rules!

My friend here is on death's door because of it. So you better do what you promised, or so help me...!"

Baddan's face grew red. He glanced at where Skullius gestured; this friend of theirs who had somehow conjured an array within his Territory. He was lying there presumably close to dying.

Even a Super potion hadn't even made his circumstances better.

Baddan, while feeling a little pang of guilt at the sight, was still furious.

The logic was tangled, roiled, and murky, but in the end, Skullius and team were in the innermost circle by the time the game ended.

That was the ache of it.

A voice came, adding to the argument for Skullius and his group.

"Right, right. Plus, this dashing young man here can heal your core back to the way it was if you keep to your promise, and we can all be on our merry way at the end."

"Yeah. Thanks for that, Tallo," Skullius said with a nod before turning back to Baddan. "Right, see what I wa—"

Skullius stopped and turned.

He searched on the ground to find Tallo lying there, almost dead, and then focused on the healthy Tallo who was brimming with energy, barely any scratches on him but his robes.

The Hybrid Luman stammered, as did Maxim.

The looks on their faces made Tallo burst out into laughter.

Chapter 748: Annoyingly Deceptive

Tallo's laughter grew infinitely more annoying with each step the trio took, speeding away from the hallowed grounds with Baddan and several of his fellow riders leading the way.

Skullius almost blocked his ears, and Maxim kept glaring at the Mage murderously.

Even Baddan was looking to be so close to erupting into a flailing fit if Tallo wasn't shut up very soon. He had made his point. His annoying, shrewdly point.

Every second he continued laughing with so many tears coming from his eyes that he had to dab them away constantly with his robes, the group's urge to gang up on him, and strangle him was inflated.

But they were decent people.

"I still can't believe you bought it! 'One of our friends is at death's door!' you said Hahahahahaha aaaaaaha Hahahahaha! That one in particular got me! Whooo!" Tallo panted, using Skullius' shoulder as support.

"Come on. Lighten up. We're all alive aren't we? So what if I tricked you a bit. It was all for our benefit. A bit of cringe worthy theatre featured in the performance I can't deny, but surely, that can't sully our perfect teamwork now, can it?"

Tallo suppressed another laugh.

Skullius was gripping Demion's Dance's hilt extra hard.

He decided to douse Tallo's laughter at least by asking a few questions.

"So... From the moment that black liquid fell from the sky, you were already fooling all of us?"

Tallo gave a cheery nod.

"Of course!" he replied, almost skipping in his sprint – they were jogging lightly after all.

The reveal hadn't been the best thing to happen to Skullius today.

The trio plus Baddan had been dumbfounded when they found out, reluctant to believe even with the evidence, but a slow, and irritating explanation from Tallo had convinced them finally.

From the moment Baddan used the dark tide, Tallo had substituted himself with an illusion.

What he had said about being unable to trick a creature like Baddan for long periods was true, but he had omitted to tell his teammates that he did have one advanced form of illusion, an advanced application of the Deception Patch, that could deceive anyone to a terrifying degree, as long as certain conditions were met.

As long as Tallo was able to completely convince a particular sense of his target – often by having the target interact with the illusion he made at least thrice without having them doubt – Tallo could influence the target's brain in relation to that particular sense.

The Prime Mage had come to the conclusion that since Baddan was humanoid, his senses were likely connected to his brain, unlike a vast collection of insect-type Cluster beasts. Thus, when Baddan saw Tallo, heard him ask who Appairitoni was, which further convinced him that he was facing the real Mage, and interacted with him through speech, he had already lost.

And indeed, Tallo hadn't resorted to fooling only one of Baddan's senses.

The Sky Watcher hadn't touched Tallo, but the Mage had convinced Baddan that he had interacted with him through the effect of Hefty Rebuke. When Maxim and Skullius were made to float, Tallo had, with a little delay, made his illusion float too – having been caught off guard.

When the tide had bashed into his illusion, Tallo had created a convincing corresponding effect; making it look like it was being swept away while trying to teleport to safe spots, but with great difficulty.

From there, Tallo had also had a hold over Maxim, Skullius, having ensnared their senses too.

This was why the Deception Patch was a rare and unique Patch. It hardly even had anything to do with mana when the target was influenced to the brain, and thus, even in a Territory, it still continued to work.

Of course, what riled up Skullius and Maxim was the fact that Tallo had made his illusion act like some typical, altruistic hero as it fooled all of them, making them believe that he was giving up his life 'to do some good', as he had said.

Skullius scowled.

No wonder he had noticed that something was wrong.

There had been nothing in the sky!

Only Baddan had seen a dense array overhead.

He had then plummeted after believing that he had been struck down by its fierce power, and his brain had caused him to be dazed as a result, sending messages of false pain throughout his body.

Except for what Skullius did to him, he was fine.

As such, Baddan was even more furious than Skullius, who had lost a precious Super potion trying to heal the realistic illusion of Tallo.

He hadn't heard the explanation as it was given by Tallo, but what he saw after arguing with Skullius about whether or not their win was valid, gave him adequate hints.

One moment Tallo was lying on the ground close to death, and in the next, he was standing behind Skullius with a funny smile.

"Jeez you won! Can you shut up now?!" Skullius snapped and Tallo waved his hands in surrender.

"Alright, alright. I've had my bit of fun," he chuckled.

"So you were holding out on us during that entire fucking battle, huh?" Maxim asked, her scowl receding as it seemed Tallo was dropping his screechy caw of a laugh.

The Mage scratched his chin before answering, looking to be considering his words very carefully, though in reality, he was merely scratching an itch.

"Of course I was. Just as you were," he replied with his finger pointing to Skullius who stiffened a bit. "I told you before. I know you're not some Form User or Arma User. There's no way. You're hiding a large collection of abilities even now.

I think it's fair to do so. No reason to reveal everything when nearly a fifth of Pelian is watching."

Skullius had nothing to say to this.

Tallo continued, his focus back on Maxim who had inquired.

"Unlike you who hails from a Family, with many already knowledgeable about your technique, I prefer to hide my wild and last resort cards until I really need them. He's in the same boat, having joined the Family circle relatively recently."

"Done your research," Skullius said without turning to the Mage.

"Everyone who had a sensible mind the day you fought that barrier-making coward would have recognised the mystery surrounding your powers and done some inquiries about you."

Skullius couldn't help but see it now.

His Preliminary Round match against Kurtish had been quite the spectacle, and if not for the fact that Kurtish had an advantage when it came to long, drawn out fights, Skullius would have won with the single most effective blow he had landed on the man.

There was a bit of silence following the back and forth, and the one to break it was Baddan, astride his striped Retriever.

"It seems the makings of the outside world... are more complex than I imagined," he said.

"They sure are," Maxim heaved his words to fashion another topic which would hopefully kill off the awkward silence. "But what you have here is also rather unorthodox. Besides... Well, whatever you call this trip of ours, is there another way to reach that mountain quickly?"

Baddan wore a cross look as he turned to the pink-haired woman, but it dissipated as soon as he saw the ignorance in her eyes.

"It is not a mountain. It is the All-Guiding Appairitoni, our god. His presence.... keeps the order here, and reaching him cannot be done by casual means, especially.... by you clueless invaders."

As he explained, Baddan felt some of his pride leave his flesh.

The powerlessness he felt in his mana core, which felt like a heavy lump in his abdomen, as if he had swallowed a boulder at supper, crippled his earlier regal, sagely attitude.

His fellow clansmen riding at his sides were likely to be losing respect each time he interacted with the foreigners, but he had been convinced adequately that he hardly had any choice.

Several minutes ago, a few arguments had been made for him to finally relent and commit to what he had promised.

Baddan had promised that if Maxim, Skullius and Tallo emerged victorious in the game, he would grant them anything they wished, but if the opposite occurred, they would be viable for slaughter, though, he was aiming to kill them as they played the game still.

In his mind, that was a better alternative to all his clansmen with him in tow attacking the trio all at once.

Said trio had indeed emerged victorious, but he had argued against the victory.... until it was revealed that Skullius could, as Tallo had introduced without the Hybrid Luman's confirmation, fix his mana core for him IF he agreed to what he stated before.

This had convinced Baddan quite a bit. In the state he was in, he would be useless as Sky Watcher, and picturing himself getting replaced and sent into the folds of the All-Guiding Appairitoni to be buried along with the other dead ones, and with a sullied reputation as his only mortal reward.... It wouldn't do.

The nail on the coffin had been Tallo mentioning that Rias was here, and he was at the foot of the mountain. Essentially, Baddan was delivering them to a 'highly probable death so he needn't worry', as the Mage so gracefully stated, earning Maxim and Skullius' glares.

Baddan hadn't bought it at first, but if it was true, that was all the more reason for him to accept the first proposal, and get his powers back.

And thus, here they were.

The obvious choice for the trio, which they unilaterally agreed on, was to have Baddan lead them to the mountain, something the Sky Watcher had hinted was possible with his abilities.

He lorded over the clouds above after all, as he had boasted before.

The Sky Watcher would have argued against this too, but it was evident that the glowing object above the All-Guiding Appairitoni was foreign, and it was what the group was after. If it truly led them out of this world, it was probably worth it to help them.

And now, the trio plus several riders were rapidly speeding in the direction of the mountain without the slowing effect clamping down their speed.

Baddan, after the long thought, relented to Maxim's question.

What was the use in withholding this information anyway. He chose to answer.

"The best way to approach the mountain, if you are not led by a Beckoned Sky Watcher, or the illustrious Beckoned Height Keeper, is.... to follow the Pioneers. They scurry about everywhere – except perhaps in wet areas, they rarely wander there – and make up to two-thirds of the population within this world. I am sure that young one, your kin, spared those little absent-minded saints because....



they do not serve as threats to anyone, though they are rather difficult to kill."

Skullius nodded.

He had been on the right track it seemed, before he was taken by the Draw Bubble.

"These Pioneers. Why are they always rushing towards the mountain?" he asked Baddan.

"So you've seen them? Well... they are pure. They have no ambition and external motive outside of instinct. They are models.... and reminders for my kin made by Appairitoni, as to how we should live.

As constant seekers of his height, and to always approach his divine being every year after meditation."

Tallo seemed especially curious about this subject. He mulled over the content and nodded.

"Well good thing you were here to act as our substitute for that," he said before turning to his partners. "Now that we have settled our route to the mountain, we still have a problem with Units. It would be great to get a few thousand right now."

Skullius waved Tallo away. He knew what he was insinuating.

Maxim had roughly 2,000 Glass Units, and Tallo had close to 4,000. Skullius on the other hand, had more than 5,000, with several hundred having been taken away by the lethal hits from Baddan.

"You really want to start the discussion on killing each other after all that?" Skullius asked.

"It's only logical," Tallo said with a bright smile.

Maxim yawned and rushed off to the side.

"I'm going to go take a piss and change into some new clothes. This armour is killing me."

Tallo watched as she dashed away.

"How open," he said. "I guess that's a no to killing each other then."

"Pretty much," Skullius said without taking his focus off the riders ahead.

"Fine, fine. We're all best friends now, with me being the lovable martyr. Now, as you promised. Answer my questions."

#### Chapter 749: Deductions

It had become rather rowdy within the stadium, with some witnesses leaping in excitement, while others psycho-analysed the decisions and actions of the contenders as they sat down.

The food and drink sometimes became a little difficult to eat because of some of the more gruesome things that showed on the screens, but no one was detached from following the events to an almost religious degree.

The interactions between the contenders and the native Cluster beasts were among the most exciting for the crowds to watch, and it soon became pretty clear, even to the commonfolk, that the environment made this Royale a lot more fascinating than it would have been otherwise.

Aside from the unique beasts and all, the many items which were sprinkled around the Royale grounds brought about interesting scenarios too, some good for the contenders and some bad.

One such item was something called a Draw Bubble, which, as the crowds had seen, had driven contenders together over a large distance. Naturally, what followed was the manifestation of mostly baseless hostility, as the gathered combatants killed each other, earning the others' Units.

On several occasions though, a trend was beginning to form. Perhaps it was because the contenders themselves realised that it might be beneficial to help each other temporarily, given that fending off the stronger beasts, and figuring out a quicker way to the GOAL by themselves was too tall a task... whichever it was led to team-ups becoming a thing.

Several teams were slaughtered by stronger contenders, but it didn't mean the formula was thwarted. In fact, the teams that survived – very few they were – found it easier to rack up Units, and gather some useful unique treasures Guissepo had mentioned would be within the Royale grounds as either deterrents to winning for others or supplements towards their own success.

One wouldn't believe the sheer variety of these items. The audience gasped at what some of them were capable of.

The earlier shock which had come to the commonfolk witnesses, of a young man casually surviving being torn limb from limb and then beheaded, had become a not-so-rare, or appalling sight as the elongated death battle went on.

In fact, it became a norm for some groups, as did the reveal of ridiculous powers, and some of their explanations which shattered common sense!

Nine hours had passed now, and the counter above the screens depicted that only 12 contenders remained.

From the start, it was evident that there was the possibility of there not being enough Units to float around, if too many powerful contenders remained.

The meaning of strength itself in an unknown environment where there were a vast amount of unknown creatures, and items that could harm contenders, was reconceptualised, and in theory, even common folk could understand just how unique, and perhaps lucky those who reached the GOAL would have to be.

Adaptivity.

Analysis.

Endurance.

These were key.

Some among the audience began to appreciate how much work was put into the workings of this Royale, and how exactly it would determine those who would be conscripted into the EverSword House.

Despite the ruthless killing, which many had gotten used to, this was genius. Truly the event of the century.

Or so they all thought.

All this said, a conversation that had occurred only once, depicted through one of the screens, with only a few of the witnesses paying much attention to it, had showed.

Rearren had keenly given it some focus.

"The young creature spared only my clan among tens... He warned us that heathens... bloodthirsty, demonic incarnates would be sent here..."

These words.

The words of Baddan as he described what Rias had instructed him to do.

The commonfolk had missed much of the context, though a few understood it, and shared with those they were seated near them.

Rearren chuckled, recalling the words.

"Amusing," he said.

His wife at his side, the meek Millisa, turned to him.

"What amuses you?" she asked.

"Nothing truly important. I simply recalled Reon's words before he left home."

Millisa's hand tightened into a fist hiddenly at the mention of that name.

"He called me a cruel, vicious man masquerading as a caring father. He viewed being sent to solitude for years to hone his Imagining Technique as he saw fit, as cruelty. Hmph. I never imparted anything in either Rias or Reon as they grew up. They carved their own paths. Rias emerged with such a stubborn heart, and his talent helped him do as he wishes.

What he desires just so happens to be what I desire. I cannot be blamed for that. I am surprised he gave the beasts here such... motivation," said Rearren.

Millisa couldn't believe her husband would sprout such self-righteous words with so much confidence.

It wasn't news that Reon died a few years after leaving his family to be free of tradition, but ironically landed in what his father planned without knowing it.

He had tried to salvage all that potential Reon had, but something had gone wrong.

No one could tell what had actually killed him several months ago.

Millisa didn't dare to voice her thoughts. She wore a calm smile, and went along as she usually did everyday.

"What Reon failed to realise, was that what he saw as cruelty, was a means to an end. Hatred, murder, madness. Things society think to be bred or built into someone from a young age, are weapons that one can forge themselves in the dark of isolation as tools to meet their goals. Rias understands that. The world of combatants cannot thrive without things like that."

Millisa gulped, and softly nodded. She trembled a little though. The thought of her sweet child Reon had almost torn down her calm facade.

"I wish to go home," she said firmly.

Rearren turned to her.

He wrapped his arm around her waist and leaned closer to her. Millisa nearly shuddered, but she gathered enough confidence to fake a smile and meet Rearren's face.

The man gave her kiss, and stared deeply into her eyes.

"Soon, I promise. I know your heart is quite feeble. It's almost done."

\*

Alaris didn't pay much focus to the other screens, especially since Skullius was beheaded.

He had hoped against hope that the Hybrid Luman hadn't died, and his faith had paid off. More than that, his hope that Skullius was steered into an awakening somehow, and that he had used the potions which he had checked in with the store keeper in the Guilds Association, before being exposed to such serious damage, had been proved correct.

That said, Alaris didn't know how one could be in their right mind after remaining as a dismembered corpse for so long. Sure, if a Supreme potion was used, maybe it could ward off the trauma, but Alaris didn't think Skullius used such a high level potion, and he was more than alright afterwards!

Besides that detail, Alaris had worn a broad grin when he saw Skullius finally exhibit what he had been trying to hint him towards.

The Hybrid Luman, from his experience, was quick to learn. His pace of growth was astounding, and that had been one of the factors that encouraged Alaris to accept Skullius as a student of sorts. However, when it came to things that weren't mana-related abilities – Mage skills – Skullius seemed to want to inspire his own, hard ideas without considering that he wasn't entirely alone in the execution.

Alaris understood why Skullius was like this.

It had come as a shock at first, but he did know – as far as Skullius had explained – that the Hybrid Luman was a Mage, Class Branching heavily into Form Using and Arma Using.

Alaris hadn't bought it at first, as for a Mage to learn Swordsmanship to his current level was simply absurd, but given how much Skullius ignored the basics and fundamentals of being an Energy

Former in general, the Bloodless Steel Phantom had been convinced that perhaps Skullius had chosen a Class he hadn't been that talented for.

Now, seeing him express a sword's purpose and power without his usual overbearing attitude, lightened his heart.

'I might not be the best teacher, but at least my student is clever enough to gather up the hints I serve him,' Alaris thought proudly.

He was especially happy to see in rows below him, Terese and Daggs overjoyed at Skullius being alive that they almost screamed out loud.

It was good.

However, Alaris hadn't forgotten that the worst was yet to come, and he made several prayers each hour that Skullius would survive whatever it was that would turn the cherry atmosphere sombre.

Chapter 750: While Others...

"Oh, it's beautiful! I wonder if it'll work outside the Royale grounds," Darwel said to herself while admiring the shape and colour of something she held in her hand. It was a thick, five point star with a particularly bright centre that gleamed of burgundy. Aside from that glow, it somehow managed to look and feel like it was made of both wood and hard plastic.

The bits of mana around it didn't tell Darwel much, except for the fact that she was most definitely keeping this object. Because of how much the burgundy glow at its centre seemed so desperate to spew out, the El Sif was sure that breaking the star would prompt its function.

That wasn't a spontaneous suspicion.

She had found a lot of items on her way through the different flavoured environment in the past several hours, that worked the same way.

"Oh, you found something else? Thank you dear," Darwel said sweetly to a long, light green vine that slithered to her feet like a serpent, in what would have been its mouth had it been an actual snake, a transparent, spherical object that looked much like a bubble.

"It looks like these are the most common items here," Darwel said with a bit of a frown and a sigh. "Thanks for the hardwork."

As she said so, the vine at her feet turned limp, and fell to the ground.

A loud creak sounded behind Darwel, and she found the large, two meter tall humanoid tree behind her lowering itself for her to sit on its shoulder.

"It's alright. Not now," she said gently, and the tree took a few steps back and stood up straight.

Above Darwel's head was a vibrant figure over a rotating, illusory pane, reading '8,100'.

The El Sif had been using a lot of plants that she awakened with her powers to roam around the areas as far from her as possible so that she could find anything that seemed out of place. Thus, she had managed to quickly find a lot of items, some she was urged by the mana around her to steer away from, and others she found very useful.

Darwel had also barely gotten into a real fight since emerging here.

With some of the more dangerous objects she had found, she had paralysed or neutralised her opponents' attacks after pulling them in with a Draw Bubble – items she had in abundance.

Another object she had found, called a Frozen Bean, which was about as common as a Draw Bubble, was perfect for incapacitating contenders and beasts alike. Dispatching them with the humanoid tree behind her when they were literally shrouded by an icy coat featuring thick flakes of snow, was too easy, and Darwel had earned quite a lot of Units because of it.

While this was good, she became concerned when her trip towards the GOAL seemed to take forever. She hadn't found anything that made it quicker, as even if she rode the humanoid tree brimming with a large amount of pure mana, it was still stalled by the clouds.

After a while, she had thought perhaps heading towards the many flashes of light and sound – where a series of scattered battles were occurring – would help her find answers, or at least kill time by earning the rest of the Units she needed, like everyone else, but decided against it.

She had doing alright without joining in.



As for her snail's pace situation, it was actually a stretch to call it a nagging problem since... she had found a kind of solution for it.

Darwel expelled a half-moon shaped object with a gleaming steel colour to it from her storage. It was heavy, so heavy in fact, that when Darwel had been handed it by a large shrub that scuttled on its roots, she had almost fallen over.

She heaved the object, and blew out a deep breath.

This was one of two items she had found that helped with shortening the distance between her and the goal. How it worked inspired the gut to spill out its contents though.

As far as Darwel had guessed from having used muscle memory to try and decipher what exactly it had done, following the activation – rubbing its side with the palm – the heavy object turned one step turn the user took in any direction, into perhaps millions of steps within an instant.

After rubbing it, Darwel had gotten the urge to walk forward, and as she did, she found a moment later, her thighs burning so badly, and her body aching so fiercely that she had hurled up her breakfast. Even for a Master like her, suddenly having the sensation that she had sped around Pelian in full sprint in just a day, was unbearable.

The reward, was Darwel finding that she had covered roughly a third of the distance to the mountain, something she had only remarked as great after the colour in her face returned.

Now, as she contemplated using another of these, she couldn't help but think on it carefully.

She only had one of these left.

Besides the consequences of using the item, Darwel thought of whether or not she would be able to find Skullius if she drew closer to the GOAL. Maybe he was already there. Or maybe he was still behind. Or maybe he was dead.

She had sent out a lot of creatures to look for him, and most of them had returned without a relevant answer.

Darwel was still thinking over this when she saw a large, black furred bear, about three meters in height waddle heavily over the ground. It had comically large ears, and its large fangs didn't seem like the kind only reserved for little golden-haired girls.

It stomped away without turning to her, though it was headed in the same direction she was.

This was the third bear Darwel had seen, but after closer inspection, she found that it wasn't alone.

A smaller, long-headed, long-faced creature was sprinting in front of it, as if leading the way, its speed perhaps three times Darwel's own as it rushed toward the mountain.

The El Sif was greatly surprised.

She hadn't seen that monkey-like creature before.

Not in this marsh she had been stuck for the past few hours.

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Aurolio had steadily, and freely journeyed towards the GOAL with minimal effort. Perhaps the most minimal effort out of all the contenders. That said, he was also probably the only contender to have barely come across any of the items Guissepo had promised during his travels.

He had racked up many Units early on to reach the 10,000 Unit requirement by the fifth hour, and after finding a group of Fleeting Pioneers, and discovering that following after them accelerated his travel speed, he had captured a bunch of them, tied them to make-shift leashes made of roots, and begun his smooth sailing towards the GOAL.

Aurolio easily killed anything that got in his way, and after several more hours, urging the long-faced creatures to move faster as he went, he saw with his advanced sight, the mountain drawing nearer and nearer.

Only about thirty miles remained, and soon, even such a distance would be void if he continued at this speed.

'This was hardly a challenge,' Aurolio thought, bored out of his mind, and with the cold being his only, true opponent.

He whipped the root leashes he had made, making the Pioneers, who were somehow still oblivious to the fact that were being abused, run a bit faster.

The pale man had encountered the obscure ability that drove the Fleeting Pioneers out of danger. It had caused a problem even for him, but he soon worked around it. He hadn't needed to use violence to capture these clueless beasts.

Enlightening indeed.

"Hmm?" Aurolio hummed as the plain he was racing through, was welcomed at its end by yet another deep forest of large, very tall, crooked trees that shut away what was ahead along with the clouds they sank into. Within the dense, dark forest, Aurolio could make out, very vaguely, an enormous shape floating within the line of trees.

No. It wasn't floating.

It simply hung, linked to another shape similar to its own, and another and another.

Chains.

The massive chains seemed to lead out of the dense forest if one followed them, but outside the darkness created by the canopies and packed wooden bodies, the chains seemed to disappear.

'Are they invisible?' Aurolio asked himself.

The closer he got, the more chains he saw, racing and twisting around the large trees within the forest, but their forms unseen outside it.

The pale man pulled the Pioneers to a stop.

While still positioned a few meters from the forest, he had discovered something else.

A voracious, mighty presence was being suppressed by the chains. It could be better felt as one drew closer to the forest, and it was only reasonable to assume that once one set foot within the darkness ahead, they would be assaulted by the full brunt of the creature's pressure.

"Well..." Aurolio said, and his voice shot into the forest with an unexpectedly clear pitch, becoming louder and louder as it went.

He didn't continue what he had been about to say.

A loud, world-shaking rumble, like that one would feel if a whale buried a kilometre deep into the ground suddenly made the effort to push itself out, emerged, almost making Aurolio topple over.

The chains rattled and the trees shook wildly.

Then a fierce storm of mana exploded violently from the forest like several hurricanes moulded into one, and pushed in all directions.

The visibility disappeared for three whole minutes, which was about as long as it took for the bellowing mana to finally simmer down. Aurolio had to let go of the Fleeting Pioneers which were swept away, unable to handle the storm of power!

Such a vast amount of mana...

'And that's the Cluster General...' Aurolio thought as a veil of purple kept him firmly planted on the ground. He took casual steps into the forest as the violent showcase swept everything away, making the strong trees lean, and pulling the weaker ones right out of the ground.

The chains which clanged made a devastating noise that travelled far and wide, and to someone so close to them, it wouldn't have been strange if their brains were fleshed up even if they were a Master, but Aurolio was perfectly fine.

A tall, large figure bound by the chains showed itself the deeper he went into the forest.

It wasn't nearly as deserving of such massive chains binding it at a glance, but the shrieking mana roaring from it told otherwise.

Surprisingly, Aurolio didn't give the beast much attention. It didn't seem to entertain him either, as it kept its eyes closed. Perhaps its body was just that sensitive to movement or sound around it even if it was 'asleep.'

What interested the pale man more, was a smaller individual sitting down on the ground while leaning against the large beast's leg.

He had his big, glowing honey coloured eyes wide open as he stared at Aurolio's approach.

"I thought you were restricted to the foot of the mountain and beyond. Didn't figure the inhibiting Angel would ignore the rules," the pale man said with a smile, enhancing his speech with mana so that Rias could hear over the loud noise.

The young man hung his head expressionlessly, and kicked away something close to his feet.

"This IS the foot of the mountain. It's larger than you think," he replied. "I imagined you'd be the first to get here. Father said it would hardly be an inconvenience for someone like you. You aren't all brawn as I thought."

Aurolio chuckled.

"Well, why don't you get to Inhibiting then, Angel?" he said as his presence flared, as if to dwarf that of the Cluster General.

"Might as well," Rias said as he stood up, a chilling power rising from his body as well.