

## Undead 751

### Chapter 751: Sharing Motives

Tallo was nodding vehemently, eager to learn everything there was about the Beckoned Sky Watchers and their kin, however close to extinction they were.

Shockingly, Baddan had taken to Tallo quite well, and was actually happily explaining away everything there was to know about the customs, traditions and norms of his clansmen, the names of the other Sky Watchers from other clans which had existed, among many other details.

Naturally, the only reason Baddan was freely doing this, was because the Mage showed a great level of interest in all the details to the most mundane one, only stopping when close to asking how they relieved themselves.

According to Baddan, his kind lived... anywhere. They preferred not to erect roofs above their heads or to create walls around themselves. They were so used to the environment, however cold it could get, and the only facilities – makeshift ones at that – which they had, were for making clothing, weapons and the like.

Most of the Sky Watcher's race was gone now, and the simple setups they made were close to useless without the many hands needed to keep their facilities functioning.

Tallo had gone on to ask about the unique variety of weapons Baddan's kin carried, and the Sky Watcher had admitted that his clan had stolen them from where the other clans had perished.

There were few of his clansmen left that actually made weapons, and for the most part, they were left to try and find natural treasures born through their land, like Baddan's Hefty spears – which he had found a long time ago.

The Sky Watcher was a very vulnerable soul, it appeared. When that was slowly revealed, it had occurred to Skullius that Tallo was very good at casual deception that didn't involve magic as well, as with his skill at wearing down the wariness of an enemy he had been trying to kill just a handful of hours ago into this...

Oh, it was terrifying.

Skullius leaned in close to Maxim who was now wearing a long, blue stylish shirt and pants made of a thick fabric, her long, pink hair tied into a tight bun, and said:

"I know we decided not to kill each other, but could you sleep well on any night with this bastard in your room?"

"I wouldn't sleep at all if I had any man in my room," Maxim replied, her hands forever crossed over her chest... for some reason.

"Ah, of course. This thing about women and men. I constantly forget about it. If not for... for uhmm.... Hmm that's weird.

I could have sworn... In any case, I understand," Skullius said with a hint of sympathy that made Maxim nervous.

"What do you understand?" she frowned as she asked him, her eyes turning suspicious.

"Uh... why you wouldn't want men close to you?" the Hybrid Luman said with a dash of uncertainty noticeable in his tone.

He somehow felt like he was mere moments away from stepping on a landmine, whatever a landmine was. In any case, something was about to explode if he persisted.

Skullius cleared his throat.

"I clearly don't know what I'm talking about. I'm sorry."

In one of the many thousands of caches of memories he had stolen, he found one that quickly urged him to feign and admit to ignorance. Probably taken from a veteran womaniser.

Surely, Maxim seemed to relax a bit as she saw his keenness on being understanding of her situation fade from his face.

She quickly switched the subject.

"It's a miracle that we haven't split paths. If I didn't know any better, I'd think that asshole was trying to get into good books with Baddan so that whenever he kills us and takes our Units, he'd still have a ticket to the GOAL."

Skullius froze, as did Maxim after realising that this very well could be what Tallo was doing while pretending to be a typical, curious Mage – even though she had been joking.

Since his reveal of what he could do with his Deception Patch earlier, Skullius and Maxim found that placing too much trust into Tallo went against their instinct.

For now, they decided to listen closely to his conversation with Baddan. Just in case he was plotting something.

"...is why we hunt these ambers. You see those there? Yes. We use them for meditation. Gathering them to form a large enough amber... is severely taxing them.

The Retrievers.... have to scour each year for large amounts of it, mainly within the ponds and lakes of Kii fish, which have the unique ability to turn special, rotten waters into molten rock. Still... even after the hot rock settles, the amber is hard to find in large volumes within one spot. Poor things," Baddan said with pity while patting the large, striped beast he rode.

"Oh, that large rock... it gets used up?" Tallo asked with shining eyes. The only thing missing from him was a notebook in which he would have loved to scribble everything he was hearing.

"Oh yes. A vibrant energy lies within it when it clusters, and a number of my kin drawing from it at the same time rapidly depletes that energy. With enough amber however.... anyone can get a full session of meditation, which draws the lesser of my kin closer to becoming Sky Watchers like me. Their heavy furs recede.... and they turn lighter like my own.

The ultimate goal is to become as pure, and righteous as the illustrious Beckoned Height Keeper.... who is the only one of our kind who can remain close to the All-Guiding Appairitoni for long periods."

"Fascinating. This is easily the most profound world I've been to. I can tell your people admire the amber. I saw offerings around it. Those were offerings weren't they?"

"Naturally, distant kin," confirmed Baddan sombrely, probably recalling that the large harvest of amber had been...

"We offer anything to the amber. It is something we are given... so we can grow closer to Appairitoni. It is only naturally that we be thankful for finding it."

Skullius and Maxim listened for a while longer before giving up. In as much as they wanted to catch any hints of Tallo betraying them, they found that neither of them was smart enough to see through the Mage's bubbly persona, if it even was one.

There had been many sides to Tallo so far, while Maxim and Skullius were more honest and earnest with their words and actions. Perhaps that was why they had clicked a bit well.

"So..." Skullius awkwardly said to Maxim after a brief silence. He had no one else to talk to, and getting lost in thought right now didn't seem like the best idea. "...why did you decide to participate in the Royale?"

Maxim's face hardened a little.

"I was forced to. Something about networking, and expanding my view outside of my own biases."

Skullius tilted his head.

"Your goal isn't to join the EverSword House?"

Maxim cursed.

"I could care less about that. It sounded like a pretty good idea at first, but no one in my Family was up for it. But... they did decide that for a 'woman of the sweetest age', I am bit too abrasive, and sheltered in my own anxieties. Which I am, and for good reason."

Skullius was about to say he understood that feeling, but he held his tongue.

Maxim continued.

"The only thing joining this event has done..." she said while pointing at the vibrant figure above her head, '7,500', "...is earn me a few more corpses under my foot. Nothing else has changed."

Over the course of the roughly five hours since their departure from the hallowed grounds, the sizable group had been steered by Maxim, Skullius and Tallo towards anywhere there was the slightest show of violence, and they had killed off the contenders there before continuing towards the GOAL again.

As a result the trio had earned quite a haul in Glass Units.

"Well, your Family seems strangely independent. I would have thought they'd express some interest in joining a House. Why aren't they too keen on it?"

"Because my Family, like most of the higher ranked Families believes that even if they aren't nearly as strong as Houses, they have a reputation from the Grand Wars that should be recognised just as much as that of the Houses. Joining said Houses would be like stamping out their pride. My ancestors made sacrifices for their generations...

for all of us, sacrifices that would be invalidated if I participated with the intent to get myself, and my Family swallowed up. In that, I agree. But I'd rather express that in more... subtle way."

"Hmmm," Skullius hummed, a tinge of jealousy pinching at him. "I wish I had that kind of independence."

His words made Maxim feel a bit happier about explaining her circumstances, however vaguely.

"You joined the Royale for what reasons?" she asked him.

The answer was at the tip of Skullius' tongue, but he felt a huge chunk of it missing, mainly most of its source, and was left stunted.

"For freedom perhaps? Maybe back when I made the choice, I was just a parasite that couldn't survive on its own..." Skullius said, his voice trailing off a bit as he remembered his argument with Stylla.

Maybe she had been right.

Maybe he was acting all confident while having forgotten to whom he owed much of the credit.

"I don't get it at all. Freedom has never been my problem," Maxim said.

Suddenly, a surge of violent mana, like a mighty gust of wind flooded the view, and attempted to sweep everyone away.

"Again?!" Skullius cried as he stamped himself to the ground, while Maxim turned herself flat.

The riders and Tallo used their own means to stop themselves from getting blown away, and by the end of the unexpected hoarse winds, Baddan looked to be troubled.

"Ever since that young one imprisoned the Height Keeper, the elder hasn't spread out his presence like this, except for today. It has happened twice now," Baddan expressed while gazing ahead at the mountain, which was much nearer than before. "Someone must have gotten close to him."

Tallo turned to the Sky Watcher and narrowed his eyes.

'The Cluster General? Is he at the foot of the mountain too?' he wondered.

Skullius and Maxim seemed to be following along the same line of thought.

Judging by what Baddan had said, someone, or some people had reached the foot of the mountain right now.

Thus...

Tallo looked to his two partners, and spoke words that didn't tally with how a normal person's mind would have interpreted the line of events.

"Do you reckon we can land a few hits on the Inhibiting Angel to get enough Units and rush to the GOAL?"

The way Tallo nonchalantly proposed this rubbed both Skullius and Maxim in the worst way possible.

As if it was the easiest thing to do with all that they had learned.

That was not what they were thinking at all!

Chapter 752: 'Fruitful' Agreement

"It's concerning that you may have actually learned nothing from everything we've been through. I think I would prefer our chances with other contenders, even if the few that remain are likely to be monsters in their own right," Skullius said while shaking his head.

He didn't even want a part of his consciousness lying to him that since Rias was a Master, he could be killed as easily as he had done some of the other contenders of the same stage.

Finding out the hard way that a good technique could outweigh the benefits that even Incandescent Stage experts had, wasn't on his agenda.

"That supports my stance. There's probably not that many contenders left, and looking for them isn't our greatest option. The Inhibiting Angel on the other hand... We know where to find him, and we could benefit from him, and his 100,000 Units."

"Or we could die fighting him," Maxim said, with her face expressing her sentiment clearly – duh. "There's no time limit on the Royale right? We have a rule breaking procession with us. Taking our time to hunt down the remaining contenders is best. What's the sudden rush?"

Tallo disagreed simply with the look on his face.

Skullius... also disagreed with how Maxim felt, but he didn't show it.

He wasn't up for wasting too much time because he anticipated that whatever was supposed to happen by the EverSword House's machinations, would happen sooner rather than later, yet at the same time, heading for the Inhibiting Angel, Rias, as an option... he considered to be suicide.

So in essence, Skullius agreed with neither Tallo nor Maxim, but didn't have a solution of his own. Additionally, he didn't want to voice his concerns if they could be heard by the entirety of the witnessing audience.

"Something terribly bad is going to happen if we stay here for too long. I for one, don't want to linger more than is needed. The three of us can deal enough damage to Rias with a perfect plan. Enough Units for each of us guaranteed. Half guaranteed. Vaguely guaranteed."

Skullius almost felt dizzy.

Why would Tallo just blurt that out?

Maybe it was because he had a connection to Guissepo, and that's why he felt more sensitive than others about what he set loose from his mouth, but still...

"Guaranteed, huh?" Maxim said as she pursed her lips. "That theory of yours... it's become pretty popular among many contenders. You really believe it?"

"I have a sneaking suspicion that it is true. My master believed the same," Tallo said. "What do you think?"

The Mage had turned to Skullius who had buried his face in his palm.

Perhaps he was the odd ball for feeling uncomfortable freely discussing this while knowing many suspicious eyes and ears were on them. He didn't even find the topic worth bringing up when he was asking about Maxim's reasons for participating in the Royale moments ago.

Well, maybe it made no difference, even if he was sure Guissepo was closely paying him some attention.

Therefore...

"Yeah. I think it's true too," Skullius relented, but didn't say it with as much certainty. "But, my stance is still the same. Attacking Rias, as you yourself said, is a really bad idea. If it was up to me, I'd say we should move more quickly to find other contenders. Regardless of what Baddan says."

Tallo gave an expressionless look towards Skullius.



If it seems as though this group should have made it closer to the mountain or perhaps even reached it already, since Baddan could stop the clouds from hindering their speed completely... that sentiment, was correct.

Baddan had stressed against the trio's arguments hours ago, that approaching the All-Guiding Appairitoni carelessly, went against his belief. They had been moving at a sufficiently fast speed before, even with the detours, but it was evident that for Skullius, Maxim and Tallo, it wasn't enough.

Tallo, who had begun learning all about Baddan and his clansmen had discovered that there was no wiggle room to argue against the Sky Watcher's decision another time, which was why he was convinced that what Skullius proposed just now, wasn't going to work.

"That won't do. We might as well cut our losses if that's the case, and try going at it without Baddan's help... If you're up for sticking with your own idea that is," the Mage said with a sigh. "Maybe I should look for better partners."

That last comment of his earned him a threatening glare from Maxim.

Skullius lost himself in thought.

Then...

"You might be right. Maybe we are wasting time as it is, and Rias is our best bet," he explained as he ejected two items from his storage.

One was a Draw Bubble, and the other... was another Draw Bubble.

Over the journey from the hallowed grounds of the Cluster beasts to right here, the trio had come across bizarre items. Some were harmful, placed in odd places to attract attention. A few had already affected curious Cluster beasts that had been wondering, like the Seducer Skullius had come across, and some were beneficial instruments that could easily be missed.

Between the three of them, the trio had found six objects that they split among themselves.

Three Draw Bubbles, two crystal-shaped objects and one hook-shaped plant with a sky-blue hue.

Skullius had identified the two crystal-shaped objects to be the Scatter Crystals that Guissepo had mentioned in his introduction, and the last, was called a Snatcher, an item that could steal a tenth of the Units from anyone who had Units, just by flinging it at them.

"I know the Snatcher is making you a bit more confident about fighting Rias for Units, and maybe you are right," Skullius said while gazing at Tallo. "Our only options present slow solutions, and maybe Rias is the answer. But before heading to him, I think we should gather up as many items as we can find, and use them against him. I for one, would feel safer that way."

"Between me and you, we can find out the effects of some of the more... harmful objects around, and use them strategically against him."

Tallo crossed his arms which were hidden behind his scaly robes.

Like Arch-Mage Rye had done with the shield Skullius had presented to him in his lies about the Fledgling Null Badubs, and the Null Devil King, Tallo could appraise items, though to vastly lesser degree than Skullius could. The Hybrid Luman had been limiting what he told to the duo when identifying something through the guidance field to not reveal another one of his cards carelessly.

"You believe we'd stand a better chance?" Tallo asked.

"It's better than going in with nothing but what? Faith? Even the Draw Bubbles could come in handy."

"You're seriously considering it?" Maxim seemed surprised that Skullius had switched his opinion so quickly after a few short seconds of thoughts.

"If the three of us help each other, I feel more confident about this than I do about sticking here for too long," Skullius replied.

Naturally, he wouldn't tell the two that time was ticking for him on another end, racing past so that he could turn back into the Penetrator once again, thus his hurry.

Maxim sighed.

"I don't have a choice but to go along then," she said.

"Knew you'd see it our way!" Tallo said with a sharp glint in his eyes, much to Maxim's displeasure once again.

Skullius stored the items he had in his hand back.

He knew what all of them could do, but the scale was still lost to him for something like the Scatter Crystals.

Did it do what the Draw Bubble did, but in reverse, and over the same massive distance?

If so, perhaps it would do more bad than good.

No chance he would be using thus!

"I should say though, that if we're going to do this, you're going to have to tell me what your abilities are," Maxim said while eyeing Tallo in particular. "Both of you know what I can do. My technique is pretty simple."

"Yeah, right! You have a lot of auxiliary techniques that we know nothing about. Like, how you moved faster than both of us that time you set to stop Baddan from projecting his Territory," Skullius pointed out with an accusing finger.

Tallo nodded.

"What he said."

"You're no better!"

"And you are?" Maxim interjected.

Tallo snickered at their little verbal scuffle to act as innocent as possible.

"This is what I was here for," he suddenly said, drawing questioning gazes from Skullius and Maxim.

"What?" Maxim said, her hostility quite blatant as she expected another taunting half-insult from the Mage.

Tallo sighed.

"My Master, Arch-Mage Verys, always told me that Magecraft was founded after many styles of combat already existed. After many classes of Form Using, and Arma Using. He told me this so that I didn't look down on anyone who wasn't a Mage.

My fellow practitioners, between dozens of Patches, tend to stack tonnes of different spells, unlike with other categories of classes which rely on one, or maybe a few techniques," he explained.

"I've been trying to see if he was right or not – perhaps trying to suppress any malignant thoughts I might have because of a superiority complex. You know, as the genius that I am."

Skullius rolled his eyes.

"And what have you found so far?"

Tallo shrugged.

"I still don't know about you, but for her, I'd see I'm impressed," the Mage said as he gestured to Maxim who was pleasantly surprised.

Her glare toned down, and she looked to the side with a scoff.

Skullius felt a little, under-appreciated. It showed on his face.

"You know you don't count as anything but an Energy Former if you can make mana look, and move like lightning just by 'getting a feel of it when it hits you'... as you said."

"Fair enough," Skullius relented.

He had answered several of Tallo's questions as he had said he would, in exchange for how the Mage had saved his life – teleporting Skullius and Maxim from the third circle to the innermost.

One of said questions had been how Skullius had manifested such a ridiculous showcase of lightning, which had destroyed a sizable portion of the hallowed grounds.

The Hybrid Luman had explained that the same principle he applied to Baddan's core applied to what he had done there too. Essentially replicating how mana within a simple lightning attack flowed.

In light of that kind of mastery over mana, he really didn't qualify as anything other than an Energy Former in Tallo's eyes, and Skullius was happy that the Mage viewed him as such.

To Mages, he often found he couldn't lie to them about being a Mage himself.

On that subject, Skullius decided to satisfy his curiosity in turn.

"How come you can't do as I did with the lightning and with Baddan's mana core? I remember Arch-Mage Ryte telling me my mastery of mana was only equal to that of an Apprentice or something like that," he asked.

Tallo nodded, seemingly seeing this as a good question. Maxim wasn't interested in the complex subject and moved away.

"Most Mages hurry to elevate themselves to forms of Magecraft that don't rely on mana. Ascended Magic or similar. Just like how it is better to use techniques with Aura instead of mana, the stronger types of Magecraft require the user to be able to discern energy types harder to perceive and control.

Asides from learning how to recreate their mana core, most advanced Mages don't care for mana that much. And I... haven't been too focused on subjects like altering mana cores. I've been focusing on advancing in the Deception Patch, even though it isn't Ascended Magic."

Skullius took a few seconds to digest all that Tallo had said.

He knew of Ascended Magic. Arch-Mage had explained it and could use it. An example was that Shocked Time spell he had used to keep the Null Badubs in place.

If it was all about what a Mage was focusing on, then it made sense why Tallo couldn't do it.

He was only a Prime Mage after all, one stage above Apprentice.

Skullius had been appreciating the prospect of his sated curiosity, when something knocked against his feet, and at almost the same time, he felt something plant itself on his armour. It was like a piece of paper wreathed in flame.

A loud cackle later, the trio, and Baddan's group found themselves in several measures of trouble.

Chapter 753: Rejecting Goodwill

A force like no other rammed into everyone close to Skullius.

He, the Hybrid Luman, immediately knew that what he had sworn to never use in the future of the Royale, had been used against him, ironically.

What had fallen at his feet... was a Scatter Crystal, and as he had surmised, it really did what a Draw Bubble could do, just in reverse. As a result, as he was pushed so far off, and with such an intense speed that even his [Graceless Hunter] couldn't pinpoint which direction was where, the same happening to Tallo, Maxim and Baddan's group.

They were all blown away in different directions, over a vast stretch!

Even as Skullius couldn't discern where he was going though, he could at least tell that this was the work of other contenders, but to what end, he didn't know.

The white paper on the side of his armour, still burning with a light, silvery-blue flame, hung on, its purpose unclear to Skullius, who didn't have the time to try and figure it out before he slammed heavily on the ground!

Perhaps there was another difference between the Draw Bubble, and the Scatter Crystal. At least the former was gentle, and wouldn't have seen him crashing down at his destination.

Skullius had sunken into a deep crater of his own making. It only took him two seconds to rush out, and try to find out if he was that far from the others, in truth, an answer he already knew.

That didn't make the prospect any less infuriating.

He had acquired semi-reliable teammates, and had been feeling hopeful about this ordeal, yet now...

"Dammit! Such impeccable timing!" he cursed as he searched around with [Graceless Hunter].

The ground under his greaves was soft, and muddy, with a few, withering plants peaking from it in their own definition of healthy. A varying assortments of hills, and large rocks were scattered about, leading to a vast mountain range about two kilometres east of Skullius' position.

Not a single was in sight.

This was a vastly different area compared to everywhere Skullius had trodden so far, and it made him scowl even more.

What was he to do now?

Well, trying to find his partners was probably best.

They had lost their advantage in Baddan, but from the looks of it – through patches of bare skies amid the clusters of close set clouds – the mountain wasn't too far off, at least for him. It was certainly much, much farther than it had been seconds ago, but still reachable quickly enough if he could find a Fleeting Pioneer.

He could search for his mates along the way.

However...

Skullius felt the mushy ground.

'According to Baddan, the Pioneers don't like wet areas...' Skullius grumbled inwardly. 'Maybe if I head into the mountain range then...'

...!

Suddenly, his [Graceless Hunter] picked up something quickly approaching. It was like four swollen, dark rocks stitched together, flying in his direction from the skies. In fact, they were soaring from the direction he had come from!

Warily, Skullius prepared.

He already felt the shimmering powers of four Masters, and when the bundled flying rocks smashed down tens of meters away from him, exploding into fragments, four individuals emerged from the broken pieces.

The piece of paper on Skullius' armour burned fiercely before turning into ash, as though to symbolise that its job was done. Skullius took this to mean exactly that.

It seemed, these enemies didn't simply split him and his group without a plan. He was targeted immediately after. The burning paper was likely something the four contenders striding from the crater they had made, used to attract themselves to his exact location.

'Were the others targeted too then?' Skullius wondered, though he didn't think Maxim and Tallo would be easy pickings.

"Well, well, well. Luck's on our side. This whole Cluster is clear now. Nothing but a few beasts running about, and after all that searching, we finally found something to pick on," a lanky man with a lithe body said with a rather radiant smile that made his handsome face even more handsome.

He had lush, blonde hair, icy blue eyes, and a rather cute, small, hooked nose. One wouldn't count him as the villainous type without hearing him speak.

"I still insist that we should follow after the Mage immediately, Grutus. I want a challenge. You can't expect me to settle for bullying some small fry," another from the group said, a woman this time.



She was larger than the hook nosed man, and well built. A staple for the brute stereotype at face value. Her leather black hair which only reached to her ears featured stylish strips of white, and her attire revealed a lot more skin than one would expect.

"Oh, shut up, Liura. Can't you see he has more Units. If he isn't a bit strong himself, he must have found himself shum schweet fwends. Hahaha!" the third individual in the group cackled at his own words, his wide set dark eyes narrowing into crescents. He was the shortest out of the four, at only about 1.3 meters. He could be mistaken for a man-faced child.

"Let's make things easy for him, why don't we?" this short man said, and turned to Skullius. "Give us your Units, and we'll leave you alone. Trust me, I for one have had enough killings for one day."

Skullius raised his brow.

Give them his Units?

'Do they have a Snatcher or something?' he wondered.

Seeing the confused look on Skullius' face, the fourth individual in the group, his frame similar Liura's – the bulky woman – but a little taller, spoke.

"See? He's just like the rest. He doesn't even know you can share Units, Hun."

The short man, Hun, sighed.

"I got ahead of myself. Maybe I should explain it to him. Only Grutus and Mandon are a little too lacking in Units right? I'd rather not be brutal about this one," he said while looking to his fellow mates.

Skullius indeed was puzzled.

"You can share Units?" he voiced.

Hun so gracefully obliged to answer him.

"Why, of course! It only makes sense that that Game Master didn't bother to mention it because... well, we're all killing each other here! It's a bonus for us who gather up to kill together, isn't it?! Clever thinking! Adapting!"

Skullius frowned.

So all this time...

He hadn't even considered it a possibility that he could share his Units. Only after finding the Snatcher, which could forcefully take away a tenth of a contender's Units, did he imagine that Units could be taken by anything other than heavy hits, lethal hits and killing.

"Get on with it," Liura, the burly woman urged Hun.

"Right, right! Look here friend. All you have to do, is point at or touch whoever you want to gift Units to, alright? Easy enough, right? Now, kindly point towards this handsome man right here, and send all your points, alright?" Hun said with a 'kind' face, and pointed at Grutus, the blondie with the hooked nose.

Skullius used Crude Vision, and saw that Grutus had 2,350 Units. Liura had 3,110 Units, Hun had 4,000, and the last man, Mandon, had 2,100 Units.

Their distribution of Units were much lower than he had expected, but Skullius supposed it made sense. He didn't have any doubts that some contenders had fallen prey to the harmful items and monsters here, and thus the number of Units was bound to already be insufficient for the remaining contenders to all reach the 10,000 Unit limit.

'Yeah, Maxim's suggestion wouldn't have worked,' Skullius thought.

Hun grew a little impatient.

"Well? I really, really... wouldn't like for us to devolve into violence so late into this game. You could even tag along with us after surrendering your Units. We have a lot of special items that can get us to the GOAL quickly. You can have a fighting chance with the Inhibiting Angel to gain more," said Hun, trying to convince Skullius.

Skullius scoffed.

"Of all the idiots and socketholes I've met in this game, you guys definitely rank first," he said, and his blackish crimson armour ignited lightly with a weak flame.

"Excuse me?" Hun said, a cold smile appeared on his face. "Are you truly rejecting my goodwill?"

Skullius spread his feet wide, and placed his left hand on his scabbard, his right just above his chest. An irregular ring of weak flame formed around on the muddy ground, causing a hiss of steam.

Then Skullius replied to Hun's question.

"I'm just saying... your goodwill is a severe downgrade from what I can get if I kill all you overconfident socketholes."

Chapter 754: Saviour

Hun trembled with rage, but the rest didn't seem to be quite as insulted. Liura, who was to Hun's left, burst into laughter as she patted Hun's low shoulder.

"You really think you can get to fuckers like this with 'goodwill'?" she said, and her face turned dark with a wave of bloodlust rushing from it towards Skullius. "Only thing people like him understand is a brutal beating before an equally brutal death. He'll be begging for mercy real soon. Then... maybe I'll let you offer him your goodwill."

Hun calmed down a bit, scoffed and pushed Liura's hand off his shoulder.

"Fine. Who gets to kill him then?" he asked with a dampening scowl.

"I'll do it. I'll earn my Units myself," Mandon said, his bulk, which was equal to Liura's, radiating a fierce Aura that also contended against the muddy, humid environment, its metal grey hue fuming wildly.

The taller man looked at Skullius hanging his head as he kept still in his stance, and his hand made a claw gesture so firm, thick veins bobbed unrealistically through his skin.

Mandon then shot ahead, with the wind screaming as he advanced.

His large body blurred as he approached [Courting Death], finding to his surprise... that Skullius didn't move an inch.

A hint of unease nagged his heart, but he didn't stop. If he managed to make contact, it would be over!

Thus, Mandon penetrated the ring of flames.

...

The bulky man didn't know what happened.

First, he felt like he had been cut by a series of knives that jabbed in the thousands at his skin, making him bleed, and on instinct, he came to a halt, feeling that a continued advance would only make his perilous situation worse.

But that didn't help, because in the next second...

A flash of light, like the edge of a sword reflecting light as it whipped through the air, was the last thing he saw before his head flew off his head!

...!

Mandon's group was left stunned.

Hun looked as if he had drunk a full mug of piss, and Liura looked horrified.

Grutus cursed as Mandon's head fell.

"Quick, save him!"

Hun spilled out of his stupor, and expelled something from his storage which he quickly dashed toward Mandon's head with.

It was a thick star, looking to have been made with both wood, and hard plastic, a burgundy glow at its centre!

Hun crushed the star in his hand, and something like glittering dust poured from it, landing on Mandon's severed head which had fallen out of Skullius' [Courting Death]!

Skullius watched.

He had just beheaded Mandon before he could get too close, as the man's rapid approach had confirmed for Skullius that unlike Baddan, the bulky man had Perfect Aura around his body, which could battle, to some degree, against his mana striding through the tens of thousands of taut streaks of Mortal Ruin that made up [Courting Death]!

Therefore...

A quick slash with Null Life Essence had done the trick though.

Now, it seemed this defeated foe...

When the dust from the shattered star fell, Mandon's unclear eyes gained a glow of life, and as if he hadn't been just a severed head a second ago, a new body appeared from the stump of his neck, adorned in the same clothing he had on his previous body which hung in [Courting Death] right now!

...!

Skullius frowned.

What?!

Mandon was alive!

The bulky man quivered, and dashed back along with Hun who kept a close eye on Skullius.

"What happened?" Hun asked with a shrill voice.

"You didn't... you didn't see it?" Mandon replied with a question of his own, shaken greatly.

"See what?"

"I don't know. Something cut at me, and then...my head..."

Liura walked towards the two, as did Grutus, both with hard faces.

"He must be a skilled Arma User. If his attacks are so fast we can't see them, we are going to have attack from a distance," Grutus said. "Liura, you're up."

The air among the enemies suddenly changed.

Skullius withdrew his [Courting Death].

'Looks like these guys weren't lying about having a lot of items. That star... if I take what Guisepo said, then it must be the Revival Star or whatever...' he thought. 'It really can revive the dead.'

As had been great topic before, outside supplements couldn't save the dead. The few who managed to realise that death within the white platform from the stadium couldn't be reserved by the Control Seal, would have realised that the Revival Star was different.

It was the only thing that could keep someone alive if they were to die in the Premium Age Royale.

'If they have several more Revival Stars... This won't be easy...' Skullius thought.

Liura zoomed towards Skullius with a start, and when she had crossed half the distance, she came to a stop, and extended her hand to the side. Numerous triangular shapes fell from her palm, their numbers growing by the millisecond!

Then, a familiar creature spawned from them. A large creature, black furred, and with a jaguar like shape. It had five tails behind its back, and a deep malevolence showed on its face, directed towards Skullius!

A Beckoned Retriever!

...!

[Primal Caution] gave a warning towards Skullius while he shuddered at the thought of what was happening here!

Before he knew it, an array made of a lightning ripped the ground under his feet, emerging faster than he could think to flee!

It shone bright, its glow rising from Skullius' feet to tower up into the clouds!

The Hybrid Luman would have escaped as he did when a Retriever tried something similar hours ago, but then... something burned his flesh, branding a bright, golden mark onto his chest beneath the armour.

The array below Skullius' feet then vanished without a trace.

"Huh?" Skullius wandered, placing his hand on his chest.

"Confusing isn't it? Don't worry. I promise you're going to love it!" Liura said while standing behind the growling Retriever which then pounced at Skullius with blinding speed.

The Hybrid Luman hurried to gather his thoughts.

This woman... she must be a Tamer!

And she had tamed a Beckoned Retriever!

'Great! That was impossible to guess!' Skullius thought with grumble.

That aside, what was the brand on his chest?

Skullius took a step to dodge the incoming Retriever, but then...

There was crisp shattering noise, like that of thunder in the skies, and his entire side was violently burnt off by something he couldn't see!

Skullius took a step forward, staggering from the suddenness of the attack, thick black smoke fuming from his body, and once again, another sharp noise sounded, and his leg was burnt off with a vigorous explosion of heat so quickly that his [Graceless Hunter] couldn't spot what had caused it!

'Shit!'

Almost at the same time, the Retriever reached Skullius, and bit his shoulder, tearing it off easily as it streaked past!

Skullius grew furious.

The part of his body to get chunked off first, healed, then his leg and shoulder.

He saw Liura in the distance smile coyly at him, and he moved his hand to unsheathe Demion's Dance, firmly intent on killing her mercilessly.

However, his move to retrieve the green sword...

...!

Once again, a blaring noise sounded, and Skullius' right hand exploded off him with a stunning scorch, a fuming stump being left behind!

...!



Liura guffawed at how pathetic she thought he looked, clearly struggling to understand what was happening.

Another mass of triangular shapes poured from her palm, revealing yet another Retriever, this one with a ring of light over its head, and six tails trailing at its rear end.

"You don't get it, do you? Good. That makes it all the more fun," she said as she climbed onto the Retriever, and rode it towards Skullius!

As she did, a Genuine Incarnation quickly formed over her head. It was a beautiful, turquoise female gladiator, dressed in a corinthian armour, a like-styled helmet fitted on her head. She had a large bow, and a long arrow already nocked to it, which she released!

The arrow soared fast, aiming at Skullius' head without a sliver of compromise, and without giving the Hybrid Luman much time to think of a solution.

Every movement caused a limb of his to ignite violently, exploding into nothing but smoke!

And...

Another fiery show occurred as Skullius' chest was ripped open with a spit smoke!

Even when trying to use one of his skills... it only caused his body to get wrecked!

What kind of power was this?!

...And then the arrow of Perfect Aura arrived.

A forceful shockwave occurred on impact.

Liura frowned.

That wasn't what she expected. That wasn't supposed to happen.

An arrow going through a feeble head not even protected by Aura shouldn't have caused such a vibrant vibration.

Skullius... was also caught in the same spirit of surprise.

He had been prepared to do something drastic, and wasteful, but it looked like he didn't need to.

Someone was standing in front him.

It was a feminine figure, holding her hand out without a shred of mana, or Aura around it.

She had a long French braid to her navy blue hair, and a black, revealing dress over her curvy body, a long, happy smile on her face.

Her palm, with the scratches, and patches of burnt skin, looked to have been what had received the arrow of Perfect Aura, dispelling it.

"Finally found you, and in the nick of time." Skullius' saviour said.

Chapter 755: Turning Point

"And we thought this would last a whole day? A shame. It's quite amazing how easy it is to end 58 lives in only 10 hours, isn't?"

"You say that as if it's some kind of profound discovery. We might have taken pleasure in it, but it should've have been quite obvious. Though... when thinking about how massive this place is, I didn't think so many of these contenders would find each other that quickly..."

"That's how this whole thing was designed, right? With those added items and such."

"How many do you reckon will actually reach that GOAL?"

"Beats me. Two? Three?"

"That's optimistic."

"I didn't realise you had such a dark side."

"Hey, I'm just being realistic here."

Amidst the raucous reactions of many witnesses, a few were busy discussing what they thought was the possible result of the Royale, the final showdown. The counter above the screens seemed to concur with their derived, morbid conclusions.

Many of the screens had now turned blank, allowing the witnesses to focus on the few that remained alive, though, to some of the more keen-eyed folks, they noticed that someone whom they had anticipated to be a definite candidate for the GOAL wasn't being shown after he was last depicted reaching close to the mountain.

What was up with that?

In any case, there was much entertainment to go around with the remaining contenders, much of them shown gathered in one spot.

This could be the last climactic battle that involved so many of them.

The witnesses were ready for it while being so drawn in by the anticipation, that they hardly noticed anything else.

....

High above the blindly surging adrenaline, and surface level apprehension, behind the highest set of seats reserved for important figures, a loud noise echoed.

A bombastic ripple of whirling, compressed winds that could almost be seen by the mundane eye shuddered just a few steps behind Rearren.

They whooshed over the flat, empty, extended space that reached beyond from the back of his, and Millisa's seats.

The cold blow caught the attention of many, as it was quite significant.

Rearren grinned widely as he squeezed Millisa's hand which was in his.

"Finally..." he whispered almost inaudibly, such that only Millisa heard him.

The woman was prompted to send her senses behind her, and she felt the chilling presence of someone standing behind them.

A familiar, cold presence.

She swallowed an agitated, fearful blob of saliva, but didn't turn her head, as her husband did not.

The numerous dignified individuals.

The Governor and his son.

Alaris.

Ruhrees.

They all turned to the source of that harsh wind, which had only become a rough breeze by the time it reached them.

What were supposed to be casual, turning glances born from curiosity turned into ashen faces with serious glares.

The winds just now, had carried with them an individual that most had only heard about in validated rumours.

There was no mistaking the rather specific look.

A man with a mask split into white and green presented himself behind Rearren's seat.

The dark robes that hid his body looked untidy and ancient, the hood attached to them somehow making the hazel gleam from an eye which showed from an opening on his mask, several degrees more haunting.

His physical appearance, however, couldn't have disgruntled the onlookers more than his wanton release of a familiar power from his body.

Undeath.

...!!!

Ruhrees did not wait a second longer.

He stormed from his seat, vanishing from common sight, and flew to reach the masked man over Rearren who casually leaned to the side as if whatever this was didn't concern him.

The masked man, Actuass, didn't move, even as the glow of a Divine Blessing from the Paladin Champion Ruhrees neared his face.

However...

Another sudden surge of chaotic winds blew to reveal another figure who quickly darted into action.

CLANG!

The steel of Ruhrees' gauntlet met the steel of a beautiful, vibrating longsword.

The figure who held it had long, silver hairs that were whipped by the remnants of the wind from the Arcane Teleportation Scroll she had used to arrive here moments after Actuass.

The stern gaze from her grey eyes which were branded onto a beautiful, youthful face featuring a deathly pale skin tone, enhanced her image.... and caused the Ruhrees to freeze.

The breath was sucked out of his lungs immediately, and horror smote him like a hammer.

"R-revia...!" he called, doubtfully. "Revia?! You're alive?!"

The former Paladin Champion pushed her senior away, and gave him an apathetic look.

"No. I died," she replied simply.

The onlookers didn't intervene yet, only preparing to take action behind Ruhrees while those who couldn't contribute got out of the way.

"Why...? What's going on? High Priest Valis told us you were taken after... after that same man dealt you several fatal blows! Why are you standing by his side?!" Ruhrees bellowed while pointing at Actuass.

Revia was unshaken.

She looked to Actuass whom she knew wasn't focusing on anything right now, except THAT. He was in a trance of sorts, and when he began, she would have to defend him for as long as what he was doing took.

In the next moment, the masked man surely did begin his work.

He raised his hands, and clasped them together with a heavy effort at his chest, and a hard breath was heard coming from behind his mask.

...!!!

A blinding hue of black and green suddenly burst from behind Ruhrees and everyone else!

What?!

They turned, and saw that on all the screens currently showing the contenders, this dual coloured glare sprang forth, causing the witnesses to turn from it, surprised and confused.

Guissepo, who sat above the sets of screens grinned and cackled maniacally.

Finally. Finally! FINALLY!

It was time!

Revia watched the ghostly looks of the people before her, who had realised that this sudden light was coming from the Royale grounds. That something terrible must be happening there.

Only when she had seen this, did she finally answer Ruhrees while brandishing her sword which began to vibrate so quickly it almost couldn't be seen as anything but a soft mist.

"I will probably pay for this in the future, but while I'm on this side, I'll at least make sure that you, and those hard-headed geezers face judgement for everything that the world didn't see you do to it... and to Elita..."

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Tens of miles of forest had been plundered viciously, dark and deep craters enough to bury hundreds of human beings showing every few paces.

Fires and cold sprang up, and died down in some spots, while furious wisps of mana, and essence collided in some before vanishing moments later.

If one were to see this scene whose makings had begun six minutes ago, they would have thought a few colossal Cluster Generals had been wrestling here, pounding each other into the ground.

But that couldn't be further from the truth.

Aurolio stood on one side, his fuzzy clothing mostly torn, but his body mostly clear of any damage at all.

On another side, Rias sat, his slender armour worn, rent and disfigured beyond belief. He too hardly showed to have been bruised or harmed.

"You're stronger than I thought," Aurolio said to the young heir of the EverSword House.

"You are just as strong as I imagined you'd be," Rias said, making the pale man laugh.

"I didn't think the Houses actually had some unfathomable measures of power like this. The Imagining Technique, was it? I shudder to think what your old man can do if you're this strong already."

"You couldn't imagine."

There was a pause.

"I've noticed you haven't used your sword. Why? Am I not strong enough?" Aurolio asked, smiling.

"What's the use? You can't be defeated, right?" Rias asked with a deadpan face.

"You know about that, huh?"

"Of course I do. I don't want to waste my strength, even if I'm stronger."

Aurolio chuckled loudly, genuinely amused.

At that moment, a giant flame roared from the distance, its intensity growing beyond the gift of light it shot, to spew quite the astounding scorch even from the far distance!

The green entangled with black gave a dreadful feel as it towered beyond the clouds, clearing them away from its wide, spanning body.

The heavy stench of undeath, almost suffocating in how it suddenly overwhelmed the natural odor of humidity around this world, made everyone alive in the Royale grounds frown.

Aurolio was no exception. His carefree expression darkened.



Rias, on the other hand, visibly relaxed.

He sighed and stood up.

"You should go through that gateway before it's too late. From now, it will only last for five minutes. Don't waste the chance you earned for yourself," he said to Aurolio before taking steps towards the direction of the flame.

"Doesn't this game have no time limit?" the pale man asked with a frown, his eyes narrowing.

"That depends on what you consider to be the 'game'," Rias replied before streaking away like an apparition, leaving Aurolio wondering a great number of mysteries.

His eyes then turned up to the summit of the mountain where a bright light could be seen. He had seen and confirmed it before, but Rias' words just now, made everything clearer.

That bright, gleaming door, was a gateway leading outside the Cluster.

#### Chapter 756: A Greedy Gleam

Darwel had turned towards the ferocious fire coming from the far distance as she rode the large, humanoid tree, and her face had scrunched up in disgust.

Undeath.

Unlike death, it was an enemy of living things. An enemy that even the Sif had faced across millennia.

She loathed it as much as any other living thing.

Darwel was only several hundred miles from the GOAL, but she couldn't help turning towards the gleaming flame, a part of her urging the instinct borne within her to go and try to stamp out that dreadful presence.

This confirmed what Festos had been saying, didn't it?

Because of the tense atmosphere here, she had almost forgotten about the specifics of the suspicions Festos had shared with her about the EverSword House and the Premium Age Royale: the connection to the Green Neolists and the Evenfall organisations.

But this...

It was clear now.

Darwel still had only a little over 8,000 Glass Units anyway, and given the sudden shift in the situation, she didn't think Festos would ignore this.

'I can't ignore it either...' she thought as she turned her striding, wooden ride.

Suddenly, a hand lightly gripped her shoulder, causing her to flinch.

Then, something seemed to stream through her, and surge upwards to the top of her head.

"This is the only chance I'll give as a respectful gesture to you, princess. Leave through the gateway before it's too late, or I'll be forced to kill you," a voice said, whispering in her ear.

By the time Darwel turned, whoever it was that had spoken was gone, but she didn't struggle quite as much to figure out who it was.

Above her, the shining light of a '10,000' was now glowing above the illusory, square pane.

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Skullius' reaction to the sudden burst of the green and black flame which oozed of a powerful stench of Undeath, was even more pronounced than Aurolio's.

In one moment, he had been puzzled, and slightly annoyed at Vali's arrival to rescue him – blocking the long arrow of Aura that had been milliseconds away from taking his head – and in the next, his eyes had turned into bulging saucers, a deep set urgency flaring through his body and soul.

Everyone around him shared half the amount of shock as him.

Vali, while being carefree when she arrived, had turned serious when the glow in the distance appeared, and the four enemies a distance from her and Skullius had too.

They looked to the sight with grave expressions.

Grutus, the hook nosed blondie cursed.

"Dammit! So we were right to be cautious about this whole thing! Is the EverSword House in league with undead?!"

"That couldn't be true, right?! How would they get away with it?! Do they plan to kill us all?!" Hun, the short man cried with a look of terror on his face.

Mandon, who was still recovering from dying just moments ago, gulped.

Indeed. Death, was very different from the rotten, repugnant stench flowing through the air from that massive pillar of fire. He would know.

He had tasted the bland, pure, inevitable pull of death, like a black hole. One couldn't hope to escape it.

It was different from this, which seemed more like the ugly maw of a disgusting colossus, huffing greedily at them!

...

Amidst everyone's apprehensions, Skullius' will flared.

'So this is it, huh?' he thought quickly. 'Then... I can't afford to hold this back anymore!'

...!

To contrast the dark green glowing in the distance, a hollow, dark blue light dimmed the brightness within the area the six were standing in.

Hun, Grutus, Mandon, Liura – with her two Retrievers – and Vali turned to the closer, much more vivid power that suddenly rose explosively.

Around Skullius, mana had fired off in every direction, before turning into a blue-ish warping carpet so dark, one could mistake it for black!

It was greedy!

It was ferocious!

It made the muddy ground bubble, and rumble, darkening the already scarcely lit space!

The tendrils from this dark mass gave it a look akin to raging fire, mimicking the one afar.

"What... what in the world...?" Liura scowled as she gawked at Skullius who still had chunks of himself missing, with grievous burns about his body.

"That... What is that?" Hun called, unable to properly identify what exactly was cloaking the Hybrid Luman.

Grutus' face turned graver.

"That is...." he said, before pausing.

Most wouldn't have believed it, but this truly was just a Full Body Aura!

A terrifyingly potent one!

Such an Aura could only enhance an Advancement Stager's power by up to 400% or 500% in rare cases, but this one....

Vali who was close to Skullius smiled enthusiastically, and moved aside.

Even she was astonished at how fearsome Skullius' Aura was.

Was it really just the common Aura of a Advancement Stage expert?

BOOOM!

Skullius' body shuddered with another explosion, the odd power from the brand on his chest, reacting late to his activation of Full Body Aura, blood flying in many a direction!

But... Skullius' hands were still mostly intact, and with a vicious glare, the coat of Aura boosted his overall ability by an amount everyone around wasn't sure of, he drew Demion's Dance with a whipping motion reminiscent of a snake's venomous strike!

To call fast was an understatement.

To call it elegant was disingenuous.

...!

Liura felt a crippling wave of bloodlust that made her turn pale, and she grimaced as she tried to turn the Retriever she was riding away!

"Curses...!" she cried.

However...

The attack she predicted didn't come for her.

Instead, she heard a roar of agony behind her, where she had left the first Retriever she had summoned!

Looking back, she saw the creature split in half by something unseen, blood splashing from its head to its behind in a crimson shower!

She turned back to Skullius while the Retriever she rode dived to increase the distance between him and them.

'You'll regret that, you idiot! Don't you know...?' she thought.

Immediately, as if to express her point, the clouds overhead spat out a large bolt of lightning that smashed towards the dead Retriever to revive it!

Liura scoffed at Skullius, as fragments of miniscule time passed, perception such as this enabled by the enhancement from her Aura.

She saw his hand explode into dust, yet his sword, which she presumed he had used for the attack just now, remained in its sheath somehow.

'He moved faster than the brand on him could register, and burn away his hand!' Liura thought, shocked, but she remained calm. 'No matter. As long as the Retriever is revived, that brand isn't going anywhere. You'll continue to suffer nomatter how strong you get!'

As Skullius' right hand and body healed, he watched as the bolt of lightning from the skies reached the Retriever.

Yet...

...!

That same bolt of lightning, surprisingly appeared over Mandon, the bulky man who had just been resurrected with the Revival Star, and smashed into him with a blinding, jarring explosion!

Hun who was close to the man dashed back, and his partners turned to Mandon in shock.

What was going on?!

The lightning... how did it...?

In the same clout of confusion, rapid footsteps rushed and reached the blaze left in the wake of lightning, where Mandon, cloaked in his Perfect Aura, was more or less unharmed.

Then...

Unheard, and nearly imperceptible, something ripped the bulky man into several pieces that flew out of the hissing fires of the explosion!

A quarter of a head, a neck, part of the chest...

"Mandon!" screamed Hun in horror upon seeing this, but Grutus rushed to him and pulled him away desperately, a bombastic orange Perfect Aura smothering the two like a wide orb!

Fractions of a fractured moment later, Skullius was standing where Hun was just now, but he wasn't idle. He swiped with his sword so fast that his hand couldn't be seen attached to his torso, and...

Unlike Baddan, neither Grutus nor Hun were tough enough to only receive a mere gash from Demion's Dance.

They were cleaved cleanly through, their cut bodies falling to the ground, with them screaming loudly in pain!

In that same moment, another bolt of lightning fell from the sky, hurtling towards the dead Retriever on the ground in a second attempt to revive it, but it didn't even make it halfway before being intercepted by something unseen... again!

BOOOM!

The lightning emerged from above Grutus and Hun, before smashing into them just as the former's Aura disappeared!

Liura had on a petrified look on her face as she witnesses this. She shakily turned her head to Skullius who, after making so many rapid moves, finally had his body noisily burst with several fiery ignitions!

Because of the dark Aura around him though, his body healed even faster. So much faster in fact, that by the time the noise from the explosions on his body ended, his body was already halfway through healing all the damage!

Vali looked on jovially, quite impressed.

Liura looked to be about to say something carved from rage when a reddish flame devoured the body of the dead Retriever suddenly. The fire was so fierce, and so eager that by the time it finished burning so greedily, only a large, hard crater remained, the Retriever's body gone.

"You better have something much more potent than that," Skullius suddenly said, and the glowing brand under his reforming blackish crimson armour faded from his body.

#### Chapter 757: Killing One Tension For Another

The concept behind generating Aura stemmed from how one's body, which had been enhanced by growth through Stages, could strain the mana core into concentrating vast quantities of mana into Aura.

The Aura produced when one became an Advancement Stager was rough, because their body was less refined, only several degrees stronger than when they had been a Foundation Stager.

Therefore, with the highly inefficient method the body resorted to in order to influence the mana core into Aura generation, only an inferior product (Full Body Aura), whose production weakened the mana core's capability very quickly, could be born.

This was why Full Body Aura could only be used once a day, that was in one go. Even if one stalled, it couldn't be used for long within 24 hours.

For Masters, their bodies, especially when they entered the Second Phase, grew as refined as they were strong, and could instinctively coddle the mana core into producing a better form of Aura that eased the strain on the mana core, though while taking up loads more mana to create.

This went to show that to be a Master, increasing one's capacity for mana storage, and bettering the quality of their mana core, was imperative. Creating a cohesive balance between mastery of Stages,



and the mana core was rough, and the journey to understand how best to exploit one's strengths, and stifle weaknesses, began when one began to produce Aura.

Most found the leap from Full Body Aura to Perfect Aura to gift an immense amount of merit, particularly the granted increase in strength which they would be a massive gain.

For someone like Skullius, however...

'If I conserve it enough, I can make it last for 30 minutes. My Aura has always been different ever since I first used it...' he thought.

The Hybrid Luman, after gaining so much time to experiment with his powers, had found that his blackish blue Aura was more vicious than any he had seen. Every time he used it, he felt like he was exceeding a certain boundary, and even if he didn't take a break, he could last roughly 15 minutes while using it, something he hadn't seen other Advancement Stagers do.

But this wasn't all there was to it.

Not by a long shot.

As for the situation right now...

Liura glared at Skullius with her menacing, wrathful eyes, looking to be ready to pounce and not give him the chance for an initiative again.

'I better finish this quickly...' Skullius thought, as he turned to Mandon's corpse which he had filleted to pieces. 'At least the Revival Star doesn't work like a potion. You won't continue to heal. I can rest assured with that. Even if she has more of them, she will die if I attack correctly.'

As he thought this, something darted out of the flames burning from where the second bolt of lightning had been redirected, smashing into Grutus and Hun. Skullius had manifested an opening for his Temporary Storage right where the lightning fell, stored it, and expelled it where he had desired, denying Liura's Beckoned Retriever a chance at revival twice, in exchange for getting rid of her friends.

Now though, it seemed one of her friends had skirted death.

A figure stood beside Liura who was quite alarmed at first.

The individual gave out a hard sigh before nodding to the bulky woman astride the Retriever with a ring of light over its head.

It was Grutus, and he was whole, a cloak of orange Perfect Aura around him.

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

"Glad you're alive," Liura said with relief, sparing only a side glance to the blondie. "Thought you died before using your Star."

"Yeah, well," Grutus didn't seem particularly pleased though. "I had Hun give his to Mandon. Now we lost both of them."

Liura scoffed sadly – however that was possible.

"Let's avenge them. There's meaning in it," she said, but Grutus looked contemplative as he locked eyes with Skullius who looked to be ready to strike once more.

Suddenly, a loud round of applause was heard.

Turning to its source, the trio found Vali on the other side with a smile, the green light from the flame all the way into the distance illuminating her face.

"I think you've settled your scores enough for the time being. For now, it's wiser for us all to ascertain our current situation," she said. "You don't need a genius to tell you that something has changed for the worst here, right?"

Skullius, Liura and Grutus wore hard faces, and turned to the gleaming green and black fire.

The hostility lingering between them had temporarily overwritten their caution, what with Skullius striking quickly to kill Mandon who had evaded death once, and Hun, as Grutus had just now confirmed.

The hostility could still be felt even now, as Liura brought her gaze back to Skullius, who now had '12,150' Units for the kills of her mates; 4,000 added from Hun and 2,100 added from Mandon!

All had been added to the 6,050 he had amassed before!

"Oh we can ascertain our situation. Just after we kill him," Liura said threateningly.

The shapely lady with the golden hook attached to the end of her navy blue hair laughed as she walked forward.

"I promise you. This is just me hoping whatever has risen can somehow be solved with our remaining numbers, or at the very least not be aided by your dead bodies. I'm not asking because you're somehow very relevant," Vali said, her smile turning a bit twisted.

Liura twitched.

Grutus patted her shoulder.

"She's right. We have bigger problems right now. It won't matter what kind of revenge we get if we die immediately after. I personally would rather live after this," Grutus said with an agitated frown.

Despite what he said, he truly wasn't pleased about Skullius walking free. He only convinced himself of this because... well, he knew exactly what kind of fate awaited him and Liura if they objected to what Vali had said.

Unlike with Skullius, Grutus didn't see a shred of a possibility of victory when facing this woman who had dispersed a sharp burst of Aura with her bare hand.

"And you?" Vali said, turning to Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman glanced at her with the dark dots in his eyes, and sighed.

He honestly didn't want this problem right now.

Even if Grutus and his group were the ones that started the fight, and deserved to pay for it, he had to agree that wasting any more Aura on them wasn't worth it. His main objective by striking first moments ago, was to relieve himself of the brand on his chest, which he had successfully done.

Now...

His Aura died down over his sleek armour.

"Fine," he said, much to Vali's cheer.

Grutus, with an uncomfortable frown turned to Vali and said:

"So, do you have any idea what that is all about?"

"Not a clue. Except perhaps, for the fact that some of the rumours I heard could turn out to be true after all," Vali said while looking unblinkingly at the rising pillar of fire.

"What rumours?" asked Liura.

"Just vague suspicions that the EverSword House was up to no good. I didn't think it would be something as bad as this."

Grutus' face hardened even more.

"We heard the same suspicions. Especially when civilians started dying unnaturally, all of them with that damned Controlled Seal. Does this mean the Royale was all for nothing? We were just killing ourselves for no reason?" he asked.

"I wouldn't think so. Some contenders managed to get away from the Royale, and are safe now. I should now. I hogged most of those that withdrew from the Preliminaries. There's a goal to this game, and it's likely still valid and worthwhile to earn Units, and get out of here," Vali replied.

Liura turned to Skullius, her hostility soaring again.

"But... I don't think we can just ignore this, can we? Especially you two. Would you be satisfied knowing that your friends died for what... so that something related to undeath could be put in motion?"

Grutus' lip twitched.

He suddenly sighed and walked off, heading towards Mandon's corpse. He took something from it, and then went to Hun's charred body, and did the same.

"What are you doing?" Skullius who had been silent until now, contemplating over what the three were speculating, asked.

Grutus ignored him, and revealed two rings. He gave one to Liura, and kept the other. Facing Vali, he then asked:

"You seem to only be moderating here, but how do we know you won't kill us all, take our Units and rush off to the goal?"

"Well, you don't. Hmm-hmm. But, if I wanted to, I wouldn't have so playfully jumped in front of you so you could all see me. I could have killed you in oh so horrible, but quick ways. You seem to already know that," Vali said while tucking tufts of her hair behind her ear, her eyes staring keenly into Grutus'.

The man couldn't withstand the firm gaze.

"Lucky for you, I only came running here because I've been looking for this one," Vali said cheerfully and laid her arm on Skullius' shoulder as if they were pals. "Barely managed to catch some Units because of it," she pointed over head where a measly '2,800' was showing, and continued. "Maybe I was just unlucky. I did run into many bizarre obstacles, you know? Wasted much of my time, really."

Skullius looked at her, and frowned.

"You were looking for me?"

"Of course. Best way I could find to pass the time. I'm not really that motivated by this whole Royale thing at this stage. I accomplished and acquired more than I could ever hope for already," Vali said while looking keenly into his eyes. "Except for one."

Skullius shrugged off her arm and sighed.

He wasn't sure how to feel about that. He did know that Vali was quite eager to recruit him for reasons he didn't quite understand. Darwel was the same, but at least her reasons were clear cut and he was mostly on board.

He was quite wary of Vali honestly, though thankfully right now, she seemed to be urging everyone into an alliance.

Since that was the case, Skullius figured he might as well follow everyone's example, as passed down from Tallo.

They were already knee deep in some terrors ahead anyway.

"Well then, everyone else seems comfortable talking about it, so I might as well share. The EverSword House is working with...."

#### Chapter 758: The Rules Are Still Relevant

Aurolio reached the summit of the mountain in less than a two minutes. Rias had been right. The mountain was larger than one would think. It suddenly broadened close to the base, arching into the forest he and the young man had battled in.

Naturally, he hadn't bothered with the powerful, chained Cluster General after Rias left. It was kept alive to keep the Cluster intact so there was no good reason for him to kill it.

Instead, he had scaled up the mountain, and found that the large landmass was not quite as normal as one would expect, especially for him who hadn't encountered an expositing Sky Watcher.

Even Aurolio was a little rattled by the mystical carvings, indecipherable writings, and twisted objects he found as he scaled the mountain.

More times than not, Aurolio had been sure he had heard a voice suddenly shriek close to him, or felt something touching his back, but when he turned, he didn't see anything.

It had suddenly grown much, much colder as he climbed ascended further. This cold wasn't the usual chill normal people felt.

In fact, Aurolio had discovered the specifics of his oddity a few decades after he accepted the proposal from the Book of Alignment.

What he felt as he cold, wasn't always related to temperature. That was indeed quite obvious. Instead, most of it was because he was very sensitive to any traces of anything that was dead. He only questioned why he felt cold on a daily basis because of habit. It had taken him a long time to figure out why he was so pale and cold, after all, and asking why, was just a way to get by.

That said, the reaction he usually got even from walking through a graveyard was never this intense. He had never heard voices like this, or feel like his wrist had been pulled, or that a blurry face had suddenly jutted out in front of him.

All this wasn't too surprising to Aurolio when he had found tens of thousands of graves all arranged neatly wherever he went, traces of weathered, white bone showing from some.

It had all spooked him a little at first, but when he went past the clouds in his ascent, he had breezed his way to the top without stopping, as the influence of the clouds was quelled.

This hadn't been the case prior to reaching the mountain.

Now, the pale man faced a bright, ethereal door that looked to have been made to accommodate the large Cluster General instead of any human. It had an inviting gleam, and Aurolio was pretty sure it could lead him outside, but then...

He turned back.

'When hearing about those followers of the Undead, I never imagined any one of them could be like me. If they were, they would have taken over this world already,' he thought. 'Void wouldn't admit it, but it's clear the Undead have the upper hand right now if they can make so many followers in other worlds, who can also somehow replicate their abilities among others.'

This was Aurolio's own interpretation of how the struggle between the Parallels seemed to be as of this moment. With this current development though....

The gleam green tinged with darkness soaring into the darkness beyond the clouds made him feel uneasy.

Aurolio hadn't lied when he said to Skullius he wasn't up for following whatever he was supposed to do as a bearer of Voided Death. He truly had goals that he had to accomplish before even considering it.

That said, he was only comfortable saying that because Skullius was nowhere near as strong as he was, thus he didn't seem him as threat.

But what about the one who held Undeath in this world?

Was he starting to show himself?

\*\*\*

The group of four reached the source of the glaring light and vicious heat.

From several dozens of meters ago, the ground had begun to turn red, screaming whenever each of them took a step over it, their bodies guarded by mana.

They stopped at the edge of a cliff, and looked down to find a dying lake with strangely calm waters, somehow free from the scorch that emanated just beyond it, bellowing from a towering green mass of fire that didn't seem to be close to dying out at all.

The fire brewed from a plain that, like the lake, seemed undaunted by the raging heat as well, and very vaguely, at the foot of the green fire, one could make out the ends of a large... array?

The stench of Undeath however, grew a hundred times stronger, becoming unbearable this close to the flame, but the four soldiered on.

Skullius could barely keep it together.



Just being in the presence of Undeath made him recall a lot of unpleasant memories despite his confidence, which had been born from defeating Somanda once, while he was projecting himself in the body of the powerful magical tool, SoSei.

What was going on here, really?

"Looks like you were right," Vali said with a serious face. "I guess we were all suspecting it, but they are working with the Green Neolists."

Down below, just in front of the flame, two figures could be seen.

One, to Skullius' displeasure, was a man wielding a large glaive – its blade like a butcher's knife – over his shoulder, a notebook in his hand. He wasn't reading or scribbling into it this time. With a cloak of mana around him, he stood against the other individual before the roaring flame, his dark eyes staring contemptuously at him.

Like the rest of them, Gabel wasn't pleased with the undeathly presence, but the person several paces before him looked to be guarding it firmly.

It was Rias.

The young man noticed the group's arrival over the cliff, and sighed lightly.

For a moment, there was silence, and then Rias spoke.

"You have a choice to make here. Turn a blind eye, and leave. At least that way, you have a chance at living, even without 10,000 Units. If you do have that much, the gateway, the GOAL, will only remain open for two more minutes. You can leave this place.

I can make it so, and as promised, you will be rewarded a place in our House, unharmed," the young man said before ejecting something from an unseen storage unit, and throwing it up into the sky.

From a short glimpse, it looked like a blue coin, and as soon as it touched the clouds, they whooshed and parted cleanly, revealing a wide path to the mountain far away.

"If you follow that trail, nothing will hinder you, and you could arrive at the gateway within less than a minute," Rias explained with his usual deadpan face.

The reward would be given.

Rias sounded serious.

A way to get to the mountain had even he made where one could rush to it unhindered!

But, to Rias' words...

"So the rules no longer apply now? Weren't you supposed to be limited to the area around that damn mountain? Why are you here? Was there any relevance everything here at all or could you do whatever you wanted with the Royale, and with our lives?!" Liura barked with a nasty scowl.

Rias was unmoved.

"The rules still apply, and they are still very much relevant. The Units, the items and all. None of this would be possible if that weren't the case," he replied calmly. "And you are right. As the Inhibiting Angel, I WAS supposed to be limited in my movements but..."

Rias paused, raised his hand, and stretched it behind him.

From nowhere, a cluster of massive, transparent glass panes emerged, and stacked themselves in the hundreds around the pillar of black and green flame protectively, making a large, tall bloated shield that almost diluted the texture of the fire!

"...as of three minutes ago, I now hold another title. I'm the new Game Master. The previous has been relieved of his duty, and burden."

...!!!

The group was not at all pleased to hear this, and a fair amount of shock rushed through all of them.

'New Game Master?' Skullius thought with a deep frown.

What did this mean?

What about Guissepo?!

Crap, what was happening at the stadium right now?!

The rush of implications brought a nasty horror to the Hybrid Luman's face.

"I know you all must be perturbed by all this, and may try to clear me from this place to dismantle what it is WE have been working towards. I'll tell you now, I won't hold back against any of you if you choose to meddle," Rias warned, his sword finally leaving its sheath.

As his mana flared, the group was smitten by its uncanny, almost boundless ferocity, and forced to recall who it was they were facing.

Liura shuddered a bit.

When she had first encountered the Retrievers, she had indeed wondered if the story about Rias single-handedly killing most of the creatures in this place was true. If there had been thousands of Retrievers here, some with more than six tails and a plethora of dangerous abilities...

Grutus gave a heavy sigh.

"So, what do we do?" he asked no one in particular. "Staying out of this does seem like the better choice. If what he says is true."

Skullius' face scrunched up.

'The rules really still seem to apply. If he needed to become Game Master to leave the area close to mountain, then he must be telling the truth. But... is there really a chance to beat this guy? I can't imagine how strong he has to be for him to have killed what? 60 Baddans?

Some stronger?' he thought. 'I currently have 12,150 Units. Should I just leave?'

Of course, that was barely a question Skullius needed to think about.

While safety was a great option, he didn't know if it was the best option for him personally.

Besides, somehow... somewhere deep within him.... He felt as though ditching everyone; Tallo, Maxim, would ache his soul. They didn't have enough Units, surely.

'Why do I even care for that right now?' Skullius thought bitterly.

Before he knew it though, Vali gripped him and leapt with him down the fall after the cliff to the lake below!

"What are you doing?!" Skullius asked, more than a little upset.

"Oh please. Don't let my opinion of you fall from how high it is. You weren't about to chicken out, were you?" she said as the two landed on the water. "That wouldn't do for a man."

Skullius scoffed.

Gabel turned to the two, and a light shone in his eyes that the Hybrid Luman recognised.

Never in his wildest thoughts did he imagine he would be standing with these two against a common enemy.

Chapter 759: Centuries Old Plan! (1)

The hazel gleam of Actuass' eyes settled on the millions of souls enjoying themselves past the hostile group that was beyond Rearren, Millisa and Revia, who was ready to fight them all.

The masked man couldn't feel the intimidating pressure from those who looked at him with absolute hatred, no doubt having some idea of who he was.

Whether it be the Bloodless Steel Phantom who glared at him cautiously, or the third ranked Paladin Champion Ruhrees boiling with a torrent of emotion; none could disturb Actuass' mental state at this moment.

This was what all his careful planning, and patience had been building up to all this time. After centuries of waiting, he could possibly ruin all the processes completed prior, if he paid attention to anything else but the goal.

...

Actuass, like Guissepo, had replaced the previous leader of the Green Neolists, who, like one would expect judging by the sheer lack of accomplishments under the Neolists' belt, had prioritized the wrong objectives, instead focusing on causing superficial terror.

That seemed to have been the trend built up for centuries with the band of necromancers, as even the Purity didn't take them too seriously. The same was true for the Capital Service from back then.

However, Actuass changed that, following the few years after he joined – roughly 400 years ago.

He taught the necromancers – rather those that accepted his takeover – how to harness the power of Undeath properly, giving them access to advanced classes, and to higher comprehensions of utility that lead them to develop Undeath Concepts.

So as to stimulate rapid growth, Actuass forbade any large movements from any of them, and had them focus all their time and effort on sharpening their skills, and learning crucial fundamentals about the world.

At the same time, Actuass crafted his elaborate plan that would take place centuries later, and in the period in-between this stretch, he found a willing sponsor.

The EverSword House.

They had their reasons for submitting to him, and assisting him in his plan, much of said reasons having to do with how he educated them on the history of Aigas, and Feinheath. The true, unaltered history.

The masked man was a history fanatic, unusually interested in events that took place millennia ago. He searched for, dug up, and reanimated the corpses of ancient scholars, and powerful combatants whose remains dated far into the histories he desired, and had them narrate olden tales – those thought to be false, and those considered objectively true.

Actuass gathered so many records from so many reanimated corpses, that by the time half a century passed, with him focusing solely on this subject, he held in his hands a copy of the truth of it all; the Grand Wars, the named battles, and finally... the Ashing of Time.

Decades later, in the same spirit of causing as little waves of possible with his group, Actuass travelled to many places to find the positions of all the pieces he required. Due to the enormous distance he had to traverse each time though, he had an Arch-Mage he had reanimated create for him objects he and his subordinates could use for both travel and offense, if need be.

The Arcane Teleportation Scrolls.

They surely made his tasks a lot easier, as their elemental variety worked in various situations.

Soon, the pieces Actuass needed were in place, however, said pieces were only alternatives he had intricately planned to use... because the best option he could hope for, was extremely elusive.

The single most convenient piece he needed to set a course for his objectives, couldn't be attained.

For him to acquire it, he needed something else.

Something extremely rare.

He needed a Spirit Warden.

Actuass decided against reaching his fangs outside of Feinheath in his search, quelling his ambition. Just because he couldn't find one in Feinheath, or more specifically Pelian, didn't mean he would broaden his horizon immediately in the search.

He wouldn't even dare to go through borders of Maqi, or Emeradis with how many unique, and powerful forces they had. Not yet, anyway.

Thus, Actuass turned to the alternatives he already had the keys to.

The very best among them, laid within the Labyrinth of the Yoke, the resting place of Fulgardt the Immoral, and his legacy.

With the help of his now trained, and careful subordinates, Actuass found Universal Gate Keys, objects that could open any, and all closed doors, IF they were meant to be opened, to use for entry into the Labyrinth.

The only assured way to acquire Universal Gate Keys, was to bargain with a certain faction Actuass believed to hail from the Severed Union. These individuals had their organisation base set outside of Feinheath, and hidden away almost as perfectly as the Severed Union itself, on a small island they called the Saint's Chamber.

After the Keys were acquired, Actuass had his subordinates recruit many people into their fold. The recruits who would go through the initiation – being killed and then resurrected, a part of their souls missing – and then be sent out to join various organisations, so that they could gather moderately powerful people, and use them to try and get to the legacy of Fulgardt.

Actuass forbade his high brass from participating, same as himself, because acquiring a legacy, would mean their Undeath powers had a high chance of being stripped away by the force of a Hidden Class. And Actuass needed his powers.

The accumulation of knowledge and power couldn't be wasted.

An insignificant pawn could afford their progress for another, however.

The Green Neolists targeted the strong among Advancement Stage experts to ensure that when they acquired their powers, Actuass could still control them, as he would still be vastly stronger than them before they got a handle on their new, profound powers.

If one of these pawns acquired Fulgardt's legacy, he would finally be ready.

Unfortunately for Actuass, none of those he sent were ever able to come back.

None succeeded.

None of them could be reanimated through Actuass' Outworld Attic without parts of their bodies.

Many sacrifices were made in the Tremur over decades, and in that same stretch, Actuass still couldn't find a Spirit Warden as was his main concern.

It was only when three and a half centuries passed, that Actuass' luck began to turn around. A certain man reached out to him, the leader of a group Actuass knew. The Evenfall.

The man proposed that they collude, as for his goals, he found that he lacked the numbers that the Green Neolists could produce.

The Evenfall intended to capture a few Paladin Champions from the Purity, extract their Divine Blessings, and free their favoured Deity, Boron of the Under. Sadly, Paladin Champions were not that easy for them to capture, and the lower ranked ones wouldn't normally travel alone unless in special cases.

To increase their chances, the Evenfall needed the vast numbers of undead when attacking weaker Champions, and in return, they offered something they thought Actuass needed, since, according to them, the Green Neolists' power seemed to be declining, evidenced by their sudden lack of activity.

Thus, they offered Divine power.

Primus, which they readily had access to.

Naturally, Actuass wasn't in need of this, but he agreed anyway, only after stalling for a bit, as if deliberating.

While insisting that he needed something else more specific, he revealed a little of what he truly wanted, characterising a Spirit Warden to the leader of the Evenfall.

'If you should find anyone with these characteristics, even in their relatives, let me know,' he had addressed.



The Evenfall agreed to help.

Surprisingly, Actuass' right hand woman, Fulina, had great use for the Primus supplied to them, which she applied with her Undeath Concept, and her rather morbid hobby.

While enduring the hellish wait for any result at all, Actuass arranged with the EverSword House a large event that he would need to harvest a massive amount of power, IF, he was successful in finding a Spirit Warden. They had wealth enough to enact it, and should it be crafted with enough elements, it would surely make his goal thrive, at least the hardest part of it.

As Direction would have it, the stars seemed to align not much later.

An informant from the Evenfall who paid attention to all things that had to do with the Purity, was sent to give Actuass crucial information which benefited both parties.

A new, young Paladin Champion who was grafted into the Purity, designated the fifth rank, matched Actuass' description. Her background, thoroughly researched, led Actuass to believe that he truly had what he needed, and to ensure that he kept the young lady in the intended shape he desired, the masked man volunteered to capture her himself.

After acquiring this young Paladin Champion, who was indeed Revia, the fruitless effort to retrieve Fulgardt's power became irrelevant to Actuass, and he gave up on it altogether, besides tying some loose ends related to it; Eobald, and a certain young man whom he had given his crest.

Eobald was still in his grasp, but the latter, Actuass was still curious about even now.

Following this, it just so happened that the Evenfall acquired new leadership in Guissepo who claimed to have been enlightened by Boron, the Traitorous Deity himself, and the terms of Actuass' agreement with the Evenfall changed.

Now, the event he had planned with the EverSword House needed to cater for both his, and Guissepo's needs since he volunteered to heave the burden of being a Game Master, and what it entailed. Accepting the change wasn't difficult for the masked man, since what he and Guissepo got was different, but he swore he wouldn't collude with a madman of that calibre again after this.

And this, was that time.

...

Vaguely, Actuass saw the maniacal stare of Guissepo who had been freed from his presiding restraints, urging him on earnestly with just his extravagant eyes.

'I know, you fool,' Actuass thought.

The masked man, after meditating enough in preparation for using his Undeath Concept on such an enormous scale, while at the same time distributing half of all the Undeath energy he had saved up in the past few centuries, sighed.

He pushed his palms so tight together that he almost felt them become one, and screamed at the top of his lungs, letting out every bit of his mana to morph it all into Aura, and then Nitros.

The brand of Actuass' Undeath Concept carved into his body exploded immediately, livid with the vibrant Nitros that saturated it!

Its intended effect then flared, linking to every Control Seal in sight!

...And Reverent Soul Undeath... began to overwhelm everything alive.

Chapter 760: Centuries Old Plan! (2)

The Premium Age Royale incorporated a variety of Creeds, and sacrifices that weren't at all beneficial to the EverSword House, the Green Neolists and Guissepo during the period of its duration.

However, one thing made it all worthwhile.

The Control Seal.

Before it was branded on a willing participant – witness or contender – said participant would be asked if they understood the risks to their body, soul and mind.

This question cemented the fate of the participant.

If they agreed, they essentially put their existence in the hands of the Control Seal, which, according to the rules of the Premium Age Royale, validated their participation, and helped them during their stay in the Venue. Upon consent, it was branded to the very soul, after all.

That said...

Allowing the Control Seal to coddle the participant, gave it power – even though after consenting, they basically had no choice.

The more it transported participants to the event Venue, defended them from harm in said Venue – outside of other protective gestures put in place – assisted them with keeping up with battles by bolstering their senses, among many other functions, the more power the Control Seal gained over whoever was branded to it.

That was why the Royale had to last for as long as possible, even if its effect on participants was likely to be contested against by figures who grew suspicious.

Additionally, all that said...

The stipulations for contenders were more lenient, according to what Actuass' had designed, since they were already risking their lives in the battles.

For the witnesses however, whose only job was to eat, watch, analyse and enjoy...

A frightening silence suddenly swept over the gigantic stadium.

All that could be heard was Actuass' bellow as he infused his all into activating his Undeath Concept, his voice echoing outward with a menacing pulse like that of a heartbeat.

Bright mana flashed over his body, and then Nitros towered into the sky, a ring of greenish black sweeping all over!

The Control Seals on everyone in the stadium suddenly shone with a bright light, but they couldn't see this. Their eyes had turned white the moment Actuass connected to the Seal, their bodies, souls, and minds – which they had been surrendering all along – suddenly shut off!

This occurred to everyone, except a few individuals, some who were so alarmed by the sudden occurrence that they were paralysed in awe, and fear.

Rearren and his wife were among these exceptions.

The latter held her husband's arm very tight while shaking like a leaf, trying not to make a sound.

Rearren couldn't be happier that all his work was being rewarded. He wore a vast smile, and glanced at the only others to resist.

A few in the lower seats, members of Families who were only spectating, and several lone powerhouses.

Besides these, there was Ruhrees, the other being Alaris, who stood gaping at Actuass. The Governor and the other important officials had fallen prey to this madness.

What was this?

Alaris shuddered.

Everyone... everyone else was caught in this mysterious trance, the thick scent of Undeath wafting so powerfully about, that the Bloodless Steel Phantom felt the air disappear from the stadium.

...!

His eyes then flashed below, and he found Daggs and Terese also donning lost visages like the tens of millions of people in this stadium.

Alaris panicked.

No.

He couldn't let Theurien lose another child!

No way!

Before he knew it, his sword was already in his hand, and he swung it with such a-

BAM!

No. He didn't swing. He only thought he had.

Alaris had only managed to grasp the hilt to his blade when it was knocked away, disappearing along with its sheath into the crowds of people before he could even feel that it was actually gone.

"The fact that you are still able to move, and think means you're safe from all of this. Don't try to get yourself killed," Alaris heard a voice speak to him.

Revia had moved so fast even he hadn't been able to react. The best way to stop a stronger opponent was to stop them from unleashing what made them strong in the first place.

"Revia! You traitor!" Ruhrees growled as he set to attack.

He knew what Revia's Divine Blessing was, and could compete with it to a fair extent because of he was an Incandescent Stage expert, while Revia was only a Master.

However, that was only if she wasn't going all out.

In less than a blink, Ruhrees had conjured the might of his blessing – the Primordial Twilight Beacons. He extended his arms, pulled with his right hand, as if drawing the string of a bow, with an arrow already nocked on it, and a shimmering, blue arrow of blinding light that seemed too sacred to be real, appeared!

'Beacon of Extirpation.'

The arrow thrummed with such a powerful force that shook the entire stadium as it full emerged!

Ruhrees aimed it at Actuass, but he found himself rammed into, and pushed back by a sharp, heavy bash that caused him to stagger, and send the Beacon of Extirpation flying up to the ceiling, the dome at the summit of the stadium – which was a powerful, invisible barrier – instead.

Something shattered like several thunders above, but no one paid it any mind!

...!

Ruhrees roared in fury, and looked to find Revia before him with a gleaming Aura, her sword in hand, quivering so quickly it looked like faint mist.

"Why?!" he bellowed at her, but she didn't answer.

Instead, she turned to look at Alaris who leapt down the rows of seats, panic-stricken, and nabbed Daggs and Terese!

The Bloodless Steel Phantom looked desperately at the two, finding that they wouldn't wake nomatter what he did, and he turned paler than before!

The necklace Terese wore... Alaris turned even more sullen to find that it wasn't working!

It was supposed to keep her safe just in case!

It was an assurance Theurien had given his daughter since she couldn't withdraw from the Premium Age Royale, but now....

A shred of sympathy showed on Revia's face, but she quickly wiped it away. It was too late. There was no stopping this. Not when it had already begun.

Following the short pause, and brief exchanges, Actuass growled. Blood splattered from behind his mask, leaking from under it in voluminous splashes!

He was staining himself immensely!

The floor was bathed crimson behind Rearren's seat!

Yet he persisted.

Everyone who was caught in Actuass' Reverent Soul Undeath, and everyone sufficiently claimed by the Control Seal, suddenly opened their mouths so wide, that it looked like their faces would split.

...And from the millions of maws, a large blob of light the size of an average human's head flowed out with a vibrant, pristine white light around it!

The image of these orbs floating above their owners was beautiful, and at the same time terribly dreadful to watch.

What was this?

No one needed to be told.

Alaris shook as the two whom he held were not spared from this fate.

'Souls...' he thought shiveringly.

Indeed. These were souls.

The souls differed in size, and because of the influence of Actuass' Undeath Concept, they had all been forced to keep the same shape – orbs.

But this wasn't all.

From all these people, several different coloured glowing shapes, vastly smaller in size than the souls, shot out.

As they emerged, a loud, mad cackle was heard from the white platform at the very centre of the stadium.

Guissepo was pleased to see these in particular!

His visions had been accurate. His method of thinking had been validated. That which had been denied by the previous Evenfall leader, who was in a rush that not even Lord Boron was in, was now being proven more efficient!

Guissepo expelled something from a storage ring on his finger.

It looked like a large, black leather sack that he held at the mouth, and raised up high before screaming manically.

"COOOOME!"

As if heeding his call, the multi-coloured shapes flashed towards the sack, and began filling it!

Strangely, the sack never seemed to truly look full, instead only bulging after a few hundred thousands of these lights shifted in!

Guissepo was overjoyed at the sight.

Actuass truly was a wise man, and he truly was the key to his goals!

What were these vibrantly coloured shapes?

Why, there were dormant blessings!

These were the blessings everyone received after having their Direction read by a Priest at the Temple. Most individuals had these blessings that only matured by clearing Clusters, or reaching the Incandescent Stage.



They wouldn't be useful otherwise to those who wielded them, but to Guissepo, they were priceless.

As the millions of these shapes finally sat within his sack, Guissepo grinned, satisfied. His collaboration with Actuass ended here, as per their terms.

Actuass would claim the millions of souls harvested, which Guissepo had no use for, and Guissepo would claim the millions of dormant blessings, which Actuass had no use for.

Since most of the witnesses here had their bodies controlled by the Control Seal now, the souls and blessings kept within them, were free for the taking.

Guissepo descended from the pane he had been floating on, and stood on the white platform with the leather sack.

Beside him, a fierce flame emerged, and died down almost immediately, revealing an old man garbed in a lavish robe.

"Ready?" the old man asked.

"Extravagantly!" Guissepo said merrily before turning to Actuass who started heaving, and rested his arm over Rearren's seat, the owner of which immediately stood to help him.

"See you whenever you decide to extravagantly hunt me down, entitled brat!" Guissepo yelled with glee.

The old man beside Guissepo unfurled an Arcane Teleportation Scroll, and in a blink, the two vanished in an explosion of flame.

Actuass huffed, and steadily stood firm, his robes soaked in his blood.

He emitted a light scoff, and looked at the millions of souls floating in the air. Then, he turned to those left unharmed.

Alaris looked soulless. No amount of Swordsmanship could stop what was happening, and he didn't think he could fare well against that young lady, and Rearren who was obviously on the masked man's side, even if he retrieved his sword.

As for Ruhrees... he was seething.

His lips trembled as he looked around for the umpteenth time, and turned to Revia blocking his path.

"Do you... do you have any idea... what you are doing?!" he cried, his eyes open wide, and bloodshot.

"I do," Revia said with some manner of hesitation, preparing to stop Ruhrees if he tried to attack Actuass once more.

"Leave him, Revia," Actuass suddenly said. "There's nothing he can do now."

Ruhrees scowled like a cloth at these words, and met the hazel glow behind Actuass' mask.

Then he heard the man speak again, a crazy coil of danger smothering his words.

"Live, and tell your little party of self-righteous fools what happened here."

...!

Ruhrees shrank. He wanted to act, but it was clear... he was outmatched here. He could only die miserably if he resisted.

Actuass turned, ignoring any of his further actions.

"Can Rias hold on a little longer?" he asked Rearren.

"Of course. He is more than capable of holding his own against whoever is left out there," Rearren proudly declared with a smile.

"Good."

As soon as Actuass remarked, another burst of chaotic wind shuddered behind him, and revealed Fulina who walked up to him with a semi-grave look on her face.

"Well?" the masked man asked her without turning.

Fulina hesitated.

"They are gone," she said. "All seven towers were empty. Those old Diviners must have known we'd come for them still."

Actuass sighed.

"No matter. It wasn't that important anyway."