

## Undead 941

### Chapter 941: The Confession

The first thing to respond to Skullius' remark, was the thunderous pressure of the twenty-five experts stationed around the great hall. It bellowed like a great beast and assaulted the Hybrid Luman, intent on punishing him for such a disrespectful gesture in the presence of their Majesties!

Erlton's presence didn't diminish the severity of the judgement at all.

Skullius merely scoffed when he felt the crushing pressure approach.

The [Wings of the Just] plastered behind his robe unfurled quickly, their massive builds and lengths spreading out wide and with a shocking level of intense golden luminosity!

This was enough to ward away most of the fatal force that was being channelled his way!

And truly, if it weren't for his wings, Skullius would have been flattened, becoming a dark red stain on the clean floor.

"This is new..." Erlton muttered to himself as he looked at Skullius; of course, he was unharmed by the sudden confrontational force.

"STOP!" Darwel cried with a fierce expression, her eyes glaring at the royal guards. By the time she had rose from her seat to make a stand, Seville had already rushed to Skullius' side.

At once, the furious pressure wafting from the experts died down.

However... this result was not entirely owed to Darwel's exclamation.

Every Sif in the hall who wasn't her and Seville looked at Skullius with perturbed looks.

As soon as the four wings behind Skullius emerged, the blood of every Sif here cried, especially that of the King and Queen.

Skullius sighed and continued walking forward. He gave blank stares to each of the royal guards who failed to meet his gaze properly.

They each trembled slightly when the Hybrid Luman's gaze lingered even a moment longer on them.

Skullius shook his head and retracted his wings.

The glow around him faded, as did the bubbling within the bodies of the Sif in the large hall.

...

Suddenly, the atmosphere within the space grew awkward for different reasons than before. Instead of reeking of a back and forth between the so-called wisdom of the royalty in Pelian and Opungale, now it held an immense degree of confusion.

Shannazah and the girl in the black armour were quite surprised by this development.

From their perspective, a human, yes, a human had walked in and everything turned chaotic for a second before becoming eerily quiet.

Even the King and Queen seemed to be stumped on how to open up the conversation surrounding what had just happened. It wasn't a normal sort of disturbance, after all.

When Skullius reached the end of the giant table where Darwel was, she backpedalled and stood by his side.

The Queen wore a disapproving look coupled with a confused one.

"Darwel?" she said that one name with a frightening tone that made the El Sif princess quiver softly.

"Moth... Your Majesty..." Darwel gathered her withering wits and faced her mother. "This is Festos."

It felt strange.

Darwel had introduced Skullius to her parents before, when they came to see his sealed body. She had then explained what he was to them hours later, in this very room.

As she had discovered earlier this night, her parents hadn't bought what she had been selling before. She doubted they even remembered Skullius' name, thus she began by telling it to them again.

"He is a Luminant. A genuine Luminant. The last one that remains."

Somehow, Darwel's words adopted an echo in the grand hall. Or perhaps it merely seemed so to those that heard and understood what she had just said. All the Sif except the royal Majesties seated before the gathered expressed immense surprise.

To some, the meaning of what just happened when they thought an insolent nobody had just walked into the hall, became abundantly clear, and this brought them to convulse as they reflected.

Was this true?

If it was actually true... what would be the penalty for something so grave?

To others, the disbelief was apparent.

This couldn't be true.

Some who were much older than Darwel doubted that this silly girl could tell a Luminant from any odd, mildly good-looking human.

Did she know how long ago it was when the last Luminant had perished?

"Darwel..." the Queen said before standing up.

This simple gesture of hers... was fiendishly threatening.

Skullius' eyes widened slightly.

'No wonder...' he thought with a bit of a grave tone.

No wonder indeed.

The Queen's voice brought about a fearsome, commanding authority that was almost material in nature.

Darwel's stance fizzled under the beautiful woman's stare. She spent it all on her daughter without pause, until Darwel looked as though she would faint.

Skullius' lips moved about.

He hadn't known.

'This woman... She's beyond the Incandescent Stage...' he thought.

Indeed!

This was woman was at the Transcendent Stage!

For the first time, Skullius was confronting an existence way beyond him in Stages!

The Queen was frightening!

No wonder his wings didn't have the same effect on her and the King as they did on Darwel.

Not only that.

The two – including the King who said nothing, but kept a stern look on Darwel – seemed to have atrocious egos as well, which likely fuelled their evident doubts about Skullius, and in turn their resistance to his authority as a Luminant.

Well, Skullius assumed so.

"Your Majesty..." Seville set out to speak on behalf of the failing Darwel, but a single finger raised from the serious royal garnered her silence.

Seville's defiance still burned in her eyes though.

Skullius smiled.

It seemed resisting the royal Majesties was easier when they were not within the vicinity.

Benyn and Cosycn showed signs of wanting to intervene, but they didn't.

He couldn't blame them. Just the Queen alone felt like an ocean packed within this hall, and she hadn't even loosened the full scope of her overbearing presence.

Said Queen then turned to Skullius.

"So, you are the walking boneman clad in flesh, poisoning my precious daughter and her servants?" she said.

Her voice didn't work on Skullius as much as it did on Darwel, thankfully.

Despite her ability to resist him, she didn't have the authority to crush him only with words, it seemed. Perhaps it was denied her because she ultimately, was inferior racially.

"I've long left the name Boneman behind. I'd prefer it if you wouldn't insist on giving me such a nickname. I believe you heard my name already. Be civil and use it," Skullius said sternly.

...

Darwel knew Skullius wouldn't submit to her parents, but she expected a certain level of tact from him when speaking to them.

Everyone in the entire hall was as shocked as she was at Skullius' reply.

Shannazah whistled silently while shrinking in his seat; the girl in the dark armour and those behind her merely watched stoically.

The Queen's expression didn't change.

"You ask too much of me, boneman," she said. "What is it that you are exactly? What importance do you THINK you hold to so boldly march into this hall and speak out of turn? Because you are a Luminant? That is quite rich coming from a human. No Luminant ever left Opungale.

Ever. No Luminant ever bred with a human."

"Now, if you would accept that you and my daughter fed each other dreadful, ignorant lies, and confess what manner of power you're using on all of us with Sif blood to make yourself appear more authentic as some Sif Messiah, I will consider letting you live. Better yet, I will even consider having Shannazah here take you back to Pelian once this is all over."

Cold silence endured.

Erlton had retreated a safe distance from Skullius, watching the proceedings curiously.

Everyone smelled defeat. The Queen had established a dominant stance over Skullius, one that eclipsed his odd 'magic' from earlier.

Everyone was convinced he was the inferior party.

Even Darwel was beginning to accept that this wouldn't go as well as she thought it would.

But then...

Suddenly, the El Sif princess felt a mighty tug at her curvy waist that pulled her towards Skullius' figure!

As several gasps sounded, Darwel found Skullius holding her tight as he boldly looked at the King and Queen whose face turned sharp at once.

"I'm afraid I will have to ask you not to demand too much from me as well," he said with a sigh of exasperation.

"I will not repeat what your daughter has already spelled out, and pardon me, but I would rather have you maintain the same bold stature you hold as royals, rather than the more demeaning alternative."

"Unhand my daughter," the Queen spoke coldly, her facial details turning sharper.

"I cannot do that," Skullius chuckled. "I've fallen for her, you see. And I wanted to be so bold as to confess it before you, my inevitable in-laws."

...!!!

It suddenly became scorching hot in the hall as the Queen's face contorted horribly.

Darwel gaped and paled.

What?!

Sevill and the other Sif shook dreadfully as well.

Out of all the things... out of all the possibilities... all the phrases.

This was the last thing anyone here expected to hear.

Chapter 942: Call of Despair

Even Erlton was caught off guard.

He hadn't expected the Hybrid Luman whom he knew for sure was... to be so forward and say something so doming before a whole host of people stronger than him!

Naturally, Erlton had some idea about what Skullius was counting on. He didn't know what the thing with the four wings was about, but he was also sure that Skullius understood that when it came to Transcendents, even without comprehending the depths of their true strength, his 'charm' would not be so effective.

Yet Skullius still looked wholly confident in himself even as the entire hall bore witness to the escalating drama while turning into a conflagrating hell.

Darwel poked at the Hybrid Luman from his chest where he had her plastered.

Looking at her, he sensed the unhealthy beating of her heart which threatened to explode.

The El Sif mouthed to him silently.

'What in the world are you saying?!'

Skullius gave her a smile.

She obviously thought he wasn't serious. Or at least that he was just trying to piss off her parents.

Well...

"I do need your services for a certain task of mine. You and several like you, that is," he said to her, ignoring the King and Queen's glare.

As Darwel wore a bizarrely appalled expression, the Queen scoffed loudly and raised her hand to point at Skullius.

The movement of her wrist was incredibly quick, so quick in fact that even Erlton almost failed to see it whip out, the royal's index pointing at Skullius with her visage turning so ugly... and strangely, so beautiful.

The Herald decided it was time to intervene. He didn't know if Skullius had something on him that could help him survive even a flick from the Queen, but he wouldn't chance it.

The Hybrid Luman had been right.

Erlton did want him to help clean up some of the messes the Heralds caused and were incapable of handling themselves.

He was a bearer of an Existential Parallel, after all, an outlier... a neutral variable.

Midway through his dash to reach the Hybrid Luman, however...

GOOOOOOOOONG!!!

A deafening, ear-splitting noise suddenly filled the hundreds of ears in the hall!

Then it came again.

GOOOOOOOOOOOOONG!!!

Everyone who heard it, lost their balance.

Something in their brains was struck the instant the gong reached their perception, and as a result...

Skullius buckled and knelt on one knee.

However, he wasn't the only one.

Darwel and Seville dropped to the floor, along with every royal guardian within the room!

Even the Queen, who was standing, supported herself with the table, an alarmed look on her face.

Erlton was the only one to remain standing, but even he found that he needed the entirety of his focus to remain on his feet.

GOOOOOOONG!!!

That sound...

Was it a bell?!

Where was it coming from?

Benyn and Cosycn made the quickest attempt to resist the effect of the gong. One of the two remained with the King and Queen while the other had rushed to Skullius, but then...

GOOOOOOOOOOONG!!

This was definitely an enemy attack!

But how did this sound wave, whatever its source, pass through the barrier over Opungale?

Was its source within the barrier?

Impossible!

There were many Sif combatants waiting for the Maqi ships outside the barrier, keeping track of their movement.

They why-

GOOOOOOOOOOONG!!!

This time, after the effect of the gong lessened, and before the follow-up, Benyn placed his hand on the giant table, and called:

"Open!"

Right then, the mansion vibrated vehemently and then quickly, it began to unravel like an immaculate tapestry, only now revealing that it too, as beautiful as it was, was made of roots, tree trunks and vines that could unwind methodically without causing damage to the property they held!

The dark sky overhead was revealed as the walls opened like the maw of a great, wooden beast.

GOOOOOOOOOONG!!

Only the expansive room, the great hall was left wholly intact, with the very tall shadows from the open walls from higher floors sweeping over the living beings struggling with their balance.

When the sycamores around the Gauurdfell were exposed, the true horror of the loud gong was also revealed.

The trees were withering, their leaves losing their green pigment for a pale, grey hue.

Their barks and trunks creaked and tightened as though being squeezed from within, and every Sif in sight grimaced at the atrocity!

Every green thing detached from the mansion was affected mercilessly.

The King and Queen seethed.

"So they chose to attack our very lifeblood first!" the Queen howled madly.

GOOOOOOOOOONG!!!

She resisted the disorienting pain, and so did her husband.

A moment later, the other experts started to get accustomed to the sound as well.

Skullius and Darwel couldn't of course.

The Hybrid Luman squinted every time the gong sounded. It was deeply uncomfortable.

'What grade of artefact is capable of bypassing the barrier up top?' he thought, recalling the properties Cosycn mentioned it had.

Just as he wondered....

"EEEEEEK!"

"ARRGGHHHHH!"

"AUUUUGHHH!"

Ghastly, desperately screams were suddenly heard from the distance, from nearby Auroras!

They immediately eliminated the relief the Incandescent Stage experts were brewing from finally being able to resist the effects of the gong.

Now there was another threat!

What could be happening to the people in the various Auroras?!

Was it actually possible that the Maqian 1,000 had already invaded deep into Opungale, without any word from the experts stationed outside?!

Skullius found it odd.

Instead of wasting time trying to resist the gong futilely, he expanded his senses, allowing the information carrying from the trees and all greens that rushed to him – including the restless ambient mana – to give him the full picture of everything that was happening.

With an astounding degree of vividness, and flexible depth, Skullius perceived what the trees saw.

Within the closest Aurora...

"Huh?"

It wasn't an army that was attacking.

Indeed, the common Sif were running erratically with dark and pale looks of terror on their faces, but no enemy followed with malice behind them.

No phenomenally powerful expert was chasing after them.

No ugly, bloodthirsty beast clawed towards them.

Then... what was it?

Skullius heard a sound akin to beads rattling, and his 'vision' was forcibly focused onto the split second image of a female Sif sprinting in fear....suddenly being devoured by a wavy, black something!

And then she was gone without a trace.

"What?"

Once again, Skullius' perception through his natural companions turned to a small girl crying amid the frightened, older Sif who rushed past her in fear.

Just as he set his vision on her, the same unsettling sound of beads sounded and the girl was taken away by a black something.

It was hard to describe.

It looked like a black cloth, but also like a large maw with dark teeth and a black tongue.

What in the world was this?

His sight was hooked again and then again in another direction.

Every second, someone was taken away.

There was no pattern.

There was no rhyme.

There was probably no reason either.

However, there was an abundance of effective despair.

Chapter 943: Rationality of the Royal

Skullius saw many more Sif disappear, and as dread would have it, more of them started to vanish per instance, as though whatever phenomenon was causing this was invigorated by the rising despair.

The inexplicable, yet greedy black took every Sif who ran, walked, stood or hid; the trees showed Skullius even from the more absurd of angles, quivering families and lovers, as though to garner more of his sympathy.

"Odd..." Skullius said with a frown.

DOOOOOOOOOOONG!

He reeled and refocused quickly.

His sight was instantly shifted to another Aurora. Many were screaming all the same, falling to despair while glimpsing the peripheral view of familiar faces getting whisked away by the unknown.

The great station – one made from towering, tangled roots – which Skullius had seen, pulsing with absurd power and an obscene amount of defences he was unfamiliar with from multiple Auroras, churned. There were Sif within it.

'So that's why...' Skullius thought at the sight of them.

All of these Sif... were dead.

They were bleeding profusely from the ears, eyes, mouth and nose.

They were Masters.

DOOOOOOOOOOONG!!

Skullius' frown grew sharper over the contours of his face.

'The noise... It's targeting specific areas...'

The random civilians were seemingly unaffected by the loud gong, their only cause of concern being the mysterious force swallowing their kind every moment. However, the stronger experts... Skullius saw them sprawled on the ground, dead, with the same symptoms he had just seen from those on the root and trunk station.

Of course... the Incandescent Stagers were still alive, but they were struggling pitifully while clutching their ears, some even conjuring their Nitros to try and ward away the ridiculously invasive sound.

As harrowing as it was, Skullius did wonder why it was so extreme over there than here....

Right as what felt like the hundredth gong sounded, Skullius' vision shifted as he grunted, and he saw the towering mass within a different Aurora light up with a verdant glow, its viney make of

impressive girth turned bright green flashing upon the city with an almost desperate sort of intensity.

Every Sif flailing around it was hidden in the protective glare in an instant!

The shroud was so potent that even the broadcast Skullius was linked to failed to show him the finer details of what was transpiring within green brightness.

One thing he could tell for sure though, was the fact that he had been right.

The defences that these stations were capable of, were not only much different from the forms he had seen, but they were very advanced. They giant structures could operate on their own too.

The light that had just blasted out was, much like a blanket, thick, yet also furiously hot like lava.

Skullius got the feeling that the heat had some kind of disinfecting application – on a magical level.

Somehow, it was supposed to counter various kinds of effects on the civilians all at once, which was very... nature-like.

However...

The bright light suddenly dimmed and fizzled.

The station creaked and crunched.

Its vibrant, natural hue was lost immediately, and it began to arc down, as though aging thousands of years in a moment!

'Damn it...' Skullius thought.

He let the remains of the screams of the people who became clear once again – the assault of the black reaper still upon them – tell the story of their deeper despair as he returned to his current predicament.

The sycamores around Gauurdfell struggled against the effect he had seen on the defensive behemoths in the Auroras, but although they managed to stall by surging within themselves what Skullius assumed was abundant life energy, it was clear they weren't going to resist for long.

DOOOOOOOOOOONG!!!

The Incandescent Stagers had already moved.

Skullius felt a bracelet get clasped onto his wrist by Cosycn, and he was heaved up from his kneeling position, along with Darwel by his side.

It was only when another dong came that he found that the discombobulating effects of the bell noise lessened dramatically, but not entirely.

'Darwel and me should have died like the Masters in the Auroras I just saw... Is it because of distance?' Skullius thought while sensing his surroundings.

The man addressed as Shannazah and the other delegation led by the girl wearing dark armour seemed to have resisted the effects of the bell with their own means.

He perceived the King and Queen's figures surrounded by ten Incandescent Stagers, with the others rushing off in different directions. It appeared the Queen had given them orders which weren't clear to Skullius because of the language barrier.

She was openly livid while the King seemed to subdue his rage.

"How is it that our barrier has been breached?! So help me if your warriors have gotten so weak that it takes mere seconds for them to be run through... allowing the enemy to reach our people...!" she barked at her spouse with her eyes letting out a vicious, magical, spark of fury that the Hybrid Luman felt impact the depths of his soul.

Everyone felt it.

The rage of a Transcendent Stage expert.

Darwel grunted unpleasantly. It could only be because she too felt her mother's particularly fierce presence.

"We still have many options at our disposal. They cannot cover the whole nation with a force of 1,000 even if they are granted minutes to roam free, Embrell," the King gave his wife a stern look that did nothing to shirk off her accusing glare.

DOOOOOOOOOOONG!!!

The Queen clicked her tongue.

Everyone was wearing the same kind of bracelet Skullius was wearing, and thus, they weren't affected terribly anymore. However... the sight of the trees beyond Gauurdfell – even past the sycamores – quickly losing vitality seemed to fuel everyone's seed of vengeance.

"You said there'd be a chance for a civil discussion. Your naiveté is showing its fruits," the Queen said to the King before pushing out of the circle of Incandescent Stagers around her and the King. "I will go meet them. You focus on getting everything ready."

"Excuse me..."

Amid the tension, Skullius interjected.

Every eye turned to him, two more dangerously than the others.

"Ah, yes. I will deal with you after this is done..." the Queen sneered dismissively, intent on hurrying towards a certain direction as many guards followed her, a hesitant Benyn included.

"No. I would prefer we deal with each other now..." Skullius said, and his four wings protruded from his back grandly, whipping into the air in a stellar golden white glow that cast a sunny flare, while their sheer length mesmerised the eye all the more.

The Hybrid Luman felt free and bold.

He felt everyone except the King and Queen succumb to his charm, turning stiff.

Of course, the beautiful El Sif with quite the tall frame and a bizarrely baggy, yet truly fabulous dress to compliment it in every way, was not impressed.

"You will—"

"You're wrong," Skullius interjected. "The Maqi soldiers have yet to arrive on land."

...!

Again, every Sif except the royal duo was smitten with an instant sort of compulsion that let them believe that Skullius was serious.

...And of course... he was right.

"How could you possibly know that?" the King frowned.

Skullius turned to him and wore an infuriating smirk.

"The greens here speak louder to me than the rest of you. I suppose.... even with their lives at risk, they see need to acknowledge me and have me in turn acknowledge the danger they are in..."

The Queen's eyes turned sharp and violent, but she instantly quelled her fury. A rational process began in her mind.

"Is that so? If what you say is true, how great is the damage?" she asked.

Skullius was quite perturbed by her sudden change in tone. He answered, his demeanour also changing to a stern one.

"Auroras closer to the ocean... from where the enemy is approaching, have been hit hardest. I'm afraid the noise is only one part of a remote attack. A pre-emptive strike, and it's working. You need to establish order quickly."

The Queen gave Skullius a quick appraisal.

She said nothing, but the Hybrid Luman felt as though she was whispering her thoughts in his ear.

Regardless of what she thought about him, he was sure... she believed every word he said. Or at least considered the validity.

DOOOOOOOOOOONG!!

Before anyone could say anything else, the ground shook horribly, as though a titan buried underneath the ground was suddenly shaken awake!

Then, within a split of a second, the dying sycamores were pulled on from above, wound together into a massive construct, one that looked distinctly like an enormous fist, and hammered down towards the gathered.

...Towards the King and Queen!

Chapter 944: Eternity's Conflagration

The paling figures of the large, and bountiful trees formed a massive, pale fist that cast a darker shade on the gathered than the unconquerable night above.

Its size was no doubt astonishing, but what threw everyone off, especially Skullius, was the vibrant energy stowed within it.

It was mind-boggling!

When the fist creaked as it rose, and then fell with atrocious speed and force, for a moment, it was as though ten Incandescent Stagers with vibrant blue mana cores had leapt down from the sky, nothing but terribly aggressive intent registering from their presence!

The fist caused the ground to rumble before it reached its two targets – both of whom were surrounded by alert guards. Its threat level was a marvel in its own right.

However...

Only one from the ten Sif combatants moved, a redhead with chubby cheeks.

Her mana flared like water from a burst dam for a split second, before rushing back into her body. Her hand whipped out towards the large obstacle at the exact same time.

Without sound.

Without impact.

The massive first vanished as if it were never there.

...

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

What in the world was that supposed to be?

Just like that?

What form of attack could counter like that?

He was tempted to reach into the woman's core and have her mana, which would be tempted to lean towards him, tell him what her abilities were, but...

Another great shadow spawned. Another amalgamation of the pale flora had come together to form another savage fist that moved even quicker than the first, dashing once again for the King and Queen!

Quite a hefty hurricane roared with the thing's movement, but once again, before it could reach, another Incandescent Stager from the direction it came, one with a rather thin face and smaller ears, squatted, opened his mouth and cried, "URAAA!"

Quite shockingly, his voice caused Skullius more discomfort than the gong which continued to resound in the background, and it became like a mighty gust of ancient winds that had been roaming around the world for a long time, hurtling towards the unliving assailant!

In a less jarring fashion than with the previous female guard, the second massive fist was halted and then obliterated to dust as the white glass around Gauurdfell shook and exploded!

'They all pack quite a punch...' Skullius thought as he recovered. 'That one must be a Form User who can amplify the sound he makes with his body. Interesting.'

The threats didn't stop. More fists began to form from the surrounding greens, which, because of the selective nature of the gong, had yet to perish as well.

The Queen grew impatient.

"This must be a very powerful Shaman at work," she said grittily before turning to Skullius. "If what you say is true, then whoever they are, they are launching all these attacks from the ocean."

Skullius found the notion impressive, but not too shocking.

"Indeed," he said.

Right then, six more fists, some a lot smaller than the first two, rushed again.

It seemed this combination of attacks wouldn't be stopping any time soon.

And thus, Benyn stepped up, a solemn look etched on his face.

"Forgive me," he whispered, "I will restore you after all this is over..."

The Queen and King heard his words and showed slight distaste, but they knew it couldn't be helped.

Every tree within a forty meter radius was being pulled to create attack after attack, and given who the target of the constant assault was, it was safe to say the attacks wouldn't stop nomatter where the two royals went.

Thus....

"Majestic Territory, Eternity's Conflagration."

As Benyn cast his Territory, all the other Incandescent Stagers around called upon their Nitros immediately, either to protect themselves or to cast it over others. Cosycn and Seville had their solid white energy cradle Skullius and Darwel while the rest of the Incandescent Stage guards coated the King and Queen.

Immediately afterward, a great wash of white, much like paint over the coloured realism of Aigas overwhelmed everything and then...

'Oh...' Skullius narrowed his blank eyes.

How curious.

The Territory of an accomplished Incandescent Stage expert would normally craft an Imaginary GeoScape – a personalised space that fit what said expert intended to create their abilities around – right after the white Nitros create a space for it to form.

However... that didn't seem to be case for Benyn's Territory. At least with how it looked at face value.

The surroundings remained the same after the initial burst of white came and faded.

The up to forty fists, large and small, all packing enough devastation to turn a city as large as Genhuis into a dark, bottomless crater, still rushed towards them, with the backdrop of Gauurdfell!

But then...

Benyn held his hands to his mouth and blew into them, as though heating them from a nasty cold. As he did, a blue fire blossomed from his mouth and sat between his palms which he brought forth.

It was tall like an erect candle flame, bits of spark jutting from its tip.

At once, Skullius recognised that this was the Primary assault function of the Territory.

"Flame-Cast Ember," Benyn called softly, and the world around everyone, normal as it had seemed turned inverted!

All colour was replaced with a greyish blue tone, a jarring white marking the outlines of everything.

An ungodly heat then burst out without warning!

It was so phenomenally scorching that even with the guard of Nitros, everyone felt its intensity, not just in temperature, but the force with which it exploded from the flame cradled within Benyn's hand, which was now depicted as white!

Its overpowering might turned the wooden fists to ash immediately.

There was zero resistance.

Better yet, as the fists were lit on fire only for an inscrutable instant, the remaining woodland within the vicinity was treated the same, culling the added chances for another onslaught of attacks!

Skullius wore a grin.

'Crazy...'

This Territory bled into the real world!

It melded itself into the environment and imposed its functions on it, instead of creating a separate space!

In short, Benyn turned the world into his Imaginary GeoScape!

How unusual...

'That's... inspiring...' the Hybrid Luman thought.

#### Chapter 945: Parting Ways

As the world maintained a tempered colour scheme, the threat was neutralised, and thankfully, the continued onslaught of attacks which still hung in the minds of the vigilant experts didn't happen.

Benyn didn't deactivate his Territory, however.

The Queen gave the Sif guard a stiff nod.

"Make sure you restore what you have destroyed," she said coldly.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

The Queen looked around. "Let's go."

She then faced Skullius.

"Quite like Shannazah and Kudobtu, I would appreciate it if you don't hinder us. I have yet to confirm anything you claimed – from what's going on to what you are. You could just as easily be a delusional idiot blinded by his own lies. Ah, you appear to be so even now."

Skullius scoffed at her words.

"Well, whether you like it or not, you'll find me on the battlefield anyway. After all, I did say I would end this war," he said, his smirk returning.

"Right," the Queen snorted and gave a pitying look to the Hybrid Luman "I'm afraid the terrors of Maqi are being taken lightly by the younger generations. What a pity."

'Is that right?' Skullius thought.

Without leaving room for a retort, the Queen, Embrell, beckoned Benyn to lead them to where the chaos, as Skullius said, was thickest. The royal guard gave Skullius a look that seemed to beg for forgiveness, for he wasn't able to extricate himself from the Queen's side in such a dire time, and when she needed him most.

Skullius didn't mind.

"Darwel. Come."

It was the King who spoke.

His tone also left no room for second thought, but Darwel found the nerve to give a rebellious look. No. Not like this.

She had to-

"Go. I'll meet up with you later," Skullius said softly.

Darwel was surprised, but seeing the look in Skullius' blank eyes, she swallowed what she had been about to say to her father. Skullius' earlier declaration also rang out in her mind.

'I've fallen for her, you see. And I wanted to be so bold as to confess it before you, my inevitable in-laws...'

Goodness.

"Alright..." she relented, giving Skullius a last look before walking into the enclosure of the Incandescent Stagers gathered around the two royals.

Skullius smiled.

Along with Seville, Cosycn and the delegation from Pelian, he perceived the movement of the giant space around them, still dyed in negative colours. It lurched quickly as Benyn dashed forth, the flame from his Territory now cupped in his hands.

Soon, a massive dome appeared to spit Skullius and the others out, returning them to natural colour as it moved away rapidly with the royal trio.

When it crossed a vast stretch along the ash-covered ground, several attacks shot out at it, but they were unable to last a moment within the great heat past the white exterior.

The dome quickly disappeared from view and sense.

Only the odd collection of Sif and humans remained.

"Well, this is awkward..."

It was the man named Shannazah who spoke.

Skullius turned to him. Only now did he chortle, realising that sometime amid the chaos, Erlton had disappeared. Oh well...

There was more company.

Skullius couldn't see the clashing colours Shannazah wore, but he did find several aspects of him rather... weird. Too weird.

He wore eight belts around his waist; his shoes were worn wrong, or perhaps they just looked that way; his sleeves were of different lengths; his hair was braided in an unsightly fashion.

What was up with that?

The man smiled at Skullius.

"Ah, you are quite the fellow. I mistook you for a human before. Apologies, apologies..." he said humbly.

Skullius imagined that his wings were what inspired the man's perspective.

"What are you anyway? What's this Luminant you called yourself?" the girl with the heavy dark armour asked coldly.

Skullius merely appraised the two without answering.

'So these guys are the reinforcements from Pelian. I remember the name Shannazah...' he thought.

Shannazah was certainly the name of the House the man who defeated Demion in the tale of Demion, Escus and Irisa – the legend surrounding his sword, Demon's Dance – belonged to.

As such, Skullius didn't underestimate this man, though he did wonder if the man standing before him was the same one who beat Demion.

Incandescent Stagers could live for very long. It wasn't impossible.

He also regarded the woman standing behind Shannazah with her own small group highly. Her name was Kudobtu. Well, her House name. Indeed, she had to be from a House as well.

"Instead of having a relaxed discussion here, how about we go someplace else..." Skullius said before beckoning Cosycn. "Take us to the Wonderfall Torrents."

"Yes, Lord Luminant."

In a flash, the group was encased in dazzling light, and they took flight, headed fast for Darwel's abode.

The loud gong continued to sound inconsequentially in the background for the group, but it continued to unnerve.

Shannazah placed his hands behind his back as they flew.

"I didn't expect a vacation instead of a bloody war as the King suggested, but this will do," he said relaxedly.

"Don't be an idiot. These long-ears will need us sooner rather than later. They clearly don't fully understand how vicious Maqi can be, even if they are limited to 1,000 men," Kudobtu said.

She garnered unfriendly attention from Cosycn and Seville.

"Since you two are here, does it mean the situation in Pelian has been solved?" Skullius asked.

"Deities, no!" Shannazah laughed. "It's only stalled and that's not purely by our efforts. I daresay these dark enemies are simply taking their time. Waiting for something. Well, the King doesn't see it that way. He sees victory.

Poor fool."

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

The current King, as far as he knew, was never relied upon. Practically everyone in Pelian lost faith in his ability to rule, and yet, mysteriously, he persisted on the throne as the years went by.

"I see...." Skullius said.

Moments later, the group took a dive towards the three falls creating a large pool, with a mansion at the centre of it.

Dreadfully, however, it became clear that like Gauurdfell, this place had been stricken hard by Maqi's pre-emptive attack.

Chapter 946: Calling In The Favour

There was a fair bit of blood splattered at the entrance to the mansion, along with several corpses. The gong which came right at this moment announced itself as the killer immediately.

Much like every Aurora, it seemed the Wonderfall Torrents was also targeted quite harshly – both experts and common Sif included.

Skullius' face constricted as their group descended.

His mind quickly rushed to the safety of Maxim and Vali – something he was not particularly proud of.

The thick, misty waters around the pool were fuming with energy, and obscuring the view as always. They parted as the Hybrid Luman focused all his innate sensory abilities... and his heart was instantly set at ease after his findings.

He didn't feel comfortable with the cheer.

There were several figures submerged in the waters, dozens of them.

As the gong came, they squirmed slightly, but they weren't convulsing in pain or bleeding from their orifices.

They were alive and mostly well.

Skullius' eyes lit up.

'Of course... These waters have special properties. They soothe the body and soul, and they have healing qualities too...' he thought.

It was just as Darwel had told him, though some of the finer details were coming to him at this moment.

It seemed several people in Darwel's mansion had taken action quickly, despite the evident losses, and soon, Skullius spotted Viccil within the pool too. If there was anyone who could have mobilised everyone into the pool quick enough, it would have to have been her.

He also spotted Vali and Maxim and almost at the same time, they spotted him just after he and the rest landed on the stone platform leading from in and out of Wonderfall Torrents.

"Do you have any more of these bracelets?" Skullius asked Cosycn while showing his wrist.

The Sif wore a difficult expression.

"I'm afraid we don't have enough for everyone. The Ceding Crests are reserved for emergencies such as this and we normally only ever use them for the benefit of their royal Majesties," he said.

"Give those three the ones you have left," Skullius gestured towards Viccil, Maxim and Vali.

The Ceding Crests were high grade artefacts that isolated damage from their wearers and limited it to themselves. Of course, while they were powerful, they couldn't ward away intense damage individually, which was why in the most serious of cases, the royal guards would stack their effects by having the King, Queen or Darwel wear multiple of them.

"That's a little less comfortable than just staying in the water, but oh well..." Vali said after exiting the pool, her hands twisting her hair to get rid of the moisture.

Maxim did the same but she couldn't help but look at the Sif servants who had to remain in the waters' embrace for their own safety.

"If it's this bad here..." she said before turning to Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman knew what she wanted to know, surprised that she had much empathy.

"Let's get inside," he said.

Everyone followed his lead.

Once they were inside, Skullius gave Viccil and Seville orders with the tone of a host.

"Why don't you give the guests some place to rest?" he said, gesturing towards the Pelian reinforcements.

Shannazah smiled.

"How hospitable of you," he said.

"Well, I'm sure you are going to jump into the action eventually. But for now, perhaps you might want to relax," Skullius said.

He then turned and left with Maxim and Vali who pestered him with questions which he reluctantly answered.

The floors were littered with blood, bone and flesh, but neither of the three seemed to mind too much as they climbed up some stairs and went to Maxim's room.

"So Maqi is capable of something like this without even setting foot on Opungale yet? That's quite ridiculous..." Vali said as she plopped into a chair.

"Yes. It's only going to get worse from here," Skullius said as he did the same.

"So why did you come back here? If you are somehow able to sense things even the King and Queen can't, shouldn't you insist on helping them?" Maxim asked with a raised brow.

"Since when were you such an empath?"

"I'm not. I'm just grateful is all. Doesn't it feel strange to watch the people who treated you so well, die like this?"

"Not really. I've tasted death too many times to feel it the same, even with others. I'm a bit desensitised. If you knew how many times I've died so far..." Skullius said as he stroked his chin.

Ah, that was twice now, not counting how he died in his original life. Or was it... thrice.

Vali and Maxim looked at him weirdly.

'Ah, another thing Erlton didn't tell...'

"Well, I want to go out there and help," Maxim said. "Better to be in the know right about now. We might just die without knowing what hit us," Maxim said. "It's best to get to the battlefield."

"I second this. I expanded my Family's reach and wealth, and I'd like to enjoy that prosperity. Unfortunately, to do that, I have to survive this ordeal, and I'd prefer that to be under my own terms," Vali gave an unintentionally seductive smile as she declared.

Skullius nodded to both of them.

"I agree. I didn't say I want you cooped up in here," he said. "In fact, I want you to join the battle with me. But first, I need to call in that favour."

Skullius looked to Vali who tilted her head.

"What?"

The Hybrid Luman sighed and raised his hand.

From an unseen, hidden space, a very long scabbard emerged and fell to his grip.

And then, only to Skullius' ears...

"Aaaaaah! Dear Master! You've finally summoned me! What did I do wrong?! Why didn't you call for me sooner?! Is it because of that wretched, green blade?!"

The Bashful Abomination cried bitterly.

"Calm down, dammit. You haven't been abandoned," Skullius growled.

"Who are you talking to?" Maxim asked, puzzled. "And what's that sword?"

"Don't worry about it," Skullius said, waving her off.

"Dear Master! Who are these two women?!" the Bashful Abomination cried again, this time quivering in its scabbard.

"Don't start," Skullius frowned and knocked the hilt of the sword on the floor, to which he heard several ouches from it.

The Bashful Abomination was the Pseudo-Mythical grade zhanmadao Skullius had acquired after defeating the Cluster General Hobbu Gobbu. As an ancient sword of a high grade, Skullius found that it could indeed talk, having developed a consciousness.

This was something he hadn't seen all too much however. The next best thing was Demion's Dance, which behaved more like an animal instead of using speech.

"Listen," Skullius said to the sword, but then he noticed the strange looks he was receiving from the two wet women before him. "The sword talks," he gave a succinct explanation before returning to addressing the zhanmadao.

"I'm ready to add an affix of my own."

"..."

"Hey. Did you hear me?" Skullius asked, a little annoyed at the underwhelming silence.

The Bashful Abomination suddenly shook violently.

"Dear Master! You're serious?! I can finally...!.... This is the best day of my life! First, you got me a scabbard and now... ..

What do you want me to do? Do you want me to make you immortal? Well... partially immortal. Do you want me to make you capable of cutting anything... well, almost anything?

Or—"

"None of that," Skullius interjected.

The Bashful Abomination only grew more motivated, though.

Was it going to be something unique?! Something NOT like Hobbu Gobbu's [Ghost Rending Divine Sword Art]?

Skullius turned to Vali.

"Just how much are you capable of with Rias EverSword's Imagining Technique? You didn't acquire its full capabilities, right?" he asked.

The Kinn Family Head folded her arms and gazed deep into Skullius' eyes.

"That's right. I'm not capable of creating anything too complex, like that kid, not to mention imagine something on the fly and make it appear instantly. It must take a lot of practice. The only thing I was able to do is make myself as strong and as relevant as a Cluster General back then," she said.

"Hmm. Is that effect still ongoing?" Skullius asked.

"No. I'm still working on how to make what I imagine stick," Vali said before narrowing her eyes. "What do you want?"

Skullius leaned forward and wagged the Bashful Abomination.

"Something a little complex. This sword is capable of creating one stipulation, an affix, that benefits me. Anything I want. Pretty hand," he said.

"I want you to make it so it can allow me to create two."

Chapter 947: Conduit

Skullius had thought about it quite deeply. Very deeply, in fact.

He had even reviewed different options, processing them all in a relatively short amount of time because of the Omniscient Thought Cracker – the grain-sized processor within his head, capable of compartmentalising and enhancing thought.

The conclusion he had come to was that the Bashful Abomination's ability to create an affix of anything he wanted was simply too good. However, it was too limited. One of it wouldn't do, especially for what he wanted.

The Hybrid Luman thought about using [Unbound] on the sword, but he was afraid the sword would change into something completely different, after all, he didn't have much control over the choices that came out with Random Upgrades.

They were called Random for a reason.

Therefore, Skullius decided to switch to the best option he had. Vali.

"Dear Master... You want to... what?!" the Bashful Abomination asked with subtle panic in its voice.

Skullius ignored it and looked straight at Vali who seemed quite surprised.

Maxim gave the Bashful Abomination an odd look

"Your sword is already around Mythical grade, right? Is it even possible to accomplish what you want without raising its grade?" she asked, her question seemingly appealing more to Vali than to Skullius.

The former didn't answer immediately, but Skullius had his own perspective to share.

"Maybe, but that's not really important. What matters to me is getting as close to the result I want as possible. I can make adjustments afterwards," he said with a confident smile.

"But... my Dear Master... Hobbu Gogo tried to do something similar to me. She wanted Hobbu Gobbu even stronger than he was, but even her runes were not strong enough to do that," the Bashful Abomination said timidly.

"Is that so?"

Well, the second Cluster General, the old, female goblin from whom Skullius had extracted his runic skills – which included the Temporary Storage from which he had just summoned the Bashful Abomination from – was definitely formidable, but he doubted that her powers were a match for the Imagining Technique, even if it was limited within Vali's hands.

"Well?" the Hybrid Luman asked Vali who was lost in thought.

"I can't really promise anything. As I said, to reach the heights of that EverSword brat requires a lot of practice. If I had to guess what kind of training he did to be able to use such a technique flawlessly, it would have to be some kind of image training. I don't have the kind of expertise that comes with that.

At best, I might be able to do what want you want, but it will take some time..." the voluptuous beauty said as she set one thigh over the other. "It all comes down to how long you are willing to wait, and whether or not you can expect a subpar result. I'm not sure this second... affix you want will be as strong as the original."

Skullius grinned.

"Don't worry about all that. That will be my own problem to deal with. I'm waiting for something, so I'm to kill some time," he said before feeling for something he had planted far away. "I won't be able to fight for a little while. I don't have any of my skills at the moment, you see..."

Vali and Maxim were a little appalled, but Skullius waved their concern off.

"I said only my skills. You don't need to worry. In the meantime, I don't have much reason to go out and look for a fight. When I'm ready, we can go and join in on the fun. In the meantime..."

Skullius handed the Bashful Abomination to Vali. The sword almost clawed for him, hesitant to leave his grasp.

Vali held it with a strange visage. The fact that it could 'talk' was unnerving to her, especially since she couldn't hear what it was saying. Maxim felt the same way.

The navy-haired beauty gripped the zhanmadao's scabbard and hilt and pulled.

"Don't unsheathe it. Trust me. Looking at its blade is pretty much fatal," Skullius said warningly.

Vali nodded.

"Alright then. Let's get this over with. No offense. Even though this is a favour I owe, I'm very sure it's not going to be pleasant for me," she said with an exasperated look.

"None taken," Skullius said as he hid his hands within the large sleeves of his dark robe.

Vali took a deep breath and closed her eyes.

Right then, a dazzling lilac flame blazed from over her right palm, changing the entire colour tone of the room.

It wasn't hot but it had a tense, shaky fluctuation to it that gave the impression that it was seconds away of suddenly dashing out the door.

Vali kept her eyes closed.

The flame was her conduit from which the things she wanted could be manifested.

The Imagining Technique specialised in creating matter from nothing but the imagination, but Vali wasn't sure if giving an already existing object additional powers would make things easier or harder, yet still, she had to try.

This was where her experience with her new technique would grow, so in a way, it was a plus.

She took the Bashful Abomination and fed it into the fire slowly.

Only Skullius heard how the sword sobbed like a child that had been abandoned.

Soon, its whole disappeared in the lilac glow and Vali wore a look of great focus, sinking into her imagination.

Skullius and Maxim rose and left the room. They figured it would do her more good if they left her alone. Curiously, Skullius brought a chair with him to the corridor outside.

"What do we do now?" Maxim asked while folding her arms.

Skullius sat down.

"I want you to protect me and Vali for now," he said as he stretched his fingers.

"What do you mean you and her? Why you?"

"I'm going to check on Maqi's forces."

"While sitting down?" Maxim asked incredulously.

"No."

Skullius took a deep breath.

'It's been a while...' he thought.

Indeed, it had been.

He hadn't used this in a very long time.

...

The pink-haired woman beside him was flabbergasted when Skullius suddenly turned limb, his frame slumping onto the back of the chair, his face turning placid.

A plume of intense darkness then rose from Skullius' body and gathered just before where he sat, shaping itself into an exact copy of the Hybrid Luman... only, with every bit of it beyond pitch black!

It stood, solid on the floor, looking at its hands, its robes and all before stretching.

"What... what in the world..." Maxim wore a confused frown while pointing at the thing shakily.

The dark Skullius didn't pay her much attention. He simply nodded and soared up quickly, flying through the solid matter like nothing before appearing in the dark night sky.

The [Crude World Projection] had finally returned.

Chapter 948: Return of Crude World Projection

The dark, sleek and sharp Skullius rose high and higher into the night which was saturated with the sound of a horrible bell's ring and a litany of screams. Things were escalating rather quickly... or perhaps not quickly enough, at least where Skullius' goals were concerned.

In any case, the Projected Luman needed to gather information before he and his two lady friends moved out as he intended, and he knew just where to start.

As he darted east quickly, soaring in a straight line amid the vast canvas of black above which his tone tried to so hard to meld into, he appreciated how he currency felt. What he currently was.

He had longed for it.

He was light, almost immaterial.

He was free, unstrained.

When Skullius first awakened his powers as an Insurgent Magnus back in Eofel, the Fruit of World Myths introduced him to the first of its 9 Seeds, [Crude World Projection]. Well, the guidance field classified it as the number 2, among the 9, but that wasn't too relevant.

[Crude World Projection], was not a skill. Even his status agreed with the fact. It was an odd trait given by the Fruit of World Myths, quite like his tattoos, the Binds of Fukal.

The collection of traits of known as the Seeds of the Fruit of World Myths were unique, and varied.

According to Fulgardt's plaques, not all of these abilities could even be used independently by the user. Apparently, some of them were best utilised by imbedding them into the PHANTASMIC RETAINERS.

PHANTASMIC RETAINERS were supernatural constructs which required specific amounts and arrays of both [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light] to create. High affinities in both elements were required to construct them.

Skullius' Second Trial demanded that he forge one of these, and so far, he had the [Just Light] part ready.

It pleased Skullius to have his first Seed back in use.

He had awakened another Seed some time ago, back when he became a Hybrid Luman, [Seramoro, Oblivion's Edge], and with [Just Light] reaching the 'S' rank in affinity, he had unlocked 3 more, which he had yet to check on. Well, he didn't need to. He knew what they could do.

None of them were quite as... amusing as [Crude World Projection], however.

As this Projection, Skullius had free flight capabilities, was intangible through normal means, and he could manipulate already existing [Evil Darkness] vastly better than he could when he was trapped in his body. His vision in this state, was a mix of grey, black and white; this was what Skullius normally used to see when dark dots appeared in the whites of his eyes.

In all, Skullius was quite fond of this ability.

It had been a shame when he had had to stop using it after he discovered that it left a way for Sila to steal control over his body.

Well, now, that wasn't an issue anymore, after all, Sila...

...

'Let's see how bad things actually are...' Skullius thought.

He sped over the trees, watching recurring scenes of thousands of Sif combatants who had acquired some form of resistance against the gong, rush through Auroras to deliver the civilians with a variety of artefacts that Skullius couldn't make out clearly.

In this state, he wasn't in touch with nature as he would be in his body, thus, there was no perfect broadcast from the loyal greens in his vision.

It seemed the Sif were responding rather well, however. Profoundly even.

The darkness that whisked away many was swiftly countered; Skullius saw several experts bring out large jars that contained some kind of liquid which they poured on saplings which they brought and planted on arrival.

These saplings grew at incredible paces, attaining thousands of meters in height and hundreds in width in no time. The civilians were beckoned into the new giant trees' trunks, which opened wide to reveal rich, pristine white spaces that seemed impossible for the dark blankets to reach.

The Projected Skullius watched this occur across nine Auroras. The situation was quickly stabilising and much of this was owed to the fact that Opungale had shocking military strength.

Sif combatants flooded the streets everywhere he passed.

Skullius saw large trees help out as well, some saving Sif combatants who were moments from death, stricken silly by the gong. They reached in with their branches, dragged the injured away, wrapping them in their roots and bathing them in their immense life energy.

It was strange to see trees regarding humanoids like Sif as companions worthy enough to turn active for, though, in Opungale's case, the nature was already strange.

Skullius saw it happen so many times in his flight, that it eventually became a norm, and even when he saw an entire woodland heeding the call of experts who called upon them, directing them towards local establishments so that they could help with warding off the Auroras where common civilians were, he wasn't fazed.

"Humans could never..." Skullius muttered to himself.

A minute of flight in the same direction later, he found the Queen.

She was in what Skullius would think was probably the capital of Opungale. It was an enormous Aurora with over forty, natural defensive stations like the ones he had seen before. It had more extravagant sights than Gauurdfell and the Wonderfall Torrents, though, to be fair, these two places didn't really need to look gorgeous.

The Royals didn't really care for extravagancy.

Hadn't Darwel said that royalty to the Sif didn't mean getting bathed in endless luxury, convenience and resources, as the humans indulged in?

That was why she went to Pelian without hundreds of Legendary or Mythical grade tools for her own protection.

...

With keen, dark sight, Skullius saw that the Queen was gathering an army alongside Benyn.

His Territory had finally been released, which, to Skullius meant that the constant onslaught of attacks had ended. This was probably why the King was no longer by Queen Embrell's side, since she had given him a task before.

Odd. That woman seemed to have the undisputed reins in the royal relationship.

If the Projected Luman remembered correctly, she had told the King to prepare something while she confronted the situation at hand.

Now, she had gathered quite the number of Sif soldiers and these were just the ones that were ready in this massive Aurora.

They numbered nearly a million.

The Projected Skullius saw, after Queen Embrell gave a command, 100,000 of them march out of the grand Aurora with Benyn taking the lead.

They were headed towards the coast, which wasn't too far from here.

"Well, I better get ahead of them..."

Skullius shot forth quickly, and soon, he could see everything he had wanted to see. Everything he had wanted to confirm.

Several large ships were approaching from the vast oceans – about two hundred meters out.

From them, the loud gong continued to ring ominously, louder than ever.

However, the welcoming party waiting by the shore wasn't fazed. It didn't look like any of them had died from the unexpected sound attack like the experts inland.

Of course, they couldn't have.

As Skullius hovered close to where the powerful, vigilant-looking Sif were, he couldn't help but wonder how long they would last in direct confrontation.

Chapter 949: What Are They Stopping For?

A great platform stood on the coast opposing them, daring them to proceed. It stood proud, glinting lightly in soft blue, illuminating the 15,000 humanoid opposers with long ears and silver armour. The sight couldn't have been more sickening for the Ode of the First Horn who stood on the figurehead to the leading ship among the seven.

The Ode of the First Horn was the heir to the throne, the Crown Prince of Maqi.

He had been told to lead this mission to finally confront Opungale about an old grudge that the strongest human nation had been denied for so long by a certain mysterious individual. Now, with all the chaos brewing in Aigas, the chance had finally come. Perhaps getting answers was the goal, or perhaps it wasn't.

What mattered was that as of right now, the Sif were showing signs of resistance and even if it was in their right to defend themselves, the Ode was determined to bring them to their knees first, a fairly easy ordeal.

Frail and humble to the natural, the Sif had of course succumbed to the weakness that came with millennia of peace and seclusion. Whatever they thought they gained from all that solitude was sure to prove fatal this night.

"Umbett, are you sure you can still hold out?" the Ode, a young man with crimson hair, peerless satin grey eyes and a bold, muscular frame accentuated perfectly by the nakedness of his torso, spoke behind him.

On the great ship, men and women mostly bare-chested like he was, were seated on the deck in long, straight rows, embracing eerie silence and profound concentration. Between the gap they left in their arrangement, was a massive, green bell hung from a hook suspended in mid-air.

The flakes of rust and the lightning-shaped cracks on the construct gave away its astounding age, while attempting to flirt with the eye with its faded gold patterns. The bell swung this way and that, emitting a horrendous noise that formed visible arcs in the air, but none on the ship were affected. Not even the old woman standing before it.

"Don't insult me, my dear Ode," the old woman said with a smack of her chapped lips.

"Insult?" the Ode said with a brow raised. "You are exerting yourself so much before the real battle even begins; enhancing the properties of the bell and casting a Man-Stealing Curse, you might find, is terribly draining for the average Shamanic Mage."

The old woman chuckled.

She looked up with her tiny eyes which were almost buried in her sagging eyelids to see the impressive, barely visible barrier around the entirety of Opungale.

"There is no such thing as an average Shamanic Mage, boy," she said with a scoff. "How do you intend to deal with the fools waiting for us. They hardly count as a vanguard. Shall we delegate to our 'partners'? They might not get anything to do during the whole trip."

The Ode was amused.

"No. That won't be necessary."

\*\*\*

Ashema was intrigued by the sight below him, but his interest was rapidly eaten away by the fact that the seven ships he had been following stopped when they were just short of ninety meters away from Opungale's coast, from the extended ice platform ahead holding up archers ready to fire thousands of arrows, and brave swordsmen more than prepared to engage.

He was eager for the chaos to begin, and yet the instigators directly below him had yet to show signs of offence besides the creepy bell they had been ringing.

It had affected Ashema quite a bit when it was first rung, but he had learned to dilute its effect by doing as the men and women aboard the ships did.

Concentration.

The bell, besides rupturing insides, instilled a devastating sense of panic within its victims.

It seemed that, in exchange for its fatal capabilities, the solution to not being affected by it as much, was made rather simple. One just had to dip themselves in focus on something that gave them the greatest sense of stability, and of course, this could be done with minimal effort by strong experts.

It was fascinating to learn with the right kind of organs and a strong soul. It had been. But now...

"What are they stopping for? Are they suddenly getting scared?" Ashema scowled.

There was no movement from both sides for a full minute.

The tension grew with each passing second, making it seem as though whenever either side decided to act, the outcome was going to be outrageously devastating, but the thrilling scene of many soldiers from both sides – with one outnumbered terribly by the other 15 to 1 – didn't happen even when three more minutes passed.

"Are you kidding me? Am I going to have to be the catalyst these bastards need? The risk is far more rewarding than this bizarre wait! Should I act?" Ashema grumbled, his gourd in hand. The fact that the blood he had stored in it had long been guzzled to nothing didn't help his ability to restrain himself.

Should he wait? Should he just jump in and worry about the consequences later? Screw all the evaluations he had done about the strength of these creatures?

Ashema was close to it, but he held himself back.

Not yet.

He had just decided to rise further into the clouds and wait when...

"What?"

Squinting, Ashema saw it clearer even in the night.

It was behind the long-eared people ready for battle, floating above the trees inconspicuously, almost blended full well within the refined canvas of night.

Darkness shaped like a human.

Ashema was stricken.

It was beautiful.

It was shaped extraordinarily well, with a long robe attached to its figure as though it were some kind of extra limb that encompassed the whole body.

"Marvellous! What is that? Is it... What is it? Do creatures of this world actually know how to use the darkness better than us?" Ashema questioned himself. Indeed, his people were the best at using the darkness.

They used it for travel, combat and creation. Being born away from the natural sun had granted them such prowess, after all.

Ashema was thrilled. Without a second thought, he decided to move and explore this oddity. He did not, however, throw caution to the wind.

#### Chapter 950: Meeting The Projection

The Projected Skullius paid closer attention to the Maqi fleet, if it could even be called that. As underwhelming as the prospect of 1,000 men pitted against 15,000 seemed, he had to admit that Maqi's sudden halt caused unfathomable tension to brew. Perhaps it was because everyone knew that Maqi didn't stop because they were afraid.

If anything, it would be because they were very confident in themselves and were letting their enemies marinate in the pool of uncertainty that came with having that knowledge.

Skullius saw the Sif leading the 15,000 over the glinting ice platform show steady signs of breaking under the pressure. She was likely contemplating which of the two ideas in her mind to execute; whether to attack or to wait for the attack to come.

Skullius was amused.

"They've kept up the reputation. Even without showing themselves, everyone knows who they are dealing with. Well, in any case... there is no correct choice here. Whatever they do won't stop Maqi from doing what they want to do," he said before floating a little lower.

He then looked behind him, following a wide path within a great forest that came several tens of meters after the clear coast.

Benyn and his force of 100,000 were on the way, only about a minute or so from arriving.

'Well, that might change things a little bit...' Skullius thought before returning his focus to the silent tension.

Right then, something odd happened.

Skullius saw darkness bubbling up close to him; the pure sort of darkness he had only ever seen a handful of times with Crude Vision. It trembled and rippled before creating a bird shape, much like

that of a particularly large crow which stretched out its large wings and revealed a set of crimson eyes.

'What is this?' Skullius frowned and moved away.

It was creature of darkness... but no, it actually had a texture of its own, something akin to stone. Strange.

As Skullius turned vigilant, unwilling to fully bet on his intangibility in this form, something even stranger happened.

The odd bird opened its beak and a flood of darkness exploded out of it, burying its whole and threatening to do the same to Skullius!

The Projected Luman zoomed out of the way, avoiding the darkness' approach swiftly, but after fleeing ten meters away, he found that the flooding black didn't make an effort to pursue him. Instead, it began to gather around to create an odd, warping vortex that attained a tinge of ash grey within its centre.

'Is this what was stealing away the people from the Auroras? No. That one was different...' Skullius thought without losing his focus on the thing before him. Damn it, there were too many applications of darkness happening at once around Opungale.

A moment later, something emerged from the vortex before him, which Skullius immediately realised was like some kind of portal.

It was a long and large arm that ended in a rugged and freshly charred hand, as though dipped in fire, which clawed at the nothingness, as though to use it as leverage to pull on.

The hand gripped the darkness from the vortex, and in the next moment, a terrible, spiked armour that looked as though it were forged out of amalgamations of frightening beasts, their remains molten over it, showed, followed by a set of great, twisted ebony horns and face of shiny grey.

Ashema emerged, and his right glowing crimson eye pierced the Projected Luman with a look of interest.

He grinned as the darkness he emerged from dissipated along with the crow which conjured it.

Skullius focused his vision on the odd creature.

What in the world was this? And why was it grinning and looking at him lustfully?

Despite how hideous it looked, though, Skullius had seen worse, and his focus was more on its intention. It didn't appear where he was by accident, that was for sure.

'Is it here with the Maqian army? Hmm... no way,' Skullius thought with certainty. Then what?

The creature didn't show signs of hostility despite its unappealing expression. And above that, Skullius saw it open its mouth and speak.

Its voice was grating and shiver-inducing, worse yet... he couldn't understand a word of it.

"What?" Skullius said quizzically after the incomprehensible words came and went.

The creature looked pleasantly surprised for some reason, as though his confusion was what it had expected to see. And then...

"What... are you?"

This time, Skullius heard it speak in the Known Language.

He frowned. Was it using some kind of communication skill? It seemed so.

"What's it to you?" Skullius asked.

Ashema grinned even more deeply.

"Well, I am in-"

BOOOOOOM!

A sudden conflagration of fat, green flames interrupted Ashema, glowing bright and releasing an absurd pressure that shoved him hundreds of meters away at stunning speed!

The forestry nearby was erased casually, beaten into dust or burnt into it by the ferocity.

Skullius, who remained in place, unfettered, turned to the coast and he was shocked by the look of the bulbous catastrophe that rocked the world from where the 15,000 strong had stood; an explosion that looked like hundreds of conjoined large, green balloons growing outward while incinerating everything in sight without any resistance whatsoever.

Even without with the touch of the flame, the blazing shock-waves they released ground the land, nature and the beginning of the towering barrier around Opungale with relative ease!

A fading trail of green from the leading ship in the formation over the oceans revealed that, in the tense confrontation... the Sif's vanguard had been had. They had waited for an attack, and when it came, it devoured them all in an instant.

Skullius grinned, completely forgetting the unlikely guest who had just showed up moments ago.

'And just like that...' he thought as he withdrew further away from the coast to hide.

When the vicious flames began to subside, Skullius saw, amid the harshly molten land and ungodly crater, the barrier's shattered face attempting to heal itself but to no avail. Remnants of the green flames stuck to the torn edges were preventing it from happening.

The Maqian fleet then began their advance, and while adopting a quicker pace, they reached the shore within seconds.

Soon, they began disembarking; men and women sculpted and chiselled consistently, on their bodies only hides that hid their midsections and plump chests, nothing else. They held all sorts of weapons, except swords, and their bodies exuded terrifying pressures.

Even Masters felt incredibly threatening, and that wasn't even accounting for the forty-one Incandescent Stagers within the group, not to mention...

'That old hag...' Skullius narrowed his eyes on the old woman who had just disembarked.

She...she was trouble.

He could tell at once.

She was followed from behind by a bold-looking young man who twisted his neck this way and that and then faced a certain group among the disembarked who looked out of place.

It was roughly a hundred combatants who wore slender, lustreless steel armour, held tall shields and wielded odd-looking staves that looked like they were made out of smooth porcelain, with different kinds of gems over them.

Skullius reeled.

Those weren't forces from Maqi.

Those were probably from Emeradis!

'They are their allies in this...?' Skullius thought, puzzled.

Even more had begun to brew in his head when suddenly... the old hag among the assembling soldiers shot her eyes in his direction!

...!!!

'Damn it!' Skullius cursed.

He would have been confident in his ability to flee... if he hadn't already seen that monstrous hag stretch her hand in his direction and gain a steady, unseen grip over him!

He was captured!

He couldn't move!

Skullius grunted. His only option was to return to his body, but he didn't know if that was going to be easy. Even if he was successful...

...!

Right then, Skullius felt another vicious grip on his Projected form.

It squeezed and pulled him away from the sight of the old woman whose face grew ugly with suspicion.