

# Undead 951

## Chapter 951: Graceful Monolith (1)

The great tug on Skullius came at the best possible moment.

The Hybrid Luman felt the difference in the two grips which exercised fierce dictation over his Projected form. One was more magical – powered by some phenomenal application of mana that simply ignored the fact that he was immaterial – something he wasn't familiar with, while the other... the other was as though someone was using [Evil Darkness Meshing] on him.

There was a more refined sort of control in the pull that dragged him towards the surviving net of trees.

Odd. To think there was someone else who could finely control [Evil Darkness]...or was it simply that they had an affinity in darkness that encroached on the territory of the Insurgent Magnus' own version a little?

Skullius wasn't sure, but he wasn't too keen to understand it right now.

While watching the distance grow between himself and the old woman, the Projected Luman hadn't decided to stay and thank his helper.

Naturally, he knew full well just who was responsible for the second grip, but he didn't quite like the idea of lingering here when that old hag had just landed on the island, especially now, when he was practically defenceless.

Thus, as soon as Skullius saw the ashen face of Ashema grinning at him, his large hand outstretched in his direction... he deactivated [Crude World Projection].

At once, bold, dark chains streaked briskly from the far distance, wound around Skullius' black form and then, with a fierce pull, they yanked him back at ridiculous speed towards his body!

Ashema, who had expected the company of the curious dark figure he had just met – one who didn't rupture into a mess when he spoke and was actually willing to converse instead of turning hostile – was disappointed to see him vanish.

He was whisked away so fast that he couldn't follow with his eye just where he had gone and it wasn't quite wise to follow brashly.

"Flitted through my fingers..." Ashema said with a scoff, looking into the distance. "Oh well... now I have more to look forward to."

He summoned the crow which had allowed him to move here again, and watched it fly up into the sky. Soon, it made way for him to transport himself into the sky, above the nest of clouds, discreetly. After all, Ashema too was wary of the scouring gaze of the old woman on the shore. She had yet to let the matter just now slide, and thankfully, she had yet to pin Ashema as a target.

\*\*\*

Maxim's soul almost left her body when a length of dark chains exploded out of Skullius' limp body unannounced, and returned in near the same instant with the dark twin of the body that she had been protecting for the last eleven minutes.

With a vicious jerk, Skullius' Hybrid Luman body regained its spunk. Skullius lifted his head, blinked several times and took a deep breath as he stood up. For a few moments, he lingered on the mystery of that horned creature and its uncanny powers, but he cast that aside in the next moment.

"Next time, you should warn me that your ability has in-built nightmarish effects! What justification is there for you having to be dragged back by those huge chains? Is it even comfortable?" Maxim said with a frown, her hand placed on her flat chest.

"Sorry about that. That isn't normally the case. It was just an emergency retreat this time around," Skullius replied while straightening his dark robe, as though it had the capacity to become rumpled. "And well, you should know that comfort isn't exactly something that applies to me."

Skullius peeked into Maxim's room as she shook her head at his response. He saw Vali still seated down, her eyes closed and the expansive lilac flame – her conduit – glowing beside her.

"Still not done, huh?" he murmured.

"She did say it could take a while," Maxim said. She sized up Skullius a few times. "You look a little tense. Is it that bad out there?"

The fact that Maxim noticed the tiny bit of uncertainty Skullius was hiding didn't impress the Hybrid Luman at all. He frowned at the pink-haired woman before answering:

"Well, it isn't good... I'll tell you that. As expected, the force Maqi sent is formidable. They are also committing to the showmanship a little too hard."

"Of course, they would," Maxim said. "Who wouldn't show off a little if they had the means. We've all wanted to remind those weaker than us who's boss at some point. I can relate, but I sure don't like being on the receiving end of the same. Are we going to just sit on our hands until she finishes up?"

Skullius chuckled.

"No. Not really," he said. "We are going to make some perfect preparations."

And indeed, that was the case.

Skullius felt that the time was right.

The Seed, was ready to bloom.

It was more so his instinct which dictated the time the Seed he had planted into the rich lake needed before it warranted bloom. At this point, many factors urged Skullius, including urgency, which was why he wasn't really concerned with whether it was ready or not. Well, in this case, it happened to have matured enough.

"What preparations are we going to do?" Maxim asked curiously.

Skullius didn't give a verbal answer.

Instead, he felt for the blessing that now dwelled within his body – [Graceful Monolith of the Eminent] – and he had it reach for the Seed.

The moment his intent was registered, Skullius' body became bathed in radiant, golden white light that forced his four wings to spread out fully, breaching their restricted forms on his robe.

[The 'Preeminent Attegoth' becomes the profile of your Seed's manifestation]

[Your Seed is blooming...]

A fierce golden streak like an arrow rising into the sky shone from far away before stopping short of penetrating the innocent night sky to broaden, becoming so wide it could have easily been mistaken for a mountain of sparkling mineral.

Maxim saw the immensity of this light barrelling from far away and shining even through the walls of the mansion, which stupefied her.

She wasn't the only one to see it, however.

Everyone within the mansion was drawn to it, nonmatter how hidden they were within the grand shelter.

Shannazah, Kudobtu, Sevil, Viccil, Cosycn...

They rushed out of the mansion to see what the light was... where it came from.

Skullius was the only one to not see the product of his own effort. Instead, he invested in feeling his connection towards it grow immensely and also...

[Transfer of all skills from 'Stasis' to 'Preeminent Attegoth' successful]

[Racial link established]

[Self-defence auto functions assembling...]

Skullius grinned.

Perfect. How perfect.

His instincts were right on the money. The Seed had fully matured just when he decided to awaken it and now... all he desired was a success. It was almost as though he had gotten... lucky.

Now all that was left was...

## Chapter 952: Graceful Monolith (2)

In a seemingly boundless Aurora that had maintained a state of stability more profound than any other settlement in Opungale, even when the threat of the gong and the man-napping had been at large, Queen Embrell had on an ashen face as she was given astounding news by a panting scout.

"What?" she said with her eyes bulging.

The scout, looking worse for wear, and with his face as though it had met that of a ghost, seemed to throw measured decorum out the window and answer with blatant terror.

"They... they were killed. All of them. They didn't even fight back..." he damn near shrieked.

Darwel who stood by her mother's side paled.

This scout didn't mean the 15,000 who had been stationed by the shore to receive the enemy.

No.

He was speaking of Benyn and the 100,000 who had just left to meet the Maqian army and possibly reinforce the 15,000 waiting by the shore. By Benyn's instruction, he, along with ten others, had been tasked with splitting from the charge and watching from different directions in case the enemy decided to split off to cause more chaos.

Their numbers were known, and so was their strength, thus, it wasn't strange to assume that the Maqian force was confident enough to multi-task even with heavy numbers of opposition against them.

That assumption had turned out to be too true.

After swiftly dealing with Benyn and the others, the scout had seen the treacherous man-beasts from Maqi split up, heading in unusually specific directions; and one of them was this Aurora.

"They couldn't do anything. It was over in the blink of an eye. They... they are coming! They split into groups! One of them could be arriving here at any moment!" the scout was practically screaming as he then fell to his knees.

The Queen's face turned fierce.

Benyn...

Even if he was slain, along with the entire force she sent ahead... what it is that this scout had seen, or felt to cause him to fall into such despair?

"Mother... Your Majesty..." Darwel called to Queen Embrell who glanced back at her.

"I expected this much, my dear. Don't be afraid. That's why I wasn't convinced with your father's plan to try and talk it out with these brutes. Speaking of him, he should be preparing what we need..." she said comfortingly.

Darwel wasn't sure she believed her mother's words. What she had faith in instead, was her mother's strength. Sooner or later, she knew the Queen would step in personally. It was a norm in Opungale.

Her concern lay with Festos at the moment. If the enemies had split up, was it not possible that they would soon besiege the Wonderfall Torrents, which was closer to the shore than where she was currently was? Darwel had no doubt that Seville and Festos had gone there.

WAAA!

The audible travel of golden light suddenly ruptured her line of thought, calling for her attention and that of anyone at all with a working pair of ears.

An eager glow contended against the dimness of night, climbing close to three kilometres into the sky as a texture-less pillar of golden white, its girth about as large as a small town.

"What is... that?" Queen Embrell questioned, puzzled. She was dazzled. The light was too beautiful, so much so that she didn't even consider that it might be a product of the enemy's machinations.

A lens flare arched behind the pillar, emphasising its grandeur, which entranced everyone in the Aurora, including the disciplined army waiting to be dispatched towards the hostiles. For a moment, they all lost their strained composure and gaped at the mound of light which suddenly adopted a different appearance, odd details smoothing over the solid golden white face.

Thick, stacked bones bathed in radiant golden-white made up the broad base of the construct, light cracks over them just barely revealing that they weren't random logs. They were absurdly large, thickest at the bottom, turning slightly slender as they rose, and becoming marred with lengthy, sparkling wings that grew increasingly large the higher the thing went.

When the wings became massive, turning into great, elongated beams of light that flapped slightly, they were then proceeded by an inflated canopy that spotted tens of thousands of huge skulls that glinted of a graceful bluish-white jade, all with blinding sockets and gaping mouths that emitted an eerie hiss that was heard all throughout Opungale.

Darwel was the only one to wear a big smile when she saw the great construct.

The direction it sprang up from... it had to be...

"Mother, you don't need to worry about that," she said quickly.

\*\*\*

Skullius felt everything get set promptly and without warning, he suddenly flashed past Maxim and appeared over the mansion, looking at the new Preeminent Attegoth with Crude Vision.

"It's beautiful..." he said.

Skullius' blessing, received from the Deity Luserus, [Graceful Monolith of the Eminent], was rather simple.

It allowed the Hybrid Luman to split off parts of himself, whether physical or otherwise and attach them, rather, preserve them, in a separate entity of his choosing. Said separate entity had to be something that already existed, though its nature didn't matter.

The entity Skullius chose would be turned into a Seed and be perfected for the merge with the elements Skullius chose, to work with them perfectly, removing weakness and breaking their limits. When it matured, it would be as though the parts of himself Skullius added were naturally a part of the result...

and in the best of cases, the Hybrid Luman would have a second self, equipped with bits of himself.

This best-case scenario was currently what Skullius was enjoying. The entity he chose to bond to, was the Preeminent Attegoth.

Skullius had stripped himself of all his skills and attached them to the Preeminent Attegoth, turning into his Grace Monolith.

The Preeminent Attegoth was a construct of [Just Light] that executed Skullius' whims, whether complex or simple, as long as its mark – a half skull – was branded on it.

[Graceful Monolith of the Eminent] had even gone so far as to greedily swallow the blessed, sacred structure that was the Luminants' shrine and added it to the Seed that the Attegoth was imbedded into, and thus, now the Attegoth had traces of the shrine!

"A nice bonus. Hopefully you don't mind watching me from there, Luserus..." Skullius said mockingly.

All this said, he was just getting started.

The next course of action was...

['Greatest Mana Manipulation' has been activated]

['Greatest Mana Attraction' has been activated]



Skullius had not said a word, or made a conscious effort with his body.

The Preeminent Attegoth had done it all. The skills imprinted into its great body ignited, only needing his mana to activate.

However, even that was about to be a burden that Skullius didn't bother with, because...

VWOOOOON!

All throughout Opungale, the staggering range of the Graceful Monolith, mana was pulled towards the Preeminent Attegoth with furious suction... and it didn't resist because Skullius, the Luminant, urged it all to head for the towering golden construct in the distance while pointing towards it.

Pure mana.

Mana lingering from the dead.

Mana lingering from the living.

Mana from white cores.

Mana from blue cores.

Mana from Sif purple cores.

The entire continent trembled for a few seconds, and clarity was subdued as the gusts of mana which became like vicious winds in their traversal to what was calling them.

Soon, they were all contained within the Preeminent Attegoth which immediately, without Skullius even suggesting it, began to create its own mana core!

One that was tinged purple...

Chapter 953: Graceful Monolith (3)

It may have boggled the mind why Skullius hadn't bothered to create an additional mana core for himself with all the mana he often stole from enemies.

It had crossed his mind before, obviously. In fact, the Hybrid Luman had even created a mana core to sustain the Chieftain Screens in the Bryne Family Estate.

The challenge was, the composition of a purple mana core was incredibly dense, and unlike with a blue core, which he himself had, Skullius couldn't recreate the natural integrity of mana so dense. He had tried to learn it, making a certain degree of progress when studying the cores of powerful Cluster beasts, but another challenge presented itself.

Mana cores were connected to the body and the soul, and even if he managed to create a purple one, tethering such dense, compact power to himself was nearly impossible with just [Greatest Mana Manipulation]. Furthermore, a mana core was connected to the soul, and only after this specific connection was forged did it become able to generate its own mana.

That's why Skullius preferred to store mana as simple condensed balls which ignited at a touch, acting as an extension of his own mana core rather than their own functional mana core likely to collapse with his lacking skill.

Now, he was about achieve just what he had been hoping for in the past, as the Preeminent Attegoth was akin to another Skullius that operated at the same level as him.

"There..." Skullius said, looking at the giant construct's mighty midriff. The heavy gusts of mana flowing into it were forcefully shaped into a ball, and rapidly, they were crafted into the mana core's Centre – the innermost portion – then the Refinery, then the Shell.

The mana core first adopted a blinding white radiance, then it turned blue and then... purple.

OOOOM!

The condensing of the mana was as quick as it was deadly.

When the hue became a darker shade than lilac, the Preeminent Attegoth stopped draining the mana from the surroundings, and Skullius felt it settle, making sure that the core was perfectly functional.

Mana channels within the great construct were already formed when it was still a Seed and now they immediately became saturated with mana which eagerly began to flow rapidly, teasing all the skills branded into the Attegoth.

'Good. Now...' Skullius thought and the Preeminent Attegoth groaned.

Two skills were immediately activated.

['Beads of Malevolence' has been activated]

['Gradius Order Halo' has been activated]

At once, mana was consumed, and the area around the brilliant Attegoth became significantly darker than it had been. All the luminance was stolen by the emergence of 700,000 pure black orbs the size of a human head, all saturated with the purple mana from the Monolith and buzzing around it at unfathomable speeds that the average Incandescent Stager wouldn't be able to react to.

Their movements caused great typhoons over the lake from which the Preeminent Attegoth had risen from, and very subtly, when ten of them passed at a time, space could be seen bending lightly.

At the same, a great golden runic halo appeared over the Graceful Monolith, casting specks, rather, flakes of twinkling silver all over it.

This was the effect of [Gradius Order Halo], which had been [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc], a Special healing skill. Now, as it had been promoted to a Super Skill minutes ago, its properties were outrageously more powerful.

"That should be enough defence for the time being..." Skullius said, satisfied. The pulsing purple core in the Attegoth made him particularly happy. Even though it couldn't self-replenish, it was stable, and having it was still a dramatic bonus. He could even tap into that mass of power if he wanted.

With a cheery smirk, Skullius chuckled, and in the next moment, the simple clothing he wore underneath the large robe of darkness was burned away as a suit of armour so red it might have been black, smothered itself over him in a buttery transition.

It was slim, sleek, with a high, thin collar that hugged his neck intimately, as well as greaves and gauntlets that traced the Skullius' limbs with impeccable devotion.

'That feels better,' thought before exercising the authority he had over the natural surroundings. He felt and saw the trees and even the waters, which allowed him to catch the reactions of Shannazah and the others who were looking at the Preeminent Attegoth with wonder and awe. It was amusing.

Cosycn and Seville seemed to have an idea what it was, or at least they recognised its connection to him, and thus they had exaggerated looks of hype, while the rest were puzzled.

'Heh...'

Skullius' senses were suddenly forcefully shifted, and he was made to look in the direction of the shore where the Maqian army was likely to come from, and he noticed that they were at least five Aurora's between the shore and the Wonderfall Torrents.

Furthermore...

'That was fast...'

Two of the five Auroras were quite literally on fire.

Skullius didn't know how the enemy had managed to set an entire city ablaze while skewering the Sif combatants within it on long, wooden spikes from their backs and their mouths, lining them up neatly right at the centre of the Aurora, in such a short period of time. Masters and Incandescent Stagers alike were treated the same.

Skullius couldn't imagine that the guardians of the Aurora had even gotten a chance to fight back at all.

Slain civilians in the hundreds of thousands were then laid like a carpet around the skewered experts, bleeding, beheaded, butchered. Their killers didn't even seem amused or interested in this 'art' they made. They simply did what they did and moved on, with some taking the time to gaze at his Preeminent Attegoth with mild interest.

'Ruthless as ever...' Skullius thought. The unnatural flora around Opungale was keenly asking him to stop the enemies. He felt his vision focus on the dead without him desiring so.

Such desperation...

'How many are there anyway?'

Fifty.

Fifty enemies were making their way, some Masters and a number of Incandescent Stagers. Skullius had to admit, even the former seemed dreadful to face, and he had been confident that he could eat Masters for breakfast. The Incandescent Stagers on the other hand...

'Would you look at that...' Skullius thought. He saw eleven figures already dashing this way, nearing the falls. They would drop in in a matter of seconds. Probably less.

Skullius grinned. Well, the timing was perfect.

His four wings sank back onto the back of his robes, and with a thought, Skullius felt the mansion squirm. The roof opened up to let him in, as it was made of living natural elements that also obeyed him. With care, he was transported back into the corridor where Maxim's room was. Maxim herself hadn't moved from her original position.

She had a task after all, and she didn't allow her curiosity to lead her away.

When she saw Skullius appear behind her, she made a face.

"What's going on?" she asked with a frown.

"We've got company."

As the words registered in Maxim's ear, there were several ear-splitting booms that rang outside, coupled with the splashing cry of water.

BOOOOM!

The wall at the end of the corridor then exploded violently, and the dark silhouette of a large woman appeared, her shadow cast long by the golden light behind her.

Chapter 954: Eating A Good One!

Maxim didn't spend a micro-moment staring at the emerged enemy. She bolted right along the corridor to deal with the foe before they attacked.

Skullius felt her presence fade, as it had when she and him had fought Baddan; an Auxiliary Technique.

He heard a teeth-rattling boom an instant later, and Maxim's figure flashed towards him, spinning viciously, bouncing on the wall as it came!

Skullius leaned to the side to dodge it, and as soon as it passed him, he heard it pound in the ground tens of meters away.

A trail of blood followed the path Maxim had taken from the obscure figure of the woman ahead, who finally stepped into the corridor, her presence filling it up with suffocating, unreasonable bloodlust.

Skullius could trace her shape and form with his abundant senses alone.

She was quite bulky, her entire body being the true definition of thick. Her calloused skin was exposed freely, leaving only her excessively generous chest and waist covered by a spotted hide that looked as tough as the woman was.

The woman had wild, ginger hair, shaved at the sides, and her face, made ugly by the bestial expression she wore, was partly covered by loose strands of it.

She took heavy steps forward, and then grunted condescendingly at the figure of Skullius.

It appeared she was mute.

Skullius gave her a soft smile as he hid his hands within his robe's sleeves. He did nothing.

The woman's presence flared from her body like a savage wind. It almost seemed corrosive, for the walls recoiled as it expanded from her body, unable to withstand it. There was also the harsh scent of blood from her, not only fresh blood, but the kind that had been accumulating for decades. Somehow, this scent was prominent in her presence, in her mana, as though the two were one and the same.

This woman was a Master. One who had reached the peak of it. One with accolades laced in the blood of thousands or perhaps even more. Considering that most people from Maqi didn't leave their nation often, this woman's achievements, her kills, must have been made locally, through monsters much like herself.

She was no ordinary Peak Master.

She reached Skullius and stood before him, towering over him intimidatingly, her mana brushing against everything chaotically. Most people would have buckled under her already.

Yet, Skullius didn't budge or show a reaction. But neither did the woman. She seemed amused that Skullius didn't react to her like everyone else she met on her way.

He was either strong, foolhardy or both.

Right then, something akin to a translucent, paper-thin plate whipped through the air, heading for the woman's face. Before it hit her, it became three dimensional, released from the imprisoning technique from which it had been held.

It was a large stone block.

It rammed into the thick woman with as much speed as it had been travelling with as a thin plate and shattered in her face, releasing dust and stone bits.

Skullius moved aside just as a bloody-faced Maxim zoomed towards the woman in the moment she took to swipe the dust from her face, her body covered in a thick layer of Perfect Aura. She lunged low, spread her arms and speared into the enemy's torso with all her might.

The Maqian woman was pushed back slightly, her bare feet scraping against the floor for a few meters.

Maxim was stunned when her momentum stopped just after she had barely pushed past three meters. She remained hugging the woman's torso, her Aura flaring mightily to enhance her strength, but the woman... simply didn't move. Not anymore. She didn't attack either.

The pink-haired beauty ground her teeth, focused her Aura and called forth her Genuine Incarnation; a flat paper centipede that swirled around her as she drew back from the woman, and stomped on the floor.

At once, a portion of the floor turned into a large, thin square plate that pivoted up with the weight of Maxim's foot, elevating where the Maqian woman stood, much like how a seesaw would.

The Maqian woman was caught by surprise. She slid down towards the lower end where Maxim was waiting, and as soon as she reached her, Maxim groaned as she threw a powerful straight punch into the woman's face!

The entire floor of the mansion rumbled horribly. Maxim had staked all her Aura into that punch, holding nothing back, and even the enchanted mansion couldn't completely neutralize the excessive force that blew from it.

...And yet...

Maxim turned pale.

The woman... was completely unharmed.

Worse yet, she hadn't even used her Perfect Aura or called her Genuine Incarnation.

She simply took the attack with her body.

Maxim couldn't fathom it. Even if her opponent was a Form User, she shouldn't have been able to take on a powerful strike like that unguarded.



It didn't make sense.

'No way...' she thought while watching as the woman grinned and grabbed her shoulder with an impossible grip that sank into her flesh.

The woman then cocked back her arm back and formed a bulbous fist.

At once, Maxim knew. If that punch connected, she was going to die.

It didn't matter that she had on her Perfect Aura. It defended against mana-based and weaker Aura-based attacks. What was meeting her was raw strength.

Without even looking to be tempered by anything noteworthy, the fist seemed to contain ungodly might.

And it came a moment later, faster than lightning, smashing into its target with horrendous force!

The walls exploded around the corridor, the vines and roots that decorated them seeming to burn away from the force that was generated in that instant, the floor sinking deep!

But...

"You seem capable of taking a punch and throwing a decent one..."

A masculine voice came.

It didn't come anywhere but where Maxim had stood, awaiting her death... only now, the Hybrid Luman stood there, holding the large fist of the Maqian woman with lazy elegance.

Maxim was gaping while laying on the floor several meters away, completely befuddled, as was the Maqian Master before Skullius.

She couldn't understand how-

"How about you take a good one from me?" the Hybrid Luman said with a nasty smirk.

The Maqian woman doubled back.

Skullius didn't follow, but he did pull on his sleeve, revealing the slender blackish-red gauntlet underneath.

The Hybrid Luman made a fist, but he didn't cock back his arm. He didn't need to.

He didn't look for leverage. He didn't it.

All that mattered was that his physical stats were now perpetually bolstered twenty times, making his previous physical strength stat of just over 30,000 jump to over 600,000.

...And that the innate <WEIGHT> property of his mana was no longer 155,000 tones.

The increase in weight wasn't proportional to the amount of mana Skullius had. It had never been. Thus, while it didn't get multiplied twenty-fold, it still did become hideously overstated.

But of course, to truly mock the Form User in front of him, Skullius added his gravitational powers into the mix and the sweet tang of a skill called [Bombardier Bangster Fist Arts] before vanishing from sight and landing his fist mercilessly into the woman's chest!

The mansion had no way of containing what came next...

Chapter 955: Marked! (1)

Cosycn had on a frown as he stared down the brute before him; a man with a heavy scar down the middle of his face. He was a mere Master, but he was fearless. He wielded a bloodstained axe that looked to be made of some kind of sturdy monster's bones. It had an evil presence that sickened him, and worse yet, it corrupted the pretty waters outside the mansion.

The royal Sif guard would loved to kill this man. Well... he had killed him, twice even. But the issue was, there were fourteen of this man around.

After chanting something with the axe close to his face, this man multiplied into more than a dozen of himself with pretty much the same physical properties. The clones had excellent synergy, and

would switch the axe between themselves. The one with the axe was granted unbelievable augments to their physical prowess, and Cosycn had almost been hacked by the axe.

It was powerful enough to break his defenses.

Cosycn wanted to use his Territory and end this quickly, after all, he sensed more enemies approaching from above, but there was another problem.

The Wonderfall Torrents wasn't a large space, and Shannazah, as well as Kudobtu, Sevil and Viccil were battling their own opponents, two of which were powerful Incandescent Stagers. It was already crowded here, and erecting a Territory would cause chaos, likely forcing the enemy to respond with their own, which was a bad idea.

After all, whenever two or more Territories clashed...

CRACKLE.... BOOOOOM!

The mansion behind Cosycn, suddenly erupted like a volcanic mountain while humming and rumbling vehemently!

An unmatched force cascaded out of the mansion, sweeping away the misty waters, the falls, and unanchored experts without compromise!

The limited space in the Wonderfall Torrents was suddenly inflated by a ruthless wind, debris and dust, all of which spewed from the massive hole that had opened up in the face of the mansion with wisps of thick smoke blowing from it.

Needless to say, this interruption nabbed the attention of the combatants who had been battling below, and they all looked up to see what in the world could have caused it.

\*

Maxim didn't know what kind of face to wear. She ended up choosing to sigh and clutch her head as she looked past Skullius' rippling robe of [Evil Darkness].

The enemy who received his fury... that Maqian woman...

She didn't exist anymore.

She was dead, but also, she was something akin to ash now.

Not even her bones remained.

Skullius looked at his fist and twiddled his fingers before looking back at Maxim who slowly rose.

"Overkill?" he asked.

Maxim didn't answer immediately.

She gave another sigh.

"No. You got rid of that taunting chest of hers. It was just the right amount of kill to me..." she said while wiping the blood from her face.

Skullius laughed.

"Is that why you were so determined to beat her?" he asked.

Maxim turned and opened the door to her room, which was still mostly intact.

"I don't have to answer that..."

Skullius smirked and looked at the massive gaping hole, and ruptured floor which began a few paces from where he stood.

'I did overdo it a little. But then again, because of that, I'm now aware of the right amount punishment the average enemy needs...' he mused.

His overall strength was absurdly high at the moment, likely higher even than most Peak Masters, as were all his other stats.

However, what truly tickled his excitement was the fact that his mana's <WEIGHT> property was now over 1,7 million tones!

The fact that his mana value was inflated by twenty times, exceeding the 2 million mark from its initial 105,000, contributed to this, but what always had greater stakes in his mana's unique trait, was his degree of knowledge in mana.

Skullius was still working with [Greatest Mana Crafter], but his relationship now superseded bounds like those of skills because of his enhanced racial quality ever since [Son of Luserus] was awakened.

That was what had caused the phenomenal increase in weight.

But the disintegration of the enemy couldn't be owed only to the million tones, and the raw strength stat.

No.

[Bombardier Bangster Fist Art] was a powerful technique that gathered the user's mana – as much as they wanted – into the point of contact of their physical attacks and ignited it violently.

Skullius had been tempted to use the purple quality mana from the Preeminent Attegoth for this technique... and he had given in to that temptation.

Thus, the result.

"Promising..." Skullius said, and he moved into Maxim's room.

Vali was still seated on the chair, her conduit burning beside her. She hadn't been rattled by the noise, or perhaps she had been, but just didn't mind it. She kept at her task without allowing anything to break her focus.

"She trusts us a bit too much," Maxim said.

"Rightfully so," Skullius said.

"Rightfully? I don't think I'm going to be much help if I can't even handle one Master," she said, seeming to relive the ordeal moments ago more than once in a second.

Skullius merely smiled at her words and turned away.

He silently snapped his fingers and Maxim jerked as she felt something appear right below her throat.

It was half a skull, glowing in gold, burned into her skin.

A brand like this had appeared on Vali as well. Maxim was puzzled and was about to ask Skullius about it when she saw that he was gone.

He was standing by the hole, looking outside, the wind and humidity beating against his light auburn hair with two bits of black mixed in.

He saw more enemies leap down along with the falls.

"There's a lot of them..." he whispered to himself.

He could already see two Incandescent Stagers down below, battling Shannazah and Kudobtu. The freaks looked pleased by the challenge, after all, those from the Houses of Pelian were also freaks of nature, and wouldn't die as easily as the experts from the Auroras.

"Lord Luminant!" Skullius heard Cosycn cry out as he leapt towards him.

Four figures, identical, all with a similar presence hurled themselves at him with hideous glee. They cackled in an unknown language, and as they reached the mansion, they jumped and sped at him with different styles and directions of attack.

Skullius, through his extra senses saw that there were more of them stalling an eager Cosycn who killed several of them in an instant, but one of them with an ugly axe turned the Sif guard wary.

These clones were all rather quick.

The first of them reached Skullius.

Again, the Hybrid Luman saw that these Maqians didn't bother to use their Aura.

They must have thought he was easy pickings, that not using their full powers was a sign of strength.

Skullius wore a chilling grin as he came face to face with the speeding foe.

"What a way to die..." he said, and on the clones' unprotected foreheads, a mark appeared.

It was a half a skull brand, but it wasn't tinged in gold. Instead, it was red.

The Preeminent Attegoth in the distance groaned, and everyone with the red mark exploded into flame.

#### Chapter 956: Marked! (2)

The roar of four giant balls of reddish orange fire that had about as much intensity as the sun was jarringly shocking.

It had happened so fast and without warning. The heat produced was staggering, and it ate away at the mansion greedily.

The four experts to leap for Skullius were completely submerged within the conflagration. Whether they were screaming in pain or not was unknown, because the grumble of the fire was louder.

And as though to ensure that the victims would cook past medium rare at the very least, the giant balls... exploded with even more fierce heat, doubling in size!

The radiance cast in the Wonderfall Torrents was too brilliant for the average eye, and it went without saying that so was the heat.

However, the Hybrid Luman moved among the four stationary globes comfortably.

The Preeminent Attegoth had cast [Ungodly Flames of Debauchery] on those that had been marked, and since the skill, which was merely Special, was cast using quality of mana far beyond that which that which was necessary, its effects were augmented tremendously.

Cosycn, among everyone else witnessing the scene between squinted eyelids, was amazed.

'So easily...' he thought.

He saw that the skill which Skullius used was struggling to end the four foes quickly, but because it seemingly wasn't going to stop – as though powered by an infinite fuel source – it dealt more and more damage over time.

The Sif saw Skullius look down at everyone, an unsettling grin on his face and...

VWOOSH! VWOOSH! VWOOSH!

All of the remaining clones were set ablaze too, including the one he had been battling, which had the nasty axe. He hurriedly backed away.

Skullius scoffed at the burning enemies.

'If only they had their Auras active, they wouldn't have been subjected to this,' he thought. That was the punishment for arrogance... or maybe madness too.

The red half a skull marks to appear on the enemies' foreheads were different from the regular golden marks. After the Preeminent Attegoth experienced rebirth to become to become a Graceful Monolith, coupled with the rise in [Just Light's] rise in affinity to S, it had attained a distinction in its marks.



These red marks could be attached to unguarded targets, which made sure that all attacks Skullius threw... never missed.

Also...

Several Masters flew from the sky, heading for Skullius.

With the Hybrid Luman's will, they were all branded with the red mark in an instant, and as Skullius gave them a dismissive gaze, they were suddenly stalled in the air.

They paused, as though space had frozen around them, keeping them still within its embrace.

If one overcame the reddish glare from the twelve balls of fire, they would find that the victims had lost their skin colour, adopting a bluish tone.

[You have activated the skill 'Static Limbo'. The targets have been afflicted by Serenity. Due to the difference in the prowess, effect lasts for 1 minute]

What had stricken the six Masters stuck in midair, was indeed [Static Limbo]!

The evolution of the Preeminent Attegoth to developing the red mark, created a circumstance where, like the Null Devil King, Skullius could use [Static Limbo] on multiple targets by forcefully giving the skill many targets to attack, something he hadn't been sure how to do after seeing the higher Null Lifeform do it.

Such a thing would normally be dictated by the skill in question, but the Preeminent Attegoth extended the dimension of the skill, and this wasn't the only instance.

Skullius raised his hand, and a green blade with a golden hilt appeared in his hand.

He didn't need to swing it.

The sword, much like the Preeminent Attegoth heeded his will, and expressed its intent; its will to cut its master's enemies.

The frozen six were hacked to bits by an unseen force, yet, since the time of their stasis had yet to elapse, they remained intact, featuring precise, brutal cuts all over their bodies.

Skullius vanished from where he stood right when the balls of fire finally fizzled out, only to release blackened corpses that coughed up soot and char.

With unreasonable speed, the effect of a newly upgraded skill, he used the suspended bodies as stairs and rose to meet the new enemies, some of whom grew wary enough to ignite their Auras.

"It won't matter still..." Skullius sneered.

He flung Demion's Dance into the air, and in the fraction of time before it disappeared from sight, a golden half a skull mark appeared on it.

Then suddenly, one of the Masters was decapitated by something he didn't see, his blood oozing a moment after what killed him had already hurled itself at another target who managed, after following berserk instinct, to avoid being killed.

Their arm was cleaved from the elbow, however.

As the unseen threat assailed, Skullius also exploded into motion, heading for a man who had been eyeing him with caution from the start.

The man conjured a massive Genuine Incarnation, a bull's skull, lit in turquoise to defend himself immediately.

To Skullius, this didn't matter.

He cocked back his fist, and with a demented grin that drained the confidence from his opponent, he flung a cruel fist straight into the Genuine Incarnation. The force and weight were just too great.

Skullius watched the Incarnation explode even before his punch connected. He also watched as his opponent's crossed arms splatter like into a bloody, fleshy mess that flew everywhere as he wailed bitterly.

The man's torso followed suit, getting borne through with a vigorous blast of pressure exiting behind him in a massive typhoon-like force!

..!!!

Right as the experience for the kill registered in Skullius' dark sight, [Primal Caution] – a cautionary skill he had – warned him of danger.

In an instant, Skullius disappeared from the air and appeared on the roof to the mansion which was crumbling nonstop.

He then raised his hand and Demion's Dance rushed into his open grip after killing one more Maqian.

"What am I up against now?" Skullius said with a smile.

Something fast and heavy landed a few meters from him.

It was a bald man with a face painted in green.

His bloodshot eyes honed in on Skullius and the Hybrid Luman felt a pressure so palpable that it pushed him back two steps.

"Finally! Someone who knows how to have a good time!" the man barked in the Known Language, spit fleeing his mouth which had rotten yet whole teeth.

An Incandescent Stager...

Skullius beamed.

The man before him didn't look at him with careless malice. He looked eager, expectant.

Skullius could relate.

He grinned viciously.

The true test for his powers began here!

He aimed to lunge with Demion's Dance in his hand when...

"Festos!"

Several torn floors below, Vali called the Hybrid Luman's name.

A moment later, a long, sheathed zhanmadao flew out from where the roof was missing.

The grin Skullius wore threatened to split his face in two when it widened.

Immediately, a golden mark appeared on the scabbard of the sword and it was flung into Skullius' grip under the questioning gaze of the opponent before him.

"I didn't think it'd be ready at the sweetest moment..." Skullius said, his face turning darkly pleased.

He felt a giddiness from the Bashful Abomination that spelled in an instant... that Vali had not just been successful.

"Heh..."

Skullius didn't waste any time.

Yet, instead of stating what the Bashful Abomination expected, he vivaciously declared:

"This is my Creed..."

Chapter 957: What Kind of Advancer...

Sevill had seen it. When the Hybrid Luman had risen from his 'slumber' while decked in an unfamiliar air, she had seen, deep within the chasm of his soul, two fresh, gorgeous lights, ethereal gems really, swimming within it. Creeds.

She had hardly believed it, but they were there despite Skullius avoiding her inquisition.

Now, as the Hybrid Luman wore a chilling grin and said words that were beyond the scale of the current state of his body, his bald enemy was alarmed.

"This is my Creed..."

WHOOOSH!

At once, Skullius felt the air whistle as the green-faced Maqian Incandescent Stager rocketed towards him in several folds of a blink and hurled what seemed like a desperate punch at his chest, intent on knocking the wind, not to mention the life out of him.

The blow was atrocious and beyond brisk, but Skullius responded in time. In fractions of an instant, he applied the <WEIGHT> property of his mana within his body...

BOOOOOOM!

When the horrendous noise of the result came, two things happened in rapid succession.

A mix of blunt and shredding forces blew in all directions... but they only told that Skullius had withstood the dangerous blow despite erecting no visible guard, and this shocked the Incandescent Stager.

However, because of the immense weight, Skullius immediately sank through the roof, falling into the mansion in a straight, undisturbed line.

He bore through several floors before catching a glimpse – with his extraordinary senses – of Vali and Maxim as he fell past them.

"What kind of Advancer can use Creeds?! Clever ruse!" a booming voice came from above, its owner rushing down with twice as much speed as Skullius.

The Hybrid Luman didn't give him an answer.

The bald man rammed into him and they plummeted down to the first floor so fast that their crash resounded inside and outside the great mansion. The busted floor they landed in sank inward as though it were rubber, shivering and crumbling, and as it did so, the two monsters who had fallen in bolted out, each dashing in a different direction.

Skullius, with two swords in his hands, stomped onto the floor cocking up several large blocks. His mana sifted into them just when they rose to reach his knees, and he kicked them all in the direction of the Incandescent Stager with surprising speed.

The target recipient saw the attack coming and his eyes widened in both surprise and wariness. He attempted to block the first of the incoming debris but...

...!!!

The arm he raised to guard, thinking the mana-reinforced blocks were probably more of a diversion than anything, was met with a vicious weight and force that had him grunt in pain before making the decision to flash out of the way of all the incoming blocks.

'Neat trick...Just like when I hit him earlier. Is he conjuring mass as he pleases?' the bald man thought while focusing on Skullius who remained still several meters from-

...!!!

The Incandescent Stager promptly turned, his hand whipping into the air like a spear for an attack.

Behind him, a grinning Skullius dodged his piercing blow at the last second, and flicked the Bashful Abomination out of its sheath with his finger. The long zhanmadao sped into the air, its long, chipped blade revealed as rose up and up.

The Incandescent Stager spared a moment to glance at it.

That proved to be a mistake.

A vicious slash cracked down on the bald man from the left side of his face to his right side in a mere blink!

No one could look at the sword's blade, bashful as it was, and remain unharmed. No one but the user.

The slash hardly possessed enough power to greatly harm an Incandescent Stager, but it did have great shock value, and that value worked especially well for Skullius who wore a grin on top of a grin.

"Weren't you prepared to have a good time?!" he called before dishing a hard blow to the man's sternum... using [Bombardier Bangster Fist Art].

The explosive rage of the shockwave that came, not to mention the impact, finally caused the mansion to lose stability and crumble while sending the Incandescent Stager piercing through its walls, past the veil of white falls, past the lateral land behind it and emerging in the next scope of land beyond it.

The bald man let out a groan before hurrying to stand up, his hand on his bare chest where dark bruise could be seen.

He didn't pay the injury much focus though. His eyes were on the Hybrid Luman who appeared from the thin air as though it was the most natural thing, both Demion's Dance and the Bashful Abomination in his hands.

"I've never been forced to keep up with a mere Master... or worse," he said with a hoarse cough that had him spewing out blood from between his rotten teeth. "I had a feeling you were like the Ode. A monster among monsters, capable of fighting several opponents beyond their own rank..."

Skullius sneered.

"The Ode, huh? Must be quite the guy. Did he beat you senseless too back in the day?"

"Like you wouldn't believe..." the bald man said as solid white covered his frame. "...though, that was only when I was going easy on him."

Skullius chortled.

Without warning, he threw Demion's Dance into the air, and as soon as it was branded with a golden mark, it vanished.

Sensing the Incandescent Stager turn tense, Skullius put him at ease.

"Don't worry. It's gone elsewhere... Maybe to your precious Ode..."

The Incandescent Stager scoffed, but it was evident that he was a bit rattled.

He hunched slightly and with a low voice, he began to chant something in an unfamiliar language.

Skullius immediately understood. He was invoking the power of his blessing.

Incandescent Stagers were gifted the ability to use the blessing they were given when they reached the Foundation Stage, which existed only as dormant for others unless they conquered too many Clusters to count.

At once, the ground rippled, and what seemed like dirty tendrils, much too pink and fleshly to be roots or vines, dug into the man's feet and climbed through his skin, their elongated bulges showing from him.

As this occurred, a cubical piece of dirt rose from the ground, then another and another, all about the size of a toddler.

They were dunked in the Incandescent Stager's Nitros as they floated around him, promising an especially unique type of suffering for the enemy.

Skullius looked on with interest. He then turned to the Bashful Abomination, which had insurmountable yearning vibrating from it, and sensed around.

'Well... no one is watching. Might as well...'

Chapter 958: Rot and Reeling



Incandescent Stagers were an utterly cracked bunch.

One thing to know about Stages in general, was that progression from a lower Stage to a higher one did not mean that one lost the powers from said lower Stage.

For instance, when one reached the Master Stage, they did not lose the ability to use the generalised Aura of an Advancer, and as such, when becoming an Incandescent Stager, Perfect Aura was not lost, but Nitros was generally better to use as it served the same purpose, along with boosting one's overall prowess past the 1,000% limit afforded when one reached the Peak of the Master Stage.

But this was not all.

Because one was granted a profound understanding of the soul after finishing the Third Trial, they gained the ability to compel and manipulate weaker souls, which ended most fights against weaker opponents very quickly.

But if that wasn't enough, Incandescent Stagers passively generated Creeds in their refined souls – constructs that allowed them to warp reality to an extent by expending them as a cost. The unpredictability this added, despite the fact that most Incandescent Stagers wouldn't use Creeds recklessly, was harrowing.

On top of this, at this Stage, an Incandescent Stager would be able to use a Majestic Territory, a more profound expression of the self than anything else that came before, not to mention the blessing granted at the start of their journeys, which also became available for them.

Skullius was facing all this, above the fact that experts from Maqi were somehow exceptionally more competent; irritatingly aware, absurdly sturdy, sharpened and fearless. That was why he had not used a red mark on this opponent.

As much as he could afford to give the minimum effort he could, that wasn't going to fly for long, and the current happenings were the greatest indicator of that fact.

'Here it comes!' Skullius thought warily.

The bald Incandescent Stager was about to reveal what his blessing could do, though, as far as Skullius knew, blessings allocated to anyone other than Paladin Champions, weren't that profound.

The Nitros coated blocks of dirt shot from the bald expert and dashed in four different directions, travelling a fair distance before abruptly coming to a halt and sinking into the ground with great thuds. They retained their white glow, in fact, it exploded out in one quick instance, leaving Skullius to wonder...

What was their effect exactly?

He had made plans to flee from his passive stance when he heard the voice of the expert:

"Stop!"

A powerful sensation attempted to press Skullius down, cutting off his ability to move, but his soul's composition wasn't the same anymore, and both him and the expert judged the result in that very instant.

The bald man frowned suspiciously.

'Was it not a ruse back then?' he thought. His opponent's soul felt solid, compact, unfettered by his words.

Curious.

The bald man didn't dwell on it. The momentary pause Skullius took was enough for him to apply his blessing.

Skullius felt it; something akin to a terse vibration in the air that resounded within the bounds of where the dirt blocks marked.

The blocks activated rather violently, and...

Skullius... got the impression that he somehow turned smaller, as though much of... himself, really, was gone.

Exactly half of himself.

Before he knew it, the bald man's painted face was right in front of him, his open palm slamming into the left side of his face, followed by a vicious knee strike to his right side as he keeled from the force of it, and finally an elbow to the pith of his chest!

All three blows landed in half a blink, and as quick as they were, they were so effective that Skullius felt huge chunks from where he was hit get obliterated, turned to no more than rotten indentations. Even his armour wasn't spared.

Skidding back several metres, Skullius narrowed his blank eyes.

'Interesting... Something's happened to me. And this rotting? Is that his Form Using Technique?' he thought, but there was barely even time for more deliberation even with the tiny grain of a brain that was the Omniscient Thought Cracker dividing his thought for improved efficiency.

To Skullius' surprise, when he attempted to increase his durability by piling on weight on himself to dodge the start of another combo against him, he found that... only half of it was conjured – about 850,000!

But that wasn't all.

His endurance.

His strength.

His senses.

His mana.

The quality of everything on his body was brought down to only half their fullest extent!

Against the blow that came for Skullius next, his overall reinforcement proved lacking.

The Hybrid Luman felt several of his bones fracture as an open palm dug in from his other side, a phenomenal force travelling through it.

The bald man truly put his all into the attack, and in a blink Skullius felt all his innards turn rotten, transitioning from fresh and functional, to gooey and gaping.

As he flew, the world crackling at the impact, the bald man guffawed.

"Where's all your earlier confidence? I thought even half of you would still be sniggering in my face!" he jeered as he shot forth to reach Skullius in an instant and jabbed him thrice with his knee directly in his gut, chest and throat, the same effective rot drilling through the points of impact.

Right as Skullius choked from the last blow, the bald Incandescent Stager brought down his hand in a chop to crack it over his opponent's skull.

However...

BAM!

A whistling noise of travel only registered when a chaotic boom rocked the entire area the two combatants were standing in!

Something carrying an ungodly degree of speed, had rushed this way from the far distance and rammed into the bald man, hitting square in the side of the chin!

The damage was minimised greatly by the enhancement from the Nitros, but...

"What... what..." the man swayed and stumbled in the deep crater made by the impact.

His eyes were unfocused and his entire body echoed the fierce force with which the... wait, what had hit him?

The man's doubling, tripling sight caught a glimpse of something black and round floating away from him, disappearing behind the image of the approaching Hybrid Luman who cocked back his arm, vanished for a moment, and then...

BOOOOOM!

A rattling force backed up by 850,000 tons of weight hammered right into the man's nose as his stability was yet to return and he was flung back with a bleeding nose.

Midway through his flight, he tensed his muscles and roared to urge them awake.

However, this only happened after the Hybrid Luman had reached him, his figure soaring above him...completely healed!

...!!!

The Incandescent Stager was alarmed, but he didn't buckle. He didn't have time to.

His opponent unsheathed his uncanny sword again. Its long silver, chipped blade went on full display, but the bald man didn't make the mistake of looking at it again... until he did.

He couldn't help it.

The sword's gleam, which he could see from the corner of his eye, suddenly disappeared, replaced by an unfathomable darkness.

The blade of the Bashful Abomination was suddenly soaked in black which rose to cover its brass hilt as well.

'What is that?' the bald man wondered, a rising unsettling fleeing burning within him.

He saw Skullius raise his sword, and judged that a slash was coming.

However, the Hybrid Luman, with a dark visage of triumph, unexpectedly declared:

"| Your Blessing Is Gone! |"

Chapter 959: True Veneration! (1)

"| Your Blessing Is Gone! |"

At the words, a swath of blacker than night darkness erupted his Skullius' mouth and sped so fast towards his opponent that it might have been the night packing up its belongings and rushing to bash into him.

The sight of the dark tide oozing forth was chilling, but it came and went just as soon as it appeared, with the darkness seemingly flowing past the Incandescent Stager harmlessly before disappearing.

...

Words could not do justice to the amount of surprise and confusion that blasted the bald man right after.

'What was...'

Right then, the blocks which he had positioned in the region around Skullius and himself, suddenly exploded!

At the same time, the Incandescent Stager felt something within his body turn dim, as though it had been a fire raging comfortably in his body, only to be doused by what Skullius had just declared!

The effects of his Blessing...

They were somehow cancelled!

...

'The effects of my Blessing are gone!' the bald man shuddered at the thought and what that meant immediately pounded him in the face, quite literally.

The Hybrid Luman, still suspended above him, nailed a vicious right kick into the man's face.

It wasn't a normal kick; it wasn't one bathed in a mere 850,000 tons of force anymore, and that was why, an absurd mushroom dust cloud followed a horrendous explosion when it met its target.

The bald Incandescent Stager howled in pain as he tumbled from it. The outrageous directional wind that came also carried him forward, and before he knew it, he had crossed a furious forest at hot speed, crashing into a far away Aurora that was mobilising a fighting force of Sif to defend against incoming enemies.

His arrival, along with that of a vicious gust that carried a few Sif and houses away, caused alarm, and the Sif combatants recognizing the enemy, hurriedly lunged.

However, the bald man quickly recovered his balance after emerging from a humble kitchen, though, his face was bleeding profusely, his skull cracked horribly. Seeing the approach of several Incandescent Stagers, he grunted.

"Don't spoil my entertainment!" he cried before whipping his palm out like a whip.

A forceful burst of warm wind barreled forth, followed by a pungent smell, and immediately, a few Incandescent Stagers were turned into rotten, walking corpses with similarly rotted armour as the gust brushed against them... same as the lower Staged experts and civilians in their direct line, who simply turned to foul-smelling sludge on the ground.

The chaos this stirred throughout the rest of the Aurora was treacherous, and the bald man grunted unpleasantly at it all.

But then...

To his surprise, there was a spray of small golden lights over everyone he could see, and the majority of them vanished in the blink of an eye!

...!

Only the Incandescent Stagers and several other experts who had been caught in the bald man's attack just now remained, and all of them... were healed.

They all looked at themselves dazedly, seeing that the vicious smell and decomposition that had clung to them, leaving most of them – even the stronger Masters among them – close to death, was gone before it could kill them.

The bald man's face turned crumpled like paper.

'Again. My technique has been dispelled. Is it him?' he thought.

Right then, the figure of Skullius appeared amid the Sif who anxiously backed away. Several of them, namely Masters, were branded with a golden mark and they disappeared from view immediately.

He then turned to the Incandescent Stagers.

"You owe me for bothering with your lives. Now get out of here and make yourselves useful elsewhere," he said.

It took a second, but it registered to the Incandescent Stagers that Skullius was the one who had healed them and evacuated everyone, and after only slight hesitation, along with a fair amount of restraint, they rushed away..

"Where did you take away the meaningless collateral? Watching them burn as a consequence of a battle beyond them raging nearby is one of the joys of having strength..." the bald man said as he began circling around Skullius, who followed suit.

"How sophisticated..." he merely said.

The man painted in green snorted.

"You have formidable powers. None can easily heal from my technique. Surprisingly, you can handle it just fine..." he said. "And you can somehow extinguish Blessings. I feel I can't use mine for a while."

"I'm not going to answer your questions, you know. It ruins the fun."

The bald man could only pretend to be amused by Skullius' reply. He was wrestling with many questions in his head.



What were all these powers?

That unreal healing property which extended even to others, and especially that darkness...

Skullius grinned.

The former was simply the result of his upgraded healing skill [Gradius Order Halo] which worked on a higher level than [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc] – on a Super level – matching the power of the bald man's Technique which was on a similar level, evidenced by his purple core.

And while [Gradius Order Halo] had the specification to extend to others other than Skullius, like [Static Limbo], it was forcefully given targets by the Preeminent Attegoth, though, unlike [Static Limbo], it had practically unlimited targeting.

As for the uncanny eruption of darkness from earlier...

Skullius moved at the same time as the bald man, only, the latter followed up his lunge with words.

"This is my Creed, bring forth a world of lava!"

...!!!

As soon he began to speak, the ground under Skullius abruptly gained a vibrant tinge of reddish orange, and exploded over a hideously wide range that encompassed the entire Aurora and then spat unreal volumes of lava which rose up to touch the sky!

In a blink, everything was devoured by scorching heat and ash, the abundant greens married to ebony and black, the ground oozing blistering orange.

The shift had been too swift to react to. Lava had suddenly sprang forth.

Skullius had been caught in it in the first micro-instant.

The bald man saw it.

Half of his body was burned badly before his proud recovery ability could kick in.

Haha.

Proud bastard.

He knew it.

Even though this man had the ability to flee, he remained. He wouldn't leave the battlefield like that.

'That's what I wanted to see!'

And in that instant, the bald man sped up to Skullius, grabbed his neck, and slammed him into lava-filled ground with a thunderous boom.

He felt Skullius' flesh vibrantly, uncloaked by an Aura, healing constantly from the burn.

Heh. This bastard was struggling now.

But before he could escape, he had to finish him off.

For that... what better way than-

"You're really having fun with the ghost, huh?"

...!!!

The Incandescent Stager was alarmed.

Skullius' voice came from ten paces ahead amidst the inferno.

He was fresh, unharmed, looking down at him as though he were a fool.

If that was the Hybrid Luman...

Dubiously, the bald man looked at what he was holding down in his hands.

Whatever it was... whatever it had been... he would never get to know because it disappeared after giving him a nasty grin.

Then, the real Skullius tilted his hand, sword in hand and spoke.

"You're fighting a little desperately while trying to prove you're much stronger. Let me reveal this card of mine then, hmm? Then you reveal yours. How does that sound?"

The bald man didn't dawdle. He finally realised that his opponent had too many tricks.

Thus, at the same time, amid the blaze... one man cast his Territory while the other...

Chapter 960: True Veneration! (2)

Several seconds ago...

Skullius felt the forceful grip of the bald man's blessing wane, and just like that his halved strength was restored. His first order of business in the miniscule scales of time that followed, with his opponent dazed at what the plume of darkness that had just done, was to bash the man's head with a vicious, full power kick.

As he watched him flash through thick greens, Skullius took a moment to gather his thoughts.

'I suppose that man's Blessing has something to do with using the ground as a medium for sapping away the strength of whoever is caught in the range of those blocks. It's quite effective...' he thought while his body fully healed all the internal mess dealt by the man's annoying rot technique. His blackish-red armor sealed up too.

'I underestimated the scope of his blessing, but it doesn't matter. As long as I can use my Veneration, I can ignore it. Though the cost...'

Skullius was interrupted by a tug at his senses. The surrounding greenery forced upon his eyes sight, and in the next moment, he was looking at the image of Sif civilians dying by rot.

'Fine,' Skullius thought with a sigh and he vanished from where he stood, appearing in an Aurora; where his attack had sent the bald expert.

Replacing his best speed boosting skill [Destined Warp Steps], was the Super Skill [I Am The World], activated through the Preeminent Attegoth, like [Gradius Order Halo], which he used to heal; the runic halo over the Attegoth right now was a sign that the healing skill was active, protecting it and Skullius simultaneously.

[I Am The World] allowed Skullius to travel to any location within the Preeminent Attegoth's range in less than an instant. And of course, the Graceful Monolith's range, was the entirety of Opungale.

Seeing the chaos caused by the enraged bald Incandescent Stager, Skullius applied golden marks to all the Sif he could, those that were alive, healing them with [Gradius Order Halo] and teleporting them away to distant Auroras using [I Am The World].

The efficiency was unparalleled.

Unlike the red mark, the golden mark – aside from functioning as the limbs of the Graceful Monolith – was meant to benefit allies. By being branded with it, targets, if Skullius willed, could be blessed with anything that the Preeminent Attegoth had, or was linked to.

The results were laid bare.

Skullius was amused by the bald man's reaction to everything, especially his fixation on how his blessing had been dispelled.

'He's still underestimating me, but he's about to break...' he thought,

In the next moment, the bald man used a Creed to catch Skullius off guard. It nearly worked, for splits of a second, but Skullius, employing the help of the skill [Ghost Rending Divine Sword Art], manipulated the Incandescent Stager into seeing a ghost of himself, a fake.

Then it happened.

The bald man broke as he saw that he had yet to even reach the bottom of Skullius' bag of 'tricks'. He immediately mobilized more mana, refining it into Nitros.

'That's what I wanted to see.'

Skullius grinned nastily as he unsheathed the Bashful Abomination again, its whole getting encased in an unreal thicket of black... then he threw it away, high and far.

His opponent clasped his fingers close to his hands and groaned with serious immensity:

"Majestic Territory Expulsion, Festering Tide!"

In an instant, a wash of white bathed the entire space, trapping Skullius and the bald man in its bounds. Then, its pristine coat over the two turned to a dark, murky green – much like a vague, cloudy sky – while under their feet, it became a sloshy mud land that became wetter and wetter by the second.

'It's foul...' Skullius thought as he felt his feet sink little by little.

He was fully at the mercy of the Territory now.

His blue mana core seemed to rebel against him, becoming unable to issue mana into his mana channels, which effectively cut off his ability to reinforce his body and use anything he had within it.

Argh.

This sense of helplessness along with the fact that there was an atrociously putrid smell coming from the domain which ravaged his innards when he took an unneeded whiff of the suffocating air, would have already ended the resolve of anyone else below the Incandescent Stage.

'Filthy.'

Skullius sank to his knees. The mud was extremely thick, so thick that his raw strength wouldn't allow him to leap out.

Worse yet, he felt the wet soil, if it even was that, chewing at his red armor, clearing it from the way and moving onto his flesh.

The rot. It was extreme. And this wasn't even the primary assault of the Territory. It was simply a natural trait of the Imaginary GeoScape!

The bald man scoffed at Skullius.

Unlike him, he wasn't sinking in the mud. While Skullius was analyzing his predicament, he made a different symbol with his hands.

"I won't be teasing or underestimating you anymore..." he said with a dark look that strangely had traces of... respect.

And then...

"Corrupted Rain."

Without delay, fierce precipitation fell from the vague outlines of the dark green clouds in the sky, its color so starkly green that it might have been black!

It was so violent that it looked like thick, long steel rods falling vertically from the sky nonstop!

By the time the rain hit him, Skullius was already halfway through the muddy ground, and each drop that hit simply carved its way through his body, eating away at him without resistance until it emerged on the other side!

In the few seconds Skullius was nailed by the Territory's primary assault function before he was submerged in the liquid rot, his torso almost seemed to melt in its entirety!

He was devoured.

...

The rain continued.

Its foul grace remained, edifying the already potent corrosiveness of the mud.

A second passed.

Then ten.

The bald man didn't assume victory.

He couldn't.

...because he felt that his enemy was still alive in the mud.

A deep frown appeared on his face.

What was coming?

If all this couldn't finish a mere Advancer...

"| To me... |"

A chilling voice so loud that it resounded from the walls of the Territory blared from the mud... followed by an indomitable darkness that dispersed much of the mud in the area while reaching for the Incandescent Stager!

...!!!

The bald man was already on alert, but that didn't seem to matter.

'Damn it!'

As soon the pitch black touched him... he was reeled in like a fish on a hook, his figure darting towards a bloody, broken skeleton smothered in dirt!

From its mouth rose a plume of darkness darker than that which cleared the mud in a spherical pattern, and just when the Incandescent Stager reached it... two shocking things occurred.

A dazzling light bathed the haggard skeleton and, in an instant, strings of flesh whipped over its body.

And then...

"| Twist for me |"

...!!!

The Incandescent Stager was instantly drowned in swathes of darkness that came from the Hybrid Luman, and as it sank deep within him without resistance, he felt it whirl, forcing his body to follow its movement!

"AUUUUUGHHHHH!!!" the Incandescent Stager screamed terribly. Blood and bones speared from his flesh as he angled to the right, twisting abnormally.

Within Festering Tide, the bald man's powers and the efficiency of his powers were increased tremendously, but right now, he didn't feel any of the augments do anything to help him!

And to make matters worse...

Skullius was fully healed a moment later, and with a hideous grin – his red armor reforming around his body – he looked straight at the agonized face of the Incandescent Stager with his blank eyes.

"Come on. You still have Creeds, right? Use them. Give me your all. What kind of an idiot loses in one move in their own Territory?"