

# Undead 971

## Chapter 971: Against Bloods

Skullius had accommodated the possibility of Demion's Dance being unable to kill off this creature in one move. He wasn't at all surprised when the blade was parried. Since he didn't have a way to sense how strong his opponent was, his enemy's feats would have to do as a measurement scheme. The Hybrid Luman loathed the fact that he had to find out in real time like this. Like a backward savage.

On the bright side, he judged that his opponent's reaction speed was way beyond that of even Maqian Masters at least, which meant that he was likely dealing with an opponent that scaled – at least physically – to the Incandescent Stage.

'What is that blood ability?' Skullius thought as he floated back.

Ashema drew the blood from the corpses below with style and ease. He painted a massive portion of the dark, aerial battlefield crimson, with part of the large volumes of the blood that didn't enter his gourd seemingly being rendered for basic attack.

Said basic attacks came in the next moment...

"Blooded Brook!" Ashema cried with glee, and the blood swimming in the air lunged at Skullius with great speed. It simply came as a tidal wave that aimed to smother him or perhaps knock him down to the ground.

The Hybrid Luman used [I Am The World] to zip away and appear right above Ashema, cocking his arm back which had the reddish black sleek armor over it, revealed when he pulled back the arm to his robe.

Ashema immediately looked up, his eyes livid with interest rather urgency.

At once, blood shot from his gourd with a terrifying bang noise erupting from its mouth!

...!

Skullius was a little surprised by its velocity. Shaped like an arrow, the blood whizzed through the air faster than Demion's Dance, and the Hybrid Luman only managed to dodge when it was almost jabbing at his forehead.

The click of Skullius' tongue in annoyance sounded a micro fragment of time later when he appeared right beside Ashema his fist already blowing back the stagnant air between him and Ashema's side.

The dark creature grinned a bit nervously. His scythe swung to block Skullius' knock away Skullius' fist or better yet, sever it, but it was a bit too late.

BAM!

The force that struck Ashema's side was much, much more devastating than he thought. It was enough to kill him outright.

And it would have...

Space turned bloated, then a ruthless shockwave rolled out in all directions. It rose and fell simultaneously, casting a terrible storm in the Aurora below which swept the several living individuals within it in numerous directions, regardless of their Stage!

This was the might of the capacity of the tons Skullius could apply to his physical power, but because he hadn't quite fully adapted to dodging the arrow of blood and attacking at a different angle than he had initially planned, the effect wasn't as strong as he had wanted.

Still, anyone on the receiving end of such power was doomed to explode into chunks.

And that was what should have happened, yet...

...!

Ashema bled from his eyes, nose and mouth, the grin on his face being marred by the red gushing from between his teeth. His armor – which looked like it was forged out of fallen beasts foreign to Aigas – was perfectly fine, even where Skullius' fist had hit.

It seemed...

'Did it absorb my attack?' Skullius questioned as he narrowed his eyes.

Immediately, he willed Demion's Dance to strike as Ashema vomited a mouthful of blood. The green hanger blurred as it once again aimed for the dark creature's neck.

Simultaneously, however, the flood of blood which had been cast earlier, had finally managed to dash back in time, covering Ashema and hardening into a massive, compact sphere!

By the time the cocoon rushed to close, Skullius had flashed out of the way, appearing higher in the sky. Demion's Dance, which hadn't been fast enough to reach Ashema shot up next to him.

'That armor. It took most of the force from my blow. It's quite resilient...' Skullius thought.

The scythe.

The gourd.

The armor.

The blood.

These were – so far – the most important points of this opponent.

'Funny. I thought I'd only have to worry about Territories and Creeds...' Skullius thought, considering how he should break the blood cocoon.

However...

CAW! CAW!

Skullius felt a large, dark bird appear behind him, and immediately after, an immense cloud of odd darkness was conjured around it, rapidly forming a black, spinning oval with a purplish centre. In the fractions of time that followed, Ashema sped from the whirling darkness – a portal of sorts – with alarming speed!

His ashen cheeks were inflated, his gourd in hand, but not his scythe.

He was five inches from Skullius when he rapidly spat shots of blood shaped like arrows right at the Hybrid Luman, a loud bang issuing from his lips each time!

As stunned as Skullius was, he managed to dodge the first shot, which had already carved lightly into his neck by the time the Preeminent Attegoth automatically cast [I Am The World] on his behalf.

'Those blood arrows...' Skullius thought as he emerged fifty meters away... only to find that seven blood arrows were already inches from his position again. 'Damn it!'

The Hybrid Luman's figure flashed from point to point, but the blood arrows accelerated furiously to reach him in an instant!

Skullius frowned.

What kind of attack was this?

He couldn't sense mana or anything in those arrows, but he could already tell that receiving them wasn't a good option.

'Is it the gourd... or is it just how he fires the blood?' Skullius wondered. The blood arrows were extremely fast, but just now, Ashema had spat them from his mouth. That said, last time, it had been the gourd that fired them off.

Skullius dodged and ducked as he soared... until he felt darkness gather above him and a large scythe issue from it at tremendous speed right when he had just evaded a blood arrow!

The scythe was wielded by a charred hand that didn't fully expose itself from the dark gateway.

...

As Skullius could fully automate the activation of skills through the Preeminent Attegoth which shared his skills, he could have dodged, however...

When the curved, ebony blade came, he faced it and applied the full force of both the gravitational effect of his own mana, and its <WEIGHT> property to himself.

MBINGGGG!

Other than attacking, the 1,7 million tons of weight Skullius had could be applied to defense, and that was exactly what Skullius did while also fixing his position in space.

The scythe bit into him, but could hardly even cause a scratch on his armor, thus the rough impact.

To retaliate, Skullius sent Demion's Dance soaring into the gateway, sinking within it to appear on what was reflected behind it and finally... it tasted blood.

Chapter 972: Clash of Darkness!

Skullius had strayed quite far from the original spot he had confronted Ashema, but by tapping into the Preeminent Attegoth's sensory capability while using his skills like [Graceless Hunter] and [Greatest Mana Manipulation], which covered the entirety of Opungale, he managed to see the result of Demion's Dance using the uncanny, dark portal against its user.

As the fact that Ashema's armor could absorb impacts had already been established, Demion's Dance targeting Ashema's neck became a reinforced maneuver. The second it passed through the gateway to emerge in a spot tens of kilometers away, it was already locked onto its flesh piece of choice through the Preeminent Attegoth's vision. Swiftly, it sliced through Ashema and he grunted in pain.

Skullius grinned.

Using [I Am The World], he flashed with the same given coordinates provided by the Graceful Monolith to reach Ashema, mounted him from his large shoulders and planted his palm on the creature's forehead; between his large, twisted horns.

The Hybrid Luman sneered:

"Heh, I win. [Immoral Authority]!"

A plume of darkness surged out with erratic vigour to sink into Ashema's orifices.

For maximum effect, Skullius kept the golden half a skull mark on the Bashful Abomination – as it was in his storage – so that he could use the affix which allowed him to increase the affinity of [Evil Darkness] to A as long he was in contact with the zhanmadao.

With this, he increased the chances of [Immoral Authority] working on strong opponents, even if it was only a Special skill.

'Now let's see what the Under looks like and what these bastards are planning to do.'

The thick, more potent [Evil Darkness] sank deep into Ashema as he convulsed, blood spraying from his neck which was barely being held together by fibers of flesh.

...

...

'What's wrong?' Skullius frowned deeply.

Nothing.

Nothing was registering.

There was no influx of memories. There was no extraction of skills and abilities.

The hell...

"HAHAHAHAHA!" Ashema laughed manically... and all the darkness that had sunken into him spilled out violently. "You would use darkness on me?! A child born in a sunless land, below and far from the light!"

Skullius clicked his tongue, but he wasn't having this loss.

There was no way he was going to lose in a clash of darkness.

Using [Evil Darkness Meshing], the evolved form of [Evil Darkness Weaving], he held the plumes of darkness scattering everywhere in place and forced them back towards Ashema.

The dark creature too exerted effort and the darkness barreling towards him stopped and inched back towards Skullius!

The Hybrid Luman was more infuriated than anything else.

'I accounted for his ability to control darkness... even my kind of darkness. How is he doing this? Do all his kind have such an ability?' he thought.

To add insult to injury, the blood which had been spraying from Ashema's neck stopped. It jumped back into his body and formed threads that linked the severed halves of his neck, drawing them together and sewing the wide, fatal cut shut.

Then, around the uncanny dark creature, the pools of blood he had formed into a cocoon before gathered around him again as he heaved magical effort into pushing away the darkness.

And thus, the struggle continued.

Skullius found that his control over darkness was superior to Ashema's, but he wasn't able to mobilize the darkness to use [Immoral Authority] again. Ashema resisted fiercely.

The darkness between the two trembled, inching this way and that as it seemed to boil in conflict.

Then, something Skullius had never seen occurred.

The darkness imploded soundlessly, leaving nothing behind.

...

Ashema and Skullius were left stunned at what had just happened for next second.

It seemed neither of them, especially Skullius in particular, who knew that [Evil Darkness] couldn't be destroyed, only dispersed, could believe it.

"Judging by the look on your face... That must be something new to you too," Ashema said, his eye fixed on where the darkness had been.

Skullius didn't confirm or deny, but it was clear to Ashema that he was right.

"Hahahaha! If that move was your only method of gathering information from me, then you're out of luck. It would seem our abilities are very, very similar. Moreso than I thought. Yet, this makes me even more interested in you. I really want to know where you got the ability to manipulate darkness on such a level," Ashema said as his scythe appeared in hand once more.

He then put his gourd to his mouth and chugged down a lot of the blood that was stowed within it.

Skullius meanwhile digested what he had just said.

'On such a level? That isn't the point. My ability to control darkness comes from the Fruit of World Myths, and [Evil Darkness] is an element formed from it. If anything, the fact that this creature can control it is the bigger mystery, not the other way around...'

Skullius thought.

Ashema grinned at him after wiping his mouth.

"Shall we continue? Or shall we settle this with more...civility? We could just talk..." he said.

"I'm not too inclined to bargain with a monster like you just yet. I've rarely committed to verbal compromise with inhuman creatures..." Skullius lied through his teeth.



Ashema scoffed.

"Well said!"

Once again, he rapid-fired blood arrows right at Skullius from his mouth. They numbered in the hundreds, all soaring at unreal speeds to pierce the target.

Skullius was rushed out of the way.

He appeared on the ground, among the clustered Maqians who had been attacking the latest Aurora whose inhabitants he had saved.

...!!!

Skullius' arrival cast a wave of shock among the Masters he was standing shoulder to shoulder with, however, the ungodly descend of the blood arrows was even more appalling.

They crashed into the Maqians like meteors, demolishing the wide land they had been standing on, the impact they caused almost prompting the ground to leap each micro-second. Of course, the men and women that were smacked into before this happened, were blown into bloody chunks that scattered everywhere, yet the true target of the attack walked out of the carnage unharmed.

The remnants of a layer of darkness Skullius had cast around himself dissipated as he took calm steps, with four Incandescent Stagers – one Maqian and three Sif – looking on as an astounded audience.

Skullius paid them little mind. They already appeared quite wary given that they had been spectating the fierce battle between himself and Ashema from the ground.

The latter flew down with his eye on Skullius and Skullius alone.

He grinned.

"Killing more of these flesh bags only works in my favor. You know that, right?" he said, and the blood from the slaughtered Maqians, rushed his way in heavy volumes.

Skullius scoffed.

"I'm aware..." Skullius said before glancing at the Incandescent Stagers around him with his blank eyes. "It won't matter for long. You've actually forced me to consider breaking down your abilities one by one until I've stripped you bare. And for starters..."

Skullius raised his hand and Demion's Dance came flying into his grip.

At the same time, his free hand became encased a brilliant, blinding golden white glow that forced everyone to squint.

The Hybrid Luman, a master of [Just Light], was about to work wonders that would leave their mark on the whole of Opungale.

Chapter 973: The Luminant's Light! (1)

As soon as Ashema saw the brilliant hue that shone in Skullius' hand, he went on guard. Much like Skullius, he wasn't quite concerned by the stunned Incandescent Stagers spectating while considering their options gravely against these two clearly powerful arrivals.

'He's switching to using light now? Just what kind of abilities does he have?' Ashema silently pondered while filling his gourd.

Understanding the nature of this intriguing foe was absurdly integral to him winning... perhaps, surviving. Given how much unpredictability was likely about to surface though, he got ready.

While some blood poured into his gourd, some slipped out. It was of a lighter shade of red than the one which was filtering in.

Skullius had been right to suspect the gourd earlier. It was a bizarre artefact that cleansed and perfected any substance that went into it, priming it for optimal use for its wielder. Naturally, 'use', extended to mundane intents, like consumption, especially for Ashema who enjoyed drinking blood, yet, that of course wasn't all.

The bright-colored blood slithered to the ground and found the numerous corpses laying on the ground quickly.

Skullius noticed this movement but didn't hurry to stop it.

He meant what he said. He was going to dismantle every single one of Ashema's abilities to learn about him and break him in the process.

And everything began with...

"[Son of Luserus]..." the Hybrid Luman called.

At once, his wings – four in all – imbibed into his black robes, unfurled to their full length. They shone gloriously, and then... two more appeared below them.

As this extra pair emerged, it inspired a greater radiance from the other existing pairs of wings, and before anyone knew it, Skullius became like a human-shaped torchlight that seemed very out of place in the steady array of night.

He was hard to look at, even for the Incandescent Stagers. Rather than squint, they had to look away, but worse than that, his presence was just as glaring as his image. It pulsed and radiated forcefully, pushing them away in a non-aggressive authoritative manner that cajoled everyone to obey.

Ashema wore a grim grin.

He realized a singular, grand truth at once...

"My affinity for darkness won't work against that..."

And he was right.

Whatever the enemy was using... was beyond the limits of that one facet of power that he possessed which he had been proud of.

As if the Hybrid Luman didn't look sacred enough, powerful enough...

"Heart of Revelation..." his voice resounded.

A gem, or perhaps a star melded from what seemed like ethereal, polished forms of gold, diamond and amethyst, shot out from the radiant Skullius, hurtling into the air for a stretch before fixing itself directly above him, way high up.

This gem, this curious glinting spark, shone vibrantly right as it stopped.

Its rays were visible to the naked eye. Not at all blinding, not at all unfathomable.

Yet, all who were touched by them...

...!!!

Ashema and the Incandescent Stagers realized immediately, when they felt naked all of a sudden, that...

BA-DUM, BA-DUM, BA-DUM...

Ashema looked bleakly at his chest.

A large lump of dark flesh shaped like a large squid was pumping blood in his blood. It may not have looked like a human heart, but it was the one he had, buried behind a set of bones that came together to form a shape like that of ribs – all exposed.

His armor was nowhere to be seen, and nothing hid the insides past his skin.

He could feel that everything was there, holding his frame together, but the light cast on him was rendering his tenders vulnerable!

"By Boron...!" Ashema groaned.

Even a part of his soul, molded like soft smoke around his flesh and bones, was exposed.

How was this... how was this possible?

What kind of application of light...?

The same fate found the surrounding Incandescent Stagers. Ashema could see all their fragile selves exposed, just like his, and they too were panicking.

"I found some inspiration a few days ago, you see..."

...!!!

Ashema heard a voice behind him, and before it came, he had seen a vast, brilliant light that threatened to hide his surroundings just as well as suffocating darkness.

"An old enemy was capable of revealing the soul with light from a moon construct within his Territory. It hurt a lot when he used it on me, but it also taught me this neat trick. Light does more than just look pretty. It's in its nature to reveal. Of course... that's only for a friend of light, [Just Light], like me to know..."

Ashema froze.

"Is that so—"

WHAAAAM!

The moment the blow that he didn't see landed, Ashema knew it was over. He even let out a strained laugh as his body blew up, the splattered parts of it soaring so fast to Quintess-knew-where that it caught on fire!

What had hit him... he didn't know.

It didn't feel like that overbearing, heavy punch from earlier.

It was lighter, yet just as impactful, like a miniature anvil shot from a cannon.

Ashema travelled tens of kilometers before he felt that the only intact part of him was his head, which was burning.

Goodness...

'Luckily... I knew to prepare beforehand...' he thought... and his conscious faded from this flesh.

When he blinked next, Ashema's new head, severed cleanly before, was being attached to its body by strands of blood dozens of meters away from the sun-like figure of Skullius.

Purified, tempered blood rushed through this new body, which had been one of the corpses of the Masters Skullius had killed before. Darkness surged around it, as though burning it with black, and in an instant, Ashema's form was reforged, armor and all, horns and all, charred skin and all.

However...

Ashema lost his appearance right away.

The light from the sky shone on him and he was once again, exposed.

Donning another grim grin... Ashema hurriedly gave instructions to all his body, searching for corpses.

"I see. You're not that easy to kill. I was counting on it..." Skullius' voice came.

Ashema was startled, but thankfully, he wasn't blown up again. The Hybrid Luman was still standing a distance away.

"Yeah," he said as his scythe appeared in his hand again, blood funneling into its hollow handle and blade – shown from the holes over both.

Then darkness encased him.

At once, he shot at Skullius, but he wasn't the only one.

Five corpses of Maqian Masters, along with hundreds of Sif civilians and combatants lunged along with him, all with his tempered blood bursting in their veins, keeping their forms intact while empowering them heavily.

Unlike with Ashema, the light from the curious gem above, what Skullius had called the Heart of Revelation, didn't affect the dead, which Ashema found thrilling, but he wasn't sure it was that much of a boon.

Whatever...

He wasn't looking for any favors or handicaps against Skullius.

He truly wanted to fight and win.

The Hybrid Luman didn't act until the horde of enemies was upon him.

His face was impossible to see, and so was the outline of his frame. All that could be glimpsed, were perhaps the six, long wings behind him, and at that moment, they rose and... flapped.

...Then the Aurora was no more.

Chapter 974: The Luminant's Light! (2)

Ashema laughed as most of his awakened corpses were erased, along with the great settlement that he had seen around him.

It had happened very quickly, but Ashema had seen it. It only took a single flap from all of Skullius' wings to erase the Aurora, leaving a clean plain that had little evidence suggesting that there had been inhabitants and graceful structures towering and layering over it.

Just a single flap.

It was uncanny. Scary, even.

Heavy dust and the remnants of a brutal gust lightly beat at Ashema who grinned while crossing his arms over his face. The distance between himself and Skullius had grown a little, but that didn't seem apparent or relevant.

Skullius was shining so bright it was almost impossible to tell if he was far or near. It didn't help that the Heart of Revelation's faint luminance also contributed to the obscurity.

'Well... I have my work cut out for me...!' Ashema thought as he whirled his scythe.

Around him, the corpses of five Masters from Maqi could be seen, all donning furious expressions. If one look closely, it wouldn't be impossible to catch a glimpse of the unusual blood flowing through their veins, faintly highlighting their blood vessels from their skin.

Ashema, as Skullius had surmised, indeed didn't use any other form of energy he knew. His kind operated under a different scheme of power than all the dwellers of the world above the Under.

They had no cores.

They had no channels of energy to filter through.

The only kind of energy that they learned to use, or rather, imbibe, was Primus, a low-level divine energy, most of which was drawn from Boron's residual powers. However, this was a crutch for the weaker ones among Ashema's kind to use to strengthen themselves.

Those like Ashema, advanced and strong, gained unusual mutations with age that more often than not gave them absolute control over particular aspects of the world. They were like blessings, in a way.

Ashema's mutation, had to do with blood. It was his tool and it was energy source. Varying kinds of blood tended to gift him different qualities when he used them, and that's why he liked to drink, tasting them for more than just flavor, but flair.

His control over blood was so profound that he could move around weaker bodies with it; of course, corpses were the easiest.



His strength ordinarily was way beyond what a Master could contend with and even the best Incandescent Stagers were more than likely to have a tough time in a contest of raw physical might.

As good as it was that he was of this level, Ashema could get stronger. Much stronger.

From the creature's gourd, blood splashed out with the grace of an ocean tide, and in the next instance, it funneled through his nostrils and mouth rapidly, giving the black and ashen skin on different sections of his body a glowing crimson hue. A guttural wave, like a miniature storm exploded out from under Ashema's skin, rolling out in all directions with furious speed.

His body bulked up lightly, his skin growing taut – though it wasn't quite as impressive to look at given that the Heart of Revelation was revealing all his innards and hiding his skin.

The same compounding and augmentation happened to the five remaining thralls he had secured. Unlike him though, they hardly remained intact. They ballooned up in a semi-controlled fashion and radiated a soft red hue around them. Since they weren't affected by the gem-like construct above, they looked slightly more intimidating.

"Are you done?" Skullius' voice came. Even though all this had hardly lasted ten seconds, it felt like a decent stretch of time had been elapsed already.

"Just about," Ashema said. "Thanks for the patience."

The finishing touch was an encasing of darkness around him and his thralls that partially hid his insides.

...And then Ashema attacked.

His takeoff was hardly seen. There was crushing boom, along with the collapsing of where he had been standing and then his scythe was close to biting into the side of Skullius' head while causing the air to hiss like a serpent!

There.

There...

Ashema was certain Skullius was going to counterattack somehow, given the absurd speed he had shown earlier.

He was right...but it didn't happen in the way he expected.

As the blade to his scythe approached Skullius luminous form... it reflected his golden white light.

...!!!

In the next morsel of time, Ashema was befuddled to feel his scythe flee from his grip and soar away rapidly, as though pushed away by a turbulent repulsive force.

Ashema was tempted to look to his darting weapon in shock, but he forced away that impulse.

That, thankfully, allowed him to see Skullius' brisk counter.

One of his six wings stabbed forth, but now, with the heightened performance of every facet of Ashema's body, he managed to see it. While employing the most intricate control of the blood empowering him in his body, he even managed to move his arms before him to guard.

Unfortunately, this didn't save him.

Despite the film of darkness around him, Ashema found that he still reflected the glorious light from the wing.

Somehow, his darkness was forced to reflect the light and as it did, a skin-ripping repulsive force drew him back, casting him away like a demon.

Ashema felt himself knock into several hard and fleshy objects, but he couldn't tell what they were because he had moved too fast and too far.

'Damn it! What is that ability?' he thought in fury, and shot up just when his speed lessened to a manageable degree.

By sensing where his thralls were, Ashema figured out just how far he had flown.

He was a little less than forty kilometers away from where he had been!

His face hardening, Ashema instantly cast away awe and concern.

More blood shot from his gourd and as it channeled itself into his body, he felt himself grow stronger. Much stronger. He then took a great swig of the tempered blood, and conjured around him not one, not two, but four great birds that looked like they might have been carved from the night itself.

Right then...

A super bright light was cast from behind Ashema!

He turned immediately, his eye bloodshot and keen.

Skullius was here, and so was the Heart of Revelation.

His enhanced vision finally saw the outline of Skullius' figure and contours of his face amid the radiance, and he managed a grin for only several splits of a second.

Skullius seemed to notice the difference in the way the dark creature looked at him now and scoffed.

"Let's play!" Ashema called.

"Gladly..." Skullius said.

Three of the four birds Ashema conjured sped in different directions while the one that remained set loose a massive swathe of darkness that devoured Ashema whole. It was only when Ashema was drowned in black that he pointed his gourd forth, in Skullius' direction and released thousands of blood arrows!

The darkness clung to them tightly as they went on their way out at breakneck speed.

Skullius looked on indifferently as the arrows came.

As he expected, the arrows, even while thickened with darkness, still reflected his light, and all of them without exception were warded away with speed comparable to that of shooting stars.

As that happened, however, Skullius felt a massive build up in energy from behind him.

No.

It came from all around him.

Several kilometers away in four different directions – excluding where Ashema was hidden.

'The corpses...?' Skullius questioned himself.

In the next instant, four rapid attacks came for the Hybrid Luman, tempered to handle his speed, and his light!

Chapter 975: The Luminant's Light! (3)

When manipulating corpses, Ashema couldn't heal them as well as Skullius could, restoring function to their more sensitive aspects. He was only capable of repairing their bodies and adjusting them for exceedingly efficient physical performance by employing his perfected blood.

That said, this allowed the corpses to use his blood abilities just as well as he could, and if there was something Ashema could match Skullius in, it was his ability to use his blood in a way that was reminiscent of the Preeminent Attegoth.

Carrying his intent, managing complex tasks freely without Ashema's input...

The blood was capable of this.

...And that was why the attack that came for Skullius was perfectly placed.

The thralls Ashema had created had all met up with the birds he sent out, and they were transported to four different locations where they gathered the blood within their bodies, and with Ashema's consent, compressed it to the point where it could barely be seen.

Then, the first thrall fired.

By cocking back its torso and puffing up its chest, it collected the compressed blood in its mouth and spat it out comically!

No sound came immediately after the shot was fired, not at all visible to the naked eye save for the blasted, misty ring of air that signaled its launch. However, the thrall's body from the neck up exploded, and only after it swayed to fall did a thunderous noise, like an echoing clap ensue, shaking the green surroundings.

No time was elapsed at all from the moment of the launch, to the blood attack's arrival right next to Skullius' head.

...!

The Hybrid Luman was a little startled.

If not for how he felt the mana around him parting like torn bread in the face of the microscopic attack, he might have not noticed before it was too late.

The blood sent his way was shaped like a needle, or perhaps more like a short string, and despite its size, Skullius felt an ungodly amount of force behind it.

Indeed, it was powerful, after all, Ashema called it:

"Godspeed Blood Thread."

Skullius' figure warped out of the way at the last miniscule bit of time. Perhaps because of its size or maybe its speed, his default defense in this form – his light – didn't work.

Thankfully, he was still fast enough to dodge.

However...

He didn't manage to dodge the second attack which came right when he barely dodged the first.

Ashema, hidden in the darkness, a short distance from Skullius grinned while overlooking and directing everything.

"Got you."

The Blood Thread pierced Skullius' body as he looked to his side, surprised that he didn't notice it quickly enough, and...

WHOOOOPH!

The air seemed to explode as the attack came with its horrendous force that could have easily pierced through a powerful Incandescent Stager on full guard... and passed seamlessly through Skullius' body as though it was merely an illusion.

...

Ashema froze.

What had just happened?

He saw it.

He saw it clearly, but he couldn't comprehend it.

His Blood Thread had just phased through Skullius body as though it didn't exist!

The dark creature grinned nervously.

Light. Light...

'Don't tell me he's actually...' he thought.

Was this man... actually just made of intangible particles right now?!

Ashema immediately held off the third and fourth Blood Thread attacks.

"Looks like you're running out of tricks," Skullius said as he looked at the well of darkness Ashema was hiding in. "Your darkness is mediocre and yes, you can't beat up light, even with such a small but powerful blood attack. My attempts at dodging gave you the impression that I was afraid your attack would hit me, didn't they? Well, sorry.

I was just annoyed by the fact that your blood attack might be as fast as I am is all."

Ashema shook his head.

"Seriously?" he said, and in an instant, the darkness he was dipped in vanished along with him, appearing somewhere far and on the ground.

Just as he took a breath, Skullius appeared above him.

"What's next?" he asked lightheartedly.

Ashema smirked.

This was beyond what he imagined.

A foe like this would have been great to fight... if he could actually touch them.

What was even up with that?

Oh, well...

Two birds rushed to his side and conjured gaping ovals of darkness that seemed to revolve endlessly.

Beyond the unique mutations of the residents of the Under, there was also their ability to control darkness. It was a natural phenomenon born from how there was no sunlight that reached the Under. The whole place was like a ginormous cavern that existed under Aigas with its own rules and laws some similar and some completely different from what the residents of what was above were used to.

One of these dissimilar rules was how the passing millennia without genuine light caused all creatures in the Under to develop an unusual affinity for darkness, and more than that, darkness became a friend.

As it were. Ashema just wasn't the most proficient at using it. Thus...

"You were right. My darkness isn't enough, and my abilities certainly won't work. Not like this. But...my kind thrive on our numbers," Ashema said.

From one of the two dark pools beside him, black, much like liquid seeped out and splattered on the ground and its soil, then a figure slightly taller than Ashema stepped out.

Different from the keen, intelligent look in Ashema's eye though, its two, golden eyes devoid of whites or pupils had a feral glare to them. Its body was covered in ashen, partly black fur, its short arms restlessly quivering at its size. A long tail whipped the air as it finally came out of the portal fully and set its eyes on Skullius.

"Is this your next move, then?" Skullius asked. "You're a curious bunch, all of you."

"We are..." Ashema said with a grin, and from the next portal, a torrent of darkness came out.

No, it wasn't that.

It was a massive flock of birds – vulture-like – great beaks, all of them as black as the coal.



As they rose up, they created a tide of darkness that hurtled towards Skullius righteously.

Ashema leapt on the wave along with the other creature to emerge from the portal and together they ran over the birds towards the Hybrid Luman.

Skullius saw the wave and chortled.

He had an inkling about what Ashema was trying to achieve.

Things were getting exciting, and Skullius was up for raising the bar for absurdity.

As surprising as it might have been, all he had demonstrated so far was merely the prowess of [Son of Luserus], not his ability with [Just Light].

It was only when he combined the two that the true value of his powers was revealed.

Chapter 976: Sure Shot!

Legends could have been written about the swift golden white swallow and the black worm clashing in the pretty, dark skies. After all, over a decent portion of Opungale, the two were seen, if for a very brief morsel of time. Both Sif and Maqians also heard deafening undulations in the depth of the world's ceiling echoing all throughout the continent, and few had the honor of seeing the two up close.

Skullius' figure moved in a straight line, leaving a lengthy trail that took seconds to be wiped out of the atmosphere. It wasn't at all clear, but an excited expression was on his face. He dropped from the sky with flawless vertical grace only to shoot straight left just before he hit the ground.

His figure was too fast for the common Sif he passed between in the streets, all too preoccupied with looking in horror at billows of smoke rising from different directions which they thought to signal the destruction of other Auroras.

By the time a staggering, precise gust was left in the wake of his travel, he was already twenty kilometers away.

The large, worm-like mass of darkness took a different route as it continued to soar far up in hopes of catching up to him. It only dove down after Skullius set to rise up again, and the two met in the middle.

Ashema, who was riding the livid flock of black birds (the worm), along with the furry kin he had called, widened his eyes to focus. His sight could glimpse the movements of Skullius as long as he didn't make constant turns, and right now, he could see his approach.

He was waiting for the right moment to strike with any one of the few machinations he had planned in his head.

One, was the thralls he had made earlier, which were racing all around while waiting for definitive orders for the next course of attack.

The second, revolved around his hairy partner.

In the Under, beasts tended to lose their ability to fondly appreciate the dark environment and use the darkness when they acquired their mutation ability.

Those that didn't, or hadn't developed these unique powers ungoverned by the need for energies as fuel for activation, were more than likely to groom that power of darkness to insurmountable heights, manipulating darkness for every little thing they needed; in this way, it truly became a friend.

The hairy beast with golden eyes was one such creature. It was only half as old as Ashema, but its ability to wield darkness was gracefully beyond his. The same could be said for the vulture-like birds Ashema called. They, much like most avian species of the Under were able to use darkness to teleport, something most advanced denizens of the Under couldn't do.

With these two brands of partners, Ashema was sure...

'I can land one critical blow for sure. That's all I need. If I can't even manage that... then I might as well call Iyuko here,' he thought.

Iyuko happened to be the Herald of Boron, one of the fiercest among all the denizens of the Under.

Ashema didn't quite like the idea of calling her. It was essentially an admittance of inferiority, and he would rather lose to a surface dweller than admit that.

"Let's do this!" Ashema said as he patted his furry companion. He then took a great swig of the blood in his gourd and it shot through his veins, elevating his strength again such that his body grew tauter, threatening to rip apart.

The furry beast spread its hands wide and a great shadow drew from behind it, rising rapidly and shooting forth.

The darkness was rather unique. Rather than just being pitch black, it had a liquid quality to it that gave the impression that it was like a potent paint capable of slathering over even the details of the world.

This darkness was way better than what Ashema could conjure, and as it flooded in Skullius' vision, he found that it didn't reflect his light.

'I thought so.'

Skullius scoffed, the Heart of Revelation seeming to echo his pride in the fact that he had guessed right on what Ashema's intent had been.

As powerful as this mysterious brand of darkness was, it wasn't nearly as fast as he was.

The Hybrid Luman flickered lightly in the sky and appeared above the flying flock that made the giant wave; above Ashema and the furry beast!

The former immediately turned a bloodshot eye towards the Hybrid Luman, much to his slight surprise.

"Let's get rid of that nuisance, shall we?" Skullius said and his figure darted towards the furry beast, avoiding his rising tide of darkness and appearing ridiculously fast behind it. One of his wings then stabbed forth with great speed and...

**BOOOM!**

...!!!

The giant flock scattered, with the majority of the birds being obliterated into rocky chunks, feathers and blood that spilled everywhere.

Ashema and the furry beast were sent flying in different directions, the former with a huge grin on his face.

He couldn't have been happier.

The one to be penetrated by something had not been the beast he called for, after all.

It was Skullius, who now donned a shocked expression.

It had come without warning, an attack from a very long distance away, like a string or thread parting the dark sky.

It was microscopic, like the blood attack from before, but instead of being just compressed blood, it was layered with the potent darkness from the furry beast he had attempted to kill just now, and when it made contact with him, a being of light, it bore through his torso and his wings, ripping past him like a massive cannon!

The thick darkness had finally cut through the radiance of Skullius, born from his skill [Son of Luserus].

"Finish him!" Ashema cried as he fell.

Before he even finished speaking, another attack like the one that had just blasted Skullius came from a different direction, bearing speed that rivalled his own.

Sneakily, Ashema had had the furry beast produce its potent darkness during the chase, and with the birds, he sent it towards his thralls who he then commanded to sent forth the Godspeed Blood Thread with a coat of the dominant darkness where he directed!

The one to send the first attack had already perished – a consequence of using the ability at full power – and the next had its head rupture open as its attack soared, aimed at Skullius' head with incredible precision.

Time seemed to slow down for Ashema. His keen sight honed in on the Blood Thread inching its way into Skullius' head and he grinned.

...Only to be shaken in fright in the next moment, when the dark sky turned brighter than the glare of the summer sun and devoured him, the remaining black birds and his furry companion within its sacred, torturous glow.

Chapter 977: Perfect Light Domain

The transition was horrendous.

Ashema had been certain of victory, but when the light came, he immediately felt that momentary sense of triumph slip through his fingers.

How did this happen?

When did he get trapped in this space, which looked as though it was crafted using an infinite number of large Cullinan diamonds, all of which reflected different intensities of golden white into Ashema's eye while launching a striking blur over everything?

It was nauseating yet also mesmerizing. It took Ashema all his willpower to not succumb to the beauty and gape foolishly at it.

'How did this...?' Ashema had wondered once again, when he remembered. He had seen a glimpse of what had happened. Just a little.

It was the Heart of Revelation.

It had still been floating above Skullius everywhere he went, and when he was about to get hit by that fatal blow – he assumed it was, at least – it simply erupted into a shower of light that seemingly moved as quickly and as gracefully as the Heart of Revelation to form this space.

'Ah... Was I doomed to lose from the beginning?' Ashema thought with a hollow smile.

Something was holding him perfectly still. He couldn't do anything other than move his head.

Beyond that, if he had felt naked in the presence of the Heart of Revelation before, now he felt like he was being groped in all his sensitives, as though being frisked for secrets.

Squinting heavily, he tried to see past the glare of the space, but he couldn't see much. He noticed dark smudges some distance away and imagined that it was either the remaining birds or the furry beast kin, floating in place like he was.

"Ever heard of the saying, light conquers all?" a familiar voice came to Ashema.

He sighed.

"Never heard of it. And I don't like it," he replied.

"Hahaha, of course."

A bundle of light much clearer and less disturbing to the eye compared to that which made up this space poured before him, creating the fully, unguoged image of a man with six wings.

Skullius looked to have vibrant smile on his brilliant face.

Ashema didn't like that either.

"Now that we've reached this point, do you mind telling me what you are... and what this creepy place is?" he said while tilting his head.

Skullius didn't respond for a while. He studied Ashema slowly, and then said:

"I'm a Luminant."

"Hmmm. I wish I knew what that was. Something impressive? I knew for sure you couldn't be human, or whatever the freaks who live here are. I'd love to taste their blood."

Skullius chuckled before assuming a sitting posture.

"It seems to me that what I am, is the opposite of what you are, in a way. You see, I have this ability that works best when I'm dealing with an enemy like you, a merchant of darkness perhaps figuratively and also literally. The fact that my light in this form works against you tells me much about you already."

Ashema looked confused.

Somehow being called a merchant of darkness didn't feel like a compliment. It made it seem like he was the bad guy here. Hadn't he been the underdog in this relatively short skirmish?

And what was this ability Skullius was referencing?

The answer to that, was rather fascinating.

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[Son of Luserus (Special) | Lv.1]

A blessing wholly granted to the beloved, graceful winged paragons of excellence, to shed themselves of their delightful grace, and ignite their overwhelming ferocity when needed.

<Passive>

Gracefully, four wings remain etched to the user's back, perpetuating a 20x boost to their physical prowess and the overall performance of their magical abilities collectively.

<Active>

Gracefully, a third pair of wings ignite the child of excellence into the purity of light, into a vague shape of radiant majesty when confronted with opposite ideals to light and purity. The child of excellence will be granted several qualities of light: the reflective defense of light; the intangibility of light; a smaller portion of the speed of light.

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Mana Requirements: None

Duration: 10 minutes

Cooldown: 1hr

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[Son of Luserus]'s active ability allowed Skullius to embody light to a certain extent. At least that was what it was currently limited to at the moment.

When he became encased in light, the third pair of wings granted him an additional boost to his physical abilities that raised the total upper limit to 30 times what his base power was capable of.

Better yet, he could become intangible, releasing this characteristic when he wanted to deliver a blow to an enemy.

He could move faster with the granted portion of the speed of light, which worked best if he moved in a straight line.

He could also repel anything that reflected the light he gave off, which effectively drowned the effectiveness of most physical attacks sent against him.

Skullius already considered all this overkill for a mere Special Skill, but he was sure this wasn't the epitome of what this skill was capable of, after all, it was still graded as Special even after Luserus unlocked it for him.

The Hybrid Luman surmised that it was probably because of the Rules of the world that this skill was still limited as such, otherwise Luserus would have granted him the whole package. Quite honestly, he doubted Luserus had an intricate power system in the world he created.

Skullius sighed.



'I can only become a 'vague shape of light' for now. This doesn't match what Darwel said happened to the Luminants when they used this skill, does it? We'll see once it reaches the Super category.'

"Forget what I just said," Skullius voiced, seeing as Ashema didn't extract the meaning in what he said. Perhaps he did but chose to still feign confusion.

"I see. You still haven't answered me, though. What is this place? And while we are on the subject, how did you heal from my attack?" Ashema asked quite boldly.

Skullius looked up blankly, unconcerned.

"I am more proficient at controlling light right now. I've been learning that I can shape it however I like, much like you and your kind can do with darkness. My light CONTROLS and GUIDES. As you long as you are devoured by it, you will eventually lose control of your body. Hmmm, I hadn't given this space a name.

[Perfect Light Domain] is probably fitting," he explained, thinking that it contrasted well with a skill he hadn't used in a long time – [Perfect Night Domain].

"As for how I healed, well... that will be too complex to explain."

The reason was of course [Gradius Order Halo] cast by the Preeminent Attegoth. What was strange was that the skill was even more efficient at healing Skullius' luminous body than his flesh one because it was derived from Dezrael back then, when it was still called [Luminous Healing]!

It was made for Luminants.

Ashema didn't press for more answers and would have shrugged if he could. Skullius decided it was his turn to do some asking.

"I think I did a pretty good job of getting a feel for all your abilities. They are quite interesting. Bood, darkness. Though, I suppose I won't be able to learn more about them by brute forcing the answers out of you, will I? You've got several of those corpse replacements for just in case you die here, haven't you?"

...

Ashema wore a snide smile.

It was true.

"Looks like we have to settle this with civility in the end, won't we?"

Chapter 978: Why So Stingy?

While using the full manifested form of his [Son of Luserus] skill, Skullius had a vast sensory range enabled by the fact that the skill itself improved the quality of how Luminant he was – if it could be postulated in that manner.

According to Luserus, the reason why the skill hadn't worked for Skullius before, was because he was diluted, with the cosmetic body he had combining aspects of his former Discount Human form and the proceeds from the Luminant Seed, which granted him the bodily qualities of a Luminant.

Of course, the one who made Luminants and the skill they used to ascend into beings made of light – Luserus – would be able to allow Skullius to use it without prerequisite, and as a result, the absolute control Skullius felt from the surrounding mana increased significantly.

As a result, the Hybrid Luman had been able to sense finely how Ashema's ability to incarnate into other vessels worked.

Right after he had blasted him with a brutal punch earlier, one unaided by the properties of his weight while in the light form, Ashema's body had literally been reduced to burning chunks, yet he had managed to use his blood to keep himself alive.

By inserting the blood into a corpse, he was able to replace the cell composition, change the texture of the tissue and intrinsically rewrite the genetic structure until it fit his own.

Skullius didn't know how this was possible. As far as he was concerned, Ashema's blood would have to carry his soul to be achieve something like this, and maybe that was the case. The only person he knew to be able to do something similar to this, was Vali, but there were dire costs.

The Hybrid Luman had kept this ability of Ashema's in mind throughout their fight and only now, when he had him trapped, did he confirm something he had been wondering about.

The dark creature could use whatever that ability was even when paralyzed on unconscious, or rather, as long as he wanted to, his blood would revive him even if he perished unceremoniously.

This was the only way Skullius could explain how unconcerned Ashema was being even when he had him in the palm of his hand.

He even had a suspicion that Ashema's current body wasn't even his original. Maybe that was left in Feinheath, where he emerged. Maybe.

"Civility, ey?" Skullius said to Ashema's words. "Sure. I suppose that could work. I admit, trying to torture or kill you... permanently at least, might waste a bit too much time. So, let's share."

Ashema cackled.

"It's quite funny, your attempt to sound dignified while admitting that despite your freakish powers you can't quite kill me," he said haughtily. "Then again, perhaps I might be pushing my luck. I have a bit of mouth on me. I can't help it."

"I noticed," Skullius said.

"Mind releasing me from this place so we can have our chat?"

Skullius tilted his head.

"Civility and trust are two different things. You can easily run away from me if I just release you," he said.

"Of course, I can, but you underestimate how much I want to know about this place. You're the only 'rational' individual I've found since coming here. I killed my fair share of creatures here, yes, but that was only after they refused...civility."

Skullius wore an exasperated look on his glowing face.

"Really?" he said, doubtful.

While he was blind, he was capable of sensing everything in the [Perfect Light Domain] perfectly. He could 'see' Ashema's face quite well, coupled with the twisted horns and... unnatural skin.

This brother looked as untrustworthy and as devious as could be. Hearing him talk about civility was one thing, but the claim that he had tried to converse with humans...seemed preposterous.

Beyond that, when Skullius' affinity of control for [Just Light] reached the S rank, he acquired the ability to shape light however he saw fit, and by taking advantage of the element's characteristics – CONTROL and GUIDING – he was able to bend [Just Light] into creating ridiculous phenomena.

The Heart of Revelation, a concept he copied from the Primary attack function of Rayn's Majestic Territory, Deific Moonlight Paradise, was forged after Skullius combined his knowledge of light from the rise of his [Just Light] affinity, and the mechanisms behind [Son of Luserus]'s active ability.

Revealing was a property of light, and to some extent, that could be attributed to its ability to CONTROL. Thus, Skullius had imbued his understanding of this into his skills to manage this ridiculous feat.

As such, at the moment, Skullius could see even the minute palpitations of everything within Ashema's body – a result of him widening the effect of the Heart of Revelation into the [Perfect Light Domain].

He wasn't fully convinced that the creature was being truthful. His soul, portrayed as a smoky substance partly entangled with his flesh, was trembling... but there was a consistency to it, as though that was its natural state instead of it being a reflection of truth or lies.

Skullius sighed.

'What am I doing? I don't know much about the behavior of the soul anyway,' he thought.

He snapped his finger and the domain vanished, revealing once again the overwhelming sorrow of this particular night.

Ashema dropped to the ground from a high altitude.

'Ah, that's right. We were in midair...' he thought.

Soon, he landed on his feet on the ground and began to stretch his hands, happy to see that he had full control of his body again. The uncanny loss of his ability to move in that brilliant, picturesque space his foe had created was truly unique.

He looked around and saw his furry companion looking at Skullius, who had also dropped from the sky with deep malice from the short distance. He quickly gestured for him to calm down.

Skullius lost his radiance, returning to his normal form, auburn hair and all, dark robe and all. Even the glow of the Heart of Revelation was gone.

"I see you didn't run," he said with a light smile.

"Don't patronize me," Ashema said as he called for his scythe into his hand. "Who gets to babble first?"

Skullius conjured a simple chair out of [Evil Darkness] and sat down.

"I'll go first, if you don't mind," he said.

Ashema looked at his little trick with a bit of scorn... and replicated it, sitting on a bigger chair of deep black.

"Fair enough."

For a moment, the two observed silence while locking sights.

It didn't seem to mean much to either of them that a small portion of Opungale was in flames, thousands dying. The smoky evidence of this could be glimpsed from above the canopies and high mountains.

Skullius felt the urge to go and save more lives, but he ignored it. He was genuinely interested in inquiring about certain things from Ashema, such as:

"You speak really well. At least, whatever you're using to translate works quite efficiently. Why then did you stutter nonsense when we first met?"

"What?"

Ashema looked as though he wanted to burst into laughter. He recalled exactly which moment Skullius was talking about, but was quite surprised that he was even interested in that. He had indeed groaned a few incomprehensible words when he met Skullius in his Projected form by the shore.

"I'd been having trouble talking to individuals from this world, especially when I used my native tongue. The weaker ones died as soon as I started speaking. I was just wondering if you were worth my time is all," he said.

Skullius nodded and then shook his head.

"I see. What about your abilities? I've noticed that you don't use any form of energy to activate them. How does that even work?"

Ashema crossed his arms over his terrifying armor.

"Hold on, I'd like to interject. Why is it that you all need energy to use your powers in the first place? Lord Boron made it so that such is unnecessary for my kind. Are the Traitorous Deities that stingy?"

#### Chapter 979: Removing The Cost

That was indeed quite the question. Skullius didn't have an immediate response for it because he too had never really questioned it. Perhaps it was because deep down, there were several reasons he considered which erased the whole point of Ashema's question.

The degree of freedom given just by the ridding of costs to the activation of abilities would no doubt lead to the emergence of stronger combatants; the possible removal of limitations in magical treatments and perhaps the evolution of its entire system; greater ambition and achievements in travel and geographical as well as interdimensional discovery; broader definitions of the ceiling of most concepts, and all this was just a macro assessment.

However...

On the flip side, all this had negative connotations, of course, inspired by the fact that there was a yin to every yang. Where some men saw possibilities of collective betterment, others saw possibilities for personal gain especially at the cost of others.

The broadening of ambition, especially when tied to stronger experts would cause chaos, emboldened thieves and psychopaths rising with the same ideology of grander scopes.

Worse yet, what kind of Cluster beasts would be born if such a thing were to happen?

Skullius could only imagine how strong Cluster beasts like the Bookworms, Jackpot – the lucky gremlin – or Hobby Gobbu would be if he didn't have limits for mana usage since birth. His course of training to be strong would have been ridiculous up until he reached the timeline where they fought.

Intelligent Cluster beasts would be just as strong as the peak of sentient life in Aigas and if they ever got out...

'Maybe if Aigas began like that, with there being no such thing as a cost for activating a technique, things would have been the same. But, wait no. Aigas; if this world remained the same, it wouldn't be able to contain what was born, especially if those bastards Quintess and Listafelle still leave...' Skullius sighed.

"Does the Under have Clusters?" the Hybrid Luman asked Ashema.

"What?"

"They are these pocket worlds created when the energies of the Deities clash and form living things that live under accelerated time until their world breaches into reality. Do you have those down there?"

Ashema tilted his head with his eye on Skullius, and then he nodded.

"I see. I might have seen such things in that place. What did you call it? Fine heart? No. We don't have such things," Ashema said.

"I thought so. Creating such a concept – costless casting – is easier when the world within which it is being introduced isn't complex. I imagine that the Under is more like a small, united society rather than multiple sects, dialects, and races wrapped up in multiple sects, dialects, and races. You said something about Boron having banished violence down there, right?"

You guys have full faith in him, and he seems to actively participate in your lives. Well, both of these things don't apply to Aigas."

Ashema laughed. He laughed so hard it shook the ground.

There was a look of vindication in his eye.

"I expected someone here to challenge what I and my kind believe, but it seems you have doubts about your own Deities," he said. "They made an imperfect world despite them having three times the might Lord Boron has."

Skullius wore a scowl.

"I have allegiance to none of them, and this body doesn't have a single print made by any of them," he said sharply. "I despise just as much as your kind."

"I see..." Ashema cackled.

He was glad to see a greater reaction from Skullius. Funny enough, he had achieved this all with words.

Skullius relaxed his face.

After a few seconds of thought, he turned his head to the Preeminent Attegoth glowing majestically in the distance.

Despite everything he thought, he did wonder...



'This costless activation... Could there be a way for me to use my abilities without the need for mana or Null Life Essence? Hmmm. It seems something like that can only be achieved through a Deity. Boron can do it.'

An odd thought trickled into Skullius' considerations.

From what he had learned from Erlton, it seemed Boron was coming to the surface soon, and that couldn't be avoided.

'Could I make a deal with Boron? Offer fealty?' he thought.

Hell, no.

Besides, Boron likely didn't like any of the surface dwellers any better than his creations.

Skullius would have thought to broker a deal with Luserus instead, but he doubted Boron and Luserus were in the same league. Worse yet, he had already discovered that Luserus was incapable of breaking the Rules of this world.

'Perhaps there's another way.'

"In any case..." Ashema interrupted his rapid thoughts through the Omniscient Thought Cracker. "...I would like to know. What is it with the creatures here? What are these long-eared fellows? What were your...the Deities thinking with such atrocious designs?"

Skullius raised a brow.

"You know, I had thought were capable of reading minds with the way you declared you didn't need me alive to know what you needed to know," he said.

"I wasn't lying. All blood contains more than a tangy, metallic taste and bits of potential. It carries memories. Unfortunately, I've long become desensitized to the taste of weaker blood. Even the blood of some of your most powerful warriors is so bland to me that I can barely feel it speak to my tongue. But you, that young human on the boat and that old fossil.

Yes, your blood could thrill and enlighten me..."

"That's disgusting," Skullius said. Deep within, he mulled on the fact that Ashema's opinion on the Ode and the had was similar to his.

"It's perfectly natural," the creature said. "Will you tell me about that or not?"

Skullius sighed and gave the bastard a summary of Aigas and the continents.

"They call that creativity? A race with long ears and one that's... big?" Ashema kicked his feet laughing.

Skullius merely watched him blankly before he felt the quirky laugh grow old way too fast.

"Enough," he said. "I get how your blood powers work, but what about the darkness? This isn't some ordinary power since it somehow intertwines with mine."

And there it was. Both Ashema and Skullius had been curious about this, but it had been obvious that Skullius had more reason to ask first.

"About that..." the dark, horned creature began.

Chapter 980: Underlying Scheme

"Evolution, huh? That's it? That's the reason? How do I believe this?" Skullius asked with drooping layers of his kin on his forehead depicting how he thought this made no sense whatsoever.

Ashema had just explained that because there was no sun in the Under, his kind had developed a peculiar affinity towards the absence of the natural light they were denied as a result of being in what was essentially the bowels of Aigas. It was as simple as that.

"I don't know what to tell you. For me, manipulating anything that is clearly darkness is a natural thing. I may not be the best at it, but what's stranger is seeing someone from up here with control over darkness that's better than mine. I'm currently just chalking it up to the fact that I know next to nothing about the powers you use here. I mean, I've seen..."

Skullius tuned the dark creature out as he began rambling about the kinds of unique powers he had been pitted against while battling the experts in Feinheath.

'Odd. How can [Evil Darkness] be affected by such a thing? Isn't that the same as a mere mutation that beasts here on Aigas have? Besides that, [Evil Darkness] is an element specifically made for the Insurgent Magnus. Is he lying? Is it perhaps true that Boron's hand is evident in this as well?

A powerful Deific influence could contend against my current progress as an Insurgent Magnus, right?' Skullius thought.

It was a bit disturbing.

So far everything Ashema was able to do went against the norms, the Rules. Well, that was fitting. That was what Boron was to the systems of his fellow Deities. A foil. An enemy. A rebel.

'Alright. Let's look at the bright side. Just like how I was able to learn to enhance [Just Light] by analyzing the properties of the Luminant kind of light, I might be able to enhance the proficiency of darkness by learning how these creatures did it. Come to think of it...'

"What do you call yourselves?" Skullius asked.

Ashema scoffed.

"Finally interested?" he said. "We are the Carven."

Skullius sized Ashema with his extraneous senses. To some degree, that did make sense. Aside from looking like he was dragged out of a volcanic mountain, Ashema had stone qualities to him. Maybe that's why the name seemed so fitting.

"I see. Good to know. I want to see how your manipulation of darkness wor—"

The Hybrid Luman was suddenly interrupted by a voice that called inside his head.

"Lord Luminant. Lord Luminant!"

Skullius perked up.

"Viccil," he responded to the mental call in the same fashion.

Hearing the masculine voice that called him, Skullius immediately remembered that it was Viccil who was inhabiting the body of a male Incandescent Stage Maqian.

Skullius had told her and Seville to speak into the golden marks below their necks and he would hear them.

"Lord Luminant, we've been doing as you said, and we've liberated a decent number of our people thanks to you and your forethought!" Seville's voice came.

Skullius nodded.

"Good to hear. Anything else?" Skullius said.

"Yes, Lord Luminant. We've noticed something. It doesn't seem like the enemy is that concerned with attacking the Auroras. It isn't their main goal. Some of them are taking their time, and from the more free-spirited ones, we've managed to gather that they intend to pressure their Royal Highnesses into submission."

"Hmm. How do they intend to do that?" Skullius frowned as he asked.

"We are not sure about that. It seems the majority of the Maqians, the common soldiers, and even the Incandescent Stagers, don't know about the details. They only know something about a signal and some technique they will need to use immediately after. Other than that, they seem to be in the dark. We think perhaps only the Ode knows anything more than that. And Lord Luminant..." Viccil hesitated.

"Whatever they want to do... they are about to do it now."

Skullius leaned forward from his seat while gesturing for Ashema to stop asking him what he was doing.

'I see. So, there's a broader plan after all,' he thought before standing up. Of course, Maqi's plan couldn't have been so simple and brutish. The warriors from that place were usually smitten with an aggressive stereotype that identified them as nothing more than impulsive brutes, but Skullius knew... more than anyone alive... that that wasn't true.

Quickly, his vision shifted.

By tapping into the broad sensory range of the Preeminent Attegoth, he searched first for the Ode and the old woman who had been with him.

He sensed them. They were walking lackadaisically through a great forest where many of the creatures within fled from them. They didn't seem to be preparing for something. They were chatting casually.

As for their destination.

'I see...!' They were headed to a massive Aurora, where he sensed the Queen's and Darwel's presence vibrantly. 'That can't be a coincidence, right? But what about this scheme Seville and Viccil mentioned?'

Skullius wondered and his focus turned towards all the invaders. The rampaging Maqians that were causing havoc everywhere they went and...

'Hold on. There was that other bunch that disembarked from the ships...!' he thought.

Indeed. There was.

There were those individuals with shields and staves, like some kind of armored Mages. What had they been doing? He hadn't encountered a single one of them. They were experts from Emeradis, right? Their getup gave it away. No Maqian would be caught dead wearing that.

Quick-searching from the route they would take from the shore, the Hybrid Luman...discovered one standing all by himself, frozen like a statue in a secluded river with his staff raised to the sky.

Skullius frowned.

His sight zipping elsewhere, tens of kilometers from this individual, he saw another adorned in the same attire also standing with his staff raised. Then there was another and forty more forming a great, irregular oval around a rather insignificant portion of Opungale.

'What are they doing?' Skullius thought. His first instinct was to release Demion's Dance so that it could decapitate all of them, but... 'The hell?'

A torrent of mana gushed from each of the forty and some experts, towering with a kind of flair that was... that was very unsettling for the Hybrid Luman.

Emeradis was the first nation to delve into the mystics of Magecraft, so he had thought that these armored individuals armed with staves were Mages. However, when he felt their mana, he thought differently.

They seemed to be Energy Formers judging by the flavor of their mana, not to mention the control, but they couldn't be Mages.

They weren't Tamers, Skullius had met his fair share of them.

The fragrance and the weaving of their mana were familiar, Skullius had met and fought only one other person with this kind of presence in their mana; a kind of foreign influence to it that suggested.

'Damn it...!' the Hybrid Luman scowled deeply.

This... might be very bad.