

Undead 981

Chapter 981: Swarms (1)

Summoners.

It had to be.

Skullius recognized the foreign feel when the forty and some armored individuals set off their mana which towered over each of them like a visible twister tinged with bluish-white that threw around their surroundings hatefully.

Trees around them along with the innocent, stationary ground were dug into, and then a majority of the mana they released flooded to their feet and poured into their shadows which became distorted. Whether their shadows stretched backward, forward, left, or right, each curled and elongated, forming an ugly, colossal shape from which hints of light began to pour out.

Skullius frowned.

'Portals...' he thought.

Summoners, unlike Tamers, called forth abominations from unknown places after using the allure born out of how their class energy to attract these monsters and make contracts with them.

The unknowns behind where Summoners called forth their contracted beasts was why anyone bearing the Summoner class was to be killed in Pelian by order of the Royal Family – the Royan Family.

On the flip side, it seemed Emeradis embraced Summoners – all things Energy Former, really.

'Looks like they are getting ready to call some creatures... quite a lot of them,' he thought as he narrowed his eyes.

Skullius had encountered a Summoner back in the day (well, months ago). He had been a member of the Evenfall Cult, and his summons were peculiar. While he wasn't the one to fight the bastard,

he had noticed him opening portals to release all kinds of freakish creatures and the feeling those portals gave, Skullius hadn't quite managed to forget it.

This was the same.

Right then, it happened.

From the glowing pores spotting the dark, colossal shapes behind the Summoners, speedy, dark shadows whizzed out with a loud, collective buzz.

Every head turned at the hum. Even without the great visual range of Skullius, many managed to deduce the fact that an unimaginable number of creatures had appeared.

There was a lively sort of intensity in the great hum, and its tune was so full of life, greed, and menace that it caused the ground to vibrate, shifting stone and soil alike.

All across the continent, it was heard, and all over, it caused gripping despair to set into the hearts of those who heard.

What was it?

Where was it?

These questions were answered almost immediately.

The ground, already made dark by the canvas of the night, became a shade darker.

A massive clump of green and blue painted over the sky while swirling like sand, squirming like a horrid infection. It looked too great to be real, and instantly, the impossible numbers that made it were revealed.

Hundreds of millions of odd little creatures shaped similarly to seahorses with a chitinous shell of verdant green at the head and ocean blue at the tail could be seen, their long, but thin wings flapping impossibly fast while somehow managing to not crash into those of fellow abominations. At best, they seemed to be about the size of a palm, but that detail wasn't comforting in the least.

They had no limbs, but they did spot two long antennae that draped from the sides of their cylindrical, protruding mouth like thin beards.

It was hard to discern how strong one of these was, but that didn't matter. As a collective, they seemed to possess the power to destroy the entirety of Opungale with one, meaningful dive, which wasn't even accounting for what kind of abilities they had other than the physical power they could produce.

Skullius clicked his tongue.

Ashema by his side was looking up, watching the organized formation of these creatures become the sky to this continent.

"What in the world are those things?" he asked.

"Beats me. But I'm certain many people are about to die because of them..." Skullius said, and immediately, he felt a desperate push from nature, urging him to move quickly and save as many Sif as possible.

He sighed but maintained a stern visage.

That was going to be a hassle.

WHOOOOSH!

A deafening noise unlike the fall of a massive wave at sea came and the incredible gathering of the strange creatures fell... and dispersed into tens of thousands of smaller groups.

They were... impossibly fast.

Skullius felt several of the creatures land around him, but he didn't give them a chance to act.

He stole Ashema and vanished, appearing further away.

"How kind of you," Ashema remarked as they landed on top of a great hill.

"I still have a lot to learn fro—"

Skullius activated [I Am The World] again, evading a speedy clump of the creatures that had already set sights on him.

'They are pretty keen. How about this?' he thought, and another of his skills was activated through the Preeminent Attegoth.

[Absolute Zero].

Skullius' only, [Evil Darkness] blessed stealth skill was used. It hid the presence of him and whoever he touched. Ashema noticed that a peculiar effect was layered over him.

'Darkness? Again?' he thought.

He didn't recognize what kind of effect was imbedded in the vague darkness but he, along with Skullius who smirked, noticed that the blue and green creatures didn't come rushing towards them.

"It worked..." Skullius said.

"Your use of darkness. It is definitely reminiscent of what I've seen some of our less...gifted, kin do."

"Is that right? I'm going to need a demonstration," Skullius said much to Ashema's frown, but he didn't get to air his rebuttal because the Hybrid Luman skipped over space again and appeared within an Aurora that was further inland, far from the approach of the Maqians.

Using the vision granted by nature, he looked around.

He wanted to see what it was that these summoned creatures could do.

Honestly, if they were barely as much of a threat as the Maqians qualitatively, Skullius wouldn't be urged to urgency, after all, now of his current abilities could destroy the swarms of these creatures easily. Additionally, he hadn't gathered enough mana for such a grand feat, though he had some wild ideas.

What Skullius saw made him scowl.

No.

Urgency was needed for sure.

This... was ridiculous.

Even Ashema was perturbed as he looked down, watching with his single the tragedy that befell every single living thing on Opungale.

Chapter 982: Swarms (2)

Skullius saw the swarm descend earnestly, and land right over the frightened civilians who couldn't do anything in the face of the vast tide of living unknown. Their eyes could hardly see the movements of the creatures, and thus, even their response to what occurred next was belated, if it even existed.

The scene devolved into something out of a horror epic. No. Perhaps, for Skullius at least, it reminded him of what happened during the Premium Age Royale, the unseen process that led to the pillar of souls that were dropped into the seal which had been carved on the ground to resurrect Rayn.

As the creatures of green and blue nestled on top of the heads of thousands of Sif in fractions of time unfathomable for the common man, they became bathed in a whitish-pink, starry light that flaked over their victims and caused them to freeze.

The manner in which it happened was rather unnerving. It was almost as though time had stopped over every individual target.

Skullius frowned lightly.

In the next instance, he watched, with a feeling of shock and urgency, the seahorse-like creatures rise up with the speed of shooting stars, below them, ghostly yet fragrant and luminous shapes like bent crystals rising along with them, nabbed from their victims!

Unfortunately, the strength of the victim didn't matter. Even experts were caught in this.

Watching the scene from a broader perspective, like Skullius and Ashema, gave a greater appreciation for the sheer beauty of the disaster.

Thousands of glinting shapes flying upward from the vast Aurora only to vanish when they reached a certain altitude... it was a gorgeous sight, not to mention ironic.

Skullius' head fell to the bodies of the Sif who dropped like logs a micro-moment later.

His eyes narrowed.

He saw the same thing happen again and again in different sections of the Aurora.

'Fascinating...' he thought, disregarding the burning urges from the green, tormenting him with the call to glorious purpose.

Fascinating indeed.

There was no choir of terror from the victims.

They were put at ease by the flakes of light from the blue and green creatures and then extracted from without harm, quite literally.

No Sif was killed or wounded as a result of the actions of the summoned monsters.

'Mana... That's all they took...?' Skullius thought.

The target of the summoned monsters, was mana.

The Hybrid Luman wore a grin.

His senses couldn't have been fooled. Nothing to do with mana escaped his understanding now, and even to say the enemy was after a simple resource like mana, was an oversight that was quickly cleared with his senses.

What was taken was actually...

'A large sample of the soul's information was extracted through their pure mana,' Skullius thought. 'The mana core is linked to both the body and soul, and it produces pure mana which is then transformed through the Refinery. That pure mana on its own... possesses so much information on the soul that it might as well be a document of the individual's current and future potential...'

Skullius' eyes turned cold.

He watched as the whole Aurora turned silent in the next instance. All the creatures left, heading for another pasture to quell their appetite. They rushed off like a locust swarm with the sounds they made with their chip-thin wings rattling the hyper-sensitive skin of the Hybrid Luman immensely.

'Disgusting,' Skullius thought.

When the swarm had left, he dropped with Ashema to the tranquil streets strewn with the bodies of common Sif and combatants alike.

The look of their immense numbers, as some stacked over of each other, brought about a dire sought of feeling even with the knowledge that they weren't dead.

Skullius felt Ashema spill from his grip, but he was too absorbed in thought to beckon him back. The dark Carven would be left in the open as soon as he fled from the Hybrid Luman's touch; [Absolute Zero]'s embrace drawing away.

'What is the goal here? Gathering the soul's information... There must be some real knowledgeable people among the men from Emeradis. It shouldn't be a surprise. A nation that focuses heavily on Energy Forming is bound to be proficient in that stuff...'

Skullius extended his vision through the Preeminent Attegoth and saw the same scene that happened in this Aurora occur over multiple within seconds. Some were completely defenseless against the unexpected attack, but the rapid reinforcement from the Sif forces, which had saved many from the loud gong and the Maqian warriors' advance, was working just as well here. Well, almost.

The swarms of these creatures were so overwhelming in number that some countermeasures which had been efficient before, were useless against them. The great, enchanted trees that swallowed civilians into the safety of their trunks, for instance, were unable to stop the creatures from flooding into the expansive spaces they made, which effectively left the Sif within trapped.

Skullius clicked his tongue.

There was so much activity.

So many of these buggers.

'Hmm?'

Something stole his attention amidst the chaos.

The Maqians...

The Hybrid Luman saw each and every one of them stick to a bizarre stance as their Aura flooded out. They all – wherever they were – had their arms pointed down with their palms open, fingers retracted, facing the ground. Their legs were spread out, their feet digging so deep into the ground that they might have been hammered in there.

The Aura around them, seemingly prompted by this stance, shrouded them in what looked like a stylish lady's bow, albeit a little morbidly tattered.

'I suppose all this is what Viccil and Seville heard. The Maqian forces look like they were prepared for it well too...'

Indeed. It was so.

The summoned glorified mana mosquitoes completely ignored all the Maqians striking the stance.

SLUUURRRRRRP!

"Yeeeergh!"

SLUUURP!

Skullius turned at the sudden noise.

He found Ashema crouching down over the body of one of the unconscious Sif. On her neck was a large gash from which a stream of blood formed a soft shape to trickle into Ashema's mouth. The dark creature drank, savored, shivered and spat it out.

"I gave it a chance. No. Not for me. That's foul. Did all that drain away the quality of the taste perhaps?" he said a scowl that turned his already terrifying face, even more treacherous. To exhibit his dislike of the flavor, he kicked the Sif responsible for it and she flew all the way out of the city.

Skullius snapped his fingers and the woman was warped back.

"That was excessive. Keep your violence to yourself," Skullius said as he tried to quell the panic he felt the surrounding nature as a result of Ashema's actions.

The Carven scoffed.

"What will you do now? Save everyone?" he said with hints of mockery. "It feels like these little bastards won't stop pouring from the Abyss. Can you really handle that?"

"Well, that won't... What did you say?" Skullius turned Ashema with a stunned look.

What he had just said...

Ashema didn't miss the shock in the Hybrid Luman's voice... and on his face. A malevolent look of glee transitioned upon his visage.

"Oh, you wouldn't know now, would you?"

Chapter 983: The Abyss

Ashema donned a face only a man with a huge amount of leverage would wear.

He was only too glad to see the ignorant look on Skullius the moment he used the word 'Abyss'.

He didn't intend to be stingy with the information, though. It wouldn't do him much good. The dark Carven had decided to stick to the unique being that was the Hybrid Luman and learn as much as he could... among other things. Turning out to be a nuisance would ruin the much-needed relationship he was cultivating with the only 'reasonable' surface dweller he had met so far.

It was only necessary until Lord Boron rose anyway.

Skullius raised a brow at the Carven.

"Are you going to tell me what you mean by Abyss or not?" he asked.

Ashema waved his hand at him.

"Don't get all hostile. I don't want to be difficult," he cleared the tension that he knew for a fact was about to rise. "You seem particularly interested in this, moreso than with anything else you've asked me before."

"It's a big deal. As far I know no one knows where these creatures are summoned from. It's certainly not from within Aigas. Is it?" a sharp look of suspicion crept on Skullius' face as he spoke.

Ashema grinned.

"You're wrong... but also right. Hmmm?" he said.

In the next moment, the Carven felt Skullius rush to grab him and with a whipping of the boundless air around them, he felt his feet land on a different swathe of ground, moist and livelier than that from before.

Skullius had moved them both.

A swarm of the discount sea life had rushed towards them both from the skies since Ashema had drawn away from Skullius and the Hybrid Luman had deactivated [Absolute Zero] in order to make his interaction with the Carven less awkward; he much preferred to have a face-to-face conversation.

"What do you mean by that?" Skullius responded to Ashema's vague answer just now.

The Carven didn't resist Skullius' lingering grip as he reactivated [Absolute Zero].

"The Abyss is an endless world of darkness. However, rather than a sunless world, like my home, it is defined by its unshakeable depth of dark that doesn't respond even to the greatest source of light. It is stable, perhaps it is even the embodiment of stability itself," Ashema said as he drew a thin line of black in the air.

"An endless world of darkness..." Skullius recited with a growing frown. "Where exactly is this Abyss then?"

"Its too vast to be identified as something that resides in a specific location. A large part of it runs through the sub-layers of this entire world that the Traitorous Deities made, and also my own. A larger part of it also exists outside it, bleeding into the Beyond Death, unseen by the casual eye."

Skullius' frown grew even deeper.

"The Beyond Death? Do you mean the Yormuness? Where souls go after death?"

"Yormuness? What an odd name. But yes."

Skullius slid his finger across his chin.

"You and your people seem to have many liberties despite being sealed away. I thought everything to do with Aigas couldn't affect your world. I never imagined your souls would have the same destination after death as those from up here," he said.

It was indeed rather curious. Skullius had always been under the impression that the Yormuness was created by the three Deities, and perhaps that was still true, but he imagined that to the Carven, being sent there after death was the greatest insult. Perhaps that was true as well.

"Well, that is the case. We are not too fond of it, but the saving grace is the promise of Lord Boron to resurrect all fallen souls, stripping them from the Beyond Death and into new vessels – the Great Incarnation, we call it – is so close. If I died right now, I wouldn't have to endure that place for long," Ashema said.

He had a tone of pride when he expounded all this.

The Great Incarnation.

Skullius scoffed inwardly.

The Carven had a suspiciously intimate relationship with their Deity Boron, so much so that Ashema was pretty justified in laughing at how practically 99% of the population of Aigas didn't know anything or even care about Quintess, Listafelle and Suzamete.

The Hybrid Luman wondered just how the Carven spoke to Boron so easily. Was it similar to how Luserus seemed to hold his limited race of Luminants so dear and thus doted on them?

All this was extraneous thought, however. Skullius shifted the subject back to its original course.

"This Abyss. It reaches even the Yormuness, which, as far as I know is outside Aigas, and transcends the seal that locked you from the surface world. If it exists everywhere, could you move through it?" Skullius asked.

...!!!

The moment he asked this question, a spark ignited in his mind. Before it was fully realized, Ashema was already answering his question.

"Of course, you can. Some of the elders among the Carven theorized that it could even be used as a shortcut to cover vast distances. You could pop into the Abyss, and out in a new location. The skill required to perform something like that is ridiculous, though. Navigating the Abyss is impossible for us.

Worst case, given how the Abyss connects to so many places outside of Aigas, you could end up lost, trapped in the same place these colorful creatures were summoned from."

Skullius didn't respond to this despite having heard it.

"It's Stagnant Space..." he suddenly muttered.

"What?"

"The Abyss. It's Stagnant Space! So, all along..." Skullius said with twinkles in his blank eyes.

Of course! How could he not have thought of it sooner?

An endless world of black...

It was indeed the concept he knew as Stagnant Space!

This concept had been made known to Skullius back when he used an Arcane Teleportation Scroll for the very first time.

Then, he had seen it in Fortune, on the stout mountain, entangled with concepts like Distorted Gravity and Spatial Lightning – with whatever was struck by the latter being fed into it only to be returned in the next moment, split in half; a telling tale of how dangerous travel into the dark space was and how it was only reserved for the truly skilled.

That...that was the Abyss.

It was like a channel to all sorts of places, but also like a lengthy mineral belt under a sand plain, keeping everything stable.

Skullius felt like he had truly been enlightened.

'So, Summoners reach into the Abyss and draw in unfamiliar beasts outside of Aigas. I suppose that's how they make contracts, and then master creating portals that reach these abnormal spaces through Stagnant Space to lighten the load on their mana. Funny that none of them know...' the Hybrid Luman thought.

Now that was suspicious. Maybe the Summoners in Pelian and in Maqi didn't know, but those in Emeradis...

Some had to know right? If Skullius now knew and after only a few months of focusing on the more energy-based side of his powers, then surely the nation known for pioneering and fostering the art of Magecraft since millennia ago had to have an inkling of the idea at least.

The Hybrid Luman had found access to Stagnant Space through the Cluster world that was now Fortune; through the stout mountain and its—

'Replicus... I gave the stout mountain to Replicus so he could learn all the concepts on there...' a dark look emerged on Skullius' face as he thought of this.

Spatial Lightning.

Stagnant Space.

Distorted Gravity.

If Replicus had mastered them all...

At that moment, Serenity's last words to Skullius rang within his mind:

'You think you've won. You believe you've lost. I pity you. He will set you straight.'

The Hybrid Luman grew annoyed.

Instead of dwelling on the subject, he tugged at Ashema.

"Good to know," he said. "Now, about that thing with how you Carven manipulate darkness... tell me all about it."

Before the horned Carven could respond, he and Skullius had vanished, heading towards the Preeminent Attegoth.

Like all living, mana-based things, it was being attacked ceaselessly, and finally needed the Hybrid Luman's help.

Chapter 984: Deathly Ruse

Skullius had long sensed that his Graceful Monolith was under attack by the swarms that had stolen the mana from roughly eight million Sif by now. The number seemed immense – and it was – but when considering only the statistical value, the toll was barely a single percentage of the total population of Sif on Opungale. That said, more were losing consciousness by the millisecond.

Given this threat and its speed when it came to reaping the mana bodies – as Skullius called them – from the residents of this land, the Hybrid Luman had been confident that the Preeminent Attegoth could hold out for a while.

While it wasn't exactly a living target, it did possess a vast mana signature, probably the largest individual one on the whole continent. As such, it had been a target for twenty percent of the entire swarm of the summoned, winged monsters since the very beginning.

At first, the 700,000 [Beads of Malevolence] around it, which were ridiculously fast and sturdy on top of being reinforced individually by a generous amount of purple quality mana, were able to shred the vast swarm of enemies as they flew by at supersonic speeds and higher.

Through the independent effort of the Attegoth, they were able to kill tens of thousands of the huddled-up creatures every second.

The winged seahorses weren't all that strong, durable or fast.

The Attegoth had demonstrated the validity of the first two aforementioned assessments, and Skullius had demonstrated the third by being able to react to the creatures' offensive dives fairly casually.

The creatures had two truly devastating weapons.

One was their ability to immobilize the target when they released their light flakes and drew upon their concentrated pure mana.

Second, was their numbers.

As time had passed, the Preeminent Attegoth had begun facing difficulty in defending itself without expending more mana for greater attack skills. The ten percent of winged seahorses that attacked it remained constant, by it also swelled.

It was just as Ashema had said.

The creatures continued pouring from the Summoners' gaping portals endlessly.

'The optimal option would be to kill those Summoners and shut off their portals,' Skullius thought as he swiftly flashed about with Ashema. 'If this continues, all the work I've done so far will be for nothing. Though, I'm not sure killing the Summoners will be easy. If they are indeed the lynchpin of the Maqians' operation, then they must have some assurance against being targeted.'

Skullius would rather not attack, fail, and have his enemies bolster their defenses as a result. From the look of it, most of the Maqians had stopped the raiding and were now fixed in that strange stance; the unknown technique they were using to ward away the winged seahorses. This meant that they wouldn't be defending the Summoners, but still, that didn't mean the Summoners needed them.

Skullius grinned.

'No matter. I'm just about to make a few offensive upgrades. One of them ought to work and solve this whole damn thing.'

Soon, Skullius reached the base of the Attegoth after exploiting a decent opening in the endless swarms of enemies that circled it, the majority of them being obliterated every second.

The noisy hum one would hear when so close to a large swarm of these monsters was irritating.

Skullius took a few moments to get used to it, as did Ashema who he dropped by his side.

"What now? You want that lesson on darkness right here?" the Carven asked sarcastically.

To his surprise...

"Yes. I'll give you an ear while I work," Skullius said sternly, and then he began.

Somewhere below Opungale...

An astoundingly beautiful man with very long, pointed ears waited patiently, his eyes closed. His thickets of royal clothing, embroidered and encrusted with gold string and precious multi-colored gems hid his figure from below the chin. Without being able to see the motions of his torso, it almost seemed as though only the man's head was the living part of him.

This man stood in a decrepit hall that, at first glance, seemed unbecoming of his status. He was the King after all.

However, he would have said the opposite.

Despite how the underground hall looked, it was the centre of all Sif tradition, culture and religion.

To the Royal Family, it was, in a way, more precious than the Luminants' Shrine guarded within the Oath of Mourning.

Of course, what made the hall important, wasn't the bricks used to make it.

It was the great bundle growing out of its floor.

Nine large daffodils of varying hues tied together by six Mythical grade tethers that resembled black, shriveled vines, could be seen.

They were so large that their stems looked like the trunks to ancient, magical trees of legend, their still petals, lightly aglow with different serene lights that strangely didn't reflect upon anything in the silent, dim hall looking as though they were viable places to live in.

The King felt a great connection to this bundle, which was known to the High Family as the Deathly Ruse. The two other individuals in the hall with him, seated on the ground closer to the bundle than he was, felt the same.

Not only did they have the same expression on their face as the King, they had similar details to their facial features as him as well, with the only difference being vague hints at the disparity in age.

All three Sif expressed reverence to the Deathly Ruse in their own way.

It was a gift from nature to the Sif, after all, arguably the best one.

With it, came some of the greatest secrets of the Sif that no one knew, one of which being their absolute mechanism for preservation.

"She is ready, father," one of the two seated Sif said to the King with a feminine voice.

The King nodded.

As had been directed by his wife, Queen Embrell, he had gotten the Deathly Ruse ready.

Only his two eldest children, El Sif purer than him and his wife, purer than Darwel, could hear and speak with it clearly, giving it commands and enacting its needs.

Ever since news of the Maqian army's mobilization had come, these two had rushed down to this hall in order to prepare.

It was already clear that Maqi would overpower the entire nation's military might even with only 1,000 combatants, as long as the Ode and a Shamanic Mage was among them. And thus, the High Family's strategy had always hinged upon defense more than it did offense.

"Do it. We can't have more of our people die," the King commanded, and the Deathly Ruse churned.

Chapter 985: Displeased

Even as the number of winged seahorses continued to pile on in Opungale from the channel that was the Abyss – Stagnant Space – opened by the forty and some Emeradis Summoners, two figures continued to leisurely walk towards their destination as though they were crossing the lovely wet sands of the beach.

The Ode had on a cool smile as he looked up at the millions of flying menaces, some of which were tempted to dive down, but desisted because of the presence of the ancient-looking woman walking beside the crimson-haired young man.

Her presence was too dark, and too vicious. It was much like a scalding vapor, the kind that one couldn't see when water was boiled but could only feel and draw back hastily.

Even these creatures which mostly existed outside the cycle of the regular beasts of Aigas knew danger when they felt it.

"It's working well, isn't it?" the Ode said.

"Yes. If only there wasn't a bargain involved. Emeradis... Bargaining and harvesting are their two most distinct traits. I have a feeling they are getting much more from this than we are," Umbett, the Shamanic Mage said with a lick of her chapped lips that seemed close to falling apart because of her age.

"How so? They may not be our equals, as they often try to assert themselves, but I believe its only right for them to take this much in return for their cooperation. They didn't ask for a portion of what we are after at least," the Ode said.

Umbett shot the young man an appraising glance.

"You're quite like your father. You both see Emeradis as a potential ally..."

"Is that such a bad thing? I believe in creating relationships. Its better than risking our entire livelihood for pride and unrealistic ideals. We can remain the dominant force of the world that we are while being smart about it at the same time."

Umbett harrumphed.

"Was calling for Summoners from Emeradis, even with me by your side also smart? I think not. If its alliances you and the First Horn want, you can forge them with less self-deprecating means. Since when does Maqi need such a huge force to take on mere Sif, hm? I can practically feel the vibrance of the reputation and weight I used to have fade away."

The Ode sighed.

He chose not to argue further. At the end of the day, a clean victory was already close to being reached. Whether his ideology or Umbett's was right didn't truly matter. Not today.

The crimson-haired young man would have preferred a bloody victory, though, and he saw an opportunity for it.

Despite how easy everything had been so far, there was no chance that the Sif didn't have something up their sleeve. Perhaps it was an old trump card made to repel their forces or maybe to kill him or Umbett.

Whatever it was, the young Ode had already prepared for it, so had Umbett.

The two had been tailed by a group of fine Maqian combatants, but they had to stay behind minutes ago because unlike him who had the exclusive protection of a revered Shamanic Mage, they didn't. They had to use the Shadowing Technique to hide themselves from the preying eyes of the winged seahorses.

Well, it wasn't like the two really needed a protective entourage.

"We're here," the Ode said as he grinned at what was ahead.

The colossal image of a particular Aurora stood before them, partly blocked out by great swarms of the millions of summoned creatures.

They darted around the sky as though without direction, with some drawing clear arcs in the air, teasing a dive and then flying up.

None of the mutant seahorses actually invaded the great Aurora.

It seemed, much like how they behaved with Umbett, they were fearful of something within the great settlement.

Where the Aurora began, neat rows of archers, some standing and some crouching in perfect display, could be seen, their arrows nocked on high quality bows.

Rows of other Arma Users, Form Users and Energy Formers could be seen behind the formation, their faces strained and stern.

They all recognized who... what they were up against. Their numbers – close to a million – didn't really matter.

Most of them were at the Master Stage, but a little less than a dozen Incandescent Stagers were among them, letting their presence known for morale and futile attempts at deterrence.

"My dear Queen, if you wish for your men to keep their lives, I advise that you tell them to point their loose weapons elsewhere," the Ode declared in an offended voice, his eyes sparking green. "I do have a very creative way for them to die so, if you don't play nice, I might just indulge myself."

The Sif soldiers shivered.

There was something unnerving about the Ode's voice.

It made their skin crawl, seeming to run through their bones and perhaps even deeper, despite it being mellow at best.

It didn't help that what the Ode said became etched into them like hammered nails, echoing through their flesh until they believed that he, the Ode alone, could kill them all.

Some began quivering in fright instantly as a result. Perhaps all the forces of Opungale should have been called here instead of being ordered to remain their various regions.

"Stand down."

A strong female voice came from behind the ranks of the large force.

The soldiers followed the order and cast away their weapons from the Ode's path.

The crimson-haired young man scoffed and walked forward, with Umbett following behind him.

The combatants before him parted like a sea, making a straight path to the end of the entire formation where Queen Embrell stood alongside Darwel, encircled by a group of the same aloof Incandescent Stagers that had defended the royals back when the gong was still a threat.

The Ode quickly reached the Queen and looked straight at her with nothing but lazy condescension.

"I had heard you weren't so barbaric anymore, that a new regime had taken the reins to Maqi. Was my source wrong?" the Queen asked with a placid face.

"No, of course not. How could anyone possibly view this as barbaric? This is simply...controlled chaos with a dash of justice," the Ode spread his arms wide as he declared rather jovially.

"Why unleash it upon us without reason then? Have you any idea how many of mine died tonight?" the Queen looked rather composed, her presence was quite calm as well, and yet her voice was drowned in boiling sorrow and hate.

The Ode chuckled and took a step towards her.

"For no reason?!" he roared.

At once, one of the Incandescent Stagers around the Queen stepped up to bar the crimson-haired man from proceeding any further.

The latter... was not pleased by this.

He frowned deeply, his face becoming marked in ugly shadows.

...And the protective guard burst into flame.

It was a scorching, green flame that swallowed her, twice as tall as her full height.

It was bright, and it was also short-lived.

It vanished as soon as it appeared, leaving behind its victim as she had been a moment prior; eyes sharp, guarded stance up, lips taut tensely.

However, deep within, the lively ghost that made the Sif whole, had been burned away like paper, leaving behind a hollow vessel that was yet to even realize it.

Chapter 986: The Reason

Darwel's breath quickened. Unlike the guards, she could afford to show cracks in her confidence.

What she had seen was absolutely mortifying.

A flame had devoured one of her mother's most trusted guards, a powerful one at that, but she still remained standing, her body complete – no parts of her charred or singed – and yet she didn't move. She simply kept staring ahead as she had been before when her loyalty to the Queen possessed her to go against the Ode.

Being unable to see her face – as Darwel saw – raised the eerie tone by several degrees.

There was a cold silence.

It seemed even the Queen was surprised by what had happened. She seemed to be the only one to truly see clearly and understand what had ended her precious guard. However, even if she couldn't understand how.

How in the world could one burn another's soul in 0.01 seconds?

How?

As this phenomenon stumped even a powerhouse like Embrell, it was only natural that it terrified the throngs of soldiers waiting on either side of the enemy duo between them.

"Did that spook you all? Funny, I thought you plant worshippers had spine. Though, I suppose you don't have the best collective role models in that regard," the Ode spouted with a tooth grin. He then walked over to the standing corpse, still with color and lingering bits of determination and vigor.

He poked the corpse and it fell over backwards, somehow managing to maintain a rigid stiffness as did so.

Before it could slam on the ground gracelessly, however, Queen Embrell caught it.

A melancholic look spread over her face. Her vibrant eyes were drowning with a depth that could only be inspired by age, and if one looked past them, it wouldn't be impossible to glimpse the crippling sorrow nesting within her soul.

Softly, the Queen, under the fuss of Darwel and her guards who split themselves between watching her and guarding her from the crimson-haired young man, laid the corpse on the ground and faced the young Ode.

"Answer me. Why?" she said with a frosty look in her eyes.

The Ode knew she wasn't asking about the guard. She had recovered rather quickly from that. Commendable.

Of course, Embrell was talking about the reason why Maqi was attacking them.

The young man, his father and all of Maqi seemed to truly believe that Opungale had done them wrong.

What was this wrong that deserved payment with such senseless killing?

It wasn't the Ode who answered this question, however.

"It has been ages since the Grand Wars, but I would have thought you all carried records of times past, revisiting them through the millennia. Honoring them, whatever they may hold. Do you mean to tell me that you do not?" Umbett said, her eyes stowed within wrinkled, rather, ridged eyelids, swelling with disappointment.

The crimson-haired young man folded his arms.

"We know our history as much as anyone. We celebrate it. We adore it. Nothing in it has ever warranted the discrimination your nation has towards us," the Queen said, her tone turning to a more hostile one. "We decided to open up our people to yours after all this time with the alliance we made with Pelian, but this... this is your response.

I had developed a little faith in the path your new First Horn took."

The Ode cackled loudly, causing more than a few soldiers to flinch.

"How buttery. You make it seem as though you had the purest of intentions, but that's not the case, is it? If you were really serious about establishing a meaningfully relationship with humans, you would have done it with the most sensible people around. You would have gone to Emeradis! Everyone knows the King of Pelian is a fool who hides in his palace with his pathetic spawn.

He is nothing like the progenitor of his line. He would have sooner allowed you to own half of Pelian if you asked kindly enough than deny your request for an alliance. Ha! You knew it! You sent that little brat to do it for you because you knew Royan was easy pickings! Isn't that right, my dear?"

The Ode's rant ended with his eyes sharply staring at Darwel who felt as though all the air around her fled at the attention of the unfathomable prince before it.

Embrell rushed to block her from the crimson-haired man's view.

"So that was the last straw then? That was why you finally chose to attack?" the Queen ground her teeth as she spoke.

There was still no mention of what exactly spurned this hatred.

Hadn't humans and Sif alike weathered the deception of the Giants in the First Grand War and the ruthlessness of the Immoral in the Second?

Was that not what history said?

"We only made our move after a certain man stopped getting in our every time. But in any case, this indeed was the last straw. We have been itching to settle the score. When Fulgardt unleashed his full madness on Feinheath, we appealed for your help. There was sure to be familiar camaraderie between us since we shared the struggles from the Giants' scheme. But no.

You refused. You kept to yourself."

"We, Maqi, took responsibility for the demon that was birthed in our land and spread our forces to assist all over the continent. The wiser Royans of the time, called for your help, even Emeradis did, but you sat still. It wasn't your concern until the fire reached Opungale and even then... the hot battles that decided our fates were fought on human soil."

Embrell and all of the Sif donned dumbfounded faces as the Ode spoke, a genuine bitterness in his voice.

Wait...

Wait...

"It's been a common theme that we Maqians discriminate against your kind, but that was never the case. THIS...was why."

Queen Embrell stammered, her brows furrowed in confusion.

"What... what are you talking about? That... that never happened!" she said.

No way. That was not what happened. What kind of bullshit reason was that?

There were records of everything Opungale was involved with from as early as hundreds of years before the Grand Wars, and what they said... was the opposite of what the Ode was accusing the Sif of.

"That's not true! There's no way! Our ancestors were not cowards!" Darwel found the strength to shout. "They would never do such a thing!"

The Ode frowned, the cracks of shadow darkening his face.

"Is that right?" he said as the air around him turned furiously hot. "I suppose its one record against the other. That's what it all comes down to, isn't it?"

Everyone was still locked in disbelief and Queen Embrell had partially lost her burning desire to fight immediately.

No. This was not right.

It didn't seem like the Ode was making up a random story. He truly believed what he was saying.

Maqi truly believed that somehow, in the past, the Sif did such a thing! That they remained silent while everyone else burned.

Deep down, Embrell thought to her husband's suggestion to have a calm discussion first. This might have been the best solution... if there had been a chance for it.

"We didn't come to compare records anyway, or to confirm anything," the Ode said, his figure getting shrouded with mana. "We came to take this land. The fates of your people can be decided later, if you decide wisely. Now, you can choose how this goes.

You can watch us burn all you've built down after coming at us all at once, or you, my dear Queen, could battle me in a traditional Kuthmuk, one on one. If you win, we'll leave. You have my word. If I win, well..."

At that moment, a random combatant standing in the thick of the crowd of Sif became encased in a great green flame that vanished in the next moment, leaving him whole, yet also... not so.

"...your fates will be sealed."

Chapter 987: The Value of Royal Blood

At the sight of another one of them combusting inwardly, losing their soul to the odd fire, morale fluctuated, adrenaline rushing in different courses.

There was no greater insult to a nation's military might than having to hesitate when they had the numerical advantage of 1000 to 0.001.

What added salt to the wound was that the Queen was being disrespected in front of said military, but rushing in without a thought to protect Her Majesty's honor would serve no purpose whatsoever.

What was more terrifying than death, was a futile death.

Many among the Sif soldiers had begun to develop thoughts along the lines of:

'Even if I die trying to attack the Ode... it won't mean anything. It will not save the Queen and even past my death, her name will still be besmirched by that man.'

It was a valid thought to have.

But then, if an impulsive attack was a stupid thing to do, what about the options the Ode laid forward.

Continuing the war as it was until one side inevitably demolished the other, was too frightening.

After all, what was even worse than a futile death, was a collection of them.

As it stood, shocking as it was, no one aside from the Queen and King could even hope to contend against the Ode. Even though, as everyone could sense, he was just an Incandescent Stager, he seemed to have extremely vicious attainments where his class was concerned.

What was worse was the fact that it wasn't just the Ode here. There was the Shamanic Mage beside him. No one even needed an essay to understand just how fruitless a clash with the old woman

would be. It was unclear what made her so strong, but everyone could feel it. Perhaps it was her age. Perhaps it was her very rare class whose definition were developed and practiced only in Maqi.

Besides even her, there was still the Maqian combatants.

For them to become active again, the Emeradis Summoners simply had to recall their summons, which was going to happen eventually.

Speaking of which, the Summoners were a threat too. Their individual threat level was currently masked because they were reaping easy gains, but that could easily change if need be.

Every Sif expert around the Ode and Umbett shook.

This was looking hopeless.

The first option was simply a death sentence. A brutal one.

Well...

Maybe...

Perhaps...

If THEY were brought forth, the battle could be won, perhaps with excruciating difficulty.

But that ceremony was only done yearly, and it would take a long time to complete.

That left only the second option the Ode presented.

Everyone looked to the Queen.

Darwel clutched her mother's arm tightly, her eyes livid with desperation.

No. Not her mother.

Her mother was powerful. Terribly so, but against... THAT...

Her eyes bulged as she pulled and stared at the beautiful El Sif's face.

"No! Mother you can't!" Darwel discarded all the formality in her speech like she had been struggling to do before the invasion. She turned pale. Unlike everyone else, she was completely aware, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that her mother would choose to fight herself.

That was tradition.

It was what she had told Skullius back then, that royalty to the Sif meant being on the frontlines. While those who were loyal insisted on treating the Queen with the respect she deserved, offering their lives, and even Cycles to her service, constantly guarding her and always executing her every whim, it was in such a trying time when the value of the royalty transcended all this.

"Darwel..." Queen Embrell said, a small smile on her face.

"No!" the young El Sif screamed.

"Do you lack that much faith in me..."

Darwel squeezed her mother's wrist and buried her head in the baggy fabric of her robe. She was unafraid to confess that she did lack the faith that her mother could win.

Queen Embrell felt the heavy tones of doubt coming from all around her. She sighed. She couldn't blame everyone for fearing for her life.

Before the Maqians came, she was the one who gathered all the troops and emphasized to them how strong the forces of Maqi were, their brand of Mages, their relentless, cruel training regiments, their Ode and the First Horn.

Records from the Grand Wars from their ancestors documented how consistent Maqi's overwhelming strength was.

The First Horn and his Ode were always formidable monsters at the top of the chart, and it always defied logic how powerful they were. As if there was a formula to it.

As such... it wasn't strange that everyone else seemed to be urging her with desperate eyes to take the first option instead.

"Will you keep your word?" Queen Embrell looked at the Ode with a cold blaze in her eyes as she asked.

The crimson-haired young man smiled.

"Of course. If you're strong enough to beat me, that'll just defeat the purpose of this excursion. My father sees it the same way, rest assured," he said. "And by the way, if you do manage to defeat me, make sure to crush my head. I wouldn't want to live long enough to endure my father's wrath."

Umbett chortled, amused.

"Very well," Queen Embrell said.

Darwel pulled on mother's arm viciously, but she couldn't move it an inch.

The Queen then suddenly wore a radiant smile as she faced the duo.

"Before we begin, however, please excuse my people," she said coolly.

The Ode raised a brow, unsure of what she meant. Did she expect him to wait until she evacuated everyone here? Well, that was dumb.

He was about to question her sensibility when...

GRUUUK!

The ground suddenly shook dreadfully, as though some titan that had been laying peacefully below had decided to awaken and rise to the surface.

What was more unsettling was how the centre of the phenomenon was not even close to this Aurora. It came from several kilometers east of here, opposite the radiant 'tree' that shone from the distance, and still it felt cataclysmic.

GRRRRUK! BOOOM!

As everyone watched, a great bundle of huge daffodils with luminous, multi-colored petals exploded out of the ground with the same grace as a gorgeous fashion model rising out of a clean pool.

The great bundle rose and rose further until it drew all the attention of all who saw it all around Opungale, eclipsing the height of even the Preeminent Attegoth, albeit losing in a contest of radiance.

All the Sif who saw, except for the Queen, were beyond astounded.

This...

It was the Deathly Ruse!

But how...

It shouldn't have been the time to awaken it yet, not according to tradition at least.

But many of the combatants were beyond pleased!

The Queen had had enough forethought to have the Deathly Ruse awakened beforehand!

Praise Listafelle!

With this perhaps they could bring...

"My children..." Queen Embrell looked at the Sif experts and then at Darwel. A sweet smile formed on her face. "I will plant you back, when all this is over."

...!!!

Just as perturbing realization struck all who heard, an unseen chord attached all the Sif in the Aurora, save for Her Majesty the Queen.

In the next moment. Every Sif alive, twisted inward, as though imploding, and became a seed...

Chapter 988: Preservation

It was indeed a secret that no one knew about the Sif.

They were quite reserved and enjoyed simple lives without much conflict – at least post the Grand Wars. They cherished these simple lives; adoring the blessings of the seas, the fruits of the forest and the life that both gave.

The Luminants had also been enthralled by the peace when they were forcefully brought to Opungale. They had assimilated to the burdenless life much better than they would if they had been brought anywhere else on Aigas.

However, reserved and kind as the Sif might have been, they were not helpless plant worshippers as most thought.

They had a secret.

The Sif did not have unnaturally long lives... naturally. They were similar to humans, though, dietary differences did give them an edge life expectancy wise.

Millennia ago, many years after Fulgardt, after the Ashing of the Time, a special species of flower, large and graceful, began to grow in the land. It was a gift, much like the natural barrier around the continent.

The High Family of that time, all El Sif, were graced with the knowledge of what this plant was for, and how to use it to preserve themselves.

The flower was a natural director of life force, with a will of its own. It deemed the Sif worth granting its blessings, which aligned with the goals of the King and Queen from that time onward.

Preservation.

All royalty lines that came before and after recognized that peace was misleading. It could drain their strength if they sank too deeply into it and neglected the possibility of another catastrophic event brewing in the future. Most from these royalty lines hadn't found a solution, but the Deathly Ruse changed everything.

Using its power, exceptionally formidable experts born in Opungale through the years, were allowed to live out their lives after reaching their full potential. When they grew old, they would be given to the Deathly Ruse, which would turn them into seed in a process called Seedification, preserving their body and soul in that form until such a time when they were needed.

Indeed, actualizing such an absurd concept, was the Deathly Ruse's power.

Preservation.

Once one was turned into a seed, they could either be stored within the stems of the Ruse indefinitely, or be planted deep within the ground in order to bloom and sprout back to life once again, their body back to prime, and also their soul. While it took up to a fortnight, sometimes less, for the process to complete, it was very well worth it.

As the years flew by, this practice did not remain exclusive to experts. It extended to the common Sif as well.

Every year, those who were close to the end of their lives while having lived under specific circumstances, unfulfilled, terribly ill or having gone through some gruesome tragedy, would be given to the Deathly Ruse during a special ceremony. They would be granted what the Sif called, the next Cycle. A new life.

The same was true for those that conducted important work around Opungale; vital researchers, doctors and the like.

It was easy to abuse this ability, very much so.

However, the long lines of El Sif created rules to manage the use of the Deathly Ruse in such a way that didn't dangerously ignore the natural order.

Only one Cycle was to be granted to common folk after their former life. At the end of it, they would not be given another.

For all the experts that were preserved, and not yet planted, if a century passed – from the moment of their 'demise' – without their strength being required, they would be allowed to pass on without being given a new Cycle.

This, to all those that governed the use of the Deathly Ruse, seemed fair.

Of course, the power of the flower... flowers, wasn't limited. Its scope far exceeded what was known by the general public.

....

This full scope was currently being demonstrated.

Every single Sif on the continent had been turned into a seed; seedified.

Billions of seeds floating over sets of clothing that dropped to the ground, could be seen everywhere in the air.

The Ode and Umbett hadn't expected this particular surprise.

The crimson-haired young man looked hundreds of thousands of the seeds around him curiously, then at the only Sif who remained.

"Wow... I did not see this one coming," he said with a genuine tone of surprise.

"I'm glad," Queen Embrell said with relieved glint in her eyes.

"Though, I do wonder if those fellows will leave them be," the Ode said and he pointed at the swarms of the seahorse-like creatures flying above, desperate to shoot down but deterred by the presence of the three monstrous experts.

Queen Embrell had already known that her people would still be under threat even in this state.

In fact, the summoned creatures were already attacking the seeds of those who weren't protected by her presence.

Thankfully, the Deathly Ruse immediately began to draw the seeds towards it.

Millions of them flashed from region to region, scattering in order to escape the pursuit of the equally numerous, greedy enemies.

The seeds that made it simply sank into the large stems of the Ruse as though dropping into a calm pool of waters, safe, but as it turned out, the collection of supernatural flowers wasn't safe either.

The discount swimmers practically flooded towards the Ruse since it exuded a large energy signature as well, but it wouldn't be taken down so easily. It couldn't be harassed to oblivion by a few tens of millions of bizarre seahorses.

Then again... perhaps a hundred million of them would do the trick.

Queen Embrell frowned.

She had hoped that her husband would show to defend the Deathly Ruse, but seeing as he wasn't, that must have meant...

"You've gotten the collateral out of the way. How about we begin now?" the Ode shattered the Queen's bubble of worries as he stepped forward, battle ready and smiling.

Embrell still had burning tension lit in her mind. She was distracted, but not enough to show it openly.

"Fine," she said heavily.

"Are you going to fight me in those baggy robes?" the Ode asked with a face close to bursting into laughter.

The Queen ignored him.

The crimson-haired young man extended his hand towards her.

Embrell just had to shake it, and the traditional battle rite would begin.

She hesitated only for a moment, her heart unsettled and weighing a couple more grams than normal, but she reached in too.

...

Right then...

A foul, blackish red light abruptly changed the highlight of the night!

All three amidst the chaotic swarms of seeds and seahorses turned to the source.

The giant tree of light in the far distance, to the west, had suddenly become suffused in an atrocious sort of... Aura, that looked like a demented flame burning and rising up!

Umbett's facial skin crumpled like paper.

"Ode..." she said in a dark, rough voice.

The crimson-haired young man frowned at the unexpected sight as well.

"What is that?"

Embrell wasn't sure as well, until she remembered her daughter muttering that this thing belonged to that arrogant man she thought was a Luminant.

What was going on?

In the next instant, Umbett, her hand moving so quickly it might have not moved at all, cast a blurred, irregular shield around herself and the Ode.

A micro-instant later, something the Ode didn't see crashed against the barrier with a precise, explosive impact so forceful and so outlandishly sharp that he felt it in his flesh despite whatever it was not being able to even scratch the barrier around him.

Well... there were two of whatever this attack was, but he couldn't have been able to distinguish them, since they came in super rapid succession.

Umbett and Embrell – who was seemingly exempt from the attack – on the other hand, saw.

They saw it all.

It wasn't only the hag and the Ode who were targeted by this strange attack.

The evidence of it showed when the corpses of tens of millions of the summoned creatures fell from the sky without warning.

However, it was billions of their parts that fell to the ground like bloody, messy hail, all finely carved, butchered and sliced into even pieces, some too small to see.

Umbett and Embrell had seen it, but they couldn't quite articulate what they had seen cut up the little menaces.

Whatever it was, however, was terribly lethal.

Viciously so.

...

Far off, the source of the chilling, inexplicable attack chuckled and tilted his head.

"Well, it was worth a shot," he said disappointed, yet highly enthused.

Chapter 989: No More Holding Back

Several minutes prior...

"Oh, so that's how you do it?" Skullius said without turning back looking back at Ashema. His hand was on his chin, stroking it carefully while his blank eyes were stuck on the design beneath his feet.

The wide carpet of massive skulls with huge gems shaped like wings sticking from them was odd to stand on, even for him who was responsible for the design.

The Preeminent Attegoth from this high up looked even more majestic and domineering than from a distance. Skullius recalled its lesser grandeur from back when he first summoned it because of a Task. It had been a marvel back then, allowing him to take down Kenno, a Master, while he was only an Advancer.

He had used it again on several occasions as a great support unit – against Hobbu Gobbu and Rias in the Premium Age Royale – but its previous strength wasn't as remarkable as it was now.

"It's rather simple, isn't it?" Ashema said, lugging his scythe over his shoulder with a grin. "I doubt manipulating darkness for you came as easy. But, I don't doubt that you'll be able to replicate the specific method we use. Hell, what you use now hasn't shown itself to be inferior, has it?"

"No, it hasn't. But I do need to understand niche styles like yours for what I need to do," Skullius replied as he dropped and caressed the skull he stood on.

Ashema had been expositing how his people used darkness and how it ended up developing traits that had nothing to do with darkness itself.

All of it was useful information to Skullius. Was it applicable? Probably not. At least not immediately. His affinity with [Evil Darkness] was not quite fully realized yet. On top of that, he had cheated his way into reaching the A rank for it, and such a thing didn't give him much understanding of darkness, but only bolstered his efficiency with it.

This had its merits though. Skullius had not created the affix on the Bashful Abomination not just because he wanted to acquire the full power of [Evil Veneration]. It also wasn't to superficially raise his affinity to darkness either.

There was a trump card involved that when used, would achieve two of his goals at once.

'Let's shelve that for a bit,' Skullius thought and sighed.

"So you said your people, the Carven, simply don't need to expend energy when using your many different abilities, right? Courtesy of Boron?" he asked Ashema.

The dark creature looked at him and smiled toothily.

"That's right. Are you thinking of offering your allegiance to Lord Boron? That could be arranged, you know."

"No. Nothing like that," Skullius said and he closed his eyes. "It seems like I can't erase the costs of activating my abilities unless I use Divinity. But, perhaps I can use a certain skill's privilege to my advantage."

Skullius felt the positions of every skill etched into the Preeminent Attegoth.

He located all skills related to [Just Light] and a devious smile appeared on his face.

At the same time, using his Graceful Monolith's vast range, he honed in on the positions of the Ode and old hag he had seen on the shore.

He wondered what they were up to now.

"Hmmm. Looks like things are moving quicker than I imagined," Skullius said.

Those two had confronted the Queen and Darwel far from his position.

That didn't bode well.

He recognized that that bold Queen must have her own plans. The way she held herself and spoke suggested it... and also the fact that she was the dominant one between the two absolute royals.

"Whatever her plans are, I should probably prepare to add on to them..."

"Who are you talking to?" Ashema asked with a laugh.

"Shut up," Skullius said as he summoned Demion's Dance into his hand. The green-bladed hanger with the golden hilt looked eager to be swung. It even sent shuddering waves through the Hybrid Luman that suggested so.

At this point. Skullius decided that he had delayed the inevitable enough.

"Do it," he commanded the sword.

At that moment, Demion's Dance's blade cracked.

Since the Premium Age Royale, the sword had been eagerly awaiting the time when it could finally reach its fullest capabilities without obstruction.

It had held back because of the Royale rules, and it had held back because Skullius told it to hours ago, but now... it was free.

CRACK! CRACK!

Its blade shattered into tiny green fragments that revolved around the golden hilt which remained in Skullius' grip. Said hilt seemed to crack as well, and soon, it too exploded into golden shards, some reduced to dust, that swirled around the Hybrid Luman.

Ever since Demion's Dance became complete, it had begun to do things the Skullius who picked it up way back, the Labyrinth of the Yoke, wouldn't have ever been able to guess.

It had been an ordinary saber at the Rare grade, then a hanger at the Legendary. Now...

Right then, an unexpected interference rushed in, breaking the ecstasy that the Hybrid Luman and his sword were enjoying.

Skullius first sensed it through the Preeminent Attegoth. Some massive rose out of the ground. It was a great bundle of daffodils.

Oddly, right after it stood straight, the Attegoth sensed the presence of almost the entire population of Sif vanishing!

"Hmmm?" Skullius frowned, highly concerned, but then...

[The Deathly Ruse gives its humble greeting]

[The Deathly Ruse wonders if you wish to be seedified?]

Skullius narrowed his eyes at the notification.

"Seedified?"

This was an alien term to him, but he swiftly understood what it meant once the Preeminent Attegoth honed in on the 'vanished' Sif.

He didn't quite understand everything to do with the flowers, but it was clear...

"I see. So that's what her plan was. I didn't think even those plants would be submissive to me though," Skullius said with a laugh. "No."

With the Ruse's influence denied cast his mind back to the glinting shards of Demion's Dance around him seemed to whisper to him.

No, they were actually whispering to him!

[Unmatched Sword Sense] seemed to be working wonders.

It had always been Skullius' suspicion that a sword like Demion's Dance would have a consciousness. Perhaps that wasn't as clear when it was still suppressed by the fact that he had yet to become a person worthy enough to use it, but now...

The shards of the sword began to gather once again in his hand, the spicy fragrance of a unique energy oozing as an advanced weapon was formed.

A Mythical grade Demion's Dance!

Chapter 990: Rise of the Wretched! (1)

When the sword was forged anew, its shattered bits drawn together by attractive swirls of energy that gathered at the very center of their orbit, it almost seemed as though nothing about the weapon would change.

The shards of steel arranged themselves neatly, forming a thick, lime green blade of approximately 1.7 meters. A hilt was swiftly formed with a cylindrical shape layered in gold, a pretty image of a woman embossed on it cleanly. It was her long hair that had much detail, visibly spinning around the hilt to reach its guard, while the woman's face remained vague, but dignified.

As the new Mythical grade weapon fit in Skullius' grip, its full likeness brought into perspective, one couldn't help but be torn on whether Demion's Dance was a katana or a falchion. Some would argue that it was both.

The Hybrid Luman himself didn't care what it looked like. Rather, he was preoccupied with how it felt when its fullness finally attached and bonded to him formally.

The whispers he had been hearing never turned into clear speech, but he began to understand them. They were constant cries for mercy, but also joyous declarations. They were spoken in a feminine voice, one Skullius remembered quite well, after all, he had heard it quite recently.

Irisa.

During the course of the final act of the Premium Age Royale, Skullius had been killed by Rias, and on his way out of Aigas, straight into Somanda's pocket, he had seen Irisa. She had told him that he was not yet to die, and surely it had come to pass.

It seemed whatever consciousness Demion's Dance had, was all tied to the woman who bought this sword for her husband, the infamous Demion who, after inheriting the Hidden Class, Appetent Guzzler, became a conqueror who almost brought Pelian to its knees.

'How poetic. So, all those moments of jealousy were nothing but the fragments of a woman's soul growing restless, a soul trapped in this sword?' Skullius laughed.

It was poetic indeed, and a little ironic.

The Hybrid Luman shifted his thoughts, his eyes burning with the darkness of Crude Vision which allowed him to see in black, white and grey. With this, he would be able to use his guidance field to appraise, and thus he did. Skullius looked at the new Demion's Dance.

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[Demion's Dance]

-Mythical-

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

-Damage-

500,170-789,900

-Durability-

467,795/467,795

-Special Effects-

95% Increase in movement speed

70% increase in reaction speed

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[Skill: Full Memory]

The user is able to assume the full mastery and attack power that Demion displayed in his battle against Escus.

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[Skill: True Impermanence]

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

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[Skill: Courting Death]

A field of malevolence born from mass producing, and refining Mortal Ruin is erected around the user. The density and the range can be expanded as the user sees fit, taking their sword mastery and mana into account

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A grin appeared on Skullius' face. How delightful.

There was a great upgrade indeed, as he had imagined.

The Hybrid Luman didn't sit still to mull every change on Demion's Dance however. He was a bit too excited, especially because of the last skill and its upgrade; [Courting Death].

He had been lamenting how he didn't have a super powerful wide range attack that could kill a decent quantity of the summoned creatures that continued to persist, pestering his Attegoth.

That problem had been solved. Well, partly.

A vicious grin appeared on Skullius' face.

Fully awakening Demion's Dance was only one step. Swordsmanship was one of his favored ways of combat, but having good swords was only one part of it. While he had been studying the Attegoth with Ashema's exposition as background noise, his true intent was to figure out if something else was possible.

WHOOOSH!!

The great Graceful Monolith was suddenly engulfed in a furious torrent of Aura that caught Ashema off guard!

He had almost thought he was on fire when both he and Skullius had been devoured by the blackish red haze that towered seemingly infinitely over their heads.

"Whoa! What is this?!" the Carven exclaimed half in suspicious concern and half in interest.

Skullius scoffed.

"You'll see. In the meantime, watch this," he said as he ran a finger over the green blade and swept the hand that held it, out.

It just so happened that now just appeared to be the optimal chance for the Hybrid Luman to act, as something he didn't want was about to happen between the Ode and the Queen.

And thus...

"[Courting Death]"

As soon as Skullius spoke, a chilling cry exploded out of Demion's Dance's blade!

Ashema recoiled in surprise.

As soon as he heard the cry, he couldn't be sure but... he thought the world turned blood red for just a moment; a moment he couldn't have possibly managed to dissect and process wholly.

Even though he wasn't certain, he was right.

What unfolded before him, told him that he was right.

The tens of millions of summoned seahorse-like creatures that had been battling against the Beads of Malevolence the Preeminent Attegoth had materialized to protect itself, were suddenly broken down into precise bits; all of them without exception.

Whatever had cut them was either super quick, super sharp or better yet, both.

The insanity didn't stop with just that, however.

The swarms further past Ashema's direct line of sight had been minced into even portions as well; past as far as his eye could see.

Around the strange bundle of flowers the Carven had seen rise up from the ground, the summoned menaces had also been diced and reduced to green and blue pieces of collateral, falling to ground with as much grace as bloody snowfall.

Several Auroras in the way between the Attegoth and Deathly Ruse had also been liberated, and of course, that included where the Ode, the hag and the Queen.

[Courting Death] was a skill that mass produced Mortal Ruin – the dark red substance Skullius had been able to produce ever since he acquired his new body from the Luminant Seed, the same responsible for the dark red armor he was currently wearing below his robe.

The Mortal Ruin was refined, given a terribly sharp edge and weaved all around Skullius into a zone where enemies couldn't move without getting cut into ribbons.

Back when he first used it during the Premium Age Royale, [Courting Death] was powerful, but still limited. Now, Skullius had more mana to funnel into it, even if his mastery of the sword remained the same. For now.

Skullius had only erected [Courting Death] for a fraction of a moment for the sake of the flying seedified Sif. In that small pocket of time, he had ensured that his attack wouldn't so much as lick any of the seeds, the Deathly Ruse and the Queen.

As for the Ode and the hag, he had concentrated a decent portion of it towards them, sending two strokes of large, refined Mortal Ruin their way.

That had amounted to nothing.

"Well, it was worth a shot," Skullius said disappointed, yet highly enthused.

Ashema blinked a couple of times at him in confusion. He would have asked what the Hybrid Luman meant, but he had feeling he was missing too much to ask that alone.

"Now, let's bump up that sword mastery, shall we?" Skullius said.

It had been a while since he used this method which he was taught months before at the Reacher Academy.

He also felt that he had a bit too many skills, many of which he only used occasionally.

Wouldn't it be better to merge them all and create something truly monstrous?

Yes, it would be.

Thus, the Hybrid Luman gathered the Full Body Aura generated by the Preeminent Attegoth, and...