

Undead 711

Chapter 711: I Had To

Skullius remained lost in his thoughts for a while. Throughout his journey home, he felt as if his head was swelling with possibilities and anxieties that had too much to do with him.

It was a lie to say that this world revolved around him, but he felt like his existence marked a turning point for Aigas. His arrival here was met with too many events, many that changed him for the better and others for worse.

In it all, a thought made Skullius open his guidance field to check the time left before his sentence again.

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## Doomed Factor 2: Existential Crisis

<Progressive Soul Confusion>

Your distinct perception and absorption of mana throughout the years has caused you to start awakening what should have been lost a long time ago. If you fail to recover and remember this in time you will suffer a crisis of your own existence and descend into madness.

Time till DF2 : 21 days

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The timer was quirky.

After Inhone, Skullius had 3 months left, and that amount of time had passed if everything that came after to now were added.

That said, Skullius had spare time afforded to him by something he had wondered about a lot.

On the night Somanda reached Divinity, he had wondered about a certain notification.

[The remnants of nourishment to your soul by a Mythical grade treasure are erased...]

Skullius had found that it must have been the medallion Sause used on him to integrate the WILLS of Fulgardt to his soul. Whenever he had checked the notification for Doom Factor 2 after that event in the Temple of Unlusted Tears, the timer hadn't changed.

That was until, this notification showed up.

When the time he had left started to trickle down again, Skullius had understood everything.

The medallion, among other things, had stalled Doom Factor 2. Of course, when Somanda became stronger, its lingering effects couldn't continue the valiant deed.

Because of this though, the Hybrid Luman had a little more time left, but he wasn't sure if Sause had helped him on purpose.

That said...

'I still haven't figured out what <Progressive Soul Confusion> means. I haven't felt any different since that day...' Skullius thought.

The tag on Doom Factor 2 had also appeared when Somanda ascended, but he hadn't felt anything remotely close to what it seemed to entail, thus had brushed it off on most occasions.

Well, if it wasn't doing anything, then he might as well not think of it for now.

'So far, I have no real reason to think too deeply about it. I just need to move forward with what I've prepared,' he comforted himself.

There were worse, closer pains he had to steel himself for after all.

Skullius blinked a couple of times, throwing his mind away from the thought.

Instead, he flung a quick sensory glance at Aurolio's mansion which he had left behind, and a crooked smile formed on his face.

Strangely, not being the only anomaly on Aigas made him feel a bit better, even if he wasn't actually friends with Aurolio.

Ah, that reminded him.

'If only I'd met Elita after I had gotten rid of UNCoddled. We would have gotten along well perhaps,' Skullius thought.

Since it was obvious that Elita had been a Voided Deathform, or at least a candidate for it, Skullius truly wished she hadn't died. The memory of her helping him escape Eofel only to be killed by dreadful curse for assisting him....

Skullius sighed.

Soon, he had opened the doors to th Bryne Family mansion which wasn't guarded by men and women decked in shiny armour anymore since the whole Family had moved back.

Skullius had no need for protection, and between him and Silrat who was usually making rapid trips to the Association or staying there for days on end, the mansion was usually left empty.

Unless of course...

"Did you have to hurry off like that? I wanted to talk to you!" a familiar voice bashed against his ears.

"I had a final few things to do before settling. Besides, we agreed that I don't have a tail with your name on it!" Skullius barked.

Darwel twisted her lips.

"Settle you say?" she asked.

Before a reply came from Skullius, two individuals standing at Darwel's side gave a deep bow before speaking in perfect synchrony.

"Good day, Lord Luminant!"

It was Viccil and Seville.

Skullius gave a nod before sitting in the lounge.

"Yes. Settle. I won't be leaving the city until the Royale begins. Is that enough time for you?" he said.

Darwel beamed.

"Of course!"

Since the Second Round of the Preliminaries had ended yesterday, Skullius had been zipping around and outside city, making it difficult for Darwel to speak to him. Finally, seeing as the Hybrid Luman was sparing time for her, she couldn't be happier.

"Before, you said you had a lead?" she asked. "Let's hear it."

Skullius bobbed his head this way and that before folding his arms.

"Yes. Kind of," he said. "After reading that parchment of yours, I saw mention of something that could be useful. There was this one, old Luminant, who unlike the others committed to their old traditions while still keeping a tight lip on details, right?"

"Yes. He built something. A shrine. A large one. It's beautiful," Darwel said with her eyes twinkling. She began to turn restless just by thinking about it.

"It's like... a towering sacred, humanoid beast made of jade, decorated with all kinds of sunset lilies, last moon straw and ostrich feathers. It was preserved from old times with magic."

Darwel tore herself from the loop of admiration, seemingly having realised that she couldn't understand why Skullius was interested in this.

"Why?"

"I don't have a concrete solution, but it'll be a start. I'll need to get to this shrine. Since you planned to get us to Opungale after the Royale, then it's no problem, right?"

"Of course, Darwel said with a large smile."

What had brought them together more than anything was the [Son of Luserus] skill that Skullius had, which couldn't be activated just by willing it to, like most of his other skills. It wouldn't respond.

With all the knowledge Skullius had gotten from Darwel, he felt like he was a step closer to getting this skill to work.

A racial skill that was supposed to bring out the true form of Luminant... or a Hybrid Luman.

Surely it would be powerful... and hopefully safe.

If Luserus really was a Deity like Skullius imagined, there was a high margin of risk, but a similarly high margin of benefit to this.

Hopefully, his luck would remain as tame as it had been.

At that moment, Silrat walked down the stairs, seemingly coming from the in-house library where he usually spent a large portion of his time.

Seeing Skullius, he gave a weak smile before a nod.

"You look terrible," Skullius remarked.

"Yeah, well, some of us have actually jobs," Silrat hissed in a low voice.

He had bags under his eyes and for the past month, he had been working his butt off as a Supervising Overseer.

The job was relatively easy, as Supervising Overseers mostly monitored scouts and the exclusive mercenaries on top of executing orders from the General Board, which wasn't that frequent of an occurrence.

Silrat though, seemed to be working extra hard towards a goal Skullius didn't know.

He perhaps had been taking other Supervisors' duties and exhausting his body so much, he had to use Full Body Aura just to keep his body from slumping to the ground.

Skullius really wanted to ask Silrat what his endgame was. He had known ever since the day he went for the evaluation – the day Silrat told him about his father – that the man had a goal, but more often than not, he resigned to the idea that if Silrat didn't talk about himself, it was better not to ask.

"How's Theurien?" Silrat asked.

"He'll be fine," Skullius waved his hand before standing up and walking up to his friend.

Silrat was a bit confused to see Skullius approach and stand there in front of him wordlessly for a while. He had expected a high five or chest pump, as Skullius usually did for whatever reason – even he didn't know why.

After a while, even Darwel cocked her head to the side.

"Do you two need the room?"

None of the two replied. But then...

"You've been pretty slippery for the past weeks, and I've really had to think long and hard about this..." Skullius said with a wry smile.

Silrat was puzzled.

Skullius could perceive how tired he was, with tinges of excitement burning within him. Whatever it was that Silrat was working towards, it was important and he felt that he was getting closer to achieving it. But for now, it had to wait.

'Seeing it to the end.'

Skullius remembered when he and Silrat had agreed to this.

Flesh that.

Suddenly, Skullius reached his hand into his Temporary Storage and drew out a lump of what looked like a bundle of lint the size of a fist, but with purple fragments imbedded into it. It looked hard and rough over certain parts its exterior though, strangely enough.

A moment later, the Hybrid Luman crushed it in his palm, and threw the fine dust it turned into right at Silrat's face!

The Overseer grew vigilant, many thoughts running through his mind, but a split second later, he felt a hand bore into his chest viciously, the torrent of pain that followed causing an impulsive reflex to take a sharp draw of the air!

All the dark dust around him raced into him the moment it was invited, gushing through his orifices and disappearing in his flesh completely.

'W...What...?' Silrat thought in horror, a feeling of immense pain clawing at his innards horribly, like he was moments away from imploding.

"I'm sorry. This is me being selfish, but I can't take chances... Not when it comes to you."

These were the last words Silrat heard before a sharp strike to the back of his head knocked him out.

Skullius caught his limp body, a dark expression on his face.

Darwel and her guards looked at the scene in utter shock, not knowing what was happening.

What was Festos doing?

Skullius turned to the three with a sharp presence about him, one that Seville and Viccil quickly recognised. It was swollen with guilt, fear and...fright.

"I had to," Skullius said before turning to Silrat's unconscious body.

This was one person he couldn't allow to be harmed. Not now.

"What did you do? Isn't he your friend?" Darwel asked. Unlike her guards who had already visibly relaxed, she remained oblivious and tense.

Shockingly, appallingly...

Under the gazes of everyone, Silrat's body that leaned against Skullius' arm started to break apart like fragile glass, the broken bits which rapidly turned into ivory specks of light dissipating into the air.

"He won't... be here for a while. Until after all this is over... or until it begins," Skullius said simply to which Darwel finally got an idea as to what was going through Skullius' head.

When all of Silrat's body had vanished, Skullius breathed out a frustrated breath with his eyes closed. He then opened them and walked back to his seat.

Looking up at Darwel who was still standing, he said.

"We still have a lot to iron out, right?" he said.

Darwel slowly nodded and sat back down.

"...Yeah."

Indeed, there were lots of things to talk about.

Yet, as the two's conversation picked back its pace, one of them was a bit distracted, hoping against hope that what he had done wouldn't go terribly wrong.

However, after a few seconds, it became hard to think about this subject.

What was it?

Who was it?

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[Ghostless Ascension Mould]

<Mythical+>

The one who takes in the mould into themselves will cease to exist as a material being, an ethereal one, and as a concept within the world they reside. The duration lies entirely with the one who inflicts the mould onto the target.

Chapter 712: The Royale Begins! (1)

A broad grin stretched on the bottom half of Guissepo's face as he rose, surrounded by the particularly unusual, yet jovial uproar that was gushing from all sides, fiercely flung by the tens of millions of witnesses in their seats.

An imperceptible rhythm coiled between the filled seats, making men and women alike bizarrely rowdy, the level of zeal they carried towards the main event being several tiers greater than even how they had responded to the Premium Age Royale when it first started.

There was barely any negativity or doubt to go around, except perhaps with those seated at the very top.

Good.

"Welcome, ladiiiiiies and gentemeeeee!" The Game Master's voice bellowed like a storm in the ear (harmlessly of course), amplified by Venue's many settings. "The main event has arrived! The defining moment that validates this extravagant game is here! Are your hearts ready?! Are your minds ready?!"

A cheer of approval was heard as some waved their hands, and some cupped them around their mouths, and screamed senselessly to the innocent air.

Good.

In the most distinguished seats, the Governor wore a grave face and took a deep breath. He felt no burning exhilaration in his gut like the commonfolk. Instead, a sense of urgency was on the verge of crippling his spine. His son next to him seemed to share the same unimpressed attitude, as if the common blood between them created a pulse that made their emotion one.

Alaris folded his arms with a stern face.

The words of warning he had received from Festos and...

Festos and....

Festos and.... hmmm.

'Wasn't there someone else... I could have sworn...' Alaris thought with a frown before chalking this up to a mere hiccough in memory.

Anyway, Festos' words rang in his mind. The warning he had given. Ever since then, looking at the enthusiastic man who was riding the large, mystic glass pane in the air gave him the sinking feeling

that maybe, after all this, he would come to regret being satisfied with remaining stagnant power-wise.

'Hmph.'

To hell with that. A Sword master had no business meddling with the likes of regret. It would only turn the edge of his blade blunt.

Ruhrees was leaning from the backrest of his seat, his eyes paying attention to what was happening before him. If need be, he had the means to protect all these people, though the sheer quantity of them could prove straining.

Maybe there truly was nothing to worry about, or the opposite could be true. In any case, he and Gillear had agreed that while the City Guardian kept Genhais City safe, he would look after things on this end, which was a tall task, but at least he could manage.

The Paladin Champion glanced at Rearren above, and found no traces of soaring emotion. He wore the same face as always.

Well, it wasn't like this could convince Ruhrees to relax though.

Below all of these people, in the rows accommodating witnessing members from the Families, a mix of apprehension and excitement ran amok. The steering, imperceptible rhythm seemed to be able to claim some, and miss others, allowing them to feel what they had felt before coming to the Venue just now.

An example of the latter was two individuals seated side by side. One was a man dressed in a formal suit, his body inched close to the young girl at his side.

Unlike him who was drenched in beads of anxiety, the young girl was completely devoid of anything but a relaxed form of joy, the necklace dangling from her neck which she wouldn't release from her small grip seemingly being the source of her carefree attitude.

Sensing the tense muscle on Daggs arm, Terese turned to him.

"Are you still worrying after what Father said, and what he gave you? Don't you trust him?" she asked with a frown.

"N-no... that's not..." Daggs stammered while turning on and off a nervous smile. Subconsciously, he fondled the ring on his middle finger.

Theurien had given them both high grade artefacts for protection, just in case, but unlike Terese, Daggs knew that even with these on, the Family Head didn't feel too happy or reassured.

He had wanted to register as a witness for the Premium Age Royale too after Skullius explained the possibility of disaster, but unfortunately, ever since the cloud of uncertainty spawned with the increasing deaths in Genhuis, the Governor had forbidden the continued dissemination of the Control Seal.

While he may have failed to stop the Premium Age Royale, he wouldn't allow more people to venture into it blindly. With his authority, the entire region had been dissolved of all signs of the EverSword House's minions who distributed the seal close to a month and half ago, thus Theurien could not participate to make sure Terese was safe.

"Even if he was gone for a while, he's the smartest man in the world! If he says you're safe, then you're safe!" Terese said to Daggs with a scowl.

The attendant had no words to this. No good would come from arguing with the little girl, so he nodded softly while apologising for being such a worrywart.

It was at this time that the witnesses noticed something strange (granted it had only been roughly a bit more than a minute).

The tent that encircled the base of the stadium, where all the rows of witness seats ended...

It was empty!

Where were all the contenders?

This had never happened before. Usually contenders and witnesses were transported at the same time.

Before too many questions were asked, Guissepo put everyone's hearts at ease.

"Pardon me, my extravagant audience. I see some of you have already begun to wonder where our contenders are. Fret not..." he said calmly.

With the snap of a finger, he manifested tens of massive, curved glass panes that settled in the air at different heights.

On their surfaces, incredibly vivid images began to show, the detail being extraordinarily clear to the witnesses who gasped and gaped.

"First, I should mention that the Royale will not take place on the extravagantly pristine white platform where the Preliminaries were held. No. We shall be using the wild, open space of this world," Guissepo declared.

It suddenly became clear to the witnesses that the images they were seeing on the glass panes were from the environment outside the gigantic stadium they were in. Since they couldn't leave, they would be watching what happened outside through these wide, magical objects, that, in another world would have had a modern youngster calling out a word that sounded like 'fork.'

The excitement transcended palpable.

What made it all even better was the food that manifested, this time the quantity enough to call a buffet.

But most of the witnesses still looked to Guissepo.

"Now. The contenders."

With the snap of his fingers, tens of silver lights flooded the white platform below Guissepo, and in the split second that followed, they were replaced by familiar figures, some of whom were a bit puzzled.

They stood at varying stretches of distance between each other, with some opting to further their range from certain individuals.

There were 58 contenders in total.

The First Preliminary Round which started with the full 234 contenders, had ended with 97 being disqualified (some killed), a total of 137 participants continuing to the Second Preliminary Round where 80 lost, leaving the aforementioned result.

There had been one contender left matchless in the Second Preliminary Round, but the Game Master had decided to grant him a special favour. He would be participating in the Royale still.

As the contenders looked around, some studying each other, Skullius narrowed his eyes and did the same with [Graceless Hunter].

He was donning the VergeRider armour, which took the form of a dark, thick, hooded jacket with dark grey steel bracers and a reddish-brown sleeveless leather over jacket. The Chains of Damnation were still wrapped around his waist, with tight fitting, rough pants and boots featuring below them, all with the matching lightless hue.

A sheathed, curved sword was at his side, its golden hilt sprung out confidently.

No one else could hear it, but a bloodthirsty murmur was coming from the sword, making Skullius frown.

The Hybrid Luman checked around and felt several familiar presences.

Tallo Rashen, the only contending Mage.

Vali Kinn, and her absurd quantities of mana.

Gabel, his glaive at the ready over his shoulder, and a small book in his hand.

Maxim Flatbed, looking suspiciously at everyone.

Darwel, of course.

Aurolio standing in his own corner, seemingly unconcerned, but with a shiver of cold coming from him.

There were a few more noteworthy participants, but Skullius hadn't gotten close enough to them to perfectly recognise their mana.

Still, there were more than five threats to him in this contest.

With a sudden thought, Skullius activated Crude Vision and jerked his head up to the stands. His monochromatic sight reached a familiar spot where... three important people were missing from what was supposed to be a collective. Only two were presented, and he recognised their shapes.

'Hope they will be safe,' Skullius said with a shallow smile. 'At least S...'

Skullius frowned.

Who was he thinking about?

Stylla was missing obviously, and Setkh too but... who was the third?

Hmm.

A boisterous voice interrupted his thoughts.

"Good. They are all here!" Guissepo called.

"Now. Let me introduce the rules of the game, starting with the most extravagant of them all – in my opinion!"

Everyone paid attention. How was this Royale going to play out?

It wouldn't be as simple as people in a large space killing each other, right?

Guissepo grinned, and looked at the topmost seats.

"Besides the contenders, there will be an additional participant. A valuable one. I call them, the Inhibiting Angel," he said before snapping his finger, which caused another flash of silver light to shine amidst the contenders.

A young man had appeared.

It was Rias EverSword.

Chapter 713: The Royale Begins! (2)

Gasps echoed throughout the grand space from both contenders and witnesses.

The contenders in particular parted like sand where Rias appeared.

One looking at the sallow skin on the young man's face would have thought it was a plague he carried that drove everyone away so suddenly.

But it wasn't.

Rias' dark, medium length hair, with a tinge of light blue at the fringes was combed to the right side of his head, partly covering one of his large, honey-coloured almond eyes.

Over his body was a sleek, light, royal blue leather armour, its left sleeve torn. In its place, a long, dark bandage covered Rias' arm to the fingers, old, unclear symbols drawn all over it, like a seal of some kind.

A sword of unknown specifics was hidden in a scabbard at his side, and many among the contenders couldn't help but stare at it, wondering many, dark things.

This young man...

One man who had been close to Rias when he appeared almost fell to the ground when the young man gave him a casual side glance.

This kid who was in teens...

At the very start of the Premium Age Royale, Guissepo had mentioned that this Cluster – a purple one – had been cleared of most of the beasts by the young man alone. He had even subdued the Cluster General, only leaving it alive because they needed the Cluster as the Venue for the event.

Many had doubted the story, but many had also believed.

Among the latter, was Skullius who gave a significant portion of attention to Rias.

The young man was Master, definitely at the Second Phase. He couldn't tell if he was at the Peak of the Stage, but that mattered little when on top of the usual prowess from experts, he could feel a mysterious, seemingly infinite cradle of power constantly molesting his young figure.

It wiggled, pulsed and thrummed silently, no doubt hidden to some, contenders included.

But Skullius didn't miss.

'The Inhibiting Angel, huh? So he'll have a role in this game?' Skullius thought.

Guissepo tore everyone away from the openly introverted young man.

"No need to give him too much attention, hahaha!" he said with a maniacal glint. "Now yes, the other less extravagant rules..."

Guissepo clapped his hands amusedly, and above every single contender, including Rias, a small, softly revolving, square-shaped glass pane appeared... along with a number over it in turn.

1,000.

The contenders looked up to see the moving object above them. It seemed like an illusion, with likely the same use as the identification function of the Control Seal.

Guissepo began to explain.

"Each contender will start the game with a total of 1,000 Glass Units or simply, Units. If you, as a contender, take a heavy hit from another contender, or ANY HARMFUL entity within the designated game bounds, you lose 10 Units from the 1,000. If you take a lethal hit, you lose 100 Units.

If you die, ALL your remaining Units will go to the contender responsible for your death, but in the case that it's not a contender, those extravagant Units will be destroyed."

There was a pause.

Everyone seemed surprise, confused, and kind of appalled.

Why did these rules seem so non-linear?

Was this really the best place to start?

Guissepo laughed uncaringly. This was exactly what he wanted. Why would he ease them all into a death game?

He continued.

"Hahaha! All this is to say... YES! This game, revolves around brutality, cruelty, dominance and extravagant murder!" he called out.

"Contenders will be fighting to earn Units from other contenders! Your objective is to acquire an extravagant total of 10,000 Units, and then reach the GOAL! As simple as that! Your skill in avoiding damage, and dealing it efficiently is being tested, is all! You are Masters at the craft, are you not?! Prove it!"

The more Guissepo screamed, the more it became clear to the contenders, most of whom developed many questions, that yes, this was shaping up to be more complex than they initially thought.

The Game Master descended and looked down at them with zealous eyes.

"When I declare the beginning, each of you will be transported to different places within the game bounds, with each location being... quasi equidistant to the GOAL, your extravagant destination. From there, you will make your way to the GOAL, and try to earn your points."

"However, you should be mindful. A few Cluster beasts were left in this Cluster for the Royale. You might run into them. Additionally, you will find several high grade artefacts and tools scattered around the game bounds. NONE of them are fitted with fatal functions, but they can harm you, and SOME can be used for your benefit.

Draw Bubbles, Scatter Crystals, Revival Stars and Frozen Beans, are the MOST COMMON of them that you will find. Consider it the Game Master's privilege."

Skullius frowned at this.

There was more than one threat?

There were usable artefacts here too?

What was a Draw Bubble? Or a Scatter Crystal?

Like the Hybrid Luman, other contenders began to mutter to themselves, wondering about these factors.

One of them raised his hand to ask a question.

"What exactly is this goal?"

Guissepo grinned.

"You'll know when you see it. It's rather obvious."

A short pause ensued.

The Game Master seemed to want to let what he had said simmer through the contenders, and at some point, some of them became convinced that they had heard all that Guissepo wanted to say.

That couldn't be, right?

Or did this guy just enjoy seeing them confused?

Another asked a question begrudgingly.

"From what you have said, if one of us is killed by something other than another contender, their points will be lost. So, what happens if a majority of the contenders are killed off by these Cluster Beasts or artefacts? This world is really big, right? How would the survivors earn enough Units?"

Guissepo chuckled.

"That is a reasonable question. Like I said, the artefacts can't kill you, and there aren't that many Cluster beast left," said before turning his gaze to Rias with a wretched grin. "But..."

"In the event that you are missing Units, and can't find contenders to kill – yes the world is huge after all – you can attempt to find the extravagant Inhibiting Angel instead."

Everyone tensed.

"He is worth a 100,000 Units, and can be hit to draw Units from him. Of course, if he hits or kills a contender, their Units are destroyed."

The gasps in response were deep.

Seriously?!

Everyone turned to the nonchalant young man standing among them with a myriad of emotions and thoughts.

What was this?

Why wasn't this mentioned before, in the main body of the rulespaning?!

To make matters worse, Guissepo who was burning with glee from the disturbance continued.

"The Inhibiting Angel will be stationed close to the GOAL, and his movements are limited to the general geographical area around it. Of course, his purpose is to act as the ultimate obstacle to the GOAL, but if you're smart or extravagant enough, he can be a saving grace, if you're in need of Units. Hurting him, goes, injuring him goes, killing him goes."

Skullius clutched his face.

Weren't there too many obstacles?!

Nomatter what, it seemed facing Rias was a must and that didn't seem like something he wanted to attempt at all. Not when he was not going to be using explicit [Just Light] and [Evil Darkness] abilities in this event.

Hurt him?

Injure him?

Kill him?

Who in the world was willing to take that risk?

"There is no time limit to the Royale. The restrictions on the quality and quantity of equipment you use still stand, but aside from that, what I've said is all for the rules," Guissepo said, seemingly putting a close to the dose of explanations.

His gaze suddenly turned to Skullius who felt its burning sting, and looked up.

His next words were directed at everyone, but Skullius felt like he was their prime target.

"Try to do your best. Those who reach the GOAL are guaranteed to survive, but for the rest, an extravagantly garnished death will be a constant and close companion. Let it begin!"

Then a flash of light dyed everyone eyes.

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Skullius found himself in a sombre and humid environment where darkness lorded over everything living and otherwise.

It was something of a magnified rainforest, with absurdly tall trees that leaned comically to the side, their thick branches which looked like swaying arms stabbing at their trunks. Vines grew everywhere from the ground, tangling with the lively roots like serpents.

Skullius could hear the flow of water in the distance. The sound it made was eerily unsettling, but this paled in comparison to the sensation the dreadfully thick, royal blue clouds that were floating just ten meters above his head, as if the sky was getting real low, instilled in him.

'Arghh...' he groaned inwardly.

Something was off about these clouds.

They seemed to bear a horrific effect on him, but he couldn't identify what it was specifically. Not yet.

The Hybrid Luman instantly went on guard.

What a strange world.

His hand gripped the hilt to Demion's Dance tight as he searched the surroundings more finely, the illusory depiction above him twinkling dully with the number 1,000.

Then, as Skullius took several steps to his right, something far off into the distance was revealed even to his limited Crude Vision.

It was unclear, what with being perked firmly so far and so high, and with the added effort of the large clouds to obscure it from view.

What was it?

It was a rectangular shape that emitted a brilliant, silver glow.

It stood a few meters above what Skullius finally identified to be the gigantic silhouette of a mountain.

'Damn...!' Skullius thought.

For the mountain to appear this large from this distance, it had to at least be as wide as an entire region, and as tall as at least ten of the tallest mountains he had seen in Aigas. This was with Skullius being approximately several thousand miles from it.

The glowing object above the mountain...

'That must be the goal. No doubt about it,' Skullius thought. 'Which means, Rias will be at the mountain's foot, I think. Tsk. How anno—'

Skullius had been about to remark about how annoying this was when, the rattling of what sounded like massive chains echoed throughout the entire world, causing a low rumble.

The Hybrid Luman shuddered.

With this noise came a gush of wind so strong it almost blew him and the surrounding trees away!

Dust that swam from miles away, within it a myriad of free passengers in the form of debris knocked against Skullius and blinded him completely as well, sweeping the area violently!

Wait!

Skullius gawked in realisation as he used his WEIGHT to plant himself firmly to the ground.

This wasn't just wind!

There was a phenomenal amount of mana carried within it!

It seemed so horrid and messy that for a moment, even the Hybrid Luman hadn't been able to tell what it was!

Something had released such a vast amount of mana throughout the entire world with but a jerk!

'That's right,' Skullius thought somberly. 'It's definitely the Cluster General.'

Chapter 714: Engraving

Cradled from all aides by the dark, and moist environment, Aurolio shivered vehemently.

He couldn't believe it.

The cruelty.

The injustice.

How did this place make him feel even colder than Genhuis City?!

While wrapped up in another one of his semi-stylish, fuzzy jackets that made him look like a human sized, white-furred ground hog, the pale man cursed, cursed and cursed some more with a furious flame in his eye that extended to his face, carving a grim scowl over it.

A faint hue of purple, its ascent and texture akin to that of smoke that rose from the dying embers of a bonfire, covered him like an Aura.

"Fuck this! That brilliant... no, extravagant fool should have warned us!" Aurolio muttered.

He hugged himself and treaded steadily in one direction while paying keen attention to this environment which had several, strange elements to it, even for a Cluster.

Well, this was a purple Cluster, so it was to be expected.

Among the relatively simpler ones – in Aurolio's view – out there; white, blue-white, blue and purple-blue, none quite compared to this Cluster. It was in a higher tier in terms of scale and uniqueness.

The ground sloshed grumbly under the boot, the excessive moisture within having turned it to a thick mud. A few vines swam within it in heaped, messy tangles, some with shades of colour that suggested that they were poisonous. What else was one to think when they saw the innards of the thick, wooden serpents gleaming faintly in dark crimson.

"Hmmm..." Aurolio hummed in fascination and disgust. Disgustation? "I guess the 'nothing here can kill you' bit only extends to things placed in this Cluster by the Game Master, and not the natural environment. I guess that should have been obvious. "

There were no trees in sight where he was, but a rather large meandering river passed seven meters to his right, and a long stretch ahead, beyond what his eyes could see in the mostly lightless area, it dumped its water body somewhere, the sound of the fall registering in his ears.

The ground had few surprises so far, but overhead in the angry skies, Aurolio felt a subtle sense of apprehension.

Clouds of blue, their wispy bodies anvil-shaped to the refined eye, strode softly in the air a couple of meters above.

They caused Aurolio the most worry, instilling onto him an overbearing sensation that leaned more towards depressing and threatening than anything else.

The pale man wasn't all that fazed, however. He had entered worse Clusters environment-wise – higher tier Clusters. One thing most combatants who hadn't entered high level Clusters didn't realise was that the environment could benefit the natives of the land in more than one way. This was what Aurolio was concerned about above all else.

In spite of the gloom though, a dazzling glow in the shape of a rectangle worlds away put a smile on the pale man's face. Even the massive silhouette it was perked on lightened his spirits.

'The cold is my strongest enemy here. I must get away as soon as possible,' he convinced himself with a sudden jerk, and a warm blow into his hands. Then he looked up. 'The kid must only be allowed to move on and around that mountain. Hmm...' Aurolio hissed out before continuing. 'That's an easy enough way to get this over with...'

When he boosted his physicality with mana however, launching himself forward, he paused with a brow raised only several strides later.

\*

With her hand on her hip, Vali smirked at the glowing shape far off in the sky.

No wonder the Game Master had said they would know the GOAL when they saw it. However, getting to it wasn't going to be easy.

Those clouds treading north just above her...

'If this is how this world works, then reaching far into that distance probably won't be as quick as I was hoping. I doubt even Speed-type Auxiliary Techniques will speed things up,' Vali thought as she puffed up her cheeks, and blew out a pressurized hot breath of air.

She pouted and sat back down on the rugged granite she had appeared on. Unless she looked up, nothing around Vali caught her attention.

It was rocks, rocks and more rocks, most which were half buried under putrid, stagnant waters that she swore to never touch.

Only a hundred meters into the distance did the scenery change, shifting to a mountainous plain that began with humble hills adorned with carpets of shrubbery, some of which, held what looked like fruit.

Vali's dreamy eyes scoured through all this disinterestedly, with the wind attempting to blow through her hair which was twisted into a French braid, and weighed on by a golden, scorpion tail shaped hook at its end.

The cold didn't affect her at all, even though her black battle dress that only modestly covered up to above her knees, a golden rimmed gap on it below her chest that revealed her toned skin and abs, allowed the unfriendly chill to taste it.

Vali actually felt good.

She had been looking for a decent challenge, and besides the fact that Aurolio was here, she considered this whole idea to join the Premium Age Royale a rather rewarding one.

If not for the tens of Families she had brought as subsidiaries under her own by providing enticing contracts crafted to draw the desperate, then for the chance to meet some interesting individuals she was trying to invest in – in more ways than one.

Speaking of which...

'I wonder. Can I finally get to interact with him as much as I want here?' she thought.

\*

Crestin considered himself lucky.

He had been the only one in the Premium Age Royale left without anyone to fight for the Second Round of the Preliminaries.

When it had come time to decide his fate, he had expected to be matched against someone outside the remaining contenders, just to make things fair. In his head, that would have automatically translated to him facing an abnormally strong opponent, and dying miserably.

Contrary to his pessimistic forecast though, the Game Master exerted his powers without limitation, and allowed him to participate in the Royale regardless. Just like that.

Crestin didn't know what he had expected where the other contenders were concerned, but no one cared. No one argued against the decision in the least.

The young man didn't know how he felt about that.

It made him feel invisible, and unimportant.... which by all accounts he was, as a mere wandering Contract Knight who had decided to take a shot at earning a spot in the illustrious EverSword House.

Crestin sighed.

Indeed, he considered himself lucky, but now, not so much.

The space within the Cluster spread a severely ominous tone to his story, which, at this point, had flavours of nobility and heroism – he hadn't even killed his opponent in the Royale just because he valued people's lives.

He had appeared on a cliff, looking down at the world that expanded before him on the lower ground to bounds unseen.

Some parts of it were beautiful, he had to admit, but some...

'Hmmm?'

Something suddenly caught Crestin's eye.

Beyond what seemed like a dying lake past what was beneath the cliff, and on a bare, barren plain that came after, something strange could be seen.

At first, Crestin was tempted to rush to it, but he quickly killed his urge to do so..

The ground on the plain had signs of a large bulge, as if something big was buried there. Inconspicuously too.

But this wasn't what made him hesitate.

What rubbed him the wrong way were the extensive groves carved into the earth around the bulge in a giant network of what looked like tens of complex arrays, and several runes.

On one hand, because the soil was wet, making the carvings a bit imprecise, this looked like a traditional, ritualistic engraving of some kind, but...

Would it really be that complex?

Was this done by the residents of this Cluster that he was yet to see, or... by something else entirely?

At that moment, a fierce gust of wind almost pushed Crestin off the cliff, but he quickly caught himself, dodging the large portions of tattered and torn objects it carried.

He was so shaken by this random occurrence that he dismissed any ideas about the peculiar engraving, and rushed away, committing to his reason for coming here.

Chapter 715: Itching For Fast Action

The incredibly vast audience was lost in the visually impressive specs of the magical screens. This wasn't their first time using these, but maybe because the option to watch the contenders directly had been available in the Preliminaries, they had neglected to use the glass screens much.

This wasn't to say the quality was the same as last time. That simply wasn't true. The level of detail was enhanced on the current displays, showing the tens of contenders who had spawned in different locations, with their reasonably varying reactions immaculately.

Unlike how dark it was outside the stadium, the actual grounds for the Royale, the displays seemed to have brightness adjustment settings that didn't compromise the quality. As such, when viewing through them, the contenders seemed to be out on a moderately sunny day.

Some of the contenders instantly started darting around, while others studied the environment with little movement.

The perspectives and angles changed according to the activity of the contender, widening or panning in different directions accordingly, which the audience quite enjoyed.

So far, with about three minutes since the contenders disappeared from the white platform, there was yet to be any meaningful encounters or conflict. A large, illusory counter at the very top of the stack of glass pane screens was still vividly displaying the number '58', confirming this. But it would change soon.

Atop the arrangement of spectating seats, a woman beside Rearren squeezed his hand. It was Millisa, his wife, who was, for the most part, a meek and quiet individual. She barely seemed to exist between the cool and calm presence her son exuded, as well as the powerful and revolutionary energy her husband embodied.

Yet, she was there all the time, always carrying a face full of veiled anxiety. She was forbidden from voicing it.

It wasn't that Rearren didn't understand her concerns, these concerns at the moment being targeted towards their son.

Rearren simply ignored her sentiments. Millisa was different from him and Rias after all, but he accepted it. There was no way he couldn't.

With a subtle move of his head, the EverSword House Head peaked behind him where nothing but shadow could be seen, and smiled thinly. His eyes then traced the multiple glass screens that showed images so vivacious and vivid that he could see without strain from a distance.

In a blink, he found a familiar scene that was barely shown on the four corners of the wide glass, when the perspective quickly panned, following its respective contender who darted in another direction.

\*\*\*

"Well this is a problem," Skullius voiced with his mouth skewed.

He had travelled a short distance towards the GOAL, before finally being brought to a halt, stumped.

Taking the clouds into account, he had thought that this Cluster worked in the same way as the goblin one, where some substance in the air would inhibit invaders and strengthen the locals; like the rain which had strengthened the Hau Kaka goblins.

However....

Well, he wasn't wrong.

That wasn't strictly the function of the clouds, granted he had yet to study them completely.

When he had started racing towards the GOAL at full speed, his body reinforced with his mana, something strange had happened.

While the Hybrid Luman could have covered a few kilometres with a few strides of his earlier sprint, he had barely managed to cover ten meters instead.

What was even stranger was that the massive trees and vines around him raced backwards as he moved, just as they should have when he was moving at such a speed, but when he stopped, he found himself to still be among the same stems of vegetation he had left behind, some of them only being a slight distance away from him.

Skullius had tried this multiple times before he finally started to understand. It was a bit easy to miss if you didn't pay attention, but the clouds overhead seemed to be locked on to him.

Every time he ran, even while everything blurred – or pretended to – some of the clouds remained directly above him, dictating how fast he could move.

To be more apt, they governed how quickly Skullius could approach the mountain, and the GOAL. Basically, he couldn't move too quickly towards it.

However, he found out a few other things.

If he went in any other direction that wasn't the mountain, he could move normally.

If he moved in the direction of the mountain, but towards a separate target, like a tree nearby, he wouldn't be affected.

If he opted to walk, pacing reasonably towards the mountain, the clouds wouldn't impose a limitation on him.

With his current abilities, there seemed to be no way around this.

The clouds seemed to be a natural phenomenon of the Cluster, which made Skullius come to the conclusion that this slowing effect wasn't something integrated by Guissepo, and in turn wasn't tied to the GOAL specifically, but the mountain it sat on.

Perhaps there was something sacred about the mountain. It wasn't unusual since the Sage Monkeys he had faced off against with Stylla, Bron and Fore in the past had also considered their mountain sacred.

Maybe that's where the Cluster General was.

Seeing as there was no way around slothing his way to his objective, Skullius began the long walk to freedom.

The ominous pressure spewing from the clouds above as they followed seemed to lessen, as if they had just been giving a warning before.

Quite frankly, once the pressure was mellowed, Skullius enjoyed the soothing, quiet walk between the crooked, twisted, mangled, angled, craning, and labouring trees that seemed to have been drawn out of a dark fantasy comic.

What did they think this was, a standard horror story starring an edgy, swordsman with a large sword?

Along the way, Skullius studied his status to pass the time, while with his Omniscient Thought Cracker, he divided some attention to scanning the surroundings with [Graceless Hunter].

~~~

[Name : Festos Dawn]

[Level : 20]

[EXP : 451,000/7,000,000 ; Trial Pending>]

[Core : Blue]

[Class : Insurgent Magnus]

[Race : Hybrid Luman]

[Inv. Status : Still doomed ×2]

[Stats]

[STRENGTH (I) : 31,050]

[AGILITY (I) : 29,334]

[INTELLIGENCE (I) : 44,124]

[ENDURANCE (I) : 30,678]

[LUCK : Atrocious?]

[HEALTH : 74,098/74,098]

[MANA (I) : 105,450]

[Null Life Essence : 12,000/12,000]

[Skills]

[Greatest Mana Crafter | Lv.89]

[Great Celestial Counterfeit | Lv.1]

[Celestial Hack | None]

[Ungodly Flames of Debauchery | Lv.19]

[Null Extraction]

[Static Limbo]

[Null Life Aura | Lv.8]

[Graceless Hunter (Special) | Lv.7]

[Instant Blaze Charge (Special) | Lv.28]

[Bombardier Bangster Fist Art (Special) | Lv.34]

[Greatest Mana Attraction | Lv.17]

[Elite Combat Arts (Special) | Lv.9]

[Elite Swordplay (Special) | Lv.9]

[Parting Wave | Lv.9]

[Primal Caution (Special) | Lv.28]

[Undaunted Calamity (Special) | Lv.23]

[Beyond the Hype | None]

[Swindling Death Dance (Incomplete)]

[Ghost Rending Divine Sword Art (Special) | Lv.48]

[Swordmaster's Quiescence (Special) | Lv.36]

[Unmatched Sword Sense (Special) | Lv.40]

[Lesser Gravel Rune Mastery (Special) | Lv.22]

[Rune Assimilation (Special) | Lv.11]

[Advanced Potion Making (Special) | Lv.19]

[<Class>]

[Evil Darkness Meshing (Special) | Lv.59]

[Evil Darkness Creation (Special) | Lv.64]

[Immoral Authority (Special) | Lv.10]

[Just Light Creation (Special) | Lv.71]

[Just Light Meshing (Special) | Lv.50]

[Boundless Evil (Special) | Lv.30]

[Absolute Zero (Special) | Lv.35]

[Saint Lumis' Benign Arc (Special) | Lv.19]

[Destined Warp Steps (Special) | Lv.55]

[Crude World Projection]

[Seramoro, Oblivion's Edge]

[Bead of Malevolence | Lv.10 (Max)]

[Perfect Night Domain | Lv.7]

[Wing of the Just]

[<Racial>]

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

[<Arts>]

[Pseudo Evil Veneration (1%)]

[<Oddities>]

[Binds of Fukal]

[Fruit of World Myths]

[Omniscient Thought Cracker]

[<Affinities>]

[Evil Darkness - B]

[Just Light - D]

[Distorted Gravity]

~~~

Skullius hummed.

He hadn't been focusing on levelling skills much, except for those that helped him skip from Level 18 to Level 20 as per Task requirements in his attempt to clear the Second Trial quickly.

What had drained most of his time was studying what Aurolio taught him, and helping Theurien with his torturous routines to get back to full strength. That, and helping him manage the Estate, of course.

With a few Enriching gems, Skullius had also increased his stats slightly, but he hadn't focused on that much since increasing his stats wasn't the only way, or even the most efficient way to make sure he survived whatever was coming.

Building a coherence and collective efficiency with his set of skills was the most important because said skills Skullius had on this list were crafted with a strict purpose in mind. While most were ways off from evolving again, they responded well to others that complemented them to a meaningful degree.

For instance...

...!

Skullius' boy suddenly grew alert as [Primal Caution] both warned him, reacted, and triggered [Graceless Hunter] to give full focus on the threat!

Before the Hybrid Luman knew it, his body had moved on its own, diving to the side splits of time before something so sharp it made the air scream in a shrill voice zoomed past where he had been!

[Primal Caution]'s forceful grip lasted for a limited amount of time, but that was enough for Skullius to regain control, and with [Graceless Hunter] already having pinpointed his enemy, he was in a better position.

The entity that had attacked landed almost soundlessly on the moist ground before glaring at Skullius, a pulse of its vicious and incredibly dense mana spiking from its large body!

With [Greatest Mana Crafter], Skullius sensed an obvious similarity to this mana signature and the one from earlier. It was a diluted version, but still potent nevertheless, its calibre, in terms strength and density, being marginally close to that of the Finite Sword god, Hobbu Bobbu.

This creature was not something to be trifled with.

The quivering of the trees from it just standing there menacingly was also telling. It also told of another unexplored fact.

Skullius grinned, as he faced the dreadful enemy of unnatural proportions.

Unnatural, feline proportions.

"It's about time. I was itching for some action," he said as his mana burst from his body, tinging the surroundings in a unique glow.

Chapter 716: Beckoned Retriever

The Beckoned Retriever.

A fierce, Tier 9 beast with a height of two and half meters, excessive, long dark furs draping from its powerful body that featured six prowling paws from six, thick legs. Crystal-like, long and thin claws protruded from their ends, gleaming with a light coat of mana that promised no shallow cuts.

Its slanted, electric blue eyes with black slits for pupils never blinked, and never lost sight of its prey as its body circled Skullius, its rounded, whisker polluted snout twitching with an abnormally wide mouth full of crystal-like, long, sharp teeth.

Skullius licked his lips as he also kept the Beckoned Retriever in his sight, noting that at its rear end, two long tails swung like whips in the air.

'Its stats are as high as some weaker Cluster Generals, barring its mana quantity at least. I wonder what abilities it has?' Skullius thought.

A large, blue mana core with a sharp radiance bellowed in the creature's body, which Skullius considered a win. If every monster he was to face in a purple Cluster had a purple core then... he would have to start thinking about writing a will.

Just then, the Beckoned Retriever turned into a blur as it dove to the right, then to the left, and began darting around Skullius at lightning speed without approaching too close.

A fierce gust of wind began to whirl around the Hybrid Luman who, from a distance, looked to be trapped within tens of dark, quivering strokes that landed on dozens of points in less than a blink, before shooting to others.

'It's quite fast...' Skullius thought.

He wagered that even if he could see normally right now, he wouldn't even be able to keep track of this beast.

However, he didn't need sight to deal with something like this.

His enemy was quite wary of him. Probably because of the large coat of mana around him.

"You should be even more cautious my friend," Skullius said with a smile before the layer of mana around him disappeared.

No.

It was expelled from his body to cover the surroundings, applying a tragic effect to them in an instant.

BOOOOOM!

With a comical whimper, the Beckoned Retriever suddenly found its body pushed hard against the ground by some, peculiar force, and it couldn't even struggle to get up!

It was as if the world was pressing down on it with enough oomph to make a small hill crumble!

The creature glared at Skullius who hadn't moved an inch, a mocking smile plastered on his face as he gazed at its large body.

"Its neat how useful this is, isn't it? And you didn't even try to stay at a safe distance, making it easy for me," the Hybrid Luman said as he then started to approach the beast slowly.

Naturally, his mana core, which was capable of mimicking the mana flow within gravity, allowed him to expel such an effect. The goal was to be able to mimic the effect of Distorted Gravity, which Skullius had seen on the stout mountain in Fortune, but this was currently all he could manage.

Still, the Hybrid Luman could choose the direction he wanted to effect the gravity – as long as there was a flat surface in said direction. He only got better at this as his mana quantity increased, but using it on more powerful opponents proved to be a bit of challenge as some of them were capable of resisting it a moment's notice – like Hobbu Bobbu.

Right now, Skullius hadn't explicitly mentioned that it was gravity because he feared the many screens at the stadium had enhanced audio functions too, and he would have just revealed one his cards if he said it out loud.

As he approached the immobilised beast, Skullius gripped the handle to Demion's Dance. He didn't want to have to waste time on these creatures. While it was great that he got to confirm that as long as he was targeting something that wasn't the mountain, he could move freely, he would much rather continue his journey, slow as it was.

But then...

...!

[Primal Caution] gave Skullius another gripping warning, causing him to stop moving at once.

The Beckoned Retriever was still on the ground, no movements from it registering through his [Graceless Hunter]. However...

Before Skullius knew it, he was dyed in a brilliant, white glow, a crushing force, and a rising, scorching heat that flared to a few tens of meters around him mercilessly, burning the innocent, albeit creepy vegetation. A maddening noise had thumped out loud along with this unexpected attack, and the Hybrid Luman had found himself buried in the ground a moment later.

Naked, and with his body more or less a dark, charred mess featuring bits of hard roasted flesh, Skullius was momentarily dazed.

'W-what the hell was that?!' he thought with subtle hints of fright and frankly...awe, glowing in his white eyes.

[Primal Caution] only took hold of Skullius' body when things he could evade himself on a basic, physical level were involved, but the fact that it didn't even bother with this one meant that...

Skullius cursed.

A moment later, a new layer of flesh, blood and bone was already weaving over his unsightly remains, his gear re-emerging as well as with a pump of some Null Life Essence.

The ever ready presence of [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc] spared Skullius a great deal of cursing.

~~~

[Saint Lumis' Benign Arc (Special) | Lv.19]

<Passive>

Adequate reserves of mana will be used to repair the user's body each time damage is incurred, to guard from curses of the same level, and to ward off – to a lesser extent – intrusive forces from enemies.

-Caution-

The duration and effectiveness of the process is determined by the severity of the damage taken – where physical damage and curses are concerned.

<Active>

The user can create a halo with a 120% increase in every aspect of restoration that the -passive- grants. The halo covers a broad range, affecting the user and their allies with an 80% increase their overall ability. Lasts 10 Minutes.

Mana Requirements: 30,000 (I) Mana Points.

Duration: 10 minutes

Cooldown: ---

~~~

When Skullius' was almost whole, the trusty hold of [Primal Caution] caused him to jerk backward, narrowly saving him from being sliced to ribbons by the nimble Retriever which had been released from its detention when Skullius lost focus from the attack just now.

In the midst of this, Skullius heard a shattering noise, like that of glass, coming from above his head, and his face fell. He immediately realised what it was.

The illusory glass revolving over him, with a numeric figure over it, had shattered, only to reform again. The 1,000 above it was gone. Now, there only stood...

900.

'Seriously? That was considered a lethal hit? I didn't even feel a thing!'

A heavy blow took 10 Glass Units from the target, and a lethal blow took a 100, according to the rules.

By all accounts, what had hit Skullius, even if he didn't understand what, was most definitely lethal.

The Retriever sped up, and tried to dice Skullius again with its fangs, but Skullius wasn't retaliating yet. He split his thoughts with [Omniscient Thought Cracker], and tried to decipher what exactly that burst of light was.

It was way too fast.

In truth, the Retriever was also faster than him stat wise, and to make sure he dodged cleanly, he was using gravity to pull himself away towards the large trees at even quicker speeds while he tried to think.

A full ten seconds later, Skullius looked up, his [Graceless Hunter] capturing the images of the clouds.

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

At the exact moment, one of the clouds above him shone at its base. This phenomena didn't last for more than a few microseconds before, with an unforgiving radiance, then a shuddering noise, a bolt of white lightning streamed towards Skullius!

So that was it?!

The Hybrid Luman had already taken action the moment the brilliance, with a very faint spark of mana, had poured out from the cloud.

On instinct, he activated one of his three, speed enhancing skills, and evaded right before he was struck for the second time.

It was only when he was a six meters away that the ground screamed, violated by the heat and force of the attack that obliterated another massive chunk of the forest, causing a torrent of flame to spill over.

'It's lightning!' Skullius thought. 'And to think I gave these clouds the benefit of the doubt!'

Once again, the Retriever shot in Skullius' direction, but unlike with gravity, Skullius when using [Destined Warp Steps], was many times faster than he was before.

Twinkling footsteps appeared in the direction where he wanted to move, and as long as he followed them to the letter, he would barely be seen moving over any stretch of distance within the skill's range.

Skullius' gripped his sword when he appeared behind the Retriever, and by the time the creature turned its head to him, a silent assassin of dark crimson hue had already streaked from his sheathed sword in a straight line and cleanly beheaded it.

The refined red energy that Demion's Dance expelled was as sharp ever, and effective at killing mortals, as its name – Mortal Ruin – boasted.

The large beast slumped to the ground lifelessly.

Skullius gave a sigh.

He wondered what those who were watching his battle just now would think. Even though it had barely lasted a minute, Skullius was sure keener eyes had already begun to dissect his move set, Guissepo probably more so.

'At least I'm keeping many others hidden, just in case,' Skullius thought with the scratch of his head.

He glanced at his sword. Thankfully, the sheath and sword were strong enough to withstand that first lightning attack, especially the former which had all its properties focused on defence. Some signs of damage could be seen on it though.

Skullius had been about to absorb the Null Life Essence from the Retriever to make up for the amount he had lost to repair the VergeRider when he stopped, a deep frown on his face.

'I didn't receive a notification for the kill, did I? And to absorb the Null Life Essence...!' Skullius thought.

A bright glow shone from above in that moment, but Skullius was already gone from where he stood by the time a thick bolt of lightning descended.

To the Hybrid Luman's surprise, the bolt didn't strike where he had been positioned, but over the Beckoned Retriever, dyeing it white, yet without the destructive mess from prior attacks to the surroundings.

Instead, as he perceived through [Graceless Hunter], the corpse of the Retriever rose unsteadily, while bound in the enclosure of blinding beams and streaking, smaller bolts derived from the larger one just now. Its head rose to reattach itself to a bleeding stump on the whole!

'What did I even expect here?' Skullius asked himself while looking at this in disbelief.

The Retriever's furs turned milky white and stood on end.

The coiling bits of scattered lightning did not die out, seeming to instead become a part of the resurrected beast.

Skullius nodded at this in profound incredulity, and when a third tail suddenly emerged from the Retriever's rear, bumping the beast's overall physical values twofold, Skullius almost gave a round of applause.

Immortality?

Perpetual augmentation?

Sure! Why the flesh not?!

The enraged Retriever growled in a frighteningly low voice, prompting Skullius to prepare once again.

'How do I get out of this one?' he wondered.

Chapter 717: Against The Perpetual Mutations.

Evolutionary paths determined the internal structure of a beast, and if it was humanoid, it would have a Class like humans, Sif and Giants, but if it was not, it would have a mutation instead.

A mutation was a sort of a unique bodily trait outside the bounds of abilities exclusively granted by virtue of being part of a particular species. Unconventional mix breeding, consuming other outlandish beasts, and coming into contact with mystical geographical phenomena were a few of the ways mutations could be born.

Thus, like Classes, there was an unlimited assortment of mutations.

That said...

'Is the set of abilities from this creature something from a mutation? It hasn't shown anything unique besides being fast and having sharp claws,' Skullius wondered.

In the next moment, his enemy which was bathed in restless, radiant bolts of lightning streaking from its now white furs that stood aloof, as if livid with rage of their own, pounced.

The Hybrid Luman had already drawn Demion's Dance from its sheath by the time he realised his enemy wasn't rushing towards him, but once again, around him.

The Retriever, which had doubled its stats, seemingly represented by the additional tail swinging from its rear, shot all around Skullius like a rebellious stream of light.

Skullius gathered his mana and expelled it from his body, hoping to see some kind of effect like last time with a striking gravitational imposition on the ground.

For a brief moment, the Retriever slowed down, but it then continued dashing about as if trying to decide when to attack him.

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

Of course.

His affinity with Distorted Gravity was a mere D, but he speculated that his affinity for Gravity on its own was a little higher. Still though, it was when facing enemies that could consolidate their bodies with abstruse abilities like these that he found imposing a gravitational weight on them ineffective, especially if they didn't remain still.

This meant...

'Better get my hands dirty then. Sword, I mean,' Skullius quickly corrected himself when he felt an enraged quiver from Demion's Dance.

It was then that [Primal Caution] gave Skullius another warning and this time, he reacted on his own, dodging the sudden pounce from the Retriever, then another and another with [Destined Warp Steps].

~~~

[Destined Warp Steps (Special) | Lv.55]

Create up to a 100 starry foot prints leading in a trail of your choosing that, when followed in perfect sequence, multiplies your usual, bare maximum speed twelve fold. After each print is successfully trampled, a miniscule window where time is dilated – 0.5 seconds – is afforded for the user to enact any action they desire, before going on to the next print at rapid speed.

The skill will not go into cooldown until all 30 minutes of duration are spent.

-Caution-

(Current maximum range – 400 meters)

-

Mana Requirements: 28,000 (I) Mana Points, 7,000 (I) Mana Points every minute

Duration: 30 minutes

Cooldown: 1 hour

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The Retriever had grown much faster than before. While [Destined Warp Steps] was capable of making Skullius more than a match for the Retriever, it was his ability to sense where it would come from that created a glaring problem.

If he whizzed around, with no doubt faster speed than the Retriever, he was likely to waste time as it would make perceiving it that much harder.

Unfortunately, even while he stood still, [Graceless Hunter] was being overwhelmed, and as the seconds passed, Skullius started to sense hundreds of after-images of the jaguar-like creature with little to no distinction from the real Beckoned Retriever.

A shard of a moment later, a striking blur went straight for Skullius' neck before he could react properly!

If it wasn't for [Primal Caution], Skullius would have lost his head, but in the nick of time, he had dodged quickly enough to only have to lose a chunk of his throat to a brutal set of claws!

'Damn it,' Skullius cursed.

Above him, the glass shattered and reformed, and the '900' depicted became a '800', which made Skullius turn furious. It seemed the illusion judged lethal and heavy hits, but how they would effect a regular human, even if they meant nothing to him.

'Fine then. I'll have to reveal a bit more now won't I?' Skullius said before crouching down and holding Demion's Dance out.

With [Unmatched Sword Sense] active, Skullius felt his body tingle, and Demion's Dance get excited.

Then, with a hot breath leaving his mouth, he jammed Demion's Dance with an elegant stab into the ground.

It only took a moment, but it was devastating.

The ground around Skullius was baptised in a sickening shade of red, before it became a dark crimson, and then... flew up violently!

The dirty, moist crust was cut apart by sharp, rampaging Mortal Ruin that left nothing untouched for three hundred meters, effectively reducing the area around the Hybrid Luman into a huge pit with flying dirt over that had yet to fall down.

For a brief moment, the Retriever was left with no footing in its proximity... and Skullius didn't miss its surprised mass that was stuck in mid-air.

In the blink of an eye, Skullius was gone from the sole patch of high land left around the huge depression, and in the same span of time, the Retriever was reduced to dozens of hacked pieces by the swordsman who was already standing a distance away, where the flourishing land weighed by vegetation continued.

As the pieces of the beast fell to the ground, Skullius paid attention.

The combination of his skill with the sword and [Destined Warp Steps] had proven too much for the Retriever once he successfully locked onto it, but... would it stay dead?

His answer came when another large bolt of lightning came slamming down from the close floating swarm of clouds and onto the Retriever.

Once again, the beast stood up, its figure even more radiant... and angry.

Another tail spawned from behind it, and another wild gush of power that Skullius found to add another twofold multiplier exploded from the feline.

The fourth tail.

Beyond this however, an expertly crafted ring of light appeared above the creature's head, and the Hybrid Luman felt that something was different about the Retriever this time.

At the same time, he thought he understood a little about this Cluster beast. Maybe.

The sacred Mountain.

The roaming clouds.

The mostly unimpressive beasts.

'If I'm not mistaken, these bastards are probably not all that strong, but gain their powers from their influence of the environment. The 'Beckoned' in their name could mean they are just slaves to something, or that they are always summoned back to life after death... or both. The 'Retriever' though, I'm not sure. Now there's that thing on its head. It's probably not good news for me...'

How was Skullius to kill this creature if the clouds could seemingly reanimate it countless times and grant it a boost in power each time?

Well, he had a few ideas, but before then...

As he expected, the Retriever was much, much faster now.

As it once again began streaking around him, the Hybrid Luman couldn't even perceive its after-images. Even the wiggling bolts around it only appeared as flashy blots for splits of time all around Skullius, and as this scene went on...

Skullius' eyes widened.

The Retriever wasn't flashing around randomly this time.

With [Graceless Hunter] and Crude Vision, he found that it kept running in a fixed path that... that seemed to have a meaningful shape – courtesy of the spots of light he could actually see.

'You sockethole!' Skullius thought as in the next moment, the fixed path that the Retriever was running in suddenly became a glaring, white formation that surrounded him, a hefty amount of mana pumped into it!

The second the formation solidified to look like it was made with wide, paint strokes, linked triangular shapes replaced it, all fashioned from lightning buzzing around Skullius!

The Hybrid Luman's eyes flashed...

At once, the linked shapes seized him like chains, binding his movements firmly.

Before Skullius could even suck in a surprised breath, the clouds ten meters above him began to gather quickly, all radiating an electric blue hue that pulsed from one cloud to the next until it reached a central point where whatever disaster was coming would spill from.

Skullius looked up instinctively, and the moment his blind eyes met the glowing hue, a treacherous, fulgurous presence dove down at him with strength even to level a large city!

Chapter 718: Seen A Ghost?

It seemed only a few battles had begun to show on the multiple screens depicting the fifty and some contenders participating in the Royale.

Some of the screens displayed a few contenders battling against each other, some displayed others still wondering around or investigating things they found. There were some though, that displayed battles against the resident Cluster beasts which the Game Master had mentioned before.

Some of them were thrilling, and all had a dash of flashy flare that caused gasps of excitement to echo around the stadium.

One battle in particular that had witnesses noisily jostling in their seats, was a battle between a familiar, auburn haired young man, and one of the large six legged Cluster beasts.

A variety of dialogues could be heard as the battle ensued, like:

"Oh my word! Look at his body! How is he still even alive?!"

"Dear Listafelle! He healed completely... and he isn't even naked!"

Or:

"Goodness! He had his throat cut out this time! How will he—"

"Woow! He doesn't even seem fazed! He healed himself again! But...he's still not naked."

Generally, what surprised the general, uncultured audience was how this man was alive despite being so gruesomely injured. It was unnatural.

Now, as they all watched, with the glass screens making sure to make the rapid action more digestible for unpowered spectators, the resilient man whom some were beginning to call 'Die Hard' or 'Dead-Not' despite his name clearly being displayed on the screen, was struck down by an attack so terrible and so bright that the screen had to go dim so as to not irritate the eyes.

The sound that came from it was also lulled.

When the images became clear once again though, the audience marvelled for different reasons; others perturbed, others sadistically pleased.

Yet, one man in the audience with a thick moustache of caramel hair below his nose chuckled to himself while gazing at this same result post refulgence.

\*

The Beckoned Retriever growled.

It now stood alone in a decimated, dry plain that hissed of steam with patches of weak flame devouring the remnants of dark tree stumps.

The flames mostly gathered around the point of impact from the last attack, hiding whatever was there – if there was anything at all – in its scorching fury, along with dwindling sparks of lightning.

Soon, the view became clearer, and a pitiable figure emerged from the flames; barely a skeleton with a shattered ribcage, and other brittle bones that were somehow still being licked fondly by flames.

Bits of a brain also squelched in the heat, exposed by a broken skull that seemed to be moments away from crumbling. There were no eyeballs in its sockets, and a hollow darkness could be seen as the skeleton staggered ahead, a broken green sword in its one remaining hand.

The Retriever growled in delight, so pleased with this sight that it almost seemed to don a vicious smile. Before properly celebrating though, the creature dashed to finish off its prey. This human had proven to be a troublesome opponent who had potent healing abilities after all.

It aimed straight for the skull as it then clamped down with its unnaturally wide mouth full of sharp, crystal-like teeth, its momentum magnified for a cruel execution.

CHOMP!

The Beckoned Retriever bit down.

But...

But... its body skidded across the ground, past the pitiable skeleton.

A look of confusion appeared on the creature's face.

There was nothing to crush in its maw, and its body seemed to have faded through the enemy, as if...

As if what it was seeing was not real.

As if...

A look of shock appeared on the beast, replacing its confused visage.

At that moment, the skeleton turned to the Retriever behind it, one of its sockets that had a large crack through it igniting with a serene blue flame. Then it spoke.

"What? Seen a ghost?"

The Retriever trembled, even if it didn't understand the words.

That nonchalance...

Before it could act, a large, gaping hole opened right in front of it, a fierce, scalding red light dyeing its body before....

A torrent of eager flames gushed out from this gaping mass, shooting out with such a concentrated force that they spilled like a beam that reached all the way to the already suffering forest of innocent, crooked trees!

The stream of fire enveloped the Beckoned Retriever entirely, and did not stop flooding from the abstruse gap until not even a shadow of the Beckoned Retriever remained.

Such was the infamous wrath of an ungodly flame.

Only when the fire sputtered, and finally died out from its hiding space, did the skeleton with the broken sword start to vanish, disappearing from sight. At the same time, the figure of a perfectly fine Skullius appeared a distance away in the same dry plain, with a smoky veil of dark purple energy around him.

The Hybrid Luman, with Crude Vision active, looked at the black skid mark on the ground that more or less represented the Beckoned Retriever – it wasn't quite as clear with the monochromatic vision. He then looked up.

The clouds did not have a response to this one, it seemed.

Good.

And surely...

[You have killed (IX) LV99 Beckoned Retriever. 1,200 EXP awarded]

[Would you like to extract the Essence of Null Life? 58 seconds remaining]

"Finally," Skullius said triumphantly.

He was glad that he managed to nip the problem in the bud before it reanimated with new ways to kill him. Literally.

As for how the Hybrid Luman had managed to win the rather short battle...

Well, it was as simple as it was complex.

When Skullius had seen that the Retriever had seemingly awakened an ability following its second death, he had already made for an escape. After all, what he could see coming, he could evade with [Destined Warp Steps].

However, with rapid thought, he had devised a way to give the beast a false victory. That was one of the only ways to keep it still long enough for what he thought was the best to get rid of it for good.

Thankfully, for such a trick, Skullius had a skill known as the [Ghost Rending Divine Sword Art]. With it, he could create realistic illusions that branched from actions he had made, like Hobbu Bobbu did.

Currently though, there was a limitation.

Without the Bashful Abomination, which still had the affix to increase the sword art skill by 475%, Skullius couldn't create tangible illusions or ghosts capable of actual attacks like Hobbu Bobbu, or like how he had done against his most recent spar with Alaris.

The illusions he could create with his own raw use of the sword art, were intangible, even if they were realistic, and could only be seen by targets close to Skullius.

The Beckoned Retriever had fallen for it – thinking it had successfully seized, and landed the bright attack on Skullius – and when it remained stationary long enough, dazed from the shocking reveal, Skullius enacted his theorised way of killing the indefinitely reanimating beast.

With the truly astounding effects of his Temporary Storage which, unlike a storage ring, could hold mana, and all sorts of elements, compress and release them from any point Skullius wished within reasonable distance, the Hybrid Luman had unleashed flames from the skill [Ungodly Flames of Debauchery] which he had stored a day earlier, just in case.

Compressing these flames, and granting a modest opening to the Temporary Storage created a flaming beam that could eviscerate almost anything, if given enough time.

This was no ordinary flame after all.

As it turned out, the Beckoned Retriever couldn't revive if it was destroyed completely in one semi-swift, unforgiving attack.

Enacting this whole idea while covered by [Absolute Zero] – the cloak of dark purple around – had been quite an enjoyable experience for Skullius actually, and he had confirmed a lot of things about his other, bestial enemies in this game.

'So these beasts gain new abilities as they die and reanimate. It's actually scary to imagine what would have happened if it reanimated again. What's worse is that this was only a Tier 9 beast. Since this is a purple Cluster, I'm sure they will be Retrievers several Tiers higher. Maybe a Tier 20? Dim my sockets!' Skullius strained.

'Do higher Tier beasts here already have abilities then? The tails seem to tell. Four probably means the beast has a unique power.'

Remembering the ring of light over the Beckoned Retriever, Skullius frowned. It looked similar to the one the Great Mane Mountain Ape Azila had.

Coincidence?

He wasn't remembering wrong, right? No.

There was no way he would ever forget that regal beast!

But what did that ring mean exactly?

As Skullius drew the Null Life Essence from the beast, which was a whopping 70 points, Skullius checked around to make sure he was safe.

He was already down to 800 Glass Units, and if he met stronger Cluster beasts...

'I'd rather fight the other contenders? At least they stay dead.'

Suddenly, Skullius saw a beam of lightning dashing down from the intimate clouds in the distance. Then another and another in different directions.

It seemed the other contenders were beginning to meet the Retrievers too. Or maybe they had already been fighting them, and he had just been too invested in this fight to notice.

A second later...

OOOOOM!

An glorious howl of energy swept past Skullius from another direction, causing goose bumps to spring up on his skin.

This was the first time this had happened.

With Crude Vision, Skullius detected something familiar in the direction where this thrilling sensation came from. His body and soul seemed to yearn for what it was, and he kind of understood why.

He had touched on such a power before.

For the first time in the almost four months since Skullius arrived in Aigas, the Hybrid Luman saw a glimpse of a proper Majestic Territory springing forth in the distance....

Chapter 719: Darwel's Playground

More than half an hour had passed since the Royale began, and in as much as a lot of action had brewed, lots of exchanges occurring already, and with a few already having died among the contenders, a decent number of people had not met so much as an obstacle since starting towards the GOAL from a distance the Game Master had claimed was sort of equal from the mountain for all contenders.

One such individual, was a beautiful woman with cherry coloured hair, adorned in a silky, purple cloak that looked much like a fancy net. Beneath it, wrapping firmly around her body, was what seemed like a simple, long, light green shirt marked with tens of traditional symbols in a silvery white hue.

Below her torso, she wore a pair of dark, leathery pants, and matching boots with a light green heel.

Darwel truly wished she had something that could send an image of her current getup to her parents. They were very strict on tradition and culture, most of the time preferring to see their daughter donning the culturally heavy costumes they often wore in annual ceremonies and such.

The Sif Princess would not have it though.

As she took unhurried steps towards the partly obscured mountain in the far distance – like everyone else who had discovered the hindrance posed by the close set clouds – she smiled while thinking back to the happier moments she shared with her parents.

She considered herself fortunate to have both her biological guardians alive. El Sif, while adored by the other Sif, usually had higher responsibilities, and it wasn't uncommon for them to die while serving the nation.

Because of this, Darwel's parents who were at a very high position that demanded great attention – the whole continent, which wasn't divided into separate nations like Feinheath – tended to be stiff when it came to parenting.

The young El Sif didn't have too many problems with this while growing up, as she quickly understood the importance of duty, but she did try to lighten the mood when she was with her mother and father.

Of course, her folks didn't always appreciate the humour which usually had a heart-attack factor attached. Darwel would find herself having to ease the tension afterwards with a "Alright, alright. Keep your wig on" or a "I heard, alright? Once a year then, for health reasons."

Being so far from them without having the pleasure of being chased about once in while, was taking its toll on her heart, it seemed. It was her choice to delay going home so she couldn't blame anyone, but still...

Carrying on with her thoughts, she kept up her slow journey while also looking around for the special items that Guissepo mentioned, and also the reason for the sudden surges of lightning coming from the far distances.

A quarter of an hour later, Darwel had stopped, facing a different direction that held something she was interested in.

Her eyes sparkled.

She was sure this had nothing to do with the added items in the Royale grounds, and found leaving it where it was to be a phenomenal waste.

Who knew? Maybe this was a steering by Direction.

At the centre of what seemed like a shallow, but wide lake of blackish, pungent waters, an enormous tree grew, several of its thick roots peeking from the swaying surface of the water.

It looked like how swallowing an apple whole would feel. So thick, bloated, and overwhelming, a significant portion of its bulk sinking into the near clouds. Its greenish-brown bark made it look both young and old, and Darwel wasn't quite sure what kind of tree it was given where it was growing.

Still, she wanted it.

Caution was not lost to her though.

The first thing she had noticed, with the ambient mana all around singing sweetly to her ear, was the eager, swollen eyes of thousands of small fish swimming in the lake.

They looked like palm sized swordfish with black scales, their still bodies blending in with the dirty waters.

Darwel looked at them with a bit of uncertainty.

Those bulbous eyes that did not blink, looking at her from one side of the fishes' face, clearly urging her to get closer...

'Are these things causing the lightning?' Darwel thought.

No. Probably not.

The mana in the air carried hints of variety.

There were different types of creatures in this place, clearly.

And these fish, despite looking so small, were not weak. Each was at least Tier 6.

But Darwel did not want to leave that tree alone.

The ambient mana told her it wasn't a sentient existence. Like any other specie of fauna, it drew on the pure mana in the air, unlike most sentient living beings.

"Solution?" Darwel asked herself.

Seconds later, the El Sif was crouching down near a small patch of pale, tufted grass growing around the lake. A soft verdant glow flowed from her fingers, and engulfed them.

No sooner had she begun to supply this affection to the grasses, did they quiver excitedly and immediately explode to the size of small trees, a massive, seemingly infinite amount of mana raging from their thin bodies.

An unnatural grassland had suddenly spawned, much to Darwel's delight.

Her Class, as her teacher back in Opungale had taught her, was Natural Tamer, an Advanced Class. Personally, Darwel favoured its other, more nuanced, and frankly less confusing name.

Flora's Keeper.

With this Class, she could tame any type of plant, plant-type monsters included. Not only that, she could also awaken them, which made them grow stronger, and be capable of exhibiting an outrageous amount of pure mana for limited periods. The more unique a plant was, the stronger it would become. Size also played a role.

This is why she had set her eyes on the tree in the middle of lake of disgusting waters.

Soon, Darwel was riding one length of grasses that she had woven together, commanding it to lean towards the lake. She had it extend as far as it could while keeping a safe distance from the fishes which had begun to move, praying that she could get a bit closer.

Or were they just waiting to see what she was going to do?

Darwel remained cautious as she rode.

When she was close enough, she leapt towards the giant tree, and hung from one of its branches.

With a sigh of relief, she looked down at the fishes, and saw that all of them, thousands in total, were now surrounding the tree.

'Do they think I'm stranded now?' she thought.

To confirm her thoughts, it seemed the fish really had assumed so, because at that moment, the lake started to change. Each of the fishes began to emit a yellow glow that transformed the waters around it... into lava.

The reddish orange and black oozed out, with toxic fumes rising messily to surround the tree. Meanwhile, the fish causing the scorching catastrophe grew in size, as if the lava – not the pungent waters – was their more favoured territory.

Darwel gave a subdued exclamation, held her breath and placed her hand on the tree, which at its roots was beginning to burn ferociously.

'Don't worry big man! I'll save you!' she thought as she calmed her heart, and injected a large portion of her mana through the trunk.

The mana riding in the air suddenly turned stiff as a magnificent verdant glow bloomed from the great tree which shook, and howled, as if something bestial was buried within it, roaring intensely!

The green glow from Darwel's hand was replaced by a voracious golden glare that bellowed from tree, expounding a staggering wave of pure mana so strong and vast that it pushed away the lava and the fish within it in a wave, leaving the clear, dry land at its roots!

The fumes were cleared as well, and the air turned pure.

Darwel donned a brilliant smile, and urged the tree on with encouraging words.

"Now stand up! Let's get away from here! This is your chance to set yourself free!"

The tree seemed to be in agreement, and so it raised its roots – those which remained. The top of it that had been hidden in the clouds arched down to show itself, maroon leaves and all, before it began taking a different shape.

The bark and thick under it grew even more taut and twisted and wrapped around itself to form a simple, humanoid shape without any complex, defining features. A bulbous head, and a pair of arms and legs extended from a simple torso, all with a height of around five meters.

An incredible amount of pure mana, not as much as the tree had expelled before, now rested within its body, and it turned to the surging waves of lava that were beginning to return after the temporary banishment.

Darwel rushed to sit on the tree's shoulder before pointing in a certain direction.

"Jump!" she screamed.

The tree hunkered down, and followed the command, its dive into the air and across whatever was beyond being such a fantastical sight because of its height and weight!

It soared for over 50 meters across the lands before landing in a different spot, a distance from the danger.

Darwel had braced for the landing, and when the two reached the ground, she gave a thrilled laugh.

"That was kind of fun," she said as she patted the tree's bark.

This was a really good experience.

It was hard for Darwel, as an El Sif, to enjoy herself with her racial and Class abilities, if she kept herself within civilisation populated by humans. Not only was there less ambient mana to communicate with, there was also little in the way of natural plant life to exercise her gifts – like in Genhuis City for instance.

This was a nice change.

"Can you get any smaller? We'll attract a lot of attention this way," she said to the tree which immediately began to shrink, becoming no taller than three meters.

Darwel had hopped off it.

She looked around and babbled with her lips.

"I wonder if I'll find him. This place is bigger than I thought," she said to herself.

"For now, let's just head to the GOAL."

Chapter 720: The Jade Orb

"This is going to take forever!" Skullius shouted, not bothering to keep his thoughts to himself.

Close to an hour had passed since his encounter with the Beckoned Retriever, and the distance between him and the goal didn't seem to have dwindled at all.

In fact, because of the clouds overhead, it almost seemed like he was standing in place.

"Is this why there's no time limit? I could be walking for eternity!"

What if the Royale took a week to end?

He would have wasted seven days to the 19 he already had left. He wanted a bit more than that if he was going to prepare to fight Somanda for his soul.

As it stood, if he didn't find something to give him an advantage, he would be royally fleshed.

Curiously though, could the Draw Bubbles, Scatter Crystals or whatever, be used to help with this ordeal? Was luck the major factor involved with finding them?

If that was the case, then...

The Hybrid Luman slapped his face.

'At least give me something else to fight in the meantime!'

Since fighting the Retriever, Skullius had expected to be swarmed by other, similar Cluster beasts, but no. Since then, almost an hour ago, absolutely nothing had happened.

To Skullius, that was just torturous.

He wasn't used to doing nothing, whether in Deadmanland, or in Aigas.

Taking quiet walks among the trees had seemed like a good thing at first, but he didn't realise how much it would bother him if it continued for this long. His body was starting to itch for something to happen.

Anything.

The Hybrid Luman took another set of steps.

The forest seemed unending.

It extended to who knew where, and judging by the flashes of lightning and signs of battle going on in other locations, it wasn't a stretch to say he was the only contender in this realm of crooked wood.

Maybe.

To no surprise, two, uneventful hours passed as Skullius trekked. He grew so annoyed by the trees that he shut off Crude Vision so as to not see their varying degrees of woven imagination.

Speaking of Crude, Skullius groaned as he began to think that perhaps, if he was still able to use Crude World Projection, where he projected a dark humanoid figure that carried his consciousness, leaving his body limp, he might have been able to scout ahead from above.

For now, he couldn't use Crude World Projection because he couldn't trust Sila to not take over his body again.

And quite frankly, with the clouds so close that they devouring the taller trees around here, Skullius wasn't willing to risk pushing through them to see if he could make out what was around better. If that was even possible.

What a hassle.

But...

'Hmmm... maybe I can...' Skullius thought. 'Well not me.'

He hadn't thought he'd use this item for mere scouting. Well, to be fair, that could be one of its uses, but Skullius hadn't imagined its utility to extend to that till now.

The very nature of the Royale, in his mind, had been much simpler, after all. Who knew you'd have to prowl through a large world until you met people to fight.

Skullius extracted something from his storage ring. The Temporary Storage wasn't meant to be exposed willy nilly. Even his use of it before hadn't explicitly revealed that he had something like it. Perhaps Mages could guess correctly.

A jade orb appeared in his hand, perfectly fitting in his grasp.

Vaguely, a cloudy texture could be seen past its beautiful exterior, but that was merely a design choice, and not something to get one's hope too high on. After all, this item was merely Unique grade.

The Hexer's Inheritance.

It was the third object Skullius had chosen to bring into the Royale, barring the storage ring, the others being the VergeRider armour and Demion's Dance.

This orb's function, was to act as a conduit that extended the user's abilities over a maximum range of five kilometres away from them. Naturally, while it couldn't be bound, as it was only a Unique item, a connection with the user could be made that extended their senses as well, allowing them to control it, but not to a perfect degree.

Additionally, it worked better with curses and external mana applications, thus limiting its use for non-Energy Formers.

'I should really try to take on missions that give access to the Second treasury,' Skullius thought. Having been rewarded with this after taking on another exclusive mission, he wondered what he could get for higher tier missions, which to his sickening luck were usually picked off by higher ranked exclusive mercenaries.

The Hexer's Inheritance wasn't as good of an artefact in his opinion.

"Now..." Skullius said as he held up the orb.

A swift light shone from his body and illuminated the orb.

It was the skill [Lucent Apparition].

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[Lucent Apparition (Special) | Lv.1]

Project a soul light from your body that can carry a portion of your consciousness and solidify it anywhere within a range of 5 miles. In the solidified state, your consciousness' only limit is the strength of your soul, and the mana required to perform complex actions in such a fragile state.

-Caution-

It is possible to receive damage through the projected soul consciousness.

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Mana Requirements: 275 (I) Mana Points, 110 (I) Mana every minute

Duration: ---

Cooldown: ---

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When the light died down, a voice sounded from it, but it rang only in Skullius' mind.

'Tomato flinger...'

'How's that for a body?' Skullius said as he let go of the Hexer's Inheritance, which began to float, moving to and fro.

'I much prefer that other, humanoid body. Being stuck with your face is a much better punishment than having to be... this!'

'You should be glad you're getting to stretch your le-, to breath the fre-... time outside, Sila,' Skullius thought, inconsistently.

Sila remained silent, not knowing if this was a joke or not.

'I assume this isn't for my own benefit, tomato flinger?'

Skullius gave a grating laugh that made Sila invisibly cringe.

'Of course not. I want you to scout the area. Start from the sky, past the clouds,' the Hybrid Luman instructed to which Sila emitted a exasperated sigh in his head. 'And be careful... wouldn't want the orb to be destroyed.'

'...'

Since Sila was an Incandescent Stage expert, he could manipulate his soul and consciousness very efficiently. Possessing the orb, which already had a link to the user, and moving around with it wasn't a problem for him. Though Skullius did find that controlling the Hexer's Inheritance himself became harder when Sila was in it.

Thankfully, he could just cancel [Lucent Apparition] if the Tower General tried anything.

Soon, the jade orb flew up cautiously.

Sila himself was quite apprehensive of the electric blue hue from the clouds. It seemed they could erupt at any time.

Thankfully, as he slowly dove into them, he found that they didn't exhibit any form of offensive intent. Of course, he didn't know what Skullius knew, but that had been done on purpose.

Past the varying thickness of the clouds, were the canopies of trees that rose for tens of meters past the foggy blurs. There wasn't anything special it seemed, until Sila turned and explored a bit in one direction where the trees were a little shorter.

The view of the gigantic mountain registered in his sight for a few moments, and he shuddered.

'This world still has terrifying things like this? Only... I remember such things being prevalent everywhere back then...' Sila thought.

How terrifying indeed.