

Undead 761

Chapter 761: Light Work

On getting the sharp gaze from Gabel, Skullius scowled.

"What are you looking at?" he asked with a haughty sounding tone.

Gabel didn't respond immediately. Instead, he tightened the grip on his glaive, and narrowed his dark eyes which were partly covered by messy – kind of oily – bangs of like-coloured hair.

"We have unfinished business," he replied, finally.

"Speak for yourself."

Skullius then turned his attention to Rias, who also seemed to focus his gaze specifically on him, and then his Units.

"You have more than enough Units to qualify yourself for freedom. If I were you, I'd use them wisely. When that gateway closes, those Units won't be as valuable," the young man said without a shift in the contours on his face.

Skullius raised a brow.

"So the Units are good for something even after that gateway closes?" he asked.

A half smile appeared on Rias' face.

"Yes, of course. It wouldn't have done too well for us to impose harsh rules onto you contenders, so indeed, Units do serve a crucial role. For your survival," he answered.

"What role?"

Rias' smile faded, and he didn't answer as well as any inquirer would have liked. Instead...

"Since you've already picked your side, you'll find out soon enough."

"Ooo, how vague~," Vali, who stood by Skullius' side said with a radiant smile. "Are you trying to turn us against each other? Fighting for his Units?"

The question directed towards Rias received an even worse reception to the one Skullius had asked. Silence.

Vali scoffed.

Skullius screwed his head to her.

"What exactly are we trying to do here? Beating him aside, how do we even try to stop whatever he is doing?" he asked.

Skullius' <CURSED HEART> was still beating rather uncomfortably. The towering green and black flame now hidden within stacks of glass panes made him consider a lot of possibilities. It wasn't a shock that one of these were that Somanda could suddenly pop out of the flame, somehow granted access to walk among the common folk of Aigas.

That would be dreadful.

Too dreadful.

Skullius' solution towards this wasn't exactly redeeming. It only guaranteed that he wouldn't lose himself to the Lich.

"Look below the flame. Well... if you can at least perceive it," Vali said, remembering midway that Skullius couldn't see. "There's something drawn on the ground. Some magical engraving of sorts. The flame is anchored around it.

My guess is that's what we need to disrupt. Our combined efforts could be enough. I'd rather not live with regrets if something especially terrible results from this."

Skullius wasn't so sure his resolve was as solid as hers. In fact, despite his somewhat resolved gripes from moments ago, the question of just leaving and abandoning his temporary partners, Tallo and Maxim here, kept swirling in his mind for some reason.

Abandoning them.

Leaving them behind.

He had to look out for himself first before others.

This was great logic – in Skullius' opinion – since he barely knew these two, but for some reason, a sentiment was growing in him about them that he hadn't had for anyone else except for... except for...

In any case...

'Damn it! I at least have to see what this is. If it really is something THAT bad, then even if I run now, it won't make a difference,' Skullius thought with a scowl.

Vali craned her neck, and with a pop coming from it, she took steps forward, heading towards Rias, who was happy to let them waste time, and take the initiative.

"I'll go ahead and get a feel of what this kid is capable of. You two can chip in whenever you feel like it," she said as her vast pool of mana which boggled Skullius to no end, burst out like the waters from behind a torn damn wall.

Skullius and Gabel watched closely.

Rias also watched Vali carefully. Despite his condescending tone, he didn't take his opponents lightly at all, most of this surprising seriousness depicted in how he held out his sword, and ran a precise stream of mana into it.

"Come," Rias said hollowly.

"Sure!" Vali responded with a grinning cheer.

Her figure swept across the distance between her and the youngster from the EverSword House cleanly... swiftly, like a ghost, and as she reached him, there was a loud boom on the ground, her and Rias having clashed their wrists heavily.

This lasted for a second, before Vali took a step back, and cocked back her arm. In an instant, from her elbow to her fingers, her skin tone turned dark, almost gleaming in a blackish grey, a massive amount of mana bubbling within it.

Rias turned cautious.

Vali's punch came at him like a dark firework, which he was more than ready to block by holding his sword out in an oblique angle with both hands. There was a crisp clash as the two met, then Vali followed up with another hook from Rias' right which he guarded against as well.

Then a torrent of Vali's punches rained over Rias who parried them away with zero difficulty, though the speed behind them was nothing short of staggering.

The clash between these two monstrosities kept digging at the ground beneath them as their mana fiercely battered against the other, then...

Rias tore from the repetitive exchange, and his sword left a moon-like curve as it set to cull Vali's incoming punch by cutting her arm from the elbow with an elegant slash. His strike was so brisk in its movement that it had bit into her skin before her fist was anywhere near Rias body.

TCHT.

However...

Biting Vali's skin was all it did.

It went no further, causing no more damage than a thin stream of blood from where it cut.

Rias' eyes showed a bit of awe before he rushed out of the way of Vali's punch, threw his sword up, and launched a heavy swing at her face from the side!

His fist travelled fast towards the woman's body which was still finishing the motions for the previous attack, but then, Rias' fist passed through Vali's face, as if she was merely an apparition.

Yet Rias wasn't surprised.

He immediately turned, and guarded – raising both his arms up – for a moment later, Vali's arm bashed against his arms powerfully, pushing him back.

The blue haired woman then kept hammering her arm viciously multiple times as Rias guarded, before, in an eerie show that the onlookers were quite shaken by, shooting her other arm which became extremely thin, between Rias' guarding arms, and gripping his neck!

"Oh..." Rias could be heard surprisingly murmuring to himself as Vali's arm expanded into a bulky, thick, dark branch of a limb, which she used to heave Rias up, and then dangerous pound him into the ground!

It was as if someone had flung a massive fireball where they were battling it out. A shockwave came after the ear-rending boom that followed, only, without the fiery aftermath.

Within the obscurity, Rias gripped Vali's arm and pulled her close with both hands, and his cheeks ballooned, as though he had suddenly sucked in a vast volume of air.

...!

Vali narrowed her eyes.

Rias blew out, and the air shrieked, rings upon rings spawned by its disturbance bashing into Vali and peeling off her skin rapidly while completely ignoring the guarding layer of mana around her!

It suddenly became quite windy... actually, devastatingly so around the pillar of green flame.

As Vali took the full brunt of this attack, which was likely from a high level Auxiliary Technique she knew was probably only known to the Houses, she grinned, even as her perfect skin was ripped out, and heaved Rias from the ground.

The golden hook at the end of her French braid suddenly became drenched in an excessive volume of mana, and jutted out from behind her to pin itself on Rias' face!

It became Rias' turn to grow wary.

With a vicious twist, he broke off Vali's arm at the joint, and leapt away to stand before the pillar of flame once again.

When distance had been created between the two combatants, that was when Rias sword finally fell back into his hands.

"You should get out of your house more often. How can such a brilliant sparring expert be so introverted. I'd welcome you home for some action any day," Vali said with a gentle smile. Her skin rapidly healed, and a new arm grew from elbow like it was nothing.

"I'll pass. I appreciate the offer though," Rias said.

Skullius was baffled.

The sheer speed, precision and relaxedness of both parties, where he would have been taking every blow seriously, made him feel a little out of place. But he didn't let this haunt him for long.

'Calm down. I'm not fighting alone here,' Skullius convinced himself.

But then again, if all that was like a simple spar...

"Get ready introvert," Vali said, as her eyes narrowed into shiver-inducing slits.

Rias prepared.

But...

By the time he heard Vali's voice, she had already reached him.

But...

For a brief moment, he didn't see or sense her because, as the trail of light from where she had stood blinks before spelled out, the daring woman had used a speed-enhancing Auxiliary Technique!

But that wasn't all...

Rias hadn't seen her coming for just that micro moment, because she had ducked down quickly, and swept her foot across the ground!

Rias saw the attack right before it got him, and would have dodged.

But...

Gabel strangled his glaive fondly.

...!

Rias, from nowhere, turned still, very still, like a block.

Vali noticed this too, but it didn't stop her from sending the young man spinning in the air – his body rigidly retaining its previous stance – with her sweep, and flinging a heavy punch loaded with ferocious mana right at Rias' chest!

On impact, Rias' armour exploded like a balloon, flying from his body, and he shot like shooting star towards the green flame, slamming heavily into the stacks of glass that guarded it!

Chapter 762: The Imagining Technique (1)

The 100 Units Vali received from landing the lethal hit would have encouraged her to go with a follow-up attack, but she didn't.

Something didn't feel right, and she wasn't thinking about how Rias' had suddenly turned stiff right before she tackled him with her sweep.

No.

When she delivered her punch, which she launched with the intent to do damage to even someone who had guarded with Aura, there seemed to be... no feedback at all.

As everyone was well aware, Vali was an Energy Former, a healer in fact, as was dictated by her unique bloodline that gave out high doses of affinity to the aforementioned class to everyone related to her.

Vali herself was different though. Not only did she have an advanced Class, her Family Technique, which she had experimented on, and refined further, was troublesome to say the least, especially when paired with her ridiculous level of Class Branching into Form Using.

Cellular Supremacy, was its name.

As the name suggested, Vali could manipulate cells, particularly blood cells. However, such a description would be selling her capabilities short. With her technique, she could mass produce and alter anything that cells could make up. Flesh, bone, organs, blood.

When it came to healing, and modifying bodies, she was an expert, quite honestly, a freak of nature. And when she exercised her power on others, the things she could do, were beyond the realms of sane.

During combat, especially when Vali was fighting opponents with powerful Auras, she would build up a massive amount of cells, and then flesh, and compress it around her arms before drenching it in mana.

Her blows would be five times as strong this way, her flesh just as tough, if not more, and if her opponents guarded with Aura, they wouldn't be able to cull much of the force of the blows, since Incarnations didn't guard against physical attacks.

All this said, seeing her attack do nothing, caused her some concern, especially since Rias wasn't using Perfect Aura yet.

The blue haired woman gazed at the young man as he slid off the front most glass pane before the pillar of fire, and hit the ground, his body suddenly managing to tear away from the rigid stance he

had used prior to taking a beating. His torso was bare, as the armour that guarded it had been ripped off, and only the protection around his lower body remained.

'Hmm. I was right,' Vali thought as Rias stood. His young skin was blameless, and his flesh as well as bones didn't show any signs that they had been struck at all.

But wait.

There, on his left arm, the one covered by a long, dark bandage with glowing symbols on it...

'Hmmm?' Vali hummed with interest.

Rias' arm looked mangled, bent at a hideous angle, and with blood seeming to be leaking from it rather profusely. If Vali didn't know any better...

'That's what I thought would have happened when I struck his chest, even if it wouldn't be considered lethal by his standards...' she thought.

Then, to her surprise, the mangled arm began to fix itself. In one moment, it bent back into place, aligning itself with the other bones in Rias' arm.

Before Vali could take a full, second breath, the young man's arm looked as good new, no more blood spilling from it!

She wasn't the only who noticed this oddity though.

Skullius couldn't help but begin to theorise madly in his mind.

Did the damage Rias was supposed to take from Vali's punch to his chest transfer to that bandaged arm of his instead?

It seemed likely, but Rias didn't give them enough time to figure it out. Instead, he turned to stare at Gabel, and the man stared back.

There were no words spoken for a while.

Quite a long while, as far as things had been progressing.

Skullius felt the silence grow increasingly tense.

Was he missing something?

Even Vali seemed to understand what the stare down meant.

Rias scoffed, and finally broke the silence.

"To think..." he said, and paused before turning away from Gabel. "...I'll have to take you both a bit more seriously."

As he said so, a voracious Aura blew out of him like a natural mist, featuring a vile green hue as it rose. At the same time, Rias extended his bandaged hand out, and a pool of this Perfect Aura gathered into it before shaping itself into a... into a...

...!!!

Vali, Gabel, and Skullius dashed back to the dying lake warily, their eyes and senses gaping at the massive head of a deer that had just appeared beside Rias!

It was pristine, a dazzling white that almost seemed holy tainting its entirety up to the long, twisting horns that stretched over a ten meter span from both sides of its head!

What was this?!

Skullius couldn't quite understand what he was looking at. He had thought that it was Rias' Genuine Incarnation at first, but that couldn't be right. The green bellowing around him like a thick, venomous blanket couldn't possibly be what made this brilliant large head, floating in the air.

Was it Rias' technique then?

The deer, with even its eyes glowing bright like white lanterns, opened its mouth wide to reveal a deep darkness within from which nothing could be glimpsed, much less seen.

Then Rias, surprisingly began to explain.

"My ancestors, as I have come to know, made our technique a bit complex. The stronger a technique is, the more it may require some form of conditions to be satisfied. Body mutations. Changes to the core. Long periods of preparation. It can be anything, really.

One of these conditions, for every EverSword member, is to make sure they visualise what they want from the Imagining Technique. What utilities they desire."

Everyone remained rooted in place, a bit enthralled by Rias' words.

Even Grutus and Liura who had chosen to watch from afar, from the cliff, seemed stunned, and a fair bit frightened by the way Rias spoke.

"My older brother, Reon, was quite fond of swords, even though our Imagining Technique doesn't conform to a specific Class. I admired him, before he left us, and then... I found myself crafting something in his honour..."

...!

From the dark maw of the deer's mouth, the tip of a curved sword peeked, before soundlessly slipping out to fall into Rias' hands.

He looked solemn as he grasped the thick bladed saber in his hand; its blade nearly as thick as both his arms combined, and its hilt quite thick, such that he couldn't fully grasp it.

Skullius gawked at the sword with Crude Vision.

"You've got to be kidding me!" he voiced, beyond terrified.

The others seemed to be just as bewildered as him, but just didn't saw anything.

The blade was a distinct black, with a series of white eyes that blinked visibly on its surface. Instead of a cross guard, it had thick, silvery furs stuck between the hilt, and the blade, with three rings of light floating around this shaggy fur!

For some reason, maybe because unlike the others here, he was the only one to come across something like it, the Hybrid Luman sensed a stack of vivid presences similar to Baddan's around this sword!

Could this... could this mean...?

Rias raised the sword high with his bandaged hand, his face turning as sombre and apathetic as before.

But instead of attacking, as the trio would have thought, his Aura flared madly, intensifying the green hue featuring around this place, and then constricted to form a shape behind Rias! A lively, but horrible shape that roared with laughter!

A living type Incarnation!

As if the situation wasn't comically perilous enough – as Skullius could tell – the deer's head grew three times as large, the saber within Rias' hand growing longer, and larger, the presence it spewed out even more suffocating!

The clouds above growled loudly, and gathered as if called by the large sword.

They turned darker, and rumbled with prospects of destruction.

Rias materialising the deer, awakening his Incarnation and the clouds gathering, hadn't taken more than five seconds, despite seeming like it had occurred over a minute for the viewers.

...And then Rias sent the sword down in a slash.

A blinding, sun-like flare of light bathed the entire region, but only for a blink.

It emerged and disappeared soundlessly, and anyone who would have been watching for a safe distance would have been thoroughly petrified at what followed.

When the original colours of the world were restored, everything beyond Rias' sight was gone.

There was no dirt.

No trees.

No cliff.

No lake.

The only thing that could be seen, was a deep chasm of darkness that hid within it separate pools of mashed colours over hundreds of miles.

Chapter 763: The Imagining Technique (2)

Skullius blinked. Crude Vision had made the experience of being borne down by that extreme weight, like judgement from the heavens that had descended from above, even more terrifying than it would have been otherwise. For a moment, he had almost forgotten to react, stunned by the glaring light, but [Primal Caution] urged him against stillness.

The land was battered in the attack's wake... and gone.

It was frightening to imagine that what had fallen was essentially condensed lightning in a wave like from the sea, but the untrained eye would have only seen a sharp burst of light.

If Rias was to be considered a centre, then, it wouldn't be a stretch to say everything north of him was gone, replaced by a chilling darkness, as if whatever had been there, had been uncreated.

Skullius himself was to the far west of the young EverSword heir. Thankfully, while the attack was extremely devastating, it wasn't so fast that a combination of [Destined Warp Steps] and [Boundless Evil] couldn't help him dodge, especially when spurred by [Primal Caution]!

'The clouds...' Skullius thought as he looked towards the green pillar that was far away, and then to the horizon on his left, where there was nothing below. 'He used the clouds... like Baddan... but on a much, much bigger scale! That's cheating!'

The sword in Rias' hand. It seemed to either be formed by the bodies of Sky Watchers, or had somehow adapted their abilities, however such a thing was possible.

To even begin to think to compete against that...!

The only thing Skullius could see as a plus, was the fact that Rias was limited to a blue mana core, which meant that as much as his Imagining Technique was terribly powerful, it was still only at the Special level. Granted, with it, he somehow managed to gain access to the Super level techniques of the Sky Watchers, which pretty much crumbled Skullius' hope to dust immediately, but...

Skullius stood from where he had sat after crashing down, saved by his skills from certain death.

With Crude Vision, he saw puddles in the darkness, barely visible unless he strained his uncoloured sight.

He couldn't tell the colours, but he could identify the shapes. The pools in the darkness... He had seen them before. Twice, actually!

First, was when he fought the Cluster General Jackpot, in the very first Cluster he ever set foot into, and the last was when he entered the Cluster with the Bookworms – the half worm, half human monsters that carried books with spells. The mash of colours within the Cluster, to Skullius, meant the border of the world within the Cluster.

He had even surmised that it was the clashing Deities' energies in their most raw form.

This was what made Clusters, but it was extremely dangerous in that state.

Well, it shouldn't be surprising that Rias actually carved out the foundations of this world with that attack. It was just that devastating.

Speaking of Rias...

"Did he say... Reon...?" Skullius wondered. Why was that name familiar?

From the distance, he saw Vali suddenly flash close to Rias.

It wasn't a shock that she had survived, even if he hadn't even been focusing on others when the attack just now struck.

This tore his mind from the whirlpool of his current thought, and he got to steadily observing.

"Is she still going to act as the cavalry?" Skullius asked himself.

Sure enough, Vali didn't seem to be fazed enough to stay away from engaging Rias.

"That sword of yours is... quite something..." she said with a grin, her mana bubbling forth. "Isn't it a tad bit too unfair though?"

"You can still leave," Rias suggested, and whirled the large saber dexterously in his hand, as if it wasn't almost as thick as his waist now, much to Vali's apprehension.

"I'll take my chances here," she said as she dashed towards Rias.

This time, she seemed to be attacking with infinitely more aggression than before.

As she approached, the radiant deer head beside Rias vanished, but the still yet to fully manifest figure behind him, his Incarnation, laughed out all the more, and turned more vivid.

It had a ghostly green appearance, its shape similar to an ugly witch with her long hair – tendrils of Aura that turned to an acid green hue – that flew up in all directions, over her body a nasty, baggy robe decorated with columns of small horns!

It was rather intricate.

Like something drawn from a children's bedtime story.

Rias brandished his sword, his hand speeding down phenomenally, but Vali was quicker to strike!

She appeared before the young man, and sent a light tap to his wrist with her foot, slowing the descent of his saber, before twisting quickly and sending a roundhouse kick dead set on decapitating Rias!

The young man ducked down, displaying a short burst of speed several degrees faster than Vali's. As he did this, he planted his sword into the ground, and threw a crisp palm at Vali that parted the air with its immense power, almost leaving the two in a vacuum!

Fragments of time before it hit, the crown of Vali's head exploded with a neon light, and she became bathed in a beautiful magenta coat of Aura.

POW!

As Rias' palm struck her, she felt the immense power behind it, but she was guarded well enough to not vomit her innards. The young heir of the EverSword House realised this, and sent a flurry of punches to Vali's vital spots, which she reacted to by...

...!

Rias was stunned to see a thick fist the size of two of his own, burrow its way from the circular opening on Vali's dress – displaying her smooth abdomen.

It caught him off guard, smashing into him crazily, but he didn't budge from where he stood, despite how he grunted silently in pain.

That was too outlandish. A thick, third arm sprouting from someone's stomach in such a quick exchange was too odd. And it was even coated in Aura!

Rias raised a brow, and gripped his sword.

"Weird," he remarked.

"It's just a limb," Vali said with a grin. Over her forehead, a gleaming shape had appeared. It was a rather exquisitely crafted diadem that almost seemed to grow from the skin over her skull, a rich variety of magenta, and purple spotting what looked like jewels over it, and its whole!

This was Vali's Genuine Incarnation. With so much offensive power, she preferred a defensive unit for an Incarnation. A stylish one.

Rias didn't waste another second with chatter. He raised his sword to bring it down, when...

He frowned, and vanished before Vali's sight.

Vali was taken aback, and in the next micro moment, she heard a loud clang!

Following the sound round to the other side of the pillar where she found Rias, clashing his eyeballed sword with... Gabel and his glaive.

It seemed that while Vali was keeping the young man busy, the tall, dark haired man had decided to try and dismantle the pillar!

The two glared at each other, a pair of large honey-coloured eyes against a small pair of dark ones.

The moment the two split, Vali leapt in, and joined Gabel in the assault. She flew up and dished out an overhead punch livid with magenta Aura which Rias dodged by diving to the side, then she threw a series of hooks, two that were swatted away by Rias' Incarnation, and the rest which he blocked on his own.

Less than a moment after, Gabel swung his glaive, creating a cross with two devastating slashes only to find that Rias was nimble enough to weave away, parry his next attack, and then jump in the air afterwards to send a hard back kick towards Vali who crossed her arms to guard against it successfully, before charging forth once again!

Gabel and Vali were astonished.

What Rias had shown before paled in comparison to his true prowess as Form User, and an Arma User. In raw combat, he was holding his own against both of them.

'Incredible!' Vali thought, half delighted, and half appalled.

When she saw Gabel get parried and pushed back by Rias, she launched herself at him, and sent a high kick at his head with staggering force from the right!

Naturally, Rias intended to duck down, avoiding it rather than parry, since he was starting to realise how much power was packed in each of Vali's physical attacks. But then, as he lowered his torso...

...!

Rias found to his shock, another Vali lunging his way with a grin, and a welcome spread of her arms!

Her magenta Aura flashed madly, increasing three fold in power as she cackled, and tackled Rias cruelly!

What in the world?!

With a glimpse that lasted no more than a quarter of a second, Rias found to his disgust an elongated mass of flesh and skin protruding from the original Vali's belly. It was the long mass that ended with another torso of Vali, which was now gripping him tight and hurling him to the glass panes around the flame!

WHAM!

With a severe smash onto the glass, Rias grunted and then felt the copy of Vali laugh madly before exploding into... an ugly mass of tens of large, bony hands that restrained him firmly!

...!

An irritated look showed in Rias' eyes that could barely be seen, what with the large hand covering half of his face tight!

His sword had fallen, and his Incarnation thrashed against Vali's flesh duplicate futilely, since it regrew the lost flesh instantly.

It was looking bad for Rias.

And then worse yet...

"O lady of the veil... is this not enough? Let me carry that burden of ceaseless flow again..."

Gabel suddenly called obscurely before pointing at Rias with his heavy glaive.

...And as if Vali's showing wasn't strange enough...

Everything turned still.

The air stopped moving.

Vali – and her clone – along with Rias and his groping hands, were frozen in place.

The green, and black flame stopped dancing.

A murky bubble had appeared, and within it, only Gabel moved.

Indeed, time had stopped moving, prompted so by Gabel.

He heaved his glaive, coated it in a shimmering, grizzly Aura, aimed and flung it at Rias' head!

Without any resistance at all, either in the air, or on getting into contact with Rias' overhead, the glaive pierced through, and nailed the young man into the thick glass pane!

...

A silence pervaded.

Rias' face continued to hold the same expression, and time seemed to still be held hostage within the small area.

Gabel took a breath.

Did it work?

Had he truly vanquished the formidable, new Game Master?

Probably not.

The man's dark eyes scrolled to Rias' bandaged arm... which was bleeding again.

Curious...

Dangerously curious...

Without thinking, Gabel stormed towards the young man, a murderous gleam in his dark eyes.

This wasn't over.

He had to finish it!

He sped, passing the large saber Rias had dropped upon being tackled.

But... this sword suddenly changed.

The silver furs on it fell away, and the dark of its blade faded.

The eyes on the blade persisted, but they no longer remained clear white.

Instead, each of them obtained a new pupil within them, a pupil... shaped like an hourglass.

Chapter 764: The Imagining Technique (3)

Gabel's Aura bellowed like a wild beast before forging an Incarnation as realistic as Vali's in an emerald-crimson hue.

It didn't get to fully form itself before he jabbed it into the still stationary figure of the young heir pinned to the pillar, but soon, the fork of a glossy trident showed, sunk deep into Rias' neck!

Indeed, this was Gabel's Incarnation. Gilded with indescribable markings, and the beautifully sculpted shape of a half-serpent, half-human figure with a solemn face, the trident seemed to ooze of mystery.

However, as with the glaive, Gabel noticed that even though he had stabbed into the enemy, there were no traces of blood to be seen.

His eye darted to Rias' bandaged arm once again, and he saw more blood leaking out from it.

So it was true...

...!!!

While still in the murky shroud of stalled time, Gabel suddenly turned to Rias' other hand, and found a large saber clasped within it tight, even though he had passed it on the ground when on his way to kill Rias.

At the same time, the dark-eyed man felt his dome of shackled time shudder before popping like a bubble, releasing Vali, and Rias! Gabel pulled his glaive, dematerialised his Incarnation and dashed back, a stony look on his face.

That saber... what had it done?!

The thought replayed in his mind, but...

In the next minute fragment of time, Gabel saw himself face to face with Rias once again, as if he hadn't moved from where he was just now – after his attempt to deal damage with his Incarnation!

...!

"So that's what it was..." the young heir of the EverSword House said with mild intrigue, no apparent gaping scar or wound on his neck or forehead. "Time..."

The numerous eyes on the surface of Rias' large saber suddenly rolled, and the miniscule hourglasses that acted as their pupils shivered within the white viscera.

Gabel, and Vali – who had just returned to her senses – felt violent tremors ring through their bodies, and the latter found her head cut into three slices, while for the former... his shoulder had been slashed apart!

Vali fell down with her face sliding off, and Gabel staggered back.

Rias was gone from before them, and was instead standing a few meters behind the two. He didn't idle by though. He noticed something with Gabel with his narrow eyes, and his figure seemed to suddenly get erased from where it was standing, appearing on the dark-haired man's other side!

A radical noise shifted the air and demanded that the ground quake in its wake. It was striking, sounding to the ear like the cacophonous noise of thousands of clashing swords in a large scale war, only, all of it condensed into a split second!

Gabel, and Rias stood still in their respective positions, but the sounds of conflict rung micro moments later, before they both shot in opposite directions. Gabel hissed a calm breath, his glaive in hand, and his Aura like a flame over him. Rias on the other hand...

Blood dripped from his bandaged arm.

His hand had been lopped off from the wrist.

It had suddenly appeared on the ground, like an Incarnation called by its Master, no evidence showing when exactly it had even been stricken off.

The bandage around Rias' arm then slid off, revealing harsh, scarred pink skin that looked as though it had just been taken out of a fire. Gabel ogled it.

So that's how the arm looked without a cover.

In a blink, however, the lost hand re-emerged from the stump of Rias' arm, as if there wasn't a previous attachment on the ground – which turned into ash.

"Your power. It's peculiar. My sword found it hard to completely emulate it. It's not like a technique etched into the body. It's not like a blessing either. Stopping time.

Reversing time. I almost thought you a Mage for a moment. What is it?" Rias asked curiously.

Gabel, wearing the same poker face as Rias, replied with a non-answer.

"O bloody veil... mine expertise in your excellence is so meaningless..." he chanted, before holding out his glaive.

Rias expected as much. As it seemed, he wasn't quite as powerful with this mysterious power as Gabel, which was why he was the only one to emerge harmed after their 'short exchange' while manipulating time.

The young Game Master gathered his fingers together several times, getting a feel of his new hand, and then he switched his sword into its grip.

WHAM!

As Gabel watched, Rias was suddenly decked in the face by a large fist!

The young man soared and tumbled in the dust, a look of mild surprise on his face.

Vali huffed, looking a little exasperated as she then stood close to Gabel, eyeing Rias whom she had caught off guard with a mean hit.

"That brat is actually a lot more cocky than I imagined," she said as she looked at his pink arm. It looked viciously mangled, but as he stood, it was already healing.

"Looks like we can't do meaningful damage to him. Everything that we do to his body, whether fatal or not is transferred to his arm which, I think, has regenerative properties close to mine in potency."

Gabel grunted.

He had noticed as well, quite obviously.

The current problem in contending against Rias was that it was hard to tell what the Imagining Technique was actually capable of. Was the strange arm a part of his Technique? Or just the deer? But what about the sword?

How could one Technique make all these things? Especially that sword.

It was becoming clear that it was capable of learning the properties of attacks and mimicking them, and it was this one ability that concerned Gabel quite a bit.

Indeed, he had the ability to manipulate time, though in restrictive pockets.

It was a power that he had come across accidentally, after finding an obscure treasure during one of his many assigned tasks from the Severed Union.

It was called Juggled Time Veneration.

Indeed, a Veneration art.

Gabel had come to regret touching the red thorn – the treasure he found – while on a rather small island south of Feinheath. When blood was drawn from his right hand, a voice had called to him, and enslaved him with its call...and the crippling, agonising pain had begun.

It was pain so great he couldn't stay conscious for more than a few minutes each time.

It persisted all day, every day, until he begged the barely discernible voice that spoke in his ear for mercy.

Only then did his perception of the red thorn and the voice begin to change.

Thus...

Gabel narrowed his eyes as he looked at Rias' sword.

He was sure Rias wasn't able to use the power of Juggled Time Veneration – slowing time, and reversing it – as proficiently as he could, which was how he had managed to cut off the young man's hand.

Of course the boy couldn't.

How could he?

But then again...

"He has more," Gabel finally said something other poetry. "More tricks and powers, I mean. Yet, he is not too concerned with us. He is waiting for something, refusing to go too far from the flame."

"Of course he is," Vali said with a half-cheery smile, her eye dashing to the pillar. She knew she wouldn't get to do much before Rias was upon them, and it seemed whatever the young heir was waiting for was fast approaching. "Well, might as well pull out all the stops. I brought resources here for a reason."

In the short distance, Rias raised his hand, and the large deer head emerged once again.

Gabel and Vali grew cautious.

The creature opened its maw wide.

"Crow..." Rias said in a dull tone.

The sound of flapping wings was the first to register. Then a dark, graphite beak the size of a man's forearm popped out of the deer's mouth, followed by a crow half as tall as full grown human being!

Its feathers were black, its body lacking much detail. It cawed before taking to the sky, but it wasn't alone.

With the whooshing of disturbed winds, a seemingly insurmountable number of crows emerged from the deer, and flew up and about!

Their numbers grew so ridiculous that for a moment, it seemed as though they filled this world, doing a fantastic job at obstructing the eye and masking important details to the senses.

It may have sounded obvious, but Vali and Gabel grew tense. They really couldn't see or sense their surroundings very well with the crows rushing about harmlessly despite their size.

Beyond that, it was as if the crows... could see it all.

Their numbers observed all, and shared it with Rias who stood a distance away, a calm expression on his face.

"This is ridiculous," Vali said as her Aura surged once more, yet a smile remained on her face.

What manner of technique was this?

What was its limit?

Well, it was quite simple.

After accomplishing a series of conditions, and adjustments to better handle the toll, a user of the Imagining Technique was afforded a chance to manifest an object or characteristic of their choice. Something they could imagine in any state of being; in sleep, cold consciousness, drowsiness, pain, fury, calm.

Conjured Daydreams, Rearren liked to call them.

The stronger the Technique got, the more Conjured Daydreams the user would be afforded, their potency in accordance to how strong their Imagining Technique was – as dictated by the core.

At the Special level, Rias was allowed three of these permanent utilities, which he manifested through a conduit shaped as he desired. In his case, it was the deer.

The first Conjured Daydream was his arm, which transferred all damage he suffered to his arm, which had ridiculous healing properties.

The second was the sword, which could replicate the effects of the abilities it had come into contact with, the efficiency of which could be bolstered by feeding it the prime source of said abilities.

The third, well...

Besides the Conjured Daydreams, a user of the Imagining Technique could manifest an unlimited number of differing (temporary) creatures, and tools with simplistic abilities up to the Special level, as long as they could visualise them vividly at a moment's notice – something all EverSword combatants paid the price for with varying degrees of solitude training.

An example of these short-lived creations, was the crows which the deer had spat out, now flying about.

Rias raised his saber, and sped towards Vali and Gabel who rushed towards him too.

This was more entertaining than the young Game Master he had thought it would be. Especially his earlier battle with the pale man, even though it hadn't been anything serious.

These two... Rias saw them as infinitely worse opponents, though he imagined they were the strongest among those that remained.

'Pity. They'll be dead soon. Even if they have Units...' he thought. 'Hmm?'

From the west, Rias saw through his overlapping vision shared from the crows, something peculiar.

It sprang forth, a golden white gleam about it, as if holy.

Was that...

Was that a golden tree?

Chapter 765: Rallying The Resources!

Three seconds after Rias' glaring lightning attack...

Skullius had quit thinking about why the name Reon, which Rias had uttered, was so familiar, and turned to look at the exchange between Vali and Rias.

He had been about to urge himself to go forward and help – somehow – when he spotted Grutus and Liura. They were both riding the multi-tailed Beckoned Retriever Liura had tamed, which featured a ring of light over its head.

Grutus seemed a bit pale, but Liura firmly sent her gaze to the figured close to where the pillar of green fire burned ferociously.

"Come on. Let's go help her," Liura urged Grutus while gesturing to Vali. "With her on our side, we could do something."

Grutus looked at his female partner as if she was insane, and stuttered.

"You... you want to fight THAT? Open your damn eyes Liura! This isn't something we can compete against! I had hope before... and I was even willing to find out what this shady business with undeath was about..."

but even our fallen friends wouldn't appreciate us dying like chickens!"

Liura was awestruck.

"Don't tell me that whole thing earlier was just a facade...again! That light show scared me too, but I'm not going to run and live with this... this grating feeling at my chest that we lived while our

friends died for what...? Some dreadful scheme that may well go beyond our little nation?" Liura barked.

"Oh please! The stronger we get, the longer we live and the longer we live the easier it will be to swallow whatever regrets we have. It doesn't have to be me out there. It doesn't have to be us. That not what our lives have taught us, right?! As for...

well... This was a battle royale, and whatever reasons behind it, we all came in expecting death!" Grutus shot back.

He huffed, watching Liura express disgust at his words. Then he continued.

"Let's just do what we meant to in the beginning. Steal our Units back from that bastard and get out like that boy said! That would be mourning enough for our friends."

For people who had known each for more than half their lives, making a living through various, legal means, from registering as Contract Knights, becoming mercenaries for a time and even dabbling in the social evil that was robbery in their earlier years of collusion, Liura couldn't believe that dispersing the fruits of her bond with Hun and Mandon was possible.

Grutus made it look like it, but she knew he could tell himself and others as many lies as he could to keep himself alive. Sometimes that required the help of the others, and other times, that relied solely on his decision.

In Grutus' mind, this situation nodded towards the latter.

Liura was about to rage out some more when she felt a tight grip on her shoulder, and she heard another falling on Grutus.

...!

The two were alarmed.

The Retriever beneath them reacted a moment too late, and in the next second, it was suddenly... turned flat.

...!!!

Grutus, Liura and the third party reached the ground, all three standing on a glossy, glassy thin pane.

"Move... and you'll share the same fate," a voice said, appealing to the shock burning within the two at the sight of the frozen beast spottable under their feet.

"Tell me. What in the world is going on here?"

Grutus and Liura looked at each other, a bit of defiance in the latter, and a smidgeon of compliance in the former.

"Maxim!" Skullius, who had hurried over called, his eyes fixed on the pink haired woman, whom, as he had been hoping, looked alright. Or at least seemed so.

Maxim turned and her face visibly relaxed a little at the sight of the Hybrid Luman, but she didn't ease up on her captives.

"Festos... I almost thought you were done for," she said with a chuckle.

"Thanks for the faith," Skullius said hollowly. "I'm guessing you didn't find Tallo?"

Maxim shrugged.

"We were sent flying pretty far from each other. I guessed he would be rushing here too, but... given that I almost died to the blinding light just now, I'm starting to turn cautiously pessimistic," she said, her eyes getting drawn to the battle happening close to the pillar.

"I see," Skullius said.

That was a morbid conclusion Maxim had drawn, but he was sure Tallo would be fine.

Everyone alive should be heading towards the pillar of green fire, so perhaps he would show.

Skullius' senses finally gave attention to the burning fury Liura radiated, all of it directed towards him. While unable to suddenly make a move towards him at the moment, she was ready to pounce if compliance and defiance gave the same result.

"What?" Skullius asked her with a frown.

Liura didn't answer.

Sensing the tension, Maxim raised a brow, and read the likely situation as much as she could without having anything explained to her.

"Want me to kill them? I could use the Units," she suggested, startling Liura and Grutus into action, but with a surge of mana, the latter was turned flat with Planate High, falling to the ground almost soundlessly.

Liura froze.

Skullius scoffed.

Well, he doubted he and Maxim and could work together with these two, or better yet offer substantial help in the current conflict anyway. So perhaps since Rias had said the Units were still valuable, he might as well let Maxim take them. If he told her they were the ones to split them up, she was likely to do it without asking anyway.

"Sur—"

"Now, now. That won't do," a voice interrupted Skullius along with a set of steps.

...!

"What the..." Skullius gaped. Maxim and Liura turned tense upon sensing the pressure gushing from the new arrival.

"Vali?" the Hybrid Luman continued in his surprise.

Indeed. Standing before the group, was the cheerful, voluptuous figure of Vali.

But...

Skullius spread his senses, and found that Vali and Gabel were also locked in combat with Rias a distance away!

So... so what was this?

"Let's not go about killing each other just yet. Not at such a crucial time. We're all important resources," Vali said with a narrow glint in her eyes.

Then, to the stunned trio's surprise, Vali arched her neck to the left, and her body bulged, flesh and bone clearly heard breaking and squirming from her right until... until she split in two!

...!

Surprises seldom walked alone.... so Vali split once again, turning into four of herself, all surprisingly donning the same revealing black dress the original had.

Skullius, Maxim and Liura maintained vigilance but with as much shock at the sight. The Hybrid Luman in particular was driven to add a "No way!" when Vali suddenly lifted her hand and set up, around them, a plum-coloured barrier so intricate, it couldn't have been from a mere Auxiliary Technique.

That meant it had to be, as Skullius had thought during Vali's first REAL fight in the Preliminaries...

"No way..." Skullius muttered again.

"Alright," Vali said with a wide grin. "How about we go around and explain how our abilities work, hmm? Trust me. All our lives might depend on it. And I really, really... want to kill that kid."

"..."

In the present time, Rias was momentarily taken with the rising golden white tree in the distance. Something like a wide, purplish barrier was breaking around it, revealing a group of contenders he hadn't seen were still around until now.

These contenders... they seemed to be doing something.

Rias recognised their actions far too late.

It started with a thin, quick object hurtling towards him while swaying little by little.

The crows spread out around this world were knocked into or killed as it passed, bathed in a watery Aura. Rias only allowed it to get close without evading, because he was quite curious on what it was, and his ability to flash out of the way even if it was an inch from him.

This turned out to not be as good of an idea, unfortunately.

When the object, which up close was revealed to be a thin glass-like pane, on it, a beautiful depiction of something like a large, whitish blue rune, as well as a glowing half a skull mark, was three meters away, it suddenly shifted from its flat state, and became a smooth, lengthy laser that zoomed so fast towards Rias that he didn't see it before it penetrated his chest to protrude from the other side of his body, carrying him away!

It was like watching a torch fall into an dark dungeon; Rias' figure was beckoned towards the mass of nothingness he had created prior!

The crows became livid.

The Vali beside Gabel nudged the man harshly.

"Out of the way!" she shrieked, and the two dashed to the side, narrowly avoiding a large arrow of Aura that was bathed in a dark crimson flame, and specks of lightning which cried on its way, before smashing against the shiny barrier erected around the pillar of greenish black flame!

There was a deafening noise, and quite the spectacular explosion.

The original Vali who stood close to the pillar could already see the result before the flame and obscurity cleared.

There were a few cracks... and that was the extent of the damage caused.

But that wasn't outside of expectations.

Close to a kilometre away, the brilliant figure of the Preeminent Attegoth stood firm, made with glowing, almost ethereal bones, skulls making up its canopy. Skullius stood before it, a complex look on his face, his fingers locked together as he spread his focus far and wide.

It had taken a lot of convincing for him to use this. In the end, he had only opted to reveal that he had something like this when Vali mentioned that accuracy was essential for what they needed to do.

Quite honestly, a little bit of intimidation from the Kinn Family Head had also played a vital role in making everyone cooperate, especially for the others, whom Vali didn't speak to as smoothly as Skullius.

Liura, Maxim, and Grutus – who had been restored – stood around the glowing tree, all still showing signs of wild awe at the luminous creation.

They wondered what it was.

They couldn't imagine how something so beautiful and yet so dreadfully designed could stand before their eyes.

But it wasn't time for admiration or questioning.

Liura, whose Incarnation – a large, feminine archer decked in corinthian armour – was drawing a large bow, and a fitting, large arrow, funnelled more of her focus while riding her Retriever.

She felt a rush of strength burrow through her like a tide of blessings, increasing the potency of her Aura greatly.

The nocked arrow of Aura billowed with more destructive power and turned bright. Liura herself felt a little invincible.

She wasn't alone in feeling this though.

The others felt the same.

...Because each of them had a Vali standing behind them, gushing what seemed like an infinite amount of edifying and replenishing energy within their bodies!

"The next!" one of the Valis called immediately after the last arrow hit its mark!

Liura urged her Retriever on, and it growled. Above, the clouds swirled and sent a shimmering bolt of lightning that attached itself to the bulky Incarnation's arrow, applying a bright tone, and a lace of potential calamity to it.

Grutus begrudgingly extended his hand towards the arrow, and sent a sizable portion of his Aura over it, as did Maxim who stood close to him, further bolstering the power of the attack many fold.

The arrow hummed dangerously, growing twice as large.

Skullius attached a half a skull mark to the arrow and a split moment later, Liura set it loose without taking precise aim!

With a harsh crackle through the air, the arrow reached the thick stack of plates around the pillar of flame, and caused a grander explosion than the last, the damage it did being many times greater.

The arrow had been so powerful, that multiple glass plates had been borne through with harsh effort, creating a gaping, smoking hollow!

The third arrow was already being prepared when Rias suddenly emerged, but for a moment, none recognised that he had returned after his second-long forced trip because of the swarming crows that left many feathers everywhere.

That momentary lapse, cost the contenders a great deal...

Chapter 766: Overwhelmed

While it was true that Rias had indeed been caught off guard, and seized by an ability of the six tailed Retriever that focused more on forcefully driving the target away in exchange for dealing dismal levels of damage, the young Game Master had barely been carried far for long.

It was also unfortunate for the contenders that Rias had seen everything that had happened in his absence through the crows' eyes, and with this knowledge...

The young heir, now standing beside the pillar of green flames again, after reversing time on himself, raised his large sword – which now, unlike when it possessed the Sky Watchers' abilities, looked like a generic black hilted, and silver bladed saber – and pointed it where the damage to his stack of glass plates was.

The bulging white eyes on his sword shook, and as if nothing had happened to them at all, they stood firm, restored from the treacherous damage they had taken!

Before Vali and Gabel could notice this, on top of the young Game Master's return, Rias had stormed towards the great golden-white structure in the distance, his Incarnation receding to become a thick, green Perfect Aura around him.

Rias reached the teaming crusade around the Preeminent Attegoth in a breath, his presence masked by his numerous crows flying about.

'This power is quite handy,' he thought, as his saber shook, and erected a large murky bubble around the area where his eight foes stood, freezing them in time.

Skullius, Maxim, Liura, Grutus and the Valis. They all grew still, all focusing on the third arrow which had been about to fully form.

Rias realised that the power his Conjured Daydream – the saber – had emulated, when it came to stalling time, was much easier to use, allowing him a full three second's worth of usage, while reversing time was only allowed to one instance, one second back in time.

The latter also carried with it a harsh cooldown, but he didn't know if this was because his sword couldn't fully incorporate what Gabel could do, or if the man suffered the same limitations.

In any case, whatever he was capable of right now was enough to kill off needless nuisances, such as these before him.

Rias stood amidst the eight, right next to Skullius and his clone of Vali, and summoned his conduit, the deer.

It opened its maw wide, wider than it had before, and manifested something... that already existed within the confines of the Cluster.

A large hand as thick as Rias was broad, was the first to emerge, then quickly followed by the rest of a humanoid mass which was bound by abnormally large chains that made an ungodly amount of noise with their rattling. They were still connected to the interior deer's maw as the creature stood on its two legs.

It had heavy silver furs, on its arms, legs and chest, and a smaller patch noticeable above its head. Its face looked almost human, and this sentiment was made more evident because of the baggy, white shirt it wore, riddled with tears and dirt, on its lower body similarly spacious pants.

It stood at four and a half meters in height, its eyes white, almost devoid of emotion, or reason for that matter.

One would be surprised to know that the Imagining Technique had another aspect to it. If the user could imagine, down to the last minute detail, the image of anything that they had come into contact with, they could summon said anything through their conduit, especially if it no means to resist.

Such was what Rias was doing with the Cluster General he had bound when he conquered the Cluster. He summoned it from its place at the base of the mountain!

The creature that the Sky Watchers revered, hoping to become like it as they grew, was the young Game Master's slave.

Rias then gazed at it in this stalled time, and snapped his fingers. The chains binding the beast shook, and the Cluster General roared in what seemed like mad fury, and went into a frenzy.

As it just so happened, the three seconds of stalled time ended, and in real time, a blast wave of ferocious mana suddenly swept through the entire Cluster from the General!

Given how it was when the beast had been thousands of miles away, the sheer power, and obliterating force of the mana gushing from the creature, to Skullius, Vali, Liura, Vali, Maxim, Vali, Grutus and Vali... was unspeakable!

There was essentially no time to react, coming from the frozen time.

...!!!

This was it.

Skullius was shredded to pieces before his Super potion could fight against the rapid fragmentation of his existence.

He only managed to glimpse at the calm and apathetic face of Rias who stood firmly close to the emerged, frenzied Cluster General.

He couldn't even utter a word.

He couldn't activate anything in time.

He couldn't even bring himself to feel disappointed.

There was no mistaking it.

He, Liura, Maxim and Grutus... perished.

The land they had been standing in suffered a similar fate, unlike the mysterious forest in which the Cluster General had been chained in originally.

It was ploughed through casually.

When the storm of mana stopped its gush from the General seconds later, the area around was left clear and almost devoid of life like the vast swath of land to the side.

Rias looked on without a shift in emotion.

"Hmmm."

His gaze then fell on something squirming on the ground. Something had survived the calamity.

He looked at a wriggling arm of Vali's with mild surprise in his eyes, and even entertained leaving it to eventually form the full body of the copy to survive.

"You really are deserving of the praise as an elite healer," Rias remarked as the clone formed itself wholly, appearing to be lying on the ground, a furious look on its face.

Rias had sensed the real Vali whom he had left close to the pillar get blown away too, so this was quite surprising.

Even Vali's doubles didn't die easy.

Speaking of the ambitious woman...

Vali had done all she could to stop herself from being swept too far.

She had been caught off guard by how the damage she was celebrating to have been done to the shield around the pillar of green flame, had suddenly been undone, and how a fierce, almost irresistible flood of wildly raging mana had pushed her away while attempting to raze her body to atoms.

It didn't make her feel any better when she felt through her flesh copies which she had constructed after Rias' first large scale attack, to assemble the other contenders, that everyone who had been close to the young Game Master... was dead.

"Tsk!"

As Vali regenerated while rising from the pile of minced trees she had crashed into, she felt a deeply sour sensation racing through her.

The tall Cluster General in the distance still blew out a vicious energy, now caged within its powerful, humanoid body, spelling out an additional problem for Vali to deal with.

The air, and bland space was twisting where the creature stood, and Vali was somewhat intimidated.

Was it just her and Gabel left now?

That made everything much, much harder.

Speaking of the dark, greasy haired man... where was he?

Vali pondered all these things while streaking towards Rias, her eyes connecting to her flesh clone which had regenerated.

'Damn it!' she cursed in her mind.

Meanwhile...

*

All he could tell was that everything was brooding and empty.

He was surprisingly fully conscious, and with difficulty, he forced his eyes open, for in this state, he could see just fine.

The surroundings were mouldy textured, with a mix of black and grey about them.

He felt himself shooting up through this wide space, that featured nothing else, and no one else.

His body... it had grown very short, a luminous glow about it. Several misshapen patches of different, contrasting colours could be spotted over his torso, telling that his form had been broken and beaten thoroughly before.

Some could be healed, some could only be patched up.

The current circumstance could be solved by neither, however.

Because he was truly dead.

Skullius felt himself lose a bit of confidence.

'I really died...' he thought to himself.

He hadn't even managed to attempt to resist, or utter some finally words. While he hadn't been afraid, it certainly wasn't like he could grin happily when such an expected, and completely unremarkable death denied him any choice.

Rias.

Skullius was sure that regardless of what happened, he would certainly remember that young man.

'Tomato flinger!' Sila suddenly screamed, his voice coming from a large, coloured patch on Skullius' abdomen. 'Do it now! Before we are taken away!'

Right.

Skullius concurred.

Him streaking upwards right now, was a really bad sign.

He was probably being drawn to Somanda, as the Lich had told him would happen if he ever died.

He could almost hear the rough, clapping laugh of the Lich from above, and almost see a massive hand coming down to grasp at him.

Whatever corridor he was travelling through right now, started spotting hints of red and green, defying the hollow black and grey hues.

Indeed. If he didn't do it quickly, all would be lost.

'Right...' Skullius said dispiritedly.

This was one of the reasons he had saved Sila for, besides from his promise.

Energy from Skullius' soul began to funnel into Sila's own, which was significantly small in one second, and slightly bigger in the next.

Sharing soul energy had happened between these two before, and Skullius was familiar with its effect.

His intent as a trump card against falling into Somanda's hand, had been to sacrifice a significant portion of his soul, so that he and Sila would become conjoined; helping Sila grow stronger as they melded.

No sooner had Skullius begun feeding Sila, had he noticed his travel through the corridor slowing down little by little, the transition of the surroundings into red and green becoming less quick.

The results were already showing.

He been right.

This was feasible!

Unlike Skullius, Sila's soul didn't belong to Somanda. It belonged to Aigas, to the three governing Deities. As such, Skullius had figured that if Sila's soul was strong enough, it would be pulled back to Aigas, to wherever the souls of the dead went.

Most in Aigas believed there was a rewarding paradise and a treacherous hell that souls would traverse to according to their deeds, and few believed... or knew otherwise.

Skullius didn't know or care which was true. As long as he didn't end up in Somanda's hands...

A grave sense of defeat weighed on him.

'I guess Maxim too...' he thought sombrely.

Everyone around must have been destroyed instantly too.

'Grutus and Liura probably didn't even get to use their Revival Stars, if they had any.'

Just as when Skullius had been fighting, Sila chose not to disturb him. That was why he had been silent.

He felt himself grow stronger, and melding into Skullius, and observed.

'...Will I get to see what I did in the past? How my old life was...?' Skullius' thoughts reverberated through the Tower General's own.

Skullius then seemed to almost stand still within the silent corridor, by he didn't seem to notice it.

Where was he to go now?

Could he potentially escape... since this half of his soul should have ties to Insurgent Magnus and Null Life powers?

Could he truly die in the first place?

Skullius didn't know.

He didn't even know if he had the courage to brave through what was next.

Perhaps...

"You've died once before... haven't you?" a voice called to Skullius, but he felt so hollow he couldn't be surprised by its sudden appearance.

He turned to the source.

"You wouldn't be so calm after dying like that if that weren't the case. Or maybe... is it that you just don't fear dying...?"

What spoke, was the most beautiful woman Skullius had ever seen.

She appeared so vivid and so firm while floating above him, that he could have sworn that she was a living human being, but... it couldn't be.

"Who... are you?" Skullius asked softly.

The woman had been smiling at him, but then her expression shifted exaggeratedly, morphing into what was unmistakably... disappointment.

"You're too cruel to ask such. Hmmm. You resemble him a bit too much..." she said, her voice sounding quite cold.

Chapter 767: As Intended

"Who do I remind you of...?" Skullius asked curiously. Apparently, only the gnawing itch to know something could brighten even the dimming sensations of a soul.

The woman stared him, a rather disgruntled look on her face. Strangely, even such an expression added to her exquisite beauty.

"Demion, of course," she said, as if it was the most natural thing in the world, her eyes keenly looking into Skullius'.

"Demion...?" Skullius was confused at first, but then his mind was shocked into realisation.

"Are you... Could you be... Demion's Dan—"

"My name is Irisa," the woman said with a light frown, slicing off whatever Skullius had been about to say. "But yes... to you, I'm just a sword. I was weaved into it in the end, tied to death itself for Demion... and now to you."

The woman, Irisa, took a frustrated breath.

"When he handled me, he never knew death. It was only when I was gone from his side that they managed to kill him. So how dare you DIE when I have regarded to be have the same will, and worth as Demion?"

Skullius was thunderstruck.

So this was Irisa? Irisa from that tale from millennia ago who gifted Demion's Dance to... Demion?

He would never have guessed that he would be meeting someone like this, or better yet, having it revealed to him that his sword actually had the soul of someone attached to it.

How good of a thing was this?

Skullius would have loved to say something, but he couldn't.

What was even more striking to him than the revelation of his sword, was what Irisa had said. She had broken down his rightfully earned brood of sullen emotion. His doubts and worries.

How dare he die?

That wasn't fair, was it?

"That... I... " Skullius stammered, a complex look on his face.

Seeing his struggle, Irida's face softened.

"I'm allowed to get angry at you, and on your behalf because I know you will do better next time. What you are pursuing. What you have been through. It all gets muddled when tension is flocking about," Irida drew closer to Skullius, and placed her soft hands over his face. "But don't forget me, alright? I'm always by your side.

Demion forgot that as he grew, but you... I was grateful that you decided to get to know me earlier, and I want to get to know you too. Only when we mean something to each other can we truly get to be so strong together, Skullius..."

Skullius felt a warmth he had never known before with Irida's palms to his face.

He didn't know he could feel it as a soul.

He didn't know how a soul could be made to feel so vivacious.

He hadn't imagined words were so powerful, they could break the anxiety in his heart right now.

Irida...

She was good.

His acceptance of the deeper intricacies of a Swordsman had blossomed into him and Demion's Dance getting stronger.

That was perhaps what caused her to manifest to him so casually, above the fact she was already bonded to him.

Ah.

But...

"Wait... what do you mean next time? I'm... dead," Skullius pointed out to Irisa.

A wider smile bloomed on her face.

"Yes, you did," she said, her sweet voice turning into an echo that was turned dull after several moments, the corridor around dissipating as well.

What did this... what did this mean...?

...

What was the meaning indeed.

Skullius blinked.

There was darkness in his vision, but he drew a breath of air that travelled through his nostrils.

He felt his tense muscles again, Demion's Dance, and his armour.

He was standing on the flat ground, a hand firmly planted on his back. He didn't need to turn his head to know that right now, a flesh clone of Vali was standing behind him, funneling revitalising energy into him.

What?!

Around him, he scanned and found Maxim, Grutus and Liura, all with Vali clones behind them as well, just as before they had all died so suddenly!

Heck, even the Preeminent Attegoth was standing proud behind Skullius, but he couldn't understand all this.

What was going on?

Maxim seemed to be stricken by shock. Perhaps even crippled. She was pale as a sheet, and Grutus, as well as Liura, seemed to be the same, with the latter slumping to the ground and frivolously molesting herself, as if to make sure she was whole.

'Them too?' Skullius thought before focusing on the glaring features before him.

Rias stood, the large Cluster General at his side, frenzied but seized into stillness.

The young Game Master didn't look as calm as before.

He was actually frowning, and weirdly, above his head, the counter for Units rolled, and the amount he had staggered downwards sharply, while Skullius' and the others' rushed up, restoring how many Units they had had before...

'What the hell?!'

The Cluster General's astonishing presence was far from being as unsettling as the mystery behind how and the others were alive right now!

Yet, the answer was plainly in focus.

Standing between Rias and his monster, and Skullius' group, was Gabel.

He was holding out his glaive menacingly, and a dark look was on his face; not a sombre one, but one that wholly expressed a darker side to him than the one he had been showing before.

His emerald-crimson Aura burst viciously outward, and it became clear as he spoke.

"I've toiled harder than you can ever imagine, boy," he said, his dark, hollow eyes set on Rias. "Do you really think your mortal prowess can contend with the mercies of the lady of veil?"

"Time, life and death. I have been chosen to hold their prospects in my hands. You cannot comprehend it with a measly mortal tool brought to life by mana or Aura. You can only make up an inferior copy of the real deal."

...!!!

Skullius, a little dazed, was once again left stunned.

No way!

The reason he was alive...

It was because Gabel rewound time, and restored their lives? Just like that?!

Wasn't that a bit too ridiculous?!

From the looks of Rias' expression, he didn't seem to be capable of such a thing, as Gabel had said, otherwise why else would he be so surprised?!

But was it that outlandish?

Juggled Time Veneration...

It was the power from another Deity outside the four on Aigas!

It wasn't a technique!

It could certainly break Rules!

"Extraordinary..." Rias remarked, but it was evident he was still perplexed. He extended his pink-skinned hand towards the deer which still had its maw open, large chains coming from it, seemingly intending to summon something else besides the Cluster General.

Gabel moved fast, yet unseen.

Rias' arm was sliced into pieces up to the shoulder, much to the young heir's light surprise, but he could tell... Gabel had used stalled time to attack him ceaselessly in the head!

At the same time, Rias found himself staggering to the ground.

An intricate trident of Aura had stabbed heavily into his thigh, forcing his leg to the ground so that it would be pinned there, even if no damage was done!

Once again, Rias hadn't seen when Gabel had formed or flung the Incarnation, and it was concerning.

He too could manipulate time with his saber, but Gabel was doing it better!

Had he been holding back?

Rias' arm began to regrow, but Gabel was already upon him!

Without his full arm to take the damage, Rias was susceptible to attacks now, and that was what Gabel was aiming for!

Skullius, who was the only one perceiving carefully among the others present, only managed to sense the sharp ring of a blade before a loud noise brewed in tandem with a tremendous shockwave that, much like the Cluster General's more tame releases of mana, sent everyone flying back!

Skullius did his best to not move too far. He kept his focus on the battle.

In the next moment, a figure darted out of the rising clumps of thick dust, and skidded close to Skullius.

It was Vali!

From her presence, Skullius deduced that she was the real one.

She looked at him with some manner of relief.

"Thank goodness! Thought you were gone for good! Would have ruined the happy times ahead for me!" she called to him with a delighted grin.

Skullius would have paid her surprising cheer some attention, if not for what she had in her hand being more interesting.

It was segments of Rias' severed, pink arm yet to turn to ash!

The pieces of flesh looked to be dissolving into Vali's hand; flesh, bone and all, until nothing remained, and Vali seemed extremely happy because of it!

"Come on! Don't tell me dying once was that big of a deal! Get over it and help me out!" Vali gave him a mad look before jumping towards the thick of a terribly vicious exchange ahead.

Skullius watched her go.

'Right... I died...' he thought, recalling what he had experienced with Irisa. What she had said to him.

Had she known that Gabel would bring them to life? Skullius didn't know.

He imagined that Gabel brought him back because the dark-haired man had 'marked' him, as Aurolio had said, whatever that really meant.

Regardless of what, Irisa was right.

He had another chance! This was it!

He couldn't afford to waste it!

But to make it worthwhile, he had to change how he approached this battle before.

What had he learned?

What could make a difference?

How could he overcome the gap in power?

Was he any different from before?

Well...?

'Oh...' Skullius thought, with his Omniscient Thought Cracker accelerating his mental capabilities.

He slightly got excited... and fearful.

He had died just now.

The feeling of death was still glowering around his soul, as if trying to claim him back.

'I can still feel it...' Skullius thought, inspiration bubbling in his head. Gabel's Veneration art likely didn't reverse what a living being went through before being brought back in time.

This was convenient for Skullius.

Maxim and the others were still in shock from dying.

But not him!

Death was just another experience to add to his earlier enlightenment!

While the feeling was still fresh, Skullius activated [Swordmaster's Quiescence], and burdened his mana core with producing Aura!

A greedy, gleam of dark Aura!

...

At almost the same time, Vali dove into the clump of heavy dust where deafening blows were ringing out, the crows encompassing the entire space flying erratically!

The Cluster General, its eyes unfocused, flung a deadly fist at Gabel at that moment, which, as it streaked like a bolt of lightning, made Vali feel as though a hurricane was about to ravage every inch of the close surroundings!

In the next moment, shockingly, the Cluster General found itself NOT throwing a punch as it had been just now, and furthermore, Rias, who had dashed away a micro second ago, was back where he was. He unceremoniously took a wrathful bash to the face from Gabel which he didn't see, sending him reeling backward clumsily!

The Cluster General meanwhile, roared, with another surge of mana building up within its body casually, but in the next moment, it also found itself skidding backwards, a searing pain in its chest!

Vali was left standing where it had been, and she looked crazed, almost frenzied with excitement.

"I could get used to this," she said, her sparkling eyes darting to Rias who had stood up from the previous blow, his large saber still clutched in hand.

He breathed out, an irritated look on his face.

...Then his sword changed.

...!

It acquired once again a black matte on its blade and the thick furs where its cross guard was supposed to be. The eyes on it suddenly lost the hourglasses within them, and the clouds above rumbled madly!

Quicker than anyone could have imagined...

"Hailstorm.." Rias suddenly said right after, and before long, the deer conduit pushed out of its mouth an almost tangible clump of thunderclouds that sprayed out heavy rain and gusts of wind!

This storm wasn't the natural kind.

Not only did the rain spew out horizontally, intent on whipping Vali and Gabel, it carried an acidic effect, conjured not from mana, but Aura!

The ground had began to melt, as did everything else that was pelted by the spray.

Vali guarded, reinforcing her Aura, but Gabel...

Immediately, the hailstorm vanished, as if it had never been there at all!

Time had been reversed, but...

Rias had brought his sword down, while chillingly uttering to the dark-haired man, "You can only reverse one instance at a time, right?"

...!

Gabel realised only later what Rias had intended.

He was right. Gabel couldn't reverse time on multiple instances – different occurrences – unless they happened at the exact same time.

The hailstorm, and Rias switching back his sword from its emulation of time, back to the Sky Watching traits, were two different occurrences, and continuously reversing time wasn't possible, since a brief window existed between – a cooldown – unlike with simply stopping time!

Thus...

A glaring bright light began to shine.

That disastrous lightning attack was going to erase another section of the Cluster!

... And it would have, if not for a shrill noise that screamed from behind Gabel, and Vali.

SHIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIING!

It was quick, and it declared a painful silence to everything else with its coming.

It shot from a presence that was darker than death, and looked quite like the embodiment of death itself.

The noise was merely a decoration, however.

By the time Vali and Gabel heard it, they had also seen the satisfying malevolence it had conjured.

It started with Rias' sword being cut through like butter, and then...

His neck was sliced through cleanly, blood splattering from the back as evidence that indeed...

He had been harmed as intended!

Chapter 768: Dying, Not Dying

Rias gurgled.

Blood rushed from his throat, and spewed heavily from his mouth as a dumbfounded look finally exploded on his face.

He quickly gripped his throat, and his bulging eyes hurriedly looked past Vali and Gabel who were also stunned by how he had been dealt such a lethal blow, to reach the blazing figure from whence said lethal blow had come from.

The shattering animation of a pane above Rias showed 100 Glass Units being torn away from his '98,600'!

A blackish red flame decked the who had slashed him so cruelly, obscuring his figure except for a pair of bright eyes and a curved, green sword.

'Is that Aura?' Rias wondered as a sharp pain wrung his throat.

What kind of an Aura was that?!

It was too creepy, and why did it look like that?

Beyond the look of it, what kind of an attack was that just now?!

Rias felt that his arm had mysteriously withered away right when his neck had been slashed, as though whatever damage came his way was too much for it to handle! It wasn't rapidly healing as it always did either, instead, it was attempting the restorative process rather sluggishly!

To make matters worse, Rias' other Conjured Daydream, his saber, had been cut in two with the same slash, and as he held it, he knew its powers couldn't be used again, unless...

But would he get enough time for that?

The blazing figure with the green sword rushed up to reach Vali and Gabel, and Rias frowned as more blood spewed from his mouth.

"Urgh..." he emitted a slushious grunt before a narrow light shone within his eyes. With but a thought, the chains holding the Cluster General near him, all extending from the wide open maw of the deer... shattered.

The creature, which had just been pushed back by Vali, was free.

...!

Amidst the surprise and caution his opponents showed, Rias darted back, and let the large creature take the front stage.

Its eyes flickered, and sanity only seemed to be restored to its mind.

A serene calm flourished around it, mirroring its changed state of mind.

Vali and Gabel looked at the beast and then at Skullius who was now standing between them.

He looked like a humanoid blackish-red flame, with only his blank, white eyes showing. With his sword in hand, he truly looked like the Incarnation of an abstract concept, and Gabel looked particularly pleased.

He was so excited by the energy radiating off of Skullius, that he wore a large grin that painted his deathly looking face from before now, with a sombrely cruel tint!

Vali expressed half as much interest.

"Neat," she described succinctly.

Skullius ignored both of them.

He couldn't even afford to pay them much attention anyway.

Vali smiled, and gazed at the Cluster General which finally set its eyes on them.

"You two, deal with that kid. I'll handle this one," she said as she darted forward, making it known to the others that it wasn't up for discussion.

Skullius and Gabel didn't linger to argue. They shot past the Cluster General and pursued Rias who, in the short time he had gained for himself, had somehow healed his neck, and was feeding his broken sword to the deer – as it was now fully unoccupied.

Hints of a glittering, powdery dust could be seen around him.

The young Game Master saw the two coming, and the irritation he felt at dealing with these two couldn't have been more pronounced.

As per his command, dozens of crows shot between him, and the two, obscuring him from view. Another batch followed, then another, and another.

Gabel scoffed. He knew Rias was trying to ensure that even if he reversed time, he could only remove one batch of the crows from hindering his sight.

How annoying.

To his surprise though, Skullius beside him, twirled the green hanger in his hand exaggeratedly (almost unrealistically), and dashed this way and that, zigzagged as he accelerated, twirling and ducking down in what could or couldn't be discerned as a rhythmic motion. He then, with the curved sword reverse handled, swiped across the air with vicious intent!

There was a horrible screech through the air, and momentarily, a bright, elegant was seen carving through the crows!

...!

Rias who was on the other side of the winged blacks was appalled, as with a spray of blood, he found once again, his neck slashed up, and his arm withered away!

'Again?!' he thought.

There was an uncaringly brutal warm blow of wind afterwards, and then, tens of thousands of feathers masked the sky, the dozens crows that had been before Rias all falling down in the same tragic drops of black that real crows would have.

'What kind of an ability is this? I can't dodge it? Is it the sword, or is it just him?' Rias wondered, a bit of fury burning within him.

Each and everyone of his crows had been 'killed' somehow, and his Conjured Daydream, the arm, couldn't take the damage from a single slash of Skullius for him!

It was if... Skullius' attacks killed his arm, leaving it no room to absorb damage.

The young Game Master hurriedly extended his hand to the deer head at his side, and the hilt of his saber showed, which he pulled out, revealing that the weapon was whole again. It had a generic design, but its eyes were back on its steel surface, all with pupils shaped like hourglasses!

In an instant, Rias reversed time on himself, such that it was as if he was never cut.

When that was done, he immediately darted to meet the two.

If fighting from a distance left him at that much of a disadvantage, he would fight at close quarters where he could stop these ridiculous attacks before they happened.

But before that...

The hideous Incarnation of a robed woman with flying, acid green hair burst behind Rias, and it clutched within its hand something it had retrieved from the young man's storage.

With a flick, the object was flung to the ground before Skullius and Gabel could react, and they belatedly noticed that it was...

A Scatter Crystal.

...!

There was a vicious expulsive force that caught both Skullius and Gabel, forcing them away in different directions in the next instance!

To no one's surprise, Gabel resisted this by reversing time for both himself and Skullius, but as soon as he reappeared, Rias' Incarnation planted a hard, large fist in his face, sending him soaring far!

Simultaneously, Rias extended his sword to Skullius, and stalled time around them, such that Skullius was frozen. With an eager swipe, he split the blazing figure down the middle with his saber!

Dispelling the stalled time, he watched as a silvery line marked where he had cut on Skullius.

But the Hybrid Luman didn't die.

Instead...

...!

Rias felt his face get cleanly diced in two.

Skullius hadn't done anything. Not with his sword. Yet Rias had been dealt a fatal blow once again that shaved off another 100 Units!

He couldn't believe his Aura had been bypassed again, as if it wasn't there, his arm withered once again even though it was recovering well!

What was this?!

Skullius stood, suddenly fine, as if he hadn't been cut.

'Irisa was right,' he thought, a smile unseen crawling on his face. 'How could I die with her by my side?'

How enlightening this was. Rias had carved his own problem by killing him!

The young heir shook, his face stern.

He wouldn't have known, but Skullius was applying what had dawned on him from the revelation a few hours ago. Just as he had done with mana, and the WILL OF CUNNING, Skullius had used [Swordmaster's Quiescence] and targeted it on the sensation of death that was fresh on his soul.

The Hybrid Luman had then pleasantly discovered that, experiencing death and fully immersing himself into it, made him understand the [Swindling Death's Dance] even more.

The skill reacted extremely well to the firm and inevitable feeling gushing through him right now, and its power, which, as the guidance field described to be [...those who are born from it, fondled by it, and dance within its embrace can send forth Death's emissaries, warding off its whole from themselves...], was quite literal.

Just now, Skullius hadn't felt the effects of his Super potion gush to heal him at all. Neither did [Saint Lumis' Benign Arc] rush to heal him even though he had been bisected.

He simply... denied death, owing to the fact that he had been performing the Swindling Death's dance as he chased after Rias.

What's more, he hadn't counter attacked Rias just now. The damage the young Game Master had done had simply been sent back to him in an even more fatal way!

The eyes on Rias' saber wriggled, and he found himself restored once again, but his expression had gone slightly pale. It wasn't him that had urged the sword to reverse time on him, but his Genuine Incarnation, thankfully.

'Facing a mortal death so many times like this... Father would be disappointed...' he thought, his eyes turning colder than before. His pink arm was healing slower, and the vulnerability he felt wasn't comforting in the least.

Nothing he had encountered in his life thus life, exceeded his arm's assigned capacity to take damage.

He couldn't understand how a simple Legendary grade sword could do this much harm!

Skullius skirted this way and that, and spun, his Aura whipped the air like flame as he dashed to Rias.

'I was right,' he thought, meaning his Aura. 'My Aura is filling me with so much strength, I can even keep up with Rias... to some extent...'

And it was true, but that wasn't all. The reason it was covering him like this, and had turned colours to match the hue of his armour instead, was because, as Skullius had guessed, there was more to his Aura that met the eye.

But that wasn't yet too important.

Rias frowned at the incoming enemy, and his sword switched once again to the native Cluster beasts' abilities. With impeccable speed, his sword shone, livid with lightning, and screed through the air towards Skullius' head!

The Hybrid Luman ignored, and allowed the attack to cut through his head seamlessly, burning through it because of the shimmering lightning!

But he didn't die.

Rias, intent on studying why this odd occurrence persisted, was met with another fatal slice through the top of his head, but it was healed immediately after, as Rias' Incarnation shattered something above him that released a glittery dust.

'A Revival Star!' Skullius thought, and he swung his sword in deadly arc so fast Rias almost failed to intercept.

This measure of dexterity stunned Rias. In his mind, he imagined that the blackish-red Aura cloaking Skullius – as he suspected from how odd it was – was an anomaly among Full Body Auras. It had to be enhancing his power by more than the 500% absolute limit that Advancers could attain.

He was right, but he was wrong about this being why Skullius was so quick in his response to his attack.

Furthermore, as he expected the clang of their swords to ring aloud, he was shocked to see Demion's Dance fazed through his own, and viciously cut through his bare chest without minding the Aura!

...!

Rias gave a muffled grunt in pain.

He gave the Hybrid Luman a murderous look.

Unfortunately for him, he could never figure out that the Hybrid Luman knew more than one style of Swordsmanship, and with Null Life Essence coating his sword, no Aura could block his attacks!

'Keep trying to fight me up close...'Skullius silently urged the young Game Master.

"Interesting!" Rias called without the slightest hints of jovial interest.

He then suddenly sent a kick towards Skullius, and the Hybrid Luman was knocked back. In that brief moment, a swarm of crows blocked the area between them!

Skullius spread his feet, and activated [Courting Death]. The tens of crows messing with his senses were immediately diced into obscure pieces of black, and in his cautious, heated state, Skullius scoured around him, awaiting a surprise attack.

It didn't come.

Rias was wrestling against a trident and a glaive with his large saber, his face twisting as he expelled effort.

Gabel had returned from his flight, and Rias seemed to have caught his advance before Skullius.

'We're cornering him. If we keep this up, we can get rid of him, and hopefully the flame!' Skullius thought, and dashed towards the two.

....

Meanwhile, Vali and the Cluster General hadn't begun their conflict. It wasn't some sort of stare down. It more had to do with the fact that the large beast, after regaining its reason had not moved, as if evaluating its opponent.

There was something strange about; something between calmness and lunacy.

Whether this beast considered Vali worthy of its attention or not didn't matter to the woman though. She had used this seven second period to thoroughly understand what she had absorbed into her flesh.

Rias' arm.

Her body was very efficient at interpreting flesh bone, blood.

With her technique Cellular Supremacy, it was easy for her understand most matters related to the physical body, and the seconds long timer was enough for her to get a grasp of this new concept strolling within her.

"I see," she said as her mana surged. "It's missing large, fundamental parts, but I get the gist of it. Let's try this Imagining Technique..."

Chapter 769: Imagining, Cornering, Resolving!

Liura and Grutus seemed to have finally gathered their thoughts, and come to terms with the fact that they had died, and that now, they were alive. While it didn't take that long to cast themselves from despair, it had been a rather awful experience, urging themselves that what mattered, was the fact that they still drew breath.

Grutus even looked enlightened, somewhat.

He took a deep breath and looked at the struggles going on in two different places near them. Even if he had made up his mind to just leave instead of trying to fight Rias, whom he knew was out of his league, the pretty much unguarded pillar of fire seemed to reel him in.

Maybe... as they had been doing before, he and Liura could try to tear the shield of glass plates around it while the others kept that monstrous boy at bay.

Yes.

If they managed that, then everyone else could chip in and they could finally disrupt whatever evil scheme was being powered there.

Yes!

Grutus gulped.

He turned to Liura who was using her Retriever for support, as she, like him, recovered from her how her body had turned lump, like it was repulsed by the fact that she had tasted death.

"Give me the items you stored..." Grutus told her.

"What?" Liura asked quizzically.

"Just do it. You wanted me to join you in helping, right? I'm helping now. At least whatever else happens I won't be looking at your guilt-inspiring stare in the afterlife!"

Liura didn't know what to make of Grutus' sudden shift in mind-set. She figured he, much like her, was feeling very grateful for being given a second chance, and perhaps trying to make that chance worthwhile, and thus, she emptied her storage.

A series of odd items, most of which she had salvaged from this Cluster, appeared in her cupped hands.

"Save the Revival Star for yourself, and keep it in hand. If we get blasted like last time, we might just get lucky enough to survive again," Grutus told Liura while picking off what he thought was useful from her collection. "Frozen Bean... maybe... uh Draw Bubble, Draw Bubble... What did we decide to call this again..."

a Faze String. Came in a bundle, right? The Shrinking Jerky... oh, and you still had this?"

Naturally, without having been told the names beforehand, Liura, Grutus and the others could only name the items they found themselves based on what they did, the objective fact that all items placed here by EverSword House couldn't kill them, guiding their experimenting spree.

The reason why the group had been luckier than most when it came to these scattered items was because Hun's choice for a Legendary item within the Royale, was a tool that was attracted to other treasures of its grade and higher.

This had been part of the short man's plan for finding other contenders quickly (he assumed the worst, as before a few hours ago, no one knew the setup of the Royale), but given what the Game Master – the original – had said, he had found another use for it.

An added bonus to his tool's wondrous effect, was the fact that it could attach trackers – small, sticky pieces of paper – on distant targets and draw the user to them over large stretches.

The results of using this tool, stood in the two's hands. Most of the items placed within the Royale grounds were Legendary and higher!

Liura looked at Grutus, and her face softened.

"Took you dying to make you realise your life can be worth something other than living it in regret?" she said.

"Come off it. Some of us still want to be more than thieves and part-time Knights. Dying... well, it makes you feel fickle, doesn't it? And how the others must felt... Then again, we did choose to risk our lives."

Liura gave Grutus a dry smile.

"Now come on! We have to get closer to that pillar without attracting too much attention. Stay close. I don't want to die alone."

The bulky woman laughed.

"Or live alone," she added.

The two set off.

Grutus set alight his Aura, in case, as he imagined, a stray something flew harshly from the vicious battles.

He assumed Liura would do the same.

However, she didn't.

Thud.

Grutus turned behind him cautiously, where Liura and her Retriever were supposed to be, and his eyes shot out in alarm.

"Liura!" he gasped.

In one miniscule moment, he thought he saw a figure holding her neck from behind her, and in a blink, the two disappeared in a distorted mash of colour!

The Beckoned Retriever left behind, did not react at all. In fact, it kept walking as though completely oblivious to the fate of its master. Worse yet, seconds later, as Grutus watched on, it stopped.

Its eyes were suddenly bathed in a murderous, untamed gleam as it gazed at Grutus who found what this meant too hard to swallow.

Somehow, the parted clouds close by (Rias' doing from earlier), mirrored how felt.

*

Vali watched the Cluster General closely. She couldn't tell if it was looking at her or not, but she didn't care.

"...Well, let's test out this Imagining Technique," she said as a wide grin stretched on her pretty face.

She shot her hand to the side, and with such an incredible amount of focus that instantly drenched her body in sweat, she vividly felt the flesh she had absorbed, and assimilated into her own, such that part of a unique Technique branded onto it was carved onto her own body as well, quiver and get dipped in an unnaturally vast quantity of mana.

As Rias had dared to say when he first used his Technique (likely because he was a prideful, overconfident teenager), that his Technique had a lot of requirements, Vali discovered that indeed, it was true. She had been developing this assimilation aspect for a while, and she could tell that she was missing a lot to truly make the EverSword House Technique work for her perfectly.

It was possible for her to copy Techniques, and even breach some of the more shallow boundaries between categories of Classes.

She had advanced her Cellular Supremacy that far.

But the Imagining Technique... it was particularly hard to crack.

Yet, a great flame bellowed from behind her palm, dwarfing her in height, and expressing a scorching girth mightier than hers. It swelled with a vibrant lilac hue, which Vali admitted had sprouted without much of her permission.

But this was good still.

From watching Rias, she had ascertained what he hadn't spilled. There was need for something from which to conjure what she wanted. The conduit, though she couldn't possibly know what the EverSwords called it that.

This flame was her own. Simple in design, and hard to keep active.

The Cluster General Vali faced squinted at this.

Vali had struck it with a sliver of this flame a few seconds ago. It recalled vaguely, as it had still been under Rias' fully control, and truthfully, in a sense it still wasn't completely free.

...!

Before she knew it, Vali was looking at a terribly heavy, large, chopping hand that gushed out storms right down on her! It seemed the Cluster General saw that she was worth acting against, finally!

Vali couldn't dodge, in as much as she briefly saw the coming attack. It would be too late by then.

Her body was splattered in an earthquake's worth of vibration, the ground sinking under the might.

Yet, Vali wasn't done.

Despite the bloody mess under the General's hand, she was striding behind it, once again igniting lilac flames from her hand.

It seemed the Cluster General had already sensed her presence once again, as this time, from the bundled clouds overhead, a thin bolt shrieked as it gathered before diving down right where she was!

Once again, Vali was obliterated, this time with impeccable accuracy and efficiency, but still she persisted, her voluptuous figure appearing elsewhere in a circling sprint!

'I might actually run out of mana if this continues,' she thought. If there was anything that sucked up her mana outrageously, it was one of her abilities, an advanced version of the simple cloning she had done before, which she called Singular Cellular Extract.

Instead of creating clones, Singular Cellular Extract made her real body into a lesser copy, and extracted her 'truest essence', as she called it, into a flesh bud that she would usually stealthily hide somewhere when she felt she was in danger and sprout into her real body!

Right now, Vali was using this ability every time she knew for certain there was danger. The principles behind the ability required complex execution, but she had managed, and the only downside was that she couldn't make such Cellular Extract automatic yet, as she would have wanted. That would be beyond what a Special skill was capable of.

Vali felt a breeze bash into her face and her skin, as well as bone was erased as the Cluster General blew out from its mouth, and to her direction. This was now the fifth time it had destroyed her body

despite her Aura coat, in the last six seconds, and she wasn't getting a chance to use her newly acquired ability.

But she wasn't exactly complaining much.

After all...

'Imagine. It's in the name, right? All I have to do is imagine what I want. What would I want to conjure...?' Vali thought with each passing second, her body getting destroyed again.

If one was given the ability to imagine what they wanted, and if they had as much mana as Vali, what would they choose?

When the look of realisation finally swept past Vali's eyes, she grinned both twistedly, and innocently.

For now, she didn't need something complex. She just needed to conjured something that made full use of her ability to manipulate her body freely.

And what was in front of her helped her imagine it firmly.

As the dazzling lilac flame appeared over her hand for the seventh time, Vali imagined this simplistic desire of hers as quickly as possible. She had no doubt that with her body, she could handle it, but she wasn't sure if it would work. With the little she had absorbed of Rias' flesh, she wasn't sure it was plausible to assume that it would work. It could easily go wrong. But not with her body.

Come on. She had seen it countless times. And she was looking at it.

And that said...

Vali locked gazes with the Cluster General, and in the next moment, she felt something unseen brew from the flame, fly out, and etch itself into her, giving her a title.

An identity.

...!

Before long, Vali screamed, but not in pain. She felt an odd burst of power vibrate throughout all her cells, her flesh, her bones and her mana core, edifying them in a rather... specific way.

Her body tumbled about eerily and unevenly, and the sudden loud cracking that came from her drew a lot of attention, and then surprise!

It wasn't just the living beings around her that showed surprise – Rias, Skullius, Gabel, and Grutus.

It was this world as well!

The clouds moved, however hesitantly, over to Vali who wasn't too lost in the ferocious might burning through her body that she couldn't witness it, a look of gleeful amazement on her face. If she wasn't close to bursting open, she would have laughed like a fool.

It was working! It was actually working!

Something from this world, was acknowledging her, and while it hadn't been Vali's explicit intent, it happened anyway.

Vali's body ballooned for a second, and in that moment, blood shot for her eyes, but she immediately healed whatever damage she was taking from the inside – from her flesh contracting horribly against itself, from her mana core growing so bright it threatened to burn her hole through her!

'Let's use it while it lasts!' she urged herself, and with all her might, she shot from the ground, which crackled before splitting, broken bits flying over tens of meters from where she had stood. The raging mana within Vali was swiftly converted to Aura.

A deep magenta coat that would have blanketed the tall Cluster General just as well, and with space to spare, enveloped her snugly. It augmented her to such a degree that she had to mobilise half of her mana strictly for regenerating her flesh!

Then, before several halves of a blink of an eye could pass, Vali had smashed her fist into the Cluster General's face with a mad roar!

An ear-piercing crack was heard as a wave of expelled wind gushed in all directions horrendously, disrupting – above Vali's ground-breaking lunge just now – all the activity around her.

The Cluster General she hit barrelled back and smashed into the group after an unnatural spin, half its torso getting buried into the ground!

This was nothing to scoff at even for Rias who looked on with a deep frown. It wasn't only him either. Skullius also looked bizarrely at Vali, as did Gabel.

There was a distinct presence gushing from her.

The same presence they all knew from facing... Cluster Generals!

How in the world.... how could she have such a vast pool of mana belching from her mana core like this?!

Vali, after her strike to the General, landed on the ground and blew out her cheeks as she struggled to keep control of her own body.

Indeed. What she had wished from her fiery conduit was to become as physically powerful as a Cluster General!

Her original intention was to gain enough strength to wrestle against this particular General, but as it seemed, that wasn't the only result.

Vali grunted as the mana just kept piling on and on.

'All right then!' she thought, and from the opening on her outfit – over her smooth abdomen – a large blob was spat out, then another and another and another.

In no time, a series of Valis all decked in outrageously thick magenta Auras were crafted from the blobs, and most of them rushed towards the pillar of flame while the rest divided themselves between the Cluster General, and the effort against Rias!

The young Game Master was not quite pleased to see eight Valis streaking through the air with loud booms towards him.

He clicked his tongue, and dashed back quickly, but immediately after, he saw the figure with a fuming Aura of blackish-red swipe through the air with a green blade, a nasty cry screeching from it, and to no one's surprise, Rias was carved at the chest, blood spilling from him messily!

Creating distance was dangerous because of that one man, and fighting at close quarters led him to getting swarmed. The situation was perfect for making any combatant miserable.

Rias bled from the mouth, but his expression was a far cry from showing signs of utter defeat. He reversed time to heal himself with his sword, but in the next, Gabel reversed it again, so that he was once again sliced through gruesomely!

The young Game Master had expected this, however.

His Incarnation was holding a star-shaped object in its hand which it broke, and sprinkled over his head. In the next moment, Rias was whole again. He had even erected a bubble of stalled time around him in order to ensure to Gabel didn't stop time just when he was about to heal himself.

'This is getting a bit too dangerous. Time seems to move slower than I had imagined,' Rias thought. As he summoned another swarm of crows to block his enemies' view and dashed off to create more distance, he looked at the Valis running towards the sheltered pillar of flame and those ganging up on the Cluster General.

Towards the former, he frowned.

Towards the latter, he felt pity.

'That thing isn't the same as when I first fought it. If it had been as vicious as it had been before I 'broke' it, me setting it loose would have ruined all our plans,' he thought as his deer head drew close. 'That said...' he continued, remembering something odd which he saw, with Vali. 'Doesn't matter anyway...'

The deer head opened its maw extra wide.

"Oh no, you don't!" a Vali dashed from out of nowhere and was so close to sinking Rias' face in when he trapped her in a bubble of stalled time. He drew back, but then a second Vali skirted around him, and dangerously cocked back her arm. Rias summoned his Incarnation to guard, and when a heavy bash smote it, dispelling it like mere smoke, he was flung high into the air.

But the torrent of enemies wasn't done with him.

They leapt through the air to get him, every one of their attacks tagged fatal.

Rias once again called his crows to obscure the view as he readied his deer. He extended his hand and with a hard face, he turned resolute.

He might as well bring out his trump card, if things were going so terribly.

The shield around the pillar was halfway destroyed by the Valis, and he would legitimately die if this continued. He had his own stack of tools prepared but they wouldn't last for long, and honestly, it ate away at his pride to use Revival Stars.

Something had begun to poke out of the deer's mouth, the third Conjured Daydream, when...

One of Rias' crows brought something to his attention.

The bright rectangular light in the distance, situated over the vast mountain, flickered before disappearing.

The GOAL. It had vanished.

The two minutes had finally ended.

...And the game, was over.

Chapter 770: The Gloomy Stream

A sense of relief finally caught up to Rias. He took a relaxed breath, and made the deer conduit swallow what it had been about to release mid flight.

Rias held the deer's antlers and spun to stand over deer's sacred looking head. He then sat down, and ordered it to soar higher, and higher into the clear sky above, close to the pillar of green and black flame.

The young Game Master drew more crows to glide around him, and then sent one of them down. The crow found itself staring down the original Vali, and the woman stared at it for a moment before looking up at Rias.

"You see pretty relaxed," Vali said.

Skullius and Gabel flashed to Vali's side just in time to hear the crow flying before her speak with Rias' voice.

"Why shouldn't I?" it said, presumably projecting Rias' thoughts. "After all, try as you might, it's all over. Even if you somehow manage to kill me."

"What?" Skullius asked with a rough look, however, he was quickly distracted by his misty, fiery Aura burning away, returning to its normal blackish blue hue, and resuming its state as a general coat around him. This was caused by the effect of [Swordmaster's Quiescence] ending, but Skullius clung on to the feeling of it desperately. Without it, he would be useless in this.

"The game ended. You all denied the chance I gave you to head to the GOAL. I suppose only one was smart enough, in the end, unlike you. Now, your chances to live may as well be done," Rias replied, though his face showed a rather irritated look when the second sentence sounded from the crow.

...!

Only one?

The trio looked up past the gap in the clouds which Rias had made, and saw that surely, the glowing gateway – the GOAL – was gone!

"You would have been better off killing each for Units, but, well... I hope you enjoyed the prospect of changing absolutely NOTHING," the young Game Master said through the crow, and from above, he showed a very small sadistic smile. His eyes turned to Skullius. "But like I said, there are liberties in your way.

As long as you still have the Control Seal, the rules are still relevant, and the Units may prove useful."

Vali looked at Rias dangerously.

What he said gave her a really bad feeling. While struggling through the raging mana, most of the excess which she had managed to spill out to her clones, she wondered.

Had this all truly been for nothing? No way. After all...

A loud crash garnered their attention, representing the final stacks of glass plates guarding the flame getting smashed apart! The texture of the tower of flame was made apparent once more, and a heat which somehow bypassed the area around them to burn everything a bit further away, was released.

Vali's clones looked at the flame with a deep set apprehension.

Rias looked at the group with a mocking gaze.

"Not so simple, is it? To get to what's inside, you need to brave through the fire. Do you have the gall to taste just how much it burns?" he said.

One of the Valis, at his words, jumped into the fire, followed by the rest, all bathed in thick, bulbous magenta Auras.

Howls of agony were heard as they stepped in and began to rush through, their bodies depicted as dark shadows within the blazing green and black heat. Rather frighteningly, most of the clones only managed to take six steps before dissolving within the fire!

Aura and all!

...!

The others looked on, appalled.

Skullius in particular was disturbed. While everyone here had noticed that there was a thick stretch of Undeath in that glaring flame, he had realised – after a while – that the flame... wasn't actually a flame. It was just a malicious expression of Undeath energy.

For it to be this destructive, judging by how it looked, it had to be extremely condensed. Even Vali's inflated Aura couldn't do anything about it, and was eaten away instantly.

For a moment, the trio was stunned, not knowing what to do.

Gabel narrowed his dark eyes at Rias, and he seemed intent on killing him, however he would do it.

He looked to be about to conjure his trident from Perfect Aura, when a thunderous noise from the sky above distracted him.

A gaping, dark portal emerged over where the tower of Undeath energy ended.

Everyone eyed it cautiously.

In the next moment, there was a disturbing cacophony of wails.

They called from the dark portal, and in their chorus, a stream of large, orb-like objects, a light glow around each, began to fall.

They slid down into the towering pillar of undeath energy, their soft light visible even from the depth of the brilliant mass.

Vali, Gabel, Skullius, Grutus, and Maxim couldn't believe their eyes. They needed no exposition to know what these things were.

Souls... these were souls!

Where did they come from?!

Their sheer quantity was only appreciated when a few seconds passed, the gaping opening above the flame growing larger to facilitate the expulsion of double the amount of souls as before!

Some of these souls, as the five contenders noticed, wailed loudly, and did not conform to the same orb-like shape that the rest were forced into. Distinct faces popped up from them as they cried, and each of the five realised immediately... that these wailing souls belonged to all the contenders who had died during Premium Age Royale.

"What the..!" Skullius exclaimed, and another realisation screeched through his mind. If these were the souls of contenders... then, were the rest the souls of the witnesses?!

Was every witness in the stadium...dead?!

The thought crossed the others' mind, and Skullius saw that they were also flabbergasted at such a possibility.

All these souls... all dropping into the towering Undeath energy as if it were gullet leading to the stomach, the engraving on the ground, which, at this moment, started to flicker vibrantly, showing all its contours, and runic ends...

Skullius dropped his sword.

He hadn't thought Guissepo, the Green Neolists and the EverSword would be so bold as to kill millions so quickly, and use their souls like this!

What were they trying to do?!

Were they summoning something?!

Above that, Skullius' body shuddered...

'Theurien... ' he thought. 'Are Terese and Daggs... alright?'

He remembered that they were the only ones from the Bryne Family left attending the Premium Age Royale, and the thought that they could be... that they could be among these souls being fed to... whatever was under here....

Skullius found himself dashing towards the flame, a pale look on his face.

He watched more closely with Crude Vision, his head conjuring the image of Terese, Theurien's daughter, burning through the violent Undeath energy.

If Theurien were to lose his youngest child too...

A part of Skullius which he thought had been healed through the Super potion earlier, strangled him.

Skullius' hand stretched out, and he took a step closer to the Undeath energy.

"Don't," he heard someone say.

Behind him, was Maxim, whose face was deathly pale. She didn't look too good.

Her voice spanked logic through the Hybrid Luman.

What was he even trying to do here. Could he hold souls in his hands? He couldn't enter the Undeath energy pool, let alone scoop up souls with his hands. How would he even know which was Terese's or Daggs'?

Were they even among these souls?

Hadn't Theurien prepared something just in case?

Yet, even with all these thoughts, Skullius' hand, as if it didn't belong to him, pushed ahead once more, and his body too followed.

A powerful grip clutched at him, and a different voice spoke.

"Please, don't do it."

Skullius turned. It was Darwel.

In her hand, she was holding a half-moon shaped object that crumpled immediately. Beads of sweat could be seen on her forehead, as she panted slightly.

"I don't think there's anything we can do here."

Skullius frowned, and looked up.

The souls just kept coming, dipping themselves into the flame.

It really didn't look like they could do anything.

The young Game Master scoffed above. He looked a bit amused.

Things became even more interesting for him when he saw Grutus rush up to the pillar, drawn to it by a screaming soul that morphed itself to show a familiar face now and then. Skullius and the others recalled who it was too, and they were all surprised to see that she was a part of this.

She was dead?

How?

Liura, in a glowing form was pressed into the flame as well, and Grutus just shattered at the sight. He trudged towards her, his face sallow, devoid of what many could have called restraint .

"Liura!" he screamed, his hands rummaging over his body as if he didn't know that he had stored what he needed within his spatial storage.

He then pulled what he and his gang had called Faze String and clutched it tight. Without another thought, he then dove into the fiery Undeath before anyone could stop him.

To everyone's surprise, Grutus didn't get eviscerated like the Valis. Instead, a vaguely vivid shadow of his body could be seen walking the towering energy as he looked up, waiting for Liura's soul to reach him.

He had become something of an immaterial being permeable if that, a property afforded by the item he was holding. It was bundled up with six others when he had found it, and was thus easy to figure out its limits. But why it came in such a quantity was also significant.

Grutus face turned rigid.

When Liura's soul, screeching awfully, with a sad face came floating down directly to where he had positioned himself showed no signs of recognising him, or sanity in its call, Grutus broke.

He desperately swung his arms to catch Liura's, but she... fazed through his body, as if she was merely a figment of his imagination.

Grutus, in gnawing horror, looked on as Liura's soul drowned in the large, glowing array (if it could even be called such a demeaning name) beneath his feet, and added to it, and a fuse blew out in his brain!

He roared angrily, fumingly and punched into the engraving as his Aura exploded outwards.

He soon felt the nasty heat start to sing his body, and ruthless devour him, but he kept on punching the engraving to no effect, until he too, was eradicated, with the Faze String's limited duration of effect ending.

The other contenders watched on with dark expressions.

Darwel pulled back Skullius further away from the Undeath energy pillar, and looked straight at him.

She held something in her hand, that looked a little like a ring, and pressed on it tight, a look of desperation on her face.

"This is really looking bad, huh?" she said. "Thankfully we found each other."

"Yeah..." Skullius said, his senses focusing upward where the stream of souls continued to descend. The ones from contenders featuring here and there among them, in order of their time of death it seemed.

Vali walked closer to the two and looked into the flame-like energy indignantly.

"If that idiot had given that thing he just used to any one of us, perhaps we could have made a difference," she snarled. The voracious mana she had seemed to be getting closer and closer to dimming down, confirming what she had said before; that she was nowhere near capable of making permanent Conjured Daydreams like Rias, if she even could.

"Any ideas on what to do now?"

Darwel frowned, thinking.

"I don't know if there's anything WE can do, but him and I are hoping against hope for someone else to show up," she then said, the 'him' she was referring to being Skullius of course.

"Who?" asked Vali curiously.

"Let me not get our hopes up," the El Sif quickly said.

"You don't think they died too, do you?" Skullius turned to her and asked.

Darwel gave a wry smile before saying, "Imagining the look on my parents faces if that happens... it won't be great. But I'm sure they are alive."

"Are we not going to do anything about him?" Maxim asked while looking at Rias who rode his deer head, while hundreds of crows flocked around him.

"He's too high in the sky. Reversing time on him isn't going to work," Gabel chipped in. It was strange seeing him not being the scribbling oddball. He gave his neck a light scratch. "And if he's

expecting to be attacked, he's already prepared more of the game's items to use against us. Unlike before, he isn't insisting on guarding that engraving, which means it's a lot harder to fight him."

"So no way for us to acquire Units to save our skins? If that is even true?" Vali asked, watching as the remainder of her clones restrained the Cluster General.

Gabel turned to Skullius, his dark eyes narrowing at the more than 12,000 Units he had.

Suddenly, a crack of wind exploded a short distance away, in front of the pillar of energy.

From it, a young lady with silver hair and grey eyes emerged, as well as an older one with a stiff face.

...!!!

[Primal Caution] screamed at Skullius, and the others also seemed to be jerked alert upon seeing the new arrivals, especially the man waking amid the two ladies.

With a half green and half white mask, and a bloody, black robe, he looked frightening, the pressure pushed out of him burning with a wicked, determined zeal.

Before any of the five contenders could do a thing, Actuass spoke.

"Don't move."

...!

This was all it took to make all five stand still as if frozen solid, in each of their eyes a rebellious, but awestricken look.

"Let's watch what remains in peace," Actuass said.