

Undead 1031

Chapter 1031: High Hell

Within the Territory, Reign of the Unending Exigencies, pure chaos ensued.

It hardly seemed to matter anymore that this was Baddan's Territory, as the fight truly became a bitter mash of varied, potent powers that clashed explosively.

It was currently a four vs two, but no hypothetical external party watching – or reading the event – could have judged that the side with the greater numbers was winning.

In fact, it almost seemed like the opposite.

Em-Sul had assigned his Mage to clash with Baddan and the bizarre, ugly creature while he dealt with Pherdanta and Grim.

Quite frankly, Baddan had his hands tied for most of the battle, especially when it first began. Adjusting to the manner of combat that Mages often used was incredibly difficult, even with the boosts that his Territory gave him.

It was more apt to say that the only reason he was keeping up with the staggering arsenal of the Mage, was because of the physical and efficiency augmentations he got.

The Mage had lunged at him and with a cold gaze, he stretched his hand out towards the Sky Watcher. In the next micro instant, Baddan felt his armour get pulled sharply by an unseen force, and in the next moment, he was right in front of the Mage, his armour's chestplate touching the man's hand!

...!!!

Magnetism?!

Baddan felt a spike in mana from the enemy, and just before it exploded into activating something potentially deadly, he had the armour spit him out!

As he soon discovered, this decision was done in the nick of time, because his dark grey, bumpy armour twisted and whirled before becoming an ominous ball that the Mage gripped in his hand.

'What?!' the Sky Watcher thought.

He couldn't have known, but this was Transmutation, a basic Mage skill that allowed a practitioner to change one substance's composition, into that of another.

The shape his armour had been turned to was that of a simple ball.

No. That wasn't it.

The Mage had the ball turn into a long, dark grey spear which he suddenly flung – and with unbelievable force – at the Warpish Fuggu!

Baddan scowled.

The spear struck Fuggu in the head and obliterated it in an instant!

Such power!

Even though Fuggu was the weakest among his beasts, and one with the less impressive abilities, it had its value.

Its core ability was, of course, Warping.

It could distort energies and material objects alike, which usually rendered their normal properties and integrities inconsistent. This was why its attacks had seemingly bypassed Em-Sul's Nitros.

Of course, the creatures it summoned also possessed this Warping ability.

Em-Sul couldn't see, but what bore holes in his body, were horned dark blue beetles the size of a child's fist, which manifested anytime Fuggu went for an attack.

Whenever the beast thrust its fist, this was a feint. The real attack would come from these beetles.

It went without saying, but the armour Baddan received by summoning the creature, also possessed the Warping ability, which was activated when going on the offense.

All this said... none of it mattered.

Truly, when dealing with Mages, common scaling just wouldn't work.

Baddan rushed the Mage.

He reached him rather quickly, and noticed that he – Baddan – was much, much faster than the bastard. The Mage had barely managed to react when he sent a ruthless punch into his face!

MBIIIIING!

'Impossible!' Baddan flared.

He felt as though he had struck against an infallible wall!

Again, he couldn't have known, but this was another fundamental Magecraft trait other than Transmutation; Consolidation!

It was just as it sounded. Mages used their extensive reserves of energies – mana, Aura or others – to augment their physical properties in a manner that could theoretically surpass even Form Users!

The Mage took advantage of Baddan's pause and threw a straight punch of his own.

The Sky Watcher didn't deign to take it and find out just unordinary it would turn out to be.

He simply dodged it... and made way for a fat figure that sprinted from behind the Mage and sent six horned, dark blue beetles zipping through the air towards him!

The Fuggu had returned!

The Mage narrowed his eyes in suspicion.

Hadn't he just killed this thing?

He didn't have time to dwell on this, though.

He could sense the bugs that bolted his way better than Em-Sul, but it was still only a vague feeling.

As a result...

His leg went flying, a portion of it gouged out by a creature he couldn't see.

No amount of Consolidation could have stopped the extra five distortive attacks that left his torso looking like a hive either!

Through this though, the Mage only looked mildly annoyed.

His eyes darted this way and that, seemingly trying to figure out if there were any more attacks coming.

But then... his head was borne through cleanly!

Baddan saw the dramatic burst of the Mage's head, but he wasn't convinced. He didn't hurry to go and 'finish off' his opponent either.

That could be a trap.

Instead, he made the Warpish Fuggu attack the supposed corpse of the Mage.

After all, one of the advantages of using his technique within the Territory, was that all the Exigencies he summoned, would never stay dead after being killed!

Better yet, Baddan saw it fit to finally unleash the Primary function of his Territory.

It had to with why, above his head, above the Forechance Deemers, there was not one, but two metallic balls!

*

Paradon climbed into the cloudy sky as though it was the most natural thing to do. Its right front paw seemed to step on the fabric of space and propel the entire body into the sky at an admirable speed, jutting in and out of the clouds seamlessly.

The world above ground seemed limitless, as in as much as Paradon was moving rapidly, it didn't seem to end, even when he moved in a straight line.

Paradon Parody was one of the forms Grim could take.

Its unique trait was that it was capable of giving its limbs the individual magical properties of other beasts that Grim had faced and thoroughly analysed.

This was the reason all his legs looked different from each other.

His right front leg had the ability to step on the air, and this was the ability the Unlimited used to 'fly.'

This flight wasn't quite efficient in this case, however.

The enemy could also do something similar.

Em-Sul was hot on Grim's trail.

He rode what looked like a metallic plate shaped like an arrowhead. It was just as fast, if not faster than Grim's galloping form.

It spun wildly around the trajectory Paradon took, and then Em-Sul did what he had been doing for the last several seconds!

He exposed two different artefacts which spat two different streams of odd energies.

Right as the blue and white jets spun around him, the Harmonic Ember once again attained a greater whitish haze around it. In the next instant, the blue and white jets were forced to collide, and Em-Sul, in that exact moment, had them flash in Paradon's direction!

Midway through their flight, they perfectly merged to create something that caused the temperature in the skies to drop.

From what it looked like, flaking like old, wet wood, yet surging rapidly towards the target, it was akin to a torrent of cold flame!

The mana imbedded within it was immense, casting this unusual power over a very wide area.

It would be very difficult for Grim to dodge.

Luckily, he wasn't alone.

Pherdanta, who rode on his back, grabbed the hilt to her sword with both hands and slashed down with aggressive intent!

Cleanly, the catastrophic meld of heat and cold was split apart in the middle, and its integrity was compromised.

However, right as it collapsed, a thin black ray that moved in an uncompromising straight line, shot from Pherdanta's right, right when she was still bearing the weight of the force she had used with her sword just now!

Another hidden attack?!

Clicking her tongue, the Unlimited, clad in her Perfect Aura bolstered her dexterity enough to where she managed to extricate her right hand from gripping the sword, and point at the beam!

Right before the beam bore through Grim...

"Aggrante!" Pherdanta cried.

From her index finger, a bright jet of mana and Null Life Essence cast an overwhelming highlight on the surroundings and swiftly overpowered the beam, shredding it halfway to its source.

Pherdanta sighed and readied again her stance as Grim changed course.

'This is ridiculous. Does he had infinite store of artefacts?' the female Unlimited thought.

Em-Sul kept revealing artefacts that stored strange energies which he extracted and used in tandem with the Harmonic Ember.

Because Kenno had brought news from the Bryne Estate back then, before they reached the Central Boundary, all the Unlimited and Baddan knew about the Harmonic Ember and its powers.

That black and white gem, stolen from the Bryne Family, was capable of combining concepts. That was how the Bryne Family were able to form their differing Contrast techniques.

More specifically though, the Ember was only able to merge no more than three concepts within the body of the person who used it. This merging could only be done once in this case. If the Ember was used for combining elements and such outside of a body, however, the usages were practically limitless.

Pherdanta's face hardened. While thinking about this...

'I thought that only the members of the Bryne Family were able to use it so well? Did this man adjust the Ember so it could work for him as well?'

It seemed likely, given that Em-Sul, as Replicus had explained to the Unlimited, had a particularly unusual proclivity with artefacts of various kinds.

While that would have been the most convenient answer, though, the true answer was something a lot more sinister.

Em-Sul wasn't the one to adjust the Ember.

This was done... by the Saint's Chamber. An organisation allied with the Severed Union.

A man like Eobald would have known how useful their services were. After all, they were the ones who tempered the Universal Gate Key he acquired for the Labyrinth of the Yoke, which he then gave to Replicus back then.

Pherdanta gritted her teeth and slashed with her large, red sword.

She had seen Em-Sul flash through the clouds only four meters away from them.

Her strike was incredibly precise, not to mention powerful, given the boost from her Living Type Incarnation!

...And it found its target!

A chilling noise ruptured.

A sharp slash had collided against firm gold!

Yet the gold remained intact, only sizzling lightly.

Em-Sul disappeared within the clouds and laughed mockingly.

"What a profound weapon you have there. It makes distance practically irrelevant when matched with your skill, correct? Not to mention the dense cutting efficiency I sensed just now," the Faction Leader said. "Unfortunately for you, I can do the same now."

...!

As Pherdanta scowled, Em-Sul's golden gauntlet manifested from its palm the hilt to a large, illusory sword that looked eerily similar to hers!

Em-Sul then shot forth while on his arrow-shaped disk, hurtling towards the duo from the cover of dark blue cloud.

This experience was turning out to be more enlightening than he imagined.

His Mage seemed to be fairing well against the Territory's Caster.

Said Territory Caster was yet to unleash his Primary assault, or perhaps he had already done so but clearly it wasn't capable of inhibiting his opponents.

...And last but not least, while it did concern him as to why Replicus wanted this Ember, especially at this particular time, he was close to his goal.

Even if Replicus had somehow caught onto what he wanted to use the Ember for, it was too late.

The gem was close to granting him what he had always wanted.

What would be a better way to celebrate that victory, if not showing the corpses of Replicus' subordinates to him when he was sure they were faring well.

The Faction Leader cackled just as he emerged in front of the leaping Paradon and swiped with all his might using the ghostly sword in his hand!

While expecting the sweet taste of victory, Em-Sul didn't recall it in the moment, but there was an extra set of eyes waiting for him.

Waiting for this exact same moment.

A pair of eyes livid with determination.

The fifth individual within the Territory finally acted.

Chapter 1032: Just One More

Meanwhile...

"You are that Thrilled character, aren't you? I remember the robes. I didn't realise you were Bright Storm's captive now?" Eaniss said while pointing at the Ardent Curse.

Here, on this star, Null Life Essence didn't pool, creating a rigid space where sound couldn't travel before.

Thrill was quite infuriated at the new name he was identified with, but he remained silent. Strangling the Flawless Flail of Ruin in his hand was his only way to deal with his surging emotion.

"It is," Replicus answered for the Curse, his sockets flashing bright. "He has chosen to be my right hand man for a while."

Thrill groaned.

Over the gigantic star which spotted towering bright wisps of nullicious heat, and suffocating fumes, an odd standoff had been set.

Replicus, in his starry armour, and the [Nullmancer's Royal Raiment of Acclimation], Thrill in his white robes, and Araeyn on the red ribbon eerily similar to the one Eaniss was wearing, on one side.

Eaniss herself, the Mad Bishop, Warding Pride and several other Faction Leaders and their subordinates on the other.

The Faction Leaders excluding Eaniss used their Nitros to protect their underlings from the supernatural heat. The expenditure of energy was ridiculous, but most of them could handle it. At least for a little while.

The great sea vessels of all the remaining Factions acted as a dark addition to the background, some stacked on top of each, some already beginning to show signs of burning.

Eaniss and Warding Pride quickly stored theirs in storage, and the others followed their example.

Replicus patiently waited for them all.

"Your business with Em-Sul must be really important for all of us to have been dragged along," Eaniss said with a smile.

Replicus chuckled.

Of course she would know. She had seen Em-Sul get dragged into Baddan's Territory.

"Indeed. But it's not like we're a team or anything, right? All of us here want to kill each other. This is the elimination portion of the voyage. How about I make the first move?" the Penetrator said, and he whipped both his hands before him.

The giant wisps of heat from the star suddenly surged as Skullius used [Greatest Null Weaver] to manipulate them. Since they were nothing but Null Life Essence embodying the nature of extreme heat, they willingly allowed themselves to be sent towards the Factions as a great, blinding tide that gushed with might!

The tide was very dense, so much so that it cracked the surface of the star, creating rifts and rises that spewed even more nullicious flame!

A litany of scorching explosions then ensued, which, when coupled with the awry tide caused the gathered experts to be separated, scattered to many edges of the star!

Because of the potent Nitros, only a few were killed by the piling heat, but the inflictions were never for Replicus to induce right now anyway!

That role was left for the Astute Duke of Transversal.

Araeyn made the Emyrean Ribbon elongate and carry him with extraordinary speed through the wisps and fumes!

Before he fully dived, he recalled what his master had told him some time before:

'Don't kill THAT individual, if you happen to come across him. He's Pherdanta's to deal with.'

Araeyn had grunted but acknowledged the order.

He soon came across one of the scattered members of the Factions, decked in a thin-ish layer of Nitros and he leapt from the Empyrean Ribbon, dropping onto the target with pairs of locked fingers that he smashed down cruelly!

Despite the covering of Nitros, the young man who had been so unlucky to face the Apostle, had his skull squashed into the base of his neck, blood and bone spraying and poking out of his mangled flesh!

[Apostle 'Araeyn Deragin Exonn' has killed LV33 Human. 75 Null Life Essence acquired]

The Empyrean Ribbon wrapped around the corpse of the man, and he sank into its fibres, every bit of him devoured and assimilated.

Right then, a human figure suddenly materialised behind Araeyn, and sent a powerful jab to the back of his head.

Immediately, the Empyrean Ribbon swiftly lengthened and dived to guard the Apostle – despite it being entirely unnecessary. The fist that had been sent his way struck the fabric of the Mythical treasure to no effect.

There was no force of impact at all.

While the assailant's shock faded at this, replaced by the beginning motions of another heartfelt attack, Araeyn's head snapped in the individual's direction.

The attacker, a human in heavy armour lost all the colour in her face when Araeyn disappeared from her sight.

Of course, she wouldn't realise until later on that her head had been divorced from the rest of her body, both being devoured by the Empyrean Ribbon without issue.

Araeyn's eyes scanned the surface of the star. He saw the targets that would be easy pickings for him, and he instantly jumped on the Ribbon had it flash in the direction of said enemies.

In a second, his fist, livid with eight hundred thousand units of Null Life Essence smashed into one Master, ignoring the Nitros that protected him.

His Ribbon reached an enemy a kilometre away and pulled them to the Apostle who simply had them get ground to nothingness by the [Inverted Boundary], the ever-present shield around him which transported all attacks to another dimension.

On and on the Apostle went, mercilessly reaping lives!

He was peculiar, different from the other Apostle's Skullius had ever had.

For one, Araeyn did not have set standards for physical attributes. His physical properties depended on how much Null Life Essence he chose to reinforce his body with.

At the moment, the environmental boost he received from being in a place that could be considered 'home ground' was even more outrageous than the one Baddan and Replicus got.

Where the Penetrator received a 300% increase to his Null Life Essence reserves and a 140% increase to the efficiency of all Null Life related skills, Araeyn got double the augments, as he was the one who summoned and controlled this space; the Boring Mine Nova Star Course.

On top of that, because the Apostle was... who he was, he didn't require cumulative mana to level up. He only needed Null Life Essence. As such, once he vanquished an enemy, he did not need [Null Extraction] to extract their Null Life Essence. It was extracted automatically, just as cumulative mana would.

Four more carefully picked victims later, Araeyn swerved, turning to go find another when...

"Finally! I thought it would be harder to catch you on your own!"

A pale man with white hair left a long, ghostly trail as he reached the Astute Duke.

He wore a devilish smile, his eyes pinned on his prize.

*

Replicus watched from afar as Aurolio confronted Araeyn.

His socket flames reduced to four concentrated beams.

'Again. That insidious interest in Araeyn...' he thought, but he wasn't too concerned. Araeyn was hard to kill, especially in a separate dimension where he controlled pretty much everything.

If anything, he was happy that the Apostle had been doing some heavy work. After all...

[Apostle 'Araeyn Deragin Exonn' has killed LV33 Human. You have received 2,000 EXP]

[Apostle 'Araeyn Deragin Exonn' has killed LV30 Human. You have received 1,500 EXP]

[Apostle 'Araeyn Deragin Exonn' has killed 36 Human. You have received 3,500 EXP]

[Apostle 'Araeyn Deragin Exonn' has killed 28 Human. You have received 990 EXP]

...

[You have levelled up!]

Finally, the Titan World Storm Penetrator had levelled up, reaching Level 79!

How?

Well, because Araeyn didn't need mana to level up, Replicus was free to take all the cumulative mana experience that the Apostle still gained from killing living things, and apply it to himself!

Replicus could almost not remember the last time he had levelled up. He needed vast quantities of experience after reaching the third tier, not to mention the fact that he was responsible for hundreds of other individuals that he had to share the experience – from various sources – with.

Only one level left.

Just one level, and the Penetrator would reach Tier 4, the level that Serenity had promised would hold not only the ultimate powers for him, but all the knowledge he needed about what his purpose as a Null Lifeform even was.

Chapter 1033: Clearing The Riffraff

"If you want to survive, you better fight for your life. I personally wouldn't count on your natural intangibility working against just anyone," Replicus said to Thrill.

The Curse grumbled.

His innate immunity to most forms of attacks was definitely an overpowered ability, but sadly, it didn't work here.

The Curse was only alive because of Araeyn.

In truth, Replicus didn't need Thrill anymore. Whether he lived or died didn't matter to him. He had served his purpose.

However, since it was better to have a party on his side that couldn't turn on him – even if for a little while – he had told Araeyn to make it so that whichever place the Apostle transposed on Aigas didn't kill the Unlimited, Baddan and Thrill instantly.

Such control was well within the Apostle's hands. Thankfully, because of the circumstances, he only had to ward off Null Life Essence from Thrill alone.

Watching the twisting features on Thrill's face, Replicus chuckled.

Right then, however, he suddenly felt a restricting force bind him place.

Several inky black symbols had etched themselves onto his Hollow Dusk Prison armour.

Replicus' sockets flared.

'Warding Pride,' was the Penetrator's immediate thought.

His vision scoured the vicinity.

There was no sign of the Faction Leader. She was probably acting from a distance.

'Wonderful.'

While Warding Pride was nowhere to be found, however, several of her subordinates could be seen launching themselves at the Penetrator through the scorching wisps, thick layers of Nitros being the only bar between them and a particularly harrowing, flaming death!

The first to reach Replicus was a rather alacritous man wielding a menacing glaive.

Well, the glaive was his Genuine Incarnation.

He swung it with confidence, perhaps hoping to split Replicus' face in two and earn Warding Pride's favour.

A crisp clang echoed on impact.

...

Replicus gave a sneer.

'To think these guys still see me as someone they can kill. Does me being a Faction Leader not count for intimidation, even if I'm still a bit new?'

The Penetrator had every reason to think this.

The assailants were given reason to consider this too... when the head of the man with the glaive got a stylish, bloody line that split it in two.

The physical damage had rebounded.

The Penetrator didn't really celebrate the bit of experience that trickled into his status. Instead, he felt awed at the unyielding charge of the enemies – four Masters in all.

Did they think that him being bound to not move a 'muscle' mattered at all?

'Socketholes...'

The Penetrator's body surged with a massive amount of Null Life Essence.

Because of the environmental amp adding to his reserves by 300%, he had 72,000 units of Null Life Essence running through him, plus 140% efficiency in all Null Life related skills!

And with that, Replicus activated [Greatest Null Weaver].

Instantly, an explosive, yet light shockwave rolled out from him in all directions, temporarily lulling the burn of the wisps around him.

Three of the four enemies screamed in agony and grew silent, fondly attached to death an instant later.

Their bodies spotted cruel, lateral lines that delicately split them up into different-sized, different-shaped sections!

By concentrating Null Life Essence, Replicus had used it to carve the flesh of the Masters.

He had taken a liking to this form of attack.

By all means, his original Flaw – the one that disallowed him from doing any kind of damage that did not have penetrative intent – still held. However, circumventing it was easy. Producing slashing attacks was quite simple, as the trick laid in making the edge of the slash be the part that reached the target first, digging into their body!

Such had occurred to the overzealous Masters. All but one.

The one who skirted such a fate was a nimble woman who, as Replicus judged, had been saved by Warding Pride – wherever the Faction Leader was.

Some of the evidence to this, was on the woman's shaking face as she soared above, having somehow been teleported out of the way. She quickly cast away her fear and took action, though.

On her arm, a kite shield appeared which she hid behind as she dropped next to Replicus.

As her feet reached the surface of the star, her shield sent out an all encompassing wave of mana that formed a spherical dome made of the same kind of kite shield multiplied to make the manifest the shape around both her and Replicus.

As soon as it was formed, the dome shrank, shrank again and then shrank some more till there was barely any space left for Replicus and the young woman to exist without burying into each other.

The Penetrator's socket flames surged.

The woman looked at him with a dark face that almost expressed severe age.

With a cruel visage, the woman said her last words:

"Please just die. Then she will be happy."

BOOOOOM!

An eruption that shook the entire star ensued.

It dug an enormous crater into the stellar body, which then allowed for even more ferocious torrent of heat to waft out!

The impact was felt all over, with a massive cloud of dark fumes rising only to stall indefinitely in the Null Life Essence saturated space above!

As impressive as the explosion was, though...

'Suicide bomber. That's rich. Hmm. Odd term...'

A large bolt of Levin shot out of the massive crater which had been formed just now.

It rose into the dark void of space, where thunderclouds began to form all of sudden. The bolt sank into one the clouds and then streaked to another, then another and another.

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'Just when I thought there wasn't much more to him...' Warding Pride said with a deep scowl.

Her seal plus the sacrifice of four good subordinates had failed. She thought the one whom she implanted with a high level exploding seal would at least do some damage, but no.

Bright Storm was seemingly immune to physical damage, and even a high level explosive at point blank range wouldn't do him in.

Warding Pride's lip curled up.

The bastard had now somehow turned into lightning, erasing the need to be held in place by her seal, which wouldn't work on matter so volatile like light. At least this variant of seal wouldn't.

In that moment, a flash of light shredded the boundless space and landed with impact right beside Warding Pride.

The female Faction Leader grit her teeth.

Her location had been found!

From the light set loose by the Levin which rained down, an arm decorated with stars shot out to grip her throat.

Warding Pride reacted adequately.

A hideous, wobbly membrane appeared over her body and caused Replicus' hand to bounce back, repelled by its buoyant nature!

A flesh barrier?!

Replicus also reacted adequately.

After his initial assault failed, a bolt of Levin fell from the clouds he had created in the air and smote Warding Pride hard!

The Faction Leader... had met the attack with a heavily resistant buckler that she mounted on her arm and raised above her head. She must have judged that her membrane barrier wasn't enough.

Warding Pride then lunged at Replicus who also pounced at her... and vanished.

Using the Astral Blizzard corridor, Replicus' own variation of simple speed, he appeared to the left of the blue-skinned woman and pressed his open palm at her side, where the membrane she had created caught it, preventing it from progressing any further.

But then... within the Penetrator's palm, a large ball of darkness appeared.

Distorted Gravity.

Warding Pride's face fell.

The trauma she had felt from those cannons she had seen back then suddenly surfaced for some reason, and she wasn't prepared!

Thankfully...

"HE'S MINE!" a shrill scream came, distracting both Replicus and Warding Pride.

The Bishop, followed by her group of attractive men rushed towards the duo.

Replicus' sockets flashed.

The chaos he had wanted, was starting to turn too chaotic.

In fact...

The Penetrator felt a large hand hook him away from his position and lock him in a vice!

Another Faction Leader had appeared.

Seething fury and hatred could be seen in his face.

'Ah, he's probably mad about that woman,' Replicus thought.

Nedalia, the Incandescent Stager with the mirror Territory, whom he had killed, had come from this man's Faction, it seemed.

Four powerful forces were colliding on this side of the star.

But no.

Perhaps it was five.

Because right at that moment, everything seemed to get brighter, the already glaring highlights on the star becoming doubly so.

Something at least half as large as the stellar body everyone was wrestling on was falling towards them!

Replicus' sockets flashed continuously.

'This bastard! Is he trying to kill us all?!' he screamed in his thoughts.

He had every reason to.

For reasons unknown, Araeyn had saw it fit... to drop another star on top of this one!

Chapter 1034: Dying Star

Aurolio clashed with the Apostle Araeyn.

Admittedly, battling the Astute Duke, wasn't as simple as he had thought. He hadn't seen much of the Emyrean Ribbon before, and thus didn't know that it could attack in tandem with Araeyn as well, making complex movements that were nearly difficult for him to evade.

In a mere fifty seconds, the two contrasting combatants exchanged raw blows over the searing surface of the star.

Araeyn landed a vicious punch to Aurolio's chest and the pale man did the same to the Apostle.

A tumultuous explosion of force that caused a great portion of the star to cave in ensued, its great mass trembling.

'Crazy...' Aurolio thought with a vicious grin.

Both he and Araeyn floated above the inferno pit below, both unmoving, both unharmed. One was coated in a thick film of Null Life Essence, another in Voided Death Essence.

In Araeyn's hollow sockets was pure hatred focused on the man with long white hair.

Something about him agitated the Apostle.

Of course, Aurolio felt this hate, and he knew exactly why it burned like so.

He split off from the Apostle when its red ribbon cut through the air in an attempt to pierce through him.

Landing on a still-intact portion of the star, he scoffed.

'It usually takes one serious blow with my essence to end most opponents. Heck, it wasn't difficult to kill those entities in Genhuis City months ago. But this one, as I thought... this one is different....' Aurolio thought, his mind scrolling to the image of Replicus.

Now that he thought about it, why did he assume that Festos was limited to the flesh form he had seen back then. The version of that Null Lifeform on this side of the world, masquerading as Bright Storm, seemed different. Perhaps behind that starry armour was something... sinister.

Aurolio could assume such an appearance. So perhaps those of Null Life could do it too.

'Should have thought about it sooner,' the pale man thought, his eyes honing in on Araeyn who stood on his floating ribbon. 'This thing must be unique in some way. Different from the other stuff Festos summoned for me. I suppose Null Life must have a larger variety.'

All that said...

"Hey, ugly," Aurolio said to Araeyn. "You have been deeply, deeply, disappointing. Is reinforcing yourself with Null Life Essence the only thing you can do?"

This, from Aurolio, was genuine.

He indeed desired to kill as many hard-to-kill enemies and absorb a lot of experience. Such enemies, could no longer be found so easily among the natural residents of Aigas because of his technique.

He needed to fight opponents from Existential Parallels.

Strong ones.

He truly wished that the opponent before him could be the first of very few to make use of anything beyond his technique, basic Voided Death Essence reinforcement and his Veneration art.

...And well, he was right.

Araeyn grew more agitated at the pale man's taunt.

GRRRRRRK.

The Apostle's wrath was manifested near instantly.

Something truly huge fell on Aurolio's head.

Something bright.

Something... close to death.

The pale man was elated.

He looked up and let out a primal roar.

"|Oh yes my dear ugly! Keep it up and this just might get interesting!!|"

It suddenly occurred to Replicus that there was a more-obvious-than-the-obvious reason why this region of the Null Verse was called the Boring Mine Nova Star Course.

'Mine' and 'Nova' seemed to be significant in this title.

Evidence to this, was the fact that the giant, far hotter star dropping on his head, was not ordinary. There was a blinking, web-like orange light menacingly glowing with different intensities deep within it, past the bluish white exterior!

This thing...

This dwarf star...

It was going to explode!

Replicus cursed.

The star had an immense amount of force behind its motion, which, frighteningly, did not really show. The mass seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, when in actuality, it was dragged from afar by the Astute Duke.

While the power behind its movement did not act upon this star, however, the dwarf star did seem to come to a halt.

Something pushed it back.

Something unseen.

As significant of a feat that was for whoever did this, it didn't seem to matter.

The ominous tinge of red on the star grew intense, and spread wider.

'Now's my cue!' Replicus thought, and he turned into a bolt of lightning that sped away from the star.

Unlucky for him, though, it seemed the Faction Leader who had him in a vice still managed to grip the tail end of his boltly form!

The Penetrator cursed.

He saw the Bishop, Eaniss and their subordinates follow after him through the dense space and cursed even more.

...

When the luminance of the stars they had left behind was starting to fade, it finally happened.

Silently, the dwarf star erupted like a bomb.

For a few minutes, no one saw anything.

The only sensation to be felt, especially for Replicus and everyone around him, was a horrible propulsion from behind them, which sent them barrelling through space with speeds they could only dream of traversing at when or if they reached Divinity!

Replicus didn't know who to thank for experiencing this phenomenon while in his Levin form.

It was so much more bearable.

The same wasn't true for the Faction Leader who had somehow held onto him.

Replicus felt his coat of Nitros being peeled away faster than he could recover it. Soon, the man screamed so loudly, and hoarsely, that it sounded like his throat got torn in the process.

Without the protection of his Nitros, whatever manner of friction he had experienced with his body shredded every inch of his being.

Soon, he was left behind in the depth of the Null space, shrivelled and hunched.

'If that's the fate he had to endure, what happened to everyone we left on the star?' Replicus thought.

If even he, who was affiliated with phenomenon related to Null Life Essence wasn't sure he could have survived that, what about everyone else?

Was Eaniss still alive?

Was Thrill?

While it was the Penetrator's plan to reduce the number of competitors and deplete the resources of those he couldn't get rid of... wasn't it working a bit too well?

Experience flooded in through his guidance field, making him relax a bit.

Thank goodness Em-Sul wasn't anywhere close to here.

If he was, he and the Harmonic Ember might have been erased from existence.

Speaking of that...

'How are the others faring? I need to get back to them. I had Araeyn split them and us apart to give those four breathing room. I'm going to need to find them soon.'

Five minutes later, when the group decelerated enough to see the dotted black space clearly again, Replicus assumed his Penetrator form once more.

Behind him, the Bishop and her burly men, as well as Warding Pride and what remained of her subordinates could be seen.

Unlike the Faction Leader who died just now, they were just fine, though Warding Pride looked a little pale.

She must expended a lot of energy.

Replicus' sockets flashed.

The Bishop, on the other hand, looked freshly mad.

"Enough running!" she cried.

Replicus chuckled.

"I'm not anymore."

The old hag grinned.

"Good!"

She then clapped her hands.

Suddenly, Replicus felt his feet hit something solid. The boundless expanse of Null space was suddenly shut away, replaced instead, by an odd field of sacredness.

The Penetrator had been brought into a place of worship.

Chapter 1035: Place of Worship

The same grand cathedral had risen once again.

Seven stories tall, branded on its walls with caramel, the construct stood proud, the silvery blue windows showing on all its levels reflecting the bright luminance of the stars beyond.

Four turrets shot from the cathedral, at their top ends an oil-painting of the Bishop, highlighted unnecessarily to sell her position in the odd religion she had manufactured for reasons unknown.

Perhaps it was a dream of hers, as a Priestess, to introduce more variety in Aigas.

Who knew?

Within the cathedral, a great hall accommodated the cautious Replicus, frowning Warding Pride and delighted Bishop.

It was very spacious.

A little too spacious.

Large, silvery blue tiling made up the floor while a pale gold ceiling littered with the same sort of glassy chandelier showed above.

At the front of the hall, behind the Bishop, was a massive oil-painted mural of a distorted version of her seeming to look oddly at Replicus and Warding Pride at the same time.

The Bishop let out a childish laugh.

Primus oozed from her and engulfed her nine followers. All nine began to float in the massive hall, tunics of light appearing over their bodies.

"Do you remember the penultimate point of our arrangement, Bright Storm?" the Bishop asked.

Replicus didn't answer.

His focus, wasn't on the old woman currently. His concern laid with the bulking men rising in the air.

Oh no.

It was coming!

That damn song was coming!

Even Warding Pride seemed to be preparing for it.

"We agreed that if you lost to me, you would have to join my faith!" the Bishop cried.

Right then, the nine men opened their mouths and began to sing a melody that was both mesmerising and ominous.

"Listen to the collective,

The collective of pure thought,

This indeed is collective,

The collective of lull thought,

The fire burning in the senses,

Let it cool and simmer down,

The fire raging to the sword,

Let it cool, let it simmer down,

The collective thought, the collective,

Come together quiet just as one,

The collective thought, the su-um,

Come together, lay hate down~"

Replicus felt the effects immediately.

The Bishop had used this song when the Factions were trapped in the Cluster with the Ardent Curses days ago.

The song, unlike compulsion, did not affect the soul in order to in turn affect the body. The song affected the body directly as long as one heard it.

All who heard would lose their will to fight and slowly feel themselves grow heavy, saturated from within by a lazy desire to stare at the cathedral and relax.

Back then, the only reason Replicus managed to resist was because he had Allora close by. The Unlimited had used her Mind Casting to reinforce everyone's minds, making it so that their bodies weren't as affected.

Right now, though, Skullius had no such cost efficient counter.

Worse yet, different from before, he was within the Bishop's cathedral, something he hadn't known was possible with her technique.

If he had to guess, there was no way to leave this cathedral conventionally.

'Flesh it!'

Replicus stormed towards the Bishop, vanishing into the Astral Blizzard Corridor!

Just like last time, it took a little longer for the full effect of the song to make him completely lose all his functionality.

Thus, he decided that his best bet was to deal with the Bishop before that.

Appearing in front of the Bishop, Replicus manifested a bolt of Levin; long, bright and saturated with mana!

He hurled it at the Bishop from close range.

However, the old woman didn't move.

She seemed confident despite having dispelled her Nitros.

A brilliant figure flashed before her and got pierced by it in her stead. The bolt of Levin sank through both arms as the man tried to defend.

It was one of the nine, a balloon-like man... who kept singing despite having the bolt poking behind him!

Replicus didn't stop.

He hadn't stopped.

He stretched his hand forward and a giant ball of Distorted Gravity manifested before him!

He was just going to have to make it hard for the Bishop and her goons to lavishly sing merry and act nonchalant!

As expected, this... seemed to have made the Bishop wary.

She finally moved.

Replicus didn't quite understand how everything played out, but...

His gravity ball seemed to pop like a balloon and then, in the next instance, he found himself in another portion of the hall, far from where he had been.

"You didn't even realise it, do you? You nearly died right there."

The Penetrator turned beside him and saw Warding Pride bearing a disdainful look as she gazed down at him.

A large, metallic cube floated before her. Well, half of it was molten, its bits falling to the tiled floor.

It seemed like another one of her specialised shields.

"If I hadn't pushed you out of the way, the Bishop was going to punch you into oblivion, just like she did to whatever that thing you summoned was."

Replicus socket flames flickered.

Wait...

What?

"You're still more green than you think. Proud and stupid. You thought taking out the riff-raff in the Union would prove that you are someone worth a title you gained after coaxing Eaniss. Now, all that babble is showing its fruit. You didn't even realise the true strength of someone you boldly decided to play a death game with."

Indeed. Indeed it seemed so.

Replicus could only imagine. If the Bishop, as Warding Pride said, just punched gravity...

The Penetrator opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out.

"Don't bother speaking to me. I can't hear anything at the moment..." Warding Pride said, her eyes turning to the Bishop who gave them both a very cross look from the distance

At the mention, Replicus noticed that Warding Pride had several large, dark symbols over her body.

His immediate guess as to their purpose was that they blocked out all sound that attempted to reach Warding Pride, eliminating the threat of the Collective song for her.

Unfortunately, this application didn't seem to work for anyone other than the blue-skinned Faction Leader. Replicus noticed that her subordinates had succumbed to the song's effect a fair distance away.

"Are you really disturbing our innocent game, Warding Pride?!" the Bishop bellowed.

Warding Pride smiled, shrugged and gestured to her ears.

In truth, she could understand the Bishop by reading her lips though.

The Mad Bishop seethed. Her empty socketholes then turned to Replicus.

"Is this it? Are you really done already?"

The full appeal of the Collective song, which had yet to stop, was finally affecting the Penetrator. He felt his mind slip, becoming both exhausted and dysfunctional.

His body followed, growing very heavy.

He kneeled.

'Ah... in the end, my current level of strength still isn't even a close match for these guys, huh?' Replicus thought.

The current him truly was lacking.

That was why he needed all these plans and schemes, after all.

He felt Warding Pride grip the top of his helmet and apply immense force. She then addressed the Bishop.

"I don't know what kind of understanding you have with him, but I think you should know what he is before committing to anything," she said with a triumphant grin. "Some things aren't as they seem. This especially applies to PEOPLE."

The Bishop raised a brow.

Warding Pride looked down at Replicus.

She had only saved him just now because she wanted some closure.

She, just like the rest of the top brass of the Severed Union, knew that the Bishop often lost control of her immense physical strength, which seemed to increase unreasonably the more followers she got.

She couldn't have Bright Storm die by a ungodly punch that turned him into dust.

"Remember what I told you back when you foolishly decided to play games with me? This is exactly what I envisioned. You at my mercy," she scoffed.

Warding Pride gripped Replicus' helmet tighter. Of course, she couldn't unmask him like some common villain with a ski mask. The Hollow Dusk Prison was a Mythical grade item, after all.

Instead, she planned to reveal Replicus' nature to the Bishop in a flashy manner. She aimed to blow it up with a seal.

A better one than what she used last time.

This was going to be very sweet.

...

The sudden disappearance of the helmet she held, however, caught her by surprise.

The Hollow Dusk's Prison vanished before she could do anything, revealing the bare features of the Titan World Storm Penetrator.

As expected, the Bishop recoiled in genuine shock, as did her nine flying man-cherubs.

She didn't think.... no one would have thought that this... was what the Penetrator looked like.

"What is... THAT?" she said as her face contorted in revulsion.

Warding Pride did the same.

While she had seen Replicus' face, she had never seen his full body.

The pitch black skeleton whose body seemed to be laced with lightning on every fibre...

This same skeleton suddenly pointed up with its bony hand as it knelt, taking advantage of its stunned enemies.

Then, from its finger, a familiar light was fired.

A light that the Bishop recalled without any kind of fondness.

It was light that ate away at her cathedral's seven stories in an instant before erupting out the roof with a triumphant bang!

Chapter 1036: Coordinated Disruption

With the use of [Epiphany], a Nullmancer exclusive skill that allowed him to analyse and learn concepts just by being exposed to them, Replicus had been able to assimilate the core power that allowed the Flawless Flail of Ruin – the Cluster General Hope's wand – to disrupt and restore guarded energy mechanisms.

He had had Thrill use the wand on him many times in the last three days, with each time the Penetrator paying with Null Life Essence to get a higher affinity for the concept.

As a result...

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[ Affinities ]

[ Coordinated Disruption – A ]

~~~

Coordinated Disruption.

That was the name of newly learned concept.

While it worked quite well in the hands of the Penetrator, it was arguably better applied using the Flawless Flail of Ruin since there was practically no resource cost.

And there lay the problem in learning Coordinated Disruption as a concept.

...

The cathedral's layers exploded, shattering like glass in the face of the orange light!

The black space outside the cathedral was revealed instantly.

The Bishop and Warding Pride wore dark faces as the chilling expanse of endless Null Life Essence poured into the cathedral once again. It meant they had to guard earnestly once more with Nitros!

"Bright Storm!" the Bishop cried, half aggrieved and half furious. "You deceiver! Are... are you truly no more than a walking corpse!"

Warding Pride, who was nearest to the Penetrator grunted in fury and struck him hard with the remains of that block-like shield she had had tank a blow from the Bishop for his sake.

Replicus was sending flying across the hall, which was starting to scatter as well.

His entire right set of ribs was broken, including his spine, but he was fine.

It seemed unique artefacts meant for absorbing harsh physical impacts were the bane of his Deviant Trigger Build, which rebounded all physical impacts below a certain threshold.

Thankfully, Prime Perpetuation, his variation of the Health stat, was unimpeded.

It allowed him to keep feeling and acting his best, even if his body was horribly damaged.

Replicus landed on his feet and immediately activated [Brilliant King's Adoring Stars].

Nodes of Levin, fifty in all appeared like miniature stars around and above him, and started pouring rejuvenating Null Life Essence as bolts right onto him!

Skullius' cracked bones were quickly healed, and he was empowered by the 210% attack power boost the skill gave.

This was in addition to [Epiphany]'s 110% increase in skill efficiency and proficiency.

...And the environmental amp of 140%!

Replicus felt frightening power run through his bones.

His sockets flashed blindingly, eclipsing even the brilliance of the fifty bolts striking silently at him!

"This is what I am," he said, two sets of his socket flames seeming to be shared between glaring at Warding Pride and the Mad Bishop who looked at him oddly.

They were repulsed by him.

They were revolted by him.

"This is who I am! I am not one of you, and I never will be! I am bone, Levin and Null Life walking among you! I'm no beast! I'm no undead! I'm no source of entertainment for either of you!

You best take me fleshing seriously!"

The words of the Penetrator, no, of SKULLIUS, reverberated through what remained of the hall.

It was impossible to miss, even for Warding Pride, because his words travelled through the pool of Null Life Essence, amplified several fold.

Replicus' hand was still aglow with the orange light of Coordinated Disruption.

It was because of this that the song of the Collective no longer had its tight hold on him.

That said, this was all Replicus could manage for now.

The reason he didn't start firing off Disruption sooner, was because there was huge cost.

It turned out that disrupting a technique, cost an amount of mana equivalent to a third of the target's total mana reserves.

In other words, to successfully disrupt the Bishop's strange cathedral, Replicus had to pay one third of the Bishop's total mana quantity as payment.

And of course, the Bishop's reserves were more monstrous than his, which were temporarily amped through [Sage Save] and [Sage Strain].

That was why he had hesitated.

At the moment, Replicus was relying on his second mana core, which was also bolstered by [Sage Strain] and [Sage Save] to reach blue quality.

His primary core, which had been boosted to purple, was nearly exhausted.

Still...

'I'll manage!' Replicus thought and he set his sights on the flying nine.

He had to kill them before his reserves of mana depleted at least.

Before he could, however...

A dark shadow was cast over him.

A great stone double gate with a fierce demon's face carved onto it appeared to his left.

This was Warding Pride's doing!

What was this?

A seal?

A barrier?

"Fine then, Bright Storm! I'll take you seriously. Survive this and you would have made your point. Not that that will save you. You are still going to die."

The blue-skinned Faction Leader's voice came.

The odd gates she made opened right after, groaning as though they hadn't been opened in centuries.

Water came out.

Rather, a great flood.

It poured so swiftly, and with such great volume that Replicus had barely managed to attempt to use Spatial Lightning to evade when he was completely submerged.

Just after he was buried, though – he and the Brilliant King's Adoring Stars – the vast gush of water which had almost covered half the hall's floor in a moment... froze solid.

Its enormous size oozed cold steam while growing from the only thing remaining of the cathedral; the wide flooring, which was also disintegrating as well.

Replicus felt that he couldn't move. No part of his body could so much as twitch.

"This is a semi-living organism I captured in a high level Cluster a decade ago. Once you are trapped inside it, all your bodily functions will cease because of the ungodly level of cold, and every cell in your body dies," Warding Pride said as she walked over to the large body of ice.

White flakes of it continued growing outward, greedily attempting to devour anything else in the vicinity.

"This thing won't stop reaching its cold fangs if you give it the chance, and it always recognises old prey. So even for someone like you..."

ZWOOOOP!!

Warding Pride's eyes moved at the sound.

Replicus' pitch black skeletal figure appeared with a flash of grey over the body of ice. He had used Spatial Lightning on himself to escape, a feat that didn't require him to move at all.

The Brilliant King's Adoring Stars followed after him.

The massive body of ice, unfortunately, also followed.

It immediately turned liquid and lunged at him!

Replicus flashed in the air again and again as the odd monster leapt.

It truly did indeed hold a grudge.

'This isn't going to work,' Replicus thought. The glow of Coordinated Disruption was still alight on his hand, but it wasn't going work in this instance.

Warding Pride and the Bishop made their way towards him, shooting through space with differing means after the tiling of the hall finally vanished.

The Bishop's crazed expression and her constant call of his moniker told Replicus all he needed to know about her mental state.

Warding Pride had succeeded in turning the Bishop against him, though probably not in the way she intended.

'I can't win against them in a physical contest. Matching them blow for blow is impossible. I'm just going to have to apply the Titan World Storm arsenal,' Replicus thought.

He had decided to switch to the more hard-hitting skills he had on his racial side three days ago anyway.

He readied himself as the wide body of water splashed against him from below, behind it the figures of two mighty Faction Leaders.

'I just have to survive long enough...'

At that moment, Replicus thought he heard a loud roar that made his soul shiver, but he didn't pay it much mind. He couldn't afford to be distracted.

While focusing his mana reserves, he activated his most powerful Titan World Storm Penetrator skill after, of course, [Titan World Storm]...

A instant later, the Penetrator's body ruptured into a gigantic mass...

Chapter 1037: Titan World Canvas!

...!!!

A furious mass of thunderclouds replaced the figure of the Penetrator, easily engulfing the semi-living water creature Warding Pride had unleashed, Warding Pride herself and the Mad Bishop!

It swept through a much larger range past the three, easily encompassing a fifteen kilometre range with its black hue and uneven design.

Bolts of Levin as thick as a normal human being was wide raced madly within the thickets, jutting in and out of the clouds as though supercharging the behemoth.

The [Titan World Canvas] was fully formed, and around it, spaced out rather... spaciouly, were the star nodes for [Brilliant King's Adoring Stars], constantly funnelling rejuvenating Null Life Essence into the Penetrator's form!

Formally, it had been the [Vivid Firmament Canvas], but after Replicus evolved, the skill was transformed into a better, bigger version of itself.

'He suddenly changed his shape?' Warding Pride thought as she swam within the almost tangible mass of clouds.

Her figure was highlighted by never-ending Levin that circled around it, its vibrant, pure form that barely resembled lightning at all inspiring great caution!

The Bishop was similar stunned.

She couldn't understand what this was. Or rather, she was starting to judge every move Replicus made with the new information she had seen about him.

Of course the blasted deceiver could simply turn himself into a cloud!

He wasn't human!

...!!!

Right then, a massive surge of mana echoed through the rifts and bloats of the clouds!

Warding Pride's eyes ballooned.

Her surroundings suddenly became glaringly bright, making her squint. Then, an outpour of deafening noise as impactful as the bold jet of Levin that stormed her way fell on her with haste!

Its power and size was great, but what was even greater was its piercing power which the Faction Leader sensed was the most lethal thing about it!

Before she had time to gather her thoughts, Warding Pride was already conjuring an golden green, egg-shaped barrier around herself.

Right when it fully formed, Warding Pride felt a shattering boom, and was sent shooting down the mass of black, illuminated cloud!

She streaked with great speed!

Such might!

That jet of Levin packed a punch!

Fortunately for her, her barrier didn't break, but...

...!!!

Four more crushing impacts bashed against her barrier, and she heard a subtle cracking noise that made her scowl.

'Where the hell is all this power coming from?!' she thought as she sweat.

She wouldn't have known, but...

~~~

[Titan World Storm (Special) | Lv.2]

The user becomes a great storm cloud brimming with super condensed Levin, one of the forms a Titan World Storm Veil Penetrator can take. In this form, the user's skills obtain a 410% increase in power and range, while the user themselves becomes completely immune to physical attacks.

The user's awareness is also bolstered by an immense degree, making them conscious of everything within double the range of their attacks.

Mana Requirements: 9750 (I) Mana Points, 1200 (I) every day skill remains active.

Duration: ---

Cooldown: 3 days

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Naturally, it wasn't exclusively this skill's characteristics that gave the sudden boosts to Replicus' abilities.

[Epiphany] played a part.

[Brilliant King's Adoring Stars] also played its part.

Yet still, Warding Pride's barrier remained firm. For the most part.

That was why...

...!!!

Warding Pride felt something hurtling towards her.

As she could freely manipulate the egg-shaped barrier around her, she managed to see past it.

A humanoid figure seemingly made out of the same Levin attempting to pierce her barrier zoomed through the thickets blocking its way, heading right for her.

Warding Pride didn't need any guesses to know... this was Bright Storm.

The bastard could simultaneously exist as the cloud and as a form of Levin that could interact with matter!

Given the 410% increase in range of all skills, this version of the Penetrator was also nearly impossible to escape!

A moment before Replicus reached the Faction Leader, the Hollow Dusk Prison covered his white, Levin figure.

Warding Pride brought her hands together to summon a seal when...

The Penetrator pointed at her with his starry forefinger... and an orange light engulfed his hand!

...!!!

'THAT AGAIN?!' Warding Pride thought.

That strange ability to erase techniques?!

If he used it, her barrier would vanish, wouldn't it?!

The Faction Leader briskly changed her plan.

Instead of summoning seals, she instantly made a gesture with her hands.

She needed to use her Majestic Territory to end this!

Yes. That would put this mess to an end!

However...

When she saw the orange light dim from Replicus' hand right when he reached the outside the egg-shaped barrier, Levin pouring harmlessly through him... she froze.

Because she had been misled.

The Penetrator's middle finger joined his index at pointing at Warding Pride's barrier.

What came in Coordinated Disruption's stead was...

"Aggrante."

CRAAAACK!

After an unstoppable highlight bled from the Penetrator's armour like a shooting star, Warding Pride's barrier finally gave in.

The stream of super condensed mana and Null Life Essence, after conquering the egg-shaped barrier, went on to clash against Warding Pride's Nitros.

Unfortunately, against raw Null Life Essence, Nitros was just about as useless in stopping it as a Territory.

Warding Pride growled in agony as her side and left arm were fried and then eroded as though touched acid.

Replicus felt an immense amount of satisfaction at the sight. He almost drowned in the feeling.

Warding Pride's piercing eye glared at him with never-ending hate.

'Yes. Taste that, will you?' Replicus chanted within his mind.

This was his last chance to fight Warding Pride as a Faction Leader.

He didn't let up.

...But cold frost threatened the moment.

A surge of bluish white ice practically materialised within his mass of clouds and began freezing it as though it were tangible matter!

'Dammit!' Replicus cursed.

What a bitter time for a foe to jump in!

Horribly enough, Warding Pride used the chance to flee before Replicus could deliver more definitive damage!

'Brilliant! Just brilliant!' the Penetrator thought before his Hollow Dusk Prison vanished from him, his white form dissipating.

....

The Penetrator appeared on top of his massive body of clouds.

To his shock, the rate at which his [Titan World Canvas] form was freezing solid was atrocious!

Had he been too focused on getting rid of Warding Pride to notice?

'I lost my chance. That stunt was meant to at least fatally wound that blue-skinned wench. I'm down to 30% of my second mana core's reserves. I can't afford to waste anymore Null Life Essence on Aggrante either.'

The Hollow Dusk Prison worked just like the Unlimited's Granted Armament. It had a setting for Aggrante as well, which used his reserves of Null Life Essence.

Unfortunately for Replicus, while he could luxuriously create numerous lumps of mana to add to his mana cores – after killing opponents – he couldn't do the same with Null Life Essence.

For as long as he could remember, the only way to increase his capacity for Null Life Essence, was to kill living creatures and absorb it from them.

He could manipulate the boundless Null Life Essence around him right now, but he couldn't use it for refills.

The last Aggrante he had just used had guzzled 20,000 units, leaving him at 52,000 Null Life Essence units.

The Penetrator couldn't use more. He needed every last bit left.

He needed it for when the Harmonic Ember was in his hands!

'If I had a Null Life Essence core like Araeyn, I could probably manipulate the Essence here better. It also doesn't help that [Greatest Null Weaver] is a simple normal skill...'

Indeed. Having a core like Araeyn might help. Maybe then, Replicus could even tweak his stats as much as he wanted with Null Life Essence and not have to rely solely on killing for a refill even in situation like this!

Replicus dived into the clouds. Since his latest attack had failed, he was going to have to figure out a less draining means of attack.

If he had dealt with Warding Pride just now, things may have been a little easier. He considered the blue-skinned Faction Leader as the lighter of his two main enemies.

He wouldn't have dreamed of attacking the Bishop first.

After all... he had also distributed a lot of firepower her way at the same time he attacked Warding Pride.

The elderly Priestess... had tanked it all with her Nitros alone. She had even protected her nine holy-wannabes!

The Bishop was truly monstrous.

Replicus watched her from afar.

She was raving something about him being a coward while zooming through the Titan World Canvas.

Worse yet, she had an illusory cathedral around her.

'This is the same ability that grants her some kind of immortality. It's probably a variation of the real cathedral I just destroyed...' Replicus thought.

He cursed.

Coordinated Disruption worked in two forms.

It was possible to aim it at the source of the technique, which would neutralise said technique, and leave the wielder unable to use it. It could also be used on the technique itself, which only led to it being disrupted temporarily.

Sadly, both options had the same resource cost, with the only exception being when the user of Disruption merely hindered the effects of techniques from reaching them.

And despite this seeming like a worthwhile application, it only worked on techniques that didn't pack a punch. Defending oneself from a song was simple enough.

'Too many enemies...'

Replicus felt Warding Pride's presence east of the Canvas. She was probably recovering.

The odd water monster was still freezing his body and the Bishop was scouring it to find him.

"Flesh it!" Replicus yelled and the large body started to move.

The Canvas surged, zooming at considerable speed towards a certain direction.

The Penetrator truly hoped he would arrive in one piece.

Chapter 1038: Disabled

The Boring Mine Nova Star Course was incredibly vast, so much so that one would wonder if Araeyn had perhaps warped a third of this side of Aigas into it.

That wasn't the case, however.

The Star Course was a compressed space, made to fit within the same stretch of Aigas that Araeyn was capable of transposing it onto.

As such, this Null space existed in two states. It was massive and it was also, somewhat small. The only ones who could interpret the Star Course in this manner, though, were those who understood Null Life Essence.

Replicus had used [Titan World Canvas] both as a means to defend himself and also as a means to bolster his sensory capabilities. The latter, was his main objective, which was why he wasn't quite as displeased that he had practically wasted mana for nothing with Warding Pride.

With the expanded senses he acquired, he managed to reach into the void of space, searching, scouring for Baddan's Territory.

Because it was also uniquely tied to Null Life concepts – the creatures summoned through Baddan's technique – Replicus had been able to sense it after not-too-long.

The large ball of white, within it several individuals ganging up on one man – as the Penetrator thought – was sitting among the stars... far, far away.

'If only that damn Apostle was a little more subservient!' Replicus thought as the [Titan World Canvas] exploded towards this direction.

Right when everyone had entered the Star Course, Replicus had commanded Araeyn to separate him and everyone else from Baddan's Territory, but the blasted Apostle had overdone it. He had taken them too far. The Penetrator had a sneaking suspicion that Araeyn was already beginning to rebel. The wrinkled newborn was a menace.

'Blaming him for all this won't help my case. I just need to speed things up some more!' Replicus thought.

This was easier said than done though. His thundercloud body was quickly being frozen by the semi-living thing that Warding Pride had summoned. Its abilities were shockingly effective on matter it shouldn't have been able to freeze. Replicus tried to apportion a part of his mana to rain bolts of Levin as powerful as those he had sent towards Warding Pride, towards the frosted abomination.

The results weren't pleasing.

Unlike Warding Pride, it didn't have phenomenal defences, but it was capable of rapidly 'regenerating' the massive chunks of ice that were shaved off its body by the consecutive bolts. Worse yet, it began to adapt to the situation by turning portions of itself into liquid, which made Replicus' efforts even more wasteful as penetration damage didn't exactly do much to bodies of water.

As if this wasn't enough, Warding Pride had recovered to some degree from the earlier attack and was chasing his storming cloud body. There was no small amount of fury brimming from the Faction Leader.

The Penetrator grunted in displeasure.

He had one option here.

Well, he had multiple, but most would produce a similar result to what had happened with Warding Pride at best, and that's why he didn't use them.

His thoughts laid in using Spatial Lightning to transport his body to Baddan's Territory, but that wasn't such a good idea at the moment. If he teleported, he was inevitably going to bring the water monstrosity with him and add it to whatever tribulations his subordinates were facing against Em-Sul.

Worse yet, using Spatial Lightning over such a distance, would drain a sizable chunk of his mana reserves.

The worst of it was that there was a chance that the four he sent were nowhere near close to retrieving the Harmonic Ember, which would make his waste of mana pointless. The then him joining the four probably wouldn't help much either.

'Damn it...'

As Replicus sensed the firm Territory, showing no signs of being dispelled, his thoughts spiralled.

"Bright Storm!"

A shrill call came just as the top layer of clouds to the [Titan World Canvas], was ripped through. The Bishop and nine angelic-wannabes appeared and all faced Replicus, their bodies – almost pure and sacred – engulfed by Nitros!

Replicus was alarmed.

It wasn't because he hadn't sensed the Bishop coming. He had. However, he didn't think she would be donning her rare serious expression, devoid of traces of mirth and madness.

Replicus wasn't in the know as much as the other Faction Leaders about the Bishop, but he did know that she was at her most dangerous when she shed that layer of insanity she always wore for some reason.

In that regard, Warding Pride had been right. Replicus was still green.

"What is the meaning of this, Bright Storm? Are you looking down on all of us? How could you dare to wiggle your way through our ranks pretending to be one of us, pretending to honour what it is to be one of us. There is no greater spit in the face than a beast making comrades of us with

hidden intent. You do realise what the Severed Union exists for you, don't you?" the Bishop said in a cold tone.

She made no moves to attack, but that didn't give Replicus any peace of mind.

"I know, I know," he said, holding his ground. "But I already told you. I'm not one of you. I never wanted to be. But, I do embody the same things you do. Selfishness, self-service... I really wasn't hurting anyone by exercising the ideals that make someone... human, right?"

The Bishop's face showed no emotion.

Her hollow sockets remained pinned on Replicus.

"Is that all you've learned about being human, beast?"

'Beast, huh?' Replicus thought.

The Bishop was quickly changing how she addressed him.

"No. Far from it. I've devoured the memories of thousands of humans. No shot that I would only learn that much. But these traits do take someone pretty far," the Penetrator said.

The Bishop merely hummed. It was impossible to know what she felt from just this alone, but her sudden step forward atop the clouds did tell that she now saw Replicus as someone to extinguish mercilessly.

"I've been alive for 322 years. I have heard many calamitous beasts speak in a manner you do, providing logic to their actions or none at all," she said. "I see you as no different from them. In fact, you might be worse."

Replicus readied himself.

He didn't know what he was going to do next, but he was sure he wasn't going to meet his end like this.

No way.

No wa...

ROOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAAR!

A great, loud roar that shook his soul shattered his resolve and made it so that his thundercloud form came to a halt.

His radiant humanoid figure was frozen still.

The Bishop was too, and so was Warding Pride, who had been approaching from behind.

Replicus couldn't think for a hot second. His mind went numb.

What in the world was that?

In the next instant, the wide expanse littered with stars, suddenly vanished.

The dark Null space was replaced by the familiar, sunny-ish skies, filled with mana and moderacy.

[Grandiose Manifestation] was disabled, which brought all those who had been dragged into the Boring Mine Nova Star Course back to the ebony sea.

This sea, however, was no longer calm, and neither was it hollowed out as it had been because of the struggle of Territories earlier.

No. It was full and level.

However, it was boiling, as though a great volcanic mountain had awakened right under it.

Chapter 1039: Vision of Misery! (1)

In the moments that followed, Replicus found his cognitive abilities returning to him, his mind turning lively again after what felt like years of being preserved in ice.

Indeed, he was back in Aigas.

Indeed, below his feet, the ebony waters were boiling, releasing toxic fumes in the process.

Indeed, he had heard a vicious roar just now, one that he could have sworn no regular tiered beast on Aigas could have made. It had shaken his soul only slightly the first time he heard it, and chose to ignore, but right now, the saying that went 'sound is nothing but a pair of shy hands' seemed to get validated.

Worse than the sound and the vexing view of the boiling sea, was how space seemed to crane and melt. Replicus wasn't sure if it was an illusion or not, but he was inclined to believe it was. After all, there was no way Aigas was tilting to the right, with the clouds above melting like wax.

Speaking of these clouds, they were moving now. They raced in the new, slanted direction which the world was supposedly tilting towards.

'Flesh me! What is going on?!' Replicus thought... and then it hit him.

'Wait. Am I...?'

Indeed, he was.

He was no longer a massive storm cloud.

He was the pitch-black skeleton, the Titan World Storm Penetrator embedded within the Hollow Dusk Prison.

When was [Titan World Canvas] dispelled, and how?!

As his socket flames gushed inconsistently, the Penetrator summoned his thought phantoms, and they frantically screeched possibilities in his mind.

"What in the world is this? Can you all feel that? Something really, really bad is coming."

"Worse than that you sockethole, how in the world did our thundercloud body and Araeyn's [Grandiose Manifestation] suddenly end before their respective durations were up? I could have sworn there was still four or five minutes left for [Grandiose Manifestation], and we sure as flesh didn't disable [Titan World Canvas], right?"

"No, you fool! Listen to the first guy! I'm willing to bet whatever is coming is what's causing all this? Can't you sense it?"

"Its bizarre. I feel it on our bones. It's like the world is sick or something?"

...

What was coming?

Replicus focused his senses North.

Oh yeah.

At that moment, it didn't matter to him that the Bishop and Warding Pride were only a few hundred meters from him on either of his sides. It didn't matter that the liquid-ice monstrosity had sunk into the ebony sea.

The Faction Leaders were stunned, and were also gazing intently in the direction that Replicus set his eyes.

What was coming?

Whatever it was, seemed to either have a very deep shadow or several massive ones. It was impossible to say it was one or the other.

Distorted shapes of whatever this thing was, dark silhouettes, ran across the surface of the sea hundreds of miles away.

They were both slow and fast.

They seemed infinitely wide.

Replicus' sight couldn't tell where each of these – or where this one vast shadow – ended whether from the West or the East.

Worse yet, the owner of these shadows couldn't be seen over them.

If anything, it seemed the shadows were a mere carpet, a prelude announcing its arrival as they shredded the ebony liquids.

ROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAARRRRRRR!!!

Another great roar came and to Replicus and everyone else... the world turned dark and muffled with only the voice of whatever god was approaching prevailing, burying every sense and will under its oppression until its echoes faded.

As Replicus' sockets flickered, he couldn't help but think that the sea had dipped a little. A large portion of it had evaporated.

'That roar. It... it's trying to freeze my thoughts! I need to act fast!' Replicus thought and he immediately began surveying the surroundings.

If everyone was spat out of the Boring Mine Nova Star Course, then...

As expected, the Penetrator saw Araeyn, quite a distance away. The Apostle was standing on the Empyrean Ribbon, opposite him the figure of a slightly battered Aurolio.

The pale man had a disgusting laceration on his cheek that revealed the set of teeth behind it. The sleeve to his thick jacket was also gone, exposing a flayed arm.

The conditions concerning his altercation with Araeyn boiled down to only this. At face value, it seemed the Apostle had been giving Aurolio the works, but the unexpected sequence of events had torn their attention from each other. They too were facing Nxorth.

Replicus shifted his vision.

'Of course...' he thought.

He saw Eaniss a little further away from the two. She looked with firm eyes towards the coming disaster too.

Of course, she was alive.

The Penetrator's eyes then finally switched to a large ball hanging above sea level South-West of where he stood.

It shimmered with firmly integrated Nitros from the outside.

Baddan's Territory.

Somehow, it still stood quite firm, and because the expanded space of Araeyn's skill had been cancelled, it was much, much closer than before.

However...

ROOOOOOAAAAAARRRRRR!

A bombastic roar later, which enveloped the world in darkness and confusion...

CRRRACCCCK! BOOOOOM!

The Territory exploded violently, its shards flying everywhere!

Seven figures flew out, their bodies almost whirling, following the changes to the space around them, coming from the stability established within Baddan's Majestic demesne.

All seven immediately bore looks of shock at the new sensations to be felt, but a majority of them already carried an emotion and sense of urgency equally as deep as the horror Aigas was now inspiring. Thus, this majority turned to the Penetrator.

"Masteeeeer!"

Replicus' sockets flared.

He was shaken.

He had never heard Pherdanta's voice so... heavy.

There she was, in midair, wielding in her hand... the Harmonic Ember!

Good! Great even!

Replicus' emotions surged in a bit of triumph. But...

The look Pherdanta wore gunned down his relief.

His sockets scoured behind her.

His socket flames blazed furiously.

It seemed...

It seemed the mission he had given his subordinates had been completed, but at a cost.

'Damn it! Damn it all!' Replicus barked in his mind.

The Harmonic Ember flew from Pherdanta's hands and he caught it.

...But not before the numerous, distorted shadows that had been approaching buried him and everyone else in total darkness.

The cast darkness was so deep, it might as well have been a tangible substance that had accolades in submerging reason and cordial thoughts.

However, the metaphorical darkness the Penetrator felt seemed infinitely superior in terms of making him feel sour and void.

Even if it weren't though, the shadows passed a moment later, bringing light once again to the world, not to mention a blast of waves washing over the remaining Factions and their Leaders.

Six groans...

Six shuddering blasts of raw force...

Four wails...

All these shook the world after the cover of shadow was gone.

Each of them sent all living beings below plummeting through the ebony sea, for they came from directly above.

It appeared whatever had interrupted the normal state of the world, wasn't simply passing by.

It was... contending against something else.

The effects of this contention were so absurd that none were able to resist the dying and replenishing of gravity to ensue, the disappearance and re-emergence of the air, and the twisting of the world which came from it.

Several moments after this fresh experience, Replicus rose to the surface, just like everyone else and looked up.

He didn't know who shouted the obvious first, but the despair in that person's voice, was rather fitting.

"DRAAAAAGOOOOOON!"

Chapter 1040: Vision of Misery! (2)

Indeed, it was a dragon.

No. It was THE dragon.

The masked man's target seemed to have come to meet them all in the middle. This target and something else unforeseen.

As countless raging gusts went berserk over the Factions rising from the waters, most unharmed by its poisonous properties, the figures of the new arrivals appeared in express detail.

The dragon was vast. Immensely vast.

It was comparable to the largest cities on Pelian and more, and that was without accounting for its tail, which was responsible for 40% of the aggressive, troubled winds, and its terrifying wing span.

The behemoth was covered in countless, stone-like, foggy grey scales that looked like they had seen better days. Some were cracked, some caved in, but this didn't immediately register to the onlookers, after all, the great beast was moving rather nimbly for its size, nearly turning into a blur at points.

Its mighty limbs, separate from the pair of wings on its back, seemed to whip out dexterously like regular arms and legs, and the few with good enough sight saw the blasted creature cast unknown abilities with its thick fingers and claws that...

BOOOOOOM!

Replicus could have sworn that that noise, that blast just now, could have been Aigas' foundation shattering to bits. After all, he and many others were flung to the opposite way of where the dragon sent whatever monstrous spell, charm, or blast it conjured.

'What the hell?!' Replicus thought as he struggled to not be dragged about by the winds alone. 'Why is this thing here? Why is the Herald here? Is it fighting the masked man already? Was he already so far ahead of us?'

This didn't make any sense.

In his absence from the fleet during the last three days, surely the rest of the higher Factions hadn't just allowed the masked man to leave them in the dust and reach Edagon, right?

RIGHT?!

BOOOM!

Another violent boom echoed, and Replicus thought he heard the sound of an enormous piece of glass shatter.

He looked up, the dragon had flown far into the skies, past the clouds – through them, actually – in an instant, to reach the muddled, checkered and bumpy skies. This was where the legendary Jiggorhaux, the Abiding Madness was said to have mended the world with his breath, leaving scars on the skies that were prevalent only on this side of Aigas.

Yet now, pieces of his workmanship – the melded fabric of the world – far, far up fell as something bashed against them.

It seemed the horrendous attack the dragon had used, had hit whatever it was that it was battling against, and it flown to smack hard against the skies.

Dear Deities...

Replicus' mind couldn't help but crash under the pressure of everything happening all at once.

He couldn't even decide how to feel about his subordinates at the moment, as the nature of what was happening around him – the reason behind why his abilities and those of Araeyn were unceremoniously dispelled – was starting to become clear.

Thankfully, his people seemed alive.

Well... most of them.

'ARGH!' Replicus raged, but his mind quickly calmed. Rather it was humbled by the escalation of the turbulent forces around him.

So, this was the scale of the mission they had been given?

This... this was what the masked man was trying to fight and conquer alone?

Ridiculous!

BOOOOOOOOOM!

There was another crashing noise, and it seemed the dragon jerked and descended rapidly.

It shot down in an instant, and as its large, radiant turquoise eyes whizzed about, its gigantic maw opening and lighting up with a yellow luminance as impressive as that of dawn, Replicus and several others – while being crushed by the sudden explosion of gravity from the dragon's descent – realized that there was more than one enemy battling against the dragon!

What in the world...?

Honestly, the size of these enemies seemed too insignificant when compared to that of the dragon, and as such, they were easy to miss.

Worse yet, the presence of the dragon eclipsed theirs by a significant margin.

'Is it not the masked man, then?' Replicus asked himself when...

...

His socket flames flashed, flickering, alternating between bright and dull.

'No way...' he thought.

He was flabbergasted.

At that moment, his mind cleared, attempting to accommodate what he felt right now; what was added to his already massive burden.

First was a binding link that exploded within him, tied to his Nullmancer properties.

Something linked to his powers, registered as being in his range. Finally.

Then at the same time, a cruel, dominant surge of Null Life Essence bombarded him like a hammer!

No. Rather than Null Life Essence, it was the presence of a Null Lifeform, quite like him. Something stronger, something superior in authority and race!

This felt very, very similar to what Replicus felt when Araeyn was born.

Pure domination!

'No way!'

As he gaped behind his Hollow Dusk Prison, Replicus caught a glimpse of whatever radiated such a presence.

It kicked off the air and sent a hollow cylinder of violated winds bursting in the opposite direction of where it lunged.

Replicus recoiled.

'It looks just like...him.'

Indeed, it looked just like Araeyn.

The being had a pale, dry face like that of corpse, and narrow eyes that held within them black chaos. Long creamy hair, like strands of light, wildly flew in all directions atop its head, complemented by the silver crown entangled with it, growing from the being's temples.

The creature was adorned in a dazzling black armor that issued from its folds a golden mist. It was impossible to see at the moment, but the armor almost seemed alive. It expanded and contracted subtly, its chest plate, branded with an assortment of triangular gems that burned with foreign light, proudly expressing its lack of damage after the latest attack its bearer took.

Replicus molded his open hand into a fist.

'Ferex! That's Ferex,' he thought.

His lost Apostle!

The Apostle, as he had been told, had succumbed to his Flaw. He had failed to beat an opponent without a bitter struggle, and thus, he had become a vessel for the Full Deck BoneTender, what the guidance field called a terrible Null Lifeform in the Null Verse.

But then, the story went deeper.

Apparently, the BoneTender had inhabited another vessel in turn; what Replicus saw currently before him.

Whatever that body was, whoever it had belonged to. It could only be...

Replicus saw a smaller, winged figure flash by with this royal Null Lifeform, hurtling towards the dragon!

It was a feminine figure.

Curly red hair, fine skin, vibrant red eyes. He recognized these details as part of someone he was fond of despite how extraordinary they looked now compared to before.

Replicus recoiled again, and his socket flames burned bright.

Was that...?

'...Stylla.'