

Undead 1261

Chapter 1261: The Order Welcomes A Worthy Master! (5)

Andori were ranked in ascending order from Grand, Sage, Ascendant to Cosmic. Each tier was split into four ranks – First to Fourth – with the Fourth representing the peak of an Andori's progression in a tier.

Andori were impossible to elevate without improving one's Broader Existence, and that was for good reason. Most of them packed great defensive, supportive and attacking powers that perhaps reality meant to keep sternly in check.

Skullius so far possessed Andori of the Grand and Sage tiers. According to the guidance field, him being in possession of abilities that fit within the Common Reality Leagues when he had just ascended from mortality, was not very common.

Of course, the Hybrid Warmoth imagined this was because of the phantoms' machinations and the fact that both his Warmoth powers and Fulgardt's held abilities that weren't meant to be limited by the cage that was mortality. Of this, there could be no doubt.

The first Andori that Skullius decided to fully analyse was the [Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus]. He already knew its capabilities now, but he decided to check it out anyway, as it was currently his strongest Andori.

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[Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus | Fourth Sage Tier]

A mystical cloud, ever-present and closely tied to its master's fondest wishes and fickliest emotion;

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-Functions-

+Will meet any and all enemy attacks, corporeal or otherwise, that come within ten meters of its master's radius, with precise, world-catching Melding Stitches, 'Maximum Frost' and 'Frigid Time'

+Passively enhances its master's Ju`wtte efficiency by 1,500%

+Passively enhances its master's attacks by 750%

+Will reject 25% damage from Andori up to a tier higher than its own

+Observes with its master's eyes the nature of an opponent's attributes, feed the collected information to its master, and fashion for them a 'Foe Biter' that will easily penetrate all said opponents' defences (if completed)

+Passively, with its master's eyes analyses the nature of any complex systems and natures to create an affinity with them; a given cost to be paid in Null Life Essence can speed up the learning process.

+Will react to its master's emotions with all available Exotic Parlous Natures

+Exerts its master's will on matters pertaining to gifting and stealing powers

+Exerts its master's will on matters pertaining to forging Apostles

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Exora Amras Requirement: 30 units for activation

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"Looks about right," Skullius said and the phantoms agreed.

The reason [Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus] was so powerful was because Skullius' phantoms had infused a plethora of abilities into its creation, forging one seamlessly compact Andori.

[Unbridled Wisdom of the Ascended Nullmancer], [Wanton Royal's Void-Biting Serpent], [Mystic Macer], [True Nullmancer's Wretched Reaper of Ugly Divinity], [Apostle's Liege], [Warmoth's

Fortitude], [Unrelenting Ju`wtte Chain], [Melding Stitches], [Warmoth's Empyrean Ambience], [Wealth of Spoils]...

All these skills had been combined seamlessly.

It seemed like a lot and needlessly so, but the fact that the phantoms had been told about the predicament involved with raising the proficiency of Andori brought the purpose of such an undertaking to light. Besides that, the phantoms hoped to save on Amras consumption with this move, and it seemed their hopes were realised.

It had also been Skullius' intention to not have so many abilities, which could end up confusing him.

'Adding the Melding Stitches to this was a nice touch. They have been fused with the merigold Ju`wtte now, which means they will be even more powerful,' Skullius thought, and he turned to other Andori.

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[Sagacious Antiphon of Dawnlight | Third Grand Tier]

A facet of the lord of darkness and light's powers that utilises radiance for wise victory;

-Functions-

+Shields its user's immediate body with a layer of profound, imperceptible light that repels corporeal and incorporeal attacks

+Impresses nodes within every cell of the user's body that trigger instant healing the moment an attack lands

+Grants its user the 'ForeStep' – a movement technique that allows them to cross any manner of distance at 80x the speed of light, as long as light can push through.

+Allows user to produce and manipulate general and 'Just Light'

+Allows the user to absorb any manner of light to rejuvenate and enhance their Immortal Physique minimally.

+Allows the user to use any manner of light to enthrall an unlimited number of mildly guarded and unguarded victims

+Allows the user to become piercing light that can and will rip through enemies with enough Amras empowerment

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[King of Severing Twilight: AfterDark | Third Grand Tier]

A facet of the lord of darkness and light's powers that utilises tenebrosity for vicious triumph;

-Functions-

+Coats its user in an imperceptible shadow; as long as the shadow remains active, all damage received by the user is reduced by 98%

+Expels the Dousing Sanctum – a dark, majestic mansion – whenever damage breaches its primary defences; as long as the user remains within range of the Dousing Sanctum, all damage they take will be transferred and detained within it.

+Gives its user access to a cavern in the bowls of the great void, far from prying eyes if needed.

+All darkness – even from the great void – becomes envy that rushes at the user's call, empowering their Immortal Physique minimally.

+Will restrain the effects of enemy attacks as long as they are completely submerged in darkness.

+Will prey on the moral darkness within targets to affect their mind, enthralling or harming them as the user wishes.

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Skullius grinned.

These Andori had become impossibly stronger versions of their previous selves, granting him immensely tantalising functions. He was surprised by [King of Severing Twilight: AfterDark] in particular.

It gave him access to the great void in manners he was surprised by.

"A great cavern in the bowls of the great void? Away from prying eyes?" Skullius said while stroking his chin. "And even the great void's darkness can be used to increase the power of my Immortal Physique, huh?"

"Even we didn't factor this in. Were Fulgardt's powers always this powerful?" a phantom said.

"It appears so," another added.

"Perhaps the Permanent Max Evolution did us another favour here. Its brilliant all the same, though it makes you wonder what relationship Fulgardt had with the void, if he did have one," another said curiously. "Serenity, is it possible for other beings to create some kind of purchase within void's vast body and live there?"

Serenity took a moment before answering.

"Void's body is quite vast large and it houses so many phenomena, most of it treacherous. However, I wouldn't say anything makes her 'bowls' its home. This is unheard of, and I doubt a simple Permanent Max Evolution would have made it possible either," she said.

How ominous.

Skullius frowned and his phantoms became distressed.

All at once, they thought of one being.

The Wanderer Who Seeds.

Chapter 1262: The Order Welcomes A Worthy Master! (6)

Skullius was not a fan of this subject. He would rather not think about it at all, but it kept cropping up when things seemed too out of the ordinary. He was ashamed to admit it, but even as a Divine, the name of this being – the Wanderer – and the flashes he had from Fulgardt's memories of him, gave him (Skullius) chills. He felt like he had no business looking for anything to do with that being.

But at the same time, if this being linked to Fulgardt, then to the great void... didn't that mean that Serenity should know something about it?

Skullius took a moment to consider.

Serenity had said before that she had her reasons for wanting to leave this reality and wouldn't share so casually. From this, he gathered that there was a lot of dark stuff he didn't know about her. (Obviously.)

Serenity's answer to his question just now was probably another indication as to her inability or reluctance to share more. Skullius was sure she knew something about the Wanderer, but he wouldn't probe. He wasn't sure he wanted to know just yet.

Thus, Skullius looked through his other Andori.

There were two Andori that belonged to the same style of attack, it seemed: True Severance Elusive Meta Carver and Ruining Cutter. Both were derivatives of [Infinite Sword God: Primordial Sword], edited by the phantoms.

[Elusive Meta Carver], according to the guidance field, was an invisible cutting technique that only struck against inanimate objects and concepts. It would not hit anything with a physical body. This had been the trade-off the phantoms had created to make it more powerful, and indeed, it was supposed to be lethal against its intangible targets.

[Ruining Cutter], on the other hand, was a visible technique that only hit physical matter. It was also a little slower than its counterpart as part of the trade-off to make it more powerful. In terms of the damage it dealt, it was supposed to be twice as strong as [Elusive Meta Carver].

As powerful as these Andori were, Skullius was a bit distressed by their cost. Each slash released required 5 units of Amras.

This didn't seem like a lot, but when battling against strong Divine beings, Skullius was sure he would start to miss his abuse of the mana system here on Aigas.

"It's crazy. [Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus] is way cheaper than this. It only needs to be cast once with 30 units of Amras and aside from its active functions, I don't need to expend more than 10 units of Amras for passive benefits. Even Dawnlight and Twilight aren't that expensive. Creating the new Phantasmic Retainers barely cost me 20 units of Amras," Skullius said and cursed.

Susu'k behind him flinched.

"I imagine it will take more than a few slashes from both [Elusive Meta Carver] and [Ruining Cutter] for even the mildest of strong Divine opponents. Well, I suppose this is the burden of the Default Body."

Speaking of the bodies, Skullius turned to the Andori that managed his Default and War Bodies: [Instant Embodiment of Perfection].

This Andori consumed 200 units of Amras to bring forth Skullius' War Body and stow away the Default Body. It then cost 100 units of Amras every hour the War Body was active. It was quite pricey, but there was no cooldown. Skullius could switch between his forms seamlessly if he needed to save on Amras.

On top of this, Skullius was sure his War Body was capable enough to deal with many foes his Default Body couldn't. Most of the ingenuity of the phantoms had been poured into it, along with

other abilities and tricks that he denied his Default Body – like the Warmoth Spine, billions of Null Exp and many other things.

The Default Body fused just the bodies Skullius had added into the fusion process, but the War Body seamlessly merged his Classes too!

Skullius wasn't willing to expend Amras just to check out his War Body right now though. Thus, he checked the [Legion Eyes] next, his second most powerful Andori.

The [Legion Eyes] allowed Skullius to perceive reality in 64 states along with removing the defences of anything he used them on, leaving targets in the most vulnerable state possible. Weaker opponents would be killed simply by a prolonged stare; the longer Skullius' gaze lingered, the longer they would have to endure being in the state of weakness.

This Andori possessed the properties of the [Heart of Revelation] as well as Delight's Pursuit, one of the Seeds of the Fruit of World Myths that trapped its victims in a pleasurable dream.

"It's nice that this Andori doesn't simply attack living things. I suppose if I used it in Aigas, I would be able to see that well with the Eternal Drakkens – the Richness of Aigas in Edagon. I wonder how it will be in practise," Skullius said.

He had been about to check his Parlous Natures next, when his innate senses picked up the slightest bit of movement from several meters in front of him.

Blobs of incorporeal yet lively entities were inching closer and closer to Skullius.

It was the WILLS of Fulgardt!

Skullius scoffed.

"I suppose it wasn't going to be that simple to get rid of them," he said and he raised one of his arms and propped up two fingers in the direction of the WILLS. "Let's see if this will work."

At once, Skullius used [Elusive Meta Carver].

Even in his 'vision' nothing registered, but the entire Second Layer of the Empyrean Hatcher vibrated slightly in response to the power of the carving technique!

A vicious clapping noise was expelled on impact!

"Hmph."

Skullius clicked his tongue.

The WILLS he had targeted were completely unharmed. Not an ounce of damage had registered on them!

To think the WILLS were that powerful.

Was [Elusive Meta Carver] too weak?

"Jan`ind."

Susu'k spoke, his head hung low. When Skullius turned to him, he prostrated himself.

"If I may be allowed to be speak," he said and paused.

Skullius raised a brow.

"If you never address me as Jan`ind again, then yes," he replied sternly.

He had a bit of petty bitterness over that title and the veneration Susu'k and that damned piece of armour in the Warmoth's Treasury had sprayed towards it. Everything had wanted him to follow after the Warmoth to inherit that title.

"Of course... master," Susu'k said, slightly shaking. When he didn't hear any reproach, he continued. "It appears to me that no amount of power you exert will damage those unfounded globes."

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

"Why is that?"

"Forgive my insolence, master, but since you are a fresh Divine being, you might not know. It is impossible to deliver a final blow to a Divine being without targeting the space between their body and soul. My older master always used to say, a prepared Divine mind is immortal. I believe what you are dealing with, is the same."

Chapter 1263: Nature of The Broader Existence

Seeing that Skullius wasn't at all convinced by what he was saying, Susu`k decided to elaborate.

"The space between your body and soul is delicate, but profound. It is the one that dictates your Divinity. The priority for most new Divines – those that have some semblance of knowledge, that is – is to find ways to guard it from harm," the Strawler explained.

"There are beings out there, even in the outside reality – I imagine – that sharpen their abilities with the express focus on destroying their opponents' most vulnerable spots."

Skullius mulled this over.

He believed part of it.

His Physique, the Audacious Chassis of the Ninth Filament offered a defence to his Broader Existence. He hadn't considered what the notification for that specific aspect of it had meant earlier, but now he understood.

'It's that delicate, huh?' he thought.

Once Skullius' blank gaze fell on Susu'k again, the Strawler continued expositing.

"Forgive me again, if this offends you, but I assume you wouldn't know. Improving the quality of that delicate space between your soul and body expands the independence of both your body and soul; they can remain apart for long periods and over vast distances without any drawbacks only when the metaphysical space between them grows and solidifies over time."

Skullius' eyes bulged with realisation.

This, he bought.

'I see. That makes sense. That would explain why Deities are able to have so much freedom even as mere souls. I didn't quite feel as free when I separated my soul from my body to look at myself earlier. I probably don't have much of an ability to be apart for long,' he thought and frowned.

"Is it difficult to target the Broader Existence – this space between body and soul – with an attack?" Skullius asked.

"So, you call it the Broader Existence? I see. It is normally extremely difficult to target it when the opponent hasn't separated both aspects of their existence – body and soul. The expertise for that likely requires incredibly powerful techniques, but if the target has separated their body and soul, it is much easier to harm their Broader Existence.

All that is required then is to land an attack on either the body or soul and the damage will reach the Broader Existence," Susu`k explained.

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Skullius narrowed his eyes.

"So, that's how it is," he said, and the [Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus], for a moment, turned into a great swirling orange-pink blaze, mirroring its master's passion.

Skullius hadn't bought what Susu`k was saying at first because in his well of experiences, existed a memory of him killing a Divine. Discounting how precarious the situation had been, Skullius had killed Caxellac with a single attack.

Caxellac had succumbed to Skullius' ultimate move, the [True Nullmancer's Wretched Reaper of Ugly Divine], a Reverse Supreme Skill that was composed of the Fallen Reincarnator's Shadow's soul arrow, Ju`wte, a Territory's effect, and Inverted Mana created from gold quality mana.

It was now clear to Skullius why Caxellac perished that time. Asides from the fact that this ultimate attack of his, in retrospect, probably had power that was half a step away from the Common Reality Leagues, Caxellac fell because he had been in the middle of using Mors, Serene Grace.

The Mors Serene Grace, according to Serenity, used the user's soul as a fuel, and in its use, Caxellac had expelled his soul from his body. Skullius had attacked his body while he was in this state, and the damage had registered not just to his body, but his Broader Existence!

'No wonder. But I imagine then that Mors Serene Grace is a terrifying ability to use if it leaves wide open to attacks like that,' Skullius thought.

"How interesting," he said to Susu`k.

He then turned to the WILLS of Fulgardt. They were slowly trying to reach him again.

"What do you make of them, then?" he asked the giant Strawler. "They belonged to a man who was a Divine like me, but he perished; mortally at least. His body and soul are in different places."

Susu`k analysed the WILLS with his ten eyes.

"Master, I assume this man you speak of heavily fortified his Broader Existence, as you call it. Even if he died in a normal sense, as long as he was prepared, he wouldn't cease to exist. He seems to have modified how his soul would continue to persist. Part of it lies in these things," he explained.

Skullius nodded.

"Very well."

It tallied. Susu`k's analysis matched the current events.

Fulgardt's body was in the Labyrinth.

When the Immoral had spoken to Skullius in his Reflection of the Soul before taking him over, he had said that he had programmed his body to go on a rampage if it ever managed to collect enough darkness and light from those who entered the Labyrinth, seeking to claim his legacy.

"It all comes together then," Skullius said and he knocked away the WILLS with Ju`wte once they got too close. They were pushed back but they remained unscathed. "Looks like I'll have to keep these around me until I visit the Labyrinth. I'll attack Fulgardt's body and see if I can eradicate his Broader Existence."

This would be quite the undertaking, Skullius imagined.

It seemed he still had a long way to go despite entering a new stage of power.

Instead of thinking of ways to fortify his Broader Existence immediately, however, as Susu`k expected, Skullius then turned to a certain broken, green skeleton.

"On the other hand, we have a bit of favour in our corner," the Hybrid Warmoth said. "Our original plans with SoSei align perfectly with this new information. It's nice to have a bit of good luck."

"Indeed. Once we figure this out, we'll be one step away from defeating Somanda. Even if he did achieve Divinity not too long ago, we can imagine he already knows how to defend his Broader Existence," a phantom said.

"Yeah. Walking right up to his door blindly and throwing everything we have at him would be suicide. This is our best bet," added another.

And indeed.

Skullius extended his hand towards the broken skeleton.

Golden white light encased it and it was pulled to him.

"This is incredibly daring," Skullius said and hints of excitement showed on his face. "I wish I could rub how much I've grown in Somanda's face right here and now, but that would be unwise. Better be quick. We'll need to finish the rest of the work on this thing in the Severed Union."

But what it was that Skullius went on to do to the poor green skeleton would not be known until he left the Empyrean Bosom and began on the task he promised Suzamete he would complete. Fortunately, it wouldn't be too long until then.

Chapter 1264: Rejecting Reverence

The Unlimited Stars and the rest of the Stark Troops had gathered in the First Layer of the Empyrean Hatcher as soon as they had felt the odd, enticing pressure that forced them to look towards the egg-shaped building. All of them had immediately assumed that it had something to do with their master; who else could it have been?

The Stark Troops donned a variation of what had been the signature suit of armour for the Unlimited – armour sets of blue, white and silver. Each was a Mythical Grade item that Skullius had personally crafted and tweaked to suit the needs of the wearer; he understood the weaknesses and strengths of each of his subordinates, after all.

Much of his time in the Timemould Mirror Box had been spent making sure each of his subordinates were up to standard.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Kintar said. She was standing beside Elita who had come striding into the Empyrean Hatcher with Yuyui, Bubbles and Timmit several minutes ago. "I figured it was only a matter of time before mastered achieved Divinity."

Elita had been the one to tell the Unlimited Stars what they had just sensed. Soidon had known as well, but he hadn't been willing to share.

Elita knew all too well what Divinity felt like. She had been battling against beings who had tasted it since she left Aigas.

"I'm the opposite. I didn't think he'd beat me to it," she said with a small smile.

The Unlimited Stars gave her an odd look, especially Kintar. Soidon scoffed silently.

At that moment, the vicious, towering glow that connected the Layers of the Empyrean Hatcher hissed, and two figures walked out of it.

The chatter in the First Layer of the Hatcher immediately died down.

The second Skullius walked in, it was as though all the air rushed out, and all sound was drowned by his immense existence.

The billowing, lead-grey cloud he was adorned with, along with the mostly-hidden, blackish-red armour – strings of Mortal Ruin coiled to form a sturdy armour – gave a significant, impressive impression. His slicked-back, honey-coloured hair with bits of auburn was enchanting, as was his smooth, coin-grey skin with veins of cobalt blue throbbing under it faintly.

His blank eyes, despite being blind sold an illusion to everyone around that they could peer through them to see their darkest secrets.

Skullius had never commanded reverence from his subordinates, preferring to be casual in how he dealt with them, but in this moment his followers felt that the mediocre displays of loyalty and respect they had given until now couldn't suffice any longer.

All at once, the Stark Troops got down on one knee and the Unlimited Stars gave deep bows. The Stark Constellations on their foreheads crackled fiercely with Ju`wte.

Only Elita and Soidon remained standing tall.

Skullius was surprised by the gestures of his subordinates. The [Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus] sent small bursts of frost issuing around him.

Skullius sighed and scratched his neck. He felt a little embarrassed.

"What are you socketholes doing? As if you giving me full control over your bodies any time I want doesn't prove your loyalty enough? Stand up straight, dammit!" he told them and flicked up a finger.

He used his affinity with Genesis Pull (essentially extreme gravity) to force his Stark Troops to their feet.

Before, some of them would have cracked some wise joke – as Skullius was fond of wisecracked jokes – but now, no one said a thing.

They all gazed at him with dreamy or fearful looks.

"You should have given them their moment, my Liege," the individual beside Skullius said.

It was Beyrmir.

Quite like he did with his master, Beyrmir could infuse his entire body within a host. During the battle against Caxellac, the Apostle had taken over the body of a powerful Cluster beast called a Sallow Face. He was inhabiting it now.

He wore a mask and a cloak of straw – the signature attire of the race.

"You think so?" Skullius said to his Apostle.

"Indeed. There can no greater joy for a subordinate than to find that their master's strength has risen. Your subjects' resolve to follow you has been validated all the more. Allow them to wallow in that delight, my Liege," Beyrmir said.

Skullius considered this. Perhaps Beyrmir was right. He chuckled.

He wouldn't have his subordinates bow to him though.

He saw many of them looking at him with shining eyes. Some avoided looking at him.

The pressure Skullius exuded even while keeping all his powers in check must have held no semblance of likeness to his old self.

Even the Unlimited Stars were acting odd. They took in Skullius' new appearance greedily. If it weren't for the presence of the Stark Troops, whom they commanded, Skullius was fairly certain Yuyui would have started poking and prodding him.

These bastards had behaved the same way when Skullius had become the Warmoth's Progeny back then.

Skullius gave everyone a few more seconds to reel in their wits. He was disappointed when everything became deathly silent. It was going to take a while for everyone to get used to him.

Noticing a few people missing, he asked:

"Where did you put Silrat and Theurien?"

Kintar answered immediately.

"We didn't think it would be safe for them to be here, O Divine one," she said and grinned creepily at Skullius.

'I should have known she'd be immune to whatever I became,' the Hybrid Warmoth thought.

The short woman, other than being a little surprised maintained her daring demeanour towards him.

But that was exactly why he made Kintar his deputy, rather than someone like Pherdanta.

"Good work," he said. Seeing the keen look in Kintar's eye though, he added, "It seems you have something to say."

Kintar's grin toned down and she stepped forward, assuming a formal stance (physical form).

"Yes, Master. While you were gone, I sent scouts to Aigas to check the situation you conveniently forgot to tell us about," she said.

Skullius' phantoms burst into laughter. He ignored them.

"Go on," Skullius said.

All mirth vanished from Kintar's face, and Elita in particular once again found the short woman exuding a pressure that made even her wary.

"It's not looking good. Many powerful humans, Sif and beasts are crossing over into the current Aigas from past times. Most of them aren't experts that can be taken lightly," she said.

The other Unlimited Stars and the Stark Troops donned severe looks on their faces. The effect of Skullius' presence was beginning to wane.

Most of the Troops had not yet been apprised of the situation, so it was hard to swallow what was being said, but it sounded really bad.

"I see," Skullius said.

"It's happening all over Aigas; Feinheath, the seas, Opungale, and even the Severed Union seem to be targets. All these new enemies are either hostile towards everyone or have a specific goal in mind," Kintar continued. She then gave Skullius a particularly sharp look and added, "The greatest numbers of these enemies, of course, belong to the spawn of Boron. They are rapidly overwhelming everything.

Pelian is already in shambles, Maqi and Emeradis are holding on. For now."

Skullius sighed.

Now that was dire.

A pang of guilt pinched him.

A part of him was to blame for this.

However, he didn't sink in these soft emotions.

What he really needed now, was to bring his subordinates up to speed on everything he knew about the Cavern and the directive at hand.

Chapter 1265: Directive (1)

Kintar laughed so hard that her ribs ached.

She slapped her knees many a time before calming down, wiping the tears from her eyes and taking a deep breath.

"So, let me get this straight. These Cavern... The only ones that actually use any kind of energy – Primus, as you said – to power their attacks, are the weaker ones; the rest don't need any kind of fuel to activate abilities. Swell! On top of that, these creatures can have any kind of ability, and none of them are limited by a specific category of Class or Stage. Beautiful!

They can control darkness too. Sweet! And to add insult to injury, their numbers are so great that they might actually rival Feinheath's population? Hahaha! Is that all?" she said with one final cackle.

"Pretty much," Skullius said, two of his arms folded before him. "But there's also a horde of super powerful experts from a distant past of Aigas that cultivated the purest crop of vicious combatants. But you already know that."

There was a pause.

A few Strawlers had been called over by Kintar to project a map of Aigas in the air, and illustrate roughly how the drapes of time – both of Aigas' pasts – were interacting with the present. With the information gathered by the scouts Kintar had sent to Aigas, exaggerated estimates were given of how many experts had invaded so far and how their distribution looked over the world.

The following numbers were presented on the map:

Roughly 2,000 humanoid experts – Sif and human.

200 atrocious Cluster beasts.

70 million Carven.

"The fact that a Deity is also on the loose adds to the misery," Savast said. His three pupil-less eyes narrowed.

Grim ruffled his hair.

"That's a lot of numbers, boss," he said nervously.

"Master, if I may ask, what exactly is it that you want to be done with all these enemies?" Kenno asked with a raised brow. "Seventy-million Carven? If they are really feeling their bloody rushing – if they even have any – they can have Feinheath in ruins by the end of the week. I don't think even Maqi, with their renown can weather through a wave like that.

Perhaps if experts from a previous time dived in to assist them..."

Chatter broke out.

Now that the Stark Troops were made aware of the situation, they understood how much graver it was than they had thought it before, from Kintar's tone.

It was easy to see how Aigas was facing its greatest threat yet, and how stopping its collapse seemed impossible.

One of the only saving graces, as Kenno said, was if olden experts of Aigas returned to fight the wave of Cavern, but this was likely to be a needless attempt at hope.

Most of the experts from back in the day, especially during the Second Grand War, were self-serving and cruel. Besides, even if they decided to become heroes, their numbers were probably not enough to thwart the swarm of Cavern, especially if it did indeed, as Skullius expressed just, hold Divine level beings like him.

That had been a jarring detail Skullius had decided to add.

Before everyone knew it, they looked to the Hybrid Warmoth, wondering why exactly he was having everyone study this information and giving special emphasis to the perils involved with the nature of enemies swarming Aigas at this moment.

Skullius clapped his hands lightly, but the sound that exploded out was terrifying. It grabbed everyone's attention at once.

"I think you all can guess what I want done. Perhaps some of you are already thinking large, hoping to leave Aigas for a different world. That is indeed in the cards, but first, WE have to respond to the threat that Aigas is under right now. Every bit of it," he said sternly.

"..."

"..."

No open protest erupted, but it was more than clear that most did not find a lick of excitement or hope in the undertaking Skullius suggested.

Deal with all the threats assailing Aigas right now?

2,000 experts of the Transcendent Stage and higher, 200 Cluster beasts of a similar level and an entire race of creatures whose benefactor was a literal god?

Some of the Stark Troops found hope in the fact that their master would obviously be fighting by their side, but still...

Seeing the expected, sombre reaction from his subordinates, Skullius chuckled. It was only natural for them to be dismayed.

"I know you have misgivings. Great misgivings. The number of enemies is vast and their power is equally great. Perhaps you can't even see beyond it," he said.

"Trust me, I know how you feel. I once stood in the same position you are standing now – facing insurmountable odds. For me though, it was the added burden of bad luck that made everything worse, along with the fact that I had no choice in the matter. I was barely given a chance to rest. Enemies stronger than I was sprang forth from every corner and on each path I chose to take. I couldn't control it."

"To add more to the gloom, I was alone or detached from intimate friends most of the time. I was constantly tested, measured against the worth of those higher in standing than me."

Skullius smiled.

"But here I am. I prevailed. Every power in this world has a limit. Beyond the horizon that seems to never end, there is a light, there is victory. I've seen it so many times, and I'll tell you, it was never always by my own merit that I managed to see that light. I had help in the end.

I had friends in the end. The conviction to push forward worked wonders in the dark."

"Was it the only reason I prevailed? Flesh no. But even when I hardly believed it wholeheartedly... Direction gave me victory. There is a reward for enduring. For refusing to give in when pragmatic thought would have you lie down and surrender. You have been working hard for strength for two months and you have grown by leaps and bounds.

You have it in you to do the impossible. But of course, if you don't believe in your strength as an individual, then believe in this..."

Amras leaked from Skullius, and it turned the First Layer of the Empyrean Hatcher cool and intense, as though a current was running through it.

"Believe that past this mountainous task I am asking of you, there will be rich gains. You will rise out of the ashes of it with a name worthy of what you – as part of a collective – would have achieved. Don't you want to know how it feels to slay a Divine when you are still a mortal? Don't you want a legend to be written in Aigas that you were part of an Order that brought down a Deity?

Don't you want part of the rights to Aigas, unseen recognition that gives you the pride to say 'I was there, and I saved a whole damn world from an apocalypse?'"

Suddenly, the atmosphere among the Stark Troops and the Unlimited Stars burned with passion.

Skullius' zeal diffused towards them.

He was pleased to see them start to emit copious volumes of stern resolve.

Chapter 1266: Directive (2)

The fever was rising.

Everyone's spirits were soaring, filled to the brim with an unreasonable sort of faith and zeal. Those that hadn't believed at all that they had any business challenging a Deity and his emissaries, now

found that they were willing to do so, defiantly resisting reasons of limitation spiralling in their heads.

How else could one's limits be surpassed if not by challenging what was impossible?

What did those two months of gruesome, treacherous training mean if the final result wasn't for something as bold and as grand as what Skullius was calling for?

The Stark Troops were indeed emboldened.

However...

"Hold on, Master," Kintar said. Her wide face didn't look half as enthusiastic or as accepting of her master's words, but that was only on the surface. She had other concerns.

The growing fever was slaughtered at once.

Kintar gave Skullius another sharp look.

"Why are we doing this? As you said, leaving this world is in the cards. That, by all means, considering that all of us have another objective far more important than this, is a much better option. Let's let Aigas go. We've all grown past it. You have helped us do that, Master.

There's better glory to be obtained elsewhere," she said firmly.

The Unlimited Stars, Pherdanta in particular, gave Kintar dark looks. Unlike the others, she hadn't spoken out against the huge undertaking Skullius postulated not just because she was the Commander of the Stark Troops, but also because she would go anywhere with Skullius without question.

Pherdanta found Kintar's boldness distasteful, but then again, she realised that was probably why Skullius had chosen Kintar to be his deputy.

She always had something to say that challenged Skullius' declarations.

There was a lull as many considered Kintar's words; they found some sense in them.

The ultimate objective of this group Skullius had created, was to storm Deadmanland and retrieve Skullius' soul. Skullius required powerful allies to help him lay siege on Somanda's tower – as he remembered it.

That was what all the Stark Troops had held onto as the final objective, what they were working towards. Perhaps focusing on this was better than trying to save Aigas, especially since Skullius was on a time limit, they all thought.

The Hybrid Warmoth turned to Kintar and smiled.

"Many lives are at stake here. I believe it isn't right to just leave it at that," he answered succinctly. This was by no means the best and most convincing answer he could have given, however.

Kintar frowned. Her oval-shaped eyes narrowed.

"Lives at stake? Master, I know you don't have a hero complex. What good comes from protecting millions of commonfolk and only a fraction of experts on this world? Why bother? You've even ascended past the likes of every single one of them. This... This is beneath you," she said.

The Stark Troops found it impressive how Kintar was staring right into Skullius' eyes as she said all this.

Even Skullius himself was a bit surprised, but he didn't let that distract him from the content of Kintar's words.

"Beneath me?" he asked.

"Yes, Master. This IS beneath you. And besides that, you've already given too much for this world. Whatever debt you feel like you owe Aigas for the destruction and death you caused with your battle against your clone, was paid when you killed the masked man, and defeated the Null Devil King. You have had us memorise these things. You've done enough for Aigas.

If that is the extent of the reason you would have us fight for this world – and we definitely could – I reject it."

...

...

While the Stark Troops were dumbfounded at this, the gazes of the other Unlimited Stars softened considerably.

They hadn't thought Kintar's thought process both empathised with what Skullius likely felt and sought to lift the burdens he pressed onto himself.

All of a sudden, even Pherdanta felt ashamed for blindly choosing to follow Skullius' order without putting much effort into understanding the reasons behind it.

Did her master really only want to save Aigas because he felt guilty?

Skullius showed no reaction to Kintar's words. She kept staring into his blank eyes, unblinking.

Skullius laughed.

"Once again, I've underestimated just how much those wicked little eyes can see," he said to Kintar. "I admit, a part of me does feel guilty, but that's hardly the entire reason behind why I want this. I made a deal, you see. In exchange for a very sturdy transport vessel through the great void, I offered our services to Suzamete to help repair the world's order.

What I am asking of you might be beneath me, as you say Kintar, but it serves the ultimate objective I called on all of you for," he said.

Everyone was smitten dumb, except for Kintar.

She folded her arms in front of her chest.

"You made a deal with Suzamete?" she said.

"That's right."

Kintar had not expected that.

She couldn't find a reasonable retort.

The short lady seemed to sink into deep thought.

Skullius took the opportunity to raise the moral of his Troops once again.

"Believe me, this excursion pales in comparison to what we will have to face after. The undead, as I have come to know, are a greater threat than I anticipated at first" – Soidon scoffed secretly – "and that means, what we are going to have to do on Aigas is a warm-up exercise to bring yourselves up to standard.

If you can overcome this, then you will prove your own worth against what you've known you are going to have to fight in the land of the undead."

Again, the zeal of the Troops rose.

"Boy, does he have a way with words now," Grim whispered into Yuyui's ear. The girl smiled. She, like Pherdanta hadn't been opposed to Skullius' desire to help restore Aigas. She had been there when he made the deal with Suzamete, after all.

Elita wore a smirk.

It seemed Skullius was going to drag his Troops through an ordeal similar to the ones she had had to endure with Void's tutelage since being whisked from Aigas.

Skullius continued to speak.

"While I've made it seem as though we'll be acting alone. That really isn't the case. We have several allies that I will have us join. But first, I need to stress that this operation cannot take too long. We won't be moving as a single group. I will have you all split into teams led by the Unlimited Stars and my Apostles.

Our allies will meet with us on the battlefields," he said.

Right after saying this, Skullius spread two of his hands outward.

One burned with pitch black darkness, the other with glimmering golden white light!

"An Order of this calibre deserves stalwart bodies and souls so that its NAME will ring true," he said.

Everyone gaped.

For the longest time, even as a Faction in the Severed Union, this collection of experts had never had a name. Others had called it Bright Storm's Faction or that new, rising band of fools, but a definitive title had never been assigned. Until today.

Even Kintar was surprised that Skullius had decided to do this now.

"From today onward, we shall be known as the Stark-Soul Order, and with damn good reason," Skullius declared and [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light] sprang forth to devour all his subordinates!

Chapter 1267: Gift Giver!

There was a perk to the powers of the Insurgent Magnus that Skullius had been very curious about since his astounding growth in the Temple of Unlusted Tears.

He had read from three plaques written by Fulgardt about the PHANTASMIC RETAINERS, the Immoral's thoughts on the fall of his Chosen, and of course, the uncanny ability to grant ANYTHING with darkness and light.

Fulgardt had written that when the affinity for [Just Light] and [Evil Darkness] reached the peak, the Insurgent Magnus would gain the ability to give anything, like some wish granter.

As appetising as this ability was with that bit of information, the reality was that it wasn't nearly as convenient as it sounded. Its results were solid, however. Skullius had seen them first hand.

Fulgardt had used this ability to bolster the bodies of his four Chosen in the Second Grand War. Their bodies had become so strong that the cause for their defeat had come only by way of a Transcendent grade treasure that manipulated their souls.

During the battle across the Central Boundary, Actuass had summoned two corpses of Fulgardt's chosen, one of which he drove the soul of Eobald into, and the other which he had turned into a whip for his own use. Both these bodies were incredibly sturdy. Even Jerthrax had had trouble dealing damage to them.

Skullius was about to grant the same durability to his subordinates.

But it wasn't a simple thing to do.

For Skullius to 'grant a wish', the recipient had to be open and ecstatic. They had to respond to his intensity with their own, whatever shape it took. Skullius had fulfilled that condition just now by bringing out the zeal of his Stark Troops – though Kintar had nearly driven that work to the ground.

Additionally, Skullius – for the most part – was the one who decided what was granted. He decided the gift given. That said, the parameters for what he was able to grant, were not as expansive as one would hope. Skullius had seen exactly what he could give through Fulgardt's memories received through the WILLS.

He could only grant something possible within the bounds of the world he inhabited; if it was power, it had to be something limitable within the power system established in that world, if it was a treasure, it also had to be according to the limit of that world.

The glimmering light and the consuming darkness in Skullius' hands rushed forth and smothered all the Unlimited Stars and Stark Troops. (Elita and Soidon were excluded.)

The hundred and some experts felt as though they were suddenly being stretched out, pulled from the heavens and the earth simultaneously!

Their physical forms were dyed in darkness and light at the same time, giving their existence in this moment, a contradicting feel and look.

Skullius watched closely.

He would have done more with his wish granting ability, but asides from its granting parameters, it also had two other bothersome limits: It couldn't be used on the same person twice, and it could only be used twice every thirty days.

The number of uses was counted by the type of gift granted at one time, not by the number of people gifted, which was why Skullius was able to gift the supernatural durability to all of his subordinates at once.

Yuyui felt herself shaking. She couldn't imagine what her master was possibly granting them all... until her guidance field chimed.

[The individual known as 'Skullius Festos Dawn' gifts to you the Unranked, 'Pseudo Immortal Physique, Intemperable Shell']

[All your stats are brought under the 'Intemperable Shell']

[Host's *ENDURANCE* is bolstered by 5,000,000 (III) units!]

[A fifth of the user's mana is constantly expended for the sole purpose of hardening their skin]

...!!!

Yuyui gaped.

Her endurance stat had long been transformed by Skullius, but to think it had just been empowered by such a staggering value!

What was this Immortal Physique thing, she wondered.

And 5 million units of gold quality?!

Yuyui didn't even have a gold mana core, but this applied to her still.

In fact, it applied to everyone at once!

As the darkness and light waned, Skullius confirmed the success of the effect over each one of his subordinates with the guidance field. This was good.

'I probably didn't do it as well as Fulgardt could have. I never would have imagined that the reason Eobald's body was so strong then was because he had this knock-off Immortal Physique Fulgardt granted,' he thought.

He had tried to replicate the exact Physique Fulgardt had created, but he found that it was too hard. Details of how Fulgardt had made it were fuzzy and if Skullius were to give too much of a stat increase to his subordinates, he feared he might harm them. Most of them weren't as strong as Fulgardt's four Chosen had been, after all.

The Troops were in awe. They gasped and looked at each other, then at Skullius, then back at themselves.

"Why do I feel like I could..."

"Like you could take a whole continent to the face and come out alive? Yeah. I feel the same way."

"This is... absurd! At this point, if it wasn't for the Starmations, our armour wouldn't be contributing much to our safety at all!"

The joy, surprise and shock spread to the Unlimited Stars as well.

The Intemperable Shell offered way less to them given how much stronger they were when compared to the Stark Troops, but the durability gain was still extremely significant.

"Boss!" Grim yelled as he felt the fresh sensation coursing through his skin. "How many more times do you intend to outdo yourself?!"

Kenno was looking at his guidance field with just as much surprise as anyone else. (He and Yuyui were <Attachments> - the two people Skullius had shared his guidance field with.)

"I guess we don't have to go into battle with just blind faith carrying us, haha," he said with the shake of his head.

Skullius smiled.

"Pherdanta," he called.

The Unlimited Star reeled when she heard him. She swiftly approached, though, the closer she got to his lead-grey cloud, the more she sensed an imminent threat from it.

She stopped when she was a meter away from the Hybrid Warmoth.

Skullius gave her an intense look.

"I believe the Commander of all these bold men and women deserves mantles and powers to back their strength," he said to her. "You've already become an outstanding Swordmaster, and for that I'm proud, but you need to be a lot more than that for what's to come."

Everyone suddenly became quiet.

They watched with rapt attention the scene unfolding ahead.

Pherdanta wasn't sure what this was about all of a sudden, but she did not disrupt Skullius.

The Hybrid Warmoth waved his hand and two swords appeared, floating in the air.

The Bashful Abomination.

Demion's Dance.

...!!!

Pherdanta was alarmed.

She backed away slightly.

"Master... You can't mean to..." she began.

"I do," Skullius said and he drew closer to her and touched her shoulder. The pressure he exuded from up close was immense. Pherdanta barely managed to keep her body from keeling over. "You will put these two swords to better use than me. I have decided on what kind of path I will focus my strength on, and it doesn't restrict me to the path of the sword."

Pherdanta's feeble stern expression cracked. She was overwhelmed with a mix of emotions.

She thought Skullius was going to say something about no longer needing these weaker weapons – and she wouldn't have had a problem with that – but this?

Skullius continued.

"I believe you've been lagging behind your peers for too long when it comes to Classes, and so...."

At once, the guidance field chimed in Skullius' vision.

[You have made the Supreme Skill, 'Infinite Sword God: Primordial Sword' into a Hidden Class!]

[Would you like to pass it to the individual known as 'Pherdanta Wykes'?]

Skullius smiled, and confirmed.

Chapter 1268: Greatest Hegemon of Sorcerous Mana

When Skullius first created [Infinite Sword God] by combining a collection of skills, its unique, compound nature – how it had multiple sword styles packed into it – had prompted the guidance field to advise Skullius to make it into a Hidden Class.

The Hybrid Warmoth, after learning that that was still an option for the skill an hour ago with his alter memories, had immediately decided that [Infinite Sword God: Primordial Sword] would work better in the hands of Pherdanta.

Before, when the Unlimited Stars were simply the Unlimited, she had been the only one to not have a Hidden Class. Hers was an Advanced Swordsman Class that allowed her to seamlessly merge two or more swords to create a single, unique one provided that she fully understood the properties of all the swords.

The Class also had the added quirk that made living things oblivious to Pherdanta's existence until she interacted with them.

Even though Pherdanta had grown so much with just this, Skullius knew she would be much better off with a Hidden Class, especially one of the calibre he was granting her right now.

Pherdanta instantly felt the skill sink into her. She was alarmed and amazed at the same time.

She hadn't expected to receive a skill on top of Skullius' two swords.

The two swords were already artefacts she had considered exceedingly unique, not to mention extremely dangerous. She had never seen them in action, but when Serenity had explained all of the possessed Skullius' abilities and weapons to her master within the Timemould Mirror Box, Skullius had shared all that information with the Unlimited Stars as well, just in case.

Pherdanta felt that the skill her master was giving her was likely the same one Skullius had explained to them before.

She barely managed to contain her excitement. She was eager to protect her image as the Commander of the Stark Troops.

The Stark Constellation on her forehead sparked furiously.

Skullius smiled. He felt Pherdanta's intense gratitude and joy.

'Thank goodness giving skills isn't so hard for me anymore,' he thought. 'The old me would have been stuck with all these skills better suited for my subordinates.'

With [Wealth of Spoils], Skullius had never been able to give skills freely to anything other than objects. But after his experience in the battle across the Central Boundary, and his battle against a master of souls like Actuass, he learned to imprint skills on the soul rather than on the body.

As the body learned from the soul, it would quickly learn the information of the soul – in this case, skills.

In the last two months, Skullius had discovered that the more compatible a skill was with the receiver, the quicker the body of said receiver extracted the skill and branded it on itself; the longest it had taken for a compatible skill to be branded to a yearning body from a soul was two hours!

'Pherdanta should be able to use it soon,' he thought, 'but then again...'

Skullius did something else while he was still in contact with Pherdanta.

'I might not be as efficient with Exora Amras yet, but I can still cheat as much as I want with mana!'

With a grin, Skullius activated [Greatest Hegemon of Sorcerous Mana]!

Right then, his massive golden core thrummed so vibrantly that everyone saw it glowing from the depths of his Mortal Ruin armour!

Pherdanta was stricken aghast. The sheer volume of gold quality mana in that core was staggering, and in the next instant, she felt a strand of that mana rush to connect with her mana cores!

Skullius didn't stop with Pherdanta. A second later, strands of mana from his core had connected to the mana cores of all the Unlimited Stars and the Stark Troops!

Kintar was especially flabbergasted. Besides from Skullius, she had the best understanding of mana out of everyone here as a True Myth Mage. What Skullius went on to do after attaching his core to everyone else's left her muttering expletives in disbelief.

'No way!'

As a result of Skullius' intense training regiments and experimenting, all of his subordinates now possessed at least two mana cores, most of which were meticulously edited by Skullius himself.

As he activated his Supreme skill, the Stark Troops with blue cores found them vigorously bursting with power and becoming dark purple mana cores with more than double the value of mana than their previous ones. Those who had purple mana cores found themselves with light gold mana cores that held the same numerical values of mana as value!

Gasps and shrieks rang out in the Empyrean Hatcher!

How in the world was this possible?!

With [Greatest Hegemon of Sorcerous Mana], Skullius had such fine control over mana that with his own as a conduit, he could influence ambient mana and that which was stored inside external mana cores as he pleased.

Skullius could change the nature of someone else's Refinery (in a core) simply by whisking his own mana into their core; he could add properties to the mana itself or remove them; he could improve the reserve capacity of mana cores; he could invigorate all natures of mana, forcing them to condense and improve in quality, as he was doing now!

The mana from all creatures in his range also became submissive to Skullius, and with a thought, he could have it divulge all of its user's secrets; mana was, after all, what activated skills and such.

This is why and how Skullius was determining who to not grant too big of a boost in mana quality and quantity, and who to bless recklessly.

Skullius did the latter with the Unlimited Stars. He had applied [Unbound] more freely with them on their stats and mana cores before, which was why some of them had recurring stats like Kintar, for instance.

All the Unlimited Stars had purple cores. With their own powerful mana manipulation skills, it wouldn't have been too difficult for them to condense their mana and enrich it to gold quality, but they would only be able to do that in Aigas, where mana was abundant. Thus, Skullius did it for them.

On top of granting them golden cores, he increased the capacity of their cores tenfold!

Such a thing wouldn't be a detriment to the Unlimited Stars, he judged.

Once again, the Stark Troops were left stumped.

They were shielded from adverse influences by the Stark Constellation; their souls, particularly.

Their bodies were reinforced by the Intemperable Shell, a makeshift Immortal Physique.

And now, they had tremendous reserves of mana to use for attacks?

Pherdanta nearly faltered when she felt the mana cores within her blaze in gold.

Her physical qualities instantly became far more formidable than before.

Withholding tears, she grabbed the swords still suspended in the air, waiting for her to claim.

"I... We will not disappoint you, Master! Even in death, we will serve!" she cried passionately.

At once, all the other Stark Troops chanted the same, their bodies radiating with vicious volumes of mana. A fire was lit in them that even they didn't know could burn so fiercely. Even Timmit was chanting, giddy about the recent boons. Bubbles joined him in his jubilation.

Skullius smiled.

Thirty-nine minutes later, he began walking towards the exit of the Empyrean Hatcher, Beyrmir following after him. His Troops made way.

Midway, Skullius beckoned Elita and Kintar to him.

When the latter reached him, he grabbed her head and simultaneously performed two actions: he used a Creed to duplicate [Greatest Hegemon of Sorcerous Mana], and gifted the copy to Kintar.

The short, wide-faced woman felt the skill swim through her at once.

Skullius gave a chuckle and said:

"Make sure you cheat as best as you can out there."

Chapter 1269: Frienemies?

"What did you think about them?" Skullius asked.

Elita was surprised Skullius would ask her opinion on this. Honestly, she had wondered just what Skullius had been hinting at before – in Aigas – when Yuyui had first appeared, impressively eradicating the thousands of Carven in a flash.

It seemed to her (Elita) now that Skullius had been expressing pride in his entire combat force, which was a lot more terrifying than half of what she had seen on other worlds within the great void.

"They are impressive. I thought so before you decided to take it a step further and make them even harder to beat. Suzamete will be pleased," she said, chuckling with the last sentence.

Skullius was displeased at the mention of Suzamete. However much he felt like he could relate to her now that he was no longer a mortal, he didn't find a part of him that was growing to like her.

The two were walking somewhat quickly on a glimmering path that looked as though it was made of a mix of glass, gold and emerald. Using Ju`wte, one could slide along it at speeds comparable to Skullius' [Neutral Acumen], but Skullius thought it would be nice to get a better feel for his new legs and feet by walking. (In the Second Layer of the Hatcher, he didn't need to walk, after all.)

The duo's destination was the great red pool up ahead, a distance away from the Empyrean Hatcher. Skullius had told Elita he had business there.

"Skullius..." the former Paladin Champion said.

Skullius turned to her.

"Yes?"

"I thought by now you'd have addressed it. You didn't need to keep me under your subordinates' keen surveillance, you know?" she said.

Skullius chortled.

"So, you knew," he said.

"I shared the same sentiment you had. Even when you invited me into your home, I was wary of you. I bet you felt the same. Even if I helped you, that doesn't really prove I'm an ally, right?"

She looked at him.

"Do you consider me, a Voided Deathform, your enemy?" she asked.

Skullius took some time to consider.

He had asked the Unlimited Stars to watch Elita just in case, because even if she had saved him from Boron, according to the rules, he and her were enemies. Her motives could have been malicious.

The first Voided Deathform Skullius had met, Aurolio, had told him about the nature of the Existential Parallels, and Serenity had added on later, confirming that indeed, Undeath, Null Life and Voided Death opposed each other despite coming from intimate sources.

Void, Emmae and Serenity were siblings who sought for ways to evade complete extinction. Each came up with their own path, Emmae's being the least unique among them. The Books of Alignment that came with the powers of the Existential Parallels detailed that a race existed between all bearers of the Parallels; they were enemies seeking to steal resources from each other.

Oddly though, Aurolio had said he refused to do anything in Void's favour until he understood the whole picture. But what about Elita? She seemed to be in Void's sweeter graces given that she had been whisked away to a training arc.

"I don't think of you as an enemy, but when we chose to claim these powers, we were automatically assigned to opposing sides. Since you were with Void all of this time, I didn't know what to think about you. I for one am not looking to start a conflict with other bearers or sockets forbid, Void and Emmae themselves. Serenity knows that," Skullius said. "What do you think?"

Elita scratched her temple and her lips curled.

"You're planning to save a world that you don't really have to," she said. "Even if I had a gripe with you, it would have been dissolved when I heard your speech. The Paladin Champion in me wouldn't allow me to needlessly fight someone so selfless."

Skullius laughed.

Selfless? That was a bit much. He was a selfish sockethole gathering hundreds for an ultimate cause that benefitted him alone – the endgame in Deadmanland.

A pause slid in.

Skullius would have wanted to ask a few more things about Void, and Elita's adventures, but he didn't think Elita would share more than the barebones details. She had avoided explaining more about Void's own propaganda with the perfect setup he had given her.

For now, he celebrated the 'peace' he and Elita had established.

"You said you'd help me investigate the matter with the Purity and Revia's whereabouts. How does that fit into our save-the-world itinerary?" Elita asked, dispelling traces of the previous conversation.

"I still plan to assist, but first, while my Troops are dealing with the wide range of enemies around the world, I have a few stops to make. First in Maqi, and then the Severed Union. Between these trips, I plan to subdue something in a certain relic of mine; something beyond Divine. I was hoping you could help me that.

If your theory about what the Purity is doing is true, the subjugation will benefit us both."

Elita's brows shot up.

Something beyond Divine to subdue?

This piqued her interest quite a bit.

She smirked.

She figured then that she would be travelling with Skullius for a while and refrained from asking about the details now.

"I see. You've got my hopes up. I imagined our mission would be bland, but who knew you had some flair added to it."

Skullius grinned. He had hoped she wouldn't be too impatient. He had instructed the Stars and Troops to prepare themselves and head out as soon as possible after deciding how to split the forces, but everything else he had to do on his own could wait a little. Thankfully, Elita didn't take this as him putting less importance on her own goals.

The two finally reached the pool.

The pool looked like one giant, solid blackish-red disc spreading on and on until it was eventually veiled by bits of frosty smoke. There were barely any fluctuations to its surface, and great blocks of the same material that made the gleaming pavement surrounded it.

This was the Ju`wte Transfiguration Pool.

Anything that fell into the blackish-red liquid would be granted the ability to transfigure into various kinds of Ju`wte-themed and inspired species, quite like the creatures that lived in the Second Layer of the Empyrean Hatcher. The transformation was safe for any and all things that would participate.

It was, after all, the only way to safely traverse through this pool, which, as Skullius had discovered when he was experimenting with it, was fully of a lot of dangerous Ju`wte phenomena.

But this wasn't his reason for visiting this place.

"Follow me," Skullius said and he rose into the sky as though it was the most natural thing to do. Beyrmir sprouted wings of mercury and followed.

Elita whipped out Broodweiler, her gold and pink sword. She threw it into the air and it started to float. She jumped on it and followed after Skullius who whistled in surprise.

"As annoying as this sword is, it has its fun sides," Elita chuckled.

The three flew northward, and were soon penetrating the layers of frosty smoke rising from the pool. Past several clouds of this smoke, a large structure was revealed. It was an island; a rather familiar one.

Deign had always been home to Skullius while he was in the Severed Union.

He had spent months growing on it, building up his strength and that of his allies. He couldn't have abandoned it so casually now that he had the Empyrean Bosom.

Kintar had told him that this was where she had stashed Theurien and Silrat. Skullius had been pleased, but also surprised by how sharp the short woman was. How she had realised his intentions was beyond him.

Deign just so happened to be where Stylla was safely stowed away, and she was Skullius' objective.

Chapter 1270: Face of Hope

Deign was an island that Skullius, as Bright Storm, had been given by Eaniss as his territory after becoming a Faction Leader. It was the same island that Timmit had called home, lordling over a large Sacred Forest as its guardian, albeit one that had needed Skullius' help from time to time.

Skullius had never managed to forget his attachments to this island. Before he initiated the two-months-long training in the Timemould Mirror Box, he had dragged Deign into the Empyrean Bosom – along with hundreds of Clusters using a Blessing he had made through the Fallen Reincarnator's Shadow – and placed it over the Ju`wte Transfiguration Pool.

The trio landed on the island. Skullius was pleased when he felt the grasses kissing his dark crimson greaves. Beyrmir and Elita had no feelings of attachment to this place, so they couldn't share this

nostalgic feeling with him. But that was fine. They could appreciate the island a many other different ways.

Skullius led the path onward.

There was little to be seen on the island that was truly extravagant. It was simply a small island without much value. Skullius had received it from Eaniss knowing this fact.

A great hill, and a few mountains rose over the near horizon. Tonnes of powerful, tall greens could be seen on another side, but all this was a mask for the true treasure on this island.

Soon, the three reached a large archway made of painted wood standing conspicuously in a clearing. A trail of grooves traced its rises from its two feet and curved along its arch. Fleshless faces were carved into this arch, giving it an intimidating look.

Skullius placed his hand on one of the posts of the archway. He infused Null Life Essence into it, and the grooves on the whole thing flashed bright. A radiant flare appeared between the posts of the archway, throbbing with spatial properties.

Skullius walked through it. Elita and Beyrmir followed.

With a sharp flash and a seamless transition that came after a moment's entrapment in sad, still darkness, the trio were assaulted by rich mana, the turbulence of a storm, and a cool air.

They were no longer on the unimpressive island.

A great mountain rose before them, piercing into a dark sky that refused to be brightened by the sun glowing high past the clouds.

Skullius always chuckled when he met this sun's light.

He had used the Brilliant Dent, a Mythical storage treasure stolen from a Grand Priest of the Purity by Yuyui, to duplicate the Aigas sun and store that copy here. Well, this whole place was the inside of the Brilliant Dent, connected to the real world by the archway.

"I felt my powers increase slightly," Elita said with a strange look on her face.

"Yeah, that an effect of this place. We're actually inside a storage artefact," he explained.

The three scaled the mountain. It didn't take much effort, thus Skullius spared some instead of flying.

Soon, they were face to face with the Honing Fortress – the original residence of what Skullius had now declared to be the Stark-Soul Order. The entire twenty-meter-tall structure seemed to be made of a collection of massive, round, obsidian poles with golden rings at their ends. 124 square windows spat light out from the inside, illuminating the mountain top and the fortress' pretty surroundings.

Two cubical pools of clear water stood before the Honing Fortress, between them a clean pavement leading to the entrance.

Elita was charmed by the decor.

She gave simple nods of approval all the way to the entrance.

The inside of the Fortress was many leagues larger than the outside; the disparity was staggering. The dark, marble floor was welcoming, which couldn't be said for the view at the end of it.

There was no wall to shield the first floor from the burst of essence coming from the back of the fortress. This was how Skullius had liked it.

He would sit on the great throne placed at the end of this floor, familiarising himself with these essences using [Epiphany] back then; the mountain was, after all, the same one from which he had extracted the secrets to Distorted Gravity, Spatial Lightning and Stagnant Space.

"This is a beautiful place," Elita said as she looked around. "Doesn't seem like anyone is using it. Are you looking for tenants?"

Skullius laughed.

"I'm considering it."

He then swept the entire fortress his intense, innate senses. Soon, he had found where Theurien and Silrat were. Several Strawlers were showing them the two great pools on one of the floors.

One was a great mana pool, and the other was a Null Life Essence pool.

All the Unlimited and Skullius himself had used these pools to replenish their reserves back then. Skullius in particular was able to access these pools even while far away from the Deign.

Of course, this wasn't a thing of the past now. After his battle with Caxellac, Skullius had stowed his excess reserves of Null Life Essence in this pool. He had further uses for it, rather than the mana pool which was struggling to justify its existence due to recent events.

With a thought, Skullius used [Greatest Hegemon of Sorcerous Mana] to connect to both Silrat and Theurien's mana cores. With another thought, he forced their mana to adopt spatial qualities through his own affinity with Spatial Lightning, and in a blink, the two men were standing before Skullius, stunned.

The Hybrid Luman did his very best to conceal a majority of his presence. Kintar had been right. It wasn't safe for them to feel even negligent bits of his pressure.

Silrat gaped.

"You've changed. Again," he said with a sheepish, wiry look. He didn't know how much of this madness he could take in one day.

Theurien seemed to be adapting better to the strange, beyond mythical world he was introduced to today.

"You look much better than before, I'd say," he said with a weak smile.

The two appraised Skullius thoroughly, but from a distance. Even they felt something unnerving about the cloud he wore like a robe.

Skullius was amused. He had half expected the two men to fail to recognise him.

He didn't entertain the needless chatter, however.

He gave Theurien a stern, heavy gaze. The man shook slightly.

"I didn't make a promise to you, but I felt obligated to deliver regardless, especially after all you lost. Today, all that I tried to do for you was almost rendered meaningless by my own hands, funnily enough," Skullius said.

Theurien didn't understand what Skullius was talking about, but the mention of loss triggered him into sorrow at once.

"What... what are you talking about?" he asked.

"It's better if I show you," Skullius said, and a moment later, the five of them were no longer in the wide and spacious first floor. They now stood in a small, bright room; the walls were white, the floor was white, the ceiling was white.

But the beauty of the room was incapable of trapping the attention of the arrivals for long, after all, a more enthralling scene stood in the middle of the room.

On a soft, white bed covered by a large, mystical glass cage layered with what looked like runes, a soul was laid.

This soul seemed to be at peace, lying on its back on the soft blankets beneath; they held it with care.

Stylla looked as though she was asleep. Her form was rather faint; fitting for a mortal soul. The runes on the glass that covered her bed constantly sent what looked like specks of glitter towards her, and her form greedily absorbed them.

Theurien fell to his knees at once.

He buried his face in his hands and struck the floor.

The first feeling he had had to endure upon looking at Stylla was overwhelming relief, but then sorrow and a feeling of dark foreboding snatched him, telling him that this was a ploy; that it was time for him to say goodbye to his oldest daughter as well.

He couldn't bear it.

Skullius was stunned. He couldn't understand why Theurien reacted this way. Silrat couldn't muster the words to say and was equally stumped.

Elita, however, kneeled and placed her hand on Theurien's trembling back.

She smiled.

If there was something she knew best, something she had absorbed so perfectly from being a Paladin Champion, it was instilling hope in the kindest possible way to those that had been living in darkness for too long. She knew how to respond to those that dared not hope for the best in case the dark stripped them of their happiness.

She smiled.

"Raise your head. Look at her. She's not going anywhere. She's hanging on," she said.

Slowly, Theurien rose. His eyes were red, thick with sorrow he had had to keep at bay for a long time. Tears and snot fell endlessly from his face.

"Is she... is she... Will she...?" he stammered as his eyes pierced Elita's.

Elita received his hope with a bright smile and a kindness in her eyes that gave Theurien ample resolve without the need for words.

At once, Theurien stood up and drank in the sight of his daughter. He wept bitterly.