

Undead 1301

Chapter 1301: Free Favours

It seemed Fulgardt had just about had his fill of sharing. Skullius' remark triggered something in him that prompted him to stand.

"As you have no intention of restraining me, I should think I'm free to leave," he said and the chair under him dissipated.

Skullius had a lot he wanted to ask. Just now, Fulgardt had spoken about something called the Great Rending, but he had been a step late in asking what it was because of everything else the Immoral spilled after.

Skullius also wanted to ask about the utilisation of Corrupted Deities, but unlike the subject of the Wanderer, he knew for sure Fulgardt wouldn't be coerced into teaching him about it.

"Is the Great Rending the formation of reality?" the Hybrid Warmoth asked.

Fulgardt scoffed.

"Make of it what you will," he said and then he turned to the First Horn who had been silently listening the whole time. "I hope for your sake that you chose the right Insurgent Magnus. I truly wouldn't want to see Maqi die so pitifully in the future, especially at the hands of someone who doesn't belong."

With that, he gave Skullius a sharp look and vanished along with Rias.

Skullius shook his head.

"Well, that was abrupt," he said to himself. "I couldn't have pushed him to stay though."

He wondered where Fulgardt was off to. If he didn't have access to the Labyrinth, what would he do about his goals? Skullius had thought about enlisting Fulgardt's help in killing Boron, but he didn't trust the Immoral enough for that. He discarded any notion that proposed Fulgardt collaborating with.

"Mind bringing me out of the dark?" Elita by his side asked. She had figured it wouldn't be possible to squeeze herself into Skullius and Fulgardt's conversation given all the context she was missing.

"When we're out of here," Skullius said and he stood, facing the First Horn. "We shall proceed as we talked about before, but not right now. I will come to collect the Ode and the hag when the crisis on Aigas had ended. Until then, I hope you can defend yourself well."

The Ode leaned forward from his bowl.

"You defended our honour minutes ago. Why would you sully it with such a hope? Of course, our nation will stand."

Skullius had no doubts about that, at least where mortal Cavern were concerned. If Divine ones cropped up...

"Just in case, let me leave you with this," he said and one of his hands pulled something from the [Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus]. It was a scroll, or more aptly, a Charged Mantle.

A Charged Mantle was a scroll charged with a unique power – Andori, Parlous Nature and the likes. They could be activated with the user's will.

The one Skullius was giving the First Horn was a World rank Prime treasure with an offensive Andori packed into it. It could be used five times before the Charged Mantle was exhausted. Divine Cavern were few and far between, and incredibly weak. Even basic Andori would likely work against them.

Despite his pride, the First Horn did not miss the incredible, threatening energy coming from the scroll. This was goodwill he couldn't refuse. He ordered one of his guards to collect the scroll.

"The nice thing about Charged Mantles as Treasures is that they aren't as aggressive as regular weapons. Even mortals can handle and use them," Skullius thought.

"I'll do you one last favour, First Horn. I'm sure you'll be thankful for it," he said to the ruler of Maqi and then turned to leave with Elita. The First Horn was puzzled but he didn't ask for clarification.

Soon, the two anomalies were outside the First Horn's palace. Skullius politely declined the offer by the Shamanic Mages from before to escort him outside the city.

"I can't tell you all about Fulgardt's secret just yet," Skullius said to Elita. "It's not because I don't want to. There are Creeds or maybe Rules at play, I'm afraid."

"Rules?" Elita frowned. "What kind of Rules?"

"There is SOMETHING in Fulgardt's Labyrinth that remains thriving and strong under a Rule that demands obscurity in exchange. No one other than Fulgardt himself was supposed to know of this THING. But, Fulgardt being Fulgardt, he had contingencies and countermeasures in place in case, the Deities, for instance, found out," Skullius explained.

"Every additional individual who finds out is under the protection of a Tie of Exchange from Fulgardt. Essentially, he can't harm me. This is another Rule meant to restore the effect of the first Rule I mentioned. The risk my knowledge of the THING poses to Fulgardt offsets the fact that the THING has been found out – the original condition for its vitality."

Elita reeled.

Basically, Fulgardt had made SOMETHING empowered by a Rule, but that Rule wanted him to keep that SOMETHING secret at all costs in exchange.

But just in case he couldn't fulfill this secrecy, Fulgardt added another Rule to ensure that the benefit of the first Rule wouldn't be lost.

This second Rule protected those who found out about his SOMETHING from him, which was a disadvantage against Fulgardt himself. This disadvantage kept up the benefit of the first Rule.

"That's... intricate," she said, and she took another couple of seconds to make sure she understood what Skullius had said. "This was actually not a bad move. Though, if it's a Tie of Exchange that protects you from him, if you ever leave Aigas..."

"Yeah. He'll rush to kill me," Skullius chuckled.

"But, don't the Deities already know everything that happens on Aigas anyway?" Elita asked.

Skullius had considered this. He didn't have a straight answer.

"I imagine it's not so easy for Deities to spy on everything Divines do, even on their worlds," he said and he looked up into the darkened sky. "Ah, time to do that favour for the First Horn."

Flocks of Cavern were flying in aggressively, intent on ruining Maqi. It had finally dawned on the main forces of these creatures that the numbers they had sent to Maqi had been obliterated. Skullius could sense two Divine Cavern among them.

He conjured the Noboboyama at once. The great Phantasmic Retainer emerged, tall and broad as ever, its darkness more extravagant than that of the night.

Skullius had imbued portions of both his Majestic Territories, Aphotic Catacomb of the Daemon and Purified Cadaver's Impartial Felicity into each of his Retainers so that he could use the effects of the Territories much more conveniently.

The Noboboyama groaned and the suddenly, a wall of light flooded from its face, travelling to meet the Cavern. When the Cavern were met by the light, their defences were stripped away, flesh and skills alike. And then, an unending series of ruthless dark slashes ripped them all – all three million of them – to bits in a less than a breath.

And then all that remained, were the Divine Cavern who were practically immune to powers of this level.

Skullius sighed.

Not these disappointments again.

They were simply canon fodder to him. What purpose did they even serve?

Chapter 1302: Rescue Squad

"This is shaping up to be easier than I imagined. A lot easier. We might just be on a tour of Pelian at this point," Vali said with a needlessly seductive smile as she looked up into the sky.

"I thought we'd be doing a lot of the fighting. How about we just turn back and join the rescued commonfolk in your estate, Val?" said Maxim. She agreed with Vali's assessment, not that a ton of analysis was required to measure its validity.

Ferex's strength was abundantly clear.

The wolven Apostle had whipped out his hand just now, and a hundred Cavern were fallen from the sky, dead.

Apparently, Ferex was striking at the soul of these creatures, not bothering with their bodies at all, which was why his dispatching of them looked so simple.

The army of experts following behind Vali and Maxim was particularly amazed. They had cheered when Ferex had slaughtered the first swarm of Cavern that had headed straight for them. They hadn't counted on even Vali and Maxim being able to handle the thousand and some Cavern easily, and thus, when Ferex killed them all in an instant, they could only be glad that they got to live for another hour before yet another swarm targeted them.

The threat of the Cavern was insurmountable to normal experts.

The Families that were brought under Vali during the Premium Age Royale mostly had Masters as the top combatants. Even if they could handle some of the Cavern one on one, they would easily be overwhelmed if a few more joined the fray.

A force of roughly four hundred Masters was nothing to scoff at though, at least by Aigas' common standards. This number of experts, following behind Vali and Maxim, had yet to lift a finger in combat this entire journey.

"Festos' promises are usually trustworthy. Not that I of all people had reason to doubt," Silrat said with a sigh. He was walking beside the pink-haired Maxim. She gave him a strange look and narrowed her eyes.

"I wouldn't go that far. Festos promised the world would still be intact after his battle. My doubts peaked when Feinheath shook so hard it looked as though it would be ripped apart," she said with frustrated tone. "He also didn't bother to mention he was actually the second coming of Fulgardt. Don't give him too much credit. I had gotten the feeling there was something wrong with him, but I just..."

Silrat gave a nervous smile.

"Well, that version of him is gone. Rest assured," he said to Maxim.

"Hmm. I think I'll miss that version," Vali said with a smile. "He was rather entertaining."

Silrat had rendezvoused with Vali and Maxim as Skullius had asked. He and Ferex had been given something that would help the two verify his identity as Skullius' messenger. Contrary to what the Hybrid Warmoth had said though, the two ladies hadn't had too difficult of a time believing Silrat.

Instead, they had strained Silrat for answers about what had happened to Skullius following his battle. Both women seemed particularly annoyed by the fact that Skullius hadn't come to meet them himself.

Even when Silrat explained about what had happened to Skullius – the separation – the two ladies had insisted that they would have liked to hear it from the horse's mouth because they were – as they put it – first hand victims.

Silrat could scarcely disagree. He apologised on Skullius' behalf. Deep down though, he thought the Hybrid Warmoth owed him a huge favour. He had never gotten to be Skullius' wingman before and becoming one now during this apocalyptic crisis was odd.

Silrat had wondered what would happen if Vali and Maxim found out that Skullius was hanging around with another woman right now instead of them.

To Vali's comment just now, though, Silrat couldn't help but disagree.

"That version of Festos buttered you up and kept you around because you were useful. Trust me, he would have discarded you as soon as he decided he didn't need you anymore. He was prepared to sacrifice me and others he had known and cared for just to kill his other self," he said sombrely.

The memory of that fresh in Silrat's mind. He had been so scared when the Hybrid Luman had appeared behind him and Theurien in the estate.

Vali kept her smile, but it lost a majority of its enthusiasm.

"That is quite distasteful," she said.

At that moment, Ferex who was ahead of them all came to a stop. They had reached a cliff overlooking one of Pelian's biggest cities: Bruine. Quite like Genhuis and Agmold, it held a massive population, or at least it had.

Maxim, Silrat and Vali rushed up to look.

The wide city was ruined. A massive black tower grew outside its walls; it was the same as what had happened to every populated area in Pelian when the Great Trembling began a week ago. Powerful Cavern had come out of these towers to slaughter all living things in the human nation.

Whatever emerged from the tower outside Bruine had succeeded in wrecking the city. All the grace of such a massive settlement had been lost; buildings were felled and crushed, blood layered over the streets, and giant fissures ran across the city, likely from great but short battles.

"Will we even find survivors here?" Maxim asked, her face scrunched in agitation.

"Only one way to find out," Vali said.

Soon, the group was marching forward. Well, they leaped off the cliff and then marched forth.

Their mission was to find and rescue as many survivors as possible in Pelian. So far, the group had seen a bit of success. They found small groups of commonfolk guarded by Stray and Capital Knights in remote villages and Ferex had picked up the signatures of souls buried deep underground in secret storehouses in other cities.

Vali teleported all the commonfolk to her estate using a Legendary grade artefact she owned and Silrat appealed to the experts they found to join them.

Under the cover of the night, Bruine looked a bit too gloomy. There was no shortage of corpses in the streets and obliterated homes, some displaced by a few blocks, blocked the roads. It was hard to watch for Silrat. The powerlessness of the commonfolk was a bitter pill. When he had been in the Guild's Association, preventing sights like these had been his goal.

But even the Guild's Association couldn't have done anything about this. The group passed its branch in this city, clawed through by some immeasurably powerful monstrosity long gone.

As they walked on, using their senses to search for those who might have miraculously survived, Vali suddenly frowned.

There was a relatively intact building to her right made of wood and stone. Its doors were closed, but that didn't stop her from sensing the view inside.

Vali walked up to it and opened the doors. She froze.

Maxim reached her and looked inside the building too only to turn away with a grimace.

"Urgh..."

Her reaction drew Silrat. His own reaction was less visceral, but no less emotional. He gaped.

A few hundred corpses were hung by their wrists from tie beams above.

Their bodies, flayed completely, their privates burned off and their eyes gouged out, swung in a dark rhythm. They were arranged in neat rows all through the interior of the building.

Silrat's heart rate quickened.

It was a dark sight indeed, but something about the view made it ten times more ominous.

All the bodies belonged to male victims.

Chapter 1303: Timely Isolation

Edagon.

Benzard sat next to Sause's large body, his sword across his lap.

He didn't know how long he was supposed to wait and watch over the Giant's body like this. He was already growing tired of it, quite honestly.

Just hours ago, when things started to become strange, with Aigas stripping in drapes of time, Sause had told Benzard that he had to make a little trip and that he'd be leaving his body behind. He had charged Benzard with protecting his body. Apparently, the Giant wasn't too confident about his survivability on this trip of his, and if something were to happen to him, he wanted Benzard close by.

A few minutes after Sause had 'left', Benzard had understood what this trip the Giant mentioned was about.

In one of the drapes of time flitting across Aigas' sky, Benzard had watched as a dragon far larger than the Herald he knew, Jerthrax, spit out a torrent of flame so bright and so pure that he hadn't been able to open his eyes for a while.

Aigas was split between times, and it appeared Sause had gone to remedy the problem. Or so Benzard had thought.

This assumption had sustained Benzard's dutiful self for a while, but not so much now. He wondered if Sause had met a setback so profound that he was still unable to return. Again, Benzard grew tired of waiting.

Edagon was a lonely place.

It hadn't always been that way though.

When Benzard first arrived here, after Sause brought him back from the Labyrinth of the Yoke, there had been many Giants to receive them – many of Sause's kin. They were friendlier than Benzard had initially thought. Because he had received Sause's powers, they treated him as if he were a Giant as well.

Several of the great cities perched on high peaks held sizable numbers of the Giants. Sause and Benzard had dined and wined in each, laughing and chatting with the Giants there.

Benzard had felt that the prospect of life here was beautiful. It was way better than what he had had to endure as a human, as a mercenary. It had been wonderful.

...Until one day, Sause decided to make a round trip around Edagon, killing and devouring the remainder of his kind. He was ruthless. He was ravenous. He left none alive, not even the young ones.

Suddenly, Benzard's view of Edagon had shifted. He had wondered if he was better off here on Edagon, as he had thought before. A part of him had wished Skullius had just killed him in that damned Labyrinth.

Benzard sighed.

From where he sat beside Sause's body, he could see a great chunk of Edagon and its many rises.

The great continent had been healing steadily from Skullius' battle with the Null Devil King, Caxellac. It almost looked as good as... well, as good as it was before that terrible battle. Watching the slow healing process had been one of Benzard's pastimes in the last few days.

"Hmm?"

Benzard suddenly felt a sharp sting of caution from his skin. Just as he was wondering what this could be, the entirety of Edagon was bathed in a crimson hue.

...!!!

He was alarmed.

The clouds and skies were dyed in the bleak colour.

How ironic. Benzard would not have thought the colour crimson could frighten him. In this case, however, he had no choice but to fear.

Even before he gazed at the source of the terror, he already knew it was impossible for him to beat.

Up on Edagon's shore, a terrible entity had arrived. It was adorned in a fearsome suit of dark armour, bulky and blocky. Furious deep crimson flames burst from every crevice of the armour, as

though attempting to melt it from the inside. The eyes behind the creature's helm were also a bright crimson, smaller flames burning from them threateningly.

A great sword was upon the creature's shoulder, pulsating with waves of power that went beyond the Transcendent grade.

Benzard grit his teeth and crimson lightning raced across his eyes. He recognised the signature of power from this enemy.

It was an undead creature!

'Dammit! Of all times for you to be away, Sause!' he thought.

But Benzard stepped up to face the threat regardless.

He streaked from his position towards the creature, lightning trailing behind him. The closer he got to this enemy, the more he felt discouraged. He couldn't even fathom how deep its powers were.

He stopped just shy of a kilometer from the undead creature. It might have looked like a great distance, but Benzard knew it could be crossed in an instant.

Knowing this fact was one thing though.

Benzard's eyes met those of the undead creature.

Suddenly, Benzard felt himself lose balance and fall to the ground. It was so abrupt. For a few moments, he felt no pain. Well, he felt nothing, really.

...Until he saw his legs standing above him, blood spraying from the stump of his waist.

Something had split Benzard in half, something he couldn't comprehend.

Pain and panic finally caught up with Benzard. He gaped and screamed in agony.

He could hardly believe it.

Was this really it?

Blood spilled from his mouth, choking him.

'Sause...' he thought with his second to last dying breath. To think the Giant had seen him fit as a successor. 'I'm... I'm sorry.'

An armoured hand suddenly pressed on Benzard's chest. In an instant, vitality was restored to his body, and the pain washed away from him. His senses even grew sharp again.

A face Benzard wasn't familiar with appeared above him.

"You must be the guy the boss mentioned," said Kenno as he made sure his Granted Restoration had given Benzard a healthy and complete lower body to complement his torso. "Good thing we arrived just in time."

Benzard was stunned.

The armour the man above him wore was littered with pretty stars and he had a brand on his forehead that spat out strings of yellowish red lightning.

He wasn't alone.

A terrifying humanoid creature, pale and pasty faced, stood in front of them both, gazing beyond at the enemy with the crimson flames.

Araeyn donned a smile.

He seemed rather interested in the enemy before him. He rarely showed excitement.

Kenno walked up to the Apostle's side and gazed at the undead creature.

"You know what it's here for right?" he asked Benzard.

The young man was still perplexed by how his body had been restored so quickly. He hardly cared that he was naked though. He quickly collected himself, stood, and nodded to Kenno's question.

"Yeah."

Kenno nodded.

"We'll get it away from here," he said and glanced at Araeyn, "for as long as we can. Do it, Araeyn!"

At once, Kenno, the Apostle and the undead knight vanished from Benzard's sight.

In a forsaken realm – a Null Remnant – an Unlimited Star, a Doom Knight and Skullius' most powerful Apostle stood in a triangular formation.

Araeyn grinned and Null Life Essence burst from him in a crazy torrent. Even against the modified soul of a Deity, he wasn't afraid.

Kenno laughed and his armour churned with great volumes of energy. He brought his hands together in a sacred gesture.

"I didn't think I would be flirting with death so early in the mission," he said and grinned. Then...

"Majestic Territory Expulsion...!"

Chapter 1304: Alternative Route

Eofel.

The golden goblet in Fulgardt's hand melted, the wine that had been stowed within it boiling to evaporation within seconds. It took no effort to see that the Immoral was incensed. Fulina, who had been the one to deliver the goblet into his hands shook. She feared the wine might not have been to his liking, but Rias reassured her that she had nothing to do with Fulgardt's rage. He should know.

"Calm down, will you? Just because someone closed one door doesn't mean another cannot be opened. We did talk of alternative routes," the EverSword heir said from the opposite end of the table.

Fulgardt gave him a malevolent glare.

"Easy for you to say," he said acidly. "I had it all planned. We could have completed one of the three conditions required for you to become a Divine simply by bringing Maqi under our heel. But that little skeleton dared....!"

Hot steam burst from Fulgardt's nostrils.

How Skullius had embarrassed him back in Maqi was eating away at his dignity. No. His dignity was all but gone. Now his sanity was the one that was being eaten away. In front of a few dozen mortals, Skullius had humiliated and outplayed him and he had been forced to just take it.

For an instant, the entire building seemed to glow, burned by a ferocious heat from Fulgardt's Broader Existence.

Barring how Skullius had found out about his secret, his hindering of Fulgardt's plans – inadvertently – was almost equally as infuriating.

Fulgardt had not sought to acquire the loyalty of the Maqians for some sort of shallow, prideful play or to get back at his home nation for how they shunned and rejected him in his time.

No.

First, Fulgardt had planned to bless the Maqians with gifts through his Insurgent Magnus class to acquire their loyalty. To invoke this power though, the recipients needed to be zealous and welcoming of him. They needed to view him a friendly manner and accept what he had to offer – and he couldn't cheat this requirement.

After he had acquired this, Fulgardt had wanted to use the entire population of Maqians to help Rias complete the Mortal Binding requirement of Divinity (where one individual had to infuse their essence into many blessed beings). With how powerful the Maqians were, this would have been a cinch.

As for the other requirements, Fulgardt had remedies. One of them laid in the Labyrinth of the Yoke, which Skullius had denied him access to.

Fulgardt's fury grew.

"I will get that brat back," he declared.

"I have no doubts about that," Rias said. "But for now, perhaps we should go with the alternative path we discussed?"

Fulgardt simmered down at once.

"Very well then. If you are that confident in your mastery over Undeath., be my guest. Just don't die in the process," he said.

Rias gave a soft chuckle.

"I am already dead."

The Noboboyama seemed omnipotent against the waves of Cavern that relentlessly attacked the duo on the [Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus].

Skullius had imbued a Fractional Territory within it (a limited Majestic Territory) and thus, it could expel some of the Primary attack functions of Aphotic Catacomb of the Daemon. It released a piercing light from the [Heart of Revelation], stripping enemies of their defences and then cutting them up using slashes that the possessed Skullius had programmed into its Imaginary GeoScape; because of this, the Phantasmic Retainer was capable of operating on its own without Skullius' input whatsoever.

"Hope you weren't getting too impatient," Skullius said to Elita as the nimbus surged, heading further north in Pelian.

"Not at all. Like I said, I really needed to replenish my Voided Death Essence. I'm determined to deal with this myself if it can be helped. I just hope we're not too late," the former Paladin Champion said anxiously.

"I doubt it. At best, the Purity failed to create whatever monster you envision and at worst, well... maybe only a handful of lives were lost when creating the Divine monster, and it really isn't all that powerful." Skullius fixed his blank gaze on her. "Tell me truthfully though. Was this really all just a hunch? Earlier, you said it was just conjecture and you'd just randomly pieced together details you remembered about the Cursed Bloods, and that Paladin Champion. Was that all true?"

Elita gave him a smile.

"I wasn't lying. It's all true. Maybe I got homesick some time out there in the great void and searched for a reason to hurry home, but I believe I am right," she said.

The reason Elita had returned was because she believed people like her, Cursed Bloods (those with ancestors who served as vessels for the Deities back during the Second Grand War and were cursed for it) were being used for a nefarious plot by the Purity. She thought that the second most powerful Paladin Champion was in on it too since she was hardly ever seen.

Elita thought that the Purity was abusing the cursed trait of Cursed Bloods, which made them vulnerable to illness, pairing that with the second ranked Paladin Champion's Divine Blessing, which allowed her to control plagues, in order to create some kind of Divine monster that they could use to control the situation on Aigas.

Elita's stalwart disposition cracked slightly.

"There was something else though," she said.

Skullius frowned.

"What?"

Elita looked sullen all of a sudden.

"There are many worlds like ours out there, you know. Worlds that form some kind of religion and get so lost in it in that they decide that waiting on the Deities is foolish and take matters in their own hands in the name of said religion. I've been to a few like that. The story is almost always exactly the same. Warped perception leads to hubris, and that hubris leads to mortals creating something they don't understand."

"I for one understand what the Purity is like. The nine that decide the Purity's course would do anything to keep the order, Skullius. Believe me. Maybe, by some luck, I arrived just in time to put a stop to it."

Skullius' gaze lingered on the former Paladin Champion and then he nodded.

"Well, I hope you're wrong. I'd rather find that the Purity was just running out of Knights to send out and ended up just holing themselves up to read their scriptures in peace," he said.

Elita smiled.

"Yeah. I'd also prefer that."

Chapter 1305: Sacred Courtyard

It didn't take long for Elita to gesture towards what she claimed was the headquarters of the Purity.

Few knew where exactly it was despite knowing that it was located in Pelian. The Purity had some competent experts when it came to non-combat abilities. It also helped that they had vast stores of genuine Divine energy, the same which had freed Skullius from his UNCoddled curse months ago, to use for complex arrays.

The mountain ranges close to what was called the Tattered Serpent's Throat – a river feeding in from the sea separating Feinheath and Opungale – acted as perfect cover for the Purity's headquarters.

It was easy to think that the lair of the self-proclaimed emissaries of the Deities was somewhere in the mountains, and a powerful array set around these mountains exploited this. It created suggestions and clues in the mountain tops and modest slopes that led nosy seekers by the nose.

The true Purity headquarters was located at the base of the three mountains closest to the Tattered Serpent's Throat. Seven more arrays hid it from view, but even if they failed to deny intruders

access, the enemies would only be able to reach the outer sacred courtyard of the headquarters, which was loaded with security measures of its own.

Skullius had no trouble dismantling the arrays around the Purity headquarters. Soon, the sacred courtyard came into view as he and Elita descended.

What he and Elita saw stunned them.

The sacred courtyard was a simple, yet wide yard of pale bricks, flat and even. It spotted three giant faceless marble statues at one of its ends and behind them all, what looked like a great tower with a three-pointed golden star glowing on its face could be seen.

Over the rest of the courtyard though, mounds of corpses could be seen.

All of them were adorned in the silver suits of armour of the infantry Purity Knights, but they hardly looked glorious and respectable. Blood, guts and limbs were sprayed all over the level ground, painting the pale bricks red.

As Elita and Skullius landed in the courtyard, Elita couldn't help but gape. She looked around in disbelief. So much carnage. What for?

She began analysing the wounds on the corpses and found that most of had been inflicted by a sword. An abundance of decapitated heads and also of bodies with multiple slashes ripping away at their torsos and limbs, told Elita that there had been more than one assailant; one preferred to end the Knights' lives quickly and the other... hadn't been so kind.

"Who could have done this?" Elita murmured. Skullius heard.

"A skilled swordman and someone simply killing with a sword," he answered her.

Skullius himself was perturbed by the scene. Perhaps it didn't validate Elita's theory on what the Purity was up to, but it did spell that something was terribly wrong. Something dark was afoot in the Purity headquarters.

"Let's move on. We've got to be quick. This doesn't look more than a few hours old," Elita said as she felt the blood on the ground. She then led the way towards the tower with the Purity's signature star.

As they approached, however, one of the faceless statues seemed to come to life. It stirred and careened. Its neck twisted unnaturally, its faceless head turning towards Skullius and Elita.

The former Paladin Champion was surprised. She had never known these statues to move. They could be used to address those in courtyard, but nothing more.

She didn't like the pressure wafting off the statue and this was in no small part because it was supposed to represent the Deitess Suzamete.

"Another interruption? Ohhhh!" the statue said in a crooked, cracking voice, "Paladin Champion Elita! You are alive and well! Thank Quintess, Listafelle and Suzamete! Their graces are everlasting indeed! You were thought to be lost!"

Elita scowled. She wondered who exactly was speaking through the statue.

"Yes. I'm alive," she said. "I wish to enter the Inner Sanctum and converse with the nine."

The statue fell silent for a few moments and then it spoke.

"Ah. It would please everyone to see that you are alive and well, Paladin Champion Elita, but I'm afraid you will have to wait in the courtyard for a while. There are sacred matters being attended to by the nine inside."

"I'm afraid I can wait no longer. What I have to say is urgent," Elita insisted.

"Forgive us for the inconvenience, but we must insist that you wait here," the statue said, its voice growing louder.

Elita narrowed her eyes.

"Who killed all these Purity Knights?" she asked the statue as she took Broodweiler in her hand.

"You shall be informed when you are permitted inside, Paladin Champion Elita," the statue said and it started to flex its fingers and take steps towards her. "Patience is a virtue you never managed to learn, is it?"

"What do you know of my virtues?" Elita said coldly right before the statue pounced, Suddenly, an ungodly amount of genuine Divine energy raced through it, and its slender, feminine outline abruptly turned ripped, thick muscles etched in the stone!

In the next instant, however, it was violently severed into thousands of pieces when Elita swung her blade in a net of blurs!

Her Broodweiler was very efficient at cutting down things affiliated with Divinity after all; it was a Realm rank Prime treasure with an Absolute Prime Property that allowed its fangs to reach even the Broader Existences of Divine beings!

The other statues in the courtyard also lunged at Elita.

Her body was suddenly encased in Voided Death Essence and she zoomed towards them before they finished their first stride. She obliterated one with a single punch to the chest and sent the other flying way past the Tattered Serpent's Throat into Emeradis!

Skullius had been watching silently behind her. Only Beyrmir hidden within him could have discerned that Skullius quite enjoyed watching her fight. There was something about her body...

"Looks like you weren't wrong after all," the Hybrid Warmoth said. "Though I wonder what the nature of the threat we're dealing with actually is."

Elita turned to him.

"Can you sense anything happening deeper inside headquarters?" she asked him.

"I have been searching everywhere within since we got here," Skullius said and he folded a pair of his arms. "Honestly, I'm not sure what I just sensed. There're several people inside. Many are dead, several are alive and one is somewhere in between."

Chapter 1306: Husk (1)

The interior of the great tower had no floor. From the doorway, a winding set of old stone steps descended deep into the darkness below. Oddly, after some distance inward, they looked like a coiling python, with the demarcations of each step making the serpent's spots.

There had been another array meant to hinder intruders, but its effect was made irrelevant by Skullius who casually crushed it. The genuine Divine energy that empowered it was powerful – as it was a form of Amras – but it was weak against Skullius' own.

"I've heard that it confounds an enemy, making them see an illusion of themselves going down the steps," Elita had described the array as they started making their descent.

The former Paladin Champion also pointed that this wasn't the only entry and exit into the Purity headquarters. There were others, but they wouldn't lead them where she wanted to go as easily. Others led to the Purity Knights' Barrion and others to what was known as the Pure Collectory, where pious blacksmiths sworn to the faith made wares for the Purity.

Skullius made endless attempts at grasping everything there was in this place. He made to scan the entire layout of the headquarters and ascertain where exactly the trouble was, but something was eluding and blocking his senses at the same time.

The Hybrid Warmoth wasn't particularly surprised. When he searched the entirety of Aigas earlier, Divine beings had dashed away from his sensory prowess, making their presences thin and others had responded more proactively, attacking him. As he was still new to this odd sensory power, Skullius wasn't too disappointed when it didn't work as well as he would have wanted.

Thus, he chose to switch to something that wouldn't so easily be countered.

Null Life Essence.

He cast the essence out in a wide net and had it sweep over everything. This was no different to him using the skill [Null Life Demesne]. In fact, it was even better. Though Skullius no longer had any basic Null Life skills, he was no weaker when applying their effects. This was another product of him reaching Divinity.

The results were better when Skullius scanned this time around, but...

"This might be a bigger problem than we thought," Skullius said.

"How so?" Elita asked.

"The Null Life Essence I expelled just now... When it reached a certain point down below, something reacted viciously. I think... no, I'm certain there's a Prime or Wicked treasure in play. It's responding to anything that tries to traverse past a certain point."

"How on earth would the Purity have access to a Treasure? Creating a Divine being is one thing, but a Treasure?"

Skullius didn't know either.

But then again, didn't that Cavern he had just fought have a set of Wicked Treasures? Skullius had taken them for himself after killing the creature. The Cavern were bred in the Under, below Aigas. How would they have gained access to Treasures? Could Boron make them?

"Treasures are different from regular weapons and artefacts, Skullius," Serenity answered after Skullius asked about this. "As I understand it, there is a special group of entities that creates all Treasures. The art was passed down by one of the Primeval Deities, who added on to the Common Reality Leagues. He formed a clan of sorts that has been crafting these Treasures for eons, or rather Consternals, and broke off from the clan as a trade-off to establishing his own name in the universal power system. If you look closely on any Treasure, you may see a signature of this clan. The story is different in the Null Verse, of course."

Skullius immediately drew the red sabres he had taken from the great Cavern he fought before. They were World rank Wicked Treasures. He searched for even the slightest hint of a forger's mark. There was none.

Curious.

He then drew the Realm rank Wicked Treasure, Malefic Gold Hand, the Treasure he had received from JOISEN ANTERRAS' contract. It was a large, golden gauntlet with what appeared to be thousands of parts. It clanked, bits of it chinking at the slightest movement. It appeared mechanical in one form or another, its protruding, pointed knuckles laced with strings of an unknown, white energy.

Skullius searched the Treasure and... there!

He spotted it.

Through his outlandish senses, he noticed a tiny engraving in the gauntlet's palm. It was a string of text bordered by a tiny rapier and a hammer.

'What does this mean then? Did the Cavern get their Treasures from another external source?' Skullius thought. 'That wouldn't make sense. They were sealed below.'

The Hybrid Warmoth gave the red sabres, which were called the Twin Usurpers of Misery, a pensive look before stowing them back.

There was no answer to the mystery. Only Boron knew the answer, and for now, he wasn't Skullius' concern.

'I really hope Araeyn encounters that bastard first and traps him in the Null Remnants,' he thought.

Skullius shared his thoughts on the possibility of a Treasure hindering them ahead with Elita. She didn't have too much insight to give. She didn't know much more about Treasures than he did. She inquired about what else Skullius had sensed up ahead.

"There really isn't much. There's a whole lot of corpses on the first few levels and on the deepest one I can reach, there's that odd one I told you about," he said.

"Right. You think the masked man had his hand in this as well? If an undead like that is here, that's the only conclusion we have, right?" Elita said anxiously.

Skullius had sensed someone inside the Purity headquarters with a signature he was well-acquainted with.

The masked man, Actuass, had unleashed a torrent of assorted undead creatures on the Severed Union troops more than once during the voyage to Edagon, and Skullius back then had spotted odd kinds of undead thralls. They were more... sane than the others, and they didn't feel like corpses raised to tainted life. They only seemed like bodies sucked up of all life and sustained by a wireless connection from somewhere, rather than flesh machines with Undeath streaming through them.

"I'm not sure. Whoever it is, they are intact and they are moving, though they seem injured," Skullius said.

His extraordinary senses would have picked up the exact shape, likeness and colour of this individual, but again, something was restricting him from obtaining details.

The two soon reached the end of the stone steps and entered a wide hallway lit with bright, ever-burning torches of some strange, red and black wood on either side of them.

Even though the light was ample, there was a gloom to it that neither of the two anomalies could explain.

Chapter 1307: Husk (2)

The hallway was clear of bodies, but bloody footprints could be seen. There appeared to be three sets of them trudging ahead in odd patterns.

Elita and Skullius walked on until they reached a wide chamber with two altars on opposite ends. The walls were embossed with three, three-pointed stars that gave a subtle reassuring glow. A red carpet with the same symbol spread on the smooth floor, under great, clay flowerpots and the many, human-sized faceless statues of the Deities.

"Just how many of these statues are there in this place?" Skullius asked.

Elita gave what appeared to be an embarrassed smile.

"You won't bother to ask soon enough."

Skullius could see the emotion in the woman's eyes. She had attachments to this place, he knew. Elita had genuinely desired to fight for justice. She was a true Paladin Champion, and for a long time, she had tempered her faith in this place.

"There are many chambers like this on this level. Of course, you know that," she said with a smile. "Before going deeper down, every Knight must make a prayer and pledge their faith in the Deities on any one of the altars every day. I used to love doing that," she said.

She then showed Skullius the thin passage that led from the Purity Knights' Barrion to this place as they walked through a corridor coursing through each of the chambers. Soon, they were descending

down another flight of stone steps, this one much wider than the last. They followed after the bloody footprints.

They appeared on the second level, which spotted a massive pool of water; at its centre a great feminine statue holding a great jar sprouted out from below, solemn and sacred. There was a corpse floating close to where it protruded from the surface of the pool. It was dressed in a heavy set of robes. The gashes on its chest from where blood escaped, turning the great pool red, looked awfully similar to the three-pointed star of the Purity.

"That was a Grand Priest," Elita said bitterly and her face hardened. "Whoever did this... they were clearly mocking the Purity, and not just because of the slashes. As I recall, Grand Priests are supposed to bathe themselves in this pool everyday to connect to Listafelle, and I'd heard it said that if they've done something impure, when they enter the waters, they will turn black around them."

Skullius merely nodded.

He could tell Elita was upset, but he didn't have the capacity to quell her emotions; not in these matters.

Like the first level, the second spotted multiple pools divided by thick partitions. There were twice the number of statues on this level compared to the last.

Elita and Skullius didn't linger. They went down the third, fourth, fifth and six levels briskly, finding nothing or more corpses desecrated in meaningful ways.

More and more, Elita was convinced that someone who truly hated the Purity had done all this, but she couldn't imagine someone who would care enough to attack the headquarters just to spite the faith. This didn't appear to be the work of the Cavern. The bloody prints told her that it was not one person, but three, oddly enough.

The duo arrived on the seventh level. Upon being confronted with another torchlit hallway, they walked down it, but the closer they got to its end, the more they felt something ominous building ahead of them.

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

This was exactly why he didn't just teleport Elita and himself to this level. This was where the interference to his senses grew bolder, and just two levels below was where he felt the effects of a Treasure pushing back against his Null Life Essence.

Both experts raised their guard. Suddenly, Elita looked even larger than she already was in the black and silver scale armour she had picked from the Warmoth's Treasury. She dual-wielded Broodweiller and another one of the two swords she had chosen as well; as she kept the great maroon bow on her back in plain view, it seemed she was ready to use it at a moment's notice too.

A triangular space appeared at the end of the hall. On the walls were nine netted orifices. Elita knew them to be where the nine spoke from. She had just been here the day she was demoted for apparently allowing a manic undead creature to ruin the homes of noblemen in Eofel.

There were more corpses in this place. Many, many more than before.

Two belonged to Paladin Champions.

Elita recognised them at once. They were the Fourth and Eighth ranked Champions!

Powerful slashes had carved through their armour and flesh.

Elita dashed towards them, but the instant she got close, they opened their eyes.

...!!!

The former Paladin Champion retreated in a breath.

The corpses' eyes rolled in their sockets, and then they whipped to their feet.

"A true delight it is that you have joined us, my dear. Though, I truly wish you had been a bit more patient as I advised."

The voice that spoke from one of the netted orifices was wet, crooked and old. A nasty coughing fit followed after it.

Skullius hid his surprise. He hadn't sensed that there was a living person here at all.

'Did the abundance of corpses confuse my senses?' he thought, but immediately answered himself with a 'No'. NOW he could sense life from the geezer behind the net, but it was thin. Very thin. It was hidden by an overwhelming presence of...

"So it was you," Elita said sharply, facing the netted hole in the wall with a shadow behind it. "Paladin Champions aren't allowed some agency anymore?"

The old thing behind the net guffawed and cast away all false courtesies.

"Ha! You were never a true Paladin Champion! We only humoured you because your fellows saw you kindly and regarded your achievements well. If we hadn't promoted you, it would have looked suspicious. We did intend for it to appear as though you Cursed Bloods had an equal right to stand as Knights for the Purity as any other."

Elita's scowled.

"Is that so? How virtuous. The fact that you'd even confess such a thing..." she said, disgusted.

"Who cares? You are of no importance." The shadow behind the net danced crookedly, "Behold, these are the true Paladin Champions! The ones who stood by us when we were under threat by that feral friend of yours, another false Champion who succumbed to darkness!"

Elita froze.

"What?"

The two arisen Paladin Champions stumbled forward like new collections of flesh and bone.

"These are the true Champions of the world, and they are fit to partake in the New Power! The New Order based on the price of the old!" the old shadow cried.

Chapter 1308: Fading

Revia could hardly feel her face with the boils festering over her skin. They twitched and convulsed as though they were alive, breathing. Some grew fatter as the seconds passed, some moving, extending to the wall she was leaning against; they truly were an infection.

Her pale, cold skin was hardly recognisable under the reddish-green affliction. In the first few hours, she had felt the throbbing pain they caused, but now, she felt nothing. If she were alive, she would have probably been dead by now. But alas, she was already dead; she was a walking corpse. She had been doomed to this fate since that day she fought Actuass in the Isise.

For a moment, Revia burned with fury. She had been assigned on a mission to that place by the nine, the High Authorities, back then; a mission to purge evil.

'Ungrateful fools!'

Revia could have given anything just to be able to stand right now.

She wished she hadn't ignored the signs.

Days ago, when she, Alaris, Ruhrees and another Paladin Champion had made for this place, she had felt herself start to get weak. Her hands twitched, losing strength and control. She should have known back then that she was on a steady path to decline. She should have known that this must have meant that the one who had called her to Undeath, was dead.

Revia wasn't sure what was keeping her alive right now: the fact that she wasn't a typical undead minion, or perhaps her fierce desire to tear down this wretched place and all that was in it. Perhaps it was both.

Since becoming an undead, after Actuass had kidnapped her and used her for his sick plans, Revia had known she'd have no place in the Purity as she was now. Of course, she could have chosen to live a quiet life away from society doing nothing but brooding.

But that wouldn't do.

Many things had burned within her ever since her skin started lacking warmth.

She had found out that Elita was gone. That woman she considered to be an older sister, had been falsely judged and demoted from her rank because the Purity hated what she was. Elita had been the one to calm her down when she (Revia) had talked to her one last time – in her prison. She had not flared because she had seen Elita smile despite how cruelly they treated her.

But where had Elita gone after that? What had the Purity done with her?

That question had turned Revia's thoughts dark.

Unlike Elita, Revia hadn't joined the Purity because she wanted to. She had joined because she had to. After losing her parents and her only sibling, she had been approached by a Priest who swore she was destined for great things. She had never truly believed it, even when she became the youngest Paladin Champion. All she believed in was Elita.

For Elita, she had stuck around with Actuass despite how sick it made her feel. She made herself believe that she could ride the coattails of the masked man's deed to gain enough authority to confront the Purity. She knew in her heart it was wrong, and she was prepared for retribution after, but she had to burn the Purity first. Only Actuass had had the power to do so; he was the only one she knew who could.

Revia had second-guessed herself once she, Alaris and Ruhrees had reached the Purity Headquarters, which wasn't easy. On top of the fact that only the top three Paladin Champions and the Cursed Bloods (because the Purity preferred to keep them all close) knew where the Purity headquarters actually was despite living in it, there had been many arrays to break through.

On facing the three faceless statues in the inner courtyard, she had questioned why she came to this place with a sword and malevolence. However, when one of the statues had risen and spoken to her, her fury had been validated.

To think the nine had the gall to denounce her; to claim that she had failed to protect the world and instead sided with the enemy due to weakness.

To think they'd set their Purity Knights against her, to kill her.

To think... to think they had been breeding something even more sinister than she could have imagined in the sacred dark depths.

Even Ruhrees, who was only accompanying Revia because he wondered why the Purity had not sent out more Knights to assist against the Cavern had been perturbed.

Alaris as well, had been stunned. He had joined to assist because he had hoped they might come back from the Purity with a great host of allies.

But alas...

Revia coughed and blood spilled from her.

She wondered where Ruhrees and Alaris were now.

They had fought their way through the Purity Knights, but when the Paladin Champions appeared, the battles had turned uglier.

Ruhrees had disappeared somewhere, fighting one, and Alaris, holding his own quite well, had vanished while fighting another.

As for Revia. Well, her body decided to fail her at the most crucial moment, when she had drawn closest to the sinister darkness brewing beneath. Her assailants had failed to judge what she was and thus, after stabbing her in all the right places, they had left her here to die.

'I can't die now! I can't atone now! At least let me see what they did to Elita, and then I'll gladly take any punishment I deserve!' she screamed from within. The boils merged around her lips, sealing them shut.

They were odd these boils.

What the Purity wished to do with disease was beyond Revia. It made those crones and geezers that called themselves the High Authorities look even more ugly.

Once more, a jolt of weakness took Revia's flesh.

She started to slide off the wall to the floor, her silver hair covering her eyes. It was cold. Too cold. Was this the true approach of death?

Revia had always known that undeath was potent, but pure death also had an authority to it. Perhaps its powers were the coldest of all, hence why she felt like a glacier at this moment. Her mind turned fuzzy.

Perhaps she couldn't have eluded true death much longer, after all, even Actuass hadn't.

Chapter 1309: Giving Peace (1)

'Feral friend...?'

The word made Elita stop. For a single moment, it seemed as though she forgot where she was.

There was only one person the individual behind the netted orifice could have been referring to. To Elita, she might have been dead. She cared for this person's fate – deeply – but probability and possibility had muddled her hope. Somehow, she felt ashamed, half because she hadn't come here for Revia's sake, and the rest because...

'She's really here?' Elita asked herself.

Skullius noticed the look on her face. He had heard what the old fossil behind the net had said. Common sense told him that the individual referred to was someone Elita loved; he imagined it was the 'sister' she mentioned.

"Elita..." He said. His voice brought the former Paladin Champion to her senses.

Elita put on her resolve.

"Sorry," she said and gripped tight her two swords as she looked at the approaching Paladin Champions. "Please, Skullius. Would you allow me to take care of them myself? I... I want them to bring them peace with my own blade. I'm sure they never agreed to their corpses being used like this."

"I understand," Skullius said and he drew back. He folded all four of his arms behind the lead grey nimbus he wore. He doubted that Elita would need his help at all.

He instead focused on the old geezer. He could see his figure well enough even if he couldn't quite sense the life from it. Rather, the life energy was very thin. The old geezer also seemed very weak. He kept coughing nastily and an affliction was on his skin; it all made Skullius suspicious.

'It seems Elita was spot-on, after all,' he thought.

This whole time, he had been itching to use his [Legion Eyes] to get to the bottom of everything happening. He wanted to use the Andori on the old man too, but he felt he should leave him to Elita as well.

To Skullius' surprise, Elita did not seem to intend to use her Voided Death Essence in this battle. The golden light of her Divine Blessing, Peerless Spirit, consumed her body as she readied herself.

The Blessing allowed her to reinforce her strength threefold, to heal others and to expel foul sources of contamination from herself and external targets.

The effect of the Blessing almost seemed visible on the current Elita as her body bulged slightly in her dark armour.

Before she was whisked away to the great void, Elita had been a Master with a purple core – quite a powerful expert. However, while her Stage and mana core remained the same on her journey off-world, her physical stats had grown staggeringly and she had acquired a massive number of skills.

Quite like how mana and souls were universal concepts that went beyond a singular world's power system, so was the fact that repetition led to mastery.

Through rigorous experiences, a body could learn new abilities and grow. Skullius, for instance, had learned [Mana Sense] in Deadmanland just because he had been infatuated with the idea of mana.

In any case, the current Elita was comparable to a peak Transcendent Stager in terms of physicality.

Elita gazed at one of the reanimated Paladin Champions. She was a tall woman with a rather muscular body. Boils of a greenish-red hue climbed onto her skin and thickened. They spread grotesquely, dancing their way even through her eyes.

They did the same for the rotund Champion beside her. He was shorter than her, with slicked back white hair that gave him a considerable amount of distinction, but the boils took away that attractive trait.

'Both their Divine Blessings are problematic, but I better deal with her first,' Elita thought and...
BOOOOM!

In an instant, she had smashed the tall woman back into the wall. She then followed a fraction of a micro-moment later with the swipe of her sword to behead her.

The head came off clean right as the edge of the Realm rank Prime katana Elita had bit into it.

"Hahahahaha! Struggle false Champion!" the geezer screamed with a horrendous cough.

Elita frowned. After slaying the first Champion she was already heading for the second, but...

'Damn it!'

She was paralysed. Her body had simply stopped moving. The other Paladin Champion rushed her with incredible speed right then. His figure billowed with mana, then Aura, then...

...!!!

Skullius frowned.

A cloud of some diseased, genuine Divine energy pooled out of the Champion right when he manifested a great warhammer of pure energy in his hands and smashed it into Elita. There was resounding crash that made the triangular room jump.

Elita was sent flying. She knocked into the wall hard, still paralysed. The rotund Champion was on her almost as soon as she was planted into the wall, his warhammer turned to a flail. He was fast, faster than the Master Elita had known him to be months ago!

She didn't allow herself to receive a second hard blow, however. Even if she couldn't move...

Silver Perfect Aura rose from her body and fashioned itself into an intricate figure before the flail knocked into her. It formed a Genuine Incarnation shaped exactly like Elita herself with impeccable detail!

A kick to the rotund Champion's wrist killed the momentum of his attack and an overhead punch from the Incarnation sent him flying down to the floor.

Skullius was surprised. The way Elita reacted just now despite being unable to move...

'She's used to fighting opponents who can suddenly split into two – soul and body – when cornered. Divines. Even though it's just a Genuine Incarnation, she's mastered using it like a projected soul,' he thought and then chuckled inwardly. 'Or is it perhaps that Quintess, Listafelle and Suzamete copied the mechanic of the Broader Existence and applied it to Aigas' power system?'

The rotund Champion landed with grace right before the beheaded body of the Fourth ranked Champion.

Elita narrowed her eyes as her Incarnation floated to the floor. She watched the disembodied corpse. Its middle and index fingers were coiled around each other.

Elita cursed.

The corpse was using its Divine Blessing, Divine Hand. The gesture it was making was the requirement for one of its abilities, she knew. With the gesture made, the Champion could restrict the movements of any one person in a hundred-meter radius completely. However, while this ability was in use, the Champion couldn't use any other ability of the Blessing or even her skills.

Skullius noticed the correlation between the finger gesture and Elita's condition too.

He was... amused.

'What a coincidence. It works like my technique in the War Body,' he thought.

The corpse of the Fourth Paladin Champion suddenly pushed itself out of the wall and collected its head. Boils rose from the stump of its neck and eagerly connected to its head, connecting the two seamlessly.

'I should have known,' Elita thought and she glanced at Skullius. 'But I'll end this soon enough.'

Chapter 1310: Giving Peace (2)

Skullius found it truly curious that Elita opted to fight without using her Voided Death Essence. He understood her seeking to give them peace herself, and even trying to save as much of her essence as possible, but to make the job a lot harder by using her base powers was still strange. Perhaps she felt confident in doing something so noble because he was here.

In any case, the two walking corpses had strange qualities that made them much stronger than they should have been, and that was all tied to the boils on their face. Skullius wondered how contagious those things were. Would Elita be running the risk of getting infected in her state? He didn't know.

The battle before him continued.

Elita's Incarnation burst forth, dual-wielding pale silver blades very much like the ones her paralysed body was holding. The rotund Champion rushed to meet her, and his flail became a trident that he used to jab at the Incarnation hundreds of times in an instant. His opponent dodged every single one, vaulted over him and dashed towards the Fourth ranked Champion instead!

The Incarnation then unleashed a storm of relentless attacks, slicing and dicing at every opening her opponent showed – and indeed they were many. The corpse didn't dodge them all. It allowed a chunk of its thigh to be hacked off along with a bit of its shoulder, and then it unleashed a burst of diseased genuine Divine energy when it punched Elita's Incarnation.

'She's fast!' Elita thought as her Incarnation flew back from the force of the hit. 'That Divine energy is allowing her to interact with my Incarnation as if it were a physical body.'

But Elita's Genuine Incarnation did not have to follow the common Rules of the world. As it flew from the blow just now, it suddenly vanished and was rematerialized above the tall woman, its katana already biting into her right hand.

The Champion reacted viciously and unexpectedly. She caught onto Elita's plan.

Before Elita's sword could slice her hand and her fingers to dispel the effect of her Blessing – as was her plan – the tall woman's arm... detached from the rest of her body!

It festered with a great number of boils that pulled it onto the wall and branded it there like some kind of sigil!

Just as Elita was reeling from this, the rotund Paladin Champion flung his trident at her real body. It travelled straight and swift, aimed at her head.

MBING!

The trident bounced off of Elita's forehead and spun in mid-air!

Everyone was taken by surprise, even Skullius. The trident was made of the diseased genuine Divine energy; the rotund Champion's Divine Blessing enabled him to mould any kind of essence and energy he came into contact with into any kind of weapon.

So how could Elita have resisted the blow when all she was using was mana and Aura?

Skullius knew. Unlike everyone else, he understood how Elita did it, and it was stupidly simple.

Elita's body ignited with a silvery pressure on top of the golden glow she already had. Well, the glow of her Divine Blessing intensified significantly. It was emboldened by how she had just merged with her Genuine Incarnation just now!

And indeed, she had. Peak Masters could perform such a feat and augment their overall prowess by 1,000%!

To the current Elita... this was extremely substantial.

The cold silver energy wrapped around her Broodweiler, and in a flash, the sword had soared like light right where the Fourth-ranked Paladin Champion's hand had been branded. The sword lopped off the fingers facilitating the activation of Divine Hand, and her paralysis was undone immediately.

And then carnage followed.

In less than a nanosecond, Elita had diced the rotund Champion into a little less than a hundred bits that she fried to extinction almost immediately with the Absolute Prime Property of the katana she wielded.

The katana could release a white flame that devoured hidden and complicated machinations and powers – Runes, arrays and lower-ranked Parlous Natures and more – within the target. It burned nothing else.

As she left the rotund Champion as mundane flesh chunks devoid of the hideous plague, and unable to come back together, she brandished the katana against her other opponent.

The tall woman reacted impressively. With her hand, she made the simplest gesture she could before being stabbed by the katana in the head: she wrapped her ring and middle fingers together.

Right then, both she and Elita were suddenly cast in a black glass casing with a granite-like texture. Well, at least their physical bodies were.

This was another application of Divine Hand. The user was able to turn themselves and anything that came into contact with them into a dark material that was nearly impervious to all forms of damage. This ability had been said to have weathered even the attacks of Arch-Mages before.

This instance of its activation was rather unique, however.

Elita found herself standing opposite a tall woman without all the boils and the pale skin indicative of fresh death. They were in a small village littered with children playing with toys and adults going about their business with wide smiles. All these people didn't seem to notice them though.

Elita looked at the tall woman. She smiled.

"You linked your Divine Blessing to the Reflection of your soul? Ingenious," she said. "You've been fighting it all along?"

The woman smiled as well, and tears fell from her eyes.

"Yeah," she said and began sobbing as she approached Elita and placed her hands on her shoulders. "Please. Save me. I didn't know this would happen. I...I didn't think it would be so evil."

Elita wore a face full of guilt.

"I know. It's not your fault," she said and she placed her hand on the tall woman's cheek. "Besides, you're already saved."

The world around the two seemed to burn away at once. An instant later, Elita was back in her physical body. Her katana, deep in the tall Champion's head was burning her body of the ill affliction. When she withdrew her sword, the corpse fell to the ground and never rose again. The Divine Blessing, Divine Hand meant nothing to a Realm rank Treasure's Absolute Prime Property.

Elita sighed, a dark expression on her face.

'To think they could even bind the souls of the Paladin Champions after death...'

And indeed. It appeared that it wasn't just the corpses that had come to life. Their souls had remained in their bodies, even after death.

Elita gnashed her teeth.

This had gone far worse than she would have thought.