Undead 1361

Chapter 1361: ALL Hands (4)

Bandit King's Boundless Collection operated in the same manner as how Araeyn managed the Null Remnants with his AUTHORITY. Its GeoScape was smothered by the darkness Skullius had released, but the plethora of colossal, glowing items remained, drifting about.

They each represented an aspect of reality basic or otherwise, that Kenno had been exposed to – gravity, Distorted Gravity, time, space, Stagnant Space, and many more. Even without his Territory, Kenno could control these around his target, but with it, his prowess was raised greatly. Of course, as a mere mortal, he couldn't hope to kill a Deity by affecting them with these aspects. Skullius had even implemented the Womb to hold his Territory together, in case the Deity decided to thrash it.

This didn't mean Kenno was useless in this case, however.

Clasping his hands together, he was the first to fall deeper and deeper into the grand darkness that now filled his Territory. But as he did, he programmed all the random, glowing items – anchors, shields, doors, spears, pails – to form a column below the Doom Knight.

All these items then embodied Distorted Gravity, which he had experienced from his master, and applied it onto the Doom Knight. The creature immediately began to drop into the darkness, following after Kenno.

<HMMM!> Unfazed, the Doom Knight shattered all the random items in an instant, but newer ones kept taking their place, keeping the effect alive. <INSOLENT!>

The darkness got thicker and thicker, beating like the ocean waves, the lower the Doom Knight went, and when it tried to move upwards, it turned out that up and down, tomato-tomahto, potato, potahto. Once deep enough, only the master of the darkness and the master of the Territory knew where the boundaries of the grand space were!

But of course, this abundance was no mere pool of [Evil Darkness]. Skullius had activated the Dousing Sanctum, a facet of his [King of Severing Twilight: AfterDark]!

The Andori had never been this potent in all the times he had used it so far. It was currently empowered by the Immortal Realm Physique, Expanded Shadow Fiend's Leather!

Cloaked in the armour resulting from the Physique, the Hybrid Warmoth descended upon the Doom Knight, along with Uyuniya. His [Vision of Calamity] flared, and sent another obscure blast which landed square on the creature, but enacted no real damage.

Yet… something significant finally happened.

[You have met the prerequisite conditions for the influence of 'Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz' <Void> application]

[Strike the enemy fourteen consecutive times using attacks enhanced by 'Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz' to extract the <Void> benefit – loosening the target's connection with their Broader Existence for a hundredth of a Consternal]

…!!!

Skullius' eyes sparkled.

'Consecutive, huh?' he thought, and immediately, he sent a message to Uyuniya via a mana network link. She gave a simple nod.

…But then the Doom Knight made the first move.

<DEAD SCREECH.> It called in a livid voice, and pointed forward its sword. An indescribable noise, almost dense enough to touch, was expelled from the end of the sword, and the chaos it wrought caused the darkness to boil. It was some form of Andori.

Skullius felt the damage pile on him even with his new Immortal Physique; his body contorted, as did Uyuniya's.

…But an instant later, they were fit and fine again.

…!!!

The Doom Knight was taken aback, but then it could think of nothing. Its mind went blank for a miniscule speck of time, and when it came to, Skullius and Uyuniya brandished their swords to carve into it!

It barely managed to react in time. Its sword was a blur, clashing with Skullius' four and with Uyuniya's two. Great sparks lit up in the darkness.

'It's not supposed to be able to see in this darkness, but I suppose its senses are just that powerful,' Skullius thought, and then his hands rapidly played a game, switching the swords from hand to hand to hand to hand and striking as quickly as possible at all points on the Deity's torso. Uyuniya did the same, but the Doom Knight was more than a match for them.

He blocked all their strikes, and then…

CRACK!

SHKACK!

Skullius was nearly twisted into a pretzel and Uyuniya might have become a well-recognised knot!

The Doom Knight used its Broader Existence to bend their bodies!

But Skullius and Uyuniya returned to normal in the next instance, and again… the Doom Knight lost its thoughts and consciousness for a small instant. When it came to, Skullius had managed to nick its side with a blade of light, and Uyuniya jabbed the point of one of hers right below its knee. Both swords were layered in puce and turquoise!

The Doom Knight's fury overcame it, and its sword – suddenly wreathed in green lightning and Undeath energy – moved so fast that it ripped Skullius' in two and cut Uyuniya into three dozen pieces. Using its insurmountably denser Broader Existence – befitting of a Deity – it held them in place and slowly started to squash them, but alas…

It lost a sense of what it was doing along with its grip on Skullius and Uyuniya. Right in that instant, the Gajjkav materialised from the darkness and devoured it whole.

Skullius and Uyuniya turned feral.

The former blasted the Gajjkav with fourteen [False Ticklers] while Uyuniya stabbed it with a blade of darkness that Skullius accurately bathed in Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz before it hit!

The sequence and execution was perfect. The Gajjkav even turned bloated and gigantic because of the effect of Exorbitance.

The fourteen [False Ticklers] were sure to meet the conditions Skullius had seen necessary for the <Void> function of his new Exotic Parlous Nature, along with Uyuniya's one extra blow. This wasn't even including the tonnes of damage that should have reached the Doom Knight as a result of the Exorbitance.

Yet…

<DIVINE SWORD HAND.>

The words came before Skullius and Uyuniya could comprehend what followed. Their bodies were to burst into fragments and fly about like decks of cards, since they were closest in range to the attack.

A hand had appeared, connected only to sparks of a red flame in the darkness right in front of the Gajjkav.

Well, it might have been a hand, but it looked like the double-edged end of a sword every other microsecond. It sent a sensational series of sharp, whipping blows, impossible to discern with simple Divine senses out into the darkness. They pierced the black, tall and merciless, and spread out into Aigas.

They cut land and sea, reaching even to the drapes of time hanging in the present. They cut the air and the mana, and the sky until Aigas almost began to resemble what otherworldly individuals might have called a pizza from an aerial view!

The force of the blow didn't stop there.

It cut through to even the great void immediately surrounding Aigas, venting its fury.

It was a formidable attack indeed. A formidable sword-based Andori that could be replicated thousands of times with ease by the Doom Knight given its immense energy reserves.

However… it failed to shatter Bandit King's Boundless Collection. The Territory had not been cut into more than 100 pieces, as the stipulation for the Womb's limit.

But even worse than that, was the fact that [Divine Sword Hand] had failed to eliminate its two immediate enemies.

Through the influence of Expanded Shadow Fiend's Leather, the Dousing Sanctum's innate ability to transfer damage from its user – and whoever within it they wished – to another source was greatly enhanced!

This was why Skullius and Uyuniya kept recovering from the Doom Knight's blows.

And that was also why Skullius decided to bring in everyone else to the party.

Elita and Aurolio joined in, their Bare Guises – sapphire and gold respectively – equipped.

Araeyn too showed himself, along with the 1,000 Penetrators, ready to serve to their last breaths.

…And then it was one final bout of chaos.

Chapter 1362: A Thousand, A Thousand and A Thousand!

'The damn thing must have used some kind of spatial Andori that allows it to warp parts of its body or the whole out of it in tricky conditions. It must have sneakily warped itself from the Gajjkav just in time while leaving its hand to unleash that attack,' Skullius thought as the others appeared. 'Well, fair and fine, but that ability doesn't seem strong enough to escape this Territory sealed by the Womb and enhanced by Expanded Shadow Fiend's Leather. As long as my Amras holds, we should be able to do something significant here.'

And indeed, Skullius' Amras reserves were depleting rapidly, so much so that he wasn't using the [Vision of Calamity] anymore. Even with the benefits of his newly equipped Immortal Realm Physique, he would soon be running dry. That's why this was his last hurrah against the Doom Knight.

He attacked with fervour that accurately portrayed his resolve.

It wasn't that hard to find the Doom Knight in the darkness. The Dousing Sanctum allowed him as much freedom with the elements within it as Araeyn had with the Null Remnants.

He brought along everyone as he zoomed upward and threw them upon the Doom Knight. As long as they were in the darkness, he had the ability to keep them alive and even boost their powers to a degree.

He led the way, of course, along with Uyuniya, who used her Mastered Void Gate aspect, as she had been doing before.

Again, the Doom Knight, utterly defenceless against it, lost touch with its Broader Existence and was left wide open.

Uyuniya hadn't been able to apply her aspect to the Doom Knight before simply because it was a much stronger target than someone like Skullius. However, when she and Skullius had tasted that terrible Andori it used to almost temper their souls with Undeath, she applied Fundamental Barter to her aspect. Or rather, she modified the one she had applied.

Previously, her aspect was limited to some few seconds of active duration, and could only be used on any one target to force them to lose touch with their consciousness and powers. This was what gave it the power to rival stronger Divines.

But she edited it.

Now, her aspect only applied to enemies with a Broader Existence and lasted for a quarter of the original time. With the Fundamental Barter, in addition to applying the necessary restrictions which gave an exponential boost of 5 to power and efficiency, making a correction to this original setting or adding another stipulation that hindered freedom in using your ability, added another 2,5 exponential boost to said ability!

This was how Uyuniya brooked through the gap in strength between her and the Doom Knight.

And thus, she and Skullius, who conjured twenty [False Ticklers] and wielded his four swords in addition, managed to land three clean hits on the Doom Knight before it came to, and then its great sword clashed against theirs, sending great sparks flying everywhere.

But then the Penetrators joined in.

The Elder Sages flung KILL Runes, and STALL Runes, and FALL Runes and BURST Runes.

But…

<DIVINE SWORD HAND, MAXIMUS.>

The Doom Knight seemed to have a thousand hands. They whipped out like sjamboks, mimicking swords and cutting down the Runes seamlessly before they could reach, while also parrying Uyuniya and Skullius' blades… and the [False Ticklers].

But there also seemed to be a thousand Skulliuses and Uyuniyas. Once their attacks were parried, they dipped into the darkness and appeared in other positions almost instantaneously, poised to attack again. The Doom Knight carved through them, folded them into ugly squares, fried them with its green lightning and beheaded them, but there seemed to be more of the two to spare each time… and the [False Ticklers] whipped around, zipping back to attack once swatted away.

And then Uyuniya applied her Mastered Void Gate aspect again.

The instant it was applied, Skullius sent a signal to Elita and Araeyn. The former was faster.

Her Mastered Void Gate applied with the Doom Knight because undoubtedly, it was an unrighteous enemy, and to even attempt to fight it was a very selfless act. Elita was decked in brilliant light and she was like a shooting star in the blank, dark sky when she streaked to the Doom Knight and managed one meaningful strike against its gut.

Indeed, Skullius had enhanced her Broodweiler with Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz. Her blade managed to scratch the Deity's skin and cut slightly into its flesh. Yet, it wasn't only the flesh that it cut. The sword had breached the Doom Knight's Broader Existence slightly because of its Absolute Prime Property!

Skullius saw the tiniest leak of Amras from the Deity's skin. It was just as what had happened when his clone, created with Second Divine Sinew, had been attacked by Broodweiler – its Amras had started to leak out as evidence that its Broader Existence had been reached!

It just so happened that when the Doom Knight came to, it also spotted the implication of the wound it had been dealt. It honed in on Broodweiler at once.

<HMMM.>

With its Broader Existence, it stretched out Elita's flesh and ripped her apart before claiming Broodweiler.

…But Skullius had been aware of the risk of having the sword on the battlefield.

He transported the sword from the enemy's grip to Araeyn, and the Apostle, having already been prepared, safely stowed it away while Elita's body reformed.

'Fourteen consecutive attacks is a hard standard to meet!' Skullius cursed and he and Uyuniya were upon the Doom Knight again.

Great tentacles of rough flesh spilled from its joints and attempted to attack the Territory boundary again, but Skullius sliced them through with [False Ticklers]. When more of the Penetrators had lit the Doom Knight with countless Runes and Levin attacks that it blocked and struck down, he unleashed a stream of [Nonstandard Splicers]!

The Doom Knight very motions were cut and for a small window, it was immobilised.

The creature had been exposed to this attack before, however, and it attacked with its Broader Existence instead, folding (literally) every potential enemy closeby.

But Araeyn was unaffected. He had hidden a safe distance away, almost forgotten. He had been waiting for this opportunity while looking at the battle through his master's eyes – the only conceivable way he could judge events correctly. Following his master's upgrade from 'Vehement Bone Nullmancer' to 'Nullmancer', he could manage such a feat.

While the Doom Knight was immobilised, 1400 spheres of a greenish Null Life Essence appeared around it and gaped, increasing in size. Each of them, if one looked closely enough, teased the dimensions which they acted as gateways to on their surfaces.

And as it just so happened, all these gateways had a powerful suction. Each wanted to drag the Doom Knight to its own domain!

"[Multi-Cardinal Micro-dimensioning]," Araeyn declared and in the next instant, he became a dancing illusion with 1400 spirit bodies!

While this still was the effect of a skill, and couldn't harm the Deity at all, it managed to buy an extra second of disorientation on the Doom Knight that allowed Uyuniya to apply her aspect on the Doom Knight once more.

The terrestrial princess managed to land five blows on the Deity, the Divine Penetrators landed a few more with Runes and Skullius managed to strike with nine [False Ticklers]!

All the attacks were imbued with Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz, and this time, there was no mistake.

They had all landed.

And…

Chapter 1363: Everyone Except...

Before everyone escaped the prison of Undeath energy earlier…

"Right, right, hold on. Before we leave," Skullius said as he turned to Aurolio, "There's something you said when you witnessed my Exotic Parlous Nature. What was it again? Critical detonation point? What does that mean?"

Aurolio raised a brow.

"Ah, that," he said. "Well, I was just pointing out that your… Parlous Nature – if that's what it's called – really is a product of Void's powers. It behaves much like Voided Death Essence, if only a bit more violent."

"Violent? Yeah, Jaqquezjaqqz is violent, but your Voided Death Essence has only ever appeared aggressive to me, not violent."

"Of course, it has." Aurolio shrugged. "Because we've had to learn to use it properly. Voided Death Essence becomes… irascible if you don't constantly have it on a leash. If you leave it in an uncontrolled state for too long, it reaches a critical detonation point, where it ignites and damages basic and advanced concepts like space almost irreparably. I think I gave you a taste of that back when we fought." The grin the pale man wore right then warranted a punch, but Skullius – with herculean effort – proved to be the bigger man.

In any case, he remembered the time Aurolio was referencing. It was when the masked man had used his Mastered Void Gate for the first time and started flexing his many interpretations of strength.

"So, my Exotic Parlous Nature is just naturally…irascible?" Skullius asked.

"Kind of, but it doesn't help that you're Null Lifeform. It takes the right physical traits to handle Voided Death," Aurolio said. He made a lot of gestures as he spoke. "But even the critical detonation point has better uses than simple destruction, as I have come to find out." He looked at Uyuniya and Elita. "I bet that's how you use that Void Clot, right?"

Neither of the two ladies answered his question. Instead, Uyuniya sighed.

"If there's nothing else, let's get this over with," she said, and using her Void Clot, she broke the Undeath prison.

***

Present time.

The conditions for the <Vain> characteristic of Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz had been met. Over fourteen consecutive blows on the target, all imbued with the Pseudo-Void rank Exotic Parlous Nature had been delivered, indeed. The guidance field even said as much in the next instance.

[The conditions for the <Vain> have been met]

But, something else had been happened at the exact same time.

The Doom Knight had just barely managed to regain its wits when the fourteenth blow landed and before the excess ones hit. It didn't know anything of the requirements of Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz, but it had grown tired of the consistent gaps in its consciousness which, while resulting in barely effective attacks on its body, seemed to be headed towards something significant.

Thus, while it would have preferred to keep this card in reserve for when it took on enemies of its level – as any other Deity in existence would, really – the Doom Knight used it right then.

There were several conditions to be meant before a Deity could create a world. One of them was marking, as the Doom Knight had done to Aigas – staking its claim, even if it was challenged by two other Deities.

The other conditions pertained to aspects the Doom Knight no longer had access to. Its rebirth into Undeath stripped its ability to create a world, after all.

However, it still possessed the call and drive which forced Deities to create worlds in the first place.

And this call and drive came from something, somethings that naturally formed within the Broader Existence of a Deity. A Broader Existence with a density far more stable and stalwart than that of a regular Divine.

…

A clear, crimson pulse, built like trillions of tiny springs exploding outward like confetti, gushed from the Doom Knight's Broader Existence, aiming to engulf far beyond the skies and itching to spread to all corners of the world.

Their brisk occurrence brooked no response from Skullius, the Penetrators, Elita, Skullius and Araeyn, who had just completed a perfect sequence of attacks on the creature. Unfortunately for them, their defences weren't enough to bear the rush of odd power which bellowed from the Doom Knight.

The only reason they survived was because the wild rush of power was not an attack at all, but the establishment of a 'stage'.

For a Deity to create a world, they had to mark any space within the great void, and then expend one or more of the natural Fated Reefs growing within their Broader Existence.

Skullius had seen what these natural Reefs were, actually, when the Elder Sages of Penetration had used the Mortal Sourcing Destiny Rune to reveal the likeness of the Doom Knight's Broader Existence. They were the islands floating around the Doom Knight's Amras well and Andori.

They were superimposed on the mark a Deity made to act as a primary foundation for a world. However, they didn't only apply to worlds. As the Doom Knight couldn't create a world, they could create something else. Something that didn't have to spawn living beings.

Green lightning fettered with hints of a mist exploded from the Doom Knight and began to lather over the springly energy coiling endlessly forth. It was the Doom Knight's Exotic Parlous Nature, staking claim over the Fated Reef!

Everything was torched with green as millions of chaotic branches of green lightning razed and smacked everything in sight while riding the tide of crimson springs. They were going to do it. They were going to reach all ends of Aigas.

But then a dash of golden radiance exploded out elsewhere and hurried to counter the crimson tide, successfully stopping it in its tracks!

It was none other than Boron who had risen to the occasion.

His raw might pushed back the Doom Knight's powers and constrained them to a limited region in Aigas, in the mountains, where the battle had been taking place.

The Doom Knight would have pushed back, perhaps even stalemating Boron who wasn't at all in peak condition at the moment.

But, of course…

[The conditions for the <Vain> have been met]

The Doom Knight had lost touch with its Broader Existence right after it had decided to unleash its Fated Reef on Aigas and imbue it with its Exotic Parlous Nature. It couldn't have continued to use it for its purposes.

Thus, while under the influence of the <Vain> it merely stood there within the limited influence of its Fated Reef, where green lightning shot out, spasming out of control and attacking all things.

BZZZT!

Behind it, a bolt as thick as a baobab tree was sprouting from the ground, slowly rising and absorbing power to consolidate itself. It was rather lively. Once it grew to maturity, the Fated Reef would be fully established, even without the manual control of the Doom Knight.

Around both the twisted bolt and the Doom Knight, however, a great transparent globe had manifested, outlined with faint hints of puce and turquoise. The <Vain> had exposed its Broader Existence and even made it possible to interact with it; the colours shaped where one could contact the Broader Existence.

But Skullius was currently disabled. His body was a mess, charred, burning and with half of it to the head missing. His soul might have been damaged too. His healing was hindered by the unending of lightning constantly blasting at him and growing stronger as the green branch grew.

The same was true for Uyuniya, Elita, Kenno and Araeyn, all of whom were in a much more dire situations.

Uyuniya could last a little longer under the attacks given that she was Divine, but Elita's only protection against the constant zaps of lightning was her World rank armour (the one she had taken from the Treasury) which was quickly losing its durability.

Kenno and Araeyn were tethered to Skullius' [Sagacious Antiphon of Dawnlight], meaning they were automatically healed, but the Hybrid Warmoth's Amras was depleting extremely quickly.

Everyone was put out of commission right when the enemy was vulnerable.

Everyone… except Aurolio.

Chapter 1364: His First Barter

A coat of darkness was around Aurolio. A Void Clot. It was blinking furiously, ready to fizzle out and leave him defenceless, but it had held for long enough to keep him alive.

Thrill and deathly terror were Aurolio's only two companions right now.

The reason he was alive wasn't because he had reacted faster than Skullius or Uyuniya or Elita.

No.

It was mix of luck… and perhaps Direction.

Aurolio had been too underpowered to attack the Doom Knight in any way while within Kenno's Territory. While everyone was busy attacking the creature, he had been looming in the depths of the darkness, watching (as much as he could with his mortal eyes) and trying to incorporate all that he had learned from Elita and Uyuniya in Void using.

Because time was short, he hadn't thought he'd have enough time to invoke the Fundamental Barter as Elita had taught him AND use the product on the Doom Knight, and thus, he had devoted all his focus to trying to learn the Void Clot.

It was the simplest to learn, he had imagined, given that he already knew about the critical detonation point.

And thus, he had tried evoking it. Once, he failed. Thrice, he failed. And then on his sixth try, he managed to coat himself with the advanced application of Voided Death Essence. He thought the speed of the activation marked him as a genius.

Once the Void Clot was up, it had been as if he was in Void's embrace. He felt strength and durability like none he'd ever experienced before!

...But then a force so great it could have collapsed a world had smashed into him.

It was the Fated Reef being formed.

Even while his Void Clot was active, Aurolio had lost the majority of his flesh and all he had to his name was raw, red, bleeding chunks of flesh loosely attached to bone. None of his clothing had survived, but that was trivial when considering even his junk had been fried off.

Things could have been much worse.

The only thing that remained on him was half his Bare Guise, but even that was discoloured and fuming. His one eyeball left functioning looked at the scene ahead while his dashed mouth released hisses of breath.

'DAAAAAAAMMMMMMIIIIIIIIIT!'

It hurt like the son of a devil.

But Aurolio was alive, standing in a world where green lightning was an endless living colony constantly burning and slapping everything within. He was smashed into by one and barely managed to keep his stance. His Void Clot was dwindling, but it was still half effective.

'They're all down!' Aurolio thought to himself, looking at Skullius and the rest. Most of their heads had been crushed or shattered, so they weren't conscious. The damage kept piling on too. 'Fuck!'

What to do?

This was where the plan was supposed to end. This was to be the full stop that ended the fight, but…

Aurolio looked ahead.

The Doom Knight was stunned and he could see the outline of its Broader Existence. But he didn't understand what he could do with that. That had been Skullius' purpose – his duty to attend to.

But what could he do?

Right then, the charred, bloody Voided Deathform noticed the thick branch of lightning slowly contorting and rising from the ground behind the Doom Knight.

It took no genius to see how its growth made the other smaller branches of lightning racing around even more driven, and violent. As soon as it grew to its utmost, Aurolio was sure he would be done for. He wouldn't be able to handle the snaking lightning bolts then.

So, what to do?

Could he do anything to do affect that leading head branch of green lightning?

Perhaps?

'If that Undead thing stays asleep,' Aurolio thought, and then he stumbled. 'To do anything significant, I need…'

He needed to invoke the Fundamental Barter on his Mastered Void Gate aspect.

Aurolio interpreted the void as strength, strength that could be used in an endless series of ways. He used each of these series interchangeably in battle and as many times as he wanted.

Apparently, according to Elita, that was why his Mastered Void Gate powers didn't even begin to match up with hers and Uyuniya's.
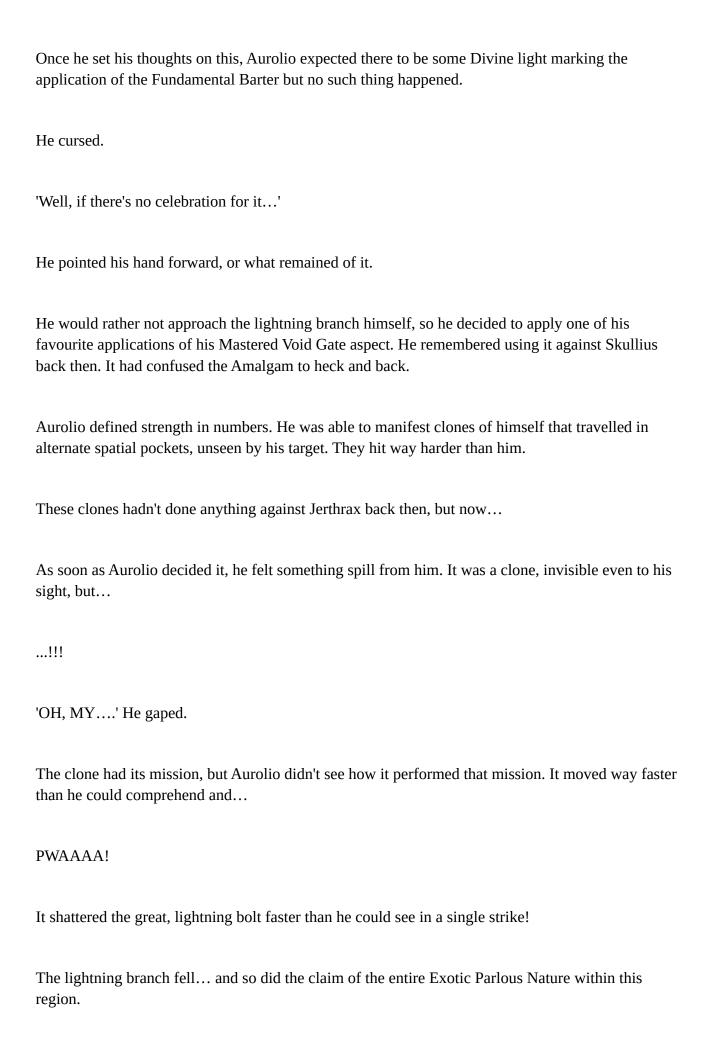
Aurolio had to impose limits.

'Well, might as well try before I get blasted to a thousand fucks…' Aurolio thought.

Elita had told him how to invoke the Fundamental Barter. It wasn't anything complex or methodical at all, given how some anomalies actually used it without knowing. Aurolio was even sure Skullius had used it too maybe once or twice, mistaking it for Creeds or Rules.

The Voided Deathform glared at the growing lightning branch with his fried, bleeding eye.

'I need to put a limit on the amount of times I can use my Mastered Void Gate powers AND how many or what kind of target it affects for me to get the benefit of increased power and efficiency – an exponential boost of 5. Haha… Let's see…' he thought and nearly stumbled when another bolt of lightning vaporised his leg, which was barely covered by his dwindling Void Clot.

'Each aspect of the way I define strength with my Mastered Void Gate, can only be used once every 24 hours,' Aurolio decided. 'Urgh… and I can only use any of them on singular Divine targets each.'

Once he set his thoughts on this, Aurolio expected there to be some Divine light marking the application of the Fundamental Barter but no such thing happened.

He cursed.

'Well, if there's no celebration for it…'

He pointed his hand forward, or what remained of it.

He would rather not approach the lightning branch himself, so he decided to apply one of his favourite applications of his Mastered Void Gate aspect. He remembered using it against Skullius back then. It had confused the Amalgam to heck and back.

Aurolio defined strength in numbers. He was able to manifest clones of himself that travelled in alternate spatial pockets, unseen by his target. They hit way harder than him.

These clones hadn't done anything against Jerthrax back then, but now…

As soon as Aurolio decided it, he felt something spill from him. It was a clone, invisible even to his sight, but…

…!!!

'OH, MY….' He gaped.

The clone had its mission, but Aurolio didn't see how it performed that mission. It moved way faster than he could comprehend and…

PWAAAA!

It shattered the great, lightning bolt faster than he could see in a single strike!

The lightning branch fell… and so did the claim of the entire Exotic Parlous Nature within this region.

All the chaos ended almost immediately, leaving the area clear, if only swarmed by the crimson of the Doom Knight's earlier marking!

Aurolio plopped to the ground as a swift shockwave spilled outward.

'It…worked…' he thought and the faintest of laughs left his non-existent lips. He felt his clone vanish. He wouldn't have access to it again for twenty-four hours. 'Fair…'

He rolled on the ground, taking deep breaths.

With the constant blasts of lightning gone, Skullius began to heal, as did Kenno and Araeyn. Aurolio saw the signs.

It was a relief indeed. Phew.

But before any of the heavy-hitters woke up, a ball of green appeared above Araeyn and widened like a maw.

An entity spilled out of it. He was handsome, his body looking as though it was made of compact vines.

"The task still needs doing, I guess," he said after looking around, and briskly, he hurried towards Doom Knight while brandishing a large, green key.

Chapter 1365: Cold Oblivion

Skullius had received three keys when he became the Warmoth's Progeny.

An ivory key to the Empyrean Bosom.

A golden key to the Warmoth's Treasury.

A green key to the Pestilent Vault.

Skullius had explored much to do with the first two keys, but he hadn't dwelt on the third key and where it led much. To be sure, he knew exactly what was in the Warmoth's Pestilent Vault and how it worked, but since it wasn't at all friendly – as the guidance field had even teased when it offered him the choice to become the Warmoth's Progeny – he didn't expose what was in it to anyone but his Apostles.

When Araeyn had brought everyone to the Miscarried Levin Compound Islands, Skullius had given him the key to the Pestilent Vault to use at the precise moment when the <Vain> attribute of Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz was applied on the Doom Knight.

However, certain variables changed.

Sila's new unconscious vessel had also been entrusted to Araeyn after everyone broke out of the Doom Knight's Undeath prison. The Apostle would have kept him hidden till the battle was over… if he hadn't gained consciousness midway through the final stretch.

The resoluteness in Sila's eyes had taken Araeyn aback.

The Tower General had memories of what Serenity had done using his new body, and as it were, those memories weren't the only thing she had left behind. His new body, tight, compact, wrapped in simple tunic, was flaring with Null Life Essence of a terrifying league!

Not many words had been exchanged between Araeyn and the Tower General. The former had given the latter the key to the vault before diving into the last bout with the Doom Knight in the dark. He had it in mind to set Sila upon the Doom Knight as soon as Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz was activated, but of course… the Fated Reef…

After Aurolio's role saved everyone though, Araeyn regained agency and opened a portal for the Tower General.

And thus, striding with delicate steps, his body of tight vines slightly aglow, his hair and stubble a pale gold, and his eyes a striking orange, Sila hurried to the border of the Doom Knight's Broader Existence marked with puce and turquoise.

'He said to simply push in the key,' Sila thought back to Araeyn's succinct explanation, 'and to be careful, just in case.'

The keys to the Warmoth's dimensions could only be used with Skullius' permission. For the Unlimited, they accessed this permission with the Stark Constellation and for the Apostles, as extensions of Skullius and Null Lifeforms to boot, they had no issues using them as long as Skullius wanted them to.

Sila was a special case, Araeyn had seen. His body was brimming with Null Life Essence and in a very niche way, as the former Stolen Angel – which had been Skullius himself – the Apostle didn't see a reason why the key would reject being used by Sila.

And his assumption had been correct. Well, half correct.

Skullius was regaining his consciousness right then. His senses tautened when Sila was about to use the key. Recognising what was happening, he gave his permission for it to work, even when it might not have been needed.

Sparks of Ju`wtte sprung out at the end of the key which met the border of the Doom Knight's Broader Existence.

'I better use this while I still can then,' Skullius thought as he took in the view of the incapacitated Undead minion.

[Would you like to apply 'Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz in <Vain>?]
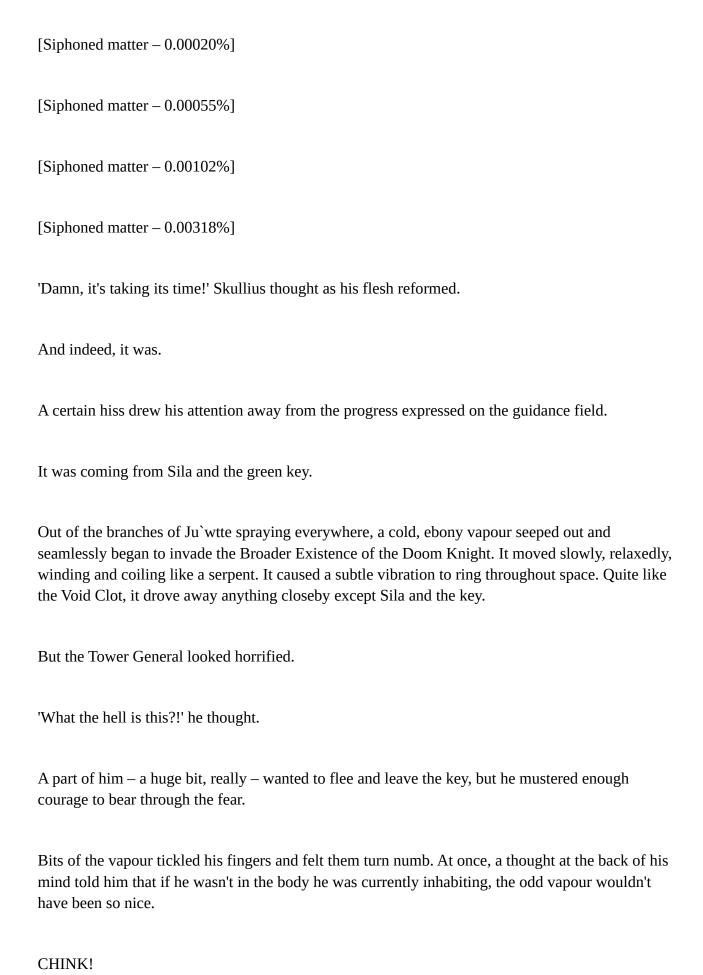
'Yeah.'

['Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz' will now siphon a portion of the target's Broader Existence]

[Please standby]

[…]

[…]

[Siphoned matter – 0.0005%]

[Siphoned matter – 0.00020%]

[Siphoned matter – 0.00055%]

[Siphoned matter – 0.00102%]

[Siphoned matter – 0.00318%]

'Damn, it's taking its time!' Skullius thought as his flesh reformed.

And indeed, it was.

A certain hiss drew his attention away from the progress expressed on the guidance field.

It was coming from Sila and the green key.

Out of the branches of Ju`wtte spraying everywhere, a cold, ebony vapour seeped out and seamlessly began to invade the Broader Existence of the Doom Knight. It moved slowly, relaxedly, winding and coiling like a serpent. It caused a subtle vibration to ring throughout space. Quite like the Void Clot, it drove away anything closeby except Sila and the key.

But the Tower General looked horrified.

'What the hell is this?!' he thought.

A part of him – a huge bit, really – wanted to flee and leave the key, but he mustered enough courage to bear through the fear.

Bits of the vapour tickled his fingers and felt them turn numb. At once, a thought at the back of his mind told him that if he wasn't in the body he was currently inhabiting, the odd vapour wouldn't have been so nice.

CHINK!

A dark, ebony crack appeared on the invisible dome marked by the Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz. Then another, and another. Amras spewed out as long, potent and bright, but it was immediately turned into a cold, ebony vapour that made a U-turn to burrow back into the Doom Knight's Broader Existence's and break it down further!

Skullius stood up, his face hard.

Uyuniya and Elita were still out cold. He didn't dare wake them up yet. If they saw this…

'Yeah, it's potent alright,' Skullius thought.

The legends of the Colossus Warmoth spread far and wide not just because of its power, but its ingenuity. Its three dimensions were highly coveted and with good reason, but many in the Null Verse did question why the Warmoth had concocted and hidden away in a vault a plague that could kill all life and Null Life, sparing only those who had Ju`wtte running through their veins!

And indeed, that was what the ebony vapour was – certain death.

The Warmoth had called it, Cold Oblivion, fittingly.

Thankfully for all life, Null Life and, as Skullius feared, Void life, in reality, there wasn't much of the Cold Oblivion. The Warmoth's Pestilent Vault could only produce a very limited amount, enough to spread languidly on half of a world like Aigas and then it would require some time to replenish it.

But this was little consolation when all life below the Divine could be killed instantly with no room for opposition. When it came to Divines and Deities, the Cold Oblivion was also very potent, but a large amount of it needed to be expended to kill them. Cold Oblivion, as it appeared, could find a target's Broader Existence once exposed to them… eventually. The user would need to keep the target submerged in it for long periods.

This was normally not possibly, of course. The best to use Cold Oblivion on an enemy was to use it once their body and soul were separate, so that the damage could reach their Broader Existence or, to find the Broader Existence – as Skullius had just done – and then infuse Cold Oblivion.

The plague turned everything within the target into Cold Oblivion and froze its target to the point of blackening.

Skullius could see already it.

The Doom Knight's Broader Existence was actually becoming visible. It looked like a rugged, dark shell as the vapour hissed and toyed with it.

'The Warmoth was either a genius or psychopath or both. It makes me think he really must have had plans to leave the Null Verse. Maybe he did,' Skullius thought. He had found delicate notes in the Warmoth's Vault explaining all about the Cold Oblivion before beginning his training with the Stark Troops in the Timemould Mirror Box.

As he was immune to the plague, he had moved through the Vault, discovering everything of interest the Warmoth had left in it.

'How's the progress on this?' Skullius thought and he checked the guidance field again.

[Siphoned matter – 2.345%]

[Siphoned matter – 2.890%]

'Hurry up already!' Skullius was furious. He wasn't sure how long the Doom Knight would remain incapacitated. The metric of time used to describe how long the effect of <Void> lasted was something he didn't quite understand.

A hundredth of a Consternal.

'I can extract up to 10% of a target's Broader Existence. I wonder if I—' he had begun to think when a gigantic deer head fell from the sky and slammed into the Doom Knight!

Sila was flung back, along with the green key to the Warmoth's Pestilent Vault, and the Ju`wtte and Cold Oblivion spilling from it vanished at once!

The great deer head opened up wide and devoured the Doom Knight as well as a large chunk of the ground.

…!!!

Skullius was astonished, but he had already been moving to rip away at the deer head, having recognised it, when something he couldn't see or sense struck him down, forcing him into the dirt.

"I love technicalities," a voice suddenly said from above him – above the massive deer head, to be precise. "And I also love a good get back. Just between you and me – Insurgent Magnus to Insurgent Magnus – I'll have you know, we're not really built to take wounds to our pride lying down. Whether it be from Deities, or snot-nosed Divines who are far too young to be playing games in the wider reality, we really don't condone being looked down upon."

Chapter 1366: Get Back (1)

Skullius was taken by complete surprise. He had been so honed in on the Doom Knight and what was happening with the Pestilent Vault Key that he hadn't even seen the massive deer head coming. But now that he thought about it, that might not have been his own oversight.

The deer head was, of course, a conduit conjured by Rias EverSword when he was using his terrifying Imagining Technique, but as it appeared, he wasn't alone. He was with someone Skullius was starting to hate almost as much as he hated the High Lich Somanda.

While immobilised, pressed on the ground by something he couldn't see, Skullius saw two figures standing on the antlers of the deer's head.

One was a tall, broad-shouldered man with long dark hair, and sharp, almond-shaped eyes that let out a grey sheen, as if polished. He had the look of someone old, yet young, experienced yet fresh. His cloak, darker than the night, was still as stone upon his body, hiding a majority of it.

He looked down at Skullius, a broad grin on his face.

Yes, Skullius hated him so, so much.

Beside the Immoral was the youthful figure of Rias EverSword, sallow, with medium length black hair spotting hints of blue at the edges. His large, honey-coloured eyes hid many dark experiences, memories, knowledge… deep powers.

He truly was the ghost of the masked necromancer, Actuass.

He too gazed down at Skullius with not a trace of fear in his eyes.

Skullius scowled. He tried to free himself but it seemed impossible. Sila gave him a side glance as he sidled next to Araeyn who was cautious and smart enough not to move hastily right then.

Kenno was only just now stirring after his body was healed. He let out a barely audible, "Oh, boy… is that who I think it is?"

Fulgardt heard him and smiled, but did not entertain him. Instead, he continued to address the Hybrid Warmoth.

"Well, it took you an awfully large party to barely beat such a lowly opponent," he said as he tapped on an antler branch twice with his foot. "With my… limited knowledge of Deities turned Undead, this wasn't even a high-ranking Doom Knight. It was but a fledgling Deity that got the misfortune of being hunted down by a Lich. I wonder, were you actually proud to defeat it?"

Skullius' response was a deeper scowl.

Fulgardt chuckled.

"Or, maybe a fellow Insurgent Magnus like you – however substandard – had it all figured out, and was just threading through with efficiency in mind? Was that it? Ah, a man after my own heart. Unfortunately, I still don't see you as a successor, brat," he said and climbed down the antler branches languidly. He shook his head. "Tell me. Why are you stubbornly restraining that great power I sensed earlier? I for sure didn't imagine it. You were willing to use it against me but… not against this foe? I'm flattered, but also… vexed."

Again, Skullius' only response was a scowl, but this time…

There was a great flash as his [Sagacious Antiphon of Dawnlight] was applied to Elita, Aurolio and Uyuniya, healing them. They were up in a blink, assessing the situation.

"Quaint," Fulgardt said, and Skullius felt whatever was holding him down stretch out and slam both of the ladies into the ground!

…!

'What the hell? I thought he couldn't harm me as long I know his secret in the Labyrinth?' Skullius thought, confused. Unless there was a great degree of technicalities involved, being slammed into the ground definitely counted as harm!

Of course… it could be that it wasn't Fulgardt who was controlling whatever was pressing Skullius down.

At once, the Hybrid Warmoth's attention rushed to Rias.

Fulgardt seemed to see through Skullius' thoughts right then.

"Yes, yes, it's as you guessed," he said airily, continuing down the antler. "The Realm rank tool, Mood Vine. It is pretty good at restraining… anything, really. I subdued it and had my little companion here use it in my stead. I always loved partnerships. Too bad they often end in betrayal," Fulgardt suddenly looked up. There was nostalgia in his eyes. He then turned to Rias. "You can go about your business now. And make it quick. Whatever this discount Magnus did to that Deity is still spreading."

Rias wordlessly obliged. He climbed down the antler in a flash and landed on the ground, facing the deer's great snout which was planted into the ground.

It was then that Skullius noticed something… off about him.

No. It wasn't just off. It was… impossible.

There was a pressure coming off of Rias that had no business riding a Master.

Yes, Rias, as far as Skullius knew, was only a Master, even with Actuass' powers and knowledge. He had sensed it when they met earlier.

But, no.

The boy wasn't a Master anymore.

He wasn't an Incandescent Stager.

He wasn't a Transcender either!

…!!!

A potent power was coming from his soul, one different from anything Skullius knew to be possible before one reached Divinity!

The boy had reached the peak of Aigas' power system – the Beyond the Veil Stage!

Skullius gaped. How was that even possible?

Creeds? Rules? Did they have such loopholes?

No way! That couldn't be!

Fulgardt was immensely pleased by Skullius' expression.

The deer head groaned and adjusted, steadying itself on the ground, jaw-first. Its mouth then opened eerily wide to reveal not moist, pink flesh walls, a tongue, and a channel to a gullet at the end of it, but a strange, nebulous place, much like a boundless fantasy sky littered with dark green mists and black waters that splashed over the great teeth of the deer.

Sitting in two straight rows within this seemingly infinite space were almost fifty thousand people, straight-backed and dazed. Their eyes were murky hues of green and black; they saw nothing… or perhaps, everything.

At the far, far end, where their rows of men and women ended, was the Doom Knight, seated in a lotus position, still under the effect of Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz.

Rias casually stepped into the mouth and it closed behind him.

It appeared then to Skullius that the Immoral and the ghost of the masked man intended to use the Doom Knight for something. Something sinister. Had they been watching his whole battle, waiting for the opportune moment to steal his kill?

'I know Fulgardt wants to create a weapon that can reach the Broader Existence using Rias' Imagining Technique, and that to do that, Rias has to reach Divinity, but…'

…And then Skullius' face fell.

"You bastard…" he muttered, fury bulging like a balloon within him. "You're really going to do it right here?"

Fulgardt's grin grew wider, twisted.

"Depends on what you mean, but, oh what the heck… YES!" he cried jubilantly and sat with a loud thud on one of the antler branches. "Oh, YES!"

Uyuniya and Elita gave Skullius odd looks. It was clear they would have appreciated it if he filled them in on what exactly he had figured out, but the Hybrid Warmoth seemed too lost in his own agency to think of them.

He activated his [Legion Eyes] at once, and Fulgardt gave an intrigued, "Oh!"

Everything immediately around the Hybrid Warmoth turned black… and then white, and then red, then gold, and then blue, and then a nasty reddish-brown, and then…

'THERE!'

Skullius saw it, more branch than it was vine – the thing that was holding him down!

His [Legion Eyes] allowed him to see the world in 64 different states, and one of those 64 allowed him to see the Mood Vine.

It was enormous, tree-like, and with a texture like a snake's skin.

Once Skullius saw its entire body, he cut it down using three especially driven [False Ticklers], and a moment later, he, Uyuniya and Elita were free!

While the latter two were still readying themselves, though, Skullius had already charged at Fulgardt.

'I won't let you, you arrogant sockethole!' he resolved. 'You made a big mistake by coming to do it right in front of me!'

His middle and ring fingers crossed together and Skullius was already paying the price to bring the War Body into play through [Instant Embodiment of Perfection]. A price of 200 Amras units was required and 100 more every hour it remained active!

Fulgardt recognised Skullius' drive. He received it grinning, as always. He had been prepared.

However…

Right then…

Right then… a cosmically unfunny joke was recited.

[The Primeval Deity 'JOISEN ANTERRAS' has invoked the terms of his LIMITED CONTRACT with you]

[The Ream rank, Exotic Parlous Nature, 'Second Divine Sinew' is in use…]

[45,677 Amras units have been expended to create a double for 'JOISEN ANTERRAS']

[…]

[…]

And right then, all of Skullius' remaining Amras reserves were depleted and his activation of [Instant Embodiment of Perfection] …failed.

Both the Hybrid Warmoth and the Immoral gaped in surprise and disbelief.

Skullius collapsed, feeling immensely defenceless and absolutely staggered that this could have happened now of all times, and by sheer...chance?

His enemy, the Immoral, on the other hand…

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAAA…. HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!!!"

Fulgardt laughed so hard, the entirety of Aigas heard it; tears flew from his eyes and spittle sprayed from his lips. His eyes turned into twisted little crescents and his face contorted into something terribly devilish.

No human could have laughed so meaningfully, so joyfully.

To Skullius, the mocking laugh might have been the same as Somanda's. Cold and genuine.

The guidance field added on, as Fulgardt's mirth persisted, growing, even.

[You have received a message from JOISEN ANTERRAS]

[…]

[Perhaps this will get your attention, little anomaly. Who are you to keep us waiting?]

There was no friendliness in the message.

Chapter 1367: Get Back (2)

It hadn't been by chance after all, it seemed.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAAAAAAA...HAHAHAHAHAHAH!"

Skullius gritted his teeth. Powerlessness was a powerful feeling, oddly enough.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAAAA! LOOK AT ME! HAHAHAHAA! PRICELESS! ABSOLUTELY PRICELESS IS THE LOOK ON YOUR FACE!"

The Hybrid Warmoth groaned and cursed and scowled, but that didn't change anything. Whatever expression he wore, or emotion that he attempted to stifle only made Fulgardt laugh even harder, and in that laugh, Skullius found something. It might have been the greatest truth of all, or at least the foundational truth an expert needed to learn after reaching Divinity.

"HAHAHAHAHA!! WHOOOOO! It's been a damn long time since I've had laughed so hard."

Skullius found the true nature of a Divine.

Cold, self-serving.

As basic as that sounded, it contradicted with the equally true notion that one couldn't survive in the wider reality without allies.

Twice, VOW had warned Skullius about not addressing the nine contracts he had received for the use of his Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz. Nine Primeval Deities were interested in his new power and some were even offering something more than the LIMITED CONTRACTS he was used to.

But of course, it hadn't been Skullius' fault. He couldn't have casually started reading through nine contracts, discerning the characters, gifts and intents of the Deities sending them midway through a battle with an Undead Deity. He couldn't have chosen one at random either, given the risks of affiliating himself with dangerous Primeval Deities. VOW had even warned him against signing with contract with a Deity named TITEMIUS.

In the end, Skullius just didn't have time, and he had hoped to address the contracts after the battle. Alas…

Fulgardt wiped the tears from his eyes and then massaged them.

"Pardon that unsightly sight," he said and clapped. "It feels good to be validated by reality itself. Direction is drawing in my favour, Skullius. No one else should be able to see that better than you. It's no fault of yours that you've lost."

Skullius was hardly listening.

He was looking at the message blinking in his vision.

JOISEN ANTERRAS, whom he had assumed was a somewhat affable character given their dealings in the previous LIMITED CONTRACT, proved to be rather vicious. He had sabotaged Skullius' moment all to humble him and force him to attend to his and other Primeval Deities' interests before his own life-threatening circumstances.

This game of CONTRACTS to the Primeval Deities was like an auction and whoever owned the thing they desired didn't matter.

To them, larger than life as they were, what Skullius was going through was no more than a trifle. Insignificant. Meaningless.

Fulgardt saw these realisations twitter in Skullius' head. It had been just as devastating for him when he realised that all Deities were simply selfish man given the rights to the boundless skies and stars.

"Skullius?" Elita approached the Hybrid Warmoth. She had been launching herself towards Fulgardt along with Uyuniya, but just like last time, when Fulgardt was involved, things just seemed to… stop. "What's wrong?"

The Hybrid Warmoth balled his hands into fists and glared at Fulgardt.

"You saw?" he asked him.

"I did," the Immoral replied, getting his meaning. "I'm a little sensitive to the guidance field, you know. Huge changes and transmissions attract my attention, and given how our last conversation went – how you teased having dealings with Primeval Deities already – I deduced fairly easily what just happened." His grin was vomit-inducing. "It's not as cut and dry as you thought, is it, working with Deities?"

For some reason, Skullius thought of Suzamete at that moment. He was furious, but he couldn't help but wonder if Primeval Deities were even half as attached as she was to anything at all. And he had condemned Suzamete.

"I see," he said to Fulgardt. There was a cautious fire in his blank eyes. The Immoral raised his hands.

"Ah, relax. I didn't come here to fight. Not with blows at least. You know I can't hurt you now that you know a little of my secrets," he said and gave a sharp look to Elita and Uyuniya who were still determined to pounce given the right opening. "I wouldn't have a problem killing your friends though. Put them on a leash. All they have to endure is us talking. If they can't though…"

Right then, space twisted behind Fulgardt and a humongous ethereal figure appeared. It was cloaked in an old, silk robe, its flesh covered in sores and scabs, and its face covered in golden bands.

…!!!

Skullius recognised it as the Corrupted Deity Fulgardt had summoned before – in Maqi!

The pressure coming from it…

"Believe me. It wouldn't take a moment for this beauty to carve you up real nice," the Immoral said, suddenly shrouded in a lethal presence devoid of mirth. "I believe the two of you" – he pointed at the two Voided Deathforms – "must know the difference between a common Deity and a Corrupted one."

Elita scowled while Uyuniya spat and maintained her ready stance.

"So, did you just come here to snatch my kill and force Rias to ascend to Divinity right in front of my eyes?" Skullius asked.

"Don't put it in such a dour manner. I'm actually doing both of us a favour," Fulgardt said as he locked his fingers and leaned forward. The Corrupted Deity drew closer to him. "After a bit of reflection, I have decided that it's very profitable for both us to stay alive. At least for now. When I created a copy of the Fruit of World Myths, I intended to create a successor who would follow after

my ideals. I confess, I never considered creating an opponent with the same powers as me as motivation to grow. Only an Insurgent Magnus can piss me off enough to think outside the box. Even if you weren't protected by the mechanism I put in place in the Labyrinth, I wouldn't have opted to kill you right now."

Skullius scoffed.

It was funny getting to know how Fulgardt's mind worked. It turned out that he really didn't care for the means he had to use to obtain benefits, and despite all the flowery, sophisticated justification, Skullius knew he was petty. He had even said so himself just now. He wanted to humiliate Skullius just as Skullius had humiliated him.

The guidance field chimed again.

[Insufficient Amras reserves]

[The <Vain> effect of 'Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz' has been interrupted]

[…]

[…]

[…]

[Total Siphoned matter – 4.545%]

[Establishment begins…]

'Damn it!' Skullius cursed inwardly.

Unlike the <Void> application of Maximum Jaqquezjaqqz, which cut the connection between a target and their Broader Existence, the <Vain> was an active application which continuously drew on Skullius' Amras reserves to work. In the end, out of the upwards of 10% of matter Skullius should have drained from the Doom Knight's Broader Existence, he only ended siphoning 4% of the creature's power.

He could feel it start to get integrated into his own Broader Existence. It would take some time for the product to be formed.

'Tsk. I bet the <Void> application on that thing will soon come undone too. It'll regain consciousness and attack, but I'm sure it's Broader Existence is still getting eaten up by Cold Oblivion,' Skullius thought and he eyed the great clamped teeth of the large deer head. 'The purpose of Doom Knight in Fulgardt's scheme…'

Skullius shook his head.

"How did you do it?" he asked the Immoral. "How did you get that kid to the Beyond The Veil Stage in such a ridiculously short amount of time?"

Fulgardt grinned.

Aurolio had resolved to pretend as though he didn't exist, valuing to keep his life after his breakthrough in strength, but he pricked his ears at Skullius' question. He knew Rias. He had fought him back in the Premium Age Royale one-on-one. A little more than a week had passed since that time and it did concern him how the boy had grown so strong.

Fulgardt gave a laugh.

"I'm a little disappointed that that would be your first question, Skullius. Why, I thought for sure you would have figured that out on your own. The method I used is a parody of how you did it, after all," he said.

Skullius frowned.

"What?"

What did Fulgardt mean? Skullius had never reached the Beyond The Veil Stage.

"Come on. Are you really that daft?" Fulgardt said and then slowly, his eyes turned to look at one of Skullius' allies: Sila. "I can never forget the feel of you, of your consciousness. I remember the burning feeling that I, as Festos, felt when you grabbed my neck and forced my defeat, Sila."

The Tower General was taken aback, but so was Skullius, who finally understood.

…!!!

He couldn't have hidden his shock.

Fulgardt had used the same method Skullius had applied to jump from the Advancement Stage straight into the Incandescent Stage!

Sila had sacrificed his Incandescent soul for Skullius after the battle with Rayn. As a result, when Skullius awakened, he had the body of an Advancer and the soul of an Incandescent Stager. Yet, when Skullius completed the Trial for breaking through to the Master Stage, he was automatically transformed into an Incandescent Stager on account of his stronger soul!

Essentially, he had cheated the system… and Fulgardt had done the same.

Chapter 1368: Get Back (3)

It made Skullius feel sick.

Even Sila was stumped. He hadn't thought he'd awaken to such a revelation.

When he had sacrificed his soul for Skullius' back then, he hadn't at all been sure it would work. He knew souls could feed off each other as fuels, but he hadn't thought about the greater effects beyond just saving Skullius' life. The Hybrid Luman's soul was an oddity amongst souls.

To think Fulgardt took inspiration from that.

'Even if he managed to make Rias a Beyond the Veil Stager, how did he bring him to the very peak of that Stage? It only has five levels, but there must be five horrifying Tasks to get through. Rias couldn't have completed them all,' Skullius thought. But then his eyes brightened. This answer to this, he discovered for himself. 'Ah, right. How could I forget?'

It was simple.

Fulgardt had been able to temper with Skullius' Tasks back then. It was no surprise that he could do the same with Rias'. Perhaps he changed them from difficult, tedious ones to simple, quick ones that could be completed in minutes or less.

Skullius had to sigh to let out his frustrations.

The Immoral scratched his chin while gazing down at him.

"And again, I urge you to see it, Skullius. Direction is in my favour," he said. His teeth looked particularly shiny. "Unlike the consensual thing you and Sila had going on, I had to find a Beyond the Veil Stager to sacrifice for my little partner. It might have been challenging if we were limited to the present Aigas, but as it so happened…" He pointed up at the drapes of time – Aigas' pasts. "There were a few Beyond the Veil Stagers in my time. It was no issue committing them to the cause. Through coercion, of course."

Skullius had already gathered that, but it was still astounding. He barely weathered through more of Fulgardt's gloating.

"Do you see it yet? Even when you won against your alter, infused with my essence, you still lost. Everything you did only paved a way for me to reach my goals even when I did not know it. That's what favour looks like! You're looking at it, in ME!"

The Hybrid Warmoth scoffed.

"Must be nice," he said, his face hard. "Why did you snatch the Doom Knight from me?"

Fulgardt slapped his knee.

"Now that's a wonderful question!" he said and he dropped from the antler branch to the ground. He stood directly in front of the deer's mouth, its teeth as his background. They looked shockingly like those of a human. "Well, my little partner is a bit of a genius, you see. There are three conditions to breaching the barrier into Divinity. Mortal Breaking, Mortal Binding and Ember Tasting. The first was the easiest to accomplish, of course, and the second would not have been hard if you hadn't interfered in Maqi, but in a way, I'm glad you did."

"You wouldn't know, given that you had my help in quickly brushing through Mortal Binding and Ember Tasting, but these conditions require a lot of time. Most mortals have never tasted what a Blessing is like – and not in use. Learning its composition and how it functions is essential to Ember Tasting. So is experiencing a sense of immortality by spreading your essence over hundreds and thousands of vessels. I planned to take my time, but then my little necromancer proposed an idea."

Skullius couldn't imagine what this idea could be. However, it did not surprise him that Rias, who had Actuass' memories and powers could think up something he couldn't.

"To quicken the process to Divinity, we opted to use… Undead elements," Fulgardt said confidently. "Undead vessels for Mortal Binding and Undead Blessings for Ember Tasting."

…!!!

Even Elita was staggered by this. She would have explained it to Uyuniya, who wasn't privy to what everyone was saying if she had the chance.

Right then, great red Undead flames leaked from between the teeth of the massive deer, and a familiar presence burst out in a tremendous wave.

Skullius recognised it at once but…

'Already?'

Rias was already becoming a Divine?!

It hadn't even been five minutes since he went inside the deer!

Skullius tried to rationalise how this made sense.

The people he had seen inside the mouth of the deer were likely experts who had been turned into undead minions, and according to Fulgardt… Rias was to transfer his essence – Undeath energy, as his choice – through them for Mortal Binding. But then for Ember Tasting…

'That brat somehow forced the Doom Knight to create Blessings using its Undeath energy and place them into the undead vessels? No. There's no way Rias could do that, even with his mastery of the soul… right? Could it be Fulgardt then?' Skullius agonised.

In any case, Blessings crafted using Undeath energy were seemingly easier for Rias to use in order to complete the Ember Tasting requirement, since he was already well-versed in it.

But Skullius was still shocked. He didn't even know Undeath could be used to create Blessings. Could Null Life Essence and Voided Death Essence do the same? Skullius suddenly remembered the [Blessing of Serenity] which had been gifted to Red Rage, his first Apostle.

Serenity who had been content simply watching how Skullius would react to this situation, answered this question.

"It's not as simple as he makes it seem, Skullius. He's only trying to rattle you. I admit, if this is really the method they are using, then it's quite impressive, but it only works because Undeath is the least complicated and least removed from the normal powers in the Common Reality Leagues out of the three Existential Parallels. That's why any necromancer can turn any normal corpse into an Undead minion and even gift it Undead powers."

"Things are different for Null Life and Voided Death Essence. With your powers, I'm sure you know that whenever you create an Apostle, more than just the original corpse is used to form the new entity. That's because non-Null Lifeforms can't handle Null Life. The same is true with Voided Death."

Skullius didn't give any remark, but he was glad Serenity had shared this information with him. That didn't mean he felt better though.

The pressure coming from the deer only grew more intense. Skullius couldn't imagine what kind of terrifying power the duo of Fulgardt and Rias would be. He would have stopped Rias if he could, but without his Amras, fighting Fulgardt was impossible, even with the help of his allies. Most of them were completely exhausted.

The only option he had was perhaps to use Cold Oblivion, but it diffused too quickly when not pointed at a single target. Skullius could end up killing everyone on Aigas.

"You've won, Fulgardt," he admitted and sat down, much to Elita and Uyuniya's surprise. "What now? You have everything you want, and you can set off on your adventure to find more people like you, as you claimed earlier, right?"

Fulgardt smiled.

"I wouldn't say EVERYTHING," he said. "There's more than one reason I'm keeping you alive."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"I didn't miss it, you know? I sensed it when the great void churned and tried to kill you. I also sensed a powerful signature of Null Life Essence guard you."

Skullius frowned. It wasn't too surprising, but…

"You can sense Null Life Essence?" he asked Fulgardt.

"Why, of course I can. Every Divine can. Null Life Essence, Voided Death, Undeath… these powers have an unspoken ranking in the Common Reality Leagues; they are special cases. They grow depending on the user. And, since they were created with Divine strength – though at extreme levels – Divines can sense them. Consider that a free bit of knowledge."

Skullius immediately thought to the difference between Uyuniya and Elita's Voided Death, and then the difference between his own Null Life Essence and the staggering quality of Serenity's, when she had been using Sila's body as a vessel.

But this was hardly important right now. What he needed to ask was…

"What does Void trying to kill me have to do with your interests? I promise you, it has nothing to do with the Insurgent Magnus powers."

"I imagined not," Fulgardt said and then he turned and walked over to the clamped teeth of Rias' deer. "But you see – and you might have already caught on – I have an…arrangement with Void. It's a small one, but she is not above contacting lesser beings. It's always nice to befriend Existential Parallels. I'm sure I fell out of Serenity's graces as Festos, but Void, well... It might now be in her best interest to have me as a special ally, since you are her enemy."

Skullius' face sank.

Fulgardt laughed.

"I'm sure Void will find value in an ally as… intimate with you as I am. Rather than waste time chasing Primeval Deities for benefits, this is plentifully more profitable, don't you think?" he said.

Chapter 1369: Get Back (4)

There was a certain property of [King of Severing Twilight: AfterDark], Skullius' [Evil Darkness] Andori, which allowed him to create a prison somewhere within the great void. This was where he had stowed away the WILLS of Fulgardt before they inevitably escaped.

The fact that an Andori like this existed, suggested that Fulgardt would have gotten access to a similar property in one of his own Andori. After all, this feature of a prison in the great void didn't have anything to do with Skullius' own ingenuity when crafting both his Default and War bodies.

This was why Skullius had suspected that Fulgardt had some relationship with Void, and now, his theory was proven true.

Even though Fulgardt could easily be lying or overstating the truth, Skullius was sure the Immoral had an ally in Void, and of course, this was extremely bad.

The Hybrid Warmoth was stumped.

Fulgardt chuckled.

"I'll take your sorry-looking face as a yes. You, no doubt, are seeing first-hand how dealing with Primeval Deities is even more gruelling than you thought when you tried to use it as a chip against him," he said. "Void stands on higher ground than them, and she is equally capable of giving gifts as part of LIMITED CONTRACTS, or even UNLIMITED ones. Did you know? Probably not."

This indeed came as a surprise to Skullius, and inflicted another blow of apprehension within him.

If Void could offer contracts like the Primeval Deities…

'Are you also able to, Serenity?' Skullius asked secretly.

"No. I have heavier restrictions than Void," was her succinct explanation. Skullius believed it. If it were him from before he had been attacked by Void earlier, he might have doubted even a little, but with what he knew, and wanted Serenity to answer for if he made it out of this alive…

"Good for you, I guess," Skullius said to Fulgardt, putting on a very poor calm front.

Right then, the ground shook and the skies seemed to echo their vibration. Again, unfathomable power flared from behind the teeth of the huge deer head.

Fulgardt glanced at it, pleased. His attention returned to Skullius. Uyuniya looked dangerously close to taking her chances against him, but Fulgardt didn't have her in his sights, not with the Corrupted Deity behind him watching them closely and ready to attack faster than Uyuniya could.

"You almost seem composed. Of course, I suppose the bulk of your confidence lies in the fact that I don't know much about your current prowess. Fair. That wouldn't give me much value if I were to deal with Void. A great shame, indeed," Fulgardt said.

He was being honest. He wouldn't tell Skullius this, but his guidance field wouldn't show him Skullius' abilities. The Immoral imagined it was because – as he had guessed in Maqi – Skullius possessed powers that exceeded his own in some way; powers he was hiding for some reason. He found that especially interesting above all. Fulgardt knew for sure that Skullius had an inferior quality of Broader Existence than him yet still…

"That is a shame. What do you intend to do then, seeing as this is a major profit opportunity?" Skullius said, almost too boldly. Inwardly, he thought:

'You wouldn't risk killing Uyuniya and Elita, not if you want to remain in Void's good graces.'

Fulgardt gave him an appraising look.

"I've considered handing you over to her," he said.

…!!!

"…but that would kill my goal of growing through another Insurgent Magnus. It's a predicament, really. Oh, how tempting both options are. One is costlier and riskier, and has assured long-term benefits, while the other is relatively safe with potential for both short and long-term merits, especially if I carry it out right away. Hmm…"

Skullius' indignation and apprehension grew once more, as did Elita and Uyuniya's. Fulgardt gave the two exasperated looks.

"I thought the prospect of serving Void's whims would excite both of you. Are you that ungrateful to your benefactor? Well, I need not ask I suppose, given the brat you're getting all churned up for," he said.

Elita had no response. Her conflict over this matter was far from over.

Uyuniya, on the other hand, having not understood what Fulgardt had said, assumed it wasn't friendly. She so desperately wanted to attack, but as the Immoral guessed, she was privy to the danger a Corrupted Deity posed, especially when in the hands of a shrewd enemy.

At that moment, the great deer head vanished.

In its place remained only the figure of Rias, sitting on the ground with his legs crossed and his eyes shut… along with the large body of the Doom Knight laying sprawled on the ground. The many victims that had been seated within the deer's mouth were gone.

The Doom Knight stirred.

…!

It was as Skullius had feared. The effect of <Void> had ended, and the creature was regaining its consciousness.

Whatever method Fulgardt or Rias had used to force the Doom Knight to create Undead Blessings likely had nothing to do with the creature's Broader Existence, since Undeath essence wasn't likely to be stored there like Amras. Skullius rendering the powerful creature immobile and unresponsive must have even helped make the process of Undead Blessing creation easier!

The Hybrid Warmoth cursed.

He didn't know what would happen now. He was unsure of the progress of Cold Oblivion in the Doom Knight's Broader Existence, but it likely hadn't spread as well as it could have, given how careful Sila had been when releasing the vapour into the enemy.

Yet, the Doom Knight seemed like the lesser threat now.

Fulgardt was still very much threatening, even if he couldn't kill him, and now, his (Fulgardt's) ally had reached Divinity.

Rias opened his eyes and a wave of Amras whipped out of his body like a gust. He took a deep breath. Greenish-black flames then raged all over his body, towering and potent. They almost seemed to replace the crimson hue over Aigas, cast when the Doom Knight marked it.

He rose and felt for his fingers. He could tell the difference in his body – in his flesh and soul. He could sense the fresh Broader Existence which had bloomed within him; a special existence that could be nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

"It's almost a miracle that I didn't reach this state in my… previous life," he said. His voice sounded a little deeper, devoid of the boyish charm it had once carried; it had appropriately matched his young, smaller frame.

Fulgardt turned to him, beaming. He walked over and placed a hand on Rias' shoulder.

"Well?" he asked.

Skullius knew what he meant. He had no choice but to prick his ears for the EverSword boy's answer.

Rias continued to look a bit too fascinated with his fingers.

"You were right. It was going to take a little more effort than I thought to change a skill I already had into an Andori," he said, and finally looked straight into Fulgardt's eager eyes. "It's done."

Fulgardt patted his shoulder.

"Perfect," he said, grinning malevolently. "Yet, our work is only just beginning."

Without warning, Fulgardt's Corrupted Deity grabbed Skullius with its massive hand.

…!!!

Skullius was not able to react at all. He was in the giant grip before he even knew what was happening.

But… what was happening?

'He's taking me to her?!' Skullius thought, horrified. Fulgardt was going to take him to Void after all.

Fulgardt flashed over to the Deity's wrist and gazed at Skullius' head, which – along with one of Skullius' hands – was poking out of its closed palm. He pulled out some kind of bracelet from a spatial storage, and locked it around Skullius' wrist. The bracelet suddenly turned into a ring of light that sank into Skullius' skin and formed a thin little black tattoo on it.

Fulgardt, all of a sudden uncharacteristically stern and serious, declared:

"This bracelet will restrict you from meddling with what you found out about me in the Labyrinth of the Yoke. It is to restrict you and you alone, and will only remain active for an hour."

"What?" Skullius was so dumbfounded that he repeated the exclamation of confusion. "What?"

Fulgardt sighed and had the Corrupted Deity drop Skullius back on the ground. He then turned away and gazed at the Doom Knight, which was rising to its feet. Its eyes were starting to reawaken the blaze of Undeath.

Enjoy new adventures from empire

Fulgardt pointed at it… and his Corrupted Deity pounced.

By the time Skullius fell to the ground, it was already over. The Doom Knight was no more.

Its body was split open five ways like a banana peel, as was its soul. The Corrupted Deity loomed over it like a giant grim reaper.

Skullius could only gape. More terrifying than the prospect of how the Doom Knight had been killed – with barely any sound – was the look in Fulgardt's eyes… and the sharp [Evil Darkness] billowing from his hand. It was barbed, clear and alive. It seemed to have had a hand in killing the Doom Knight too.

Fulgardt sucked his teeth. He looked to the Hybrid Warmoth, eyes like cold moons.

"You'll live until you're no longer of use to me." His words were like swords, cutting and fearsome. The mirth was gone from him. "Maybe you'll have the pleasure of seeing me again after I have slaughtered the Deities left in this place."

And with that, he and Rias were gone.

Chapter 1370: A Hunt Over Aigas

Yuyui would have laughed at the expression on Grim's face. She had been in Suzamete's domain before, only hours earlier. It wasn't something she could get used to after only a single experience, but that first time obliterated most of her shock over the gigantic form of the Deitess' body melded into the sky-themed space in a fashion beyond words.

Understandably, Grim was struggling to perceive where Suzamete began and ended in this odd territory. He was flustered. He, like the others behind him and Yuyui had got down on their knees, almost unwillingly upon being invited into the domain.

The rest of the Stark Troops were just as shaken as Grim, as were the beasts which had been forced asleep by the Nigella and her company before – Azila and Hauza included. This place had a way of tautening the senses, stretching them to extremes; as soon as the beasts had been carried into the domain, they had been forced awake.

Suzamete seemed to recognise that Yuyui was a good, lucid candidate for a clear conversation. She addressed her.

<I congratulate you on defeating foes much stronger than you are. You're a wonder. Few have been able to access the true mechanism of growth I, Listafelle and Quintess developed for Aigas before it was tainted. I anticipated it, but I'm pleased all the same.>

Yuyui blushed.

Somehow, it felt wrong to accept the compliment, given that her master and Suzamete didn't see eye to eye. But that was an even more absurd thought. Skullius had grown to the point where he could argue with Deities.

"T-thank you," Yuyui said and found no other words to add.

Suzamete allowed an awkward pause to reign before speaking again.

<You must be wondering why I invited you here. To be sure, I have a task for you… and him.>

Grim sensed the intense wave of attention and lifted his head.

"M-me?" he stuttered and chuckled sheepishly. "Me?"

<Yes. You will be integral for what I hope to do, but you will have all the help possible, besides Yuyui.>

Both Grim and Yuyui were staggered. The idea that a Deity could find value in them was absurd. It wasn't a mark of doubt in their own prowess as a whole, however. Grim and Yuyui understood their current limits, especially when they matched themselves against the likes of Kintar and Pherdanta. They had every hope to grow and even surpass them by leagues, but s they were now…

<The job I have for you is as simple as it is complicated. The lynchpin of it has all to do with your recent growth, Yuyui – your new eye.>

"My new eye?" Yuyui reeled. "The Eye of the Visitor?"

<Indeed. Awakening it at this time was the best thing that could have happened, where your Hidden Class is concerned.>

Yuyui was puzzled. Her mind raced and raged.

She had awakened her new eye only a few minutes ago though, and she found it both impressive and unbelievable that Suzamete had concocted some sort of plan for Aigas' benefit from the eye already. She recoiled. Or maybe, was it…?

"Forgive me for asking," she said, "but when you invited us here before, didn't you say you couldn't see the future now that Boron has been released?" Yuyui remembered Skullius barking at Suzamete for not being certain about the future when it was in her powerset to know everything that happened on Aigas.

<No. I merely said events become uncertain when someone of a similar calibre as I is involved. I can see the trajectories of all lesser beings – multiple trajectories for the future per individual. Since the presence of another Deity can cause many variables I won't able to predict, I can only make guesses according to the many possible futures I begin to see. For instance, I saw you and Grim die to the Order of the Trodden Rose in a future where they attacked you in full force – all twelve.>
Experience new stories with empire

<I saw you awaken all twelve eyes after hunting down and killing all twelve women in another future, but Aigas was crumbling and everyone including your master was dead. It is hard to ascertain anything now, and I can only be glad when one of the futures I hoped for turns out to be the new reality. In this case, I so desired for you to awaken this obscure, unique eye.>

Yuyui slowly nodded and reflexively touched her eye.

Right then, one of the many individuals she had seen in this domain before, bowing at Suzamete, spawned, drawing behind them a large cart. This individual then immediately joined the others, bowing deeply before the Deitess.

It was a momentary distraction that didn't take away from the punch of the situation.

"Um… what exactly does the Eye of the Visitor do?" Yuyui asked.

<I would rather explain what I expect you to accomplish and why.> Suzamete said, but not harshly. <The threats from the past – the drapes of Aigas' previous times – will only continue to grow in number. As quickly as your order, the Stark-Soul Order, is moving to intercept the many threats, it may take a little longer than I expected to quell all the chaos. That little delay from a critical point is what I hope to clip. I need to hasten the process of weakening the effect of Boron's influence on the drapes of time.>

Yuyui nodded and waiting patiently for Suzamete to continue.

<The great void is a very dangerous place. It breeds more than just intelligent Divines and Deities. It also spawns powerful forces, natural disasters, some of which take the form of living, irrational beasts. There is one which might be able to help me. I know its location, but I cannot leave to get to it, and unfortunately, my Fruit Bearers aren't strong enough for the task either. Your eye, Yuyui, is the key…> the Deitess said before turning to Grim. <And your affinity with beasts is another. Yuyui, with my help, will draw the creature to Aigas and you will capture and siphon its abilities. I believe you have that capability.>

Grim gaped for the better part of ten seconds.

"Capture… Capture a creature from the great void?" he stumbled over his words and turned pale. "There's no… I mean, isn't it a Divine creature, like my master? How on earth could I even hope to do anything against it right now?"

<Your objective is not to fight and kill it. Indeed, that is impossible. All you need to do is learn as much about what it's capable of as possible. For that, you will need to survive. You won't be alone. I will send with you a portion of my Fruit Bearers and their artefacts, and the guardian beasts you have rallied will be your allies as well. And of course, you won't be travelling far into the void. You will meet the creature right outside Aigas and make your stand there.>

Grim's eyes flashed a deeper gleam of red. Cold fear raced through him and many questions came to jab doubts at his resolve.

But then he recalled the Impossible Task, and remembered how desperately he had been anticipating judging his new strength against a powerful opponent and circumstance, just like Yuyui had done minutes ago.

This was as best of an opportunity as he was going to get, it seemed.

Sweat dribbled from his forehead. He emitted a nervous laugh.

'What would the boss think if he heard I was too much of a coward to invite such a challenge?' he psyched himself up.

But it seemed Suzamete had more to share to ease his concerns.

<For an added measure, I will also have another competent ally join you. He may still be halfway through the process of healing, but there might be no better help on present Aigas than him.>