

Undead 901

Chapter 901: Six Wands (1)

The use of Creeds to free the imprisoned Curse had come as a surprise to Replicus. Given the evident effort that the Ardent Curses had put in to make sure that Hope didn't escape, it hadn't occurred to him that it could all be undone with a single sentence.

But then...

'It must have cost a lot of Creeds to achieve this. An amount only someone as insane as the Bishop could spare to pay,' Replicus had thought. 'Or did the fact that Musing acted as a replacement ease the burden of payment?'

The Penetrator was unsure.

Creeds were too broad for him to understand as very few Incandescent Stagers were willing to share their secrets.

While he knew they were powerful, he didn't understand some of their more nuanced applications: like Eaniss making a 'Fuck off!' work in her favour days ago.

The Penetrator did know that Creeds weren't exactly portable miracles. While they were Fragments of Rules, they couldn't outright kill or create things. They were more like instruments used to make adjustments not too far fetched from reality.

"Boss. The others are leaving..." Allora pointed out just as Hope tore down the masking and barring over the exit to the Cluster.

Those that managed to ward away the effect of the Collective song rushed out of the gap, taking their leave.

There really wasn't anything keeping anyone here anymore, since the flying Curses who were more or less invulnerable had been taken down.

"Right," Replicus said.

It was time to leave.

The oh so menacing Curse that had been freed from its prison was kind enough to let them leave as goodwill.

That had surprised him.

He had gotten the distinct feeling that this creature was going to be cruel and unreasonable, not that he preferred this.

There were many reasons to follow the others and get back onto the voyage.

Replicus had been wondering about Eaniss and the other Factions, whom he considered to be the core of the Severed Union were missing, initially thinking they were outside the Cluster before he got an idea about the truth.

Finding the time to think it all through was difficult, but every micro moment he spent being a spectator to the things happened around him counted, as the thought phantoms constantly debated efficiently and came up with useful conclusions.

Now that he knew that Eaniss had seemingly messed with time, many reasons for why popped up.

One of them was because Eaniss, who was heavily competitive, had plucked those she deemed most valuable as allies to capturing the masked man, and left with them, leaving everyone else here.

That was likely assumption.

It wasn't like she imagined all of them dying here anyway.

They were merely stalled, and one might argue Eaniss viewed them as safe here.

This voyage was a race at the end of the day.

But why leave the Mad Bishop? Wasn't she one of the core figures of the Severed Union too?

At that moment, the grand cathedral which had been a super stone's throw away vanished, along with the nine angel-like men singing the melody.

The cathedral then appeared around the Mad Bishop and Hope.

While the view of the two was blocked, the Mad Bishop's amplified voice echoed loudly, allowing Replicus to hear:

"How about you join my Faith, hmmm? Shake my hand, and we'll call it even."

'Of course,' Replicus thought.

Of course the Mad Bishop would say something like this.

He immediately sensed that things were about to turn hostile.

It wasn't like the emerged Great Father Hope would consider nine hostile arrows pointed at him – even if they wouldn't pierce him – an invitation to a picnic in the outside world.

At once, Replicus snapped his fingers and soft, white clouds appeared over his Unlimited and Baddan.

"Boss?" Grim asked with a concerned look.

"Get out of here. I'll meet you outside," he ordered.

"But—"

"Don't worry. I only want to confirm something and I'll be right with you. Things are about to get too dangerous and unpredictable," Replicus spoke over Pherdanta who wanted to protest. "Call yourself some cloud and fly out of here. It should still be useful even after you return outside."

Replicus had the ability to share control of clouds he made with his subordinates. For that, he needed to grant them a cloud over their head which had his mana signature.

This was the same ability Grim had been using during his assignment, right when the great trembling occurred.

In this particular scenario, the clouds Replicus had been conjuring to ride all along, were now at the behest of the hesitant Unlimited.

"Go," Replicus said before summoning the [Nullmancer's Royal Raiment of Acclimation] over his body and shooting towards the cathedral with Araeyn whom he beckoned to follow.

His subordinates looked at each other anxiously, before doing as they were told.

Replicus shot into the sky and climbed using the clouds he had created, soon reaching directly above the cathedral and its open courtyard.

He saw the Mad Bishop and Hope engaged in an ominous staring contest.

'I expected the Cluster General to throw a fit right away. Is he actually reasonable?' he thought before using his guidance field to check the creature's status.

[Unable to reveal status: Too great of a strength gap exists between user and target]

'...Right...' Replicus thought with his sockets flaring.

The guidance field didn't think that Hope was something he could defeat. At least not in a direct confrontation.

No matter.

What he was here for, was to analyse the Mad Bishop first and foremost.

He wanted to learn her fighting style, her powers.

Given that she was so intent on having this fine Curse 'join her Faith', she was likely to invest a considerable degree of effort to capture him. He wanted to analyse the process.

It seemed neither Hope nor the old Faction leader needed further conversation to understand where their intentions lied, because nine beautiful white arrows shot towards Hope at the same time.

They stretched into thin beams of light that instantly reached their target from the moment they left the bow.

Curiously, Hope raised one of his six wands... and the arrows vanished without a trace.

They hadn't even gotten the chance to be warped by the protective phenomenon that covered each Curse.

"Splendid!" the Mad Bishop cried as Hope pointed another one of his wands at her; her proximity so close he had angled his wand vertically.

...!

Replicus was alarmed.

The Mad Bishop was instantly turned into white ice, her figure frozen in the same posture she had adopted a split moment ago.

He felt her presence die out immediately, as though she had really... died.

However...

From one of the doorways leading into the courtyard, the Mad Bishop emerged, running jubilantly as she yelled:

"A saint never dies! That is the faith I have taken to! Isn't it marvellously absurd?!"

Hope indifferently pointed his wand at the Mad Bishop again, at the same time receiving nine more arrows his way.

He caused the Mad Bishop's newly emerged body to burst into a scorching blue conflagration that dyed the massive Cathedral in its hue while burning away the greenery outside it.

At the same time, the Curse turned the white projectiles that hurtled towards him non-existent.

Much like before, the Mad Bishop came sprinting from one the doorways into the courtyard, a grin on her face.

As a thick smoke billowed upward from her previous corpse, Replicus' sockets turned bright.

'What the hell is going on?' he thought. 'Is she like Yuyui?'

He would have dwelled on how he genuinely felt that the wand Hope kept using to kill the Mad Bishop had enough power to kill an Incandescent Stager in one attack, but how the old woman kept respawning was equally astounding!

Yet, Hope didn't seem disturbed at all.

How could he not be bothered by a seemingly immortal opponent?

'Is it the cathedral?' Replicus wondered, when Hope pointed another of his six wands towards the Mad Bishop, while the same one he used to defend against the arrows from the sky acted on the third volley of them.

This time, the Penetrator used his guidance field to identify the wand pointing at the old fossil.

...!!!

Without thinking, he turned into a massive bolt of Levin that lurched from cloud to cloud as it rushed far away without even taking the time to tell Araeyn to retreat!

'DAMMIT!' he thought.

A second later, Replicus knew he couldn't outrun what was about to happen.

What was about spawn from that absurd wand.

Chapter 902: Six Wands (2)

Replicus had thought that if he could outrun it, flee from its range, then he would have a fair chance of escaping. However, he was proved wrong. A part of him had already judged that he was doomed, but instinct drove him to act.

Before he knew it, he was spinning.

No.

Yes?

He was forcibly returned to his Penetrator form from the dazzling Levin, and while floating in the open space, his eyes and senses perceived the world spinning all around him.

There was no way to distinguish which way was up or down anymore, as everything turned into a rushing blur. Replicus felt as though he was within a massive, hollow, colourful globe that spun incessantly, not giving him the chance to rise or plummet.

'DAMMIT!'

While enduring the ordeal, it seemed activating skills was impossible, because even his mana channels were disoriented. They couldn't carry mana to the right positions where skills were etched into his body.

His body wasn't firm enough to resist.

'That wand...!' Replicus thought.

The glimpse he had managed of it showed to him that that wand, was called the Siphoning Axis, an object of the Mythical+ grade!

As long as one saw it, they would be unable to resist its effect once it was activated, and said effect, caused the target to feel the world spinning around them. If they truly believed the world was somehow spinning, the target would start spinning in place, making the effect more potent.

The sensation at that point could be likened to how a chunk of wood nailed at one end would react when someone moved around the other end in circles.

'Nghh...!' Replicus groaned.

He had been living off the few seconds before Allora's protection from the Collective song died out, but now, he heard the melody no more.

He wasn't the only one to be affected by the Siphoning Axis' ability after all.

He imagined the Bishop and her guards were affected too.

At that moment, he heard a distant cackling and then a disjointed, muffled sentence.

"This... y... Creed! ...see you!"

The Mad Bishop screeched something in what he could only imagine was glee. It was definitely a Creed!

But she didn't stop there.

Replicus definitely heard the muffled word 'creed' again, and then a deafening impact with a grimace-inducing shock sounded, almost seeming to vibrate against his armour, even though it had happened a distance away!

At once, Replicus wasn't spinning away, and he began falling to the ground.

His curious sight searched the skies for what caused the sound, and he saw the last signs of a figure shooting to the ground with a tinge of flame and rings of broken air, only to crash to the ground in a meteoric spectacle!

"Hahaha! Brilliant!" the Mad Bishop roared as she hung in the air looking at where a crater was dug in the ground.

Her eyes depicted slight signs of disorientation.

Shockingly, the grand cathedral, several times larger than it had been before, was floating around her, skewed at an angle, and very faint, as though it was a mere illusion.

It was a bizarre sight.

As Replicus also plummeted and took a few moments to restore his balance, his mind worked furiously.

'What the hell did the Bishop do?' he thought and his sockets darted to where the figure he had just seen had shot and fell.

That was Hope. Somehow, the Bishop had... hit him, using a Creed.

But how?

A moment later, the figure of the Curse exploded from deep into the ground and soared high.

Replicus was alarmed to see his face marred with a nasty gash on its right side, as though someone had nailed it with a hit using a barbed bat!

The set of events that happened next almost happened too fast for Replicus to see.

He was surprised to see the now silent nine guards from before emerge and start to whiz around the Bishop and Hope at flashy speeds, leaving pale trails from their bright tunics.

Dozens of their white arrows flashed towards Hope, but with the same degree of indifference as before, he held out a wand that mysteriously caused them all to disappear before they reached him, and at the same time, he pointed another wand at the Bishop.

Replicus turned into Levin and climbed up the clouds away from the battlefield, but he didn't forget to identify the wands being used..

The Flawless Flail of Ruin.

The Elemental Gambit

Both Mythical+ grade.

A thick jet of white climbed through the air rapidly to reach the Bishop. It seemed at first, to be fire, but Replicus only realised after it hit the Bishop with obscene speed, that it was actually frost.

The sudden disappearance of heat, and the emergence of cold so potent it changed the colour of the world, told much.

'Even she couldn't react to that...' Replicus thought warily, continuing to back away.

He watched as the pristine block of ice that was the Mad Bishop, so pretty and almost sacred, fall from the sky.

But yet again...

Somehow, from within the faint cathedral, the Bishop emerged and sprinted across the air with the construct following her, each of her footsteps causing shuddering booms. She donned an unnaturally grin and called out:

"A saint never dies!"

Then Replicus felt himself and the world spinning again.

He grunted.

This ability was loathesome!

He couldn't see what happened next, but a lot of violent exchanges seemed to happen. He heard the Mad Bishop scream in pain – with jovial cackles, of course – and for moment, the world stopped spinning and then resumed right after.

Within the moment of reprieve, Replicus heard the Bishop scream a Creed and then a horrendous impact occurred again.

The cycle continued for ten whole seconds, and twice, Replicus almost believed the Cluster was falling apart.

All the while, his thought phantoms shrieked their thoughts, and after furious debate...

"I think I heard it well enough this time! She's using two Creeds at a time. One to see the location of that Curse when he uses the Siphoning Axis, and another to hit him! The latter... if I heard corrected makes her attacks practically non-existent until they hit that thing's body!"

"That's ridiculous! You mean she is using her bare hands? Raw physical might each time? How many Creeds do you need to do that? Is she aiming for an endurance battle? Against a creature with multiple purple mana cores?"

"Well, she seems to be immortal. I'm not sure how it works, but it definitely has something to do with the cathedral. Can she do it indefinitely?"

"Doubt it."

The world turned normal again in that moment, and Replicus tumbled.

The sky was littered with remnants of vicious heat and uncaring chill. The green and gold over the ground had either frozen still or incinerated.

That was definitely the power of the Elemental Gambit.

Hope seemed capable of using all elements, and on a much deadlier scale than his lesser kin.

Each jet of flame or cold he cast, was capable of killing the Bishop in one hit!

Replicus got a good look at the Hope.

His body wasn't looking too good.

He had taken a beating, and the bruises he had, while not as gruesome, did seem to be from punches.

A slightly anguished look appeared on his face, and he pointed the Flawless Flail of Ruin at the Bishop who had a demented smirk as she kicked at the air, backing away.

Replicus was curious about this particular wand.

It seemed to make things disappear without a trace.

What would it do to the Bishop?

Replicus heard the first voice of fury from Hope as the Flawless Flail lit up with a tinge of orange.

Something strange happened.

Instead of anything happening to the Bishop, something occurred to her illusory cathedral instead.

Pwaaa!

As though it wasn't just illusory, but fragile, it shattered like glass, and in a manner that seemed to express that it had been hammered by something unstoppable, and quick!

Whatever it was that crashed into the cathedral wasn't satisfied with just this.

Replicus saw for the fourth time since he came to Aigas, the pool of multi-coloured substance spill from where the Bishop's cathedral had stood.

The Cluster had been harmed, broken through.

Chapter 903: Six Wands (3)

The Bishop looked stunned.

Her eyes exploded with awe and surprise.

Her mouth opened wide as she looked at Hope, signs of unease in her eyes.

Her cathedral had been destroyed, even though it couldn't be touched. It was as it appeared, loosely realised within reality.

Hope wore several grins at the expression the Bishop had.

"Now you cannot evade me."

Indeed, it seemed so.

The centre of the Bishop's supposed immortality was gone.

She was open to dying to one of Hope's attacks.

Yet, she wore a bright smile.

"Indeed! Brilliant! You can break through techniques with that wand! Brilliant!" she cried, genuinely amused.

For that was truly what had happened.

'The Flawless Flail of Ruin...' Replicus thought keenly. He had seen its description from the guidance field, but how it was expressed in the text only vaguely suggested what the wand was capable of.

It was only when he saw what it could do that he believed.

Apparently '...can disrupt and restore guarded energy mechanisms,' meant that the wand could actually puncture through techniques and destroy them too!

Guarded energy mechanisms!

Because the cathedral collapsed and the Cluster was leaking behind the Bishop, Replicus had it confirmed now, and his mind couldn't help but race.

A thought rose in his mind as he gazed at that wand.

'I need to get my hands on that...' he thought.

But first, the world spun again.

Just before it did, Replicus saw dozens of white arrows fly towards Hope who, this time, didn't bother to use the Flawless Flail of Ruin. As they reached him, the arrows soared up, as though their sense of direction had been altered.

They had been uplifted in a literal sense, by Hope.

Replicus heard and felt flying elements and screams with the world whirling around him twofold.

He didn't know if the Mad Bishop would be able to fight without her miraculous cathedral, which seemingly made her immortal.

He imagined it wasn't going to be easy for her now at the very least.

What did having your technique disrupted mean?

The Mad Bishop said Hope 'broke through it', which could mean anything when she said it. She could literally mean her technique was destroyed and couldn't be used indefinitely, but was too unhinged to feel despair from it.

Regardless...

'I need to get a hold of that wand. To be able to disrupt techniques, even if it's temporary, is a very valuable ability. It doesn't require taking several hits first like with [Epiphany],' he thought with an immense dose of greed. 'I suppose that's what that Curse has been doing to the arrows. Why do those nine keep shooting those arrows anyway? It's not helping at all...'

The Penetrator deliberated in his mind, considering everything he could.

He really hoped the Bishop would push on.

He had stayed here hoping that he would see what she was capable of, but now, he was getting something even more valuable, and she was vital to him getting it.

'Hmmm. Would I be able to learn the ability of that wand if I let it hit me? Would [Epiphany] register it?' Replicus wondered.

A part of him immediately warned against it.

While [Epiphany] was surely powerful, not every concept could be learned, since some could just destroy him on contact, not to mention the skill itself, like the current case.

'Or maybe I could use [Wealth of Spoils] to extract it...?'

That was plausible. He would have to see if Mythical+ grade tools were manageable with his capabilities yet. Extracting from Mythical grade objects, depending on the complexity could take several days to weeks.

Replicus sighed.

He needed to get the wand first.

How was he supposed to do that?

He couldn't even get close without being exposed to the creature's emotions, which the Bishop was somehow impervious to.

What to do.

Replicus was tired of being at the mercy of the Siphoning Axis.

Maybe it was only a matter of time before he was caught in something sinister. It wasn't like the Bishop and Hope were oblivious to his presence.

'Don't you dare lose, you crazy hag...' Replicus thought.

The world stopped spinning in that moment.

To his surprise, the world had turned hot.

The gold on the ground had melted and it was flying up and down, creating searing waves that splattered on everything in sight!

Replicus dodged blobs of gold that flew in his direction.

'Is this the effect of another wand?' he thought.

There was another staggering jolt of force that coursed through everything vehemently!

Replicus immediately looked towards the source.

The Mad Bishop and Hope were stuck in mid-air, grinding yellow sparks gushing from between them as though the two were rapidly clashing with swords !

But that wasn't the case.

The Mad Bishop who looked worse for wear and was laughing hoarsely had her fist, which was smothered by an outrageous amount of golden energy – Primus energy – extended forth, pushing against the natural protection surrounding Hope!

Right then, Replicus watched her fist go deeper, getting closer to Hope.

What the heck?

The Primus was staggering in volume!

It was astounding!

But...why was this suddenly a battle to penetrate Hope's guard?

Why wasn't the Mad Bishop attacking as she had been? With Creeds.

Had she run out?

And why wasn't Hope attacking her with his wands? He was gritting his three sets of teeth, but his hands were stiff, his wands pointed in different directions.

...!

But then it hit Replicus!

Hope was likely stunned with compulsion!

Unlike the other Curses who had been warned about it, he hadn't been.

However, he seemed a little too expressive for someone completely under the influence of it.

His soul was likely too strong to be subdued easily, quite like Incandescent Stagers' souls were less likely to fall for compulsion themselves!

But why not-

Replicus' sockets flashed.

'A lot of give and take happens with Creeds. The Bishop must have been successful with her earlier Creeds to pass through Hope's protective powers because she was only landing one hit at a time. She must be aiming for something else...' Replicus deduced.

Around the two, the Bishop's nine guards were flying at Hope again.

Again? What for?

The sequence of events grew more convoluted in by the second when a tide of gold hurtled towards the fighters!

Everything became golden as the tide rose, and spread, as though intending to bury the two, though obviously only one would truly be affected – the Mad Bishop.

Replicus imagined that Hope had already commanded the gold to do his bidding before he was stunned.

Replicus climbed higher into the sky, and only then did he realise that his Apostle had vacated to a higher altitude from the beginning, hence his absence around him. To be fair, he had fled from him first.

As he rose, he saw Hope grin and grunt:

"Let go, or you'll die. I'll recover soon, anyway."

"Let go? You are thinking too rationally," the Bishop cackled. "I have a good hold over your soul so far. Why would I let go? As a matter of fact, since you tempered with my ability to revive, it's only fair that you should pay with your soul. I have more reason to have you join my Faith now.

You can use that wand of yours to restore that ability of mine, right?"

Hope frowned.

A shadow was cast over the two, and the wall of boiling gold drowned them!

Replicus was amazed.

So that's what the Bishop had been after!

She was still hellbent on making Hope 'join her Faith.'

He recalled that she had extended her hand for him to shake earlier.

Could she force him perhaps?

Maybe she needed to make prolonged contact with him.

How was that going?

Replicus looked down at the boiling golden sea.

It was tinged with an ominous red glow.

The Mad Bishop could survive something like that, right? Unless of course, the gold had other properties.

As Replicus looked down, he saw a figure drifting through the gold, unharmed.

Instantly, he shot down, manifesting an orb of darkness that hung just above the figure and spawned an attractive force that pulled him upward.

The figure didn't resist.

He wasn't able to, much like the rest of the Ardent Curses since Hope was unsealed.

Replicus looked at the figure as he materialised over a cloud he made, his vision alternating between Thrill before him, and where Hope, as well as the Mad Bishop had drowned.

"I wonder if you'll be cooperative..." Replicus said to the Curse.

Chapter 904: Divine Intervention

"Why are you suddenly so limp? Are you that scared of that guy?" Replicus said.

At first, Thrill didn't answer. He looked annoyed... and ashen.

Replicus scoffed.

"What manner of coward are you? I thought your name was Thrill."

"I'm not a coward!" Thrill finally barked with vigour. "Have you any idea what I've had to do in order to keep that... him... imprisoned?" At the latter end of his outburst, Thrill seemed to remember that he who spoke of was still at large. "All of us are subject to a special wand the Great Father of that era is gifted by the gold. We can't oppose."

"Is that right?" Replicus said, and his eyes darted to where the gold continued to boil a distance away. "You know the wands he has by name? And their effects?"

Thrill remained silent.

"For socket's sake just say it, you bastard! You're screwed whether or not you tell me. You kept that sockethole locked up for centuries!"

"He deserved it!" Thrill blurted again. "He's cruel to his own kind! You won't get to see it. He doesn't have an absolute hold over you, does he?"

At that moment, the layer of gold where Hope and the Bishop had been washed down exploded upward, and the former shot out into the sky with a gleeful triple grin.

He stretched out his six arms and with one wand that Replicus immediately deigned to identify, he caused the gold to cool and solidify instantly.

With a wave of the wand again, the gold fashioned itself anew, creating golden vegetation, hills, homes and many of the same things Replicus had seen when he first came here.

Thrill shuddered.

Replicus used Spatial Lightning to appear far and into the sky and dragged the Distorted Gravity orb pulling on Thrill up to him in a blink.

'Did the Bishop lose?' Replicus thought while watching Hope look down in satisfaction.

No way.

Her nine guards were still around, flying in the air, their faces inexpressive.

Surely that meant the Bishop was still alive, right? At least perhaps the glowing tunics the nine were should.

The nine all held out their bows, aiming arrows at Hope.

Replicus couldn't understand why they kept doing this.

It seemed Hope wondered the same.

"The rest of you fled. You should have taken the chance to run as well..." he said as he raised his wand.

Replicus turned tense.

He really hoped it wasn't the Siphoning Axis again.

In any case, he was sending a command to Araeyn at the same he saw Hope's wand flick. If it really was his turn to fight-

"Hahahahahaha!" a raucous laughter exploded, not from below, but above.

The Mad Bishop was soaring above Hope, her figure looking burnt but vivacious.

Hope looked up with three frowns.

"Still?" he grunted before desperately pointing his wands up.

However...

Something he didn't expect occurred.

Even Replicus hadn't, and it was fitting, since he had been wondering about its source just now.

The nine flying around in the air, holding their bows, saw them vanish from their hands and rush upward as streams of pristine blueish white light.

It happened too quickly!

...!!!

Replicus was grateful that he hadn't been anywhere close to the nine, who, as it seemed, were constantly flying while creating a circular boundary around Hope and the Bishop, intentionally.

Hope, sensing danger, relaxed the Siphoning Axis and extended the Flawless Flail of Ruin at the Bishop!

The old fossil above him merely laughed.

"This is not from me, dear fool. This is purely the strength of my subordinates. Ah, those I have inducted into my Faith. THEY are the true source of my strength," she said, stunning everyone who heard.

"Good!" Hope bellowed before pointing the Flawless Flail of Ruin at one of nine.

"Ah, fair mistake. Did I give you the impression that these nine are all that are piously involved in my Faith? Pity. There are thousands of believers and unless you can kill them all once, you are kidding bread," the Bishop said.

Hope growled unreasonably and he flicked another one of his wands.

The world spun.

Replicus cursed.

Again!

However, he heard the Bishop speak clearly.

"You see, when my believers, in a collective cannot fell an enemy...ugh, I might vomit... When exactly 1,000 blows they attempt fail to reach an enemy, an intervention beyond even me flourishes and comes to their aid. Divine intervention. Even I don't know where it comes from and it takes a different form each time."

...!!!

As though to demonstrate in action what the Bishop had just said, the so-called Divine intervention showed itself.... from above.

Of course, Replicus couldn't see what was happening, but he felt it.

It descended from the blameless sky; a partly visible dark purple hue that stormed down like lightning, with purpose!

It smashed into Hope in high fractions of time, and the Curse was torn down from the sky and onto the golden land he had reformed with an incredible boom that wrecked an excessive amount of it!

The Curse bellowed in pain, for the torrent of purple didn't stop descending!

It seemed infinite!

The victims of the Siphoning Axis were relieved at that moment, and they looked at the ongoing result of the 'Divine Intervention'.

The jolt of purple was akin to a misty acid that tore Hope's skin apart, disintegrating his flesh by the second. His triply scream rang across the Cluster boisterously!

Replicus was amazed.

'What could be capable of this?' he asked himself.

He couldn't tell what the light purple haze was supposed to be.

The Bishop knew.

She laughed in ridicule at Hope.

"Of course! The answer to hope... It was so clear. Despair!" she cried out.

The Penetrator looked at her and gaped.

Despair?

So the purple he saw... the torrent attacking Hope... was tangible despair!

Right! The Curses were protected by exaggerated versions of the emotions they represented. The swiftest way to beat them... was to expose them to an opposing emotion!

If only humans could actualize emotion as weapons.

Hope looked to be in a great deal of pain.

Blood gushed from his mouths, and his arms were quickly starting to become all bone.

Was this the end for the Curse?

Replicus turned to Thrill who had a semi-hopeful look on his face as he watched his Great Father's demise.

"Now will you tell me what Hope's wands can do?" Replicus asked.

Thrill looked to turn stubborn again, but he did respond.

"Why do you keep asking? You want to steal them? Hahaha! You can try, but only a Curse can use these wands! They are nurtured by mother gold only for us! It will be useless to you!" he sneered.

"I'll be the judge of that," Replicus said and he turned to Araeyn. "I want you to retrieve that particular one."

He sent a mental image of the exact one he wanted, and Araeyn obeyed his command with a frown. As always.

With the Empyrean Ribbon, which could extend as long as he wanted, the Apostle rushed down on a silky red curve.

At the same time, the Mad Bishop darted down towards Hope as well.

The two descending towards the Curse, with obvious objectives; ones that did nothing to assuage his panic, caused him to rage.

The Siphoning Axis activated.

The Mad Bishop used a Creed to stabilise her vision and find Hope's location.

As for Araeyn...

Replicus had entrusted this task to him because he had discovered, quite obviously, that the Apostle was not affected by the Siphoning Axis. After all, he didn't have eyes.

Much like how he resisted the ghost in Nedalia's Territory, he was immune to things he could not see and more.

And thus, with his mysterious perception he continued to hurtle towards Hope freely... and without pause.

Chapter 905: Curses of the Faith

Because of Araeyn's advantages, he managed to reach Hope before the Mad Bishop.

The moment he touched the downpour of purple haze, however, barking sparks poured, along with a grating noise, as though metal was being cleaved through by an equally metallic substance that spun to shred its obstacle!

Replicus' sockets blazed.

In addition to the fact that Araeyn was unaffected by the Siphoning Axis, Replicus had sent him forth because he, much like the Curses, had a passive protection against physical attacks around him.

[Inverted Boundary].

Anything that approached Araeyn would be transported elsewhere.

The Apostle pushed against the falling despair, and in a matter of seconds, even though the friction, likely born from clashing energies, increased, he passed through.

Araeyn looked at Hope with the dark holes on his face.

The Curse looked hideous.

From his back which faced up, flesh had molten off his bones, and he was barely looking like anything more than a perverse mummy. It seemed that the only thing keeping him alive, was the two purple cores churning within him, reinforcing his body.

"You think... I will die... so easily...?!" he said, and another one of his wands flicked lightly, its effect activated. "Come... come and save me!"

At once, the almost long forgotten Ardent Curses scattered around the Cluster were delivered from their paralysis, and within them, an aching urge to serve their Great Father rose. Their energy billowed immensely and against their will, they soared through the sky towards Hope.

Jets of light began to assault the Bishop's nine guards and Replicus who cursed, as he was still caught in the effect of the Siphoning Axis!

"Hurry up, dammit!" Replicus cried as multiple attacks struck at his armour, some of them breaking through. Thrill, whom he was holding captive tried to struggle and urged his fellow Curses to aim at Replicus. This was all he could, after all, he had dropped his wand earlier.

With great effort, the Penetrator summoned Null Life Essence to guard his body when several Curses indeed aimed more of their attacks at him. Unlike mana, Null Life Essence didn't strictly require to be moved through specific channels in his body.

This defence bought him time, and just for the damage he suffered, he refused to deactivate the orb of Distorted Gravity keeping Thrill in place.

He was going to deal with him afterwards.

Araeyn looked down at Hope and searched for the wand he had been told to find. He seemed obliviously to Hope's barking.

He found it promptly and reached in to grab it.

"Not so fast, ugly," the Mad Bishop appeared and grinned. She seemed to be unaffected by the despair entirely.

Araeyn halted.

The Mad Bishop looked down and stomped on Hope's hand which held the Siphoning Axis. She knew which shade of gold it was by now. The wand fell out of Hope's hand as he grunted and tried to turned over.

Of course, the effect of the wand desisted.

"Bright Storm! You're too bold for your own good!" the Mad Bishop shouted into the sky while cupping her hands in front of her mouth. "This is my kill, you know! Technically!"

Replicus who had stopped spinning and began to dash around to avoid the Curses' attacks replied:

"I don't want the kill! I just need one of those wands!"

The Bishop made an 'O' with her mouth and then apologised for calling Araeyn ugly.

She looked down at Hope.

"Fair. We did agree to share spoils from enemies we both felled, didn't we?" she said, and crouched down to the Curse who growled abrasively. "Don't worry. You're in no real harm. In fact, you should be glad. I'll put you good use."

The same glow that had appeared around the Bishop's hand before, appeared again and she pressed her hand against Hope successfully, after all, the despair had defeated his eternal imperviousness.

The glow in her hand spread over Hope and the Curse gritted his teeth chokingly.

He shivered.

He swooned.

He tried to rebel while screaming threats and all, but unfortunately, his intentions were soon drowned.

The despair had done.

Araeyn had flown up to hand his master the Flawless Flail of Ruin which he grasped with the Empyrean Ribbon.

Replicus was a little distracted.

His original intent – to learn about the Bishop's abilities – was being fulfilled all the more right now as he looked down below. He couldn't be bothered with the annoyed Araeyn poking him with his Fond Calamity.

The old hag was walking amongst the Ardent Curses who stood paralysed as they did when Hope first appeared. She hopped from one to the next, touching their chest with a hand that was dipped in a stellar glow for several seconds.

She was making believers out of the Curses.

She did it so with such jubilation that one would have thought this wasn't at all a severe case of exploitation.

As it were, the Bishop could induct anyone into her Faith by touching them, even if they didn't want to – though that took a little more effort, and demanded certain conditions – and once turned into a believer, it was impossible to rebel against the Bishop's orders.

With her abilities, the more followers she had, the more power she accrued and its applications were more than she had let on in the previous fight.

Naturally, the one responsible for this current haul of believers, was Hope who stood far behind the neat rows of Curses. He had a stern look to him, as though he was an unfeeling machine.

His body was all healed up, presumably through a healing potion given by the Mad Bishop.

A particular wand of his was raised.

The Fathering Guide. It gave him authority over every single Ardent Curse there was, giving him the power to even control their individual powers.

It was chilling how dark the currently unfolding tale would sound to an outsider without context...well, even with context it didn't sound good at all.

'Well, it's not honest work...' Replicus thought to himself, desisting from being a judge of the Bishop's exploits.

He had achieved what he set out to do.

The golden wand, which was longer than he imagined before – roughly the size of his arm – was in his hands now.

As he finally took it from Araeyn, he found that it felt odd. It was like holding a thick hosepipe in which water was gushing through.

The Flawless Flail of Ruin.

Replicus had only seen its effects once, but that had solidified his intent to not walk out of this Cluster empty-handed.

The ability to disrupt and restore guarded energy mechanisms.

Could Hope have used this against the towering despair?

'Not when he couldn't even point up at its source, I suppose,' Replicus thought.

Thankfully, the Mad Bishop hadn't been stingy and she had given Replicus the wand after having Hope restore the cathedral ability he disrupted with the wand.

Watching this had reminded him what Thrill said, that the wand could only be used by a Curse, which would have posed a problem, if not for the fact that he had procured the 'rights' to that bastard from the Bishop as well.

Thrill was in his possession. If Replicus played his cards carefully, he would be able to exploit him well.

Soon, it seemed the Mad Bishop finished her work and she set to leave the Cluster with her entourage.

Replicus flew down towards her with Araeyn following.

"Ah, Bright Storm! Good show, wasn't it?! You know, this could have been us, but you've been keeping your distance," the Mad Bishop said while gesturing towards herself and Hope who walked silently ahead.

"I'm sure it would have been fun," Replicus replied with a sigh.

"We could still do it. After all, we are in range. What do you say?" the Mad Bishop said eagerly.

Replicus shuddered. He thought she had calmed down, that her sudden better-than-nothing sanity since she began fighting with Hope would persist longer.

"Come on, you must be exhausted after that battle. You should rest. Didn't you even exhaust your Creeds too?" he asked, trying to dissuade her.

"Exhausted? I'm fresher than freshly baked bread! I had to limit the use of my abilities in order to not kill that fellow. Though, if he could use more than two wands at the same time, I would have fought a little harder. For a saint, I do have too many destructive powers. I can't help it.

There's too many followers now. Don't know what to do with all the excess strength. I get a lot of Creeds from it too."

"...I see."

'Of course. Why not?' Replicus thought within.

What he had seen of the Bishop was already outstanding, but of course, she wasn't fighting to kill Hope. Rather than Priestess, the Bishop struck Replicus as a Tamer.

'She gets Creeds from getting more people to come into her faith? The gaps in strength between Incandescent Stagers is ridiculous.'

It indeed was. The Bishop was using Creeds unsparingly through the fight. Other Incandescent experts wouldn't stand for it.

On another note, Replicus had thought it weird that Hope wasn't using the Siphoning Axis, Elemental Gambit and Flawless Flail of Ruin at once. The combination would have been deadly.

As it turned out, he couldn't use more than two wands at a time.

"I suppose that bastardess Eaniss left us all behind, hmmm? She missed all the fun."

Replicus' sockets flashed.

"We're in a race, aren't we? She simply played her cards right."

The Bishop merely grunted.

Replicus was baiting a response from her.

He wasn't sure, but he had a feeling the Bishop knew what happened. The shenanigans with time.

"Played her cards right? Well, there is no right."

Soon, the group exited the Cluster.

Everyone else was gone, but Replicus could see his crew waiting on the still clouds above.

He turned to the Bishop.

"We'll definitely stick to our arrangement next time," he said daringly, and before she could answer, he fled upward.

Chapter 906: Cool Down

The earlier platform of gold erected by the Ardent Curses was promptly dispelled, and afterwards Replicus and his crew were sailing in their ship once again, the spikes behind it igniting furiously, mirroring the team's intent to catch up to the others.

Replicus made it a point to tell Pherdanta who was controlling the ship to have it barrel ahead at full speed while keeping sufficient distance between himself and the Bishop who trailed behind.

Using a few skills to boost the vessel's speed, what Replicus wanted was manageable. The ship crossed a massive distance in the ten minutes that followed, even with the return of the poisonous sea, the Reverse Clusters and the Scorching Tears.

Pherdanta steered perfectly.

Unfortunately, there was no sign of the other Factions yet and there wouldn't be for a while.

Allora and Grim pestered Replicus with questions about what had happened within the Cluster. The effectiveness of their cultured nagging ended up convincing him to give them detailed answers to satisfy their curiosity.

"I didn't think we'd face an enemy who we couldn't even hit! I was the only useless one in there!" Grim had said begrudgingly while Allora, who was a little disappointed that her roles so far had been utility-based, was happy to have one-upped Grim – in a way.

After sulking, Grim went on to pester Baddan, who, unlike Replicus, was pleased to entertain Grim's enquiries about his technique.

It was only now, when Replicus was on deck that he saw the growing closeness between the two and it surprised him somewhat.

It was good.

Once again, as he saw Grim nod with interest at Baddan's explanation while Allora chimed in, trying to understand why Baddan had to chant "Grant me the chances" before using his technique, Replicus was reminded about something.

Fulfilment.

Both Pherdanta and Grim had told him that they felt fulfilled, and that the current trajectories of their lives were perfect for them.

Replicus' sockets flickered.

'Not quite.'

He was far from it.

The thought rushed further away from him when the ship wound around the many Reverse Clusters; some peeking from the angry, ebony ocean, some high in the sky, some standing oblique just over the waters.

He recalled that Cluster he had seen when he used Lambent Phosphor.

Eaniss had harnessed the power of the time-manipulating Cluster to temper with time. He guessed she reversed it, but how else had she used it? How often?

The prowess and ambitions of other Faction leaders were every bit as deadly as his.

Eaniss had shown it and now the Mad Bishop.

Replicus couldn't shake the feeling that to them all – excluding those he had dug bloody holes through so far – he was but a source of amusement, and in all fairness, with the depths of power they had, it was reasonable to see him that way at face value.

The Penetrator tsked and went for the small cabin, appearing below deck.

He entered the room where the Paladin Champion was.

He had erected a barrier around the man's bed, just in case the undeath flowing through him erupted by some machinations he had not foreseen.

Replicus looked at the man. He looked soulless. Barely alive.

His singed, medium length, cherry-coloured hair. His large, curved nose amid a burnt face. His missing right arm and festering flesh livid with Undeath.

All of it suggested a lack of life.

The words of the Definer of Causality echoed in Replicus' mind as he stared:

"If you know what's good for you, throw this man back into the ocean, and turn back."

The ominous foreboding he felt when he first heard those words thrummed within him.

What the hell did it mean?

There was no answer.

Replicus dwelled in the silence for a stretch.

The waters parting below the ship, enabling it to move rapidly up high waves and past calm volumes were barely audible from within the room.

Replicus had to strain his perception to hear them.

After a while, he called his thought phantoms to dispel the tranquility.

"So, what are we thinking about the Mad Bishop? Do we really want to fight her?" one said.

"We have a few trump cards reserved for pressing situations. And the others will probably be fine against those nine, bulky men of hers. She's honouring our deal so far. In fact, she's being generous."

"Don't say it like that. Makes us look like idiots proposing the conditions we did before in the first place."

"Does it? I agree her ability to perpetually revive after death is pretty ridiculous, and well, all her other abilities are probably on the same level - like her Divine intervention, though I doubt its strictly as the name sounds - anot to even mention her Territory, but we got the wand we needed. We could learn how to disrupt techniques."

"Considering how long [Wealth of Spoils] takes to extract skills from high grade items, I think we should try another method for making that wand useful. [Epiphany]... we're already starting to see its limits. Some concepts are just too absurdly powerful to learn, with annoying costs, and some are just too dangerous, and will probably simply bypass [Epiphany]'s criterion."

A thought phantom looked upset at the blast of negativity.

"Well, in the case of Integral Time, we should be glad Araeyn is somehow immune to being bamboozled by shifts in time. We wouldn't have even known about it if not for him. I can't even imagine how he knew."

"Me neither, but I suppose he must have something else special about him, since he almost qualified for that Dominion thing when he was born."

The phantoms murmured in agreement. Indeed Araeyn was special.

"Right. Anyway, as far as [Epiphany]'s concerned, let's just chalk that up to being the limit of our current Nullmancer abilities. We might need to rely on our more effective racial abilities next. It's only a shame the Curses made it impossible for us to use some of them."

There were nods of agreement.

Speaking of the Curses, Thrill hadn't been brought aboard. Replicus had chucked him into Stagnant Space before leaving the Cluster.

He could summon him when needed as long as he was in an enclosed space away from the Reverse Clusters.

"Let's hope the bastard is cooperative."

"He will be after spending a few hours in total isolation and darkness, with no hope of getting out on his own," a thought phantom laughed coldly.

Replicus stood, took one last look at the Paladin Champion, and exited the room.

He then went to the Mana and Null Life Essence pools.

Even though he could draw upon both energies from a distance, he decided to dip himself in the pools for a change.

First, he sunk himself into the Null Life Essence pool.

With the feature of his armour, the Hollow Dusk's Prison, he felt the Null Life Essence against his bones.

It was calming.

It was serene.

Something deep within him felt at home.

Chapter 907: Inadequacies

"Would you stop looking like that? It was a bad match up! There was nothing you could have done," Allora said to Grim. Her placing a hand on his shoulder, with her towering height, seemed to annoy the white-haired man.

He swatted it away.

"What do you mean there was nothing I could do? There was. I just didn't get the time. Things were moving too quickly," Grim grumbled.

Allora shook her head.

"I've never felt my admiration for someone evaporate so quickly. As an ordinary Faction member, I thought you were unshakeable. You and Pherdanta especially. I didn't realise you'd whine so much."

Grim clicked his tongue.

"I didn't ask you to adore me! And besides, there's never been a situation where my abilities weren't handy."

"There has been. Many in fact," Pherdanta chipping in caused the two to shiver.

Baddan was standing some distance from them chortled.

"There has not!" Grim turned and defiantly declared. "Pherdanta, you have swords for every occasion. That's cheating."

"It's a perk of being a Swordswoman."

"Oh please, I've been adding to your cache since old times. I even gave you that white scimitar days ago!"

"So what? I put it to good use. You should do the same with your fangs and claws."

Grim sighed, smiled darkly as he looked at the woman.

"You insufferable little... princess," he changed the last noun to his sentence when Pherdanta gave him a cross look.

He also seemed to remember midway that in a few seconds, Pherdanta could easily throw him overboard when his guard was forcibly dipped in the wake of her abilities.

With another sigh, Grim looked at the ocean.

He wasn't really that upset, but he did begin to wonder if matchups were going to dictate a majority of what happened with the battles going forward. His abilities could be pretty versatile, but how useful was that in overly complex battles.

He was quite concerned, and rightfully so, after all, at the end of the day, he wasn't used to fighting in the real high leagues yet. It hadn't been that long since he acquired his new abilities and the period he had had them could easily be considered as a growth period where he was evolving in a controlled environment – with the boss being the source of the control.

Well, not anymore.

Quite surprisingly, the pitter patter of rain began.

Droplets fell onto the umbrella-shaped barrier, and their hue was quite dark, as though they were darkness liquefied.

Well, with the constant heat that fell and rose, it was hardly surprising that rain would be a norm – born from the poisonous water. The fact that it hadn't rained since the anomalous conditions surrounding this voyage was the strange part.

The distance the distance the vessel had covered in the last hour seemed to denote another step into deeper, more treacherous sailing conditions.

The silence that followed, with everyone being partly mesmerised by the raindrops, was broken by Allora who had sat on the deck.

"How far are you two into your Stages?" she asked Grim and an imperceptible Pherdanta. "The boss is determined to have you two in particular get a lot of cumulative mana experience."

Grim tapped the rising hull playfully.

"Yeah," he said. "I'm past the halfway point into the Master Stage by a bit. I believe, according to the number of my Tasks so far... It should be 34. Six more Tasks and a Trial, and I'll be an Incandescent Stager. Thankfully, for the Tasks ahead, I have already amassed a fair amount of experience."

"I'm 36 in. Close too. Kenno is at 39," Pherdanta said succinctly.

Allora grimaced.

She was not even a Second Phase Master yet, and couldn't create a Genuine Incarnation, though she was close.

"I wish I had gotten the confidence to get my Class sooner," she said.

"What's the rush? The boss has promised to leave us all the weaker fodder so that we continue to amass experience. We're practically being stuffed, and our only Task is to use our nutrients well," Grim while giving Allora a light kick.

She gave a small smile.

"I suppose. Bad analogy though."

This was the main idea of Replicus' plan for the Unlimited. They were to take out the common combatants and grow.

Reaching the Incandescent Stage – which began from Level 41 to 60 – was something Grim and Pherdanta desired immensely. Their powers would grow too as a result, even though they were formidable already, a cut above the rest.

But Tasks stood in the way.

By keeping count of how many one had endured so far, one could tell how far they were into the Stages, after all, the fact that they were only 100 of them was public knowledge. Some counted them as levels, but it was accurate all the same.

It was possible to store cumulative mana experience indefinitely, though it would only be useful when Tasks were completed, the required experience for the next level deducted each time.

"What Task do you have?" Allora asked Grim, somewhat nervously.

It wasn't common to ask such a thing. She didn't dare ask Pherdanta.

"Well, I have to hunt down 50 aquatic beasts of the 15th Tier and above, using only my first beast form, Avhanar," Grim said while shaking his head. "It's sick, I know."

Allora saw it the same way. That was a tough Task and it couldn't have been done on the voyage since in the first half, they had been in a hurry to get to the Central Boundary, and now, the waters were too poisonous.

Allora wondered if that was why Grim had been so excited after claiming to have sensed the presence of strong monsters days ago, right after she got her class. Unfortunately, it had turned out to be Baddan.

"Seems being human is quite... devastating," the Sky Watcher spoke from the side.

"Well, I barely count as one," Grim snorted, which made Allora and Baddan chuckle.

There was flaring red shade imprinted onto the deck from the skies.

It grew increasingly broad and broader as the ship went.

Everyone grew tense and looked to its source.

It coming from just ahead.

"We've caught up!" Allora said.

Indeed they had.

Tens of ships were a distance beyond... but they weren't moving.

"What the hell?" Grim focused his eyes.

The view became clear.

The ships of the other Factions were surrounding a towering, dull red pillar that swayed vigorously left and right. It was very, very broad in girth, astoundingly so.

'Wait. It's a flame!' Grim thought.

A red flame above the sea.

"It's..." he set to alert his fellow Unlimited and Baddan, but he paused as he saw something more and then felt his skin crawl. The others did too.

Grim saw an enormous ship within the flame.

It was nearly twice as large as those that had been given to the Factions, and overall designed vastly differently.

It was worn down, its hull and keel smoking, the effect of the poisonous ocean water very effective upon it – chewing it through. Burn marks, likely from the Scorching Tears also showed from it, along with blotches of blood stains.

The ship was already sinking, leaning from behind as it slowly descended.

The red fire around it made the scene greatly disturbing.

However... the red turned out to not be a true flame at all.

It was Undeath.

The masked man... had he... had he finally been caught?!

Chapter 908: Marking The Enemy

"It's here."

Pherdanta steered the ship in a curve. She only brought it to a halt when it was far to the right, behind six other ships that pointed towards the great red hue.

Replicus had spawned on deck.

The lighting in his sockets spoke volumes about how he felt towards the surging Undeath housing the slowly sinking vessel everyone was undoubtedly paying attention to.

Finally, the masked man...

Had they truly caught up to him?

Given that Eaniss' ship, which Replicus had marked earlier, was also here, it was fair to assume that the masked man truly was cornered. Eaniss surely wouldn't be fooled easily, right?

"Is it a barrier of some kind? A barrier of Undeath?" Allora asked anxiously.

"It should be. Otherwise why hasn't everyone just attacked?" Grim said.

Replicus remained silent.

That was indeed odd.

Everyone was just waiting here, making the tension grow each second as the subtle noise of the rain persisted.

From what he could see, nothing of note had shown yet from show the sinking vessel ahead, either on its deck, or on its bowsprit which was facing up. Soon, those two would be the only options left for the masked man if he didn't want to taste the corrosive ebony waters.

Why wasn't he coming out?

He couldn't teleport.

He couldn't fly.

He erected the tall, winding red frame around the ship as a shield most likely, but for what?

'Why do I feel so uneasy about this?' Replicus thought.

Well, he was sure everyone was feeling the same.

The second wave of undead he had surmised would come the next time they saw a semblance of the masked man were yet to be seen. What was the necromancer's angle?

"Stay on guard. I'll be back," Replicus said.

"Where are you going?" Pherdanta immediately lurched forward.

"To get some answers."

With that, the Penetrator leapt from the ship and began to create clouds that he stepped on, climbing over the ships in his way, and in-between some of them. He had gone left from his own vessel, and soon, he was standing close to his destination.

He looked through the golden umbrella-shaped barrier of the vessel closest to the ominous red, towering pillar, and his sockets met the relaxed, ocean blue gaze from Eaniss' upturned eyes.

Adorned in the peach-coloured armour with an emerald flame, she looked as impressive as always. The sly expression she donned didn't impress Replicus as much though.

"Come on in," she urged the Penetrator, the barrier to the ship dissipating.

Replicus dropped to the ship's deck with a light leap, and the barrier returned behind him.

"Look who it is..." a voice that didn't belong to Eaniss said and Replicus wasn't too pleased to see Aurolio as its owner.

The pale man had an irritating smirk on his face as he stood close to Eaniss.

Aside from the two, Replicus saw fourteen dark humanoid figures, all placed strategically around the deck. It didn't seem like Eaniss brought another living soul on this excursion beside Aurolio.

"So..." Replicus said, and pointed towards the red glow "...what's that all about?"

Eaniss crossed her arms before her chest.

"Our catch. As soon as we caught up to him, he immediately warded himself with this impenetrable layer of Undeath. Nasty business. It won't budge for anything," she said, and looked ahead at the smoking ship behind the red.

Replicus looked towards it too.

"Why is the ship damaged then?" he asked.

"It isn't so obvious, is it?" Eaniss said while tilting her head his way. "We enjoyed the luxury of these vessels carrying us through terrible ordeals without understanding how brilliant their design truly was. The Emissary was pretty generous. The masked man likely couldn't procure an adequate vehicle. As you can see, his couldn't last against these conditions."

"Really?"

Replicus was astounded.

He thought the masked man would have a pretty good vessel too. Of all the things he could have lacked foresight on.

Weird.

But then...

"I assume you caught him off guard, then. By messing with time perhaps," Replicus said sharply.

Eaniss turned to him. So did Aurolio.

She chortled.

"You figured it out, huh? Of course you did," she said.

"You had one of your crazy humanoids retrieve one of those time-screwing Clusters, didn't you?" Replicus added.

Eaniss smiled and extended her hand forward.

In a blink, something appeared in her palm.

It was something Replicus, in another lost continuum of time, had found hard to describe, but only because he barely saw it for more than a moment.

The object looked much like a Rubik's cube, well, if the Rubik's cube had its nine square's on each side replaced with the conical ends of small trumpets.

It looked fleshy, membranous and translucent, as though it were some living organism – with twitches of life too – and a plethora of colours danced within it and its 32 ends.

Replicus' sockets blazed at the sight of it.

"What is that?" he asked.

"A storage vessel that gives whoever wields it free reign and control over anything it has trapped," Eaniss generously explained. "Sadly, only one object can be stored at a time, and whatever is stored loses its potency the more you manipulate it."

'That's conveniently dangerous!' Replicus thought to himself.

"Quite the sight, isn't it? Feeling a little greedy?" Eaniss asked smilingly.

"Not quite," Replicus said, but his eyes kept on the cube. "So what? You reversed time on the sea and had the masked man's ship dial back?"

"Precisely."

Replicus' sockets went dim.

That was just a guess.

"Thought that would have gotten the bastard flustered" Aurolio spoke as he too gazed at the bright red, "It didn't."

"Indeed," Eaniss said as she stored back the cube. "That's what concerns me. I'm convinced the masked man hasn't been underestimating us – his pursuers. The Ardent Curses incident convinced me of that much. He's been wary. Wary enough to – like you – have contingencies even against the unexpected reversal of time.

Our assignment's description wasn't false advertisement, Bright Storm."

"You've lost your confidence all of a sudden? I thought you brought the few best along with you because you believed that was enough – even though you left the Mad Bishop behind," Replicus said.

"I still am confident," Eaniss said. "And please, I didn't want a volatile component to an otherwise perfect team."

There was an astounding bit of sincerity in that statement.

Eaniss then looked at the dark sea that was constantly been pelted by dark drops.

"Not to worry. I have measures that just might be ready to break through this obstacle."

Replicus was sceptical about that.

But better yet...

"Are you sure he's in there?" he asked Eaniss.

"Too damn sure," Aurolio answered on the Head Faction leader's behalf, his eyes which were brimming with Voided Death Essence staring at one point within the ship where he was certain a great, vibrant plume of pure, almost sacred Undeath energy was balled into one human figure.

Chapter 909: Wrong All Along

What measures Eaniss could have meant, Replicus didn't know.

He assumed that her humanoids were doing something in the ocean, though the thought of Eaniss' creations being potentially more durable than the great ship before him seemed unbelievable.

The look Aurolio had also suggested that he was Eaniss' assurance at the fact that the masked man was indeed still in the ship, but Replicus didn't see a future where the pale man answered his enquiry on the bizarre energy surrounding his eyes and how that proved anything at all.

Thankfully, there was Eaniss.

"What's your plan then? How will you take down the barrier?" Replicus asked.

The Head Faction leader twisted her lips, narrowed her eyes and pushed a strand of her hair behind her ear.

Replicus barely ever paid attention to Eaniss' hair as it was always changing colour. Its velvet shade at the moment was rather distasteful in his opinion.

"It's quite tedious and complicated to enact, let alone explain. I'm being too good to you, Bright Storm. I might just tell," Eaniss said teasingly.

Replicus scoffed.

"You see—"

...

A jaw-rattling cry interrupted Eaniss.

It came not from just ahead, but from behind.

Its source was a greenish-black blast of energy that sent powerful rings of distorted force so violent that they sent several ships hurtling like flung stones into the air, in different directions!

Eaniss' ship wasn't spared.

The abrupt shift from peace to violence was painfully efficient, as almost everyone was caught off guard!

The result of this, was several Faction members meeting an untimely end after the force that threw them sent them into the clutches of powerful Reverse Clusters that caused their ships to implode in a blink, with barely any impact to be heard or seen.

Some were stretched by the odd spatial forces they got too close to, and were ripped apart before they could do a thing against the circumstances!

Many vessels were lost.

While the destruction and death amounted only to a second at moment, in that time, the more capable among the Factions mobilised their keen instincts quick enough.

The waves of poisonous water roared, rose and rippled madly, joining the dark rain. They shook the vessels unsteady.

If there had been any Scorching Tears to fall, they would have claimed several more victims at this moment.

Replicus' sockets burned bright in the chaos.

Eaniss' humanoids had managed to stabilise the ship quickly and easily.

Neither Eaniss nor Aurolio had been too shocked by the sudden turn of events, but of course, they had more than a little degree of concern and curiosity.

Replicus was shaken, but only because he didn't know the state of his subordinates. His vision crossed quickly to his ship, to see if it was alright along with the people it carried.

...!!!

To his surprise, it was. But not for the right reason.

The ship... his ship... was decked in a greenish-black hue that pulsed everywhere, creating persistent, visible rings that drove the waves from it, causing the ocean to dip where it stood!

His ship was the source of the great disturbance just now!

"Bright Storm...?" Eaniss said questioningly to Replicus while looking at the same scene he was looking at.

The Penetrator couldn't be bothered to answer right now.

'What is... Is it the Paladin Champion?!' Replicus thought quickly. The greenish-black around the ship, lighting everything like a solar flare while battling the red from the barrier ahead, was undoubtedly Undeath as well!

A different brand.

A specific kind!

'Is the Champion being used by the masked man as a thrall? From the remnants of Undeath within him? The Definer of Causality?!'

Replicus had considered these possibilities, which was why he had erected a barrier around the barely-alive Paladin Champion.

He hadn't half-assed that barrier.

It was the strongest one he could make!

But...

Replicus saw his ship groaning, sunken to the very ends of the hull, as though something heavy had sat on it!

The Penetrator would have rushed to the ship immediately, but the recurring coloured rings blasting from the ship discouraged him.

He had a nasty feeling about them.

That if he approached carelessly, he might be killed sooner than he could believe.

"Dammit..." he cursed.

The fact that he couldn't see any of his subordinates on deck alarmed Replicus all the more. He tried to create a mental link with Araeyn.

The damned Apostle didn't respond.

He tried to see through the Unlimiteds' armour.

It was all dark. There was interference.

The Undeath was potent.

'Did I take the masked man too lightly?'

Surely not.

Replicus anxiously took a glance back at the sinking, massive vessel.

The masked necromancer must be controlling everything from there!

Replicus tried to shut away the echo of a few words he had been pondering over.

'If you know what's good for you, throw this man back into the ocean, and turn back...'

The Penetrator groaned in displeasure.

"You said you had a way to get rid of that barrier around the ship. Do it, already!" Replicus yelled at Eaniss.

She raised a brow.

Aurolio scoffed... but then he suddenly frowned as he turned around.

The Head Faction leader deigned to answer Replicus... but paused. Her eyes moved first. She looked behind Replicus.

The Penetrator was smitten by a dark feeling.

He turned to look where Eaniss set her eyes, and he shuddered.

On the deck to his ship, he saw the Paladin Champion standing firm. He was half-naked, his toned, damaged but well-crafted torso on full display. His cherry hair partly covered his burnt face, but with his hand, he pushed it back and took a deep breath.

He spotted a new right hand, somehow, which he looked to flex a couple of times, and then he looked ahead.

The presence of the Paladin Champion and not that of his subordinates caused the Penetrator a greater sense of alarm, but a realisation that shocked his mind that instant... nearly caused him to sink into despair.

No.

No way.

He and Aurolio seemed to see the same thing, but with slightly different degrees of pretext.

The pale man saw the sacred, potent Undeath energy he had seen from the sinking vessel... now brimming within the man standing on Replicus' ship.

The Penetrator... he recognised something from the face of the Paladin Champion.

His eyes.

His piercing eyes!

There was a familiar hazel glow to them that brought his mind back to that time!

That day, when he, Tulnas and his harem were standing before an injured, masked man who carried a most terrifying presence of Undeath!

Behind that mask, he could have sworn...

"It's him..." Replicus found himself muttering.

He hadn't been ferrying the Paladin Champion as he thought he was.

No.

It was... him.

The man with the hazel eyes locked eyes with the Penetrator's sockets.

Those eyes... they were uncaring, cold, and determined.

But so was the might that exploded out of him in the next moment, when he brought his hands together, making the Penetrator feel, for the first time, the staggering magnificence of his unfathomable soul!

Chapter 910: Break The World! (1)

All one's eggs in one basket.

Actuass had learned to strip himself of such an idea, and burn it away centuries ago.

In order to accomplish his ideals, he would have to learn to constantly be ahead of his enemies and to emerge and strike only when they least expected it.

This current instance was an example of him committing to the opposite of the notion that encouraged keeping all your trump cards and treasures close.

As he overlooked the many ships struggling against the waves and the many eyes glaring at him, he felt nothing.

This was standard. He was used to seeing the dumbfounded looks on his enemies.

'Causality is in my favour once again...' he thought.

As such, this meant he could execute his objective without worry.

Actuass felt the tremendous energy that was funnelling into his body again after his shift from the proxy close by, flare atrociously, igniting and exploding out with about as much grace as the summer sun rising from the horizon.

Ah.

The power he had taken from Rayn was too sweet, yet too powerful.

Even for him who understood souls to an inhuman level, keeping that vicious might bestowed by the Deities from weighing on his original body was tremendously difficult. It hadn't been that many days since he acquired it, but his body was already falling apart.

Unlike Rayn who was born with a body keen to house the unfathomable, Actuass' wasn't as gifted.

In order to prevent it from further burning or collapsing – which occurred gradually, with his soul proving too great – he had had to infuse a vicious degree of Undeath energy into his body, which enabled his flesh to remain functional, attaining the properties akin to that of a reanimated corpse. It was as though he was dead, but not quite the same.

Thankfully, on his way to Edagon, Actuass had met a most gifted Paladin Champion.

One with a body that was getting so acclimated the power of his Divine Blessing and the presence of the Deities to such an extent that it could almost wield the weight of his current soul without any problems.

Almost.

Taking interest in the Paladin Champion's ability and body, Actuass decided to immerse himself with them.

He left his body behind, and hopped into the Champion's in order for his soul to learn how his ability worked. Since he could function well enough in this flesh vessel as well, he decided to use it for the time being.

And the Champion's Divine Blessing...

Yes. It would do.

His soul had mastered it enough to where he could perform while in another body.

Actuass brought his hands together, and channelled his focus.

The ocean shook at once.

Like the earth, it seemed to desire to crack and fall in on itself after being shaken by a tremendous power.

Actuass grunted.

This was a far greater ordeal than what he had deigned to do in the climax of the Premium Age Royale.

Pulling on the souls of millions – shockingly – was a more tame task in comparison to this.

As he began though, it seemed his enemies wouldn't let him proceed peacefully. His hazel eyes facing head, Actuass saw a man in a starry armour, with a curious design to his helmet, hurriedly extend his hand towards him and make a clawing gesture.

The necromancer felt something strike at the pulsing force field of his personal brand of Undeath energy immediately after, but it could not proceed further.

The assailant didn't look surprised that it didn't work.

In fact...

'I see. So he's the one...' Actuass thought as a length of luminosity grew under the man's other hand.

It was a very long, crooked bolt of what seemed like frozen, blue lightning, at its front end a single, lethally sharp end.

It thrummed with such an incredible force that several of those close to the man in the starry armour looked curiously at the thing.

Sadly, they couldn't get a good look because the bolt vanished from sight and hurtled towards Actuass with cruel intent!

The necromancer narrowed his eyes.

A crazy impact flashed before him, causing him to blink, and he felt the impending force of his Undeath field shudder at the might of the bolt persistently crashing into it while spinning and wriggling like a drill, its force unrelenting.

There was crack.

Then another.

'It's effective. Of course it is...' Actuass thought.

As if that weren't enough, another assailant rushed towards him.

It was a man with pale skin and long, white hair.

What were the odds?

Actuass scoffed lightly.

To think the Definer of Causality was right in its declaration that calling forth the Premium Age Royale would do more than simply win him a chance at gathering enough energy to acquire Rayn's soul, but it would cause him to come face to face with the 'others'.

He felt it.

These respective two, as Direction would have it...

The pale man grinned as he reached the pulsing barrier, and with the force of a single, forceful punch, he shattered the pulsing greenish-black field around the vessel!

This was no doubt brought about by the long bolt weakening the field first with its penetrative power, but still, Actuass was left open to attacks from two people with powers like his!

While he was preoccupied with making the perfect severance, he couldn't engage directly.

Thankfully...

BOOOM!

Spawning out of nowhere and landing on the ashy ocean with a tremendous splash, was a great, rather, enormous black creature that looked to be made of black stone. It was akin to a mix between a lizard and a mantis, its head resembling that of the former, and with limbs – twelve in all – that belonged to a mix of the two.

Greenish-black flames blazed in its sockets, turning fiercer as it hissed in rage.

The creature wound its enormous body around the ship, though, the contact it made with the poisonous water made it sizzle dangerously.

The monster, as it seemed, was a great deterrent, as Actuass knew his enemies recognised it.

It was the same he had sent with the thousands of undead that the Factions had faced when he was battling the Paladin Champion!

The pale man drew back as expected, but just in case, Actuass had the great beast surrounding his new vessel protectively open its eerily wide maw open, and from the gaping darkness, a single warrior leapt out and fell onto the surface of the sea.

Actuass watched as everyone grew tense.

Of course, they all recognised this undead too.

It was the undead old man he had sent with the first wave of his forces!

The Incandescent Stage expert hurtled towards the pale man and they clashed.

At this point, all the other enemies were mobilising to attack, with the man in the starry armour, already on his way.

But Actuass knew... it was too late.

...!!!

Right then, the ocean cried as though it were a living being, and then, it parted as though sliced through effectively.

Over a shocking distance – which was vaster than anyone could ever imagine – the ocean split with a deep roar, the large chasm that forced the two apart growing with each second.

West or East, its end couldn't be seen.

The new falls created in this moment were deafening, and within the dark chasm in which they fell, strikingly bright jolts of coloured energies scarcely seen erupted, lightning up the waters and shattering as though they were the networks to an invisible mechanism.

It was an ungodly sight.

While quite astonishing to even Actuass himself, he didn't have the luxury to look behind him, where this phenomenon occurred. He could only look at it through the eyes of his bewildered enemies who halted immediately.

Watching the world spill out lights of treacherous proportions behind the unmasked man, from the unending slew that marked a division more impressive than the Central Boundary, caused them to stop.

This was especially so for those who, after being sent flying by Actuass' Undeath field manifesting just now, were on the other side of the chasm, and they numbered a fair bit.

Yet, regardless of who was on what side, their feelings towards the current happenings, included a light share of awe.

'It's that magnificent, is it?' Actuass thought, somewhat emotionally.

But this was only the beginning.

While churning out a greater degree of his strength, he caused more of a spectacle.

Directly above where the chasm in the ocean could be seen, the sky cracked likewise, West and East.

The already existing cracks in the sky, where it seemed as though the world had been mended by a Divine blacksmith, were overshadowed by the ever growing line!

Scorching Tears fell like rain. No, more like the waters from a broken gourd, and this broke the immersion, finally.

It was cataclysmic.

It was chaos.

Yet all the same, it was clear.

The necromancer was splitting Aigas into two.