

Undead 1291

Chapter 1291: Even With The Consequences

Skullius took a deep breath.

'VOW also advised me to pick at least one of these contract offers for my own good,' he thought.

He already had a pick. However, Skullius feared that his decision could lead to some terrible consequences for him, his subordinates, and Aigas.

'Serenity,' he turned to his benefactor, 'if I refuse D'JORRO's contract, he'll be pretty upset no doubt but, does he have the power to instantly kill me or even curse me from a distance like Somanda did before with UNCoddled?'

Serenity considered.

"He likely knows your location at this moment, but unless he gets upset at every little thing, I do not think he will choose to attack you. Travel across the great void isn't so simple, and I can't imagine he lives close by. If he is to attack you, it would be through the use of some long-range tool or Andori, which I doubt he will use because the distance between you and him will cost him Amras for casting. At the same time, if you offended him so deeply, there is nothing that would stop him from simply coming to you, no matter how long it takes. If you are going to refuse his contract, at least don't wound his pride."

Skullius nodded.

'That's fair. Though, can you tell me what the value of a Deity's Tear is?' he asked.

D'JORRO and TITEMIUS were offering their tears and Skullius couldn't understand the significance of them.

"A Deity's Tears serve two purposes," Serenity said. "One is to mark the recipient with the distinct presence of the Deity. This would allow you to more easily skirt away from danger with enemies of Deific power; they would realise you had the favour of someone strong. Two, if you were ever in a place that the Deity who gave you their Tear considers their territory, you would be received kindly

– very kindly. For Primeval Deities, a third of reality is their personal territory. The effects of the Tears don't last forever though. If I recall, they last a few months at best – in Aigas' time."

Skullius groaned.

This made him want to pick to D'JORRO's offer.

The Tear the Primeval Deity offered would be a great insurance against enemies when he and the Stark Troops left for Deadmanland!

But again, reason fought Skullius' impulse. He reminded himself why he was rejecting D'JORRO's deal in the first place.

'Serenity, these terms... If I allow someone like D'JORRO, for instance, access to my Parlous Nature, whose Amras would be consumed each time he wants to use it for himself?'

"I think you already know the answer to that, Skullius."

The Hybrid Warmoth groaned again.

This, he couldn't allow.

If he agreed to D'JORRO's contract, he would be allowing the bastard to use Second Divine Sinew any time he wanted and with his own Amras.

Skullius, even now, was appalled by the regeneration speed of his Amras. His Immortal Physique, Audacious Chassis of the Ninth Filament gave a 15% increase to his reserves and a 7% increase in regeneration speed, but Skullius had yet to recover even a third of the 140 units of Amras he had expended in the previous battle.

A single use of Second Divine Sinew required a large amount of Amras, and it wasn't fixed. It depended on the nature of the source. To use it on himself, Skullius needed to expend 200 units of Amras. The cost for a Deity, or whatever the Deity would want to use Second Divine Sinew on was likely to be atrocious!

Worse yet, if the Deity he had allied with chose to use Second Divine Sinew when Skullius was in the middle of battling a powerful opponent, what then?

His reserves would be depleted, leaving him wide open.

There was just too much risk with this.

'No. I can't,' Skullius decided. But then he thought of the Exora Mead. Could it be what he thought it was?

He turned to Elita for this.

"Elita, do you know anything about something called Exora Mead?" he asked.

She was surprised when he turned to her.

"Oh, yeah. Divine beings used it to replenish Amras all the time," she said. There was a gladness in her tone, but then a suspicious look appeared on her face. "Have you been offered a contract?"

Skullius was taken aback.

"How did you know?" he asked.

"Exora Mead is a valuable resource. It's used for many terms of trade across reality. Seeing as you haven't left the planet, it only makes sense that you've been presented a contract through the guidance field where Exora Mead is one of the terms of exchange. A few friends of mine experienced the same before," she answered.

"Oh. You're right." Skullius nodded. "You have allies outside?"

"Of course, I do! You can't survive out there without help, even with Void as your backer," she said with the shake of her head. She then gave him an appraising look. "Don't go thinking that Exora Mead is THAT valuable of a resource for trade though, Skullius. It's really not. The amount of Amras the Mead restores is negligible. There is always a demand for vast volumes of it everywhere you go. Little amounts are essentially useless."

Skullius' spirits fell.

He had decided to go with JOISEN ANTERRAS' contract, but the meagre two skins of Exora Mead it gave lost all their value in his eyes.

"I see..." he said to Elita. His resolve was shaking.

The former Paladin Champion tilted her head.

"Let me guess. You're being threatened?" she said.

"Not exa- Pretty much, yeah. There's a Primeval Deity involved and I'm trying to weigh the benefits of choosing his contract against the drawbacks."

Elita grimaced at the mention of a Primeval Deity. No wonder Skullius was shaken. Her visage softened in the next instant though.

"Don't worry. There's more than one way to beat a Deity. If they turn hostile, there is the option of fleeing. I know several places in the great void that even Primeval Deities can't worm their way into casually," she said encouragingly. "Make your choice, Skullius. I'll support you through the consequences. I'd like a shot at fighting impulsive, unjust gods. Void knows Broodweiler is itching for it."

Skullius smiled when he sensed the resolve from her. She was serious.

He laughed.

"I will keep you to that," he said.

He felt reassured indeed. Serenity also chimed in.

"She's right. There's more than one way to beat a Deity. You don't need to be afraid of an encounter with the enemy if you can run from them. This isn't about honour or pride."

Skullius nodded. He knew she probably had something up her sleeve to keep him safe as well.

"Alright then," he said and confirmed his decision with the guidance field.

[You have successfully signed a LIMITED CONTRACT with Primeval Deity, JOISSEN ANTERRAS!]

[You have received the Immortal Realm Physique of the Third Stratum, Expanded Shadow Fiend's Leather!]

[You have received the Realm rank Wicked Treasure, Malefic Gold Hand!]

[You have received Exora Mead (x3 skins)!]

[...]

[...]

[...]

[You have received a response from JOISEN ANTERRAS. Would you like to read it?]

[You have received a response from D'JORRO. Would you like to read it?]

Skullius steeled himself and opened both responses at once.

He first read JOISEN's.

[You made the right choice, little anomaly. I believe this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship. I will be invoking my one-time usage of your Exotic Parlous Nature, very soon]

Skullius gulped.

He then read D'JORRO's message.

[What a mistake you have made, brat. From this hour onward, you shall cower in fear till the ends of your Constern, for you have made yourself a terrible enemy]

Chapter 1292: How To Properly Get Rid of Enemies

Emeradis.

Before dusk had fallen, thousands of Cavern had been slain by the competent Mages of the great nation, but of course, millions still remained.

It agitated all the Mages across Emeradis that had the disaster from earlier not happened, they would have been able to hold their own against the swarms of the dark creatures easily.

The battle between two exceedingly powerful entities that shook the world hours ago, had disturbed the peace, wrecked powerful cities and killed important powerhouses – crucial Mages with fundamental or extremely rare Mage Patches.

Before the Mages had recovered from this blow, they had been assaulted by throngs of enemies with great numbers on their side.

This kind of invasion required the expertise and firepower of Arch-Mages.

Mages had their own ranking of power and skill outside the measure of Cores and Stages: Apprentice, Prime Mage, Master Mage, Grandmaster Mage and Realm Source.

The Realm Source was only theoretical, however. None had ever actually reached it, not even the progenitor of Magecraft himself, Arch-Mage Remos, whose legends died in the Second Grand War.

In Emeradis, there were roughly 1,200 Arch-Mages and among them, 11 were considered to be the cream of the crop. Even the Monarch of Emeradis, its ruler, had once posited that these 11 could potentially reach the Realm Source rank if nurtured well.

Unfortunately, two of these Arch-Mages had died during Skullius and Replicus' battle, which wounded Emeradis' pride greatly.

"Lady Stern-Mage! We are ready!"

In one of the most powerful remaining cities in Emeradis, Bane, six thousand Mages had gathered in its massive, lovely square.

They all had shaved heads with thick robes on their bodies that might as well have been luxurious, knitted blankets. Mana streamed out of all of them uniformly, calm and controlled. The Mages looked upwards at the soft blue dome barrier around the city, maintained by an automated array branded into the city's foundation.

The barrier was cracking.

How could it not?

It was being assaulted by a vast, black mass with spots of ruby red!

Of course, this black mass was a swarm of Cavern so dense that it blocked out the view of everything beyond the city. The Cavern covered all sides, bombarding the dome barrier with all sorts of attacks, most of which actually succeeded in weakening it because they were cast without the need of mana.

A gangly woman, bald and square-faced stood in the middle of the formation of the Mages.

She was given the title Stern-Mage, as she was one of the 9 remaining Arch-Mages with powers beyond any other.

She had been sent to this city to help defend it at costs. Unlike what Pelian became, Emeradis was determined to not lose ground against the Cavern nomatter the cost.

"Begin!" the woman commanded the six thousand Mages.

They obeyed at once. They formed a twenty-fold ring around the Stern-Mage and began to rush around the woman in rhythmic steps while channelling their mana towards one specific Patch of Magecraft.

There were common Patches of Magecraft, like Transmutation, for instance, which allowed one to change the state of existence of a target.

The Embubblement Patch was also a common Patch, though more advanced than Transmutation.

This Patch allowed its user to temporarily reinforce the nature of their mana or another's by varying degrees. The reinforcement of the mana could go one of two ways: the condensing of mana into a higher quality or into a higher form, like Aura or Nitros.

A single individual couldn't use the Embubblement Patch for the latter, however. They needed assistance.

This was exactly what the Mages were doing for their Stern-Mage.

The woman, adorned in a gold and silver robe that hid even her feet, brought her hands together and took in a deep breath.

Her name was Weyven Irlis, and she had mastered her own form of Ascended Magic, like Arch-Mage RYTE's Binding Patch and its derivative spells like Shocked Time.

Mana burst from the thousands of Mages around her and coiled at her feet. It changed shade and density, becoming far more potent with each passing second. By the time it acquired the distinct properties of Nitros, Stern-Mage Weyven was ready to use it all at once.

Mana, Aura and Nitros could be used to cast skills and spells. Nitros could even be used to cast Territories, but Mages often shunned the use of Majestic Territories. They preferred the distinct, iconic individuality of their spells.

Weyven gathered the massive, surging Nitros.

'It's barely enough,' she thought. 'But it will have to do.'

Indeed, the augmented mana she was received was too little, the enemies too many. An atrocious kind of output – maybe three times higher than the one she was currently being enabled with – was required to wipe the Cavern at once, which was Weyven's goal.

This estimated output she had thought she would need... was suddenly reached and exceeded a moment later.

...!!!

The thousands of Mages were shocked when their mana reserves suddenly exploded, and the efficiency of their Embubblement Patch spell quintupled!

All of sudden, the great city of Bane shook and Stern-Mage Weyven roared as stunning power flooded through her!

Where was this power coming from?

What was happening?

Well, Weyven had sensed the suspect – the cause. It was a glowing individual floating high in the skies, close to the barrier; they were inside the city, somehow. The light they expelled was great, shielding their features from common sight.

Weyven couldn't sense how or why, but she knew it was this unusual person's influence that had suddenly quintupled her output from what it had been before!

...And she wouldn't waste the chance.

With a single gesture – a double snap with her fingers – her Ascended Magic, Common Displacement, was activated.

All of a sudden, the great mass of Cavern turned hysterical.

Some screeched, bled and died. Some imploded. Some turned mad and drove themselves into the ground, flailing and twitching. Some had their abilities backfire on them, killing or maiming them severely.

Three thirds of the swarm of Cavern died while the rest were incapacitated. The visual was terrifying, especially when the expected result with such a massive amount of Nitros being consumed, was an effect that seemed so...abstract and uncanny.

Stern-Mage Weyven grinned. The effect was as she had hoped. She had vanquished 2 million enemies at once.

"Oh, that is quite an interesting Patch you got there," a voice suddenly said from beside her.

She turned quickly, her face drained of colour.

"What the—!" she cried as she jumped back

"Relax. I'm an ally," the new arrival said.

Stern-Mage Weyven glanced at the sky. The radiant individual from before was still floating below the barrier.

The person standing beside her was a very short woman with an oval-shaped face and similarly-shaped eyes. She looked rather... untrustworthy, especially with her coy smile. She was decked in a beautiful armour swimming in stars, a half cape draping behind it.

Oddly, this woman's feet never touched the ground. She was floating gracefully.

She gave Weyven a smile. Everyone tensed. The thousands of Mages around prepared to attack.

"As I was saying, your magic is interesting. It does especially well against crowds. If I may, your spell just now – with a random sequence, matrix, rather – swapped common features in the swarm of enemies, didn't it? It swapped their cells, their brains, their abilities, their souls, which led to some of them dying instantly. Splendid!" Kintar said with a little clap.

Her eyes narrowed and Stern-Mage Weyven grew more wary.

"This spell has a reaaaaal big flaw though," Kintar continued as she pointed outside the barrier where more than a few tens of thousands of enemies were still attempting to destroy the barrier and enter the city. "If it's used against a swarm of enemies with similar racial properties, there will more than likely be survivors because some of them share genetic traits that even if swapped, won't incapacitate them. That isn't even factoring their resilience."

Stern-Mage Weyven had had enough.

"Identity yourself or we will kill you where you stand," she said coldly. The other Mages readied offensive spells.

Kintar gave them all a wider, more sinister smile.

"Very well. But at least let me show you how to PROPERLY get rid of a horde of enemies," she said.

She turned towards the persistent Cavern and lazily raised a finger. Before it, a great revolving wheel of luminous, pulsing mana, no doubt of the golden quality, appeared. Six great runes of different colours were branded into six partitions within the wheel.

At the sight of wheel and the runes, all the Mages, including Weyven marvelled.

No...

This was...

But this was...!

Before they could say what this was, Kintar activated an application of magic beyond them all.

"Absolute Magic, Infinitesimal Division," she called.

As all the Cavern, dead and living came undone like poorly made knots and vanished as though they had never existed to begin with, all the Mages who watched came to a chilling conclusion.

There were in the presence of a Realm Source Mage!

Chapter 1293: Recruitment Squad

Urja Forest, Pelian.

The group descended down the dips in the ever-snowy lands. The Sacred Forest nurtured a lot of creatures that had an affinity for the cold. All year round, everything remained lathered in snow and ice; the mana here which carried a queer bit of persistent frost that commonfolk wouldn't be able to live through, was likely the cause.

Yuyui felt an odd sense of intimacy with this place even though she shouldn't have. She had only been through this place twice and both times, she remembered being scared for her life. The last time she crossed the frozen forest was after Skullius had rescued her from the Temple of Unlusted Tears. They had been passing through on their way to Genhuis City when Skullius had suddenly lost his Hybrid Luman form, turning into the Penetrator for the first time before her.

Yuyui had been mortified.

She smiled as she thought about that. It seemed like so long ago now.

"Something funny?" Grim asked her with a brow raised.

"Just a memory," she said to him with a broad smile.

The two were walking alongside two guardian beasts and a Herald.

Azila looked as majestic as ever, his large frame making the great collection of cold structures around him look smaller and less impressive when compared to him. It was only natural, especially when you considered that the Great Mane Mountain Ape had a halo of light above his head.

A smaller but more powerful beast moved by his side. It had black and white fur, long arms like Azila's and a face no different to that of a bat; it was pink and raw, with beady black eyes moulded over it. Karima too held a beam of light above his head. He strutted on with an air of superiority.

His appearance fascinated Yuyui quite a bit. She had met the beast during her master's battle with his alter and since then, she had been very curious about him.

This unseemly crew had been made possible by the Herald among them, Erlton the Reader.

He was the one to convince Karima to travel to other Sacred Forests and broker alliances with other powerful beasts. He had shared this arrangement of his with Skullius after his battle, and this was what had sparked the Hybrid Warmoth to send Yuyui and Grim to help.

Upon leaving the Empyrean Bosom, the two had used a special artefact Skullius had given them to attract Erlton's attention. It released a very familiar signature of genuine Divine energy that drew the Herald to them at once. Erlton had then collected the two for this journey and explained to Azila and Karima their affiliation.

So far, Karima, Azila and Erlton had managed to rally two guardian beasts to their cause. One had refused to join them; Erlton's presence had not been a persuading factor at all.

"She was weak anyway," Karima had grunted as they left that Sacred Forest. "Besides, she doesn't look like the type that is able to rally together all the beasts in that forest. If I didn't have honour, I'd usurp her authority."

Typically, Sacred Forests had the potential to have multiple guardian beasts. It depended on their size and the richness of the mana that was expelled from their centres.

Many beasts in the Urja Forest fled from the group as they passed. Even the most brazen ones picked up on the hint that these five were not to be messed with. If Grim and Yuyui had chosen to bring the twenty and some Stark Troops under their charge instead of having them on standby outside the Forest, the reaction would have been much worse.

"Could I ask a question?" Yuyui suddenly said to Karima with an innocent smile. "I always had this nagging curiosity when I met you before. What's the purpose of that ring of light over your head?"

Karima was normally irascible and unfriendly towards humans but he couldn't have dismissed Yuyui.

The fact that she was allied with the monstrous, four-armed being that fought the man with the dark robes was certainly something that would have made him more accommodating to her, but even more stalwart of a reason, was that Yuyui had dragged Karima, Azila and Dellan to safety before Skullius' final gambit, the world-destroying ray had completely obliterated the Tremur Forest!

Her reaction had been even faster than Erlton's. The Herald had settled for saving only Soidon splits of a moment later. The sudden loss of the Tremur, as Erlton judged, was likely why Karima agreed to help him in the end.

"The 'rings' are called Crowns. They qualify us as guardian beasts. Every beast born in the forest has to submit to a genuine guardian beast. No exceptions," Karima explained. "Though, for others with great potential, the Crowns hint at the chance for Ascension."

Grim tilted his head.

"Ascension?" he asked.

Karima looked irritated by the question.

"Beasts born in Clusters are usually more powerful than we, born in Sacred Forests. They are nurtured by their Clusters with overwhelming abilities. We on the other hand, have purer blood and greater privilege. Once we reach a certain stage, we Ascend and acquire the authority to create Permanent Havens."

Sensing that both Yuyui and Grim were about to ask what Permanent Havens were, Karima hurriedly explained.

"It's the closest a beast can reach to Divinity, the next step of a Majestic Territory for beasts. I know of only one guardian beast who managed to create a Permanent Haven – Ashton," Karima spat. "He abandoned it for the sake of a deal he made with a human thousands of years ago."

It was no mystery that Karima disapproved of Ashton's decision. Even the bird's reasoning was laughable to him.

"Ah, we're here," Erlton said.

Before them, the flaky white snow feeding into a strange marsh that slowly swallowed a few dozen dead trees, smoothly changed to a sky-blue hue.

There was a Dormant Territory up ahead.

The waves of power from it, so neatly hidden that only the strong could sense them, told of the presence of a beast on the level of Karima and Azila or perhaps even stronger.

"Shall we?" Erlton said, gesturing with a hand for Karima and Azila to go first. The two beasts obliged.

Grim and Yuyui followed.

But then the latter stopped. Her head suddenly whipped behind her, a pale, fearful look on her face.

The Eye of Dispersal immediately spawned on her forehead.

"Hey. What's wrong?" Grim asked, frowning.

Erlton too looked at Yuyui in surprise.

The lime-haired girl didn't know how she could have explained what she had sensed. It was an odd sense of... resonance. She had felt something deep within her resonate with something out there, somewhere in Pelian.

She looked at Grim.

"I...I'm not sure," she said, but then her eyes flickered.

A notification from the guidance field had appeared in her vision and what it told... made her blood turn cold.

Chapter 1294: Exora Mead

Beyrmir's giant head sprouted from Skullius' [Entropy's Harmonising Nimbus] for a third time and sprayed jets of Clear Fire at the incoming enemies, obliterating them with ease. The ordinary

Cavern, far from Divinity, were no match for the heat. Clear Fire was invisible. Its intensity increased the more it spread, burning material aspects or space itself. It could even be adjusted to target a single enemy, leaving everything else unharmed.

Beyrmir was only too happy to take care of the small fry for his master. Skullius after all, no longer earned experience, but Beyrmir did and he was obtaining a massive amount of it. The Apostle reaped cumulative mana experience and Null Life Essence for his core all at once with each enemy felled.

After Skullius had sent Silrat out on the mission to rendezvous with Vali and Maxim, the Apostle had decisively hidden in Skullius' body; he had known he was unneeded for most of what had followed in his master's domain.

He had only shown himself once Skullius called and told him to deal with the many enemies. The Hybrid Warmoth had more pressing concerns after all, and his partner wasn't too interested in fighting the hordes of Cavern either.

Skullius was deep in thought. Elita would answer some of his troubles when he turned to her, ready to spill his anxieties.

"Like I said, Skullius. There's more than one way to evade a Primeval Deity. There's no need to stress yourself over this right now," the former Paladin Champion said.

Skullius shook his head.

"No. D'JORRO's threat isn't what's troubling me the most. If worse comes to worst, sure, I have the means to hide. It's this TITEMIUS that scares me. We know where D'JORRO stands, but TITEMIUS... He didn't give a response."

And indeed. After Skullius had chosen JOISEN ANTERRAS' contract over the other two, the Deity had expressed his elation, D'JORRO had made known his ire, but TITEMIUS hid his thoughts.

If VOW hadn't just warned him about this particular Primeval Deity, Skullius wouldn't have given the matter too much thought.

TITEMIUS was probably a busy guy. In the grand scheme of things, he had bigger concerns than the choices of a mere Phase 1 Broader Existence Divine being, right?

That would have been Skullius' stance, but he just felt that something sinister was brewing.

"I got rid of my atrocious luck, so why does this keep happening?" Skullius said as he rubbed his forehead. "I didn't think I'd encounter Primeval Deities hours after ascending to Divinity dammit!"

Elita chuckled.

"You're an anomaly. That's par for the course. I was only a Master Stage expert when I got dragged into the great void to fight Divine beings – well, I'm still a Master, aren't I?" she said. "You're not all that special in that regard."

"I suppose," Skullius said. His anxiety persisted.

"At least look at the bright side. You earned a few things you probably weren't going to get for a while otherwise," Elita said with a shrug.

Skullius hummed in agreement. His lead grey nimbus spat out something into one of his hands.

It was a large diamond-coated wineskin with a sparkling golden cork.

This skin contained the Exora Mead he had acquired from the terms of his contract with JOISEN. He had gotten three of these, in addition to a Realm rank Wicked Treasure, the Malefic Gold Hand and the Immortal Realm Physique, Expanded Shadow Fiend's Leather.

Because of how anxious he had been, Skullius hadn't given himself the chance to check the look of these items. He looked at the skin.

"Looks luxurious," he commented and pulled the cork out. An odd, yeasty smell wafted from inside the skin. It wasn't entirely unpleasant. "Alcohol."

"What gave it away? Was it the name, Exora Mead?" Elita said.

Skullius grunted.

He put the mouth of the skin to his lips and downed the contents.

A sweet and faintly bitter taste touched his tongue and then swam down his throat. The liquid was a little thick and rich. Skullius thought it tasted like apples mixed with apricots and dunked in a vat of the cheap brandy he and Silrat used to drink.

As he drank, a notification popped in his view. With the seconds ticking by, it showed his Amras replenishing. However...

[Exora Amras (Beginner Sage Affluent): 287,370/287,500]

[...287,380/287,500]

[...287,390/287,500]

[...287,400/287,500]

...

Skullius stopped drinking.

"That's it?" he said with a frown while wiping his mouth.

Elita gave him an I-told-you-so look.

To Skullius' utter amazement, the Exora Mead recovered only 10 units of Amras every five seconds, and this effect only worked when he drank the Mead continuously. With a quarter of one skin, Skullius was able to recover all of the Amras he had used when he was in the Empyrean Bosom and that which he had used when fighting the six Divine Cavern before, but this did not delude him about how pathetic the rate of Amras regeneration actually was.

"This is crazy. There're no other alternatives? Like higher quality Exora Mead?" he asked Elita.

"Not that I know of," she said. "Like I said, without a large amount of the Mead..."

Skullius facepalmed.

The only saving grace about this Exora Mead was that it worked like Absolute Conversion on Aigas. It could recover all ranks of Amras from World to Cosmic Affluent, and the rate of regeneration was consistent across the board.

Skullius sighed and recovered the rest of his Amras. He stored back the skin in his nimbus with a click of his tongue. A thought came to him as he did.

'Serenity. Do you know everything about how Immortal Physiques work? Is it possible to have two at once?' he asked.

"I know for certain that an expert can have more than one Physique, but I'm not sure how they would interact. There is some nuance there, quite like with Wicked and Prime Treasures. You could use a <Counsel> to ask VOW how that works."

Skullius considered it.

After his guidance field's Patronage Rank had risen, he had acquired two pieces of <Counsel>. Sadly, VOW had used one of them to warn him about TITEMIUS and he was left with only one.

The Hybrid Warmoth shook his head.

'I'll save that one for later. There might be something pressing I'll want to know.'

With how knowledgeable VOW was – being privy to things that Serenity didn't even know about her own treasure, the Null Verse – it was best to save the piece of <Counsel> for later. Even if he had wanted to use it right away, Skullius wouldn't have found the time.

Right then, he and his two companions were already flying over Maqi, their first destination.

Chapter 1295: Unexpected Enemies

Skullius remembered every detail about his trip to Maqi – as his possessed self. Since his intent for coming here wasn't nearly as daring as what he had had in mind last time, he was determined to

ensure that his approach didn't trigger the egos of the Maqians; that was all too easy to accomplish with the right amount of cockiness, after all.

He made sure to descend quite far from Maqi's capital and that he would be spotted by hidden sentries. (They weren't so hidden before his natural divine senses.)

The Maqians embraced nature almost as much as the Sif, only, they did in their own way. They valued the land more than its produce – trees and all forms of vegetation. This fact was embodied by the sentries who rushed to receive Skullius and Elita as soon as they landed.

They had been disguised as anthills in a woodland nearby, absorbing and expelling mana as they waited and watched. All four of them held a Class that Skullius found most interesting – Shamanic Mage. It was the same Class the old hag, Umbett, who had accompanied the Ode to Opungale, possessed.

The four approached calmly. They were dressed in beautiful hides that might have looked no different from cotton shirts and pants from a distance. The pressure of Incandescent Stagers roared from their bodies.

One of them, a short man with a long neck, looked Skullius dead in the eye.

"What do you want here... creature?" he asked.

There was less malice than Skullius would have expected. It seemed the man had recognised his strength. At least, he was poised not to start with hostility when faced with something he didn't quite understand.

This made matters easier for Skullius. He didn't have to face slap before getting down to business.

He had been about to give the short man an appropriate answer when his extraordinary senses traced the shape of another one of the sentries, a woman with long, brown hair and small, sharp green eyes.

Skullius' mind whirled. Suddenly, he was in a hall of ice where millions upon millions of souls were caged in huge, frosty blocks. He was looking upon a familiar soul, bound like the others, only, he felt it resonate with his.

THRUM. THRUM. THRUM!

"MY LIEGE!"

Beyrmir's voice woke the Hybrid Warmoth up. Everything returned to normal.

Again, Elita was giving him a curious look.

'Dammit!' Skullius thought, seething. This was ridiculous. Again, Doom Factor 2 had been triggered, and just because the Maqian woman he had seen had brown hair, like Camilla's!

'Thanks, Beyrmir,' Skullius said to the Apostle.

Beyrmir had retreated back into his master's body after they had started descending. He acknowledged his master's gratitude with a sense of unease. This wasn't going to be the last time his master needed waking.

Elita would have asked if Skullius was alright, but that wouldn't do with enemies about. That would make him look weak, especially in front of the Maqians. They had noticed how oddly Skullius was behaving just now.

Before everything got too awkward, Skullius spelled his identity to the Maqians in a very simple fashion.

A vast, dark shadow pooled at his feet and a great, glowing jewel appeared over his head, shining with a piercing, but limited light.

The Maqians' eyes widened.

At once, they realised that they didn't need to be so wary. In fact, they were to escort this man to the First Horn immediately!

Skullius had made quite an impression the last time he was here in Maqi. Practically all the high-level experts knew about him. He was the only non-native to ever be brought before the First Horn and live to tell the tale.

Those that hadn't seen him personally had been told about his distinct appearance and features, most unique of all, the dark shadow that followed him, and the miniature sun above his head – what had been the [Heart of Revelation] before. It was also known that he had been acknowledged by the First Horn. Some form of agreement had been brokered between the two.

"Follow," the short, long-necked Maqian said to Skullius and Elita.

The journey was rather quick.

The four Shamanic Mages raced through the lands and of course, they expected Skullius to keep up.

Elita gave the Warmoth a concerned look. She didn't say the words, but he felt her probing. Now wasn't the time to tell her about Doom Factor 2 over a cup of tea though. He signalled that he would explain later.

As they crossed through multiple towns and villages, Skullius noticed that Maqi was quite untouched, and not just by the assault of the Cavern.

His possessed self had formed a Creed that ensued that their battle would only be hosted in heavily populated places across Aigas. The battle had ravaged Pelian and Emeradis, Skullius remembered. He didn't recall them devastating Maqi.

Great houses – built from mud and wood – created splendid, well-organised towns and cities where millions lived, safe and unbothered, even with the threat of the Cavern at hand.

The many Cavern corpses Skullius saw, all piled outside villages and cities, suggested to him that Maqi had swiftly taken care of a wave of Cavern recently. Their skies were clear and so were their lands. The Cavern, if they had a strict budget for their forces allocated to different places, were likely late in realising that a staggering portion of their army had already fallen.

'If Maqi had been serious about punishing Opungale – truly bloodthirsty – the Sif would have been wiped off the face of Aigas,' Skullius thought to himself.

A force of 1,000 had been sent to Opungale a week ago, and the whole nation had been paralysed. If the possessed Skullius hadn't been there, things might have ended differently.

Soon, the group had arrived in Maqi's capital.

All the cities, towns and villages in the nation had no fixed names of their own, not even this one; to identify them, the name of the individual that lorded over them was used. The Maqians believed in plainly giving power to the one who oversaw the land, not the land itself.

In this case, to refer to the capital, one only had to say, 'The First Horn's domain' or 'The First Horn's City'.

The capital had no walls. From the widest entrance, all the way to what was clearly the First Horn's palace dozens of kilometers away, great earthen sculptures could be seen, each at least forty meters tall and nearly half as wide. They were all moulded after the previous First Horns. This was way this singular, straight road to the First Horn's premises was called the Hallowed Road. It was forbidden to walk along the Hallowed Road if your purpose wasn't to meet the First Horn.

Skullius hadn't gotten the time to admire this city before. Immediately after he had arrived with a Maqian ship, holding Umbett and the Ode of the First Horn as hostages, he had been imprisoned while awaiting an audience with the ruler of the nation. (He allowed it, of course.)

Now, as soon as all the powerhouses saw his 'sun and shadow', they marvelled and allowed him and the four Shamanic Mages to pass without any qualms.

Soon, the group had arrived before the great entrance into the hall of the great palace.

They had just stepped in when Skullius felt an extreme sense of foreboding. This time, Elita sensed it too. She frowned.

The only threat that could have made both of them wary was...

'Consequences...' Skullius thought. The presences he sensed...

The great hall, made of dry mud varnished in some way to be smooth and shiny, almost like glass, was gorgeous. It had three layers; the first accommodated the First Horns palace guards, all female Incandescent Stagers, the second layer, higher than the last, held sixteen of the First Horn's personal guards and the last, the topmost, held a large, earthen bowl with a large, fat tree growing in it.

The First Horn nested within, looking down on his two guests.

When Skullius and Elita entered the great hall, his eyes turned to them instead. The two before him did the same.

...!!!

Skullius' eyes widened to the limit, and then they turned cold.

"You," he hissed.

"Me? Have we met before?" the man Skullius was glaring at said with a cool, calm smile. He narrowed his eyes at Skullius' 'sun and shadow', however. "Ah, I see. Time works wonders."

The broad-shouldered man with long, dark hair and sharp, almond eyes that released a piercing grey light chuckled.

The other man by his side, much younger in comparison, not to mention smaller, looked at Skullius with intrigue.

"We meet again," he said.

The Hybrid Warmoth scowled at him.

The potent power of Undeath hidden within the young man was too distinct for Skullius to miss.

'I knew that damned necromancer had another card up his sleeve!' Skullius thought.

Fulgardt seemed delighted by Skullius' reaction.

"Ah, of course you know my partner too. How fortunate," he said and then he turned to the First Horn. "I suppose this was whom you were referring to? The man you made a deal with previously?"

The First Horn simply frowned at this.

Fulgardt wore a sinister grin, one that made Skullius want to puke.

"Well now. How shall we resolve this?" the Immoral said.

Chapter 1296: Mettle of Steel

Skullius gnashed his teeth.

He couldn't have imagined that two of the enemies that had caused him some of the most treacherous ordeals in the past week would be standing side by side and in more nefarious, overwhelming forms.

Actuass had died and passed on his Undeath powers to the young EverSword heir, Rias, who had the ridiculous Imagining Technique.

Fulgardt had infused Skullius with his WILLS, which almost ended with him killing himself. But Skullius would have gladly traded this Fulgardt before him for his possessed self as an opponent any day.

The Immoral, was, after all, a Divine being; this man had crippled an entire world on his own, almost turning the race of Luminants extinct. He had single-handedly left Luserus, a Deity, defeated.

Skullius wasn't sure which timeline he came from, but that hardly mattered right now.

Elita only needed to see the cloak of darkness around Fulgardt to guess who he was. Skullius' reaction also helped confirm it.

"Well, this is pretty bad," she muttered under her breath.

Fulgardt sniffled mirthfully.

"I wasn't quite sure I'd run into you at all – my successor. The future is quite disappointing, you see. The only thing that puts a smile on my face is the fact that Maqi still remains the greatest power on Aigas. With the Giants gone – and I was so utterly devastated to find out – this nation proves its worth against time. Yet," Fulgardt glared at the First Horn, "all this power has been rotting away in this muddy, backwards cesspool."

The Incandescent Stagers within the hall turned furious. Their pressure shook the palace and then the city and then the entire nation!

They knew what Fulgardt was; or perhaps they guessed.

They knew how powerful he was.

But they did not take kindly to his insult.

Fulgardt scoffed at them.

"Enough!" the First Horn commanded and the hall turned silent and still. He gazed down at Fulgardt. "Did you rip through time only to burn away our dignity?"

The Immoral laughed and turned from him. He graced Skullius with his attention.

"What did you promise this fool?" he asked. "If you are indeed the one who owns my Labyrinth now, I can only assume you promised him a gift with my powers, and he is more willing to receive it from you rather than from me. That pains me."

Skullius' brow only tightened further.

Fulgardt was amused.

"Come now. Is this how you reward the progenitor of your powers? Show me a little fucking respect."

"You're going to be veeery disappointed if you're hoping for a hug from me," Skullius said icily, Amras arming his body.

Fulgardt's face turned as deep and dark as shadow, but his grin remained.

"I see. You're another ungrateful, backstabbing dunce, aren't you?" he spat. "My Direction must be the funniest thing. Even across time, I find little loyalty nomatter what I do."

DUUM!

"What loyalty does a deluded sockethole like you deserve? Even your own bear their fangs against you. Ha! You couldn't be more pathetic. You're a Divine from before their time, a legend, and they STILL don't see someone worth fearing!" Skullius said, laughing.

The experts in the hall were emboldened by his words. Indeed, they weren't afraid. Even if it meant death, they would bare their powers against the Immoral.

Fulgardt's grin turned darker and darker. He was no longer amused.

DUUUM!

"Well, your tongue is quite sharp. Only Rayn ever bested me in a battle of words," Fulgardt said with a cold chortle. "It's unnerving how much like him you are. You even ally yourself with the Paladin pups."

Elita did not like that jab. She too wasn't afraid of Fulgardt.

She brandished Broodweiler and scoffed.

"Keep talking, old man. When I take your head, it will be all the more satisfying."

DUUUUM! PWAAAAA!

Right then, space exploded like glass, alarming everyone in the hall!

A series of persistent, glowing orbs had just escaped a prison of darkness and ripped through space!

Skullius gaped, utterly bewildered.

'NO!'

It was the WILLS of Fulgardt!

He had sealed them in a prison in the great void through his Andori, [King of Severing Twilight: AfterDark]. The prison was powerful, but it was distant. Without actively checking in, Skullius couldn't tell what was happening within it!

The WILLS hurtled towards Fulgardt who realised what they were only when they sank into his body one by one.

Skullius grimaced.

'How the hell did they escape? Wait! Could they have escaped all along? Were they just biding their time?' he thought, appalled.

The WILLS were indestructible; at least with his current arsenal he couldn't destroy them. Perhaps they possessed other powers that they had kept hidden, like for instance, complete immunity to Insurgent Magnus abilities. Skullius thought this was likely the case.

Fulgardt hummed as the WILLS fed into him.

His eyes quivered and his arms twitched.

"Ah, I see now," he said and mirth returned to his face. He pushed back his long, black hair and laughed mockingly. His eyes stared deep at the Hybrid Warmoth "So that's how it is, Skullius."

...!!!

'He's got all his and my memories from when he was possessing me,' the Hybrid Warmoth thought and cursed.

When she heard Skullius' name spill from Fulgardt's lips, Elita channelled her Voided Death Essence, reinforcing herself.

"Let's kill him, Skullius," she said and assumed a sword stance. "If he knows everything about you..."

Fulgardt glared at the former Champion.

"Kill me?" he asked, raising a brow.

It was Skullius who responded to his arrogance. The middle and ring fingers of his upper right hand locked together. He was ready to activate [Instant Embodiment of Perfection] and assume his War Body in a flash.

"Like the lady said, sockethole," he said tartly, "it will be that much more satisfying when we take your head."

Fulgardt's grin dimmed. The gesture in Skullius' hand... the Amras he was releasing...

The Immoral's eyes focused deeper on Skullius and for a moment, he looked concerned. He hid his unease well though.

"Brat, you're hiding something stronger than I am!" he said with a single, dry fit of laughter. Amras burst from his body. "Amusing. Deeply amusing. It's settled then. We are all dying here! As powerful as you are, strength has a bloated meaning in the wider reality, and I have no shortage of strengths!"

Right then, a flash flared behind Fulgardt who donned a crazy, demented visage. The light coalesced into a massive ethereal figure in an ancient, silk robe with ugly patterns. The creature's features were covered in sores, scabs and gashes and its face was covered by dozens of golden bands. Great, cracked beads floated around the creature, smoking and sputtering with sparks.

...!!!!!!

Skullius paled.

This creature...

He didn't need to be told!

It was a Corrupted Deity!

He activated [Instant Embodiment of Perfection] at once, but Elita was faster. A blank, shiny sapphire mask appeared over her face and her presence seemed to grow tenfold.

The Immobility Pin, a World rank Prime khopesh Skullius had gifted her from the Warmoth's Treasury, appeared in her free hand and she flung it at a dozen times the speed of light!

The red khopesh stuck itself in the space right before the Corrupted Deity's head!

The creature grew still, immobilised, but only for a millisecond. The khopesh shattered almost immediately.

Fulgardt was taken aback. He had not expected Elita to be this competent.

The millisecond the Immobility Pin (which was able to restrict the movements of entities) bought was enough for Elita to dash forward without the need to worry about the Corrupted Deity's immediate counter. Her Broodweaver was ready to slay the Immoral.

Fulgardt had his eyes on her though. He took her more seriously now.

Rias' body blazed with greenish-black Undeath flames, and the large head of a deer appeared above him: the conduit for his Imagining Technique. While slower in reacting, he was still a competent player in the chaos.

A horrendous amount of Amras burst from Skullius, and his body began to change. Everything around him seemed to start glistening, burning away.

However...

"Majestic Territory Expulsion...!"

The Territory that erupted right then, surprised the four.

Skullius and Fulgardt sensed tens of thousands of Creeds being expended to make it as strong as it ended up being.

Even if it was only for a split second, the frightening hellscape that the four were dragged into, littered with archaic towers of intense blue flames and hundreds of burning, charred men watching them, managed to outshine everything else in terms of extravagance. The Territory captured the attention of the Divines.

It shattered immediately afterwards, however, having failed to contend with Elita's powers, the pressure from the Corrupted Deity and Skullius' tide of Amras. But its purpose was served all the same.

The First Horn had risen from his bowl, his body engulfed in blue flames. He stared down the four experts, his face fierce, fearless.

"If you wish to slaughter each other, be my guests. However, you shall NOT do so in my domain."

Chapter 1297: Die or Die

The momentum of the clash died at once.

Skullius, Elita, Fulgardt and Rias turned to look at the First Horn. He didn't flinch at their collective stares. After pulling off what might have been the ballsiest move of all time for a mortal, he had to stand his ground despite being weighed on by the immense pressure of the Divine-level experts before him.

Each of them, except perhaps Rias, could kill the First Horn before he could blink, but they had to commend him for accentuating what his guards had only hinted at before – utter fearlessness.

Fulgardt broke into a boisterous fit of laughter.

"Oh dear, you're a man amongst man!" he cried with a twisted smile and casually waved away the giant Corrupted Deity behind him. It vanished into thin air. "You singlehandedly killed my mood. But that's not entirely a bad thing."

The Immoral glanced at Elita, who had stopped just a few centimeters from him with her sword, and then at Skullius.

The fresh Divine had halted the activation of [Instant Embodiment of Perfection] and his exploding reserves of Amras were quickly dying down. Quite contrary to its name, this Andori which he had rely on to access his War Body took a few seconds to perform. Of course, this wasn't the Andori's own fault. The War Body had a tremendous amount of components packed into it that were hard to parse for a mere Grand tier Andori, hence why it was not-so-instant.

In any case, Skullius had stopped the activation of the technique for the same reason Fulgardt dispelled his Corrupted Deity. The fever for destruction and slaughter that had tugged at him a second ago was gone. Besides that, he had a feeling that as Fulgardt had said, if all of them clashed at full force, there was not going to be any one victor. They would all most likely die.

Elita's mask vanished from her face, and she dashed back to Skullius. She too desisted from attacking once the moment was disturbed. Her reason was a lot more reasonable: she had yet to recover all her Voided Death Essence. Using high level abilities sapped a lot of her essence and if she could save her powers, she wouldn't hesitate.

"Tsk. If I had known this was how it was going to turn out, I wouldn't have wasted that red khopesh," she muttered to Skullius frustratedly.

"You didn't waste it. You took away Fulgardt's chance to make the first move with that moment the khopesh bought. Whatever attack that came from that... thing, would have overwhelmed us," the Hybrid Warmoth said.

Rias' deer head vanished, as did the raging greenish-black flame around him.

"This would have been a waste," he said in a boyish voice, and turned to Fulgardt. "And all because you couldn't keep it in your pants. I thought we had a deal."

Fulgardt laughed.

"Forgive me," he said. He meant it. "I'm used to living on the edge, where I'm from...rather, when I'm from." He looked at Skullius. "Now, does this mean we can reach some kind of diplomacy? Quite honestly, other than detesting your nature, I sympathise with everything else about you from before you came to Aigas."

Skullius narrowed his eyes.

Fulgardt then turned to the First Horn.

"May we be allowed to sit in Your Eminence's palace?" he asked in a voice livid with sarcasm. As he received no response, Fulgardt sat down anyway. A simple chair made of darkness formed under him. "It wouldn't do to sit on the floor."

And indeed, while it wouldn't harm a Divine, the floor was red hot because of the clash of immense powers just now – mainly the evocation of Skullius' War Body.

"What diplomacy do you think is needed between us? If you have my memories, you know I want nothing more than to be rid of you," Skullius said and he conjured two chairs for him and Elita.

"I'm aware. But I also know you're not above making deals with people you're fond of. Marriages of convenience. That's how you had to live before, right? You had none of those Unlimited, or friends... You were all alone – forced to fend for yourself against Direction," Fulgardt said.

Skullius frowned.

"So?"

"So, I'm hoping you will allow yourself to make one last deal with an enemy. Quite frankly, I won't give you a choice. You see, I am ready to die in a blaze of glory. Your coming here is just as much a sweet miracle as it is a scythe of true death on my neck. You could say I yearn for either. The short of it is, we either leave here alive or we all die together."

Skullius folded all four of his arms before his chest.

"Before I ask about whatever deals you might want to make, just what is your purpose for being here? I doubt that you're still driven by the desire to kill the Deities. You must have already sensed Boron. He's in a very vulnerable state at the moment, thanks my lady here yet you haven't made a move," he said. "You can leave and enter Aigas as you wish as a native denizen in the past as well – the Rules won't stop you."

Fulgardt smiled.

"Ah, yes. Killing Deities," he said with a chuckle. "There was a time when I was foolish enough to believe that could be done by a mortal. I suspect that most in this time wouldn't know, but that goal of mine fell apart rather quickly in the light of new, more feasible prospects. My older self – as I can tell now – resorted to a cheaper trick for spitting in the face of Aigas' gods."

Skullius knew what he meant at once. When he had met Fulgardt in his Reflection of the Soul, the apparition had told him that his corpse in the Labyrinth of Yoke was part of a secondary plan of his. If people failed to earn his legacy, the powers the corpse collected from the failing challengers would eventually give it enough strength to leave the Labyrinth and destroy Aigas.

The corpse was, after all, Fulgardt's divine body, and none on Aigas could have stopped it, especially with Quintess and Listafelle gone.

"My desires are different now. Once again, I can only delight in my miraculous encounter with you," he said to Skullius, and then looked at Elita, "and you."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Elita asked with a frown.

Fulgardt chortled.

"He's the deal I'll make you, Skullius," he said, ignoring Elita's question. "I don't have access to the Labyrinth of the Yoke in this time. Back in mine, it's hardly as sophisticated as it is here since I have only just begun collecting all the other elements required – other than the sacrifices necessary to help me reach Divinity, that is. They were first things I added. As I see it, if I'm being denied access, that means there's a kind of special permission I must have made after completing the Labyrinth. A key. Ah, a Voiding Key. You have it."

Skullius didn't like where this was going.

"What do you want really?"

Fulgardt grinned.

"Give me permission into the Labyrinth and in return, I will ally myself with you when you go to retrieve your soul from that Lich. If you refuse, then, I'm afraid Maqi will have to become a dark, barren hole on Aigas, with the remnants of all our existences, Broader or mortal, floating still within it."

Chapter 1298: Scheme (1)

"Hard pass, sockethole," Skullius said at once.

Fulgardt raised a brow. He hadn't expected Skullius to be so direct. He expected him to ponder about it first at least.

"Hmph. You sure about that? Don't tell me you think you have nearly enough allies to help you raid the dwelling of the Liches. Haha. If you truly believe that, you're a bigger fool than I had hoped!" he barked.

"I have no reason to trust you," Skullius said calmly. "Ties of Exchange won't work for us after we leave Aigas and I'm not so confident in my ability to create other powerful contracts. Needless to say, I wouldn't trust you to handle that either."

The weakness of a Tie of Exchange – a type of contract governed by the Deities of Aigas – had been revealed to Skullius when he was battling in the Null Remnants against Aurolio. The Voided Deathform had made a Tie of Exchange with Skullius that forbade him from doing him any harm, yet in those deserted spaces where the Deities of Aigas had no access or control, he had been able to attack the amalgam Vohnvolt as much as he wished without consequence.

If Skullius entered into a Tie of Exchange with Fulgardt – the safest bet when it came to contracts, as it would be overseen by Deities – its terms would cease to matter after they left for Deadmanland. There would be no repercussions for breaching it.

"I suppose that's a fair fear," Fulgardt said and his eyes turned vicious. "But do you really think you can afford to lose me as a potential ally? It's not as though I would dart away after you give me what I want in exchange. I would gladly dive into the land of the undead myself if I knew how to get there."

"I have enough allies. They are all budding and best of all, they have my trust," Skullius said.

In the past few seconds, his phantoms had been theorising on just how much information Fulgardt got from the WILLS. It appeared that Fulgardt only had information from before Skullius merged with all the elements of himself he had carefully split and conjoined – all of his alter's memories, that is. That should have been obvious, but the fact that Fulgardt mentioned the Unlimited had tripped him up a bit. He wasn't supposed to know that.

Skullius imagined he might have learned that from Rias, who had Actuass' memories. The masked man would definitely have had a strong impression of the Unlimited solely because of that last attack they had launched on him as a collective.

The Hybrid Warmoth turned to the First Horn.

"Excuse me, First Horn," he said with a tone of respect. "What exactly did he offer you?"

The 'he' was referring to was no doubt Fulgardt.

The First Horn had sat back in his bowl. He considered Skullius for a bit.

"The same thing you offered us. As you are here, I am certain you remembered what you proposed," he said.

"Oh, I remember," Skullius said while secretly grinding his teeth.

At that moment, the words his possessed self had said before their battle rang in his head.

'...nothing you do can stop the progression of these plans. Even besting me will not change the course I have made.'

This scenario was one of the things Skullius' possessed self had been talking about.

"I promised that I would take you with me on a voyage outside Aigas and that I would give you gifts that would make the treacherous journey easier. I remember," Skullius said.

The First Horn supported his chin with a hand.

"I decided to pick your favour over that of this man, the scourge of Maqi. The other First Horns venerated in stone before my palace would curse me if I yielded to him," he said, giving Fulgardt a nasty look. "But, as you and I agreed, there are additional terms – my terms – in response to your proposal."

Fulgardt laughed. Skullius sighed.

"Indeed, there are terms. I remember," he said.

The fact that his possessed self had already promised to give gifts to the Maqians when he had yet to unlock access to the Insurgent Magnus' ability to gift anything, was rather bold.

This ability, which Skullius had just used on his Unlimited Stars and Stark Troops earlier, could only be acquired when the affinity for both [Evil Darkness] and [Just Light] had reached the pinnacle – S grade. Additionally, it could only be used on the same individual once, and it could only be activated twice every thirty days.

But this wasn't exactly relevant for now. What was important, were the terms the First Horn had made after Skullius had proposed the idea of Maqi coming under him.

"I only have the right to your son, the Ode," Skullius said.

The First Horn nodded.

"Indeed. You bested my son in combat, as well as Umbett. Those two are at your disposal to do with as you wish. If they are to come under you as you traverse past Aigas, they shall. If they are to bring a portion of their followers with them, they shall. They cannot and will not refuse to be yours. But I will not serve or bring myself under you," he reiterated what he had told the Hybrid Luman.

Fulgardt hummed in thought.

"Oh, that's right. You did tell HIM that," he said, his eyes shining. "Such false honour. Anyone who tests the might of the Insurgent Magnus is doomed to fail. Even if it were you who was supposed to fight against HIM, you would have lost all the same."

Skullius disagreed. He only beat the Ode back then because of several perfect conditions matching his repertoire of new abilities. He could not have bested the First Horn. In fact, it wouldn't have been a fight at all.

But perhaps Fulgardt was imagining himself going against the First Horn while wearing Skullius' skin. Perhaps that would yield a different outcome.

The Immoral then turned back to Skullius.

"I will not sit here and watch as you two get chummy. Make your decision, brat. Will you make a treaty with me or not," he said, and a dangerous pressure began to rise from him again.

Elita was ever ready to match it, Skullius knew.

He sighed.

That wouldn't do.

"Fine," Skullius said. Fulgardt grinned.

"What?" Elita turned to him, shocked. "What are you doing?"

Skullius kept his blank eyes fixed on the Immoral.

"However, in exchange for giving you access to the Labyrinth of the Yoke, I don't want you as an ally for my final goal, Deadmanland," he said.

The grin disappeared from Fulgardt's face.

"What is it you want then?"

It was Skullius' turn to grin.

"I have recently made a terrible enemy, you see. Two enemies, in fact. Two Primeval Deities. One is TITEMIUS and the other is D'JORRO. I'd appreciate it if I had a senior Divine expert to help me if ever the wrath of these gods befell me."

Chapter 1299: Scheme (2)

The shade of colour on Fulgardt's face shifted to a sickly one at once. His brows furrowed and his pupils dilated. Even the Immoral could only have reacted this way.

Primeval Deities...?!

It couldn't be!

How could a Divine as fresh as this one...?

A vein throbbed on Fulgardt's forehead. He had been about to shriek something at the Hybrid Warmoth when...

...!!!

Something else budded on his forehead, peeling away the strands of dark hair on his face with its exploding energy.

It was a brand that looked like a tree, its branches lifting up shining stars. Ju'wtte sparked and crackled from it violently.

Skullius' grin grew more sinister as Fulgardt's expression became even more grave.

Right then, the Hybrid Warmoth's already blank eyes turned glazed and unfocused. They trembled.

'Oh yes!'

Fulgardt rose from his seat and roared in fury as Amras blasted from him like a tide.

"RAAAAAAAARRRRRR!!!"

A hand sprouted from his shoulder and clawed at his forehead. It was a third hand, not part of his physical body. It gripped the Stark Constellation and wrenched it from his face before crushing it. The brand turned into sparks that fizzled out instantly.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?!" Fulgardt screamed, his face turned ugly as he advanced towards Skullius.

Elita, immensely confused hurried to stand before Skullius, her hand reaching for her sword.

The Hybrid Warmoth didn't move. A cool smile was on his lips. He seemed completely unconcerned by Fulgardt's advance.

"What's going on?" Elita asked him, but her eyes did not turn away from Fulgardt.

"YOU BRAT! YOU THINK THAT WAS FUNNY? CLEVER?!" Fulgardt foamed at the mouth.

Both Elita and even Rias were shocked by this reaction. The Incandescent Stagers around them quaked, stricken numb. It was one thing when Fulgardt was excited, and another when he was so angry he could explode.

How in the world did the 'peaceful' negotiation just now turn into this?

"Fulgardt," Rias called.

The Immoral stopped advancing towards Skullius, but he remained incensed to the utmost.

...And Skullius found immense pleasure in this.

He laughed a cold laugh that was meant to agitate Fulgardt even more. He had gotten the bastard!

"All of a sudden, you're no longer as mysterious as you appeared to me before, Fulgardt," he said calmly.

Fulgardt seemed to burn from the inside. Skullius stepped forward, passing Elita and stood face-to-face with the Immoral. They locked eyes but Fulgardt did not make a move as most in the hall would have believed.

Skullius gave him a smile.

"It's good you know that I know now," Skullius said and he kindly patted Fulgardt's cheek with one of his hands.

He then turned back and took his seat again. He urged Elita to sit back down as well.

"You too," Skullius then said to Fulgardt. The Immoral ground his teeth for a few seconds, wishing he could resist, wishing he could refuse. In the end, he sat down as instructed.

Elita gave Skullius an uneasy look and asked again, "What's going on? What did you do?"

All the experts in the hall were curious too. Even the Ode.

Skullius folded all four of his arms. He gladly explained.

"Ever since the world was ripped into three timelines, I had always expected to meet a Divine here. The only Divine Aigas has ever produced was Fulgardt, so I expected him to show up. In fact, I knew it would be much easier for him to pass through the timelines. Suzamete said that powerful experts would need to wrap themselves in their Territories to be able to accomplish this feat, but a Divine wouldn't need such a thing," he said. "There were a few surprises that caught me off guard though."

"I wasn't expecting this sockethole to be allied with this kid. And I wasn't aware that the masked man had a contingency like this. I also didn't expect the WILLS to react the way they did, taking the initiative to rush to their master. Hmph."

And indeed. Just earlier, Skullius had been caught by surprise when the WILLS jumped out of his darkness prison. He couldn't sense any reactions within the prison itself passively.

Skullius' eyes bore deep into Fulgardt's own.

"At first, I intended to find a way to destroy your WILLS, but then I thought of a better idea. I knew it was inevitable that I would run into you, whichever version, so I tinkered with the WILLS and placed my Stark Constellation on them. The Stark Constellation only works so well on mortals. I intended to use it on you when you had your guard all the way down and for a miniscule amount of time. That was all I imagined the Stark Constellation would last for anyway," he said.

"When your WILLS jumped out on their own, I thought for sure my plan was done for. I hadn't confirmed it, but I thought your WILLS would inform you that I had tempered with them – as I wasn't sure how much of my memories they would retain, if they even did. When I didn't see a reaction from you to my Stark Constellation attached meticulously with Creeds, and how you seem to processing my memories lackadaisically, I pounced. And look at us now. Our roles have reversed."

Elita was stunned.

All that? Skullius had planned all that?

She didn't quite understand, of course, how the Stark Constellation worked. The brand, provided that it was attached to a body and its soul, would allow Skullius access to the individual (all of them). On its own, it couldn't have bested Fulgardt, a Divine, but by using the remainders of his Creeds, Skullius managed to give it enough oomph to overwhelm Fulgardt for an instant.

Of course, what he had just told Fulgardt, about TITEMIUS and D'JORRO being his enemies, had been meant to divert his attention and weaken him for just that required instant.

"What does this mean exactly?" Elita then asked. She was sure this was some kind of victory, but as to the full nature of it...

Skullius chuckled.

"It means, I managed to peer into Fulgardt's memories and learn of his goals and vulnerabilities," he said.

Fulgardt growled.

"I swear—"

"Swear to who?" Skullius cut him off. "You restrained yourself just now because you know acting rashly could prove cataclysmic for you with what I know now. Hold onto that restraint. I know why you want to enter the Labyrinth of the Yoke. You played it off so casually, but who would have thought it was some really dark stuff."

"You seem to know quite a lot," Rias said.

Skullius turned to him.

"I do. I also know why he's keeping you around. He wants to get you to the Divine state quickly and elevate the prowess of your Imagining Technique into an Andori. A rather ambitious goal," he said as he turned back to Fulgardt. "Using the Imagining Technique to craft a weapon that can strike at the Broader Existence directly... That is exceedingly ambitious."

Elita gaped. She didn't quite understand what the Imagining Technique was but she did understand what the implications of someone like Fulgardt getting a weapon that struck at the Broader Existence meant. After all, her Broodweiler was a similar type of weapon.

"So, you know it all, do you?" Fulgardt said. Skullius could have believed that there was no one Fulgardt hated more than him right now.

"I always wondered how you 'died', you know. I wondered even more about that after learning about the Broader Existence. That Labyrinth," Skullius said, shaking his head, "I couldn't have comprehended how dark, deep and twisted it really is. I barely scratched the surface. I'm glad you just enlightened this brat to the truth of it."

Chapter 1300: Answers

Fulgardt's memories from the WILLS were greatly fragmented. Skullius had gleaned a great deal from them but not nearly as much as he would have liked. There was a lot about the Labyrinth of the Yoke and its purpose that was missing; there were other fractured bits of Fulgardt's adventures outside Aigas; there were lacking details about Fulgardt's encounter with the Wanderer Who Seeds.

Skullius had hoped to learn more about these subjects with the stunt he had pulled on Fulgardt. He was only half-successful.

Seeing Fulgardt turn docile was cathartic though. For once, the Immoral wasn't dictating how everything would end.

"What will you do with that information now?" Fulgardt asked.

"I'm yet to decide," Skullius said, "but rest assured, I won't be using it to dictate your actions. Much."

And indeed, Skullius knew not to push an enemy like Fulgardt into a corner. His battle against his alter possessed by the WILLS showed him just what Fulgardt was prepared to do when he was left with no escape routes.

Elita was dying to know what it was that Skullius knew that would make Fulgardt restrain himself. She wondered why the Immoral wasn't once again staking his life to end theirs in order to make sure this 'secret' wasn't used against him. It was all curious.

"I feel you misunderstand our intent," Rias suddenly said. "You read correctly that I indeed have a pact with this man to produce something especially valuable using my technique, but his goal and mine align somewhat. We both seek to preserve ourselves. I want to escape death as long as possible and Fulgardt desires to live long enough to achieve his ambitions. The weapon he requires merely guarantees his safety through the great void."

"I'm aware," Skullius said. "And like I said, I don't intend to dictate your actions."

"Then why will you not allow me into the Labyrinth?" Fulgardt barked.

Skullius sighed.

"You have the gall to ask me that when you have memories of what you did to me with your WILLS?" he asked. "I do not trust you. You said earlier than I should show you some respect. Well, progenitor, shouldn't you also accept that I, as your successor requires the Labyrinth more than you do? Even if I merely have an imitation of your powers."

Fulgardt scowled.

"How did you know that?" he hissed.

"Does it matter?"

And indeed, Skullius had appraised the Fruit of World Myths and discussed that it was an imitation – a fake. This had led him to the conclusion that his powers were probably an imitation as well, though that didn't necessarily have to mean they were weaker.

Seeing that Fulgardt had heavy investment in the subject, Skullius pushed on.

"Mind indulging me on this? I mean, you might as well, right? You lose nothing from explaining this to me," he said. "What exactly is the Fruit of World Myths? Where is the original? The Wanderer Who Seeds gave it to you, right?"

Against his better judgement from earlier, Skullius had asked the question he had been sure he wasn't ready to learn the answers to. But with the real Fulgardt before him, wouldn't it have been a waste to not ask?

The hall turned eerily silent. Everyone was listening, waiting for the Immoral's response.

Skullius had expected Fulgardt to grunt and spit some irritable one-liner, but then he remembered something: Fulgardt was very open when it came to questions about the Wanderer. Back during the Second Grand War, he had spread the message about the Wanderer before going around forcing others to accept this obscure being.

Fulgardt turned solemn.

"If men in my time were as curious as you are, maybe the war wouldn't have happened at all," he began with a scoff. "It's as you say. The Wanderer gave me the Fruit of World Myths. It was a key to unique powers that could touch upon the Common Reality Leagues, he said, and perhaps beyond. I believed him."

Skullius locked his fingers.

'Well, that part is true,' he thought.

"I studied the Fruit of World Myths as best as I could before deciding to use it. It was beyond my comprehension when I was mortal, but when I ascended, it opened its secrets to me. I created a replica of it, intending to use it for the future."

"Oh," Skullius said, intrigued. "That clears THAT up. Why were you given this power anyway? What was so special about you? And who even is the Wanderer Who Seeds? Is he a Primeval Deity?"

Fulgardt chortled coldly.

"You are no successor of mine, truly," he sneered. "I loathe everything that calls itself a Deity. Everything that was raised from mortality to godhood cannot claim to be a Deity and lord over mortals. The Wanderer is different. He is not from this reality. He carries himself unlike these Deities. He is infinitely wiser, infinitely stronger."

Skullius frowned.

Well, he should have remembered that Fulgardt had a vendetta against all Deities, nomatter how strong. This Wanderer enabled him.

"How could you possibly know he was not a mortal before?" Skullius asked.

Fulgardt looked bemused.

"Because he showed me the Great Rending that formed all life in this reality – how he himself came to be," he said. "And I'm not the only one he chose. There are others in this reality enlightened by him and granted powers like mine, unique and never before seen."

To this Skullius reeled.

There were... other Fulgardts out there?

Skullius had always thought that anomalies were the only... anomalies in this reality, but now it seemed there was another group distinguished individuals.

"There aren't many of us. I have hoped to meet one other enlightened as I am, but I have failed to find them. Reality is wide and dangerous, even for Deities."

There was a deep stare from Fulgardt as he said this.

"I see," Skullius said. For an instant, he felt sorry for Fulgardt. His 'secret' made all the more sense now.

"To think you actually did something so devoid of immorality in your lifetime," he said. Only he and the Immoral understood.

Perhaps the Immoral became less immortal in his eyes.