

Undead 1421

Chapter 1421 Permanent Haven (2)

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The look on Azila's face immediately told Grim that his suspicions were correct. He had heard from Karima the purpose of the Crowns and stars on some of the beasts he had seen.

It meant that they had the potential to achieve the peak established by the Deities of Aigas for beasts: the development of a Permanent Haven.

Grim hadn't known that it would look and feel like this though. It was significantly different from a Territory. If anything, it felt more like the inside of a Cluster. As Grim had bonded with Baddan during the voyage past the Central Boundary, he connected what Baddan explained to him to this. Apparently when it came to being in his home as a Cluster beast, there were things he felt that contrasted merely being in a world.

It was definitely different from what Grim felt when inhabiting his home world, Aigas.

Here, in Asthon's Permanent Haven, he felt as though an unseen force was urging him to grow, eager to support his every inclination towards thriving – whatever interpretation the word took.

Asthon himself was nowhere to be seen, which was rather queer, but it seemed only Grim found that strange.

Azila's eyes were shining as he looked up at the foggy orbs and webs of light in the multi-coloured sky.

"We don't have long here," a voice spoke from around them, making Grim turn every which way, searching for its source. "This is my Permanent Haven. I regret to say, it's my and every beast's limit with growth, if they don't change their very nature, at least. Listen well. Jiggorrhax and the Fruit Bearers are out there holding off the Fiends. They will die soon if we work slow."

Grim started to piece it together as Asthon spoke.

He remembered what Skullius had told them before they left the Emphyrean Bosom.

Majestic Territories were never meant for humans and they essentially altered how humans' powers developed since the Grand Wars.

It showed, really.

Only beasts could bring out the full potential of Territories.

Grim had spent some time with Timmit while Replicus' Faction still used the island of Deign as a base back then. That was when he discovered the many ways beasts could use Territories to their advantage.

They could make them Dormant, which helped them produce the Secondary and Tertiary assault functions quicker, for instance.

He also learned from Baddan that beasts could make their Territory boundaries exceptionally wide, allowing them to clash with multiple opponents at once.

And thus, it stood to reason that there was more that beasts could do with the Territories than humans.

In the case of Asthon with the Permanent Haven, Grim discovered especially terrifying.

'Like the Deities... did he use his body to create this place?' he thought, a little horrified. The implications...

"This place is like a larger scale Territory, nearing the quality of a real world. It's a better version of what Jiggorrhax tried to create earlier, and there are several perks that I admit, if I had utilised to their fullest in the last 4,000 years, would have made me pretty competent even by Divine standards, but..." Asthon's voice came, sounding heavy and frustrated. "In this place, I can alter the characteristics of existing living beings through the abundant life energy you sense – their race, their mutations, their Tiers, even their Territories. It would have been especially useful if I hadn't let the creatures that developed in my Territory perish over the years."

Grim and the other beasts gaped in shock and excitement.

Hauza, the ice goblin, let out a thrilled, "Ha!"

He realised belatedly that his reaction could have easily been misinterpreted as him celebrating Asthon's regrets, but no one had such thoughts.

"Alter the characteristics of living beings?" Grim said aloud, his eyes round and misty with thoughts of the possibilities.

"Indeed," Asthon confirmed. "That property is meant for the creatures a beast develops in their Territory, but in this case... I can expend it on others. There are three more qualities to a Haven, but before I disclose them, I have to explain how we will deal with the situation – the Fiends, I mean. Most of you will not like it."

Suddenly everyone grew tense.

What was Asthon going to propose?

"Without a strategy, all of us will die the next time a single Impermanence Fiend breaks our defences. I could feel it. Just being within close proximity with one will do us in. It won't matter how much mana or Nitros we have, or even genuine Divine energy for that matter," the old bird said. "Frankly, there is no reason for all of us to face the enemy. We have to invest in Grim. I will have you all expend every ounce of your strengths for him."

The guardian beasts were indeed displeased.

Was this to be their sole role then? Were they to submit to the human just like that?

Hauza was the first to speak up.

"I will admit, I had doubts about this human's strength before, but even then, he can't do it alone, even if you give him all our powers. This task requires all our input with our individual skills working up a clever and clear strategy, rather than brute, amalgamated power!"

Azila was second.

"With all due respect, Asthon, we all came here ready to die," he said. "We have skills that we have sharpened over many, many years, and this... this is our time to show their efficacy with the help of Grim! Don't underestimate us! Do you expect us to become docile after you've just made our blood boil with your display of power? You've shown us what we can become by persevering through harsh odds! How can we just sit around after witnessing that?"

Grim felt he had no right to argue in this. He watched and waited for Asthon's response, even though he knew what the old bird would say. Heck, he knew Azila and the others knew what Asthon would say. They had been there when he explained all about his plan with Grim; it seemed they had not accepted it.

The old bird, wherever he was, scoffed. There was pity in his voice.

"This is why I detached myself from beasts. You see a Permanent Haven and you see invincibility. It's a cage, nothing more. I told you before. Your role is not as limited as you think. I'm trying to make a path for you. A new stage of progression. You will understand after you invest yourself in Grim and learn from what he becomes. You will watch and learn and surpass what I have shown you without having to waste 4,000 years of your lives, my friends! I ask you... watch and wait."

Chapter 1422 Permanent Haven (3)

1422 Permanent Haven (3)

Asthon could understand. After the Ashing of Time, the world was starved of the immense, rich volumes of pure mana that used to dance and twirl in the atmosphere, free for all – human and beast. All creatures could develop quickly back then, beasts even more so than humans, at least where raw energy reserves, and the skill in controlling those reserves was concerned.

But now, it took ages for a beast to obtain a Crown and ages more to Ascend and get marked with the star. And unfortunately, just as beasts failed to evolve their Territories to Havens, humans also lagged and failed to touch upon the Beyond the Veil Stage, not to mention Divinity itself.

BOOOOM!

The Haven was assaulted, but the coarse vibrations from whatever blasted it did not travel through its bizarre space. They rattled the individuals within instead. Grim and the other beasts spat blood from their orifices and stumbled to the grass-layered ground.

"Dammit!" the Unlimited Star cursed as he wiped the blood from his nose. Hauza, who was a few meters to his right, was leaking some cold, blue substance from his lips. Some of his teeth had even shattered.

A fierce roar came from all around right then, but it sounded very distant. The battle outside the Haven must have been intense, which was astonishing. Jiggorrhax must have been pulling out all the stops to survive for so long. The Fruit Bearers were likely a large part of why he was still sticking though, Grim judged.

'Some of my organs burst,' the Unlimited Star thought, but then he jerked.

His intestines which had been ruptured to bloody ribbons were reformed, along with his lungs.

Hauza's eyes went round. His teeth were restored as was everything within him that had been violated. The same was true for all the other beasts.

Azila was the first to recover from the surprise of it all. It wasn't too marvel-worthy for the Haven to have the properties to heal such wounds so quickly. It was to be expected.

"What do you want us to see? How can we surpass you? You spent more than 4,000 years with the humans, and in addition to reaching the peak of what a guardian beast can achieve, you learned different facets of power. You learned Magecraft for Suzamete's sake! How can you imagine there's more a mortal beast can obtain from Aigas?" he asked, looking up at the skies.

Asthon didn't answer immediately. Unbeknownst to the beasts, he was appraising the situation outside. It was... dire.

He answered the Great Mane Mountain Ape a second later.

"Are you blind?" the old bird said. There was a subtle hint of fury in his voice. "Did you not just witness the battle that rocked Aigas hours ago? Was one of those participants not a beast by Aigas' standards? Did you not see him battle a Herald – Jiggorrhax, for that matter – on equal grounds without a Permanent Haven? There are many ways around what you know. Let me break that ignorance of yours! It's fickle as glass anyway! For that, I need you to discard your pride! You all need to discard it and become roots that steal the secrets of the fruits above them!"

Azila shuddered. The old bird's voice thundered through him and almost ruptured his freshly healed organs again. Hauza didn't have the stomach to argue as Azila did, but he was still a little sceptical.

Still, if Asthon could discard his pride and suffer the folly and wisdom of humans for millennia, who was he not to try?

"Alright," he glanced at Grim. "I'll give it a try."

Azila gave him a look and relented.

"Me too."

The other beasts, far less powerful and ballsy than the ape and goblin, could only follow in their steps and look at Grim curiously.

The Unlimited Star didn't know what face to make. He was glad he had made conversation with them all earlier though. That probably contributed to how quickly they decided it wasn't so bad to invest their powers in him – whatever that meant.

"Good. I will not applaud you too much for your choice since I had to force it, but well done," Asthon said right as the Haven was struck again by another tremendous burst of force. The beasts healed before they could wretch and cry about their injuries. "You're already greater than most of the beasts from this age and the one I was born in. Now, all of you – except Grim – open your Territories."

Azila, Hauza and the other beasts drew away from each other and mobilised their energies.

One by one, they began opening their Territories while minding not to extend their boundaries too far. The Imaginary GeoScapes were formed, and for Azila and Hauza's Territories, little living creatures could be seen thriving within them.

In the former's Territory, a forest scape of golden trees, little golden dragonflies could be seen, with a few as large as the average human, buzzing around quicker around their juniors. They exuded pressures of Tier 7 beasts and a little higher. They were called StarGold Clusterflies. Skullius had killed one of them back in the day, in the Tremur Forest.

In Hauza's Territory, what might have been a small city in a frosted cavern, tiny little naked humanoids with fox-like ears, and wings as thin and brittle as dried leaves, could be seen. The strongest among them was a Tier 1.

Grim marvelled.

'Yeah, in a battle of Territories, I would definitely lose to these two if I don't apply the trick the boss taught us,' he thought.

But Asthon was far from amused.

"This is underwhelming, I must say. I expected you to have developed further than this with how much you were psyching yourselves up, itching to jump into death's clutch," he said. He couldn't be bothered to lessen the blow of his words with a kinder tone. "You focus too heavily on making your subjects stronger in Tier. Can you not develop their ability to use Perfect Aura? Why didn't you establish them with both Classes and Mutations? What is wrong you two?"

...?

Azila, Hauza, Grim and the rest took a moment to process what Asthon had just said.

Grim was the first to speak, utterly dumbfounded.

"Wait... Did you just say Perfect Aura? For beasts?"

Azila was second.

"Both Classes and Mutations?" He felt like an idiot.

What was Asthon talking about?

Asthon might have face-palmed.

"This is why I wanted you to watch, you fools!" he growled. "There's no value in these useless puppets you have created. I will sacrifice them for Grim and you will begin anew."

His attention scrolled down to the Unlimited Star.

"Do you know how Hidden Classes were developed?" Asthon asked, but didn't give Grim the chance to answer. "During the First Grand War – the time when Giants tried to take Aigas over – humans and Sif travelled to Sacred Forests to observe beasts and magical phenomena foreign to their civilizations. They wished to grow strong enough to fight the Giants. I wish I met the human who developed your Hidden Class, Grim. I will carry on the insights he gained all those years ago."

Outside the Haven, Jiggorrhax was fighting a bitter battle. Some of his scales had already come off, some of them eaten away by death. A dragon's scales were a symbol of pride and wisdom brought on by age. The harder they were, the stronger a dragon was. Jiggorrhax had lost his scales earlier while protecting Aigas, and he was losing them again so soon.

He was giving too much for his world, he thought.

The only reason he and Fruit Bearers were alive was because they were sticking close to the dome-shaped boundary of the Haven behind them.

The Impermanence Fiends seemed to regard it with some kind of...aversion. They weren't afraid, but they didn't dare break it even though they probably could.

They teased and vanished from existence every so often. They had a clear target in mind, but they were conflicted. This target was in the Haven. They must have lacked the intelligence to endure the stress the contradiction brought on them.

Because of this Jiggorrhax and the Fruit Bearers only really had to worry about the Chronocle Fiend for a while. It too lacked great intelligence. It had yet to do anything other than strike a thread it had drawn from the void with one of its spears. The creature must have been in denial that it wasn't working... or perhaps, it was afraid to deplete more itself with stronger attacks. Not yet.

Fortunately for it, the vibrations from its basic attacks had been extracting Jiggorrhax's time and smashing his physical body pretty hard. Just three had left him in this state – practically half-dead.

As for the Fruit Bearers, they seemed surprisingly unconcerned with their own lives. Frankly, Jiggorrhax wasn't sure if they could be affected by the Chronocle Fiend at all. They prioritised keeping his siphoned time away from the Chronocle Fiend and healing his wounds.

But Jiggorrhax was on his last legs. He had no attacks that could harm the Fiends and that strained his mental fortitude even when his body was healed by whatever Treasures the Fruit Bearers had.

'How much longer?' he thought as flames built up in his mouth. He would unleash his flames and see if they did him any good against the enemies that harnessed time and death.

But before he did, however, a cavity opened up in the boundary of the Haven behind him.

Jiggorrhax turned and the Impermanence Fiends immediately went wild.

Someone came out of the Haven, drifting softly and slowly in the void. He had shed away his Nitros. He didn't need anymore.

Jiggorrhax was about to express his relief when...he shuddered. He momentarily forgot to keep his own Nitros about him.

...!!!

"What in Suzamete's graces...!" the dragon exclaimed.

The abomination, or perhaps, perfection, slowly drifting towards him was...

Chapter 1423 The Impossible Conduit! (1)

1423 The Impossible Conduit! (1)

"Keep your focus!" Asthon's voice came to Grim.

'I know dammit!' the Unlimited Star snapped in his own private mind space. Indeed, he knew.

That was why he had cast away his Nitros and was drifting upwards stiff as a board without making the slightest movement. He feared that even the twitch of his finger would ruin everything before he was ready. The conditions of the great void assaulted him mercilessly, but they were the least of his worries.

Jiggorrhax, who was momentarily stunned by Grim's physical appearance was forced to snap out of his daze when the Impermanence Fiends vanished from his sight, deciding finally that they didn't have to respect the immense presence of life energy now that their target was separated from it.

They aimed for Grim at once, appearing around him.

The Unlimited Star gritted his teeth and activated Tranquil Instance with his Granted Star Armament. He was immediately flushed in a bold, blue outline that sent tendrils outward; it was operating at full capacity.

The Impermanence Fiends would have had him if it wasn't activated. They didn't draw too close after the boundary of Null Life Essence was established, but they didn't give up either.

'Damn it! Damn it! Damn it!' Grim thought when the creatures encircled him. A cord of reddish black, like a ribbon, connected them together, and an ominous presence that felt distinctly like a warm, dusty breeze swept over everything in the vicinity. It was bad, Grim and Jiggorrhax knew.

The Herald's eyes shone with urgency.

Asthon capitalised on that. He informed the dragon of what he needed to do immediately.

Jiggorrhax was up to the task.

'Very well. I hope your hypothesis is sound,' he thought, and he turned his whole body to Grim and the Fiends as best as he could, flames leaking from his teeth.

He considered the whole situation and reconciled it with what the old bird had told him.

Would that young human really be...?

From the look of him, it certainly looked like he could.

Grim's white hair was now a silvery-blue and so much more voluminous than before. It danced for three meters past his skull. But it could it even be called hair anymore? It was alive. Parts of it formed serpentine shapes, some of it wolverine or even great predatory fish. The shapes seemed eager to race away from Grim and his scalp.

His face was littered with what might have been illusory worms of gold and blue, crawling beneath his skin. They made him look both scary and complex as a living organism. Some of them – much fewer – traced the surface of Granted Star Armament. Some energy unknown was throbbing from the Unlimited Star.

Asthor told Jiggorrhax to preserve Grim's life until that energy was given a proper shape.

"BURN."

The Herald drew in a deep breath of his Nitros and his chest grew to twice its original size, the green scales over it flushed with a glowing bluish-red.

The instant Jiggorrhax's attention was stolen away, though, the Chronocle Fiend made a swift decision, like its travelling companions. It would also join the fray. If the Impermanence Fiends were becoming this active, it wouldn't need to expend too much energy. Perhaps it would only need a few uses of that.

The Fruit Bearers responded to its sudden movement. They extracted more Treasures. This time, one of them produced a Realm rank Prime Treasure. It looked like a large, ivory pot with a wide mouth spotting jagged teeth on its face.

Indeed, Treasures were hard for mortals to handle. Elita's Broodweiler had been subdued for her by Void herself and when Skullius had left the World rank Treasure for the First Horn of Maqi earlier, he had noted that it was a special kind without a will of its own: a Charged Mantle.

The Fruit Bearers could effortlessly use Treasures because they were more puppet than human. They had no souls. They had no real will. They were special vessels, powerless on their own, but especially receptive to magical tools and Suzamete's will. They imbibed the powers of the tools they wielded and were perfect short-term vessels for the Deities of the skies.

The Realm rank pot one of them produced caused the Chronocle Fiend to hesitate for a split moment. Treasures outscaled every other aspect of the Common Reality Leagues of the same level, after all.

'If this works...' he thought, gulping.

Jiggorrhax's breath fizzled out right then.

The Impermanence Fiends didn't waste time before warping towards Grim again. They were determined not to lose another moment without him in their clutch.

But the Unlimited Star was hoping for it. That was why he had left the Permanent Haven before finishing the process of creating the thing, the conduit, Asthon and him had planned.

One of the Impermanence Fiends morphed its jellyfish-like body to create a strange, tentacle-like to grab Grim, completely disregarding the twitching arm beside him.

That was a mistake.

A grave one.

Grim's severed limb suddenly exploded, tendrils of ugly, white, veiny flesh flying in all directions, devouring the portion of the Granted Star Armament around it and integrating the worms visible on its surface.

In less than a fraction of a micro-second, it adopted a familiar yet unfamiliar shape, and its large canine head whipped forth, its large fangs biting at the tentacle of the Impermanence Fiend!

By the time the Fiend decided to draw back its tentacle, it was too late. A chunk of it had been torn off and was being swallowed by the thing beside Grim.

The other Impermanence Fiends were disturbed.

How was this possible?

Any living creature that touched them was fated to succumb to death!

The answer flared in their senses right then.

The creature beside Grim, who was grinning and geeking out, was flushed with Null Life Essence!

The creature he had made... was Paradox Parody, an aspect of his Hidden Class, but with several unfathomably powerful augments that wouldn't affect him alone.

One of them was undoubtedly its Tier; it was something no beast on Aigas had or would ever be able to achieve.

It was an Impossible Tier reminiscent of the Stolen Angel's: 2,500!

Chapter 1424 The Impossible Conduit! (2)

1424 The Impossible Conduit! (2)

Before Grim left the Permanent Haven...

The Unlimited Star kept nodding furiously with a thoughtful expression after Asthon had explained his reasoning – his theory for how all beasts could transcend their limits. During the explanation, he kept finding chances to scold Hauza and Azila who were still dumbfounded by some of the things the old bird said were possible.

But as excellent as the old bird's reasoning was, there was one snag. He explained it to Grim who couldn't find a way around it either.

There was indeed a problem. The Deities, as Grim now came to understand after being given dense insight, were actually hard on beasts not because they favoured humans more. Beasts had less restrictions over what they could achieve – at least in terms of raw power. Theoretically, they could get insanely powerful simply by increasing their Tiers. They didn't have limitations like Tasks and Trials, after all.

To be sure, Divinity was something that might have seemed out of their reach, but the Deities had actually hidden clever clues in their power sets for reaching levels of power they wouldn't have imagined; perhaps they only meant to limit the number of beasts who reached Divinity.

This was why Asthon attached himself to the humans – to find these clues. Indeed, they were hidden in the way humans thought and progressed.

The problem he had run into, however, was that it was difficult for a single vessel to hold the fullness of human properties and beast properties at the same time – the very thing Asthon figured was the key for a beast to transcend.

Both properties...

Both properties!

It came to Grim right then. He snapped his fingers and looked up at the colourful sky. There were roughly four hundred creatures floating about: giant golden dragonflies and human-sized blue creatures with wings like those of fairies. They were bathed in tendrils of greenish-blue energy, and their powers kept soaring.

The strongest among them was already at Tier 200.

These were the creatures extracted from Hauza and Azila's Territories.

"Wait. Maybe both these properties don't need to be infused in a singular body or your own body for that matter!" Grim cried excitedly.

"I've already thought about that, Grim. Even while using a third party or several third parties as guiding mechanisms to transmit the unique method I explained, it's impossible. Those third party also have limits. We can't create something beyond our own potential. In the case of multiple third parties – be it living or non-living conduits – the more of them there are, the harder it is to control them and guide the effects back to your body," Asthon said disappointedly.

"No, no!" Grim waved his hands as though thinking the old bird couldn't see him from wherever he was. "The boss did it once! Well, his evil self did. He created this thing – it was actually a living thing, I think – that held all his skills and powers. He could use it develop and activate even his strongest abilities effortlessly. Yuyui told me it was very strong. The Stolen Angel, I think he called it. It was a Tier 1000 or something, she said."

"Tier what?" Asthon's excitement was sparked. "But that's impossible! Even I only reached Tier 789. Doesn't this... boss of yours have a Hidden Class though? We are talking about Fulgardt levels of potential here."

Grim grinned.

"Oh, come on," he said, brimming with excitement. "The boss is on the same level, and he'd be disappointed if I didn't aim for the same kind of power he has." He rubbed his hands. "And after all this time, are you really going to complain about attempting something impossible?"

The sky in the Permanent Haven trembled, but it wasn't because some blow had attacked it from the outside.

"You have a sharp tongue, human!" Asthon said, but he wasn't angry or offended. "Whatever you hoped to lance into me, it worked. You've succeeded in igniting the fire in me for sure! I knew you were the one I was meant to meet! Let's attempt the impossible then!"

It was a large leopard, black as tar and fierce of face. Its spots were the shining stars that were the default design for the Granted Star Armament. Its claws, teeth and eyes gleamed with the same radiant sky-blue hue. It was a triple threat.

The creature's pulse of Null Life Essence was astonishing. Grim was still surprised that Asthon had managed to create an array that would perfectly infuse the properties of the Skullius' Granted Star Armament with Paradon Parody. The complicated matrix had been branded onto his body before he left the Haven. It would activate after he willed the Paradon Parody into existence as a separate being; that part required severing a part of himself.

Of course, this didn't mean that Asthon could perceive or even manipulate Null Life Essence. It just meant he managed to keep the networks in the Granted Star Armament functional within the pseudo-living being he and Grim had made.

And indeed, Paradon Parody had been separated from Grim's Hidden Class. It was the key to everything, after all!

Jiggorrhax was astonished by what had happened. He couldn't believe that the leopard had managed to tear a chunk of the Impermanence Fiend and without incurring any damage at all to boot!

But... what was it?

It wasn't a fully living being. It had no soul and... there were a lot of complicated arrays and runes running within it. Even he had trouble following what they were accomplishing, but now wasn't the time to dwell on that.

The Impermanence Fiends were a little dazed by the harm that came to one of them. Grim took advantage of that small window.

His Nitros flared and he wore the biggest grin he could. He looked at the Paradon Parody and snapped his fingers.

The leopard suddenly spun in place before pulling its paws together and hugging itself. It became a leopard-shaped statue, still and firm.

...And then a modest pressure of death began billowing from it!

...And then a modest pressure of death began billowing from Grim!

...!!!

The Impermanence Fiends hissed in fury.

What was this?

The human and the strange creature beside him were exuding a pressure like theirs! How?

It was several leagues weaker, but still... how was that possible?

'I can't maintain it for long. Haha. Of course I can't. Who knew that if you tried to harness raw death, you'd die?' Grim thought as the presence of extinction flared from his limbs. The fact that he

recalled Yuyui saying she was able to use the power of death once using Demion's Dance, one of the swords Skullius had passed to Pherdanta, gave him confidence. 'But death is in my arsenal now. On my own, this will still be a challenge, but...'

He sent a message to Jiggorrhax through the mana network.

"I've got something for you, big guy. Try not to panic," he said and before the Herald could ask, the Paradon Parody shone brilliantly. Jiggorrhax did too.

His immense form released a staggering pressure into the great void... and then it began to shrink.

In less than a fraction of an instant, his outline, still glowing bright, had assumed a humanoid shape a mere three times as large as Grim's.

When the light died away from him, a new figure emerged.

It was a burly man covered in old, majestic green scales. They were part of his ridiculously thick, impractical, but imposing armour. His head was fire trowelled into an immaculate shape, burning with bluish-red hue; his eyes were flickering torrents of dark blue flame, same as his short, wild hair.

Steam and flame sprayed forth from numerous orifices in his armour, emphasising the overflow of his power.

But Jiggorrhax – initially – wasn't sure why he was suddenly feeling nearly three times as powerful as before... until he sensed it.

Something about him had changed, something fundamental.

As a dragon, Jiggorrhax cultivated power the same way as humans, Sif and Giants. He was not a beast.

But now, on top of a Stage, nine Classes, countless Skills, and mana cores... he had a Tier. If he had a guidance field, it would have shown him a staggering figure of 1,000 in front of that Tier!

The same was true for Grim who grinned at the dragon's new form!

The Impermanence Fiends were agitated by the thriving changes in their opponents.

The dragon had shrunken down, increasing its strength somehow.

Well... why couldn't they?

They screeched and their bodies were coated in morbid flares of dark red. An instant later, they were no larger than the new Jiggorrhax, with humanoid shapes that resembled some of the creatures they had devoured from other worlds.

Right when this happened, there a great crash above, and the Fruit Bearers came flying down like bolts of lightning, broken like dolls.

The Chronocle Fiend roared. It had had enough. Its roar was the match that ignited one of the shortest and fiercest battles this region of the wider reality would ever know!

Chapter 1425 Finish It (1)

1425 Finish It (1)

The Permanent Haven shattered right then.

Unlike the shards of the world Jiggorrhax had attempted to create, which were still floating about, the Haven's pieces turned into streams pure life energy that went on to form Asthon's body. His Crown and star did not retain their glow. Instead, they kept flickering, sometimes bright, sometimes dull.

The guardian beasts which had been in Asthon's Haven floated around him, watching the chaos that was about to unfold.

"Watch closely. How all beasts evolve will be up to you and how much you manage to glean from this," he told them, but his mind and magical faculties were being employed elsewhere. The Paradon Parody statue was left to his care. Grim couldn't fight and protect it at the same time.

Thus, Asthon applied every single concealing and protection spell and skill he knew on it, and just in time too, because when the turbulence began, it didn't stop. It only ramped up further in violence and absurdity.

His small eyes watched. His Crown flickered, mirroring his dark thoughts – his predictions.

If everything didn't go as planned, he might have to...

It started with the Chronocle Fiend, its face still a canvas of absentmindedness.

One of its longer, human-like arms reached into the void and grabbed another cord of time. Instead of striking it with a spear, however, it yanked on it hard and twisted. The great void thrummed as though some gargantuan monstrosity even larger and stronger than the Chronocle Fiend was snaking its way through it. But that wasn't it.

The darkness around whirled and then, without warning, throbbing pulses of light and heat blasted from above the Chronocle Fiend. They shot down, dozens of times swifter than light. They were great rocks searing with different kinds of flame, aimed towards the enemies beneath the Fiend. They numbered in the thousands.

This phenomenon was a meteor shower from a few dozen Consternals ago pulled to the present by the Chronocle Fiend!

Grim grinned.

One of the rocks caught him before he could react, but with Granted Restoration, he effectively had multiple lives. Besides, the attack that came for him didn't kill him. He healed his blasted, flaming side while taking flight towards one of the Impermanence Fiends instead of big daddy time.

Three of the Impermanence Fiends now looked like trolls, with ugly margins and marks to their dark red skin and fat limbs; three others like black, slim elves; and the rest like humans with multiple, misshapen limbs and eyes.

'This should be fun!' Grim thought and as he shot upwards, he was engulfed in a flash of light. He willed Paradox Parody to change his form, and it did. Suddenly, Grim was a giant serpent, pristine white and layered with thick vapours and flakes of deep cold. He streaked towards a Fiend that looked like a troll.

It noticed him and Grim watched as it drew back and turned less detailed, as though it had hidden behind some obscure glass. He almost laughed.

"You think I can't see you?" he cried with a serpentine voice amidst the downpour of hellish fiery masses. Grim embodied death too now, and couldn't be fooled by its primary techniques.

In a blink, his maw had opened and he ripped off the Fiend's shoulder as he blasted past, freezing a great portion of it at the same time. The Fiend shrieked in agony and its details came back to focus. But Grim coiled behind it, and assumed a human shape again. Three of fingers were already propped, pointing at the Fiend's back.

His eyes flashed a brilliant red and the Stark Constellation on his forehead sparked furiously.

"Nos Aggrante!" The blinding flash was horrific for the Fiend. It was engulfed by the detonation and the light while screeching horribly. It didn't help that some of the flying rocks bashed into it mercilessly simultaneously.

Jiggorrhax had been watching Grim while dodging the obstacles.

'So that's how you do it,' he thought and spots of fire lit up behind his humanoid shape, firing; they acted as propelling flames.

They made him a string of light, fast, clear and thin. He was hard to perceive. Jiggorrhax crashed into the oncoming rocks and overwhelmed them. He was targeting another one of the Impermanence Fiends – one that looked like a crafty, skinny elf. Unlike the one that Grim attacked, this one didn't see him coming. He had used the shower as cover.

Before he reached it, attacking from its flank, he was cast in a brilliant light, and then he was no longer a humanoid dragon. He was a stag of harsh fire, perhaps the greatest kind Aigas had to offer. His horns were blinding, sharp prongs, erect and lethal. With his momentum, he stabbed them into the enemy and they detonated at once!

The eruption was ungodly. It didn't kill the Fiend, but it hurt like death. Flames blazed from its back, roasting its strange flesh. It shrieked inhumanely and wore a dark, atrocious face of hate and fury. With one of its hands, the only one that remained after most of its torso was blasted to high hell, torn and glowing with the heat, it grabbed Jiggorrhax's neck.

Two other Fiends rushed to the aid of their partner. They turned invisible to the dragon as they approached. Jiggorrhax immediately changed back to his humanoid form and his hand blurred, whacking away the grip of the Fiend he had charged into. His arms left after-images as they formed intricate shapes, as though they were rapidly painting on an invisible canvas. By the time his palm poured into the Impermanence Fiend's chest in a deafening blast, the creature didn't realise what was going on at all. It was sent flying right into one of the falling meteors at shattering speed!

As it fell, screeching, it couldn't help but agonise...

Why was that creature unaffected by its deadly touch? It didn't make any sense!

Jiggorrhax didn't have time to pat himself on the back. A cruel blow landed on his jaw sending him streaking into one of the meteors himself. The enemy that attacked him... he couldn't see them, but that didn't deter him. His hand blurred and with a powerful Form Using technique, he blasted the meteor apart, sending millions of small flaming fragments flying everywhere.

The dragon, like his younger sibling, Jerthrax had multiple Classes.

Jiggorrhax was a Warrior (a Form Using Class), an Arch-Mage, a Summoner, a Swordsman, Assassin, Priest, Mind Caster, Tamer, Diviner and Archer. He also had multiple golden cores with great volumes of mana, which, when paired with his Mage Class were used with terrifying efficiency.

'Grim did something to ensure that I wouldn't die to the Impermanence Fiends with a simple touch. Hm. With my newly enhanced physical attributes – because of that Tier – as well as my fire, I can harm the Fiends, but I need to be able to see them,' he thought. He knew another blow was coming for him, but he couldn't see it still.

But then, he spotted one of the Fruit Bearers below him, healed from whatever had caused them to scatter into pieces by the Chronocle Fiend. They had thrown up a giant, brass ring towards him.

'Huh?' the dragon was puzzled.

But then a huge cold, white serpent came streaking from behind the Fruit Bearer and right when it went through the ring, its speed was augmented by a degree that Jiggorrhax failed to perceive. The Herald only heard something akin to two great explosions behind him.

He turned, but couldn't see anything other than the speeding white shadow of the serpent crashing into showers of meteors great distances away. It was unbelievably fast!

Jiggorhax couldn't perceive it, but two Impermanence Fiends had had their sides and shoulders chewed through by Grim.

The brass ring that Grim had gone through was a Realm rank Treasure that multiplied the speed of anyone who passed through it by an exponential of 2!

He kept up the momentum in his snake form and charged towards the Chronocle Fiend. He dodged as many of the meteors as he could, returned to his human form and used Granted Warp!

He was above the Chronocle Fiend in a flash, so close to one of the spears revolving over its shell!

But... something was wrong. There was something about being close to the Fiend, sharing the atmosphere it created around it... It was unnerving.

The Fiend's gigantic eye scrolled to Grim. He paled and in an instant, he used Granted Warp. But he wasn't fast enough. He managed to teleport himself away but...

'What the...!' Grim thought as he looked at his arm (the new one, unshielded by the Granted Armament). It looked... younger.

No. Grim was younger. He was 10 years younger!

He grew ashen.

But then the space around him groaned. A terrifying force fell on everyone and everything with all the wrath in the void!

Everything above Aigas was caught in a bubble of frozen time, stalled and still!

Chapter 1426 Finish It (2)

1426 Finish It (2)

The Chronocle Fiend was aware of its weaknesses. It had yet to mature into a horror that Deities of Suzamete's calibre would truly be wary of. The fact that she had sent a bunch of mortals to fight it showed just how low she regarded this particular Fiend.

The reason she wasn't too concerned with it was because she knew that unlike Impermanence Fiends, Chronocle Fiends needed to learn efficiency to survive. Without that skill, they would simply use themselves up without bringing anything of consequence about.

The hesitation the Fiend had earlier was based on its knowledge that it was terrible at efficiently applying its time-abilities, especially on stronger mortal beings. It couldn't even isolate individuals with its attacks yet.

But now, it couldn't afford to care. In truth, it had been startled by Grim's invasion of its personal dome of time, where it was strongest, where it didn't need to pull on cords of time from the void as a means to activate attacks. That shouldn't have been possible... unless grim held a power that made him resistant to weaker forces of time – a strange protection.

And of course, Grim did. He had the Granted Star Armament which employed Null Life Essence in abilities like Tranquil Instance, which Grim had active. If Grim hadn't had that ability, he would have been rewound to nothing just by being in the Chronocle Fiend's personal dome.

But still, he had been affected. Barely a second in the dome and he had been aged back 10 years. Even if his armour and powers weren't affected because of Null Life, just a few more seconds in there and he would perish.

In a panic, the Fiend twisted the cord of time in its hand and cast another one of its abilities: Stall Flow.

It unleashed a fierce control over time to temporarily freeze it in a specified range.

Thus, the meteor shower froze, Asthon and the beasts froze, Jiggorrhax froze.

But the Impermanence Fiends didn't freeze. They held a concept of reality senior to time.

...And since that was the case...

"Las Aggrante!"

The younger Grim too wasn't frozen. He couldn't move as freely because his mastery of death was still laughable at best, but he could point three fingers at the Chronocle Fiend and fire the fastest variant of Aggrante in his arsenal. The shining ray was intense and driven. It pierced through the dome of frozen time on its way to the Chronocle Fiend.

The creature would have counted on its confidence in its personal dome of protection and waited for the ray to be rewound, but it grew cold feet and countered instead. With a third arm, it reached into the void and pulled on a thick cord of time which it drew to block the Aggrante. There was a brilliant shower of sparks as the two forces met and cancelled each other.

Some of the countless tangles of greenish-white that made the Chronocle Fiend vanished and it suddenly looked a little smaller. It released the ability, Stall Flow, and time flowed naturally again.

Grim didn't miss any of this.

Jiggorrhax sent him a message through the network, making an inquiry. Grim responded quickly.

As the Chronocle Fiend reeled, the Impermanence Fiends took the chance to attack. None of the ones Grim and Jiggorrhax attacked had died. It was difficult to kill death, after all. The one Grim bit into first and blasted with Aggrante had restored its strange flesh. It looked livid. They all did.

They were quickly closing in on Jiggorrhax and Grim who drew closer together and floated back-to-back.

Three of the Impermanence Fiends suddenly opened their mouths so wide they could have devoured Feinheath in a single bit, and blackish red liquid torrents spewed in horrifying volumes. They moved swiftly, eager to engulf anything that had had traces of life. It was, after all, Death's Tide.

Grim's pupils constricted. Even for him who had traces of death, it was unlikely that he would escape this unscathed. The concentration of death in that wave was too great.

But even though he knew taking in too much death was a risk, Grim did it anyway.

He immediately changed into his Avhanar form, becoming a great, white wolverine head with a ravenous hunger and thirst. He opened his mouth wide as he soared to meet the tide and drank it all greedily!

The Impermanence Fiends were shocked, but that didn't stop the rest of them from rushing to attack him while his back was turned.

Thankfully, Jiggorrhax was up to the challenge.

Just now, when he had spoken to Grim, the Unlimited Star had explained everything.

"It's difficult for me to share this affinity for death with the Paradox. I need to eat more of these Fiends to enhance my proficiency with death and create a new, stable form for using that concept. Even then, I'll only be able to use it for a short time. For the time being, I've ignited a spark of death in you – a small one – making you resistant to short moments of contact with the Fiends. I'll use our link to help you perceive them."

And indeed, he did. While drinking the tide, Grim painted a picture of the locations of each of the Impermanence Fiends for Jiggorrhax in his mind.

The dragon went wild.

He mobilised his mana and, in a blink, from the great void, which met with the Stagnant Space protruding from Aigas, a series of creatures great and small, powerful and weak spewed out in the tens of thousands. They distracted the incoming Fiends for a split of a split of a microsecond, but that gave the Herald enough of a chance to warp back to his original draconic form, open his maw wide, and unleash a frightening storm of fiery destruction.

Some of the Fiends were caught in it and scorched, but some managed to phase away. Grim told Jiggorrhax where they had gone. The dragon changed into his humanoid form, and then into the stag form. He formed Rune Runes as he charged towards the Fiends, and in another splendid show, he attempted to create a world around himself and the Fiends. It shattered almost immediately, but he had managed to keep them from running further away.

He bounced off the scattered pieces of earth, water and sky and pierced another one of the Fiends with his prongs. The Fiend's torso exploded in a magnificent jet of fire. A sun might have been forming.

Even Jiggorrhax was surprised by how effective assuming this shape and form was.

The Paradon Parody was a cheat unlike any he had ever seen before.

The conclusion Asthon and Grim had come to was simple.

To overcome their limits, beasts had to transcend one of the fundamental rules that applied on them: humanoid beasts had Classes, and non-humanoids had mutations.

The difference between mutations and Classes was that the latter was more effective, in exchange for greater costs in mana, while mutations were less effective, with barely any costs for activation at all.

Most beasts would opt for Classes, since they weren't built like humans – with an innate aptitude for learning to be efficient with their powers given time. And indeed, most non-humanoids had mutations and were usually of low intelligence.

In truth, neither was better than the other. But being able to use the properties of both mutations and Classes would be a boon for beasts who were above a certain threshold.

To overcome the limitation of effectiveness in mutations, they would simply pour their astounding reserves of energies into mutation abilities, ramping up the output outrageously.

Jiggorrhax had been given access to Paradon Parody's properties. It allowed Grim and anyone he willed, to obtain beast properties (as shown by the acquisition by a Tier). They could even cycle through any beast form they pleased; non-humanoid forms gave them access to mutations, and humanoid forms gave them access to Classes.

Jiggorrhax could use his own abilities while in the stag form. He found his fire more unruly and dangerous since it suddenly counted as a mutation rather than a Class ability. Its fire power was greater than he could have imagined possible!

The Impermanence Fiend he had impaled and blasted screeched and failed to find the strength to counter. Its mates did, however. Jiggorrhax felt too great blows strike his body. He changed form in a shower of scorching flames, becoming a humanoid with a scale armour. Fire concentrated in his

hands and formed a blazing scimitar that he whipped around like a whip, cutting into the Fiend which had struck him.

It was a special Sword Technique he used.

His opponent had its right hand and abdomen slashed through cleanly, but then its mates were flying over it. One of them opened its mouth wide and spewed out a Death's Tide at Jiggorrhax.

Grim was late in warning the dragon... and Jiggorrhax was drenched in the liquid death.

"RRAAAAAAAARRRRRRR!!!" He roared in agony. His flesh melted and then it disintegrated without pause. The liquid death was like a fast-acting virus running through the flesh, eating him without mercy. Jiggorrhax tried to heal, but his energies were lost without effecting any sort of healing.

A hiss came right then. A giant serpent used its immense body to crash into the Fiends, sending them flying away from Jiggorrhax.

This chilling form of Grim's was adopted from the humanoid, winged creatures which had been in Hauza's Territory. Asthon had empowered them along with the dragonflies from Azila's Territory using his Permanent Haven, increasing their Tier to over 300. Then they were sacrificed to feed the matrix which allowed Paradon Parody to be formed. And thus, Grim had access to the power of those creatures.

The Unlimited Star wanted very much to worry about Jiggorrhax, but there were more Fiends coming from behind him. He hadn't dealt with the ones whose Death Tide he had devoured.

He spun, assumed his human form and then sent a Nos Aggrante against them. As the Fiends dodged, Grim rushed over to Jiggorrhax and placed his hand on him.

"Granted Restoration!" he commanded... and nothing. One usage of the powerful healing Starmation was used up and it did nothing. Jiggorrhax's body was still being eaten away by the effect of Death's Tide. "Damn it!"

And to make matters worse...

The Chronocle Fiend knocked its spears against one of the cords of time it had pulled from the void.

The time started to get siphoned from all the living beings in the area again!

Chapter 1427 Finish It (3)

1427 Finish It (3)

One of the Fruit Bearers had been lying in wait. The shower of meteors had been the only real thing that hindered them from acting, but it had come to an end. They held up an ivory pot in the direction of the Chronocle Fiend right when its spear struck against one of the time cords it had pulled. The pot's wide mouth opened up.

The Chronocle Fiend shuddered.

It recalled this damned Realm rank pot. It was the reason why it had gone ballistic and blasted the Fruit Bearers to pieces earlier. But now, it was in use again, its user restored as though they had never been injured at all.

A song came from the pot, loud and ominous.

"Break thy time, time, time,

Harm O mine, mine, mine, Break thy valour, valour, valour, Take O mine, mine, mine."

The pot started to spot cracks and a moment later, it burst apart.

But as it did, the outlines of time that had been escaping from everyone returned to their owners.

...And then some the strings of greenish-white that made up the Chronocle Fiend vanished; there was no doubt about – it was smaller!

The creature's dazed face changed for the first time. Hints of fear showed. Its energy had been wasted again and with no effective result.

The Realm rank pot was called Beckon Your Hopes and Break Me. It was a Treasure that took its time reading the nature of an opponent's properties and then it took on the hostile effects of any attack cast by an opponent upon itself instead of the user. Anyone whom the user wished to be spared would be protected as well. (And of course, it was a single use item.)

Grim was glad to be spared indeed, but with Jiggorrhax rapidly getting eaten away by death and the Impermanence Fiends closing in, he didn't know if he would survive for long. Not even Asthon could pull a miracle that could save him from the encirclement by the enemies.

"Do you have any way to delay your death? Don't you dare die a pitiful death like this?" he said to the dragon desperately. "You're supposed to be the Abiding Madness, right? A legend from history. What would I tell people when I get back to Aigas? That you died to trolls?"

As he groaned, grunted and roared in agony, Jiggorrhax found a split-second's worth of time to smirk.

"I'd rather die by my own flame!" he said and then he morphed to his immense dragon form, majestic and fierce, but his legs and half his torso were already gone.

Jiggorrhax drew a breath and without hesitation, he spilled the fullness of the same fiery breath that mended Aigas' Rules onto himself in attempt to burn away the death creeping upon his life!

It worked. Death was stalled, kept at bay, but it was only a matter of time before Jiggorrhax ran out of energy to burn himself. He could afford to spare his breath for a time though. His flames kept burning on his body, warding away the death.

Grim was relieved.

But now he had to defend the dragon while simultaneously finding a way to kill the Fiends.

How did one kill death?

It was impossible.

But... was it?

First was what Asthon had told him in the Permanent Haven.

"The man who created your Hidden Class only made it so that he could mimic the effect of beasts instead of becoming them. I think he could have done it, but perhaps he was afraid of becoming a beast. He was afraid of becoming something inhuman, wholly man and wholly beast. Are you afraid of that too, Grim?"

Two things sprang up in Grim's mind at that moment.

And then there was something that Skullius had said. It meant much more to Grim and made more sense now that he was in this perilous position.

"I call it the Impossible Task because it initially seems impossible. Facing a thousand of yourself all capable of responding and evolving like you... that would be impossible for most. But what I hope for you all to do is the impossible. That's why the saying goes "Between a rock and a hard place, not between a rock and a marshmallow." Hmm. I don't know where that came from, but it's fitting."

...And it was as though Grim saw himself and his dilemmas in a different light.

Right. Was he really afraid to toe the line between human and beast?

No. He wasn't, but even better than that...

'What's wrong with being both? What's wrong with going crazy as a man-beast and not having to worry if I'll find myself again? I'm not that complicated of a man anyway. I have no complex past, no complex ideology. I have nothing to lose.'

An Impermanence Fiend's fist blasted towards him right then while two others spat a Death's Tides from his flanks.

The Unlimited Star remembered one moment during the Impossible Task when thirty Grims had been rushing him while using all of his beast forms from every direction. There had been no option for escape back then. As such, Grim hadn't chosen to escape.

He assumed the same mentality right then.

What did he have at his disposal?

Death.

How could one use death?

Well... to kill.

Grim's pupil's constricted.

He pushed his own fist against that of the massive Impermanence Fiend with all his might.

When the two fists met... the power and momentum in one of them died completely.

The troll-like Impermanence Fiend reeled. Its fist simply lost all its imposing characteristics and went still. While it was dazed, Grim used Granted Warp to appear on its neck. He jammed his hand into its flesh and propped two fingers up its neck.

"Nos Aggrante."

The Fiend's head exploded from the inside, shattering into ugly pieces.

...But it still didn't die.

Aggrante wasn't enough, Grim knew.

...But Death showed him the way.

Death was not entirely loyal to the Impermanence Fiends after all, just like time wasn't entirely loyal to the Chronocle Fiend!

Death rushed into his eyes and even though Grim didn't process it right then, he had gained a skill – a Supreme Skill.

[Death's Apprentice: Three Strings]. It wasn't a normal Supreme Skill, however.

The Unlimited Star's vision was pulled towards the elusive, throbbing organ deep within the Impermanence Fiend, located just below where its navel would have been!

"I see!" he said.

In a barbaric show, he changed into a vicious, shaggy red beast with great claws and tore his way into the Impermanence Fiend's body. He broke apart every part of its unusual flesh and chomped on the ball-shaped throbbing organ. It looked like a peeled orange, only, with pink, ghoulish flesh laced with ripe death. This was the source of its powers and how it kept death as a companion and a weapon.

His body laced with death as well, Grim chewed on it hungrily, and swallowed.

A distance away from him, the Paradox Parody thrummed.

One Impermanence Fiend had been proven impermanent. Grim grinned with glee. For a moment, he wasn't Grim anymore. As he tore of the Fiend's corpse, which faded into some form of cosmic dust, he assumed his human form again.

Jiggorrhax had been left to fend off against the Death's Tide shower on his own, but he didn't complain. The Impermanence Fiends no longer cared for him. He warped away and watched as Grim stormed towards the rest of them, crazed. They were stunned by the death of their companion.

How had the little life-filled creature managed that?

They hissed and attacked Grim at once, using the remnants of Jiggorrhax's destroyed world as footing. They knew they couldn't hide from Grim as they could do with him, after all.

Grim tensed his naked arm and dark claws appeared at the end of each of his fingers. Death was a great companion. No. It was a great master.

He jumped to meet the enemies and swiped with his claws meaningfully at the air.

Instantly, two of the Fiends were violently slashed by quick, fangs of unseen death!

Their torsos, right up to where their navels would have been, were carved away in a blink... and they perished instantly.

The rest wore ugly, furious faces. Grim only laughed maniacally at them and assumed a huge serpentine shape as he streaked towards them.

But his enemies weren't done yet. They had more tricks.

Grim sensed an invisible pressure waft from them like a hot spray of air, with a taste of dust. He might have suddenly been placed in an invisible desert. But as the enemies kept coming, Grim aimed to meet and kill them.

...Until an invisible assailant knocked him so hard that he streaked several thousand kilometers away from Aigas!

But Grim used Granted Warp to teleport back in less than a second... only to receive a nasty blunt blow to his serpentine jaw. He spun and crashed against a piece of sky left from Jiggorrhax's second attempted world!

Grim's head was almost a pancake by then. The force behind the blows was serious.

'What type of death ability is this? I can't see where the attacks are coming from even when I focus death into my eyes,' Grim thought while bleeding profusely from the mouth. The Impermanence Fiends were following after him every time he received the hard blows.

Were they not the ones beating him with those attacks?

Another fierce blow broke a large piece of his serpentine body and sent him spiralling elsewhere in the void.

"Urghhhhh!" Grim roared in pain. The dense taste and smell of dust followed him everywhere.

What was this?

But then things got worse. He felt death's loyalty wane. His body had finally reached its limit while adopting the properties of death.

'Now is a pretty bad time for this!' he thought, aggrieved. But his scales were starting to disintegrate and his flesh was beginning to look less... lively. 'Damn it! Just how many times am I supposed to evolve and break past my limits?'

As he thought this, the Impermanence Fiends were on him again. He was forced to return to his human form and deactivate the properties of death Paradox Parody gave him.

Was Aggrante all he had now to fight off the Impermanence Fiends?

Was all hope lost?

"GRIM!" The call was so loud in his head that Grim had to grimace. He searched for its source and found a small bird streaking upwards, heading for the Chronocle Fiend which was being stalled by one of the Fruit Bearers.

The old bird gave him a wave with a wing before accelerating.

A brass ring teleported over him, and before he crossed it...

"FLY, YOU FOOL!"

Grim caught on immediately. He lunged forth in flight and then used Granted Warp to appear right beside Asthon. The old bird coated him with his Nitros... and then they both passed the brass ring. They streaked with fierce alacrity towards the Chronocle Fiend!

None could perceive how quickly they pierced the void!

As they coursed, a Permanent Haven appeared Grim, a giant orb of life energy, almost akin to a giant pearl on the outside.

It headed for the Chronocle Fiend and smashed it in the face before it could react. The creature grunted in annoyance. It had lost a tooth, but was unharmed.

...Until the Haven opened up.

A great serpent head came out of the cavity in a flash, lunging to bite a huge chunk off the Fiend's cheek and devour!

Grim hurried back into the Permanent Haven, which closed.

It indeed had some resistance against the Chronocle Fiend's abilities. Back when Jiggorrhax and the Fruit Bearers were fending it off while the rest were in Asthon's Haven, they hadn't been siphoned off their time, he had noticed.

Naturally, that meant they were safe this time around too.

Indeed.

Grim was overjoyed. He wore a broad grin. The Paradon Parody, which he assumed Asthon had temporarily left to Azila and the others for protection, was already processing the properties of the Chronocle Fiend; time was a lesser concept than death, after all and required less prerequisites.

"We're almost there, Asthon! You did it! I would have died if it weren't for—" Grim said excitedly, but suddenly stopped mid-sentence.

He was suddenly ejected from the Haven.

He found himself falling leagues away from the Fiend... and then he saw the slowly crumbling Permanent Haven. Its pieces wound and poured into one singular point that formed an old, little bird. The bird spread its wings, almost helplessly... or maybe in a gesture of surrender... or maybe freedom.

It rapidly grew smaller and smaller in size before turning into a dark egg.

...And then even that vanished into nothingness.

Grim, watching with a lost expression, heard a few words ring in his head before he could understand what had happened.

"You were right. In the end, I did the thing I feared I'd die before doing. I did the impossible, all because of that damned mouth of yours! Hahaha! Direction repaid me well. So now, finish it, Grim, and make my long, meaningless life a little more meaningful."

Chapter 1428 Finish It (4)

1428 Finish It (4)

Indeed, Asthon's Permanent Haven had some resistance to the powers of the Chronocle Fiend, but the reason wasn't what Grim had imagined. It wasn't because it was some special place with just that much of a uniqueness to it. Well, one could have worded it that way.

The reason was because... like a real world, the Permanent Haven was made of Asthon's own body. Any harm that was to befall the people inside the Haven had to interact with Asthon first and only when he was bested, would they be cast to harm.

When he had used the Permanent Haven the first time, the blows that banged on the Haven had reached him first, causing him pain none could have imagined. But it was of no consequence to the old bird as long as what he hoped to see was done.

His Permanent Haven could only be erected as many times as the Crown and Star were aglow. He had already expended a massive amount of energy with everything he tackled in his Haven the first time.

By the second... he wasn't able to bring forth the Haven's fullest output. He had been tired. Very tired.

But he soldiered on.

"You were right. In the end, I did the thing I feared I'd die before doing. I did the impossible, all because of that damned mouth of yours! Hahaha! Direction repaid me well. So now, finish it, Grim, and make my long, meaningless life a little more meaningful."

Grim realised only half of all these reasons as he flew down, as he watched the old bird get rewound – unmade.

'I see...' he thought, and he looked behind him, where Azila, Hauza and the rest of the guardian beasts were surrounding Paradon Parody protectively, on their faces hard, trembling and cracking expressions. They had known before Grim what had been about to happen. 'I see...'

The tangles and strings that made the Chronocle Fiend dwindled. It grew smaller. A sense of urgency rushed through it. In the next instance... it detonated.

Or perhaps, more aptly defined, it applied the reversal of time on itself, and recreated the cataclysmic event that occurred when it was formed. Tendrils of chaotic Exotic Parlous Natures rushed out as it unwound, with giant cords of Consternals colliding and spinning against massive blocks of a dead world; corpses that had been that world's cache of living organisms could be seen flying about.

The Parlous Natures that flared then brought about horrific calamity. They were thousands of times more dangerous than the meteor shower. Even the Impermanence Fiends had to steer clear from the explosions, the flying debris, the cold, electric effects of Divine phenomena...

Jiggorrhax rushed towards the guardian beasts and the Paradon Parody and shielded them with his great wings.

But Grim couldn't have brought himself to flee. He was bathed in the cruel amalgamation of violence.

As it all ripped, scorched, butchered, shocked and bore into him, Grim gave the Chronocle Fiend... and the event that was its chaotic birth a silent, cruel glare.

There was grief in that glare.

The Paradon Parody, a shadow of the Stolen Angel, shone right then, deep within Jiggorrhax's embrace.

And then it was done.

Tendrils of greenish-white formed all around Grim, devouring him and the Granted Star Armament. They formed a cocoon... which was then devoured in turn by a blaze of death. The cocoon wasn't resistant to the violent Exotic Parlous Natures. It was rippled, slashed, burned and whacked around. But it held.

And then...

"Chrona Aggrante."

It was a soft, calm voice which came from the cocoon, but the bold beam of blue light that blasted out of it was anything but soft and calm. Branches of whirling greenish-white like lightning followed after it, involving themselves with the collapsing chaos gushing everywhere.

...And that chaos was forced back, reversed in time back towards its source!

Everything that happened followed the pace of the beam of Aggrante. The reversal of time, represented by the snaking bands of green was connected to the fierce, vengeful blast of condensed Nitros and mana. It pulled everything scattered from the Chronocle Fiend and in a second, the Chronocle Fiend was re-formed.

It was stumped when it found itself whole again.

It would have automatically formed itself back in a matter of seconds – when it was sure the enemies would have been vanquished.

But all didn't go according to plan.

The Fiend searched for the cause.

Someone had rewound it. That was supposed to be impossible.

Time was supposed to be loyal to it!

But no. Time had no master. Quite like death, it had apprentices. Many apprentices.

The figure freshly shed from the cocoon of greenish-white, staring up at the Chronocle Fiend, was an apprentice of both death and time. Its upper body was wholly human, if only thrice as large. It had thick, hairy arms that protruded from a black cuirass with shining stars drawn on it. Its hair was a collection of animal shapes, pristine white, snapping and fighting against themselves. Its eyes were fierce, fatal and crimson. There was not a shred of mercy within them.

Its lower body was that of a shaggy black canine beast with thick, powerful legs ending in large, lethal claws. Death ran in those furs, thicker and stronger than before.

This was a new form of the Esurient Hoarder: the King of Unforgiving Impermanence. Time and death danced within Grim's body. Time offset the lethal effect of death in his body, allowing Grim to use it for longer, and death empowered the powers of time. Time and Death were not enemies after all. They were companions.

And thus, for the minute that (assured by Suzamete's boost from earlier) he could use this astounding power, Grim made sure to finish it, as Asthon wanted.

The Chronocle Fiend was shuddering. The Impermanence Fiends were paling.

The former made to turn tail, but Grim extended his hand.

He felt inspired. Rage and grief were motivators, he knew.

Tendrils of greenish-white whipped from his hands and danced around his fingers. But the effect was applied on the enemy far away with haste.

The Chronocle Fiend was duplicated, then triplicated, then quadruplicated, then quintuplicated and so on and so forth. Funny enough, Grim using the Chronocle Fiend's own energy to accomplish this feat.

It still had its hands on the cords of time pulled from the great void. Versions of the Fiend from the past were siphoned and layered over each other in a stream that went up and up and away.

...And then Grim snapped his fingers.

The Fiend at the very end of the stream brandished one of its spears against the one before it. It slammed down hard with all its might!

The Fiend that had been hit did the same to the one in front of it. The blow was twice as strong.

The one struck retaliated against the next, and then the next, and the next... all the way up to the original Chronocle Fiend, which had been made to watch as the cascading spear strikes grew stronger and stronger and then...

The last blow came. The Chronocle Fiend's face warped in horror. It had grown smaller and smaller the more of its power Grim used. But its duplicates' size had remained the same.

The spear that was meant to strike it was over fifty times its size and as it came down... the Fiend was blasted to bits smaller than atoms.

That was its end.

...And then it was the Impermanence Fiends' turn.

They were braver than the Chronocle Fiend. They used the same technique which had vexed Grim before – unseen blows that he couldn't avoid.

But now Grim saw through it.

The Fiends conjured a dimension of death – a bland desert – so dense and complex that he hadn't been able to see it before. It was called the Restless Graveyard.

Grim had existed in this dimension. It even moved around to accommodate his movements, but it simply didn't interact with anything else in the wider reality. The things that attacked him were the carcasses of all the victims the Impermanence Fiends had ever killed. They were stored in this dimension. Monsters as strong as they were, and even a few who were a bit stronger.

The Restless Graveyard was in effect again. This time, Grim saw them all.

Large carcasses and small ones, roaring and wailing. They didn't stink of undeath. They were not animated with some cruel desire to kill the living. It was this dimension that was puppeteering their corpses, using them against the enemy.

But the corpses needed not be marionetted for much longer.

"The boss would find this sight sickening, I bet," said Grim passionlessly and then he pointed three fingers in front of him, and the charging husks. "Chrona Aggrante." The dimension was pierced through by the Aggrante while the bands of time reversal forced the corpses back into the desert sands.

When the Impermanence Fiends saw their dimension collapse, their fervour died immediately. But that was their end too.

Dark red claws protruded from the ends of his fingers and he swiped at the air... finishing it.

Chapter 1429 Another Time, Another Whim

1429 Another Time, Another Whim

'You were very ambitious, Asthon. More than I thought. I also misjudged your intent. You were a bit more selfish than you appeared,' said Azila, sitting down in the sky-themed domain. He was watching the chilling scene happening before Suzamete. Everyone, for some reason, observed silence. 'The path you made for us isn't cheap, but I get it now. Through a Territory and the creatures that form within it, we can learn to adopt mutations and Classes. But even then, we'll need a conduit, like Grim's Paradox Parody.'

He frowned.

'But... I suppose it can't be harder on us than it is on him.'

He was looking at Grim who had jerking and puking blood from all of his facial orifices. Yuyui was beside him, patting his back. The Esurient Hoarder had returned to his normal human form, but he looked worse than hell.

He refused to let Suzamete relieve him of his pain. It was obvious why. It was written all over his face.

His cheeks were traced with trails of crimson, as were the sides of his neck and his chin.

He was kneeling in a pool of his own blood.

Yuyui didn't know what to say anymore. She only hoped Grim didn't actually let himself die from blood loss. For an expert of his calibre, he'd have to choose to die that way.

Finally, the pour of blood ended.

Grim laid flat on his back against the canvas of crimson, looking up at the endless sky.

His lips trembled and tears dribbled from the edge of his bloodshot eyes. He drew in deep, hoarse breaths.

<It came at a great cost, I know.> Suzamete said. <It's a miracle that someone of your level can match the power of an average Chronocle Fiend. That is Divine power. Even with the amplification I gave you, it wouldn't have been possible without your inspiration, and Asthon's complex design. But even then...>

"I know," said Grim with a broken voice. "I'll wish I was dead after each use of that power."

<It's worse than that. Your body has grown a bit weaker. The next time you use the Paradox Parody to access that new form, you might actually die.>

Grim gnashed his teeth.

It hurt to hear that, but the feeling in his heart was worse. He wasn't sure why he was feeling like this himself.

Hadn't he just met Asthon?

Had Asthon really meant that much to him in the end? Yes. The answer was yes, and that was a damn shame.

The old bird and Grim had connected on a level he wasn't sure he would ever connect with anyone ever again. It was a short-lived connection, but it was extremely powerful. Man and beast had become thick and thieves in a matter of minutes. Trials tended to do have that effect.

The pain that burned Grim's heart was the yearning he held towards making that connection he had with Asthon last longer.

Why did that bastard just submit to death so easily?

Why did he suffer such a crude, gloryless death?

"Then I guess I have to get stronger," he said. His eyes were misty.

There was another bout of silence.

Jiggorrhax was sitting opposite Yuyui, on Grim's other side. He had assumed his human form, and was whole and well. Grim had purged the effect of Death's Tide on him before his time with King of Unforgiving Impermanence ended.

The dragon was watching Grim's grief with impassive eyes.

The Unlimited Star turned to look at Suzamete's incomprehensible figure.

"Can you really not bring him back?" he asked in a voice so soft, it might have not been real at all.

Suzamete had entertained this question more than twice since the group had returned to her domain. Grim found it hard to believe that with all her power she couldn't bring back that small, passionate bird.

Words would not suffice, Suzamete knew. Thus, she called forth one of her Fruit Bearers. He pulled his cart as he approached her. She must have given him some directive, because a moment later, a rift opened behind him and he went through it into Aigas.

Less than ten seconds later, he came back through the same rift and parked his cart in front of the Deitess. Everyone except Jiggorrhax watched curiously. The Fruit Bearer extracted a soul – one of a small woman with short hair – from his cart and offered it to Suzamete. The Deitess took the soul in her hand and what might have been a mouth opened on what must have been her face. She deposited the soul into it.

...!!!

Gasps and gapes flew about.

Suzamete looked at everyone one by one, appreciating their shocked faces.

They were all wondering why she had just devoured the poor soul. Of course they were. To normal humans, it was unusual. Why would she do that?

Jiggorrhax was surprised the Deitess would show them all this just to prove a point. It was unnecessary as far as he could reason.

<This soul I just devoured is from someone who was injured terribly during one of the battles between the remains of the Capital Service and a force of the Cavern in Pelian. One of the duties of my Fruit Bearers is to collect the souls of people like this, incapacitated, very ill, or near death. I feed on them to make myself stronger. All Deities – especially those involved in partnerships in the creation of a world – do this to increase their power; to regain the power they expend on their creations; or to give the poor, suffering souls a chance at being remade in another time, another world, another whim... Two of these are some of the selfish reasons Deities create worlds.>

Grim sat up, gaping. Yuyui opened her mouth to speak, but her worlds failed her.

Azila staggered.

"You... you eat the souls...?" Hauza stuttered, but everyone else seemed to have caught onto something more significant than that.

<Normally, the souls of the dead go to the Yormuness, where they are tended to by Spirits. The mechanism Quintess, Listafelle and I created will not allow us to touch any souls that have already passed on to the Yormuness, as a rule. We can't resurrect them either. It's part of the stringent limitations that come with creating a world in the great void.> Suzamete explained. <The

Yormuness and my nourishment are the standard fates that await all souls I oversee in the end. Well, unless you count the involvement of anomalies or other Divines.>

Grim struggled to his feet. His face looked like how a wet towel felt.

"So, Asthon..." he began.

Suzamete allowed a pause and then she spoke.

<Asthon was waiting for one thing since he attached himself to the Royans. He was glad to die as long as he saw it happen. I allowed him to temper with the powers of humans, Sif and Giants back then, just so I could see how his story ended. But the end of that story was obscured with Boron's rise. Even I couldn't have known how he would die; if he would ever accomplish what he hoped – for other beasts and for his own selfish interest. But I do know that being revised and rewound wasn't the kind of extinction he would have hoped for. So...>

Grim's eyes grew wide. Even Jiggorrhax was taken aback. He had not expected that.

"What... you mean..." Grim stuttered. Hope flared in his eyes.

<In time, perhaps his essence will find its way into another little bird, wise, rebellious, cunning.> Suzamete said, but then her tone changed. She refused to spell it out for those who weren't keen enough to catch on. <But now isn't the time for mourning. The drapes of time need to be fixed. I need you to be strong, Grim.>

The Unlimited Star wore a small smile. He was one of those who caught on.

He couldn't have asked for too much more than this. Blood leaked from the edge of his mouth. He wiped it away.

"Right," he said and with a thought, he manifested the Paradon Parody. "Let's do it. Let's finish it."

Yuyui looked at him a little enviously. She nudged him on the arm.

"And you were getting all cranky about not finding your chance to shine against Nigerra," she said with a grin. "Bitter loser."

Grim chuckled.

"Yeah, I might just take a peek into the past to see how stupid I looked with all that bitterness," he said.

A vibration coursed from Suzamete right then that startled them all.

At first Grim thought it was because he had fibbed about time travelling for such a fickle reason, but he soon discovered that he was wrong.

Suzamete... gave a bark of laughter.

<Of course he was alive!> she exclaimed. <Just the variable we need!>

She saw something none of those in her domain saw. She saw someone approach Aigas – someone previously thought lost to the great void.

They would change the whole course of the Aigas' fate. Yes, indeed.

Chapter 1430 Summoning The Houses

1430 Summoning The Houses

Aingor was the last Herald of the three governing Deities. He ranked second among the three, or rather, when there had still been three Heralds on Aigas (in the present time).

There had always been rumours about beings who ruled the Severed Union from the sidelines. They were only partly true. It wasn't multiple individuals, but only one: the Herald Aingor and his faceless Emissary.

He was far more active than Erlton, the Reader.

He implemented ideas that he thought would help Aigas in present and future.

He was the one who established the Severed Union, an organisation that – aside from harbouring some of the vilest living beings on Aigas – was also responsible of making sure the great continents of Feinheath and Opungale did not get assaulted by horrors, Cluster beasts for the most part, that went untended from the seas and regions unknown.

The Severed Union also made sure it never got too peaceful on the two great continents. south of Aigas. Bandits would constantly invade and kill, keeping up the vigilance.

Aingor thought a bit of death and suffering would keep experts active and wary. Sure, it worked for the first few centuries after the Ashing of Time, but as time barrelled on, he could only say the initiative had dwindling returns.

Aingor was also the one responsible for tempering with human history records around Feinheath and Opungale. He was the reason why humans and Sif thought the end of the First Grand War came about with the complete defeat of the Giants.

He was also the one who made Maqi believe that during Fulgardt's reign of terror in the Second Grand War, the Sif had sat still, choosing not to land a hand to the humans on Feinheath at all.

None of the aforementioned was not true, of course, but Aingor had believed that when the time was right, it would be beneficial to plunge Aigas into a great war again, stimulating growth, especially with the second falsehood he created. (The one about the Sif.)

Skullius had put a pause to that when he was possessed by Fulgardt's WILLS, and then Boron had forced the matter away entirely with the chaos he had created now.

But now Aingor had no more ideas to implement.

What he had sent Guissepo with was not his own mandate. It was one he was given directly by Suzamete.

Guissepo was to help quell the situation on Aigas.

One of the messages he was sent to Pherdanta with was playing a role at this very moment.

The five Houses of Pelian, fighting forces above the Families, had gathered and were conversing with Pherdanta and her group.

It was Agnees Kudobtu who was playing host to the meeting. She was the head of the Kudobtu House. It really helped that she knew Skullius. When the Great Trembling began, King Royan had called on the Six Houses – excluding the EverSwords, of course – and ordered Agnees Kudobtu and Braxten Shannazah to go to Opungale to help the Sif against the Maqian forces.

She and Braxten had ended up helping Maxim and Vali defend Skullius' Preeminent Attegoth while he was fighting the Ode.

The five heads of the Houses were seated upon their own prestigious chairs in the luxurious room. Opposite them were Pherdanta, Maxim, Vali, Guissepo, the old Priest from a past Aigas, and Ferex.

"So let me get this straight," Shura Desmonn said. He was a harsh-looking man with a face so heavy with hairs he might not have been 100% human, "all this information comes from Suzamete herself through a Herald, but even she isn't sure if that's how it will go?"

He was frowning. The identity of Guissepo hadn't been easy for him or anyone else to swallow. Suddenly, this man who had caused this whole mess was supposed to help them solve it?

How did that make any sense?

But at the very least, all five House heads could settle down and listen to the proposal.

There was no denying that some supernatural intervention had helped Guissepo and the rest find even one of the dwellings of a House. They were ancient households build during the Second Grand War. Nothing short of Supreme skills or Transcendent grade artefacts could find them. It was Aingor who had advised Guissepo where to have Pherdanta and the Stark Troops look.

"That's right," Pherdanta took the reins. Guissepo had done his part. "Because a Deity stronger than Suzamete is here, she isn't able to ascertain the future precisely. She can see a countless number of possibilities. In one of them, something goes terribly wrong if the Under is left unaddressed. Boron is planning something. There are crystals here on Aigas that serve a purpose we are yet to ascertain, and then there's something brewing down below."

"A sizable force is required to tend to what's happening in the Under. I and the Stark Troops may suffice, but we just don't know what might happen. To be safe, your combined powers are needed. You won't need to worry about the surface. My allies are here and there are more than enough to keep Pelian, Emeradis and Maqi from falling."

Shura gave Pherdanta a sharp look. He couldn't sense anything from her, but given how she was the supposed leader of the troupe he had seen outside, she couldn't have been weaker than him. The fact that she had managed to reign in Vali Kinn and Maxim Flatbed was also impressive in his eyes. Thus, Shura toned down his abrasive attitude.

A man dressed in a series of atrocious colours barked in laughter.

"Come now. If a Deity tells us to jump, we jump! This isn't like that order from Royan the Fool!" Braxten Shannazah said joyfully. He too had been in Opungale and was an acquaintance of Skullius.

"How can you decide something like that ficklely? Even if the surface remains safe, we may just be walking to our deaths, right?" said a rough-skinned, gangly woman.

Illyinni was her name, and Wolverik was her House.

Her prestige was as great as that of the EverSwords who had turned traitor. She turned to Pherdanta with suspicious eyes. She might have hoped to intimidate her with her peak Incandescent Stage presence. "What guarantee do we have that we will survive at the very least? Suzamete is a Deity. Can she not bring us back to life after we die? I'd like a guarantee of that sort in writing, and then I'll follow you into the sun, if you want."

Vali and Maxim rolled their eyes.

Pherdanta expression didn't change.

"I'm all the guarantee that you need," she said sternly. "None of you need to take charge or split off into branches that will risk themselves in the possible danger we will find. That duty will be for me and my Stark Troops. As long as you allow me to perform that duty, you will not die."

"Hahahaha!" Illyinni chortled. "That's a tall, bold declaration, young woman! Hahahahaha!" Her laughter soared... and then it slowed. She found that she was laughing alone.

Agnees, Braxten, Shura and Morde were scanning Pherdanta seriously.

She didn't blink or dodge their piercing stares.

"You're serious?" Illyinni said, frowning. She couldn't believe everyone was taking this woman seriously.

"Well, if a Herald has confidence in you... I'll buy into your confidence for a while," said Shura. "But what of this he said"- he pointed at Guissepo – "about going into the Under. There is one entrance, right? Where this Formula thing used to be. How are we supposed to use it if that's where Boron likely is? We'd be obliterated in a breath, wouldn't we?"

"That is... extravagantly true," Guissepo confirmed and then he turned to Pherdanta. "We can't use that entrance into the Under. We have to make a new one. Rather, she has to."

For the first time, Pherdanta looked less confident in herself.

She knew. A mortal like her could create an entrance into the Under.

Or rather, the Infinite Sword God could.

The technique she needed was not simple, however, and she wasn't sure she'd master it quickly enough.

Pherdanta needed to learn the trick that allowed her master's possessed self – Festos – to match the near-Divine Warmoth's Progeny in the battle that shook Aigas hours ago!