

The Sun 351

Chapter 351 – The Outside

?The group walked towards the exit of Crimson City.

Nick wanted to know if anybody was following them, but that wasn't possible right now since his teammates were also looking at him.

Nick walked near the front, together with Clayton.

Behind the two of them were Petra and Jason, walking side-by-side but with a bit more distance than there was between Nick and Clayton.

Jenny was in the middle, in the back.

The positioning of the team wasn't related to authority but to where everyone would be most useful during a battle.

If one looked at their position from above and drew a couple of lines, one could see that the five of them were walking in an upside-down pentagram formation.

Jenny was well-defended at the back, and nobody could approach them from the front or the sides.

After a bit, they reached the bridge.

There were four Johns guarding the exit of the city, making sure that no normal people or Newbies left.

The outside world was extremely dangerous and leaving would be akin to suicide for most people.

Nick approached one of the guards and showed a sheet of paper to him.

The guard read through the paper, nodded, motioned for his colleagues to step to the side, and stepped to the side himself.

After the guards stepped to the side, the guard nodded at Nick. "Good luck out there," he said.

Nick nodded, and his group walked past the guards onto the bridge.

The bridge was only two meters wide, which meant that the group had to shrink their formation.

As the five of them walked across the bridge, their Barriers activated.

Even though the bridge kept most of the red mist at bay, a bit of it still floated across the bridge.

Luckily, they could survive this little bit of mist.

As they walked across the bridge, they felt quite claustrophobic due to the gigantic red "walls" surrounding the bridge.

"Can we walk faster?" Clayton asked in a deep voice from beside Nick. "My Barrier is using more Zephyx than I like."

Nick glanced at Clayton, turned to the team, and motioned forward.

The next moment, they sped up and ran across the bridge.

Nick still felt like he was walking at a comfortable speed, but the three Initial Johns were already running with a lot of power.

About a minute later, they reached the end of the bridge.

Since all Extractors in Dark Dream were required to have a certain level of fitness, none of them had run out of stamina.

One had to remember that advancing a level only increased the multiplier of one's base strength.

A scrawny Peak Newbie who barely moved daily might not be stronger than a top athlete who wasn't an Extractor.

While not every Extractor in Dark Dream had the physique of an athlete, the weakest among them were at least used to running for about ten minutes every day.

The five of them were highly interested in how the outside world looked like and looked around.

Sadly, they only found themselves in a corridor.

This corridor had been created to keep people from looking backward and accidentally seeing the Crimson Sea.

There were two people standing guard where the corridor met the bridge, and they just glanced at the team of five with a bit of interest.

The guards on this side of the bridge were vastly more powerful, with both of them being Experts.

The entire city only had a bit more than 80 Experts, and only about 20 of them worked for the city at a time.

Having two Experts stationed here meant that 10% of all Experts were stationed here.

This showed how serious Crimson City was taking the city's entrance.

Although, it actually made sense.

While the two Experts guarding Kugelblitz's entrance didn't make the most sense, guarding the entrance of the city seemed to be a sensible thing.

The two guards didn't ask any questions after seeing Nick.

By now, most Experts and Veterans had seen Nick before and knew who he was.

Someone of Nick's profile wouldn't sneak out of the city.

He was just too recognizable.

The group of five walked past the guards and walked through the corridor.

After about ten meters, the even floor turned into stairs.

Crimson City was on top of a cauldron filled with ruins, but there was also a natural earthen wall surrounding that cauldron.

The earthen wall was around ten meters high and was essentially just a hill that surrounded the city.

After a couple of stairs, the five of them reached the top, and they could already see the exit.

The five of them walked forward and stepped out of the corridor.

When they left the corridor, they had officially left Crimson City for the first time in their lives.

Less than 1% of people would ever see the outside.

And they were finally part of these select few people.

Beside the entrance were four Veterans, all focusing on the endless world before them.

Jenny, Petra, Clayton, and Jason took deep breaths as they saw the outside world for the first time.

It was so big!

It was endless!

They could always see the end of the city from the roof of any building, and the city had been their world for all their lives.

This meant that they had always been able to see the end of their world.

But now, they could no longer see the end of their world.

The next thing that hit them was the sheer lack of metal.

There was absolutely no metal visible anywhere!

Just dirt, sand, and stone.

Almost everything that the eye could see was either light-

brown earth, light-brown dust, yellow sand, or grey stone.

There were dusty valleys, stony hills, and mounds of sand.

That was it.

That was the world.

Plants?

No.

Animals?

No.

Buildings?

No.

People?

Extremely few.

Life?

Almost nonexistent.

If one got rid of all of the life within Crimson City and left behind a world of metal, there would be just as much life inside the city as outside the city.

The world was huge and endless...

But also pointless and lifeless.

Except for the Specters and their minions.

Chapter 352 – Two Adversaries

?However...

Nick narrowed his eyes as he looked at something very noticeable about two kilometers away.

Just because there were no plants didn't mean that there weren't things looking like plants.

In the endless pointlessness of dust and dirt was a lush green forest with a beautiful lake in the middle.

All in all, the forest was about twenty meters wide.

There were fish, birds, trees, fruits, berries, and beautiful water in the small forest.

It was brimming with life and vitality.

Sadly, this entire forest was the doing of a Specter.

There were no plants, animals, fish, or whatever in the forest.

All of these things were created with Zephyx, and they all only looked like their real counterparts.

The forest was essentially a three-dimensional cardboard cutout of a house.

There was nothing to be gained by entering one of these forests.

Anyone who entered one of these forests would be consumed by the Specter.

Naturally, before Nick had left the city, he had researched the outside as much as he could.

Information about the outside world was not kept confidential.

These small forests were all over the world, according to the information Nick had gathered.

While the existence of these forests was not secret, the closer details were.

Luckily, Nick, thanks to his position as Chief Zephyx Extractor, had the authority to access classified information.

After all, Crimson City wanted the city to capture and suppress more Specters, and keeping vital information about the outside world secret would only result in unnecessary death.

Of course, people with access to the information were not allowed to give that information to just anyone.

They were supposed to handle the information on a need-to-know basis when talking to their Extractors.

So, while Nick knew about the Specter behind these forests, he couldn't tell his team since knowing the Specter's background wouldn't increase or decrease the group's chance of survival.

The forest was created by the False Hope, an extremely powerful Specter.

In fact, it was an Adversary, a level eight Specter, just one level below an Eternal.

These forests were all over the world, and all of them led to death.

The False Hope gained power by consuming life.

The distinction between gaining power by consuming life and by killing people was important.

Since the False Hope gained power by consuming life, it also became more powerful by killing animals and plants.

Luckily, the False Hope was doomed to never become an Eternal.

After all, there was no more life left, and every human that could be found outside the city would never enter one of these forests.

The False Hope was stuck at its current level.

According to Aegis, the False Hope didn't have sentience, which meant that it wouldn't just suddenly change its approach.

For all eternity, the False Hope would destroy its forests and create new ones in other places, doomed to never reap another life.

But what about the life inside the city?

Couldn't some seeds or animals from the city leave and rebuild in the outside world, which would then strengthen the False Hope again?

Yes, from time to time, a couple of seeds floated out of a city and started to turn into plants in the surroundings.

However, these plants didn't survive for even a day.

That was due to a second extremely powerful Specter.

Nick saw something moving in the huge dusty valley in front of him.

About a kilometer away, Nick saw something black slowly moving forward.

It was a big black oozy blob.

It was about two meters high and just as wide.

There were five human arms growing out of its front, which were grabbing the ground and pulling the blob forward.

As it moved forward, the blob left a black trail behind, which seeped into the ground, turning it black.

This black blob was a minion of another powerful Adversary.

It was called the Eternal Hunger.

The Eternal Hunger gained power the same way as the False Hope, by devouring life.

However, compared to the False Hope, the Eternal Hunger created these huge black slimes to consume life.

The black slimes scoured the world for all life.

When they sensed something alive, they immediately attacked it.

It didn't matter if they saw humans, animals, or plants.

They attacked everything.

Additionally, the black ooze they left behind poisoned the land, making it even more difficult for plants to grow.

These black oozes were also the main reason why going outside of the city was forbidden for most people.

These black oozes were quite common, and the weakest of them had the power of a Mid Newbie, while the strongest could even reach the power of Veterans.

Luckily, the really strong oozes were exceptionally rare.

The black oozes grew more powerful based on the amount of life they had reaped in their lifetime.

Not only was it difficult for an ooze to grow stronger, but oozes also didn't tend to live long.

The reason was...

The ooze suddenly sped up, shooting forward at a speed of over 100 kph!

It had just found life!

Or did it?

The ooze charged right into the small forest.

BANG!

The ooze exploded as soon as it entered the forest, and the black slime seemed to turn into smoke before completely disappearing.

At the same time, the forest's width shrunk by a couple of centimeters.

This was why these oozes often didn't live for long.

Aegis wasn't sure if the oozes knew that the forests were made by a different Specter or not, but whenever they saw one, they immediately charged in.

When an ooze charged into a forest, both sides would lose a significant amount of Zephyx, and one side would always die.

Either the ooze was destroyed and turned into nothing, or the forest vanished, leaving a smaller ooze behind.

This interaction happened all over the world, and Aegis wasn't completely sure about the reason behind it.

Did the oozes think that the forest was real, or was this some kind of war between two predators that hunted the same prey?

In any case, Aegis wanted more of these interactions to occur since these interactions seemed to weaken the two Specters.

Extractors all over the world were encouraged to lead oozes towards these forests.

Chapter 353 – The Wall

"That was the 24th today," one of the guards said with a smirk to the one beside him. "Six more and I win."

The other guy didn't answer, but his face showed annoyance.

The four people following Nick looked at the spectacle with interest.

Nick had already told them about the forests and these black oozes, and they thought it was quite interesting to watch these things kill each other.

"You ready?" Nick asked his team of four.

The four turned to Nick, nodded, and assumed their positions again.

However, one thing was different this time.

Petra and Jason were not focusing on the front of the group.

Instead, they were more focused on each other and Jenny.

When Nick had tried to come up with a good formation, he had tried to think of any possible weaknesses.

Since Nick was essentially fighting like an assassin, he immediately noticed that Jenny represented a weakness in the formation.

If someone could sneak up from the back, they could take out Jenny without being noticed.

Because of that, Nick decided to change where Petra and Jason were looking.

While Nick and Clayton would focus on the front and the frontal sides, Jenny would focus on Nick and Clayton, and Petra and Jason would focus on Jenny and on each other.

Like this, everyone had somebody watching over them, making it impossible to kill any of them secretly.

Nick threw a glance at the guards, who were standing beside the corridor in front of a wall.

For security reasons, Crimson City had built a two-meter-high wall around the top of the hill surrounding the city.

Ironically enough, this wall wasn't supposed to stop the enemy but their allies.

After all, if one approached the hill and went to its top, one would be able to see the Crimson Sea.

That was a bad thing.

Of course, a two-meter-high wall could even be climbed by many commoners, which made it irrelevant to anyone who could potentially cause damage to Crimson City.

However, these hypothetical enemies could just go ahead and jump over the wall.

But as soon as they did, navigating would become very difficult since they would be on an incline that led to the Crimson Sea.

They would either need to blindly jump over the kilometer-wide gap into the city or blindly find the corridor and bridge.

Or they could just open their eyes, but, well...

While the Crimson Sea had caused many deaths, it actually also served as an amazing tool for the city's defense.

The walls of the old Crimson Fungus City had been extremely tall and durable, and it had been manned by many guards.

The main reason for these walls had been the black oozes.

But now, they didn't need such a strong wall anymore.

The black oozes could easily slosh over the wall, and based on the statements of several guards, the oozes sped up as soon as they reached the top of the small walls, and a couple of seconds later, the sound of something liquid falling into another liquid could be heard.

The Crimson Sea's enticing qualities seemed to also work on the oozes.

The only difference was that the oozes didn't laugh while jumping in.

While the thought of an ooze jumping into the Crimson Sea was quite funny, there was actually still a worrying aspect about it.

The city didn't know how the oozes interacted with the Crimson Sea when it came to Zephyx.

If an ooze fell into the Crimson Sea, did the Crimson Sea's Zephyx increase or decrease?

If it decreased, that would be amazing.

But if it increased...

That could be bad.

Luckily, the oozes were quite weak, and a Fanatic like the Crimson Sea would need countless oozes to become a Demon.

So, even if they increased the Crimson Sea's Zephyx, the city would have enough time to adapt and react.

Additionally, if everything went as expected, the Crimson Sea wouldn't be a problem anymore after a couple of years.

Nick led his group away from the city and stepped into the big valley.

The slope into the valley was quite steep, and the five of them had to slide down, creating a small avalanche of sand and dried earth.

After reaching the bottom, the five of them continued walking forward.

By now, the smell in the air had changed significantly.

The smell of metal and rust that had accompanied everyone for all their lives had vanished, replaced by a dry and dusty smell.

If they were not Zephyx Extractors, they might have coughed.

The group looked over to the forest, which was now only a couple hundred meters away from them.

It looked quite strange.

Only Nick and Jenny were used to the existence of trees since they frequented the Inner City quite a lot, but the other three were still new to them.

Trees were just such a weird concept.

Several meter-tall living, hard brown pillars that breathed with weird green things hanging from them.

That sounded about as creepy as a Specter.

As they continued walking, the smell became pleasant.

It smelled like flowers and clean water.

Naturally, that smell came from the forest.

Everyone except for Nick felt themselves gulping and becoming thirsty.

The only reason Nick wasn't affected was that he was in a constant state of Zephoxis as a Veteran.

Additionally, he hadn't drunk anything in two years.

The only thing he needed to survive was one breath every couple of minutes and Prephyx or Zephyx.

"Where are we going first, boss?" Petra asked from behind Nick after taking a swig from a bottle of water she had brought with her.

"We won't be able to find any Specters close to the city," Nick answered with a neutral tone. "The other Manufacturers have people constantly patrolling the surroundings."

"We can only find Specters about ten kilometers from the city or even further away."

"First, I want to take a look at the Swallowing Swamp. Maybe I can find something out about it."

Chapter 354 – The Infestation

?The five of them followed the valley for several minutes.

They were walking at a fast pace, but they were not running.

It was important to keep a stable formation.

Eventually, they followed a bend in the valley, and the city vanished behind the valley's wall.

The five of them continued walking for another minute before Nick stopped.

"I want to test out the defensive formation," Nick said. "Assume the defensive formation!"

The others nodded and ran to the middle of the formation.

Then, they turned their backs to each other and looked outside, surveying the surroundings.

Meanwhile, Nick jumped over them and landed in the middle of the formation.

Right now, all four of Nick's teammates had their backs turned to him, with a bit over two meters of distance between him and their backs.

Nick had told them that this defensive formation would protect them in case they were surrounded.

Of course, that wasn't the real point of the defensive formation.

When Nick landed in the middle of the defensive formation, he felt his ability reactivate.

Right now, none of his teammates could sense him.

Nick had created this defensive formation for scouting reasons.

Since none of his teammates could sense him, Nick could check if someone was looking at their team, thanks to his ability.

'No one is currently looking at us,' Nick thought as he silently looked at the valley. 'Nobody inside the city knows of my ability, which means nobody is going to purposefully look away from us.'

'The chances of us being followed by someone from the city are very low.'

"Good job. Disperse!" Nick ordered.

Nick's team assumed its normal formation.

"I will regularly call for the defensive formation from now on," Nick said. "This might seem nonsensical to you, but I want to keep you guys focused and ready at all times. Additionally, a sudden and hectic change of position on our part might disorient anyone that's following us, which might result in them exposing themselves."

"Whenever I call for the defensive formation, I want you guys to assemble as if we are about to enter a serious fight. Understood?" Nick asked.

"Yes, boss!" the four of them answered in unison.

"Good. Then, let's continue," Nick said before he continued walking forward.

The group continued walking along the valley for another couple of minutes.

Eventually, Nick stopped and looked at one of the walls for a bit.

"There should be an Infester to the south of here. I think it might be a good idea to look at it. I want us all to see one so that we can avoid any accidents if we see one in the future," Nick said.

Clayton narrowed his eyes while the other three had expressions of interest on their faces.

They also wanted to see one with their own eyes.

"Check your Barriers if they are set for outside," Nick said as he took out a big silver coin from his pocket.

The other four also took out their Barriers to check.

A moment later, everyone put the Barriers back into their pockets and nodded.

When Nick saw that everyone was ready, they went to the cliff face to the south.

The team approached the southern wall and climbed it by rapidly jumping several times.

Nick and Jenny didn't have any issues in climbing the dusty hill, but the other three had to put in quite a bit of effort to outpace the small avalanches below their feet.

About half a minute later, everyone arrived at the top.

Their Barriers were already showing signs of getting lightly triggered occasionally.

The team was now on a relatively even plane, which was just as dusty as the valley.

However, about 200 meters in front of them was something that couldn't look any more noticeable.

It was a ten-meter-tall bloody human spine growing out of the ground.

Dimly shining vessels of blood were crawling up the spine until they touched a big and bloody branch-like outgrowth near the top of the spine.

There were several of these thick and bloody outgrowths, and at the end of each of them was a pair of big human lungs, which were constantly inhaling and exhaling.

A trachea was hanging from each pair of lungs, and the air the lungs were breathing was entering and exiting from these tracheas.

This was an Infester, and it was the minion of a Specter, which was called the Infestation.

The Infestation was not nearly as powerful as the False Hope and the Eternal Hunger.

Additionally, the Infesters, the Infestation's minions, were not everywhere in the world.

The Infesters were only found in a large area to the south of Crimson City.

According to Crimson City, the Infestation was a Fanatic.

The Infestation grew more powerful by transforming human matter into more of itself.

It accomplished that by growing these Infesters all over the place.

The Infesters dispersed invisible spores in a radius of about 200 meters.

Anyone that breathed in these spores would have their mind altered, and they would feel the irresistible desire to approach the Infester and suck on one of the tracheas hanging from the lungs.

This would give them a lethal dose of spores, and their body would "explode" and wrap around the Infester.

Researchers from Crimson City found out that this also worked on corpses, which only needed to be placed near an Infester to trigger the transformation.

Their Barriers had different settings, specifically due to the Infesters.

The spores of the Infesters were not picked up by normal Barriers and were therefore not blocked.

Because of that, it was necessary to have special Barriers when one planned on exploring the outside world.

The group looked at the Infester for a while before they were distracted by something near its base.

There was a group of seven people standing near the bottom of the Infester, their Barriers constantly shining.

As a Fanatic, the Infestation was highly desired by Ghosty's Lab, Anatomy, and Kugelblitz.

All three of these Manufacturers had claimed one Infester for themselves so that they could run experiments on them.

This Infester was the closest to the city and belonged to Kugelblitz, which was also the reason why Nick was okay with coming here.

Out of the big three Manufacturers, Kugelblitz was of the least concern due to Julian's influence over their shareholders and Vernon.

"If you see one of these on our journey, tell me immediately," Nick said before he jumped down into the valley.

"Yes, boss," the others answered before following him.

Chapter 355 – The Corrosive Dust

?The team turned around and went back into the valley, after which they continued towards the east.

They had left Crimson City via the south, which was where the bridge was located.

To the south of the city was the big valley that they had entered earlier, which was about two kilometers wide and about 200 meters deep.

The valley extended towards the south for about two kilometers before it veered off towards the left, which was the east in this case.

The Infester had been to the southern side of the valley, and in terms of distance, it was around three to four kilometers away from Crimson City's entrance.

The valley would continue towards the east for another two kilometers before it bent to the south again and then again to the east.

At that point, the valley would end.

All in all, the valley was around seven kilometers long.

As the team continued traveling along the valley, the amount of dust increased.

From time to time, Jason and Petra coughed while Clayton tried his best to suppress coughs.

Jenny also felt uncomfortable, but she didn't need to cough.

"Don't activate your Barriers for the dust," Nick said after he heard another cough. "We're only going to be this close to the Dust Zone for a couple of minutes."

Nick's Extractors didn't answer but continued following him.

The Dust Zone was a humongous zone filled with corrosive dust to the south of the city.

The Dust Zone started about ten kilometers away from the city and had a round shape with a diameter of a whopping 60 kilometers.

It was by far the biggest landmark near Crimson City.

However, even though the Dust Zone only officially started ten kilometers to the city's south, some of the dust still reached the valley's end, which was about five kilometers away from the Dust Zone.

Naturally, the corrosive dust was produced by a Specter, which was fittingly called the Corrosive Dust.

The Corrosive Dust resided in the middle of the Dust Zone.

The appearance of the actual Specter was kept highly confidential, but it was known that the Specter was a Physical Specter, not a Force Specter.

This meant that it had an actual body that could be touched and moved with one's bare hands.

Only Veterans could survive at the edge of the Dust Zone with their Barriers active for a couple of minutes.

Johns would probably collapse when they were just about to reach the border due to the residual dust in the surroundings of the Dust Zone.

The closer one got to the center, the stronger and thicker the corrosive dust became.

About ten kilometers away from the center, even Specialists would only survive for a couple of minutes with their Barriers.

The Corrosive Dust was a Demon, and since it was also a Physical Specter, it was highly sought after...

By more than one city.

The nearest neighboring city of Crimson City was Darksy City, and it was about 30 kilometers south of the southern border of the Dust Zone.

On a map, Crimson City was about 100 kilometers away from Darksy City, and the Dust Zone covered over 60% of the path between the two cities.

Both cities had more than one Hero, and both of them wanted to claim the Corrosive Dust for themselves.

However, there were several issues.

First of all, the Specter was apparently pretty big, and capturing it had no point if the cities didn't have fitting Containment Units.

Additionally, the Corrosive Dust was definitely not an Initial or Early Demon due to its power.

It was, at least, a Mid Demon or maybe even a Late Demon.

Trying to suppress and capture it would be a huge and risky undertaking since it might even be able to kill some or all of the Heroes.

On top of that, warfare between the cities was basically the same as warfare between Manufacturers.

Aegis made it technically illegal to fight another city, but the cities often did it in secret anyway.

If Crimson City decided to send their Heroes to capture the Corrosive Dust, a Hero from Darksy City might show up and help the Specter out.

And if Aegis asked what happened, Darksy City could just say that they didn't know what happened. The Heroes of Crimson City must have died trying to suppress the Corrosive Dust.

The residual dust near the end of the valley had the same effect on Initial Johns as inhaling some smoke had on normal people.

It was bad, but it wouldn't be dangerous if the exposure wasn't very long.

As the team reached the edge of the valley, they slowly climbed out.

The residual dust was concentrated at the end of the valley due to the lower elevation, and when the team walked out of the valley, their coughing also reduced.

After they left the valley, Nick took note of a couple of hills around them.

The terrain here was rather hilly, and these hills were the reason why Nick had chosen to leave the city in this way.

About two kilometers south of the end of the valley was another Infester, and this one belonged to Anatomy.

While Nick could tell that nobody was following them, he didn't want to be seen by Anatomy's researchers.

They might not plan to kill Nick right now, but if they coincidentally found Nick in the outside world with nobody around...

Walking close to the Infester to be seen was like walking around with one's wallet held in one's hands.

Stealing was illegal, but some people might not be able to help themselves when such a good opportunity presented itself.

Nick had no interest in going further to the south anyway.

The closer one got to the Dust Zone, the more Infesters one would meet.

There were over 15 Infesters located within a three-kilometer radius.

Half of them were inside the Dust Zone, while the other half were outside.

The Infestation had to be located somewhere within that Zone, but no one had ever found it.

And Nick didn't want to be the first one to find the Fanatic.

Chapter 356 – The Swallowing Swamp

Nick and his team carefully navigated around the hills and traveled further to the east.

From time to time, Nick ordered them to assume the defensive formation.

Nick was still certain that nobody was following them.

A bit later, the team found a crater that was about a kilometer wide.

At the bottom of the crater was something that looked completely different from the dry world around it.

It was a purple swamp.

The purple and viscous liquid of the swamp slowly and lethargically bubbled, releasing small black clouds.

Some decaying grass and ferns could be seen on top of the swamp, partially covering it.

As the group stood on the edge of the crater, their Barriers flickered from time to time.

The gas that was released by the swamp was poisonous and would quickly kill normal people.

This was the Swallowing Swamp, a Specter.

"I want to search through it," Nick said as he descended the crater. "You wait up here and keep a lookout of the surroundings. Stay hidden, if possible."

"Yes, Boss," Nick's team said before they went close to some of the hills.

Nick was not worried as he approached the Swallowing Swamp.

The Swallowing Swamp was probably the unluckiest Specter in the world.

It was a Force Specter with a huge body and a powerful ability that could kill normal people and animals from far away.

And yet, it spawned in the middle of this dead world where nobody but powerful Extractors walked around.

Because of that, the Swallowing Swamp was an Initial Hatchling, the weakest Specter.

While it had the potential to kill hordes and armies of animals and people, there simply was nothing to kill.

The Swallowing Swamp had the potential to become as terrifying as the Crimson Sea, and maybe even more terrifying, but it would never be able to realize its potential in this world.

Everyone who had left Crimson City knew about the Swallowing Swamp. After all, it wasn't very difficult to spot.

However, no one had even attempted to suppress and contain it.

The effort and money required to suppress such a huge body of water was vastly bigger than what a mere Initial Hatchling was worth.

Additionally, where would one even keep this huge swamp?

So, the Swallowing Swamp was just left here to keep existing in the lifeless nothingness that was the outside world.

Nick reached the edge of the swamp and stopped.

Nick had deactivated his Barrier for now since the Swallowing Swamp's poison wasn't even nearly strong enough to affect him.

He didn't move for a while and focused on his ability.

From time to time, his ability was activating and deactivating.

After looking around for a bit, Nick could see that this came from Jason occasionally glancing at Nick from one of the edges of the crater.

He was the only one who could see Nick from his position.

A moment later, Nick took one of his shoes off and touched the Swallowing Swamp with his bare foot.

Then, he waited.

When Nick felt his ability activating and deactivating with Jason's looks, he narrowed his eyes.

The fact that his ability was still acting this way could mean only one thing.

The Swallowing Swamp could not perceive Nick, even though he was in physical contact with it.

But that didn't make sense.

After all, the Fog had been able to perceive Nick via touch, and the same thing had been true when the weak Crimson Sea had touched Nick for a bit.

Force Specters still had some form of consciousness, even though they were not really sentient or sapient.

Force Specters would realize if something touched them.

They might not react, but they would still feel it.

Nick had come to the Swallowing Swamp to investigate it.

It had been investigated by a couple of Manufacturers in Crimson City before, but after they had come to their conclusion, it had basically been ignored.

There was no point in looking at this Initial Hatchling anymore.

However, Nick had something that the other Extractors of Crimson City didn't have.

The Null's ability.

When it came to sensing someone else's perception, nothing was better than this ability.

Nick knew that this ability had amazing investigative properties, and he was relying on it almost daily.

That was why Nick had come here.

Maybe his ability would uncover something that the other Manufacturers had overlooked.

And sure enough, it did.

'The fact that it can't sense me means it is either not a Force Specter or that I'm not touching it right now,' Nick thought.

After a bit, Nick turned to look at Jason, who was on the edge of the crater.

"I'm going to dive in and investigate. If you see anyone approaching, tell me immediately," Nick shouted.

"Understood, Boss," Jason shouted back before relaying Nick's orders to the others.

Nick turned back to the Swallowing Swamp and started to undress.

He didn't want to use his Barrier since he wanted to use his sense of touch to find the actual Specter.

After about a minute, Nick only wore his two wristbands, which were his deactivated fist weapons.

Nick's ability hadn't activated in a while, which meant that Jason was probably watching Nick's naked behind with quite a lot of focus.

He got a bit annoyed by the constant attention, but that wasn't really important right now.

Nick slowly approached the Swallowing Swamp and stepped into it with his bare feet.

It was surprisingly warm.

'This reminds me of the time I jumped into the old sewers,' Nick thought.

He took a couple more steps forward and was soon submerged up to his chest.

Going into the Swallowing Swamp wasn't nearly as bad as going into the sewers.

Yes, the Swallowing Swamp was technically filled with acid and poison, but it didn't smell as bad as the old sewers.

It had a very chemical smell to it.

Nick took a deep breath after a bit.

Then, he jumped forward and dove in.

Chapter 357 – Searching

?Nick fully dove into the Swallowing Swamp.

Almost immediately, horrifying faces appeared around him as they bit into his flesh, tearing chunks out of him.

However, even though Nick felt a lot of pain, he wasn't surprised or panicked.

'This confirms it,' Nick thought. 'If I were inside a Force Specter, the Nightmare's power wouldn't work. The fact that I am under the Nightmare's influence means that I am not inside a Force Specter right now.'

Nick quickly came to the surface again, and all the horrifying faces vanished.

Of course, his ability also deactivated since Jason could see him again, and Jason looked at Nick with a lot of interest.

Nick continued to walk forward.

Right now, the Swallowing Swamp was not so deep, but it became deeper the further he progressed.

After walking into the swamp for about ten meters, it became quite difficult to touch the floor without submerging.

Nick started to swim forward with quite a bit of force, his arms producing gigantic waves as they pushed the sludge away.

In water, Nick wouldn't be light enough to float, but the sludge in his surroundings was actually quite dense.

Although, even if it were not as dense, Nick could just swim by kicking the sludge below him.

He swam forward for over a hundred meters.

Nick had no idea how deep the Swallowing Swamp was beneath him, and even though he had been in many scary situations before, it was still not easy for him to keep his cool.

The image of a gigantic beast swimming just a couple of meters below Nick's feet appeared again and again in his mind.

Even worse, that was an actual possibility.

If the sludge was not the Specter but only a byproduct, it was possible that some kind of Physical Specter in the shape of a creature released the sludge.

What if the sludge wasn't meant to be poisonous?

What if the Swallowing Swamp was a Fanatic that released such weak poison to attract Veterans and Experts so that it could more easily kill them with an ambush?

Right now, Nick swam inside a big and viscous dark purple pool in the middle of a wasteland as the orange sun shone down from above.

Nick kept swimming into the middle of the swamp.

Was he scared?

Of course, he was scared.

However, Nick didn't let his fear dictate his actions.

Courage was one of the most important aspects of an Extractor, and one could only have courage if one felt fear.

And frankly, not feeling any fear of the things an Extractor went through regularly would be idiotic.

Eventually, Nick reached the middle of the swamp and looked around.

'Nothing special here,' Nick thought, 'but that's what I expected.'

Sure, there was a possibility that some powerful creature lived in this swamp, but the possibility was actually quite small.

After all, all of the powerful Extractors knew of the Swallowing Swamp, and they had experimented on it several times.

If any of their Extractors had died here, the Manufacturers would have had much more interest in the Swallowing Swamp.

But no Extractor ever vanished.

After looking around for a bit, Nick swam in circles that spiraled outward.

He wanted to make sure that there was not some kind of hidden domain somewhere on the Swallowing Swamp's surface.

For several minutes, Nick just swam around the Swallowing Swamp.

Eventually, he reached the place where his clothes were and stepped out of the Swallowing Swamp.

The sludge around Nick's body clung to him like glue, and Nick furrowed his brows.

He pushed the sludge on his arms away, and he felt a hard layer crumbling away from his body.

He took a look at what he had peeled off and saw pieces of some fragile black material hanging on the sludge.

Luckily, Julian's lessons about basic chemistry paid off.

'That's probably what the acid in the sludge turns into after it used up all its power,' Nick thought as he crumbled the black material between his fingers.

'The sludge attaches to the skin but also to the black material, making it very difficult to get rid of. It might not be difficult for me to push the sludge off my body, but a Newbie would have quite some difficulties while also being burned and poisoned the entire time.'

Nick walked over to his clothes, but he didn't put them on.

Instead, he grabbed one of the three big cylinders and walked back to the swamp.

SHING!

After pressing a button, the cylinder turned into a long throwing spear, almost two meters long.

The spear was quite heavy since Nick's ability wasn't active, but he could still carry it without any issues.

As he entered the Swallowing Swamp again, he grabbed the spear by one end and touched the floor with the other.

He continued like this until he was about 50 meters away from the coast.

At that point, the floor was too far away.

So, Nick changed his hold.

He put one of the tips of the spear between his toes on his right foot and grabbed it.

Like this, Nick got quite a bit more reach.

Another 100 meters further, it became too deep again.

However, Nick noticed something.

'The crater is round, and the rate at which it is gaining depth is decreasing.'

'From nothing to a depth of two meters took barely ten meters, but another meter took fifty meters, and another meter took 100 meters.'

'The Swallowing Swamp's deepest spot is probably only about four to five meters deep.'

Nick did a bit of planning and submerged.

'The Nightmare's influence only starts at a depth of about half a meter. As long as I don't dive deeper than that, I'm not in danger.'

Nick kept going forward as he swung his spear back and forth with his toes, constantly scratching the ground.

The Swallowing Swamp had to have a body, and it had to be somewhere in the swamp.

Nick searched.

And searched.

And searched...

Chapter 358 – Result of the Search

?And searched...

Nick had been searching like this for over two hours by now.

For two hours, he had been scratching every single spot on the floor with his spear.

Was there really a body somewhere in the Swallowing Swamp?

It didn't seem like it.

What if the Specter could move its body, and it simply kept avoiding Nick?

What if it just swam away whenever Nick approached it?

Like this, Nick would never be able to capture it.

Most people would have this concern, but Nick didn't.

After all, for the Specter to avoid him, it would first need to know where Nick was, and if it knew where Nick was, his ability would have deactivated.

Yet, his ability was still active.

The Specter had no idea that Nick was here, even after two hours of Nick poking around the Swallowing Swamp.

By now, it was obvious that the Swallowing Swamp wasn't some kind of predator that just waited for the perfect opportunity to strike.

If it only attacked people after they searched through the swamp for hours, it would have never gained any food, even if the world were filled with life.

So, Nick kept moving his spear back and forth.

For two more hours.

Nick had been inside the swamp for over four hours now, and he was pretty sure that he had checked through almost every part of the center.

'Is it not in the center?' Nick thought with furrowed brows.

Usually, one could find the Specter in the middle of its domain if it had one.

'But there are also cases where Specters are not in the middle of their domain,' Nick thought. 'After all, if the Infestation were in the middle of the infested area, it would have long since been caught.'

'Guess I should check.'

Nick grabbed the spear with his hand while remaining submerged.

Since he was no longer searching through the deepest part, he didn't need to use his legs anymore.

However, Nick stayed submerged since he wanted to be absolutely sure that his ability wasn't deactivated by Jason peeking over.

The search became faster since Nick could now swing his spear much more skillfully and faster.

Feet just weren't made to handle spears.

Nick kept circling around the middle of the Swallowing Swamp for another two hours.

He had been looking for over six hours by now.

However, Nick didn't stop.

Most people would have long since given up, but not Nick.

Nick relied on the accuracy of his ability.

He just kept swimming and swinging.

Swimming and swinging.

Ding.

Nick stopped.

Just now, his ability had deactivated before activating again.

Nick's heart rate increased.

Did he find it?

Nick surfaced and looked around.

There was no one around him.

After submerging again, Nick carefully moved his spear around.

This time, he was moving it much slower.

Clink.

It deactivated again!

Nick's eyes narrowed, and he moved his spear carefully around the object it was currently touching.

It didn't feel any different from a random stone.

It was hard, smooth, and of average length.

The next moment, Nick quickly dove down.

The Nightmare appeared around Nick again, but it barely had any time to cause Nick pain since he was already surfacing again.

Shortly before Nick reached the surface, he stopped.

He couldn't see what he was carrying in his hand due to the dark purple liquid surrounding it, but he was sure that it was the Specter.

After all, even though he hadn't surfaced, his ability was still deactivated, which meant that something or someone was sensing his presence.

'This is it!' Nick thought.

'This has to be the Specter!'

Then, Nick slowly surfaced and looked at the thing he was holding in his hand.

It was a glass bottle.

It looked extremely normal, except for two things.

First, it was filled with the purple sludge.

Second, there was a huge and clear gash going across its body.

Naturally, the gash came from Nick swinging his spear around and hitting it.

One had to remember that each of Nick's big spears weighed way over a hundred kilos, and he had been moving it quite quickly.

A weak Hatchling couldn't possibly resist such a strike.

However, Specters were very difficult to kill, and Nick was quite sure that he wouldn't kill the Specter with a casual swing of his spear.

If he wanted to kill the Specter, he would probably need to throw it against a metal wall with a ton of force.

Only if it exploded into pieces would it die.

Nick held the bottle with its opening facing down.

That was when Nick noticed another peculiar thing.

The dark sludge inside the bottle wasn't coming out of the cut that Nick had made.

It was only leaving through the actual opening.

Nick kept pouring.

And pouring.

And pouring.

And pouring.

Nick's eyebrows rose.

The black sludge had been pouring out of the bottle for over 30 seconds, and while it wasn't moving very fast due to its viscosity, he was certain that it should have already become empty.

Just to be sure, Nick poured out the bottle for another two minutes.

It still looked full.

'That settles it,' Nick thought as he looked at the bottle. 'This is the Specter.'

'It probably produces this toxic sludge infinitely.'

Nick looked around the purple swamp and took note of the bubbles that released the black smoke.

'The amount of sludge the swamp is losing by evaporation is probably around equal to the amount of sludge produced by the bottle.'

Nick looked back at the bottle.

Then, he turned it upright, with its opening facing the sky.

Nick's eyebrows rose.

The sludge stopped coming out of the bottle!

Now, the bottle just looked like a normal-filled bottle.

Although, the sludge was still not coming out of the cut on its side.

'Interesting,' Nick thought.

'So, if it is upside down or tipped over, it infinitely produces the sludge, but if it's standing upright, it's producing none of it.'

'I'm certain that this is a Possession Specter due to its characteristics, and I think I also already have a fitting name for it.'

'The Spilling Bottle.'

Chapter 359 – Could That Work?

?Nick held the bottle upright and jumped out of the swamp.

As a Veteran, Nick had so much power that stepping on something as viscous as water or this sludge wasn't any different from stepping on solid ground as long as he kicked fast enough.

Nick quickly got dressed after cleaning himself of all the sludge he had carried with him.

And finally, he was done.

His excursion into the Swallowing Swamp had ended.

Nick looked at the Swallowing Swamp one last time.

'All the moisture will probably leave at some point, leaving behind even more viscous sludge. Although, maybe it will also just vanish and turn into Prephyx since the Spilling Bottle is no longer here.'

Nick looked at the bottle in his hand.

'I have to get this back into the city.'

"Jason, call everyone over," Nick shouted as he jumped out of the crater.

Jason shook his head as he was taken out of his daydream.

After that, he quickly ran to one of the hills on the side, which was where Jenny was located.

A couple of seconds later, everyone gathered in front of Nick.

They were all looking at the bottle in Nick's hand with expectation.

"Boss, is that the Specter?" Petra asked with surprise.

Nick nodded. "It's an Initial Hatchling Possession Specter," he said.

The Extractors got a bit excited when they heard that they had actually succeeded in capturing a Specter.

Sadly, the excitement quickly vanished as it sunk in that it was a Possession Specter.

The fact that it was an Initial Hatchling wouldn't have been an issue if it were a Force or Physical Specter.

Unfortunately, Possession Specters couldn't grow more powerful.

Assuming that they fed this thing with as much as it could eat every day, it would probably produce five to seven grams of Zephyx at most.

Any one of the present Extractors earned more credits per day than this entire Specter produced.

Even more, it couldn't even really be used to get Initial Newbies to become Early Newbies.

They already had the Screaming Coffin for that, which produced more Zephyx, was just as safe to work with, and probably even ate less.

The Spilling Bottle was probably the worst Specter that Dark Dream could have captured.

But at least it was a Specter.

"How's your status? Can you continue?" Nick asked.

Everyone nodded.

"Good," Nick said. "Then, I will bring the Spilling Bottle back to Dark Dream. I'm faster if I'm alone. I will be back in, at most, 30 minutes."

"Sure thing, Boss," Jenny said.

Then, Nick ran towards the west with a lot of speed.

When the three Initial Johns saw Nick's speed, they had to sigh.

They also wanted to be this powerful one day.

Within ten seconds, Nick reached the edge of the valley and jumped into it.

After about a minute, Nick had cleared five of the seven kilometers of the valley.

Then, he narrowed his eyes.

One of the black sludges was quite close to Nick, and it had spotted him.

Of course, it immediately started charging at him.

Luckily, the sludge was a bit smaller than two meters in diameter, which meant that it was only at the beginning of the Adolescent stage.

Nick walked around it and continued running forward.

Naturally, the sludge kept running after Nick.

Since Nick was much more powerful than the sludge, it couldn't even hope to catch up.

Nevertheless, it tried by constantly clawing forward with its many long arms.

These sludges had no sapience and attacked any kind of life they could see.

Nick didn't go as fast as he could since he wanted to lure the sludge to the forest.

After around half a minute, Nick arrived beside the forest.

The sludge was about 100 meters away from him.

Lastly, Nick just ran around the forest until it was between him and the sludge.

Silence.

BANG!

Nick heard the sludge explode.

Extractors were encouraged to lead the sludges to the forests, and Nick did just that.

After that, Nick turned around to-

'Wait,' Nick thought as he stopped.

Then, he looked back at the forest.

And then, at the Spilling Bottle.

'Can the Spilling Bottle affect the forests?' Nick asked himself. 'I guess it depends on its effect and its consistency.'

'Is the sludge normal physical matter, or is it Prephyx matter, like the bodies of the Blood Specters?'

'If it's normal matter, the forest will most likely ignore it.'

Nick looked at the Spilling Bottle with furrowed brows.

'But that's highly unlikely.'

'If it were normal matter, the other Extractors would have noticed that the sludge wasn't the Specter but only a byproduct.'

'I'm sure they tested if the sludge is normal matter or Prephyx matter, and I'm quite sure that it's Prephyx matter.'

'Let's try it out.'

That was when Nick realized that he was in view of the four guards at the city's entrance.

'Wait, the four guards know that I left with a team of Extractors. If I suddenly start doing something very noticeable, they might decide to tell Anatomy, assuming one of them is from Anatomy.'

'I should lay low for a bit. Leaving during your shift is very conspicuous, and they won't risk it as long as nothing crazy happens.'

Nick turned to the city again and ran back.

"Thanks, asshole," one of them said sarcastically as Nick arrived. "Because of you, I lost the bet."

"Oh, fuck off," another guard said. "That thing would've noticed the forest even without him. You're just mad that you lost. Don't blame him."

The first guard just grunted in annoyance.

Nick just looked at the two of them before he walked into the corridor.

After a bit of walking, he saw the two Experts who were guarding the bridge itself.

"Did you catch any Specters?" one of them asked with a serious tone.

Nick looked at the guard.

"Yes," Nick said.

The other guard also turned to look at Nick, and both of them had a glint in their eyes.

Chapter 360 – Not as I do

"Alright," the guard said. "I can't see it. Do you have the Specter with you right now?"

Nick lifted the bottle up, showing it to them.

Under normal circumstances, Nick would never show one of Dark Dream's Specters to an outsider.

Sadly, he had to.

All Specters that were brought into the city had to be announced.

Transporting a Specter through the city was always dangerous, and the city wanted to make sure that the Specter was properly suppressed.

"Want to take a closer look?" Nick asked, holding the Spilling Bottle forward.

Nick wasn't afraid that they would steal it.

The two Experts here were from the city itself.

They were not temporary guards who usually worked for Manufacturers.

Even more, doing shady things here would be stupid since there were several more guards close by and since this area was highly surveilled.

The guard just warily looked at the Specter.

Many Specters had crazy and scary powers, and he wasn't about to touch a Specter that he didn't know.

"No, I'm fine," the guard said. "We need your identification and the level of the Specter."

"Nick Nick, Chief Zephyx Extractor of Dark Dream," Nick said, "and this thing is an Initial Hatchling Possession Specter."

The other guard snorted in suppressed laughter.

"Oh wow, careful," the other guard said with a sarcastic voice. "Valuable cargo."

The serious guard just nodded at Nick. "You can pass."

"Thanks," Nick said before he passed by them and ran across the bridge.

When he saw the guards on the other side of the bridge, he told them that he would be back soon and that he was only there to get something.

These guards were not employed by the city, and Nick wouldn't tell them about the Specter he had brought with him.

The guards just said that they understood, and Nick quickly went to Dark Dream.

After Nick entered Dark Dream, he quickly went to the second floor and approached the only free Containment Unit on it.

Unsurprisingly, Julian was already waiting in front of it with a friendly smile.

Naturally, he had sensed Nick before he even entered the building.

Nick walked up to Julian and handed him the bottle. "Keep it upright," he said.

Julian took hold of the bottle and looked at it with interest.

"An Initial Hatchling Possession Specter?" Julian asked as he looked at it.

Nick nodded.

"What does it do?" Julian asked.

"It produces infinite amounts of toxic sludge if it is tipped over. This is the Swallowing Swamp, or the reason behind the Swallowing Swamp's existence, depending on your viewpoint."

"Interesting," Julian said as he opened the Containment Unit.

As soon as the Containment Unit opened, several mouths from the hallway slithered into it, plastering themselves all over the walls, ceiling, and floor.

"What kind of matter is the sludge?" Julian asked without looking at Nick.

"Most likely Prephyx Matter," Nick said.

After that, Nick explained to Julian how he had come to the conclusion.

"Good job," Julian said with a smile.

Nick didn't show any reactions.

Ever since Julian had started teaching Nick, he kept using this kind of belittling voice.

It was like Julian was praising a toddler.

Of course, Nick didn't like being addressed like this, but this was the result of his actions.

Nick had chosen this "person" as his superior.

Initially, Nick had no idea why Julian was constantly talking to him like he was a toddler.

He just thought that Julian was an asshole.

However, the more Julian had taught Nick, the more Julian's conduct made sense.

Nick had never highlighted how Julian's manner of speech made him feel, and he didn't plan on telling him.

Even though they were allies, Nick wouldn't hand over all of his secrets and thoughts to Julian.

After about a year of studying under Julian, Nick realized two things, and fortunately, he also realized the value of these two things at basically the same time.

If he hadn't realized the value of these two things, he might have wasted them.

The first thing was that Julian was exceedingly arrogant.

Anyone that he could control was beneath his notice.

He ignored all Newbies, Johns, Veterans, Experts, and even very weak Specialists.

As soon as he could control them, they were no longer in his mind, basically.

All of Julian's attention was on the stronger Specialists and Heroes.

And the second thing that Nick realized was that Julian viewed him as even lower than the people he already ignored.

Due to his conduct, Nick had often appeared quite dumb in the past.

Additionally, Nick even willingly worked under Julian, which was very different from everyone else.

Maybe that made Julian look down on Nick even more.

Lastly, as Nick's teacher, Julian had seen how many basic things he needed to teach Nick.

Just like many other people, Julian was taking Nick's lack of education as a lack of intelligence.

Julian believed that 99% of people were beneath him and that Nick was even beneath these 99% of people.

Because of that, he didn't put a lot of effort into keeping his cards close to his chest in Nick's presence.

He probably wasn't even realizing that he was doing something to Nick that he had never done to anyone else.

He let his mask slip.

Nick was basically the only person Julian could talk to without having to put up a false front.

And maybe that aspect of being able to be whoever he wanted to be made him belittle Nick again and again.

Arrogance, conceit, disgust, deceit, aloofness, pride, boundless confidence, disregard, unending ambition, greed.

This was Julian's true self.

The true self of a Specter.

And when he was with Nick, he didn't need to keep these things secret.

Ironically, the things that Julian taught Nick allowed him to see how Julian was violating the very things that he was preaching.

Nick also knew something else.

He knew that Julian would get rid of him as soon as his power approached Julian's.

Julian and Nick were allies, but only as long as Nick couldn't pose a danger to Julian.

Nick knew that.

He knew that they would become enemies in the future.

And because of that, Nick did not tell Julian about the two things he had noticed.