

Void 1071

Chapter 1071 Perilous Sanctuary [1]

The second layer.

Or rather, the true first layer.

The Severed World was called a sub-universe because its rules were nearly as complete as a true universe, but it wasn't nearly as big.

The entire realm was centered around a massive peak called Skyrend Mountain. With this in mind, Ghost King's Crevice was more of an entryway than a true layer of the ecosystem.

After all, it was completely different from the rest of the sub-universe.

Nevertheless, the second layer, the Perilous Sanctuary, was the stopping point for 99% of the practitioners who ventured into this world.

While the caves in the cliffside leading up to it were filled with Human-Faced Spider, the actual cliff wall was free of them.

According to Bertram, this was because the Human-Faced Spiders were prey for many of the beasts in the Perilous Sanctuary, and traversing the cliffside essentially made them sitting ducks in the eyes of their predators.

It was the first taste of the "Sanctuary" half of the layer's name.

But of course, it wasn't called perilous for nothing.

The Perilous Sanctuary's danger level was relatively low as long as one maintained wariness. Most of the beasts weren't hostile unless provoked, while the rest weren't strong enough to pose a threat like the Ghost King.

More than this, the entire layer was filled with treasure.

Heavenly resources grew like common grasses and every beast possessed some quality that would be beneficial when consumed. Some miners even dug into the ground, learning that there were precious minerals present in spades!

This was the reason why the Severed World was so popular.

However, with every gain came a loss.

The dangers of the Perilous Sanctuary were hidden, lying in wait for helpless practitioners who dropped their guard.

For every treasure present, there was a fake.

These fakes were sometimes beasts in hiding, sometimes deadly traps, and other times horrifying plants or materials disguised as beneficial resources.

The more greed one possessed, the more likely one was to die in this area.

Was it mere coincidence?

Or was it a mechanic specifically designed for this purpose?

Regardless of the answer, the truth didn't affect Damien.

"Let's not spend too much time here," he said.

At this time, the group had already made their way up the cliff and received an extensive breakdown of the Perilous Sanctuary from Bertram.

"If the treasures are really so great, we can come back for them once we've finished our original mission."

"Hmm..."

Elena looked around curiously.

The scenery was a lush tropical rainforest that stretched as far as the eye could see. Several hundred kilometers away, one could see the trees darkening and far more beasts in the sky, but this area, for the most part, was just a beautiful rainforest.

"Are we on a time crunch?" she asked.

"Not really, but I do want to finish as fast as possible. It's been a long time since we've been home," Damien responded.

"Home, huh..."

Elena frowned slightly. Could it be considered a home when she had no one waiting for her there?

"How about we stay for the day and see what we can find? There's no harm in taking a little rest, right?" Rose jumped in, breaking the sullen mood before it could form.

"I also agree. We may not have time to return on the way back, and while the treasures might not be too useful, it would be nice if we could find replenishment for some of our supplies," Ruyue chipped in.

Damien nodded, realizing the truth of their words.

Almost half of their recovery pills and elixirs had been used up in Ghost King's Crevice. It was impossible to get out of that swarm unharmed.

'I keep forgetting I don't have [Heal] anymore. It really would be dangerous if we ran out of methods to quickly heal.'

"Alright then, let's split up and see what we can find. We'll meet back here at this same time tomorrow," he finally said, looking between the girls.

They apple for a few more minutes, finalizing a few plans, and then split up, each taking a different direction so they could maximize their profits.

The most excited out of them was probably Zara.

After regressing, her bestial nature seemed far more prominent than usual, which made her more prone to her vices.

Damien overcame his own bestial instinct easily with the mental growth he'd gone through in more recent years, but Zara had been trying to conquer her Nox side, which amplified her desires, for a very long time, and still hadn't quite won yet.

Damien made a mental note to look out for her before turning around and facing the man behind him.

"So this is where our cooperation ends, huh? It was...an adventure, to say the least," he said with a grin,

"Haha, that's it. I can guess what yer crazy group is up to, and it sounds fun, but I like my life, so I won't join ya," Bertram responded, grinning back.

"Hmph, you're missing out, but I digress. You have money to make, after all."

The original agreement was for Bertram to navigate them through Ghost King's Crevice, a task he accomplished with flying colors.

During a time when no other guide was willing to take the risk for survival, he led them across the crevice and got them to their destination as efficiently as possible.

It was a doubt whether the others were even still alive.

Damien was interested in Bertram's eyes and held a little hope that the man would continue accompanying them so he could study their function and use them, but it was natural that such a thing wouldn't happen.

Wasn't Ghost King's Crevice enough of a warning?

Hell, even now Damien could hear intermittent screams echoing through the forest.

Bertram was right. He and the girls were definitely the crazy ones in this situation.

"Well, it was a pleasure working with you. I'll catch you another time when I have another job ready," Damien said, putting his hand out.

Bertram reached up and grabbed it with the same grin.

"Haha, good on you, old boy. Just remember, my services ain't cheap!"

"Isn't it natural to pay for quality?"

"Totally natural!"

The two men powerfully shook hands.

After another short goodbye, they parted ways.

Damien walked through the rainforest, his gaze panning the surroundings in search of anything interesting.

'I didn't realize it before, but now that we're guideless, it kind of feels like I'm in the First Dungeon again.'

He thought back to that place often. Perhaps, more than anything else, it was the place that created the man known as Damien Void.

It taught and let him experience so much that other situations that bore similarities became incredibly easy to dissect.

And whenever he found an environment that gave him the same feeling as that one, he always got excited.

'I have a whole day to myself, but I don't really feel like treasure hunting...'

Damien looked around and found a nice tree.

'...I guess I'll just chill.'

He smiled to himself and bent space, using an ability he'd long forgotten about.

'Telekinesis'

The foliage in the surroundings morphed, cracked branches and fallen logs were broken down and transformed, and a small resting area was formed at the base of the tree.

Damien walked into his creation and laid his body on the soft leaf bed he'd set up for himself.

"Ahhh, this is the life."

Chapter 1072 Perilous Sanctuary [2]

While Damien sat back and relaxed as if nothing in the world bothered him, the girls went on a quest for resources.

They were like true adventurers, exploring the lands at high speeds and grabbing any treasures they found along the way.

Of course, each of them had their own measures for avoiding the layer's dangers, but they weren't completely safe. Each of them encountered the perils of the realm in their own ways.

Rose met an illusion beast that was disguising itself as a precious herb, Ruyue fell into a trap that caged her in the area and tried to consume her, Elena found a cluster of light-attributed materials, but later learned that they were extremely poisonous plants, and Zara found...well, the constant struggle between beasts to determine superiority.

For a second, Damien felt like he was being a useless soft rice-eating husband, but he disregarded that thought.

The girls didn't want his help.

They knew he could support them and they had trust that he'd be there when they needed that support, but they didn't want to hug his thighs and act like common women who were only there to leech on him.

They hadn't really gone on an adventure all together before, and now that they were doing exactly that, none of them were willing to be baggage.

Therefore, Damien's help would only be counterintuitive.

'Either way, I have a constant source of elixirs at my disposal, so there's no need to worry.'

Damien's spatial storage was connected to the Sanctuary, which gave him essentially unlimited storage space, but as he found while he was fighting, he was still able to access it, bypassing the Severed World's restrictions.

In reality, his spatial storage was a separate dimension that used the Sanctuary as a base, and in a certain sense, could be considered a middle ground between it and the Real Plane. If Damien allowed others to access this space...

'Elvira is really the greatest helper a man could wish for. I should give her an appreciation gift or ten when we get out of here.'

Elvira deposited medicines in the spatial storage, which Damien could then retrieve. This was the simple yet totally broken method Damien found himself capable of abusing.

And when it came to the Sanctuary's ability to produce these medicines, there was nothing to be said.

From the very start, Elvira had been raising Alchemists who could support Theavel, and the amount of elixirs they had in stock was monstrous.

'It's hard to grasp it, since I created that planet, but it really is a thriving world now. Actually, now that I think about it, have they started populating that second world yet?'

Damien created it and turned it into a specialized environment for Astoria's training, but he'd cleaned it up by the time they left. Those special environments were still present, but they had their own places on the planet now instead of defining the nature of the planet itself.

'I can't wait to see how the Sanctuary evolves in the future.'

That place was Damien's proudest and greatest achievement.

He—

"Hm?"

His senses were suddenly pricked by the sound of leaves rustling.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

Heavy footsteps approached rapidly. The sound of foliage being broken and pushed aside filled the air.

ROAR!

The angered roar of a beast made the trees tremble, and Damien, without another choice, stood up with annoyance painted on his face.

"Dammit. There goes the mood," he muttered to himself, exiting through the leaf door of the resting area and gazing into the wilds.

He could see it approaching. It was a huge panther with tight muscles that bulged with every step.

However, its attention wasn't on him.

Rah!

A barely audible panicked roar entered Damien's ears, turning his curious eyes downward just in time to see a creature breaking through the tall plants in front of him.

Before he could make a move, that creature rushed up to him and curled itself around his leg.

ROAR!

The panther broke through the grass not even a second later, screeching to a stop when it noticed Damien.

Grrrr!

It warily walked his periphery, growling and hissing as it assessed the threat he posed.

"Tch, so it was something like this?" Damien frowned.

This place was resembling the First Dungeon more and more, wasn't it?

This scene reminded him of his meeting with Zara, which, frankly, annoyed him more.

"Dammit, I'm too weak to kids."

He opened his mouth and took a deep breath.

He looked the panther directly in his eyes and flared his killing intent, creating an illusory storm of blood.

And...

[Breath]

ROOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAR!

He let out the roar of a dragon, shooting a beam of terrifying mana light into the air.

Empowered by the pure dragon bloodline present in Damien's current body, the roar had far more power than anything he could unleash in the past. The atmosphere was razed and the surrounding trees were cracked as collateral damage.

The panther immediately jumped back and scurried away, its survival instinct telling it that survival was a complete impossibility!

Several beasts hidden in the surroundings who had been watching Damien for the past few hours, regarding him as prey, also bolted.

In a single move, Damien established himself as one of this rainforest's apex predators, abusing bloodline suppression to establish prestige that'd guarantee he wouldn't be bothered again.

Once they were all out of sight, Damien finally turned to the little beast that was still wrapped around his leg.

It looked up at him, shivering with regret.

"Pfft...! Hahahaha!"

He couldn't help but laugh. It seemed this little guy thought he was about to get eaten!

Damien grabbed it by its nape, lifted it up in front of his face, and smiled at it.

"Relax, brat. I'm not going to eat you," he said as he brought it into his little shelter and set it down on the bed.

"Here, take it as a peace offering."

He took a random beast corpse out of storage and tossed it at the creature, who approached it carefully and sniffed it a few times before devouring it without reservation.

When it came to beast corpses, Damien probably had a few tens of thousands of them frozen in time in his inventory, but that was beside the point.

It was definitely a curious little thing. It was a white tiger cub, but it was cute enough to be considered a kitten.

'There's no such thing as a cuddly beast in the wild. Plus, if a much stronger entity was chasing it with such fervor...'

Zara was chased by the 40th-floor Wyvern because it wanted to consume her bloodline, and this cub was likely also something special enough to be desired by the beasts in this ecosystem.

'I don't really have the time to raise a kid right now, but it'd be stupid to reject something like this when it happens in a true land of opportunity, right?'

He looked at the cub with an evil smile.

"Little buddy, how would you like to come with this uncle?"

It looked up at him warily.

Whatever this strange-looking dragon wanted...

...definitely wasn't a good thing!

Chapter 1073 Messengers [1]

As was the case for most isolated realms and spaces, time flowed differently in the Severed World.

Damien and his companions entered the sub-universe roughly a day and a half ago, but over two weeks had already passed in the outside world!

Heaven's Army was working tirelessly this entire time to remove any traitors they became aware of, and soon enough, the first Infected Source World raid would begin.

It was a monumental time for the universe as a whole, to be attacking these scourges they could never get rid of before, and anyone who had an interest in the survival of Grand Heavens Boundary paid great attention to the coming raid.

Meanwhile, the man who brought them the ceasefire that allowed them to make such bold moves was...

"Ack! Hey, knock it off!"

...struggling in other ways.

Grah!

A small white tiger cub climbed over his body like it was its personal perch, scratching and biting as it pleased.

"Damn kid, don't think I won't do anything to you!"

He reached back and tried to grab the cub off his back, but it very conveniently dropped out of his reach and scurried around elsewhere.

"Haa...I knew it was a mistake," Damien sighed.

"Haha, so this is the little cub you were talking about? It's so cute!"

Elena's voice cut off his melancholy as she picked the cub up and adored it. Rose and Ruyue also joined in somewhat, standing around and curiously looking at it.

Their group had met up just a bit ago after finishing their day-long hunts, and while they were going over rewards, the only thing Damien had to present was this little guy.

"I don't know what his specific race is, but I'm hoping he'll evolve into a divine white tiger or something," he said, scratching his head.

"Well you do have luck when it comes to beast companions, but I don't think we'll find anyone as special as our Zara, no?"

"Hmph! Exactly. I can't believe you'd betray me like this."

Zara strutted around pompously, glaring at Damien in faux jealousy.

Damien shrugged.

"When did I betray you? You act like this bratty kid could ever be better than you," he told Zara with a grin, scratching her head teasingly.

Grr?

The cub's attention turned to them, a glimmer of intelligence in its eyes as it looked between Damien and Zara.

So this wolf was its competition?

Hmph!

It jumped out of Elena's arms and proudly strutted up to Zara, puffing its chest with an expression that screamed, "I'm better than you!"

"This brat..." Zara growled.

"Alright, calm down," Damien interrupted before she could do anything.

"He'll be traveling with us from now on, so you can always teach him a lesson later. For now, shouldn't we get moving?"

They'd been standing around for a few minutes already, and they'd already checked their inventory and gains.

The girls were truly able to find a great deal of treasures in that single day.

Rose mainly found supplements that would help with mana replenishment and resources that the Alchemists in Theavel could use to create other elixirs, while Elena and Ruyue found mainly strengthening elixirs and resources, along with a few strange metals they weren't able to identify.

Overall, their harvest wasn't beneficial in the short term, but as all of them had seen the Sanctuary at least once, they were aware of the greater goal they all shared,

That was to create their own major influence!

Theavel's people were completely loyal to Damien, so nurturing them was an absolute benefit for those he was close to.

Plus, there would come a day when the few of them were no longer enough to hold off the threats they faced.

Regardless, they had their fill of the Perilous Sanctuary in the past day, and more than treasures, what they saw was people dying to their own idiocy.

It was a great place to grab resources for one's influence or even to solidify one's own foundation, but it wasn't for everyone.

And it sure as hell wasn't enough for Damien's group!

They began their trek to the third layer soon enough. It was only a few tens of kilometers away, but they had to take the entire distance on foot, which made it a bit more troublesome.

Because now, they were entering the main ecosystem of Skyrend Mountain.

Skreeee!

Skreeee!

Skreeee!

The second they got within a few kilometers of the boundary, incessant screeching filled their ears.

Toucan-like birds sat in the trees and flew through the air, screeching as if they'd die if they'd die if they ever stopped.

Elena frowned and raised her arm to shut them up, but Damien quickly stopped her.

"Don't. The last thing we want to do is anger the Messenger Birds."

In reality, Skyrend Mountain was the domain of aerial beasts.

There were several customs that needed to be followed if one wanted to traverse it safely.

Mainly, they could only stay at an elevation level they'd earned the right to occupy.

Higher elevation signified higher status to these flying creatures, and a violation of this status quo was absolutely disallowed.

Anyone who dared would be attacked by every beast at that elevation and forced back down where they belonged, most of the time as a corpse.

Messenger Birds were different from the rest, though.

They were considered envoys of the Cloud Emperor who sat at the peak of Skyrend Mountain, and regardless of how high they flew, none dared to mess with them.

They'd screech all day and all night as if to provoke any and everyone they came across, but the second one retaliated, the entire swarm of Messenger Birds would turn into demons that relentlessly pursued them until they were tortured to death.

The worst part was that they were as weak as paper! A single flick from a common practitioner was enough to drop one out of the sky!

Damien gave the girls earplugs and put his own in as they crossed the boundary into the third layer.

'The first move is to find a relatively powerful beast around here and kill it silently so I can search its memories,' Damien thought to himself.

Void Breathing was blocked and he couldn't do anything about that, but Devour's expanded capability was still in effect, one of the only things he kept from his original portfolio.

He spread his awareness into the nearby surroundings and carefully scanned for a target before finding a sleeping jaguar hidden within the nearby foliage.

'I almost couldn't sense it.' Damien thought with a grin.

'Perfect.'

His body flashed away, instantly appearing above the jaguar's head. He grabbed Mirage and plunged it into the beast's neck, setting up a Vector Wall to block the smell of blood from spreading.

'Nice kill.'

He placed his hand on the now-dead beast and said that special word that made the world go round.

"Devour."

There was only one reason for this move: information!

Aside from the Messenger Birds, who were a known threat, and the class system, barely any information about the third layer was present.

Damien wasn't trying to find out why through experience:

As the tendrils of blackness left his body and swallowed the beast below him, a frown formed on his face:

'Yeah, that's going to be a problem.'

Chapter 1074 Messengers [2]

Damien looked up at the sky, his frown deepening.

"Yeah, we need to go now."

The sun was setting across the horizon. They maybe had another 20 minutes of sunlight at most.

Which meant...

'There's no point thinking about it if we'll be forced to experience it so soon.'

Damien didn't waste time.

He immediately started sprinting, the girls following behind him without question.

He scanned the area for any sign of proper shelter, but there was nothing of the sort.

The environment was ruled by aerial beasts, who made sure to keep the ground clear of too much clutter so they could pick their prey without too much hassle.

It was totally disadvantageous for those who couldn't fly, and Damien and the rest who had no status to go higher could only suffer the same fate!

'Is there no other way?' Damien wondered.

There was still one solution, but it was a risky one.

"What do you think we should do?" He said, sending a sound transmission to the girls to fill them in.

"Let's take the risk," Ruyue responded.

"From what you've said, it is far worse for us to find no shelter than to take shelter there."

Damien glanced at the other two before nodding.

"Haa, fine. I guess a peaceful night is wishful thinking."

He pushed his foot into the ground and pivoted to the right, continuing his dash powerfully.

His target was a grove of strange trees. Their leaves were like banana trees in the way they were long and floppy, but unlike those common trees, these were like bubbles of isolated space.

The leaves extended bulbously all the way to the ground, forming a spherical shield around the tree trunk.

And it wasn't an exaggeration to describe it as such. Because each of these leaves was metallic and far stronger than anything Damien could cut through with his current strength!

They were called Aegis Trees, named after their barrier-like properties.

It had already taken a decent amount of time to reach this grove, and the sky had darkened to an extent.

Clouds took formation in the sky rapidly as if they'd been waiting for the sun's retreat.

Slowly but surely, drops of rain fell into the rainforest.

"Quick!"

Damien and the girls picked up the pace and reached the tree grove within a minute, pushing aside one of the heavy canopies of the Aegis Trees and entering the bubble within.

"Phew..."

Damien put the lead back in its place and retreated to the tree trunk.

And...

Pssshhhhhh!

The sound of rain hitting the metallic leaves filled the air.

Skreee!

Skreee!

SKREEEEEEEE!

The screeching Messenger Birds turned maniacal.

Their voices cut through the rain as if it didn't exist. Damien and the rest were shielded from them, unable to see as their eyes burned red and their gazes focused on every Aegis Tree in the surroundings.

BANG!

Something thudded against Damien's tree's defense.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

It was the beginning of an onslaught.

Without a care for their lives, the Messenger Birds threw themselves into the metal leaves of the Aegis Trees, putting dents in their surfaces that were emancipated by their companions.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

SKREEEEEEEEEE!

It was terrifying to hear with no context.

"Aegis Trees produce Honeydew Nectar, which acts like a drug for Messenger Birds. Whenever night falls, they'll attack relentlessly until they can get that dew," Damien explained.

"Why only at night?" Rose questioned, warily watching the leaf walls.

"Because in the night, the Frenzy Rain comes. For normal beasts, it just makes them more aggressive and whatnot, but for Messenger Birds..."

BOOOOOM!

"...it's the most high-performance steroid imaginable."

Damien finished his words with a wry smile.

The boom that interrupted him came from another Aegis Tree that had been broken into.

The second its defense was pierced, the tree was absolutely ravaged.

The trunk was torn to pieces by thousands of Messenger Birds, who only became more crazed after getting a taste of the beautiful golden-brown Honeydew Nectar.

'It won't be long until they come for this one. They'll definitely attack us when they see us, which means we'll have no choice but to run. Yet, running is probably even more dangerous...'

Messenger Birds were demons in the night. Honeydew Nectar was their primary goal, but what if those who couldn't find any?

The inhabitants of the third layer would face slaughter from every Messenger Bird alive, a number that could only be described as disgusting.

BANG!

BANG! BANG! BANG!

BANG!

The thudding of Messenger Birds against every tree in the grove made a harmony almost like music to the ears, and Damien's tree wasn't free from the attack.

He could clearly see the walls denting in every direction, without even a safe place to exit from.

'If there's no safe space, we'll just have to make one.'

The problem with the memories of a denizen is that they followed the laws of the jungle without question.

Damien could only infer what would happen in many situations.

Like this one.

If it came down to it, he could only hope that the Honeydew Nectar was enough to distract the Messenger Birds away from them!

"Come on, let's get ready to leave," he said solemnly.

It had only been around 30 minutes.

They had a whole nighttime to survive.

BANG!

It was far louder than before.

BANG! BANG!

Damien's eyes narrowed as he readied himself to sprint, signaling the girls to prepare as well.

BOOOOOOOOOOOOM!

The canopy split apart.

And a massive shadow filled every part of its interior.

"GO!" Damien roared.

He pushed his foot into the ground and dashed through the army of birds.

'We're good...we're good...we're good...we're not good!'

They only made it a few feet out of shelter before they were attacked by ten Messenger Birds that broke away from the pack.

"Try to avoid if you can! Worst case scenario, just kill! We can't be worrying about the consequences right now!"

The greatest upgrade Messenger Birds got in the nighttime was the sharpness of their beaks. Beaks that could pierce through metal several times harder and denser than iron could absolutely tear them to shreds with no problem!

Damien ducked and flashed around, abusing teleportation to get away from the crowd.

Meanwhile, Rose used illusions to do the same, protecting herself and her sisters.

They rushed forward, evading the birds to the best of their capabilities, but it wasn't enough.

"Dammit!"

Damien flashed back and held Rose's hand as she grabbed Elena and Ruyue.

Wap!

The four of them teleported several tens of meters forward with Zara in Damien's shadow already, but it still wasn't enough!

Anywhere they could go, there were Messenger Birds. It was like they were back in Ghost King's Valley again!

'This time, our mobility isn't limited and we have more options than just blazing through mindlessly. Hopefully, we can evade the worst-case scenario.'

Damien gritted his teeth.

There was no other choice.

If they wanted to make a quick escape, they needed to take risks!

Shing!

Mirage slashed an arc through the air, dicing the attacking birds into pieces of mincemeat.

"Don't look back!"

With that warning in mind, the group pushed mana into their legs and propelled themselves forward at insane speeds.

And behind them...

SKREEEEEEEEEEEE!

The angered roars of the Messenger Birds spread as they found the corpses of their comrades.

'We'll be a target as soon as we're spotted.'

"Rose, use illusions to their maximum capability! Elena, try to use light refraction to support her! We need to conceal ourselves without hindering our movement!"

The girls followed his command, providing them with temporary safety, but how long with it last?

If one thing was certain it was this:

After experiencing the Severed World, Damien and his women had developed an extreme distaste for pack animals!

Chapter 1075 Messengers [3]

Running, running, running.

The amount of physical exhaustion built up with this level of exertion was taxing even for Damien, let alone the girls who didn't have his physical capabilities.

They had no choice but to run, though, because the number of Messenger Birds chasing them only increased with every passing minute!

"Zara!"

Damien's shadow expanded and Zara jumped out into the world, rapidly expanding in size until she was half as tall as most of the surrounding trees.

"Hop on her back and follow! I'm going to start teleporting!"

Damien didn't have the convenience of teleporting multiple people anymore. At most, he could only take one along with him.

It was easier for the girls to use Zara as a transportation method since her shadow teleportation didn't have the same limits.

And since they didn't have to exert themselves running, they could focus on driving away the surrounding swarm!

SKREEEEE!

SKREEEEE!

SKREEEEEEEE!

Relentless wasn't a strong enough word to describe the suicidal determination Messenger Birds held to get vengeance for their fallen.

Damien underestimated them severely. He knew they'd chase, but he didn't think they'd all do it.

Flash!

His body jumped forward several hundred meters, followed by Zara and the girls who hopped between the shadows cast by the ambient moonlight.

'The same heavy defense we used to hide from the Ghost King should work in this situation too, but it takes time to set up. If we want to survive through the night, we need to shake them off.'

Damien wasn't running away without a plan. Unlike Ghost King's Valley, he now had complete use of his awareness and available abilities, as well as a large amount of space he could traverse without worry.

Even now, he was moving with a destination in mind.

His body barely existed in the Real Plane anymore, flashing in and out of the spatial layers so fast the Messenger Birds almost lost sight of him.

But of course, that wasn't possible.

A swarm of tens of thousands circled them in the air like vultures, and groups of a few hundred would swoop down at a time aiming to impale the group with their sharp beaks.

Rose, Ruyue, and Elena were doing most of the fighting at this time. They used their abilities in tandem to make sure those that dove couldn't reach them, and even more so to keep those circling above from attacking all at once.

Minutes passed like this, with Zara using her connection with Damien to follow his untraceable steps, and finally, they arrived where they needed to be.

"Inside!"

Damien pushed aside a massive metallic Aegis Tree leaf and dove inside, slamming it shut the second Zara and the girls entered after him.

BANG! BANG! BANG! BANG!

The birds chasing them slammed into the heavy leaf and exploded into blood mist. Meanwhile, the rest screeched even louder and slammed into the leaves in waves, intent on breaking through the defense.

"We only have a few minutes before they break through, but the plan was never to stay here. We're going to use Honeydew Nectar to split the group and get rid of them," Damien hurriedly explained.

"How?" Rose asked. "We can't cut through the trees; it's impossible for us to get the nectar."

"Yeah, that can't be changed, but we don't need to cut through. At the moment, the birds have all their attention focused on us, so they aren't attacking the trees wantonly..."

"I see. Once they break through and destroy the trunk trying to chase us, a portion of the group will break off to consume the Honeydew Nectar since they can't withstand its temptation," Ruyue continued.

"Right. We'll have to move from tree to tree and use this strategy until only an amount we can deal with is left. Once we've killed them, we need to find a cave to take shelter and set up a concealment formation to last us through the night."

"What about the morning? Didn't you say they'll never stop chasing us?" Elena asked.

"Ah, that..." Damien grinned. "I have another plan for that."

He didn't want to say too much before he confirmed it for himself, but he was sure he could deal with the problem of the Messenger Birds, at least temporarily, when the sun rose.

"Then, there's nothing left to say. Everyone ready?" He asked.

"No, but death doesn't sound fun, so let's go anyway," Rose responded with a smile.

He nodded and looked away. The girls prepared their mana and Zara dug her heels into the ground, ready to pounce at any moment.

And not even a minute later, the Aegis Tree lost its protection.

BANG!!!

The Messenger Birds swarmed in, a situation not too dissimilar from the one that landed them in this predicament in the first place.

However, this time, the birds didn't pay any attention to the Aegis Tree.

They charged at Damien and the girls who stood before its trunk without diverting their attention.

"Wait...wait..." Damien held his breath as the swarm approached.

Time seemed to slow. Slowly, slowly, hundreds of birds pushed their way through the hole in the Aegis Tree leaf, and when they were just barely a foot away...

"Now!"

Damien's body disappeared. Zara and the girls melted into the shadows and zipped out of the Aegis Tree's protection, rushing into the next nearest tree in the grove.

Unable to react in time, the forefront of the Messenger Bird wave slammed into the Aegis Tree's trunk, shattering it into a thousand pieces!

A viscous waterfall of golden-brown sap coated the splintered wood, emitting an intoxicating scent that couldn't be ignored.

The hundreds of Messenger Birds that entered the tree fought for the exposed sap, ignoring their original purpose entirely and turning on their fellows to gain a taste of the delicious nectar!

The rest, on the other hand, followed the scent of Damien and the girls to the next tree, continuing their endless onslaught!

BANG!

Another Aegis Tree exploded, and another several hundred birds separated from the crowd.

Damien and the girls continued their routine, leading the birds who were clearly lacking in intelligence through a maze of Aegis Trees and ruining their impervious formation.

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

BANG!

A new explosion rang out every few minutes.

One would think those who separated from the crowd at the beginning would have rejoined by now, but that notion was incorrect.

After all, Honeydew Nectar wasn't said to be a drug to them for no reason. The "high" they got wouldn't wear off for several minutes, and this was exactly what Damien was banking on with this plan!

Luckily for him, Aegus Trees were almost as numerous as Messenger Birds in the third layer, which gave him endless capital to wear down the crowd until it was small enough to suit his needs!

It was brutal.

Finding the timing to escape was crucial to make sure the Messenger Birds would properly destroy the Aegis Trees and act as he wanted them to, but it was an extremely mentally taxing task.

The closer they got before he teleported, the more of them could be trapped inside each tree.

But that also meant he had to nearly kill himself every single time.

Ah, the struggles one went through for survival!

Chapter 1076 Messengers [4]

Damien didn't have the mind to count the time, but considering the moon's trek over the horizon, it had been over an hour since they started dispersing the crowd.

The original number was in the tens of thousands, but now, they'd been cut down to only a thousand or so birds chasing Damien and the girls through the rainforest.

They'd already left the Aegis Tree grove behind, along with the many birds who were stuck there,

The best part of Damien's plan wasn't splitting the crowd, it was turning them against each other!

It was inevitable for the Messenger Birds who got separated at the beginning to recover before the chase ended, but Damien kept cutting down Aegis Trees and producing more nectar!

When those who finished their meal returned to the chase, they were subjected to several shattered trees covered in nectar that was being fought over by their comrades.

But when it came to Honeydew Nectar, there was no such thing as camaraderie.

Like a domino effect, the birds piled on top of each other and killed each other for food, getting too involved in their own conflict to care about Damien and his group!

Damien turned back and glanced at the birds that were still following.

'With this amount, we should be able to win after a few minutes of battle, but without a guarantee that the ones we left behind will stay behind, that's too long.'

The solution was simple.

"Rose, work with me on this!"

Damien called Rose off Zara's back and wrapped his arm around her waist, teleporting away as Ruyue and Elena accompanied Zara in fending off the crowd.

"We're setting up a minefield!"

"Got it!"

Rose didn't need more instruction to understand her role.

Every time Damien rematerialized, he tapped his foot into the ground and set a delayed reaction mine formed from spatial mana, Vector Control, and just the tiniest bit of lightning to act as a fuse.

Once he was done, Rose followed up and drenched the area in the scent of their group and hid the mana fluctuations from the bomb, even adding the smell of Honeydew Nectar into the mix with illusions to attract the enemy.

They repeated the process ten times, creating a true minefield that spanned several hundred meters before flashing forward and leaving the area.

"Zara!"

Damien's call echoed through their spiritual connection and rang in her ears.

Her eyes immediately turned solemn.

Bang!

She slammed her paws into the ground and pivoted on her ankles, lurching as she abruptly shifted direction.

"Woah!" Elena exclaimed, hurriedly clutching her fur to avoid falling off.

Meanwhile, Ruyue jumped in the air and put her hands together in a strange formation.

'Marking of Death.'

The spell she used essentially did the same thing as Rose's illusion in this situation.

It amplified the smell of death coming from her body, driving the Messenger Birds mad with provocation and rage!

Ruyue flipped back and landed on Zara's back just in time to catch her acceleration.

The birds lost all sense of reason in their tiny brains and rampantly pushed forward in chase.

Zara danced through the environment gracefully, shifting from side to side and impossibly twisting her path, naturally throwing off the birds and—

BOOOOOOM!

A massive explosion went off behind her, swallowing a good portion of the pursuers.

Her steps led her through the minefield without stepping on a single trap, but the Messenger Birds weren't so lucky.

Because even though they didn't touch the ground themselves, time was up!

The tiny strand of lightning mana Damien incorporated in the traps snapped, starting a chain of chaotic interactions that led to an even greater explosion of mana!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

With Damien's space mana as a basis for these explosions, every single one twisted the atmosphere and ripped the birds who got caught in them to shreds.

But...

They were remote-activated and heavily disguised.

These kills didn't carry Damien or his group's traces at all!

"Run! This is our chance!"

Damien instantly roared, his voice booming over the explosions.

He dashed forward, angling his body slightly to the right and moving almost 5 kilometers to the east until he found a cave hidden by foliage and naturally disguised in the forest.

He and the girls rushed in, instantly covering its entrance with concealment formations.

And without hesitation, they combined their power once more to create a greater concealment formation that could even hide them from boss-level creatures like the Ghost King.

"Haa...haa...haa..."

Heavy breathing was the only sound filling the air. All of them needed to catch their breaths, and more importantly...

Thud!

Thud!

Thud!

Thud!

Their bodies collapsed to the ground.

They could barely hold themselves up on their jelly-like legs anymore.

But for now, they were out of trouble.

For now, at least.

Damien shuffled through his spatial storage until he found a large mountain of strange glimmering stones, of which he withdrew a chunk and threw on the floor.

"Spirit stones?" Ruyue immediately remarked in surprise.

"Right, I stole a bunch of them back in the Cloud Plane, but I never found somewhere to use them. Since we have to conserve mana, we might as well use them now to power the formation," Damien replied with a shrug.

"Fair enough," Ruyue nodded, "but they won't last very long."

"Haha, they might not have before, but did you forget? We're only using 2nd class power right now."

"Ah!"

Ruyue nodded in understanding and stopped asking. Since it was taken care of, she could recover without worries.

"Oh, right," Damien suddenly said.

"You should be able to access my spatial storage through the engagement rings I gave you. If you ever need anything, just check in there. It's stuff that's been piling up for over a decade at this point."

The engagement rings he gave them weren't common rings.

In fact, they were rings he crafted himself with a very special functionality.

They let the individuals they were soul-bound to enter the Sanctuary without Damien as a medium.

It was a method that could be used for self-protection, but also one that allowed him and the girls to meet at any time, regardless of the distance that separated them.

Damien just remembered that accessing his subspace was also a byproduct of this connection.

It would definitely be useful for them in the future to use his resources, especially since he'd hoarded so much in recent years.

'Even on Holy Light Star, Elena came up with that whole plan to plunder all the treasures and extort the geniuses by auctioning them off at the end, but the Nox didn't let that happen, so all those treasures are just collecting dust in my inventory.'

Damien shrugged it off and focused on recovery as well, conversing with the girls and watching the outside situation to make sure the Messenger Birds didn't find their traces.

Hours passed.

There were several close calls, and the incessant screeching that got more furious with the passing of time got closer and closer, but in the end, Damien and the girls were able to see light entering through the gaps in the cave's entrance, indicating the coming of dawn.

And the coming of dawn meant—

OOOOOOOOOOOH!

'As I thought.' Damien grinned.

'It's here.'

Chapter 1077 Overseer [1]

OOOOOOOOH!

The rainforest shook at the massive bellow.

The sun was just rising over the horizon. Only half of its form could be seen.

But as that being appeared in the sky, the sun became nothing more than a speck of dust.

WHOOOOOSH!

The winds whipped through the air, lashing all things in its path. A gigantic shadow blanketed the third layer, the form of a beast far greater than any mere Messenger Bird.

Its feathers were deep black, almost blending in with the shadow it cast, and ruffled in the wind majestically. Its eyes glowed with red light, making it look especially feral, but it didn't attack mindlessly.

This creature appeared like a mix between a raven and a vulture. Every flap of its wings was powerful enough to shatter the environment to pieces, and the bellow it released to let its presence be known immediately floored all beings under its gait.

VOOOM!

A powerful wave of suppression spread through the third layer.

The beasts in the skies and on the ground dropped and kneeled before the massive creature, but the Messenger Birds...

SKREEEE!!!!

They screeched angrily, swirling up like an inverted tornado to attack the creature's underbelly.

OOOOOOOOOH!

It let out another bellow, spreading its mana downward and easily dispersing the Messenger Birds.

Its bellow also brought light into their eyes, ridding them of the frenzy caused by the rain.

The atmosphere was misty with the aftereffects of the rain, but it had stopped as soon as the sun showed its head.

And with the actions of that creature, the Messenger Birds calmed down, returning to their usual routine of screeching and harassing their peers.

"The Overseer..."

Damien's mutter filled the cave that was currently enveloped in an atmosphere of wonder.

The Overseer was the most important creature Damien saw in the jaguar's memories.

It was the ruler of the third layer, the most powerful beast existing here.

It didn't act often. It spent most of its time perched in the tallest tree of the layer and, as its name suggested, overseeing the happenings of its territory.

It was indifferent to most things, but it did have one job it would complete without fail every morning.

It would appear and suppress the Messenger Birds that wreaked havoc in the night, bringing peace to the day.

Damien was ecstatic about its arrival.

Because of its influence, the Messenger Birds wouldn't be able to pursue their group during the day!

'It's like the purge happens every night in this place. We have peace for now, but once night falls again, we'll be forced into the same chase.'

They made it through the first trial, but if they couldn't figure out a way to lose the Messenger Birds' attention, they definitely wouldn't survive long enough to find the Primal Sovereign.

'Now that I've seen it with my own eyes, I can't doubt that they'll continue pursuing us to the ends of the world if necessary. There doesn't seem to be any method to quell their anger, but...'

As they were considered envoys of the Cloud Emperor, Messenger Birds had no natural predators.

Including the central area, or Skyrend Mountain's truest ecosystem, the number of Messenger Birds present had to be in the millions, which meant any method that involved directly killing or suppressing them would be useless as well.

'The only one who holds some power over them is the Overseer. It would be best if we could bribe it, but it's infamous for its indifference in the face of all things...'

Damien frowned at the thought. There had to be something he was missing.

There was no such thing as an inescapable situation for him!

"Ah, that's right!"

Damien suddenly exclaimed out loud, dropping his fist on his palm.

"It's time for 'that' to happen soon, isn't it?"

There was one more interesting fact Damien learned from the jaguar.

This was something that every being living in Skyrend Mountain's ecosystem knew about, but never reached the ears of an outsider before.

"The Ascension Ceremony."

Class was an incredibly important thing to the aerial beasts of Skyrend Mountain.

If one couldn't fly at a high altitude, they'd be treated like and seen as nothing more than a weak peasant who could be bullied.

But beasts were constantly evolving. Setting a class system that couldn't be changed was idiotic at the very least.

The other option was endless slaughter to determine status, something the Cloud Emperor disdained.

Therefore, he created the Ascension Ceremony.

Every year, the aerial beasts of the mountain held this ritual to determine their positions.

They gathered together in the fourth layer during a time of absolute nonaggression and took part in a ceremony where they flew up the side of Skyrend Mountain and faced its growing pressure, racing and competing with each other to get as high as possible.

However far they could reach was the highest elevation they could occupy for the year and their status in the hierarchy.

It was a simple mechanism, but it was of absolute importance to the denizens of this realm.

And this very ceremony...

...was going to take place in less than a week's time!

'The Overseer might be the most powerful in the third layer, but it probably stays here because it is just a part of the crowd in the central area. Taking the nature of beasts in this environment into account, I shouldn't be wrong in assuming that it is desperate to climb the social hierarchy.'

Every being had ambitions.

If Damien could abuse this fact, couldn't he solve his own problem as well?

"Alright, that's how we're doing it," he decided.

He turned to the girls and began explaining his plan.

"So basically," Rose said after hearing him out, "we have to bribe the Overseer with something that'll help it in that Ascension Ceremony in return for it suppressing the Messenger Birds for us?"

"Yeah, that's the best solution we have right now. Although it's only temporary respite, it should be able to keep us safe until the day of nonaggression, and that's when we can deal with the problem once and for all," Damien said with a nod.

"Can we deal with it? Didn't you say there were millions of them?" Elena asked.

"We can," Damien replied definitively.

"Even Messenger Birds have to abide by the laws of this place, as we saw when they were suppressed earlier. As long as we can reach a higher elevation than them in the ceremony, we'll be safe from their harassment."

"Are we able to participate?"

Damien smiled at Ruyue's question.

"Of course!" He said with a smile.

"Any flying beast has the right to participate in the ceremony. We can't fly, but don't we have the most talented flying beast alive with us right now?"

All eyes turned to Zara, who was quietly resting in the corner.

She raised her head, her wings flapping in curiosity.

Damien and the girls grinned.

"Right, we do indeed."

The peak of Skyrend Mountain was likely where the 2nd Primal Sovereign stayed, so participating in the ceremony was a must for them regardless.

There was no better use for the phrase, "killing two birds with one stone," than this!

Chapter 1078 Overseer [2]

A plan had been formed, now they needed to act on it.

"Rose, Elena, you take Zara and head back to the Perilous Sanctuary to find raw materials. If you find anything good, leave it in the spatial storage and I'll have Elvira's people make some good stuff with it. Ruyue and I will search the third layer to find any treasures that could help as well," Damien said, dividing their team to best accomplish their mission.

Rose, Elena, and Zara had speed and concealment that surpassed Damien and Ruyue, so sending them back would achieve better results.

Meanwhile, he and Ruyue could make themselves useful elsewhere.

"Understood. We'll meet back here?" Rose said, accepting her role.

"That's the best-case scenario, but if it ends up too taxing, don't risk it. We can always contact each other through the Sanctuary, so we can set up a better rendezvous point if necessary."

"Got it," Rose nodded. "We'll set out right away."

"Ah, wait," Damien stopped her and said.

"The Messenger Birds never enter the Perilous Sanctuary. I don't know why, but it's safe there. Spend a few days looking if you can't find anything today. Don't rush back if you don't have to."

Rose nodded, taking Elena and Zara with her as she left the cave's shelter.

There was no time for idle talk right now, only action!

Once they were gone, Ruyue turned to Damien questioningly.

"They will be fine in the Perilous Sanctuary, but how are we supposed to survive if they don't come back tonight?" She asked.

It was a real concern. The Messenger Birds weren't kind enough to give them the respite they desired so easily.

If half of their group was missing, the other half would taste the beasts' rage at an exponentially greater level!

However, Damien shook his head, telling her not to worry.

"I have a plan. If it works, we'll be fine, but if it doesn't..."

"If it doesn't?"

"We'll just have to run some more, no?"

"Pfft...!"

Ruyue let out a slight giggle.

What kind of plan was that?

It could barely be considered a plan in the first place, but if it worked, it worked, right?

Dawn was still in the process of arriving, which left them around 15 hours until night fell again.

Ruyue shrugged, accepting that this was how traveling with Damien always went.

It was fun and they always managed to survive until now, so it was fine, right?

"So what're we doing?" She finally asked.

"Well, if we follow the patterns of these kinds of places, the overworld is only half the fun," Damien responded mysteriously.

Ruyue's face paled.

"Don't tell me..."

"Yup! We're going underground!"

"Tch!"

There was never a time when Ruyue had good memories underground. Every time they ended up down there, something bad happened.

It was basically fate at this point!

"Do we have to?"

"We do."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Really really?"

"Yeah, come on, it won't be that bad, I swear. I mean, the alternative is scouting the overworld, which I don't think will be very fun..."

The Messenger Birds might've been docile during the day, but their grudge was still as great as ever.

There was no way they'd let Damien and Ruyue have an easy time doing what they needed to.

Ruyue sighed in defeat.

"There's no other choice."

"That's what I was telling you from the beginning."

"It's still hard to accept."

"Relax. Either way we're in trouble, so we might as well follow the path that'll give us something for our efforts, right?"

"No, you don't have to explain it. I've already accepted it mentally; I'm just complaining because I really don't want to do it."

Damien smiled.

A talkative Ruyue was really his favorite thing in the world.

"Since you got the complaints out of your system, let's get going."

No matter how much he wanted the conversation to continue, they had work to do.

And what better place was there to start from than this very cave?

Damien sent his senses into the ground, grabbing hold of several vectors and bending them to his will.

"Be careful. We're about to drop."

Right after his warning, the ground caved in.

Damien had agitated the foundation of a circular area of rock below them, finding the nearest underground pocket and collapsing anything that separated them from it.

Luckily, the target location wasn't too far away, so he was able to do it with his limited abilities.

Rumble!

The earth rumbled.

Damien wrapped his arm around Ruyue's waist while she held onto his neck.

Soon enough, the duo was falling along with the imploded debris.

They descended almost half a kilometer before solid ground came into sight again.

Damien let loose his mana, covering himself and Ruyue in a small whirlwind of spatial mana that slowed their fall until...

Tap!

They landed in the underground space gracefully and spread their awareness to look around.

"This is...a mine?" Ruyue muttered.

"No, it looks like one, but this formation is natural," Damien responded, feeling the cave walls.

The cave was small, but it was connected to tunnels in two directions, like a mine in Ruyue's words.

But no mine would be so clean.

This was more like...

Damien's eyes narrowed.

"Stick close to the walls. When you hear rumbling, immediately attack in that direction without hesitation," he said solemnly.

Ruyue nodded, and the duo made their way to the cave wall, following it closely as they entered one of the connecting tunnels and walked its length.

It was dark and musty, an underground tunnel that didn't seem to have any beginning or end.

But it definitely had both.

Because this tunnel was created by—

Rumble!

Damien and Ruyue both looked behind them at the same time, pushing their arms out and charging their mana.

Xiu! Xiu! Xiu! Xiu!

Ruyue attacked first, sending a rain of icy projectiles down the tunnel towards the rumbling.

As it got closer, Damien also attacked, using Vector Control to form beams of plasma that followed the trajectory of Ruyue's attack to hit the approaching being.

Shhhhhh!

The sizzling of holes being pierced in a thick carapace resounded.

Ruyue frowned when she heard it and flicked her wrist again, lining her ice swords with death mana and sending another barrage at the unknown being.

Shik! Shik! Shik! Shik!

Her attacks also made impact this time, digging into that being's body.

They still couldn't see it yet.

They could only hear the strange sounds it made, like the transformation of a car into a robot, and the rumbling of the earth as it moved.

But...

"It's surprisingly weak?" Damien muttered.

Its pace had already slowed severely, and by the time Damien finished his thought, it stopped moving entirely.

'Did overestimate the threat?"

It was a jinx greater than any other.

Grrrr...

A menacing growl resounded through the tunnel.

"Something" began to approach.

"Fight or run?" Ruyue asked.

Damien's brow furrowed.

Running was probably the right option but—

"I'm tired of running. Let's fight!"

"I knew you would say that."

The two smiled at each other and left the safety of the cave wall, standing tall as the unknown enemy approached.

The first thing they saw when it came out of the shadows?

A massive circular mouth lined with thousands of teeth...

...and a strange gem deep in its throat that radiated beautiful emerald-green light.

Chapter 1079 Overseer [3]

The creature's body took up the entire tunnel space, leaving nowhere for Damien and Ruyue to go but backward as its massive mouth approached them.

'Wherever there's an underground, there will be worms.' Damien thought to himself as he cautiously retreated.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

KIIIIIIK!

Ruyue formed a swarm of projectiles and shot them into the creature's mouth, making it reel in pain. Green blood spurted over the cave floor. The worm shook and stopped its movements for a second, giving Damien the perfect opportunity to strike.

Bang!

One shot from Hel's barrel was all it took. A bubble of spatial mana exploded on the worm's body and blew its mouth to pieces.

It dropped limp, all signs of life leaving its body.

"Hm? Was it really that easy?"

He originally thought they'd failed to kill the beast in their first attack, but was he wrong?

Hong!

A strange sound rang out at that moment.

An emerald-green light filled the air and formed a bulbous protrusion around the worm's bloodied corpse.

And miraculously, its last string of life force suddenly boomed with vitality. Within a second, it had healed back to peak condition.

KIIIIIIIIK!

The worm once again let out an angered screech and charged forward again to consume its prey.

From its reaction, it was clear that this situation was considered normal.

Damien's eyes narrowed. He retrieved Freya and fired a barrage of mana bullets into its body again, watching with furrowed brows as the process repeated itself.

'Immortal body? No, it's...'

"Ah! Fallen Heart Jade!"

Ruyue's voice suddenly rang out.

"Fallen Heart Jade...?" Damien repeated.

"Yes," Ruyue responded, her eyes glimmering in understanding.

"That gem in its mouth is a Fallen Heart Jade. It is the reason the beast can continue regenerating."

She killed the worm again as she continued,

"I read about it in an ancient text long ago. The Fallen Heart Jade is a natural material with extreme regenerative abilities, but the conditions for its formation are extremely rare. The piece in that worm's mouth isn't too big, but it's more than enough to support a weak monster like that."

Damien's eyes widened slightly.

"Something like that exists? Then..."

He rushed forward as the worm finished regenerating and fearlessly shoved his arm into its mouth.

KIIIIK!

The worm roared in anger and rapidly shut its mouth around Damien's arm, It closed like the petals of a flower, giving him no choice but to withdraw from its most important treasure, but unfortunately, it wasn't nearly strong enough!

"Stop that."

Damien's words were accompanied by a surge of mana, through which he forcefully solidified the space around his arm and made it impossible for the worm to continue moving.

He wrapped his hand around the green bead attached to the creature's throat and ripped it out with all his strength, pushing backward and shooting it in the head several more times.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

Another river of blood flew through the air, and the worm dropped dead for the fourth time.

But this time, it wasn't coming back to life.

Damien observed the bead in his hand with All-Seeing Eyes, his interest growing with every second.

'I didn't expect something like this to exist. It uses mana similar to the [Heal] trait to manifest effects that mirror Transcendent Regeneration. Unfortunately, the lifespan of this piece is mostly used up...'

Naturally, such a small piece accompanied by a weak beast that died far too easily wouldn't be able to last long.

However...

"It was fused to this worm's body. That isn't something that'll happen naturally unless the treasure has sentience."

Damien glanced at the worm's corpse and withdrew Mirage.

'Void Sword Art First Form: Bladeless'

A gash spread through space, slicing the worm in two vertically.

There wasn't much space to move around in the tunnel, so Damien had no choice but to walk through the worm's goo to find what he was looking for.

And find it he did.

A grin spread across his face as he cut open a glowing sack in the corpse, revealing five more pieces of Fallen Heart Jade.

Though they were dulled, they presented an interesting prospect.

He turned to Ruyue.

"If the rest of the species share this trait, we might have found what we were looking for," she said, voicing his thoughts.

Fallen Heart Jade would be incredibly useful to possess during the Ascension Ceremony.

It was called a ceremony, but it was, in reality, a miniature war where all conflicts boiled over and bared their fangs.

Every beast was willing to use any means necessary to climb higher, and if they couldn't keep going, they would make sure others couldn't get above them!

Fallen Heart Jade was a piece of the puzzle. On its own, it wouldn't be enough to bribe the Overseer, but it gave Damien an idea of what to do.

Plus, with these kinds of effects, couldn't he restore his own regeneration to a certain extent?

Damien quickly cleaned the worm fluids off his body with mana, but left a hint of its scent in his aura.

With their target determined, it was time to start the hunt!

The duo rushed through the tunnel, soon finding that it didn't intersect with other paths to form a system.

They jointly spread their awareness and searched for a path anywhere nearby, and to their surprise, there wasn't just one, but many!

These worms were clearly independent creatures. They were able to sense each other's presence and actively moved to avoid each other.

This was great news. It meant they would be free from the risk of a swarm as they hunted.

Creating a path from tunnel to tunnel was easier than expected. Ruyue was able to compromise the structural integrity of the rock far easier than Damien could, and Damien was able to rapidly destroy the compromised area to give way for them.

The hunt proceeded smoothly from there.

Most of the worms were weak, which also meant the amount of Fallen Heart Jade they possessed wasn't much, but the few stronger beings had large chunks of the material in their bodies that made the fervor in the duo's hearts rise.

Eventually, they'd killed over 50 of these worms and collected a decent amount of jade.

And judging by their internal clocks, night was soon to fall.

"Should we go up?" Ruyue asked, a bit hesitant.

"We should. We don't know if we're safe here, and if it turns out we aren't, we'll end up being chased through this enclosed space where we don't have room to act freely."

"Hmm..."

"Plus, we have to meet the others."

"That's true. I guess it can't be helped."

The amount of raw material they had was more than enough to carry out Damien's intentions. It would be nice if they could stay in the underground and avoid the dangers that lay before them, but it was stupid to make assumptions in a place like this.

Time and time again, this sub-universe had proved that it would do everything against one's logical assumptions.

And who could say this time would be different?

Perhaps Damien and Ruyue didn't know...

...but this time wasn't different at all.

Chapter 1080 Overseer [4]

Damien and Ruyue hunted for an entire day, but no matter how many worms they killed or tunnels they explored, they never found a single deposit of Fallen Heart Jade.

It remained a question: just where did the worms gather their jade?

Damien naturally devoured several of the worms they killed, and from their memories, he learned that the implantation of the first Fallen Heart Jade was a sort of ritual for their species.

In those memories, he was able to see massive caves filled with Fallen Heart Jade in monstrous amounts, but no amount of searching led to these natural areas, nor did the memories provide any clues to their location.

But, maybe that was a good thing.

Fallen Heart Jade was such a mystical resource; was it possible to keep it hidden in the subterranean world?

Not many beings dared to venture into the depths in fear of the unknown ecosystem present there, but there was a specific species that held no such fear.

They were, of course, the Messenger Birds.

The Cloud Emperor's authority spread through every inch of the Severed World whether it be in the skies or deep below the ground. Regardless of where they went, Messenger Birds were almost guaranteed safety.

They didn't have any interest in the jade themselves, since it wouldn't matter if they died in one hit despite its presence with their weak bodies, but they had their own reasons for collecting it.

The subterranean world was not safe during the night.

Most of the Messenger Birds would target Aegis Trees, but a portion of them would always attack the underground as well.

The second the sun was replaced by the moon in the sky, they made their move.

Their incessant screeching filled the air, the Frenzy Rain began to fall, and all hell broke loose in the third layer once again.

At this moment, Damien and Ruyue were rushing through the tunnel system they'd created, headed back to the hole they came through.

From all around, they could hear thudding and thumping, sounds like a horde of rats approaching.

However, there were no rats, nor were they approaching.

That was just how loud the Messenger Birds were, charging haphazardly through the enclosed tunnels!

They didn't care about the worms. Anything they could provide was just scraps, so every worm that got in their way was instantly demolished by the force of the swarm.

Their goal was the jade deposits hidden by complex natural formations and guarded by several tens of worms.

If Damien and Ruyue got caught up in the collision between the two forces, they were sure to have a torturous night!

Luckily for them, the conflict was far away and didn't seem to be approaching them.

They traveled through the tunnels and eventually made their way back to the original space they came through, walking past the first worm corpse Damien dissected.

"It doesn't look like Rose and Elena are coming back tonight. Let's hope we can be safe inside the cave again, but if it looks bad, prepare to run," Damien said solemnly as they approached the circular spot of moonlight signifying the exit.

An environment where everything was a danger.

It definitely wasn't fun to be a part of!

That thought was definitely a jinx.

Because right as the duo reached the exit...

BOOOOOOOM!

The earth exploded to their right, forcing them to jump back and dodge.

KIIIIIIIIK!

The screech of a Jade Heart Worm, as Damien named them; a sound both he and Ruyue were extremely accustomed to at this point.

However, this creature was far bigger than anything they'd encountered before!

Its massive body was already twice the width of the tunnel, and when it tore through, it directly punched a hole in the dense earth with its bodily strength alone!

The duo watched warily as the worm's massive body slithered by them.

BOOOOOOM!

Once again, the tunnel wall tore open and that creature's gargantuan mouth surfaced before Damien and Ruyue. Its teeth rotated like a circular saw, giving it the ideal physique to mutilate its enemies in the cruelest way possible.

'It just passed by and it's already back?! Is it able to make such sharp turns with its body shape?' Damien wondered as he moved to dodge.

'I wanted to just run, but if it can target us without any delay in its attacks, it won't be possible. The current limit on teleportation means I have to concentrate if I want to do any complex movement, so it's still possible we'll phase into the earth if I act carelessly.'

Damien's eyes narrowed as he watched the creature's body slither, now in two different directions, and clearly on its way to becoming more.

'Why is it targeting us specifically? Isn't this time for it to go help its comrades?'

There had to be a reason.

The most probable would be that—

'—it's a clan leader, and we just massacred its family.'

In the end, it wasn't a strange event at all.

If one killed enough subordinates, one was bound to eventually face their leader!

'I didn't know worms could be vengeful, but anything is possible in this world. I guess I should consider this a final gift from the subterranean world, but we still have to finish it fast.'

The massive Jade Heart Worm had an equally huge chunk of jade supporting it, which would be a great treasure for Damien and the girls' personal use.

"We have to rip its jade out first. It'll take too long to wear down a piece that big," Damien said quickly, watching for the worm's return.

"No need to say more. Just move, I'll follow." Ruyue responded.

Damien nodded gratefully and did exactly that.

He jumped forward, grabbing Mirage and grappling the worm's body.

BOOOOOOM!

Its head slammed back into the tunnel soon after, repeating its same motion in an attempt to swallow Ruyue whole.

Damien gritted his teeth as his body was flung around, but kept his hold as best as possible.

He was dragged along with the worm's body as it moved through the curved tunnel it carved with its movements. His body crashed into the earth and forcefully tunneled through it, a move that tore his skin apart and formed countless gashes on his exposed muscles.

But this was still in the plan!

He hardened his will and forced himself to act through the pain, sending his mana into the tunnel's ceiling and setting a plethora of delayed space mines just as he'd done with the Messenger Birds previously.

Meanwhile, Ruyue occupied the worm's head. She attacked it with countless projectiles and formed spikes of ice lined with death mana that jutted out of the ground and impaled the worm from underneath.

Her moves weren't necessarily meant to harm it, but to keep it moving forward, following her back the way she and Damien came from.

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!

KIIIIK!

The tunnel was expanded and exploded by the worm's movements. It moved roughly, trying to gain a vantage point from which it could directly swallow its prey.

Damien was eventually freed from his torment when his section of the worm's body made it back to the main tunnel, and as he pushed Transcendent Regeneration to numb his pain, the time came to act!

BOOOM!

BOOOOM!

BOOOOOM!

The furthest back portion of the worm's body entered the tunnel Damien just exited, and his traps instantly set off.

Minor pockets of spatial mana imploded one by one, collapsing the surrounding rock and cracking the worm's hard carapace.

KIIIIIIK!

It didn't do much damage, but that didn't mean it didn't hurt!

The worm screeched in pain.

Ruyue saw her chance and pounced, reaching into its mouth to grab its jade, but...

KHHHHHH!

A guttural sound came from deeper in the worm's body and something fizzled up its throat.

'Poison!'

Ruyue instantly realized the problem and flipped her body, kicking her foot into the ceiling above and collapsing it so she could sit on the worm's head.

Psssshhhh!

The poison spilled out of the worm's mouth, burning a deep ditch in the tunnel.

Ruyue's eyes hardened.

She pressed her hands into the worm's head and spread her icy mana to slow its movements and hopefully freeze it.

Damien also made it back to her position at this time, coordinating with her to utterly halt the worm's movements and steal its jade!

Their goal was to distract the worm long enough to do what they needed to, but the poison it displayed made the task far more difficult.

'Worst case scenario, I burn my hands off a little bit...' Damien thought to himself.

He sent a quick glance backward, his ears picking up the sounds in the surroundings with total precision.

His "worst case" idea might've been the only option.

Because right now—

"—those damn sky rats are coming."